The Anchor: Supporting Kids Through Separation

Aims of the program
1. Decrease levels of distress
2. Improve communication
3. Build resilience
4. Allow children's voices and experience to be included in decision making

Interventions
1. Child Consultation
2. Therapeutic Services for Children and adolescents
3. Community Education
Assessment

Level 1: The FDR agenda, working out a parenting plan, how is the child travelling in general re the separation

Level 2: The child’s well-being: How are they coping emotionally, in terms of their beliefs? How resolved are they in terms of grief and loss? Do they hold any feelings of self-blame? Are they depressed? Anxious? Burdened? Feeling invisible?

Level 3: Relationship System: What is their prior and current relationship with each parent like? Are they struggling with a new step parent/a new step sibling? Are they getting caught up in their parents’ conflict? Have their relationships with parents, siblings and extended family changed?

Level 4: Which intervention would suit them best? Individual therapy? A group around separation? Acceptance of the separation and the new family arrangement might be addressed in a normalising group context or perhaps a group around high conflict/violence? Some family therapy with a parent?

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Indicators for Therapy

- The level of relationship distress
- The refusal to see a parent
- The level of the child’s distress
- Parent’s lack of attunement
Therapeutic Case Planning Tool

- Short term Therapy model (6-8 sessions). Therapist holds agenda for therapy
- Theoretical bases - systemic focus on relationships; attachment focus; trauma theory; and the post separation research on the impact of separation and parental conflict on children.

“Child’s Therapeutic Case Plan”

Areas of Intervention:
- Safety
- Separation Issues
- Parenting Arrangements
- Individuation
- Relationships with each parent
- Other issues

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Childs Therapeutic Case Plan

SAFETY: are there any safety issues/ concerns to address?
- Fear of parent by child
- P’s Drug/ Alcohol/ mental health concerns
  - At changeover (general)
  - Addressing emotional/verbal issues
  - Allegation of violence/ abuse by a parent
  - child ideation for self harm/ depression

Separation issues: does the child understand / accept the separation?
- Story of the separation?
- acceptance of new partners
- resolved sadness
- Understanding of new family system?
- stepfamily issues - belonging

Arrangements: Is the child happy with the parenting plan?
- Clarify understanding of current arrangements
- Explore possible changes
- Monitor any changes in plans
- ease of changeovers / missing parents
Childs Therapeutic Case Plan

**Individuation**
- Child’s separation from each parent
- Management of reactivity/distress (P and C)
- Ability to raise their issues with parents
- Not caught up in parental conflict

**Relationship with each Parent**
- Child’s relationships with each parent explored
- Explore any constraints to relationship e.g. child angry at parent
- Gradual re-introduction of estranged rx or relationship sessions between parent/child
- Parent to ease pressure for increased contact on child

**Other issues**
- Step family issues
- Extended family
- Issues at school
1. Safety

“ My room is up in the clouds, in a very long tree. The car room has only girls cars. This is the ice-cream room, computer games room, dress up room and TV room. The fun room has anything you want to eat, like a buffet. My friends can come in to my bedroom: this is the only room they are allowed into. The pathways are all connected. A professional security guard is at the bottom, you need a special pass to come in, if you try and come in without a pass, the security guard will use a Taser – but it won’t hurt”
2. Separation Issues

“I knew my parents were forgetting to be friends because they often looked so sad. They didn’t talk to one another very much, and we even stopped having family night. I couldn’t even remember the last time we laughed together...”

(p.10-11)

Jennifer Moore-Mallinos
Illustrations: Marta Fabrega
The Story of my parents' separation.

- by Melissa (6)

Mum, dad, Chandelle and I lived all together, with Miffy.

Then mum and dad were fighting... they decided to separate.

I felt sad and worried.
Dad moved to Grandma's house. We stayed with mum.

We saw dad every weekend and Tuesday nights.

Now dad has his own house. We see him every second weekend.

I am happy because the fights have stopped. I love mum and dad so much.
3. Parenting Arrangements

Jamie’s Volcano of Feelings

Jamie’s volcano:
All the things that he is angry about

What he is feeling

What he does when he is angry

Noticing the volcano heating up

Calming himself down

Not letting the volcano wreck his day.

