



# UL ENGAGE

## Community Briefing

2018 No. 30

### Children's Grief Centre Limerick HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD COPE WITH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Allana Reckard  
Inga ten Hagen

Academic Supervisor: Bernie Quillinan



UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK  
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**UL Engage**

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# THE BRIEF

## Project Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of this project was to create a brochure for parents outlining how their actions impact children after a separation or divorce and what they can do to help their children cope.

Through parental separation, children experience a distressing process. However, the emotional and behavioural response of the children are strongly influenced by people around them. Supporting children during this time is crucial to ensure their well-being in the long-term. The parental attitude and behaviour is a determining factor in this. Thus, it is important to inform the parents about the effects on the children and how they can help them.

## Project Rationale

This project is important because there are many children grieving the separation or divorce of their parents in the Limerick community, considering the high divorce rate in Limerick. The 2011 Census indicated that 19% of the children in Ireland are living in households headed by a single parent and the highest rate of marital breakdown occurred in Limerick city (Central Statistics Office, 2012).

70% of the children attending the Children's Grief Centre are there due to marital breakdown. The support of the centre helps children cope, however, the support workers have noticed a lack of understanding from the parents about how their actions after their separation or divorce truly impact the children. Helen at the Children's Grief Centre had the idea of creating a brochure to inform the parents about what they should and should not be doing in regards to their children after their separation or divorce. The overall message of the brochure is intended to be positive and not accusatory, in order to appropriately get the message across. The goal of the brochure is to give the parents some resources, knowledge, and awareness about what they can do to ease the pain children feel after their parents separate or divorce.

# OVERVIEW

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The Children's Grief Centre Limerick is a support service for school-aged children and young people affected by loss through death, separation or divorce. It was established in 2009 in Limerick by the trained social worker Sr. Helen Culhane and a support group of individuals. The focus of the centre is to help the children. The participation of children and young people is the heart of the work of the Children's Grief Centre. The service is provided by trained and experienced people and is free of charge.

The centre provides a safe, non-judgemental and supportive place for children and young people (aged 4 to 18 years) and their families who are grieving. It gives children the opportunity to explore their experiences of loss associated with bereavement and parental separation. The centre offers one on one support for children, young people, parents, guardians and their families. Sr. Helen, who works full-time on the project, and approximately ten part-time volunteers provide sessions for children and their parents.

Most times, children are brought to the service by their parents. In the first session, the parent(s) and child meet with Sr. Helen or one of the volunteers, to establish reasons for the referral. Subsequently, the child gets individual sessions, although they are always accompanied by a parent waiting in another room. The service is not counselling, but provides a listening ear. Adjusted to developmental stage and wishes of the children their expression of emotion is facilitated through a number of different ways: through talking, as well as through creation and play, including the use of paint, music, workbooks, clay, games and storybooks.

The child can attend as many sessions as they feel they need and are invited back for a follow-up three or four months after the final session. On average, children attend three to five one-hour sessions, although this varies depending on the complexity of the case and the individual needs. Approximately 70% of the children are attending due to marital breakdown and 30% due to bereavement.

The centre's aim is also to raise the awareness in the community about grieving, coping and ongoing growth and development. Thus, the centre engages with school and community groups to inform and educate about bereavement and grief.

# COMMUNITY

## **Helen Culhane - Children's Grief Centre's Founder and Director**

Sr. Helen is a Sister of Mercy and she is also a qualified social worker and a psychotherapist. Much of Sr. Helen's work in her earlier life had related to issues around death, bereavement and palliative care. Over the years Sr. Helen also became more aware of children and young people who were suffering loss in other ways, especially through the separation and divorce of parents.



Helen has worked for thirteen years as a social worker with TUSLA in the area Child Protection and Child Psychiatry. In, 1991 she obtained an advanced diploma in Child protection from Trinity College. In 2001, she moved as Senior Social Worker to Milford Care Centre where she set up and facilitated a group work support programme for bereaved children. It was through these types of work situations that Sr. Helen developed a clear awareness and insight into the needs of children and young people who were being affected by the death of a loved one and the relative dearth of services and supports for these children and young people. In 2015 Helen qualified as a Counsellor and Psychotherapist with the Dublin Counselling Centre.

