

ESRC INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES

**DIVORCE AND SEPARATION: NEW MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE
TO SUPPORT PARENTS**

ESRC Award Ref: ES/L000792/1
<http://www.york.ac.uk/spsw/research/child-maintenance-esrc-seminars/>

ABSTRACTS

Family Matters - guiding parents to resolution

By Christine Skinner, Reader in Social Policy, Department of Social Policy and Social work, University of York.

Divorce and separation can be a devastating time for families and the levels of conflict associated with it can be highly damaging to child well-being. However, we know less about how to reduce the level of distress associated with family separation or how to help parents resolve problems and reach agreements about their children. Resolution has developed an innovative new service called Family Matters (FM) which was funded by the Department of Work and Pensions under their Help and Support for Separated Families initiative. FM aimed to help separated parents collaborate more effectively in the best interests of their children. Highly qualified 'FM Guides' (trained lawyers and mediators) were to combine their legal know-how and conflict resolution skills in order to: work with both parents together or as individuals; provide legal information (not legal advice) ; guide parents to reach their own agreements; deal with parents' legal, emotional and practical difficulties in a holistic way. Resolution worked jointly with Dr Christine Skinner from the University of York on a 'co-production of knowledge project' funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). They conducted research that would address the following questions:

- What was unique about the role of being an FM Guide?
- What challenges did FM Guides face in practice?
- How were FM Guides perceived by parents?
- How did the FM Guide service fit within the local legal landscape?

This presentation will provide the results of the study and will stimulate debate about the future of professional practice in a world where legal aid is highly restricted and separated parents – especially low income parents – have nowhere else to go for specialised face-to-face support.

Navigating family relationship support: Joining up support before, during and after separation

By David Marjoribanks, Senior Policy Officer, Relate.

This presentation will present the findings of Relate's recently-published report, *Breaking up is hard to do: Assisting families to navigate family relationship support before, during, and after separation*, which explores the current provision of support before, during and after separation and the extent to which it is currently coordinated. What it diagnoses is: a disparate and disconnected provision of

support; a lack of clear entry points into the information and support; a fragmented system with few triage mechanisms to provide holistic assessments of need and support appropriate referrals; a market driven by supply rather than demand (because demand is expressed late on, which can skew provision on the supply side towards crisis intervention, and because the lack of market information inhibits customers' ability to exercise informed choice); a system which often provides siloed, single-issue support, with gaps between different forms of support and limited inter-agency and inter-professional awareness of communication; and a system in which children's and young people's voices are too often missing. The presentation will then focus on current opportunities for more cross-agency and inter-professional coordination and collaboration, drawing on examples of good practice, and future possibilities for a more joined-up approach to family relationship support.

Family Relationship Centres: a key and (mainly) successful part of Australia's family law system

By Professor Lawrie Moloney - Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne

Australia's 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) represented the biggest single item of expenditure associated with the 2006 family law reforms. This presentation speaks briefly to the political atmosphere leading to this initiative, some implementation issues that arose, and a few conceptual adjustments that needed to be made as research data on the dynamics of separation came to light. Operating within the context of a default mandatory mediation regime and the requirement that all family mediators be trained and registered, FRCs have been associated with a substantial and sustained reduction in litigation over children. They also act as a gateway to other relevant services.

Though Australian longitudinal data on parenting dynamics paint a mainly positive picture of post separation parental relationships, they also reveal both improvements and deteriorations in quality of relationships for about one in five families. Thus, FRCs provide a place for separated families to negotiate both initial and later parenting arrangements. At the same time the data suggest that between 4% and 5% of all separated families remain highly conflicted and largely dysfunctional more than 4 years after separation.

In their present form, FRCs may therefore be close to reaching a limit in terms of what can be achieved via initiatives such as 'mandatory' child focused and child inclusive practices, collaborative approaches with legal and other services and proactive referral processes. While FRCs have to date remained at arms length from court processes, an argument is emerging for the introduction of formal reporting mechanisms in dysfunctional or at risk cases to assist judicial officers. The presentation discusses some of the issues raised by such an initiative.

New innovations and research evidence: 'Splitting Up - Put kids first' (Title TBC)

By Penny Mansfield – One Plus One