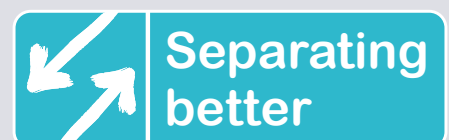# oneplusone

An evaluation of *Separating better*

Supported by the Department for Work and Pensions Reducing Parental Conflict Challenge Fund 2

Evaluation led by:
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Separating better

Contents

Content warnings
Sexual assault, emotional abuse, suicide ideation, intimate partner violence, gaslighting

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.

1. Introduction

Background

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. These impacts range from emotional and behavioural problems through to a detrimental impact on health, attainment and current and future relationships (eg Harold et al., 2016; Reynolds & Houlston, 2014). Based on 2019-2020 data, that means approximately one in eight children (12%) living in two-parent households are likely to experience the negative impacts of potentially harmful levels of parental conflict (Understanding Society data, as cited in DWP, 2024a).

As of April 2023, it is estimated that there were 2.4 million separated families in Great Britain and 3.8 million children in those separated families (DWP, 2024a). When relationships break down, as in the case of the estimated 125,000 couples who separate each year (Williams, 2019) conflict can become heightened and entrenched as parents struggle to reach agreement on co-parenting and financial arrangements. Data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) suggests this is likely to be the case for approximately half of children in separated families, in particular those who are living in families where there is infrequent contact with a non-resident parent and difficulty sustaining effective child maintenance arrangements. Both of these characteristics are key indicators of a conflicted co-parenting relationship (DWP, 2024b).

Helping parents to establish and maintain constructive relationships (whether together or apart) for the sake of the children has been a priority for successive departments and agencies for over 30 years. In the mid-1990s the Lord Chancellor's Department recognised the central importance of the couple relationship through a programme of funding to develop the evidence base around what works to support couple relationships and the provision of core funding to organisations involved in couple services. Over subsequent years, funding has been made available by the Department for Education, the Home Office, and the Ministry of Justice to develop resources, training and interventions targeting different groups of parents and different life stages, such as new parents, separated families, blended families, and prisoners' families.

As a national relationship support organisation OnePlusOne has been a key party in working with government throughout this time to develop evidence-based tools and resources to strengthen couple relationships. The project described in this evaluation is a natural development of OnePlusOne's 50-year programme of relationships science and innovation to inform the development of effective early intervention programmes. *Separating better*, which is the subject of this report, draws on:

- Insights from the development of hybrid learning vehicles such as our flagship *Brief Encounters* training programme for practitioners, and our practitioner training programme *How to Argue Better* (2014).
- Early provision of web-based information and support for parents such as OnePlusOne's Couple Connection and Parent Connection websites.
- Pioneering DBCIs such as *Getting it Right for Children* (2012, DfE grant funded), an online programme to help separating parents ensure children don't get caught in the middle of conflict.

- Developing an online Co-parent hub for Cafcass services users where they can access specialist content designed to support face-to-face services and interventions

- Insights from online learning programmes such as our *Staying Connected with Loved Ones* programme for prisoners funded by the National Offender Management Service (2016).

- Pilot work enabling local authorities to develop and integrate couple support into their parents and families offer through the Local Family Offer pilot (2015, Department for Work and Pensions), the precursor to the Reducing Parental Conflict initiative described below.

Most recently, OnePlusOne has expanded and tested its repertoire of interventions as part of the DWP's 'Reducing Parental Conflict' (RPC) initiative. Launched in 2017 the RPC programme aims to equip organisations that deliver family services with the tools they need to reduce conflict between parents or carers (whether they are together or separated) to improve outcomes for children.

As part of the RPC programme the DWP launched the Challenge Fund in 2019 to build an evidence base around what works to reduce parental conflict, including what works in the digital space, and improve outcomes for children. The learning from phase one provided strong foundations for phase two. Through projects such as OnePlusOne and Good Things Foundation's *See it Differently* (Hirst & Reynolds, 2020) and OnePlusOne's *Me, You and Baby Too* digital intervention (Hirst et al., 2020), phase one demonstrated that parents actively seek support and information in the digital space, that online delivery helps to increase parental reach and engagement, and that digital interventions can successfully create behaviour change.

Looking at future sustainability of support for parents, phase two of the programme includes a focus on self-guided approaches that can be accessed independently of local authority services, align with central government services or alleviate pressures on them. One such area of pressure is the needs of separating parents and the impact on the family court system and child maintenance service of a failure to resolve differences and agree co-parenting plans. This is the target of *Separating better*.

Rationale

As any number of recent reports and studies have shown (eg House of Lords, 2024; Family Solutions Group, 2020; Williams, 2019), the existing landscape of support for separating parents is failing to provide many parents with the help they need to reach agreement without the assistance of the courts. Despite measures to increase take-up of mediation before court application – such as the pilot introduction of vouchers for mediation and compulsory Mediation, Information and Assessment Meetings (MIAMs) for all applicants who wish to make a private family law court application (MoJ, 2023) – fewer couples are making use of mediation.

Increasing numbers of parents are turning to the family courts to make child arrangements, with estimates that at least 20% of cases that could be resolved by parents are wrongly ending up in court (McFarlane, 2022). Backlogs in the courts mean that parents are waiting increasingly longer for their cases to be heard. For example, in 2015 the average was 26 weeks compared with 45 weeks in 2022 (MOJ, 2023). The adversarial nature of the process further escalates conflict and puts children at risk of

poor outcomes. Delays are equally damaging, leaving child maintenance, custody and housing arrangements unresolved for many months. Not only are these delays emotionally costly for families, they are also costly to the state and increase the likelihood of parents requiring help from public services such as housing, education, child mental health, and child maintenance. It is this widespread fallout for public services that makes what may seem a private event one of concern across government.

One reason for the falling take-up of mediation is the loss of the signposting role played by solicitors following the removal of legal aid for family court cases (Symonds et al., 2022). The Private Law Working Group Family Solutions sub-group (2020) concludes there is a void in appropriate support for separating families, including appropriate *"authoritative information, legal advice and emotional support"* (Symonds et al., 2022). As Symonds et al. (2022) found, emotional and relational resources are key to helping parents negotiate with their ex-partners. When parents found it hard to manage their distress, conflict and tension could become entrenched, making it more difficult to manage the separation. Central is the issue of emotional readiness, which is a critical factor in separating parents' successful engagement in dispute resolution (Barlow et al., 2017). When parents are not emotionally ready, they are less likely to progress to a healthy co-parenting relationship and more likely to become entrenched in unnecessary drawn-out legal battles with consequences for an already stretched family court system.

Commentators agree that parents need a 'safety net' of support. As increasing numbers of people are going online to access peer support groups, advice, and other resources (Caplan & Turner, 2007), the obvious first port of call for this safety net should be online. This is the conclusion of the Family Solutions Group, who 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's *Separating better* app seeks to fill this void.

About *Separating better*

The *Separating better* app is an innovative digital intervention designed by OnePlusOne to provide separating parents at risk of escalating or entrenched conflict the practical and emotional tools they need to navigate separation. It addresses the deficit in support for digital self-help tools that help parents to navigate the process of separation and settle practical arrangements such as childcare and child maintenance.

This document reports on a test and learn approach to the development and trial of the app and its effectiveness in helping parents to navigate the separation process without further escalation of conflict or recourse to the courts.

Report layout

The remainder of this report discusses the development and implementation of *Separating better* in chapter two. Chapter three describes the approach adopted to evaluate its impact before the remainder of the report outlines key findings of the evaluation in chapters five and six and concludes with a discussion bringing together essential learning and recommendations for next steps in the final chapter.

2. Project development and delivery

This section describes the approach to the development and delivery of *Separating better*.

Before any development work, we created a Theory of Change (Appendix A) to guide the project development and delivery, as well as the evaluation. This is 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.

Content development

The *Separating better* app consists of five core areas and was designed to provide separating parents with the practical and emotional support needed to navigate their separation.

- Advice and guidance articles provide practical guidance and support for parents around difficult conversations such as talking to children about separation as well as accessible information and advice around childcare arrangements, finances, law, and child maintenance support.

- The Work it out section comprises a DBCI with five Behaviour Modelling Training (BMT) videos to help separating parents communicate better, make childcare arrangements, and improve their co-parenting.

- A budget planner helps parents figure out their finances.

- A collaborative parenting plan provides a framework for parents to agree on co-parenting arrangements.

- The goal setting section helps parents decide on goals and monitor progress.
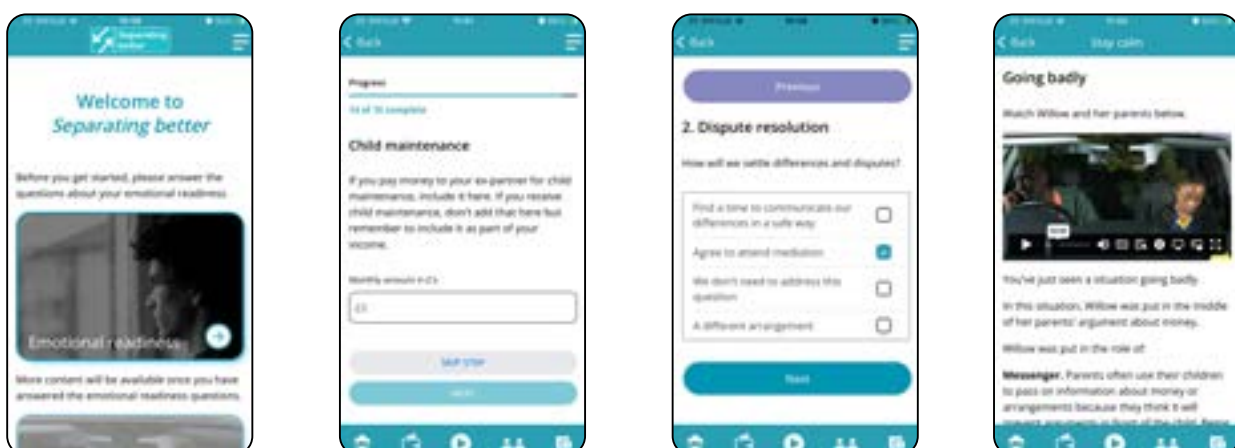
As well as the five core elements, the app consists of these additional features.

- Emotional readiness assessment to measure parents' readiness at the beginning of their journey and monitor it against their progress through the app, allowing us to assess the parameters for effective support.

- An AI chatbot to support parents using the app to access the right support.

- Tailored referral pathway through National Family Mediation (NFM) for users who need additional support.

- Safeguarding zone with established referral pathways to appropriate support for those who need it.

- Local referral to signpost users to additional professional support.
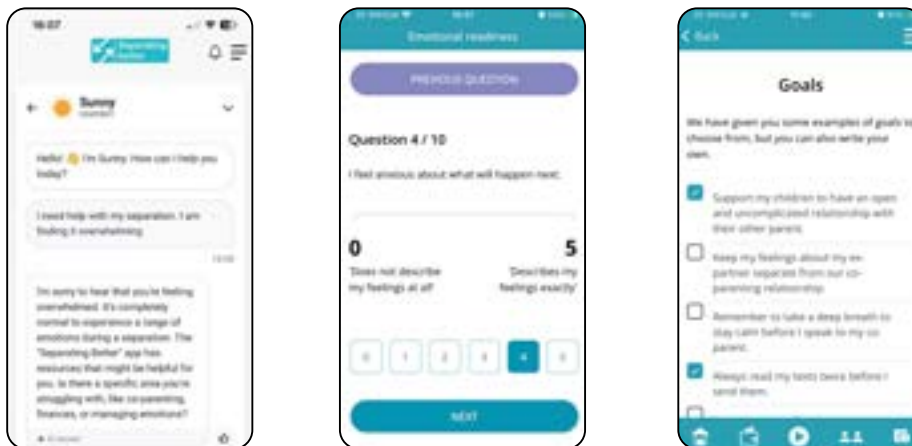
Theoretical underpinnings

Each element of the app was designed in line with relevant theoretical principles.

User experience

The entire app was designed in line with theories that explain best practice in user experience (UX) as outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1. KEY UX THEORIES

Theory	Key principles	Why it's important
Usability theories	**Learnability**. How easy it is for users to achieve their goals. **Efficiency**. How quickly users can complete tasks. **Memorability**. How easily users can relearn an app after a break. **Error tolerance**. Minimising user errors and providing clear recovery paths. **Satisfaction**. Creating a pleasant and rewarding experience.	These principles ensured that our app is functional and meets basic user needs. An app that isn't usable won't retain users.
Human-centred design	Design starts with understanding the needs, wants, and limitations of the end users.	Designing the app with our end user in mind and engaging them in co-creation sessions ensures the content within the app resonates with our target audience
Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988)	Human working memory has a limited capacity. Overloading it with too much information or complex navigation reduces effectiveness.	Simple interfaces, clear navigation, and intuitive designs reduce cognitive load and make apps easier to use. This is particularly important when balancing data collection with user engagement.
Gestalt principles (eg, Hamlyn, 1957).	Humans perceive objects not as individual elements but as complete patterns.	Helps users intuitively understand layouts, increasing engagement. Particularly important for *Separating better* because of the type and volume of information across different the sections of the app.
Emotional design (Norman, 2004)	**Visceral**. Aesthetic appeal (colours, typography, animations). **Behavioural**. Usability and functionality. **Reflective**. Users' emotional connection and perception of the app.	Emotions drive decision-making, brand loyalty, and user retention.
Interaction design and feedback	Good design involves seamless interaction between the user and the app, with clear feedback (eg button states, loading indicators).	Feedback reassures users and builds trust in the app's responsiveness. This was particularly important in the onboarding journey and parenting plan. Giving the user feedback in the design helps to guide them through the process.
Behavioural economics (eg Tversky & Kahneman, 1992)	Small design changes can guide user behaviour (eg pre-filled forms, persuasive micro copy).	Encourages user actions like sign-ups or purchases without overwhelming them.

UX is essential for app building for the following reasons:

- **Improves user retention**. Apps that are intuitive and enjoyable keep users coming back. This was especially important with *Separating better* as it is information heavy and because some areas such as the Work it out videos and the goal-setting functionality require continued engagement for the user to start seeing progress.

- **Minimises development costs**. Identifying user needs early reduces costly rework after launch.

- **Drives business goals**. A well-designed UX leads to higher conversions and user satisfaction.

- **Facilitates accessibility**. Inclusive design ensures apps cater to diverse user groups, increasing reach and engagement.

- **Creates competitive advantage**. In crowded app markets, superior UX distinguishes your app from competitors.

By embedding UX theory into our app design, we were able to create a product that is not only functional but also resonates with our users on a practical and emotional level.

Behaviour change

As well as UX theories, the app was designed with behaviour change theories in mind. Behaviour change theories help us understand how to change behaviours. The behaviour change objectives of *Separating better* were to raise parents' awareness of the impact of conflict during separation, of conflict resolution skills, rooted in relational capability theory, and to help develop those skills by learning how to decrease negative interactions and increase positive ones (Figure 1). Furthermore, by empowering parents through awareness raising and skill development, we aimed to improve parents' emotional readiness to navigate the separation process.

For *Separating better*, we adopted the COM-B model of digital behaviour change (Michie et al., 2011) which recognises that behaviour comprises:

I. **Capability** – Knowledge, skills, stamina.

II. **Opportunity** – Time, resources, prompts, support.

III. **Motivation** – Motives, desires, impulses.

Digital behaviour change interventions employ digital technologies to encourage and support behaviour change. They can include techniques such as, nudges, gamification, and goal setting.

Behaviour Modelling Training (BMT)

BMT uses visual demonstrations of behaviours to help learners acquire and practice these new skills, based on the different steps that support behaviour change:

- **Attentional** – Observing ideal behaviours from least difficult to most difficult.

- **Retentional** – Memorising the new skills.

- **Reproduction** – Practicing the observed skills.

- **Motivational** – Positive reinforcements for demonstrating the newly learned skill.

Relational capability

Relational capability is about the ability and opportunity to engage in effective social interaction to the benefit of both partners. Doing so requires individuals to draw on a range of relationship skills, including those that enable people to manage difference and conflict constructively (Figure 1). The Work it out videos show parents using different relational capability skills, building on the skills learnt in a hierarchical manner. Relational capability skills were also threaded through the Advice and guidance articles.

FIGURE 1. EXAMPLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Self-regulation
(eg breathing, self-talk, steadying yourself)

Active listening
(eg "So, what you're saying is…", checking in, nodding, showing
you've understood, kind gestures)

Seeing it differently
(eg seeing it from the child's point of view, thinking of
reasons for the other person's behaviour and understanding it,
not making assumptions about the other person)

Stepping into the other person's shoes
(empathy, eg reflecting on how the other person may feel, how would I
feel in that situation, what would I do in that situation)

Speaking for myself
(eg "When x happens, I feel…", "It would help me if you could do x…")

Negotiate
(eg offering something positive that you can do, simple, concise and clear requests)

Work it out
(eg recognising when there is an actual or potential rupture and
using the skills above to repair the interaction)

App development process

There were two support elements to the app – practical support and emotional support. Practical support was wound through the advice and guidance articles, the budget planner, and the parenting plan. Emotional support was offered through the Work it out and advice and guidance sections.

App development

The first step in developing the *Separating better* app was to conduct three literature reviews covering parents' and children's experiences of divorce and separation, separating parents' use of technology, and where separating parents go for support in the UK. This allowed us to understand the evidence around separating parents' experiences and what support they may need from a self-guided digital resource, alongside how they may use it.

To supplement this, and in line with the theoretical principles discussed above, we carried out co-creation sessions with parents from our target audience to understand more about their experiences of separation. We carried out one in-person session at a contact centre

in the Isle of Wight, and four remote sessions using Microsoft Teams to explore: the common issues that separating parents experience, the services and resources they use, how they access those resources and anything that is missing, things they argue with their ex-partner about, media they use to communicate with each other, the language they use, and how they negotiate conflict.

In designing the app, we worked closely with the developer, using the guiding principles of the theoretical frameworks discussed above to create wireframes, focusing on behaviour change theory to design the flow and function of the app. As our evaluation of *Separating better* was exploratory, we did not force user behaviour through the app. After signing up to the app and completing demographics and an emotional readiness assessment, users were free to access any part of the app in any order.

During the live phase we added a chatbot to the app, as discussed below.

Because the app was intended to be a self-guided and early intervention resource, it was not suitable for families where there was or is domestic abuse. We therefore worked alongside a domestic abuse expert to develop a domestic abuse filter (Appendix B) to highlight the differences between parental conflict and domestic abuse and provide a list of domestic abuse services for each county in England to signpost parents to. We also compiled a list of services for separating parents in each county in England, for parents requiring additional support beyond a self-guided app.

Work it out videos

The Work it out videos depict five scripted scenarios in which separated parent couples argue in front of their children. To reflect the different ways that parents communicate with each other, particularly in a post-Covid world, we showed parents communicating through voice notes, phone calls, and face-to-face. In line with BMT, each video depicted the argument escalating into destructive conflict. The scene was then repeated, but this time actors modelled positive conflict and communication skills (Table 2).

TABLE 2. *WORK IT OUT* STORYLINE AND SKILLS

Video title	Description	Conflict communication skills
Willow's family	A Black British separated parent couple in their early 40s co-parenting an 11-year-old daughter. Communicating by phone while dad is in the car with daughter. Conflict centres around disagreements about who is responsible for buying Willow's football boots.	Stay calm
Riley's family	A young White British separated couple co-parenting a 7-year-old son. Communicating through WhatsApp voice notes while Riley is in the room with mum. Conflict centres around dad taking Riley to work on his days with him and not spending quality time with him.	Stay calm See it differently
Freya's family	A middle-aged, separated parent couple, Chinese heritage mum and Indian heritage dad, co-parenting a 16-year-old daughter and pre-teen son (off screen). Communicating face-to-face with Freya in the room. Conflict centres around mum picking Freya up early from school because dad didn't answer his phone, and mum getting takeaway for dinner.	Stay calm See it differently Speak for myself
Isaac's family	A same-sex separated parent couple, Asian British mum and White British mum, co-parenting an 8-year-old son. Communicating over the phone both directly and through their son, who is in the room with one of his mums. Conflict centres around organising contact during Christmas holidays.	Stay calm See it differently Speak for myself Negotiate
Maya and Emi's family	A separated White British dad and Filipino mum co-parenting 13- and 10-year-old daughters. Communicating over their daughter's phone, with both Maya and Emi in the room with their dad. Conflict centres around dad being late taking Maya to a doctor's appointment and it having to be rescheduled.	Stay calm See it differently Speak for myself Negotiate Work it out

Advice and guidance

Through our co-creation sessions with parents and desk research we identified the core concerns that parents have during separation and developed a comprehensive advice and guidance section. This consisted of articles that explored and explained various aspects of separation, from the first steps that one may take when considering separation, to speaking to the children about separation, advice on mediation and family courts, financial issues around separation, and even navigating new partners. As part of our aim to provide parents with practical and emotional support, the advice and guidance section was not only practical and aimed at raising awareness of core issues parents may face when separating, but also written in such a way as to provide parents with emotional support and guidance on how to navigate this transitional period using relational capability skills.

Chatbot

During development we identified the need to support people across the spectrum of separation and to encourage parents' engagement with app. We reviewed our learnings from previous projects and the co-creation sessions we held as part of the development stage of *Separating better*. Through this we identified the following:

- The importance of some level of support in accessing self-guided resources – even if that is just a 'check in'. This is in line with behaviour change theory, which encourages the use of nudges and prompts as behaviour change techniques.

● Although our target audience was those either thinking of or in the early stages of separation it is not possible to control which parents make use of a self-guided resource, especially in view of the scarcity of support available to those parents with higher levels of need.

Based on these findings we looked at how we could support parents either through the app or signpost them to more appropriate resources (for example, if they were in an abusive relationship). We turned to the body of emerging evidence that chatbots can act as an effective means of supporting people in therapeutic relationships (eg Jabir et al., 2022; Martinengo et al., 2022). Although we did not intend for the chatbot to be used as a therapeutic tool, we wanted to be able to offer parents empathic and targeted support. We worked alongside an expert on using AI chatbots in therapeutic settings to 'train' a ChatGPT chatbot hosted by Watermelon to support parents in using *Separating better*, or signpost them out of the app when they required more support (see Appendix C for the instructions we gave the chatbot to achieve this).

