

# Research into parent-child contact after parental separation

Good policy requires good data. The Institute is currently developing a study to explore qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents might share time with their children. In this article, the author sets out some of the emerging methodological issues that confront this endeavour.

**BRUCE SMYTH**

**A**s part of the broad policy shift towards encouraging post-separation co-parenting, there remains keen interest in ascertaining the nature, amount, and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children. This interest stems from several issues of pressing policy relevance.

First, in Australia, as elsewhere, the extent to which different parenting arrangements (for example, “sole care” versus “shared care”) impact on child and parent outcomes continues to be an issue of significant practical and policy import (Demo and Acock 1996; Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam and Telesca 2001). Yet scant methodological attention has been paid to post-separation paternal involvement in the divorce outcomes literature.

Second, resident parents (mainly mothers) report that around one-third of non-resident parents (mainly fathers) have little or no contact with their children when parents live apart (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998). While similar patterns have been reported in the

United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, not much is known about why many non-resident parents lose or do not maintain contact with their children (Dudley 1991; Greif 1997).

Third, issues related to contact disputes, denial, and enforcement feature prominently on the policy and legislative agendas of many countries – such as Australia, Canada, and Hong Kong (Children Act Sub-Committee of the Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Board on Family Law 2002; Rhoades 2002). In its 1998 report on problems with the enforcement of child contact orders, the Family Law Council noted the reality and persistence of these problems, and the need to address them. It recommended a three-tiered approach – “preventative measures”, “remedial measures”, and “punitive action” – in dealing with contact order breaches (Family Law Council 1998). This recommendation was subsequently enacted as part of the Family Law Amendment Act, which came into effect in December 2000. However, the various family dynamics and psychosocial determinants that underpin contact disputes are still not well understood (Trinder 2001).

Fourth, there is ongoing lively debate in Australia and overseas about the links between parent-child contact and the payment of child support – the so-called “access-maintenance nexus” (Arditti 1992; Kitch 1991; Seltzer, McLanahan and Hanson 1998; Veum 1993). Central to this debate are important questions about the extent to which contact improves the quantum and regularity of child support payments, and the degree to which child support payments take account of the costs of contact for non-resident parents. An increasingly pervasive view is that child support legislation “ought” to foster and facilitate parent-child contact (Melli 1999). But this view is in marked contrast to what has been the prevailing ethos in Australia – that contact and child support should not be linked because such a link is unlikely to be in the best interests of children (Joint Select Committee 1994: 383). Part of the impetus for strengthening the nexus between contact and child support is an increasing emphasis on the need to recognise the costs of contact to non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children (Family and Community Services 2000).

Of particular note with respect to this fourth issue is the background to the Child Support Legislation Amendment Bill (No 2), which was passed on 29 June 2001. Currently, non-resident parents who have their children for more than 30 per cent of nights per year (the “substantial access threshold”) pay a reduced amount of child support. The Amendment Bill proposed, among other things, to reduce child support payable by non-resident parents whose children stay with them for between 10 and 30 per cent of nights per year. Recognition that payers incur costs during contact was one of the key rationales for lowering the “shared care” threshold (Family and Community Services 2000). While this proposal was rejected last year by the Senate and subsequently removed prior to the Bill being passed, discussions on strengthening the nexus between contact and child support are likely to continue (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000).

In view of the apparent policy push towards strengthening the contact-child support nexus, it is perhaps surprising that little is known about the way that parent-child contact is structured in Australia, the associated financial costs of contact for non-resident parents, and the relationship between these costs and those incurred by resident parents in caring for children (see Henman and Mitchell 2001; Woods and Associates 1999).

Fifth, parallel to the policy shift towards encouraging co-parenting, there is some evidence – albeit piecemeal – of increased involvement (or interest) of non-resident parents in their children’s lives. For instance, drawing on interviews with legal professionals, in the context of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, Dewar and Parker (1999: 102) concluded that: “there is now a greater willingness to challenge the standard contact ‘package’ of alternate weekends and half school holidays, and to seek (and be granted) orders for longer weekend contact than previously (for example, Friday night to Monday morning), more midweek contact, and for contact with children at an earlier age than previously”.

More recently, drawing on data from a national random sample of divorced parents in Australia, Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg (2001) found that 41 per cent of

non-resident fathers some five years after separation wanted to change children’s living arrangements – two thirds of these fathers wanted children to reside with them, while the remaining third wanted equal care of children.

But this and most other surveys of post-separation patterns of parenting have tended to be broad and shallow in their measurement of parent-child contact, giving primacy to frequency as the core dimension of contact. Consequently, it is hard to get a definitive picture of the “nuts and bolts” of contact – namely, when, what, where, and how such parenting occurs – and the extent to which quantitative and qualitative changes might be occurring.

