



Current research on the effects of parental separation on children: What hurts and what helps

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**How common is parental
separation?**

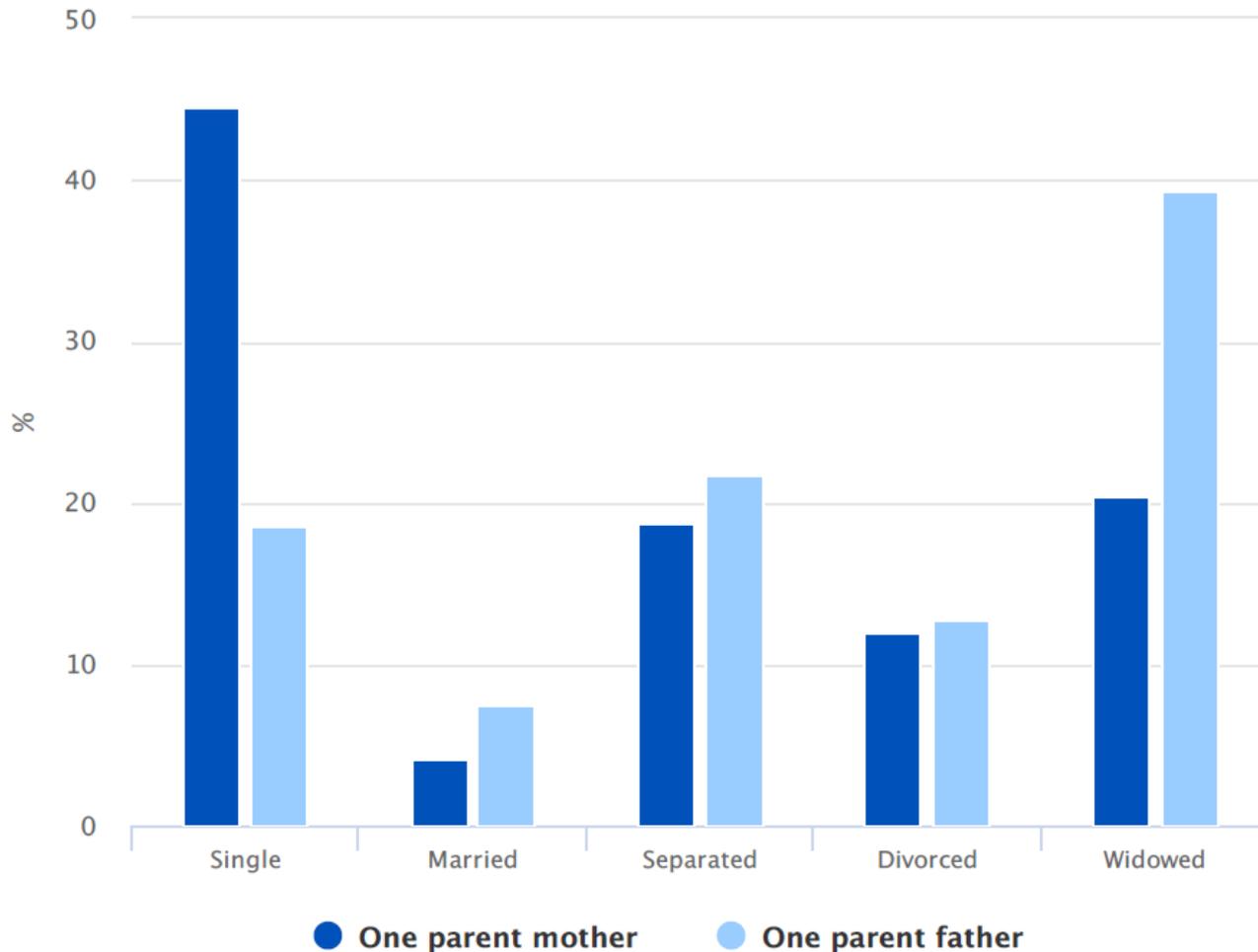
Lone Parent Households

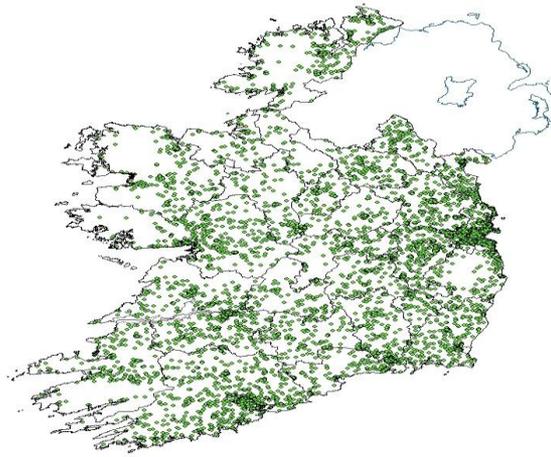
Number of Lone Parent Households (Fahey & Russell, 2001; CSO, 2002; CSO, 2006, 2012, 2016)

Year	No of Lone Parent Households	Percentage Increase
1996	129,116	—
2002	153,863	19%
2006	189,200	23%
2011	215,315	13.8%
2016	218,817	1.6%

Lone Parent Households – Census 2016

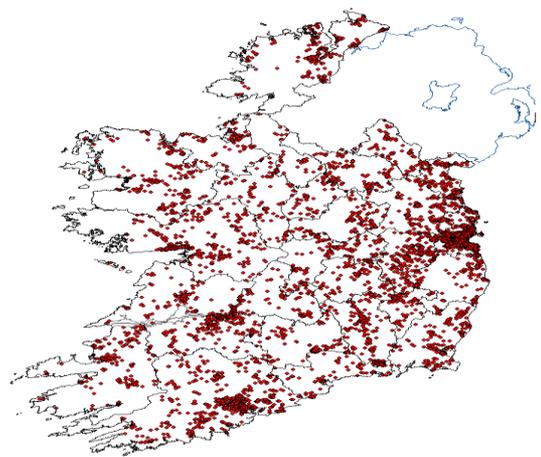
Figure 2.6 One parent families by sex and marital status, 2016





