

4

LITTLE OR NO CONTACT



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK IN CHAPTER 4 LITTLE OR NO CONTACT

Six resident mothers

AUDREY, aged 53, separated eight years ago. She has two daughters aged 11 and 13 years. Her former partner now lives overseas and occasionally has contact with the children at Christmas time.

DENISE separated from her former partner 12 years ago. Her two daughters, aged 18 and 14 years, have had very minimal contact with their father during the past eight years.

KIM separated from her former partner, who now lives interstate, 11 years ago. She has a son aged 18 years and a 16-year-old daughter, who have had minimal contact with their father since the separation.

LEANNE, aged 40, has been a single mother for 12 years. She has a 13-year-old daughter who has not seen her father since she was a baby.

MAUREEN, aged 45, has two adult children and one 15-year-old daughter, Emily. She has been separated from her former partner for two years, and during that time Emily has seen her father on three brief occasions.

SUE is the mother of a five-year-old girl, Laura. She moved to Melbourne from interstate to be near her family when she separated 12 months ago. Laura has only seen her father twice since the separation.

Six non-resident fathers

ALEX has been separated for 12 years. He has a 17-year-old daughter who lives with him, and another daughter aged 14 who he has only seen twice in the past two years.

GEOFF has been separated from his former partner for ten years. He has two teenage sons who lived with him for six years following the separation, but who now live interstate with their mother.

MARTIN, aged 41, has been separated for seven years. He has two sons aged 13 and 12 and a ten-year-old daughter, whom he sees for brief periods at Christmas time and on their birthdays.

RAYMOND, aged 44, has been separated from his former partner for two years. He has a 14-year-old son whom he hasn't seen for more than six months.

ROGER has been separated for ten years. He has two sons, aged 11 and 13 years, with whom he has had no face-to-face contact during the past 12 months.

ROSS has been separated for three years. His former partner moved overseas when they separated, and he hasn't seen his seven-year-old son since. He also has a two-year-old son whom he has never met.

In order to protect the identity of all participants and their significant others, the names of people and places used in this report have been changed. To enhance the readability of the report, minor grammatical changes have been made to some of the quotes used.

4 Little or no contact

Bruce Smyth

"You can't legislate love." [Audrey]

"When you get a parent who basically says 'You cannot see your father without my consent', then basically you can't stand a chance." [Roger]

Little or no face-to-face contact with children after divorce is in many ways the polar opposite to 50/50 shared care. While no regular or fixed pattern of father-child contact is ever established in some families, in many others, contact falters, tapers off or abruptly stops (Trinder, Beek and Connolly 2002).

Father absence has enormous implications for children's wellbeing, and has been shown to be associated with a plethora of social ills for children – from poor academic achievement to youth suicide (Amato 2001; Pryor and Rodgers 2001; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002). Children themselves typically report the loss of daily contact with one of their parents as the worst part of their parents' separation (Rodgers 2003). There is also emerging evidence that paternal disengagement can be a profound and complex psychosocial phenomenon for many non-resident fathers (Kruk 1993).

Fatherless-ness: "Our most urgent social problem"?¹³

High rates of post-separation paternal disengagement (especially where parents have never married or lived together) have been reported in most western countries (Arendell 1995; Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams 1999; Burghes, Clarke and Cronin 1997; Kurz 1995; Lee 1990; Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Simpson, McCarthy and Walker 1995; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992),¹⁴ spurring a flurry of concerned social commentary on the issue of "father absence" (Blankenhorn 1995; Horn and Sylvester 2002; O'Neil 2002; Popenoe 1996; Wilson 2003; see also Dudley and Stone 2001).

In Australia this concern has recently come to the policy fore, with "father absence" providing the impetus for the recent parliamentary inquiry into a legal presumption of joint residence. In a recent radio interview¹⁵, the Prime Minister said:

13. This turn of phrase derives from Blankenhorn (1995).

14. In Britain, Bradshaw et al. found that 21 per cent of non-resident fathers had not seen their children for at least a year; and that another 10 per cent had only seen their children once or twice in the past year; Maclean and Eekelaar; Simpson et al. 1995 found that 27 per cent of non-resident fathers had no contact with their children. In New Zealand, Lee (1990: 47) found that one-quarter of children had lost contact with their fathers within two years of their parents' divorce. In the United States, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992: 172) found that "by the end of our study, the proportion of mother-residence children who were no longer visiting their fathers during regular portions of the school year reached 39 per cent".

15. 20 June 2003, on the Allan Jones show: www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview203

“I am very worried and many people are worried [tape break] boys out of broken families end up not having effective male role models, perhaps ever . . . They live with their mother, they don’t have older brothers or uncles or male grandparent[s] with whom they can identify, and they go to schools now where there are very few male teachers. They can often be 15 or 16 and perhaps never before they find a male role model and it does result in perhaps not the most balanced upbringing, and that’s something that we should try as a society to see if we can address.”

