This article considers the sudden rush of enthusiasm to hear children's voices in divorce proceedings in countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and elsewhere and points to the problems that are likely to occur if the family law system really does mean to treat children seriously. It argues that children give complex accounts that may not fit neatly into either adult or legal agendas. Notwithstanding the difficulties that flow from this development, it is argued that it is essential to include children’s understandings in the formulation of future policy and practice.

In developed countries like the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, it has become very important for practitioners in the field of divorce or marital separation to try to find ways of listening to children. There is a growing urgency in this quest as more legislation specifies the need to consult children or at least to ascertain their wishes and feelings. Moreover, many practitioners such as Family Mediators and Court Welfare Officers (now known as Officers of CAFCASS in the United Kingdom) feel a genuine commitment to the idea of giving space to children to air their views in the divorce process.

In this article, I shall reflect on some of the problems that arise from this new enthusiasm, not because the principle of talking to children is misplaced but because the process of starting to treat children seriously poses many challenges to adults—as well as to legal systems. There is, for example, the fear that listening to children will become a kind of token process, a box that needs to be ticked rather than a genuine consultation. Although in developed societies, “voice” is increasingly seen as a basic human right, unless minority groups can enjoy the conditions under which their voice can be expressed, it is unlikely that they will really be able to participate. Moreover, there are the problems of how to hear what is being said and then what to do with the diversity of accounts likely to be expressed. This raises issues about whether the legal process is sufficiently child-friendly. Does it, in its present form, allow space for children to speak if they wish to, when they wish to? Is there time for children to develop confidence in the system, and is there time for children to try out their thoughts and to change their minds? Can there be ongoing support for children that they can access some time after the divorce?

The more we look at some of these issues, the more it becomes apparent that adding children to the process requires a fairly fundamental shift in what is done. But it also requires us to start thinking differently about children and, in particular, the position of children in their families. This means that parents need to be addressed too. Although there is much work to be done in talking to professionals and practitioners about children’s participation, there is yet more to be done with parents. Thus far, in the United Kingdom at least, our main communication with parents who are divorcing has been through a kind of media megaphone.
designed to impress on them that what they are doing will harm their children. There cannot be a parent in the United Kingdom who does not fear that divorce will mean psychological and emotional damage to his or her children, damage she or he imagines will probably blight the children's adult lives. But these parents are rarely offered methods or strategies to avoid, reduce, or address this perceived harm. Indeed, there is some indication that parents' worries over their children give rise to a tendency to avoid speaking to children about what is happening in the family. The worry seems to give rise to a silencing where it is thought that it is better for children not to know what is happening so that they will be unaffected. So genuinely worried parents may try to keep their children in the dark as a way of safeguarding them from harm for as long as possible. This, of course, is the complete antithesis of allowing children to have a voice and being able to hear what they say. Indeed, it is a very good example of how the welfare principle (acting to protect children) can, at some levels, be experienced as being in conflict with principles of participation (allowing children to have a voice).

In England and Wales, there have been problems in moving forward positively on listening to children in the field of private law (divorce and separation), and one of the main reasons has been the problem of resolving the apparently competing demands of principles of welfare and of participation. In spite of the importance of the Children Act 1989, which emphasized “ascertaining the wishes and feelings of children,” little has yet been put forward to help practitioners achieve this goal. This is not the place to document the difficulties that have been encountered in family policy in England and Wales over the past decade, but strategies for developing legal procedures to involve children are in their infancy, and services for parents and children at or after divorce are still rare. Thus, little progress has been made in listening to children, notwithstanding the genuine desire on the part of practitioners to change both policy and practice.

