

Making contact

How parents and children negotiate and experience contact after divorce

Liz Trinder, Mary Beek and Jo Connolly

The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

© Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2002

All rights reserved.

Published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by YPS

ISBN 1 84263 078 4 (paperback)

ISBN 1 84263 093 8 (pdf: available at www.jrf.org.uk)

Cover design by Adkins Design

Prepared and printed by:

York Publishing Services Ltd

64 Hallfield Road

Laythorpe

York YO31 7ZQ

Tel: 01904 430033; Fax: 01904 430868; E-mail: orders@yps-publishing.co.uk

Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Summary	v
1 Introduction	1
The context	1
Aims of the study	1
Methods	2
2 How contact varies	5
Introduction	5
Consensual committed contact	6
Faltering contact	12
Conflicted contact	14
3 Why does contact vary?	24
Introduction	24
Direct determinants	25
Challenges	31
Mediators	36
Time	44
Summary	45
4 Implications	46
Implications for policy-makers	46
Implications for practitioners	47
Implications for parents	48
References	49
Appendix: Further sample details	51

Acknowledgements

The Lord Chancellor's Department and Norwich Court Service provided invaluable support in enabling us to make contact with separated parents. We would like to thank Suzanne Coulson and Sandra Kielty who undertook some of the children's interviews. We had invaluable support and advice from our advisory group: Harriet Bretherton, Eunice Halliday, Clem Henricson,

Charlie Lewis, Mavis Maclean, Bren Neale, Charles Prest, Martin Richards, Margaret Robinson, Shelley Day Sclater and Susan Taylor from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Thanks also to Bruce Smyth from the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Our greatest debt is to the parents and children who agreed to be interviewed for the study. We hope that we have done justice to their accounts.

Summary

Key findings

- *This study aimed to examine how adults and children negotiate contact, how contact is experienced and what factors or issues shape contact.*

We set out to construct a sample of contested and uncontested contact cases as a means to identify what makes contact ‘work’ or ‘not work’ for children and parents. The final sample consisted of 140 individuals from 61 families, half of which had entirely privately ordered contact arrangements, with the remainder having varying degrees of involvement with lawyers and the courts.

- *The quality and quantity of contact varies tremendously.* Nine different types of contact arrangement were identified within three umbrella groupings:
 - 1 *Consensual committed:* where both parents and children were committed to regular contact and interparental conflict was low or suppressed. These arrangements took three forms. *Reconfigured continuing families* were characterised by frequent contact and friendly relationships between parents. *Flexible bridgers* had ad hoc contact arrangements with parents working together to overcome logistical barriers. The *tensely committed* had regular ongoing contact, with both parents supportive of each other’s relationship with the children despite a degree of parental tension.
 - 2 *Faltering:* where contact was irregular or had ceased, without court involvement. In the *ambivalently erratic* grouping both parents were, or had become, ambivalent about the importance of contact and no contact timetable had ever been established or adhered to.
 - 3 *Conflicted:* where role conflicts and/or perceptions of risk resulted in disputes about

the amount or form of contact. *Competitively enmeshed* parents battled over their respective roles largely in private. Parents in the *conflicted separate worlds* resolved the issue by ceasing all communication. Two groups took disputes to court hearings, in the *rejected retreaters* grouping leading to the withdrawal of the contact parent, whilst the *ongoing battling* group fought on. In the *contingent contact* grouping, contact was continuing subject to formal and informal risk management strategies.

- *Contact places significant demands on both adults and children.* It is important to recognise that contact is a difficult process for everyone, whatever the nature of the arrangements. Even ‘working’ arrangements had some associated problems. It was clear, however, that where contact was not working there were even greater demands upon, and emotional costs for, both adults and children. Looking across the sample the problems identified by children were parental conflict, relationships with new partners of contact parents, difficulties in establishing a meaningful relationship with the contact parent and not being consulted about contact. For resident parents, the problems were the continuing emotional engagement with the former partner, erratic contact parents, conflict and risk, whilst for contact parents the major problems were adjusting to contact status and insecurity about one’s relationship with the children, conflict and logistics (time, money and distance).
- *There is no single ingredient, or individual, responsible for making contact work or not work.* Instead, it is the attitudes, actions and interactions of all family members – that is, resident and contact parents and children – that shape contact. There are a wide range of factors that determine the quality and quantity of contact including challenges (the nature of the

separation, new adult partners, money, logistics, parenting style and risk), mediating factors (beliefs about contact, relationship skills, external agencies) and direct determinants (commitment to contact, role clarity and relationship quality) all interacting over time.

- *High quality contact requires ongoing proactive efforts to make it work, not just the absence of major problems between parents.* Making contact work requires a continuing process of negotiating and balancing relationships, an insight into the perspectives of others, an ability to compromise and open, honest communication between parents and children. Where contact was working it was also based on the commitment of all parties to contact, together with a 'parental bargain' where the non-resident parent accepted their status and in turn the resident parent proactively facilitated contact. Beyond that there is no single best form of contact arrangement or ideal quantity of contact. It is the quality of relationships rather than the precise amount of contact that is important.
- *Parents do have difficulties in finding an appropriate balance in talking to children about the separation and contact arrangements.* In some cases children appeared too involved; however, in some of the consensual groupings, the efforts of parents to make the parental relationship work meant that some children felt that they had not been consulted about contact. It is helpful if parents give children permission to alter contact to suit their own needs.

Practical implications

- *The private ordering or 'no order' principle of the Children Act 1989 appears to be working well, enabling parents who can do so to make workable contact arrangements without external intervention.*
- *Existing interventions for families where contact is faltering and conflicted require rethinking.* Reliance on court orders is not enough or necessarily helpful in enhancing the quality of relationships which is critical to making contact work. A wider range of services, including therapeutic interventions, which go beyond imposing an outcome without providing a solution to conflict should be developed by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). More supervised rather than supported contact centres are needed to manage cases involving risk to parents or children. Information for parents should be made more generally available, with practical and realistic strategies for managing contact. Counselling services should be more widely available for children. Consideration should be given to introducing a statutory requirement that non-resident parents should maintain regular contact with children if this is in children's best interests.

Introduction

The context

One of the responses to high rates of divorce and cohabitation breakdown has been to emphasise the importance of contact as a means to maintain relationships between children and their absent parent. There is now a strong although rebuttable legal presumption in favour of continuing contact, although a meta-analysis of 63 studies has suggested that it is the quality not the quantity of contact that is associated with children's well-being (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999).

It is clear, however, that the practice of contact is difficult for many families. A substantial proportion of children do lose contact with their absent parent. In Maclean and Eekelaar's (1997) study, 32 per cent of divorced parents were no longer having contact, with the proportion even higher for former cohabiters. Where contact does occur it can be a source of ongoing parental conflict (Wolchik and Fenaughty, 1996), reflected in the steady rise in the number of applications for contact orders since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 (Pearce *et al.*, 1999) with additional problems with the enforcement of orders (Advisory Board on Family Law, 2002). There are concerns too about the risks to women and children of contact with violent men (Hester and Radford, 1996; Advisory Board on Family Law, 1999).

There have been a number of studies examining the reasons why contact continues or ceases and why the amount of contact varies. Studies have considered a wide range of factors. The following are associated with *continuing* contact:

- *Sociodemographic status*: higher income and education (Stephens, 1996; Cooksey and Craig, 1998).
- *Legal status*: divorcing rather than cohabiting parents or 'never (lived) together' parents (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997).
- *Geographic*: fathers living in close proximity (Cooksey and Craig, 1998, Smyth *et al.*, 2001).

- *Economic*: fathers who pay child support (Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Smyth *et al.*, 2001).
- *Family Formation*: further birth children for the contact parent, but not the repartnering of the resident parent (Manning and Smock, 1999; Smyth *et al.*, 2001).
- *Parental relationship*: contact is more frequent where there is less conflict (Smyth *et al.*, 2001). Wolchik and Fenaughty (1996), in contrast, found no association between level of conflict and amount of contact, but a significant association between resident parent's anger/hurt about the divorce and their perceptions of the contact parent's parenting abilities. Findings have been mixed on whether parental involvement pre-divorce is linked to continuing contact (Cooksey and Craig, 1998).

Aims of the study

Although there is a strong presumption of contact in law and policy, existing research has shown that there is considerable variation in the extent of contact and ongoing concerns about commitment to contact, conflict and harm. Researchers have also identified a range of factors that influence the quality and quantity of contact. The aim of this study therefore was to take a detailed look at particular sets of contact arrangements to identify how contact is experienced by family members and how it is negotiated. In particular, we were seeking to work out how and why contact 'works' in some families, but not others, and what issues or factors lead to, or negate, the need for court involvement in contact.

In order to understand how contact operates and is experienced it was important to get the perspectives of all the key players, that is, resident and contact parents and children. One of the problems of research in this area is that studies are

Making contact

frequently based on unrelated parents and children talking about different sets of contact arrangements. We set out to recruit 'family sets' of resident and contact parents and children from the same families in order to identify how mothers, fathers and children viewed the same set of arrangements as well as the actions of each other.

Our aims, in brief, were to:

- understand how adults and children experience contact
- identify how contact arrangements are negotiated and developed over time, including the relative influence of mothers, fathers and children, and the role of external agencies
- identify what factors or issues lead to positive, negative or mixed contact experiences, in other words what makes contact 'work' or 'not work' for children and parents, and what gives rise to disputes over contact.

Methods

Who took part in the study?

The data for this project are based on qualitative interviews with adults and children from 61 families. We conducted 140 interviews: 48 with resident parents, 35 with contact parents and 57 with children/young people. Families were recruited from a range of sources, a court service

mailout, articles in local newspapers, posters, a contact centre and snowballing (see Appendix).

We had three aims in sampling:

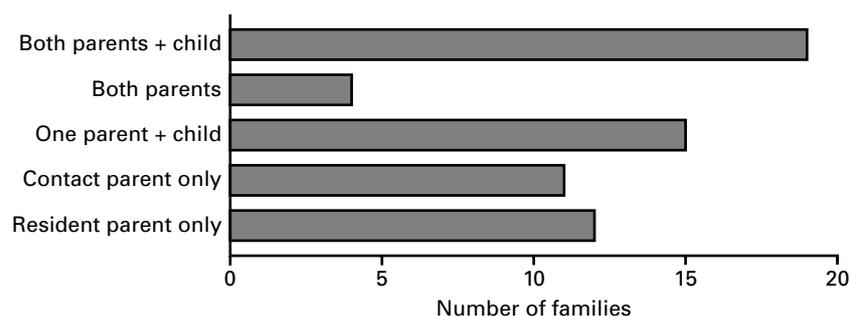
- 1 to build a sample incorporating a range of contact arrangements, including both 'contested' and 'uncontested' contact as a means to explore what gives rise to contact disputes
- 2 to include a broad range of families, with a mix of socio-economic backgrounds, ages, legal status and time since separation
- 3 to recruit 'family sets' of both parents and children where possible.

Recruiting full family sets proved challenging. Nonetheless, in just under two-thirds of families, we achieved interviews from at least two perspectives (Figure 1).

This is a purposive rather than a representative sample. Our aim was to identify and explore in depth different types of contact arrangement, and in particular to ensure that we had a balance of contested and uncontested cases. We managed to achieve this balance. In 33 families contact had not been raised as a particular issue with solicitors or neither parent had seen a solicitor. In five families at least one parent had sought legal advice about contact. The remaining 23 families had had much more extensive legal involvement (see Appendix).

Although there is deliberate over-sampling of contested cases, the sample otherwise contains a

Figure 1 Extent of interviewing per family



broad mix of families. The Cardiff Children's Perspectives and Experience of the Divorce Process study (Butler *et al.*, forthcoming) provides a useful comparison. That study was based on a representative sample drawn from court records of 104 children from 70 recently divorced families. We include below further details of the sample, with comparisons to the Cardiff study where possible:

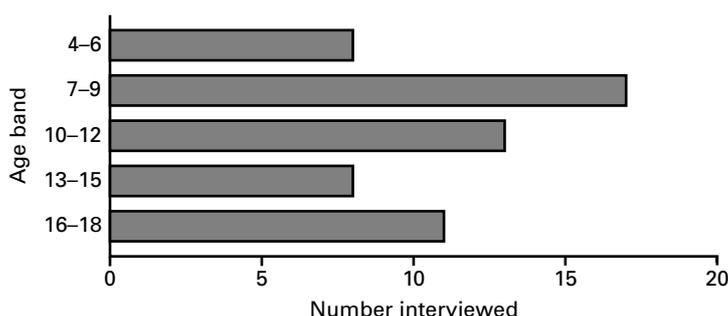
- *Average age of interviewed children:* The average age of the children at interview was 10.8 years. Figure 2 gives the age distribution. The mean age of the children in the Cardiff study was 11.5 years.
- *Socio-economic class:* 29 families were white-collar/professional, 22 blue-collar/manual, ten were unemployed. In the Cardiff study, 46 resident parents were in paid employment, 21 not in paid employment with missing data on three, and 47 absent parents were in paid employment, 11 not in paid employment and 12 'don't know' or missing data.
- *Ethnicity and nationality:* in 52 families, both parents were white UK nationals. Eight families contained at least one non-UK national parent. Only three non-white parents were interviewed. All the Cardiff children were white British.
- *Length of parental relationship:* parents had been together for an average of ten years,

with a range of two to 21 years. The average length of the relationship in the Cardiff study was 11.4 years.

- *Time since separation:* the mean length of time since separation was 4.8 years, with a range from a few months to 15 years. In the Cardiff study, the average was three years.
- *Gender of resident parent:* mothers were the resident parent in 54 families, fathers the resident parent in six families and in one family residence was divided equally. Mothers were the resident parent in 65 out of 70 families in the Cardiff study.
- *Legal status:* in 54 families the parents had been married, in six families the parents had cohabited and in one family the parents had never lived together. All parents were the biological or adoptive parents of the children concerned. The Cardiff study drew its sample from divorce records.

The comparison with the Cardiff study provides considerable reassurance that our sample is broadly based. A sample of 140 in-depth interviews from 61 families is very large for a qualitative study. Even so it is likely that we will have missed certain types of contact arrangements. The sample included fewer younger parents (in their twenties), fewer black families and fewer former cohabitantes than we would have liked, each of which might have distinctive approaches and experiences of contact.

Figure 2 Age of interviewed children and young people



The interviews

We began the interviewing process with a single adult who had agreed to be interviewed. Interviews with further family members were conducted if the original informant chose to pass on details of the project and after the other adult and/or children had given informed consent. In order to maintain confidentiality we had separate interviewers for each adult, as well as a specialist children's interviewer.

The interviews with parents were loosely structured to permit interviewees to talk in depth about their experience and raise issues that were pertinent to them. In each case the interview covered six broad topic areas:

- nature of the separation
- expectations and wishes for contact
- history and nature of contact
- arranging and negotiating contact
- sources of advice and support
- evaluation of contact arrangements.

The children's interviews included structured and unstructured discussion and structured tasks. The topics covered were:

- pattern, amount and development of contact
- feelings at different points in contact (using 'emotions' faces for young children)
- involvement in decision-making about contact

- advice for children and parents on supporting children after divorce and involvement in decision-making (using vignettes)
- evaluation of contact arrangements.

The analysis

All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using the grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis (Strauss, 1987), facilitated by the software package *QSR NVivo*. A brief account of the method of analysis can be found in the Appendix.

One important point to note is that we were not trying to identify which was the 'true' account from all of those given by different family members, but instead to identify how each individual experienced the same arrangements. The analysis that follows is therefore based on the perspectives of all the family members who were interviewed, sometimes highly consistent, at other times diametrically opposed.

Anonymity and language

The majority of interviews were carried out in East Anglia. We have retained local expressions in interview extracts, e.g. 'he do' or 'he let' rather than 'he does' or 'he lets'. To preserve anonymity we have used age bands rather than exact ages for children, and have changed non-essential details such as locations and children's gender in some cases. All names are pseudonyms.

2 How contact varies

Introduction

The nature of contact varied enormously across the sample. In some families contact was very frequent with both parents supporting the children's relationship with the other. In other families contact arrangements were irregular and infrequent, and the parental relationship was a source of mutual frustration; alternatively, contact, whether frequent or infrequent, could generate high levels of conflict between parents.

A sense of the variation in the nature of contact is evident in the frequency of contact. Some children in the sample had frequent contact whilst others had had very little or no face-to-face contact within the past year (see Figure 3).

