

Sure Start



Working with
family diversity



Revised July 2002

*Investing in
our future*



contents

Preface	2
Families: Being a helper, being a parent	3
Section 1 Addressing You	4
Open your mind to everything	6
The first encounter	8
Active listening	10
Mind your baggage	12
Getting stuck: getting unstuck	14
How to move things on	15
Section 2 Transitions	16
The transition to parenthood	17
How you can help	18
Distracted parents/distressed children	20
Family conflict	22
If a relationship breaks down	23
Starting over	26
The impact of a new baby in a step family	28
Money	32
Work	34
Section 3 Resources	36

Preface

Welcome to Sure Start's first specially-commissioned development pack. I hope you find it useful. It deals with the subject of working with families, which is one of five broad competencies we think all Sure Start workers will need to develop.

Every local programme will be in contact with all families with children under 4 in its area. Understanding and sensitivity to family diversity and change is essential to our work. Like individuals, families come in different shapes and sizes. Each has its own personality and its own particular needs, both of which can and do change over time. We tend to think about lone parents, step parents, and couples when thinking of the needs of families, but other issues also have a major impact: the ethnic identity of each parent and child, the number of children, the gender mix of the children, the age range of the children - these are all factors which contribute to the mix which makes each family unique.

To make Sure Start work effectively programmes must develop services and approaches which meet the needs of individual families. They must empower families to make their own decisions. They must be sensitive to the needs of children and adults, particularly at times when families are going through change. It is important that everyone who works on a local programme, whether he or she is a volunteer or a professional practitioner in the field, is able to identify and recognise the pressures that affect families. A new baby, separation of parents, and remarriage all can have a major impact on every person in a family, particularly on those who are without choices in the new arrangements. Lack of money also causes significant difficulties, for children who want what their peers have, and for adults who wish that they could offer more to their children.

We asked One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research, Parentline Plus and the National Council for One Parent Families to develop some guidance that would identify issues that frequently arise in family work and would suggest ways of working alongside families in a responsive and constructive way. Each of these organisations has considerable experience in this area and together they have produced this versatile and easy-to-use resource pack. It's designed to help all those who work with families to develop practical skills to ease some of the most difficult transition points in family life.

I do hope you find the pack useful, and that you are able to share it in learning groups within the Sure Start Partnerships.



Naomi Eisenstadt
Director, Sure Start Unit

Families: Being a helper, being a parent

Sure Start is new and it demands something new from those who work within it. This pack can help you rise to what will be one of the most exciting challenges in family services since the war. It will demand many skills from those working within it. Some will be skills you already possess from your previous work, some will be new and in some cases we might be asking you, not so much to learn new ways of doing, but to learn new ways of thinking about your work.

Increasing diversity

This pack has been developed by the National Council for One Parent Families, Parentline Plus (incorporating the National Stepfamily Association) and One Plus One Marriage & Partner Research. These three organisations have come together to share their diverse experience of working with parents and children; as a result they are developing innovative approaches to early intervention and support for families at times of change and transition. The picture of family life in Britain has changed considerably and will change further:

- There are 12.4 million children living in the UK today.
- Just over one in five families with dependent children are headed by a lone parent.
- Over a million dependent children live in full-time step families.
- If current trends continue, by 2016 children will be equally likely to be born outside marriage as within, and there will be over one million cohabiting families with children.

Research clearly suggests that despite diversity in households, most people still have strong family ties – families still matter.

Skills and awareness of diversity

The pack is designed to increase your confidence to offer effective support, to raise your awareness of the issues facing contemporary families, particularly at times of change and transition, and to enhance your skills as you work with these families. Research demonstrates that the relationship between you and the service user will determine the value of the interaction and ultimately the outcome for the service user. The extra information we give on the special issues affecting, for example young single mothers, stepfamilies, or couples in difficulty, may enrich that relationship but cannot replace it.

Section 1

Addressing you

How to use this pack

The pack is divided into two sections. The first section, **Addressing You**, is intended for workers to use themselves, preferably in a group, or if this cannot be arranged, we hope you will read it through individually. The second section, **Transitions**, is designed to give you ideas for your work with parents. It is by no means comprehensive but we hope it will stimulate ideas and open up new or different perspectives. At the end we have a resources section and a wallet of useful material.

We have provided exercises for use in groups (or with individuals). In some cases it will help if you photocopy pages to hand out – we have indicated this with an icon. You can either distribute the introduction for each session for people to read before they come, or read it out at the start of the group meeting. Some pages may be useful for overhead projection if you have the facilities.

Why groups?

A well managed group can provide a safe space in which to discuss your work and allow you to share some of the inevitable burden of working with young families. It is also a way of reflecting on your own practice and learning from each other. Group dynamics, if carefully observed, also allow you to reflect on the way in which you are 'seen' in the world and the way in which you interact with others. Your insights will be tremendously useful when you work with others.

Group rules

If a group is to work successfully it is important to establish basic rules. The same rules that you would use in work with a parents group:

- there should be no criticism of each other
- advice should only be given when it is asked for
- information should remain confidential.

It will help if one person facilitates each meeting, reads, and where necessary photocopies the materials for that session and keeps the ball rolling. The facilitator can be the co-ordinator but it could also be a task which you rotate around the group.

Skills sharing

There is no 'standard' Sure Start project. The resilience of the idea lies in its diversity: different projects for different places. In some projects, people have already been working together for some time, in others the project will be bringing together people who are strangers to one another. It may help to start by reminding new and old colleagues of each other's strengths and just how much you all have to offer each other and your service users. You will find that you have, between you, an enormous range of skills and knowledge – and some you never thought of!

Value what you know

What to do: Start by compiling a list of the skills you already have between you. Health visitors may list their professional qualifications; volunteers may need encouragement to write down any skills at all, but we all have practical skills. Some of us are good at cooking or gardening. Others, turn out to be secret disco dancers. Acknowledging individual skills is helpful and affirming, and it also provides you with information which could turn out to be useful in your work. A volunteer who is a good cook may be able to provide absolutely key support to a young single mother which a health visitor who hates cooking might miss.

How to do it: You could ask everyone to contribute to a list on a flipchart or you could ask people first of all to list their own skills on separate sheets of paper, before compiling a joint list for the whole group. This approach may feel more comfortable if group members have widely differing backgrounds and don't know each other well. You can then ask the whole group to add to the list, skills which they know others possess but have failed to write down.

Honing your helping skills

What to do: Think of a time when you were able to help someone. What skills did you use? Were they just practical skills? Try to list the interpersonal skills that you might use in helping someone.

How to do it: you could do this in pairs, or individually.



