

POST-SEPARATION PATTERNS OF PARENTING IN AUSTRALIA

WHO OPTS FOR WHICH PATTERNS AND WHY?

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ABSTRACT

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 between children and non-resident parents (mostly fathers). 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.

Recently there has been a push towards recognising and describing both qualitative and quantitative differences in the many ways that parental sharing of time with children can occur after divorce. This thesis attempts to identify and explore some of these differences by comparing five different patterns of care: (i) 50/50 shared care, (ii) little or no contact, (iii) holiday-only contact, (iv) daytime-only contact, and (v) “standard” contact (thought to occur every-other-weekend and half of each school holidays). A representative snapshot of parent–child contact schedules after separation is presented to provide some of the detail of arrangements within this typology.

Two (complementary) types of data are used: qualitative data from a series of focus groups with separated parents, and quantitative data from three large representative samples of separated/divorced parents in Australia. 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, with different combinations of factors clearly linked to qualitatively different patterns of post-separation parenting.

While separating parents need to be encouraged to think more laterally about what arrangements might work best for their children and themselves, the data presented suggest that some parents in Australia are already being very creative and there is much diversity of arrangements. The central argument running through this

dissertation is that arrangements that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are critical for children's and parents' wellbeing.

The ideas and data presented here – especially some of the more creative timesharing schedules developed by parents – are likely to be a useful resource for separated parents, and the family law professionals they approach for assistance, to reflect on when developing or refining parenting arrangements after divorce.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandparents, Gertrude and Reuben Cohen, and my friend Paddy.

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I am especially grateful to Michael Gilding and Kathy Betts of Swinburne University of Technology for their encouragement, support, expert supervision, and helpful comments along the way; my friend and colleague, Ruth Weston, who has also been a bedrock of support and encouragement; and my other friends and colleagues at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, particularly Anna Ferro, Catherine Caruana, Lixia Qu, and Ilene Wolcott, for their help with the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project*. More specifically, Anna Ferro, Catherine Caruana and Carol Whitfield helped transcribe and analyse some of the focus group data. Under supervision, Anna conducted the initial analysis of the focus group data for “standard” contact, while Catherine and Carol did the same for the “daytime-only” contact and holiday-only contact focus groups respectively. Anna also helped to sort and transpose the contact schedule data, computed some of the descriptive statistics used in Chapter 10, and profiled the focus groups participants whose comments were quoted (see Appendix 2). Lixia Qu provided statistical expertise in transposing the Family Characteristics Survey data, and in calculating the design effect for the HILDA data reported in Chapter 9. I have re-worked the focus group material in Chapters 6–8 so that what remains is my original thought and words.

Other colleagues at the Institute also deserve special thanks: Carolyn Shaw, Claire Walker, and the late Christine McCarthy, for their meticulous transcriptions of some of the focus group interviews; Carole Jean, Anita Emmanoulidis, Judy Adams and other members of the Family Information Centre for their help obtaining much of the material cited in this work; Ross Millward and Melissa Veit for their unwavering expert I.T. support; and the Institute’s editor, Meredith Michie, for minor editorial suggestions along the way as part of the publication process.

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One special friend, Sophie Holloway, deserves to be singled out. Sophie read every word of this thesis on several occasions, and constantly chanted “You can do it! Keep going!” in the background. May each word come back as a blessing.

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Any shortcomings or errors in this work are mine alone.

DECLARATION

No part of this work has been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or tertiary institution.

To the best of the best of my knowledge, any theories or research that are not my own have been acknowledged in the text.

While parts of this thesis draw on joint published or unpublished work, the work presented here is based on my intellectual contribution, and was written and conceptualised by me.



Bruce Smyth

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Parent–child contact after divorce (more commonly known as “access” or “visitation”) continues to attract much attention – perhaps because it remains a source of conflict for many parents (see, for example, Bainham, Lindley, Richards and Trinder 2003; Department of Justice Canada 2005; HM Government 2004; Dunn, Cheng, O’Connor and Bridges 2004; Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer and Tuschen 2004; Smart, May, Wade and Furniss 2004). Yet despite widespread interest, the gaps in our knowledge of post-separation patterns of parenting remain large and fundamental. Most studies have taken a quantitative tack, measuring the frequency and/or overall amount of face-to-face contact between children and non-resident parents (mostly fathers). This 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 and quality of the interaction are also important – perhaps even more so (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Hawkins and Palkovitz 1999; Pleck 1997).

In their recent scholarly review of attempts to measure parent–child contact in the U.S., Argys et al. (2003) conclude that: “[c]urrent data do not yet provide a consistent or clear picture of either the quantity or quality of interactions between children and their non-residential parents” (p.19). Argys and her colleagues go on to make a plea for the collection of more detailed data on contact, and suggest a number of recommendations about what should be collected, how, and from whom. Moreover, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) have urged researchers to adopt more comprehensive measures of contact quality instead of relying on simple measures of contact frequency. Similarly Melli (1999), another prominent U.S. scholar, has argued that research into parent–child contact needs to recognise and take account of the multiple qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share the care of children.

In Australia, little information has been collected 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.

Why look at different patterns of parent–child contact? At the level of public policy, the Australian Government held a parliamentary inquiry in 2003 to investigate whether a presumption of joint residence (specifically 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; see also the *Family Law (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2005* (Cth); Commonwealth of Australia 2005b). 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. The Australian Government has recently announced that a network of Family Relationship Centres will be established to help parents consider sensibly what arrangements will best meet their children’s and their own needs (Commonwealth of Australia 2004; Ruddock 2005). Research that explores different patterns of parenting might help to inform these centres of some of the challenges to be faced.

In addition, parents and the various professionals they approach for assistance may often be unaware of different ways of doing things in relation to structuring post-separation parenting arrangements. The rapidly changing nature of family and work-life patterns for men and women as parents and partners has led to a softening of the boundaries around the care of children. But mutually reinforcing social (and legal) customs often fail to reflect actual shifts in social values, practices, and behaviour. The apparent prevalence of every-other-weekend

residential schedules in many western countries perhaps attests to this (see next chapter). In the U.S. context, Lye (1999) found that many legal professionals promoted such schedules and that parents often had limited information about other patterns of care. Examining different parenting arrangements through information-rich mixed-method frameworks can shed light on the qualitatively different experiences these arrangements might provide family members.

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.

Some commonly held “truths”

Arising out of her clinical practice, Ricci (1997) has developed a set of propositions about creating cooperative parenting arrangements to help maximise children’s wellbeing after divorce. These ideas (Ricci 1997: 7-8) are likely to have particular relevance 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.
3. *A good legal agreement does not guarantee a good outcome*. A good legal agreement alone is often not enough to ensure positive 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, including those involving children, is possible and worth the effort.*¹ 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, Ricci (1997) maintains, can be learned and worked at.

These propositions should be borne in mind when exploring different patterns of care because they are likely to underpin the extent to which these arrangements function well or badly for children.

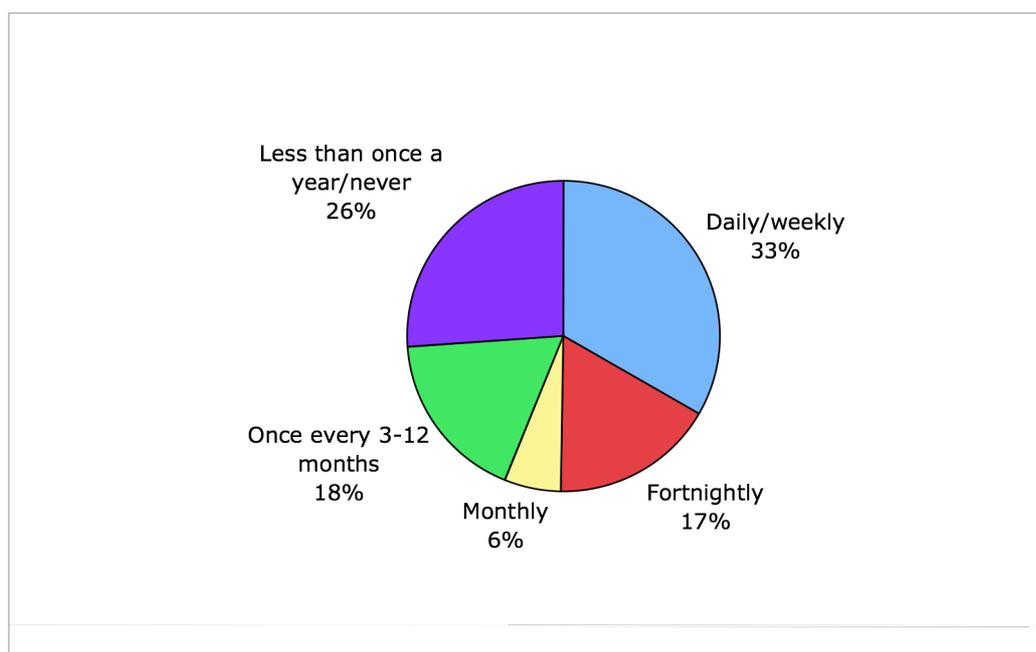
Patterns of parent–child contact in Australia

It is useful at this point to offer a brief contemporary snapshot of post-separation patterns of parent–child contact in Australia. This snapshot sets the scene for

much of what follows. The figures presented are based on data from the latest Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 2004).²

Figure 1 shows the frequency of face-to-face contact between children and their non-resident parents (typically fathers), according to resident parents' reports (mostly mothers).

**Figure 1. Children aged 0-17 with a natural parent living elsewhere:
Frequency of face-to-face parent-child contact**



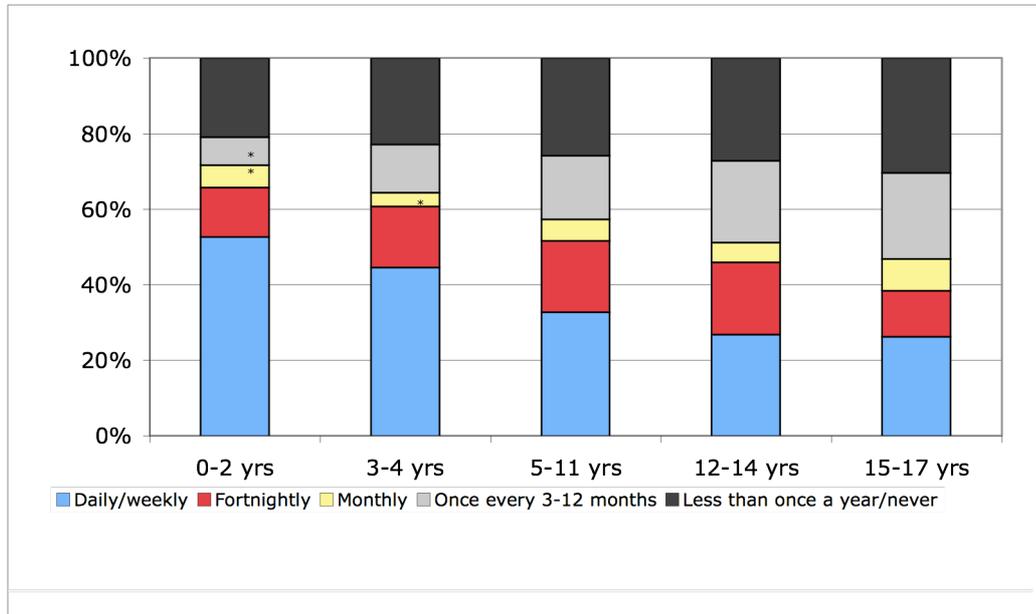
Note: Reported by resident parents.

Source: *Family Characteristics Australia* (ABS 2004), Catalogue no. 4442.0.

Figure 1 shows that half of all children under 18 with a parent living elsewhere have at least fortnightly face-to-face contact with that parent. Six per cent of children see their other parent at least once a month, 18 per cent of children see their other parent once every three to twelve months – a loose proxy perhaps for holiday-only contact – while 26 per cent see their other parent less than once a year or never.

Figure 2 (overleaf) shows the frequency of face-to-face parent-child contact by children's age.

**Figure 2. Children aged 0-17 with a natural parent living elsewhere:
Frequency of face-to-face contact by children's age**



* These estimates are subject to high standard error.

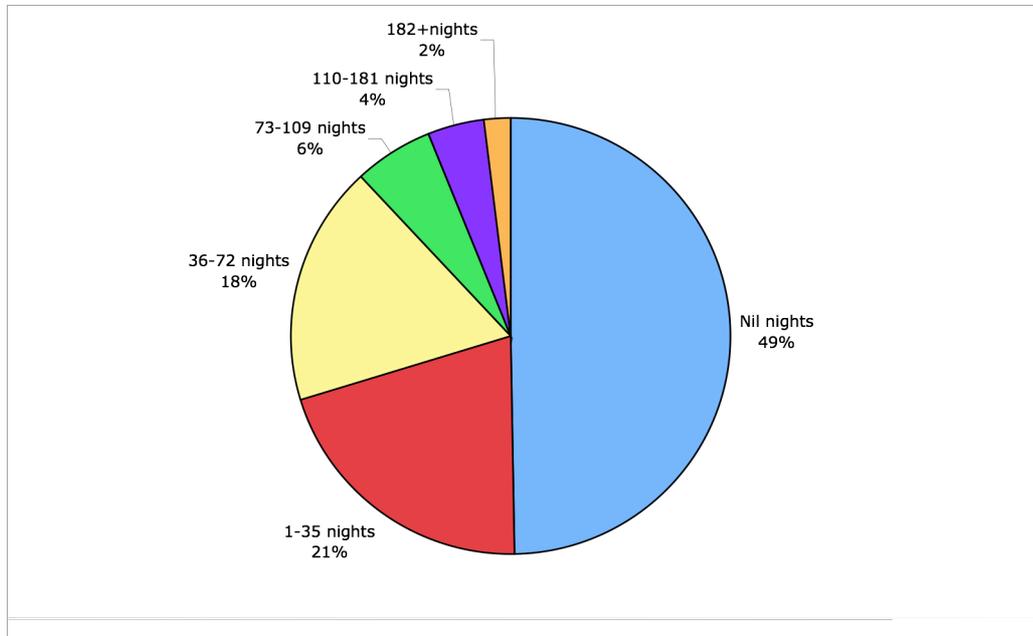
Note: Reported by resident parents.

Source: *Family Characteristics Australia* (ABS 2004), unpublished customised tables.

Figure 2 shows that younger children have more frequent contact with their non-resident parent than older children. Of course, older children typically have more independence, and more social and other commitments than younger children.

Figure 3 (overleaf) shows the number of nights that children stay with their non-resident parent each year, according to resident parents' reports.

**Figure 3. Children aged 0-17 with a natural parent living elsewhere:
Number of overnight stays each year**



Note: These categories are based on level of care thresholds under Child Support Scheme.²
Reported by resident parents.

Source: *Family Characteristics Australia* (ABS 2004), unpublished customised tables.

It can be seen in Figure 3 that almost half (49%) of children with a parent living elsewhere never stay overnight with that parent; over 70 per cent spend less than one night a week if at all with their non-resident parent (covering “nil”, “1-35 nights” and part of “36-72 nights”). Only six per cent of children of separated parents spend an equal (or near equal) number of nights with each of their parents (that is, 110 or more nights per year). These data suggest that the experience of time with children after parental separation for many fathers may be stilted and constrained. Of course, it is hard to tell what experiential reality sits under these bars, pie slices, and numbers. In many ways, the above figures raise more questions than answers about the sorts of parenting arrangements that are in place and how these arrangements are experienced. The present study seeks to flesh out some of the detail of these arrangements and experiences.

Structure of the thesis

Following a review of the research literature on parent–child contact (Chapter 2) and an overview of the study’s methodology (Chapter 3), a typology of five distinct patterns of post-separation parent–child contact is proposed and examined. These patterns are 50/50 “shared care” (Chapter 4), little or no contact (Chapter 5), holiday-only contact (Chapter 6), daytime-only contact (Chapter 7), and “standard” contact (every-weekend or every-other-weekend) (Chapter 8). To embed these findings in the wider national picture, a supplementary analysis is conducted using recent nationally representative data on economic and family-functioning issues – data from Wave 1 of the *Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA) survey (Chapter 9). Chapter 10 sets out the contact schedules of children who have a set pattern of care each week or fortnight. These data start to progress the static typology into moving picture form. Two final slices of data are presented in Chapter 11 to support the argument that parent–child contact is really about the subjective experience of time rather than about time as a number to be apportioned between parents. The final chapter (Chapter 12) synthesises and discusses the key findings, notes some of the study’s limitations and strengths, and sets out several 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 thesis aims to shed light on what shapes different parenting arrangements in Australia, how these arrangements might be experienced, why they might come about, and how these arrangements might be working for parents and children.

Language

A brief note about language is warranted at the outset. The terms “contact” or “parenting time” will be used throughout this report (instead of “access” or “visitation”). Likewise the term “residence” is favoured over “custody”. This linguistic approach is in keeping with changes in 1996 to the *Family Law Act*

1975 (Cth), which, among other things, replaced the language of “guardianship”, “custody” and “access” with the less proprietorial “residence” and “contact” (*Family Law Reform Act 1995*). The language of “custody” and “access” is deeply imbued in the language of parents’ “rights”, adversarial process, and “winning” and “losing” children – none of which is conducive to helping parents to develop and sustain positive healthy relationships as parents, and with children.

A typology for categorising contact

Since much of this dissertation rests on classifying parents’ arrangements into five different patterns of care, the thinking behind this approach deserves comment. As de Vaus (1994) has pointed out, the way that a typology is developed shapes the labels and categories that flow from it. He distinguished *conceptual* (‘top down’) typologies from *empirical* (‘bottom up’, data-driven) typologies.

The typology developed here is a hybrid of each approach but with a strong empirical bent. The categories of “standard contact”, and of holiday-only or sporadic contact, grew out of anecdotal evidence that many parents opt for every-other-weekend arrangements or less frequent patterns of care. But in exploring parent–child contact in different Australian datasets over the past five years, it was also evident that some children spend near equal time with each parent after separation, others only see their non-resident parent in the day, and still others have little or no contact. Thus a five-category classification system – 50/50 “shared care”, little or no contact, holiday-only contact (later contrasted with “sporadic” contact involving no overnights), daytime-only contact, and “standard” contact – suggested itself as part of the early thinking for this investigation.

While there are likely to be many other ways of classifying patterns of parenting after separation, this typology looked to have intuitive appeal: it seemed to be grounded in the “real world” (being able to encompass most post-separation

patterns of care) while also pointing to some of the more qualitative dimensions of parent–child contact in time and space (such as nights, days, long blocks of time, and little or no time). For instance, overnight stays suggest a bed in a home, daytime-only contact may mean time in a park or in a car, while holiday-only contact may mean “fun” or sleeping on a fold-out bed. These potential experiences under different timeshare arrangements are explored more fully in Chapter 10 and 11, and form the basis of my central thesis: that the experience of time lies at the heart of parent–child contact, and that a multiplicity of temporal and experiential parent–child contexts is important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing. But before exploring these ideas, a review of the post-separation parenting literature is necessary.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Most Western countries continue to wrestle with high rates of relationship breakdown (de Vaus 1997, 2004; Gilding 1997). Australia is no exception. Around one third of all marriages in Australia are predicted to end in divorce (ABS 2002). Estimates of relationship breakdown are much higher, of course, when non-marital relationships and subsequent marriages are also considered, and a growing number of children in Australia, as elsewhere, are experiencing dramatic changes to the structure of their family through parental separation.

In 2003 over one million children in Australia under 18 were living with one natural parent and had a parent living elsewhere, usually because of marital dissolution or relationship breakdown (ABS 2004). This represents nearly one in four children in Australia. For 84 per cent of these children, the parent with whom they live is their mother. Many of these children – between one-quarter to one-third depending which dataset is used – appear to have little or no face-to-face contact with their father (ABS 2004; Parkinson and Smyth 2004).

While there is ongoing lively debate about the extent to which “father absence” is the *cause* of a plethora of social ills for children – from poor academic achievement to youth suicide (see, for example, Blankenhorn 1995; Popenoe 1996; Pryor and Rodgers 2001) – there remains sparse and inconsistent information on exactly how much and what type of contact occurs between non-resident fathers and their children after parental separation (Argys et al. 2003). Certainly in Australia, there is little information on some of the most basic aspects of contact, such as the distinction between daytime and night-time parenting, and holiday-only contact versus regular contact throughout the year.

This chapter summarises Australian studies into parent–child contact, as well as some of the major recent studies conducted in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.³ The aim of the chapter is to set out what is known about parent–child contact in English-speaking countries, what (if

any) substantive gaps exist, and which methodological approaches have been adopted. While the literature is somewhat patchy, different lines of investigation and methodological emphases have occurred in different countries. The literature is therefore sorted by country of origin.

It is important to note at the outset that small pockets of research from Australia and elsewhere are also summarised at the start of subsequent chapters. This is because these pockets of work act as useful context for making sense of the data presented. For instance, several studies of paternal disengagement are examined separately in Chapter 5 as context to the data on little or no father–child contact. Likewise, a small number of studies of relocation are examined separately in Chapter 6 as context to the focus group data on holiday-only contact. There is also an interesting – albeit abstract – literature on the potential links between self-identify, the experience of time, and ruptured relationships (as in the case of parental separation). But it makes sense to introduce this line of thought in Chapter 11 as part of the interpretive lens for understanding differential reporting by men and women. The allocation of literature in this way hopefully makes for a more focussed (self-contained) examination of studies of parent–child contact in this chapter, and a more balanced frame for understanding the many pieces of data presented elsewhere.

It is also worth noting that the following literature review has been guided by an analysis of 292 empirical studies of the impact of divorce on children and parents. This body of literature was examined in the formative stages of this research in the belief that it was the best place in which to locate studies of parent–child contact. To help develop the parameters of this research, a methodological question asked was: Which domains of parent–child contact have been measured, and how? Only 36 per cent of these studies reported measuring contact and, of these, most (around two thirds) focused only on the frequency or quantity of contact – this is despite emerging evidence that the nature and quality of contact is critical to good outcomes for children (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Whiteside and Becker 2000).⁴

Studies of parent–child contact: What do we know?

This literature review begins by examining the Australian studies of parent–child contact. Studies are ordered chronologically.

Australia

Most of the Australian studies of parent–child contact have been conducted with small to medium sized samples of Family Court clients, comprising either men or women. Some studies, nonetheless, have drawn on data from national random samples, comprising independent samples of men and women. Only a handful of studies include data collected directly from children.⁵

The first detailed study of parent–child contact in Australia began around the time of the introduction of the *Family Law Act 1975*. Burns (1980) surveyed 233 mothers and 102 fathers whose marriages had ended in the early 1970s.

Respondents replied to advertisements about the study in the Sydney media. Burns found that around half (52%) of the 469 children in the sample rarely or never saw their non-resident parent (father or mother); 27 per cent of children saw their non-resident fathers on a regular weekly or fortnightly basis. According to Burns, almost two-thirds (65%) of mothers whose children rarely or never saw fathers were satisfied with this level of contact; only half of the fathers expressed dissatisfaction with this. According to Burns “the exodus of non-custodial parents from their children’s lives was truly massive. This exodus was not, however, generally mourned, particularly amongst mothers” (p. 151).

In a much smaller study, Gilmour (1983) drew a sample of 40 separated men from the records of a capital city registry of the Family Court. In marked contrast to Burns’ findings, Gilmour found that most (79%) of the 24 non-resident fathers in the sample saw their children at least once a fortnight.

