

The establishment of a new network of Family Relationship Centres forms the centrepiece of the latest round of family law reforms in Australia. This article draws on insights from practice and research in an attempt to anticipate some of the challenges that the Centres might face.

Family Relationship Centres in Australia *Reflections based on research and practice*

LAWRIE MOLONEY AND BRUCE SMYTH

With around one in three marriages expected to end in divorce in Australia (ABS 2004), and relatively high rates of relationship breakdown among never-married and previously-married parents, the search continues for processes, services and information that can help separating parents to consider sensibly what arrangements can best meet their children's and their own needs.

Three years ago, a Pathways Advisory Group identified three basic ways through the family law system: *self-help pathways*, in which information and education assist parents to reach their own agreements; *supported pathways*, in which service providers offer customised packages of support to help parents reach their own agreements; and *litigation pathways*, used as a final resort, or when issues of safety have been raised. They noted, however, that because of the multiple routes into the system, families find it difficult to know the best pathway for their particular needs and circumstances. The Advisory Group recommended an "integrated family law system that is flexible and builds individual and community capacity" (Commonwealth of Australia 2001: v).

The Prime Minister's proposal to establish a new network of 65 community-based Family Relationship Centres as clearly visible and widely recognised single entry points into the system offers a response and a way forward. Spread widely across the country, the Centres would be capable of responding to local needs and at the same time, guide families towards conflict resolution processes that are child focused, dignified and relatively inexpensive.

Parkinson (2004) has detailed the evolution of the idea of Family Relationship Centres. As the name implies, they would offer support to families at a variety levels. For *separating* families, a major function would include "case assessment, referrals and practical assistance to parents, including help in developing a parenting plan. Centres will screen cases for violence and child abuse and refer such cases to support services and direct to the courts where appropriate . . . Information, advice and the first three hours of dispute resolution sessions will be free . . . [and] centres will be supported by a free telephone advice line for those who are unable to access a Family Relationship Centre in person." (Prime Minister, Commonwealth of Australia 2004)

In November 2004, the Australian Government released its discussion paper "A New Approach to the Family Law System". The paper, summarised by Caruana (2004 in this issue), endorses the proposed network of Relationship Centres as the central plank in the reform package. The emphasis continues to be on providing the right service as early as possible in the process of family separation. Consistent with our knowledge of the debilitating effects of ongoing parental conflict on children, an important aim is to prevent conflict surrounding separation from becoming entrenched. It is envisaged that most post-separation disputes will be handled by Relationship Centres and other community-based organisations and practitioners. The Discussion Paper also proposes the exploration and adoption of less adversarial litigation processes within *court-based* proceedings, as well as possible changes to the structure of the Court itself. In addition, the Paper recommends an elevation of the status of grandparents after parental separation, calls for a re-evaluation of the Child Support Scheme, and speaks to the need for a program of community education.

The idea of sharing the parenting after separation is also reinforced. Gone is the idea implicit in much of the earlier thinking, practice and language of family law that it is acceptable to reduce the "other parent", usually the father, to the status of "visitor". This vision sees parenting as an ongoing dynamic in which parenting primarily assumes a relationship rather than a legal dimension. The quality of parenting after separation remains embedded in but not determined by the amounts of parenting time

that might be negotiated by a former couple or specified by a court. It is recognised that cases such as those involving systemic violence or abuse will continue to need more traditional investigative processes and legal determination. Therefore beyond skilled intake procedures that precede appropriate and timely referral, Relationship Centres are unlikely to be involved in cases at this end of the spectrum.

Not surprisingly at this stage, a raft of questions remains concerning how Relationship Centres will function. For example, many separating couples wish both property and child matters to be dealt with simultaneously. Should all staff, therefore, be competent in dealing with both these areas? If not, how is the work best divided? If so, what minimum competency standards apply (see for example Sourdin, Fisher and Moloney 2004)? How will staff working in regional areas receive and maintain the necessary competencies? How will Relationship Centres complement the considerable number of already existing and highly experienced Family and Relationships Services Program organisations? And so on.

Such issues will be the subject of much further discussion, a great deal of which will no doubt be stimulated by the

public submissions Government has requested by January 14th 2005. As part of a framework for these discussions, this article addresses three key questions: What do we know about post-separation patterns of parenting in Australia? What does this research tell us about the sorts of services that parents and their children may want or need? Can research inform some of the challenges to be faced by the new network of Family Relationship Centres?