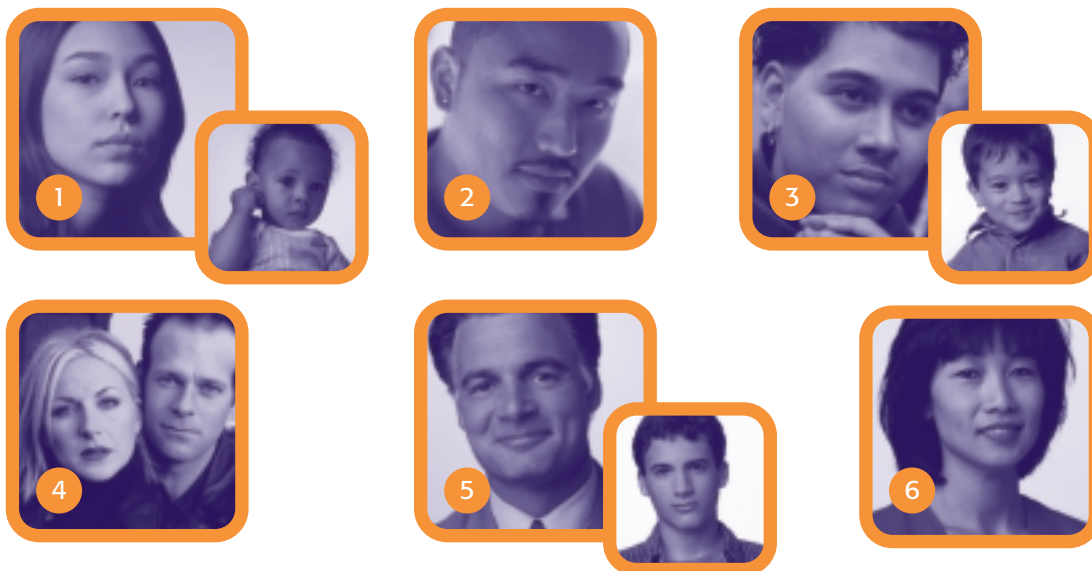
Open your mind to everything

Stereotyping is useful. It is a way of categorising information about people and making the world a little more manageable. The first two categories a child ever discovers are me and mother (some would say me and my source of food). Then they add fathers and brothers and sisters and friends and...by the teenage years we are inveterate makers of categories, labelling people according to their dress, hair, taste in music, age and even attitude to work. Creating a tightly drawn 'in group' makes the adult world seem safer but, some people may become fiercely antagonistic towards those who are not in their group: the 'out-groupers'.

As people become more secure about their place in society they may become slightly more accepting of people who wear their hair differently but they don't abandon stereotyping. They use it in more and more sophisticated ways to allow them to make 'snap judgements' about the people they meet. Effectively they are using the bank of information they have built up about their 'in group' and checking everyone they meet against that list. If strangers check out on the important things, we trust them; if not, we may choose to reject them.

Professionals may find themselves using stereotyping in a quite systematic way, often using statistical data to back up their categories: absent fathers, teenage mothers, disabled people. In policy making it can help us to put people into categories. When working with individuals, a category can be a prejudice dressed up.

The three organisations behind this pack work with a diversity of families: lone parents, married couples, co-habitees and step families. They have a wealth of information about the various family types but they share a common understanding that each of us, and each of our service users, is a person not a category and that the job of a Sure Start worker is to listen first to the person. This is an invitation to become aware of our own stereotyping and to see past it, to the person we are trying to help. The additional information which we provide is there to enhance your understanding not to block your view.



“

- A "If you say you are gonna be there for your kid, you've got to be there. Cos you've got to look after the kid for the rest of its life... got to make sure your kids well looked after, got to love 'im. No point having a kid if you don't love em, might as well not be there."
- B "Interfering old cow what does she know about my life?"
- C "I need help. I don't think I can cope."
- D "If I don't get an evening out this week I am going to start climbing the walls"
- E "He don't know me, he's five months old and he don't know who I am, they totally put me to one side."
- F "Providing for them is absolutely critical because it justifies my existence – that is why I am doing this?"

”

Reality check

How to do it: in pairs, individually or as a group.

What to do:

- Look at these photographs and describe the peoples characteristics according to the categories they are likely to be seen in.
- Now look at the quotes and captions and try to match them up. Then check the 'answers' on page 38 and discuss (or think about) the gap between the stereotype and the reality.



The first encounter

Creating trust

To be effective you need to create a climate in which the person you are working with feels valued enough to trust you. You may have only a few minutes in which to develop good rapport and that means reaching through the stereotypes that they may have of you.

Creating a space for listening

Parents will learn to trust you if they feel that you are listening to what they say. If they trust you they will be far more likely to open up to you and be prepared, in return, to listen to what you have said.

'I thought, we're never going to get over this, we've ruined our life. My health visitor offered to sit with Mark and me and talk through things. She was very sensitive...not pushy at all.'

This health visitor had been through a Brief Encounter training provided by One Plus One, which emphasises listening skills. She was taking part in a trial in which one group of trained health visitors used a relationship screening questionnaire in the post-natal period. The results were striking. Where the health visitors had been trained, and used the questionnaire, they were six times more likely to pick up relationship problems than those who were not trained and relied on the person to disclose problems.

Dr Roger Neighbour, who has trained many GPs, has observed that it is not unusual for a GP to listen for the first two or three minutes of a ten minute encounter before apparently deciding what the patient needs and spending the rest of the time trying to 'sell' it to the patient. Neighbour suggested that it would be better to spend the first seven minutes listening, because only then will the real issues be identified, and the patient feel that she has been heard, and feel ready to co-operate in finding a solution.

Waving or drowning?

If you are observing carefully you may pick up signals of unexpressed, or covertly expressed, distress. Sometimes there is no more than a slight feeling of unease that there is underlying distress (the person may look tired, fed up, or not be taking trouble with her appearance). It is at this point that your reactions are critical. If you respond to the signals and let the person know that you sense something is wrong, you can create an opportunity for him or her to open up and voice their difficulties.

How do I look?

How to do it: In pairs or individually

What to do: Consider:

- What sort of stereotypes will people see in you?
- What sort of messages do you think you send out?
- What kind of signals?
- What will make people want to talk to you?
- How do you think that the parents in your project see you: a mum like me, an interfering old busy-body, too busy to listen, someone I can trust?
- Think about how you might appear to someone new.

How to offer help

- **pick up signals** both from the person you are working with AND from inside yourself
- **listen**
- **reflect back** the person's feelings to them so that they know they have been heard and understood.
- **assess** the limits of your own competence
- **clarify** what you are able to offer (either in terms of time or practical assistance)
- **check** that you have been heard and that the person accepts your offer.



Active listening

To listen effectively, you need to put on hold your own ideas and anxieties about solving problems, or your panic about where the conversation is headed. Concentrate on listening to what the person is telling you and the feelings expressed. What is the main message he or she is giving? Let them know that you are trying to follow their story by reflecting back to them what you have heard. If you are not used to using these core skills you may want to consider further training (See page 37, One Plus One - Brief Encounters).

Do

- ✓ Sit comfortably.
- ✓ Observe carefully.
- ✓ Concentrate on listening (see exercise opposite).
- ✓ Make eye contact (though note that in some cultures this is considered impolite and challenging).
- ✓ Reflect back what you have heard to ensure that you have understood.
- ✓ Reflect back what the person you are working with is feeling (particularly strong feelings).
- ✓ Help them describe their feelings.
- ✓ Review what has been said and ensure that you both have the same understanding of any agreement made (even if it is only that the service user is welcome to make contact again).

Don't

- ✗ **Advise** – that might seem strange, after all what are you here for? There may be the time and the need for advice at the very end of the encounter, but wait to be asked, or make suggestions tentatively. Advice which has not been asked for is rarely heeded and it more often than not simply serves to end communication rather than extend it.
- ✗ **Self disclose** – it can be appropriate to drop in an anecdote that shows that you have some personal experience of what they are going through, but self-disclosure must be appropriate and brief. The service user needs to believe that you are tuning into them directly – not substituting your experience for theirs.
- ✗ **Judge** – disapproval will shut anyone up. However bad you think the person's behaviour is or has been, you will be unable to communicate effectively unless they feel respected.
- ✗ **Miss the point** – this is related to active listening (above). People who feel misunderstood are unlikely to return to clarify things.
- ✗ **Ignore the point** – don't be tempted to try to steer the discussion into more comfortable waters. It is almost certainly the thing that makes you feel uneasy is what the person needs to discuss.
- ✗ **Appear distracted** – shuffle papers, break off to talk to a colleague, look around the room.

