Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Well-Being

Evidence Review

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Acknowledgements

TCRU's Responsive Research Programme

This study was carried out as part of the Thomas Coram Research Unit's programme of responsive research for the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This provides a facility for government policy makers to request small-scale, exploratory studies on issues of immediate policy relevance. Such work is carried out by experienced researchers in accordance with sound research principles. It is, however, important when reading and using reports from responsive programme studies to bear in mind the limited time and resources available for each piece of work. Responsive programme studies are particularly useful in bringing together diverse evidence, 'scoping' a new field, and providing a basis for more substantive in-depth research where this appears to be necessary.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Demographic and social changes in the last three decades have resulted in families that are more diverse and complex in their structure. More couples are cohabiting and becoming parents, though the risk of parental separation among this group is higher than among married parents; divorce rates have remained relatively constant and the number of stepfamilies is growing fast. Children now have a higher probability of experiencing parental separation, having a lone parent, and being part of a stepfamily than was once the case. The impact this experience has on children is a key issue for policymakers since although the government wants to support stable relationships between parents, where they break down there is a responsibility to provide support to optimise positive outcomes for children.

As a consequence, the Thomas Coram Research Unit, under the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funded responsive programme, was commissioned to undertake a review of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children's well-being and development, to inform the PMSU / DCSF childhood project and policy development in this area. The overall aim of the review was to highlight key findings concerning the antecedents, processes and sequelae of family breakdown and its impact on children, while giving due weight to the complexities of the topic, the strength of the evidence (whether associative or causally linked) and any gaps in knowledge.

Due to the limited time and resources available for the review it was agreed in consultation with the DCSF to draw primarily on review-level evidence rather than to undertake a systematic search for all relevant material. Key texts were supplemented by others identified through a targeted search of bibliographic databases and internet searches.

Family breakdown and its impact on children

On a range of outcomes including educational achievement, behaviour, mental health, self-concept, social competence and long-term health, there are significant differences between children who experience parental separation compared with children from intact families. Although the difference between the two groups is generally statistically significant, effect sizes are nevertheless small, reflecting the fact that within both groups, children vary widely in their experiences. Children from intact families can experience circumstances known to increase the risk of poor outcomes such as poverty, parental conflict, violence and poor parenting, whilst children whose parents separate may not experience these or can cope well, with the result that many children experiencing family breakdown will function as well as, or even better than, children from intact families.

While family transitions place children at an increased risk of negative outcomes, the evidence shows that relatively few children and adolescents experience enduring problems, and some children can actually benefit when it brings to an end a 'harmful' family situation, for example where there are high levels of parental conflict, including violence. Long-term effects in adults, who as children have experienced family breakdown, include problems with mental health and well-being, alcohol use, lower educational attainment and problems with relationships.

There are significant differences within and across family types, and simple comparisons between different family types can mask much of the variation that exists. Stepfamilies, for example, vary enormously and living in a more complex stepfamily, where both parent and stepparent have brought children into the 'new' family has been associated with more adjustment problems than in a stepfamily where all the children are related to the mother. In

terms of outcomes, the differences between children within family types can be greater than across family types. This suggests that family functioning, and not family type, is of greater significance.

Explanatory mechanisms

Family breakdown is not a single event, but a process that involves a number of risk and protective factors that interact in complex ways both before and after parental separation or divorce to increase or limit the risk of the adverse outcomes associated with family breakdown. These inter-related factors include parental conflict; the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships; maternal mental health; financial hardship; and repeated changes in living arrangements, including family structure.

Parental conflict is a key variable associated with negative outcomes in children from both intact and non-intact families. Research in this area clearly shows that family functioning has a greater impact on outcomes than family structure. High levels of conflict, stress resulting from the separation and/or resulting poverty can all negatively affect maternal mental health. Poor mental health affects the ability of parents, whether married, separated or divorced, to parent effectively, which in turn impacts on children's well-being.

Financial hardship and the stress it induces can both contribute to family breakdown and is often a consequence of it. When compared with their peers from more advantaged backgrounds, children from poorer backgrounds, whether from intact or non-intact families, generally do less well across a number of measures, such as health and educational attainment. Compared with two parent families, lone parent families tend to be significantly worse off financially. Financial hardship increases the likelihood of other variables associated with negative outcomes, such as poor housing, health problems, poor nutrition and fewer material resources for nurturing children.

Parental separation and divorce can lead to repeated changes in family structure from a two biological parent family, to lone parent, to stepfamily status, and repeated family transitions increase the risk of negative child outcomes. Family transitions are also linked with a number of other changes including moving house, school and/or neighbourhood and it is these multiple changes that negatively impact upon children.

Optimising positive outcomes

There is wide variation in children's experiences of family breakdown due to individual differences and family factors, although there is considerable agreement on what matters to children when their parents separate. Children want to be told what is happening, though are often kept in the dark, and some want to be involved in decisions about living arrangements. All children experience change and transition in their lives. How well they cope depends on the management, timing and pace of change and the extent to which children are prepared.

A number of factors are associated with children's positive adjustment to family breakdown, including competent and warm parenting, parents' good mental health, low parental conflict, cooperative parenting post separation and social support. In general, children have fewer adjustment problems when the resident parent, usually the mother, does not have mental health problems and the quality of their parenting is not disrupted.

Fewer adjustment problems and improved academic achievement are also associated with having good relationships with the non-resident parent, usually the father. Although the quality of the relationship appears more important than frequency of contact with the non-resident parent, frequent contact is likely to sustain good relationships, and vice versa. Children do not benefit from contact with a non-resident parent when they do not have a

good relationship with that parent, where the contact is against their wishes, or where there is abuse or poor parenting.

Low levels of parental conflict have been found to act as a protective factor against adverse outcomes. When parental conflict is high, a good relationship with at least one parent is beneficial. Having grandparents and friends to whom children can turn to for support is also associated with positive outcomes.

A range of services and interventions have developed aimed at facilitating communication; helping children manage transitions; facilitating support networks; conflict management and reduction; and parenting support to encourage 'good' parenting. However there has been little evaluation of these services in terms of their effectiveness on child outcomes. There is some evidence to suggest that interventions designed to reduce maternal depression can be effective, and that school based support programmes are beneficial for children, although not all children are comfortable in talking about their family situation in school.

There is some evidence that divorce education programmes and custody mediation can be effective; for example in raising awareness of children's needs, reducing behaviours where children are put in the middle of disputes, and improved communication between parents. This evidence is from the USA where such programmes are often compulsory. However, pilot programmes in the UK have met with mixed results in terms of effectiveness in conflict resolution and improving parental relationships.

Conclusions

The review has drawn together the evidence on family breakdown which shows that although children are at increased risk of adverse outcomes following family breakdown and that negative outcomes can persist into adulthood, the difference between children from intact and non-intact families is a small one, and the majority of children will not be adversely affected in the long-term.