To answer these three questions, we first address the *conceptual terrain*, setting out key issues that arise from the practice-based and broader research literature. What do years of practice suggest with respect to how best to structure and support good post-separation parenting? Second, we summarise the more “hard edged” *empirical terrain*. What do we know about patterns of parenting after separation, levels of parental and child satisfaction, contact arrangements, child support, and levels of inter-parental conflict? The third section is concerned with the future *research terrain*. It flags gaps in our knowledge with respect to the delivery of services in the Australian family law system. Finally, we focus more specifically on the need for a research plan that *will monitor and evaluate* the Australian Government’s latest policy initiative.

Table 1 Summary of core practice issues and key research-based support

<i>“Each child is unique”, as is each family’s circumstances.</i> What one child can deal with, another may not; what works for one family may not work for another.	No single post-divorce arrangement is in the best interests of all children.
<i>Children from two-parent families love, want, and need both parents.</i> Both parents contribute significantly to a child’s wellbeing and development. Both are and remain central to a child’s world.	The interests of children post-separation are generally best served when children can maintain continuing and frequent contact with both parents who cooperate and communicate with low levels of conflict.
<i>The way that parents relate to each other is critical.</i> The fundamental challenge for separating parents is to disentangle their former (intimate) relationship from their parenting, and to manage their emotions so that they can stay focused on their children’s needs.	Children do best when they are kept out of the middle, and are not used as spies or messengers.
<i>The way that parents relate to each other impacts on the way all family members are able to relate to each other.</i> Children need parents to be in charge of their own lives. They become disturbed and confused when those they love and rely on are in conflict with each other.	It is the <i>quality</i> of relationships between parents, and between parents and children, that exerts a critical influence on children’s wellbeing. The <i>quantity</i> of time is relevant in so far as it supports quality.
<i>Children do badly when their parents are engaged in open warfare and even worse when their parents drag them into the hostilities.</i> The longer and more intense the battle, the greater the potential for long-term damage to children. Unresolved or entrenched conflict is bad for children.	Where there is high and continuing co-parental conflict, or where children have experienced or are likely to be exposed to continuing domestic violence or child abuse, contact may be highly inappropriate and can have serious, long-lasting adverse effects on children.
<i>An abusive controlling partner generates fear and chaos in a family.</i>	In cases of systemic and controlling abuse it may be preferable for a child to be parented only by the non-abusive partner, who, in turn, is protected and supported by legal sanctions.
<i>Money can be a critical issue during family re-formation.</i> Following separation, there are often insufficient funds to maintain the family’s prior lifestyle. Children often experience a “double whammy” – the loss of a parent, and the loss of their environment and other supports.	Parental separation is a leading cause and correlate of child poverty.
<i>Resolution of conflict via adversarial processes tends to come at a high financial and emotional cost to family members.</i> The processes that support conflict resolution need to be child- and parent-friendly.	Adversarial legal proceedings can create or support great animosity between separated parents. Court procedures are often experienced as, or perceived to be, confusing and intimidating.
<i>A good legal agreement does not guarantee a good outcome.</i> A good legal agreement alone is often not enough to ensure positive outcomes for everyone. Parents need to “own” their agreement. Many parents also need support in learning how to put their agreements into practice in daily life.	Support services, such as mediation, parenting education programs and information, have been shown to make a significant difference.
<i>A “good” divorce, including those involving children, is possible and worth the effort.</i> A “good” separation or divorce, especially where children are involved, often goes against the emotional grain and demands considerable energy and attention up front from both family members and dispute resolution practitioners.	Many separated parents are able to cooperate as parents, and put the needs of their children first. Many high conflict partners can be assisted to continue to “parallel parent” – that is, continue to be effective parents though having minimal contact with each other.

Note: The work of Ricci (1997) and Pryor and Rodgers (2001) feature in this table.

Conceptual terrain: Insights from practice and research

Both the practice-based and broader research literature suggest that the best interests of children are strongly connected to co-parental relationships and cooperation, parenting capacities and skills, and practical resources (such as adequate housing and income). Table 1 summarises specific key insights.

The insights from research and practice are generally consistent, with both pursuits being conceptually interrelated. These insights form the conceptual foundations for what follows.

Three core post-separation relationships

The above practice issues sit, in turn, within three significant intersecting challenges for separating parents, noted by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003: xii-xiii). They are: self-restoration and renewal (looking after oneself); creating a new more businesslike relationship as parents; and supporting children through and beyond the separation. Emery (2004) and Ricci (1997) are amongst the major researcher-practitioners who make similar observations.