The Prime Minister’s concerns are buttressed by data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997 Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998), which suggest that almost one-third (30 per cent) of children under 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere rarely or never see their other parent, typically their father. This figure is backed up by more recent Australian estimates (Parkinson and Smyth 2003).¹⁶

There is compelling evidence that parental conflict and the economic fallout from divorce drives many of the negative consequences of divorce for children (Ambert 1998; Duncan 1994; Reynolds 2001; Rodgers and Pryor 1998) – not paternal absence *per se*. Inter-parental conflict, in particular, can adversely affect the quality of relationships between children and parents (both in intact and separated families), and may be a significant precursor to paternal disengagement, while “father absence” can tip children into poverty since contact and the payment of child support often go hand-in-hand (Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg 2001).

Empirical studies

Not a great deal is known about paternal disengagement and its correlates. Indeed only a handful of studies has directly examined why many fathers lose contact with their children after divorce. None of these has been conducted in Australia.

In one of the earliest investigations into paternal disengagement, Dudley (1991) surveyed 84 divorced fathers living in Philadelphia who had either occasional overnight or daytime-only contact, or no contact, with their children.¹⁷ He identified four perceived impediments by fathers to more active fathering. These were: their relationship with children’s mothers (41 per cent of fathers reported this); fathers’ own problems or issues, such as substance abuse, or work, or new relationship commitments (28 per cent); children growing older (16 per cent); or physical distance¹⁸ (15 per cent).

Dudley (1991) found that high inter-parental conflict was common across all four groups of fathers. Also common was the use of adversarial legal processes for the establishment, enforcement, expansion or renegotiation of contact – with the exception of fathers who reported their own issues as the main reason for no contact. The “my own issues” group was also more likely than other groups to be satisfied with the lack of contact. Dudley (1991: 284) suggested that (a) feelings of inadequacy, (b) being discouraged from being an involved parent by a friend or a

16. High rates of paternal disengagement appear to have been historically stable in Australia (see, for example, Hirst and Smiley 1984).

17. Dudley (1991) actually surveyed 255 divorced fathers, 84 (33 per cent) of whom had either occasional overnight or daytime-only contact, or no contact, with their children. The focus of his study was on these 84 fathers.

18. On the issue of long-distance parenting, see also Cohen (1989).

new partner, (c) the valuing of work or leisure over children, or (d) a belief that their children were best off without them, may have underpinned this tendency.

Elsewhere, Kruk (1993) conducted a four-year cross-national study of the impact of divorce on non-resident fathers, especially in relation to paternal disengagement. He obtained two samples: one from Canada, comprising 80 divorced fathers located through family court records; the other, comprised 80 British divorced fathers located from a variety of sources. Each sample had two sub-samples: 40 fathers who were in contact with their children; 40 fathers who were not. He conducted structured face-to-face interviews with these fathers.

Kruk (1993) maintains that paternal disengagement is related to the dynamic interplay of two sets of factors. The first, *structural* factors, includes the adversarial nature of traditional legal processes, the inability of such processes to develop and strengthen capacities to enable effective co-parenting, and lawyers' predictions and pre-adjudications of likely outcomes in custody disputes. The second, *psychological* factors, includes grief, loss, role ambiguity, a sense of unfairness, concern about the potentially negative impact of divorce on children, the perception of becoming a "visitor", and the "pain of visits – their brevity, artificiality, and superficiality" (p. 89). Each factor alone, argues Kruk, is unlikely to lead to disengagement. But together, they are a "potent force militating against post-divorce paternal contact" (p. 74).

For Kruk (1993: 74-75):

"Divorce represents a situation where a father is judicially, culturally, and legislatively disadvantaged on the basis of gender, but a father's psychological adjustment to the consequences of divorce is the other critical factor in the disengagement equation . . . Unable to tolerate the idea of the loss of their children, but given little expectation for success and what many consider to be a highly adversarial means to try to prevent the loss (which they believe will seriously harm their children), they gradually disengage from their children's lives."

Kruk's research paints a picture of "Defeated Dads", as opposed to "Deadbeat Dads", and points to both individual and structural forces as the primary colours in the portrait of disengagement. It also adds a psychological dimension to Braver and O'Connell's (1998) finding (see below) that the over-riding reason that many fathers disengage from their children is because they feel "disenfranchised" as parents – be that by the court system, their former spouse, or both (see also Arendell 1995).

Greif (1995) surveyed 185 divorced parents (109 non-resident fathers, 76 non-resident mothers) from North America and Canada who had little or no contact with their children. Parents had not seen their children for at least six months, and responded to a 40-item questionnaire published in an issue of the *Parents Without Partners* magazine. Using Dudley's (1991) typology, Greif found that 62 per cent of the sample blamed the other parent for the lack of contact, 30 per cent believed that distance was the main reason, 16 per cent blamed their own issues, and 16 per cent reported children's issues as the main reason for no contact (see also Bradshaw et al. 1999: 90; Hamer 1998).

