

Taking a longer view of contact: The perspectives of young adults who experienced parental separation in their youth

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Summary

Two contrasting case studies

Susan, now aged 29, has very positive memories of having contact with her non-resident mother. In fact, she thinks her parents handled the contact arrangements very well and she can't think of anything she would have wanted changing. Susan's mother left suddenly when she was 11, all three children remaining with their father. She had contact every weekend, staying over once her mother got suitable accommodation, and when they were younger her mother came around to 'babysit' so her father could go out. Susan enjoyed the time she spent with her mother, who always made sure there was 'lots to do'. Her parents were civil to each other and neither ever said anything negative about the other in her presence. The arrangements were flexible and her mother was always willing to change if Susan had other things to do. She had an easy relationship with her mother's new partner, who did not come onto the scene for some years, was introduced to her very gently and, in the early stages, was not around much during the contact weekends. Susan feels she now has a good relationship with both her parents and is quite happy to invite them both to her forthcoming wedding.

In contrast, **Anna** (25) recalls her experience of contact with her non-resident father as very negative. Anna lived with her mother after her parents separated when she was five years old. Every Sunday, for the next nine years, her father collected her and her younger sister and took them to his house where he lived with his new partner, her three children and two children from their new relationship.

Anna says that she saw her father 'out of protest', because her mother insisted that it was very important for her to keep up the relationship with him. One of her earliest memories is sitting at the bottom of the stairs and being prised off the banisters to go with her father. Other vivid memories are sitting waiting while her father either turned up late, or not at all, and her parents having 'blazing rows' at handovers. Both parents continually badmouthed each other. Anna never felt at home at her father's house. She had a difficult relationship with her stepmother, objecting to being made to call her mum, send her mother's day cards and call her parents Nan and Granddad. There was little to do on contact visits except visit a car boot sale or watch television. She would much rather have been at home with her friends. Although as she got older she enjoyed her relationship with her stepmother's children, she felt her father put them first. He bought them more expensive birthday and Christmas presents, and never spent 'quality time' with her and her sister alone.

Anna's mother told her that her father had been a 'brilliant dad' before the separation but Anna cannot remember this at all. She feels her father was not really bothered about seeing her, had focused on his new family and was never really 'a father' to her or bothered getting to know her. At the age of 14 Anna decided to stop the regular Sunday visits and to make her own decisions about whether and when to see her father. Although she has remained in touch, this is more out of a sense of obligation than emotional connectedness and they now have little to say to each other. Her parents remain hostile to each other and after a couple of disastrous experiences Anna says she will not be inviting them both to the same social event again.

The very different experiences of these two young women illustrate many of the key themes in this research study.

Background to the research

Thousands of children experience parental separation every year. An increasing body of international research shows that most will find this event extremely stressful and that some will experience long-term adverse outcomes. An important way of protecting them from such harm is to ensure that they have a positive relationship with each parent. On separation couples must decide how their children's future care is to be organised. The traditional arrangement is for one parent (typically the mother) to be the primary carer, and for the other (usually the father) to become the contact parent. This research study was conceived at a time when there was considerable debate over whether legislation should be introduced encouraging separating parents to share their children's time more equally between them.

This controversy has recently gained pace with the government now intent on amending the Children Act 1989 in a way designed to promote non-resident parents' greater involvement in children's lives. Whatever the outcome of these plans, contact will remain high on the UK family policy agenda. It is also one of the most difficult issues faced by the courts and family justice practitioners. It is therefore crucial for legislators, policy-makers and practitioners to have access to sound empirical evidence which can help inform their thinking. Without it there is a real danger that important changes will be introduced without asking one vital question – what is the long-term impact on the children themselves of the contact arrangements that parents make under the existing law?

This study aimed to address this research gap by documenting the views of young adults who experienced parental separation in their youth.

Aims of the study

The first objective of this project was to give voice to a group of people largely ignored in UK research on post-separation contact, young adults who had experienced parental separation in childhood. It aimed to document their reflections on the contact they had/did not have with their non-resident parent, with particular reference to certain specific research questions: what worked/did not work for them; what was and was not important; what problems, if any, they experienced and how these were dealt with; how far they were able to express their own views about contact and the extent to which those views were taken into account; what they wished had been done differently; what impact they felt the contact they experienced had had on their adult lives, particularly their current relationships with their parents. Our second objective was to investigate whether their evaluations of contact was associated with any particular characteristics of contact, the involvement of the young person in contact decisions, and the nature and extent of contact problems, including safety concerns and exposure to parental conflict. One key question which we hoped to address throughout was whether their views about contact and their non-resident parent had changed as they grew older, including their own estimation of the value of contact and their perceptions of how their parents dealt with it.

Study design

There were two parts to the study. First, a telephone survey of 398 young adults in England who experienced the break-up of their parents' relationship before they reached the age of 16. Ages ranged from 18 to 35, with a mean of 25. Thirty-eight per cent had been less than five when their parent's relationship ended; 47% between five and 12 and 15% teenagers. The interval between parental separation and the survey ranged from three to 32 years, with a mean of 18.3. Fifty-eight per cent of the sample were female, and 88% white. Their parents had typically been married (80%) with most of the rest (14%) having cohabited. Participants

were recruited through a survey agency (TNS-BMRB) which had a data-base of several thousand young adults who had been previously surveyed – although not on this topic – and were willing to be approached about future research. The agency identified a sample of 6187 prospective respondents, selected to be representative of the population in terms of gender, ethnicity and social grade within each region of the country. These were screened, by telephone, to establish eligibility (respondent experienced parental separation before the age of 16; lived with at least one parent up to 18; both parents were still alive). Of the 866 who met these criteria 408 agreed to take part, a response rate of 47%. The 408 were then interviewed, by the survey agency, using the Quancept Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. The questionnaire, which used mainly closed, scale, or Likert format questions, was designed so that interviewees followed one of six different ‘paths’ according to their main arrangement for residence and contact. Interviews lasted, on average, for 14 minutes. Data from 10 respondents subsequently had to be discarded, giving a final sample of 398.

The second part of the study consisted of in-depth, face to face interviews with a sub-sample of 50 young adults selected from the 222 respondents who agreed to the survey agency passing on their contact details to the university research team and for whom the agency had postal addresses. Our selection criteria for this phase of the study were a) parental separation had occurred after implementation of the Children Act 1989, because this substantially changed the law and b) the respondent had had at least some contact with the non-resident parent, since the key objective of the project was to obtain respondents’ views about their experience of contact. Eighty of the 114 respondents who met these criteria were invited to take part. These were selected to include a range of contact experiences, both in terms of whether it had been continuous or disrupted, and how positively the respondent had described contact in the telephone survey.

Key themes

Children as independent social actors

Our findings indicate that children often emerge from the shock of their parents’ separation with a precocious maturity, a critical awareness of their parents’ frailties and considerable clarity over their own needs. Although some separating parents involve their children in discussion over their future upbringing, respondents’ accounts suggest that surprisingly large numbers seemed unaware of their children’s new found independence, and assumed that they would fall in with whatever arrangements were put in place for their future upbringing. Our data shows that being involved in making decisions about contact was associated with a positive experience of contact, which is consistent with respondents’ strong advice to all future separating parents that they should routinely consult their children before organising residence and contact arrangements.

Respondents not uncommonly asserted their independence, typically in adolescence, but sometimes younger, by simply refusing to comply with residence or contact arrangements they considered untenable. A strongly moralistic attitude to the non-resident parent’s perceived responsibility for breaking up the family, for example by having an affair, led some respondents to refuse contact. Others responded similarly to non-resident parents’ failure to overcome depression, alcoholism, drug abuse or violent behaviour. On entering adulthood, some respondents certainly became less judgmental, but others were unable to let go of their anger or forgive the behaviour.

As independent players in their own right, respondents formed their own clearly thought out views of their contact with the non-resident parent. We found no evidence to support the common perception that children often resist contact primarily because their resident mothers pressurise them into doing so. Such manipulation was reported, but only extremely rarely and then usually with young children in circumstances where their mothers had good grounds for their own concerns. Our findings suggest that if and when children resist contact visits, they do so, not as brain washed children, but for reasons of their own, often in response to the non-resident parent's own behaviour.

The importance of retaining a relationship with both parents

Our respondents saw contact between children and their non-resident parents as being vitally important in principle, it being a way of reassuring children that they are still loved and important to both parents. This was considered to be the case even amongst those who had never had any contact themselves and those whose own experience of contact had not been particularly happy. Some had even persisted with relationships with non-resident parents throughout their childhood and well into adulthood when their visits held little enjoyment and could even be feared.

But despite this view that contact was immensely important, for many this was a principled answer to a theoretical question which had no reality in their own lives. Many chose to terminate unsatisfactory contact when they felt able to do so. Furthermore, there was overwhelming agreement that there were circumstances, such as an abusive parent/child relationship, where contact should never take place. There was also a strong view that contact should not start or continue if it did not promote the child's best interests and that no contact was better than bad contact.

The ingredients of successful contact

Our findings showed that for contact to be successful it needs to be continuous. Respondents who had had unbroken contact throughout their childhood were most likely to rate their contact in positive terms. Responsibility for contact not happening at all or not being regularly maintained was very largely attributed to the non-resident parent, and typically explained in terms of that parent's lack of commitment to the child. Statistical analysis of the data from the telephone survey indicated that the likelihood of contact being established and maintained was linked with a constellation of pre- and post-separation factors. Most of these were also associated with whether or not contact was a positive experience for the child.

One of the most striking findings of the study was the importance of the pre-separation relationship between the child and the parent who subsequently became non-resident. Where relationships had been very close contact was most likely to be both continuous and a positive experience for the child. The foundations of successful contact, then, are laid down pre-separation.

Respondents were also more likely to rate their experience of contact with the non-resident parent as being positive if the following factors were present: the parents involved their children in the decision-making; there was little or no post-separation conflict between the parents; there was no domestic violence or serious concerns about the care the non-resident parent could provide; the resident parent encouraged the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent; the non-resident parent made time for the child; the child felt equally at home in both the resident and non-resident parent's home; the non-resident parent either did not repartner or the child got on well with their new partner.

Many of these factors were linked; resident parents were more likely to encourage the child's relationship with the non-resident parent when there was no domestic violence and they were confident about the latter's care of the child, when there had been a good pre-separation relationship between child and non-resident parent and when levels of post-separation parental conflict were low.

The in-depth interviews confirmed the importance of these factors but also highlighted two more subtle and inter-linked factors: the extent to which the non-resident parent was considered to have made an effort to make contact an enjoyable, child-focused experience and whether they demonstrated their commitment to the child. Being subjected to adult pursuits or being ignored were taken as indications of their own lack of importance to the non-resident parent. Equally they were quick to pick up subtle signs indicating the strength or absence of that parent's emotional investment in their relationship together.

The relative unimportance of the amount or type of contact

In contrast our findings indicate that structural matters such as the frequency of contact and its format – when, where and how often contact occurs; the inclusion of overnight stays; whether or not there was a contact schedule – were not strongly associated with respondents' positive experiences of contact or the closeness of their relationship with the non-resident parent.

In terms of frequency, in common with most previous research studies we found that a substantial number of respondents would have liked more contact than they had had. Analysis showed, however, that this desire was typically linked with a wish that contact had been more consistent or dissatisfaction with the original residence arrangements. It is true that where contact had been continuous respondents with high levels of contact were most likely to feel that it had been sufficient. However, at every level of contact, apart from the very minimal, the majority were satisfied with the frequency they had experienced. Moreover there was no consensus about the optimal level of contact. It is also true that where contact was continuous more frequent contact was associated with a more positive experience. Analysis suggests, however, that this was because those with more frequent contact tended to have had a very close pre-separation relationship with the (future) non-resident parent. The pre-separation relationship also helps to explain the apparent association between higher levels of contact and the closeness of the post-separation relationship.

Overnight stays did not emerge as a significant factor in explaining respondents' positive experiences of contact or the closeness of their relationship with the non-resident parent. Whilst many of those taking part in the face to face interviews were enthusiastic over their value, this was by no means a unanimous view, with others being far less confident that they were necessary or even desirable. There was similarly little statistical or qualitative evidence that a regular contact schedule was an important feature of successful contact arrangements. What respondents did emphasise, however, was the need, on the one hand, for non-resident parents to be reliable about their contact and on the other, to be prepared to be flexible and accommodate the child's needs and wishes, especially as they grew older.

Two key points emerged from the analysis of the structural elements of contact. First, they seemed less important than other factors, such as the continuity of contact, the pre-separation relationship between the child and the non-resident parent, and the quality of contact. Second, and crucially, there is no blueprint for contact which will work for all, or even the majority of

children. Indeed one of the central messages of this study is that each child is an individual and that contact arrangements need to be tailored to their unique needs and circumstances.

Resident parents were much more likely to facilitate than to undermine contact

One of our clearest findings was how rarely respondents reported that the resident parent had prevented contact or tried to undermine the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent. It was even more unusual for respondents to say that resident parents had done so for reasons which had little or nothing to do with their children's well-being. Such behaviour was normally reported in the context of violence or concerns about the non-resident parent's capacity to care for the child. While respondents did not always agree with how their resident parent had behaved, most could appreciate the reasons for their actions. It was exceptional for a respondent to say that the resident parent had tried to undermine their relationship purely because of their own feelings about the separation.

In contrast, a strong and consistent theme in both the telephone survey and the interview data was the extent to which resident parents had encouraged the relationship between their children and non-resident parents, in some cases even when they had themselves suffered from the non-resident parent's violence and even when the children themselves opposed the contact.

Although the resident parent's active encouragement of the relationship between the child and non-resident parent was associated with the contact being a positive experience for the child, it did not in itself necessarily ensure that the contact was positive. Nor did any discouragement on the part of the resident parent necessarily undermine the child/non-resident parent relationship.

Continuity and change in relationships between parents and children

Although every child will experience changes in their relationship with their parents, those with separating parents may be more vulnerable to change. Our findings suggest that the process of parental separation can damage children's relationships with both parents, at least in the short term. Respondents recalled being left bewildered and shocked by an event which most found distressing, often having been given no advance warning or explanation of the reasons. At a time when children need the love and support of their parents, it was not uncommon for one or both parents to have retreated from the parenting role, sometimes into depression and continuing conflict.

Respondents' relationships with their non-resident parents were less stable over time and more likely to deteriorate than those with their resident parents. In this context the findings highlight the importance of the pre-separation relationship between the child and the parents who became non-resident. There was a strong correlation between a close pre-separation relationship between the non-resident parent and child and the maintenance of such a relationship throughout later childhood and then into adulthood. Those non-resident parents who had established a good relationship with their children prior to the separation had more chance of maintaining it post-separation, despite undermining factors such as geographical distance and ongoing parental conflict. The reverse proposition also applied; poor relationships rarely improved.

Children's own responses to the non-resident parent's behaviour can play an important part in the trajectory of their relationship. Respondents often withdrew from the relationship when confronted by worrying behaviour such as violence, alcohol and drug abuse, or if they

continued to harbour anger over the non-resident parent's responsibility for breaking up their parents' relationship. They were quick to pick up on signs indicating the absence of their non-resident parent's emotional investment in their relationship together – a factor which affected both their enjoyment of contact and the extent to which they felt close to the non-resident parent throughout their childhood, and sometimes into adulthood.

In adulthood, respondents were more likely to be close to their resident parent than their non-resident parent. Ongoing parental conflict was strongly indicative of poor relationships in adulthood, as was the perceived absence of the non-resident parent's emotional investment in the young adult's life. Nevertheless, children's relationships with their non-resident parents were not always irretrievably damaged and could sometimes be sustained and repaired with respondents, in adulthood, becoming less judgemental, particularly when the non-resident parents demonstrated a fresh commitment to their children's lives.

The changing perspectives of children and young adults

Our findings support our original proposition that young adults are well able to reflect on the way that their childhood experiences of contact feed into their relationships with their parents throughout their childhood and then into adulthood. Their recollections provide an important repository of information about what works and what does not work in contact arrangements both in the long and short term.

The telephone survey data showed how childhood interpretations of parents' motives, (notably non-resident parents' motives underlying their failure to maintain continuous contact with their children), could sometimes, in adulthood, be replaced by a subtly different interpretation of what had occurred, although their interpretations were as likely to be more negative as more positive. This does not suggest that children rewrite their past on becoming adults, rather that they acquire a different understanding of past events.

Children's attitudes sometimes changed as they grew older. Most, looking back over their childhood, seemed satisfied that their own childhood views about their parents had not been wildly inappropriate and that if and when they were consulted over aspects of their contact and residence arrangements, their responses had been the right ones. In rare cases, however, some, as adults, regretted choices their separating parents had allowed them to make themselves - most particularly over which parent they wished to live with in future. These respondents felt their decisions had been misguided and had led to very poor outcomes - unlike others who had been unworried by making similar choices.

Children who had strongly disapproved of their parents' behaviour sometimes became far less judgemental as they grew into adulthood. Some had acquired a greater tolerance and sympathy for their parents' faults and felt able to forgive non-resident parents for behaviour that as children they had considered wholly reprehensible. Others, however, as adults, never lost their childhood disapproval of their parents' behaviour, with no later improvement in their relationship.

Implications

Implications for separating parents

Many parents can take heart from the findings of this study: a substantial proportion of respondents felt that their parents had done a very good job in organising their children's contact arrangements on separation: 42% of the respondents to the telephone survey, for

instance, said there was nothing their parents could have done differently and 38% that, if they were ever to be a separated parent, they would handle things pretty much as their parents had. Over half rated their contact positively and 75% were, as adults, still in touch with their non-resident parent.

Nonetheless the data also indicates that many respondents wished their parents had managed the separation and post-separation parenting more effectively. Parents need to prepare their children for the separation, to explain the reasons for it and to support their children through it. Many respondents described parents abandoning their usual parental role in the aftermath of the separation and becoming less emotionally available, leaving them feeling very alone and unsupported and sometimes concealing their distress in order to protect their parents. Children are particularly disturbed by parents whose behaviour dramatically changes, becoming depressed, resorting to substance abuse, or looking to their children for support. Parents may need to seek help for themselves to enable them to support their children at this time, and, in some instances, seek external help for their children.

The importance respondents attached to contact, particularly as a way of reassuring them that they are still loved by the non-resident parent, means that, unless contact is not in a child's interests or contrary to their wishes, it should be established as soon as possible and maintained. Our data suggests that it is non-resident parents who particularly need to take heed of this – overwhelmingly, where contact was not established or sustained, our respondents attributed the responsibility for this to the non-resident parent. However it also seems to be important that, provided contact is in a child's best interests, resident parents, for their part, actively encourage the relationship.

There is no blueprint for successful contact. Hence parents should not get too worried by issues such as frequency and overnights. What is important is that they tailor the arrangements to the age, needs and circumstances of the individual child, the quality of their pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent and, above all, their own views. A clear message from the study was that parents should be more keenly aware of their children's maturity and their capacity to discern their own needs and, unless they are infants, should always consult them before establishing residence and contact arrangements. Genuine consultation with children should produce contact arrangements with which children are themselves happy. It is unlikely that a child's relationship with a non-resident parent will be enhanced by being physically coerced into unwanted contact.

Having consulted their children, some parents may choose to share their children's care more or less equally between them. However parents can also feel confident that the more traditional arrangement involving one parent being the primary carer and the other maintaining regular contact with them, works well and is in no sense second best. Simply seeing the non-resident parent, however, is not enough: as noted above, a number of ingredients contribute to successful contact. One of the most important, however, is that the non-resident parent demonstrates that they have an emotional investment in the child by providing a child-focused experience and showing them that he or she has a real interest in them.

It is also vital that parents do their utmost to overcome any hostility they feel towards each other and attempt to co-operate over matters to do with their children. Parental conflict not only has a psychologically damaging impact on children but it impairs their relationships with both parents, often well into adulthood and seriously undermines their enjoyment of

contact with the non-resident parent. One young woman spoke for many in giving the following advice to separating parents:

Keep in contact with the child and talk to each other a lot about what's going on. Have an agreed plan about what you're going to do with your child for the next week, two weeks to a year, what do you want to happen. Don't involve your child in your arguments, keep them away from it and talk to them about what's happening, you know, remind them that it's, you know, what is going on and that old story, you know, keep on telling them that you love them and it's not their fault.

Implications for service provision and service providers

Practitioners involved with separating families will not be surprised by our respondents' advice about how best to manage separation and post-separation parenting. The list of strategies, which reinforces similar findings of earlier studies with children, includes: forewarn children about the impending separation and give them explanations; avoid exposing children to parental conflict; consult children but do not give them inappropriate choices; design contact arrangements to suit each individual child, taking account of their own circumstances.

The research, however, also highlights the need for support services to be readily available to both parents and children. Children very often find their parents' separation an emotionally damaging experience, made worse if their parents become overwhelmed by their own practical and emotional problems and are unable to parent them as they had done before or to support them through the process. Some respondents who, as young adults, had developed severe emotional difficulties, attributed this to having no one to confide in as children.

Many respondents considered that their own emotional problems had been exacerbated by their parents' response to the distress of their separation, with some developing severe depression or turning to alcohol, leaving their children with grossly impaired parenting. Separating parents often need swift medical and therapeutic treatment for specific problems, but would also benefit from external counselling support and education programmes to help them deal with separation more effectively. Such programmes would be particularly beneficial if they not only helped parents cope with their new separate lives but also promoted their relationships with their children through assisting them to develop skills in co-parenting and managing conflict.

Implications for the courts

Although few respondents said that their parents had been involved in litigation the study produced much that is relevant to the courts. Since the children involved in such cases are already suffering from their parents' conflict, it is important that they benefit from the order the court makes. It should make matters better, not worse.

The data suggests that the courts' current approach that contact is almost always in the interests of children is not sufficiently nuanced but should take account of the child's need for good contact rather than simply any contact. One of our clearest findings is that it depends entirely on the individual child and parents in question whether contact will benefit that child in the short or long term. Successful contact is associated with a number of complex and inter-related factors, including such matters as a good quality relationship between the non-resident parent and child, the absence of conflict or domestic violence, no serious concerns about the non-resident parent's caring abilities, the child's own willingness to have contact.

Some of these factors are unlikely to characterise court cases – notably absence of parental conflict and no domestic violence or serious concerns about the non-resident parent’s care. Hence it is imperative that courts are able to obtain a thorough assessment of the child and his or her family background providing them with all the information they need to predict with any confidence that a good contact experience will emerge from their orders. Only this sort of detailed information will enable each court to tailor the contact order to the needs of the individual child and the circumstances of their family. Regrettably, under current circumstances, Cafcass cannot always provide this sort of assistance.

It is also vital that the court hears the views of the child. Contact arrangements which do not accord with children’s views are not likely to be successful. We acknowledge that cases in which children appear to be unreasonably resisting contact present courts, with their pro-contact stance, with a dilemma. The findings from this study, however, indicate that before a court takes the draconian step of overriding a child’s wishes, the underlying cause of resistance should be very carefully explored to ensure that important information about the child’s relationship with the non-resident parent is not overlooked. Our findings suggest that parental alienation is extremely rare in the general population and that when children resist contact with the non-resident parent they often do so for their own independently formed reasons. The courts should therefore be extremely cautious before they extend the use of transfer of residence orders as a sanction when a resident parent is refusing to comply with a contact order on the grounds that the child does not want contact.

The courts should also be cautious about increasing the use of shared residence orders, and should take account of the advice of the young adults in this study - *viz* that such orders should *not* be made unless: parents live very close to each other; children can attend the same school; parents are on good terms; parents can provide their children with two sets of rooms, clothes and school equipment. Above all the children themselves should be happy with such an arrangement.

Implications for policy makers

The research findings presented above on the support needs of children and parents strongly endorse the government’s declared intention to increase service provision for separated and separating families. Similarly, our findings that positive relationships post-separation are rooted in pre-separation family life indicate that policy initiatives to encourage the involvement of fathers in the upbringing of children in intact families are to be welcomed.

In contrast they challenge another limb of family policy which is to amend the Children Act 1989 so as to encourage cooperative parenting. Consultation on the government’s proposals for change ended in September 2012. Subsequently the government announced that it intended to proceed with its favoured option, which introduces a presumption into the Act. The court, when considering applications relating to children is under a duty, *‘as respects each parent ...to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of that parent in the life of the child concerned will further the child’s welfare.’* (Draft clause 2A Children Act 1989; see also DfE 2012).

While superficially a formula of this nature may seem to do no more than give statutory weight to the court’s existing pro-contact stance, our research supports critics who consider it to be ill-advised. An undoubted aim of the planned legislation is to encourage the courts to order more generous contact than they do already. Our research indicates, however, that different children will be satisfied with different amounts of contact and that the quantity of

contact is less important than the quality of the child's experience. Successful contact is linked to a number of inter-related factors, including the absence of conflict or domestic violence between the parents *and* children enjoying good pre-separation relationships with their non-resident parents. Our findings notably highlight the significance played by this last factor. If the child's pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent was good, post-separation contact is likely to be beneficial. However when it was poor, court-ordered contact may be of little benefit to the child and, depending on other factors, may even be seriously damaging.

New legislation is also likely to encourage the already increasing use of shared residence orders, even when parents are in conflict. As noted above, participants in this study queried the wisdom of this, with most considering that it could only work when certain conditions were met.

There is also a risk that any new legislative imperative will make it even more difficult for children who do not wish to have contact, or resident parents who consider it is not in their best interests, to have their voices heard and taken seriously. Yet our research indicates that children usually have very well thought out reasons for objecting to contact, that manipulation by a resident parent is rare, and that resident parents are far more likely to encourage a child's relationship with the non-resident parent than to impede it.

If the proposed legislation is to proceed, it will be imperative that the courts have access to detailed information about the child's circumstances, needs and wishes and, where children are resisting contact, to the services of a child's separate representative. Without this they cannot be confident that any contact order they make will meet each child's individual needs. As signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UK is committed under Article 12 to provide children with the opportunity of being heard in any judicial proceeding, directly or through a representative or an appropriate body. The courts are already hampered in their ability to order welfare reports because Cafcass is over-burdened, and separate representation is rarely ordered. Hence this would require the allocation of considerable extra resource.

Our research suggests, however, that the proposed legislation should not proceed. Rather the courts should retain an unfettered discretion to determine whether or not the welfare of the particular child in question would be furthered by the involvement being sought by the litigant parent. This would accord most closely with one of the major themes in this research, the importance of tailoring contact arrangements to the needs and wishes of the individual child in their particular circumstances. In contrast, the government's preferred option would commit the courts to adopting a simplistic, broad-brush approach to the subtle complexity of child-parent relationships. In its present form, section 1 of the Children Act 1989 ensures that each child's individuality is respected by the courts, in so far as any order the courts make must be designed specially with this child's particular needs in mind. Parliament should consider very carefully before removing this essential safeguard.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Child contact after parental separation or divorce has become a contentious and highly politicised issue. This project was designed to inform the development of policy and practice in this difficult area by documenting the views of young adults, aged between 18 and 35, who experienced parental separation in their youth. Through a telephone survey of 398 young adults, followed by 50 in-depth face to face interviews, it made a detailed study of their whole contact experience and its impact on their lives, including their current relationships with their parents.

Background

The potential value of contact

Half of all couples divorcing in 2010 had at least one child living in the family (Office for National Statistics, 2011) and estimates suggest that one in three children in the UK will experience parental separation before they attain the age of 16. International research (summarised in Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; see also Mooney et al, 2009) indicates that while most children are resilient and do not experience long-term adverse outcomes, around a quarter are not so fortunate. It also identifies a number of protective factors, one of which is a positive relationship with a non-resident parent who is involved in the child's life and can provide authoritative parenting (Ahrons, 2004; Hunt and Roberts, 2004; Johnston et al, 1989; Lamb, 2005; Pryor and Rodgers, 20010). Unless there is contact between the child and the non-resident parent, of course, such a relationship is unlikely to develop or to be maintained. Nevertheless, the research evidence on the contribution that contact, in itself, makes to children's well-being is equivocal (Dunn, 2004; Gilmore, 2006, Mooney et al, 2009; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001).

Contact - the unresolved debates

Over the last twenty years, researchers have increasingly studied the changing role of non-resident parents, typically fathers (Amato et al, 2009) and the part that they can play in promoting their children's well-being through child contact arrangements. Many have suggested that it is the non-resident parent's active involvement in their children's everyday lives that is key to a beneficial relationship between them (Dunn et al, 2004; King, 1994; King and Sobolewski, 2006; Whiteside and Becker, 2000). Some argue that such involvement is predicated by very frequent contact, presenting evidence suggesting that improved outcomes for children depend on non-resident parents sharing parenting time - not less than one third, ideally 50%. It has been suggested that this is an appropriate approach even in cases of very high parental conflict (Fabricius et al, 2010; Fabricius et al 2012). Others strongly disagree (Fehlberg et al, 2011), citing the research indicating that it is the quality of the relationship that is more important than the frequency of contact (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). Although regular contact appears to contribute to most children's long term well being, the quality of the non-resident parent-child relationship is ultimately more influential (Amato et al, 2009). Those who maintain that the quality of the contact is more important than the quantity also argue that in some circumstances contact can be damaging, for instance where it exposes children to parental conflict, well-evidenced to be a key risk factor for adverse outcomes (Amato, 2001; Amato et al, 2009; Emery, 1982; Grych and Fincham, 1990; Harold and Murch, 2005; Harold and Leve, 2012; Rhoades et al, 2012). A number of recent research projects have explored those aspects of contact that might contribute to its overall quality, such as overnight stays (Cashmore and Parkinson, 2008) and children having their own room in each household (Janning et al, 2010). Nevertheless, there

is still surprisingly little evidence indicating what factors are associated with contact arrangements which promote high quality relationships between non-resident parents and their children.

Contact as a disputed area of public policy

Public policy and case law in the courts strongly promote children's continuing relationships with both parents after separation. Successive governments have emphasised the same view. The previous government had a firm belief that 'in the event of parental separation, a child's welfare is best promoted by a continuing relationship with *both* parents, as long as it is safe to do so' (HM Government, 2004, p7). Similarly the present government believes that 'children normally benefit from the continued involvement of both parents in their lives' (MoJ and DoE, 2012, p18). Research also shows that the family courts operate on the principle that contact is in children's interests, to be promoted wherever possible (Bailey-Harris et al, 1999; Hunt and Macleod, 2009). However, to date there has been no statutory presumption of contact. When considering how to determine a contact dispute, the courts have been merely directed by section 1 of the Children Act 1989 to consider the child's welfare as their paramount consideration and they have had unfettered discretion to determine each dispute on a case-by-case basis. The absence of more specific legislative guidance on contact has led to vociferous demands for change from pressure groups representing non-resident parents. Encouraged by the significant legislative reforms introduced in Australia in 2006, following extensive lobbying by Australian fathers' groups, these activists have sought a range of changes. Demands have ranged from imposing on the courts a legislative direction to consider general principles about the value of contact to requiring them to reach decisions on the basis of rebuttable presumptions about particular divisions of parenting time. The introduction in Parliament in 2011 of two Private Members Bills, both designed to promote shared parenting, was further evidence of a growing pressure on the incoming government to change the existing law.

The controversy over whether legislative changes should be introduced increased after the new government came to power in 2010. It quickly asserted that it favoured the notion of new legislation 'supporting shared parenting through a change in parental attitudes, underlined by a clear message that the courts will expect both parents to be involved in the child's upbringing, unless there are exceptional reasons why this is not possible' (MoJ and DfE, 2012, p66). More specifically, it 'believes that there should be a legislative statement of the importance of children having an ongoing relationship with both their parents after family separation, where that is safe, and in the child's best interests' (MoJ and DfE, 2012, p18). These words were contained in a formal response to the report of the Family Justice Review (FJR) which had specifically rejected the introduction of a legal presumption in favour of equal shared parenting similar to that introduced by the 2006 Australian shared care legislation (FJR, 2012: 4.28). Like the House of Commons Justice Committee, which had also considered and rejected this proposal (Justice Committee, 2011, p66), the FJR was worried by reports of the difficulties the Australian legislation had created for parents and practitioners alike (Kaspiew et al, 2009. See also Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011; Rhoades, 2010; Rhoades, 2012; Trinder, 2010). Both bodies (FJR, 2011: 4.23; Justice Committee, 2011, p56-57) had taken account of research evidence suggesting that the Australian arrangements had produced damaging consequences for children, in so far as the imposition of shared care on highly conflicted parents could expose children to harmful levels of stress (Fehlberg et al, 2009; Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011; McIntosh et al, 2010; Trinder 2010).

The new government's words set out above suggested that the introduction of a legal shared parenting presumption was not envisaged; rather it intended to introduce a legislative principle or statement emphasising the need for children to have an ongoing relationship with both parents post-separation. Having confirmed, in May 2012, its intention to proceed with draft legislation, the government explored the possible format of such a statement in a detailed consultation document setting out the various legislative options for amending section 1 of the Children Act 1989 (DfE and MoJ, 2012). Subsequently, in November 2012, the government announced its intention to adopt its favoured option – one which introduces a presumption into section 1 of the 1989 Act. A court, when considering applications relating to children, '*is as respects each parent ...to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of that parent in the life of the child concerned will further the child's welfare.*' (Draft clause 2A Children Act 1989; see also DfE 2012b). Although such a move is controversial, the speed of these events suggest that reform of the Children Act 1989 is now imminent.

Whatever its final format, a legislative statement alone would undoubtedly restrict the courts' freedom of discretion less than a formal shared parenting presumption. Nevertheless, like the Justice Committee before it (Justice Committee, 2011, p70-71), the FJR (FJR, 2012: 4.29-4.40) had taken account of Australia's experience of working with a similar statement (reinforcing the importance of a child continuing to have 'a meaningful relationship' with both parents) and had also rejected this option. It considered that even a simple statement of this kind might, as in Australia, prove confusing and difficult to interpret. Additionally, as in Australia, it might lead to a public perception that formal shared parenting arrangements were now a legally sanctioned aspect of the law, with such parenting arrangements being imposed on children in inappropriate and/or unsafe circumstances (Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011; H Rhoades, 2012). Most fundamentally, it would risk diluting the central principle of the Children Act 1989, the paramountcy of the welfare of each individual child.

When responding to the FJR's concerns the government had already undertaken to take particular care to avoid the pitfalls stemming from the Australian legislation (MoJ and DfE, 2012, p18). By way of further reassurance, it also emphasised that the proposed legislative change was 'categorically not about equality in the time that a child spends with each parent after separation' (DfE and MoJ, 2012: 4.4). Nonetheless, the Australian experience suggests that the interpretation of such a statement is difficult without importing ideas about quantity of contact, specifically *more* contact, rather than quality (H Rhoades, 2012). Furthermore, experience in Sweden (Newman, 2011) and Denmark (Busey, 2012) suggests that legislative change encouraging shared parenting can have dangerous consequences for the children of separating parents. It seems that the government feels obliged to set aside the cautious approach adopted by the Justice Committee and the FJR; it is undoubtedly only too aware that without swift legislative action there will be no diminution in the pressure to do more to address the demands of the various pressure groups. It should perhaps be noted at this point that the government also hopes to change the terminology currently used in parental disputes (Department for Education, 2012a). The terms 'contact' and 'residence' may eventually disappear, if and when new legislation replaces contact and residence orders with 'child arrangements orders' (Provisions about Family Justice Bill 2012, clause 2).

Genesis of the study

Whatever the outcome of the controversy over whether there should be legislative change, contact will remain high on the UK family policy agenda. It is also one of the most difficult issues faced by the courts and family justice practitioners. It is therefore crucial for

legislators, policy-makers and practitioners to have access to sound empirical evidence which can help inform their thinking. One vital source of such evidence is those most significantly affected by decisions made about contact – the offspring of separated parents. In recent years valuable insights have been provided by UK studies which include, or focus on, the views of children and adolescents (Buchanan et al, 2001; Butler et al, 2003; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Smith et al, 2001; Wade and Smart, 2002). Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to the views of young people as they become adults and establish independent lives.

The only UK research to focus on the contact experiences of the adult offspring of separated parents is a pilot study by one of the authors of this report (Fortin et al, 2006). Elsewhere in the world, such research has become more common, but has largely focused on the impact of parental separation, usually divorce, rather than on contact (Ahrons, 2004; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; Angarne-Lindberg et al, 2009; Arditto and Prouty, 1999; Cartwright and McDowell, 2008; Marquardt 2005; Peters and Ehrenberg, 2008; Sobolewski and Amato 2007). When contact is covered, the participants are typically treated as sources of data through which associations can be explored between contact and specific adult outcomes, pre-determined by the investigators. Far fewer researchers have engaged with young adults as experts who can offer a unique perspective on how contact worked out for them and how those experiences have fed into their present day lives and relationships. The samples in these studies, moreover, are usually drawn from quite restricted groups, such as college students (Derevensky and Deschamps, 1997; Fabricius et al 2010; Fabricius et al 2012; Fabricius and Hall 2000; Fabricius and Luecken, 2007), the children of parents who have mediated their disputes (Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000) or who have received clinical help (Wallerstein, 2005; Wallerstein and Lewis, 1998). In addition, the focus is often limited to issues such as the amount of contact, experienced or desired. A study carried out by Ahrons (Ahrons 2004; Ahrons, 2006) appears to be the only study that does not suffer from either of these limitations. Ahrons interviewed 173 young adults, with an average age of 31, whose parents had taken part in an earlier longitudinal study of divorce, by the author, undertaken in one U.S. county. Although the primary focus is divorce, the study contained useful data on participants' experiences of contact.

The present study aimed to extend substantially this strikingly thin knowledge base by interviewing a large, national sample of young adults, aged between 18 and 35, who experienced parental separation before the age of 16, focusing specifically on contact. It was designed to build on the insights yielded by the small amount of existing research, such as that carried out by Ahrons. It was also able to draw on the findings of the pilot study mentioned above which was completed in 2005 (Fortin et al, 2006). In that study telephone interviews were carried out with 103 young adults to elicit their experiences of contact, with particular reference to their past and current relationships with resident and non-resident parents. Its primary objective was to compare the experiences of young adults who had been subject to court-ordered contact arrangements with those whose parents had not invoked the court's assistance. Its findings highlighted a number of factors which appeared to undermine the development of a good long-term relationship with a non-resident parent: parental commitment to contact; the young adult's attribution of blame for the separation; the role of step-mothers; disputes over money.

Whilst the pilot study's findings were important, the focus of the present study was designed to be far broader. Given that only around 10% of the separating population go to court to resolve disputes over contact (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003; Lader, 2008; Peacey and Hunt,

2009), a research sample focusing on those who had been the subject of court ordered contact is an essentially restricted one. Although these may be among the most highly conflicted families, recent research funded by the Nuffield Foundation (Peacey and Hunt 2009) demonstrates that this does not mean that the rest of the population are reaching mutually agreed, satisfactory or problem-free contact arrangements. In reality the majority of separated couples experience problems with the potential to affect contact and typically, that study found, one parent makes the decisions. Consequently, rather than focusing on court usage, the present study was designed to look more broadly at aspects of contact which the young adults may now see as problematic, such as parental conflict, as well as the more positive elements. Its findings would therefore be more robust and have a wider relevance than the pilot.

One benefit of the pilot study was that, consistent with a growing body of international research, its findings established clearly the special value of gaining the perspectives of young adults on specific matters relating to parental breakdown. Whilst their opinions carry no greater weight than those of children and the views of each group have their own validity, researchers have found that young adults can look back over their whole childhood and evaluate their experiences from a different standpoint and with a degree of emotional distance (Ahrons, 2006; Deverensky and Deschamps, 1997; Fabricius and Hall, 2000; Fortin et al 2006; Wallerstein and Lewis, 1998). Their perspectives, therefore, form an important part of the whole picture. Although the use of retrospective self-report results in researchers being dependent on the participants' recollections, there is evidence that this material is reliable over time (Ahrons, 2004; Brewin et al, 1993). Ahrons, for example, found that young adults' recollections of the extent of parental conflict was strongly correlated with their parents' contemporaneous reports, 20 years earlier. There is also the advantage that, unlike research with children, getting access to young adults does not have to be negotiated with their parents, whose gatekeeping can produce a skewed sample (Smart et al, 2001).

The aims of the study

The first objective of this project was to give voice to a group of people largely ignored in research on post-separation contact, young adults who had experienced parental separation in childhood. It aimed to document their reflections on the contact they had/did not have with their non-resident parent, with particular reference to certain specific research questions:

- what worked/did not work for them;
- what was and was not important;
- what problems, if any, they experienced and how these were dealt with;
- how far they were able to express their own views about contact and the extent to which those views were taken into account;
- what they wished had been done differently, by their parents, by themselves, by professionals;
- what impact they felt the contact they experienced had had on their adult lives, particularly their current relationships with their parents.

One key question which we hoped to address throughout was whether their views about contact and their non-resident parent had changed as they grew older, including their own estimation of the value of contact and their perceptions of how each of their parents dealt with it.

Our second objective was to investigate whether the young adults' evaluations of their contact experiences was associated with any particular characteristics of contact, such as the

type and quantity of contact; the quality of contact; the involvement of the young person in contact decisions, and the nature and extent of contact problems, including safety concerns and exposure to parental conflict.

Methodology

The research used both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative element involved a brief telephone survey of 398 young adults, living in England, whose parents had separated before the respondents had reached the age of 16. This took place between October and December 2010. The survey was followed by in-depth, face to face, qualitative interviews with 50 of those participants, conducted between March 2011 and January 2012.

The telephone survey

The telephone survey was carried out by a survey agency – TNS-BMRB - which identified our target group through telephone screening of a pre-existing pool of young adults who had taken part in previous research by the agency and had agreed to be re-contacted for the purposes of further research.

Rationale for selecting this approach

Alternative ways of obtaining a sample were explored but had to be rejected. It was not feasible, for instance, to draw a sample from an existing survey since most did not collect information about parental separation, or where they did, would not generate sufficient numbers. The only large survey which potentially had the data we needed was *Understanding Society*, a new longitudinal survey of 40,000 households. However the content of the first six waves had already been determined and it was not possible for other researchers to buy into the survey or to carry out follow-up interviews with a sub-sample. This would have been possible with the Bristol ALSPAC study, which has tracked a cohort of children born in 1991-2, and has data on parental separation. However the children in that study were only just reaching adulthood at the point this project was designed.

The choice, then, lay between generating an entirely new sample, for example by buying into an Omnibus type survey, or screening from an existing sampling pool. The advantages of the first option were that an Omnibus survey, particularly one using random probability sampling, would produce the most robust sample. The disadvantage, however, was that most survey vehicles are too small to generate sufficient responses from the target population in a realistic timeframe, and using multiple waves would have been prohibitively expensive. We therefore concluded that the only cost-effective way of accessing the target population in a realistic timeframe was to screen from an *existing* data-base of respondents who fell into the appropriate age-group.

The *Demographic Data-base* held by TNS-BMRB was considered to be the most suitable because it consisted of respondents to previous face to face or telephone Omnibus surveys who had agreed to be re-contacted for further research. The face to face Omnibus uses a random location method to provide a sample which is in line with the national demographic profile. The telephone Omnibus uses random digit dialling sampling, in which numbers not available in directories or other sources are represented in their correct proportions. Although these methods are not as robust as random probability sampling, we considered there was no reason to believe that the sampling pool generated by this method would be skewed in any way which would undermine our research findings. We also considered that it was substantially better than using a data-base generated from on-line surveys. Another important consideration was that the survey agency had considerable experience of conducting research

on sensitive topics, including research with parents involved with Cafcass (The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service). This was crucial since it was intended that they would conduct the telephone survey as well as the screening.

Although telephone interviews are a cost-effective way of acquiring data from a large number of people they do have limitations in terms of the amount and depth of information which can be obtained and our resources only permitted a 15 minute interview. We did consider using the screening process purely to identify our target group, concentrating resources on more extensive interviews with a selection of those eligible who agreed to be re-contacted. However this would have meant we would have insufficient information on the profile of potential interviewees to allow us to a) obtain a sample which would enable us to explore the key issues around contact and b) ascertain how our end-group compared with those who did not participate. Judging from the experience of other researchers (Bradshaw et al, 1999), we also anticipated a substantial drop-out rate.

The strategy we adopted, of substantive interviews with several hundred respondents, it was thought, would not only enable us to obtain a good targeted sample for in-depth interviews but also provide information about the contact experiences and perceptions of the full sample. The time we would have available would be short, particularly given the subject matter. Nevertheless, previous research by one of the applicants (Peacey and Hunt, 2009) which used a 10 minute module in the ONS Omnibus survey to ask separated parents about contact problems, including domestic violence and substance abuse, demonstrated that it is possible to get high quality data on sensitive topics in a short time. Although that survey used face to face interviewing, the pilot study conducted by Fortin, the precursor to this project, showed the viability of telephone interviews with this age group, on this topic.

Sampling

The survey agency initially selected 5,500 records from their data-base of individuals who participated in the TNS-BMRB omnibus surveys between January and September 2008 and were then aged between 18 and 30 (and a reserve sample of 1214). The sample was stratified by age, gender and social grade within regions in order to be representative of the population. Eligibility was established by a positive response to three screening questions: a) did the respondent's parents separate before the respondent was 16; b) did the respondent live with at least one of their parents up to the age of 18 and c) were both parents still alive. The reason for the third condition was that since we wanted to ask about relationships with each parent in adulthood we felt it would be insensitive to include individuals who had been bereaved.

In the event the initial and the reserve sample combined did not generate anywhere near the required numbers because of lower than anticipated rates of eligibility in the sampling pool and a higher than expected level of 'deadwood'. Before the survey began it was estimated that the penetration (percentage of respondents eligible) would be 20%; in the end it was 14%. More than one third of the sample (36%) could not be contacted - the telephone number was no longer valid, the respondent no longer lived at that address or was not known at that address, was now deceased, or other reasons. The target sample was therefore reduced to 400 and a further 2,045 records drawn, from individuals added to the data-base between January and June 2010, again stratified to give a representative sample.

In total, 6187 individuals were contactable, of whom 866 were eligible and 408 agreed to take part, a response rate of 47%. Ten interviews were subsequently excluded because of problems with the data.

Representativeness of the survey sample

As stated earlier, the sample approached by the survey agency was selected to be representative of the population in terms of gender, ethnicity and social grade within a region, using the Office for National Statistics estimates based on the 2001 Census. Table 1.1 shows the composition of the final sample.

Table 1.1 Representativeness of the survey sample

	Survey sample	ONS data
	%	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	42	48
Female	58	52
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	88	92
Other ethnic group	12	8
<i>Social grade</i>		
ABC1	49	53
C2DE	51	47
<i>Region</i>		
NE, NW, Yorkshire & Humberside	29	29
E & W Midlands, East Anglia	27	22
SE, SW, Greater London	44	49

The telephone interview

The full telephone interview then took place either immediately after the screening call or at a time more convenient to the participant. Although all respondents were offered the option of being sent written information before deciding to take part, no-one took this up.

Interviews, which lasted 14 minutes on average, were conducted using the Quancept Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. The questionnaire was designed so that interviewees followed different ‘paths’ according to their residence and contact arrangements. The questions asked or the wording of questions and the answer list options varied depending upon these contact ‘paths’.

Respondents were first divided according to their main living arrangements after parental separation, using the following question: ‘once your parents separated, until you were 18 or left home, did you mostly a) live with your mum, b) live with your dad, or c) live with each parent, dividing your time more or less equally between the two?’ Those who selected c) were assigned to the ‘shared residence’ pathway¹.

Respondents who said they had mainly lived with one parent were then asked if they had ever had face to face contact with the other parent. Those who said no were assigned to the ‘never any contact path’. Paths for the remaining respondents were assigned on the basis of the

¹ The terminology used to describe such arrangements varies, with policy makers commonly describing such an arrangement as ‘shared parenting,’ whilst the courts describe the orders they make establishing such an arrangement as a ‘shared residence order’. In Australia, the term used is ‘shared care’. Throughout the remainder of this report we use the term ‘shared residence’.

response to the question: ‘when you were living with your mum/dad, which of the following best describes the face to face contact you had with your dad/mum, the options being:

- a) I had contact the whole time (*continuing contact path*).
- b) There were one or more breaks in contact but it always re-started (*sporadic contact path*).
- c) I used to have contact but it stopped completely (*ceased contact path*).
- d) I did not see my dad/mum for six months or more but then I started seeing him/her and continued seeing him/her (*delayed contact path*).

Constraints of time meant that the interview schedule had to be tightly focused and largely confined to closed, scale, or Likert format questions, although we were able to include three open-ended questions. In addition to some basic demographic information the questionnaire covered the following areas:

- Details about the contact/shared residence arrangements.
- How and by whom the contact arrangements were made, including any court involvement and the extent to which the respondents were involved.
- Respondents’ satisfaction, then and now, with the contact/shared residence arrangements.
- Any difficulties experienced over contact.
- Exposure to parental conflict post-separation.
- Relationships with each parent post separation and as adults.

The data was entered into SPSS by the survey agency and analysed by the university research team.

The qualitative interviews

At the end of the telephone interview each participant was asked, by the interviewer, if they would be willing for the survey agency to pass on their contact details to the university research team with a view to taking part in an in-depth interview. The primary purpose of this part of the research was to put flesh on the bones of the bare quantitative data, exploring the underlying narratives and giving respondents an opportunity to tell their stories in their own way. Further, while the survey was only able to ask respondents about their main experience of contact, the in-depth interviews would be able to follow the story over time, including not only changes in contact but also changes in residence, the latter event leading to a consequent change in the identity of the non-resident parent.

Table 1.2 Agreement to be contacted by university team by questionnaire path

<i>Questionnaire path</i>	Telephone sample		Agreed to be contacted		Refusal rate
	No	%	No	%	%
Shared residence	18	5	12	4	33
Continuous contact	165	42	129	40	22
Delayed	48	12	43	13	10
Sporadic	61	15	54	17	11
Ceased	40	10	36	11	10
Never any contact	66	17	49	15	26
<i>All</i>	<i>398</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>323</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>19</i>

Four in five respondents to the telephone survey (323; 81%) agreed to take part in the qualitative part of the study, the refusal rate varying from 10% of those assigned to the 'ceased contact' path to 33% of those who said their main arrangement had been shared residence (table 1.2)

It later emerged, however, that the agency only held full addresses for 222 of these 323. Ethical approval for this stage of the project had been given on condition that a letter and information leaflet explaining the research was sent to potential interviewees. Thus for the remaining 101 we would have to ring them to get the full address before sending out the information. In view of the effect this might have on the project – delay, possible sample loss, additional researcher time – we decided to confine the initial sampling pool to the 222 for whom we had full details, drawing on the rest if we had problems recruiting sufficient numbers.

We further excluded a) those whose parents separated before the Children Act 1989 (since this substantially changed the law), which reduced the sampling pool to 123 and b) those who had never had any contact with their non-resident parent (114), since the key objective of the project was to obtain respondents' views about their experience of contact.

Table 1.3 The qualitative interview sampling pool by questionnaire path

<i>Questionnaire path</i>	Telephone sample excluding never any contact		Sampling pool for qualitative interviews*	
	No	%	No	%
Shared residence	18	5	5	4
Continuous contact	165	50	61	54
Delayed	48	15	19	17
Sporadic	61	18	15	13
Ceased	40	12	14	12
All	332	100	114	100

*Excludes subjects who did not agree to be contacted, whose parents separated before the Children Act, who never had any contact & those for whom we did not have full addresses.

Eighty of these respondents were sent information about the research and invited to participate in an in-depth interview. These were selected to include a mix of types of contact and were divided fairly evenly between those who had had continuous contact since separation (38) and those whose contact had been disrupted in some way (39) while three had said they mainly lived in shared residence. Since we also wanted to include a range of experiences we sent information to 36 people who had said in their telephone interview that their experience of contact/shared residence had been fairly or very positive, 16 who said it had been fairly or very negative and 19 whose experience was described as mixed. In the remaining nine cases, contact had ceased and data was not available on the experience. Information was sent out in three tranches, so that, if necessary, we could correct the balance of the sample.

This process yielded our intended sample of 50 interviews. Fourteen people declined to take part, 13 were not contactable and three, having made appointments, did not show up. As can be seen from table 1.4, the balance of the achieved sample was almost identical to that aimed for.

All but one of the interviews (which was conducted by telephone) were carried out face to face, mainly in the respondent's own home although a few took place in coffee bars. They used a loosely structured format, organised around broad topic areas and explored participant's recollections about the evolution of contact over time, their views about the contact they experienced and their relationship with each parent. All were tape-recorded, with the interviewee's consent. These tapes were fully transcribed and analysed thematically using a computer-assisted programme, NVivo.

Table 1.4 The interview sample

	Approached for interview		Interview achieved	
	No	%	No	%
<i>Questionnaire path</i>				
Shared residence	3	4	2	4
Continuous contact	38	48	23	46
Delayed	17	21	11	22
Sporadic	13	16	8	16
Ceased	9	11	6	12
<i>All</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>100</i>

Profile of the samples

Table 1.5 presents key background information about the research participants and compares the composition of the interview sub-sample with the survey sample. It can be seen that in both groups there were more female respondents than male, the majority were white, had parents who had previously been married and lived mainly with their mother after parental separation. The interview respondents were more likely than the main sample to be aged between 25 and 30 at interview, to be five or more at the time of the parental separation, and to be of social class C1 and above. Levels of parental conflict were also higher in the interview sample.

Across the whole sample, almost three-quarters of separations (285 of 398; 72%) occurred between 1986 and 2000. As noted earlier, it was our intention to exclude from the interview sample any respondent whose parents had separated before implementation of the Children Act 1989 in 2001, although erroneous recording of the respondent's age in the telephone survey meant that one of our interviewees did not meet this criterion. In the survey sample 61% of separations occurred after the Children Act. The interval since parental separation ranged from three to 32 years in the survey sample, with an average of 18.3 years and 71% occurring between 11 and 25 years previously. In the interview sample the mean interval was somewhat shorter (15.4 years) with the range being from six to 24 years and 86% of separations occurring between 11 and 25 years earlier.

Table 1.5 Profile of the samples

	Survey sample		Interview sample	
	No	%	No	%
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	167	42	22	44
Female	231	58	28	56
<i>Age at interview</i>				
18-24	188	47	20	40
25-30	164	41	29	58
31-35	46	12	1	2

*The mean age of the survey sample was 24.8 years; that of the interview sample 25.0

Table 1.5 (continued)

	Survey sample		Interview sample	
	No	%	No	%
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
White	351	88	43	86
Black	21	5	4	8
Asian/Chinese	13	3	1	2
Dual heritage	11	3	2	4
Other/No data	2	<1	0	0
<i>Social grade</i>				
A	5	1	0	0
B	45	11	13	26
C1	147	37	21	42
C2	88	22	5	10
D	72	18	7	14
E	41	10	4	8
<i>Region</i>				
North	38	10	1	2
Yorkshire/Humberside	48	12	5	10
East Midlands	31	8	5	10
East Anglia	20	5	4	8
South East	92	23	15	30
Greater London	59	15	8	16
South West	25	6	3	6
West Midlands	54	14	8	16
North West	31	8	1	2
<i>Parental status before separation</i>				
Married	320	80	44	88
Cohabiting	57	14	6	12
Neither	20	5	0	0
Not known	1	<1	0	0
<i>Respondent's age at parental separation</i>				
Less than 5	152	38	7	14
5-12	187	47	31	62
13+	58	15	12	24
No data	1	<1	0	0
<i>Interval since parental separation**</i>				
5 years or less	8	2	1	2
6-10 yrs	40	10	5	10
11-15 yrs	88	22	18	36
16-20	103	26	25	50
21-25	93	23	1	2
26-30	48	12	0	0
31-35	7	2	0	0
No data	11	3	0	0

Table 1.5 (continued)

	Survey sample		Interview sample	
	No	%	No	%
<i>Year parents separated</i>				
1976-1980	6	2	0	0
1981-1985	50	13	0	0
1986-1990	92	23	1	2
1991-1995	105	26	24	48
1996-2000	88	22	18	36
2001-2005	40	10	7	14
2006+	8	2	0	0
No data	9	2	0	0
<i>Level of parental conflict post-separation</i>				
None	121	30	13	26
Low	85	21	16	32
Moderate	39	10	3	6
High	47	12	12	24
Data not collected	106	27	6	12
<i>Residence arrangements</i>				
With same parent throughout	314	79	37	74
Primary care but residence changed	48	12	11	22
Mainly lived with one parent but some time in shared residence	11	3	1	2
Mainly lived with one parent but change of residence + period in shared residence	7	2	1	2
Shared residence throughout	3	<1	0	0
Mainly shared residence but period living with one parent	15	4	0	0
<i>Main residence arrangement</i>				
Lived with mother	346	87	39	78
Lived with father	34	9	9	18
Shared residence	18	5	2	4
<i>Contact pattern</i>				
Shared residence	18	5	2	4
Continuous contact	165	42	23	46
Delayed start then continued	48	12	11	22
Sporadic	61	15	8	16
Ceased in childhood	40	12	6	12
Never any contact	66	17	0	0
(N=)	(398)		(50)	

Structure of the report

Chapters 2 to 8 of the report present the findings from the telephone survey. Chapter 2 outlines the residence and contact patterns in the sample while chapter 3 looks at decision-making and chapter 4 covers post-separation parental relationships. The next two chapters look in detail at the contact arrangements in terms of quantum (chapter 5), then quality (chapter 6). The final two chapters in this section examine the relationship between the respondent and each of their parents over time. Chapter 7 deals with relationships in childhood, chapter 8 in adulthood. This section of the report concludes with a summary of the key findings from the telephone survey.

