

When the difference is night & day:  
*Insights from HILDA into patterns of  
parent–child contact after separation\**

Bruce Smyth  
Research Fellow  
Australian Institute of Family Studies  
bruce.smyth@aifs.gov.au

Patrick Parkinson  
Professor of Law  
University of Sydney  
patrickp@law.usyd.edu.au

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## Abstract

Drawing on data from Wave 1 of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, this paper explores patterns of contact between non-resident fathers and their children – including patterns of day-only contact. It also examines the impact of repartnering on contact and mothers' and fathers' satisfaction with contact arrangements. Implications are drawn from these data for our understanding of post-separation parenting arrangements.

The data suggest that in Australia more than one-third of children whose parents do not live together do not see their fathers, while 17% have day-only contact. The levels of contact are a source of dissatisfaction for both mothers and fathers. Although the majority of resident mothers expressed satisfaction with the contact arrangements, 40% reported that they would like to see more father-child contact taking place, while only 5% thought that there was too much contact. By contrast, three quarters of non-resident fathers wanted more contact with their children.

Non-resident fathers with overnight contact reported significantly higher levels of satisfaction with their relationship with their children than fathers who had day-only contact. Factors associated with day-only contact include the father's income level and the number of bedrooms in his accommodation. The age of the child was not significant in fathers' reports of day-only contact although it was in mothers' reports.

## I. Introduction

In this paper, we explore rates of parent–child contact – including the prevalence of overnight stays – among different subgroups within the general population of separated parents in Australia.

Parent–child contact is an area of considerable interest to researchers investigating separation and divorce. An increasing body of research demonstrates the importance of contact from the perspective of children. Children of divorce report as young adults a yearning for more time with their fathers (Fabricius & Hall 2000; Laumann-Billings & Emery 2000). The research evidence also indicates that where fathers not only have contact but engage actively in post-separation parenting, there are significant benefits for children (Amato & Gilbreth 1999).

Contact is also a significant issue for family lawyers. The numbers of contact applications has doubled since 1995 in Australia (Rhoades, Graycar & Harrison 2000), although this upward trend was evident before 1995. There has also been a significant increase in contact enforcement applications. This phenomenon is not confined to Australia. In Britain, for example, there was a nearly threefold increase in contact orders between 1992 and 1998.

Family lawyers tend to focus on those families where there are very high levels of conflict because these are the families who are most visible to the family law system. Here issues about domestic violence and child protection loom large (Family Law Council 2002; Rendell, Rathus & Lynch 2000). Sometimes contact is not in children’s best interests despite their expressed wishes (Jones & Parkinson 1995). If levels of conflict between the parents continue at very high levels after separation, and children are caught up as messengers or spies in these conflicts, then contact may impact negatively on children’s wellbeing (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson 1999).

In developing family policy, however, it is important not to focus only on the families who are most visible and the problems that are most pressing but to explore the patterns of parenting after separation in the general population.

The multi-dimensional nature of contact also needs attention. To date, however, research into post-separation parent–child contact has focused almost exclusively on the frequency and/or amount of face-to-face contact. The same is true of family policy and family law.

This quantitative bent is not surprising. Time is tangible – it can be counted, divided, and apportioned – and often the thing that is measured is that which is easiest to measure. But obviously there is more to parent–child contact than just time. The nature of the interaction is also important, perhaps even more so (Amato & Gilbreth 1999). Research thus needs to begin focusing on some of the more qualitative aspects of post-separation parenting (eg., *When* do children see each parent, and *what* things do they do together?)

### **When the difference is night and day...**

One dimension of contact that has attracted little attention to date is the distinction between day-only contact and overnight stays. This dimension is important for several reasons. To begin with, there are notable qualitative differences between day- and night-time parenting. Overnight stays help foster the development of close emotional bonds between children and non-resident parents (Lamb & Kelly 2001; Warshak 2000). Time is usually less constrained and structured, allowing the dynamics that typically characterise family life to occur – such as putting children to bed, saying good night, waking and dressing children, and starting the day with them over breakfast (Kelly & Lamb 2000). 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 from the broad spectrum of practical contexts necessary for children's social, emotional and cognitive development (Kelly & Lamb 2000).

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” (Ricci 1997); affirm non-resident parents' self-identity as a “parent” (Lamb & Kelly 2001), and allow resident parents to gain respite from the immediate responsibilities of care giving (Funder 1993; Ricci 1997).

Another reason that the day–night distinction is important is that different patterns of care might foster different psychosocial outcomes. For instance, there is lively debate about whether young children should stay overnight with non-resident parents and, if so, at what age and how often (Gould & Stahl 2001; Kelly & Lamb 2000; Lamb & Kelly 2001; Solomon & Birgin 2001; 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 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 (see Fehlberg & Smyth 2000). Distinguishing between day-only contact and sleepovers is a necessary prerequisite in any attempt to obtain reliable estimates of these costs.

But Australian data on day-only contact versus sleepovers are sparse. Data from the 1997 Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998) indicate that a significant minority (34%) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, who see that parent, never stay overnight with them (Smyth & Ferro 2002). This figure is quite striking.

Why might so many children not stay overnight? Two possibilities are money and stability. Two households are not as cheap to run as one. Aside from

inverting the economies of scale, parental separation duplicates many of the costs of caring for children across two households. Confronted by both the start-up costs of setting up somewhere new to live and child support liabilities, some non-resident parents may not be in a position to provide the suitable accommodation to facilitate overnight stays. Thus where one parent is able to provide better accommodation than the other, children might sleep primarily in that parent's household.

In other cases, stability may be valued for its own sake. A basic axiom of child psychology is that children need stability to ensure their healthy development. One of the cornerstones of stability is having a place to call "home". For children (especially young ones), home and family are intrinsically intertwined: "My home is where my family lives" (Garbarino 1995: 56). Even though parental separation acts to create two families and two homes for children, a "one home" mindset often persists (Ricci 1997). Stability in this sense might mean "one home, one bed". Day-only contact might reflect this mindset for some parents.

