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Putting Children First – it's not about the kids!

March 2, 2012 by karenwoodall

In 2006, I wrote a book with my husband Nick called Putting Children First. The book was intended to set out for parents, the ways in which working together after separation can bring better outcomes for children. As separated parents ourselves, we had gone through much of the difficulties that family separation brings. I was a single parent in the late eighties, struggling to bring up my daughter alone and, when I met him, Nick was recovering from the shock of separation from his very small children after their mother had decided to move on and move out, taking the children with her. Over the intervening years we both shared the care of our children, me with my daughter's step father and he with the mother of his children, whilst he and I put off living together for some seven years in order not to disrupt our children's lives too much. Not only have we both worked at the Centre for Separated Families for a combined thirty five years, we have lived the experience of family separation including single parenting, sharing care and step parenting.

Writing the book, we thought, might be a way of sharing some of the things we did wrong as well as some of the things we did right. It also, in our view, set down our thoughts of what child focused parenting after family separation might look like in the days ahead when sharing care of children would not be constantly questioned. In 2007, when the book was published, the Labour government presided and, back then, whilst there were some enlightened moves being made to modernise the CSA, the prevailing wind very much kept the old order in place. Later, whilst the bigger charities were banding together to launch the 'Kids in the Middle' campaign (a lobby which levered out millions and yet produced nothing in the way of real change), we continued to develop the child focused practice that still underpins our work to this day. It is a practice that we use in our work with families and in our training to other practitioners. It is also a philosophy that, in our view, forms a foundation stone that could help to make a modernised Children Act effective in enabling children to maintain a relationship with mothers and fathers after separation.

Child focused practice isn't our invention; I should make that clear from the outset! I am not claiming that the Centre for Separated Families is the architect of this way of working. What we have done over the years, however, is test child focused interventions in our service delivery and we have underpinned our way of working with gender analysis to ensure that our services meet

the different needs of mothers and fathers. This additional element in our work makes a crucial difference when working with separated families, particularly in supporting post separation arrangements for care and provision for children. This is because it ensures a strong engagement, not only with mothers but with fathers too and it demands that services are built that meet the real, rather than the perceived, needs of families. Our child focused, gender aware practice underpins the delivery of Child Maintenance Options (<http://www.cmoptions.org/>), a service we helped to develop in 2008 and which offers parents the information that can help them to make their own arrangements in providing financially for their children after separation. Today we deliver our child focused training and practice to Children's Centres across England as well as through our Family Separation Clinic, a specialist service for families where separation has created high conflict between parents.

The first print run of our book was called Putting Children First and, whilst our intention in calling it that was to flag up how parents could, with some careful planning, put the needs of their children at the heart of a collaborative relationship, the title has often been misinterpreted. I have lost count of the number of times I have been told by a parent that they are 'putting children first' by upholding a child's reluctance to spend time with their other parent, or heard a practitioner say that asking a child what they think should happen after separation is 'putting children first'. This is not child focused practice, it is child determined practice and, in our view, it is very damaging to children.

But child determined outcomes, in which children are overly involved in the decision making about relationships with parents after separation, is on the increase. A recent report from the Children's Commissioner for England (<https://www.rights4me.org/home/library/report-family-justice-review---the-childrens-verdict.aspx>), entitled Children's Rights exemplified child determined practice when it said:

Relationships with parents: The strong view was that the law about this should say that keeping relationships with parents when a child has been separated from them should depend on whether the child wants the relationship or not. It should not be kept up if either of the parents wanted it without the child also wanting it..

Whilst the Wishes and Feelings Reports which are undertaken by CAFCASS are often used to present in court the 'definitive' representation of what the child wants to happen. This drift towards seeing a child as being the arbiter of decisions about relationships with parents is on the increase and it is almost exactly the opposite of what we really need to be doing if we are to protect our children and their ability to relate well to both of their parents after separation.

Child determined practice seems to arise from the efforts of some to show that they are in favour of change. It is a common misconception amongst parents that doing what a child says is putting their needs first. Similarly, in agencies supporting families, there is an increased tendency to think that good practice means asking children their opinion. In separated families however, where the hierarchy of authority has already broken down, asking a child to decide what should happen is akin to asking them to choose which of their parents they can most do without. It also risks elevating them to the position of quasi adult in the system and making them responsible for managing change. Children do not want to be put in a position of having to give an opinion about their parents, about their living arrangements or their relationships with their wider family. Children simply want to get on with being children, and being helped to adjust to the changes that living a different way brings.

Child focused practice when working with separated families, aims to restore the working hierarchy of authority in a family system, which in turn enables parents to work together around their children's changing needs. The hierarchy of authority is, quite simply, the decision of the parents to continue being the adults in the family system and their commitment to ensuring that children do not have to take on responsibilities that are not rightfully theirs. Child focused work with separated families ranges from helping parents to understand what care patterns are most useful for children at different ages, to how to enable teenagers to negotiate their changing needs in a separated family. In short, child focused work is about helping mothers and fathers to maintain their parenting roles and responsibilities by increasing their understanding of the impact of change upon children and how to manage it effectively. Child focused parenting after separation does not mean being best friends or even liking each other. It does mean a commitment to basic levels of communication and a willingness to keep on being mum and dad. 'Putting children first', in this respect, is about helping parents to work out where they need to compromise, so that their children do not have to.

