

All about... family breakdown

When parents split up, practitioners can be pivotal in helping children feel secure and understand the situation. *Annette Rawstrone* explains what staff can do to help both children and parents



It can feel like a child's world has been ripped apart when their parents decide that they want to separate, regardless of whether it's amicable or fraught with tension. How seriously affected the child is can depend on a number of factors, ranging from the age of the child and how much they understand, to what support they receive from their parents and other people they are close to, including childcare practitioners.

Just under half of the 114,720 couples that divorced in the UK in 2013 had at least one child under the age of 16, according to the Office for National Statistics. More than 20 per cent of these children were aged under five years. However, many more children will have experienced the breakdown of their family unit but not be included in these figures because their parents were unmarried. As the statistics only partly show, family breakdown is a very real issue that, as an early years practitioner, you will doubtless be confronted with.

'A lot of parents keep the more difficult aspects of their family lives a secret, so it's hard to know what is going on. But children show in their behaviour when things are going badly wrong. It's then up to the practitioner to pluck up the courage, speak to the parents and ask if everything is alright,' says Honor Rhodes, director of strategic development at Tavistock Relationships.

'The child is the most amazing emotional barometer. Lots of parents will say that their child doesn't know, or that they only argue when the child has gone to bed, but a child can notice that their parent is in a ▶

state of frozen anger, or get up in the night and listen on the landing. Family breakdown can shake a child's world to the core.'

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS

Suzie Hayman, relationship counsellor and trustee of Family Lives, says there is no best age for a child to experience their parents separating; it is going to be hurtful whatever. 'Divorce is devastating for an adult so it's bound to affect a child,' she says.

Under two Even babies can feel tension, though they don't understand the reason. Pre-verbal children will soon realise that they see less of their mum or dad, and it can be scary and confusing.

Toddlers and pre-school This age will often blame themselves for the break-up. They think of themselves as the architects of their world and will likely think that it's all their fault – for example, their dad is withdrawing his attention and love because they were naughty. But by the time they're five or six they're unlikely to consciously remember their parents being together because their memories haven't been laid down.

Primary-school age At this age, children are likely to feel abandoned, anxious and may blame one of the parents or worry that their parents will divorce them.

Teenage While understanding the

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concept of divorce, teenagers won't know what it means for them, which is unsettling. They are likely to want to get on with their own lives and not

want, for example, the disruption of visiting their dad at weekends. 'The number one thing to say to a child is that it's not their fault. They need to

CASE STUDIES

Springfield Nursery in Marwood, Devon

'While not commonplace, it feels like we're working with increasingly more families that are separating. We aim to have a close rapport with our families and most parents have told us when this is happening, but a few times practitioners have become aware through a child's altered behaviour or comments. We will then quietly speak to the parent who

collects the child,' says owner and manager Anna May. 'Our main aim in these situations is to ensure that there is as much support for the child as possible from their key person and other practitioners. Often their lives are rocked by the split and the only consistency is nursery.

'We are clear with parents that, while we'll provide a listening ear, we have to remain unbiased and non-judgmental. We do signpost parents to outside support and advice agencies. The child's key person ensures that they have the up-to-date circumstances and finds out from the parents what the child knows. We advise parents to give honest, simple answers to their children.

'When parents are living separately, we ensure that

we communicate with both of them. If parents have joint custody then either has every right to collect the child. We can only stop a parent from seeing their child if there is a court order. It's tricky, but in these cases we ensure we've seen the paperwork and we enforce it. Happy, consistent care is at the forefront of everything.'

Folkestone Early Years Centre, Kent

'A mother of two children, aged one and three years, had been accessing our children's centre for three years when, in September 2015, she arrived in a distressed state and told me that her partner had said that he didn't love her any more.

'It had come as a complete shock, but they were going

to live together for the sake of the children,' says Action for Children's family support practitioner Tina Wilkings.

'We discussed the impact that this could potentially have on the children. She admitted that there was a bad atmosphere in the house and they hardly spoke. Also, their eldest child was asking lots of questions and would often wake up in the night crying.

'A few weeks later, the mum told me that there was a lot of tension at home, and the children were appearing more unsettled. I sympathised with her and used the solution-focused approach – asking questions and exploring what she could do, rather than focusing on problems – which helped her to conclude that





still there for them and still love them. It's not divorce that harms children but the withholding of attention and affection.'

