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# NOT SEEN, NOT HEARD – CHILDREN’S VOICES IN POST SEPARATION PARENTING

MCCAUGHREN, S., HOLT, S., PARKES, A., (2022). ONE FAMILY –  
TRINITY – UCC.

# PRACTITIONERS PERSPECTIVE – THE CHALLENGES POST SEPARATION

## Overview of Presentation:

- The challenges for children
- The challenges for parents
- The challenges for front line practitioners
- Existing supports
- Gaps
- Outcomes for children

# CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN POST SEPARATION

- Children are often not told of the changes that are happening in their family form
- Children are confused
- Children are scared
- Children are unsettled – routines in the home have changed
- Children are worried
- Children are often the silent mourners, grieving the loss of their family form
- Grieving the loss of a parent
- Children are most often not asked – they are a silent partner in separation
- Children are caught in the middle of the interparental conflict

# COMMON CONCERNS FOR CHILDREN AT THE POINT OF SEPARATION

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**Loyalty conflict:** it is important that the child does not feel that they have to take sides

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**Does Mum or Dad love someone else:** it is important to reassure the child that Mum/Dad love him/her

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**I don't want to come over today:** parents need to see this as a natural part of growing up and not take it personally

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**Fantasies of responsibility and reconciliation:** children may feel responsible for the break up and worry what to tell people.

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**Why don't you love Mum/Dad anymore?:** often children will blame the parent who has initiated the separation and view the other as a victim. The initiating parent must explain to the child why this is happening – however both parents need to see the role they played in the relationship and why it broke down.

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**Anger:** children between 8-16 can experience intense anger. Children may be angry with the parent who left but often take the anger out on the parent who has not left.

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**Why are you separating?** Children need clear age appropriate explanations

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**Whose to blame?** Children often see the parent who has left the home as the victim and throw blame at the parent who remains in the family home. This can be very challenging when there is addiction and or an affair.

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**Worry about the future:** this is more likely to occur when there is parental conflict around contact and maintenance. Parents need to listen to the child's worries and talk honestly and openly with them.

# CHALLENGES FOR PARENTS POST SEPARATION

- Parents are grieving the loss of the relationship with former partner
- Parents are grieving the loss of the family they created
- Parents are confused
- Parents are angry
- Parents are worried – worried about their children and the relationship they have with their child, how to maintain it while nurture it
- Parents feel anxious about what the future holds (housing, money)
- Parents lack a sense of security
- Parents feel they have lost control and often want to ‘control’ what they can as a result – this is often around the children.

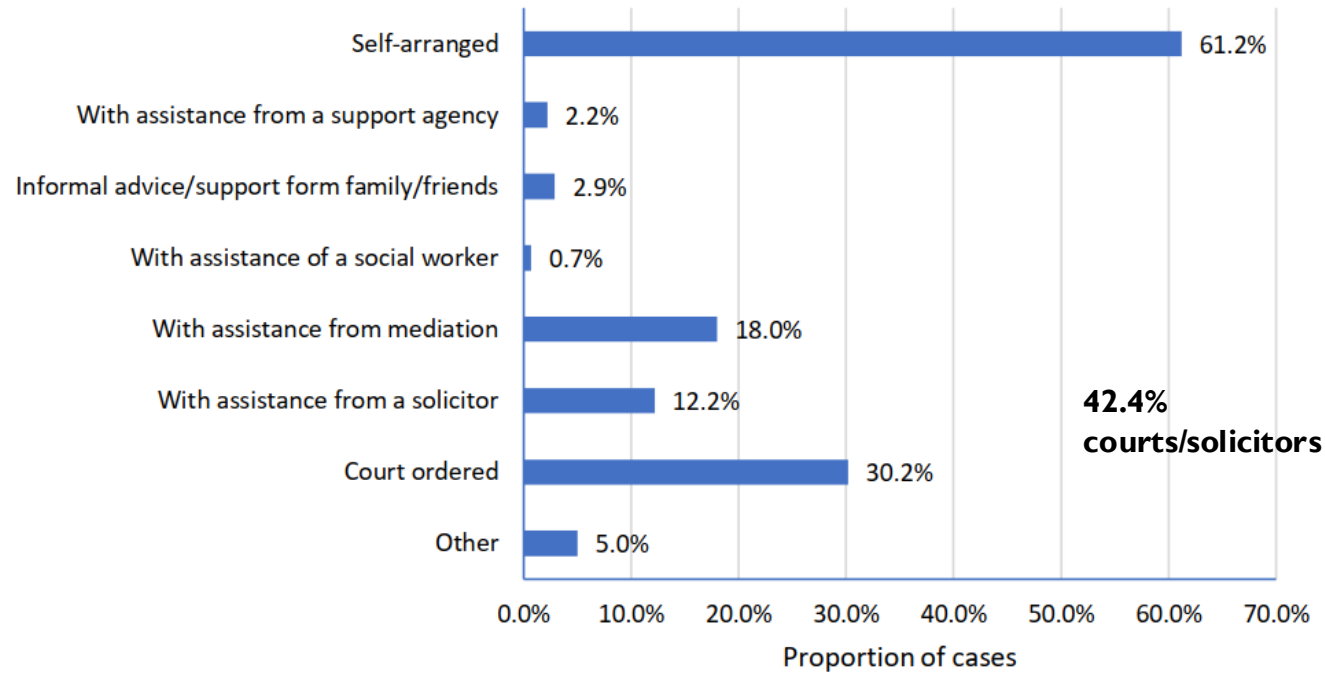
# CHALLENGES FOR PRACTITIONERS – WORKING TO SUPPORT CHILDREN & PARENTS POST SEPARATION

