

# PARENT-CHILD CONTACT AND POST-SEPARATION PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS



Edited by Bruce Smyth

Research Report No.9

Australian Institute of Family Studies

© Australian Institute of Family Studies –  
Commonwealth of Australia 2004

Australian Institute of Family Studies  
300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000 Australia  
Phone (03) 9214 7888; Fax (03) 9214 7839  
Internet [www.aifs.gov.au/](http://www.aifs.gov.au/)

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without permission in writing from the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing. Views expressed in its publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect Institute policy or the opinions of the Editor or the Institute's Board of Management.

*Parent-child contact and post-separation parenting arrangements*, Edited by Bruce Smyth, Research Report No. 9, June 2004.

Bibliography  
ISBN 0 642 39512 8

Designed by Double Jay Graphics  
Printed by Impact Printing

ISSN 1447-1469 (Print)  
ISSN 1477-1477 (Online)

## 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
<b>Summary</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>1. Why study parent–child contact?</b>	<b>1</b>
<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
<b>2. Research design</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Bruce Smyth</i>	
Participants	14
Question guide	14
Logistics	15
Caveats	15
<b>3. Fifty-fifty care</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>Bruce Smyth, Catherine Caruana, Anna Ferro</i>	
Participant profiles	18
The focus groups	20
Vignettes	21
Key themes	22
Summary	29
<b>4. Little or no contact</b>	<b>31</b>
<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
<b>5. Holiday-only contact</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>Bruce Smyth, Carol Whitfield</i>	
Participant profiles	52
The focus groups	55
Vignettes	56
Key themes	57
Summary	65
<b>6. Daytime-only contact</b>	<b>67</b>
<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

<b>7. “Standard” contact</b>	<b>85</b>
<i>Anna Ferro</i>	
Participant profiles	86
The focus groups	89
Vignettes	90
Key themes	91
Summary	100
<b>8. Points of convergence</b>	<b>101</b>
<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
<b>9. The demography of parent–child contact</b>	<b>111</b>
<i>Bruce Smyth, Lixia Qu, Ruth Weston</i>	
Analysing the HILDA survey	113
Results	115
Summary	122
<b>10. Summary and conclusions</b>	<b>123</b>
<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

## About the authors

**Catherine Caruana** is a Senior Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and is part of the team working on the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* Project. Prior to joining the Institute, she worked primarily as a family law practitioner, a child and family mediator, and a policy and community development lawyer in the area of family law.

**Anna Ferro** is a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and is part of the team working on the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* Project. She has worked on this project since joining the Institute in 2002.

**Bruce Smyth** is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and is responsible for conceptualising and managing the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* Project. Since joining the Institute in 1995, he has published widely on an array of issues related to divorce and post-separation patterns of parenting.

**Ruth Weston** is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, heading the Institute's Family and Marriage Research Program. Over the past two decades, Ruth has published extensively on a range of issues, including quality of life, couple formation and relationship stability, fertility decision-making, and parent–adolescent relationships. She is perhaps best known for her work in the *Settling Up–Settling Down* series on the economic and emotional consequences of divorce.

**Carol Whitfield** is a Research Officer at the Department of Sustainability and Environment, State Government of Victoria. At the time that this report was written, she was on placement at the Institute as part of the Sociology Intern Program at Swinburne University of Technology.

**Ilene Wolcott** is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology. For many years prior to this, Ilene was a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Her publications and expertise on work-and-family issues are well known, both in Australia and overseas.

**Lixia Qu** is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Her research has included demographic trends analysis, children's living arrangements after parental separation, couple formation, and changes in and determinants of labour force participation of lone and couple mothers.

## Acknowledgements

This report uses data from the confidentialised unit record file from the Household, Income and Labour Market Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA survey is funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services. The survey is designed and managed by a consortium led by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. Other partners are the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Further details can be found at the web site address: <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/>

The authors would like to thank Ruth Weston, David de Vaus and Ann Sanson for their unwavering support. They are also grateful to the following people: Ros Hurworth for her expert tuition on focus group methodology; Lawrie Moloney and Richard Muntz for moderating or assisting with some of the men's focus groups; Christine McCarthy, Carolyn Shaw and Claire Walker for their meticulous transcriptions of the interviews; Elspeth McInness, Michael Green, Margo Northey and Jeremy Meagher for their insights on some of the family dynamics surrounding divorce; Christine Millward, Adrienne Burgess, Tess Ridge and Sophie Holloway for their helpful comments; and Meredith Michie for her ever impeccable editing. Any shortcomings or errors are, of course, the authors' own.

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.*

## Summary

---

Despite widespread interest in patterns of parenting after separation in Australia, the gaps in our knowledge remain large and fundamental. Most studies, including those overseas, have taken a quantitative tack, measuring the frequency and overall amount of face-to-face contact. But obviously there is more to parent–child contact than just time. The nature and quality of the interaction are also important – perhaps even more so.

In the United States, Melli (1999) has argued that research into parent–child contact needs to recognise and describe clearly both qualitative and quantitative differences in the many ways that parental sharing of time with children can occur. To date, however, little information has been collected in Australia on some of the most rudimentary components of contact, such as the distinction between daytime-only contact versus sleepovers, and holiday-only contact versus regular contact throughout the year.

This report presents qualitative data from a series of ten focus groups which formed the *Parent–Child Contact Study*, a component of the larger Australian Institute of Family Studies *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project*. Fifty-four separated or divorced parents (27 mothers, 27 fathers) took part in the focus group discussions about different aspects of parent–child contact. Groups were structured around five different patterns of contact: (1) 50/50 shared care (for example, week-about), (2) little or no contact, (3) holiday-only contact, (4) daytime-only contact, and (5) “standard” contact (for example, every-weekend or every-other-weekend). Participants were recruited through a story in a Melbourne newspaper combined with snowball (referral) sampling.

The qualitative data are also embedded in the wider national picture through an examination of data derived from a large representative sample of separated/divorced parents who participated in the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey.

Several key insights emerged:

- Patterns of parenting after separation are very varied, as are the perceptions and motivations of parents with different arrangements. Nonetheless, parents with different parenting arrangements appear to have distinct demographic profiles (see below).
- Family dynamics in tandem with several demographic factors – most notably material resources, the quality of the co-parental relationship, physical distance between parents’ households, and the repartnering status of parents – look to be important correlates of particular patterns of care, with inter-parental conflict being a dominant force. The maturity of

children also seems to be important, with daytime-only contact being most common when children are of pre-school age, and “shared care” applying when children are of primary school age.

- Not surprisingly, higher levels of contact appear to be associated with lower levels of inter-parental conflict, lower rates of repartnering, less physical distance between parents’ households, and higher levels of financial resources. The *Parent–Child Contact Study* breaks new ground by showing how the interaction of these and other factors appears to be clearly linked to qualitatively different patterns of post-separation parenting.
- The perceptions of mothers and fathers differed markedly where father–child contact was tenuous: mothers perceived fathers not to be interested in being involved with children; fathers believed that mothers cut them out of their children’s lives.
- Many parents expressed a need for resources that would assist them in making decisions regarding the future care of children, especially in relation to different ways of sharing the care of children.

To sum up, there is much to suggest that family dynamics, in tandem with demographic factors, temper the form that parent–child contact takes.

# 1

## WHY STUDY PARENT-CHILD CONTACT?

---





# 1 Why study parent–child contact?

Bruce Smyth and Ilene Wolcott

The changing nature of family life and patterns of women’s and men’s workforce participation have meant that the parenting roles, expectations and responsibilities of mothers and fathers are in transition. This has led to a softening of the boundaries around the care of children (Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn 2004), and has prompted re-evaluation of the previously accepted post-divorce (maternal) “sole custody” model of parenting, towards encouraging co-parenting after separation (Ricci 1997).

Yet despite widespread interest in the way that patterns of parenting might be changing and evolving, significant gaps exist in our knowledge of contact between non-resident parents (mostly fathers) and their children. Indeed, apart from some of the general findings about the frequency and overall amount of parent–child contact (described below), not a great deal is known in Australia.

The *Parent–Child Contact Study*, which forms part of the larger the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Caring for Children after Separation Project*, explores different patterns of parenting among separated and divorced parents with children under 18 years. It aims to shed light on some of the main patterns of post-separation parenting beyond what has become known as “standard” contact (every-other-weekend and half holidays), and the qualitatively different experiences these patterns might provide family members. Five patterns are explored: (1) 50/50 shared care, (2) little or no contact, (3) holiday-only contact, (4) daytime-only contact, and (5) “standard” contact.

Why look at different patterns of parent–child contact? There are several good reasons to do so. First, at the level of public policy, the Australian Government recently held a parliamentary inquiry to investigate whether a presumption of joint residence (that is, 50/50 shared care) should become part of Australian family law. Under such a presumption, the starting point in any legal proceedings would be that children spend equal time with each parent unless there was evidence that this arrangement would not be in children’s best interests.

The Parliamentary Committee investigating the proposed “joint custody” model recently rejected the notion of “equal-time” parenting in favour of a presumption of “shared parental responsibility” (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). However, there is likely to be ongoing lively debate about just what “sharing” the responsibility for children means, the extent to which it is a realistic legal and moral mandate, and how timesharing (“parenting time”) aligns with a “shared responsibility” model. Exploring parents’ schedules, perceptions and motives in relation to their parenting arrangements might help to clarify some of these thorny issues by illuminating how parents with different arrangements share the care and responsibility for their children, and their reports of their experiences.

Second, at a practical level, parents, and the professionals who they might approach for assistance, are often unaware of different ways of doing things in relation to structuring post-separation parenting arrangements. Every-other-weekend residential schedules appear to be the dominant post-separation parenting paradigm in most western countries. In the United States, Lye (1999) found that many legal professionals promoted these schedules and that parents often had limited information about other patterns of care. Examining different parenting arrangements through information-rich qualitative frameworks can shed light on a variety of different arrangements, why separated parents opt for particular arrangements, and what “works” for them and their children and what does not.

Third, at a more theoretical level, researchers working in the area of divorce continue to grapple with the many complex issues surrounding restructuring one family unit into two stable functioning units, including setting out the financial and parenting arrangements, and dealing with the many subsequent role transitions for family members. Patterns of parenting in both intact and separated families are often complex and dynamic. There is thus much value in using qualitative approaches to explore the sometimes subtle, sometimes not-so-subtle shifts from one pattern of care to another – such as the shift from every-other-weekend contact, to holiday-only contact, to no contact. Such transitions are likely to involve complex structural and psychological processes that cannot be identified by quantitative data collected at a single point in time.

In setting out the various rationales for this research, it is important to note that the primacy of children’s best interests cuts across all three rationales. While the paramountcy principle remains the bedrock of the Family Law Act 1975 and of subsequent legislative reform, more recently this concept is being challenged – what constitutes children’s best interests, how should these interests be assessed and aren’t children’s and their parents’ interests inextricably linked?

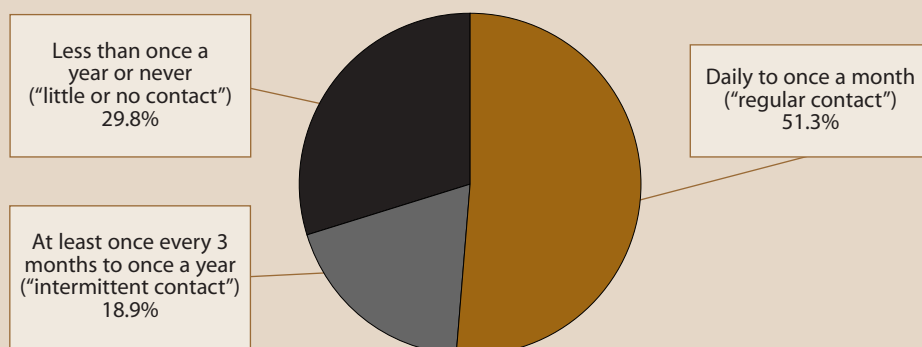
## Patterns of post-separation parenting

In 1997 around one million children in Australia under 18 were living with one natural parent and had a parent living elsewhere (ABS 1998). This represents about 21 per cent of all children under 18 in Australia. For 88 per cent of these children, the parent with whom they lived was their mother. Only a tiny proportion (3 per cent) were in “shared care” arrangements,<sup>1</sup> although another 4 per cent of children had daily face-to-face contact with a non-resident parent. A more recent estimate based on both mothers’ and fathers’ reports, derived from the HILDA Survey, suggests that around 6 per cent of separated households share the care of dependent children.<sup>2</sup>

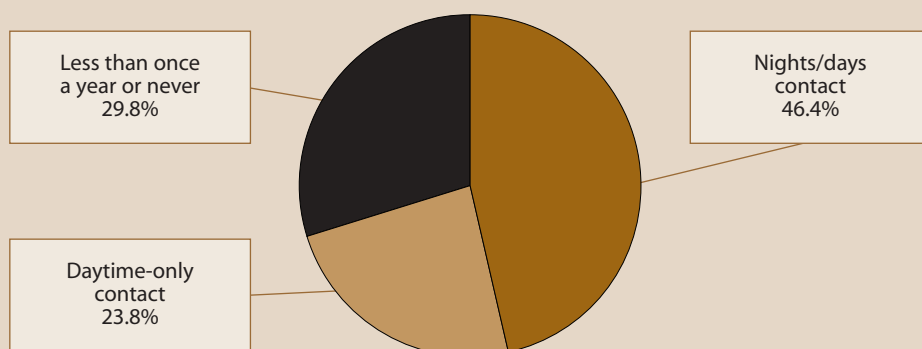
Of concern, however, are data that indicate that almost one-third (30 per cent) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere – according to resident parents – rarely or never see their other parent, typically their father (ABS 1998) (see Figure 1a).<sup>3</sup> Of those who do see their non-resident parent, a significant minority (34 per cent) never stay overnight (Smyth and Ferro 2002) (data not shown). Again, these estimates are mirrored with more recent data based on both mothers’ and fathers’ reports (see Parkinson and Smyth 2003).

- 
1. Defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as at least 30 per cent of nights per year.
  2. Defined as at least 30 per cent of nights per year.
  3. This estimate looks somewhat historically durable (see Hirst and Smiley 1984; Harrison 1986; see also Funder 1989).

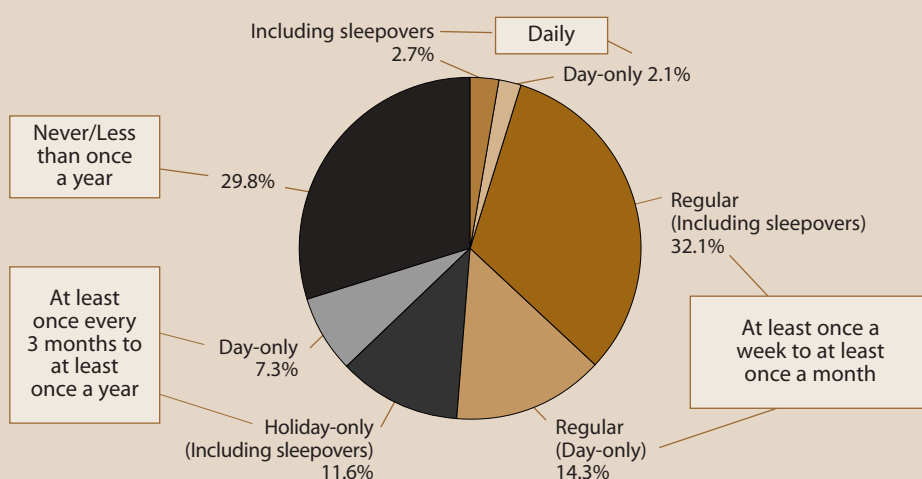
**Figure 1a. Frequency of face-to-face contact between child and non-resident parent: Resident parents' reports (ABS 1997)**



**Figure 1b. Type of face-to-face contact between child and non-resident parent: Resident parents' reports (ABS 1997)**



**Figure 1c. Frequency and type of face-to-face contact between child and non-resident parent: Resident parents' reports (ABS 1997)**



\* Most resident parents were mothers (88 per cent)  
 Note: 2.6 per cent of children were in shared care (defined by ABS as a child spend at least 30 per cent of nights per year with each parent). Excludes non-responses.  
 Source: Family Characteristics Survey 1997, customised tables.

Figure 1a shows that about half (51 per cent) of all children under 18 with a parent living elsewhere have fairly frequent face-to-face contact with that parent; the other half do not. However, as evident in Figures 1b and 1c, other patterns of contact (such as daytime-only or holiday-only contact) suggest that post-separation paternal involvement is far more complex than this – certainly more complex than early “absence/presence” binary models might have assumed (Day and Lamb 2004; Flood 2003; Pasley and Braver 2004). For instance, as evident in Figure 1c, around 12 per cent of children stay with their other parent at least once every three to six months to once a year – a loose proxy perhaps for holiday-only contact – while another 7 per cent have a similar level of contact but without overnight stays, suggesting occasional day contact which might indicate more emotionally tenuous parent–child relationships. In this and many other respects, the above figures raise more questions than answers about the type of parenting arrangements that are in place and how these are experienced.

It is important to note that hidden underneath these broad patterns of contact is a high level of dissatisfaction around post-separation parenting – especially for non-resident fathers. For instance, Parkinson and Smyth (2003) found that a sizeable proportion of separated and divorced parents in Australia would like to see more contact occurring (75 per cent of non-resident fathers; 40 per cent of resident mothers). In addition, non-resident fathers with daytime-only contact report significantly lower levels of satisfaction with their relationship with their children than fathers who have overnight stays.

Furthermore, Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg (2001) found marked differences between resident mothers and non-resident fathers in their desire to change children’s living arrangements. Few resident mothers (3 per cent) wanted any change compared with 41 per cent of non-resident fathers. Around two-thirds of these dissatisfied fathers wanted children to reside with them while the remaining one-third desired joint 50/50 care.

And in the most recent data available on the issue of equal shared care (Smyth and Weston 2004), three-quarters (74 per cent) of non-resident fathers in Australia, compared with only one-quarter of resident mothers (27 per cent), agreed with the idea that children should spend equal time with their parents after separation – which is in stark contrast to the tiny proportion of parents who actually exercise shared care. Equal-time parenting also has appeal to teenage children of divorced parents (Parkinson, Cashmore and Single, forthcoming). Of course, a basic axiom of social psychology is that attitudes are not always consistent with behaviour. Exercising or experiencing 50/50 care may be quite different from being attracted to it as an ideal of fairness for parents and children.<sup>4</sup>

The high levels of dissatisfaction apparent in the recent Australian studies attest to the difficulties inherent in allocating parenting time to meet the diverse desires and needs of all family members.

---

4. One would hope that children’s best interests would always be paramount to parents’ interests and needs.

## The literature

The shared parenting literature is both voluminous and complex. The bulk of this literature was produced during the 1980s by scholars working in North America (see, for example, Folberg 1991; Benjamin and Irving 1989; Steinman 1981) and has been updated more recently by a number of meta-analytic and narrative reviews (see, for example, Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Arendell 1996; Bauserman 2002; Irving and Benjamin 1995; Whiteside and Becker 2000). It is a literature fraught with challenge and ambiguity because of the various methodologies, samples and terms<sup>5</sup> employed across studies.

Nonetheless a critical review of this literature reveals the following key findings.

- The diversity of families and children's situations reinforces the conclusion that no single post-divorce arrangement is in the best interests of all children (Lye 1999; Mason 2000; Ricci 1997; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003: 192). In fact, "one-size-fits-all" approaches, such as legal presumptions that favour certain specified arrangements, are likely to be harmful to some families (Lye 1999).
- Most studies indicate that the interests of children post-divorce are generally best served when children can maintain continuing and frequent contact with both parents who cooperate and communicate and have low levels of conflict (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Where there is high and continuing co-parental conflict, or where children have experienced or are likely to be exposed to continuing domestic violence or child abuse, contact may be highly inappropriate and can have serious, long-lasting adverse effects on children (Cummings and Davies 1994; Jaffe, Lemmon and Poisson 2003; Reynolds 2001).
- Despite a pre-occupation with allocations of parenting time (that is, the *quantum* of time) by many parents, legal professionals and courts<sup>6</sup>, the research literature suggests that it is the *quality of relationships* between parents, and between parents and children, that exerts a critical influence on children's wellbeing (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Of course, an emotionally close and warm relationship requires time to sustain it.
- Parental separation is a leading cause and correlate of child poverty. Most studies indicate that the single factor most likely to lead to poor child outcomes – be they poor educational performance, emotional problems, anti-social or other behavioural problems, or health and developmental problems – is poverty and not separation *per se* (McLanahan 1999; Rodgers and Pryor 1998).

Taken together, the research literature suggests that the best interests of children are strongly connected to co-parental relationships and cooperation, parenting capacities and skills, and practical resources such as adequate housing and income. (For excellent overviews of the literature, see Arendell 1996; Benjamin and Irving 1989; Lye 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001; see also AIFS 2003 for a recent summary of this literature.)

---

5. The terms "joint custody" and "shared parenting" are especially problematic because they are often used without the distinction being made between "joint *legal* custody" (decision-making) and "joint *physical* custody" (children's living arrangements and residential schedules).

6. At the end of the day, time is essentially the only commodity that courts have to deal with in parenting disputes. This is in no way a criticism, but rather their reality.

## Some commonly held truths

Arising out of her clinical practice, Ricci (1997) has developed a set of propositions about creating cooperative parenting arrangements. These ideas (Ricci 1997: 7-8) are likely to have particular use in the context of understanding different patterns of contact and their outcomes for family members:

1. *“Children love, want, and need both parents”*. Both parents are fundamental to a child’s wellbeing and development. Both are central to a child’s world, and neither is ever forgotten by him or her. The way that the divorce transition is handled, especially in relation to how a non-resident parent’s “absence” is handled, is of tremendous importance to a child.
2. *“Each child is unique” (as is each family’s circumstances)*. What one child can deal with, another cannot. The best interests of children should always be paramount in making decisions about contact, with the appropriateness of different patterns of care contingent on many factors, including the quality of care, as well as children’s individual temperament, resilience, stage of development, and experience. (An important corollary of Ricci’s proposition is that “children’s needs are not one-size-fits-all” (Mason 2000: 8) and that, along with parents’ circumstances, they change over time. Dunn and Deater-Deckard (2000) suggest that parenting arrangements should thus be periodically reviewed, with children’s voices central in this process.)
3. *A good legal agreement does not guarantee a good outcome*. A good legal agreement alone is often not enough to make good outcomes for everyone happen. Parents need to learn how to put their agreements into practice in daily life.
4. *The way that parents relate to each other is critical*. According to Ricci: “Children do poorly when their parents are engaged in open hostilities and even worse when their parents involve them in the battle. The longer and more intense the war, the more potential long-term damage to their child.”
5. *A “good divorce”,<sup>7</sup> including those involving children, is possible and worth the effort*. The secret to the “good divorce” is that there are standards of conduct. A good divorce takes work (as does a good marriage). These standards of conduct, maintains Ricci (1997), can be learned and worked at.