Back in 2006 when we wrote the book, the idea that family separation could damage children was way off limits. The prevailing orthodoxy back then and still, to some degree now, is the belief that talking about damage to children will somehow stigmatise people (usually single mothers). I could never understand the hysteria around this. As a single mother myself, who had been abandoned to bring up the baby alone, what I wanted most of all was information and support on how to ameliorate the impact of the lack of a father in my child's life, but I couldn't find it. What I could find, however, was a wealth of support which told me how brilliant I was as a single mother, how equal I was to everyone else and how normal I was. I didn't feel normal. What I felt was abandoned and anxious about my child and being told I was brilliant didn't make that feeling go away. What would have made it go away was information and support around how to help my child deal with the lack of a father in her life. How to answer questions about why she didn't have a father and how to manage and maintain boundaries around what became a very chaotic pattern of her father turning up out of the blue and then disappearing again. I had to learn the hard way (as did my child) that this kind of engagement caused upset, hurt and attachment problems and that the way to deal with it was to set and maintain boundaries.

Then I met Nick and discovered the other side to family separation, a side in which his life was controlled by the whims of his children's mother who remarried and became better off financially whilst still taking child support from him, even though he was caring for his children for half of the week. I watched the difficulties that young children struggle with as they try to make the transition from one household to another and once again, when we looked for help, we found nothing but silence or worse, a thinly veiled hysteria that hissed warnings about shared care and harm to children.

And so, in the absence of any other available help we wrote *Putting Children First* and we carried on developing child focused practice at the Centre for Separated Families. In our experience we knew that what was missing was information and guidance on what happens to children when the family fragments. We wanted our child focused practice to offer much more to parents than had been available to us. These days, we can, and do, talk about the impact on children that family separation brings and we can also talk about damage. Alongside that, we also work to develop information, support, advice and guidance about how to manage the changes that the experience brings so that parents understand how they can protect their children. And finally, after over a decade of developing this work, the signs are that finally there is a change coming, a change in

which it will be possible to acknowledge that it's not just conflict that affects children in separating families, it is the separation itself and the fracturing of the psychological, mental and emotional family structures as well as the physical change.

Recently, I took a call on our helpline. The young woman I spoke to had a daughter aged six who was asking continuously why she didn't have a daddy. Her mum explained that she had asked her health visitor what she should say but the health visitor had simply replied that she shouldn't worry about it, she was doing a brilliant job and it was just a phase anyway. I asked this mum what she felt she should say to her child. She answered, 'I feel I should say that she has got a daddy but that he doesn't live with us anymore. That's not because he doesn't care about you or love you, its because he isn't very well most of the time and he can't get over to see you.' I asked her why she hadn't said that to her little girl already and she replied that she didn't know whether, by telling her daughter the truth, she would be hurting her more. We talked on about children and truth and how to ensure that language that is used is age appropriate and how much or how little truth to tell. She ended the conversation by thanking me for being prepared to talk about the things that no-one else seemed to want to. I realised all over again that the silence around how children are affected by family separation is not because parents themselves don't want to know.

Child focused practice in support to separated families means working with parents to equip them with the tools and knowledge that they need to keep on being parents together. Child focused practice is underpinned by gender analysis and is delivered by people who understand that the legislation that surrounds separated families, shapes their choices and affects their behaviour. Child focused practice is a world away from involving children, hearing their voices or elevating them to the role of arbiter of decisions about relationships. Child focused practice values mothering and fathering and the balance that is created when parents are able to put their own 'stuff' aside to concentrate on their children.

Both mothers and fathers have written to us to say that they have tried to use our book as a guide but that their children's other parent has simply refused to do so. In that respect, our book can seem more hopeful than useful. We agree. Back in 2007, when the book was published, the idea of shared parenting was still not on the horizon of possibilities, at least in legal terms. However, with the potential for an introduction of a legislative statement that sets out the importance to children of a relationship with both of their parents and, perhaps further, what a meaningful relationship looks like, we believe that the need for information and support around how to set up and manage a shared care relationship will increase. Also, with the changes that are being brought through by the DWP, through the Child Maintenance System and their provision of funding for support for collaborative parenting, we are hopeful that much more of the kind of information that parents will need to make shared parenting work will be made available. Our aim to make sure that this is child focused and not child determined and to help people to work with parents not children. Our hope is, that in the future, putting children first will mean not involving the children at all!

One comment

John Denbigh · March 3, 2012

Well said. Personally, I believe that the so-called 'wishes and feelings' approach, ie determining cases on the basis of the purported wishes of a child, contrary to case law, is one of the most damaging aspects of a rotten system. It was developed purely to address Cafacss resource pressures and disregards wider welfare interests, burdens a child with taking decisions that they are too young to take and understand the long term implications of and empowers and indeed incentivises the mother to alienate and harmfully divides a child's loyalties. In short it is the biggest contributor to parenatal alienation and many of us, including me, have no relationship or contact with our children because of this approach and the inability of those running the system to understand alienation, the extent to which children's perceptions are tainted by the resident parent and the need to put their welfare interests of having both parents in their lives above tainted and irrational views towards the non-resident parent.

Agree too that any introduction of a legislative statement that sets out the importance to children of a relationship with both of their parents will benefit from information and support as to how that could be best managed an feel that such a statement or principle may be meaningless without some definition or such guidance.

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