

Father–child contact after separation

Profiling five different patterns of care

Much is known about the broad patterns of parenting after separation in Australia. But who does what, and why, is not so well understood.



BRUCE SMYTH, CATHERINE CARUANA AND ANNA FERRO

Much continues to be written about the plethora of social ills that appear to be linked with father-absent children in the aftermath of divorce (Blankenhorn 1995; Horn and Sylvester 2002; Pryor and Rodgers 2001). But binary approaches in divorce research (for example, contrasting father absence and presence) are giving way to more refined models in which paternal involvement is conceptualised on multiple dimensions (Day and Lamb 2004). Both in Australia and overseas, the search is on for approaches that take account of the multiple qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share the care of children.

In an attempt to improve our understanding of post-separation parenting, we recently examined five different patterns of father–child contact: (a) 50/50 shared care (for example, “week-about”); (b)

“standard” contact (every-weekend or every-other-weekend); (c) daytime-only contact; (d) holiday-only contact; and (e) little or no contact. Two sources of data were used for this investigation: qualitative data from a series of focus groups, and data from a large representative sample of separated/divorced parents in Australia. In this article, we summarise some of the key insights to emerge from this research.

Why focus on father–child contact? While much of the empirical terrain in Australia has been charted in relation to the frequency of parent–child contact after divorce, the nitty-gritty of who does what, and why, remains poorly understood. The Australian empirical data suggest around one in five children under 18 live with only one of their biological parents (typically their mother) and that about half these children have relatively regular face-to-face contact with their other



parent (predominantly their father) (ABS 1998). It also seems that only a tiny proportion (around 3-6 per cent) are in “shared care” arrangements, while at the other end of the spectrum almost one-third (30 per cent) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere – according to resident parents – rarely or never see their other parent (typically their father) (ABS 1998). Of those who see their non-resident parent, a significant minority (34 per cent) never stay overnight (Smyth and Ferro 2002).

Hidden underneath these broad patterns is a high level of dissatisfaction around post-separation parenting – especially for non-resident fathers. Parkinson and Smyth (submitted), for instance, found that a sizeable proportion of separated and divorced parents in Australia would like to see more contact occurring (75 per cent of non-resident fathers; 40 per cent of resident mothers). In addition,

non-resident fathers with daytime-only contact report significantly lower levels of satisfaction with their relationship with their children than fathers who have overnight stays.

While the preceding empirical snapshot is informative, qualitative data have the potential to shed light on the experience of and motivations for particular kinds of arrangements. They also afford a different methodological viewpoint from survey findings, especially in relation to context, diversity, transitions, and process. This viewpoint can improve our understanding of the factors that might promote or impede father-child contact and how these play out over time.

Research design

Early in 2003 we conducted a series of focus group interviews with 56 separated/divorced parents (27 mothers, 29 fathers) who had at least one child under the age of 18 years. With one exception, the parents interviewed were not matched pairs of former couples, which means that we were only privy to one side of each story. The focus groups were structured around five different types of paternal involvement, as described earlier (see Figure 1). Participants were recruited through a story in a Melbourne newspaper combined with snowball (referral) sampling.

In an effort to place the small-scale, qualitative focus group data in the wider national picture, we also explored the extent to which different patterns of parenting may be linked to certain demographic elements in the general population of separated/divorced parents. This involved a profiling exercise, drawing on data extracted from Wave 1 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.

Of the 13,969 household members interviewed in the HILDA survey, 1243 were separated/divorced parents with at least one child under 18 years old (see Figure 2). Of

these, we focused on “co-parents” (63 parents who indicated that their child spent at least 30 per cent of the time with each parent) and the two largest groups in the sample: resident mothers ($n=600$) and non-resident fathers ($n=376$) ($N=1,039$). As with the focus group data, women and men were independent groups rather than matched pairs of former couples.

Who does what, and why?

The various pieces of data suggest a set of distinct father-child contact profiles (described below). These profiles must be viewed as impressionistic insofar as they represent an amalgam of both the qualitative and quantitative data. Overall, the data provide strong empirical support for the idea that both relational and structural factors play an important role in the form that father-child contact takes.

