



**Kids in the Middle: the national debate on support for  
separating families**

**Media Coverage Report**

**July-September 2008**



## National Newspapers

# The Independent

16 July

## Agony aunts' campaign to help broken families

Amol Rajan

Leading agony aunts will launch a campaign today calling for easy-access, highly visible support centres to help children from broken families.

The "Kids in the Middle" initiative has been set up by Virginia Ironside, who writes for The Independent together with Bel Mooney, who writes for the Daily Mail, and The Sun columnist, Deidre Sanders.

A questionnaire will ask people with experience of parental separation for advice on how to ease the anguish for children involved.

"We find ourselves in a situation where 28 per cent of the 12 million children in our country have experienced the trauma of a separation, whether it is through marriages breaking up or otherwise," Ms Ironside said. "We can't just go ignoring this crisis". Ms Mooney, whose own marriage to the broadcaster Jonathan Dimbleby ended in divorce in 2004, said she felt the consequences of family breakdown were proving increasingly catastrophic.

"We have to recognise that there are a lot of very, very crap parents out there," she said. "And when these parents are the only models our kids have to learn from, you rather despair for the kids' welfare. We need to provide these innocent victims with much greater support, and show them that we care."

The campaign has the co-operation of four charities – One Parent Families, Families Need Fathers, the Fatherhood Institute, and Relate.

The results of the questionnaire will be delivered to Gordon Brown and David Cameron, the Tory leader, in October.

## The Independent [also in the Belfast Telegraph]

16 July

[Comment]

### Virginia Ironside: Divorce hurts – and it hurts the children most of all

When my parents separated – I was 14 at the time – I remember the terrible mixture of horror and relief that I experienced. Both my parents were, in their own way, shell-shocked by what had happened, with very little room in their shattered lives to explain to me what was going on.

All I do remember is that when I went to school the next day, I was asked to sit outside the classroom while the headmistress spoke to the class about the situation. "Virginia's parents have separated," she said, apparently, to my class-mates. "I hope you will be very sensitive and caring towards her for the next few weeks."

In those days no one, but no one, had divorced parents. But these days one in four out of 12 million children have separated parents. And more often than not, the parents, at the moment of separation, not only are far too upset themselves to be able to think of the effect the separation is having on their children but they drastically underestimate the effect it's having on them. Even tiny babies can feel distress, though of course they can't express it – and that's why so many parents often imagine their children are unaffected.

But they're wrong. Which is why, today, Relate, One Parent Families, Families need Fathers and the Fatherhood Institute, aided by a special grant for the Big Lottery Fund, are launching a national debate, called Kids in the Middle, (you can join in by logging on to [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk)), and they hope to be able to present their findings to the Government in the autumn in the hopes that more help is available for children of separating parents.

Occasionally, agony aunts band together to support a campaign – I think the last time we all got together was to support the abortion law – but this time everyone from myself and Deirdre Sanders, to Irma Kurtz and Bel Mooney, are all throwing ourselves behind this initiative, simply because we know, from letters we've received, the terrible damage that can be done to children when their parents split up.

A survey has already shown that 93 per cent of people believe that there is not enough help on offer for children of separating couples, and that services available concentrate too much on custody, contact and child maintenance, but don't address the issues of managing conflict and emotional damage.

The odd thing is that while everyone's in agreement that children should be protected from emotional damage, when you're in the thick of an

unpleasant separation, it's very difficult to remember that the children's emotional health is paramount.

The result is that children whose parents separate can, first of all, feel incredibly lonely. Each parent is suffering, in his or her own way, and doesn't have enough emotional strength to support anyone else except themselves. Then, it's quite likely that each parent is blaming the other – without remembering that the children consist of each partner in equal parts. So every time a father rants about his wife's behaviour, he is, in effect, criticising 50 per cent of the child's genes, and each time the mother rants about the father's behaviour she is also criticising 50 per cent of the child's genes.

Small wonder that children feel confused, hated, and isolated. They feel, literally, torn. There is no one, unless they have a sympathetic grandparent, aunt, uncle, older brother or sister or, at a pinch, a teacher, to confide in. There is no one to reassure them that what is happening is not their fault, to reassure them that though their parents may loathe each other, each one does love them deeply.

Having probably endured the misery of hearing their parents arguing for months before the separation – or, equally stressful, suffered the unbearable atmosphere of silent tension – children of parting parents do not know to whom they can turn. They daren't show their misery at losing a parent to the one they're living with in case they unleash a flood of abuse or, worse, tears.

