

# **The Children's Counselling Service at Family Care: An Evaluation**

A report prepared for Family Care

by Chris Dearden  
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# **The Children's Counselling Service at Family Care: An Evaluation**

## **Background information**

The Children's Counselling Service is based in Family Care, an independent social work agency which provides adoption, family support and training services. Family Care operates within the Christian values of compassion, respect for others and a concern for social justice, but the organisation supports people of any or no religious persuasion. The organisation is partly funded through grants from Nottinghamshire County Council and the Diocese of Southwell.

The Children's Counselling Service is funded through a grant from Children in Need for a three-year period, from March 1996 to March 1999. At the time of this report the service has been in operation for just under two years. The service was considered necessary because of the increase in the incidence of divorce and family breakdown and the effects this has on children. Although local services exist for adults experiencing separation, such as Relate and family mediation, there is little counselling support available for children and no specific service for those children whose parents have separated.

Following the successful application for funding from Children in Need, a children's counsellor was appointed in March 1996. The counsellor is employed by Family Care and receives support from both within the organisation, through her line manager, and from outside, from a specialist play therapy supervisor.

## **The aims of evaluation**

Family Care approached Loughborough University in summer 1997 and requested a small-scale evaluation of the Children's Counselling Service. The aim of the evaluation was to provide feedback to staff and Trustees in Family Care, specifically the children's counsellor, to indicate how well the service was being received by children and families and how it was viewed by professionals who could refer children and young people on to the service. Family Care also wanted to use the evaluation as a means of reporting back to their funding body (Children in Need) on the success of and the need for the service.

It is difficult for an organisation to get feedback from service users when the service provided is a confidential one. This problem is exacerbated when the service users are vulnerable children. Staff at Family Care were aware of this from the outset and sought advice in preparing simple questionnaire feedback forms for children and young people and their parents/carers who had used the service and come to the end of their counselling sessions. Forms have now been designed, but are yet to be implemented. These forms will ultimately provide the children's counsellor and other members of staff with information about the extent to which children and young people feel comfortable with the counsellor; whether the environment is appropriate; whether the toys, games, books etc. are appropriate; and whether children, young people and their carers feel that the service has been beneficial. However, staff also felt that external evaluation would be beneficial in further exploring these areas. It was felt that the use of an independent researcher, experienced in interviewing vulnerable children, would offer children, young people and parents/carers the opportunity to give more detailed feedback in confidence and would be more likely to yield honest answers.

### **Methodology adopted**

Following discussions with Family Care it was decided to conduct a total of 16 in depth interviews with children and young people, parents/carers and professionals. Since the service offered is a confidential one, children and parents/carers were asked whether they would be prepared to be interviewed by an independent researcher at the end of the counselling process. Those who agreed were contacted by letter initially and then by telephone to arrange a suitable time to meet.

Interviews were conducted with six children or young people, six parents, three professionals and the children's counsellor. All of the interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed thematically. All of the children were interviewed in their own homes but were seen independently of their parents. One of the parents, who has left the area, was interviewed by telephone, the remainder were interviewed in their own homes. Two of the professionals were interviewed by telephone, one in person. The children's counsellor provided background information during meetings, by letter and, finally, in a telephone interview. Appendix 1 lists the themes covered during interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to develop themes and to gain a knowledge of how both children and parents/carers perceived the service, what they felt they or their children may have gained from using the service, any criticisms of the service, and any hopes which had not been met

by the service. All respondents were assured that their names would not be used in the report, but absolute confidentiality could not be offered because of the small number of interviews conducted and because all interviews had to be arranged initially through Family Care due to the confidential nature of the service. Nevertheless, all respondents appeared relaxed during interviews and were happy to speak to the researcher. It was stressed during interviews that their identities would be protected as far as possible and that, should they have any criticisms of the service, it was very important for the organisation to know about these in order to rectify them in the future.

In addition to the fieldwork interviews Family Care provided a breakdown of referrals from March 1996 to summer 1997, a Trustees report, a specimen referral form and a copy of the original funding application.

This report draws on the interviews with children, young people and parents/carers, often using their own words. Reference is also made to the small number of interviews with professionals to comment on how the service is perceived by other professional groups and organisations. Also contained within the report is some statistical information from the breakdown of young people referred to the service between March 1996 and summer 1997.

### **Service aims and objectives**

The service has three main aims:

- To provide a service for children and young people whose parents or significant caretakers are divorcing or separated. This may well include children and young people who have already experienced parental separation.
- To promote a greater understanding of the effects of parental separation and divorce on children and young people.
- To develop a greater understanding of the needs of children and young people who are experiencing or have been through parental separation or divorce.

The objectives which underpin these aims are:

- To provide counselling support for children and young persons aged four to 18 years who are affected by parental divorce and separation, on an individual basis or jointly with siblings.
- To establish support groups for children and young people in schools, and be responsive to their needs.
- Through contact with primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges, to promote greater understanding of the effects on youngsters of divorce and separation, and the implications for their needs within these educational establishments.
- To promote the service to other agencies involved with children and families, including social services, health authorities, the voluntary sector and faith communities.