**STANDING IN CHILDREN’S SHOES**

With colleagues at the University of Leeds, we have completed three research projects that have involved speaking with children about their families after divorce, and we are now in the midst of a new study that allows us to return to the children we previously interviewed to see how their views have developed and changed. In the process of carrying out these projects, one of the most significant “outcomes” for us was the way in which talking to children, and analyzing their stories, had the effect of jolting us into a child's worldview. Although this process of entering into the world of the “subject” is not unusual when a researcher is engaged in qualitative or ethnographic work, it was a particularly powerful experience for us because we had, in a previous study, interviewed the parents of many of these children, and so we were acutely aware of how different the experience of the “same” divorce was for parent and child. We heard accounts of the same events told from very different standpoints, and we became acutely aware that even the most caring parent could find it very difficult to see divorce from the standpoint of his or her child. Moreover, because we interviewed parents twice over a period of two years, we were able to see how their understandings and feelings changed over time. This made us more conscious than ever that while children’s accounts are often dismissed because they are “likely to change,” parents’ accounts are not so dismissed, even though they too change as they experience new transformations in their lives.

We were able to see how easily children’s accounts were overshadowed by those of the adults in terms of the legitimacy given to them. We also went through a process of recogniz-
ing that, seen through the eyes of a child, the family can look like a very different place to one presented by a parent. In 1978, the feminist sociologist Jessie Bernard pointed out that in any household, there could be two marriages even though there was only one couple. She argued that there was a man’s marriage and a woman’s marriage and that they would be completely different sets of subjective experiences—even if objectively there was a commonality. So too, it is now possible to argue that there are parents’ families and children’s families and that accounts of both are equally valid. It is not that children’s accounts obliterate or correct the parents’ accounts; nor is it the other way around. Rather, it is to acknowledge that people stand in different relationships to one another, have access to different resources, and regard different things as important. So this is not a position that gives primacy to children over adults, but it does give legitimacy to children’s experiences on the same level as that given to parents’ experiences. Recognizing the validity of children’s experiences in this way is one step toward treating children with greater respect and is the starting point for hearing what they have to say.

The second step in this process arises from one of the basic tenets of moral philosophy, which is the principled starting point of being able to put oneself in the shoes of the other. In areas like gender, “race,” and disability, the ability to imagine oneself in the position of the person who is marginalized or discriminated against is vital. We need to do this in relation to children. But there is an important difference here. As Young (1997) has pointed out, when adults attempt to put themselves in the shoes of a child, what they often do is project onto the child their memories of their own childhood. So they do not see the child in question but their own childhood reconstructed and recollected through many layers of personal history. We also, of course, see “the child” through the lens of a culturally and historically specific framework, which means that we need to be reflexive about our own class, ethnicity, generation, gender. So putting oneself in the shoes of a child is therefore not easy; it requires reflection and sensitivity. It is not simply a matter of allowing the child to speak; it is also a matter of being attentive to what it is that we hear the child say.

Standing in the shoes of a child as a way of trying to hear what he or she might be saying about her or his family is a very different approach from the one advanced in formal legal policy in England and Wales. The requirement to “ascertain the wishes and feelings of children” is a step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. A child may not want an officer of the court to know his or her wishes or feelings because that might appear like taking sides against a parent. A child might also not know what to wish for realistically because he or she may not have enough information about the possibilities. The point I am wishing to make is that the exhortation to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children makes the process appear far easier than it is. But it also makes it appear as if gleaning these “wishes and feelings” will make it easier to come to a just or fitting decision about postdivorce residence and contact arrangements. This is unlikely to be the case, however, because if we really do allow children to speak, and if we really attempt to hear what they say, it will become harder to find solutions. This is because at present, in policy terms, children are regarded as the objects of their parents’ concerns and desires. This means that the just apportionment of the child (or the child’s time) is seen as the solution to the conflict between parents. But once the child himself or herself becomes a speaking participant in the process, the idea of apportionment rapidly appears to be less than ethical as a solution. This means that including the perspectives of children will alter the whole process; it will not be the ingredient that makes the current process fairer or easier to resolve.

So what I propose to do in this article is to provide some insights into how the children my colleagues and I have interviewed across a number of projects saw postdivorce family life
and their relationships with their parents. My purpose is to demonstrate the range of experiences that children have even when, on the face of it, their circumstances may be broadly similar. I also hope to convey a flavor of their experiences to encourage adults to be able to think more like children and/or to be able to step more readily into their shoes.

