

# COOL WITH CHANGE

young people and family change

Final Report March 2007



SCOTLAND'S  
families

Supported by the Community Fund and the Scottish Executive

Gill Highet  
Lynn Jamieson



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Cool with change was 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 (Family Mediation Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland, Relate Scotland, Scottish Marriage Care and Stepfamily Scotland), a consortium of organisations with a long and impressive track record of providing support to families, and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR).

Cool with Change breaks new grounds by combining in-depth research of young people's experience of family change in Scotland, reflection by service providers on the implications for their services and consultation with young people about possible future development of support services.

The research consisted of a questionnaires administered to 361 young people aged 10-14 in five Glasgow schools. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 70 young people – 55 on a one to one basis and 15 in a focus group. A further 19 participants were interviewed a second time to follow up emergent themes and chart changes over time.

## Key Findings: Experiencing family change

- Children or young people experiencing family change through the divorce, separation, re-partnering or death of a parent are also more likely to experience other changes such as moving house, town or school.
- When parents separate it changes children's relationships with both parents not just the one who becomes 'non-resident'. Children feel better when they can see by the way parents act that they still have an important place in both of their parents' lives.
- Young people found it easier to accept their parents' new partners when they were friendly and kind from the outset, and when the process of getting to know them happened gradually. In some cases where relationships with new partners ended, there were further consequences and losses for young people.
- Relationships with non-resident parents (mostly fathers) were facilitated when they were supported to keep in contact by their resident families, when their friends could be included, and when they were better off. Keeping in touch with their non-resident parents' wider family was also important to some young people.
- Relationships with non-resident parents often deteriorated when they found a new partner or had another child but were likely to recover if actions demonstrated to children or young people that they still fitted in their parent's life. Where there had been domestic violence or imprisonment children or young people were also less likely to have a good relationship with their non-resident parent, or to be in contact with them.
- Most children in this study whose parent had died did not draw on any formal support. Those whose family support networks consequently became less effective, whether because of grief, drifting apart or family feuds, found it more difficult to adjust to their loss.
- Young people who had experienced family change as asylum seekers were relatively disadvantaged and often the nature of family change was characterised by continued uncertainty about whether they would remain in this country. They often experienced racism, had less freedom than their Scottish peers, and were more socially isolated.

## Getting help and support

- 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; for a few children or young people these other relationships provide their main support.
- Young people are less likely to use formal support services, although when they do pastoral care or guidance services at school are the most used source of help and support.
- Many young people found support from guidance staff at schools helpful, but some were not sure about its confidentiality or their ability to help.
- Although there are several sources of web-based support and advice, children had only heard of ChildLine and Bullying Online and most did not access any of these services. Some had no access to a private computer and did not want their family, or someone at school to see they were looking at such sites. If web services are to be more effective they must become much better known and be widely seen as having something to offer most children.



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- 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, with some positive experiences of using a counsellor, but concern about what friends might think if they found out they were using such a service. Children who don't understand what counselling is often respond positively to the idea of a school counselling service. 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.



# INTRODUCTION

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This report is the culmination of a project involving researchers, children and young people and providers of support services to families in Scotland. The aim was to use research to enable young people's experiences and perspectives to inform and shape support services for young people whose family households have been transformed by the separation of parents, the re-partnering of a parent, death of a parent or other forms of significant change in family life impacting on children's family households. The project was funded by lottery money under the Research Grant scheme of the Community Fund and conducted by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships on behalf of a consortium of voluntary organisations, Family Mediation Scotland, Relate Scotland (formerly Couple Counselling Scotland), One Parent Families Scotland, Stepfamily Scotland and Scottish Marriage Care. The everyday work of these agencies includes the provision of information and support for families experiencing radical change. Some of the agencies already provide a range of direct services to young people, including working with young people through schools, and have carried out research in related areas (Mayes and others, 2000; Pankaj, 2000). All of the agencies are considering how best to develop their services for children and young people. A key trigger for the research was the experience of the consortium organisations of increasing numbers of young people trying to access help and their sense of need for more systematic information from and about children and young people, to enable the design and delivery of "best practice" services.

Academic research on children's and young people's experiences of family change is growing and now includes a number of important studies in which the voices of young people can be heard. However, this research has rarely encompassed their views of the development of appropriate services to support young people experiencing circumstances of family change. In the research reported here, children and young people talked about their experience of change both in terms of their actual experience in the context of their existing support systems, usually family and friends rather than formal services, and in terms of the hypothetical possibilities of additional support from more formal services beyond their immediate informal support networks. With the exception of the various forms of pastoral care offered in school settings, children do not have widespread experience of support services. The majority of children and young people are not in touch with specialist voluntary or statutory support services and many are largely unaware of their existence. Nevertheless, this does not mean they are uninterested in the possibilities of such services or unable to provide views informed by their own experience. It makes little sense to plan services for children and young people, without a detailed understanding of their views about services and the realities, complexities and significance to children of their 'naturally' occurring relationships, which form the bedrock of their everyday informal support systems.

## Structure of report

We begin by briefly discussing the experience of change and particularly family change in children and young people's lives before describing who was involved in the project and the methods we used. We then move on to present young people's accounts of their informal support systems and experiences of change in their family lives.

In order to capture the essence of young people's accounts, we use their own words, but while the data extracts themselves are authentic, we have anonymised their authors by giving them a pseudonym in order to preserve confidentiality. We have also altered other details which may identify participants, for example, names of people and places. Rather than simply exploring children's accounts from the perspective of different family forms - lone parent families, step-families and the like - we take sets of more or less extraordinary circumstances involving events and processes of change as a starting point, including parents separating or re-partnering, death of a parent and relocation in search of asylum. While much research has focused on only one of these circumstances, there may be lessons to learn by looking across different experiences of change. By exploring continuity and change in their family and friendship relationships around and since such events and what children themselves say about what it's like, we aim to increase our understanding of how processes of change affect children and of the responsiveness and dynamism of their informal support networks. This is juxtaposed to young people's views about formal support services and their possible value in managing experience of change.

## Ordinary and extraordinary change in family and personal life

Some changes in family and personal relationships are normal aspects of childhood. The process of growing up means constant adjustments in family relationships as children, parents, siblings and other family members renegotiate their relationships. Even if there are no changes in parenting arrangements during childhood, household composition may be changed by the arrival or departure of siblings. Radical changes and minor adjustments are common, however, in





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children's constellation of friendship relationships and are often imposed by circumstances beyond children's control as they progress through school years, move from primary to secondary school and families move homes in response to parents' employment or other events of adult life.

One experience of change in family life during childhood that has dramatically increased in recent years is that of co-resident parents separating, resulting in changed parenting arrangements. Since the 1970s, partnership behaviour has been transformed by low rates of marriage, growing rates of co-habitation and high rates of separation, re-partnering and divorce. For a child to experience the separation of co-resident parents has become statistically common place, albeit not yet a majority experience, and one that is unevenly distributed. The breakdown of couple relationships varies to some extent by socio-economic background, being more common among poorer families. It also remains highly unusual among some ethnic minority communities (Hylton, 1995, Berthoud, 2000, Pankaj, 2000) in comparison to white Scottish families. New patterns of partnering and parenting mean that children live in a wide diversity of households. A growing minority proportion of children grow up in lone parent families, usually lone mother families, the majority as a result of parental separation and some will experience the transition to a two-adult household when their mother re-partners. In addition to the wide diversity in household types in which children live, the pathways children follow between different types of households can be complex and involve changes over time (Batchelor and others, 1994, Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997).

Parents who re-partner may go on to have children genetically 'half-siblings' to their existing children. For some children these new brothers and sisters will be co-resident, for others they will be non-resident half-siblings, and for some they will be a mixture of both. Re-partnering can also involve creating a link between children from previous relationships. The term 'step-children' can be stretched from its original meaning which assumes the creation of a legal connection through remarriage to connections created by new cohabiting arrangements that have no legal status. However, just as the terms stepfather and stepmother are not always used in such circumstances and may not capture how children and young people see such relationships, so it is with the terms step-brother and step-sister. For some children, the arrival of new half-siblings represents an addition to an existing network of step-siblings who may be resident in children's households on a full time basis or may live with another parent. When a parent's new partner already has children, this often also involves newly acquired resident or visiting stepsiblings along with other extended kin.

Research continues to show that even if common place, living through parental separation does not typically feel ordinary (Brannen and others, 2000, Douglas and others, 2000, Dunn and Deater-Decker, 2001, Pryor and Rogers 2001, Smart and others, 2001, Wade and Mason, 2002). Some studies have found that compared with birth fathers moving out, step-fathers moving in is a less memorable event in children's minds (Brannen and others, 2000). Parents are commonly the most important people in children's and young people's lives and parents' decision to dissolve their partnership is invariably initially upsetting and unsettling. The separation of parents is often experienced for a period as a loss of normality, and more so when it precipitates other losses. Sometimes children subsequently lose contact with the non-resident parent, usually their father, and his associated kin. Sometimes it results in geographical moves and the further loss of familiar people and places. This body of research shows that friends, grandparents and siblings can all be particularly important supports at this time. Research has also shown, however, that young people are sometimes able to negotiate a sense of gains as well as manage their losses (Smart and others, 2001).

Although separation of parents can be experienced as loss, it is objectively a much less final loss than the death of a parent. While the experiences of death of a relative, friend or pet is not uncommon (Harrison and Harrington, 2001), the death of a parent is an extraordinary and life changing event experienced by between 4% and 7% of children (Ribbens-McCarthy & Jessop, 2005, Ribbens-McCarthy, 2006). After reviewing the existing British literature, Ribbens-McCarthy and Jessop conclude that the evidence base is weak but what evidence there is indicates that bereavement can result in isolation from other family members and sometimes also from friends. They suggest that bereavement may have 'particularly harmful implications in the lives of young people who are already vulnerable or living in disadvantaged circumstances, or who have experienced multiple problems' and note that support services are a 'hotch potch of provision' or lack of provision and that best approaches remain contested.

Another change that may be experienced in terms of loss is that of forced migration away from friends and kin. Scotland has a small population of new migrant children, some of whom have been radically dislocated from their previous lives. This is particularly so for children that arrive as part of refugees and asylum seeking families and even more so, for those who are sent here as unaccompanied minors who have arrived in Britain in search of asylum. Typically, they have no informal social network beyond the family members they travel with and are hampered in their possibilities for developing informal supports by language difficulties and poverty.



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In this study, young people have provided us with their perspectives on what it's like when extraordinary changes happen in their family lives, in particular changes that come about as a result of their parents separating or divorcing but also their responses to extraordinary death and relocation. The report takes as its analytical starting point, sets of circumstances, such as a parent moving out of the family home or a resident parent re-partnering, rather than different family structures. Children's and young people's stories of what this is like underline the inadequacy of thinking about 'family' as fixed and the value of thinking in terms of more fluid 'family practices', the active participation and commitment required to 'do' or 'make' family life rather than simply, 'be' in a family (Morgan, 1996, Morrow, 1998). Children's accounts reflect the significance for their lives of their relatedness to and distance from not only their parents and household members but also wider social networks of effective friends and active kin.

# RESEARCHING YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY CHANGE



Cool with Change's collaborative approach 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 further developments of support services. There was no easy way of identifying young people who have experienced family change other than asking them. This was done through a questionnaire administered to 361 young people aged 10-14 in five Glasgow schools. The results were reported in our Interim Report and are repeated here.

## Experiences of change among 10-14 year old pupils

Parents separated	26%
Mother died	1%
Father died	3%
Mother has new partner	13%
Father has new partner	12%
Parental separation or death and one or more parent re-partnered	<b>16%</b>
One parent away for a long time	<b>8%</b>
Have a very ill relative	<b>21%</b>
Someone close has been ill for a long time	<b>36%</b>
Someone close has died	<b>43%</b>
Moved school	<b>14%</b>
Moved house	<b>23%</b>
Moved town	<b>6%</b>
Left home as asylum seeker	<b>4%</b>

A substantial minority, about 30%, had experienced radical change in 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. Those children who have lost a parent from their family-household are more likely to have experienced multiple changes. They were more than twice as likely to have experienced moving house, town and school than their peers.

## Moving by change in parenting arrangements

	No change	Separation or death and/or re-partnering of a parent
Moved house	17%	36%
Moved town	4%	10%
Moved school	10%	21%

There is a significant difference in the incidence of experiencing parental separation between children who described themselves as Christian or of no religion and those who described themselves as Muslim. There were no such differences with respect to experiences of illness, death or absence. Substantial proportions of children from all backgrounds could think of a death or longstanding serious illness in their family or of 'someone close'.



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### Experience of parental separation by 'religion'

<b>Christian</b>	<b>Muslim</b>	<b>None or 'don't know'</b>
32%	9%	29%
184 (total in category)	78 (total in category)	77 (total in category)

It could also be anticipated that there would be differences in experience of parental separation by socio-economic status and indeed the relatively affluent group were less likely to have experience of parental separation.

### Experience of parental separation by 'affluence & deprivation'

<b>Relatively deprived</b>	<b>Middle group</b>	<b>Relatively affluent</b>
31%	30%	18%
91 (total in category)	142 (total in category)	135 (total in category)

Following this, the research team recruited participants for interview, targeting those who had experienced family change and had agreed to a follow up interview. 70 young people participated in the main interview phase of the study, 15 of whom contributed to focus group discussion, and 55 who took part in an individual, face-to-face interview. Following a preliminary analysis of the interview data, a further round of interviews with 19 participants was conducted in order to follow up on emergent themes and chart changes over time. More detail of our methods of contacting children and young people, conducting interviews and analysing their accounts is given in the Appendix.

## Representing young people's accounts

In order to capture the essence of young people's accounts, we use many extracts from participants' interview transcripts. These data extracts are authentic and use the exact words used by participants but we have anonymised their authors by giving them a pseudonym in order to preserve confidentiality. We have also altered other details which may identify participants, for example, names of people and places. On many occasions, we use selected quotes rather than everything that was said and to illustrate that something has been missed out, we show this in the text by a series of three dots ... as shown here. Any explanatory text inserted into a quote by us is shown by square brackets [].

In the text of the report, we often use the informal terms 'mum' and 'dad' rather than the formal constructs 'mother' and 'father'. This reflects how young people talk about their families, and, therefore, seems more appropriate both to the subject matter and some potential readers of this report.

# CHILDREN'S INFORMAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

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In our Interim Report we noted that accounts from Cool with Change are consistent with other similar studies which suggest that parents and wider kin are important support sources of support (Brannen and others, 2000, Borland and others, 1998, Smart and others, 2001). Relationships with mothers in particular were highly valued and this was often portrayed as self-evident in young people's accounts. Sibling relationships too emerge as very important in young people's lives following divorce (Edwards and others, 2005). These relationships are complex and diverse and children themselves are active in shaping them. Children also have a sense of change over time in themselves and their siblings as they grow older and they face changes in their everyday relationships with brothers and sisters, not just in problematic family circumstances. Research also confirms that children often seek and gain support from grandparents following the separation of their parents, but contact with paternal grandparents in particular often reduces around this time (Hawthorne and others, 2003). Other studies show that there are often more continuities than change in relationships between children and their grandparents following parental separation and those children who have enjoyed a good relationship with their grandparents prior to their parents splitting up, often continue to do so (Ferguson and others, 2004). As with other studies, our data also highlight the significance of support networks outwith the family, particularly relationships with friends (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001, Butler and others, 2003, Dunn, 2004). In this chapter, we look in more depth at young people's accounts of who they turn to for support in their family and social networks and what forms this support takes.

## Who children say they turn to for support

In our interviews participants filled in an 'Important people' chart and they also spoke about who they would turn to for support if they were having a problem. The vast majority of our participants identified intricate networks of support encompassing family members (including step-parents) and friends, and for some, wider kin as well. Siblings, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles were all identified as assuming a particularly important support role. For some of our participants adult friends also played a significant part in offering support. A few children mentioned a mix of formal and informal support, and this typically involved a teacher or in some instances, a social worker alongside friends and family. The forms that this support took were many and varied and we explore this in greater detail later in this chapter. Many participants' accounts focused on who they might 'talk to' about problems and concerns. To some extent this is due to the way in which we posed our questions about support and this perhaps explains why our data appear to over-emphasise 'talking' over other strategies for managing problems. Nonetheless our data does provide some insights into other strategies that young people adopt when they need support. Some, for example, talked about how they derive support from family pets and others mentioned spending time on their own, playing on the computer and writing a diary. Some talked explicitly about 'not talking'. Mostly, this related to one particular person (or persons) and only in a few instances did it appear that children felt they had no-one they could talk to. Drawing on extracts from participants' accounts, we now look in more detail at how and in which contexts these informal networks of support operate. We conclude this chapter by exploring what participants say about why they don't seek support from particular people in their family and social networks.

## Support from parents

A recent study commissioned by the Scouts Association has found that most young people identify their parents (particularly their mother) as the person they most admire (nfp Synergy, 2007). Our accounts show that one or both parents (and in some cases step-parent(s) as well) are the primary source of support for the vast majority of our participants. Young people in our study often talked about this source of 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'*. Furthermore, this was sometimes expressed in a way that suggests a permanent quality: *'she'll always be there for me'*. One girl from a Pakistani family spoke of her father in this way:

*I'm really special to my dad ... he makes me feel really precious (Malika, 14)*

It is not possible, from our data, to say if there is a gendered dimension to how young people talk about the support they receive from their mother, on the one hand, and their father (or step-father), on the other, although a few people referred to fathers (but not mothers) offering more practical and social forms of support:

*He just kinda helps me with music. We're doing the guitar and he's kinda helping me to play that ... And we've got, like a computer, and he can fix my phone if it breaks (Pattie, 12)*

However, the accounts of some participants, in particular, those who took part in two interviews over the space of a year, suggest that the support role assumed by each parent may change to suit changing circumstances. These



accounts suggest that rather than seeing 'support' as static and one-dimensional, it is more useful to see it as flexible and open to change. In her first interview, Rachel stayed mainly with her mum and with her dad at week-ends and she drew a clear distinction between both relationships:

*Well, I'm probably more close to her [mum] because we've been through quite a lot together ... we've always been quite close and it's my mum I can talk to about more things than I can with my dad ... [Dad] he's great to be around, he's always really funny and we just always have a joke and stuff like that*  
(Rachel, 1st Interview)

By the time of her second interview, Rachel was now staying mainly with her dad and while she talked about remaining close to her mum, her account also suggests that her dad's approach to his parental role had changed somewhat. In particular, he no longer lives with his girlfriend, but visits her at week-ends instead, and he now assumes greater responsibility for structuring Rachel's school week:

*It's good because, like with my mum I've got freedom. And with my dad I've got sort of structure* (Rachel, 2nd Interview)

As well as assuming general parental caring responsibilities our accounts suggest that close relatives (and in some cases wider kin) provide particular types of support. Some young people, for example, talked about turning to their mum for support if they were experiencing problems with other members of their family, typically their dad or a step-parent, or if they were having problems at school:

*[My mum helps me] if I ever have any problems at school or problems with my dad or my step-mum or anything* (Danny, 12)

In the same way, fathers can also act as mediators when children fall out with their mothers:

*When my mum and me were, like just having a wee fall-out, it's just a stupid argument, and I think it's quite bad because I don't usually have arguments with my mum, I just go up and speak to my dad and my dad helps out a lot with it*  
(Sarah, 11)

And in some cases, participants talked about this being a two-way process, with each parent acting as a mediator in disputes with the other parent:

*I can talk to my dad about my mum and my mum about my dad* (Sinead, 11)

Given that this study is about young people's experiences of family change, it is not surprising that many participants spoke about how they manage problems and issues that invariably arise when families are in transition. What is perhaps more surprising is who young people turned to for help in these circumstances. Two sources of support in particular stand out - friends, especially those who have experienced similar circumstances, and siblings.