Working through these challenges is often difficult because each challenge has within it a paradox.

Paradox 1: *At a time when parents need to take special care of themselves, they are most likely to neglect themselves.* Major change is stressful. Feelings of loss and grief can be emotionally debilitating. Health problems, difficulties sleeping and concentrating, and trouble with weight and alcohol control are not unusual in the aftermath of relationship breakdown. Self-care takes effort. This leads to a second paradox.

Paradox 2: *Parents are less able to give of themselves at a time when their children are most in need of their love, affection, attention and care.* Put simply, in order to care for others, we need to be able to care for ourselves. Yet, the aftermath and associated stresses of divorce typically mean that parents are less available psychologically to their children.

Paradox 3: *Parents are less able to get along with each other at a time when children most need their parents to cooperate.* Parents separate because one or both can no longer live with the other. But from a child's perspective, parents are forever. Chronic failure or unwillingness to cooperate over parenting issues, has long-term negative impacts on children. Conversely, willingness to find ways to cooperate about future parenting arrangements minimises the impact of separation and divorce on children.

Each of these paradoxes is exacerbated by the fact that at this time, parents are likely to be struggling financially. Two households are not as cheap to run as one, and divorce typically duplicates the costs of raising children (two rental payments or mortgages, two beds, two toothbrushes, two of everything). Financial pressures can be a major stressor, and often exacerbate the sort of problems outlined above.

Though by no means a panacea, assisting parents to stay focused on their children's needs can help parents overcome each of these challenges. For example:

On the relationship with self: "My children need me. I need to look after myself so that I can care for them."

On the relationship with former partner: "Look at what our fighting's doing to our children. Let's not wait for the wheels to fall off – by then it'll be too late. Let's keep the kids out of our stuff and try to work together as parents. Our children need us."

On the relationship with children: "What kind of a parent do I want to be? I need to stay engaged with, and be available for, my children. They need me, and need to know that I care. How will my/our children look back on how we handled this in five or ten years time?"

As noted by Mason (2000), children have a way of calling their parents back to reality. Adequately trained practitioners can help parents hear that call. Through empathic connections, they "earn the right" to challenge former partners' attitudes that are insufficiently child focused.

Empirical terrain: Post-separation patterns of parenting

In recent years, several new datasets have begun to shed more light on different aspects of post-separation family life in Australia.

- Around one-third (32 per cent) of separated parents report a great deal of conflict with their children's other parent, almost another third (30 per cent) report some conflict, while just over another third (38 per cent) report very little or no conflict (new unpublished Australian Institute of Family Studies data).
- About half of separated parents report making an "informal arrangement" – without any court involvement, including court or consent orders – with their former partner in relation to how their children's living arrangements were decided (new unpublished Australian Institute of Family Studies data).
- Half of all children under 18 with a parent living elsewhere have at least fortnightly face-to-face contact with that parent, while a sizeable proportion of children have daytime-only or holiday-only contact with a parent (see, for example, ABS 2004; Smyth 2004).
- Around one-third (31 per cent) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere rarely or never see their other parent, typically their father (ABS 2004). Parental conflict, physical and emotional distance between parents, new partners, and relative economic disadvantage feature prominently in the profile of parents who report little or no father-child contact. Fathers who report on this, tend to see themselves as having been "cut out". Mothers are more likely to report that fathers cut themselves out (Smyth 2004).
- A high level of dissatisfaction towards post-separation parenting exists – especially for non-resident fathers. Many separated/divorced parents in Australia would like to see more contact occurring (75 per cent of non-resident fathers; 40 per cent of resident mothers) (Parkinson and Smyth 2004).
- Non-resident parents (male and female) are more likely to favour the idea of 50/50 shared care than resident parents (female and male) (Smyth and Weston 2004).