CHILDREN’S VOICES

All of the research projects we have been engaged in with children have been based on in-depth interviews in a one-to-one situation (except on rare occasions when a child wanted to be interviewed with a sibling or friend present). With all the children and young people who participated, we used combined methods of open-ended questions that invited them to give narrative responses. We combined this with the use of vignettes, which were hypothetical scenarios where we asked them what they would do if they, or a friend, found themselves in a particular situation. In addition, we used drawing methods and timelines and also tick charts. Different children responded more to some of the methods than others, and necessarily some of the interviews were quite short, especially with very young children. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and our analysis employed cross-sectional and case study approaches. Our aim was to allow the children to tell the stories they wanted to tell as much as this was possible given our research agenda, and the interviews were akin to conversations, especially with the more confident and articulate children.

In what follows, I have drawn data from these interviews to provide an insight into the meanings of family “space” and family “time” from the perspective of children. Our studies focused a great deal on what it was like for children to have parents living in different places and for them to share their time between parents. This meant that much of our conversation centered on the practical and emotional experiences of the everyday life and how children managed these situations. Notwithstanding that their narratives were about the ordinary daily activities of family life, their accounts speak volumes about what it is like to be a child living contemporary family life. These narratives allow us briefly to imagine what it must be like to have the experiences these children are having and to understand how some families look from the vantage point of childhood.

CHILDREN ON SPACE AND PLACE

PHYSICAL SPACES

Some of the most obvious and potentially difficult features for children about having parents in different households are the practical issues of getting from one place to another; organizing clothes, toys, school work; ensuring friends know where you are; and remembering where to be at certain times. The children to whom we spoke referred to the time it took to get used to living in two places and the adjustments they had to make.

[At first] it was confusing. I’d worry I’d go to the wrong house at a certain time or something. . . . But, it’s just like second nature now. I’ve been doing it so long I can hardly remember what it was like before. (Rachel, 16)

It was different at first, but I’ve got used to it now, so it’s just like normal. (Frances, 12)
[It] was odd at first but I got used to it... it's like a pattern, you just sink into it after a while. (Nick, 14)

In some families, the need to move back and forth led to incredibly precise planning and almost military-style operations. For others, children found that they were forever missing toys or that their clothes were in the wrong place.

Having to move across spaces changed children's lives in ways that they could find irksome. These practical issues were probably the most easy to accommodate—at least if parents were attentive to the problems. However, we found that the children were not only traversing physical space but also emotional and psychological space and that this gave rise to rather different issues that require more attentiveness on the part of adults.

EMOTIONAL SPACES

The physical journey between a mother’s home and a father’s home is also a journey between two emotional zones. Where once the family lived together, the physical separation of the parents symbolizes the fact that they now occupy different emotional spheres in relation to one another. One parent may still be grieving the breakdown, one may be angry or irritated with the other, one may be lonely, one may have a new partner and new children. Thus, children may be moving not simply from one house to another but from one emotional landscape to another. Moreover, they are likely to feel the difference acutely and will have their own feelings about these different emotional zones. Some of the children we interviewed had to spend time with aggressive, resentful, or depressed parents, and this could be a problem for them. Whereas when their parents still lived together, there might be one parent who could mediate the other parent’s moods or behavior (or even protect the child), after separation, the coparented child is obliged to spend time alone with the problematic parent without the other parent to mediate or deflect some of the problems. For some of the children, this meant that they attempted to reduce the time they spent with the problematic parent, but this was not always easy, especially where the problem parent was committed to his or her equal share in the child.

Q: What’s it like when you’re going off to dad’s?
Alistair (11): Well it depends whether he’s been nice to me the week before. Sometimes I want to go but not usually... I like Mum the most... I didn’t like it when I was seeing dad more. I never saw my mum at weekends. So I asked for it to change. Now it’s much better. Dad used to be much nastier than he is now, especially to mum. He shouts at me, he used to give me smacks a lot, but he’s better than he was.

The distance between parental homes therefore can create a distance between a child and the parent with whom he or she feels most safe or most comfortable. This means that the children can dislike the prospect of moving back and forth intensely. But even where children were equally happy to be with either parent or in either home, we found that the journey between the two was an emotional journey for them. The child had to make a regular emotional adjustment.