## Support from friends and siblings

Our accounts suggest that friends help in a range of ways, for example, they are in a position to compare circumstances and offer advice based on how they have handled particular situations with different family members, for example, non-resident fathers or step-family members:

*Susan, like, I could talk to her because her mum and dad split up when she was way younger ... it's just like you just have to talk to her about, like, new people coming in* (Rebecca, 13)

Our accounts also suggest that having friends who share similar circumstances is intrinsically valuable because it is of some comfort to know that other people 'know what it's like' and to have a sense that you're 'not the only one'. The support that friends offer in these circumstances is also highly valued because it is offered in a context which more easily lends itself to 'having fun':

*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, you know it's a new experience* (Pattie, 12)



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*She jokes about everything but you can also be serious, that's why I can tell her a big secret and she wouldn't tell anyone (Karen, 13)*

It is also interesting to note that this kind of support does not appear to depend on a friend sharing exactly the same family circumstances, rather, knowing what it's like to experience 'loss' may be just as important:

*Would you talk to Kay about difficult stuff? (Interviewer)*

*Yeah, 'cause she's kinda, like, yeah, she's been through stuff that I've been through as well ... Well, her dad died so it's not like, it's kinda similar but like in a way it's totally not (Pauline, 13)*

A key dimension of support that appears to emerge from our accounts is that young people prefer support to be a two-way process:

*I think I helped him through bad times, and em, I've helped in some ways, I suppose you could say I've helped him but we've helped each other really (David, 12)*

Siblings also emerged in our accounts as a very important source of support with around one quarter of our sample explicitly placing brothers and sisters (mostly older, but not always) in this role. Our data suggest, for example, that siblings, particularly those that can offer their own perspective on the same events, are children's first choice of confidante:

*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)*

Siblings are also someone that children turn to for support at school, for example, moving to a new school or meeting new people:

*So, how did you cope with moving from one school to another? (Interviewer)*

*I don't know, I had my big sister to talk to, we talked about what happened and stuff (Fergus, 11)*

*Although we fight a lot, like, when we are getting on, we have lots of fun and joking and stuff like that and because she's older than me I know lots of people in second year already and stuff, and that all helps when I grow up (Kathy, 11)*

In our next extract, Martin describes what it was like moving to a new school where he would be joining his step-sister's class. He talks about this with some ambivalence although he describes a happy outcome:

*What was it like having to go to another primary school? (Interviewer)*

*Kinda nervous as well as worried but, like, I knew someone that was there, and that was my step-dad's daughter and she was, like, in my class, and that, so that wasn't really that bad but I got to know people quite easily (Martin, 12)*

Several of our participants also talked about brothers and sisters who no longer live in the family home. Their accounts suggest that older siblings often provide social and financial support:

*He [older brother] buys me stuff and he takes me out places (Graham, 12)*

Some of our participants who talked about their siblings, though, spoke about them not so much in relation to specific problems but, rather, as being a constant supportive presence:

*I'd go to her [sister] with, like, anything (Julia, 14)*

*He's [little brother] a good friend to me and helps out quite a lot and I have a laugh with him as well (Kenneth, 12)*

Our accounts also reflect the important role that other members of a child's wider kin often play in supporting young people and we now explore the nature of this support and the contexts within which it is offered.



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## Kin networks of support

Members of a child's wider kin, often an aunt (or a close adult friend referred to as an 'aunt') sometimes act as confidantes, and in some instances, offer respite in particularly difficult circumstances:

*I see her a lot and my Auntie Cathy keeps secrets at home (Julie, 10)*

*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)*

Our accounts also show that other relatives, typically grandparents, uncles and cousins also play a crucial role in offering support. Sometimes this support can be predominantly of a practical nature, sometimes it can encompass more than one type of support:

*My gran picks me up from school, I get my dinner there, then my mum comes and picks me up (Hassan, 12)*

*My uncle's quite close to me 'cause he's always been there for me to talk to him, and if there's anything, like if I need to ask him stuff, he's quite helpful 'cause he gives me lifts and that if I need them (Kenneth, 12)*

Cousins, sometimes older, sometimes around the same age, often act as confidantes:

*My big cousin, Maggie, I've told her a lot of secrets (Lee-Ann, 14)*

*I trust my cousin more [than my friends], it's just 'cause we're so alike and we're like, the same ages and stuff, we just find it so easy to talk to one another because we've been close all our lives, she's always been the first person I would go to if I had a problem (Rebecca, 13)*

In one instance, an older cousin has been very supportive in helping his younger female cousin to manage cultural tensions in her household:

*My mum said stuff to me, like "don't do this" and "don't do that" and I'm like, "she doesn't want me to do fun stuff. But then, like my cousin, he's like, been here for two years now, or three years, he told me about it, he's quite big but he understands, so he told me about, like, mum, like, it's not her fault and he told me some reasons why my mum would be saying that (Serila, 12)*

## Children who don't seek or cannot get support

In this section, we consider accounts which suggest that some children 'don't talk' or explicitly seek support from people within their informal social and family networks.

Our accounts suggest that children think about this in four different ways and we now look at each of these in turn. It seems clear that there are some children who derive support through diversion, that is, they prefer to involve themselves in activities that help to take their minds off problems:

*Sometimes I feel upset and sometimes I'm not (Hassan, 12)*

*So, at that time [when mum and dad split up] was there anybody you could talk to about it or did you not want to talk about it? (Interviewer)*

*I just didn't want to talk about it (Hassan, 12)*

In Hassan's account, he described having lots of aunts and uncles whom he visits regularly. He also seems to be doing well at school and he enjoys playing football with his friends. Given this context, it seems reasonable to take Hassan's comment at face value and to conclude that 'talking' about problems is just something that doesn't particularly appeal to him. Instead, he prefers to play football with his friends and generally just get on with life. Hassan also values his privacy and this may be another reason why he is not an advocate of getting things off his chest: "I keep things to myself and not spreading it about".





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The accounts of a second group of participants suggest that there are cases where children may actively avoid seeking support from certain individuals within their family and wider social networks. We know from other research studies that children are very discriminating about which friends they choose to talk to, and our data reflect the importance of being able to trust someone to keep a secret:

*I talk to Sarah lots, I talk to Sarah the most and she's kept a lot of my secrets. But Susan and Connor, I don't really talk to them about my secrets 'cause I'm scared of whether they'd tell (Joanne, 11)*

Our data also suggest that there are some issues that young people may be reluctant to discuss with a parent and may prefer instead to talk to friends:

*There's probably a few things I would feel uncomfortable talking to her [mum] about (Danny, 12)*

*And is there anyone else you would talk to about those things, or would you just kind of keep them to yourself? (Interviewer)*

*Probably my friends, Ross, Martin and David, and Ewan (Danny, 12)*

*Can you give me an example of the kind of thing you might talk about [to friends rather than to parents]? Interviewer*

*Em, well, if you fancy someone (Graham, 13)*

*Is there anything you wouldn't talk to her [mum] about? Interviewer*  
*Boyfriends (Julie, 10)*

Sometimes, it seems that other adults, for example, the parents of friends, can step in to offer support when young people are afraid to disclose certain things to their mum:

*She [friend's parent] said that if, like, I was ever upset about something, I was scared to tell my mum, I could always tell her, and she would, like, sort it out (Cheryl, 11)*

For another small group of participants, there are times when support seems to flow in the opposite direction, that is, from the child to a parent, typically their mum:

*'Cause my dad's recently left us, she kinda gets upset easily, so I spend a lot of time with her (Julia, 14)*

Where support appears to be flowing from child to parent, other adults may offer support:

*[Janet] that's Carey's mum, she's friends with my mum, but she'll, like, come up and talk to me and stuff, about my dad, and see if I'm OK. Her husband left her so she, like, kind of knows what my mum's going through so she can help me to help my mum (Julia, 14)*

Our data suggest that there is a fourth group of children who could benefit from support but who are unable to access this from family or friends. These children all live in very different circumstances but to some extent they all appear to be socially isolated. Chantelle is of Pakistani origin and lives with her mum and her two brothers. Her account strongly hinted that there may be a background of domestic abuse and she appeared to live quite a solitary existence, spending most of her time reading and playing on her computer. She named all the girls in her class as friends but her account suggests that she only sees them at school and she also hinted at occasional difficulties with some of them: "sometimes like, they sometimes just walk away"

She was very quiet and subdued throughout her interview and clearly found it difficult to talk about some issues, such as her mum and dad's separation:

*Did you talk to anyone about how you felt at the time [mum and dad splitting up]? (Interviewer)*

*[shakes head]*



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*No, not really? Did you talk to your mum about it?*

*[shakes head]*

*Did you feel you couldn't talk to her because she would be upset?*

*[nods] (Chantelle, 11)*

Sanjay's family are refugees or asylum seekers. He has been re-settled in Glasgow with his family, having fled here from Afghanistan three years ago. Apart from his family life, he seemed to lead a fairly solitary existence. When we asked him if he had made friends at school, he replied 'no', although he did talk about having some much older friends in Year 7 who are similar in size to him. Having no English when he arrived would have made it impossible initially for him to get to know Scottish children and his English still seemed less fluent than most of the asylum seeker children interviewed. Also unlike the other asylum children discussed later in the report, he had no friends among asylum seeking children. It may be that there were no children speaking his language living near him. His account also hints at the barriers he faces in accessing any formal help. He lived thirty minutes walk from school and talked about difficulties he was having walking to school. He spoke to somebody about this when he started secondary school but he did not remember to whom, nothing had been done about it and he now just puts up with it:

*Well we can walk, you know, my leg is sore and ... you know if I walk too much it's sore but (Sanjay, 12)*

*And do the school know that? (Interviewer)*

*No (Sanjay, 12)*

Another participant, Peter, had moved to another secondary school. His circumstances had changed significantly just prior to his first interview and he seemed very quiet and subdued and upset at times in the course of the interview. In particular, he found it very difficult to talk about what it was like now living with his dad and his gran (having lived up until then with his mum):

*So have you always lived with your, your Dad and your Gran? (Interviewer)*

*No, I stayed with my Mum till I was eleven, and stayed with my Dad when I was eleven, last year (Peter, 11)*

*What was that like having to change over? (Interviewer)*

*[Pause] quite bad (Peter)*

*Did your Mum and Dad talk you about it at all what was happening?*

*No*

*Did you talk to anybody about how you were feeling at the time?*

*Nope*

*Would you quite have liked to have talked to somebody?*

*[Pause] yeah.*

From Peter's account it seemed clear that his mum used to be his main source of support but he now sees her every second week-end and he seems reluctant to tell his mum how he feels about this: "Probably make my Mum be upset". Peter talked about just going to his room when he was upset and although he talked about having a lot of friends, this doesn't always help:

*Do your pals ever cheer you up as well? (Interviewer)*

*No, not all the time (Peter, 11)*

Peter indicated that he would be happy to take part in a follow-up interview and we tried to contact him at his new school. A member of the research team visited the school only to find that Peter had moved on again. A member of the school management team explained that Peter had been truanting a lot and had been on the receiving end of many interventions aimed at trying to get him back to school. He had since left that school and they were unable to say which school he had gone to.



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Our fourth participant in this section, Lizzie (see Case Study) described very difficult family circumstances. Her non-resident father continues to pursue her against her wishes and she talked about being socially isolated because she is frightened to go out in case she meets him in the street. Lizzie spoke explicitly about not receiving the support she feels she needs from family or friends, and she also described unsuccessful attempts to seek support from Childline and a magazine problem page. Nonetheless, Lizzie is clearly still looking for support to help her manage and perhaps resolve some of her problems and she asked the interviewer to send her information about services which may be able to offer her the support she needs.

In this chapter, we have discussed the crucial role that members of young people's family and wider social networks play in offering support. Our last four accounts suggest that where support from informal sources is thin or lacking, young people would benefit from more support from formal services but are either not seeking or unable to access formal support. This reinforces the importance of those who job it is to support children and young people being highly visible and accessible to all children and young people or able to identify and reach out to those in particular need of support.

## AFTER PARENTS SEPARATE

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### Home with one parent instead of two

Parental separation often involves children in then having a home with one parent, usually their mother, rather than two parents, although this description does not fully capture the range of circumstances of children's post separation lives. Change is heightened when parental separation also precipitates moving house, so that children's main home is no longer the place that was the 'family home' of their two-parent family. Most children continue to have one main home, but now visit another home, usually their fathers', often on weekends. But a few children, in effect have two homes that they move between.

The fact of still having one parent in at home, and particularly when that home is the 'family home', means that there is considerable continuity in their parenting arrangements as well as change. However, their new circumstances also involve change in their relationship with their parent at home as well as the more dramatic change of a parent leaving home. The fact of being the only parent available in an everyday way at home create shifts in children's relationships with that parent. For example, sometimes children feel conscious of being closer or more important to their mother following the departure of their father. Some take on the role of attempting to provide comfort and support to their mother during the upheaval and immediate aftermath of separation.

It is also the case that the material circumstances of the family household have typically changed in ways that impact on relationships therein. Women and children are typically poorer after the parenting couple dissolves. This can modify relationships in a range of ways, from more frequent expressions of tension and frustration, to children self-censoring demands because they are more aware of the financial pressures on their mother. Mothers may change their working patterns in response to a changed economic situation and this in turn means less time at home and perhaps resulting in children having more unsupervised time and greater freedom to come and go. Divisions of labour sometimes change within the family household with children taking on more responsibilities:

*The reason I want to take a full time job for a year is because mum has got two minimum wage jobs, she doesn't get paid a lot, she has helped me out with me going on holiday this year and my sister going on holiday with her friends, she can't afford to even go to England or something herself because even to go somewhere close is quite expensive. I was wanting to save up to take her on a wee holiday (Julia, 14)*

### When a resident parent's new partner moves in

Previous research has been concerned with the factors influencing whether or not a 'step-parent' is accepted by children (Allan & Crow, 2001). The relevant factors that influence this include the children's age, their relationship with and the length of time they have lived apart from the birth parent, the step-parent's role in the household and the perceived desires of the resident parent. Research also explores how those taking on the role of step-parents create, understand and experience their parenting and family lives, finding variation by gender and social class in understandings of the best way to do things but a general concern to do the right thing (Ribbens-McCarthy and others, 2003). In this section, we focus on the accounts of those children (21) whose resident parent has re-partnered and resulting in a new adult in their home. Not all of these new arrangements became permanent and children did not always think of this new person as like a parent or call them a step-parent and we have no way of knowing how the adults concerned thought of their role. Our main focus is on what children's accounts tell us about what factors make these circumstances easier to manage and conversely, which factors may get in the way of children feeling comfortable at home and in themselves.

### 'Bedding-in' process

In most of the situations that children and young people described involving their resident parent repartnering, the new partner gradually joined their household and this did not involve children moving home or major upheaval. Children's and young people's accounts, together with other accounts generated in similar studies (Brannen and others, 2000) suggest that a new partner moving into the family home is usually experienced not so much as a 'change' or an 'event', but rather, as a gradual process which plays out over time. Usually a parent's partner had visited and stayed in their home many times before becoming a resident and/or marriage. Those who share these circumstances typically reported that they had known their mother's partner for some time and many said that they felt happy on their mother's behalf. In our study there was very little evidence of children resenting their step father moving in. Several participants spoke about the importance of getting to know their mum's new partner prior to him



moving into the family home. In particular their accounts highlight the importance of him being friendly and kind to everyone right from the outset:

*He didn't really, like, officially, move in here. He just, like, started staying over more and then, like, brought some of his stuff through and eventually he kind of just lived in our house (Kristina, 13)*

*He was really nice from the start and my Mum, like, well, she took it really slowly 'cause you know some people overreact badly but he was just nice to Connie and me from the start (Kathy, 11)*

*Mum's got a new boyfriend, he seems really nice. He has been up a few times, he stays in England, he comes up a lot and when we move into the new house in the summer I think he we will be moving in with us, but its not really been discussed properly yet but I just get the feeling (Catherine, 13)*

### **'Fit' and the interplay of family relationships**

A gradual process of moving in allows time for children to get used to the presence of the new adult and the possibilities of interaction with him (or her) and encouraging or resisting his (or her) increasing levels of involvement in the household. How a resident parent's new partner 'fits' into the family, is influenced by the particular expectations that children have of his (or her) role compared with what they expect of their mother and non-resident father. The fit of a new male adult as mother's partner into their lives is modified for some children by whether they feel that their pre-existing father is fulfilling the role and whether or not they feel that the situation of father is vacant. This is not to suggest that the situation is always a zero-sum game in which mother's new partner can only be regarded positively if their father is regarded negatively, although this is clearly how some children do see things. The comprehensive absence of a father does not always mean young people see the situation as vacant, as the memory of the irreplaceable person or ideal of the biological father persists. At the same time, there are other examples among children's and young people's accounts of good relationships with non-resident fathers and good relationships with mother's new resident partner. It is possible for some children to think of themselves as having something like two fathers or to create a division in which one is more like a brother or uncle or adult friend.

Some accounts from this study reflect other research findings (Brannen and others, 2000) which suggest that children are more likely to perceive their mum's new partner as a father figure in circumstances where they have a poor or non-existent relationship with their birth father. This is illustrated by Kay's and Theresa's accounts of their experience. Kay's mum and dad split up when she was very young and she has seen her dad on and off since her parents separated. She currently lives with her mum and Tom who recently got married after Tom had been a resident in their home for a few years. Kay's account suggests that she feels an enduring sense of disappointment and anger that her dad has never made proper time for her in his life:

*I don't see him [birth dad] that much, he always says he's too busy or he's working, but he's in a relationship and he's always too busy with her and he won't come and see me. And I'm kinda, really annoyed with that ... He's done it to my whole life, he says he'll just come and pick me up but he never does (Kay, 13)*

Kay generally gets on well with Tom, her mum's new partner, but there are occasional 'blow-ups' and the time leading up to the wedding was a particularly fraught. Nonetheless, Kay considers him to be more of a father to her than her birth dad:

*Well, it was hard at first and then it was harder when they were getting married, 'cause they were always shouting and moaning because they couldn't get things right ... I get on with Tom a lot, but sometimes he just really gets on my nerves ... I spend more time with him, more than with my dad I think. He's always here, I always see him, he acts more like my dad (Kay, 11)*

Theresa's relationship with her father is discussed in more detail later. It is problematic because of his history of being violent to her mother. In contrast, Theresa spoke warmly of her relationship with her stepdad and clearly regards him as a father figure:



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*Dave's my stepdad and he's just like a dad to me 'cause he's really nice and he'll give me money and that. And he'll, like, he treats me as if he's my dad, he doesn't treat me as if, like, that's my fiancée's daughter. Like if I get upset or something like that then he'll come and he'll try and comfort me and try and be nice whereas the other people will just go like that, 'she's fine, she's fine' but he won't. Since Dave's been there, it's been a lot better, I'd prefer David to be my dad (Theresa, 12)*

These accounts suggest that where a child's relationship with their birth father is poor or non-existent, they are more likely to accept a new person into the family home and to regard this person as a potential or actual father figure. It is not always the case, however, that children are prepared to accept a substitute for an absent father. Although it was four years after Catherine's father had died when her mother's boyfriend started to come round to their house, there was considerable resistance to the perceived threat of someone taking her father's place.

While it is possible that children who retain a very good relationship with their non-resident father will resist also having a stepfather, this is not necessarily the case. In Danny's case the problem seemed to be rather that he treated his mother's boyfriend more like a father than the boyfriend wished. Danny had always enjoyed a good relationship with his birth father, and reported being pleased that his mum has found a new partner. Nonetheless, in his first interview, he portrayed his mum's relationship with a new partner as breaking down because the new partner could not cope with him and his sister:

*It was good because my mum obviously had someone she could talk to and stuff and I got on fine with him and so did my sister and so did my brother but he didn't have kids of his own. Like, the real reason, part of the reason him and my mum split up was because he didn't have kids of his own and he didn't really understand. But my mum and him are still friends anyway and she was out with him last night at the cinema (Danny, 12)*

Danny explained in his follow-up interview that his mum had recently got back with her new partner and his detailed and reflective account of this draws attention to the subtle and complex interplay of different family relationships. In particular, he reflects upon the role that he feels he and his sister played in both the split and the subsequent reunion (see Danny's Case Study).