The type of contact schedule in operation varied by amount, frequency, flexibility, predictability and by lead decision-maker. Five different types of schedule were evident:

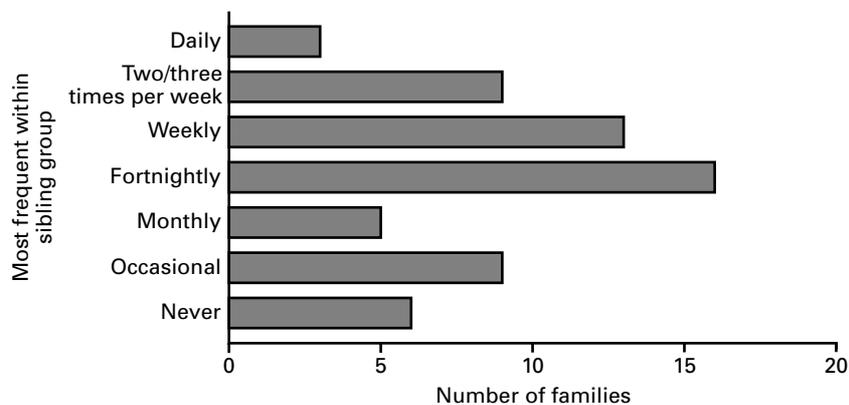
- 1 *Rigid*: tightly scheduled arrangements with minimal room for flexibility, developed by parents to avoid the need for parental communication or defined by court orders.
- 2 *Flexibly routine*: predictable arrangements established by parents with scope for flexibility to accommodate parent and child commitments and additional visits.

- 3 *Fitted in*: irregular pattern of contact due to logistical constraints for parents, although set within a general expectation of making contact as frequent as possible. Each contact was negotiated separately by parents to fit around logistical constraints and parent/child commitments.
- 4 *Self-servicing*: irregular but fairly frequent pattern of contact directed by teenagers.
- 5 *Sporadic*: irregular and infrequent pattern of contact with failed attempts to establish a predictable pattern of arrangements.

The data on the amount and form of contact capture only part of the story however. As well as the *quantity* of contact, it was the *quality* of contact and the *quality* of parent-child and parent-parent relationships that diverged significantly across the sample. A core task for the analysis was to map out different patterns or types of arrangements that captured all elements of quantity and quality, meanings and experiences of contact. We identified three broad 'umbrella' groupings of different types of contact:

- 1 *Consensual committed*: both parents and children are committed to regular contact and interparental conflict is low or suppressed.

Figure 3 Frequency of contact over last year



- 2 *Faltering*: contact is irregular or has ceased, without court involvement.
- 3 *Conflicted*: role conflicts and/or perceptions of risk result in disputes about the amount or form of contact.

In the remainder of this chapter we describe the core characteristics of each of the three groupings and their subtypes (see Figure 4, and the Appendix for a full summary table).

The description of each grouping below also includes a short section identifying the 'strengths and difficulties' of the arrangement. It is important to note that all groupings had some problems associated with them, although the level of difficulty varied significantly. Conversely, in some groupings it was easy to identify the benefits of contact for all family members, whilst in others one or more of the family members found contact to be highly stressful and contact was clearly not working.

Drawing on our analysis of the different types of contact we define 'working' or 'not working' contact in the following terms:

- 1 Working or 'good enough' contact requires that *all* the following apply:
 - contact occurs without risk of physical or psychological harm to any party
 - all parties (both adults and children) are committed to contact
 - all parties are broadly satisfied with the current set of arrangements for contact and do not seek significant changes
 - contact is, on balance, a positive experience for all parties.
- 2 Not working or 'not good enough' contact is defined as when *at least one* of the following applies:
 - contact poses an ongoing risk of physical or psychological harm to at least one party

- not all parties are committed to contact
- at least one party seeks significant changes to the existing contact arrangements
- contact is, on balance, not a positive experience for all parties.

Using these definitions, the arrangements in the 'consensual committed' umbrella group were working. They were not problem-free, but the difficulties were relatively minor or manageable and were outweighed by the rewards. In contrast, families that we classified as part of the 'erratic' or 'conflicted' umbrella groupings had contact arrangements that were not working.

Consensual committed contact

Overview

There were three different types of arrangements where both parents and children were committed to regular contact. In all three groupings parents subscribed to current child welfare principles of putting children first, enduring parental responsibility and parental amicability. Parents had a friendly relationship in the 'reconfigured continuing families' and 'flexible bridgers' groupings, but parents in the 'tensely committed' grouping had to work harder to manage conflict. Contact was very frequent for the 'reconfigured continuing families', a little less so for the 'tensely committed', with arrangements in the 'flexible bridgers' grouping arranged on an ad hoc basis to encompass logistical constraints.

Reconfigured continuing families (three families)

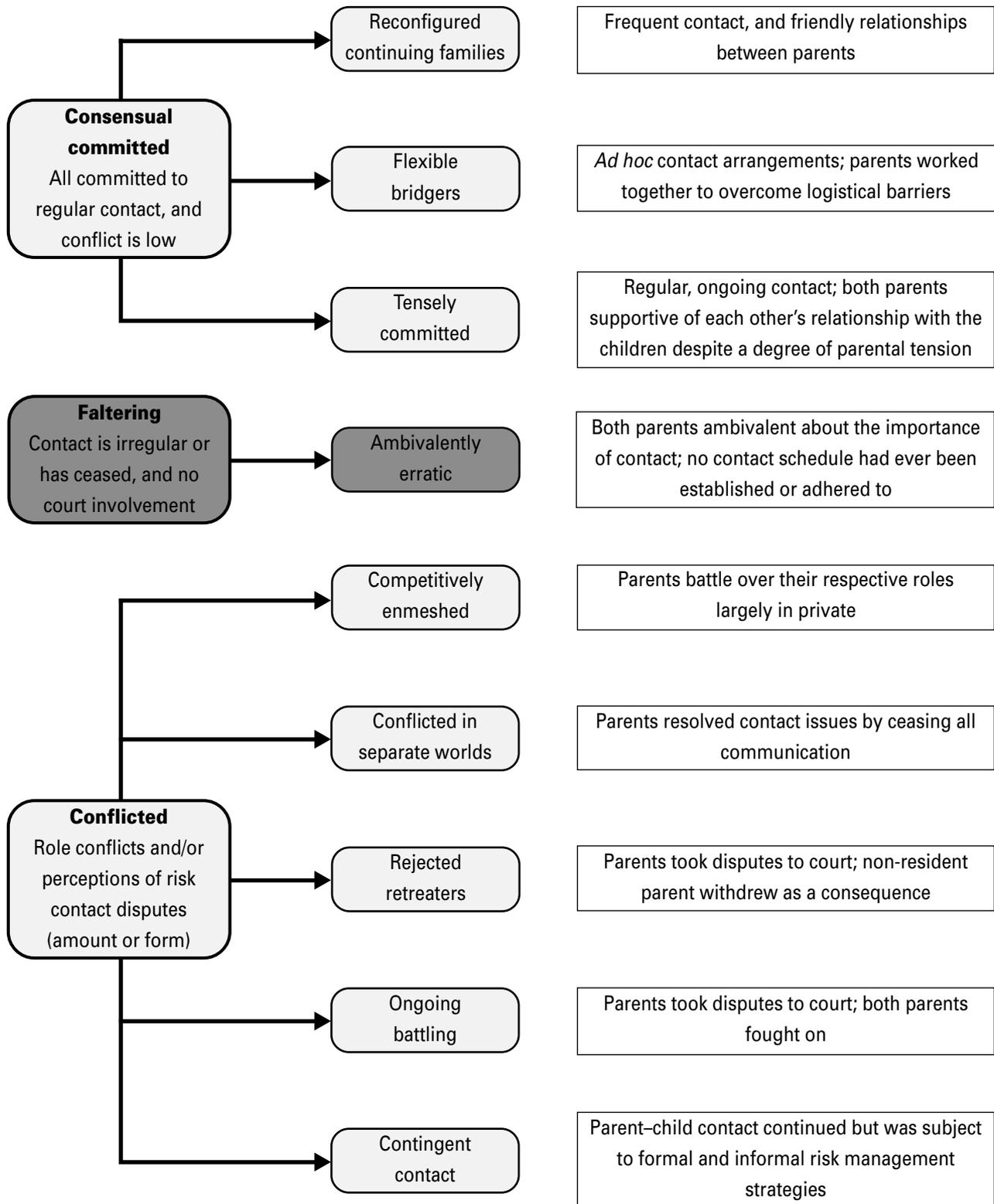
The same as it was before apart from I'm not staying there any more.

(Contact father)

Overview

There were three families who were seeking to maintain a continuing sense of family life after parental separation. Contact was extensive, with a

Figure 4 The three umbrella groupings and their subtypes



Making contact

well-established and reliable pattern of staying visits each weekend, as well as near-daily school runs or after-school visits. The children were central to both parents' lives, with none of the parents having new partners or full-time employment. Parents now had a friendly relationship following often stormy marriages. Both parents emphasised the importance of the children's relationship with the other parent, and considered the other to be a good parent, though with scope for minor everyday conflicts:

The only thing I would say about it is that he let them get away with too much. But then that's my opinion. He thinks I am too strict so you are going to get that with anybody.

(Resident mother)

Parents operated together as a unit, backing each other up in parenting matters:

When [child] says 'She has been horrible to me', I say 'Well you must have done something to make her horrible to you'. Well [child] says 'I did this, that and the other' and I say 'Well there you got to accept it. If you do something wrong you get told off the same as you do when you are here.'

(Contact father)

Relationships between children and each parent were positive. Children were comfortable with both parents with considerable overlap between the two homes in the form of joint celebrations and outings 'as a family', and encouragement to phone each parent whichever household they were in. All the children had an explanation about why their parents couldn't live together:

I like it at Dad's but I like it here as well because I can see them both, not at the same time, but differently.

Interviewer: 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)

The relatively minor difficulties reported by children concerned missing parents, friends and pets when at the other house.

None of the parents used the language of 'equal parenting' or rights. Instead, arrangements were cast in terms of children's needs, in particular the ideas of 'putting children first', ensuring continuity and shielding children from conflict. Fathers had increased parenting involvement after separation, but the residential status (and centrality) of mothers was not questioned:

I knew she'd always live with her mum ... Because, she's just yeah she adores her mum. It's strange because I take her everywhere ... But she loves her mum more.

(Contact father)

It was clear that the resident parent remained the key decision-maker, although they were highly facilitative gatekeepers providing that it was consistent with child welfare principles:

I said you can see the children when you like, how you like, whatever time you like ... in front of the children he does not call me [names] and I do not call him. And that is the rule we have got really.

(Resident mother)

Both fathers and children appeared to accept the centrality of maternal decision-making, although some of the older children were beginning to make some decisions about the timing of contact:

She has always been in charge. Mum just decided it really ... But yeah, sometimes I just go because I just feel like getting out of the house for a little while.

(Child, 10–12)

The emphasis on parental decision-making meant that all of the arrangements were entirely privately ordered with minimal contact with lawyers. There was also a strong injunction against extended family members 'interfering' in contact.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

Contact appeared to have benefits for all: contact parents were assured of a substantial continuing relationship with the children, residential parents had a break from childcare and children had continuing and meaningful relationships based on a considerable amount of 'normal' life with both parents. Contact was not a battleground and adults and children were pleased with their arrangements.

These arrangements did require substantial time and emotional investment in both the children and the other parent to sustain the relationship. Some parents noted that the arrangements meant that their personal lives were on hold. That type of investment, or possible entanglement, in the continuing family may not be possible or desirable long-term as children develop their own interests, or if parents were to gain new partners.

Flexible bridgers (two families)

His father telephones him and speaks to him, about every other day, every three days and they have long telephone conversations. And he has come to see him or I have taken Marco to Spain about every two months. We haven't actually ever sat down and said this is what we are going to do for the rest of Marco's childhood, we have said we will cross each bridge as we come to it.

(Resident mother)

Overview

In these two families parents were also friendly and mutually supportive, however significant practical problems (irregular work patterns and distance) precluded a regular pattern of frequent contact. There was frequent phone contact but direct contact occurred on a monthly or bi-monthly basis.

As with the reconfigured continuing families grouping there was a strong and recurrent emphasis on dominant child welfare discourses. There was general agreement about the respective roles of both parents and no concerns about the commitment of each parent to contact despite

relatively limited and ad hoc arrangements for contact. Parents endorsed each other's parenting ability and offered mutual support to each other as parents:

She'll do her best to help me. And the same the other way round. If she needs anything I'll do whatever I can to help her, because, if she's got a problem, then the kids have got a problem ... She'll say, 'They've been a handful this week' and, if they've been nasty to each other or being spiteful towards her, you know, verbally, then I'll tell them, you know, but she can deal with it most of the time.

(Contact father)

The logistical demands faced by parents meant a flexible approach of fitting contact around pre-existing child and adult commitments, but also mutual facilitation of contact by sharing the transport burden (e.g. meeting halfway, taking turns to travel), making the home available as a contact venue and using indirect contact:

I send him and other relatives ... pictures that [child] has done and that he has made, things from playgroup. Letters with my news.

(Resident mother)

As with the reconfigured continuing families grouping, there was minimal involvement with solicitors to initiate the divorce and friendly relationships with extended families but a prohibition on interference with contact.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

These were families where conflict-free contact occurred as much as possible, despite major practical constraints. Parents had established a mutually supportive relationship with some emotional boundaries established, partly by distance and partly by the subsequent repartnering of at least one parent. Nonetheless there were difficulties; the continuing engagement with the other parent could be emotionally confusing or burdensome:

Making contact

We don't argue or shout anyway but we, we especially want to, show [child] that we are comfortable. Of course I don't enjoy having him around now. But I feel that ... this is the best thing for [child] really.

(Resident mother)

Equally, the ad hoc arrangements for contact required a high degree of parental trust and flexibility, with the risk of both parents feeling let down:

There was a slight conflict at one stage where she said I wasn't seeing them enough because she wanted more time on her own ... And after we'd had a discussion, she sort of calmed down a little bit and she was fine. I got upset once, because I do all the ringing, I'm always ringing them and I said ... 'Why don't you ring me or get the kids to ring?' ... But she's never stopped them, she's never prevented them.

(Contact father)

We have no data from the children's perspective.

Tensely committed (22 families)

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

(Resident mother)

Overview

In 22 families contact was sustained and all parties were committed to it, but there was a degree of 'surface correctness' and tension underlying the determination to 'do the right thing' for the children. Much of the tension stemmed from the nature of the break-up, with third parties being involved in three-quarters of families. In one case these difficulties precluded contact in the early months, but for all families in this grouping contact was ongoing at interview and parental

relationships were reasonably friendly or workable. Newer arrangements were typically alternate weekends plus weekday direct or indirect phone contact. The older established patterns, where children were now approaching their mid to late teens, were evolving into less frequent arrangements.

Parents also strongly subscribed to dominant child welfare discourses. This was also accompanied, for residential parents, with a personal 'child welfare burden' of 'putting children first' where it meant ongoing involvement with an adulterous former partner or the frustrations of dealing with a less committed father:

Everybody has said to me, 'Oh I think you're being remarkable', you know, but I have to think about them, I have to put them first and I just think that if we were shouting and screaming at each other, it just doesn't get you anywhere.

(Resident mother)

Resident parents (all women with one exception) actively facilitated contact, making suggestions about activities or sharing the burden of travelling. In some cases the degree of residential insistence on, and facilitation of, contact managed to elicit relatively high and consistent involvement of fathers who might drop out of regular contact:

It was so painful seeing them and then letting them go that I thought right, well [pause], I thought that it might be just easier to say 'I don't want to see you any more'. It was an idea that I toyed with. I don't think I really believed in it and I talked to one or two friends about it and they said, 'No, absolutely not'.

(Contact father)

If there was any sort of hiccup or change of plan then nine times out of ten she would sort out the compromise situation ... she would put herself out to make sure that things would run smoothly or change weekends or do things like that ... she has always been very keen to keep contact.

(Contact father)

For contact parents acceptance of their new non-residential status was hard. There was a significant sense of loss and insecurity about their relationship with the children, with a fear that children would not want contact if it were not enjoyable, hence a reluctance to enforce discipline:

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 sort of drive away in tears.
(Contact father)

Because I'd only see them every fortnight I was actually loath to lay down any parental authority, because I kind of like valued the time I had with them and I didn't want to be put in the position where I had to say, 'look I hear that you've been doing this and doing that'.
(Contact father)

Although parents did their best to avoid conflict there were occasional arguments between parents about financial matters, the timing of contact and the presence of new partners at contact. Resident parents, especially, had to work hard to separate out the roles of former spouse and parent:

I did make a point of saying to them that he was still their dad and whatever happens between us he's still their dad and he's not changed in that respect. It's me he's fallen out with, not them.
(Resident mother)

Nonetheless, both parents strongly endorsed the other's relationship with the children as well as each other's parenting abilities. At least one of the parents in each family had repartnered. The parenting role of new partners was downplayed but it meant that contact was therefore about the continuity of two separate parent-child relationships. Christmas and birthdays tended to be celebrated separately (over two days or part-days) and boundaries often had to be renegotiated:

I said 'I don't want to have this constant contact, it doesn't do me any good'. So I went through a period of dropping the child in the door and I refused to go in the house because I didn't know whether she was there or not. And I took to taking the child myself because if he comes in my house the whole house is taken and you cannot have a life.
(Resident mother)

Children's reaction to contact was variable. Younger children tended to enjoy contact, although a few were reluctant to go on every scheduled visit. For older children in long-term contact arrangements the most difficult thing to achieve was the meaningful relationship they wanted with someone they saw relatively infrequently in a fairly artificial situation:

I can't talk to dad as much as I'd like to. It's like when I see dad, it's like, 'Oh hi, how are you? Blah, blah.' It's like, I don't know him and that's what I don't like. That upsets me, just not knowing him as much as I'd like to.
(Child, 13-15)

Even more difficult for young people was the presence of the new partner of the contact parent with whom all the young people had difficult relationships, sometimes avoiding contact as a result.

