

# Parental separation from an adolescent perspective

## What do they say?

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This paper is based on *Views of Adolescents in Separated Families: A Study of Adolescents' Experiences After the 2006 Reforms to the Family Law System* (Lodge & Alexander, 2010). It highlights findings from interviews with adolescents from separated families.

At a general level, the study emphasised the importance of listening to the perspectives of young people on their experiences of parental separation, including what is important to them in adjusting to their changing families. Adolescents make considerable adjustments when parents separate, and the findings illustrate adolescents' differing developmental capacities to understand and accept family changes.

### KEY MESSAGES

- Parental separation is a stressful period for adolescents and involves a lot of adjustment.
- Parents are the most important and valued source of support for adolescents at the time of separation and can help them to understand what is happening without involving them in any disputes.
- Older adolescents may be more capable of understanding the reasons behind parental separation than younger adolescents.
- Parents need to remain sensitive and responsive to their children's needs, including having flexible arrangements around adolescents' schedules.
- Parents being there to listen and non-intrusive monitoring of their children's activities is important.
- Where re-partnering occurs, supporting and developing quality step-parent-child relationships is important.
- For adolescents experiencing parental separation, a strong relationship with at least one parent is likely to have an integral role in their adjustment.

The findings indicate the need for varied forms of service provision that can meet a range of needs within the family, including adolescents' developmental needs. Promoting open and ongoing communication within families about the organisation and re-organisation of family life is important, particularly as the needs of adolescents change. Giving adolescents a role in decisions about practical aspects of family life was especially empowering for some adolescents—but importantly, not for all. The findings of the study also highlight the adolescents' sensitivity to the conflicts and distress of their parents. Finally, the study points to implications for services in supporting parents and their adolescent children to maintain strength and closeness of relationships over time, as a strong relationship with at least one parent is associated with more positive adjustment after parental separation.

## Introduction

In Australia, it is estimated that 50,000 children will experience the effects of family breakdown resulting from separation and divorce each year (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2004). While much research has been carried out to explore the effects of parental separation on children's lives, the emphasis in past research has been on adults' accounts of children's difficulties and responses to family transitions. International and Australian researchers have increasingly stressed the importance of understanding the perspectives of children and young people on their experiences of parental separation (Bagshaw, 2007; Campbell, 2008; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2009; Douglas, Murch, Robinson, Scanlan, & Butler, 2001; Smart & Neale, 2000; Taylor, 2006). In particular, the 2006 reforms to family law in Australia, which came into effect through the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) (SPR Act 2006), were intended to bring the views, feelings and experiences of children into sharper focus. In this context, what does research tell us about how adolescents in Australia view the separation of their parents—and especially what they want for their changing families?

This paper presents the key findings from an Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) study involving intensive interviews with 623 adolescent children (321 males and 302 females) from separated families. This study was part of a large-scale longitudinal representative community survey of around 10,000 separated families from across Australia (for further study details and methodology, see Lodge and Alexander, 2010).

## Key findings

Key findings from the study included the following:

### Adolescents feelings and perspectives associated with the separation

- Following parental separation, adolescents reported a range of feelings and wishes, including relief over the separation, as well as wishing their parents could reconcile. While most adolescents felt that the separation was the best solution for their family, older adolescents (aged 15+ years) were more likely to express relief over the separation than were younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years). Almost twice as many younger adolescents (30%) wished their parents would get back together (agree/strongly agree) compared with older adolescents (16%). One in three younger adolescents (33%) felt that it would have been better for them if their parents had stayed together compared with one in five older adolescents (22%).
- Despite the fact that many parents tried to shield their children from any ongoing relationship difficulties, many adolescents were aware when the conflict between parents continued after

separation. These adolescents expressed the greatest relief over their parents' separation and the least desire for a parental reunion.

### Consulting adolescents

- Almost two in three adolescents *wanted* to have a say in the decision about who they would live with after their parents separated and most (70%) reported that they participated in the decision process about where they would live. Of those who were involved in making decisions about new family arrangements, most achieved this by talking the decision over with their mother and/or father.
- Three in five adolescents (61%) agreed that the decision on where they would live was very much what they wanted and were satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their other parent. On the whole, adolescents felt they were able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to and few adolescents expressed a desire to change their current arrangements.

