

What do Children Say When they are given a Voice?

The following is based on a piece of research funded by the Nuffield Foundation and produced in 2001 by Neale and Smart, of Leeds University, entitled 'Good to Talk – Conversations with Children after Divorce'. 52 children were interviewed, all of whom had experienced their parents' separation at least three years previously.

The results are summarised as follows:

- **Protection and support.** Children expect to be protected, to be cared for and to have emotional support.
- **Being included and informed.** They showed a marked preference for a democratic style of parenting based on open communication and shared understanding. They liked to be listened to, taken seriously, to be kept informed, and to be kept in the picture without being inappropriately burdened with problems.
 - *“Children wanted to know what is going on in their families and value being able to talk to their parents and share their thoughts and feelings. But they draw the line at being pressured into thinking, feeling or acting like their parents, especially if this means being turned into an ally, spy or ‘go between’ in parental war”.*
- **Dislike of conflict.** Children value respect between parents. Three years after the separation they were more likely to regret on-going arguments than the divorce itself. They were unanimous in their dislike of open conflict. Again, no surprises there.
- **Fairness.** Children wanted there to be fairness, not so much in terms of equality in arrangements, but in the sense that everyone's needs and practicalities were considered.
- **Consultation about arrangements affecting them.** Children wanted to be consulted about arrangements: they did not ask for an autonomous choice, but they wished to participate in the decision-making process. They wanted recognition and a voice, rather than control or rights. The fine line that parents walk is this: they need to equip children to make choices, but not to involve them in contests of power while they are still learning how to make adult choices.