

# 7

## “STANDARD” CONTACT

---



## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK IN CHAPTER 7 “STANDARD” CONTACT

### Six resident mothers

**BRIDGET**, aged 41, separated from her former partner 13 years ago when their daughter Andrea, now aged 14, was a baby. Andrea has regular contact with her father by way of a flexible arrangement that changes to accommodate Andrea’s activities and her parents’ work rosters.

**KATE**, aged 32, has been separated from her former partner for 12 months. She has two young children, who have contact with their father every weekend for one or two nights, and Tuesday evening.

**KERRIE** has been separated for seven years. She has two daughters aged eight and ten who stay with their father every weekend for one or two nights, and also see him each Wednesday evening.

**PIA**, aged 41, has been separated from her former partner since their son Chris, now aged 11, was a baby. Pia and her former partner have a flexible contact arrangement which can change from week to week.

**ROXANNE** has been separated from her former partner for 12 months. She has a son aged 15 and a 13-year-old daughter, who stay with their father every second weekend and see him on alternate Wednesday evenings.

**RHONDA**, aged 31, separated from her former partner, who now lives in the country, six years ago. She has an eight-year-old son, who goes to stay with his father every second weekend.

### Six non-resident fathers

**ANGUS**, aged 40, separated from his former partner two years ago. He has a daughter aged seven and a son aged five with whom he has contact on alternate weekends for three nights, and on Wednesday evening.

**BENJAMIN** has been separated for three years. He has two teenage children – a son aged 13 and a daughter aged 15 years. He has contact with his children on alternate weekends and on Thursday and Friday evenings during the other week.

**HARRISON**, aged 47, has been separated for eight years. He has twin sons, aged 12, and a 16-year-old daughter, who stay with him every second weekend for two or three nights and each Wednesday night.

**JASON**, aged 32, separated from her former partner three years ago. He has a four-year-old son with whom he has contact on alternate weekends from Friday evening to Monday morning, and on Thursday evening.

**JOSEPH** separated from his former partner three years ago. He has a five-year-old son whom he sees every weekend.

**SHANE**, aged 42, has been separated for two years, and has a six-year-old son. Contact occurs every second weekend for one night.

---

*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.*

# 7 “Standard” contact

Anna Ferro

*“My arrangements just sort of fell into place, and that was it.”*  
[Harrison]

There is widespread belief in Australia that parent–child contact typically comprises alternate weekends and half school holidays (a pattern commonly referred to as “standard” contact or the “80/20” model) and that this pattern acts as a template for deciding court orders (see, for example, Hirst and Smiley 1984; Bowen 1994; Dewar and Parker 1999). The extent to which this is the case – empirically as opposed to anecdotally – at least as the starting arrangement, is for the most part unclear.

However, some recent data to emerge from the Family Court of Australia suggests that alternate weekend contact between children and their non-resident parent may be the most common outcome. Eight hundred and forty one cases from Court registries in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane were analysed to inform the recent parliamentary inquiry into child custody arrangements in the event of family separation. The findings showed that contact was awarded to the non-resident parent at the level of 51-108 days in just over 40 per cent of consent applications, 50 per cent of settled applications, and over 70 per cent of applications determined by a judge (Commonwealth of Australia 2003).

There is also evidence that an alternate weekend pattern of contact is common overseas. For instance, in a recent investigation into post-separation patterns of parenting in Washington State, Lye (1999) found that over 45 per cent of a large sample of court approved parenting plans specified an alternate weekend schedule of contact between children and their non-resident parent (defined as no more than three overnights per two-week period). More than one quarter of parenting plans in the sample provided for less than alternate weekend contact. Similarly, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found that where children had contact and stayed overnight with their non-resident parent (just under 25 per cent had no contact and over 25 per cent did not stay overnight), the most common pattern was alternate weekend contact.

