



Shared parental responsibility

Stability of arrangements among separated Australian families of young children across two years

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Recent reforms to the family law system and Child Support Scheme reflect and promote a major cultural change in relation to parenting after separation.

Introduction of these reforms coincided with, and to some extent were prompted by, emerging research and social changes. These changes include an increase in fathers' involvement in their children's lives, general acceptance that non-resident parents should make reasonable provision for the financial support of their children (Smyth & Weston, 2004), and research evidence on the benefits to children in most families of having a close relationship with both parents after separation (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Key themes of the reform package focus on the indissolubility of parenthood and emphasise:

- joint financial responsibility for children after separation;
- children spending substantial time with each parent where possible;
- shared decision-making by parents; and
- assisting separated parents to improve their communication about childrearing and to reduce conflict.

An examination of these four themes, using data from the first two waves of *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*, is the focus of this paper. Each of the themes will be covered by first outlining existing research evidence, followed by presenting results from the present analysis on the issue, and finally discussing these findings in relation to earlier research and the reform package. In order to capture these themes, in addition to describing the distribution of the sample on the indicators of child support compliance, parent-child contact, shared decision-making, and parental conflict, this paper will also look at the extent of change under each theme over the period of two years. The extent of change over the period is investigated from two different perspectives. Firstly, the change in the distribution of the population on these four measures from Wave 1 to 2 is described using cross-sectional data from each wave. Secondly, longitudinal analysis of individual families is used to look at the extent of change as experienced by families.

Data source

All new analysis presented in this paper relies on information provided by the resident parents from the first two waves of LSAC. The sample included



those children, aged 4 to 5 years in Wave 1, for whom (a) one of their parents were living elsewhere, (b) the other parent was known and he/she knew about the child, (c) the resident parent was not in a relationship with the child's other parent, and (d) the separation took place more than three months before the Wave 1 interview. Wave 2 cases were excluded where (a) the parents now live together, (b) the other parent was deceased, or (c) both parents now live elsewhere. In addition, 18.6% of Wave 1 respondents did not participate in Wave 2. The final sample comprised 764 sample weighted (715 unweighted) cases in Wave 1 and 591 sample weighted (523 unweighted) cases in Wave 2. Distribution analysis on the measures of state and remoteness of residence found the sample of this study to be representative of the total LSAC child cohort sample.

In terms of socio-demographic characteristics on the measures of sex, age, marital status, country of birth and Indigenous status, the Wave 1 sample of this study was comparable to the set of parents with a child support entitlement for a 4-year-old child registered with the Child Support Agency (CSA)—the main Australian data source on the circumstances of separated parents.¹ Due to lack of data availability and low reliability rate, the measure of income could not be compared.

In summary, the findings in this paper are based on a sub-population of relatively young families—which is not entirely representative of the total population of separated Australian families—and represent the account of the resident parent only.²

Joint financial responsibility

Parental separation is one of the leading correlates of child poverty in Australia, and with the steady increase in divorce rates and ex-nuptial births over the last two decades (de Vaus & Gray, 2004), ongoing financial support of children in non-intact families will continue to be a concern in Australia. Governments also have an interest in parents meeting the costs of their children—when they have the capacity to do so—to reduce the call on Family Tax Benefit.

The Australian Government is in the process of reforming the Child Support Scheme to meet the best interests of children from separated families. Reinforcing the notion of joint financial responsibility for children after separation and ensuring the payment of an appropriate level of child support are central elements of the reforms based on recommendations made in a report by the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005). The reforms are being progressively introduced in three stages between July 2006 and July 2008.

Analysis presented in this paper is based on data collected prior to the introduction of these reforms, but it provides a valuable overview of resident parents' reports of financial contributions made by non-resident parents for the period. The theme of joint financial responsibility is captured by examining resident parents' reports on the extent to which non-resident parents paid the expected child support in the last month.³ A limitation of this

measure is that it cannot identify cases where the deficit was made up in the following months.