- High level interparental conflict can get in the way of parents engaging with supports
- Parents have often shifted their gaze without meaning to away from their child to the adult conflict – so the Family Courts become a key player
- Systemic issues such as housing crisis, homelessness, domestic violence intersect with the challenges separation presents – making it more difficult to unpack the needs of the children and parents – making it more difficult to implement supportive interventions
- Children often come to the attention of Tusla
- Conflict is ongoing, court orders are confusing – front line practitioners often struggle in knowing where to start and what part is theirs to focus on
- Maslow's hierarchy of needs comes into play, we cannot engage parents in parenting supports when they are struggling to feed children, manage conflict, have secure homes and enough money to pay the bills – a range of supports are needed
- Front line practitioners worry they can easily become caught up in the conflict or part of the conflict or without meaning too, loose sight of the child as parents struggle with the adult conflict.
- Practitioners often lack support, training and the confidence to work with complex separation – holding the child until parents can come back into that space.

# INFORMING PRACTICE – EVIDENCE BASED RESEARCH

- **All children, regardless of age**, who are capable of forming views **have a right to be heard** in all matters affecting them including decisions about contact arrangements – whether formally or informally made.
- Parents and many practitioners struggle with how to ‘listen to the voice of the child’ especially very young children.
- **Contact is a right of a child** to have access to both parents and not the other way around.
- Parents really struggle to champion the role of both parents in the child’s life and feel they as the parent have a right to contact
- Research highlights that **children and young people believe strongly in their right to be heard but do not want the power to decide**
- Parents and practitioners often get caught in this trap and want to give the child what they want, before unpacking what the child truly needs or is telling them.

Q12 How were contact arrangements set up? (n=139)



WHERE IS THE  
CHILD'S VOICE?



Q31: Were the child(ren)'s view reflected in the decision made about shared contact? (n= 112)