Lye (1999) found that many legal professionals (such as judges, lawyers and mediators) and county guidelines within Washington State promoted parenting plans centred on an alternate weekend schedule, rather than devising parenting plans based on the needs of individual families. In another example, the Danish Government promotes a standard package of contact arrangements by way of a leaflet which specifies that a “normal schedule” is every second weekend, one day in the other week, alternate Christmas and Easter holidays, and one to two weeks in the summer holidays (cited in Parkinson 2003).

Why might the alternate weekend model be the “standard”? Several explanations have been offered.<sup>33</sup> One is based on traditional sex roles and work patterns. In intact families, fathers are traditionally seen as the breadwinners, while mothers tend to be homemakers and carers. Following parental separation, such role differentiation may continue: mothers usually remain the primary caregivers of children, while fathers have contact and continue to support their children financially. Weekends may be the only opportunity a non-resident father who works full-time has to care for his children, and alternating weekends also allows resident mothers to have some leisure time with their children (Yeung, Sandberg and Davis-Kean 2001).

Altobelli (2003) offers another view. He notes how contact arrangements for young children tended to exclude overnight contact, mainly due to a presumption that infants form a primary relationship with one parent, generally the mother. This presumption was often reflected in contact orders that provided for daytime contact on weekends. As children grew older, suggests Altobelli, the arrangement took the form of an alternating weekend pattern that subsequently became the standard model of post-separation care. Needless to say, this line of reasoning assumes that children are often young when their parents separate – an assumption that may not be far off the mark for many families in Australia, given that separation often occurs within the first seven years of marriage.<sup>34</sup>

Another possibility is that every-other-weekend schedules have evolved out of an absence of other possibilities. Lye (1999) has recently suggested that parents have limited information in relation to formulating creative and individualised parenting arrangements, and few places to seek help. They thus go along with what is suggested to them by legal professionals, who themselves lack any ideas on different approaches.

Yet there is evidence that, along with the broad push toward co-parenting and the changing nature of family life (including an increased desire by many fathers for greater involvement in their children’s lives), many parents are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with a fortnightly contact arrangement. In discussing patterns of post-separation parenting in the United States context, Lye (1999: xiii) recently concluded:

“Many primary residential parents regard this [alternate weekends] as the most practical and workable schedule. But many non-primary residential parents regard every other weekend as too little time and inimical to real parenting. Some parents favour 50/50 arrangements, but most parents regard this as impractical and undesirable. There appears to be considerable support for arrangements that provide the non primary residential parent with more time than every other weekend, while still having the child live most of the time in one household.”

This dissatisfaction may extend to an awareness among parents, and among the legal professionals they approach for assistance, that there are other possible ways of structuring contact arrangements. In New Zealand, Smith and colleagues (1997: 87) interviewed family lawyers about parent–child contact.

---

33. I am indebted to Laurie Moloney for outlining these.

34. For instance, of divorcing couples in 2001 with at least one child aged under 18, half of these couples had a child aged under the age of eight (ABS 2002).

They found that a number of lawyers believed there was now a much broader range of post-separation care options for children, and that the pattern of every-second-weekend had declined in favour of more flexible approaches. Similarly, drawing on interviews with legal professionals in the context of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, Dewar and Parker (1999: 102) concluded that:

“There is now a greater willingness to challenge the standard contact ‘package’ of alternate weekends and half school holidays, and to seek (and be granted) orders for longer weekend contact than previously (for example, Friday night to Monday morning), more midweek contact, and for contact with children at an earlier age than previously.”

However, the extent to which a shift away from the “standard” approach to contact is occurring is unclear. No empirical data have been collected with the sufficient level of detail that is needed to test this possibility – not in Australia at least.<sup>35</sup>

This chapter, drawing on qualitative data obtained from focus groups, explores some of the ways that separated parents with “standard” parent–child contact structure their arrangements. It also examines a range of other issues relevant to post-separation parenting.

## The focus groups

*Profiles of each of the focus group participants in this chapter are presented on page 86.*

The following analysis is based on the comments of 12 separated or divorced parents (six non-resident fathers in one group and six resident mothers in another). None of these parents was from the same former union. All of the parents (except one resident mother) lived relatively close to their former partner. Seven of the 12 parents reported getting along well with their former partner, four parents said that they didn’t get along too well, and one parent had little or no communication. All of the parents had “standard” contact arrangements: the non-resident fathers had contact with their children at least once a fortnight, as did the former partners of the resident mothers. Overnight stays were occurring in all 12 cases.