Day-only contact can also indicate concerns about a child's safety, a lack of knowledge or self-confidence about parenting skills on the part of the non-resident parent, or possibly emotional friction between parents (such as where one parent acts as the gatekeeper of contact), or between a child and a new partner of a non-resident parent (see, for example, Taylor, Smith & Tapp 2001). It can thus act as a marker for deeper contextual issues that need to be explored in terms of family dynamics.

In sum, the distinction between day- and night-time parenting has important implications in terms of bonding, costs and outcomes. But obtaining data on patterns of care from a wide cross-section of the separated parent population is difficult and expensive.

### **Data source**

One dataset that can offer unique insights into post-separation patterns of parenting is the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. This national household-based panel survey collects information related to three broad domains: (a) economic and subjective wellbeing; (b) labour market dynamics; and (c) family dynamics. The first wave of the survey was conducted in the latter half of 2001, and examined a range of issues, including marital history, family (re)formation, and patterns of parental care for children under 18 years whose parents live apart.

The power of this dataset for research into parent-child contact is that it enables national estimates to be obtained across the spectrum of the separated parent population (including parents who have never married or never lived together). These data currently provide the most recent national estimates available of separated parents' parenting arrangements and personal circumstances.

## Methodological and conceptual issues

It is important to note at the outset that the samples of separated men and women are independent. That is, the men and women had not been married to each other. Our analysis thus focuses on the characteristics and perceptions of one parent – the parent who was interviewed – in examining post-separating parenting arrangements.

Three more general methodological issues warrant brief mention. First, while the longitudinal design will eventually be able to unpack the 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. Second, for reasons of economy, where respondents had more than one child under 18 potentially in their care, the HILDA methodology required respondents to focus on the *youngest* natural or adopted child. Finally, some caution should be exercised in viewing the family types presented as static structures. In reality, individuals often pass through a range of family constellations after divorce or separation but this complexity is masked by single-point-in-time data<sup>1</sup> (Maclean & Eekelaar 1997). The fluidity of family form should be borne in mind when examining the accompanying figures.

## II. Methodology

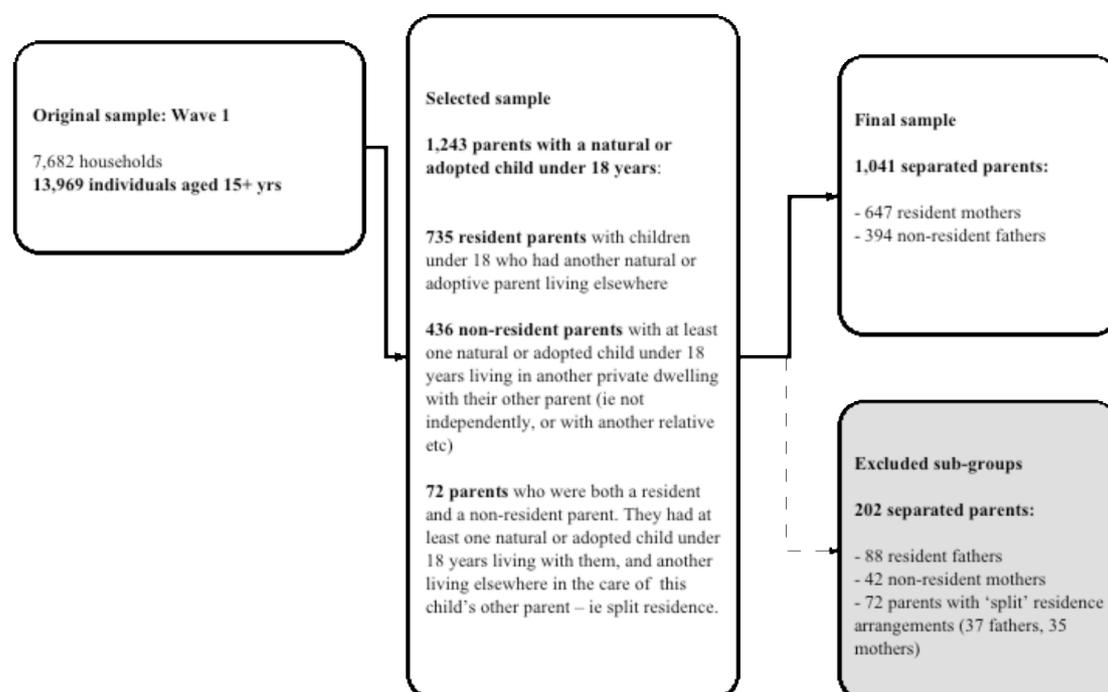
### Sample selection

The sample on which this paper is based comprised 1,041 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 households across Australia (described overleaf, and shown in Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup> This complexity is likely to surface in subsequent waves of data collection.

Figure 1. Sampling strategy



The initial sample for Wave 1 comprised 12,252 households from around Australia, of which 11,693 were identified as in-scope. Interviews were successfully conducted with 13,969 members of 7,682 households – yielding a household response rate of 66 per cent. (See Watson & Wooden 2002 for more detailed information on sampling issues.)

Of the original 13,969 household members interviewed, we selected a sample of 1,336 separated parents who (a) had at least one child under 18 years in their care for at least 50 per cent of the time (ie., resident parents), and that child's other parent lived elsewhere ( $n=822$ ), and/or (b) had at least one child under 18 years in their care for less than 50 per cent of the time (ie., non-resident parents), and that child usually lived with their other parent ( $n=514$ ); 74 parents were double counted because they had at least one child in their care and another child in the care of that child's other parent (ie., 'split residence'). The sample was further refined by excluding 21 parents (two of whom were split resident parents) who had been widowed, or whose children were living in a non-private dwelling (eg., boarding school, university or institution) or were in complex family types (eg., had step-children whose other parent had died).

The selected sample consisted of 1,243 parents: 735 resident parents (88 men, 647 women), 436 non-resident parents (394 men, 42 women), and 72 split resident parents (37 men, 35 women).

Given the small number of respondents in some of the less common groups (eg., resident fathers, non-resident mothers), this analysis focuses on reports of resident mothers ( $n=608$ ) and non-resident fathers ( $n=379$ ). Since the repartnering status of either parent has been found to be a potentially

important factor in patterns of contact (see, for example, Bradshaw et al. 1999; Funder 1993; Maclean & Eekelaar 1997), the resident and non-resident parent groups are disaggregated into two groups: those who are single, and those who have repartnered. A similar tack was adopted in terms of the pre-separation relationship status of parents: those who had never married, and those who had ever been married.

