Children, Divorce and Family Relationships

JAYNE WOODHOUSE and her colleagues on the Year One Early Childhood Studies course at North East Wales Institute of Education, were asked to 'Select an article from a current early years/childhood journal that addresses a social issue that affects children's lives'. They were required to 'Outline the main argument(s) in the article and discuss these with reference to social theory'.

The article selected by Jayne was: Stephenson, J. (2005) 'War of the Parents'. *Children Now*. 26 January: pp.20-21. Her analysis and evaluation of the article constitutes this paper.

Jayne has clearly 'Reflected on Early Years Issues' in just the way we hoped people would! Perhaps the following article will encourage others to consider and respond to some of the current issues in depth.

Introduction

Mayall (2002: 45), states that 'most young children talk warmly about being and doing the family thing'. She goes on to say that children describe the family and home as a source of comfort and material goods with valued relationships. They talk of enjoying family times especially if the father is involved. But what happens when things go wrong and the relationship between the parents breaks down? I will briefly discuss the topic of divorce under the following sub-headings: divorce on the increase, staying together for better or for worse; and building relationships.

Divorce on the increase

In the past sociologists have referred to the family as the 'cornerstone of society' (Haralambos and Holborn 1993: 453). Haralambos and Holborn (1993) see the family as an institution which cannot be avoided and a good thing for both the community and the individuals. Jackson (2000) claimed that sociologists painted a rosy picture of family life before the 1970's. So why is divorce on the increase? Taylor (2000) suggested that sociologists thought that problems in the family arose because of factors relating to poverty and war.

In less than a century, marriages that end in divorce have gone from 1 in 10,000 to 1 in 3 (Yeo and Lovell 2004). It is suggested that the breakdown of a marriage is due to several factors including:

- people having higher expectations of marriage;

- there being greater equality between the sexes;
- women being far more independent as they are paid for work outside the home;
- childcare being readily available;
- people are living longer (Yeo and Lovell 2004).

The authors suggest that, following the breakdown of a marriage, divorce is more likely because of the changes in divorce laws. The introduction of Legal Aid in 1949 has made divorce more accessible for poorer families. There is also less shame in getting divorced owing to the decline in religious beliefs and less hostility from families and friends in the community.

Eysenck (2002: 178-179) describes divorce as a 'transition requiring considerable adjustments'. To begin with there are conflicts between the parents which can be very stressful for the children involved. Then there is the separation itself which is more often than not going to end in divorce and the adjustments that all involved need to make.

The rise in divorce has also lead to a large increase in 'reconstituted families' (Yeo and Lovell 2004: 93). In today's society it is not unusual for a family to separate and then merge into different contexts or move on into other relationships (Bauman and May 2001). This appears to prove that although couples may not have been happy in their previous relationship they have not given up on the idea of marriage and are still striving to find the perfect relationship. However, Giddens (2000) claims that divorce from second marriages is very likely as statistically they are less successful than the first. This means that the children within the reconstituted family will lose a step-parent, step-siblings and step-grandparents with whom they may have bonded.

Staying together for better or for worse
Giddens (2000) suggests that children prosper when they are loved by reliable parents who are sensitive to their needs. Yet Giddens (2000) goes on to say that divorce could make it difficult to sustain a good parenting style. But parents who stay together for the sake of the children, could be doing them as much harm by leaving them in an unhappy family life, as conflict between the parents can be distressing for the children and can lead to behavioral problems (Smith *et al.* 2003). Walls (2005) cites Fisher who claims that it is better for all concerned to break up a family than it is to struggle on in an unhappy one. Marital breakdown and separation often lead to a sudden drop in living standards leading to poverty and this is particularly likely when the parent left to bring up the children alone is the mother, as in 90 percent of divorce and separation

cases (Yeo and Lovell, 2004). This can affect the children as they are completely dependent on their parent's material resources (Mayall 2002). It would appear that one parent cannot provide for their children as comfortably as two. When asked to distinguish between their parents, children claimed that mothers were responsible for the home and childcare and fathers were responsible for earning a wage and financial matters (Mayall 2002). In Mayall's research, children said that their mothers were the parent that they went to for discussions and conversations, for permissions and to confide in. Biddulph claims that fathers have increased the time they spend with their children by a huge amount since the 1960s. Boys with absent fathers are more likely to be violent and girls are likely to have a low self-esteem, both are likely to do poorly in school.

