

PARENT-CHILD CONTACT AND POST-SEPARATION PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS



Edited by Bruce Smyth

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Foreword

Parent–child contact after divorce continues to attract much policy attention – perhaps because it remains a source of conflict for many parents. The recent House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, which in late 2003 released its report on its *Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements Following Separation*, attests to this policy interest and controversy.

In Australia, as elsewhere, not a great deal is known about the “nuts and bolts” of parent–child contact. What are the most common patterns of parenting after separation? Why do parents opt for certain patterns of care? What factors facilitate or impede contact, particularly contact between fathers and their children, and how might these factors interact to influence different patterns and levels of care? And most importantly, are some patterns of care “better” for children and parents than other patterns? This report of the *Parent–Child Contact Study*, by Institute researcher Bruce Smyth and the study team, explored these questions, making use of both qualitative and quantitative data to give the investigation both depth and breadth.

The analyses of the data reveal a number of interesting insights that will be of interest to researchers, family law practitioners and parents themselves. We hope the findings encourage researchers to continue to explore the issues addressed here, both by drilling down further into the detail and by testing the generalisability of the findings on larger representative samples. The data on the diversity of solutions parents have found to parenting post-separation, and the challenges and pressures their children encounter, will be helpful both to family law professionals and to parents living the experience of parenting post-separation.

This report is the first of a series of outputs from the Institute's larger *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* Project, which together aim to shed light on a range of issues related to parent–child contact after parental separation. The issues are complex, and no easy solutions can be expected. However, empirical evidence on “what happens” and “what works” will help ensure that policy and practice best support child and family wellbeing. This is one of the key reasons that family law remains a central plank of research at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Ann Sanson
Acting Director
Australian Institute of Family Studies
May 2004

Contents

Foreword	v
List of tables and figures	viii
About the authors	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Summary	xi
1. Why study parent–child contact?	1
<i>Bruce Smyth, Ilene Wolcott</i>	
Patterns of post-separation parenting	4
The literature	7
Some commonly held truths	8
“Heavy metal” research: Its strengths and pitfalls	8
Structure of the report	9
2. Research design	11
<i>Bruce Smyth</i>	
Participants	14
Question guide	14
Logistics	15
Caveats	15
3. Fifty-fifty care	17
<i>Bruce Smyth, Catherine Caruana, Anna Ferro</i>	
Participant profiles	18
The focus groups	20
Vignettes	21
Key themes	22
Summary	29
4. Little or no contact	31
<i>Bruce Smyth</i>	
Participant profiles	32
Fatherless-ness: “Our most urgent social problem”?	33
Empirical studies	34
The focus groups	36
Vignettes	37
Key themes	38
Summary	48
5. Holiday-only contact	51
<i>Bruce Smyth, Carol Whitfield</i>	
Participant profiles	52
The focus groups	55
Vignettes	56
Key themes	57
Summary	65
6. Daytime-only contact	67
<i>Catherine Caruana, Bruce Smyth</i>	
Participant profiles	68
Night and day	69
Some recent data	71
The focus groups	72
Vignettes	73
Key themes	74
Summary	84

7. “Standard” contact	85
<i>Anna Ferro</i>	
Participant profiles	86
The focus groups	89
Vignettes	90
Key themes	91
Summary	100
8. Points of convergence	101
<i>Catherine Caruana, Anna Ferro</i>	
Participant profiles	102
Change as a constant	104
The need for information and support services	105
The ubiquity of grief and loss	106
Grandparents and extended family	107
9. The demography of parent–child contact	111
<i>Bruce Smyth, Lixia Qu, Ruth Weston</i>	
Analysing the HILDA survey	113
Results	115
Summary	122
10. Summary and conclusions	123
<i>Bruce Smyth</i>	
Who does what, and why?	125
Implications	129
Future research	132
Appendix 1: Question guide	133
References	134

List of tables

1. Main reason that youngest child does not stay overnight with non-resident parent: Separated/divorced parents’ reports where face-to-face parent–child contact is occurring but sleepovers are not	71
2. Characteristics of separated/divorced resident mothers by care arrangements of their children	116
3. Characteristics of separated/divorced non-resident fathers by care arrangements of their children	117

List of figures

1a. Frequency of face-to-face contact between child and non-resident parent: Resident parents’ reports	5
1b. Type of face-to-face contact between child and non-resident parent: Resident parents’ reports	5
1c. Frequency and type of face-to-face contact between child and non-resident parent: Resident parents’ reports	5
2. Research design and the respective group numbers	13
3. Focus group question structure	15
4. Equal-time parenting schedules: Some examples	23
5. HILDA sampling strategy	112

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We are deeply indebted to focus group participants for disclosing much personal information about themselves and their post-separation circumstances. Most participants did so in the hope that this would make a difference to the lives of others. If we had a wand, our wish would be to take away the pain and grief that many participants – and their children – had experienced or were still experiencing. In some small way, the insights provided from their stories might act as markers, pothole flags, or beams of light for others.

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.

*This report is dedicated to the memory of Christine McCarthy,
a colleague and dear friend of Institute staff.*