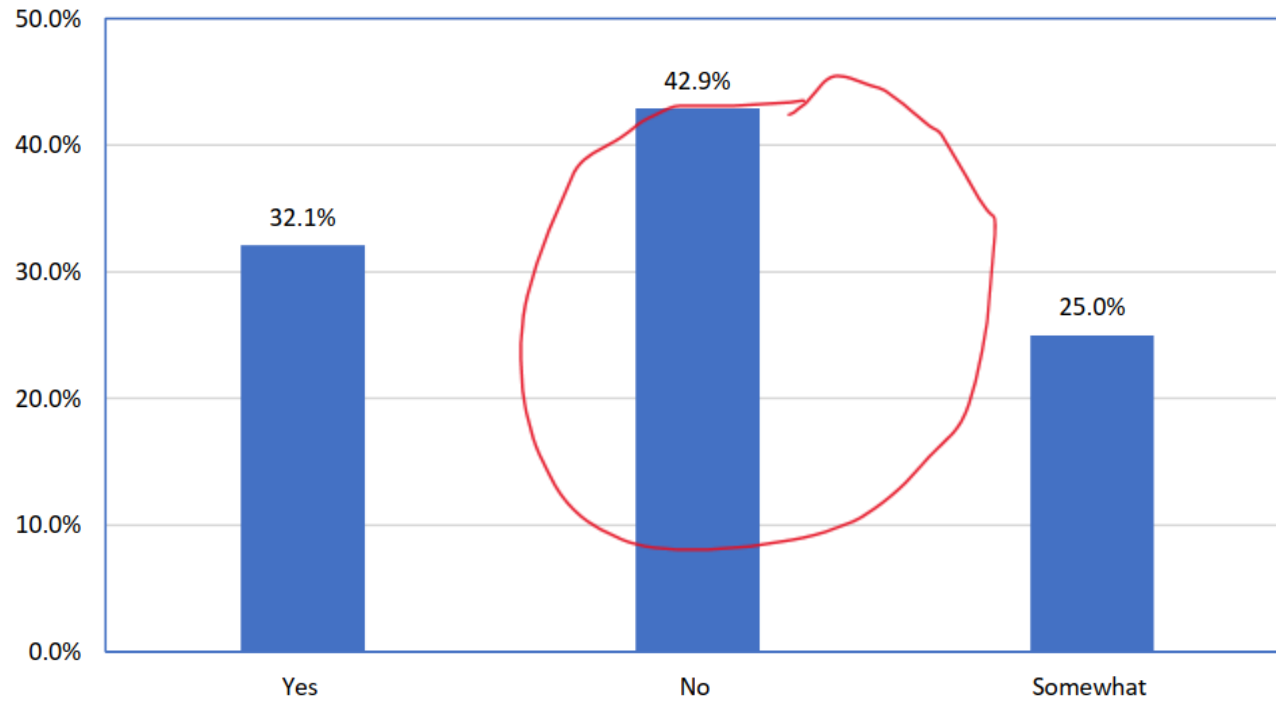


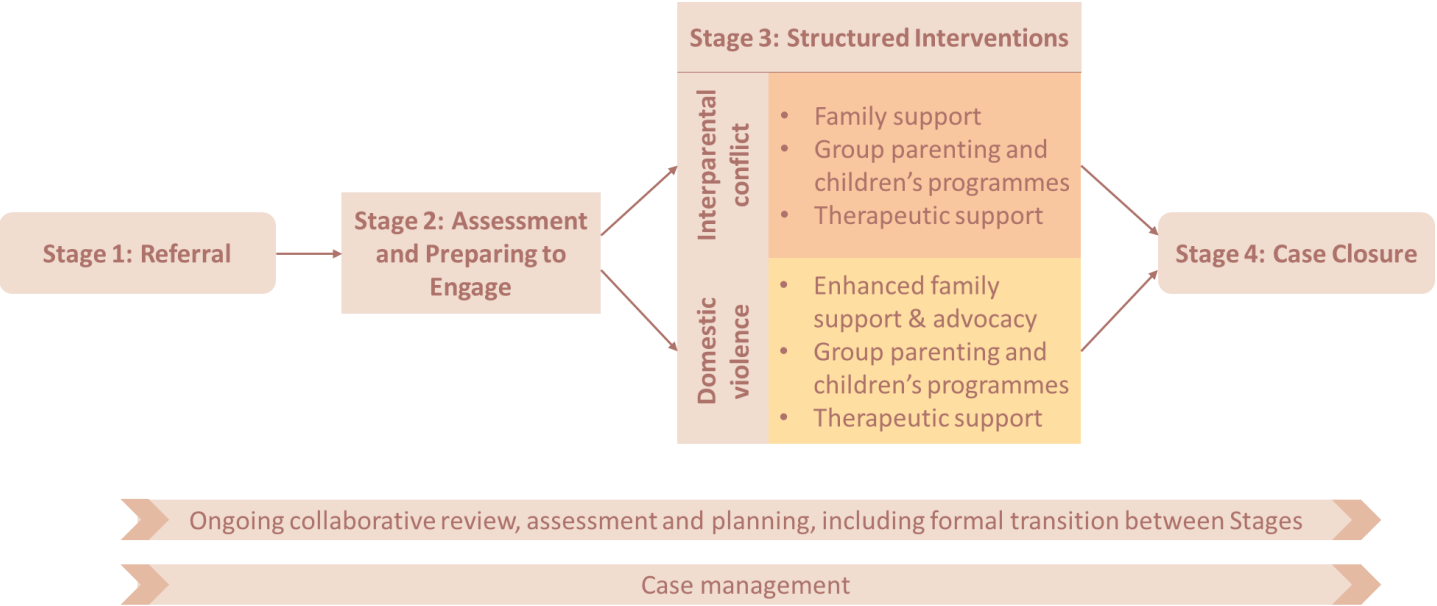
Figure 2: Column chart of whether children's views were reflected in the decision about shared contact (n=112)

WHERE IS THE  
CHILD'S VOICE?