Listen to each other

How to do it: in pairs.

What to do:

- One person has had a hard time getting to work. He/she has three minutes to talk to a representative of the transport company. The other member of the pair now responds (as a representative of the transport company), using some of the points on the DON'T list (previous page).
- Debrief: person one should describe how the encounter felt emotionally and physically. It may have made you physically tighten up, you may find that your shoulders have drawn up to your ears or that you are holding your breath, as you try to hold yourself back. Or it may have made you want to explode and shout out. We all want to be heard. It is not usually until we feel that we have been heard, and understood, that we feel ready to ask for guidance.

Now that you have created the space in which to listen, in pairs again, take three minutes each to talk through a change or transition you have experienced. The listener should then:

- Reflect back the content/facts of what you have said.
- Pick up the feelings that you expressed, or hinted at and name them. Check that they were right about those feelings.

Note how it feels to be actively listened to rather than interrupted or blocked.



Mind your baggage

It isn't just suspect parcels on trains which can blow up. Everyone has personal baggage, the stuff of their own history which they carry around with them. Your personal experience can help you to empathise with others, but it can also get in the way. If there are some subjects which you find troubling you may be tempted to avoid them. There may be occasions when you need to protect yourself – it is hard to be 'available' to someone as a shoulder to cry on if you need a shoulder yourself.

When you find that you are avoiding something, it is important to sort out whether:

- You can't cope with **your own feelings**.
- You are afraid you won't be able to cope with **their feelings**.
- You are afraid of being **swamped** by their demands.
- You **lack confidence** in your own skills.

You can't listen if you can't cope with what comes up, and if you don't listen you won't be able to help.

Fear of your feelings

If you are afraid that you will be upset by a disclosure of distress, you may instinctively cut off communications. Sometimes it is wise to do so, as long as you have acknowledged the person's distress by a touch or a word, and provided you have the means to refer them on. If you find that you are blocking emotional encounters regularly on account of your own fears then you yourself may be in need of an opportunity to talk. Hopefully group sessions will provide that time and you will develop a supportive ethos in which such concerns can be discussed safely. Workers who have encountered distressing events in their own lives may also need the opportunity to get professional support outside work and should be encouraged to see this as of both professional and personal benefit.

Fear of their feelings.

By this, most people usually mean that they are afraid that the person will break down or lash out. Crying is not something to be afraid of. Just do what comes naturally – provide a space in which they can express their feelings, a box of tissues, and some reassurance that crying is okay. Very often anger is a way of avoiding tears. An angry person may dissolve into sadness if your response is sympathy rather than hostility or blocking. People who have 'unmanageable feelings' are looking for someone to hold on to the feelings for them. A worker who can listen and remain calm and sympathetic will make the feeling seem more bearable so that, in time, it may then be possible to start looking at the conditions from which the feelings arise and, gradually, help the person see a way of moving on. (See 'If A Relationship Breaks Down' on page 23 for examples of such situations.)

Fear of being swamped

Sometimes you feel you just don't have time to allow someone to open up. It doesn't take time to acknowledge another person's pain (often a touch on the arm will be enough) but it may take time to listen. It is often enough to say something like, 'I can see you are distressed and it sounds too important to rush things now. If you can come back...I will be able to give you 20 minutes', or 'If you can wait till tomorrow we can have an hour together.' Knowing that you can manage time, and that you will only allow the time offered, enables you to establish a clear boundary which will make the encounter feel safer for both of you. The service user doesn't feel that she is 'bothering you' and you don't fear being swamped. This may be particularly important if it is a person who you know, or fear, to be demanding.

Lack of confidence in your own skills

We hope that this pack will help you to see how much you do have to offer, but it might also be an opportunity to consider further training (see appendix). It may also be that you are genuinely uncertain of procedures. If this is the case it is perfectly legitimate to say to someone; 'I don't know what is the best course of action but I will find out.'

Getting in touch with feelings

How to do it: this could be done as a group 'brainstorm', in pairs or even individually. It may be a useful icebreaker to use with service user's too.

What to do: just tick the boxes – or come up with a better description of your own. Then explain your choice. Is there an animal you would rather be?

The animal that most represents the way I feel is:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> a growling bear | <input type="checkbox"/> a worm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a beast of burden | <input type="checkbox"/> a howling wolf |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a purring cat | <input type="checkbox"/> a prickly hedgehog |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a mother hen | <input type="checkbox"/> a lost sheep |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a caged lion | <input type="checkbox"/> a mad dog |
| <input type="checkbox"/> a sky lark | <input type="checkbox"/> the cat that walks alone |

Getting stuck: getting unstuck

Listening is the way to open up an encounter. But then what? Your job is to enable the service user to cope better with her own problems, not to take them onto your own shoulders instead. If you are to help someone to move on you need to be aware of your own behaviour and reactions.



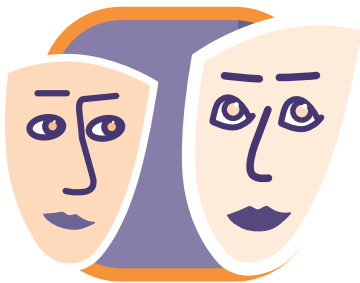
The worker as parent

It is very easy to fall into the trap of setting up a dependency in which a person is coming to you for help and you are protecting, encouraging, sympathising and rescuing. In other words being the nurturing parent to the person's 'child' who may be obedient or manipulative but will also be stuck in a framework in which she is in perpetual need. While it is often necessary to open up an interaction in this 'nurturing' mode, it is important to move things on.



The worker as facilitator

A positive outcome would be for you to pass control back to the individual and move on into an adult relationship in which, together, you evaluate, make decisions and the person feels able to act. In acting to change a 'stuck' situation, he or she is then empowered rather than remaining dependent.



Moving on

- Help the person to see the situation they are in. In order to help them see it is important not only to provide space for them to speak but then to reflect back to them the story they are telling you. Reflect back also what you pick up about their feelings so that they can begin to separate the emotional reaction from the underlying story .
- Once the person feels understood it may be possible to invite suggestions for change. Perhaps by asking: What do you want? What do you really want? Now/in the long term? What would be happening if things were different?

Helping skills

How to do it: in pairs or alone

What to do: Think back to a time when you have needed help:

- for a practical matter
- for an emotional matter.

Ask yourself:

- How easy was it to ask for help? What were the barriers you had to get through?
- Was help offered?
- How easy was it to accept help?
- If you did accept help, what was it about the quality of the offer that made it acceptable?
- How do you feel about the person who offered it?

How to move things on

Don't take sides. When family members get into disputes they may want you to 'take sides' but disputes between people who are close to one another may be based in lack of communication rather than in straightforward issues of right and wrong. Helping people to communicate their feelings is usually more useful than stoking up the fire of their indignation.

Clear communication. A person who misunderstands what you are offering, or your intentions, may feel let down and angry. Use more than one way of passing on information: tell anecdotes, provide hand-outs, write things down. (Even if someone is not literate, there may well be someone nearby who is.) Just a few words can provide something to hang on to in between sessions and a point of reference for the next one.

Endings. At the end of a discussion, always review what has been said and ask the service user if your review is correct. If action is to be taken, a referral is to be made or there is to be another appointment – write it down. If there is to be no appointment decide whether it would be appropriate to 'keep the door open' with a closing remark about talking again when the person feels the need.

