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*Supporting children and
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Principal researchers

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- Dr Joe Sempik

Project length

6 months

Funder

NCH and the Children's Fund

Where to find more evidence

Sempik, J. and Munro, E.R. (2008) *An Evaluation of the Derbyshire NCH Children's Support Service: perceptions of satisfaction and effectiveness*. Loughborough: CCFR.

This CCFR Evidence paper forms part of the Promoting the **Wellbeing of Children and Young People** research programme.

This evidence paper was written by Emily R. Munro and Joe Sempik.

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Rodgers, B. and Pryor, J. (1998) *Divorce and Separation: The Outcomes for Children*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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Supporting Children and Families

An evaluation of the Derbyshire NCH Children's Support Service

Parental separation and divorce affects many children and their families. The Derbyshire NCH Children's Support Service aims to reduce the negative impacts of family conflict on children, by offering them up to six sessions with a support worker. This evaluation was conducted to examine service user and stakeholder perceptions of the role, value and purpose of the service and to identify strengths and weaknesses in what is provided.

- Parents' reasons for attending the service related to their children's emotional and behavioural difficulties and a desire for improvements in their wellbeing; the opportunity for their son or daughter to talk about their feelings and emotions with someone independent or impartial; and to enable children to understand the family situation and come to terms with changes in family circumstances.
- Data from feedback forms revealed that satisfaction with the service was high. Ninety two per cent of parents rated the service as 'good' or 'very good'. Seventy seven per cent felt the service had 'helped a lot'; a further 20 per cent felt the service had helped 'a little'. Before coming to the service twenty nine per cent of children felt happy; after attending this had risen to seventy one per cent.
- Parents also felt that the service enabled children to develop strategies to cope with particular difficulties, including, for example, anger and nightmares, through communication.
- Family Resource Workers saw the outcomes of the service as enabling children to express their feelings, communicate better with their parents (and others), and helping them to manage their anger (thereby improving their behaviour in school). These were achieved through development of specific strategies 'taught' to the children during the course

- of the support sessions and also by providing children with an opportunity to talk. They recognised the value to the children of being able to speak to impartial adults who were trained and experienced in listening to their problems.
- CAMHS workers suggested that the support service used methods and approaches that were "imaginative" and "creative" and which engaged with the children. The service did not simply offer "talking". One great strength of the NCH Children's Support Service was that it was seen as not putting a "mental health label" on the situation or making it part of the medical process.

Project aims

The aims and objectives were to:

- identify benefits of the service to children and their families and the evidence for this;
- explore the levels of satisfaction of clients who have previously attended the support service and to investigate strengths and weaknesses of the service;
- examine the interactions of other agencies (stakeholders) with the NCH Children's Support Service and to explore the perceptions, views and needs of those stakeholders with respect to the service;
- identify any issues that need to be addressed to improve service provision.

Methodology

This evaluation examined feedback forms completed by parents, children and young people at the end of their contact with the service; surveyed and interviewed a small sample of parents and children who had had involvement with the service in the last five years; followed the progress of three current cases (interviewing the families at regular intervals); interviewed school-based Family Resource Workers and a school nurse, professionals from CAMHS, CAFCASS and NCH support workers.

NCH Children's Support Service

NCH Children's Support Service provides a voluntary service that aims to support children who are experiencing difficulties as a result of parental separation. Referrals are taken by a number of different routes, including schools, CAMHS, CAFCASS and GPs. Self-referrals are also accepted. Children may attend a programme of up to six sessions with a support worker after an initial assessment in which the parent (or both parents) and child may be seen either jointly or separately.

Expectations of the service

Parents provided a range of reasons for attending the service. Helping children to come to terms with changes in family circumstances by allowing them the opportunity to communicate and discuss how they were feeling was seen to be valuable. The independent and impartial nature of the support workers was also identified as important in allowing children to discuss their emotions openly.

Although there was a hope the service would 'benefit' their child, few had clear expectations about final outcomes.

I didn't have an expectations. I just hoped that they would be able to help out...hoping there would be some kind of help at the end of it (Birth parent)

Parents' views

Feedback forms and interviews with parents both indicated a high level of satisfaction with the service. Almost three quarters (77%) of parents' felt that the service had helped a lot (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: What difference has the service made? (Parents' responses)

| | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Helped a lot | 23 | 76.7 |
| Helped a little | 6 | 20.0 |
| Didn't help | 1 | 3.3 |
| Made things much worse | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 30 | 100.0 |

Parents' identified the following benefits:

- Improved emotional wellbeing – children were perceived by parents to be happier and less angry. Improvements in behaviour were also reported.
- Communication – parents felt that children had become more communicative and 'opened up' about their emotions; parents felt that communication with their children had improved
- Understanding – children had a better understanding of the family situation.

One mother reflected that after attending the service, her son:

Came to terms with how he was feeling and what was going on in his head; [he] started to open up

Another mother identified how her son had been reluctant to discuss his feeling with her:

He didn't want to say something to me in case it upset me

The independent and impartial nature of the support service was therefore particularly valuable. After attending the services, she felt there was a positive change in her son's wellbeing:

He seemed a lot more confident while he was seeing her, he was able to talk about all his problems and get it off his chest and he does feel a lot more confident even now. If he's got a problem he will actually say he's got a problem, he won't leave it and leave it till it's the last possible minute to tell you.

Children's views

Children completed feedback forms at the end of their programme of sessions. Under a third (29%) said they felt happy before attending the service. After the programme this rose to 71%. Similarly, a quarter of the children were 'sad' before the start of the session but only one was sad afterwards.

Stakeholders' views of effectiveness

A small number of professionals from schools (Family Resource Workers and a school nurse), CAMHS and CAFCASS were interviewed about their experiences of referring cases to the NCH support service and their views of what was provided. Once again, opinions were positive and support workers' expertise 'around family break up and helping children manage with that' (family resource worker) was acknowledged.

The CAMHS team also saw NCH as being effective at involving parents in the service in a very direct way. The NCH support workers were seen as giving 'firm', but non-judgmental advice to parents and also being persistent:

They can, in my experience, be quite persistent in engaging parents and being very clear about what parents need to be doing differently, and in quite clear and assertive [ways], necessarily so, with parents at the role that they take in the emotional well being of their children. And I think parents have both appreciated that and I think there's a tendency sometimes, in the past there's been a tendency for services generally to pussyfoot around that bit. I think NCH have started to find really effective ways of being very clear and assertive with parents.

Implications for policy and practice

Around one in three children will experience parental separation before the age of sixteen. Children and young people are affected by divorce to varying degrees.

Many children receive informal support from friends and family as they seek to adjust to changes in household composition and contact arrangements with non-resident parents (Maclean 2004). However, some children and parents benefit from more formal interventions and professional help (Rodgers and Pryor 1998, Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001, Hawthorn et al. 2003). Findings from this evaluation indicate that interventions offered by the Derbyshire NCH Children's Support Service are highly rated and valued.

Every family I have worked with have commented on how positive they have found the support of NCH (CAFCASS Family Court Advisor).