## “Heavy metal” research: Its strengths and pitfalls

In Australia, the building blocks of knowledge on parent–child contact after divorce largely derive from population-based national surveys (such as the Australian Divorce Transition Project). These surveys (termed “heavy metal” research because of the crude nature of their closed questions and their relative brevity and impersonal style) are good at collecting information on “how-many-parents-do-x?” but not so good for tackling the more difficult “why-do-parents-do-x?” questions. Examples of the latter include: Why this particular pattern of contact? Why don’t children stay overnight? Why has contact faltered, tapered off or ceased? “Why” questions are best addressed by more qualitative approaches, involving in-depth interviews or focus groups.<sup>8</sup>

---

7. Ahron’s (1994) term is used here.

8. This does not necessarily mean asking “why” questions directly to respondents.

In the United States, Melli (1999) has argued that research into parent–child contact needs to recognise and describe clearly the multiple qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share the care of children.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project* collects both quantitative<sup>9</sup> and qualitative information on different patterns of care. This report sets out the qualitative data from that project, derived from a series of focus groups with separated and divorced parents – the *Parent–Child Contact Study*. These data are also accompanied by survey data from a large representative sample of separated/divorced parents.

## Structure of the report

Following a brief overview of the *Parent–Child Contact Study* methodology, five distinct patterns of non-resident father–child contact are examined. These are 50/50 “shared care” (Chapter 3), little or no contact (Chapter 4), holiday-only contact (Chapter 5), daytime-only contact (Chapter 6), and “standard” contact (every-weekend or every-other-weekend) (Chapter 7). Points of convergence across the groups are then examined (Chapter 8).

To embed these findings in the wider national picture, a supplementary analysis is conducted using the most recent nationally representative data on economic and family-functioning issues available – data from Wave 1 of the *Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey (Chapter 9).

Chapter 10 then synthesises and discusses the key findings, and sets out a number of practical and policy implications arising from the data.

By comparing the arrangements, motives, reflections and demography of separated parents with different patterns of parent–child contact, this report aims to shed light on what shapes different parenting arrangements and how these arrangements might be working for parents and children.

The intention was to allow the focus group participants to do as much of the talking as possible so that readers can access different family members’ experiences of the many ways that contact can occur. Contact is not an end in itself but rather a means through which parents and children across two households can develop, sustain, and extend deep emotional attachments to one another – often in the face of conflict and physical distance. These attachments cut to the heart of who we are, and for this reason are best articulated by those who speak from experience.

---

9. Forty-minute telephone interviews have recently been conducted with 971 separated and divorced parents from around Australia. The data from these interviews are currently being analysed and are due for release in the next six months.



# 2

## RESEARCH DESIGN

---





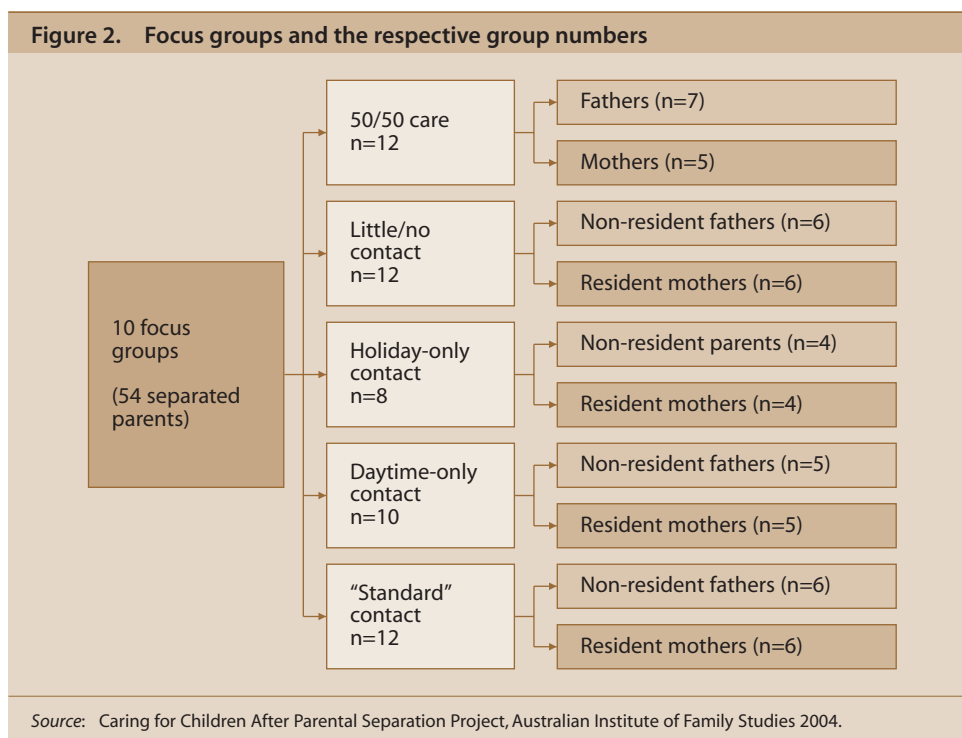
# 2 Research design

Bruce Smyth

This report draws on qualitative data derived from a series of focus groups conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Parent–Child Contact Study*. These data were collected as part of a larger study of parent–child contact after separation – the Institute’s *Caring for Children After Parental Separation Project*. The study was designed to obtain a different methodological viewpoint from survey findings into post-separation patterns of parenting, especially in relation to context, diversity, transitions, and process.

Ten focus groups were conducted (see Figure 2). Each group comprised four to seven respondents, and related to one of five patterns of post-separation care: (1) 50/50 shared care (for example, week-about); (2) little or no contact; (3) holiday-only contact; (4) daytime-only contact; and (5) “standard” contact (every-weekend or every-other-weekend).

All five groups (except the male holiday-only contact group)<sup>10</sup> comprised same-sex respondents to minimise the risk of conflict or gender power differentials,



10. The holiday-only group of non-resident fathers included one non-resident mother (“Julie”). This group was extremely difficult to fill, and many of the issues with which this non-resident mother was wrestling were similar to those raised by fathers in the screening interview.

and to ensure that members within each group were as similar as possible on certain key attributes. It is this similarity within groups that allows for differences across the groups to be explored.

## Participants

Participants were recruited through a range of non-probability sampling techniques. Specifically, a story appeared in the Melbourne *Herald-Sun* newspaper about the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* Project. The story mentioned the focus groups and called for volunteers. Snowball sampling – in which participants first contacted are asked to name acquaintances in similar circumstances, who are then approached, and asked for additional names and so on until the required number of participants is obtained – was also used.

Focus group participants, Institute staff, and the Institute's email alert service were used to invite separated parents who fell into one of the five contact categories to participate. Various organisations were also contacted by letter to recruit participants.

All potential participants were screened for eligibility using an intake protocol, and a quota of six participants for each group was filled where possible.

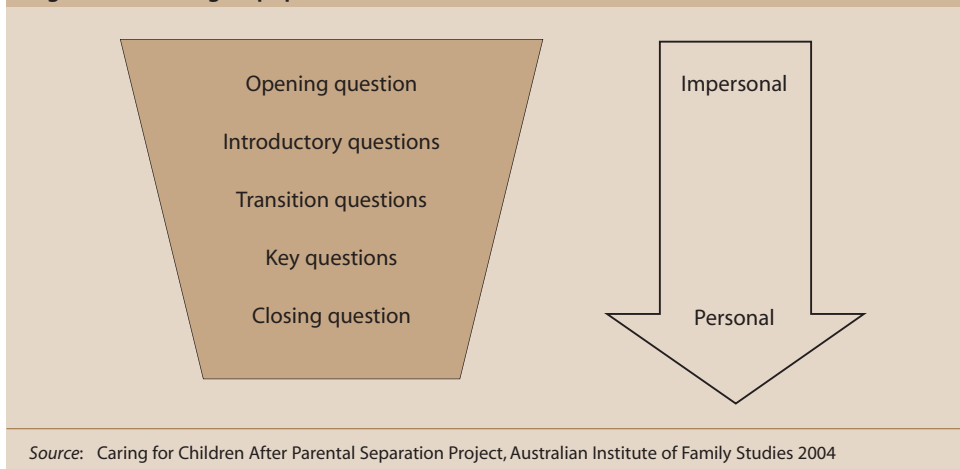
The final sample for the focus group component of the study comprised 54 separated parents (27 mothers; 27 fathers), each of whom had at least one child under 18 years at interview. Apart from one mother and father, parents were not matched pairs of ex-couples.

The age range of the youngest biological child of each respondent was between two and 17 years. Parents ranged in age from 26-58 years (with an average age of 42) and had been separated for around six years (ranging between three to ten years). Just over half (54 per cent) were single (that is, not living with a partner), 64 per cent of them women; 44 per cent of them men. Virtually all participants were Australian-born of English-speaking background. Forty-four per cent of participants reported getting along pretty well with their former partner; 27 per cent reported not getting along too well; almost one quarter of the sample avoided any contact with their former partner; and the remaining 5 per cent had contact but fought and did not get along.

## Question guide

A structured group interview guide was used comprising around a dozen questions (see Appendix 1). Focus group interviews typically have a particular logic, where questions are guided by a funnel design (see Figure 3). Relatively broad, easy, non-threatening questions are initially asked to promote group cohesion, rapport and trust. Introductory questions are then followed by transition questions, which help participants move their thinking towards the key issues, and finally key questions (targeted and more personal in nature) are asked. As far as practical, the same questions are asked of all of the groups so that points of contact and disparity can be explored both across and within the groups. By and large, all questions were asked of the group (rather than of individuals).

**Figure 3. Focus group question structure**



Examples of the questions are:

- Could you tell me a bit about how your particular arrangement works? [*Introductory question*]
- Why *this* pattern of contact? [*Transition question*]
- How is the overall pattern of contact working for everyone – for you, your former partner, and the children? [*Key question*]
- What advice would you give to other separated parents in making arrangements for children after separation? [*Closing question*]

## Logistics

All of the focus groups were conducted at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in Melbourne. The groups comprised four to seven members. Focus group sessions, held across a two-week period in February 2003, lasted about 90 minutes. They were audio taped with the participants' permission, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Participants were paid a small amount of money to cover any expenses incurred in attending the sessions.

Each group had a moderator, and a moderator's assistant. The project team (two females, one male) filled these roles. Where possible, female groups were moderated by female team members while the male team member and a male colleague (not part of the team) moderated the male groups.

## Caveats

Given the small-scale non-probability design, observations are framed as "insights" rather than findings generalisable to the wider population. These insights, presented throughout this report as boxed insets, may help to generate hypotheses for subsequent larger scale study.

Five caveats should be noted. First, the richness and depth of respondents' individual stories can never be fully represented by any form of data display.

Second, the groups of separated and divorced men and women are very small, and they were not drawn randomly from the general population of separated or

divorced parents. Thus no claim is made that the responses are representative of parents with similar arrangements or generalise to that population. Qualitative data are not used to draw inferences about a particular population at large. Rather, they provide in-depth information about context, diversity and process, and can help to generate hypotheses that may be tested in subsequent empirical work with representative samples.

Third, collecting information from both parents from the same relationship is extremely difficult (Smyth 2002). In the *Parent–Child Contact Study*, only two of the 54 focus group participants were from the same former union. Without access to both sides of each story, making sense of some of the family dynamics at play is a formidable task.

Fourth, some issues requiring great sensitivity (such as domestic violence or personal depression) were not explored or tackled if they were raised. Such issues could not be explored adequately and ethically within the confines of a group situation. Where sensitive or potentially serious disclosures were made, the wellbeing of individuals who made these was monitored closely in line with pre-developed ethical protocols, and information on support, counselling and referral services was made available to participants.

Finally, one potential disadvantage of focus groups is that they discourage individual members to speak against the group norm. This means that individual group members may be reluctant to disclose attitudes or behaviours that are inconsistent with “group disclosures” (Iyidén and Bülow 2003). Some things may therefore remain hidden.

Nonetheless, few studies of post-separation parenting in Australia have been able to yield the depth and breadth afforded by mixed-model designs, in which qualitative and quantitative data are combined.

# 3

## FIFTY/FIFTY CARE

---



## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK IN CHAPTER 3 FIFTY/FIFTY CARE

### Four mothers

**CAMILLE** separated two years ago and has since repartnered. She has two daughters aged 13 and ten. Her parenting arrangement involves a week-about schedule with the changeover occurring on Fridays after school.

**KATHY**, aged 40, has been separated from her former partner for five years. She has two children; a son and daughter aged ten and six respectively, who move between Kathy's and her former partner's house every two or three days.

**RACHEL**, aged 43, has been separated for eight years. She has two teenage daughters, Jane who is 19 and Jade who is 17, and is also the stepmother of 16-year-old twins. Her parenting arrangement involves a week-about schedule, which has been in place for seven years.

**SALLY**, aged 45, is the former partner of Rod (see below). Sally and Rod have been separated for five years. They still get along well and have a flexible parenting arrangement that enables their three teenage children to spend equal amounts of time with each of them.

### Seven fathers

**ANDREW**, aged 48, has been separated for five years. He and his former partner share the care of their six-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Lisa, by way of a week-on, week-off arrangement. When Lisa was younger, Andrew had contact for three days each week, from Thursday evening until Sunday.

**CONRAD**, aged 58, has been separated from his former partner for ten years. He has one adult child, a 17-year-old son, and two stepsons aged 19 and 17 years. His parenting arrangement is a flexible one that is largely centred on his son's activities.

**NIGEL**, aged 53, has shared the care of his children since separating four years ago. He has two daughters, aged 18 and 16, and two sons aged 14 and 12 years.

**PAUL**, aged 46, has shared the care of his 13-year-old daughter since he separated six years ago. His parenting arrangement involves the children spending a week with him and then a week with his former partner.

**ROD**, aged 49, is the former partner of Sally (see above). Separated for five years, they have an amicable relationship, and their three teenage children spend equal amounts of time with each of them.

**SIMON**, aged 30, has shared the care of his daughters, aged seven and nine years, by way of a week-on, week-off arrangement, since he separated five years ago. He has since repartnered and has two stepchildren.

**STEPHEN**, aged 42, has been separated from his former partner for four years. He has a 13-year-old daughter and two sons aged 11 and eight years. He also has a week-about arrangement.

---

*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.*

# 3 Fifty/fifty care

Bruce Smyth, Catherine Caruana and Anna Ferro<sup>11</sup>

*“I notice that the one thing about the group as a whole is that all of us are here because we’re putting the kids’ welfare first, and most of us are getting on well with the ex because the kids are more important than the ex, or whatever . . . There are so many things where you just have to throw away the remote control and worry about the things that you can do.” [Andrew]*

Superficially, 50/50 care may be perceived by many to be the Rolls-Royce model of post-separation parenting. It appears to be fair and simple. Indeed, these perceived qualities underpin a common view – certainly for non-resident parents – that shared care is a good idea (Smyth and Weston 2004).

The Australian Government recently investigated adopting a legal presumption of joint residence. Under such a presumption, the starting point in any legal proceedings would have been that children would spend equal time with each parent unless there was evidence that this arrangement would not be in children’s best interests.

While recommending that 50/50 care be considered an aspiration by way of a “starting point for discussion and negotiation”, the Parliamentary Committee investigating this issue concluded that the amount of time that a child spend with each parent following separation “be a decision made, either by parents or by others on their behalf, in the best interests of the child concerned and on the basis of what arrangement works for that family” (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 32). In short, the Committee favoured the creation of a legal presumption of “shared parental responsibility” (that is, decision-making) rather than the 50/50 timeshare of children.

Why the interest in 50/50 care? The parliamentary inquiry “reflects the Government’s commitment to ensuring that, to the greatest extent possible, children have the benefit of the love and care of both their parents when a couple separates” (Williams and Anthony 2003). This view is consistent with arguments put by advocates of joint residence that focus on the benefits for children of maintaining a close relationship with both parents (Bauserman 2002). By contrast, opponents of joint residence typically emphasise children’s need for the stability of one main home and the potential harm for children of continuing to be exposed to ongoing high levels of parental conflict, parental neglect or mental health problems (Bauserman 2002; Brotsky, Steinmen and Zimmelman 1991).

---

11. This chapter is an abridged version of a paper presented at the Australian Social Policy Research Conference at the University of New South Wales on 9-11 July 2003, and subsequently published in *Family Matters*. The full paper is available on the Australian Institute of Families website at: [www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/papers/smyth4.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/papers/smyth4.pdf)

Despite substantial interest in “splitting” parental care “down the middle” after separation, little is known in Australia about parents who opt for equal (or near equal) care of their children, how these arrangements are structured, and how well they work (see, for example, Abaranel 1979; Bauserman 2002; Braver and O’Connell 1998; Brotsky et al. 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch, 1996; Krecker, Brown, Melli and Wymer 2003; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Mason 2000 in the United States context; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001 in the United Kingdom).

This gap in our knowledge is not surprising given that such arrangements are relatively rare in Australia. Less than 3 per cent of children with a natural parent living elsewhere had “shared care” arrangements in 1997 – defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1998) as involving at least 30 per cent of time spent with each parent. Moreover, less than 4 per cent of parents registered with the Child Support Agency last year were deemed to have “shared care” of their children – defined by the Child Support Agency (2003) as involving 40-60 per cent of time spent with each parent.

In this chapter, the arrangements, motives, and reflections of parents who have a joint residence parenting arrangement are examined.

## The focus groups

*Profiles of each of the focus group participants in this chapter are presented on page 18.*

The following analysis is based on the responses of 12 separated or divorced parents (seven fathers in one focus group, five mothers in another), each of whom had an equal (or near-equal) shared care arrangement. Half of the parents had re-partnered (three mothers, three fathers). Two of the 12 parents were from the same former union.

All of the parents lived in relatively close proximity to their former partner. Seven of the 12 parents reported getting along well with their former partner, three said that they didn’t get along too well, and two had little or no communication. All except three of the participants made their own parenting arrangements without involvement in the legal system. All of the men had reduced or relatively flexible work arrangements; all of the women were in paid work.

Parents in the 50/50 care focus groups appear to be a relatively distinct subgroup of separated parents. Their profiles shed light on some of the basic conditions conducive to shared parenting: proximity, work flexibility, a degree of financial independence, and a cooperative co-parenting style – which perhaps largely explains why most of these parents did not seek legal interventions. Interestingly, two of the three parents (one male, one female) who did go to court are the same two parents who reported avoiding their former partners in their parenting patterns (that is, adopted parallel parenting).

Of course, there may be two types of cooperative parenting: active cooperation, involving deliberate actions of co-parental support (the most desirable type); and passive cooperation, involving avoiding demonising the other parent in front of children or refraining from making children act as messengers or spies.<sup>12</sup> While passive cooperation may not be the ideal, it may be the critical factor to make shared care workable where residual bad feelings between parents exist.

---

12. We are indebted to Adrienne Burgess for sharing her thinking on this under-developed idea.

While this profile is informative in its own right, the following comments from parents point to great diversity in the way that parenting is shared and to family dynamics at play. Findings are structured in two parts. First, two vignettes are offered. Second, key themes that emerged from the interviews are presented.

## Vignettes

### *Sally and Rod*

Sally and Rod are from the same former union. They have been separated for four and a half years. They have two boys and a teenage daughter. Rod has repartnered but Sally has not. They have an extremely cooperative relationship and are happy with their shared parenting arrangement (see Figure 4). The complexity of their arrangement appears to be a function of each family member's need to have frequent contact with one another.

According to Sally:

*“We have a very informal arrangement which we just arrived at ourselves . . . we have stuck to that for the sake of the children. And we do a little bit like what you were saying . . . the children are with me Sunday night, Monday night, Tuesday night – with Rod Wednesday night, Thursday night. And on the weekends we swap, so whoever's weekend it is has them on the Friday night and then the other person has them on the Saturday night and the Sunday, and then they come back to me on the Sunday night. It sounds mucky – but it works for us. None of us wanted to not see them for very long. I don't know how you do the-week-without-them thing. Neither Rod nor I would agree to that for a minute. We might now that they're at secondary school, but I couldn't have managed that personally when they were young.”*

Sally and Rod's schedule is very child-focused in that the children's activities act as anchor points for changeover. For instance, on Saturdays, the boys play basketball. One parent arrives with the children. Both parents watch the game, after which the other parent takes the children. The weekend rotation means that weekend time (often viewed as “quality” leisure time by parents) is shared so that Friday and Saturday night care is alternated, allowing both parents to have a social life.

In passing it is noteworthy that Sally and Rod had discussions this year with their children about changing the pattern of care. They were concerned that their teenage daughter might have wanted something a little different from her younger brothers. To both parents' surprise, all three children wanted to keep the pattern as it was.

### *Kathy*

Kathy and her former husband have shared the care of their ten-year-old son and six-year-old daughter for five years. Kathy's arrangements (see Figure 4) and perceptions differ markedly in some ways from those of Sally and Rod. This may be because Kathy and her former partner have little contact with each other. Essentially they “parallel parent”. They have been involved in extensive litigation regarding the children and have an extremely detailed order.

Kathy says:

“Well my arrangement is very rigid and we don’t deviate or else I end up back in court. The children’s changeover is predominately after school, so Monday night they go to their Dad’s, then they get picked up from school. Tuesday they’re at their Dad’s. Wednesday I pick them up from school. Then they’re with me Wednesday night and Thursday night. Weekends alternate and on his weekend he brings them back to me on the Sunday night. The kids adjusted to it. They get annoyed at times and say, ‘I wish I didn’t have to go’ or ‘I wish I didn’t have to do this!’ Because it’s not an amicable situation there’s lots of games being played – of socks not being returned and toys that can’t be transferred, and things like that. We have issues around their possessions and then they’re manipulated as part of a power struggle. So that becomes quite difficult. But in relation to the children, they know the routine . . . But how they’d like it, I don’t really know at this stage because they just know that’s what the judge said so that’s the arrangement.”

It is interesting to note that one of the anchor points in both Sally and Kathy’s schedules is Sunday night, whereby the children start the school week with their mother.

On this point, Kathy is clear:

“So that’s basically how we set it up. He said ‘I want 50/50’ and I said ‘well not quite’ because at least at the beginning of the week I know they’ve gone to bed and, as I said, they were only really little. But there have been a lot of pitfalls . . . There were egos that we had to contend with as well as access. And quite often he forgets that the actions that he’s taking are ultimately affecting them – they will affect me but I can get over it because I can see through it, whereas they are the ones that have to wear it and live with it, and that’s where it’s really hard.”

It is important to note that other 50/50 timeshare schedules were operating outside of those described above, with “week about” being the most common arrangement. However, even in this pattern, there were differences in the day on which handover occurred (such as Friday or Monday).

INSIGHT

Which split?