Matthew's parents split up seven years ago and he has lived with his mum and his step-dad for the past five years. Matthew has always had a good relationship with his dad and he considers himself to fortunate that he sees him on a regular basis. Like Danny, Matthew was pleased on his mum's behalf when she began seeing his step-dad, but in contrast with Danny, things appear to have worked out very well right from the start and have continued in the same vein:

*It's just lucky to see him 'cause some people don't see their Dad, and it's good that I see him ... He [step-dad] was nice to me like, em, it wasn't just Mum alone and we just got on really well and he's just good fun to be with (Matthew, 12)*

In common with quite a few Cool with Change participants, Matthew also spoke with great fondness of his family pet. His cat pre-dates both his mum and dad's separation and the arrival of his step-dad and it may be that she has helped Matthew to maintain a sense of continuity in his family life in the context of changing circumstances:

*Because she's (pet cat, 'Doodles') been in my life for as far as I can remember*

## **New 'half' or step-siblings at home**

Theresa and David talked about what it was like for them when a new half-sibling was born into the family home. At the time of her first interview, Theresa was living with her mum, her mum's new partner and their two young children, her genetic half siblings. A step-brother of the same age was due to move in to the family home with them, an event Theresa wasn't looking forward to. She talked about feeling very close to the two younger children and described how she helped to look after them. Her remarks at her follow-up interview suggested that her concerns about her step-brother moving in and going to the same school as her were largely unfounded. Her account described



minor tensions and fears of invidious comparison and competition for favour with parents that are characteristic of many sibling relationships. She is thankful that she and her step-brother were in different classes at school allowing them some space apart from each other and avoiding too direct comparisons. On the other hand, Theresa had just had a good school report whilst he had had a bad one, and this was causing some tension within the family. Although they fight a lot at home, each was expected to do their fair share of the chores and Theresa highlighted this as a good thing:

*It's chaos, 'cause we fight all the time but it's a lot better to have someone else around so we can share the chores, like if I'm washing, he'll dry the dishes. Or if he's washing, I'll dry (Theresa, 12)*

David lived with his mum and her new partner and his older brother and, in recent months, a new half-brother had been born into the family. David, in contrast to his older brother, was very positive about having a new little brother:

*It was a blessing ... I help look after him and help make his bottles and feed him and change the nappy. I think my older brother can't really cope (David, 12)*

For both Theresa and David, active involvement with their new 'half siblings' has helped their sense of engagement in their co-resident family although it may have further alienated David's brother, who, for whatever reason, was not engaged with the baby. It is, of course, easier for older children to shift the balance of their main sources of informal support and the locus of their attention to personal life outside the family home. Theresa was very ambivalent about her father and unsure of continuing contact with him. Her energies in terms of family life were focused on her co-resident family and it was clearly very important to her that things did not go wrong because of the arrival of her new step-brother. David, on the other hand, as well as being engaged with his co-resident family was also determinedly rebuilding his relationship with his father, who also has a new partner and son. These circumstances are described in greater detail in the section on non-resident fathers.

## **Relationships after the stepfather or mother's boyfriend moves out**

It is not clear whether children and young people always know or consider whether their mother's new partner who is moving into their home will be a permanent arrangement. Not all such arrangements become long-term. Our data include accounts where children have experienced the break up of a second relationship. What this is like is illustrated by Martin, Stewart, Catherine and Rachel.

Martin's dad moved out of the family home when he was three and his little sister was newly born. Martin saw his dad in the immediate aftermath of the separation but then lost touch. He re-established contact with his dad last year as a result of his mum using the Friends Reunited website and he and his sister now visit him and his family regularly. Around 5 years ago the composition of his household changed to include his mum's new partner but this couple relationship has recently deteriorated and his mum's partner moved out a few months prior to the interview:

*They hadn't been getting on, so, like, he moved out, but we're still allowed to go and see him and that ... It was enjoyable when he stayed but, like, there was times when things weren't so good ... There's not much to do on a Wednesday now if we don't go up to my aunt's and I just miss him ... He says that once he actually gets a flat, a house or something, then, like, me and my sister can go and stay when we want and that, so we'll like still keep in touch. And the flat that he's going to see soon is just round the corner so it's not that far (Martin, 12)*

Stewart has maintained a close relationship with his non-resident father since his parents split up when he was aged around 6. His father continues to contribute financially to the household and takes Stewart to visit his grandparents and other relatives on his side regularly. Stewart has two younger half-siblings who live with him and his mum. He refers to his mum's ex-boyfriend as his 'step-dad', perhaps because he is the father of his half-siblings, although he has never lived in the family home. His mum and his stepdad have recently split up. At the time of interview, Stewart's relationship with his step-dad was virtually non-existent and contrasts sharply with Martin's desired continued closeness with his mother's ex-partner. Stewart explained why it is that his step-dad spends time with his half-siblings, but not with him:



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*'Cause they're the real Dad's [children] and I'm just a step-dad's [child]. I only see him when he comes down to collect them, I don't go up to his house, I've got my dad's house to go up to (Stewart, 11)*

A number of our participants also described what it's like when a less well-established relationship between their mum and a new partner breaks down. Catherine's case study, presented later, illustrates how a short term relationship can have a big impact and Rachel's account also provides a similar example.

Rachel's parents separated when she was very young and they share Rachel's care, often adapting their arrangements in line with changing circumstances. For example, at the time of her first interview, Rachel's main home was with her mum but by the time of her second interview she was now living with her dad through the week, and her mum at week-ends. Rachel did not enjoy spending time with her mother's boyfriend:

*Sometimes I didn't get on with my mum's boyfriend and his family weren't that nice either. And sometimes I was quite happy when it was just me and my mum, but I don't think my mum was happy, she did still like him (Rachel, 12)*

Rachel went on to describe the aftermath of the demise of this relationship as a very upsetting time for her mum, and one in which she offered a lot of support:

*She really didn't want to do anything after that because mum was quite upset but I helped her and got her out and things like that and she, she wouldn't really have carried on if hadn't really helped her ... It wasn't very nice and, like, I didn't really feel I could tell my dad they had split up because they weren't, we weren't that close at that point because, just because he had his girlfriend and my mum had her boyfriend so everyone had a different life. But I felt OK because I knew that it was just something that you had to get on with, but it was a bit upsetting, they didn't really understand, because I was only about 7 at this point (Rachel, 12)*

In these two instances their mum's relationship with a new partner did not last for very long and didn't develop into a 'step-parenting' relationship but the break up of the relationship nonetheless had consequences for them. These consequences were indirect and were related to their mum's ability to cope with the situation rather than constituting a direct loss of a relationship that they had enjoyed.

## **Relationships with the non-resident parent**

Across the UK, family policy actively encourages the maintenance of contact between children and both parents following separation and divorce, portraying this as a presumed social good which promotes the interests of children and wider society. In Scotland, recent legislation gives the parent the right 'if the child is not living with him, to maintain personal relations and direct contact with the child on a regular basis' and confers a responsibility on parents for ensuring that contact (Section 2, Family Law (Scotland) Act, 2006). Where there is a dispute, the courts can provide a forum for coming to an arrangement, but in practice, the great majority of cases do not involve the courts or legal system, with most families reaching agreement without recourse to formal court processes (ESRC/Scottish Executive, 2006). This is consistent with trends in other EU member states and Australia. Research suggests that parents generally find private arrangements satisfactory in contrast to high levels of conflict in cases involving the courts (Bjornberg, 2002, ONS, 2003, Smyth and others, 2004, Statistics Norway, 2005). British policy has also sought to continue father's financial responsibility for children beyond separation or divorce. Relatively little is known about patterns and levels of private child support arrangements, income transfers from the non-resident parent to the resident parent, and how these compare in different countries (Wasoff, 2006). Research has repeatedly shown that the lone parent family-households formed by divorce are invariably poorer than the couple households that preceded them and in many European countries divorce and separation is a direct route into poverty for children.

The research literature on non-resident parents has focused chiefly on the extent of contact between children and their non-resident parent and on the payment of support, with much less emphasis on the emotional closeness and psychological significance of these relationships. Some studies drawing on children's perspectives though, have shown how a child's relationship with a non-resident parent is embedded in a network of other social relationships, for example, with wider kin (Trinder and others, 2002, Pryor 2003) and with friends (Neale & Smart, 2001, Dunn, 2004). Our data also draw attention to the interplay of children's wider social networks and their material circumstances with their material and emotional connectedness to their non-resident father. It would appear that for some young





people, lack of social support in maintaining the relationship and/or lack of material resources is a significant barrier to maintaining contact with a non-resident parent. The latter can be as simple as lacking the means of maintaining credit on a mobile phone, which has become a standard form of communication in recent years.

It is also important to note that a non-resident father can remain important as an idea and a potential future relationship even when there is little or no connection. Our interviews include a small number of accounts of children taking the initiative in seeking out contact with fathers who had been absent from their lives. For example at age 9 Kenneth enlisted the help of his family to trace his father:

*I asked my mum where my, no, I asked my nan where my dad was 'cause it was just to get in touch with him I think, and she said, em, she said, I don't know and then she asked my mum ... they tried to get in touch with him so I could start seeing him and they ended up finding his aunt's number I think it was...and then she said that she hadn't heard from him in a while but then soon, like the day after, no, it was about a week after, he phoned and then I saw him and I remember we went bowling. He asked how I was and that (Kenneth, 12)*

*Yeah. So what was that like the first time you met him then? (Interviewer)*

*I think it was pretty emotional. But it was fun (Kenneth, 12)*

In this section, we focus on the accounts of those children (37) who talked about their relationship with a non-resident parent. We wanted to understand more about what for children makes their relationship with their non-resident parent work, and conversely, what gets in the way. We begin with a set of illustrations of how material circumstances and a child's wider social network can facilitate contact with a father who lives elsewhere. This is followed by illustrations of what happens where a non-resident parent re-partners, and where a non-resident parent has another child. The section ends with accounts from children in circumstances which hinder a good relationship, focusing on particularly extreme sets of circumstances: where domestic violence and/or imprisonment are issues.

## **Enabling factors: father's material contributions and supportive social relationships**

A few of our participants linked their relationship with their non-resident father very closely with how both parents get on. Their father's willingness to contribute financially to their mother and to them is a factor in this. For some children, the fact that their father sustained the role of financial provider was taken as an indication of his continued care for them. Research by Warin and colleagues (1999) suggests that boys in particular are likely to emphasise the role of father as provider. Stewart and John's accounts suggest that it is particularly important to them that their dad continues to make a significant financial contribution:

*He (dad) spends more money on me 'cause my Mum's not got a job and my Dad's got a job and I'm his only one. And Mum, my Dad just gives my Mum some money as well to help her out and that (Stewart, 11)*

*My dad, he pays for the house. He doesn't live in it any more but he still pays for it 'cause he doesn't want to see us out on the street which is kinda stupid 'cause he can't pay his own rent because he broke his leg recently and he has to drive a lot for his work, so he can't work overtime (John, 13)*

Although both of these participants focused on the contribution their dad makes to their material well-being, their accounts also hint at an emotional bond. For Stewart, it's also important that both parents get on well and do not lead totally separate lives. For example, he talked about both parents coming to watch him play in school football matches:

*Do your family come and watch you play? (Interviewer)*

*Yes my Mum and my Dad, well sometimes my Dad can't make it but he tries his best to get there before the half time point (Stewart, 11)*

The extent to which father's continue to be included in and embedded in the wider social networks of the child's social world was also very important. For example, some participants highlighted the significance of their friends being included in some way in the time they spend with their non-resident parent:



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*All ma pals have seen ma Dad, they all think ma Dad's a bit funny (John, 13)*

*Just two weeks ago, Peter and Connor stayed at my dad's, which was good 'cause I never used to want to bring friends to my dad's house (Danny, 12)*

Other accounts point to the importance of continued contact with members of their non-resident parent's wider family. Where these relationships continue to flourish, they help to sustain a child's relationship with their non-resident parent, even from a distance:

*I find it easier to talk to ma Dad's Mum 'cause I see her more often (Sinead, 11)*

### **Complicating factors: when a non-resident parent re-partners**

When a non-resident parent, typically father, chooses to live with a new partner, this inevitably has an effect on his relationship with his children. Children and young people who were unhappy about their contact with their father often talked about how things had deteriorated since their father had re-partnered. This is not the only story in the data, however. Some children talked positively about this new relationship and some changed their story over time.

We begin by looking at Kenneth's account. He lives with his mum, his brother and a baby half-brother. His mum's boyfriend has his own flat but often stays with them. Kenneth's parents split up when he was very young and he didn't see his dad until age 9 or 10 after he had enlisted the help of his family to trace him. After their initial contact he used to see his father every Saturday but then Kenneth's dad re-married and moved further away:

*I only started seeing him when I was about 9 or 10 like, 'cause by this time he still lived up in Glasgow and then I think he moved when I was about 12, so I've not seen him, I don't see him that often anymore. He used to stay just outside Glasgow and I used to go every week-end but now I see him, like, every month, which is pretty rubbish. And he's got a new wife, so (Kenneth, 12)*

There's some phone contact between Kenneth and his dad but this tends to be at his dad's behest because Kenneth, in common with several other participants in our study, finds it difficult to keep his phone in credit.

Other participants did not appear to experience their father's re-partnering as a significant event in itself so much as simply another chapter in an unsatisfactory relationship. These accounts suggest that some children can harbour enduring feelings of dislike and disappointment with their father. Kay's parents split up many years ago and since then she has enjoyed a close relationship with her mum, describing her as: 'like my friend'. She feels very differently towards her father, and one of her complaints about him is that he is 'too busy with her [his girlfriend]'. Kay's definition of what 'family' means to her reveals a lot about how she regards her relationship with her father:

*Em, it's got to be the people that come to Christmas dinner and people that are there for you. People that don't just come and see you, give you money and then leave again, that's what ma Dad does. He thinks that's the only reason I've got to see him it's for money, then he goes back to the pub (Kay, 13)*

While Stewart and John quoted in the previous section illustrate how children can see the continuance of the role of father as provider as evidencing his care for them, Kay's account shows that sporadic generosity can be seen as a cynical substitute for consistent investment of time and emotional energy.

Other accounts suggest that it may be particularly difficult to accommodate a non-resident parent's new partner when it occurs in the immediate aftermath of the separation, as was the case for Julia whose father only very recently moved out of the family home to live in England:

*He seems to have enough time for her [dad's girlfriend] but not enough for his own flesh and blood (Julia, 14)*

Julia's account also reflects the ripple effect that the effective loss of a parent can have on other personal relationships, for example, on relationships with friends. Since her dad left, Julia says she has changed a lot and talks of becoming socially isolated and victimised at school:

*After my dad left I wasn't, I was loud and I suppose I wasn't as happy and up for doing as much things I use to be, and they all just kind of got bored with that and*



*just stopped hanging about with me, still haven't talked to me. I don't really talk to anyone in school ... I have not got a problem with anyone, its just they don't really want to talk to me. Just walk down the corridor and just get abuse, actually quite a few people have been ... a couple of months ago someone threw an open yoghurt at me, it was all in my hair. Someone threw a dead rat at me a couple of weeks ago ... I had a problem with one of my teachers, he used to also, like, say things about how I looked and make comments about me, like in front of the whole class (Julia, 14)*

Her sense of loss following her dad's departure has made her think about loss in her wider family:

*I think probably after my dad left, quite a bit after my dad left I was watching TV or something, it was this wee happy family, I didn't even really realise how much I had actually missed my dad, and a wee grandpa came on the scene and I thought, I don't have a grandpa anymore, I only have one grandparent and that's my gran and she doesn't talk to me, I don't have a dad now, and I just kind of really got upset for quite a while, so that was probably the worst, just realising that they actually aren't there, it hadn't sunk in yet (Julia, 14)*

The condemnation of her father by her mum's kin may have reinforced a sense of irrevocable loss. The attitude of her mum's kin were demonstrated by what happened when her dad came to her older sister's 18th birthday party:

*Well my mum, because he moved away, the circumstances, all of his friends up in Glasgow have taken my mum's side, and the ones that were there just completely blanked him all the time, so he stood at the bar on his own most of the time. Me and my sister tried our hardest, like, to get him up and dance and stuff, but he realised that we were doing it 'cause we felt bad for him, and he wanted us to have a good time so ... but there wasn't any bother with him, my sister was quite worried about that in case he started a fight in the middle of her party, but they ignored each other (Julia, 14)*

Pauline also found her dad getting together with a new partner difficult to get used to. She lives with her mum and her sister in a lone parent family. She described her father's girlfriend, now her step-mum since they have married, as 'kind of youngish', and she spoke about how she felt when her dad re-partnered:

*I was kinda let down 'cause it was, like, soon after Mum and Dad split up, but I did feel awkward at first. We didn't really, weren't really used to my Dad being with someone else (Pauline, 13)*

A year or so later, Pauline's dad and her step-mum got married and Pauline spoke with great pride about being a bridesmaid at the wedding. She also spoke warmly about the recent birth of a half-sibling:

*It's more fun, my dad and step-mum are like, they, I think they're happier (Pauline, 13)*

So what might account for this change of heart? Pauline talked about spending a lot of time with relatives on her dad's side as well as with her step-mum's parents, so unlike Julia, she is clearly embedded in many branches of her dad's new and wider family. Pauline also talked about the value of having a close friend who has experienced similar circumstances. Another clue may lie in how Pauline described her relationship with her dad:

*I get on with him [dad] well 'cause we're both quite laidback so we don't really take much seriously, we just kinda joke about most of the time so it's quite good ... he's more like my brother than my Dad I think (Pauline, 13)*

Perhaps Pauline has re-situated herself in relation to her father and this has helped her to resolve earlier uncertainties about where she 'fits' in her father's life in the aftermath of him establishing a new relationship. Her important role at her dad's wedding reflects the 'special' place she continues to occupy in his life but she likes to think of him as more of a 'brother' than a father.

So, perhaps not surprisingly, getting used to a non-resident parent's new partner appears to depend to some extent on when the re-partnering occurs. However, other factors, such as the role that other relatives play and how a child feels about where they 'fit' in their father's new life, are also important.



Pattie's account also suggests that a non-resident parent's new partner can enrich a young person's life by operating as a 'bridge' into new experiences:

*I think Lena's [dad's partner] a bit closer to me than Steve [mum's partner] is 'cause I met her before I met Steve, so we got to know each other a lot better. And she gives me lots of shoes... but she's just a very interesting person. She's been around the world and she's, like, met the Queen and she's going to the party with Prince Charles and all that (Pattie, 12)*

## **Complicating factors: when a non-resident parent has another child?**

Young people in our study had a range of responses to fathers who no longer lived at home having another child with their new partner. For some, like Kristina, this had an adverse effect on their relationship and for others, like Kathy, it was seen as improving their relationship with their father and his household.

Kristina's parents separated when she was very young and to begin with, she didn't see her dad, only re-establishing contact around 4 years later by which time her dad had re-married. Her dad had a child with his new wife a few years later at around the same time as Kristina's mum's boyfriend moved into the family home. Kristina's account suggests that her dad having another child has caused further alienation, although she continues to visit her dad regularly:

*Before Molly was born, I like, talked to them all and stuff. When Molly was born I quietened down and I don't really talk to them at all. I still see him, like, once a week, it's just that when I'm there, I don't really talk or anything (Kristina, 13)*

Kathy's parents also split up when she was very young and like Kristina, she lives in a step-family and is very close to her step-dad. In contrast to Kristina, she has retained a close bond with many relatives on her dad's side of the family and she visits them regularly when she stays with her dad:

*Sometimes we like, go and see my gran who lives across on the east coast as well, and there's other people that live there, like my cousin, aunts on my Dad's side. We go and see them or we can like, we sometimes go shopping, like it tends to be me and my sisters and my Dad's girlfriend (Kathy, 11)*

Kathy's account also suggests that she has a problematic relationship with her dad, and she seems to have 're-positioned' herself in relation to him as a way of managing these difficult feelings. In contrast with Kristina, the birth of a new half-sibling also seems to have helped in this regard:

*I don't really get on that well with my dad, to tell the truth I don't really like my dad. I just, usually feel uncomfortable with him and like, I don't call him dad, I call him Patrick... Because with Seamus [new baby], I don't like that name, but with him there it sort of takes the burden off me and Constance of being all the attention and that makes things a wee bit easier (Kathy, 11)*

Kathy's mum also appears to have helped her to manage her difficult feelings about her dad by agreeing that she and her sister need only visit their dad every third week-end instead of every second week-end.

