

5

HOLIDAY-ONLY CONTACT



FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK IN CHAPTER 5 HOLIDAY-ONLY CONTACT

Four resident mothers

CLAIRE, aged 33, has been separated for ten years. She has a 13-year-old daughter who sees her father during school holidays because he lives interstate.

GEORGIA separated from her former partner, who now lives overseas, five years ago. She has two children – a daughter aged 15 and a son aged 12, who travel overseas every second school holidays to see their father.

JACKIE has been separated from her former partner, who now lives overseas, for four years. She has a four-year-old son, Mitchell, who has irregular, predominantly daytime-only contact with his father.

JUDE, aged 51, has been separated from her former partner, who now lives a few hours drive away in the country, for 17 years. She has a 17-year-old son who goes to stay with his father for six days every school holidays.

Four non-resident parents

GERARD, aged 41, has been separated for 11 years. He has a 16-year-old daughter who lives interstate with her mother. Gerard pays for her to fly to Melbourne each school holidays to spend time with him.

JULIE, aged 46, has been separated for nine years. Her two teenage sons previously lived with her but now live interstate with their father. They fly to Melbourne to see her each school holidays, and she goes to see them on their birthdays.

MARK, aged 36, has been separated from his former partner, who now lives interstate, for nine years. He has an 11-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old stepson whom he sees during school holidays when possible. He also has two young children with his new wife.

RON, aged 26, separated from his former partner before his daughter was born. Ron's daughter is now eight years old and lives interstate with her mother. His daughter has recently begun to fly to Melbourne to visit Ron, but previously he travelled interstate to see her.

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.

5 Holiday-only contact

Bruce Smyth and Carol Whitfield

“I was very worried when Jake came back because he hadn’t seen Mitchell (aged four) for such a long time, and I just didn’t know how Mitchell was going to react . . . And Jake got out of the car and was walking up the driveway and Mitchell said, ‘Is that my Dad?’ And he just threw his arms around him, and it was pure relief.” [Jackie]

Australia is a large continent, and its population highly mobile. Between 1996 and 2001, around 42 per cent of Australia’s population changed their place of residence (ABS 2003). While the bulk (86 per cent) of movers did not relocate interstate, around 11 per cent did.²¹

Separated and divorced populations are particularly mobile (Khoo 1993). Indeed life-cycle changes (such as moving in and out of relationships) are one of the key reasons that people move (ABS 2000, 2003; see also Pocock 2003: 51).²² Where a parent sees his or her children in infrequent chunks of time because of relocation, long-distance parenting is likely to impact on all family members but in different ways.

Recent data from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey suggest that around 26 per cent of separated/divorced parents live more than 500 kilometres from their former spouse, while another 15 per cent live between 100 and 500 kilometres apart.²³ In other words, *at least* one in four parents (mostly fathers) live a significant distance from their children. The remaining 59 per cent of separated parents – that is, the majority – live less than 100 kilometres from their former spouse; in other words, typically within an hour’s drive.

Not surprisingly, distance and face-to-face contact have been found to be strongly related: the greater the distance, the less contact (Maccoby and Mnookin 1992; Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg 2001; Woods 1999). Obviously the further that parents live apart, the greater the time, effort and money required to make parent–child contact happen.

21. The move of 2 per cent of people was undefined.

22. Moving can also be a trigger itself for relationship breakdown – as in the case where relocation is used as a “convenient means of exiting a failing relationship” (Green and Canny 2003: 24). However, this issue lies outside the focus of this chapter and is thus not explored here.

23. These estimates are derived from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey, Wave 1 (see also the estimates by Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg 2001; Woods 1999). Distance between parents’ households is measured on an ordinal scale. Thus the category “100-499 km” cannot be disaggregated.

Why do separated parents relocate?²⁴ Clearly there are many reasons: the need for one or both parents to enter into or remain in paid work, to pursue career or educational opportunities, to return to family or friends, to be with a new partner, or because of a partner's new job (Gottfried 2002; Ricci 1997). Some parents may just want a fresh start. Others may be trying to cut the other parent out of a child's life (Turkat 1997) or to distance themselves emotionally from that parent – or even a child. Research on the reasons that separated parents move is much needed in Australia, particularly given that most Australians live in a small number of cities that are separated by great distances and pinned to the edges of the continent (Pocock 2003).