The proportion of non-resident parents paying child support was approximately the same in both waves—with over 60% of resident parents reporting that they received the full child support amount, but one-quarter reporting they did not receive any of the expected child support amount in the month preceding the survey (see Figure 1).⁴ Interestingly, the proportion of parents estimated by this study to be paying full child support reflects the proportion of non-resident fathers who agreed that fathers who do not live with their child should always be made to pay child support (56%) and also the proportion of non-resident fathers who believed that parents, rather than the government, should bear the main responsibility for financial support for children after separation (60%) (Smyth & Weston, 2005).

While the overall level of compliance with child support obligations remained relatively stable over the two years, analysis of individual cases found that only 63.2% of resident parents reported no change in the level of child support compliance over the two-year period. An additional 17.5% of resident parents reported that non-resident parents increased their level of compliance, while 19.3% reported a lowered level of compliance (see Table 1).

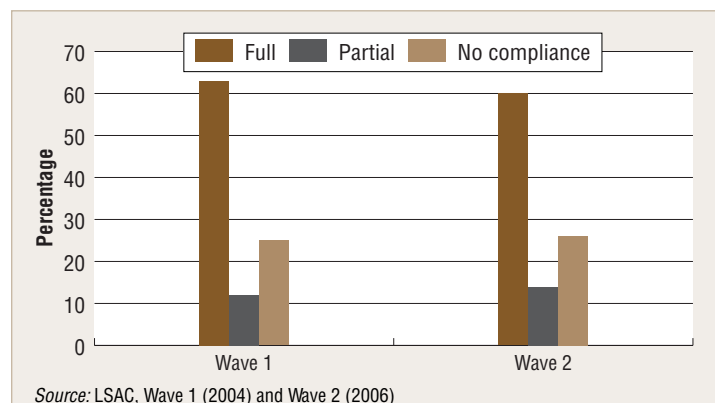


Figure 1 Distribution of child support compliance in LSAC Wave 1 and 2

Table 1 Change in compliance with child support obligations from Wave 1 to Wave 2

Direction of change	%
No change	63.2
Increased compliance	17.5
None → Partial	1.1
None → Full	8.4
Partial → Full	8.0
Decreased compliance	19.3
Full → None	7.7
Full → Partial	8.5
Partial → None	3.1
Total (n = 350)	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

Table 2 Distribution of Wave 1 child support compliance in Wave 2 (%)

Wave 1	Wave 2			Total (n = 350)
	Full	Partial	No	
Full	74.3	13.5	12.2	100.0
Partial	52.7	27.0	20.3	100.0
No compliance	38.7	5.3	56.1	100.1

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

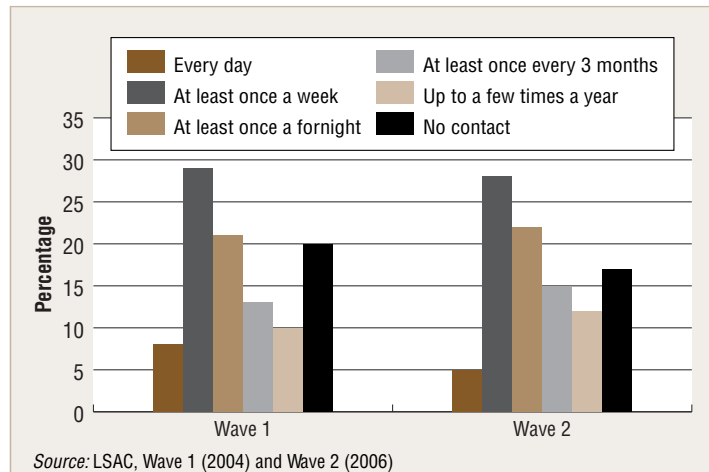


Figure 2 Distribution of parent-child contact in LSAC Wave 1 and 2

Table 3 Change in frequency of parent-child contact from Wave 1 to Wave 2

Direction of change	%
No change	56.2
Increase in contact	18.2
No contact → Contact	4.4
Increase in frequency	13.8
Decline in contact	25.6
Contact → No contact	4.4
Decline in frequency	21.2
Total (n = 590)	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