These accounts suggest that when a non-resident parent has another child, this can bring to the fore complex and often contradictory feelings about where young people 'fit' in their father's life which are difficult to resolve, but this isn't always the case. For some young people, like Kathy, the presence of a new half-sibling can ease the pressure on a difficult relationship. Other accounts suggest that the impact of this event can change over time.

David lives with his mum, his older brother and his much younger half-brothers [it's not clear from his account if he has a step-dad who lives with him]. His account reflects on what it was like when he first found out that his Dad had another child:

*I had lost contact with my dad when I was 5 and I got back in contact when I was about 10 maybe. But the first time I'd ever really seen him I was told that I had a wee brother and, you know, just finding out, it was like they had a whole other life over there and it was a wee bit of a shock to me (David, 12)*



Although David talks of 'losing contact' with his dad, it is perhaps significant that in the absence of actual physical contact, he 'kept alive' this relationship by keeping treasured photos and mementos. When David began seeing his dad again, he faced another challenge – how to maintain a close relationship whilst separated by hundreds of miles (his dad lives in the south of England). However, David and his dad, with the support of his mum and other family and friends, have set up a range of different ways of maintaining contact:

*I spend time with my gran and granddad, on his side at their house up north... I take a train down there maybe every fourth month or whatever and I speak to him regularly on the phone and we text each other and things like that. I have contact with him regularly, he phones me every other day and I can text him or phone him whenever I want to (David, 12)*

David's dad also pays money into his bank account every week and is planning a holiday which David hopes will help him to forge a relationship with his new half-brother on his dad's side:

*I don't really see him that much and I'm uncomfortable in that situation. I'd love to see him but obviously I'm going to spend a fortnight with him in Spain, get to know him the same as Dylan [new half-brother on mum's side]*

A few other participants also mentioned going on family holidays with their non-resident parent and his family and it may be that occasions such as this can play a key role in nurturing a child's relationship with their non-resident parent as well as facilitating relationship-building with other family members. However, like visiting and communicating across geographical distance, this use of holidays is much easier for those who are reasonably well off and it requires a level of resources that is beyond the households of some of the participants in the study.

## **Hindering factors: domestic violence and imprisonment**

Few studies have asked children themselves what it's like to live with a violent father. An important exception to this is a UK study which explored children's perspectives on domestic violence (Mullender and others, 2002). Mullender and colleagues found that irrespective of whether children wished to be in touch with their fathers or whether they felt they still loved or hated and feared them, the lives of all those children had been deeply marked by having lived with violent, authoritarian men. Although we did not ask children directly about their experiences of living with domestic violence, a significant minority (7) talked about managing their relationship with a violent father who no longer lives in the family home. Some of these children, such as Cheryl, Julie and Stuart, have no contact at all with their violent, non-resident father, and their experiences are discussed in the section on children without contact with their fathers. Here we draw on the accounts of Theresa, Sarah, Lesley and Kirsty.

We begin with Theresa whose dad left the family home when she was very young. At the start, she had some contact with him but as she got older she learned about his violence towards her mother. This appears to have shaken the image she held of her father to the extent that she decided to stop seeing him:

*When I found out I was quite shocked because I didn't think my dad was like that, I always thought he was my dad really, no' somebody that was really violent and was really angry ... I felt quite hurt, I didn't think that he'd do something like that to my mum. And I thought that he really liked her, or loved her really (Theresa, 12)*

In the immediate aftermath of the separation, her mum drew heavily on Theresa for support and her account suggests that this was a very difficult burden for her to bear at the time. It also appears to have had a lasting impact on how she feels about her dad:

*And she [Mum] says that I was, like the only person that knew about it. And she says to me not to tell anybody ... It felt quite uncomfortable, like, when I hadn't seen my dad and knowing that he's done it and he's just covered it up.*

*It's still like, I know he's my dad but I feel as if I want to disown him really. That's quite harsh I think. (Theresa, 12)*

Theresa's mum has since re-partnered and had another child and she was quoted earlier in the report describing her step-father as 'being like a dad to her'. We interviewed her twice over the course of a year and by the time of



her second interview, Theresa had begun to see her biological dad every two weeks (chaperoned by her mum) in response to him phoning and asking to see her. In spite of this long absence, it sounds as though Theresa still feels close to her dad but she struggles to reconcile these feelings with his past behaviour:

*Well ma dad's no really lived with me since I've been wee. But when I'm with him I feel dead close tae him. But then when I'm no with him I feel like there's something took away ... There's something, there's something that wants me to, like talk to him, and at the other side that he's not been there for me ... I'm sort of mixed (Theresa, 12)*

Theresa's account also suggests that she fears that her dad's violence may not only be a thing of the past:

*Sometimes when I look at him you can see it, because I know. And sometimes you see it and he's just ... You can see sometimes when he's angry, you can see it, just the way he looks (Theresa, 12)*

Another of our participants, Sarah, also described how her parents had separated because of domestic abuse perpetrated by her dad against her mum:

*My dad used to, didn't like my mum going out and enjoying herself. He wouldn't mind if she was away with her work and then coming back and then going to work the next day. But because my mum didn't listen, just go out and done what she wanted to do ... then my dad and her just had a couple of rows because of it, my dad just hit my mum ... so I think my mum just became fed up with it. Also, we were seeing it as well, so she really wanted to get away from it. That's why they split up (Sarah, 11)*

Sarah's account suggests that her family circumstances went from bad to worse, and she ended up being taken in by her aunt on two occasions, once when her mum became ill and her dad went to prison, and again when her mum became homeless:

*I had to go and stay with my Aunty Tina because, eh ... my mum and dad, my mum went mental as well. She went into hospital and my dad got took to the prison, I think it was for assaulting her ... then I got taken away from my mum after that again because we didn't have enough money to pay the rent so my mum stayed in a [hostel for homeless people] but she didn't want to take us in there because she wouldn't like us to stay in there so I stayed with my Aunty Tina again (Sarah, 11)*

In spite of these problems, Sarah seems to have rekindled her relationship with her dad, but very much on her own terms:

*And, em, he got out and he was on drugs and stuff so I didn't actually speak to him at that point but then a couple of years after that, my mum got out and then I started staying with her again. And then I started, I spoke to my dad on the phone and I said he needs to buck up his ideas if he wanted to see us (Sarah, 11)*

Sarah's account gives a couple of clues about what may have helped her maintain a positive relationship with her dad. Firstly, it seems that although her dad does not pay proper child support, he does give Theresa money when she needs it, for example, to buy clothes:

*We don't get any money from my dad. We do get pocket money but my mum doesn't get any money from my dad for us so my mum struggles quite a bit ... For the last few months I actually have to ask my dad to buy me stuff because I've kinda got, not got hardly any clothes (Sarah, 11)*

Sarah also refers to keep-sakes she has of happier times when her mum and dad were together, including a video taken at the time of their marriage. At the time of interview, she talked as if she had watched videos of her parents' past recently and it is clear that they are important to her. She also talks of putting troubles of the past behind her. Perhaps the videos reaffirm the ideal of a mother and father and help her to maintain an emotional connection with her dad, rather than reminding her of the grimmer realities of the past:

*Basically I've put it all behind me and just tried to get on with my life instead of thinking back but, em, I've got a couple of videos and you see my mum and dad*



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*all together, it like brings quite a lot of things back 'cause I've got videos of when they used to go together and when they got married and stuff (Sarah, 11)*

Another of our participants, Lesley, also talked about her dad being in prison. We interviewed both Lesley and her older sister, Kirsty, on two occasions. At the time of their first interview, their parents had only recently separated and both sisters lived with their dad but saw their mum regularly. By the time of their second interview, they had moved house, were back living with their mum and their dad was in prison for a drugs offence, although only one sister spoke about this in her interview. Lesley appears to express mixed and ambivalent feelings about spending time with her dad:

*He's in Barlinnie, my mum says my dad is not letting me go and see him, but I wanted to go and see him yesterday because it was fathers' day. But my mum says he won't send out a meeting form or anything like that, like a booking or anything like that ... I think actually he deserved to go into jail for like, selling the drugs and all that, and I don't usually want to see him now because what he done and all that (Lesley, 12)*

Her dad had been in prison on two previous occasions and Lesley said that this time his sentence was extended for hitting her:

*But my dad was meant to be coming out on December, the same day as he came in, that was a year, but he got extra time put on because he was hitting me with belts and slapping me with slippers on and all that ... I told my social worker and got interviewed by police ... the social worker took me (Lesley, 12)*

In contrast, Lesley's older sister made no mention in her interview of her dad being in prison. Like her sister, she has no contact with her dad at the moment, and she seemed reluctant to talk about this:

*Do you still see you dad? (Interviewer)*

*No (Kirsty, 15)*

*Not at all, no, and how do you feel about that? (Interviewer)*

*I don't know, I don't really mind, I don't know (Kirsty)*

*I think before you said you were quite close to your dad (Interviewer).*

*I don't really know, I haven't really thought about it*

Children and young people whose non-resident parent is in prison and/or has a history of domestic violence face additional difficulties if they want a relationship with their father following their parent's separation and are more likely to have to contend with multiple disruptions to their family life. As the next section shows, some choose no contact in these circumstances. All of these participants did want contact, although some were more ambivalent than others, and their accounts highlight how difficult it is for a young person to reconcile violent and criminal behaviour with their image of what a father should be. Sarah's experience in particular shows how young people in such circumstances may have to deal with many other associated problems, such as homelessness and mental health issues.

## **Children with no contact with their non-resident parent**

In spite of this presumption of contact, a minority of children have little or no contact with their non-resident parent (mostly fathers) from the point of his departure from the household, whilst others lose contact over time. In the US, a number of studies reported that half of children whose parents had separated lost contact with their fathers completely 10 years after separation (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985, Seltzer, 1991). A more recent British study found that the strongest indicators of contact were the father's occupational status and level of income - the higher the employment status, the more fathers were likely to have regular contact with their children (Simpson and others, 1995). Bradshaw and colleagues draw attention to the difficulties of interpreting data which define 'contact' as 'seeing' a child, arguing that this can fail to capture the 'essence' of a child's relationship with their non-resident parent (Bradshaw and others, 1999). They report that contact is more likely to be regular if there is an amicable relationship with the caring parent and if maintenance is being paid, although it is impossible to assess the direction of causality in these associations.



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In their study only 21% of non-resident fathers reported no contact with their children.

Whether or not continued contact is always appropriate is deeply contested. One leading researcher concludes that “although the benefits of continued involvement by both parents in their children’s lives outweighs the adverse effects of parental conflict in most cases, this is not true in a sizeable number of cases, in which the relationship with the non-resident parent is tenuous or poor and the effects of exposure to conflict are great” (Lamb, 2005). Conversely, some non-resident parents claim they are marginalised by a biased legal system whilst children’s organisations say that children are not adequately protected nor their voices adequately listened to. Popular discourse has often portrayed non-resident fathers in a negative light and this has led to the assumption that where there is no contact, or a loss of contact, this is usually due to a lack of commitment on the part of non-resident parents or the result of ongoing conflict between resident and non-resident parents. However, the reasons for this are complex and varied and structural constraints such as distance, suitable accommodation and lack of material resources also play a role (Bainham and others, 2003). There is broad agreement that the sustainability and success of contact arrangements between a parent and child do not only depend on their relationship but also the network of other relationships in which they are embedded (Dunn, 2004, Pryor, 2003). Much of the research on contact has tended to approach the issue from the point of view of parents, in particular, from the perspective of non-resident fathers losing contact with their children (Bradshaw and others, 1999, Simpson and others, 1995).

Among the group of children interviewed in depth, 7 young people reported having no contact with their non-resident parent (in all cases their father). For some, there has been no contact since their parents separated, for others, contact has broken down over a period of time. Four of these children live in a lone parent family and three live in step-families. All without exception met the criteria we use to place research participants in the most economically disadvantaged group (see Appendix). Nevertheless, none of the children were socially isolated and despite the complete absence of their father, each had access to some adult kin support in addition to their mother. Three children said little or nothing at all about their relationship with their non-resident father in their interview. All of these children displayed signs of feeling uncomfortable with this line of questioning and in light of their discomfort, we chose to move on to safer ground but their accounts do offer some clues about the circumstances surrounding the absence of contact with their non-resident parent. In two cases, children have moved away and in the other, domestic violence may have been an issue. Three girls and one boy spoke in more detail about contact arrangements with their absent father, allowing us to look a little more closely at these relationships and the contexts within which they operate.

Julie lives in a lone parent household and has a close relationship with her mum, her gran and two aunts. She also has a network of close friends, one in particular she has known all her life. Her parents split up when she was a baby and she has never had contact with her dad since her parents separated. She knows that he lives locally and when she “got older”, her mum told her about the circumstances surrounding their separation, something she didn’t want to talk about. Julie said very little about why she doesn’t have any contact with her dad, but her comment below suggests that her mum’s attitude is a factor which has influenced her decision not to see her dad. Her comment also suggests a degree of ambivalence about this:

*My mum doesn’t want me to see him and I don’t really want to (Julie, 10)*

Stuart and his older brother have lived with their mum and step-dad for five years. He enjoys playing football with his friends and regularly sees his maternal grandparents and his step-dad’s parents. He is also close to his mum’s brother and is in contact with other relatives of his mum’s and his step-dad’s who live in another city. He hasn’t seen his dad since his parents separated. Around a year ago, he began to ask about his dad. He knows his dad’s name and where he used to live but has no current contact details for him. Like Julia, his comments suggest a degree of ambivalence about potential contact with his dad. In his account, he said that he would ‘kinda’ like to see him and later he said:

*My mum just told me everything and now I don’t really care (Stuart, 11)*

Cheryl lives in a lone parent household with her mum and has two older siblings. She has an older sister who lives in a city in the north of England, and her older brother has recently come back to live with Cheryl and her mum. She’s close to one her aunts and her family but her mum’s other sister doesn’t talk to the family. She also has a number of close female friends as well as an adult friend of her mum’s. Cheryl has a social worker and goes to a ‘social work’ club every week because of problems with her behaviour. Cheryl and her sister are survivors of her dad’s abuse. He was sent to prison for assault and is now only allowed to have any contact with Cheryl’s brother. Cheryl seems content not to have any contact with her dad, although her comments suggest that it’s important for her to understand why he behaved the way he did.





*Ma big sister was fifteen and I was one. He used to batter us all the time – I don't know why, probably doesn't like girls, babies and that, 'cause he used to love my big brother, and he still loves my big brother, he sends letters and that. Sometimes he writes about me, asks how I am and all that ... I don't know if he's still alive, that's what I wrote on my form. My mum said he's still alive but I don't, like, speak to him. So, that's all about my dad (Cheryl, 11)*

These accounts, although few in number, are valuable because they reflect the perspectives of young people who have no contact with their non-resident parent, and this is a voice that is seldom heard. Their accounts reflect the diversity of influences that young people who have no contact with their non-resident parent have to weigh up and engage with. Some children's accounts, such as those of Julie and Stuart, suggest an ambivalence about whether or not to have contact with their father. In both cases, their mother's attitude towards their father may be a contributory factor and there may be an element of them feeling that they have to weigh up loyalty to their mother against a desire to see their father. Cheryl's account and that of Lizzie, described in more detail in a separate case study, on the other hand, display no such ambiguity. They are clear that they do not want contact with their father and this is perhaps not surprising given the circumstances they describe which continue to impact on their lives.

## Case Studies: Danny and Lizzie

Many children whose parents separate experience multiple changes in circumstances that have an impact on their family life. This section presents two contrasting case studies which contain themes of separation from a parent and parents re-partnering. In one case, Danny, he talks about his relationships moving on and change in himself, resulting in more self assurance and sense of maturity. In Lizzie's case, however, her account is one of lack of progress and indeed a worsening situation to the detriment of her sense of self and connection to others. We begin each case study with a brief contextual description of each person's family circumstances. We follow this with an analytical account of their experiences of changing family circumstances, illustrated by extracts from their interview transcripts.

### DANNY

At the time of his first interview Danny was aged 11. He lives with his mum and two older siblings. His parents split up around five years ago and since the separation he and his siblings have spent most weekends with their dad and his new family (a 'step-mum' and two step-sisters). At his first interview, Danny said that his weekly visits can sometimes be an uncomfortable experience because he doesn't get on with his step-mum and this sometimes causes tension between him and his dad. His visits to his dad also mean that he can't see his friends on a Saturday, something he would like to do. He values time on his own with his dad (a medical professional) but this doesn't happen very often. He is close to his mum and regularly visits relatives on both sides of the family. He enjoys school and has a wide network of friends and leisure interests. His mum has recently 'split up' with a boyfriend because things weren't working out between him and the children. By the time of his second interview, Danny's family circumstances had changed, for example, his mum had resumed her relationship with her boyfriend. He appeared to be happier and seemed more reconciled to his family situation than before. He is happier spending time at his dad's house now and gets on much better with his step-mother.

#### Spending time with a non-resident parent

In his first interview, Danny talked a lot about what it was like spending time with his dad and his new family, and he painted a problematic picture which at one point, resulted in him having a break from seeing his dad:

*I don't really get on with my step-mum that well and sometimes it means I don't have that good a relationship with my Dad which upsets me quite a lot  
(1st Interview)*



*There was a big blow up and I stopped going to see my Dad for, I think it was two or three weeks, because I didn't like my step mum at all. I just don't really like her [laughs] I don't think she's a very nice person to be honest (1st Interview)*

He also spoke about having to forego spending time with his friends in order to spend week-ends at his dad's:

*Sometimes it annoys me because, like, on a Saturday night the friends I go to The Crypt with, there's also another youth club called Destiny which is down in the church just down there, and most of the time they're all saying, "Oh do you want to come to Destiny this weekend? It's really fun" and I have to say, "No I can't 'cause I have to go to my Dad's" which annoys me sometimes (1st Interview)*

Another factor which Danny described as having an adverse effect on how he experiences week-ends at his dad's house was the presence of his two step-sisters:

*My step mum's daughters, em, they're called Julie and Kim. Julie's just a year older than me and Kim's just a year younger than me. I don't really get on with Julie, but Kim I get on with most of the time (1st Interview)*

*It's good when I just spend time with my Dad, just me and him, but sometimes that doesn't happen, 'cause, like, we all work together when it's, like, my two stepsisters, my step mum, and my sister, and me and my Dad (1st Interview)*

Danny also described how he drew upon a network of informal support, in particular his mum but also friends who are experiencing similar circumstances, to help him cope with these difficulties:

*Michelle's Dad, she doesn't see him, and Jackie's parents are split up as well. It's just, if like you're really worked up about, like, say your Dad, then Jackie will say, "Yeah that happened to me once" and you'll be able to talk to her about it and ask her what, like, she did, and that's good (1st Interview)*

### **A resident parent re-partnering**

Danny also spoke about aspects of his family life with his resident family and he described how his mum had recently 'split up' with her boyfriend. Although Danny and his siblings got on fine with him, his account suggests that this happened because he didn't have children of his own and as a result was finding it difficult to fit into the family.