Respondents ranged in age from 17-70 years (M=37 years, 2 months, SE= 4 months), and had been separated for around 5 years (median = 5 years; M=6 years, 4 months; SE=2 months). The average age of the youngest biological or adopted child of each respondent was 8 years, 7 months (SE=2 months).

### Measures

Four different survey instruments were used to collect information in the first wave of the HILDA survey. These were: (i) the Household Form, (ii) the Household Questionnaire, (iii) the Person Questionnaire, and (iv) the Self-Completion Questionnaire. Much of the information used in the following analysis derives from the Person Questionnaire – Section H: Family Formation, which was administered by way of face-to-face interview.

Among other things in Section H, separated parents were asked: “About how many nights each week, fortnight or month does this child usually stay overnight with (you/their other parent)?” (H9/H22); And about how many days would [child’s name] spend with (you/their other parent) each week, fortnight or month without staying overnight?” (H10/H23) (emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup>

### III. Findings

Findings are structured in three parts. First we examine patterns of contact by family type. Parents' levels of satisfaction with different amounts (and types) of contact are then examined. Finally, drawing on non-resident fathers' reports, we identify some of the key correlates of overnight stays.

It should be noted that prior to analysis, the data were weighted using the responding person population weight.<sup>3</sup> In addition, to address HILDA's stratified cluster design, estimates of the variance were adjusted for the design-effect using Stata 7.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Non-resident parents were asked Questions H9–H10. Resident parents were asked Questions H22–H23. Both questions provide two reporting time frames: number of nights or number of full weeks (for block time such as across school holidays). Around 5% of parents (resident and non-resident) report contact using the full week reported category for night stay overs.

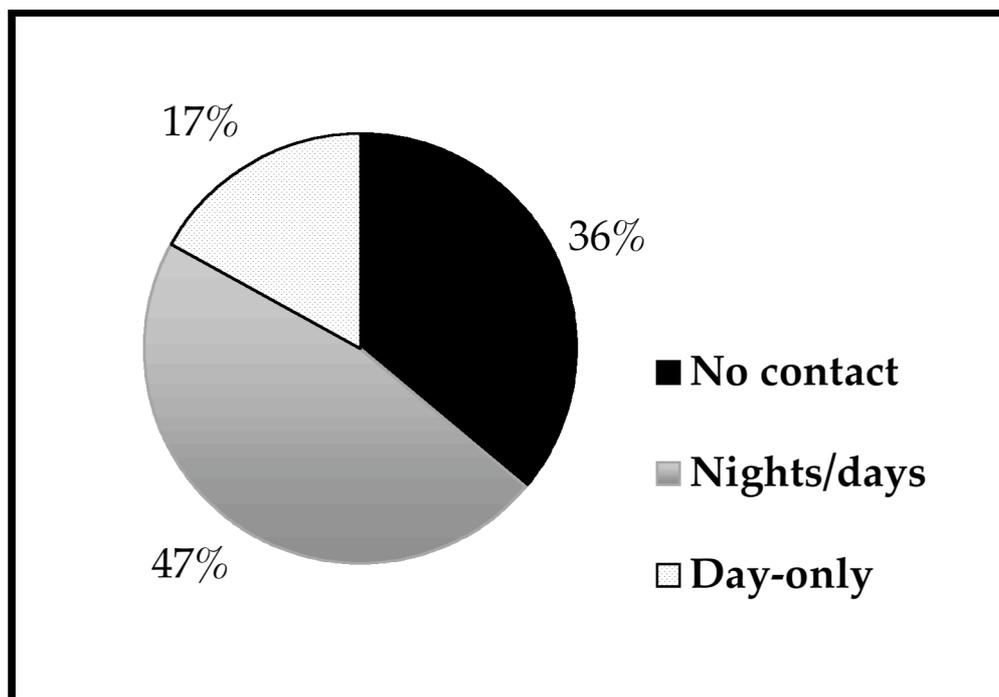
<sup>3</sup> This weight – the inverse of the probability of selection – is adjusted for the probability of response to household and person level benchmarks (see Watson & Fry 2002).

<sup>4</sup> We are grateful to two AIFS colleagues: Matthew Gray for statistical advice on this procedure, and Anna Ferro for calculating the statistical tests.

## The basic patterns

As context for the following analyses, Figure 2 shows the distribution of the three types of contact of interest: no contact, overnight care, and day-only contact.

**Figure 2. Nature of contact: Resident mothers' and non-resident fathers' reports**



Consistent with prior studies in Australia (ABS 1998), around one-third (36%) of fathers do not appear to have any face-to-face contact with their children. By contrast, almost half (47%) of fathers have children stay overnight, while the remaining 17 per cent see their children only during the day.

Even though marked gender differences emerged – with non-resident fathers generally perceiving themselves to be more involved with their children in terms of face-to-face contact than resident mothers perceived their former spouses to be (no contact: 31% vs 39%; stayovers: 54% vs 42%; day-only contact: 15% and 19%) – we report the average of both sets of reports to provide a point of reference for the figures that follow.