- A small but discernible increase appears to have occurred over the past six years in the proportion of fathers playing a greater role in their children's lives (derived from ABS 2004), including an increase in the number of parents sharing the care of their children (roughly 3 per cent in 1997 compared with around 6 per cent in 2003).
- Family dynamics in tandem with demographic factors temper the form that contact takes. These factors largely reduce to "the three Rs" – repartnering, relocation (geographical distance), and residual bad feelings (particularly conflict) between parents (Smyth 2004). To this list may be added three other Rs – relative economic disadvantage, "rotten behaviour" by a parent (including abuse, domestic violence, or obstruction of contact), and regard for parents' work patterns and children's age, developmental stage, individual temperament, experiences and wishes. Higher levels and qualitatively richer types of contact appear to be associated with lower levels of parental conflict, lower rates of repartnering, less physical distance between parents' households, and greater financial resources (Smyth 2004).
- In the United States context, parenting agreements (or "parenting plans") have been found to reduce the likelihood of ongoing disagreements and conflict (Lye 1999).
- Child support continues to be a source of conflict for some families. Many non-resident fathers (especially those who have new families to support) complain that they are paying too much, and/or that they cannot see their children despite having to support them financially. By contrast, many resident mothers complain that child support is not paid, debts are not pursued, or that the child support system can be manipulated in order to minimise or avoid child support obligations altogether (Commonwealth of Australia 2003).
- Parent-child contact and child support often go hand-in-hand. Non-resident parents who pay child support also tend to spend time with their children; those who do not spend time, tend not to pay child support. The six Rs described above may also influence or mediate the close but complex links between contact and child support.
- Many parents appear to opt for "standard" post-separation parenting arrangements (every-other-weekend and half holidays) by default: that is, they are typically unaware of other feasible alternatives and perceive the every-other-weekend schedule as the norm. Parents have a need for resources that can help assist in making decisions regarding the future care of children, especially in relation to different ways of sharing the care of children (Smyth 2004).
- Safety and mental health issues appear to pervade the litigation end of the family law system. The system is still trying to come to grips with how to best manage these issues. Processes for investigating and proving allegations of violence and abuse have been generally slow, unreliable and often politicised. The boundaries between state and federal responsibilities tend to add additional layers of complexity to these cases.

Implications for support services

What implications do the above findings have for support services for separated parents and their children?

- Some families may need very little help; other families may benefit from some help; still other families may require a lot of help. If adequately resourced, Family Relationship Centres could be well placed to help separating parents choose the best pathway for their particular needs.
- Interventions are needed that provide systemic ways of handling significant conflict (i.e. attending simultaneously to the needs of the children and *both* parents).
- Such interventions tend to be more satisfying, more cost effective and more enduring. A variety of child focused and child inclusive intervention models exist (e.g. Fisher and Pullen 2003; Moloney and McIntosh 2004). Group-based educational programs can also be very effective for some categories of high conflict separating families (McIntosh and Deacon-Wood 2003). With some qualifications, the earlier in the separation process the intervention(s) are offered the better.
- The use of detailed parenting plans developed with the help of a skilled neutral third person can give parents the chance to reflect on the nature of their parenting



responsibilities, and to specify how they will resolve any future parenting disputes should these arise (Emery 2004; Lye 1999; Ricci 1997). Aside from reducing the likelihood of disagreements and conflict, parenting plans can also help parents and children anticipate and come to terms with changes in family life.

- Services can assist parents to remain open to reviewing their arrangements periodically perhaps every two years, as children mature and parents' circumstances change; one-size-does-not-fit-forever. Where possible, parenting arrangements should be reviewed as children enter their teens, become more independent, and typically spend more time with their peers (Mason 2000). For some parents, however, a review may run the risk of re-igniting parental conflict which may not, on balance, be in the children's interests. These children tend to pay the price of their parents' stand-off by having to conform to rigid post-separation parenting patterns.
- Well researched and well trialled information that sets out a range of alternative time-sharing schedules, alongside children's developmental and emotional needs is likely to be a valuable tool to help parents develop or adjust their parenting arrangements. The Government discussion paper sees such a document as a potentially valuable aid for parents and "parent advisers". While we agree, we are also aware that pre-ordained schedules can assume a false legitimacy. As Emery, (2004) notes, parents are generally in the best position to know which arrangements will work best for their children and themselves. Rather than the application of formulas, parents are better served by skilled support that helps them articulate knowledge they already possess about their family's circumstances.
- Carefully considered guidelines and processes need to be developed for dealing with the issue of domestic violence and child abuse, and mental health issues. Drawing on the expertise of existing specialised services for women and children experiencing violence makes good sense with respect to the continuing development of screening protocols, and ongoing staff training. Adequate intake protocols overseen by formally trained staff must be an essential condition for the support and funding of Family Relationship Centres, just as it has been in federally funded child and family mediation services. Although these Centres, assuming adequate resourcing, could be expected to deal with a large number (perhaps the majority) of family law related parenting disputes in the future, staff should not be placed or place themselves in a position where they make *judgements of fact*. In our view, where children and/or one of their parents report having experienced violence or, following careful intake, are deemed likely to be exposed to continuing violence or abuse, court-supported processes (such as the Magellan or Columbus Projects), need to be immediately invoked as a vital part of the intervention strategy (see Brown et al. 2001; Murphy, Kerin and Pike 2003). It is equally important that these specialised services are able to respond quickly. In the interim, support for ongoing parenting by the alleged offender may not be appropriate.

