The research literature on the effects of divorce on children has shown a shift in emphasis over the past few years, most notably in its recognition that not all children suffer long-term damage from parental separation or divorce. The recent development in psychology of a ‘risk and resiliency’ perspective has opened up the possibility that divorce may not be wholly negative or harmful to children, but that a variety of factors may impact on their development and well-being (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Thompson and Amato, 1999). What might actually help or hinder children in the aftermath of parental divorce, of course, remains a topic of ongoing concern and debate. Unresolved parental conflict, economic disadvantage, parental repartnering and the movement into stepfamily life have been singled out as potentially damaging to children, while those who experience ‘multiple transitions’ are considered to be at particularly high risk of adverse outcomes.

To date, this body of literature has conceived of ‘multiple transitions’ in ways that we would suggest are too restrictive, their meaning and impact limited to those changes associated with parental repartnering twice or several times over. The Exeter Family Study (Cockett and Tripp, 1994), for example, frames its discussion of the impact of ‘transitions’ almost exclusively in these terms. Furthermore, the overriding emphasis in most studies
continues to be on harmful factors and how to avoid them (the problems framework), rather than on what might have been helpful or positive to those children who have successfully navigated their way through family change.

Drawing on data from a longitudinal study of young people whose parents have separated or divorced, our purpose in this article is to re-examine and refine the notion of ‘multiple transitions’. We seek to provide new insights into the way that young people manage change, focusing in particular on the pace and nature of change and the different contexts in which changes occur. In the process, we shed light on the significance of parental divorce in relation to the other pressing concerns in the lives of young people.

**New perspectives on family change**

It is increasingly recognized that if we wish to understand the interplay between factors of risk and resiliency for children we need to develop new conceptual and methodological tools for investigating subjective experiences of change. The growth of life course perspectives on family change and the newer, ecological approaches offer new ways forward here (Elder, 1994, 1998). They enable an understanding of divorce not as a discrete event signalling the rupture and breakdown of family life, but as a process, through which many relationships change yet endure. They suggest, too, the need to take account of children’s cumulative life experiences, a need reinforced by the new sociological studies of childhood that emphasize children’s agency in negotiating their childhoods (e.g. Christensen and James, 2000; Smart et al., 2001). Together, these theoretical reorientations point to the diversity and particularity of children’s experiences of post-divorce family life and their active engagement within it.

Typically, studies that have taken account of cumulative experiences (see, for example, Mullen et al., 1996; Rodgers, 1990) have tended to do so retrospectively, with adults. Few have talked to children at, or around, their times of transition and hence the immediacy of their experiences has not been captured. It is now recognized, however, that the extent of children’s abilities and capacities for coping and their agency in relation to their own futures cannot simply be ‘read backwards’ from an adult standpoint – either their own or ours as researchers. Nor can we safely hold prior assumptions about what constitutes a major challenge or transition in the life of an individual child.

‘Multiple transitions’: broadening the definitional scope

In their overview of research concerned with divorce and its effects on children, Pryor and Rodgers (2001: 28) state that about one in five children live with just one parent and one in 10 live in a stepfamily. A significant number
of those in stepfamilies will see the dissolution of their parents’ second partnership (Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; O’Connor et al., 1999). These multiple transitions are routinely thought to pose a range of risks for children, including lower self-esteem, unhappiness, poor educational achievements and behavioural and mental health problems (Amato and Booth, 1991; Cockett and Tripp, 1994; Fergusson et al., 1992; Kurdek et al., 1995; Pong and Ju, 2000). Whatever the explanations offered for these risks and the extent to which they can be mitigated (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001: 9, 69–71), these studies all tend to focus on divorce as the key transition affecting the children. This gives a partial picture in both senses of the word. First, it is biased in where and what it assumes is the most significant sphere of influence in young people’s lives. Second, it leaves out of the frame, or pays scant attention to, other changes and challenges that are commonly experienced by all children and young people, regardless of their parents’ marital status. It is these ‘othered’ experiences of change and transition – which, in our study, include issues surrounding school, friendship, death, illness, sexuality, unemployment, financial hardship, housing, etc. – which need to be brought back into the picture. Children’s own sense of their significance makes it imperative to include them in any discussion of transition or change.