Material from the in-depth interviews is reported in chapters 9 to 15. Chapter 9 presents the context for the contact arrangements, including respondent's experience of parental separation. Chapters 10 and 11 focus on the contact arrangements and chapters 12 and 13 on children's agency. Chapter 14 examines the parent-child relationship over time. Chapter 15 is based on respondents' wider reflections on contact and on the issue of shared residence. Chapter 16 draws together the findings from the research and considers their implications.

Chapter 2 Residence and contact arrangements

Residence

Main living arrangements

At the start of the telephone interview respondents were asked: ‘from the point your parents separated until you were 18, or left home, did you a) mostly live with your mum, b) live with your dad, or c) live with each parent, dividing your time more or less equally between them?’

The vast majority (380 of 398; 95%) said they had lived mainly with one parent, typically (346; 87%) their mother (table 2.1). This pattern is broadly comparable with data on the general separated population in that the vast majority of resident parents are mothers (Mattesson and Babb, 2002; Peacey and Haux, 2007; Smallwood and Wilson, 2007), although it may slightly over-represent respondents in father residence. There was very little difference between male and female respondents in the pattern of residence.

Table 2.1 Main living arrangements post separation

	Gender of respondent					
	Male		Female		All	
<i>Main arrangement</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%
Lived with mother	144	86	202	88	346	87
Lived with father	15	9	19	8	34	9
Shared residence	9	5	9	4	18	5
(N=)	(168)		(230)		(398)	

Eighteen respondents to the telephone survey (5%) said they had split their time equally between their parents. A further 18 said that although they had largely lived with one parent they had spent some time in dual residence. The proportion was highest in the most recent separations, accounting for 28% of those whose parents had separated within the last 10 years (13 of 47) compared to 12% (22 of 191) where the separation had been between 11 and 20 years ago) and a mere 3% of longer separations (5 of 149). These figures, however, seem inherently unlikely. Recent data from *Understanding Society*, a nationally representative survey of households, indicates that even in 2009 equal time-sharing was very much a minority family form, reported by only around 3% of separated parents (Ermisch et al, 2011, cited in Fehlberg et al, 2011), and earlier research by Peacey and Hunt (2009) gives a figure of 9%.

We suspect, therefore, that at least some of our respondents may have misunderstood the question put to them, which was ‘Once your parents separated until you were 18 or left home, did you mostly a) live with your mum b) live with your dad, or c) live with each parent, dividing your time more or less equally between the two?’ Indeed there was some confirmation of this in our face to face interviews. One of those who had identified themselves as having mainly lived in shared residence, had not in fact done so, but had changed residence. However, because she had spent roughly the same period living with each parent, she had mistakenly, but understandably, classified the arrangements as shared residence. A second respondent had moved backwards and forwards between his parents as his behaviour became too much for either of them. While technically this could be described as shared residence, it is not what would normally be understood as such and certainly was not a planned arrangement.

There is no way of knowing whether any of the remaining 16 respondents who said shared residence had been their main arrangement, or the 18 others who said they had had some experience of this, had erroneously classified themselves. We did, therefore, consider whether it would be best to remove these cases from the data-base. However in view of the current interest in shared residence we decided this was not a viable option and that it would be best to retain these respondents in the sample but caution about reliance on the findings.

Of those who said they had mainly lived with a primary carer, mother residence was somewhat less common among those whose parents separated after implementation of the Children Act 1989 (205 of 231; 89%; compared to 139 of 147; 95%) and where the children were aged five and above at separation (202 of 228; 89%; compared to 143 of 151; 95%). However the differences were not statistically significant.

Continuity of residence

Research in the U.S. on young adults from separated families (Ahrons, 2004) reports high levels of instability in residence arrangements, with half the sample saying that they had changed the arrangements at least once, mainly moving from primary residence with mother to residence with father, often in adolescence. The majority of respondents in our research, however, (317; 80%) had the same residence arrangements throughout their childhood, with 314 living with the same parent throughout and three being continuously in shared residence (table 2.2). Only one in five reported more changeable arrangements, spending some time living with the other parent (12%) or having a period in shared residence (3%) and in some instances, (2%) both. Again, there was virtually no difference by gender.

Table 2.2 Continuity of residence arrangements by gender

	Gender of respondent					
	Male		Female			
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Same primary carer throughout	130	77	184	80	314	79
Shared residence throughout	2	1	1	<1	3	<1
Primary carer but spent some time with other parent	21	13	27	12	48	12
Mainly one primary carer but some time in shared residence	6	4	5	2	11	3
Mainly primary care but change of carer + some time in shared residence	2	1	5	2	7	2
Mainly shared residence but period with primary carer	7	4	8	4	15	4
(N=)	(168)		(230)		(398)	

Only three respondents said they had shared residence arrangements throughout their post-separation childhood. Of the remaining 15 who said this had been their main arrangement, seven said they had begun in shared residence, after which they lived with one parent as the primary carer, five reported the reverse and three said that it had both preceded and been followed by primary care. Most (13) started shared residence before the age of 13. Although all but one of them continued into adolescence, only two continued with the arrangements up to the point they reached 18. Four of the five who started shared residence as teenagers remained there throughout. On average, shared residence lasted for 5.4 years, but the range was wide – from one year to 14 (table 2.3).

Table 2.3 Duration of shared residence

<i>Shared residence pattern</i>	Duration (yrs)		(N=)
	Range	Mean	
Continuous throughout childhood	4-14	8.3	(3)
First arrangement followed by primary care	2-6	4.4	(7)
Preceded by primary care	1-8	4.4	(5)
Preceded & followed by primary care	3-7	6.3	(3)
<i>All shared residence cases</i>	<i>1-14</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>(18)</i>

Satisfaction with residence arrangements

Those who had mainly lived with a primary carer were asked whether they would have preferred to live with the other parent or to divide their time more or less equally between their parents. As table 2.4 shows, over three-quarters (279 of 362; 77%) indicated they were happy with the arrangements they had. Nineteen per cent said they would have preferred shared residence and 4% to live with the other parent. It was notable that those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout were least likely to say they would have liked a change (17%) compared to half of those who had changed residence or experienced shared residence (31 of 61).

Table 2.4 Whether wanted different residence arrangements by residence pattern*

	Preferred residence arrangements						
	Live with other parent		Shared residence		No change		(N=)
<i>Residence arrangements</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Same primary carer throughout	9	3	43	14	249	83	(301)
Primary care but some time with other parent	6	13	13	29	26	58	(45)
Mainly primary care + some time in shared residence	0	0	5	56	4	44	(9)
Change of primary carer + time in shared residence	1	14	6	86	0	0	(7)
<i>Total</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>67</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>279</i>	<i>77</i>	<i>(362)</i>

*Excludes those who said their main arrangement was shared residence

Analysis indicates that, where respondents were able to remember the relationship they had had with each parent before the separation (as discussed in chapter 7, not all respondents could remember this), there was a statistically significant association between the desire for change and their reported closeness to each parent. Thus, 43% of those who said they had been equally close to both parents prior to the separation (29 of 68) said they would have liked either to have dual residence (37%) or to live with the other parent (6%) as did 33% of those who said they had been closer to the non-resident parent, most of whom would have preferred to live with that parent. In comparison, only 12% of those who had felt closest to the resident parent wanted any change, with all of those who did opting for dual residence (table 2.5).

Table 2.5 Desire to change residence arrangements by comparative closeness to each parent pre-separation*

	Preferred residence arrangements						
	Live with other parent		Shared residence		No change		(N=)
<i>Closeness pre separation</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Equally close	4	6	25	37	39	57	(68)
Closer to NRP	5	28	1	6	12	67	(18)
Closer to RP	0	0	8	12	57	88	(65)

*Statistically significant <.001

Male respondents were slightly more likely than females to say they would have preferred different residence arrangements (38 of 151; 25% compared to 45 of 211; 21%; (table 2.6). Overall, those who mainly lived with their mothers were less likely to want a change in their residence arrangements than those who had lived with their fathers (74 of 330; 22%, compared to 9 of 32; 28%). Of those living with fathers the proportion of males and females wanting a change were very similar (29% and 28%) and the difference was only slightly greater for those in mother residence (25% males, 21% females). None of these differences were statistically significant.

Table 2.6 Whether wanted different residence arrangements by gender

	Preferred residence arrangements						
	Live with other parent		Shared residence		No change		(N=)
Gender	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Male							
Mainly lived with mother	7	5	27	20	103	75	(137)
Mainly lived with father	2	14	2	14	10	71	(14)
All males	9	6	29	19	113	75	(151)
Female							
Mainly lived with mother	7	4	33	17	153	79	(193)
Mainly lived with father	0	0	5	28	13	72	(18)
All females	7	3	38	18	166	79	(211)
Total	16	4	67	24	279	77	(362)

Most of the respondents who said their main arrangement had been shared residence (14 of 15 answering the question), said they had been reasonably happy with the arrangement, with only one saying they would rather not have been in shared residence at all. A contributory factor in this is likely to have been the fact that, as we report in chapter 3, half said that they had either been mainly responsible for the arrangement starting (4) or that the decision had been taken by 'everyone'. Moreover, of the rest, only two said they did not feel their parents had taken sufficient notice of their views about the details of the arrangements. Respondents' level of control over the arrangements is also indicated by the fact that of the 10 instances where shared residence ended before adulthood, nine respondents said this had been their decision.

Contact

Patterns of contact

As Dunn points out (Dunn et al, 2004), contact can vary along several dimensions such as frequency, regularity, continuity and nature (i.e. face to face or by telephone, email or letter). This study focused only on face to face contact, which has been found to be highly correlated with other forms of contact (Dunn et al, 2004). In order to capture the continuity dimension, respondents who did not define their main residence arrangement as dividing their time equally between their parents were asked what face to face contact, if any, they had had with their non-resident parent. As explained in chapter 1, the choices were:

- I had contact with the parent I did not live with the whole time (for brevity, we shall call this *continuous contact*)
- There were one or more breaks in contact but it always restarted (*sporadic contact*)
- I used to have contact but then it stopped completely (*ceased contact*)
- I did not see the parent I did not live with for six months or more after separation but then contact started and continued (*delayed contact*)
- I never had any contact with the parent I did not live with (*never any contact*)

The sample is thus made up of six groups, defined according to their main living arrangement after separation and the contact they had with the parent they did not live with (table 2.7). The largest single group (42%) consists of those who lived with a primary carer but had unbroken contact with the other parent, the smallest those who mainly lived in shared residence arrangements (5%). These two groups might be termed *sustained contact*. Just over a quarter of the sample (109, 27%) experienced some interruption to contact either because there was a delay in contact starting (12%) or because once it started there were one or more breaks (15%) but they were still seeing both their parents at the point they reached adulthood (*interrupted contact*). Almost the same number (106; 27%) either never had any contact (17%) or contact started but then stopped (10%). The respective proportions in these last two groups is similar to that found in a cross-sectional survey of separated parents (Peacey and Hunt, 2009) in which 69% of resident parents who said there was currently no contact said that there had never been contact.

Table 2.7 Contact patterns

	No	%
<i>Sustained contact</i>		
Continuous contact	165	42
Shared residence	18	5
<i>Interrupted contact</i>		
Contact delayed but then continued	48	12
Contact sporadic	61	15
Contact ceased	40	10
Never any contact	66	17
(N=)	(398)	

Ceased contact

Only a quarter of those who said contact had ceased in their childhood (10 of 39; 26%) said this had happened within two years of separation. Indeed 41% said contact had gone on for

more than five years (table 2.8). The average age of the group at separation was 6.8 years; the average age when contact stopped was 11.4. Typically, however, contact had not been continuous up to that point, with two-thirds of those who could recall (24 of 36; 67%) saying there had been previous breaks.

Table 2.8 Duration of contact before it ceased

Years	No	%
<1	7	18
1-2	3	8
3-5	13	33
6-10	10	26
11+	6	15
(N=)	(39)	

Table 2.9 Age parents separated by age contact ceased

	Age contact ceased						
	Less than 5 years		5-12		More than 12		(N=)
<i>Age at separation</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Less than 5 years	3	18	6	35	8	47	(17)
5-12	0	0	11	58	8	42	(19)
13+	0	0	0	0	4	100	(4)

Views about lack of contact

Research with children in separated families generally indicates that most want contact with the non-resident parent (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001) and that the loss of contact is painful, leaving a sense of longing that can persist for years (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Walczak and Burns, 1984).

Respondents to our telephone survey who had never had any contact and those whose contact had ceased, were therefore asked what they had felt about this as children and whether as adults they had any regrets. As can be seen from table 2.10, only a minority indicated this had been a great concern for them at either point. Just 21% of those who had never had any contact and a mere 10% of those whose contact had ceased said that they had been ‘very unhappy’ about the lack of contact in childhood, while 18% in each group said that, as adults, they had regretted it ‘a great deal’. Indeed only 25% said indicated that it was a major issue either as children or adults. Nonetheless only half said that it had not been an issue at all for them at either point.

Moreover, when asked, towards the end of the interview, what they would do differently from their parents if they were ever to be a separated parent, 57% of those who had never had any contact as children, and 54% of those whose contact had ceased, said that if they were to be a separated parent they would ensure that their child had contact/more contact. This group included 31 respondents who said that the loss of contact had not been an issue for *them*. This suggests that even if contact had not been vital to them, or they had learned to deal with the loss of contact, keeping both parents involved in the child’s life after separation was seen as important. Overall, 80% of those who had not had any contact or whose contact had ceased either indicated unhappiness as children, regret as adults or determination, if they were to be a separated parent, to ensure their children remained in touch with both parents.

Table 2.10 Feelings about loss of contact

	Ceased contact		Never any contact		Either	
<i>Feelings in childhood</i>	No	%	%	No	No	%
Very unhappy	4	10	13	21	17	17
Fairly unhappy	9	23	7	11	16	16
Not particularly bothered	23	59	37	59	60	59
Quite happy	2	51	3	5	5	5
Very happy	3	8	3	5	6	6
(N=)	(39)		(63)		(102)	
<i>Regrets as adult</i>						
A great deal	7	18	12	18	19	18
A bit	10	25	15	23	25	24
Not at all	23	58	39	59	62	58
(N=)	(40)		(66)		(106)	
<i>Either</i>						
Very unhappy as child or great regret as adult	9	23	17	26	26	25
Fairly unhappy as child or some regret as adult	14	35	13	20	27	26
None of these	17	35	36	55	53	50
(N=)	(40)		(66)		(106)	

Delayed contact

Our definition of delayed contact was contact not starting for at least six months after parental separation. We chose this interval because research with children (Butler et al, 2003) indicates that there is often a brief hiatus in getting contact established either because of practical or emotional difficulties. As can be seen from table 2.11, typically the interval was much longer than six months, exceeding one year in 73% of cases and in 46% two. The average age at separation in this group was 7.2 years, the average age contact started was 10.9.

Table 2.11 Duration of delay in starting contact

Years	No	%
<1	12	27
1-2	12	27
3-5	9	21
6-10	8	18
11+	3	7
(N=)	(44)	

Table 2.12 Age parents separated by age delayed contact started

	Age contact started						
	Less than 5 years		5-12		More than 12		(N=)
<i>Age at separation</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Less than 5 years	10	48	8	38	3	14	21
5-12	0	0	13	62	8	38	21
13+	0	0	0	0	5	100	5

Sporadic contact

Those who said there had been breaks in contact, although it never completely stopped, were asked some further questions about this. Two-fifths of those answering the question (23 of 58; 40%) said they had regular contact interrupted by one or more periods without contact. The majority, however, had a much more episodic experience, with contact either being very occasional and unpredictable (13; 22%) or irregular with gaps (22; 38%). It was unusual, moreover, for there to be only one break in contact (three cases). Even among those who said that when contact was happening it had been regular, half (11) said there had been more than three periods when there had been no contact.

Changing patterns since the Children Act 1989

As noted in chapter 1, the year in which the parental separations in our sample occurred ranged from 1976 to 2006. They thus spanned implementation of the Children Act 1989, which substantially changed the law relating to post-separation arrangements for children. Of particular relevance to this research is the introduction of the concept of on-going parental responsibility after separation and the replacement of ‘custody’ with ‘residence’ and ‘access’ with ‘contact’. In an article entitled ‘Joint parenting systems: the English experiment’, Brenda Hoggett (now Baroness Hale of Richmond) emphasised that a core objective of the Act was to encourage joint parenting after divorce. One of the Act’s main architects, she stressed the importance of the new concept of parental responsibility as a means of recognising that both parents ‘have equal status as parents and can both be fully involved in looking after the child while he is with them’. The legislation was intended to reflect the fact that bringing up children ‘is a never ending responsibility’ (Hoggett, 1994:9). Its whole ethos was to keep fathers involved with their children (Smart and Neale, 1999:38). Hence, although it was not the main focus of the study, we were interested to explore any differences in the patterns of contact between those whose parents had separated before and after implementation of the Act in 1991.

The telephone survey provided some evidence of change. Thus, of those with primary care arrangements, while 26% of respondents whose parents had separated before the Children Act (38 of 147) said that they had *never* had any contact with their non-resident parent, only 12% of those with post-Act separations said this (28 of 203, a statistically significant difference, $p=.000$). Overall, 34% of those whose parents separated pre-Act said either that there had never been any contact or that it had ceased (51 of 149) compared to 22% of post-Act separations (55 of 247). This tends to support the picture from cross-sectional research that the proportion of children having no contact has reduced over time (Hunt, 2003).

Of those in primary residence who had some contact, the proportion who had uninterrupted contact was lower in the pre-Act separations (53 of 109; 49%, compared to 111 of 203; 55%), although this was not statistically significant. Interestingly, where contact was disrupted in some way, it appears that contact was less likely to be *delayed* post-Act (26 of 92; 28% compared to 21 of 56; 38%) but more likely to *cease* (27, 29% compared to 13, 23%), which might, conceivably, suggest that more parents are trying to establish contact in the immediate post-separation period but then running into difficulties. Interestingly, there was little difference in the proportion reporting sporadic contact (22, 39% pre-Act; 39, 42%, post-Act).

Factors associated with the pattern of contact

Previous research has identified a wide range of factors associated with whether or not contact is established and maintained after parental separation (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Hunt, 2003; Peacey and Haux, 2007; Whiteside and Becker, 2000). Since this was not the

focus of this research it was not feasible to attempt to explore all of them in a brief telephone interview. However analysis of the data we did collect indicates that the pattern of contact reported had a statistically significant association with three *pre-separation* factors a) the relationship status of the parents prior to separation; b) the age of the respondent at the point that separation occurred; and c) the closeness of the relationship between the child and the future non-resident parent – or, in the case of shared residence, the father.

As tables 2.13 and 2.14 show, those who never had any contact were most likely to have had parents who had never lived together (18%) and whose relationship had ended when the child was under five (67%), findings which chime with previous research (Cooksey and Craig, 1998; Maclean and Eekelaar, 1997; Peacey and Haux, 2007). In sharp contrast, all those in shared residence had parents who had lived together - and typically were married - and only 6% split up before the child was five². The age of the child at separation remained significant even when account is taken of the parents' previous relationship status (table 2.14)

Table 2.13 Contact pattern by parental relationship status prior to separation

	Married		Cohabiting		Never lived together		(N=)
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Shared residence	16	89	2	11	0	0	(18)
Continuous contact	140	85	22	13	3	2	(165)
Delayed contact	38	79	8	17	2	4	(48)
Sporadic contact	50	82	9	15	2	3	(61)
Ceased contact	31	80	7	18	1	3	(39)
Never any contact	45	68	9	14	12	18	(66)
<i>All</i>	320	81	57	14	20	5	(397)

*Statistically significant $p=.001$

Table 2.14 Contact pattern by age of respondent at separation

	Age of child at separation						(N=)
	Less than 5 years		5-12		More than 12		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Shared residence	1	6	12	67	5	28	(18)
Continuous contact	44	27	88	53	33	20	(165)
Delayed contact	21	45	21	45	5	11	(48)
Sporadic contact	25	41	32	53	4	7	(61)
Ceased contact	17	43	19	48	4	10	(39)
Never any contact	44	67	16	24	6	9	(66)
<i>All</i>	152	38	187	47	58	15	(397)

*Statistically significant $p=.000$ The mean age at separation for each group was as follows: shared residence, 10.7 years; continuous contact 8.7; delayed 7.2; sporadic, 6.8; ceased 6.8, never any contact 5.1.

² The mean age at separation for each group was as follows: shared residence, 10.7 years; continuous contact 8.7; delayed 7.2; sporadic, 6.8; ceased 6.8, never any contact 5.1.

Table 2.15 Contact pattern by age of respondent at separation (respondents born to married parents only)

	Age of child at separation						
	Less than 5 years		5-12		More than 12		(N=)
Contact pattern	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Shared residence	1	6	10	63	5	31	(16)
Continuous contact	33	24	78	56	29	21	(140)
Delayed contact	14	37	19	50	5	13	(38)
Sporadic contact	17	34	29	58	4	8	(50)
Ceased contact	11	36	17	55	3	10	(31)
Never any contact	23	51	16	36	6	13	(45)
All	99	31	169	53	52	16	(320)

*Statistically significant $p=.01$ The mean age at separation for each group was as follows: shared residence, 10.9 years; continuous contact 9.0; delayed 8; sporadic, 6.8; ceased 7.3, never any contact 6.7

One factor which emerged from the analysis as potentially important, which does not appear to have been received much attention in previous quantitative research, although highlighted in a qualitative study by Butler and colleagues (2003), was the closeness of the pre-separation relationship between the respondent and the non-resident parent – a topic addressed in detail in chapter 7. Excluding those who said they were too young to remember what the relationship had been like, those who had continuous contact were more likely to say the pre-separation relationship had been very close than those whose contact had been disrupted and less likely to say they had not been very close or not at all close (table 2.16). Those who said their main arrangement had been shared residence (who were asked about the pre-separation relationship with their dad) were much the most likely to describe it as very close. The association remained statistically significant when only those whose parents had been previously married were considered (table 2.17).

Table 2.16 Contact pattern by closeness of pre-separation relationship with NRP/father*

	Closeness of pre-separation relationship				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Contact pattern**</i>	%	%	%	%	
Shared residence	65	24	12	0	(17)
Continuous contact	48	39	12	2	(109)
Delayed contact	36	36	21	7	(28)
Sporadic contact	25	38	25	13	(32)
Ceased contact	35	44	17	4	(23)
Never any contact	24	48	20	8	(25)
<i>All</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>(234)</i>

*Excluding those too young to remember the relationship

**There was a statistically significant association between the contact pattern and whether or not the relationship was very close $p<.05$

Table 2.17 Contact pattern by closeness of pre-separation relationship with NRP/father (children of previously married parents only)*

	Closeness of pre-separation relationship				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Contact pattern**</i>	%	%	%	%	
Shared residence	67	20	13	0	(15)
Continuous contact	47	39	12	2	(97)
Delayed contact	36	36	20	8	(25)
Sporadic contact	24	41	24	10	(29)
Ceased contact	44	38	11	6	(18)
Never any contact	24	52	19	5	(21)
<i>All</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>(205)</i>

*Excluding those too young to remember the relationship and those whose parents were not previously married

**There was a statistically significant association between the contact pattern and whether or not the relationship was very close $p < .05$

The post-separation relationship between the parents, research has generally found, is a crucial factor in whether contact takes place at all, or is sustained (Ahrons and Miller, 1993; Arditti and Bickley, 1996; Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Bradshaw et al, 1995; Dunn, 2003; Funder et al, 1993; Gibson, 1992; Gorrell-Barnes et al, 1998; Koch and Lowery, 1985; Lund, 1987; Peacey and Haux, 2007; Smyth et al, 2001; Simpson et al, 1995). In this study, data on this was not collected where there had never been any contact or it had ceased. For the remainder, however, it was found that the level of conflict between the parents was related to the continuity of contact. As we explain in detail in chapter 4, respondents who had some contact up to the point they reached 18 were asked a series of questions aimed at establishing the level of conflict in their parents' relationship. Those who had had continuous contact since separation were most likely to report little or no conflict (141 of 165; 85%) and least likely to report high conflict (7%) (table 2.18). In contrast, those with delayed contact were most likely to report high conflict (35%) and least likely to report relatively harmonious relationships.

Table 2.18 Contact pattern by level of parental conflict post-separation

	No conflict		Low		Moderate		High		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Contact pattern</i>									
Shared residence	8	44	4	22	4	22	2	11	(18)
Continuous contact	85	52	56	34	12	7	12	7	(165)
Delayed contact	12	25	11	23	8	17	17	35	(48)
Sporadic contact	16	26	14	23	15	25	16	26	(61)

*Statistically significant $p = .000$

The extent to which the resident parent was said to have encouraged the child's relationship with the other parent (a topic covered in detail in chapter 4) was also linked with the continuity of contact. As can be seen from table 2.19, where contact was continuous, 68% of resident parents were said to have encouraged the relationship 'a lot'. This fell to 42% where contact had been sporadic and 17% where it was delayed. Similarly, looking at it the other way round, (table 2.20), of those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship 'a lot', 72% had continuous contact, compared to only 51% of those whose resident parent had only encouraged the relationship 'a bit', 39% where they had not done so at all, and 25% where they had actively tried to undermine it.

Table 2.19 Resident parent's encouragement of relationship by contact pattern*

	Encouragement of relationship with NRP**								
	A lot		A bit		Not at all		Tried to undermine		(N=)
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Continuous	110	68	38	24	9	6	5	3	(162)
Sporadic	25	42	22	37	7	12	6	10	(60)
Delayed	17	35	15	31	7	15	9	19	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>152</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>75</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>(270)</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact or it ceased in childhood, and those whose main arrangement was shared residence

**Statistically significant $p=.000$

Table 2.20 Resident parent's encouragement of relationship by continuity of contact*

	Continuous		Delayed		Sporadic		(N=)
<i>Encouraged relationship**</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
A lot	110	72	17	11	25	16	(152)
A bit	38	51	15	20	22	29	(75)
Not at all	9	39	7	30	7	30	(23)
Tried to undermine	5	25	9	45	6	30	(20)
<i>All</i>	<i>162</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>(270)</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact or it ceased in childhood and those whose main arrangement was shared residence

**Statistically significant $p=.000$

This link, of course, does not necessarily mean that the pattern of contact was a result of the resident parent's attitude; it could equally be the case that where the non-resident parent was not maintaining contact the resident parent was less inclined to promote the relationship or the child was reluctant for it to continue. It is also important to note that (as reported in chapter 4) resident parents were more likely to be described as supporting the child's relationship with the non-resident parent 'a lot' where, pre-separation, the relationship had been very or fairly close.

Table 2.21 Continuity of contact by RP concerns over care of child or domestic violence *

	Concerns		
<i>Pattern of contact</i>	No	%	(N=)
Continuous	21	13	(163)
Sporadic	32	53	(60)
Delayed	20	43	(47)
<i>All</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>(270)</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact or it ceased in childhood, and those whose main arrangement was shared residence

**Statistically significant $p=.000$

The continuity of contact was also associated with whether or not the resident parent was said to have had serious concerns about the non-resident parent's capacity to care for the child or whether there had been domestic violence or fear of violence (a topic addressed in chapter 4). Although some of those with continuous contact also reported such concerns the proportion was quite low (13%). However it rose to 43% of those whose contact had been delayed and 53% of those with sporadic contact (table 2.21). Again, (as reported in chapter 4) the absence

of such concerns was linked to the extent to which the resident parent supported the child's relationship with the non-resident parent.

The gender of either the contact parent or the respondent, however, did not prove to be significant, although it was noticeable that young women were more likely than young men to be in the never any contact group (41 of 202; 21% compared to 19 of 144; 13%) and that it was more unusual for contact to start and then cease with non-resident mothers than fathers (1 of 34; 3% compared to 39 of 346; 11%, table 2.22). This finding echoes the rather scant amount of research which has examined gender-based differences in contact (Funder, 1993; Furstenberg et al, 1983; Peacey and Haux, 2007; Zill, 1988).

Table 2.22 Contact pattern by gender

	Continuous	Delayed	Sporadic	Ceased	Never any contact	
<i>Contact parent</i>	%	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Father	43	12	16	11	17	(346)
Mother	47	15	18	3	18	(34)
<i>Gender of respondent</i>						
Male	47	10	17	14	13	(159)
Female	41	15	15	8	21	(221)

Summary

Most research on post-separation arrangements for children is cross-sectional and therefore only shows the pattern of residence and contact at one particular time. The advantage of interviewing young adults is that they were able to look back over their childhoods and tell us about continuity and change.

Their accounts showed a great deal of continuity in terms of *residence*. Most respondents (79%) had their main home with one parent, typically their mother, throughout their childhood. Twelve per cent, however, had moved to the other parent, while a few had spent a period dividing their time between their parents and/or changing their main residence. Only three respondents remained throughout in shared residence, although a further 15 said this had been their main arrangement and an additional 18 said they had had some experience of this. It is important to point out, however, that we are not at all confident in the accuracy of the data on shared residence and suspect that some respondents may have misinterpreted the question.

There was far more change in the pattern of *contact*. While the majority of respondents (83%) had some contact with the non-resident parent (or their main arrangement was shared residence), only 42% had uninterrupted contact throughout their childhood. In 12% of cases contact was not established for at least six months after separation – and typically for much longer than this. In a further 15% there was at least one break in contact, while in 10% of cases it ceased altogether.

In addition to changes experienced by individual respondents, we were also able to look at change over time in the patterns of contact and residence. This suggested a slight shift away from traditional, mother residence arrangements, with more respondents whose parents separated after implementation of the Children Act 1989 reporting that their main living arrangement was father residence or dual residence. In terms of contact, far fewer

respondents whose parents separated after the Act said that they had never had any contact (12% compared to 26%) and fewer said that contact had been delayed (28% compared to 38%). This suggests that, post-Act, more parents were trying to establish contact in the immediate post-separation period. On the other hand, slightly more respondents whose parents separated post-Act said that there had been breaks in their contact (42% compared to 39%) and more said that contact had ceased altogether (29% compared to 23%). This may suggest that although more parents were embracing the legislation's objective of keeping both parents involved after separation, the reality continued to present difficulties for one or more of the parties. Overall, however, more respondents in post-Act separations reported the sustained involvement of both parents, with 51% reporting either continuous contact or shared residence, compared to 37% of those whose parents separated earlier. While this may reflect the impact of legislation, it is, of course, just as likely to be the effect of social change, to which the Children Act was a response.

Given the limitations of a brief telephone interview, it was impossible to try to explore all the factors which other studies have suggested affect whether contact is established and maintained. This study did, however, confirm the findings of previous research that the age of the child at separation and the previous marital status of the parents are relevant. Respondents who said they had never had contact with the non-resident parent were most likely to have parents who had never lived together and whose relationship had ended before the child was five years old. In striking contrast, all those who said their main arrangement was shared residence had parents who had lived together, most of whom had been married, and only 6% split up before the child was five. Both these factors make it more likely that the child will have an established relationship with both parents prior to the separation.

The research also highlights the importance of the closeness of the pre-separation relationship, a factor rarely examined in previous quantitative research. Of those who could remember what the relationship had been like, those with continuous contact were more likely to say the relationship had been very close than those whose contact had been disrupted or who had never had any contact.

The study provides further confirmation of the findings of previous research on the importance of the post-separation parental relationship to the maintenance of contact. Where contact was continuous, 85% of respondents indicated that there had been little or no conflict between their parents and only 7% had been highly conflicted. In contrast, the parents of 35% of those whose contact had been delayed had been highly conflicted and only 11% were in the low, or no conflict categories. It also highlights the relevance of the resident parent's concerns about their ex-partner's capacity to care for the child and whether there had been domestic violence or fear of violence. While among those whose contact had been continuous there were a few examples of such concerns (13%) they were far more prevalent in cases where contact had been either delayed (43%) or sporadic (53%). Finally, it shows the importance of the resident parent's support for the relationship between child and non-resident parent: of those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship 'a lot' 72% had continuous contact, compared to only 51% of those whose resident parent had only encouraged the relationship 'a bit', 39% where they had not done so at all, and 25% where they had actively tried to undermine it.

Chapter 3 Responsibility for making decisions about contact

As outlined in the previous chapter, 46% of the respondents to the telephone survey either had unbroken contact with the non-resident parent, or, in the case of those whose main arrangement was shared residence, with both parents. All the rest either never had any contact or their contact was delayed, sporadic or ceased before they turned 18. Since the most important decisions about contact are likely to be whether it occurs at all, or is maintained, we start this chapter by looking at decision-making in cases where contact was not continuous.

Responsibility for contact not being continuous

The 202 respondents in this group were asked who they thought had been mainly or solely responsible for contact not happening at all, for it being delayed, sporadic, or ceasing before they reached 18. Five choices were offered: the resident parent, the non-resident parent, both parents equally, the respondent or the respondent and the resident parent.

Table 3.1 Person considered mainly or solely responsible for no contact or disrupted contact

	No contact	Ceased contact	Delayed contact	Sporadic contact	Total	
	%	%	%	%	No	%
Resident parent	15	0	12	5	17	8
Non-resident parent	66	53	65	63	126	62
Both parents equally	10	15	7	18	26	13
Child	7	33	14	13	31	15
Child & resident parent	2	0	2	0	4	2
(N=)	(59)	(40)	(43)	(60)	(202)	100

As table 3.1 shows, it was unusual for respondents to attribute responsibility to both their parents. By far the most common response was to say that the non-resident parent had been mainly or solely responsible, selected by 62% of all those answering the question, ranging from 53% where contact had started but ceased, to 66% where there had never been any contact. Overall, respondents whose parents had separated prior to implementation of the Children Act were less likely to attribute responsibility to the non-resident parent (64 of 1123; 57%; compared to 61 of 89; 69%), this being largely accounted for by an increase in the proportion saying they had been mainly responsible. However it remained the most common response.

In terms of gender, non-resident fathers were more likely to be held responsible than non-resident mothers (110 of 186; 64%, compared to 7 of 16; 44%). Young men living with their mothers were less likely than young women to blame their father (53% compared to 71%) while those living with their fathers were more likely than young women to blame their mothers.

Fifteen per cent of respondents (31) considered that they themselves had been mainly or solely responsible, ranging from only 7% (4) where there had never been any contact to 33% (13) where it had started but ceased. There was no difference by gender. As noted above, the proportion was higher where the separation occurred after implementation of the Children Act, 1989, 8% compared to 21%.

The proportion citing the resident parent, however, 8% overall (17), actually dropped in the more recent separations: 10% before the Act, 7% afterwards). No-one said the resident parent had been responsible for contact ceasing, although 15% (9) said they were responsible for it never starting. Of those in maternal residence young men were more likely than young women to blame their mother (4 of 73, 5%; compared to 10 of 112, 9%) while, of the few in paternal residence, young women were marginally more likely to blame their fathers (2 of 10, 20%; 1 of 6, 17%).

Non-resident parent responsible for contact not being continuous

With the exception of cases where contact had been delayed³, respondents holding the non-resident parent responsible for contact not being sustained were presented with a list of possible reasons why a non-resident parent might not maintain contact and asked to select those which reflected their understanding as children. Later in the interview they were presented with the same list and asked to select those which reflected their understanding as adults.

Table 3.2 NRP deemed responsible for no contact, ceased and sporadic contact: understanding of reasons in childhood*

	Type of disrupted contact				
	Never	Ceased	Sporadic	All	
<i>Reason</i>	%	%	%	No	%
Not sufficiently interested in me	77	52	24	46	52
Did not want to pay to support me	46	67	33	41	46
His/her new partner would have made things too difficult	31	62	33	35	39
Too difficult because of work/distance/accommodation	31	14	48	30	34
Thought it was best for me	23	10	15	15	17
Thought it was what I wanted	9	10	9	8	9
Wd have been too upsetting for him/her	3	10	9	6	7
RP would have made things too difficult	0	10	6	4	5
Did not know I existed	3	0	0	1	1
(N=)	(35)	(21)	(33)	(89)	

*Data not available for delayed contact cases

Four reasons dominated the responses in relation both to childhood and adult understandings, although the order varied between the different types of disrupted contact (tables 3. 2 and 3.3):

- The non-resident parent was not sufficiently interested in the respondent (52% of all responses in childhood, 48% in adulthood). This was the most common reason cited at both time points for respondents who had never had any contact (77% and 67%).
- Reluctance to pay to maintain the child (46% in childhood, 43% in adulthood). Most commonly cited by respondents whose contact had ceased (67% as child and adult).

³ This was because of constraints on the number of questions it was possible to ask in the interview.

77% of respondents gave one of these two reasons in childhood, ranging from 64% of those whose contact had been sporadic to 83% of those who had never had any contact and 95% where contact had ceased. As adults 70% did so (50% where contact had been sporadic, 74% where there had never been any contact and all those whose contact had ceased).

- c. Difficulties occasioned by the non-resident parent's new partner (39% in childhood, 34% in adulthood). This was not the most common reason in any group, but second in both the ceased and sporadic groups.
- d. Logistical difficulties because of the non-resident parent's work, distance or accommodation (34% in childhood, 24% in adulthood). This was by far the most frequent reason cited by those with sporadic contact (48% as child, 34% as adult).

Only a minority of respondents (27% as children; 28% as adults) thought the non-resident parent's reasons had been child-centred, ie either they thought it was best for the child or that it was what the child wanted. The proportions giving either of these reasons as children was very similar among the three groups (24% ceased contact; 27% sporadic; 29% never any contact) although the differences were larger in terms of adult understandings (20% ceased; 26% sporadic; 33% never any contact).

Table 3.3 NRP deemed responsible for no contact, ceased and sporadic contact: understanding of reasons in adulthood*

	Type of disrupted contact				
	Never	Ceased	Sporadic	All	
<i>Reason</i>	%	%	%	No	%
Not sufficiently interested in me	67	57	24	47	48
Did not want to pay to support me	44	67	29	42	43
His/her new partner would have made things too difficult	26	57	29	33	34
Too difficult because of work/distance/accommodation	18	14	34	23	24
Thought it was best for me	18	10	18	16	16
Thought it was what I wanted	18	5	8	11	11
Wd have been too upsetting for him/her	13	5	5	8	8
RP would have made things too difficult	3	0	5	3	3
Did not know I existed	0	0	0	0	0
(N=)	(39)	(20)	(38)	(97)	

*Data not available on delayed contact cases

Although the similarities between tables 3.2 and 3.3 suggest that respondents' interpretation of events had changed very little over time, comparison of individual responses shows that the explanations selected by 40% of respondents were different, with 18% selecting options which indicated a more positive, or at least less negative picture of the non-resident parent's behaviour and an almost identical proportion changing in the opposite direction (table 3.4).

Table 3.4 NRP mainly/solely responsible for discontinuous contact: change in understanding over time

	Type of disrupted contact				
	No contact	Ceased	Sporadic	All	
<i>Change in understanding</i>	%	%	%	No	%
Yes, became more positive/less negative	20	15	18	15	18
Yes, became more negative/less positive	10	40	9	14	17
Yes, mixed response	3	10	3	4	5
No, no change	67	35	70	50	60
(N=)	(30)	(20)	(33)	(83)	

*Data not available on delayed contact cases

Respondents whose contact had ceased were most likely both to give different explanations (65%) and to give more negative interpretations as adults. The other two groups were very similar both in the proportion changing their views and in the direction of change. Somewhat surprisingly, those who had had some contact with the non-resident parent in adulthood although they had either had no contact in childhood or had had some contact which then ceased, were somewhat less, rather than more likely to change their evaluations than those who had not (9 of 20; 45%, compared to 20 of 35; 57%). (Five became more positive, four more negative). Young men were more likely than young women to change their views (52% compared to 43%) and those who did so were more likely to think more positively/less negatively in adulthood (6 of 11, 54% compared to 8 of 18; 44%). These differences remained if we compare only those living with their mothers.

Respondents were also asked about the source of their childhood understanding about the reasons for the non-resident parent's perceived reluctance to keep in touch. Two of the groups – those whose contact had ceased or had been sporadic – most commonly cited themselves (43% and 53%), while those who had never had any contact, somewhat oddly, cited the non-resident parent first, then themselves. It is unclear whether this indicated there had been some communication with the non-resident parent or whether it meant simply that the respondent was making a judgment on the fact that there had been no contact. What was notable, however, was how few people cited the resident parent, ranging from only 8% of those whose contact had been sporadic, to 22% where there had never been any contact.

Table 3.5 Where did ideas in childhood about NRP's reasons come from?

	No contact	Ceased	Sporadic	All	
	%	%	%	No	%
<i>Source</i>					
Resident parent	22	14	8	14	15
Non-resident parent	39	33	31	32	34
Own ideas	33	43	53	40	43
Other people	6	10	8	7	8
(N=)	(36)	(21)	(36)	(93)	

*Data not available on delayed contact cases

Respondent responsible for disrupted contact

The 31 respondents who said they had been mainly or solely responsible for contact not being established or being discontinuous were typically older children at the point they first made the decision, 80% (24 of 30) being aged at least 10 and 53% being teenagers (table 3.6).

Table 3.6 Age at which respondent first made the decision not to have contact

	Type of disrupted contact					
	No contact	Ceased contact	Delayed* contact	Sporadic contact**	Total	
<i>Age (years)</i>	No	No	No	No	No	%
<5	1	0	1	0	2	7
5-9	0	2	1	1	4	13
10-12	2	3	2	1	8	27
13+	1	8	2	5	16	53
(N=)	(4)	(13)	(6)	(7)	(30)	

*Respondents in this group were not specifically asked how old they were when they made this decision, the age given relates to their age at parental separation.

** Missing data one case

Only a third (10 of 31) said they now regretted their attitude, the proportion ranging from none of the four who never had any contact and less than a quarter of those whose contact had ceased, to half in both the delayed and sporadic contact groups (table 3.7). Given that in both these latter two groups, although contact was not continuous, it was maintained until the respondent reached 18, this higher proportion is understandable. What is perhaps more surprising is that half still thought they had made the right decision at the time. None of those who said, looking back, they wished they had made a different decision, were under the age of five at the time they took the decision, half were aged between five and 12, the rest were teenagers (table 3.8).

Table 3.7 Regretted decision not to have contact by type of disrupted contact

	Type of disrupted contact					
	No contact	Ceased contact	Delayed contact	Sporadic contact	Total	
	No	No	No	No	No	%
Yes	0	3	3	4	10	32
No	4	10	3	4	21	68
(N=)	(4)	(13)	(6)	(8)	(31)	

Table 3.8 Respondents who regretted their decision by age decision made

	No contact	Ceased contact	Delayed contact*	Sporadic contact	Total	
	No	No	No	No	No	%
<5	-	0	0	0	0	0
5-12	-	2	2	1	5	50
13+	-	1	1	3	5	50
(N=)	0	(3)	(3)	(4)	10	

*Respondents in this group were not specifically asked how old they were when they made this decision, the age given relates to their age at parental separation.

Interviewees who said they had been mainly or solely responsible either for there being no contact, or for contact having ceased or been sporadic (but not those where contact had been delayed), were given a list of possible reasons for this and asked to choose those which applied to them. Where an option was clearly not applicable to a particular group, that question was omitted.

Table 3.9: Reasons respondent had not wanted contact as a child (disrupted contact)

	Type of disrupted contact*					
	No contact	Ceased contact	Sporadic contact	Total		(N=)
<i>Reason</i>	No	No	No	No	%	
Thought it would upset RP	2	3	3	8	36	(22)
Difficult relationship with NRP	1	7	4	12	45	(22)
Did not like NRP's new partner or children	1	7	3	11	50	(22)
Did not like the arrangements/proposed	1	1	3	5	23	(22)
Fear of NRP	0	4	0	4	18	(22)
Did not enjoy contact**	NA	7	2	9	50	(18)
NRP unreliable**	NA	5	1	6	33	(18)
Parents argued too much**	NA	1	1	2	11	(18)
Never met/no memory before separation**	1	NA	NA	1	25	(4)
Blamed NRP for separation**	3	NA	NA	3	75	(4)
(N=)	(4)	(13)	(8)			

*Respondents who experienced delayed contact were not asked about their reasons

**This question was not asked for all types of disrupted contact

Of the four respondents who said they had been mainly responsible for contact never occurring, only one person - whose parents had separated before the respondent was five years old - said this was because s/he had never met or had no memory of the non-resident parent. The others all said it was because they blamed the non-resident parent for the separation. One person gave this as their sole reason. The other two also said it was because they thought it would upset the parent they were living with. However no-one said concern about upsetting their resident parent was the only reason. Just one person selected additional reasons, viz dislike of the non-resident parent's new partner or new children in the household, and not liking the arrangements which had been proposed (table 3.9).

Had 'blaming the non-resident parent for the separation' been a response available to other respondents who held themselves responsible for contact not being continuous, we suspect, on the basis of our qualitative interviews, in which this emerged as a strong theme (see chapter 12), that several would have selected it. Indeed, in a separate question about who they blamed for the parental separation, three of the eight respondents who said they were responsible for contact being sporadic said they had blamed the non-resident parent for the separation, as did four of the six who said they had been responsible for contact being delayed and nine of the 13 where it had ceased.

Those who said they had been mainly responsible for contact having *ceased* typically only did so after persevering for contact for a long time – only four of the 13 stopped it within three years. The most common reasons cited all related to their experience of contact or something about either the non-resident parent or their household. Most respondents chose more than one reason, although two people only selected the non-resident parent's unreliability and one a dislike of his/her new partner or their children. It was notable that no-one said that they had stopped contact solely because of concerns about upsetting the parent they lived with. The three people who included this among their reasons also selected not enjoying contact (2), dislike of the non-resident parent's new partner or their children (3), fear of the non-resident parent (1) and parental conflict (1). These three respondents were also the only ones in this group who said, looking back on it now, they would not make the same decision again.

Most of the eight respondents who said they were responsible for contact being *sporadic* produced several reasons for this, most of them relating to the non-resident parent, their household or the contact arrangements. All three of those who selected ‘you thought it would upset the resident parent’ all gave other reasons as well: a poor relationship with the non-resident parent (2); you did not enjoy contact (1); unreliability about contact (1) parents argued too much (1) you did not like the non-resident parent’s new partner or children (1) the contact arrangements were too inflexible (1). The only person who gave a single reason chose ‘you did not like your non-resident parent’s new partner or their children’.

Over 60% of those who said they were responsible for there being no contact, or for it ceasing or being sporadic (15 of 24, 63%), said that the resident parent had encouraged them to have contact ‘a lot’, the proportions varying from only 25% where there had never been any contact to 85% of those where contact had ceased (table 3.10). At the other end of the spectrum only one person (4%) said that this parent had positively discouraged contact and a further three (13%) that they had not encouraged contact ‘at all’. Twenty-one per cent of resident parents seem to have been rather lukewarm in their encouragement, these respondents (5) selecting ‘a bit’.

Table 3.10 Did resident parent encourage contact? (respondent responsible for contact not being continuous)

	Type of disrupted contact*				
	No contact	Ceased contact	Sporadic contact	Total	
	No	No	No	No	%
Yes, a lot	1	9	5	15	63
A bit	1	2	2	5	21
Not at all	2	1	0	3	13
Positively discouraged it	0	1	0	1	4
	(4)	(13)	(7)	(24)	

*This question was not asked of those whose contact was delayed

Resident parent responsible for disrupted contact

In the past, the primary explanation for contact not taking place tended to be framed in terms of the non-resident parent failing to keep in touch (Peacey and Hunt, 2009), a perspective very much reflected in the data reported above.

More recently a competing paradigm has emerged – obstruction by a hostile resident parent, typically the mother. Research with non-resident fathers in the UK indicates that they perceive contact obstruction to be a major reason for contact breakdown (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Mitchell, 1985; Lund, 1987; Kruk, 1993; Simpson et al, 1995; Wikeley, 2001). Between a quarter and a third of non-resident fathers in one U.S. study (Wolchik et al, 1996) reported interference of some kind with visitation. While resident parents are less likely to report such behaviour (Pruett et al, 2007), 23% of resident mothers in one U.S. study (Pearson and Thoennes, 1988) said they had at times actively ‘interfered’ with contact in order to punish their ex-partner, while in another study (Braver et al, 1991) a quarter of resident parents admitted that they had undermined or denied contact at some point. (It is not clear, however, whether such interference was transitory or resulted in contact being suspended or ceasing). Fabricius’s research with young adults (2003) reports that 35% of mothers (typically the resident parent) were said to have interfered with the relationship with the other parent. Some UK qualitative studies also give a few examples of obstruction (Pearce et al, 1999; Smart and Neale, 1997; Smart et al, 2005). It is of note, however, that

Dunn's research with children reports 'no direct evidence of explicit gate-keeping in the sense of one parent keeping the child away from the other (Dunn, 2003, p26). A Swiss study of high school students and young college students (Struss et al, 2001) reports that most resident parents encouraged contact.

Contact obstruction tends to be conceptualised as one end of a 'gate-keeping' spectrum (Austin, 2005, cited in Ganong et al, 2012) which ranges from 'inhibitory' or 'restrictive' behaviours to behaviours which facilitate the involvement of the non-resident parent. Trinder, for example, (2008), who interviewed both resident and non-resident parents, found that resident mothers adopted a range of 'gatekeeping' strategies in relation to the father's involvement, ranging from pro-active gate-opening to gate-closing. It is also acknowledged that a wide range of motivations may underlie such behaviour (Pruett et al; 2007, cited in Ganong et al, 2012) and that in some instances restrictive gate-keeping may stem from a need to protect the child (Austin, 2008, cited in Ganong et al, 2012). A recent review of the literature reports that the few studies which have examined mothers' perceptions of paternal incompetence at parenting are consistent in showing that mothers actively restrict father's involvement when they believe that fathers are incapable of parenting (Ganong et al, 2012, p84). Past violence towards the mother, abuse of the children or concerns because of substance abuse may lead to highly restrictive gatekeeping (Roy and Dyson, 2005; Sano et al, 2008, cited in Ganong et al, 2012) and even when mothers want to encourage the relationship they monitor the contact more closely (Hardesty and Ganong, 2006; Laakso, 2004; Sano et al, 2008, [cited in Ganong et al, 2012]).

One problem with much of the research on gate-keeping (Ganong et al, 2012) is that typically, only one parent is interviewed. Trinder's U.K. study is unusual in that the sample included both parents. She identifies five maternal strategies in relation to gatework. *Pro-active gate-opening* involved strategies to ensure that contact continued and was a positive experience for children. *Contingent gate-opening* employed similar strategies but incorporated additional safeguards to protect children and was conditional on the mother's perception that contact was safe and the child wished to have contact. *Passive gatekeepers* did not adopt, or no longer adopted, pro-active or contingent strategies but placed the responsibility on non-resident parents and children about whether and when contact should take place. Resident mothers who reported *gate-closing* behaviour attempted to reduce, restrict or end contact on child welfare grounds (*justifiable gate-closing*) while non-resident fathers argued that the mother's gate-closing was either inexplicable or due to vindictiveness (*pro-active gate-closing*). Trinder also emphasises, however, that the findings suggest that such 'gatework' is not a 'linear and unidirectional process' involving only the resident parent, but 'could be a dynamic, transactional process where parents exert a continual, bidirectional and reciprocal influence on each other' (Trinder, 2008, p 1320).

The data from our respondents indicates that they did not see contact obstruction or 'gate-closing' by the resident parent as a major factor in contact not being continuous. As noted earlier, only 17 (8%) said that the resident parent had been solely or mainly responsible for either there being no contact (9), or for it being delayed (5) or sporadic (3), and no-one said s/he had been responsible for contact having ceased.

Moreover, where data was available on the perceived reasons (9 no contact, 2 sporadic) it did not present an uncomplicated picture of resident parents unjustifiably obstructing contact. It is true that the two most common reasons selected for the resident parent preventing contact were reluctance to have anything to do with the other parent (8) and bitterness about the

separation (5) (table 3.11). All nine respondents gave one of these reasons. It was notable, however, that five of them also said that the non-resident parent had been violent/threatening or that the resident parent had been worried the child would not be returned or did not think the non-resident parent could look after them properly. Similarly, while one of the two respondents who said the resident parent had been mainly responsible for contact being *sporadic* said it was because of dissatisfaction over child support, the other said it was because the non-resident parent was unreliable about contact and there were also concerns about his/her ability to look after the child.

Table 3.11 Reasons resident parent was thought not to want contact

<i>Reason</i>	Nos	%
RP did not want anything to do with NRP	8	89
Bitter about separation and wanted to punish NRP	5	56
NRP had been violent/threatening	2	22
Afraid child would not be returned	2	22
Thought NRP would not look after me properly	2	22
RP thought it would be too upsetting/confusing for child	2	22
Thought NRP would be unreliable	1	11
Angry about lack of child support	1	11
RP said did not know who he was	0	0
Thought it was what I wanted	0	0
NRP had never taken any interest in child	0	0
(N=)	(9)	

Responsibility for starting contact in delayed contact cases

As noted earlier (table 3.1) only 14% of respondents said that they had been mainly responsible for contact not being established within six months of the separation and only 7% attributed responsibility to both their parents. They were much more likely, however, to claim responsibility for getting contact started, with almost a third (14 of 44; 32%) saying they had been mainly responsible and a further six (14%) saying they had been partially responsible.

There was also more evidence of joint decision-making, with six respondents saying ‘everyone’ was responsible and nine that it was ‘Mum and Dad together’ (34%). Where one parent was seen as mainly responsible for getting contact started this was more likely to be the non-resident parent (9 compared to 6 citing the resident parent).

Respondents who considered themselves wholly or mainly responsible for contact getting established were typically teenagers at that point (10 of 14) and only two were under the age of 10. Interestingly, the ones who saw themselves as primarily instrumental were rarely the ones who said they had been responsible for contact not happening from the beginning. There were only three examples of this. The others had attributed responsibility for this mainly to the non-resident parent (7), though two cited the resident parent, one both parents equally and the other one had not known who was responsible.

Respondents who did not cite themselves as being partly or wholly responsible for contact starting after an initial delay were generally satisfied that their parents had paid enough attention to what they wanted about this (21 of 27). Only six said they had not. None of these, however, were respondents who said they had been mainly responsible for contact not happening at the beginning.

Responsibility for decision-making where contact was continuous or the main arrangement was shared residence

Continuous contact

Decision-making in cases where contact had been continuous was notable for the high degree of mutuality, with just 26 respondents (of 163; 16%) saying that the details of the arrangements had been decided by only one of their parents (14 by the resident and 12 by the non-resident parent). The largest group (69; 42%) consisted of those who said ‘everyone’ had been responsible, with a further 31 (19%) saying their parents had decided the arrangements jointly.

Just over a fifth of respondents (37; 23%) said that *they* had been mainly or entirely responsible, with an additional 42% (69) saying they had been involved in the decision. Most of those who considered they had been mainly or entirely responsible for making the arrangements (22 of 27; 81%) said they were 10 or more when they started determining this. However a few reported this happening earlier, with one person saying they had been as young as five.

