

**CHILDREN IN CHANGING FAMILIES: LIFE AFTER PARENTAL SEPARATION** *by*  
*Jan Pryor and Brian Rodgers*  
*Blackwell Publishers Ltd.*

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In “Children in Changing Families, Life after Parental Separation”, Jan Pryor and Brian Rodgers research the many answers to the question of how our children are faring in response to family change. They compare research studies from Britain, North America, Australia and New Zealand

The existence of, and understandings about, family change are divided usefully into conservative and liberal views which assists in situating the divergence of thinking about effects on children. For instance a conservative view would say that divorce needs to be made harder to protect families, “equating family change with family decline”, whereas the liberal view would say that “divorce liberates many adults and children from punitive, unhappy family situations” (p.7).

The book covers wide-ranging issues that affect children as their families change, with research and discussion about separation, lone parents (both mothers and fathers), stepfamilies and the effects of multiple transitions. The discussions carefully draw on relevant studies from each country.

The findings are a useful reference in the areas that need attention for children (by parents, counsellors etc) to minimise the risk of negative effects of family transitions. As Pryor and Rodgers write:

Undoubtedly, parental separation constitutes a risk for children, but the evidence suggests that that it is not *the* major risk factor. Children are not necessarily harmed by family transitions, but neither are transitions benign, risk-free events. (p.73)

I appreciated a chapter dedicated to fathers in families and the reason given for this when there was not one for mothers. There has been much emotive writing and “talk” of the role of fathers and this discussion of research findings is a useful one that unsurprisingly concludes that it is not their presence per se but the quality of their fathering that is important, as is the case for parenting generally.

The mere presence of fathers, though, is not enough. Children benefit from having them in their lives when the relationship is positive, supportive, and involved, and this is true whether parents are together or apart. Conversely, negative, intrusive, and abusive father-child relations are not good for children, regardless of family structure. (p.203)

The book is very readable, making it accessible and useful both to parents and to those involved with these families, including lawyers, the Family Court, counsellors and policy makers. The content, statistics, tables and discussion are given life by quotes from young people interviewed. I appreciated many (perhaps all?) of these being from New Zealand studies. For instance a 15-year-old boy is quoted at the beginning of chapter 4 as saying:

Try to take into account the kid's views because the kids know what they want more than the parents do because they're them. (p.112)

There are also highlighted repeats of the text throughout the book that bring forward important points. I would imagine readers finding these useful in looking for areas that were relevant to them to then read further, without having to read the whole book.

I have some frustration, too, as a family therapist in reading research, in that it researches what *is* as dictated by understandings that have led to these "conditions" for children, rather than what *could be* if understandings were different. I suspect in the conservative view having been predominant that there has until recently not been enough support and knowledge available about how best to support children through family transition. Perhaps this was due to thinking that this might encourage divorce. As recognition and acceptance of families of difference grows and knowledge of useful ways of living in them, too, I suspect outcomes for children will be better. This book reminds us of the importance of this happening.

I would have appreciated in the book some addressing of families and children that stand outside the dominant majority, for instance, by culture or sexual orientation. Do cultures that have a wider view of family, perhaps living in extended families, have different outcomes for children? I would also have been interested whether there were unique aspects to Aotearoa New Zealand, while acknowledging that one book cannot cover everything. I hope Jan Pryor and her colleagues continue in their research here so that we may have a better understanding of findings in our own context.