Table 4 Distribution of Wave 1 parent-child contact in Wave 2 (%)

Wave 1	Wave 2						Total (n = 590)
	No contact	Up to a few times a year	At least once every 3 months	At least once a fortnight	At least once a week	Every day	
No contact	74.3	13.2	3.6	4.1	2.6	2.2	100.1
Up to a few times a year	20.4	44.5	18.1	10.4	6.7	0.0	100.1
At least once every 3 months	3.6	18.7	54.1	16.8	6.9	0.0	100.0
At least once a fortnight	3.8	8.8	11.0	52.3	22.2	1.9	100.0
At least once a week	2.3	1.5	8.5	21.9	59.8	6.0	100.0
Every day	3.3	7.0	1.2	9.4	48.5	30.7	100.1

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

Among non-resident parents who did not change their child support compliance level, the most stable group was the group with full compliance in Wave 1, with 74.3% remaining fully compliant in Wave 2. A further 13.5% moved to partial compliance, and 12.2% dropped to no compliance. Of the partial compliance cases in Wave 1, more than half (52.7%) moved to full compliance in Wave 2, while an additional 27.0% remained partially compliant. The trend among non-compliant parents in Wave 1 was not so positive, with the majority (56.1%) remaining non-compliant two years later. A further 5.3% moved to partial compliance, while 38.7% became fully compliant (see Table 2). Changes in the method of collection of child support could have been an important contributing factor to the level of compliance.⁵ However, as the method of child support collection was not recorded in the second wave of LSAC, this paper could not investigate the interaction between child support collection methods and any change in level of compliance with child support obligations.

In terms of other determinants of compliance, earlier analysis of LSAC data found compliance in Wave 1 to be the strongest predictor of compliance in Wave 2, followed by parent-child contact (Losonecz, 2007). However, it should be noted that while researchers generally agree on the substantial positive relationship between child support compliance and parent-child contact, the causal sequence to date is unclear (Fehlberg & Smyth, 2000).

Parent-child contact

For most children, separation of their parents will be marked by a considerable loss of contact with their non-resident parent, often the father. Research tends to indicate a strong desire among fathers to remain involved with their children after separation. For example, a survey of 260 separated Australian fathers, by Hawthorne (2005), found that over half wanted shared or sole custody of their children (42.3% and 11.5% respectively) at the time of their separation. Yet, while there is an increase in the use of shared care in Australia, the proportion of separated parents using shared care is still relatively low—between 5% to 6% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2004; CSA, 2006). The present study found that, while the proportion of children whose



parents have a legal shared or joint parenting arrangement was around 12%, the majority (64.4%) of these children spent only two days or less a fortnight with their other parent. Conversely, of the children who spent more than two days a fortnight with their other parent, fewer than half were in a shared or joint parenting arrangement. Regardless of the parenting arrangements reported in LSAC, there was a wide range of variation in the amount of time spent between the child and the other parent. Therefore, in this paper, analysis of parent–child contact included all cases where one parent lived elsewhere.

Analysis of the LSAC data in this study showed that in both waves around 20% of children had not seen their non-resident parent in the last twelve months, while around 10% had only seen their non-resident parent up to a few times a year. The proportion of children seeing their non-resident parent at least once every three months, but less than once a fortnight, was between 13% and 15%. Over 20% of children had seen their non-resident parent at least once a fortnight, while approximately one-third of children had seen their non-resident parent at least once a week over the preceding year in both waves (see Figure 2). These figures are consistent with other survey reports of parent–child contact after separation (ABS, 2004; Parkinson & Smyth, 2004).