Of those who did not report any responsibility for the decision themselves, most (46 of 55, 84%) said that their parents had taken sufficient account of their wishes. There were only nine respondents who felt this had not happened. In five of these cases the non-resident parent was said to have been mainly responsible for the decision, with two people saying it had been the resident parent and two both parents together.

Respondents in this latter group were most likely to say either that the contact arrangements had been insufficiently flexible (5 of 9); that the contact they had was not enough (5) or alternatively too much (1); or to have repeatedly said they did not want contact (1). In all, seven of the nine (78%) made one of these points, which would seem to bear out their feeling that their views had not been sufficiently taken into account. It is interesting, however, that so did a large proportion (29 of 48; 60%) of those who said their parents *had* taken their views into account, which suggests that their views were not determinative. (Ten said the arrangements were too inflexible; 20 that the amount of contact was insufficient and three had repeatedly said they did not want to continue with contact, while two more wished they had done so). In contrast only a quarter of those who said they had been mainly or partly responsible for the arrangements indicated any dissatisfaction on these grounds. (Of those who said they had been mainly responsible (37) no one had said they wished to stop contact, although one person said they would have preferred this; only 3 said the arrangements were too inflexible and 7 that they would have liked more contact. Similarly, of the 69 who had been partly responsible only 2 reported repeatedly saying they wanted to stop contact, 7 found the arrangements too inflexible, 10 would have liked more contact and 1 less.)

Shared residence

Respondents whose main arrangement had been shared residence were less likely than those with continuous contact to report that decision-making had been mutual. Only five respondents said it had been decided by everyone and four by the parents together. In the remainder, respondents were more likely to say that either they (4) or their father (4) had been mainly responsible, with only one person citing their mother. The respondents who considered they were mainly responsible for the shared residence arrangements were all aged between 12 and 15 when they took this decision.

Of those who did not report having any responsibility for the arrangements starting, two said they did not feel their parents had taken sufficient account of their own views, while one person said they did not know. These three respondents were also the only people to say that their parents had not taken sufficient account of their views about the details of the shared residence arrangements, although one other respondent, who said that ‘everyone’ was responsible for there being shared residence, when asked whether s/he was reasonably happy with the details of the arrangements, said that s/he would have preferred not to be in shared residence anyway, which again suggests that the respondent’s views were not determinative.

Respondents were more likely to say they had been mainly responsible for the shared residence arrangements ending than for them starting (7 of the 9 answering the question). All were aged 12 and above at the time, and five were aged 16 or more. One person said it had been mainly their father’s decision, the other both parents together. None of the three respondents who continued in shared residence up to the age of 18 reported that they had ever said they wanted the arrangements to cease.

In total all but five respondents reported some responsibility for the shared residence arrangement either starting or ending – and in three instances, both.

The involvement of the courts in decision-making

As table 3.12 indicates, 17% of respondents (63 of 377 answering the question) said that their parents had gone to court over the arrangements. Overall this is rather higher than other research would suggest obtains in the general population, 10% or less (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003; Lader, 2008; Peacey and Hunt, 2009). However the figure for post-Children Act separations is very close, (11%, 26 of 236) suggesting that the survey sample does not over-represent those with particularly litigious parents.

Typically respondents reported that their parents had only been to court once or twice. Just 3% (13) said this had happened ‘repeatedly’. Those who said they had never had any contact, or that their contact had been delayed, were most likely to say there had been repeated court action (10% and 9% respectively) while none of those with shared residence or continuous contact reported this.

Table 3.12 Did parents ever go to court over contact/shared residence

	Yes, repeatedly		Yes, once or twice		No		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Shared residence	0	0	2	12	15	88	(17)
Continuous contact	0	0	18	11	139	89	(157)
Sporadic contact	2	3	7	12	50	85	(59)
Delayed contact	4	9	6	13	37	79	(47)
Ceased contact	1	3	5	13	33	85	(39)
Never any contact	6	10	12	21	40	69	(58)
<i>All cases</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>314</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>(377)</i>
Pre-Children Act	9	7	28	20	102	73	(139)
Post-Children Act	4	2	22	9	210	89	(236)

Use of the courts, not unexpectedly, was also linked to the level of conflict in the parental relationship. As described in the next chapter, the responses to a whole series of questions about this were used to categorise the respondents into four groups: those where the data

indicated the parental relationship had been largely harmonious (no conflict); and those where the level of conflict was judged to be low, moderate or high.

Of the 63 respondents who said their parents had been to court over the arrangements, we had data on the conflict levels in 39. Analysis indicates (table 3.13) that half those who said their parents had been 'repeatedly' in court fell into the high conflict group, compared to a third of those whose parents had been 'once or twice', but only 13% of those who had never been to court over contact, confirming previous research evidence (Peacey and Hunt, 2008; Trinder et al, 2006) that cases which reach the family courts involve the most conflicted families.

Table 3.13 Use of the courts by conflict level*

	No conflict		Low		Moderate		High		
<i>Use of court</i> **	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Never	114	47	69	29	26	11	32	13	(241)
Once or twice	3	9	11	33	8	24	11	33	(33)
Repeatedly	0	0	1	17	2	33	3	50	(6)

*Excludes those who never had any contact or whose contact ceased

**Statistically significant $p=.000$

The data also confirms, however, that families who do not seek the assistance of the courts are not necessarily free from conflict (Peacey and Hunt, 2008). As table 3.14 shows, even in the most conflicted group, 70% of respondents said their parents had never taken their disputes to court.

Table 3.14 Conflict level by use of the courts*

	Did parents ever go to court over contact?						
	No		Once or twice		Repeatedly		
<i>Level of conflict</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
No conflict	114	97	3	3	0	0	(117)
Low	69	85	11	14	1	1	(81)
Moderate	26	72	8	22	2	6	(36)
High	32	70	11	24	3	7	(46)
<i>All</i>	<i>241</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>(280)</i>

**Excludes those who never had any contact or whose contact ceased

**Statistically significant $p=.000$

Table 3.15 Use of the courts by welfare concerns, domestic violence or fear of violence

	Concerns		DV/fear		Either	
	(N= 258)		(N=263)		(259)	
<i>Use of court</i> **	No	%	No	%	No	%
Never	20	9	35	16	52	23
Once or twice	4	13	11	36	14	47
Repeatedly	4	80	3	50	5	83
<i>All</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>27</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact, whose contact ceased or whose main arrangement was shared residence

**Statistically significant $p<.01$

Information about domestic violence and worries about the non-resident parent's care was not available on all cases. Where it was, however, it was notable that these factors were much more common where the respondent said the courts had been involved (table 3.15), rising

from less than a quarter where no such concerns were reported to almost half of those whose parents had been to court once or twice and five of the six who had been to court repeatedly.

Respondents whose contact was not continuous were asked whether their non-resident parent had ever obtained a court order allowing contact. As can be seen from table 3.16, some respondents were not able to answer this question. Of those who could, only a third (12) said such an order had been made, of whom five said contact had been established/re-established as a result, three selecting the option ‘eventually’. Most of those who said it had not (5 of 7) were those who never had any contact, two of whom said the non-resident parent had not tried to take it up, despite the order. One of the other two had delayed contact, the other sporadic, which presumably means that although contact did eventually happen, the court order was not seen as instrumental in this.

Table 3.16 Did the non-resident parent ever get a court order allowing contact (cases where contact was not continuous)

	Yes		No		DK		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Sporadic contact	4	44	4	44	1	11	(9)
Delayed contact	2	20	5	50	3	30	(10)
Ceased contact	1	17	3	50	2	33	(6)
Never any contact	5	28	12	67	1	6	(18)
<i>All cases</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>(43)</i>

Children’s agency in court cases

Thirty-three of the 63 respondents who reported court involvement answered the question asking whether they felt their views had been taken into account by the court. Nineteen said yes – two of whom said they thought the court had taken *too* much notice of what they said – 14 said no. Those whose parents had only been to court once or twice were more likely to say their views had been taken into account (16 of 26; 62%) than those where this had happened ‘repeatedly’ (three of seven, 43%). There was, however, no obvious relationship between the contact pattern respondents had experienced and whether they felt their views had been taken into account: both of those who had had shared residence said they had, but so did all those who never had any contact and the single person whose contact had ceased. Much lower proportions were reported by those whose contact was sporadic (3 of 8), delayed (4 of 7) and by those who had experienced continuous contact (5 of 11).

Most respondents (37 of 45 answering the question; 82%) felt that the court had made the right decision, with most of the rest saying they did not know. Only three respondents, all, interestingly, those whose contact had been delayed, said that they felt the court’s decision had been wrong. However these three had nothing else in common: one said there had been a court order, the other two that there had not; one said the court had not taken sufficient account of their views, one was not sure and the third said the court had taken too much notice.

Summary

The material presented in this chapter challenges what appears to be an increasingly influential view, that resident parents – usually mothers – commonly and unreasonably subvert their children’s relationship with their non-resident parent. Of the 202 respondents to our telephone survey who did not have continuous contact, only 8% (17) said that the resident parent had been solely or mainly responsible for this, ranging from none where contact had ceased, to 15% where it had never started. Moreover, in the 11 cases where data was

available on the resident parent's reasons for preventing contact, six included either domestic violence or worries that the child would not be properly cared for.

In contrast, the majority of respondents (62%) favoured a more traditional interpretation of events, that the non-resident parent was mainly or solely responsible for what had happened, varying from 53% where contact had started then ceased, to 66% where it had never happened at all. Four main reasons were given for this: the non-resident parent's lack of interest; reluctance to pay to maintain the child; difficulties caused by the non-resident parent's new partner; and logistical problems because of work, accommodation, or distance, although the proportions selecting each varied somewhat between the different contact groups.

While some respondents had changed their views in adulthood there was no single direction of change. Eighteen per cent gave a more positive interpretation eg logistical difficulties rather than reluctance to pay child support, 17% were less positive. Moreover the same reasons dominated, with lack of interest remaining the most common. Only a minority (27% as children, 28% as adults) thought that the non-resident parent had acted from child-centred reasons (i.e. either they thought it was best for the child or that it was what they wanted). In contrast around seven in 10 (77% as children and 70% as adults) attributed the non-resident parent's behaviour either to lack of interest or reluctance to pay child support.

The material also highlights the part played by the respondents themselves. This was particularly evident in relation to bringing shared residence to an end, where seven of the nine respondents answering the question said that they had been mainly responsible. Around a third said they had been mainly responsible for contact ceasing and a similar proportion for getting it started after a delay. Typically respondents who took such major decisions about contact were at least 10 years old at the time (43 of 51, 84%) and well over half (31, 61%) were teenagers.

In terms of the reasons for their decisions, those who claimed responsibility for contact having ceased or for it being sporadic typically explained their decision in terms of some problematic aspect of contact– the relationship with the non-resident parent; difficulties with a new partner or new children; the non-resident parent's unreliability; not enjoying contact. Those who had decided to end contact completely usually did so only after having had contact for many years – only four stopped it within three years.

In our qualitative interviews, as reported in chapter 12, blaming the non-resident parent for the separation emerged as an important factor in explaining respondents' reluctance to have contact. Regrettably, in the telephone survey, this specific option was only included in the questions for those who said they had been responsible for there never having been contact – and was selected by three of the four respondents. We suspect, however, that had this response been available to all those who held themselves responsible for contact not being continuous, several would have selected it. All respondents were asked a discrete question about who they blamed for the parental separation. Strikingly, nine of the 13 who said they were responsible for contact ceasing completely said they blamed the non-resident parent, as did three of the eight where contact was sporadic and four of the six where it was delayed.

Less than a third of respondents who said they were responsible for there never being any contact, for it ceasing or being sporadic (8 of 25) selected 'concern about upsetting the resident parent, as one of their reasons. Moreover, none of them gave this as their sole reason.

Indeed, most respondents (15 of 24; 63%) said that the resident parent had encouraged them to have contact 'a lot' and only one person said that they had positively discouraged it.

Decisions which resulted in contact not happening were almost always reported to be made by only one person, whether that was one of the parents or the child. Only 26 respondents (13%) said that both their parents had been responsible and four (2%) they and the parent they lived with. Greater mutuality, however, was evident in decisions to get contact started after a delay, to set up shared residence arrangements, and most particularly, making the contact arrangements where contact was continuous. In this latter group 61% (100 of 163) said the arrangements were determined through joint parental decision-making or by both parents in conjunction with the child. Half the shared residence group said this had been the case, as did 34% (15 of 44) of those where contact started after a delay.

Moreover, while only a minority of respondents felt that they had been mainly responsible for the decision to set up shared residence (4 of 18; 22%) or for the details of the contact arrangements where it had been continuous (37 of 163; 23%) most felt they had been involved or that their views were taken into account by their parents. Thus, in the continuous group, in addition to the 37 who said they had been mainly responsible, a further 69 respondents said they had been responsible along with their parents and of the remaining 55, all but nine said that their parents had taken their views into account. Altogether, then, 93% of those whose contact had been continuous seem to have had some involvement in the decisions about contact – which may well be, of course, why contact was sustained. In the shared residence group a smaller proportion said they had been directly involved in the decision (4 being mainly responsible and 5 along with their parents) but only two said that their parents had not taken their views into account (although one person was not certain about this).

The more consensual nature of decision-making in the continuous contact and shared residence group was reflected in the fact that only a small minority (11% and 12% respectively) said that their parents had been to court over the arrangements and none had done so repeatedly. In contrast, 21% of those whose contact had been delayed and 31% where there had never been any contact said that their parents had gone to court and 9% and 10% respectively had done so repeatedly.

In all 63 respondents (17%) said their parents had been to court, the proportion being lower (11%) where the parents had separated after the Children Act 1989. Most of those answering the question (37 of 45; 82%) said that they felt the court had made the right decision, although only just over half (19 of 33; 56%) said they felt their views had been taken into account.

Chapter 4 Parental relationships after separation

There is widespread agreement in the literature on contact that the post-separation relationship between parents is a key determinant in whether contact occurs at all, and its frequency. Although high levels of conflict are not necessarily associated with low frequency (Wolchik and Fenaughty, 1996), contact has generally been found to be more likely where relationships are positive (Ahrons and Miller, 1993; Arditti and Bickley, 1996; Bradshaw and Millar, 1991; Bradshaw et al, 1995; Dunn, 2003; Funder et al, 1993; Gibson, 1992; Gorrell-Barnes et al, 1998; Koch and Lowery, 1985; Lund, 1987; Peacey and Haux, 2007; Smyth et al, 2001; Simpson et al, 1995). Indeed Peacey and Haux, who used data from over a thousand separated UK families to explore the relative importance of a wide range of factors which previous research suggested were linked with contact, found that:

‘by far the most important factor in predicting whether contact occurred at all, or occurred fairly frequently, was the current relationship between the parents’ (Peacey and Haux, 2007, p18).

There is also an extensive literature on the impact of parental conflict on children. Parental conflict is one of the key factors affecting outcomes for children of separated families (Amato, 2001; Amato et al, 2009; Emery, 1982; Grych and Fincham, 1990; Harold and Murch, 2005; Harold and Leve, 2012; Rhoades et al, 2012) and some forms of conflict – notably that which is frequent, intense, physical, unresolved and involves the children directly – are more damaging than others (Grych and Fincham, 1992; Harold et. al, 2004). Theories concerning the processes through which conflict affects children suggest that it can threaten their emotional security (Davies and Cummings, 1994) and disrupt parent-child relationships (Erel and Burman, 1995). Research also demonstrates that it is not only the degree of conflict which impacts on children but the perceptions they assign to it and how their parents deal with it (Harold et al, 1997; 2001; Harold and Leve, 2012).

Smart and colleagues, interviewing children, report that:

What was unacceptable for the children was open conflict which impacted on them. Such conflict, no less than poor parent-child relationships, can lead to significant unhappiness....At the least, children wanted their parents to contain their disputes so that they did not have to be involved, or used as emotional props, or turned into allies, spies or go-betweens in a parental war (Smart et al, 2001, p65).

Similarly emphatic messages are also reported from other research with children (Bagshaw, 2007; Buchanan et al, 2001; Butler et al, 2003; Clark, 1999; Dunn, 2003; Hogan et al, 2003; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Struss et al, 2001; Sutton-Brown, 1998; Trinder et al, 2002; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Ahron’s research on young adults (2004, p80) also notes that: *‘the thing that stresses children most, sometimes for years, is lingering conflict between parents’*.

In the telephone survey we therefore asked a series of questions designed to elucidate the extent of conflict in the parental relationship, which is the subject of the next section. Time constraints on the questionnaire meant that, regrettably, we were not able to include questions on the extent to which the parents cooperated about the child’s upbringing. Later in the chapter we look at whether the resident parent had any concerns about the non-resident parent’s capacity to care for the child and whether s/he encouraged the relationship between them and the child.

Parental conflict

Respondents who were still in contact with their non-resident parent at the point they became adults – or in the case of shared residence, with both their parents - were first asked how their parents had generally got on during their post-separation childhood and presented with a list of pre-coded responses: ‘they got on OK’; ‘there was some bad feeling’; ‘there was a lot of bad feeling’; ‘they had a very up and down relationship’. The largest single group, which accounted for almost half the respondents (133 of 285; 47%), consisted of those who selected ‘got on OK’. At the other end of the spectrum, 53 respondents (19%) chose ‘a lot of bad feeling’, while 99 (35%) said there had either been ‘some bad feeling’ (19%) or the parental relationship had been ‘very up and down’ (15%) (table 4.1).

As one might expect, those who had had either continuous contact or whose main arrangement had been shared residence were most likely to report their parents had ‘got on OK’, (59% and 50% respectively), although it was striking that three of those in shared residence (17%) and 15 of those with continuous contact (9%), said there had been a lot of bad feeling. These respondents were much more likely than those where the parental relationship was not conflicted to report that decisions about the arrangements had primarily been made by one parent (8 of 18; 44%, compared to 11 of 102; 11%).

Although parental relationships in the other two groups were clearly worse, the most conflicted group appeared to be those whose contact had been delayed, 61% of whom said there had been either a lot of bad feeling or the parental relationship had been very up and down, compared to 46% of those whose contact had been sporadic.

Table 4.1 Parental relationship after separation by type of continuing contact

	OK		Some bad feeling		Very up & down		Lot of bad feeling		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Shared residence	9	50	4	22	2	11	3	17	(18)
Continuous	95	59	30	19	21	13	15	9	(161)
Sporadic	16	27	16	27	11	18	17	28	(60)
Delayed	13	28	5	11	10	22	18	39	(46)
<i>All</i>	<i>133</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>(285)</i>

Table 4.2 Parental arguing after separation by type of continuing contact

	Much arguing after separation				
	Yes		No		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Shared residence	4	22	14	78	(18)
Continuous	38	24	121	76	(159)
Sporadic	26	43	35	57	(61)
Delayed	21	45	26	55	(47)
<i>All</i>	<i>89</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>196</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>(285)</i>

Despite the fact that over half the respondents reported at least some bad feeling between their parents, less than a third (89 of 285; 31%) said that there had been ‘much arguing’. Again, there was a clear differentiation between the shared residence/continuous contact group (22% and 24% respectively) and the others (43% and 45%) (table 4.2). Not surprisingly, those who reported a lot of parental bad feeling also tended to say there had been ‘much arguing’ (39 of 51; 77%), as did almost half of those who described the relationship as ‘very up and down’ (20 of 42; 48%). However 31% of those who reported

only ‘some bad feeling’ (17 of 55) also said there had been a lot of arguing, as did 9% of those who said their parents had ‘got on OK’ (12 of 132).

For just over two-fifths of the sample, therefore, (127 of 292; 44%) contact seems to have taken place in the context of a reasonably conflict-free parental relationship (table 4.3). All the rest were exposed to varying degrees of parental acrimony. As table 4.4 shows, there was a large difference between those who had on the one hand either experienced continuous contact or mainly lived in shared residence, half of whom reported neither bad feeling nor much arguing, and those whose contact had been disrupted, where the proportion dropped to just over a quarter. Similarly, while a few of the first group had sustained contact despite reporting lots of bad feeling and arguments (6% of those in shared residence and 8% of those with continuous contact), the proportions rose to 20% where contact had been sporadic and 27% where it had been delayed.

Table 4.3 Parental bad feeling and arguments

	No	%
No bad feeling, not much arguing	127	44
No bad feeling but much arguing	12	4
Some bad feeling but not much arguing	38	13
Some bad feeling and much arguing	18	6
Very up & down relationship but not much arguing	24	8
Very up & down relationship & much arguing	20	7
Lot of bad feeling but not much arguing	14	5
Lot of bad feeling & much arguing	39	13
(N=)	(292) ⁴	

Table 4.4 Levels of conflict by type of contact

	No bad feeling/not much arguing		Lot of bad feeling & much arguing		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Shared residence	9	50	1	6	(18)
Continuous	88	53	13	8	(165)
Sporadic	17	28	12	20	(61)
Delayed	13	27	13	27	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>127</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>(292)</i>

The 89 respondents who reported ‘much arguing’ were asked some further questions. First, about the severity of the arguments. Although half (44 of 88 answering the question) said they were only either mild (25%) or moderate (25%), the same proportion said they were either quite severe (39%) or very severe (10%). In total, therefore, 15% of respondents (44 of 291) reported very or quite severe parental arguments (table 4.5). Again, those in the delayed or sporadic contact groups were much more likely to report this (31% and 27% respectively,

⁴ Those who reported that they did not know either what their parents’ relationship had been like or whether there had been much arguing were coded as no bad feeling/no arguments on the grounds that they were not aware of any conflict.

compared to 6% of those with shared residence and 8% of those who had had continuous contact).

Table 4.5 Severity of arguments by contact pattern

	Arguments					(N=)
	None	Mild	Moderate	Quite severe	Very severe	
<i>Contact pattern</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Shared residence	78	6	11	0	6	(18)
Continuous	77	10	6	7	1	(165)
Sporadic	58	3	12	22	5	(60)
Delayed	56	6	6	23	8	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>(291)</i>

The second question put to those who reported ‘much arguing’ was to what extent they had been caught up in their parents’ arguments. Seventy per cent (62 of 88) said this had happened only a little (48; 55%) or not at all (14, 16%). However 26 (30%) said it had happened ‘a lot’. This works out at 9% of the total (26 of 291, table 4.6). Those whose contact had been delayed, followed by those with sporadic contact, were most likely to report that they had been caught up in their parents’ arguments ‘a lot’ (21% and 12%) but there were some instances in the continuous contact group (5%) and one in the shared residence group (6%).

Table 4.6 Involvement in parental arguments by contact pattern*

	A lot		A little		Not at all		No arguments		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Contact pattern</i>									
Shared residence	1	6	2	11	1	6	14	78	(18)
Continuous	8	5	24	15	6	4	127	77	(165)
Sporadic	7	12	14	23	4	7	35	58	(60)
Delayed	10	21	8	17	3	6	27	56	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>203</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>(291)</i>

*Statistically significant $p < .05$

Those who reported there had been much arguing were asked whether the arguments had ever become violent. Thirty-three of the 89 (37%) said they had, which works out at 11% of the whole group.

Whether or not they had reported much parental arguing, all respondents were asked whether either of their parents was ever afraid of being physically harmed by the other. Forty-nine (17%) said this was the case, with 43 saying it was their mum who was afraid, one their dad and five saying both had been frightened. Generally, those who reported fear had also reported violent arguments. Five respondents, however, reported fear but no violent arguments while four said there had been violence but no fear.

In all, almost one in five respondents who had ongoing contact or whose main experience had been shared residence (55 of 291; 19%) said that their parents’ post-separation relationship had involved either violent arguments or fear of violence. This was more likely to be the case where contact had been either sporadic (36%) or delayed (31%). However it was also reported by 9% of those who said they had had continuous contact and four of the 18 (22%) who had been in shared residence (table 4.7).

Table 4.7 Parental relationship involved violent arguments or fear*

	Violence		Fear		Either		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Contact pattern</i>							
Shared residence	2	11	4	22	4	22	(18)
Continuous	7	4	10	6	14	9	(165)
Sporadic	16	26	20	33	22	36	(60)
Delayed	8	17	15	31	15	31	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>(291)</i>

Drawing on all the data relating to parental conflict produces the following very complex picture.

Table 4.8 Parental bad feeling, arguments and violence/fear of violence

	No	%
No bad feeling, arguments, violence or fear	121	41
No bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments, no violence or fear	13	5
No bad feeling, no arguments but fear	6	2
Some bad feeling but no arguments or fear	35	12
Some bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments but no violence or fear	10	3
Some bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments, but no violence or fear	2	<1
Some bad feeling, no arguments but fear	5	2
Some bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments plus violence or fear	2	<1
Some bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments plus violence or fear	1	<1
Very up & down relationship but no arguments, violence or fear	21	7
Very up & down relationship, mild to moderate arguments but no violence or fear	6	2
Very up & down relationship, severe or quite severe arguments but no violence or fear	1	<1
Very up & down relationship, no arguments but fear	3	1
Very up & down relationship, mild to moderate arguments plus violence or fear	2	<1
Very up & down relationship, severe or quite severe arguments plus violence or fear	11	4
Lot of bad feeling but no arguments, violence or fear	11	4
Lot of bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments but no violence or fear	7	2
Lot of bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments, but no violence or fear	10	3
Lot of bad feeling, no arguments but violence or fear	3	1
Lot of bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments plus violence or fear	4	1
Lot of bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments plus violence or fear	18	6
<i>All</i>	<i>(292)</i>	<i>100</i>

It is striking – and reassuring - that just over two in five respondents (121; 41%) reported that their parents exhibited no bad feeling towards each other, did not argue much and that there was no violence between them or fear of violence. Moreover, although most respondents were aware of some conflict in their parents' relationship, only a small minority reported extremely high levels - a lot of bad feeling combined with either severe/quite severe arguments and/or domestic violence or fear of violence.

To facilitate further analysis respondents were grouped into four categories: no conflict, and low, moderate, and high conflict. Table 4.9 sets out how these groupings were arrived at.

Table 4.9 Levels of conflict, grouped

	No	
No conflict		
No bad feeling, arguments, violence or fear	121	41
Low conflict	85	29
No bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments, no violence or fear	13	5
Some bad feeling but no arguments or fear	35	12
Some bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments but no violence or fear	10	3
Very up & down relationship but no arguments, violence or fear	21	7
Very up & down relationship, mild to moderate arguments but no violence or fear	6	2
Moderate conflict	39	13
No bad feeling, no arguments but fear	6	2
Some bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments, but no violence or fear	2	<1
Some bad feeling, no arguments but fear	5	2
Some bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments plus violence or fear	2	<1
Very up & down relationship, severe or quite severe arguments but no violence or fear	1	<1
Very up & down relationship, no arguments but fear	3	1
Very up & down relationship, mild to moderate arguments plus violence or fear	2	<1
Lot of bad feeling but no arguments, violence or fear	11	4
Lot of bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments but no violence or fear	7	2
High conflict	47	16
Some bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments plus violence or fear	1	<1
Very up & down relationship, severe or quite severe arguments plus violence or fear	11	4
Lot of bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments, but no violence or fear	10	3
Lot of bad feeling, no arguments but violence or fear	3	1
Lot of bad feeling, mild to moderate arguments plus violence or fear	4	1
Lot of bad feeling, severe or quite severe arguments plus violence or fear	18	6
(N=)	(292)	100

Respondents who said they had had continuous contact were most likely to fall into the low or no conflict groups (141 of 165; 86%) and least likely to be in the high conflict group (12; 7%). The shared residence group emerged as having somewhat higher levels of conflict, with only 12 of the 18 (66%) having low or no conflict and two high conflict. The most conflicted appeared to be parents of respondents whose contact had been delayed, 35% of whom were in the high conflict group (17 of 48) and only 48% (23) in the low or no conflict group. While

about the same proportion of those where contact had been sporadic were in the low/no conflict groups (30 of 61; 49%), slightly fewer (16; 26%) were in the high conflict group.

Table 4.10 Conflict level by pattern of contact

	No conflict		Low		Moderate		High		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Shared residence	8	44	4	22	4	22	2	11	(18)
Continuous	85	52	56	34	12	7	12	7	(165)
Sporadic	16	26	14	23	15	25	16	26	(61)
Delayed	12	25	11	23	8	17	17	35	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>121</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>(292)</i>

*Statistically significant $p=.000$

Where respondents had lived mainly in maternal residence, young women were less likely than young men to be in the no/low conflict group (66% of 143 compared to 76% of 104) and more likely to be in the high conflict group (20% compared to 14%). However this difference was not statistically significant and it disappeared when those who had changed residence were excluded. There were no gender differences for those who had had paternal or shared residence.

Concerns about parenting

In addition to this series of questions about parental conflict, respondents whose contact had been continuous, sporadic or delayed were asked whether the resident parent was ever seriously worried about how the non-resident parent might look after them. Only 11% (29 of 269; 11%) said yes and only 4% (11) that the worries stemmed from specific concerns such as substance abuse, mental illness or possible child maltreatment, rather than a general lack of trust (table 4.11). Those who had had continuous contact were least likely to report any concerns (9 of 163; 6%) compared to 13% (6 of 46) where contact had been delayed and 23% (14 of 60) where it had been sporadic. Those with sporadic contact were most likely to report specific concerns (7; 12%) compared to only 2% of those with continuous or delayed contact.

Table 4.11 Concerns about the other parent's parenting by contact pattern

	Any concerns		Specific welfare concerns		Concerns wholly justified		Partly justified		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Continuous contact	9	6	3	2	3	2	2	1	(163)
Sporadic contact	14	23	7	12	6	10	8	13	(60)
Delayed contact	6	13	1	2	2	4	3	6	(46)
<i>All</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>(269)</i>
Shared residence	4	22	4	22	2	11	2	11	(18)

Respondents who reported concerns were also asked whether they now felt the worries were justified. All those identifying specific concerns said that they had been either entirely (8 of 11) or partly (3) justified, with all three of the latter group having had sporadic contact. Even where the worries were thought to stem from general lack of trust, only three people (of 18) said they felt they had been entirely unjustified, with the majority (11) opting for partly justified.

Resident fathers were much more likely than resident mothers to be reported to have had serious concerns (6 of 27; 22% compared to 23 of 242; 10%). The concerns of resident fathers were also more often said to stem from specific issues rather than a lack of trust (3 of 6; 50% compared to 8 of 23; 35%) and to be entirely justified (3 of 6; 50% compared to 9 of 23; 39%).

Those whose main experience had been shared residence had to be asked a slightly different question - whether either of their parents had had serious worries. This may account for the fact that four of the 18 (22%) said yes, a proportion on a par with those who had sporadic contact. It may be more important that all four respondents said that these worries represented specific concerns, by far the highest proportion of any group (50% of those with sporadic contact, 33% with continuous and 17% delayed). They were also most likely to say that the concerns were entirely justified (half, compared to between 33% and 44% of the other groups) and none of them thought they were entirely unjustified (on a par with the sporadic group and compared to just over half the continuous group and 17% of the delayed group).

Concerns about parenting were linked with the level of conflict in the parental relationship (table 4.12). Where there was no conflict, only 4% of respondents reported such concerns (5 of 121). This rose to 11% where there were low levels of conflict, and 18% and 26% where there was moderate or high conflict. Concerns in the high conflict cases were also more likely to involve specific welfare concerns, rather than a general lack of trust (7 of the 12 categorised as high conflict, compared to only one of the five no conflict cases) and the respondents were most likely to say that the concerns had been entirely justified (6 of 12).

Table 4.12 Concerns about the other parent's parenting by level of conflict

	Any serious worries		Specific concerns		Wholly justified		Partly justified		
<i>Conflict level</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
No conflict	5	4	1	1	1	1	4	3	(121)
Low	9	11	4	5	4	5	2	2	(85)
Moderate	7	18	3	8	3	8	4	10	(39)
High	12	26	7	15	6	13	6	13	(47)
<i>All</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>(292)</i>

As reported above, 19% of respondents who had ongoing contact or whose main experience had been shared residence said that their parents' post-separation relationship had involved either violent arguments or fear of violence. Adding in those who reported concerns about parenting gives a figure of 21% of cases (62 of 291) where there were either issues around domestic violence or one parent had serious and specific concerns about the care the child might receive. Respondents whose contact had been continuous were least likely to report this (10%), the proportion rising to 31% where contact had been delayed and 40% where it had been sporadic. The proportion among those who said their main experience had been shared residence was almost as high as in the sporadic group (39%), although, as noted earlier, the figures for serious concerns might have been inflated by the fact that the question asked about both parents, rather than, as in the contact cases, only the non-resident parent.

Support for the relationship with the other parent

As noted in chapter 3, there is some research indicating that the attitude of the resident parent is a factor in whether contact takes place or is maintained, although in our sample only 8% of respondents said that the resident parent had been mainly responsible for there never having

been any contact, or for it being delayed, sporadic or ceasing. Research by Trinder (Trinder et al, 2002; Trinder 2008) also suggests that where contact is taking place, active facilitation of contact by the resident parent is an important factor in making it ‘work’ rather than merely happen.

Active facilitation, or, ‘pro-active gate-opening’, is one of five maternal gate-keeping identified by Trinder, the other four being *contingent gate-opening*, *passive gatekeeping*, *justifiable gate-closing* and *pro-active gate-closing* (see chapter 3 for explanations of these terms). Since Trinder’s study was qualitative, she does not report what proportion of resident parents did actively facilitate contact or, in contrast, had engaged in ‘gate-closing’ behaviours (see chapter 3). She does, however, argue for future, quantitative research to establish their relative distribution. While our study was not set up to do this, we did include a question in the telephone survey about the extent to which one parent supported the child’s relationship with the other.

Those with continuous, delayed or sporadic contact were asked whether the resident parent had encouraged the child’s relationship with the non-resident parent. Just over half (56%) said they had done so ‘a lot’, with a further 28% saying they had ‘a little’ (table 4.13, overleaf). Only a few (20; 7%) said the resident parent had tried to undermine the relationship, although a further 9% were said not to have encouraged it ‘at all’. This suggests that, at least where some contact is taking place, gate-closing is not common (either 7% or 16% if we include those who selected the response ‘not at all’). Pro-active gate-opening – represented by the 56% of respondents who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ – is by far the dominant mode. It is harder to know whether those who selected ‘a bit’ represent Trinder’s passive gatekeepers and whether those who selected ‘not at all’ should be included. (Moreover, as reported in chapter 3, very few respondents thought that the resident parent was responsible for there never being any contact or for it ceasing or being interrupted and most of those who said they themselves had been responsible also said that the resident parent had tried to encourage them to have contact).

Interestingly our figures were very similar for those whose parents separated before and after the Children Act. The proportion saying the resident parent had encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ was exactly the same in both groups but the balance had shifted slightly away from the more negative choices. Of those whose parents separated post-Act 8% said the resident parent had not done anything to encourage the relationship and 7% that they had tried to undermine it, compared to 10% and 9% of those in pre-Act separation. Similarly, post-Act 29% were said to have encouraged the relationship ‘a bit’ compared to 26% pre-Act.

Table 4.13 RP’s encouragement of relationship with NRP by gender of RP

	A lot		A bit		Not at all		Tried to undermine it		
<i>Gender RP*</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Mother	138	57	68	28	22	9	16	7	(244)
Father	14	54	7	27	1	4	4	15	(26)
<i>All</i>	152	56	75	28	23	9	20	7	(270)

*Statistically significant $p=.000$

Trinder does not report whether there was a gender difference in behavioural patterns. In our study, similar proportions of resident mothers and fathers were said to have encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ or ‘a bit’, although more fathers were reported to have tried to undermine

it rather than merely not encouraging it at all (table 4.13). Whether or not the parents were previously married, or whether they had lived together, made no difference to whether the resident parent encouraged the relationship.

Like Trinder (2008) we found that the perceived attitude of the resident parent was closely related to the level of conflict in the parental relationship (table 4.14). Where no conflict was reported, 76% of resident parents were said to have encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ and only 2% to have tried to undermine it, compared to only 27% encouraging it where conflict was categorised as high and 22% trying to undermine it.

Table 4.14 RP’s encouragement of relationship with NRP by level of parental conflict

	A lot		A bit		Not at all		Tried to undermine		
<i>Level of conflict*</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
None	86	76	19	17	4	4	2	2	(111)
Low	42	53	28	35	6	8	3	4	(79)
Moderate	12	34	16	46	2	6	5	14	(35)
High	12	27	12	27	11	24	10	22	(45)
<i>All</i>	<i>152</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>75</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>(270)</i>

*Statistically significant <.01, correlation coefficient 0.389, Kendall’s tau

Domestic violence and/or fear of the other parent were also implicated. Over a third of those who said the resident parent had tried to undermine the relationship (7 of 20; 35%) reported either that there had been violent arguments or that the resident parent was afraid of their ex-partner. This proportion dropped to 30% who had done nothing to encourage the relationship (7 of 23); 27% of those who had encouraged it a bit (20 of 75) and only 11% who had encouraged it a lot (17 of 152) (table 4.15). Conversely, it was striking that, of the 51 respondents who said that there had been violent arguments or fear, 72% were said to have encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ (17; 33%) or ‘a bit’ (20; 39%), while only seven (14%) had tried to undermine it.

Table 4.15 RP’s encouragement of relationship by domestic violence/fear

	DV/fear*		No DV/fear		
<i>Encouragement</i>	No	%	No	%	(N=)
A lot	17	11	135	89	(152)
A bit	20	27	55	73	(75)
Not at all	7	30	16	70	(23)
Tried to undermine	7	35	13	65	(20)
<i>All</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>219</i>	<i>81</i>	<i>(270)</i>

*Statistically significant p<.01

There was also a statistically significant association between the extent to which the resident parent encouraged the relationship with the non-resident parent and whether there were concerns about the other parent’s care, although the pattern was not completely consistent. Thus, those who were said to have encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ were the least likely to have had worries about care (7 of 152; 5%). However 24% of those who had done so ‘a bit’ (18 of 75) did have such worries, almost as many as those who were said to tried to undermine the relationship and more than those who had not encouraged it at all (3 of 23; 13%). Moreover, the proportion of those worries which reflected serious welfare concerns was actually highest where the resident parent was said to have encouraged the relationship a lot (4 of 7, compared to 1 in 3 of those undermining it). This suggests that at least some of those

who had serious concerns but who were encouraging contact belonged to Trinder's 'contingent gate-openers' who tried to maintain contact despite their anxieties about the other parent's care (Trinder, 2008), a hypothesis borne out by some of our qualitative interviews.

Table 4.16 RP's encouragement of relationship by concerns about care

	Any serious concerns		No serious concerns		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	
<i>Encouragement</i>					
A lot	7	5	145	95	(152)
A bit	18	24	57	76	(75)
Not at all	3	13	20	87	(23)
Tried to undermine	5	25	15	75	(20)
<i>All</i>	33	12	237	88	(270)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$

In all, where resident parents who were said to have encouraged the relationship a lot, in 13% of cases there were either issues about domestic violence or specific concerns about the other parent's care. This rose to 28% of those who encouraged the relationship a bit, 30% who did not encourage it at all, and 35% of the few who were said to have tried to undermine it (table 4.17).

Table 4.17 RP's encouragement of relationship by domestic violence & specific welfare concerns

	DV or specific concerns		No DV/specific concerns		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	
<i>Encouragement</i>					
A lot	19	13	133	88	(152)
A bit	21	28	53	72	(74)
Not at all	7	30	16	70	(23)
Tried to undermine	7	35	13	65	(20)
<i>All</i>	54	20	215	80	(269)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$

Those who were older at the point their parents separated were also more likely to say that the resident parent had encouraged the relationship (table 4.18).

Table 4.18 RP's encouragement of relationship by respondent's age at separation

	A lot		A bit		Not at all		Tried to undermine		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Age</i>									
Less than 5 yrs old	43	48	30	34	10	11	6	7	(89)
5-12	81	59	35	26	9	7	12	9	(137)
13+	27	63	10	23	4	9	2	5	(43)
<i>All</i>	151	56	75	28	23	9	20	7	(269)

*Statistically significant $p < .05$

Finally, the pre-separation relationship between the child and the parent who subsequently became non-resident – a topic we report on in full in chapter 7 – was also relevant (table 4.19). Sixty-nine per cent of respondents who were able to remember the relationship and described it as very close, said that the resident parent had encouraged the post-separation relationship 'a lot' compared to 59% of those who described the pre-separation relationship as only 'fairly close' and less than 40% of those who said it was not very close or not at all close.

Table 4.19 RP's encouragement of relationship by pre-separation relationship child-NRP

	A lot		A bit		Not at all		Tried to undermine		
<i>Previous closeness*</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Very close	48	69	11	16	4	6	7	10	(70)
Fairly close	37	59	16	25	3	5	7	11	(63)
Not very close	8	31	13	50	4	15	1	4	(26)
Not at all close	3	38	3	38	1	13	1	13	(8)
<i>All</i>	<i>96</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>(167)</i>

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ Correlation coefficient .185, Kendall's tau

In 14 cases, however, the resident parent was said to have tried to undermine a relationship which was described as having been very or fairly close. It was notable that in nine of these the respondent had reported either that there had been domestic violence/fear of violence (5) or that the resident parent had had serious worries about the other parent's care (5). Of the five cases where there was no indication that such issues might explain the resident parent's behaviour, three had had continuous contact, while in two contact had been delayed. In all 14 cases there was a degree of conflict, with four having been categorised as moderate conflict and eight as high.

Respondents who had been in shared residence arrangements were asked whether each parent had encouraged their relationship with the other. While most said this had been the case (14 of 18; 78%), one said only their mother had done so and three said neither parent had. (Unfortunately for reasons of space we were unable to ask whether either parent had tried to undermine the other's relationship). Again this seemed to relate to the level of conflict, with seven of the eight people who said there had been no conflict reporting that each parent had encouraged the relationship with the other compared to only three of the six people who reported moderate or high conflict. There was no relationship with the child's age at separation, the previous marital status of the parents or whether or not either parent had serious concerns about the other's parenting.

Summary

There is now a great deal of research on the negative impact of parental conflict on children and on the link between the parental relationship after separation and contact between the child and the non-resident parent. The findings presented in this chapter on the incidence of conflict are in some respects quite positive. Although we did not ask questions about the parental relationship in cases where there had never been any contact, or where contact had ceased, of the rest, two in five respondents (121 of 292; 41%) said that, post-separation, their parents had exhibited no bad feeling towards each other, did not argue much and there was no violence between them or fear of violence. Moreover, only a small minority reported extremely high levels of conflict – defined as a lot of bad feeling combined with either severe/quite severe arguments and/or domestic violence or fear of violence.

Nonetheless, more than half (171 of 292; 59%) were exposed to a degree of parental conflict.

- 19% said there was 'some bad feeling' between their parents; 15% that the relationship was 'very up and down' and 19% that there was 'a lot of bad feeling';
- 31% said there had been 'much arguing';
- 15% reported very or quite severe parental arguments;
- 26% said they had been caught up in parental arguments, with 9% saying this had happened 'a lot';

- 19% said either that there had been violent arguments between their parents (11%) or that one parent had been afraid of being physically harmed by the other (17%).

As one would expect, given the established link between the parental relationship and whether contact happens and its frequency, the incidence and extent of parental conflict was highest where contact had been delayed or sporadic. Thus only around a quarter of these groups (25% and 26% respectively) were categorised as no conflict compared to 52% of those whose contact was continuous. Similarly, while only 7% of those with continuous contact were placed in the high conflict group, this rose to 26% of those whose contact had been sporadic and 35% where contact had been delayed.

In many cases, however, contact was sustained without interruption even where the parents were conflicted, although, as we shall show later in this report, that does not mean that it was a positive experience for the children. Almost half of those with continuous contact (48%) were exposed to some conflict, and 14% to moderate or high conflict. The incidence was even higher among those who said their main experience had been shared residence, 56% of whom reported conflict between their parents, with 33% being categorised as moderate (22%) or high (11%) conflict.

Indeed, four of the shared residence respondents (22%) said that at least one of their parents had had serious worries about the other parent's care. Moreover, all four of them said that the concerns related to specific issues such as substance abuse, mental illness or possible child maltreatment, rather than a general lack of trust, and all four said that the concerns were either wholly (2) or partly (2) justified. There were even a few continuous contact cases where such concerns were reported about the non-resident parent (6%) and although only three respondents (2%) said the worries related to specific issues, all three said they were completely justified.

Contact/shared residence could also be sustained where domestic violence was an issue. Four respondents who said their main arrangement had been shared residence (22%) said that there had either been violent arguments or fear of the other parent, as did 9% of those who had had continuous contact. Indeed 10% of those with continuous contact, and 39% (7 of 18) of the shared residence group, reported either specific worries about the other parent's care or domestic violence/fear.

As one would expect, however, where such concerns existed, contact was more likely to be interrupted. In the sporadic group 40% said either that the non-resident parent had had specific concerns about the other parent's care (12%) or that there had been violence/fear of violence (36%). In the delayed group the proportion was 31%, with almost all the issues being around domestic violence (31%) and only 2% citing specific welfare concerns.

The data presented in this chapter highlights an emerging theme in the research, that resident parents were much more likely to play a facilitative than an obstructive role in relation to contact. It was noted in chapter 3 that only 8% of respondents said that the resident parent had been mainly responsible for there never having been any contact, or for it being delayed, sporadic or ceasing. In this chapter it was found that where contact was on-going (i.e. continuous, delayed or sporadic) only 7% of resident parents (20 of 270) were said to have tried to undermine the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent. Indeed almost eight times as many (152; 56%) were said to have encouraged the relationship 'a lot' while a further 28% had done so 'a bit'. Those with continuous contact were most likely to

report the resident parent had encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ (68% compared to 42% of those with delayed contact and 35% with sporadic contact) and least likely to report they had not encouraged it at all or had tried to undermine it (9% compared to 22% and 34%).

The reported attitude of the resident parent was significantly associated with a number of factors: the level of conflict in the parental relationship; whether domestic violence was an issue or the resident parent had serious worries about the other parent’s care; the age of the child at separation and the closeness of the pre-separation relationship between the child and the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent.

The importance of the pre-separation relationship between the respondent and the (future) non-resident parent is another emerging theme in this research. In chapter 2 it was noted that those with continuous contact were more likely to say the relationship had been very close than those whose contact had been disrupted or who had never had any contact. In this chapter we reported that 69% of those who were able to remember the previous relationship and said it had been very close, said that, post-separation, the resident parent had encouraged their relationship with the non-resident parent ‘a lot’, compared to 59% of those who described it as ‘fairly close’ and less than 40% of those who said it was not very close or not at all close. Analysis of the few cases in which the resident parent was said to have tried to undermine a relationship which was described as having been very or fairly close indicates that in nine of the 14 the respondent said either that domestic violence had been an issue or that the resident parent had had serious concerns about the non-resident parent’s care, while in all 14 there was parental conflict.

Parental relationships in the shared residence group emerged as quite polarised. Just over half (10 of 18) of these respondents reported that both parents had encouraged the relationship with the other, there were low levels of conflict, if any, neither parent had concerns about each other’s parenting and there were no issues about domestic violence. In the rest, however, it was very different. Seven reported domestic violence or specific concerns about parenting, six moderate or high conflict, and four that only one parent, or neither, had supported the child’s relationship with the other parent.

Chapter 5 Contact: regularity and quantity

The constraints of a brief telephone interview meant that we were unable to ask more than a few questions about the details of the arrangements. It was also impossible to attempt to capture changes over time. We therefore had to adopt a broad-brush approach.

Regularity of contact

Quantitative research on contact typically focuses on frequency. The regularity of contact, however, and therefore its predictability, may also be an important dimension (Dunn et al, 2004; Smith et al, 2001). Respondents who had continuous contact with their resident parent were therefore asked which of a set of statements *best* described the contact arrangements they had had, while those whose contact had either been delayed or ceased were asked which *best* described the contact they had had while it was occurring.

As can be seen from table 5.1, almost two-fifths of these respondents (93; 37%) said that there had been no set arrangements. This was fairly unusual where contact had been continuous (22%) but applied to the majority of those whose contact had either been delayed or ceased (72% and 66% respectively; table 5.2). Where there had been set arrangements, those whose contact had been delayed or ceased were also more likely than those with continuous contact to say that there had been little or no flexibility (23% and 33% respectively, compared to 3%). However overall, only a tiny minority of respondents appeared to have had very rigid arrangements throughout.

Table 5.1 Best description of contact arrangements*

	No	%
I usually saw my NRP on particular days and times but it was fairly flexible	85	34
I usually saw my NRP on particular days and times & there was little or no flexibility	12	5
There were set arrangements which became more flexible as I got older	59	24
There were no set arrangements	93	37
(N=)	(249)	

*Continuous, delayed or ceased contact only

Table 5.2 Flexibility of contact arrangements by contact pattern*

	Contact pattern					
	Continuous		Delayed		Ceased	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Fairly flexible set arrangements	77	47	2	4	6	15
Little/no flexibility	4	3	3	7	5	13
Flexibility increased with age	47	29	8	17	4	10
No set arrangements	36	22	33	72	24	66
(N=)	(164)		(46)		(39)	

*Continuous, delayed or ceased contact only

Respondents who reported that contact had been sporadic were presented with a slightly different set of statements and asked which best described their experience a) regular contact interrupted by one or more gaps b) irregular with gaps or c) very occasional and unpredictable. As reported in chapter 2, only 40% said that contact had been regular.

Thus, of all those who ever had contact, more than two in five (42%; 128 of 307) did not have regular arrangements. This proportion was slightly higher amongst those whose parents

had separated since the Children Act 1989 (43%, 86 of 201, compared to 40 of 104; 38%). Although the data are not equivalent, this echoes the finding in Lader's cross-sectional study (2008) that 43% of resident parents reported no set arrangements. Dunn's study (2004) appeared to find a much lower figure, with only 10% of those who were having contact seeing their non-resident fathers less than once a month and irregularly and 7% more than once a month but irregularly.

Frequency of contact

All those who had had any contact (continuous, sporadic, delayed or ceased) were asked about its frequency. Again we adopted a broad brush approach, asking respondents '*during school terms, what was the most you would see the parent you did not live with in an average month*', the available responses all being expressed in terms of the number of days on which contact took place. In doing so we hoped to reduce the risk, highlighted by Fabricius (Fabricius, 2012) associated with the more commonly used measures such as weekly, fortnightly etc, where, for example, respondents with two days contact every two weeks might describe this as either fortnightly – since contact only occurred every two weeks, or weekly, since it occurred on two days out of every 14.

The largest single group (86 of 311; 28%) comprised those who said they saw their non-resident parent on more than six days in an average month (table 5.3). A further 16% selected 5-6 days. At the other end of the spectrum, 21% chose less than once and 16% 1-2 days.

Although it is impossible to compare these figures with other data they do reflect the findings of cross-sectional research that there is a very wide range of contact frequencies and that some children see their non-resident parent very frequently (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003; Dunn, 2003; Ermisch et al, 2011; Lader, 2008; Lodge and Alexander, 2010; Peacey and Haux, 2007; Smith et al, 2001). Peacey and Haux, for instance, report that 11% of those having contact were seeing the non-resident parent every day, and 49% once a week. Blackwell and Dawe report that 49% of non-resident fathers saw their child at least weekly and 8% daily. Lodge and Alexander's study of adolescents found that almost half saw the non-resident parent at least once a week.

Table 5.3 Number of days per month on which contact took place

Days per month	Pre-Act separations		Post-Act separation		All	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
>6	28	26	58	29	86	28
5-6	13	12	36	18	49	16
3-4	24	22	36	18	60	19
1-2	14	13	36	18	50	16
<1	29	27	35	17	64	21
(N=)	(108)		(201)		(309)	

The findings also provide further evidence of change over time, supporting the picture built up through a series of research studies (see Pryor and Rodgers, 2001) that children may be seeing their non-resident parents more frequently now than in the past. It was earlier noted (chapter 2), that far fewer respondents whose parents separated after implementation of the Children Act said that they had never had any contact and more reported sustained contact. Our findings also show that, of those who did have contact, more of those in the post-Act group were seeing the non-resident parent on at least five days in an average month (47%

compared to 38%) and fewer were having minimal contact (only 17% said contact was less than once a month, compared to 27%) (table 5.3).

Variation by contact pattern

There was a clear difference, however, in the frequency of contact between those whose contact was continuous and the rest (table 5.4). Almost two-thirds of the continuous group reported seeing their non-resident parent on at least five days in an average month (and 45% said it was more than 6 days). None of the other groups came anywhere near this level (25% sporadic; 16% delayed, and 13% ceased). Those with continuous contact were also least likely to report the lowest frequency, only 22% saying contact had been on no more than one or two days in an average month, whereas the proportions in the other groups ranged from 55% to 74%.

Table 5.4 Frequency of contact by contact pattern** (those who had ever had contact)

	Continuous		Sporadic		Delayed		Ceased		Total	
Days per month*	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
>6	74	45	7	12	4	8	1	3	86	28
5-6	34	21	8	13	4	8	4	10	50	16
3-4	33	20	12	20	10	21	5	13	60	19
1-2	11	7	21	34	10	21	8	21	50	16
<1	11	7	13	21	20	42	21	53	65	21
(N=)	(163)		(61)		(48)		(39)		(311)	

* Number of days on which contact took place per month

** Statistically significant $p=.000$

Irrespective of the pattern of contact, interestingly, respondents whose parents separated after the Children Act generally reported higher levels of contact than the others. Where contact had been continuous the differences were small – 63% of the pre-Act group reported contact on five or more days a month and 9% on less than one day, compared to 68% and 9% respectively post-Act. The differences were rather more marked in some of the rest, particularly in relation to the proportion of respondents seeing their non-resident parent less than once a month, which dropped from 83% to 23% in the ceased group and 48% to 35% in the delayed group (although where contact had been sporadic it actually rose from 18% to 23%). At the other end of the scale the proportion having contact on five or more days rose from 14% to 19% in the delayed group, 23% to 26% in the sporadic, and from 0% to 19% in the ceased.

Other factors associated with the frequency of contact

Previous research has identified a range of factors associated with the frequency of contact – although typically cases where there is no contact are either excluded, or not separated out. According to Pryor and Rodgers (2001) the factors on which most studies agree are: the post-separation relationship between parents; the distance between the households and socio-economic factors such as employment status and educational level; payment of child support; the child's age at the time of the separation; and the pre-separation relationship status of the parents. Our data from the telephone survey allowed us to examine three of these: the parent's previous relationship status; the child's age at separation; and the degree of post-separation conflict between the parents. We also examined one factor which does not appear to receive much attention in the literature - the closeness of the child's pre-separation relationship with the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent.

Previous relationship status of the parents

The findings from our telephone survey initially did suggest that the previous relationship status of the parents made some difference to the frequency of contact: respondents whose parents had been married were most likely to report the highest levels of contact and least likely to report the lowest, the position being reversed for the small number whose parents had never lived together. However it was not statistically significant and, when only those with continuous contact were considered, the differences between the previously married and cohabiting group reduced and while none of the three people whose parents had never lived together said they had had contact on more than six days a month, neither did any of them report contact at less than 3-4 days a month (table 5.5).

Table 5.5 Frequency of contact by previous marital status of parents

	Number of days per month on which contact took place					
	>6	5-6	3-4	1-2	<1	(N=)
<i>Any contact*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Married	30	16	20	16	19	(257)
Cohabited	22	16	16	16	31	(45)
Neither	0	13	25	25	38	(8)
Total	28	16	19	16	21	(310)
<i>Continuous contact</i>						
Married	47	20	21	6	7	(139)
Cohabited	43	24	10	14	10	(21)
Neither	0	33	67	0	0	(3)
Total	46	21	20	7	7	(163)

*Excludes those who never had any contact

Age at separation

Across the whole sample of those who had ever had contact, frequency was related to the age of the respondent at the separation, with those under five at the time least likely to report the highest levels and most likely to report the lowest, a statistically significant difference (table 5.6). When only those with continuous contact were considered, however, while the trend was still apparent, it was no longer statistically significant.