Reducing the risk of a negative impact on child outcomes necessitates understanding the mechanisms involved in the process of family breakdown and how they impact on child outcomes. The evidence shows that high levels of parental conflict, the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships, poor maternal mental health and financial hardship interact in complex ways before, during and after parental separation, and impact on child outcomes. The multiple transitions that children can experience following parental separation are also a significant explanatory factor. It is clear from the evidence that how the family functions, rather than family type, is more relevant to understanding the impacts associated with family breakdown.

It is a feature of today's society that many children will experience family breakdown and that family structure will continue to be diverse. Policies which focus on supporting maternal mental health, facilitating cooperative parenting between parents, and communication between parents and their children, reducing and managing parental conflict, encouraging good parent-child relationships, and strategies for reducing financial hardship are just some of the areas that may help to maximise positive child outcomes following parental separation.

Changes and transitions of different sorts feature in all children's lives. Helping children to manage changes and transitions through, for example, improving their coping skills and resilience, is likely to benefit all children, some of whom may have experienced, or will in the future experience, parental separation.

1. Introduction

The Thomas Coram Research Unit, under the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funded responsive programme, was commissioned to undertake this review of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children's well-being and development, to inform the PMSU/DCSF childhood project and policy development in this area. The review incorporates evidence concerning family breakdown, and its consequences, in the context of understandings of 'the family', 'breakdown' and the 'well-being' of children and young people, and includes research relating to both married and cohabiting parents. 'Well-being' is defined as incorporating children's mental, emotional and physical health.

1.1 The social and demographic context

Demographic and social changes in the last thirty years have brought about a transformation in family formations and structures. Since the 1970s marriage rates have fallen steadily while divorce rates have remained relatively constant (ONS, 2007a), although more recent evidence shows a slight drop in the rates of divorce of (ONS, 2008). One reason for the decline in marriage rates is the rise in the number of couples who cohabit (Kiernan, 2003). There has also been a move away from becoming a parent within marriage to having a first child within a cohabiting union. Non-marital childbirth has increased significantly, from 9 per cent of all live births in 1975 to 43 per cent in 2004, with three-fifths of these births to cohabiting parents (ONS, 2007a). These changes are neatly summarised by Lewis, who said, "*over the space of a single generation the number of people marrying has halved, the number divorcing has trebled and the proportion of children born outside marriage has quadrupled*" (Lewis, 2001). Children born to parents who are cohabiting are more likely to see their parents separate than those children born within marriage (Kiernan, 2003). Cohabiting relationships that do not convert into marriage are the most fragile with at least one-fifth dissolving by the time the child is five years old (Kiernan, 2003). Cohabitation is therefore more unstable than marriage and more likely to result in separation and lone motherhood.

In 2006, almost a quarter of dependent children lived in lone parent households compared with seven per cent in 1972 (ONS, 2007a). Although not all lone parent households will be formed as a result of parental separation, divorce remains the main route into lone parenthood, whilst the rise in births to cohabiting mothers has made an important contribution because of the higher rate of breakdown in relationships within this group (ESRC, 2006). Lone parent families compared with two-parent families on average tend to be more disadvantaged in terms of poverty and health. The 2004 Families and Children Study shows that lone parents were consistently worse off in financial terms than couple families, and were twice as likely as mothers in couple families to describe poor health (Barnes et al., 2006).

Three quarters of all dependent children live in families headed by a couple; 65 per cent have married parents, and 12 per cent have cohabiting parents (ONS, 2007a). But some of these two-parent families will be stepfamilies, described as the fastest growing family form in the UK (Ferri and Smith, 2003). In 2005, more than 10 per cent of all families with dependent children in Great Britain were stepfamilies (ONS, 2007b). Although the number of stepfamilies at any one time may not have changed greatly, the probability of a child or parent spending some time in a stepfamily has increased markedly and it has been estimated that about 30 per cent of mothers would spend some time in a stepfamily before they were 45 (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2000). However, children living in stepfamilies formed as a result of parental separation are more likely to experience another transition because parental separation and divorce rates are higher in stepfamilies than in intact

families (Booth and Edwards, 1992 and Cherlin and Furstenberg,1994 both cited in Dunn, 2002).

These changes have resulted in greater diversity and complexity in family forms. Compared with children 40 years ago, children now have a higher probability of experiencing parental separation, lone parenting, stepfamilies, visiting families, and half-siblings (Bradshaw and Mayhew 2005 cited in Muschamp et al., 2007).

1.2 Aims of the review

The overall aim of the review was to highlight key findings concerning the antecedents, processes and sequelae of family breakdown and its impact on children, while giving due weight to the complexities of the topic, the strength of the evidence (whether associative or causally linked) and any gaps in knowledge. More specifically, the review addressed the following research questions:

1. What do we know about the process of family breakdown and its impact on children's well-being?

2. What explanatory mechanisms have been identified concerning the impact of family breakdown on children's well-being?

3. What factors optimise positive outcomes for parents and children during and following family breakdown?

The government has highlighted the importance of stable parental relationships and wants to support stable relationships between parents, although where they break down it wants to provide the necessary support to optimise positive outcomes for children following parental breakdown (HMS Treasury and Department for Education and Skills, 2007). Parental separation and its impact on children is a key issue in public policy. Although not a specific aim of the review, the policy implications of these findings are highlighted in the conclusions, with a focus on what might be done to improve outcomes for children experiencing family disruption. Given the brevity of the review, the focus is on direct effects such as poverty or parental stress, rather than on indirect influences, such as maintenance arrangements or child support systems, which may potentially improve financial circumstances or reduce stress.

1.3 Methodology

Given the limited time and resources available for this review, it was agreed in consultation with the DCSF to draw primarily on review-level evidence rather than to undertake a systematic search for all relevant material. There are a number of reviews of research conducted in Europe, in the USA, Australia and New Zealand upon which the review draws, including an overview of studies commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation between 1998 and 2000 (Maclean, 2004); a systematic review of published work on outcomes for children (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001); a review of interventions and services for children of divorcing and separating parents (Hawthorne et al., 2003); and a meta-analysis of studies undertaken by Amato and Keith (1991) and since updated (Amato, 2001).

These key texts were supplemented by others identified through a targeted search of bibliographic databases (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), ERIC, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts and Recent References Related to the Social Sciences) and internet searches (Google and Google Scholar). Search terms used included: family breakdown; family transitions; parental separation and divorce combined with children; children's outcomes; children's well-being, and covered the years 2002 to 2007.

In general, and despite the wide variety of studies of different types and with different methodologies, the indications are that the quality of the research evidence at the review level is high, including comprehensive narrative evaluations of studies, and well conducted meta-analyses on the consequences of divorce, and the impacts of conflict on child well-being. Overall, the research evidence presents a robust and consistent picture of the impacts of family breakdown on children, and of the mechanisms (such as poor maternal mental health and disruptions to parenting) through which these impacts operate. There is, however, much less systematic evidence, and little robust evidence, of the efficacy of initiatives or programmes designed to facilitate children's adjustment to family disruption, and to improve well-being for children in these circumstances.