The power of the group. Group work can be a powerful way of challenging service user/worker dependency. The fact of hearing feelings, thought and dilemmas similar to one's own, publicly vocalised by other people can be extraordinarily liberating and group inter-action is a powerful tool for teaching, learning and reflecting. (See pages 4–5 for more on groups.)

Section 2

Transitions

Relationships

Families are about relationships and relationships are about love. We may not always love wisely or well, but it is the need for love – not the hope of a council flat or someone to pay the rent – which fuels our life dreams and propels us into an affair, a marriage, or the longing for a child. But love is also haunted by the fear of its ending. Fear of separation and loss can loom so large that we give up before we have started or run away as soon as we get close.

Every relationship goes through cycles: some people return to the first one or two phases, over and over again, never making it through to calmer waters. Others make a few false starts before finding a way of navigating the choppy waters of a long-term relationship. Transitions or adjustments in a relationship are inevitable and have to be negotiated; this is particularly true in the first five years – which often coincide with parenthood. Some common transitions are:

- moving house
- getting pregnant
- changing jobs
- child going to school
- becoming a mother/father
- losing a close relative or friend
- getting married
- losing employment
- moving in together
- becoming a couple.

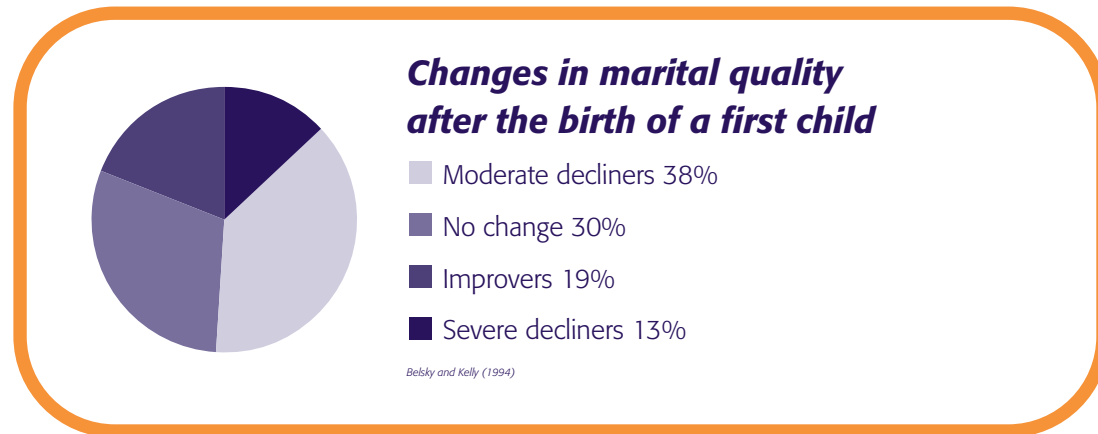
Are there any other transitions that you or the people you work with have to cope with?

Becoming a parent

Children may arrive at any stage. They may complete a relationship, hasten the end of it, test it to its limits, or even replace it. There is only one thing for certain – they will change it!

Eight out of ten women will have a baby before they are 40. Eighty per cent of those babies will be born to couples who live together (the majority of whom are also married). Few women decide to parent alone; indeed, for many women alone with a baby, the pregnancy, or the birth, has already precipitated the end of a relationship. But being in a couple doesn't necessarily offer

protection from the shock of new parenthood. Though the average first-time mother is in her late twenties and has already been married for over two years, 50 per cent of parents surveyed (Belsky, 1994¹) reported a severe or moderate decline in marital satisfaction whereas only 19% heralded this often much yearned for event as 'improving' marital satisfaction. Clearly the birth of a baby is also often the birth of a personal crisis.



The transition to parenthood

Those working with new parents need to be alert to signals of distress which may be well hidden behind a 'happy new mum' facade. The feelings which new parents express may be very powerful and, if unexpressed, may undermine relationships and parenting skills.

- New mums are happy aren't they?
- I am so tired
- I feel sad and lonely
- I am angry
- I'm being taken over

How you can help

Getting the feelings out

Ask mothers to describe the way they are feeling (perhaps using the exercise on page 19.) It often helps just being able to identify and express feelings which seem irrational such as anger, jealousy or fear.

Identifying the ghosts at the feast

Behind every parent with a new baby is a host of memories. Parents may find that they are haunted by memories of their childhood (not all of them positive) which seem to rise from nowhere when a baby is born. Lone mothers may welcome the opportunity to talk about their fears and couples may find that it helps to discuss their anxieties about parenting so that they become part of their understanding of each other.

'My dad left when my mum had me. I expect he'll leave too.'

'I had two abortions and I keep thinking about them. I look at her and wonder what they would have been like.'

Real relationships may also need to be re-negotiated. Lone mothers, for example, may need help negotiating a 'mother' role when living with (or very close to) their own mothers.

'The reason she (the partner's mother) sort of don't want me about is to do with the fact that I'm not working. I don't fit her standards.' (Young Unemployed and Unmarried)²

Moving it on

Once a parent has identified her needs it is time to talk about how at least some of those needs could be met.

'I went to see my health visitor and I realised I was depressed. She managed to make me express my feelings to her and got me to talk to my husband. She came around to the house and talked to both of us. We had been having arguments every day but now we are communicating a lot better. She saved my marriage really.' One Plus One

Encourage communication

Even if couples are not living together, better communication may ease the overwhelming feeling of responsibility some lone mothers feel. Those who are living together may find that a gulf has grown up between them – and it seems to be occupied by a baby. Mothers feel that fathers don't do enough. Research suggests that men often over-estimate their contribution to housework. Fathers may feel excluded from the drama of new parenthood and resent what feels like nagging. If you feel you lack the skills to help, further training may be useful.

Help to make connections

Isolation can be acute for all mothers. Mothers who have been working may have no friends or relatives near their homes. They may become particularly dependent on their partners, building up very high expectations for companionship and support – something their partners may not have expected or been ready for. Partners may react by backing off, returning to adolescent patterns, and treating the new mother as they might an angry parent trying to curtail freedom. Lone mothers may in fact be less isolated by day because they are more likely to have maintained connections with friends and relatives. For them the isolation in the evenings may be hardest to deal with.

'It's one thing your mum saying your doing a good job, but when Thomas's in bed, and you're sitting on the settee, you've got no one to cuddle up to, do you know what I mean?' Young, unemployed and unmarried

Connecting feelings to circumstances

What to do: Ask yourself the two questions below. Then draw lines from the feelings on the left to the causes on the right

Why are you feeling this way?

Who are these feelings directed towards?

The feeling

- anger
- jealousy
- sadness
- unloved
- guilt.

What/who is it about

- the baby crying
- husband going out to work
- mother/partner absent
- partner unresponsive
- about neglecting the other children.

What would make it better?

What to do: Ask parents 'if you could wave a wand, what would you wish for?' This may help them to express their feelings and provide an opportunity for you to validate them.

Three of the most likely things are:

Sleep: Lack of sleep is often a major reason for stress and it makes all the other stresses of early parenthood seem much worse. When both parents are tired it is easy to start blaming each other rather than recognising that both are needy and could help each other.

Love: You want a cuddle – he wants sex. If couples are unable to talk about their emotional and sexual needs they may both be feeling miserable and unloved.

To have someone look after me: Parents may find themselves wishing that they could be the baby for a while and be looked after and soothed. Help them to think of ways they could get some 'time out' from caring – even just for an hour a week.