Table 5.6 Frequency of contact by respondent's age at parental separation

	Number of days on which contact occurred per month					
<i>Age at separation</i>	>6	5-6	3-4	1-2	<1	
<i>Any contact*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	(N=)
<5	18	10	26	16	29	(106)
5-12	33	18	15	16	18	(158)
13+	33	22	20	17	9	(46)
Total**	27	16	19	16	21	(310)
<i>Continuous contact</i>						
<5	34	18	30	7	11	(44)
5-12	51	22	15	6	6	(86)
13+	46	21	21	9	3	(33)
Total	45	21	20	7	7	(163)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ **Excludes those who never had any contact

Parental conflict

Similarly, overall, for those who were having contact at the point they reached 18, the level of parental conflict had a statistically significant association with the frequency of contact

(table 5.7). However, as noted in chapter 2, parental conflict was linked with the pattern of contact (continuous, delayed, or sporadic) and when only those with continuous contact were considered, it no longer proved statistically significant. While those reporting no conflict were most likely to report having contact on more than six days a month (45 of 112; 50%) over a third of those reporting moderate or high conflict (9 of 24; 38%) were also having contact at this level.

Table 5.7 Frequency of contact by parental conflict level

	Number of days per month on which contact took place					
	>6	5-6	3-4	1-2	<1	(N=)
<i>Any contact*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
No conflict	40	15	18	12	15	(112)
Low conflict	33	21	23	15	9	(80)
Moderate conflict	23	14	14	20	27	(35)
High conflict	13	16	27	22	22	(45)
Total						
<i>Continuous contact</i>						
No conflict	50	18	18	7	7	(84)
Low conflict	42	24	24	6	6	(55)
Moderate conflict	42	25	25	0	8	(12)
High conflict	33	25	17	17	8	(12)
Total	45	21	20	7	7	(163)

*Statistically significant $p < .05$

The pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent

Although there is some research on the links between paternal involvement pre-separation and the frequency of contact post-separation, it is somewhat contradictory. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) write of 'divorce-activated' and 'divorce de-activated' fathers, while Smart and Neale (1999) and Simpson et al (1995) report some fathers becoming more involved with their children after separation than before. Indeed Kruk (1991) found an inverse relationship, reporting strong pre-separation attachments in those who withdrew from the relationship after separation. In contrast, a meta-analysis of research on children whose parents separated before they were five years old found that fathers' pre-separation involvement was a predictor of both contact frequency and the quality of the post-separation relationship between the parent and the child (Whiteside and Becker, 2001).

We have already noted (chapter 2) that respondents who had had continuous contact were more likely to report very close pre-separation relationships than those who never had any contact or whose contact had been discontinuous. Our findings also indicate that there was a link between the closeness of that relationship and the frequency of contact, where it occurred. Indeed it was the clearest association of all the factors tested. Sixty-nine per cent of those reporting a very close relationship pre-separation had contact on at least five days in an average month. In contrast only 17% of those who said their relationship had not been very close had contact at this level (table 5.8).

The pre-separation relationship, moreover, proved to be statistically significant even when only cases with continuous contact were analysed. Sixty per cent of this group who said they had had a very close relationship with the contact parent prior to parental separation reported contact on more than six days a month, compared to only 37% of those whose relationship had been only fairly close, 25% where it had not been very close and neither of the two

respondents who said they had not been at all close. Respondents with very close previous relationships were also least likely to have very low levels of contact.

Table 5.8 Frequency of contact by pre-separation relationship with NRP

	Number of days on which contact occurred per month					
<i>Pre-separation relationship</i>	>6	5-6	3-4	1-2	<1	
<i>Any contact*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Very close	46	23	12	6	13	(78)
Fairly close	25	26	15	18	16	(73)
Not very close	10	7	33	30	20	(30)
Not at all close	0	0	22	33	44	(9)
Too young to remember	24	9	23	16	28	(120)
<i>All</i>	28	16	19	16	21	(310)
<i>Continuous contact**</i>						
Very close	60	25	10	4	2	(52)
Fairly close	37	32	20	7	5	(41)
Not very close	25	8	42	17	8	(12)
Not at all close	0	0	50	50	0	(2)
Too young to remember	46	13	26	4	13	(55)
<i>All</i>	46	21	20	6	7	(162)

*Statistically significant $p=.000$ **Statistically significant $<.01$

Overnight stays

As Cashmore and colleagues point out, (2008) although the risks and benefits of overnight stays for very young children is a hotly debated issue which has attracted some research (Altenhofen et al, 2010; McIntosh et al, 2010; Pruett et al, 2004; Solomon and George, 1999) there is only limited data relating to their value for older children. Clearly, however, there are substantial differences between staying with a non-resident parent and just visiting: the time spent together is not only likely to be longer but to include more ‘normal’ activities; it encourages children to feel they have two homes and provides more opportunities for forging strong relationships (Lamb and Kelly, 2001, 2009; Parkinson and Smyth, 2003; Warshak, 2000). An Australian study on the adolescent offspring of separated parents (Cashmore et al, 2008) reports that those who stayed overnight more than one night every other weekend reported more involvement by, and a closer relationship with, their non-resident parent than those who did so less often or not at all. The association was significant independently of the overall frequency of contact and the quality of the parental relationship. As the authors point out, of course, this finding is open to competing explanations about the direction of effect. Brinig (2005), however, found that the frequency of overnight stays was not linked to any differences in children’s well-being.

To our knowledge, none of the research with young adults has specifically examined the question of overnight stays, although there is perhaps some indication of their relevance to the quality of the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent in a small study by Janning and colleagues (2010). This found that the quality of the ‘personal space’ the child had at each house was related to the quality of the relationship: where children had a

personalised space at both houses (which one might hypothesise is more likely where the child stays overnight) their relationship with each of their parents was equally close.

In our study, almost three-quarters of the respondents to the telephone survey said they had stayed overnight with the non-resident parent at least sometimes and just over a third had done so regularly. Somewhat surprisingly, in contrast to our data indicating more contact where the parental separation had occurred after the Children Act 1989, the proportion saying they had *never* stayed overnight was higher in the later separations (28%, 56 of 202, compared to 21%, 23 of 109). This figure chimes with cross-sectional national data (Lader, 2008) reporting that, in 2007, between 26% and 30% of children never had overnight stays and also with data from *Understanding Society* (Ermisch et al, 2011), in which 31% of children never stayed overnight. We also found that the proportion staying regularly was higher pre-Act (39%, 43 of 109, compared to 31%, 62 of 202). Moreover, the pattern was the same across all the contact patterns – continuous, delayed or sporadic – with the exception of respondents whose contact had ceased, who were more likely to have overnights and regular overnights if their parents had separated post-implementation of the Act. Nor was the unexpected finding adequately explained by age differences in the profile of the pre and post-Act samples. Because of the construction of our sample, the post-Act separation group included those whose parents had separated when the respondents were teenagers and the pre-Act group did not. Previous research (see below) suggests this group are least likely to stay overnight. However, even when only the respondents who were younger at separation are considered, the pattern remained.

Table 5.9 Pattern of contact by overnight stays

<i>Pattern of contact</i>	Regularly		Occasionally		Never		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Continuous	85	52	53	32	27	16	(165)
Sporadic	9	15	33	55	18	30	(60)
Delayed	6	13	29	60	13	27	(48)
Ceased	6	15	12	30	22	55	(40)
<i>All</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>127</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>(313)</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact and shared residence

** Statistically significant p=.000

Table 5.10 Overnight stays by pattern of contact

<i>Stayed overnight</i>	Continuous		Sporadic		Delayed		Ceased		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Regularly	85	80	9	9	6	6	6	6	(106)
Occasionally	53	42	33	26	29	23	12	9	(127)
Never	27	34	18	23	13	16	22	28	(80)
<i>All</i>	<i>165</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>(313)</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact and shared residence. **Statistically significant p=.00

Overall, those who had had continuous contact were most likely to report having regular overnight stays with the non-resident parent (52% compared to between 13% and 15% in the other groups) and only 16% said they had never stayed overnight compared to 27%, 30% and 55% (table 5.9). This would seem to support the findings of previous research (Gibson, 1992, cited in Cashmore et al, 2008, and Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992) that contact which included overnight stays was more likely to be sustained than daytime only contact. As can be seen from table 5.10, 80% of those who reported regular overnight stays also had uninterrupted

contact. This dropped to 42% of those said they had only stayed occasionally and 34% who had never stayed. Again, however, caution is needed in assuming the direction of effect. Since contact is more likely to be sustained when it is going well, and respondents who are enjoying contact are probably more likely to want to stay overnight, regularity of overnights may simply reflect those conditions rather than, in itself, leading to contact being maintained.

As one would expect, those with more frequent contact were more likely to report overnight stays (table 5.11), both across the whole sample of those who had ever had contact and those whose contact had been continuous.

Table 5.11 Overnight stays by frequency of contact

	Pattern of overnight stays						
<i>No of days with contact per month</i>	Regular		Occasional		Never		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Any contact*</i>							
>6	60	70	15	17	11	13	(86)
5-6	23	47	19	39	7	14	(49)
3-4	15	25	37	62	8	13	(60)
1-2	5	10	26	52	19	38	(50)
<1	2	3	29	45	34	52	(65)
Total	105	34	126	41	79	26	(310)
<i>Continuous contact only*</i>							
>6	52	70	12	16	10	14	(74)
5-6	18	53	11	32	5	15	(34)
3-4	10	30	19	58	4	12	(33)
1-2	3	27	4	36	4	36	(11)
<1	1	9	6	55	4	36	(11)
Total	84	52	52	32	27	17	(163)

*Statistically significant $p=.000$

Factors associated with overnight stays

Previous research has found one or more of the following factors to be associated with overnight stays: the age of the child; the quality of the current parental relationship, the non-resident parent's financial status and living circumstances; the non-resident parent's pre-separation involvement with the child; distance between the two homes; the resident parent's confidence in the non-resident parent's parenting abilities; the attitude of each parent; the previous marital status of the parents and whether they have re-partnered; (Cashmore et al, 2008; Caruana and Smyth, 2004; Cooksey and Craig, 1998; Maccoby and Mnookin, 1992; Parkinson and Smyth, 2003).

Age at separation

Across our whole sample of those who ever had any contact, overnights were associated with the age of the child at separation, being most likely for those aged between five and 12, 40% of whom reported regular stays, with only 18% never staying. In contrast 32% of those under five and 34% of those over 12 never stayed and only 29% and 26% stayed regularly (table 5.12). The difference between the 5-12 group and both the others just reached statistical significance ($p<.05$).

However this was clearly affected by the continuity of contact. For those with continuous contact there was little difference between the younger groups. The statistically significant difference was between those who were teenagers at the point their parents separated and those who were younger (table 5.12). Twenty-nine per cent of the former group said they had never had an overnight stay and only 35% had stayed regularly. The limited amount of international data gives a rather similar picture of overnight stays being less common in adolescence, although the proportions vary (for example 26% in one Australian study [Cashmore et al, 2008]; between 45% and 57% in another [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, cited Cashmore et al, 2008]; to 60% in a U.S. study [Stewart, 2003]).

Table 5.12 Overnight stays by age at separation

	Regular		Occasional		Never		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Age (years)</i>							
<i>Any contact*</i>							
<5	31	29	42	39	34	32	(107)
5-12	63	40	66	42	29	18	(158)
13+	12	26	19	40	16	34	(47)
<i>All</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>127</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>312</i>
<i>Continuous contact only**</i>							
<5	24	55	13	30	7	16	(44)
5-12	49	56	28	32	10	12	(87)
13+	12	35	12	35	10	29	(34)
<i>All</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>(165)</i>

*The difference between the 5-12 group and both other groups was statistically significant $p < .05$

**The difference between the teenagers and the other groups was statistically significant $p < .05$

The post-separation parental relationship

Across the whole sample, as previous studies have found, the relationship between the parents proved to be important. When respondents reported a conflict-free relationship almost half had had regular overnight stays, compared to only 18% where there was high conflict, and only 20% said they had never stayed (compared to 32%) (table 5.13).

Table 5.13 Overnight stays by parental conflict level

	Regular		Occasional		Never		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
<i>Any contact*</i>							
No conflict	53	47	38	34	22	20	(113)
Low conflict	28	35	37	46	16	20	(81)
Moderate conflict	11	31	18	51	6	17	(35)
High conflict	8	18	22	50	14	32	(44)
<i>Continuous contact only</i>							
No conflict	48	57	21	25	16	19	(85)
Low conflict	25	45	23	41	8	14	(56)
Moderate conflict	8	67	3	25	1	8	(12)
High conflict	3	33	6	50	2	17	(12)
<i>Total</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>(165)</i>

*Statistically significant $p < .05$

However when only those with continuous contact were compared, no clear pattern emerged: regular overnights were most common among those who reported moderate conflict and the proportion who had never stayed was highest where there was no conflict. Other factors, therefore, appeared to be coming into play.

The pre-separation relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent

Similarly, the previous relationship between the child and the non-resident parent was also statistically significant across the whole sample (table 5.14). The proportion having regular overnights was greatest for those who said they had been very close (46%), only 19% of whom said they had never stayed overnight. In contrast none of those who said they had not been at all close said they had had regularly stayed and 44% had never stayed.

Table 5.14 Overnight stays by pre-separation relationship with NRP.

Pre-separation relationship	Overnight stays						
	Regular		Occasional		Never		
Any contact*	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Very close	36	46	27	35	15	19	(78)
Fairly close	24	33	34	47	15	21	(73)
Not very close	7	23	14	45	10	32	(31)
Not at all close	0	0	5	56	4	44	(9)
Continuous contact							
Very close	29	56	12	23	11	21	(52)
Fairly close	20	48	17	41	5	12	(42)
Not very close	6	46	4	31	3	23	(13)
Not at all close	0	0	1	50	1	50	(2)

*Statistically significant $p < .05$

However, of those with continuous contact, while those with previously very close relationships were still most likely to have had regular overnights (56% compared to 46% of those who had not been very close and neither of the two people who had not been at all close), the proportion never to have stayed was no longer the lowest. Moreover, that proportion (21%) was very similar to the proportion who had not been very close (23%)

Parents' previous marital status

Table 5.15 Overnight stays by previous marital status of respondents' parents

<i>Marital status</i>	Regular		Occasional		Never		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Married	92	36	104	40	62	24	(258)
Cohabited	13	28	20	44	13	28	(46)
Never lived together	1	13	2	25	5	63	(8)
<i>Total</i>	<i>106</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>(312)</i>
<i>Marital status</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
<i>Continuous contact only</i>							
Married	73	52	44	31	23	16	(140)
Cohabited	11	50	8	36	3	14	(22)
Never lived together	1	33	1	33	1	33	(3)
<i>Total</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>(165)</i>

Regular overnights were only marginally more likely where the parents had previously been married (table 5.15), and the difference disappeared for those who had continuous contact.

Gender

There was no difference between male and female respondents as to whether they ever had overnight stays or whether these were regular. Respondents were however, less likely both to have overnights and regular overnights if their mother was the non-resident parent, although this was not statistically significant. Thirty-five per cent of respondents stayed regularly with their non-resident fathers and only 25% had never stayed overnight. In contrast only 21% had stayed regularly with their non-resident mother and 36% had never done so. To some extent this is likely to reflect the finding reported in chapter 4 that more resident fathers than mothers had concerns about the capacity of the other parent to care, since overnights and regular overnights were less likely in those circumstances. Thus where there were no worries about care, 38% of respondents had regular overnights and only 21% had never stayed, compared to 18% and 29%). However while the association between concerns and overnights is consistent in relation to non-resident fathers, 43% of those who never stayed overnight with their non-resident mothers (9 of 21) said there were no worries about care.

Satisfaction with the level of contact

Even where children are having contact with their non-resident parents, many studies report a proportion wanting more (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Butler et al, 2003; Cockett and Tripp, 1995; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Funder, 1996; Lodge and Alexander, 2010; McDonald, 1990; Mitchell, 1985; Smith et al, 2001; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). One UK study (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001) gives a figure of one in four; another (Smith et al, 2001) 38% definitely wanting more contact and 17% giving a 'qualified positive response to the question; an earlier UK study (Cockett and Tripp, 1995) reports half wanting more contact. Research with young adults also reports a longing for greater father involvement (Ahrons, 2004; Fabricius and Hall, 2000; Finley and Schwartz, 2007; Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000; Marquardt, 2005; Schwartz and Finley, 2005). Laumann-Billings and Emery found that almost 50% of the young adults in their study wished that the non-resident parent had spent more time with them, while Finley and Schwartz report that the 'vast majority' wanted more father involvement than they had had.

In our telephone survey a certain level of dissatisfaction with the level of contact emerged in response to one of the final questions in the survey: 'knowing what you know now, if you were ever to be a separated parent, would you hope to handle the arrangements for your children a) pretty much as your parents did b) rather differently c) very differently?' Those who did not say they would do things pretty much as their parents had (242) were asked what they would do differently, of whom 222 made at least one relevant suggestion. More than half these comments related to the quantitative aspects of contact, principally: ensuring that contact happened (70; 31%); that the child had more contact than they had had (29; 13%); or that contact time was equally divided (13; 6%). Overall, however, only 11% said that they would make sure their child had more contact than they had had.

Other data, however, indicates that this under-estimates the proportion who would have liked more contact themselves. Immediately after the specific questions about the pattern and frequency of contact respondents were asked what they thought of this, the options offered being 'about right', 'too little', 'too much' and 'would have preferred none'.

Sixty per cent of those who had ever had contact (186 of 312) said that they had had enough contact. Indeed a few said they had had too much and 26 (8%) that they would rather not have had any contact at all (table 5.16). The proportion who said they would have liked more was lower among those whose parents separated after the Children Act 1989 (77 of 202, 38%; compared to 44% of those involved in earlier separations, 48 of 108), which chimes with the findings reported earlier of higher levels of contact in the post-Act group. Nonetheless, they still constitute a substantial minority.

Table 5.16 Satisfaction with level of contact by contact pattern

	About right		Too much		Too little		Prefer none		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Continuous	115	70	3	2	44	27	2	1	(164)
Sporadic	15	25	0	0	41	67	5	8	(61)
Delayed	15	31	1	2	26	54	6	13	(48)
Ceased	11	28	0	0	15	39	13	33	(39)
<i>All</i>	<i>156</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>126</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>(312)</i>

It was evident, however, that the level of satisfaction was linked to the continuity of contact (table 5.16). Respondents whose contact had not been continuous were most likely to say they would have liked more contact, ranging from 39% where contact had ceased to 67% where it had been sporadic. In comparison, only 27% of those whose contact had been continuous said this. Some of the desire for more contact, therefore, may well reflect this discontinuity, rather than specifically frequency. Smith and colleagues (2001) also found that those who had regular, frequent contact were more likely than other children to think the level of contact was about right.

Indeed, those with continuous contact were the only group in which there was a statistically significant association between the desire for more contact and the level of contact. Only 14% of those who saw their non-resident parent on more than six days in an average month said they would have liked more contact (table 5.17). This rose to over half of those who had contact less than once a month, with the level of dissatisfaction being about the same (36%-40%) for the remaining frequencies. It is important to note, however, that apart from the group having very limited contact, at each level of frequency a majority of respondents thought the level of contact was 'about right'.

Table 5.17 Those wanting more contact by number of days contact per month & contact pattern*

	Continuous**		Sporadic		Delayed		Ceased		Any contact***	
<i>Days per month</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
>6	10	14	3	43	1	25	0	0	14	16
5-6	13	38	6	86	1	25	2	50	22	45
3-4	12	36	8	67	5	56	1	33	26	46
1-2	4	40	15	83	7	70	4	67	30	68
<1	5	56	9	75	12	80	7	64	33	70
<i>All</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>73</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>44</i>
(N=)	(160)		(56)		(42)		(25)		(283)	

* Excludes cases where respondent said they would have preferred no contact at all

Statistically significant $p=.000$ * Statistically significant $p<.05$

Respondents were more likely to be satisfied with the level of contact if they had regular overnight stays - 79%, compared to only 42% where there had been only occasional stays and 31% where there had been none. For every contact pattern, when those who would have preferred no contact are taken out, those who had had regular overnight stays were most satisfied with the level of contact (table 5.18).

Table 5.18 Those wanting more contact by overnight stays and contact pattern

	Continuous		Sporadic		Delayed		Ceased		Any contact	
<i>Overnight stays</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Regular	16	19	3	33	2	40	3	50	24	23
Occasional	18	35	25	78	18	67	3	43	64	55
Never	10	37	12	86	6	60	9	69	37	58

* Excludes cases where respondent said they would have preferred no contact at all

Across the whole sample of those who had ever had contact (excluding those who said they would have preferred no contact at all) satisfaction was associated with whether or not there had been set arrangements for contact (table 5.19). However, when account was taken of the continuity of contact there was no consistent difference (table 5.20) and the only one which (just) reached statistical significance, was where contact had ceased. Indeed, where contact had been continuous, those who said there had been no set arrangements were actually slightly more likely to say that the level of contact was 'about right' (89 of 127; 70%; compared to 25 of 34; 74%).

Table 5.19 Satisfaction with level of contact by whether set arrangements*

	About right		Too much		Too little		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Set arrangements**	106	63	3	2	60	36	(169)
No set arrangements	46	42	1	1	63	57	(110)

* Excludes cases where respondent said they would have preferred no contact at all

** Statistically significant $p < .01$

Table 5.20 Satisfaction with level of contact by whether set arrangements and contact pattern*

	About right		Too much		Too little		
<i>Contact pattern</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
<i>Continuous</i>							
Set arrangements	89	70	3	2	35	28	(127)
No set arrangements	25	74	0	0	9	27	(34)
<i>Ceased**</i>							
Set arrangements	6	75	0	0	2	25	(8)
No set arrangements	5	29	0	0	14	71	(17)
<i>Delayed</i>							
Set arrangements	4	33	0	0	8	67	(12)
No set arrangements	10	35	1	3	25	63	(28)
<i>Sporadic</i>							
Set arrangements	7	32	0	0	15	68	(22)
No set arrangements	6	19	0	0	25	81	(31)

* Excludes cases where respondent said they would have preferred no contact at all

** Statistically significant $p < .05$

Overall young men and young women were almost equally satisfied with the level of contact they had had (51% men, 49% women), with 41% and 40% saying it had been insufficient and 8% and 9% that they wished they had not had any (table 5.21). Those in paternal residence were less satisfied than those living with their mothers (39% compared to 51%) with 57% saying there was insufficient contact (compared to only 39%) and only 4% preferring no contact (compared to 9%). The least satisfied group were young men living with their fathers, only 29% of whom were happy with the amount of contact they had had with their mothers, with 64% wanting more contact and 7% saying they would have preferred none.

Table 5.21 Satisfaction with contact by gender

	About right		Too much		Too little		Prefer none		
<i>Gender of respondent</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Male	70	51	56	41	1	<1	11	8	(138)
Female	86	49	70	40	3	2	15	9	(174)
<i>Living with</i>									
Mother	145	51	110	39	4	1	25	9	(284)
Father	11	39	16	57	0	0	1	4	(28)
Male living with mother	66	53	47	38	1	<1	10	8	(124)
Female living with mother	79	49	63	39	3	2	15	9	(160)
Male living with father	4	29	9	64	0	0	1	7	(14)
Female living with father	7	50	7	50	0	0	0	0	(14)

Summary

The research confirms the findings of cross-sectional research that even when children are having contact, the frequency varies widely: 28% of respondents to the telephone survey said that they had seen their non-resident parent on more than six days in an average month, while for 16% it was less than once. A comparison of those whose parents separated before and after implementation of the Children Act, 1989 also reveals more frequent contact in the post-Act group, confirming indications from other research.

The findings of previous research on the links between frequency of contact and the previous relationship status of the parents, the child's age at separation and parental conflict were not supported when account was taken of the continuity of contact. The importance of the child's previous relationship with the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent, however, which, as shown in chapter 2, was associated with the continuity of contact, again emerged as an important factor in relation to frequency, remaining statistically significant even among those whose contact had been continuous.

Almost three-quarters of respondents had stayed overnight with their non-resident parent at least sometimes and just over a third had done so regularly. In contrast with other data presented in the chapter suggesting that respondents whose parents separated after implementation of the Children Act 1989 had more contact than those with earlier separations, it was found that the post-Act group were actually less likely to have ever stayed overnight and to have stayed regularly. Moreover this unexpected finding was not explained by differences in the age of the respondents at the time of the separation or by the pattern of contact. The figure of 26% who had never stayed overnight is consistent with cross-sectional data from other research.

Overnight stays were more likely when contact was continuous – and, conversely, where there were regular overnights contact was more likely to be continuous, a finding which supports previous research. However caution is needed in concluding that this means that overnights, in themselves, contribute to the maintenance of contact. Rather, the association may simply mean that where contact is a positive experience children are more likely to want to continue with it and to make overnights part of their routine.

Across the whole sample of those who were having contact at the point they reached adulthood, overnights were associated with some of the factors identified in previous research: the age of the child at separation, the level of conflict between the parents, and the closeness of the respondent's pre-separation relationship with the (future) non-resident parent. However these links seemed to reflect primarily the impact of these factors on the pattern of contact, and did not discriminate when only those with continuous contact were considered. The only one which remained statistically significant was the age of the respondent at separation, with those who were already teenagers at this point being less likely than those who were younger to have overnight stays. This lends support to previous cross-sectional research that teenagers are less likely to have staying contact.

Sixty per cent of the young adults in our telephone survey felt they had had enough contact. However, in line with cross-sectional research on children, this retrospective data indicates that a substantial minority (40%) would have liked more - 44% of those whose parents separated prior to implementation of the Children Act 1989 and 38% of those subject to later separations.

It was notable, however, that those whose contact was discontinuous were much more likely to say their contact had been insufficient: 27% compared to between 39% and 67% of other groups. It therefore seems likely that at least some of their dissatisfaction with the amount of contact they had had reflected that discontinuity, rather than specifically its frequency. Moreover, the only group in which there was a statistically significant association between the desire for more contact and the actual level of contact was the continuous contact group. Of these respondents who had seen their non-resident parent on more than six days in an average month only 14% said they would have liked more contact. This rose to over half of those who had contact less than once a month, with the level of dissatisfaction being about the same (36%-40%) for the remaining frequencies. Given that, as we show in chapter 6, those who had continuous contact were more satisfied than any other group with the *quality* of their contact, it is not surprising that some of those with lower levels of contact, and even a few of those with the highest levels, should have wanted to increase this. Nonetheless, at every level of contact apart from the most minimal, a majority of respondents considered that the frequency had been 'about right'.

Respondents were also more likely to be satisfied with the level of contact if they had regular overnight stays - 79%, compared to only 42% where there had been only occasional stays and 31% where there had been none. This applied across all contact patterns. There was no consistent relationship, however, between satisfaction and whether or not there had been set contact arrangements.

Chapter 6 The quality of contact

There is now a considerable amount of research into the outcomes of parental separation exploring the relationship between contact – typically its frequency – and the well-being of the child, both in the short and long term. However, as Pryor and Rodgers acknowledge, summarising this research, while ‘the assumption that contact *per se* is measurably good for children does not stand up to close scrutiny’ ... ‘positive contact is in itself a good outcome for children who usually want it’ (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001, p 214). In this chapter we examine respondents’ views on the *quality* of their experience and the factors associated with positive/negative contact.

Respondents’ overall evaluation of the quality of contact

Although research on children’s views of their contact experience is fairly limited, it generally indicates that most of those who are having contact are positive about the time they spend with their non-resident parent (Buchanan et al, 2001; Butler et al, 2003; McDonald, 1990; Smith et al, 2001; Struss et al, 2001). Smith’s U.K. study, for example, reports that over two-thirds of children said that they definitely enjoyed contact while a further 17% gave a qualified, but still positive response. Only 4% were negative, although 10% had mixed feelings. Eighty-four per cent of the children in McDonald’s Australian research said they enjoyed what they did on contact visits. Even in research with children whose parents had been involved in court disputes over contact (Buchanan et al, 2001) 21 out of a sample of 30 said they usually enjoyed contact. There are, of course, exceptions within each study, but Cockett and Tripp’s research (1994) which reports that ‘few’ children felt positive about contact, seems unusual.

In our telephone survey, respondents who said their main arrangement was shared residence were asked: ‘Looking back, which of the following best describes your experience of shared living arrangements - very positive, fairly positive, mixed, fairly negative or very negative?’ Those who had mainly lived with a primary carer who had had continuous, delayed or sporadic contact were given the same options but asked: looking back over the contact you had with your (non-resident parent) after your parents separated, which of the following best describes your experience? Time constraints meant that unfortunately we were not able to put this question to those whose contact had ceased.

Our data confirms the picture presented by most research on children to the extent that only 11% said their experience had been very or fairly negative. However it also indicates that respondents’ experiences were quite varied. Only 28% said that their experience had been very positive, with 30% saying that it had only been ‘fairly positive’ and 32% that it was ‘mixed’.

Factors linked with a positive experience of contact

Age at separation

It has already been noted (chapter 2) that the age of the respondent at the point their parents separated was associated with whether there was any contact at all, those under five being most likely to lose all contact. Even where there was contact, however, respondents who were under five at separation were less positive about it, just under half (47%) describing it as very or fairly positive, compared to 59% of those aged between five and 12 and 77% of those who were older than this (a statistically significant difference; table 6.1). This was largely accounted for, however, by the fact that (as reported in chapter 2) these younger children were also least likely to have had continuous contact. For those who had had contact

throughout their childhood, although there was still a trend (68% saying contact had been very/fairly positive compared to 74% of those aged between 5 and 12 and 85% of those older than this) the differences were smaller and no longer statistically significant.

Table 6.1 Experience of contact/shared residence by age of child at separation*

	V positive		Fairly positive		Mixed		Fairly negative		Very negative		
Age**	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
<5	25	28	18	20	35	39	6	7	7	8	(91)
5-12	36	24	53	35	47	31	11	7	5	3	(152)
13+	19	40	36	17	9	19	2	4	0	0	(47)
All	80	28	88	30	91	31	19	7	12	4	(290)

*Excludes those whose contact ceased in childhood

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

The continuity of contact

It was very evident that the *continuity of contact* made a difference to how positively respondents regarded their experience, an issue which does not seem to have been covered in previous research. Those who had had continuous contact throughout their childhood were most positive, with 74% selecting 'very' or 'fairly positive', compared to only 30% of those whose contact had been sporadic and 31% where it had been delayed. Only 4% said it had been fairly or very negative, compared to 18% of the sporadic and 23% of the delayed group (table 6.2). Indeed those with continuous contact were more likely to say their experience had been very positive than those who said their main experience had been shared residence (39% compared to 28%).

Table 6.2 Experience of contact/shared residence by contact pattern

	V positive		Fairly positive		Mixed		Fairly negative		Very negative		
Contact pattern	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Shared residence	5	28	8	44	3	17	2	11	0	0	(18)
Continuous contact	64	39	58	35	35	21	5	3	2	1	(164)
Sporadic contact	5	8	13	21	32	53	7	12	4	7	(61)
Delayed contact	6	13	9	19	22	46	5	10	6	13	(48)
All	80	28	88	30	92	32	19	7	12	4	(291)

*Statistically significant $p = .000$. The association remained statistically significant when those who had not lived with the same parent throughout were excluded.

The pre-separation relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent

It was also clear that the *pre-separation relationship* between the child and the person who became the non-resident parent was an important factor in how positively they regarded their contact experience. It was noted earlier (chapter 2) that there was a statistically significant association between the pre-separation relationship and a) whether contact had ever taken place and b) whether it was continuous or disrupted and it was therefore not surprising that this proved to be important across the whole sample. However, even when only those who had continuous contact are considered (table 6.3), the association remained significant. Eighty-seven per cent of those with continuous contact who said the previous relationship had been very close also described their experience of contact as very (54%) or fairly positive (33%) compared to 69% of those who said they had only been 'fairly close' and 27% of those with less close relationships.

Table 6.3 Experience of continuous contact by pre-separation relationship with NRP*

	V positive		Fairly positive		Mixed		Fairly negative		V negative		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
<i>Continuous contact only*</i>											
Very close	28	54	17	33	6	12	0	0	1	2	(52)
Fairly close	10	24	19	45	11	26	2	5	0	0	(42)
Not very close	3	21	3	21	4	31	2	15	1	8	(13)
Not at all close	1	50	1	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	(2)
<i>All</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>(109)</i>

*Excludes those who did not have continuous contact, those whose main experience was shared residence and those too young to remember their pre-separation relationship

**Statistically significant $p < .05$. Correlation coefficient .295 Kendall's tau. Remained significant when those who changed residence were excluded.

Post-separation parental conflict

Parental conflict also made a difference to respondents' evaluation of their contact experience, both across the whole sample and within the sub-group of those whose contact was continuous. In this latter group 52% of those in the no conflict group described their experience of contact as very positive, compared to 32% in the low conflict category, 17% where conflict was categorised as moderate and none of those judged to be high conflict. Indeed, as can be seen from table 6.4, on every dimension of conflict measured, the proportion of those saying their experience of contact had been 'very positive' was highest amongst those reporting the lowest levels of conflict and lowest amongst those reporting the highest conflict. These associations were all statistically significant.

Table 6.4 Experience of continuous contact by exposure to parental conflict

	Experience of contact					
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
<i>Parental relationship after separation*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
They got on OK	48	38	13	1	0	(95)
Some bad feeling	30	40	27	0	3	(30)
Very up and down	33	10	48	10	0	(21)
Lot of bad feeling	7	47	27	13	7	(15)
<i>CC.296</i>						
<i>Did parents argue a lot*</i>						
No	47	35	15	3	1	(121)
Yes	11	37	45	5	3	(38)
<i>CC.350</i>						
<i>Severity of arguments*</i>						
Parents did not argue a lot	48	35	14	2	1	(126)
Mild arguments	25	44	31	0	0	(16)
Moderate arguments	0	20	70	10	0	(10)
Quite severe arguments	0	46	36	9	9	(11)
Very severe arguments	0	0	100	0	0	(1)
<i>CC.314</i>						

Table 6.4 continued

	Experience of contact					(N=)
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	
<i>Caught up in parental arguments*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Parents did not argue a lot	48	35	14	2	1	(126)
Arguments but not caught up in them	17	17	67	0	0	(24)
Caught up a little	13	38	46	0	4	(24)
Caught up a lot	0	50	25	25	0	(8)
CC.335						
<i>Were there violent arguments*</i>						
No arguments	48	35	14	2	1	(126)
Arguments not involving violence	13	29	52	3	3	(31)
Violent arguments	0	71	14	14	0	(7)
CC.342						
<i>Level of conflict*</i>						
No conflict	52	36	11	1	0	(84)
Low	32	30	32	4	2	(56)
Moderate	17	50	25	8	0	(12)
High	0	42	42	8	8	(12)
CC.336						

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ cc=correlation coefficient (Kendall's Tau)

Table 6.5 Experience of continuous contact by whether parents argued a lot

	Experience of contact					(N=)
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	
<i>Bad feeling and arguments*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
No bad feeling, no arguing	52	37	10	1	0	(87)
No bad feeling but 'much arguing'	20	50	30	0	0	(10)
Some bad feeling, no arguing	36	41	18	9	5	(22)
Some bad feeling, much arguing	11	33	56	0	0	(9)
Very up and down relationship, no arguing	40	13	33	13	0	(6)
Very up and down relationship, much arguing	17	0	83	0	0	(6)
Lot of bad feeling, no arguing	50	50	0	0	0	(2)
Lot of bad feeling, much arguing	0	46	31	15	8	(13)

Similarly, as can be seen from table 6.5, whether respondents said their parents' relationship had been 'OK', 'very up and down' or coloured by 'some' or 'a lot of bad feeling', each group was less likely to say their experience of contact had been very positive where there had been overt parental conflict.

Domestic violence and concerns about the other parent's care of the child

Contact was also less likely to be positively rated where either the resident parent was reported to have had serious concerns about the care the non-resident parent could provide or domestic violence/fear of the other parent was an issue. As can be seen from table 6.6, this association was statistically significant across the whole sample of those whose contact had either been continuous, delayed or sporadic. Where there were such worries, as noted earlier, contact was less likely to be continuous. However, even within the continuous contact group, those who reported either domestic violence, fear or welfare concerns were half as likely to describe their contact as very or fairly positive as where those concerns were absent (32% compared to 65%; table 6.7).

Table 6.6 Experience of contact by domestic violence and welfare concerns

	Experience of contact					
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
<i>Domestic violence or fear*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Yes	8	26	45	12	10	(51)
No	32	30	30	5	3	(222)
<i>RP concerns**</i>						
Yes	7	26	44	15	7	(27)
No	30	30	31	5	4	(244)
<i>Any of the above***</i>						
Yes	7	25	47	12	9	(68)
No	34	31	28	4	3	(204)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ **Statistically significant $p < .05$ ***Statistically significant $p = .000$

Table 6.7 Experience of continuous contact by domestic violence and welfare concerns

	Experience of continuous contact					
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
<i>Domestic violence or fear</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Yes	7	57	29	7	0	(14)
No	42	33	21	3	1	(150)
<i>RP concerns*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Yes	13	25	50	0	13	(8)
No	41	36	19	3	1	(155)
<i>Any of the above</i>						
Yes	10	43	38	5	5	(21)
No	43	34	19	3	1	(143)

* Statistically significant $p < .01$ **Statistically significant $p < .05$

Whether the resident parent encouraged the relationship

In chapter 2 we reported that the perceived attitude of the resident parent to the child's relationship with the non-resident parent was linked with whether or not contact was continuous. The data shows that this was also linked with respondents' experience of contact, both across the whole sample and for those who had continuous contact. As can be seen from table 6.8, which relates only to those who had continuous contact, where the resident parent was said to have encouraged the relationship 'a lot', 46% of respondents reported a very

positive experience of contact, whereas only 29% of those who said the resident parent had done this ‘a bit’ did so, and a mere 11% of those who said they had not done so ‘at all’. This finding is in line with Trinder’s analysis of ‘working’ contact (Trinder et al, 2002) which concluded that one of the key elements was a parental ‘bargain’ whereby the resident parent facilitated contact while the non-resident parent did not challenge their status. Similarly, Struss and colleagues (2001) found that lack of support for contact from the resident parent correlated with the child’s negative emotions before the contact visit. This association is not surprising given that, as reported in chapter 4, the extent to which the resident parent was said to have encouraged the child’s relationship with the non-resident parent was correlated with the level of conflict and whether there were issues about domestic violence or the care provided by the non-resident parent.

Table 6.8 Whether resident parent encouraged child’s relationship with non-resident parent by experience of continuous contact

	Experience of continuous contact					(N=)
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	
<i>RP encouraged relationship*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
A lot	46	35	16	4	0	(110)
A bit	29	37	32	0	3	(38)
Not at all	11	44	33	0	11	(9)
Undermined it	50	0	25	25	0	(4)

*Statistically significant $p < .001$

At the same time support from the resident parent is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for a positive experience of contact. Some of those whose resident parent encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ nonetheless had mixed or even negative experiences of contact. Perhaps more surprisingly, of the four interviewees who said the resident parent had ‘undermined’ the relationship, two said their experience of contact had been very positive – which is actually a higher proportion than those who reported a lot of encouragement’ and no one said contact had been very negative’. Similarly, in the broader sample, five of the 19 respondents who said the resident parent had tried to undermine their relationship (26%), nonetheless said that their experience of contact had been very positive. Notably all five of them said their pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent had been very or fairly close.

The respondent’s involvement, as a child, in decisions about contact

As reported in chapter 3, most of those whose contact had been continuous said that either they had been mainly or partly responsible for the contact arrangements or that their parents had taken account of their views. However, of the nine respondents who said that neither of these had occurred, six described their experience as mixed, two as fairly negative and one as very negative. It was also noticeable that although those who said that their parents had taken account of their views, but had not had any responsibility for the decisions, were slightly more likely to say their contact experience had been very positive, they were also more likely to have mixed or negative views (table 6.9). This finding echoes the findings of research with children (Butler et al, 2003; Dunn, 2003; Smart, 2000). Dunn, for instance, reports that

‘(C)hildren who had been given an active role in decision-making about arrangements for contact....were more likely to have positive feelings about their divided lives’ (p25).

Table 6.9 Experience of continuous contact by respondent's involvement in decisions

	Experience of continuous contact					(N=)
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	
<i>Involvement in decisions</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Mainly or partly responsible	41	41	17	0	1	(105)
Not responsible but parents took account of views	44	28	22	7	0	(46)
Neither	0	0	67	22	11	(9)
<i>All</i>	39	35	21	3	1	(160)

*Statistically significant $p < .000$

The structure of contact

The *frequency of contact* did initially appear to be a relevant factor in how positively respondents rated their experience, both across the whole sample of those who were still having contact at the point they reached 18 and those whose contact had been continuous. In this latter group, those who saw their non-resident parent on more than six days in an average month were much more likely than those with less frequent contact to say that contact had been fairly or very positive (87%, 64 of 74, compared to between 68% and 55% of the rest, table 6.10), although the difference between the other groups was not statistically significant.

However, there was no correlation between the two factors where contact had been either delayed or sporadic. Moreover, even in the continuous group, when account was taken of the respondent's pre-separation relationship the association was no longer significant. Indeed, of those who said they had previously had a very close relationship, the few who saw their non-resident parent on less than five days a month were actually more likely to report a very positive experience of contact both than those who had contact on between five and six days a month and those with more frequent contact.

Table 6.10 Experience of continuous contact by number of days contact per month

	V positive		Fairly positive		Mixed		Fairly negative		Very negative		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
>6 days*	35	47	29	39	9	12	1	1	0	0	(74)
5-6 days	12	35	11	32	9	27	1	3	1	3	(34)
3-4 days	10	30	11	33	9	27	2	6	1	3	(33)
1-2 days	3	30	3	30	4	40	0	0	0	0	(10)
<1-2 days	3	27	3	27	4	36	1	9	0	0	(11)
<i>All</i>	63	39	57	35	35	22	5	3	2	1	(162)

* Excludes those who did not have continuous contact and those whose main experience was shared residence

**Statistically significant $p < .01$ Correlation coefficient .207, Kendall's tau. Remained significant when those who did not live with the same parent throughout were excluded.

Overnight stays were not linked to a positive rating where contact had been continuous (table 6.11). Indeed, while those with regular overnights were more likely to report positive or very positive experiences of contact than those with only occasional overnights or those who never stayed at all, a higher proportion of the latter group were fairly positive or very positive than those with occasional overnights (74% compared to 62%).

Table 6.11 Experience of continuous contact by whether stayed overnight with non-resident parent

	V positive		Fairly positive		Mixed		Fairly negative		Very negative		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Regular overnights	39	46	31	37	13	15	2	2	0	0	(85)
Occasional overnights	15	29	17	33	17	33	2	4	1	2	(52)
No overnights	10	37	10	37	5	19	1	4	1	4	(27)
<i>All</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>(164)</i>

For those whose contact was delayed there was a statistically significant difference between those who *never* stayed overnight and the rest, with only 15% of the former saying contact had been fairly or very positive (2 of 13) and 54% saying it had been fairly or very negative (compared to 37% and 11%). However, those who stayed only occasionally were actually more satisfied than those who had regular stays (38%; 11 of 29, compared to 33%; 2 of 6) and less likely to say contact had been fairly or very negative (3 of 29; 10% compared to 1 of 6; 17%). Where contact had been sporadic there was a non-statistically significant difference between those who never stayed overnight and the rest, with only 11% (2 of 18) of the former saying their experience had been fairly or very positive, compared to 36% (15 of 42) of the rest. Again, however, those who only stayed occasionally were more likely to be fairly/very positive than those with regular stays (13 of 33; 39% compared to 2 of 9; 22%) and less likely to say that contact had been fairly/very negative (4; 12% compared to 2; 22%).

Set arrangements for contact were not associated with more positive ratings, although there was a trend in the delayed and sporadic groups. This may reflect the greater fragility of these arrangements, particularly the sporadic group, so that set arrangements were an indicator that the non-resident parent was committed to contact. For those whose contact was continuous, however, those with set arrangements were actually less likely to report a very positive experience of contact. There is no obvious explanation for this, since those who had set arrangements were not more likely to say that the arrangements were too inflexible for them.

Gender

Table 6.12 Experience of contact by gender

	V positive		Fairly positive		Mixed		Fairly negative		Very negative		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
<i>Maternal residence</i>											
Males	29	28	33	32	35	34	5	5	2	2	(104)
Females	41	29	39	28	43	30	10	7	9	6	(142)
<i>Paternal residence</i>											
Males	1	8	4	31	6	46	1	8	1	8	(13)
Females	4	29	4	29	5	36	1	7	9	6	(14)

Gender did not emerge as an important factor (table 6.12). Young women were marginally less likely than young men to say that contact had been very or fairly positive (94 of 165; 57%; compared to 74 of 126; 59%) and more likely to say that it was negative or fairly

negative (22; 13% compared to 9; 6%). Contact with the small number of non-resident mothers was much less likely to be described as positive/fairly positive than contact with non-resident fathers (13 of 27; 48% compared to 142 of 246; 70%) although the proportions describing contact as fairly or very negative were much closer (3; 11% compared to 26; 7%). Of those in maternal residence, females were slightly less satisfied than males – 56% being fairly or very satisfied (compared to 60%) and 13% fairly or very negative (7%). In paternal residence the position was reversed with only 39% of young men saying contact had been very or fairly positive (compared to 57%) and 15% saying it was very or fairly negative (7%). None of these differences, however, were statistically significant.

Respondents' perspectives on the qualitative aspects of contact

Research with children, young people and in some instances, young adults, identifies a number of features of contact which contribute to making it a positive experience - other than simply seeing their non-resident parent. These include: flexibility; enjoyable activities; the non-resident parent's active involvement and reliability; proximity of the two homes; the encouragement of the resident parent; a cooperative relationship between their parents. Aspects of contact which children report as problematic include: boredom; distance; unreliability; inflexibility; missing out on other activities; moving belongings between households; different rules in each household; a conflicted parental relationship, particularly when this involves badmouthing, having to act as a go-between, keeping secrets and being 'quizzed' about the other parent; the non-resident parent's new partner or new children in their household; and managing the feelings of one or both parents (Ahrons, 2004; Angarne-Lindberg et al, 2009; Buchanan et al, 2001; Butler et al, 2003; Cockett and Tripp, 1995; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Lodge and Alexander, 2010; Marquardt, 2005; Mitchell, 1985; Peacey and Hunt, 2008; Smart, 2000; Smart et al, 2001; Struss et al, 2001; Trinder et al, 2002; Wade and Smart, 2002; Walczak and Burns, 1984; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein and Lewis, 1998).

Drawing on these findings, we drew up a set of statements about contact/shared residence and asked respondents to the telephone survey to say whether they were 'very true' for them, 'fairly true', 'not very true' or 'not at all true'. There were nine statements which were common both to respondents who had had shared residence and those with primary carer + contact arrangements. There were also a few questions which were only asked of the shared residence group or the continuing contact group. The questions and the total responses are set out in table 6.13. It should be noted that for some questions – such as 'I felt equally at home at both houses' the most positive response would be 'very true' while for others – eg 'I found it difficult having different ways of doing things in the two houses' 'it would be 'not true at all'. This latter set of 'negative response' questions are indicated in italics.

Table 6.13 Experience of contact/shared residence

	Very true	Fairly true	Not v true	Not at all true	N=
Shared residence & continuing contact cases	%	%	%	%	
I enjoyed being with my NRP/each of my parents	52	37	8	3	(291)
My NRP/both my parents made time for me	36	37	17	11	(291)
I felt equally at home at both houses	37	25	17	20	(289)
<i>I found it difficult having different ways of doing things in the two houses</i>	7	18	22	51	(286)
<i>I often missed out on doing things at one home or with my friends because I was at the other house</i>	7	17	22	55	(289)
<i>The arrangements were not flexible enough for me</i>	8	17	21	55	(285)

Table 6.13, continued.

	Very true	Fairly true	Not v true	Not at all true	N=
Shared residence & continuing contact cases	%	%	%	%	
My parents often used to say bad things about each other to me	17	20	17	46	(290)
I had to act as go-between or keep secrets between my parents	8	14	16	62	(292)
I did not like all the travelling between the two houses	13	14	22	52	(286)
Shared residence only					
I found going backwards & forwards quite unsettling	12	29	35	24	(17)
Continuing contact only					
I could not rely on the NRP seeing me when they said they would	16	18	15	52	(273)
I was afraid of/didn't feel safe with the NRP	1	6	13	81	(272)
I got on well with the NRP's new partner (no new partner in 51 cases)	35	32	15	18	(217)
I enjoyed seeing the children at NRP's house (no chn in 132 cases)	50	28	8	14	(140)

We asked one further question of both groups, 'I could do different things with my mum and dad', intending this to refer to the different contributions each parent might make to the child's life in terms of interests and activities. With hindsight, we realised that this question could have been interpreted to mean that the child was allowed to behave differently at each house and therefore discarded this data.

As table 6.13 shows, across the whole sample responses were much more likely to be positive than negative, with between 62% and 93% of respondents selecting 'very' or 'fairly true' in reply to the positively worded questions and 'not very true'/'not true at all' to the negatively phrased ones. Indeed, on most of the questions, at least half the respondents gave the most positive response ie 'very true' or 'not true at all. The exceptions were: 'My non-resident parent/both my parents made time for me' (only 36% saying this was very true); 'I felt equally at home at both houses' (37%); 'I got on well with the non-resident parent's new partner' (35%); and 'my parents often used to say bad things about each other in front of me' (only 46% said this was not true at all).

Responses by pattern of contact

As table 6.14 shows, however, there were considerable differences by contact pattern. Those who had had continuous contact throughout their childhood were more likely to give the most positive responses than those whose contact had either been delayed or sporadic, there being only one exception to this – the question about the relationship with the non-resident parent's new partner, where the proportions were very similar in the continuous and delayed group. On most questions, interestingly, the proportions were also higher in the continuous contact group than in the shared residence group, the only exception being in response to the statement 'I felt equally at home at both houses' where only 46% of the continuous contact group gave a very positive answer, compared to 50% of the shared residence group. This was one of only three statements to which less than half the continuous contact respondents gave

an entirely positive response, the others being ‘my non-resident parent made time for me’ (47%) and ‘I got on well with my non-resident parent’s new partner’ (40%).

Table 6.14 Entirely positive response by contact pattern

	Shared residence	Continuous contact	Delayed contact	Sporadic contact
	%	%	%	%
<i>Positively worded statement</i>	<i>% saying statement was ‘very true’</i>			
I enjoyed being with my NRP/each of my parents	61	64	38	30
My NRP/both my parents made time for me	44	47	23	13
I felt equally at home at both houses	50	46	26	20
I got on well with the NRP’s new partner	NA	40	40	18
Got on well with NRPs new partner or there was no new partner	NA	51	53	33
I got on well with the children in the NRPs house	NA	56	42	41
Got on well with children in NRPs house or there were none	NA	79	68	67
<i>Negatively worded statement</i>	<i>% saying statement was ‘not true at all’</i>			
I found it difficult having different ways of doing things in the two houses	44	58	42	49
I often missed out on doing things at one home or with my friends because I was at the other house	24	55	58	59
The arrangements were not flexible enough for me	39	67	33	44
My parents often used to say bad things about each other to me	28	57	25	37
I had to act as go-between or keep secrets between my parents	50	69	56	49
I did not like all the travelling between the two houses	39	59	40	45
I could not rely on the NRP seeing me when they said they would	NA	68	32	23
I was afraid of/didn’t feel safe with the NRP	NA	88	70	70
I found going backwards & forwards quite unsettling	24	NA	NA	NA

Similarly, those whose contact had been continuous were much less likely to select entirely negative responses than those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic, the only exception being the statement ‘I got on well with the other children in the non-resident parent’s house’ where the proportion was very similar to the delayed group (table 6.15). In relation to shared residence the picture was more mixed – on four statements the shared residence group had fewer of the most negative responses than the continuous contact group, on four there were more and on one the proportion was the same.

Table 6.15 Entirely negative response by contact pattern

	Shared residence	Continuous contact	Delayed contact	Sporadic contact
	%	%	%	%
<i>Positively worded statement</i>	<i>% saying statement was 'not true at all'</i>			
I enjoyed being with my NRP/each of my parents	0	1	15	2
My NRP/both parents made time for me	0	2	30	23
I felt equally at home at both houses	0	13	36	33
I got on well with the NRP's new partner	NA	15	23	22
I got on well with the children in the NRPs house	NA	10	12	26
<i>Negatively worded statement</i>	<i>% saying statement was 'very true'</i>			
I found it difficult having different ways of doing things in the two houses	0	6	13	10
I often missed out on doing things at one home or with my friends because I was at the other house	12	4	13	8
The arrangements were not flexible enough for me	6	3	20	14
My parents often used to say bad things about each other to me	17	7	31	33
I had to act as go-between or keep secrets between my parents	6	6	13	13
I did not like all the travelling between the two houses	17	6	29	18
I could not rely on the NRP seeing me when they said they would	NA	5	30	34
I was afraid of/didn't feel safe with the NRP	NA	0	2	3
I found going backwards & forwards quite unsettling	12	NA	NA	NA
(N=)	(18)	(164)	(48)	(61)

Aspects of contact associated with a positive/negative evaluation of contact

We used the responses to these questions to explore the aspects of contact associated with respondents overall evaluation of contact (table 6.16). This indicated that, across all those who were still having contact when they reached 18 – i.e. those with continuous, delayed or sporadic contact – all but three of the factors measured proved statistically significant.

Table 6.16 Aspects of contact associated with the overall evaluation of contact*

	Evaluation of contact					(N=)
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	
Statistically significant	%	%	%	%		
<i>I enjoyed being with the NRP**</i>						
Very true	45	30	22	1	1	(140)
Fairly true	10	33	46	7	4	(102)
Not very true	5	19	33	24	19	(21)
Not at all true	11	0	33	33	22	(9)
CC.436						

Table 6.16, continued

	Experience of contact					
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
	%	%	%	%		
<i>NRP made time for me**</i>						
Very true	59	26	10	2	2	(96)
Fairly true	15	43	38	3	2	(101)
Not very true	2	21	58	14	5	(43)
Not at all true	6	6	50	19	19	(32)
CC .528						
<i>Equally at home both houses**</i>						
Very true	49	31	18	1	1	(98)
Fairly true	25	38	30	3	4	(69)
Not very true	11	29	42	11	7	(45)
Not at all true	7	17	52	16	9	(58)
CC .414						
<i>Badmouthing**</i>						
Not at all true	35	33	23	6	3	(127)
Not very true	37	30	28	2	2	(46)
Fairly true	16	28	47	4	6	(51)
Very true	9	19	49	15	9	(47)
CC .261						
<i>Acting as go-between/keeping secrets**</i>						
Not at all true	32	30	29	6	4	(171)
Not very true	30	35	30	0	5	(43)
Fairly true	14	29	47	6	6	(36)
Very true	9	17	44	22	9	(23)
CC .174						
<i>Could not rely on NRP**</i>						
Not at all true	44	32	18	5	1	(140)
Not very true	20	39	37	2	2	(41)
Fairly true	4	27	56	8	4	(48)
Very true	7	12	51	12	19	(43)
CC .415						
<i>Difficulties with different ways of doing things in two households**</i>						
Not at all true	34	31	26	6	4	(142)
Not very true	22	36	31	5	5	(58)
Fairly true	15	23	51	9	2	(47)
Very true	24	10	43	10	14	(21)
CC 186						
<i>Got on well with NRPs partner**</i>						
Very true	38	34	26	0	1	(76)
Fairly true	26	28	35	7	4	(69)
Not very true	18	46	33	3	0	(33)
Not at all true	10	15	46	21	8	(39)
NA, no partner	35	28	24	6	8	(51)
CC.145						

Table 6.16, continued

	Experience of contact					(N=)
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	
	%	%	%	%	%	
<i>Lack of flexibility**</i>						
Not at all true	32	35	26	5	3	(149)
Not very true	25	36	28	8	4	(53)
Fairly true	19	19	50	7	5	(42)
Very true	23	5	50	9	14	(22)
<i>CC.186</i>						
<i>Afraid of/felt unsafe with NRP**</i>						
Not at all true	32	30	30	6	3	(220)
Not very true	15	33	39	3	9	(33)
Fairly true	0	20	60	13	7	(15)
Very true	0	0	0	67	33	(3)
<i>CC.221</i>						
Not statistically significant						
<i>Often missed out on things</i>						
Not at all true	29	29	31	8	4	(154)
Not very true	29	34	30	2	5	(56)
Fairly true	23	35	37	2	2	(43)
Very true	17	11	50	11	11	(18)
<i>Enjoyed seeing children at NRPs</i>						
Very true	31	36	23	4	6	(70)
Fairly true	13	29	42	8	8	(38)
Not very true	18	36	46	0	0	(11)
Not at all true	10	15	45	25	5	(20)
NA, there were none	33	28	31	5	3	(132)
<i>Did not like all the travelling</i>						
Not at all true	29	31	31	6	4	(141)
Not very true	31	29	29	7	3	(58)
Fairly true	29	26	37	6	3	(35)
Very true	12	30	46	3	9	(33)

*Excludes those whose main experience was shared residence, those who never had contact and those whose contact ceased. **Statistically significant $p < .01$ CC=correlation coefficient (Kendall's Tau)

The factors which were not statistically significant have all been identified in previous research as important to children. Thus, in relation to 'missing out on other activities because of contact', Butler and colleagues, for example, (2003, p128) report that 'having to share time between family and friends to accommodate contact posed a real dilemma for many children'. Smart et al (2001) refer to children limiting their pastimes in order to spend time with each parent and worrying that the non-resident parent might think, if they did not, that the child did not want to see them (see also Wade and Smart, 2002 and Walczak and Burns, 1984). The emphasis on the hassle of travelling in Ahron's study of young adults (2004) may reflect the much greater distances children in the US may have to go to see their non-resident parent. It is not clear, however, why, given the findings by Dunn (2003), relationships with new children in the non-resident parent's household did not emerge as more important, although, as can be seen from table 6.16, respondents who said either there were no other children or that it was very true that they got on well with them were more likely than other groups to say their experience of contact had been very or fairly positive.