Not surprisingly, only one-quarter of non-resident fathers and just over half of resident mothers in Australia believe that the amount of contact between the child and the non-resident father is “about right”, while as many as 74% of non-resident fathers and 41% of resident mothers think that the amount of contact is “not enough” (Parkinson & Smyth, 2004). Despite the significant proportion of both resident and non-resident parents who report that they would like to see more contact occurring, and research evidence on the beneficial effects on children of generous post-divorce contact with non-resident parents (Amato & Keith, 1991), contact between the child and the non-resident parent on average tends to decline over time (Braver & Griffin, 2000).

These findings were supported by the present research, which found that when there was a change in the frequency of contact between waves, higher proportions of resident parents reported a cessation or decline (25.6%) in contact, rather than an increase or commencement (18.2%) of contact. For the remaining 56.2% of children, the frequency of contact from Wave 1 to 2 remained the same (see Table 3). A more detailed description of change over the two-year period is shown in Table 4.

The research also found that less frequent contact was not balanced by longer visits, as average contact hours within each category changed very little between waves (see Table 5). In fact, there was a small decline in the total average daytime hours spent with the non-resident parent in a year; however, this decline did not reach a statistical significance of 0.05.

To date, very little is known about the reasons for such a considerable difference between the actual



Contact between the child and the non-resident parent on average tends to decline over time.

Table 5 Frequency of parent–child contact and average contact hours in Wave 1 and 2

Frequency of contact	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	%	Daytime hours in a year	%	Daytime hours in a year
No contact	19.8	–	17.3	–
Up to a few times a year ^a	9.6	87	12.3	108
At least once every 3 months	12.9	179	14.9	179
At least once a fortnight	20.8	676	22.4	647
At least once a week	28.6	841	28.3	861
Every day	8.4	949	4.8	954
Total	100.1	637	100.0	592

Note: ^a Hours of contact were not available for cases where contact was a few times a year and therefore those cases were not included. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

and desired parent–child contact. One suggestion by researchers is poor relational factors between parents (Parkinson & Smyth, 2004). This suggestion is supported by previous analysis of the LSAC data, which found the level of parental conflict in Wave 1 to be a statistically significant predictor of shared decision-making in Wave 2, which in turn was a significant predictor of frequent parent–child contact in Wave 2 (Losoncz, 2007).

However, given that a significant proportion of resident mothers (41%) also desire greater contact, other factors—such as the cost of contact, limited housing circumstances, the distance between the residences of the child and non-resident parent, and re-partnering of either parent—may also be important contributing factors (Parkinson & Smyth, 2004).

One risk factor identified by previous studies for the disengagement of non-resident fathers is contact arrangements not being worked out during the early stages of separation (Ahrons & Miller, 1993; Isaacs, 1988). A longitudinal study of 103 separated American families, interviewed in the first and third years of separation, found strong support for stability in visiting arrangements. Isaacs (1988) suggested that having a schedule in the first year did appear to act as a buffer to protect children from any negative effects

of relational factors, such as parents' arguments over visits. Analysis of LSAC data in the present study supported the association between having a schedule and maintaining contact. Families with a "set pattern" of contact in Wave 1 were more likely to maintain the same frequency of contact than families without a set pattern of contact (57.5% versus 43.7%). However, having a set pattern of contact in Wave 1 did not improve the chance of an increase in the frequency of contact in Wave 2.