1 "Shared care"

We begin the profiling exercise with 50/50 care because this pattern has attracted considerable policy interest recently (Commonwealth of Australia 2003; Smyth, Caruana and Ferro 2003). The focus group data suggest that 50/50 residential care arrangements are often logistically complex, and

that those who opt for shared care appear to be a relatively distinct subgroup of separated/divorced parents.

Virtually all of the parents in the focus groups had adopted a shared care arrangement from the time of separation; many had maintained this arrangement for a considerable period and most had done so without any involvement with the legal system. All were employed (either full- or part-time), and appeared to have access to family-friendly work practices (such as flexible work hours). One co-parent mother, like a number of the parents with the more common "week-about" shared care schedule, worked long hours in one week, enabling her to leave work early in the week the children were with her. One father, a self-employed IT consultant, reflected: "If I show up on occasions with a kid in tow, clients don't mind. It works really well."

Furthermore, participants appeared to have a child-focused mindset. Most had adopted a working businesslike relationship with their former partner and seemed to be able to put aside any relationship issues for the wellbeing of their children. As one father remarked: "Reasonable relations make so much possible." Family members were committed to making shared care work, and this commitment was reflected in the way most parenting arrangements centred on children's activities and were flexible enough to accommodate children's needs. Nonetheless it was evident from the discussions that 50/50 parenting brings with it many logistical challenges, particularly in arrangements other than week-about that involve numerous changeovers. In addition to both parents being required to have flexible work schedules, there was also a need to keep track of clothes, schoolbooks, and equipment as children move between households.