This empirical gap stems from both conceptual and methodological issues.



## Measuring contact

Three measurement issues warrant particular attention: disentangling the dimensions of contact; the economic implications of contact for both parents; and measuring the quality of contact.

### The dimensions of contact

Parent-child contact can vary along many dimensions, including frequency, nature, quality, flexibility, regularity, and continuity (ongoing, start-stop, re-start). These dimensions can differ among siblings. Given this potential complexity, research into residence and contact needs to clearly describe and recognise both qualitative and quantitative differences in the many ways that parental sharing of time with children can occur (Melli 1999).

To date, however, little information has been collected on some of the most rudimentary components of parent-child contact, such as the distinction between “day only” contact versus “sleepovers”, and “holiday” versus “term-time” arrangements. Failure to make these distinctions can inaccurately convey both the amount and quality of contact that is actually occurring.

These distinctions are not just of academic interest: they also have financial implications. Different patterns

of parenting may require different levels of infrastructure and are therefore likely to involve different financial costs. For example, regular overnight stays would usually necessitate separate bedrooms for children (Woods and Associates 1999) while “day only” contact would not. The collection of more detailed contact information is thus a necessary prerequisite for any attempt to obtain reliable estimates of the financial costs of contact for non-resident parents in particular.

The above distinctions also have psycho-social implications. Different patterns of care may foster different child and parent outcomes.

On the one hand, overnight stays might encourage close emotional bonds between non-resident parents and their children. On the other hand, there is lively debate on the need to consider developmental issues

to recognise the costs of contact for non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children.

While there can be considerable costs involved in maintaining a residence that can accommodate overnight stays for children (Saunders et al. 1998; Woods and Associates 1999), little data are available in Australia or overseas on the monetary costs of contact (such as the cost of transport, food, leisure activities, energy and medicines) to non-resident parents, and the relationship between these costs and those incurred by resident parents in caring for children.

In reality, it seems likely that many of the costs of separately caring for children would not be shifted from resident parents to non-resident parents unless high levels of contact occur. This is because separation duplicates these costs and this, along with the inversion of economies of scale,

means that the overall cost of children increases markedly if parents separate (Henman and Mitchell 2001).

In the United States, Melli (1999) has “guesstimated” that a reduction in the financial costs of caring for children by resident parents probably does not occur until near-

equal time-sharing (that is, 40–50 per cent shared care). In Australia, we have little data to assess this issue despite its current relevance for child support policy. Ideally, a configural approach drawing on ‘couple data’ (that is, information from both parents from the same relationship) is needed so that the costs of caring for children under different post-separation timeshare arrangements can be estimated. But, as discussed below, obtaining couple data is problematic.

#### **Contact quality**

Without knowing the context of contact, and what activities non-resident parents and their children engage in (if and) when they are together, it is hard to assess the relationship between contact and child outcomes. Yet scant attention has been paid to measuring the quality of contact.

In recent years, “authoritative parenting” – encompassing warmth and involvement, the encouragement of psychological autonomy, and monitoring and boundary setting – has been shown to be an important dimension of relationship quality in both one and two parent families (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Lamborn et al. 1991; Steinberg et al. 1994). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) point out that few studies in the divorce literature have measured authoritative parenting in its “full complexity” but a number of studies have nonetheless tapped particular parental behaviours that represent its various sub-dimensions.

Based on a meta-analytic review examining these and other studies, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that the *quality* of contact is more important than the *amount* of contact in terms of good post-divorce outcomes for children. Accordingly, they suggest that future research adopt more comprehensive and rationally based measures of contact quality instead of relying on simple measures of contact frequency. Thus far, however, this does not seem to have happened.

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and family dynamics regarding the appropriateness of sleepovers for very young children (compare Gould and Stahl 2001; Kelly and Lamb 2000; Lamb and Kelly 2001; Solomon and Biringen 2001; Warshak 2000).

Then again, an absence of overnight stays may indicate concerns about a child’s safety, a lack of self-confidence about parenting skills, possible emotional friction between the child and a new partner, or unwelcoming surroundings which, in the child’s view, might be cold, cramped or boring.

Thus, distinctions related to the structure of contact can act as markers for deeper contextual issues that need to be explored in terms of family dynamics.

#### **Financial costs of contact**

Parallel to the policy shift towards encouraging co-parenting, there has been increasing emphasis on the need

## The (thorny) issue of sampling

A fundamental methodological issue for researching contact is that collecting information from both parents from the same relationship within the general population of separated parents is extremely difficult.

Couple data have several benefits over data obtained from independent samples of men and women. Without couple data, it is difficult to disentangle differential reporting by men and women from sample bias. Differential reporting is common to family research (Callan 1991). But where a study comprises different samples of men and women, it is hard to know to what extent any differences in perceptions are exaggerated by systematic differences between the samples. Independent samples of men and women may be prone to such differences because separated men and women who participate in surveys are likely to derive from different segments of the general population of separated parents (discussed below).