Shared decision-making

Along with joint financial responsibility and contact with both parents, the *Family Law Amendment Act 2006* presumes equal shared parental responsibility

and requires "decisions to be made jointly" by persons who have equal parental responsibility.⁶

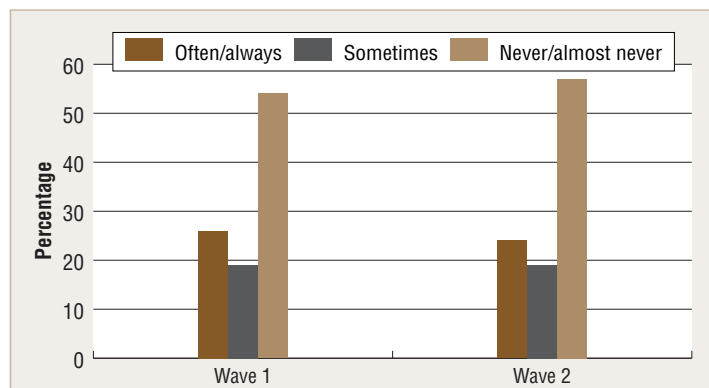
Shared decision-making and consultation with the non-resident parent has been found to have a positive effect on other aspects of post-separation involvement. For example, focus group discussions with American divorced fathers found that fathers who thought that "they shared control with mothers over childrearing issues" also tended to view their financial contribution and substantial time spent with their children as a natural aspect of post-separation fatherhood (Braver & Griffin, 2000). Earlier longitudinal analyses by Braver and his colleagues (1993) of both resident and non-resident parents found that perceived control in non-residential parents was related to high involvement in various aspects of their children's lives, including the payment of child support. Similarly, analysis by Losoncz (2007) using LSAC data found a high level of consultation with the non-resident parents in Wave 1 to be predictive of frequent parent-child contact and compliance with child support obligations in Wave 2.⁷

While a high level of shared decision-making appears to have a positive influence on post-separation involvement of the non-resident parent, the present analysis of the LSAC data found a relatively low level of consultation with the non-resident parent. In both waves, more than half of resident parents reported that they never or almost never ask the other parent's view, while about one-quarter of parents reported often or always asking the child's other parent for his/her views when making major decisions about the child (see Figure 3).

For 66.7% of parents, the level of consultation about major decisions remained the same over both waves (see Table 6). The remaining parents either increased (15.7%) or decreased (17.6%) their level of consultation. The most stable group were those parents who never or rarely involved the other parent in their decision-making in Wave 1, with 81.1% also not involving the other parent in Wave 2. Conversely, the group that reported high consultation of the other parent in Wave 1 did not remain as stable, with only 50.5% reporting the same level of consultation, and 39.6% dropping from "often/always" to "never/rarely" involving the other parent in Wave 2 (see Table 7).

The reasons for low rates of shared decision-making reflect the complexity of post-separation relationships. In his interviews of Australian non-resident fathers and their experience of parenting, Hawthorne (2005) found that fathers identified structural as well as personal barriers that limited their scope to influence decisions made about their children.

A number of structural barriers have been progressively removed by amendments to the *Family Law Act*. For example, in the *Family Law Amendment Act 1995*, the new "residence" order replaced the prevailing "custody" order. While the residence order meant that the child should live with one parent, it gave that parent no particular advantages in decision-making. The emphasis on equal decision-making power was expanded in the 2006



Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

Figure 3 Distribution of shared decision-making in LSAC Wave 1 and 2

Table 6 Change in extent of shared decision-making from Wave 1 to Wave 2

Direction of change	%
No change	66.7
Increased consultation	15.7
Never/rarely → Sometimes	4.3
Never/rarely → Often/always	8.0
Sometimes → Often/always	3.4
Decreased consultation	17.6
Often/always → Never/rarely	9.8
Often/always → Sometimes	2.5
Sometimes → Never/rarely	5.3
Total (n = 589)	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

Table 7 Distribution of Wave 1 shared decision-making in Wave 2 (%)

Wave 1	Wave 2			Total (n = 589)
	Never/rarely	Sometimes	Often/always	
Never/rarely	81.1	6.7	12.2	100.0
Sometimes	53.6	11.9	34.5	100.0
Often/always	39.6	9.9	50.5	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)



amendment, which also removed the labels of “residence” and “contact”. However, while it remains the case that the parent with whom the child primarily lives has no additional *legal* decision-making power, responses from fathers in the above survey tend to indicate that, at least in practice, the nexus between residence and decision-making still exists.