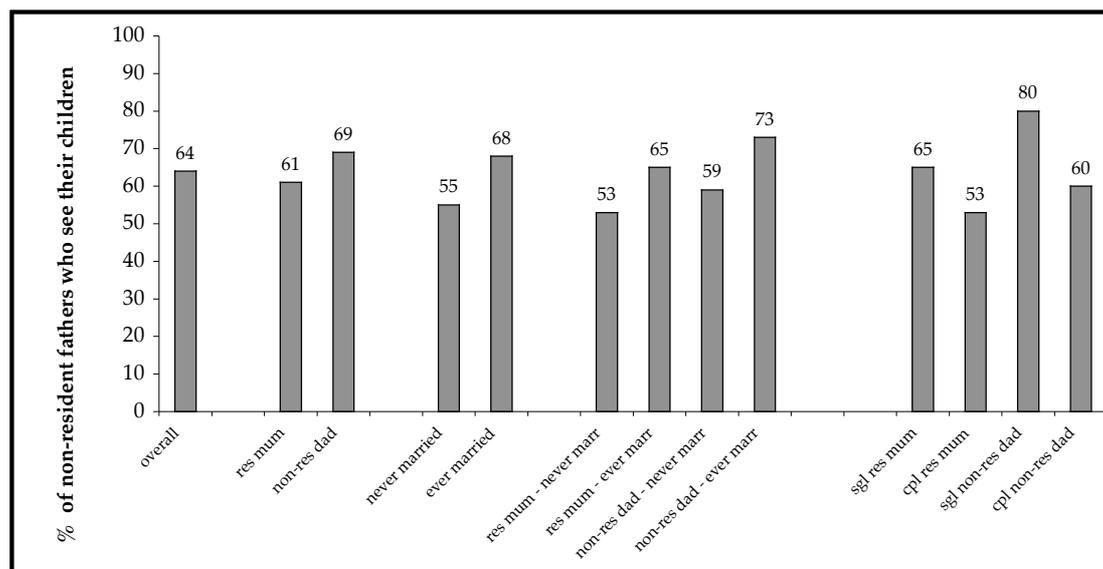
It is noteworthy that when day-only contact is taken into account, the rate of shared care (ie., more than 109 nights per year) doubles according to resident mothers' reports (from 4 per cent to 9 per cent), and almost triples according to non-resident fathers reports (from 4% to 11%).<sup>5</sup> Where contact is occurring (ie., where no contact is excluded), these figures increase to 6% to 15%, and to 6% to 16%, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> These estimates are calculated on either days or nights – which ever was the larger. Days and nights were not summed because there was ambiguity around whether some respondents included day-only contact as part of the day after a sleepover.

Prevalence of contact across different types of families

Figure 3 shows the prevalence of face-to-face contact between children and non-resident fathers, as reported by resident mothers and non-resident fathers (single or repartnered; ever or never married).

**Figure 3. Prevalence of face-to-face contact by parents' marital history status (never vs ever married) and relationship status at interview (repartnered vs single): Resident mothers' and non-resident fathers' reports**



Working through the patterns summarised in Figure 3 from left to right, the first bar indicates that almost two-thirds (64%) of non-resident parents appear to have some form of face-to-face contact with their children.

Not surprisingly, non-resident fathers reported a significantly higher rate of contact than resident mothers (69% vs 61%;  $p < .05$ ). Differential reporting by women and men is a common feature in the divorce literature (Braver & O'Connell 1999), with non-resident fathers generally perceiving themselves to be more involved with their children than resident mothers perceive their former spouses to be.

Parents who had been married reported a significantly higher rate of contact than parents who had never been married (68% vs 55%;  $p < .001$ ). This pattern is consistent with prior work (Maclean & Eekelaar 1997), which suggests that the marital relationship typically facilitates higher levels of investment in the parental relationship than the non-marital relationship.

The left-hand cluster of four bars combine parents' residence status with their marital history and, in doing so, reflect the pattern of contact expected by this combination: non-resident fathers that were married were the most likely group to report the occurrence of face-to-face contact (73%), while resident mothers who had never been married were the least likely group to report the occurrence of face-to-face contact (53%) ( $p < .001$ ). (Fathers' reports were higher

than mothers' reports, and reports by ever-married parents were higher than those given by never-married parents.)

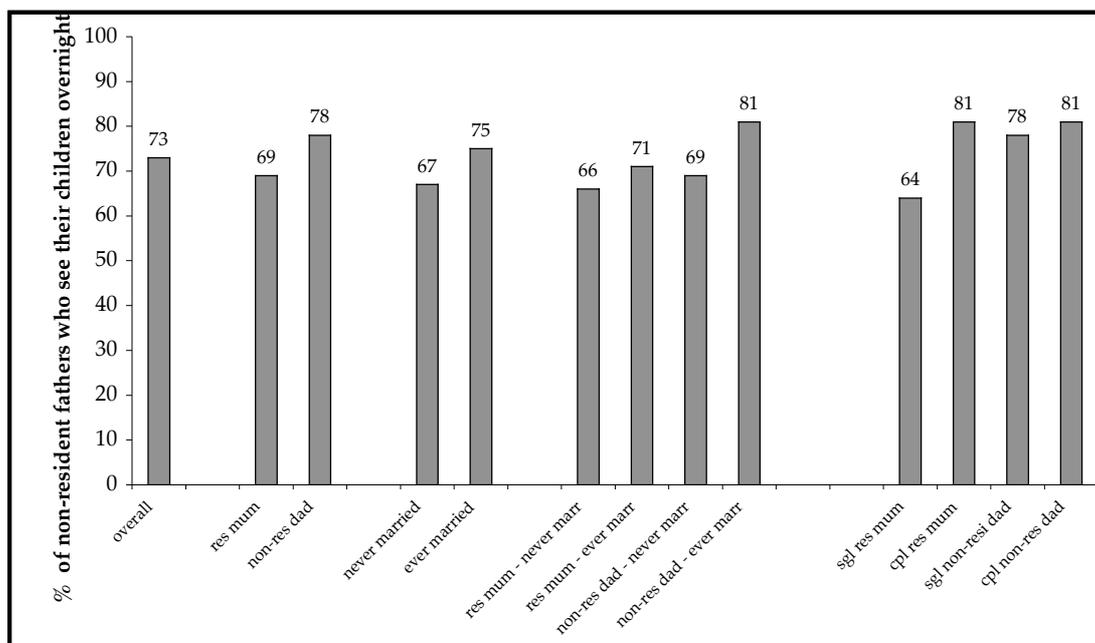
Finally, consistent with previous research (Maclean & Eekelaar 1997; Smyth, Sheehan & Fehlberg 2000) parent-child contact was less likely to occur when either parent had a new partner. Almost two thirds (65%) of single resident mothers reported that fathers had contact with their children, compared with around half (53%) of repartnered resident mothers. A similar pattern was also reported by non-resident fathers: 80 per cent of single non-resident fathers reported seeing their children compared with 60 per cent of fathers who had repartnered. These differences were statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively).

