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# The Impacts of a Poorly Managed Separation: A Research Note on Parental Separation and Divorce

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## Introduction

Parental separation and divorce is an increasingly common experience for both adults and children. Rates of divorce have risen over a number of decades, and the UK Government (Department for Work and Pensions, 2016) estimated the separated family population in 2013/14 to be 2.6 million families.

In 2016 Northern Ireland had 2,572 divorces, which involved 1,935 children and young people aged 0-15. This is an increase on the numbers from 2015, when there were 2,360 divorces and 2014 there were 2,445. It is important to note however that this does not account for the very large number of parental separations where the parents were never married. In 2012, there were 45,500 households consisting of one adult and at least one child. This number is expected to drop slightly going forward, with around 43,500 such households by 2037. The Continuous Household Survey estimated that in 2016/17 28% of households were single parent, with 26% being single mothers.

The 2009 Families Matter Strategy suggested that between 1999 and 2009, there had been approximately 2500 parental separations during that period, and all evidence suggests that this number has risen since that document's publication.

This tells us that the numbers of divorces and parental separations are significant and a large percentage of children and young people in Northern Ireland therefore, will have direct experience of parental separation.

The impacts of this are important, because parental separation is one of the most high-stress and difficult situations families experience. The long-lasting impact of separation is dependent on a wide range of factors, but research is clear that a poorly managed, high-conflict separation with significant post-separation levels of conflict is highly damaging for children and young people.

Despite the large numbers of children and young people affected, and the considerable impact on families and the state, policy responses have been limited. In the 2009 Family Matters strategy, parental separation was noted as being "profoundly damaging for children", but the only areas of support policies noted in the Strategy was child contact centres and family mediation. While these have a very important role to play, they do not go far enough in preparing parents on how best to manage impending/ongoing separation, in particular complex and emotionally charged separations.

In the consultation for the as-yet-unpublished Children and Young people strategy 2017-2027, family breakdown and parental separation is mentioned as an issue. However, there is a lack of clear policy to support parents going through separations to ensure that they are able to put their children and young people's needs first. The focus instead is on the child/young person's right to maintain a relationship with both parents (if that is in their best interest). While this is an admirable aim, there is little to suggest what precisely can, should and will be done to support the reduction of the parental

conflict and thus reduce the most damaging impacts of separation on the child/young person.

This is the first of three papers, focusing on the impact and importance of recognizing the effects this has on the children and young people involved. This initial paper will focus on the effect of poorly managed separations and the early impacts of divorce. Later papers will look at longer-term effects of parental separation and strategies to mitigate negative effects.

### Reasons for separation

There are a number of reasons why parents may choose to separate. While it is difficult to track the exact reasons why parents who never married decided to separate, the UK Government does track reasons for divorce. According to research from Co-op Legal services, the top ten reasons a couple sought a divorce in 2016 was:

1. An inappropriate relationship with someone else
2. We grew apart
3. We fell out of love
4. I stopped fancying them
5. One party wanted children, the other did not
6. Work commitments put a strain on the relationship
7. Abuse of drugs or alcohol
8. They wanted to relocate
9. We had nothing left in common
10. Illness

Some of these reasons are likely to cause more stress, pain and relationship conflict than others. In particular issues of abuse or an inappropriate relationship can be difficult to deal with for an adult, and even more challenging to explain to a child or young person.

In a Northern Ireland specific context, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) records the number of divorces – in 2016 it was 2,572. The most common reason by far was non-cohabitation, making up 1,885 divorces. Of course, this particular ground is not overly helpful in explaining the reasons why parents are non-cohabitating in the first place. The next most common grounds being either one or others behavior, which likely plays a significant factor in most divorces/separations.

The process of separation is also complex and varied, while some parents will require long, drawn out and combative legal proceedings other will be able to come to an amicable agreement with little outside influence. For example, Family Mediation NI, which is Northern Ireland's leading family mediation charity hosted 1141 sessions in 2016/17 aimed at resolving family conflict in this regard.

## The impact of separation

It is important to note at the outset of the paper that parental separation is not an issue which Parenting NI takes a normative view of. The organisation is not “pro” or “anti” separation or divorce. Nor should this paper be taken to imply that remaining in a relationship – particularly one where there is significant strife or abuse – is “preferable” to separation. Nonetheless, Parenting NI comes into contact with hundreds of parents seeking support and assistance with separation on a yearly basis. Over the last year, Parenting NI has had 918 contacts on the Regional Parenting Helpline regarding separation issues (the single most common issue), and 158 contacts relating to contact issues. This accounted for a total of around 22% of all calls to the helpline.

Separation and divorce is an event with seemingly paradoxical outcomes. D’Onofrio (2011) notes that while “parental separation is associated with approximately a one-half to two fold increase in the risk for impairing outcomes”, they also state that “a majority of offspring who have experienced a parental separation do not experience these serious outcomes”. What is effectively suggested by the research is that while the long term effects of separation are normally minimal, when they are negative they are extraordinarily negative for children’s outcomes.