In terms of personal barriers, a small survey of recently divorced American fathers questioned about their involvement after separation found that the most important factors predicting fathers’ co-parental interaction was the amount of parenting support received from their former wife/partner, followed by fathers’ satisfaction with their own parenting involvement (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000).

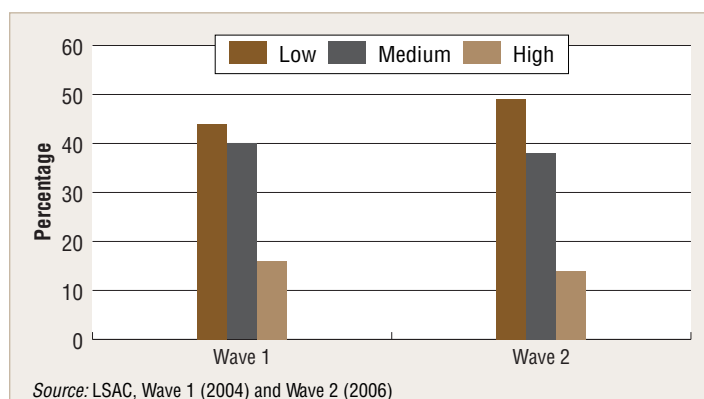
However, co-parenting after separation is not easy. Parents have to establish new rules for co-parenting in their new family structure of separated households, while at the same time letting go of their role as marital partners (Emery, 1995). Also, if the resident mother sees little value in the father’s involvement, she tends to limit the father’s role within the post-divorce family (Braver & Griffin, 2000). Given the strong emphasis in the recent family law reforms on promoting the benefits of both parents’ involvement in their children’s life after separation, it is likely that parents will be more inclined to persevere with co-parenting after separation. Providing parents with workable models and assisting them in adapting these models to their own situation is likely to have a positive impact on shared decision-making among separated parents.

Parental conflict

Another closely related influencing factor on parent–child contact is parental conflict. In fact, child support, parent–child contact and involving the non-resident parent in decision-making are often the source of conflict for separated families (House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003). However, while many parents experience moderate to high levels of conflict after divorce, generally it tends to decline over time. A typical pattern is for couples to disengage within a couple years of the separation (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

Furthermore, not all conflicts are bad. While inter-parental hostility is negatively associated with contact and involvement with children (Hawthorne, 2005), and intense, open parental conflict or domestic violence is associated with poor child outcomes (Braver & Griffin, 2000), conflicts vary in their content, intensity, frequency, resolution and the extent to which children are directly exposed to them. Indeed, many intimate and functional relationships involve some conflict (King & Heard, 1999).

Consistent with the findings of Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991), the level of parental conflict reported by the resident parent in LSAC fell between the two waves.⁸ Of those resident parents who had contact with the other parent, the proportion reporting medium or high conflict decreased



Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

Figure 4 Distribution of conflict among parents with contact in LSAC Wave 1 and 2

from 40.3% and 15.7% in Wave 1 to 37.6% and 13.6% in Wave 2. Conversely, the proportion of parents reporting low conflict increased from 44.0% in Wave 1 to 48.8% in Wave 2 (see Figure 4).

However, reduced conflict is not always evidence of an improved relationship between parents. It may indicate that the parents have nothing to do with one another (King & Heard, 1999). The present study found an increase in the level of disengagement between separated parents over the two years, particularly among parents with high conflict. Nearly 10% of resident parents reported that they ceased contact with the other parent between waves, while less than 4% reported that contact resumed in the same period (see Table 8). In terms of the parents who moved to no contact, high-conflict parents in Wave 1 were twice as likely as low-conflict parents to cease contact with the other parent by Wave 2 (12.4% versus 5.7%) (see Table 9).

