

# When the difference is



The broad cultural, legal and policy push towards encouraging post-separation cooperative parenting needs to be underpinned with detailed research that goes beyond simply measuring the frequency of contact between children and non-resident parents. This article considers one important dimension that has attracted little attention to date: day-only contact versus overnight stays

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**D**espite widespread interest and policy relevance, significant gaps exist in our knowledge of contact between non-resident parents and their children. These gaps warrant attention.

In Australia, as elsewhere, research into post-separation parent-child contact has focused almost exclusively on the measurement of one domain: the frequency of face-to-face contact.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising. Time is tangible – it can be counted, divided, and apportioned – and often the thing that is measured is that which is easiest to measure.

But obviously there is more to parent-child contact than just time. The nature and quality of the interaction is also important, perhaps even more so (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). In the United States context, Melli (1999) has argued that research into 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. To date, however, little information has been collected in Australia on some of the most rudimentary components of contact, such as the distinction between day-only contact versus sleepovers.

The day-night distinction is important for several reasons. To begin with, there are notable qualitative differences between day-time and night-time parenting. Overnight stays help foster the development of close emotional bonds between children and non-resident parents (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Warshak 2000). Time is usually less constrained and structured, allowing the dynamics that typically characterise family life to occur – such as putting children to bed, saying good night, waking and dressing children, and starting the day with them over breakfast. By contrast, daytime contact is typically more time-limited and thus tends to be structured in ways that foster participation in mutually rewarding activities. While these activities are important for building and maintaining

emotional bonds, they are only one slice from the broad spectrum of practical contexts necessary for children's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Furthermore, it can take time for parents and children to get re-acquainted after not seeing each other for a while – even after a week or two. Overnight stays can help this process. They can also encourage children to feel that they have two homes, and that they are not just “visitors”; affirm non-resident parents' self-identity as a “parent” (Lamb and Kelly 2001); and allow resident parents to gain respite from the immediate responsibilities of care giving (Funder 1993; Ricci 1997).

Another reason that the distinction between day-time and night-time parenting is important is that each pattern of care may have different degrees of durability. For instance, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found that overnight stays remained relatively stable over time whereas day-only contact did not. There was a shift from no contact to day-only contact by some non-resident mothers, while the reverse was the case for some non-resident fathers (who shifted from day-only contact to no contact). Day-only contact might thus reflect a more fragile or transitional relationship structure than overnight care, acting as a stepping-stone to or from disengagement.

A fourth reason that the day-night distinction is important is that different patterns of care might foster different psychosocial outcomes. For instance, there is lively debate about whether young children should stay overnight with non-resident parents and, if so, at what age and how often (Gould and Stahl 2001; Kelly and Lamb 2000; Lamb and Kelly 2001; Solomon and Birigin 2001; Younger 2002). This issue is of significant import to separated parents with young children, as well as legal professionals and clinicians.

Finally, each pattern of care can involve different financial costs. Regular overnight stays, for instance, usually necessitate separate bedrooms for children (Woods and

# night and day



## PARENT–CHILD CONTACT AFTER SEPARATION

Associates 1999) while day-only contact does not. Overnight stays also typically require more meals, furniture, bedding, toys, clothes, games, and so on. Recently there has been increasing emphasis on the need to recognise the costs of contact to non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children (FaCS 2000). Distinguishing between day-only contact and sleepovers is a necessary prerequisite in any attempt to obtain reliable estimates of these costs.

But Australian data on day-only contact versus sleepovers are sparse. Recent national data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey offer some insights. According to resident parents' reports, a significant minority (28 per cent) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, who see that parent, never stay overnight with them.<sup>2</sup> Data from the 1997 Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998) put this figure at 34 per cent.<sup>3</sup>

Why might so many children not stay overnight? Two possibilities are money and stability. Two households are not as cheap to run as one. Aside from inverting the economies of scale, parental separation duplicates many of the costs of caring for children across two households. Confronted by both the start-up costs of setting up somewhere new to live and child support liabilities, some non-resident parents may not be in a position to provide suitable accommodation to facilitate overnight stays. Thus where one parent is able to provide better accommodation than the other, children might sleep primarily in that parent's household.