Figure 1 Focus groups and the respective group numbers

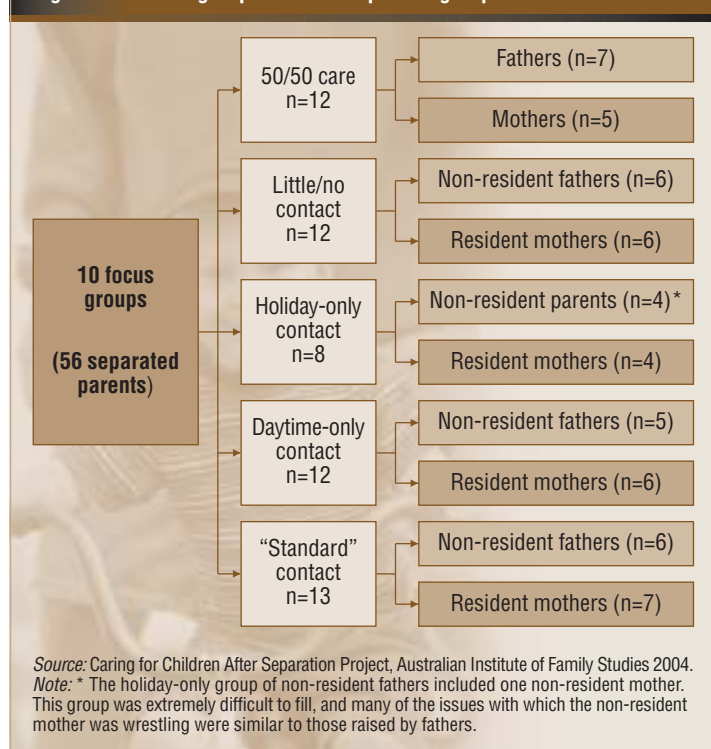
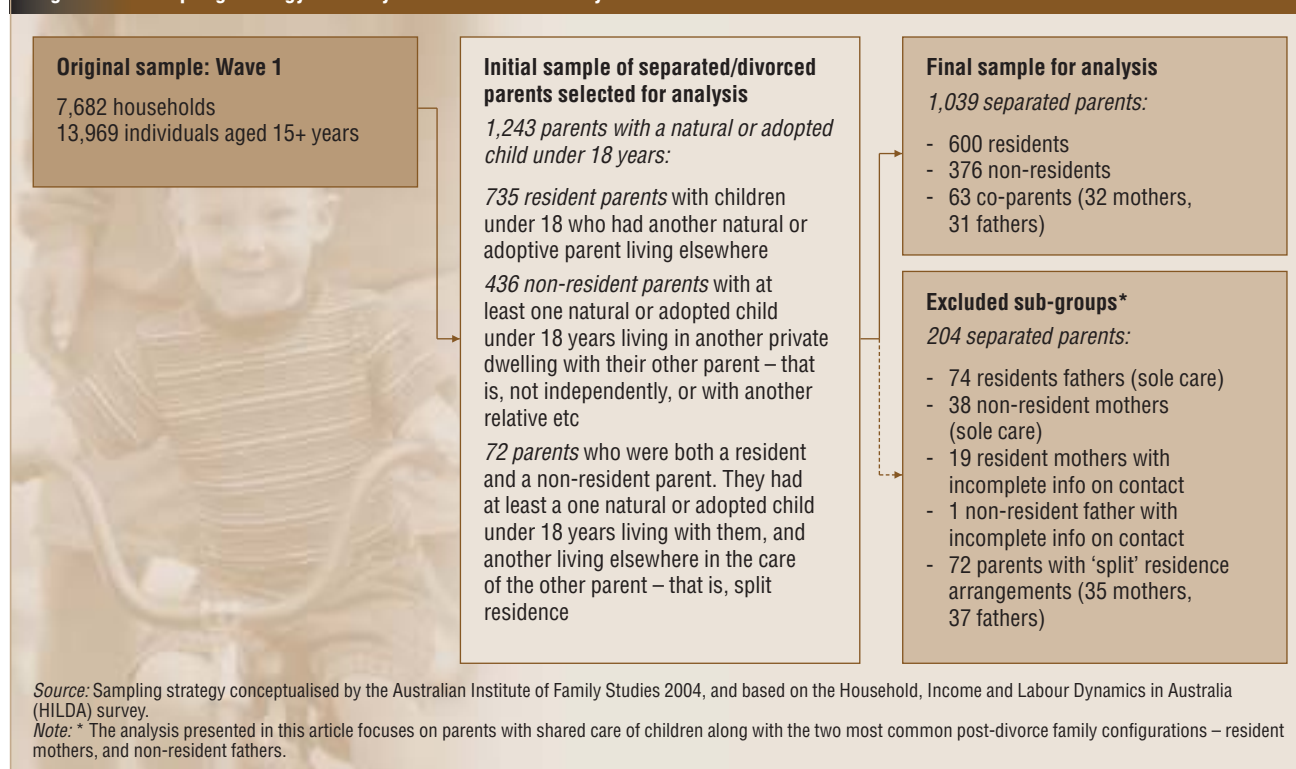


Figure 2 Sampling strategy for analysis of the HILDA survey



The profile of parents who opt for 50/50 care sheds light on some of the basic conditions conducive to shared parenting: proximity, work flexibility, a degree of financial independence, and a cooperative co-parenting style – which perhaps largely explains why most of the co-parents in the focus groups did not seek legal interventions. Interestingly, two of the three parents who did go to court also reported avoiding their former partners (that is, had adopted a “parallel parenting” style). Of course, there may be two types of cooperative parenting: active cooperation (involving deliberate actions of co-parental support – the most desirable type) and passive cooperation (avoiding demonising the other parent in front of children, or refraining from making children act as messengers or spies). While passive cooperation may not be the ideal, it may be the critical factor to make shared care workable where residual bad feelings between parents remain.

Overall, co-parents in the focus groups had found 50/50 care to be a beneficial experience. They described how time apart from their children allowed them to “have a life” socially as well allowing them the space to organise for their week “on”, thereby enabling them to spend more quality time with their children. As one mother put it: “You’re looking forward to the next time you have them, you’re planning the next time you have them and you’re clearing the way to be more family oriented.” One father described how the substantial amount of time he spent with his children led to “a depth of relationship... that normal fathers don’t develop”. Only one mother in the 50/50 care focus groups expressed doubt about whether shared care was the best arrangement for her family. This mother had a history of extensive litigation with her former partner. Their parenting arrangement rarely deviated from highly detailed court orders.