Her vast experience over the years has given her a wealth of experience in working with children and adults. Sr. Helen explored and examined other examples of good practice in relation to services for children and young people experiencing loss and grief. In 2006, she had direct contact with children's bereavement services in Australia and especially with the National Centre for Childhood Grief (also known as The Friend's Place) which is based in Sydney. Analyses of services in Australia and her own experience of working in palliative care in Ireland convinced Sr. Helen of the need to set up a service in Ireland which would be specifically focused on children and young people affected by loss and grief.

Helen has very good communication skills and networks with a variety of agencies within the mid-west. In 2009, following consultation with the Provincial Leader of the Sisters of Mercy about the establishment of this type of service, Helen established the Children's Grief Centre initially as a pilot project. Her vision was that the project would provide children and young people with a listening ear. At this stage the Centre is very well established with Mid-West Region, especially with Limerick City and County. Helen is supported by the Sisters of Mercy and by the contribution and expertise of our volunteers which is core to the success of the Centre.

# STUDENTS



**Allana Reckard – University of Minnesota**

I am a third year accounting student at the University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management. Although my education background is in business, I have always had an interest in social services, especially for children. This project has allowed me to gain an understanding of how separation and divorce impact children. Working with the Children’s Grief Centre helped me see how this issue impacts children within the Limerick community and the importance of the centre for the community.



**Inga ten Hagen – University Bielefeld (Germany)**

I am a postgraduate Psychology student from Germany. I was always interested in support work for children and youth and did years of voluntary work in this area, as example organizing weekly groups for youth or work as supervisor for children’s vacation programmes. Moreover, I worked in a Youth Training Centre in Germany to help classes of children to improve their communication and social abilities. During this experiences I learned a lot about the needs of young people and how to support them. My studies and an internship in a clinic for children with mental disorders and their families showed me how important the psychological help for children is, especially in difficult processes as separation and divorce. I also wrote my bachelor thesis about the impact of parental feedback on the development of children and I am very interested in supporting children and their parents during that time. This project gave me insight in the Irish culture and community work and I was glad to be part of it.

# OUTCOMES

The outcome of our project is the brochure we created. The brochure is addressed to parents to help their children cope with separation and divorce. Therefore, it is a support for the families in the Limerick community in the process of separation and divorce, especially the children who suffer from this type of loss. It is intended to benefit the well-being of the children by educating the parents on the effects of their actions, particularly the ones that negatively impact the children. Once Helen distributes the brochure to the parents at the Children's Grief Centre, there will hopefully be a benefit, however, it may take a while for the change to occur.



**10 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD**

- Have age appropriate conversations with your children, let them know what is going on
- Make sure your children know that the separation is not their fault
- Listen to your child and answer any questions they have without judgement
- Minimize change and inconsistency in your child's daily life
- Cooperate and communicate with your ex
- Support your child's need to have a strong relationship with both parents
- Take care of yourself and get the help you need during this time and in the future
- Do your best to make your child feel safe and secure
- Put your children's needs first, act in their best interest
- Always remember to let your children be children

**More Information:**

**Book**  
*When Parents Separate: Helping Your Children Cope*  
 by John Sharry, Peter Reid, and Eugene Donohoe

**Websites**

"Changes in Parent-Child Relationship After Divorce"  
[www.goodtherapy.org/blog/changes-in-parent-child-relationship-after-divorce-0307175](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/changes-in-parent-child-relationship-after-divorce-0307175)

"Children and Divorce"  
[www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/children-and-divorce.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/children-and-divorce.htm)

"Children and Separation"  
<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/ain-gle-blended-family-parenting/helping-children-heal-after-divorce/helping-children-heal-after-divorce-onbooklet.pdf>

"Helping Children Heal After Divorce"  
<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/ain-gle-blended-family-parenting/helping-children-heal-after-divorce/helping-children-heal-after-divorce>



**CHILDREN'S GRIEF CENTRE**  
*Supporting children and young people affected by loss through death, parental separation and divorce*