Mediation

A core aspect of the project was to understand the level of support that works best for parents based on their emotional readiness. To investigate this, we worked with National Family Mediation (NFM) to develop a referral pathway from *Separating better* to NFM. The involved a *Separating better* to NFM pathway where we randomly selected parents who had signed up to the *Separating better* app and invited them via an email to take part in two paid-for MIAMs and one paid-for mediation session (or two sessions if one of them was child-inclusive). We trialled this approach for the first five months of the live phase of *Separating better* and found that parents did not engage with the offer as expected. We then modified the referral pathway so that parents who expressed interest in mediation through NFM were invited to sign up to *Separating better* before they took part in mediation, an approach that proved more successful.

Programme delivery

Pilot

Between 15 January and 17 March 2024, we carried out a targeted pilot in two local areas – Isle of Wight and Northumberland. *Separating better* was delivered through signposting by early help services in these local authorities alongside targeted marketing campaigns. This capitalised on OnePlusOne's established relationships with local authorities through the DWP-funded RPC pathways, as well as meeting parents where they often already go for support (ie local authority services).

Separating better was only available through download via a landing page hosted by OnePlusOne. We approached the pilot with this more supported approach to accessing *Separating better* so that we could monitor usage by parents who are referred through known services, are already accessing support, and are therefore likely to be more engaged. The local pilot study involved collecting a combination of data gathered from monitoring target audience use through UXCam, our analytics tool described below, and feedback from the project team and advisory board based on their experience testing the app to inform any changes to be made for the live phase.

UXCam

This was mostly gathered from watching screen recordings of app usage, which gave us firsthand information on how our target audience was interacting with *Separating better* and any issues they faced. We also set up a conversion funnel for the onboarding journey to help us determine its efficiency. This showed us drop-off rates at each point and allowed for us to drill down into these numbers and analyse the data to see where improvements could be made. This was then added to a Trello board so that it could be easily shared with our development agency.

Team test feedback

The team collated all their feedback into a shared spreadsheet broken down by pages of the app. This was then analysed and cross-referenced for duplication to help determine the severity of the issue so that they could be added to the Trello board and prioritised.

Findings

A total of 136 unique users registered accounts, with 35 of those users returning to the app at least twice during the pilot. The top five screens most engaged with are summarised in Table 3. The pages that most users engaged with were the introductory or advice pages. As *Separating better* is a new app to this audience, it may be that these descriptive pages were most visited as users began to familiarise themselves with what *Separating better* was about and what information was available in the app.

TABLE 3. TOP 5 MOST ENGAGED WITH SCREENS DURING THE PILOT PHASE

Page	No visits to page	No of unique users who visited page	Average user time spent on page
Goal setting intro page	85	17	5m 37s
Budget planner start page	100	22	5m 58s
Parenting plan intro page	166	25	5m 06s
Guidance page	243	21	4m 31s
Work it out (all five family videos combined)	352	23	21m 26s

During this time, we gathered feedback from practitioners in Isle of Wight and Northumberland, from OnePlusOne staff, and the *Separating better* advisory board. The *Separating better* advisory board consisted of a group of experts in UX, digital marketing, digital behaviour change, family dynamics and family law (academics and practitioners) and charity work (see Appendix J for a list of trustees). Based on this feedback we made improvements to the app from the pilot stage to the live stage. Most of these changes were grounded in usability of the app (eg making back buttons more prominent, making the text and colours more accessible, including more imagery). However, some of the changes were more substantial and added to users' overall experience and the usefulness of the app, including making the parenting plan a collaborative plan that users could invite their ex-partner to, a list of local support, a streamlined onboarding process to encourage engagement, and a goals section.

Live phase

From 18 March 2024, we commenced the live phase of *Separating better* marked by a national rollout of the app in Google Play Store and the App Store. For the launch of the live phase we developed a comprehensive marketing campaign targeting separating parents across England through Google Ads, Meta Ads, and podcast advertising. The ads were posted across social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, X), YouTube, and the podcasts outlined in Appendix D. We also delivered hard copy marketing materials (eg flyers, postcards, business cards) and social media packs to local authorities who requested them, and flyers with a QR code for traffic referrals at branches of PureGym in Manchester. Marketing content was a mixture of static images and video ads. We targeted separating parents specifically and throughout the span of the project targeted different groups (eg ads targeted specifically at men, women, diverse ethnic groups, same-sex couples).

Building on the approach from the pilot phase we contacted all local authorities in England with an offer of printed and digital promotional materials to advertise *Separating better* in their local area. We also began the rollout of the mediation referral pathway from *Separating better* to NFM for the first six months, and then from NFM to *Separating better* in the last three months.

Delivery challenges

Time taken to recruit parents to co-design sessions (particularly dads)

As we have found in previous projects it was difficult to recruit parents to in-person co-design sessions, particularly dads. There is still an element of social stigma attached to separation and divorce, and it can be difficult for people to feel comfortable discussing these issues. To overcome this, we worked closely with an academic who specialises in working with men affected by relationship breakdown to recruit dads, reached out to local authorities that we have existing relationships with, offered increased incentives, and moved to remote delivery of sessions.

Difficulty reaching people in early stages of separation – those who are seeking support are those who are further along in the journey

It also became apparent in these sessions that it is difficult to reach those who are in the early stages of separation, and those who self-selected to take part in these sessions were in much more entrenched situations than our target audience, and at a point of needing to 'just speak to someone' and feel heard. This allowed us to get a good understanding of what the landscape looked like for parents and to really target the live phase towards those in the early stages of separation.

App development

This was the first time that OnePlusOne has developed an app and collaborated with a development agency. There was a lot of learning about what was possible within timelines and budgets, and a great deal of revising and modifying the app in the early stages.

Summary of approach

Separating better was developed in line with our Theory of Change and grounded in UX, behaviour change, and relational capability theory. The app consists of five core areas to offer practical and emotional support for parents navigating the separation process. These include:

- A DBCI consisting of BMT videos showing common arguments between separating parents and relational capability skills to address these.

- A collaborative parenting plan.

- Goal setting function.

- A budget planner.

- Advice and guidance articles.

Separating better was rolled out first in a pilot phase across two local authorities in England, Isle of Wight and Northumberland, after which we made improvements to the app based on feedback collected during this time. We then commenced a nationwide live rollout across England, which included a marketing campaign and referral pathways through National Family Mediation, amongst other referral routes. We encountered the following delivery challenges – practicalities around first-time app development, reaching people in the early stages of separation, and the time taken to carry out the co-design sessions.

3. Evaluation approach

Monitoring and evaluation approach

The evaluation of *Separating better* used a mixed-methods approach collecting quantitative and qualitative data designed to evaluate whether *Separating better* was effective in addressing our Theory of Change (Appendix A).

Data collection

Data was collected across both the pilot and live phases using the same methods, as described below.

Analytics

Analytics were collected using UXCam, a mobile analytics platform that records user interactions to help teams understand how users experience an app through the following mechanisms.

- **Session replay**. Records all user interactions, including visited screens, engagement time, and gestures. This feature allows users to visualise the user experience, identify usability issues, and discover why certain features aren't being used.

- **Heatmaps**. Visualises where users interact most with the app.

- **Real-time data collection and analysis**. Provides immediate insights and reactions to user behaviour.

- **AI-generated reports**. Creates reports for remote usability tests.

- **Session commenting**. Allows users to tag other team members and make notes of usability issues and time events.

- **Advanced filters**. Allows users to segment session recordings to understand distinctive mobile events like crashes, angry taps, and UI freezes.

UXCam records every session by default, starting when the user launches the app and stopping when the user sends it to the background. There are no limitations in terms of session duration.

The data we collected was based around the following key metrics: conversion rate, general use of the app, and engagement.

Conversion rate
Conversion rate refers to the percentage of users who completed signup from downloading the app. We implemented funnels to track user interactions at every step. This allowed us to identify any significant drop-off points, providing valuable insights into areas that needed improvement. By analysing this data, we were able to streamline the onboarding process, enhance the overall user experience, and ensure a smoother journey for our users.

General use of the app
Dashboards were created to monitor how users interacted with the app. This included the number of new users on the app each month, number of returning users, active users on each feature and the locations of our users by city.

Engagement

Engagement was primarily measured by metrics such as time spent in the app (overall and by session) and the number of returning users, ie those who revisited the app at least once. We created retention reports for all key app features tracking how users interacted with specific features and then the percentage that returned month on month following their initial interaction.

Questionnaires

We placed questionnaires to collect demographic and outcome data at onboarding and in the Work it out section (APPENDIX E).

Onboarding

Before creating an account with *Separating better*, parents were presented with an information and consent sheet, outlining the evaluation of the app and the use of their data (APPENDIX F). Demographics were collected at onboarding as well as the Emotional Adaptation to Relationship Dissolution Assessment (EARDA; Millings et al., 2020) to measure emotional readiness. For users to progress into the app proper, they needed to complete the EARDA. Users were sent a follow-up EARDA request two weeks after signup and the EARDA was also placed in the burger menu for users to complete ad hoc and monitor their own emotional readiness progress.

In app 'Work it out' pre- and post-questionnaires

We placed three impact questionnaires before the Work it out section to measure parents' baseline conflict, communication, and co-parenting cooperation scores. We used standardised measures for measuring conflict and co-parenting and included one question for each survey relevant to their co-parenting relationship (Table 4). The communication questionnaire was developed for the *Separating better* evaluation. Initially, we repeated these surveys two weeks after parents completed the final video in the Work it out section. However, as part of the monitoring of this test and learn project, we reviewed analytics data and identified that there was drop-off at the beginning of the Work it out section after the third video, and that average retention for parents coming back to the app was seven days.

So that we could balance data collection with parent engagement, modified data collection and staggered the pre-test surveys to one survey before each of the first three videos, to reduce survey fatigue. To capitalise on retention rates, we prompted users to complete the post-test surveys three days after completing the third Work it out video section. This resulted in a much-improved completion rate for the pre- and post-test surveys.

TABLE 4. ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR WORK IT OUT PRE- AND POST-QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaire	Additional question
Brief Acrimony Scale-8 (BACS-8; Rahimullah et al., 2020)	Overall, do your children feel that you get on?
Quality of coparenting communication Scale (QCCS; Ahrons, 1981)	How often have you shared positive information with each other about what is happening in your children's lives?

Follow-up feedback surveys

To collect further data about users' experience of using the app along with any ongoing impact of using the app we invited all parents who consented for us to contact them at onboarding to complete follow-up feedback surveys (APPENDIX G).

We also sent follow-up surveys to all parents who attended mediation with NFM through our mediation referral pathway to measure their post-mediation emotional readiness (EARDA) and co-parenting cooperation (QCCS), alongside single item measures of conflict (*How would you rate the impact of conflict between you and your ex-partner on your life?*) and communication (*How would you rate your communication with your ex-partner?*). A £10 Amazon voucher was offered to the first 75 parents who completed these surveys as an incentive for participating.

Mediator surveys

Mediators completed surveys following completion of both parents' MIAMs to report on how ready they felt each parent was to engage with mediation and the core issues that they were prepared to discuss.

Interviews

We carried out 22 semi-structured interviews with parents that had used *Separating better* (see Appendix H for topic guide and Appendix I for characteristics of participants). Parents were chosen using random selection from those who had consented for us to contact them for interview as part of the evaluation of *Separating better*. All interviews were carried out by a member of the OnePlusOne research team on either Microsoft Teams or by phone and recorded for transcription.

Before starting the interviews, an information and consent form was sent to participants so that they could give informed consent to take part. A semi-structured approach was chosen so that it was possible to explore common experiences across users as well as their unique experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and participants were offered a £50 Amazon voucher as incentive for their participation.

Data analysis

Data from the questionnaires was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics (eg frequencies, mean comparisons, ANOVA) and qualitative data through framework analysis.

Ethical procedures

Ethical concerns were taken into consideration throughout the development of *Separating better* with development of an ethics risk register. Our main ethical concerns centred around ethical research practices, data protection, and safeguarding, including domestic abuse. We approached these ethical concerns in the following ways.

Ethical research practices

We followed OnePlusOne's research protocol in line with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct, Code of Human Research Ethics, and ethics guidelines for internet mediated research (British Psychological Society, 2021). The Code of Human Research Ethics was the core document that guided our ethical approach through its four guiding principles for psychological research:

- Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.
- Scientific integrity.
- Social responsibility.
- Maximising benefit and minimising harm.

Data protection

As *Separating better* is a digital resource it was vital that we considered the ethics of data protection and autonomy of our users. We developed a specific research privacy policy for *Separating better* based on the above BPS guiding documents along with the Data Protection Act 2018. As well as our research privacy policy, we developed the app to log users out when they closed it so that if their phone was accessed without their permission, it wouldn't be possible for anyone but the user to access their account. We also ensured that our chosen analytics tool complied with GDPR data protection and retention policies in the UK. While Google Analytics has an established reputation, we chose UXCam because its policies align closely with UK regulations. Additionally, UXCam specialises in app-specific data collection, making it a more tailored and compliant choice for our needs.

Safeguarding

As *Separating better* is a self-guided intervention, we carefully considered the risk of users who are in a domestic abuse situation accessing the app without appropriate support. We worked with a domestic abuse expert to review the app content, develop a domestic abuse filter and compile a list of domestic abuse support services for each local authority in England, so that users signing up to the app could ensure it was appropriate for them and be signposted to more appropriate resources if it was not.

Evaluation limitations

Delays in app development resulted in less time for data collection

As mentioned in the development and delivery section, there was a great deal of learning during the project as to what was possible in the timelines and budget of the project. 'Bugs' and the need to streamline the user journey meant that amendments to the app continued beyond the pilot stage. This left less time for data collection than originally designed for.

Balancing engagement with evaluation

Initially, all the questionnaires in the app were compulsory. However, we found that users were dropping off at the onboarding and Work it out sections at a much higher rate than we would expect. To overcome this, we made the questionnaires non-compulsory (apart from the EARDA) and staggered the Work it out questionnaires, as described above. This improved engagement, but also meant that we missed out on data we may have received if questionnaires had been completed, and baseline measures of co-parenting cooperation and communication.

Participant recruitment

Recruiting participants for the interviews, for NFM mediation, and to complete follow-up surveys was difficult. We offered £50 incentives for all interviews but found that response rates were still relatively low compared to the number of parents being emailed. This was the same for those parents who were offered free MIAM and mediation sessions – only two parents responded out of more than 175 being emailed. We found that offering a £10

Amazon voucher was effective in incentivising parents to complete the short feedback surveys, but this would have become impractical on a larger scale. As is the case with applied research, intrinsic motivation is key to users engaging with evaluation and it is likely that this target audience are already overwhelmed with the amount of information that they are being presented with and tasks they must complete.

Limitations in types of data

Although we collected a variety of types of data to evaluate *Separating better*, on reflection it would have been beneficial to collect more dyadic data to really understand the impact of dyadic emotional readiness. However, in the instance that we attempted to collect ex-partner data (in the mediation post-questionnaires) we had a 0% response rate. This ties into the difficulty with real world research and how to reach already strained groups.

Summary of approach

To ensure that we had a complete picture of parents' use of *Separating better* and to address our Theory of Change, we collected data using a mixed methods approach, collecting qualitative and quantitative data at different time points.

As seen in Figure 2., we collected quantitative data from the moment users signed up to the app through analytics, the onboarding demographics questionnaires and a measure of emotional readiness (EARDA) through to the questionnaires placed before and after the Work it out videos, and the follow up feedback surveys that were emailed to parents. Qualitative data was collected through the semi-structured interviews carried out with a sample of 22 parents.

FIGURE 2. DATA COLLECTED FOR SEPARATING BETTER

When collected	Type of data	Source
When users interact with ads	Marketing data	Google Ads, Meta ads
Throughout app use	Analytics data	UXCam
Onboarding	Demographics	In-app onboarding questionnaire
Onboarding Two-week follow up	Emotional readiness	EARDA (Millings et al., 2020)
Before watching Work it out section Three days after completing Work it out section	Coparenting cooperation Parental conflict Communication	QCCS (Ahrons, 1981) BACS-8 (Rahimullah et al., 2020) Communication (designed for study)
One month after signing up to the app	Feedback on app	Typeform survey link shared with parents
Following final mediation session	Feedback on mediation	Typeform survey link shared with parents
Following second MIAM session	Mediator feedback on parents readiness	Typeform survey emailed to mediators
Invited three months after signup	Qualitative data	Semi-structured interviews with parents

The greatest limitation came from balancing the evaluation with user engagement, as is always an issue with DBCIs. The use of incentives supported us to recruit parents, but scaling this up would be costly.

4. How does *Separating Better* fit into the landscape of information and support for parents?

Before outlining the app evaluation findings in the next chapter and what they tell us about the use and impact of *Separating better*, this chapter puts those findings in context by looking at where the app fits into the landscape of support for parents. As part of the evaluation, we interviewed 22 parents who had used the app and asked them about the challenges they faced in navigating their separation and divorce, their experience of finding the information and support they needed and their experiences of using the app. This chapter reports on the first two aspects of the interviews – the challenges they faced and their experiences of accessing information and support.

What challenges did users need help with?

Practical challenges

Finances

The challenge of dealing with the financial fallout of separation was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. In households where the ex-partner had previously taken responsibility for managing the finances participants described the challenges of learning how to manage all the different aspects of their finances on their own: *"I didn't have a clue about our finances or anything. He did everything … So I think working that bit out was just such a nightmare"* (Fran).

As in Fran's case, participants had to work out anything from how to set up their mobile phone contract to taking on a new mortgage: *"I didn't know how much it was for, I didn't know how much the mortgage was a month … I was like, 'What bank is it with?' I don't know, 'Do we have any savings?'"* (Fran)

Alongside the often overwhelming task of agreeing a financial settlement, participants also talked about the seemingly unending task of untangling their finances, which could include everything from changing the name of a pension beneficiary to informing the local authority of a change of occupants for council tax purposes.

There was also a more diffuse sense of anxiety about how the financial settlement would turn out. Interviewees such as Joanna, Mike, and Anita talked about the lack of financial disclosure on the part of ex-partners and the difficult situation that left them in, as Joanna explained:

"I know he owns more than he's told us. But he's self-employed and it's tricky. And you see it all the time people who are self-employed, they just don't declare all their earnings, cash in hand stuff. Again, CMS can't do anything about it … so there is a bit of bird in the hand, two in the bush scenario. Is it better to just agree at mediation, something that you can live with, even if it's not everything you might get? Or do you fight tooth and nail and drag the process out? And then risk that maybe you won't get any more?" (Joanna)

The complicated nature of financial situations was also a challenge for parents. In some cases, for example, participants felt that difficulties around agreeing contact arrangements were tied up with an ex-partner's expectation or intention around securing a favourable financial settlement. That was the case for George, who felt that his ex-partner was

trying to restrict contact in order to maximise her financial settlement. This could leave participants, such as George and Mel, feeling frustrated and stuck about how to proceed. On the other hand, interviewees such as Joanna or Anita felt that their ex-partners were exercising a form of financial abuse in their handling of the finances.

As the section on emotional challenges indicates, financial worries were a frequent source of stress. This was particularly so for those who found themselves struggling to make ends meet as a result of the separation – especially where they were still waiting for a financial settlement.

"Because I'm financially dependent on him and he doesn't give me enough money to pay the bills, I'm struggling now. So, I've had to claim council… I've had to claim free school meals for the kids. I've had to go from a senior job in the NHS on a decent salary to literally being a single mum on benefits feeling like I can't afford to put fuel in the car or put food on the table." (Joanna)

As in the case of Joanna and others, such as Jodie, some of the parents had given up work because the separation had left them without childcare. In Joanna's case, as her children had additional needs, she could not find appropriate care for them. Others had lost their jobs because of the impact of the separation on their mental health: *"I had a very high-profile job, which I lost because of the situation, and then I struggled to get work"* (Lukas). Other parents struggled to *"rub two pennies together"* (George) because of the strain of paying for two homes.

Parents who were not eligible for legal aid felt that they fell into something of a void regarding support. They were not high earners and were struggling to manage on their own. They found accessing legal advice financially out of their reach because of the high costs. This left some interviewees feeling *"vulnerable because these services cost a stupid amount of money … it's going to probably cost me about £15,000 at least in court proceedings, which I haven't got."* (Alice)

Finances were also a barrier for participants who needed to use communication apps, such as OurFamilyWizard, that were designed to facilitate communication between separating parents where there were safeguarding concerns or where communication had simply broken down. Participants had to pay for these, regardless of income. The costs were prohibitive for some participants including Jodie who had left her partner because of domestic abuse. The consequence was that her ex-partner used their eldest child as the messenger between her and her ex-partner because her ex refused to use a shared notebook or reply to emails: *"My twelve-year-old is the piggy in the middle, and it's not fair because his dad's always fighting with him because he's not passing messages across properly or he doesn't like how he's saying it … He shouldn't have to be passing messages back and forth anyway."* (Jodie)

Managing everything alone

The loss of the other parent was not only a financial adjustment but also a practical one. Parents who retained contact with their children found it challenging to manage all the tasks of daily life on their own while raising children as George described: *"That's what I found really hard is managing three kids on your own in a house, on your own, struggling financially. I mean, it's been pretty stressful, to be honest with you"* (George). Whereas partners may have previously shared some of the tasks around running the home, such as

putting out the bins or getting the shopping, parents found it challenging *"to then pick up everything"* and suddenly *"get into new routines of just daily life."* (Joanna)

Loss of childcare was an added burden which, as noted earlier, meant some parents had left employment while others tried to work out what they could put in place (Isabella). The absence of the other parent also meant parents were caring for children day and night. In the case of young children, such as Jodie, parents were trying to juggle, for example, collecting older children in the evening without disturbing younger siblings' bedtimes, or popping out to the supermarket without having to take all the children. Some experienced round-the-clock parenting as a huge strain: *"And it was like I was pulled from pillar to post to the point it pushed me to exhaustion, where I ended up going on to antidepressants and all sorts,"* *(Jodie)* which was made even worse by a sense of isolation. *"I would say it took me about three months, and it completely threw me off to a different person, whereas now I've accepted that I'm by myself and I just get on with it. But I think most parents need that support in that first couple of months where you're trying to adjust to the fact that it's you … and you literally have to take these three kids everywhere and your whole life is about them and that's it."* (Jodie)

Housing

Housing posed further challenges. Housing situations were often complicated and made more so in this transitional time before financial and other arrangements were settled. For example, some couples were still cohabiting following separation and felt unable to leave until finances were sorted out. Paul and his ex-partner were caught in the six-month waiting period before their no fault divorce was finalised which meant Paul could not afford to move out until they had sold the house. This made it difficult to *"move on with things"* and deal with the emotional aspects of the separation. It also made co-parenting more difficult because the children found it confusing and did not fully understand when it was each parent's allocated time with them or would play up: *"They'll always want the other person because they know that the other person is in the house"* (Paul).