Relocation by a parent may have serious, long-lasting consequences for children, as well as for the non-moving parent (Kelly and Lamb 2003; Ricci 1997). Braver, Fabricus and Ellman (2003), for instance, recently surveyed over 600 North American college students whose parents had divorced. They found that young people who had experienced relocation by either of their parents reported faring worse on a range of financial and emotional outcomes compared with those whose parents had remained in close proximity to the other parent. The cross-sectional nature of their data, however, did not allow any specific causal relationships or processes to be unpacked.

But relocation can also have benefits. According to Kelly and Lamb (2003), where a resident parent is competent, and relocation improves his or her educational, career or repartnering opportunities, then children are likely to gain from that parent's enhanced wellbeing – especially if the children can maintain a meaningful relationship with their non-resident parent through regular contact. Where children have a distant or disturbed relationship with a non-resident parent, or where children are caught in the middle of high levels of parental conflict, relocation is also likely to enhance children's wellbeing (Wallerstein and Tanke 1996). More commonly, however, where children have a meaningful relationship with both parents, the relative costs and benefits of relocation are far more difficult to weigh-up (Kelly and Lamb 2003: 202).

Indeed, relocation cases present the Family Court with some of the most difficult parenting issues to adjudicate, and there has been much recent debate on the principles that courts should follow in deciding relocation disputes (see, for example, Ackers 2000; Austin 2000; Braver and O'Connell 1998; Eastal, Behrens and Young 2000). Some (including Wallerstein and Tanke 1996) have argued for a legal presumption in favour of relocation, while others (including Warshak 2000a) have argued against such a presumption. Still others (including Kelly and Lamb 2003) straddle both positions.

In the Australian legal context, as with all matters involving children, the best interests of the child remain the paramount consideration. At the same time, the constitutional right of a parent to freedom of movement is an important countervailing factor for the court to consider. The 1995 amendments to the Family Law Act, which emphasise the child's right to contact and an ongoing relationship with both parents, have thrown the inherent conflict between

24. Braver et al. (2003: 206) define "relocation" as when one or both parents "move more than one hour's drive away from one another" after separation. We define relocation to mean where one parent moves away far enough to make face-to-face daytime contact with children for one parent difficult or impossible.

these competing interests into sharper focus. Recent cases, such as *U v U*²⁵, represent a shift in the court's approach to one that appears more willing to make orders limiting parental movement after separation. It would seem that the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs holds a similar view (see para 2.48, Commonwealth of Australia 2003).

Academic and legal debate aside, one way that non-resident parents seek to overcome the challenge of distance is to see their children during school holidays. While there is a dearth of studies into long-distance parenting after divorce, Warshak (2000a) has suggested that holiday-only (and even weekend-only) contact may not be sufficient to maintain the "breadth of involvement" necessary for a close relationship with children. Without such breadth, fathers often become the "fun" parent (the "Disneyland Dad") while mothers become the "boring" parent who supervises chores, homework and other day-to-day mundane tasks (Warshak 2000a: 94).

However, holiday-only contact has its own pressures for non-resident parents. Frequent contact typically acts to cement the bond between parents and children (Warshak 2000a). Sparse contact, on the other hand, can place great strain on relationships. Some father-child relationships may not be able to withstand this strain. Holiday-only contact might thus sometimes inadvertently act as a stepping-stone to paternal disengagement.

In a bid to help long-distance parents stay connected to their children, new technologies are being recommended (and in some cases judicially ordered in North America) to supplement face-to-face contact and court-ordered telephone contact (Gottfried 2002; Shefts 2002). These "virtual visitation" technologies include video-conferencing, internet web-cams, email, mobile phone-cams, and simple text messaging (SMS), and hold much promise for independent and private communication between children and non-resident parents. These emerging technologies have also been suggested as useful tools for maintaining extra contact with children for families who live near each other (Gottfried 2002; Shefts 2002).²⁶

The focus groups

Profiles of each of the focus group participants in this chapter are presented on page 52.

The analysis is based on the responses of eight separated or divorced parents (three non-resident fathers and one non-resident mother²⁷ in one focus group, and four resident mothers in another) where contact between children and the non-resident parent occurred only during school holidays. Non-resident parents reported on their own experience of long-distance parenting, whereas the four resident mothers reported on their former partner's long-distance parenting. Relocation was the reason this pattern of care had been established by all participants

All eight parents lived some distance from their former partners: two resident parents' former partners had moved overseas; five others lived interstate from a former spouse; one other participant's former partner had moved to the country. Of the eight parents, seven reported that parent-child contact occurred every

25. *U v U* (2002) 29 Fam LR 74.