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“A little part of me hates my dad... he left us. He has a new girlfriend. He won’t give mum money... i still love my dad though.” Linda, 15
I am worried that:

- Dad would move away with Sue
- Dad will leave us alone with Sue
- Mum will be sad
- Dad and Mum will keep fighting
- If Zoe and me can’t see dad
- dad might love Jake the most
- Dad isn’t in our family anymore
- Sue will get angry
Dear dad,
I have some really strong feelings about sue. i don’t like her. She is mean to me and Zoe when you are not there. i don’t like that she is the mother of my brother. i don’t want you to get married to her. i don’t like that you believe her over me. i don’t think she tells the truth. i fell (feel) invisible. sue hates me Zoe and Paul. I hate it when she calls me stubbing. (stubborn)

dad when I am at your place it fells (feels) like u become Sue’s family and your family does not exist (which is me Zoe and Paul).

Thank u for reading this letter,
Isaac
6. Other

Step family issues

Extended family

Issues at school
School’s - Engagement and Intervention

• Community Education in schools: seminars

• Linking schools to family law

• Intervening where the children are and with the people that first notice.

• Researching evidence based information kits
Website

The Anchor: Supporting kids through separation

“...everything, but just when I needed them most, they were the two people I couldn’t talk with.”

Julia, 18, parents separated when she was 13

About The Anchor

The Anchor: Supporting kids through separation was developed by UnitingCare Unifam Mediation & Counselling to assist children and young people, their parents and their support system during and after separation.

The Anchor is funded by the Attorney-General’s Department.

UnitingCare Unifam Mediation & Counselling is a member of UnitingCare Children, Young People & Families; a service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT.

The Anchor provides:

- counselling for children and young people
- therapeutic groups for children and young people to share their experiences with others who understand
- Child Consultation so that children’s experiences are understood and their needs are considered when their parents are in Mediation (Family Dispute Resolution), Counselling or in a Parenting Orders Program (Keeping Contact)
- seminars for parents
- seminars for professionals
- consultation to other professionals, e.g. teachers, school counsellors, Independent Children’s Lawyers.

The Anchor is based in Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle and the Central Coast. For further information about these services please contact us.

Contact us today on 1800 288 760 (Mondays to Fridays, 9am – 5pm AEST)
Email: theanchor@unifamcounselling.org

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The journey of the “School’s Kit“

Developed relationships with a key contact at each of the 50 pilot schools

Trialled “Breaking the Fall” School’s Kit in a range of schools, both high, primary, public and private to determine: -

• Age appropriate?
• Ease of dissemination of material?
• Relevance?
• What in the kit was most useful?
• What changes might be helpful?
“this resource has given me the language to speak to children about things I didn’t feel I could talk about” Teacher - Greystanes NSW
Contents of The Anchor Schools Kit

1. Poster
This can alert children/young people and their parents that there are specialist services just for them.

2. Cards
If you are concerned for a student and want to assist them to get further support, you can call The Anchor with the parents consent, and/or give them our card.

3. Feelings chart
This two sided chart can be used with children (faces) or young people (words) to assist them to express the complex feelings than can emerge through separation, parents repartnering, going to court, having new step-siblings etc. The range of feelings is comprehensive enough to allow children to use words that explain the inner turmoil they feel.

4. Indicator of distress checklist for children and adolescents
These are a guide with signs to look for in children/young people when a noticeable change in their behaviour/affect/thinking has occurred. These can alert you to the possibility of the need for additional support for that student.

5. Breaking the Fall: Teachers Handbook
These are especially for principals, deputy principals, year advisors (high school), welfare officers, the chaplain or senior teaching staff who are more likely to be made aware of children who are not coping well. It is a more concise version of the Manual contained in the Kit.

This contains an overview of the feelings, reactions and implications of separation and divorce on children and young people, including themes such as: the loss of the "family"; the impact of parental conflict; change and adjustment; resilience; questions kids ask; roles kids take on; hope and acceptance; family relationship dynamics after separation; the family law system; and creative ideas for teachers.

7. Brochures for referral
We have included brochures on The Anchor Program, Child Consultation, Family Dispute Resolution and some of the groups and seminars that are available for children and their families.
The Feelings Chart

Feelings chart

angry
- Grumpy
- Frustrated
- Irritable
- Mad
- Grumpy
- Bored
- Betrayed
- Annoyed

confused
- Disoriented
- Confused
- Scared
- Confused

sad
- Unhappy
- Upset
- Depressed
- Embarrassed
- Distressed
- Abandoned
- Naked
- Uninterested

distressed
- Unhappy
- Upset
- Depressed
- Embarrassed
- Distressed
- Abandoned
- Naked
- Uninterested

happy
- Excited
- Glad
- Happy
- Liked
- Loved
- Optimistic
- Friendly
- Hopeful

scared
- Afraid
- Frightened
- Nervous
- Scared
- Terrified
- Worried
- Distressed
- Terrified
- Scared
- Terrified
- Worried
- Distressed
- Terrified
- Scared
Nobody knows how hard it is when your parents break up.