Emotions and behaviours a child may experience include:

- a sense of loss and grief
- abandonment, rejection and insecurity
- anger towards one or both parents
- fear of being left alone
- guilt at having caused the separation
- regression – becoming clingy, bedwetting, tantrums or refusing to sleep
- experiencing physical complaints, such as stomach aches.

These feelings can be exacerbated by the practicalities of separation such as moving home or nursery and leaving familiar and comfortable environments behind. Children may fight more with their siblings or be defiant because they are feeling angry. There will be some children living in very tense or violent situations who may be relieved by the separation, but even then many children hold on to the hope that their parents will reconcile. This range of reactions is normal and should lessen over time as the child adjusts to their new family situation.

'Nursery workers need to be sensitive to the signs, such as children demonstrating their upset in their play or developing preoccupations such as rushing off to meet the other dads. They must then talk to the parents, explain what is happening and ask what is going on in order to know how best to look after the child,' says Ms Rhodes. 'Nursery workers shouldn't act as a counsellor but they need to be an emotionally distant listener, a professional in their role. Parents can see that the early years practitioners are on the child's side so there are no divided loyalties. They want what is best for the child.'

Hazel Davies, NDNA early years adviser, stresses that communication from practitioners is key, both with the child and the parents.

'Provide both parents with opportunities to talk, either together or separately in confidence with you and your manager about the situation and any arrangements they have made that affect the child. You will be able to support their child more effectively if you are made aware of anything that may affect them,' she says.

'Continue to communicate with your manager about any conversations, advice sought from or given to the parents.' ➤

know that it's nothing to do with them and they couldn't do anything to stop it,' says Ms Hayman. 'Sit the child down, tell them both parents are

their home life would be more settled if the father moved out.

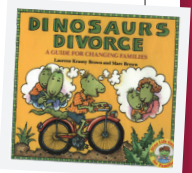
'I supported the mum while she adjusted her benefit claim to that of a single parent and in the meantime referred her to a support agency which provided her with gas, electricity and food so she could keep her family safe.

'We regularly discussed the importance of maintaining stability for the children and explaining why their dad was not living with them any more. I stressed the importance of both parents reassuring the children that mum and dad still love them.

'The mum decided to relocate near to her family so that she'd have more support. I helped her during the move and we recently had a phone catch-up. She is happier and the children have settled into their new nursery.'

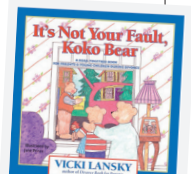
Books for children

Dinosaur's Divorce
by Marc Brown and Laurie Kransy Brown
Helps address the fears and confusion around divorce.



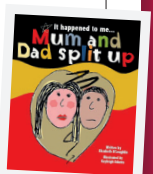
I Don't Want to Talk About It by Jeannie Franz Ransom
When a child's parents' tell her they are getting divorced she'd rather roar like a lion than talk about it.

It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear by Vicki Lansky
Koko Bear doesn't understand divorce and doesn't want two homes.



Mum and Dad Glue by Kes Gray
A boy searches for 'parent glue' to paste his parents' marriage back together.

Mum and Dad Split Up by Elizabeth O'Loughlin and Kayleigh Adams
The simple story of a family splitting up through a child's eyes.



My Family's Changing by Pat Thomas
Raises the fears, worries and questions that children can have.

No Matter What by Debi Gliori
Fox's mum proves that a parent's love is limitless.



Two of Everything by Babette Cole
Demetrius and Paula Oglebutt have parents who argue, bicker and clash.

Was it the Chocolate Pudding: A story for little kids about divorce by Sandra Levins
Explaining divorce and what happens.



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PARENT RESPONSES

Dee Holmes, senior practice consultant at Relate, finds that many parents feel guilty about splitting up because they don't want their child to come from a broken home. It can also be difficult because they may not be at the same stage of accepting that the relationship has ended, or one may feel aggrieved because their partner has had an affair or treated them unfairly.