26. Of course, this may only be in technologically advanced countries.

27. The non-resident mother was included in the fathers group because the "holiday-only" groups were extremely difficult to fill despite the apparent prevalence of long-distance parenting in the general population of separated/divorced parents.

school holidays (varying from six–ten days to the entire holiday period); one parent reported more sporadic patterns of contact. Five parents also reported that they generally got along well with their former partners; two parents reported high levels of inter-parental conflict; and one parent reported little or no communication with their former spouse. But three of the four non-resident parents frequently referred to high levels of obstruction by their former partner, while two of the four resident mothers left their former spouses because of physical violence. Thus, for some parents, physical distance may have helped reduce inter-parental conflict.

The following analysis begins with three vignettes, which act as a window into the experience of “holiday-only contact”.

Vignettes

Jackie

Jackie’s former spouse, Jake, immigrated to Australia shortly after he and Jackie were married. They separated three months after the birth of their son, Mitchell, after which Jake returned to Canada. Jackie believes Jake relocated to avoid his parental responsibilities towards their son, and she laments the lack of predictability of Jake’s visits and its effect on their four-year-old:

“My parenting arrangement is just a nightmare . . . He’s a travel agent and he sort of flitters to and fro. This was Jake’s first holiday. I think he hadn’t seen him for a year and a half. Before that he was here for three months, then he’d go back, leave him for four months, come back, and I did say to him at one point, ‘Look it’s going to be really difficult for him to cope with this’.”

Despite considerable effort to encourage a good relationship between her son and his father, Jackie recently appears to have let go:

“It’s just gotten worse and worse . . . We separated when Mitchell was three months old, and . . . I did everything in my power. I used to take him around there and force Jake to see him. He [Jake] used to just get really emotional and really highly strung, and even when he went back to Canada I really did make an effort to tell him about every milestone. As time goes on, I think I just . . . [pause] . . . especially with his age now, because he’s starting to understand. It’s a lot easier for me now not to take responsibility for his father. I spent a long time doing that, trying to make excuses for him and I just decided one day, look, I’m his Mum and I can only be his Mum and I’m not going to keep saying ‘Your Dad loves you to bits – and blah, blah, blah’. But I’ve never spoken down about Jake in front of Mitchell. As far as Mitchell’s aware there’s no problem at all. I would never sit around and put his father down.”

Gerard

Gerard, separated 12 years ago when his daughter, Mandy, was aged four. For the first four years of separation, Gerard had substantial contact with Mandy who was with him on Wednesday nights and weekends. His former wife then decided to relocate to Toowoomba. Mandy, then eight, chose to go with her. Gerard remained in Melbourne and sees Mandy (now 16) every school holidays. Even though the arrangement is regular, he feels that it compromises his role as a father:

“At best I’m a ‘part-time’ Dad – at best. I know that sounds harsh but that’s the way I felt. I was part-time – every now and then. You pay the money, you make a couple of calls, and you’re a Dad.”

Like two of the other non-resident parents in the group, Gerard felt that his former spouse took advantage of the situation by making communication and contact arrangements difficult to spite him:

“At one stage she [his daughter] wasn’t allowed to call from the home phone. She had to call me from a local [public] phone. Which nine-year-old is going to go down to the phone box down the road to ring their Dad? It [contact] wasn’t really encouraged. I said, ‘Well, I’ll pay for the phone calls that she makes to Melbourne.’ [Former partner] said, ‘Oh no, I don’t agree with that.’”

Later Gerard adds:

“You’re detached from it because it brings you down too low. And then it starts dominating most of your life.”

Mark

Mark’s 11-year-old daughter and 13-year-old stepson both live in Darwin. He describes his former partner as “uncooperative”. He’s been unable to get any structure to his parenting arrangements and his former wife has broken many court orders. Mark’s former wife has relocated several times since they separated. On two occasions, Mark lost contact with his children for several months.

Mark reflects:

“It’s discouraging, especially when you’ve done hard yards ... for nine years or however long you’ve done it. And it is easy to think, ‘Well, I’ll just give it all away.’ I get told by my friends often that when the kids become old enough they’ll understand. They’ll understand and they’ll appreciate it. And I keep telling them, ‘I’m waiting for that day.’”