While the parents imagine the kids are coping "remarkably well", they're usually suffering agonies in silence, often even agreeing to suffer roles as little postmen between the parents just in order to keep a kind of peace.

If only solicitors, who are in the front line of witnessing parental rage and distress, could have somewhere to point the parents to send their children for help – or if only teachers could suggest to parents, involved in disputes, that counselling and sympathy were available for their children – so much agony and guilt might be spared children who often carry the scars of parental separation well into later life.

**To view all comments and responses:**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/virginia-ironside-divorce-hurts-ndash-and-it-hurts-the-children-most-of-all-868652.html>

**The Sun**  
16 July  
**How I'd Mend Broken Britain**

**A TERRIFIED girl of 14 emailed me yesterday.**

She wrote to say a boy the same age had threatened her with a knife, warning she and her family would be hurt unless she “flashed” for him on a webcam.

The case is another horrific example of what we now refer to as “Broken Britain”.

But after hearing from thousands of readers up and down the country over recent years, I feel I have been watching a tsunami of problems steadily gathering.

*Today, the tidal wave is sweeping down and threatening to engulf us — and it's terrifying.*

One of the root causes of the sickening decay in our society is family breakdown.

Time and time again when helping readers I can trace problem teenagers, and teenagers' problems, back to their parents splitting up.

**Misery**

More than one in four of Britain's 12 million children have parents who have separated.

We all agree that children should be the priority when parents part.

The trouble is that when relationships break down, parents have precious little attention left over to appreciate their children's needs.

They often think babies and toddlers won't be affected as they are too young to talk, but these children are emotional sponges.

The misery they absorb pours out in later years in such forms as eating disorders, behavioural problems and self-harming.

*More than eight in ten of us believe that more should be done to support children — but what would really make a difference?*

We need, as a nation, a programme rolled out which faces up to what's really going on.

It needs to support the thousands of adults and children going through this trauma every year, and we need to make the help free and easy to find — really in-your-face easy to find.

People shouldn't be scratching around wondering if their kids can phone Childline or whether they can talk to the doctor about their turmoil.

*Lots of you have been through this. Now I want **YOU** to tell me what would have helped you, and I promise to take your experiences right to the heart of Government.*

[Click here to take part in the survey](#)

Have your children experienced your relationship breaking up, or did you live through your own parents parting? How was it for you?

Do you look back and realise that the right sort of help would have made all the difference? What help would that have been?



## **kids in the middle**

I am leading the Kids In The Middle campaign, calling for more help for families going through divorce, and I want to hear your suggestions on what needs to be done.

There will be a national report to the Government in the autumn, and those of you who send in the most powerful contributions will be invited to go with me to 10 Downing Street to share your ideas with Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Support groups including Relate, One Parent Families/Gingerbread, Families Need Fathers, the Fatherhood Institute and the nation's leading agony aunts and uncles are all backing the campaign as we know this issue is vital.

There cannot be any of us who have not been directly affected by this issue — if it's not our own children, it is our nephews and nieces, our grandchildren, our children's friends . . .

*We've all witnessed the distress and turmoil. Now let's get together to help heal the wound.*

# The Guardian

16 July  
[Letter]

## Let's reduce the pain of family separation

One in three children in the UK will experience parental separation before the age of 16. When these separations escalate into serious conflict, the damage done to children can be serious and long-lasting, leading to behavioural and health problems, poor educational performance and an inability to form strong relationships in the future.

Yet the support system in this country is mainly concerned with the practical aftershocks of separation such as residence, contact and finances rather than reducing conflict between parents and providing emotional support for children. This in turn can prevent the resolution of important issues around parenting and finances, adding to the damage caused.

Our own polling, published today, shows that an overwhelming majority of the public are worried about the effects of conflict on children during parental break-up and think children should be the priority during this time. More than nine out of 10 want to see more opportunities for children's voices to be heard and support for families.

That is why today we are launching a national debate, Kids in the Middle, to hear from families, young people and children affected by parental break-up, professionals and politicians, and to find out how services can respond more effectively to resolve conflict during separation and put the needs of children first. We will report our recommendations to the government in the autumn. Providing comprehensive child-centred support to parents and families when they separate will benefit children today and the families they raise in future.