# SUPPORTING PARENTS TO BROADEN THEIR VIEW OF WHAT SHARED PARENTING CAN BE

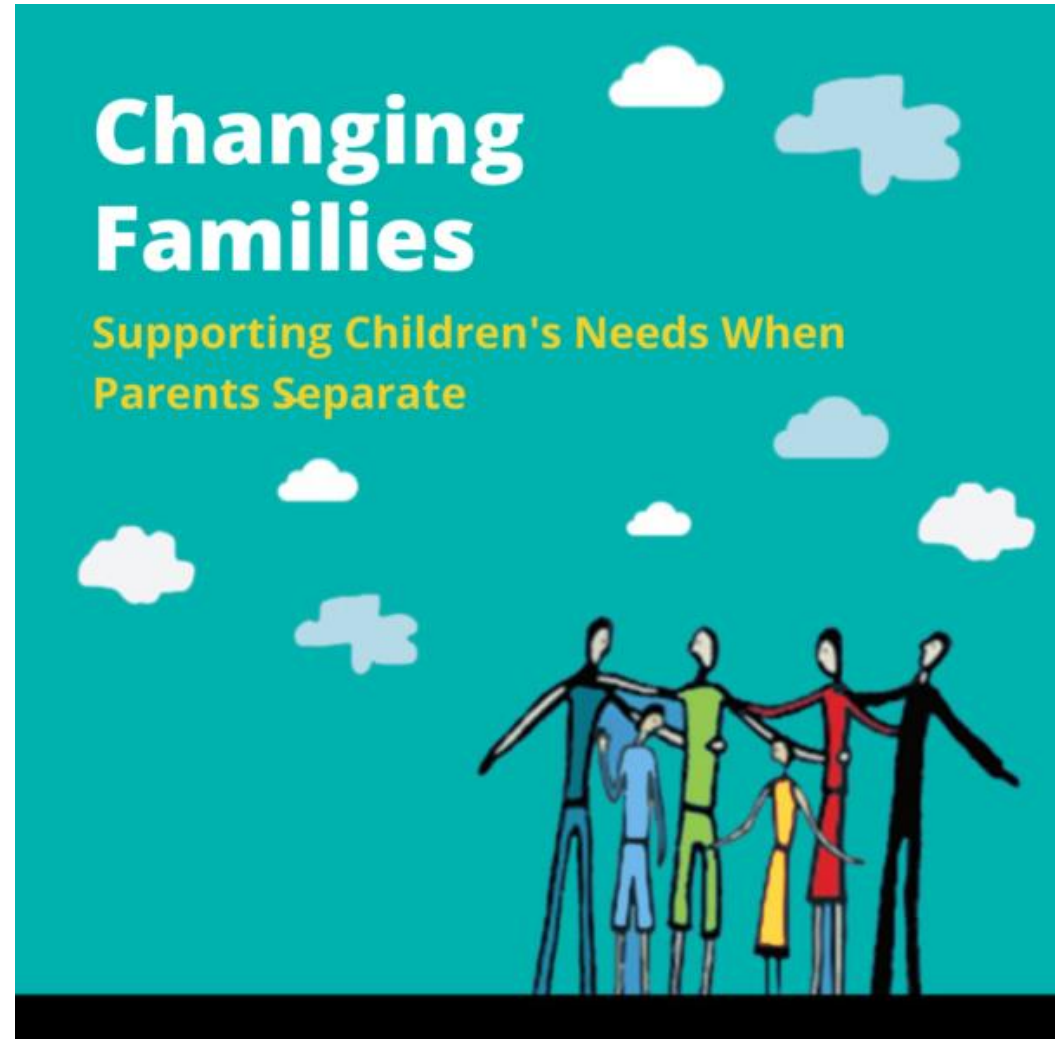
***Shared parenting is when both parents, who live separately, have an active parenting role in their child's life, irrespective of how much time they might actually spend with their child.***