Also drawing on clients of the Family Court, Hirst and Smiley (1984) sought to gain better information about parent–child contact. They obtained a random

quota sample of 200 resident parents (88% were mothers) from all separating parents who came into contact with the Brisbane Registry of the Family Court between January and September 1977. Of these parents, 147 were interviewed face-to-face using a highly structured interview schedule. The average time since separation was three years.

Hirst and Smiley found that 22 per cent of non-resident parents in the sample had free or regular flexible contact with children, 15 per cent had regular fixed arrangements, 33 per cent had occasional contact, and 32 per cent had no contact of any sort with their children – according to resident parents. Only 17 per cent of non-resident parents had an every-other-weekend arrangement. This finding ran counter to the view that the “every second weekend” formula was favoured by the Family Court and the legal profession. Hirst and Smiley also found that agreements reached privately were more likely to be flexible and to be viewed as satisfactory by parents than arrangements determined judicially (see also Harrison 1986; Harrison and Tucker 1986), and that there was a tendency for contact to change and decrease over time.

Weir (1985) conducted face-to-face interviews with 70 resident parents to assess the type and level of contact that children had with their non-resident parent. These parents had been clients of the Melbourne Registry of the Family Court. Weir found that parent–child contact was an “important post-separation experience for both adults and children” (p. v). Unlike Hirst and Smiley’s (1984) earlier work, two-thirds (66%) of children ($n=138$) saw their non-resident parent for the weekend each fortnight (or more frequently) three years after separation. Weir found, like Hirst and Smiley, that litigation tended to produce more rigid arrangements than arrangements made privately.

In one of the earliest studies conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Ochiltree and Amato (1985) examined children’s views of family life. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a large number of primary and secondary school children in Victoria, and one parent (mainly mothers) of each child. Almost half the children sampled were living in sole parent or stepparent

families. Ochiltree and Amato found that most of the 146 children who no longer lived with their fathers nonetheless continued to see their fathers on a regular basis.⁶ Primary school children reported doing lots of different activities when they spent time with their fathers; most children mentioned going out and playing together (58% and 41% of children respectively). More than half (64%) of these children would have liked to spend more time with their fathers. By contrast, secondary school children reported staying at home, talking, and working together when they were in their father's care. Over half (57%) of the secondary school children who had contact were satisfied with the amount of time they had with their fathers. Nonetheless, 41 per cent of secondary children would have liked more time with their fathers.

Smiley, Chamberlain and Dalgeish (1987) also spoke with children, investigating the implications of marital separation. This work was supported by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Smiley et al. recruited three groups of children and parents: (i) 20 children whose parents had been separated for about one year; (ii) 22 children whose parents had been separated for about two to three years; and (iii) 28 children whose parents were still together. These families were recruited through schools, the media, and the Family Court in Brisbane. They found that the majority of separated parents (71%) had regular contact with their children, 21 per cent irregular contact, and only 7 per cent (three parents) had no contact at all. Parents who had been separated for two to three years were more likely to report regular and flexible contact than parents who had been separated for around one year. Smiley et al. suggested that children's adjustment to their parents' separation often mirrored their parents' adjustment – especially that of their resident parent; that most parents cope well through the divorce transition; and that most children seem to adjust reasonably quickly to their parents' separation.

It is helpful to pull together some of the disparate threads evident in the Australian studies of parent-child contact published in the 1980s. It seems that the first major study, conducted by Burns (1980), derived its impetus from the introduction of the *Family Law Act 1975*, and related questions about the impact

of the Act on Australian families. With the establishment of the Family Court, the Court itself began to develop its own interest in research (as evidenced by the in-house study by Weir, and by the Court allowing others access to Family Court samples). A range of sampling strategies (often targeting mothers and children) and different methodologies were nonetheless at play in the 1980s, and it seems that different estimates of contact emerged because of this. These trends appeared to continue in the 1990s.

McDonald (1990a, 1990b) investigated children's perceptions of parent-child contact after separation and their adjustment to separation. She collected information from 53 resident parents and their children who had come into contact with the Family Court counselling service in Newcastle, and where parent-child contact was occurring. She found that, while 10-15 per cent of resident parents reported no face-to-face parent-child contact, the majority of children (70%) "continued to have regular and in their view satisfactory access visits for some years following the separation" (1990a: 7).

Gibson (1992) surveyed 125 non-resident fathers who had come into contact with the Family Court counselling service in Sydney and Parramatta. To meet the selection criteria, the fathers needed to have at least one child aged 5-18 years, and to not have shared care or split care of the children. Gibson found that, two to three years after separation, almost half (48%) of non-resident fathers saw their children on a fortnightly or weekly basis with overnight stays, 16 per cent had a similar pattern of care but without overnight stays, 13 per cent reported occasional contact with overnight stays (usually in school holidays), and 23 per cent had little or no contact (15% had no face-to-face contact). Gibson interpreted these data to depict "a fairly positive picture of access arrangements" (p 26). She found distance and inter-parental conflict to be the two most potent predictors of contact. It is noteworthy that 16 per cent of non-resident fathers in Gibson's sample reported living more than 500 kilometres from their former partners.

McMurray and Blackmore (1993) conducted in-depth interviews with 68 non-resident fathers aged between 28 and 61 years. Fathers were recruited through the Perth media. Twenty-seven per cent of fathers saw their children weekly, while another 35 per cent had at least monthly face-to-face contact (mostly every other weekend); the remaining 38 per cent saw their children less frequently (some only in the school holidays or when their former partner allowed contact). Thematic analysis of the interview data suggested that the key predictor of contact was the (often poor) quality of the relationship between parents. McMurray and Blackmore noted that the overriding concern for fathers in the sample was missing the daily experience of children in their lives.

Funder (1993; 1996) contributed to one of the landmark studies of divorce in Australia – the *Settling Up-Settling Down* series (McDonald 1986; Funder, Harrison and Weston 1993). Drawing on a sample comprising 575 divorced parents who had two children, had been married for between 5-14 years, and had divorced in 1981 or 1983 through the Family Court, Funder explored post-separation patterns of parenting. Five hundred and twenty-three parents and their children (including 105 children from 55 families) were re-interviewed in 1987.

Funder found that more than 60 per cent of fathers saw their children at least once a year, and that only 13 per cent of parents in the study reported having had no contact of any kind with their children within the prior year. Like Gibson (1992), she concluded that the two most important factors that reduced contact with children were high levels of co-parental conflict and geographic distance between parents' households. Repartnering by fathers was also found to be related to less frequent contact.

Some commentary is again helpful. It is noteworthy that apart from the study by McDonald, the other studies conducted in the 1990s either focused on non-resident fathers (see Gibson 1992, and McMurray and Blackmore 1993), or at least included them (for example, Funder 1993). Children's reports featured in two of the four studies. Moreover, two of the four studies were in-house research conducted by the Court, while Funder's (1993) research accessed a sample of

divorced parents from the Court. The Family Court thus appeared to have a keen interest in monitoring the impact of the *Family Law Act 1975*. Although set-up in 1980 to monitor the wellbeing of Australian families, the Institute of Family Studies took some time for its work on contact (for example, Funder 1993) to emerge.⁷ This is partly because of the complex longitudinal nature of that work.

Studies conducted after the year 2000 have involved either national random samples from the general population or the Family Court. It is worth noting that almost a decade passed between published research into contact between 1993 and 2003 – partly reflecting an apparent drop off in research by the Family Court, and the loss in 1997 of one of the leading family law scholars in Australia, Dr Kathleen Funder, who was working on a follow-up study of parenting arrangements at the time.⁸

Building on Funder's early work, Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg (2001) surveyed a representative sample of 237 divorced parents (141 resident mothers, 96 non-resident fathers) in Australia.⁹ They found that non-resident fathers were more likely than resident mothers to report contact, either weekly (34% and 25% respectively) or fortnightly (38% and 19%). Almost three-quarters (72%) of non-resident fathers reported seeing their children at least fortnightly whereas only 44 per cent of resident mothers reported at least fortnightly father-child contact. Resident mothers (27%) were more likely than non-resident fathers (15%) to report that the non-resident parent rarely (once a year) or never saw his children. They also found that the frequency of contact by telephone and/or by letter tended to reflect the frequency of in-person contact: the more frequent the in-person contact, the more frequent other forms of contact tended to be.

Smyth et al. also found marked differences between resident mothers and non-resident fathers in their desire to change children's living arrangements. Few resident mothers (3%) 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.

Parkinson and Smyth (2004), drawing on nationally representative data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, found that 36 per cent of non-resident fathers had not had any face-to-face contact with their youngest child in the previous 12 months. Almost half of fathers reported having children stay overnight, while the remaining 17 per cent saw their children only during the day. Parkinson and Smyth found that repartnering and physical distance appeared to be linked to lower levels of father–child contact. The fact that many of the fathers who were not seeing their children also reported that they wanted more contact was interpreted by Parkinson and Smyth as evidence that a lack of contact did not mean disinterest. (This line of thought is examined more closely in Chapter 5.)

Hawthorne (2005) surveyed 260 non-resident fathers throughout Australia who had come into contact with the Family Court between 1998 and 2000, had separated between 1996-1998, and had only one child under 18. He found that 49 per cent of fathers saw their child at least once a week, 26 per cent at least monthly, 14 per cent at least several times a year, and 11 per cent once a year or less. Work commitments and former partners were the two most commonly reported impediments to parent–child contact.

Taken together, the Australian studies of parent–child contact focus heavily upon the amount of time that fathers spend with their children, with little information on how this time is spent. The findings show that: (a) as might be expected, contact is often influenced by inter-parental conflict, physical distance, and non-resident fathers' work patterns; (b) not surprisingly, different studies yield different estimates of the frequency of parent–child contact, with smaller Family Court samples producing higher estimates of contact frequency than larger Family Court or general population samples (estimates of little or no contact range from 10–52%; this range is likely to reflect different measures, methodologies, cohort effects, and sampling biases); and (c) many non-resident fathers report wanting to spend more time with children; likewise, many children report wanting to spend more time with their fathers.

The Australian studies appear to reflect a mix of both academic and government-funded research, with the key studies largely emanating from the Family Court or the Australian Institute of Family Studies. While pockets of research may have reflected policy imperatives (such as the work by Smyth et al. in 2001 in relation to the introduction of the *Family Law Reform Act 1995*), the general feel of the research is broad, academic, repetitive and patchy, and informed by sociology, psychology, and family law.

New Zealand

Four major studies of parent–child contact have been conducted in New Zealand – two quantitative, two qualitative. Both quantitative studies were published in 1990 by the Department of Justice.¹⁰ This body of research appears to have been initiated in an attempt to determine what parenting arrangements separating families in New Zealand had in place, given that other English-speaking countries had been exploring these issues for some time.

Maxwell, Robertson and Vincent (1990) investigated how decisions about children were made after separation, what arrangements were arrived at, and parents' satisfaction with those arrangements. They drew a random sample of 528 first time clients (ex-couples where possible) of the Family Court from four registries: Otahuhu, Hamilton, Wellington, and Christchurch. Maxwell et al. found that about half of all residence and contact issues were resolved privately without any help from the court, with only a minority of separating couples seeking judicial intervention from the Court in resolving matters relating to children. They also found that little or no contact was far more likely to occur when the court was involved in decision-making than when parents were able to reach their own agreement themselves (rare or no contact: 20% vs 8%). Moreover, those who were able to reach their own agreements about children were more likely to report being satisfied with the decisions than those who relied on counsellors, lawyers or judges in the making of a decision or where the decision was made unilaterally by the other partner (80% vs ~60%).

Lee (1990) conducted a large longitudinal survey of parent–child contact in New Zealand. She surveyed 490 divorcing couples (980 people) who obtained a dissolution of their marriage for the period 21 March to 30 April; 581 individuals completed the initial questionnaire. Parents had been separated on average for about four years. Lee noted that non-resident parents were inclined to report more frequent parent–child contact than resident parents. Contact also tended to drop off over time. Specifically, where contact was occurring, the majority of children tended to see their non-resident parent at least fortnightly: six months after separation, 57 per cent of resident parents, and 71 per cent of non-resident parents, reported this; one year after separation, 50 per cent of resident parents, and 66 per cent of non-resident parents, reported this; two years after separation, this decreased to 41 per cent of resident parents, and 60 per cent of non-resident parents.

Similar to many of the Australian studies summarised earlier, Lee found that a sizeable proportion of children did not see their non-resident parent at all. This proportion increased over time: six months after separation, 18 per cent of resident parents and 15 per cent of non-resident parents reported no parent–child contact. Six months later, these percentages increased to 22 per cent of resident parents and 16 per cent of non-resident parents. By two years after separation, 25 per cent of resident parents and 16 per cent of non-resident parents reported no parent–child contact occurring.

Not surprisingly, Lee also found that resident parents tended to be more satisfied than non-resident parents with the contact arrangements. Around 26 per cent of non-resident parents were dissatisfied with the arrangements six months after separation, compared with 12 per cent of resident parents. Nonetheless, according to resident and non-resident parents' reports, children generally enjoyed spending time with both parents (see also Hall and Lee 1994).

Taking a more qualitative tack, Smith et al. (1997) examined children's, parents' and lawyers' perspectives on parent–child contact and related post-separation issues. Twelve families took part in the study (12 mothers, 11 fathers, and 27

children and young people aged 5-20). Seven lawyers were also interviewed. The most popular arrangement was for children to see their non-resident parent every-other-weekend (5/12 families) or every weekend (3/12 families). Three other families had a shared care arrangement, while children in one family travelled from the South Island of New Zealand to the North Island every 3 or 4 weeks to see their father who had moved there. A majority of the children reported that they had little involvement in the decision-making process about their living and care arrangements. Nonetheless most – but not all – children reported being satisfied with the level and type of contact. One of the most important conclusions drawn from the study was that children have clear views about the experience of their parents' separation, and are extremely capable of expressing these views.

Using a multiple case study approach, Fleming and Atkinson (1999) interviewed 40 families in which the adults had remarried, and one or both had children from a previous union. Four open-ended interviews were conducted: one with the couple together, one with each adult separately, and one with children (19 interviews with 35 children; some individually, others jointly).¹¹ Remarriage families, suggests Fleming and Atkinson, differ in important ways to other families. Their study sought to chart some of these differences. Fleming and Atkinson found that the most common pattern of care was for the children to see their non-resident parent every-other-weekend and half of each school holiday. But there were also other variants of this including shared care, half of school holidays only, or contact every third weekend. One of the key findings of the study was the frequent changes in contact patterns over time; these changes reflected many different life changes more generally – including children's wishes, relocation by a parent, and repartnering. Fleming and Atkinson's study highlights the often fluid, subtle and complex shifts in family dynamics as families change over time. Shifts in patterns of care are one thread in these shifting dynamics.

Although small in number, the New Zealand studies straddle academic and policy interests. No large-scale studies, drawing on data from a national random

sample of the general population, have been conducted. Such studies would help to confirm the patterns found for once-married couples travelling through the Family Court.

United Kingdom

There have been at least four major studies of parent–child contact conducted in the United Kingdom over the past decade.¹² Two of these studies sought to improve understanding of non-resident fathers; another study looked at parenthood across households more broadly; and one other, at parent–child contact specifically.

Simpson, McCarthy and Walker (1995) surveyed 91 non-resident fathers who were part of a cohort of families who had passed through the British divorce courts during 1986. Non-resident fathers in the sample (along with their former wives and children) received a series of questionnaires over a five-year period since passing through the court system. In-depth interviews were also carried out in 1992. Simpson and his colleagues found that, some five years after divorce, a significant proportion (23%) of fathers had no contact of any kind with their children; 38 per cent of fathers had at least weekly contact; 23 per cent had weekly to monthly contact; and 16 per cent had less than monthly contact with children (see also Ford, Marsh and Finlayson 1998). Over time, the frequency of contact decreased. Around half (49%) of fathers wanted to change contact arrangements, and almost a quarter of fathers wanted a change in residence arrangements. Simpson found physical distance between parents to be the best predictor of contact frequency. They did not find the quality of the parents' relationship to be related to contact frequency but were quick to point out that the frequency of contact may not be the best outcome variable to focus on – overnight stays may be a more meaningful indicator of meaningful parenting time since this allows for more “sustained and meaningful contact with children” (p. 22).

Maclean and Eekelaar (1997) sought to examine the extent to which emotional and financial support for children differ by parents' relationship status prior to separation – never lived together, never married, and married. They conducted face-to-face structured interviews with 249 parents (78% were resident parents – mostly female [94%]; 22 per cent were non-resident parents – mostly male [91%]). Participants were recruited from a large national random Omnibus telephone survey. They found that there was a much higher degree of parent–child contact where parents had been married compared with parents who had never lived together or never married – perhaps because it represents “a higher degree of investment in the parental relationship” (p. 132). For example, 69 per cent of once married parents reported continuing parent–child contact compared with 35 per cent and 45 per cent of parents who had never lived together or who had never married respectively. In a perhaps starker example of this effect, only 5 per cent of once married parents reported “no parent–child contact ever” compared with 39 per cent and 14 per cent of parents who had never lived together or who had never married respectively. Where contact was occurring, the most common arrangements were for it to happen once (24%) or twice (13%) per week – without overnight stays. Overnight stays occurred in 25 per cent cases. Equal (or near) equal care appeared to occur in somewhere between two and ten per cent of cases. Maclean and Eekelaar made the interesting observation that although parent–child contact often reflects the quality of the parental relationship, it can also operate to improve the co-parental relationship in the longer term.

Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams (1999) sought to improve knowledge about the circumstances of non-resident fathers in Britain. They surveyed 626 non-resident fathers, and then conducted subsequent in-depth interviews with fathers in two sub-groups; one interview focussed on parent–child contact; the other, on child support. Participants were recruited from two existing Omnibus telephone surveys that could identify non-resident fathers. Bradshaw et al. found that 21 per cent of fathers had not seen their children in the year prior, while another 10 per cent had only seen their children once or twice in the past year. By contrast, 47 per cent saw their children at least once each week; 14 per cent,

at least once a fortnight, and 7 per cent, at least once a month. Bradshaw and his colleagues noted that contact was more frequent when the father was working (and paying child support), lived near the children's mother, the children were young, and the father had no new children living with him. The quality of the co-parental relationship was also found to be an important predictor of contact, and potentially related to his (or his former partner's) repartnering status.

Trinder, Beek and Connolly (2002) investigated how parents and children negotiate and experience contact after divorce. They conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 48 resident parents, 35 non-resident parents, and 57 children (aged 11 years, on average) from a total of 61 families. Half the families had made their parenting arrangements entirely by themselves. Families were recruited from a range of sources, including the Family Court, British media, and a supervised contact centre.

Trinder and her colleagues found that the quantity and quality of parent-child contact "varied tremendously" (p. v). They identified nine different patterns of care within three broad groupings: (a) *consensual committed* arrangements, where parents and children were all committed to regular contact and co-parental conflict was low or contained; (b) *faltering* arrangements, where contact was sporadic or had stopped, without court involvement; and (c) *conflicted* arrangements, where disputes occurred about the type of level of contact because of role conflicts or perceptions of risk.

According to Trinder, Beek and Connelly's typology, the *consensual committed* grouping embodies three subtypes: *reconfigured continuing* families, in which there is regular parent-child contact, and friendly relationships between parents; *flexible bridgers*, in which ad hoc contact arrangements were made, and parents co-operated together to overcome various logistical barriers to contact; and the *tensely committed*, where both parents were committed to ongoing, frequent parent-child contact but in the face of a degree of parental tension. Under the *faltering* contact grouping, those described by Trinder et al. as *ambivalently erratic* (which applies to both parents) are ambivalent about the importance of

contact, and no arrangement or schedule had ever been adhered to or followed. Finally, under the *conflicted* grouping, five subtypes are identified: *competitively enmeshed*, in which both parents fight about their respective roles but do not go to court to do this; *conflicted in separated worlds*, in which contact issues are resolved by having no contact with each other (that is, “parallel parenting”); *rejected retreaters*, in which parents sought a judicial intervention, and the non-resident parent withdrew following a court battle; *ongoing battling*, in which parents went to court but still continued to fight about contact; and *contingent contact*, whereby parent–child contact was maintained but was conditional on informal and formal risk management strategies.

More broadly, Trinder et al. found that (a) parent–child contact can place significant demands on children and parents; (b) no single factor – or indeed family member – is responsible for making contact work or not work; and (c) high quality parenting time requires significant proactive efforts – not merely the absence of problems between parents. This study appears to be one of the few studies that has attempted to identify and understand the often complex and primitive interpersonal dynamics surrounding the negotiation of contact, and the outcomes for family members of this process.

The recent UK studies have a strong academic bent, and appear to reflect a need to understand parent–child contact from the non-resident fathers’ view – perhaps in line with mounting pressure in recent years by non-resident fathers for more contact to occur. This strand of research is both rich and erudite.

United States of America

Most research into relationship breakdown more broadly has been conducted in the United States. As a consequence, most studies of parent–child contact are set in the US context. Eight empirical studies stand out in this literature, and are described below.

In their landmark study of how children and parents cope with divorce, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) interviewed 60 families (including 131 children aged 1-22 years) who had come into contact with a divorce counselling service in California. They found that, five years after the separation, most fathers in the sample continued to see their children and remained interested in their children's lives. Indeed "45 per cent of children and adolescents, as compared to two-thirds seen after separation, continued to enjoy 'reasonable visitation'" nearly five years after the separation (p. 236). Only nine per cent of children had no contact with their fathers. Wallerstein and Kelly also found that younger children were more likely than older children to spend overnights and weekends with their fathers, but with age, children's time with their fathers became briefer.

Furstenberg and Nord (1985), drawing on a large national random sample of US children aged 11-16, conducted another of the early landmark studies. This study remains one of the most commonly cited, perhaps because its estimate of paternal disengagement was so high. Furstenberg and Nord (1985) found that almost half (49%) of children in the study had not seen their non-resident parents in the past 12 months, only one child in six averaged weekly contact or better, and four out of five children reported that they had not stayed overnight at their non-resident fathers' house in the past month. Furstenberg and Nord (1985) concluded that "most children have little contact with their non-resident parents, and what contact there is tends to be social rather than instrumental" (p. 893).¹³

Drawing on data from a 1981 national random survey, Seltzer and Bianchi (1988) also investigated the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident biological parents. Similar to Furstenberg and Nord, they found that a substantial proportion of children had little or no contact with their non-resident parent. Among children living mainly with their mother, 35 per cent never saw their father, while another 24 per cent saw their father less than once a month. Seltzer and Bianchi found that the two best predictors of the frequency of contact were whether the resident parent had repartnered, and the time since separation. Children who lived with a stepparent were less likely to have contact than

children who did not live with a step- or adoptive parent. Father–child contact also generally diminished over time.

Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) explored how children fared with different patterns of care after divorce. These researchers examined data from a sample of around 1,100 Californian families recruited through the divorce courts, interviewed at three points in time after parents had separated. They found that “three and a half years after parental separation, there were very few children who had not seen their fathers within the past year, and most children in mother-residence families were visiting on a regular basis” (p. 198).¹⁴ They also observed that where children had contact and stayed overnight with their non-resident parent, the most common pattern was alternate weekend contact.

