

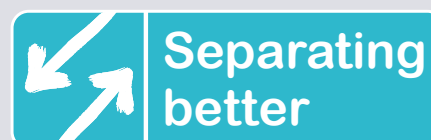
An evaluation of *Separating better*

Executive summary

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Executive summary

Children who are exposed to frequent, intense, and poorly resolved parental conflict are at significant risk of experiencing more negative long-term outcomes compared to their peers. When relationships break down, conflict can become heightened and entrenched as parents struggle to reach agreements on co-parenting and financial arrangements.

When trying to navigate a complex legal system that can be costly and confusing, parents who are not emotionally ready are less likely to resolve the practicalities around their separation. The Family Solutions Group argue that separating couples should be able to digitally access help that enables them to become emotionally ready to engage in successful resolution of disputes, improve communication and reduce conflict, and better negotiate parenting and financial arrangements (Family Solutions Group, 2020).

OnePlusOne were commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to develop and evaluate an app for separating parents at risk of escalating or entrenched conflict, which provides the practical and emotional tools they need to successfully navigate separation.

Our theory of change statement:

Providing separating parents with a self-guided Digital Behaviour Change Intervention (DBCI) that provides evidence-based practical and emotional support will help them to develop the skills, understanding and emotional readiness required to reduce the risk of becoming entrenched in high conflict separations and increase the likelihood of finding support and guidance that avoids parents seeking resolution in the courts.

Separating better was developed through a series of in-person and remote co-design sessions, alongside extensive desk research. The app comprises five core areas designed to provide separating parents with the practical and emotional support they need to navigate separation:

- Advice and guidance articles.
- A DBCI with five Behaviour Modelling Training (BMT) videos.
- A budget planner.
- A collaborative parenting plan.
- A goal setting section.

There were also features for parents who required additional support, such as signposting to local resources and mediation, an AI chatbot, and tools measuring parents' emotional readiness.

Separating better was delivered through a pilot phase in the Isle of Wight and Northumberland and rolled out nationally in the rest of England in a live phase. Our marketing approach targeted separating parents through social media channels, podcasts, and Google Ads and Meta Ads. We set up a referral pathway with National Family Mediation (NFM) to provide a random selection of parents with two paid-for MIAMs (Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting) and one mediation session.

The project was evaluated using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Analytics data was collected from all users of the app, and quantitative questionnaires were placed in different areas of the app. Parents were also sent follow-up surveys to provide feedback on the app, and on mediation if they had been involved with the NFM referral pathway. We conducted semi-structured interviews with parents to explore their use of *Separating better* and the impact it had.

Key findings

The challenges for parents navigating separation and divorce

Practical and emotional challenges

When navigating separation and divorce, parents faced significant practical and emotional challenges. Practical challenges included financial ones. For example, undertaking the task of managing finances alone, reduced income, and untangling previously joint finances. Alongside financial difficulties, parents were challenged by the adjustment to parenting alone, including all aspects of running a household, and the pressures of housing. That included the strain of continuing to cohabit after the relationship had broken down, managing an ex-partner's access to the family home, and finding affordable housing.

As well as practical challenges, parents faced emotional challenges. Separation is known to be a time of great upheaval and trauma, and parents discussed managing a spectrum of emotions – fear, vulnerability, depression, anger, and overwhelm. This posed a great strain on their mental health, with some participants having contemplated suicide. Parents also discussed varying levels of abuse from their ex-partner. Those at a higher level had had police and other agencies involved, and those at a lower level of emotional and financial abuse felt stuck about where to turn for help.

Another emotional challenge was the impact of emotional readiness. Although some parents may have been ready to engage with the negotiations around their separation, there were clear differences in each partner's readiness which impacted the whole process for both parents. Even where one parent was ready, they could see where an ex-partner's lack of acceptance was acting as a roadblock to finalising a settlement.

Help and support

Finding appropriate information and support was hugely challenging for parents. Information was hard to find, and internet searches resulted in a 'black hole' of information that was difficult to sift through, of variable quality, and scattered across the internet. Participants described being passed from service to service with no one able or willing to provide the type of guidance they needed.

Thresholds for accessing formal support from, for example, children's services or third sector organisations, were seen as too high. Participants concerned about potential emotional or financial abuse felt that they had nowhere to turn because services did not appear willing to engage with this perceived grey area that did not pose a physical threat to their safety. Male participants felt that they were operating in a system that was biased against them and intrinsically in favour of women.

Criticisms levelled at the legal system included unmanageable costs, lengthy waits, and too many solicitors keen on lining their own pockets. Here too, men found what appeared

to be a system tilted in favour of women where they could be subject to false allegations and parental alienation that left them powerless and without redress.

