

Presentation

Good Morning. I'm Katrina Baird, manager of Parent Support and Stakeholder Engagement at Child Support Agency. I would like to thank you all for coming to today's panel discussion to hear about how Gillian, Cynthia and I are involved in Building Resilience through Engagement, Empowerment and Self-help Resources.

The role of the CSA

Firstly I want to quickly outline the CSA's role.

As you would all know, family separation is common in Australia today. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has reported that almost 50,000 divorces are granted each year, and over 44,000 children are affected by separation each year.

Our role is to support separated parents to transfer child support payments for the benefit of their children. We do this for around 1.5 million parents for the benefit of around 1.1 million children.

It's important to point out that we are first and foremost a support agency for parents. We're not directly involved in working with, educating, empowering or supporting children, as my fellow panel members are.

However, when we say we support parents to transfer child support for their children's benefit, we're talking about emotional as well as financial support. We strive to be, in this sense, a facilitator of resilience and strong families, by helping to empower parents to effectively manage their personal and family situations.

We've done a lot of research with separated parents that show they are often – and understandably – so caught up in the experience of their separation, their relationship with the other parent, particularly when it's negative, and their interactions or experience with us and the Government, that they often lose sight of the impact of all these things on children.

The research also shows that if they effectively budget and manage their money, form a cooperative relationship with the other parent, and deal in a 'business-like' way with the other parent, they are more likely and able to meet their child support and related financial responsibilities. And many of these parents can manage their child support and care arrangements without the involvement of the CSA. Currently about three-quarters of newly separated parents choose to transfer child support without our involvement.

Once parents can deal well with those issues and manage their own arrangements, they can usually deal better with all other aspects of their lives, including their relationship with their children.

So how do we help to build resilience? We do it in a variety of ways, including service delivery initiatives, focussing on customer service, proactive stakeholder engagement, and working to link with service providers in the community.

We also do it in a couple of other key ways. One is actively referring our customers to relevant support services in the community – services like those operated by all of you in this room. Another is developing free support resources and publications.

Today I'd like to tell you about the latest resource we're developing in partnership with a number of family law and separation stakeholders and service providers.

The resource is for children aged under 12 experiencing family separation, or whose parents have already separated.

Given what I've said about us being primarily supporting parents, not children, you might ask why the CSA is developing such a resource.

Well as I've also outlined, we worked out a long time ago, by listening to parents, to you, to the community, and to Government, that we cannot just be in the debt collection business.

We need to help parents deal with their own situation, and help their kids deal with it too.

In doing this, we identified a gap for resources aimed at children from separated and separating families. Resources exist, but many are dated and not Australian, so not quite as relevant to Australian families as we'd like them to be.

We started addressing this gap by developing a publication called *Family separation: a guide for teens* in 2007.

This has been extremely well received by teenagers, parents and others in the family law system, with nearly 107,000 copies distributed since its launch at the end of 2007.

This new resource for children under 12 will complement that publication, and add to our broader suite of support publications that many of you are probably familiar with, such as the *Me and My* series for parents.

It also complements efforts of family service providers to build resilient families by capitalising on our position in the family law system as a primary contact point for separated parents.

We hear/talk to 7000 separated parents every day. CSA is in a unique position to help separated families in a direct way.

Developing the resource – the process so far

Once we identified the need for a resource for children under 12, we consulted with a range of key stakeholders, some of whom may be here today, to assess the effectiveness of the existing resources, and if they thought these families and children needed a new one.

We also spoke to the Family Court in New Zealand and the Law Courts Education Society of British Columbia, who have both developed great examples of similar types of resources that have been very well received.

I really want to emphasise how important this part of the process was, and continues to be. We recognise the importance of our partnership with other agencies, stakeholders and service providers. We know we can't support and build resilience in families alone.

And nor should we. Yes, we're in a prime position in the family law system as a principal contact for separated parents, but we rely on you for understanding the issues that separated families face, and for best practice advice in dealing with those issues and offering support to families.