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Putting aside the issue of “couple” versus “single” perspectives for a moment, family law research has been characterised by its use of small, ad-hoc, convenience samples. These samples can work well for in-depth, qualitative studies aimed at showing diversity, improving an understanding of certain processes, contextualising a phenomenon, or at generating hypotheses, but the findings typically lack generalisability. Since family law policies need to cover an array of situations, findings usually need to be broadly applicable. National random samples typically afford generalisability, but obtaining these samples can be difficult at the level of practicality and cost.

Obtaining representative samples of separated parents has plagued family law research in Australia (for example, Woods and Associates 1999; Funder 1986; Rhoades Graycar and Harrison 2000) and overseas (for example, Maclean and Eekelaar 1997). Because relationship breakdown occurs behind closed doors, no list (“sampling frame”) exists containing the names of parents from different types of relationships who have separated. For this reason, there has generally been a reliance on data from population surveys and government agency records.

Survey data have several drawbacks. Because of the cost of screening out other groups, surveying a random sample of separated parents can be very expensive. In addition, population-based data typically focus on either resident parents or non-resident parents rather

than former couples. This is because in survey research, random samples are assembled primarily through contact with one parent: the parent who responded to the survey. Involving the other parent usually requires the respondent parent to provide contact information for the other parent. However, where high conflict exists between former partners, the respondent parent may not know where their children’s other parent lives, or may not want the other parent to be contacted. This means that where information is sought from both parents, the sample is likely to be biased towards low-conflict parental relationships.

Data collected by government agencies (such as the Child Support Agency, the Family Court of Australia, and Centrelink) has its own strengths and weaknesses.

These data often yield contact information for both parents from the same former relationship. Moreover, a random sample can usually be drawn from an agency’s database. However, by definition, such databases are selective of parents in certain situations (for example, those in receipt of government income support, or those who cannot reach agreement on their parenting arrangements) and do not represent separated parents from a broad range of circumstances – particularly those whose parenting and property arrangements have been settled privately. Thus data collected from respondents contacted through government agencies may not reflect the experience of most separated or divorced parents.

In short, a trade-off usually exists between attempting to draw a “representative” sample of separated or divorced parents, and obtaining information from both parents from the same relationship. This creates a “no-win” situation for researchers studying parent–child contact.

Longitudinal or panel studies, which make use of sophisticated techniques for tracking respondents, appear to be a useful way to obtain couple data from a representative sample. They can also map pre-separation levels of involvement between family members – thus providing unique insights into process-oriented issues, such as changing levels of involvement, negotiation processes around parent–child contact, causal relationships between factors, and the timing and reasons for any change in arrangements over time.

While two large-scale panel studies (the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children) are currently underway in Australia, the annual rate of relationship breakdown by parents with children under the age of 18 means that it can take a substantial amount of time to build a sample comprising relatively large numbers of separated families.

So where does all of this leave researchers and policy makers who desire a better understanding of post-separation parent–child contact issues?

## Moving policy forward

Regarding the issue of measurement, the complexity of post-separation parenting requires a series of questions that tackle the various dimensions of contact – particularly the nature and quality of contact. As with tapping any complex domain, the main issue here is that a comprehensive set of questions requires interview time, but most broad-brush studies cannot afford the time needed to address this degree of complexity. Clearly, a separate study of post-separation contact arrangements is needed to help inform family policy in Australia. Such a study is currently being developed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. This study aims to map in detail the various dimensions of contact in order to systematically explore qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share time with their children.

In terms of obtaining a representative sample comprising couple data, a short-term practical approach is needed until the Australian panel studies reach fruition. One approach would be to collect information from both a national random sample of separated parents and a sample drawn from a large administrative database: one sample could be used to identify and calibrate any sample biases in the other. This approach is also likely to yield couple data, which could then be used to calibrate the data from the independent groups of women and men.

To sum up: there is a clear need to develop more comprehensive measures of parent–child contact. These measures need to be able to tap the various dimensions of contact so that contact patterns can be determined with some precision, particularly regarding issues of shared costs and shared parenting. Until these data are collected, policy related to parent–child contact is unlikely to be able to address the many challenges it currently faces.

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**Bruce Smyth** is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. He is currently developing the *Caring for Children after Separation* project as part of the Institute’s Family and Marriage Program. This article is a version of a paper presented at the 15th International Sociological Association World Congress on 7-14 July 2002, in Brisbane. The idea for that paper grew out of a piece that Dr Belinda Fehlberg and the author wrote for *Family Matters* (Fehlberg & Smyth 2000).