[It] gets to about five o’clock on Sunday and I get like a really awful feeling and then... Aah! Packing up again... I don’t complain about it. That’s just the way it is. There’s no point complaining about it, nothing’s going to change... [But] usually on a Sunday around that
time . . . we’re upset because we’re having to move and everyone’s temper is . . . you know, you
get quite irritable. (Selina, 16)

Selina spoke of a sense of loss each week and a strong feeling of missing whichever parent
she had just spent time with. Other children found it incredibly emotionally disorienting,
sometimes missing days at school after the changeover.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACES

Quite independent of the emotional landscapes of different households and the journey
between them was the issue of psychological space. Different households work in different
ways, with different routines, different codes of behavior, different expectations, and so on.
So children had to learn to fit into these different spaces.

When I’m here I don’t, sort of say, “Hang on, what am I doing? Why am I doing this, I don’t nor-
mally do this,” you know. I just sort of, wherever I am I just sort of do whatever it is. I’d get really
confused if my mum and dad swapped places, that would just totally confuse me. I’d be doing all
the wrong things at the wrong house! But, you know, you just sort of got to get used to it. (Karl, 15)

Lifestyles and routines in different households might be affected by very different mate-
rial standards of living, and children could find themselves moving between relative afflu-
ence and relative poverty. Life in the different households might vary further if one or both
parents re-partnered, especially if the new partner influences things considerably. In one
household, the child might be an “only child,” while in the other, there might be several other
stepsibling or half sibling. These differences could be difficult for children to manage.

You sort of change, depending what house you’re at. I don’t know about other people, but I find
that I’m a different person at different at a different house. ‘Cause the different environment
and . . . my parents react differently to different things. It is difficult to explain. So I adapt to my
environment, I suppose. I mean, my core personality doesn’t change, I suppose. But the way I
behave does. . . . [And] because we like change a bit, who we are, what we do and stuff, it takes a
while to settle in, to being . . . the other person. I mean, it’s getting shorter, but it used to take a
couple of days. And then when there was short times, and I’d only be somewhere a couple of
days, it was a bit disconcerting. But it’s getting better now. (Rachel, 16)

Giddens’s (1991) might refer to this as a form of ontological insecurity that can be discon-
certing. It entails a loss of the sense of one’s true self, which may be a narrative fiction, but
which is essential to our sense of security and ability to manage everyday life. But for some
children, this sense of dislocation was not necessarily wholly negative. The psychological
journey they undertook meant that they experienced a distance between themselves and their
parents. Parents could be seen as separate individuals rather more clearly than before the
divorce or separation. Children could see how their parents acted in new relationships, could
distinguish between their attitudes and approaches to issues, and could make choices
between them. The distance created between children and parents could end the taken-for-
grantedness of relationships, and this could be positive as well as negative.

Q: Do you think the way you get on with your dad is different now? Has it changed at all?
James (12): No, it’s just the same. . . . Sort of, like, appreciate him more. Sort of think about it more.
Whereas before I just like took it for granted that he was there.
From the point of view of children, therefore, the physical space that opens up in families when parents separate creates a range of emotional and psychological challenges and changes. A great deal more effort may be required of children for them to sustain their relationships with parents, while parents themselves may simply take their children's "accommodation" to change for granted. Parents could make the transitions required of children harder or easier, and where it was made harder, the children bore an incredibly heavy burden. Of course, some parents may have been sufficiently indifferent to their children not to care about this, but it is likely the majority simply did not understand how much they were asking of their children and failed to imagine what it must be like to be a particular child in such a situation. Not all parents were free to alter arrangements, and many did their utmost to ameliorate any problems, but others were inattentive to their children and would not accommodate any changes in their regimes at all. In these circumstances, children often felt they had no voice at all.