Research terrain: Gaps in the knowledge

Thus far we have tried to summarise what we know about post-separation parenting in Australia, and what this body of knowledge might mean for delivering services to families

in transition. But many research gaps remain. Four such gaps of potential relevance to Family Relationship Centres are offered here.

Who uses which services and why?

Not much is known about who opts for which services and why they do so (or do not). For instance, in the recent parliamentary inquiry into joint residence, there was considerable interest in determining the proportion of separated parents who reach arrangements over children's matters with support but without litigation. Recent estimates by the Family Court suggest that only around 6-7 per cent of all Family Court applications in children's matters end up before a judge in a fully contested hearing (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 7). Many others seek consent orders with respect to agreements reached in a variety of ways that vary from informal processes, through negotiation via lawyers, mediation, and early litigation usually seeking interim orders. Of course, the Court has no data on those who do not make applications to it.

As such, no solid "process" research has been conducted in Australia on how separated parents come to arrangements in children's matters without the Court's assistance. In this instance, we mean by "process" research, an investigation into the ways in which separating couples arrive at decisions and access conflict resolution opportunities and services designed to assist them with parenting disputes. Research tends to take "snapshots" of individuals at a particular point in time. But without asking former couples directly about why they chose a certain pathway, it is unclear whether one or both of them saw legal processes and possibly court as a first option; or whether they chose a lawyer for his or her negotiation skills, or reputation as a litigator, or sympathetic stance with respect to mediation; or whether they were even aware of the existence of primary dispute resolution services such as mediation.

We also remain unclear about broader motivations for choosing particular pathways, even if information about the range of options is sufficient. These might include a lack of money, a fear of hurting the children, difficulties in meeting a former partner face to face, a desire to avoid escalating conflict, and so forth. Until longitudinal research is conducted that specifically focuses on parents' pathways, and the reasons behind their decisions, it is difficult to gauge how the family law system is operating as a whole, and how families can be helped to choose the best pathway for their particular needs.

Thus whilst an implementation review is planned for one year after the new Family Relationship Centres network comes into operation, research planned now that aims to map pathway choices, is likely to provide a useful lens to determine which services are being used within and outside this framework, and why.

Encouraging shared parental responsibility

In Australia, the recent parliamentary inquiry into 50/50 shared care rejected the legal presumption of "equal-time" parenting in favour of "shared parental responsibility" (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). However, it is unclear just what "sharing" the responsibility for children means in practice and how time-sharing ("parenting time") aligns with a "shared responsibility" model. In Australia, there is not much research on how parents share decision-making and parental responsibilities in "intact" families; even less

is known about separated families (especially in relation to the ways in which parents construct their work patterns around caring for children). Research on this is likely to be helpful to practitioners working with separated parents.

More broadly, the Australian evidence base is not strong for what works and what doesn't after separation and divorce, for whom, and why. Data that improve our understanding of different arrangements, child and parent outcomes, perceptions of fairness and satisfaction, and the quality of relationships among family members (pre- and post-separation) are likely to have much practical use for parents, practitioners, and policymakers.

While there is little data to support the idea that a linear relationship exists between more time and better outcomes for children, there is nonetheless good evidence that *joint parental responsibility* together with *substantial* parent-child contact – as long as this is safe – may produce the best outcomes for children and parents (Braver and O'Connell 1998). Rather than focusing almost exclusively on amounts of time, it may be better for mediators to encourage parents to develop more creative arrangements that are tailored to the individual needs of children and parents. (Of course, where conflict is low, flexibility can be high; where conflict remains high, clearly specified, predictable, stable arrangements may be more helpful.)