### Changes associated with parental separation

- A key issue for adolescents was flexibility in their arrangements. Being able to move between households on their own schedules was important. Adolescents who had equal care arrangements reported the greatest ease in being able to see each parent and manage this with their other commitments such as doing schoolwork, playing sport and seeing their friends.
- Logistical and relationship challenges were the main obstacles for adolescents in seeing their other parent. For example, often parents lived some distance away from each other, or the challenge of coordinating busy parent and child schedules made care arrangements overly complex.
- About a quarter of adolescents found interruptions and changes to their care schedules difficult and somewhat stressful. Of those adolescents who wanted a change in the number of nights they spent with each parent, most wanted the change so that they could have a relationship with both of their parents. Others wanted more stability or consistency in their arrangements, particularly around the transition between households.
- Parental re-marriage and re-partnering was a challenging experience for some adolescents. Adolescents with equal care tended to have more of a connection with step-parent/s than others. Likewise, adolescents who lived mostly/only in one household were more likely to have warmer relationships with their co-resident step-parent.

### Relationships with parents following separation

- For most adolescents, their parents' separation resulted in one parent becoming primarily responsible for their care. Across all age groups this was most often their mother (64–66%). However, the proportion of adolescents living mostly/only with their father tended to increase from the younger to older age groups, whereas adolescents with equal care were typically younger adolescents aged 12–14 years. While there was a relatively equal split between boys and girls living mostly/only with their mother, more boys than girls were living with their father or in equal care arrangements.
- Daytime contact with the other parent (without staying overnight) was relatively common for adolescents living primarily with one parent. Almost half the adolescents saw their other parent during the day at least once a week. Some 71% of adolescents living mostly/only with one parent reported that they were in touch with their other parent either on the phone or by email at least once a week.
- Feeling close to at least one parent was important in helping adolescents adjust to life after parental separation. A secure relationship with at least one parent was associated with greater self-rated school achievement, self-confidence and general happiness with life. Less secure relationships with both parents were associated with poorer academic and psychological wellbeing.

## Coping and support

- The family, and particularly parents, constituted the most important and valued source of support for adolescents at the time of separation. Adolescents said they were most likely to talk to the parent with whom they lived more of the time, while those with equal care were just as likely to talk to their mother or their father. Almost half of the adolescents also turned to siblings, grandparents and other relatives for support during their parents' separation. In general, adolescents expressed a desire to see their grandparents more often. Friends were also important, but not necessarily as confidantes. Most adolescents found the support and advice of family and friends to be very helpful.
- One in three adolescents spoke with a counsellor, including phone or online counselling services such as Kids Helpline. While some adolescents described the process as awkward and embarrassing, most reported that it was useful to talk through their feelings and to clarify issues concerning their parents' separation.

## Practical implications

There is a number of practical implications of these findings:

- It is important for those working with separated parents and their children to understand that the reactions of children to their parents' separation differ with age. This research suggests that older adolescents may be more capable of understanding the reasons behind parental separation than are younger adolescents. This developmental difference should be taken into account when attempting to understand a child's fears, wishes for reconciliation, grief at separation from, or the loss of contact with a parent. In particular, younger adolescents may require different levels of support for the changes resulting from parental separation.
- Facilitating communication between parents and children about the separation is very important for all adolescents. However, it was especially notable in families where there was parental conflict. Adolescents who were able to understand their parents' decisions or behaviour were better able to accept family changes.
- Documenting adolescents' perspectives on their involvement in decision-making about family arrangements is an important first step towards testing the association between these perceived stresses and adolescents' wellbeing and adjustment. Giving adolescents a role in decisions about family arrangements was associated with them having more positive feelings about their living arrangements. However, more than one in three adolescents did not want to be asked to make such major decisions—in most cases, this was because they wanted to avoid having to “choose” between parents.
- Parental separation is a stressful period for adolescents, and appropriate levels of support are needed. Family members, mainly parents, helped adolescents by listening and by providing information and reassurance. The connections with grandparents and other relatives also highlight how important it is to provide support for these relationships where possible. Services providing counselling were seen as helpful by some adolescents in providing someone to listen and to help make sense of their views and expectations about family change.
- In making family arrangements after separation, parents must be encouraged to remain sensitive and responsive to their children's needs, including having flexible arrangements around adolescents' schedules (e.g., doing schoolwork, playing sport and seeing friends). This is likely to be more important as children develop into their adolescent years, and their involvement and interest in events outside of the family become more pronounced. Being able to move between households on their own schedules was critical. Helping adolescents to communicate their problems about moving between two households is also useful.

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