Distracted parents/ distressed children

During periods of stress (such as homelessness, illness or separation) parents are often too taken up with their own distress to be able to provide comfort and reassurance for their children, whose needs may be inadvertently pushed aside. Children are extremely sensitive to changes in the emotional temperature – this is particularly true if no one has explained to them what is happening:

'Most adults say, this is happening and that is it, so live with it'

'It's as though my feelings didn't matter'³

They may start bed-wetting, become anxious and withdrawn at school, eating and sleeping patterns may be disturbed, and they may start to suffer bullying as the signs of their distress are picked up by other children.

In a supportive relationship the less stressed parent can be encouraged to take up the emotional slack and fill the gap left by the stressed partner. A greater problem arises if there is no partner or when the stress is a result of marital conflict. Parents are the first people that children turn to when they are unhappy. When parental conflict is the cause of their unhappiness, or when the parent is alone, or perhaps in a new relationship when the partner may not yet feel able to step in, children may feel that there is no one to whom they can turn for support. They may also feel that they must protect their parents and that they may be in some way responsible for the distress.

How you can help

Children may not ask for help but are often very grateful for the opportunity to be listened to. Research by the National Stepfamily Association³ found that professionals working with children were extremely reluctant to talk to them about family stress and yet, the children interviewed for the same research made it clear that they wanted, indeed needed, to talk. As one young woman put it in an interview with The Guardian newspaper,

'It was the first time I'd really talked to others in the same situation as me. It really felt good.'

Guardian Parents, June 1999

Young People and Family Change is a booklet produced by the National Stepfamily Association. It contains a number of trigger activities which can be used to help start such discussions with children and young people.

Grandparents (and other relatives)

Grandparents may feel unsure of their role during a family crisis or transition. Children need all the stability they can get and a continuing relationship with grandparents (on both sides if separation is likely) may help to reassure them that life will become stable again and that changes do not mean loss of love. Grandparents can be a real island of continuity and peace at times when parents seem to have lost their way. However, it is important that they are not seen by the children to take sides in disputes between parents.

Child's needs v parent's needs

If a worker has gained a parent's trust, and then suspects abuse or neglect of a child, taking action in support of the child may feel like a breach of trust. It helps both workers and adults if the guidelines on the reporting of suspected cases of child abuse are made absolutely clear. It should not be left to individual workers to make a decision in such cases.



Family conflict

Conflicts happen between people, they are a normal part of relationships and most conflicts can be worked through. They don't necessarily mean the end. Different couples have different ways of dealing with conflict: some avoid rows, others blow up and find anger a useful way to clear out stuff that has been brewing, some talk things through. All are valid as long as they work for both partners. Parenthood means different things too. Some couples opt to prioritise their children and feel relaxed about the changes in their own relationship. For others, the relationship is the priority and the early years of parenting bring some difficult adjustments.

- Couples who make room for each other, even in the busy period of early parenthood, are more likely to be happy in their partnership than those who allow their children to crowd each other out.
- Women are more likely to 'bring a dispute to the table' and try to deal with it, whereas men are more likely to bury it, or try to ignore it. Given this imbalance it is worth helping women to find ways of opening up a dispute which don't immediately escalate into a row. Try using the Active Listening exercise on page 10 to encourage couples (and parents and children) to listen to each other recognising both the content and also the feelings.
- Some 70 per cent of arguments are not about things that can be resolved – they are recycled grievances about things that probably cannot be changed. Better to accept the differences between you and move on – a sense of humour can help!
- Conflict with children is part and parcel of being a parent. There are parenting programmes available which can be used by groups, and many of the exercises and hand-outs provided can also be useful for individuals. See Resources on page 36.

How you can help

Conflict may have started because the partners, or the parent and child (or even close friends) have been unable to 'hear' one another. Workers should be careful how they 'reflect back' to the person. It is tempting to take sides with someone, but be aware of the danger of acting as an amplifier, rather than facilitator, and making things worse. Workers need to point out that they are not in a position to make judgements, but that they may be able to help people manage disputes more constructively. Couples in real difficulty might benefit from talking to a relationship counsellor.

Violence

Violence, or threat of violence, either to partner or children, is never an acceptable way to deal with relationship conflicts. All Sure Start projects need to have clear guidelines on how workers should deal with known, or suspected, incidents. In addition it would be wise to have links with local refuges and violence prevention programmes (which have a good record of success). Victims of domestic violence are more likely to open up to workers, rather than waiting until violence has escalated, if they think that the helper will listen and support them, whatever they decide to do.

If a relationship breaks down

- Two marriages in five end in divorce.
- The average length of marriage for those marrying today is 9.8 years.
- Three in five divorcing couples have children under 16.
- Over half the divorcing parents will repartner and form a stepfamily.
- At least half of these marriages also end in divorce (25 per cent break down within the first year).
- Only three children in every hundred lose all contact with their fathers after divorce or separation. Nearly half see their fathers once a week.

Research and children of divorce

Most research indicates that the children do best if they can maintain a strong relationship with both of their biological parents and, through those central relationships, learn that separation need not mean the end of love.

*'My mum left my real dad when we were young. I was pretty close to my real dad. All I knew was that we were going on holiday with nanny, and we never went back. I don't want that for Carl. If [his dad] gets married or has other kids then Carl is still going to know that his daddy loves him.'*⁴

If this core relationship can be maintained, relationships with other adults will be easier. For example, a child is more likely to accept a step parent if he or she doesn't fear losing the relationship with his or her own parent.

Parents and children may discover that children find contact visits upsetting. Children may cry when they leave one parent and then cry again when they come home, particularly if visits are irregular and the parents clearly show their hostility towards each other. Parents may find it hard to believe that this turmoil really is 'good for the children.'

This is a very difficult situation to handle but it might help if workers bear in mind that evidence from research suggests⁵ that most children adjust better if:

- They are kept in the picture about changes which affect them, including remarriages and the arrival of stepchildren in both families.
- Parents avoid pressure on a child to 'take sides'. Most children need to preserve their belief in the goodness of both parents. There will be time, when they are older, for them to make judgements of their own. Parents should try not to say negative things about the 'ex' in front of the children.
- Parents avoid arguing in front of their children.

What the law says

- Under the Family Law Act 1996, public funding is provided for mediation in family proceedings. People who intend to apply for public funding are required to consider whether mediation might be appropriate for resolving disputes. People who are not married may also ask for mediation. The Government encourages the use of mediation in appropriate cases.
- The Children Act 1989 recognises the child's need to maintain contact with people who are important to them (this usually means immediate family but it could be a close family friend or stepparent). Contact includes school reports but it could be interpreted to mean anything from letters to regular visits.

Courts will make contact orders. But it is very much in the interests of the children for parents to come to an agreement rather than to subject their children to court action.

Parental responsibility

Those with parental responsibility are:

- All mothers.
- Fathers who are married to their children's mothers.
- Fathers who have 'parental responsibility agreements'- where both parents agree this can be drawn up and signed at any time and registered at the Principal Registry of the Family Division (PRFD). If the mother does not agree, the father must apply for a court order.

Others with an interest in the child can also apply to the court for 'contact'.

If a parent has been violent, contact may be denied or strictly limited.

When children won't go

If children refuse to visit their non-resident parent, workers may be able to create some space in which they can talk about their feelings. The non-resident parent often believes that the resident parent has 'turned' the child against them, but in fact there are many possible reasons:

- They may identify very strongly with the resident parent's pain, and blame the non-resident parent for inflicting it. It may help if the resident parent can be encouraged to make it clear that, in spite of their own feelings of hurt, they want their child to keep in touch with the other parent.
- They may be angry with the non-resident parent for leaving them and want to punish him/her by rejection. If this is the case, it is perhaps necessary for the non-resident parent to allow the child space to deal with the anger. There are many ways of keeping in touch and most children do get over these feelings if they are given evidence of their parents' continuing love and concern.
- They may be at a stage (perhaps early adolescence) when they want to be able to organise their own lives and resent having to 'fit in' with a parent.