These arrangements were privately ordered, with again minimal contact with solicitors regarding contact arrangements. Teenagers were increasingly influential in shaping the quantity and quality of contact. As peer activities became more important, young people scaled down the frequency of contact or actively attempted to build a more meaningful relationship with the contact parent.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

Despite some underlying tensions, contact was ongoing and sustained. Families were faced with the task of dealing with roles and boundaries between the first and second family. For resident

Making contact

parents this meant ongoing contact with the former partner; for contact parents the sense of being a secondary parent; and for children the difficulties of relating to someone who they saw less regularly and who might have a new partner. Logistics could be important, too, with some contact having to be conducted over long distances.

Consensual committed contact: explaining these arrangements

There were three common factors shared by these groupings. These were:

- 1 *Child welfare discourses*: parents were strongly committed to ideas about putting children first, the importance of contact and amicability.
- 2 *Role clarity*: resident and contact roles were clear. Contact parents accepted their roles and in turn resident parents continued to proactively facilitate contact.
- 3 *Empathy and insight*: adults had a balanced view of their former partner, recognising strengths and weaknesses. They could identify with the other's and especially the children's perspectives, sometimes drawing upon personal experience or examples from friends caught in conflict.

The three different contact solutions arrived at linked to three other issues:

- 1 *Logistics*: none of the adults in the reconfigured continuing families group was in full-time employment and each lived within a short drive of each other. In contrast practical issues of time, money and distance were more important in the tensely committed and especially in the flexible bridgers groupings.
- 2 *Reason for separation and new partners*: in the reconfigured continuing families and flexible bridgers groupings no third party had been

involved in the separation. In the reconfigured continuing families parents had not repartnered, but in the flexible bridgers grouping new partners were introduced slowly and sensitively. All the tensely committed families contained at least one parent who had repartnered, often causing the separation.

- 3 *Demographic/time factors*: the reconfigured continuing families and flexible bridgers arrangements were of reasonably short standing with fairly young children. All were formerly married working-class families. In contrast the tensely committed grouping was more heterogeneous, including both short- and long-term arrangements, children of all ages, parents of all social classes, different lengths of cohabiting and marital relationships, and close and distant locations.

Faltering contact

Ambivalently erratic (eight families)

I wish having left that I'd, you know, 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 in fact it's probably been more damaging than if they'd just never seen him.

(Resident mother)

Overview

No fixed or regular pattern of contact had ever been established in eight families. Contact was intermittent and decreasing to the point in two families (both resident fathers) where no contact had occurred in the last year. Contact, when it happened, tended to be day visits only.

In the tensely committed grouping some potentially erratic arrangements were solidified by ongoing efforts of the resident parent to sustain contact. In this grouping both parents appeared

ambivalent about contact. Resident parents were aware of current child welfare principles and would have preferred to operate within them:

I just get very envious of these couples that split up and they have got such an amicable arrangement, the fathers desperately want to see their children and I think what did I do wrong?

(Resident mother)

However, these principles were considered unrealistic where contact parents were seen as unreliable and uncommitted. Instead, resident parents had moved to an alternative set of child welfare principles questioning the value of contact for children in favour of the 'clean break':

Yes I know children need their father but they need the right sort of father, they don't need this, they would be best off without him. If he don't see him or hear from him then he gets on with his life ... once they hit six they can join clubs and things at school, he has got a social life now.

(Resident mother)

Well he is upset about it, but you know, perhaps it's over ... he over-emphasises it.

(Resident mother)

Some of the contact parents also appeared to favour the idea of the clean break, not only for the child, but also for their own need to move on:

Once the family unit went down, as far as I was concerned that was it. If I took that stance when we first broke up I'd have probably got over it a lot quicker than what I did, but because I kept on having access ... You know I've got a life to get on with you know. So has [child].

(Contact father)

Facilitation of contact in this grouping was reactive or passive. After early abortive attempts by some resident parents to establish a contact regime, the resident parents had moved towards waiting for the non-resident parent to make contact:

I'll leave it to him to contact me. And that's partly because he's difficult to contact. I mean I've got an address, but I don't try, I leave it to him to contact.

(Resident mother)

The parental relationship was not overtly hostile or angry, although mutually frustrating where it still existed. Residential parents were immensely frustrated that the contact parent was refusing to establish a regular schedule for contact, would give little or no notice of a visit or a cancellation, or would be late:

I'm trying to be stronger about saying, 'look I've got some rights as well' ... It wasn't as if he couldn't give us the notice. He just didn't choose to give us the notice ... He likes to be in control and I think it's his way of controlling me.

(Resident mother)

However, attempts to formalise arrangements were also perceived by some contact parents as controlling:

She try and dictate, you know you're a useless father and says this is when you're going to have him, this is what you're going to do now, this is this, this is that.

(Contact father)

Contact parents also pointed to the logistical factors – money, distance and accommodation – that they felt that the resident parent discounted, and also pointed to the unfairness of having to do all the travelling. However, there was also little indirect phone contact.

The children's response was mixed. Some children desperately missed their parent and found it hard to understand why they could not see them:

I remember phoning her, and someone picked up the telephone and then put it back down. But I'm trying to get in contact by writing letters, but she hasn't replied.

(Child, 13–15)

Making contact

Other children seemed to reflect back the parent's disinterest and did not want more regular contact:

I didn't want to go, and then, like there was like a little boy there. I said to him, 'hit me', and then I pretended that I got hurt, so I come home.

(Child, 10–12)

Grandparents and aunts/uncles had become more emotionally salient for these children. Ongoing contact was sustained in most cases with the extended family of the non-residential parent:

In fact the person who has been most helpful has been his sister, so I often ask if she will have the children and she has actually been really helpful and it enabled me to do some of things that I wanted to do.

(Resident mother, ambivalently erratic)

In some cases the resident parent had consulted solicitors or attended mediation to establish a contact regime. All reported frustration at the capacity of the legal system to enforce contact.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

Contact was occurring in some cases, and none of the children wanted to terminate all contact. The problem with the 'clean break' was that not all family members were fully committed to it. Some of the residential parents wanted a clean break but their children did not, whilst other residential parents were engaged in a frustrating push-pull struggle with their former partner, prompted by the children's desire to have contact.

Explaining these arrangements

It is impossible to identify the initial causes of the lack of parental commitment to contact, although the parental relationship was of shorter duration than the sample average. No maintenance or child support was being paid. The resident parent had been the most involved parent prior to separation. Contact parents appeared to feel hurt, excluded and misunderstood, and pointed to logistical factors, including distance which was a significant

problem in some, but not all, cases. In turn, resident parents felt let down and frustrated, leading to a spiral of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and mutual confirmation of negative perceptions of the other. All the children in this grouping were relatively young with limited ability to insist on contact.

Conflicted contact

Overview

There were five groupings where there were significant disputes about amount or form of contact, and/or where past or present violence or abuse was impacting on contact. 'Competitively enmeshed' parents struggled over their respective roles largely in private. Parents in the 'conflicted separate worlds' resolved the issue by ceasing all communication, ironically following mediation. Two groups took disputes to court hearings in the 'rejected retreaters' grouping leading to the withdrawal of the contact parent, whilst the 'ongoing battling' group fought on. In the 'contingent contact' grouping contact was continuing subject to formal and informal risk management strategies.

Competitively enmeshed (five families)

My ex-wife wanted to maintain, she wanted the last say in everything basically, because she sees the mother's role in a relationship a lot differently than I did.

(Contact father)

Overview

Contact for these five families took the form of a private battle for increased time with the children and over the meaning of the resident and contact parent roles. Contact was based on a complicated pattern of daily or near daily frequency.

Parents articulated current child welfare discourses, but differed in their interpretation of what these principles meant in practice:

I was trying to think about what was best for [children]. I think [ex-husband] was thinking for himself and quite often does still now.

(Contact mother)

Resident parents were not seeking to end contact, but instead turn what were seen as chaotic and burdensome arrangements for the children (and themselves) into a 'standard package' of weekly or fortnightly weekend contact, with themselves clearly established as the resident parent:

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 turn contact parents did not accept a clearly secondary parenting role, felt that the resident parent was undermining their relationship with the children and sought to maintain or increase contact:

I felt that unfair pressures had been put upon the children, not to spend as much time with me as they wanted ... there always has been a lot of pressure in that direction, according to the children.

(Contact father)

The level of contact in some respects was similar to the reconfigured continuing families grouping. Here, however, the contact parent was less likely to subscribe to ideas about maternal centrality and instead emphasise mother–father equivalence:

Don't for a minute believe that you're a second-rate parent because you're a father, but by the same token don't believe that you're any better than the other person. It should be equal all the way through.

(Contact father)

Relationships between parents were tense and competitive but at the same there was a relatively high degree of parental contact, with some joint celebrations and house entry rather than doorstep

handovers, often initiated by the children. The sense of competition between parents, however, undermined their ability to share parenting tasks, decision-making or facilitating the other's relationship with the children:

I just felt any communication with him was not going to help either me or the children, it would all be ammunition ... his interests were in scoring points rather than helping the children.

(Resident mother)

Parents were critical of aspects of each other's parenting, with each parent feeling that the other was under- or over-supervising the children:

They would be returned very upset and often a bit frightened because they had been left in the house on their own and they were actually quite young and I found that very hard really to cope with.

(Resident mother)

Nonetheless, the children maintained good relationships with both parents. All wanted contact to occur although some children found the pattern of contact with frequent changes burdensome. Children had three strategies for dealing with the conflict. One was to withdraw from the situation as much as possible:

I always found myself worrying about like because I hear mum and dad arguing over the phone. It's just more worry and you can't do anything about it. I get out a lot more now because I don't have to worry about anything, it's good just to go out.

(Child, 13–15)

The second strategy was to attempt to diminish or minimise the conflict. Some children stepped into the decision-making vacuum where both parents felt that the other had more control over arrangements:

I used to be with [one parent] on Tuesdays, but I said I wanted to be round my [other parent]. Then I was normally only round [one parent] till 4, then I moved it

Making contact

to 5, then I moved it to half 5 ... I make the decision normally.

(Child, 7–9)

The third strategy was to take on responsibility for parents' welfare:

I almost timetabled the days so that neither parent was on their own at any point so if I was going to my dad's for 4 o'clock, my [brother] had to be timetabled for 4 o'clock here.

(Child, 16–18)

The pattern of decision-making in these families was complex. In one case the impasse was resolved by an overseas relocation of the resident parent and children following a court hearing. Otherwise these were arrangements that remained privately ordered with no involvement from outside agencies, although some residential parents would have welcomed an external referee.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

These were arrangements where children had frequent contact allowing them to build positive and meaningful relationships with both parents. Although lengthy legal battles were avoided, contact was an ongoing struggle between parents with children brought into the conflict or actively engaging in ways to limit the conflict.

Explaining these arrangements

These had been long-term relationships where the now contact parent (including one mother) had had sustained prior involvement in parenting. Parents lived close by, facilitating regular frequent contact (although one subsequently relocated). The critical difference with the reconfigured continuing families grouping, or with the more frequently committed contact families, was the difficulty for parents in agreeing their respective roles, with contact parents pushing for an equal role and resident parents seeking to defend or re-establish their role.

Conflicted separate worlds (two families)

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 her the better I like it.

(Contact father)

Overview

Two families had contact arrangements where parents did not communicate. In each case one party accused the other of abusive phone calls and in both there were long-standing financial disputes. Contact was fairly extensive but handovers took place in the street. In both cases there had been an early involvement in mediation.

Despite parental antipathy both parents subscribed to the principle that children should have ongoing contact and considered the other parent to be minimally competent. It was not possible to shield children from parental conflict:

And the children I try to keep out of it as much as possible, but it is very difficult because it involves everyone and with someone in the background manipulating the children to get through to me.

(Resident mother)

Parents also employed an additional set of 'parental welfare' principles, of parental need for contact and fairness for parents, ideas that potentially clash with child welfare principles:

And now I know [laughs] they are getting fed up, well they have been fed up for some time ... But I suppose it is better than me seeing them for a weekend once a fortnight.

(Contact father)

I only agree with the fairness of if my partner has them for three weeks, then I will have them for three weeks as well at another time so that everything is balanced and works out that way.

(Resident mother)

In both cases direct parental communication had long since broken down. There was no joint

parental decision-making and amendments to contact arrangements were therefore conducted by messages sent via the children. All the children involved in these arrangements were teenagers and had some input into organising and amending arrangements within the constraints imposed by the framework. One teenager had chosen to reject all contact with the non-residential parent. The remaining children either initiated contact on their own terms or made minor adjustments within a shared care arrangement. In both cases the parents had one or two mediation sessions early on but there had been no further legal involvement.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

Contact was ongoing without further court battles. All children who wanted contact were able to organise it for themselves. The ongoing conflict continued to provide a significant source of stress to parents and children:

Interviewer: Any other things that are issues for you?

When the parents don't get on. Hm because that kind of gets stressing really.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you hope might change?

Our parents will talk civilly. That's about it really.

(Child, 13-15)

The level of parental stress and preoccupation with the battle restricted the ability of parents to support the children:

How the children feel about it I really don't know, they tolerate it I think more than anything.

(Resident mother)

Explaining these arrangements

In both cases the separation was initiated by the involvement of a third party, leading to one parent having an ongoing sense of injury and to difficulties in communication which became mutually sustaining. The lack of parental decision-

making about contact was manageable in both cases as all the children were teenagers able to organise contact and act as go-betweens.

Rejected retreaters (two families)

But it was drummed out of her at home because her mother would say, to have nothing to do with her father, me.

(Contact father)

Overview

In two families contact had ceased following a short but decisive legal battle about it. According to the contact parents the resident parents were directly opposed to contact and had encouraged the children to reject the contact parent. In both cases the contact parent withdrew, with tentative attempts to re-establish contact via the resident parent being spurned.

The perception of the contact parent was that the resident parent wanted to monopolise parenting:

Well, she always felt that they were her property, if you know what I mean. So I suppose she would generally feel that they'd be better off only having the one influence.

(Contact father)

Rather than fight on the contact parent chose to withdraw, not wanting to force themselves upon apparently rejecting children, and partly to protect themselves from further hurt:

They decided ... whether or not they were brainwashed into that I don't know, but they said they didn't want the contact themselves and I thought, I thought to myself, well if they've got to be here because the judge says so then they're going to be fidgety and bored. I thought it would be easier simply say the arrangement was I was happy not to specify contact, but I would send them birthday cards, Christmas cards, ring them up on their birthday and keep in contact that way.

(Contact father)

Making contact

Some effort was made to establish direct and indirect contact to no avail. In both cases the approach was made via the resident parent who rejected the request:

But the situation we've got now is that a couple of years ago I sent them Christmas cards and the first post immediately after Christmas Day she'd posted them back to me.

(Contact father)

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

We had no data from resident parents and children making these arrangements impossible to evaluate.

Explaining these arrangements

These were arrangements where resident parents, and possibly the children (all teenagers), were rejecting contact with the non-resident parent, for unknown reasons. In both cases the non-resident parent appeared to have limited involvement in parenting prior to the separation which might account for their tentative approach:

I was waiting for them to get to that little bit older when you could have a conversation, a meaningful conversation, rather than child talk, you know but felt frustrated because we never went anywhere that sort of challenged their mind or thinking.

(Contact father)

Ongoing battling (seven families)

If I let her get away with it I just know that the defined order that I have got, she will just 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)

Overview

In seven families parental conflict was prolonged and intensifying. There was an ongoing legal battle over the pattern, although not explicitly the principle, of contact. Disputes concerned all aspect of contact timetables (e.g. delivery and return

times, allocation of holidays). The timetable dispute was accompanied by allegations of emotional abuse and violent incidents accompanying contact. There were repeated cycles of solicitors' letters, directions and full hearings and ever more defined contact orders. Arrangements were highly scheduled, but the operation of orders continued to give rise to disputes. The situation was stalled or worsening. In some cases weekend staying contact was continuing, in others contact was now indirect only.

Limited reference was made by parents to child welfare principles, other than to suggest that they were being ignored by the other parent. Resident parents were not opposed to contact but argued that the behaviour of the contact parent made contact unworkable:

He has never tried to work at [child's] level and at his pace to allow him to do things his way. He has always said 'this is my way and if you don't want to do it this way then I won't see you' which to a child is emotional blackmail. He has got to accept that this is [child's] home and that he has made himself an outsider.

(Resident mother)

The children have dealt with it in their own way, he's the one that's lost out and still losing out, he's turning them against him and he still thinks it's me.