### **Meeting aims and objectives**

In this section we will look in turn at each of the aims and objectives of the service and discuss the extent to which these have been achieved.

- *Aim 1:* To provide a service for children and young people whose parents or significant caretakers are divorcing or separated. This may well include children and young people who have already experienced parental separation.

In its first 17 months the service accepted 50 referrals. Since then the rate of referrals has increased and, by March 1998, a total of 83 children had been referred. Three cases were transferred to Family Care's family support worker as *family* support was deemed more appropriate than counselling for the children. Approximately 14 cases were successfully dealt with by telephone conversations and visits, and did not progress to counselling for the child. A further ten cases did not progress for other reasons such as the withholding of parental consent. Of the remainder, 32 cases have now been closed and 24 children and young people continue to receive counselling.

During the first year of the service the majority of referrals came via Relate, but more recently there has been a wide range of referring agencies and individuals and the counsellor feels that schools are

probably now the main source of referral. Although parental consent is required before children can be counselled, whatever the source of referral, the organisation has decided that any young person aged 16 or over who requests counselling will be able to receive the service without this consent.

As anticipated, many of the children and young people counselled have already experienced parental separation, and some are now experiencing the breakdown of second or subsequent relationships. The children and young people therefore come from a wide range of parenting situations, including non-biological parents. Although all of the young people who use the service will have experienced some form of family breakdown, this will not necessarily have been a recent occurrence. As the counsellor commented:

I've had some children come to me almost in shell shock, having literally just been told that their parents are separating, but I've had others where it's been two or three years down the line and they're still upset about it.

What these children and young people appear to have in common is the fact that the counsellor is often the first person they have really been able to speak to, in confidence, about their situation. Again, the counsellor commented

Perhaps there isn't a trusted teacher, or they don't want people to know elsewhere, or there doesn't seem to be anybody appropriate who they can off load onto without that person taking sides, perhaps if they're in the family. They can't all get through to ChildLine and most of the ones I've seen haven't tried ChildLine.

- *Aim 2:* To promote a greater understanding of the effects of parental separation and divorce on children and young people.

Once the counsellor was in post, she set about a period of local awareness-raising of both the service and the issues which underpin the need for the service. With reference to this initial awareness-raising, the counsellor commented:

We wrote out to a number of organisations, and when I first got here, because I didn't know Nottingham, I went on a lot of meetings with different joint bodies and things, found some of the other play therapists and other young people's counsellors, let them know the service

existed, went to ChildLine, Parentline who have referred as well. And a number of things like that. Then we decided we needed to do a more strategic drop [of leaflets] because some of the schools had found out about me, but not everybody had. We decided to do a drop by the LEA, to let them know about me, and also the health authority we did another one to let all the GPs know that the service was in existence.

Leaflets were distributed widely, to all schools in Nottinghamshire via the local education authority (LEA), to all GP surgeries, to strategic staff within social services, to Relate, mediation services and organisations for separated or divorced people, to other local counselling services and to specific local organisations for children and young people.

- *Aim 3:* To develop a greater understanding of the needs of children and young people who are experiencing or have been through parental separation or divorce.

The awareness-raising strategy outlined above helped to develop a greater understanding of these issues. In addition, the counsellor offers training sessions on divorce and separation and how these affect children. These training sessions are for other professionals and organisations and interested parents. This combination of training and awareness-raising has helped to develop more understanding of the issues. The counsellor has also responded informally to comments made regarding divorce and separation in a local newspaper. The publication of this letter led to several people finding out about and contacting the project.

- *Objective 1:* To provide counselling support for children and young persons aged four to 18 years who are affected by parental divorce and separation, on an individual basis or jointly with siblings.

As indicated above, the service has received over 80 referrals since its inception and has completed work in about 70 per cent of these cases. The majority of the work has been on a one-to-one basis although some children and young people have been seen as sibling groups. Furthermore, the service has met the needs of children across the age range of four to 18. As the counsellor commented:

There's a cluster, I would say, more normally of say [between the ages of] seven to eight and fourteen to fifteen, that's the main age range, but I have seen them as young as four and as old as eighteen.

The first 50 children and young people referred to the services spanned the entire age range, the average age, both mean and median being ten years.

The aim of the service is to try and meet the needs of the young people in six to eight sessions, but this has not always proved possible and some require more extensive counselling over an extended period of time. The counsellor feels that this can be problematic when young people are seen as sibling groups:

That's [the need for further counselling] a difficulty if it occurs in a sibling situation.

Because I have seen children together as sibling pairs, and sometimes one needs to carry on and the other doesn't. I guess that was part of the early learning process.

All children and young people who use the service are informed that they can contact the counsellor again should they experience further distress.

- *Objective 2:* To establish support groups for children and young people in schools, and be responsive to their needs.

