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Cool with Change

Young people talking about support

Many children living in Scotland experience significant changes in their family circumstances in the course of their childhood. The most common such change is when parents decide to live apart but a small proportion of children lose a parent because of death, or experience long term absence of a parent for some other reason, or experience dramatic change as refugees or asylum seekers. Change is typically upsetting at first particularly when it is unanticipated and dramatic and it is always upsetting when it involves a sense of loss. Most young people are able to cope and get on with their lives once they get used to new arrangements, but many acknowledge that some extra help and support might have been and might be useful. The Cool with Change research project seeks to understand more about young people's perspectives on what kinds of support, both formal and informal, are helpful. This briefing complements Research Briefing 26 which focuses on children and young people's experience of family change.

Key Points

- Parents, particularly mothers, are the primary source of support for most young people experiencing family change, although they also turn to other family members and friends

- Informal support networks are often disrupted when families change, through changes in schools, losing touch with some relatives, or moving house or country. This can leave some young people very isolated

- Sadness at change or self-doubt when rearrangements create uncertainty about where a child fits in their parent's life can also result in withdrawal from friends. Those affected by parental imprisonment or domestic violence are the most vulnerable to social isolation

- Few young people know about or access formal support services. The perceived ability of services to respect confidentiality is a key concern, and contributes to children and young people's reluctance to access formal support.

- The most commonly used service was guidance or pastoral staff at schools. Many found this helpful, but some were not sure about its confidentiality or its ability to help

- Web-based support services were almost unknown amongst the children in this study. If they are to be more effective they must become much better known and be widely seen as having something to offer most children

- There were mixed views and experiences of social workers and their ability to help, with children sometimes focusing on their power to take children away from families rather than support they might offer

- There were mixed views about the role of counselling. School based counselling services need to be confidential, provided by someone other than a teacher, and embedded into the school so that children and young people are aware of who they are and what they offer

- The most vulnerable children were those whose informal support networks were very thin and who had low self esteem. If school based support services can create an ethos of being places where a range of issues can be brought, they will avoid stigmatising users as the desperate with nowhere else to go

Background

Some changes in family and personal relationships are normal aspects of childhood but radical changes and minor adjustments are also common and are often imposed beyond children's control as they progress through school years and families move homes in response to parents' employment and other events of adult life. Research continues to show that even if common, living through parental separation does not typically feel ordinary (Brannen and others, 2000, Douglas and others, 2000, Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001, Smart and others, 2001). The death of a parent is an extraordinary and life-changing event experienced by between 4% and 7% of children (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006) and bereavement may have 'particularly harmful implications in the lives of young people who are already vulnerable''. Scotland has a small population of new migrant children, some of whom have been radically dislocated from their previous lives.

The study

Cool with Change is a three year research project funded by the Community Fund with support from the Scottish Executive. It is the result of a collaboration between 'Scotland's Families', a consortium of organisations (Family Mediation Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland, Relate Scotland, Scottish Marriage Care and Stepfamily Scotland) and researchers based at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR). The study breaks new ground by combining in-depth research of young people's experiences of family change in Scotland, reflection by service providers on the implications for their services, and consultation with young people about possible future developments of support services.

Children were selected for interview of the basis of short questionnaires completed by 361 pupils aged 10-14 in five schools within ethnically and socially diverse areas of Glasgow. 70 young people were interviewed, 15 contributed to focus group discussion, 55 took part in an individual interview (19 of whom also participated in a follow-up interview). Two groups of 'young consultants' and representatives from the Children's Parliament have advised the research team at key stages throughout the project.

Findings

Almost a third of participants had experienced a change in their parenting arrangements involving the separation of their parents, or much more rarely, the death of a parent. 16% had experienced both the loss of a parent from their household and a parent re-partnering. 6 participants had joined the school population after being settled in Glasgow.

Parental separation remains highly unusual among some ethnic groups. Our findings also reflect a trend whereby the break-down of couple relationships varies to some extent by socio-economic background, being more common among poorer families. A fuller

discussion of the findings is available in Research Briefing 26 and in a full report on our website.

Experience of separation, death, forced migration and re-partnering among 10-14 year old pupils

Either separation or death of parent	30%
Parents separated	26 %
Mother died	1 %
Father died	3%
At least one parent has new partner	16%
Forced migration	4%

Young people talking about support

Informal sources of support

Children, like adults, often turn to parents (sometimes step-parents), siblings, wider kin, friends and sometimes family pets, for help and support. Young people often spoke about parental support, in particular maternal support, in a self-evident way: *'she's just there for me', 'I can just talk to her and stuff, she's special'*. Some children in our study also appreciated it when parents were able to act as a sounding board and a supportive ear when they were having a problem with the other parent or with a step-parent. Brothers and sisters too are a great source of support for many young people. Siblings, for example, can offer their own perspective on family events, making them a very useful person to talk to:

> *"I don't really talk to my mum about stuff like that [feeling uncomfortable when visiting her dad]. I would tell her, like, if something happened, but I speak to Carol [sister] about that because she's obviously there when I go so we speak to each other about that"*
>
> (Kathy,11)

Cousins sometimes act as confidantes and in some instances an aunt (or a close friend referred to as an 'aunt') may offer respite in particularly difficult circumstances:

> *"I had to go and stay with my Auntie Tina because my mum and dad, my mum went mental as well. She went into hospital and my dad got took to prison, I think it was for assaulting her"*
>
> (Sarah, 11)

Grandparents too often provide day to day practical and emotional support. Friends also help in lots of ways. Having friends who share similar circumstances is especially valuable because it's of some comfort to children to realise that they're 'not the only one'.