(Resident mother)

Contact parents, in direct contrast, reported that resident parents were seeking to undermine contact:

She feels that she has the moral high ground, 'you walked out of this marriage, you have nothing to do, the kids don't want anything to do with you, I don't want anything to do with you, we are now a family unit'.

(Contact father)

There was no evidence that resident parents had directly attempted to influence the children against

contact. However, it was also clear that neither parent attempted to facilitate the other's relationship with the children. Parents communicated only through lawyers or by electronic communication (faxes, texting, email).

We cannot say whether there was a history of abuse in any of these families. It appeared, however, that what were presented as primarily interparental disputes over roles were also generating, or fuelling, acts of violence and allegations of physical and emotional abuse. In four of these cases assaults were alleged, although involving new partners rather than the biological parents. Whilst parents described their own relationship with the children as positive, the former partner was presented entirely in negative terms, as insensitive, manipulative, punitive or obsessive.

All the children involved were fully aware of the ongoing conflict, either being informed by one or both parents or witnessing disputes. The degree of children's distress was partially acknowledged by the parents but responsibility was placed on the actions of the other parent:

I've gone up the school and they've said 'He's been in tears all day, because "something about the judge", sobbing uncontrollably'. So I managed to actually speak to her [mother] and ask her 'What are you doing, why are you doing it?' ... the last weekend I had him he said ... 'The judge, Dad, I'm going to have a word with him', he said, 'It should be half each'. So, I don't know where he's getting it from. I've been taking all the welfare reports very seriously and, but he's been involved so much he knows exactly what's going on.

(Contact father)

Children were clearly aware of their parents' feelings about each other and they seemed the most informed about contact and the nature of the family disputes, including financial matters:

The court welfare officers said that I shouldn't be telling the children everything that happens, but then I disagree with that. [Child] when I come back from court sits me down and says 'right what happened?' He says 'I have a right to know, it's my life'. I agree with him, so I tell him most of it, what concerns him.
(Resident mother)

Try to tell [child] everything because my mum told me everything.

Interviewer: So you knew what was going on.

To build a bigger picture of what is happening.

(Child, 10–12)

In two cases some, or all, of the children had resolved the conflict by rejecting the non-residential parent:

I would never ever ever ever ever have contact. I would say for my bit I wish [father] died.

(Child, 7–9)

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)

Children lived in two separate emotional worlds with little if any contact with one parent whilst with the other. Handovers occurred in the street or at contact centres.

A wide range of agencies were involved to deal with disputes, allegations and incidents – mediation, the courts and court welfare service, contact centres, psychiatrists, police and social services. Solicitors were viewed as extremely supportive or avaricious. But residential and contact parents were united in their dissatisfaction with the legal system either on grounds of lack of enforcement or favouring the other party/gender:

Making contact

According to most people I have got reasonable contact, but that's nothing compared to some form of co-parenting I want to be involved in. I am able to arrange my life to do that and that's causing the courts and the system a lot of problems.

(Contact father)

They try and get you in court as a formula ... we don't fit that formula, the children themselves are people that don't fit that formula. This is my life and I've had no say in it at all, nothing has been discussed, nothing has been asked, nothing has been done at all, it's like being puppets.

(Resident mother)

Equally, children who had been interviewed by court welfare officers had felt misunderstood and misrepresented:

We have to tell these people [CAFCASS] who go to court for us, they don't always listen and they tell their opinion instead of what we said, which I don't like because then it doesn't get through to the judge and so sometimes the wrong decisions are made.

(Child, 10–12)

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

It is difficult to identify any particular strengths. In each of these cases the parents appeared highly stressed and preoccupied by the battle and a continuing sense of persecution by the other parent:

He wants to make life as difficult as possible for me so that I will have a nervous breakdown and he will be able to take the kids.

(Resident mother)

Children were trapped in highly conflictual situations, whilst even those who did not want contact were still the subject of disputes.

We cannot identify the original 'cause' of disputes or determine whether or not contact was safe or appropriate for those involved. Whatever the original issues involved, the subsequent actions and reactions of each parent seemed to escalate the

conflict further, resulting in a negative downward spiral with each action confirming a sense of injustice and anger and negative perception of the other. Ongoing court involvement had not offered a way out of conflict or addressed the concerns of each parent, and instead seemed to sustain and even exacerbate the conflict.

Explaining these arrangements

In each case one or both parents had felt angry, embittered or abandoned from the beginning of a sudden, unannounced separation, sometimes but not always involving a third party. Some of the parents in this group had mental health problems. Most, however, were simply caught up in a battle with no prospect of resolution. Adults held fixed and absolute opinions with the actions of the former partner seen as completely unjustifiable and inappropriate. Parents expected that the courts would do exactly as they wished, and legal practitioners and court welfare officers were evaluated according to whether or not they acted decisively in accordance with the parent's wishes.

Contingent contact (ten families)

Overview

In ten families the primary issue about contact from the point of separation was the attempt to continue contact whilst attempting to manage potential risk to a parent or child from domestic violence, physical sexual or emotional abuse of the child, neglect or abduction. These were cases where the conflict related to managing risk rather than disputes clearly about the relative involvement of each parent in the child's life.

This is a more heterogeneous grouping than the previous ones, defying easy generalisation. Three of the cases centred principally upon concerns about the non-residential parent's addiction problems, two concerned abduction and two concerned child abuse. Three cases concerned domestic violence issues only, although domestic violence was also a factor in four of the other cases.

In five cases involving domestic violence cases there had been no further incidents although a continuing perception of risk. In two cases there were subsequent acts of violence to the mother or child, and in one case violence had started only after the separation:

He wasn't violent at all during our relationship, at all, but of course as soon as it broke up he was violent. And he would do it in front of [children] and he would, I mean physically smash my head up against the door and the police were there every weekend.

(Resident mother, informal supervision)

The pattern of contact arrangements varied. In three cases the resident parent's perception of risk had diminished significantly. In each case there had been significant legal involvement but contact was now regular, frequent and unsupervised. In seven cases the perception of risk remained. In three cases contact was occurring at a supported contact centre under a court order. In one abduction case contact was indirect only. In three cases the resident parent was attempting to organise 'informal supervision' by having extended family or new partners present at regular contact outside of the context of the court order. In one case involving a parent with a drug addiction problem the resident parent was seeking supervised contact. Finally, in one domestic violence case, contact was suspended pending a final hearing.

None of the resident parents was seeking to terminate contact although all were seeking continuing or further safeguards. Resident parents used current child welfare principles; however, contact was contingent upon two additional factors – the continuing expressed wishes of children to see the other parent, and the resident parent's perception of their own and the child's safety:

As long as he can be safe and as long as he's happy to see his dad as well, if he ever turned around to me and said 'I don't want to see my dad' I would respect his wishes. But I think you need to know who your

parents are. Warts and all. You need to have an accurate picture of who your parents are.

(Resident mother ['informal supervision'])

It's half of him, it's a part of him that he wants to find out about so. If he wants to see his dad that's fair enough and when he says 'no I don't want to any more' then I shall stop it. He is his own self, he has got a right to make up his own mind about his parents.

(Resident mother, supported contact)

All the resident parents were facilitating contact to varying degrees. This ranged from taking children to a contact centre, to organising indirect contact, to organising 'informally supervised' contact. In each case contact orders were complied with.

Some of the contact parents who were interviewed acknowledged some element of risk, although some argued that the conditions placed on contact were unreasonable or that their former partner was obstructing contact:

I had a row and slapped her that caused another argument. I was done for it. I deserved it I shouldn't have slapped her ... I couldn't see the kids for another six weeks and then I had to go back to the contact centre ... I can't understand why she won't let me take him out of the building. It's just she is punishing me because of the arguments. I don't know what the reason is. Well yes I did smash the windows and break the TV but the kids were not in the room when it happened. I'm very bad tempered. I was totally out of control.

(Contact father)

The thing that annoys me is that I am not seeing my daughter for some reason, she [mother] says that she won't come because she can't forgive me for what happened with i.e. the domestic violence in the house. Other people seem to think that she is being kept back and that and that things just ain't quite right for some reason.

(Contact father)

Making contact

The response of the children to contact was widely divergent. One child with unsupervised contact was clearly worried about contact. Some of the children with indirect or supported contact wanted contact but the relationship with the contact parent was somewhat distant or low-key:

If you don't live with your dad that's quite hard to keep up with 'em, because you're saying something and then they say something completely different and then you try and stick to what you're saying and they say something else and ignore what you said and they didn't understand you so, it's just best to speak slowly and stay to one thing.

(Child, 10–12)

Another child where the risk of domestic violence had subsided enjoyed her frequent contact.

Evaluation: strengths and difficulties

These were all cases where contact was ongoing despite elements of risk. In some cases parents were able to establish a workable relationship, particularly where the perception of risk had diminished significantly. In other cases there was a higher degree of antipathy or fear of the other parent:

We go through highs and lows, we can be quite polite to each other mainly because if I see him I still have this sense of fear, you know I still feel frightened. You couldn't reason with him, he is lacking the ability to reason.

(Resident mother, informal supervision)

With the exception of an indirect contact only case, the highest level of vigilance in these cases was a supported contact centre. Contact parents were frustrated at having to use the centre and wanted unsupported contact. Residential parents expressed some concern or disquiet about the level of security or supervision offered by supported contact centres (see also Furniss, 2000):

I don't leave [child] in there with him.

Interviewer: You stay?

Yeah I wouldn't leave [child] alone with him ... As soon as I walk out of there I am always watching over my shoulder in case he is following me.

(Resident mother)

Some resident parents however attempted to manage risk privately to enable contact to occur. In three cases (involving addiction and/or violence), the resident parent tried to ensure that a responsible adult (partner or grandparent) was in the house, although this did not always guarantee safety:

He started saying 'you don't understand me, I need to see my dad' and I wanted him to see him but if he wasn't agreeing to the contact centre there just didn't seem an alternative ... There were times when maybe [child] didn't want to go, he wasn't very keen, he did hit [child] again and I spoke to him about it ... I think it happened several times actually, he phoned me to say that his dad was asleep and that the woman wasn't in the house, would I come and get him and I'd call and collect him.

(Resident mother)

We cannot make any assessment about whether or not contact was safe in these cases. What does emerge is that there are few options to ensure that contact can be made completely safe where resident parents and children are wanting contact to occur. The resident parents had all found their lawyers supportive, although one 'informally supervised' case had not consulted a solicitor. However, it is clear that low vigilance supported contact centres are being used where resident parents perceive a higher degree of risk. There are also extremely difficult questions to address about what support could, or should, be offered to families where resident parents are committed to contact but are managing risk privately.

Explaining these arrangements

This was the most heterogeneous of the groupings, with families experiencing a wide range of difficulties and risks. The common factor was that resident parents remained committed to contact despite a greater or lesser degree of risk.

3 Why does contact vary?

Introduction

In the previous chapter we described the very different ways in which contact is organised and experienced in different families. In this chapter we turn to look at why contact varies so much and what factors makes contact work or not work.

The answer is not straightforward. Our analysis suggests that the success or failure of contact cannot be attributed to or blamed on a single individual. Instead, we have to understand contact as being about individuals operating within a network of relationships or family systems (Emery, 1994). Contact is not made (or disrupted) by one person, but by at least three (the resident and contact parent and each child), with their relationships also set within a wider context that includes new partners, extended family and external agencies.

There are also multiple factors involved in shaping the quality and quantity of contact. We have developed a four-layer model of the determinants of contact based on a comparison of the core characteristics or properties of the different umbrella groupings and sub-types (see Figure 5).

The four layers of the model are as follows:

- 1 *Direct determinants*: these are overarching factors that *directly* determine the quality and quantity of contact, that is they are the three critical features that separate the three umbrella groupings. The three direct determinants are:
 - commitment to contact of resident and contact parent and children
 - role clarity, acceptance and congruence
 - relationship quality between parents and between parents and children.
- 2 *Challenges*: the challenges are contact-related issues or potential problem areas that families may or may not have to negotiate. These challenges may be present at separation or emerge later on. The challenges are:

- nature of the separation
- new adult partners
- financial settlements/ child support
- logistics: time, money and distance
- parenting style / quality
- risk / safety issues.

- 3 *Mediators*: the mediating factors are essentially filters that influence how challenges are responded to and in turn underpin, or contribute to, direct determinants. The mediating factors are:
 - beliefs and discourses about contact
 - relationships skills: empathy and insight, ability to think through situations and to compromise
 - extrafamilial involvement: family and friends, legal system and other agencies.
- 4 *Time*: the challenges, mediators and direct determinants factors are interactive, but this interaction also develops over time. The two key time factors are:
 - child age and stage
 - time post-separation.

The model in Figure 5 highlights the complexity of the processes by which families manage or do not manage contact. There is no single magic ingredient that makes contact work or not work, but instead a wide range of factors at different levels. The remainder of this chapter examines each layer and each factor in more detail, beginning with direct determinants. Before we do so, however, it is important to stress that this is an interactive and dynamic model. Although we will discuss each factor separately, it is important to recognise the interaction between factors and processes, between layers and within layers. There is a connection, for example, between commitment to contact and relationship quality, with poor quality relationships weakening commitment to contact, which may in turn lead to further deterioration in relationships. This example also highlights the possibility of

mutual influences or circular relationships between factors and between layers. In the consensual committed groupings, for example, there was a high commitment to contact, a strong belief in child welfare discourses and generally positive views of the former partner's parenting style. Which of these predated or caused the others is impossible to detect.

Direct determinants

By comparing the fundamental differences between the three umbrella groupings we isolated three factors or processes that appeared to directly shape the nature of contact. What separated the three

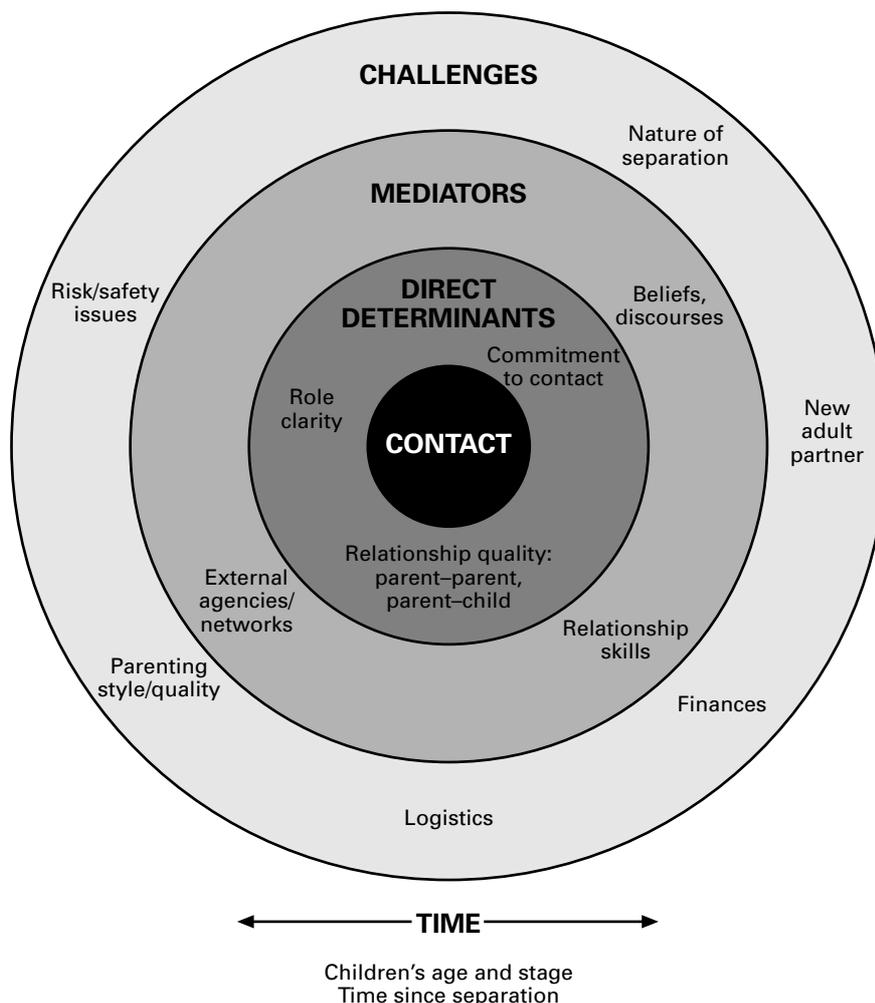
umbrella groupings above all were commitment to contact, clarity of roles between parents and relationship quality (Table 1).

Commitment to contact

Contact requires the commitment of all participants, resident and contact parent and children to make it work (Table 2). Where contact parent's commitment to contact was weak, in the ambivalently erratic and rejected retreaters groupings, contact was irregular or had ceased.