Building on the Maccoby and Mnookin study, Buchannon, Maccoby and Dornbusch (1996) interviewed 522 adolescents aged between 10 and 18 years inclusive who were the children of parents interviewed in the original study. Buchannon et al. found that “continuing practical – as well as emotional – ties existed for the great majority of adolescents whose parents had separated four and a half years earlier” (p.147). Most adolescents in the sample were satisfied with the time spent with each parent. Those dissatisfied wanted to see more of their non-resident parent rather than less. While distance between parents’ homes surfaced as a key predictor of contact, the level of co-parental conflict was also implicated – but only insofar as it related to the resident mothers’ level of hostility early after the separation. Buchannon et al. reasoned that resident mothers can function as “gatekeepers” to minimise parent–child contact during this critical time when families are being reformed. One of the most significant findings of the study is that children can do well regardless of whether they are living with their mother, father, or in a shared arrangement – so long as these arrangements were made in the best interests of children.

Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Fogas and Bay (1993) drew on a three-wave longitudinal dataset (comprising both mothers’ and fathers’ reports) to predict parent–child contact patterns and child support payments. They found that non-

resident parents (mostly fathers) tended to report more parent–child contact than resident parents (mostly mothers), and that the most potent predictor of parent–child contact and child support payments was a non-resident parent’s perception that he or she “had some control over the child’s upbringing” (p. 9). Drawing on social exchange theory, they also found support for the idea that “the greater the perceived rewards and the less the perceived costs of the parent–child relationship, the greater the parental involvement is predicted to be (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler and Sheets 1993: 90).

Stephens (1996: 466) sought to examine the determinants of parent–child contact, and to assess the relative worth of three sociological explanations for what shapes contact: (a) *social parenting* (in which new relationships and new children can act to constrain contact with first-family children), (b) *marital-involvement parenting* (in which the fathers’ level of involvement with his children during marriage may shape his level of involvement post-separation, with the age and gender of children acting as potential proxies for pre-separation involvement), and (c) *socioeconomic-advantaged parenting* (in which the level of paternal involvement can be explained by parents’ socio-economic characteristics – seeing children requires considerable finances, especially for overnight stays). Drawing on representative data from the US National Survey of Families and Households collected in 1998, Stephens found that fathers in the US appear to have limited contact with their children after divorce that further diminishes over time. (Around 27% of non-resident fathers in the sample saw their children at least weekly; 25%, several times a month; 21%, several times a year; 11%, once a year; and 16% reported not seeing their children at all.)

Stephens found support for the socioeconomic-advantaged parenting perspective; mixed support for the social-parenting perspective; and no support for the marital-involvement perspective. Specifically, socio-economic resources (and physical distance) were shown to be related to weekly father–child contact, such that better educated, higher earning fathers who lived closer to children were more likely to see their children each week than less educated fathers who lived further away and had fewer financial resources (the socioeconomic-advantaged

perspective). Stephens also found that repartnering by fathers was more likely to reduce parent–child contact than repartnering by resident mothers (the *social-parenting perspective*) (see also Cooksey and Craig 1998). However, pre-separation factors did not predict post-divorce father–child contact (the *marital involvement-perspective*).¹⁵ (Skevic recently found a similar pattern of results in Norway (Skevic, in press).)

Finally, one other important US study warrants mention. In an 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. Lye also 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. Lye’s findings point to the importance of family law professionals in the development of post-separation parenting arrangements.

The major US studies into parent–child contact are grounded in a range of samples and methodologies. Those based on large random samples of the general population tend to suggest less frequent parent–child contact than smaller (more homogenous) samples drawn from divorce counselling centres or recruited through divorce courts from one jurisdiction. The US studies appear to be more developed conceptually than those conducted elsewhere, with several seeking to test theoretical propositions (as opposed to being data-driven). Nonetheless, like most other studies, the frequency of parent–child contact seems to be the main yardstick by which paternal engagement is assessed.

Canada

Canada has only recently started to conduct large-scale empirical research into parent–child contact. Some small-scale qualitative work has also been conducted (for example, Sage Research Group 2000).

Perry, Bolitho, Isenegger and Paetsch (1992: xi) conducted one of the earliest empirical studies of parent–child contact in Canada. In the context of a lack of good information about contact, they sought to estimate the prevalence of parent–child contact, and to identify “child access problems” in Alberta. They sent a questionnaire to 30 resident parents and 45 non-resident parents identified from a large representative sample of 890 adults in the general population. Non-resident parents were more likely than resident parents to label parent–child contact as problematic, more likely to perceive their circumstances as “very difficult” or strained”, and more likely to be in favour of shared care (p. 28).

Marcil-Grattan and Le Bourdais (1999), drawing on Wave 1 data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, examined the living arrangements of children of separated parents and patterns of parent–child contact. These data were the first available national data on these issues in Canada. Marcil-Grattan and Le Bourdais (1999) found that 30 per cent of children saw their father every week, another 16 per cent saw him fortnightly, 25 per cent saw him irregularly (once a month or in holidays), while 15 per cent never saw their father. Seven per cent of parents reported shared care. Children whose parents had never married were more likely to not see their father than children whose parents had been married. Parent–child contact was also found to diminish over time.

More recently, Le Bourdais, Juby and Marcil-Grattan (2001) analysed data from the General Social Science Survey of the Family collected in 1995 in order to explore separated fathers’ reports of parent–child contact. They found that almost one-third (30%) of fathers had very frequent contact with their children, almost one-quarter (23%) had fairly regular contact, 23 per cent had low levels of

contact, and another 23 per cent had little or no contact with children.¹⁶ They also found that more father–child contact was likely to occur when (a) children were older, rather than younger, (b) parents lived near each other, (c) fathers were in regular full-time employment, rather than in part-time employment (and thus had more money than their part-time employed counterparts), and (d) had a positive attitude towards fatherhood (which, of course, could reflect the experience of contact itself).

Most recently, Moyer (2004) interviewed 50 separated parents who had registered for a divorce in Edmonton, Calgary or Alberta between 1998 and 2000. All of the parents had children in their care for at least 40 per cent of the time. Moyer found that (a) children’s living arrangements had remained reasonably stable for most of the families in the study, (b) most of the parents reported being able to get along with their children’s other parent (most were in frequent contact and were friendly to each other), and (d) most were happy with their parenting arrangements, and thought the arrangements were working well for their children. Most of the parents in the sample had worked out their arrangements for the care of children informally over time – without any legal intervention – and admitted to being in relatively high socio-economic circumstances (almost all of the parents were working full-time).

These Canadian findings are generally consistent with data from Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

Summary

This review of over 30 studies of parent–child contact suggests that many similarities exist across the literature from Australia and other English-speaking countries. Most studies suggest that: (a) little or no face-to-face contact is far more likely to occur when the court is involved in decision-making than when parents are able to reach agreement themselves; (b) non-resident parents tend to report higher levels of parent–child contact than resident parents; (c) contact typically drops off over time as children reach their teens; and (d) every-other-

weekend patterns of face-to-face contact are common after separation, with some diversity in form.

The literature also suggests that the level of contact between children and non-resident parents is typically related to the quality of the co-parental relationship, distance between parents' homes, the relationship status of parents at separation (married, never married or never lived together) and post-separation (repartnered or single), non-resident parents' employment status, and the perception that they can make a difference to their children's lives. That is to say, parent-child contact is more likely to occur than not occur when parents can get along, parents live near their former partner, parents were married, parents do not repartner and have no new children to support or care for, children are young, fathers are working full-time, and fathers believe that they can make a difference to children's lives.

Like the Australian research, quantitative dimensions of contact (most notably, frequency and quantity) dominate the research landscape overseas, with considerable variation in the level of little or no contact reported – again largely reflecting differing methodologies, samples and measures.

Parent-child contact and children's wellbeing

As noted by Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Fogas and Bay (1993), the two behaviours that exert the greatest impact on children after parental separation are the payment of child support and the level and quality of the relationship between parents and children. Thus a brief overview of the literature on the links between contact and children's wellbeing is germane. While a voluminous and complex literature exists on these links, findings from three recent meta-analytic reviews are informative.

Amato and Gilbreth (1999) conducted a meta-analytic review of 63 studies examining non-resident fathers and children's wellbeing. They found that the quality of contact is more important than the amount of contact in terms of good

post-divorce outcomes for children. They suggest that “authoritative parenting”, encompassing warmth and involvement, the encouragement of psychological autonomy, and monitoring and boundary setting, is an important dimension of relationship quality in both one and two parent families.

Similarly, Whiteside and Becker (2000) conducted a meta-analytic review of young children’s post-divorce adjustment. They too found that “warm, authoritative fathering is most likely associated with better child functioning” – not the amount of father–child contact *per se* (p. 21). Accordingly they suggested that any:

... discussion with parents needs to shift from a preoccupation with number of overnights to a more complicated assessment of the parenting environment. A particular schedule provides time and opportunity for a parent to be in a relationship with the child, but given that opportunity, what transpires between the parent and child is most important (p. 21).

Bauserman’s (2002: 91) meta-analytic review of 33 studies comparing child adjustment in joint- versus sole-custody parenting arrangements is one of the most widely cited recent studies of post-separating parenting outcomes.

Bauserman found that children in joint custody (physical and/or legal):

were better adjusted than children in sole-custody settings, but no different from those in intact families.... The results are consistent with the hypothesis that joint custody can be advantageous for children in some cases, possibly by facilitating ongoing positive involvement with both parents.¹⁷

However, a number of studies point out that parental conflict is typically a confounding variable in comparative work across different types of parenting arrangements (such as shared care versus sole maternal care) since most parents who opt for shared care are likely to be self-selected for low conflict. Most studies (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Bauserman 2002; Lee 2002; Pryor and Daly-Peoples 2001) conclude that the most negative consequences for children result from being caught up in continued conflict between parents.

Summary

While there is ongoing debate about which post-divorce parenting arrangements are “best” for children, the overseas evidence points to the following conclusions.

First, 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). 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).

Second, 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).

Third, despite a pre-occupation with allocations of parenting time (that is, the *quantum* of time) by many parents, legal professionals and courts¹⁸, 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.

Fourth, 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 – not any particular pattern of care. (For excellent overviews of this literature, see AIFS 2003; Arendell 1996; Benjamin and Irving 1989; Lye 1999; Moyer 2004; Pryor and Rodgers 2001.) As with Ricci’s “commonly held truths”, these points should be borne in mind when exploring different patterns of care because they are likely to underpin the extent to which these arrangements function well or badly for children.

The need for a more comprehensive approach

The literature on parent–child contact sits between two conceptual bookends: the first appears to have its historical roots based in early “absence/presence” binary models (Day and Lamb 2004), in which contact is conceptualised as either happening or not happening – with little in-between; the second bookend seems to have quantity as its focus – be that in the form of the amount or frequency of parent–child contact.

While many of the basic predictors, correlates and outcomes of parent–child contact are known, family sociologists and family law scholars in the United States (especially, Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Argys et al. 2003; Melli 1999) have begun to call for the collection of more detailed information on the level and type of contact that occurs – information that can take account of the multiple qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share the care of children. In short, the apparently myopic and monolithic pre-occupation with contact frequency and quantity in post-separation parenting research is poised to move towards more nuanced conceptual frameworks that can identify and shed light on the diversity of experience of different patterns of care. A mixed-model design, in which both quantitative and qualitative

information are collected on different patterns of care, can break new ground here.

In this thesis, an attempt is made to explore some of the more qualitative and quantitative dimensions of contact by comparing five different patterns of parent–child contact – (i) 50/50 shared care, (ii) little or no contact, (iii) holiday-only contact, (iv) daytime-only contact, and (v) “standard” contact (reported to occur every-other-weekend and half of each school holidays) – and examining a representative sample of parent–child contact schedules. This conceptual lens acts as a new analytic prism in which to explore these dimensions. If nothing else, the patchy and at times repetitious nature of the preceding literature review suggests the need for a fresh conceptual tack.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter describes the study's research design. This design aims to help answer the research question: which separated parents opt for which pattern of care and why? Two types of data are used: qualitative data derived from focus groups; and quantitative data derived from three national random surveys. Each type of data and its source and limitations are now described.

Qualitative data

Dataset 1: Focus groups

This thesis draws on qualitative data derived from a series of focus groups conducted by the author at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. These data were collected as part of the development of a larger study of parent-child contact after separation – the Institute's *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project*. The focus group component 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.

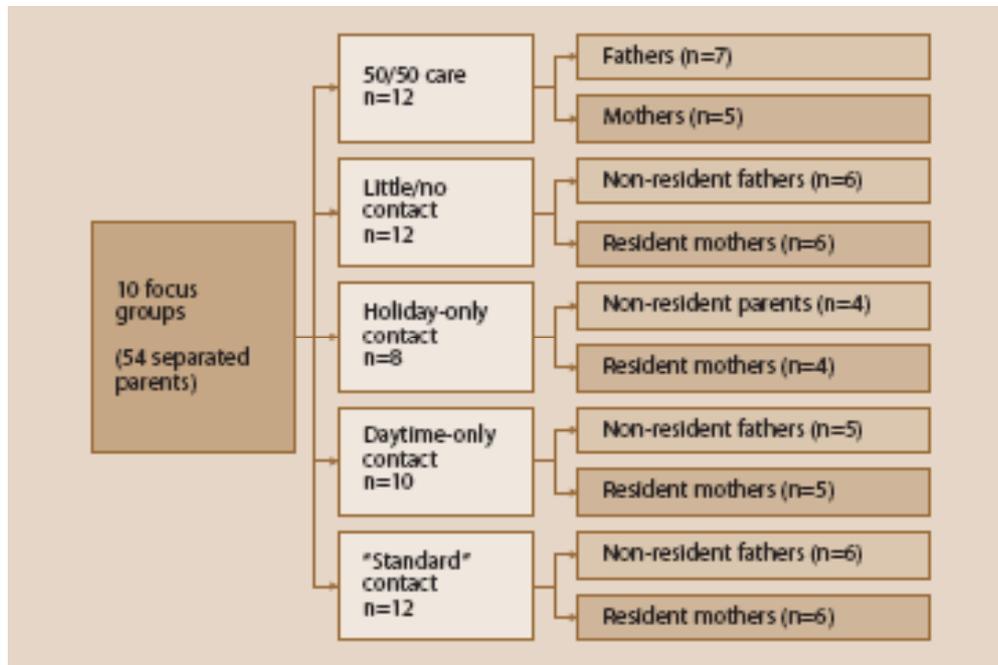
Focus groups encourage spontaneous self-disclosure among people who are similar in certain characteristics of interest (for example, parents who have recently divorced) (Krueger and Casey 2000). They are an efficient way to obtain a rich understanding of what people think, feel, and have experienced (Morgan 1998). Much of the power of focus groups appears to lie in the way that individuals can bounce ideas off each other in a synergistic fashion, and respond to similar shared experiences or sets of beliefs – such that the group is greater than the sum of the individuals within it. Facilitated group discussion can provide safe emotional space and a permissive environment for group members to discuss and explore sensitive issues of mutual interest. Focus groups are particularly well suited as an exploratory technique when (a) little is known

about an issue, and (b) an efficient, information-rich approach is sought.¹⁹ Focus groups with family law professionals and separated parents have been used with much success overseas to help understand patterns of parenting after separation (see, for example, Lye 1999; SAGE Research Corporation 2000).

Ten focus groups were conducted in the present investigation (see Figure 4). 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, which included one female²⁰) comprised same-sex respondents to minimise the risk of conflict or gender power differentials, 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.

Figure 4. Focus groups and the respective group numbers



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.

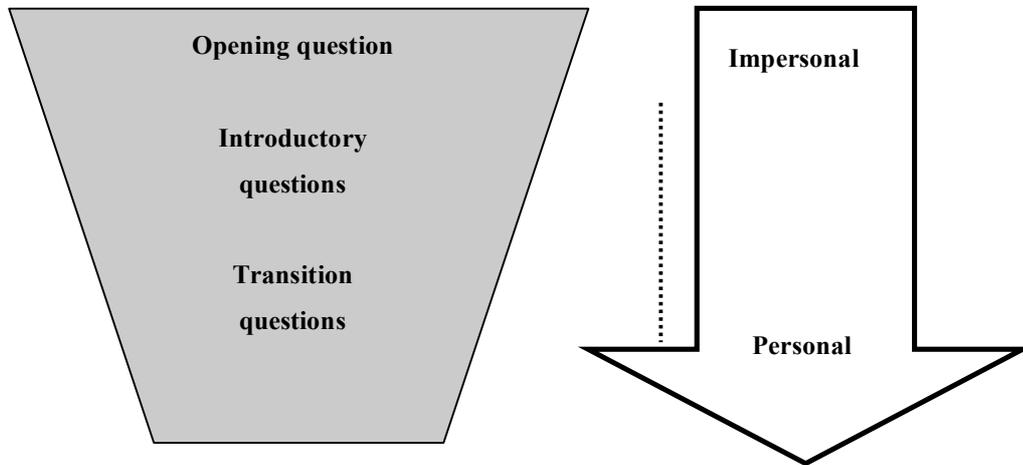
The final sample for the focus group component of the study comprised 54 separated parents (27 mothers; 27 fathers), each of whom had at least one child under 18 years at interview. Apart from one mother and father, parents were not matched pairs of ex-couples.

The age range of the youngest biological child of each respondent was generally between six and ten 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%) 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 5). 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 5. 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. 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.

With informed consent of participants, each of the focus groups were audio-taped, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Profiles of each of the focus group participants who appear in the focus chapters (Chapters 4–8) are presented in Appendix 2.²¹

Caveats

Given the small-scale non-probability design, observations are framed as “insights” rather than findings generalisable to the wider population. These insights, embedded throughout Chapters 4–8, may help to generate hypotheses for subsequent larger scale work.

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 focus groups, only two of the 54 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” (Iiydén 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.

Quantitative data

Three quantitative datasets are used: the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, the Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project, and the Family Characteristics Survey (FCS).

Dataset 2: HILDA

In an effort to place the small-scale qualitative focus group data in the wider national picture, data collected in 2001 for Wave 1 of the HILDA survey (see Watson and Wooden 2002 for more detailed information about the survey) were examined.

HILDA data are collected through face-to-face structured interviews. This 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 candidate, as part of his work at 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.

Participants

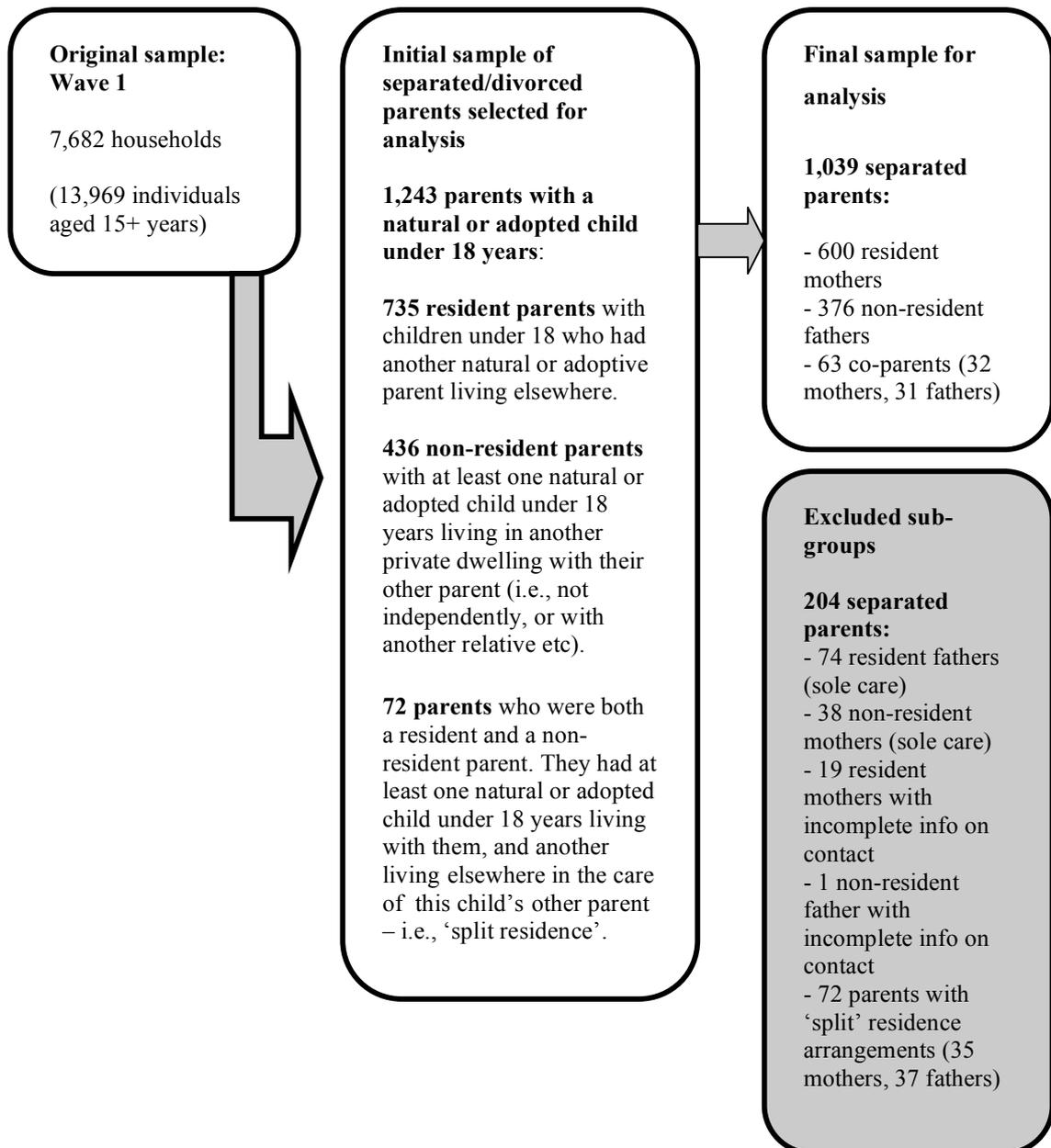
Of the 13,969 household members interviewed in the HILDA survey at Wave 1, 1243 were separated/divorced parents with at least one child under 18 years old. Of these, 63 parents who indicated that their child spent at least 30 per cent of the time with each parent (5% of the sample) and the two largest groups in the sample were selected: resident mothers ($n=600$: 48% of the sample) and non-resident fathers ($n=376$: 30% of the sample) (thus $N=1039$). As with the focus group data, women and men were independent groups rather than matched pairs of former couples.

Sample

The sample on which the analysis in this thesis is based comprises 1,039 parents (see Figure 6). 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).

Figure 6. HILDA sampling strategy



Analytic groups

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 1 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 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.²²

Caveats

Three caveats warrant mention in relation to the HILDA data. To begin with, 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). Thus all analyses in this thesis focus 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.²³

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.

Dataset 3: Caring for Children after Parental Separation

To map the detail of parent–child contact, data from the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project* were also examined. This study was conceptualised and managed by the author, and conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2003. Data were collected by the Institute through computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) lasting approximately 40 minutes.

Participants

The sample comprised 971 separated parents (56% women; 44% men) who had either separated or divorced (or had never lived together) and who had at least one child under the age of 18 years.

The majority of the parents had been married to the child’s other parent (72%); 23 per cent had been living in a de facto relationship but had not married the other parent; 5 per cent had never lived with the other parent. Parents who had lived together had been separated for an average of five years, with almost 12 per cent having separated for less than 12 months. Women ranged in age from 19 to 56 years (median age 38 years); men’s ages ranged from 18-74 (with 95% being no more than 55 years old; median age 42 years).