In other cases, stability may be valued for its own sake. A basic axiom of child psychology is that children need stability to ensure their healthy development. One of the cornerstones of stability is having a place to call "home". For children (especially young ones), home and family are intrinsically intertwined: "My home is where my family lives" (Garbarino 1995: 56). Even though parental separation acts to create two families and two homes for children,

a "one home" mindset often persists (Ricci 1997). Stability in this sense might mean "one home, one bed", with day-only contact reflecting this mindset.

Day-only contact can also indicate concerns about a child's safety, a lack of knowledge or self-confidence about parenting skills on the part of the non-resident parent, or possibly emotional friction between parents, or between a child and a new partner of a non-resident parent (Taylor, Smith and Tapp 2001). It can thus act as a marker for deeper contextual issues that need to be explored in terms of family dynamics.

Of course, where there are chronic levels of co-parental conflict, or where children have experienced or are likely to be exposed to continuing domestic violence or child abuse, contact (day or night) may be highly inappropriate. The best interests of children should always be paramount in making decisions about contact, with the appropriateness of different patterns of care contingent on a range of factors, including the quality of care, as well as children's individual temperament, resilience, stage of development, and experience (Gould and Stahl 2001; Ricci 1997).

In sum, significant gaps exist in our knowledge of contact between non-resident parents and their children. One such gap is the distinction between day-only contact and sleepovers. This distinction has important implications in terms of bonding, costs and outcomes.

### *Data source*

One dataset that can offer unique insights into post-separation day- and night-time parenting is the 1997 Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998).<sup>4</sup> This large-scale national survey maps patterns of parental care for children aged less than 18 years whose parents live apart. Much of the information in this survey was collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for the first time. This included

a question on overnight stays: “Does [child’s name] ever stay overnight with his/her mother/father?”

In this article, data from the Family Characteristics Survey are used to investigate the occurrence of sleepovers, and three potential correlates: family type (single-parent versus repartnered-parent households), age of children, and child support (received or not received). These factors were chosen because each has been identified as a significant predictor of contact more generally: first, non-resident mothers often maintain stronger social ties with their children than non-resident fathers – as evidenced by higher levels of extended contact rather than day-to-day contact (Stewart 1999b); second, younger children are more likely than older children to have contact with non-resident parents (ABS 1998); and third, non-resident fathers who see their children tend to pay child support, unlike fathers who lose or do not maintain contact (Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg 2000). While other factors are likely to be important (for example, the quality of the co-parental relationship, geographical distance between parents, and the gender of children), the data set most readily accommodated consideration of the former three key factors.

### Methodological and conceptual issues

This analysis excludes children who have little or no contact with their non-resident parent (30 per cent of children living with one parent), as well as a sizeable number of children who “were identified as living with one natural parent, but no other parent was living elsewhere” (perhaps due to the loss of contact with, or death of, the

other parent) (ABS 1998: 7).<sup>5</sup> The sample thus comprises children under 18 who have *some* contact with their non-resident parent.

It should also be noted that the Family Characteristics Survey relies on resident parents’ reports (mostly mothers). Differential reporting by women and men is a common feature of research of this nature (Braver and O’Connell 1999), with fathers generally perceiving themselves to be more involved with their children than mothers perceive them to be. This means that the data presented below are likely to be an underestimate of paternal involvement, including the prevalence of overnight stays.

Since non-resident parents were not interviewed, the following analysis is restricted to three family types: single-mother households, single-father households, and repartnered-resident-parent households (of whom 87 per cent were repartnered mothers). These three family types comprised 28 per cent of all families in Australia with children under the age of 18 years in 1997 (18 per cent single-mother families; 3 per cent single-father families; and 7 per cent step or blended families) (ABS 1998).

One final caveat: some caution should be exercised in viewing the three family types presented as static structures. In reality, individuals often pass through a range of family constellations after divorce or separation but this complexity is masked by single-point-in-time data (Maclean and Eekelaar 1997). The fluidity of family form should be borne in mind when examining the accompanying figures.

### Findings

As context for analysing sleepovers, we first examine the frequency of contact by family type (Figure 1).