Infant cohort:
11,134 at 9 months
9,001 at 5 years

6% experienced parental separation/divorce between age 9 months to 5 years



Child cohort:
8,568 at 9 years
7,400 at 13 years

By age 9, about 15% had experienced separation

6.2 % experienced parental separation/divorce between age 9 to 13 years

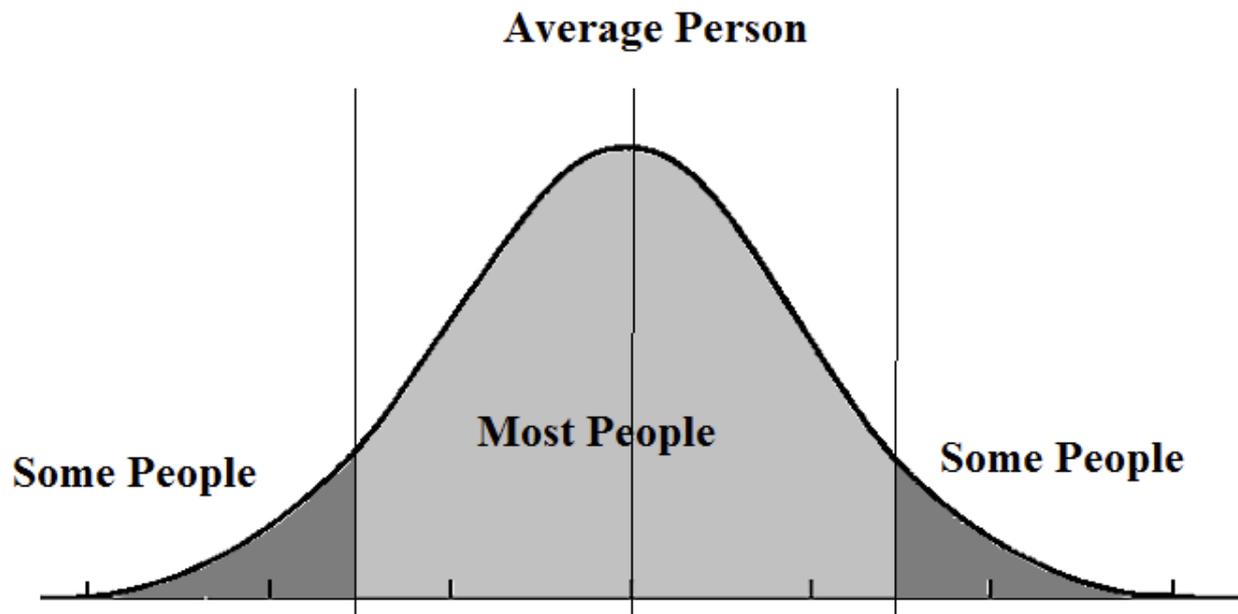
1.5% experienced death of a parent
7.4% experienced conflict between parents
39.1% death of a close family member (not parent)



**How does parental
separation matter
children?**

How Separation Matters for Children

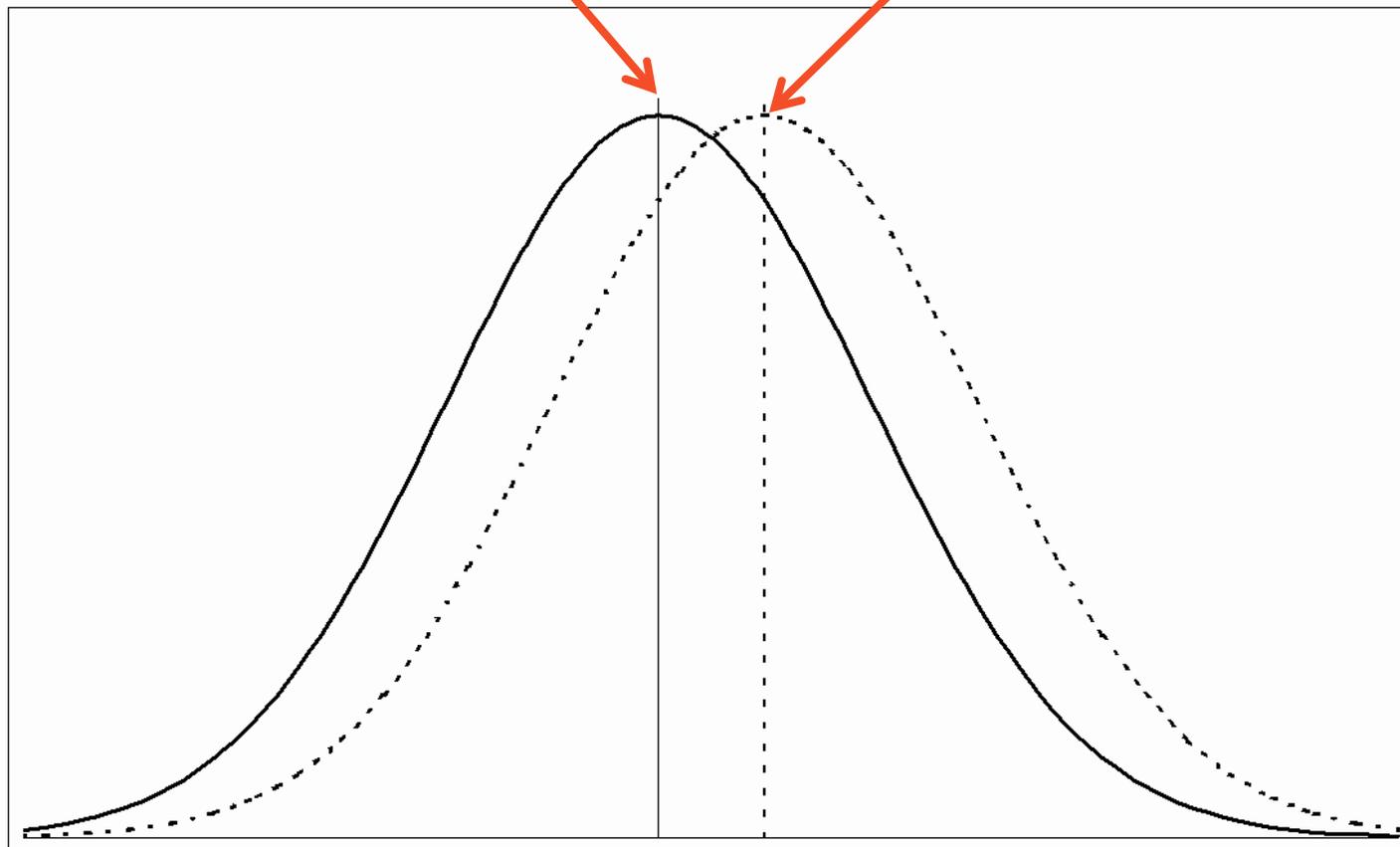
Research comparing children from separated v non-separated households