The court will enforce contact orders where it feels the resident parent is being obstructive but court action is unlikely to be welcomed by the child and may well deepen resentment. It is very important for the non-resident parent to act in the interests of the child – that may sometimes mean standing back from the relationship while tempers cool.

How you can help

To help both parents and the child/children manage contact arrangements you might suggest to the resident parent:

- They use the time when the children are away visiting the non-resident parent to do something they enjoy so that they too will look forward to the visits.
- They should be consistent – make contact arrangements and stick to them so that children know where they will be each week.
- If contact with their ex-partner is upsetting, they should try to find another person such as a grandparent, friend, or child contact centre to take care of the hand-over. A third party may also be able to help out if arrangements break down.

You could also :

- Try to include non-resident fathers in outreach work. They are rarely given the opportunity to talk about their feelings or learn parenting skills.

Contact centres

Where relationships between estranged adults are stormy, child contact centres provide a place where the non-resident parent can meet children. For contact centres in your area contact National Association of Child Contact Centres 0115 948 4557 or visit their website at: www.naccc.org.uk.

Starting over

If one relationship ends, parents are likely either to run for cover emotionally and avoid new relationships, or try to find another person to fill the emotional gap. In the end, most children whose parents divorce will experience the re-coupling of one or other parent. In the early 1990s one child in twelve was living in a stepfamily. That figure is rising. A stepfamily is not a re-constituted family. It is something completely new for all the people involved –



fantasy

(equivalent to First Love)



immersion

*pressure confusion and stress
mount as differences become clear.*



difference

This is the most critical phase when break down is most likely. Workers may be able to help the family move on to the next stage.



mobilisation

when conflicts start to be aired.



action

when new rules and ways of doing things are agreed.



contact

intimacy and authenticity in relationships.



resolution

the family feels whole – children feel secure in both families.

Based on Papernow's description of the stages of step family life.

Opening up and owning up

How to do it: In a group, using a flipchart, or individually:

What to do: Ask whether participants have ever been on holiday with another family, or shared events such as Christmas, or spent time at a drop-in centre with other families with children. Look at the stages described by Papernow, and discuss the ways in which they also apply – in a speeded up sense – to such events. Then:

- List the events which triggered conflict between family groups (different rules about key times such as bed time and meal times. Key issues such as 'manners', swearing and sweets etc.).
- Describe the different ways in which children reacted (anxious, over-excited, manipulative, silent or sullen).
- Describe the different ways in which parents may react towards the children (defensive of own children, overly critical of own children, silently critical of your children, hostile to your children, tolerant but detached, friendly and engaged).
- Pool ideas about how you have managed such situations (didn't discuss it, had an almighty row on the last night and never saw them again, talked things through before you left and agreed to shared rules).
- How could communication be better managed in the future to allow parents to express feelings of shame and anger in a controlled way rather than blowing up or splitting up?

Putting two families together

A new love might seem like a new start for the adults involved, but it will always be different for the children. For them there has been no period of 'falling in love' to cement the relationship. They are faced, initially, not with gaining a parent but losing one, as attention and energy is focused on the new partner. Indeed, for children, the creation of a stepfamily may feel like a crisis similar to the break-up of the first family.

If they are living in the step family there will be issues of territory (why should I share my room?), of favouritism (why should he be allowed to stay up later than me?), of fear of loss (what if my mum/dad likes the other children more than me?) and simple dislike (I don't know this person – why should I be expected to share my life with them?). If they are only visiting the step family they may feel like strangers and feel intensely jealous of the children who have full-time access to 'their' dad or mum.

Parents need to be able to talk about the conflict between their own need for love and and their children's fears of loss. Children will cope better if they are encouraged to express their fears openly and to discuss ways of resolving family differences and creating shared family 'rules' or traditions. All Together Now, by Claire Salisbury and Cheryl Walters (from Parentline Plus), focuses on areas of particular tension in step family life – and how best to handle them.



The impact of a new baby in a step family

Having a baby is an extremely emotional experience. Adding a baby to an existing step family affects a number of different relationships which may already be quite fragile.

*'Difficulties in the relationship between step family couples were especially apparent among those who had produced children of their own.'*⁶

Workers should be aware of the likely areas of tension.

Existing children

Children may feel fear that their father/mother won't love them any more and that the new baby will take their place. While all children experience some of these feelings at the birth of a younger sibling, with step children the fear is sharpened by distance (if the child is born to a household which they only visit) or, if it is the family they live in, by a fear that they will be seen as inferior to a baby born of a united couple. Half siblings need a great deal of reassurance.

'Her father made sure that his son was the very first person to see her after she was born. It was quite hard to organise but worth it I think because he had been so anxious about her birth and was so charmed by her in the flesh.'

As long as the children's feelings are acknowledged, and relationships encouraged, the new baby will help to make things work because he/she will be the only member of the family with no particular baggage, and babies are usually happy to love anyone who seems to be interested in them.

A new mum in an 'old' family

When the baby is a first for one parent, but not the other, the new mother will feel all the confusions of new parenthood but she will have other problems too: she may be haunted by the knowledge that he has been through this with another woman and find it hard not to feel jealous. She may also find it hard to feel in control of a process which her partner knows more about than she does. On top of that she may resent the time he spends with his older children, and try to use the pregnancy and birth as an opportunity to loosen his bonds with his first family.

An old dad in a new family

For the prospective father this may be a particularly difficult time. He may feel that his own needs are being squeezed out. His partner may be anxious about the impending birth and expect one hundred per cent attention; his children may well have become angry or withdrawn, his ex may act out her feelings of betrayal and loss by stepping up demands around money or access arrangements. The father may feel inclined to draw closer to his 'new' family and withdraw from the old one just because it seems like the easier way out.

Difference in feelings for step and birth children

Love for a new baby can, temporarily, over-shadow feelings for older children. Usually, as the baby becomes less demanding, those feelings start to even out. Where the baby is a birth child and the older children are not, that difference will be exaggerated.

'She is my flesh and blood, she carries my genes. When she is sick, for example, I can deal with it quite naturally, but if James is sick, it makes me feel rather squeamish. It is getting easier but I was quite shocked that I felt that way.' Fiona Fullerton in Changing Families issue³

Step children who have strong attachments to their birth parents will experience, and understand, the difference in these feelings. It is important to ensure that they are treated fairly and that they are reassured that their birth parent will still love them as much as ever. Although it may be hard for the new parent, it is important to understand that stepchildren may need more contact with their parent, rather than less, when a new baby is born.

Ex-partners

Even when relationships are quite amicable the birth of a baby can bring back intense feelings of jealousy and loss.

'It was like a kick in the guts: birth and children was the only thing left of us together which she hadn't taken from me.'

If they are not amicable, the birth may exacerbate problems around access and money. An estranged mother may refuse to allow her children to visit the new baby (often suggesting that it is the child's feelings they are protecting). An estranged father may withhold money on the grounds that he doesn't want to subsidise another man's family (though it is of course his own children who will suffer). The new parent may insist on restricting access (because she/he is tired and preoccupied) or, on the other hand, may want to draw them closer in – to create a 'real' family and in so doing restrict access to an absent parent.

Time to get in touch with primary feelings of jealousy and grief may help an ex-partner to come to terms with the changing situation and make it easier for him/her to co-operate at a time when he/she may want to lash out in pain.

