

THE FORGOTTEN TEEN

Parents Advice Centre held the first of a series of seminars on Monday 18th January 2010 at Malone House in Belfast. Almost 70 delegates attended the seminar, many travelling from across Northern Ireland. Under the theme 'The Forgotten Teen' delegates heard from Dr John Coleman, Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Education at the *University of Oxford*, who gave an insightful presentation entitled 'Changing Families: Divorce and Family Reorganisation'.

Dr Coleman opened his presentation looking at the changes in the family structure and pointed to several elements that have contributed to the change in the makeup of families and that the increase in divorce and family breakdown has led to new family types being formed. Dr Coleman also pointed to a recent study in the USA, which showed that 51% of the workforce was made up of women, changing the old style family structure where the mother stayed at home to look after the children and the father was the breadwinner. It is also thought, that extended families are becoming more involved and due to increased life expectancy, grandparents now play an increasingly important role in their grandchildren's lives

Dr Coleman referred to the differences in family types and the general assumption of the benefits of marriage and couple families for children. He thought this could be linked to couples being more likely to stay together if they are married. However, he noted that the research is clear that there are disadvantages for the children of unmarried couples. Interestingly, these are as much to do with adverse economic circumstances as the emotional impact.

Although research indicates that children can be very resilient and can cope perfectly well when their parents split, the negative impacts on the child of their parents separating are most profound and severe where there is parental conflict and the child feels caught in the middle. Dr Coleman stressed that quite often it is not the divorce itself that impacts on the teenager. As practitioners we should be looking at the overall circumstances surrounding the divorce – the situation and how the child was feeling both before and after the divorce, in particular if the child has been the focus of the parents conflict.

Dr Coleman said it is important to recognise the different types of conflict. He referred to the work carried out by Judy Dunn in researching children's responses to conflict between their different parents including biological parents, mother and new partner and father and new partner. It was shown that children are affected much more when the conflict is between the two biological parents and especially when the child is at the centre of this conflict. It must also be noted that conflict in each of these settings can be particularly damaging as a child can often feel that they have no 'safe haven'.

At the time of separation teenagers do not tend to turn to their siblings for emotional support and this may be due to loyalties within the family. Rather, teenagers tend to turn to their friends to act as confidants.

These friends play a key role in the teenager's life at this time and Dr Coleman stressed the importance of a teenager maintaining the same friends throughout the process of their parents separating. There is evidence that quite often step-parents can be of great help to a teenager at this time and have a positive relationship. Especially in adolescence this

can be significant. Dr Coleman again mentioned the work of Judy Dunn which showed that often step-parents can feel that they do not know how to parents appropriately. When they have guidance, they can do a fine job of parenting the teenager, which in turn can help create an environment with less conflict.

Dr Coleman brought to the group some lessons for practice. He highlighted the key role that both parents play in their child's life and how essential it is for the teenager to have contact with both parents. He mentioned the anxieties that fathers may face about keeping contact and stated that family support services should not accept the status quo but always enquire about contact with the teenager's father. Often teenagers can feel a sense of responsibility for the separation and if the focus of the parent's conflict is the child, this can exacerbate this feeling of responsibility. On the other hand if both parents amicably stay involved in their teenager's life the teenager will cope much better.

Dr Coleman concluded by highlighting protective factors for teenagers stressing that information, stability and the role of the new family are key factors to ensuring better outcomes for the teenager. He recognised how family support services faced difficulties in not knowing what help to offer the teenager but stated that working with the teenager on a partnership basis and giving them various options of help, is most beneficial. He said there is a need for services to give consistent messages about family breakdown and they need to gain a clearer understanding of what help teenagers want and when they want it. Finally, Dr Coleman said that parents who know how to talk with teenagers about the separation are more likely to be able to provide a better transition environment for their teenager.

References:

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Jenkins, J and others (2005) Mutual influences of marital conflict and children's behaviour problems. *Child Development*. 76. 24-39.

Judy Dunn, and others (2005) Children's responses to conflict between their different parents: mothers, stepfathers, non-resident fathers, and non-resident stepmothers. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 34. 223-234.

O'Connor, T and others (2001) Family settings and children's adjustment. *British Journal of Psychiatry*. 179. 110-115.

Dr Coleman's recommended Reading

Barrett, H (2003) Parenting programmes for families at risk. Family and Parenting Institute, London. www.familyandparenting.org

Coleman, J and Brooks, F (2009) Key data on adolescence: 6th Edn. Young People in Focus, Brighton www.youngpeopleinfoocus.org.uk

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Layard, R and Dunn, J (2009) A good childhood: searching for values in a competitive age. Penguin Books. London.

O'Brien, C and Scott, J (2007) The role of the family. Chapter 2 in Adolescence, risk and resilience. Edited by Coleman, J and Hagell, A. Wiley Blackwell. Chichester.

Roker, D and Coleman, J (2007) Working with parents of teenagers: research, policy and practice. Jessica Kingsley. London.

Having heard from Dr John Coleman delegates were asked how existing services could be extended to offer more help for teenagers when the couple separate. Below are the key messages of action from the group discussions.

- More work with schools and youth services to get a directory which would not only pinpoint suitable agencies but also give clearer information on how and who they could support.
- Public campaign with key messages, why both parents need to be involved in children's lives.
- Parenting programmes delivered by those who currently offer these services
- Contact Centres could be made more teen orientated or used as a pickup/drop off point
- Support people who already have a role in the teenagers life i.e. youth worker and give these people the skills to guide the teenager through this difficult time
- Children's Court Officers are in a good position to sign post
- The possibility of a booklet which could be given to parents and young people when separation was first disclosed, or that they could pick up themselves through solicitors, doctors etc which would give them relevant information on what to expect, how they may be affected and who can support them.
- Court officers felt that mediation should be compulsory and involve the teenager for all families coming through the courts system.
- Accessible support groups aimed specifically at young people would be useful although the group also mentioned the need for these to be easily accessible and facilitated to appeal to young people. Suggestions included allowing teenagers to work through the affects using music, art and drama.
- Given the significant number of parents who may experience depression, stress and anxiety Doctors surgeries and Health Centres should display posters and carry information on resources on how both parents and young people can access info and support in relation to separation.
- A website aimed at teenagers and separation would be a valuable resource and something that the young person could access at their convenience and in various settings.
- Many resources are not teen friendly and needed to be more colourful and relevant to teens