**Fiona Weir**

One Parent Families/Gingerbread

**Jon Davies**

Families Need Fathers

**Claire Tyler**

Relate

**Duncan Fisher**

Fatherhood Institute

**The Daily Mail**  
19 July

**We need your advice on divorce**

**Bel Mooney**

There's no union of advice columnists, but every so often we band together on an important issue.

One of our number, Deidre Sanders, has made the rallying call - asking us to draw readers' attention to the desperate need of children for support when their parents part. It's a massive issue.

More than one in four of the 12 million children in this country have separated parents and the distress of a painful family breakdown lies behind so many of the problem letters we all receive. When a child's misery is not properly handled it can result in long-term damage.

On Wednesday, the 'Kids in the Middle' campaign was launched, spearheading a national debate on how to support separating families. Promoted by Relate, Families Need Fathers, One Parent Families and the Fatherhood Institute, it will use research from the Tavistock Institute.

All of us who run problem pages want to send a message begging parents who are splitting up not to let their emotional state interfere with their ability to take proper care of their children and pay heed to their feelings. And we want professionals and politicians to be aware of the importance of the issue.

The Kids In The Middle national online survey and debate began two days ago, seeking responses and views from anyone with experience of separating families - especially (I suggest) the young people themselves.

The online survey can be accessed through the websites for all the charities I list above, but if anyone prefers to use old-fashioned methods (or finds the websites difficult) then write to me, marking your letter Kids In The Middle, and I will make sure your views are heard.

A new ICM poll shows that 93 per cent of the public think children should come first when parents separate, yet three-quarters of children think their emotional needs are neglected, coming after practical issues such as custody and housing. What do children in this situation need? Let us know.

I wish I knew what is to be done about the fragility of family life. But we can work together to take care of the children caught in the crossfire.

**The Sun**  
20 July  
Deidre Sanders

**WHAT help do kids need when their parents split up? Here's your chance to go to Number 10 to tell Gordon Brown about your experience.**

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TIME and time again when helping readers I can trace back the problems of tearaway teenagers to their parents' relationship breaking down.

It's not the only cause, far from it, but it is so often the starting point.



### **Campaign ... Kids in the Middle**

More than one in four of the 12 million children in this country today have separated parents, so it is a mammoth issue.

Have your children experienced your relationship breaking up, or did you live through your own parents parting? How was it for you all?

Do you look back and realise that the right sort of help would have made all the difference?

This is your chance to say from your own experience what support you would like to see in future – for the children of separating parents and for the parents to help them protect their children from the worst effects.

Lots of charities have come together for this important Kids in the Middle campaign – Relate, One Parent Families/Gingerbread, Families Need Fathers and the Fatherhood Institute.

There will be a national report to Government in the autumn, and the Sun readers who send in the most powerful contributions will be invited to go with me to 10 Downing Street to share your ideas personally with Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

[Click here to go straight to the special online questionnaire](#)

## The Independent

19 July

[letters]

### Parents are in denial about the harm divorce does to children

I was moved by Virginia Ironside's article "Divorce hurts – and it hurts the children most of all" (16 July). My parents separated in the early 1970s when I was five and, like Virginia, I was the only one in my class in that situation. My father had uncontested custody of me and my brother; as this made us even more unusual, social workers became involved. They did not help and only reinforced the message that we were indeed an odd "family".

My parents were bitter. When my brother and I showed delight at going to mum's for a holiday, dad snarled, "You're only happy 'cos you're going to see your mam." Mum was equally scathing about dad. Our childhood was most definitely adversely affected.

Now I cringe when I hear separating parents saying how resilient children are, how they cope really well, that they have two homes now instead of one, and all the other drivel that assuages their guilt.

The new initiative, Kids in the Middle, is admirable, but I wonder if more funds should tackle helping parents to stay together, or to work out why so many marriages are breaking down.

Angela Elliott

Welton le Marsh, Lincolnshire

It is great to read about Kids in the Middle, and that so many are co-operating to highlight the needs of children experiencing separation and divorce. It addresses a truly urgent need.

But, given that prevention is better than cure, would it not be wise to also push for greater resources to be channelled to those organisations – many voluntary – that are involved in relationship education and are passing on the knowledge and skills that will help couples to live together well from the very beginning of their relationship. The Government spends a pittance on this provision by comparison with the huge sums it spends on the far more difficult business of picking up the pieces when things are broken.

Why put a fleet of ambulances at the bottom of the cliff and pay scant attention to building a fence at the top?