1.4 Structure of the report

The rest of the report is organised around the research questions addressed by the review. Section 2 considers the impact of family breakdown on children's development and well-being, section 3 looks at the mechanisms and the complex interplay of different factors associated with divorce and separation that may account for its impact on children, and section 4 explores the evidence relating to factors that may facilitate or hinder the likelihood of positive outcomes following family breakdown.

2.   Family breakdown and its impact on children

In this section we consider the differences between children whose parents separate and those that remain together, the magnitude of the differences, the areas of development where the differences are most apparent and whether the timing of the separation in terms of a child's age has a lesser or greater impact on child outcomes.

2.1 Differences in outcomes between children from intact and non-intact families

Paul Amato in a review of the research evidence on the impact of divorce highlights the difficulty of making sense of this literature because results from individual studies range from finding serious effects to modest effects and to no effects at all (Amato, 2005). This inconsistency he explains is due to differences in types of sample, the ages of children, outcomes investigated and methods of analysis across studies. Using meta-analysis enables results from across a number of studies to be pooled and adjustment of such variations. A meta-analysis of 92 studies conducted during the 1980s (Amato and Keith, 1991) and of 67 studies conducted during the 1990s (Amato, 2001) compared the well-being of children from divorced and two-parent families and found that children from divorced families had significantly lower scores on a range of outcomes including educational achievement, behaviour, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social competence and long-term health.

Rodgers and Pryor undertaking a comprehensive review of the research evidence on the impact of divorce and separation on outcomes for children (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001) concluded from the evidence that children of separated parents compared with children whose parents remain together are at increased risk of:

- Growing up in households with lower incomes and poorer housing;

- Experiencing behavioural problems;

- Performing less well in school and gaining fewer educational qualifications;

- Needing more medical treatment;

- Leaving school and home when young;

- Becoming sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an early age;

- Reporting more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence and adulthood.

Although there are differences between children from intact and non-intact families on a range of child outcomes, these differences are relatively small (Joshi et al 1999; Burns et al 1997 and Allison and Furstenberg 1989 cited in Mackay, 2005; Amato 2005; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). For example, 13-17 per cent of children in stepfamilies show social and emotional problems compared to 10 per cent of children in intact families (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Amato suggests that this reflects the fact that children within both groups vary widely in their experiences: children from intact families can experience circumstances known to increase the risk of poor outcomes, such as poverty, parental conflict, violence and poor parenting, whilst some children whose parents separate can cope well, perhaps because their parents are able to separate and co-parent amicably (Amato, 2005).

Despite the modest difference in effect size, the probability of poor outcomes occurring is nevertheless higher among children whose parents separate: 'The evidence indicates unequivocally that those children whose parents separate are at significantly greater risk than those whose parents remain together, for a wide range of adverse outcomes in social, psychological, and physical development' (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001:73). Among children whose parents separate the probability of experiencing long-term adverse outcomes is about twice that of children in intact families, yet such outcomes only affect a minority of children whose parents separate (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). While family transitions place children at an increased risk of negative outcomes, 'studies of children's adjustment to divorce and remarriage have shown that relatively few children and adolescents experience enduring problems' (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2002 cited in Wise, 2003).

Not only do some children do well despite parental separation, some children can actually benefit where parental separation brings to an end an aversive family situation, for example when there is a high level of marital or relationship conflict (Booth and Amato, 2001; Jekielek, 1998) or when the relationship between parent and child is of a poor quality (Videon, 2002 cited in Mackay, 2005). There is research evidence to suggest that parental separation can have positive effects. Several studies find that children, especially daughters, can develop a particularly close relationship with their custodial mothers (Amato et al., 1997; Arditti, 1999 both cited in Amato, 2000).

2.2   Short-term and long-term effects

The length of time that children have been in a particular family structure is an important factor when comparing children from intact and non-intact families. Studies that compare long-established families with families in the immediate aftermath of a transition tend to find poorer family outcomes for children in the 'new' families (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2002 cited in Wise, 2003). Although problems and difficulties associated with parental separation can decline over time (Chase-Lansdale and Hetherington, 1990 cited in Mackay, 2005), and short-term distress, which is common at the time of separation, tends to fade with time (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998), there is evidence that some effects are persistent and enduring (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Amato and Keith 1991). Adults who had experienced parental separation in childhood had a higher probability of problems which included mental health and well-being, alcohol use, lower educational attainment and problems with relationships.

2.3   Age and gender

There is some evidence that adolescents are more negatively affected by parental conflict than younger children (Sweeting et al, 1998 cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998) but that younger children adjust more easily to subsequent re-partnering by their biological parent (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). On the other hand, children who experience parental separation at a young age are more likely to be exposed to repeated transitions in family structure. Overall, evidence indicates that younger children are at greater risk of adverse outcomes, including higher rates of delinquency in adolescence (Wadsworth, 1979), birth outside marriage (Douglas, 1970) and unemployment (for males) in adulthood (Kiernan, 1997) (all cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). However, evidence associating family breakdown with subsequent teenage delinquency may be confounded by anti-social behaviour reaching its peak among boys in this age group.

The tendency for some commentators to suggest that boys are more likely than girls to experience adverse outcomes as a result of family breakdown has been questioned. Amato and Keith (1991) argue that data on adult outcomes show no significant gender differences, although it is also possible that there are gender differences in the way distress may be expressed (Zaslow, 1989). Evidence from cohort studies shows that the negative impact of family breakdown on girls has a delayed effect and tends to emerge during adulthood, when they experience greater anxiety and depression than boys (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). It has been hypothesised that family breakdown has a greater influence on women's expectations of relationships in adulthood (Mackay, 2005). Cohort studies in the UK also indicate that young women are at greater risk of educational underachievement, leaving school early, lower occupational status, and of early family formation and dissolution (Kiernan 1997; Ely and Richards 1997; Sweeting and West, 1997, all cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998).

2.4   Differences between and within families

Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study reveal the complexities of parental relationships. In this study 60 per cent of children were born to married parents (mirroring national statistics), 25 per cent to cohabiting parents and 15 per cent to those who were not in a co-residential partnership (Kiernan and Smith, 2003). About a third of fathers not in a co-residential partnership were 'closely involved' with the mother at the time of the child's birth and whether or not they subsequently moved in together, this group were more likely than other absent fathers to see their child regularly and to contribute financially. The complexities of these relationships suggest that simple comparisons between different groups such as married versus unmarried can 'disguise a good deal of the variation that exists in the connections between parents, particularly fathers, and their children' (Kiernan and Smith, 2003: 33).

Stepfamilies vary enormously in their composition and cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group. Children may be living in a household with a stepparent who has no children of their own or in a household where both their parent and stepparent have brought children from earlier relationships into the 'new' family, often referred to as complex or blended families. Children may have stepsiblings, half siblings or both and living arrangements may vary, and often on a weekly basis, with differences in arrangements for weekday and weekend. Living in a more complex stepfamily has been shown to be associated with more adjustment problems than living in a stepfamily where all the children are related to the mother (Hetherington et al., 1999; Dunn et al and the ALSPAC study team, 1998 both cited in Dunn, 2002).

