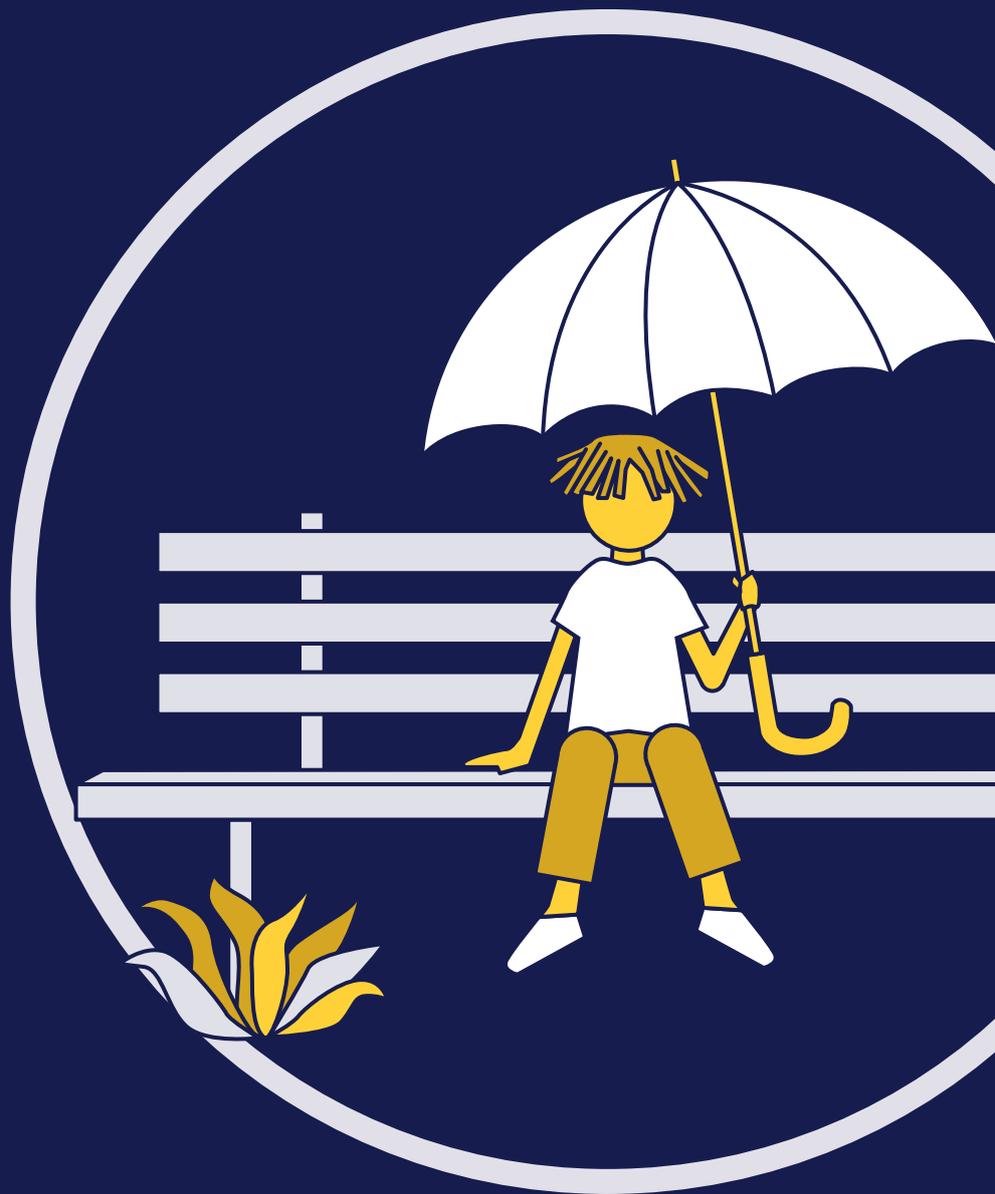


Private law | October 2021

Children's experience of private law proceedings: Six key messages from research



Introduction

The family court has a role in resolving disputes between separating parents over child arrangements—known as private law. More than twice as many private law applications are started in England and Wales each year than public law applications. Yet little is known about the children and families involved in them.