It should be noted that repartnered non-resident fathers were more likely to live further away from their children than single fathers who had not repartnered. The same was true for repartnered mothers compared with single mothers. Thus the apparent relationship between family type and contact, in part, appears to be mediated by distance.

Day-only contact versus overnight stays

Figure 4 shows the prevalence of overnight stays between children and non-resident fathers, as reported by resident mothers and non-resident fathers (single or repartnered; ever or never married).

**Figure 4. Prevalence of overnight stays where parent-child contact is occurring by parents' marital history status (never vs ever married) and relationship status at interview (repartnered vs single): Resident mothers' and non-resident fathers' reports**



Almost three quarters (73%) of non-resident parents who have contact with their children appear to have children stay overnight with them.

This pattern of overnight stays virtually mirrors the pattern of face-to-face contact/no contact described in Figure 3. Overnight stays were more likely to be reported by: non-resident fathers than resident mothers (78% vs 69%;  $p < .05$ ), ever-married parents than never married parents (75% vs 67%;  $p = .05$ ), and non-resident fathers who had been married than resident mothers who had never been married (81% vs 66%;  $p < .01$ ).

Of particular interest, is the cluster of four bars on the extreme right showing parents' residence status and relationship status. It is noteworthy that non-resident fathers were less likely to have children stay overnight when the children's mother was single than when she had repartnered (64% vs 81%;  $p < .001$ ). This pattern is consistent with data from the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998) recently analysed by Smyth and Ferro (2002).

In summary, the above patterns suggest that relationship status for women (repartnered vs single) and marital history (ever vs never married) are two correlates of overnight stays – and indeed contact more generally. We explore other possible correlates in the third part of this section.

### Satisfaction with contact

To explore separated parents' level of satisfaction with parent-child contact, respondents were asked: "How do you feel about the amount of contact [child's name] has with their other parent? Would you say that the amount of contact is not enough or too much?" Respondents were probed for one of the following categories: "Nowhere near enough", "Not quite enough", "About right", "A little too much", and "Way too much".

**Figure 5. Level of satisfaction with the amount of father-child contact: Resident mothers' and non-resident fathers' reports**

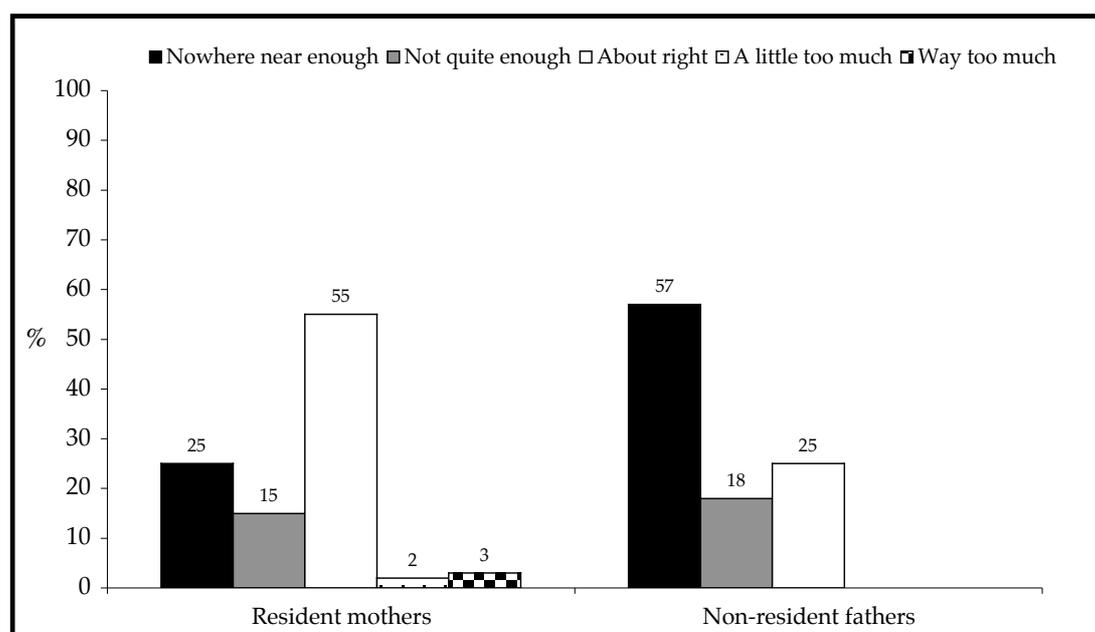


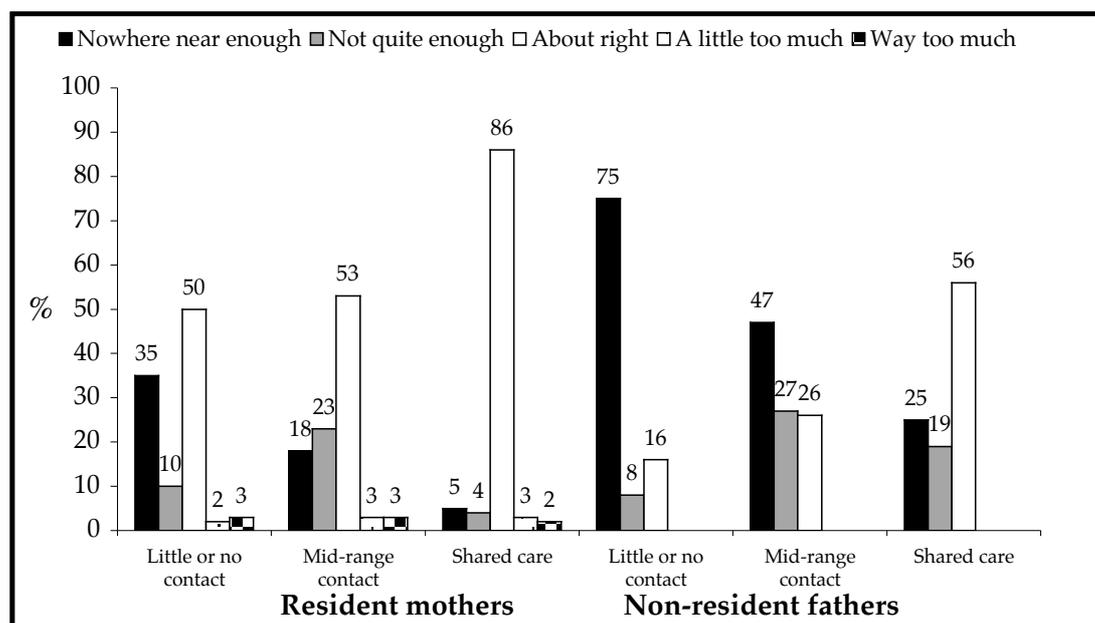
Figure 5 shows that resident mothers and non-resident fathers differ markedly in their level of satisfaction with the amount of father-child contact occurring. The potential for contact disputes suggests itself in these attitudinal data. Over half (55%) of the resident mothers in the sample believed that the amount of contact was about right, compared with a similar proportion (57%) of non-resident fathers who believed that it was nowhere near enough. And in a similar mirror-image reversal: around one quarter (25%) of the resident mothers believed that the amount of contact was nowhere near enough, compared to the same proportion (25%) of non-resident fathers who believed that it was about right.