Matt (14): It's just a drag really for me.
Q: What's the worst thing about it?
Matt: Just not being able to settle down in one place for longer than one night. . . . It's just my room.
Really it doesn't ever feel lived in as it would if I was at one house all the time, that's it really . . .
Q: If you had a completely free choice, what would you like to do?
Matt: I'd like to stay in one place.
Q: How do you think [your mum and dad] would react if you said, "Can we try something different?"
Matt: I don't know, they'd probably like go mental about the amount of time I was spending at each house. . . . I'd just feel under pressure not to say anything. . . . They'd fight over every day. . . . They argue over like, whoever had had like one long day or something. It's just relentless. I wish they would stop it I suppose.

CHILDREN'S TIME

When parents separate, a major source of conflict is how much time children spend with each one. Typically, both parents want more time, and it is assumed that parents have a right to command children's time. Children's time is typically not their own to use as they wish, even though, of course, they may have some autonomy where "spare" time is concerned. This situation reflects children's relatively less powerful status when compared with adults, and it would be unrealistic to imagine that parents will (or should) stop regulating their children's time to a large degree. The problem is that after divorce, children are subjected to two parents independently commanding their time, and their time also becomes a source of conflict and is thus loaded with a new emotional significance. Put simply, time itself takes on new meanings, and the way in which parents command that time can also take on a new set of dimensions.

EQUAL SHARES

Perhaps one of the most dispiriting consequences of the growth of interest in shared residence after divorce is the tendency for this to mean an exact division of children's time so that each parent gets precisely equal amounts. Thus, we interviewed children who spent one week with one parent and one week with the other; or four days with one and three with the other in one week, then three days with one and four days with the other the next week. We even had children who spent alternate nights with each parent. In some instances, these
arrangements were completely inflexible, and children had no choice about or control over them.

I just want to be normal... it feels like I haven’t got a proper home really. Whenever anyone asks me for my phone number or address or something I always give them two and they’re like, “Which one do I phone?” and I don’t know and they’re like, “Well which one are you at the most?” and I don’t know that either ‘cause [my parents have] got this stupid thing that... most of the week I’m at one house and the most of the next week at the other house. And I always have to ask them where I’m going to be. I’ve always hated it. I always get in trouble at school as well ‘cos I don’t have the right books sometimes and stuff. (Colette, 13)

However, some children were quite happy with alternate nights with each parent, and so it would be a mistake to assume that it is the actual apportionment of time that causes distress. It was just as likely to relate to how well the parents managed the situation and the quality of the relationship between children and parents.

I like my family. I think you should spend an equal amount of time at your mum and dad’s. We sleep Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays at our mum’s and Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at our dad’s. I see them both every day. I come back to mum’s after school and then round to my dad’s for an hour or so. (Harold, 12)

The problem with apportioning time, however, especially if it is decided on by the courts, is that it is more likely to be organized to suit parents than to suit children. In many cases, this is unavoidable because of parents’ working commitments, but sometimes the insistence on an exactly equal division of time between parents seems a long way away from the interests of their children and rarely seems to be based on consultation. As James stated, an exactly equal division would be stupid:

It’s not equal to the day, to the hour, I mean that’s stupid, but it’s pretty equal days. It’s fair to everybody ‘cause it’s equal, nobody’s got an advantage with me. (James, 9)

It is clear from what James says that time is heavily invested with emotion and the apportioning of hurt and, in some cases, even hate between adults. The majority of the children who were being “shared” knew how important this equal apportionment of time was for their parents and the extent to which it was heavily invested with both an ideology of gender neutrality and emotional equivalence. But this made it particularly hard for children to alter the arrangements if they did not suit them. They found that they had to take a stand against a powerful philosophy, which insists that equal shares are fair, and also against the emotional strain of upsetting the balance between their parents. In this respect, being shared on a fifty-fifty basis could become uniquely oppressive. This was reflected in Karl’s response when we asked him what he would wish for if a wish could be granted. He replied that he wished that one parent would just disappear after divorce.

**TIME APART (SABBATICALS)**

While for some children an equal sharing of time became a kind of double burden, for others it was an opportunity for time apart from parents that could work to the advantage of both children and adults. We know from the interviews we carried out with parents that adults
can appreciate having time without their children. Some parents used that time to enjoy adult relationships without their children around, and it enabled some to have such relationships independently of their relationships with their children. So time apart could create emotional space for other things. It could also mean that relationships could work better. A number of the children actually felt that their relationships with their parents improved simply because they were not in each other's pockets the whole time. In particular, where relationships with one parent were bad, time away from that person could make the relationship feasible; whereas if it were constant, it would break down completely. Others just enjoyed the amount of time they had with each family/household.