All three vignettes have a ring of ambivalence and despair about them, which, in many respects, is understandable given the practical and emotional challenges of long-distance parenting. These comments bear an affinity with comments made by parents with little or no contact (see Chapter 5). We explore the distance–disengagement link more fully below.

Key themes

Seven key issues emerged for long-distance parents: (1) juggling work, family and holidays;²⁸ (2) the need for predictability; (3) the pressures of kin keeping; (4) the importance of other forms of communication; (5) conflict and disempowerment; (6) physical space and emotional space; and (7) the relevance of children’s age.

Juggling work, family and holidays

Holiday-only contact, where one parent has primary care of children and the other has regular but infrequent contact, can have contrasting negative effects for both resident and non-resident parents.

28. Of course, this is an issue for many families, separated or otherwise.

For resident parents, respite from the burden of caring for children surfaced as a critical issue. Claire expressed this well:

“My big thing – and I imagine for a lot of other women who don’t have regular access or grandparents – is respite. It’s just full-on – especially when they’re little and you just crave some time. Just some regular time off.”

Similarly, on reflecting on how she would like things to change, Georgia said:

“I would choose . . . to be geographically closer so that he possibly saw them more often . . . and that also I’d get respite – some break, you know, even if it was every second weekend.”

By contrast, a significant problem for non-resident parents was the ability to access sufficient time off work to see their children, or to spend time with new family members during holiday periods.

Julie, a non-resident mother with two teenage boys, is a case in point. She relocated with her sons after separation but relinquished care back to the children’s father when she started experiencing mental health problems. Julie dealt with the challenge of maximising the time with her children each holiday period by not taking full-time or permanent work:

“Because I wanted to be there when they’re down [in Melbourne], I couldn’t have a full-time job because you only get four weeks annual leave and I need at least six. So I went into temp work and now part-time work.” [Julie also receives financial support from her new husband.]

Gerard agrees:

“Like Julie said – that’s a good point – the kids have so many weeks holiday and I only get 20 day’s leave and I’ve got to work . . . I’m by myself. I don’t have a partner. So if I don’t work, forget about it . . . [My daughter] has to be with my Mum – who doesn’t work when I’m at work – because I can’t have all that leave.”

For Mark, new children further complicate things:

“I’m a school teacher so I’m lucky. But it’s still a disadvantage. You’re not able to take a holiday necessarily independent of your children with your new family.”

Long-distance parenting has its own challenges

Long-distance parenting involves many challenges – especially in relation to balancing work and family life.

The imbalance of care responsibilities with one parent having sole care of children for most of the year means that resident parents often get little respite while non-resident parents may not get enough time off work to see their children each holiday period. Thus holiday-only contact can place great strain on mothers and fathers, albeit for different reasons.

Predictability, then quantity, and then quality?

Parent-child contact can vary along many dimensions, including frequency, amount, nature, quality, flexibility, and stability. Focus group members were asked if any of these particular dimensions were more important than others.

For Mark, predictability was the critical dimension:

“I don’t think that the type of contact for the children makes a hell of a lot of difference as long as it’s regular as clockwork. It doesn’t matter if it’s every fortnight, every week or every Christmas holidays, as long as it’s remote-control regular. I don’t think it makes any difference whatsoever. Predictability is the key to it.”

But there was also a practical edge to predictability – being able to book a cheap flight during holiday periods, especially since holidays attract peak season rates and these costs can be considerable.

Mark points out:

“You’re paying top dollar for airfares.”

Gerard adds:

“The longer you leave the flights, the more expensive they get...That’s why I try and get them [the parenting arrangements] buttoned down early so I can get a reasonable or a cheaper flight.”

But predictability was not the only issue of concern. So too was the quantity and quality of time together with children. All four non-resident parents expressed considerable dissatisfaction about the relatively small amount of time they had with their children, and the way in which this time was not conducive to “quality time”.

For Gerard, holiday-only contact did not allow sufficient opportunity for him to establish the kind of presence in his daughter’s life that most parents would like:

“I think it’s [contact] a bit superficial. I don’t know any of her friends’ names.”

Gerard adds:

“When they come down on holidays you’re the ‘Good-time Guy’. You take them there, do this, do that. You don’t get to see that. I know hypothetically you’re the Dad like everyone that’s a parent. But you don’t get involved in the day-to-day activities.”

