

Children and Families in Transition

PowerPoint Presentation

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Other researchers involved

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- Jeanette Fiegehen
- Postgraduate students
- Centacare Family Services Staff

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Why the project?

- For all the impact separation has on parents, step-parents and grandparents it is possibly the children who suffer most.
- During separation it is easy to concentrate on the needs of adults and to overlook the children, or to focus on the child but not necessarily put the child in the centre.

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Statistics

- There were 53,100 divorces granted in Australia in 2003
- 10 % increase in 10 years (48,400)
- 20 % increase in 20 years (43,000)

(ABS 2003)

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Statistics

- 2003: 49,000 children were involved in the divorce of their parents
- For 62% of these divorces the youngest child was less than 10 years of age

(ABS 2003)

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- Research that has already been carried out shows that violence in a relationship is more likely to occur or intensify during and after separation
- Children are affected and traumatised by that violence
- Our phone-in early May 2005 with parents, caregivers, relatives and their children supported these findings

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- Currently most services are designed for adults
 - There are too few services designed for children experiencing the separation and divorce of their caregivers and even fewer for children with special needs
- (Australian Law Reform Commission and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997,; McIntosh, 2000a)

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Aim of the project

- To develop, pilot and evaluate a 'best practice' model of child centred intervention for children and families experiencing separation and divorce that will offer a range of appropriate, integrated services and early access to relevant information and support.

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Objectives

- To use a range of research strategies to analyse the experiences and meanings attached to separation and divorce, and the special needs of children and families experiencing conflict and violence in the separation process.

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To use this research data to inform the development of:

- Early, child centred strategies to assist parents to handle their parenting and associated conflicts
- Timely and age-appropriate information, education and support to children, as individuals and in groups

- Education groups and packages for parents with a focus on the possible needs of their children

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To use this research data to inform the development of:

- Early intervention strategies to prevent/minimise parental conflict over their children and to keep children safe
- Education, training and support to enable family law professionals to work cooperatively within a child centred framework
- Strategies and approaches with a 'best practice' model to be implemented by Centacare Family Services and then evaluated

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Research methodology

- A combination of quantitative and qualitative research
- A feminist poststructuralist approach was used to analyse the qualitative data as it focuses on language as it conveys meaning and constructs understandings about and representations of reality

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A multi-method research approach that included:

- Comprehensive literature review
- Online survey with service providers in Australia (199) and overseas (108 – mostly from Germany)
- Interviews with service providers to Indigenous communities
- State-wide phone-in with parents, relatives and children who had experienced separation (117)

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Rationale for the phone-in

- The phone-in allowed for complete anonymity
- The phone-in provided a rich source of data from various groups in rural, remote and urban locations in a relatively small amount of time
- The phone-in had the advantage of providing access for people who are not currently using services

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Advertising the phone-in

- *The Advertiser* and *Sunday Mail* newspapers
- *Messenger Press* urban and regional papers
- other rural papers
- Regional, metropolitan and national radio stations
- Electronic mail distribution to the University of SA staff and students
- Electronic mail distribution to other target groups
- Posters and flyers
- The advertisements in newspapers included two different versions: one child friendly version for children and young people who have experienced the separation of their families and one adult version for parents and relatives who have experienced separation that involved children.

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The Interviewers

- The phone interviewers were staff and students from Conflict Management Research Group, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia; staff from Centacare Family Services staff and staff and volunteers from Women's Information Service.
- The phone-in was conducted over 2 days between 10 am and 8 pm, Monday and Tuesday, May 2005

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Participants

- 116 callers were interviewed:
 - 55 mothers
 - 35 fathers
 - 10 girls
 - 9 boys
 - 6 female relatives and 1 male relative

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Approach

- Each researcher used a structured interview schedule for each group

- Interviews with parents averaged 2-3 hours
- Interviews with children averaged about half an hour to an hour
- Callers were transferred to WIS staff if they needed further information or support

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The Process and Analysis

- Prompts guided the interviewers through each interview and detailed notes taken.
- Notes were typed up by one researcher and analysed by another two, with assistance from QSR's computer software program NVivo.
- Throughout the analysis, researchers looked for dominant themes and repetitive comments and made a concerted attempt to control their biases and avoid interpretation.
- The detailed analyses in the Interim Report include many quotes from the callers so their voices are clearly represented.

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The Children

- 19 children called during the two-day phone-in: 9 males and 10 females. 15 were aged between 8-12 years. Two brothers were aged 12 and 19 years. Two older women aged 22 and 33 years rang in to share their childhood experiences. When asked why, one (22) said: 'It's affected me. I didn't think it would but it has scarred me.' Her parents split up when she was 8 years old.

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The Children

- Seven callers had parents who had separated in the prior 3 years, 3 within 6 years and 5 within roughly 10 years. Most of the children who rang were from the Northern suburbs of Adelaide and some were ringing from a school, with permission from the school counsellor. Two described themselves as Aboriginal. Three lived in rural areas of South Australia and the rest in the Adelaide metropolitan area.

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The Children

- Nine had step-sisters and/or step-brothers and 4 had half-brothers and/or sisters. Three were living separately from their biological siblings, who lived primarily with their other parent. Twelve children primarily lived with their mother and another 5 initially lived primarily with their mother after the separation and then moved to live primarily with their father. Two has primarily lived with their father since the separation

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Recommendations

- Overall, recommendations from the literature review and research are that services should be provided to children and families *early* in the separation transition:
 - Educational information for children about the legal and court processes and procedures
 - Educational information for children about separation and divorce, and its effects
 - Educational information for children, provided in age-appropriate ways so that they may understand and better cope with their emotions and feelings during the transitional phase of separation and divorce

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Recommendations

- Educational information for parents about the effects of separation on children so that they can identify, understand and respond to their children's needs
- Educational information for parents about legal and court processes and procedures
- Children be provided with easy and affordable access to separate representation or advocates to assist their voices to be heard during the separation and divorce process

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Recommendations

- Primary dispute resolution services for parents be accessible early in the separation process in order to reduce conflict and lessen the trauma of separation
- Educational information and training for professionals about the experiences and needs of children so that they are able to recognise the effect of separation, high level conflict and domestic violence on children and can support and assist children and families through separation
- Educational information be readily available for professionals about various forms of intervention that may be suited to children at different ages and stages of development, such as play therapy, group therapy, educational groups, counselling, peer mentoring and support so forth

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It is also recommended that:

- All court and community-based services for children and families in transition practice from a child-focused, child centred and/or child-inclusive perspective
- A range of accessible services be provided from a 'one-stop shop' to support and assist children and parents through the separation process, including counselling, mediation, play therapy, group work, provision of legal/court information, advocacy, access centres and information, education and training for professionals in order to maximise parental cooperation and the well-being of the children involved

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Recommendations

- All programs be aware of, and responsive to, the special needs of different groups, such as those from rural communities, indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and/or those who have experienced family or domestic violence
- Any physical site used for the provision of services is child oriented so as to provide a safe and welcoming environment for the children who attend the service

- Children be used as consultants and advisors in relation to their service needs and the effectiveness of current and future services designed to meet their needs

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- Children and Families in Transition web site:
- <http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cpcm/cafit.asp>
- CHaT First – Children and Teens First – web site:
- <http://www/chatfirst.com.au>