Experiences of mediation were more positive. In some cases, it had been helpful and constructive. Mediation provided the space to communicate more effectively with a co-parent and have personal experiences validated. It was, however, dependent on a partner equally willing to engage in the process. Several participants' ex-partners were unwilling or unable to do so. Although much cheaper than going to court, mediation was still felt to be expensive and therefore beyond the reach of some parents. Parents who came to *Separating better* having first been to NFM for mediation presented with lower baseline emotional readiness than those users who came directly to *Separating better*. This may be reflective of the level of need for people who access mediation. Although mediation did increase parents' emotional readiness from pre- to post-mediation, it was not to the same degree as those users who engaged with the Work it out section of *Separating better*, where the BMT videos are presented.

Routes to *Separating better*

Most users who completed the in-app questionnaire had been referred to *Separating better* by a practitioner, such as a family support worker. Other common routes included NFM referral and word of mouth. Social media also played an important role in directing users to the app, with this the fourth most popular route.

Only 7% (42) of users came to the app because of internet searches. The most successful search term was 'parent separation', although many users who found the app were searching for 'divorce lawyers' or 'free support'. Interviewees who used the app were desperate for affordable and trustworthy information and advice and did not know where else to turn.

Google Ads resulted in 61,800 click-throughs leading to 5,993 downloads. Meta Ads were significantly less successful, resulting in just 668 click-throughs and 115 installs. Podcast ads reached 2,882 unique listeners.

Who came to *Separating better*?

A total of 1,053 users signed up to *Separating better*. Users were reflective of the general population, with the majority of users white British (82%) and identifying as heterosexual (90%). Females (72%) were slightly overrepresented, although this mirrors the way in which women are overrepresented, compared to men, in their likelihood to access alternative routes for dispute resolution. Men are more likely to apply to family court to settle disputes. The majority of users (61%) were already separated or divorced and were acting as the resident parent (55%). This highlights the wide appeal of the app, which had been developed originally for a target audience of parents in the earlier stages of separation.

How did users engage with the app?

Parents engaged with the app as and when they needed it, resulting in a 'dipping in and out' approach to the resource. The ease with which users could find their way back to what they had been looking at previously and the user-led design meant that parents could easily find what they were looking for. This was important as the interviews demonstrated how overwhelmed parents felt as they navigated separation and how little free time they had.

New and returning users to the app followed a positive linear pathway for the most part, with sign-ups and returning users increasing each month, excluding the summer holidays which saw a slight decrease in sign-ups. The most popular aspects of the app were the advice and guidance articles and the parenting plan. Following a consistent decline from month one to five, the parenting plan drove an increase in retention rates at six months. This demonstrates the need for parents to access clear advice and practical tools to support them across the separation life course. Although fewer parents accessed the Work it out video section, this was the section that parents spent the most time engaging with once they were there.

Emotional readiness did not impact how users engaged with the app overall, but it did seem to influence how users engaged with the Work it out section, with those in the low emotional readiness category being more likely to start and finish the videos. Tentatively this suggests that users who are lower in emotional readiness seem to be more willing to engage with, and perhaps benefit more from, a BMT-style approach to learning skills.

Barriers to engaging with the app included having already addressed some of the issues covered in the app as a result of being further along the separation journey and the extent to which an ex-partner was willing or able to engage in a cooperative parenting approach.

What difference did *Separating better* make to parents?

Following use of the app, parents' emotional readiness improved significantly between baseline and two-week follow-up. Use of the practical and emotional support and skill development in *Separating better* may have helped parents to make the shift from negative inwardly-focusing emotions, towards improved emotional readiness. Users who completed the Work it out section saw an even greater improvement in emotional readiness from baseline to two-week follow-up compared with those who did not complete the section. We also found descriptive improvements in users' co-parenting cooperation. Although these findings are approaching significance, they are drawn from a small sample size which suggests that, with a larger sample size, we would see a statistically significant positive effect of *Separating better* on these outcomes.

Men and women had significantly different baseline emotional readiness and co-parenting communication scores, with women having significantly higher emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation than men. Descriptive statistics indicate that *Separating better* brought men's emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation up to a similar level to women's following use of the app. In the case of co-parenting cooperation and communication, men had even better outcomes than women.

Unexpectedly, users who were already separated or divorced had significantly lower emotional readiness and higher conflict levels than those users who were in the process of separating or thinking about separating. We would expect to see lower emotional readiness at the start of an individual's separation journey and for emotional readiness to increase as time goes on (Millings et al., 2020).

Analysis of the qualitative data from 22 semi-structured interviews with parents indicates positive impacts of the app across a spectrum of parents, who were all at different stages of their separation journey. The main highlights of these can be broken down into five core themes:

The process of separation. Parents felt better informed about the separation process, about their rights, what they needed to do next, and how to organise their finances. They felt more able to manage the process, including managing their finances and felt more emotionally ready to engage in what needed to be done.