There appears to be much diversity in how parents with 50/50 care divide their time with their children. Even in the most common pattern of shared care in the groups, “week about”, parents differed on the day (and way) that the weekly changeovers occurred. 50/50 care may be “fair”, but it is rarely simple.

**Key themes**

Six key themes emerged from the data: (1) parents’ motives; (2) work and money issues; (3) quality time versus quantity of time; (4) paternal competence; (5) logistical challenges; and (6) a child-focused mindset.

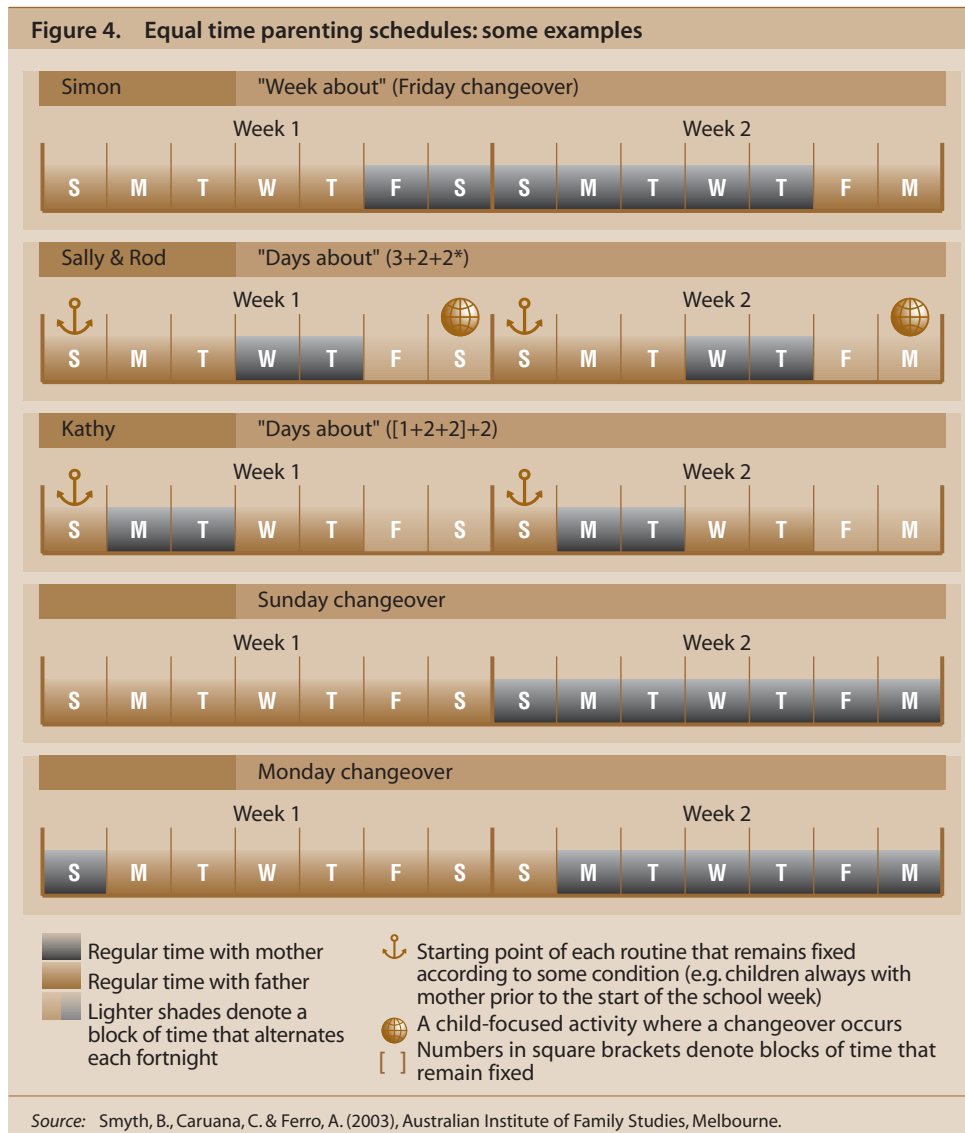
**Parental motives**

One of the transition questions we asked, “Why this pattern of contact?”, sought to identify the thinking behind different patterns of care. When we asked the co-parents in the 50/50 arrangements, “Why *shared* care?”, some gender differences emerged.

For a number of fathers, a sense of their own rights as parents – perhaps best characterised by what Smart and Neale (1999: 129) refer to as an “ethic of justice” – appeared to be a key motivating factor.

For Rod, for instance, the relevant question was not “why?” but “why not?”:

“I was quite adamant that I wanted 50 per cent on that because a male has got as much to give as a female, and the children were only very young. And I’ve got as much experience at bringing up children as my wife has, because it was her first experience as well.”



Simon's arrangement seems to have grown out of both default and his own sense of parenting rights:

"My ex is very busy. And also she left me so she had to go and find a place. So of course I was left with full custody of the kids until she found a new place. And also there was no way I was going to give up any more than 50 per cent, and she knew that I'd take that as far as I had to."

Conrad viewed the shared arrangement as a compromise:

"I was after full custody. The best I got was custody of one, and shared care of the other."

Andrew appeared to gain a split arrangement by default:

"My ex wanted to spend time with her new man, and I don't think she felt capable so she gave me the kid half time. Just because it was easier for her."

Paul's motives were more child-focused, and in that regard were aligned with the mothers' views below:

"In my case it was that my own level of maternal drive, and also the fact that Mum knew I was very involved from day one, and would do that anyway. And just the principle that it's fair that the child needs to see the mother and the father."

Mothers voiced two dominant motivations for 50/50 care. First, they felt that a high degree of father involvement was in their children's best interests. Second, they believed that fathers were entitled to maintain a key role in their children's lives. These motivations appear to straddle, to draw on Smart and Neale's concepts, an "ethic of care" and an "ethic of justice".

Camille says:

"I thought it was crucial . . . the girls adored their Dad and despite his failings, and my failings as well, in our relationship, I wasn't going to let that cloud my judgment with him being a role model for them in the future. It just wasn't an option . . . And it's been fabulous for the girls and their relationship with their Dad. He takes them fishing, camping. He does more now than he did when we were married. Which is awesome. I just love it. It's great for the kids."

In Sally's case neither parent wanted to be away from their children for too long:

"There just never seemed to be any option for us. We both wanted them and the kids wanted to be with both of us. So we just came to the best arrangement that we could. And there was no reason for them to be with me more than with him. There was just no question ever, and there hasn't been ever since. And the kids run out the door when he arrives – I could never imagine it being any other way really, for us."

Rachel's motivation for a 50/50 arrangement appears to have derived from a strong moral position on the equal rights of parents – strong enough, it seems, to have overcome some serious concerns she initially had about her former partner (a Family Court counsellor advised Rachel not to leave the children in their father's care):

“You can’t choose someone to father your children and then decide that it’s not right to have anything other than equal access to your children. So it was a philosophical point of view. In practice, for many years I was worried I’d made a terrible mistake, and I think I’m nearly at the point where I think it’s worked out well. But I believe I took a very big risk.”

#### Motives – his and hers?

A range of motives for 50/50 care is evident.

For many of the fathers, a sense of their right (and need) to be involved as parents appears to have been a key motivating factor for 50/50 care.

By contrast, mothers appeared to be motivated by the rights of both the child and the father to continue their relationship. (Is this because high maternal involvement is taken for granted, and thus mothers are able to look beyond their own needs?)

It may well be that as fathers take more individual care of their children, they become more child-focused.

#### *Work and money*

One of the most conspicuous features of the mothers and fathers in the 50/50 care groups was that all were in paid employment. Most of the parents appeared to have framed their work patterns to care for their children, such as by choosing to work a four-day week or less, working longer hours during the week the children were not in their care, or working part-time when they had the children. All appeared to have some degree of flexibility in their work hours. Some of the fathers had changed jobs (or stayed in jobs) to give them this flexibility.

For Andrew, being self-employed gave him the flexibility he needed to care for his daughter:

“I run a small business . . . I just always put my daughter first and the business second . . . If I show up on occasions with a kid in tow, clients don’t mind. It works really well.”

Stephen adds:

“I work in the community sector and I work four days a week, and they’re very flexible about it. The week that I haven’t got the kids I work extra hours, and when I do have them I finish at school time.”

Rachel felt that the shared care arrangement had enabled her to further her career. She also felt that there were advantages for family life:

“I don’t think my kids [would have got] to see me as much had I stayed with their father. Because in my job if I work longer hours it’s in the week I don’t have them, and so the week I do have them we all make an effort to be there and don’t put other things on that week.”

Mothers in particular found that paid employment gave them the ability to make choices for themselves and their children. According to Rachel, money is a critical factor for shared care:

“I could imagine that money would be an extremely constraining factor in many arrangements like this [50/50 shared care]. I’m grateful that that’s not been a big issue for us, but I’m certain it must be very difficult if you’ve not got good choices available to you.”

These comments allude to the logistical and economic pressures that are likely to face *either* parent in opting for shared care.

INSIGHT

#### The work–family balance

Parents who spend equal time with their children may need access to family-friendly work practices (or in its absence, access to good child care). Both mothers and fathers who opt for shared care generally appear to be in a financial position that allows them to make choices about their work–family balance.

#### *The parent–child relationship*

Both mothers and fathers spoke of how sharing the care of their children equally with their former partner enabled them to be more child-focused when children were in their care. They used the time children were with their other parent to get organised, work longer hours, or go out with friends. They were thus able to spend more “quality” time with children. It appears that for most of these parents the shared care arrangement promoted better parent–child relationships.

Rachel said:

“You’re looking forward to the next time you have them, you’re planning the next time you have them and you’re clearing the way to be more family oriented.”

Simon also described the benefits of having a week to himself:

“I’ll go and see the movies I want to see in the week when I don’t have the kids. And then when I’ve got the kids, all through the week I try to be . . . organised for the kids.”

Camille felt that she made more effort to spend time with the children when they were with her:

“We really concentrate on having good quality time with them. That’s really important to us because we miss them so much in the other week.”

A defining feature of the fathers with shared care was the way in which they viewed the time they spent with their children. They spoke of how the substantial amount of time they had children in their care gave them a chance to do simple everyday things with them – “quality things”.

Andrew reflects:

“For me . . . basically it’s quantity of time. Spending a lot of time together, just wandering around . . . with her on my shoulders when she was little enough to stay up there without killing me. Eating together . . . watching TV together – the day-to-day boring stuff.”

Nigel expressed many of the fathers’ thoughts on this issue:

“What do I do with the kids? I’d say, I’m *around* them.”

Being able to spend time with their children and participate in day-to-day activities with them enables fathers with shared care to develop and maintain close relationships with their children.

As Andrew put it:

“In most nuclear families, mum has the majority of time with the kids and she develops the closer relationship.”

Andrew viewed the shared care arrangement as providing him with a unique opportunity:

“One really interesting thing – and I don’t know if you guys found it? – but the product of all the time you spent is the kind of different relationship you have . . . The sort of depth of relationship, and everything that normal fathers don’t develop.”

#### It’s about time

The respite afforded by 50/50 care allows parents to more effectively balance their energy between their children and themselves. For fathers, 50/50 care allows them to spend more time with their children than might otherwise be the case. More time means that fathers can embed themselves in their children’s lives – “being” rather than “doing”. In other words, *quantity* of time itself is thus seen as an important precursor to “quality time”.

#### ***Paternal competence***

Many of the fathers found shared care to be an extremely rewarding experience. This did not mean that they necessarily found it easy learning how to be a primary carer.

For example, Andrew provided a sharp image of his own growth in this regard at different points in the focus group interview:

“I felt *terribly* alone after the separation. Me and a 15-month-old baby and a broken heart, and a pile of nappies. Bloody traumatic. Just you and the kid. There’s no mother, sisters, health care nurses. Nothing. But something that I found really interesting was that apparently nature has built all sorts of nurturing instincts in men that nuclear families have kind of forgotten about. It’s all just there waiting to be discovered. And it’s terrific to find it in yourself, to go for it . . . It’s wonderful! I found one of the hardest things was getting in touch with my gut instinct, and then just having confidence in it.”

### The road less travelled

For some fathers, separation may entail learning how to become a more involved parent, or how to “parent” independently. Practical and emotional support at this time may assist these fathers in managing role transitions and/or caring for very young children.

### Logistical challenges

Shared parenting involving a 50/50 split appears to be a logistically complex parenting arrangement. Parents talked about the need to be organised, structured and to plan ahead given that children were spending an equal amount of time in two households. When moving from one home to the other, parents (and children) need to ensure children have all they need for the days or week ahead, such as equipment for activities and schoolbooks. In the case of extra-curricular activities, children can miss out unless both parents are willing and able to facilitate their involvement.

Shared care arrangements involving more changeovers (such as Sally and Rod’s arrangement) can require an even greater commitment to ensure the transition for children between houses is a smooth one.

As Sally commented:

“So we do a lot of picking up and dropping off from each other’s houses . . . constantly actually. All the time one of us is at the other’s house, dropping off or picking up, so I don’t know how you make it work if you’re not prepared to do that either.

The complexity of shared care became abundantly clear during one interchange between two fathers, Rod and Nigel:

*Rod:* “We see each other all the time. Clothes? . . . I’m forever driving here and dropping off school clothes there . . .”

*Nigel:* “We have three sets of everything – one in each household and one set lost somewhere in-between. And it’s kind of true that stuff gravitates one way and you’ve got to say: ‘Hey! I’m out of this!’ or ‘Where are all my towels?’”

*Rod:* “Or you do a big wash and say ‘I’ve got everything!’”

*Nigel:* “That really depends in my case on reasonable relations with my ex-wife. Reasonable relations make so much possible.”

### Reasonable relations . . .

Shared care involves many logistical challenges. Parental cooperation can help to overcome these challenges.

### Putting kids first

Nigel’s final comment in the previous quote that “reasonable relations make so much possible” embodies a key insight that Ricci (1997) and others (Funder 1993; Reynolds 2001) have previously articulated: the way that parents relate to each other after separation is crucial.

This, of course, is one of the key challenges for all parents who separate: being able to disentangle their prior intimate relationship from their parenting. It seems reasonable to assume that in Nigel's case "reasonable relations" is his way of describing a structured business-like working relationship with his former partner for the sake of their children. The child-focused flavour of this working relationship was indeed a common thread that ran through many of the comments of mothers and fathers in the 50/50 care focus groups.

Camille reflects:

"Yes it's amicable. We just take our egos out of the equation and do what's best for the kids basically. All the time."

Nigel is adamant on this point:

"We never use the kids as pawns . . . or as ammunition, or say: 'Who do you want to live with?'"

And Andrew appears to be very committed to a cooperative parenting pattern:

"We keep a good working relationship . . . there's a lot of generosity towards each other, and we both remember that it's about the kids, and that's important."

## INSIGHT

### For the sake of the kids

Parents who opted for 50/50 care generally got along with each other, respected the other parent's abilities, and worked hard to put their children's needs above their own.

## Summary

An exploration of the arrangements, motives, and reflections of these parents provides unique insights into a range of contextual issues about sharing the care of children following parental separation. They suggest that parents' arrangements may often be logistically complex, and that those who opt for 50/50 care appear to share a number of common characteristics.

Specifically, a number of conditions – relational and structural – appear conducive to making shared care a viable option for separated parents. These conditions include: geographical proximity; the ability of parents to get along and, at minimum, to maintain a "business-like" working relationship as parents with children being kept "out of the middle"; child-focused arrangements, with children's activities forming an integral part of the way in which the parenting schedule is developed; a commitment by everyone to make shared care work; family-friendly work practices; a degree of financial independence, especially for mothers; and a degree of paternal competence.

This is not to say that all of these conditions must be met. Indeed, parents in at least two of the families did not get along and appeared to have some difficulty keeping children out of their bad feelings for each other. To what extent these arrangements, although "functioning" in legal and technical terms, were nonetheless exacting a toll on the children is unclear. However, destructive patterns of family dynamics were not the norm in this small group. Virtually all of the parents in the focus groups had adopted a shared care arrangement from the time of separation, many had maintained this arrangement for a considerable length of time, and most had established this arrangement without any involvement with the legal system.



# 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"?<sup>13</sup>

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),<sup>14</sup> 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 interview<sup>15</sup>, 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](http://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).<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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 distance<sup>18</sup> (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 colleagues<sup>19</sup> (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 methodologies<sup>20</sup> 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.



# 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.<sup>21</sup>

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).<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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?<sup>24</sup> 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; Easteal, 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*<sup>25</sup>, 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).<sup>26</sup>

## 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 mother<sup>27</sup> 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;<sup>28</sup> (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.<sup>29</sup> 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”<sup>30</sup>*

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.

# 6

## DAYTIME-ONLY CONTACT

---



## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK IN CHAPTER 6 DAYTIME-ONLY CONTACT

### Five resident mothers

**LEONIE** separated from her former partner five years ago. She has two daughters aged 19 and 16 years. Leonie's former partner comes to her home every Saturday to have contact with their younger daughter.

**MARILYN** separated from her former partner before their son, now aged two-and-a-half, was born. Her former partner began having contact with their son when Marilyn moved to Melbourne from interstate around 12 months ago.

**MEREDITH** has been separated for nine years. She has two daughters aged 13 and 16 years, who spend time with their father each Sunday.

**SHIRLEY**, aged 39, has been separated from her former partner for seven years. She has a seven-year-old son, Daniel, who spends four hours with his father every Sunday.

**TESS**, aged 48, has been separated for seven years. She has two daughters aged 21 and 13 years, and two sons aged 18 and 16 years. The children's father now lives more than a two-hour drive away, and the two younger children have dinner with him each Wednesday evening.

### Five non-resident fathers

**DEREK**, aged 53, has been separated for five years. He has a 14-year-old daughter whom he sees on alternate Saturdays and Sundays.

**GRANT** separated from his former partner five years ago. He has an 18-year-old son and a 16-year-old daughter. He lives very close to his former partner and sees his children at their residence several times a week.

**JOHN** has been separated from his former partner for three years. He has two daughters aged six and five, and an 18-month-old son. He spends one or two days with his children every third weekend.

**RICHARD**, aged 41, has been separated from his former partner for eight years. His ten-year-old daughter lives a three-hour drive away and he sees her once every three weeks. He also has a son with his new wife, and two stepsons.

**RUSSELL**, aged 53, has been separated from his former partner for ten years. He has a 13-year-old son whom he hasn't seen for the past three months. Prior to this, he had daytime-only contact for seven years.

---

*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.*

## 6 Daytime-only contact

Catherine Caruana and Bruce Smyth

*“Seven years ago, when Francis was about six, I moved in with my new partner, Kim. My son has never stayed there overnight in seven years.” [Russell]*

According to resident parents, almost one-third (30 per cent) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere rarely or never see their other parent, typically their father (ABS 1998). Of those who do see their non-resident parent, a significant minority (34 per cent) never stay overnight (Smyth and Ferro 2002; see also Parkinson and Smyth 2003).

These figures paint a stark picture of the potentially high stakes of divorce for children, and hint at the nature and quality of the contact that is occurring in a significant number of cases. However, wider questions remain. Why is daytime-only contact so pervasive? Is it a variant of maternal obstruction or the result of paternal disinterest and a lack of responsibility in men for their offspring? Maybe it is simply a question of economics, with the cost of accommodating children comfortably in two households proving prohibitive for many separated families? Perhaps daytime-only contact is indicative of a more fragile post-separation relationship moving in the direction of contact ceasing altogether (Maccoby and Mnookin 1992)? Or might it merely reflect a cooperative parenting arrangement whereby both parents are equally involved in their children’s lives, live close to each other, but, for reasons of convenience and choice, the children have one primary residence?

Whatever the reasons for its occurrence, the prevalence of daytime-only contact is certainly high enough to warrant special research attention.

### Night and day

The distinction between daytime-only contact and overnight stays is important for several reasons. To begin with, there are notable qualitative differences between daytime and night-time parenting. Overnight stays help foster the development of close emotional bonds between children and non-resident parents (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Warshak 2000b). Time is usually less constrained and structured, allowing the dynamics that typically characterise family life to occur – such as putting children to bed, reading to them, saying good night, waking and dressing children, and starting the day with them over breakfast. By contrast, daytime contact is typically more time-limited and thus tends to be structured in ways that foster participation in mutually rewarding activities. While these activities are important for building and maintaining emotional bonds, they are only one slice of a multiplicity of contexts necessary for children’s social, emotional and cognitive development.

Furthermore, it can take time for parents and children to get re-acquainted after not seeing each other for a while – even after a week or two. Overnight stays can help this process. They can also: encourage children to feel that they have two homes, and that they are not just “visitors”; affirm non-resident parents’ self-identity as a “parent” (Lamb and Kelly 2001); and allow resident parents to gain respite from the immediate responsibilities of care giving (Funder 1993; Ricci 1997).

Another reason that the distinction between daytime and night-time parenting is important is that each pattern of care may have different degrees of durability. For instance, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found that overnight stays remained relatively stable over time whereas day-only contact did not. There was a shift from no contact to day-only contact by some non-resident mothers, while the reverse was the case for some non-resident fathers (who shifted from day-only contact to no contact). Day-only contact might thus reflect a more fragile or transitional relationship structure than overnight care, acting as a stepping-stone to or from disengagement.

A fourth reason that the day–night distinction is important is that different patterns of care might foster different psychosocial outcomes. Much of the academic debate on the question of care arrangements for small children has occurred within the context of developmental psychology and in particular, concerns that absence from the primary caregiver may cause disorganised attachment and separation anxiety (Altobelli 2003; Gould and Stahl 2001; Kelly and Lamb 2003; Lamb and Kelly 2001; Solomon and Biringen 2001; Warshak 2000a; Younger 2002). This issue is of significant import to separated parents with young children, as well as legal professionals and clinicians.

Finally, each pattern of care can involve different financial costs. Regular overnight stays, for instance, usually necessitate separate bedrooms for children (Woods and Associates 1999) while day-only contact does not. Overnight stays also typically require more meals, furniture, bedding, toys, clothes, games, and so on. Recently there has been increasing emphasis on the need to recognise the costs of contact to non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children (FaCS 2000). Distinguishing between day-only contact and sleepovers is a necessary prerequisite in any attempt to obtain reliable estimates of these costs. Thus, the distinction between daytime-only contact and overnight stays has important implications in terms of bonding, costs and outcomes.

Why might so many children not stay overnight? Smyth and Ferro (2002) suggested several possibilities: some parents may seek to promote stability in a child’s life (“one home, one bed”); others might have concerns about a child’s safety; and in some cases, non-resident parents may not be in a position to provide suitable accommodation to facilitate overnight stays. Moreover, a lack of knowledge or self-confidence about parenting skills on the part of the non-resident parent (especially in relation to very young children) might also underpin daytime-only contact, as might possible emotional friction between parents or between a child and a new partner of a non-resident parent. Thus, in many cases, reasoned Smyth and Ferro (2002), daytime-only contact might act as a marker for deeper contextual issues that need to be explored in terms of family dynamics. But all of this is little more than speculation.