The counsellor has worked in one school with a group of young people experiencing difficulties related to parental separation and family breakdown. In this particular school, the group has worked very well and the teaching staff are very pleased with the way in which the children have responded. The school in this instance found out about the service from the leaflet which was sent via the LEA delivery (proving the success of this approach) and contacted Family Care for more details. A teacher from the school commented:

It was something that I had been really worried about, supporting children whose behavioural difficulties stem from that, and so it seemed like manna from heaven, so I wrote almost immediately and said 'Yes, we would love to be involved' because they were offering to come into schools, offering the services to schools.

The counsellor was also pleased with the group work, feeling that it had offered the opportunity to work together with young people and therefore enabled her to see more children in a relatively short space of time – a good use of her limited time. She did feel that some of the children had been referred inappropriately but that all of the children had benefited from the group sessions. Her feeling was that group work is an excellent way forward for many children, but that a separate

group worker would improve the service and the number of young people who could be supported. Thus, while other schools have expressed an interest in her doing some group work with their pupils, she is not in a position to respond at the moment.

Some of the children interviewed had been involved in group work and their comments are included below (see children's perceptions).

- *Objective 3:* Through contact with primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges, to promote greater understanding of the effects on youngsters of divorce and separation, and the implications for their needs within these educational establishments.

The points made above indicate the success of working in partnership with schools and other educational establishments. The success of this approach has led to the service actually having to refuse further group work for the time being, and also to schools becoming the major source of referral to the service. A teacher at the school where group work was initiated commented:

I have to say that as a result of this work we have even extended it. We have extended it further, we now have our own art therapist employed by the family of schools ... so it would be very hard to be critical because, as I say, we have not only taken advantage of that service, but extended it and employed someone.

The counsellor is also available for training sessions within schools, as part of the job description and wider aims of the post.

- *Objective 4:* To promote the service to other agencies involved with children and families, including social services, health authorities, the voluntary sector and faith communities.

Again, the awareness-raising strategy outlined above has been used to promote the service, and the availability of the counsellor for training sessions will also help to promote not only the service, but also the issues which underpin it and make it necessary.

Of the first 50 young people who used the service, all bar one were white European. Since then another Asian young person and two of African Caribbean heritage have used the service. However,

continued efforts are required within the black and Asian communities and faiths if the service is to respond to the needs of all young people who require it.

The service appears to have successfully met some of its aims and objectives, particularly with regard to working with children and young people, offering support across a wide age range and making contacts with educational establishments. It is working towards meeting the others, having operated a successful awareness-raising strategy and having made contact with many other individuals, organisations and agencies which support children and families and which can refer on to the service.

In some ways the service has been a victim of its own success. The large number of children and young people supported and the level of need identified (which sometimes requires more protracted and extensive support) has reduced the potential for the service to offer group work in schools and has resulted in the very recent establishment of a waiting list for new referrals.

Having identified the aims and objectives of the service and discussed the extent to which these are being realised, we now look at perceptions of the service.

### **Children's experiences and perceptions of the service**

The children interviewed ranged in age from eight to 15. All had experienced family separation and in one case the child had experienced the breakdown of a subsequent relationship. Five of the six children and young people are now living in lone parent families, although in two cases the parent with whom they reside has embarked on a new relationship. The other young person is now living with a parent and step-parent.

During interviews the children were asked about their initial feelings about the counsellor and counselling sessions; the environment, activities, toys and games etc.; how they had felt before counselling and how they felt after the sessions; how they felt about confidentiality; and whether they would recommend the service to any friends whose parents were separated or divorcing.

The younger children were less aware of how they had found out about the service and who had made the initial referral. In two cases they had been introduced to the service via their school and, as the teacher pointed out, the school has lots of different people coming and going, such as

classroom assistants etc. so another face was easily accepted by the children. In other cases the parents had heard about the service and had asked for their children to be seen by the counsellor. Another young person appears to have been informed by both the school welfare officer and the family social worker. The 15 year old had wanted to discuss her feelings with an outsider and, although her mother was initially told about the service, she was eager to get involved.

### ***Perceptions of the counsellor***

The responses from the children and young people were very encouraging. For example, when asked about their feelings with regard to the counsellor comments included:

I liked her, I thought it was a good idea [to meet first before the initial counselling session], you know, meeting before and not just to be plonked in front of her ...she didn't put any pressure on me or anything. I could just talk about what I wanted to.

Sharon [counsellor] is a really nice person, she is kind, she is helpful.

She was very easy to talk to, like I couldn't really talk to [teacher] she was very easy to talk to because she listens very hard.

I just think she's really great and she knows how to, she knows what to say to you whatever mood you're in ...she knows if I'm down, then she'll try and bring me up and if I'm happy she'll try and keep me happy.

I trust her, you have to feel safe.

She were good, I liked her and she made me laugh sometimes.

I was a bit shy, I'm not shy with her any more though.

I just did feel totally comfortable with her.

Possibly the highest accolade for the counsellor is the comment on feeling safe - a prerequisite for this type of work. The comments indicate not only the success of the service, but also the personal qualities of the counsellor who made the children feel comfortable and safe.