Parents in the groups reported a diverse range of contact schedules. The most common arrangement was alternate weekends. Seven parents had adopted this pattern. However, there was some variation in the number of nights children spent with their non-resident parent on a fortnightly basis, ranging from three nights (Friday/Saturday/Sunday) to one night on the weekend. Four of the parents had arranged for contact to occur every weekend, and again there was variation between families as to duration of visits. The remaining contact arrangement allowed for children to spend time with their non-resident parent on two out of every three weekends.

A noticeable feature of these parents’ contact arrangements was the inclusion of midweek contact. Supplementing weekend contact with additional contact during the week meant that non-resident fathers had the opportunity to parent their children in a broader range of ways, and reduced the length of time between spending time together.

---

35. The Institute’s *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* project will be able to do this.

## Vignettes

The following two vignettes highlight the variation that existed among the parents, both in their current contact arrangements and in the apparent forces driving these arrangements. They also illustrate some of the various ways parents had structured their arrangements.

### *Pia*

Pia and her former partner separated ten years ago when their son, now 11, was 19 months old:

“Because he was so small we avoided any kind of outside interference. And so for us it has always been: ‘I want to do this this weekend. Can you do that?’ Or: ‘If I go there at this time, could you . . . ?’ We’ve managed to sort of muddle our way through that a bit . . . I don’t know. We’re just constantly negotiating, and it’s just constant. If there are birthday parties – I drop him off, Pete picks him up, Pete drops him off, I pick him up. It’s always changing. I don’t think we’ve ever had one single week where it was the same. It’s like, ‘I need to go here. Can you do this?’ ‘Yeah, all right then.’ ‘Well that’s good because the following weekend I need to do that. Can you do this?’ ‘Oh yeah, okay then.’ I have no concept about there being any kind of – it just has to be flexible. It just has to be for me.”

Ostensibly, the contact arrangement is based around a weekly schedule. Pia’s son spends time with his father from 10am to 6pm on Saturday one weekend, and from Saturday morning to Sunday evening the following weekend. However, as Pia mentioned, the arrangement is very flexible and extensive contact occurs in addition to the set pattern. The flexible nature of the arrangement continues during school holidays.

### *Angus*

Angus, who has been separated for two years, has a daughter aged seven and a son aged five. While he has regular contact, he is keen to have his children stay overnight during the week:

“Yeah, I’ve got alternate weekends. Friday night pick up from school to Monday morning drop off at school, and Wednesdays for dinner. She won’t allow overnight [mid-week].”

Angus also cares for his children for half of every school holiday period.

While Angus has a considerable amount of contact with his children, this has not always been the case. The path to the current contact arrangement has not been an easy one for him:

“Yeah, basically just over two years ago I was asked to leave the family home. She made allegations about me. So my initial contact was that she allowed me Wednesday evenings in the family home with her there, and that’s basically the only contact I had through 2001. First court thing was December 2001, and I could have them sort of unsupervised daytime – one day like Sundays – as well as Wednesday evenings. Then June last year was the first overnight contact I had. Again, that was with someone sort of supervised. Then in August I

had a Registrar's decision in my favour, [so I] didn't need to have anyone supervise overnight. I went from there. She wasn't offering anything outside of that. The Registrar didn't stipulate, apart from equal share of the school holidays, three nights or whatever. But then they [her side] put forward the three nights/half school holidays. I wasn't particularly happy with it, but compared to what I was getting it was great."

Angus revealed that he is currently a lot happier than he has been during the last two years, primarily because he now has regular contact with his children. Angus described how he is attempting to "build up a good record of care" of his children, with the aim of eventually obtaining a shared care arrangement.