I really like it. Because I don't spend too long with [each] family, not that I mind spending ages with them. And I don't spend not enough time with them, I spend about the right amount of time. I miss my family a bit but I kind of . . . I still want to see them every other week. I don't just have to spend years with one family missing the other family and wishing I was there. (Clare, 11)

Children could also see that time away from them did their parents good or at least gave them the opportunity to get on with things:

I think it helps her do her own thing when we go out. It's not always just when we come here for the weekend, but just if I go out for a day to see a friend or something, I'll come back and she's like, well I came back the other day and she'd got a new carpet down, she'd sorted all the books out, started putting them into piles to sell and she'd never do that while we were there. She feels too much like, she's got to keep us entertained, but when we go out she'll do her own thing and get things done. (Bob, 13)

In cases like these, children could see that their parents had separate lives and could identify the effect on their parents of having children to look after. They could stand outside themselves and reflect upon the situation of parent/child relationships rather than simply “living” them.

In some cases, children did worry about their parents when they were not with them. In situations where a parent had not re-partnered, they often thought that that parent would be lonely when left alone or worried that the parent they had left would be missing them while they were away. Of course, the experience of time passing could be very different for children and for parents. Younger children could find that a week away from one parent was too long to endure. The very youngest child we interviewed, who was six, simply told us that he cried all the time because he was missing one parent or the other and that, as a consequence, the arrangement was changed so that he spent shorter spells away from each parent. Some children reported that time passed more slowly when they were with one parent rather than the other. Thus, they expressed the frustration of boredom if they were with a parent who was inattentive, absent a lot, had a home without creature comforts, or lived a long way away from their friends.

Well, my dad was just boring and he never used to do anything with us. We always just used to go round and sit there (pause). Go round and do some work for him or something, you know. We never used to go out and do something. There was nothing. But at that age you want to do something rather than just sit in the house. (Sabrina, 17, reflecting on her experience when she was first interviewed at 14)
In some instances, friends preferred coming to one house rather than another, and this too had consequences for how children would spend their time when they were with different parents.

TIME TO ONESELF

I'm worried [that] my dad or my mum hasn't seen me much. Sometimes I just get worried that one parent will miss me when I'm out 'cause I haven't seen them much . . . And the worse thing is the, like, yes, it's probably one of the worst things, like, you can't go out much 'cause the other parent can't see you much or something and that you don't get much space or anything. (Roberta, 10)

Q: If you had a wish for yourself and your family, what would your wish be?
Frances (12): [That] there was two of me, then I could be with mum and I could be with dad at the same time and I could see my friends.

One of the problems that the children we interviewed had to manage was finding time for themselves so that they could be alone or spend time with their friends. This became a particular issue for children as they got older and wanted to spend less time with parents per se and more time with friends or just “chilling out.” These children “lost” free time in moving between households, in having to relate to parents anew each week or fortnight, and in having to plan and organize themselves, especially if they had a long way to travel. Some of them wanted to be able to “stay still” so that they could enjoy doing nothing or so that they could be free of the expectation to be somewhere else. These feelings did not arise only in cases where children disliked one parent; they could be present even where relationships were good. But reducing time with one parent often led to strong feelings of guilt. Some children reported sleeping problems when faced with this dilemma; others—when taking action to reduce the time spent with one parent—reported feeling ill, frightened, or worried. In a situation of coparenting, the children could not simply allow time spent with parents to diminish because, for so many parents, too much was at stake in having their (equal) share of the child's time. So the change in the parent-child relationship could not happen imperceptibly or incrementally; it had to be confronted and negotiated. In this sense, the management of time (especially reducing time spent with parents) might be seen as more problematic for these children than for many others.