***Perceptions of the environment, activities etc.***

When asked about the physical environment and the toys, games and other activities, the children were also enthusiastic although, as one would expect, some preferred one activity over another. The following comments were made:

We did some pictures and I liked to play with the dollies. It was good, there was some dollies and some lego and there was some play dough that I could play with and some puppets ...I liked it when we were playing with the puppets and making stories about the puppets ...reading books wasn't very good.

I thought it was really wicked going in ...they had teddies and toys and everything, I played with the toys and things. I think it is much better, you know, compared to a room where it is a bit boring. I liked going into the children's room.

It's [room] got children's toys in it and stuff like that. I feel like I'm in a room where I should be ...it's colourful and that and it brings you up a bit. It's not like you're sitting in a dull room and you're feeling awkward, it makes you feel as if this is a room where they want you to be happy ...they've got all the right stuff in the room. They've got paper if you just want to draw and everything. It's really good.

I get to talk about how I'm feeling and everything which gets it off my chest ...we have drawing pictures ...we use plasticine ...but we tend to just talk.

Face gunge, play dough, a house and sand ...it's [room] clean and there is a lot of bars on the window.

We had this game, it was called Feelings ...that was fun, I liked that game because you can express your feelings in a game, the first time I heard of that. You can actually, like, if it says 'emotion' that means 'Are you mad, sad?', it told you questions, 'Do you like your dad's wife?'

We used to play games and draw pictures and then we had a drink and a biscuit ...we used to play ball games ...we used to make a story ...we used to draw and play hangman and things like that.

We used to play games and draw pictures and then we had a drink and a biscuit ...we used to play ball games ...we used to make a story ...we used to draw and play hangman and things like that.

The children and young people all had something positive to say about the activities done during sessions with the counsellor. For the younger ones, the games were the most important, whereas the older ones also felt that they enjoyed talking to the counsellor and 'off loading' as much as the other activities. The bars on the windows, commented on by one of the younger children, are there for insurance purposes and are drawn back during the day.

### ***Feelings before counselling***

When asked about their feelings before and after the counselling, some of the younger children found it quite difficult to articulate how they had been feeling, although all appeared to have enjoyed the sessions and felt comfortable during them. Comments regarding their initial feelings included:

Sometimes I felt it [the divorce] was my fault, when I was little ...I'm still sad. When dad went off I was a bit confused about everything.

I didn't really talk to my friends at all ...but I talked to my doctor a lot ...I was always in tears, but then I got into medication [from the GP].

Things were getting on top of me in school, I just couldn't cope with the school and I just needed someone to talk to I suppose, and get it all out of my system.

I don't really care [about parents separating] ...I feel a bit sad ...because she [mother] took my brother away from me.

I was a bit naughty at times ...when [mother's partner] left I was so sad ...I didn't want to show it to my mum, I just wanted him. Just to have happy times. So I didn't react, I cried at night but I didn't want my mum to hear it, she would start crying.

When I never used to go to Sharon [counsellor] I used to always think about why did my mum and dad split up and all that.

The above comments indicate some of the hurt, anxiety and confusion felt by the young people before the counselling sessions. Although counselling could not change their family situations, it did offer them the opportunity to talk through their feelings and the freedom to express these feelings without hurting their parents.

### ***Feelings following counselling***

The children and young people all felt that the counselling sessions had helped them in some way, either by helping them to understand about family breakdown and to realise that they were not the only people in that position, or by helping them to come to terms with their own feelings of loss and therefore make them feel less sad. Comments included:

I didn't feel as sad because I knew I had someone to talk to, to tell someone ...it stopped me feeling sad a bit, yeah ...it made me understand a bit better ...I don't feel that confused any more.

I get to talk about how I'm feeling and everything, which gets it off my chest and she [counsellor] helps me see things from different points of view and from angles which really helps ...I think I have come to terms with it more, it has helped me come to terms with it definitely.

I didn't think that she'd [counsellor] understand. I just thought that it was my problem and no-one would understand about it. And she has listened and she's helped ...I was stressed, I was shouting and I was always losing my temper and now I feel like I've calmed down a lot.

I'm not as angry now as what I was, I've sorted out what has happened and everything, but now I can put it behind me and get on with everything now.

It just helps to get it out of me.

We talked about how I was feeling, if I was happy enough ...I said 'Yes' it's helping me a lot ...I was a bit scared, she has made my fear go away ...I was happy with what she did because I knew she was trying to help me, not trying to hurt me.

It helped me, it calmed me down and things like that ...easier, yeah [to understand] I am getting used to it and it has made it easier for me.

### ***Confidentiality***

The children and young people were offered a confidential service and assured that the counsellor would not discuss the sessions with their parents, teachers or anyone else unless they disclosed anything which put them at risk. The counsellor explained how the issue of confidentiality was broached:

I tell the parents in the first meeting and then I tell the children when they come to see me and the rule is that if they reveal that somebody's abusing them that I would have to make that known. And that's the circumstances in which I'd breach it, obviously also if I felt their safety was at risk ...and I remind them ...if some of the children have wanted to tell me secrets I remind them what our rule is about secrets.