Grandparents

Grandparents and other relations of older children may fear that they will be 'cut out' in favour of the grandparents of the new baby. Alternatively, the grandparents may switch their allegiance to the children of the new family and marginalise those who live elsewhere and only visit at weekends.

'When we separated, his mother stopped seeing them. She didn't even send birthday cards. It was as though she thought the children belonged to me and she dumped them out of loyalty to him.'

Other permutations

These are just some of the variations and it is important to remain sensitive to other possibilities. Things will be different where children have lost a parent through death; if a father has lost contact with his previous children his joy may be mixed with grief for which he may feel he has no legitimate outlet. Where it is the father who is the new parent it may be hard to deal with sibling jealousy from older half brothers and sisters – he may feel he is being crowded out of the relationship with his partner.

Family maps

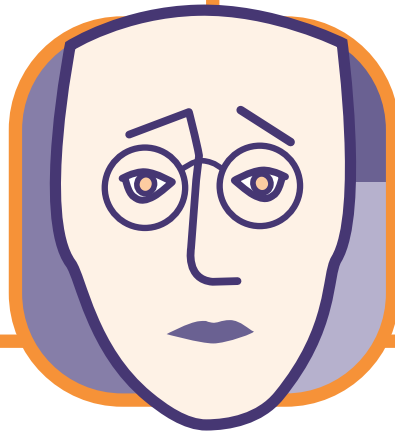
This exercise may help family members to get in touch with their primary feelings (of grief or betrayal) and, by allowing them expression and validation, they may be better able to contain or disperse feelings of rage and anger which may be tempting them to take action which could in the long term be destructive to themselves and other family members.

How to do it: In ante-natal classes (it can be a useful exercise with any parents – not just step parents), or for partners to do together.

What to do: Draw a map of your own family (like the one opposite). Note the size and position of the family members – who feels close and who is small and far away from the centre. What does this say about your relationship with each person? How do you feel your relationship with each member may change (for the better or the worse) once the baby is born?

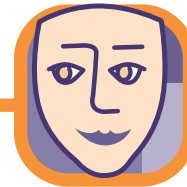
If your partner is not with you, take your drawing home and ask him or her to draw another map, so that you can compare and talk about your fears and hopes for managing these relationships. You may wish to ask your stepchildren to draw maps too. This will give you an opportunity to discuss their fears and to reassure them.

Good, a proper family at last.
They can bring the baby for Christmas.



I want a family
of my own.
I wish his
children would
stay away.

Mothering is my job –
how dare she try it?



How can I cope with so
many competing demands?



I have a mum and a dad and
a big sister would be fun.



I am afraid Dad won't love me any more.



Money

Poverty is likely to be an underlying factor in much of the work Sure Start projects are engaged in. Between a quarter and a third of children in the UK are living in a family on means-tested benefits. Poverty is related to a cascade of negative life events: these children are more likely to be badly housed and suffer frequent moves, more likely to get ill, more likely to have problems at school, more likely to have to cope with hard knocks and less likely to have the reserves to cope with them. Evidence shows that some lone mothers on benefits cannot afford to eat healthily. Many experience severe hardship, poor housing, lack of access to financial services, and debt.

Lone parents

Lone parents are more likely to live in poverty. Typically, lone parents' incomes are less than half those of two-parent families, with average net incomes a little over £100 a week. Two thirds of lone parents are currently relying on Income Support and half the lone parents in work were claiming Family Credit – a figure which will rise as The Working Families Tax Credit comes in this year (see 'Work' page 34).

Step families

Step families also tend to have less disposable income than intact first families. This is because either there are larger numbers of dependent children living full-time in the family, or one or other partner is paying maintenance to a first family as well as incurring additional costs for visits.

Child Support

Any lone parents claiming Income Support or Job Seeker's Allowance, must either apply to the Child Support Agency (CSA) or show 'good cause' why contact with the absent partner would be a danger to themselves or their children. If there is 'good cause' to fear violence or undue distress, no benefit will be deducted. If, however, a lone parent opts not to co-operate with the CSA, money will be deducted from Income Support.

Any maintenance claimed from their absent partner will be deducted from their benefit. This will change under the new rules which come into effect in 2001, allowing parents on benefits to retain £10 of any maintenance recovered.

Housing

According to 1998 figures, 30% of lone parents had experienced homelessness in the last 10 years, compared to only 3% of couples with dependent children⁷. Under the 1996 Housing Act homeless families with children lost their right to automatic re-housing by councils. The council is obliged only to help them find temporary accommodation. Much of that accommodation will be in the private sector and it is not uncommon for families (in particular lone parent families) to be forced to move fairly regularly (20% of the lone parents surveyed by March-Ford and Finlayson⁸ had spent time in temporary accommodation). This clearly has an effect on the children who may have to move schools and will have more difficulty maintaining relationships with friends and neighbours.

Housing is also more likely to be sub-standard: 4 out of 10 reported repairs outstanding; over half those in council accommodation reported problems with damp; 4 out of 10 reported problems with rats or mice; 22% have no central heating.

Debt

Rent arrears are a major problem for one in five lone parents. Rent arrears are a bigger problem for those in work than those on Income Support, which may be because of the way in which Housing Benefit is administered and the activation of 'frozen' rent debts when they return to work. Of the 22% of lone parents who are owner-occupiers, 16% were in arrears (rising to 31% among those out of work).

Those on low incomes have little recourse for unexpected expenses: the repair of a washing machine, a lost winter coat, a broken bed. Although loans are available through the Social Fund, the application process is cumbersome and intrusive, and so people are often tempted to turn to loan sharks or to build up 'catalogue' debts.

How you can help

Workers cannot banish poverty, but it is important to recognise the part it may be playing in demotivating people. Practical help such as benefits advice, debt counselling, or even a do-it-yourself class with tools on loan, could help people to deal with major, pressing and practical problems which may be adversely affecting their ability to cope with parenting. Workers should also be alert to the fact that financial or practical problems can sometimes be masking deeper issues of isolation and helplessness. Practical assistance may lift anxiety, but if the underlying difficulties are not addressed, a new set of practical problems will almost certainly appear and the person will come back for help. 'Getting Stuck, Getting Unstuck' on page 14 of this pack provides strategies for engaging people in their own 'rescue'.



Work

More than half of the mothers of children under five are in paid work and one in five works full-time. Of those in work, the majority are older mothers (in their thirties) with higher educational qualifications. Those least likely to be in work are lone parents and those with unemployed partners.

Partners of unemployed men share with lone mothers a greater chance of living in an area with high unemployment, a lower level of education (40% of lone mothers have no qualifications) and a lower chance of finding work which pays above the benefit level. Both groups have been caught in a poverty trap – all their potential income has been set against benefits. Where work is irregular, and incomes low, parents may feel safer staying on benefits which will at least ensure that they don't get into rent arrears.

The Working Families Tax Credit replaced Family Credit from October 1999 for parents who work 16 hours a week or more. It tops up wages for families with children and offers additional help with the costs of paying for registered childcare. In calculating entitlement to this benefit, any child maintenance received is ignored but, if the parent is receiving Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, these will be affected by the WFTC income.

New Deal for Lone Parents is a programme offering advice and support to lone parents wishing to move into work. All lone parents on Income Support whose youngest child has reached school age will be invited in to meet a Lone Parent Adviser who can help them to identify the barriers stopping them working and consider how best to overcome them. Advisers should have information about local provision of childcare, education and training and also have budgets to help their service users with all three. The programme is entirely voluntary and parents of younger children can also make use of it if they wish. They simply go into their local job centre and ask to register.