In terms of adverse outcomes, the differences between children within family types can be greater than the differences across family types, suggesting that family functioning is more important than family structure, a point we shall return to in the following section (Demo and Alcock, 1996 cited in Mackay, 2005). Furthermore, the differences between children within the same family can be as great, if not greater, than the differences between children in different families (O'Connor et al., 2001), suggesting that children differ in their resilience and response to stress (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Joshi and her colleagues found that children varied both within and between family type on all their indicators of children's well-being, indicating that some children are more resilient and others more vulnerable to the risk of adverse outcomes (Joshi et al., 1999).

3. Explanatory mechanisms

The evidence indicates that there is no direct causal relationship between family breakdown and negative child outcomes (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Mackay 2005). On the contrary, there is a broad consensus that a number of factors may interact in complex ways to contribute to the impact on children's well-being associated with parental separation. In essence, family breakdown is not generally considered predictive of poor outcomes in children; rather that an interplay of a number of risk and protective factors may serve to increase or limit the likelihood of negative social and psychological effects in the short (and sometimes longer) term.

Understanding family breakdown as a process rather than an event is fundamental to an awareness of the ways in which pre- as well as post-separation factors may be implicated in child outcomes and debates concerning the direction of causality. We therefore aim to give due weight to the complexities of the evidence, while also highlighting key factors commonly identified in the literature as associated with children's well-being (or lack thereof). These factors include: parental conflict; the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships, including those with the non resident parent; maternal mental health; socio-economic factors, and repeated changes in family structure and living arrangements. These factors interact in complex ways and are often mutually reinforcing. Financial hardship, for example, may be the result of family breakdown which may, in turn, contribute to inter-parental conflict and reduce the resources (emotional and financial) required for adequate parenting.

3.1 Parental conflict

Parental conflict has been identified as a key mediating variable in producing negative outcomes in children, including those in intact families (Smith and Jenkins, 1991). Parental conflict may be a continuing feature of family life post-separation, as well as in intact families. Research comparing intact families experiencing high levels of conflict with lone parent families, found that children fared less well in intact families (Booth and Edwards, 1990; Slater and Haber, 1984, cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998), demonstrating that family functioning has a greater impact than family structure (McFarlane, Bellissimo and Norman, 1995) or divorce (Amato and Keith, 1991) in contributing to child outcomes. Indeed, research by Hanson (1999) found that 75 per cent of couples experiencing high levels of conflict chose not to separate. The consequences of impaired family functioning for children, regardless of family structure, should therefore not be ignored. However, research also indicates the importance of identifying persistent and unresolved conflict, rather than conflict *per se*, as having a negative impact on children, particularly when children witness domestic violence or where they feel 'caught in the middle' (Kelly, 1993 cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). Consequently, it has been argued that parental separation may benefit children experiencing persistent conflict (Booth and Amato 2001; Jekielek, 1998) but that children adjust less well when parental separation occurs in the context of low parental conflict (Amato et al, 1995; Booth and Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 2003).

Children who are the subject of protracted conflict between their parents following separation, or who feel themselves to blame for it, are particularly at risk of negative outcomes (Johnson et al, 1985; Jenkins and Smith, 1991; Harold and Murch, 2005). There is some evidence that age and gender are variables mediating the impact of conflict on child outcomes, and that boys (Bream and Buchanan, 2003) and adolescents generally fare less well (Sweeting et al, 1998, cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). Children may also be affected indirectly as a result of parental conflict leading to a reduced capacity to parent effectively, thus contributing to impaired parent-child relationships (Grych and Fincham, 1990) and a higher likelihood of anxiety, behaviour problems or withdrawal in children.

3.2   The quality of parenting and parent-child relationships

Parenting behaviour and the quality of the parent-child relationship play a critical role in understanding children's well-being in relation to family change. The quality of parenting is one of the best predictors of children's well-being both in intact families as well as lone parent and stepfamilies (Amato, 2005; Dunn, 2005). Yet the evidence shows that the quality of parenting and of parent-child relationships often diminishes with separation and stepfamily formation, and that this disruption can precede separation (Emery 1982; 1994; Hetherington 1989, 1993; Simons et al., 1996 all cited in Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). This is reflected in a lack of warmth and support, less involvement, harsher discipline, and inconsistency. The quality of parenting and parent-child relationships reflects the impact of other stressors such as parental conflict, maternal mental health and socio-economic disadvantage (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001).

The quality of parenting and of the relationship with the non-resident parent, usually the father, is also associated with children's well-being, and is more significant than contact in itself: 'The mere presence of fathers is not enough… To the extent that men remain involved in parenting after separation, or assume parenting practices they have not done before, they have a positive influence. As in intact families, the most effective way they can parent is by providing authoritative parenting… It is these aspects of parenting, encompassing monitoring, encouragement, love and warmth, that are consistently linked with …well-being' (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). It should be recognised, however, that it is often not easy for separated fathers to establish family life and good parental relationships with their children after family breakdown, because of issues such as unsuitable housing, lack of funds, or contact restricted to meetings in public places (Bainham et al, 2003)

Just as parental conflict, maternal mental health and socio-economic factors can disrupt parenting and parent-child relationships, children's behaviour can also play a part, so that children who are temperamentally difficult, distressed or badly behaved, can influence the quality of parenting and relationships (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Likewise, the quality of the relationship with parents preceding family breakdown is likely to influence the nature of relationships following separation and divorce (Smith, 2004c).

So long as the parental relationship remains relatively conflict-free, children generally report a wish to maintain a relationship with both parents (Wade and Smart, 2002). However, there is a tendency for contact with non-resident parents to decline over time, and there are some debates concerning the impact on child well-being of 'absent' fathers. It has been hypothesised that lone parenthood reduces the time and attention that is available for children (Amato, 1993) and that boys in particular suffer from the lack of a male role models and are therefore more likely to develop behaviour problems (Simons et al, 1999 cited in Mackay, 2005). On the other hand, evidence from a number of sources, particularly studies of bereaved children, step-families and of the impact of contact arrangements, indicates that problems attributed to 'absent father' syndrome may have only a weak association or cannot be proven. First, children who experience loss through bereavement fare better than children whose parents separate. It has been suggested that various social factors might account for this difference, including the better financial and occupational status of widows compared with lone mothers (Biblarz and Gottainer, 2000 cited in Mackay 2005). It is also possible that the emotional context of loss is qualitatively different and is not therefore a valid source of comparison. Secondly, some fathers manage to maintain good relationships with their children. Evidence suggests that managing to sustain a 'normal' parental role, rather than over-focusing on special activities and 'treats' is important for the quality of the relationship (Simons, 1996). Research that takes young children's perspectives into account found that there is a robust relationship between children's views of contact, and their perception of the quality of the relationship with their fathers (Smith, 2004c).