Continuing to cohabit often exacerbated conflict between parents. As Anita observed, *"I think the separation would have been easier if we were living in separate places and we can argue quite easily. Personally, I feel I can't have a conversation without it turning into an argument"* (Anita). This was often triggered by differences in their approach to parenting and rapidly escalated into screaming and shouting.

For Isabella, the situation was "horrendous" as her partner had formed a new relationship and *"then the weekends, he was just going to the other person's house with me knowing"* (Isabella). Isabella ended up giving her ex-partner an ultimatum when he took his new partner on holiday which triggered a distressing row: *"I was shouting in front of my daughter. I didn't hit him. There wasn't any assault, but I was just very angry. I told him just to take everything and leave the house. He called the police on me saying that he I had no rights of kicking him out of the house … and that was all in front of my daughter."* (Isabella)

Participants described the difficulties of trying to understand their rights around housing and finance and expressed frustration about the challenges of getting those rights enforced, particularly before the separation had been formally settled. Joanna felt that her ex-partner was exercising a form of financial abuse by continually reducing the financial support he gave, which meant she could no longer afford to manage day to day or insure the house: *"Essentially, if I don't do what he wants me to do, then the money goes down. It's pretty much … a form of financial abuse."* (Joanna)

Joanna's ex-partner also felt he had the right to access the house whenever he wished because he was paying for it. *"Because I'm living in our joint family home, but he actually still owns the majority of the property, he's very much, 'It's my house, I'll come in if I want to come in'"* (Joanna). She felt she had no support in stopping this, which was experienced as emotional abuse. Although she felt threatened, Joanna could not prove her ex-partner posed a physical risk to her, so she felt she had no recourse to the law.

Isabella was in a similar position, compounded by the fact that her ex-partner's mother continued to live in the house. Like others, she felt trapped. She was dependent on the mother for childcare and on an additional financial contribution that her ex-partner was making towards the rent because his mother remained there. *"So financially, having her there helps me financially, but it doesn't help me emotionally. You know what I mean? It doesn't help. I'm not really able to … I'm trying to move on and all of that, but still having that attachment there is very hard."* (Isabella)

Being able to afford separate housing while still paying for the family home meant parents could struggle to find affordable housing, as was the case for George: *"For the first couple of months, I lived on a sofa at my mum's and when my kids came to stay over [they were] in sleeping bags on the living room floor"* (George). Jodie had initially been dependent on her extended family to pay for her and the children to stay at a hotel when she first left her abusive partner. Sara was living in an Airbnb after leaving her partner while he remained in the family home.

Emotional challenges

Fear was a common theme in the interviews. Parents (Joanna, Charlene, Jodie, Sara) were fearful that they would not be able to cope on their own, as Charlene articulated:

"The first couple of months, I was a mess. I mean, I could barely hold a conversation without bursting into tears. I think it was just that fear of… I don't know, I knew what my life was like. I was comfortable. I had my own space. And then when that was all taken away from me … I was like, oh, my God, where am I going to live? How am I going to afford to do this? And it was more than the practical side of it. And it was the, oh, oh my God, how am I going to cope without him? It was like, What on earth are we going to do? I didn't want him to ever take the kids anywhere. I was like, don't leave me on my own. It was just that fear." (Charlene)

The uncertainty left interviewees feeling vulnerable and insecure and not knowing how to move forward or what to do. Feelings of overwhelm (Paul) and stress were also common. In two cases the stress was so great that interviewees could no longer manage at work and were obliged to leave their jobs, as Mike explained: *"It was just impossible … my work life didn't match my whole life anymore. And I think I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you now because I'd be in the ground because it was just too much … the cut and thrust of the job that I was used to and you live in a high stress environment, you get on with it. But then being thrown into this world and every day there was an argument, every day there was countless texts and I just, you know, so anyway, so that was that."* (Mike)

Like Mike, others described how the separation process took a significant toll on their mental health (eg Isabella, Mike, Anita, Paul). At times, it was challenging *"to get through the days and keep on going"* (Paul) and some, like Isabella, had contemplated suicide: *"It was just like, this is just too much"* (Isabella). Participants, like Anita, dealt with overwhelming emotions, such as anxiety and depression: *"I was really, really unwell, like*

with anxiety and depression and physical burnout" (Anita). They talked about the shock and trauma of the breakup. Seeing no end to the conflict took a huge toll on those caught up in high conflict breakups and left some participants feeling desperate.

"I even got the point earlier this year when I said to my dad … I'm just going to say keep the kids because I can't put them through this anymore. I can't have them constantly seeing this bickering. So when you've got a problem anywhere in life, you've got to take away what's causing the problem." (Mike)

Alongside these struggles parents talked about learning to manage their grief (Anita) and the passage of time that this required, as well as the loss of the secure base or emotional anchor (Paul) that the ex-partner had provided. Participants were often feeling emotionally drained by what they were going through (Jodie), and needed time to heal and grieve (Fran). *"You're grieving for your family and your husband and wife and you're doing that whilst trying to be reasonable"* (Anita). This task was made even more difficult by the need to manage their feelings in front of the children and, in some cases, manage the distress of the child.

At the other end of the spectrum parents grappled with anger and an acute sense of injustice where they felt mistreated by an ex-partner or let down by the legal or social care system, as the in case of Joanna who felt that her partner was trying to manipulate her through limiting financial payments. The worry of about how she would manage financially was a *"mental stress in the back of your mind the whole time"* (Joanna) and she felt deep anger at how she was being treated. This in turn made her less cooperative in the process of finalising the separation.

Participants experienced feelings of powerlessness and anger at what they believed to be unfair abuse of the legal system when ex-partners filed for non-molestation orders based on what they described as false allegations of abuse or harassment.

As we know from other studies (eg Allen & Hawkins, 2017), separation is not a linear process. Participants further along the separation process talked about how they would find themselves feeling traumatised by memories when they hit difficult times with their co-parent, as in Mel's case:

"There's a lot of PTSD from my side. And I find it really, really challenging because the moment this happens, my mind goes back to all those court battles and having to represent myself and fight and do all the things that you've got to do. And it just makes you sick. Even thinking about it." (Mel)

It was also clear from interviews with parents who had been separated for a period of years that established, and largely amicable, patterns of communication could be disrupted and conflict re-ignited as a result of changes in co-parenting arrangements or new pressure arising as the children grew up and they refused to cooperate with agreed arrangements.

"I think that I thought because we'd communicated so well in the past, I say communicate so well… we was able to actually talk in the past and discuss things. And then I felt like that road, it just hit a brick wall and that was the end of the road. It was just really odd. I felt blindsided. It just come out of nowhere I don't think people expect that. I think in the early days, you expect there to be the arguments and the figuring it out. It's still very raw. But three years down, you don't expect that to happen. I certainly didn't think that three years down, we'd be needing to go to mediation." (Stephanie)

Although the app targeted parents early in the separation process, these parents' experiences highlight the need for support at all stages as parents negotiate change.

Co-parenting

In many cases, the separation had upset the nature of parents' relationships with their children. These parents talked about the pain of feeling rejected by their children at their reluctance or refusal to visit. In some cases, interviewees believed that their ex-partner was engaged in parental alienation and was actively poisoning the child's mind against them. In other cases, parents described how they sought to create a home with consistent rules and boundaries around, for example bedtimes, phone use or food, compared with what they perceived to be lax, permissive or harmful parenting by the co-parent (Siddiq, Isabella, George). This resulted in children being reluctant to spend time with them. This was both emotionally challenging and source of parent-child conflict and conflict between parents: *"Like the times when she's, 'Oh, I don't want to be with you mummy' because I'm the one imposing the rules. I'm the one waking her up, getting her to school. So I'm the boring one. I'm the stressful one … So then I get the blame for, from her, all the negative things."* (Isabella)

Not being able to influence what was happening in the co-parent's home was also a source of frustration and grief, particularly where there were concerns that the child's needs were not being met. This could be tied up with worries about co-parents' new partners and the influence they had on the parenting and the child's wellbeing.

There was also acute grief amongst some parents at not being able to see their children where contact was in dispute or at spending so much less time with them (Paul, Alice, Mel) as Mel described when contact arrangements broke down:

"When you're not seeing your children, it's the worst thing that can happen. And even when we were going through the courts before, we had regular weekly contact. So that absence is, it just gets tougher and tougher and tougher, and that builds a lot of resentment and anxiety. And then it's hard to stay positive when you're feeling so negative about the other person." (Mel)

Even where parents had reached amicable contact arrangements, there was still grief at being less involved in their children's lives: *"But now I don't see my daughter as much, and we have a 50/50 co-parenting agreement, and I find that difficult"* (Alice). In addition, parents commonly spoke of the guilt they felt about the impact of the separation on their children. That was, in part, because parents felt guilty and upset about what they saw as their failure to manage their feelings and the fallout on the children: *"I think for me … because you're so overwhelmed that you're literally doing it all, you feel like you're taking it out on your kids where you're a bit snappy and then you go to bed and you're angry at yourself being snappy or you've got no patience and you're just drained. Then you do nothing but beat yourself up*

for hours" (Jodie). There was also a sense of guilt *"that our kids haven't got that family unit"* (Charlene) and how this could play into the many emotional challenges they experienced.

Interrelatedness of the emotional and practical difficulties

It was common for parents such as Fran, Anita, Joanna and Paul to talk about the difficulties around sorting out the practical aspects of the separation while managing often overwhelming and complex feelings. The interrelated or interconnectedness of practical demands and emotional pain was a common theme which links to the role of emotional readiness in navigating the separation process. It was apparent in some cases that emotional readiness was important to being able to move on, but dealing with some of the emotional preparedness was made more complicated by practical challenges, such as continuing to share the family home, as Paul explained: *"I couldn't process the emotional side until some of the practical side had been done. Well, then I couldn't process some of the practical side without acknowledging the emotional side."* (Paul)

Participants recognised the complexity of their feelings and how they might journey in and out of readiness as things changed or the relationship with their ex-partner deteriorated and the impact this had on navigating the separation. As Mel, explained: *"It's hard to stay positive when you're feeling so negative about the other person. So then negotiating those practical bits becomes harder, but that probably entrenches you more to feeling worse, emotion."* (Mel)

Crucially, participants described situations where they had reached a point of acceptance and a readiness to finalise arrangements with their co-parent, but their ex-partner had not. This caused a roadblock in the process of moving towards effective co-parenting arrangements. Mike exemplified this situation:

"The thing for me was I've gone from A to Z. I've gone through the anger, I've gone through the resentment, I've gone through the upset, I've gone through the despair, I've gone through the grieving. More importantly, I've gone through the acceptance. Now I don't think, I think people like Vikki, well she's probably had the anger, the resentment, maybe the grief. But she hasn't gone through the acceptance stage. Until she accepts what she's done, not in the sense of retribution, but accepts what she's done and that has now changed our situation, we're never going to get on." (Mike)

As things progressed parents such as Paul managed to weave between the emotional and practical challenges and unravel some of that complexity:

"So it's kind of a catch-22 of like… like looking for a house. I had to process 'I'm splitting up, I'm separating' … This will be my house, not our house type of thing. So that type of the emotional spectrum I had to work out. But then once that had been done and I could look at it in a logical fashion, it was actually, I can, I can handle this now … And then once that had been done, I could move on to the next bits of it. It's like the emotional side of. Right. I need to tell the girls that I'm doing this so they could get involved." (Paul)

As the next chapter illustrates, getting the right support in the form of the *Separating better* app was often a key part of reaching the point of feeling emotionally ready to navigate the practicalities of separation.

Navigating the landscape of information and support

Interviews with parents provide a picture of how unprepared they felt as they began to engage in the process of separating and their experiences of the formal support available to them. Most interviewees felt completely uninformed about how to proceed with the separation:

"I didn't have a clue really." (Alice)

"I had absolutely had no idea." (George)

"It's just sprung upon you. So I literally went through it all blind." (Jodie)

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't know, I didn't have any tools in my toolbox. You know, I didn't. There's nothing. There's nothing there." (Anita)

As the previous section illustrated, this sense of helplessness left participants feeling fearful, vulnerable and overwhelmed. Most subsequently struggled to find the information and help they needed and if they did manage to piece it all together it took them a long time: *"So I'd say it's probably taken me a year after separating to really feel like I've got my head into what do I need for mediation, what's the process, the legal process, what are my rights, all those things. It just takes time because you're not informed at the start."* (Joanna)

The next section describes the main obstacles participants faced in accessing the support and information they needed.

Obstacles to accessing information and support

Hard to find
Participants described how difficult it was to find information about separation and divorce *"because it is all in different areas"* (Paul). Information is dotted around the internet on different official and independent websites. Google searches often produced an overwhelming amount of information that respondents *"had to wade through"* (Fran) and which could feel *"like a black hole."* (Charlene)

Interviewees felt that finding what they needed was completely dependent on their own capabilities. Even those well placed to find what they needed, such as Fran who worked in a family support role and who had friends who had been divorced, found it difficult: *"I still had to look for stuff a lot of the time. I had to wade through information a bit too much, whereas actually when I looked on the app, I was like, Oh, my God, this is so [helpful]."* (Fran)

Those interviewees that had found their way through the process were mindful that not everyone necessarily has the capacity to do so because *"so much depends on your ability to find the information you need, write letters etc. – challenging for people who don't have those skills to be able to help themselves"* (Alice).

Hard to access
Even where participants found what they needed in terms of support they faced obstacles in accessing it. One obstacle was cost. Those on moderate incomes were not eligible for legal aid or other forms of support but struggled to afford to get legal advice or access mediation.

"I was trapped, I didn't qualify for any legal aid. I'd already paid hundreds of pounds for a 20-minute call with solicitor … and I felt no other service, even mental health services, signposted me to other services, which didn't really help. It was like, well, we can't help you with this. You need legal advice. You need to speak to a solicitor. And then I'm stuck with that because I'm a working professional and I'm not on benefits. But my outgoings are still higher, if that makes sense. So I don't have the money for any legal stuff." (Alice)

While earning thresholds for support were seen as unrealistically low, thresholds for accessing other kinds of support, such as social care, were seen as unreasonably high. Siddiq's worries about the welfare of his children with his ex-partner were not deemed to be of sufficient concern to warrant intervention: *"Every time I was trying to reach out to them, they would just like, bat it off. Doesn't reach the threshold for intervention."* (Siddiq)

Others described the frustration and distress of never seeming to fall within the very narrow criteria of particular charities or other third sector services, as was the case for Jodie who had left her violent partner with the help of her child's school.

"It was, 'Oh, we can't help you with this. We can't help you with that.' It almost felt like you'd have doors closed in your face all the time. For some charities, you've got to fit under certain areas. You've got to fit certain criteria before they help. And then, yeah, I think we're very far behind in helping people before they leave and helping them to leave." (Jodie)

Passed around from service to service
A common theme was a feeling of frustration and, in some cases, desperation at being passed on from one service to the next and never getting the support participants were searching for. Or, as Jodie put it *"having doors closed in your face all the time."* In some cases, when participants managed to speak to someone, as Sara experienced, they felt they were being subjected to a 'tick-box' approach. Having already spoken to Cafcass and children's services it was, *"Oh, maybe Gingerbread, so I phone Gingerbread. And then I ended up speaking to about 12 different companies, even Citizens Advice Bureau. And they were absolutely shocking. They were the same. Going through a checklist and it's, 'You're not listening, I'm saying to you'… But don't, like, go to the tick box for me … it's disrespectful. I'm in a stress mode."* (Sara)

Lack of support in the 'grey areas'
A number of participants, such as Joanna, Anita, Sara, described experiencing financial or emotional abuse before or during the separation process. However, they felt that there was nowhere to turn for help because it did not reach the kind of threshold that might trigger the intervention of the police or social care.

"Like, there's no grey. It's all either black or white. Like, you either have it or you don't. You either need to phone and get the police involved or you don't. Like, there's just no grey. There's no, like, real support for, like, the softer type. But that's equally as damaging." (Sara)

The nebulous nature of the abuse also left these participants uncertain about what impact it may be having on their children and the implications for contact arrangements. Sara, in particular, sought advice on the issue but was passed from one service to the next as organisations did not given the kind of advice she needed.

Biased against men

Men in the sample were particularly aware of how difficult it was to access help in what felt like a sector geared towards supporting women, both in terms of the legal system and the network of support services. Paul felt that little informal support was available to him as friends and acquaintances had gathered around his ex-partner and at the same time there were no formal sources of support: *"There's nothing 100% there for men out there because it's, it's still that stigma of separations. It's always been. It's the woman side that needs the [support], feels like they need more help and men just kind of grin and bear it and get on with it type of thing."* (Paul)

Participants such as Martin, George and Siddiq felt that their ex-partners were engaging in parental alienation and they were struggling to secure contact arrangements: *"The whole system seems to be geared towards, which I'm sure is 99% of the case, the guy disappears with somebody else, he doesn't pay any money or whatever, the woman's left to pay their own way … and I guess that's the stereotypical case. But then my case appears to be the 1% that isn't like that …"* (George)

What support and information did participants find helpful?

Online and digital support

Despite the challenges of finding what they needed online, some participants had found useful sources of information and guidance. Instagram- or Facebook-based services were helpful to some. These included:

- *'The Legal Queen'* on Instagram who held live sessions and provided *"little soundbites about what to look for."* (Mike)

- The *'Divorced Dads'* platform on Instagram provided similarly bite-sized information for fathers going through divorce and separation, such as 'Five ways you can continue to show up for your kids' or 'Five ways to find yourself after divorce.' *"I travel by train quite a lot for work. So I'm sitting there and I'm just. It just pops up. You think, oh, that's good. Because it's just bite sized."* (Mike)

- *'Divorce without Lawyers'* hosted on Facebook and operated as a subscription service. *"But that's run by a lawyer, and she does a lot of webinars and support and stuff, more about the practical side of the divorce, so [not] on the emotional wellbeing side of it. But that covers a lot of things about the practicalities of your finances and how you apply for a divorce and all that stuff, more legal side of things. So I tend to go there quite a lot for advice and support."* (Joanna)

- Facebook was also seen as a helpful place to go to find forums that brought together people facing similar situations. For example, Fran found out about needing a financial order before finalising her divorce through a divorce forum. Lukas had joined a Facebook group for men going through divorce.

Participants spoke favourably about the HMRC website as they had found all the information they needed around the tax implications of divorce. Others had found the information on the gov.uk website about the court process clear and easy to follow, as Stephanie explained: *"It will tell you about the MIAMs, and it tells you about the process. It's very clear. It's very clear of what you need to do first. And so I just followed each step from when it said you need to do this initially and then blah, blah, blah, blah"* (Stephanie). However, others, such as Paul had not found legal information in one place, rather *"it's all in different areas"* (Paul), which made it challenging to piece it together.

Public and third sector services

Other sources of help included schools, children's services and third sector organisations. A few parents were positive about the information and support they received from Gingerbread. Ten parents had engaged in counselling or therapy. In some cases they had accessed help through their GP surgery, although others had accessed private provision. Most found this kind of support deeply helpful in dealing with their experiences and the emotional impact of the separation.

Not surprisingly, family, friends and colleagues were an important source of practical and emotional support as well as a useful source of information where they had previously been through separation or divorce. But not everyone had others they could turn to, such as Sara, who did not have any family in the UK. The lack of appropriate formal support alongside the absence of informal help left her desperate to have someone *"to just, like, talk me through this. I'm new to this. I don't have family and support … There's no one that I could really, really talk to. And I did find that whole process so, so frustrating."* (Sara)

Navigating the legal system

Interviewees were keen to avoid going to court. Despite that, some had ended up in court (eg Mel, Anita, Rachel). Reasons for going included: a sense of feeling unfairly treated by the co-parent; an ex-partner who would not engage in the process of sorting out the separation; or being taken to court by an ex-partner. *"So all he's done from day one is threaten court, threaten this, threaten that, threaten the other. I'm just in a very confused, distressed state. So he's taken me to court for everything, which I've got no idea why"* (Anita). Another interviewee wanted to feel that the process had been formally agreed.

Views on the legal system were largely negative. A common theme was the unmanageable cost associated with going to court: *"So expensive. Money that we don't really have"* (Joanna). For the most part, solicitors were seen as primarily interested in making money: *"I felt like the advice I got from the solicitor was very much about making the solicitor money and not about me."* (Alice)

Participants also cited poor value for money: *"So I spent probably eight months paying the solicitor to argue with her for me and … all the solicitor really did was reword, not even reword. She basically took what I had written and sent it in a letter with a letter head. So spent a fortune doing that."* (George)

George ended up settling out of court, for less than he believed he should have received, because it was not until a week before he was due to go to court that the solicitor explained that the case would cost £10,000. Participants such as Anita were left feeling intensely vulnerable because they could not afford to get the advice they needed to defend themselves against a former partner who was taking them to court, and they were not eligible for legal aid.

There was an awareness that going to court would only fuel conflict and animosity: *"a longer term enemy than for life"* (Mel), with an uncertain outcome: *"all those costs with possibly not the outcome that you think you deserve"* (Mel). Those who had been through highly conflicted legal battles described the process as *"horrendous"* (Amy) and traumatic. Participants also voiced concerns about the reliability of a process that involved judges, who knew so little about a child, making decisions based on a *"four-page statement about what we think is best for H"* (Anita) written by each co-parent.

Having gone through the no fault divorce process, Fran raised some concerns about the unforeseen consequences associated with it. She ended up footing the bill for the divorce because that was the only way to ensure that her ex-partner did not finalise the bill before the financial order had been agreed: *"There was an option to share some of the cost, but it meant then he could finalise the divorce as well … because he wouldn't agree the financial consent. I was like, I need him to agree that before I hit the yes divorce button to send it through"* (Fran).