Eighty-four per cent of mothers were resident parents; 63 per cent of fathers were non-resident parents. The next largest group was resident fathers (17% of fathers), while a small proportion of mothers were non-resident parents (5% of mothers). Around 5-7 per cent of mothers and fathers reported “split” arrangements (that is, each parent had at least one child of the former relationship in their care). Thirteen per cent of fathers ($n=57$) and 7 per cent of

mothers ($n=37$) indicated that the children lived with them for at least 30 per cent of the time (that is, parents had “shared care”).

The sample was obtained through random digit dialling, and was stratified by gender and geographical location from the population of Australian households with landline telephones. Random digit dialling has a number of benefits, including the ability to make contact with unlisted numbers. The proportion of unlisted numbers has increased markedly in recent years, adding bias to samples drawn from the electronic telephone databases.

To obtain the target sample, more than 163,000 telephone calls were made around Australia. Of these calls, 46 per cent (74,618) of households were not contactable (primarily because the number was either invalid, had been disconnected, was connected to a business, or there was no reply). Of the households known to contain a person who met the sample selection criteria, around 35 per cent of respondents agreed to participate in the interview.

Survey content

The survey sought information on a broad range of issues, including respondents’ parenting arrangements, decision-making responsibilities, wellbeing, and demographic circumstances.

Methodological issues

Two methodological issues warrant brief mention. First, the unit of analysis was a former partner from a former relationship (committed or otherwise). In no instance were both ex-partners interviewed. This means that differential reporting and any sample biases cannot be distinguished. Differential reporting by men and women is a common feature of research of this nature, while the sensitive nature of surveys of relationship breakdown may be off-putting to certain types of respondents (such as those who do not see their children or who do not provide financial support for them).

Second, since not everyone is accessible by telephone, the omission of certain groups of people in the population not available through telephone surveys sets limits on the generalisations that can be made from the data to the Australian population at large. While random digit dialling overcomes a number of sampling issues (for example, accessing women who have an unlisted number because of the experience of abuse, and parents who have recently moved residence and whose telephone numbers have not yet been listed), certain groups are nonetheless often systematically excluded, including the very poor, those with only mobile telephone numbers (such as non-resident fathers who are highly mobile), and those who have hearing or English language difficulties (Bennett and Steel 2000).

Dataset 4: Family Characteristics Survey

One other dataset that can offer unique insights into post-separation patterns of parenting is the 2003 Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 2004).²⁴ This survey is a supplement to the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Monthly Population Survey*, which is a national random sample comprising around 30,000 households. This large-scale national survey maps patterns of parental care for children aged less than 18 years whose parents live apart. It is important to note that only the reports of resident parents are sought about parent–child contact. The data are collected through face-to-face interviews. Data from the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 2004) were purchased as a set of customised tables from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Summary

This study's methodology is based on a mixed-methods design: in-depth qualitative data from focus groups are used to help understand separated parents' arrangements, motives, and reflections; quantitative data are then used to (a) estimate the prevalence of different patterns of care, (b) profile separated parents with different arrangements, and (c) provide some of the empirical detail of the arrangements that parents have in place for the care of their children. This is the

first time that such breadth and depth of data have been used in Australia to explore parent–child contact after parental separation.

CHAPTER 4: FIFTY-FIFTY CARE

In this and the next four chapters, qualitative data from each of the focus groups are presented. The intention is to allow the focus group participants to do as much of the talking as possible so that different family members' experiences of the many ways that contact can occur can be accessed.

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.

To recap: the five different patterns of care examined are: (a) 50/50 shared care (this chapter), (b) little or no contact (Chapter 5), (c) holiday-only contact (Chapter 6), (d) daytime-only contact (Chapter 7), and (e) “standard” contact (Chapter 8). This typology of parent–child contact patterns was developed specifically for this investigation.

Each chapter begins with a brief overview to provide some context for each pattern of care. These chapters explore the arrangements, motives, and reflections of parents who have different parenting arrangements after separation.

50/50 shared care

Superficially, 50/50 care of children 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).

As noted in Chapter 1, in 2003 the Australian Government 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. Yet, in its recent report on the exposure draft of the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2005*, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs has recommended a return to the language of "equal time" parenting (see Recommendation 4, Commonwealth of Australia 2005b: 19). The debate continues.

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).

The push for 50/50 care in Australia likely reflects a broader push in most western countries towards the fostering of parent-child contact more generally (what some feminist commentators, such as Rhoades, Harrison and Graycar

(2000), describe as the “pro-contact culture”). Trinder (2003) has identified three clear social forces in relation to the increased emphasis on, and the presumption of, contact: (a) an ever-increasing body of social science evidence on the importance of parent–child contact for children’s wellbeing; (b) the influence of father’s rights groups and the powerful vocalising of personal experience by some individuals (for example, Geldof 2003) (see also Flood 2003; Kaye and Tolmie 1998), many of whom couch their arguments for increased contact in the language of children’s rights; and (c) the legal and philosophical articulation of certain relationships as a “human right”, most notably in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR) and the *Human Rights Act 1998* (see also Bainham 2003; Herring 2003).

Back in Australia, despite substantial interest in “splitting” parental care “down the middle” after separation, little is known here 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; and Moyer 2004 in Canada). This gap in our knowledge is not surprising given that such arrangements are relatively rare in Australia. Six per cent of children with a natural parent living elsewhere had “shared care” arrangements in 2003 (ABS 2004) – defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics 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 in 2003 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.

The focus groups

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 not demonising the other parent in front of children, or refraining from making children act as messengers or spies.²⁵ 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.

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 7). 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 7) 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 mine's [her arrangement] 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."

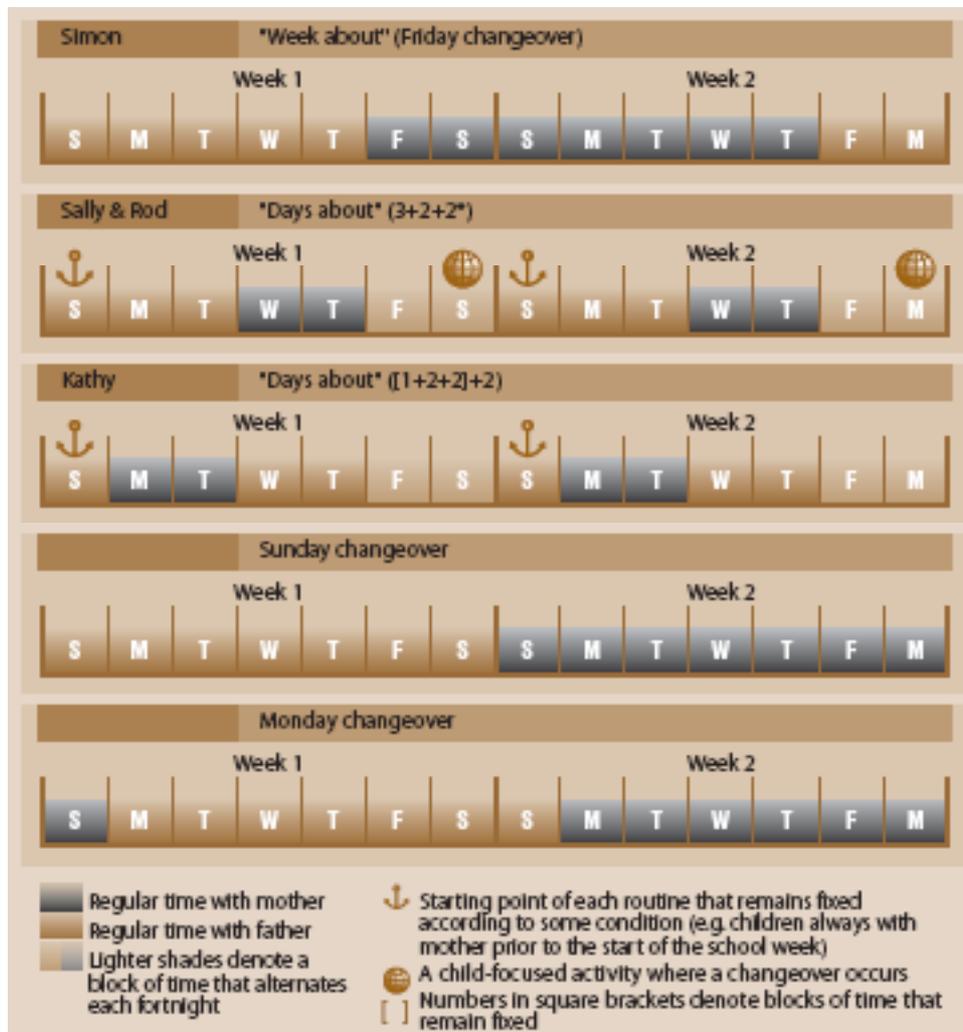
It is interesting to note that one of the anchor points in both Sally and Kathy's schedules is Sunday night, whereby the children start the school week with their mother.

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).

Figure 7. Equal time parenting schedules: Some examples



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. Fifty-fifty shared care may be “fair”, but it may not be 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 asked in the focus groups, "Why this pattern of contact?", sought to identify the thinking behind different patterns of care. When the co-parents in the 50/50 arrangements were asked, "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), building on Gilligan (1993), 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 Gilligan’s (1993) 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.”

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 look beyond their own needs?) It may well be that as fathers take more individual care of their children, they become more child-focused. But this is speculation.

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.

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 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 could well be that 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 three 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.”

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.”

In general, it seems that shared care often 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.”

Thus parents who opted for 50/50 care generally seemed to get 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 profile is consistent with work conducted elsewhere by Moyer (1994), Benamin and Irving (1989), and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003).

However, 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 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.

CHAPTER 5: LITTLE OR NO CONTACT

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: Society’s most pressing social problem?

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 et al. 1999; Burghes, Clarke and Cronin 1997; Kurz 1995; Lee 1990; Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Simpson et al. 1995; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992), 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 interview²⁶, the Prime Minister said:

“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 2004), which suggest that around one-quarter (26%) 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 2004).²⁷

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 et al. 2001).

Research into paternal disengagement

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.²⁸ He identified four perceived impediments by fathers to more active fathering. These

were: their relationship with children's mothers (41% of fathers reported this); fathers' own problems or issues, such as substance abuse, or work, or new relationship commitments (28%); children growing older (16%); or physical distance (15%).²⁹

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 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 colleagues³⁰ (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

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.

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, geographical distance, and the use of adversarial legal processes 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 examined 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 2004). For Denise, for example, 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, for example, 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.

The above comments suggest that 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 with 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’.”

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, Gilding, Critchley, Shields, Bakacs and Butler 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.”

It seems 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, and in some cases feel like the future with children looks bleak.

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.”

It seems that 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."

As with entrenched parental conflict, it seems that 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, this account is 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 methodologies³¹ 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.

Fathers' comments highlight the many barriers that they perceive cut 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.

CHAPTER 6: HOLIDAY-ONLY CONTACT

Australia is a large geographical mass, 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%) of movers did not relocate interstate, around 11 per cent did.³²

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).³³ 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.

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.³⁴ 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 et al. 2001; Woods 1999). Obviously the further that parents live apart, the greater the time, effort and money required to make parent-child contact happen.

Why do separated parents relocate?³⁵ 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 United States 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 these competing interests into sharper focus. Recent cases, such as *U v U*³⁶, represent a departure in the Family Court's approach to one that seems to be more open to make orders restricting 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 fathers. 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).³⁷

The focus groups

The analysis is based on the responses of eight separated or divorced parents (three non-resident fathers and one non-resident mother³⁸ 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 non-resident parents lived overseas from a former spouse; five others lived interstate from a former spouse; one other parent moved to the country. Of the eight parents, seven reported that parent–child contact occurred every 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 partner, Jake, moved 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:

“Mine’s [her parenting arrangements] 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 aged 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, Mandy 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.' Jill [my ex-] 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). The distance–disengagement link is explored more fully below.

Key themes

Seven key issues emerged for long-distance parents: (1) juggling work, family and holidays;³⁹ (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.

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.”

The preceding comments suggest that 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 may 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, 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.”

Thus 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.⁴⁰ The brevity of contact during holidays can work against having “quality time” with children. Long-distance parenting is likely to involve 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.”

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."

It seems that, 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 daytime-only and little or 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.”

The preceding comments suggest that some 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 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."

In summary, 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”⁴¹

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:

“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.”

To sum up: 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.

CHAPTER 7: DAYTIME-ONLY CONTACT

Around one-quarter (26%) of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, according to resident parents, rarely or never see their other parent, typically their father (ABS 2004). Of those who do see their non-resident parent, a significant minority (34%) never stay overnight (Smyth and Ferro 2002; see also Parkinson and Smyth 2004).

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? Or maybe it is simply a question of economics, with the cost of accommodating children comfortably in two households proving prohibitive for many separated families? Or might it merely reflect a cooperative parenting arrangement whereby both parents are substantially involved in their children's lives, live close to each other, but, for reasons of convenience and choice, the children have one primary residence? 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)? Regardless of the reasons for its occurrence, the prevalence of daytime-only contact is certainly high enough to warrant focussed research attention.

When the difference is 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 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 (Commonwealth of Australia 2005a). 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? Several possibilities suggest themselves: 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, daytime-only contact might act as a marker for deeper contextual issues that need to be explored in terms of family dynamics. But this is speculation.

Who don't some children stay overnight?

Table 1 summarises the reasons given for why some children do not stay overnight with their non-resident parent. These data, taken from the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation* Project suggest that daytime-only contact occurs for a range of disparate reasons. These reasons 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. Main reason that the 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)

Main reason	Resident parents [#] (n=109) %	Non-resident parents ^{###} (n=39) %
<i>Children's age or choice</i>		
Child is very young/breastfeeding	15	8
Teenage child does his/her own thing	13	23
Choice of child (middle childhood)	3	3
<i>Non-resident parent's choice</i>		
	17	3
<i>Relationship dynamics</i>		
Resident parent's choice/obstruction	1	23
Concerns for child's wellbeing/safety	12	0
New partner(s)/new children ^{###}	6	5
<i>Structural factors</i>		
Unsuitable accommodation/no space	10	10
Physical distance between households	6	10
Non-resident parent's work schedule	6	0
<i>Other</i>		
Other	9	10
Unlimited day contact/stability for child	2	5
TOTAL	100	100

Notes: [#] includes 12 fathers (excluding this group makes little difference to the patterns);

^{##} includes 8 mothers (excluding this group makes little difference to the patterns);

^{###} New partner(s)/new children in non-resident parent's house.

Table 1 shows that more than a quarter of separated/divorced parents (28% of resident parents and 31% 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% of resident parents and 8% of non-resident parents referred to children's young age; 13% of resident parents and 23% 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.

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. Such data are now examined.

The focus groups

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 that 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 more careful 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 his children on the Saturday and Sunday of every third weekend – they do not stay with him overnight. John maintains that 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 is never sure if he will be allowed to see his children 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 troubled by the fact that his parents have never met his young son.

John obtained a court order several months earlier to stop his former wife from acting on her threats to move overseas with the children. However, the order has not improved the level of his former wife's cooperation and John reported still having trouble seeing the children at the times stated in the order. Like many of the non-resident fathers in the 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 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.”

Penny

Penny 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 limited to a couple of hours on a Wednesday night when he takes them out for dinner. Penny describes this as a “token” gesture.

The former couple have a highly conflicted relationship, which in the past has involved litigation in the Family Court and an incident in the early days of their separation when Penny was arrested for breach of orders. Nonetheless, now that conflict with her former spouse has subsided, Penny would prefer it if her

children, especially her son, had more involvement with their father – for the sake of both their emotional wellbeing and to provide her with some respite.

According to Penny, her ex-husband has, over the six years since separation, changed from being a “brilliant” and dedicated father to someone 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, Penny 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) new partners 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 any form of communication. However, at least half of the ten participants had been involved in litigation to resolve disputes about children (including Penny, who had been arrested for breaching an order). For some of the parents, the conflict had escalated to violence. For instance, one male participant revealed that he had been the victim of a string of domestic assaults. 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 raise the question: what is the experience for children 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.⁴² According to the women in this group they themselves are not the 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 stories of quiet manoeuvring behind the scenes to facilitate contact are overshadowed in the debate by the more dramatic public stories of spiteful women stopping 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 protected 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.”

In sum, 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.

“Hanging out” 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 are likely to 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 stay overnight has been especially difficult. With some of his parenting 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 reflects:

“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 his parenting time 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 quotes 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 their children, 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 their time together.

And Penny'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 comments of 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 little or 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.”

The preceding comments suggest that contact limited to daytime activities may deprive children of important familial contexts in their contact with the non-resident parent. Resident mothers with daytime-only contact arrangements also lose the respite afforded by overnight stays. But daytime contact can nonetheless be rewarding for parents and children insofar as it fosters focussed time with children.

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 are often multiple factors at play, as in the stories of Russell and Penny (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 care of his son, and to establish an educational trust 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 educational trust. 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.

Penny reflects:

“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 none of the focus groups contain data on how children view their relationship with their father, there are hints in the parents’ accounts of how children are faring.

For Francis, stuck in the middle of his parent’s fighting, the impact is obvious. For Penny’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 many references in the transcripts to the reluctance on the child’s part to spend time with their father. All except one of the mothers talked about the great amount of effort required to encourage or coax 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 shed light on what might be motivating the children's reluctance or ambivalence. Clearly there is a wider story to be told.

The above comments suggest that 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 main reason given by the resident mothers in the group 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 Penny 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 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, Penny'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 men and women. Reading between

the lines it is not difficult to discern something more than just paternal indifference in action. Penny's 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 spending time with their father's second family. 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.

Penny 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."

Put simply, 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.

Triggers and the status quo

One scenario that is suggested by the focus group data 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.

Thus, in some cases, 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 then 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 mothers, 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 attests 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 thwarted 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.”

The preceding reflections suggest that 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. For Russell [opening quote], that event was the central reason for overnight contact ceasing.

Penny 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.”

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

Structure or process?

The focus group data suggest that relational factors, such as inter-parental conflict, perceived paternal apathy and repartnering, play a more important 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 replication with another large, national sample. More research is clearly needed on daytime-only contact.

Summary

The data presented in this chapter 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.

CHAPTER 8: “STANDARD” CONTACT

There is a common belief in Australia that parent–child contact generally occurs every-other-weekend weekends and during half of each school holidays and that this pattern acts as a stencil for shaping court orders – filtering down as a template for separating parents more generally (see, for example, Hirst and Smiley 1984; Bowen 1994; Dewar and Parker 1999). Recent data from the Family Court (see Chapter 2) suggest that alternate weekend contact between children and their non-resident parent is indeed the most common arrangement for parents travelling through the court system (Commonwealth of Australia 2003). But the extent to which this is the case for the general population of separating parents is for the most part unclear.

Why might the every-other-weekend model be the “standard”? At least two (not mutually exclusive) possibilities exist. Traditional sex roles and work patterns underpin one possibility. In families where parents remain together, fathers are traditionally seen as the main breadwinners while mothers tend to be the main homemakers and carers even if they do much paid work outside the home. The most common pattern is that fathers work full-time while mothers work part-time, especially when children are young (de Vaus 2004). Following parental separation, this role differentiation may continue: mothers usually remain the primary caregivers of children even when they also work to help support the household, while fathers continue to support their children financially, albeit with typically limited contact with their children. Weekends may be culturally prescribed as the only opportunity for a non-resident father who works full-time to care for his children. Alternating weekends also allows resident mothers to have some leisure time with their children.

Another possibility is that every-other-weekend schedules have evolved out of an absence of other possibilities. In the United States, Lye (1999) has suggested that parents have limited information about formulating creative and individualised parenting arrangements, and few places to seek help. Running on “automatic” in

the confusion, pain, and stress of relationship breakdown, parents go along with what is suggested to them by legal professionals, who themselves lack more creative approaches. (Precedent creates a powerful mindset in law and in its shadow.)

But change may be afoot. Drawing on interviews with legal professionals in Australia in the context of the *Family Law Reform Act 1995* (Cth), 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.

Rhoades et al. (2000) reported a similar finding, as did Smith et al. (1997) in New Zealand. Smith et al. found that a number of lawyers believed there was now a much broader range of post-separation care options for children, and that the prevalence of every-second-weekend schedules had given way to more flexible approaches.

Indeed it could well be that the changing nature of family life and patterns of women's and men's workforce participation (including an increased desire by, or the need for, many fathers to have a greater involvement in their children's lives) may be leading to a growing dissatisfaction with fortnightly contact arrangements (see, for example, Parkinson and Smyth 2004).

In the United States context, Lye (1999: xiii) concluded that:

Many primary residential parents regard . . . [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.

However, the extent to which prevailing post-separation (maternal) “sole custody” models of every-other-weekend contact are giving way to more flexible approaches is unclear because representative micro-data have not been collected on contact schedules until recently. (These data are presented in Chapter 10.)

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.

The focus groups

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 the 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 discernable feature of these parents' contact arrangements was the inclusion of midweek parenting time. 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.

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.

Max

Max, 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].”

Max also has the care of his children for half of each school holiday period.

While Max has a considerable amount of contact with his children, this has not always been the case. The path to the current contact arrangement has been far from easy 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.”

Max revealed that he is currently a lot happier than he has been during the last two years, primarily because he now has regular face-to-face contact with his children. Max described how he is attempting to “build up a good record of care” of his children, with the aim of eventually obtaining equal parenting time.

The above vignettes illustrate the diversity of parents' arrangements. While in each case contact is occurring on a weekly or fortnightly basis, the details of each of these arrangements vary considerably. Further, 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, and parents' attitudes, needs, and work commitments.

To speculate: it could well be that "standard contact" may not be so standard. A variety of parenting arrangements are subsumed under the umbrella of 'at least once a fortnight'. There may not be a formulaic schedule for contact adopted routinely by separated parents. Rather, arrangements may often be tailored to accommodate individual family circumstances and, for many families, change over time as circumstances change. But this is speculation.

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 an every-other-weekend arrangement?

While there was much heterogeneity in response to the question "Why this pattern of contact and not another?", some common trends nonetheless emerged.

Resident mothers generally reported that they opted for a 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 said 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 financial consideration in relation to child support.

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 parenting time 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 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 – G-d, 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. They also viewed their arrangement as temporary rather than fixed. The desire for more contact is consistent with most non-resident fathers’ views (see Chapter 2).

Joseph, who spent time with his son every weekend, said:

“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 every second weekend.”

Some of the fathers expressed a clear view that they would like to share the 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.”

Max 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 it’d – 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.”

It may well be that 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 more 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 this goal. Impediments 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 plus 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 thinking about taking up a shared care arrangement in the future if his new partner was agreeable.

There also seemed to be an 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 more equal time sharing.

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 Max 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.”

The preceding comments suggest that involved fathers who wish to share the care of their children may often be conscious that what they would ideally prefer may not always be achievable due to considerations, such as work commitments and new partners. As a consequence, they may settle 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-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 did not appear to feel pressure to entertain their children.

Shane’s comment is indicative 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 play-station. 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 Max, 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 in the care of each 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.

In sum, 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 time with their children is available to them.

Holidays and special occasions

Another issue that was raised by both resident mothers and non-resident fathers related to contact during school holidays 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 holidays periods.

