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**The needs of children in conflict management**

The Children and Families in Transition project

Dale Bagshaw

Children and Families in Transition (CAFIT) is a joint University of South Australia (Centre for Peace Conflict and Mediation, Hawke Research Institute) and Centacare (SA) project, funded by the Telstra Foundation. We have researched the experiences and special service needs of separated families and their children in order to develop early intervention strategies to promote child-centred practices and positive, cooperative parenting. This research has informed the development of a broad-based model of service provision, which has been piloted and tested. The research findings and the services provided will assist separating families to recognise and centralise the best interests of their children in their post-separation arrangements.

Our research has been undertaken in two stages. Stage 1 (2005–06) included a national and international survey of service providers, and then a phone-in with separating parents and caregivers and their children. In Stage 2 (2006–07) we developed a child-centred service model for children and families in transition, including child-inclusive mediation, parallel education groups for parents and children and the launching of an associated child-centred website, ChaT First (Children and Teens First), with separate sections for children adolescents and families going through separation or divorce.

Who are we?

The Children and Families in Transition project involves professional workers from Centacare Catholic Family Services working with academic research staff from the Centre for Peace, Conflict and Mediation, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, with

contributions from postgraduate students from the Conflict Management programs and fourth year Bachelor of Social Work Honours and field education students.

An interdisciplinary research team was formed for the purpose of the CAFIT project at UniSA in 2005 and included people with different professional backgrounds and with different expertise. As the project is run in cooperation with Centacare Catholic Family Services, the research was also guided by the practical experience of Centacare staff.

Stage 1 (2005–06): The research

Part of Stage 1 of the CAFIT project was the national distribution of an electronic survey to various organisations that provide services to children and families who are experiencing separation and divorce. The survey used a semi-structured questionnaire with yes/no questions, scaled questions, and room provided for qualitative comments, opinions and experiences.

The next phase of our research involved a statewide (SA only) phone-in in May 2005 for children and young people, parents, stepparents and relatives of children who have experienced separation and divorce. We were particularly interested in hearing from young people, in order to more fully develop services that meet the needs of children who have experienced or are experiencing the separation and divorce of their parents.

Focus groups and individual interviews were also conducted with service providers to Aboriginal families and children to ascertain the experiences and special service needs of this population.

At the end of these two phases the researchers collated and analysed the collected qualitative and quantitative data and used this information to develop recommendations for a child-centred approach to services for children and families experiencing separation and divorce.

Our report from Stage 1, *Children and families in transition: towards a child-centred integrated model of practice*, is available in hard copy or online (from the project website <www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cpcm/cafit.asp>).

Stage 2 (2006–07): Development and evaluation of the service model

Stage 2 of the project involved the implementation and evaluation of a child-centred service for children and families experiencing separation and divorce, including parallel child-focused education groups and a website for parents and children.

Based on the research from Stage 1 of the project, we developed parallel parent and child education groups and a child-centred website for families who are going through separation and/or divorce, with a focus on the children and teens involved. Children, young people, parents and other family members will find appropriate information about the process of separation and divorce on this site. Among other things, the site provides several activities for children to help them understand what is happening and to help them to deal with their feelings around their experience of separation. There is also a 'groovy' section for teens which includes the music of Quest, an Adelaide-based group of young people who have supported the project.

The website, CHaT First (Children and Teens First <www.chatfirst.com.au>), was launched on 26 April 2007 by The Honourable Justice Christine Dawe. The music on the site was provided

by Ashton Rudd, Den Aspy, Lou Aspy and Ben Robins, the members of Quest. ●

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The project website is <www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cpcm/cafit.asp>.