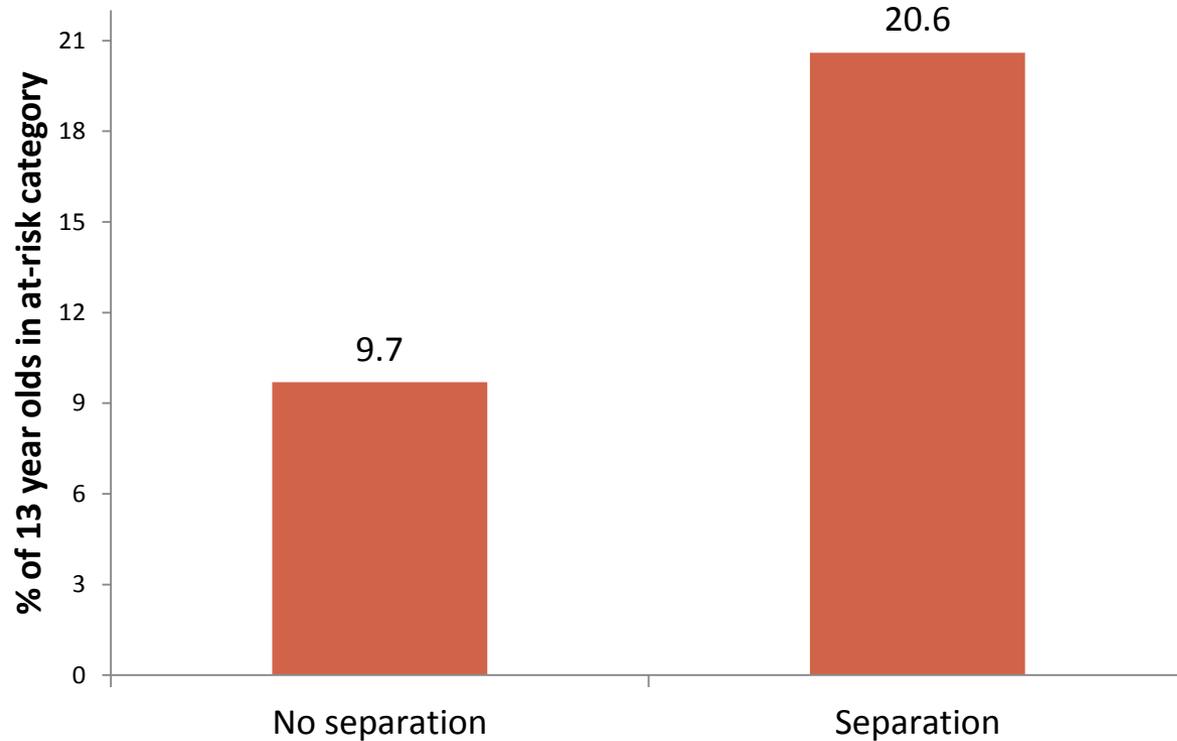
How Separation Matters for Children

Average score for children from separated households

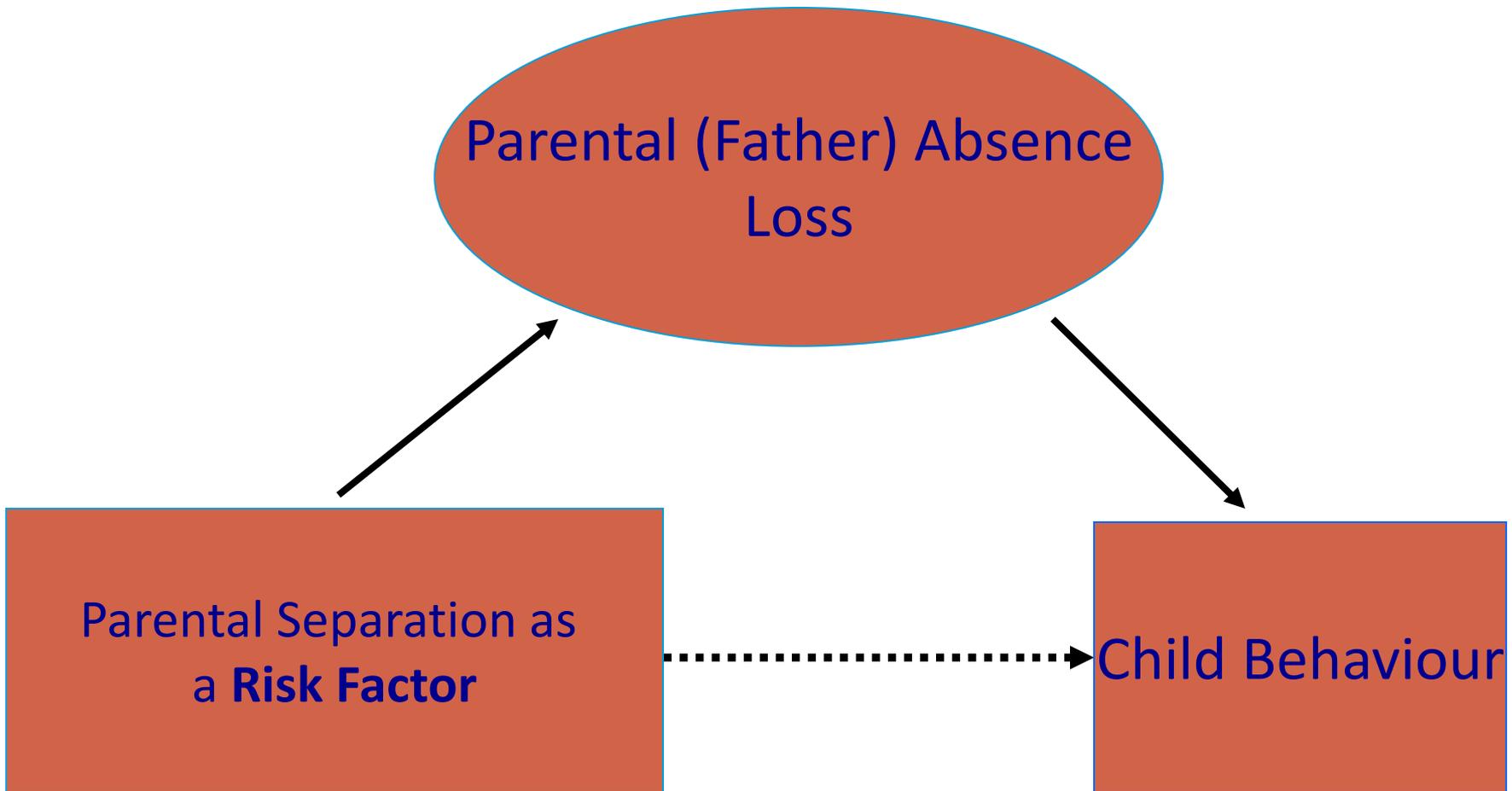
Average score for children from non-separated households