Mark agrees:

“We’re a bit like party planners when you have *that sort of contact* – holiday contact. It’s pack as many things into a week or a fortnight as you can.”

Julie, a non-resident mother, puts this simply:

“ I’m not in with the nitty-gritty of their life.”

Another difficulty caused by the relatively short amount of time that long-distance parents spend with their children is the periods of adjustment in re-connecting with their children, closely followed by the anticipation of separating again.

Gerard says:

“That’s what makes me apprehensive – even though she’s coming for two weeks I just don’t like saying goodbye. Because you have to let them go. So you get into that pattern and it’s unfortunate because you should make the best of the time while they’re there.”

Julie experiences similar feelings:

“They’re there for the first two days and there’s this boundary-setting again and then for the few days before they go home . . . because we all know we’re going to go our separate ways again . . . And it’s continual. I look at it as grieving because you lose them every time they go back. And that is so hard.”

INSIGHT

A hierarchy of contact needs?

For long-distance non-resident parents, predictability of contact seemed to be a base need, followed by quantity of time, and then quality of time.²⁹ The brevity of contact during holidays can work against having “quality time” with children.

Long-distance parenting often involves considerable additional financial costs, which is why predictability is also important.

Other forms of communication

Other forms of communication become critical given that long-distance parents are unable to see their children grow and develop each day (Ricci 1997). Focus group members referred to a range of approaches that they used to try to stay connected with their children. But this connection was much harder to maintain where children were toddlers or teenagers, and/or where the children’s other parent was not supportive of ongoing contact.

Ron, for instance, struggles to maintain meaningful phone contact with his eight-year-old daughter. He says:

“I ring up and she says, ‘Whatever, whatever,’ but I think it’s just the age. Or if you ask, ‘What did you do today?’ and they say ‘Nothing.’ It’s a kid thing.”

Mark concurs:

“The phone is a very imperfect way of communicating with someone when you actually want to find out things about them . . . I just use it as a means of telling them what I’m doing rather than trying to find out what they’re doing because you don’t get a lot – one-word or one-line answers, pretty much. I try to write. I tried a strategy of actually sending them envelopes with stamps on them so there’s a possibility of them sending stuff to you. But it never happens . . . You just hang in there and try to talk to them as much as you can.”

29. Flexibility may sit on top of quality time where children are older and there is little inter-parental conflict, as alluded to by Claire.

However, non-resident parents were quick to point out the critical role that the other parent played in fostering other forms of communication. Julie described a particularly painful encounter:

“I used to ring them every day just to say Hi and remind them that I was still around and tell them that I loved them. And that was basically it. It was no great long conversation. And they were pretty young. And then the stepmother . . . got on the phone and said, ‘I wish you’d stop ringing them so often. The children make fun of you.’ I cried a lot over that. I ring them three times a week. They never ring me.”

Later in the interview, Julie added:

“I tried ringing them straight after school when I knew that the parents weren’t home and that was okay, until they were not allowed to answer when there was not an adult at home. And this boy’s 16.”

Gerard also experienced indirect obstruction. He explains:

“At one stage she [daughter] wasn’t allowed to call from the home phone . . . It [contact] wasn’t really encouraged. But now she’s got her own mobile phone. She’s 16 now . . . It’s changed a lot. And over the last year there’s email. She’s got a computer at home but she won’t email me from home. She emails me from school. I’m not saying that my ex-wife tells her, ‘Look you can’t contact your Dad.’ But I reckon there’s implied pressure that they put on her”.

Where there was a good working relationship between parents, and children were older, other forms of communication clearly added to parent–child relationships. Claire, for instance, encourages all forms of contact between her former partner and their daughter:

“Most days [they are] on the phone. Andrew [often] rings up, and he’s given me a mobile so Vanessa can ring up whenever she wants.”

Staying connected – maintaining meaningful communication

For non-resident parents with younger children, long-distance communication can be problematic in maintaining contact and can be particularly compromised by a lack of cooperation on the part of the other parent. But where contact is encouraged, other forms of communication can enhance emotional closeness.

This suggests that even technological fixes, such as “virtual visitation” through the internet, may not work with very young children, or where resident parents discourage contact between children and their other parent.

Obstruction and disempowerment

A recurring theme among many of the non-resident parents with holiday-only contact was a sense of disempowerment in the face of a former partner who acts as gatekeeper to the children (a theme echoed by the parents from the day-only and no contact groups).