Colm Black

Inverness

# The Daily Telegraph

2 September

Lesley Garner

## Calling all families affected by break-up

I'd like to start the new term by asking you to help me with an important task. The organisations most concerned with relationship break-ups and their effect on families have got together with people like me to launch a campaign aimed at supporting children whose parents are going through separation and divorce. It's called Kids in the Middle, and here's how you can help it.

Firstly, if you are a separated parent or the child of separated parents, fill in their survey. The findings will be presented to politicians and public policy makers later in the year. Find the survey on one of these websites: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk), [www.fnf.org.uk](http://www.fnf.org.uk), [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk) and [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk).

Many Telegraph readers have been touched by family break-ups. If this issue has affected you, please write to me, focusing on the experience of your children or, if you are the child of separated or divorced parents, on what your own experience has been. I want to hear from family members and teachers who observe the damage inflicted on children by break-ups. What could have been done differently? What help from the courts, or from people outside the family, would have made a difference? Here is the chance to have your say and get it heard by people who are in a position to make changes. Thank you for your contribution to this important debate.

Websites

## Charities Aid Foundation

### Divorce child enquiry launched

17 July 2008



A number of children's charities have launched a national debate on the effects of separating parents on young people's lives.

Statistics show that a third of children will see their parents divorce or separate before the age of 16 and the organisations - Relate, One Parent Families/Gingerbread, Families Need Fathers and the Fatherhood Institute - hope that the Kids in the Middle debate will motivate the Government to make changes to support services.

According to a poll produced by the charities, 75 per cent of UK adults believe services focus too heavily on practical issues such as child maintenance rather than considering emotional support.

It also found that some 84 per cent believe more should be done to support children whose parents are separating.

Virginia Ironside, writing in the Independent, has described the "horror and relief" that she experienced while her parents were going through a divorce and added that many parents "drastically underestimate" the effect separation has on their children.

## MSN

### The custody battle

Dr. Pam Spurr

As Britney Spears and Kevin Federline begin a battle for custody of their children, our relationships expert and agony aunt Dr Pam Spurr tackles the tough topic of how best to handle a marriage break-up and protect the children if it happens.



When I discovered that Britney Spears and Kevin Federline were about to appear in court for another custody hearing, I wanted to take them, shake some sense into them, and tell them to put their children's needs before their own. Hopefully this time round they will think about how to prevent their children feeling hurt and upset over their break-up.

Yes, their children are still very young but even very young children absorb emotional heartache between parents like a dry sponge. Grown-up children are also affected by their parents' divorce and I see Lindsay Lohan's parents are also squaring off this week. With her history of problems I hope they'll think about keeping their differences between themselves and not trying to get Lindsay to take sides.

**Divorce can hurt everyone**

You see, divorce is a traumatic time for every member of a family. There is plenty of research to prove that children have fewer problems when parents keep calm - or at least try to!

Sometimes younger children seem to do better because changes in your household may not seem so obvious. For example, if they haven't seen daddy for a few days they may not even notice, particularly if he tends to work long hours. It's also sometimes easier to cover up your heartache from very young children because they accept at face value what you say. Let's say that they find you upset - you can get away with telling them a story like you banged your toe and that's why you're crying. With older children that won't wash!

### **Important dos and don'ts to help you through this difficult time**

If you're going through a break-up and have children think about these points:

Don't expect your children not to feel bad if you're feeling bad. Imagine how upset and angry you feel over your break-up. So think how they must - they expect you to protect them from the problems of the world but if you're upset then they will feel they have no one looking after them emotionally.

Don't turn this into the end of the world! If you feel your world's fallen apart and let your children think that too, you'll damage their well-being. One of the most important things you can do for your child is to tell them that, "Yes there will be changes but that but many things will stay the same." Avoid telling them things like you feel your world is going to fall apart. That's incredibly frightening for them.

Don't expect your children to prop you up emotionally. Your friends and

family are there to do this. Many parents start relying on a little bit of happiness from their children when they should be providing their children with as much happiness as possible during a difficult time.

Do reassure your children that a break-up is not their fault. Pre-teens and teens can become very anxious that if they've been causing stresses and strains that this might've caused the breakdown. If they ask you this, do tell your child clearly, and more than once, that a divorce is not their fault.

Do keep the lines of communication open and tell your child that they can ask you what ever they want, whenever they want.