The focus group profile was, to a large extent, replicated by the HILDA data. These data show that parents with shared care do indeed appear to be a relatively small but select group of parents (comprising around 6 per cent of separated parents). They are more likely than other groups to have post-secondary school qualifications, to have primary-school aged children, and to be able to work from home. Of particular note is that co-parent mothers tended to have higher personal incomes than the other groups of mothers (perhaps reducing the risk of conflict over child support). Co-parent fathers were more likely to be single (and thus perhaps were less likely to be emotionally torn between first and second families).

Consistent with the stories of the focus group participants, parents with shared care drawn from the HILDA data tended to view their relationship with their former partner at the more positive end of the relational scale suggesting that absence, or at

least effective management, of conflict is a necessary precondition to successful shared parenting. They tended to be more satisfied than other parents with the amount of parent–child contact that was occurring.

2 Little or no contact

The narratives of both mothers and fathers in the “little or no contact” groups were often complex and multi-layered. There was rarely a simple reason why children were not having face-to-face contact with their non-resident father; rather a range of factors appeared to have evolved over time culminating in a loss of contact.

Fathers with little or no contact tended to see themselves as having been cut out, whereas mothers tended to see fathers as opting out. For many fathers in this focus group, the emotional difficulty



One father described how the substantial amount of time he spent with his children led to “a depth of relationship... that normal fathers don’t develop”.

of trying to maintain contact in the face of ongoing conflict with a former spouse and in the face of what they perceived as maternal obstruction had led them to disengage from their children. Resident mothers, however, gave paternal disinterest more prominence and spoke of the emotional and financial burden of solo parenting.

Some parents described how father–child contact had dropped off dramatically or ceased altogether when either they or their former partner relocated. One father revealed that he had not seen his sons since the day his former partner moved overseas with them. And for another father, a move by his former partner interstate combined with other barriers to ongoing contact might as well have been a move to the other side of the world. Other factors included a perception by mothers that fathers’ parenting skills were limited, and a sense by many of the fathers of being disenfranchised by “the system” and/or their former partners.

One of the most troubling aspects to surface with the “little or no contact” group was the apparent link between children’s adjustment problems and their experience of their parents’ separation. In a number of cases, parents’ reports suggested that children had been caught in the middle of parents’ conflict or left wondering about the intermittent or total absence of their father from their lives. One father reported that, on giving his child a birthday present, his child said: “Dad I didn’t think that you cared”.

Both fathers and mothers in the “little or no contact” group also spoke clearly of the impact of parental conflict and minimal father–child contact on their own wellbeing. Fathers spoke about the “shallowness” of limited contact, about not being able to physically recognise their children after a long gap apart, and the pain of seeing their children adjusting poorly to the separation. In addition to a lack of respite, resident mothers were also troubled by the impact on the emotional well-being of children left disappointed by unpredictable or minimal father contact.

Data from the HILDA survey suggest that parents who report little or no father–child contact have a distinct demographic profile. Mothers and fathers tended to be renting (as opposed to purchasing or owning) their own home, and were inclined to report no post-secondary educational qualifications. A relatively high proportion of fathers were not in paid work, and reported earning no more than \$15,000 a year. The fathers in particular were more likely to be repartnered, and both mothers and fathers tended to report living 50 kilometres or more from their former partner than other parents (and therefore, for non-resident parents, from their children). They were, on the whole, less satisfied with the relationship with their former partner than other parents. This pattern of response may be indicative of inter-parental conflict or disappointment. It is noteworthy that both mothers and fathers in the “little or no father–child contact” group were more likely than other groups to be unable to rate the quality of their relationship with their former partner. This pattern of response, along with geographic distance and repartnering, suggests a “clean break” at many levels.

In summary, the HILDA data show that conflict, emotional and physical distance, new partners, and relative economic disadvantage feature prominently in the profile of parents who report little or no father–child contact.