As part of Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's focus on how the well-being of children and families

can be improved following parental separation, there is a need to better understand children's views and experiences.

However, despite a wealth of research showing how parental separation and interparental conflict affect children's outcomes, there is a comparative lack of research into how children experience or view their parents' separation or divorce, and their experience of private law proceedings.

We recently identified and summarised the extent of the research in this area. This Spotlight paper highlights the six clear messages that emerged from our synthesis of this literature. It summarises the research as a whole, while highlighting findings from a number of individual studies, and aims to raise points for reflection and discussion.

Research, gaps and limitations

We reviewed UK and international research studies from the last 20 years (2000–2020) that directly obtained children's and young people's thoughts on parental separation and/or their experience of court proceedings.

A total of 45 studies from 7 countries were identified that met the inclusion criteria (see Bibliography). They included 11 studies conducted in England, 4 in England and Wales and 6 in Scotland. Much of the international research was conducted in Australia (13 studies) and Canada (4 studies). The review also included four international literature reviews, 2 studies from Ireland and 1 from the United States.

An overview of these studies is provided in a separate report, which is available from: www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/childrens-experience-private-law

There are several important limitations to the literature, and a number of research gaps were identified.

- There is limited research from England and Wales that focuses on children's experience of private law proceedings. Much of the existing research was conducted in the early 2000s. There is a clear need for updated research focused on the experiences of children in England and Wales.

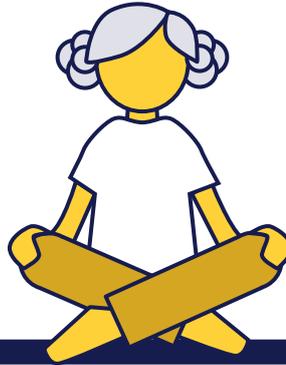
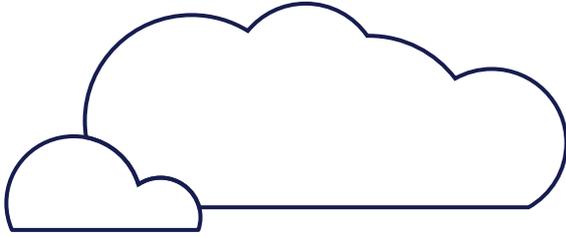
- Most research has been conducted with older children (aged 10+)—however, court proceedings are most likely to affect children under 10 (Cusworth et al. 2020; Cusworth et al. 2021).
- There is a lack of attention paid to the ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and wider socioeconomic circumstances of children and their parents, and how experiences of parental separation or private law proceedings may vary depending on these factors.



Summary

Despite the limitations, the research clearly indicates that children are actively—not passively—involved in their parents' separation and court proceedings. In summary:

- Parental separation can be highly stressful for children and can have a big impact on their lives. For some, this impact can last into adulthood. The court system should be set up to try to minimise stress and harm rather than add to it.
- Children often feel left in the dark about what is happening throughout their parents' separation and the court process. In some cases, children know more about what is going on than adults realise but are not always given the accurate and timely information they want. Attempts by adults to hide what is going on can in fact cause significant stress for children. Professionals should take an active role in ensuring children have access to adequate information presented in child-focused ways.
- Children overwhelmingly feel unheard in court proceedings. This causes them significant distress. When children did report positive experiences of participation, this was linked to them experiencing the decisions made more positively. Some studies highlighted that simple changes—such as communicating the final decision in a child-friendly way and ensuring children were aware proceedings had started and what that meant—could make children feel more listened to.
- Many children want to be more involved in decision making. There are different ways children can be supported to share their views and different children may want different things. There is an important distinction to be drawn between children wanting their views to be listened to and taken seriously and children wanting responsibility for the final decision.
- Children may have to engage with a lot of professionals while their parents are going through separation. Professionals need to ensure these interactions are sensitive and supportive, and that they demonstrate an understanding of how serious these issues are for the children involved. Support can make a difference for children and we need to think about how to improve support in the community, including from schools, for children.
- Generally children will have views about contact with some serious thought behind them. But they also need time and support to be able to consider their views, especially where domestic abuse is a factor.