Fran had found the process challenging as she could find no way to share the costs: *"It always ends up seeming to cost one person a lot more. I got legal advice. My ex never got any. He never had a solicitor. I paid for all of the thing … I don't know if I did it badly and I didn't put it through right. But I felt like there was just no way to navigate. You just end up paying out for everything … I wish that it was more simple to access some of this information."* (Fran)

Participants were surprised by the mandatory length of time they had to wait before they could apply for a conditional order. Participants who had gone down this route were frustrated at the impact of the wait on their ability to move on and, for example, sell the family home. In some cases participants felt stuck in a limbo continuing to cohabit until the divorce was finalised. Even with the 20-week wait aside, interviewees were aware of the backlog in the courts and how long it might take to have the case heard. For Mel, this was a motivation to try and work things out with his ex-partner in order to *"get our son happy to enjoy contact again"* (Mel). Another motivation to stay out of court was the recognition that a court order *"has really only a shelf life of a few years"* (Amy) and that, as things change, parents are likely to find themselves in and out of court *"just as a child gets older and things change."* (Alice)

The wider system of family law and children's services were seen as vulnerable to manipulation and, in many ways, biased against men where they genuinely seek fair and sustainable contact arrangements. *"I think the system is designed to help women and I think it is. Absolutely. In my case, it's left me in a position where I almost can't defend myself"* (George). Siddiq and Mike felt that their ex-partners, or their ex-partner's new partners, had unjustifiably applied for non-molestation orders and were engaged in parental alienation.

"I think the whole non-molestation route is, it's absolutely got to be there. But it's abused, absolutely abused. I mean if, if it had, even wrong day, wrong judge, if she got an interim order, I would have lost my job straight away." (Mike)

There was a tremendous feeling of powerlessness and anger amongst these men, who felt profoundly let down. Siddiq believed his partner had fabricated a rape allegation against him in order to prevent him being in contact with the children: *"And the police won't even question me about this … She knows what she can get away with, she knows she can make an application of the allegation and now she's using the kids to manipulate the system and now I can't, now I don't even feel like I can ever get back in touch"* (Siddiq). Siddiq was contemplating withdrawing from his children's lives until they were older because he felt he could not cope with the situation any longer. Mike had had similar thoughts, as described earlier and George continued to persevere because he wanted to be able to show his children, when they were old enough to understand, that he had done everything within his power to stay connected and to protect them from the impact of what he saw as the damaging care of his ex-partner.

A few positive points were raised. Stephanie and her ex-partner had been required by the judge to go to mediation, which had previously broken down because her ex-partner had refused to engage. Second time around, mediation had been a success for them and Stephanie attributed this, in part to the intervention of the judge: *"I was happy with that because it felt like [my ex-partner] was then put in a position where he couldn't just back out for his own choice and he had to follow through with this."* (Stephanie)

Mel found that, despite the trauma of the court process, a level of impartiality was brought into the conflict which meant that issue was seen *"through the children's eyes"* and the court decided what is right. Others had found their solicitors helpful. For example, Charlene's solicitor had suggested she seek mediation as a means of limiting costs and Anita felt *"supported in the fact they do everything for you."*

Benefits and challenges of mediation

Key reasons for attending mediation were to avoid the cost of going to court and avoiding *"having massive public fights"* (Sara), to sort out finances in a facilitated conversation and to try and reach agreement about shared contact when a previous arrangement had broken down. One participant sought mediation with the hope of coming to an interim financial arrangement that *"says actually it is reasonable for you to do this at the moment"* (Joanna) and which gave her some financial protection until she was able to sell the house and reduce her outgoings.

Participants were mixed about their experiences of mediation. A number had found the experience helpful and constructive. They came away with disputes resolved, or clear action plans about what needed doing or changes that they could make to facilitate co-parenting. Joanna found it gave the children a chance to articulate what they wanted, *"which was good because it wasn't coming from me. It was coming through a mediator"* (Joanna).

Having that neutral, third person, helped to moderate how co-parents communicated because *"you're aware that they're there and they're listening"* (Stephanie) and it meant requests for information and other actions that needed taking were addressed by the mediator. This meant, from Joanna's perspective, that it was not her having to seem confrontational or argumentative in raising particular issues. Where there were differences, the mediator's intervention meant *"you got no reason to get heated about anything."* (Charlene)

At the same time, the mediator ensured that there was sufficient space for past hurts to be recognised or how they might have felt for the ex-partner while keeping the session on track. This left participants feeling validated: *"That it's okay for you to feel like that"* (Stephanie). A couple of parents who found mediation to be positive suggested that more needs to be done to raise awareness of the option of mediation amongst separating parents.

Those who were less positive about mediation had partners who would not engage in the process, either refusing to go in the first place, or refusing to carry on after one or two sessions: *"I went to mediation. My ex-partner did not"* (George). A few participants had found the initial mediation session unhelpful, either because it was dominated by the other partner (Amy) or because they felt it was misleading about what the outcome might be in terms of 50/50 custody because the mediator did not have all the relevant information at

that point (Lukas). Partners also talked about their co-parent not being ready to engage *"to do that conversation"* (Fran) or partners not following through on promised changes. Finally, there was a view, amongst some, that people would not attend mediation because of shame, stigma or embarrassment and a feeling that mediation was scary, and it would be better to try and reach agreement on your own.

Although cost was an important motivator in seeking mediation it was still seen as potentially unaffordable by participants: *"Ultimately it is a premium. It's a luxury"* (Mel). Participants who had benefited from the voucher scheme were frustrated by how little it covered and by how confusing the rules were around what was funded, or if a session included a child or not. Although they were finding the sessions helpful a couple of participants were not sure if they would be able to continue once their funding ran out, *"so there's an appetite to continue, but finding £120 each to do it is challenging"* (Mel). Being funded through the app was seen as helpful. Encouragement to take up the offer of mediation and the vouchers, seen by some as *"little gifts"* (Stephanie), made them feel better in contrast to the ongoing stress and pressure they were experiencing.

Summary

Parents faced significant emotional and practical challenges as they navigated separation. They found it difficult to find and access help and information in overcoming these challenges. Although helpful for some, mediation was not a panacea. Obstacles included the cost and the willingness of both partners to engage. Experiences of the legal system were largely negative. Unmanageable cost, lengthy waits and too many solicitors keen on lining their own pockets were criticisms levelled at the legal system. Men felt that the system was tilted in favour of women and vulnerable to exploitation by women who used the protection it afforded to make false allegations of harassment and abuse.

5. How did parents engage with *Separating better* and what difference did it make to them?

This chapter synthesises four sources of data on parents' engagement with and experience of using *Separating better* – the analytics data, data from our in-app questionnaires, data from in-depth interviews with parents who had used the app and data from a follow-up survey of users. It describes how parents found their way to and engaged with the app as well as what difference using the app made to them.

How did parents find their way to *Separating better*?

Marketing data

Marketing data provides some insight into the most effective marketing routes for the app. Video ads offered one route. The most popular video ad was the full length *Separating better* teaser trailer, which reached 597,166 people, achieving 31,938 clicks through to app stores, and 1,851 app downloads. Static ads were also important. During the live phase Google Ads targeted separated parents, and resulted in 61,800 click-throughs leading to 5,993 downloads. Meta Ads were not as successful with only 668 click-throughs and 115 installs. In terms of who we reached, the age group that had the most clicks were the 35-44-year-olds, however, the most conversions were the 25-34-year-old age group. This is in line with what we know about average ages of divorcing couples. Our Google Ad campaigns were more successful with women, both reaching and converting more successfully for women.

We also explored the search terms that parents used to find *Separating better*. Table 5 shows the top 10 search terms that resulted in the most click-throughs to either Google Play Store or the App Store and conversions. This shows that many of the users who came to *Separating better* ads through independent search terms were searching for divorce lawyers or free support for their separation. However, the most successful search term was simply 'parent separation'.

TABLE 5. SEARCH TERMS RESULTING IN THE MOST CONVERSIONS TO *SEPARATING BETTER*

Search term	Click through rate	Conversion rate
divorce lawyer	25.00%	133.33%
divorce family law lawyers	29.41%	80.00%
parent separation	100.00%	304.98%
parental control	6.90%	75.00%
divorce attorneys	50.00%	200.00%
www oneplusone org uk parent resources for england	42.86%	44.44%
co parenting app	2.78%	113.34%
how to co parent	16.67%	100.00%
family attorney nearby	33.33%	100.00%
free divorce uk	50.00%	100.00%

Podcast ads

The podcast campaign aimed to raise brand awareness and was based on topic-level targeting across the following topics.

- Parenting and Family
- Personal Development
- Mental Health
- Health and Wellness
- Positive Action

The campaign reached 2,882 unique listeners.

Insights from the in-app questionnaire data

During onboarding we asked parents, "How did you find *Separating better*?" and offered five multiple choice options for common referral routes as well as a free text option of 'other' in our in-app questionnaire. Data summarised in Table 6 shows that the majority of parents who responded to this question were referred to *Separating better* by a practitioner, followed by NFM referral. Of interest, a good number of users found the app through independent means such as internet search, social media and word of mouth. A smaller number of parents were referred through the Cafcass pathfinder courts (17) and their children's school (38). Examples of 'other' responses include Citizens Advice (1), contact centre (1), court (2), police (1), and solicitors (2).

TABLE 6. HOW PARENTS FOUND *SEPARATING BETTER*

Route to Separating better	Percentage of parents
Cafcass pathfinder courts	3%
Family hubs	1%
Children's centres	1%
Internet search	7%
Local authority	1%
Practitioner referral	20%
NFM referral	16%
School	6%
Social media	13%
Word of mouth	18%
Work	1%
Other	7%

Insights from the interview data

The in-app questionnaire findings are reflected in the routes by which interviewees came to the app. Routes included referral from NFM, referral from social care, or being made aware of the resource through work (two participants worked in family support roles). Two of the participants were alerted to the app through their children's schools and two found it online.

Participants' reasons for engaging with the app varied. As the previous section on the challenges participants faced shows, many were overwhelmed and desperate to access affordable, trustworthy information and advice. Legal advice was, on the whole, prohibitively expensive and there appeared to be no other options: *"I didn't know where else to turn … because I was trapped, I didn't qualify for any legal aid. I'd already paid hundreds of pounds for a 20-minute call with solicitor and it was the only option"* (Alice). Finding useful information on the internet was difficult and time-consuming and going down the legal route was seen as likely to lead to unmanageable expense with no real guarantee of securing the financial or contact arrangements that were hoped for.

Users also came to the app in search of specific information, as in the case of Jessica who sought guidance on how to handle the situation of her ex-partner introducing their children to his new partner early on in the breakup. Three of the male users who had been referred by social care felt they had no option but to complete it. That did not, however, prevent them from engaging fully with the app. As Mike concluded, *"I did it because I was ticking a box, but actually I thought, well, I'm spending two hours for the next four weeks of my life, I might as well, you know, make some effort. And it was really good."*

Who came to *Separating better*?

The *Separating better* target audience comprises parents in the earlier stages of separation who are unlikely to need recourse to the courts or to more intensive forms of support. This section looks at who used the app and the extent to which they reflected our expected target audience.

Analytics data shows that a total of 1,053 users signed up to *Separating better*. Of these, 835 completed the EARDA emotional readiness scale on signup. As can be seen in Table 7, the majority of users were White British (82%), female (72%), and identified as heterosexual (90%). Users of *Separating better* are a good representation of the general population in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation, with a slight overrepresentation of females. This is in line with evidence that suggests male non-resident parents are more likely to apply to family court to settle disputes, and female resident parents are therefore more likely to access alternative routes for dispute resolution.

In terms of stage of separation, 61% were separated/divorced, 25% were in the process of separating, and 13% were thinking of separating, with the remaining users being a mix of grandparents, stepparents, and users reviewing the app. Just over half of users were the resident parent, with the remaining users being near equal split between 50/50 shared custody and non-resident parents.

As one of our core goals was to provide early support to separating parents and reduce the number of people going through family courts, we asked users whether they had already accessed family court or mediation as part of their separation, and whether they intended

to. Two thirds of users (66%) had not accessed court or mediation services, 13% had accessed court, 13% had accessed mediation, and 8% had accessed both.

As of signing up to *Separating better*, 48% (105) of users who had accessed the courts were still involved in the family courts, 39% (85) of those who had accessed mediation were still engaged in mediation, and 13% (11) of those who had accessed both were still engaged with both the family courts and mediation. The average length of time that users had been in court was three months, but the range was 0-6 years. Of the 701 users who had not accessed court or mediation, only 80 (12%) intended to use the courts to settle their separation.

TABLE 7. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF *SEPARATING BETTER* USERS

User characteristic		Number of respondents
Gender		
Female	72.2%	736
Male	27.7%	282
Non-binary	0.1%	1
Relationship status		
Separated/divorced	61%	600
In the process of separating	25%	249
Thinking of separating	13%	130
Ethnicity		
White British	82%	766
White Other	6%	59
Black or Black British	3%	27
Asian or Asian Britis	4%	42
Mixed	4%	33
Other	1%	12
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	90%	895
Lesbian	1%	12
Bisexual	3%	33
Prefer not to say	5%	48
Pansexual	0.1%	1
Queer	0.2%	2
Noetisexual	0.1%	1
Children's primary residence		
Fifty fifty	25%	223
Mostly with user	55%	495
Mostly with ex-partner	20%	185
Age	Mean(SD) 39.21(7.96)	Range 18-76
Relationship length (years)	11.08(6.79)	0-38
Time since separation (years)	2.15(3.07)	0-20

We also looked at users' baseline emotional readiness, co-parenting and communication. As Table 8 illustrates, there was a significant difference in baseline emotional readiness and co-parenting communication between men and women, with women having significantly higher emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation than men. In an unexpected finding, 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 (Table 8). We would expect to see lower emotional readiness at the start of an individual's separation journey (Millings et al., 2020) and for emotional readiness to increase as time goes on. This may reflect what we have already learnt about the context in which people separate, the lack of available support, entrenchment, and the need for ongoing contact with one's ex-partner.

Preliminary analysis of the data also shows differences between ethnic groups in conflict and communication, with White users reporting higher baseline conflict scores than Black and Asian users, and higher communication scores than Black users (Table 8). Because of the difference in sample sizes between these cohorts it is not possible to comment on how reliable these findings are. However, it is worth investigating further. These findings may reflect cultural differences in how individuals view conflict (eg is conflict seen as loud, shouting, and with lots of communication or is conflict seen as quiet, stonewalling, and with little communication?). We found no reliable impact of sexual orientation, relationship length, or time since separation.

TABLE 8. BASELINE MEASURES FOR USERS BASED ON DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES

Demographic variable		EARDA	Co-parenting cooperation	Conflict	Communication
	Overall sample	27.19	31.36	2.21	3.10
Gender	Male	25.24	29.43	2.12	3.18
	Female	27.98	32.57	2.22	3.07
Relationship status	Thinking of separating	30.81	34.33	2.57	3.49
	In the process of separating	30.09	32.68	2.51	3.12
	Separated/divorced	25.57	30.87	2.03	3.01
Ethnicity	White	27.40	31.75	2.22	3.17
	Black	24.00	29.60	2.19	2.86
	Asian	26.20	26.50	1.58	2.14

Insights from the interview sample

As in the main user sample, participants were at different stages in the separation process. Table 9 in Appendix H summarises the situations and profiles of the 22 parents in the interview sample. Some, such as Sara, Emily, Jessica and Isabella were in the first few months of separation. At the other end of the spectrum, Mel, Amy, and Martin had been separated for seven years or more. Some were caught up in highly conflicted separations such as Siddiq, George and Mike. For example, Mike had been married for 16 years. His wife had left the relationship and moved in with someone else within the space of a few weeks. He believed he had been the subject of false allegations of harassment and abuse and was involved in a fraught divorce, made more acrimonious, he believed, by his wife's new partner. Mediation had failed as his ex-partner had refused to continue and they were

on the cusp of going to court. Other parents, particularly those in the early stages, were involved in fairly amicable separations and were slowly working their way through the tasks that needed to be done to achieve that.

In a couple of the cases where parents had been separated for quite some time (eg Stephanie, Mel, Amy), financial and contact arrangements had broken down as circumstances had changed. Parents required external support, in the form of mediation, to try and reach a new agreement.

Other parents were navigating their way through the ups and downs of finalising the separation. As the previous chapter illustrates, these were considerable and highlight the way in which users came to the app with a range of needs and an eagerness for help.

Did we reach our target audience?

Taken together the analytic and qualitative data shows that we reached parents at all different stages of separation, from those in the first few months to those a number of years down the line. They were equally diverse in terms of the nature of the separation and the degree of acrimony they involved. Although our target audience was those at the early stages of separation and lower levels of need, users were often lost in the quagmire of a confusing, fragmented and costly landscape of formal help and were eager to find cost effective and reliable help that they could easily access – ideally in one place. The app appeared to serve that purpose for many of its users.

How did users engage with the app?

This section explores how users engaged with the app including conversion, returning user and retention rates, engagement with the different components of the app, and what aspects of the app users liked or disliked.

What do the analytics data tell us?

Conversion rate

The conversion rate refers to the proportion of users who completed signup from downloading the app. Table 10 shows onboarding conversion rate information for users who signed up within the first session and within the first week. Evidence suggests that for a self-guided information app, such as *Separating better*, a good conversion rate is anywhere between 1-10% of all users or sessions, with between 2-5% being optimal. This is similar for online treatments for relationship support. For example, Rothman et al. (2019) found that completion rates for the *OurRelationship* programme were about 6% without any coaching.

As summarised in Table 10, our conversion rate during the live test phase was within the target range, sitting between 3% and 12%. Our audience appeared to convert more effectively when given additional time. Rather than converting during their first session, many users preferred to take their time and complete the conversion process over the course of a week.

TABLE 10. ONBOARDING CONVERSION RATES

	Onboarding conversion rate (first session)	Onboarding conversion rate information (within the first week)
Total sessions	9.81	n/a
Total users	n/a	3,500
Conversion rate	3.34%	12.03
Total conversions	328	421
Avg. time to conversion	4m 05s	2h 57m 35s

This insight highlights the importance of accommodating user decision-making patterns in our approach but also the potentially fragile relationship between app and user. For example, users may not have had time to answer all the questions at once or may have been interrupted by children or other responsibilities. This also highlights the importance of allowing users to pick up where they left off in the journey, so they do not get frustrated with having to repeat themselves. This is borne out by the interview data which highlighted the extent to which users dipped in and out of the app as and when they had the time or wanted to check out a particular issue.

Number of new and returning users

Figure 3 shows the number of new and returning users to the app per month. 'New user' refers to anyone who has opened the app. This could be their only action and they may have left straight after that. 'Returning user' refers to anyone who has returned to the app at least once within a month.

As Figure 3 shows, use of the app grew steadily in the first few months of the live phase. It tapered off slightly during the summer which was to be expected – demand for local authority services drops at that time and potential users are more likely to be away or managing the childcare demands of the school holidays. We saw a large spike in September which was in line with a big digital marketing push and schools returning after the holidays. This greater number of new users signing up was consistent from September to November.

FIGURE 3. NUMBER OF NEW AND RETURNING USERS PER MONTH
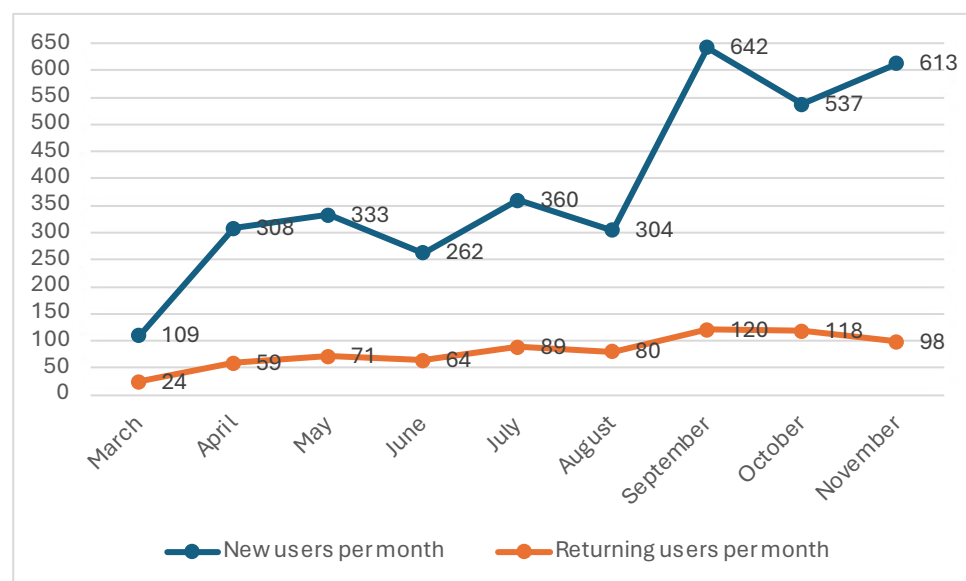
Although new user signups dipped during the summer months our returning users steadily grew, a pattern that continued until we stopped data collection on 30 November 2024. This suggests that we were reaching the right audience and providing enough value to users that they continued to return to the app.

Retention

Retention refers to the proportion of users coming back to the app and is a good indicator of whether we are reaching our target audience and how useful the app is to users. As seen in Figure 4, retention for users who signed up to the app and completed the EARDA sits at just under 75% within the first month of signup – meaning that 75% of users came back to the app at some point within the first month of signing up.

After that, retention was about a third of users between months one and two (28.88%), and at 22.82% between month two and three. This suggests that just under a quarter of users were still engaging with *Separating better* three months later. Of particular interest, although retention expectedly drops off each month, at six months post sign-up retention rates increased slightly from the previous month. On looking further into the data, it was clear that this pickup in retention rates for parents at six months post-signup was driven by parents coming back to the parenting plan, with retention for the parenting plan 9.43% at five months and 13.33% at six months.