Differences aside, a significant proportion of both resident mothers (40%) and non-resident fathers (75%) reported that they would like to see more contact occurring.

*Satisfaction by amount of contact*

An interesting question is: To what extent do these patterns actually vary by different amounts and types of contact? Figure 6 addresses this question.

**Figure 6. Level of satisfaction with the amount of father-child contact by number of days/overnight stays per year: Resident mothers' and non-resident fathers' reports**



Notes. 'Little or no contact' = 0-17 nights/ days; 'Mid-range contact' = 18-109 nights/ days; 'Shared care' = 110+ nights/ days.

Figure 6 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different thresholds of father-child contact.<sup>6</sup> The categories are based on criteria adopted by Woods (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Initially we analysed the 0-18 nights/ days group as two distinct groups: 0 nights/ days, and 1-17 nights/ days. But since both groups presented similar patterns, they were combined for the sake of simplicity.

Three clear patterns emerged. Again, gender differences feature prominently. First, around half (50-53%) of the resident mothers in the 'little or no' contact or 'mid-range' contact groups believed that the amount of contact was about right. By contrast, three quarters (75%) of the non-resident fathers who rarely or never saw their children believed that they had nowhere near enough contact (but note the 16 per cent who believed that the amount of contact was about right).

Second, as expected, as the amount of father-child contact increased, resident mothers and non-resident fathers were less inclined to believe that there was nowhere near enough contact occurring (resident mothers: 35%, 18%, 5%;  $p < .001$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively; non-resident fathers: 75%, 47%, 25%  $p < .001$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively) – though, predictably, this effect was far more pronounced for men than for women.

Third, and not surprising perhaps, shared care – albeit the least common pattern of care – was the pattern in which resident mothers and non-resident fathers were most likely to believe that the amount of contact was about right. This pattern was especially pronounced for women in that group (86%).

In passing, it is noteworthy that only one non-resident father reported that contact was a little too much (not shown in Figure 6)<sup>7</sup> whereas around five per cent of resident mothers – regardless of the amount of contact – believed that the amount of contact was a little too much or way too much.<sup>8</sup>

#### Satisfaction by type of contact

To what extent does satisfaction with amount differ by the type of contact? Figure 7 addresses this question.

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<sup>7</sup> For clarity, this case was removed from the satisfaction analyses.

<sup>8</sup> The 5% of resident mothers in the 'little or no contact' group who believed that too much contact was occurring were predominantly those where contact ranged from 1-17 nights per year.

**Figure 7. Level of satisfaction with father–child contact by type of contact: Resident mothers' and non-resident fathers' reports**

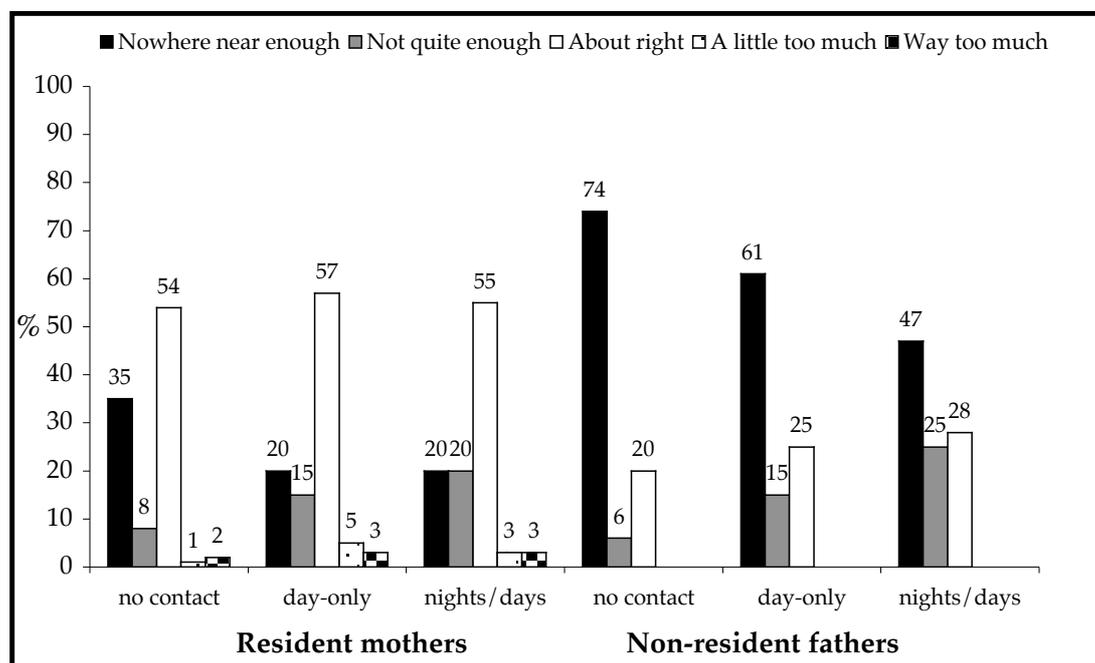


Figure 7 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different types of father–child contact. Most conspicuous in this figure is that the majority of resident mothers appear relatively satisfied ('about right') with contact regardless of its form – none, days-only, or night and day (54-57%). Resident fathers, on the other hand, appear to be more satisfied as the type of contact becomes qualitatively richer – from none, to some (day-only), to sleepovers ("nowhere near enough": 74%, 61%, 47% respectively).