Kerrie explained:

“He doesn’t have them [in the] 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 resign from 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 immune from disputes over sharing the care of children 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.”

It may be that holiday-time is sometimes a special case in point. “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 could minimise the need for communication and negotiation between parents.

It is noteworthy that having 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 outside of court.)

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 parenting time.

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 put 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.

Thus 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' remarks in this focus group shed light on previously unanswered questions, such as why standard contact arrangements come about, and how such arrangements 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 father-child relationship, mothers commented that their former partners often felt the need to entertain children during contact periods. 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. By 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 emphasised 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.

CHAPTER 9: THE DEMOGRAPHY OF PARENT–CHILD CONTACT

This chapter extends the focus group data in two ways: first, by estimating the prevalence of the main patterns of care under examination; and second, by examining the demographic profile of separated parents with different arrangements. These quantitative data move the analysis into more representative and generalisable terrain.

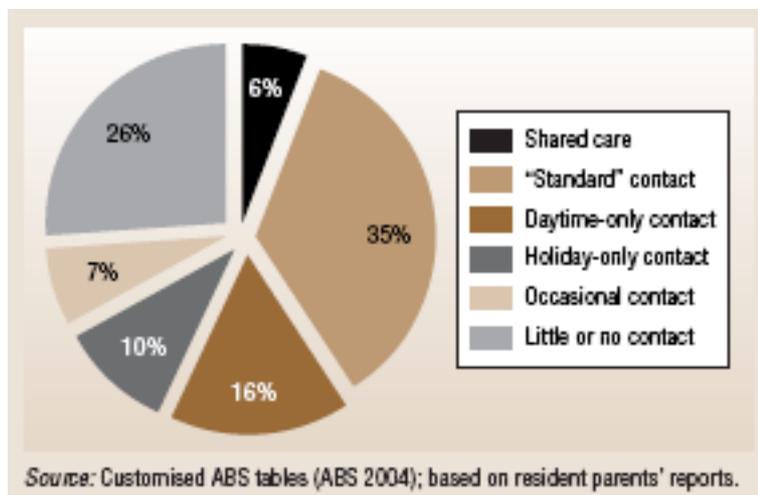
The prevalence of different patterns of care

As noted earlier, parents can share the care of their children after separation in many ways. Figure 8 sets out the relative percentage of children of separated parents in each category of the typology developed earlier, using data from the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 2004) (see Chapter 3). For conceptual clarity, holiday-only contact (which involves overnights) is distinguished from occasional contact (with no overnights).⁴³ The prevalence of each pattern of care, from most to least common, is:

- *“standard” contact*, in which children see their non-resident parent each weekend or every-other-weekend (34% of children with a parent living elsewhere);
- *little or no contact*, where children rarely (less than once a year) or never see their non-resident parent (26% of children with a parent living elsewhere)
- *daytime-only contact*, in which children see their non-resident parent only during the day (16% of children with a parent living elsewhere);
- *holiday-only contact*, where children see their non-resident parent only during school holidays (10% of children with a parent living elsewhere) typically because parents live a long way from each other;

- *occasional contact*, where children see their non-resident parent once every three to six months (7% of children with a parent living elsewhere) – sometimes reflecting an emotionally tenuous parent–child relationship; and
- *equal (or near) shared care*, in which children are in the care of either parent for at least 30 per cent of nights a year (6% of children with a parent living elsewhere).

Figure 8. Patterns of post-separation parenting experienced by children with a parent living elsewhere



In many ways, the above groups ‘boil down’ to three main patterns of contact – *high* levels of parent–child contact (equal or near equal care); *medium* levels of contact (such as every other weekend or each school holiday); and *low* levels of contact (that is, little or no face-to-face contact). Holiday-only contact, sporadic contact, or daytime-only contact may sometimes act as stepping-stones between these three main patterns of care – as hinted at by the comments of some of the parents in the focus groups.

Profiling separated parents with different arrangements

In an effort to embed the qualitative focus group data in the wider national picture, the extent to which different patterns of care are linked to certain demographic elements in the general population of separated/ divorced parents is

now examined. Essentially this is a profiling exercise, drawing on data extracted from Wave 1 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. Chapter 3 describes this survey in more detail.

Tables 2 and 3 present the 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 when it is stated 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.

It is important to note that holiday-only contact or sporadic contact are not examined in this profiling exercise. The HILDA survey did not collect data on parent–child contact during holiday periods, and information on sporadic contact remains under-developed.

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

	Little or no father-child contact (n=246)	Daytime-only contact (n=114)	“Standard” contact (n= 240)	Shared care ^a (n=32)	p
Employment status					*
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%	
Able to work at home (employed)					
Yes	18.8%	19.5%	26.2%	34.7%	
No	81.2%	80.5%	73.8%	65.3%	
Educational attainment					**
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%	
Age of youngest child (years)					**
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%	
Distance between parents					**
<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%	
Living with a partner					**
Yes	41.7%	19.5%	36.7%	24.3%	
No	58.3%	80.5%	63.3%	75.7%	
Age (mean years)	34.8	35.7	36.7	37.4	**
Housing tenure					**
Fully own/purchasing	39.2%	36.4%	51.0%	67.4%	
Rent	60.8%	63.6%	49.0%	32.6%	
Number of bedrooms in HH (mean)	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.1	**
Personal income (\$)					**
≤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%	
Relationship with former partner^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%	
Child support (received)					**
Yes	29.4%	53.7%	65.7%	50.3%	
No	70.6%	46.3%	34.3%	48.8%	
Any financial support (received)^c					**
Yes	33.9%	62.0%	73.0%	66.6%	
No	66.1%	38.0%	27.0%	33.4%	
Annual child support received per child^d	2708	2543	3535	2980	
Views about amount of contact					**
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%	

Source: HILDA Wave 1 (2001); **Notes:** weighted data; analysis adjusted for the design effect; ^a Shared care = 30% overnight threshold used by ABS (“co-parents”); ^b Ratings of satisfaction are on 0-10 point scale (0=completed dissatisfied; 10=completely satisfied); ^c Includes (regular) child support and any other financial support; ^d where child support is received; ** p < .01 level (χ² test); * p < .05 level (χ² test); # Different from shared care group at 0.05 significance level

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

	Little or no father-child contact (n=117)	Daytime-only contact (n=57)	“Standard” contact (n= 202)	Shared care (n=31)	p
Employment status					**
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%	
Able to work at home (employed)					
Yes	24.3%	20.5%	26.7%	44.9%	
No	75.7%	79.5%	71.3%	55.1%	
Educational attainment					**
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%	
Age of youngest child (years)					
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%	
Distance between parents					**
<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%	
Living with a partner					**
Yes	60.8%	24.3%	44.0%	17.5%	
No	39.2%	72.7%	56.0%	82.5%	
Age (years)	36.1	37.7	40.2	38.6	**
Housing tenure					**
Fully own/purchasing	35.1%	41.5%	54.4%	74.1%	
Rent	64.9%	58.5%	45.6%	25.9%	
Number of bedrooms in HH (mean)	2.9	2.5	2.9	3.3	**
Personal income (\$)					**
≤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%	
Relationship with former partner^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%	
Child support (paid)					
Yes	53.4%	71.3%	86.2%	53.8%	
No	46.6%	28.7%	13.8%	46.2%	
Any financial support (paid)^c					
Yes	59.1%	84.9%	97.7%	58.9%	
No	40.9%	15.2%	2.3%	41.1%	
Annual child support paid per child^d	\$2250	\$3189	\$3631	\$2378	
Satisfaction with contact					**
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%	

Source: HILDA Wave 1 (2001); **Notes:** weighted data; analysis adjusted for the design effect; ^a Shared care = 30% overnight threshold used by ABS (“co-parents”); ^b Ratings of satisfaction are on 0-10 point scale (0=completed dissatisfied; 10=completely satisfied); ^c includes (regular) child support and any other financial support; ^d where child support is received; ** p < .01 level (χ^2 test); * p < .05 level (χ^2 test);

Different from shared care group at 0.05 significance level

Shared care

The focus group data presented in Chapter 4 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 .

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%) 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.⁴⁴

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

In addition, co-parent mothers were the most likely of the female groups to be in full-time employment (47% of co-parent mothers vs other mothers 15-28%), and to have incomes of \$35,000 or more (35% vs 9-16%), 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 little or no father-child contact (co-parent mothers 35% vs other mothers 19-26%; co-parent fathers 45% vs other fathers 24-27%).⁴⁵

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 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% vs other fathers 14-33%) and were the least likely to express dissatisfaction (co-parent fathers 25% vs other fathers 35-62%). 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% vs other mothers 30 to 37%) and, like co-parent fathers, only a minority of co-parent mothers expressed dissatisfaction (33% vs 38-50%).

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.⁴⁶ 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 (all of whom were non-resident parents) were the least likely of all the fathers to have repartnered (18% vs 24-61%). The repartnering rate for co-parent mothers was somewhere in between that for the

other female groups (24% vs 20-42%), 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% vs other mothers 52-57%; co-parent fathers 67% vs other fathers 20-25%).

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.

“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 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% vs other fathers 61-68%) and to have incomes in excess of \$35,000 (52% vs 25-32%), and were the second most likely to be home owners/purchasers (54% vs 35-42%)⁴⁷. According to mothers’ reports, fathers with “standard” contact were

also the most likely group to support their children financially (73% vs 34-67%), 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% vs 23-27%), while mothers with “standard” contact were the second most likely of all mothers to provide favourable views (37% compared with 29-47%). 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%) than mixed feelings or indifference (25%).

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 5 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 another “r” – relative economic disadvantage. (It could well be that this factor may be as important – or perhaps more – important than the other factors in many cases. For instance, few financial resources might generate more bad feelings – everything might feel that much harder – and create the need to repartner and then to relocate. But this is speculation.)

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 school qualifications (60% vs 24-35% of men in other groups), to be without paid work (35% vs 15-27%), to be earning less than \$15,000 per year, and to be renting their home (65% vs 26-5%). 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% vs 34-48%); more than half were not in paid work (53% vs 25-69%), and had incomes of less than \$15,000 per year (54% vs 29-64%). 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% 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% vs 24-37%; fathers: 61% vs 18-44%), and to be living 50 kilometres or more from their former partner (mothers: 67% vs 14-39%; fathers: 67% vs 1-42%). 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 ex-partner, suggesting that they had lost contact with their former partner.

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% vs 25-49%). 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 group were the most likely of all groups to be unable to rate the quality of their relationship with their former partner (mothers: 39% vs 12-21%; fathers: 31% vs 10-20%)⁴⁸. This pattern of response, along with geographic distance and repartnering, suggests a “clean break” at many levels. Nevertheless, a clean break from the 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% vs 12-20%; fathers: 74% vs 12-59%).

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. It would be useful to try to explicate some of the likely linkages between these factors – especially the role of financial resources as a catalyst for conflict, repartnering and relocation.

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 generally the most likely to be renting (mothers: 64% vs other mothers 33-61%; fathers 59% vs other fathers 26-65%) and to express dissatisfaction with their relationship with their former partner (of those who reported their views on this issue, mothers: 44% vs other mothers 33-50%;

fathers: 49% vs other fathers 25-62%). In addition, the mothers were the least likely of all female groups to be earning more than \$35,000 per year (9% vs 13-35%).

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% vs 17-27%; fathers: 33% vs 15-24%). 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. The often-different perceptions of women and men add another layer of complexity to this psychosocial-economic montage.

The importance of socio-economic factors is somewhat intriguing in this montage in that it is unclear to what extent money matters of itself or attributes relating to "social capital" more broadly, as defined by Coleman (1988), are at play – particularly with respect to 50/50 shared care. Is it that educated parents can analyse their situation better than those with little education? Are they better able to think their way through things, better able to resolve conflict, have more resources or are better able to find the resources required? Are their perceptions of the future more positive because of the self-efficacy that often flows from

having more “social capital” to draw on? Conversely, are less well-educated parents more likely to be fatalistic? These ideas are beyond the limits of the data, but warrant exploration by those in a position to collect more targeted information on social capital and parent–child contact.

Overall, these data nonetheless provide strong empirical support for the idea that practical and relationship factors play an important role in the form that father–child contact takes. The focus group data outlined earlier are therefore largely supported by data collected from the large representative HILDA sample of separated and divorced parents in Australia.

Where next?

The HILDA data are extremely useful insofar as they provide a quantitative profile of the demography of parent–child contact, and help to confirm many of the qualitative insights that emerged from the focus group methodology. But another methodological lens is needed to help bridge the gap between the qualitative and quantitative data. Mid-range data in the form of a representative sample of contact schedules have much utility here. These data can provide a less static and crude view of different patterns of care by showing the detail of exactly when children spend time with a non-resident parent. To date, little (if any) attempt has been made to map this detail in Australia or elsewhere. The next chapter makes such an attempt.

CHAPTER 10: PARENT–CHILD CONTACT SCHEDULES

As noted in Chapter 2, 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 can cooperate – or at least “encapsulate” their conflict (Kelly 2004a). This literature also suggests that it is the *quality of relationships* between parents, and between parents and children, that exerts a critical influence on children’s wellbeing, not the *amount of time per se* (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

Of course, an emotionally close and warm relationship between parents and children requires time to sustain it, and the greater the range of contexts for interaction between parents and their children – sleepovers, sharing meals, doing homework – the better (Lamb and Kelly 2001). But 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; Reynolds 2001).

Parents can share the care of children in many ways after parental separation. As outlined in Chapters 4 through 8, at least five broad patterns of father–child contact after separation can be identified in Australia: equal (or near) shared care; daytime-only contact; holiday-only contact; “standard” contact (every-other-weekend or ever-weekend); and little or no contact.

Ricci (1997) has distinguished five different types of parenting time: overnight stays, “together time”; “outside activity” time; holidays, “special days and recreational” time; and “away-from-both-parents” time. Ricci mentions these in passing but they warrant being brought to the fore in the line of argument being developed here.

- *Overnight stays* help promote the development of close emotional bonds between children and non-resident parents (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Warshak 2000a, 2000b). Time is typically less stilted and structured, allowing the dynamics that characterise family life to occur – such as feeding, waking and caring for children. Moreover, it can take time for parents and children to get re-acquainted after not seeing each other for a while – even after several days or so (Smyth and Ferro 2003). Overnights also encourage children to feel that they have two homes, and that they are not just “visitors”; they can affirm non-resident parents’ self-identity as a “parent” (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Ricci 1997); and they can give resident parents some breathing space away from the immediate responsibilities of care giving.
- *Together time* forms the hub of family life, and is critical for family wellbeing (Ricci 1997: 169). It can be focused one-on-one time (such as playing a game, talking in a car, reading a book together, or helping a child with homework), or involve sharing space together while doing independent activities (for example, where a parent works on the kitchen table but is still available to children who are watching television). Recent evidence, both in Australia and overseas, suggests that young people would generally like to spend more time with their parents, which clearly attests to the importance of “together time” (Pocock and Clarke 2004; Åman-Back and Björkqvist 2004).
- *Outside activity time* refers to activities that children and parents do together outside of the home. Sports activities, fishing, or music or dance lessons, for example, provide opportunities for children’s emotional, physical, social and cognitive development, and give parents the chance to mentor, and to remain engaged with, their children. For Ricci, selecting, taking part in, and supporting suitable outdoor activities for children is an important dimension of parenting.
- *Special days and holidays* (such as birthdays, Mothers Day or Fathers Day, Christmas, long-weekends, and school holidays) foster the pursuit of

mutually rewarding activities for children and parents. Such activities help parents to stay connected with children, break the grind of school and work routines, and can create positive life-long memories.

- *Time away from both parents* can be particularly important for teenage children. But it is also important for parents, argues Ricci, to be aware of how much time children spend outside of both their care. The hustle and bustle of modern family life means that children may spend long hours home alone because of a long commute for a parent, a long working day, or a second or third job. Even with the rising number of parents who work from home, being a work-at-home parent doesn't necessarily mean "being there" or being available for children.

Ricci's "parenting time" dimensions point to the importance of both parents being able to share time with children in different ways, assuming of course that it is safe for children to do so and that the time parents and children spend together is positive. In some instances, neither may be the case.

Parent–child contact schedules

In recent years, drawing on the latest divorce research and a rapidly growing evidence base on children's needs at different ages, several prominent American practitioner/researchers (Emery 2005; Kelly 2004b; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003) have proposed a range of scheduling options.⁴⁹ These (normative) options aim to help separated parents consider sensibly what arrangements will best meet their children's and their own needs, and seek to take account of a number of critical factors, most notably the level of parental conflict, children's ages and individual needs and temperament (particularly the child's ability to handle change), distance between households, and parents' work patterns.

The general thrust of these models is that: (i) the greater the anger between parents, the less flexibility and fewer *direct* handovers recommended; and (ii) the older the children, the greater the potential options available and the longer the

possible gap between each parent's time with children (that is, the more conflict and/or the younger the children, the greater the need for simplicity).

In addition, most models emphasise the importance of stability and predictability for infants and young children – including daily “together time” with each parent where possible, a predictable eating and sleeping routine, and limited overnight stays with the non-resident parent until children are older (Ricci 1997) – although there is ongoing lively debate about when overnights should start, and the *stability of place* versus the *stability of relationships* (see, for example, Gould and Stahl 2001; Lamb and Kelly 2001; Solomon and Biringen 2001; Warshak 2000a).

While the various models differ, all share one fundamental philosophical tenet: that each child is unique, as is each family, and that it is parents who are generally in the best position to know which arrangement will work best for their children (Baris and Garrity 1988; Emery 2005). The models also emphasise that they are *options* – not prescriptive guidelines.

Kelly's (2004b) model is attracting wide interest. It aims to minimise long blocks of time away from each parent where practical and appropriate, and has eight different timeshare options for school-age children (aged 5-17 years). Figure 9 sets out Kelly's model using a visual scheme developed for this dissertation.

Figure 9. Eight parenting time options for children of school age (Kelly 2004)

Option	Week 1							Week 2						
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
1												🏠	🏠	...
2			🕒									🏠	🏠	...
3	.											🏠	🏠	🏠
4			🏠	🕒						🏠	🕒	🏠	🏠	...
5	🕒		🏠	🕒						🏠	🕒	🏠	🏠	🏠
6	.		🏠	🏠	.					🏠	🏠	🏠	🏠	🏠
7	.		🏠	🏠	🏠	..				🏠	🏠	.	🏠	🏠
8	🏠	🏠	🏠	🏠	.							🏠	🏠	🏠

Key: 🏠 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🕒 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🏠 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. . = The contact period ends in the morning. .. = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ... = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Each option in Kelly’s model carries with it various costs and benefits for different family circumstances, such as overly long gaps between contact periods, too constricted a range of contexts in which interactions can occur, too many transitions for children, handovers in the face of conflict, insufficient rest periods for a parent – or the reverse in the case of more family-sensitive arrangements. (See Kelly 2004b for an excellent summary of the pros and cons of these options under different family circumstances.)

But while there is emerging evidence on different ways of sharing the care of children after separation, not a lot of data exist to clarify the sorts of arrangements that parents have in place.

Measuring parent–child contact

As noted earlier, despite pleas by several US scholars (for example, Argys et al. 1993; Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Melli 1999) to adopt more comprehensive measures of contact quality instead of relying on simple measures of contact frequency, little headway has been made in measuring parent–child contact. This is probably because measuring the many activities that children and their non-resident parents can engage in when they are together, and the quality of these interactions, is no easy task. Naturalistic approaches take time, and their micro-perspective and use of small, *ad hoc* samples restrict the generalisability of findings. On the other hand, quantitative approaches have difficulty taking account of the complexities of contemporary family life, particularly where parents have separated. Siblings may have different care arrangements from each other, and multiple children from multiple unions are increasingly common. Mapping this degree of complexity takes survey time (and money) and requires sophisticated conceptual and analytic frameworks, a number of which are still being developed.

One useful research tool for this kind of work is the time-use diary (“How much time is spent on different activities each day?”). However, the way that time-use data are currently collected means that we know very little about what non-resident fathers do with their children when they are together, and which days and times they are together. This is because non-resident children are essentially treated as “visitors” by existing time use coding protocols, and therefore cannot be identified in analysis.

An alternative approach to mapping parenting time is through the collection of children’s contact schedule data from a national sample of 971 separated/divorced parents. This dissertation makes use of such data (see Chapter 3).

Two research questions (one descriptive, one suggestive) form the focus of this chapter. First, what is “standard” contact, and how standard is it? Second, do some parents take more lateral approaches to structuring parent–child contact

and, if so, what do these approaches look like? The answers to both questions have implications for parents, practitioners, legal professionals, and policymakers.

To obtain the contact schedule data, six questions were asked of parents who reported that a set pattern of face-to-face contact was occurring: Is your contact arrangement based on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly schedule? Each [week/fortnight/month], how many blocks of contact usually occur? Thinking about [each] block of contact: What day of the week does contact usually start? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually begin? What day of the week does contact usually end? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually end?

This set of questions yielded data strings of temporal information, which were sorted into discrete groupings and then transposed onto a visual fortnightly grid designed for this research.

Methodological issues

Five methodological issues warrant brief mention. First, the contact schedule questions yield “pseudo-time-use” data in the form of handover times, and the length of blocks of care by each parent. These data are collected in a 24-hour clock format. However, it should be noted that the actual parent–child activities that occur in the blocks of care are indeterminate – with the exception that an overnight stay has occurred. To try to make more refined in-roads into the data, two assumptions have been made: first, midweek contact between 3:00pm and 5:00pm (that is, contact of two hours duration or less) involves a drive somewhere; and second, midweek contact between 3:00pm and 6:00pm (that is, contact of three hours duration or so around meal times) involves a meal or snack. While there is likely to be some error in these interpretations, this approach attempts to give the flavour of some of the different qualitative dimensions of parenting time for non-resident parents in particular. Parent–child contact involves behaviour that is complex, dynamic and multi-faceted (Argys et

al. 2003), and there is a strong push, certainly in the United States, towards research that tries to capture this complexity. The data presented here should be seen as part of the early groundwork to make qualitative in-roads to measuring parent–child contact, as crude as this approach might be.

Second, the samples of separated men and women in the survey are independent. That is, the men and women had not been married to each other. The analysis thus focuses on the reports of one parent – the parent who was interviewed – in examining post-separating parenting arrangements.

Third, for reasons of economy, where respondents had more than one child under 18 years potentially in their care, the methodology required respondents to focus on the youngest natural or adopted child. This means that the pattern of care reported may be influenced by the characteristics and needs of older siblings.

Fourth, since not everyone is accessible by telephone, the omission of certain groups of people in the population not available through telephone surveys sets limits on the generalisations that can be made from the data to the Australian population at large.

Fifth and finally, the bulk of the findings are based on a relatively small sub-sample of 274 parents who reported the occurrence of face-to-face contact that is structured (has a clear set pattern: see Figure 10). Once these cases are subdivided into patterned clusters, many schedules include single instances of particular patterns of care. This is understandable. As noted by Ricci (1997), each child is unique, as is each family's circumstances. Parenting arrangements are likely to be highly idiosyncratic. The relatively small number of cases presented in the following analysis requires that the pattern of results be interpreted with some caution – particularly given that much of the analysis is based on a subjective visual interpretation of patterns in the data.

Findings

Findings are reported in three sections. The first examines some of the broad patterns of different types of contact (such as little or no face-to-face contact, overnight stays, and structured versus unstructured patterns of care). Section two systematically sets out the different clusters of contact schedules (from one-night-a-fortnight to 50/50 shared care). Section three explores some of the more lateral approaches to structuring the care of children.