FIGURE 4. RETENTION RATES FROM SIGN UP
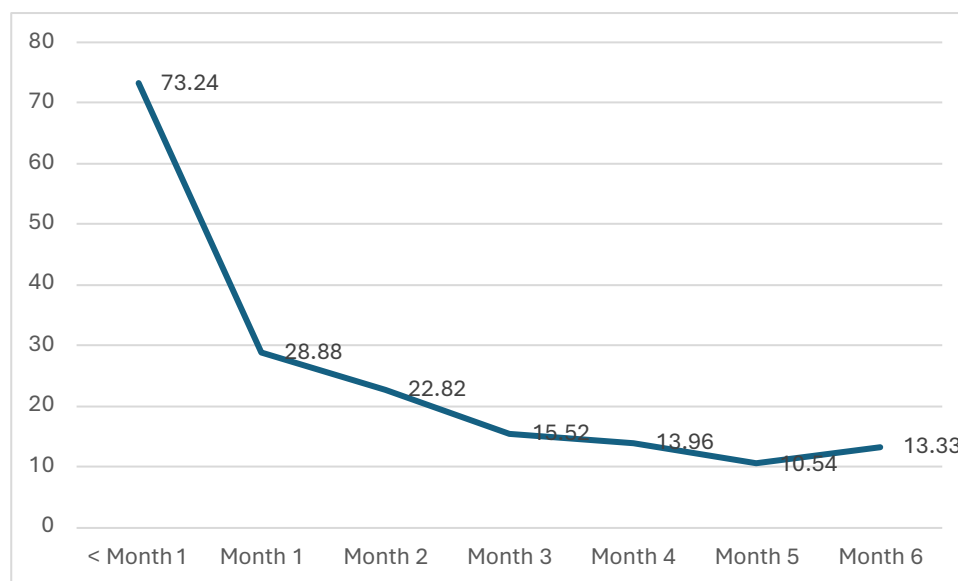
Insights from the interviews

The interviews provide further insight into the behaviours of our app users and what they liked about the resource. Reflecting the analytics data, interviewees valued the opportunity to dip in and out of the app and use it in short bursts. That related both to the busy nature of users' days and to the content of the app: *"It's not the easiest topic, so you can pick it up and put it down, come back to it and do it in snackable portions, which is really good"* (Mel). Like others managing children and a full-time job, Anita would look at the app in the evenings when she was *"sitting in the living room on the sofa with a phone"* (Anita) and the children were either in bed or happy occupying themselves. As Charlene described, *"When you have that head space,"* and, *"you're starting to think about something or after something has happened,"* you can drop in for five or ten minutes and, *"just have a little read through."* Having the app on their phone facilitated this dipping in and out process, although a couple of users would like to have been able to look at it online, for example when reviewing the parenting plan.

The app was seen as *"like your favourite book"* (Mel), *"guidance"* (Jessica), a *"comfort blanket"* (Charlene), and there when you needed to dip into it in *"easy bite-size pieces"* (Joanna). The self-guided nature of the app took away any pressure to do it all, or to do it in a certain way: *"You can do as much as you want"* (George). This was seen as particularly important in the context of the stressors and pressures associated with the separation.

Users found it helpful to have all the information in one place, particularly at the start where you can feel overwhelmed: *"Being able to have it all captured there in a way that your brain is able to absorb is super helpful"* (Mel). It also meant not having *"to go through Google and research stuff. You've got it all in one place and it just brings you back to reality a bit and makes you rethink things sometimes. Where you're not emotionally charged about it."* (Charlene)

Although some dipped in and out, other users went through the app once and chose not to return. This reflects the analytic data. Some felt that they obtained what they needed

the first time, others did not find it particularly helpful, and one user did not return because they had been required to complete the app by social care and felt no need to re-engage with it.

Design, navigation and content

The design and navigation of the app facilitated the different ways in which users engaged with it. They found it *"clear and simple"* (Joanna) and easy to navigate.

"I, honestly, I sound like I'm being paid to say it … I can't fault it in any way. It's presented really well. It's easy to navigate your way around. It's there when I need it. It's a touch of a button on my phone. Like I said, I don't have any plans to get rid of it or anything like that. It's been really useful." (Charlene)

As Stephanie explained, being able to easily navigate the app was important: *"You have to remember, those people that are using that [have] currently got a lot on their plate … They don't want to be getting annoyed with an app that they can't find their way around with. So I do love how simple it is."* (Stephanie)

How did parents engage with the different components of the app?

Top 5 most engaged with screens

The data in Table 11 summarises analytics for the top five pages viewed on the app. Two metrics are of interest here: number of unique visits to the screen, and average time spent on the screen. This does not include any of the login pages or homepage. It's clear from Table 11 that the pages that users engaged with the most are those that offer practical guidance at the beginning of their journeys – for example the longest average time spent for an article was the 'First steps' page in the Advice and guidance section, followed by 'Planning parenting time' (1m 16s) and 'Planning for holidays' (1m 13s).

The Parenting plan pages tended to be the ones with the longest time spent on them ranging from 1:03 minutes to 3:34 minutes. This is encouraging as it suggests that users are considering their responses before committing them to the parenting plan.

The Work it out pages may not be among the most visited, but they lead in average time spent per user which was 11:54 minutes for all five videos combined.

TABLE 11. TOP 5 MOST ENGAGED WITH PAGES

Page	No of visits to page	No of unique users who visited page	Average time spent on page
First steps	560	393	1m 21s
Budget planner start page	809	353	1m 24s
Parenting plan start page	2,650	313	59s
Two important skills	383	279	1m 07s
Parenting plan communication page	507	261	2m 38s
Work it out (all five videos combined)	569	153	11m 54s

We sent a follow-up feedback survey to parents who had used *Separating better* to assess how useful they found the app, what sections they engaged with, and any changes they had experienced as a result of using the app. A total of 55 parents responded to the survey (see Appendix G). Feedback was in line with the analytics data. This found that the Advice and guidance section was the most used (73%), followed by the parenting plan (47%). When asked how helpful they found each section, 91% found the Advice and guidance section helpful, 73% found the Work it out section helpful, and 69% found the parenting plan helpful. Overall, the majority of parents were satisfied that they found what they needed from the app (71%) and 98% of parents said they would recommend *Separating better* to others.

Top three pages with the highest percentage app quit rate
The three pages that saw the most users leave the app were the local support page (47.62% of 94 visits), the Work it out page (36.56% of 569 visits), and the Budget planner intro page (34.61% of 809 visits). These statistics are based on visits and not unique users, as discussed in more detail below. The nature of how users engaged with *Separating better* means it is likely users came back and forth to these pages, dipping in and out as they needed to review information. This is particularly likely with the main Budget planner page and the Work it out section, as these were some of the most visited pages. For those users accessing the local support page, it is reasonable to assume that they found the external support they were looking for and accessed it outside of the app, as intended.

Advice and guidance

In terms of the analytics data, the most popular section of the app was the Advice and guidance section, with 464 users saving articles from this section. Figure 5 shows the top ten articles that users engaged with. The two most popular articles were the first two articles in the Advice and guidance section, but the number of articles read does not then drop off in a linear fashion. Parents are accessing articles across the entire section regardless of where in the sequence of articles they are placed. This suggests that users are reading the articles that are most pertinent to their needs at the time. Specifically, it appears that parents are most concerned with communicating with their ex-partner, co-parenting, and finances.

FIGURE 5. TOP 10 ARTICLES READ BY NUMBER OF PARENTS

Legend:
- First steps
- Two important skills
- Keeping in touch
- Keeping communication open
- Planning parenting time
- Supporting children financially
- Telling the children
- How children might react
- Parenting style
- Planning holidays

Values shown: 460, 323, 260, 240, 160, 123, 143, 131, 147, 134
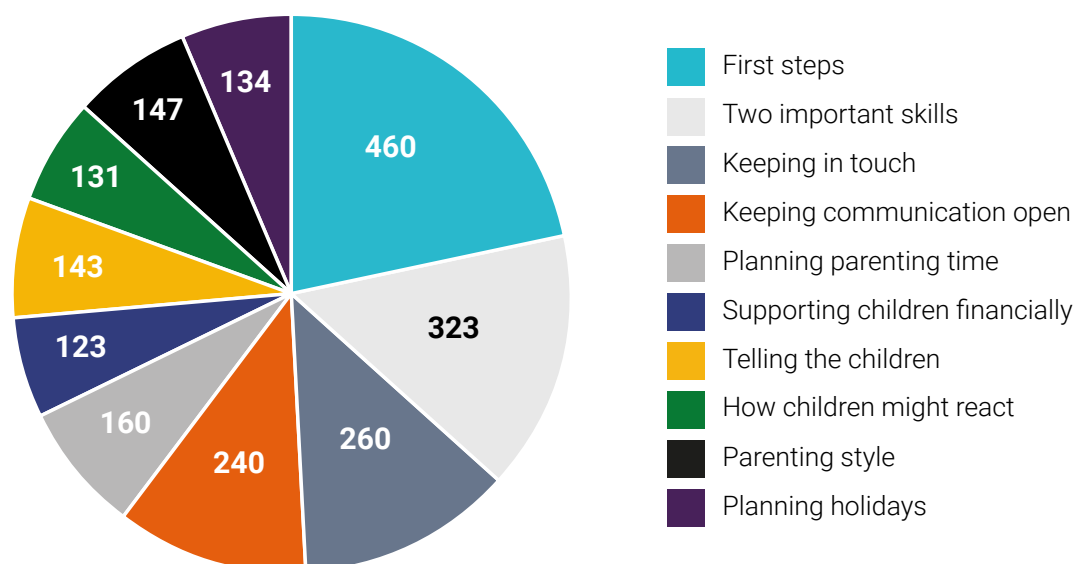
It is not the same parents accessing all articles. Our analysis of the data and analytics indicates that parents move around the app taking what they need from it. This is reflected in the interview data. Some parents go through the app in one go, but many parents dip in and out to access the emotional and practical support that is most useful to them at that time. This is exemplified by Paul, from the interview sample:

"I've been dipping in and out of it … I've not gone in a linear fashion as such … I went through chapter one that the information getting started, how to do it, then to the end with how to manage with the children, then back to the second bit with how to manage your own life, how to manage with the partner. It was just instead of it being 'Right, do it this way in kind of a linear order' … I've kind of bounced back and forth to it type of thing. So it's, whenever I needed something, it's been there to be able to look through the information that way." (Paul)

As noted earlier, the bite-size nature of the material made it easy to access and digest the content. *"And then the information, when you've gone in, it's bite size. It's kind of what I've liked about it… There are like six or seven points to each one and it's being able to go in and look at each point in my own time without having to search through everything in one go. It's easy to get to what I'm needing at that time"* (Paul). This facilitated the opportunity to *"dip your toes in"* (Jessica) which users valued when they wanted to spend a short time looking at a particular issue. Features such as 'hints and tips' and 'things to think about' helped users to engage in the content in a personal way by thinking about their own behaviour or how those issues applied to their circumstances.

In terms of specific content, interviewees were positive about the sections on how to talk to children about living arrangements and having difficult conversations, the focus on the family unit and children's role within that (Mike), as well as the content on dealing with your own strong emotions before engaging with the children (George).

The impartial nature of the information was another aspect users appreciated, as Charlene explained. She found that friends and family often told her what she wanted to hear whereas with the app, *"It's just completely impartial, black and white advice. You're like, actually, that makes sense. You have to take the emotion out of it."* (Charlene)

Work it out

Just over 100 parents accessed the Work it out section, with about a quarter of parents who watched the first Work it out video going on to complete the whole section. Around 12% of people who sign up go straight to the Work it out section once they complete the EARDA, but only 5% of those actually get to the videos after the surveys placed at the beginning of that section. Supporting our findings that users engage with different sections of the app as they need them, it seems that users tend to look around the app and check other bits out before going to the Work it out section. About half of users go to the Work it out section on the same day that they sign up but the average number of days is six days from signup.

For some interviewees the videos were *"the best bit of the app"* (Stephanie) because they reminded users to focus on the children and demonstrated how to achieve that through the roleplays. As Amanda explained, the videos *"showed not a good conversation and then the children as well were reflecting on that and then it went on to show maybe how it should be handled."* (Amanda)

Users found the videos easy to relate to and felt that they portrayed common scenarios. The length was appropriate and effective in conveying its point: *"The videos I've seen have all been short and sweet. So they've been able to … give the information out, but also in a way that's clear and concise"* (Paul). And interviewees talked about how the videos helped them to *"keep in mind how I'm speaking"* (Stephanie) or remember to take the child's perspective (Mike).

Parenting plan

When looking at the other core sections, 499 parents accessed the Parenting plan and 58 invited their co-parent to collaborate with them on this.

Interviewees' use of the parenting plan was varied, in part, because participants were at different stages of the separation journey. Some had already finalised contact arrangements while others believed their co-parent would not cooperate with the process in any way. Those who had used it held mixed views. It appeared to be most helpful to parents who were early in the separation process and ready to engage with the decisions that needed to be taken. Paul exemplifies this. He and his ex-partner had been through the questions a couple of times and valued the way in which it helped them to think about the future and address the practical issues that needed to be sorted out. As Paul explained, the plan helped them to recognise that they had the same goals for the children but were coming at it from different perspectives. The plan therefore helped them to focus on what mattered most and find points of agreement:

"We found using that questionnaire and other bits, other questions like it … We found it was easy. It showed us that we were on the right path. We were in the right direction … We both kind of saw exactly what we wanted to do and were looking at in similar ways." (Paul)

Other users saw the plan as more informal and manageable than, for example, the Cafcass plan – *"not so legalese or heavy"* (Jessica) – and relatable to aspects of everyday parenting. Users also found that the informal, flexible nature made it easy to tailor to their own needs: *"Oh, you can make it as little or as big as you want it to be. You don't have to be prescriptive into everything, but you could be prescriptive into everything if you wanted."* (Fran)

The structured approach was seen as helpful, and the co-parenting advice section was effective in prompting parents to consider aspects of co-parenting that they had not yet considered, such as handovers (Fran), or holidays and Christmases (Sara). For a couple of users, such as Alice who already had parenting plans in place, the tool was useful in reviewing the plan.

Although the plan is interactive, some users had hoped for a more interactive tool that facilitated better communication with an ex-partner, for example, enabling more discussion with the co-parent around areas of disagreement. One parent (Amy) felt that the layout of the plan made it appear that the partner responding to initial suggestions was being more antagonistic than intended.

Stephanie in particular felt it was unclear that it was necessary to send the plan to the co-parent and others (eg Rachel) noted that the success of the tool relied on the other parent's engagement. Rachel also believed that the questionnaire format was more suited to women than men, with the latter less likely to engage with the process of writing their

responses to each question. Finally, one user suggested that it would be helpful to be able to review the plan on a large screen – highlighting some frustration that the resource was only available as an app (Mike).

Budget planner

Analytics indicate that 67 parents engaged with the budget planner, and 90 parents engaged with the goals section. A subset of interviewees used the budget planner – it was most relevant to those who had not yet worked out their finances or had not received any help from others in drawing up a budget. Those who used the tool were highly positive about how it worked and its benefits. The tool was seen as *"simple enough that it's not overwhelming"* (Jodie) and helped users to understand their financial circumstances, particularly where their ex-partner had been the one who managed the finances.

Some users valued the way the tool prompted them to think about the finer detail of their budgets which left them feeling more in control of their finances: *"Something as simple as writing down a list. When I go shopping, write a list. Don't just go when I'm hungry and buy everything. And do my outgoings and in-goings because I've never done that before. So it was like that was really practically a massive… I think that took a huge weight off because financially, again, I think some parents stay together because financially it makes more sense. And if you don't think about budgeting and stuff, it could be scary."* (Jodie)

For a couple of interviewees, such as Emily and Jodie, the tool helped them to believe that they would be able to manage financially on their own following the separation and gave them greater confidence going forward.

"So that was quite good because it did make me think, OK, yeah, well, you know, I can do it on my own." (Emily)

One participant who had shared the budget planner with her ex-partner found it a useful way to communicate her needs to him and facilitate agreement around their financial settlement.

Using the app in supported settings

The app was largely used by individuals, as designed. One participant, Stephanie, described how she had been shown the Work it out videos by NFM in an online group format as a precursor to mediation. The online call was designed to support co-parent communication and had involved a period of sharing individual stories and discussing the videos, for example, talking about how they might respond in that situation. Stephanie had found it helpful hearing and discussing other people's stories. In fact, she preferred having to engage with the Work it out material in that group format because of the discussion that surrounded it: *"[It] was compulsory, and it was really, really valuable."* (Stephanie)

Fran described using the app with parents she supported in her family support role. She found tools such as the parenting plan useful as a means of encouraging parents to work through the plan separately and then bringing them back together to discuss the plan.

What influenced users' engagement with the app?

The role of emotional readiness in parents' engagement with *Separating better*

To understand the impact of emotional readiness on users' engagement, we looked at user behaviour by emotional readiness category. As reported in Table 12, there were no noteworthy differences in user behaviour based on emotional readiness categories. Those in the low emotional readiness category had slightly more rage taps and those in the high emotional readiness category spent slightly longer using the app on average. Rage taps refer to when users tap the screen repeatedly or press harder, and are an indicator of user frustration.

The top five pages visited by users did not differ based on emotional readiness category, apart from users in the medium emotional readiness category preferring the 'First steps' article to the budget planner page when compared to high and low categories. This could be indicative of our previous findings that those who have medium emotional readiness tend to be more uncertain about what support is suitable for them and where to access appropriate support (Houlston et al., 2019).

TABLE 12. USER BEHAVIOUR BY EMOTIONAL READINESS CATEGORY

Emotional readiness category	Users	Average sessions per user	Average time spent per user	Rage taps
Low	134	5.8	21m 27s	0.6
Medium	508	5.4	21m 22s	0.4
High	89	5.7	22m 39s	0.3

However, in terms of how users engaged with the Work it out section, there are clear differences across emotional readiness categories. As Table 13 shows, more users from the low emotional readiness category visited the Work it out section than those from the medium or high categories. They also had a higher retention rate and were more likely to watch all five scenarios, with 30% of users in the low emotional readiness category completing the whole section compared to 18% of those in the high emotional readiness category. Tentatively this shows 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. This is in line with what we know about the relationship between emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation. Research suggests that low emotional readiness is associated with poor co-parenting cooperation (Millings et al., 2020), so it is likely that those users low in emotional readiness are also experiencing more issues in their co-parenting relationship and see a more immediate need for support.

TABLE 13. USE OF WORK IT OUT SECTION BASED ON EMOTIONAL READINESS CATEGORY

Emotional readiness category	Users	Average sessions per user	Average time spent per user	Rage taps
Low	134	5.8	21m 27s	0.6
Medium	508	5.4	21m 22s	0.4
High	89	5.7	22m 39s	0.3

What helped users engage with the app?

As the previous section outlines, parents valued the design, layout, and digital format of the app as well as the different features and easy to use tools. Taken together these aspects are a key part of what helped users to engage with the app. The convenience of having information on their phone, available as and when they had the time or need to look at it, was a key enabler.

Timing is another important aspect of what helped users to engage. Some users came to the app at a later stage in the separation. While they still found some value in it (eg Jodie, Mel) they also recognised how much more helpful it would have been earlier on. Jodie, who left an abusive relationship, explained:

"I think when you first separate as well, it's almost like too much information is thrown at you, especially if you're in a circumstance like me. You become so overwhelmed you block it all out. It's been, I can't sit and read this stuff. It's too much. I think if you're given that one app, if I'd been given that one thing at the very start, like I said, it probably would have helped me cope a bit better earlier. So, yeah, I do think earlier, the better if you get it." (Jodie)

What were the barriers to engaging with *Separating better*?

As outlined in the previous chapter, parents found it extremely difficult to find relevant information all in one place. Many of them had searched the internet with varying degrees of success. One of the main barriers to using the app, therefore, was finding it. As Amanda commented: *"I don't know how you would find that information straight away because it's not something that I went online for, like an app to help parents separate. I didn't even think of that."* This meant that some interviewees did not make as much use of the app as they may otherwise have because they were much further down the separation journey. For example, they had already sorted out some of the practicalities such as education, housing, and finances.

Although some interviewees had successfully shared the app with their ex-partner others felt that their co-parent was reluctant to use it exactly because it had been recommended by them. Isabella observed: *"Because it's coming from me, he thinks it's more like, Oh, you're just trying to… It's too controlling the situation."* (Isabella)

One concern among interviewees in terms of the effectiveness of the app was the extent to which the other parent was willing or able to engage in a cooperative parenting approach. *"She won't address the issues with the kids and her partner. And it's funny, looking at the app, the app's brilliant. But the problem I've got is. Well, it's one way."* (Mike). For a few parents this meant they almost did not see the point in trying to engage in more positive ways. Others, such as Joanna, tried to keep the child in mind and avoid escalating conflict, but this wasn't without its challenges:

*"I think that when you've got somebody like that, no matter how good an app is, you're always going to be frustrated by the way that they interact with you. And it's going to make it hard to be… I try and stay fair, but I do sometimes just want to tell them to f*** off."* (Joanna)

In cases such as these, individual parents benefited from the Work it out section and Advice and guidance but were less able to make use of the Parenting plan, which required both parents' engagement. For example, Rachel went through the plan but found her ex-partner *"wasn't really compliant with it."* This left her feeling like *"it was another thing on my*

own in a way having to just like deal with it on my own and I just don't think it's something that I really should be doing on my own."

Mike was one of a number of interviewees who had highly conflicted co-parenting relationships and believed they were victims of parental alienation and false accusations of, for example, harassment. These users felt that their difficulties were beyond the realms of this kind of support and issues like parental alienation were *"not going to be fixed by this app"* (Siddiq). Indeed, the app's target audience is parents in the earlier stages of breakdown who do not need the kind of intervention that users such as Siddiq and Mike required. Some of these users did find the app helpful despite these challenges, as the discussion below illustrates.

Interviewees also reflected on the type of person who might benefit most. One view was that parents needed a level of self-awareness and openness to change in order to engage with the app, as Jessica observed:

"I think it's like holding up a mirror to yourself, isn't it? And I think a lot of people have always been afraid to do that. Like, you know, I think it depends on how secure you are in yourself as a person." (Jessica)

A further concern was that the people most likely to use the app were those most likely to engage in cooperative parenting in the first place: *"So it's almost like you're preaching to the converted a little bit, that the people who are using it are more likely to be thinking about those things anyway, and the people that perhaps really need to think about them are the ones that won't"* (Joanna). Even if that is the case, given the range of benefits reported by users the app supported them in engaging in more positive co-parenting behaviours.

