



Cool with Change

young people and family change

Many Scottish children experience change in their household and parenting arrangements in the course of their childhood. The Cool with Change research project seeks to understand more about young people's perspectives on what kinds of support, both formal and informal are helpful.

Key points

Young people talking about family change

- Young people experience family change in diverse ways and many experience multiple changes
- Family change is best understood as a process, rather than as a one-off event
- The experience of family change may be accompanied by other 'losses', for example, time spent with friends and/or family may be curtailed
- Many children, some over time, successfully manage life in two families and continue to enjoy a good relationship with two separated parents and with wider kin on both sides of the family
- Where ongoing family conflict goes beyond what may be expected at times of emotional turmoil, children's wishes and desires may take second place to the approaches adult family members take to managing their differences
- Children who flee their country of origin to come and live in the UK face particular challenges which may include family change but which also encompass a range of other issues

Young people talking about support

- Informal support networks, mainly friends, family and wider kin, are extremely important to most young people, with friendship seen as particularly important
- Children are very discriminating about whom they choose to confide in
- Many children place themselves in the role of supporter, sometimes to other children in similar circumstances, sometimes to other family members, usually their mother
- Some children make effective use of technologies such as MSN messaging, e-mail and texting to keep in touch with non-resident members of their families
- Many young people who access formal provision highly value this support, but in some cases this support may fall short
- Schools are an important site for the provision of support but many children have reservations about how and by whom this support is provided
- Some young people do not see formal services as relevant to them, but only for children who are being abused or living in other extreme circumstances
- Some young people only access support when they have reached crisis point

Background

Many children experience change in their family household and parenting arrangements. It is now estimated that at least one in three children experiencing the separation of their parents by the age of 16 (Maclean/JRF, 2004). 1 in 4 marriages in Scotland is now a remarriage and 1 in 8 children will grow up in a stepfamily. 1 in 5 households are headed by a lone parent. A small number of children, between 4 and 7 per cent, will lose a parent through death (Ribbens-McCarthy, 2005). Some minority ethnic groups have very low incidences of divorce or separation, but consequently stigma and social exclusion are likely when it does occur.

The study

Cool with Change (formerly Understanding and Supporting Young People Through Family Change) is a three year research project funded by the Community Fund and the Scottish Executive. It is the result of a collaboration between Scotland's Families, a consortium of organisations (Couple Counselling Scotland, Family Mediation Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland, Scottish Marriage Care, Stepfamily Scotland) with a long and impressive track record of providing support to families, and researchers based at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR). The study breaks new ground by combining in-depth research of young people's experiences of family change in Scotland, reflection by service providers on the implications for their services, and consultation with young people about possible further developments of support services.

Children were selected for interview on the basis of short questionnaires completed by 361 pupils aged 10-14 in five schools within ethnically and socially diverse areas of Glasgow. 70 young people have participated in follow-up research. 15 contributed to focus group discussion, and 55 who took part in an individual, face-to-face interview. The research team have also recruited two groups of 'young consultants' to advise the research team at key stages throughout the project.

Findings

A substantial minority, in this study (33%), had experienced household change impacting on parenting arrangements: either the separation of their parents (26%) or, much more rarely, the death of a parent (4%) or a parent re-partnering (19%). 16% had experienced both the loss of a parent from their household and a parent re-partnering.

Young people from Muslim families were significantly less likely to have experienced parental separation (9%) than those describing themselves by a Christian denomination (32%) or as no religion or don't know (29%).

Some experience of bereavement is common. 43% of the young people reported that 'someone close' has died. Substantial proportions reported serious illness of a relative (21%) or 'someone close' (36%). The other common change was moving house, reported by over a fifth (23%). The sample included a small number of

pupils (4%) who had fled their country of origin to seek asylum.