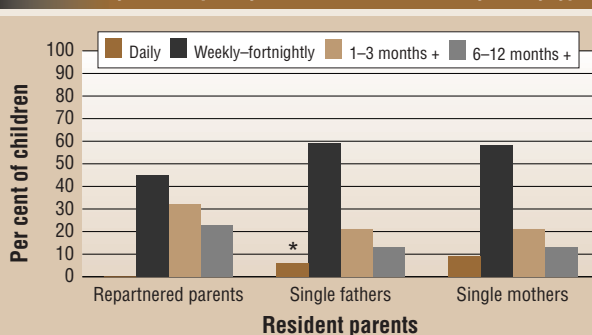
Single mothers and single fathers reported very similar patterns of contact between non-resident parents and children. This similarity accords with research overseas (for example, Stewart 1999a, b). Figure 1 shows that over half of children had face-to-face contact with non-resident mothers and fathers at least once a fortnight (59 per cent and 58 per cent), while around a fifth of children saw their non-resident parent every one to three months (21 per cent). In contrast, daily contact with non-resident mothers and fathers was relatively uncommon (6 per cent and 9 per cent), as was contact that occurred less than once every three months (13 per cent for both).

A less regular pattern of contact was evident for children in the care of a repartnered parent (mostly mothers), whereby fortnightly contact was less likely to occur in repartnered-parent households (45 per cent) than in single-mother and single-father households (58 per cent and 59 per cent respectively). However, contact that occurred at least once in a three-month period was more common for children in repartnered-parent households than for children in single-parent households (32 per cent compared with 21 per cent). The same pattern was evident for children who had contact at least once every six months (23 per cent compared with 13 per cent). So, overall, children of repartnered mothers tended to see their fathers less often than children of single mothers.

### Overnight stays by family type

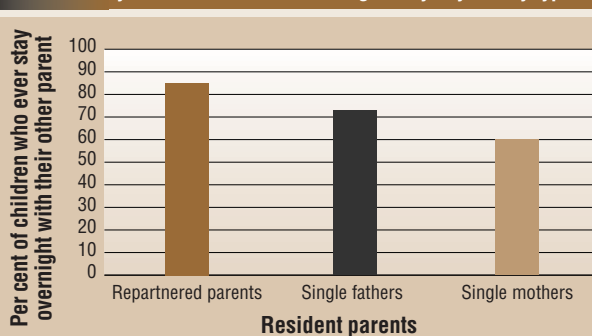
Figure 2 shows the occurrence of overnight stays by family type. A clear pattern emerged: overnight stays varied markedly by the relationship status and gender of parents. Children in the care of a repartnered parent were more

**Figure 1** Children under 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere and who see that parent at least once a year: Frequency of face-to-face contact by family type



Note: \* = Relative Standard Error 25-50%. This bar should be interpreted with caution. Source: Family Characteristics Survey: customised tables, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998

**Figure 2** Children under 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere and who see that parent at least once a year: Occurrence of overnight stays by family type



Source: Family Characteristics Survey: customised tables, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998

likely than children in the care of a single mother or father to stay overnight with their other parent (85 per cent compared with 60 per cent and 73 per cent).<sup>6</sup> So too were children in the care of a single father compared with children in the care of a single mother (73 per cent compared with 60 per cent).

The higher rate of overnight stays reported by single fathers compared with single mothers is somewhat surprising given the similar patterns of face-to-face contact reported by each group in Figure 1. This difference is likely to be a function of traditional gender role expectations. Society expects women to be nurturers – perhaps even in the relatively small proportion of cases where children are not in their care. Interesting work by Stewart (1999a) in the United States suggests that this expectation may not surface in the frequency of face-to-face contact but in the quality of the interaction between non-resident mothers and their children.

According to Stewart (1999b), non-resident parents (male or female) typically face many emotional and practical obstacles that act to inhibit high levels of day-to-day contact with non-resident children. But where non-resident mothers are in contact with children, they tend to be more involved with them in qualitatively richer types of contact, such as using telephone and letter contact to stay emotionally connected to them, and spending longer blocks of time with children, than non-resident fathers (Stewart 1999b). Sleepovers may be another example of this qualitative difference in mothers' and fathers' involvement with children.

Most striking in Figure 2 is the higher rate of sleepovers by children in the care of a repartnered parent (mostly mothers). This pattern might reflect certain family dynamics. For instance, relationships need "adult" time and space. There might also be "push and pull" factors for children around the presence of a step-parent (such as emotional friction with this parent).