A subset of 14 fathers within Greif's sample reported that they did not wish to see their children. The responses of these fathers suggested that they felt the other

parent had turned their children against them or had obstructed contact. According to Greif, this group appear to have withdrawn because they felt rejected. He also points out that they were less likely than the other fathers in the study to have been involved with their children, during marriage or on separation.

Greif (1995: 83) concludes: "Sometimes fathers are pushed out and others withdraw on their own . . . Some men have a tendency to shy away from an ambivalent or unclear situation, which custody arrangements often become. One way of dealing with uncertainty is to make a unilateral decision and withdraw."

And finally, in arguably the most rigorous quantitative investigation thus far into paternal disengagement, Braver and his colleagues¹⁹ (Braver and O'Connell 1998) examined a raft of data derived from interviews with 378 divorced families in Arizona in the United States. Respondents were interviewed at three points in time: just before filing for divorce, one year later, and two years after the second interview. Seventy per cent of the interviews at Wave 1 involved husbands and wives from the same former union (that is, couple data).

Braver explored more than 30 possible correlates of paternal disengagement and found that one factor consistently surfaced as the most important: fathers feeling "parentally disenfranchised" (Braver and O'Connell 1998: 156).

According to Braver and O'Connell (1998: 158-159):

"Many of the fathers interviewed felt that everything about the divorce, especially anything concerning the way the children were raised, was completely out of their control . . . they were on the outside looking in. Many were extremely embittered that society demanded that they still assume the *responsibilities* of parenthood. As they saw it, society, the legal system, and their ex-wives had conspired to rip asunder their connection to their children . . . Overwhelmingly it was these disempowered, embittered, despairing fathers who were the ones who discontinued contact with and support of their children . . . In each case, something profound happened to them to make these formerly responsible fathers disengage. Their paternal urges were thwarted. They were somehow made to feel, either by the legal system or perhaps their ex-wives, that they had no real role to play in their children's lives. A better, more accurate label for them [as opposed to Deadbeat Dads] might be 'Driven Away Dads'."

The focus groups

Profiles of each of the focus group participants in this chapter are presented on page 32.

The following analysis is based on the responses of 12 separated or divorced parents (six fathers in one focus group, six mothers in another). Fathers had little or no face-to-face contact with their children; mothers had a former partner who had little or no contact with their children. "Little" contact was defined as irregular face-to-face contact that had occurred no more than a couple of times over the preceding 12 months.

19. Sandler and Wolchik (various years).

None of the participants was from the same former union. Every story has two sides but without access to couple data, we are only privy to one side of each story in the following accounts. The independent groups of men and women also mean that we are likely to be sampling from two different populations: fathers who feel that they have been cut out; and mothers who feel that fathers have “cut out” (that is, are disinterested).

Most of the parents lived a considerable distance from their former partner. Eight of the 12 parents reported having no contact with their former partner, another reported high levels of conflict, and three said that they didn’t get along too well. Expressed more simply, none of the parents in these two focus groups reported harmonious social relations with their former partner.

Thus high levels of inter-parental conflict and geographical distance featured in the profile of the participants in the “little or no contact” focus groups.

Vignettes

Two vignettes are used to introduce the stories of some of the participants. These cases provide a snapshot of the two main accounts given for paternal disengagement – some fathers perceive themselves to be *cut out*, while some mothers unsuccessfully try to *cut fathers in*.

Ross

Ross has two sons aged seven and two. He divorced a year ago and separated about a year before that. The day after the separation, which he suggests was “mutual”, his children and pregnant wife went back home to Brazil. His wife’s family lives in Brazil, and is affluent and supportive. Ross has no contact with his seven year-old son except for minimal phone contact. He has never met his youngest son, saying: “I don’t really know what he’s like”.

Ross reflects:

“My last physical contact with Frances, who’s now seven, was [when he was] five . . . it was about two weeks after my wife and I decided to get separated. We’d already planned the trip back to Brazil – a holiday. She kept her ticket and cashed mine in. I was on my way down to Melbourne on a trip. I was living in Newcastle. They dropped me off at the airport and I said goodbye to Frances knowing that I had another week after I got back from my trip with him before he left.

And she tells me as I get out of the car: ‘Oh, my lawyer told me not to tell you but we’re leaving tomorrow night.’ And so that’s the last time I saw him . . .

The last time I spoke to him was Christmas day . . . that broke my heart. He said: ‘Dad. You know what? Something’s missing.’ And I said: ‘Oh what’s that?’ And he said: ‘You’re missing. I want my family together.’ So I said: ‘Look . . . one Christmas I’ll be over.’ . . . It was Christmas morning my time; Christmas Eve their time. He said: ‘It can’t be *this* Christmas because that’s only tomorrow and it takes longer than tomorrow to get here.’ I said: ‘Yeah . . .’”

Ross is required to pay child support and says that he cannot afford to travel to Brazil because of this. He is unsure whether he'll see his children again, and hopes that his finances improve, or that, on turning 18, his eldest child might return to Australia.