Westbourne, 44/46Avenue Avenue,  
 South Circular Road, Limerick, W9A 1DA

T: 051 224 627  
 M: 087 985 1733  
 E: [childrensgriefcentre@gmail.com](mailto:childrensgriefcentre@gmail.com)  
 B: [www.childrensgriefcentre.ie](http://www.childrensgriefcentre.ie)  
 C: [www.facebook.com/childrensgriefcentre](https://www.facebook.com/childrensgriefcentre)  
 www.childrensgriefcentre.ie  
 Charity Number: 20109





**"I'M STUCK IN THE MIDDLE"**

*How to help your children cope with separation or divorce*



**Introduction**

Separation and divorce is stressful for the whole family. Everyone copes differently and needs support during this time, especially the children. The way parents act during and after this process is crucial to the well-being of the children. This brochure will show you how you can help your child through this to make it less difficult for everyone.

**Emotional Support**

Separation and divorce impact children differently depending on their age and personality. Many children are not as resilient as they appear. They may keep their negative feelings to themselves, allowing them to build up over time. It is important to give your children the opportunity to talk about their feelings in a safe and open environment.

During this time, you can help your child cope with those feelings by listening and answering questions. Your children need to know that their feelings are valid, that they are not at fault, and that both parents still love them. One of the most beneficial things you can do for your children during this time is to make sure they know the truth.

**Consistency and Cooperation**

It is important to remember that even though you and your partner are no longer together, you are both still parents to your child. Your child needs both of you! Maintaining consistency and communication between you and your ex is crucial in easing the transition for your child. No matter which parent your child is with, rules and daily routines should remain similar. This will help your child feel less separation anxiety and have a sense of security in a stable environment. Security and safety should be priorities because both are fundamental needs for all children.

*"Feeling heard and understood allows children to release the feelings, let go and move on."*

When you interact with your ex, it is essential to be as civil as possible. Children are good at picking up on hostility and may feel guilty if they overhear arguments, especially if they are about them. You can help your children by keeping your negative opinions about your ex away from them. It is best for your child that relationships with both parents are supported to prevent internal conflicts about where loyalties should lie. Children tend to be loyal to both parents, no matter how angry they may be with them. Remember that even though you no longer love your ex, your child still does.



# TESTIMONIALS

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**UL Engage: Community Practicum Project - Allana Reckard and Inga ten Hagen**

**Community Partner: Children's Grief Centre**

**Date: 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2018**

Participation in the UL Engage Practicum Project as a community partner has been a very beneficial experience for us here at the Children's Grief Centre. We have had an opportunity to collaborate with the University of Limerick through the UL Engage programme and access the huge wealth of experience and knowledge through our engagement with the UL Engage-appointed students, Allana Reckard and Inga ten Hagen. Allana and Inga were tasked with the job of compiling an information booklet aimed at parents and guardians of children who access services here at the centre.

Allana and Inga carried out their appointed tasks with enthusiasm and attention to detail to an impressive extent. Additionally, Allana and Inga interviewed our Director, Helen Culhane, our administrator, Anne English and Ita Hannan, one of our support workers to gather as much relevant information as possible and kept Helen informed of their progress at every stage of the process. Both Allana and Inga were a pleasure to deal with and they showed sensitivity and a depth of understanding towards the subject matter that was very considerate and empathetic. They have produced a very useful leaflet which will be of huge benefit to the parents and guardians.

We would like to thank Bernie Quillinan, Civic Engagement Champion and Tracey Gleeson, Project Administrator for their assistance during this process. Both Bernie and Tracey were extremely helpful and offered advice throughout the whole process.

From the initial UL Practicum introductory meeting through to the Community Progress Review workshop (December, 2017) and again at the UL Christmas Community Celebration - Charity Presentation hosted by Eamonn Cregan, Director, Corporate Affairs, our experience with the UL Engage programme has been enjoyable and rewarding and has afforded the Children's Grief Centre the opportunity to gain something from the experience (Information booklet) and meet other community partners. We would sincerely like to thank all involved especially Allana and Inga.