# ONE FAMILY - SEPARATING WELL FOR CHILDREN (SWP) SERVICE MODEL



# FRONT LINE PRACTITIONER TRAINING: SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S NEEDS WHEN PARENTS SEPARATE

- Developed by One Family (Geraldine Kelly & Maggie Petroli)
- Hybrid Course (Part 1 e course; Part 2 three half days on zoom)





**Best Practice Guidelines  
for Contact between  
Parents and  
Infants/Young Children**

**in Separated Families**

BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR  
CONTACT BETWEEN PARENTS AND  
INFANTS/YOUNG CHILDREN

SUPPORTING THE PARENT AND  
PRACTITIONER

# WHAT ARE THE BEST PRACTICE GUIDELINES

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Voice of the child

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Each child is unique

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Children keep changing

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Child's best interests

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Child's right to a relationship

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Secure Attachments

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Quality vs. quantity

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Making child centred child contact arrangements

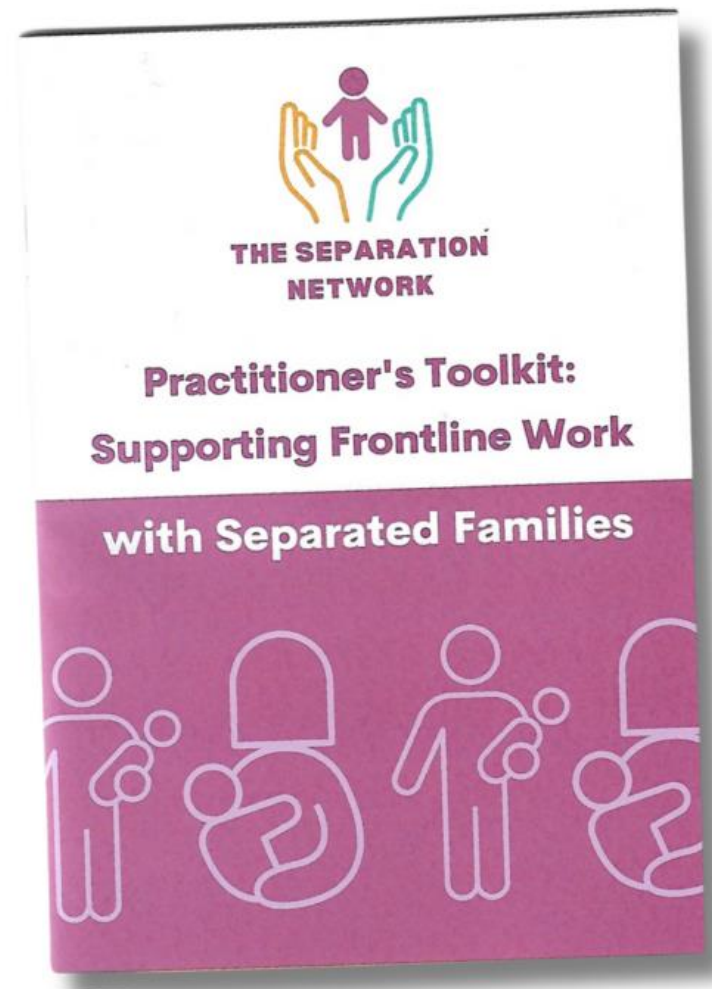
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No magic ingredient

# THE SEPARATION NETWORK TRAINING & RESOURCES

**As Practitioners we work with parents to  
unpack – while holding children central to all  
decisions affecting their day-to-day life!**