3 *Holiday-only contact*

Very little is known in Australia about long-distance parenting and holiday-only contact. No reliable estimates exist about the proportion of children who live with one parent and spend holidays with the other, and there are no data that describe the timing, frequency, and duration of this pattern of care.

Recent data from HILDA suggest that roughly 20–25 per cent of non-resident parents (mostly fathers) live 500 kilometres or more from their children.

According to resident parents’ reports in the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998), 18 per cent of children with a natural parent living elsewhere saw that parent no more often than “several times a year”, most probably during school vacations, or at Christmas and Easter. Taken together, both estimates suggest that a substantial number of children in Australia have contact with a non-resident parent only during school holidays.

The views of separated parents whose children have holiday-only contact are particularly instructive given the dearth of statistical information. All but one of the eight parents in the focus groups lived in different states or countries from their former partners. They articulated a number of key issues of concern during the group interviews. The first was that of time: resident parents craved regu-



lar respite from the pressures of caring for children throughout the year, which was more than holiday contact afforded them. The difficulty for non-resident parents was in accruing enough leave to see their children when holidays came around, and, for those who had established second families, to balance holiday time with new family commitments. The focus group data suggest that holiday-only contact can place great strain on mothers and fathers, albeit for different reasons. The views of children on this pattern of care warrant articulation.

It also emerged that the critical dimension for long-distance non-resident parents was the need to know *when* contact would occur. Predictability was essential to enable work and travel arrangements to be set in place. The quantity or amount of time non-resident parents could spend with their children was also important and impacted on their perception of the quality of the interaction. There was a general view among fathers that holiday contact was typically “shallow”. School holidays are traditionally a time for fun and several fathers spoke of a need to entice their children to see them again. Thus many felt under pressure to entertain children. For two fathers, this left them feeling like “party planners” or the “goodtime guy”. The often

superficial nature of contact appears to have led some non-resident parents to feel disenfranchised and detached as parents. These parents appeared to struggle with a range of emotions from grief to anger in relation to not seeing their children frequently.

Other forms of communication, such as mobile phones or e-mail, were an important potential means for staying connected to children across great distances. But where children were young, or a resident parent was not supportive of contact, the ability of non-resident parents to use these other means to engage with their children required a high level of commitment on their part.

Finally, the reports of participants suggest that as children grow older, long-distance parenting often gets easier. Indeed, many non-resident parents in the “holiday-only contact” group appeared to be marking time

pre-school aged child; and/or a relatively weak economic base (indicated by lower personal earnings, and high rates of renting) which, for fathers, may equate with a lack of adequate accommodation to have children stay overnight. Compared with separated parents with “standard” or shared care, those with daytime-only contact were more likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of their relationship with their former partner, and the fathers were more likely than all other groups to report that they had nowhere near enough contact with their children.

The individual stories that surfaced in the focus groups pointed to a more complex mosaic. Like parents in the “little or no contact” groups, fathers with daytime-only contact tended to feel they had no choice about the lack of overnight stays in the face of perceived maternal gatekeeping or obstruction. By contrast, some resident mothers felt they had no choice in the face of paternal disinterest. The absence of couple data limits our ability to make sense of this apparent gulf of experience between mothers and fathers.

New partners and physical distance between households again emerged as factors militating against strong father-child

One non-resident father advised “Every decision you make, write down the impact on your kids, then read it and think: ‘what are the kids going to think about this?’”



until their children were old enough to have an independent relationship with them. Thus, holiday-only contact looks to require effort and long-term commitment to make it work – or at least to be sustained.

4 Daytime-only contact

As noted earlier, a significant minority of fathers have daytime-only contact with their children. Parents who reported daytime-only contact in the HILDA survey were characterised by two demographic features: they were more likely than others to have a

contact patterns. In one father’s case, the trigger event that saw the end of sleepovers had occurred seven years earlier when he moved in with his new partner. For one mother, the discomfort her children felt spending time with their father’s second family, and the problem of geographic distance (they lived two hours’ drive away from their father), made the dwindling of contact to a mid-week dinner understandable. However, another father’s arrangement, which involved a six-hour return trip every three weeks to spend time with his ten-year-old daughter, allowed him to spend focused time with his daughter away from the complications of new

partners and subsequent children. This father had maintained this schedule for eight years, and it represented his best attempt at balancing his daughter's needs with new family responsibilities and his own wellbeing.