The above vignettes illustrate the variation that existed in parents' contact arrangements. While in each case contact is occurring on a weekly or fortnightly basis, the minutiae of each parent's contact arrangement vary considerably. Furthermore, the stories of parents in this group highlight that one separated family's circumstances can be very different from another's in terms of children's ages and needs, parents attitudes and needs, and work commitments.

## INSIGHT

### "Standard" contact may not be so standard

A variety of parenting arrangements come under the umbrella of 'at least once a fortnight'. There does not appear to be a formulaic schedule for contact adopted routinely by separated parents. Rather, arrangements are tailored to accommodate individual family circumstances and, for many families, change over time as circumstances change.

## Key themes

Unlike the "little or no contact" group, these parents did not present with a specific or pressing problem. So, what resulted was a discussion of various issues that had arisen during the course of their day-to-day experience as separated parents with dependent children. Nonetheless, six common themes emerged: (1) reasons for having a standard contact arrangement; (2) barriers to greater contact or shared care; (3) father-child time; (4) the special case of holidays and special occasions; (5) the potential benefit of court orders; and (6) children's needs.

### Why a "standard" contact arrangement?

Given that the 12 focus group participants were a miniscule sample of the large number of separated parents with weekly or fortnightly contact arrangements in the general population, it is not surprising that there was much heterogeneity in response to the question "Why this pattern of contact and not another?" However, there were some common trends.

Resident mothers generally reported that they chose the weekly or fortnightly arrangement because they thought that it was the "norm", but appeared unsure of where this idea had originated. Kate mentioned that a psychologist had suggested the arrangement to her. Kerrie commented that she "just sort of chose what was the normal", while Roxanne recalled suggesting "every second weekend which I thought was the norm" and later in the discussion added "I thought that most people have arrangements every second weekend."

Other explanations were offered for why a standard contact arrangement had come about. These included the necessity for mother–child time on weekends and money.

Rhonda described how a fortnightly arrangement enabled her to spend quality time with her son which weekends afforded:

*“And it’s every second weekend because I need to spend a weekend with him [son] or else I feel like I’m just doing the routine to death.”*

This had also been an issue for the former partner of one of the fathers.

For Bridget, child support had been the driving force behind the contact arrangement:

*“My arrangement came about due to money. Because, you know, obviously my partner was baulking at the idea of paying maintenance, as you imagine . . . We decided that rather than him pay me full maintenance, he’d have what he feels is having her half the time. Which isn’t half the time at all, but he imagines it’s half the time and therefore he pays me half the maintenance. So [it was] purely for money.”*

Those mothers who had adopted a particular arrangement based on an idea that it was the norm, or because it was suggested to them, seemed to be somewhat dissatisfied with the current situation. They mentioned that they had been contemplating reducing contact, particularly midweek visits which they felt were too disruptive for children. For example, Kerrie commented that the children need the Wednesday night on which they have dinner with their father to do their homework. She also felt that the interruption to their routine resulted in them being tired the following day.

Some resident mothers were also opposed to the idea of children living primarily with their father. Implicit in this attitude was the idea that children should live primarily with their mother and “visit” their father regularly.

For example, Rhonda recalled:

*“That was another point. Jonah’s older brother and his Dad would be talking to him – ‘Oh, you should come and live with us for a year’, and stuff. And I would have Jonah coming home at four saying, ‘Oh, maybe I’ll live with Dad next year’. I told him that until he was 16, that decision – I just explained to him that he’s a little boy and those big decisions aren’t for him to make at his age. And at 16 I hope – God, he doesn’t want to.”*

Kate responded by saying:

*“That decision is taken out of my partner’s hands. Completely. The minute I would hear my children say ‘I’m going to live with my dad’ I would remove all access from him without blinking an eye.”*

Fathers’ views differed greatly to mothers’ views on the issue of “why ‘standard’ contact?” They generally wanted a pattern different from the one they currently had. Thus, their arrangements appear to have come about by default. While there was generally a perception among the mothers that weekly or fortnightly

contact is the norm, fathers viewed this amount of contact as inadequate, and typically reported that they would prefer to see their children more often or to care for them half the time, and viewed their arrangement as temporary rather than fixed. The desire for more contact is consistent with most non-resident fathers' views described by recent large-scale quantitative research (such as Parkinson and Smyth 2003).