### **Reflections on the past: constructing a mature identity?**

In Danny's second interview, he painted a somewhat different picture and he reflected a lot on how he had portrayed family life, in particular his relationship with his step-mum, in his previous interview:

*When I last spoke to you I used not to like my step-mum but I like her better now and stuff. When Connor and Peter stayed at my dad's house, em, I think I'll be honest about it, I think most of the time I started to like my step-mum a lot earlier than I wanted to admit but just because I thought it'd make me look good and it'll make me look as if I've got a really hard life (2nd Interview)*

Danny also spoke in greater detail about the role his mum had played in helping him to resolve these early problems:

*My mum was always like, whenever I said I didn't want to go, my mum would always say, 'You say that now but when you're older, if I say to you 'OK Danny, you don't need to go', when you're older and you say you've not got a relationship with your dad any more you'll feel guilty and you'll wish that you had gone and*



*even though sometimes you don't like your step mum, she's a nice person, most of the time to you'. And she just said things like that and so I kept going and I think because I kept going, even though I didn't want to, that it made me like it (2nd Interview)*

In his follow-up interview, Danny reported that his mum and her boyfriend were now back together and he offers an alternative explanation for their earlier split. Danny's mum had explained to her children that her boyfriend didn't want them to think of him as "another dad, type thing" but it would appear that Danny and his sister had other ideas which brought matters to a head during a family holiday:

*They've got back together again because, em, the reason they split up was, em, probably me and my sister's fault and at the time I didn't want to admit it ... We went on holiday with him and em, I think, me and my sister kind of ignored what my mum had said and sort of, just treated him like we would treat our dad on holiday... I think it just drove him to distraction and so we came back from holiday and it was actually my mum, she said to him, "I don't think that you were very happy so maybe we should just not see each other". And I think it was just because they still saw a lot of each other just as friends, but then I think my mum realised that me and my sister had both grown up quite a lot so she invited him round to the house one day and then everything was fine (2nd Interview)*

## LIZZIE

Lizzie was 11 at the time of her first interview and lives with her mum. She has an older sister whom she visits a lot and has occasional sleep-overs. Lizzie's parents split up a few years ago as a result of her dad having an affair and he lives locally with his new wife and step-children. Lizzie's contact with her dad since her parents separated has been erratic. At the time of her first interview she said that she used to see her dad but that he was 'bad' to her and that she doesn't want to see him again. At both interviews she described how her dad paid a lot of money for her to go to some "psychologist place". At first, she thought this would help but she now feels duped and believes that it was an underhand attempt by her dad to gain access to her. Lizzie's dad has continued to pursue her and by the time of her second interview, the situation had deteriorated to the extent that Lizzie talked about being afraid to go out in case she bumps in to him. Lizzie and her mum are moving into a new house with her mum's boyfriend and his two children soon and Lizzie has mixed feelings about this. It is unclear from Lizzie's accounts when her mum re-partnered. At her first interview, Lizzie talked about having two close friends whom she trusts and can share secrets with. She also seemed to be close to her maternal grandmother. Both these sources of support, though, had become compromised by the time of her second interview. She has tried to access support from a range of sources, including phoning ChildLine, but was unable to get through.

### **Contact with a non-resident parent following an acrimonious separation**

At her first interview, Lizzie described the circumstances surrounding her parents' separation:

*I remember everything about it because it was so bad. They always used to hurt each other, they always used to fight and stuff and I'd be in the room with my sister crying because my dad was having an affair and my mum and him, used to, they both started to fight with each other and started crying and stuff and just split up (1st Interview)*



Since then Lizzie's contact with her father and her attitude towards him have been erratic, and this is something she spoke about at great length in both interviews:

*I didn't see my dad but then I sort of wanted to see him again so I went roughly for about a year or something but then he started being bad to me so I didn't see him again but then we made up again for, for about another year and then just, it's about a year ago I stopped seeing him because he's been really bad and it was just yesterday, I was passing down by Woolworths and, you know, just like that, he pointed out the car and went, "you stand there" in an angry voice, I just ran and stuff 'cause he's awful bad to me (1st Interview)*

*Mum took him to court*

*Right, was that to get him to stay away from you, kinda thing? (Interviewer)*

*Yeah, but he's not listening, he keeps phoning me and my mum and hanging up ... and he's getting, em my dad's family, I don't like them either 'cause they're all bad, to like phone and hang up as well 'cause my grandad lives in England and he keeps on phoning as well (1st Interview)*

*So you were saying your mum's trying, trying to sort it out? (Interviewer)*

*Yeah, but she doesn't need to 'cause I'm not going back at all now ... and I won't even look at his face. I've ripped up all his pictures and everything and stamped on them (1st Interview)*

*He's been chasing me and I'm paranoid to go out anywhere now (2nd Interview)*

*I like going to my Grannies but I'm kind of paranoid because like, I'm moving house and stuff like that and my dad, I've not been to see him for about two years and I'm scared in case, like, he tries to catch me again and me and my mum are getting phone calls and we're answering and they're hanging, up and we think it's him... so I don't go out much or that (2nd Interview)*

Lizzie's account suggests that relations with her dad were problematic prior to her parents splitting up. She spoke about him "locking her in rooms" to discipline her. On those occasions when she did visit her dad and his new family, things were also difficult. She described a harsh regime in which she wasn't allowed any treats, and she spoke about fights with her step-brother which he initiated and she always got the blame for.

#### **'Support' or 'coercion'?**

At both interviews, Lizzie described her experience of her dad seeking professional help to sort out their family problems following the split. To begin with Lizzie appreciated the opportunity to talk about how she was feeling but this didn't last. Ultimately, she feels that this was a covert attempt to pressurise her to see her dad and she resented being taken out of school to attend these sessions:

*I went there for like, a month or something and then it was kinda, they were kind, they were to help family problems and so they were trying to get me back with my dad and I fell for that one and I went back with him and he, got, he was still like, mistreated me and stuff like that so I stopped seeing him again. What they actually aim to do is get you back with them, not like sort out the problems 'cause my dad paid them to get me back with them and that's all they were doing. They never helped me at all, just tried to stitch me up...and it was really getting annoying 'cause I would have to come out of school and go there for no reason (1st Interview)*



### **A resident parent re-partnering**

By the time of her second interview, Lizzie had moved from primary to secondary school. She had recently been on a family holiday with her mum, her mum's boyfriend and his two children (both a few years younger than Lizzie). They are all moving into a new house soon and Lizzie has mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, they will be moving to a bigger house in a nice area and they will be better off financially but on the other, she often doesn't get on with her mum's new partner and feels that her mum always takes his side:

*My mum and me fight quite a lot*

*What kinda stuff do you fall out over? (Interviewer)*

*Like, er, my mum's boyfriend kind of, winds me up a lot and I shout at him and get cheeky because he really annoys me and he sits and laughs. My mum knows he annoys me but she still shouts at me for being cheeky to him (2nd Interview)*

### **A bad situation gets worse**

By the time of her second interview, Lizzie also seemed to feel more fearful of her dad and was becoming more and more socially isolated:

*I wanted my mum to phone up a lawyer and get like, a restraining order, so he wouldn't come near me. But mum says she's not going to do that, but I think my mum's already asked and she said that they can't do that because that's a father's instinct to go and get their kid but I don't want him to come and try and find me. I want him to leave me alone and they're not going to do anything about it so I'm not going to. And my childhood is getting wasted because I can't go out anymore 'cause he'll be there waiting on me (2nd Interview)*

Whilst at her first interview Lizzie spoke about talking to friends and family about her problems, by the time of her second interview, she appeared to feel let down by these sources of support and had begun to look elsewhere for help:

*I don't really trust anyone, I just kinda keep it all to myself. 'Cause I talked to my mum, like, about feelings I have and stuff and she tells me to grow up and not to be silly and it's just fears and just stuff like that (2nd Interview)*

*I try and talk to Ruth but it doesn't help 'cause she doesn't understand what the real situation is. She just, she still sees her mum and dad and stuff so she doesn't know what I'm going through so I can't really talk to her ... I've told her the details but she still doesn't kinda understand because, the second time I stopped seeing him she goes, "Oh why didn't you give him another chance, go for it," and stuff like that (2nd Interview)*

*I've phoned Childline before but I couldn't get through to them because, I waited about half an hour and then hung up, it's always busy (2nd Interview)*

*I did write into a magazine about another fear that I had and they wrote back but it takes about five months to reply (2nd Interview)*

Lizzie's own assessment of her situation seems to be that everything would be fine if only her dad would stop pursuing her:

*It's not that I need help it's just that I want my dad to leave me alone (2nd Interview)*



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Both case studies clearly reflect the connectedness and embeddedness of young people's relationships with individual family members in a wider network of social relationships with family and friends. In Danny's case, these connections have acted as a force for good, for example, Danny's mum made a very valuable contribution in helping him to come to terms with difficult feelings about his step-mum. By inviting his friends to spend time with him at his dad's house Danny blurred the boundaries between friends and family in a way that helped him to resolve earlier tensions about how and with whom he spends his leisure time. He also derived support from friends who have experienced similar family circumstances. In Lizzie's case, other family members on her dad's side appear to have conspired to further problematise her relationship with her dad whilst her dad's behaviour has made it more difficult to access informal support from her maternal gran. Moreover, Lizzie feels let down by a close friend who can't understand why she doesn't want to see her dad.

We can also see in both accounts, the extent to which young people's interests take centre stage (or not) and their room for manoeuvre in shaping what happens. It is clear from Danny's account that he was involved in decisions about how his time was divided between his parents, and that he felt that his wishes and desires carried weight in his parents' decision-making. Lizzie's account on the other hand, reflects her sense of an absence of any possibility of shaping what happened, a disregard for her wishes on the part of her father and a poor understanding of her feelings on the part of her mother. It is clear from Lizzie's account that she could benefit from the intervention of formal services (indeed, she asked the interviewer for details of support services). It is unfortunate that her account seems to suggest that the very services that exist to help young people like her have failed to do so because of inadequate funding which limit access.

We know very little about the emphasis that children place on the psychological significance and emotional closeness of family relationships at times of change but our three case studies (including Catherine next section) hint at the importance of feelings and emotions. In Danny's case, it is a source of real regret for him that at times it was difficult for him to spend time on his own with his dad – time that he perhaps regarded as 'special'. The fact that his dad's re-partnering resulted in the introduction of new step-siblings into the family perhaps served to shake Danny's sense of where he 'fitted' in his dad's life and threw into relief the importance of spending time on his own with his dad. Catherine's account of her brother's reaction to his mum starting a new relationship some four years after the death of their father also highlights the emotional dimension of these experiences.

Above all, our case studies reveal that seldom is one factor alone responsible for a child negotiating their way successfully through the changes that characterise family life, rather, it is the interplay of several factors operating within a network of social relationships. It is likely that factors operating at a broader, structural level will also have some bearing on these processes. For example, being reasonably well off will make it easier for young people to maintain a close relationship with a non-resident parent but as Lizzie's account shows, moving to a bigger house and getting more pocket money will not make up for relationships which are of poor quality and which push a child into social isolation and the risks associated with this.

## AFTER A PARENT DIES

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We interviewed 8 children and young people whose parent had died. Children's and young people's experience of bereavement is, of course, much more extensive than a focus on death of a parent would suggest. In our screening survey, 43% of 10 to 14 year olds said that someone close to them had died. Many have lost a grandparent, and some had experienced multiple bereavements. When asked to record the main events or changes in her life on a time line, Catherine, whose case study follows this section, wrote down eight events, four of which were deaths: papa died, dad died, gran died, hamster died, moved house, mum got boyfriend, mum broke up with him, moved house. It was noted earlier that a review of existing literature concluded that bereavement can result in isolation, is particularly harmful for young people who are already vulnerable or disadvantaged and that existing support services are patchy (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2005). Research also suggests that experience of loss varies with the circumstances of the family and characteristics of the child including age, gender, and the quality of their relationship with the person who has died and with remaining household and family members. It is likely that none of the young people we interviewed had had bereavement counselling at the time of the death. Only Susie drew on formal support at the time of her parent's death. She spoke with a guidance teacher who was unlikely to have had bereavement training, because we know that guidance staff in participating schools were having difficulties in getting time out for such training. Lisa had a series of six sessions with a counsellor several years after her mother's death in response to a range of difficulties she was experiencing at school and in her stepfamily. None of the others had any professional help. All talked about the support they received from friends and family but some clearly also were more isolated at least for a period following bereavement, had support systems that were weakened by the death of their parent and remained relatively fragile.

### Loss of mother versus loss of father

It has often been observed that the loss of a mother is likely to have some different consequences to the loss of a father and vice versa. Historically, fathers have been the main earners and provider playing a less engaged role in the everyday details of children's lives. In contemporary families many mothers are carers and providers and many fathers have 'hands on' caring involvement in their children's lives. Nevertheless, recent research shows that gender differences persist including differences in children's expectations of mothers and fathers. Men's and women's average earnings are not equal. Women often withdraw from employment for periods during children's early years and in many households men remain the main earner. Both survey research and qualitative research exploring children's experiences of their family life typically finds mothers are still more likely to be treated as confidantes by children of both sexes, and particularly girls, than fathers and mothers often know more details of their children's lives than fathers. Research on the social relationships of family and kinship also repeatedly finds that women do more of the work of 'kin keeping' than men. That is the organisation of family time, family events and kin contact is more often done by women than men.

These general patterns do not, of course, tell what it will be like for particular individual. Susie's story, described in more detail below, illustrated some of the expected gendered consequences of the loss of a mother. Her father became withdrawn rather than replacing her mother as her confidante and her relationships with her kin weakened because he did not take on his wife's role as the kin keeper. Similarly, Lisa felt unable to use her father as a confidante following her mother's death because she thought that she could not burden him further because he was too upset because of his own bereavement. Lisa's own feelings for her dad and around her mum's death were further complicated by the fact that her dad had stopped living with her mother and started another relationship and that she, herself, had gone to live with her dad and his girlfriend before her mum died. On the other hand, for Monica, who had come to Britain as an asylum seeker following her mother's death, her father was her confidante and indeed had been before her mother died because her mother used to travel with her work leaving her father looking after her as a baby. Also not all of the respondents who had lost a father felt unequivocally close to their mother. Rebecca's mother was not her confidante. She both acknowledged and denied being close to her mother during the interview, and described a relationship that was volatile with lots of rows and her father's death did not result in them becoming closer. Her cousin was her closest and most trusted friend and she described herself as being as close to her cousin's mother, her auntie, as to her own mother.

### Age at bereavement and passage of time

Psychologists have suggested that strategies for dealing with the stress of bereavement may be gendered and less effective at younger ages (Seiffgre-Krenke 2000). For young people we interviewed who were very young at the time of their parent's death, there was little or no sense of trauma or loss, simply because they did not remember anything about it. For example, this was the case for Lee-Ann, who was aged 2 when her father died, and Robert and Mandy who were even younger. Not surprisingly, they spoke of more recent events as much more traumatic, in Lee-Ann's



case the death of a grandparent and in Robert's case, having to go into foster care when his mother was ill. At age seven when her father died, Rebecca, who was 13 at interview, described herself as too young to really understand at the time and went on to say, 'but when I got I was a bit older, I kind of started realising that, no, it didn't really make a difference about how, the way I feel about my family because I didn't really feel that I got to know him that well. So. It sounds sad, but I didn't really, like, yeah, it means a lot to me but it wasn't really, at the time it was really drastic but now it's, if people talk to me, they're like "Oh, I'm really sorry for talking about it". I'm like, "It's fine. I'm over it. It's not a big deal."' Catherine on the other hand, whose story is presented as a case study, and about the same age when her father died, followed up an assurance that it is fine to talk about it with, 'That was probably the saddest thing that's happened in my life.'

The passage of time also, of course, makes a difference to the experience of bereavement, as well as age at age when the death occurred. Many children who call Childline to discuss bereavement have made the call within two weeks of a death (Cross, 2002). Much of the research points out that the idea of inevitable progressive healing with the passage of time can be a comforting idea to the bereaved, but while reflecting the experiences of many, it is also too simplistic for the considerable variation in the extent to which strong feelings of loss persist (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2005). The different feelings expressed by Catherine and Rebecca are clearly not a function of age or the passage of time since these were not radically different but rather reflect other individual differences in the nature of their relationship with their father and their circumstances at the time and since.

## **Time and resources for preparation**

The different circumstances which may impact on the amount of support that children receive include the extent to which it was possible in terms of time and resources for them and their immediate family to prepare for the death. It's not always possible to tell from the interviews whether children had any warning of the possibility that their parent might die but Susie and Rebecca both clearly had some preparation, while Catherine's talked of her father's death as sudden and unexpected. In Susie's and Rebecca's case, each of their parents had an illness with a very poor prognosis resulting in a point where there was no possibility of cure. Susie commented 'nobody really knew when she was going to die but we all kind of a knew it was before Christmas, but then it just took us by surprise'. Rebecca described her mother's extensive careful preparation around her father's death. This included her mother doing lots of research on his illness, planning a long and exotic holiday when he was still able because it was likely to be their last holiday together as a family, although this reason was not clear to Rebecca until later, and 'not being all down and depressed' but 'keep going' which Rebecca believed helped her and her brother. Her mother also orchestrated an occasion for friends and family to say goodbye. 'I got to say goodbye to him so it was easier that way instead of not knowing. ... We had like, on the day, we had a lot family and close friends round, just for everyone to say goodby and he himself, he was, he'd been ill for ages and he kinda wanted all the pain to be over but we were all, it sounds sad but we were all happy for him.'

Rebecca's family not only had time for preparation but also resources, including her mum's energy and skill and sufficient economic security for her mum to focus these on looking after Rebecca's dad and family. Clearly the ability to go on a long luxury holiday together without worrying about the costs was a form of anticipating death that would not have been available to many of the respondents' families. Rebecca's family was one of the most socio-economically advantaged in the sample.

## **Time out to grieve**

There's no shared cultural understanding of how much time a child should take off school when a parent dies. Susie went to school the day after her mother died, while other children took two weeks off of school. Being at school seemed to be a positive experience for Susie but for Catherine it was clearly very difficult initially as she felt she was being pitied and was troubled rather than helped by expressions of sympathy. It is not clear whether more preparation time or time out before going back to school would have helped this but her own reflections some years later suggest that some more formal bereavement counselling or peer support before or at the point of going back to school might have helped.

## **Strengthened or weakened informal support systems**

In Catherine's account the possibility of her wider kin acting as a support system is seriously weakened by family arguments which in turn are related to and played out around deaths. A schism seems to have been occasioned by





dispute over inheritance following the death of her grandfather and this is then deepened by non-attendance at her father's funeral. The ability of families to act as support systems can be impaired even when they are not suffering from such feuds. This is illustrated by Susie's account of her mum's death. Her family household was also one of the better off families in the study. Before her mum's death, they had moved from one of the poorest estates in Glasgow to an owner occupied house in an area that she described as having 'nicer people'. The conversation indicated that the 'we' who knew and were anticipating her mum's death included her dad who is 'always there but he's dead quiet about it but you know he just cares about you', her older brother who is 'dead ignorant and stuff – we don't really get on – but like he was there for me like I'm upset about something' and her maternal grandparents. She explained a particular affinity with her grandmother and grandfather because their sense of loss was akin to her own. "cause my mum was her daughter and stuff, she's just lost her and she knows how I feel and stuff and she helps me and it's the same with my grandpa.' Her family could afford holidays and a car, making it possible to visit her relatives but, nevertheless, she only saw her grandparents relatively occasionally, on the odd holiday weekend or in the summer holidays. Susie always had access to a phone she could use to contact her grandparents. She sometimes texted her gran but noted 'it takes her ages to get the text 'cause she doesn't know how to work her phone.'

As the conversation with Susie progressed, it became clear, not only that her immediate family were unable to provide her with the level of support that she used to receive from her mum, but also that members of her family interacted with each other less than before her mum died. She had acknowledged both points very candidly on her questionnaire before we interviewed her when she wrote, 'I have been lonely at home. She [mum] was my best friend'. This loneliness at home was despite speaking of her dad's quiet support, and expressing the belief that he knew how she felt because his own mother had died when he was a similar age. Her story of her father's biography included the fact that his mother's death had had very significant consequences for him, since he had to take on responsibility for helping at home and looking after younger siblings while his own dad was out working. Susie used this biographical account to counterbalance her portrayal of her dad's capacity to be empathetic and caring with the suggestion that he had become as absent to her as his own father had been from the family home during his childhood. She said of her dad: 'he's always at work. He goes, after he drops us off at school and then he comes in like half nine at night, so. And then he goes on the internet, so you never get to see him. But at the beginning he took a couple of weeks off work to help us and stuff and he was like, he understood more.' She also notes that she does not see her grandparents or any of her aunts and uncles that live in England very much, not only because they live in England, and, in her grandfather's case are becoming very infirm, but also because her mum used to organise it and nobody else is doing it: 'it used to be my mum that arranged it all and said we're coming up for Easter and stuff but now like we don't really talk as often as we used to to arrange stuff'.