Remind, rethink, reframe. The app had a positive effect on parents' thinking, whether that was a reminder of how to communicate, a prompt to think about things not previously considered, or a nudge to reframe a particular viewpoint. Parents found that the app helped them to see the bigger picture and enabled them to see that they held a shared responsibility for how the separation panned out.

Communication. Parents described being more aware of how they communicated with an ex-partner, being more able to manage their emotions when they engaged, and more able to see an ex-partner's perspective. They also reported improvements in how they communicated with their children.

Keeping the children in mind. The parents we interviewed were more aware of the impact of parental conflict on their children and felt better able to keep the children in mind when engaging with their ex-partner, avoiding getting caught up in heated exchanges either by managing their feelings or postponing conversations until they felt more in control of their emotions.

Emotional wellbeing. The app helped to normalise parents' experiences and reassure them they were not alone. The kind of emotional benefits users described included feeling less anxious, more 'level-headed', more positive and more accepting.

What worked well?

When asked what worked well about the app, parents were overwhelmingly positive about the design and function of the app, as outlined below.

- The app could be used in a way that suited users' needs and lifestyles. For example, in short bursts in the evening when the children were in bed or to check out a particular query.
- It was easy to dip in and out of the app. Something that was facilitated by the design and navigation of the app, because users did not have to work through it in a linear fashion.
- The bite-sized nature of the information made it manageable to engage with and reduced the intensity of engaging with challenging subject matter.
- The content was relevant, and users engaged with the full spectrum of articles.
- The Work it out videos were popular. Parents spent the longest time in total on these pages. The video scenarios were easy to relate to and the length was seen as effective in conveying the point.
- The parenting plan was one of the most used tools in the app and feedback from parents was positive as it allowed them to consider issues they had not previously thought of. Use of the parenting plan varied, however, as some parents had already agreed their plans and others could not get an ex-partner to engage with it.
- Although the budgeting tool had limited use those parents who used it found it empowering as it helped them to manage incomings and outgoings and feel more able to manage on their own financially.

What could work better?

Our marketing data and our downloads to signups indicate that more work needs to be done to better understand how to reach the wide range of parents who would benefit from the app. This includes the priority group of parents in the early stages of separation, and parents who are already separated and have hit the point where they require additional support. Parents also had suggestions for how the app could be improved. These included:

- More interactivity in the parenting plan.
- A direct messaging function to facilitate communication with an ex-partner.
- A shared calendar to support information sharing around children's activities, school events and household needs such as bills that need paying.
- A forum for parents to share experiences and support.
- Further guidance around the legal system, what to expect, how to represent oneself.
- Information targeting different stages of the separation journey.

Limitations

The project involved the development, co-production, and piloting of *Separating better* followed by a national rollout and evaluation all within the space of 18 months. The relatively short period of time allocated to the evaluation had an inevitable impact on data collection and the numbers of parents it was possible to recruit during that timeframe. This was further hampered by finding a balance between encouraging use of the app and ensuring collection of pre- and post-test data. It is therefore necessary to treat these promising findings with caution due to the number of sign-ups to the app and the number of users who completed the in-app questionnaires and follow-up surveys. This means that, for some results, we are dependent on descriptive data rather than statistical tests.

Challenges around collecting data on the emotional readiness of parents engaging in mediation made it difficult to draw conclusions about the use of the Emotional Adaptation to Relationship Dissolution Assessment (EARDA) as a tool for triaging parents to appropriate support during separation.

Smaller sample sizes also meant that we could not comment reliably on the effectiveness of the app in supporting different groups of users, for example, in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation. Given the challenging nature of accessing support, it is vital to understand how underrepresented groups access services and what works best in supporting them.

The app reached parents far beyond our original target of parents early in the process of separating. While this has been encouraging in terms of endorsing the wide appeal of the app, it leaves further questions about differences between parents at different stages and what levels of support each may require. Again, being able to extend the evaluation would have been beneficial in regard to these limitations.

Summary and future research

The positive impact of the app on parents' emotional readiness and cooperative co-parenting, although tentative in terms of reaching statistical significance due to the small sample sizes, highlights its potential to support parents throughout the process of separation. Developing parents' relational skills and helping them to feel more emotionally

ready to engage in the separation process could have a number of benefits. It could mean that parents would be able to engage more productively with the process and services available to them – whether that be children’s services, mediation or court – or to reach agreement without recourse to external help. It could also help to address some of the power imbalances between partners that were apparent in the interviews, by giving them both the emotional and relational resources they each need to engage.