Joseph has had contact with his son every weekend since he separated. He viewed anything less as insufficient:

"I just firmly believed at that time that every second weekend stuff was not appropriate for, if you like, sort of re-establishing this relationship with my son."

Some of the fathers expressed a clear view that they would like to share care of their children. Harrison said:

"Now my kids are at the age they're at, I've been thinking recently of changing the pattern – of going week on/week off or a couple of weeks on/a couple of weeks off, or something along those lines. My kids are old enough now to handle it."

Angus echoed the sentiment:

"Yeah 'week about'. It'd be great!"

Shane wanted more, voicing that he would like to be the primary carer of his son:

"For me . . . look, I think my son should live with me, and she should have access on weekends, you know. She can have every weekend but basically he can come and live with me, because he's said that he wants to do that."

INSIGHT

"I just thought it was the norm"

In many cases, post-separation parenting arrangements do not come about as the result of a conscious decision-making process. A perceived lack of options may lead parents to adopt an arrangement that they view as less than ideal.

**Why not greater contact?**

This group of non-resident fathers expressed the desire to have more contact with or equal care of their children, however they described various barriers to such a goal. These included restrictions imposed by long or inflexible working hours, commitment to new partners, and the perceived hindrance of court process.

One father was unable to sustain a shared care arrangement in the past mainly due to inflexible working hours. Joseph, a principal of a school, was experiencing a similar problem.

"I have to be on the road 7.30 in the morning, have to be at the office by 8, till 5 or 6. Shot through this afternoon. But that's hard if you have to do that shared care stuff. I mean it's very, very hard. I basically run my own operation and people like to see you there."

Furthermore, the needs of new partners influenced how much time two fathers spent with their children. The main concern for Jason appeared to be maintaining a balance of time with his son and time with his new partner, as he explained:

“Then when I re-partnered it wasn’t fair on my partner if I saw my son every weekend, the whole weekend, [when] I was working the whole week. So that also came into how much time I was spending with him. Otherwise, probably ideally I would have – I would go for say two out of every three weekends, or three out of every four weekends, plus the Thursday, every Thursday. But it probably wouldn’t suit my partner.”

Jason was contemplating taking up a shared care arrangement in the future if his new partner was agreeable.

There also seemed to be awareness among fathers that a shared care arrangement may be difficult to obtain; some felt that they would need to go through the process of obtaining a court order before they could move from their current “standard” arrangement to shared care, as they felt that their former partners would not consent to equal-time parenting.

Jason said:

“But I mean everything’s told me that – from what I know and from hearing about other stories – shared care is next to impossible.”

Shane explained:

“I’d rather another pattern, but this is the pattern the courts handed down. Basically, they were the options I was guided to by people who counselled me and other people I spoke to, and then the court made the decision ... I like what Angus is going for – shared care would be good. Maybe it could become shared care, but at the moment its just going by what the courts said.”

INSIGHT

“Maybe it could become shared care, but...”

Involved fathers who wish to share the care of their children are often aware of possible barriers to this. They appear to be conscious that what they would ideally prefer may not always be achievable due to considerations such as work commitments and new partners. They thus settled for regular weekly or fortnightly care.

### *Quality versus quantity*

There is much evidence to suggest that non-resident fathers tend to engage in predominantly recreational activities with their children when they see them, rather than participating in their child’s day-to-day routine, such as helping with homework (Stewart 1999). Father’s role as secondary caregiver before separation, and a desire to make visits fun and conflict-free, may lead them to adopt a “Disneyland Dad” style interaction with their children following separation.