Experiences of separation, death and re-partnering among 10-14 year old pupils

Either separation or death or re-partnering of parent(s)	33%
Parental separation or death and at least one parent re-partnered	16%
Parents separated	26%
Mother died	1%
Father died	3%
At least one parent has new partner	19%
Mother has new partner	13%
Father has new partner	12%

Parental separation

Multiple challenges

Data from Cool with Change echoes other studies showing the diversity of children's experiences of family life following the separation of parents. Some children have always had contact with their non-resident parent, others had no or only episodic contact. Some have ongoing difficulties relating to their parents' separation whilst for others, it has been relatively unproblematic. Many young people face a range of other challenges, in particular moving to a new school and ongoing conflict and tension within their families. Many children also talk about family illness, whilst others highlight financial hardship and broader social issues such as vandalism, violence and racism within their communities.

Conflict and change

Some young people experience the separation of their parents as heralding an end, or at least a lessening of parental conflict, particularly where domestic violence is an issue. Many children continue to live with conflict and tension. In most cases, the conflict has its origins in earlier episodes of violence or other unacceptable behaviour perpetrated by children's fathers against their mothers. In a few cases, children themselves are also a target.

Other separations

In a few instances, events other than parental separation or divorce have resulted in a parent's absence. Family change as a result family members being in prison, through illness and hospitalisation, or a parent spending sustained periods of time abroad all featured in this study.

Contact and support in separated families

Many young people who experienced the divorce or separation of their parents described themselves as living happy, well-adjusted lives. Their accounts often bring out two factors, continued contact with the non-resident parent and a wider network of informal support.

“Fridays I stay over at my dad’s to Saturday and then Sundays I just go out and play with my friends” (Matthew, 12)

Some enjoyed a good relationship with their father ever since their parents separated, whilst others did not see their father initially, but have since established and maintained regular contact.

“When did your mum and dad get divorced?” (Int)

“Eh, kinda about when I was four or five I think but it’s just kinda carried on, it’s not just the once, it still goes on. But, like I prefer it that way because what’s the point of them arguing?” (Sinead, 11)

Many accounts suggest that ‘family’ is more to do with how people behave towards one another, rather than simply reflecting biological or living arrangements.

“It doesn’t change how they feel about you. They still love you and they still try to do the best that they can for you, so it doesn’t really make a difference” (Karen, 12)

Living in two homes

Moving between two households on a regular basis is now a common experience for children whose parents have separated with almost half of interviewees having had this experience. 18% continue some arrangement other than living in one home and 15% living part of the week in one home and part of the week in another. Some of those participants talked about ‘missing out’ on spending time at the week-ends with their friends.

“Sometimes it annoys me, because on a Saturday night the friends I go to Blast with, there’s also another youth club called Jungle which is down in the church. And most of the time, they’re all saying, ‘oh, do you want to come to Jungle this week-end? 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” (Danny, 11)

Many young people in this position, though, emphasised that there are both positive and negative aspects associated with this experience.

“I mean you want to see your mum when you’re with your dad and you’re missing your dad when you’re with your mum. I think that’s the hardest bit. But the good bit is you get two Christmases, two birthdays, so there’s a good side to everything” (Sinead, 11)

Living without contact

Contact arrangements with non-resident fathers can be compromised by violent or other unacceptable forms of behaviour. Some children described feeling that they have no choice but to take sides with their mother, sometimes alongside other family members, usually maternal grandparents. Episodic outbreaks of hostility can result in children being denied access to their father by their mother.

In some cases, children talked about making the decision for themselves to reduce or stop contact

with their father based on a growing realisation of the inappropriateness of their father’s behaviour.

Other difficulties

Other adverse family circumstances can also make life difficult for children whose parents have split up. Several participants talked about money being ‘short’ and two others have had to deal with their father spending time in prison. Children who seem most vulnerable are those who appeared to have little support. Their parents generally didn’t get on well and they were reluctant to talk to anyone, including their friends, about what’s happening and how they’re feeling.

Death of a parent or close relative

The importance of context and meaning

Bereavement is a common, and sometimes life-defining, experience for young people and while many young people in this study find bereavement deeply upsetting, not all the consequences are necessarily negative and much depends on the context and nature of the bereavement and the meaning it holds for individuals.