Six key messages from research

1. Parental separation can be distressing, traumatic and confusing

Parental separation can cause distress, trauma and confusion for children. This is often not helped by the court process.

Parental separation and the resulting disruption to children's everyday lives was perceived as a form of crisis by children, with their lives being 'uprooted' (Butler et al. 2002 – England and Wales; Birnbaum and Bala 2009 – Canada; Cafcass 2010 – England).

Some children reported that the separation affected their schoolwork and their ability to concentrate

and sleep, and often led to intense emotions such as anger or guilt. Some talked about how involvement in court proceedings affected their mental health. Others were also acutely aware of their parents' stress and emotions during proceedings, and felt a responsibility to look after them.

For some children, the separation was a moment of relief, marking an end or a reduction in their exposure to parental conflict. Such feelings of relief often sat alongside grief and sadness.

Over time, some children reflected back on their parents' separation as positive. Over half the children in a study from England (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001) were positive about their 'divided lives' post separation.

However, the majority of participants in this study had not been involved in court proceedings; one study found that where parental separation was marked by high conflict and court proceedings, it continued to affect the children into adulthood (Kay-Flowers 2019 – England).

Reflections for practice

How might we reduce the distress, trauma and confusion that children experience?

What changes can be made to the court system to minimise stress and harm?

2. Good communication and access to information are important

A consistent finding across the research was that children were generally kept 'in the dark' during the separation, both by their parents and professionals (Carson et al. 2018 – Australia). This lack of explanation and information caused children significant distress. A study in Ireland found that children who had been denied access to information about what was happening during the separation were more likely to show anger or resentment about the process (Halpenny, Greene, and Hogan 2008).

Talking about separation with parents

Research from England found that most children had very little communication with their parents about family change: a quarter said that no one talked to them about the separation when it happened, and only 5% felt that they were given a full explanation (Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001). In another study in England and Wales (Butler et al. 2003), the majority of children interviewed said that one or both parents had not told them about the separation, or explained what it might mean for them.

Children felt that adults tried to hide or keep information from them in order to protect them or not involve them in 'adult issues'. However, children were often better informed or aware of the separation than their parents and professionals thought.

A study from Australia found that children knew more about the separation than their parents and other adults realised (Campbell 2008).

Information about court proceedings

Research shows that children whose parents went to court were given poor explanations of what was going on in court by parents and professionals, and in some cases, were unclear if proceedings had even commenced. They had a limited understanding of the court process, the role of lawyers and judges, and their right to be heard.

In the absence of a clear explanation, children came up with their own worrying ideas. Many children associated 'court', 'law' and 'lawyers' with criminal cases and punishment (Butler et al. 2003 – England and Wales).

In one study, a child spoke about the extreme stress they experienced when they thought that they would have to go to court themselves and 'say in front of your parents that you choose one of your parents' (Birnbaum and Bala 2009 – Canada). Other children feared that the court would punish their parents, or their parents would be sent to prison.

Across the research, children indicated that they wanted to be kept better informed about various aspects of the legal process, including who was representing their parents, what the possible outcomes were, who

was making the decision, the length of the process, and when and how they would be able to express their opinion. This was particularly true of those involved in domestic abuse and contested cases (Cashmore 2011 – Australia; Carson et al. 2018 - Australia).

Reflections for practice

How can we provide children with access to the right level of information at the right time? How can we find out what children want to know, rather than making assumptions?

What sort of information would help avoid children 'filling in the blanks' for themselves and who is best placed to provide that information?

Is current practice based on the assumption that by not involving children we are shielding them from the burden of adult conflicts? If so, does the research challenge current practice?

3. Being heard and understood in court can feel empowering

Children felt that the courts should give their views equal weight to the views of their parents. But across the literature, children generally described court proceedings negatively, with the consistent impression that they had not been listened to or that their views were not considered important by the court.

In one study in Australia, the majority of children involved felt that the court was indifferent to their views (Carson et al. 2018). A study from Ireland involving children with fathers who had perpetrated domestic abuse found that the majority of children interviewed could not recall any consultation with professionals (Holt 2018).

Several studies reported that children felt the court was focused overwhelmingly on the conflict between parents, even though the decisions being made would have huge implications on their everyday lives.