## Some recent data

Data from an Australian Institute of Family Studies survey<sup>31</sup> of 971 separated parents suggest that daytime-only contact occurs for a range of disparate reasons. These reasons are summarised in Table 1, and cluster mainly around relationship and structural issues, as well as being a function of choice (often guided by children's developmental stages). While some respondents provided several reasons, the first reason offered was treated as the most salient reason in most cases and coded accordingly.

Table 1 shows that more than a quarter of separated/divorced parents (28 per cent of resident parents and 31 per cent of non-resident parents) pointed to the developmental needs of either very young or teenage children as the main reason for daytime-only contact occurring (15 per cent of resident parents and 8 per cent of non-resident parents referred to children's young age; 13 per cent of resident parents and 23 per cent of non-resident parents referred to teenager's inclination to prefer to do their own thing with friends). The tendency for mothers to report a focus on the needs of young children, and the tendency for fathers to attribute daytime-only contact to teenage children's need for independence, is perhaps not surprising.

<b>Table 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 (n=148)</b>		
<b>Main reason</b>	<b>Resident parents<sup>#</sup> (n=109) %</b>	<b>Non-resident parents<sup>##</sup> (n=39) %</b>
<b>Children's age or choice</b>		
Child is very young/breastfeeding	15	8
Teenage child does his/her own thing	13	23
Choice of child (middle childhood)	3	3
<b>Non-resident parent's choice</b>		
	17	3
<b>Relationship dynamics</b>		
Resident parent's choice/obstruction	1	23
Concerns for child's wellbeing/safety	12	0
New partner(s)/new children <sup>###</sup>	6	5
<b>Structural factors</b>		
Unsuitable accommodation/no space	10	10
Physical distance between households	6	10
Non-resident parent's work schedule	6	0
<b>Other</b>		
Other	9	10
Unlimited day contact/stability for child	2	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<small>Notes: <sup>#</sup> Includes 12 fathers (excluding this group makes little difference to these patterns reported in Table 1);  <sup>##</sup> Includes 5 mothers (excluding this group makes little difference to these patterns reported in Table 1);  <sup>###</sup> New partner(s)/new children in non-resident parent's house.  Source: Caring for Children after Parental Separation, Australian Institute of Family Studies 2004.</small>		

31. The sample from which these data are drawn comprises 971 parents (56 per cent women; 44 per cent men) who were separated or divorced, and who had at least one biological or adopted child under 18 at the time of interview. This sample was obtained through random digit dialling (RDD), and was stratified by gender and geographical location from the population of Australian households with landline telephones. The sample includes parents who either (a) had never lived together, (b) had never married, or (c) had married but subsequently separated or divorced.

Other examples of a clearly gendered pattern of perceptions in relation to attributions were also evident. Non-resident fathers were inclined to report obstruction on the part of resident parents, whereas resident parents were inclined to point to a concern for children's safety or a lack of desire for overnights stays on the part of non-resident parents as the main reason that sleepovers did not occur. This disparity is understandable in relation to safety issues in that some mothers may not articulate their concerns directly to fathers for a range of reasons, leaving fathers perhaps to perceive any reluctance by mothers as obstruction.

Not surprisingly, structural factors in the form of money, distance, and non-resident parents' work schedules, also featured as inhibitors of overnight stays. It is noteworthy that aside from concerns about the age of the child only a few parents reported a focus on the stability of place for children as the main reason for daytime-only contact.

While the above empirical snapshot is informative, more qualitative data has the potential to shed light on issues related to the context and diversity of daytime-only contact. It is to these data that we now turn.

## The focus groups

*Profiles of each of the focus group participants in this chapter are presented on page 68.*

The following analysis is based on the comments of ten separated or divorced parents (five non-resident fathers, five resident mothers) whose children had varying degrees of contact with the parent they did not live with but rarely, if ever, stayed with that parent overnight. None of these parents was from the same former union. Only two of the parents (both men) had repartnered.

Most parents lived in the same city as their former partner, and therefore relatively close by. For two families, however, contact necessitated a drive of over two and a half hours.

Eight of the ten participants (both mothers and fathers) were dissatisfied with the contact arrangement they had in place. Most fathers wanted more time with their children, and for it to include overnight contact. Most mothers also wanted more paternal contact, both for the sake of the children and to provide themselves with some respite from the burdens of sole parenting. There was one exception to these broad patterns, however: one mother was glad that the children never stayed overnight with their father as it alleviated her concerns about their safety when with him. (This concern appears to resonate more broadly, as evident in Table 1.)

For one participant the absence of overnight stays was primarily a function of distance. Only one out of the ten arrangements appeared to be the result of a cooperative arrangement whereby the children had one primary residence, with the father living within close proximity and having frequent and flexible daytime contact, primarily in the former family home. (Table 1 suggests that this type of arrangement is unusual with respect to daytime-only contact.)

While dissatisfaction with contact was evident across both the men's and the women's groups, accounts of the reasons for why such a situation had evolved were clearly split along gender lines: mothers, despite considerable efforts to

encourage contact, decried a lack of paternal interest in, or responsibility for children, and fathers felt they had been deliberately prevented by their former partners from maintaining a relationship with their children. However, a closer reading of the transcripts suggests complex reasons.

## Vignettes

The following vignettes hint at both the diversity of the initial motivations for daytime-only contact and also at the complexity of the dynamics at play.

### *John*

Unlike the other fathers in the group, John's children are relatively young – two daughters aged six and five years, and a son aged 18 months. John generally spends the day with the children on the Saturday and Sunday of every third weekend – they do not stay with him overnight. According to John's account, the nature, amount and frequency of the contact he has with his children is largely determined by two factors – his work patterns (he is a shift worker) and what he sees as the openly hostile attitude of his former wife to that contact. This means that he can never be sure if he will be allowed contact on the weekends that he is not working.

In John's case it is not difficult to discern other possible reasons for the lack of sleepovers. Soon after the separation, the children's mother moved interstate to be closer to her family. John's monthly visits in the following two years established a pattern of daytime-only contact that persists, even though he has since relocated to be closer to them. The fact that he currently "lives with a mate" suggests potential problems with the suitability of his accommodation to cater for a sleepover of three young children. The relocation has also meant that his relationship with his youngest child, conceived during a brief reconciliation but born after the mother had moved, is somewhat tenuous. John is distressed by the fact that his parents have never met his young son.

John obtained a court order several months previously to prevent the mother from acting on her threats to move overseas with the children. However, the existence of the order has not improved the level of his former wife's cooperation and John was still having trouble seeing the children at the times stipulated. Like many of the non-resident fathers in other focus groups, he expressed fears that contact with his children may cease at any time:

*"Every time I have any contact with the kids, I say 'I love you' because who knows when I'm going to see them next? And I always want them to know how much I care about them. So no matter what happens, they always know that . . . that their Dad loves them."*

Through his struggle to maintain contact with his children, John has developed his own personal ethos of self-preservation:

*"I'm going to keep getting [on with] my life, doing things. And then if I can't . . . because of her, I can't get to see the kids, I'm not going to let that stop me living my life. You've still got to live it. And the kids will fit in when it's available to fit in when she allows me to have them. And everything [else] will get put on hold when I have the kids but I'm going to still live my life and enjoy it and hopefully the kids can be a part of it in the process."*

## *Tess*

Tess is the mother of four children, two over the age of 18, and a son and daughter aged 16 and 13 respectively. She separated from her husband when the youngest child was six years old. His contact with the younger two children is confined to a couple of hours on a Wednesday night when he takes them out for dinner. Tess describes this as a “token” effort.

The former couple have a highly conflictual relationship which in the past has involved litigation in the Family Court, and an incident in the early days of their separation when Tess was arrested for breach of orders. Nonetheless, now that conflict with her former spouse has subsided, Tess would prefer it if her children, particularly her son, had more contact with their father, both for the sake of their emotional development and to provide her with some respite.

According to Tess, her ex-husband has, over the six years since separation, changed from being a “brilliant” and dedicated father to a man whose interest in the children “really isn’t there.” She sees the current situation as being primarily a matter of choice for him, despite the fact that he initiated litigation in the Family Court for contact. She believes that his gradual disengagement was triggered initially by him entering a new relationship.

“And when he finally left, then he made huge noises about “He didn’t leave the kids – he’d left *me*”, you know, and all that sort of stuff. And he really made the effort at first. He’d set up the house near where we lived and he did everything and he was going to have the kids there every second weekend. But then he met another woman and little bit by little bit, the resolve that he had to still keep a relationship with the children just started to crumble. And eventually he moved right away, so he lives a good two and half hours or two hours drive away now from the kids. And they have had their own children. So it’s virtually that our first family has kind of been washed into the distance somewhere.”

Notwithstanding this, Tess supports the relationship the children have with their father and displays an ability to place the interests of the children above any dispute she may have with her former husband.

## **Key themes**

Seven clear key themes emerged from the stories of the parents in the daytime-only contact groups: (1) the impact of parental conflict; (2) activities; (3) the nature of the parent/child relationship and the risk of disengagement; (4) paternal disinterest; (5) children’s ages and the status quo; (6) safety concerns; and (7) repartnering and second families.

### *Parental conflict*

There was a relatively even spread among the participants across the range of levels of conflict between them and their former partners – two stated at the screening interview that they “get on really well” while two avoided all contact. However, at least half of the ten participants had been involved in litigation to resolve disputes about children (including Tess, who had been arrested for breaching an order). For some of the parents, the conflict had escalated to violence: a male participant disclosed that he had been the victim of serial

domestic assaults, and several women stated that their former spouse's behaviour had, at times, caused them to fear for their safety.

For three fathers, high levels of conflict with a former spouse appeared to be the primary reason for their inability to have the kind of contact with their children they desired. Maternal obstruction, which in several cases extended to active parental alienation, loomed large in the accounts of the men.

According to John:

*“As far as the pattern of care goes, it totally fluctuates based on her mood swings and how she wants to control me. I’m wanting to have that relationship and contact with the children but she takes it as a personal threat or vendetta that I’m having such a good relationship, that she doesn’t want me to have it. She’ll do anything to stop me.”*

In Russell’s case conflict was manifest in constant petty disputes:

*“And . . . it was like clockwork. Within three to four hours of me dropping him back home, there’d be a call from her to complain about something. ‘What do you mean you’re giving him Tea Tree Oil for a bee sting? How dare you do this? Why don’t you check with me what sort of medications?’ It was that sort of behaviour.”*

Recently estranged from his 13 year-old son after ten years of conflicted relations with his former wife, Russell is on the verge of giving up the battle. Prior to this, contact had been regular but always tenuous, with the “plug getting pulled” over “any little thing.” Having recognised the extent to which his son had become enmeshed in the conflict and the damage that was causing, it had become apparent to Russell that disengagement from the situation was the only option in the short term.

For John, a useful way to manage the conflict with his former partner is to maintain a strict child focus in all his dealings with her:

*“Getting emotionally involved with her in these fights . . . doesn’t achieve anything. It’s lose/lose – and, if anything, you come out even worse than what you started with. These days if things are getting bad, I just turn around and put it to her, ‘Has this got anything to do with the children? If it’s got nothing to do with the children, I don’t want to discuss it’.”*

Of course without the children’s views here, the accounts of parents such as John and Russell, enmeshed in hostile interactions with their former spouses beg the question – what is the experience for children whose parents are unable to manage their conflict, of moving between opposing and hostile camps? Could a schedule of daytime-only contact act to minimise a child’s experience of conflict by reducing the amount of contact and communication required of parents unable to manage conflict in more constructive ways?

The women’s accounts paint a very different picture from that of the men. Once again the lack of couple data leads one to suspect that the samples represent two distinct populations – aggrieved, involved fathers and aggrieved, supportive mothers.<sup>32</sup> According to the women in this group they themselves are not the

---

32. Also without the voices of parents in the less common categories of non-resident mothers and resident fathers, it is easy to characterise this as a gender issue.

obstructors, but the facilitators, and they speak at length about the amount of effort expended keep their former spouses involved in their children's lives. The compromises made by the women to do this were significant and included allowing contact to occur in their home, forgoing child support, or letting their former partner see the child completely on their terms and at short notice. They appear to do so for the sake of their children.

In some ways these accounts of quiet manoeuvring behind the scenes to facilitate contact are eclipsed in the debate by the more dramatic stories of spiteful women preventing fathers from seeing their children.

For Shirley, the "scenes" with her former partner are not a reason to stop contact, but simply necessitate a strategy to ensure their son is quarantined from the conflict:

"My ex-husband behaved atrociously – [he] would come up and yell at me in front of Daniel. In the end I just said to him, 'Well, that's not on. I can't bring up a healthy child if you're going to behave like this to me. So if you want to see your son, you send someone else to pick him up because I'm not seeing you until you can behave like a normal human being.' And that was about four years ago and I still don't see him because he still can't behave like a normal human being. But it works. I'm happy because I don't want my son exposed to that sort of crap. So there's always a way around something to get what you need."

The overriding motivation for most of the mothers in facilitating contact was to ensure that their children developed some sort of relationship with their father. Shirley never wanted her son to be "one of those kids who doesn't know their dad."

Shirley reflects:

"I think that's how it works in the end. As a mother you sacrifice whatever you need to sacrifice so your children can spend time with their father."

Leonie in particular believes the outcome was worth the sacrifice:

"I do believe it's because I pushed constantly for them to see him and allowed him the freedom to see them whenever that I think maintaining that continuity on a really regular basis, rather than a fortnight here and a fortnight off . . . I think maintaining that contact actually has had a benefit – an enormous benefit for the children."

#### Conflict: cause or effect?

Restricting contact to daytime-only is one way that a resident parent can act as gatekeeper to contact. But while some non-resident parents feel that gate keeping is motivated by hostile intentions, it may also be an important strategy for a concerned parent to ensure the relative safety of the child. Daytime-only contact may also be a way of minimising conflict as it reduces the amount of contact and communication required between parents.

### *“Doing stuff” with Dad*

For most of the parents in the “daytime-only contact” group, father–child contact predominately involved activities outside the home – shopping, sporting activities, playing in the park, eating out, going to the movies, visiting family and friends and so forth. While many of the five non-resident fathers expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time they had with their children, the quality of the contact was not raised as an issue of particular concern. But it would be unwise to presume that a lack of complaint was consistent with satisfaction with the contact they had. Involved fathers who have limited contact with their children will make the most of the little time they have with them.

As one of the fathers in the group, John, stated:

“Whatever time I have with the kids, whether it’s with the grandparents or anyone, is quality time and something worth remembering.”

For Russell, the inability to have his son overnight has been particularly difficult. With a portion of his contact time consumed by his son’s sports commitments, activities with which his former wife was also involved, Russell rarely had the opportunity to enjoy one-on-one time with his son. This has made it difficult for him to establish himself as an alternative influence in his son’s life.

Russell recalls:

“I used to have a Saturday or a Sunday. But . . . what was starting to frustrate me was that my Saturdays were not my Saturdays because half the day I’d have to spend interacting or around her because she was the orange lady or the scorekeeper or whatever. And I didn’t find that to be very fair. So it wasn’t my time.”

Richard’s arrangement involves a six-hour return trip every three weeks to spend time with his ten-year-old daughter. The main misgiving he has about the contact is that, by necessity, it occurs in a vacuum, outside the context of his wider family network.

Another non-resident father, John, enjoys an emotionally close and involved relationship with his daughters and was particularly enthusiastic about the time he spends with them. But because his contact is limited and tenuous, John puts a lot of effort into planning child-centred activities. He talks about the importance of creating memories for the children of the time they spend together:

“But your kids will always remember it. I know people that . . . that they’ll pick up their kids and take them home and whack the video on and then go off and do their own thing. [With us] the TV doesn’t go on, the video doesn’t go on. It’s whatever you kids want to do – we’ll do it. And I don’t care if I’ve got to do finger painting and I’m bored shitless – which I’m not. I’ll create things to do so that they’ve got a memory of something they can hang up, and something they can stick on the notice board at home, or take home with them – so they’ve got a memory of that day with Dad in some shape or form.”

It is evident from the above excerpts and from the accounts of other participants, that one of the advantages of daytime-only contact is that it allows non-resident parents to focus all their attention on the interaction with the child, while engaged in fun activities and away from the complications of new partners, second families and domestic routines. For all the shortcomings of his contact arrangement, when Richard visits his daughter in country Victoria, he devotes the allocated six hours solely to her.

And Tess's children enjoy the Wednesday night dinner with Dad because "it's like he comes back to *their* situation", but feel uncomfortable going into their father's new family environment. While there is some suggestion in the literature that sleepovers offer greater opportunity for parents to develop strong emotional bonds with their children (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Warshak 2000b), the responses from these parents indicate that persistence, effort and consistency can help make daytime-only contact a valuable experience for non-resident parents.

The contrasting experience for the resident mothers in the group, as in the holiday only and no contact groups, is that of unrelenting responsibility as the primary caregiver, with no respite afforded by contact that is longer than a few hours in duration and with no nights "off".

Shirley has little time for fun activities:

"I'm the one's who's doing all the cooking, all the washing, all the shopping whatever, whatever. In reality sometimes I don't actually have much one-on-one time with my son because I never get a break. He's there the whole time and I really have to make an effort to just down tools and at least spend an hour or so with him. Because it's just so easy not to because there're so many balls that you're juggling, between trying to earn some money and trying to pay some bills and trying to keep a house that looks like responsible people live there. It's a big job."

## INSIGHT

### What a difference a day makes ...

Contact limited to daytime activities may deprive children of important familial contexts in their contact with the non-resident parent. However, daytime contact can nonetheless be rewarding for parents and children in as far as it fosters focussed time with children.

Resident mothers with daytime only contact arrangements do not benefit from the respite afforded by overnight stays.

### ***Impact on the parent-child relationship***

For three of the ten participants from the groups, the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent could be characterised as precarious, with one father teetering on the brink of disengagement. Emerging from these cases and the accounts of other participants are a number of factors that the literature suggests vitiates against strong father-child connections following separation. Factors such as high conflict between parents, perceived maternal obstruction,

perceived lack of paternal responsibility and motivation, concerns for the safety of children, and the establishment of second families by fathers dominate the accounts. Other factors such as distance, work commitments and children's ages and wishes, play a lesser role. Where there is more than one of these factors at play, as in the stories of Russell and Tess (see below), the risk of paternal disengagement is particularly real.

Russell's 13 year-old son, Francis, has refused to see his father for the last three months and has had no overnight contact at his father's home in seven years. Parental conflict and the ongoing obstruction of contact by his former wife seem to be the major factors described by Russell. The trigger event that saw the end of sleepovers occurred seven years earlier when Russell moved in with his new partner. At the time of interview, Russell is on the verge of abandoning years of effort to maintain a relationship with his child, primarily for reasons of self-preservation:

"It's a bit like being a cancer patient I suppose. If this is not good for my life, then I have to put it aside. And I'm now facing that issue. Whether I have to put aside my son, which is extremely painful, for his welfare – as best as it can be, although I know he's getting polluted. But also my sanity. And my partner's sanity, because everyone's getting f...ed up."

He approaches this prospect with a degree of resignation:

"So I've mentally started to shift to a balance . . . where I say 'that's life' and I have to accept it. That's what I get on with. As hard as that is . . ."

As a last resort, Russell sought assistance from the court, making an application for overnight contact and to establish an educational trust to allow for his son to be educated at the same private school he himself had attended. Although he was successful in both applications, the priority for him was the latter. Anticipating his son's withdrawal, Russell reasoned that having some choice in the school his son attended would allow him to establish a form of vicarious care or supervision via the school pastoral care system:

"I hold a lot of faith in the pastoral care system of the school he's going to. Where I have two or three of my old teachers and two or three new friends I've made there who actually are looking after my son, or they're keeping an eye on him. And I find that sort of interesting – that they've become the parent in that sense."

The feelings of disempowerment expressed by Russell and the other fathers who felt their contact had been obstructed, were exacerbated by a perception of bias in the "system" in favour of mothers (mirroring a view held by many of the fathers in the "little or no contact" focus group). This is true for Russell even though he was successful in his application and to a large extent felt vindicated by the counsellor's report prepared for the Family Court proceedings.

From the women's standpoint, there is a prevailing sense of disappointment and resignation about the reduced role their former partner plays in their children's lives. They too are disempowered by a situation over which they have no control.

Tess puts this simply:

*“The whole point of that is that they [the fathers] have to want to, don’t they? And there’s no way under any law or anything, you can make it happen that they have to do it, is there? It’s just that the father has to want to do that.”*

Once again, the voices missing in this discussion are those of the children. While we have no data from the focus groups on how children view their relationship with their father, there are hints in the parents’ accounts of how children are faring.

For Francis, embroiled in his parent’s fight, the impact is obvious. For Tess’s children there is a sense of disappointment in a father who is becoming a stranger to them. And Leonie’s son feels the absence of his father as he navigates adolescence. There are numerous references in the transcripts to the reluctance, on the child’s part, to spend time with their father. All but one of the women talked about the great amount of effort required to encourage or cajole reluctant children to see their fathers. Several fathers had personal experience of this and two of them attributed the child’s attitude to the brainwashing by the other parent. None of the accounts sheds much light on what might be motivating the children’s reluctance. There is obviously a wider story to be told.

INSIGHT

**One step away from disengagement?**

The absence of overnight care which allows a child to become part of the non-resident parent’s household, even if only for a short period, may make it harder to consolidate the father–child relationship after separation. This is especially so where the other parent is not supportive of, or has an openly hostile attitude to, contact.

***“His interest just wasn’t there anymore”***

The predominant reason given by the women for the absence of overnight care by fathers was a lack of paternal responsibility and commitment – that fathers choose it to be so. For Marilyn, this is attributed to her former partner’s relative youth and erratic working hours as a musician in a band. Meredith doubts the depth of her former husband’s emotional commitment to the children and strongly asserts that he doesn’t “deserve” them, while Tess sees her former husband’s diminishing role in his children’s lives as a matter of personal choice triggered by a new relationship which “seemed to take his focus altogether”. Where feelings about the separation remain unresolved, withdrawal from the child by a non-resident parent can also be a deliberate strategy used to hurt or inconvenience a former partner.

These accounts of fatherly disinterest are in direct contrast to the stories of the male participants, most of whom were responsible and involved fathers desperate to play a meaningful role in their children’s lives. Once again the absence of couple data limits our ability to make sense of the motivations underpinning behaviour within these families.