Children need to have bonds in their lives as this is important for the development of relationships in later life (Rutter 1990). Bowlby (1965) suggested that unhappy childhoods lead to unhappiness in people's own marriages. Penn (2005) cites Dunn as saying that children are highly sensitive to the tensions and emotional exchanges within the family: this would appear to mean that children know when things are wrong between their parents.

Building Relationships

The government believes that a stable family gives children the best possible start in life (Haralambos *et al.* 2003): yet, between 150,000 and 200,000 couples separate each year. The effects of divorce on children are difficult to determine. Certain factors appear to influence the children's emotional and social development such as the conflict between the parents, whether the children have siblings, loss of contact with grandparents and the extended family, the relationships with the parents and how often they see their absent parent following the separation (Giddens 2000). Children must remain the main concern during a divorce as they can be scared by the prospect of a separation and fear the future. Conflict between the parents can have distressing consequences for all concerned, for example, approximately 40% of fathers lose contact with their children (The Full Story, 2004, www.childrenneedfathers.com). The government see marriage and nuclear families as the ideal, but critics argue that the government should not impose one style of family. Critics of the government believe that it should realize that families are diverse and it is not a political concern to make couples stay together (Haralambos *et al* 2003). However 'nearly half the children in the UK will see their parents divorce' (Divorce or separation of parents, 2004, www.rcpsych.ac.uk) so the government have decided to update the family justice system to make sure that both parents continue a positive

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relationship with each other and most importantly with their children following the divorce (Fathers get a raw deal on child access, says Mps, 2005, www.guardian.co.uk). In March 2004 London, Brighton, and Sunderland started a government three-stage pilot scheme which involves mediation for adults seeking divorce (The Full Story, 2004, www.childenneedfathers.com). The article states that couples thinking of separation as the answer would profit from some help from outside agencies. The article is strongly in favour of mediation which includes parents being shown a video involving children talking about their experiences of divorce. Parents will then undergo training in conflict management and, with the help of an officer from CAFCASS (The Children's and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) will work out parenting plans including contact arrangements (Fathers get raw deal on child access, says MPs, 2005, www.guardian.co.uk).

Conclusion

In 1980 Wallerstein and Kelly studied the effects of divorce on children and came to the conclusion that children will adjust well to the changes in their family structure if they have continuous positive relationships and contact with both parents (Dallos and Sapsford, 1993). In 1989, The Children Act stated that parents, both jointly and individually, should maintain the care and protection of their children. 'The Act claimed that parents are not free to give up their parental responsibilities even if their marriage ends' (Land 1993: 96). Walls (2005) cites Williams as saying that being honest with children is likely to help the quality of relationships through the divorce. In conclusion I would claim that most parents especially fathers do not want to end their parental responsibility, Fathers 4 Justice have been making this stand for many years and divorce courts are now able to help them maintain positive relationships with the introduction of pilot schemes to include parenting plans. With the support of CAFCASS, parents should get the help they need to make amicable decisions which should limit the conflict.

As the original article points out, there is still a lot of work to be done to minimize the distress caused to the children when their parents divorce, but hopefully the pilot scheme which began in 2004 will prove successful and become a nationwide service which will make life a little easier for the children and help the parents to settle their differences with as little discomfort and upset as possible. In professional practice I would strive to help the children in my care to come to terms with the reality of their parent's separation by being reliable, comforting and predictable. I would also help them find something positive in what has happened in order not to upset everything else in their lives.

What are YOUR views on the issues of divorce in our society and the effects of family relationships amongst young children?

Have your say now by e-mailing j.moyles@ntlworld.com

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