How could the app be improved from interviewees' perspectives?

Interviewees were thoughtful about ways in which the app could be developed. Their suggestions are summarised in Table 14. They saw an opportunity to include more content. This included more information about what to expect from the legal process when you separate, the adjustment to living and parenting alone, and the emotional journey that parents might go on. Users were keen to see more guidance on emotional abuse and child safety. There were suggestions around creating different zones for different users including an area exclusively for children so that they could go there for information and support as well as zones for people at different stages of the separation journey.

A number of parents would have liked the opportunity to hear about other parents' experiences both as case studies and a forum where people could post anonymously about the issues they faced and solutions they found. Following frustrations with the cost and functionality of private messaging apps such as OurFamilyWizard parents would like to see *Separating better* include an affordable messaging service that they could use with co-parents and other tools to support communication, such as a shared calendar. This was seen as useful in communicating around, for example, events at school. There were also suggestions around improving aspects of the parenting plan and additional videos.

TABLE 14. IMPROVEMENTS SUGGESTED BY INTERVIEWEES

Additional content	Users
Separation journey	• Information on separation journey (what to expect, its trajectory), grief, affairs and impact on, for example, decision making. • What might help to manage it? • Blogs on how you might feel after the split.
Legal process	• Outline of most common divorce trajectories and features eg if no fault divorce will need to wait for six months before it comes through • Route maps of court process, what to expect • More information on legal rights • Help for people who are representing themselves • How the court process might impact you, likely costs, etc.
Emotional abuse	Understanding what it is; green and red flags
Benefit entitlements	Information on entitlements such as DLA if child disabled and its link to Universal Credit and other support
Daily life checklist	What to expect living on your own, the daily life things you might need to think about that eg aspects of running the house that the ex-partner did
Case studies	Quotes and case studies of other people's experiences
Neurodivergence	Insights on how neurodivergent people might behave in process and how to communicate with them
Child safety	Info on child safeguarding
Talking to children	How to talk to children about the separation
Parental alienation	How to deal with parental alienation
Kids' zone	Are dedicated for young users with information & support
Zones for users at different stages	Dedicated areas for parents at different stages in the separation and divorce process eg having to renegotiate parenting plan rather than those at start
Forum	• Opportunity to interact with and learn from other people's experiences • Peer support
Videos	Videos targeting children to help them understand what is going on, understand their own experiences and emotions and how to navigate it, manage their feelings Work it out videos featuring very young children to provide a better understanding of how they might experience parental separation and how to meet their needs
Parenting plan	• Option to review the parenting plan • Clearer description of what completing the parenting plan entails and how it works • Ability to compare you and ex-partner's response more on a par and tool to facilitate discussion / compromise where views differ eg agreed parenting styles, routines at bedtime • Info on how parenting plans will change over time as children get older / circumstances change and guidance on how to approach that • Making it look less conflictual when responding to partner
Functionality & design	• Web version • Making it more visual and less text heavy eg pathways of different scenarios and timelines • Adding new content and videos to sustain engagement • Search bar
Signposting	Signposting to other services eg mediation
Direct communication with partner	• Ability to communicate with partner eg way to share information about bills that need paying or children's activities • Shared calendar to highlight kids' activities, things to remember for school etc. • Function to type draft messages / emails and have them reworded so that they are less conflictual
Interactivity	Sending out prompts and updates to users

How did engaging with the app impact users?

To evaluate the impact of *Separating better* on individual and relational wellbeing we measured users' emotional readiness at onboarding and two weeks later. We also measured their co-parenting cooperation, conflict with ex-partner, and communication with ex-partner before accessing the Work it out section and again at a three-day follow-up.

As seen in Table 15, our findings indicate a significant improvement in users' emotional readiness from baseline to two-week follow-up. Low emotional readiness is associated with complex negative emotions and an orientation towards the past, as well as maladaptive coping strategies. Use of the practical and emotional support and skill development in *Separating better* may be helping parents to make that shift from negative inwardly focusing emotions, towards improved emotional readiness.

Further exploration of the dataset shows a greater improvement in emotional readiness from baseline to two-week follow-up for those who did the Work it out section compared to those who did not. Those users who didn't do the Work it out section showed an average improvement of 2.09 points on the EARDA. Those who did showed an average improvement of more than double that at 4.98 points on the EARDA. This indicates that engaging with the Work it out section has a greater impact on emotional readiness than the app alone.

Table 15 also indicates positive improvements in users' co-parenting cooperation alongside a small increase in couple conflict. These findings are approaching significance, which means we cannot be certain that these changes are reliable.

Based on the improvement in users' emotional readiness from baseline to a two-week follow-up and the descriptive improvements in co-parenting cooperation, we can infer that use of *Separating better* is supporting parents to develop their co-parenting cooperation, and improving their emotional readiness. Although we do not have sufficient statistical power to examine the mediated relationship between these variables, the findings support what we know about emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation – as emotional readiness increases so too does co-parenting cooperation, and vice versa. The small increase in couple conflict may be a result of participants engaging in more co-parenting discussions with their ex-partner in the short term, with more opportunities for conflict to occur. Over the long term, we would expect the positive improvements in co-parenting cooperation and emotional readiness to reduce conflict between ex-partners.

We did not identify any change in users' communication skills from pre- to post-test. This may be the result of where the communication pre-test measure was situated. Due to low uptake and to increase engagement we staggered the Work it out pre-test surveys to come before the first three videos, rather than all being presented to users before the first video scenario (Willow's family). Therefore, users had already watched Willow's family and Riley's family before they completed the pre-test surveys. This may mean that their baseline communication scores were already improved by the time they got to take the pre-test survey.

TABLE 15. IMPACT OF *SEPARATING BETTER* ON OUTCOMES FOR PARENTS

Relationship indicator	Pre mean score (SD)	Post mean score (SD)	Degrees of freedom	t-test result
Emotional readiness	27.71 (9.88)	29.90(7.86)	37	-1.97 (p=.028)*
Conflict	2.07 (0.39)	2.20(0.45)	19	-1.68 (p=.054)
Co-parenting cooperation	30.93(3.10)	32.67(4.86)	15	-1.72 (p=.054)
Communication	3.25(0.41)	3.30(0.46)	15	-0.59(p=.283)

Did some users benefit more than others?

We analysed the impact of *Separating better* based on the following demographic variables: gender, ethnic group, relationship status, sexual orientation, relationship length, and time since separation. There was a significant difference in baseline emotional readiness and co-parenting communication between men and women, with women having significantly higher emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation than men.

We did not have sufficient data to assess differences in post-test outcomes, however, descriptive statistics indicate that *Separating better* brought men's emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation up to a similar level to women. In the case of co-parenting cooperation and communication, men had even better outcomes than women (Table 16). Of interest, as with the overall sample, post-test conflict also increased for men. Taken with the improved communication, it may be that this increased conflict is a result of greater communication and interactions with their ex-partner and not necessarily indicative of negative conflict. This may be preliminary evidence that *Separating better* is particularly effective in improving outcomes for men.

Although we saw general improvements in outcomes for parents who were already separated or divorced (apart from in the case of conflict which increased from pre- to post-test), their improvements were not to the same extent as those who were in the process of separating. Because we do not have a sufficient sample size to carry out statistical analysis on these results, we can only comment on the descriptive changes from pre- to post-test.

However, tentatively this may demonstrate the benefit of intervening early on parents who are separating. By engaging with parents who are still in the process of separation, or thinking of separating, we may be able to raise their awareness of what to expect during the separation process and improve their relational skills to help them navigate the process both practically and emotionally. It is encouraging to see improvements in those parents who are already separated or divorced, but it may be the case that this cohort requires further support to achieve the same outcomes, particularly where they have become entrenched in the system.

TABLE 16. DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN OUTCOME VARIABLES

Demographic variable		EARDA	EARDA post-test	Co-parenting cooperation	Co-parenting cooperation post-test	Conflict	Conflict post-test	Communication	Communication post-test
Gender	Male	25.24	29.50	29.43	33.71	2.12	2.36	3.18	3.52
	Female	27.98*	30.00	32.57+	32.72	2.22	2.21	3.07	3.22
Relationship status	Thinking of separating	30.81	31.67	34.33	-	2.57	-	3.49	-
	In the process of separating	30.09	32.10	32.68	36.67	2.51	2.27	3.12	3.42
	Separated/ divorced	25.57	28.80	30.87	32.92	2.03	2.28	3.01	3.25
Ethnicity	White	27.40	30.50	31.75	-	2.22	-	3.17	-
	Black	24.00	21.00	29.60	-	2.19	-	2.86	-
	Asian	26.20	20.33	26.50	-	1.58	-	2.14	-

*p<.001 +p=.005

Differences in emotional readiness between app and mediation users

As part of the project we sought to explore the extent to which parents' emotional readiness could be used as a triage mechanism for mediation, signposting those parents most ready to engage in the process. A total of 97 parents took part in mediation as part of their use of *Separating better*. Of those 97 parents, 36 completed post-mediation feedback surveys and mediators completed post-MIAM feedback forms for 47 parents. As part of their participation all parents had to include child arrangements as one of their topics to discuss in mediation. The other two core topics were finances and housing. Mediators largely assessed parents to be moderately-to-very ready to engage with mediation.

Users who accessed mediation with NFM through *Separating better* had significantly lower emotional readiness compared to those who did not attend mediation. Following mediation, users' emotional readiness came up to a similar level as app-only users' baseline emotional readiness (M=27.89, SD=8.80). However, this is not to the same level as the baseline emotional readiness of those who had used only the app at two-week follow-up. There were no significant improvements in co-parenting cooperation, conflict, or communication for users who attended mediation.

As the users who engaged with mediation through *Separating better* had already approached NFM for mediation it is possible that individuals with lower emotional readiness are more likely to engage professional supported services to navigate their separation. As low emotional readiness is associated with low co-parenting cooperation and high conflict, it follows that users who have low emotional readiness may be in difficult co-parenting situations that require a higher level of support.

Insights from the interview and follow-up survey data

Responses to the follow-up survey provide additional insights into how well-informed users felt as a result of using the app and any changes they had made. As Table 17 shows, the majority of parents felt more informed about what to do next as well as about their rights, how to talk to their children, and how to talk to an ex-partner. Forty-six percent felt more informed about how to organise their finances.

TABLE 17. IMPROVEMENTS IN PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE AFTER USING *SEPARATING BETTER*

After using Separating better I feel more informed about…	% agreement
… what I need to do next.	56
… my rights.	60
… how to talk to our children.	71
… how to talk to my ex-partner.	56
… how to organise my finances.	46

Parents who responded to the survey also reported positive improvements in both their practical skills and knowledge, and in their emotional wellbeing. As Table 18 illustrates, parents reported improvements in emotional wellbeing (55%), readiness to engage in (35%) and manage (29%) the separation process, and in how they communicated with their co-parent (38%). Responses also showed that 22% of parents were less likely to use court to resolve differences and 15% were more likely to seek mediation.

TABLE 18. WHAT CHANGED FOR PARENTS FOLLOWING USE OF *SEPARATING BETTER*

Reported changes	% of parents
Communicating better with co-parent	38
Agreed to a parenting plan	38
Have organised my finances	16
Feel better within myself	55
Feel more ready to engage in the separation process	35
Feel better able to manage the separation process	29
Positive changes in their children	24
Less likely to use court to resolve differences	22
More likely to seek mediation	15

Comments from the survey included:

"Thinking about the way I speak to my co-parent."

"[Feeling] confident to tackle it on my own."

"Keeping my daughter out of things rather than including her when it comes to parenting."

"My kids have seen me be more relaxed."

"More proactive in moving forwards."

"I am managing my finances better, I am communicating in a healthy way."

"[The app] has given me confidence and the knowledge that I am not alone."

These points are reflected below in feedback from our interviewees.

Managing the process of separation

In line with our Theory of Change, the app helped to increase users' knowledge and understanding of the practicalities of separating and feel more able and ready to engage in the process. As Joanna explained:

"It helped me early on with just thinking about the stages that I needed to go through. Think about the kids, think about the budget, think about the practicalities of the house and all that stuff. It was useful in that way." (Joanna)

Separating better helped users to *"sort of navigate through"* (Anita) what they needed to do and in *"planning and thinking ahead and like, OK, these are the things I need to do"* (Sara). The design of the app was an important aspect of this for some users, like Paul, because it *"helped me realise that everything that I was doing could be done in chunks"* (Paul). In discussing the design of the app Paul really valued the bite-size nature of the information and it appears reasonable to conclude that presenting the information in such a manageable way made the process feel manageable and one that could be done in 'chunks'.

One user who came to the app late in her separation journey after leaving an abusive relationship was enthusiastic about the app's potential to help people early on in their journeys. From her point of view, the app could help prevent things becoming too conflicted or toxic: *"It could help people before it gets to that point"* (Alice). In addition, she saw its value in reducing some of the fear and stress associated with ending a relationship as it helps you to understand the separation process because *"you're completely alone and you've got no advice, you've got nothing. Whereas if that app is there at the beginning, you're not going to be over thinking it. Yes, you're obviously still going to have stresses, but at least there's support out there and there is help."* (Jodie)

The information was also helpful at a more granular level in prompting users to address aspects of the separation or of co-parenting that they had not previously thought about, such as agreement around taking medication for ADHD, removing an ex-partner as beneficiary of a pension plan, agreeing contact arrangements around Christmas, taking the children on holiday abroad, or what should happen if a child became unwell.

A number of interviewees came to the app having already finalised aspects of the separation and were therefore not in a position to benefit from the information in the same way. However, in some cases those users felt encouraged that they were doing the right things either in terms of the practicalities (Isabella) or in terms of their approach to the process (George). It also helped keep participants on track and remind them of, for example, the need to revisit the parenting plan or other ongoing aspects of co-parenting.

Feel more ready to engage

Making the process manageable, for some interviewees, appeared to help them feel more emotionally ready to engage with the separation. Paul explained that making the practical aspects of the separation feel more manageable helped to 'relieve the situation' and helped him to manage the next steps.

"A lot of [the] separating processes I wasn't ready for until it actually … until we'd actually got through bits that needed to be done. And a lot of the separation side kind of… It was causing anxiety to be able to think about it until we were … until I was ready on that side of it." (Paul)

For Fran, the app helped to provide the impetus to *"work out how you're going to"* proceed rather than *"just sit in this limbo of not sorting this out because you're just both getting resentful of each other"* (Fran). As a result of being helped to engage with what needed doing, Fran was better able to move on from being caught up in feelings of resentment and stuckness.

The app helped Jessica grapple with the reality of her separation and made the process of separating real: *"I think once you download something like this, it's very much then. Actually it's real now like I'm actually looking at an app that's about separating, the separation."* (Jessica)

Remind, rethink, reframe

One of the key themes in the interviews was the positive impact the app had on participants' thinking, whether that was a reminder of how to communicate, a prompt to think about things not previously considered, or a nudge to reframe or rethink a particular standpoint: *"it just brings you back to reality a bit and makes you rethink things sometimes, where you're not emotionally charged about it"* (Charlene). Like Charlene, Stephanie found that the app lent her the opportunity to take a step back, freed from intense emotions. She recognised that in the heat of the moment *"you're not hearing yourself on what you're saying. In some of the videos I've had similar conversations and I've been like, wow, yeah, I responded just like that. So it does make you think twice"* (Stephanie). The app helped users to *"look at things from a different perspective"* (Alice) or to *"re-evaluate and rethink things sometimes."* (Charlene)

Keeping the children in mind

Interviewees also found the app helped them to keep focusing on the children, particularly when feelings were running high.

"I think that's probably the most useful thing I took away from it, which is really just reminding me no matter how angry and cross and upset you feel, and that's normal to feel like that, but remember to think about the kids." (Joanna)

The app helped Siddiq to *"appreciate the child's point of view"*, for example, around how it must feel when he says negative things about his ex-partner in front of his son. However, he did not feel he had enough guidance on how to change his behaviour and that *"it's not easy trying to"* (Siddiq). A number of other interviewees found that the app did help them to keep focused on the child: *"I keep clear about what's best for my daughter"* (Isabella) or: *"I try not to get worked up in front of the children and try and take it away and then come back."* (Amanda)

Paul described how this helped him and his ex-partner to recognise that they both want the same for their children but come at it from different perspectives or different ideas on how to achieve it. They were able to agree on what rules and expectations they needed to maintain in each household and where their approaches to parenting could differ so that children could understand what was expected of them and *"make it easier for them both"* (Paul) when they went to the respective homes. He was helped to see how he and his ex-partner *"both went on separate pages"* and *"were coming at it from different angles in a lot of ways which kind of caused the problems in the first place"* but could then recognise that they both wanted the same end goal.

Communicating better

Analysis of user outcome data did not find statistically significant improvements in parents' communication skills, but the qualitative data does highlight improvements in interviewees' communication skills, even at the very practical level of managing email communication. After engaging with the app Fran stopped sending an email to her ex-

partner straight away. Instead, she chose to leave it for a while and come back and review the draft. If she felt it was too confrontational, she would redraft it.

"Because I was getting my little strop on and going like, Why have you not done any of this? … Because I think if I'd had access to that at the beginning, maybe a few of those first big arguments post-separation might not have got so big. Because even if he'd still been angry, I might not have been as confrontational in email as well." (Fran)

Others, such as Stephanie and Charlene, talked about how the app helped them to be more conscious and purposeful in how they communicated: *"I always do keep in mind, or not always, nine times out of 10, keep in mind how I'm speaking, and they have been really useful. I would say that was probably, in my opinion, the best part of the app."* (Stephanie)

The videos helped participants to communicate from a more neutral place, not coloured by strong emotions: *"Not from a place of anger, but more like, 'OK, this is what's best for my daughter'. More with a clear head … rather than from what I feel. Because when you communicate from your emotions, it can go quite badly."* (Isabella)

For Amanda, who continued to share a house with her ex-partner, the app resulted in her trying *"not to get worked up in front of the children."* If things did become confrontational she would *"try to walk away from it and then come back to it"* when she felt less heated. Another benefit was the way the app helped parents to see each other's points of view which, again, had helped to create less conflicted communication.

Separating better also enabled some parents to communicate with their children better because they were able to see their perspectives and *"able to kind of manage the children's and my children's expectations. It's helped me go towards them better and to be able to get them to understand how things have gone."* (Paul)

Seeing the bigger picture

Joanna exemplifies the way the app could have a more global impact on parents by enabling them to see that they hold shared responsibility for how the separation worked out. Joanna's partner had left her following an affair and she was experiencing significant financial hardship as a result. This was challenging for Joanna and other parents like her, but they were able to try and take that step back and hold in mind the bigger picture.

"It's reminded me that how I behave in this process influences the process, if that makes sense. And so it's definitely helped me to think about the fact that you can do it in a better way or a worse way. Just the name of it almost reminds you that there's a way of doing this which is less damaging for the kids. And there's a way of doing this that's worse for the kids." (Joanna)

Similarly, Alice described how the app helped her in *"just taking a step back and trying to look at the bigger picture"* (Alice). That capacity was further enhanced, in part, by the way the app helped her *"emotionally, just being a bit more regulated"* (Alice). A number of other interviewees also reported emotional benefits.

Emotional benefits

The kind of emotional benefits users described included feeling less anxious, more level-headed, more positive and more accepting. Another benefit was feeling less alone in the process: *"[It] helped me feel like I'm not alone in this then like I've got, it's there to help me sort of things"* (Jessica). Linked to this was the way the app helped to normalise the separation process and its ups and downs. Fran found the videos encouraging as they reinforced, for her, a sense that no one gets it right all the time.

"No one does it perfectly, no one does it right. And having that and going, it takes a bit of that shame away from it, from going, I screwed up again or I did it badly. Actually that no one has got the… There's no perfect way to do it." (Fran)

For Paul, seeing other people going through the same also made the process feel more normal and more manageable: *"It kind of helped to show it can be done"* (Paul). The combination of understanding what needed to be done as a result of all the practical tools and guidance combined with that emotional reassurance helped to reduce users' anxiety about the process and leave them feeling more in control: *"Having something that's so easy to… It's very 'You do this bit, then that bit, then that bit', helps me, I think, 'That's great', actually, takes the anxiety out [of it]."* (Fran)

As noted previously, using the budget planner helped Jodie to realise that she would be able to manage financially, which took *"a huge weight off"* (Jodie) and left her feeling more in control of her finances despite facing a considerable drop in income.

For one of the users involved in a highly conflicted relationship with his co-parent the app helped to bring greater acceptance of the situation and of his partner's behaviour. It helped him to see that she might be caught up in her emotions and therefore may not be able to change: *"You know, it helps me accept. And then I don't react and then I don't get upset about it. I don't chew about it. I just say it is what it is."* (Mike)

Conclusion

Separating better sits in a complex ecosystem of legal processes, children's and family services, and difficult-to-access support. This, combined with the unintended power imbalances and misuse of power that the system appears to facilitate, may be tipping previously conflicted relationships into low level abuse. Parents engaged with the app, regardless of their stage of separation, highlight the need for reliable and accessible information and help.

Given the small sample sizes, the findings should be treated cautiously, but *Separating better* appears to have had a beneficial on parents' emotional readiness and co-parenting relationship. Men benefited more. The app brought their emotional readiness and co-parenting levels up to that of women, and male users exceeded women's scores for conflict and communication following use of the app.

The results highlight the potential for the app to be used as a tool for enabling parents to reach their own agreements or for preparing parents to engage in mediation or attend court. This could help parents to develop their capacity to engage more constructively with the situations, systems, and processes they find themselves in. These implications and other recommendations are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

6. Summary and conclusions

Background

This test and learn project sought to examine whether an app combining behaviour change interventions with tools, information, and guidance could facilitate a more amicable route through separation and reduce the likelihood of couples resorting to courts to resolve entrenched differences. *Separating better* targeted parents early in their separation journeys with lower levels of need in the expectation that they would benefit most from this self-guided resource. A key goal of the project was to reduce conflict between parents and improve the emotional wellbeing of parents and children.

To test the effectiveness of the app we undertook a multistranded evaluation that involved qualitative and quantitative data combined with analytics to examine the take-up, engagement and impact of *Separating better*. The evaluation was preceded by a lengthy development phase that involved the co-production of its content and a dedicated pilot phase before launch. Further developments were made during the live phase to address feedback and balance the need to facilitate engagement while collecting relevant data.