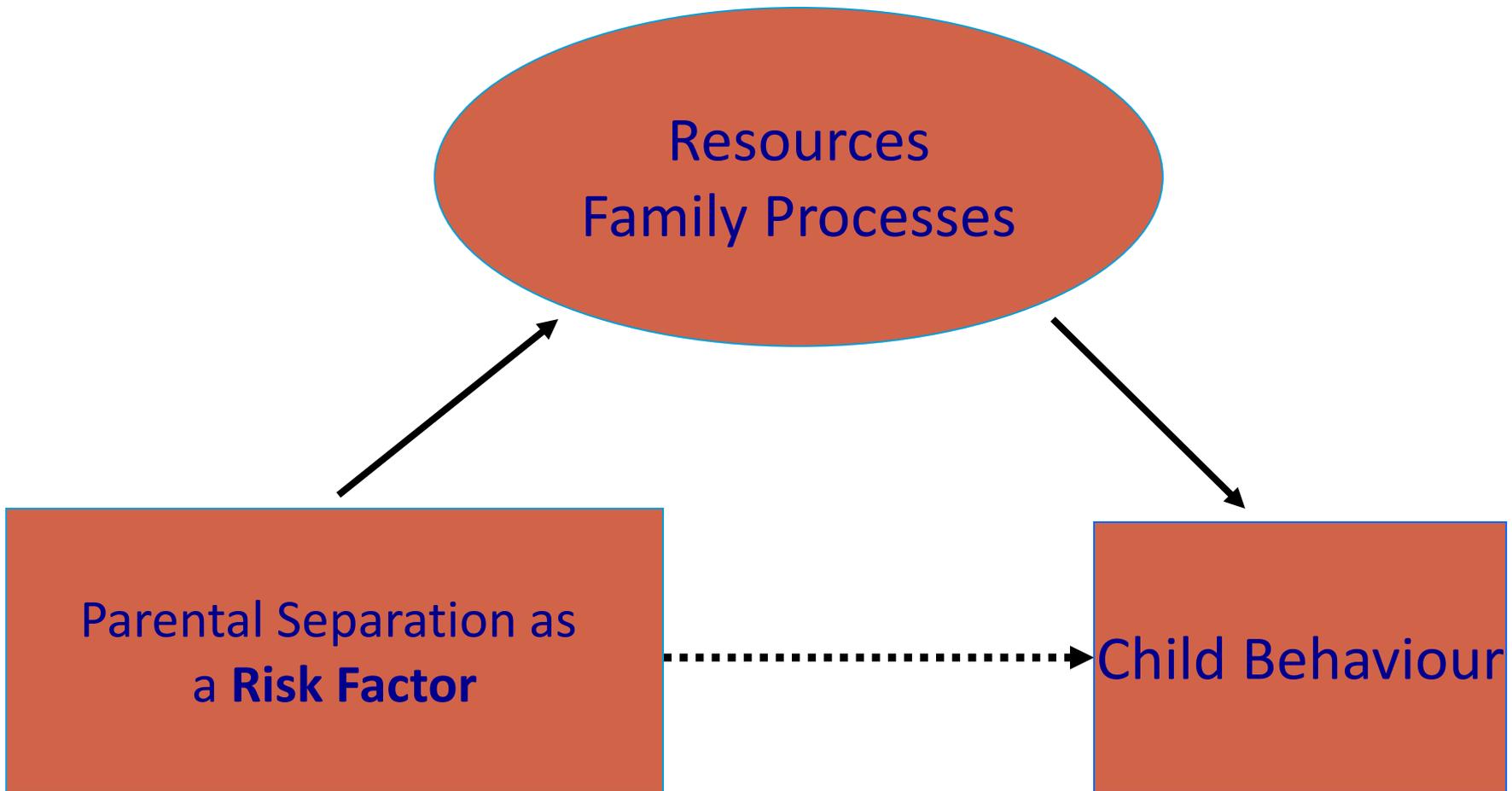
How Separation Matters for Children



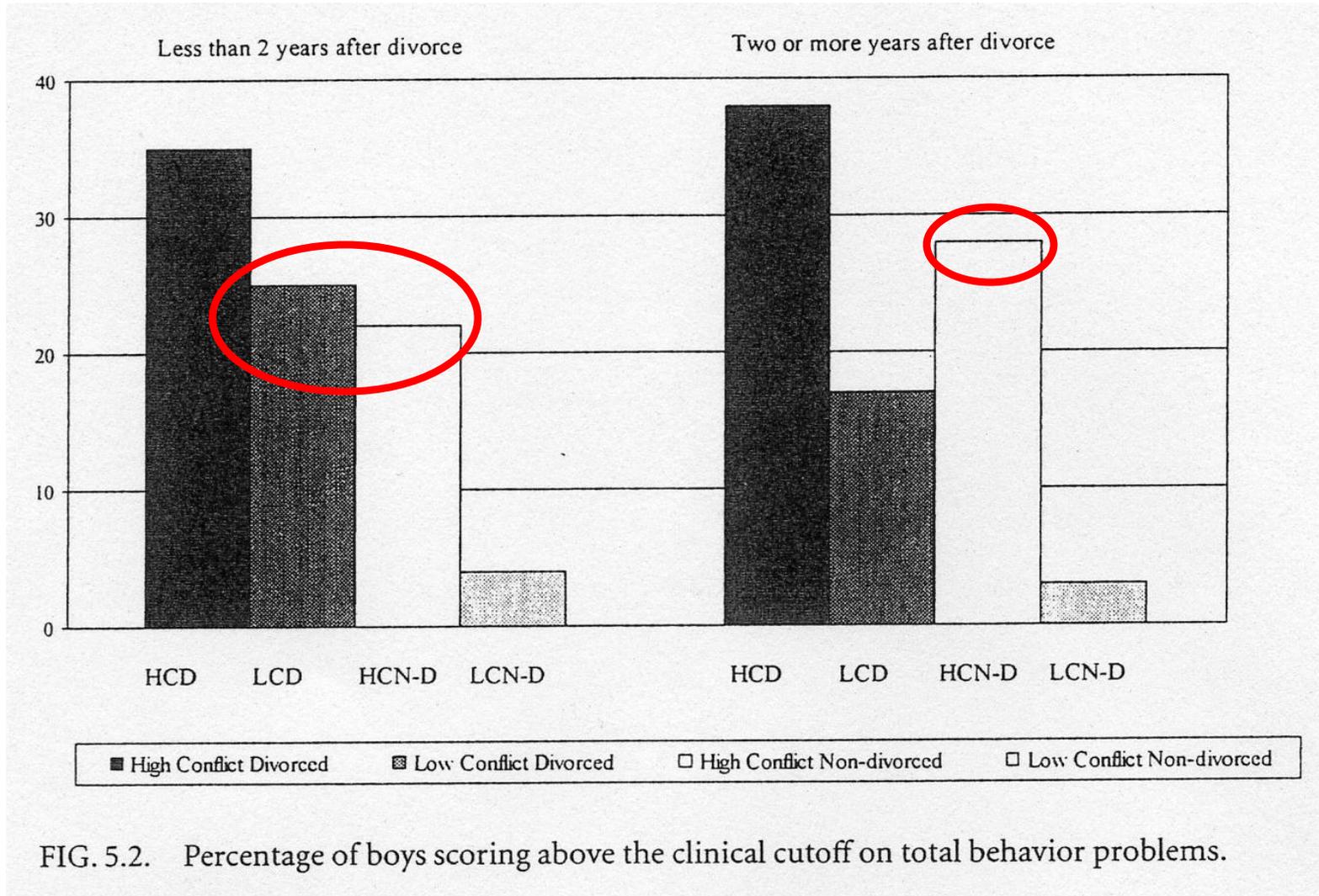
How Separation Matters for Children



How Separation Matters for Children



Interparental Conflict



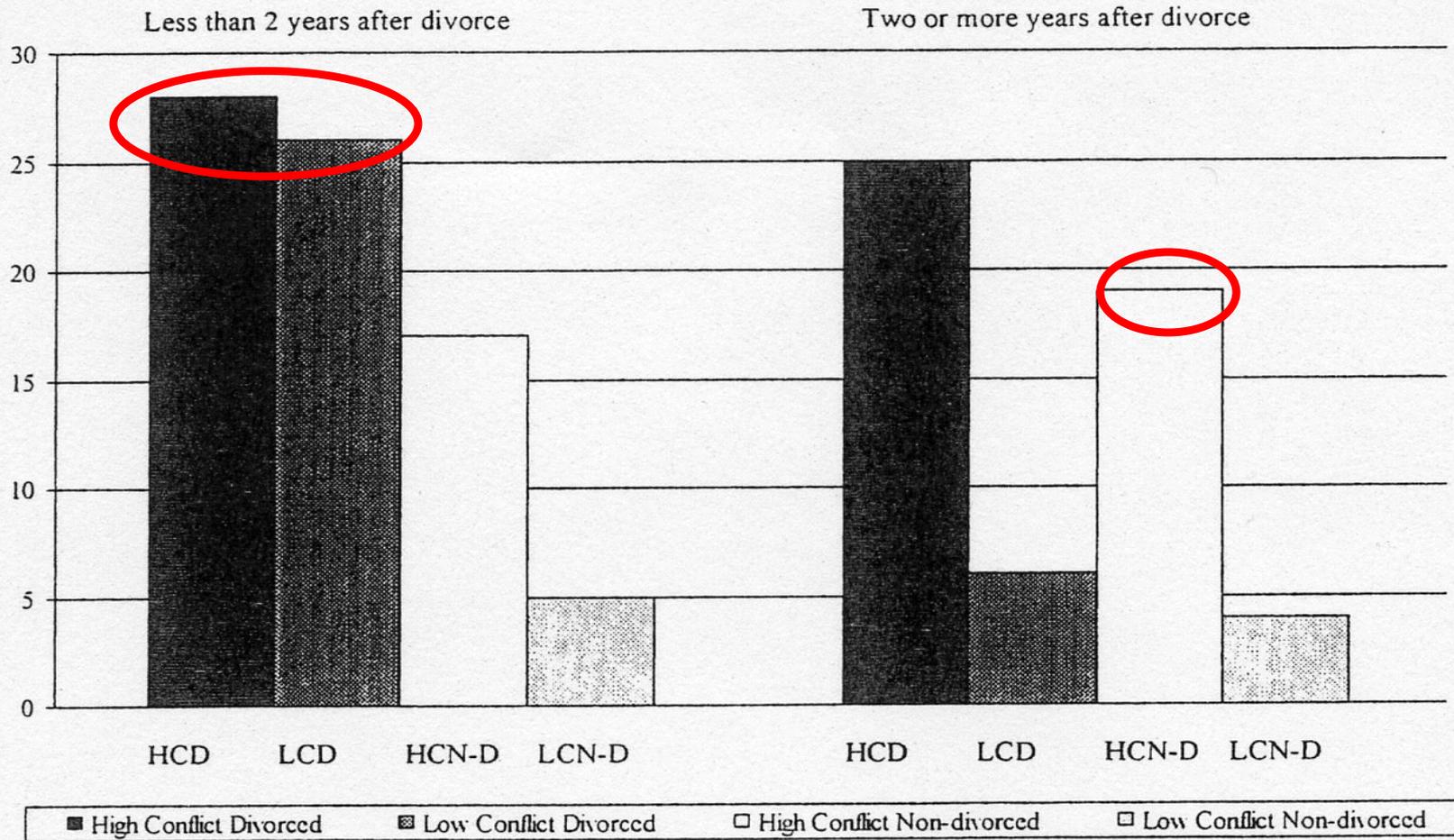


FIG. 5.1. Percentage of girls scoring above the clinical cutoff on total behavior problems.

Interparental Conflict (IPC)

Children affected by Parental Relationship Distress (CAPRD)

Conflict levels before, during and after the process of parental separation/divorce v the separation per se.