Since separate analyses on the different contact groups indicated that a clearer picture emerged when those whose contact had been disrupted were excluded, and numbers in the shared residence group were very small, we focus on those who had continuous contact throughout their childhood (table 6.17).

Table 6.17 Aspects of continuous contact associated with the overall evaluation of contact

	Evaluation of contact					
	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
Statistically significant	%	%	%	%		
<i>I enjoyed being with the NRP*</i>						
Very true	52	33	14	0	1	(104)
Fairly true	18	46	32	4	0	(50)
Not very true	11	11	44	22	11	(9)
Not at all true	0	0	0	100	0	(1)
CC .387						
<i>NRP made time for me*</i>						
Very true	62	27	8	1	1	(77)
Fairly true	20	47	30	3	0	(70)
Not very true	0	31	62	8	0	(13)
Not at all true	0	31	62	8	0	(13)
CC .441						
<i>Equally at home both houses*</i>						
Very true	55	37	8	0	0	(74)
Fairly true	33	41	24	2	0	(42)
Not very true	16	32	40	8	4	(25)
Not at all true	19	24	43	10	5	(21)
CC .388						
<i>Badmouthing*</i>						
Not at all true	43	40	16	1	0	(93)
Not very true	50	30	17	0	3	(30)
Fairly true	25	32	32	7	4	(28)
Very true	8	25	50	17	0	(12)
CC .321						
<i>Acting as go-between/keeping secrets*</i>						
Not at all true	43	36	19	2	0	(114)
Not very true	40	40	16	0	4	(25)
Fairly true	25	38	25	6	6	(16)
Very true	11	11	56	22	0	(9)
CC .287						
<i>Could not rely on NRP*</i>	%	%	%	%		
Not at all true	49	35	14	2	1	(111)
Not very true	23	46	27	5	0	(22)
Fairly true	9	35	52	4	0	(23)
Very true	38	13	25	13	13	(8)
CC .318						

Table 6.17 continued

	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
	%	%	%	%		
<i>Difficulties with different ways of doing things in two households*</i>						
Not at all true	45	37	15	0	0	(93)
Not very true	33	47	20	0	0	(30)
Fairly true	21	31	42	3	3	(29)
Very true	44	0	33	11	11	(9)
CC.215						
<i>Got on well with NRPs partner*</i>						
Very true	43	45	11	0	0	(53)
Fairly true	44	31	23	3	0	(39)
Not very true	24	43	29	5	0	(21)
Not at all true	15	15	50	15	5	(20)
NA, no partner	53	33	10	0	3	(30)
CC.302						
<i>Afraid of/felt unsafe with NRP*</i>						
Very true	-	-	-	-	-	(0)
Fairly true	0	20	40	40	0	(5)
Not very true	29	21	43	0	7	(14)
Not at all true	41	37	19	2	1	(145)
CC.220						
Not statistically significant						
<i>Often missed out on things</i>						
Not at all true	43	36	18	2	1	(90)
Not very true	35	38	24	0	3	(34)
Fairly true	32	36	29	3	0	(31)
Very true	29	29	29	14	0	(7)
<i>Enjoyed seeing children at NRPs</i>						
Very true	40	42	13	2	2	(45)
Fairly true	16	32	42	11	0	(19)
Not very true	29	57	14	0	0	(7)
Not at all true	13	25	63	0	0	(8)
NA, there were none	47	32	18	2	1	(85)
<i>Lack of flexibility</i>						
Not at all true	39	40	19	1	1	(109)
Not very true	38	38	17	7	0	(29)
Fairly true	35	15	40	5	5	(20)
Very true	60	0	20	20	0	(5)
<i>Did not like all the travelling</i>						
Not at all true	40	39	21	1	0	(96)
Not very true	36	39	17	6	3	(36)
Fairly true	43	24	19	10	5	(21)
Very true	22	22	56	0	0	(9)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ CC=correlation coefficient (Kendall's Tau)

Six of the statements proved to have a statistically significant correlation with a positive experience of continuous contact *and* a clear and consistent differentiation between the groups, viz:

Taking a longer view of contact

1. *I enjoyed being with the parent I was not living with*
52% of those who said this was 'very true' said their experience of contact had been very positive. This percentage dropped to less than 20% who said this was only 'fairly true' (18%), 'not very true' (11%) or 'not true at all' (0%). ($p < .01$; correlation coefficient (cc) .387, Kendall's tau)
2. *The non-resident parent made time for me*
60% of those who said this was 'very true' said their experience of contact had been very positive, compared to only 20% of those who said it was 'fairly true' and none of the other two groups. ($p < .01$, cc .441)
3. *I felt equally at home in both houses.*
55% of those who said this was 'very true' said their experience of contact had been very positive, falling to 33% of those for whom it was only 'fairly true', 16% where it was 'not very true' and 19% where it was 'not true at all'. ($p < .01$, cc .388)
4. *One or both of my parents used to badmouth the other in front of me.*
43% of those who said this was 'not at all true' and 50% of those who said it was 'not very true' said contact had been very positive compared to only 8% of those who said it was 'very true' and 25% who said it was fairly true. ($p < .01$, cc .226)
5. *I was asked to act as go-between or keep secrets*
43% of those who said this was 'not at all true' and 40% of those for whom it was 'not very true' said their experience had been very positive, compared to only 25% of those who selected 'fairly true' and 11% 'very true'. ($p < .01$, cc .187)
6. *I got on well with the non-resident parent's new partner*
Those who said their non-resident parent had not re-partnered were most likely to say that contact had been very positive (53%) followed by those who said the statement was 'fairly true' or very true (44% and 43%). In contrast, only 24% of those who said it was 'not very true' and 15% who said it was 'not at all true' reported positive experiences. ($p < .01$, cc .302)

Moreover, all but this last factor remained significant even when account was taken of the closeness of the respondent's previous relationship with the non-resident parent, which, as noted above, proved to be important in explaining differences in how positively respondents regarded their contact experience.

The remaining factors analysed were either not statistically significant, the pattern was not consistent or the numbers were very small. The unreliability of the contact parent, for instance, was statistically significant, bearing out the findings of previous research about the negative impact this can have on children (Dunn, 2001; Mitchell, 1985; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Smart et al, 2001; Walczak and Burns, 1984). Dunn, for example, (p25) notes that it was a 'source of particular distress'. However, although 49% of respondents who selected 'not very true' had a positive experience of contact, so did 38% of those who said it was 'very true', while only 9% of those who said it was fairly true did so. This may indicate that where contact has been reliably established, even if it was not entirely predictable, some children at least were able to tolerate the disappointment of the non-resident parent not turning up. In contrast, of those whose contact was sporadic, none of those who said it was

very or fairly true that they could not rely on the non-resident parent turning up said that contact had been very positive for them.

Similarly, 45% of those who said it was ‘not at all true’ that they had difficulty having different ways of doing things in the two households (another statistically important factor) rated their experience as ‘very positive’. However, so did 44% of those who said it was ‘very true’. Finally, in relation to the statement ‘I was afraid of/didn’t feel safe with the non-resident parent’, only 15 respondents indicated this had been a problem, and none said that it was very true. Hence although the association was statistically significant, and those who said the statement was not at all true were most likely to say contact had been very positive, the findings are best regarded as indicative only.

Satisfaction with the quality of contact/shared residence – overall positivity quotient

In the previous section we used the responses to specific questions about particular aspects of contact/shared residence to identify the factors associated with the most positive experience. We then used these responses to build up an overall ‘positivity quotient’ for each respondent by:

- Calculating a score for each person, based on their responses to each question. Where ‘very true’ indicated the most positive response (as in, for example, the question ‘I felt equally at home at both houses’, this was scored as 4. Where it indicated the most negative, it was scored as 1.
- Turning this into a percentage by dividing it by the maximum score possible based on the number of questions each individual had answered. Missing data was usually because the question was not relevant, for example where the non-resident parent had not re-partnered.
- Using SPSS to divide the results into five groups from the most dissatisfied to the most satisfied.

This process indicated that the most positive responses overall were produced by those who had had continuous contact, 57% of whom were in the most positive two groups, and only 22% in the two most negative (table 6.18). The shared residence group came out somewhat less well, with only 39% in the two most positive groups and 33% in the most negative. Both, however, were considerably more positive than the sporadic and delayed contact group, each of whom only had 15% in the two most positive groups and around 70% in the most negative (71% and 69% respectively).

Table 6.18 Positivity quotient by contact pattern

	Most positive		Second most positive		Middle group		Second most negative		Most negative		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Shared residence	4	22	3	17	5	28	0	0	6	33	(18)
Continuous contact	40	24	54	33	35	21	20	12	16	10	(165)
Sporadic contact	4	7	5	8	9	15	18	30	25	41	(61)
Delayed contact	0	0	7	15	8	17	19	40	14	29	(48)
<i>All</i>	<i>61</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>69</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>(292)</i>

*Statistically significant $p=.000$

The positivity quotient maps quite well, but not perfectly, onto the respondents' own rating of their overall experience of contact, which suggests that people were not just answering our questions randomly but thinking quite carefully about their answers. It is particularly notable that the proportions in the two most satisfied groups fell from 73% among those who had said that contact had been very positive, to 47% in those saying it was only fairly positive, 16% in the mixed experience and fairly negative groups and none of the very negative group. Similarly the proportions in the two most dissatisfied groups rose from 10%, through 24%; 66% and 84% to 100% (table 6.19).

Table 6.19 Positivity quotient by respondent's assessment of contact/shared residence experience

	Positivity quotient										
	Most positive		Second most positive		Intermediate		Second most negative		Most negative		
<i>Experience of contact</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Very positive	28	35	30	38	13	16	5	6	4	5	(80)
Fairly positive	18	21	23	26	26	30	11	13	10	11	(88)
Mixed	2	2	13	14	17	19	29	32	31	34	(92)
Fairly negative	0	0	3	16	0	0	5	26	11	58	(19)
Very negative	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	58	5	42	(12)

*Statistically significant $p=.000$ correlation coefficient .485, Kendall's Tau.

Another indicator of satisfaction might be whether the respondent ever said they did not want to see the non-resident parent again or that they wanted the shared residence to end. The most striking thing, perhaps, is that the vast majority of respondents (73%) said that they had never either said or felt this and only 10% had either said they wanted the arrangements to end (8%) or wished they had said it (table 6.20). Again, this was highly correlated with our overall positivity quotient.

Table 6.20 Whether respondent ever said wanted contact/shared residence to end by contact pattern

	Repeatedly		Occasionally		No, but wished I had		Never said/wished this		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Shared residence	1	6	1	6	0	0	16	89	(18)
Continuous contact	6	4	16	10	2	1	141	86	(165)
Sporadic contact	9	15	17	28	4	7	31	51	(61)
Delayed contact	7	15	15	31	0	0	26	54	(48)
<i>All</i>	23	8	49	17	6	2	214	73	(292)

*Statistically significant $p=.000$

Respondents who said they had ever said they wanted contact/shared residence to end were asked whether they were expressing their own genuine views or reflecting the views of one of their parents. The vast majority (62 of 72; 86%) said it was what they had felt themselves, with only eight saying it mainly reflected the views of the resident parent. Five of these eight had had continuous contact, two sporadic and one delayed.

In general, the responses to this question fit fairly well with the respondents' overall rating of their experience, with the proportion who said they had never either said or felt that they wanted contact/shared residence to end rising from only 25% in the very negative experience group to 91% in the very positive experience group (table 6.21). There were, however, a few interesting anomalies: in particular, one wonders why two people would rate their experience as very positive while also reporting that they had either repeatedly said they wanted the arrangements to end or wished they had done so? Conversely, why would three people who said their experience had been very negative also say they had never said they wanted it to end or wished they had done so?

Table 6.21 Whether ever said wanted contact/shared care to end by respondent's rating of experience

	Repeatedly		Occasionally		No, but wished I had		No, never said or wished this		
<i>Respondent rating</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Very positive	1	1	5	6	1	1	73	91	(80)
Fairly positive	3	3	9	10	1	1	75	85	(88)
Mixed	12	13	25	27	3	3	52	57	(92)
Fairly negative	5	26	2	11	1	5	11	58	(19)
Very negative	2	17	7	58	0	0	3	25	(12)
<i>All</i>	23	8	48	17	6	2	214	74	(291)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ Correlation coefficient $-.382$ (Kendall's Tau).

The responses also align well with the positivity quotient, perhaps rather better than with the respondents' overall ratings, at least in the most positive groups, none of whom reported they had either said, or wished they had said they wanted the arrangements to cease (table 6.22). It seems possible that the responses to the individual questions about the experience tapped into feelings of dissatisfaction which were muted in the overall response.

Table 6.22 Whether ever said wanted contact/shared care to end by positivity quotient

	Repeatedly		Occasionally		No, but wished I had		No, never said or wished this		
<i>Positivity</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Most positive	0	0	0	0	0	0	48	100	(48)
Second most positive	2	3	6	9	0	0	61	88	(69)
Intermediate	4	7	7	12	2	4	44	77	(57)
Second most negative	4	7	15	26	3	5	35	61	(57)
Most negative	13	21	21	34	1	2	26	43	(61)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$ Correlation coefficient $.386$ Kendall's tau

Another question aimed at ascertaining the respondent's degree of satisfaction, but in relation only to shared residence, was whether they would recommend it to others. All but two said they would, with one saying no, the other saying they did not know. The one who said no rated his/her experience of shared residence as 'fairly negative' and was also in the most dissatisfied group on the positivity index. S/he also said that he would rather not have been in shared residence, that s/he had repeatedly said s/he wanted the arrangements to end and that the experience had got worse over time. The respondent who was uncertain was in the second most dissatisfied group on the positivity index, although s/he said his experience had been 'fairly positive'.

Of those who said they would recommend shared residence to others there were some other anomalies. One person, for instance, rated the experience as ‘fairly negative’, was in the second most negative group on the positivity index and also said the experience had got worse over time. Five other people who said they would recommend shared residence also came out as being in the most negative groups on the positivity index.

Doing it differently?

At the end of the questions about the quality of contact, respondents who were still having contact when they reached 18 or had had shared residence as their main arrangement, were asked ‘What is the most important thing your parents could have done to improve your experience of contact/shared residence? A few (4) merely said ‘stayed together’, in eight instances the response was unclear, and 28 said they didn’t know. Of the rest 116 said ‘nothing’ and 135 made some suggestions. As table 6.23 shows, those who said their experience was very or fairly positive were least likely to suggest ways in which their experience could have been improved (31%) and most likely to say ‘nothing’ (58%). Conversely, those who said their experience was very or fairly negative were most likely to make suggestions for change (82%) and least likely to say nothing (11%). These differences were statistically significant. There was also a statistically significant association between the positivity quotient and whether the respondent suggested ways in which their contact experience could have been improved. Both indicate that respondents’ answers to the questions about the quality of contact were generally highly consistent and are likely to be an accurate reflection of their experience.

Table 6.23 Any suggestions for improving contact/shared residence

	Suggestions for change		Nothing		Don’t know		
<i>Evaluation of contact*</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Very or fairly positive	50	31	93	58	17	11	(160)
Mixed	62	68	20	22	9	10	(91)
Very or fairly negative	23	82	3	11	2	7	(28)
<i>Total</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>(279)</i>
<i>Positivity index*</i>							
Most positive	4	9	36	80	5	11	(45)
Second most positive	19	28	41	61	7	10	(67)
Middle group	25	46	20	37	9	17	(54)
Second most negative	37	69	13	24	4	7	(54)
Most negative	50	83	6	10	4	7	(60)
<i>Total</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>116</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>(280)</i>

*Statistically significant p=.000

Overall, among those who made any suggestion for improvement, the most frequent was for their parents to have been less conflicted or more cooperative (41%, 56 of 135; table 6.24). This was also the most common among those whose experience of contact had been very or fairly positive (40%; 20 of 50) and those whose experience had been mixed (30 of 62; 45%) and the second most common amongst those whose experience had been very or fairly negative (6 of 23; 26%). The next most frequent overall was for the non-resident parent to make more effort or to be more reliable (21%; 29 of 135). This was the most common comment made by those whose contact had been very or fairly negative (35%; 8 of 23) and the second most common where it had been mixed (26%; 16 of 62). Only 10% of those

whose contact had been very/fairly positive, but made suggestions for improvement (5 of 50) said this.

Table 6.24 Suggestions for improving contact by evaluation of quality of contact

	Quality of contact			
	Positive	Mixed	Negative	All
	%	%	%	%
Less conflict/more cooperation	40	48	26	41
NRP make more effort/be more reliable	10	26	35	21
More contact	22	8	9	13
Live closer together	20	11	4	13
Taken account of my wishes and feelings	8	10	22	10
RP encourage/not discourage contact	2	2	13	4
More flexible arrangements	4	2	13	3
More structured arrangements	0	2	0	2
(N=)	(50)	(62)	(23)	(135)

None of the other suggestions were put forward by more than 13% of respondents, although in the positive group 20% (10 of 50) said it would have helped if their parents had lived closer together. Twenty-two per cent of the negative group (5 of 23) wanted more account to have been taken of their wishes and feelings. It was notable that only 4% of all those making suggestions (5 of 135) said it would have helped if the resident parent had encouraged/not discouraged contact dropping to 2% of those with positive or mixed experiences and only rising to 13% (3 of 23) of those who said their experience had been negative.

Those who had had continuous contact throughout their childhood or whose main arrangement had been shared residence, were least likely to suggest anything their parents could have done to improve the experience (48 of 165; 30% and six of 18; 33%, respectively) compared to 68% (32 of 48) of those whose contact had been delayed and 83% (49 of 61) where it had been sporadic, table 6.26). They were also the most likely to say 'nothing' or to respond with an entirely positive comment about their experience (89 of 165; 54% and 10 of 18; 56%; compared to 23% of those with delayed contact [11 of 48] and 8% sporadic [5 of 61]).

Among those who did make suggestions for how their experience might have been improved, less conflict/more cooperation was the most common suggestion for those who had had continuous or delayed contact, and was the second most common where contact had been sporadic. In these groups the proportion voicing this desire were very similar, ranging from 38% in the continuous contact group to 44% in the delayed group. In the shared residence group, however, it was much, much higher, with all but one of the six respondents who made suggestions for improvement (83%) saying either they wished their parents had communicated more (4) or that there had been less bickering (1). It was also notable (table 6.25) that the proportion of all those who had had shared residence as their main arrangement, 28% said they wished their parents had been less conflicted/more cooperative, a very similar figure to those with delayed or sporadic contact but more than double that for those who had had continuous contact (11%).

Table 6.25 Suggestions for improving contact by contact pattern (those suggesting improvements)

	Contact pattern			Shared residence
	Continuous	Delayed	Sporadic	
<i>Suggestions</i>	%	%	%	%
Less conflict/more cooperation	38	44	39	83
NRP make more effort/be more reliable	6	19	41	NA
More contact	19	0	18	NA
Live closer together	17	16	8	17
Taken account of my wishes and feelings	10	10	12	0
RP encourage/not discourage contact	2	6	4	0
More flexible arrangements	6	0	2	0
More structured arrangements	2	6	0	0
(N=)	(48)	(32)	(49)	(6)

Table 6.26 Suggestions for improving contact by contact pattern (full sample)

	Contact pattern			Shared residence
	Continuous	Delayed	Sporadic	
<i>Suggestions</i>	%	%	%	%
Less conflict/more cooperation	11	29	31	28
NRP make more effort/be more reliable	2	17	33	0
More contact	5	0	15	0
Live closer together	5	10	7	6
Taken account of my wishes and feelings	3	6	10	0
RP encourage/not discourage contact	<1	4	3	0
More flexible arrangements	2	0	2	0
More structured arrangements	<1	4	0	0
Any suggestion for improvement	30	68	83	33
(N=)	(165)	(48)	(61)	(18)

The importance to children of the quality of their parents' relationship also emerged in the responses to one of our final questions in the survey: 'knowing what you know now, if you were ever to be a separated parent, would you hope to handle the arrangements for your children a) pretty much as your parents did b) rather differently c) very differently?' Of the 388 people answering this question 146 (38%) opted for a), 76 (20%) for b) and 166 (43%) for c) (table 6.27).

Table 6.27 How would respondent handle arrangements for the children if ever separated parent, by contact pattern

<i>Contact pattern</i>	As parents did		Rather differently		Very differently		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Shared residence	14	78	1	6	3	17	(18)
Continuous contact	105	66	33	21	22	14	(160)
Sporadic contact	8	13	10	16	43	71	(61)
Delayed contact	7	15	11	23	29	62	(47)
Ceased contact	3	8	10	26	26	67	(39)
No contact	9	14	11	18	43	68	(63)
<i>All</i>	<i>146</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>166</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>(388)</i>

In both the shared residence and continuous contact group a majority of respondents said that they would handle things pretty much as their parents had and less than one in five said they would do things very differently. In the other groups, however, the position was completely reversed.

Those who did not say they would do things pretty much as their parents had (242) were asked what they would do differently, of whom 225 made at least one relevant suggestion. While, as noted in chapter 5, more than half these comments (119 of 225) related to the quantitative aspects of contact, by far the most frequent comment in relation to the quality of contact (49 of 225; 22%) was that they would maintain a better relationship with their ex-partner than their parents had managed. For instance:

I wouldn't let my child see us arguing; I wouldn't tell my child everything, I wouldn't slag his dad off...I would maintain a decent relationship with the dad for the sake of my kid.

I would be as friendly as possible towards them for the childrens' sake, regardless of how I felt.

Just make sure I got on with the father and make sure I was civil and didn't argue with him.

I would be more co operative and more considerate.

Communicate better so that the children didn't have to see the animosity between the two parents and had to choose.

I would not make it awkward by arguing with the dad. Make it nice for the children; it's not their fault.

I wouldn't bad mouth my ex partner in front of the children.

Fifteen per cent of respondents (34 of 225) gave responses indicating they would behave differently towards the child. This included putting the child first (15; 7%); protecting or supporting the child (9; 4%) and listening to the child (7; 3%), with individual respondents saying, variously, they would build more of a relationship with the child; show interest in the child; get involved with the child's schooling, be there for significant events in their lives and ensure they had a closer relationship while the family was still intact. None of the other suggestions were put forward by more than 3% of respondents. These included not living so far away; not going to court or alternatively using the courts; financially supporting the child; not having so many new partners and ensuring that the other person pulled their weight.

Summary

The data presented in this chapter gives a rather more nuanced picture of children's contact experience than that given by much of the research. Although it confirms previous findings that few children are entirely negative about contact, only just over a quarter of our respondents said that their experience had been very positive, with 62% saying it had either only been *fairly* positive or was mixed.

By adopting a retrospective approach we have been able to show the importance of the *continuity of contact*, a factor which does not seem to have been much explored in previous research. Respondents who had continuous contact throughout their childhood were much more likely to describe their experience as very or fairly positive, compared to those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic, and only rarely said it had been negative.

The research also demonstrates that *traditional arrangements*, whereby the child lives with one parent and has contact with the other, work, provided that contact is maintained. Indeed, respondents in such arrangements were actually more positive about their experience than those who said their main arrangement had been shared residence.

The importance of the *pre-separation relationship* with the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent again emerged as a key theme. Not only was it linked, as reported in previous chapters, with whether contact took place at all, and whether it was continuous, it was also associated with how positive an experience contact was for the respondent. Eighty-seven per cent of those who described their previous relationship as very close also said contact had been very or fairly positive, compared to 69% of those who said they had been fairly close and only 27% of those with less close relationships. Again, this does not seem to be a factor which has received much attention in previous research.

The data from the telephone survey confirms the findings of qualitative research on the adverse impact of *parental conflict* on children's experiences of contact. In an earlier chapter we showed that the level of parental conflict was linked with the *pattern* of contact, with respondents who had had continuous contact being most likely to report little or no conflict and least likely to report high conflict. This chapter has shown that even where contact was *continuous*, the experience of contact was inversely linked with the level of parental conflict. Thus, both on our overall measure of conflict and on each of the separate dimensions of conflict measured, the proportion of those saying their experience of contact had been 'very positive' was highest amongst those reporting the lowest levels of conflict and lowest amongst those reporting the highest conflict. Moreover, whatever the level of bad feeling respondents reported between their parents, if there was overt parental conflict in the form of 'much arguing' the experience of conflict was less likely to be described as very positive.

The importance of parental conflict to respondents' experience of contact was also evidenced from other data. First, analysis of the responses to questions about different aspects of contact showed that both parental badmouthing and being asked to act as a go-between or keep secrets were inversely correlated with a very positive evaluation of contact, even when contact was continuous. Second, when asked, at the end of the telephone interview, what was the most important thing their parents could have done differently to improve their experience of contact, by far the most frequent response was for their parents to have been less conflicted/more cooperative. While those with continuous contact were least likely to make suggestions – as one would expect given that their experience of contact was the most positive – less conflict/more cooperation was the most common response among those who did. Finally, when asked what they would do differently if they were ever to be a separated parent, of those who made any suggestions relating to the quality of contact, again the most common resolution was that they would maintain a better relationship with their ex-partner than their parents had managed.

Respondents were more likely to report a positive experience of contact if domestic violence was not an issue and the resident parent did not have serious concerns about the care provided by the non-resident parent.

Given that, as reported in chapter 4, the *resident parent's encouragement* of the child's relationship with the other parent was closely linked with the degree of conflict between the parents, and whether there were issues around domestic violence or the non-resident parent's care of the child, it is not surprising that this also proved to be associated with how positive

an experience contact was for the child, even when it was continuous. Where the resident parent was said to have encouraged the relationship a lot, respondents were most likely to describe their experience as very positive. The proportion was also higher among those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship a bit than those who said they had not done so at all. This chimes with previous research findings that where contact was taking place, the attitude of the resident parent was important in making contact work rather than merely happen. Interestingly, however, in the few cases where the resident parent was said to have tried to undermine the relationship, respondents were more likely to say that their experience had been very positive than those who said they had only encouraged it a bit or not at all. It is hard to know how to interpret this. It may be that active discouragement was actually counter-productive. Alternatively that the relationship was already too well-established to be affected – all said their pre-separation relationship had been either very or fairly close.

In contrast to the factors outlined above, the *structural aspects of contact* – frequency, overnights, whether there were set arrangements – did not appear to be particularly relevant to how positive an experience contact was for our respondents. In terms of *overnights*, the only statistically significant difference was in the group whose contact had been delayed, and then only between those who never had overnights and the rest. Having *set arrangements* was not significantly associated with more positive contact in any group.

At first it seemed that the *frequency* of contact was important, although only for those whose contact was continuous. However when account was taken of the respondents' pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent, not only was there no longer a statistically significant association but those respondents seeing the non-resident parent on less than five days a month were more likely to say it had been a very positive experience than those with more frequent contact.

Chapter 7 Relationships with parents before and after separation

The relevance of contact, and in particular its frequency, to children's outcomes is a hotly contested issue and research presents a mixed picture (Dunn, 2004; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Mooney et al, 2009). The evidence is more consistent, however, for the significance of a high quality relationship with the non-resident parent (Amato, 1994; Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Buchanan et al, 1996; Dunn et al, 2003; King and Sobolewski, 2006; Marsiglio et al, 2000; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Smith et al, 2002; Whiteside and Becker, 2001). Dunn and colleagues (2003) found that the association was particularly clear for children in single-mother families. Although our research was not an outcomes study, and in particular did not explore the relationship between contact in childhood and adult well-being, we therefore thought it was important to examine the quality of the relationship between the respondents and their non-resident parent. Indeed, since children generally see the non-resident parent as an important person in their lives (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001), a positive relationship might be regarded as a good outcome in itself.

Relationship quality can encompass a number of dimensions. Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis (1999) found that good outcomes for children were associated with authoritative parenting by non-resident fathers (support, affection and limit setting) and feelings of closeness. Two recent UK studies (Dunn et al, 2003 and Smith et al, 2002) report that good adjustment was linked to high warmth and low hostility in the relationship. Fabricius (2012) writes of emotionally secure relationships developed through parental availability for interaction and parent responsiveness.

In the telephone survey, in which we wanted to explore changes in parental relationships over time, it was only considered feasible to ask respondents about the *closeness* of their relationships at all three stages - pre-separation; during their post-separation childhood; and as adults – asking additionally whether, as adults, they would feel able to discuss problems with each of their parents. Both factors, we would suggest, are likely to reflect respondent's sense of emotional security. In addition, although we did not ask directly about parental responsiveness, one of our questions about the quality of contact 'the non-resident parent always made time for me' (see chapter 6) may tap into this dimension. We did not attempt to address the issue of authoritative parenting or warmth/hostility in the relationship.

Closeness of pre-separation relationships

Space constraints on the questionnaire meant that we were unable to ask all respondents about the closeness of their pre-separation relationship with each parent. We therefore prioritised the relationship with the person who subsequently became the *non-resident parent*, asking all respondents about this. Questions about the relationship with the *resident parent* were only asked in cases where there was contact up to the point the interviewee reached adulthood, ie excluding those who never had any contact or whose contact ceased. In order to make comparisons possible across the sample, for the shared residence group we have taken the respondent's father as the equivalent of the non-resident parent in the contact group.

Not surprisingly, given the relatively young age of many respondents at the point their parents separated, many said they were too young to remember how close they had been to one or both of their parents. Although close or fairly close relationships predominated, the data indicates somewhat closer pre-separation relationships with the parent who subsequently became the resident parent – or, in the case of shared residence arrangements, mothers (table 7.1). Thus while 80% of those who had on-going contact said the relationship with the non-

resident parent/father had been very close (81 of 186; 43%) or quite close (68; 37%), this was less than the 94% who said that the relationship with the resident parent/mother had been very (70%, 144 of 206) or quite (50; 24%) close. Twenty per cent said the relationship with the non-resident parent/father had not been very close (29; 16%) or not at all close (8; 4%), compared to 6%, with less than 1% saying the relationship with the resident parent/mother had not been at all close.

Table 7.1 Closeness of pre-separation relationship with each parent*

	Resident parent/mother		Non-resident parent/father	
	No	%	No	%
Very close	144	70	81	43
Fairly close	50	24	68	37
Not very close	1	5	29	16
Not at all close	1	1	8	4
(N=)	(206)		(186)	

*Excludes cases where there was never any contact with the non-resident parent or contact ceased in childhood

A case by case analysis of the responses shows that, in the 173 cases where data was available on the relationship with each parent, 77 (45%) indicated they were equally close to both, while 73 (42%) were closer to their (future) resident parent/mother and 23 (13%) to their (future) non-resident parent/father. Ahrons' study of young adults (2004) also reports closer pre-separation relationships with mothers, who typically became the resident parent).

In terms of gender, 93% of young men and 92% of young women said the relationship with their mother had been very or fairly close pre-separation and 79% of men and 82% of women said that about the relationship with their father (table 7.2). The proportion saying they were closer to their mother was similar (39% women, 42% men) but women were much more likely than men to say they had been closer to their fathers (21% compared to 8%) while men were more likely than women to say they had felt equally close (50% compared to 40%).

Table 7.2 Closeness of pre-separation relationship with each parent by gender*

	Mother		Father	
	No	%	No	%
<i>Males</i>				
Very close	67	71	34	38
Fairly close	21	22	37	41
Not very close	5	5	17	19
Not at all close	1	1	2	2
(N=)	(94)		(90)	
<i>Females</i>				
Very close	73	66	51	50
Fairly close	29	26	32	32
Not very close	8	7	12	12
Not at all close	0	0	6	6
	(110)		(101)	

*Excludes cases where there was never any contact with the non-resident parent or contact ceased in childhood

Closeness of post-separation relationships

The literature on the relationship between children and their non-resident fathers traditionally presents a rather gloomy picture - ‘fading’ fathers, Disneyland dads and devitalised relationships (Arditti and Prouty, 1999, p61). Divorce has been reported to have a negative effect on the relationship with the non-resident parent (Booth and Amato, 1994; Lye et al, 1995) and to undermine the paternal role more than the maternal (Braver, 1999; Leite and McKenry, 2002; Marquardt, 2005). Non-resident fathers have been perceived by their children as remote, less involved, disengaged or even lost (Emery and Forehand, 1994; Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke, 1997, cited in Shulman et al, 2001; Arditti and Prouty, 1999). However, there is also evidence of variability, both in the closeness of relationships and in the direction of change, with some relationships deteriorating, others remaining unchanged and some improving (Arditti and Prouty, 1999; Ahrons, 2004; White and Gilbreth, 2001).

The young adults in our telephone survey (excluding those whose main arrangement had been shared residence) typically described their post-separation relationship with the *resident parent* (343 of 380; 90%) as either very close (67%) or fairly close (24%). In contrast, less than half (179; 47%) described their relationship with the non-resident parent in these terms, while over a third (132; 35%) said it was not very close/not at all close and 18% had no contact after separation (table 7.3).

Table 7.3 Closeness of post-separation relationship with each parent*

	Resident parent/mother		Non-resident parent/father	
	No	%	No	%
Very close	254	67	70	19
Fairly close	89	23	109	29
Not very close	29	8	90	24
Not at all close	8	2	42	11
No contact	0	0	66	18
(N=)	(380)		(380)	

*Excludes those whose main arrangement was shared residence

Even if we exclude cases where there was no contact or contact ceased in childhood, respondents were much more likely to report close post-separation relationships with the resident parent than with the non-resident parent, 92% saying their relationship with the former was very or fairly close as compared to 63% (table 7.4).

Table 7.4 Post-separation relationships with parents (on-going contact only)*

	Resident parent/mother		Non-resident parent/father	
	No	%	No	%
Very close	191	70	67	25
Fairly close	62	23	103	38
Not very close	18	7	72	27
Not at all close	3	1	30	11
(N=)	(274)		(272)	

*Excludes cases where there was no contact with the NRP, contact ceased in childhood or the main arrangement was shared residence

Case by case analysis of individual responses confirms this picture, with 61% of respondents (164 of the 271 where data was available on both parents) saying that, post-separation, they

were closer to the parent they had mainly lived with. Only 11% (29) said that they had been closer to the non-resident parent, although 29% said they had been equally close to both parents. There was no statistically significant association between comparative closeness and the gender of either the respondent or the parent.

Factors associated with the closeness of the child's post-separation relationship with the non-resident parent

There appears to be little research on the factors affecting the quality of the relationship between children and their non-resident parent (Stone, 2006). The frequency of contact has attracted the most attention. King and Soboleskwi (2006, p1210), conclude that 'although not a guarantee, high-quality father-child relationships and positive parenting behaviours appear to be more likely when the father and the child have more frequent contact'. Fabricius (2012, p195) reports a 'substantial association' between parenting time and emotional security in the relationship with the father, while Dunn and colleagues (2004, p562) report 'unequivocal' results that more frequent and regular contact is associated with closer, more intense relationships with non-resident fathers, although noting that these included both more positive and more conflicted relationships. However some researchers have drawn attention to other factors: the pre-separation relationship between child and parent (Whiteside and Becker, 2000); a cooperative parental relationship (King and Soboleskwi, 2006; Whiteside and Becker, 2000); frequency of contact between the parents (Dunn et al, 2003); the quality of the resident mother-child relationship (Dunn et al, 2003); the (non-resident) father's role clarity (Stone, 2006); the perceived parenting abilities of each parent (Stone, 2006) and the non-resident parent's responsiveness to the child (Fabricius, 2012).

Age at parental separation

It was noted earlier (chapter 2) that respondents who were under five years old when their parents separated were more likely than those who had been older to have no contact with their non-resident parent (table 7.5). The data also indicates that those who did have contact was more likely to describe their post-separation relationship with the non-resident parent as not very close or not at all close (47%, 50 of 107), compared to 39% of those aged between five and 12 (66 of 170) and 37% of those who were teenagers (19 of 51; 37%). These differences were statistically significant.

Table 7.5 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by age at separation*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	No contact	(N=)
<i>Age*</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
<5	16	22	17	17	29	(151)
5-12	22	34	27	9	9	(186)
13+	30	26	32	2	11	(57)
<i>All</i>	21	28	24	11	17	(394)

*Statistically significant $p < .01$

The pre-separation relationship

Another factor not related to the post-separation arrangements was the pre-separation relationship between the respondent and the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent (or father in the case of those whose main arrangement was shared residence). Across the whole sample there was pre-and post-separation closeness were correlated with almost half (112 of 233; 48%) saying there had been no change in the closeness of their relationship. Moreover the association remained significant, and was indeed stronger, even

when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact (table 7.6). We look in detail at continuity and change in relationships later in this chapter.

Table 7.6 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by pre-separation relationship

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	No contact	(N=)
<i>All respondents able to recall*</i>	%	%	%	%		
Very close	44	30	17	3	6	(95)
Fairly close	8	45	23	11	14	(89)
Not very close	0	18	66	3	13	(38)
Not at all close	9	9	18	46	18	(11)
<i>All</i>	22	33	27	8	11	(233)
<i>Those who had some contact**</i>						
Very close	47	32	18	3	-	(89)
Fairly close	9	52	26	13	-	(77)
Not very close	0	21	76	3	-	(33)
Not at all close	11	11	22	57	-	(9)
<i>All</i>	24	37	30	9	-	(208)
<i>Primary care + contact**</i>						
Very close	34	43	18	5	-	(61)
Fairly close	4	51	31	15	-	(55)
Not very close	0	12	85	4	-	(26)
Not at all close	13	13	13	63	-	(8)
<i>All</i>	16	39	34	11	-	(150)
<i>Primary care + continuous contact***</i>						
Very close	44	51	3	3	-	(39)
Fairly close	3	64	27	6	-	(33)
Not very close	0	27	64	9	-	(11)
Not at all close	0	50	50	0	-	(2)
<i>All</i>	21	53	21	5	-	(85)
<i>Shared residence</i>						
Very close	91	0	9	0	-	(11)
Fairly close	25	75	0	0	-	(4)
Not very close	0	0	100	0	-	(2)
Not at all close	0	0	0	0	-	(0)
<i>All</i>	65	18	18	0	-	(17)

* Statistically significant $p < 0.1$, correlation coefficient .394, Kendall's Tau. **Statistically significant $p < 0.1$, correlation coefficient .443, Kendall's Tau ***Statistically significant $p < 0.1$, correlation coefficient .542, Kendall's Tau

Residence arrangements

Differences in residence arrangements partly explain variation in post-separation closeness. Of those who lived with the same parent throughout, but had some contact with the other, just 55% (135 of 249) said that their relationship with the non-resident parent was very or fairly close. In contrast, where residence had changed, 77% (44 of 62) did so (table 7.7). Pre-

separation, however, the relationships in each group were similarly close. The sole carer group were also less likely to say they were equally close to both parents post-separation (28% compared to 33%, table 7.8) although, again, pre-separation, there was no difference (44%). It seems perfectly understandable that moving to live with the previously non-resident parent would have the effect of bringing about greater closeness.

For those who said their main arrangement was shared residence, however, their greater post-separation closeness (15 of 18; 83% saying they were very or fairly close and 56% being equally close to both parents) was explicable in terms of pre-separation relationships rather than shared residence *per se*. Eighty-eight per cent (15 of 17) described their pre-separation relationship with their father as fairly or very close; half (8 of 16) said they had been equally close to each parent while a further three said they had been closer to their father.

Table 7.7 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by residence arrangements*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Residence arrangements**</i>	%	%	%	%	
Same primary carer throughout	20	35	31	15	(249)
Mainly one primary carer but some time with other or shared residence	34	37	19	10	(62)
Mainly/solely shared residence	61	22	17	0	(18)
<i>All</i>	25	34	28	13	(329)

*Excluding those who never had any contact. ** Statistically significant $p < .01$

Those whose main arrangement had been shared residence were also more likely to report feeling equally close to both parents post-separation (10 of 18, 56%) compared to 28% (60 of 216) of those who lived with the same parent throughout and 33% (18 of 55) of those who had lived with each parent at some time (table 7.8)

Table 7.8 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent post-separation by residence arrangements*

	Equally close		Closer to RP/mother		Closer to NRP/father		(N=)
<i>Residence arrangements**</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Same parent throughout	60	28	142	66	14	7	(216)
Mainly primary care but some time with other parent	18	33	40	22	15	27	(55)
Mainly shared residence	10	56	5	28	3	17	(18)
<i>All</i>	88	30	169	59	32	11	(289)

*Excludes those who never had any contact, those whose contact ceased in childhood & those where data not available on both parents.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

The continuity of contact

Although, as noted above, post-separation relationships were related in some degree to the residence arrangements, where the respondent lived with the same parent throughout the continuity of contact was also important (table 7.9). Where contact was continuous, 78% (99 of 127) described the post-separation relationship with the non-resident parent as very or fairly close, compared to only 33% of those whose contact had been sporadic (15 of 46); 30% where it was delayed (13 of 44) and 25% where it had ceased (8 of 32). The association also remained significant when those whose contact had ceased were excluded.

Table 7.9 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by continuity of contact*(those living with same primary carer only)

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Contact pattern**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Continuous	28	50	19	3	(127)
Sporadic contact	11	22	50	17	(46)
Delayed contact	11	18	34	36	(44)
Ceased contact	9	16	50	25	(32)
<i>All</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>(249)</i>

*Excludes cases where there had never been any contact & where respondent did not live with same parent throughout

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

Those who lived with the same parent throughout, but had continuous contact, were also more likely to say they felt equally close to each parent (48 of 127; 38%, compared to 13% and 14% of those with sporadic and delayed contact [6 of 45 and 6 of 44] respectively) (table 7.10). This difference was statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Table 7.10 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent post-separation by continuity of contact* (those living with same primary carer only)

	Equally close		Closer to RP/mother		Closer to NRP/father		(N=)
<i>Contact pattern**</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Continuous contact	48	38	70	55	9	7	(127)
Sporadic contact	6	13	37	82	2	4	(45)
Delayed contact	6	14	35	80	3	7	(44)
<i>All</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>(216)</i>

* Data on both relationships not available for those whose contact ceased

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

Frequency of contact

Table 7.11 Closeness of post-separation relationship with non-resident parent by frequency of contact

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Days per month**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
>6	41	49	9	1	(86)
5-6	28	42	26	4	(50)
3-4	20	35	32	13	(60)
1-2	8	17	56	19	(48)
<1 day	8	23	34	34	(64)
<i>All</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>(308)</i>

*Excludes those whose main arrangement had been shared residence and those who never had any contact

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient .422, Kendall's Tau.

Frequency also appeared to be relevant, both overall and when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact. Excluding those whose main

arrangement had been shared residence or who had never had contact (table 7.11), there was a statistically significant correlation between the amount of contact respondents had (measured by the number of days in an average month on which they saw the non-resident parent) and the closeness of the relationship with that parent. Thus, 90% of those who saw the non-resident parent on more than six days in an average month (77 of 86) described their relationship as very or fairly close, compared to 70% (35 of 50) of those with contact on 5-6 days; 55% (33 of 60) of those with 3-4 days and 25% (12 of 48) of those with only 1-2 days and 31% (20 of 64) less than one day.

The correlation remained significant, although weaker, when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact (table 7.12). Thus, of those who lived with the same parent throughout but had continuous contact with the non-resident parent, 91% who had contact on more than six days in an average month (49 of 54) described their relationship as very or fairly close compared to 75% (21 of 28) of those with contact on 5-6 days; 67% (16 of 24) of those with 3-4 days and 56% (5 of 9) of those on only 1-2 days. Oddly, though, eight of the 11 respondents (73%) of those seeing the non-resident parent on less than one day a month also described their relationship as very/fairly close. It seems possible that these respondents may have had extensive holiday contact and/or kept in touch in other ways. Alternatively, that their relationship was strong enough to be able to cope with relatively infrequent face to face contact.

Table 7.12 Closeness of post-separation relationship with non-resident parent by frequency of continuous contact

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Days per month**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
>6	37	54	9	0	(54)
5-6	21	54	25	0	(28)
3-4	25	42	25	8	(24)
1-2	11	44	33	11	(9)
<1 day	27	46	18	9	(11)
<i>All</i>	29	50	18	3	(126)

*Excludes cases where the respondent did not live with the same parent throughout & those who did not have continuous contact

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient .246, Kendall's Tau.

It is important to note, however, that when account was taken of the respondent's previous relationship with the future non-resident parent, the only group in which there was a statistically significant correlation between frequency and the closeness of the relationship was where respondents' pre-separation relationships had been very close (correlation coefficient .425). This tends to suggest that frequency can help to preserve previously close relationships.

Overnight stays

Overall, close relationships also appeared to be associated with overnight stays. However when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact, the differences virtually disappeared (table 7.13).

Table 7.13 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by overnight stays

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Overnight stays</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Regularly	25	54	20	0	(59)
Occasionally	31	45	19	5	(42)
Never	31	46	15	8	(26)
<i>All</i>	28	50	19	3	(127)

*Excludes those who did not live with the same parent throughout & whose contact had not been continuous

The experience of contact

In contrast, respondents' relationship with the non-resident parent was correlated with their evaluation of the quality of contact, both overall, and among those who had lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact (table 7.14). Ninety per cent of those who said their experience had been very positive (43 of 48) said their relationship had been very or fairly close, compared to 83% (39 of 47) for whom it had been fairly positive, 62% (16 of 26) where it had been mixed and none of the four who said fairly negative (although one of the two respondents who said their experience had been very negative also said their relationship had been very or fairly close). It should be noted, however, that when account was taken of the previous relationship, the quality of the contact was only significantly correlated with the closeness of the post-separation relationship where the pre-separation relationship had been very close (correlation coefficient .402).

Table 7.14 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by evaluation of contact

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Evaluation of contact**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Very positive	40	50	8	2	(48)
Fairly positive	30	53	17	0	(47)
Mixed	12	50	31	8	(26)
Fairly negative	0	0	100	0	(4)
Very negative	0	50	0	50	(2)
<i>All</i>	28	50	19	3	(127)

*Excludes cases where the respondent had not lived with the same parent throughout and contact was not continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient 0.396, Kendall's tau

Level of parental conflict

When all those who had ever had contact were considered, the closeness of the child's post-separation relationship with the non-resident parent was correlated with the level of parental conflict, with closeness consistently reducing as the conflict level increased (table 7.15). Where there had been no conflict, 77% (92 of 120) described their relationship as very or fairly close; 64% (54 of 84) where conflict was low; 51% (20 of 39) moderate; and 40% (19 of 47) where it was high.

Table 7.15 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by level of parental conflict*

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Level of conflict**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
No conflict	35	42	18	5	(120)
Low conflict	29	36	27	8	(84)
Moderate conflict	21	31	33	15	(39)
High conflict	9	32	36	23	(47)
<i>All</i>	27	37	26	10	(290)

*Excludes cases where there had never been any contact

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient .250, Kendall's tau

While there was still a statistically significant correlation in cases when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact, the pattern was less clear (table 7.16). Those who reported no conflict were still most likely to say the relationship had been very or fairly close (85%, 56 of 66). However the proportion was almost as high among the few who said there had been moderate conflict (5 of 6; 83%) and the lowest proportion was among those who said there had been low conflict (31 of 45; 69%), almost the same as where conflict was high (7 of 10; 70%). The only consistent pattern was in the proportion reporting very close relationships: 38% of those who said there had been no conflict (25 of 66) described the relationship as very close, compared to 22% of those where conflict was low (10 of 45); 17% where it was moderate (1 of 6) and none of those where it was high. When account was taken of the pre-separation relationship, the level of parental conflict just failed to reach significance ($p = .05$).

There was no consistent pattern in terms of which parent the respondent was closer to.

Table 7.16 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP by level of parental conflict (same primary carer and continuous contact only)

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Level of conflict**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
No conflict	38	47	14	2	(66)
Low conflict	22	47	27	4	(45)
Moderate conflict	17	67	17	0	(6)
High conflict	0	70	20	10	(10)
<i>All</i>	28	50	19	3	(127)

*Excludes cases where the respondent did not live with the same parent throughout & where contact was not continuous

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient 0.239, Kendall's tau

Whether the resident parent encouraged the relationship

There was a statistically significant correlation between the closeness of the relationship with the non-resident parent and encouragement of that relationship by the resident parent, both overall and (table 7.17) for those who had lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact. Indeed the correlation was slightly stronger in the latter cases, although it should be noted that the numbers who said the resident parent had not encouraged contact at all or had tried to undermine it were very small. Eighty-seven per cent of those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship with the non-resident parent 'a lot' described

it as very or fairly close (75 of 86) compared to 62% (18 of 29) who said they had only done so ‘a bit’; 67% (6 of 9) saying ‘not at all’ and neither of the two people who said they had tried to undermine it. Again, however, when account was taken of the closeness of the pre-separation relationship the correlation was only significant for those who had previously been very close (correlation coefficient .394).

Table 7.17 Closeness of post-separation relationship with NRP/father by whether resident parent encouraged the relationship*

	<i>Closeness of post-separation relationship</i>				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>RP encouraged</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
A lot	34	54	12	1	(86)
A bit	17	45	31	7	(29)
Not at all	22	44	33	0	(9)
Tried to undermine	0	0	50	50	(2)
<i>All</i>	29	50	18	3	(126)

*Excludes cases where the respondent had not lived with the same parent throughout & where contact had not been continuous

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient 0.266, Kendall's tau

The availability and responsiveness of the non-resident parent

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, although it was not considered feasible in the telephone survey to ask questions designed to elicit how available and responsive the respondent felt their non-resident parent had been, we did wonder whether one of our questions ‘the non-resident parent always made time for me’ might give an indication of how respondents’ perceived this.

The responses to this question were certainly strongly correlated with the closeness of the relationship, both across the whole sample of those with continuing contact and those who lived with a primary carer and had continuous contact. However, the responses were also strongly correlated with the frequency of contact (correlation coefficient 0.504), which suggests that the question might have been interpreted in terms of the amount of time the respondent spent with the non-resident parent rather than their availability or responsiveness.

Relationship with the resident parent

In contrast to Dunn and colleagues’ finding about the importance of the relationship with the resident parent, this did not emerge as significant in our study.

Continuity and change in pre-and post-separation relationships

As noted above, where respondents were able to recall their pre-separation relationship with the (future) non-resident parent (or the father in the case of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence) the data indicates a close correlation between pre- and post-separation closeness. Overall, 48% of respondents indicated there had been no change in the closeness of their relationship, the proportion varying between 44% of those who lived with the same parent throughout and 49% of those whose residence arrangements changed, to 88% of those whose main experience was shared residence (table 7.18). However 34% had become less close and 11% had had no face to face contact since the separation. This was most likely to happen where the respondent had lived with the same parent throughout their

childhood. Even where contact had been continuous with the non-resident parent 40% (34 of 85) said that their relationship had become less close.

Table 7.18 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation

	No change	Closer	Less close	No face to face contact	(N=)
	%	%	%	%	
Shared residence	88	6	6	0	(17)
Residence changed	49	21	26	5*	(66)
One RP throughout	44	5	38	13	(173)
<i>All</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>(233)</i>

*Although this may seem anomalous, the interview data indicates it is possible: some did not see their other parent at all during this time.

Over half of those who had previously been very close (53 of 95, 56%) and 47% of those who had been fairly close (42 of 89) became less close or lost touch. In contrast relationships with resident parents were much more stable – 71% of respondents (146 of the 206 where data was available on both time periods) indicated no change in closeness. Only 17% (34) indicated a deterioration, while 13% (26) said they had become closer.

Only 18 respondents (8%) said that they had become closer to the non-resident parent/father. This was most likely to happen when residence had changed (21%, compared to 6% of those in shared residence and 5% of those who lived with the same parent throughout) (table 7.19).

Table 7.19 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation

	No change	Closer	Less close	No face to face contact	(N=)
	%	%	%	%	
Very close	44	-	50	6	(95)
Fairly close	45	8	34	14	(89)
Not very close	66	18	3	13	(38)
Not at all close	46	36	0	18	(11)
<i>All</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>(233)</i>

Seven of these 18 who had become closer were respondents who said they had become very close having only been fairly close before (8% of 89). This applied to two of the 65 (3%) who had lived with the same parent throughout, four of the 20 who had changed residence (20%) and one of the four in shared residence (25%). Seven became fairly close having not been very close before (3 of the 31 who had lived with the same parent [10%] and four of the five who changed residence). Interestingly neither of the two respondents in shared residence who said their previous relationship with their father had not been very close said that they had become closer after separation. Rather surprisingly, given the above findings, three of the four who said they had become closer having not been at all close before, lived with the same parent throughout (30% of the 10 who had previously not been very close at all). One said the relationship had become very close, one fairly close while the third reported only marginal improvement to 'not very close'. The fourth person was the only one who changed residence to say that their previous relationship had not been at all close. They also only became slightly less distant, becoming only 'not very close'. None of those in shared residence described their pre-separation relationship as not at all close.

Close post-separation relationships between children and the parent they no longer live with, therefore, are rooted in pre-separation family life. Although it is not impossible, separation is very unlikely to improve that relationship – 93% of those who described their post-separation relationship as very or fairly close (117 of 126) were also close prior to the separation. However, separation can result in relationships becoming more distant, and in some cases foundering entirely, while in a few it can result in improved relationships. Two questions then arise. First, what helps to prevent previously good relationships deteriorating? Second, what helps to improve previously poor relationships?

To explore the first question we looked at the data from respondents who said that their pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent/father had been very or fairly close and looked for factors associated with relationship change/continuity.

Preventing previously close relationships deteriorating: factors associated with continuity and change in pre- and post-separation relationships

A number of factors were associated with the maintenance of previously close relationships. As one would expect, given the material presented above, the *residence arrangements* proved statistically significant. Only one of those who said their main arrangement had been shared residence (7%) and 35% who had lived with each parent for a period said that their relationship had become less close post-separation. In comparison, 61% (81 of 132) of those who lived with the same parent throughout said that the relationship with their non-resident parent had become less close or had ceased (table 7.20).

Table 7.20 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation by residence arrangements*

	No change	Closer	Less close	No face to face contact	(N=)
<i>Residence**</i>	%	%	%	%	
Same parent throughout	37	2	49	12	(132)
Mainly same parent but some time with other	54	11	30	5	(37)
Mainly shared residence	87	7	7	0	(15)
<i>All</i>	45	4	42	10	(184)

*Excludes those who could not recall the pre-separation relationship or who did not describe it as very or fairly close.

