

Children's and parents' experience of contact after divorce

Although law and practice strongly encourage contact with the absent parent after divorce or separation, little is known about how contact is experienced or negotiated by children and parents. This study by the Centre for Research on the Child and Family at the University of East Anglia looked at what factors make contact work or not. The research found that:

-  Quality and quantity of contact varied widely. In 27 of the 61 families in the study, contact arrangements were classified as 'working'.
-  Where contact was working, conflict between parents was low or suppressed, and parents made contact arrangements without legal intervention. Although even contact arrangements that were working were not problem-free, interviewees felt that the benefits of contact outweighed the problems.
-  Children reported difficulties with new partners of contact parents, in establishing a meaningful relationship with the contact parent, and not being consulted about contact. Resident parents found the continuing emotional engagement with the former partner difficult. Contact parents experienced difficulties in adjusting to their contact status and with logistics.
-  Making contact work required the commitment of both adults and children, together with a 'parental bargain' contracted over parental roles where contact parents accepted their status and resident parents facilitated contact.
-  Both parents' relationship skills were also vital. Contact worked where parents had a balanced appraisal of each other's strengths and weaknesses and were able to compromise.
-  Contact did not work for two main reasons: lack of parents' commitment to contact, and parental conflict. In some families, no regular contact schedule had ever been established or adhered to. Both parents were, or had become, ambivalent about the importance of contact. In many families, parents were in conflict about the form or amount of contact. Some were disputing in private, others were seeking court orders.
-  Contact was a significant source of stress for children and adults in the contact 'not working' group. Emotional costs were more evident than reported benefits.
-  The researchers conclude that existing legal interventions have limited capacity to facilitate contact or reverse a downward spiral in contact relationships. Resources should be redirected to more creative work on improving parental relationships.

Background

There is a strong assumption in law and practice of the benefits of contact after divorce. However, research has shown that there is considerable variation in the extent of contact, and concerns about commitment to contact, conflict and harm. This study, based on 140 interviews with parents and children from 61 families, aimed to identify how contact is experienced by family members and, in particular, how and why contact 'works' in some families but not in others.

Variation in contact

The nature of contact varied enormously across the sample, with some arrangements clearly working and others not working at all. In some families, contact was very frequent and both parents supported the children's relationship with the other parent. In others, contact arrangements were irregular and the parental relationship was a source of mutual frustration. Contact – frequent or infrequent – could generate high levels of conflict between parents.

'Working' contact

The researchers defined 'working' contact as:

- contact occurring without risk of physical or psychological harm to any party;
- all parties (adults and children) committed to contact;
- all parties broadly satisfied with the current arrangements for contact and not seeking significant changes;
- contact, on balance, being a positive experience for all parties.

According to this definition, contact was working in 27 of the 61 families. Here, conflict between parents was low or suppressed, and parents made contact arrangements without legal intervention. Some families were characterised by frequent contact and friendly relationships between the parents:

"Do you speak to dad on the phone?"

*"Yeah, loads of times. Same with mum when I go round to dad's. They are friends, but they don't want to live with each other because they have rows."
(Child, 7-9)*

In some families, parental relationships were equally warm, but practical problems of time and distance meant that contact was less regular. Parents worked together to get round these barriers:

*"We always meet. Again we've got a good agreement there. We meet at ... It's roughly halfway for both of us."
(Contact father)*

In other families, there was regular contact and parents supported each other's relationship with the children, despite some parental tension often stemming from the separation:

*"Everybody has said to me, 'Oh I think you're being remarkable', but I have to think about [the children], I have to put them first and I think that if we were shouting and screaming at each other, it just doesn't get you anywhere."
(Resident mother)*

Benefits and burdens

Although contact was working in 27 families, there were still some associated difficulties. Children identified problems in maintaining a meaningful relationship with the parent they did not live with, particularly if that parent had a new partner:

*"It is a bit annoying sometimes, because you just want to go out with him ... she is ... holding us back from being together a bit and I just wish that maybe we could go out on our own."
(Child 13-15)*

Some children felt that they had not been consulted about contact arrangements:

*"No one has ever asked me to decide what I want."
"If they did, how would you decide?"
"Spend a lot of time thinking on it."
(Child 7-9)*

Parents also experienced some problems. For resident parents, the commitment to contact came at the cost of having to carry on dealing with their former partner:

*"To myself I always think no matter what I feel or how hurt I am he is [the children's] father and this is going to be it for the rest of our lives and so we have to get on."
(Resident mother)*

As well as dealing with logistical problems, contact parents had to adjust to their new role as the 'absent' parent. Consequently, many felt insecure about their relationship with the children:

*"There's a bit of apprehension, will they still want to see me, are they going to get on with everyone? And this great sense of loss. The seeing them was easy, it was the giving them back again which was bloody hard and often I would ... drive away in tears."
(Contact father)*

Nonetheless, in the working contact group these problems were outweighed by the benefits for children and parents:

"Yeah, it suits everybody fine. I'm doing fine, [son] is doing fine and [ex-wife] is doing fine as well. We're

just getting on with our lives and ... I'm still spending as much time with [son] as I can." (Contact father)

Making contact work

The researchers identified two ingredients critical for making contact work.

Joint parental commitment and role bargain

Where contact was working, it was evident that all parties were committed to contact, and to making it work. This commitment was accompanied by an implicit agreement or bargain between parents about their respective roles. Non-resident parents accepted their non-resident status and did not challenge the status of, or denigrate or threaten the resident parent. Resident parents actively supported contact, for example by suggesting or organising activities:

"She used to say, 'look, the kids have started swimming at school and you can swim, so how about taking them swimming?' So I'd think, 'Yeah that's a good idea, I'll come, I'll bring me gear and we'll go swimming.' So she'd actually suggest things. So that helped because I felt ... at least they'll be doing something they really want to do as well." (Contact father)

Active facilitation was vital in ensuring that children had the emotional permission to enjoy contact. In some cases, it also ensured the continuing involvement of contact parents:

"He's actually a really good dad. You know, with everything else he's really calm, patient, gentle, he's lovely in fact. So ... the situation's loads better now. But if I didn't pick up the phone saying phone [child], for the next two weeks there is a very good chance we wouldn't see him." (Resident mother)

Relationship skills

The other key component was that parents were able to work through the inevitable difficulties. Contact was about establishing 'good enough' rather than perfect relationships. Parents had a realistic, balanced appraisal of each other, recognising strengths and weaknesses. Equally, they accepted that some disagreement was inevitable, but managed to compromise or deal with conflict in a way that did not escalate a problem into a dispute. A presumption of 'good intentions' meant that differences in parenting style were accepted as legitimate, or could be tackled without undermining contact:

"He lets the [children] watch 18 [rated] videos. He lets them stay up very late ... I object to the late nights because I get them back on Sunday bad-tempered, tired and whatever. So I have had arguments about that. But he is a good dad to them." (Resident mother)

'Not working' contact

The two main reasons why contact did not work were lack of parental commitment to contact, or high levels of parental conflict. In these families, the benefits of contact were harder to identify and the problems far more salient.

In eight families, no regular schedule for contact had ever been established or adhered to. Here, both parents were, or had become, ambivalent about the importance of contact, although some resident parents had earlier tried to use the legal system to enforce contact without success.

"I wish having left that I'd broken all contact and I also wish that I hadn't thought that the kids needed that link because in fact since, his contact has been very sporadic and erratic, and it's probably been more damaging than if they'd just never seen him." (Resident mother)

Parents were frustrated with each other rather than overtly hostile. Children varied in their response. Some had become largely indifferent to the non-resident parent; others faced the uncertainty of not knowing if or when they would see their parent again:

"We don't know what she looks like anymore. Every time when she's promised to come round, she keeps on lying which makes me sad ... ever since she kept on lying I just kept on getting annoyed and then getting annoyed at school, disrupting my education and that lot." (Child 13-15)

In 25 families, contact was not working because parents were in dispute about the amount or form of contact. The cause, extent and outcome of the conflict varied. In some families, parents battled over their respective roles, with each seeking to increase the amount of time they spent with the children, although without taking disputes to court.