'When a relationship ends there is anger, hurt, upset and a sense of failure. At the centre of this are the children who are upset and confused,' she says. 'If parents can manage to split as amicably as possible and allow their child to continue a healthy relationship with both parents, and communicate and operate as single parents as well as possible, then the child is not caught in the crossfire feeling torn and guilty.'

Both parents still have a very important part to play in their child's life, unless there are exceptional circumstances such as abuse. It is not helpful if one parent makes a clean break and leaves. 'Children need both parents and they can receive emotional presence

even if they can't be there physically. They can Skype, text and phone,' says Ms Hayman.

Also, parents may have good intentions by deciding to stay together for the children, but she believes this can be more harmful than separating (see case study). 'Children are then living in an environment where the parents are unhappy and dissatisfied. Living in that atmosphere tells children that relationships are about misery and maybe even abuse,' she explains.

'It's never a good idea to stay together for the sake of the children. It's all about finishing a relationship and then maintaining a relationship. It's difficult to go back to being friends and co-parenting, but life is tough and children are the ones who need looking after.'

PRACTITIONER SUPPORT

While it's not possible to shield children from the distress of a family breakdown, Ms Hayman, says that early years practitioners can help children to manage their anguish and provide some of the stability that is missing from their lives.

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

Parents will often turn to early years practitioners for help and guidance. If they seek your advice, encourage them to:

- reassure their child that they both still love them and they are not at all to blame for the separation
- talk to their child, together if possible, before any changes in living arrangements occur

- explain any changes to them as simply as possible and answer questions honestly. They should say if they don't know
- put their child's feelings ahead of their own by avoiding blame and presenting a united front. Signpost parents to additional specialist support services and counselling, if needed (see further information).

MORE INFORMATION

- *Supporting Children's Experiences of Loss and Separation* (2013) by Pre-school Learning Alliance, <http://bit.ly/2kCrKdE>
- *A Short Guide to Working With Co-Parents* by Honor Rhodes, www.tavistockrelationships.ac.uk
- *Parents as Partners* is a free programme for parents wanting to work on their relationship to help their children, run by Tavistock Relationships, www.tavistockrelationships.org/relationship-help/parents-as-partners-programme
- *The Guide for Separated Parents: Putting Children First* (2009) by Karen and Nick Woodall
- *Have a Happy Family Life* (2012) by Suzie Hayman
- The NDNA has a Legal Helpline, 01206 846090, and a policy on separated families, both free to members
- www.actionforchildren.org.uk
- www.divorceaid.co.uk
- www.familylives.org.uk
- <http://gingerbread.org.uk>
- National Family Mediation, www.nfm.org.uk
- <http://theparentconnection.org.uk>
- www.relate.org.uk

'Help the parents to see that the child knows what is going on and needs the support to manage it,' she says. 'Often in a crisis situation, parents think the best way to deal with children is to let them off the hook, stop the routines and rules. But this can frighten children and encourage bad behaviour. They can act up because their parents have let go, and practitioners may notice that.'

'Let parents know that it's important to still keep to routines because they help children to feel secure. Children like to test boundaries but it can be terrifying if the fence gives way. When the bed and bath routine is there it means mum or dad are in charge and they are safe.'

At nursery, the child may need additional time at dropping off or picking up or at particular times of the day, so ensure their key person is available and is tuned in to the child's needs. Ms Davies also recommends finding out what children have already been told in case they want to explore it further in the setting.

'When agreeing with parents about what to tell the child in response to their queries, support parents to be age-aware,' she advises. 'In general, younger children need less detail and will do better with a simple explanation, while older children may need more information. Share practical information – particularly about changes in their living arrangements, school, or activities – but don't overwhelm them with the details. Remember that the information should be truthful above all else.'

Ms Hayman stresses the importance of sitting down with the child and checking how much they understand about the situation. Ask them to explain things back and find out their interpretation because they can easily take comments literally and misunderstand.

Reading picture books on the subject of divorce and separation can help children to compute what is happening. Ms Rhodes also suggests using toys to prompt conversations or using play phones to allow children to articulate their feelings. Think about what they are representing in their play – if they are burying objects in the sand then what are they burying? 'Early years practitioners have a vital part to play,' she says. 'You don't need to be a therapist but an attentive person who walks alongside and supports the child as they explore what their new world will be.' ■