IPC: along a continuum – from silence to violence

Not all children equally vulnerable to effects of conflict; age & gender

Why and how some children are affected by IPC

- 'Spillover effect' and the role of parenting

- Threats to emotional security

- Attributions of responsibility, blame

- Role of neurobiology and stress responses

Separation Process & Loss

Separation as a process – not a discrete event

Antecedent to other family transitions, such as re-partnering

Which aspects of transitions affect stress, and for whom

Challenges in dealing with loss following separation

Accepting the reality of the loss

Lack of support following the loss

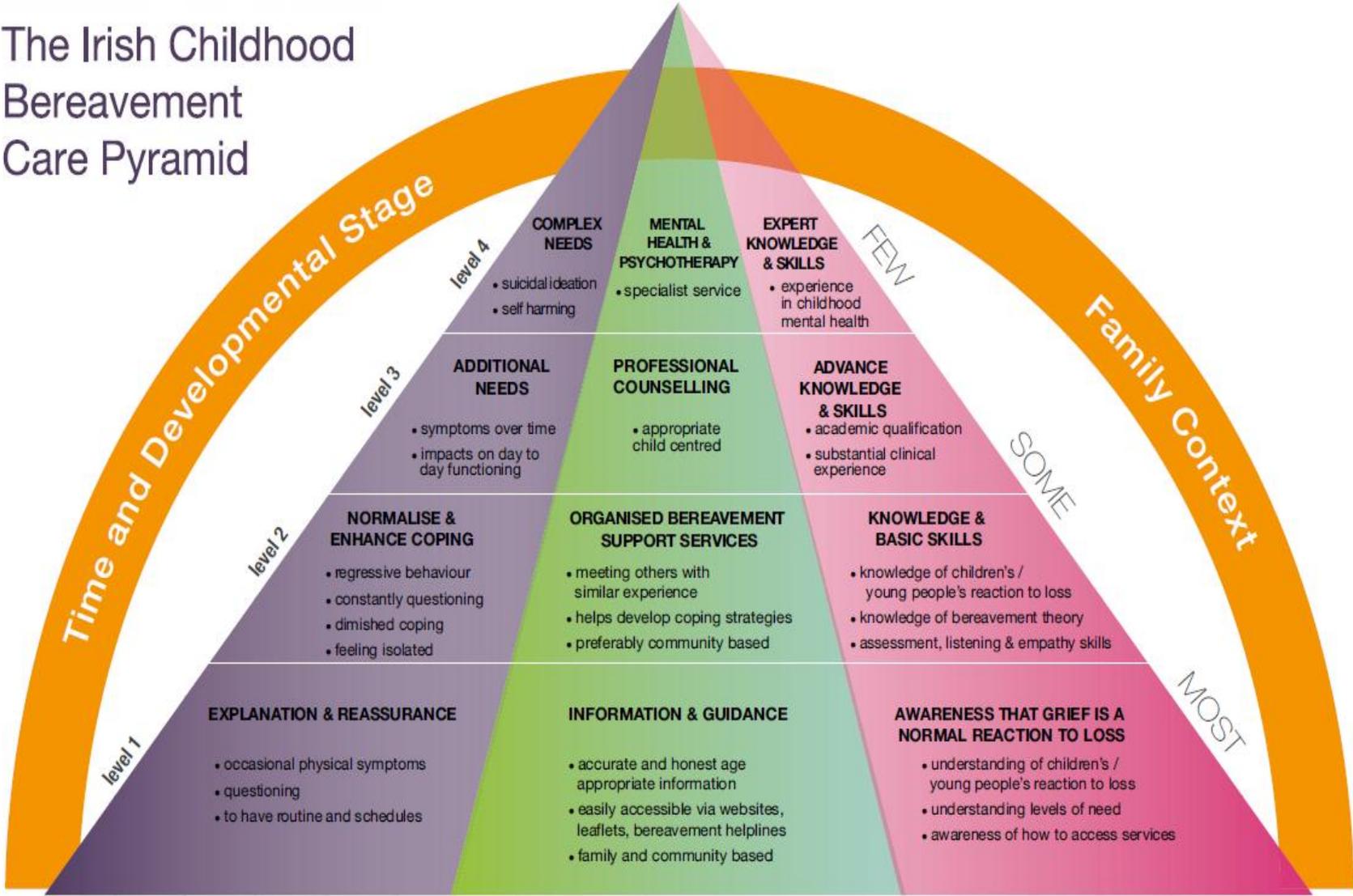
Caught in the middle/divided loyalties

Period of re-organisation

(Amato, 2000; Hadfield et al., 2018)



The Irish Childhood Bereavement Care Pyramid



NEEDS → **SERVICE/SUPPORT** → **COMPETENCIES**

How can children be supported?



CHILDREN'S

GRIEF CENTRE



EVALUATION OF THE CHILDREN'S GRIEF PROJECT

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2016



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The Evaluation of the Children's Grief Project

Profile of families who use the service – based on data from Annual Reports
Evaluation sheets

Five questions are asked of the children: (approximately 189 children, 33% response)

1. What did you find helpful?
2. What did you find unhelpful?
3. What did you like most about coming to the Children's Grief Project?
4. Did the sessions make any difference in your life (if so, can you describe the difference?)
5. What would you change?

Seven questions are asked of the parents: (approximately 209 parents, 37% response)

1. Overall how satisfied are you with the service?
2. What was most helpful about the service?
3. What was least helpful about the project?
4. Do you feel the service is well organised?
5. Do you feel the service is friendly, helpful and accessible?
6. Do you feel the support you received helped you and your child understand and come to terms with your situation?
7. Have you noticed a difference in your child's behaviour? If so, what?

	September 2010- December 2011	January 2012- December 2012	January 2013- December 2013	January 2014- December 2014	January 2015- December 2015
Number of children	154	135	107	150	140
Gender of child (% and number of boys)	48% (74)	55% (74)	47% (50)	51% (77)	45% (63)