Clearly how this issue is approached depends upon the age and understanding of the children concerned, but the young people all appeared to understand that the service was confidential although some still appeared reluctant to discuss some things in case it upset their parents. Some of the young people commented on the confidentiality offered:

I could say 'Mum is really, really whatever' kind of thing, and she [counsellor] would say 'That's fine' ...when I come out, my mum goes 'What did you talk about?' and I say 'It's none of your business' I quite like that, that's important to me, that confidentiality.

I didn't really want to tell her [counsellor] a lot because mum would tell me off. She doesn't like me talking about her.

It's [confidentiality] quite important. I wouldn't want my dad to know what went off inside my head because I think he'd be a bit worried ...he knew I needed someone to talk to so he was the one that first suggested it.

She [counsellor] told me [the service was confidential] I thought she was telling a lie at first because I didn't really know her, but through the weeks I began to trust her.

In some cases confidentiality did not appear to be an issue and the children simply said that they trusted the counsellor, particularly the younger ones. However, the older ones valued it more highly. The comments above, relating to initial disbelief and the feeling that to talk openly may upset or anger parents, reflect the power imbalance inherent in adult-child relationships. It is difficult for some children to fully believe that they can talk openly with an adult who will not discuss this with their parent.

### ***Recommending the service to others***

All of the children and young people were asked whether, if they had a friend whose parents were separating or getting divorced, they would tell their friend about the service and whether they thought it might help a friend. All said they would tell a friend and felt it would help. This reflects the level of satisfaction they felt with the service, highlighted in their comments above.

### **Parental perceptions of the service**

In addition to ascertaining the children's perceptions of the service, we were also interested in how the parents viewed it. During interviews we asked parents how they had heard of the service; what their expectations had been; whether they felt their children had benefited from the counselling; how they felt about the counsellor; how they viewed the confidential nature of the service and the level of feedback that they had required and had actually received; and whether they felt they could recommend the service to someone else in a similar position.

### ***Initial contact with the service***

Parents heard about the service from a variety of sources. In some cases they were told about it by a professional and followed it up themselves, contacting Family Care and requesting the service. One of the parents was informed about the service by a professional who was supporting her following her separation. She was unclear about which organisation the professional worked for, but it may have been another member of Family Care or someone from Relate. In another case, a family member heard that the service was about to start and passed this information on. Another parent heard about the service from a teacher at school when he told the school that he and his wife were about to separate. In another case, one parent heard about the service from a professional and passed the information on to her expartner. The remaining parents were told about the service by the school which organised the group sessions.

### *Initial expectations*

Initial parental expectations regarding counselling varied considerably. Some of the parents felt that their children needed to speak to somebody about the family situation, and would benefit from counselling, while others were less clear about what the service could offer their children.

Comments from parents included:

I think part of the problem was because I was so upset she didn't like to bother me, because she was sort of looking after me, while I was worried sick about her. I think she needed somebody else really, to go through it all, someone who would just sit and let her go through lots of things with her...she wouldn't tell anybody at school because she said she was ashamed...she really needed to be away from everybody she knew, really.

Well I knew he needed help, there was a lot of anger...there was a lot of bad language

There was obviously a divided loyalty and I would imagine that she felt she needed to talk to somebody about it, to sort it out...I just felt it would give her somebody independent who she knew wouldn't be talking to us, so she felt she could open up.

Other parents were less clear about their expectations and the reasons their children may have needed counselling, for example one parent commented: 'Well I thought it couldn't do her any harm...she was pretty unhappy so I thought I was prepared to give them a chance' although she remained unconvinced that her daughter would benefit positively from the experience. This parent in particular had reservations from the outset, many of which were tied in with the issue of confidentiality which is discussed below. In spite of her reservations she decided to give permission for the counselling, but remains unconvinced that this was the right decision and that her child benefited from the service.

Where the children were given group sessions in school, the teachers had suggested that counselling may help the children and the parents were not always clear about the reasons:

I was told because he was a little disruptive in the school, in class, they put it down to the fact that he had come from a broken home, but I think he's just a normal little boy, you know, playing up.

She [teacher] did tell me he would benefit from it because he has special needs.

The above comments indicate that parents and teachers often have their own reasons for referring to the service, something which the counsellor herself commented on:

Of course they've got different agendas. The school want you to help with their behaviour in school, because they can see it's distressing the children and they're acting out in school.

The parents may want the same thing for home, or they may have other issues and you can't be sure. And you've always got to bear in mind that those agendas may be completely different to the child's agenda.

The comments suggest that there can be positive, negative or neutral reasons for the parents requesting or agreeing to the service.

### ***Perceived benefits or drawbacks of the service***

While most of the parents could see some improvements in their children's general well being following the sessions, they were not always clear whether this was a direct result of the counselling. Nevertheless, these changes were appreciated by the parents. One parent commented:

I don't know what she would have been like if she hadn't seen her [counsellor] .that's the truth as to how much it helped, I really don't know .she's so much better now than she was when she left Sharon anyway, there's been such a huge leap forward in that time, but a lot of that's just down to her growing up .it's hard to say really. I think maybe it helped to get it off her chest at the time.