Another possibility is that repartnered parents are more likely to each have their own children from a prior relationship to care for, some of whom are likely to be living elsewhere. One way to maintain contact with each set of children is to rotate caring for them over each weekend.

Yet another possibility relates to life stage. Repartnered parents are more likely than single parents to have older children, and older children tend to have less face-to-face contact than younger children (ABS 1998).

### Overnight stays by children's age

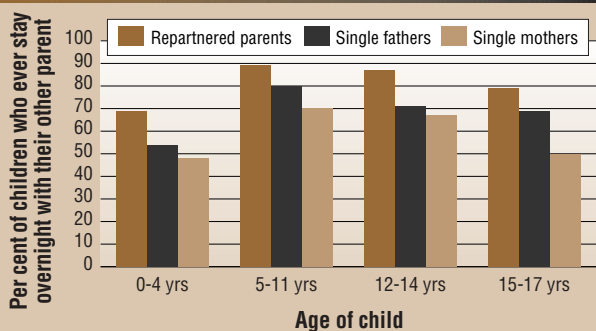
To explore the possibility that the higher rate of sleepovers by children in the care of a repartnered parent relates to life stage, we examined the occurrence of overnight stays by children's age and family type (see Figure 3).

Regardless of children's age, children in the care of a repartnered parent were more likely than children in the care of a single mother to stay overnight with their other parent. (Children in the care of single fathers fell in between repartnered parents and single mothers but not all differences were statistically significant.) Controlling for the effect of children's age thus suggests that life stage is not driving the apparent differences in sleepovers by children in different families.

When sleepovers are examined within each family type (starting with the largest group: single mothers), clear age-related differences again emerged, with the youngest and oldest groups of children (0-4 years and 15-17 years) being the least likely of the groups to have sleepovers. (Similar

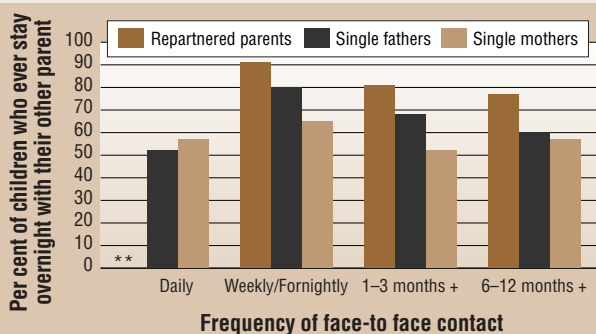
patterns were evident for children in the other family types, but these patterns were not statistically significant, probably because of the relatively small size of these groups.) The lower occurrence of overnight stays by children aged 15-17 years accords with their developmental need for independence from parents, while the lower rate of sleepovers by children aged 0-4 years might reflect non-resident parents' uncertainty about caring for young children or a perception of this by their former spouse (Kelly and Wallerstein 1977).

**Figure 3** Children under 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere and who see that parent at least once a year: Overnight stays by family type and age of child



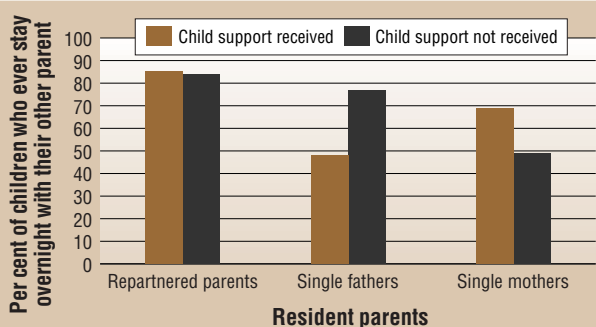
Source: Family Characteristics Survey: customised tables, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998

**Figure 4** Children under 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere and who see that parent at least once a year: Overnight stays by family type by frequency of face-to-face contact



Note: \*\* = Relative Standard Error > 50%  
Source: Family Characteristics Survey: customised tables, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998

**Figure 5** Children under 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere and who see that parent at least once a year: Overnight stays by family type and child support receipt



Source: Family Characteristics Survey: customised tables, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998

It is worth noting that a linear pattern emerged within the 0-4 year age group of children in the care of single mothers when this group was further sub-divided. Thirty-eight per cent of children in the 0-2 year age group stayed overnight at their other parent's house, compared with 60 per cent of children aged 3-4 years (data not shown). That is, older children were more likely than younger children to sleepover in this age group.