One study identified that the failure of the court to explain the final decision directly to children was a significant factor in children's perceptions that their views were not considered important by the court (Tisdall and Morrison 2012 – Scotland).

The perception that their views and experiences were not listened to caused children a lot of distress and fear. This was particularly true when children had experienced violence and abuse (Carson et al. 2018 – Australia). Court was frequently perceived as a scary, intimidating place.

There were few examples of positive experiences. In Bailey, Thoburn, and Timms' (2011) survey of 141 children involved in private law proceedings in England, almost three quarters (74%) thought that they had been able to 'have a say'. Only just over half, however, thought that their opinion had made a difference to the outcome.

A handful of studies found that children's experience of participation was associated with how satisfied they felt about the outcome of proceedings. For example, Cafcass (2010) found that when young people were not happy with the outcome of their parents' separation it was mainly because they felt that they had little input into the process or that their views were not taken into account. By contrast, some responses suggested that the more children felt that they had been listened to, the more satisfied they were likely to be with the outcome of proceedings.

Different ways children want to participate in court proceedings

There were differing ideas about what level of participation or input was preferred in court proceedings.

Generally, children felt that having their views represented in court by a professional (such as a lawyer, mental health professional or social worker) was appropriate. However, in practice,

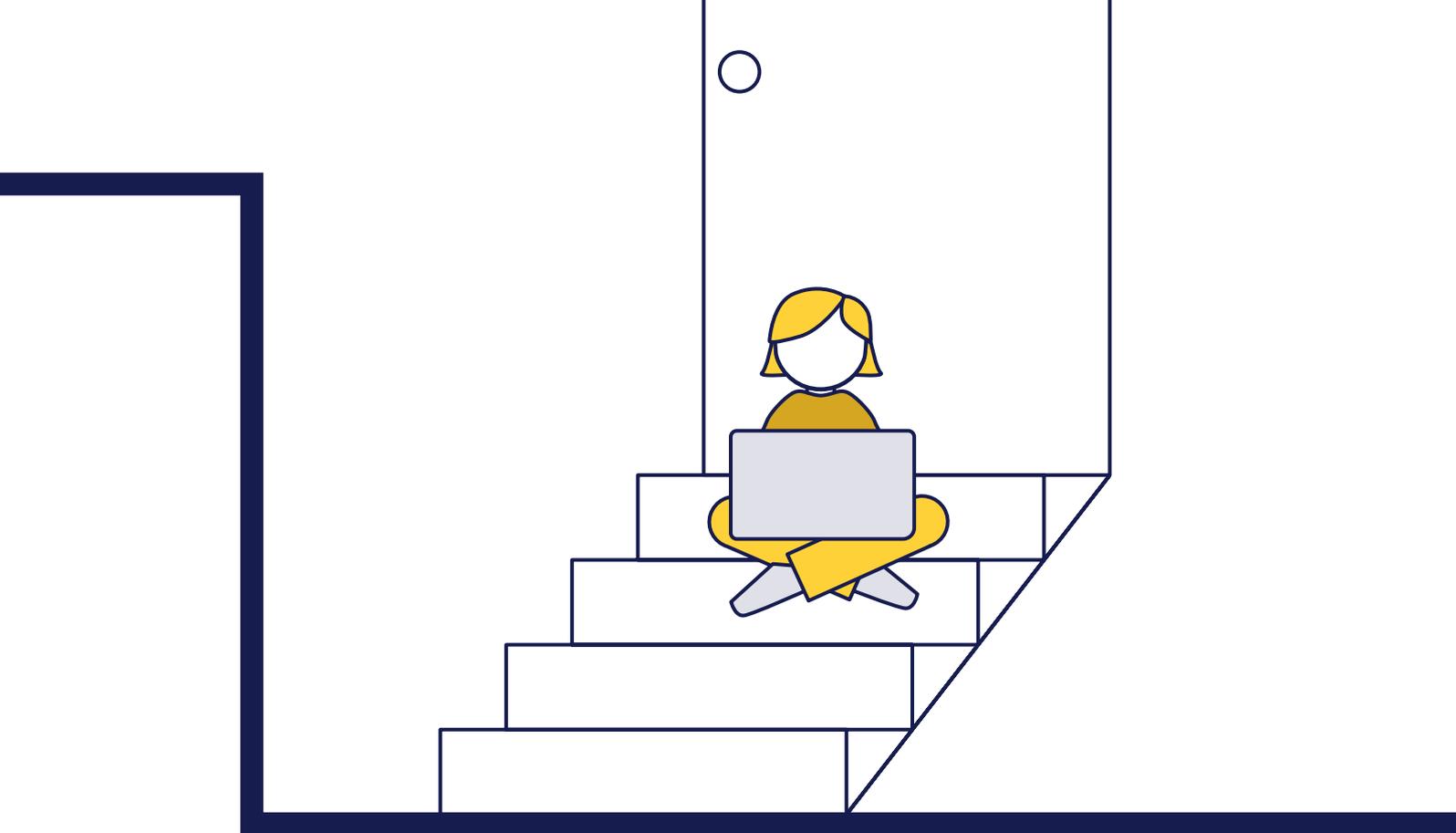
children reported mixed experiences of professional engagement. One study in England (Douglas et al. 2006) found that children who had been independently represented were generally happy with the outcome and appreciated having someone to talk to that they could trust. They report that the experience of being listened to by a legal representative empowered children. Other children expressed concern about a lack of empathy and engagement in their interaction with representatives, lack of time spent with them, and concern about their views being misrepresented or ignored (Carson et al. 2018 – Australia).