However, Tess’s account of her ex-husband’s reduced involvement in their children’s lives provides some insight both into the complexity of the dynamics at play and the gulf in understanding between the sexes. Reading between the lines it is not difficult to discern something more than just paternal indifference

in action. Her story contains a recipe of factors which has been characterised as a “potent force militating against post-divorce parental contact” (Kruk 1993: 74) and conducive to paternal disengagement. Foremost amongst these is the high level of conflict between the parents, evidenced by the history of police intervention in the enforcement of court orders. Against this backdrop of conflict is the discomfort of the children in spending time with their father’s second family – the “other little kids now that they barely know calling their dad ‘Dad’.” Add to this the problem of geographic distance, felt particularly keenly by teenagers busy building a social life, and the dwindling of contact to a mid-week dinner becomes more understandable.

Tess reflects:

“My kids quite like my ex- coming down Wednesday night because it’s like he comes back to their situation so that’s what they like to do. In school holidays, he wants them to come up and stay with him, but they just don’t want to do that because – number one, they don’t have any friends in that area. And, you know, they want their own bed. They don’t particularly like going into that new family scene. And sometimes I’ll actually force them to go but they ring up saying, ‘Can we come back? We hate it up here.’ It just doesn’t work. I’m lucky if they want to go one night.”

INSIGHT

Disinterested or defeated?

Contact that does not involve overnight stays may be a convenient arrangement for fathers who are disinterested in their parenting obligations. However, for some fathers, what may appear as disinterest may be the result of a layering of inter-parental conflict and bad feelings.

*Trigger factors and the status quo*

One scenario that is suggested by the focus group narratives is that circumstances existing at the time of separation, such as the young age of the child, relocation by a parent, or initial concerns about the safety or welfare of the children, may set the stage for limited or daytime-only contact and that with the deterioration of the relationship between the parents, or perhaps just with the passage of time, this becomes an entrenched pattern. This formula seemed to fit most of the cases, all but three of which had been daytime-only at the outset.

This certainly seems to be the case with John who had two children under five at the time of separation, and one child born subsequently. The mother’s relocation interstate with the children and the enduring conflict between the parents has seen the daytime-contact regime persist, even though John has moved to be closer to the children. For Marilyn and Shirley, whose children were babies at the time of separation, it was a given that contact would not extend to overnight.

According to Shirley:

“Whenever Marc came down to Melbourne I’d make a point of being available, and because Daniel’s only a baby, I would always be there. But when Marc hadn’t seen him for, you know, like a month or something, I could hardly hand him over and go away.”

Leonie fled with the children from a potentially violent situation and, while not denying him contact with the children, kept her whereabouts secret from her husband. As such, overnight care was initially out of the question.

For Russell, the difficulty of having contact with his son has not only meant lost time but also a missed opportunity to establish a relationship base strong enough to withstand the teenage years:

*“It’s very sad when you really think that through. I’ve missed out on a lot of years. Now I’m probably going to miss out on a lot of his teenage years because he’ll be off and he won’t want to see the old Pa. He’ll want to be off with the boys or the girls, or whatever.”*

It is noteworthy that the three parents (two fathers and one mother) whose contact arrangements initially included overnight contact which was subsequently reduced to daytime-only care expressed the most dissatisfaction with the father–child relationship and appeared to involve the greatest risk of paternal disengagement.

INSIGHT

**Night may not always follow day**

Daytime-only contact established at the outset, when children are particularly young, or where relocation of one party occurs, may persist as the status quo. Entrenched conflict between the parents or even just the passage of time may make it difficult for the non-resident parent to negotiate anything beyond this.

***Children’s safety and paternal competence***

Another significant factor raised by several women, two in particular who had experienced violent outbursts from their former partners, was their concerns for the welfare of the children when in the father’s care. In both these cases, the option of daytime-only contact, which would be more likely to involve activities outside the home, allowed them to achieve their stated aim of fostering the relationship between child and father while at the same time not compromising the safety of their children.

Meredith’s veiled concerns about the children’s wellbeing when with their father (whom she describes as “strange” and “a weirdo” and as someone who makes her “uneasy”) goes some way to explaining the contact arrangement that has evolved. That she remains philosophically committed to fostering the relationship between her daughters and their father notwithstanding these concerns perhaps suggests that the absence of overnight contact adequately addresses her disquiet and is testament to her ability to place the needs of the children before her own.

Three of the fathers in the group had been accused of abusing their children – allegations that remained unsubstantiated. For Derek, a paraplegic, it was his former wife’s concerns about his daughter’s safety in the car when driving with him that posed a problem. And many of the fathers agreed with Russell’s comment that this perception of the incompetence of fathers was pervasive in the community:

“There’s a real theme there which I think a lot of us have talked about . . . we have been painted by our ex-spouses to be incompetent or dangerous or potentially dangerous dads or whatever. But agencies across the board always, with family-related issues, tend to believe that dads are incompetent, are incapable et cetera. We have to prove ourselves in a different way.”

Leonie’s former husband was stymied by a lack of confidence:

“He would consult me all the time about the best activities or where he should take them and what he should do. And in the end he didn’t do anything because he couldn’t make a decision.”

INSIGHT

**Obstructive or protective?**

Concerns raised by one parent about the safety of the child when with the other, whether founded or unfounded, and general views about the competency of fathers to care for children, can be motivations for limiting contact to daytime only.

***New partners and second families***

None of the mothers in this group (nor any of the former partners of the fathers) had entered a new relationship, while only two of the fathers had repartnered. Recall that for Russell (opening quote) that event was the central reason for overnight contact ceasing.

Tess also felt that the establishment of a new relationship and family had eroded her former partner’s commitment to their children and drastically changed their experience of contact:

“They don’t like to go to his place very much because it’s a whole new set up there. There’s other little kids now that they barely know calling their dad ‘Dad’ and it’s . . . just too weird. They just don’t like it at all.”

Richard speaks of the difficulty in assimilating the trips to see his daughter with the daily demands of his second, blended family:

“So in terms of what I found difficult is the expectation, I guess, that I am to become their [stepsons’] father, one hundred per cent to fill that role . . . I just probably found the responsibility – whilst coming to grips with separating from my daughter at the same time – you start a new relationship with new children and stepchildren involved so . . . that hasn’t been easy to balance too . . . You feel guilty because you spend more time with your stepchildren than you do with your own child.”

INSIGHT

**Starting over**

The complexity of family relationships in second and blended families can also cause disruptions to contact with children of a prior relationship.

### *Structures or processes?*

The focus group data suggest that relational factors, such as inter-parental conflict, perceived paternal apathy and repartnering, play a more dominant role in many cases than practical concerns, such as work and money. While the data presented in Table 1 support such an assertion, this hypothesis warrants testing in a large, representative national sample. More research is clearly needed on daytime-only contact.

#### INSIGHT

##### **Relational rather than structural?**

Long-term inhibitors to maintaining contact that includes overnight stays may be predominately relational (such as conflict, disinterest, disenfranchisement, and repartnering) rather than structural factors (such as income, distance or work).

### **Summary**

Recent Australian data suggest that three sets of factors feature prominently in the reasons that parents give for children not staying overnight with their non-resident parent: child age-related factors (most notably the presence of a young or teenage child); relationship issues (perceived obstruction or disinterest by a parent, or the presence of a new partner or new children in the non-resident parent's household); and/or structural issues (unsuitable accommodation, geographical distance, or work schedules). A marked gender disparity tends to cut across these factors, such that mothers tend to emphasise the tender age of children, concerns about children's safety, or paternal disinterest whereas fathers tend to emphasise maternal obstruction, teenagers' autonomy, and work demands. Many of these issues surfaced in the focus group interviews.

Parents in the daytime-only focus groups pointed to a number of reasons for this pattern of care, including geographic distance, inter-parental conflict, safety concerns and mutual consent. Again the gender divide emerged: fathers felt they had no choice in the face of maternal gate keeping; resident mothers felt they had no choice in the face of paternal disinterest. The common thread that bound these different views was a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the arrangement. This level of dissatisfaction was especially pronounced for fathers.

The stories of these parents appear to support the view that father-child contact that does not include sleepovers may face a greater risk of disengagement. For a number of fathers, the sense that they were losing their place in their children's lives was very real. Russell's story was a clear case in point. Many mothers also lamented their former partner's diminishing involvement in their children's lives. Both mothers and fathers talked of the child's reluctance, at times, to see their father. Here, as in other groups, the most corrosive ingredient in the post-separation recipe was unresolved conflict between the parents.

But the news was not all bad: for several fathers, daytime contact provided a special opportunity for child-focused time, engaged in fun activities. Grant's story in particular stood out as an account of a more positive experience. His was the only arrangement that appeared to be the preferred set-up for all involved. Grant lived within walking distance of the former matrimonial home and saw the children, both teenagers, almost every day. The combination of low parental conflict, older children and close proximity made Grant's story a notable exception.

# 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.

# 8

## POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

---



## FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO SPEAK IN CHAPTER 8 POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

### Eight mothers

**CAMILLE** has two daughters aged 13 and ten years. She separated two years ago and has since repartnered. Her parenting arrangement involves a week-about schedule with the changeover occurring on Friday after school.

**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 during holiday periods.

**KATHY**, aged 40, has been separated from her former partner for five years. She has two children; a son and daughter aged ten and six respectively, who spend half their time with each parent in short blocks.

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

**MEREDITH** has been separated for nine years. She has two daughters aged 13 and 16 years, who spend time with their father each Sunday.

**MICHELLE**, aged 37, has been separated for three years. She has a six-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son, who spend half their week with each parent.

**RACHEL**, aged 43, has been separated for eight years. She has two teenage daughters, Jane who is 19 and Jade who is 17. She is also the stepmother of 16-year-old twins. Her parenting arrangement involves a week-about schedule, which has been in place for seven years.

**SHIRLEY**, aged 39, has been separated from her former partner for seven years. She has a seven-year-old son, Daniel, who spends four hours with his father every Sunday.

### Eight fathers

**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.

**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.

**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.

**PAUL**, aged 46, has shared the care of his 13-year-old daughter since he separated six years ago. His parenting arrangement involves the children spending a week with him then a week with his former partner.

**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 over six months.

**RICHARD**, aged 41, has been separated from his former partner, who now lives interstate, for eight years. He has a ten-year-old daughter whom he sees once every three weeks.

**ROD**, aged 49, has been separated for five years. He and his former partner have a flexible parenting arrangement that enables their three teenage children to spend equal amounts of time with each of them.

## 8 Points of convergence

Catherine Caruana and Anna Ferro

This chapter examines several issues that emerged more generally across all of the focus groups. Some of the issues surfaced as a result of explicit questions while others emerged more tangentially.

It should be noted at the outset, however, that three particular issues are not examined in any depth. The first of these is the devastating effect that parental conflict can have on all family members. We note the centrality of conflict, and re-visit this issue in the final chapter.

The troubling issue of parents' and children's safety in the context of contact surfaced in some participants' stories across the groups. As mentioned earlier (Chapter 2), such issues could not be explored adequately and ethically within the confines of our focus group situation. Thus absence of empirical and analytical focus on these issues should not be interpreted to mean that issues of safety are unimportant in relation to parent-child contact (Jaffe, Lemon and Poisson 2003; Kaye, Stubbs and Tolmie 2002). Rather it is out of recognition of the complex and profound nature of these issues, and a constrained methodology, that they have not been specifically addressed in this study.

Finally, child support is not discussed in any depth because the focus group data are both patchy and uncontroversial. Dissatisfaction with the child support system, especially by non-resident fathers, was an issue common to all the groups,<sup>36</sup> and it seems that child support transfers (or the lack thereof) continue to act as a "lightning rod" for the transmission of pent-up anger and grief that often flows out of relationship breakdown (Joint Select Committee 1994: 11).

Not surprisingly, resident and non-resident parents differed markedly in their criticism of the child support system. The most common complaint by parents who were paying child support was that they were paying too much – largely, they believed, because the cost of seeing their children and the cost of re-establishing themselves in a separate household were not adequately taken into account in the calculation of child support liability.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the most common complaint by parents eligible for child support was that payments did not occur (especially where payers were self-employed) or, if they did, were not enough to cover children's needs. And many parents, both resident and non-resident, reported encountering difficulties in their dealings with the Child Support Agency – particularly the high turnover of Agency staff and the frustration of constantly dealing with new case managers. Some parents noted that bureaucratic processes at times exacerbated inter-parental conflict.

---

36. See also Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 149, para 6.123.

37. That child support is assessed on gross rather than net income was also bone of contention for many non-resident parents.

Complaints of this nature are not new (see, for example, JSC 1992, 1994; Commonwealth 2003). Neither is the apparent linking of child support with contact by many parents in the groups (I-pay-so-I-see). Indeed the contact–child support nexus manifested itself in a variety of forms across all the groups, from parents who based their parenting arrangement on monetary concerns, to mothers who were willing to forgo financial support in an attempt to keep a father on the scene.

Four central threads were evident across the focus groups: (1) change over time, (2) the need for parental resources and support, (3) the ubiquity of grief and loss, and (4) children’s contact with extended family.

*Profiles of each of the focus group participants in this chapter are presented on page 102.*

## Change as a constant

Contact patterns can be fluid and complex. Many of the focus group participants (at least 32 of the 56 parents) were either poised to move into a different parenting arrangement at the time of interview or had experienced changes in the way they and their former partners cared for the children post-separation. Change thus emerged as a constant.<sup>38</sup>

A snapshot of three cases illustrates the kinds of transitions that families can move through after separation and some of the triggers for change:

- *Family dynamics and physical distance:* Raymond was one of the six fathers in the “little or no contact” group. He and his former wife had shared the care of their son on a “week-about” basis for two years following the separation. After the failure of a brief reconciliation, the child’s mother moved with the child to the other side of the state making it difficult for Raymond to maintain meaningful contact. He has not seen his son for six months.
- *Parental wellbeing:* Like most of the parents in the shared parenting group, Camille was committed at the outset to sharing the parenting of their children with her former partner. However, for the first nine months following separation, the children only saw their father on the weekends, giving him an opportunity to adjust emotionally to the separation and to re-establish himself in a new residence. They now share the care of the children equally.
- *The work–family balance, and children’s ages:* Harrison, a non-resident father who has contact with his children every second weekend, initially had the children in his care 50 per cent of the time. He was unable to maintain the arrangement due to an inflexible workplace. However, now that his children are older and can make their own way home from school, he is considering resuming a shared care arrangement.

The prevalence of change in arrangements concerning the care of children after separation would suggest that the notion of achieving “final orders”, the ultimate objective of court proceedings, may be incongruous and unrealistic. Parkinson and Smyth (2003) have recently suggested that “it may be prudent to foster the view that orders concerning the care of children are by their very nature interim and would benefit from periodic review”. There is much in the comments of parents to support such a view.

---

38. This runs counter to the findings of a number of quantitative studies that suggest that arrangements made soon after separation tend to remain in place indefinitely (Funder 1993; Smyth et al. 2001).

## The need for information and support services

A second clear recurring theme across all the groups was the need for easier access to resources to assist parents in the restructuring of families after divorce. Many parents appeared to feel ill-equipped to navigate this major family transition. One father described the difficulty of finding appropriate help at a time when he was more inclined to “spend most of his time down at the pub!”

Meredith’s comments encapsulate the initial sense of bewilderment common to parents facing divorce:

“You’re in such a state . . . I was just winging it day-by-day, trying to do what was best for the kids.”

Parents’ comments also indicated that guidance is required at a number of critical points during the process: at the time of separation, when making arrangements regarding the children, and in dealing with later transitions (such as the introduction of new partners and the establishment of blended families). Timely information about the emotional and practical resources available to help both parents and children adjust to the separation was seen as essential.

A particularly pressing need expressed by participants was for resources that would assist parents in making decisions regarding the future care of children. Many stated that information on different models of parenting after separation was sorely lacking. The comments of one parent who had participated in mediation suggested that help with the *processes* of decision-making without practical information on the pros and cons of the different models and particular advice on what may or may not suit individual families, was of little assistance:

“They [the mediators] just said, ‘You two just need to sort it out. You two need to come to a compromise’, rather than saying, ‘For the future, these are the things you need to take into consideration – your children are these ages, these are hurdles that you’ll come across’.”

It was the parents with less common arrangements, especially those from the shared care group, who were particularly vociferous about the need for more creative solutions for parenting after divorce. Several fathers saw the provision of such information as being essential to encourage men to continue having an active role in their children’s lives after separation:

“A lot of guys just don’t realise that they can do that [exercise 50/50 care]. They just automatically go down this thing: ‘I’m only going to get them for the weekends, or I’m only going to get them on holidays’.”

Paul, an involved father, found the approach of the Family Court unduly restrictive:

“One thing I would have liked was a comprehensive model about shared parenting/shared residency. When I went to court I got a one-page sheet which was your ‘standard care’ thing: child lives with mum, and dad gets to visit. I looked at that I went: ‘No. No way!’”

Rachel also felt she would have benefited from hearing the accounts of other parents when negotiating the shared care of her two daughters in mediation. As it was she felt that she and her former partner had to make it up along the way and “it was hard to always have to be creative yourself.”

Shirley concurred:

“I was writing the whole thing from scratch, as if I was the only person who’d ever been separated in the world, whereas obviously there’s a squillion of us and there must be some things that work.”

The lack of information about alternatives and the perception that the “system” promotes a formulaic response to post-separation parenting appeared to frustrate many parents wanting more individualistic solutions. That many of those who expressed the need for more guidance and assistance had extensive contact with a range of professionals in the family law system is particularly telling. The fact that some parents saw an “alternate weekend” model as the “norm” is perhaps a somewhat ironic comment on a system predicated on case-by-case decision-making. Of course, consumers’ views critical of the system are not new; the comments of these parents echo the findings of the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group (2001) and many parents who appeared before the recent parliamentary inquiry into joint “custody”.<sup>39</sup> They reflect the reality that, for many people, accessing resources to help families “weather” marital breakdown, continues to be like navigating a “maze.”

It is hoped that future reform works towards developing an “integrated family law system that is flexible and builds individual and community capacity” (Commonwealth of Australia 2001, 2003).

## The ubiquity of grief and loss

Emerging from the accounts of many separated parents was the experience of a strong sense of loss in relation to their children. While this feeling was predominantly recounted by non-resident fathers, especially those who had little or no contact with their children, it was also an issue of concern for mothers and fathers who equally shared the care of their children.

Loss was experienced in a number of ways. Fathers in particular lamented the loss of an emotionally close relationship with their children resulting from the reduced time they were able to spend with them. For example, Benjamin, who has weekend contact with his children stated:

“I’m disappointed because I was growing up with my children. I was seeing them every day. She [the mother] sees them every day just about, and I don’t. How can you make up for, 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.”

For some parents, separation had resulted in a reduction of their parenting role – a different kind of loss. This was particularly so for parents who were only able

39. A number of the Committee’s recommendations seek to address the need for more information and support for separating parents, particularly those interested in a more equal parenting arrangement: see recommendations 6, 7 and 10.

to interact with their children outside of normal familial contexts (for example, those with daytime-only or holiday-only contact). Some felt that the introduction of new partners compromised their role further.

Michelle saw this as a natural consequence of changes occurring within the family:

“I used to think that motherhood was everything. I’ve had to give up a lot of my mummy role with the kids. My ex’s new partner took my daughter to the first day of school because that was their day. And I thought: ‘I can’t butt in here. I can’t take all the cream and expect her to do a whole lot of the long haul with my daughter’. So it’s sad because I have to give up some of the special occasions.”

It was also common for parents to talk about the difficult experience of parting with their children. Not surprisingly, non-resident parents with holiday-only contact felt this most strongly due to the long periods between seeing their children. However, even when parenting arrangements were working well and each parent had substantial time with the children, parting could still prove to be difficult. Mothers with shared care stood out from the other groups of women in this respect.

Kathy still finds it hard after five years of shared care:

“I struggle for three days without them. School holidays are different. They’re a killer. I hate them.”

Parting was also difficult for Paul, a father with a “week-about” schedule:

“Parting is perhaps the worst time. The Friday when I used to drop her off at school in the morning, and I know that she’s not coming at night, that whole weekend was a very, very miserable weekend. And I looked forward to going to work on Monday, or to always visit people on the weekend. But even doing that – going out for tea with them and coming back – home was very, very lonely. And then you sort of pick up [because] you’re with people during the week. Then you see her again and, whatever. But that’s a very debilitating thing.”

Thus, even parents with 50/50 care arrangements appear to experience feelings of loss, loneliness and grief when they are not with their children.

## Grandparents and extended family

An issue of concern running through the group discussions was the impact of parental separation on the relationship between children and their extended family, particularly grandparents, and the significant role these relationships can potentially play in supporting a family through relationship breakdown. Again, this issue was not specifically asked about but surfaced frequently in the course of discussion.

The common experience, and one reinforced by the literature (Weston 1992; Douglas and Ferguson 2003) seemed to be that grandparents often have a reduced relationship with children when their parents separate. This was primarily the case for paternal grandparents where little or no father-child contact was occurring. Paternal involvement appeared to provide a bridge across the generations.

For example, Geoff, who rarely sees his children, described how his parents no longer have a relationship with their grandchildren:

“They [grandparents] haven’t seen the kids for three or four years I suppose, because of the ‘distance’ factor. I’ve had the kids up there but my parents haven’t seen the kids, my sons, for a long time. It was my father’s 60th birthday a week or so ago and he was asked if he has photographs of the kids, but he hasn’t even got that. He hasn’t got a recent photograph.”

Richard’s comment, that “Mum’s just been through hell and back with [the] absolute disconnection of her grandchild” hints at the emotional cost of parental discord for grandparents deprived of involvement in their grandchildren’s lives.

That paternal contact and paternal grandparent contact appear to go hand-in-hand is understandable. Parent–child contact can be difficult for children and parents at many levels. To add another layer of family dynamics and logistics to parenting arrangements may, in some cases, be simply unachievable, especially where bad feelings between parents bring on, what Johnston and Campbell (1998: 47) term “tribal warfare” over children. Even in families where children spend a substantial amount of time with each parent, it was difficult for some to arrange contact with grandparents.

Camille, a mother in the shared care group, spoke of the obstacles faced by her current partner who is also separated and sharing the care of his children:

“My partner has two children and his ex-wife is quite difficult unfortunately. She’s made ‘access’ a little difficult for the grandparents [his parents]. So that’s been negative, unfortunately. I guess we as parents have the right to 50 per cent but if the grandparents want some time with the kids in *her week* – they live in the country and the children are down in Melbourne – she’s a bit precious about her time . . . The kids haven’t been able to benefit from seeing their grandparents. So the extended family has lost out.”

Parents with other contact arrangements also spoke of the “juggle” involved in maintaining contact between their children and extended family. This dilemma was very salient for non-resident parents whose contact with their children was limited to school holidays. These parents expressed frustration at having to use the short time they had with their children to visit extended family, who also miss out on contact during the year.

While it was acknowledged that parental separation can impact negatively on the child’s relationship with their extended family, participants also described the many ways in which grandparents in particular support children, mothers, and fathers through the difficulties of life after divorce. Grandparents can play a pivotal role in raising children and supporting resident mothers, especially where the biological father’s contact is sporadic or his involvement in the children’s lives is tenuous.