Separating better’s ability to strengthen emotional readiness could help mitigate the negative impact that the low emotional readiness of one partner can have on progress towards finalising a separation. However, recruiting partners with low emotional readiness may be a challenge – the majority of our users had medium levels of emotional readiness – and it may even be more difficult to recruit both partners at the same time. This could be helped by using the app in supported settings, whether in groups or one-to-one, for example with family support workers, mediators or other practitioners. Taking a more hybrid approach to use of the app may also increase take-up.

The wide appeal of the app to parents at very different stages of separation and divorce highlights the value in developing marketing and referral mechanisms to maximise *Separating better’s* reach and impact. Other mechanisms for increasing take-up could include signposting from places where parents frequent or turn to for help, such as schools, employee assistance schemes, and public health services. Engaging with these services could run alongside targeted marketing campaigns across different social media platforms. Further research is needed to better understand how and where to reach parents thinking about, or in the early stages of, separation as these made up a smaller number of users.

Users were keen to see additional content and functionality in the app such as direct messaging, a shared co-parenting calendar, a parents’ forum, and more information about navigating the legal process. They also hoped to see new content, such as new videos, uploaded regularly. This would serve to maintain engagement as well as reach new users. Another consideration which would facilitate supported use of *Separating better* by practitioners is to offer a web-based version. Such an approach would make it easier for practitioners to, say, work through the parenting plan with both parents, or to watch the videos in a group setting. This could also create the opportunity to develop income streams to support the app, for example, by licensing the resource to service providers. Sustainability may also be helped by exploring a two-tier offer, with a free basic version complemented by a subscription service which provides access to live webinars, personalised support, and so forth.

Future research

Our initial findings from the *Separating better* project are promising, and reviewing our findings and limitations we have identified gaps in the knowledge base that would benefit from future research.

Explore the impact of dyadic emotional readiness on the experience of separation

To better understand the dyadic nature of emotional readiness, future research consisting of longitudinal dyadic studies would shed light on the impact of each member of a separating couple’s emotional readiness on the journey of separation.

Understand more about how emotional readiness impacts engagement with separation support

Although we know that emotional readiness is a big factor in how parents navigate separation, we need to understand more about how emotional readiness impacts parents' engagement with support to navigate their separation, whether that is self-guided or supported (eg mediation, court) and to test an effective means of triaging parents to these resources.

Test the most effective pathways to reach parents in the early stages of separation as well as those already separated or divorced

We know from our findings that parents at all stages of their separation came to *Separating better* looking for help. To more effectively reach parents at all stages of separation, future research should engage with parents who are thinking of separation and in the early stages of separation to understand where they go for support and how best to reach them, then to test pathways that differentiate between reaching parents at different stages of separation.

Explore whether early, tentative changes are sustained

To understand the longer-term impact of *Separating better* and its aims regarding our Theory of Change, longitudinal follow-up research is needed to assess whether any of the changes reported are sustained. Further research that replicates our findings using larger sample sizes would also be of benefit to better understand if any of the descriptive changes we saw are statistically significant.

Develop and test a supported model of delivering *Separating better*

To better understand the impact of how parents engage with resources based on their level of need, future research would benefit from developing and testing a supported delivery model of *Separating better* and comparing this to parents using the app in a self-guided manner.

Understand what works best for different groups of separating parents

There is an urgent need to better understand what works best for supporting separating parents across the spectrum. Future research should explore the needs of different groups of separating parents (eg stages of separation, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity) and how best to support them.

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the limitations and the need for caution in interpreting the results, the findings from this ambitious test and learn project are extremely encouraging. *Separating better* has successfully reached parents across the spectrum of separation. It appears to have had a beneficial impact on these wide-ranging users. By strengthening parents' capacity to co-parent cooperatively, manage conflict more effectively, and become more emotionally ready to engage with the task of separating, the app has given parents the best chance of mitigating the negative outcomes of separation on their children and themselves. Given the opportunity to continue to develop and test *Separating better* we would hope to demonstrate its effectiveness more definitively and find ways to embed it more securely into the ecosystem of support for parents, including as part of the suite of support available to parents to help them engage more effectively in mediation and in the family

courts. This would furnish the opportunity to test out a wider range of mechanisms by which to share the resource such as in a hybrid supported model, and to address some of the unanswered questions that remain about, for example, what works for which groups, the role of dyadic emotional readiness, and how to reach the population of parents who can most benefit from it.

Recommendations

- Develop the content and functionality of *Separating better* in line with user feedback.
- Develop and trial a supported delivery model of *Separating better* and compare this to parents using the app in a self-guided manner. This should include examination of outcomes for parents at different stages of separation and different demographic groups.
- Conduct further research with parents who are thinking of separation and in the early stages of separation to understand where they go for support and how best to reach them.
- Explore options for income generation to ensure the sustainability of the resource.



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