

# the Centre for Separated Families

## Because supporting the whole family brings better outcomes for children

“By supporting both parents to continue to continue a positive input, it is possible to help children to adjust to life after separation. It is those emotional and psychological adjustments that enable children to reach their full potential”

### SPEAKERS:

**Stephen Geraghty**  
Commissioner for Child Maintenance

**Anthony Douglas CBE**  
Chief Executive of Cafcass

**Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP**  
Founder of the Centre for Social Justice

**Karen Woodall**  
Director of the Centre for Separated Families

**2008 is the year that heralds an unprecedented change in the way that family separation is dealt with in the UK.**

The new Child Maintenance Options service will, for the first time, offer impartial information and support to both parents to help them deal with maintenance and wider separation issues. Whilst Cafcass, through the implementation of the Contact and Adoption Act 2006, will roll out its own parenting programmes and commission new services to strengthen parenting after separation.

The Centre for Separated Families is delighted to host the Conference to showcase services to support the whole family to bring better outcomes for children.

This landmark conference furthers the debate around family separation at a crucial point in time.

### ONE IN THREE CHILDREN

Research suggests that at least one in three children in the UK will experience parental separation before the age of 16. Studies have consistently shown better outcomes for children who are able to maintain relationships with both parents after separation and that co-operative post separation parental relationships are the key to achieving this.

Successful post separation parenting requires the development of and adaptation to new roles and responsibilities, which are not always easy to manage. Many children experience major shifts in their parents' relationships, with families

struggling to stay together, families splitting up and stepfamilies forming. While many families succeed in negotiating these difficult changes with little or no help from outside agencies, others struggle.



There are many reasons why parents may find it difficult to develop and maintain a co-operative post-separation relationship, even when they are willing. Structural and psychological barriers can often undermine parents' efforts, and advice and support that recognises these problems and helps them to come to terms with their difficulties is rarely available.

Successive governments have, through child maintenance and benefits law attempted to deal with the *problem* of family separation.

But family separation is complex and cannot simply be reduced to the issue of money and how parents provide financially for their children.

### LISTENING TO CHILDREN

The Centre for Separated Families has commissioned a major survey of children's views on their home life to coincide with the Best Practice in Support to Separated Families conference. Full results from the survey entitled '*Happiness, hopes and wellbeing - children's views*' will be published later today but a summary of the key findings clearly shows that children living in separated family situations are:

- less likely to rate themselves as feeling happy than children who live with both of their parents
- likely to have fewer close friends than children living with both parents
- less likely to rate themselves as doing well at school
- less likely to want to have children of their own in the future

Crucially, children living in separated families were:

- more likely to want their parents to stay together even if they were not getting on

### HELPING FAMILIES TO COPE WITH SEPARATION

Whilst it is never going to be possible to prevent parents from separating, it is possible to help them build better post separation relationships.

A key factor that determines how well children will adjust to the post separation environment is the absence of conflict between parents. Research shows that children whose parents can communicate well after separation are those who fare best.

It is not surprising that the relationship between parents deteriorates during and after separation. After all, the fact that the relationship has broken down is the reason for the separation in the first place. However, the presence of children means that parents must remain in a relationship, however conflicted.

Successful renegotiation requires them to develop new ways of communicating at a time when they would often prefer to have little or no contact with each other. Indeed, the relationship between the parents, and between parents and children, needs to be completely renegotiated. This may be happening whilst parents are undergoing a re-visioning of themselves, separate from the marital relationship.

This process of re-negotiation moves most parents into areas with which they are unfamiliar, since choices and decisions that need to be made can no longer be done on the basis of clearly demarcated parental responsibilities within the family unit. Even outside any

bitterness and hurt that usually accompanies a family separation, there is little wonder that parents find themselves retreating into defensive, rights-based, positions. At a time of emotional upheaval, the security that a clear, unambiguous sense of one's own rights can be the only anchor that will make sense of the world.

### LISTENING TO PARENTS

At the point of separation parents often feel hurt and angry and are often seeking some sort of vindication and to have their 'rights' upheld. To offer rights based support at this point, however, only serves to exacerbate conflict rather than resolve it.

Our work at the Centre for Separated Families has shown that the parents who dig themselves into the most adversarial and hostile positions are those that are struggling to come to terms with their own grief at the ending of their adult relationship. It is this that parents most need help to resolve so that they can go on and



make positive choices about things like money and care for their children together.

Mothers and fathers have similar experiences of the grief and pain, but very different needs for support. Our work shows us that mothers find access to support easier after family separation whilst fathers can feel isolated and alone. Similarly it is easier for mothers to make flexible working arrangements so that they can care for children, whilst fathers often find it difficult to ask for flexible leave, even where that is possible.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY SEPARATION

Gender differences play a big part in the way that parents perceive their roles in children's lives after separation. Whilst we live in a world where roles for men and women are changing, mothering is still largely regarded as caring for children whilst fathering is about providing. This means that when the family separates, it is most often mothers who assume the role of carer whilst fathers are expected to retreat to the role of financial provider.