**Statistically significant $p=.001$

The *continuity of contact* also proved significant. Of respondents who had lived with the same parent throughout, those who had had continuous contact with the other parent were less likely than others to report more distant relationships (33 of 72; 46%, compared to 67%, 12 of 18, where contact was delayed and 83%, 10 of 12, where it had been sporadic) (table 7.21).

Table 7.21 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation by continuity of contact

	No change	Closer	Less close	(N=)
<i>Contact pattern</i>	%	%	%	
Continuous	53	1	46	(72)
Sporadic	17	0	83	(12)
Delayed	28	6	67	(18)
<i>All</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>(102)</i>

*Excludes those who could not recall the pre-separation relationship or who did not describe it as very or fairly close.

**Statistically significant $p=.01$ when those who had become closer are excluded.

Continuity seemed more important than the details of the *structure*. Analysis of the data on those whose contact had been continuous indicates that neither frequency, overnights, nor whether or not there were set arrangements proved statistically significant, although there was a trend for relationships to remain unchanged when there were regular overnight stays and, interestingly, when there were no set arrangements. However, in terms of frequency there was not even a consistent trend. In fact those with the lowest levels of contact were least likely to report less close relationships (table 7.22). Even if one ignores those with lower levels of contact, since the numbers are so small, although those with contact on 5-6 days a month were more likely to report that the relationship had become less close than those seeing their non-resident parent more frequently than this, the difference was not statistically significant. The most that can be said, therefore, is that high levels of contact may help to prevent relationships deteriorating.

Table 7.22 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation by structure of contact

	No change	Closer	Less close	(N=)
<i>Set arrangements</i>	%	%	%	
Yes	53	0	47	(55)
No	53	6	41	(17)
<i>Regular overnights</i>				
Yes	58	0	42	(36)
No	47	3	50	(36)
<i>Frequency</i>				
>6 days a month	59	3	38	(34)
5-6 days	44	0	57	(23)
3-4 days	38	0	63	(8)
1-2 days	75	0	25	(4)
<1 day	67	0	33	(3)

*Excludes: a) those who could not recall the pre-separation relationship or who did not describe it as very or fairly close, b) those who did not live with the same parent throughout and c) those whose contact was not continuous.

In contrast, the *experience of contact* was statistically significant, although it should be noted that the number of those with continuous contact who did not describe their experience as very or fairly positive was small. Of those who said contact had been very or fairly positive 39% (23 of 59) said they had become less close, compared to 73% (8 of 11) of those who

described it as mixed and both the two respondents who said it had been fairly or very negative (table 7.23).

Table 7.23 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation by experience of contact

	No change	Closer	Less close	(N=)
<i>Experience of contact**</i>	%	%	%	
Very positive	62	0	38	(29)
Fairly positive	57	3	40	(30)
Mixed	27	0	73	(11)
Fairly negative	0	0	100	(1)
Very negative	0	0	100	(1)
<i>All</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>(72)</i>

*Excludes: a) those who could not recall the pre-separation relationship or who did not describe it as very or fairly close, b) those who did not live with the same parent throughout and c) those whose contact was not continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

Finally, we looked at the *parental relationship* and the *resident parent's attitude* to the relationship (table 7.24). The level of parental conflict proved to be statistically significant, although the pattern was not entirely consistent. While those who said there had been no conflict were least likely to say they had become less close (35%; 16 of 46) and conversely, those with the highest levels were most likely to say this (14 of 17, 82%) the proportion among those who said there had been low conflict was actually higher than those where it had been moderate. Encouragement by the resident parent, on the other hand, was not statistically significant. However, there was a consistent trend, ranging from 49% reporting more distant relationships where the resident parent had encouraged the relationship (33 of 67) to 75% (6 of 8) of the few where s/he was said to have tried to undermine it.

Table 7.24 Change in relationship with NRP/father post-separation by parental relationship*

	No change	Closer	Less close	(N=)
<i>Parental conflict**</i>	%	%	%	
None	63	2	35	(46)
Low	30	0	70	(30)
Moderate	44	11	44	(9)
High	18	0	82	(17)
<i>RP encouraged relationship</i>				
A lot	50	2	49	(67)
A bit	45	0	55	(20)
Not at all	29	0	71	(7)
Tried to undermine	13	13	75	(8)
<i>All</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>(102)</i>

*Excludes: a) those who could not recall the pre-separation relationship or who did not describe it as very or fairly close, b) those who did not live with the same parent throughout and c) those whose contact was not continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

Improving previously poor relationships

As noted above, 11 of the 18 respondents who said their relationship with the (future) non-resident parent had become closer after separation described their pre-separation relationship as not very close or not at all close. These cases appeared to have nothing in common apart from the fact that they had all mainly lived with their mothers. No-one said that their relationship with their non-resident mother had improved.

Not surprisingly, only four of the 11 were teenagers. If strong relationships have not formed by the time children reach adolescence, they are not likely to be at a stage in life when the key developmental task is to develop autonomy, and when relationships with parents naturally take second place to peer group activities. However age was clearly not the determining factor. In fact the proportion of teenagers was actually higher than in the group reporting no change in their relationship (36% compared to 5 of 30, 17%).

Experience of living for a period with the non-resident parent, however, was relevant (and statistically significant, $p < .05$). Ninety per cent of those who said their relationship had not changed (27 of 30) had lived with the same parent throughout. In comparison, six of those describing closer relationships had changed residence.

Similarly the continuity of contact was important (and statistically significant even when account was taken of the residence arrangements, although the numbers are small). Of those whose relationship had improved, all but one of the six who lived with the same parent throughout had had continuous contact throughout their childhood (83%), compared to only seven of the 27 whose relationship had not changed (26%).

High levels of contact did not seem crucial. Only two of those who said their relationship had improved reported having contact on more than six days in an average month, while seven said it was between 3-4 days and two less than this. Nonetheless those whose relationships became closer did have more contact than those whose relationship remained unchanged – only 18% saw their non-resident parent on less than three days in a month, compared to 74% (20 of 27). However the difference was not statistically significant when changes of residence were taken into account.

Those whose relationship became closer were also more likely to have had overnight stays (9 of 11, 82% compared to 57% (16 of 28) where the relationship did not change. They were also more likely to have had regular overnights (5 of 11 compared to only two of 28; 7%). Again, however, the difference was not statistically significant when account was taken of the residence changes.

The experience of contact was vital. The majority of those whose relationship improved (8 of 10 [this data was not available in one case because contact had ceased]) described contact as very or fairly positive and no-one said it had been very or fairly negative. In contrast, only a quarter of those whose relationship remained unchanged (6 of 24) said contact had been very or fairly positive and 23% (7) said it had been very or fairly negative. Moreover, the association remained significant even among those who had lived with the same parent throughout ($p < .05$) and although the numbers were too small to test for significance, even where contact had been continuous the pattern remained.

Levels of parental conflict were generally lower among those whose relationship became closer - seven of 10 said there had been little or no conflict, compared to 46% (12 of 26)

whose relationship remained unchanged. However it was notable that the proportions categorised as high conflict were little different (3 of 10 compared to 9 of 26, 35%). And, perhaps surprisingly, the proportion saying that the resident parent had tried to encourage the relationship was actually higher among those whose relationship had not changed – 42% said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship ‘a lot,’ compared to only 11% (1 of 9).

Summary

Following parental separation, as reported in previous chapters, some respondents never saw one of their parents again. Others had contact for a while but then it completely stopped. This chapter has shown that, even where there was contact, respondents typically had closer relationships with the parent with whom they mainly lived than the non-resident parent (61% compared to 11% being closer to the non resident parent). Indeed 38% said that they had not been very close or not at all close. Less than a third (29%) were equally close to both parents after separation. The data therefore supports the findings of previous research that a substantial proportion of relationships between non-resident parents and their children are weak or non-existent. At the same time, as other research has found, the picture is by no means universally bleak – 47% of all respondents in primary care arrangements said that they had been very or fairly close to the non-resident parent.

The closeness of the post-separation relationship was associated with a number of factors, only some of which were related to the residence or contact arrangements. As previous research has found, the *age of the child* was relevant. Earlier in this report we noted that respondents who were under five when their parents split up were less likely to have any contact. In this chapter we found that younger respondents who did have contact were also more likely than those who had been older at the separation to describe their post-separation relationship as not very close or not at all close.

The *pre-separation relationship* between the child and the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent – or, in the case of those who mainly lived in shared residence arrangements, their father - has also been identified in earlier chapters as an important factor in whether contact occurs or is maintained. This chapter has established that, in line with some other research, it is also correlated with the closeness of the post-separation relationship. Overall 48% of respondents indicated there had been no change in closeness. This applied to 44% of those who said they had been very close; 45% who had been fairly close; 46% who had not been at all close and 66% who had not been very close. The correlation remained significant, and was indeed stronger, when account was taken of the post-separation residence arrangements and the continuity of contact.

Differences in post-separation closeness, however, were also linked to the post-separation *residence arrangements* and the *continuity of contact*. Respondents who lived with the same parent throughout their post-separation childhood were less likely to have a close relationship than those who had changed residence. However those who had lived with the same parent but had continuous contact were more likely than other respondents to describe close or fairly close relationships with the non-resident parent. While those whose main arrangement had been shared residence were more likely to have close relationships, this was largely explained by the closeness of pre-separation relationships.

The *frequency of contact* – a factor identified in previous research - also appeared to be relevant, even when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact, although the correlation was weaker than for the sample as a whole. Almost all of

those who had contact on more than six days in an average month described their relationship as very or fairly close, the proportion generally declining as the amount of contact reduced. When account was taken of the pre-separation relationship, however, the association only remained statistically significant for those who had previously been very close. This may suggest that high levels of contact can preserve existing relationships. Alternatively, it may simply mean that those who were very close pre-separation wanted high levels of contact. Overnight stays were not associated with differences in closeness once the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact were taken into consideration.

The closeness of the post-separation relationship was also correlated with respondents' evaluation of the *quality of their contact*, even when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact, although as was found with frequency, it was weaker than for the larger group. Ninety per cent of those who said their experience had been very positive said their relationship had been very or fairly close, compared to 83% for whom it had been fairly positive, 62% where it had been mixed and none of the four who said fairly negative. Oddly, however, one of the two respondents who said their experience had been very negative also said their relationship had been very or fairly close. Again, however, when account was taken of the pre-separation relationship, the association only remained significant when this had been very close.

Two factors related to the parents and their relationship also appeared to have some relevance. The level of *parental conflict* was inversely correlated with the closeness of the child's relationship, even when account was taken of the residence arrangements and the continuity of contact, although the pattern only consistently obtained in relation to whether respondents felt *very* close to the non-resident parent. Thirty-eight per cent of those who said there had been no conflict described the relationship as very close, compared to 22% of those where conflict was low; 17% where it was moderate and none of those where it was high. When account was taken of the closeness of the pre-separation relationship the association just failed to reach significance.

The *resident parent's encouragement* of the child's relationship with the non-resident parent was also correlated with the closeness of the relationship, both for all those where there was on-going contact and those who lived with the same primary carer and had continuous contact. Indeed it was stronger in this latter group in which 87% of those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship with the non-resident parent 'a lot' described it as very or fairly close (75 of 86) compared to 62% (18 of 29) who said they only done so a bit; 67% (6 of 9) not at all and neither of the two people who said they had tried to undermine it. When account was taken of the closeness of the pre-separation relationship, however, the correlation was only significant for those who had previously been very close.

The material presented in this chapter confirms the findings of previous research that the impact of parental separation on the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent is variable. As noted above, almost half the respondents who could recall the pre-separation relationship said it had not changed in terms of closeness. It also indicates, however, that where change did occur this was most likely to involve the relationship becoming more distant (34%) or even ceasing on separation (11%). It was rare for relationships to improve (18 of 233; 8%). It also confirms that relationships with non-resident parents are much more vulnerable to deterioration than those with resident parents – 84% of respondents said that their relationship with the resident parent had either remained the same or become closer after separation with only 17% saying it had become more distant.

A number of factors were associated with the maintenance of previously close relationships. The *residence arrangements* clearly made a difference: those who lived with the same parent throughout were more likely to report less close relationships than those whose main arrangement had been shared residence or who had spent some time living with each parent. The *continuity of contact* was a protective factor: where respondents had lived with the same parent throughout, those with continuous contact were more likely than others to retain a close relationship.

The continuity of contact seemed more important than the details of the contact arrangements. Provided contact was continuous then neither the frequency, nor whether there were overnight stays, nor having set arrangements proved statistically significant. In contrast the *experience of contact* did. Those who described contact as very or fairly positive were less likely to report deteriorated relationships.

Absence of parental conflict was a protective factor and conversely high conflict a risk factor, although at intermediate levels of conflict the pattern was not consistent. The attitude of the resident parent was not statistically significant, although there was a consistent trend, with those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship a lot being most likely to report unchanged relationships, those who said they had tried to undermine it the least.

Only three factors seemed important in explaining why some relationships became closer after separation. First, the pattern of *residence*: six of the 11 whose relationship improved had lived for a period with each parent – although none had lived in shared residence – compared to only 10% of those whose relationship remained poor (27 of 30). Second, the *continuity of contact*: of those whose relationship had improved, all but one of those who had lived with the same parent throughout their childhood had had continuous contact, compared to just over a quarter of those whose relationship was unchanged. Third, the *experience of contact*: eight of the 10 respondents whose relationship improved said contact had been positive compared to only a quarter of those with unchanged relationships and no-one said it had been negative (compared to 23%). Neither the frequency of contact, nor having overnight stays were statistically significant when account was taken of the residence arrangements. Encouragement by the resident parent was not a protective factor: the proportion saying s/he had encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ was actually higher among those whose poor relationship with the non-resident parent did not improve.

Chapter 8 Relationships between respondents and their parents in adulthood

The impact of parental separation on the child's relationship with the non-resident parent can last into adulthood (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001; Arditti and Prouty, 1999; Aquilino, 2006; Lye, 1996; Marks, 1991 [cited Shulman et al, 2001]; Radina, 2003; Cooney and Uhlenberg, 1990, cited Radina, 2003; Wallerstein and Lewis, 1998; Zill, et al, 1993). Lye, for instance (1996, p 98), reports that 'divorced fathers are less likely (than non-divorced fathers) to be in touch with their adult children, less likely to be emotionally close and less likely to be involved in exchanges of assistance'. One-third of divorced fathers are said to have yearly or less contact with at least one adult child (Cooney and Uhlenberg, 1990, cited in Radina, 2003). Aquilino (2006) found a good deal of variance in young adults' frequency of contact with the previously non-resident father and their willingness to turn to him as a source of support. About one-third appeared to have little or no relationship, a third had strong relationships characterised by regular contact and seeing their father as a source of support and the remaining third had an ongoing but weak relationship. Only 21%, however, would look to their father for support. Aquilino also found considerable continuity between relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Level of father contact in adolescence was the strongest predictor of contact in adulthood, accounting for 24% of variance. Aquilino concluded that 'when noncustodial fathers invested in their relationship with their sons and daughters during childhood and adolescence, the investment paid off in closer relationships with their biological offspring in early adulthood (p 942)

In this chapter we look first at whether respondents had any contact with their parents in adulthood, then at the quality of the relationship and finally at continuity and change in relationships.

Contact in adulthood

All the respondents to the telephone were in touch with the parent they had mainly lived with in childhood (or, in the case of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence, their mother). A substantial proportion (297 of 398; 75%) were also in touch with the non-resident parent/father. There was a stark contrast, however, between those who were still seeing their non-resident parent/father when they turned 18, 93% of whom were in touch as adults (271 of 292) and those who had never had any contact or whose contact ceased in childhood (23%; 24 of 106) (table 8.1). Because of this contrast we look briefly at the latter group first, before examining the factors associated with maintaining contact into adulthood for those who were still in touch at 18.

Table 8.1 Contact with NRP/father in adulthood by contact in childhood*

	In touch with NRP/father now		(N=)
	No	%	
Seeing NRP/father at point turned 18	271	93	(292)
Ceased contact in childhood	9	23	(40)
Never any contact	17	26	(66)
<i>All</i>	297	75	(398)

*Statistically significant $p < .001$

Those who never had any contact in childhood or whose contact had ceased

One hundred and six respondents had either never had face to face contact with their non-resident parent or it had ceased during their childhood. Forty-three of these (41%) said they

had had some contact since they became adults (38% of those who had never had any contact and half those whose contact had ceased in childhood). There was no gender difference in the proportions of respondents who made contact in adulthood with the non-resident parent and virtually no difference between young men and women who had previously lived in maternal or paternal residence.

Eighteen respondents (42%) said it had been their idea to get in touch, while 10 (23%) said it had been instigated by the non-resident parent and three (7%) by the resident parent. A sizeable proportion (12; 28%) selected 'other' from the list of options.

In most cases where contact was re/started this happened either immediately (20; 47%) or within three years of the respondent reaching 18 (13; 30%) with the rest being in their mid-twenties, although in a couple of cases it did not happen until they were 30. Only seven of the 18 who said it had been their idea to get in touch, however, did so when they were 18; a lower proportion than among those who said it had been someone else's idea.

At the point they completed the survey, 26 of those who had had some contact as adults (60%) were still in touch, although not necessarily having face to face contact. Seventeen of the 24 who had established contact in adulthood having never had contact in childhood were still in touch (71%) and nine (38%) were seeing the non-resident parent. The proportion was somewhat lower for those whose contact had ceased in childhood: nine of the 19 who had re-established contact (47%) were still in touch but only four (21%) were in face to face contact. Eleven respondents not only stayed in touch but established relationships which they described as very or fairly close, although 15 said they were either not very close (11 or not at all close (4).

Of the 17 respondents whose contact was not maintained, nine said it had been their decision; seven that it had been the (previously) non-resident parent's and one said it had been mutual.

Factors associated with maintaining contact into adulthood

In the previous section we established that still being in touch with the non-resident parent/father at the point respondents reached the age of 18 was of critical importance to whether they were still in touch as adults. In order to explore which other factors are associated with sustained contact in adulthood we therefore excluded from the analysis those whose contact had ceased in childhood or who had never had any contact.

Residence arrangements

Table 8.2 Still in touch with non-resident parent as adult by residence arrangements*

<i>Residence arrangements**</i>	In touch as adult		(N=)
	No	%	
Same primary carer throughout	198	91	(218)
Mainly one primary carer but some time with other or shared residence	55	98	(2)
Mainly/solely shared residence	18	100	(18)
<i>All</i>	<i>271</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>(292)</i>

*Excludes those who never had any contact or whose contact ceased in childhood

**The difference between those who had lived with the same primary carer and the two other groups amalgamated was statistically significant $p < .05$

Of the 271 respondents who were having contact when they reached 18, those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout were least likely to still be in touch with the non-resident parent as adults (198 of 218, 91%). This compares with all 18 of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence and 98% (55 of 56) of those who had mainly lived with one primary carer but had spent some time living with the other parent (table 8.2).

Where respondents had lived with the same primary carer throughout (218), 92% of young men and 90% of young women were still in touch with the parent they had not lived with (table 8.3). Those previously in maternal residence were equally likely to remain in touch with their father (91% and 92% respectively). All the young men previously in paternal residence (10) were still in touch with their mother, as were 13 of the 14 females.

Table 8.3 In touch with non-resident parent in adulthood by gender of resident parent and respondent *

	No	%	(N=)
Male previously in mother residence	76	91	(84)
Female previously living in mother residence	101	90	(112)
Male living with father	10	100	(10)
Female living with father	11	(12)	(12)
All males	86	92	(94)
All females	112	90	124

*Excludes those who had never had any contact or whose contact ceased in childhood and those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout.

Continuity of contact

When account is taken of the contact patterns within the group of those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout, it seems clear that the continuity of contact with the non-resident parent was as important as the residence arrangements. Ninety eight per cent of respondents who had had continuous contact throughout their childhood (124 of 127) were still in touch with the non-resident parent as adults, compared to 84% (37 of 44) of those whose contact had been delayed and 79% (37 of 47) of those whose contact had been sporadic (table 8.4).

Table 8.4 Still in touch with non-resident parent as adult by continuity of contact*

	In touch as adult		(N=)
<i>Continuity of contact*</i>	No	%	
Continuous contact	124	98	(127)
Delayed contact	37	84	(44)
Sporadic contact	37	79	(47)
<i>All</i>	<i>198</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>(218)</i>

*Excludes those who had never had any contact or whose contact ceased in childhood

**Statistically significant $p=.000$

Frequency of contact

The continuity of contact also appears to be more important than its frequency. When the data from all three groups (continuous, delayed or sporadic contact) are amalgamated, those who had low levels of contact (no more than one to two days per month) were least likely to stay in touch as adults (67 of 80; 84%) (table 8.5). However the proportions for respondents who had had higher levels of contact were little different (93% to 97%) and was actually highest

where contact had been on between five and six days in an average month. The differences were not statistically significant. Moreover, when the data for each group was analysed, the only one in which there was even a trend was in the delayed group, while among those whose contact had been sporadic, those with higher levels of contact were actually least likely to still be in touch.

Table 8.5 In touch with non-resident parent as adult by frequency and continuity of contact *

	Days seen in average month					(N=)
	>6	5-6	3-4	1-2	<1	
<i>Contact pattern</i>	% in touch	% in touch	% in touch	% in touch	% in touch	
Continuous contact	96	100	100	100	91	(126)
Delayed contact	100	100	89	78	80	(37)
Sporadic contact	75	75	75	79	83	(12)
<i>All</i>	95	97	93	84	84	(197)

*Excludes those who never had any contact, whose contact ceased in childhood, or who did not live with the same primary carer throughout.

Overnight stays

Similarly, across the amalgamated groups, those who had had regular overnights were more likely than other respondents to stay in touch as adults (99% compared to 90% of those who only stayed occasionally and 82% who had never stayed, table 8.6), although the difference was not statistically significant. However the main impact was on those whose contact was either delayed or sporadic (and even then the difference was not statistically significant). Overnights for these respondents may have been a marker of the extent to which contact, even though it was not continuous, was embedded in their lives. For those whose contact had been continuous, (almost all of whom stayed in touch anyway), there was virtually no difference (96% of those who had never stayed overnight remained in touch, compared to 98% of those who only stayed occasionally and 98% of those who had regular overnights).

Table 8.6 In touch with non-resident parent as adult by overnight stays and contact pattern*

	Regular	Occasional	Never	
<i>Contact pattern</i>	% in touch	% in touch	% in touch	(N=)
Continuous contact	98	98	96	(127)
Delayed contact	100	89	69	(44)
Sporadic contact	100	80	71	(47)
<i>All</i>	99	90	82	(218)

*Excludes those who had never had any contact, or it had ceased in childhood and those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout

Experience of contact

Across all those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout and were still having contact with the non-resident parent at the point they turned 18, when they reached adulthood, whether or not they remained in touch as an adult was linked with their reported experience of contact (a statistically significant association). Ninety-eight per cent of those who said their experience had been very positive (79 of 80) or fairly positive (87 of 88) were still in touch with their non-resident parent in adulthood. This proportion dropped to 86% of those who said their experience had been mixed (62 of 72), 80% who said it was fairly negative (12 of 15) and only 58% of the few for whom it had been very negative (7 of 12) (table 8.7). Although the pattern was not entirely consistent, there was a statistically

significant association in both the continuous contact and sporadic groups, and a trend in the delayed group.

Table 8.7 In touch with non-resident parent as adult by experience and continuity of contact*

	Very positive	Fairly positive	Mixed	Fairly negative	Very negative	(N=)
<i>Continuity of contact</i>	% in touch					
Continuous contact**	98	100	100	50	100	(127)
Delayed contact	100	88	84	80	67	(44)
Sporadic contact***	100	100	74	100	25	(47)
All*	98	98	86	80	58	(218)

*Excludes those who had never had any contact, or it had ceased in childhood and those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout

** Statistically significant p.000 ***Statistically significant p<.05

It was interesting to note, however, that even when experiences were reported to be fairly or very negative, most respondents (19 of 27; 70%) still kept in touch, and that this was the case across all groups. This suggests that if respondents had persevered with contact with the non-resident parent throughout their adolescence, despite it not being a positive experience for them, they were unlikely to give up on the relationship when they became adults.

The closeness of the post-separation relationship with the non-resident parent in childhood

Table 8.8 In touch with non-resident parent as adult by closeness of post-separation relationship and continuity of contact*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Continuity of contact</i>	% in touch	% in touch	% in touch	% in touch	
Continuous contact	97	100	92	100	(127)
Delayed contact	100	100	80	75	(44)
Sporadic contact	60	100	78	63	(46)
All**	94	100	84	75	(217)

*Excludes those who had never had any contact, or it had ceased in childhood and those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout

**Statistically significant p=.000

Whether the respondent stayed in touch in adulthood with the parent they had not previously lived with was only significantly associated with the closeness of the relationship in childhood when the three groups (continuous, sporadic and delayed contact) were amalgamated (98% of those who said their relationship had been very or fairly close [124 of 127] were still in touch in adulthood, compared to 81% [73 of 90] who were not very close/not at all close). This suggests as far as maintaining contact into adulthood was concerned, the continuity of contact was more important than the closeness of the relationship, reinforcing the conclusion suggested above, that if the respondents had persisted with contact in childhood despite a distant relationship, they were likely to continue. Within each group there was a non-statistically significant difference between, on the one hand, those who had been very/fairly close and, on the other, those who had been not very close/not at all close (99% compared to 93% where contact had been continuous; 100% compared to 77% where it had been delayed and 87% compared to 74% where it had been sporadic). However there was no consistent trend between the finer gradations of closeness (table 8.8).

Closeness of pre-separation relationships

As noted in chapter 7, many respondents said they were too young to remember how close they had been to the parent who became the non-resident parent before the separation. Of those who could, however, it was interesting to find a statistically significant association between the closeness of the *pre-separation* relationship and whether the respondent stayed in touch with that parent in adulthood (in this sub-group who had lived with the same parent throughout and who were having contact at the point they reached 18). While the association did not remain significant when account was taken of continuity of contact, nonetheless, in each group, respondents were more likely to remain in touch as adults if they said the relationship with the non-resident parent *pre-separation* had been very/ fairly close than if they said it had been not very close/not at all close (99% compared to 92% where contact had been continuous; 89% compared to 86% when it was delayed; and 92% compared to 67% when it was sporadic) (table 8.9).

Table 8.9 In touch with non-resident parent as adult by closeness of pre-separation relationship and contact pattern*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Contact pattern</i>	% in touch				
Continuous contact	97	100	91	100	(85)
Delayed contact	78	100	80	100	(25)
Sporadic contact	100	86	83	33	(22)
<i>All**</i>	<i>94</i>	<i>98</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>(123)</i>

*Excludes those who had never had any contact, or it had ceased in childhood; those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout & those who could not remember the pre-separation relationship

**Statistically significant $p=.05$

Quality of relationships in adulthood

Most respondents (91% of 397) reported that in adulthood they had very close (287, 72%) or fairly close (74; 19%) relationships with the *resident parent* (or, in the case of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence, their mother). Only 7% (26) said the relationship was not very close and 3% (10) that it was not at all close (table 8.10). The majority (339 of 398; 85%) also said that if they had a problem in their lives now, they would feel able to talk about it with the parent they had previously lived with/their mother, although 53 (13%) said they would not and a further six (2%) were uncertain about this.

Table 8.10 Closeness of relationship with parents in adulthood

	RP/mother		NRP/father		
	No	%	No	% all respondents	% those in touch as adults
Very close	287	72	106	27	36
Fairly close	74	19	101	26	34
Not very close	26	7	68	17	23
Not at all close	10	3	20	5	7
Not in touch	0	0	96	25	-
(N=)	(397)		(391)		(295)

The contrast with the respondents' relationships with the *non-resident parent*/father was striking. As noted above, a quarter (96 of 391) were not in touch at all, and a further 22% said their relationship was not very close or not at all close, which works out at 30% of those who

were still in touch. Similarly, even where the respondent was currently in touch with their non-resident parent/father, only 64% (188 of 295) felt they would be able to confide in them about problems in their lives (compared to 85% who could do so with their resident parent/mother).

A case by case analysis indicates that, where the respondent was in touch with both parents in adulthood, just 37% (108 of 293) said they were equally close to both parents, with 51% (150) saying they were closer to their resident parent /mother and only 12% (35) being closer to their non-resident parent/father. Equal closeness typically meant that respondents were either very (77; 71%) or fairly (22; 20%) close to both parents. However, nine people described themselves as not very close (8; 7%) or not at all close (1; <1%) to either.

Over half the respondents in touch with both parents in adulthood (173 of 315; 55%) said they would feel able to talk to either parent if they had a problem. Almost a third, however, (102; 32%) said they would only confide in the parent they had previously lived with/their mother, compared to only 5% (23) who would only talk to their non-resident parent/father. Sadly almost a quarter said they would not feel able to talk to either.

Factors associated with the quality of the relationship with the non-resident parent in adulthood

In order to explore which factors were associated with the *quality* of the relationship in adulthood, the following analysis is based only on those who were in touch as adults.

Residence arrangements

Table 8.11 Closeness of relationship with non-resident parent/father in adulthood by residence arrangements as child*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Residence arrangements</i>	%	%	%	%	
Same primary carer throughout**	32	36	24	8	(197)
Mainly one primary carer but some time with other or shared residence	59	28	11	2	(54)
Mainly/solely shared residence	44	39	17	0	(18)
<i>All</i>	38	35	21	6	(269)

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those with no contact in childhood and those whose contact ceased.

**There was a statistically significant difference between those who had lived with the same parent throughout and the rest (p.001) but not between those whose main arrangement had been shared residence and those who had lived mainly with the same parent but had also lived with the other.

We noted earlier that for those respondents who were still having contact with their non-resident parent/father at the point they reached 18, the residence arrangements they had had in childhood seemed to make a difference to whether or not they maintained contact with that parent in adulthood. Similarly, among those who did stay in touch, the residence arrangements were relevant to the closeness of their relationship in adulthood. Sixty-eight per cent of those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout (134 of 197) said they had a very close or fairly close relationship with the previously non-resident parent in adulthood. In comparison 83% (15 of 18) of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence and 87% (47 of 54) of those who had mainly lived with one primary carer but spent some time with the other parent described their relationship with the non-resident parent/father in those terms, a statistically significant difference (table 8.11).

It is interesting that those whose main arrangement had been shared residence were much less likely to describe *very* close relationships than those who had mainly lived with one primary carer but spent some time with the other or had a period in shared residence. Our in-depth interviews (see chapter 13) would suggest this probably reflects young people opting to move to the previously non-resident parent, either because they had always wanted to do so, or because of difficulties in the household in which they had previously lived.

Those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout were least likely to say they were equally close to each parent in adulthood (35%; 69 of 195, compared to half [9 of 18] of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence and 46% [25 of 54] of those who had been mainly in primary care but spent some time living with each parent) (table 8.12). Not unexpectedly, they were also most likely to say they felt closer to the resident parent (111, 57%) although a few (15, 8%) said they were now closer to the parent they had not lived with. It was perhaps more surprising that 39% of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence also said they now felt closer to their mother.

Table 8.12 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent in adulthood by residence arrangements*

<i>Residence arrangements**</i>	Equally close		Closer to RP/mother		Closer to NRP/father		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Same primary carer throughout	69	35	111	57	15	8	(195)
Mainly primary care but some time with other parent	25	46	16	30	13	24	(54)
Mainly shared residence	9	50	7	39	2	11	(18)
<i>All</i>	<i>103</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>134</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>(267)</i>

*Excludes those not in touch with parent in adulthood; cases where data was not available on both parents; and those who had no contact in childhood or contact ceased.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

Table 8.13 Able to confide in non-resident parent/father in adulthood by residence arrangements as child*

<i>Residence arrangements**</i>	No	%	(N=)
Same primary carer throughout	117	59	(197)
Mainly one primary carer but some time with other or shared residence	45	82	(55)
Mainly/solely shared residence	14	82	(17)
<i>All</i>	<i>176</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>(269)</i>

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those with no contact in childhood and those whose contact ceased. **Statistically significant $p < .05$

Those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout were also least likely to say they would feel able to confide in the non-resident parent if they had problems in their lives now (117 of 177; 59%, compared to 82%; [14 of 17] of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence and those [32 of 39], who had mainly lived with the same carer but spent some time living with the other parent)(table 8.13).

As noted earlier, the gender of either the respondent or the contact parent appeared to make little or no difference to whether those who were having contact up to the age of 18 remained in touch or those who were not got in touch in adulthood. Analysis of the closeness of relationships of those who were in touch with their previously non-resident parent as adults also did not indicate that gender was an important factor. However the data on those who

remained with the same primary carer throughout did reveal some differences, indicating somewhat stronger bonds between male respondents and their non-resident fathers and female respondents and their non-resident mothers, although few associations were statistically significant:

- Young men who lived with their mothers were more likely than young women in maternal residence to say they felt close/fairly close to their non-resident father in adulthood (62 of 87; 71% compared to 67 of 110; 61%). Similarly, young women who had lived with their fathers were more likely than young men in father residence to feel close to their non-resident mothers (9 of 13; 69% compared with 7 of 11; 64%).
- Case by case analysis reveals little difference in terms of comparative closeness for those who had lived with their mothers, with 35% of young men and 32% of young women saying they felt equally close to both parents, 56% and 61% feeling closer to their mother and 9% and 7% closer to their father. For those in father residence young women were more likely than young men to say they felt equally close to both parents (46% compared to 27%) while males were more likely than females to say they were closer to their father (55% compared to 39%) and very similar proportions (18% males, 15% females) feeling closer to their mother.

None of the above differences were statistically significant.

- Young men in mother residence were more likely than young women to say they would feel able to discuss problems with their non-resident father (59 of 87; 68%; compared to 55 of 110; 50%). Young women in father residence were more likely than men to feel able to confide in their mothers (9 of 13; 69% compared to 6 of 11; 55%, a statistically significant difference, $p < .05$).
- Young men in mother residence were more likely than young women to say they felt able to confide in both their parents (60% compared with 44%) with females more likely to confide only in their mothers (49% compared to 26%). This difference was statistically significant ($p < .01$). Very similar proportions felt able to confide only in their father (4% males, 3% females) while 11% of males and 5% of females would not discuss their problems with either.
- Females in father residence were more likely than males to feel able to confide in either parent (57% compared to 36%). Males were more likely than females to say they would confide only in their father (27% compared to 21%) or their mother (18% compared to 7%). 18% of males and 14% of females said they would not confide in either.

The continuity of contact

Where respondents were in touch in adulthood with the parent they had not previously lived with, their relationship was clearly related to the continuity of the contact in childhood. Table 8.14 is based on respondents who lived with same primary carer throughout their childhood. It can be seen that 76% of those who had continuous contact (94 of 123) said their current relationship with the previously non-resident parent now was very or fairly close. This proportion dropped to 54% of those whose contact had been delayed and where it had been sporadic (20 of 37 in each). Interestingly these figures for delayed and sporadic contact are actually slightly lower than for those who had never had any contact in their childhood but had established contact in adulthood (9 of 16; 56%), although all of them were considerably more than the 25% (2 of 8) of respondents who had ceased contact in childhood but re-established it in adulthood. If respondents who did not have any contact or whose contact ceased in childhood are excluded, the association between the continuity of contact and the closeness of the relationship remains significant ($p = .000$)

Table 8.14 Closeness of relationship with non-resident parent in adulthood by continuity of contact, same primary carer throughout*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Continuity of contact**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Continuous contact	40	37	21	2	(123)
Delayed contact	27	27	24	22	(37)
Sporadic contact	11	43	35	11	(37)
Ceased contact	0	25	38	38	(8)
No contact in childhood	19	38	38	6	(16)
<i>All</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>(221)</i>

*Excludes those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

Almost half of those who had had continuous contact in their childhood said they now felt equally close to both their parents in adulthood (54 of 121, 45%, much higher than any of the other groups (table 8.15). It was notable, however, that a quarter of those who had never had any contact, but established it in adulthood, said they felt equally close, more than those whose contact had been disrupted or ceased, while another quarter said they now felt closer to the non-resident parent, a higher proportion than any group. The association remains significant when those whose contact ceased in childhood or who never had any contact, are excluded ($p < .01$).

Table 8.15 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent in adulthood by continuity of contact, same primary carer throughout*

	Equally close		Closer to RP/mother		Closer to NRP/father		(N=)
<i>Continuity of contact</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Continuous	54	45	58	48	9	7	(121)
Delayed	8	22	23	62	6	16	(37)
Sporadic	7	19	30	81	0	0	(37)
Ceased	1	13	6	75	1	13	(8)
No contact in childhood	4	25	8	50	4	25	(16)
<i>All</i>	<i>74</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>125</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>(219)</i>

*Excludes those not in touch with parent in adulthood and cases where data was not available on both parents

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

Those who had had continuous contact were also most likely to say they would feel able to confide in the previously non-resident parent if they had problems in their lives now (86 of 123; 70%, table 8.16). In comparison, only 43% (16 of 37) of those whose contact had been delayed, 41% (15 of 37) where it had been sporadic and 38% (3 of 8) where it had ceased said they would feel able to do so. Again, however, there was evidence that a good proportion of those who had never had contact in childhood but established it once they were adults, had developed a good relationship, with 56% (9 of 16) saying they felt they could confide in the non-resident parent. The association is still statistically significant when those whose contact ceased in childhood or never had any contact are excluded ($p < .01$)

Table 8.16 Able to confide in non-resident parent/father in adulthood by contact pattern (same primary carer throughout*)

	Able confide in NRP		
<i>Continuity of contact**</i>	No	%	(N=)
Continuous contact	86	70	(123)
Delayed contact	16	43	(37)
Sporadic contact	15	41	(37)
Ceased contact	3	38	(8)
No contact in childhood	9	56	(16)
<i>All</i>	<i>129</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>(221)</i>

*Excludes those not in touch as adults and those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

The frequency of contact

The relationship between respondents and their previously non-resident parent, then, was related to the residence arrangements they had had in childhood and the continuity of their contact arrangements. For those whose contact had been continuous – but not for those whose contact had either been delayed or sporadic – the frequency of contact also seemed to make some difference. Tables 8.17 to 8.19 present data on those who lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact with the previously non-resident parent. Respondents in this group who had had contact on more than six days a month were much more likely than others to describe their relationship in adulthood as very or fairly close (table 8.17); to feel able to discuss any problems with the non-resident parent (table 8.18) and to say they were equally close to both parents (table 8.19). These differences were all statistically significant. It should be noted, however, that at less than this level the pattern was not consistent. Thus of those who had relatively low levels of contact (no more than 2 days a month) 79% described the relationship as very or fairly close, which was actually higher both than those who had had contact on three to four days and those with five to six.

Table 8.17 Closeness of relationship with non-resident parent in adulthood by amount of contact in childhood*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>No of days on which contact per month**</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
>6	57	31	12	0	(51)
5-6	36	39	25	0	(28)
3-4	13	42	38	8	(24)
1-2	44	33	22	0	(9)
<1	30	50	10	10	(10)
<i>All</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>(122)</i>

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout and those whose contact was not continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient 0.253, Kendall's tau.

Table 8.18 Ability to discuss problems with non-resident parent in adulthood by amount of contact in childhood*

	Able discuss problems with NRP in adulthood		
<i>Number of days on which contact per month*</i>	No	%	(N=)
>6	44	85	(52)
5-6	18	64	(28)
3-4	13	54	(24)
1-2	5	56	(9)
<1	6	67	(9)
<i>All</i>	86	71	(122)

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout and those whose contact was not continuous. **Statistically significant $p<.05$

Table 8.19 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent in adulthood by continuity of contact in childhood*

	Equally close		Closer to RP/mother		Closer to NRP/father		(N=)
<i>No of days contact per month**</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
>6	31	61	17	33	3	5	(51)
5-6	11	39	14	50	3	11	(28)
3-4	26	26	16	70	1	4	(23)
1-2	4	50	3	38	1	13	(8)
<1	2	20	7	70	1	10	(10)
<i>All</i>							

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout and those whose contact was not continuous. **Statistically significant $p<.05$

Overnights

Table 8.20 Ability to discuss problems with non-resident parent in adulthood by whether overnight stays in childhood*

	Able discuss problems with NRP in adulthood		
<i>Stayed overnight**</i>	No	%	(N=)
Regularly	46	79	(58)
Occasionally	26	65	(40)
Never	14	56	(25)
<i>All</i>	86	70	(123)

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout and those whose contact was not continuous.

**The difference between regular overnights and occasional/never overnights, but not between the three groups, was statistically significant $p<.05$

Overnight stays did not appear to be consistently linked with the closeness of relationships in adulthood. Where contact had been continuous the only statistically significant measure was whether the respondent would feel able to confide in the previously non-resident parent, where 79% of those who had had regular overnights said they would, compared to 62% of those who only had occasional overnights or had never stayed at all (table 8.20). However

there was a trend for those with regular overnights to have closer relationships (table 8.21) and to be more likely to feel equally close to both parents (table 8.22).

Table 8.21 Closeness of relationship with non-resident parent/father in adulthood by overnight stays in childhood

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Stayed overnight</i>	%	%	%	%	
Regularly	46	33	21	0	(57)
Occasionally	34	39	20	7	(41)
Never	36	40	24	0	(25)
<i>All</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>(123)</i>

*Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

Table 8.22 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent in adulthood by overnight stays with non-resident parent in childhood*

	Equally close		Closer to RP/mother		Closer to NRP/father		(N=)
<i>Stayed overnight</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Regularly	28	49	24	42	5	9	(57)
Occasionally	16	41	21	54	2	5	(39)
Never	10	40	13	52	2	8	(25)
<i>All</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>(121)</i>

*Excludes those not in touch as adults; those who did not live with the same primary carer throughout and those whose contact was not continuous.

For those whose contact had been sporadic there was only a non-statistically significant trend for those who had had regular overnights to say they were now very or fairly close, while for those whose contact had been delayed there was not even a trend.

Experience of contact

Where contact had been continuous there was a clear, and statistically significant, association between the relationship respondents had with the non-resident parent in adulthood and their experience of contact as children. Thus 87% of those who said their experience had been very positive said their relationship now was very or fairly close (table 8.23), falling to 77% of those who said their experience had only been fairly positive, 65% who said their experience had been mixed, and only one of the four people who reported negative experiences.

Table 8.23 Closeness of relationship with NRP in adulthood by experience of contact in childhood*

	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Experience of contact**</i>	%	%	%	%	%
Very positive	59	28	13	0	(46)
Fairly positive	34	43	21	2	(47)
Mixed	19	46	35	0	(26)
Fairly negative	0	0	50	50	(2)
Very negative	50	0	0	50	(2)
<i>All</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>(123)</i>

*Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$; correlation coefficient 0.309, Kendall's tau

Similarly (table 8.24) 85% of those with positive experiences said they would confide in the non-resident parent if they had problems now (compared to 66% of those who said their experience of contact had been fairly positive; 56% with a mixed experience and again only one of the four with negative experiences).

Table 8.24 Able to talk about problems with non-resident parent/father in adulthood by experience of contact*

<i>Experience of contact**</i>	Yes		(N=)
	No	%	
Very positive	40	85	(47)
Fairly positive	31	66	(47)
Mixed	14	56	(25)
Fairly negative	0	0	(2)
Very negative	1	50	(2)
<i>All</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>(123)</i>

* Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

Finally, those who had had very positive experiences were much more likely to say they felt equally close to both parents in adulthood (61% compared to 36% of those who were fairly positive about their contact and 38% who reported a mixed experience; and none of the four who were very negative) (table 8.25).

Table 8.25 Comparative closeness of relationship to each parent in adulthood by experience of contact in childhood*

<i>Experience of contact</i>	Equally close		Closer to RP		Closer to NRP		(N=)
	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Very positive	28	61	15	33	3	7	(46)
Fairly positive	17	36	26	55	4	9	(47)
Mixed	9	38	14	58	1	4	(24)
Fairly negative	0	0	2	100	0	0	(2)
Very negative	0	0	1	50	1	50	(2)
<i>All</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>45</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>(121)</i>

*Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$

In relation to respondents who experienced delayed contact there was a statistically significant association between the experience of contact and both the closeness of the adult relationship and feeling able to confide, although not for a feeling of equal closeness. For those whose contact had been sporadic there was only a non-statistically significant trend for those with more positive experiences of contact to feel closer.

Closeness of the relationship in childhood with the non-resident parent

The strongest association, not unexpectedly, with the respondents' adult relationship with their previously non-resident parent, was the relationship they had established in childhood. Of those who had lived with the same primary carer throughout and had had continuous contact with the non-resident parent in childhood, 53% (67 of 126) indicated no change in the closeness of their relationship (tables 8.26 and 8.27). In particular 69% of those previously very close remained very close and while 28% had become less close, only 3% were no

longer in touch. Ninety-one per cent of those who described their relationship in childhood as very close said they would feel able to discuss problems they had as adults with the non-resident parent (table 8.28).

Table 8.26 Change in closeness of relationship with NRP childhood to adulthood

	Closer	No change	Less close	Not in touch	
<i>Relationship in childhood</i>	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Very close	-	69	28	3	(36)
Quite close	34	47	19	0	(62)
Not very close	38	50	4	8	(24)
Not at all close	75	25	0	0	(4)
<i>All</i>	26	53	18	2	(126)

*Excludes respondents who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

Table 8.27 Closeness of relationship with non-resident parent in adulthood by relationship in childhood (same primary carer throughout & continuous contact)*

	Closeness of relationship in adulthood				
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	(N=)
<i>Closeness of relationship in childhood</i>	%	%	%	%	
Very close	71	26	3	0	(35)
Fairly close	34	47	18	2	(62)
Not very close	14	27	55	5	(22)
Not at all close	0	25	50	25	(4)
<i>All</i>	40	37	21	2	(123)

*Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$, correlation coefficient 0.483, Kendall's tau

Table 8.28 Able to talk about problems with non-resident parent in adulthood by relationship in childhood*

	Yes		(N=)
	No	%	
Very close	32	91	(35)
Fairly close	42	68	(62)
Not very close	10	46	(22)
Not at all close	2	50	(4)
<i>All</i>	86	70	(123)

* Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and where contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .01$

The closeness of the post-separation and adult relationships also proved to be significantly correlated for those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic. Indeed for the latter the correlation was strongest of all (.518 compared to .403 where contact had been delayed and 0.483 where it had been continuous). This perhaps indicates that relationships which both survive and manage to be close despite interruptions are not likely to founder.

It was also apparent, however, that the previous relationship was not absolutely determinative. We look at this further in the final section of this chapter.

The pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent

In an earlier section in this chapter we reported a link between the respondent's *pre-separation relationship* with the person who became the non-resident parent and whether they were in touch with that parent in adulthood. There was also a statistically significant association between the pre-separation relationship and the relationship in adulthood. Table 8.29 presents data on respondents who had lived with the same parent throughout but had had continuous contact with the other parent, who were in touch with that parent in adulthood and could remember the pre-separation relationship. It can be seen that just over half of those who said they had been very close pre-separation (20 of 38; 53%) also described their relationship in adulthood as very close, the highest proportion of any group, and 82% said it was either very or fairly close (31; 82%). Only 18% said it was not very close and no-one said it was not close at all. The association remained significant for those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic and indeed was stronger (correlation coefficient 0.404 and 0.422 respectively).

Table 8.29 Closeness of relationship with NRP in adulthood by pre-separation relationship *

	Closeness of relationship in adulthood				(N=)
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	
<i>Closeness of relationship in childhood</i>	%	%	%	%	
Very close	53	29	18	0	(38)
Fairly close	21	46	27	6	(33)
Not very close	30	30	30	10	(10)
Not at all close	50	0	50	0	(2)
<i>All</i>	37	35	24	4	(83)

*Excludes respondents who were not in touch with the non-resident parent in adulthood, who had not lived with the same primary carer throughout and whose contact in childhood had not been continuous.

**Statistically significant $p < .05$, correlation coefficient 0.238, Kendall's tau

Relationship change childhood to adulthood

Change in closeness of relationship with non-resident parent/father

Table 8.30 Change in closeness of relationship with NRP/father childhood to adulthood

	Relationship in adulthood				(N=)
	Closer	No change	Less close	Not in touch	
<i>Relationship in childhood</i>	%	%	%	%	
Very close	-	71	26	4	(78)
Fairly close	37	44	18	<1	(106)
Not very close	36	44	7	13	(75)
Not at all close	50	27	-	23	(30)
<i>All</i>	28	50	15	7	(289)

*Excludes those who had no contact in childhood or whose contact ceased before they reached 18.

As noted earlier in this chapter, 23% of respondents who had either had no contact with the non-resident parent in childhood, or whose contact had ceased before they reached adulthood, subsequently re-established and sustained contact. Table 8.30 shows how relationships had

changed for the remaining respondents (i.e. those who had had continuous, sporadic or delayed contact or whose main arrangement had been shared residence).

The largest single group (143 of 289; 50%) consisted of those whose relationship had not changed in terms of closeness, while 28% (81) were now closer and 22% (65) either less close or no longer in touch. The most stable group were those who said their relationship had been very close in their post-separation childhood, 71% of whom (55 of 78) reported no change), with almost all the rest saying they had become less close (26%) rather than losing touch altogether (4%). The least stable group were those who said they had not been at all close (8 of 30; 27%). One might, perhaps, have expected these relationships to be most likely to founder entirely and almost a quarter (7; 23%) did. However half said their relationship was closer now than it had been in childhood. In between these extremes childhood relationships which were described as fairly close or not very close were equally likely to remain unchanged (47 of 106 and 33 of 75; 44%). A very similar proportion in each group had also become closer (39 of 106; 37% and 27 of 75; 36%). Where they differed was that where relationships had worsened almost all of those who had been 'quite close' reported more distant relationships (19 of 106; 18%) but only one person said they had lost touch) whereas 13% of those who had not been very close were no longer in contact (table 8.31).

Table 8.31 Closeness of relationship with NRP in adulthood by post-separation relationship in childhood*

	Closeness of relationship in adulthood					(N=)
	Very close	Fairly close	Not very close	Not at all close	Not in touch	
<i>Closeness of relationship in childhood</i>	%	%	%	%	%	
Very close	71	24	1	0	4	(78)
Fairly close	37	44	16	2	1	(106)
Not very close	11	25	44	7	13	(75)
Not at all close	3	27	20	27	23	(30)
<i>All</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>(289)</i>

*Excludes respondents who never had any contact in childhood or whose contact ceased.

Overall, of those still in contact with their non-resident parent/father at the point they reached 18, young women were more likely than young men to report closer relationships with their previously non-resident parent/father in adulthood (55 of 164; 34% compared to 26 of 125; 21%) although the proportions reporting they had become less close or were no longer in touch were about the same (table 8.32). Of those who had mainly lived with their mothers, there was no difference between men and women in the proportion reporting more distant relationships or losing touch entirely with their father, although young women were more likely to report closer relationships. Numbers in the other groups were small but young women previously in paternal residence were also more likely than young men to report closer relationships with their mother in adulthood and less likely to report deteriorated relationships or losing touch. Among those whose main arrangement had been shared residence, however, young men and young women were equally likely to report closer relationships but again less likely to report deterioration. None of these differences, however, were statistically significant.

Table 8.32 Change in closeness of relationship with NRP/father in adulthood by gender of respondent

	<i>Relationship in adulthood</i>				
	Closer	No change	Less close	Not in touch	
	%	%	%	%	(N=)
Young men	55	21	17	7	(125)
Young women	45	34	14	7	(164)
<i>Maternal resident</i>					
Males	20	57	14	9	(103)
Females	34	43	15	8	(141)
<i>Paternal residence</i>					
Males	31	46	23	0	(13)
Females	43	43	7	7	(14)
<i>Shared residence</i>					
Males	11	44	44	0	(9)
Females	11	78	11	0	(9)

*Excludes those who had no contact in childhood or whose contact ceased before they reached 18.

Change in closeness of relationship with resident parent/mother

Relationships with the resident parent/mother were less likely to change in adulthood. Three-quarters of all respondents (298 of 397) said their relationship with the parent they had lived with was as close as it had been in childhood, and 15% that it had become closer. Only 10% (39) said it was now less close. As can be seen from table 8.33, those who reported having been very close when they were growing up were most likely to report no change (238 of 265; 90%).

Table 8.33 Change in relationship with mother/resident parent post-separation to adulthood

	Post-separation relationship						
	No change		Closer		Less Close		
<i>Post-separation relationship</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Very close	238	90	0	0	27	10	(265)
Fairly close	43	46	43	46	8	9	(94)
Not very close	13	38	14	41	3	9	(34)
Not at all close	4	50	3	38	1	13	(8)
<i>All</i>	298	75	60	15	39	10	(397)

Respondents whose main arrangement had been shared residence were most likely to say that their relationship with their mother had remained unchanged (17 of 18; 94%) and no-one said their relationship had become less close. Those who had mainly lived with one parent but spent some time living with the other had the most changeable relationships, with 23% (15 of 66) saying the relationship with the resident parent had become closer and 8% (5) that it had worsened. Respondents who stayed with the same parent were less likely than this latter group to report change but slightly more likely to say the relationship had become less close (34 of 313; 11%) (table 8.34).

Table 8.34 Change in relationship with RP/mother by residence in childhood

	Post-separation relationship						
	No change		Closer		Less Close		
<i>Residence arrangements</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Same parent throughout	235	75	44	14	34	11	(313)
Mainly one parent but some time with other	46	70	15	23	5	8	(66)
Shared residence	17	94	1	6	0	0	(18)
<i>All</i>	298	75	60	15	39	10	(397)

Where respondents had lived with the same parent throughout there was no clear relationship between whether that relationship changed in adulthood and the contact they had had with the non-resident parent (table 8.35).

Table 8.35 Change in closeness of relationship with RP by continuity of contact with NRP in childhood (lived with same parent throughout)

Childhood (lived with same parent throughout)							
	Post-separation relationship with resident parent						
	No change		Closer		Less Close		
<i>Continuity of contact</i>	No	%	No	%	No	%	(N=)
Continuous	92	73	19	15	15	12	(126)
Delayed	34	77	5	11	5	11	(44)
Sporadic	39	83	5	11	3	6	(47)
Ceased	27	82	4	12	2	6	(33)
No contact	43	68	11	18	9	14	(63)
<i>All</i>	235	75	44	14	34	11	(313)

Overall, young women were more likely than young men to report closer relationships with their resident parent/mother in adulthood (48 of 229, 21% compared to 12 of 168; 7%) although the proportions reporting worsened relationships were fairly similar (19, 8% compared to 20; 12%). Where respondents had lived with the same parent throughout this applied irrespective of the gender of that parent (table 8.36).

Table 8.36 Change in closeness of relationship with RP by gender of respondent

	Closer	No change	Less close	
	%	%	%	(N=)
Young men	7	81	12	(168)
Young women	21	71	9	(229)
<i>Maternal resident</i>				
Males	8	82	10	(144)
Females	20	72	8	(201)
<i>Paternal residence</i>				
Males	7	60	33	(15)
Females	32	53	16	(19)
<i>Shared residence</i>				
Males	0	100	0	(9)
Females	11	89	0	(9)

*Excludes those who did not live with the same parent throughout

Summary

As previous research has found, the impact of separation on relationships between the child and their non-resident parent can last into adulthood. At the time they took part in the telephone survey all the respondents were in touch with the parent with whom they had mainly lived in childhood (or, in the case of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence, their mother). However, only 75% were currently in touch with the other parent. Similarly, even where respondents were in touch, only 70% said their relationship was close or fairly close, compared to 91% who described their relationship with the resident parent/mother in those terms. Only 64% felt they would be able to confide in them about problems in their lives, compared to 85% who said this about their resident parent/mother. Just 37% said they were equally close to both parents, with 51% being closer to the resident parent and a mere 12% closer to the non-resident parent.

The *residence and contact arrangements* made for the respondents in their childhood were clearly relevant to relationships in adulthood. Those who had never had any contact, or whose contact had ceased in childhood, were least likely to be in touch with the previously non-resident parent as adults (26% and 23% respectively, compared to 93% of the others). Of those who were having contact at the point they reached 18, those who had lived with the same parent throughout were least likely to have maintained contact with the non-resident parent (91% compared to 98% of those who had mainly lived with one parent but had experience of living with the other and all those who said their main arrangement had been shared residence). Even where respondents were currently in touch, only 68% of those who had lived with the same parent throughout their childhood said they were very or fairly close to the non-resident parent, compared to 83% of those previously in shared residence and 87% of those who had mainly lived with one parent but spent some time with the other.