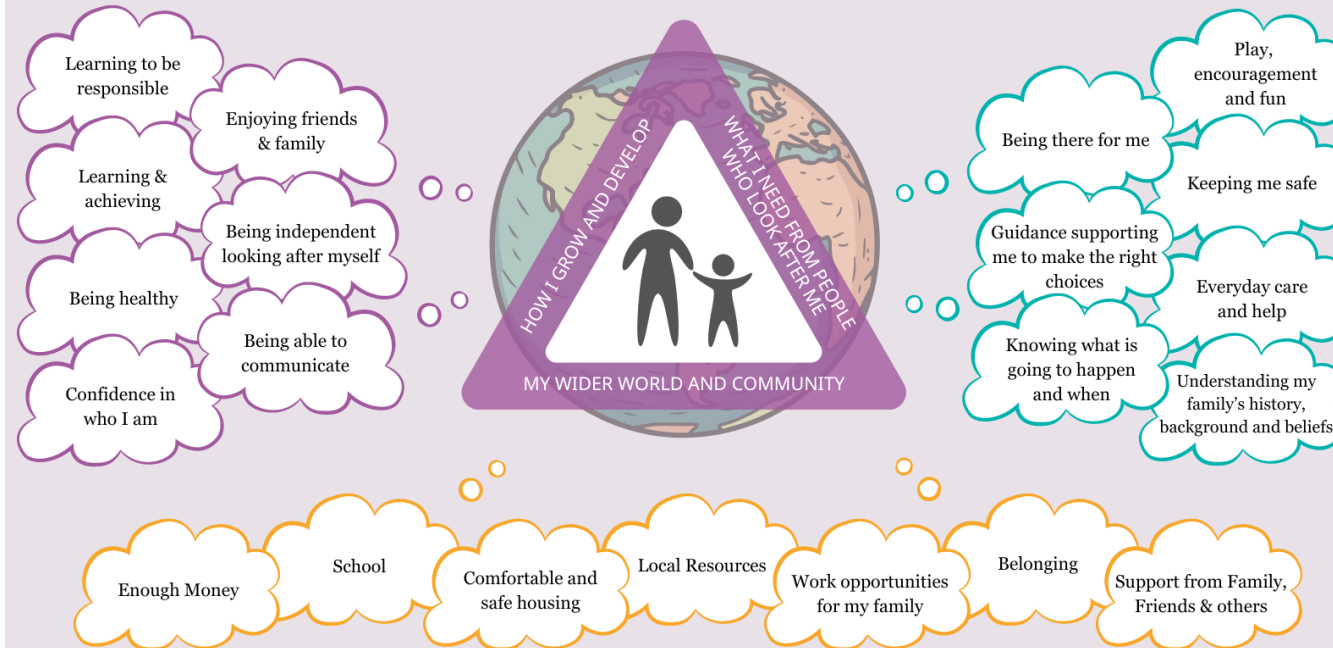
[HTTPS://ONEFAMILY.IE/THE-SEPARATION-NETWORK-2/PROGRAMME-OF-ACTIVITY/](https://onefamily.ie/the-separation-network-2/programme-of-activity/)



# PLACING CHILDREN'S NEEDS CENTRAL IN PARENTAL SEPARATION

## My World Triangle

The whole health and development of the child or young person





# 5 NATIONAL KEY INDICATORS– NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE 2023-2028

As a nation we are committed to all children in society being supported to be:

- active and healthy
- achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development
- safe and protected from harm
- economic security and opportunity
- connected, respected and contributing to society

# WHAT WE WANT FOR CHILDREN – PARENTS POST SEPARATION

Children experience a safe and positive home environment.

Parents experience more self-efficacy in their role as parent.

Positive child wellbeing and development.

Improved communication and enhanced ability to manage conflict within the family.

Reduced engagement with family courts.

Reduced engagement with Tusla and fewer children entering care

Decreased number of children living with long term conflict or domestic violence, resulting in decreased referrals to CAMHS.

Children confident in their family form.

Acceptance of diverse family forms starting in the home and reaching the community at large

# SUPPORTING FAMILIES POST SEPARATION IN EVERY COMMUNITY

- **Effective, specialist services should be resourced and delivered for children and parents to prevent children being negatively impacted by separation**, with the aim of keeping children safe and reducing the detrimental impacts of domestic violence and interparental conflict, which may be heightened during separation.
- **Support services should include a focus on child protection and safeguarding**, ensuring that children are kept safe in their family.
- **Skilled and experienced professionals** from a range of professional backgrounds **are crucial to the successful delivery** of supports.
- **The needs of families experiencing domestic violence and interparental conflict differ.** Similar types of interventions are effective for both, though the content and focus must be tailored depending on whether domestic violence or interparental conflict are prevalent.

Sherie de Burgh Event Series  
6th Annual Commemorative Seminar 2025

## Contact with Children Following Separation: Practice-to-Policy NGO-TCD Research Collaborations



13 February 2025 | 5.30pm - 7pm  
TRiSS Seminar Room, 6th floor  
Arts Building, Trinity College Dublin



# THANK YOU!