Unlike Catherine, Susie did not report pushing away her friends following her mother's death. On her questionnaire she described herself as not having a best friends but rather as having 'lots of friends'. At interview a few months later her friendship network was in fact quite small and centred on one or two friends, one of whom was described as her best friend. It is not possible to say whether this reflected an actual change or the different information elicited by a questionnaire and a detailed conversation. As with many children and young people there may have been some flux in her friendship relationships. She described Nasmi as her best friend and placed her in the inner most circle of her four concentric circle diagram. It was very clear that she regarded Nasmi as a key source of support and it was not clear whether this relationship could be replaced if it broke down. She had known Nasmi since primary school and said she was 'psychic' because of her ability to read her moods and 'always there for you'. In the second circle she put one other school friend described as 'my other friend but she's not my best friend' whom she'd known since secondary. Her 16 year old cousin, who 'Doesn't have to be my friend but he is. He just has to be my cousin. He doesn't have to really like me but he does', is placed in the third ring. In the outermost ring she placed a 17 year old girl she had met recently and saw occasionally when her father took her to a church event. But at the same time, her relationship with Nasmi lacked support from Nasmi's family. She said of Nasmi's father that 'he doesn't like her hanging about with white people' and that he always questioned her closely if she phoned her friend. Nasmi did not have a mobile phone and so Susie's preferred method of texting was not a possibility. Nevertheless, these circumstances has not prevented their friendship and it seemed that Nasmi was allowed to stay over at Susie's house, something that again that Susie's family's material circumstances had facilitated, since her bedroom had been decorated and a futon had been bought for this purpose.

## **Formal support**

Susie explained that her Guidance Teacher and her friends helped her as well as her family 'over the next couple of weeks'. When asked if she knew there were people who were 'bereavement counsellors' she said 'Yeah my guidance



teacher told me' and went onto suggest that she felt she was receiving sufficient support from her guidance teacher: 'My guidance teacher was like kind of helpful too because her dad died recently, so she was like, she knew how I felt'. It seems that one of the issues she discussed with both her guidance teacher and at least one of her friends her 'best friend' was the fact that she had had an argument with her mother the night before she died. She was comforted by the assurances she received 'it doesn't matter about the argument because she really loved you and everything'.

Lisa had some form of counselling which she initially went to with her dad. The family had suffered from multiple bereavements, her mother, her oldest brother and her grandfather had died within a relatively short period. It seems that it was Lisa's stepmum who suggested counselling and this resulted in Lisa and her father both attending some sessions. The details Lisa offers are vague. She described it as 'a meeting thing with a person and he talked to me', however, it is clear that she found it helpful 'since then, I just figure it out and you've got to get on with your life. You cannae live life for the past and that's what I say to my Dad ... It helped me a lot actually, 'cause I though, I know she's [her mother] away. I mean, there's nothing you can change about that and one day she's got to leave us, know what I mean? I need to get on with my life.'

## CASE STUDY: CATHERINE

Catherine was 13 at the time of her first interview and lived with her mum and her older brother. During this interview, she spoke a lot about the multiple bereavements she has experienced in her life and how these have affected her. Her dad died around 5 years ago and she has also lost two grandparents - one when she was aged around 5 and another a few months after her dad died. A family feud following the first bereavement appears to have caused a long-standing rift in the family and few relatives attended her dad's funeral. An important exception is her Uncle Tommy with whom she has a very close relationship. Prior to this interview, her mum had broken up with a boyfriend and suffered a breakdown which meant spending some time in hospital. Catherine and her brother stayed with her Uncle Tommy over this time. Her older brother could not accept her mum's boyfriend and felt that his mum was being disloyal to his dad. Catherine talked about having a wide network of friends and she remains particularly close to her uncle and to one of her mum's friend's and her daughter. She had recently been on a school trip abroad and had made a lot of new friends. Her mum has a new boyfriend whom Catherine likes a lot and when they move house in the coming months, she expects him to move in with them, although this hasn't been fully discussed yet.

### Dealing with multiple bereavements

Catherine's first experience of family bereavement affected her brother more than it did her, because she was still fairly young at the time:

*I remember her [mum] saying to us that, she didn't want to tell us that he died 'cause my brother was very close to him and so she told that he was away somewhere. And then she told me eventually that he died, like, a few months later but I didn't really understand then because I was quite young but my brother did and he was, like, really upset and really sad in general (1st Interview)*

A few years later, Catherine's dad died suddenly and in her account she reflected on the lack of family support, for her mum in particular, and the knock-on effects of this for her and her brother:

*My Uncle Tommy, he was the only one that, like, stood by us. When my Papa died they had a fall out over, em, his will or something. I'd of liked it if they [mum's brother and sister] were there because they didn't even come up or see how we were or send any cards or come to the funeral or anything. I thought that was really bad and I've not spoke to them since that because I just thought that was really bad so I'd prefer it if they were there, like, the whole family there and it would've helped my Mum through things as well (1st Interview)*



*When my dad died, someone could have helped my mum more, because she didn't have anybody, because as I said, all her family live further away and couldn't be there every single time, and it was, like, me and Colin had to look after my mum, and it kind of ruined my social life for a few months because she was always, like, upset and things like that. So if someone was there to help her then it would have helped me as well, took the stress off me (1st Interview)*

Catherine's paternal gran died a month or so after her dad and she described this as a really depressing time for the whole family. According to Catherine, her gran's death was a little easier to deal with but it also brought to the surface tensions between her and her brother:

*Well, when my gran died it wasn't really my mum's side of the family, My mum was upset but she wasn't really close to my gran as it was my dad's mum, but Colin and I were both really close to her, so it affected us ... Colin started, that was maybe when the trouble started, it had always been, like, hard between me and Colin but when my gran died it was like, even worse, and he used to bring it up all the time, like when we were having arguments, like, "oh, what would gran think and all of this?" (1st Interview)*

*My friend Rosie, she was close to my Gran as well and Rosie called my Gran 'Gran', em, so Rosie would come up and visit her with me. And when she died, I was like upset but I'd already had all this past of dying so I was like, wasn't used to it but I kind of knew how it was gonnae be for the next few weeks so it wasn't as bad (1st Interview)*

### **Supporting a young bereaved person**

When her dad died, Catherine found it very difficult to deal with people, especially her friends, expressing sympathy and asking her how she was:

*Em, it was, two weeks before my eighth birthday*

*Uhu, gosh, so what was that like, can you remember, do you mind talking about it? (Interviewer)*

*No it's fine, it's fine. Em, that was probably the saddest thing that's happened in my life. I didn't, I didn't like it when people gave me sympathy, em, 'cause I don't like that, like they're all taking pity on me and I just preferred they just leave me alone (1st Interview)*

*Em, I was sad for like, weeks but, em, eventually I like, overcame the sadness and just got on with my life ... I didn't talk about it that much but my friends were always coming up to me and say "oh how are you?" and all that ... it's like one day you're like, just forgetting about it, and then someone comes up to you and mentions it and you just think "shut up"... Often I would, like, just take big rages at them [friends] and just tell them to shut up and go away, em but I didn't actually explain to them that I didn't want them, like I wanted them to leave me alone, I think if I'd maybe explained to them the situation I was in they maybe they would've left me alone and I think that would've been better. And just, like, having fun with them, and to, to take your mind off it (1st Interview)*



During her second interview, Catherine returned to the issue of how friends can best support you when a parent has died and she spoke about how her own personal experience influenced the approach she took to supporting a friend who had also lost a parent:

*It's difficult, and I suppose other people don't know what to say really, and don't want to ignore the fact, but they don't realise ... I did the same when Rosie's dad, he passed away, and I did the same, I didn't know what to do then I realised I was doing it, and I thought, "ok, maybe she feels the same as me and I should stop it" (2nd Interview)*

Catherine's account suggests that with the benefit of hindsight, she may act differently in the future:

*Maybe when people are helping you try to accept it more, and like, I don't know how to put it, don't push away people as much because sometimes its good to let people help you 'cause they know what they are talking about...I snapped at my friends a lot, and its something now I think that if something like that happened again then I wouldn't do that, because if you push people away then you just get more upset and just bottle everything up inside, its so much better to talk to someone than it is when you push people away (2nd Interview)*

#### **Re-partnering after a spouse's death**

When Catherine's mum started a new relationship about a year after her dad died, this caused problems, particularly with Catherine's brother:

*My brother doesn't like it all, he, em, he just thought that my Mum was, like, being unfaithful to my Dad and all that. My brother would like, often he'd go off in like a strop or something and would shout at my Mum's boyfriend, but I was okay with it most of the time, but my Mum was, like, she wasn't spending as much time with us any more and she wouldn't be talking to us, she was just spending all this time with her boyfriend and that got on my nerves a lot (1st Interview)*

*My Mum, em, later on when she and her boyfriend, em, when she broke up with him, something happened I don't want to talk about that but, em, she was going places like therapists and psychiatrists and stuff and she was in hospital for a while so ... I had to stay with my uncle for age and that's when I got really close to my uncle. And Colin was happy, he was, just kept doing the whole "told you so" thing but, afterwards, em, Mum recovered, and then everything was fine again (1st Interview)*

*Em, my Mum's a bit like me she doesn't really like any support, she just likes to sort it out herself but I think my Mum needs support, she's just one of them people that, that can't do it herself so. My brother gives her a lot of support, but I don't, I don't really talk much to her that much anymore (1st Interview)*

At her second interview, Catherine spoke about her mum's new relationship:

*She [mum] is fine, got a new boyfriend, he seems really nice. He has been up a few times, he stays in England, he comes up a lot and when we move into the new house in the summer I think he will be moving in with us, but its not really been discussed properly yet but I just get the feeling ... he seems really nice, he's a head master but he doesn't seem strict at all, he is just really nice (2nd Interview)*

## LIFE IN AN ASYLUM-SEEKING FAMILY

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*The most difficult thing [in my life] was coming from Turkey to here and settling in here, because in Glasgow there isn't, I've not got. At first when we came there was no Turkish people where we lived, the area where we lived. And we didn't know anybody. So it was hard settling in at first and to the new school when I didn't know any English at all and couldn't understand what people were saying. (Serila, 13)*

Glasgow City Council received asylum-seekers under the Home Office dispersal programme and between 2001-2006 had a contract with National Asylum Support Service to provide accommodation for 2000 asylum-seeker families, plus 500 solo asylum-seekers. A report by Save the Children and Glasgow City Council Education Service (2002) notes that the arrival of 2000 families resulted in approximately 1300 young asylum-seekers joining the city school population and that twenty-seven primary and seven secondary schools provided education for children and young people seeking asylum. Among the 10-14 year olds who completed our initial questionnaire, 13 of the 349 children, 4%, ticked the item 'Leaving home to live as an asylum seeker' in a list of possible changes that they might have experienced. 13 children, then, were acknowledging a very radical break from their previous social world.

We conducted at least one in-depth interviews with four of these young people, three girls Sema and Serila who came from Turkey and Ayesha from Palestine, and one boy, Sanjay, from Afghanistan. Sema and Serila were interviewed twice. We also draw on a pilot interview with, Monica, a 15 year old who was recruited from the hundred and one older pupils who also completed our questionnaire. She told us that her father left Africa with her and her siblings in fear of his life, after the death of her mother who suffered beatings at the hands of 'political people'. All five children have arrived in Glasgow with at least one parent. Their first months in Britain had involved multiple transitions, typically short-term housing and education arrangements in London, sometimes lasting many months, followed by dispersal to Glasgow. We did not attempt to explore the antecedents of seeking asylum or the process of journeying to Britain and initial arrival but rather focused on the extent of their social networks and support systems and how these had been built in Glasgow.

### No possibility of preparation for change

Because we decided not to directly ask, we do not always know whether the children experienced fear, danger or trauma before leaving their previous country. It is possible that parents managed to shield their children from the reasons for their departure. Several spoke of not knowing or understanding that they were undertaking a journey that involved permanently leaving their home. Having little or no pre-warning meant no time for mental or physical preparation for the transition and this has a legacy in their current social world. Some of the interviewees expressed lingering regrets at not saying proper goodbyes to those left behind:

*When I leave my grandmother [mother's mother] behind like I thought I was going to come back so like I didn't kiss her so much. I just said 'Bye' (Sema, 13).*

Serila also notes she has no photographs of her grandparents and none of her former possessions

*So, well actually I, I was kind of sad because I didn't. If I had thought. If I knew I was coming, I would have [said goodbye to] my grandparents and stuff and like I didn't really take photos or things but. We didn't, like, have that. We didn't bring much stuff, just clothes (Serila, 13)*

Not only are family, friends and pets left behind, but also asylum seekers have typically been able to bring very few possessions with them. Perhaps inevitably such a radical break results in feelings of loss and powerlessness. When asking about contact with relatives left behind in their place of origin or in other parts of the world, children were aware of the impossibility of visiting. For example, Sema had relatives in Germany and when asked if she sees them, she said 'they came here like one or two times. We can't go there.' One indication of how radical the break is between their past and their present is the extent to which they continue to include people from their former home in the concentric circle map we asked children to fill in showing the people who are important in their lives. While Sema and Sanjay restricted themselves to people in Glasgow, Ayesha included three cousins on her diagram who are in Palestine, one of whom she described as like a sister, despite the fact that she no longer sees her. She also included a sibling who has died. Serila wrote 'grandparents, aunts and uncles' in a segment of the inner circle of her diagram although only one uncle lives locally. Sabine and Serila do have some sense of continued contact with absent living relatives. Sabine talks of yahoo messaging her cousins. Serila talks to her aunts and uncles in London and grandparents in Turkey on the telephone and says of the latter 'they've sent videos so we can see what they look



*like.* Monica's only live connection with anyone from her former home in Africa is indirectly with her best friend from boarding school through her friend's sister who lives in London and made contact during Monica's months in temporary accommodation before dispersal to Glasgow. With the exception of Monica, none of the refugee children have retained links with friends from their previous life who are not also relatives. However, it is not clear whether contact with absent relatives is always able to contribute positively to children's everyday lives. Serila commented about her grandparents *'and when I phoned them, they kind of cry, so it makes me so sad, but I know that's only [because] they love me. I really love them as well, so.'*

## Continued uncertainty

Arriving in Britain seeking asylum is typically followed by a prolonged period of uncertainty while claims work their way through the system. While the children interviewed had been in Glasgow for 2-4 years, uncertainty continued. Serila is the only one who talks of her family having been granted permission to remain in the country and in her second interview speaks of them waiting to get passports. The everyday preoccupations of school life and established routines may work against children or young people being preoccupied with whether or not they and their family are likely to be permitted to remain in Britain, but reference to this basic uncertainty surfaced in interviews. For example, when attempting to ask Sanjay about his experiences of formal support services and any assistance they might have to offer him, he immediately said that what his family needed most was citizenship or 'nationality' as he called it.

*They don't give you your own nationality [the opportunity to] like staying here. We don't have that, so my Dad can't work. (Sanjay, 12)*

When Sema was being asked about what advice they would give to somebody making a similar transition to help them cope with it, this included her own strategy for dealing with the uncertainty of 'being patient':

*Not look at other people and say 'Oh my God! We are just like, we don't have, like, passports. We are not allowed to stay in this country.' They should have, they should be patient, because, like, you don't know when you are going to get the passports' (Sema, 13)*

This major uncertainty may have been compounded by the uncertainty concerning where they will be living in Glasgow. Several of the asylum seeking children were housed in buildings that they knew to be earmarked for demolition but they did not know when or to where they would move. Ayesha had become friends with girls in the neighbouring blocks and commented *'I never, like, I never not going to see my friends any more.'*

## Relative disadvantage

The new lives of asylum seeking families are, at least initially, typically relatively disadvantage in comparison to other people in their reception localities. Many arrive with little or nothing by way of material or economic capital and unable to speak English. Once 'dispersed', they are housed in local authority housing allocated to asylum seeking families, typically in areas of multiple deprivation and/or in housing stock that is coming to the end of its life. The denial of access to employment and benefits other than the support provided by the National Asylum Support Service set at 70% of standard income support ensures their relative poverty. Poverty combined with the stress of uncertainty, experiences of racism and the day to day vagaries of living in relatively deprived housing estates in an unfamiliar culture and new language inevitably have consequences for well being (Avan and Bakshi, 2004). Most of the children in our sample who had come to Glasgow as asylum seekers met the criteria<sup>1</sup> which we use to place research participants in the most economically disadvantaged group. This was the case for all of our interviewees except Ayesha. The economic circumstances of Sema's household were fairly typical. She and her family had been in London for 9 months before moved being moved to Glasgow with a group of asylum seekers. At the time of her first interview she had been living in Glasgow for three to four years. Her family live in a two bedroom flat in which Sema shares a bedroom with her 9 year old brother. They have no car and do not go on holidays. They had a television but no computer; neither email nor text messaging were part of her way of life.

## Lack of Freedom

Sema exemplifies how the circumstances of being the child of an asylum seeking family can create not only a radical disjuncture between her own past and her present but also a childhood in Glasgow that is rather different from that



of Scottish children in similar economic circumstances. Her life is more home based and restricted than that of many Scottish peers in equivalently disadvantaged circumstances (Jamieson and McKendrick ). At the weekend she usually stays at home and plays with her much younger sister, although if the weather is good she also sometimes plays football with her younger brother in a nearby park. She looks after her two year old sister while her mother goes shopping alone and her father is elsewhere. Her family has no recourse to any childcare outside of the immediate family unit. While we have not spoken to her mother, it seems likely that her mother does not wish to expose her children to a situation in which she struggles to buy what they need and cannot afford to buy things they might suggest that they want. When asked if she sees school friends in the evening she replies, *'No I don't because I can't get out of the house. So I can't. I just see them in school.'* She contrasts her life now with when she was living in a village in Turkey: *'You can just like go and play anywhere. But see, when we came here first, we need to like stay at home. Not go anywhere like for months and months.'* She talks about her parents' fears about the dangers of their neighbourhood and the possibility that they will be picked on or get in fights. When her younger brother is allowed to play football, he is warned by his mother *'Don't like fight with anyone. Just play nicely.'* Her main activities are watching TV and doing her homework. The tone of her second interview is upbeat. She emphasises the importance of her school work and says she wants to become a doctor, although she is also aware that she does not yet know whether they will be allowed to remain in Britain.

Sema understood that her parents are trying to protect her from the moral and physical dangers that they are alerted to by knowledge of the neighbourhood and direct experience of racism shared by asylum seeking families. Serila was similarly restricted in her freedom to come and go by her parents. She explained *'I've not gone into sleepovers to my, any like friends, because my dad and my mum they feel like they don't know my all other friends. So they don't feel that it's safe for me to go.'* Neither Sema nor Serila thought that parents' concerns about their safety were unreasonable. Serila also explained that if she wants to go somewhere to meet her friends or to go shopping, she is not allowed to go by herself. When Serila was asked if her father was worried about her being out without an adult she explained: *'Most people told him that at my age [13/14] that hang around, well, you know, they hang around but they sometimes graffiti the walls and then they make a hassle. So, my dad thinks that it's not good. People wouldn't think in a good way if I go by myself to the shops and stuff.'*

## Racism

All recent research on the experiences of asylum seekers has noted their experiences of racism and concerns about safety (Avan and Bakshi 2004, Hopkins and Hill 2006, Macaskill and Petrie 2000, Save the Children and Glasgow City Council Education Service, 2002). Experiences of racism were volunteered in several interviews with children in this study. Sema told us of a boy who picks on her brother and Serila talked about *'Scottish people'* in her neighbourhood swearing and making remarks to asylum seekers *'about their colour, their hair and stuff'* and went on to report her own experience: *'When I first came here it was my age, like three girls my age, they kind of made me a bit sad. ... I told my dad and he's like, 'Well, it's what they think, so you shouldn't get sad for what people say to you' and stuff. So I don't, even if they say it, I don't really get offended much. It doesn't really make me angry any more.'* Serila then went on to talk about the resentment she was aware that some Scottish and English people felt towards asylum seekers as *'stealing their government's money by coming here'*, a view she rejects. While, of course, not all interactions with Scottish children were characterised by racist name calling or targeted unfriendly behaviour, research has shown that the majority of asylum seekers experience racism (Avan and Bakshi, 2004). Save the Children's research on asylum seekers in Glasgow with 41 young people and 52 parents concluded that one of the consequences of racism was that young people were not permitted to go out alone after school and parents were also reluctant to go out in the evening. Not being able to go out, in turn restricts the possibilities of developing friendship with Scottish people who are not part of the very immediate cluster of refugee flats.