On the issue of more creative approaches to sharing the care of children, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has recently collected detailed contact schedule data from a national random sample of separated parents. The objectives of this research were two-fold: first, to explore the extent to which "standard" contact (alternate weekends and half-school holidays) is typical; and, second, to identify more lateral approaches to the structuring of parent-child contact. The article by Smyth elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters* summarises these contact schedules. These data suggest that while schedules are very varied, around half of all structured contact arrangements appear to be based on an every-other-Saturday-night or every-Saturday-night schedule, with additional nights for extended blocks of care being added on Friday, then Sunday, then Thursday.

Hearing and supporting children

A quiet revolution is occurring in Australia around the importance of children being heard and supported in post-separation parenting disputes. Australia is at the vanguard of a number of child-focused and child-inclusive practices (Chisholm 2004; Moloney 2004). These interventions are likely to raise parents' awareness of the centrality of children in family disputes, and encourage a framework for achieving child-sensitive outcomes.

However, as noted by Moloney (2003: 83), child-responsive practices require high levels of expertise, care, clarity of purpose, and support. They also need to be buttressed by evidence of their efficacy. While empirical support has yet to be furnished in Australia, research aimed at assessing its efficacy is well underway (McIntosh, Long and Moloney 2004). The excitement being generated around these initiatives, therefore, needs to be kept in check until there is evidence that such approaches do indeed improve post-separation family outcomes.



Contact disputes

Despite extensive legislative, policy, and research initiatives in recent years, parenting arrangements continue to be a major source of conflict for many separated and divorced parents. Indeed, inter-parental conflict about parent-child contact after separation does not seem to be dissipating. Instead, the reverse seems to be the case: disputes about contact appear to be increasing – at least within the confines of adversarial legal process, and not just in Australia (Parkinson 2002). Feminist commentators and fathers groups put forward differing explanations for this phenomenon. The reasons are likely to be complex.

Parenting disputes about contact place great strain on the court system. As a designated entry point into the family law system, and with their focus on early intervention and dispute resolution, Family Relationship Centres may help to reduce this strain. The approach they take is likely to be able to hear the differing narratives that underlie each dispute. Researchers and practitioners, such as Winslade and Monk (2001), would argue that hearing and responding to the inevitably differing stories of separation is a prerequisite for a lasting resolution and consequent healthy patterns of parenting into the future.

At the same time, our more general understanding of what disputes are about, when they occur, what triggers them, what stops parents from resolving them, and what influences the decision to pursue a legal intervention are issues not well understood. Collaborative research on these issues between the University of Sydney and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, funded by the Attorney-General's Department, might help to inform the work of the new Family Relationship Centres on this important issue.

Family Relationship Centres: The way forward?

To what extent can Family Relationship Centres act as a buffer against some of the stresses of relationship breakdown and minimise damage to children? Despite our imperfect knowledge of how to best manage post-separation disputes, we have learned enough to know that timely competent and respectful *processes* minimise the chances of disputes solidifying and becoming entrenched. Relationship Centres have the potential to offer this. In addition, the services "maze" could all but disappear if separating families knew that Relationship Centres were the recommended first port of call and were strongly encouraged to use them.

Appropriately, considerable debate is likely to ensue about issues such as training standards and the best mix of services to be offered within Relationship Centres. The debate should be respectful of both practice-based experience and research-based insights. We have covered what we believe to be some core research-based issues. There is much that could be said on the practice front, but we wish to confine ourselves at this stage to mention of a potential link between community-based services and Family Court services that holds much promise.



Gibson (2004) has outlined a developing future vision in which the role of Family Court counsellors and mediators would change to that of consultants to families who are unable to make use of community-based forms of mediation, conciliation or counselling. As consultants, these Family Court staff would combine the roles of facilitator, child advocate and source of independent information to the Court in the event that the case proceeded to litigation. This would appear to be a rational

approach to a changing environment in which community-based services are likely to absorb the bulk of the dispute resolution work, while more unusual and more problematic cases are handled by the Court. Gibson's vision holds great promise.

We believe that in proposing the establishment of Family Relationship Centres, the Australian Government has made a bold response to the *Report on the Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation* (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). This Report was, in turn, a visionary statement which, in the words of the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee, was persuaded to go beyond its original brief, especially after hearing from children who had experienced the separation of their parents. The Government's Discussion Paper, which places the Family Relationship Centres at the core of the proposed reforms, offers a window of opportunity that is unlikely to be repeated for some years to come. Let us hope that the discussions which emerge from the Paper are both comprehensive and well focused.

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Lawrie Moloney is Associate Professor and Director of the Department of Counselling and Psychological Health at the School of Public Health, La Trobe University. **Bruce Smyth** is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

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