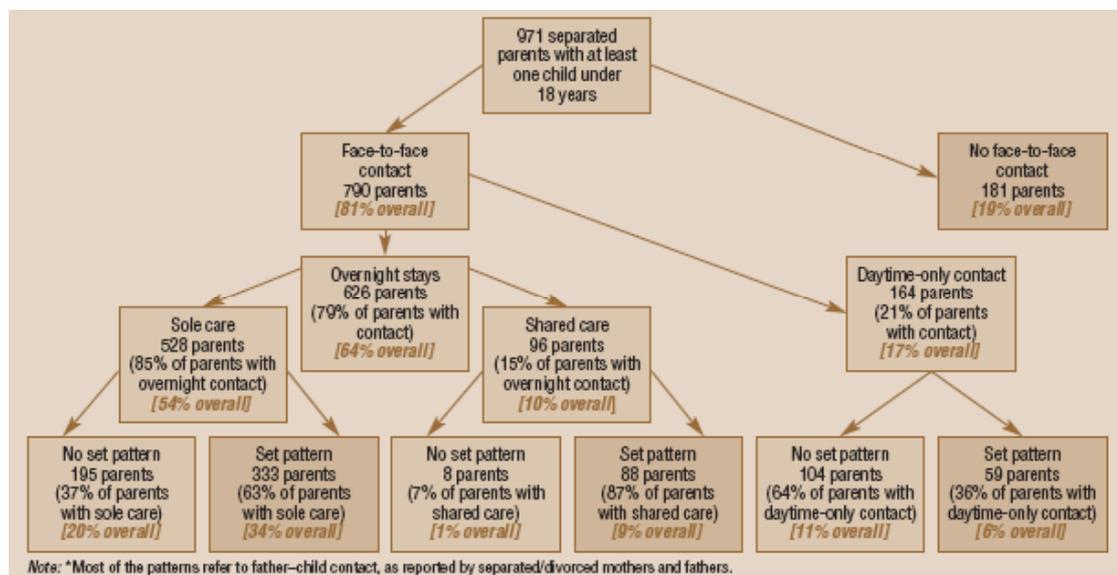
(i) Different patterns of parenting

This first section provides a “big picture” of patterns of contact. Figure 10 shows the distribution of cases that fall into each category of care. One of the most striking features of the different patterns of parenting in Figure 10 is the marked difference in structured arrangements between overnight stays and daytime-only contact: almost two-thirds (64%) of parents who reported daytime-only contact reported no set pattern in the contact arrangements, whereas the reverse was the case for those who reported overnight stays (67% reported a set pattern of contact). Thus daytime-only contact looks to be a much more flexible and malleable arrangement than overnight stays. This makes sense: overnight stays need more planning, preparation, and supporting infrastructure than daytime-only contact, and children with this pattern of care are often very young or teenagers (Smyth 2004).

Moreover, in some cases, no set pattern of care may act as a marker for more troubled family dynamics (where safety concerns or high levels of parental conflict exist). In other instances, it may simply reflect highly cooperative, flexible arrangements in which parents live near each other and children have one primary home but come and go at their own choosing (as suggested by Ricci’s “open time between homes” dimension). More work is needed to improve our understanding of the workings, context and diversity of daytime-only contact.

Figure 10 acts as the empirical backdrop for drilling down to the micro-data on when children spend time with each parent after parental separation. The following analysis is based on the reports of 274 separated parents (28% of the total sample) who had regular overnight stays with children on a weekly or fortnightly basis and who had been married for at least 12 months. (Some parents could not provide enough information to enable a clear picture of their contact schedule to be ascertained; others reported monthly parent–child schedules or less frequent patterns of care.)

Figure 10. Different patterns of parent–child contact after separation



(ii) Different clusters of contact schedules

This section maps the detail of parents’ arrangements using a cross-case analytic approach, whereby individual contact schedules are grouped into similar arrangements and then examined as a cluster. For clarity, each cluster is presented and annotated separately. Fortnight-based schedules are presented first, followed by week-based schedules.

Overnight stays are depicted by a bed symbol, while daytime-only contact periods are represented by a meal or car symbol. The number of cases for each pattern appears in the first column of each figure; the total number of cases for

each figure is given as a percentage of the total number of structured arrangements where contact was occurring.

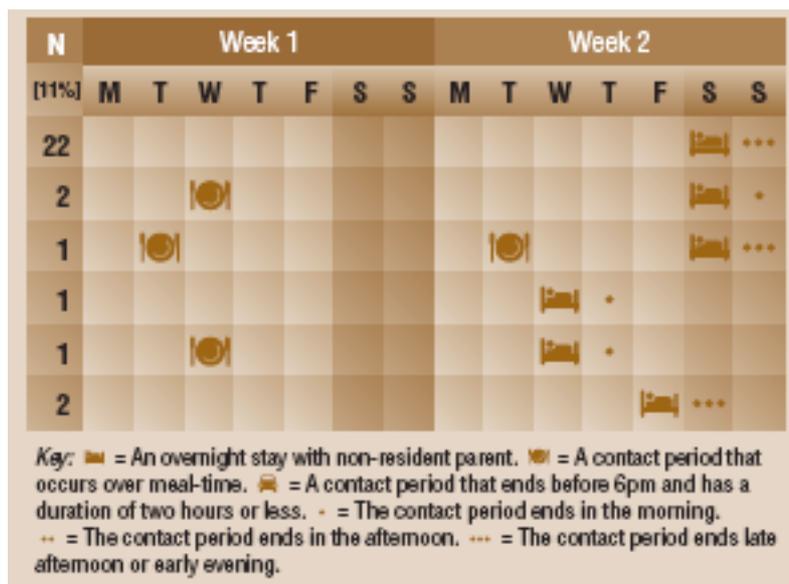
Fortnightly schedules

The first set of contact schedule grids (Figures 11-14) are based largely on a fortnightly pattern.

One-night-a-fortnight

Figure 11 shows that about 11 per cent of separated parents with structured arrangements (3% of the total sample) reported that parent–child contact occurred every second Saturday night (or in a couple of cases, every second Friday or Wednesday night, or every second Saturday night supplemented by mid-week contact). A defining feature of this pattern of care is the long block of time each fortnight that children and their non-resident parent do not see each other – what Kelly (2004a) terms the “12-day wait”.

Figure 11. Pattern 1: One night a fortnight

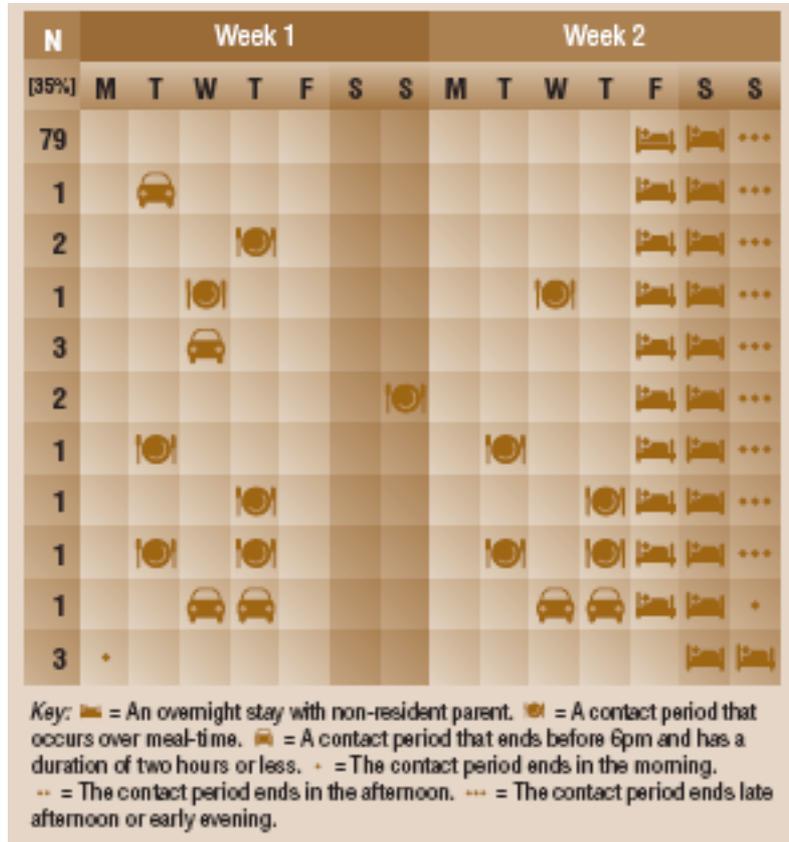


Two-nights-a-fortnight

Figure 12 shows that around one-third (35%) of separated parents with structured arrangements (10% overall) reported that parent–child contact occurred in a block on Friday and Saturday night every-second-weekend. Again the defining feature of this pattern of care is the potential for long blocks of parental absence (a 10-day wait), although, in some cases (2%) midweek contact helps to minimise the length of these periods. The first two rows in Figure 11 and 12 resemble Option 1 in Kelly’s (2004b) framework; the other rows map Option 2 more broadly.

According to Kelly (2004b: 3), a 10-12 day wait may be “too long for many children, and may diminish the second parent’s importance to the children – with fewer opportunities for involvement in their day-to-day, school and homework activities”. Every-other-weekend arrangements also provide little respite for resident parents. At the same time, notes Kelly, this arrangement may be favoured where one parent has had little involvement with the children, work patterns constrain parenting time, or the infrastructure associated with having children overnight and for extended blocks of time make it difficult to give the children as much time with each parent as both they, and the children, may desire (see also Parkinson and Smyth 2004). This pattern may also be a useful transitional arrangement (Kelly 2004b).

Figure 12. Pattern 2: Two nights a fortnight



Three or four nights-a-fortnight

Figure 13 shows that 9 per cent of separated parents with structured arrangements (3% overall) reported that parent-child contact occurred in an extended block of time every-second-weekend – from after school on Friday night to before school Monday morning. In a couple of instances, this pattern was augmented by some midweek contact (rows 3-5 and 7). In another instance (row 5), a sleepover early in the second week was followed by a brief gap of several days, and then two adjoining sleepovers on the weekend: Friday-Saturday, or Saturday-Sunday. (This cluster, particularly row 2 in Figure 13, maps Option 3 in Kelly’s model.)

The commonality across the cases in this pattern of care is that all of the arrangements involve at least one sleepover that precedes a school day. This

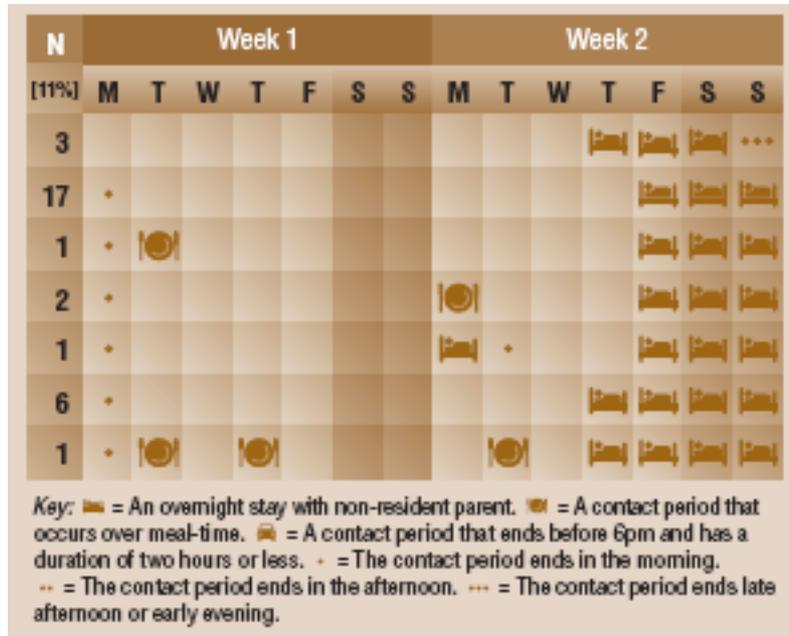
means that non-resident parents are engaged in a broader range of activities in caring for their children – including bedtime and morning routines – than probably is the case over just weekends.

As noted earlier, there is emerging evidence that engaging in a multiplicity of contexts and activities with children is necessary for their social, emotional and cognitive development, and leads to deeper emotional ties between parents and children (Lamb and Kelly 2001). While large chunks of parental absence still occur in this arrangement, the inclusion of Sunday night or a midweek school night might help to offset the idea that non-resident parenting time is “fun time”.

Kelly notes that extended blocks of time with an after-school pick-up and before school drop-off reduces the opportunity for parental conflict. Midweek transitions can fuel parental conflict at handovers, and midweek “together time” can feel shallow and rushed for children and non-resident parents – especially for homework. Nonetheless, the inclusion of mid-week transitions may be practical where one or both parents have demanding work patterns (Kelly 2004b).

The last two rows in Figure 13 essentially expand “extended weekend blocks” by adding Thursday night to “Friday-night-to-Monday-morning” arrangements – that is, *four-nights-a-fortnight* (2% of parents with structured arrangements; 1% overall). This addition adds another degree of contextual multiplicity to the pattern of care by including sleepovers that precede two school days – one day at the start of the school week (Sunday night), and one day at the end of the school week (Thursday night) (see also row 5). This pattern affords a greater involvement of non-resident parents in their children’s lives, while also minimising disruption to the school week for children. Such an arrangement is likely to have a qualitatively different feel about it than arrangements based only on every second Saturday or Friday/Saturday night.

Figure 13. Pattern 3: Three or four nights a fortnight (extended weekend contact)



Interpretative comment

It is important to note the bunch-up of cases in the above four patterns: a sleepover every-second Saturday night (22 cases: Figure 11); sleepovers every-second Friday and Saturday nights (79 cases: Figure 12); sleepovers every-second Friday night to Monday morning (17 cases: Figure 13); and sleepovers every-second Thursday night to Monday morning (6 cases: Figure 13). These common groupings bear the hallmark of “standard contact”, and account for 45 per cent of the cases analysed here (13% overall). Children and their other parent do not see each other for long periods of time in these arrangements (10-12 days).

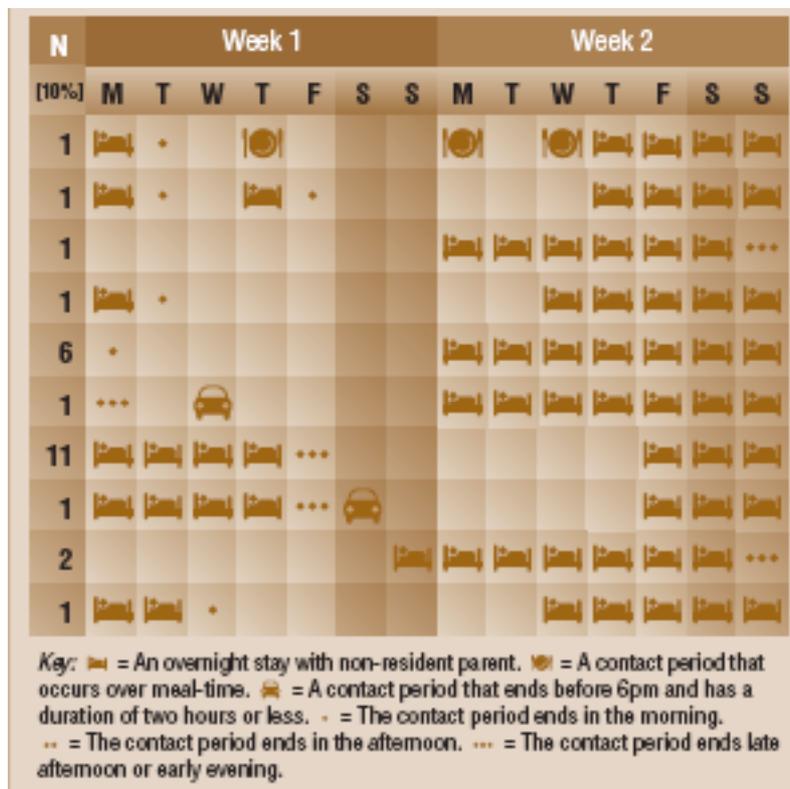
Five-or-more-nights-a-fortnight

Figure 14 shows another 9 per cent of cases involving five or more nights every second weekend (3% overall). These cases include “week-about” shared care arrangements (starting on Friday or Monday night; 12 and 7 cases

respectively), or some other variant. (This pattern, particularly row 7 in Figure 14, maps Option 8 in Kelly's model.) Kelly notes that Friday night changeovers often work better than Monday night changeovers because the transition is more gentle – parenting time starts by “winding down” rather than “gearing up” (p.6).

It is worth noting that midweek contact on the “off” week is generally not reported, perhaps because the blocks of contact are regular and substantial enough to be self-sustaining. As noted in the preceding chapter, equal parenting time involves many logistical and relationship challenges, and appears to be adopted by a relatively small group of mainly well-educated, dual career, parents with primary school aged children in Australia.

Figure 14. Pattern 4: Five or more nights a fortnight (~50/50 care)



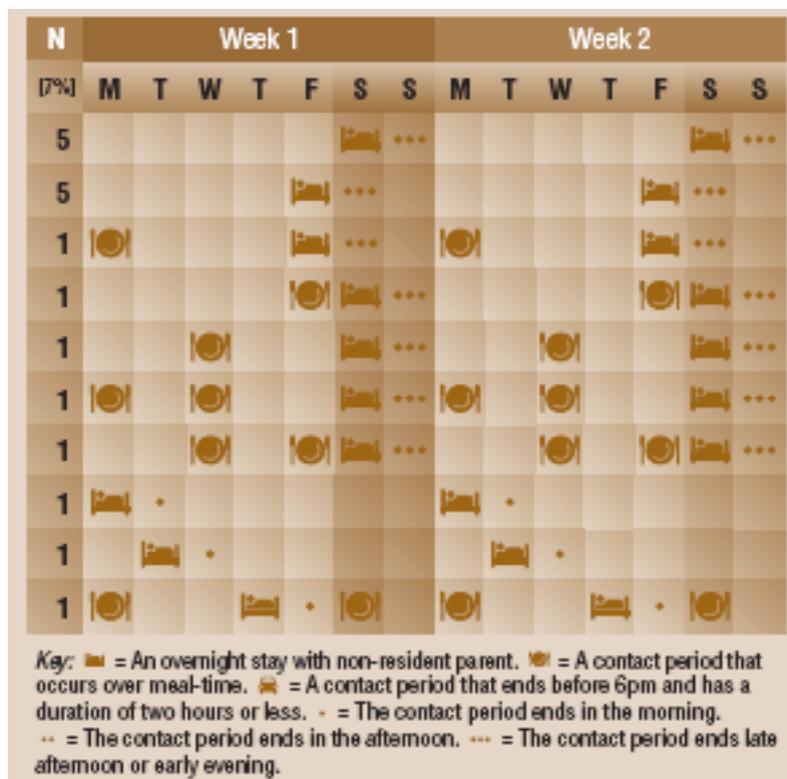
Weekly schedules

The remaining contact schedule grids (Figures 15-20) are based largely on a weekly pattern. The advantage of weekly schedules over fortnightly ones is that it is easier for young children to remember which day or night they are with mum, and which day or night they are with dad (Emery 2005). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003: 180) note how one young child suggested the use of a *blue* lunch box for a pick-up by dad and a *red* lunch box for a pick-up by mum.

One-night-a-week

Figure 15 shows that about 7 per cent of parents with structured arrangements (2% overall) reported that parent–child contact occurred every Saturday or Friday night (supplemented by instances of mid-week contact in some cases). In many ways, one sleepover each week essentially mirrors every-other-weekend schedules but is simply more frequent.

Figure 15. Pattern 5: One night a week



Two-nights-a-week

Figure 16 shows that contact typically occurred in a block on Friday and Saturday night at least once every second weekend, augmented by one or two sleepovers during the other week (4% of structured arrangements; 1% overall).

Figure 17 shows that sometimes the schedules involved two nights each week (comprising 9% of structured arrangements; 3% overall) but none on Saturday or

Sunday night (such Monday and Tuesday nights, Wednesday and Friday nights, or Thursday and Friday nights). Work or social patterns might shape these arrangements.

Figure 16. Pattern 6: Two nights in one of the weeks

N	Week 1							Week 2						
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
4	🛏️	.										🛏️	🛏️	...
3			🛏️	.								🛏️	🛏️	...
1			🛏️	.						🕒	🛏️	🛏️	...	
1				🛏️	.							🛏️	🛏️	...
1	🕒	🕒		🛏️	...			🕒		🛏️	🛏️	.		
1	.	🛏️	.									🛏️	🛏️	

Key: 🛏️ = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🕒 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🕒 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. . = The contact period ends in the morning. .. = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ... = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Figure 17. Pattern 7: Two nights each week

N	Week 1							Week 2						
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
18					🛏️	🛏️	...					🛏️	🛏️	...
1	🕒	🕒	🕒	🕒	🛏️	🛏️	~	🕒	🕒	🕒	🕒	🛏️	🛏️	~
1	🕒		🕒	🛏️	🛏️	...		🕒		🕒	🛏️	🛏️	...	
2	🛏️	🛏️	...					🛏️	🛏️	...				
1	🛏️	.	🛏️	.		🕒		🛏️	.	🛏️	.		🕒	
2			🛏️	.	🛏️	...				🛏️	.	🛏️	...	
1			🛏️	.		🛏️	...			🛏️	.		🛏️	...

Key: 🛏️ = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🕒 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🕒 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. . = The contact period ends in the morning. .. = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ... = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening. ~ = Variable times.

These two groupings involved much heterogeneity in schedules, although Friday–Saturday regime still features prominently, again perhaps a remnant of an “every-other-weekend” regime.

Three-nights-a-week

Figure 18 shows this grouping (4% of cases in this configuration; 1% overall) typically involved a block of contact occurring on Friday and Saturday night at least once every second weekend. In many of these cases, a third night (mostly Sunday but sometimes Thursday or Wednesday) extended the block of care (see the first row in Figure 19). (The schedules in Figure 18, for example, see row 2, map Option 4 in Kelly’s model.)

Figure 19 shows that the three-night-block pattern adopted in Week 1 was repeated in Week 2 (4% of structured arrangements; 1% overall); otherwise, the midweek sleepovers were duplicated each week, and weekend sleepovers were added only every second weekend (see, for example, the first three rows in Figure 18).

These two groupings are a good example of the highly structured nature of arrangements, even though there is much diversity in the schedules, each individual case is highly patterned within itself. This makes sense, of course, given the need to have structure when trying to balance children’s schooling and parents’ work commitments. Sleepovers need predictability to facilitate preparedness.

It is also worth noting that even with a fair amount of face-to-face contact occurring, reasonably long periods of time (up to 8 days) can still occur where children and non-resident parents do not see each other.