These consultations identified several common findings and recommendations:

1. There is a clear need for a free resource for children in this age group
2. The preferred approach and format is an interactive multimedia resource supported by a complementary booklet – a 'how to guide' for older children and 'story or activity book' approach for younger children.
3. Issues that need to be addressed in the new resource include loss, grief, loyalty, jealousy, reassurance, normalising the experience and emotions

The resource

So what exactly will this resource be, and what will it look like?

It will be a self-help resource for younger children, also aiming to empower parents to focus on and help their children cope with issues that arise as a result of family separation.

We've got four basic aims we want to achieve with this resource:

1. Educate five to 12 year old children about how to cope with separation and associated issues, situations and emotions.
2. Raise knowledge and awareness among five to 12 year old children of the different stages of separation and associated emotions.
3. Help five to 12 year old children maintain and build relationships with their parents following separation.
4. Support children who are affected by family separation, normalising the process and providing assurance it's not their fault and help is available.

In response to what you and other stakeholders told us, the resource will have two parts – an interactive CD-Rom for children between seven and 12, and an activity or story book for five-seven year olds.

Both resources will be as engaging as possible, while not making light of the seriousness of the subject matter.

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As you can see on the screen, the creative theme of the CD-ROM is an amusement park and the rides and attractions at the park will represent a topic or question.

There are two characters (a boy and girl aged between 12-14 years old) who will 'interact' with the children and guide them through the program. Other characters (aged 12 years and under) will be present at the different rides or attractions and will also interact with the children about the related topic.

Children will navigate through the program, via an interactive map, choosing what they want to learn about relevant to their own situation or experiences. CSA has modelled this product on the New Zealand and Canadian resources I mentioned earlier (with their permission of course).

The content is based around the events, feelings and issues that children are likely to experience when their family is separating. It focuses specifically on why this is happening, feelings children might be experiencing, information on the legal process they may be involved in, changes that may occur as a result of the separation, general information and where they can access further help.

What now? Next steps

We have just finished going back to some of the service providers and stakeholders involved in our initial consultations, to get their views and suggestions about the proposed concept. We got a great reaction and some

really useful input we'll be incorporating into the further development of the resources.

We'll now be fleshing out the script and the story / activity book, and putting the finishing touches on the CD rom.

Before finalising and releasing the resource early next year (we're aiming for April-May), we'll conduct extensive testing of the resource with families to see what they think of it, and whether and how they might use it.

Service providers like you, and even school guidance counsellors, have certainly indicated you'll be able to refer families to the tool, or use it in your work with these families and with children. You'll definitely be hearing more from us before the resource is finished.

Wrap up

Our new resource for young children is the latest CSA initiative aimed at supporting separated parents and helping them support their kids.

By giving children a self-help resource like this, and further empowering parents in this way, we hope the resource will help parents feel more in control of their family situation so they can deal better with other aspects of separation, like meeting their child support responsibilities.

I hope you agree that this will be an important resource that we can all use to facilitate engagement with and empowerment of separated families.

I thank you again for the opportunity to share our work in this area with you, and I look forward to continuing to work together to help build resilient families.

FRSA 2nd National Conference “Children and Families: Reducing Risk, Building Resilience”

Panel Session: Building Resilience through Engagement, Empowerment and Self-help Resources

Child Support Agency: Building Resilient Families, Katrina Baird

Other Panel discussions

Participation and Empowerment – Giving Kids a Voice (Working Title), Gillian Clvert, former NSW Children’s Commissioner (TBC)

Emotional Fitness and Literacy, Cynthia Morton (Emotional Fitness Australia)

Convener: Kasy Chambers, Anglicare Australia

Summary submitted to Conference Program book.

This presentation will outline a new Child Support Agency (CSA) resource for children aged under 12 years old experiencing family separation. This interactive online resource is designed to support both children and parents in separated families by providing them with the information and advice they need to help young kids deal with family separation. CSA has worked hand-in-hand with family support providers to develop this initiative.