3.3 Maternal mental health

Persistent and unresolved parental conflict is likely to have a negative impact on maternal mental health, often leading to depression, a consequent drain on the emotional resources required to parent adequately and lower levels of tolerance for 'problem' behaviour in children. Financial hardship can also function as an exacerbating factor, contributing to high levels of stress which independently impacts negatively on mental health.

Depression is the most common mental health problem in the population generally, with higher rates reported among women and people on low incomes. The rate of depression is particularly high among mothers in low income families with young children, and in lone mothers (Brown and Harris, 1978; Brown and Moran, 1997). There is evidence that maternal depression is both a risk factor for separation or divorce (Aseltine and Kessler, 1993; Bifulco and Moran, 1998) and a consequence of family breakdown. High rates of current and past depression, for example, have been reported among mothers in step-families compared with other family forms (Smith, 2004a). Family breakdown often precipitates a period of acute stress, and the quality of parenting is likely to be disrupted during this period, resulting in lower levels of affectionate behaviour, poorer communication and more erratic discipline (Hetherington et al 1982 cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; and Mackay, 2005). Some evidence suggests that family breakdown has a more negative effect on women's mental health than men's (Block et al, 1988 cited in Mackay 2005), but that where maternal mental health remains relatively robust children are more protected from the effects of family breakdown (Kalter et al, 1989 cited in Mackay, 2005). The evidence suggests that the mental health status of the mother is more predictive of child outcomes than family structure (Smith, 2004a).

Overall, the evidence indicates that children who have a parent with mental health problems are at an increased risk of emotional and social problems, although not all children are affected. For example, in a sample of children of psychiatric patients a substantial proportion (one third) remained unaffected, and a similar proportion experienced only temporary psychological problems (Rutter and Quinton, 1984). Outcomes are poorest when children are the object of parental aggression and neglect (Rutter, 1966) or harsh or ineffective discipline (Berg-Nielsen et al, 2002), and recent research indicates that serious injury is more common among the children of depressed mothers (Smith, 2004a).

3.4 Socio-economic factors

Family breakdown and the resulting lone parent status (usually mothers) often lead to financial hardship (Rodgers and Pryor, 2001). Shouls et al (1999) have highlighted that approximately 70 per cent of lone parents live in poverty, and other research has demonstrated that single parents are more likely to alternate between employment (often unskilled) and dependence on welfare benefits (Evans, Harkness and Ortiz, 2004). The relationship between poverty and child outcomes is well established: children from poorer backgrounds generally do less well on a number of measures, such as health and educational attainment, than children from more advantaged backgrounds. It has therefore been suggested that poverty may be a significant factor in explaining negative child outcomes rather than family breakdown *per se* (Burghes, 1994 cited in Rodger and Pryor, 2001). When income is controlled for, the negative impact of parental separation is significantly reduced (Carlson and Corcoran, 2001 cited in Mackay, 2005) or disappears entirely (Blum et al, 1988 cited in Mackay 2005). Others have argued that not all differences can be attributed to socio-economic factors (Elliott and Richards, 1991; Kiernan, 1997; Kuh and Maclean, 1990).

Poverty and the resultant stress not only affects mental and physical health (Smith, 2004b), but can be both a consequence and a cause of family breakdown. Among parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds the divorce rate is higher (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). Although poverty may directly contribute to negative child outcomes following parental separation, it is more likely to be the stress resulting from poverty that disrupts the quality of parenting and parent-child relationships, and which in turn impacts negatively on child outcomes. Studies of two parent families in America who suffered a severe drop in income showed that the economic pressure led to increased depression in both mothers and fathers and increased marital conflict, which resulted in increased hostility to children, more coercive parenting and disrupted family relationships, negatively affecting children's well-being and behaviour (Conger et al., 1992).

3.5   Repeated changes in family structures

Evidence indicates that, in the majority of cases, family breakdown is followed by a period of lone parenthood and subsequent re-partnering. Indeed, step-families have been described as the fastest growing family type (Ferri and Smith, 2003). It has been argued that repeated changes in family structure are more likely to produce negative outcomes in children (Dunn et al., 1998). However, it is less clear whether negative outcomes are associated with repeated changes in family structure *per se* or with factors associated with transitions in family forms. Roberts (2002), for example, argues that children in stable lone parent households fare better than children who move through different family contexts, and that stability is therefore an important variable in explaining child outcomes. Repeated transitions in family structure are associated with parallel changes in living circumstances, parental employment, schools and fluctuations in income (Smith, 2004c). These latter factors independently contribute to adverse outcomes for children.

Indeed, evidence indicates that family breakdown is likely to be transmitted intergenerationally (Amato and Keith 1991; Mueller and Pope 1997; Amato and DeBoer, 2001; Teachman, 2002) to the extent that the children of divorced parents are estimated to be twice as likely as children of non-divorced parents, to experience divorce themselves (Amato and DeBoer, 2001). This has been explained by children of divorced parents tending to leave home and form partnerships and enter parenthood at an early age. It is argued that young couples are less likely to have developed the emotional maturity to sustain an enduring partnership and tend to experience greater financial hardship and less social support (Mueller and Pope, 1997) - both factors that enhance the risk of family breakdown.

4. Optimising positive child outcomes

We have seen how factors associated with family breakdown, such as parental conflict, parenting and parent-child relationships, maternal mental health, socio-economic factors and repeated changes, interact before, during and after parental separation to impact upon children's development and well-being. Here we consider the evidence on what helps children adjust to the changes and transitions they experience as a result of family breakdown, and what optimises positive outcomes. However, we turn first to what children themselves say about their experiences of parental separation and family change.

4.1 Children's perspectives on parental separation

There is a growing body of research particularly from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, that considers the views and experiences of children whose parents have separated (e.g. Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Hogan et al., 2003; Pryor and Daly-Peoples, 2001; Smith et al., 1997; Smart et al., 2000; Wade and Smart, 2002; Butler et al, 2003). Several themes emerge from this literature, though it should be noted that children differ significantly in their perceptions and reactions to parental separation and divorce (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Hogan et al., 2003). For example, although distress, anger and sadness are feelings often reported by children when their parents separate, these feelings are by no means universal (Dunn et al., 2001; Pritchard, 1998, cited in Hawthorne et al., 2003). In one New Zealand study, 44 per cent of children had neutral or mildly positive reactions to the separation which the researchers concluded was likely to be associated with escaping a family situation marked by parental conflict (Smith et al., 1997).

Individual differences, such as age, gender and temperament, together with family issues such as the level of parental conflict, and the quality of parent-child relationships are some of the factors which will affect how children react to parental separation. Even children within the same family may perceive and react differently to the changes in their family circumstances (Hogan et al., 2003).