The commitment of the resident parent to contact was also critical. In the consensual and the contingent contact groupings, resident parents engaged in a wide range of strategies or 'emotion

Figure 5 Model of the determinants of the quality and quantity of contact



Making contact

work' (Seery and Crowley, 2000) to facilitate contact. This went well beyond a passive or rhetorical endorsement of contact, and entailed proactive facilitation strategies to ensure that contact did occur, that the non-residential parent remained engaged and that contact was a high quality and safe experience for children. In some of the tensely committed cases this facilitation of contact appeared to keep some contact parents who might otherwise find contact too difficult engaged:

When I first met [new partner] he [father] backed off a bit and I rang him and said 'I'd hate to see him take your place, because he's not the dad'. It was like a shot up his backside and he just reverted back to how he'd always been and that's how it's gone on.
(Resident mother, tensely committed)

Elements of this emotion work or facilitation of contact were:

- encouraging contact: with the other parent and children
- encouraging a sense of ongoing parenthood: e.g. emphasising the secondary status of step-parents, sharing decision-making, invitations to school report evenings
- enabling contact to occur: e.g. being flexible over schedules, taking children to contact or sharing the travelling, providing a venue for contact
- promoting a positive image of the other parent: e.g. avoiding criticism of the other parent, organising Mother's/Father's Day cards
- promoting high quality relationships: e.g. organising or making suggestions for contact activities, encouraging a normal routine,

Table 1 Core characteristics of umbrella groupings

Core factor or process	'Working' contact (consensual committed)	'Not working' contact (faltering and conflicted)
Commitment to contact	All party commitment to contact, and	Low and/or uneven commitment to contact, and/or
Role clarity and congruence	parental role bargain, and	no parental role bargain, and/or
Relationship quality	good or adequate quality relationships between parents and parents and children	conflicted relationships between parents and possibly parents and children

Table 2 Cross-family commitment to contact

Non-residential parent commitment to contact	Residential parent commitment to contact	Children's commitment to contact	Groupings
Mid-high	High	Mid-high	Reconfigured continuing families Flexible bridgers Tensely committed Contingent contact
Low-mid	Low-mid	Low-high	Ambivalently erratic Rejected retreaters
High	Low-mid	Low-high	Competitively enmeshed Conflicted separate worlds Ongoing battling

encouraging listening between parent and child, establishing risk reduction measures

- peacekeeping or mediating between children and the contact parent: e.g. raising issues with the contact parent, suggesting non-confrontational strategies for children.

Children’s commitment to contact varied also. Their commitment was linked to the quality of their relationship with the contact parents (and step-parents) as well as their age. But it was also linked to the commitment of both parents to contact. Some ambivalently erratic children had picked up their parents’ disinterest and rejected them in turn. Equally, the proactive facilitation of contact by resident parents in the consensual and contingent contact groupings gave children the emotional permission to enjoy contact that was missing in the conflicted separate worlds, rejected retreaters and ongoing battling groupings.

Role clarity: the parental role bargain

By itself commitment to contact is not sufficient to determine contact. Commitment has to be also linked to clarity and agreement about the respective roles of family members. In the faltering grouping the major problem was lack of commitment to contact. In the conflicted groupings, with the exception of the contingent contact group, the major problem was that the contact parent was more committed to contact than the resident parent

wanted. In contrast what appeared to make contact work in the consensual (and to some extent contingent contact) groupings was that parents had struck an implicit role bargain where the contact parent accepted their non-residential status and in turn the resident parent proactively facilitated contact. There was no role bargain in the competitively enmeshed, conflicted separate worlds and ongoing battling groupings where the respective roles of both parents were disputed, and the non-resident parent continued to challenge their non-resident status and the authority of the resident parent.

Acceptance of non-resident status required two things. First, it precluded seeking or threatening a change of residence, either outright or through incremental changes in contact. Second, it required an acknowledgement that the resident parent had greater, but not total, responsibility for day-to-day care and decision-making.

This parental bargain appears conservative, based as it is on the idea of a resident and contact parent, usually on a gendered basis. Certainly, it militates against the idea of shared residence or shared care based on the idea of two equal parents. But the bargain does appear to work. Where resident parents considered their status under threat there was very little facilitation of contact; conversely, in the consensual groupings, resident parents were secure enough in their role to actively facilitate contact (Table 3).

Table 3 Facilitation and role congruence

Residential facilitation of contact	Acceptance of non-resident status	
	Low	High
Low	Competitively enmeshed Conflicted separated worlds Ongoing battling	Ambivalently erratic Rejected retreaters?
High	No cases	Reconfigured continuing families Flexible bridgers Tensely committed Contingent contact?

Ironically, providing that both elements of the formula are in place, and depending upon logistical factors, the parental bargain can result in low conflict but extensive contact resembling shared care, albeit with a different meaning for the participants. There were no examples of successful 'equal rights' shared care in the sample, and indeed the most active proponents of shared care were contact parents in the competitively enmeshed and ongoing battling groups.

Relationship quality

Contact, above all else, is about relationships and the variable quality of relationships had a significant impact on how contact was organised and experienced by all parties. Our analysis, particularly of commitment and role clarity, suggests that the critical relationship for setting the framework for contact is that between resident and non-resident parents. It is not the only one that counts, however. Relationships between children and both parents are also highly influential in shaping contact. Other relationships in the network can also be important, particularly the relationships between children and parents' new partners and between siblings. Furthermore it is important to recognise that each set of relationships does influence the quality of other sets of relationships. The child–contact parent relationship, in particular, is acutely sensitive to the quality of the parent–parent relationship (and see Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001).

Conflicted parental relationships

Parental relationships within the faltering and conflicted grouping were difficult. In these families contact had become an additional or prime source of parental conflict. Relationships were characterised by arguments, mistrust and sometimes fear. Both resident and contact parents felt overwhelmed and disempowered by the other (see also Buchanan *et al.*, 2001):

The worst thing, the really worst thing is that I have to go through this period of, sometimes acute, anxiety in order to solve a problem with my ex-wife.
(Contact father, competitively enmeshed)

I don't want to communicate with him, I don't want to be anywhere near him, I don't want to be in a room with him because deep down inside he does unnerve me, he really does unnerve me and I am sick of it, I have had enough of it.
(Resident mother, conflicted separate worlds)

The consequences for contact were that parents had great difficulties in working together to organise contact, in establishing and adhering to a contact timetable and in accommodating changes to schedules. Parental meetings at handovers could be fraught, sometimes violent.

The consequences of poor parent relationships were extremely difficult for children to manage (see also Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). Children varied in their responses but for many it meant that contact was a difficult experience of, at times, doubtful quality. Some of the children seemed resigned to the conflict (e.g. some of the conflicted separate worlds children), others were desperate for change or simply numbed:

The poor kids are standing there and we just get in the car ... I said 'I'm sorry you had to witness that' [assault between new partners] and Annie just goes 'why can't you talk, why can't you talk?' and that's all she was. Chris said nothing at all ... That's him you see, he is very sensitive and he just doesn't show any emotion whatsoever. He just never cries.
(Contact father, ongoing battling)

Alternatively, children responded to the conflict by reducing the amount of contact they had. Some children attempted to remove themselves from the conflict by being away from both parents as much as possible with friends. Others, in the rejected retreaters and ongoing battling groupings, rejected the contact parent and aligned with the resident

parent. This could be an appropriate response to an insensitive or punitive parent (Kelly and Johnston, 2001), but it was also apparent that some children were faced with intense loyalty conflicts:

Interviewer: 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 shall 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, ongoing battling)

Friendly or suppressed conflict parental relationships

In the consensual committed groupings levels of parental conflict were significantly lower and parents were able to work together in organising contact and giving children emotional permission to retain relationships with both parents. In these groupings contact was ongoing and broadly a positive experience for all parties. But ‘doing the right thing’ placed significant demands on parents. The difficulty for these parents was the emotional cost of the necessary ongoing contact with the other parent and the need to remain as friendly as possible. For some this meant that there was a feeling that they could not move on emotionally:

I think, oh god, what does he have to ring [the children] every night for? In the early days that really, really got on my nerves, but now perhaps not so bad. I do resent the fact that he's going to have to be in my life for as long as the children are here with me.
(Resident mother, tensely committed)

This was a particular difficulty with infants where the need to keep some continuity of care required even more frequent contact between

parents resulting in emotional confusion and some resentment:

And because she was a baby, I mean she was still breast-fed, so he would actually come over and babysit for me. Which is quite difficult because then that means he is in my home.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

In some cases parents deliberately renegotiated boundaries to reduce the amount of direct contact between parents whilst retaining a working relationship:

She wanted as minimum contact with me as possible. It has helped us both I think, more Sarah than I because she could come to terms with things more, she didn't have to keep being reminded that I am still around so but now three years on we have moved on and we are very friendly. There are times when it is a little bit difficult but now we are very friendly and it's very easy.

(Contact father, tensely committed)

Children in these groupings were aware of the tensions between parents but were encouraged by both parents to maintain relationships with the other, even though this could be tinged at times with a degree of parental conflict:

Even though mum would always say something nasty about dad or whatever, she'd then say, 'but he's your dad, you know', and 'I'm sorry' and she would say to me, you know, 'you always ... love your dad, I want you to love' ... dad would always say, 'be good for your mum', even though they sort of hated each other they'd encourage us to be good and love the other one sort of thing.

(Child, 16–18, tensely committed)

Contact parent–child relationships

It was not just the level of conflict between parents that mediated the relationships between parents and children. Even where parental conflict was limited, some children still found it difficult to

Making contact

sustain a meaningful relationship with the contact parent. This was evidently the case where contact was infrequent or had effectively ceased. But, even with regular contact, there was a sense from some children of losing touch with the non-resident parent. Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) meta-analysis found that warm relationships between contact parent and child, and especially authoritative parenting practices, were associated with positive adjustment for children. It is, though, a difficult relationship to make work in the somewhat artificial and possibly conflictual context of contact, not least because high quality relationships are generally not routinised or scheduled but occur when each party wishes.

Where levels of conflict were low and contact was relatively frequent, younger children tended to enjoy a pattern of contact that was often activity-based. But, from early teens, young people across groupings became increasingly preoccupied with the limitations of the relationship with the contact parent. The loss of daily interaction meant that the contact parent could not be fully involved in the young person's life, certainly in comparison with resident parents:

He talks for ages like he keeps asking us questions. It's like he really wants to talk to us and be close to us, but he can't, you know. But, if he was living with us, he wouldn't have to do that, he wouldn't have to say, what are you doing or how are you?

(Child, 13–15, tensely committed)

It then became like a friendship and I didn't want a friend, I did want a father and I think that's what was difficult and I think he found it difficult too, trying to find a medium between not being overly fatherly and not being just a friend.

(Child, 16–18, competitively enmeshed)

The response of children was variable. In some cases the relationship was allowed to drift, in others children also actively attempted to make the relationship work:

Well, I wrote dad a letter actually saying, you know, I look forward to seeing him and I love him and like spending time with him and stuff, but I don't want to hurt you, but sometimes it's boring, you know, tried to explain it in a letter to him ... and we did talk about it.

(Child, 16–18, tensely committed)

Harsh or insensitive parenting

Not all parenting was ideal, however. One of the difficulties for younger children particularly was managing being away from home, and being with a second parent they did not know so well and did not see very regularly. Not all contact parents acknowledged that children might miss their resident parent whilst on contact, or encourage or enable them to phone the other parent. Nor did all contact parents seem tuned into children's needs:

I didn't feel like eating really 'cos like, I miss my mum.

Interviewer: Did he notice that you were not eating?

I don't really know really, I didn't say anything really.

(Child, 10–12, tensely committed)

For some children this meant that they were not particularly committed to regular contact, particularly in the ambivalently erratic grouping. However, for some children, their experience with both parents was far from ideal:

He [contact father] always smacks me.

Interviewer: Does he?

When my sister does bad things, I get the blame. I don't really like it. Mum doesn't smack us like dad does. She just like kicks us and sends us to bed.

(Child, 7–9, ambivalently erratic)

Direct determinants: summary

The three critical determinants of how much contact occurs and what the experience is like are commitment to contact, role clarity and relationship

quality between all participants in contact. The question then arises as to why commitment, role clarity and relationship quality themselves vary. Why are some parents far more committed to contact than others, why does relationship quality vary so much? Part of the explanation lies in the relationship between these three factors. Although we have considered these three factors separately, it is important to recognise that they are related and do interact in complex ways with, for example, a lack of clarity about roles or role competition associated with deteriorating or poorer quality relationships which may weaken, or further weaken, resident parent commitment to contact. However, although commitment, roles and relationship quality are ongoing (and interactive) processes in their own right, they are also the differential 'outcomes' of other processes, that is, challenges, mediating factors and time.

Challenges

Families are faced with a variety of possible challenges that can impact on contact. None of these challenges alone solely determines the nature of contact. Instead, whether and how challenges do impinge on the quality and quantity of contact is related to the saliency of any challenge, as well as to how it is perceived and how it is handled via the mediating factors of relationship skills, beliefs and external involvement. We will consider each of the challenges in turn, that is, the nature of the separation, new partners, logistics, parenting quality and risk.

Nature of the break-up

One of the inherent difficulties or ironies of contact is that it is founded on the assumption of a workable parental relationship following the failure of the spousal relationship. The relationship, and the nature of its ending, cast some form of a shadow over all contact arrangements, particularly through its impact on the quality of relationships between parents. By itself, though, the nature of the separation has limited explanatory power. As Table 4 indicates, there is no clear linkage between the reason for the separation and grouping. Instead, the reason for separation is a classic example of a challenge that could be managed in different ways depending upon other factors. For example, separations involving a sudden abandonment for a new relationship were highly traumatic for the parent who was left and the children. In such situations in the tensely committed grouping other factors, including commitment to contact and the relationship skills of both parents, could make contact manageable whilst, in some of the 'ongoing battling' cases, the aftermath of such a painful rejection continued to impact on contact arrangements.

New partners

At the point of interview, the majority of families contained at least one parent who had repartnered. In eight families (13 per cent) the residential parent had a new partner, in 21 families (34 per cent) the non-resident parent had a new partner and in 18 families (30 per cent) both parents had a new partner, with only 23 per cent of families where neither parent had repartnered.

Table 4 Reason for the separation, by umbrella grouping

Grouping	Adultery/third party	'Irretrievable breakdown'	Violence/abuse
Consensual committed	16	9	2
Faltering	4	3	1
Conflicted	10	10	6

Making contact

New partners shaped contact in a number of ways. In some cases new partners could be helpful in mediating between the two biological parents, possibly putting across alternative perspectives or organising handovers. More commonly, new partners posed a challenge for both parents and children to work around, although again there were other critical factors in terms of how this challenge was handled. In the conflicted groupings, the presence of new partners appeared to fuel parental conflict. Resident parents might feel that the new partner was encroaching on family boundaries:

This woman obviously had fantasies about herself and my children ... that she would be a better mother to them than I was. She was all over them they would say.

(Resident mother, competitively enmeshed)

Contact parents could feel usurped and excluded by a new resident 'step-parent':

As soon as Steve [new partner] comes along, he messes it all up stopping me from talking to the kids. It's got to the stage now where OK if he comes on the street I'll knock him off his foundation, I'll hurt him badly, because he's messing up my life by not letting me see the kids.

(Contact father, contingent contact)

In the ongoing battling grouping the continuing presence of third parties on contact erupted in some violent scenes as conflict between the parents was displaced onto the new partners.

In the consensual committed groupings the new partner seen as responsible for the break-up, less so subsequent partnerships, could also be difficult for some parents to negotiate. Resident parents typically asked the contact parent not to have their new partner present at contact in the early stages. Some contact parents ignored the request or complied for a certain period. The critical distinction from the conflicted groupings in dealing with this situation was that resident parents let this matter go rather than escalating the dispute:

The agreement was for the first month, they were not to come in contact with her. Well he did break that, he took them back there which I did have a bit of a go, but they've seen her now ... they've got to get used to her. They don't like her.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

The presence of new partners also had an impact on children's commitment to contact and the quality of their relationship with the non-resident parent. Very few children felt particularly close to their parents' new partners, but children had particular difficulties relating to the new non-resident 'step-parent' (and see Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001). Teenagers in recent separations could initially refuse contact or insist on contact without the new partner being present. Where the separation was more distant, and even where the new partner had not been implicated in the separation, both children and older teenagers had strained relationships with the new partner. In some cases this was simply because they did not like the new partner or the new partner did not like them, in other cases the new partner was seen as explicitly encroaching upon the boundaries of the 'first family':

I think the difficult thing has been in a way being forced to take another person into the family.

(Child, 16-18, competitively enmeshed)

Alternatively, it meant that the young people had too little time alone with their parent:

I can understand, because he's got a lot of things to do. But it is a bit annoying sometimes, because you just want to go out with him ... she is like um holding us back from being together a bit and I just wish that maybe we could go out on our own.

(Child, 13-15, tensely committed)

The difficulties of the relationship with the contact 'step-parent' placed some strain on the relationship with the non-resident parent, which might in turn mean a reduction in contact initiated by the young person:

I think I can't say anything, there's a barrier there, that I can't say anything to my dad because it goes straight back to [new partner].

(Child, 13–15, tensely committed)

I just remember going less and less, as they got more and more involved, I don't know, it kind of became less important to go up there.