As policy and practice around separated families are also framed upon this expectation, parents can find it very difficult when, for example, their circumstances do not fit the majority arrangement. Fathers with more care of their children report feeling doubly isolated, as a man unused to asking for help and as a father, uncertain and unskilled. Whilst mothers who live apart from their children face stigma and suspicion that they must have done something wrong.

## A NEW WAY OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES

The Centre for Separated Families has developed new ways of thinking and talking about separated families as well as new ways of supporting them.

In doing so we have abandoned labels such as 'non resident' and 'resident' parents and terms such as 'contact'. Instead we talk about provision for children and parenting time and how each parent can maintain their ongoing responsibilities for these in children's lives.

Our model does not rest upon supporting one parent or the other but on helping parents to untangle the end of their adult relationship from the ongoing responsibilities for their children.

Our model of working is also based upon our understanding that we learn to be parents by being parented ourselves and if our model of a parenting relationship is healthy we are much more likely to go on and parent well in the future. So many of the parents that we have worked with have not had a healthy model of being parented as our work in Leeds with young parents demonstrates.

## EVIDENCE FROM OUR WORK IN LEEDS

Our work in Leeds was supported by the Parenting Fund and has involved the delivery of our parenting programme and direct support to parents. The following snapshot of this work demonstrates the importance of a healthy model of parenting.

On a weekend residential we asked a group of sixteen young mothers whether the father of their children was involved in care giving or financial provision and most said that there was some level of involvement, albeit sporadic.

We asked the group whether their extended family was involved in care giving or financial provision and all said that their mother was supportive. All but four of the group said they still lived at home.

We then went on to ask whether there had been any support given to the father of their children whilst they were pregnant and whether anyone had offered support to them as a couple when the baby was born. All said that they had received no such support. Most went on to say that they didn't believe that the fathers needed that kind of support as they, as mothers, could provide on their own, everything that their child needed.

Finally we asked the group about their own experience of being parented and what their relationship with their mother and father had been like. Every one in this group said that their parents had separated before they were seven. All but one had lived only with their mother and all but two had lost contact with their father.

When we asked about the events leading up to the loss of contact, the mothers reported that their father had tried to keep in touch but had not had somewhere suitable for them to live or that he had moved away to work.



Some mothers reported that they had stopped seeing their father because of the problems it caused with their own mother. None said that their father had simply walked out and left them; most felt that he had tried to keep in touch.

These young mothers who see no need for a father in their children's lives, have no real experience of being fathered themselves and do not possess an internalised model of a healthy relationship from which they can draw on in parenting their own child.

Whilst they recognise that their father had tried to keep in touch, they no longer see a father figure as being important. Their internalised model of being parented is of their mother taking care of everything and this is what they intend to go on and do in their own children's lives.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Public policy around separated families over the past two decades has not been to promote and support parents working together.

The model it has largely supported has been that of one parent, usually the mother, overburdened by the need to care for children alone. Fathers, where they have featured in public policy, have been seen as the provider.

Instead of promoting co-operation between parents, our policies and practice with them have served only to further widen the gap that opens up when a family separates.

If we are going to interrupt the negative impact of family breakdown we are going to have to pay more attention to the impact of our public policy upon families and develop ways of supporting co-operation between parents instead of reinforcing divisions. This means looking at ways of supporting fathers to be more involved with caring for children as well as paying for them and helping mothers to see the opportunities that sharing care can bring in the outside world.

We would like to see the introduction of policies that would support both parents to remain positively engaged with children both before and after separation. The old fashioned, gendered division of parenting roles, reinforced by policy and practice is now out of step with how families manage their responsibilities and fails to recognise that both parents have a role in providing a model of a strong healthy relationship for the next generation.

Most separated mothers and fathers have one thing in common, their deep desire to do the best for their children. But too many parents get caught up in fighting about rights instead of being able to focus on their responsibilities. We believe that it is time for a new policy approach.

### A NEW POLICY APPROACH

We believe a new approach to supporting separated families is urgently needed, one that helps parents to renegotiate and rebuild their parenting relationship even where their adult relationship cannot be mended.

But new approaches have to be delivered in ways that are relevant to the different needs of mothers and fathers if they are to make a difference.

The Centre for Separated Families would like to see dedicated services for mothers and fathers who are separating so that each can access support and information about all of the important issues in their children's lives.

- a dedicated helpline so that parents can discuss the issues that affect them at the point of separation and beyond.
- an online support service that can be easily accessed out of working hours.
- a national email and telephone advice line dedicated to giving parents more information about how best to make arrangements for their children, where they will live, how to manage transitions between homes and how to ensure that relationships with children are protected and nurtured
- more research about the how parents make decisions around care and provision for their children after family separation and to what extent law has an impact on how parents understand themselves to be a good parent. Research that looks at the different needs of separated mothers and fathers is also urgently needed if we are to build more holistic support to families to deliver better outcomes for children.

The Centre for Separated Families already provides some of these services and over the coming months plans to deliver more. Working together with other key organisations, such as those presenting at this landmark conference, we can build a new future for support to separated families and through that deliver better outcomes for children.

the centre for  
**Separated  
families**

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