Mean age of children in years (standard deviation)	10.62 (3.69)	10.13 (3.55)	10.50 (3.49)	9.99 (3.44)	10.26 (3.67)
Reasons for Attending					
Bereavement	36%	31%	36%	37%	32%
Separation	60%	69%	64%	63%	68%
Other (including sibling illness)	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Source of Referral					
Parents	70%	96%	93%	95%	87%
School	14%	4%	2%	1%	4%
Other, including GP, HSE	16%	0%	5%	4%	9%
Hours to children	510	890	902	1280	1482
Hours to adults	102	50	121	206	194
Geographical Area of Referral					
Limerick	82%	80%	80%	76%	83%
Tipperary	5%	9%	13%	13%	11%
Clare	12%	11%	7%	8%	6%
Other	1%	0%	0%	3%	1%

Children's Perspectives: what was most helpful?

An opportunity to talk about their feelings:

"That I got to talk about my feelings and no one else's instead of keeping them bottled up".

"Talking and getting a lot out. Being around positive people. When you talk about things you're not being judged. What you talk about is confidential and is talked about to no one".

"The way you didn't fire questions at me, you let me talk and then added bits of information which made me understand why I was upset. The feelings sheet helped me to realise there was nothing wrong with how I was feeling. I have been doing the deep breathing to help me stay [calm]".

Feeling understood and achieving a better understanding

"I know that it wasn't my fault my parents broke up".

"When I found most helpful was understanding more about bipolar".

The workbook and activities

Children's Perspectives: what they liked most?

Being able to talk to somebody and feel listened to

"The opportunity to share and unload worries or problems. Being able to talk to someone completely neutral and understanding".

"It was a safe place to talk. No one knew your business. The person was so nice and helpful and I really enjoyed it a lot".

"The thing that I most liked about coming here is talking about how I feel after the separation".

"How easy it was talking to the counsellor. The very good advice given by the counsellor. Also, how comfortable I felt talking about my grief to the counsellor".

Safety in opening up – trust and confidentiality

"Being able to talk to them and being able to trust them".

"The way I could be open and honest with you without worrying about upsetting you. I felt like I could sit back, take time, and talk without being forced to say anything. All of your advice is treasured and I use it every day. I feel more happy now".

Children's Perspectives: what they liked most?