Mothers in the focus groups also pointed to this tendency. They discussed the difficulty their former partners had in knowing how to interact with the children. The following exchange sheds light on their perceptions:

*One of the mothers: "Dads often feel they have to entertain."*

*Roxanne: "I think Scott's finding a balance of entertaining and . . ."*

*Kerrie: "I think my ex has finally found that out after it was costing him a lot of money. And the kids going saying, 'What's in my surprise box this week?' rather than, 'Hi dad, how are you?' And you try to tell them [fathers] the children want you. They don't care if they sit with you and watch cartoons all day or watch a video. They want *you*. They want to sit on your lap. They want to talk to you."*

*Roxanne: "I think it's the Disneyland Dad thing. Sometimes I think they don't know how to just *be* with them. Or feel they have to do-do all the time instead of just sitting there."*

In contrast to the general perception held by mothers, non-resident fathers described how the time they spent with their children predominantly involved "just being with them". Although the majority of fathers voiced that they would prefer more contact, they enjoyed the substantial amount of time they spent with their children. Half of the fathers commented that the arrangement was "working well". The activities they engaged in with their children included both leisure activities and day-to-day activities such as grocery shopping. Moreover, they didn't appear to feel pressure to entertain their children.

Shane's comment is representative of these fathers' approach:

*"Well, normally just, you know – you have your meals, my son might help me do the washing or, you know, just try to get him into that kind of angle. And we might catch a movie or watch a couple of videos or go on the Playstation. But I go along with what was said before, that there's no point in . . . every [time] its got to be cram-packed with, you know, go to the movies both days, and Luna Park as well, and all this stuff, because it's too unrealistic."*

Other men in the group, such as Angus, agreed:

*"It's fairly low key most of the time."*

Fathers offered specific reasons why the time they spent with their children was generally not occupied with activities designed to entertain. A lack of finances was said to restrict the types of activities fathers are able to participate in with their children. The focus group participants also believed children benefited from experiencing a continuity of routine when moving from their resident parent's to time with their non-resident parent.

As Shane explained:

*"I try to keep it on par with what his mother does, with what's happening at home. That's what he thinks is normal back there . . ."*

At the same time, some non-resident fathers expressed frustration at not being able to have the relationship with their children they wanted to due to the limited quantity of time available to them.

According to Benjamin:

“As far as I’m concerned I’m disappointed because I was growing up with my children, and I was seeing them every day, and she sees them every day just about, and I don’t, and how can you make up for the – you know, when they’re going to bed at night-time just having a ten-minute chat with them about whatever’s on their minds. So I’m disappointed about that. I’m sad about that.”

Joseph agreed:

“You try to pack so much in to that 24-hour period, or that 48-hour period, or whatever. Yeah, probably my frustration is just the amount of time, and the quality that I can put into that.”

Mothers and fathers had contrasting views about how non-resident parents spend time with their children. While mothers focused on the “Disneyland Dad” phenomenon, fathers reported that the time they spent with their children was often occupied by routine activities. It should be noted that the fathers in this group had a reasonable amount of contact. Fathers with less contact may not have the opportunity to engage in day-to-day activities with their children, as illustrated in earlier chapters where little contact was occurring.

INSIGHT

To “do” or to “be”?

It may be difficult for some non-resident fathers to adjust to their role as a “part-time” parent, and to know how to best make use of the time they have with their children. This may particularly be the case when limited quantity of time is available to them.

*Holiday/special occasions*

Another issue that was raised by both resident mothers and non-resident fathers related to contact during school holiday periods and on special occasions. Although half of the school holidays is often seen as part of the “standard” package, this did not appear to be the case for those mothers (about half) whose former partners had limited contact with the children during school holidays.

Kerrie explained:

“He doesn’t have them holidays. He won’t. But I’m doing a university degree which I should finish this year and I said, ‘When I’m working you have to have them half the holidays.’ But it’ll be interesting to see what happens because he doesn’t have them. He’ll take them for a week at Christmas – four days [or] five days at Christmas. He’ll take them for four days over Easter, and maybe a long weekend. But he won’t take them for normal school holidays. And I’ve said to him, ‘We’re going to have to talk about that’.”

As would be expected, and as other mothers who are the primary carers of their children have noted, resident mothers in this group also found it difficult to balance their work and family obligations due to the lack of holiday contact between children and their non-resident parent.