McIntosh (2003) notes that only about 8-12% of parents remain “at an impasse post-divorce”. This means that the vast majority of parents manage to adopt a business-like co-parenting style, where there may be little warmth or affectionate communication between themselves but that communication and a primary focus on their children/young people is central. Conversely, those parents who do not manage to adopt such an approach risk violating “children’s core developmental needs and threaten their psychological growth” (McIntosh, 2003).

There is a persistent myth that provided that they are under a certain age, children “don’t notice” or are unaffected by parental separation. The consensus of research soundly rejects this – Lee & Bax (2000) state that “children of all ages are sensitive to parental divorce”. It does not matter if your child is 5, or 15. They will be sensitive to, and have experience of separation. The only difference is the manner in which it affects them. For example, even children as young as 18-months can feel the tension in a household surrounding a separation. This in turn causes them to feel distressed, and can impact their immune system and health outcomes. Teenagers will often react by withdrawing or becoming distant to one of both parents. Toddlers, who are more ego-centric, often place the blame for the separation on themselves, “even though the concept of divorce is too complicated for them to understand” (Chirban, 2016).

In fact, some studies have suggested that the most damaging time to experience separation was during the toddler years. A study by Fraley & Heffernan (2013) found that those who experience divorce/separation between birth and 3-5 years old were more insecure than those who experienced it later.

In explaining the impacts of divorce on children of varying ages, psychologist Carl Pickhardt Ph.D. suggests that:

*Basically, divorce tends to intensify the child's dependence and it tends to accelerate the adolescent's independence; it often elicits a more regressive response in the child and a more aggressive response in the adolescent.*

This is useful in understanding and dealing with the likely impact of your separation on your child/young person. If you have small children, they are likely to seek and need more direct support and love, and more likely to be dependent for emotional wellbeing. On the other hand, teens and older children are more likely to withdraw from parents and seek other sources of comfort and emotional stability.

Experience of divorce is also gendered. Boys tend to have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce, and employ more threats of physical violence. Girls, by contrast tend to make use of compromise and evasion of conflict (Brown & Portes, 2006).

Another area where the scale of the impact of parental separation can be seen is in Family Courts. Between 2013-2016, more than 24,000 court decisions were made in Northern Ireland relating to children and families. 10,206 contact and residence orders were issued during this time, and the average time taken to conclude such legal action was six months.

The Review of Family Justice by Lord Justice Gillen in 2016/17, which will be explored in more detail in later papers, outlined a number of structural factors that impact the severity of formal separations. It is easy to see why a 6 month (on average, as often highly acrimonious cases can take considerably longer) court case could strain relations between parents. When considered in the context of an already tense and difficult time, it cannot be ignored that legal and structural factors in Northern Ireland play a part in negative impacts of divorce.

This review made a number of suggestions that might reduce the combative nature of separation, which in turn may reduce the negative impacts of separation.

Whatever the age or gender of your child or young person, the initial impacts of parental separation are significant. This is because your ability to parent during the separation process is often disrupted. The Royal College of Psychiatrists states that your child or young person may feel:

- A sense of loss - separation from a parent can mean you lose not only your home, but your whole way of life
- Different, with an unfamiliar family
- Fearful about being left alone - if one parent can go, perhaps the other will do the same
- Angry at one or both parents for the relationship breakdown
- Worried about having caused the parental separation: guilty
- Rejected and insecure
- Torn between both parents.

While most parents are able to reduce the levels of conflict post-separation - around 8-12% of parents continue to have high-conflict after divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2002), the impact of separation is less tied to length of time and more directly relatable to the levels of parental conflict both pre and post separation. Separations where there are very high levels of conflict affect the parents and children severely. For parents, “persistent conflict between spouses pervasively undermines the capacity of the parenting” (McIntosh, 2003), this is doubly damaging for children, as this period is when children most need parental support. Parents often unintentionally pass on their feelings of anger, betrayal and stress to their children, and must “avoid overburdening a child with their own unhappiness and irritability” (Lee & Bax, 2000).

### **Conclusions – the effects of poorly managed separations on children**

It is difficult to determine the exact impacts of parental separation on children, as this does not occur in a vacuum. Unlike other traumatic events, like injury or sudden illness, separation is often a drawn out and difficult process. As such, the causal impact and effects that can be directly tied to separation, rather than being attributed to other factors such as education, poverty or mental health are limited.

Despite this, the research is fairly firm in stating that, at least during the build up to a divorce or separation, levels of stress are high for children of all ages. Outcomes for children are mostly negative, particularly if parents are unable to develop “a collaborative and cooperative business-type relationship” (Lee & Bax, 2000) in the post separation landscape.

The good news is that, statistics suggest that the majority of parents do manage to maintain their parenting skills over the medium to long term, and this is particularly true if they are given the right support and guidance. The next paper will examine outcomes for children and young people of separated parents in the period after the first year of separation.