We were a special family. Now we're not.

When your parents split, you split too.

I'd just love a straight answer from somebody. Anybody!

It's been a year. I'm ready to talk now.

Since the split, it's all about mum and dad. I haven't even been there.

I feel so mixed up since my parents split up.

I don't want to dump on people.

Everyone grows up with the dream of their parents staying together.

You never think it will happen to you.

I wish my mum and dad knew how much it hurts me.

When my parents broke up they said nothing would change... hello?

Contact cards for parents
Part 1 - The Experience of children... what they feel

- Community Education in schools: seminars
- Linking schools to family law
- The impact of separation on children and young people
- The impact of parental conflict
- Loss
- Feelings and common questions children ask
- Resilience and Stability
- Family Roles and Relationship dynamics
- Case studies

I always wondered if we’d completely change and not be a proper family anymore. Is this going to change us and ruin everything? "I wanted to ask that but I didn’t know how" - (Jill now 22 parents separated at age 6)
Part 2 - What we can do about it

- Identifying distress
- Indicators of distress in children and adolescents
- Two homes; change and adjustment
- Resilience
- Roles

“I told mum I wanted to live with her...I told dad the same thing” (Shelly 16)
Part 3 - What we can see and hear. Identifying changes in behaviour and indicators of distress

- How schools can help
- What to say to kids
- What to say to parents
- School support/referral systems
- How to help in the classroom and school community
- Creative ideas for teachers
- The family law system and how it works

- “Mum told me she wants Dad to be part of my life ...and I feel so relieved” (Olivia 8)
Distribution

- Public: 471
- Catholic: 261
- Private: 46
- Christian: 49

- Gosford: 24
- Newcastle: 104
- Wollongong: 90
- Parramatta: 90
- Fairfield: 137
- Cambelltown: 286
- Penrith: 96

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The Anchor Seminars and Groups

• Somersaulting Through Separation
• Growing through Separation
• Talking with Your Kids

• Jigsaw
• Connect Kids
• Storms
Jigsaw

A fun active 6 week therapeutic group for children 6-11 years old whose parents have separated, covering the following areas:-

- Understanding separation
- Identifying and expressing feelings
- Relaxation and tools for feeling better
- Staying out of parental conflict
- Roles for parents and kids
- The difference between feelings and behaviour
- Looking at the future

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Connect Kids

What are the Central concerns for children?

- How do I keep myself safe?
- How do I figure out what is true and real?
- How do I keep my life predictable?
- How do I stop the fighting?
- How do I keep my parents safe?

5 Therapeutic Goals to address Developmental deficits

1. Create Common ground and safety
2. Explore the language and complexity of feelings
3. Defining and understanding the self
4. Defining and revising roles and relationships
5. Restoring a moral order
Dear Mummy and Daddy,
* It makes me sad when you fight.
* It’s disappointing when you fight.
* I feel stuck in the middle when you fight.
* It’s sometimes hard to go between two houses.
* I feel sad and worried when you fighting.
* I get frustrated when you yell at each other.

I’d like for my family to talk and get along.

Bianca, Alyssa, Brooke, Yasemin

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HAVE YOUR SAY!

1) How have you found coming to the Connect Kids group?
   I have found it really cool and funny. I rate it 10/10.
   I want to come next year in the same group as this year.

2) In these group times I have learnt.....(list 2 things)
   1. Other children's parents are split up too.
   2. That it's ok that your parents are split up.

3) What would you tell other children about this group? (List 2 things)
   1. That it's really cool.
   2. If your parents are split up come to this place.
School Group Evaluations

Children

“Don’t keep your feelings bottled up, tell someone”  13 years
“I learnt how to be more brave about the situation and be strong”  8 years
“it’s not our fault”  8 years
“other kids go through the same things that I have”  11 years
“that I am not the one who caused the fight”  11 years

Parents

“My daughter has opened up more to me about how she feels”
“talking about the separation has gotten better, it’s ok to talk about it in a non judgmental way, without having to make justifications, just to be able to discuss it freely”
STORMS – Adolescent Group
“The rain is all the sadness, the dark cloud is everyone’s anger; the lightning is my parents’ hurtful words to each other”....

“The thing that gets me through the storm is that I know a rainbow will come out afterwards .... When my parents fight I hope for that rainbow so I can get through the storm”.

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