Another parent's comments reflected her perceptions of the reasons the school teaching staff felt her child would benefit from the service:

Well, he is getting better marks and things... but he likes his teacher, so I don't know which, you know, which way it would have gone really .but I would say he is a little bit more open about talking about past things which have happened.

Other parents, however, were more confident that their children had benefited positively from the counselling:

Sharon helped him understand it, that it's not his fault and it's not his responsibility or anything like that, he's come to terms with that now. He enjoys going to see her because I know he's got a lot of trust in her, which is quite hard for [son] to trust someone.

It's very difficult to sort of judge or mark it, counselling ...really it's a very gradual process, just a change in thinking really ...all I can say is that in my mind she seems secure and happy and I was quite happy for her to see somebody and I felt she benefited from it.

I really think it has helped him a lot ...I mean he has been with Sharon and she has been brilliant with him. She has got a lot of things out of him that I couldn't get out of him. Understanding about the break up and things ...I am really pleased that we did go ahead with it.

Interestingly, one parent also commented that she felt her own relationship with her expartner had improved as a result of the counselling. She felt that it had brought them closer together and, by improving the child's understanding of the situation, had also improved her own understanding.

### ***Feelings about the counsellor***

All of the parents met the counsellor before their children started the sessions apart from the one who no longer lives in the area, whose consent was obtained by telephone. This initial contact was for the counsellor to gain parental permission, to explain the service and to explain the rules regarding confidentiality. Most had one further meeting to discuss progress, but apart from this the majority of parents only saw the counsellor when dropping off and collecting their children before and after sessions. In some cases, therefore, they found it difficult to make judgements about her as a person. Where they felt able to comment on her qualities, all were positive, usually commenting in terms of the way she treated their children and her approachability and friendliness. Even the one parent who had fairly negative feelings about the counselling as a whole, was positive about the counsellor herself:

I thought the conversations I had on the phone with Sharon were really good, very good. She was very supportive. I mean, there were a few times when I was distraught about things she'd [daughter] been saying, things she's been doing .she was actually sort of counselling me on the phone ...I personally got a lot out of that for me. Just to be told things from Sharon, like 'Well that's perfectly normal, you know'. Oh, thank God for that, you know that was really helpful to me.

However, in spite of having some very positive experiences with the counsellor, this parent remained unconvinced of the value of the service:

I think they had a kind of text book attitude to how children should feel and what is normal for a child in that situation to feel, as if they all feel the same ...perhaps not taking into consideration that particular child in that particular situation.

### ***Confidentiality and feedback***

The issue of confidentiality appeared to divide parents. Most were happy that the service was a confidential one and had no concerns about their children speaking in confidence to the counsellor. Some thought the service should be confidential but would have appreciated more feedback. One parent in particular, who had concerns about the whole experience, was very unhappy about the confidential nature of the service.

Those parents who felt happy with the confidentiality saw it in a positive light as something to which their children had a right. Comments from these parents included:

In fact, I think the first time I took him I said to him 'If you've got something to say, just say it. Keep in mind no-one is going to know what you say. Sharon won't tell anybody'

I felt that by being totally confidential for her that it would allow her to open up and that the things that she was keeping secret in her own mind, she could just release and get an answer, and she could go on from that and that she wouldn't end up stuck and bottle up feelings that she didn't understand.

Well, a child should be able to express his feelings without any reprisals from anybody really ...if it helps him, if it is helping him to come to terms with what has happened, and to sort of prove that he is not at fault when the relationship breaks down, then I think it must work.

One of the parents was initially happy with the confidential nature of the service but later felt threatened by it:

I thought that [confidentiality] was what was needed and I was quite happy with that until, I suppose, recently ...I felt, but I might be wrong because we don't actually know, she was sometimes using Sharon as a complaining thing about me ...I was a bit uncomfortable about that.

In the case of the one parent who had misgivings about the whole process, most of these misgivings seemed to stem from the confidential nature of the service:

My main worry, once I found out about it and what it entailed, when they told me I imagined that it would be very much talking to us both or even, if they were talking to her, that I would be kept informed all the time ...there was nothing that she said that could have bothered me ...she was totally open with me about everything that she was feeling ...I know it was done for the right reasons, but I'm still not sure that they are good reasons.

Given that the majority of parents were happy for the service to be a confidential one, most had limited expectations regarding feedback and were satisfied with the level of feedback offered to them. Again, the parent who was unhappy with the issue of confidentiality was also unhappy about the limited feedback she received.

It takes a great deal of courage for a parent to give consent for their child to undergo confidential counselling sessions. In the case of divorce or separation, many parents feel they have 'failed' in their relationship and the hurt experienced by their children can add to these feelings of failure. It is therefore understandable that some parents fear that, in confidential sessions, their children will complain about them and they may be judged inadequate or 'bad' parents. The one parent whose feelings were so negative may, with hindsight, have been better advised to seek family counselling, rather than counselling for the child alone, to reduce these feelings and make her feel more secure. However, the counselling was directed at the child and the child did not appear to share her parent's concerns.