While Ross may have been cut out, the reverse may be the case for other fathers. Audrey's former spouse is a case in point.

Audrey

Audrey's two daughters, aged 11 and 13 years last saw their father at Christmas.

According to Audrey:

“For the first few years he was living in the same area and so he would have them every other weekend, but that was only when it suited him. He originally wanted to have the children on a Thursday night so that he could take them to school on a Friday and be done with it . . . After a few years . . . he went back to Canada and saw the children only at Christmas time. But recently – he's actually been very ill and almost died – there's been a change of heart . . . and he wants to re-establish a relationship with the children . . . He offered to air them to Adelaide where his new wife's family live. And the children actually said no. They had no desire to go at all. The little one, she didn't know him – and she was only three when he left. That realisation, that they were now old enough to call the shots, made him do a turnaround, plus the fact that he'd become very, very ill. So I've had letters and the children have had letters with profound apologies. I've tried to work with him therefore to create a better relationship with the children, but this is his last chance. He's now gone back to Canada but promises to come back more frequently. . . It's not that I care about him very much, but I care very much about the children, and if they can salvage something it would be good.”

The dynamic nature of life, and the way that relationships can unravel over time, especially when a parent moves overseas, feature prominently in Audrey's narrative. So too does her apparent anguish at trying to balance her children's needs for a meaningful relationship with their father against their need for predictability and stability (an issue we turn to in more detail shortly).

Key themes

Nine key themes emerged for parents in the little or no contact groups: (1) limited parenting skills; (2) repartnering; (3) relocation; (4) fathers' perceptions of being cut out; (5) the psychology of disengagement; (6) “the system” as a barrier to contact; (7) the “shallowness” of sporadic contact; (8) other forms of contact; and (9) children's adjustment.

It is noteworthy that mothers with former partners who rarely or never saw their children were inclined to point to a lack of commitment on the part of fathers, along with a single trigger event – such as repartnering, relocation, or incidents in which a father behaved irresponsibly or lacked the necessary parenting skills or self-confidence to provide adequate care. But simple paired associations

between contact and a particular trigger were often overshadowed by more complex family dynamics, such as ongoing parental conflict or relationship “enmeshment”, whereby one or both parents had not let go of issues related to their former intimate relationship.

A similar set of structural factors emerged for fathers but the co-parental relationship factors were mirror reversed: the six fathers in the group reported being highly motivated but highly obstructed.

Questionable parenting skills

Two of the six mothers had concerns about their former partners’ capacity to parent.

For Maureen, her former partner taking their 15-year-old daughter to a gaming outlet on Christmas Day triggered the cessation of contact. Maureen admitted:

“I wouldn’t allow him any more access after he took our daughter to the pokies. I stopped contact due to his behaviour.”

In Leanne’s case, her former husband’s limited parenting skills and support, compounded by their child’s tender age, appear to have acted as catalysts for his withdrawal. Leanne reflects:

“I separated when Amber was ten months old and my ex-husband only took her once. And, of course, she was very sensitive. She was tiny at that stage as well, but she’s pretty perceptive and she screamed the whole time. He was with his sister who hadn’t had children at that stage so it was the “blind leading the blind”. She was promptly brought back and that was it. That was it.”

Repartnering

The repartnering of either parent can act as a barrier to contact (Parkinson and Smyth 2003).

For Denise, the links between her two daughters and their father had always been somewhat tenuous, but contact ceased altogether while he was involved in a new relationship. According to Denise:

“The children were two, five and 12 years old when we separated, and he had them occasionally for the first two years – but never overnight. One week was spent with them – well, his mother had them, but he was up there. So I’ve had [a] one week [break] in 12 years. He dropped off contact the third year. He got a girlfriend and dropped the kids, and then he didn’t see them for years . . . He rings the kids once or twice a year but he wants to talk to me, which is really awful.”

Of course, new partners can also be instrumental in encouraging non-resident parents to resume or maintain contact with children from a former relationship.

Relocation

Relocation by one or both parents is perhaps a more obvious potential wedge to contact than re-partnering.

According to Raymond, who had not seen his 14 year-old son for seven months, things were working well until his former spouse and son moved. Raymond explains:

“When we first separated, we had equal [physical] custody. The problem was we got back together again and then she just disappeared with my son. But it actually was legally equal custody. My last contact was a phone call on Christmas Eve with my son. It didn’t go well. The problem with my son is he’s basically been turned against me. I can never do anything right . . . She decided she was going to move. I was only told two days before they were moving that they were moving to Mildura. But I wasn’t even told by her or him. She actually made him keep it a secret. I was told by my parents . . . I think the idea behind that was that I couldn’t stop it . . . And so then the other problem’s become distance now, let alone everything else . . . I’ve come to the point now [where] I think I’ll let him ride. In the end I would hope he realises that it’s not all my fault.”

