

Child Focused Resolution Centre – Phase Two

The Child Focused Resolution Centre (CFRC) was established to provide divorcing parents with an early conciliatory forum to help them reach agreement on the care arrangements of their children. Counselling and mediation is carried out at the early stages of divorce proceedings to help parents deal with their emotions, understand and focus on the needs of their children and to help them in their parental roles post divorce. In this way they can move forward instead of becoming entrenched in their disputes.

Since the CFRC began operations on 26 September 2011, it has seen over 1,780 cases¹ and resolved 95%² of them in 2012; i.e. it has facilitated a majority of divorcing parents from having to undergo adversarial court trials that often involve more filing of affidavits and lengthy investigations via custody evaluation or social welfare reports. In its first phase of functioning, the CFRC focused on children below eight years of age, (approximately 52% of the divorce writs filed with children under 21 years old), as they are highly dependent on their parents for continued care and support - hence most vulnerable.

In the second phase, the focus will extend to the next most vulnerable group - children below 14 years and their teenage siblings who face different challenges from younger children. These children are developing greater cognitive abilities and understand the content of their parental conflicts in greater detail. However, they often do not have the emotional ability to cope with the understanding and experience of their parents' divorce. In general, children in this group face stressors such as academic pressures of taking major exams, transition to secondary education and stresses related to developmental maturation such as puberty, forming social/peer relationships and negotiating their autonomy with parents.

The CFRC hopes to help parents understand how their management of the divorce impacts their children. When parents become very self-absorbed by the psychological, emotional and even the physical impact of divorce, the children receive less attention and support from their parents for the stressors they face. The children's developmental process of gaining a sense of autonomy is disrupted when the teen begins to feel insecure about the relationship with the parents and perceives that the parents have separated from them. It is therefore not surprising for a teen from a divorce family to feel that the parents cannot be counted on and the teen has to rely on himself or herself, or the friends. Research has found that teens from divorced families are exposed to greater risk of being more aggressive, higher rates of delinquency, drugs and alcohol addiction and are more sexually active at an earlier age.

More critically, parents who are preoccupied with conflict may neglect to realise the burden compelled on



their children to assume the parents' emotions or take responsibility for the parental conflict. Professor Devari, from Seton Hall University (1995) noted that teens have probably developed a cognitive capacity for self-reflexive thinking and an ability to perceive opposing views held by each parent. Hence, they are often regarded as mature by their parents and are expected to decide who they want to stay with, who is the better parent, provide emotional support and to take sides during parental conflicts. Imagine if you are the teen caught in your parents' divorce, how do you determine who is right or wrong, or who to side, or what to tell the Judge? In summary, teens are especially vulnerable to loyalty conflicts and in the most unfortunate of circumstances where conflict continues after divorce, the children may experience lifelong symptoms of emotional issues and difficulties.

The complex and multifarious challenges faced by children and parents, even after the divorce proceedings, signal a critical need for strong follow up services from the community sector to strengthen protective factors for the children who have to adjust to a new arrangement or act as a preventive buffer. In preparation for the second phase, the CFRC continues its efforts to engage stakeholders and explore more collaboration with community agencies to help improve parents' abilities to resolve potential conflicts and adjust to their new status as divorced parents, in addition to existing initiatives such as co-parenting workshops, assisted access or transfer services.

The CFRC has also expanded its team to cater for the next phase and the accompanying complexities presented by cases. The team of Judges, counsellors, psychologists and social workers share varied experiences in working with children and young persons, such as in the context of community centres, child protection, education, forensic, mental health or special needs and mediation, to name a few. Together with a common passion, the CFRC looks forward to supporting more parents and children with holistic and sustainable solutions.

¹From 26 September 2011 to 28 February 2013

²Average settlement rate of children's issues for cases concluded in 2012