Jackie, whose former partner now lives overseas, described how her own father has become highly involved with her young son:

“Mitchell said to me the other week: ‘I’m lucky. I’ve got two daddies’, and I got a bit concerned [laughs] and he said, ‘Because Pop’s my daddy and my other daddy lives in Canada.’ And I thought that’s a pretty good indication of trying to have male role models in their life, and I think Mum and Dad have been fantastic. They’ve entirely taken over his side of the responsibility . . . I know that Dad’s going to go to all the Fathers Day things, with his kinder and stuff. You know, they’ve been fantastic. He’s very, very close to his grandfather.”

Some resident mothers, recognising the value of kin to their children, made an effort to maintain contact with the paternal grandparents, or other members of their former partner’s family, even when father–child contact was not taking place.

Kim, who has very little extended family of her own, was one of these mothers:

“Tim [former partner] was one of five and I’d always got on very well with his brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews, and I always got on well with his parents, and am still invited to the family things . . . It’s been great. I’ve been able to go to wedding’s and christening’s and things with my kids and they keep that contact with cousins, which is fantastic.”

Grandparents can also act as facilitators of contact. Jason mentioned that his former wife’s parents assisted with the negotiation of contact:

“If I can’t get through to her [former partner] sensibly I’ll actually speak to her parents . . . They try and talk some sense back into her.”

In summary, while they can play a (potentially) pivotal role in post-separation family life (see Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001), it may be common for grandparents and other extended family to have a diminished role in children’s lives following parental separation. Douglas and Ferguson (2003) in the United Kingdom recently reported similar findings. The clear policy imperative from these data is the need for grandparents to be kept at the fore in the development of parenting plans – with one rider: decisions about such contact should be guided by the desires of each child and the existing quality of relationships between that child and extended family, including grandparents.

These then are some of the main points of convergence that emerged across the focus groups. These points are an appropriate point of departure for the qualitative data. In the next chapter, we explore the extent to which these data can be generalised to the Australian population of separated/divorced parents with dependent children.



# 9

## THE DEMOGRAPHY OF PARENT-CHILD CONTACT

---





# 9 The demography of parent–child contact

Bruce Smyth, Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston

In an effort to embed the qualitative data in the wider national picture, this chapter examines the extent to which different patterns of care are linked to certain demographic elements in the general population of separated/ divorced parents. Essentially this is a profiling exercise, drawing on data extracted from Wave 1 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.

## Analysing the HILDA survey

The HILDA survey collects information related to three broad domains: economic and subjective wellbeing; labour market dynamics; and family dynamics. The first wave of the survey, conducted in the latter half of 2001, examined a range of issues within these three domains, including employment status, work hours and flexibility, personal and household income and their sources, marital history, family (re)formation, and patterns of parental care for children under 18 years whose parents live apart.

The power of the HILDA survey for research into parent–child contact is that it enables national estimates to be obtained across the spectrum of the separated and divorced parent population. The Australian Institute of Family Studies was involved in formulating a set of questions which provide information on separated parents' parenting arrangements and personal circumstances. The chance to draw on these data to explore different patterns of parenting was thus theoretically intriguing and practically inviting.

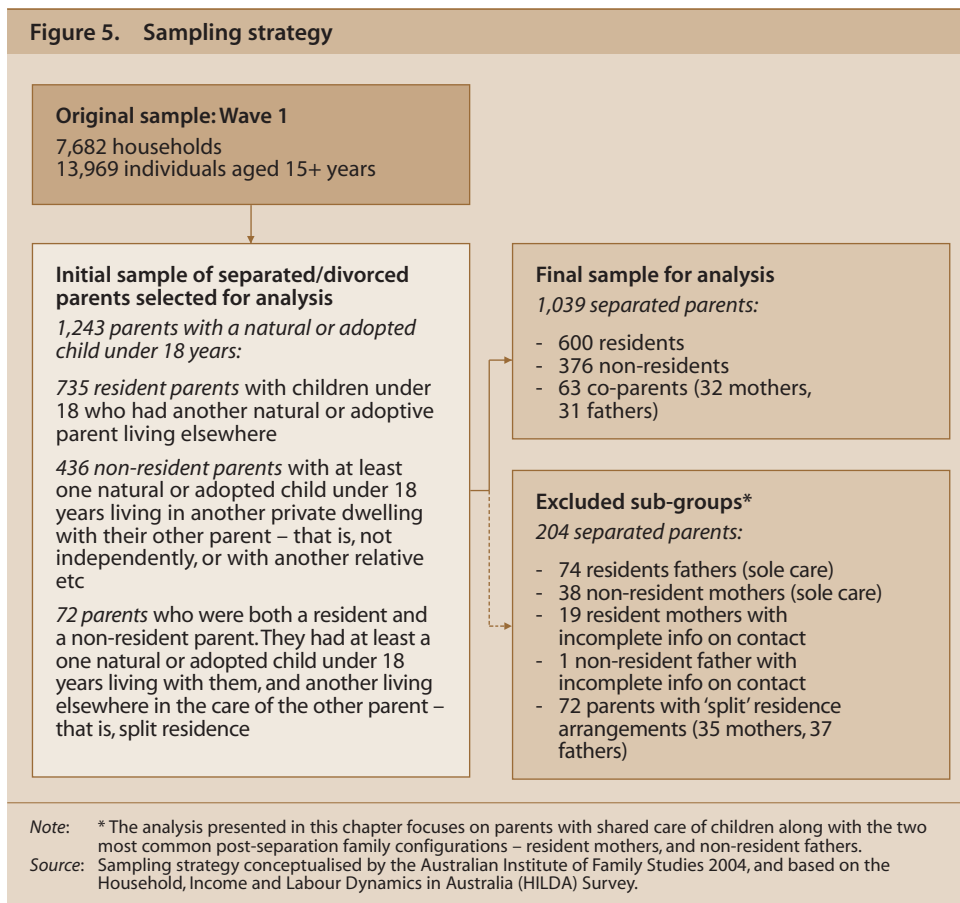
## Sample

The sample on which this analysis is based comprises 1039 parents. These parents had at least one natural or adopted child under 18 years at the time of interview, but were not living with that child's other parent. This sample was derived from a large representative sample of 7,682 households involving 13,969 household member interviews across Australia, yielding a household response rate of 66 per cent (see Watson and Wooden 2002).

Of the 13,969 household members interviewed, 1243 were separated parents with at least one child under 18 years old. Of these, we focused on "co-parents" (63 parents who indicated that their child spent at least 30 per cent of nights per year with each parent) and the two largest groups in the sample: resident mothers (n=600) and non-resident fathers (n=376).

Both the resident mothers and non-resident fathers were subdivided into three groups according to their reports on father–child contact patterns. The first group had "standard" contact – whereby fathers have children in their care up to 29 per cent of nights per year, typically every-other-weekend or every weekend. The second group had daytime-only contact – that is, children have

**Figure 5. Sampling strategy**



no overnight stays at their father's house. The third group had little or no contact – whereby fathers saw their children less than once per year. (HILDA did not collect data on contact during holiday periods. Thus no profile is offered for the “holiday-only” contact group). In total then, four groups of mothers and four groups of fathers are compared.<sup>40</sup>

### **Caveats**

Some caveats warrant mention. The samples of separated men and women are independent. That is, the men and women had not been in a relationship with each other (married or cohabiting). This analysis thus focuses on the characteristics and perceptions of one parent – the parent who was interviewed – in examining post-separating parenting arrangements. The extent to which any systematic biases are present within each independent sample is unclear.<sup>41</sup>

40. It should be noted that the data were weighted using the responding person population weight. This weight – the inverse of the probability of selection – is adjusted for the probability of response to household and person level benchmarks (see Watson and Fry 2002). In addition, to address HILDA's stratified cluster design, estimates of the variance were adjusted for the design-effect using Stata 7.

41. Piecemeal evidence exists in Australia to suggest that involved non-resident parents may be far more likely to participate in divorce research than those less-involved (the Australian Divorce Transitions Project is a case in point). That the HILDA survey covered a broad range of issues (not specifically related to divorce) may help to minimise such biases. The use of the words such as “divorce”, “child support”, or “contact” in the sample recruitment phase may act as alarm bells to less involved parents.

In addition, while the longitudinal design may eventually shed light on any causal directions between parent–child contact and other factors, Wave 1 data are cross-sectional. Thus no claim can be made that certain factors *lead to* certain patterns of contact or vice versa.

Moreover, cross-sectional snapshots may create the impression that patterns observed are static. The reality, of course, is that patterns of contact are complex, and families can move between different patterns of care. Such complexity is not captured in this single wave of data.

Finally, for reasons of economy and to reduce respondent burden, where respondents had more than one child under 18 potentially in their care, the HILDA survey required respondents to focus on the *youngest* natural or adopted child.

## Results

Tables 2 and 3 present patterns of socio-demographic characteristics of mothers and fathers with the four different types of father–child contact outlined above. A central issue examined below is the extent to which these profiles are consistent with the insights from the focus group material. To this end, simple chi-square tests or analysis of variance tests are computed for the HILDA data to assess whether any overall significant relationship or differences exist on key measures across the groups of interest. But where we say that one group is the “most (or least) likely” to have certain characteristics, this should not be interpreted to mean that this group is significantly more likely than all other groups to possess such attributes.

### *Shared care*

The focus group data presented in Chapter 3 suggest that 50/50 residential care arrangements are often logistically complex, and that those who opt for shared care appear to be a relatively distinct subgroup of separated/divorced parents. Virtually all of the 12 parents in the 50/50 care groups (“co-parents”) adopted a shared care arrangement from the time of separation, and set up this arrangement without any involvement with the legal system.

The qualitative data point to a number of factors – relational and structural – that appear to be conducive to making shared care a viable option for separated/divorced parents. These factors include:

- geographical proximity;
- the ability of parents to get along sufficiently well to develop a business-like working relationship;
- child-focused arrangements (with children kept “out of the middle”, and with children’s activities forming an integral part of the way in which the parenting schedule is developed);
- a commitment by everyone to make shared care work;
- family-friendly work practices for both mothers and fathers;
- reasonably well off financially (particularly for women); and
- shared confidence that the father is a competent parent.

**Table 2. Characteristics of separated/divorced resident and co-parent mothers by care arrangements of their children (n=632)<sup>a</sup>**

	Little or no father-child contact (n=246)	Daytime-only father-child contact (n=114)	"Standard" contact (n=240)	Shared care <sup>a</sup> (n=32)	p
<b>Employment status</b>					
Full-time	24.8%	14.6%	27.8%	46.6%	*
Part-time	22.2%	16.4%	33.5%	28.2%	
Not employed	53.0%	69.0%	38.7%	25.1%	
<b>Able to work at home (employed)</b>					
Yes	18.8%	19.5%	26.2%	34.7%	
No	81.2%	80.5%	73.8%	65.3%	
<b>Educational attainment</b>					
Degree or higher	12.8%	11.9%	18.3%	45.0%	**
Other qualification	37.6%	40.4%	38.2%	21.2%	
No qualification	49.6%	47.7%	43.5%	33.8%	
<b>Age of youngest child (years)</b>					
0-4	26.6%	42.8%	22.0%	16.9%	**
5-11	38.3%	31.7%	46.4%	60.1%	
12-14	14.6%	10.9%	15.2%	12.1%	
15-17	20.5%	14.7%	16.3%	11.0%	
<b>Distance between parents</b>					
<10 km	12.4%	38.3%	26.9%	62.3%	**
10-49 km	21.1%	36.3%	34.2%	23.8%	
> 49 km	66.5%	25.4%	38.9%	13.9%	
<b>Living with a partner</b>					
Yes	41.7%	19.5%	36.7%	24.3%	**
No	58.3%	80.5%	63.3%	75.7%	
<b>Age (mean years)</b>	34.8	35.7	36.7	37.4	
<b>Housing tenure</b>					
Fully own/purchasing	39.2%	36.4%	51.0%	67.4%	**
Rent	60.8%	63.6%	49.0%	32.6%	
<b>Number of bedrooms in HH (mean)</b>	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.1	
<b>Personal income (\$)</b>					
≤15,000	54.0%	63.9%	45.4%	29.1%	**
15,001- 35,000	32.8%	27.1%	38.2%	36.1%	
>35,000	13.2%	9.0%	16.4%	34.8%	
<b>Relationship with former partner<sup>b</sup></b>					
Satisfied (0-3)	29.7%	29.1%	36.5%	47.4%	
Mixed feelings (4-6)	20.3%	27.4%	25.2%	20.1%	
Dissatisfied (7-10)	50.0%	43.5%	38.3%	32.5%	
Satisfied (0-3)	18.0%	23.0%	32.4%	41.6%	
Mixed feelings (4-6)	12.3%	21.6%	22.4%	17.7%	
Dissatisfied (7-10)	30.3%	34.3%	34.0%	28.6%	
Not stated	39.4%	21.1%	11.3%	12.0%	
<b>Child support (received)</b>					
Yes	29.4%	53.7%	65.7%	50.3%	**
No	70.6%	46.3%	34.3%	48.8%	
<b>Any financial support (received)<sup>c</sup></b>					
Yes	33.9%	62.0%	73.0%	66.6%	**
No	66.1%	38.0%	27.0%	33.4%	
<b>Annual child support received per child<sup>d</sup></b>	2708	2543	3535	2980	
<b>Views about amount of contact</b>					
Nowhere near enough	35.1%	20.3%	20.4%	11.9%	**
Not enough	8.9%	14.5%	22.3%	4.5%	
About right	53.8%	56.9%	52.0%	74.5%	
A little/way too much	2.3%	8.3%	5.3%	9.1%	

Notes: weighted data; analysis adjusted for the design effect; <sup>a</sup> Shared care = 30 per cent overnight threshold used by ABS ("co-parents"); <sup>b</sup> Ratings of satisfaction are on 0-10 point scale (0=completed dissatisfied; 10=completely satisfied); <sup>c</sup> Includes (regular) child support and any other financial support; <sup>d</sup> where child support is received; \*\* p < .01 level (X<sup>2</sup> test); \* p < .05 level (X<sup>2</sup> test); # Different from shared care group at .05 significance level

Source: HILDA Wave 1 (2001)

**Table 3. Characteristics of separated/divorced non-resident fathers and co-parent fathers by care arrangements of their children (n=407)<sup>a</sup>**

	Little or no father-child contact (n=117)	Daytime-only father-child contact (n=57)	"Standard" contact (n=202)	Shared care (n=31)	p
<b>Employment status</b>					
Full-time	60.5%	62.6%	79.1%	67.5%	**
Part-time	4.1%	11.0%	6.2%	10.4%	
Not employed	35.4%	26.5%	14.7%	22.1%	
<b>Able to work at home (employed)</b>					
Yes	24.3%	20.5%	26.7%	44.9%	
No	75.7%	79.5%	71.3%	55.1%	
<b>Educational attainment</b>					
Degree or higher	7.5%	14.2%	13.9%	20.3%	**
Other qualification	32.8%	50.4%	52.8%	56.1%	
No qualification	59.7%	35.4%	33.3%	23.6%	
<b>Age of youngest child (years)</b>					
0-4	22.0%	33.2%	15.1%	24.0%	
5-11	49.5%	36.0%	44.9%	59.1%	
12-14	14.0%	15.8%	22.2%	10.3	
15-17	14.5%	15.0%	17.8%	6.5%	
<b>Distance between parents</b>					
<10 km	12.7%	41.7%	26.5%	69.0%	**
10-49 km	20.6%	27.7%	31.4%	29.6%	
> 49 km	66.7%	30.6%	42.1%	1.4%	
<b>Living with a partner</b>					
Yes	60.8%	24.3%	44.0%	17.5%	**
No	39.2%	72.7%	56.0%	82.5%	
<b>Age (years)</b>					
	36.1	37.7	40.2	38.6	**
<b>Housing tenure</b>					
Fully own/purchasing	35.1%	41.5%	54.4%	74.1%	**
Rent	64.9%	58.5%	45.6%	25.9%	
<b>Number of bedrooms in HH (mean)</b>					
	2.9	2.5	2.9	3.3	**
<b>Personal income (\$)</b>					
≤15,000	43.9%	38.3%	21.7%	39.7%	**
15,001-35,000	24.8%	36.6%	25.9%	28.7%	
> 35,000	31.3%	25.1%	52.4%	31.7%	
<b>Relationship with former partner<sup>b</sup></b>					
Satisfied (0-3)	24.3%	26.7%	31.7%	22.5%	**
Mixed feelings (4-6)	13.5%	24.6%	33.1%	52.9%	
Dissatisfied (7-10)	62.3%	48.7%	35.2%	24.6%	
Satisfied (0-3)	16.7%	21.5%	28.5%	20.1%	
Mixed feelings (4-6)	9.3%	19.8%	29.8%	47.4%	
Dissatisfied (7-10)	42.9%	39.1%	31.6%	22.0%	
Not stated	31.1%	19.6%	10.1%	10.6%	
<b>Child support (paid)</b>					
Yes	53.4%	71.3%	86.2%	53.8%	
No	46.6%	28.7%	13.8%	46.2%	
<b>Any financial support (paid)<sup>c</sup></b>					
Yes	59.1%	84.9%	97.7%	58.9%	
No	40.9%	15.2%	2.3%	41.1%	
<b>Annual child support paid per child<sup>d</sup></b>					
	\$2250	\$3189	\$3631	\$2378	
<b>Satisfaction with contact</b>					
Nowhere near enough	73.7%	59.2%	49.1%	11.8%	**
Not enough	6.2%	14.2%	25.7%	18.2%	
About right	20.2%	24.2%	25.2%	67.1%	
A little/way too much	0%	2.5%	0%	2.9%	

Notes: weighted data; analysis adjusted for the design effect; <sup>a</sup> Shared care = 30 per cent overnight threshold used by ABS ("co-parents"); <sup>b</sup> Ratings of satisfaction are on 0-10 point scale (0=completed dissatisfied; 10=completely satisfied); <sup>c</sup> Includes (regular) child support and any other financial support; <sup>d</sup> where child support is received; \*\* p < .01 level (X<sup>2</sup> test); \* p < .05 level (X<sup>2</sup> test); # Different from shared care group at .05 significance level

Source: HILDA Wave 1 (2001).

This profile was largely replicated by data from Wave 1 of the HILDA survey. These data show that parents with “shared care” do indeed appear to be a relatively small but select group of parents.

As noted earlier, an important caveat is that parents with joint physical care of their children are a relatively rare group in Australia. This means that obtaining a large, representative sample of co-parents is extremely difficult, and that most surveys, even those of substantial rigour such as HILDA, typically yield co-parent sample estimates that are not statistically reliable. At the same time, there is so little empirical data on shared parenting that to disregard small pockets of data runs the risk of leaving our knowledge of joint parenting poorly informed. The HILDA co-parent data are thus presented, but with the caveat that these data should be interpreted with caution – especially in relation to between-group comparisons.

Of all types of arrangements, co-parenting appeared the most likely to occur when the youngest child was aged between five and 11 years (that is, of primary school age). This situation applied to the majority of co-parent mothers and fathers (59-60 per cent) and to less than half the parents in all other groups. This pattern makes sense: infants and pre-school age children are likely to have a stronger psychological attachment to one parent (typically the mother), and moving infants between two households on a regular basis is also logistically more difficult for parents than moving older children between households. In addition, children older than primary school age are likely to have particularly strong needs for close involvement with their friends, a situation that may work against dual-residence living<sup>42</sup>.

Consistent with the focus group data, socio-economic resources appear to be a critical facilitator of shared parenting arrangements. Parents with shared care were the most likely of all parents to have a university degree (45 per cent of co-parent mothers versus 13-18 per cent of mothers in the other groups; 20 per cent of co-parent fathers versus 8-14 per cent of fathers in the other groups). They were also most likely to be home owners or purchasers (67 per cent of co-parent mothers vs other mothers 39-51 per cent; 74 per cent of co-parent fathers vs other fathers 35-54 per cent); and to live within ten kilometres of their former partner, which itself may be related to financial resources (62 per cent co-parent mothers vs other mothers 12-38 per cent; 69 per cent of co-parent fathers vs other fathers 13-42 per cent).

In addition, co-parent mothers were the most likely of the female groups to be in full-time employment (47 per cent of co-parent mothers vs other mothers 15-28 per cent), and to have incomes of \$35,000 or more (35 per cent vs 9-16 per cent), while co-parent fathers were the most likely of the male groups to have a larger home in terms of the number of bedrooms (co-parent fathers mean=3.3 bedrooms vs other fathers mean=2.5-2.9 bedrooms).

Furthermore, although most parents in the sample were unable to work from home, co-parents appeared to be more likely to be able to do this than parents with

---

42. However, it may be that primary-school-aged children today are more likely than similarly aged children in previous years to live in a shared care arrangement. Should such a “cohort effect” exist, then future teenagers would be more likely than today’s teenagers to experience shared care, all other things being equal.

43. The ability to work from home was significantly more likely for fathers in shared care than for fathers in each of the other groups (taken separately). While the results were not significant for mothers, the pattern is the same. (The overall relationship between ability to work at home and caring arrangement was neither significant for mothers nor fathers.)

little or no father–child contact (co-parent mothers 35 per cent vs other mothers 19-26 per cent; co-parent fathers 45 per cent vs other fathers 24-27 per cent).<sup>43</sup>

While satisfaction with one’s relationship with another person should be viewed as a crude proxy for quality of the relationship, trends in satisfaction with relationships with former partners were consistent with the notion emerging from the focus group data that co-parents are able to adopt a cooperative or business-like relationship. Of the men who participated in the HILDA survey who indicated how they felt about their relationship with their former partner, co-parent fathers were the most likely to express mixed feelings or indifference (neither good nor bad: co-parent fathers 53 per cent vs other fathers 14-33 per cent) and were the least likely to express dissatisfaction (co-parent fathers 25 per cent vs other fathers 35-62 per cent). While the pattern of results was not significant for mothers, it was consistent with that for fathers. Close to half the co-parent mothers viewed their relationship with their former partner positively (co-parent mothers 47 per cent vs other mothers 30-37 per cent) and, like co-parent fathers, only a minority of co-parent mothers expressed dissatisfaction (33 per cent vs 38-50 per cent).

Along with “resident parenting”, co-parenting may well reduce the desire and opportunities for repartnering. Both types of parenting typically involve far greater investment of time in the children’s lives than the different forms of “non-resident parenting”, and it may well be that resident parents and parents with shared care prefer to invest themselves in their children rather than in a new relationship. Such a preference would certainly be in keeping with a child-focused orientation.<sup>44</sup> In addition, finding a partner who is willing to take on the role of full-time or near half-time resident step-parenting may not be easy. It is thus not surprising that co-parent fathers were the least likely of all the fathers (all of whom were non-resident parents) to have repartnered (18 per cent vs 24-61 per cent). The repartnering rate for co-parent mothers was somewhere in between that for the other female groups (24 per cent vs 20-42 per cent), a trend that is not surprising given that all other groups were resident parents.