### **Overnight stays by frequency of contact**

Figure 4 shows the relationship between overnight stays and frequency of face-to-face contact by family type. Not surprisingly, face-to-face contact and overnight stays are related: the more contact children have with non-resident parents, the more likely they are to stay overnight. This pattern holds regardless of the gender or relationship status of the primary carer.

Of interest, however, is the tendency for some children in the care of a single parent to see their other parent daily but not to stay overnight with that parent. This pattern of care may be indicative of cooperative parenting (for example, close proximity between parents, and high

***Around a third of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, who see that parent, never stay overnight with them.***

involvement by the non-resident parent in children's day-to-day routines), or it may simply reflect inadequate accommodation, or emotional friction with a step-parent.

### **Overnight stays by child support payments**

While the main focus of this paper is on the extent to which children in different types of families stay overnight with non-resident parents, the close but complex links between child support and contact deserve attention on the issue of overnight stays. "Paying" and "seeing" tend to go hand-in-hand. But whether this nexus extends to overnight stays is unclear.

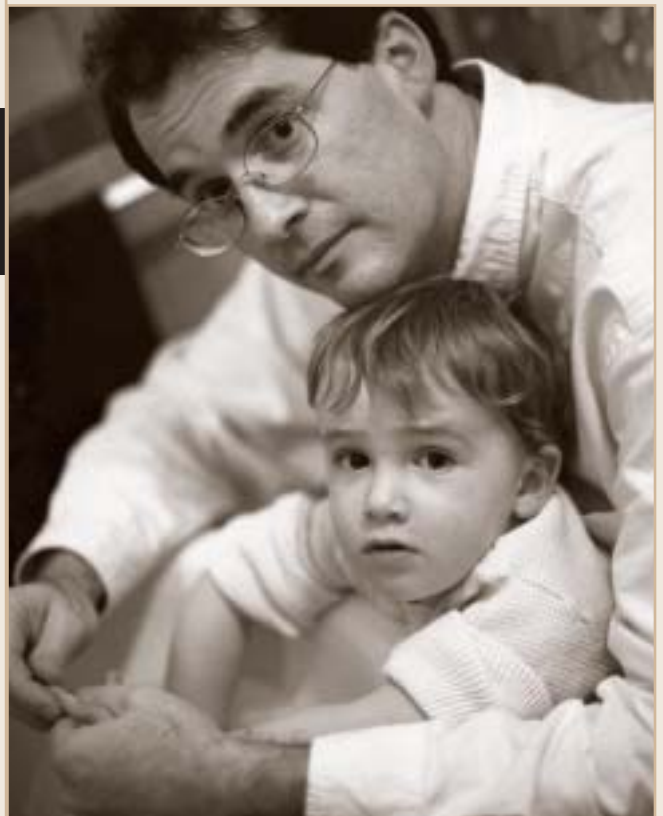
Figure 5 shows the relationship between overnight stays and the receipt of child support in the 12 months prior to interview. Child support payments appeared to make little difference to whether children in repartnered parents' households stayed overnight with their other parent. The vast majority of children in this family type stayed overnight with their other parent regardless of whether or not child support was received (85 per cent and 84 per cent).

However, child support appeared to be related to sleepovers in the case of children in single-parent households, although this relationship was not straightforward.

As noted earlier, non-resident fathers who see their children tend to pay child support, unlike fathers who lose or do not maintain contact. This pattern appears to generalise to sleepovers where the resident mother is a single parent (69 per cent compared with 49 per cent). But the reverse seems to hold for the much smaller group of children in the care of single fathers: children in single-father households that do not receive child support are more likely to stay overnight with non-resident mothers than those in households that do receive child support (77 per cent compared with 48 per cent).

What might explain this anomaly? Single-father households are a relatively small (but growing) group. They tend to be better off financially than single-mother households (Smyth and Weston 2000). As a consequence, child support and contact are often unrelated: frequent, flexible contact remains the norm in the absence of child support payments (Funder 1993). The relatively high rate of overnight stays between children and non-resident mothers who do not pay child support is thus not surprising.