(Child, 16–18, tensely committed)

Money

Financial settlements and child support were a further challenge with a possible impact on contact. Whether or not finances do impact on contact, primarily through the quality of the parental relationship and commitment to contact, was contingent upon whether or not finances were in dispute, parent's expectations about appropriate financial support and the extent to which parents saw contact and money as linked or separate issues, again linking to wider factors. The relationship between money and contact appeared in different combinations across the sample:

- *Agreed financial settlement including child support, with no linkage with contact:* found only within the consensual committed and competitively enmeshed groupings.
- *Resolved financial dispute with no linkage with contact:* typical of some tensely committed arrangements:

For a while [he] was only paying half of what he should ... he quite often just didn't give me it, withheld it. Eventually I did a really rotten thing, but I told him beforehand that I had to get it reassessed, to get it legally done and needless to say that caused a little bit of a, he was cross.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- *Unresolved financial dispute with no linkage with contact:* found in the tensely committed and ambivalently erratic groups:

By this time I had completely given up any idea of maintenance at all. [New partner] and I had had long discussions about it. He said 'look there is just no point, you are not going to get anything, you don't want to go back to court, we're surviving quite happily, just leave it, just forget about it, stop it being an issue'.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- *Ongoing financial dispute linked to escalation of parental conflict:* financial disputes were common in the conflicted groupings and contributed to further conflict between parents, although no explicit linkage was made with contact.
- *Ongoing financial dispute with direct linkage with contact:* in some of the ongoing battling cases there was an explicit linkage between maintenance and the amount of contact:

I was paying £93 a week CSA [Child Support Agency] money. Now she's getting £10 a week off me 'cos I'm off work sick. And she's telling me I've got to go back to work before I can see the children during the week again. And that's why, now, I've got to go to court.

(Contact parent, ongoing battling)

Logistics

For most families contact poses logistical challenges additional to those where all family members are co-resident. Contact involves travel between two households, involving travelling time, additional expenses and possibly the question of suitable accommodation. A number of surveys have found that contact is more likely to be sustained and be more frequent when non-resident parents live nearby (e.g. Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Smyth *et al.*, 2001).

In our sample the most frequent contact also occurred where parents lived closest together, that is, the reconfigured continuing families and competitively enmeshed groupings (Table 5).

Making contact

Table 5 Mean distance between households (in minutes, by usual form of transport) for UK contact,^a by grouping

Grouping	Mean distance	Number of families	Std deviation
<i>Consensual committed</i>			
Reconfigured continuing families	15.00	3	0.00
Flexible bridgers	180.00	1	0.00
Tensely committed	60.00	22	78.12
<i>Faltering</i>			
Ambivalently erratic	112.50	8	79.37
<i>Conflicted</i>			
Competitively enmeshed	12.50	4	5.00
Conflicted separate worlds	25.00	2	28.28
Rejected retreaters	67.50	2	74.25
Ongoing battling	20.00	6	11.40
Contingent contact	45.00	9	61.75
Total	59.40	57	75.20

^aFour cases are excluded from the table where the contact parent was based overseas (one flexible bridger, one competitively enmeshed, one ongoing battling, one contingent contact).

Again, this logistical challenge alone cannot account for the pattern of contact. Distance was a major challenge in several groupings, most notably the ambivalently erratic, flexible bridgers and tensely committed groupings. In the latter groups, however, the commitment of both parents to contact resulted in ongoing regular contact, whilst in the ambivalently erratic grouping the commitment of both parents to contact was weaker, including use of indirect contact (see also Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Cooksey and Craig, 1998).

The greatest logistical challenges occurred following a relocation. The following two case studies where the resident parent had relocated within Europe illustrate the linkage between commitment to contact and distance.

Case study A: flexible bridger

Contact parent phones every two to three days. Contact occurs every few months with parents taking turns to travel. During contact the resident parent moved to her new partner's house to enable the contact parent to stay with the child:

If Marco didn't see his father, he would feel that his father had abandoned him, or that I was somehow to

blame and prevented it, and it might turn into resentment against me. He would have the whole gap in his knowledge and his self-identity, he is half Spanish and I want him to be aware of what Spain is like, and his Spanish relatives. I do think it is important for Marco to spend time in Spain with his father to see where he comes from.

(Resident mother)

Case study B: competitively enmeshed

Contact was disputed prior to relocation, with the contact parent wanting more contact. The resident parent relocated overseas following a court case. There were continuing disputes about the contact arrangements specified in the court order, but no return to court:

Those statements [to the court] were not adhered to in terms of contact, so the whole of the summer holidays suddenly that wasn't quite what the statement meant, you know, so all the rules were changed ... [it's] these very, very far-reaching assurances that they would certainly encourage the children to phone at least once a week, write regularly all that kind of stuff, it's all in there, none of it's happened.

(Contact father)

Parenting styles and quality

Whilst differences in parenting style and quality can be problematic in intact families, the issue can become even more salient in post-divorce families. As with other potential challenges, the extent to which parenting style was an issue was variable across groupings, as also was the issue about how conflicts were addressed.

- *No, or relatively minor, differences over parenting styles:* in the consensual committed groupings both parents considered the other to be a competent parent, or at least one with good intentions. Conflicts over parenting were relatively minor and concerned issues about, for example, bedtimes and what were or were not appropriate activities. These differences were accepted as legitimate differences in style or alternatively would be tackled without undermining the parental relationship, or contact:

I just wanted him to be who he needed to be with them and they could be who they needed to be with him. So they would sort that out, I didn't need to know about that or to be in that.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

He lets the [children] watch 18 videos. He lets them stay up very late ... I object to the late nights because I get 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, reconfigured continuing families)

- *Significant or major differences over parenting style:* in contrast, in the erratic, and especially the conflicted, groupings, there were a range of parenting matters that could be disputed, including religious upbringing, leaving children unsupervised, being too lax or too strict about discipline. Underpinning these

conflicts was a perception that the other parent was less competent than oneself:

I think it is an all or nothing parenting. I think it is umm, I think it is a very unpredictable one, I think [child] is never quite sure where he is at, there is lots of treading on egg shells, and always was and is.

(Contact father, competitively enmeshed)

He is quite a short-tempered person and he does shout at them and he parents very differently from me ... he is more disciplined and they will do as they are told and they will sit at the table and eat their meal whether they like it or not. I don't think he sees a child as a child. It is character building, they will do this, if they don't like it they will get used to it.

(Resident mother, ongoing battling)

Why parents had different perceptions of each other's abilities as parents is impossible to determine. We did not measure the 'quality' of parenting to identify whether or not parents in the conflicted groupings were dealing with more serious parenting problems than in the consensual committed groupings. As a consequence we cannot know whether levels of conflict led to heightened awareness of parenting differences, or whether, on the contrary, perceptions of poor parenting were the reasons for disputes. Whatever the reason, and we suspect that both processes were in operation, there was a stark difference between the consensual committed and the other groupings in perceptions of parenting ability with consequences for contact.

Risk/safety issues

There was a wide range of risks that impacted on contact, including domestic violence, abduction, and child abuse and neglect as well as concerns about possible accidents to children through inadequate supervision.

Precisely how risk impacted upon contact was filtered through a range of other factors. One factor

was the perception of current risk. In a number of consensual committed families there had been violent incidents in the past, precipitating or surrounding the separation, but there was no current perception of risk. Where at least one parent was concerned about current or future risk, precisely how this did shape contact was again linked to a range of other factors, most notably, in the contingent contact grouping, to commitment to contact and the availability of services.

Mediators

The previous section outlined a range of challenges that families face over contact. The pattern of challenges differed across the sample, with some families facing more significant challenges than others. To a considerable extent, how individuals perceived and responded to these challenges was related to another layer of mediating factors, that is, beliefs and discourses, relationship skills and external involvement. These mediating factors in turn were linked to the direct determinants processes discussed above.

Beliefs and discourses

Parental beliefs about contact were important in shaping how parents responded to challenges, and, in turn, were related to commitment to contact and role clarity.

There were three 'belief/discourses packages' about contact expressed by parents, distributed unevenly across the sample:

- 1 dominant child welfare
- 2 alternative child welfare
- 3 parental and child welfare.

Dominant child welfare

This set of ideas almost exactly mirrored the provisions of the Children Act 1989. The key idea was the principle of 'putting children first', which was associated with a belief in the importance of ongoing contact with the non-resident parent as a

means to meet child rather than adult needs. It also included the idea of separating child and adult issues, with an injunction, so far as possible, to not argue in front of the children or denigrate the other parent whilst continuing to make joint parental decisions:

Well I really do think the cliché of not using your children as part of your armoury either in terms of money or access if you can possibly avoid it, whatever may have happened between the two of you, they don't deserve any of it and if you do have to split up it needs to be as good as you can make it for them.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

In addition, although the role of new partners/step-parents might be extensive, it had clear limits and was not a replacement for the contact parent:

He doesn't try to pretend to be a dad, he is Jim ... and he has been the one that is around, he has taken her to school, done all the sorts of things a dad does really, but a very clearly defined role, he is not her father.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

Alternative child welfare

The second set of ideas relates to a pre-Children Act 1989 conception of child welfare consistent with the well-known work of Goldstein *et al.* (1979). Again parents expressed ideas of putting children first but this was based on the concept that children would fare best by building their relationship with the resident parent (and possibly his/her new parent) and letting go of the past relationship with the non-resident parent:

I'm taking her out once a week, we're going out for an hour or two hours, on this part-time basis, you know. And I thought well this is just fucking ridiculous you know, this is just not worth it you know, and I thought you're just better off with you mum, Lisa, you know you really are.

(Contact father, ambivalently erratic)

Step-parents were conceived as a possible replacement for the absent biological parent:

From the time we got married they called [new husband] dad and they called him dad all the way through and to me they saw him more as a dad than their original dad.

(Resident mother, ambivalently erratic)

She applied to have the children adopted with her new bloke, and you can imagine getting this letter saying 'our clients have thought about this very carefully and it is clear they are a family unit, we are therefore enclosing the forms of consent for adoption'.

(Contact father, ongoing battling)

Parental and child welfare

The third set of ideas also emphasised the needs of parents after separation. Parental needs could be given equal prominence with children's needs, or the articulation of the needs of parents might mean that children's needs gained limited recognition:

You cannot say the contact is important for the children, but should not have any importance to the absent parent, and the absent parent is just the person who should sign the cheque. You are fully entitled to see them, as much as the children are entitled to see the parent.

(Contact father, ongoing battling)

And now I know [laughs] they are getting fed up, well they have been fed up for some time ... But I suppose it is better than me seeing them for a weekend once a fortnight.

(Contact father, conflicted separate worlds)

Ideas about child welfare, or 'putting children first' were widely adopted by parents in this study, although the interpretations of what this meant in practice were very different, underpinning different levels of commitment to contact and how parents talked about their response to challenges. Parents in the consensual committed groupings referred only (and continuously) to dominant child welfare principles and used these ideas to explain how they

were trying to conduct contact. These beliefs were also shared by parents in the contingent contact grouping, although resident parents also added two riders, that contact should occur only if it were as safe as possible and as long as it were consistent with children's expressed wishes. Resident and contact parents in the competitively enmeshed grouping also subscribed to these principles, but their perception that the other parent was not reciprocating was a source of further parental conflict.

The alternative child welfare principles were adopted, in some cases reluctantly, by parents, both resident and contact parents in the ambivalently erratic grouping, whilst the parental and child welfare principles were articulated most consistently by contact parents in the ongoing battling group. The only group without a consistent belief system were resident parents in the ongoing battling group who made reference to elements of all three packages without wholly adopting any. This may reflect the difficulty of finding a socially sanctioned explanation of their approach to contact in the context of what appear to be strong social norms in support of contact.

This raises the question about why different beliefs are adopted and why they are retained or rejected. Are beliefs unshakeable and do they determine other responses, or are they essentially changeable given what happens with contact? Our study suggests that both are possibilities. Some parents stuck to their beliefs despite significant challenges to them. Resident parents in the contingent contact grouping used dominant child welfare beliefs to explain their continuing commitment to contact, despite ongoing concerns about risk and the behaviour of the other parent. In contrast, in the ambivalently erratic grouping, some of the resident parents were in the process of switching to alternative child welfare principles in response to the inability to establish regular contact, although they may of course have been initially ambivalent about these beliefs anyway.

Relationship skills

Relationship breakdown, and the various challenges identified above, can generate a wide range of emotions for parents, including feelings of loss, betrayal, rejection, anger, guilt, failure and fear. How these emotions were managed was strongly associated with the quality and quantity of contact, particularly in terms of the quality of relationships and commitment to contact. To a considerable extent this was dependent upon individual characteristics or attributes, particularly the capacity to think through problems, empathy and insight, and an ability to compromise. These individual characteristics were, however, exercised in the context of a relationship with the other parent. There were, for example, parents in the consensual groupings who had been in highly conflicted arrangements in previous relationships, highlighting the importance of thinking about relationship skills within a relational context.

Empathy and insight

Few, if any, of the adults in the sample behaved perfectly to each other. There were conflicts and difficulties in the consensual groupings, and, most obviously, in the contingent contact grouping. In these groups at least one of the adults generally had a greater degree of insight into their own, and their former partner's, feelings and emotions, and greater empathy for the needs of all participants.

The elements of this included the following:

- *Acknowledging one's feelings:*

She said she felt a bit put out that I was seeing someone else ... And it's just, I suppose, a natural feeling to see somebody you've been with for, you know, x years or whatever suddenly with somebody else. And that's how she felt. And I'd feel the same if she sees anyone now. And I found out she'd been out with a couple of guys and that made me feel a bit ... I know how I felt, very jealous, very ... upset me quite a bit. It's inevitable.
(Contact father, flexible bridgers)

- *Disaggregating one's own and children's needs:*

And he's still their dad and he's not changed in that respect. It's me he's fallen out with not them.
(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- *Acknowledgement of former partner's needs and relationship with the child:*

As far as I'm concerned he's their father, he loves them and I know it hurt him to leave them. No, he's their father and they've got every right and he's got every right to see his children.
(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- *Understanding the former partner's perspective:*

When I had had an argument with [ex] or whatever over the phone, [new partner] actually puts her perspective over for me and makes me see sense because you are too emotionally involved at that time and you are hurt and you are angry and you are feeling powerless.
(Contact father, tensely committed)

- *Sensitivity to others' feelings:*

My ex-husband's father has just died and I think he, it would be nice for Daniel to be there now, the, my ex-mother-in-law, is a widow now, it would be nice for her I think to have her, her young grandson around at this time if I can arrange it.
(Resident mother, flexible bridgers)

- *Balanced appraisal of the other, recognising their strengths as well as weaknesses:*

He's harmless, it's not, you know, he's not horrible, he's good with Paul, but he's odd.
(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- *Recognising the burdens and constraints on the other parent:*

The hard slog is the week and I think that means the mother has to sort of rule the roost so to speak, and then I come along, oh they can do anything they like, we'll go out and sort of stay

out. Whereas [mother] can't afford to take them to McDonald's every day.

(Contact father, tensely committed)

I have to give him his due, he would walk ... to come see the children and he would walk back, even to see them for a couple of hours. He has struggled and he has fought with his new girlfriend to carry on seeing them ... and I have to respect the guy for it.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- **Acknowledgement of facilitation of contact:**

Very little difficulty [with contact]. She wanted her kids to keep the contact and I have to take my hat off to her, it really goes against the grain the way our relationship deteriorated and frankly broke down, it's quite open-minded of her.

(Contact father, tensely committed)

Parents drew upon a number of ideas and strategies to do this, including child welfare principles and their children's wishes. Quite a few drew upon their own childhood experience of father absence or conflicted divorce, or witnessing friends and families fighting over contact. Others used a process of behavioural rationalisation, attributing the behaviour of the other person to an external (and understandable) cause rather than inherent and fixed characteristics:

He had a bad time with his dad when he was younger, you know he was in and out of homes and I suppose in a way he didn't really know how to be a dad properly because he hadn't had anybody to sort of show him the way.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

In contrast, in the erratic and conflicted groupings, the other parent was generally portrayed in black-and-white terms with few if any redeeming features. Nor could either parent understand the behaviour of the other. In the absence of any understanding of the conflict, the behaviour of the other was interpreted as being

uncaring, manipulative or punitive:

It's just her, it's just her, she is punishing me because of the arguments I don't know what the reason is.

(Contact father, contingent contact)

I always felt that he was playing a game that I didn't know he was playing so that, if I said anything, there would always be an ulterior motive while he was listening and some reason for him, and his perception of me is so different to how I feel I am that, if I said anything, it would drop into another universe almost and then I would be totally astonished by the response.

(Resident mother, competitively enmeshed)

Compromise and non-escalation

The other critical component of working contact was that one or both parents managed to compromise over issues and deal with conflict in a way that did not escalate a dispute. There was a range of ways of doing this:

- **Letting go and moving on:**

You can't go through life harbouring resentment, you only get one shot at it, so you've just got to go on. I know girls that are stuck in the past, deeply resentful of their husbands and what they've done and the kids are pulled backwards and forwards and I can't see the point, you know, because it's not going to change what's happened.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- **Developing alternative investments, e.g. in a new social life/relationships, education or jobs, etc.**

- **Period of time-out:** where there is no direct contact between parents, for example getting another person to accompany children on handovers.