Earlier research found that the relationship between shared parental responsibility and parental conflict is not simple. For example, analysis of LSAC by Losoncz (2007) found that low parental conflict in Wave 1 was associated with increased shared

Table 8 Change in level of parental conflict from Wave 1 to Wave 2

Direction of change	%
No change	52.8
No longer have contact	9.3
Re-established contact	3.7
Increased conflict	14.9
Low → Medium	9.1
Low → High	1.4
Medium → High	4.4
Decreased conflict	19.3
High → Low	1.5
High → Medium	5.5
Medium → Low	12.3
Total (n = 589)	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)



Maintaining relatively low conflict between parents appears to assist with shared parental responsibility.

Table 9 Distribution of Wave 1 parental conflict in Wave 2 (%)

Wave 1	Wave 2				Total (n = 361)
	No contact	Low	Medium	High	
No contact	76.4	14.3	5.1	4.2	100.0
Low	5.7	65.0	25.5	3.8	100.0
Medium	11.8	34.6	41.2	12.4	100.0
High	12.4	11.3	41.8	34.5	100.0

Source: LSAC, Wave 1 (2004) and Wave 2 (2006)

decision-making in Wave 2, which in turn was associated with high parent–child contact. Therefore, maintaining relatively low conflict between parents appears to assist with shared parental responsibility.

The above finding is parallel to that of Arditti and Bickley (1996), who found that low parental conflict was predictive of high parental relationship quality, which was associated with greater involvement on the part of fathers. On the other hand, the findings of Arditti and Bickley also suggested a positive association, though much smaller in magnitude, between parental conflict and father’s involvement. A similar association was found by King and Heard (1999), suggesting that more involvement on the part of fathers will create more opportunities for conflict to occur. Some parents may choose to deal with this conflict by disengaging from contact with their ex-partner and giving up their influence on decisions made about the child, or by reducing their contact with their children. Some support for this view has been found in recent Australian studies. For example, in his qualitative interviews of separated Australian fathers, Hawthorne (2005) found that some fathers reported that, in order to avoid parental hostility, they adopted the strategy of avoiding contact with former partners, even if it meant potential costs to the children.

It appears that some conflict is an inevitable result of shared parenting. The more aware separated parents are of this potential conflict and the more strategies they have to deal with them when they occur, the better placed they might be to resolve them in positive ways instead of reducing their engagement.

Conclusion

Recent reforms to the family law system and Child Support Scheme emphasise the importance of sharing parental responsibility after separation. These reforms reflect current cultural changes in relation to parenting, and are intended to serve the interests of children. Using LSAC data, this paper described parental arrangements made by separated families and the extent to which these arrangements changed within a two-year period. Data analysed in this paper were collected prior to the introduction of significant reforms to the family law system and the Child Support Scheme, but they provide a valuable overview of the circumstances of separated parents during the period, against themes emphasised in the reforms.

The present study found that the arrangements of separated families are far from static. Instead, the results are indicative of a high level of instability over time in the arrangements of separated parents under the four themes of joint financial responsibility, parent–child contact, shared decision-making, and parent contact and conflict.

Under the theme of joint financial responsibility, child support compliance was found to be relatively low. The proportion of resident parents reporting that they received the full child support amount they expected was approximately 60%, while one-quarter reported not receiving any of the agreed child support amount in the month preceding the survey. While the overall level of child support compliance over two years remained the same, the change for individual families was substantial, with only two-thirds of families reporting the same compliance level category two years later.

Child support compliance is closely related to the second theme examined—the extent of parent–child contact. The present study found the frequency of contact between children and non-resident parents to be relatively low in some cases. Furthermore, the frequency of contact declined on average over the two years, but there was no corresponding increase in the number of hours associated with each visit, indicating a decline in the average level of contact between children and non-resident parents over time. The decline occurred despite indications in previous studies that a significant proportion of both resident and non-resident parents would like to see more contact occurring. This paradox calls for further research—including up-to-date reports from non-resident parents reflecting their views on frequency of contact—to improve our understanding of factors that inhibit the higher level of parent–child contact desired by a sizeable proportion of non-resident and resident parents.