Although children's experiences may be diverse, there is significant agreement on what matters to children when their parents separate and the support they may find helpful (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Children want to be told what is going on when their parents separate, yet they are often left in the dark and are particularly distressed and confused when parents leave suddenly and without explanation (Hawthorne et al., 2003; Hogan et al., 2003). Communication, or the lack of it, was also identified by children in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) study as a key factor: a quarter of children in the study whose parents had separated said that no one had talked to them about the separation, and few felt that they had a full explanation, leaving them feeling confused and distressed (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Dunn, 2002). Children also report that parents can exacerbate difficulties by poor communication, or help to alleviate unhappiness by keeping them informed about what is happening, and by behaving responsibly (Walczak and Burns, 1984 cited in Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). Even where there was no direct contact with the non-resident parent, children's emotional well-being and educational performance post-separation benefited from good family communication and information about the non-resident parent (Owusu Bempah, 1995).

Not only do children want to be told what is happening, some want to be consulted and involved in decisions about their living arrangements (Hawthorne et al., 2003), and there is some evidence that children who felt that they had been consulted and had their wishes taken into account were doing better following a divorce, than those who did not feel they had been consulted (Butler et al, 2003). Studies in Canada, the USA and NZ involving children from the age of 12 to young adulthood found that spending equal time with both parents was the preferred option (Hawthorne et al., 2003). Although children who do spend

considerable amounts of time in two households tend to express positive views (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001) there is evidence that they become less satisfactory over time from the child's perspective (Neale et al., 2003). Generally, children want to retain a relationship with both parents and the quality of relationships with significant adults in their lives is of major importance to them (Wade and Smart, 2002).

It is important to remember that change and transition feature in all children's' lives, whether they come from intact or non-intact families. The need to understand the changes that occur in children's lives and the extent to which divorce may trigger these changes or be the least significant of them all is emphasised in studies by Neale and her colleagues (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003; Neale et al., 2003; Wade and Smart, 2002). Although children experiencing family change through the divorce, separation, or re-partnering of a parent are also more likely to experience other changes such as moving house, town or school (Highest and Jamieson, 2007; Wade and Smart, 2002) what emerges as important in how well children cope is the management, timing and pace of change, and to what extent children are prepared and supported through them (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003; Neale et al., 2003).

4.2   Facilitating children's adjustment to family breakdown

Research over several years has identified a number of factors that facilitate children's adjustment to family breakdown, including competent and warm parenting, parents' psychological well-being, low parental conflict, cooperative parenting post-separation and social support (Amato, 2000; Kelly 2006)

4.2.1 Parenting and relationships

As discussed earlier, the quality of the parent child relationship, parenting practices and mothers' psychological well-being are all important predictors of children's well-being generally (Petit et al., 1997 and Simons et al., 1999 cited in Ram and Hou, 2003), and these are themselves linked. The psychological well-being of parents generally is important as it predicts the extent to which the parent-child relationship and parenting are likely to be disrupted. Where the resident parent's mental health is good following separation, parenting and the parent child relationship are less likely to be impacted (Emery et al., 1999; Hetherington, 1999). Children who reside with a parent with whom they have a good relationship, and who continues to offer warmth and emotional support, to be attentive, discipline appropriately and have expectations that are age-appropriate, are likely to adjust more easily after separation, compared to children where the resident parent is preoccupied and inattentive, less supportive or disciplines coercively (Hetherington, 1999; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Kelly, 2003). Longitudinal research shows that good quality parent-child relationships and flexible arrangements can ameliorate many of the potentially negative effects of separation on children's well-being (Neale and Flowerdew, 2007)

We have seen how the quality of the relationship with the non-resident parent, usually the father as about 90% of children end up living with their mothers when their parents separate, also impacts on child outcomes. Aspects of the relationship which are linked to fewer adjustment problems in children are involvement, affection, support and limit setting (Dunn et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2001). Children of non-resident fathers who are actively involved with them, and have close relationships with them, are more likely to have fewer adjustment problems and greater academic success, compared to those with less involved fathers (Amato and Fowler, 2002, cited in Kelly 2006; Amato and Gilbreth,1999).

Although the evidence in relation to children's outcomes points to the importance of the quality of the relationship rather than the frequency of contact, children with good relationships were generally also more likely to have regular and more frequent contact with their non-resident fathers (Smith, 2004c). In other words, good relationships are likely to result in more frequent contact. It is probable that positive father-child relationships existing before family breakdown are more likely to result in a higher level of positive contact after separation, and that this is itself a factor in sustaining the positive relationships after family breakdown (Dunn et al., 2004; Smith, 2004c).

However, the assumption that all children will benefit from contact with both parents following divorce or parental separation is not supported by the research evidence (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Children do not benefit from contact with non-resident parents with whom they have a poor relationship, where parenting practices are poor or where the non-resident parent is mentally ill or abusive (Amato and Fowler, 2002; Emery 1999; Kelly, 2000, Pruett et al., 2003 all cited in Kelly, 2006).

4.2.2 Co-operative parenting post-separation

A co-operative, mutually supportive and non-confrontational co-parenting relationship benefits children generally (Amato, 2005), but research indicates that such relationships are not the norm following parental separation and divorce. Only about a quarter to a third of parents achieve cooperative parenting, characterised by joint planning, flexibility, sufficient communication and coordination of schedules and activities, post-separation (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Evidence suggests that when parents can protect children from conflict associated with separation or divorce and maintain a working partnership as parents, children adjust to family breakdown (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998).

High levels of parental conflict alongside frequent contact with the non-resident parent and using children to express parental anger are associated with poor adjustment (Kelly 2006), whilst protective factors include a good relationship with at least one parent or caregiver, parental warmth and support (Kelly, 2003). When parents in high conflict situations are able to suppress their conflict, and do not put their children in the middle of their disputes, these children do not differ from children whose parents have low or no conflict (Buchanan et al., 1991, cited in Kelly, 2003; Hetherington 1999).

A co-operative post-separation relationship between parents is one factor contributing to continuing contact with the non-resident parent (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). Trinder et al (2002) found in their study of children's and parent's experience of contact after divorce, that contact worked in 27 of the 61 families due to a number of factors including the commitment of both adults and children, agreement over parental roles and the relationship skills of both parents in terms of recognising each other's strengths and weaknesses and the ability to compromise. Lack of commitment to contact and high levels of conflict marked the families where contact was not working. The researchers concluded that resources should be directed at work to improve post-separation relationships.

4.2.3 Social support

Parents are often unable to adequately support their children when family breakdown occurs due to their own distress, and children often seek and gain support from those outside the immediate family such as grandparents and friends. In the ALSPAC study, grandparents and friends were children's key confidantes following separation and in their current stepfamily situations (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). This study found that children who felt close to their maternal grandparents had fewer adjustment problems, though it is important to question the direction of effect. It may be that grandparents have closer relationships with grandchildren who are well adjusted than with those who have problems. Although friends

can be a source of support (Wade and Smart, 2001; Highest and Jamieson, 2007) and peer support has been positively related to children's adjustment to divorce (Samera and Stolberg, 1993; Silitsky, 1996 and Teja and Stolberg, 1993 all cited in Amato 2000) children can be cautious about which friends or others can be trusted to respect the privacy of personal information (Wade and Smart, 2001; Hogan et al., 2003).