For Raymond, distance and what he perceives as attempts by his wife to alienate him from his son appear to underpin the lack of contact that he has. Raymond’s final comments suggest that he has started to disengage psychologically – perhaps due to the perception that things are beyond his control. On the issue of physical distance, Raymond concludes with a realisation that:

“The most important thing that I’ve noticed from tonight to clear contact is distance. My contact has obviously changed so much when that distance became so much wider . . . since the distance came into it, there’s been very little, very little contact. And I think one of the biggest issues is distance.”

In Sue’s case, her own return to Melbourne, as well as the age of her child, are likely to have been significant factors in her former partner’s withdrawal from their child:

“My daughter hasn’t seen her father since we separated a year ago. We were both living in Sydney. I moved here to Melbourne for some family support in March last year, and so we’re coming up to a year. He’s seen her twice . . .”

But at a deeper level perhaps, relationship issues and enmeshment were also at play here. Sue ended the marriage following the discovery of her husband’s extra-marital affair. She rejected his requests for a reconciliation and has since found a new partner, with plans to remarry. Her story suggests that her daughter’s father has not been able to disentangle his former (intimate) relationship with her from his parenting responsibilities:

“[His lack of contact] I think is punishment really for me, and it still appears because I won’t forgive him and return to the relationship, it’s the punishment for Laura. You know, I mean that he has had contact, it’s always, ‘We’ll get back together and I’ll see Laura all the time.’ He can’t understand that Laura is a separate identity . . . He sees that if we got back together then he could be a father. He doesn’t correlate that it’s his job *now*. It’s very sad.”

Repartnering and relocating: A “double whammy”?

As Sue’s story shows, the complex dynamics at play in family breakdown can create a matrix of conditions that are far from conducive to sustainable parent–child contact. Not surprisingly, a combination of repartnering and relocating by some parents, particularly non-resident fathers, ultimately acted as a kind of “double whammy” for ongoing contact with their children.

Kim recalls:

“The children were six and eight when we separated. My ex-husband didn’t see them for six months . . . Then he had the odd weekend with the girlfriend that he had at the time, where he’d pick them up at 6 o’clock on a Friday night. He owned a gym so he’d drop them off at 6 o’clock Saturday morning . . . I think that happened two or three times. Then he didn’t have them at all. His new girlfriend had never had children so she decided [the two of them] should go around Australia . . . They came back and . . . decided they’d go back to Darwin where he’s opened a business. He didn’t speak to them [the children] for over two years. No Christmas cards, no birthday cards . . .”

In summary, physical distance between parents’ households, new partners, limited parenting skills and/or motivation, relationship and enmeshment issues, loom large in the above accounts of these parents as to why father–child contact faltered or ceased.

Fathers’ perceptions of being “cut out”

Like many of the other fathers in this group, Martin feels like he’s been “cut out” of his children’s lives and has chosen to let things ride because of the difficulties in attempting to maintain contact. He reflects:

“I probably only see the kids three or four times a year. That’s my choice. It’s my choice because of the crap that the mother goes on with. It’s a bit too hard so it’s best off to say, see you on birthdays, Christmas and Easter maybe, and that’s about it.”

As an example of the “crap” that he must contend with, Martin described the difficulty he experienced in trying to organise one of these rare visits with the children on the occasion of his son’s birthday:

“His birthday was on Saturday. We rang up earlier in the week . . . to say we want to see them on the Saturday, his birthday. The mother said no you can’t. He’s too busy. You can see him Friday, or Sunday. And so we had to opt for Sunday. And I rang last night to speak to him because he had a skateboard . . . Well she was mouthing off in the background when I was talking to my son. Saying stupid things like oh, where’s *my* present, where’s my Christmas present? Where’s my Valentines Day stuff? That’s the sort of crap that goes on in the background . . .”

Intense parental conflict seems to be acting as a wedge in Martin’s relationship with his children.

In Geoff's case, his two sons were in his care for six years until they decided to live with their mother in Queensland. Since then there have been ongoing legal proceedings regarding contact. Geoff explains:

"They went to live with their Mum in July '99 so you've got that two years of total alienation during that period. Things are getting a little bit more sensible now. I'm remarried. I've got a two-year-old daughter. My kids are up in Queensland . . . I've got a trip planned for the end of this month. I'll arrange it with the kids. There's no official court orders – things are "pending", so to speak, in the court system . . . I don't think [their] mum will cause any trouble over it, not while things are pending. I think once the Family Court issues are resolved there'll probably be more problems."

It would seem that in Geoff's case, distance between households, new family responsibilities, and high levels of inter-parental conflict converge to make face-to-face contact with his children difficult and infrequent.

INSIGHT

The 3 Rs: Relocation, repartnering and residual bad feelings

Substantial geographical distance between households, the demands of a new relationship, and ongoing conflict or relationship enmeshment can act as catalysts for the breakdown of parent-child contact. There often appear to be direct links between these factors.