Furthermore, friends can support one another and have fun too:

> "Just like my friend, my other friend, Carol and my other friend, Jane, their parents have split up as well, so I could talk to them but have fun at the same time"
> (Pattie, 12)

**Disruption to children's informal
support networks after family change**

Most children emphasise and draw heavily upon informal sources of support. Unfortunately, dramatic and unanticipated change which heightens the need for support may also disrupt informal support networks and this is true to a greater or less extent for all of the changes discussed here that involve loss: separation of parents, death of a parent, asylum seeking. The loss of a parent through death or separation can sometimes result in other family members drifting further apart rather than closing ranks and can have a ripple effect throughout a child's informal support network:

> "I didn't like it when people gave my sympathy [after dad died], 'cause I don't like that ... often I would take big rages at them [friends] and just tell them to shut up and go away"
> (Catherine, 13)

Resulting new residential and parenting arrangements can also disrupt friendship networks. Sadness at change or self-doubt when rearrangements create uncertainty about where a child fits in their parent's life can also result in withdrawal from friends. In seeking asylum, parents and their children lose their network of wider kin, friends and neighbours and the circumstances of their entry into a new society make it difficult even for children to regenerate a new informal support network that goes beyond home or school. This can leave children with very little support if there are problems in their home or school lives.

**Formal support in coping
with extraordinary change**

At times of extraordinary change, informal networks of support can be compromised and weakened and for a small but significant proportion of children, may be absent altogether leaving them socially isolated to a greater or less degree and unable to access support. This is particularly so for children whose non-resident parent is in prison and/or has a history of domestic violence. In these circumstances, any additional assistance that children receive is likely to ease pressure on informal networks of support. Few children in our study knew much about formal support services, with the exception of the Pastoral Care and Guidance system among those at secondary school. Many young people found support from pastoral care at school helpful, but some were not sure about its confidentiality or their ability to help:

> No, because I can't really trust them because it's in the school and like, it's also a teacher that teaches and stuff like that I know they shouldn't, but in the staff room you, like, it's

obvious that they tell other teachers and stuff like that. And they have a good wee gossip and stuff like that and, just don't trust them at all (Lizzie, 12)

Websites set up for and about children were virtually unknown, with the exception of ChildLine and Bullying Online, and some people were uncertain about using them:

> "I would do it [visit internet support sites], if I was, like, 100% sure it was safe and they were who they were trying to make out they were and they were just there to help you and that"
> (Robert, 12)

Many children were unsure of what counselling was. Some were also uncertain about what social workers did but the most commonly mentioned aspect of the social work job was the power to take children away from their parents. There seems to be a widespread belief among young people that formal support services are for and about extreme and stigmatising situations. ChildLine, the best known voluntary service, was typically seen as a last resort for situations like 'abuse' and neglect and only for the sad and desperate.

Children were, on the whole, positive about the hypothetical possibility of counselling in schools offering people the opportunity to talk over change, even when it was not a crisis. Some retained reservations about talking to an adult stranger but it seems likely that this could be overcome if those working there became familiar figures and were seen as separate from teachers. Many young people very much liked the idea of school-based peer support systems because they thought it would be easier to talk to someone around the same age and could imagine perhaps contributing to such a service. Fear that confidentiality will not be respected was the most often repeated reservation about using both counselling and peer support services, followed by fear of being stigmatised.

> Well, when I started seeing my counsellor, I wasn't wanting really to tell anyone, I don't know, you think people are, like, saying, 'oh, she must be crazy, have all those mental problems and stuff'. Then my sister actually told someone, and then they told people and it ended up getting back to my friends, 'oh, do you see a counsellor?' and they didn't actually care, so I think it was actually me just being a bit too paranoid about it
> (Julia, 14)

Conclusion

Children most in need of support are often the least likely to be given help to find it because they are already socially isolated. A range of highly visible and widely understood support service options including well known websites and range of school-based people providing support might ensure that the most vulnerable children do access formal support. It is also important to provide a range of open access fun activities for

those children who prefer diversionary activities as a way of supporting children through uncomfortable and unsettling change.

Policy recommendations

- More work needs to be done on making children and young people aware of the support services that already exist in order for them to be utilised

- Support services in schools need to be open to all, provided by someone other than teachers, and embedded in the school culture in order to avoid being seen as stigmatising.

- Guidance services in schools need to make their confidentiality processes much clearer to children and young people if they want to be able to offer help to all

- Supporting families through change can help to minimise negative effects on children and young people.

- Teachers need to be aware of the support services available in the community.

- More needs to be done to involve children and young people in the development and delivery of support services

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Authors

This briefing was written by Gill Highet and edited by Sarah Morton, based on a full report of the findings from this study.

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