### ***Recommending the service to others***

With one exception all of the parents would be happy to recommend the service to other parents whose children were affected by parental divorce or separation. Even this parent stated: 'I would just say "There is this service, I've used it but I'm not sure it did a great deal of good, but it didn't do any harm and if you want to try it, it's there".'

Overall, the interviews with parents suggest that they are satisfied with the service and that their children have benefited from it in some ways. All gave their consent for their children to use the service and the majority were satisfied with the outcomes. Those who had actively sought the service were clearer in their own objectives and tended to express more satisfaction with the

outcomes. The one parent who remained unconvinced about the value of the service at least felt it had done no harm, even if it had done no good.

### **Professionals' perceptions**

We interviewed only three professionals (in addition to the counsellor herself) therefore these comments cannot be said to be representative of all those who refer young people on to the service or are involved with it in any other capacity. The three professionals interviewed were a member of the local Relate organisation, a teacher at the school where the group work took place and a teacher in another school.

Relate has been involved with the service from its conception, through work with the local mediation service. As a counselling service for adults who are experiencing relationship problems, the organisation was aware that many of these people have children and were requesting a service for their children. This is not a service which Relate is able to offer, therefore Relate counsellors were eager to be able to recommend a support service for children affected by divorce or separation. While Relate counsellors have made several informal referrals to the service, they were unable to state the exact number since they do not make written referrals but simply inform clients that the service exists and give them information on how to contact the service. They do not see it as their role to follow up whether clients have acted on this information. The staff member to whom we spoke indicated that many parents, while expressing the desire for support for their children often requested somewhere where they and their children could be supported together:

I think we are perhaps then getting into the realms of family therapy and group therapy when we are looking at parental separation and the effect on the child, I think it is probably better for the child to have a forum for themselves, on their own ... when it's been raised by the mother or the father, I think they haven't actually seen it from the child's point of view.

Relate counsellors tend, in these circumstances, to recommend mediation for the parents and the children's counselling service for the children. Because referrals are informal, however, they have no way of knowing the number who actually take them up. As the Relate counsellor commented: 'There is a difference between what people say is a need and then actually taking it [the offer] up'. However, records from the Children's Counselling Service suggest that the majority of referrals in 1996 did come via Relate, indicating that, initially at least, many clients were following up the recommendations of Relate counsellors. Current thinking indicates that children should be involved

in mediation as well, not directly in the mediation process, but to be fully informed about what parents propose for the future (see Richards, 1995). While this may be beneficial, the decisions remain in the hands of parents and children may still require independent support and counselling to help them to come to terms with the decisions which affect them so greatly but on which they have little influence.

The teacher in the school where group work has been instigated has been extremely satisfied with the service. As indicated earlier, the school found out about the service after receiving a leaflet via the local education authority. As the counsellor indicated (see above) teaching staff often have their own agendas for referring children to the service, and this teacher acknowledged that behavioural problems were often the major cause for concern although she linked these to family breakdown and the effects this has on children. Sharon suggested that in two cases the referrals had probably, with hindsight, been inappropriate. While the teacher did not suggest that any of the referrals were inappropriate, she did imply that the children had, perhaps, been less affected than others in the school and that there were other children she would now refer to the service:

You can't set children up to fail, you can't put them in a situation where they are going to feel worse at the end of it and I wanted to know whether Sharon's work was going to be successful whether this kind of work was going to be beneficial. I was delighted with the first group and therefore we talked about the most difficult two then.

In fact the teacher was 'testing the water' to see how advantageous the service was going to be, before referring other children with what she considered to be more difficult problems. The school staff are very satisfied with the service provided and are anxious to continue the group work. When asked about the outcomes of the counselling, the teacher commented:

As the weeks went by, he [child] got calmer and calmer and more positive about his work and about his relationships with other children the other child, again there has been an improvement so I definitely feel that Sharon's time is supporting his development and this is a very, very able child, very intelligent boy who was totally underachieving.

Research suggests that children of divorced parents are more likely to show behavioural disturbance and lower levels of educational achievement (Elliott and Richards, 1991) and the comments by teachers, parents and children who took part in the group work in this school suggest that short-term interventions can have a positive effect on these problems.

The other teacher had found out about the service after the school received a pamphlet from Family Care. This teacher had referred about ten young people to the service and was very satisfied with the process of referral and the outcomes. Again the reasons for referral were diverse but the outcomes were felt to be tangible:

It definitely helps, it definitely helps. The child having somebody who has the time to listen to them and has the time and the expertise to be able to ask the right questions, to tease out the problems, the deep-seated problems, to me is an invaluable service ...the children who've had the service are definitely much more at ease and much more able to cope with what's going on.

This teacher also commented positively on the counsellor's involvement in a staff training session on peer counselling, which she perceived as beneficial to the school and which contributes towards Family Care's objectives of providing training and promoting understanding of the wider issues of parental separation and divorce.