While the preceding attitudinal data are illuminating, children's voices are an important – indeed critical – part of the story that is missing here. Marked differences in satisfaction should be tempered by these voices.

### **Predicting overnight stays**

In this final part of the results, we address the question: What predicts overnight stays? At an empirical level, this is a slippery pursuit because the shift between day-only contact and overnight stays, or vice versa, may be quite subtle and complex. It may also involve a number of economic and/or relationship variables. For instance, non-resident fathers with low incomes may be more likely to have day-only contact because they may not be able to afford housing that can accommodate overnight stays by their children (and their children's friends).

On the basis of prior research into the correlates of contact, more generally, the following variables were examined:<sup>9</sup>

*Demographic variables*

- Distance between parents (km)<sup>10</sup>
- Age of child (0-17 years)
- Time since separation (yrs)

*Relationship variables*

- Level of satisfaction with relationship with children (0 = *completely dissatisfied*; 10 = *completely satisfied*),

*Economic variables*

- Personal gross annual income (\$)
- Payment of child support (some vs. none)
- Amount of child support paid or received (\$ per year)
- Number of bedrooms

(Recall that relationship status at interview and marital history were examined earlier.) To explore these predictors, we focus on the data provided by non-resident fathers. This is because overnight stays are likely to be related to fathers' circumstances as opposed to mothers' (eg., mother's income, number of bedrooms in the mother's home, mothers' level of satisfaction with their relationship with their children, etc). Table 1 presents means, standard error estimates and *t*-test *p*-values for specific key variables.

**Table 1. Mean, standard error and *p*-values for key measures: Non-resident fathers' reports**

Predictor	Day-only		Nights		p
	M	SE	M	SE	
Age of child (yrs)	8.07	.69	9.29	.31	ns
Time since separation (yrs)	5.10	.69	6.16	.38	ns
Relationship satisfaction*	5.82	.44	7.60	.19	<.001
Personal gross income (\$ p.a.)	\$22,808	\$1,599	\$31,649	\$1,384	<.001
Child support (\$ p.a.)	\$4,391	\$723	\$5,827	\$355	ns
Number of bedrooms	2.51	.16	2.98	.07	<.01

Notes. ns= not significant (two-tailed *t*-test)

\* Relationship satisfaction: 0=*completely dissatisfied* to 10=*completely satisfied*;

Table 1 shows that non-resident fathers with overnight contact with their children reported significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction with their children than fathers who had day-only contact. They also had significantly higher incomes and more bedrooms than those with day-only contact.

<sup>9</sup> One obvious omission from this list is that of the quality of the co-parental relationship. The HILDA dataset has one item that potentially taps this domain: "How satisfied are you with your relationship with your (most recent) former spouse or partner?" (Self-completion form – B11h). This item, however, is not directly targeted at the parent of the youngest child of the relationship of interest.

<sup>10</sup> The response options were: <5km, 5-19 km, 20-49km, 50-99, 100-499km, 500+km, overseas.

Moreover, consistent with the so-called 'contact-maintenance nexus', fathers who paid child support were more likely to have their children stay overnight than fathers who did not pay child support (83% vs 64%;  $p < .05$ ; one-tailed test) (data not shown). However, the amount of child support paid did not differ significantly between the two groups (\$5,827 vs \$4,391;  $p > .05$ ).

Further, neither age of child nor distance between parents' households appeared to be related to over-night stays. (This was not the case, according to resident mothers: overnight care was more likely to occur where children were over three years and where children lived more than 20 kilometres away). Moreover fathers with day-only contact had not separated more recently (or longer) than fathers with overnight contact of children.

This paper reports a work in progress. We intend to do further work using logistic regression models to understand better the relative importance of the above predictors in a multivariate framework. Nonetheless, some conclusions and implications can be drawn at this stage.

#### **IV. Conclusions and Implications**

Six clear findings in relation to father-child contact are suggested by the data from Wave 1 of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey.

1. The data suggest that in Australia more than one-third of children whose parents do not live together do not see their fathers, while 17 per cent have day-only contact.
2. A significant proportion of both mothers and fathers would like to see more contact occurring: 40 per cent of resident mothers reported that they would like to see more contact while 75 per cent of non-resident fathers would like to see more contact. The HILDA data cannot tell us why it is that less contact is occurring than many women and most men consider desirable. The literature on post-separation parenting would indicate that relational factors between the parents are to the forefront. However, since a substantial minority of resident mothers would like the children to see their father more, it may well be that on both sides of the divide there is an unsatisfied desire for greater contact to occur. Other factors, including the costs of contact and the impact of distance and repartnering, may well be more significant than the literature on contact suggests.
3. Only a small minority (20% of those with no contact; not shown in Figure 6) of non-resident fathers appear to be disinterested in contact or have emotionally disengaged from their children. Among the group that saw the child for 1-17 nights or days per year (not shown in Figure 6), only 8% considered that the level of contact was about right.
4. The data are consistent with the idea that mothers often act as the gatekeepers of contact, with 55 per cent considering that the arrangements for contact are about right and 57 per cent of fathers considering that there is far too little contact. The percentage of resident mothers satisfied with the contact arrangements varies little between those where the children stay overnight for under 18 nights

per year and those where they stay for up to 109 nights per year (ie., 'mid-range contact').

Only a tiny proportion of resident mothers appear to have had to accept contact arrangements with which they are not comfortable. Three per cent of resident mothers considered that there was way too much contact, and this held constant across the spectrum of contact arrangements, including the group in which the father sees the child for less than 18 nights per year. A further two per cent responded that there was a little too much contact. There has been some criticism in the family law literature (e.g. Rhoades, Graycar & Harrison 2000) of the "pro-contact culture", and that this has resulted in an imposition on resident mothers of unsatisfactory parenting arrangements after separation. The data on satisfaction with contact indicate, however, that this does not appear to be a problem across the general population of separated parents. Nonetheless, among the small group of resident mothers who believe that there is too much contact, it may well be that there are significant issues that the family law system has failed to address, such as domestic violence and child protection concerns. There is indeed much evidence of this from other research (Kaye, Stubbs & Tolmie, in press; Rendell, Rathus & Lynch 2000).