For Mark, the relationship he has with his daughter is in the hands of his former wife, and he believes that court action has been the only recourse available to him to safeguard this relationship:

“The custodial parent has a hell of a lot of referred power. How they use that power is the complete determination of how successful the non-custodial parent’s relationship is with their children.”

Later Mark adds:

“I’ve had a complete inability to get any structure over the last seven years. There’s been no cooperation. Basically if I’ve seen her in the holidays it’s because Jessie’s Mum has allowed her to come . . . That’s the reason why I’ve been to court.”

Gerard agrees:

“The stumbling block’s got to be the other end because they’ve got all the leverage, all the control. And obviously for them it’s like malice towards you.”

Perceptions of the resident parent being the gatekeeper of contact were not gendered; even the non-resident mother in the group, Julie, felt that contact was very much on her ex-husband’s “whim”.

But animosity comes in different forms. Jackie’s view was that both parents potentially have a degree of control over the other through their children, and that an aggrieved non-resident parent can withdraw from the child’s life as a way of punishing their former partner:

*“I think a lot of what happens to the children is out of bitterness. Because I know with Jake, because I left, it was like he didn’t see Mitchell to punish *me*. You know, a lot of it’s the underdog in the situation who I find is the one who keeps the hold or pushes away. Jake always had that choice, but it was, like, to hurt *me* – ‘I’m not going to turn up’ – you know? It would be nice if the kids could always come first.”*

INSIGHT

The obstruction-disengagement link

Non-resident parents felt powerless in the face of an obstructive former partner. They felt their non-resident status put them in a position of powerlessness – especially given that distance meant infrequent contact. These patterns may be precursors to parental disengagement.

Physical space and emotional space

Major geographic moves by a parent can impact on the whole family. But long-distance parents, in particular, may experience a range of negative emotions related to the physical distance between themselves and their children.

Julie, a non-resident mother, is very honest about its effect on her already troubled mental health:

“For me personally [relocation] had a toll. I’ve been in and out of psychiatric units, [and, at times, have] become very depressed and suicidal.”

Mark experiences a pervasive feeling of guilt:

“I have a constant battle with the fact that I’m not proud of the situation I’m in. I really do have a lot of guilt associated with where I’m at. Despite the fact that people say that it’s not my fault, the fact is that I do feel that it is my fault.” [Mark’s former wife moved to Sydney.]

And even though Jackie’s former spouse moved overseas, Jackie believes that this has come at some emotional cost to him:

“I think Jake felt very guilty when he went back. His Mum said he was suffering and missing Mitchell a lot.”

Distance can also take its toll on children. It seemed clear that travelling large distances was not easy for some children – as reflected by Georgia’s comments:

Georgia: “My daughter didn’t want to go there [overseas] the last two times at all, so I don’t know what will happen in the future.”

Moderator: “What happened when she didn’t want to go there?”

Georgia: “She went. The first time she was in the airport and I had to have her paged, I couldn’t find her. She was on the phone to her friend. And the second time she couldn’t even bring herself to pack her bag. It was just this dreadful feeling – this ‘weight’. She said “I don’t even want to put anything in the bag I don’t want to go so much”. But eventually she did. And her father knew that she really didn’t want to go. He said, ‘I can’t see that she’s going to keep doing this for much longer’, and I said, ‘No, that’s right.’ And she doesn’t particularly enjoy it.”

Moderator: “And what about from his perspective? How do you think the arrangement works for him?”

Georgia: “He defines the ten days. It suits him. He’s a partner in a large accounting firm so he’s busy all the time, so he chooses times when he knows he’s not going to be so busy. I think ten days is all he can handle.”

Other children appeared to long for a closer relationship with their non-resident parent. Claire, for instance, reflects:

“Vanessa just loves her Dad and she’s just rapt when he comes down because she’d like to see him a bit more. I think she’d like him to live in Melbourne so she could see him more often, [and] be closer.”

Nevertheless, despite the many varied challenges of holiday-only contact, a number of the parents tried to make the best of a difficult situation or tried to see the good side of the arrangements.

Julie simply says:

“We just muddle through and do the best we can and hopefully they’ll [the children] be okay with it all.”

Mark is marking time, and views the time he spends with his children (although imperfect) as an investment towards a future relationship:

“You’re doing it not for now, but for when they’re 25 years of age and they’re adults, and they’re living their life . . . That’s why I do it. So anything that happens between now and whenever they’re old enough – hopefully, of their own accord, they want to then maintain a relationship with you. Everything else is just working toward that and nothing is ever perfect and it’s not really satisfying but you’re working to a grander plan.”