Figure 18. Pattern 8: Three nights in one of the weeks

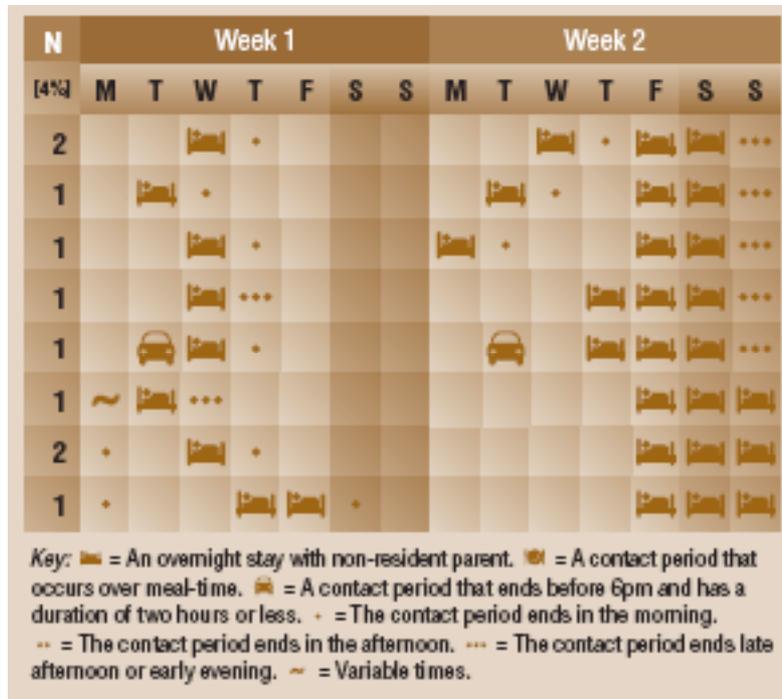
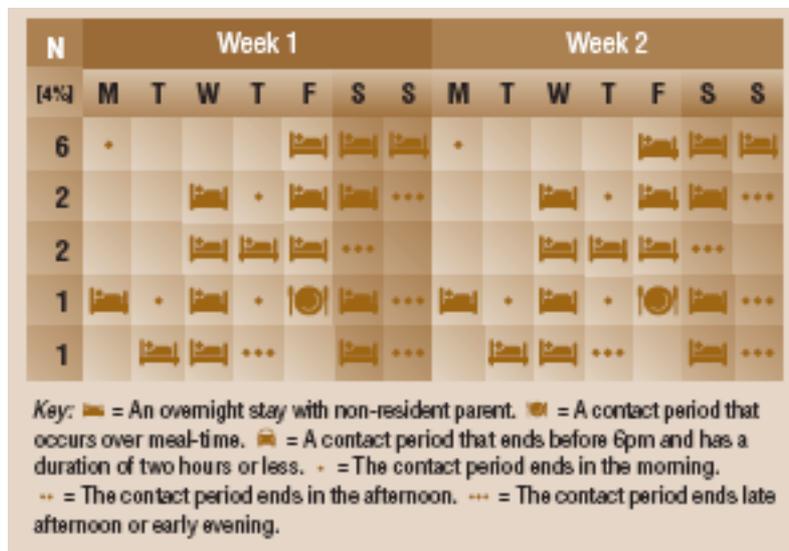


Figure 19. Pattern 9: Three nights each week (~50/50 care)

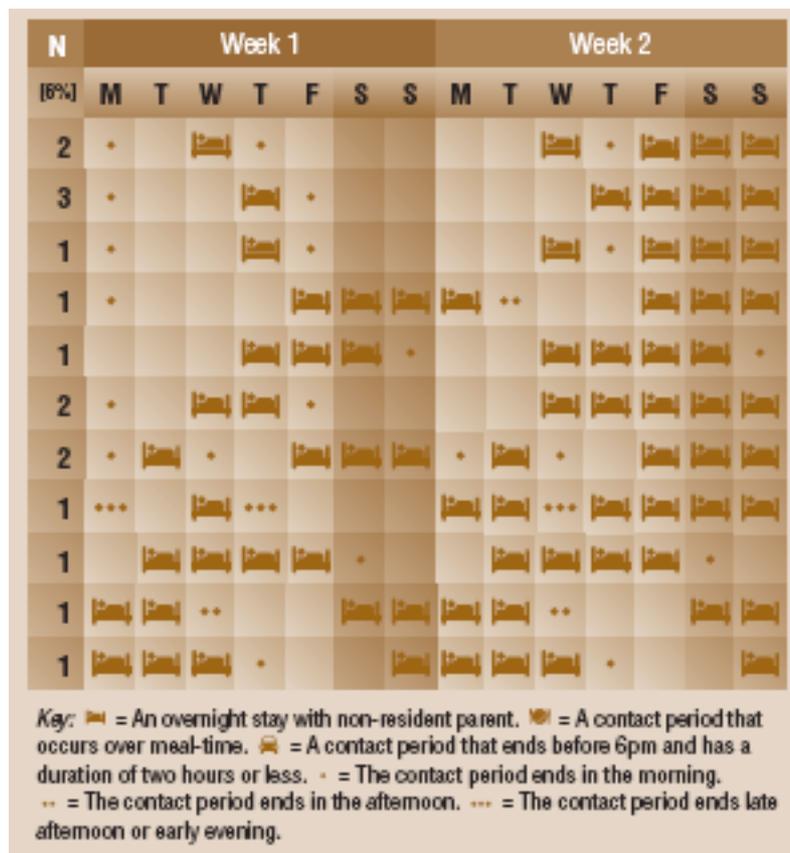


Four-or-more-nights-a-week

Figure 20 shows a grouping largely comprising parents who adopt an equal (or near-equal) timeshare arrangement (6% of structured arrangements; 2% overall).

Again, there is a mix of arrangements; in some cases the bulk of contact occurs in one week, with some sleepovers occurring in the other week (see rows 1 to 3); in other cases, blocks of time are essentially mirrored weekly (such as Saturday night to Wednesday morning, Thursday night to Sunday morning, Tuesday night to Saturday morning; or Tuesday night plus Friday night to Monday morning) (see rows 4, 7 and 9). Long blocks of parental absence are less likely to occur in these arrangements. These arrangements are interesting in that they are more complex but afford more frequent contact between children and both parents. (This cluster encompasses approximations of Options 5-7 in Kelly’s model.)

Figure 20. Pattern 10: Four or more nights in one week (~50/50 care)



Interpretative comment

As with the “every-other-weekend” patterns outlined earlier, the bunching-up of certain patterns provides tell-tale clues of the conceptual scaffolding underpinning the arrangements. Three clusters stand out: an overnight stay every

Friday *or* Saturday night (10 cases: Rows 1 and 2 of Figure 15); overnight stays every Friday *and* Saturday night (18 cases: Row 1, Figure 17); and overnight stays every Friday night to Monday morning (6 cases: row 1, Figure 19). These clusters around weekends mirror similar but less frequent fortnightly patterns outlined earlier. They too bear the hallmark of “standard contact”, and account for 12 per cent of the cases analysed here (4% overall). It is worth noting that these schedules and their fortnightly counterparts account for over half (57%) of the contact schedules involving structured arrangements (16% overall).

Put simply, in the majority of cases where face-to-face contact is occurring and there is a set pattern to the arrangements, contact typically occurs every second weekend on Friday and/or Saturday night (in some cases extending to Sunday night) or every Friday and/or Saturday night. This suggests that even where contact is relatively frequent and predictable, considerable time can pass before children and their non-resident parent see each other again.

But it is also important to note that in almost half (43%) of the schedules examined, every-other-weekend or every-weekend routines had been augmented or replaced by more complex arrangements – raising the possibility that a subtle shift may be occurring towards higher levels of involvement by non-resident fathers.

Temporal shifts in parenting time cannot be tested because representative detailed contact schedule data have not been available to date. However, it is worth noting that a small but discernible increase appears to have occurred over the past six years in the proportion of non-resident fathers playing a greater role in their children’s lives (compare ABS 1998 with ABS 2004), including an increase in the number of parents with equal (or near equal) care of their children (roughly 3% in 1997 compared with 6% in 2003).

The changing nature of work and family life may be fostering clear expectations of high levels of continued parental involvement and responsibility for children by both parents, regardless of parents’ relationship status. Contact schedule data

hold much promise for exploring temporal shifts in patterns of parenting after separation.

(iii) Lateral approaches to structuring parenting time

Figure 21 in this section sets out some of the more novel and imaginative contact schedules from those reported by parents (embedded in Figures 11-20).

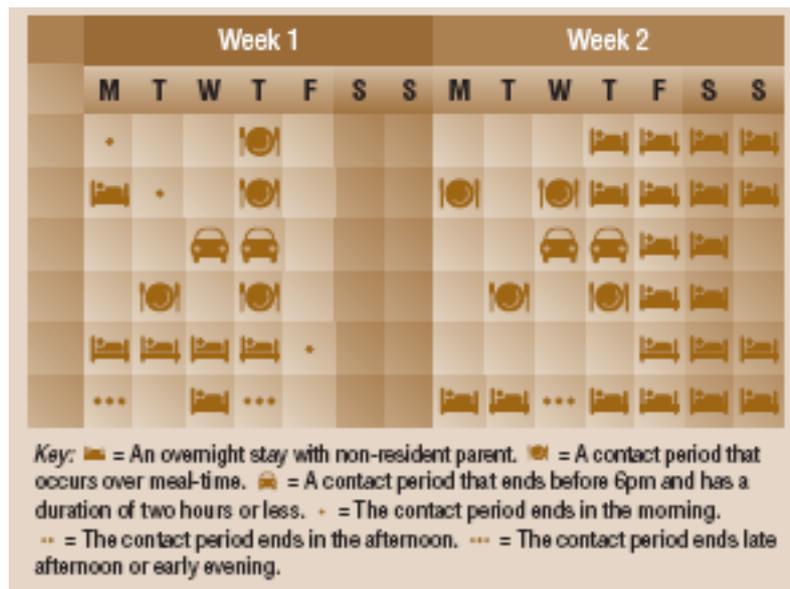
Example 1: extended weekend contact: The first row in Figure 21 shows an extended block of contact every-other weekend, beginning on Thursday night and ending Monday morning at school. The feature of the schedule is that two of the four overnight stays involve the setting up of school days (which might include homework to be handed in, the provision of playlunch and lunch, organising school clothes and sports gear, and so on). A Thursday night meal in the “off” week reduces the potentially long break between the single extended block of care each fortnight. While this arrangement may require a little more work, it is likely to have a qualitatively richer feel about it than a regular weekly Friday–Saturday night schedule.

Example 2: near equal care: The second row in Figure 21 shows an extended block of contact every-other weekend, beginning on Thursday night and ending Monday morning at school. Meals every couple of days break the otherwise eight-day wait between extended blocks of care. This pattern is likely to require a fair degree of cooperation, commitment, and financial resources to make it workable.

Example 3 and 4: every-other-weekend but with midweek contact: The third row in Figure 21 shows an every-other-weekend arrangement (Friday and Saturday night), but with regular midweek contact after school every Wednesday and Thursday night. This contact might involve “outside activity time” and “together time”, which might facilitate greater opportunities for building emotional bonds with children. The same holds for Example 4.

Example 5: split “week-about”: The last row in Figure 21 shows a “week-about” 50/50 arrangement (Monday night to the next Monday morning) but the Wednesday of that week is swapped with the other parent so that there is some contact every week with both parents.

Figure 21. Some creative examples



These real-world examples are far from exhaustive. Nor are they meant to be prescriptive. Obviously there are many other possibilities. A simple brochure of different parenting plan options that separated parents, mediators and legal professionals could access easily would have much utility in the Australian context.

Of course, some separated parents may not want to be “boxed-in” to a fixed schedule since the arrangement that is most likely to be child-responsive and to approximate traditional family life is one where children move freely between households – or remain in one household – when they choose to, and where it practical and safe to do so.

Summary

The extent to which every-other-weekend schedules form the “standard package” of contact in Australia has for the most part been unclear because representative micro-data on contact schedules have never been collected. The data presented here break new ground in this respect.

Three clear findings emerged. First, there is much diversity in the arrangements that parents make. The rich tapestry of variation is indeed striking. Second, overnight stays appear to anchor around Saturday nights, followed by Friday nights and then (as unfolding extended blocks of time) Sunday nights, and then Thursday nights. Weekly contact loosely duplicates this pattern, but with some minor variation in one of the two weeks. Third, 45 per cent of the schedules involved the “standard package” of contact that occurred every second weekend on Friday and/or Saturday night (with no midweek contact) while another 12 per cent of schedules involved overnight stays every Friday and/or Saturday night (again with no midweek contact).

This suggests that every-other-weekend or every-weekend models remain pervasive, and that even where face-to-face contact is reasonably frequent and predictable, five to twelve days can pass before children and their non-resident parent see each other again. At the same time, it is important to note that in 43 per cent of the schedules, every-other-weekend or every-weekend contact schedules had been augmented or replaced by more complex arrangements. It should also be remembered that a sizeable proportion of separated parents have arrangements that have no set pattern (39% of those who reported that parent–child contact was occurring), or have no arrangements in operation because little or no face-to-face contact is occurring (19% in this sample). Thus a range of other arrangements is at play outside of every-other-weekend models.

The work of several prominent practitioner/researchers (for example, Ricci 1997; Kelly 2004b) points to the importance of both parents being able to spend time with children in different contexts (such as overnight stays, doing homework,

eating icy-poles at the park, and so forth) – assuming, of course, it is safe for children to do so.

But thinking through how to develop creative, child-responsive parenting arrangements in the often emotionally charged context of relationship breakdown is no easy task. As Ricci (1997: 168) points out: we are not programmed to disassemble the time that we spend with loved ones into discrete pieces. Yet parental separation – whereby one family unit needs to be restructured into two stable functioning units, including setting out the parenting arrangements – demands this with all its complexities and challenges. Separated parents should be encouraged to consider some of the recent options proposed by Kelly (2004), Emery (2005), and others, so that children’s needs remain paramount in the “remaking” of families.

CHAPTER 11: THE EXPERIENCE OF TIME WITH CHILDREN

Thus far the arrangements, parenting schedules, motives, reflections, and demography of separated parents with different patterns of parent–child contact have been examined. But an important – yet typically hidden – dimension may sit behind these grids, percentages, perceptions, and patterns: the subjective experience of time with children.

In this chapter, it is argued that much of the recent debate in Australia on the merits or otherwise of 50/50 shared care after separation is not about parenting time *per se* but about the *experience* of time with children. Indeed two types of “time” may exist after separation, each largely gendered: for non-resident fathers, time with children is typically experienced as stilted, shallow, artificial and brief; for resident mothers, time with children may often be experienced as fluid, deep, demanding, and a given. Patterns of care after separation that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing. The chapter explores these ideas in the context of recent research into parent–child contact after separation.

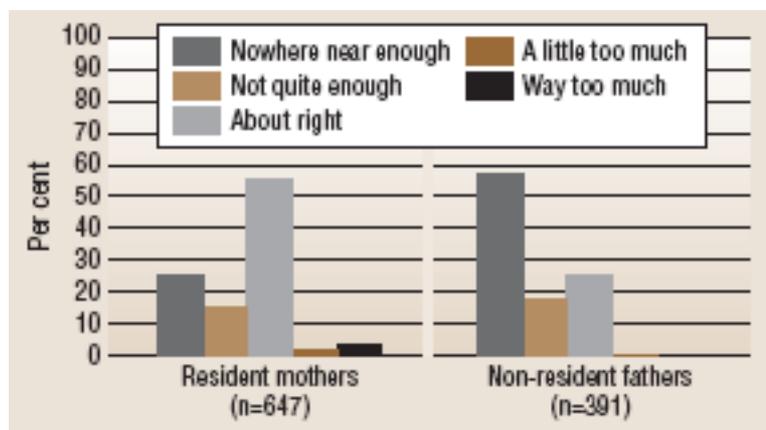
Parenting time and its discontents

More than three decades ago, Bernard (1972) pointed out that every marriage actually comprises two marriages – “his” and “hers”. The same could hold for divorce. For example, there is a tendency for divorced fathers to report higher estimates than divorced mothers of child support compliance and the frequency of father–child contact are examples of such differences (Ahrons 1983; Mizell 2002 – but see Lin et al. 2004, and Braver and O’Connell 1998 for more complex analytic frames on differential reporting; see also Funder 1989). Indeed differential reporting is also a feature of both the focus group data, and the data from HILDA.

Perhaps something more fundamental is at play regarding women’s and men’s perception and experience of time with children after separation. Analysis of two recent studies of parent–child contact in Australia are intriguing in this regard.

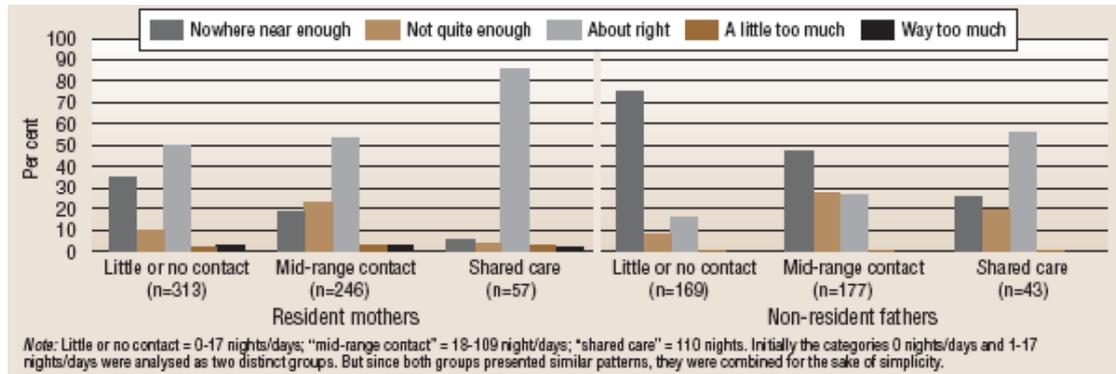
Data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey indicate that resident mothers and non-resident fathers differed markedly in their level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact occurring. Over half (55%) of the 647 resident mothers in the sample believed that the amount of contact was about right, while a similar proportion (57%) of the 394 non-resident fathers believed that it was nowhere near enough (see Figure 22). (It should be noted that the samples of men and women were independent – that is, the men and women had not been married to each other.)

Figure 22. Level of satisfaction with the level of father–child contact: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports



Parent–child contact can be defined by varying degrees of time and type. To what extent do these patterns change when levels of satisfaction are disaggregated by these dimensions? Figure 23 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different thresholds of actual father–child contact.

Figure 23. Level of satisfaction with the level of father–child contact by number of days/overnight stays per year: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports



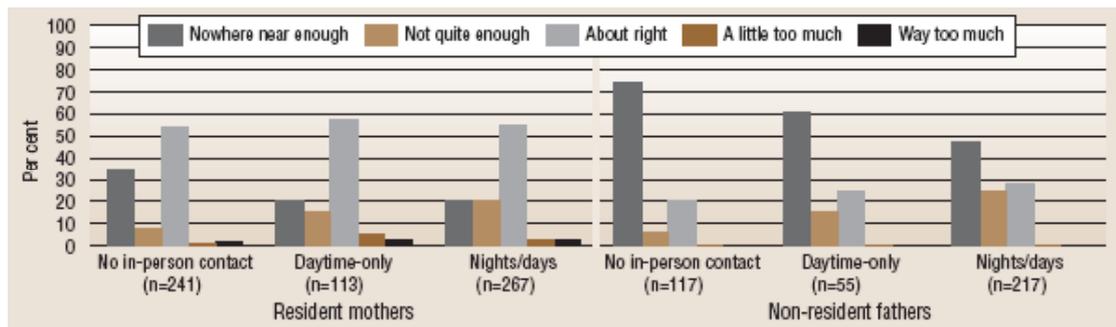
Three clear patterns emerged. Again, gender differences feature prominently. First, around half (50-53%) of the resident mothers in the “little or no” contact or “mid-range” contact groups believed that the amount of contact was about right. By contrast, three-quarters (75%) of the non-resident fathers who rarely or never saw their children believed that they had nowhere near enough contact (but note the 16% who believed that this amount of contact was about right). Thirty-five per cent of resident mothers in the little or no contact group also thought that “not enough” father–child contact was occurring.

Second, 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 – though, predictably, this pattern was far more pronounced for men than for women.

Third, 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. That fathers with shared care were less likely than their female counterparts to believe that the amount of father–child contact was “about right” might depict a desire for full-time family life with children.

Does the type of contact matter? Figure 24 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different types of father–child contact.

Figure 24. Level of satisfaction with father–child contact by type of contact: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports

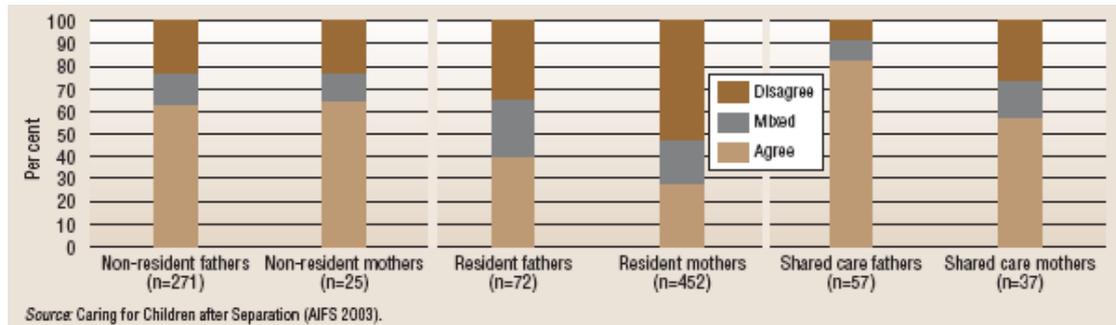


Most conspicuous in this figure is that the majority of resident mothers appear relatively satisfied (“about right”) with contact regardless of its form – none, daytime-only, or night and day (54-57%). Non-resident fathers, on the other hand, appear to be more satisfied as the type of contact becomes qualitatively richer – from none, to some (daytime-only), to sleepovers (“nowhere near enough”: 74%, 61%, 47% respectively).

These relatively gendered perceptions in relation to fathers’ time with children after separation are striking.

Recent data that depict separated parents’ attitudes to 50/50 shared care after divorce, as shown in Figure 25, are similarly intriguing.

Figure 25. Level of agreement with the idea of "equal time" parenting by gender and residence status: Separated / divorced parents' views



These data indicate that around three quarters (73%) of non-resident fathers in Australia, compared with around one-quarter of resident mothers (27%), agreed with the idea that children spend equal time with their parents after separation. But the similarity of response between non-resident mothers and non-resident fathers, and between resident mothers and resident fathers, should be noted. These data suggest that it is not so much respondents' gender that predicts attitudes to 50/50 care but parents' residence status (resident or non-resident). In other words, living with or apart from children may matter more than gender – though obviously both are usually closely intertwined.

At one level, both sets of data simply provide further evidence of the tendency for resident and non-resident parents (and thus most women and men) to see things differently. At a deeper level, perhaps these data reflect a different subjective experience of time with children. Maybe there are critical patches in time and space that allow children and parents to connect in deeper and more meaningful ways.

It's about time . . .

Time is our most precious resource. It is a crucial element in forging and strengthening family relationships, particularly with children (Dey 1999). Most

of us live in the hope that we can grow old and grey with those around us whom we love.

Increasingly, the dimension of time is becoming an important lens for understanding the social world (Adam 1991). Gendered conceptions of time have featured prominently in this emerging vista, with time-use studies providing many insights (see, for example, Craig 2002; Folbre and Bittman 2004).

Most studies show that a chasm often exists between women's and men's experience of time at home and with children (Thompson and Walker 1991). Women's time is more "pressured" than men's in terms of the density and intensity of family work, while any leisure time is much more "fragmented" (Sullivan 1997: 221). And in the context of time with children, mothers spend much of their time with children as the primary carer while fathers tend to play with children, generally in the presence of the child's mother (Craig 2002; Thompson and Walker 1991).