Background to the study

Between 1997 and 1999, two linked projects were carried out at the Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood at the University of Leeds, UK, on the experiences of 117 children living in post-divorce families. These children and young people resided in the north of England, were of mixed age and social class background and were recruited through a variety of routes (thus avoiding an exclusively legal or therapeutic sample). In our current study we followed up 60 of these children after a 3- to 4-year period to find out how their lives have changed. The follow-up sample was balanced in terms of age (most were aged 11–17), gender and social background. As in our previous research, we paid particular attention to the ethics of conducting research with children, giving them an informed choice about taking part and guaranteeing their confidentiality (Neale and Smart, 1998).

A key aim of the research was to explore the nature of the changes that young people were undergoing, whether, for example, these changes were expected or unexpected, perceived as positive or negative, or whether they were generated internally by young people themselves or imposed upon them by others. We wanted to explore the pace and cumulative nature of these changes and to tap into young people’s perceptions and understandings of the impact of these changes on their lives, in particular, the extent to which they felt supported through the changes by their parents and others.
We also sought to look more closely and critically at what ‘multiple transi-
tions’ entail for young people and the extent to which experiences beyond
the divorce assumed significance in their accounts. The discussion that fol-
lows focuses on several themes: ‘getting used to’ family change; the man-
agement, pace and cumulative nature of change; the quality of relationships;
and divorce as an ‘everyday’ challenge.

‘Getting used to it’: children’s perspectives on new parental
partners

Given the widely documented pitfalls awaiting those who venture into step-
family life (Popenoe, 1994), it is surprising, perhaps, that the majority of
children and young people taking part in this study gave accounts of their
own transitions in broadly positive terms. In addition – and this is in contrast
with research findings elsewhere – it was not only younger children for
whom this was the case. Some of those experiencing this change during ado-
lescence also emphasized the benefits it brought:

Before Mum and Dave got married, it used to be much more difficult. We used
to get cheaper clothes, we didn’t live in as good a house either as now. Yep, we
kind of lived in a scruffy house and we just didn’t get stuff we wanted as much.
Things have got a lot better I reckon, a lot. We had a really big party when they
got married. It was really good. And Dad’s new partner is good, she’s nice.
She’s a lot like Dad which I think is good. (Robert Cook, aged 12)

Robert’s commendation of stepfamily life in terms of its economic benefits
was a factor mentioned by a number of children. Widely documented as a
‘risk factor’ in the aftermath of divorce (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994;
Thompson and Amato, 1999), economic hardship was something children
appeared reluctant to admit to. Rather, as Robert did, they tended to empha-
size their enhanced quality of life when any hardship ceased. In the case of
Percy Drew, aged 14, no such financial hardship ensued after his parents’
separation and his transition into stepfamily life was made with apparent
ease:

My Dad’s girlfriend is really nice and helpful and stuff. She sort of gets into
things that we like. . . . And my Mum’s just married Steve. He got me into
cricket and stuff like that. . . . And he’s good ‘cos like he’ll come home and I’ve
got to go out somewhere in half an hour and I haven’t told him and he’s fine
about it. (Percy Drew, aged 14)

In other cases, however, the arrival of new partners was perceived as
difficult and challenging:

Mum and Dad have both gone their separate ways and they seem happier, so let
them be. . . . I used to get on really well with my stepmum but soon as she got
the ring on her finger that were it, she changed. . . . And I didn’t use to get on
with my stepdad when he first arrived, when we moved in with him. I’d say it’s
got better but I don’t see that much of him ‘cos he works through the day and
works at the club at night. But there were like four kids all of a sudden in the house. If we’d had more space, like, somewhere to go when you wanted to be on your own, that’d make it easier. (Becky Hawkins, aged 16)

Another young woman, Charmane James, had experienced problems with her Mum’s partner:

My Mum knows I’m not keen on him . . . He never gets cross with me or anything, but he’s very individual with a very strong presence and he likes talking about himself a lot but he doesn’t listen to what you’ve got to say . . . Even though it’s 2 years on, I’m still getting used to it. Because for a long time I was completely used to it being Mum, me and my sister, just the three of us. And we moved here to a house I don’t like. I loved our other one. I’d been there from the age of 3 to 13. What makes it easier is that I can see Mum’s much happier than she was without a partner . . . It’s 2 years with my Dad’s new partner, too. But because she’s so nice and gentle, it’s been made easier . . . I get on really well with my stepmum. She’s really nice. But her youngest daughter has got something quite serious wrong with her. They don’t know what it is yet. (Charmane James, aged 15)

These two accounts testify to some of the difficulties known to exist for children in the process of stepfamily formation. In particular, these include issues around moving home, dealing with new stepparents during adolescence, negotiating new ‘ground rules’ in relation to family routines and finances, coping with stepsiblings, and learning to ‘share’ parents and domestic spaces (Cherlin et al., 1991; Morgan, 1996; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Robinson, 1991; Walker, 1992). In addition – and this is something that emerges in our data more widely – there was a sense of loss at the transition from lone-parent family (the majority of whom are mother-headed) back to two-parent family. This particular loss is afforded less recognition in the research literature (although see Arditti, 1999) than children’s need to mourn the loss of what is regarded as their ‘complete’ family in the immediate aftermath of separation and divorce (Dowling and Gorell-Barnes, 1999). There is clear evidence in our study that with several years of post-divorce family life behind them, children’s sense of what constitutes the ‘complete’ family has often shifted radically. What was an ‘extraordinary’ period of transition in their lives had become wholly ‘ordinary’.

Despite these difficulties in adjusting to their new family situations, by their own admissions, Becky and Charmane were gradually ‘getting used to it’. They also suggested, as did others in our study, that their parents’ happiness was an important motivating factor in their acceptance of new partners. And indeed, the 2-year time frame alluded to by Charmane is recognized in the research literature as the average period required for stepfamily members to adapt to their new situations (De’Ath, 1992; Robinson, 1991).
Multiple transitions: the management, pace and cumulative experience of change

On the basis of research evidence elsewhere, it might be expected that children whose parents have re-partnered more than once would be more likely to report difficulties in adapting. Yet, on the basis of our data, this argument cannot be substantiated in any straightforward way:

I’ve known my stepdad since I was 6, but he’s known me since I was a baby ‘cos they all went to college together. I didn’t really know him then ‘cos I was a baby. Dad has had two girlfriends since he and Mum split up. He’s got one now. She’s okay but I preferred the other ones. He keeps changing but that’s fine.
(Ralph Dutton, aged 12)

Relationships in Ralph’s stepfamily were harmonious. His Mum, Dad and stepdad had been friends since their college days and his Dad and stepdad still regularly played golf together. That his stepdad had known him ‘since he was a baby’ both intrigued and pleased Ralph. It appeared that against the backdrop of this enduring ‘friendship-cum-family’ history, his Dad’s comparatively short-lived relationships were viewed with equanimity and unconcern. A similar picture emerged in the following extract from Sabrina Scott’s interview:

Dad had a girlfriend and like, she finished with him out of the blue. He’s got a new girlfriend now. I get on with her. I get on with her kids and everything. Mum’s still got the same boyfriend. He’s nice. We’ve known him for years and years. He’s not in your face, he just sort of moulds in. (Sabrina Scott, aged 17)

Again, Sabrina’s experience of parental re-partnering was more ‘one-sided’. Her Dad had had two relationships since the divorce while her mother had had the same partner ‘for years’, someone so familiar to the children that he ‘moulds in’ almost like part of the furniture. The mother of Joey Davies had also changed partners:

Mum’s got a new partner since I spoke to you last. And that’s fine. I get on with him really well . . . he has a son of 11 but that’s not difficult. I don’t feel challenged by him in any way. I mean I suppose if they’d moved in just after Mum and Dad split up, or after Mum’s first partner went, that might’ve been difficult. . . . I mean a couple of years after Mum and Dad divorced, Mum got a partner whose kids I got quite good friends with. I mean that lasted for about 6 years so he did become quite a part of my life, him and his kids. It was fairly sad when it finished. (Joey Davies, aged 18)