- **Diverting anger,** most frequently towards the 'other woman/man' though with no implementation:

You do get angry because you can't help it and sometimes letting the anger out is, you have to join a gym or bang something, because it is very difficult not to let that anger out onto the person that has made you angry even if it makes no difference. I am going to let it out somehow, she [new partner] is a possibility, if she comes across me. Yes, it is ridiculous, I mean I am not a violent person in any way.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- **Accepting differences in parenting style:**

He's very sort of into computers and stuff like that so they do quite a lot of that which I don't kind of fully approve of, but I just have to step back because it's not my time with [child], you know, it's [father's].

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- **Non-accusatory approach to conflict, dealing with disciplinary conflicts in a calm way, not jumping to conclusions:**

[Son] was saying something to do with [new partner] being nasty to him and I thought well that doesn't sound very good and I thought well instead of like phoning up and going 'grrrr' down the phone at her, I spoke to [father] I said 'look you know, [son] probably interpreted it all wrong you know because he got told off for something but can you tell me what happened?' And he told me and I said 'oh right' you know because what [son] said was different to what actually happened.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

- **Ability to talk through issues, in establishing and renegotiating arrangements and boundaries:**

I didn't have a problem with him coming in and having a cup of tea. But we found that it did upset the children, it confused them. And we talked about it and we decided that it would be better if in future, not because of any ill-feeling, that he

took them at the door rather than coming into the house.

(Resident mother, tensely committed)

Nonetheless, dealing with the other partner was difficult, even in the consensual committed group. Ideally, both parents should demonstrate the same level of insight and relationship skills. This did not occur often. More typically, instead of always working through anger and hurt through negotiation and discussion, one or both parents suppressed or deflected their anger or hurt with residential parents experiencing a 'child welfare burden' and contact parents feeling insecure about their role.

Restrained honesty

The ability of parents and children to communicate was also vital for high quality contact, particularly given that different children in the sample wanted different amounts and types of contact at different times. The ideal, identified by children, was open and honest communication about contact:

Talk to your parents. Let them know how you feel and, if you don't like something, tell them, because that's the only way it's going to get changed. If they don't have a choice, they're just being carted backwards and forwards without choice.

Interviewer: And is that something you feel that you have been able to do, more or less or ...?

Yeah. I can talk to my parents about things like that.

(Child, 13–15, tensely committed)

However, the message about openness was tempered by a belief that not everything had to be always fully disclosed. Children did not want to hear all the details of their parents' arguments, although in some of the conflicted cases they were drawn into them. Equally, children appreciated being able to talk freely about what they did with the other parent, but again this was a question of balance, with children having a choice about what

they confided with whom:

Now when I come back I go, 'Yeah, had a good time. Yeah, that was good.' And then just walk up to my room, listen to some music, go back down and watch TV. Just let the dust settle a bit. Make sure she's not thinking about it and then come back downstairs. So then I know I won't be asked about it again [laughs].

(Child, 13–15, tensely committed)

If I have an argument with someone, mum'll always say, 'Can't you see their point of view?' Whereas dad would be, 'Oh I can't believe they didn't agree with you'. So talking to dad about things, especially things about mum, is quite difficult. I mean, you never like hearing horrible things about your parents, so I just don't talk to him about mum.

(Child, 16–18, tensely committed)

It was clear, however, that the ideals of restrained honesty were not often met. Many parents had great difficulty in talking to children about sensitive issues, including arrangements for contact (and see Walker, 2001, Chapter 24, where few parents passed on specially designed leaflets about divorce to children). In its most extreme form this meant continuing uncertainty for children in the ambivalently erratic grouping where contact had ceased without explanation. However, there were also children in the consensual groupings, particularly younger children, who felt that they had not been consulted about contact (and see Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Butler *et al.*, forthcoming):

No one has ever asked me to decide what I want.

Interviewer: If they did, how would you decide?

Spend a lot of time thinking on it.

(Child, 7–9, tensely committed)

Interviewer: Did anyone ask you about how you felt about going then?

Sometimes [pause]. No, not really.

(Child, 7–9, tensely committed)

The dominant child welfare principles articulated by parents in the consensual groupings tended to emphasise continuing parental responsibility and amicability, with less explicit emphasis on always consulting pre-teenage children directly about specific arrangements. In contrast, in the conflicted groupings where parents could not agree, and in the contingent contact where the presumption of contact was more problematic, there tended to be (although not always) more direct emphasis on what children wanted. Finding an appropriate balance between consulting children and burdening them with resolving adult conflicts, as in some of the competitively enmeshed cases, was difficult.

Equally, children found it hard at times to balance articulating their own needs with wanting to protect the feelings of their parents (and see Smart *et al.*, 2001):

Obviously protect the children from things, but don't hide things from them, because me and my brother knew a lot more than my mum and dad thought we knew. We knew a lot of what was going on, you know, and we felt as if we were kind of being pushed out of it and that sort of thing and children see and hear a lot more than what is realised. You know, instead of hiding things, be open about it and just say, 'All right me and dad don't like each other, we don't get on', that sort of thing, rather than trying to protect it all from them and saying 'no everything's fine'. And be open about their feelings and not try and please the parents, you know, be themselves, you know, don't try to do things just to please the parents. I remember when dad couldn't afford to take us out and he'd feel guilty and that would make us feel guilty and we'd feel as if we shouldn't even be complaining or thinking of, you know, and just be sitting there. It started to become uncomfortable, because we didn't want to hurt him or upset him, that was like our main aim, not to upset dad this weekend. Or, if the parents say, 'Are you unhappy about this?', then say if you are, because a lot of the time we used to say, 'No, it's

Making contact

fine, it's fine'. I mean I remember mum saying to me 'Me and daddy are going to split up. Are you OK with that?' And I said, 'Yeah, it's fine'. And I remember thinking, you know, well, OK I'm upset. I wasn't that affected by it, but at the same time I did want to talk about it and say, well I am unhappy, but I just said, 'No, that's fine', you know, trying to be grown up and that sort of thing. So I would say definitely to talk about it and you can overcome a lot of walls and boundaries by talking about things.
(Child, 16–18, tensely committed)

The consequences of the difficulties with communicating were that some children did not have the contact that they would have preferred. Some children who wanted to make changes to arrangements were concerned that one parent might feel rejected or that they might not be taken seriously:

Just say to your mum and dad that 'this isn't working can we arrange something else to fit more fair and equal see'.

Interviewer: Right. Do you think that would be a hard thing to say or quite easy?

No it would be very hard 'cos it is hard to speak to your mum and dad about this. Because you don't know if you are going to put this in a way that your mum and dad are going to take it seriously and that you want to see the other person more. She doesn't mean for one not to see her.

(Child, 7–9, tensely committed)

Other young people felt unable to tell their parent that they did not like their new partner. Some scaled down contact as a result, but this, in turn, could result in some feelings of 'non-attendance guilt':

I did feel bad. For a bit I did feel bad about not going up and not seeing dad so much, but in the end, I don't know, I think it was kind of easier for them in a way, if I didn't come up, because I know that my

step-mum did find it quite hard when I was there.
(Child, 16–18, tensely committed)

In some cases parents encouraged children to openly express their feelings, for example giving children explicit permission to alter contact to suit their needs, but this was a rare occurrence:

I've said to him if there's something that he desperately wants to do on a day when he's supposed to be seeing me, I don't mind. All I ask is that he phones up and tells me. I just said to him, you know I don't mind what you do, just be open with it about it with me and I won't be upset because I can deal with the fact that you're growing up and that you are being individual, just talk to me.
(Contact father, tensely committed)

External agencies and networks

The last mediating factor to consider is the role of external agencies. We look first at how external agencies are used before considering their impact on contact.

Solicitors were by far the most commonly utilised form of professional support for parents, although the extent of involvement was highly variable (Table 6). In six families neither parent had consulted a solicitor. In 24 families at least one, but generally both, parents consulted a solicitor to make arrangements for the divorce and financial settlement. However, in these families, where neither parent had any particular problems with contact, the consultations centred on the divorce process and financial settlement. Parents either could not recall any discussion of contact or reported that solicitors had encouraged parents to make their own arrangements if possible. None of these parents had anticipated being advised about contact or were surprised or disappointed by the private ordering message (and see Eekelaar *et al.*, 2000). In five other families at least one parent elicited the help of a solicitor with sorting out a specific problem with contact. In none of these cases was further legal action taken. It is

noteworthy that the highest level of legal involvement in the consensual committed groupings was two families where there was an early exchange of solicitors' letters. Otherwise the consensual committed arrangements were entirely privately ordered. Solicitors and the courts were more extensively used in the erratic and conflicted groupings.

The impact of the legal system on contact is highly variable therefore. In almost half of the cases in the sample there was barely any direct influence of either lawyers or the court system on the nature of contact arrangements. However, in the erratic and conflicted groupings where families had more extensive involvement with the legal system, there was little evidence that this enhanced the quality of contact, and in some cases it appeared positively unhelpful in helping families deal with challenges.

In terms of the *quantity* of contact, resident parents in the ambivalently erratic grouping expressed considerable frustration with the inability of lawyers and the courts to encourage or force non-resident parents to establish a contact regime. In the conflicted groupings, court involvement for the rejected retreaters was followed by no contact and, whilst a tightly defined contact schedule was laid down by the court in the ongoing battling group, it itself became a source of further conflict. Nor was there much more success in enhancing the *quality* of contact in the conflicted groupings, with court involvement followed by contact without parental communication in the conflicted separate worlds group or further entrenched positions in the ongoing battling group.

The one positive aspect of court involvement was with the contingent contact group, at least for resident parents who found both lawyers and judges to be supportive of their concerns. However, even here, the lack of supervised contact is worrying, as are cases where the non-resident parent refuses to use a contact centre or where the resident parent has had no legal advice.

Apart from solicitors and courts there was little use of other agencies. The exception was the ongoing battling grouping who typically had a wide range of agencies involved, including lawyers and CAFCASS, police, mediation, social services, psychiatrists and contact centres. A small number of parents from different groupings had sought support from a therapist or counsellor. Consistent with Davis *et al.* (2001, p. 264), there was a very low level of awareness or understanding of mediation, with many confusing mediation with marriage counselling or Relate:

We didn't go for mediation at all because we both knew that it was irretrievable.
(Contact father, competitively enmeshed)

Only five families had attended out-of-court mediation. An agreement was reached in only two cases, neither of which endured or enabled parents to negotiate effectively themselves.

Few children received any professional support in dealing with the divorce or managing contact. Instead, children's confidants were their parents, siblings, extended family members (particularly the residential grandmother) and friends. Three children had seen either a school counsellor or

Table 6 Highest levels of legal involvement per family, by umbrella grouping

Umbrella grouping	No legal contact	General divorce advice	Specific contact advice	Solicitors' letters re contact	In/out of court mediation or agreement	Court welfare report
Consensual committed	4	19	2	2	–	–
Erratic	1	3	1	1	1	1
Conflicted	1	2	2	1	8	12
Total	6	24	5	4	9	13

counsellor attached to a GP surgery, and all had found it helpful. Children's experiences of the court welfare process were less positive, with a perception that they had not been listened to or had insufficient influence (see Chapter 2 of this report and Buchanan *et al.*, 2001).

What emerges strongly from our data is the limited capacity of the legal system to repair or facilitate human relationships. Families using the courts were facing significant challenges and the capacity of the courts to help families deal with the challenges that they faced was extremely limited. This was a small sample and there will be many cases where the involvement of solicitors and the court system will facilitate contact. However, the inability of the courts to improve parental relationships, and the potential to increase stress and conflict, does echo the findings of other recent studies (e.g. Pearce *et al.*, 1999; Buchanan *et al.*, 2001).

Time

Having examined the direct determinants of contact, challenges and mediating factors we finally have to look at how these operate over time. We will look first at how contact changes in relation to children's age and stage, and then take a broader look at how contact develops over time.

Children's age and stage

The ability of children to influence arrangements and the type of contact that they wanted was linked to some extent to their age and stage. A common pattern was for teenagers to assume greater control of the frequency of contact than their younger siblings or, in longer-term arrangements, to take more control as they grew up than they had formerly done so, often scaling down contact to some extent (see also Smart *et al.*, 2001). The reduction in contact could be a response to difficulties with relationships, particularly the relationship with the contact 'step-parent'. In other

cases it was about wanting to see a parent when they wanted to rather than when it was scheduled or simply because contact could clash with other things that young people wanted to do, particularly being with friends:

Yeah I like going out and stuff, but sometimes it is a bit annoying. I have to go out with my dad when sometimes I'd prefer just to hang around with my friends and stuff.

(Child, 13–15, tensely committed)

This gradual shift towards peer relationships and away from family relationships is typical of intact families. However, not all young people were able to assume control of arrangements. The level of parental conflict in some families meant that some teenagers were stuck in rigid arrangements set by parents.

Time post-separation

In 34 per cent of families in the sample the separation had occurred within the last two years, in 33 per cent three to five years previously and in 33 per cent six to 15 years previously. The families in our sample were therefore at different stages in contact arrangements. Nonetheless, one of the most striking aspects of the data was the presence of two common trajectories of either a virtuous or a vicious circle over time established early in the contact process. Where parents had a workable relationship in the beginning, the parental relationship continued to improve with the exercise of contact (and see Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997). This was reflected in the amount of contact, with consensual committed arrangements stable over time, although appropriately tapering off for teenagers. Conversely, in the erratic and conflicted groupings, where contact was problematic to begin with, parental relationships did not improve and, in the ongoing battling cases, continued to decline, as did the amount of contact. In the ambivalently erratic grouping both the parental relationship and amount of contact continued to decline from a low base.

Once contact had become problematic it was extremely difficult to get it back on track, whilst conversely, once contact was established in a relatively conflict-free manner, then the reasonably good relationships between participants reinforced each other and enabled families to ride out challenges such as the arrival of new partners. Some families in the tensely committed group did have problems with contact in the early stages with some non-resident parents finding it difficult to commit to contact or with, in one case, a refusal of contact by the resident parent in the early stages. Persistent facilitation of contact by the resident parent in the former cases did result in stable committed arrangements being established, whilst in the latter a change of heart by the resident parent prompted by the children meant that the parents pulled back from the brink of court action and contact was resumed and started to work well.

Otherwise the operation of the virtuous/vicious circle meant that there was very little movement between groupings. The exceptions were some of the contingent contact cases where the threat of violence/abuse had diminished or disappeared and the parental relationship went on to resemble those in the tensely committed grouping. In addition one family that initially shared most, but not all, of the characteristics of the reconfigured continuing families grouping moved clearly into tensely committed type arrangements following a renegotiation of boundaries between the parents.

Summary

In this chapter we have outlined the factors that shape the amount and experience of contact. Our analysis highlights the multiplicity of factors that determine contact. The critical or direct determinants are joint commitment to contact, role and relationship quality. However, we have also emphasised the interaction between these three processes over time, as well as the influence of challenges and the role of mediating factors. Above all what is apparent is the degree of circularity about making contact, with family members acting and reacting to the behaviour of others within the context of a network of relationships, the ongoing interaction between different processes (within and between direct determinants, challenges and mediating factors) and the pattern of contact over time in the form of vicious and virtuous circles. What this highlights are the limitations of analyses of contact that blame, or praise, the actions of a single individual for making contact work or not work, whether it is a mother or a father. It also highlights the need for effective early intervention where contact is not working. One of the worrying aspects of the study is how ineffective the potentially positive mediating factor of external intervention was in many cases in managing to break a vicious circle of deteriorating relationships. We consider the implications of this in the following chapter.

4 Implications

This study has implications for policy-makers, practitioners and parents. We discuss each of these groups in turn.

Implications for policy-makers

The findings of this study provide both good and bad news for policy-makers. The intention of the Children Act 1989 was that parents should, where possible, make their own decisions about contact. The evidence from this study is that this is the correct approach, enabling parents who have the capacity to do so to make workable contact arrangements without external intervention that are consistent with the child welfare principles of the Act. Solicitors appear to be supportive of this approach, acting as a resource to be drawn upon where parents raise contact problems, but otherwise encouraging parental decision-making.

The major problem is where contact is not working. The findings from this study suggest that existing interventions have limited capacity to shift 'not working' into 'working' contact, or to prevent a continuing downward spiral in relationships. The evidence from the faltering and conflicted cases is that the courts are not the places to make relationships work. Where conflict between parents is intense, as in the ongoing battling group, prolonged court engagement was not only failing to provide a solution but was also exacerbating the conflict and the distress of both children and parents. As a consequence we would concur with Sturge and Glaser's (2000, p. 625) call for 'greater creativity' in addressing contact difficulties and the recent report on *Making Contact Work* by the Children Act Sub-committee (CASC) of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Board on Family Law (Advisory Board on Family Law, 2002) therefore represents a welcome rethinking for support services. The report recommends an expanded role for CAFCASS in working with families rather than merely reporting, and a wider range of other services including in-court conciliation, counselling

and parenting programmes. There will always be a role for courts in making decisions about contact (or no contact) and in framing contact schedules where necessary. However, our study suggests that resources should be redirected towards work that is focused on helping parents to find some resolution of relationship difficulties rather than merely imposing a solution. CAFCASS is the agency that is best placed to undertake this work.