Living with the same parent throughout childhood, however, does not inevitably mean impoverished relationships with the previously non-resident parent in adulthood. Much depends on the *continuity of contact*. Ninety-eight per cent of those who had had continuous contact were still in touch as adults, whereas only 84% of those whose contact had been delayed and 79% whose contact had been sporadic. Similarly, 76% of those with continuous contact said their relationship was very or fairly close, compared to only 54% where contact had been delayed or sporadic.

The *experience of contact* is also an important factor in explaining differences in adult relationships. Even where contact had been continuous, 87% of those who said contact had been very positive said their current relationship with the previously non-resident parent was very or fairly close. This proportion fell to 77% of those who said the experience had only been fairly positive, 65% where it was described as mixed and only one of the four people who said it had been negative. There were similar trends among those whose contact had not been continuous.

In contrast the *frequency of contact* or whether it had included *regular overnight stays*, were not associated with whether the respondent was in touch with the previously non-resident parent in adulthood. Where contact had been continuous, but not where it had been delayed or sporadic, those who had had contact on more than six days in an average month were more likely than other groups to describe the relationship in adulthood as very or fairly close. However at lower levels of contact there was no consistent pattern. There was also a trend for those who had continuous contact and regularly stayed overnight to have closer relationships.

As chapter 7 showed, of course, many of these factors are also linked to the relationship the respondent had with the non-resident parent in childhood and consistent with other research we found a strong correlation between childhood and adult relationships. This applied particularly where relationships in childhood had been close, 71% of whom reported no reduction in closeness in adulthood. Nonetheless there was also evidence of change: of those who were still in touch with their non-resident parent/father when they reached 18, some relationships became more distant in adulthood (15%) or even foundered completely (7%), while 28% became closer. Indeed some of those who had never had contact, or whose contact had ceased in childhood, not only re/established contact in adulthood but established a relationship which they described as very/fairly close (11 of 26; 42%).

Relationships with the previously resident parent/mother tended to be more stable. Three-quarters of all respondents said that the relationship was as close as it had been in childhood while 15% said it had become closer. Only 10% said it had deteriorated. Ninety per cent of those who said they had been very close reported no change.

The importance of the respondent's pre-separation relationship with the parent who subsequently became non-resident has been highlighted in several of the earlier chapters in this report. Rather unexpectedly it was even found to be linked with relationships in adulthood. Not only was it related to whether respondents were in touch in adulthood, it was also linked to the closeness of relationships. Thus, of those who had lived with the same parent throughout and had had continuous contact, 53% who said they had been very close pre-separation also described their relationship in adulthood as very close. The correlation was even stronger for those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic.

Key points from the telephone survey

Contact is important to most children

- 32% of those who had never had any contact or whose contact ceased in childhood said that as children they had been very or fairly unhappy about this and as adults 42% said that they regretted the loss of contact either a great deal (18%) or 'a bit' (24%). Overall only half said they had neither been unhappy about this as children nor regretted it as adults. (Chapter 2)
- 57% of those who had never had any contact as children, and 54% of those whose contact had ceased, said that if they were to be a separated parent they would ensure that their child had contact. (Chapter 2)
- Overall, 80% of those who had not had any contact or whose contact had ceased either indicated unhappiness as children, regret as adults, or determination, if they were to be a separated parent, to ensure their children remained in touch with both parents. (Chapter 2)
- Only a minority of respondents (15%) said that as children they had been mainly responsible for there being no contact or for it not being continuous (ranging from 7% where there had never been any contact to 33% where it had ceased). (Chapter 3)
- Of those respondents whose contact had not ceased in childhood, 72% said they had never said, even occasionally, that they did not want to see the non-resident parent, nor had they ever wished they had done so. (Chapter 6)

The picture of post-separation contact presented by the young adults taking part in our telephone survey was in many respects very positive.

- Less than one in five said they had never had any contact; almost three-quarters were still in touch at the point they turned 18 (on-going contact) and over two in five had had continuous contact throughout their childhood. Respondents whose parents had separated after implementation of the Children Act 1989 were less likely than others to say they had never had any contact (12% compared to 26%) and fewer said that there had been a delay of more than six months in establishing contact. More of the post-Act group reported either continuous contact or shared residence (51% compared to 37%). (Chapter 2)
- 44% of those who had ever had contact saw the non-resident parent on at least five days in an average month. Very low levels of contact were unusual. Levels of contact were also higher among those whose parents had separated after implementation of the Children Act – 47% of them had contact on at least five days per month (compared to 38% of those experiencing earlier separations) and only 17% said it happened less than once a month (compared to 27%). (Chapter 5)
- Three-quarters had stayed overnight at least occasionally and two-thirds had done so regularly. (Chapter 5)
- Six in 10 said that the amount of contact they had had was sufficient. (Chapter 5)
- Of those with on-going contact/shared residence, 58% said the experience had been very or fairly positive. Only 18% said it been very or fairly negative. 41% of all respondents said there was nothing their parents could have done to improve their experience of contact. (Chapter 6)
- Those having on-going contact were not usually exposed to high levels of parental conflict. (Chapter 4)

Traditional arrangements, with the child living with one parent and maintaining uninterrupted contact with the other, generally worked well

Only 5% of the respondents to our telephone survey said that their main living arrangement after parental separation had been shared residence. Over three-quarters lived with the same parent throughout, while the rest had mainly lived with one parent but spent some time with the other. The evidence indicates that such traditional arrangements were usually a good experience for respondents, provided contact was sustained.

- 83% of those who lived with the same parent throughout were happy with the arrangements; only 14% said they would have preferred shared residence and 3% to live with the other parent. (Chapter 2)
- 73% of all those with continuous contact said they had enough contact. (Chapter 5)
- 74% of those who had had continuous contact said that it had been a very or fairly positive experience and only 4% that it was fairly or very negative. (Chapter 6)
- 98% of those who had had continuous contact were still in touch with their previously non-resident parent in adulthood; 76% said their relationship now was very or fairly close and 70% would feel able to confide in that parent if they had problems in their adult lives. (Chapter 7)
- Asked what they would do differently from their parents if they were to be a separated parent two-thirds of those who had had continuous contact said they would handle things pretty much as their parents had done and only 14% said they would do things very differently. Fifty-four per cent said there was nothing their parents could have done to improve their experience of contact. (Chapter 6)

Respondents who had had continuous contact throughout their childhood were more likely to describe contact in positive terms than those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic. Even for those whose contact was continuous, however, it was more likely to be a positive experience if the following conditions were met (chapter 6):

- The pre-separation relationship between the respondent and the parent who subsequently became non-resident was very close: 85% of such respondents described contact as very or fairly positive, compared to 69% who said the pre-separation relationship had only been fairly close and 27% of those with less close relationships.
- There was little or no post-separation conflict between the parents: 52% of those in the no conflict group described their experience of contact as very positive, compared to 32% in the low conflict category, 17% where conflict was categorised as moderate and none of those judged to be high conflict.
- There was no domestic violence and the resident parent did not have serious concerns about the care the non-resident parent could provide: those who did report such issues were half as likely to describe their contact as very or fairly positive as where those concerns were absent (32% compared to 65%).
- The resident parent encouraged the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent. Where they were said to have done so 'a lot', 46% of respondents reported a very positive experience of contact, compared to 29% whose resident parent had done this 'a bit', and a mere 11% of those who said they had not done so 'at all'. Active undermining, however, in the very few cases where this was reported, did not necessarily equate with a negative experience of contact: two of the four respondents said contact had been very positive.
- The child had been involved in decision-making about the arrangements: 82% of those who said they had been mainly or partly responsible described contact as very

or fairly positive, compared to 72% of those whose parents had taken account of their views and none of the few who said neither of these conditions had been met.

- The non-resident parent was reported to have ‘made time’ for the child: 60% of those who said this was ‘very true’ said their experience of contact had been very positive, compared to 20% of those who said it was only fairly true and none of those who said it was not very true or not true at all.
- The child felt equally at home in both the resident and non-resident parent’s home: 55% of those who said it was very true rated contact as very positive, dropping to 33% of those for whom it was only fairly true, 16% where it was not very true and 19% where it was not true at all.
- The non-resident parent either did not re-partner or the child got on well with their new partner: 53% of the first group and 43% of the second described contact as very positive, compared to less than a quarter of the others.

In contrast to the factors outlined above, the *structural aspects of contact* – frequency, overnights, whether there were set arrangements – did not appear to be important.

The few who said their main experience had been shared residence form a diverse group and the findings are mixed

Only a tiny proportion of respondents to the telephone survey (18; 5%) said that their main experience had been to divide their time more or less equally between their parents, and it seems possible that at least some of these may have misinterpreted the question. Our findings, therefore, have to be treated with caution. The data does suggest, however, that these respondents are not a homogeneous group.

- Most of those who could recall (11 of 17), said that the pre-separation relationship with their father had been very or fairly close. However four said it was only fairly close and two not very close. Eight (of 16) said they had been equally close to both parents. Five were closer to their mother and three to their father. (Chapter 7)
- Half said that the decision to establish the arrangements had either been agreed by both their parents or by ‘everyone’. However five said it had been determined by just one of their parents and four by themselves. (Chapter 3)
- 55% (10 of 18) reported a harmonious parental relationship with little or no conflict, mutual support for the child’s relationship with the other parent and no concerns either about domestic violence or the care the other parent might provide. The rest identified at least one of these issues, and usually more than one. Seven reported domestic violence or specific concerns about parenting, six moderate or high conflict and four that only one parent, or neither, had supported the child’s relationship with the other parent. (Chapter 4)
- Shared residence appeared to be less durable than primary care arrangements: in 10 of the 18 cases where the main arrangement had been shared residence, 10 (55%) terminated before the respondent reached adulthood. In contrast, only 66 (17%) of those who had mainly lived in primary care reported any change. But at the same time, a rather higher proportion of those mainly in shared residence said they had been satisfied with the arrangements at the time (14 of 15 answering the question; 93%, compared to 83% of those who had lived with the same parent throughout). This apparent paradox may reflect greater control exercised by the shared residence respondents, both in terms of their involvement in setting up the arrangements and perhaps more particularly in bringing them to an end, with all but one person saying that they had been responsible for this. (Chapter 2)

- The shared residence group, however, were less positive about their experience than those who had lived with a primary carer throughout *and* had continuous contact: only 28% of the former were very positive, compared to 39% of the latter and 11% were very or fairly negative (compared to 4%). (Chapter 6)
- Shared residence did seem to facilitate the maintenance of close relationships after separation. Of those who said their pre-separation relationship had been very or fairly close, only 7% of those whose main arrangement had been shared residence said their relationship with their father had become less close after separation. In comparison, 46% of those who lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact said that their relationship with the non-resident parent had become less close. However, shared residence did not improve relationships which had not been close to start with. Neither of the two respondents who said they had not been very close/not at all close reported any change. In contrast seven of the 18 respondents who had lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact, but whose previous relationship with the non-resident parent had been not very/not at all close, became closer.
- In adulthood those who had lived with the same parent throughout but had had continuous contact were only marginally less likely than those whose main arrangement had been shared residence to be still in touch (98% compared to 100%). They were, however, rather less likely to report very or fairly close relationships (76% compared to 83%).

Previous family forms and relationships made a difference to whether contact happened, its continuity and frequency, whether it was a positive experience for the child and the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent

A persistent theme in our analysis of the data from the telephone survey was the relevance to contact of the family form prior to the parental separation and more especially the relationship between the child and the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent (or, in the case of shared residence, their father).

- Respondents who never had any contact were more likely than those who had some contact to have had parents who had never lived together (18% compared to 2%) and least likely to have been born to married parents (68% compared to 83%). Those who had continuous contact, or whose main arrangement was shared residence, were more likely than those whose contact had been disrupted or ceased to have been born to married parents (89 and 85% respectively compared to between 79% and 82%). (Chapter 2)
- Even for respondents whose parents had been previously married, their age at the point their parents separated – and therefore the length of time they had lived with the non-resident parent and also the duration of the parental relationship – made a difference to whether contact happened at all and its continuity. Fifty-one per cent of those who never had contact were under five when their parents separated, compared to 35% of those whose contact either ceased or was not continuous and only 22% who either had continuous contact or shared residence. (Chapter 2)
- Of those old enough to remember their relationship with the future non-resident parent/father, 65% of those whose main arrangement was shared residence and 48% who had continuous contact described their pre-separation relationship as very close, compared to only 24% of those who never had any contact and 31% of those whose contact had not been continuous. (Chapter 2)
- The closeness of the pre-separation relationship was significantly associated with the frequency of contact both for the whole group of those who had ever had contact and

for those whose contact had been continuous. In this latter group 60% of those who said they had been very close pre-separation had had contact on more than six days in an average month, compared to only 37% of those who said they had been only fairly close, 25% not very close and neither of the two people who had been not at all close. They were also most likely to have had regular overnight stays (56% compared to 46% of those who had not been very close and neither of the two who had not been at all close).(Chapter 5)

- There was a statistically significant association between the closeness of the pre-separation relationship and respondents' evaluation of the quality of their contact experience both across the whole sample of those who had contact and those whose contact had been continuous. Among the latter, 87% of those who described the relationship as very close said their experience had been very or fairly positive, compared to 69% who said they had been fairly close and only 27% with less close relationships. (Chapter 6)
- Pre and post separation closeness were highly correlated. Across the whole sample of those who had lived with the same parent but had had contact with the other, 77% of those who said they had been very or fairly close remained so, while 85% said they were not close before or after the separation. Pre-separation closeness remained a differentiating factor even among those whose contact had been continuous. (Chapter 7)
- The effect of pre-separation relationships was even detectable into adulthood. (Chapter 7)

If children have not established a close relationship with the future non-resident parent prior to separation they are very unlikely to do so post-separation. However separation often results in relationships becoming more distant and in some cases ceasing (Chapter 7)

- Of those who described their post-separation relationship as very or fairly close and who could remember the pre-separation relationship, 93% (117 of 126) were also close prior to the separation. Only 18 respondents said they had become closer. Seven of these were respondents who said they had become *very* close, having only been *fairly* close before. Of those who said they had not been very close or were not at all close prior to the separation, only 14 (of 49; 22%) said that they had become closer.
- 44% of those who could recall their pre-separation relationship with their future non-resident parent/father (103 of 233) said they had become less close post-separation, or that there had been no contact.
- This was most likely to happen to those who had previously been very close (56%; 53 of 95) followed by those who had been fairly close (42 of 89; 47%).
- The proportions among those who had not been very close or not at all close were much lower (16% and 18% respectively) but most of these relationships ceased on separation.

Analysis of the data on cases in which the respondent described their pre-separation relationship with the future non-resident parent/father as very or fairly close indicated a number of factors were significantly associated with whether or not the relationship became more distant after separation.

1. *The residence arrangements.* 61% of those who lived with the same parent throughout said that the relationship had become less close or ceased, compared to 35% of those who had changed residence and 7% of the few respondents who said their main experience had been shared residence.

2. *The continuity of contact.* Of those who lived with the same parent throughout and did not lose touch entirely with the non-resident parent, 46% reported more distant relationships, compared to 67% where contact was delayed and 83% where it was sporadic.
3. *The experience of contact.* Among those who lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact, 39% of those who said their experience of contact had been very or fairly positive said they had become less close, compared to 73% of those who described it as mixed and both the two respondents who said it had been fairly or very negative.
4. *The level of parental conflict.* Where respondents had lived with the same parent throughout and had continuous contact with the other, 35% of those who said there had been no conflict between their parents said their relationship with the non-resident parent had become less close, compared to 82% where conflict was high. However the pattern was not consistent; those with low conflict were actually more likely to become less close than those where it was moderate (70% compared to 44%).

Whether or not the resident parent encouraged the relationship was not statistically significant although there was a consistent trend where contact had been continuous.

Nor was there a statistically significant association between whether the relationship became more distant and the frequency of contact, whether there were regular overnight stays, and whether there were set arrangements. There was a consistent trend for relationships to remain as close as they had been pre-separation when there were regular overnights and when there had not been set arrangements. However in relation to frequency there was not even a trend, indeed those with the lowest levels of contact were least likely to report relationships becoming more distant.

Resident parents were very rarely held responsible for contact not happening or being disrupted and active encouragement of the child's relationship with the non-resident parent was far more typical than undermining it.

- Only 8% of respondents said that the resident parent was mainly responsible for contact not being continuous, ranging from none holding them responsible for contact ceasing, to 15% where it had never started. (In contrast, non-resident parents were held responsible in 53% of cases where contact had ceased and 66% where it had never been established). Six of the 11 respondents who supplied reasons for the resident parent's reluctance included concerns about their ability to care for the child properly or domestic violence. (Chapter 3)
- Where respondents saw themselves as responsible for contact not being continuous, over 60% said that the resident parent had encouraged them to have contact 'a lot', ranging from 25% where there had never been any contact, to 85% where it had ceased. Only one person (3%) said that the resident parent had discouraged contact. Respondents who had withdrawn from contact typically explained this in terms of contact difficulties and no-one gave upsetting the resident parent as their sole reason. (Chapter 3)
- Of those who were having contact at the point they reached 18, 56% said that the resident parent had encouraged their relationship with the non-resident parent 'a lot' and 28% to have done so 'a bit'. While 9% had done nothing to actively encourage the relationship, only 7% were said to have tried to undermine it. (Chapter 4)
- There were statistically significant associations between the resident parent's encouragement of the child's relationship with the non-resident parent and a) whether

they had concerns about that parent's ability to care for the child b) whether the resident parent was afraid or/had suffered violence from the non-resident parent and c) the level of conflict in the parental relationship post-separation. (Chapter 4)

The post-separation parental relationship was linked to the continuity of contact and how positive an experience it was for respondents but not to its frequency

- Continuous contact was associated with relatively harmonious parental relationships, with 86% being classified as no/low conflict and only 7% as high. Fifty-nine per cent of these respondents said that their parents had got on OK; 76% said there had not been much arguing, and where there were arguments they tended to be mild or moderate; violence or fear were rarely reported (Chapter 4). Only 12% said their parents had ever been to court over contact and none had done so repeatedly.(Chapter 3)
- In contrast only 48% of those whose contact had been delayed were categorised as no/low conflict while 35% were judged to be high conflict. Thirty-nine per cent said there had been 'a lot of bad feeling'; 45% 'much arguing'; 31% severe or quite severe arguments and 31% violence or fear (chapter 4). Twenty-one per cent of these respondents said their parents had been to court over contact, and 9% had done so repeatedly (chapter 3).
- Similarly only 49% of those whose contact had been sporadic fell into the no/low conflict group: 28% said there had been 'a lot of bad feeling'; 43% 'much arguing'; 27% severe or quite severe arguing and 36% violence or fear (chapter 4). Fifteen per cent of parents had been to court; 3% repeatedly (chapter 3).
- There was no statistically significant association between parental conflict levels and the frequency of contact, although among those who had continuous contact there was a trend. However, in this group, while half of those who were not aware of any conflict had contact on more than six days a month, 38% of those reporting moderate or high conflict were also having contact at this level (chapter 5).
- Parental conflict was significantly associated with how positively respondents rated their experience of contact, even when account was taken of the continuity of contact. Of those with continuous contact, 52% of those where there was no conflict said their experience had been very positive, compared to 32% where the conflict level was categorised low, 17% where it was moderate and none where it was high (chapter 6).
- By far the most common suggestion made by respondents as to how their contact could have been improved was for their parents to have been less conflicted or more cooperative (chapter 6).
- Similarly, asked what, if anything, respondents would do differently if they were ever to be a separated parent, the most frequent response was to maintain a better relationship with their ex-partner than their parents had (chapter 6).

Relationships with the non-resident parent/father in childhood often, but not invariably, predicted relationships in adulthood. Relationships were more likely to improve than deteriorate. However, as adults, respondents were still more likely to be close to the previously resident parent and many had poor or non-existent relationships with the non-resident parent/father (chapter 8).

- Of those who had not lost touch with the non-resident parent in childhood, half said their relationship as adults had not changed in terms of closeness. However 28% said they were now closer than they had been in childhood, while 22% were less close or had lost touch. Twenty-three per cent of those who had no contact in childhood or whose contact had ceased subsequently re-established contact.

- Relationships which had been very close in childhood were likely to remain very close (71%) with only a tiny proportion of the rest (4%) foundering completely, rather than becoming less distant.
- Relationships in the other groups were less likely to remain unchanged (ranging from 27% where the previous relationship had not been at all close to 44% where it had been not very close/fairly close). In each, relationships were more likely to improve than deteriorate or cease completely. Of those who had only been fairly close during childhood, 37% said they became closer, 18% less close and less than one per cent lost touch completely. The proportion reporting improved relationships was similar among those who had not been very close (36%), but more terminated completely (13%) rather than just becoming more distant (7%). The greatest contrast was in the group which had not been at all close, half of whom became closer, while 23% had no contact.
- At the time the telephone interviews were conducted, while all the respondents were in touch with their previously resident parent/mother, only 75% were in touch with their non-resident parent/father.
- Even when they were in touch only 70% said their relationship was close or fairly close, compared to 91% who described their relationship with the resident parent/mother in those terms. Only 64% felt they would be able to confide in the non-resident parent/father about problems in their lives, compared to 85% who said this about their resident parent/mother. Just 37% said they were equally close to both parents, with 51% being closer to the resident parent and a mere 12% closer to the non-resident parent.
- Close relationships with the previously non-resident parent/father were less likely where the respondent had lived with the same parent throughout their childhood (68% compared to 87% of those who had lived with each parent for a period and 83% whose main experience had been shared residence). However, those who had continuous contact were more likely to have close relationships than those whose contact had been delayed or sporadic (76% compared to 54% where contact had been delayed or sporadic) and were almost as likely to report being equally close to each parent as those who had lived with each parent (45% compared to 46% and 50%).

Chapter 9 The context

This is the first of seven chapters based on the material from the in-depth interviews with 50 of the participants in the telephone survey. The remaining six chapters concentrate on contact and post-separation relationships between parents and children. However, as our interviews revealed so vividly, contact experiences cannot be understood without an appreciation of the context in which they have evolved. Hence this chapter sets the scene, first, by documenting respondents' accounts of their pre-separation relationships with the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent and then by examining their experience of parental separation and their recollections of its effects on them and their parents. First though, we set out below some information about the interview sample, how they were recruited and their profile.

Recruitment of the interview sample

As explained in chapter 1, at the end of the telephone interview all participants were asked if they were willing for their contact details to be forwarded to the research team with a view to them taking part in the next stage of the research. Of the 323 who agreed we excluded 200 on the basis that: a) their parents had separated prior to the Children Act 1989 or b) the survey agency did not have full contact details or c) the respondent had never had any contact with their non-resident parent. From the remaining 123, we approached 83 individuals, selected, on the basis of the survey data, to give a balanced mix of those with continuous or disrupted contact, and those who described their experience of contact as very/fairly positive, very/fairly negative and mixed. Of these, 13 people were not contactable, 14 decided not to take part and three did not turn up for an arranged interview.

Profile of the interview sample

Table 1.5 in chapter 1, gives a full profile of the interview sample and how it compares with the survey sample. In brief, the average age of those interviewed was 25. Half (29) were aged between 25 and 30; 40% between 18 and 24, and one person, whose age had been erroneously recorded in the survey, was 35. Twenty-two were male, 28 female. In all but six instances their parents had been married, with all the rest having cohabited. Only seven respondents had been under five at the point the separation occurred, with 31 being between five and 12 and 12 older than this. The average age was between 10 and 11. All but one of the separations occurred after the Children Act 1989: 24 between 1991 and 1995; 18 between 1996 and 2000, and seven between 2001 and 2005. The exception was the respondent whose age had been wrongly recorded, his parents separated in 1987. The average interval between the separation and the interview was just over 15 years, with 86% of separations taking place between 11 and 20 years previously.

The majority of respondents (37) lived with the same parent throughout their post-separation childhoods. Typically this was with their mother (14 of the 15 young men and 17 of the 22 young women. Of the 13 whose living arrangements had changed nine involved a single change (three men and three women moving from maternal to paternal residence and one man and two women moving in the opposite direction). Five reported more than one change, including two who spent some time in shared residence. None of our sample, however, had shared residence as their main arrangement. As reported in chapter 2, although two of them had categorised their main living arrangement as shared residence, it emerged in the interview that one had wrongly classified herself because she had changed residence and the other had oscillated between his parents every few months because of his behaviour and would be more accurately classified as having had multiple changes of residence.

Half the sample consisted of those who said in the telephone interview that their contact had been delayed (11), sporadic (8) or had ceased in childhood (6) while 23 had had continuous contact (the remaining two being those wrongly classified as having had shared residence as their main arrangement. In the telephone survey 23 had described their experience of contact as very (10) or fairly (13) positive; 10 as fairly (7) or very (3) negative and 11 as mixed. In the remaining six, where contact had ceased, this data was not collected.

Pre-existing relationships with the non-resident parent

There was a lot of variance in respondents' descriptions of their *pre-separation* relationships with the parent they did not live with after separation. While a number described these as 'good' or 'close' there were also many who said the relationships was 'not good' or 'difficult'. Positive pre-separation relationships were usually in families where the future non-resident parent had been actively involved in their children's lives.

Respondent *He spent all of his time when he wasn't working with us.*

Interviewer *He was a really good dad?*

Respondent *Yeah.*

Interviewer *What did he do with you, the two boys, did he take you off?*

Respondent *He took us out to nights out, there was at the youth club we used to go to on a Thursday night, which we went to that, he would take us out to football and anything and everything, just down to the park just to run around, and that's it, anything.*

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)⁵

In some cases the non-resident parent had spent time developing shared interests with their children, or taking an active interest in supporting their children's education.

Respondent *Yeah, I had a lot of time, I was a very big daddy's girl, I spent a lot, because he was very into science and maths, I think he wanted me to be a science and maths genius, he'd kill me now because I'm into humanitarian stuff. But he'd take me down the caves, museums, everything, every weekend we would do something, and it was always something to try and challenge me. We couldn't just go to a museum, he'd be quizzing on the years and well if it's done in that year what year... just always something.*

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

It was clear from young adults' accounts that it was the quality rather than the quantity of time spent with their parents which contributed most to the perceived closeness of their pre-separation relationships. Those who reported the most positive relationships were those whose contact parent had often worked during the week but who made an extra effort at weekends or in the holidays to spend time with their children, participating in child-focused activities.

Interviewer *Did you always get on better with your father, when your parents were together?*

⁵ The information in brackets at the end of each quote, after the case number, gives some basic information about the case. M/F indicates the respondent's gender and the numbers refer first to their age at the point their parents separated and then to their age at interview. Data is then given about the residence and contact arrangements. Where residence changed data is given about the contact with each non-resident parent.

Respondent *Yeah. I think it's the whole thing that because we didn't see each other the whole of the week because he was working, the weekend, he literally dedicated the whole of the weekend to us. We loved that. It was always him that took us to the park, it was him that did stuff during holidays, obviously because my mum did it during the week, but when you look back, you kinda remember the weekends more.*

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Conversely, those who reported the most negative relationships were those in which the contact parent was often absent from the family home (either working or socialising) and/or, more significantly, when they were at home remained 'distant' or 'detached' from their children's lives.

Respondent *To be honest, growing up I didn't really know my dad, he wasn't around, I don't even think he was there when I was born. It was my mum, and her brother, that I knew, then he went to America so it was just me and my mum and my little brother. He kind of just dropped in and out and I can't really remember him being there for a constant amount of time.*

10901 (M, 12, 22, mother residence throughout, ceased contact)

Interviewer *Right from the start your earliest memories of your parents how were they getting on?*

Respondent *They never really saw each other, because my mum used to always take us away and do things with us, like go to X. My first memories of my dad was he was always in the pub, quite distant, even had his own room where he could watch telly away from us, because we were like our little family, he was just the man that lived there and put money on the... put food on the table, and drifted around a bit.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Interviewer *Prior to your parents' separation did you do everything together, mum/dad?*

Respondent *No, my father worked on the oil rigs during the 80s so he was away for quite long periods of time, and then home for quite long periods of time.*

Interviewer *What did he do when he came home?*

Respondent *I think he was quite detached, he read his boxing magazines, he stood almost like on guard, on duty. Quite often he'd stand in front of the fire and just stare into space, maybe taking things in, I don't know. He wasn't like a natural get involved with your children, I think he was just observing that we were behaving ourselves.*

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

In a few cases, poor pre-separation relationships between children and their contact parents were attributed to specific problems such as drinking, aggressive or violent behaviour and mental health issues.

Respondent *I had two parts of my life because my dad had a drink problem. He didn't drink in the day as far as I was aware, it was great, loved my dad to bits, wanted to be around him, but as soon as the evening came around I'd withdraw from him because he was like a ticking time bomb, really ready to have an argument.... when he'd drink we wouldn't want to be around him then, so it's almost like he had a split personality*

because there was the drunk dad and the sober dad and they weren't the same person.

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Respondent Before they separated it was more a case of, the relationship was more just he's my dad so if he tells you to get a beer out the fridge, you got a beer out the fridge, you just didn't dare cross his path and you just accepted that's the way it was because you didn't know any different, as far as you were concerned it's just that's how dads are.

Interviewer Did he do stuff with you, kind of did you ever have...?

Respondent No he never done anything other than, he never hit me and he never did anything else, it was just violence [towards mother and brother] was his only problem, shouting and violence.

20255 (M, 8, change of residence mum to dad then back to mum, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

The experience of separation and divorce

The impact of the separation on the respondent as a child

Young people's accounts of their lives after the separation were often characterised by feelings of loss, change and subsequent readjustment in their relationships. The degree of change experienced varied among respondents. Some reported very little change in their day-to-day lives.

Interviewer To go back to the time of the separation. Did it affect you in terms of how you felt going to school and friends, did you tell anybody at school?

Respondent No one really asked, I was too young then, I was more interested in playing football, things like that, so it never really got brought up at school, so it wasn't a big thing, he was hardly ever there anyway, so it was... he just weren't there at all.

Interviewer So you wouldn't say you were terribly upset about it?

Respondent No, I wouldn't have said I was to the point distraught or anything, I was just he's gone, not going to see him now for a while...

11445 (M, 8, 21, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

For others, however, the separation caused major disruption and psychological distress which affected them for years afterwards. Indeed, it was noticeable that, for most respondents, the finality of the separation came as a shock, even when they were aware of problems in their parent's relationship.

Respondent I just felt... whenever anyone asks me about it I always felt like I was watching myself on the telly, because when it was all happening Byker Grove was on, and I'd just watched a story where a child, his parents had split up, and I just thought that would never happen to me, and it was like I just kept thinking is this a dream? Am I watching telly or something? This doesn't happen, not to my life, I'm too happy, and it was really that selfish thing that it won't happen to me, my life is too set, and it just did. It just did, and the night it just went belly up, it was really weird.

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

There was a common feeling, highlighted in the following quote, that divorce was something which happened in ‘other people’s families’.

Interviewer *What would you say was the general impact on you at that time? Did it have a bad effect on you?*

Respondent *Yeah, I think it did. I think because I thought as a kid you see other people's parents split up and you just think that's not going to happen to my mum and dad because they love each other and they love me, and they love my sister, and we're happy, yeah he's not there 24/7, but in some ways that's easier for him to be away for a length of time because then we appreciate him more, and you do, you just think it's never going to happen, my family are never going to be like that, we're not going to be... and then literally the moment it happened I was like... your life changes, regardless of whether you want it to or not, and I didn't think it would, because he was away so often anyway. But I think when that person leaves you suddenly go I haven't got a standard family anymore, it's completely different.*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

Respondents’ accounts of their feelings in response to the separation highlight the degree of loss they felt.

Respondent *I was devastated. I've just this clear picture of being outside the bus station in the car and then going. As I said I was closer to my dad and I remember him walking away. I was quite devastated about it. (Interviewee is crying as she recalls this.)*

Interviewer *It's obviously stayed with you for a long time.*

Respondent *Yeah, it still does now but I felt quite lost, I don't know if lonely is the word. I felt lost...*

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

The sense of loss was not always confined to the parent who had left the family home. Some respondents talked about the loss of the family unit, or were left feeling that they had lost the love and care of both parents.

Respondent *The upsetting bit is you've gone from having a mum and dad, you've still got a mum and dad but now you can only live with one of them...it's like getting an Olympic runner and saying which leg do you want to keep because we're chopping one off, you know.*

30639 (M, 9, 35, several changes of residence, continuous contact but minimal with NRM)

Respondent *Because I just felt so much anger, I remember just feeling angry all the time, I know it's hormones and obviously teenagers get like that, but I remember just feeling like this is not normal, why do I feel like this? And then questioning everything, and then I thought does my mum not love me, my dad doesn't love me, and I just felt unloved and uncared for, nobody cared and the world was against me.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Interviewees reported significant changes in parenting after the separation. Up to that point, it was clear, in the majority of families mothers had been the main care-givers, taking responsibility for both the practical and emotional care of the children. Those who remained

with their father often spoke of his struggles to cope with changed responsibilities after the children had lost the person who had mainly provided the structure to their lives.

Interviewer At that time, did it affect you in your life, at school or at home, did it have any kind of impact on you?

Respondent It definitely, definitely did because there was nobody there. My dad would leave for work really early in the morning and give me £5 to get the bus and get something to eat at school and my year 11 year, I barely went. I had no-one following me.

Interviewer Clearly it was your decision not to go to school but do you feel that you would have liked somebody to give you a bit of a kick and make you go?

Respondent Oh yeah I do. Not that I blame her but yeah it was her role and had been all those years that did all that stuff and suddenly she hadn't been there at a crucial time in my life. Very hormonal, just growing into your body and things that go on at school anyway with boys and all that side of thing my sister had to take up on... I didn't have the structure at home to then take on with me through my education because my dad wasn't there, he was at work and would just leave me money out expecting me to go, which I very rarely did... I definitely think that as she left she almost gave up all her mum roles and rights that she then never really took an interest in my education, never really gave me any advice or guidance either. She was quite self-absorbed for those few years.

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact increasing over time)

Respondent My mum had been the principal caregiver so my dad was really struggling. In the period before Christmas, he was taking me, really as an adult I think. Oh my god, he was taking me to pubs with him immediately after school; I'm fairly sure he was drinking all the time, driving on the way home picking up kebabs – and that was our dinner. Not very much home cooking going on. From what I remember that seems to be my memory of that time, going to pubs.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Respondent After mum had gone dad just stopped taking an interest and I don't think I had any structure for the next couple of years before I'd sort of left and went off to University, so I just took full advantage of that and didn't do very much work and didn't do very much of anything and just got on doing my own thing, and yes I missed the structure of a mum and a dad. They didn't come together very much but there was a structure there. Whereas once they were apart and dad was, had lost interest and didn't really know how to look after children I think that was the thing that had the impact.

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

It was not just those living with their fathers, however, who expressed the loss of parenting they experienced as a lack of structure or boundaries in their lives, at a time when they really needed the structure and guidance of at least one of their parents.

Respondent I was quite an aggressive kid. I used to fight a lot at school. There were just no sort of boundaries in the house or structure, just always...and my dad not being there.

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact ceased when father moved abroad)

Respondent I missed a lot of days that year at school. Just 'cos I was really struggling with it. It's

a lot of strain at that age trying to hold everything together. I had a lot of friends so I didn't hide away or anything but after about six months, after he went, is when it really hit me actually because it was not up until that point that I think, I remember we used to go and see him and I kept seeing him up until then. I was a bit numb I think and just doing my best to keep everything together and then one time it just all started to crumble a little bit and I got quite depressed, badly depressed at one point. I think I was just 14 or something. That was not a good time 'cos that was the time when I started to miss a lot of school, but it had to come out at some point because I had been keeping it together for a long time.

Interviewer *Do you put that down to what happened between your parents?*

Respondent *Yes. Until the separation I was so naïve and very innocent and very happy positive sort of person, it was how I was made, glass half full type person and I didn't see any bad in situations. There was always a good reason for stuff and I kind of just used to bounce through everything and that happened and my dad taught me everything. My dad taught me to read and write and everything and suddenly for him to be turning his back on everything, yeah it was all down to that.*

14362, (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

A lack of discipline was also felt by some respondents. This was often the case in families in which, prior to the separation, the non-resident parent had been the main disciplinarian. The lack of fair and consistent discipline appeared to have a particularly detrimental effect during the teenage years and was sometimes said to have led to poor and destructive behaviour.

Respondent *I suppose we took liberties a bit more than we would have done if my dad was around.*

Interviewer *Did you go off the rails a bit?*

Respondent *My brother did more than I did. With me it was more every Friday, Saturday, Sunday I would have too much to drink, stagger around, fall on the floor somewhere. My brother did go into the drugs side of things... When I was 19 I was done for drink driving. (Dad) didn't want to know. I went through the whole thing, going to court, by myself.*

10442 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent *I had to basically administer my own rules throughout being a teenager. I didn't have anyone to...because my mother being as she is and I'm probably a stronger personality than she is, she couldn't really administer any rules on me, so it was me to really take it upon myself to understand things.*

11351(M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact ceased when father moved abroad)

Another strong feeling was abandonment. A number of young people reported not being able to understand how a parent could leave them and move, sometimes a great distance, away. Even when they had not gone far, respondents were sometimes left feeling that the parent had somehow chosen to leave their life for good.

Interviewer *Did you say three years ago he moved?*

Respondent *It might have been longer than that then, because I hadn't seen him before he moved, I didn't see him, I refused to, because I was like don't want to see you now.*

- Interviewer* When you found out he was going?
- Respondent* When I found out he was moving to (another country) I was like that's it, I said, 'I'm not going to see you anyway so why change a habit, if that's how it's going to be from now on might as well keep it as it is.'
- Interviewer* Why did he go?
- Respondent* Better job prospects I think, and I think they had the money, and I think it was just let's go, why not? (New partner) didn't have any reason to stay, and yeah I think he just wanted a new start, a different life.

13887 (F, 0, 20, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Several respondents were also having to deal with painful feelings of self-blame, even in families in which parents had tried to reassure their children that the breakdown of the marriage was in no way their fault.

- Interviewer* It sounds as though you felt very responsible for her feelings?
- Respondent* I did. For a long time afterwards I thought it was my fault really why it had happened because my dad had given me more attention.
- Interviewer* At that time?
- Respondent* Yes, I didn't even realise. I knew that I felt I needed to fix it but I didn't understand that I felt responsible until later on. I spent years feeling responsible for what happened.
- Interviewer* Do you think that's part of the reason that you took on responsibility for your mum and brothers and sisters?
- Respondent* Yes, very much. My mum used to say all of the right things, it was nothing to do with all of us children and all the right things were said but at that age I understood certain things and I understood that my dad used to treat me like a grown up, nothing funny, but he used to treat me like a woman, I was slightly older for my age in some ways. He used to give me a lot of attention, sometimes over my mum. Again nothing funny but he...it's like it used to make him feel good, it was all very strange. I did feel like it was my fault, like I'd taken it away from my mum.

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

- Interviewer* How important do you think it is for a child to have contact with their parent?
- Respondent* It would have to be pretty close to 1⁶. It is pretty important to see him.
- Interviewer* Because?
- Respondent* Because that caring factor. If you see him then you don't feel at fault I guess.
- Interviewer* Do you think that is an issue for a lot of children?
- Respondent* Yes because when you've had no experience of managing relationships it's difficult to understand why and a lot of adults hide certain things from children. So as a young person you think I must be at fault somewhere along the line. You have to show the

⁶ In response to a card which asked respondents to rate the importance of contact from 1 (really important) to 5 (not at all important).

child that it's not their fault even if it is. If there is constant contact then it wouldn't occur to you that there is any fault involved, and you wouldn't think 'Oh why haven't I seen him'.

30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

It is obvious from the quotes set out above that for very many respondents the separation was associated with emotional turmoil and distress. Interviewees reported feeling upset and bewildered, many were angry and a number reported bouts of low mood and mild depression. A smaller number suffered even more severe emotional reactions.

Respondent I went through a period when I become very depressed and I started self-harming.

Interviewer How old were you?

Respondent I think I started probably when I was about 13/14. Then when I was 15, I took an overdose and ended up going into hospital because I'd made myself quite poorly. Then after that I had a referral to a child psychologist for a little while. I think we talked and she sort of felt that most of my problems were down to my parents basically and that actually you know – that was the impression that I got, you know that I had a difficult living situation and it was almost to be expected.

Interviewer Was she right?

Respondent Yeah.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Respondent I was quite suicidal in year 7, I used to cut my arms and things, and I was quite a recluse...I had really bad eczema, and well psoriasis and it got really bad that I got hospitalised because of it, because stress makes it a lot worse, and my whole body from below that was covered, and it was wearing tights over wounds, and got put in hospital for two weeks.

Interviewer Did anybody see that you'd been self-harming, that you'd been cutting yourself?

Respondent Because it was my eczema was bad, so it would in amongst, so it just looked like another cut, so it didn't look obvious.

Interviewer How long did you go on doing that for?

Respondent Not that long, I was too much of a wuss to do anything more serious, as much as I hated life I'd rather hate life living than hate life dead.

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Severe emotional reactions were not always immediate. Some respondents reported that the impact of the separation had hit them several years later and resulted in a major breakdown. This usually occurred where respondents reported that they had bottled up painful feelings resulting from the separation and had come to a point where they could no longer contain them.

Interviewer So when you were 19, was there something that triggered you to have a meltdown?

Respondent It was years of being a serial fixer. I used to try and fix everything in my family and I took it all on myself. The divorce was the beginning of all of that, because before that I never needed to really, I had two parents, they took care of everything and I didn't

have to worry about anything. When that changed that was the beginning and I never used to off-load anything and it gradually built and then I hit 18 I moved out. Then I had too much time on my own and that's when it started to...really. But my head started acting out before I knew what was going on...I'm not really a negative depressive sort of person, I'm genuinely not so it had to be something proper.

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Interviewer Do you think that stuff had a long term impact?

Respondent Yeah, I think it did... I literally was bottling it up and bottling it up till it like, within the last... I was about 20 and I literally just went (mimics a bomb exploding). I was driving to XXX everyday working for X, getting up at 6 in the morning picking someone up and driving 80 miles a day and it was quite a hard apprenticeship I was doing...then one day that was it I just had enough. I even crashed my car just round the corner, the paramedics came and did a full medical and they thought I was high or something because I was crazy.

Interviewer Do you remember anything about it, did you feel it coming?

Respondent I knew that there was too much and that I just couldn't deal with it and then I remember just one day not wanting to go to work and I thought to myself I'll drive around a bit and pretend that I couldn't go to work. I remember driving round the corner to reverse into the drive and I just crashed into the concrete post out of nowhere...I was in my own little world trying to think of the best way to avoid everything and then that was it, bang.

30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

The impact of the separation on parents

Many respondents' accounts of change following the separation focused on their experiences of parents who had in some sense become absent to them. It seemed clear that both mothers and fathers often became unavailable to parent as they had previously and provide the guidance and emotional support which was so needed by the young people at that time. In some cases, respondents attributed their parents' unavailability to practical factors as one parent no longer lived with them and sometimes moved a distance away. However, respondents were also acutely aware of the psychological impact of the separation on their parents and the knock on effect this had on family life and relationships.

Respondents often felt that their parents had tried to protect them from their own painful feelings and the emotional distress caused by the divorce.

Respondent It's really hard because mum can be so strong when she wants to be, and especially when it comes to her children, she's like a lion, she just does not let anybody hurt us, and she brought this barrier up, and all her priority was me, and obviously (my sister), but at the time I was there. So she just went into overdrive, and throughout the whole divorce I never saw her emotions, because she would not let me see them, she was just, 'I am your mother, I'm sorting it, don't worry.'

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Interviewer Was your mum very upset about the separation, were you aware of it having an impact on her that you saw?

Respondent I think she tried to be quite strong about it, and I think the focus was I've got two kids, I've got to keep going for them, and I think a part of it was me in my head thinking

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she's really upset, I've got to do something. But no, mum was really good about it, she was really strong, and I think literally when you're a woman and you get in that mode you're literally I've got to go, I've got kids to look after and I've got to keep going, and that's what mum was like. I know she had a breakdown behind closed doors and stuff when we weren't around, and I think she was considerate enough to not do it in front of me, to do it behind closed doors, not to break down in front of us. Where I think if she had I'd have found it a lot harder, because I wouldn't have known how to deal with that.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

However, despite these best efforts, some respondents were aware of many of the difficulties faced by their parents in the aftermath of their separation and the emotional turmoil they were going through.

Respondent She was lonely, I remember her always being lonely. I don't really remember much but I remember her being lonely.

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent She was upset for ages. I think she's still going through the effects, she's not been with anyone since. I think for her it was very bad.

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact ceased when father moved abroad)

Respondent (Mum) just left one night. She left a note. My dad came home to find she was gone, her stuff was gone. It was quite a shock...very traumatic for my dad. My dad suffered a lot with it really...he lost a lot of weight, and was a bit lost, for a long time really. I think if it hadn't been for having us kids it might have got worse for him.

Interviewer You talked about your dad being very affected by the separation. What about your mum?

Respondent I do remember occasions when my mum used to come to the house and use the washing machine and I would go and sit with her in the kitchen and she would sit and cry and say she couldn't believe she had done this. Regret really. Because she had moved from the family home, from somewhere where she was stable financially to...because she wasn't actually working at that time, she was doing a lot of supply work but not a regular income, to being in a flat where she had to live hand to mouth.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

A number of parents were reported to have suffered from bouts of low mood and depression.

Interviewer So when did that change do you think?

Respondent I think when he come out of his depression, helped, because I was quite angry at that, I did know that he wasn't well and I did know why, but I couldn't fully come to terms with the fact of the way he was exactly reacting, why he was so insular, you know, I didn't, didn't not have my dad, but to extent not really, he wasn't working, he wasn't being very active with it, like he wasn't really doing anything. If I used to go around there he used to sort of be on the settee, or he'd be in bed and I used to be, I suppose I was a bit angry at the fact of that, I couldn't really, I thought he was being quite selfish but then I've never been through probably what he went through, so...

Interviewer So during that time did you actually see less of him?

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Respondent I did more so for the fact that he did just sort of pull himself away from people.

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer You said your dad was upset about the separation. How did that manifest itself?

Respondent At one stage I went to the doctor's with him and he got upset with the doctor, he was crying in the doctor's and he was given - I called them cow tablets, they were big and they smelt of cow poo – they were anti-depressants apparently. At one stage dad had to leave work for a good two months, he was quite depressed.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

There were also several accounts of more severe emotional reactions which had been witnessed by the young people, and in which they had often become involved.

Respondent She's had a few nervous breakdowns, and that was one of them, and as a lot of people will tell you I had to grow up fast due to a number of different things, and that was so to speak the first moment of growing up extremely quickly. I remember holding her, telling her everything will be alright.

20246 (F, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased).

Interviewer Okay, so was your dad affected when they split up?

Respondent Yes, yes he went to, he got sent to a mental hospital for depression for about six months...he put himself there...oh he put himself there, he put himself into it for depression.

Interviewer Was that quite soon afterwards or much later?

Respondent Within a year I'd say.

Interviewer And would you put that down to the separation?

Respondent Oh definitely, definitely, I'm the same as him, we've both got low self-esteem and trust issues and as soon as that happened it just sent him off the rails,

30178 (M, 14, 24, residence changed several times - mother-father-mother-father – continuous but minimal contact each NRP)

Interviewer Would you say (your dad) was badly affected when (your mum) left?

Respondent Yes, he went off sick from work and he never went back, he had his six months sick leave and then they retired him on ill health...He would just, he would sit around the house and just cry and he would try and get comfort from both me and my brother. My brother tells me a story there was one night that dad just came into his room and got into bed with him, and of course it's a single bed so my brother got up and went and slept in his bed and the next thing you know is dad's back again and he just wanted someone close, and when you're 12 you're just like 'go away'. And for me, for me dad would alternate, because on the one hand he wanted comfort, he wanted me to tell him that, you know, it was all going to be alright and she was going to come back and he would ask me to take messages to her, tell her I still love her, tell her that she can come back whenever she's ready, tell her this, tell her that and I knew that that would make, that I think my biggest fear was that I would tell her something like that and she would come back because I knew she would be miserable and it wasn't what she wanted, so I had to make that choice I had to think well I want

my mum to be happy and I think my dad will be happier in the long run, but that was a huge thing for me to have to...

31284 (F, 15, 29, change of residence father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

All too often respondents had witnessed parents who had turned to drinking and other destructive behaviours as a way of coping with the difficult feelings they were experiencing.

Interviewer How did your dad respond?

Respondent Drinking himself into a heart attack, and nearly killing himself.

Interviewer How quickly?

Respondent It was years, when he was 50 he had his heart attack, he'd drunk all of his money and nearly lost the house.

Interviewer But he hadn't drunk before they separated?

Respondent Not like this no, and he was drinking all the time.

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Interviewer He was a mess for a long time – really was.

Interviewer How did that come across to you?

Respondent (very emotional) I'm sorry. He would cry on and off all the time and he started drinking very heavily - which even as a child I was aware of. He'd be sort of drinking a bottle of scotch a day, in the evenings after he picked me up and yeah, he sort of, was just obviously very sad.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Interviewer What about your parents. Do you think they were initially affected in any way?

Respondent I know my dad definitely was. He did some really crazy things that he wouldn't do now...like the one I can really remember is, quite soon after he found out and they were splitting up my nan and granddad were coming round and I think it must have been the weekend because it was during the day time and my dad would usually be at work and we had a porch at the front of the house and my dad climbed up it and was trying to get into the house through my brother's bedroom window which seems completely mad now and my mum told me, which may have been exaggerated but he was saying to my mum, not threatening her with a knife but trying to give her a knife and say to stab him which my mum didn't tell me that until I was about 15, quite a bit older, so just sort of strange things.

Interviewer It suggests that he wasn't really himself?

Respondent Yeah, he took it a lot worse than she did.

30979 (F, 13, 19, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer Was he disciplining you?

Respondent He just really did start drinking quite a lot, and he was quite heavy handed.

Interviewer With all of you?

Respondent I think more so with me than the boys, but yeah still with the boys.

Interviewer Did he hurt you?

Respondent Yeah, I don't know whether it was malicious or whether it was just drunken because he was a big man and I was a child, or a young person.

31624 (F, 11, 26, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

A couple of respondents reported that one of their parents had become so distressed they had threatened to take their own life. One respondent said her father would ring and tell her what he was thinking.

Interviewer How about your dad, how did he react?

Respondent He was very low. He drank. He drank a lot anyway, he probably drank even more. His reaction was constantly that he was going to kill himself. It was all towards me, I was the only person he would ring and say that to.

20791 (F, 14, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact, ad hoc, reduced over time)

Some parents were said to have become disengaged from their usual mode of parenting in the aftermath of divorce, preoccupied with their own emotional distress and/or focused on sorting out their own lives, sometimes at the expense of their children's needs.

Respondent I've always thought when they separated the biggest impact...it's had was that they, sort of when you're in a family home I think your focus is go to work, come home, look after the family needs, but when the separation hit that focus on the family was taken away, the focus was now on right I need to, mum's focus, I need to rebuild my life, you know, of course she was looking after me but this, she had to buy a house, she had to, you know, re-establish where she was living, redo the home all of that and then redo her own life, so that was her focus.

13878 (F, 12, 26, change of residence father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

One young woman painted a picture of a family in which everyone was struggling with their own emotional reactions and unable to support each other, resulting in the feeling that the family was falling apart.

Respondent My mum struggled to keep it together. She was the strong one in some aspects but it kind of flaws you so...

Interviewer So emotionally it had quite a big impact on her?

Respondent Yes. We were all kind of crumbling all over the place.

Interviewer What about your dad?

Respondent My dad, he just felt guilty, but not too guilty. He felt guilty when we were in front of him...otherwise he seemed to be very good at shutting it off when he wasn't in front of it. He felt guilty and spent all of his time trying to justify it.

Interviewer How was it for you in those first few weeks and months?

Respondent The difficult thing was that because I was the oldest and my mum used to talk to me a

lot, I tried really hard to be strong for her, I remember that and we used to spend a lot of time talking...I used to take a lot of it on my own shoulders.

Interviewer That's a lot to take on for a 13 year old?

Respondent A lot yes. It messed me up a bit.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

As well as the emotional difficulties parents were dealing with, respondents were also aware of other problems in their parents' lives, such as those who were struggling financially.

Interviewer Was she terribly upset when he went?

Respondent Hmmm.

Interviewer How long did that go on for?

Respondent About a year or so, it was more the struggling, because obviously she had lost a wage as well, so she was struggling, and I don't think at the time the benefits, whatever you get, weren't that good, so it was more the financial thing that I saw her struggling with rather than the emotional side.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Although respondents were well aware of the difficulties faced by many parents in the aftermath of divorce, it is noteworthy that a number of others reported how well their parents had adjusted to the challenges presented by their changing parenting roles.

Interviewer How did (your dad) behave after your mum left?

Respondent I think looking back he did really well because there was three of us he took care of and did the mother things as well. Like I was quite young and he did things like make my packed lunch and did all the shopping. So looking back I think he did really, really well. I think it was difficult, I think he was quite stressed. He had his business and I think it made him quite stressed.

31624 (F, 11, 26, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Indeed some respondents reported that the separation had a positive effect on the well-being of at least one of their parents.

Respondent My mum it's like she transformed into a new person. Her friends from what I could see, her friends just, she makes friends wherever she goes, she's very personable, you know, people like her she talks to them. She makes friends wherever she goes, she's really into doing things so she's out, you know, most nights of the week doing stuff, so this whole life got created. Whereas my dad's very much quite happy to sit indoors or just go to the local restaurant, so it's like from two people being together and once being in love and wanting to have a family together, the change, they're like worlds apart now. I think they'd struggle to sit in the same room and have a conversation sometimes

13878 (F, 12, 26, change of residence father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

Respondent I think it was more of a positive thing for him, because that was it, didn't have to deal with anything, he had no strings, he literally had no responsibilities. I think he missed us, or he'd never say that he was happy to be away from us. I think he was

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happy to be away from the situation, and I think for him that was a positive. But I think he missed us, I don't think it was a completely positive thing, I think there was that part of him that missed us. But yeah I think it was more of a positive thing for him.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

Summary and discussion

This chapter provides insight into the lives of our respondents prior to, and in the aftermath of, their parent's separation, providing the context for their accounts of post-separation life presented in the following chapters. When describing their pre-separation relationships with the parent who went on to be the non-resident parent, it was clear that there was a considerable variation in the perceived closeness and quality of these relationships, which echoes the findings of the quantitative data from the telephone survey. Many of these parents had not been the primary carer, were often working during the week and were only around during the evenings or at weekends. Respondents were clear, however, that it was not the amount of time together which determined the nature of their relationships, but rather how that time was spent. Good pre-separation relationships were reported with parents who spent time engaged in child-focused activities, were perceived to be involved in their children's lives and responsive to their needs. In contrast, poor relationships were described with parents who remained uninvolved and detached even when spending time together and were perceived by the children to be unresponsive to their needs. This lack of involvement may have been due to a number of factors. Most, for example, were fathers who, compared to mothers, have been shown to demonstrate a less involved style of parenting, even when they are the primary care-givers (Belsky et al, 1984; Frodi et al., 1982). Parents' own life course experiences affect their relationships with their children (Dunn et al, 2000) and marital conflict prior to the separation may also have reduced the availability or sensitivity of parents (Cummings and Davies, 1994). Respondents also identified a number of pre-separation parental behaviours which acted as barriers to close relationships with their (subsequently) non-resident parent, including excessive drinking, violence or fear of violence and mental health issues.