TIME AND HURTING

One of the most difficult situations that a subgroup of our children had to deal with was waiting for a nonresidential parent to come to visit them or take them out. It was in this situation that children felt particularly powerless and where time spent waiting appeared to them to be a measure of how much they were cared for.

I would just sort of say, “Well, if you break a promise to me then I’ll break a promise to you.” 'Cause I was so happy, that was when she were going to see me, and when she never, I was devastated really. (Daniel, 9)

Some would try to accelerate time by going to bed and sleeping. This strategy enabled them to wake up having forgotten their disappointment. Others would try to distract themselves by playing, or even by becoming angry and violent. Of course, for children with reli-
able parents, the time they might have to spend waiting was just an inconvenience. But for the
children who had experienced many disappointments, or who were routinely let down, the
time spent waiting had a very different significance.

I would just sit and I would just believe that he would still come. I would just say to myself, “I
know that he will come.” I would forgive him even if he didn’t come ’cos there is just no point in
making it any harder; there’s just no point. (Isabel, 10)

This child seemed to have learned that it was best to tolerate the situation, as at least this
might mean she could preserve a relationship, even if it is only in her imagination. Other chil-
dren had given up on their fathers, though:

I think all dads tell lies like my dad. (Patrick, 6)

He might have got drunk and gone out with this mates and not caring about the son . . . I know
how the little boy [in the vignette] feels because my dad didn’t want me at all, so I know how it
feels. (Kara, 9)

TIME AND SHARING

For children who had plenty of time with both parents and where parents were on good
terms, sharing time could be seen as a way of continuing family life. For them, family life
continued to be synonymous with all sorts of sharing and closeness—notwithstanding the
divorce or separation.

Rosie (9): [Coparenting is] more sharing. It’s more sharing of time, love, money, everything.
Q: And you can all care about each other?
Rosie: Yes. I’m quite lucky really, ’cause my dad and mum aren’t rivals or anything. They’re just
not together.

Tom (11): It’s worked out really well. I don’t think there could be any better arrangement than this.
Q: So what is it that you think makes it work so well?
Tom: I think it’s because even though mum and dad don’t love each other they’re still very kind to
each other and they get on really well, even when we swap over and things.

This dimension of sharing was, for the children, less to do with the apportionment of time
than the quality of relationships. Thus, it was the quality of relationships that gave rise to the
sharing, and so the key element in the success of these arrangements was not the equal time
but the equal caring. Expressed slightly differently, it was the way in which the parents “did”
the relationship that created the sense of well-being, love, and security for their children. It
was not the formal structure of residence and contact, counted in hours or days, that produced
happy or contented children. What was more important to the children was how their rela-
tionships were sustained and managed. This reflects the approach taken by Morgan, who has
revisualized family as being constantly reproduced through interweaving practices rather
than a given that is established by structure or status. He states,

In this alternative approach, family was to be seen as less of a noun and more of an adjective or,
possibly, a verb. “Family” represents a constructed quality of human interaction or an active pro-
cess rather than a thing-like object of detached social investigation.11
If we see family in this way, and certainly the children we interviewed seemed to, it is hard to see the wisdom in seeking to resolve family strife through the simple regulation of space and time rather than emphasizing the qualities of relationships.

**WHAT CAN WE DO ONCE WE HAVE STOOD IN CHILDREN'S SHOES?**

Our interviews with children revealed to us how acutely attuned most were to their parents' moods and feelings, even though they might have been kept in the dark about actual events and plans. The most difficult thing for most children (depending to some extent on their maturity and experience) was a complete lack of control over their lives. Prior to a divorce or separation, children might not have had much control; but for many, the routines they would have been familiar with provided continuity and security. For those living in chaotic households, divorce or separation did not seem to be a major issue, but for others it was a major disruption. We found that children had to reestablish their relationships with their parents, and a great deal depended on the trust and warmth that had been established prior to separation and then on the quality of postseparation parenting. A majority of children were clear that they did not want to be forced to make choices, but they did want to have a voice and they did want to understand what was happening. They also needed time to settle into new arrangements, and they wanted the flexibility to change things if necessary. Even children as young as six are able to participate in decision making if parents are prepared to hear:

I want to have three days at each house. 'Cause I'm missing my mum and my dad too much. It feels like I'm living at one house for two weeks. . . . When they first split up and it was like "I really don't want this"—to spend a whole week at each house—'cause in holidays it's really hard for me 'cause when I was in Ireland I missed my dad too much. I was crying. (Adam, 6)

Being able to hear what children have to say does change things. It is part of a cultural shift around our understanding of childhood. But at the very least, we have to be able to stand in children's shoes if we are going to be able to hear their voices. The growing body of research on children's lives from the perspective of children themselves is part of this gradual process of social change. This research may not provide precise policy guidelines, but it can make accessible a wider diversity of children's experiences, and it can take the time to hear what children say. Through this method, more adults may be able to stand in more children's shoes and, from that vantage point, begin to hear what is being said.

**NOTES**

1. There has also been a parallel development in the field of research where sociologists and others have woken up to the need to talk directly to children. See, for example, Leena Alanen, *Modern Childhood? Exploring the "Child Question" in Sociology* (Research Rep. no. 50), Finland: University of Jyvaskylä; also see ALLISON JAMES & PIA CHRISTENSEN, EDS., *RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN* (London: Falmer, 1999); BERRY MAYALL, ED., *CHILDREN'S CHILDHOODS OBSERVED AND EXPERIENCED* (London: Falmer, 1994); ANNE O'QUIGLEY, *LISTENING TO CHILDREN'S VIEWS: THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF RECENT RESEARCH* (York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000).

2. CAFCASS is the Child and Family Court Advice and Support Service. It was formed in April 2001 to bring together legal services for children.


In the field of public law, there is a longer tradition of talking with children, even though there may be imperfections in this field too. See Judith Masson & Winn Oakley, Out of Hearing: Representing Children in Care Proceedings 179 (New York: John Wiley, 1999).


8. It is necessary to say a little about the projects on which this article is based (a full account of two of them is to be found in Smart et al., supra note 6). The first project was a follow-up study of the children of parents we had previously interviewed in Family Fragments? (Carol Smart & Bren Neale, Family Fragments 222 [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999]). This entailed in-depth interviews with fifty-two children aged between six and twenty-two. Only four of the "children" were aged eighteen or older in this study, and we interviewed them because, although they were adults, they volunteered to be interviewed and had been dependent children at the time of their parents' divorce. Most of the children in this study were between the ages of seven and fourteen, and they came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some had lost contact with a nonresidential parent, some saw both an equal amount, but a majority were in the classic situation of living with one parent and seeing the other at weekends. We usually refer to this as the Nuffield Study because it was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

The second study was funded by the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of their Child Programme. In this project, we interviewed sixty-five children who were being "coparented" after divorce or separation. By that, we mean that they spend virtually equal amounts of time with both parents and basically had two homes. The children were in the age range of five to sixteen. This sample was skewed somewhat toward more middle-class or "alternative" households, with about 25 percent being defined as working-class. This was to be expected, given that we were attempting to research what might be a new family form that entailed either an ideological commitment to a new form of parenting (hence the "alternative" households) or enough material resources to sustain coparenting. However, it would be wrong to assume that this form of postseparation parenting is simply a middle-class form.

Across both the Nuffield and the ESRC studies, we interviewed equal numbers of boys and girls, but the majority were from white families. Because so few were from minority ethnic families, we have not sought to identify them as distinct groups. Moreover, the children chose their own pseudonyms and so it is impossible for the reader to draw conclusions from the names they are given.

For the purpose of this article, I have also included some data from a study that is yet to be published. This is a study funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and explores young children's needs for support at times of family transition. In this study, we selected four primary schools in Yorkshire. One was in a traditional white working-class area, one was in an inner city area with many minority ethnic and refugee families, one was a Jewish school, and the fourth was a predominantly middle-class school in a nearby market town. We have interviewed two cohorts of children from each school (amounting to forty) in the age groups of five and nine years. We also held group discussions with all the children in each of the classes we visited. From this study, we have reached more children in very disadvantaged circumstances than in our previous projects. The results of this study will be available in 2002.


10. See supra note 8.


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