

Putting the children first when a family falls apart

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A judge has ordered Britney Spears to hand over her children to their father. Catherine Scott met one couple who are helping families avoid the worst pitfalls and pain of separation.

KAREN and Nick Woodall are excited. They are looking forward to moving in together for the first time since they were married a year ago.

This is no ordinary couple.

The pair decided to live separately for the sake of their children from previous relationships. Karen has been living at her house in York with her daughter, Hannah, and Nick in Richmond at the home he shares three days a week with his two children.

They truly believe in putting their children first. They are only now getting a flat together because Hannah is away at university and Nick's children, at 17 and 15, are old enough to understand. But even then he will return to the house he shares with them for three days.

"We know what we have done is quite extreme and it's not for everyone, but we felt that it was important to make our children feel secure and relaxed," says Karen.

"We decided when we started our relationship, rather than drag our children hither and thither, we would do the moving around."

Karen and Nick met and work at the small, but visionary Centre for Separated Families in York.

In their pokey first floor office behind a nondescript door, just off historic Micklegate, the pair and a team of seven run a unique organisation trying to make life better for hundreds of separated families, especially the children, who are often the innocent casualties when a relationship breaks down.

But it is this smallness which the Woodalls protect with passion.

"It means that we can be truly independent," says Nick, an accountant. "If we were to expand, we would always have to be working to someone else's agenda. This way we can be really fair."

And fairness, or equality of opportunity, is something they both hold dear.

They do not care whose fault it may have been or not been in the breakdown of a relationship, the centre is not about taking sides, it insists that both mother and father are of equal importance in their children's lives.

It has developed services and a unique course to support all parents to do the best for their children, no matter how agonising the circumstances.

"Whatever happens in the relationship, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the children," says Karen.

Children in Focus helps people to work through what has happened to them as adults. "They can come and learn from other people's experiences."

Karen started working for a small charity called the One-Parent Families Support and Information Network in 1990.

Like other agencies of the time, it followed the Government thinking that when a couple splits, it divides who does all the childcare, in most cases the mother, and the person who brings in the money, normally the father.

"Immediately things start to become unfair," says Karen. "It could be that the mother is used to going out to work and doesn't want to be the full-time mum, and it assumes that the man has nothing to do with the children, except financially."

People became little more than labels; a resident or non-resident parent.

In 1998, the organisation embarked on a four-year partnership with Oxfam UK's poverty programme, looking at the experiences of children living with family separation and poverty.

They discovered that children were at severe risk of poverty when they were with their non-resident parent.

"All the support networks are focused on the parent with care. It is an historic thing – post Second World War, the mothers did the caring and the fathers provided. There were a lot of stereotypes about who were lone carers."

Karen started to think there must be a better way forward, which was more representative of today's world, which would be fair on the separated parents and the children. "We did an evaluation and we recognised that much of our work excluded fathers. So we changed."

Nick adds: "We wanted to change the way in which people look at separated families. People have got to realise that the modern family is very different. There are whole networks of blended families where children move in and out of different families depending on what day of the week it is.

"We want to help families make that work."

Karen says she comes from a typically working-class Yorkshire family. Her mother worked for Rowntrees and her father was a precision engineer.

She left school to work for Rowntrees at 16, continuing her education informally through the women's movement.

In 1982, she took a job at a feminist publishing co-op and, in 1990, she started working for the one-parent families group, directing its formal name change and shift in direction in 2005.

She was single herself when she gave birth to Hannah whose father left before her birth. When her daughter was five, Karen moved in with a man and, although the relationship foundered, Hannah still thinks of him as her stepfather.

Karen is facing a new dilemma of her own. Hannah's biological father has recently got in touch with her which has given her mixed feelings. While pleased for Hannah, there is a small part of her which recognises she is having to bite her lip for the years he wasn't interested.

She laughs at the irony, but as long as Hannah is happy that is all that matters.

There is no doubt in either Nick or Karen's mind that the children come first. In fact, they have just published a book entitled *Putting Children First: A Handbook for Separated Parents*.

The centre has its own research unit, boasting a staff of one. And while wanting to change the inherent inequalities in the way separated parents are treated, Nick and Karen don't believe the way forward is confrontation.

"We aren't about making political statements," says Karen.

"I can see why some fathers are driven to do things out of desperation and frustration at being ignored. The system is weighted against them, but it's not the way forward."

For more information, visit www.separatedfamilies.org.uk