Consistent with focus group data suggesting a strong motivation by both parents to make this shared care work well, parents with this arrangement – albeit the least common pattern of care – were the most likely of all groups to believe that the amount of parent–child contact that that was occurring was “about right” (co-parent mothers 75 per cent vs other mothers 52-57 per cent; co-parent fathers 67 per cent vs other fathers 20-25 per cent).

To sum up, well-educated dual career former couples who lived near each other and who had primary school aged children were the most likely to have shared care arrangements. The co-parent mothers, in particular, tended to be the best off in terms of personal income of all female groups, while the co-parent fathers were the most likely to be single and to have some work flexibility, and the least likely to express dissatisfaction with their relationship with their former partner. This might suggest that they were able to adopt at least a working businesslike relationship with their former partner.

---

44. Our focus group data suggest that while their high involvement with their children may be off-putting to some women, co-parent fathers’ personality styles and generally positive, sensitive demeanour may not.

### *“Standard” contact*

Of the other three forms of contact examined in this analysis of HILDA data, “standard” contact was the most commonly reported form for fathers, while for mothers, much the same numbers reported “standard” contact and little or no contact. A number of parents in the focus group with “standard” contact noted how this pattern of care was practical given parents’ work and new family commitments.

Indeed, the HILDA data suggest that fathers reporting standard contact were the most likely to be in full-time employment (“standard” contact fathers 79 per cent vs other fathers 61-68 per cent) and to have incomes in excess of \$35,000 (52 per cent vs 25-32 per cent), and were the second most likely to be home owners/purchasers (54 per cent vs 35-42 per cent)<sup>45</sup>. According to mothers’ reports, fathers with “standard” contact were also the most likely group to support their children financially (73 per cent vs 34-67 per cent), a trend that is consistent with the (non-significant) pattern of reports by fathers on this issue.

Of those who reported how they felt about their relationship with their former partner, fathers with “standard” contact were the most likely of all fathers to view this relationship positively (32 per cent vs 23-27 per cent), while mothers with “standard” contact were the second most likely of all mothers to provide favourable views (37 per cent compared with 29-47 per cent). Nevertheless, most fathers with “standard” care were not particularly happy about their relationship with their former partner: one third indicated mixed feelings or indifference, and around another one third expressed dissatisfaction. Mothers with “standard” care arrangements were more likely to express either satisfaction or dissatisfaction (37-38 per cent) than mixed feelings or indifference (25 per cent).

In summary, fathers with “standard” contact appeared to be best off financially, a trend that may partly stem from their being a little older and that would certainly help in their ability to have the children stay overnight. While only a minority of parents in all groups seemed happy with their relationship with their former partner, mothers in this group provided the most favourable evaluations of all female groups.

### *Little or no father–child contact*

The focus group data presented in Chapter 4 suggest that high levels of inter-parental conflict and physical distance between parents often underpin little or no father–child contact. Resident mothers also reported disinterest on the part of fathers as a significant factor.

Again the qualitative profile was largely replicated by the HILDA data. These data suggest that parents who report little or no father–child contact tend to have a distinct demographic profile, as characterised by the three Rs – repartnered, relocated, and residual bad feelings towards each other. To this list could also be added a fourth “r” – relative economic disadvantage.

Specifically, non-resident fathers who reported little or no contact with their children were the most likely of all groups of men to have no post-secondary

---

45. As noted earlier, those with shared care were the most likely to be home owners (74 per cent).

school qualifications (60 per cent vs 24-35 per cent of men in other groups), to be without paid work (35 per cent vs 15-27 per cent), to be earning less than \$15,000 per year, and to be renting their home (65 per cent vs 26-59 per cent). Resident mothers whose children rarely or never saw their father also tended to have low socio-economic status, although on some socio-economic indicators, they seemed better off, or no worse off, than those whose children had daytime only contact with their father. They were the most likely of all female groups to have no post-secondary school qualifications (50 per cent vs 34-48 per cent); more than half were not in paid work (53 per cent vs 25-69 per cent), and had incomes of less than \$15,000 per year (54 per cent vs 29-64 per cent). While lack of a job and low personal income may not necessarily indicate financial deprivation (for example, a new partner may be a high income earner), it is noteworthy that 61 per cent were renting their home (compared with 33-64 per cent of other mothers).

Both mothers and fathers in the little or no father-child contact group were the most likely of all groups to be living with a new partner (mothers: 42 per cent vs 24-37 per cent; fathers: 61 per cent vs 18-44 per cent), and to be living 50 kilometres or more from their former partner (mothers: 67 per cent vs 14-39 per cent; fathers: 67 per cent vs 1-42 per cent). In fact, 17 per cent of mothers and 8 per cent of fathers who reported little or no father-child contact were not able to provide information on the whereabouts of their former partner, suggesting that they had lost contact with them.

Of those providing views about their relationship with their former partner, non-resident fathers with little or no contact were more likely than all other fathers to report being dissatisfied (62 per cent vs 25-49 per cent). Although mothers' views about relationships with their former partner did not vary significantly with contact arrangements, the pattern of overall results was consistent with that for the fathers: 50 per cent of mothers who reported that their children rarely or never saw their father expressed dissatisfaction, compared with 33-44 per cent of mothers in the other groups.

This pattern of response may be indicative of inter-parental conflict or disappointment. It is noteworthy that both mothers and fathers in the little or no contact father-child contact group were the most likely of all groups to be unable to rate the quality of their relationship with their former partner (mothers: 39 per cent vs 12-21 per cent; fathers: 31 per cent vs 10-20 per cent).<sup>46</sup> This pattern of response, along with geographic distance and repartnering, suggests a "clean break" at many levels. Nevertheless, the clean break from a former partner did not necessarily reflect a desire for a clean break between children and their fathers. Mothers and especially fathers who reported little or no father-child contact were the most likely of all groups to see the amount of father-child contact as "nowhere near enough" (mothers: 35 per cent vs 12-20 per cent; fathers: 74 per cent vs 12-59 per cent).

In summary, the HILDA data suggest that conflict, emotional and physical distance, new partners, and socio-economic disadvantage feature prominently in the profile of parents who report little or no father-child contact.

---

46. This question was included in the self-completion questionnaire (rather than the face-to-face interview). These percentages exclude mothers and fathers who did not return the self-completed questionnaire (5-6 per cent of mothers in all groups, and 10-12 per cent of fathers).

### *Daytime-only contact*

Parents who reported daytime-only father-child contact closely resembled the little or no contact group on several dimensions – most notably, housing tenure and relationship quality with former partner and, for mothers, personal income. That is, resident mothers and non-resident fathers who reported daytime-only contact were among the most likely to be renting (mothers: 64 per cent vs other mothers 33-61 per cent; fathers 59 per cent vs other fathers 26-65 per cent) and to express dissatisfaction with their relationship with their former partner (of those who reported their views on this issue, mothers: 44 per cent vs other mothers 33-50 per cent; fathers: 49 per cent vs other fathers 25-62 per cent). In addition, the mothers were the least likely of all female groups to be earning more than \$35,000 per year (9 per cent vs 13-35 per cent).

It is noteworthy that fathers who reported daytime-only contact with children had fewer bedrooms than other fathers (mean = 2.5 bedrooms vs mean = 2.9-3.3 bedrooms).

But most conspicuous in the profile of parents who report daytime-only father-child contact is the over-representation of children aged 0-4 years (mothers: 43 per cent vs 17-27 per cent; fathers: 33 per cent vs 15-24 per cent). This suggests that daytime-only contact may also be a function of children's young age and level of emotional dependence on a primary carer.

### **Summary**

Material resources and conflict look to be important correlates of particular patterns of care. The maturity of the child also seems to be important, with daytime-only contact being most common when the child is of pre-school age, and "shared care" applying when the child is of primary school age. All of this highlights the complexity surrounding different patterns of father-child contact, socio-demographic factors and parental relationships after separation.

Overall, these data provide strong empirical support for the idea that practical and relationship factors play an important role in the form that parent-child contact takes. The *Parent-Child Contact Study's* focus group data are therefore largely supported by data collected from the large representative HILDA sample of separated and divorced parents in Australia.

However, ideally, any discussion of contact should also be grounded in the views of children since it is they who are often mute in the decisions that affect their lives, and most affected by parenting arrangements (Kaltenborn 2001, 2004; Mason 2000; Parkinson et al. forthcoming; Smart et al. 2001; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003).

# 10

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

---





# 10 Summary and conclusions

Bruce Smyth

*“One of the things that the separation has taught me is that children aren’t mine. They’re not my possessions. And whatever I can do as a parent, as a father, that’s going to help them adjust to the world, I try to do . . . after all, we brought them here in the first place.” [Alex]*

The Australian Institute of Family Studies *Parent–Child Contact Study* explored five different patterns of parenting among separated and divorced parents with dependent children, with a view to shedding light on qualitative differences in experiences associated with these patterns comprising: 50/50 shared care; little or no contact; holiday-only contact; daytime-only contact; and “standard” contact.

Large-scale demographic data (ABS 1998) based on resident parents’ reports suggest that around half (52 per cent) of all children under 18 with a parent living elsewhere have fairly frequent (at least weekly, fortnightly or monthly) face-to-face contact with that parent. Not surprisingly, patterns of parenting after separation are very varied, as are the perceptions and motivations of parents with different arrangements.

Joining the dots between the various pieces of data, there is much to suggest that family dynamics, in tandem with demographic factors, temper the form that parent–child contact takes. These factors largely reduce to the three Rs – repartnering, relocation, and residual bad feelings (particularly conflict) between parents. To this list may be added three other Rs – relative economic disadvantage, “rotten behaviour” by a parent<sup>47</sup> (including abuse, domestic violence, and obstruction), and regard for children’s individual temperament, resilience, experience, age, developmental stage and wishes. Not surprisingly, higher levels of contact appear to be associated with lower levels of inter-parental conflict, lower rates of repartnering, less physical distance between parents’ households, and higher levels of financial resources. There is little new here. But what is new is the way the interaction of these and other factors appears to be clearly linked to qualitatively different patterns of post-separation parenting.

## Who does what, and why?

The various pieces of data suggest a set of distinct parent–child contact profiles (described below). These profiles must be viewed as impressionistic insofar as they represent an amalgam of both the qualitative and quantitative data.

---

47. It is important to note that while “rotten behaviour” should be named and made explicit, research exploring this issue is relatively under-developed in Australia (see, for example, Brown 2003) and the methodologies on which the present study is based – namely, focus group interviews and a national random survey – are not well suited to examining such behaviour.

### *50/50 shared care*

The HILDA data suggest that shared care appears to be adopted by a relatively small group of mainly well-educated, dual career, ex-couples with primary school aged children. Of particular note is that co-parent mothers tend to be relatively financially secure, which may, of course, significantly lessen conflict over child support. Co-parent fathers tend to be single, and therefore may not be emotionally torn between first and second families. Co-parents also appear to have flexible work arrangements, such as being more likely to be able to work from home than other parents, and to live near their former partners. Adequate to high socio-economic resources seem to be a critical facilitator of shared parenting arrangements.

Buiding on the above profile, parents in the focus group typically adopted a working businesslike relationship as parents – that is, they seem to be able to put aside any relationship issues for the wellbeing of their children. As one focus group member put it: “Reasonable relations make so much possible.”

Virtually all of the 12 parents in the focus groups had adopted a shared care arrangement from the time of separation; many had maintained this arrangement for a considerable length of time; and most had established this arrangement without any involvement with the legal system. The two parents who did have a history of litigation co-parented at arm’s length. Destructive patterns of family dynamics were not the norm.

For many of the fathers with shared care, their own need to be involved as a parent seems to be a key motivating factor for 50/50 care, while co-parent mothers appear to be motivated by the rights of both the child and the father to continue their relationship. Both sets of motives, although different, nonetheless aligned, were mutually reinforcing, and may have fostered a commitment by family members to make shared care work. By and large, co-parents seemed to be happy with the way that their arrangements were working for themselves and their children.

### *Little or no contact*

Several datasets suggest that around one-third of children in Australia with a natural parent living elsewhere, rarely or never see that other parent, typically their father (ABS 1998; Parkinson and Smyth 2003). Some fathers appear to be cut out (according to fathers’ reports); others appear to cut themselves out (according to mothers’ reports).

Several possible drivers – not mutually exclusive – of paternal disengagement suggest themselves: fathers’ own problems or issues (such as alcohol or substance abuse); new family responsibilities (especially the presence of a second set of natural children); a belief by fathers that their children may be better off without them, or that walking away is a way of dealing with grief, loss, ongoing conflict, role ambiguity, a sense of unfairness, and the “pain of contact visits – their brevity, artificiality, and superficiality” (Kruk 1993: 89); disengagement may also be a response to feeling disenfranchised by “the system” and/or a former partner (Braver and O’Connell 1998).

The demographic data from the HILDA survey suggest that conflict, emotional and physical distance, new partners, and relative economic disadvantage feature prominently in the profile of parents who report little or no father–child conflict. The individual stories of focus group members pointed to a similar list. In addition to some fathers’ limited parenting skills were a lack of motivation, or poor social support, and perceived efforts by mothers to discourage or obstruct contact. Other significant issues for fathers also included the “shallowness” of sporadic contact, and the pain of seeing their children adjusting poorly to the separation. In this respect, both the focus group and population-based data accord with key issues identified in research overseas (Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993).

### *Holiday-only contact*

Very little is known in Australia about holiday-only contact. No reliable estimates exist about the proportion of children who experience this pattern of care, and there are no data that describe the timing, frequency, and duration of holiday-only contact.

Recent data from HILDA suggest that roughly 20-25 per cent of non-resident parents (mostly fathers) live 500 kilometres or more from their children. According to resident parents' reports in the 1997 data from the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998), 18 per cent of children with a natural parent living elsewhere saw that parent no more than several times a year (most likely in school holidays, Christmas and Easter). Taken together, both estimates suggest that a substantial number of children in Australia spend small or large chunks of time with a non-resident parent only during school holidays.

Given the dearth of statistical information about this group, the views of separated parents who exercise holiday-only contact are instructive. Such parents articulated six key issues during focus group interviews.

First, the resident parents in these focus groups seemed to crave respite from the burden of caring for children, but non-resident parents had difficulty accruing enough leave each holiday to both see their children and balance time for new family commitments.

Second, for non-resident parents, long-distance parenting was typically "shallow", and many felt under pressure to have fun with children – "holidays are for having fun".

Third, the critical dimension for long-distance, non-resident parents was the need to know when contact would occur – that is, predictability to enable work and travel arrangements to be set in place, followed by a sufficient quantity of time, followed by the ability to have "quality" time with children. The ability to have a flexible arrangement may be the "icing on the (residential schedule) cake".

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

Fifth, the often superficial nature of contact appears to have led some non-resident parents to feel disenfranchised and detached as parents. Indeed these non-resident parents appeared to struggle with a range of emotions from grief to anger around not seeing their children frequently. The resident mothers (and apparently children) also seemed to struggle but for different reasons.

Finally, the reports of participants suggest that as children grow older, long-distance parenting often gets easier. Indeed, many non-resident parents in the "little or no contact" focus group appeared to be marking time until their children were old enough to have an independent relationship with them.

All of this suggests that holiday-only contact requires strong commitment and special effort in the form of "forget-me-nots", other forms of communication, and predictability to make it work or at least be sustained.

### *Daytime-only contact*

According to resident parents' reports, around one third (34 per cent) of children with ongoing face-to-face contact with a non-resident parent do not stay overnight with that parent (Smyth and Ferro 2002). Parents who reported daytime-only contact in the HILDA survey were characterised by two demographic features: they tended to have pre-school aged children; and/or a relatively weak economic base (as indicated by personal earnings, and higher rates of renting) which may equate with a lack of adequate accommodation to have children stay overnight. They also tended to report dissatisfaction with the quality of their relationship with their former partner.

However, this profile is from the generality of grouped data. The individual stories that surfaced in the focus groups pointed to a more complex mosaic. For at least one focus group member, daytime-only contact had its basis in a cooperative co-parental arrangement with an emphasis on stability for children. For other group members, fathers' work patterns (for example, shifts or late nights), distance from children, or paternal disinterest was perceived to underpin daytime-only contact. Some fathers perceived obstruction and "gatekeeping" by mothers, while at least one mother in the group sought daytime-only contact because of a concern for the safety of her children. Still in other cases, daytime-only contact reflected an arrangement put in place when children were young which had simply rolled on. More empirical work is needed to improve our understanding of the various reasons for this pattern of care.

What characterised the accounts of these parents, particularly the non-resident fathers, was a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the arrangement. This view was corroborated by the high percentage of fathers with daytime-only contact in the HILDA survey who felt they had "nowhere near enough" contact with their children.

### *"Standard" contact*

The largest (and probably most heterogeneous) group examined were parents who opted for every-weekend or every-other-weekend (sometimes with extra nights mid-week) residential schedules. One of the key insights to come out of the focus group material is that many parents appear to opt for "standard" contact by default: that is, they are typically unaware of any other feasible alternatives and perceive the every-other-weekend schedule as the "norm". Moreover, a number of parents also noted that this pattern of contact was the most practical and workable arrangement in the light of parents' work patterns and the need of the primary carer to have some recreational time with children.

### *Summary*

Family dynamics, in tandem with several demographic factors (most notably material resources, and the quality of the co-parental relationship, physical distance between parents' households, and the repartnering status of parents), look to be important correlates of particular patterns of care. The maturity of children also seems to be important, with daytime-only contact being most common when children are of pre-school age, and "shared care" applying when children are of primary school age.

## Implications

There are a number of practical and policy implications that flow out of the material presented.

### *Parenting arrangements*

Each child is unique. So too is each family's circumstances. Thus no one post-separation arrangement is going to be, or indeed has been found to be, in the best interests of all children (Lye 1999; Mason 2000; Ricci 1997). Separated parents should thus be urged to be creative in the types of residential schedules that they construct for the care of their children. They need to be encouraged to think about different ways of doing things. Parents also need to be encouraged to review their arrangements periodically – one-size-does-not-fit-forever – perhaps every two years, as children mature and parents' circumstances change. Of course, for some parents this may simply not be possible. High levels of inter-parental conflict may necessitate some rigidity.

The material presented in Chapters 5–7 suggests that many parenting arrangements, especially “standard” contact, occur because parents and legal professionals are unaware of different ways of approaching more individualised timesharing arrangements. An information booklet that sets out a range of different timeshare schedules, along with children's various developmental and emotional needs, is likely to be a valuable tool to help parents develop or adjust their parenting arrangements.

Professionals who help parents make their arrangements might also benefit from such a resource. Professionals, such as those in the Family Court (including judges, registrars, mediators, and lawyers), lawyers, mediators and counsellors working in community settings or privately, and divorce-support people more generally, are well placed to help parents think through the many complex considerations required to develop more individualised arrangements for children. This means that more refined and comprehensive supporting material should be developed for use by professionals.

### *Managing conflict*

It is well known that conflict is “bad” for children (Pryor and Rodgers 2001; Reynolds 2001; McIntosh 2003). But data presented earlier in this report suggest that conflict is also bad for parents. Not only can conflict escalate into more serious forms of destructive behaviour with long-lasting consequences for everyone, but it is often linked to paternal disengagement. The identification of interventions that provide better, more cost effective and more enduring ways of handling conflict for highly conflicted parents thus remains a matter of extreme importance.

Fisher and Pullen (2003) have recently pointed out that the tensions that may arise in ascertaining and balancing children's and parents' needs and interests may be better served if interventions become more child-focused and child-inclusive. Australia is at the vanguard of a number of such interventions (Children in Focus 2003; Jaffe, Lemmon and Poisson 2003; McIntosh 2000; McIntosh and Deacon-Wood 2003) and, where possible, separated parents should be encouraged to make use of these. These interventions are likely to raise parents' awareness of the centrality of children in family disputes, and encourage a framework for achieving child-sensitive outcomes (Children in Focus 2003).

### *Implications for policy*

The *Parent–Child Contact Study* suggests at least three implications for policy: the need to encourage the use of parenting plans, the need for family-friendly work options, and the need for the provision of emotional support for parents.

- **Parenting plans.** One implication for policy is greater encouragement for the use of detailed parenting plans, preferably using a structured approach with the aid of an information kit along with the help of a trained mediator or skilled neutral third person. This person would either simply help parents at a difficult time to develop concrete and specific plans, or help where conflict exists over a particular issue or set of issues (Family Law Council 1992, 2000).

A parenting plan (or “parenting agreement”) simply sets out in writing how both parents intend to contribute to the care and wellbeing of their children (Spengler 2001). Detailed information is usually in four areas: children’s living arrangements and contact schedules; financial support for children; parents’ decision-making responsibilities; and parental dispute resolution processes.

Parenting plans aim to “give each parent the opportunity to consider the nature of their parenting responsibilities”, and “to increase the likelihood of shared parenting” (FLC 1992: 38-39). They are intended to be “flexible and capable of easy alteration to meet the changing needs of the child”, and seek to prevent future disputes by ensuring that all potentially contentious issues are identified and dealt with in as constructive a way as possible, thereby “preventing unnecessary involvement in the Court system and its adversarial process” (FLC 2000).

A critical feature of parenting plans is that they encourage parents to specify how they intend to resolve any future parenting disputes (FLC 2000; Lye 1999). The dynamic and complex nature of family life means that changes to parenting plans are almost inevitable, and that conflict over some issues (relocation by a parent, for example) may be part and parcel of post-separation life. While not all parents may be willing or able to enter into a parenting plan, such plans can act as a solid peg on which to hang parenting responsibilities and they certainly afford a number of benefits over abstract “as agreed” or “reasonable contact” provisions (Lye 1999).

- **Family-friendly work options.** Another implication of the data for policy is the clear need for family-friendly work options, especially for parents of primary school-aged or younger children. While virtually all parents need access to such options in order to negotiate the many work–family demands placed upon them, separated and divorced parents have special needs because of the additional demands of supporting and parenting across two households. Resident mothers often have no second adult to help within the household, and non-resident fathers often would like to be more involved with their children. Thus many are likely to benefit from the ability to access such things as flexible work hours, work from home, part-time employment with benefits, and paid family leave (Arendell 1995). Currently, there appears to be much diversity in the availability of these options in Australia, even within individual workplaces (Gray and Tudball 2002).

- ***Emotional support for parents.*** The third policy implication relates to the provision of emotional support for parents. The emotional fall-out from separation can be profound, especially for non-resident parents. While a number of excellent education courses are available for separated parents in Australia, many non-resident parents in the focus groups spoke of a need to discuss post-separation parenting and related issues on a regular and ongoing basis with those in similar circumstances. One way to provide this kind of emotional support is through the use of professionally led mutual-support groups.