However, this particular teacher also commented on the fact that the referral process was fast: 'Now obviously if the referral time is extended then the positive results, or the positive comments that you've had from me would not be quite so forthcoming, because children like things to happen immediately, as a lot of adults do'. In this instance, the instigation of a waiting list would be viewed in a rather negative light. Waiting times and receipt of a service are clearly linked with adequate funding, summed up by the teacher who commented:

I think it's a service that appears to be in its infancy, I just hope that the funding that has been provided to actually provide this service in the first place will continue, because the service that's being provided is, to me, one of the best things that the children can have should they need it.

### **Summary and conclusions**

The Children's Counselling Service has supported a large number of children and young people since its inception in 1996. It has achieved many of its aims and objectives, most notably in providing a service to children across a wide age range and in group working with children in schools and raising awareness of the issues within educational establishments. The provision of training to professional groups and organisations will enable it to continue to achieve its aims and objectives.

Continued efforts need to be made to meet the needs of black and Asian young people affected by divorce or separation, although reflection, awareness-raising and training are ongoing and may result, in the future, in more referrals from ethnic minority communities. The service currently only has one worker which exacerbates the difficulties in reaching the various ethnic minority communities.

The issue of confidentiality is critical to the success of the service, but can be misunderstood by parents. Some parents may therefore need more support themselves and reassurance that they are not being judged as parents. An acknowledgement of the fears and anxieties of parents may help to reduce the potential for conflict around the issue of confidentiality.

The counsellor has been struck by the sometimes intractable parental relationships which contribute to children's feelings of sadness and anxiety. In these cases there has often been a need for more protracted counselling rather than the six to eight sessions envisaged. Partially as a result of these cases requiring prolonged support the service has now instigated a waiting list for new referrals.

The value of group work in schools has been great, with larger numbers of children being seen and with tangible outcomes in terms of improved educational performance. These children have also benefited from peer support. Group work is a very good use of limited resources, both financial and in terms of time and the service would greatly benefit from an additional designated group worker.

Overall, the service provides excellent value for money, making good use of limited financial, time and personnel resources. Further expansion is now limited due to financial constraints. External specialist support is a necessary expenditure for a project such as this if the counsellor is to be fully supported and must be budgeted for in any future work.

The service is highly valued by children and young people, parents/carers and local professionals, and there have been some very positive outcomes, not only for the children concerned, but also for parents and professionals. In its first two years the service has proved itself a much needed asset to local resources and, given the imminent changes to the law which will require family mediation and a 'period for reflection' prior to divorce, demand for the service is likely to increase.

## **References**

Elliott, J. and Richards, M. (1991) 'Children and divorce: educational performance and behaviour before and after parental separation', *International Journal of Law and the Family*, 5: 258-76.

Richards, M. (1995) 'But what about the children? Some reflections on the divorce White Paper', *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 7: 4: 223-7.

## **Appendix 1: Interview schedules**

This appendix provides a broad overview of the themes and issues discussed during interviews with children and young people, parents/cares and professionals who have referred on to the project. The schedules relate to themes covered rather than specific questions asked.

### **Children and young people**

Age; background information about family .who they live with, parents, siblings, grandparents etc.; when parents/carers separated, contact with absent parent/carer; feelings now regarding family breakdown; feelings at the point of parents/carers separating; any particular problems following separation .school, friendships, behaviour, ‘taking sides’ etc.; any friends in similar position; how easy is it to tell others about family situation; who would they chooses to live with; feelings regarding current living arrangements. *Counselling* .how did they find out about service; how many times counsellor seen; would they have wanted more or fewer sessions; feelings regarding activities etc. with counsellor; feelings regarding room used for counselling; did counselling help .if so, how, if not, why; did they trust counsellor; feelings regarding confidentiality; general feelings regarding counsellor; best and worst things about seeing counsellor; any criticisms of service; anything that could be improved; would they recommend service to friends in similar position.

### **Parents/carers**

Background information .whether married, how long married, when separated, whether divorced; number and ages of children and details of which children used service; relationship with ex-partner and children at time of separation and now; who lives with whom and contact arrangements; any problems with residence and contact. *Counselling* .how did they hear of service; initial feelings regarding service .any worries, apprehensions etc.; did they feel children needed counselling; why did they give consent; how did other parent feel, did they discuss it together; feelings regarding confidentiality; feelings on meeting counsellor; how much contact with counsellor; how many times did children see counsellor; did children benefit from seeing counsellor .if so, in what ways, if not, level of disappointment, feelings now; what did they want/expect from counselling; were these expectations met; overall feelings regarding service; would they recommend service to others in similar position; any criticisms of service; any improvements which could be made.

**Professionals/referrers**

How they heard of service; initial feelings regarding service; initial meeting/contact with organisation and counsellor; referral process; how many young people referred; reasons for referral; own objectives in making referral; to what extent have objectives been realised; level of satisfaction with service provided; feelings regarding confidential nature of service; level of feedback received and satisfaction with feedback; approachability of staff; outcomes of counselling; any practical problems relating to referral process etc.; is service necessary; any alternative sources if service did not exist; any criticisms of service; any improvements which could be made.