From Dr Heckle(d) to Mr Hide? The psychology of disengagement

A number of psychological processes may underpin paternal disengagement. Some clues are embedded in mothers' and fathers' comments.

For fathers, separation often involves a series of profound emotional pushes and pulls around the welfare of their children and their own self-preservation. This process of rationalisation is clearly evident in Geoff's comments:

"You come to the stage, I suppose, where you go through anger, the frustration, the hurt, and then you say: 'Well, I'm getting on with the rest of my life. I've got a new family.' And if it means I never see the kids again, there's nothing I can do about it. There is no processing or latitude to get that contact back in a meaningful fashion. You've just got to turn your back on it and cut that part of your life out . . . You . . . shut off the pain or part of your life and you focus on the positive aspect, which is your new family – especially when you're just getting that new family . . . And you're not going to have a second family for long if you carry over baggage from previous the relationship. It's difficult enough for people to start out with a second family financially, let alone the emotional baggage. It's just not going to happen."

As indicated earlier, Geoff has little faith that protracted family court proceedings between him and his former wife will make his dealings with her, and therefore contact with his sons, any easier. He is "battle-weary" and, for the reasons outlined above, is resigned that:

“When it [conflict] starts again I’ll just turn my back and . . . I’ll leave it for them [my sons] to contact me.”

In Geoff’s case, the emotional pushes and pulls were multi-layered and multi-faceted. Layer 1 involved a history of high levels of inter-parental conflict and perceived “put-downs”. Layer 2 involved several thousand kilometres between him and his children, and the difficulties this placed on him having a relationship with them. Layer 3 involved a new relationship and new parental responsibilities on his part. Layer 4 involved the perception that he was fighting a losing battle with the court and the legal system. Layer 5 involved Geoff’s sensing his own limits, and being mindful of the potential cost of losing the “new” because of the “old”. In many ways, Geoff was caught between two worlds, and one way for Geoff to stay afloat was to let go of the children of his first marriage. In this respect, paternal disengagement can be seen as a survival mechanism – especially where it acts as a buffer against ongoing parental conflict.

Roger, who had not seen his children for over a year, seems to have been able to hold onto to his identity as a father despite little contact. Like several of the fathers, he appears to be in a holding pattern hoping that things will change for the better as his children grow older:

“. . . eventually I hope this is all going to resolve itself, that I will be able to have a longer-term relationship with my boys.”

However, for some fathers, the emotional difficulty associated their changed role may be just too hard to face. Referring to her former husband’s withdrawal from his children’s lives, Denise says:

“It was easier for him to cope emotionally by not having contact – by cutting off. He admitted to being a ‘runner’.”

INSIGHT

Conflict is not just bad for kids

The adverse impact of parental conflict on children is well documented and well known. But conflict is bad for adults too. It grinds parents down. Inter-parental conflict looks to be one of the base ingredients of paternal disengagement.

One strategy that some fathers use to cope with being “cut out” is to pull back from their children in the hope that things will improve with time.

“The system”

One of the most prominent features of fathers’ comments was their contempt towards the various parts of “the system”, most notably the Family Court and the Child Support Agency, but also lawyers and politicians. In line with work by Kruk (1993) and Braver (Braver and O’Connell 1998), for some fathers in the “little or no contact” focus group there was a perception that “society, the legal system, and their ex-wives had conspired to rip asunder their connection to their children” (Braver and O’Connell 1998: 158; see also Turney et al. 2003). Fathers in the other four focus groups were also critical of parts of “the system” but nowhere near the degree to which fathers in this group were.

In an early interchange, Geoff says:

“There seems to be a fundamental approach with the Family Court that if Mum is with the kids then Mum’s faultless; Mum’s blameless; Mum can do no wrong . . .”,

To which another father quickly adds:

“And Mum gets all the money.”

Roger then says:

“I think the legal system needs to be taken to task.

Raymond suggests:

“But the Family Court is not the only problem. The CSA [Child Support Agency] . . . they’re part of the problem. They are. They genuinely, really are.”

INSIGHT

“You can never win against something like that”

A common perception among fathers with little or no contact with their children was the gender bias, injustice and invincibility of the family law system. These perceptions appear to make fathers feel disenfranchised.

The “shallowness” of sporadic contact

Enjoying “quality time” with children can be difficult without a home base, as attested to by Geoff who travels interstate several times a year to spend time with his children. His time with them is usually brief. He explains:

“Last time I saw them it was an extended weekend. Went up there for a weekend arrangement and put in an extra day . . . One of the difficulties with contact when it’s not at your home is that you don’t have amusements for the kids. You’ve got to amuse them. All you’ve got is a hire car and a hotel room for two nights. Yeah, it’s a strain. The trouble is how do you amuse them . . . under those contact conditions? You’re under pressure to do that because it’s such a short period of time, such limited contact. You want it to be ‘quality time’. You want them to enjoy it. You want to enjoy it yourself. You don’t want to become a disciplinarian parent again . . . You can’t ask them too many questions because that’s interrogating them . . . It’s very bloody difficult.”