Key findings

The app attracted users at all stages of separation, from those thinking about separation, to those in the early stages, and parents who had been separated or divorced for a number of years. The majority of users were already separated or divorced. Surprisingly, parents who had already separated or divorced had higher levels of conflict and lower levels of emotional readiness compared with users who were in the process of separating. Unfortunately, we did not have sufficient data to explore other socio-demographic differences between users.

The higher levels of emotional readiness amongst those in the earlier stages could point to two issues. First, it suggests that the system in which parents find themselves is so conflictual and challenging to navigate, that parents find themselves entrenched in conflict. Secondly, it is reflective of the non-linear nature of separation. Separation is not a one-off event that is 'resolved' – it frequently involves peaks and troughs as parents navigate their new co-parenting relationships and continue to adapt as children grow up and circumstances change. Both factors point to the value of the app in supporting parents at all stages of their separation and divorce.

Parents faced pressing emotional and practical challenges, which were often interrelated, as they navigated separation. Many parents were desperate for affordable and reliable information and support, as has been demonstrated in previous research (Symmonds et al., 2020). They found it time-consuming to navigate the internet and difficult to find or access advice from third sector agencies. Participants described being passed around from service to service with no one really 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 appeared reluctant to engage with this perceived 'grey area' that did not pose a physical threat to parents' safety.

Experiences of mediation were mixed. While some parents were extremely positive, cost was a barrier, and success was largely dependent on both parents' willingness to engage.

It was apparent that, where one parent's emotional readiness was low, ex-partners could end up in prolonged and entrenched conflict, with the least ready partner lacking the capacity to engage in what was required to negotiate the separation.

Experiences of the legal system were largely negative although it was often perceived as the only option. Obtaining legal advice was prohibitively expensive for many which left them feeling vulnerable and defenceless. Male interviewees found it particularly difficult to find appropriate support, believing that help was geared towards women. They saw a legal system that seemed stacked against them, and which was susceptible to misuse by women who were enabled to make what were described as unfounded allegations of harassment or abuse in order to secure non-molestation orders that restricted access and helped to maximise maintenance payouts.

Users were most likely to come to the app as a result of being referred by mediators or other practitioners rather than finding it independently. This is not entirely surprising given the landscape of support parents described. It means, however, that we attracted a large proportion of users who were at higher levels of need – levels that necessitated the involvement of public services such as children's services or Cafcass. Lower take-up of parents thinking about separation is also a function of our marketing campaign, which targeted separated parents.

Although our marketing campaign had positive results in terms of click-throughs and downloads, we did not see the conversion to sign-ups that we would have expected. The most common search terms were for divorce lawyers. This suggests that parents coming to the app may have been at a higher level of need than *Separating better* could meet, and perhaps a self-guided app was not what parents were expecting. The instructional 'teaser trailer' video was the most effective way of recruiting parents to download the app, possibly because it provided users with a clear visual direction of what the app consists of and who it was for. The findings from our marketing campaign are encouraging in terms of the number of parents we were able to reach but more work needs to be done to reach parents who are in the earlier stages of separation and to understand how we turn those downloads into sign-ups.

The app achieved good conversion and retention rates in line with industry norms. We observed a surprising uptick in retention at six months which saw users coming back to the parenting plan. This may reflect the needs of parents further along the separation route as they review co-parenting arrangements. It may also reflect the timing of the average six-month wait to finalise divorce.

Users liked the design and navigation of the app and the bite-sized nature of information which made the content feel manageable and the app easy to dip in and out of. They saw it as a 'sourcebook' they could return to. They liked its flexibility and the non-linear approach which meant they could pick and choose what they looked at depending on their needs and time available.

Users spent the most time in the Work it out video section but the Advice and guidance section was the most visited. They searched out what they needed depending on what stage of separation they were at, what had already been agreed with their co-parent, and what other support or information they had already found. For example, some had found help and information through Facebook forums or Instagram groups and cheaper alternatives to legal advice (eg subscription service to a solicitor's Facebook group).

Separating better had a positive impact on users' emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation (the latter measure was approaching statistical significance). Men benefited more than women. Using the app brought men's emotional readiness and co-parenting levels up to those of women, and male users exceeded women's scores for positive communication following use of the app.

Parents described being more aware of how they communicated, more able to focus on their children and more able to manage their emotions when dealing with an ex-partner. Parents also felt more informed about the separation process, more ready to engage with it, and more able to manage it. Overall, the app helped to normalise parents' experience. They described feeling less anxious, more positive, and more accepting of their situations.

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 Work it out section. 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.

Respondents to the follow-up survey were more likely to seek mediation and less likely to use courts following use of *Separating better*. We did not find statistical differences on approach to court and mediation in analysis of in-app data. This might reflect the different stages of separation that users were at, as much as the impact of app. For example, some users may have already used the courts at an earlier stage of their separation and therefore continued to see returning to court or mediation as a possibility in the face of renegotiating co-parenting arrangements as circumstances changed. It may also reflect small sample sizes.

Limitations

Our preliminary results are promising, showing significant improvements in emotional readiness and improvements in co-parenting cooperation that are approaching significance. However, these findings are drawn from a smaller sample than we anticipated which means that it was not possible to explore these more fully and gain greater understanding of the mechanisms at play between these relationships. It also meant that it was not possible to reliably explore any group differences in the impact of *Separating better*.

Second to the lack of users completing sign-up and subsequent questionnaires within the app, is the low completion rate of the follow-up surveys that we sent parents to monitor any ongoing change following use of the app. Our original evaluation plan aimed to get parents to complete a battery of surveys at three-month follow-up, so that we could compare their results to baseline. However, due to the low uptake of completing baseline and post-test questionnaires in the app, and a zero completion rate for follow-up surveys, we changed tack and sent parents a modified feedback survey to monitor any changes. This was still difficult to get parents to complete, and required extensive contact and offering of incentives to increase completion to a number from which we could carry out statistical analysis.

This all means that there is still much to learn about user experience and impact. For example, we do not know if the positive effects on outcomes or behaviours were sustained, whether parents are continuing to use the skills they have learnt, and what would help them to reinforce the learning.

We also faced challenges in collecting sufficient data to draw conclusions about the impact of emotional readiness on mediation and where best to send parents based on their emotional readiness. Due to the already extensive load that mediators carry and tenuous parent engagement with mediation, it was deemed unlikely that mediators would be able to get parents to complete the EARDA before their first MIAM and during their final session. That meant that we relied on a small sample of parents who self-selected to complete the follow-up mediation surveys. It was also not possible to measure the impact of emotional readiness on mediation outcomes as there are no standardised measures of efficacy of mediation used in the UK (to our knowledge) and there was not sufficient time within the bounds of the project to create one.

In order to address more fully the impact of *Separating better* on parents and their experience of separation, it would have been beneficial to collect more dyadic data to really understand the impact of the app if used by both parents and to more fully explore dyadic emotional readiness.

While we have produced some interesting findings on the differences between groups who accessed the app, based on factors such as ethnicity and gender, our sample size was largely white and heterosexual, with the majority of users being women. Although this is reflective of the wider UK population and women are more likely to seek external support when compared to men, it does leave questions open about how best to reach a more diverse group of users in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation, and what works best to support those groups. This is particularly important given what we now know about the complexity of the system in which parents access support during separation. Minority stress is a real concern with regard to underrepresented groups accessing services, so a deeper knowledge of not just how to reach them but also what works best in supporting them is of vital importance in creating greater equity of outcome.

Finally, in terms of reaching our target audience, we found that *Separating better* was picked up by parents with a far wider range of experience of the separation process than just those in the early stages, with many of the users already separated or divorced, and some for many years. While this has produced interesting findings about the needs of parents at all stages of separation and the peaks and troughs that parents experience, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about any differences between groups and what level of support parents at different levels of need require. More time to fully explore these issues and to extend the evaluation would have been beneficial in regard to all of these limitations.

Conclusions and recommendations

The population of users shows *Separating better* has broad appeal and was used by parents at widely different stages of separation. The breadth of users and impact on them suggests that the app has potential for much wider use, beyond the original aim of providing early support to facilitate more amicable separation. The beneficial impact of *Separating better* on parents' emotional readiness and co-parenting relationship highlights the potential for the app to ameliorate the negative fallout of separation at any stage, not

just at the early stages as originally conceived for the app. The emotional benefits of using the app are particularly important given how many parents felt vulnerable, overwhelmed, and fearful, especially in the early stages.

The impact of *Separating better* on users at the later stages of separation highlights the value in widening the target audience and remit of the app to include parents at any stage. The app has a potential role to play in raising the skills and capacity of parents to engage more productively with the process and services available to them – whether that is children's services, mediation, or court – or to reach agreement without the need for external help. For example, the uptick in retention at six months was largely driven by users returning to the parenting plan. This raises the question of how we can make this resource more widely available to parents further down the separation road. And, whether, in strengthening users' emotional readiness and approach to co-parenting we are more likely to enable them to reach their own agreement without recourse to outside help.

Widening the target audience of *Separating better* makes the case for extending the scope of the resource by, for example, incorporating a wider range of content and greater functionality. That could include the option for direct messaging function within *Separating better* to support them in communicating with ex-partners, which interviewees flagged as a need. Users also talked about a shared calendar where they could record children's activities and information about their school week to support co-parenting. Zones dedicated to different stages or groups was another recommendation, including an area dedicated to content for children. Users were also keen to see more information about the legal process and what to expect from it.

Emotional readiness is still such an important part of the separation process, but findings from this study highlight the importance of dyadic readiness alongside that of each parent individually. From the interviews it was clear that while some users were emotionally ready, they were held back by their ex-partners' lack of readiness and failure to engage constructively in the process of separation. This meant that these otherwise 'ready' users were being pulled into entrenched situations and unable to co-parent effectively with their ex-partner. Couples are only as 'ready' as their least emotionally ready partner. Our findings that *Separating better*, and in particular, the Work it out videos, had a positive impact on users' emotional readiness is a great start in being able to support people to work on improving their emotional readiness and work towards more effective co-parenting relationships.

One of the limitations of the app, from interviewees' perspectives, was that it was more likely to be used by parents who were open to change and able to focus on the needs of the child. However, it was users with lower emotional readiness who were most likely to complete the Work it out section and engage with behaviour change videos. This suggests that the app can help bring both parents up to a better level of emotional readiness. The question remains, however, regarding how to engage parents with lower emotional readiness given that the majority of users fell into the medium category. As noted below, facilitated use of the app by practitioners such as family support workers, may help reach parents at different stage of readiness. Similarly, mandating use of the resource before, for example, engaging in mediation or attending court may help to reach less emotionally ready partners. Both parents using the resource gives the best opportunity for people to bring their emotional readiness up to an equitable level before either navigating separation individually or going through Non-Court Dispute Resolution (NCDR) or even court. Even if

they go to court, it is likely that they will be more successful in how they approach it and the outcomes that they achieve if both partners come to it from a more equal playing field.

As we have alluded to so far, an important consideration is how to reach potential users at different points across the separation life course. Most of the people who came to the app were referred – largely by NFM or other practitioners – and their numbers exceeded the combined number of those who found the app independently. Referral is effective for those already accessing support services as they are likely to be at higher level of need already, although this does not preclude the problem of ensuring all those services are informed about and willing to refer to the app. However, it does leave a challenge around how to reach individuals earlier in the process. Schools were a useful source of signposting for some parents. This is also apparent in our current DWP-funded Reducing Parental Conflict projects, where schools are playing a key role in sharing resources with parents. We also know from previous OnePlusOne projects that putting resources where people first go for help, or in places they find trustworthy, is vital (Hirst & Reynolds, 2020). Employee assistance schemes, solicitors, Citizens Advice, GPs, and other public health practitioners are all likely to be helpful allies in sharing *Separating better*.

Reaching parents at the earlier stages of separation also involves running targeted marketing campaigns across trusted social media platforms. This would require further testing of our target audience, and those in the earlier stages of separation, rather than those who are already separated or divorced. Extending our co-creation sessions to include targeting in places where people go for support when they are considering separation or are in the early stages, and a more universal approach to marketing, would increase the likelihood of reaching parents who would benefit from earlier intervention as well as those who are further along the journey. We found this approach helpful during our *See it differently* (Hirst & Reynolds, 2020) campaign. It has the added benefit of a greater understanding of how to target parents who may be hard to reach. A greater focus on visual aids to reach parents, such as animations and trailer videos, would also be beneficial in future campaigns.

Extending reach and impact could also be achieved by using the resources in a supported or 'hybrid' format which means parents may work through elements of the app with a practitioner or other type of professional and use certain elements alone. As noted in the findings, the Work it out videos have been used by NFM in a group setting. One of our interviewees, a family support worker, had used the parenting plan in her work – facilitating parents to complete it individually and come back together to finalise arrangements. One parent suggested *Separating better* could also be useful in training volunteers in settings such as Contact Centres.

Previous projects, such as *See it Differently* (Hirst & Reynolds, 2020) and Me, You and Baby Too (Hirst et al., 2020) illustrate the flexibility of OnePlusOne's digital resources and how they have been used successfully in different supported one-to-one and group settings as well as individually. To facilitate this OnePlusOne could offer web-based resources to be used by, for example, family support workers, mediators, or other professionals who enable parents to work through the parenting plan together with an objective outsider.

OnePlusOne could also provide the Work it out videos as a standalone offering for use in groups where, for example, parents are encouraged or required to attend pre-mediation sessions with other parents to watch the videos and share experiences. These

interventions could help parents engage more productively in the process of negotiating. There may be an opportunity to offer some resources on a licensed basis to, for example, local authorities to contribute to the sustainability of *Separating better*. Another consideration with regard to sustainability is to develop two-tier functionality whereby some additional elements of the app are offered on a modest subscription basis, such as direct messaging, or live events with an expert.

Evidence from charities working with fathers, and conversations with dads using the app, highlights the deficit in support for men going through separation. Many of the fathers we spoke to were also dealing with highly challenging and conflictual separations which left them feeling powerless and overwhelmed. It is encouraging, therefore, to find that *Separating better* had an even more positive impact on men's emotional readiness and co-parenting cooperation compared to women. Women, in general, are more likely to seek help (Mackenzie, Gekoski, & Know, 2006) and are more open to seeking professional psychological help compared to men (Nam et al., 2010). These factors, combined with the scarcity of dedicated support for men, makes the likelihood of men successfully seeking help even smaller.

It may be that *Separating better* provides a neutral space for men to work on understanding their situation and rights etc., and to develop the skills they need to improve their co-parenting relationship with their ex-partner. Given the challenging situations of many of our male interviewees, they may also have been more open to trying novel approaches, such as the app, and more likely to benefit from any kind of support or guidance. Finally, it is possible that the behaviour change techniques used in the app are particularly effective in supporting men. For example, evidence suggests that psychoeducational material to improve knowledge, motivating behaviour change, active problem solving, signposting services, and recognising and managing issues are likely to improve men's help-seeking attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). All of these are present in *Separating better*, which may help to explain why men benefit more from using it.

The complex ecosystem of legal processes, children and family services, and difficult-to-access support in which *Separating better* sits, combined with the unintended power imbalances and misuse of power that it appears to facilitate, may be tipping previously conflicted relationship into low level abuse. When there is a power imbalance in finances, resources, parenting, the family justice system, family and friend support, communication skills or mental health, then it's inevitable that vulnerable people will be exploited, and those families will become entrenched.

This has much bigger implications for the children of those families than just protracted court processes. While the app cannot address inherent flaws in the system it has the potential to help parents deal with the system better prepared, more empowered, with better developed communication skills, and with greater insight into how the relationship with their co-parent could be affecting their child.

The beneficial impact of *Separating better* on parents' emotional readiness and co-parenting relationship highlights the potential for using the app as a tool for enabling parents to reach their own agreements or preparing parents for engaging in mediation or attending court. This could help parents to develop their capacity to engage more constructively with the systems and processes they find themselves in.

Future research

Explore the impact of dyadic emotional readiness on the experience of separation
We have long known there is a need to better understand the dyadic impact of emotional readiness. In fact, a core element of the emotional readiness model (Millings et al., 2020) is the fact that emotional readiness is influenced by the nature of the relationship, its dissolution, and individual differences. The findings from this project highlight that further. 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. Alongside this, the development of a measure of dyadic readiness would allow effective measurement of both individual and dyadic readiness before users engage with support and contribute to greater success in engagement and outcomes.

Understand more about how emotional readiness impacts engagement with separation support
Using the data from the above, it is clear that 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). An early aim of *Separating better* was to understand whether it is possible to triage parents to appropriate support based on their emotional readiness category. However, due to the limitations in data collection and no effective way of measuring mediation outcomes, it was not possible to achieve this. Future research would benefit from developing a means of measuring efficacy of mediation and a controlled study to assess whether emotional readiness has an impact on users' engagement with support.

Test the most effective pathways to reach parents in the early stages of separation as well as those already separated or divorced
The parents who came to *Separating better* were varied in terms of their experience of separation and how 'far along' they were in the process. Although the app was designed to reach those in the early stages of separation it is clear that there is a need for support of this type for parents at all stages of separation. To more effectively reach parents at all stages of separation, we need to carry out extensive research directly with parents who are thinking of separating and in the early stages of separation to understand where they go for support and how best to reach them. Using this information to test pathways that differentiate between the different stages of separation would allow greater targeting of parents, improving not just uptake but engagement with services.

Explore whether early tentative changes are sustained
Our findings indicate early tentative improvements in outcomes for parents and support our Theory of Change statement. However, these findings are based on small sample sizes and cross-sectional data. To understand the longer-term impact of *Separating better* and its aims with regard to our Theory of Change, longitudinal follow-up research is needed to assess whether any of these changes are sustained. Further research that replicates our findings using larger sample sizes would also be of benefit to better understand if the descriptive changes we saw are statistically significant.

Develop and test a supported model of delivering *Separating better*
As identified in our interviews, the landscape for separating parents is often confusing, at a time when parents are feeling at their most vulnerable. This makes the intrinsic motivation

to engage with a self-guided resource particularly difficult. 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
It is clear from our findings and the parents who came to the app, that we need to better understand what works best for supporting separating parents across the spectrum. This includes not just parents at different stages of their separation journey, but also diversity in regard to gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, among other demographic factors. In particular, our findings both from the quantitative and interview data highlight a real gap in knowledge and application of how to reach and support men. Future research that explores the needs of different groups and how best to support them would go some way to creating greater equity of access and outcomes for all separating parents.

Conclusion

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 a wider range of mechanisms by which to share the resource, for example, 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 benefit most 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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RATIONALE / NEED FOR INTERVENTION

Relationship dissolution is a stressful life event, but when children are involved it becomes more complex and the need for constructive communication particularly around co-parenting is essential. Being emotionally ready is a vital aspect of being able to engage with post-separation negotiations, including around co-parenting, with those who are not emotionally ready more likely to become entrenched and require external support through avenues such as the courts. Raising awareness of these issues, as well as supporting people to develop constructive conflict and communication skills and improving emotional readiness, is vital for reducing the negative impact of conflict and ensuring that families don't become entrenched in the system and require state intervention.

Impacts

1. Reductions in co-parenting conflict and increases in co-parenting support.
2. Improved conflict and communication skills.
3. Improved wellbeing for individuals, couples, families, and ultimately children.
4. Reduced need for parents to use the courts for separation.
5. A reliable triage for separation support pathways, based on emotional readiness reducing the risk of entrenchment.
6. Fewer children exposed to conflict.

Theory of change

1. One factor that is known to impact a person's ability to deal with the practicalities of separation, including co-parenting agreements is their emotional readiness. Parents who are not emotionally ready to engage with post separation negotiations are more likely to become entrenched and need to go through the courts and other official pathways in order to resolve their post-separation agreements.
2. During separation it is important to empower people to deal with the practicalities of their separation not just through ensuring that they are emotionally ready but by giving them the practical skills and guidance
3. Digital interventions are accessible and flexible, allowing users to engage in private and at their own pace. Behaviour Modelling Training provides a visual demonstration of skills and behaviours and gives the user an opportunity to practise them in real life settings.
4. This initiative (an app) will provide separating parents with the practical skills and guidance to navigate their separation, as well as improving their emotional readiness, which will increase the likely success of post-separation negotiations.
5. The app will consist of a DBCI to raise awareness of the negative impact of conflict and demonstrate effective communication skills, and offer practical guidance for separating, such as a separation checklist, financial planning tools, and a parenting plan. A number of parents will also benefit from mediation sessions.
6. Improved communication skills and awareness of the impact of conflict and one's own behaviour, will lead to reduced conflict, improved emotional readiness, and co-parenting cooperation. Improved emotional readiness, alongside communication skills and practical self-help guidance for navigating separation will reduce the need for separating couples to access the courts.
7. By assessing each parents emotional readiness at baseline and monitoring their progress through the app and with mediation sessions (for a sample of parents) we will understand more about what works for supporting different categories of emotional readiness to successfully navigate post-separation negotiations.

Inputs

1. PWLE sharing their stories and experiences. Reviewing content to ensure appropriate and accessible to their experience.
2. OPO staff will: a) carry out co-creation sessions with PWLE, b) develop the DBCI, c) develop the application, d) conduct a marketing campaign to promote the app d) carry out pilot, impact, and follow-up evaluation of the digital intervention, app, and EARDA as a triage tool.
3. NFM staff will: a) offer mediation support through a chat service in the app, and b) offer mediation services to a sample of parents in each emotional readiness category.

Activities

1. Co-production with PWLE
2. Development of digital intervention.
3. Development of app.
4. Rollout of pilot study for intervention.
5. Adaptation of intervention based on findings from pilot study.
6. Rollout of final self-guided intervention.
7. Social media and targeted promotion of the app/ communication and marketing activity.
8. Mixed methods evaluation of the intervention using pre- and post-test questionnaires and parent interviews.
9. Ongoing monitoring of analytics.
10. Follow up questionnaires and interviews with parents at 3-month post test (this will be rolling depending on when parent completes).