The third theme of shared parental responsibility—an important new measure in the 2006 family law amendments—is designed to encourage cooperative parenting. While research to date has found that a high level of shared decision-making is positively related to the involvement of the non-resident parent, the current study found the level of consultation



with the non-resident parent when making major decisions about the child to be consistently low, with some decline over time. Barriers preventing non-resident parents remaining involved in their children's lives include structural and personal factors as well as a lack of societal norms describing post-divorce roles. While there is a lot of emphasis on, and a relatively clear understanding of, the role of fathers in contemporary intact families, societal norms defining post-divorce roles, particularly roles for non-resident parents, remain ambiguous.

Under the fourth theme, the relationship between separated parents, particularly parental conflict, was examined. Aspects of shared parenting are often the source of conflict for separated families. While some conflict is an inevitable part of separation, continued high levels of conflict between parents may have a negative impact on the non-resident parents' involvement with their children. Therefore, services set up to assist separated parents need to focus on ways of strengthening support and communication between parents about child-rearing and strategies for resolving disagreements when they arise, while ensuring that the safety of all parties, especially children, is maintained.

Separated families, just like intact families, are made up of unique individuals with a wide range of characteristics, circumstances and personal attributes. Relationship and dispute resolution services, such as Family Relationship Centres and other services funded by the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP), can help parents by assisting them to set up workable, safe and relatively stable parenting arrangements after separation. This research provides evidence that establishing, maintaining and renegotiating a working post-separation parental relationship is an important element of this process.

This particular study only examined resident parents' reports of post-separation arrangements over the period of two years. Future research, using successive waves of LSAC, should consider a longer period and the views of non-resident parents as well. Future research could also include the various measures available in LSAC of child wellbeing and the extent to which these measures are influenced by post-separation arrangements. This would provide a fuller understanding of shared and non-residential parenting and its implications for post-separation family relationships and child wellbeing.

Endnotes

- 1 Analysis was based on unpublished data extracted from the Child Support Evaluation Dataset (CSED), a point-in-time dataset developed by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), linking extractions from the CSA Client Research Unit Data and extractions from the FaHCSIA Longitudinal Data Warehouse, for research, analysis and modelling of policy directions and proposals. The dataset used for this study consisted of CSA cases that were current at 30 June 2004.
- 2 Differential reporting of visitation and child support by resident and non-resident parents is a common feature in the divorce literature. Non-resident parents report substantially more of both than do custodial parents (Braver et al., 1993).
- 3 In over 70% of the cases the expected amount was the amount assessed by the CSA, while for another 17% it was the amount agreed with the other parent.

- 4 Only a small proportion of the resident parents who reported no compliance indicated that they agreed to the nil payment for the last month (14.7% in Wave 1 and 13.5% in Wave 2). The proportion of resident parents in the partial compliance group who agreed to a lesser amount for the last month was higher (39.4% in Wave 1 and 29.9% in Wave 2).
- 5 Over half of child support payments are made directly from the payer to the payee (i.e., privately collected). If private arrangements cannot be arranged, or if private payment does not work out, the payee can ask CSA to collect child support (i.e., CSA collects).
- 6 There is an exception in cases where there are reasonable grounds to believe that a parent has engaged in child abuse or family violence.
- 7 The extent to which the non-resident parent is consulted on major decisions about the child was measured on a 1 (never/almost never) to 5 (always/almost always) scale.
- 8 A composite measure of parental conflict (if parents had any contact in the last 12 months) was constructed from the three variables of: how well parents get along with each other; how often they disagree about basic childrearing issues; and how often there is anger between them. The Cronbach's alpha value of .78 indicated an adequate degree of internal consistency for this scale.

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