Moderator: “If you were there on a regular basis, how would it be different do you think?”

“You’d need a home base for them to come and visit you and you need to have in-house amusements. You just cannot spend two to three days in a car with them going around to different things . . . It’s too shallow and it’s too expensive and yeah – it doesn’t work.”

Geoff adds:

“Eventually you sort of come to the conclusion that what sort of contact am I having? Is it really quality contact and you say, no it’s not. And you say well, am I going to miss it? And is my son going to miss it? And the conclusion is, probably not . . .”

While non-resident fathers in the focus group were seeking increases in both the quantity and quality of contact, mothers were trying to encourage fathers to have *any* face-to-face contact. Audrey was quite blunt with her former spouse:

“I said to him . . . ‘It’s actually about having a relationship. Having a relationship means that you have to spend time with the child in order to relate to them. That’s what a relationship is: you relate to the children.’ And it was kind of interesting that I had to spell that out because I think really they [fathers] don’t understand what a relationship is.”

Other mothers also seemed baffled about how to engage their children’s other parent, as evident in the following interchange:

Sue: “I don’t know why there’s an agency like the Child Support Agency to facilitate child support but there is no-one to make parents have some responsibility to see their children.”

Kim: “Forced time together is not quality time.”

Sue: “Yes but in time, the parent might accept their responsibilities to the child.”

Audrey: “You can’t legislate love. They can’t be forced. My children are the best thing that ever happened to me. If the other parent doesn’t feel that, they don’t deserve children.”

Several mothers agreed with Audrey’s sentiments. Leanne was very clear about what she would and would not accept in terms of father–child contact:

“Amber has had no contact . . . I’m really glad of that . . . The main thing that I’m happy about is either it’s all on or it’s not . . . It’s not that I want to deprive my daughter of a relationship. It would be fantastic. But knowing him, and knowing what he’s like, I don’t want her to have her hopes up and down – you know they’re going to call, and then they don’t, and for her to be let down.”

Kim adds:

“I agree with you. I know it sounds bitchy but sometimes they [the children] can be better off and better settled if they don’t have that disruption.”

INSIGHT

Shallow time versus any time

Irregular and brief contact can put non-resident parents under pressure to engage in mutually rewarding activities with their children. Sporadic contact can lead to some mothers opposing contact in an attempt to protect their children from disruption and disappointment.

Other forms of contact

Where face-to-face contact is rare or never occurs, other forms of contact can be of critical importance in maintaining a connection between children and their non-resident parent. In the case of long-distance or high-conflict parenting,

technological advances, such as mobile phones and email, had the potential to help some father's stay in touch with children while avoiding conflict with their former partner.

This was true in Roger's situation:

"I think contact in whatever form is important. I leave it basically now to the boys to call me. I never call them at home. She doesn't want that . . . We do have email contact. It's very infrequent . . . If they call me and I can't talk to them for any reason, you know, I'll always call them back on their mobiles because I know I'll get them rather than getting her on the phone."

However, as Denise points out, advances in communication systems are useless without the desire for contact. She was disappointed that an email account set up for the purpose of father-child communication had been rarely used by her former partner.

Caught in the middle: Children's adjustment

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. This was manifest either by children being caught in the middle of their parents' conflict or left wondering about the intermittent or total absence of a parent from their lives.

The story of Maya, Alex's teenage daughter, is a good example of a child caught in the crossfire:

*"My younger daughter, Maya, lives with her mother, and has been in and out of hospital, the mental health unit, for about the last 12 months. And it's been suggested by her mother that it's my fault – that I'm not having any contact with her, out of Maya's choice. And the reason I believe it's occurring – and it's backed up by what the daughter who lives with me, Karen, says too – is actually *it's what her mother is saying to them*, and her [the mother's] own inability to deal with the separation which occurred 12 years ago, and to face some of the issues."*

The last time Alex saw his daughter, Maya, was for her birthday. He went to her house with his new wife to give Maya a present:

"Maya came out [to the front door] and I said, 'Hi, happy birthday', and she was very hesitant. She's not well. She's been in hospital and she's on [drug medical name] and she looks like she was that close to a nervous breakdown. I said, 'Look, we've got some presents for you.' . . . And she undid them slowly . . . That's when she said, 'Dad, I didn't think you cared about me.' . . . Karen, her sister, is telling me that her Mum's saying that Dad doesn't care about you."

Roger's children appear to have a heightened awareness of the conflict between their parents. Roger explains:

"When I had the kids, I used to get them on a weekend basis. It would come to sort of Sunday night . . . She [former wife] would come and pick them up. By four o'clock in the afternoon the kids

were getting nervous because they knew Mummy and Daddy didn't get on. And, you know, the kids would be saying, 'Mummy's going to be here soon.' I would think, it's not worth it – the kids, going through this trauma."