Do give them age appropriate information. What you tell a 7-year-old may be different than what you tell your 17 year-old.

Don't shy away from their questions even if they seem to be difficult ones. If you answer with care and confidence then you'll generate a more confident feeling in them.

Don't criticise your ex-partner to your children, no matter how much you feel like doing so. Even if your ex has done something that might impact in some way on your children (like become difficult over money) it will only make matters worse to criticise them. You may have angry and spiteful feelings to your ex but sharing those with your children will make them miserable.

Do let their school know that you're going through a break-up so that the school can help monitor your children's behaviour. Research shows that particularly the schoolwork of teenage boys suffers during a divorce. If a teacher can give you a heads-up that something's wrong, then you can act sooner rather than later to help your child adjust to the break-up.

Even if the break-up was over a third party, don't throw your new boyfriend or

girlfriend straight into the mix with your children. That's like exploding a nuclear bomb in a war zone - it'll definitely make things worse. Bide your time before introducing someone new.

Don't let the break-up throw a big black cloud over your entire lives. Get your children out and about for some fun. Try to keep the routine as much as possible to what they know.

Finally, as everyone is affected by your break-up, make sure every child feels that they're still valued and loved no matter what you're personally going through.

A useful general contact is [www.parentlineplus.co.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.co.uk) or 0808-800-2222

Email your dilemma to Dr Pam...

\* The Kids in the Middle national on-line survey and debate is now online, seeking responses and views from anyone who has experience of separating families. It can be accessed through the following websites; [www.dad.info](http://www.dad.info), [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk), [www.fnf.org.uk](http://www.fnf.org.uk), [www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk](http://www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk), [www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk](http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.uk).

Trade Press

## **Children and Young People now**

16 July

### **Debate opens on support for separated families**

**Sue Learner**

Parenting charities are calling on teachers, social workers and nursery staff to take part in a national survey about more support for families affected by separation.

An alliance of four organisations - One Parent Families | Gingerbread, Families Need Fathers, Relate and the Fatherhood Institute - wants family professionals to get involved in the debate, which is called Kids in the Middle. Over the coming months, Kids in the Middle will take evidence and testimonies from parents, children and young people affected by separation, as well as professionals and politicians. This will be done through the Kids in the Middle online survey...

Blogs

<http://www.kneedeepinknightsbridge.com/serendipity/index.php?/archives/512-Mamma-Mia!-Kids-Caught-In-The-Crossfire.html>

Bel Mooney wrote in her wonderful column in the Daily Mail yesterday about the Kids In the Middle campaign, set up to support children of separating parents. It's a brilliant idea. Of course the kids come first. But sometimes, perhaps, they don't. Perhaps some people are so wrapped in their adult pain they forget the pain of their little ones.

[http://www.belmooney.co.uk/stop\\_press.html](http://www.belmooney.co.uk/stop_press.html)

When I was eight and my parents were getting divorced no one would talk to me. I knew my mum was crying all the time. I could see she was in pain but she wouldn't tell me why. My dad couldn't talk about it either. He was the one who was supposed to tell us one awful weekend. When mum picked us up she asked us. She said; 'Did he tell you?'

Of course, he hadn't. Because he couldn't. He'd uhhmed and aghhed and tried. But I didn't know why. I didn't know what it was all about Alfie.

That's why this sort of organisation is good. It's been a long time coming but now is it's time.

It's a survey which will be used to talk to politicians and professionals. A new ICM poll shows that 93 % of the public think that kids should come first, yet three-quarters of children think their emotional needs are forgotten when parents are arguing about housing and money and custody.

Talking of fathers I wonder what's happened to My Boy's dad. He certainly hasn't heard from him. Not a word for ten days now.

He has just asked me; 'Why doesn't daddy ever call?'

I didn't know what to say. What IS the etiquette on post-Court 'divorce' shock-horror? I've no idea.

He doesn't take my calls so there's no point in me trying to call him up for Our Boy.

Let's hope he calls him soon eh?

I have tried extremely hard to be kind and fair when talking about his dad at all points during the horrors of the past 18 months.

Because I know that our row is not his row and that he loves his dad, as I once did, and he will, I hope, continue to love his dad as I will make sure that happens.

I am going to get stuck in with them. I think it's a brilliant idea.

Here's the link to the survey that they are working on. Have a look at it. Fill it in.

All those kids need all the help they can get.

<http://www.poll daddy.com/survey.aspx?id=590aabb45734af45>