Of course, not all single-father households have sufficient incomes on which to live (Meyer and Garasky 1993). Indeed, in Australia, a significant number of single fathers (24 per cent) have "low incomes" (Smyth and Weston 2000: 8), and their former partners are likely to be in similarly poor circumstances – in which case contact might occur but not sleepovers for all the same reasons that sleepovers may not occur in some single-mother households. Under financial stress, this group of single-fathers may be under pressure to obtain child support even if it is only a small amount. Regardless of what might be driving the different



rates of sleepovers between single fathers who receive child support and those who do not, it is important to remember that overnight stays with a non-resident parent are still the norm for children of both groups of single fathers.

### **Conclusion**

Overnight stays provide opportunities to engage in an array of interactions and functional contexts that are usually not possible in day-time contact (Lamb and Kelly 2001). Despite the importance of examining different patterns of care by parents after relationship breakdown, very little is known about the distribution of day- and night-time parenting by parents. Our findings point to the importance of distinguishing between day-only contact and overnight stays when conducting research into post-separation parenting.

Three key findings emerge from the above analysis.

First, according to resident parents' reports, around a third (34 per cent) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, who see that parent, never stay overnight with them.

Second, and not surprisingly, the more contact children have with a non-resident parent, the more likely they are to stay overnight. A similar pattern holds for child support in relation to the most common post-separation family type configuration – resident mothers, non-resident fathers: children in single-mother households that receive child support are more likely to stay overnight with their father than children in households that do not receive child support.

Third, overnight stays varied markedly by family type. Children in the care of a repartnered parent (mostly mothers) were the most likely to stay overnight with their other parent, while children in single-mother households were the least likely to do so. With one or two minor exceptions, this pattern held regardless of the age of children or the frequency of face-to-face contact between children and their non-resident parents.

This pattern is remarkably consistent, and quite striking given the similarity in face-to-face contact reported by single mothers and fathers, and the somewhat less regular pattern of face-to-face contact for children in the care of a repartnered parent. Put simply, children in the care of repartnered parents are less likely to have regular contact with their non-resident parent, but when they do, this contact is likely to involve overnight stays with that parent. Two possibilities are that repartnered parents may want "adult" time with each other, or they may have two sets of children to care for.

A complex set of family dynamics is likely to underpin the above patterns, and thus there is a clear need for more detailed work that can unpack these dynamics. The decision-making process around overnight stays also warrants examination.

Obvious data sources for this work are the two large-scale longitudinal datasets funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services – namely, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). However, multi-wave longitudinal data are still some time away. In the mean time, the Institute's own study of post-separation patterns of parenting also hopes to shed light on the night–day parenting distinction.

## Notes

- 1 We recently analysed 292 empirical studies identified by several key meta-analytic and narrative reviews of the impact of divorce on children. Our question was: What domains of parent–child contact have been measured, and how? Only 36 per cent of these studies reported measuring contact and, of these, most focused on contact frequency.
- 2 This estimate was calculated after personal communication on 18 October 2002 with Nicole Watson, HILDA Survey Manager. This estimate increases to 56 per cent when children with no contact with their non-resident parent are included. Both estimates are based on the youngest child (aged 17 years or less) in a resident parent's household, unlike data from the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998) that are based on all natural children aged 0–17 in a resident parent's household.
- 3 This estimate is derived from customised tables obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It is based on resident parents' reports, and excludes children with a natural parent living elsewhere, who do not see that parent.
- 4 The Family Characteristics Survey was a supplement to the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Monthly Population Survey*, which is a national random sample comprising around 30,000 households. All analyses in this article are based on weighted sample estimates produced by the ABS.
- 5 By "little" contact, we mean that children have not seen their non-resident parent more than once in the last year. By "a sizeable number" of children, we note that the Family Characteristics Survey identified 102,800 children living with one natural parent but where no other

parent was reported as living elsewhere. This represents almost 10 per cent of the total population of children living with only one natural parent.

- 6 All percentages have Relative Standard Errors (RSE) below 25 per cent, unless otherwise stated. All statistical differences are reported at the 95 per cent level of confidence.

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