Ross's frustration is that while his former partner, who now lives overseas with the children, accuses him of being the cause of his son's behavioural problems, he has minimal input into how to deal with the situation:

"He's been seeing a psychologist over there, I know. He's apparently been diagnosed with ADHD, [a condition] which was blamed on me. But the medication is doing nothing. And she just doesn't listen when you say, 'Well, that means he doesn't have it.'"

The mothers in the group were particularly concerned about the constant disappointment and disruption for children when contact with their father was intermittent and/or unpredictable. As mentioned earlier, their desire to protect children from this led several mothers to conclude that no contact was better than some.

Denise reflects:

"See, I made the mistake of setting them all up with a reunion a couple of years ago, and I tried to facilitate that, as you say, for the children. Things were going smoothly in the seven years that we hadn't seen him. I'd had my daughter back and forth to the child psychologist. And it's been up and down [since the reunion]. It's just been another waste, it's just a repeat cycle. So I feel really angry that I got pulled into that too, because you *do* have that emotional side of you that you feel guilty, that you don't want to sabotage the relationship, you want to try and facilitate it for of the children, but they've been disappointed *again* . . . I should have just put my foot down when the child psychiatrist intervened, after the three years my daughter was seeing the child psychologist when she was only very young because there was no continuity. They never knew when their Dad was coming. You know, he disappeared at one stage. They never knew where he went and they were just so traumatised."

Audrey recalls:

"My teenage girl had undergone an emotional crisis about why her father had left *her*, and I'd taken her to a psychologist and . . . I said to him that . . . under no circumstances would he be allowed to see the children and blame them for his departure."

Audrey later adds:

"I was in this bloody insidious situation where I was having to explain his bad behaviour and trying to convince the children that they were loved. I don't know whether he knew or not. But the bottom line for me was those children. Every child has the right to know that they are loved and that they're not the cause of it [the separation]. I was constantly saying to them, 'He loves you but the problem is he had to go for his job.' . . . You're constantly making more and more excuses for his bad behaviour because they know. They know. You can't lie to them."

“Dad, I didn’t think you cared about me . . .”

As with the experience of entrenched parental conflict, paternal disengagement can have a devastating effect on children. Children can be left feeling unloved and unwanted, and not sure why. Concerns about their children’s wellbeing distressed many of the mothers and fathers who reported little or no father–child contact.

Summary

This chapter examined the views of 12 separated or divorced parents: fathers had little or no face-to-face contact with their children; mothers had a former partner who had little or no contact with their children.

Mothers’ and fathers’ comments suggested that they were from different worlds. Mothers were frustrated by fathers’ apparent lack of interest, whereas fathers were frustrated by what they saw as obstruction by the resident parent and “the system”, which they perceived to reinforce mothers’ gate keeping role. Both views are potentially consistent, of course, given that the groups of men and women were independent of each other (that is, they were not matched pairs of ex-couples). But even with couple data, it is not hard to imagine men and women coming up with completely contradictory stories arising from their mutual antagonism and lack of communication.

While differential reporting remains an intriguing (and common) issue for research of this nature, we are nonetheless left with a somewhat lop-sided and gendered view of the dynamics surrounding disengagement. The commonality is that each parent blames his or her former spouse. On this point, one of the most striking aspects of the accounts was the anger and blame about the other parent’s behaviour – and the subsequent moral outrage this engendered.

It is important to note that fathers who do not want contact with their children are unlikely to volunteer for research of this nature; neither are mothers who deliberately obstruct fathers’ contact with their children. And were they to volunteer, they are unlikely to disclose socially undesirable behaviour. More sophisticated methodologies²⁰ are thus needed in locating and collecting personal information from these particular groups of parents.

Regardless of the perspective, there is much in the comments of the 12 parents to suggest that a lack of father–child contact has had a devastating effect on parents and children. Certainly, based on parents’ reports, the wellbeing of the children who had little or no contact with their parents looked to be worse compared with children who spent equal time with each parent. Of course, this is more likely to be a function of family process variables (most notably, the quality of relationships among family members) than the structure of the parenting arrangements – although both are inextricably linked to some extent. The small, non-random nature of the groups suggests that this observation should be interpreted with great caution.

20. Recent advances in the use of data collection systems, such as Audio-Computer-Assisted Self-Interviews (ACASI) in which respondents listen to questions played through audio headphones and key their own responses into a laptop, hold much promise for collecting information from separated parents on sensitive issues.

Fathers' comments highlight the many barriers that they perceive cuts them out of their children's lives. The grief, despair, frustration, and anger expressed by several of the fathers in the focus group are consistent with research overseas which has found a link between inter-parental conflict, the use of adversarial processes, and subsequent paternal disengagement (see, for example, Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993; Greif 1995). Many mothers in this group expressed anxiety about the struggle to create a secure base for their children without any support from their children's father, and the emotional and financial drain this entailed.

The concerns of parents for their children's wellbeing point to the clear need for making available child-focused, non-adversarial interventions that provide better, more cost effective and more enduring ways of handling disputes between highly conflicted parents.