5. Repartnering has a significant impact on contact, and this is consistent with other research on parenting after divorce. Only 53 per cent of repartnered mothers reported that the biological father had contact with their children and only 60 per cent of repartnered fathers reported contact with their children (compared with 65 per cent of single mothers and 80% of single fathers). As new families are formed, so this appears to have an adverse effect upon the connections between children and parents of previous relationships.
6. The HILDA data highlight the importance of including day-only contact in examining patterns of parenting after separation. It would appear that there is much more shared parenting happening than the statistics on overnight stays would suggest: 16% of children who see their fathers do so on at least 30% of the days of the year but only 6% stay overnight at least 30% of the time. Reports from resident mothers would suggest that both the age of the child and distance are associated with the occurrence of overnight stays, as one might expect, but these factors do not appear to be relevant according to the responses of resident fathers. In fathers' reports, much more weight appears to attach to economic factors, including income levels and number of bedrooms.

According to a study conducted by Woods (1999), non-resident parents typically create an infrastructure to facilitate overnight stays regardless of their income (p.1). Yet Woods (1999) himself points out that "some of the children [in the study] are on day visits only and do not have sleeping accommodation" (p.23) – underlining the reality that some non-resident parents may not be able to facilitate sleepovers because they do not have the financial means to do so. It may be that some fathers at lower income levels find it difficult to afford the infrastructure associated with providing an alternative home for children in the aftermath of separation. Indeed, in the case of the

Woods study, such fathers are unlikely to have been surveyed because respondents with less than 18 nights of contact per year were excluded on the basis that they were deemed not to have had 'regular contact' (p.7).

Overnight stays are significantly related to fathers' satisfaction with contact arrangements. Fathers who have their children stay overnight indicated a higher level of satisfaction with the contact arrangements compared with fathers with day-only contact. They were also more likely to pay child support.

What then are the implications for policy? The evidence from HILDA gives us only part of the picture of what is happening across Australia in terms of post-separation parenting, but it is an important part of that picture. More than a third of Australian children do not appear to have any contact with their father. The data on satisfaction with contact arrangements indicate that while the majority of mothers are satisfied with the contact arrangements, a substantial proportion would like to see more contact, as would most men. The inclusion of day-only contact in the overall picture of contact arrangements indicates that there is rather more shared parenting than is apparent from studies that focus exclusively on levels of overnight contact. However, the absence of overnight contact appears to be a source of dissatisfaction for many non-resident fathers and there are some indications that economic factors may play a part in making it difficult for children to stay overnight.

Policies about post-separation parenting and financial arrangements are best developed slowly and after careful exploration of the research evidence. We do not conclude this paper then with any rush to recommendations. There are nonetheless some important implications of these findings both for researchers and practitioners, for the evidence indicates that there is a triangle of unmet need for contact. Significant numbers of separated mothers and fathers – and, in other research, children and young people (Smith & Gollop 2001) – all would like to see more contact occurring. While the quality of the parent-child interaction is as important to children – if not more so – than the quantity (Amato & Gilbreth 1999; Smart & Neale, 2000), when children desire more contact, and are not being exposed to high levels of conflict or to the risk of abuse, then increased contact is likely to be beneficial to them.

We need to understand better what inhibits more satisfactory levels of contact. Most attention has been paid to relational factors between parents. We also need to examine the financial and logistical factors. Even in intact relationships, it may well be that many working parents would like to have more time with their children (Lewis, Hand & Tudball 2001). When parents live apart, and particularly if new life circumstances place an increasing geographical distance between them, the difficulties for the non-resident parent of maintaining as much parenting time as desired are that much greater. It may be that the financial costs of contact, and the infrastructure associated with having children overnight and for extended periods, make it difficult for some parents to give the children as much time with the non-resident parent as both they, and the children, may desire. Logistical factors are also significant. Contact arrangements must fit in with school, sporting

and other commitments of children which may restrict the time for contact even where the parents have a high level of co-operation.

Nonetheless, it may be that there is scope in many separated families for greater contact with the non-resident parent after the dust has settled on relationship breakdown. The responses to the HILDA (Wave 1) contact questions are given on average around five years after separation, when in most cases, the initial grief, anger and resentment associated with relationship breakdown has subsided (Funder 1993). In examining these issues, it will be important to recruit families who are representative of the population of post-separation parents, rather than just those who have been users of legal and court services, and explore what happens over time.

The evidence of unmet need for contact also has implications for legal practitioners, counsellors and mediators. It may be that some families are not well-served by being guided into standard packages of contact arrangements, and that we need to encourage them to look afresh at the issue of contact once families move beyond the period when emotions are raw and feelings about the other parent most negative. After all, the law's emphasis on making orders which will be final as far as the Court is concerned is discordant with the realities of post-separation parenting. Families are dynamic, not static. Over time, changes occur in people's emotional responses to relationship breakdown, in their attitudes as parents and in their life circumstances. Children's feelings, needs and circumstances also change. We ought perhaps to encourage a more open-ended approach to contact, seeing dispute resolution in the aftermath of a relationship breakdown as being directed to relatively short-term goals, with further negotiation encouraged over time. Perhaps contact arrangements should be expressed in terms of minimum levels rather than fixed levels where there are no concerns about violence or child protection.

More specifically, there is a need for research into why a significant number of parents opt for day-only contact and how this pattern of care is negotiated. We especially need to understand also the perspectives of children, as well as mothers who say there is too much contact and to improve the quality of decision-making where there are significant concerns about women's safety and child protection (Family Law Council 2002; Rendell, Rathus & Lynch 2000).

The first wave of HILDA data reveals much important information about post-separation parenting. Analysis of further waves will add a longitudinal dimension, and improve our understanding of the patterns of parenting after separation in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

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