We would also strongly endorse the CASC report recommendation for additional funding for both supported and supervised contact centres (Advisory Board on Family Law, 2002, para. 8.35). The data from the contingent contact grouping provided some evidence that families are being referred to contact centres that offered a lower level of supervision than resident parents perceived was necessary.

The faltering cases, where contact was irregular or had ceased, posed a particular problem that does require further research and debate about possible solutions. Neither of the CASC reports (Advisory Board on Family Law, 1999, 2002) has addressed this issue and yet we know that substantial numbers of children lose contact, and from our study it was clear that this can be a major source of frustration for some resident parents and a significant loss for some children. The reasons for the lack of commitment are complex. Kruk (1992) found that the fathers who disengaged were more likely to be those who had been most involved in parenting prior to the divorce. This was not the case in our ambivalently erratic group, although it was apparent that non-resident parents found contact with children and the former partner painful. We would like to see some form of voluntary intervention, of joint or individual counselling, that might engage both parents. We would also welcome a debate on the merits or otherwise of the introduction of a statutory duty on non-resident parents to maintain regular contact where this is consistent with children's welfare similar to s.1 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

Even where contact was working well, it could be a long-term struggle for both parents and children. The CASC report (Advisory Board on Family Law, 2002) recommends that a range of information about divorce and contact should be made more widely available to parents. This is a helpful suggestion. However it is the implementation, rather than awareness, of child welfare principles that generates most difficulties. We would recommend that information goes beyond statements of principles and includes strategies for making contact relationships work including those identified by parents in this study.

Contact is not always going to work well or at all, nor will all parents be able to fully support their children. We would like to see a wider range of services available to support children. We would like more information for children about divorce/separation and contact to be available in school and we would strongly recommend the greater availability of counselling services for children. We would particularly like to see the disproportionate expenditure on investigation and enforcement in high conflict cases being diverted to enable CAFCASS officers to offer greater support to children caught in intense conflict.

Implications for practitioners

All the parents in our study were attempting to do the right thing as they saw it, although their perspectives about what the right thing was could be highly divergent. We strongly endorse the CASC report (2002) that envisages a wider role for CAFCASS in working on relationship issues. Our major reservation with the report is that it implies that it is the behaviour of resident parents alone that blocks enforcement of contact orders (e.g. Advisory Board on Family Law, 2002, para. 14.53). Our analysis of the ongoing battling group suggests that the picture is more complex, with both parents needing help in working more effectively together. We would recommend that

CAFCASS considers piloting the therapeutic mediation approach to working with high conflict cases that has been developed in the US (e.g. Johnston and Campbell, 1988; Kelly and Johnston, 2001).

This study provides some evidence that solicitors and courts are taking domestic violence seriously. We would recommend, however, that assessment procedures need to be tighter to prevent inappropriate referrals of families where the degree of risk (of domestic violence, but also child abuse and neglect, and abduction) exceeds the level of supervision offered by a contact centre. We would also recommend that for some families long-term use of contact centres should be possible, rather than aiming to 'move families on' as soon as possible. We are also concerned about the number of cases where resident parents attempt to manage risk by arranging 'informal supervision' through friends and relatives. One possibility in these circumstances is for the development of contact centre 'outreach services' or, at least, for resident parents to have the opportunity to discuss risk reduction strategies with professionals.

Nonetheless, we would concur with Sturge and Glaser's (2000) opinion that contact is not always consistent with child welfare, or indeed the welfare of adults. It is essential to have a wider range of interventions aimed at reducing conflict and/or risk. However, where a range of solutions have been tried and exhausted, as with some of the ongoing battling families, then there comes a point when enforcement of contact should cease on child welfare grounds, at least for a defined period. At this point it might be helpful to have on record the desire of the non-residential parent to have had contact. In such cases there should be a requirement that schools should provide copies of school photographs and school reports to both parents unless contra-indicated on child protection grounds.

Just as difficult is the question of how to respond to contact parents who have dropped out

or are in the process of dropping out of contact. We would recommend that all practitioners encourage non-resident parents to stay in contact as much as possible as well as supporting resident parents in engaging contact parents. Where parents find direct contact too painful practitioners should emphasise to non-resident parents the importance of indirect contact, including cards and photographs, as well as the need to give children a reason why contact is not possible rather than simply disappearing.

A number of studies, including this one, have identified that children and young people feel insufficiently consulted by parents and by practitioners about the contact arrangements that directly involve them. We recommend that information-providers and other practitioners emphasise to parents the importance of consulting with children about contact arrangements, and on an ongoing rather than one-off basis. It would be particularly helpful if parents could be given ideas about how to do this without leaving children with the burden of making decisions where parents are not able to agree contact themselves.

Implications for parents

The greatest burden of making contact work does fall on parents. Making contact work is difficult. Contact works best when the kinds of problems identified above are absent or less salient. But high quality contact requires more than the absence of problems, it requires ongoing proactive efforts to make it work. The recipe for good contact requires of parents that:

- both are committed to contact
- the contact parent accepts their non-residential status and the resident parent proactively facilitates contact and includes the contact parent in decision-making

- both support the children to have a relationship with the other parent, and especially do not denigrate or verbally or physically threaten the other parent
- they adopt a realistic appraisal of the other parent, recognising both strengths and weaknesses
- they recognise that some conflict or disagreement is inevitable, but find a way to manage conflict without escalation
- they consult children about contact arrangements
- they find time to be alone with children without new partners always being present.

This is a tall order where emotions are raw and where the other parent may be less than ideal. It is important, however, to have realistic expectations about contact. Contact itself and parent–parent relationships do not have to be perfect, merely ‘good enough’. Nor does the list of ingredients of ‘good (enough) contact’ form a prescription for each family about how contact should be organised. Each of the ingredients listed above is important, but they can be put together in different ways with different amounts of contact to suit the particular circumstances of each family, as in the three different types of consensual committed contact (reconfigured continuing families, flexible bridgers, tensely committed) and some of the contingent contact cases.

Making contact work is a difficult and demanding process for all family members. However, the evidence from our study clearly indicates that getting contact wrong places even greater burdens on children and on adults and few, if any, rewards.

References

- Advisory Board on Family Law: Children Act Subcommittee (1999) *Contact between Children and Violent Parents*. London: Lord Chancellor's Department
- Advisory Board on Family Law: Children Act Subcommittee (2002) *Making Contact Work: A Report to the Lord Chancellor*. London: Lord Chancellor's Department
- Amato, P. and Gilbreth, J. (1999) 'Nonresident fathers and children's well-being: a meta-analysis', *Journal of Marriage & The Family*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 557–73
- Buchanan, A., Hunt, J., Bretherton, H. and Bream, V. (2001) *Families in Conflict: The Family Court Welfare Service: The Perspectives of Children and Parents*. Bristol: The Policy Press
- Butler, I., Scanlan, L., Robinson, M., Douglas, G. and Murch, M. (forthcoming) 'Children's involvement in their parents' divorce: implications for practice', *Children and Society*
- Cooksey, E. and Craig, P. (1998) 'Parenting from a distance', *Demography*, Vol. 35, pp. 187–200
- Davis, G. et al. (2001) *Monitoring Publicly Funded Family Mediation*. London: Legal Services Commission
- Davis, G. and Pearce, J. (1998) 'Privatising the family?', *Family Law*, Vol. 28, October, pp. 614–17
- Dunn, J. and Deater-Deckard, K. (2001) *Children's Views of Their Changing Families*. York: YPS for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Eekelaar, J., Maclean, M. and Beinart, S. (2000) *Family Lawyers*. Oxford: Hart Publishing
- Emery, R. (1994) *Renegotiating Family Relationships*. London: Guildford
- Furniss, C. (2000) 'The process of referral to a family contact centre: policies and practices', *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 255–81
- Goldstein, J., Freud, A. and Solnit, A. (1979) *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child*. New York: Free Press
- Hester, M. and Radford, L. (1996) *Domestic Violence and Child Contact Arrangements in England and Denmark*. Bristol: The Policy Press
- Johnston, J. and Campbell, L. (1988) *Impasses of Divorce*. New York: Free Press
- Kelly, J. and Johnston, J. (2001) 'The alienated child. A reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome', *Family Court Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 249–65
- Kruk, E. (1992) 'Psychological and structural factors contributing to the disengagement of noncustodial fathers after divorce', *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, Vol. 30, pp. 81–101
- Maclean, M. and Eekelaar, J. (1997) *The Parental Obligation*. Oxford: Hart
- Manning, W. and Smock, P. 'New families and nonresident father-child visitation', *Social Forces*, Vol. 78, No. 1, pp. 87–116
- Pearce, J., Davis, G. and Barron, J. (1999) 'Love in a cold climate – Section 8 applications under the Children Act 1989', *Family Law*, Vol. 29, January, pp. 22–8
- Seery, B. and Crowley, S. (2000) 'Women's emotion work in the family', *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 100–28
- Smart, C., Neale, B. and Wade, A. (2001) *The Changing Experience of Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity
- Smyth, B., Sheehan, G. and Fehlberg, B. (2001) 'Patterns of parenting after divorce', *Australian Journal of Family Law*, Vol. 15, pp. 1–36
- Stephens, L. (1996) 'Will Johnny see daddy this week?' *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 17, pp. 466–94
- Strauss, A. (1987) *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Making contact

Sturge, C. and Glaser, D. (2000) 'Contact and domestic violence – the experts' court report', *Family Law*, Vol. 30, pp. 615–29

Walker, J. (2001) *Information Meetings and Associated Provisions within the Family Law Act 1996*. London: Lord Chancellor's Department

Wolchik, S. and Fenaughty, A. (1996) 'Residential and nonresidential parents' perspectives on visitation problems', *Family Relations*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 230–8

Appendix: Further sample details

We used a wide range of sources to incorporate as many different types of arrangements into the sample as possible. Our main sources were snowballing (using our personal contacts and those of interviewees) and a court service mailout to divorce petitioners (Table A1.1).

Our goal was to interview ‘family sets’ where possible. Not surprisingly, it was easier to gather all perspectives in the consensual groupings (Table A1.2).

Analytical approach

The analysis was conducted using grounded theory. Transcripts were open coded line-by-line and a researcher-generated (rather than pre-developed) code assigned to the relevant text. For example, the code ‘performance anxiety’ was generated from the following data:

I did do some planning for the weekends as well to try and make sure they were enjoying it enough to keep them coming.

All further data expressing the same concept were assigned the same code. Codes were continually reorganised within a tree hierarchy (e.g. groups of ‘child welfare discourses’, ‘flexibility/reliability issues’, ‘problems’, ‘benefits’).

From the first few interviews conducted it was apparent that contact took very different forms. After a dozen or so interviews had been coded we began to develop groupings of contact arrangements. Two families were identified where the parent interviews had produced very similar lists of codes. A ‘memo’ was then written summarising the key characteristics of what was subsequently called the ‘Reconfigured continuing families’ grouping. Further groupings were then defined and further refined in relation to each other. This process also helped in identifying important phenomena across the sample, each with different dimensions, e.g. facilitation could vary on the dimension of high/low (later proactive, neutral, reactive, blocking). A table of the core characteristics of each grouping can be found in Table A1.3.

Table A1.1 Sample source by umbrella grouping

First point of contact	Consensual committed	Faltering	Conflicted/Competitive	Total
Court service	7	3	6	16
Local media (newspapers, newsletters, radio)	5	1	8	14
Posters (surgeries, refuges, etc.)	2	2	5	9
Snowballing	13	2	4	19
Contact centre	–	–	3	3

Table A1.2 ‘Fullness’ of interviewing by umbrella grouping

	Consensual committed	Faltering	Conflicted/Competitive
Triad	10	3	6
Parental dyad	3	–	1
Parent–child dyad	7	4	4
Contact parent	1	–	10
Resident parent	6	1	5

Table A1.3 Core characteristics of groupings

	Consensual committed				Faltering		Conflicted		
	Reconfigured continuing families	Flexible bridgers	Tensely committed	Ambivalently erratic	Competitively enmeshed	Conflicted separate worlds	Rejected retreaters	Ongoing battling	Contingent contact
Overall	Contact to preserve family	Fitting contact around logistical constraints	Struggling to 'do the right thing'	Erratic contact with residential ambivalence	Private battle over allocation of contact time	Contact with no parental communication	Rejected contact parent retreats from legal battle	Repeated legal battles over contact	Contact contingent upon risk reduction measures
Amount (direct contact)	High – near daily	Low–mid	High–mid – fortnightly	Low – nil	High – near daily	Mid–high	Nil	Mid–low	Variable
Form	Staying	Staying	Staying, some day visits	Day visits	Staying	Staying	None	Staying – nil	Staying – indirect only
Regularity	Regular	Irregular	Regular for younger children	Irregular	Fairly regular	Regular	None	Regular (regulated)	Fairly regular
Reliability	Reliable	Reliable	Fairly reliable	Unreliable	Fairly reliable	Reliable	N/A	Reliable	Variable
Long-term trend	Stable	Stable	Downward trend with teenagers	Low start and downward trend	Stable, some residence shifts	Stable	Low start to nil	Stable or downward	Stable or downward
Core discourses (parents)	Child welfare (children first, amicability, enduring parental responsibility)	Child welfare	Child welfare + 'child welfare burden'	Alternative child welfare (clean break, residential centrality)	Child welfare by self, but not upheld by other	Child welfare + 'child welfare burden', parental welfare	-	Parental welfare, some child welfare by self but not other	Child welfare + child welfare burden + child determination
Nature of 'family'	Bi-location family. Joint celebrations	Two separate but overlapping families. Some joint celebrations	Two separate but overlapping families	One actual family. Contact parent misses celebrations	Two overlapping families. Some joint celebrations	Two disengaged families. Separate celebrations	One actual family. Contact parent misses celebrations	Two separate families. Separate celebrations	Two separate, unequal families. Contact parent misses celebrations

Table A1.3 Core characteristics of groupings (continued)

	Consensual committed			Faltering		Conflicted			
	Reconfigured continuing families	Flexible bridgers	Tensely committed	Ambivalently erratic	Competitively enmeshed	Conflicted separate worlds	Rejected retreaters	Ongoing battling	Contingent contact
Experience of contact of children	Relaxed	No data	Positive early, later difficulties with step-parents and 'meaningful' relationships	Mixed: loss, worrying or counter-rejection	Competitive. Difficulties with step-parents and 'meaningful' relationships	Tense	No data	Stressful, refusing	Mixed. Scary, disengaged or warm
Importance of contact to resident parent	Vital	Vital	Vital	Contingent upon contact parent commitment Low	Positive if contact reduced	Important	Ambivalent – hostile?	Ambivalent – hostile	Contingent upon safety
Resident parent facilitation	High	High	Mid–high		Low	Low	Low	Low	Mid–high
Resident parent satisfaction with contact parent involvement	High	High	High–mid (concern over possible drop out)	Low (under-involvement)	Low (over-involvement)	Mid	Unclear	Low (over-involvement)	Mixed
Contact parent commitment to contact	High	High	High–mid	Weak or resistant	High	High	Low	High	High
Logistical problems	None	High (distance, work, time, money)	Some (distance, second families)	Some (money, distance, accommodation)	None	None	Unclear	None	Some (distance, money)
Contact parent satisfaction with contact	High	High	High but role insecurity	Unclear	Mid	High?	Low	Low	Low

Table A1.3 Core characteristics of groupings (continued)

	Consensual committed			Faltering		Conflicted			
	Reconfigured continuing families	Flexible bridgers	Tensely committed	Ambivalently erratic	Competitively enmeshed	Conflicted separate worlds	Rejected retreaters	Ongoing battling	Contingent contact
Contact parent acceptance of role/status	High	High	Mid-high	High	Low	Low	Unclear	Low	Mid
Interparental relationships	Friendly	Friendly	Fairly friendly; occasional rows	Ambivalent or broken down	Tense, conflictual, competitive	Non-existent	Non-existent	Highly conflictual	Tense
Parental alliance, decision-making	High	High (but logistical constraints)	Mid-high	Low. Residential decision-making	Mid but strained	Absent	Absent	Independent decision-making	Residential decision-making
Safety concerns and allegations	Adequate supervision	Adequate supervision	Adequate supervision, contactability	Physical chastisement	Emotional abuse – self and children	Emotional abuse – self and children	Insufficient data	Emotional, physical and sexual abuse	Abduction, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse
External involvement	Actively avoided	Actively avoided	Financial matters only	Some, but unhelpful	None, potentially desired	Early mediation	Court hearing prompts withdrawal	Extensive (and unhelpful)	Mostly extensive (supportive lawyers), supervision problems
Relationship length, mean years	11	7.50	11.55	5.38	13.60	14.50	14.50	10.14	6.80
Time since separation, mean years	2	2	6.68	3.75	4.00	4.50	5.50	3.43	4.40