Mutual-support groups (also known as self-help groups) are essentially “groups of people who share a common [personal] problem and who come together to do something about it” (Ephraim 1988: 233). Such groups hold much promise for the delivery of emotional support on a larger and more economical scale than traditional interventions, such as counselling (Franzoni 1992; Galanter 1984; Powell 1987). This is because group work is more efficient than one-on-one work, trained volunteers (such as psychology or social work post-graduate students) can act as facilitators, and the groups can meet at community centres that are already in place for small informal group work. While a number of fathers’ rights groups act as support groups for non-resident parents, the absence of a trained facilitator and a support group “environment” means that grief and anger may take a more politicised form, or indeed be escalated by group reinforcement.

## Future research

There are many matters yet to be explored in the area of parent–child contact after parental separation, including: the nature, amount, and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children; the issues for resident parents around supporting and facilitating contact (for example, child grief, fear or refusal to see their non-resident parent, disruption to a child’s schedule, or the danger of violence or abuse to either the parent or child); and the extent to which different patterns of care foster different child and parent outcomes.

It is also important to learn more about the extent to which different patterns of care might require different levels of financial support, particularly the associated financial costs of contact for non-resident parents, and the relationship between these costs and those incurred by resident parents in caring for children. And it would be useful to have more information on the decision-making processes regarding children’s post-separation living arrangements, particularly where conflict exists and/or where there are significant concerns about women’s safety and child protection.

Other areas of potentially fruitful research include: the role of the family law system (including private mediation and solicitor negotiation) in producing more individualised timeshare arrangements; attitudes to relocation, and the reasons that parents move some distance from each other; and patterns of care after relationship breakdown among Indigenous families and other cultures in Australia.

Further work needs to be done on the extent to which separated parents are able to negotiate their work hours to accommodate caring for children after separation, and the sorts of family-friendly work practices that separated parents with different parenting arrangements would find useful.

Significantly, it should be noted that little is known in Australia about children's views about contact. While some interesting work is underway (for example, Parkinson, Cashmore and Single, forthcoming), the collection of information from children of divorce represents a crucial plank of knowledge, and is likely to lead to more child-focused outcomes than is perhaps currently the case.

To this end, one obvious research initiative would be to extend the *Parent-Child Contact Study* by attempting to involve all family members (parents and children from pre-separation household units) in separate focus groups. While such a pursuit is likely to involve many logistical and ethical challenges, the insights that may emerge from triangulating family members' perspectives are likely to be numerous and powerful.

### *Love, security and support*

In summary, the changing nature of family life and patterns of women's and men's workforce participation mean that parenting roles, expectations and responsibilities are in a state of flux. However, as noted by Mason (2000), one constant remains – children's need for love, security and support. In an ideal world, parents are best placed to provide these things. Research thus needs to continue to work towards improving our understanding of post-separation parenting so that parents can be better supported in this crucial endeavour.

# Appendix 1 – Question guide

---

## *Opening questions*

1. Please tell us your name, the names and ages of your children and the most recent thing that made you feel good about being a parent (or one thing that your child does that makes you smile).
2. When you first heard you were coming here to talk about patterns of contact with children after separation, what was the first thing you thought about?

## *Introductory question*

1. So, first of all, could you tell me a bit about how your particular arrangement works? [Probe: when, where, and how do changeovers occur?]

## *Transition questions*

2. Why this pattern of contact?
3. Would you change anything about it?
4. Have there been any major changes in this pattern over time? [Probe: for those of you for whom there have been changes: what would you say was the main reason for that change?]

## *Key questions*

5. Now I want you to think about how the overall pattern of contact is working for everyone – I'd like you to think separately about how it's working for you, your former partner, and the children.
6. Can you talk about any of the things that make your arrangements work well?
7. And what about any things that make your arrangements difficult?
8. [Time permitting: Do you think that children should be involved in any of the decision-making?]
9. What are the main activities that you and your children do together?
10. What sorts of things have affected your contact arrangements? [Probe: what about money, relationship issues, travel, costs of contact, child support?]
11. What arrangements do you have for school holidays? [Probe: what about special days, like Christmas and birthdays?] [Supplement: How do you come to these arrangements?]

## *Closing questions*

1. Is there any information you wish you had at the time of separation that might have made contact with your children after separation better?
2. What advice would you give to other separated parents in making arrangements for children after separation?
3. Have we missed anything, or is there anything else you'd like to add?

## References

---

- Abarbanel, A. (1979), "Shared parenting after separation and divorce: A study of joint custody", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 49(2), 320-329.
- ABS (1998), *Family characteristics survey 1997*, Catalogue No. 4442.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- ABS (2000), *Victoria's movers: How many, how far, and why?*, Catalogue No. 3237.2, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- ABS (2003), *Census of population and housing: Population growth and distribution, Australia*, Catalogue No. 2035.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Ackers, L. (2000), "From 'best interests' to participatory rights: Children's involvement in family migration decisions", *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 12(2), 167-184.
- Ahrons, C. R. (1994), *The Good Divorce*, Harper Perennial, New York.
- AIFS (2003), *Submission of the Australian Institute of Family Studies to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Altobelli, T. (2003), "Contact cases: Have we been getting them wrong?", Paper presented at the Family Law Practitioners' Association of Western Australia 14th Weekend Conference, 11 July, Western Australia.
- Amato, P. R. (2001), "Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15(3), 355-370.
- Amato, P. R. & Gilbreth, J. G. (1999), "Non-resident fathers and children's wellbeing: A meta-analysis", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61, 557-573.
- Ambert, A. (1998), *The Web of Poverty: Psychosocial Perspectives*, Haworth Press, New York.
- Arendell, T. (1996), *Coparenting: A Review of the Literature*, National Center on Fathers and Families, Philadelphia.
- Arendell, T. (1995), *Fathers and Divorce*, Sage Publications, California, London and New Delhi.
- Austin, W. G. (2000), "Relocation law and the threshold of harm: Integrating legal and behavioural perspectives", *Family Law Quarterly*, 34(1), 63-82.
- Bauserman, R. (2002), "Child adjustment in joint-custody versus sole-custody arrangements: A meta-analytic review", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 16, 91-102.
- Benjamin, M. & Irving, H. H. (1989), "Shared parenting: Critical review of the research literature", *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 27(2), 21-35.
- Blankenhorn, D. (1995), *Fatherlessness America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, Basic Books, New York.
- Bowen, J. (1994), *Child Support: A Practitioner's Guide*, Law Book Company, Sydney.
- Bradshaw, J., Stimson, C., Skinner, C. & Williams, J. (1999), "Non-resident fathers in Britain", in S. McRae (ed.) *Changing Britain: Families and Households in the 1990s*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Braver, S., Fabricus, W. V. & Ellman, I. (2003), "Relocation of children after divorce and children's best interests: New evidence and legal considerations", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17(2), 206-219.
- Braver, S. & O'Connell, D. (1998), *Divorced Dads: Shattering the Myths*, Tarcher/Putnam, New York.

- Brotsky, M., Steinmen, S. & Zimmelman, S. (1991), "Joint custody through mediation: A longitudinal assessment of the children", in J. Folberg (ed.) *Joint Custody and Shared Parenting*, Guilford Press, New York.
- Brown, T. (2003), "Fathers and child abuse allegations in the context of parental separation and divorce", *Family Court Review*, 41(3), 367-381.
- Buchanan, C. M., Maccoby, E. E. & Dornbusch, S. M. (1996), *Adolescents after Divorce*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Burghes, L., Clarke, L. & Cronin, N. (1997), *Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain*, Occasional paper 23, Family Policies Study Centre, London.
- Child Support Agency (2003), *Child Support Scheme Facts and Figures 2002-2003*, Department of Family and Community Services and Child Support Agency, Canberra.
- Children in Focus (2003), A professional development program for practitioners working with separating parents, URL <http://www.childreninfocus.org>.
- Cohen, M. (1989), *Long Distance Parenting: A Guide for Divorced Parents*, Penguin, Canada.
- Commonwealth of Australia (2003), *Every Picture Tells a Story: Report on the Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation*, Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, Canberra.
- Commonwealth of Australia (2001), *Out of the Maze: Pathways to the Future for Families Experiencing Separation: Report of the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group*, Commonwealth Departments of the Attorney-General, and Family and Community Services, Canberra.
- Commonwealth of Australia (1992), *The Family Law Act 1995: Aspects of its Operation and Interpretation: Report of the Joint Select Committee on Certain Aspects of the Operation and Interpretation of the Family Law Act*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Cummings, E. M. & Davies, P. (1994), *Children and Marital Conflict: The Impact of Family Dispute and Resolution*, Guilford Press, New York and London.
- Day, R. D. & Lamb, M. E. (2004), *Conceptualising and Measuring Father Involvement*, Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey.
- Dewar, J. & Parker, S. (1999), "The impact of the new Part VII Family Law Act 1975", *Australian Journal of Family Law*, 13(2), 96-116.
- Douglas, G. & Ferguson, N. (2003), "The role of grandparents in divorced families", *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 17(1), 41-67.
- Dudley, J. R. & Stone, G. (2001), *Fathering at Risk: Helping Non-residential Fathers*, Springer Publishing Company, New York.
- Dudley, J. R. (1991), "Increasing our understanding of divorced fathers who have infrequent contact with their children", *Family Relations*, 40, 279-285.
- Duncan, S. W. (1994), "Economic impact of divorce on children's development: Current findings and policy implications", *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 23, 444-457.
- Dunn, J. & Deater-Deckard, K. (2001), *Children's Views of their Changing Families*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Easteal, P., Behrens, J. & Young, L. (2000), "Relocation decisions in Canberra and Perth: A blurry snapshot", *Australian Journal of Family Law*, 14(3), 234-258.
- Ephraim, N. W. (1988), "Self-help groups", in M. Aveline & W. Dryden (eds) *Group Therapy in Britain*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.
- FaCS (2000), *The Portfolio Budget Statements 2000-2001*, Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Family Law Council Australia (1992), *Patterns of Parenting after Separation: A Report to the Minister for Justice and Consumer Affairs prepared by the Family Law Council*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Family Law Council Australia and the National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council Australia (2000), *Letter of Advice to the Attorney-General on Parenting Plans*, AusInfo, Canberra.

Fehlberg, B., Sheehan, G. & Kelly, F. (2000), "Family Law Pathways and Processes: Case Studies", Unpublished report, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Fisher, T. & Pullen, J. R. (2003), "Children and the shadow of the law: A resource for primary dispute resolution professionals", *Journal of Family Studies*, 9(1), 81-105.

Flood, M. (2003), "Fatherhood and fatherlessness", *The Australia Institute Discussion Paper*, 59, November.

Folberg, J. (1991), *Joint Custody and Shared Parenting* (2nd edn), Guilford Press, New York.

Franzoni, E. M. (1992), "A meta-analysis of self-help group effectiveness", Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Fordham University, Michigan.

Fulgini, A. S. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2004), "Measuring mother and father shared care-giving: An analysis using the Panel Study of Income", in R. D. Day & M. E. Lamb (eds) *Conceptualising and Measuring Father Involvement*, Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey.

Funder, K. (1993), "Exploring the access-maintenance nexus: Non-resident fathers' post-separation involvement with children", in K. Funder, M. Harrison & R. Weston *Settling Down: Pathways of Parents after Divorce*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Funder, K. (1989), "His and her divorce", in P. McDonald (ed.) *Settling Up: Property and Income Distribution on Divorce in Australia*, Prentice Hall, for Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Galanter, M. (1984), "Self-help large-group therapy for alcoholism: A controlled study", *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 8, 16-23.

Gottfried, S. (2002), "Virtual visitation: The wave of the future in communication between children and non-custodial parents in relocation cases", *Family Law Quarterly*, 36(3), 475-485.

Gould, J. W. & Stahl, P. M. (2001), "Never paint by the numbers: A response to Kelly and Lamb (2000), Solomon and Biringen (2001), and Lamb and Kelly (2001)", *Family Court Review*, 39(4), 372-376.

Green, A. & Canny, A. (2003), *Geographical Mobility: Family Impacts*, Policy Press, for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Bristol.

Greif, G. (1995), "When divorced fathers want no contact with their children: A preliminary analysis", *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 23(1/2), 75-84.

Hamer, J. (1998), "What African-American non-custodial fathers say inhibits and enhances their involvement with children", *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 22, 117-127.

Harrison, M. (1986), *Is Access Working? The Family Law Program: Property and the Children: Access*, Leo Cussen Institute, Melbourne.

Hirst, S. R. & Smiley, G. W. (1984), "The access dilemma: A study of access patterns following marriage breakdown", *Conciliation Courts Review*, 22(1), 41-52.

Horn, W. F. & Sylvester, T. (2002), *Father Facts* (4th edn), National Fatherhood Initiative, USA.

Ilydén, L. & Bülow, P. (2003), "Who's talking? Drawing conclusions from focus groups: Some methodological considerations", *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6(4), 305-321.

- Irving, H. H. & Benjamin, M. (1995), "Shared parenting and sole custody", in H. H. Irving & M. Benjamin *Family Mediation: Contemporary Issues* (1st edn), Sage Publications, California.
- Jaffe, P. G., Lemon, N. K. & Poisson, S. E. (2003), *Child Custody and Domestic Violence*, Sage Publications, California, London and New Delhi.
- Johnston, J. & Campbell, L. (1988), *Impasses of Divorce: The Dynamics and Resolution of Family Conflict*, Macmillan, New York.
- Joint Select Committee on Certain Family Law Issues (1994), *Child Support Scheme: An Examination of the Operation and Effectiveness of the Scheme*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Kaltenborn, K. (2001), "Children's and young people's experiences in various residential arrangements: A longitudinal study to evaluate criteria for custody and residence decision making", *British Journal of Social Work*, 31(1), 81-117.
- Kaltenborn, K. (2004), Parent-child contact after divorce. The need to consider the child's perspective, *Marriage and Family Review*, 36(1), 67-90.
- Kaye, M., Stubbs, J. & Tolmie, J. (2003), *Negotiating Child Residence and Contact Arrangements against a Backdrop of Domestic Violence*, Research report No. 1, Families, Law and Social Policy Research Unit, Socio-Legal Research Centre, School of Law, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Kelly, J. B. & Lamb, M. E. (2003), "Developmental issues in relocation cases involving young children: When, whether and how?", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 17(2), 193-205.
- Khoo, S. (1993), *Repartnering after Divorce: The Formation of Second Families: Child Support Scheme Evaluation Report No. 4*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- Krecker, M. L., Brown, P., Melli, M. S. & Wimer, L. (2002), *Children's Living Arrangements in Divorced Wisconsin Families with Shared Placement*, IRP Special Report 83, Institute for research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, USA.
- Kruk, E. (1993), *Divorce and Disengagement: Patterns of Fatherhood Within and Beyond Marriage*, Fernwood Publications, Halifax, NS.
- Kurz, D. (1995), *For Richer or Poorer: Mothers Confront Divorce*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Lamb, M. E. & Kelly, J. B. (2001), "Using the empirical literature to guide the development of parenting plans for young children: A rejoinder to Solomon and Biringen", *Family Court Review*, 39(4), 365-371.
- Lee, A. (1990), "A survey of parents who have obtained a dissolution: Family court custody and access research: Report 2", Policy and Research Division, Department of Justice, Wellington.
- Lee, S. M. & Oleson, N. W. (2001), "Assessing for alienation in child custody and access evaluations", *Family Court Review*, 39(3), 282-298.
- Lye, D. N. (1999), *The Washington State Parenting Plan Study: Report to the Washington State Gender and Justice Commission and Domestic Relations Commission*, Washington Courts, Washington State.
- Maccoby, E. E. & Mnookin, R. H. (1992), *Dividing the Child: Social and Legal Dilemmas of Custody*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Maclean, M. & Eekelaar, J. (1997), *The Parental Obligation: A Study of Parenthood across Households*, Hart Publishing, Oxford.
- Mason, M. A. (2000), *The Custody Wars*, Basic Books, New York.
- McIntosh, J. (2000), "Child-inclusive divorce mediation: Report on a qualitative research study", *Mediation Quarterly*, 18(1), 55-69.

- McIntosh, J. & Deacon-Wood, H. (2003), "Group interventions for separated parents in entrenched conflict: An exploration of evidence-based frameworks", *Journal of Family Studies*, 9(2), 187-199.
- McIntosh, J. (2003), "Enduring conflict in parental separation: Pathways of impact on child development", *Journal of Family Studies*, 9(1), 63-80.
- McLanahan, S. S. (1999), "Father absence and the welfare of children", in E. M. Hetherington (ed.) *Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting, and Remarriage: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.
- Melli, M. S. (1999), "Guideline review: Child support and time sharing by parents", *Family Law Quarterly*, 33, 219-234.
- O'Neill, R. (2002), *Experiments in Living: The Fatherless Family*, The Institute for the Study of Civil Society, London.
- Parkinson, P., Cashmore, J. & Single, J. (in progress), *Adolescents' Views on the Fairness of Parenting and Financial Arrangements*, University of Sydney, Sydney.
- Parkinson, P. & Smyth, B. (2003), "When the difference is night and day: Some empirical insights into patterns of parent-child contact after separation", Paper presented at the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies, 12-14 February, Melbourne.
- Parkinson, P. (2003), *Supplementary Submission to the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs Inquiry Into Child Custody Arrangements*, Submission No. 1698.
- Pasley, K. & Braver, S. (2004), "Measuring father involvement in divorced, non-resident fathers", in R. D. Day & M. E. Lamb (eds) *Conceptualising and Measuring Father Involvement*, Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey.
- Pocock, B. (2003), *The Work/Life Collision*, Federation Press, Sydney.
- Popenoe, D. (1996), *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Marriage*, Free Press, New York.
- Powell, T. J. (1987), *Self-help Organisations and Professional Practice*, National Association of Social Workers, Silver Spring, MD.
- Pryor, J. & Rodgers, B. (2001), *Children in Changing Families: Life After Parental Separation*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
- Reynolds, J. (ed.) (2001), *Not in Front of the Children? How Conflict Between Parents Affects Children*, One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research, London.
- Ricci, I. (1997), *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Rodgers, B. & Pryor, J. (1998), *Divorce and Separation: The Outcomes for Children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Shefts, K. R. (2002), "Virtual visitation: The next generation of options for parent-child communication", *Family Law Quarterly*, 36(2), 303-327.
- Sigle-Rushton, W. & McLanahan, S. (2002), "Father absence and child wellbeing: A critical review", Paper presented at the Conference on Public Policy and the Future of the Family.
- Simpson, B., McCarthy, P. & Walker, J. (1995), *Being There: Fathers after Divorce*, Relate Centre for Family Studies, Rugby, UK.
- Smart, C. & Neale, B. (1999), *Family Fragments?* Blackwell Publishers, Malden, MA.
- Smart, C., Neale, B. & Wade, A. (2001), *The Changing Experience of Childhood: Families and Divorce*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, MA.
- Smith, A. B., Taylor, N. J., Gollop, M., Gaffney, M., Gold, M. & Henaghan, M. (1997), *Access and Other Post-separation Issues*, Children's Issues Centre, Dunedin.
- Smyth, B. (2002), "Research into parent-child contact after parental separation", *Family Matters*, 62, 33-37.

- Smyth, B., Caruana, C. & Ferro, A. (2003), "Some whens, hows and whys of shared care: What separated parents who spend equal time with their children say about shared parenting", Paper presented at the Australian Social Policy Conference, 9-11 July, Sydney.
- Smyth, B. & Ferro, A. (2002), "When the difference is night & day: Parent-child contact after separation, *Family Matters*, 63, 54-59.
- Smyth, B. & Weston, R. (2004), "Attitudes to 50/50 shared care in Australia", *Family Matters*, no. 67, Autumn, pp. 8-15.
- Smyth, B., Sheehan, G. & Fehlberg, B. (2001), "Patterns of parenting after divorce: A pre-Reform Act benchmark study", *Australian Journal of Family Law*, 15(2), 114-128.
- Solomon, J. & Biringen, Z. (2001), "Another look at the developmental research: Commentary on Kelly and Lamb's 'Using child development research to make appropriate custody and access decisions for young children'", *Family Court Review*, 39(4), 355-364.
- Spengler, L. (2001), "Developing a parenting plan: A guide for divorcing parents", MU Extension, University of Missouri-Columbia, USA.
- Steinman, S. (1981), "The experience of children in a joint custody arrangement: A report of a study", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 51, 403-414.
- Stewart, S. D. (1999), "Disneyland dads, Disneyland moms? How non-residential parents spend time with absent children", *Journal of Family Issues*, 20(4), 539-556.
- Trinder, L., Beek, M. & Connolly, J. (2002), *Making Contact: How Parents and Children Negotiate and Experience Contact after Divorce*, YPS in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, USA.
- Turkat, I. D. (1997), "Management of visitation interference", *Judges' Journal*, 36, 17-47.
- Turney, L., Gilding, M., Critchley, C., Shields, P., Bakacs, L. & Butler, K. (2003), "DNA paternity testing: Public perceptions and the influence of gender", *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 1(Spring),
- Wallerstein, J. S. & Tanke, T. (1996), "To move or not to move: Psychological and legal considerations in the relocation of children following divorce", *Family Law Quarterly*, 30(2), 305-332.
- Wallerstein, J. S. & Blakeslee, S. (2003), *What about the Kids? Raising your Children Before, During and After Divorce*, Hyperion, New York.
- Warshak, R. A. (2000a), "Social science and children's best interests in relocation cases: Burgess revisited", *Family Law Quarterly*, 34(1), 83-113.
- Warshak, R. A. (2000b), "Blanket restrictions: Overnight contact between parents and young children", *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 38(4), 422-445.
- Watson, N. & Fry, T. (2002), *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey: Wave 1 Weighting*, HILDA Project Technical Paper Series No. 3/02. Available at: [www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/hdps.html](http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/hdps.html).
- Watson, N. & Wooden, M. (2002), *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey: Wave 1 Survey Methodology*, HILDA Project Technical Paper Series No. 1/02, Available at: [www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/hdps.html](http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/hdps.html).
- Weston, R. (1992), "Families after marriage breakdown", *Family Matters*, 32, 41-45.
- Whiteside, M. F. & Becker, B. J. (2000), "Parental factors and the young child's post-divorce adjustment: A meta-analysis with implications for parenting arrangements", *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14, 5-26.
- Williams, D. & Anthony, L. (24 June 2003), "Government moves ahead on child custody", Media release.

Wilson, K. C. (2003), *Male Nurturing: What is Known and Why it Matters*, Harbinger Press, Canada.

Woods, M. & Associates. (1999), *The Behaviour and Expenditures of Non-resident Parents During Contact Visits*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra.

Yeung, W. J., Sandberg, J. F. & Davis-Kean, P. E. (2001), "Children's time with fathers in intact families", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 63(1), 136-154.

Younger, J. T. (2002), "Post-divorce visitation for infants and young children: The myths and the psychological unknowns", *Family Law Quarterly*, 36(1), 195-210.