## Restricted Social Networks

Acknowledging feeling lonely was no more common among asylum children than the rest of our respondents but asylum children have to manage the combined effect of the break with their previous relationships and circumstances which make it more difficult to build good relationships with Scottish children. The concentric circle diagram we asked children to fill out to map their social network illustrated the social constraints experienced by most of the children interviewed from asylum seeker families. Sanjay was the most extreme case. He named only his immediate co-resident family members, his mother and father and his three siblings. He has no contact with anyone in his



former home in Afghanistan and no friends he wanted to name in Glasgow. His years in Glasgow have encompassed two years in primary school and one year in secondary school but he said he has no friends from either setting. Sema similarly restricted the family she named on her diagram to the immediate family with whom she lives but she also named four friends: one boy from her school and three girls who have also come from Turkey and live in the flats allocated to asylum seekers. She did not actually see the boy much at school or at all outside of school but simply says that she likes him. At her second interview, these three girls remained her most important friends but she added that she did not see them very much outside of the occasions on which their parents and families visit each other for tea. When asked if she still saw the boy she had named, she laughed and said no.

The absence of Scottish friends who are seen beyond the school setting was typical, although Scottish children were occasionally named on the concentric circle maps. Serila reported a social world essentially similar to Sema's. At her first interview Serila talked of only knowing one person at primary school, a girl who arrived after her, but then acquiring lots of friends from Scotland and Pakistan that she did not identify by name. These friendships were school based. Her time out of school was mostly family time and the only friends she saw then were, like Sema, girls from Turkey. Similarly, Ayesha, when naming friends in Glasgow, also first wrote down girls who were the children of asylum seeking families. In the course of discussing her diagram she added a Scottish girl in the year below her own at school, whom she then described as her 'best friend' because *'she always plays with me. And. She talks to me and I phone her. And she phones me sometimes.'* She also wrote down another Scottish girl whom she described as the friend of the first. Only Monica, who is older, had developed a more diverse set of durable friends including a Scottish best friend who is her main confidante as well as friends from asylum seeking families.

## Support in coping with change

One of the issues we raised with asylum children in the interview was what helped them settle in and become more comfortable with their life in Glasgow. Serila's answer echoes themes found in larger studies of asylum seeking young people, she names her family and teachers, and particularly the specialist teacher who helped with learning English. Her family also had an advantage over some families in that they already had relatives living in Britain who were able to give them some support.

*Well it was most of my family, like we were helping each other. And our relatives also, they came up [from London] after, well they came after we settled in actually. So it was probably my teachers, Miss [name], she was a teacher. She, like people usually go to her class before just settling into a normal English class.*

(Serila, 13)

When asked if anything might have made the transition easier, she noted that her family would have preferred to stay in London because they had relatives there. Reflecting on the help her family received once they arrived in Glasgow, she remembered that the council sent somebody to check there was no problem with their house and commented on initial generosity towards asylum seekers that she perceived as declining over time.

*So when we first came it was actually, they were helping a lot to refugee and asylum seekers. There were parties at Christmas. They took us to this big big huge hall. And they were giving presents and stuff. And they even had your name. We don't know how. And they were helping a lot when we came... But then ... as more people came their help actually went down. They can't really help a lot of people and if they hold parties and stuff they know it will be too full.*

(Serila, 13)

The importance of family relationships had been intensified for asylum seeking children as a result of their collective experience of dramatic change. The importance of being with family was often stressed at various points in the interview. This did not necessarily mean that children were keen or able to confide in their parent(s). Aspects of the circumstances of asylum children work against this. The existing research literatures suggests that asylum children are sometimes reluctant to speak to their parents about problems because they do not wish to add to their worries. It also talks about the gulf in the experiences of parents and children, with the latter being more immersed in Scottish culture through their participation in school. The material situation of asylum seekers is also likely to have an impact on the quality of family relationships. A sense of being confined to the home combined with the limited resources and space at home creates a suitable environment for tensions.





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Sema struggled to explain tensions between herself and her mother.

*My mum sometimes doesn't listen to me and I get so angry and she understands in a different way and I'm like 'Mum it's not, it's something else' but she still understands like that. (Sema, 13)*

Most but not all of the asylum children interviewed had some informal support outside of their immediate family, typically friendships with other asylum children. None had initiated contact with any formal support services. Like many of the young people we spoke to, the children of asylum seeking families we interviewed had no experience of counselling or peer support. In discussion of such possibilities, issue of trust and confidentiality were quickly raised. Nevertheless, these discussions confirmed that the idea of somebody outside of your family that you can trust and whose job it is to listen to you got some endorsement as an attractive idea.

# FORMAL SUPPORT IN COPING WITH CHANGE



Many children and young people experiencing extraordinary family change have little or no support from any formal support service. The formal agencies of support that are the most visibly available to them are based in schools. Before turning to their own accounts we briefly describe these services.

## Services for children and young people

To date, only a few studies have directly explored young people's views and experiences of formal support services and there relatively few Scottish studies (Lyon and others, 1999, National Stepfamily Association, 1999, Stepfamily Scotland, 2000, Mason and Rundell, 200, Hawthorne and others, 2003, Wilson and others, 2003). The existing studies highlight the importance of facilitating children's networks for support (Hawthorne and others, 2003) and in particular, providing opportunities for children to interact with other children who have experienced similar family circumstances (Wilson and others, 2003). In our interim report, we noted that most Cool with Change participants had heard of formal services, ranging from school-based services to statutory social work involvement, although rather less had made use of any of the formal services we asked about:

**Proportion of 10-14 year old boys and girls saying they have heard of or used the following types of help:**

SERVICE	HEARD OF	USED
Guidance/pastoral care	84%	38%
School self help group	57%	10%
Social worker/youth worker	84%	16%
ChildLine or other helpline	82%	7%
Spending time with a buddy	54%	20%
Advice leaflets and books	82%	20%
Advice websites	77%	19%
Advice CDs and games	54%	15%
Family mediation projects	29%	6%
Child contact centres	42%	5%

The accounts of participants who took part in our first round of interviews suggest that schools in particular are a very important site for the provision of support and consequently, we present a brief summary of the types of support that are currently available in Scottish schools. Many professionals, including educational psychologists, learning support teachers and home-school link workers are involved in providing support in schools and we regret that in the context of this report, we cannot do justice to them all. Instead, we focus on four sources of support which the majority of pupils are likely to come into contact with: guidance support, nursing support, peer support and counselling support.

## 'Guidance' support in Scottish schools

'Guidance' has a long history in Scottish schools, dating back to the 1950s, although it was some years later before it became formalised through the document *Guidance in Scottish Secondary Schools* (SED, 1968). Traditionally, there has been a tri-partite division of guidance into educational, vocational and personal. Different models of guidance and pupil support have evolved in primary, secondary and special schools and these can be classified into two broad categories: 'embedded' support and 'specialist' guidance approaches. A recent study reports that pupil support is more likely to be 'embedded' in primary and special schools where staff perceived it to be an integral part of learning and teaching. In contrast, secondary schools tend to deploy variations of a specialist guidance model, for example, some schools operate an integrated pastoral care and learning support approach (SCRE, 2004). This report also noted that provision is changing in line with social inclusion policies which have brought more teachers into contact with members of other agencies. New standards for providing personal support in schools present a vision of 'caring school communities' in which 'teachers make a difference' in partnership with parents, other agencies, local communities and young people themselves (SE, 2004). Pupils themselves say that they try, as far as possible,



to exercise choice within the various 'guidance' and pupil support systems. Their accounts suggest that they want staff who provide them with support to know them, care about them, respect their confidences, and be someone with whom they could 'get along'. Their accounts also suggest that they tend to take school-related problems to teachers/guidance staff but, in contrast, reserved 'personal or health issues' for parents. A significant minority of pupils reported that they would tell 'no-one' if they had a problem (SCRE, 2004).

## **Nursing in Scottish schools**

School nursing services also have a long history of operating in Scottish schools and this sector too is currently re-inventing itself to better fit with the vision of a wider, multi-disciplinary, multi-agency approach (SE, 2003). A new discipline of 'public health nursing' which brings together health visiting and school nursing has been developed. This is founded on the twin principles of improving educational attainment and enhancing social inclusion, "giving children the opportunity to realise their full potential so that can leave school with relevant skills, well motivated, with high self-esteem and better equipped for adult life" (SE, 2003).

## **Peer support in schools**

The involvement of pupils in schools is a key theme in the development of inclusive and 'child friendly' schools and many schools have developed systems which seek to involve pupils more fully, and especially in the area of peer support (Shucksmith and others, 2005). In particular, peer support is now a key component of the Scottish Executive's restorative approach to improving discipline and problem-solving in schools (Hendry & Mellor, 2005, SE, 2001a). Some types of peer support, such as befriending/buddying schemes, draw upon a person-centred counselling approach but are much more informal (Cowie & Hutson, 2005). Other models of peer support place more emphasis on the process and experience of involvement, in particular the experience of autonomy, of listening and being heard (Hartley-Brewer, 2002, ChildLine, 2005). Some, for example, distinguish between schemes which are 'peer-led', that is, schemes where children have a considerable degree of control over the nature, functioning and direction of the project they are involved in. 'Peer-delivered' on the other hand, implies less autonomy and reflects schemes that peers deliver to an agenda and format that is essentially planned in advance by adult co-ordinators. We noted in our Interim Report that 'buddy schemes' or peer support schemes appear to be popular with many young people, for example, as a way of addressing bullying in schools, and helping children to manage the transition to a new school. Some young people, though, had reservations about the 'formal' aspect of buddy relationships and expressed a preference for naturally occurring peer relationships.

## **Counselling in schools**

*'For Scotland's Children'* (SE, 2001b) draws attention to the diversity of problems affecting children in Scotland, including several for which counselling services are seen to be relevant. More recently, *The Mental Health of Children and Young People* (SE, 2005) policy document identifies schools as occupying a key role in mental health promotion and ill health prevention within an integrated service design. In response to this, youth counselling services and/or schools counselling services have been set up in a number of areas in Scotland. Projects include the Counselling in Schools Project in Glasgow, funded by Greater Glasgow NHS Board (Cooper, 2005), the East Renfrewshire Youth Counselling Service, funded by the Changing Children's Services Fund as part of the Choose Life national suicide prevention programme, the Airdrie LHCC Youth Counselling Service and the REACT project based in Greater Easterhouse (part of Scottish Marriage Care). Other projects, such as the 'Rainbows Programme' (which uses a peer support design) and 'Seasons for Growth' provide a range of counselling interventions in school settings for young people who have experienced loss in their lives. We know very little about school-based counselling interventions from the perspectives of young people themselves, although two recent evaluation studies provide us with some evidence (Cooper, 2005, Bondi and others, 2006). Cooper and his colleagues argue on the basis of their findings that the Counselling in Schools Project (which offers mainly 1-1 counselling in school settings) should be extended, albeit with greater consideration given to the development of self-referral mechanisms and the protection of children's privacy. On the basis of an evaluation of the Airdrie Youth Counselling Service, Bondi and her colleagues similarly argue for a mainstreaming of the youth counselling service, but within a broader context which would further develop networks with partner agencies and help to raise awareness amongst potential service users.



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## Young people talking about pastoral care at school

Thirteen participants discussed their views and experiences of guidance support (also known as pastoral care) in their interviews. Of those, six had direct experience of accessing guidance support and we begin by looking at their accounts. Four of these participants had sought guidance support in relation to school issues, in particular problems relating to bullying and issues to do with subject choice. Danny reported a positive outcome when he consulted a guidance teacher (on behalf of a friend) about a bullying problem, and in particular, he appreciated that this was dealt with in confidence and that the teacher in question did a thorough job, also supporting the ‘bully’ and ‘getting to the bottom of’ of why the bullying was taking place. Similarly, Malika talked about her guidance teacher dealing satisfactorily with a bullying problem:

*When I started here [secondary school] in first year I got called names and then I talked to my guidance teacher about it and it got sorted out, and then that was quite good, and a couple of more times I encountered the same thing over and over again, and when I talked to him again, every time I tell him he deals with it (Malika, 14)*

In contrast, one of our other participants said that she would not seek this kind of support from a guidance teacher for fear of receiving an unhelpful response which may have unpleasant repercussions for all involved:

*Like, if they were getting bullied, they won't really want to talk to an adult, like, in school ... you wouldn't want to tell the teacher because the teacher, like, shouts at the pupil, and then the pupil will just, like, batter them after school and stuff, and if the child gets expelled and has to go to a new school, then their friends will be picking on you instead (Karen, 13)*

Robert described how his guidance teacher had played an important role in alerting other teachers to problems that he was having accessing his school books whilst staying with temporary foster carers. His account suggests, though, that he would not seek emotional support from a teacher, though he may talk to a school counsellor:

*They're obviously not strangers 'cause they'll talk to you and that, but they're not really someone close to you who'll know how it feels and that so you're not that keen on speaking to a teacher.*

*What about if there was a special person at school who wasn't a teacher but who was a kinda, school councillor, that was there just to speak to? (Interviewer)*

*Probably, 'cause they've maybe dealt with these situations more*

In her account, Julia spoke about experiencing problems at school in the aftermath of her mum and dad's separation. Like Robert, she too expressed a preference for talking to a counsellor rather than a teacher and her account appears to suggest that the support she has received from pastoral care staff was somewhat lacking. She was not critical of individual teachers, but, rather of a system which in her experience over-burdens those who have to juggle pastoral care duties, on the one hand, and teaching duties, on the other:

*You were saying before you have had some dealings with your pastoral care teacher but that's just not really worked out particularly? (Interviewer)*

*I think they [pastoral care staff] are a waste of time to be honest, they have got too many people to look after, and 'cause they are also teachers at the same time they only see people once every so often when they don't have a class to teach. I've got a pastoral care teacher who is supposed to see me once every day, and I've seen him, I don't think I have actually seen him once about it. They don't have enough time to do anything about anything, so I don't think they are worth being there. If you have a problem and go to see them they are usually in a class or you can't find them. It's kind of like, 'cause there is no-one else there it's like, kind of their responsibility to look after the kids, also they can't be in two places at once, they have to teach as well (Julia, 14)*



Those others who spoke about guidance support in their accounts were more or less equally divided in their views about whether or not they would seek support from a guidance teacher – three said they would and four said that they wouldn't. In contrast with those participants who said they would prefer to talk to a counsellor rather than a teacher, Rachel's account suggests that it may be less stigmatising to discuss problems with a teacher:

*Because I think when, if you say a counsellor to somebody, they think that they are getting help or being mad or something, whereas if you just say a pastoral care teacher or somebody like that, you know they are there just to talk to you*  
(Rachel, 12)

The four participants, all girls, who said they would not access guidance support if they had a problem, presented a range of reasons for this. Sema and Karen's accounts suggest that they would prefer to access support from within their informal networks, for example, from friends, older siblings or another relative, like an aunt. Serila and Lizzie, on the other hand, both expressed concerns about confidentiality and privacy. This is of particular concern in Lizzie's case whom we have seen (see Case Study) appears to be a very troubled girl. She has tried in vain to access support from a range of sources, both formal and informal, yet when asked about whether she would talk to a pastoral care teacher, Lizzie said:

*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)

## **Young people talking about service(s) providers other than teachers**

In our interim report, we noted that a few Cool with Change participants mentioned contact with formal services other than teacher-provided pastoral care, including statutory social work involvement. For the most part, young people who have accessed formal provision value it highly. Far more young people, though, do not see formal services as relevant to them. From their perspective, services (in particular ChildLine) are for children who are being abused or living in extreme circumstances, or they are for children who have no-one else to turn to. This is an important point for service providers to address because whilst it is certainly true that many children experiencing family change do not require formal support, there may be vulnerable children who hold this view of formal services and who may only seek support when they have reached crisis point. Conducting follow-up interviews with a third of our participants gave us an opportunity to explore young people's views of formal services in greater depth and how we might make these more relevant and accessible. In particular, we explored two possible ways in which services might be delivered drawing on the resources children have in school but without relying on teachers:

### **1) new technology**

Most children today have access to computers, in school, if not at home. Many but not all, also have access to mobile phones. We wanted to find out more about how these modes of communication that are very popular with young people might be useful as means of delivering forms of information and support for those dealing with family change.

### **2) school-based counselling services**

The provision of counselling services for young people is one of the most rapidly expanding areas within the counselling profession in the UK today. As noted earlier, many of our participants highlighted a potential association between counselling services and 'stigma', suggesting that where such an association is perceived, it is likely to act as a barrier to children accessing such services. Others expressed a clear preference for turning to friends rather than accessing formal services in times of need. These insights raise important questions about the role and potential impact of school-based counselling services. Do such services run the risk of further stigmatising those children most in need of support? Alternatively, should such services aim to normalise counselling processes to the benefit of everyone in the school community, and if so, how can this be achieved?



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## Surfing, e-mailing and texting

In recent years, young people have enthusiastically embraced the internet with 75% of UK 7-16 year olds now using this medium on a regular basis ([www.nop.co.uk/survey/internet\\_item34.htm](http://www.nop.co.uk/survey/internet_item34.htm)). A plethora of sites offering health information and other forms of support are now available. There is some evidence that young people would appreciate information about topics such as diet and exercise, illicit drugs and sexual health (Ackard, DM and Neumark-Stainzer, D, 2001) but we know little about whether young people are aware of websites or if they use the internet to access health information at all. Findings from one UK study suggest that there are a number of factors that may inhibit young people's use of the internet for health information (Gray and others, 2002).

The majority of our follow-up participants had private access to a computer in their homes and are regular users of the world wide web. Overwhelmingly, these young people used the web for leisure purposes and the most popular sites were messaging services, in particular, MSN, and music and games sites. Google was the most popular search engine and this was generally used to look up random things. Only a few of our participants talked about using the web for other purposes, mainly sites for helping with homework and in one instance, a site which provided information about a health query. Two participants talked about accessing a specific MSN support service called 'Smarter Child' where you can type in a question and the programme comes up with an answer but the vast majority used messaging services to chat with their friends. In an abstract sense, most of those young people were positive about the potential of web-based support services for young people although none talked about having accessed such a service. Most were aware that such sites exist but few were aware of specific sites which offer support to young people. We showed participants details of the following services and asked if they had heard of any of them:

*ChildLine* (interactive web-based service accompanying free help-line)

*Bullying Online* (web-site offering support to children in relation to bullying at school)

*Itsnotyourfault* (NCH web-site offering practical information for young people whose parents are going through a family break-up)

*Teenage Health Freak* (interactive web-site offering advice to young people on a wide range of health issues)

*There4me* (a messaging service run by the NSPCC offering support to children who are experiencing problems in their lives)

*Talking2Ourselves* (web-site developed by young people offering well-being advice to young people)

Apart from ChildLine and Bullying Online, no-one knew about the existence of these sites and no-one had accessed any of them. Around the time of our follow-up interviews, the Samaritans launched an e-mail service as an alternative to their free help-line. We asked participants if they had heard about this and if they thought it was a good idea. Few of our participants were familiar with the Samaritans organisation and those that were, associated it solely with people contemplating suicide. Consequently, they did not see this service as relevant to them. In general terms, participants expressed mixed reactions to the idea of using e-mail to seek support. Some felt it would be easier and less embarrassing than talking to someone face to face, while others said they would prefer to talk to friends. Most, but not all, of our follow-up participants had their own mobile phone and some of these were into texting in a big way, mainly to keep in touch with friends.