4.3   Services and interventions

These findings on the importance of parenting and parental relationships, cooperative parenting post-separation, and social support suggest the types of services and interventions that are needed to support children and their parents, both at the time of family breakdown and in the longer term, include:

- facilitating communication between parents and children;

- helping children to manage transitions and develop coping strategies;

- facilitating children's networks for support;

- maintaining school and community links;

- enabling conflict management and reduction;

- parenting support to encourage 'good' parenting;

- facilitating contact with non-resident parents (Hawthorne et al., 2003).

Hawthorne et al identified a wide range of different services and interventions covering these issues, from counselling through school based projects, telephone helplines and e-mail, information through leaflets, websites, books, and audio-visual aids, to mediation, parents' classes, parenting plans and contact centres. However, the effectiveness of these services and interventions was rarely evaluated at all, and even less often rigorously evaluated.

Key issues concern the kinds of support needed by parents and children, at what stage, and how they might be best delivered. Support, for example, may be focused on preventing family breakdown as in the Premarital Relationship Enhancement Programme described below or, following family breakdown, helping to improve the situation for parents and their children post-separation. There is also the important question as to who the support should be aimed at - partners, resident parents, resident parents and children, or children. The availability of a range of different sources of support and the extent to which parents and children are made aware of them are also significant factors. In particular, it has been stressed that access to sources of support should be determined by need, and not the civil status of the parental relationship (Maclean, 2004).

There is some research evidence for the effectiveness of interventions designed to support relationships and reduce the number of breakdowns. A Premarital Relationship Enhancement Programme (PREP), delivered by trained professionals and targeted at couples, focusing on communication and problem-solving skills, clarification and sharing of experiences, and sexual enhancement found a significantly lower level of divorce among participants (5% after three years) compared with 24 per cent in the control group (Markman et al, 1988 cited in Tilford, Delaney and Vogels, 1997). However, this programme was designed and delivered in the US and there are questions concerning its transferability and acceptability to potential participants in the UK.

Given that poor maternal mental health is implicated as a risk factor for, and a consequence of, relationship breakdown, and that positive maternal mental health functions as a protective factor in relation to child outcomes, the potential for family support services to function in a preventive capacity should not be overlooked (Smith, 2004a). Mental health professionals have a potentially important role to play in helping parents with mental health problems to parent effectively and, in some cases, this requires closer working relationships between child and adult mental health services than is currently the case (Smith, 2004a). In relation to psychological therapies appropriate for parents experiencing separation or divorce, there is strong evidence that cognitive behavioural therapy is effective in the treatment of depression or anxiety generated by adjustment to significant life events (Department of Health, 2001). GPs provide access to such services offered by the NHS, although their availability tends to be limited, and as a result there are often long waiting lists.

It was noted earlier that wider kin and friendship networks provide a source of social support for parents and children during the process of family breakdown (see 4.2.3). In addition, research suggests that some parents seek help from professionals, such as GPs, counsellors, teachers and solicitors at this time (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001), although some professionals, particularly teachers, may not see providing support and advice to divorcing and separating parents a part of their job (Schonveld, 1999). The wider availability of information and training targeted at these professional groups to enable them to support parents during separation or divorce more effectively, is required.

At the time of separation, parents also need access to information and support to address a range of practical issues, such as housing, welfare benefits, childcare, and legal provisions concerning the division of assets, child custody arrangements and child support. Evidence suggests that lack of awareness of legal rights and responsibilities concerning parenting roles and the division of assets is common among cohabiting couples on separation (Wade and Smart 2002; Perry et al, 2000; Pickford, 1999). We are aware that the post-separation status of cohabiting couples in relation to their children is currently under review.

In relation to post-separation support for parents, promising findings were reported by Wolchik et al (2002) concerning the effectiveness of a 'New Beginnings Program' targeted at mothers. This experimental trial found that a programme of group and individual sessions with mothers only, and a programme targeted at mothers and their children both reported significant benefits for children up to six years later, including lower levels of mental health problems and substance abuse, as well as fewer sexual partners, compared with the control group who were given books on adjustment to divorce. This suggests that targeted parenting programmes post-separation can be effective in improving child outcomes.

4.3.1 *School-based support programmes*

In a review of services supporting children through family change, Hawthorne et al (2003) found that as well as school-based interventions aimed at supporting children with emotional and behavioural difficulties generally, there are school-based programmes that specifically address issues for children relating to family change. There is some evidence that school-based programmes for children with separated or divorced parents are beneficial (Emery et al., 1999 cited in Amato, 2000; Wilson and Edwards, 2003). For example primary school aged children participating in a support programme still showed improvements in their self-esteem, their perceptions of peer and adult support, and difficult behaviour, six months following the end of the programme (Wilson and Edwards, 2003). Components of targeted programmes that appear to be most effective include combining affective and behavioural strategies (Hawthorne et al., 2003). Programmes with individual sessions have been found to be marginally more effective in their impact on outcomes than group sessions (Wilson and Edwards, 2003). However, not all children are comfortable with talking about their family situation in school often because they are concerned about confidentiality (Hogan et al.,

2002; Wade and Smart, 2002) although children may find support from school staff helpful (Highest and Jamieson, 2007).

4.3.2 Enabling conflict management and reduction

In many jurisdictions, divorce education programmes and custody mediation have been adopted as an alternative to the adversarial process. Research evidence, predominately from the USA, suggests that such programmes can be effective in raising awareness of children's needs, encouraging a greater acceptance of the non-resident parent having contact, a reduction in behaviours where children are put in the middle of disputes, and better communication (Haine et al., 2003; Kelly 2002; Kramer et al., 1998; Pedro-Carroll, 2001, 2005 all cited in Kelly 2006). Where parents agree custody and parenting arrangements through mediation, research suggests that, compared with parent outcomes in adversarial processes, parental conflict is lower, communication and cooperation is greater and paternal involvement up to 12 years after divorce is higher, (Emery, 1994; Kelly, 1996 and 2004 all cited in Kelly, 2006).

In England, the majority of separating parents make their own arrangements for residence and contact, and only a small minority (approximately five per cent) which tend to be those cases with intractable problems, including those that may place a child at risk, go to court, (DCA,DFES and DTI, 2004). Little work has been undertaken regarding the levels of parental conflict in cases that do not go to court, and although it is generally assumed that parental conflict levels are lower, early findings from a study of non-court cases in England suggest that many of these cases are also characterised by high levels of conflict and distress (Wasoff, 2007).