For instance, Bridget's former partner doesn't look after their teenage daughter during the Christmas break. However, in her case the age of her teenage daughter lightened the burden of the situation:

*"It's so difficult. I feel like I have to palm her off because I'm working. I have to ring up all these people [but] everybody's busy, and I just feel like she's this Orphan-Annie that I'm farming out. I feel so sorry for her. She's a bit older now, so I can leave her on her own, but she doesn't really like that."*

Rhonda, who has a young son, was left with only one option: to quit her job each school holidays. Rhonda said:

*"I basically have to quit jobs because I don't have any family in this state, and nor does Jonah. Oh, he's got an uncle, but I basically have to stop working, especially during the summer holidays. I just have to leave and look for another one."*

In contrast, several of the non-resident fathers felt they were not being given the opportunity to spend time with their children on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas. Again, even these fathers, who had a reasonable amount of contact with their children, were not impervious to disputes over sharing of contact on special occasions.

Their perceived lack of control is reflected in the following comments:

*Joseph: "The only area of difficulty I have are the big ones – you know, the birthdays and the Christmas days. Christmas Day we had a huge blue . . . the only answer I was getting was, 'It's always been this way'. That was the logic I was getting. But there's not a lot of movement there. But it's not too bad from an informal point of view. But when you're not holding the cards it's a bit hard to call the game."*

*Benjamin: "Yeah same here. She wanted to do it with her family. That was fine, I didn't argue. I went on holiday for a week and after I came back from holiday I had the kids home for Christmas, and we shared presents and did all that sort of stuff."*

#### The special case of holidays

"Standard" contact between children and their non-resident parent may not always involve equal sharing of children during school holidays. When time with children is not shared, holidays and special occasions can be a particularly stressful and difficult time for both mothers and fathers.

### *The benefit of detailed contact arrangements*

Another key theme raised by parents was the benefit of legal processes. This stood out strongly from the father's accounts, but resident mothers also raised this issue.

Four of the six fathers with "standard" contact arrangements had been through family court proceedings and had contact orders. These fathers had in common the experience of finding it difficult to negotiate contact with their former partner prior to initiating court proceedings. They felt they had little control and that the terms of the arrangement were "dictated" by their former partners. In the process of going to court, they gained a sense of control and contact subsequently ran more smoothly. This finding is consistent with qualitative research conducted by Fehlberg, Sheehan and Kelly (2000), in which some participants reported that use of more formal family law processes reduced conflict, particularly when conflict was already high.

The following statements by Jason and Shane illustrate this point:

*Jason: "I felt at the whim of whatever she dictated. Although I tried to negotiate, it was what she dictated . . . So since having the court order about August last year it's been really good. It sort of made her turn around as well, and think 'Well, I can't now dictate because it's law, and this is the way it is.'" . . . Since going to court and having this order made, we actually work out things better."*

*Shane: "After I moved out it was okay for a while, and then for the whole of 2002 she wouldn't let me see him and I had no recourse to be able to . . . I had no cards to play so I ended up in court. And it was pretty tough. And now since it's gone through court she's sort of had to bite her tongue a little bit, and be a little bit more understanding."*

Resident mothers also pointed to the potential advantage of legal processes. Kerrie, for instance, believed that court orders could be useful in high conflict situations. She commented that, in such instances, a highly specified contact arrangement would reduce the need for communication and negotiation between parents.

#### INSIGHT

##### *"The negotiating was done for us"*

Having the contact arrangements specified in a court order can reduce conflict by clarifying the parameters of parenting and reducing the need for communication between parents. (Of course, there is much evidence to suggest that, in general, adversarial processes often exacerbate or create conflict and can work against healthy parenting arrangements.)

### *Staying child-focused*

From various comments made throughout the course of the group discussion, it appears that the mothers worked hard to set aside or contain relationship issues and negative feelings towards their former partners for the sake of the father-child relationship, which they viewed as important. This was the case even in instances of highly conflicted parental relationships.