Another significant factor raised by several women, two of whom had experienced violent outbursts from their former partners, was their concerns for the welfare of their children when in the father's care. In both cases, the option of daytime-only contact (which would be more likely to involve activities outside the home) allowed them to foster a relationship between the children and their non-resident father while at the same time not compromising children's safety. Safety concerns can often be hard for a resident parent to articulate. However, without a sense of such concerns, a non-resident parent could well perceive any limitation of contact as obstruction.

Regardless of the reason for fathers seeing children only during the day, a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the arrangement characterised both mothers' and fathers' views. As indicated above, the HILDA data corroborated the qualitative data.

However, for at least one focus group member, daytime-only contact had its basis in a co-operative co-parental arrangement with an emphasis on stability for children. One father lived within walking distance of the former family home and saw his children, both teenagers, almost daily. The combination of low parental conflict, older children, and close proximity made this father's story a notable exception but one that may be more common than these preliminary data suggest.

5 "Standard" contact

Weekly or fortnightly contact arrangements (often including half school holidays) represent the most common pattern of care where father-child contact occurs. But according to focus group participants, much diversity exists in arrangements characterised as "standard". Some arrangements included mid-week nights in addition to weekends, while others did not involve extra contact over school holidays (which was a source of complaint for a number of mothers). While three of the six fathers in the group felt that their arrangements were working well, most wanted more contact with children or ideally to share the care of them equally with their former partner.

One of the key insights to come out of the focus group material is that many parents may opt for "standard" contact by default: that is, they are typically unaware of any other feasible alternatives and perceive the every-other-weekend schedule as the "norm". However, a number of parents also noted that this pattern of contact was the most practical and workable arrangement in the light of long or inflexible work hours, new family responsibilities, and the need of the primary carer to have some recreational time with children.

The group interview with parents with "standard" contact arrangements suggested that many were very focused on their children's needs. One non-resident father advised "Every decision you make,

write down the impact on your kids, then read it and think: 'what are the kids going to think about this?'" Mothers had a firm belief in the importance of children maintaining contact with their father, which for some was despite incidents of prior spousal violence. One mother had her former partner charged with assault but still asserted: "I feel very, very, very strongly about having a father in the child's life... nothing on this planet would entice me to separate them."

According to the HILDA data, fathers with standard contact were more likely than other fathers to be working full-time, earning in excess of \$35,000 and were also the most likely group to pay any financial support for children. Interestingly, fathers with standard contact were the most likely to express satisfaction with their lives. Work and money often matter.

Points of convergence

Several issues emerged across all of the focus groups. Perhaps the most striking similarity in the experiences of many parents was the strong sense of loss they felt in relation to their children's absence. While this was predominantly the experience of non-resident fathers, especially those who had little or no contact with their children, it was also an issue of concern for co-parents who shared equally in the care of their children. High levels of contact can act to bring into sharp focus the absence of children from daily life.

Loss was experienced in a number of ways. Not only did many parents, including several with shared care, speak about the difficult experience of parting with their children, fathers also lamented the loss of an emotionally close relationship with their children and a reduction or inability to further develop their parenting role. In addition, some parents felt that the introduction of the other parent's new partner compromised their role further since new partners sometimes assumed parental responsibilities, especially where younger children were involved.

Change in parenting patterns also emerged as a common characteristic. Many of the focus group participants (at least 32 of the 56 parents) were either poised to move into a different parenting arrangement or had experienced changes in the way they and their former partners cared for the children since the separation. Change thus emerged as a constant. Some of the triggers for change included the practical and emotional adjustments necessary after separation, relocation by a parent, changes in the parental relationship (both positive and negative), the changing demands of work and, inevitably, the changing needs of children as they mature.