Across several international studies, there were mixed feelings about whether children should speak directly to the judge. Many wanted to present their views themselves in court and to speak to the judge directly—this was felt to minimise the chance that their views would be misrepresented or not heard by the 'decision maker'. This desire to speak to the judge directly was especially strong for children who had firm views about contact or were involved in contested cases. Others felt that speaking to the judge would be too intimidating or formal.

Reflections for practice

How can we make sure that children's views are heard in court, and are properly considered?

What would a system look like where children were given more choice and options about how they wished to participate in proceedings?



4. Being properly involved and consulted in decision making is important

A clear theme across the research was that children want to be more involved in decision making when their parents separate.

The reasons children gave for wanting to be consulted included: the importance of being acknowledged by the court; perceptions of fairness; the desire for autonomy; and to be kept better informed about decisions that were made. Children also felt that their increased involvement would lead to more informed decision making and better outcomes.

Only a minority of children did not want to be consulted. In one Australian study, 20% of children did not want to be involved, compared with 56% who did want to have a say (Qu and Weston 2015). In another Australian study, most children (64%) felt that the family law professionals should listen more to their views and experiences and respect their preferences on

arrangements (Carson et al. 2018).

Some studies suggested that children who were involved in contested cases, and who had experienced domestic abuse, felt especially strongly about wanting to have a say.

Being in a difficult position

The research also reflects the fact that being involved in decision making can put children in a difficult situation. Some children expressed concern that they were being asked to choose between parents, or found talking about their views emotionally difficult.

There was a distinction drawn between the desire to be included in certain aspects of the decision-making process, and to feel like their voices were heard and taken into account, and the burden of feeling like they had the 'final say' in decisions about living arrangements.

Reflections for practice

How can we support children to share their views in a safe and protected way?

What support can we provide to ensure that children do not feel over-burdened, and are clear how their views will be taken into account?

5. Getting the right support makes a difference

The research explored sources of support for children during parental separation, including in a professional context and through personal relationships.

Experience with professionals

Generally, children reported positive experiences of legal representation or support from a children's guardian. Few studies have explored children's experiences of involvement with Cafcass during private law proceedings. Cafcass' consultation with 136 young people (Cafcass 2010) and a survey of 141 children who were interviewed by Cafcass (Bailey, Thoburn, and Timms 2011) found that, generally, children were positive about the support provided by Cafcass.

However, some children reported more negative experiences. Several studies highlighted that children recalled experiences where their views were misrepresented by professionals, or feared that they might be.

Some children reported that professionals lacked empathy or downplayed the 'seriousness' of their situation and the level of stress or upset they felt. This was particularly distressing for children who raised concerns about physical or psychological abuse with a professional and felt that the court did not respond adequately or sensitively.