Evaluations of two pilot programmes aimed at conflict resolution and improved parental relationships following separation and divorce have recently reported. The *Family Advice and Information Service (FAInS)*, began in 2003, uses solicitors as a gateway to advice and support which includes counsellors, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or mediation (Douglas, 2005). FAInS aims to 'facilitate the dissolution of broken relationships in ways which minimise distress to parents and children and which promote ongoing family relationships and co-operative parenting. It will also provide tailored information and access to services that may assist in resolving disputes and/or assist those who may wish to consider saving or reconciling their relationship' (Hawthorne et al, 2003: 57). However, the evaluation of the programme reports disappointing results, with the programme largely failing to meet its objectives (Walker et al., 2007). The *Family Resolutions Pilot Project*, a court-based intervention to help parents manage conflict and develop more cooperative post-separation parenting, which began in 2004, has met with variable success, with only half of the referred couples completing the programme, though those who completed it were more likely than those attending other services, to report that the parental relationship had improved (Trinder et al., 2006). An earlier evaluation of a Family Mediation Project reported more positive findings (McCarthy and Walker, 1996 cited in Oliver and Smith, 2000). The initiative was designed to help parents reduce conflict concerning child custody and other issues attendant to divorce or separation. Outcomes for parents participating in 'child-focused' negotiations were compared with those involved in 'all issues' negotiations. Parents participating in 'all issues' negotiations reported less conflict and lower legal costs than parents who focused solely on child-focused issues.

Several initiatives have been introduced or piloted by the Government over recent years to help separating parents to make arrangements in the interests of their child. These include parenting plans, an accreditation system for family lawyers who have agreed to the ethic of conciliatory practice, the development of a problem-solving role for the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service, and a 'collaborative law' model whereby lawyers and their clients agree that they will not take court proceedings, and in the event of failure to settle, the

clients have to instruct fresh lawyers (DCA, DfES, DTI, 2004). Although mediation is encouraged it has not been made compulsory as is common in the USA.

5. Conclusions

Compared with children growing up in intact families, outcomes across a range of measures are poorer for children who experience family breakdown, and some of these persist into adulthood. For example, they are less likely to gain educational qualifications, and more likely to leave home and become a parent at a younger age. The differences, however, are comparatively small, with many children not affected, and most children are not adversely affected in the long term. Some children benefit from parental separation, particularly children who have witnessed or been subject to violence and abuse, or living in households where there were high levels of parental conflict.

The review has shown that dimensions of family functioning and some socio-economic factors have a greater influence than family structure on child well-being. Financial hardship and poor or disrupted parenting have a negative impact on outcomes for children growing up in intact as well as separated families. It is therefore important to avoid the risk of stigmatising certain family forms, such as single parent families, and to focus instead on the underlying mechanisms that contribute to poorer outcomes for children.

Recent research stresses that family breakdown should be understood as a process and not a single event. Evidence shows that a number of key factors contribute to, and/or are a consequence of, family breakdown. Among these, the most significant are financial hardship, poor maternal mental health, and protracted and unresolved conflict between parents. These factors interact in complex ways and, via a chain of events, have a cumulative effect. Typically, they lead to increased stress on the part of the custodial parent (usually mothers) which, in turn, increases the risk of negative outcomes in children. However, positive maternal mental health and mothers' access to adequate social and financial support serve to moderate the potentially negative impact of family breakdown on children. Good communication between parents, and positive child-parent relationships are crucial to children's well-being. Parents who are able to contain their distress and to negotiate and facilitate acceptable arrangements post-separation also help their children to adjust to family breakdown.

The findings highlight the dynamic nature of change in contemporary family life. Divorce and parental separation are more common than they once were, and an initial experience of family breakdown often heralds further changes, including those in family structure. Increasingly, children and parents are required to develop the necessary coping skills to adjust to repeated transitions in family form. In this context, it will be important for public policy to acknowledge the realities of family life and to adopt strategies that support parents in the task of parenting and to enhance those factors that have been shown to reduce the potentially negative effects of parental separation.

5.1 Future work

As was pointed out earlier, although there are some interventions to help children and their caring parents experiencing a family disruption, in general these have developed in a piecemeal fashion, and are not always evidence based, nor are they systematically or robustly evaluated to assess their effectiveness. This suggests that there is a need for interventions of demonstrated effectiveness to be developed, based on the best evidence available about what is needed to help children and their parents to cope with the changes occurring, to manage and cope with conflict and distress, to facilitate communication, and to move towards constructive new forms of cooperative parenting following the separation. Parents' and children's needs will differ according to individual aspects of the relationship, as well as the stage of the process they are at, and they are likely to follow individual trajectories, so effective support will need to be flexible and responsive to the needs of individuals at different stages of the process.

As has been identified earlier in this review, some children experiencing breakdown will be upset or disturbed by it, while others will be well supported through, and cope well with, the changes. Other children not experiencing family breakdown, but experiencing family conflict, for example, may be distressed or disturbed by that. What distinguishes family breakdown is that their parents are likely to be distressed at the same time - in fact, it is likely that parents' distress may be a direct casual factor in children's distress. Parents' own distress may mean that they are unable to support and nurture their children adequately through the acute phases of family breakdown, and children may be unable or unwilling to communicate their needs or distress to their caring parent, in order to protect them from further distress. This indicates that children who have difficulties should have direct access to independent child-centred support which can address their needs. School based programmes that offer support for children with emotional difficulties would be ideal for this, as long as they can be provided without stigma, and effectively address the needs of children experiencing or having recently experienced, family breakdown. These programmes need to be properly and robustly evaluated to assess their effectiveness in helping children

On a more basic level, the evidence is weak on how best to strengthen and support family relationships, to reduce levels of family conflict, to enhance the stability of couples, and to support the 'buffering' necessary to protect the relationship and the quality of parenting in times of stress or difficulties (Belsky and Vondra, 1989), such as through a period of maternal mental health problems. Research has suggested that counselling is not effective in supporting relationships (Gottman, 1998), although as identified earlier, although largely untested in the UK, pre-marital programmes to teach skills, such as avoiding negative behaviour, may be (Stanley, 2001). Similarly, although not widely used in the UK, premarital inventories may be effective in identifying potentially unstable or negative relationships (Williams and Jurich, 1995). There is clearly scope for more research in this area.

5.2   Policy implications

Although a discussion of the policy implications is beyond the scope of this review, we have identified some general themes and issues which may benefit from further attention. It is possible that some of these areas are already under active consideration, in which case we hope the review will contribute to current discussions. The findings highlight the potential benefits of:

- Supporting maternal mental health via the wider availability of family support and appropriate statutory and non-statutory mental health services for parents prior to, during and following family breakdown;

- Developing parenting programmes that are specifically targeted at supporting parents to manage the effects of family breakdown on themselves and their children;

- Improving access to sources of information and advice pertinent to the needs of separating parents, including information on legal and financial rights and responsibilities of married and cohabiting couples, child custody arrangements, housing advice and welfare benefits;

- Investigating options for maximising the incidence of negotiated settlements between parents at separation as a means of reducing parental conflict, and actively supporting the development of effective cooperative parenting arrangements post separation. Adversarial legal and court action should be reduced or adopted as a last resort.

- Identifying strategies for reducing financial hardship among custodial parents (generally mothers) following family breakdown;

- Developing flexible and varied sources of support for children experiencing family breakdown, perhaps through raising awareness of the impact of family breakdown via whole-school approaches to improving children's health and well-being.

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