Cool with Change participants show that young bereaved people have diverse support needs, which may not easily be met. For example, acknowledgement of their loss was not always welcome. After her father died, when she was at school, Kathryn would have liked her friends to take her mind off things, but she was unable to ask for this kind of support.

“It’s like one day you’re just forgetting about it and then someone comes up to you and mentions it, and you just think, ‘shut up’, often I would just take big rages at them and tell them to shut up and go away, but I didn’t actually explain to them that I wanted them to leave me alone” (Kathryn, 12)

New family configurations

There-partnering of a parent seems to be best understood as a process, sometimes initially experienced as a form of loss, but changing over time.

“Joe’s my mum’s boyfriend. I didn’t like him at all at the beginning. I think I was kinda jealous of him because mum hadn’t been with anyone for ages. And then he came along and I was, like, ‘what are you doing here, go away’ kinda thing. But I’m used to him now” (Rebecca, 13)

Some participants described how they are expected to spend time with the whole family, at the expense of spending time alone with their non-resident parent.

“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 step-sisters. My step-mum, and my sisters, and me and my dad” (Danny, 11)

Many Cool with Change participants who have experienced the birth or introduction of a new sibling talked of a happy event which enriches their family life and feeling close to new half-siblings. However when children already experienced their relationship with

a parent as problematic, the introduction of a new half-sibling into sometimes further estranged their relationships.

"When Maggie was born I quietened down and I don't really talk to them all" (Kristina, 13)

Asylum seeking children

Cool with Change interview participants included four young people who live in asylum-seeking families and have fled their country of origin to live in Scotland. Inevitably all had lost some if not all contact with family and friends in their country of origin in the process. Establishing themselves in their new surroundings often involved the challenges of multiple moves, struggling to be understood in a new language, awareness of their parents' on-going difficulties and of difference. For example, when exploring what might have made the change easier, one boy stressed that his father should be allowed to take up paid employment.

All had smaller than average friendship networks, tending to spend time with their immediate family and sometimes also children in similar circumstances.

Young people talking about support

Informal support

Young people's accounts overwhelmingly highlighted the importance of their informal support networks, mainly friends and wider kin. In particular, the support and companionship of friends appear to be crucial at times when young people are vulnerable, for example, if they have to move to a new school as a result of their parents' separation. What is common about young people's accounts, though, is how discriminating they are about whom they choose to confide in.

Young people's accounts also show that support does not flow only in one direction. Many children as well as being the recipients of support themselves, offer support to others. Sometimes, they may support other children who are experiencing similar circumstances or they may support adults, usually their mother.

Formal support

Only a minority of young people had ever used any formal support agency. Of those participating in the survey, 37% had consulted guidance staff or staff responsible for pastoral care at school, 20% had spent time with a 'buddy', 16% had contact with a social worker or youth worker. Interviews indicate that most young people who accessed formal provision valued it. Critical remarks, such as worries about staff respect for confidentiality, were more often made by those who had never used the service. But our interviews also contained occasionally unhappy stories including one account in which being taken into care was experienced as being processed rather than informed and involved.

Schools emerge as a very important site for the provision of support, but children's accounts contribute to the debate about how and by whom school-based support is best delivered. The idea of 'buddy' schemes (also known as peer support schemes) was popular with the vast majority of Cool with Change participants, although only a minority had any direct experience. Some children had reservations about the 'formal' aspect of 'buddy' relationships and expressed a preference for naturally occurring peer relationships.

Some accounts suggest that many young people do not see formal services as relevant to them. From their perspective, services are for children who are being abused or living in extreme circumstances, with no-one else to turn to. It is certainly the case that many children experiencing family change do not require formal support. However, there may be vulnerable children who hold this view of formal services and who may only seek support when they have reached crisis point.

A fuller discussion of the findings of this study, in particular young people's views on support services, can be found in the full report available from www.crfr.ac.uk. The report also contains a more complete bibliography.

References

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

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