These accounts suggest comparatively smooth transitions for the children and young people involved. As such, they offer some valuable insights into what may help or hinder children in navigating these changes. The external management of these new partnerships was clearly an important factor. Our data suggest that children find it easier if only one parent re-partners more than once, or perhaps more accurately, if only one parent is re-partnering at any one time. In these cases, the resident parents had the most
enduring partnerships, while the vagaries of the non-resident parents’ re-partnering had less day-to-day impact and could be treated with equanimity. Wider evidence suggests that parents may adopt a ‘semi-detached’ mode of relationship (‘living apart together’ rather than cohabiting) or keep their commitments to children and new partners in different domains of space and time, thereby preserving stable relationships for their children (Levin, 2002).

A second important factor in the smoothness of these transitions is the pace at which the changes are managed. The pace of change was clearly manageable for Joey. Giddens’ (1992) concept of ‘psychological travelling time’ – that is, the length of time it takes to accept and come to terms with a major life change – is useful here. Arguably, travelling implies a destination and destination is always one place – we cannot be in two places at once. In other words, coming to terms with each major life change is likely to require ‘psychological travelling time’ or a period of emotional recovery.

Typically, where children were experiencing difficulties, they were dealing with a range of qualitatively different challenges in their lives that were occurring at an uncomfortably accelerated pace. This was so for Becky Hawkins:

I lived with me Mum at first when they split up. And me Dad lived nearby. But then he moved over Derby way with his wife and I went to live with him at the time ’cos I got on really well with my stepmum. But she changed, wanted my Dad to herself. I saw Mum every holiday. . . . Yeah, then it were one night and I says to Mum, I’m not going back. And that were it. I just stayed here. . . . It’s been hectic (long pause). It’s like I’ve been moved from house to house and school to school. Ain’t really been settled. After the divorce we ain’t really been settled, until now. (Becky Hawkins, aged 16)

Thus, while for Joey Davies the pace of change had been measured and comfortable, for Becky it had been ‘hectic’ and unsettling. As a further example, Leanne had experienced a range of challenging and unwanted transitions over the years:

When I was really little it was awful, them fighting and the police coming round. . . . After that it got worse. I was taken to a court and asked what I wanted. I was 7, too young to think of a system. I wanted it equal like it is now. But it’s taken a long time and lots of hard stuff in between. . . . After a while Dad got a house and we could stay over. Then my Mum became an alcoholic. We started being with Dad more ’cos Mum couldn’t look after us. She didn’t take that too well. She wouldn’t get out of bed. It was a really hard time. And my Mum was a dinner lady at school and she’d come in drunk and I’d see her. And everyone knew. It went on for a year or two. I was quite depressed. Other hard things happening were with the CSA. My Mum contacted them. They took so much money off Dad that he nearly lost the house. And I was seeing a counselor and Dad couldn’t afford to pay for it any more . . .

Then about the same time, a friend of my Mum’s became an alcoholic. She and my Mum had been best friends until Mum had an affair with her husband. But Lynn stayed a really close friend of mine. She died last August and I’m still really upset about that. . . . And then with Dad’s new partner, things
have all moved too fast again. Within a couple of months of meeting her on the Internet, she moved in with her two children. They don’t speak English; I can’t speak their language. And now, within a couple of months, they’re getting married. . . . I’m so happy he’s met someone ‘cos he’s been unhappy for so long. But adjusting, it’s a shock. There’s more people, so less money, less space. (Leanne Jacobs, aged 14)

For Leanne, successive, major life changes had been condensed into too brief a time frame in which there had been little or no time for recovery. The loss of counselling support during these changes was particularly difficult for her. There was a sense here, as research elsewhere suggests (Mullen et al., 1996; Rodgers, 1990), that multiple risk factors can have cumulative or synergistic effects. That is, their combined effects are likely to be greater than would be expected by ‘adding together’ individual sources of adversity (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001: 141).