This chasm in experience may expand on parental separation – but not necessarily. Increasingly, many fathers are saying that they want to be more – if not equally – involved in their children's lives after divorce. But given the generally lopsided contributions of mothers and fathers to family work and children prior to separation, it is understandable that the desire of some fathers to want to start from an equal footing in relation to caring for children after separation appears to anger some mothers. Why the sudden shift by many fathers?

Ruptures in time

Alheit (1994) has suggested that two types of time are constantly experienced: "everyday time" (comprising the taken-for-granted routines of everyday life) and "life time" (comprising both future time and the past). Each type of time supports the other – one provides the detail, the other the big picture. Everyday time has practical expediency, while life time is a sequentially experienced contextual

frame. Alheit contends that crises can trigger a (retrospective and prospective) “biographical stock take”. Suddenly the future looks different, and the past warrants re-evaluation.

Alheit (1994: 310) writes:

Crises . . . always affect the substance of our biography because they put at risk any reconstructable or anticipated continuity of self-plan. And we are no longer ‘the same person’ as we were before the onset of crisis . . . [Crises] throw our biographical assessments into question, refuting entirely the expectations that we had nurtured for our further life.

Relationship breakdown is one such crisis that can challenge a projected future – a future with a partner and with children. It can also “rupture” time. As Game (1997) points out: “time is unhinged” by ruptures or disruptions to the future. She suggests that a crisis can release:

. . . time that has been frozen in the routines of everyday life, a time which . . . is ‘made invisible’ by ‘Habit’. Something is cracked open and the flow of time is there again. But this moment in which time is announced is also an overturning: it is time unhinged (p. 116).

Separation is likely to be one such critical juncture or jolt that can “unhinge” time. Whereas marriage may tend to mask the gendered nature of domestic life because of the benefits of complementary pursuits (breadwinning and caregiving), for many fathers, separation may expose what was once experienced as a given: the presence (or at least the availability) of children as part of the daily routines of family life. Many non-resident fathers as a consequence of seeing their children only on weekends, during the day, or in school holidays, report that their time with children feels stilted, brief, shallow and artificial (see earlier chapters, as well as Braver and O’Connell 1998; Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993). For these fathers, separation abruptly changes the subjective experience of time with children.

Separated fathers’ feelings of disconnection with children have recently been given voice in Australia by grass-roots fathers’ rights groups, a number of whom have

sought to introduce a legal presumption of 50/50 parenting time after separation (see, for example, Williams 2003). While this proposal was recently rejected by the Australian Government in favour of a presumption of “shared parental responsibility” (Commonwealth of Australia 2003), the need for family law professionals to encourage parents to consider sharing the care of children to a much greater degree remains a feature of the most recent round of proposed family law reform. It is important to note that the family law system in Australia, like similar systems elsewhere, is still grappling with how best to hear children’s voices in the push towards shared care (May and Smart 2004; Moloney and McIntosh 2004; Smart 2002; Smith, Taylor and Tapp 2003).

What is most striking about the recent debate in Australia on shared care after divorce is that it has largely centred on numbers – 50/50, 80/20, 70/30, and 60/40 time splits – and on “mathematising” parenting time. Of course, time is typically expressed in quantity, which makes number essential in its articulation (Zerzan 2005). But this apparent preoccupation with time as a number in family law (the “legality” of time) rather than a subjective experience (the “emotional experience” of time) means that separated parents can lose sight of what is most important to their children – spending time in a broad spectrum of activities and experiences with their parents. The importance of breadth and depth in caring for children is now examined.

The need for a multiplicity of times

As noted earlier, according to Kelly and Lamb (2003), the greater the range of contexts for interaction between parents and their children, the better. They suggest that different contexts facilitate children’s social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as afford greater opportunities for parents to build emotional bonds with their children. It is the intermingling of different activities *and* the different experiences of time that diverse contexts bring that form the hub of family life, and which are critical for family wellbeing. For instance, *overnight stays* allow for the experience of mundane everyday routines, as well as special moments – such as putting children to bed, reading to them,

saying good night, and starting the day together over breakfast. *Focused one-on-one together time* (such as playing a game, talking in the car, reading a book together, or helping with homework) sends a clear signal to children that they matter. *Outdoor time* (such as fishing, netball, or hiking) provides opportunities for children's emotional, physical, social and cognitive development, and give parents the chance to mentor, and to remain engaged with, their children. *Fun time* (such as long-weekends and school holidays) or *special time* (such as birthdays, Mothers' or Fathers' Day, and Christmas) foster the pursuit of mutually rewarding experiences for children and parents, help create bonds between each and symbolise those bonds, and can create positive life-long memories.

But while these, and other, types of time are important for children's and parent's wellbeing, one type of time warrants special attention: *being-in-the-moment time*. This type of time involves unstructured, spontaneous, intimate time where a parent and child are free to "hang out", talk about things, or engage in activities that are important to them (such as a teenage daughter talking about boyfriend problems while her father peels potatoes). Post-separation parenting arrangements that involve thin slices of parent-child time, such as daytime-only contact each Saturday afternoon, work against the experience of "being" time as this sort of time needs to feel natural and unimpeded to create the conditions for free-flowing interpersonal engagement. (See, for example, Mark's comments in Chapter 6 on the pitfalls of long-distance parenting, and the comments in Chapter 7 of some fathers in the daytime-only focus group who crave more fluid time with their children.)

In many ways, "being-in-the-moment" time represents the Holy Grail for many separated parents and their children because it brings into awareness the kind of closeness, warmth, and mutual understanding that remain elusive when parenting from a distance. Fluid, meaningful time cannot be scheduled, especially with children. It needs to be cultivated. (Perhaps this is another reason that contact typically occurs across weekends, since weekends are the most likely point in the week when time can breathe.)

Could it be that the desire for 50/50 care of children after divorce by many non-resident fathers is really a proxy for the yearning for “being” time with children? More broadly, could the apparent obsession with numbers (hours, days, time splits) in the context of caring for children after separation reflect a deeper concern about what that time might mean: time to develop more closeness with a child; time to continue or generate an intimate satisfying relationship; time to strengthen, enhance or even to maintain one’s identity as a “father” or “mother”?

Time as a lock . . . and a key

For Kearl (2005), time is the “container” of social activities. It is also therefore the container of emotional bonds. After separation, time is the gateway into the development or sustainment of close emotional bonds between children and their parents, especially where together time occurs across a range of time–space contexts (sleepovers before a school day, sharing meals, doing homework, doing “day-to-day stuff”, and having fun).

While parenting time after separation may largely be based on calendar and clock time, parent–child contact can nonetheless be structured in ways that encourage the experience of different types of time with children – ways that create the likelihood of “being-in-the-moment” time. Structuring parenting time in such a way that allows time to be porous is often not easy after separation because of the difficulties inherent in allocating time to meet the diverse desires and needs of all family members. But it is possible.

In exploring different patterns of parent–child contact after separation, data in the previous chapter suggest that a sizeable proportion of contact schedules may involve arrangements that are far more complex than traditional every-other-weekend approaches. The critical thing to note about these more complex arrangements is that they are structured in such a way as to involve a range of time–space experiences (without putting children at risk, one would hope).

After separation, time can be a lock – and a key. Some resident mothers may be *locked into* long periods of time with children with little room for respite and reflection. Likewise, some non-resident fathers may be *locked out of* less bounded time with children – constrained by snippets of weekend time with their children. But time can also be a key into new ways of being with children. Parents need to be encouraged to think more laterally about what arrangements might work best for their children and themselves. Arrangements that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing.

This chapter has sought to highlight the importance of “being” time with children in the hope that what matters is how time is spent and experienced, not just how it is allocated or distributed. In many ways, this is the central thread of this dissertation, and the core conceptual plank underpinning all of the data examined – both quantitative and qualitative.

CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Parent–child contact after separation 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. The extent to which different patterns of care impact on children is a matter of immense import to separated parents, practitioners, and policymakers. Yet despite widespread interest, research into parent–child contact has largely focused on contact frequency or quantity – this is despite mounting evidence that the nature or type of contact is as important as the amount of contact, if not more so.

This dissertation has explored five different patterns of parenting by 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 2004) based on resident parents’ reports suggest that half (50%) of all children under 18 with a parent living elsewhere have fairly frequent (at least weekly or fortnightly) 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 the other three Rs – relative economic disadvantage, “rotten behaviour” by a parent⁵⁰ (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 focus group data suggest a set of distinct parent/contact profiles (described below). These profiles must be viewed as impressionistic insofar as the qualitative data cannot be generalised to the broader population of separated parents.

50/50 shared care

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 not emotionally torn between first and second families. Both parents are able to adopt 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.” 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.

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

Recent Australian data suggest that 26 per cent of children with a natural parent living elsewhere, rarely or never see that other parent, typically their father (ABS 2004). 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 presented in Chapter 9 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 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 2003 data from the Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 2004), 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 16 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere do not stay overnight with that parent (ABS 2004). 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. In asking the question “who opts for which pattern of care and why?”, it would seem that the answer to this complex question lies in the particular emotional and financial resources that each parent has at his or her disposal post-separation, the emotional and physical space between each parent, and the degree to which parents can see, hear and intuit their children’s needs and interests, and protect them from any conflict or harm.

Limitations and significance of the study

This research is not without any shortcomings. The most obvious omission is that it is based on parents’ views, and does contain the voices of children. Any discussion of parent–child 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; Smart et al. 2001; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003).

On other omissions, two important domains have received sparse mention – violence and abuse, and child support. The troubling issue of parents’ and children’s safety in the context of contact surfaced in some participants’ stories across the focus groups. As mentioned earlier (Chapter 3), such issues could not be explored adequately and ethically within the confines of a 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 2003; see also Murphy and Pike 2003). 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.

Child support is also not discussed in any depth. This is because the focus group data on child support are both patchy and uncontroversial. Child support remains a source of considerable angst for resident and non-resident parents (see, for example, Joint Select Committee 1992, 1994; Commonwealth of Australia 2003, 2005a; Smyth and Weston 2005). While financial matters are likely to cut across many of the issues explored in the present study, there was insufficient information to flesh out the complex links between contact and child support (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present investigation makes three important contributions to knowledge: first, at least five different patterns of care can be identified in Australia, and that these appear to be linked to different combinations of practical and relationship factors; second, contact can be mapped reasonably precisely using date-time data; and third, the importance of time as an experience rather than just as a number may be the “missing link” in attempting to understand the recent push by many fathers for 50/50 care of their children.

These contributions take us some way from outdated “absence/presence” binary models (in which contact is conceptualised as either happening or not happening, with little in-between) to conceptualising and gauging parent–child contact in qualitatively richer ways. The richness of the contact schedule data presented suggests that researchers should consider the routine collection of such data where they are interested in research on children and parents after divorce.

Implications

A number of practical and policy implications 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 qualitative material presented in Chapters 4–8 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 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 et al. 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

This investigation 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” (Family Law Council 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” (Family Law Council 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). Support groups conducted by a skilled facilitator 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). 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 extent to which some patterns of care may be more stable than others; 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.

Finally, 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, McIntosh, Long and Moloney 2004), 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 focus groups described earlier by attempting to involve all family members (parents and children from pre-separation household units) in those 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.

Parting reflection

Parent-child contact typically acts as the gateway into the development or sustainment of close emotional bonds between children and parents after divorce. While every-other-weekend residential schedules may operate for practical reasons, as a vestige of the past, or by default, the data presented here suggest that many separated parents are indeed looking for more creative way of sharing the care of children after separation – ways that are hopefully responsive to their

children's needs and wishes. More work is needed to improve our understanding of how society can better support this positive pursuit.

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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 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

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

APPENDIX 2. FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS*

Focus group participants who speak in Chapter 4: Fifty/fifty care

FOUR MOTHERS

CAMILLE separated two years ago and has since repartnered. She has two daughters aged thirteen and ten. Her parenting arrangement involves a week-about schedule with the changeover occurring on Friday 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 nineteen and Jade who is seventeen, and is also the stepmother of sixteen-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 a seventeen-year-old son and two stepsons aged nineteen and seventeen. 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 eighteen and sixteen, and two sons aged fourteen and twelve.

PAUL, aged 46, has shared the care of his thirteen-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.

ROD, aged 49, is the former partner of Sally (see above).

SIMON, aged 30, has shared the care of his seven and nine-year-old daughters, 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 thirteen-year-old daughter and two sons aged eleven and eight. He also has a week-about arrangement.

* This appendix was compiled by Anna Ferro at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Focus group participants who speak in Chapter 5: Little or no contact

SIX RESIDENT MOTHERS

AUDREY, aged 53, separated eight years ago. She has two daughters aged eleven and thirteen. Her former partner now lives overseas and occasionally has contact with the children at Christmas time.

DENISE separated from her former partner twelve years ago. Her two daughters, aged eighteen and fourteen, have had very minimal contact with their father during the past eight years.

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

LEANNE, aged 40, has been a single mother for twelve years. She has a thirteen-year-old daughter who has not seen her father since she was a baby.

MAUREEN, aged 45, has two adult children and one fifteen-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 twelve years. He has a seventeen-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 thirteen and twelve, and a ten-year-old daughter, who he sees for brief visits 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 who has hasn't seen for over six months.

ROGER has been separated for ten years. He has two sons, aged eleven and thirteen, who he has not had any face-to-face contact with during the past 12 months.

ROSS has been separated for 3 years. His former partner moved overseas when they separated, so he hasn't seen his seven-year-old son since. He also has a two-year-old son who he has never met.

Focus group participants who speak in Chapter 6: Holiday-only contact

FIVE RESIDENT MOTHERS

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

GEORGIA separated from her former partner, who now lives overseas, five years ago. She has two children; a daughter aged fifteen and a son aged twelve, 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 day-only contact with his father during holiday periods.

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

FIVE NON-RESIDENT PARENTS

GERARD, aged 41, has been separated for 11 yrs. 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 eleven-year-old daughter who he sees during school holidays, and also has two young children with his new wife.

RON, aged 26, separated from his former partner before his daughter was born. She 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.

Focus group participants who speak in Chapter 7: Daytime-only contact

FIVE RESIDENT MOTHERS

LEONIE separated from her former partner five years ago. She has two daughters aged nineteen and sixteen. 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 thirteen and sixteen, 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.

PENNY, aged 48, has been separated for seven years. She has two daughters aged twenty-one and thirteen, and two sons aged eighteen and sixteen. The children's father now lives over two hours drive away, and they have dinner with him each Wednesday evening.

FIVE NON-RESIDENT FATHERS

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

GRANT separated from his former partner five years ago. He has an eighteen-year-old son and a sixteen-year-old daughter. He lives close to his former partner and sees his children several times a week.

JOHN has been separated from his former partner for three years. He has two daughters age six and five, and an eighteen-month-old son. He sees his children every third weekend for one or two days.

RICHARD, aged 41, has been separated from his former partner, who now lives interstate, for eight years. He has a ten-year-old daughter who he sees once every three weeks, and 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 thirteen-year-old son who he hasn't seen for the past three months, prior to which he had day-only contact for seven years.

Focus group participants who speak in Chapter 8: “Standard” contact

SIX RESIDENT MOTHERS

BRIDGET, aged 41, separated from her former partner thirteen years ago when their daughter Andrea, now aged fourteen, 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,

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 eleven, 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 fifteen and a thirteen year old daughter, who stay with their father every second weekend.

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

MAX, aged 40, separated from his former partner two years ago. He has a daughter aged seven and a son aged five who he has contact with 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 thirteen and a daughter aged fifteen. 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 sixteen-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 who he has contact with on alternate weekends from Friday evening to Monday morning, and on Thursday evening.

JOSEPH separated from her former partner three years ago. He has a five-year-old son who 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.

LIST OF PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS FROM THIS RESEARCH

Smyth, B. (forthcoming), "Non-resident parents", in G. Ritzer (ed), *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Blackwells Publishing.

Smyth, B. (2005), "Time to rethink time? The experience of time with children after divorce", *Family Matters*, 70, 4-10.

Smyth, B. & Weston, R. (2005), *A snapshot of contemporary attitudes to child support*, Research Report No 9, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

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Smyth, B. & Ferro, A. (2002), "When the difference is night and day: Parent-child contact after separation", *Family Matters*, 63, 54-59.

Smyth, B. (2002), "Research into parent-child contact after parental separation: Some methodological challenges", *Family Matters*, 62, 33-37.

NOTES

¹ The concept of the “good” divorce is borrowed from Ahrons (1994).

² Figures 1 through 3 were developed by Lixia Qu and the author at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

³ Some Australian studies are not examined here. These studies include: Dickinson, Heyworth, Plunkett, and Wilson (1999), Nicholls and Pike (2002), Parkinson, Cashmore and Single (2005), Rhoades et al. (2000), Violi, Patterson and Buttler (2001), and Woods (1999).

⁴ Research conducted by Dunlop and Burns (1988) is a good example of where the domain of parent–child contact was largely ignored, despite strong claims being about the wellbeing of adolescent children after separation.

⁵ Data from children collected by the Australian Institute of Family Studies as part of the Australian Divorce Transitions Project are not examined here. These data, comprising the reports of 62 children, have recently been analysed by Parkinson, Cashmore and Single (2005).

⁶ Of the primary school children: 7 per cent had daily face-to-face contact; 20 per cent had once a week contact; 28 per cent had once a fortnight contact; 15 per cent had contact once a month; 25 per cent had contact with their fathers less often than once a month; and 4 per cent had no contact. Of the secondary school children, 1 per cent had daily face-to-face contact; 26 per cent had once a week contact; 18 per cent had once a fortnight contact; 20 per cent had contact once a month; 30 per cent had contact with their fathers less often than once a month; and 3 per cent had no contact (Ochiltree and Amato 1985).

⁷ The Australian Institute of Family Studies was established in 1980 under the *Family Law Act 1975*.

⁸ This project was titled the Australian Divorce Transitions Project. Data from this project were eventually analysed by Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg (2003) and others.

⁹ But unlike Family Court samples comprising “couple data”, the men and women in the sample had not been married to each other (that is, the samples were independent groups of men and women).

¹⁰ See also the excellent review of the parent–contact literature by Jan Pryor in New Zealand and Bryan Rodgers in Australia (Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

¹¹ Some children were recruited outside of the study families.

¹² Earlier studies are nonetheless worth noting. Mitchell (1985), in her studies of Scottish divorces, found that 25 per cent of non-resident parents had no contact with their children, and another 15 per cent rarely had contact (40% reported contact occurring at least once a week, another 20% reported contact occurring at least once a month) (see also Mitchell 1981). Similar estimates were reported by McCoy and Nelson (1983) in Northern Ireland (cited in Brown 1994), and by Eekelaar and Clive (1977) in England (see also Bradshaw and Millar 1991). More recently, Carol Smart and her colleagues have also conducted a number of interesting studies of parent–child contact (Smart and Neale 1999; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001), and more recently, of contact disputes (Smart, May, Wade and Furniss 2004). (See also Dunn and Deater-Deckard 2001.)

¹³ Braver and O’Connell (1999: 42-45) have attempted to explain the high rate of paternal disengagement found by Furstenberg and Nord (1985) – not the least that the sample of fathers sampled were divorced in the 1960s, had been separated for more than 10 years, and their children were teenagers when re-interviewed in 1981 (see also the next note).

¹⁴ Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) offer a number of reasons why their findings differ markedly to the much lower levels of contact reported by mothers in Furstenberg and Nord’s (1985) study; according to Maccoby and Mnookin, these differences look to stem largely from the different samples and cohorts drawn on by each study.

¹⁵ Pryor and Rodgers (2001) note mixed support for the marital-involvement perspective.

¹⁶ These percentages are averaged across mothers’ and fathers’ reports (p. 8).

¹⁷ It should be noted that 22 of 33 studies reviewed by Bauserman (2002) were unpublished theses (thus not peer-reviewed), many of which did not control for socio-economic status. Socio-economic status has been shown to be a confounding variable influencing outcomes.

¹⁸ At the end of the day, the allocation of parenting 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.

¹⁹ Face-to-face interviews can yield richer information but such interviews are typically far more labour-intensive, and cannot capitalise on synergistic group dynamics.

²⁰ The holiday-only group of non-resident fathers included one non-resident mother (“Julie”). This group was extremely difficult to recruit, and many of the issues with which the non-resident mother was wrestling were similar to those raised by fathers in the screening interview.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

²³ 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.

²⁴ The Family Characteristics Survey (ABS 1998, 2004) was a supplement to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Monthly Population Survey, which is a national random sample comprising around 30,000 households. All analyses in this article are based on weighted sample estimates produced by the ABS.

²⁵ I am indebted to Adrienne Burgess for sharing her thinking on this under-developed idea.

²⁶ 20 June 2003, on the Allan Jones show:
www.pm.gov.au/news/interviews/Interview203

²⁷ High rates of paternal disengagement appear to have been historically stable in Australia (see, for example, Hirst and Smiley 1984).

²⁸ Dudley (1991) actually surveyed 255 divorced fathers, 84 (33%) of whom who had either occasional overnight or daytime-only contact, or no contact, with their children. The focus of his study was on these 84 fathers.

²⁹ On the issue of long-distance parenting, see also Cohen (1989).

³⁰ See, for example, Sandler, Wolchik and Braver (1988).

³¹ 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 sensitive information from separated parents on sensitive issues.

³² The move of two per cent of people was undefined.

³³ 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.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ Braver, Fabricus and Ellman (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.

³⁶ U v U (2002) 29 *Fam LR* 74

³⁷ Of course, this may only be in technologically advanced countries.

³⁸ The non-resident mother was included in the fathers group because the “holiday-only” groups was extremely difficult to fill despite the apparent prevalence of long-distance parenting in the general population of separated parents.

³⁹ Of course, this is an issue for many families, separated or otherwise.

⁴⁰ Flexibility may sit on top of “quality time” where children are older and there is little inter-parental conflict, as alluded to by Claire.

⁴¹ This observation was Jackie’s.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ This sharper conceptual framework has not appeared earlier because it has grown out of (that is, *post hoc* of) that work.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ 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.)

⁴⁶ The 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.

⁴⁷ As noted earlier, those with shared care were the most likely to be home owners (74%).

⁴⁸ 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% of mothers in all groups, and 10-12% of fathers).

⁴⁹ Emery's (2004: 177-197) model is one of the most conceptually advanced, comprising different timesharing schedules based on three "divorce styles" ("angry", "distant" or "cooperative") and six age groupings for children: infancy (0-18 months), toddler (18 months - 3 years), pre-school-age (3-5 years), early-school-age (6-9 years), and late school-age (10-12 years), and adolescence (13-18 years). This model yields a range of schedule options, which can then be tweaked for other factors (such as physical distance between households, and children's individual needs). Holidays and vacations are treated as a special case in point. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003) adopt a similar framework based largely on children's ages, developmental stages, gender, and temperament.

Ricci's (1997) model makes use of broader timeshare splits for school-age children – such as one-day-a-weekend, 80/20, 70/30, 50/50, child-directed "open time between homes", or "bird nesting" (where children stay put and parents alternate in the primary home for set blocks of time). Like Emery (2004), Ricci suggests that holidays and special days be given careful consideration because of the symbolic value of certain days or periods for family members.

⁵⁰ 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.