Parents also spoke in a united voice of the need for resources to assist in restructuring families after divorce, especially in relation to the future care of children. Many parents felt ill-equipped to navigate this major family transition. A lack of information about different parenting models and the perception that the "system" promotes a formulaic response to post-separation parenting appeared to frustrate many parents wanting more individualistic solutions.

Another central thread running through the group discussions was the impact of parental separation on the relationship between children and their extended family, particularly grandparents. The common experience, and one reinforced by the literature (see Ferguson elsewhere in this issue), seemed to be that grandparents often have a reduced relationship with their grandchildren when parents separate. This was primarily the case for paternal grandparents where little or no father-child contact was occurring.

That paternal contact and paternal grandparent contact often go hand-in-hand is understandable. Parent-child contact can be difficult for children and parents at many levels. To add another layer of family dynamics and logistics to parenting arrangements in the form of grandparent-grandchild contact may, in some cases, simply be unachievable – especially where bad feelings between parents bring on what Johnston and Campbell (1988: 47) term “tribal warfare” over children.

Even in families where children spend a substantial amount of time with each parent (that is, shared care), it was difficult for some to arrange contact with grandparents. Parents with other contact arrangements also spoke of the “juggle” involved in maintaining contact between their children and extended family. This dilemma was very salient for non-resident parents whose contact with their children was limited to school holidays. Some of these parents expressed frustration at having to use the short time they had with their children to visit extended family – who also miss out on contact during the year.

What influences contact? The three Rs

There was much in the comments of these separated parents to suggest that family dynamics in tandem with demographic factors temper the form that parent-child contact takes. These factors can be reduced to the three Rs – repartnering, relocation, and residual bad feelings (particularly conflict) between parents. To this list may be added another three Rs – relative economic disadvantage, “rotten behaviour” by a parent, and regard for children’s individual temperament, resilience, experience, age, developmental stage, and wishes.

Not surprisingly, higher levels of contact appear to be associated with lower levels of inter-parental conflict, less physical distance between parents’ households, and higher levels of financial resources. There is little new here. But what is new is the way the interaction of these and other factors appears to be clearly linked to qualitatively different patterns of post-separation parenting. It is almost as if different combinations of these factors act to switch separated families into different types and levels of parent-child contact.

While change featured in many of the parents’ stories, one constant nonetheless remained –

children’s need for love, security, and support. In an ideal world, parents are best placed to provide these things. Research thus needs to continue to work towards improving our understanding of post-separation parenting so that parents can be better supported in this crucial task. Such research is also likely to help policy-makers develop more targeted interventions.



Parents also spoke in a united voice of the need for resources to assist in restructuring families after divorce, especially in relation to the future care of children.

References

- ABS (1998), *Family Characteristics Survey 1997*, Catalogue No. 4442.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Blankenhorn D. (1995), *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, Basic Books, New York.
- Day, R. D. & Lamb, M. E. (2004), “Conceptualising and measuring father involvement: Pathways, problems, and progress”, in R. D. Day & M. E. Lamb (eds) *Conceptualising and Measuring Father Involvement*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey.
- Horn, W.F. & Sylvester, T. (2002), *Father Facts*, National Fatherhood Initiative, USA.
- Johnston, J. J. & Campbell, L. E. G. (1988), *Impasses of Divorce: The Dynamics and Resolution of Family Conflict*, Free Press, New York.
- Parkinson, P. & Smyth, B. (submitted), Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with father-child contact arrangements in Australia, *Child and Family Law Quarterly*.
- Pryor, J. & Rodgers, B. (2001), *Children in Changing Families: Life After Parental Separation*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Smyth B. & Ferro, A. (2002), “When the difference is night and day: Parent-child contact after separation”, *Family Matters*, vol 63, pp. 54-59.

Bruce Smyth, Catherine Caruana and Anna Ferro are researchers at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, working on the *Caring for Children After Separation* project. This project is part of the Institute’s Family and Marriage research program.

This article summarises some of the key insights gained from a recent study of five different patterns of father-child contact, to be published by the Institute in its Research Report series: *Father-Child Contact: Views of Separated Parents*, Edited by Bruce Smyth, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.