Subjective experiences of change and the quality of relationships

The accounts from Becky and Leanne in the previous section would seem to bolster the view that multiple transitions are, in themselves, inherently difficult. However, such a view would be too simplistic. Emma Jamieson (aged 14) and her younger brother had faced a series of major life changes that had also proceeded at a rapid pace. Theirs were ‘multiple transitions’ in the widest application of the term – a series of new parental partners, the arrival of various step- and half-siblings, frequent house moves and prolonged periods of economic hardship:

It’s hard for my Dad ’cos he lost his job a few months ago and couldn’t afford to keep his car or come up to see us so often. But he comes up on the bus every fortnight to spend Saturdays with us. My stepdad also lost his job 2 years ago but Mum makes the best of it, changed where she shops and cut back on things.

... When Mum and Dad first split up, we had to move into a hideous flat. Then we got a little terraced house. Mum had a relationship for a long time which didn’t work out. Then she met Phil and they had Tom together. Then they split up and he moved out. Then it turned out our next door neighbour had a brother who is now our stepdad (laughter). That brought us another brother from my stepdad’s first marriage. We moved into this house and then Mum and him had Amy. (Emma Jamieson, aged 14)

The wider evidence suggests that all these experiences are potentially serious ‘risk factors’ for children’s well-being (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Thompson and Amato, 1999; Wu and Martinson, 1993). However, Emma went on to explain:

I do have very close friends. Some are at my Baptist church which I love. I go there with Mum and my brothers. . . . We’ve not really had any problems at home. I was upset when they split up when I was 4. . . . But I’ve gained another Dad, lots of brothers and sisters and Mum and Dad get on fine. If I’ve needed to talk to someone, I talk to Mum. We’ve talked a lot recently about GCSE
options. She got me into the school I wanted. . . . She’s always been supportive, told us exactly what’s going on. We’ve all just helped each other along. (Emma Jamieson, aged 14)

It is striking that from Emma’s perspective, she had ‘not really had any problems at home’. The view from the ‘inside’ of her family culture allowed her to assert this with assurance, although it is likely that any ‘outside’ assessment of her situation, one based on more ‘objective’ measures of family life after divorce, would almost certainly reach a different conclusion. The key to Emma’s positive evaluation of her home life and her ability to cope with the multiple transitions which it entailed lay in the good quality of her family relationships and the wider, community relationships in which these were embedded. In our study, where relationships between biological parents and children were experienced as ‘close’ or ‘good’ and where lines of communication were generally easy and open, as in Emma’s case, children and young people appeared able to integrate a range of challenges and transitions comfortably into their biographies (Buchanan and Maccoby, 1996; Capaldi and Patterson, 1991; Hetherington and Jodl, 1994; Kurdek et al., 1995; Neale and Smart, 2001). Similarly, where harmonious or non-conflictual relations existed between the parents themselves, children felt they had more resources with which to cope with change (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Thompson and Amato, 1999). This was also clearly the case for Emma. Conversely, as research elsewhere has shown (Amato and Booth, 1997; Hetherington, 1999; Jekielek, 1998), and our data more widely suggest, high levels of conflict between parents, both pre- and post-divorce, pose some of the greatest challenges to children’s abilities to cope with change, and indeed, this was the experience of both Becky and Leanne discussed earlier. Becky, for example, had endured years of legal conflict between her parents over contact and residence. The accounts considered earlier from Robert, Charmane, Sabrina and Joey about their parents’ new partners and/or their stepsiblings, all testify to the overriding importance of the quality of relationships and, indeed, this was a constant theme running through the children’s accounts.4

Decentring divorce?

As will be apparent from many of the accounts given in the preceding sections, not all of the changes facing young people were directly related to divorce or the transition into stepfamily life. This is clear, for example, in the account of Leanne Jacobs, who was trying to stay apace with a range of changes in her life. As her extract earlier shows, Leanne was grappling not simply with divorce-related transitions but the challenges associated with alcohol abuse, illness, stigma at school, money problems and the death of a friend. The ill health or death of a family member, friend or teacher emerged as one of the most difficult experiences for children to cope with. This raises
a further point, one that is frequently neglected when thinking about children’s biographies and life stories. Children, like adults, are likely to have experienced loss, change and transition in their personal relationships, particularly in the sphere of their friendships and schooling, and these personal experiences are likely to assume as much, if not more, significance for them as the situations experienced directly by their parents.

