

#SortItOut: A Family Solutions System

- The #SortItOut campaign, which is supported by an alliance of family and relationship support organisations, was launched in winter 2020 by the APPG for Supporting Couple Relationships and Reducing Parental Conflict to call for greater government investment in reducing parental conflict and improving family support through Family Hubs.
- This aspect of the campaign focuses on the needs of separating families, which are often overlooked. They, and their children, fall between government departments.
- The current system is failing many children and their parents, and this affects society as a whole.
- Now is the time to act.
- The new Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 is due to come into force this autumn. This landmark legislation is an ideal springboard to really improve outcomes for the children of separated parents.

Key issues

- Every year, around 280,000 children see their parents separate in the UK.
- How those separations are handled will affect the rest of their lives.
- Research consistently shows that parental conflict is harmful to children in multiple ways.
- The annual cost to the taxpayer of family failure is estimated to stand at £51 billion, up from £37 billion ten years ago.ⁱ
- Improvements can be made whilst still recognising some families need law and justice.
- It is right that the justice system exists for those who are vulnerable and need protection, but it is not the place for most families and courts cannot cope with the increasing caseload.
- Evidence shows that most families need other support.
- Disagreements about children may be symptoms of unresolved emotions following relationship breakdown, yet relational issues are not addressed in a system designed to administer justice.
- In practice, a 'justice' response to parenting disagreements is a blunt instrument for a family going through a vulnerable time. For many, it adds fuel to the fire, increasing stress and conflict.



The President of the Family Division:

*"It should be a matter of concern for society in general to achieve better co-parenting between separating couples. ... Where there are no issues of domestic abuse or child protection, parents ought to be able, or encouraged, to make arrangements for their own child, rather than come to a court of law. ... The trend is that more and more parents see lawyers and the court as the first port of call in dispute resolution, rather than as the facility of last resort as it should be in all cases where domestic abuse or child protection are not an issue. ... The courts can only do so much, any major change requires widespread engagement and support."*ⁱⁱ

*"The task of identifying, developing and then funding a better way to achieve good enough co-parenting between separated parents is a matter for society in general, policymakers, government and, ultimately Parliament; it is not for the judges. My purpose today is, therefore, simply to call out what is going on in society's name, and at the state's expense, and invite others to take up that call."*ⁱⁱⁱ

We need a 'Family Solutions system' to complement the provision of our 'Family Justice system'.

The APPG for Strengthening Couple Relationships and Reducing Parental Conflict is working on how government can improve support for separating families. Proposals include:

Family Hubs – should be resourced to offer 'Parent Aid'^{iv}, a universal offer to established standards, enabling separating and separated parents to access programmes and interventions to address relationship and parenting issues between them, and offering consultations for children and young people and sign-posting for support.

MoJ – Public education is needed to promote wider understanding of family law and the legal expectations upon parents who separate, together with earlier sign-posting and completion of children-focused programmes.

DfE – Training for all school staff on the impact of parental conflict on children's mental health, behaviour and learning. Schools should have a member of staff responsible for providing information and sign-posting to parents and children when parents separate. Production of resources including digital resources for school staff, parents, children and young people on understanding the impact of parental conflict.

DHSC – Training for GPs and frontline health professionals on recognising parental conflict and its impacts in families where parents are separated or separating to enable sign-posting to interventions and digital resources.

DWP – Building on the successful Reducing Parental Conflict programme – promote universal access to face-to-face, remote (e.g. via Zoom) and digital parenting programmes.

MHCLG – Support the establishment of local Family Solutions Groups to create local coordination of support for families and link to existing local Family Justice Boards.

This is not simply an issue for the overburdened family courts.

Safe systems are needed to protect children of all parents who live apart.

Mental health support in school may be wasted if family relationships at home are in conflict.

This cuts across the whole of society, across every social class.

This is a social issue affecting a generation of children.

i <https://relationshipsfoundation.org/publications/pressreleases/cost-family-failure-2018-update>

ii Foreword to Family Solutions Group report. <https://www.judiciary.uk/publications/what-about-me-reframing-support-for-families-following-parental-separation/>

iii President of the Family Division, keynote address, Resolution Conference 2019

iv Parent Aid could be to a Family Solutions system what Legal Aid is to the Family Justice system. Parent Aid would provide triaging of needs, screening for safeguarding issues, assessment of emotions, parenting support, mediation, child consultations and sign-posting to other local support as needed.