"My vision of when your mum and dad separate is that your dad comes and takes you out on a Sunday and you go the zoo. But it is control, control." (Resident mother)

In some cases, there was a stalemate with ongoing contact, but parents refusing to communicate with each other:

"I normally get a message via [child] and I use [child] as a mouthpiece as well. As you can imagine the less I speak to [mother] the better I like it." (Contact father)

Two groups of families had taken disputes to court hearings. In one group this led to the withdrawal of the contact parent; the other group fought on:

"If I let her get away with it I just know that the defined order that I have got, she will continue to eat away at, because she wants me to have nothing to do with the children whatsoever. Her goal will be to have me gone." (Contact father)

In the last group, contact was occurring subject to formal and informal risk management strategies using contact centres or relatives to 'supervise' contact:

"We go through highs and lows, we can be quite polite to each other mainly because if I see him I still ... feel frightened. You couldn't reason with him, he is lacking the ability to reason." (Resident mother)

Conflict over contact had a profound impact on all parties involved:

"So before you see your dad, do you know how you feel?"
 "Well the whole family usually gets well, not upset, but they all feel uptight with it. I feel that I have to make the most of mum before I leave the house, before I leave to go with dad. I feel a bit more sad than happy because every time I go with my dad then when I come back dad and mum always have an argument when mum comes to pick me up or something like that." (Child, 7-9)

All the children were very aware of the conflict between their parents. Some tried to manage the conflict, others tried to avoid it by going out as much as possible, or rejected the contact parent:

"I only get upset after I have seen my dad, then I get better, then he comes along and then I get upset again and so I said the perfect way is that I just don't see him." (Child, 10-12)

Virtuous and vicious circles

In the 'working' contact arrangements, the commitment to contact and parents' role bargains were in place very early in the decision-making process. Parents' ability to recognise each other's strengths and weaknesses and to compromise meant that parental relationships often improved over time, with nil or minimal involvement from solicitors or courts in contact arrangements.

In contrast, in the 'not working' arrangements, parents became ever more frustrated or angry with each other. Each generally portrayed the other in black and white terms with few, if any, redeeming features. Nor could either parent understand the behaviour of the other. Not all parents in the 'not working' arrangements sought outside assistance with contact. However, where they did there was little

improvement. Solicitors were unable to increase the commitment of parents who were ambivalent about contact, and applications for court orders appeared to exacerbate rather than resolve parental disputes.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that the 'no order' principle of the Children Act 1989 appears to be working well, enabling parents who can to make workable contact arrangements without external intervention. There are, however, major problems with existing interventions, which have limited capacity to shift 'not working' into 'working' contact, or to prevent a downward spiral in relationships.

Resources should be redirected towards more creative work to improve parental and parent-child relationships rather than repeated attempts at imposing a solution. Children should have greater access to counselling services. Advice on how to make contact work should be available to parents, including the importance of consulting with children.

About the project

The research was undertaken by Liz Trinder, Mary Beek and Jo Connolly at the Centre for Research on the Child and Family at the University of East Anglia. The study was based on qualitative interviews with 140 parents and children from 61 families. Families were recruited from both contested and uncontested contact arrangements, to identify what factors are associated with working and not working contact. The families were diverse in terms of time since separation, length of relationship and social class.

How to get further information

The full report, **Making contact: How parents and children negotiate and experience contact after divorce** by Liz Trinder, Mary Beek and Jo Connolly, is published for the Foundation by YPS as part of the Family Change series (ISBN 1 84263 078 4, price £12.95).