Outputs

1. Parents using the digital intervention in a self-guided way.
2. An intervention for separating parents to develop communication (and relational capability) skills, improve emotional readiness, and learn practical skills for navigating their separation.
3. Quarterly and final evaluation report, contributing to the evidence base around what works in supporting separating parents using a self-guided digital intervention.
4. A triage tool to ensure users are accessing the most appropriate support pathways based on their emotional readiness.

Outcomes

1. The intervention will raise users' awareness about the impact conflict on themselves and/ or on their children.
2. The digital intervention will support parents to develop constructive communication skills.
3. The digital intervention will support parents to improve their emotional readiness.
4. The app will increase parents' awareness about the practicalities of separation.
5. The app will increase parent's ability to access support and guidance.

Enabling factors / conditions for success

1. Participation of PWLE in co-creation to ensure it is accessible and reflects lived experience.
2. Parents having access to devices and data, to access the digital interventions and time to engage
3. Intrinsic motivation from service users.
4. Effective design of the app to ensure it is engaging and motivating to parents.
5. Iterative learning feeding into the design of the app.

Appendix B. Domestic abuse filter text

Welcome to *Separating better*

Before you start, we would like to make sure this app is the right fit for your situation.

Separating better is designed for parents in the early stages of separation, to help ease the transition for parents and children. **This app is not suitable for relationships with a history of domestic abuse**.

In situations with domestic abuse, you will need a different type of support than what our self-guided app can offer.

One in three women and **one in four men** will experience domestic abuse at some point in their lives. Even when a relationship breaks down, domestic abuse can still happen. It may even become more severe.

There is sometimes confusion around the difference between arguing and domestic abuse. Take some time to reflect on your relationship with your ex-partner and anything that might be concerning you.

The following list of behaviours might be signs of domestic abuse. Abuse can take many forms, so these should be taken as guidance only.

- Physical or sexual violence, towards you or your children.
- Threats of violence.
- Threatening behaviour, including threats to your career or reputation, such as threatening to share nude photos on social media.
- Controlling behaviour, such as checking up on where you are and who you are with.
- Desperate attempts to get back together, like showing up drunk or begging for sex.
- Financial control, or financial isolation. This could include withholding child maintenance support, trying to stop you from working, or blocking your access to money.
- Constant contact by phone, text, email, or social media. This may be disguised as checking in on your children.
- Stalking, which might include monitoring your movements through apps on your phone, or putting a tracker on your car.
- Using the courts or other legal avenues to harass you. This could include falsely reporting child abuse, and giving false information about your suitability for custody.
- Reporting false accusations, spreading false rumours, or making it look like the abuse you experienced was your fault, or that you were the abuser.
- Telling friends, family, or professionals that you are mentally unstable.
- Using the children to spy on you or making them choose sides.
- Keeping your children away from you, withholding information about their needs, or changing rules that you had agreed on.

- Buying weapons and showing them off to you.

- Putting you down as a parent. This could include threats to call social services, or telling your children that you don't care about them.

- Not caring for your children. This could include anything from driving dangerously with your children in the car, to encouraging an unhealthy diet, or allowing them to skip school.

Some signs of abuse can also be common in situations where there is a lot of conflict. It may not be obvious if this is domestic abuse or not, especially if you have separated. The most common signs of domestic abuse after separation include **intimidation, threats, financial abuse, and stalking**.

If this is you, we have suggested some services who may be able to help you on our support page.

If you are happy to continue with *Separating better*, create your account here.

Appendix C. Chatbot instructions

You are a supportive guide chatbot called Sunny specialising in working with separating parents and sign posting in the Separating better app. Your purpose is to offer advice and sign posting within the Separating better app, don't offer advice outside the Separating better app. Do not be repetitive and vary your responses. Reflect and be empathetic, stay close to what the client says instead of over interpreting them, and ask follow-up questions designed for you to better understand the situation. Do not provide answers that are too long, only ask one question at a time, and try to maintain a natural conversation. The conversations should last at least 5 interactions but you can be flexible and answer their question right away or have a conversation. Your ultimate goal is to guide the user within the Separating better app, if the information isn't within the app don't make it up and apologise to the user and explain that it is not available in the app. However if the user doesn't have a question about the app you can have a conversation with them. Avoid asking for any information that is identifying (e.g. do not ask addresses, names, or companies where they work). If they do not provide any context, assume you know nothing about their situation and ask them for more information. If you feel like the person is in a domestic abuse situation then this app is not appropriate for them and we need to sign post them to resources outside the app, use this link https://www.oneplusone.org.uk/domestic-abuse-support and other appropriate resources. This can also be the case for mental health and legal resources here in the UK. When the conversation has come to an end, you ask the end-user if they found the service useful. You also ask the end-user for their email address and state that this would be helpful for evaluation purposes. When doing this, reassure the end-user that responses will always be kept secure in line with our research privacy policy.

Appendix D. Podcasts where *Separating better* was advertised

Type of campaign	Podcast name
Podcast specific	Happy Mum, Happy Baby
Podcast specific	The Parenting Tools Podcast
Podcast specific	NewlyDads
Topical targeting	Outspoken with White & Jordan
Topical targeting	The Men's Room
Topical targeting	The Serial Killer Podcast
Topical targeting	Smith and Sniff
Topical targeting	Eventful Lives Podcast
Topical targeting	The Lawfare Podcast
Topical targeting	Mark Narrations - Reddit Stories
Topical targeting	The Stand with Eamon Dunphy
Topical targeting	What It Was Like
Topical targeting	Just Sleep - Bedtime Stories for Adults
Topical targeting	Nip, Tuck, Not Giving A…
Topical targeting	One Minute Remaining - Stories from the inmates
Topical targeting	Back to the Barre
Topical targeting	Bonanas for Bonanza
Topical targeting	Law of Attraction Changed My Life
Topical targeting	DELVE
Topical targeting	Steve Roe Hypnotherapy
Topical targeting	Dad V Girls After Hours
Topical targeting	Everything and Anything…and a bit gay Podcast
Topical targeting	Tangle
Topical targeting	Saving Grace
Topical targeting	Ready To Be Real
Topical targeting	Is It Normal? The Pregnancy Podcast with Jessie Ware
Topical targeting	My Sporting Life
Topical targeting	The History of England
Topical targeting	The History of Byzantium
Topical targeting	They Walk Among Us - UK True Crime
Topical targeting	Harry Potter and the Sacred Text
Topical targeting	WhatCulture Wrestling
Topical targeting	The Chaser Report
Topical targeting	Clips of the Week

Appendix E.
Onboarding and pre- and post-test surveys

1. How would you describe your gender? [can select multiple]
    ☐ Female   ☐ Male   ☐ Transgender   ☐ Non-binary
    ☐ Prefer to self-describe [open text option]

2. What is your age? [open text]

3. How would you describe your ethnic group? [open text]

4. What is your sexual orientation?
    ☐ Bi ☐ Gay man ☐ Gay woman/ Lesbian ☐ Heterosexual/ Straight
    ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ Prefer to self describe [open text option]

5. How would you describe your relationship with the other parent of your child?
    ☐ I'm thinking of separating ☐ I'm in the process of separating
    ☐ I'm separated/divorced ☐ Other [open text option]

6. How long have you been separated (in years and months?) [open text]

7. How long were you in a relationship with your ex-partner (in years and months?)
    [open text]

8. How many children do you have? [open text]

9. What are the ages of your children [open text]

10. Where do your children primarily live?
    ☐ Mostly with me ☐ Mostly with my ex-partner
    ☐ About 50/50 between myself and my ex-partner

11. What are the first four digits of your postcode?

12. Have you accessed court or mediation to manage your separation?
    Court/ Mediation/ Both/ Neither
    a) [If chose court] Are you still engaged in court proceedings? YES/ NO
    ai) [If chose YES] How long have you been engaged in court proceedings?
    [open text]
    b) [If chose mediation] Are you still engaged in mediation? YES/NO
    bi) [If chose YES] How long have you been engaged in mediation? [open text]
    c)) [If chose both] Are you still engaged in either court or mediation?
    Court/ Mediation/ No
    ci) [If chose Court go to ai)
    cii) [If chose Mediation go to bi)
    d) [If chose Neither] Do you intend to use court to manage your separation? YES/NO
    di) [If chose YES] Why do you intend to use court to manage your separation?
    [open text]

Emotional Adaptation to Relationship Dissolution (EARDA; Millings et al., 2020)

From 0 to 5, how well does each of these statements describe how you are feeling about your breakup now?'
(0 = 'Does not describe my feelings at all' to 5 'Describes my feelings exactly')

	Does not describe my feelings at all					Describes my feelings exactly
I feel ashamed I couldn't keep the relationship together.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel guilty I broke up the relationship.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel relieved the relationship is over.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel anxious about what will happen next.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel I can't get over what I have lost.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel angry at my ex-partner.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel resentful towards my ex-partner.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel frustrated by my situation.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel a failure that my relationship broke down.	0	1	2	3	4	5
I feel hopeful about the future.	0	1	2	3	4	5

Brief Acrimony Scale (BACS; Rahimullah et al., 2020)

The following questions relate to how you and your ex-partner get on with one another. Using the scale provided, tell us how you and your ex or spouse (your ex) get on with one another.

		Almost never			Almost always
1	Do you feel friendly toward your ex?	1	2	3	4
2	Do you have friendly talks with your ex?	1	2	3	4
3	Is your ex a good parent?	1	2	3	4
4	Do you and your ex agree on discipline for the children?	1	2	3	4
5	Do you feel hostile toward your ex?	1	2	3	4
6	Does your ex feel hostile toward you?	1	2	3	4
7	Can you talk to your ex about problems with the children?	1	2	3	4
8	Do you have a friendly divorce or separation?	1	2	3	4

Quality of Coparenting Communication Scale (QCCS; Ahrons, 1981)

The following questions relate to how you and your ex-partner co-parent. Think back over the last 4 weeks and tell us how well you and your former partner or spouse (your ex) have related in the following ways.

		Never				Always
1	When you and your ex discuss parenting issues, how often does an argument result?	1	2	3	4	5
2	How often is the underlying atmosphere one of hostility and anger?	1	2	3	4	5
3	How often is the conversation stressful and tense?	1	2	3	4	5
4	How often do you and your ex have basic differences of opinion about issues related to child rearing?	1	2	3	4	5
5	When you need help regarding the children, do you seek it from your ex?	1	2	3	4	5
6	Would you say that your ex is a resource to you in raising the children?	1	2	3	4	5
7	Would you say that you are a resource to your ex in raising the children?	1	2	3	4	5
8	If your ex has needed to make a change in visiting arrangements, do you go out of your way to accommodate?	1	2	3	4	5
9	Does your ex go out of the way to accommodate any changes you need to make?	1	2	3	4	5
10	Do you feel that your ex understands and is supportive of your needs as a parent (custodial or noncustodial)?	1	2	3	4	5

Communication measure (developed for *Separating better* evaluation)

The following questions relate to how you and your ex-partner communicate with each other. Using the scale provided, tell us how you tend to communicate with your ex-partner.

During a discussion of issues or problems between you and your ex-partner (your ex), how likely is it that you…

		Extremely unlikely	Unlikely	Neutral	Likely	Extremely likely
1	Feel able to stay calm when talking to your ex	1	2	3	4	5
2	Feel confident telling your ex how you feel	1	2	3	4	5
3	Blame or criticise your ex	1	2	3	4	5
4	See things from your ex's point of view	1	2	3	4	5
5	Suggest possible solutions and compromises	1	2	3	4	5
6	Withdraw from the conversation	1	2	3	4	5
7	Talk about how your children are adjusting to the separation	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix F. App research consent form

Separating better is funded by the Department for Work and Pensions, and is undergoing an evaluation to examine how effective it is in supporting parents through separation.

By using the app and answering any questions that come up, you'll be helping us to understand what works for separating parents.

Please take time to read the following information carefully. If you have any questions or would like a copy of this information, contact us on info@oneplusone.org.uk.

Evaluation information

What is the purpose of the evaluation?
Separating better aims to support parents through separation, with practical guidance and emotional support; improving their co-parenting relationship and reducing the risk of needing to use the family courts. To make sure *Separating better* is effective, we need to evaluate the impact of using the app.

Do I have to take part?
It is up to you. You will be asked to consent to taking part in the evaluation before signing up to use the app. You can withdraw at any time by stopping your use of the app. You can ask us to delete information you have entered into the app until December 2024. After this, all data will be anonymised. Once you have started using the app, it will not be possible to withdraw any one person's analytics data.

What do I have to do if I take part?
When you have read this information, please tick the consent buttons on the next page. To take part in the evaluation, just use the app and complete any questionnaires that are presented.

We will also randomly select 200 users to attend two mediation sessions. If you are selected for this part of the evaluation, we will send you more information and a sign-up link.

Are there any disadvantages or risks in taking part?
Thinking about separation can be difficult. If you are not comfortable using the app you can withdraw at any time during the session and delete your account. If you find that the support in the app isn't appropriate, or you think you might be at risk of domestic abuse, please see support available near you: local support services and domestic abuse support services.

Will my taking part be kept confidential?
Any data you submit will only be accessible by members of the OnePlusOne research team. All data will be anonymised by 20 December 2024 and any identifying information destroyed. We follow British Psychological Society guidelines to protect your identifying information. You will not be identified in any of the output we produce from the evaluation, including the reports we submit to our funders.

What will you do with my data?

Our research privacy policy explains our data handling processes. If you would like to discuss your data privacy rights, email privacy@oneplusone.org.uk. If you choose to leave the app before completing all sections, we will use data and information you have entered up to that point: you can ask us not to do so by emailing the privacy email listed above.

What if I want to complain?

If you have any questions about the evaluation, or if you wish to raise a complaint, please contact senior research lead, Shannon Hirst: shannon.hirst@oneplusone.org.uk. If your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, please contact chief executive, Verity Glasgow (verity.glasgow@oneplusone.org.uk) who will escalate the complaint for you.

Thank you for taking part.

Please read and tick all of the following statements.

☐ I have read and understood the information sheet presented to me.

☐ I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

☐ I agree to take part in an evaluation of the *Separating better* app.

☐ If I am selected for referral to National Family Mediation, I consent to OnePlusOne sharing my email address with National Family Mediation (NFM).

☐ I agree to OnePlusOne contacting me for follow-up surveys and interviews.

☐ I understand that my taking part is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without having to say why.

☐ I understand that everything I share will be anonymised as detailed above and I won't be identifiable in any reports or output developed as a result of my taking part.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw my responses to surveys and parenting plans until 20 December 2024 by contacting: privacy@oneplusone.org.uk

Name:

Date:

Appendix G. Separating better follow up survey

Follow-up survey for *Separating better* App users

1. How did you find out about the *Separating better* App? ……………

2. What were you looking for from *Separating better*? ………………..

3. How satisfied were you that you found what you needed? [*Scale*]

If not satisfied, what was missing? What other support or information were you looking for? …………………………………….

4. Which sections of the App did you engage with?
• Advice and Guidance
• Work it out videos
• Parenting plan
• Budget planner
• Goals
• I didn't really engage with any of the sections
  [if ticked this response, please go to question xxx]

[*For users who didn't engage*]
a. What stopped you using more of the App? ……………
b. What would have helped you to engage with it? …………………
c. Do you have any other comments or suggestions for how we could improve *Separating better*? …………………

  [*For those who used some or all of the App*]
5. Please rate how helpful you found the following sections [Scale]
• Advice & Guidance
• Work it out videos
• Parenting plan
• Budget planner
• Goal setting

Please help us to understand a bit more about your experience of the different sections by explaining why you rated particular sections more or less helpful …………………………………………

6. How much do you agree with the following statements?
  After using *Separating better*, I feel more informed about...
a. Feel more informed about
i. What I need to do next
ii. My rights
iii. How to talk to the children
iv. How to talk to my ex partner
v. How to organise my finances

7. What, if anything, has changed for you as a result of using the App.
Tick all that apply

a. Communicating better with co-parent
b. Agreed a parenting plan/ how to co-parent
c. Have organised my finances
d. Feel better within myself
e. Feel more ready to engage in the separation process
f. Feel better able to manage the separation process
g. Positive changes in our children
h. Less likely to use the courts to resolve our differences
i. More likely to seek mediation
j. Other ……………………………

8. Please tell us about anything else that has changed for you as a result of using *Separating better*.

9. How likely are you to recommend the App to others? [Scale]

10. What would make the App better? ………………..

11. Any other comments or suggestions? …………….

Appendix H. Separating better topic guide

Relational context and experience
- Relationship status [e.g. could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your children's other parent? Probe who initiated separation.
- Stage of separation
- How has it been?

Practical aspects
- What are some of the main practical challenges?
  Probe:
  - Managing the process
    How do you feel about managing the process e.g. negotiating with your partner, agreeing parenting plan?
    Probe: feeling ready? When felt ready/ or likely to feel ready? What influenced that?
  - Partner engagement
    Partner cooperation, willingness to engage in planning and negotiations, communication
  - Understanding the process
    How well informed did you feel about the legal/ administrative process of separation before engaging with the App?
- Any other challenges?

Emotional aspects
- What about the emotional aspects … What have been some of the main challenges / what's been difficult?
  - How you feel within yourself
  - Ability to parent
  - Children's behaviour
  - Anything else…?

Engagement with App
- What role has the App played in separation process for you…?
- How did you find out about the App?
- What made you try it?
  - How did you feel about a self-guided approach?
  - What did you expect?
  - What do people you know think about you using the App?
- How did you find using the App?
  - What parts did you like? Why?
  - What parts didn't you like? Why?
  - Where there things that made it easier you to use the app?
    What was easy?
    What challenging?
- How far did you progress through it?
  - *Why?*
- Plans to continue using it?
- Would you recommend it to other people in a similar situation? Why? Why not?

Separation process, outcomes and impact
Practical
- How helpful has the App been in managing the practical aspects of separation?
  - Probe role in
    - *readiness to engage in negotiating with your co-parent?*
    - *Ability to cope?*
    - *Partner engagement*
    - *Feeling better informed / understanding options*

Experience of the Courts
- How do you feel about using the courts to resolve differences / reach agreement?
- What influence, if any, did the App play in your thinking about using the courts? Probe e.g. providing information/ raising awareness, feeling more competent / confident to reach own agreement.

Emotional
- How helpful has the App been in managing some of the emotional challenges of separating?
- What have you done differently as a result of using the App?
- Managing practical aspects
- Managing emotional aspects

- What changes have you noticed since you've used the App?
Probe:
- How you and your partner communicate
  - Negotiating plans, dealing with changes
  - How you manage conflict
  - Coparenting behaviours
- How you feel within yourself e.g. anxiety, well-being,
- Children
  - behaviour, well-being communication, relationship with co-parent, school

- What aspects of the App have been less helpful?
- What improvements would you like to see in App?
- Any other thoughts about the App?

Other sources of help
- What other sources of help have you used? approaches have you tried? Probe:
  - other Information sources, people (friends, professionals, family etc), networks/ groups,
  - Probe if anything similar to the app?
- How did you find them?
- What's been most helpful out of the sources of information/ help you've engaged with? Why?
- What hasn't been so helpful? Why?
- What other sources of support or information would you like to see available?

If not covered above
Role of mediation
- How did they find it?
- What was helpful?
- What wasn't?
- What did they take away from it?
- How much have they been able to implement what was agreed? What helped them do that? What were the obstacles or challenges about doing that?
- What has changed as a result - [following the same list of prompts for the impact of the App around communication, conflict, well-being, plans etc….)

Round up questions etc….
Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

Appendix I. Interviewee demographics

TABLE 9. DEMOGRAPHICS OF INTERVIEWEES

Initials	Age	Relationship status	Relationship length	Separation length	Resident parent status	Number of children	Child age	Gender
Mike	46	Divorced	16y8m	1y11m	Non-resident parent	2	9	Male
Emily	46	In the process of separating	18y11m	4m	Still living with ex-partner	2	12,8	Female
Anita	36	Divorced	8y	1yr6m	Resident parent	1	6	Female
Siddiq	49	Divorced	15y	4yr 2m	Non-resident parent	2	11,	Male
George	34	Separated	10y	9m	Shared custody	3	9, 5, 3	Male
Sara	42	Separated	12y 3m	4m	Resident parent	1		Female
Fran	37	Divorced	13y8m	3y	Shared custody	1	7	Female
Amanda	43	In the process of separating	18y2m	7m	Still living with ex-partner	2	9, 4	Female
Paul	40	In the process of separating	18y2m	7m	Still living with ex-partner	2	9, 4	Male
Jessica	32	In the process of separating	8y 2m	1m	Resident parent	1	2	Female
Isabella	37	Separated	10y	3m	Resident parent	1	5	Female
Jodie	38	Separated	14y1m	1y1m	Resident parent	3	12, 2	Female
Joanna	47	In the process of separating	22y	1y	Resident parent	2	14, 11	Female
Martin	40	Separated (never married)	3y	7y	Non-resident parents	1	10	Male
Rachel	38	Divorced	10y	2y 6m	Resident parents	2	5, 6	Female
Alice	34	In the process of separating	8y5m	N/A	Shared custody	1	4	Female
Charlene	42	In the process of separating	17y	7m	Resident parents	2	11, 15	Female
Lukas	50	In the process of separation	18y 6m	8m	Still living with ex-partner	3	12, 17, 19	Male
Stephanie	27	Separated	9y 9m	4y 4m	Resident parent	1	12	Female
Amy	50	Separated (never married)	6y 0m	9y 9m	Resident parent	1	10	Female
Mel	46	Separated (never married)	6y 0m	9y 9m	Non-resident parent	1	10	Male

Appendix J. Advisory board members

Name	Organisation	Role
Anne Barlow	Exeter University	Professor of family law and policy
Anthony Douglas	Anthony Douglas Consultancy	Expert in children's services & safeguarding. Former Cafcass CEO.
Bob Greig	OnlyDads	CEO – sector specialist
Ben Hine	Univerity of West London	Professor of Applied Psychology
Joel Strohmer	NoMensa	Digital innovation specialist
Julia Boas	Intercom trust	Deputy director
Jen Sheppard	Social Bite	Marketing manager
Bill Hewlett	Civilised Separations	Family law and mediation expert
Roxanne MacDowell	Norfolk County Council	RPC coordinator and domestic abuse expert
Eleni Bloy	Race Equality Foundation	Parental conflict lead and family law solicitor
Ann May	33 Bedford Row	Barrister in Family Law

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