Other concerns raised by children included a lack of clarity about what professionals would do with their views (for example, who would read the report written by a social worker) and feeling overwhelmed about the number of professionals involved in the case.

It was felt that things could be improved if professionals took the time to get to know the children, gain their trust, and were empathetic about their situation.

Support from family, peers and school

A number of studies sought to identify sources of support for children in the community.

In a handful of studies, grandparents were found to be a key source of support for children during parental separation. Other sources of support mentioned by children included friends and peer support groups, and more formal sources of support such as counselling or school.

Reflecting on their experiences of parental separation in adulthood, participants in one study commented that professionals, especially teachers, should take greater responsibility for supporting children

during separation (Fortin, Hunt, and Scanlan 2012).

One study conducted in Ireland (Halpenny, Greene, and Hogan 2008) concluded that there is no 'one size fits all' model of support for children and that children may need different forms of support throughout the separation process. A number of barriers to accessing support were identified—including children's fear of stigmatisation; concerns about family privacy and the belief that parental separation was a 'family matter' (and one that should not be discussed or disclosed beyond family boundaries); and a lack of services in the community to meet the need for fast access to support at different times throughout the separation process.

Reflections for practice

What can we do to make sure that interactions with professionals are sensitive and supportive?

What simple changes in the way that we communicate with children might make a difference?

How can support from the community—including schools—be improved?



6. Thoughts and feelings on contact are complex and take time to process

A handful of studies explored children's views about contact with the non-resident parent post separation.

In one study from England (Fortin, Hunt, and Scanlan 2012) researchers asked young adults to reflect back on their parents' separation. Overall, they felt that they had formed their own well-thought-out views about contact with the non-resident parent. Where children had resisted contact, they recalled having done so for reasons relating to the quality of their relationship with the non-resident parent.

In the study highlighted above, the factors that were associated with positive experiences of post-separation contact included the quality of the child-parent relationship before the separation, the child being consulted in making contact arrangements, and a little or no ongoing conflict between parents (Fortin, Hunt, and Scanlan 2012).

Contact with parents who had perpetrated domestic abuse

Several studies explored children's views on post-separation contact with fathers who had perpetrated domestic abuse (though no studies were identified that explored children's views on contact with mothers who had perpetrated abuse).

The body of research, although relatively small, suggests that children's views about post-separation contact are complex and diverse.

Domestic abuse did not necessarily prevent children from wanting contact. Children often have contradictory feelings about their fathers (for example, seeing them both as fatherly and violent), which they may struggle to accommodate. Others felt considerable fear and dread about contact, and concern about their safety, as well as that of their mothers.

In one study (Morrison 2016 – Scotland), views about contact varied considerably between the 18 children interviewed. A few were positive about contact and reported enjoying

spending time with their fathers; others were more ambivalent; and a some had very negative views about contact.

Where children expressed a wish not to have contact, but were still made to do so, it caused significant distress.

In general, children and researchers stressed the need for flexibility in making arrangements. One child spoke about wanting a 'trial run' of contact before making a final decision about what they wanted (Holt 2018).

Reflections for practice

How can we ensure children have enough time and space to reflect on and develop their views about contact (which might not always be straightforward)?

Do our current practices enable flexibility and allow for children to have time to try things out?

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the research clearly indicates that children are actively—not passively—involved in their parents' separation and court proceedings. Decisions made by the court have a big impact on children's lives, and children's experiences of being left out of decision making can increase anxiety and upset.

Across the research, there was a clear need for children to be provided with greater support and guidance to adjust and cope in the context of these family changes, and for the court and other professionals to better involve children and communicate with them about the process. This should include setting clear boundaries about their participation.

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About Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The

Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-founder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. Nuffield FJO funded the development of this briefing paper. Any views expressed are not necessarily those of Nuffield FJO or the Nuffield Foundation.

This briefing paper was written by Alice Roe, a researcher at Nuffield FJO.

We are grateful to all external reviewers who took the time to provide feedback.

Recommended citation:

Roe, A. (2021). Children's experience of private law proceedings: Six key messages from research. Spotlight series. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.



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