Activities and the workbook

"I always had lots of fun and I got lots of time off school. Love coming to the Children's Grief Project;

"I liked the workbook as it was a fun way to release feelings"

Perceived benefits from attending

"She made my life easier"

"Instead of crying I'm building up happiness"

"It made me feel better. I was upset when I came first"

Children's Perspectives: what difference did the sessions make?

93% - positive difference to their lives

Reduction in negative emotions

"Yes I was very sad but now I am only a tiny bit sad".

"I don't cry anymore. It helped me to stop stammering".

"Going to the sessions removed some of the sadness from my life and made me feel better".

"My temper went down and I don't react so quickly"

"I don't hit or kick"

Feeling happier or better

"I feel more happy and relieved"

"They made me feel a lot more positive towards life and made me feel happier in my life"

Reduction in psychosomatic symptoms

"I stopped getting problems in my tummy"

Children's Perspectives: what difference did the sessions make?

Increased understanding of their situation

"I used to blame myself for family issues and beat myself up about it. But now I just accept it and leave it at that".

"Yes as they showed me how to cope with grief and how to improve the relationship with my father."

"Yes it made a big difference. I feel more at ease with [Family member's] death, now and even though some days I feel sad and miss him I understand that is normal. Now I am able to continue with my life and not be letting my sadness control how I feel, while still acknowledging it".

Increased contact with father/improved family relationships

"I got back in contact with my dad"

"Yes because it helped me to become closer to my daddy"

Learnt strategies to help them cope

"I am better able to sleep and tell my dad to stop when I didn't want to hear something"

Children's Perspectives: what was unhelpful?

Asked from 2013 onwards; 93% identified nothing or did not respond

Eight children

- Painful memories evoked

- Specific activities

- Interference with other activities

Nine children identified changes that they would make

- Having to wait for an appointment

- Having appointments later in the day

- Make the space more appealing to teenagers

- Change to activities or toys

Parents' Perspectives

Ratings of satisfaction: 82% very satisfied, 5% satisfied, 13% non-response

What was most helpful?/ Did the support help child and parent?

A safe place for their child to talk

“My child had a place to talk [about] what was on his mind and had a very kind and understanding counsellor who worked through his needs”.

“[Child] was very upset at the start before he attended and was very unhappy. After a couple of weeks he was much more content and happy. I saw a big difference in him and he always looked forward to coming. He needed someone to talk to and knew it was confidential”.

“It was a place [child] could come to and speak openly about things going on that he wouldn't talk to anyone else about and especially knowing that he could trust [support worker] one hundred percent”.

“My daughter learned to open up with her feelings. She trusted [support worker] to tell her things she couldn't say to me”.

Parents' Perspectives

Warmth and non-judgement that emanated from staff and the environment

“The service [is] very organised. [Support worker] was a very warm person and welcoming. My daughter found her kind, gentle and loving. She felt she could really talk to her and express her feelings. We were really made welcome with everyone we met”.

“[Support worker’s] care and guiding of [child] through the steps of her grief. Thank you for holding her so gently”.

Support for Parents themselves

“I have received reassurance about [child] which makes more space for me to cope better. I feel reinforced by the feedback that we are handling the bereavement for all of our family well”.

Almost all parents (173/175) reported that they had been helped

Parents' Perspectives

Difference in Child	Frequency	Sample Quotations
Calmer/less angry/more relaxed or at ease	54	<p>"She appears less angry".</p> <p>"She is calm and easier".</p> <p>"[Child] is much calmer (he still has his moments) but in general he is not as angry with the world. He understands the situation a lot better now".</p>
Happier/more content in himself/herself	65	<p>"She is happier, more relaxed and more confident in herself".</p> <p>"I notice my son smiling every time he comes out of a session with [support worker] and he seems more calm and grounded".</p> <p>"She seems happier in herself, her nightmares have stopped and her separation anxiety has improved greatly".</p>

Difference in Child	Frequency	Sample Quotations
<p>Not afraid to communicate feelings or needs/opens up more/more confident or assertive</p>	<p>78</p>	<p>“She seems to be voicing exactly what she wants” .</p> <p>“When a situation escalates she is very clear in what she needs or wants” .</p> <p>“Definitely has found her ‘voice’ and is more self-assured.”</p> <p>“My daughter is not afraid to ask me things about the break-up. She is a lot more confident in herself now” .</p>
<p>Less problematic behaviour</p>	<p>20</p>	<p>“[Child] has stopped hitting and pinching me.”</p> <p>“He is not as angry as he would have been 13 months ago and we have had no tantrums for the past 5 months” .</p> <p>“My child’s behaviour has much improved, she is not afraid to speak out about her feelings now. She goes to the bathroom on her own again and she now eats her own meals without me having to spoon feed her.”</p>
<p>More engaged at home, in school and in activities</p>	<p>19</p>	<p>“[Child’s] behaviour has completely turned around, she is full of life again, it is so nice to see her laugh and smile and joke and be with her friends and be a ‘normal’ kid again” .</p> <p>“She is not clingy now and happily goes to school, ballet and with her dad” .</p> <p>“His school work has improved and all his teachers have commented on the change in him”</p>

Parents' Perspectives

Organisation, friendliness, helpfulness and accessibility

Broad unanimity around these issues

Very well organised

Welcoming atmosphere

Appointments well planned and organised

Areas for Consideration

Logistic issues – accessibility, waiting for an appointment

Communication with parents

"I feel communication between the parent and [support worker] could be improved in terms of feedback from sessions....Feedback would be instrumental in my understanding of the great work done in sessions".

"[I] would prefer now and again to speak to the counsellor to review how the child is doing"

What can we conclude?

Separation is a risk factor for children's development

What happens before and after is as important as the separation per se

Different children are affected in different ways

Key processes that mediate outcomes – interparental conflict and experiences of loss

Importance of understanding children's perspectives (see research by Elke Hayes)

Parents are key agents in supporting children through the process