One example of a pressing area of change and challenge for young people in our study was that of their emerging sexual identities or those of their parents. Specifically, seven of the 60 children and young people we interviewed were dealing with issues around parental same-sex re-partnering. A further two were involved in same-sex, and in one case, under-age relationships of their own. As a number of them pointed out, school curricula routinely provide courses designed to help them with these kinds of issues. Nonetheless, all nine voiced concerns about ‘coming out’ about their own or their parents’ sexuality in the context of homophobic practices in school and in their communities more widely:

There’s been a lot happening [since the last interview], but not so much in ways you’d be thinking about. Things are more or less the same at home. No, the big thing for me has been to do with my sexuality, about coming out about it at college. It’s been the most important thing for me over the past few years. I didn’t dare say anything at school. It was only after my GCSEs when I left school and went to college that I felt it was okay to tell people. (Milly Slater, aged 18)

Milly assumed, as did others in our study, that her preoccupying concerns would not be ours. Known to our participants primarily as researchers interested in ‘family life after divorce’, a number of them queried the usefulness of taking part in our follow-up study when, according to them, the most interesting changes and developments in their lives had taken place outside the sphere of family. In another example, Ruby and Sabrina Todd talked about their mother’s sexuality:

Sabrina: I didn’t believe it at first about Mum. Only our close friends know, ‘cos if anyone else found out they’d be thinking ‘like mother, like daughter’ and we’re not gay. But it’s not the fact that’s Liz [mum’s partner] is a woman, it’s how she is.
Ruby: Yeah, she’s got depression and so she’s often in a mood. And like we didn’t get along with Dave, Mum’s first partner. He was thick, a prat to everyone but Mum was happy with him. . . . We can’t have friends round to the house any more and we always did that, even when Dave was there. . . . And when I was doing my GCSEs, things were all over the place and I did really bad. Dad had just finished with his other partner who was really nice. She had this really sweet little lad. We haven’t seen them since ‘cos his new partner doesn’t like us to. So I made Dad help Sabrina with her GCSE options because Mum and Liz told her to go to her room and do it herself . . .
Sabrina: The divorce is nothing. It’s everything else, one thing on top of another. Every little bit just adds on an extra layer. Like Mum being with a woman. I don’t know whether it makes it worse, but it’s just something else you have to think about, another weight on. And it’s not that we wouldn’t like any partner.
We want Mum to be happy and when Liz is in a good mood, she’s okay… But we’d like for us to have time with our Mum too (Ruby and Sabrina Todd, aged 17 and 13 years; emphasis in original)

Ruby made a powerful connection here between things ‘being all over the place,’ her doing ‘really bad’ in her GCSEs and making her Dad ‘help Sabrina with her GCSE options’. It has been suggested that the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person’s life (Elder, 1994). In other words, the timing of life changes is pivotal in how well children feel able to cope with change. It has also been suggested that the early assumption of adult responsibilities or concerns may have adverse effects for children as they have to grow up before they are ready to do so (Hetherington, 1999; Newcomb, 1996; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001: 40). Ruby and Sabrina insisted, however, that timing is only part of the story. They emphasized the cumulative ‘weight’ or layering of life experience where ‘divorce is nothing’ compared to the difficulties posed by ‘everything else’. As in Leanne Jacob’s account, the pace of change had not allowed them sufficient ‘psychological travelling time’ in which to reach a state of equilibrium with their mother and her partner, nor to integrate these experiences with the changes in their father’s life and the challenges of their schooling.