## Barriers and concerns

A few of our follow-up participants did not have private access to computers and accordingly, had little to say about the potential of web-based services for offering support to young people. Although these participants could access computers in the school library, they expressed unease at the idea of using a school computer in this way. In this setting, computers are often arranged in way that offers little privacy and some were concerned that they might 'get caught' accessing a support service by the school librarian. A few participants also felt that the cost of internet access is a barrier to using the internet in this way. Many participants expressed concerns about the security of internet sites offering support to young people - in particular, people 'hacking' into the system and 'taking the micky'. Not being certain who is on the other end of the communication and whether or not they are genuine were also potential worries for some:

*I would do it, 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)



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A few participants also expressed the view that there is no substitute for talking face to face with a real person. Some also felt that the impersonal, one-way nature of seeking support via a web-site could potentially make people feel more upset. Some participants did not own their own mobile phone, and their access to a land-line at home was not felt to be private, but rather, was 'policed' by other family members. Even for people who own a mobile phone, keeping it in credit was a very real constraint.

## Discussion

Whilst computers and mobile phones can be used by professional agencies and voluntary groups to deliver support and advice to young people, these technologies are not universally available and this particular use is, as yet, a step or two beyond how many young people use them. While it is certainly true that many young people have access to, and enjoy using, these technologies, most do so in a leisure context, primarily as a way of communicating and keeping in touch with their friends. Most of the participants in interviews were largely unaware of existing web-sites that offer support to young people. Available web and text services aimed at children and young people need to become much more visible before they will be viewed by young people as a resource you can casually explore to help you think through issues. It is also worth noting that children from asylum seeking backgrounds and those living with complex and difficult family circumstances are typically amongst those who do not have private access to these technologies and the economic circumstances of many children who do have mobile phones do not extend to keeping them in credit.

## Young people's views and attitudes to counselling

We asked our participants to talk about what they think 'counselling' is and what a counsellor does. Data from our first round of interviews suggested that children are more likely to be familiar with what a social worker (as opposed to a counsellor) does and for this reason we prefaced our questions about counselling with a few questions about their views and experiences of social work. We also felt that asking about both of these professions and how young people differentiate between the two would provide us with some useful insights into the potential barriers to young people accessing these services. A number of themes emerged from their accounts which we discuss below.

### Social workers act, counsellors talk

Those participants with no direct experience of social work intervention were either unsure what a social worker does or they expressed the view that social workers take children away from their parents and their homes, although most saw this as a necessary response to a desperate situation. Almost a third (6) of our follow-up participants had direct experience or close family experience of social work intervention and their views appear to be very much influenced by these experiences. Two participants viewed their own experience of social work intervention as broadly positive, in spite of some concerns with aspects of the process. Their accounts also drew attention to the power invested in social workers but they regarded this as potentially helpful:

*They, like, take kids, and, like, if their parents are abusing them or anything. Like, they talk to kids and that (Robert, 12)*

*Maybe get a visit for a complaint to see, check you. Just sometimes might want to see your arms just to see if you've got bruises or anything. And investigate your life to see if everything is OK. Help young people, try and find someone they can live with (Brian, 11)*

In stark contrast, others expressed anger and dislike of social workers, and perceived their authority in a very negative light:

*My big sister got a child taken off her 'cause of the social worker and my wee sister has a social worker and I don't really like them. And they're dead two-faced, I just really hate them (Karen, 13)*

Julia came into contact with the social work department when she went missing for a few days last new year and she also expressed concern about how social workers wield their authority:



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*You might be put in a home and stuff, which is the only thing I really think about social workers, is the kind of power that they have, it's just frightening' (Julia, 14).*

A few participants made a direct comparison between social workers and counsellors:

*[social workers] are just along the same lines as counsellors, but they take more immediate action than, like, they could take you out of your homes and put you in better ones (Catherine, 13).*

*I think you get social workers for different things. Like, they help you with your family and things I think. They sort of do more actual work rather than just sort of talk to you. They'll sort things out for you and if you've got family problems and if your parents are hitting you, they'll put you in, they'll find you accommodation or whatever, A counsellor will just talk to you about your feelings (Rachel, 12)*

It seems evident from these accounts that children view social workers as 'powerful'. Some express the view that children's best interests are served by the authority invested in social workers, while others see it as damaging and destructive to family life. In particular, these accounts seem to reflect a widespread view amongst young people that social workers take decisive action while counsellors talk about feelings. We now turn to what participants said about counsellors and the processes of counselling.

### **Counselling as a 'problem-focused' process**

Participants expressed a range of views about what 'counselling' is and what a counsellor actually does. Some were vague and unsure. Others equated counsellors with 'psychiatrists', and psychologists' and some used words like 'freak' 'crazy' and 'mad' to describe a person who would use a counsellor. Yet others saw it in relation to political processes: 'pupil council', 'town councillor'. Some related counselling to specific problems, in particular to addictive behaviours like smoking, drinking and taking drugs. Others mentioned family problems, problems at school, for children getting abused, for children getting bullied at school, for badly behaved children, for 'racial' issues. So whilst there is a fair degree of diversity in how young people perceive counselling, what seems to unite these accounts is a view of counselling as predominantly a problem-focused activity. Most people also distinguished counselling from a one-off meeting, seeing it as an ongoing process that may last for weeks and months.

### **The role of counselling in addressing mental health in schools**

Putting schools at the centre of the drive for the promotion of emotional well-being among children and young people is now a widespread approach throughout the UK and beyond (WHO, 2004, Health Scotland, 2006). Feedback from schools, though, indicates a continued discomfort amongst teachers around issues relating to emotional well-being and there is a perception of lack of knowledge, experience and skills (LTS, 2005). Studies also point to low levels of awareness amongst teachers of the importance of pupils' emotional well-being (DfES, 2005) and training for staff has been found to be unsatisfactory, with much of this focusing on managing pupils' behaviour rather than on promoting a positive approach to relationships and resolving conflicts (DfES, 2005, SEED, 2006). Young people themselves have identified emotional ill health as an important issue (Shucksmith & Pratt, 2003). It is within this context that school-based counselling services are beginning to be introduced into schools. The form that such initiatives take are many and varied. (Some, such as the Counselling in Schools Project, are run by professionally qualified adult counsellors, while others like the React Project, are less formal and are led by young people who are trained to deliver counselling support to young people in schools.)

Some, such as the Counselling in Schools Project, is run by adult counsellors as a pilot project in a number of Scottish schools in Glasgow and beyond. Scottish Marriage Care's flagship REACT project provides an in-school counselling service to children living in the deprived Greater Easterhouse area of Glasgow. Professionally trained youth counsellors deliver the service.

We wanted to find out what our participants thought about the idea of introducing counselling services into schools, in particular we wanted to explore the extent to which engagement with counselling processes might serve to stigmatise young people, and hence discourage them from using such services. None of our participants had any





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direct experience of a school-based counselling service (one participant was seeing a counsellor at the time of her second interview, but at home and not at school and we discuss this later). We asked participants if it would make them feel any differently if they knew that someone in their class was going to counselling. For some, this appeared to depend on why they were seeing a counsellor:

*Not sure. It depends what for, if they were going because maybe they had something in the family, like somebody died, where they were depressed, then I wouldn't really think anything of them because it's just natural, but if they were going because they had an anger problem or something (Catherine, 13)*

For others, how they felt about the person was dependent upon their prior relationship with them:

*Would you feel differently about, say, one of your pals going to see a counsellor? (Interviewer)*

*No (Raymond, 13)*

*What if it was someone else in your class you didn't really know? (Interviewer)*

*Maybe a bit awkward, I'd feel a bit awkward (Raymond, 13)*

*Why is she just going to, like, the counsellor, not talking to us? (Karen, 13)*

Some accounts reflected a degree of ambiguity with participants expressing apparently contradictory views:

*If it was one of my friends, I would maybe feel a bit hurt that she didn't come to me, but if it was just someone else in my class that I talk to casually it wouldn't really make any difference to me because I don't know them (Malika, 13)*

But in response to a question about whether she would tell her friends if she was seeing a counsellor, Malika said:

*Probably not. They probably wouldn't understand, they would think I'm kind of a freak or something (Malika, 13)*

With regard to how and by whom such a service might best be delivered in school settings, most young people favoured having a counsellor based in schools because:

*A teacher might treat you differently (Julia, 14)*

*Counsellors know what they're doing – it's their job (Robert, 12)*

Only one person expressed a preference for talking to a member of the pastoral care staff, but this person would have to be someone with whom you already have a good relationship and whom you perceive to be 'understanding'.

As mentioned earlier, one participant, Julia, talked about her ongoing experiences of seeing a counsellor. Her mum referred her to a counsellor soon after her dad left the family home, a year or so ago. Julia said that this experience has been useful in helping her to move on from difficult family experiences and difficulties at school but she feels that she no longer needs to see a counsellor and is only continuing to go in order to comply with her mum's wishes:

*I don't really see why I need one, but my mum has kind of forced me (Julia, 14)*

When she first started seeing a counsellor, Julia didn't tell any of her friends because she was worried about a potential negative reaction from them:

*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)*



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## Implications for school-based counselling services

It would not be appropriate to make generalisations on the basis of such a small number of accounts, but these reflections nonetheless offer a fascinating glimpse into how young people view mental health issues in general, and counselling in particular. Most young people favoured the idea of school-based counselling services but their accounts highlight some of the pitfalls that such a service may encounter. For most young people, counselling is perceived as a 'problem-focused' activity and for some, the stigma associated with counselling is more to do with the nature of the problem rather than counselling itself. For others, their attitude to counselling is very much linked with how they perceive their relationships with their closest friends. And the way that some people talk about counselling seems to reflect an ambivalence that people may have about talking about mental health matters in general.

These insights suggest that school-based counselling services, in spite of their good intentions, may run the risk of further stigmatising those children most in need of support. However, these insights, together with what we already know about the difficulties of addressing mental health issues in schools, suggest that this needn't be the case and that school-based counselling services could usefully play a role in 'normalising' the counselling process to the benefit of everyone in the school community. So what might such a service look like? Our accounts help us to tease out some general principles which might underpin such a service and we end this chapter by suggesting what some of these principles might be:

- 1) Emotional support should be seen as relevant to everyone in the school community (and the local community in which the school is situated), it is not just relevant to certain troubled individual pupils
- 2) School-based counselling services should be 'every-day' rather than problem-focused, for example, school counsellors should be involved in school events and celebrations as well as engaged in 1-1 and other forms of support
- 3) School-based counselling services should try to find innovative and inclusive ways of offering support, for example by involving friends

By adopting such a set of principles, school-based counsellors have the potential to occupy a unique role in the school community and beyond and to 'normalise' issues relating to mental health and well-being in a way that benefits everyone.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

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Change is a normal part of children's family life but when change feels like loss and is unanticipated and dramatic it is inevitably upsetting in the short-term. Large scale longitudinal surveys comparing life's outcomes for those who consistently lived with the same two parents throughout their childhood with outcomes for those who experienced upheaval in their parenting arrangements typically conclude that such changes have a long-term negative effect for a small proportion of children. In this study our more detailed conversations with children explored their experiences of family change and their views of what actually helped and what could have helped them to cope with change. Most emphasised what we have referred to as their informal support network, their family or kin relationships and friendships. For children, like most adults, family – mothers above all but also often siblings, fathers, those in stepparent roles, cousins, aunts and uncles - and friends were their front line source of care, assistance, advice, emotional warmth and diversionary activities.

While children themselves did not name poverty or lack of material resources on the one hand, or economic advantages on the other, as factors that impacted on what helped or hindered them in coping with change, this is also a theme that can be drawn from their accounts. It is not that those who are well off always found change easy or those that are not always found it difficult, but rather the level of difficulties and possibilities of making things easier were modified by economic and material resources as well as by the social resources of family, kin and friends.

Unfortunately, dramatic and unanticipated change which heightens the need for support is also likely to disrupt informal support networks. Upset is likely to be minimised when informal support networks either remain relatively undamaged or recover quickly. Disruption of support networks is true to a greater or less extent for all of the changes discussed in this report that involve loss: asylum seeking, death of a parent, separation of parents.

In seeking asylum, parents and their children lose their network of wider kin, friends and neighbours in which their relationships with immediate family were previously embedded. The circumstances of their entry into a new society and the legal and welfare categories to which they are allocated 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 either of these spheres of their lives.

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. Parental separation and disputes following death can both create a break in a kin network which can become a chasm rather than be bridged by new forms of connection. 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 her or his fit parent's life can also result in withdrawal from friends.

The term 'network' suggests an interlinked set of relationships and sometimes we talk about support 'systems' which suggests a team that works together. Both terms only approximate the complex realities of children's lives. The term network is an appropriate description in only a loose sense because not all of children's friends and family or kin are known to each other or directly connected together other than through their links to the child. Moreover, of course, not all are equally important in providing support and it is, therefore, not always possible when loss creates a gap to simply close ranks or join the loose ends. Mothers, siblings and some friends are often more important than others, although for some children it is a father or cousin or an aunt who plays the most important role in providing them with support. The term 'system' is very rarely wholly appropriate as few children have social networks which work as a team. Nevertheless, these terms are helpful in indicating ideal situations to which realities approximate. It is clear that children who experienced the most sustained support during dramatic change had a key supporter who provided a coordinated effort to draw in others in their network. But children also had continuous support to some extent when, if one part of their network was less able to offer help, for example if a parent was paralysed by bereavement, then other kin or friendship relationships were not affected.

Formal support agencies are unlikely to achieve a level of trust and engagement with a child's life sufficient to know and help their informal support networks to flourish as a system. However, any additional assistance that children receive in times of dramatic change is likely to ease pressure on informal networks of support. Few children knew much about formal support services, with the exception of the Pastoral Care or Guidance System among those at secondary school, and even fewer had ever tried to access formal support services. Websites set up for and about children were virtually unknown and clearly need to be made much more visible. Many 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. This awareness linked into the widespread notion that formal support services are for and about extreme and stigmatising situations. Childline, the best known voluntary sector service, was typically seen as a last resort, for situations like 'abuse' and neglect or only for the sad and desperate. As



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noted in our Interim Report, only two participants recognised ChildLine as a service that young people could access for a wide range of reasons, such as falling out with friends or problems in the family.

However, when we raised the hypothetical possibility of counselling in school offering people and places to confidentially talk over change, even when it was not a crisis, children and young people typically responded positively. While some retained reservations about talking to an adult stranger, it seems likely that this could be overcome if those working there became both familiar figures and retained separation from teachers. As noted in our interim report, many research participants very much liked the idea of school-based peer support systems, because they thought that it is easier to talk to someone your own age, and could imagine perhaps contributing to such a service. Fear that confidentiality will not be respected was the most often repeated reservation about both counselling and peer support, followed by fear that stigmatisation might follow from participation. Any school-based or school-used service that is to side-step these reservations must somehow generate an ethos of absolute confidentiality combined with availability to all and providing value for all. Websites similarly need somehow to become both very well known and the normal thing to look at if children without access to the web at home are not to fear being 'caught' looking at them in the library.

Children in most 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 a range of school based people providing support might ensure that the most vulnerable children do in fact access formal support. It is also important to recognise that for some children and young people, diversionary activities were more important than talking about problems. Highly visible and open access fun activities for children are therefore also a possible way of supporting children through uncomfortable and unsettling change.

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# APPENDIX :

## FURTHER DETAILS OF METHODOLOGY

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### Obtaining consent and conducting the fieldwork

The research team obtained consent from Glasgow City Council Education Department to conduct the research in Glasgow schools and then secured the agreement of five schools (two secondary and three primary) to participate in the research. At all stages, information about the different phases of the research was provided to schools, parents and young people themselves in a form and language appropriate to each audience. We used an 'opt-out' consent process for parents and in our information sheet encouraged parents to contact us if they wanted more details or to discuss any aspect of the research. In our initial questionnaire we asked children to indicate if they would like to participate in the interview study (and likewise in our initial interviews) and we followed up only those children who indicated they would like to take part. It was made clear that children could change their minds at any time and withdraw from the research. In practice, most of the young people we followed up to take part in an interview, and subsequently in a follow-up interview, did in fact participate. In a few cases, we lost track of children who had moved house or moved school.

### The questionnaire and affluence scale

The questionnaire was completed in class time and was designed to gather some basic information that would make it possible to identify children who had experienced family change and would be willing to be interviewed. This included some questions about the child's or young person's household which were used to create a scale of affluence: number of holidays, car ownership, type of housing tenancy and whether children had their own room. The households of children described in the report as 'relatively deprived' had at least two and typically at least three of the following circumstances: no holiday over the last year, no car, live in council housing or temporary accommodation, shared bedroom. Those described as relatively affluent had at least three of the following: two or more holidays, two cars, owner occupied house, own bedroom.

### The interviews

The interviews were informal and participative and lasted around 45 minutes. In all cases (apart from two where participants chose to be interviewed at home) the interviews took place in school. In all but one of our schools, it was possible to secure a private room. In the other, on some occasions, the only room available was the office of a member of the school's senior management team and in this instance, although the research team placed a high priority on privacy, these interviews were often interrupted, usually by a teacher coming into the room. When this happened, the researcher chatted with the young person being interviewed about neutral topics and resumed the interview once the teacher had left. In both interviews, the research team used a semi-structured approach and in this way achieved a balance between discussing issues the research team brought to the interview (for example, how young people spend their leisure time, who the important people are in their lives and significant events that have occurred) and issues and concerns that young people themselves chose to raise in the interview. In the first interview, participants completed an 'Important people' chart and a 'Lifeline' diagram as part of the interview. In the second interview, the research team followed up on emergent themes, following preliminary analysis of the interview data (see below for further details). On each occasion, at the end of the interview, participants were given information about sources of support as a matter of course. They were also given a gift voucher to mark their contribution to the study.

### Data analysis

With the permission of participants, all of the interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The research team also kept field-notes and wrote a brief summary of each interview. All of these data were entered into NVivo 2, a computer software package which facilitates the storage and management of qualitative interview data. The research team 'coded' the data according to anticipated and emergent themes, using a combination of manual and computer-aided indexing and searching. This process involved scrutinising the data, frequently returning to interview transcripts as well as consulting relevant literature. Drawing upon the principles of a 'grounded theory' approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the research team used a process of 'constant comparison' (checking the emerging analysis of each theme against every instance of similarly coded data) to make sure that the analysis represented all perspectives. The research team also sought and discussed 'negative instances' in order to refine the analysis.

The analytical process involved an active interface between service providers, researchers, consortium members and young people themselves. At the beginning of the project, the research team recruited two groups of young consultants, one from each of our participating secondary schools and these young people helped to design the topic guide and advised on dissemination strategies. It proved difficult to sustain the involvement of these young






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consultants over the course of the whole project and the research team plan to involve the Children's Parliament in discussion about potential service developments in the near future. At the end of the first interview phase, a workshop with consortium members helped to guide the academic team on issues for further exploration in the second round of interviews. At the stage of the Interim Report a conference attended by 80 local and Scottish service providers provided an opportunity to focus on reactions to the findings and the implications for policy and practice.

### **Outputs**

The research team have produced findings from the research in a range of formats for many different audiences at both the interim and final stage of the project. These include conference presentations, workshops, reports, young people's newsletter, a poster for distribution to schools and briefing reports for policy makers and practitioners. Copies of these can be downloaded from the CRFR website: [www.crfr.ac.uk](http://www.crfr.ac.uk)



The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships was set up in January 2001 to produce research and commentary on families and relationships relevant to Scotland and to disseminate such work widely. CRFR facilitates a network of researchers and those interested in families and relationships research, produces regular research briefings and information bulletins, and holds events.

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One Parent Families Scotland  
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