Sincerely,

***Helen Culhane***

***Anne English***

***Ita Hannan***

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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As of now, there aren't any formal recommendations that we have for this project going forward, as we have completed the brochure. Our community partner is very happy with what we have done throughout the semester, however, the brochure has yet to be implemented at the centre. If there are any issues that come up once the brochure is in use at the centre and the project needs to be revisited, we recommend future groups get feedback from the parents at the centre and take that feedback to revise the brochure we have created.



# GALLERY



The photographs above are of a support room at the Children's Grief Centre. Children will meet with a support worker in this room for their one on one session. The room has a lot of toys and other activities for the children to use.



The above pictures show Inga, Helen, and Anne (left) and Inga, Allana, and Anne (right) discussing potential titles and the design of the brochure at the Children's Grief Centre.

# APPENDICES

- Brosh, A. (2013). *5 Tips for Co-Parenting When You Can't Stand Your Ex*. Retrieved from <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/co-parenting-tips-when-you-cant-stand-your-ex-0417134>.
- Children's Grief Centre (2017). *Children's Grief Centre*. Retrieved from <https://www.childrensgriefcentre.ie/>.
- Cohen, G. (2002). *Helping Children and Families Deal with Divorce and Separation*. Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/110/5/1019.full>.
- Desai, A. (2007). *How Could Divorce Affect My Kids?* Retrieved from <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/divorce-and-infidelity/should-i-get-a-divorce/how-could-divorce-affect-my-kids#fn16>.
- Dixon, M. (2017). *Changes in the Parent-Child Relationship After Divorce*. Retrieved from <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/changes-in-parent-child-relationship-after-divorce-0307175>.
- Focus on the Family (2009). *Helping Children Heal After Divorce*. Retrieved from <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/single-blended-family-parenting/helping-children-heal-after-divorce/helping-children-heal-after-divorce>.
- Kemp, G., Smith, M., & Segal, J. (2018). *Children and Divorce*. Retrieved from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/children-and-divorce.htm>.
- Sharry, J., Reid, P., & Donohoe, E. (2001). *When Parents Separate: Helping Your Children Cope*. Veritas, Dublin.

# HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN COPE WITH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE



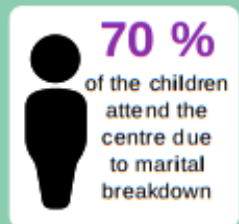
## Issue



The Children's Grief Centre helps children cope with the effects of separation and divorce, but has noticed a lack of understanding from the parents about how their actions can negatively impact their children.

## Children's Grief Centre Limerick

- one on one support service for children (aged 4 - 18) affected by loss through death, separation or divorce
- provides a safe and non-judgemental place for grieving as well as a listening ear
- established 2009 by Sister Helen Culhane
- free service provided by trained people



## Objectives



- to create a brochure for parents
- to give them some resources, knowledge, and awareness about the impact of the situation and their actions on the child

➔ **What can parents do to ease the pain of their children and help them cope?**

## Observations

- children often feel stuck in the middle of the parental conflict and blame themselves
- there is a lack of common understanding between the two parents about the child's needs
- children may be angry with their parents but are still loyal to them
- some children start to take care of their parents which makes them grow up too fast
- children do not always have the necessary open communication with their parents to deal with their feelings



## The Brochure's Content

### 10 Things to Do to Help Your Children Cope



- Have age appropriate conversations
- Make sure your children know that the separation is not their fault
- Listen and answer any questions without judgement
- Minimize change and inconsistency in daily routines
- Cooperate and communicate with your ex
- Put your children's needs first
- Support your children's need to have a strong relationship with both parents
- Take care of yourself and get the help you need
- Do your best to make your children feel safe
- Let your children be children

*"Feeling heard and understood allows children to release the feelings, let go and move on."*



## Moving forward

- benefit for both the children and parents
- evaluation of the impact of the brochure needed

Authors: Allana Reckard & Inga ten Hagen  
Academic Supervisor: Bernie Quillinan  
UL Engage - Learning with communities  
University of Limerick, Ireland



[www.ul.ie/engage](http://www.ul.ie/engage)    E-mail: [ULEngage@ul.ie](mailto:ULEngage@ul.ie)

Telephone: +353 61 202096