Transitions and transformations: divorce as an ‘everyday problem’

As numerous commentators point out (Bauman, 1993, 1995; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Giddens, 1992), change and transition are features of all lived lives and these experiences are not inherently good or bad. What these commentators often neglect to point out is that this is true also of children’s lives. More specifically, change and transition are features of all children’s lives, not only of the lives of ‘children of divorced parents’. We cannot assume that what is most difficult or most challenging in their lives is related solely to the fact of their parents’ divorce. Nor can we assume a simple or necessary relationship between what is most difficult or most challenging and what is most damaging. This downplays the extent to which children contribute to their own developmental pathways (Morrow, 1999) and creation of their social identities. As research elsewhere has shown, and as many taking part in this study insist, a link can sometimes be made between difficult experiences and an increased sense of independence, competence and self-awareness (Amato, 1987; Kurdek and Berg, 1987; Pritchard, 1998; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). This is suggested in what Jake Waters, aged 14, had to say about the focus of our research project:

I have to say I didn’t have feelings about the divorce then and I don’t now…

As far as I can see, the divorce hasn’t been a big problem to me. Providing
parents act properly, divorce shouldn’t be a problem. . . . I mean I don’t want to criticize what you’re doing, but there’s a lot of fuss nowadays about talking about things. And I think that in some ways, for younger people, talking about things can just make them worse. Because I think a lot of people really can just sort of deal with things providing they’re not going over and over them. . . .

I think if you’re like suicidally depressed, or compulsively cutting yourself, then it [talking about problems] is a good thing, obviously. But I think in a lot of instances it’s just best to let go. The going over of what are really everyday problems, problems that affect millions of people, is not something appropriate for everyone. Is it a third or two-thirds of marriages that end in divorce? So you can’t say it’s something shocking. I suppose I think it’s strange to be singling people out to talk about this. It’s interesting in a way because you wouldn’t say all this in an ordinary conversation. It’s not awkward for me but I do feel it’s unnecessary – unnecessary for me. But if it helps someone else, that’s fine. (Jake Walters, aged 14; emphasis in original)

For Jake, as for so many of the young people in our sample, the changes and transitions associated with divorce were no longer unusual or extraordinary. They had become ‘everyday problems’.

‘Multiple transitions’ featured in the lives of the majority of children and young people in this study. In some cases it was those experiences directly associated with separation, divorce and re-partnering which continued to perplex and preoccupy them. However, most young people had worked through these transitions and become accustomed to these changes over time. The management, timing and pace of change emerged as critical factors in how young people cope with these changes. The pace of change becomes especially important when children are dealing with multiple changes in different spheres of their lives (school, home, friendships, personal relationships and so on). In these cases, we found the concept of ‘multiple challenges’ a more useful way of thinking about the very different concerns with which young people may be preoccupied. Whether children are cushioned through these multiple challenges of their childhoods will depend on the quality of their relationships, including the extent to which they are respected and can be allowed a degree of control over the changes they experience. What may be experienced as a stress factor in one child’s life may be viewed as a resource in the eyes of another. The contribution of children’s individual differences is important if not yet well understood.

It is clear that if we want to understand how risk and resiliency factors work in children’s lives after divorce, we have to look at factors beyond the ‘everyday’ ones associated with divorce. As a number of young people insisted, for them (if not for us), divorce is ‘nothing’ compared to some of the other issues with which they are grappling. The provision of appropriate support for children (where needed) will depend on a more nuanced understanding of the specifics of their experiences at key times in their lives and a move away from stereotypical assumptions about what must be troubling them. Our study has shown that young people themselves no longer wish to be inappropriately typecast as ‘children of divorce’ and that we therefore
need to decentre divorce in theoretical and empirical debates. The implication that these children’s futures will be determined by the accumulation of past experiences and processes from which there is no escape, and that above all, it is the experience of their parents’ divorce that will define and shape their lives is too narrow a vision. It is a vision that would give us only a partial understanding of the dynamics of their childhoods.

Notes

1. The Enduring Families project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant no. ROO239248).
2. This is reported in full in Smart et al. (2001). We are grateful to our colleagues Carol Smart and Amanda Wade for their contributions to the research on which this article is based.
3. Relatively few minority ethnic children were recruited into the samples of the previous studies and these children are, therefore, underrepresented in this follow-up study.
4. cf. Bray and Berger (1993). For detailed discussion of what makes for good quality relationships from the perspective of children, including the principle of respect for their personhood as well as good quality care, see Neale and Smart (2001) and Smart et al. (2001).

References