Pia valued her son's relationship with his father despite an incident of violence directed at her:

"Christopher's father is a fabulous bloke. I mean, the fact that he gives me the shits when I live with him is irrelevant. He's a fabulous bloke. He's a brilliant father. And my son worships the ground he walks on and vice versa. And I can just remember thinking to myself [that] nothing on this planet would entice me to separate them. And that includes the fact that he once grabbed me and threw me against the table and I had him up on assault charges and everything. Even during that – I just separate the two."

Kerrie had an intervention order against her former partner, but nonetheless expressed a similar view:

"I think, as you said, they need to be in contact with their Dad. Their Dad's a big part of their life. And I don't want to ever deny them seeing him . . ."

More broadly, both mothers and fathers believed it was important to keep children's needs a priority throughout the process of making and implementing arrangements for contact.

For example, Harrison urged:

"So my advice to someone else is, every decision you make, write down the impact on your kids, then read it and think, what are the kids going to think about this? That's the advice I'd give, because at the end of the day, mine [parenting arrangements] worked really smoothly because we both kept the kids interests number one, regardless of money or anything else . . . and the children are really good now because of it. Touch wood."

Bridget, who remarked that she always puts her daughter's needs first, revealed:

"Andrea's quite stable and balanced and she's been through access visits for 13 years. So I just think it would be a relief to know that it doesn't always have to be traumatic or, you know, at each other's throats. That the child can sort of turn out to be quite balanced at the end of it."

The focus group participants were also aware that children's lives are often disrupted by parental separation and the subsequent need to move between two houses. Resident mothers discussed how older children were often reluctant to go to their father's house because they had been invited to a friend's birthday party or another social occasion. The general consensus was that despite this, contact between older children and their non-resident parents could be fostered if parents are flexible in order to accommodate their children's increasing autonomy.

#### Children first

It is possible for parents to achieve good outcomes for their children following separation or divorce. The key to doing so appears to be keeping children's interests a priority.

## Summary

Parents' narratives in this group shed light on previously unanswered questions, such as why standard contact arrangements come about, and how they are structured. While weekly or fortnightly contact was occurring in each situation, parents had structured their arrangements in a diverse range of ways. This is not surprising considering that their family circumstances, including age of children, time since separation, the presence or absence of conflict in the relationship with their former partner, and the presence of a new partner, also varied greatly.

The following comment from Pia encapsulates this insight gained from the 12 parents:

*"It doesn't really matter what the arrangements are as long as they accommodate everybody's needs."*

A wide range of factors appears to influence the arrangements for contact made by separated parents. These factors include new partners, the age of children, work commitments, parent's own needs, and a lack of knowledge of other options. Particularly for fathers, their contact arrangement reflected a perceived inability to have their preferred pattern, rather than having come about as the result of conscious decision-making processes.

Mothers and fathers appeared to have differing experiences of post-separation parenting. This was particularly evident during the discussion of the father-child relationship, and school holiday contact. In relation to the former issue, mothers commented that their former partners often felt the need to entertain children during contact visits. On the other hand, fathers reported engaging in day-to-day activities with their children during the time children were in their care, rather than organising special leisure activities.

When it came to the issue of holiday contact, men and women had contrasting complaints. Several resident mothers felt burdened by responsibility during school holidays, due to a lack of contact between children and their father at this time. In contrast, non-resident fathers felt they were not being given the opportunity to spend time with their children on special occasions such as birthdays and Christmas. They often celebrated Christmas with their children some weeks after the event.

Many of the parents also focused on children during the discussion of post-separation parenting. Mothers and fathers highlighted the importance of putting children's interests and needs before their own. Many in the resident mothers group stressed that they viewed the father-child relationship as important, and supported the maintenance of this relationship through contact. Parents were also aware that children are often inconvenienced by having to move between two households.

There was much in the comments of the 12 parents to suggest that their lives involved an ongoing process of negotiation and management of issues that arose around contact. Both positive and negative aspects of their situations were highlighted. Overall, everyone seemed to be managing well, despite a range of obstacles that often presented themselves along the way.