



Fact Sheet
Friday 29 April

Australian Society

How can we help children when their families break up?

Interview with Associate Professor Dale Bagshaw, University of SA

There are many notions of family relationships today – de facto, same sex, re-married or step-families – but one thing is true for most families - breaking up is hard, in particular for the children and young people involved. For all the impact separation has on parents, step-parents and grandparents it is possibly the children who suffer most – they don't often have much power to make their feelings or wishes heard.

As part of its ongoing research into Children and Families in Transition, researchers at UniSA's Hawke Research Institute are examining the separation experience and how services can be shaped to better help children and their families through this difficult time. UniSA research leader for the project, Associate Professor Dale Bagshaw, says the study is designed to track not only the impact of separation on children and families but also how services might be improved to help people to focus on the interests and needs of children and young people throughout that process.

"A lot of things happen when people separate – there are so many issues to consider. Often emotions run high and levels of anxiety, fear and conflict increase," Prof Bagshaw says.

"Research we have already carried out shows that violence in a relationship is more likely to occur or intensify during and after separation and children more often than not are affected or traumatised by that violence.

"On top of that adults are struggling with the separation on practical levels too – 'how will I support myself and my children, will I continue to see my children?' However for dependant young people the big questions are – 'how will I survive, where will I live, will I still see both of my parents, my relatives, my friends? Unfortunately for some its – 'how can I handle the conflict or abuse around me without making it worse or without being disloyal, am I safe, is it all my fault?' Children's experiences can be confusing and frightening. Adults are often so preoccupied with their own problems that the effects of their conflicts on children are downplayed or overlooked.

"Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are service gaps for separating families, especially in relation to their children. Help, support or advice can be expensive, hard to find, fragmented, conflicting, culturally inappropriate, or is simply just not available when or where it is needed most. We need to plot what is working and what isn't before we can suggest improvements."

Prof Bagshaw says it is important to find out how Commonwealth and State social services, the police, lawyers and the Family Court can work better together to help families, especially children, through this often volatile period.

"Children and young people often feel stuck in the middle of their parents' conflicts and they have little power to make their feelings or their wishes known, so we want to know from them what supports they need and how we can best help others like them. We hope that they will feel free to call us - they will not be identified by name and everything they say will be helpful to other children whose families are separating."

Prof Bagshaw says with the proposed changes to Family Law, the new emphasis on child-inclusive practices and the development of new Commonwealth-funded family relationships centres she hopes this qualitative research will help to inform future planning and help service providers, parents and other adults to be more focussed on the needs of dependant children and young people when nurturing adult relationships break down.

More information
Telephone
Email

Associate Professor Dale Bagshaw
(08) 8302 4375
dale.bagshaw@unisa.edu.au