Jude is pragmatic:

“It seems to work okay with us . . . My husband doesn’t try to have any more contact . . . He doesn’t make any great effort to do anything else so that suits everyone.”

INSIGHT

Marking time

Non-resident parents appeared to struggle with a range of emotions surrounding not seeing their children frequently. Children also seemed to struggle for different reasons. In essence, non-resident parents appeared to be marking time until their children were old enough to have an independent relationship with them.

“It gets easier as they get older”³⁰

Following on from the preceding insight, several parents observed that some of the challenges of long-distance parenting did indeed ease as children got older. Claire says:

“Well, as Vanessa’s got older it’s become a lot easier. She can fly to Adelaide now. It’s really just her maturing. Things are a lot better.”

Ron’s daughter is much younger but the same holds:

“She’s old enough (eight years) to come over on the plane by herself . . . And I can get away with her for about two weeks without her being too homesick.”

Gerard is pleased that his daughter’s maturity removes the necessity to communicate with his former wife:

“[My daughter’s] 15. She’s more independent. I don’t talk to my ex-wife. I don’t need to talk to her anymore to make any arrangements. I talk to my daughter. I ring her occasionally . . . to get her perspective on how she’s going.”

Older children also were able to make use of more advanced forms of communication, such as email, as Gerard notes:

30. This observation was Jackie’s.

“I tried sending her cards, sending her envelopes. But it was all wasted energy and it just led to a lot of frustration . . . It’s changed now because she’s older . . . It seems to be easier [for her] by email because she does it from school.”

Some fathers also seemed better able to care for, and relate to, older children. Claire reflects:

“When she was young, he didn’t seem to want to spend much time with her but he’s made a real effort over the last couple of years . . . I just don’t think he can relate to little kids much. Now that she’s older (well, she’s not an adult but she can communicate like an adult) he just finds her a lot more interesting, and she responds to that.”

Jude concurs:

“Now that my son’s a bit older . . . and can have a drink with him [the father] and things like that, he’s more interesting and therefore they probably get on better than when they were living together.”

INSIGHT

Things can get better with time . . .

Long-distance parenting presents many challenges for parents but as children get older, things often get easier.

Summary

This chapter explored some of the key issues that emerged for eight separated or divorced parents exercising holiday-only contact. Four non-resident parents reported on their own experience of long-distance parenting, while four resident mothers reported on their former partner’s long-distance parenting. All of the parents lived some distance from their former partners: two non-resident parents lived overseas from a former spouse; most others lived interstate.

Six clear themes emerged that shed light on a range of contextual issues about sharing the care of children when parents live a long way from each other.

First, resident parents craved more regular respite from the burden of caring for children than holiday contact afforded. Non-resident parents, on the other hand, had much difficulty accruing enough leave each holidays to see their children, or balancing new family commitments with seeing their first family children during holiday periods.

Second, the critical dimension for long-distance non-resident parents was predictability, followed by quantity of time, followed by quality of time. Where children were older, and parental conflict was low, flexibility was the icing on the cake for healthy patterns of parenting.

Third, for non-resident parents, long-distance parenting was typically “shallow”, and they felt under pressure to have fun with children (a) because contact occurred during school holidays, traditionally a time for leisure, and (b) the many challenges surrounding face-to-face contact conspired to put non-resident parents under pressure to entice children to see them again.

Fourth, other forms of communication were an important potential means to stay connected to children. But, where children were young or in their teens, or the resident parent was not supportive of contact, the ability of non-resident parents to engage with their children required a high level of commitment on their part.

Fifth, taken together, the often superficial nature of contact, the presence of an obstructive parent and/or parental conflict, and little coming back from children, leads some non-resident parents to feel disenfranchised as parents. These feelings of disempowerment resemble the sorts of feelings that were articulated by non-resident parents who had little or no contact with children. Distance and conflict thus look to be important precursors to the psychological phenomenon of emotional disengagement from children by some parents.

Sixth, as children get older, long-distance parenting typically gets easier, and many non-resident parents appeared to be marking time until their children were old enough to have an independent relationship with them.

These themes suggest that distance between households matters, and that holiday-only contact presents special challenges for family members that are particular to this pattern of care.