The benefits to the mother

Mothers themselves see the companionship of the workplace as even more important than income. A job can break isolation, increase self esteem and improve skills. Mothers who have no qualifications and no job experience will need advice and support, before they are able to venture into the job market.

The downside

Parents working full time often feel very stressed. Lone parents may feel that they are not seeing enough of their children and that they have no time for themselves. Dual earner families also report more marital dissatisfaction than families in which the mother stays at home.

What about the children?

Most of the evidence shows that children thrive in good quality childcare. Under ones do better with one to one care. However, many mothers prefer, while children are under five, to work part-time. In the few months after a divorce or separation, or at the start of a new relationship, when children need extra stability, parents may feel particularly strongly that they need to put the emotional needs of their children first.

How you can help

- Provide opportunities for parents to think through their options.
- Prepare lone parents for Start-up and Personal Adviser meetings.
- Suggest that they draw up a list of their own pros and cons.
- Suggest that parents draw up a list of their skills (see exercise on page 5)
– help them to identify skills which may not be immediately obvious.
- Provide information about colleges and courses.
- Provide information about benefits.
- Discuss childcare options. This is critical – no mother wants to leave her child with people whom she doesn't trust (nor should she be expected to).

Section 3

Resources

Group resources

Learning to Step Together: building and strengthening step families, Kahn T, available from Parentline Plus (see below). Ideas for dealing with the difficult issues that arise in step families from setting rules to strengthening the couple relationship.

Parenting: A Rough Guide, Phillips A, available from NSPCC, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH. Tel: 0207 825 2775. Produced in collaboration with Community Education Development Centre. A resource for use with groups of parents which focuses on children's behaviour.

Us and the Kids – Ideas and resources for parent groups, 1991, available from Development Education Centre, 998 Bristol Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6LE. Tel: 0121 472 3255. Ideas and resources for groups of parents to learn from each other and support each other.

Publications

All Together Now, Claire Salisbury and Cheryl Walters, available from Parentline Plus. Practical guide to navigating step family get togethers.

The Transition to Parenthood, Belsky J and Kelly L, 1994, Vermillion.

Young, unemployed, unmarried, Rolph J, 1999, available from Working with Men 320 Commercial Way, London SE15 1QN. Tel: 0208 308 0709.

Divorce and Separation: the outcomes for children, 1998 available from Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. Tel: 01904 629241.

Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation, McAllister F, 1995, available from One Plus One Marriage & Partnership Breakdown (see below).

One Plus One Information Pack, contains information cards and statistical data on subjects such as marriage, divorce, relationships and health and parenthood.

When Partners Become Parents: the big life change for couples, Cowan C and Cowan P, 1992, Basic Books.

Young People and Family Change, Braun D and Smith C, 1999, available from Parentline Plus (see below).

Single and Pregnant, NCOPF, 1999, available free to lone parents from NCOPF Lone Parent Helpline.

Getting it Right: the Guide for Lone Parents on Benefits and Tax, NCOPF, 1999, available free to lone parents from NCOPF Lone Parent Helpline.

Maintenance and the Child Support Agency, NCOPF, 1999, available free to lone parents from NCOPF Lone Parent Helpline.

Training

One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research – Brief Encounters, designed to help participants recognise and respond supportively to individuals and couples experiencing relationship difficulties, particularly at critical times such as after the birth of a baby.

Parentline Plus – Family Change and Family Support, provides an understanding of the impact of family change on children and adults, offers a framework for use with families.

Parentline Plus – Parent Network ‘Parenting Matters’ – aims to help parents develop their confidence as parents and develops communication skills.

Useful organisations

National Council for One Parent Families. 255 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2LX, Tel: 0207 428 5400. Lone Parent Line: 0800 018 5026. Information on maintenance, tax, benefits, legal rights, housing.

One Plus One Marriage & Partnership Research. The Wells, 7-15 Roseberry Avenue, London EC1R 4SP. Tel: 0207 841 3660. Translates research findings into practical training programmes and innovative projects to help couples and families.

Parentline Plus. 520 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NW5 1TL. Tel: 0808 8002222. A range of information sheets, publications and training materials on how to support families during transitions.

Daycare Trust. 21 St. Georges Road, London SE1 6ES. Tel: 0207 840 3350. Website: www.daycaretrust.org.uk. Provides information on childcare options for parents and advises those working with parents.

Gingerbread. 7 Sovereign Close, Sovereign Court, London E1W 3HW. Tel: 0800 0184318. Support and practical help for lone parents and their children via a national network of local self-help groups.

The National Early Years Network. 77 Holloway Road, London N7 8JZ. Tel: 0207 607 9573. An independent charity concerned with improving the quality of life for all young children. Supports early years workers through professional training programmes and publications.

Maternity Alliance. 45 Beech Street, London EC2P 2LX. Tel: 0207 588 8582. Provides information on rights and services for pregnant women, new parents and their babies. Publishes factsheets and provides training courses.

National Association of Child Contact Centres. Minerva House, Spaniel Row, Nottingham NG1 6EP. Tel: 0115 948 4557. Centres offer neutral meeting places where children of separated families can enjoy contact with one or both parents, and sometimes other family members, in a comfortable and safe environment when there is no viable alternative.

National Family Mediation. Star House, 104-108 Grafton Road, London NW5 4BD. Tel: 0207 485 9066. For separating and divorcing couples. Can help couples make joint decisions about a range of issues.

Relate. Herbert Gray College, Rugby CV21 3AP. Tel: 01788 573241. Offers counselling to couples experiencing relationship difficulties.

Helplines/advice lines

Lone Parent Helpline at National Council for One Parent Families: Tel: 0800 018 5026
Open 9.15 – 5.15 weekdays for help and information on maintenance, tax, benefits, legal rights, housing. For maintenance and money advice call Mon & Fri 10.30 – 1.30pm and Weds 3pm-6pm.

Parentline Plus: Tel: 0808 800 2222. A confidential freephone helpline for anyone in a parenting role, including step parents, grandparents, foster carers. Textphone: 0800 783 6783.

Maternity Alliance Information Line: Tel: 0207 588 8582. Open 3 days a week between 10.30 am and 12.30pm. Days may change each week but recorded information on maternity rights is available.

Gingerbread Advice Line: Tel: 0800 018 4318.

Answers from page 7

- 1 caption (b) This mother is also a fifteen-year-old. In relation to you, is she a fifteen-year-old confronted with an authority figure, or a mother talking to another mother? Which relationship is likely to empower her? Does she need you to respond to both sides of her? How should you do that?
- 2 caption (a) This is a quote from a young unemployed man whose girlfriend is pregnant. From Young, Unemployed, Unmarried... Fathers Talking, by Justin Rolph, published by Working with Men, 1999. What support could you offer him?
- 3 caption (e) This is another quote from the same father. We don't know whether or not this young man is now part of a step family. He could be but that would not cancel out his sense of grief for the child he has lost. What support can you offer him?
- 4 caption (c) Being financially secure and educated doesn't make you immune to parenting difficulties. Middle-class women sometimes report that they are overlooked because professionals assume that they already know everything, when in fact they are often more lacking in practical support from other mothers than young women on an estate.
- 5 caption (f) A quote from Father's Work and Family Life (Jo Warin et al, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 1999). You probably guessed right!
- 6 caption (d) This could be a centre co-ordinator, and yet she too is a single mother and in fact understands the needs of her fifteen-year-old service user rather better than she realises. In some ways she is worse off (she doesn't have her mum at home to babysit) in others much better off – but she could still do with support at times. Discuss some of the other ways in which you as a group are like, or unlike, the people you are helping.

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Notes

Notes

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