The significance of the quality of pre-separation parent-child relationships has relevance when considering the impact of the separation on the child. According to attachment theory children's emotional security is influenced by the quality of parent-child attachments. Parents who demonstrate warmth, responsibility and stability help foster emotional security in their children (Ainsworth et al, 1978) and children with higher levels of emotional security are less prone to emotional distress at times of stress (Bowlby, 1973). Even for those with good attachments, as an increasing body of research indicates (see research summarised in Harold and Murch, 2005; see also Harold and Leve, 2012), many children respond to inter-parental conflict with a range of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, aggression, hostility and self-blame, all of which may be exacerbated by the impact of their parents' eventual separation. The respondents in our study reported a range of reactions to their parent's separation, with most recounting a degree of emotional turmoil and distress associated with adjusting to family and relationship changes. Many were upset and angry about what had happened, experienced low mood and depression and a few suffered extreme emotional reactions, the consequences of which were sometimes felt for months and even years afterwards. This finding is consistent with a number of studies that report intense negative affect in some children following parental separation (Kalter, 1987; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein and Lewis, 1987; Wallerstein, 1991). Similarly, Laumann-Billings

and Emery's research with young adults from divorced families (2000) concluded that while they are generally resilient, their distress can be significant.

The intensity of distress reported by our respondents appeared to reflect the degree of perceived change and loss in their lives. Those reporting little change were largely unaffected compared to those who felt that their family life and relationships had been majorly disrupted. Those who experienced emotional distress referred to overwhelming feelings of loss and a threatened sense of physical and emotional security. Described losses included the loss of a relationship with a parent or the family unit and losses resulting from changes in parenting such as care-giving and discipline. As noted above, the exposure to parental conflict before their parents separated may have undermined their ability to adjust to such instability. Given these factors it is unsurprising that a number reported psychological confusion and feelings of abandonment and self-blame.

One of the factors respondents felt had contributed to their difficulties in adjusting was their exposure to and involvement in their parents' emotional distress. In many cases parents had tried to protect their children from their painful feelings but despite their best efforts respondents were all too often aware of their parent's distress. Respondents frequently recounted parents struggling to contain their emotions and suffering from low mood and depression. A number of parents had turned to excessive drinking as a way of coping and it was not uncommon for respondents to witness more severe psychological reactions. Overall, respondents felt that there had been a shift of focus in their parents, even if only temporary, away from their usual mode of parenting and prioritising their children's needs while they concentrated on sorting out their lives and coping with difficult feelings. Earlier studies have also reported diminished parenting following separation, characterised by less warmth and affection and more erratic and harsh discipline (Hetherington and Kelly 2002; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Furthermore, Kelly and Emery (2003) highlight that increased anger and upset in children following a divorce increases the challenge faced by distressed single parents in maintaining effective parenting.

These accounts describe some of the complexities of family life experienced by our respondents at the time and in the aftermath of their parent's separation. They illustrate how varied the quality of pre-separation relationships were with the (future) non-resident parent. Some were close, had shared interests and clearly enjoyed spending time together. Others however felt more distant and alluded to existing difficulties in relationships even before the challenges posed by the separation. It was clear that most respondents were living in an atmosphere of emotional turmoil attempting to cope with their own and their parent's distress. For some the immediate emotional impact of the separation was substantial. Family members were trying to support each other as best they could but usual sources of support were sometimes unavailable. Overall, however, respondents were remarkably understanding of their parent's difficulties and described great admiration for those who had adjusted well to the immediate challenges they faced. These findings set the context in which respondents had to adjust to the changes in family structure and relationships caused by the separation, the accounts of which are presented in the following chapters.

Chapter 10 Perspectives on the quantity and structure of contact

The next two chapters examine respondents' experiences of contact. Chapter 11 will address the issue of the quality of contact. This chapter focuses on respondents' perspectives on what might be termed the 'infrastructure' of contact - what they thought about the amount of contact they had; their views on overnight stays; the balance between structure and flexibility. Since their thoughts were very obviously affected by the type of contact they had, in terms of when it started, its regularity and when it ceased, the chapter begins by looking at patterns of contact and in particular respondents' explanations for contact ceasing or not being continuous. As reported in chapter 3, 10% of our survey sample said that contact had ceased in their childhood, while a further 27% said that contact had either been delayed (12%) or had been sporadic (15%).

Contact patterns in the interview sample

As noted at the beginning of the previous chapter, 37 of the interview respondents lived with one primary carer throughout their post-separation childhood, 31 with their mother, six with their father. Contact patterns for these respondents fell into three main groups: those who had had continuous contact with the non-resident parent (18); those where there had been contact but it either completely stopped in childhood (9) or there was no further face to face contact (3) and those where contact was not continuous but was nonetheless taking place at the point the respondent reached adulthood (7).

Of the remaining 13 cases where residence had changed, seven respondents stayed in touch with both parents throughout – although in one instance there was no face to face contact and in another it was very limited. Of the rest, while living with their first primary carer, four respondents had continuous contact with the non-resident parent but disrupted contact after they moved to the other parent, while two experienced the reverse pattern.

Explanations for ceased contact

Two strong themes pervaded the narratives of those whose contact had completely ceased in their childhood. First, the fragility of previous contact. Only a couple of people reported ever having had regular or frequent contact with the non-resident parent and only one was still having this immediately before it suddenly stopped. In some instances contact had not taken place until months or years had elapsed after parental separation and often it had involved only occasional, unpredictable visits, or being taken out, rather than overnight stays. Even if such contact was enjoyable in itself – and that was not usually the case - it was not embedded in the fabric of the child's life.

Respondent *I don't think I saw him that often...I think going all the way through it was once, twice, or three times a year, it wasn't really that much...He had opportunities, he had a lot of opportunities, but he only did it when he felt like it.*

Interviewer *Did you stay with him overnight?*

Respondent *No, never overnight.*

Interviewer *So it was just an afternoon or morning, or a whole day sometimes?*

Respondent *Maybe just a whole day, but usually I think it was really just an afternoon.*

Interviewer *And you weren't very upset when you didn't see more of him?*

- Respondent* No.
- Interviewer* Did you ever tell him you didn't want to go?
- Respondent* No. It was alright going out with him, he was... yeah I didn't mind it at all.
- Interviewer* At what point did you finally lose contact with him?
- Respondent* I think it was one time when he came over, and mum wasn't here, but I just didn't like him, he was very uncomfortable.
- Interviewer* How old were you do you think?
- Respondent* I think I was about 16 or 17, and [exhales] to tell you the truth yeah, I think that was the time when I really saw him for what he was.
- Interviewer* So at that point when you had that visit with him, which you really didn't enjoy, next time he phoned you did you tell him, 'sorry'?
- Respondent* No, after that visit I never heard from him again.
- Interviewer* How odd, so perhaps he realised that it just was not going to work?
- Respondent* No, but to tell you the truth I don't regret it.

32024 (M, 2, 22, mother residence, contact ceased at 16)

The second theme was the extent to which respondents declared themselves wholly or partially responsible for contact stopping. This could be because they had never wanted contact anyway with a parent of whose behaviour they were critical, because of a deterioration in relationships, or because contact had never been very satisfactory (these issues are explored further in chapter 12). In one unusual instance the respondent was responsible for both starting and terminating the contact with his non-resident father, with whom he had had no contact since his parents separated when he was an infant. At the age of 13 he decided to get in touch. For a couple of months contact went well and the respondent enjoyed both seeing his father and the paternal side of the family. However he grew increasingly concerned about the amount of drinking which went on when he was there and also, he says, discovered things about his father he hadn't known before, which made him decide to terminate contact.

- Respondent* It wasn't nice being under his control while he was drinking, if you get what I mean, and it just wasn't... I don't know, didn't feel safe really.
- Interviewer* Did you just tell him 'I've had enough I'm going'?
- Respondent* No, I just went, and when my mum picked me up I just didn't ever go back again. He rang me up and I told him that was it....I don't regret going round, but some point I wish I'd never met him before. You know I said I had a half-sister. When my step mum was pregnant with her he kicked her down the stairs, that's the kind of stuff. Stuff like that is completely wrong, and I didn't find out half of this until I started going around. Then when I found out about it I just didn't want anything to do with him... it's made me realise what a nasty person he is.

11340 (M, 1, 20, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then ceased)

In the survey sample, as noted in chapter 3, over half the respondents said that the non-resident parent had been mainly or wholly responsible for contact completely ceasing. There

were also some examples of this in the interview sample, such as case 3204, reported above. Another respondent recalled with regret how contact with his father, never frequent or substantial, had petered out when he was 11, two years after parental separation:

Respondent (The) first year he was still around, but after a while, I don't know if he met someone else or stuff like that but the contact became less and less.

Interviewer Did you look forward to it?

Respondent Yeah, I looked forward, because it felt special seeing him, yeah.

Interviewer Would you have liked him to come more often?

Respondent Yeah, I think let's say he came about once a month let's say, so it's like not just see him and going out, just see him for a small chat or stuff like that, it would have definitely made us get closer to him as well. So I think that's a part that I've missed kind of thing, I didn't get the experience of having a father.

Interviewer Would you have liked to go back and have a whole weekend with him or a holiday with him?

Respondent Yeah, I think would have got to know him better, because I feel like yeah he's my dad but what do I know about him? Not really a lot.

Interviewer So really it was only ever a couple of hours at McDonalds? ...Did you get any sense of why (it stopped)?

Respondent I think he had a new partner so he...

Interviewer Did your mother tell you that or is that something you just picked up?

Respondent No, we picked it up, it must have been some other people that were new in his life...I think he thought make a life with them, so to get over my mum he, kind of like, let's say not got over us but felt to stop seeing us would help him with that.

Interviewer Did you resent the fact that he was coming less and less?

Respondent It felt sad, the fact that seeing him we felt, well we looked forward to it basically, and then he betrayed us, he let us down.

Interviewer So he'd really disappeared?

Respondent Yeah, it's like from the start he wasn't that involved...and then he wasn't really there so felt like he wasn't part of my life no more basically, yeah.

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased at 11)

As in the survey sample, none of our interviewees said that the resident parent had been mainly responsible for contact stopping. Indeed only one person seemed to hold their resident parent responsible in any way for what had happened. In this instance there was an altercation between the child, then aged 10, and her stepmother, leading to her slapping the child on the face. This led to furious arguments between the parents, resulting in mother 'dragging' it out of the child that she didn't want to see her father any more.

Respondent I can remember it was I woke up on a Sunday morning, I'm not much of a bed making person, because I realise I'm going to be sleeping in it tonight, so what's the point of making it as far as I'm concerned....And she came to tell me off and I went, 'whoa,

you don't tell me nothing, you're nothing to me... you don't tell me off.' At which point she slapped me, there was an argument between her and my dad from what I can gather. But obviously I now have a mark on my face, and my mum found out.

Interviewer *So you went home with a mark?*

Respondent *Talking to my mum after I'd gone back home, I can't remember the exact conversation, but it was along the lines of her asking me outright if I still wanted to see my dad...I think she had rung my dad up, and had a proper shouting down the phone at him, and then it had been dragged out of me that no I didn't want to see my dad, and then the next week's visit, the weekend visit, them having another row outside (X)....*

Interviewer *Which is where you were to be passed over?*

Respondent *This was to be passed over, they had a blazing row, and I can remember getting really upset that they're rowing in public, which to me was a huge embarrassment anyway, screaming for them to stop, and then my mum, and I'd never tell her this either, but I'll never forgive her for making me say to him that I didn't want to see him again, and then that was it, he drove away.*

Interviewer *And that was it?*

Respondent *That was it.*

20246 (F, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased).

It is important to note, however, that while subsequently resenting the way her mother had handled this, and bitterly regretting the loss of contact, this respondent also told us that she was in no doubt that if she had said she did want to see her father her mother would have made sure this happened.

In contrast – and very much bearing out the findings of the telephone survey - several respondents said that the resident parent had tried to persuade them to maintain contact. One respondent, for instance, in one of the few cases which had gone to court, was having supervised contact because of concerns over her father's mental health. However after he assaulted her, at the contact centre, she refused to have any more contact, and maintained this position despite her mother's attempts to change her mind.

Interviewer *The contact centre meetings went on for a time, did your mum mind you going to those?*

Respondent *No, she encouraged it....She desperately wanted me to have a relationship with my dad, she really really wanted it.*

Interviewer *She thought that was important?*

Respondent *Yeah, and at the end of the day she kept saying to me, 'if you want to see him you see him, nobody is going to stop you, and I'll make sure of that.' Then when I said I don't want to see him anymore she said, 'are you sure? You're not going to change your mind? You can always go and see him,' and she tried to make it clear that I could see him, even if I changed my mind, and just, no that day I was adamant, nobody else, me.*

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased at 11).

Another respondent, whose father had been violent to both her and her mother pre-separation, and whose behaviour continued to frighten her, maintained very occasional contact for years before eventually giving up on the relationship. While her mother had not actively promoted contact, the respondent was clear that she had been allowed to make her own decision.

Respondent (Mum) always said, "if you want to see your dad that's fine, I will take you, I will drop you off, that's fine....I think even for our own piece of mind I think if we cut off complete contact with dad we may have found ourselves at this point in our lives going, but I wonder if – I wonder if we did give him a good enough chance? And I wonder what he's like now? Whereas we were given the opportunity, mum never said, 'well you're not going to see dad.' She always said, 'go. If you want to see dad go for it,' and we were then able to make up our own minds, and I think that's really important because otherwise it's going to come back on a parent later on in life. As a parent you've got to indemnify yourself from any comeback later on.

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased at 16)

Explanations for discontinuous contact

Respondents also often held themselves responsible for contact which was not continuous. Often they had changed residence, having had difficulties in the relationship with their first primary carer or their new partner, and subsequently suspended contact with the now non-resident parent. In other cases the disruption was due to difficulties with contact or in the relationship with the contact parent (see also chapter 12). One young woman, for instance, who very much blamed her father for the separation, said her stop-start experience of contact was mainly due to her struggles to deal with her own anger and his guilt.

Interviewer: How would you describe the pattern of contact that you had with him?

Respondent It was a bit on and off and some big chunks of time, it was a bit of both really. Whatever it was I always called the shots...I was angry at my dad and seeing him and having to constantly face up to the situation. When you go through that sometimes emotionally it just gets too much and you need to be where you feel comfortable and safe and I felt so unsafe and unhappy at my dad's and I couldn't handle how I was feeling about him as well.

Interviewer: Those times when you started seeing him again, would you say that that was entirely your decision or did you do it because he put the pressure on?

Respondent: 50:50. Sometimes because he was putting pressure on me and sometimes it was because I felt I had to sort out that part and see him. Sometimes I did and I would tell him why I found it hard to see him. Like that every single time he had to talk deep and justify everything. Every single time we saw him and I told him in the end it was too much, just stop doing it because you can never have fun it always deep and emotional and you can never just go and have fun.

Interviewer: So part of it was what was happening when you were there?

Respondent: Oh yes. He was difficult to be around. Every time he looked at us he would get guilty and he was so weak and pathetic in front of us. You didn't feel safe because you've got this man that used to get upset and stuff so it was just...if it had been a little bit more light hearted, a bit more for us, you used to get the feeling 'Oh this is all very well you trying to make yourself feel better but this is not enjoyable for us'. You have to have those conversations but once or twice is enough, not every single time.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Most of these respondents felt it was very much their choice, at the time, not to have contact for a period. There was one case, however, where there was a lengthy gap in contact, in which, although the respondent said he had decided to stop seeing his dad, this was not what he really wanted.

Respondent *It stopped because my mum married another man, she's not had very much luck with men bless her, but she married another man that was a bit of a control freak and he sort of like put us in a position where we had to basically choose to see our dad or not... but he used to like beat my mum up a lot.*

Interviewer *This was her new partner?*

Respondent *Yes, which we said no we didn't want to see our dad because we didn't want nothing to happen to our mum because of that reason.*

Interviewer *Yes*

Respondent *So that's what happened, well that's what I can remember why I done it anyway...My dad was really upset but he just thought that we'd said it. My mum was too scared to say anything to him she didn't even tell anyone that (stepfather) used to hit her or anything so, but then I think it was about four years later my nan and granddad, my mum's parents, sort of like secretly got us around there and got my dad around and got us in contact again... without him knowing and then shortly after my mum left the second husband.*

31442 (F, 3, 22, mother residence throughout, no contact between the ages of 6/7 to 11/13, regular contact then re-established and continued)

In the telephone survey, almost two-thirds of respondents whose contact had not been continuous blamed their non-resident parent for this. There were some clear examples of this in the interview sample. One respondent, for example, whose non-resident father left long gaps between each contact visit and was rarely in touch in between, said:

Respondent *It's been very hard to keep contact with him, not for lack of wanting or trying. I would have liked to have spoken to him every day.*

Interviewer *Do you think they should have organised for you to see your dad regularly, or...?*

Respondent *Not that they didn't organise, it's just that he wasn't that co-operative a lot of the time. You can only organise a certain amount, if he's not going to be co-operative then he isn't going to do it.*

20292 (M, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous but very intermittent contact, reduced over time)

Two examples concerned children living with their fathers whose non-resident mothers had each moved a considerable distance away. One respondent, aged 10 at the point her parents separated, said her mother had not been in touch with her for several years because, she understood, she had chosen to live with her dad. Although contact was then established in the holidays, when the respondent was 16 her mother withdrew from contact again for several months because of an argument with the resident father. This respondent, who said her father was very supportive of contact, saw the arrangements as entirely driven by her mother and herself having little say in what happened.

- Interviewer* And over the contact, would you have liked more? Would you have liked to say to Mum 'I'd love to come and stay for a bit longer' or did you feel unable to ?
- Respondent* Probably yeah, Mum was always the one who instigated it and I didn't ever feel able to ask. Or yeah, say that I'd like to stay longer or anything, it was this whole thing that I was always worried that I would be saying something which would make her switch off from me again, so she was always the one who determined the length.
- Interviewer* Were you frightened of her?
- Respondent* I wouldn't say I was frightened of her but I was frightened of losing her, I was definitely frightened of losing her again.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

The second respondent, aged nine at the separation, had been having regular, if not very frequent, contact with his non-resident mother for several years until he was 16 when it just stopped, for a year, without any explanation. The mother stopped ringing and for his part the young man made no effort to contact her.

- Respondent:* Yeah. Later on, there was a very long period when I didn't see her. I think there was one period of maybe around a year when I was 16, 17 and then another for about 18 months when I was 17, 18. We didn't really fall out, contact just stopped really. It sounds crazy, the way it can just stop but it became less and less. I think, looking back, I think I might have been slightly annoyed and perhaps waiting for my mum to call.
- Interviewer:* A number of people have said things like that.
- Respondent:* Yeah, one of those things where you expect the other one to call and then 18 months later....Yeah, I remember that, there were a couple of times, the longest was about 18 months.
- Interviewer:* That's a very long time.
- Respondent:* It is. I think it's times like that that have perhaps done the most damage to the relationship. Having said that, when we saw each other again it did resume as normal, it felt normal, it wasn't that we would feel like strangers, there was never that feeling, we felt familiar with each other, but obviously it's those little things like me asking permission to do things that wasn't there so much.

31628 (M, 9, 25, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

It was notable – and consistent with the telephone survey – that very few respondents attributed responsibility for irregularities in contact to their resident parent and, as we discuss in detail in chapter 13, none said that the resident parent had impeded contact with an entirely suitable non-resident parent for insubstantial reasons. In one case, for instance, there had been repeated court proceedings, with contact initially being supervised - presumably because of father's reported violence towards the mother - then fixed at alternate weekends, unsupervised. There were then several returns to court over a period of years, because the resident mother kept suspending contact. Often this was for reasons which the respondent understood, although he felt his mother sometimes over-reacted.

- Respondent* Things got rather messy and the court cases just kept coming. It started with something silly like we'd come home when we were hungry, he would have fed us but just not fed us enough, or he'd have fed us first thing in the morning so by the evening

Taking a longer view of contact

we were really hungry or something like that, and my mum was like 'oh he doesn't feed you I'm not sending you around anymore, anything', and she just stopped contact, period, doesn't matter whether it's something serious or minor, she stopped contact. He'd take her to court, the courts would say 'no he's got to be able to see them' so then we'd start visiting him again and then something new would happen and she'd say 'you're not going around there again', we'd go back tired because he'd let us stay up until 1.00 in the morning so 'oh you're not going around anymore' and it was like that for years just constantly.

Interviewee Did you feel she was justified in her concerns?

Respondent Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes like if he was to get violent, aggressive or not feed us at all, then yes, but sometimes she just stopped contact for seemingly minor, very minor reasons, which I, even to this day I think was wrong because the reasons weren't serious enough. If we're getting fed and we're safe and he's not violent I don't see any reason to stop the contact, but she did, because he was late picking us up for example, he meant to pick us up at 8.00 he'd turn up at 8.30, 9.00, so she'd stop all contact. Or one time when he was meant to pick us up every other weekend and one weekend he went 'I can't do it this weekend', give her last minute notice which is really inconvenient to her, but she chose to punish him by stopping all contact...You end up as a kid, you're constantly getting, you can go see your dad every other weekend then for some bizarre reason, some minor reason that you could never predict, my mum would just come out with some reason why she doesn't want you to go see him. And then it would be months of waiting for it to go to court for her to get told 'no she's got to let us see him'.....

And there's another case where you get conflicting stories because my mum would come back and say 'oh the court's agreed with us that your dad was out of order but we should continue on, and your dad's just going to have to behave and if he doesn't behave he'll go to prison'. And my dad would come back and go 'you've come to see me again because the courts agreed that your mum was being out of order and they've forced her to let you see us again', so...

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM)

It is relevant that this young man, although critical of some of his mother's behaviour, also referred to feeling on edge sometimes at his father's house because of his temper and previous violence, of discovering that his father had also been violent to his second wife, and of coming to realise, after he moved in with his father (and his brother) briefly, at the age of 15, just how difficult life with him could be.

Interviewer Once you'd moved in with your dad was that a good arrangement, did that work out?

Respondent No, I regret it. I say regret it, I've learnt, I regret it as much as any decision where you learn from it, I've learnt but I didn't, it wasn't a lesson I wanted to learn.

Interviewer Why do you say that?

Respondent Well I've learnt, I've learnt in the sense of how roles, I very quickly picked up on how to cook my own food because if you didn't you were starved, so I learnt how to be independent and I learnt a different way of living as such but it wasn't a better way of living, and it come at the cost of watching constant fights and a very rough, unpredictable lifestyle and my whole life getting thrown in the air...It was nice to see my brother more but obviously it came at the expense of watching him getting whacked, so...

He also referred to his father regularly badmouthing his mother – though she did not reciprocate – and trying to draw the children into the adult conflict. Nonetheless he still thought that his mother had sometimes stopped contact unjustifiably and when asked what he would do differently if he was ever to be a separated parent, said:

Respondent I'd try not to be so judgemental or I wouldn't flare up over a slight disagreement, I'd try and negotiate. For example if they keep being late I'd just say 'well do you want to pick them up later' rather than just stopping all contact. I wouldn't, I'd try my best at all cost not to stop contact unless there's a good reason, because I know how annoying and frustrating that is for the child, because even if there is a good reason the child doesn't fully understand it anyway, so let alone when there isn't a good reason. So I'd do the same sort of system but I'd try to do it better, more stable.

Explanations for changes in the amount of continuous contact

As noted at the beginning of chapter 9, 18 of the 37 respondents in our interview sample who remained with the same primary carer throughout their post-separation childhood maintained uninterrupted face to face contact with the non-resident parent. It was notable, however, that most of these arrangements changed over time, typically involving a reduction in the frequency or the amount of contact. There were only a couple of cases where contact stayed the same - one respondent reporting only visiting contact at the weekend, the other staying Friday to Sunday every other week – while only one person said that contact had increased and three that it had first increased then reduced.

In most instances contact diminished as the child grew older and regular arrangements became more flexible to reflect the other pulls on teenagers' time and interests. In a few, however, it reflected dissatisfaction with contact and the young person's increased ability, with age, to make his or her own decisions. This theme of children's involvement in changes to contact arrangements, which we discuss in detail in chapter 12, is in line with the findings of the telephone survey, in which 65% of those who had continuous contact said that they had been involved in the details of their contact.

There were also a few cases where the decrease in contact was attributed to the non-resident parent's diminishing interest in his or her children or to either the resident or the non-resident parent moving, so that the distance between the two households increased.

Satisfaction with the amount of contact

In the survey sample, as reported in chapter 5, 60% of those who had ever had contact said that the amount had been sufficient for them. In the interview sample respondents who did not express a desire for more contact were fairly evenly divided into two main groups. The first consisted of those who did not want any more contact because what they had was unsatisfactory. Many of this group eventually ended contact, although several soldiered on.

Interviewer Did you look forward to going?

Respondent I don't think I did, I think I was reasonably indifferent. I don't remember even saying I don't want to go, I don't remember being excited about going either, it was just kind of part of the routine that I didn't really have a choice and I just kind of went along, you know.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact alternate weekends, Friday to Sunday plus some week-nights, increased then decreased).

- Interviewer* In your telephone interview you said your experience of contact was pretty negative.
- Respondent* Not so much negative as just nothing. I never had what I would consider proper contact, proper time with him.
- Interviewer* So it wasn't that the contact was awful for you as that there was nothing much there?
- Respondent* There wasn't any content I suppose....I think if I'd been a toddler when they'd split up that contact would have been completely gone...

20791 (F, 14, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact, ad hoc, reduced over time)

In contrast the second group had had positive experiences of contact but felt that the amount they had was sufficient for their needs. Most of these respondents had high levels of contact, seeing their non-resident parent on between four and six days every fortnight, with patterns varying between alternate weekends plus a midweek visit, one day every weekend and a midweek, or every weekend.

- Respondent* I was quite happy with what I had because I was very much going out with my friends. And when (mum) was round I had to be there, to spend time with her, so if it was more than that I would have felt a bit suffocated because I wouldn't have been able to go out with my friends. If she was there more often I would have felt I needed to stay in.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact every Saturday and Wednesday midweek, reduced over time).

- Respondent* I think more or less it all worked out as best it could. I don't really think that practically I could have seen him much more because he was working and I had school so I think it worked out as good as it could.... I don't think it would be too good if I was there every weekend 'cos the weekend is your free time so I wouldn't have wanted to spend all my free time at my dad's but every other weekend worked out quite well.

30979 (F, 13, 19, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, two days alternate weekends, reduced over time)

Others, however, seemed content having contact on only two days in a fortnight, while one person, who saw her dad for two to three days whenever he could manage it, roughly monthly, said the arrangements had been fine for her.

- Respondent* It worked for me and my sister, and it worked for him, and it might not have been enough for some people, it might have been too much for others. But for me and (my sister) it was that happy medium, we were good with how it was, and we wouldn't have changed it, because we were seeing him, and we were seeing him when we wanted to. We weren't being forced, and for us that was a good thing. Some people might not understand, they'll go 'oh that's a bit weird', but that's what worked for us, so no it was good...It worked for us at the time, and I wouldn't have changed it, now that I look back at it I wouldn't have changed that because we spent enough time together, whether other people who were outside looking in think we did then whatever, but we felt like we did. We felt like we had enough time, because it was our choice, we were never forced to do it. So no I wouldn't change that, because it worked for us.

30979 (F, 13, 19, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, 2-3 days per month, reduced over time).

Around a third of our interview sample said that as children they would have liked more contact. Some of these had always wanted to live with the non-resident parent and did eventually change residence and for them however much contact they had had would not have been enough.

Respondent *I never felt that I saw enough of my dad. ...the every other weekend was precious. It always flew by, I wished it was longer. I would have gone every weekend....I just enjoyed seeing my dad. At the end of the day, I liked all the things he did with us. I just really enjoyed seeing him. And as I say I would have gone every weekend if I thought I could have done.*

31289 (F, 13, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

What was striking about the others who would have liked more contact was that very few had experienced regular unbroken contact throughout their childhood. Hence for most, the desire reflected not a simple yearning for more time with the non-resident parent but rather for contact to be regular rather than ad hoc, continuous rather than interrupted, or to have continued rather than ceased. There were only a few instances of respondents voicing a desire for more contact where they had been happy with the residence arrangements *and* contact had been both continuous and regular. Moreover, some of these only expressed this view when pressed, or with hindsight.

Interviewer *Was there anything that you would have liked that would have been done differently in terms of the arrangements that were made?*

Respondent *I would like to have seen my dad a bit more, because after his weekend you'd get home Sunday and you'd be like I've got to wait two weeks until I can go and hang out with my dad again. You go over and see him on the Wednesday, and that was cool, but that was just a few hours, you'd have tea and you'd play a few games, then you'd have to go back home, and that wasn't that cool. But it is what it is isn't it?*

Interviewer *So would you like to have had every weekend, if he could have managed that?*

Respondent *I think that would have been really really nice, but that would have been unfair to them both, because then my dad wouldn't have any time for himself, and my mum would not have any time with us, because during the week, as I said, it's get up, go to school, come home, dinner, bed. Just because I was saying that mum was the one that did all the boring things with us doesn't mean to say that we didn't do any fun things on her weekend, it was just it was more of 'yeah dad's', it was 'oh still with mum'...Yeah like it would have been nice, as I said, to see dad more often, but that's what it was, and there wasn't... At the end of the day he had to work because he had to pay, give mum some money so that we can live, and mum had to work and stuff like that, it just got difficult.*

30287 (M, 8, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, alternate weekends, Fri to Sun and Wednesdays, reduced over time)

Interviewer *Is there anything that you can think of, not necessarily which didn't work, but that could have made the overall contact better for you?*

Respondent *I don't know really, maybe looking back at it now it probably could have been quite nice to see my dad a little bit more, maybe a little bit more structured time with him would have been good for that period in my life and his life, but not necessarily really. Yes I mean yes maybe more of a structured time to spend a little bit more time*

with my dad and that may have made us a bit closer through that period of my life, but I don't think anything other than that.

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence, continuous contact, one overnight every weekend, reduced over time).

Overnights

In the telephone survey, as reported in chapter 5, respondents who had regular overnight stays with the non-resident parent were most likely to be satisfied with the level of contact - 79%, compared to only 42% where there had been only occasional stays and 31% where there had been none. Where contact was continuous, those who had regular overnights were also most likely to report a positive or very positive experience of contact. Almost three-quarters of the survey sample who had ever had contact with their non-resident parent (74%) said they had stayed overnight at least occasionally and just over a third (34%) had done so regularly. However 26% had never stayed over.

All these groups were well-represented in the interview sample and in this section we look at what each of them had to say about the issue of overnights.

Those who never had overnights

Of those who never had overnight stays only a couple of respondents clearly said they wished they had. One was a young man whose mother had moved a considerable distance away, after which he only saw her when she came to visit him, every two to three months, and at one point contact stopped for around a year. His desire to have overnights was part of his general longing for his mother to live nearer so that he could have more frequent contact.

Respondent *Ideally, my mum would have lived nearby and we could have stayed at hers regularly. Because other friends of mine whose parents have split up they had quite an ideal relationship where they seemed to have two houses and they'd be like on the bus home from school, when we were 14, 15, and I remember one of my friends on the bus saying I'm at my mum's tonight and I was like 'that's cool, like change of scenery, he can just go round his mums' and I would just be envious that he could do both.*

31628 (M, 9, 25, father residence throughout, mother visited every 2-3 months with one gap of a year)

A second respondent, who only had contact at his own home, in his mother's presence, basically wanted time with his father on his own. While he would have liked to have stayed at his father's, just to be able to go out with him would have been a vast improvement.

Respondent *It would have been better if there had been a bit of a balance of having time with my dad or being able to go to (X) and stay with my dad.*

Interviewer *Do you think it would have been enough if he had come down and taken you out for that one-on-one time or do you think that being able to go and stay overnight at his home was more what you needed?*

Respondent: *Personally I don't think it would matter where the quality time would have been, if it had been (here) and going out for the day. I imagine it would have been beneficial to have gone and been with him in his environment to have quality time there and have the normal routine and get up and have breakfast, so I think it would have helped if I could have gone and stayed overnight.*

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Another respondent, who said she had never been really bothered about staying and would have been reluctant to because of her mother's accommodation, conceded, when pressed, that had conditions been different it might have been nice to stay over.

Interviewer *What about staying contact? At the time were you happy with the fact that you were never able to stay over?*

Respondent *I think I was. I don't think I ever wanted to stay. I don't ever remember wanting to sleep over. I think the fact that it was a one bedroom flat with a tiny uncomfortable sofa was really off-putting and she did smoke and I don't want to smell like that. It really put me off.*

Interviewer *If there had been better facilities, if you'd had your own room, do you think you'd have wanted to stay?*

Respondent *That probably would have been nice if it had been an option. If it was a nice environment when you were there then yes definitely nice to wake up in the morning, have breakfast and stuff and have two homes really. That would have been nice. ...Yeah, if it was a little house and nicer then yes I probably would have wanted to stay and I probably would have done but I never felt it was an option for me to stay there and I remember not wanting to really.*

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time).

Each of these respondents told us that they would have liked to see their non-resident parent more, as did a few other respondents who never had overnight stays. None of the latter, however, said that they would have wanted to stay overnight while one, whose contact with his father had just petered out, said he would have been quite happy just seeing him every weekend.

Interviewer *Looking back if you could wave a wand what sort of contact would you have liked to have with him?*

Respondent *Every week, that's I think... yeah, because seeing as he's not going to be there during schooldays then every weekend, and just two hours a day every weekend.*

Interviewer *Two hours, or would you have liked to stay with him?*

Respondent *I think two hours is... two hours Saturday and two hours Sunday, so four hours a weekend would be...*

Interviewer *Really?*

Respondent *Yeah.*

Interviewer *Just a two hour visit?*

Respondent *Yeah.*

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased at 11)

Most of those who never stayed overnight, however, did not want more contact than they already had because the contact they did have was poor. None of them spontaneously said that they would have liked overnight stays and although the question was not put to them specifically we consider it safe to deduce that they would not have wanted this. Interestingly,

though, a couple did say they thought that as a general principle it was important for contact to include overnights.

Interviewer Do you think it's important for a child to have overnight stays with the non-resident parent?

Respondent Yes definitely.

Interviewer And why in particular overnight stays?

Respondent Because if they don't have overnight stays then they think there's something wrong with it, then they might think 'oh well why am I not allowed to stay overnight with dad anymore, or mum anymore, what's...' and they might think they can't ask because they don't want to upset the situation and stuff like that.

30639 (M, 9, 35, several changes of residence, continuous contact but minimal with NRM)

Interviewer How important do you think it is for children to stay overnight?

Respondent I think it is, yes.

Interviewer It's important for you, as a (separated) dad?

Respondent Definitely important for you as a dad, I think it's important for a dad or the child as a bonding.

Interviewer Right, which you can't get just with visiting contact?

Respondent It's hard because, you know, you can visit an aunt, you know, of a weekend but you aren't going to have the same bond as a parent, it's out of sight out of mind.

30178 (M, 14, 24, residence changed several times - mother-father-mother-father – continuous but minimal contact each NRP)

Those who only had occasional overnights

Among those who only stayed overnight occasionally, one respondent said emphatically she would have liked this to happen on a regular basis, ideally every other weekend. This young woman had had a very disrupted experience of contact, with two long gaps when her non-resident mother was not in touch at all, interspersed with periods when she either only had visiting contact or stayed in the holidays. Overnights, therefore, were a precious way of preserving and consolidating a rather fragile, but important, relationship.

Interviewer Do you think it was the fact that you stayed nights with her that improved (your relationship)?

Respondent Definitely. I think spending a few hours with her – it sort of like the night time if we'd been out during the day, we'd end up in the evening cosying up together on the sofa and watch tele and chat about things – a bit of time and if we'd just met up during the day we wouldn't have that. You know, just being able to sit down and relax – that certainly is what I felt developed our relationship more than anything else. Sometimes I would climb into bed with her and sort of sleep in her bed or first thing in the mornings I'd get up and sort of when she sat up in bed reading I'd get into bed next to her with her reading. Those were definitely my favourite bits. Staying overnight, having that nice chunk of time with her made up for not seeing her for months sometimes.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Taking a longer view of contact

This was the only person, however, who said they would have liked regular, rather than occasional stays, while a few people specifically said that they would not. One, for instance, said she had tried it and hated it, another that she was quite happy just visiting her father every Sunday with the odd overnight. Another spent most of her childhood refusing to see her father at all and was very unhappy with the overnights she did have.

Respondent *I think that (Sunday) was enough, I think we both probably couldn't handle any more time.*

Interviewer *So you wouldn't have liked regular overnight weekend stays?*

Respondent *No, I think it was the arrangement we had if we wanted to we could, we'd ring him up, and there was occasions like school holidays we did, but we...*

Interviewer *What was the longest time you ever stayed with him do you think?*

Respondent *Probably a few days, pick us up in the morning, we'd spend overnight and we'd go home the next evening. But that wasn't a lot, because of the age we was we wanted to get out and play with our friends...That was more important to us at that time; we just wanted to get home and be with our friends.*

30569 (F, 12, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, visiting only, every Sunday).

Interviewer *Some people tell me, 'oh well actually it was the overnight stays, because it meant that I had a bit more time with him' or...*

Respondent *It was never like that for me, ever, total complete opposite. I never really cared about seeing him, because he was this person that put my life through hell.*

Interviewer *If you waved a wand you wouldn't have wanted a holiday abroad with him?*

Respondent *I went on holiday abroad with him and cried on the phone to my mother for two weeks....I hated it, I wanted my mum, my dad wasn't that person that was there, he wasn't emotionally there, he wasn't...It was the same when I was little, if I ever fell over and scuffed my leg I'd always ask for my mother....It's always been the same, my mum's always been moral support, well emotional moral support, my dad's always been like, 'let's have fun and do what we want'.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Of those who had occasional overnights but did not specifically comment on the issue it was usually clear from the interview that regular staying would not have been high on their wish-list, either because they did not feel at home at their non-resident parent's house or because they were not enjoying the contact they did have. One young woman, for instance, who had had several gaps in contact but who saw her father either every Saturday or alternate Saturdays, said she would have liked more time with him (and for him to be more reliable). However she never felt at home at his house.

Respondent *I can understand now why I felt uncomfortable, it never felt like home. His place was a single man's place, nothing homely about it. We could never feel comfortable there. That's something as well, you should make it comfortable for your family if you've got kids coming.*

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

When asked about her general views about overnights, as reported in chapter 15, this respondent emphasised that they should not necessarily be part of contact, could be too much for young children and that whether or not they occurred should depend on what a particular child wanted.

Those who had regular overnight stays

Less than half of those who had regular overnight stays specifically commented on the importance of overnights to them personally, or more generally. Most of these, including a couple of people whose personal experience had not been very satisfactory, did think it was important. One young woman, for instance, who only saw her dad in the holidays, having talked about how she had never felt at home at his house and often found it boring to be there, when asked whether overnight stays were important, nonetheless replied:

Respondent I think overnight is important, yes....Just because then you kind of like go to bed, then you like wake up in the morning and you're with them still in the morning, whereas if it's just in the day it's more like oh just a day thing, I don't know, I don't know how to explain what I want to say, but where it's overnight it's kind of like you trust being there overnight and like...It's more normal than just spending the day and then going home.

13494 (F, 2, 22, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reducing)

Respondents who had regular overnight stays proffered a range of reasons for overnights being important. Going to bed, getting up, having breakfast, provided a more 'normal' experience. Staying made the non-resident parent's house feel more like a second home rather than just a place to visit. More, or different, activities could be fitted in. One young man, for instance, spoke with delight of going night-time fishing with his dad, while this young woman referred to her mother teaching her how to cook family meals.

Respondent You get that whole bedtime routine, that whole silliness you can play with. If we'd never seen my mum in the day we wouldn't have been able to have wine with our dinner of a night because she'd have had to take us back to my dad. It was just all the silliness, we'd get a movie – we was allowed to stay up late at our mum's, we'd make cakes together, we'd cook a dinner, she taught me how to cook a dinner, I remember her teaching me how to cook scrambled eggs, make a lasagne, bread and butter pudding. All those things take time. I think knowing that I've got a bed at either house, knowing that if there was ever a problem at the other house.

14300 (F, 12, 28, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent It makes it feel more like a place that you live, I think if you just visited in the day it wouldn't have felt the same. It just puts it on a more level footing with your other home, it's not as level but it's more level if you're staying over and we had our bedroom and we had our beds.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, increased then decreased).

A couple of respondents, however, although enjoying their contact, did not think that overnights were particularly important, while one young woman suggested that it was more important to her father than to her.

Respondent I did enjoy staying but sometimes I would have preferred to stay in my own bed. I think my dad saw it as very important, because then it's like me living there as well, rather than just visiting. Which I agree with, rather than being just a visitor I lived

there with him, even though not permanently, I had my own room. I think it was quite important to him and I enjoyed staying. But sometimes I would have preferred to go home to my own bed because nothing beats your own bed. I still sometimes prefer coming home, because that bed isn't all that comfortable. But I think it was important overall, in the sense of us having more time together.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, every weekend, Friday to Sunday, reduced over time)

The duration of overnight stays

Although, for those who did have overnight stays, the duration of each varied from one night to three, only one person specifically commented on this, explaining how she and her sister found staying over till Monday morning very disruptive but her father had refused to change the arrangements.

Respondent *We went every other weekend on the Friday until the Monday morning, he dropped us off at school. We didn't want it to be the Monday morning, we asked if we could come home Sunday, he wouldn't budge on it, he wanted it to be Monday morning.*

Interviewer *Why did you want it to be on a Sunday?*

Respondent *Because we had to get up so much earlier to go to school. We had to go from either my grandparents or his house to our home, because mum had to do the washing, so we had to get our uniform, like he wasn't doing that...So we had to go back, quickly get dressed at home and then he would take us to school and it was just a hassle, for the sake of going to bed it wasn't, we asked if we, but he wouldn't budge on it.*

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Since some of those with regular overnight contact said that they would have liked more contact than they had, it seems conceivable that they might have liked this in the form of longer stays. However this was not the case. One person, who stayed overnight every Saturday, simply wanted his father first to have been more reliable and then not to have dropped out of his life. Another, who stayed two to three days in the holidays, would have liked her father to live nearer, so that contact, but not necessarily staying contact, could be more frequent. The others all stayed from Friday to Sunday every other week. One, who had really always wanted to live with her dad, would have liked to stay every weekend, while another said that ideally she would have liked her dad to live closer so that she could see him during the week (see below).

Only one person reported having overnight stays during the week, an experience she found very disruptive.

Respondent *The Wednesday night I think was a bit weird because it broke the structure and I'm only realising, I'm thinking a bit more about it now but it's, I remember having to pack a bag on Wednesday mornings to go to my mums and bring it to school with me and that was getting annoying. It was like I've got to get up early so I can get packed because dad wouldn't have done it for me like before or anything.*

Interviewer *Right so it's up to you to do it?*

Respondent *Oh yes, yes, so, and I had to kind of lug that to school with me, mum would come and pick me up from school and then take me to school the next day.*

Interviewer But then you'd have your bag presumably to take back to your dads?

Respondent And a bag again and I would have, you know, I enjoyed the weekends there more.

Interviewer So would you been quite happy to do without the Wednesday?

Respondent Yes.

13878 (F, 12, 26, change of residence father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

Weekday contact

For most of our respondents face to face contact was something which happened at weekends. Some, however, also saw their non-resident parent during the week, at least for a time, either as part of a regular arrangement or, for those who lived very close, on a more casual 'drop in' basis.

Respondent Where my dad was living was on the way home from school, so we'd quite often walk together to see my dad for a little while, and then go home.

Interviewer Was that right from the start?

Respondent Yes, I think we were old enough that we could just say 'can I come round tonight'. 'Just give us a call and you can come over at any time.' It was nice to have that option.

Interviewer You were old enough to go on your own and he was close enough for you to drop in?

Respondent Exactly yeah, it was on the way, we walked to the school on our own anyway, so it was on the way, so as long as we said what we were doing it wasn't a problem, which was nice.

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent I liked the Wednesday thing because it was Monday, Tuesday, middle of the week we'd go to hang out with my dad on the evening, just for three hours, come home and then back to school Thursday, Friday, and then if it was his weekend straight after school, pick them up at school. Go and stay there, stay there all weekend and come back Sunday night.

30287 (M, 8, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

All these respondents had continuous contact throughout their childhood and all but one reported a generally positive experience. Midweek contact, therefore, shortened the interval between visits and afforded them additional enjoyable time with the non-resident parent. Further, as one or two commented, it enabled the non-resident parent to be more involved in their everyday lives.

Interviewer Was he interested in what you were doing at school, your activities?

Respondent He was, yes. The evenings we went there we always did homework and stuff. The Wednesday night thing was always chips, pot noodle and then you'd do your homework, and then you'd do whatever until it was time to go, until we got took home. That was religious, we'd always have a plate of chips with pot noodle on the side. Not exactly the best, healthiest meal. I always remember that.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

This was a point also made by a few respondents who had not had midweek contact, often linked with the wish that the non-resident parent had not lived so far away.

Interviewer Looking back on your contact arrangements, what do you think would have been the ideal arrangements for you?

Respondent I think to start with...again even an evening and a weekend and more than once a fortnight, I don't think that was good enough. It would have been nice having things to do and the parents should get involved in real stuff not just about taking you away from your normal routine, stuff you need to do, homework and everything. It takes you away from all that and you spend time in a void somewhere else and then going back again. I think you should be able to merge the two.

Interviewer: So getting the other parent involved in your everyday life?

Respondent: Yeah, stupid things like you should be told to take your homework with you. It should be like a normal evening arrangement. And not for the other parent to be so far away. If my dad had been in the same town it would have been a lot easier. You could have had the choice then, gone round any night of the week. We didn't have time together to get comfortable like family does.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Interviewer If you look back at it now, what do you think your contact arrangements should have been, what would kind of be your ideal?

Respondent I think, well I don't know, because they lived, you know, I couldn't just walk across and see them, but if they lived closer I would have liked to have just popped over for tea after school or just go and knock on the door and say hello whenever, you know, so it's there.

Interviewer Yes, so do you mean having the sort of more day-to-day type things?

Respondent Yes you know, just if I wanted to go and see him that day he was there to see, not having to wait for the weekend.

Interviewer What difference do you think that would make, having that kind of day-to-day contact, what difference do you think that would have made to your relationship at the time?

Respondent I think that would have given my dad a more of a father role and he would have understood a bit more of what we were up to and he could have had more say in what we done and things.

31442 (F, 3, 22, mother residence throughout, no contact between the ages of 6/7 to 11/13, regular contact then re-established and continued)

Structure, flexibility, reliability and choice

In the survey sample, as reported in chapter 5, 42% of those who had ever had contact said that there had been no set arrangements. This was typically the case where contact had been disrupted in some way (72% where it was delayed; 66% where it ceased; and 60% where it was sporadic) although it also applied to 22% of respondents who had experienced continuous contact.

Some of those we interviewed in depth were happy with the absence of structure and might even have resented anything more formal.

Respondent It was pretty much the way I wanted, I visited when I wanted to visit. That was the way I liked it so that's the way we kept it like, you know, that was...

30639 (M, 9, 35, several changes of residence, continuous contact but minimal with NRM)

For others, however, it was less than ideal or even problematic.

Respondent: I never could not see her, I wasn't one of those children who could only see my mum once a Sunday, every fortnight or every Wednesday evening, it was 'Oh I'm bored or what are you doing tonight, do you want to come round', so it wasn't bad, it just wasn't the best...It probably would have been better to have been arranged, a proper arrangement in place. Just purely because when you're a teenager anyway your whole life is a bit scatty and crazy that that part of it being structured would have been nicer....It almost got to the point where we were living like single people but coming together, like crashing into each other....Now I'm an adult I probably maybe would have said something at the time and maybe even forced them to sit together and do something about it but when you are young you have no real influence over them anyway so what can you do?

Interviewer Overall, is there anything you wish had been done differently?

Respondent: Yeah, I wish my mum had got herself a property that was more suitable for our needs as well as her own and had a far more structured arrangements for visiting and staying would have been much nicer...Structure and arrangements are key for everybody's peace of mind...I've got my own children and if we were ever to part for any reason then I would want it to be structured, stable as possible because children need routine and need to know what's happening and when it's happening. My daughter is forever asking me how many days until something is happening, she wants to know exactly when, what time... it should have been ...if it ever happened to me then it would have to be an absolute regular on the dot thing...Children need to know and to be stable and to be in a routine and know when daddy is going to be there and when mummy is going to be there instead of might be, might not be.

Interviewer: So the importance of routine and predictability.

Respondent: Yeah, I think I probably would have been far more confident in everyday life just knowing exactly what was going to happen, living in limbo is not pleasant.

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time)

For some respondents with ad hoc contact, the lack of set arrangements seemed to be indicative of the non-resident parent's lack of interest or commitment.

Respondent My dad's never been the one who made time for us, he's always lived his own life then 'oh, I'll see my kids now'.

Interviewer: So do you feel he was committed to you as a father?

Respondent: As a father, no. I just find my father wasn't really a day to day father, he's a once in a while father.

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact ceased when father moved abroad)

Interviewer So you really resented your dad not being there for you?

Respondent I hated it, I actually hated him.

- Interviewer* Did you often ring him up to say, 'come on?'
- Respondent* Yeah, I still do it now, 'where are you?' And he'll be, 'I'm busy. Well obviously that's not good enough. ...It's literally every excuse he can find sometimes. Oh give us...
- Interviewer* But you knew his phone number, and you could contact him?
- Respondent* Oh yeah, a lot of the time, but then sometimes if he doesn't pick it up, or he thinks as he's always busy, or, 'I'll ring back later,' and never does.
- Interviewer* Did you complain to your mum about that?
- Respondent* I still do now, I still complain about him.
- Interviewer* So she knew that you really would have liked to see more of him?
- Respondent* Yeah.
- Interviewer* And she'd try to get him to come?
- Respondent* She tried very hard, yeah she tried, but...
- Interviewer* And he just wouldn't?
- Interviewer* Looking back on what contact arrangements should have been in place, every weekend you say?
- Respondent* That's the very least.

20292 (M. 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

In contrast, for one respondent the problem was the exact opposite: both her parents very much wanted her to spend time with them; the effect of the lack of structure was to place her under the unbearable burden of trying to reconcile their competing demands.

- Interviewer* I think you said overall it was fairly negative, would you say that was about right?
- Respondent* Hmm.
- Interviewer* Looking back on it now what do you think made it fairly negative, I mean what was it about it from your perspective that didn't work for you.
- Respondent* I think it was that there was just no structure to it...I think what I was left with was that if I was with my mum I wasn't with my dad, if I was with my dad I wasn't with my mum and it was always those feelings of wasn't, I couldn't win no matter what I did, whoever I was with, I wasn't with the other one and so, and that was my fault and I couldn't...My way of dealing with it I think was to be emotionally not present for either of them, I just kind of, because of the age I was I could just go off with my friends and say I can't do this, if I can't be with both of you I'm not going to be with either of you and you can just live your lives and get on with it.
- Interviewer* If I said to you now looking back what contact arrangements do you think you should have had, what would you say now?
- Respondent* I would say, I would say I would have liked someone external to come in and look at the realities of the situation and then make a plan.

31284 (F, 15, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF)

Reinforcing these points, several respondents who did have structured arrangements emphasised how important this had been to them.

Respondent I'm quite good at routines, I like routines, so having the routine of going there.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent Structured every other weekend was good, I think the more it's planned ahead the better because when it came to Christmas' and holidays it's very awkward when it's a last minute 'oh I want them this week' and the other person hasn't planned for it, or if they planned to have it on a certain week and then the other one changes his mind. So having it set is a lot more handy because for a start the kids know where they stand as well the parents.

Interviewer It sounds like from your point of view at that time some kind of predictability about when?

Respondent Without a doubt predictability, yes, and the structure of knowing when you're going to see them.

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM).

Interviewer In your telephone interview, you said your experience of contact was very positive. What would you say were the most positive things about it?

Respondent: Probably the fact that it was so regular, I always knew what I was doing and when. Having that routine.

Interviewer That was important to you?

Respondent: Definitely. Not so much as I got older and wanted to be doing more things but when I was younger I liked knowing what I was doing when and with who.

Interviewer: So the most important thing for you was the structure?

Respondent Yes.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

There is not much point in having a structure, of course, if parents do not abide by the arrangements. As noted in chapter 6, 34% of respondents to the telephone survey said that it was very true or fairly true that they could not rely on the non-resident parent seeing them when s/he said they would. While this did not invariably detract from their experience of contact these respondents were more likely to say that contact had been negative.

Respondent I can remember him not turning up, yeah.

Interviewer Did he often not turn up?

Respondent Maybe once a month, but he'd never ring, he just wouldn't bother turning up..... I think after a while maybe you start to build up a bit of a trust thing thinking oh he is going to turn up every Sunday, and then you just get let down again.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

The structure also has to act as a framework, not a straitjacket. Parental willingness to change arrangements was seen as very important, particularly as children got older, whether this related to having more contact than was scheduled, missing the occasional visit, or not staying for as long as expected. As we discuss further in chapter 12, respondents expressed their appreciation of parents who demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness to the child's wishes while those who insisted on sticking rigidly to the arrangements could be resented.

Respondent *I think my mum and dad did the right thing, they let us make the decisions of when we were going to see them or see him. They never forced us to do anything that we didn't want to do, and if we were there, if we were with my dad and we were like, 'Actually dad we want to go home now,' he'd be like, 'Alright, pack your stuff I'll take you home.' There would never be, 'No you're staying until I've said you're going to go home', and he'd ring my mum and be like, 'Look the kids want to come home, they've had enough, I'm going to bring them home in three hours is that alright?' She'd be like, 'Yeah, bring them home.'*

Interviewer *So it's clearly very key in your whole experience that you always felt in control, you had choice of what you did?*

Respondent *Yeah.*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed, then continued)

Respondent *I think the problems started when we weren't allowed to go to parties because it was his weekend and he couldn't seem to, mum didn't want it as regimented as it was and we didn't want it as regimented as it was, but he wouldn't have it any other way....His weekend he wanted us to be with him and do nothing else. It's like I used to play tennis on a Saturday morning and I had to give it up because I was missing every other weekend, and it just got to the stage where it was silly because he was saying he wasn't driving back from there to take me here, and he didn't realise that mum didn't, when we were at home at the weekend with mum she wasn't with us all the time, we would be doing our own things still, but he couldn't seem to, he couldn't seem to let us do that, so.*

Interviewer *Are there any ideal contact arrangements or does it vary?*

Respondent *I think that it does vary, but I think it has to be free and easy that you have to roll with things that come up. I know in certain circumstances there has to be a certain time if the courts are involved and they have to have a set time because of that, but if it's like with my arrangement, if it had been not every other weekend if we had something on, or maybe not even every other weekend, sometimes go out in the evening, just not the regimentality of it.*

Interviewer *Not so rigid, yes.*

Respondent *Just being able to pick and choose a bit more would have been nice. It's not easy to do that, I know that, because you need to know what you'll be doing otherwise your life's on hold, if your child wants to come and see you, but I think that every other weekend was fine had it not been so regimented....Because I mean I was upset that I had to stop tennis because of it, because that was something I enjoyed doing and suddenly my parents' divorce, which had nothing to do with me, according to them, was affecting me, not just in the fact my dad didn't live there anymore but I couldn't do something that I wanted to do, and had it been different I could have carried on doing that and seen him as well, so I think it's flexibility is the best thing, yes.*

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Summary and discussion

This chapter began by examining respondents' explanations for contact ceasing, or for it not being continuous. Three main themes emerged: the fragility of contact which eventually terminated, the centrality of the respondent's role in terminating or suspending problematic contact and/or difficult relationships and, most notably, the absence from respondents' accounts of the hostile resident parent unreasonably obstructing contact. Indeed resident parents were typically described as having tried to persuade the child to maintain contact. This picture was consistent with the quantitative data from the telephone survey, but is very much at odds with research on non-resident fathers, who, as described in chapter 3, are commonly reported as seeing obstruction by resident mothers as a major reason for contact breakdown (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Mitchell, 1985; Lund, 1987; Kruk, 1993; Simpson et al, 1995; Wikeley, 2001). It also appears to conflict with Fabricius's research with young adults in the U.S. (2003) which reports that 35% of mothers (typically the resident parent) were said to have interfered with the relationship with the other parent – although it is not clear whether this resulted in contact being disrupted.

The theme of children's agency, particularly as they became teenagers, which is discussed in detail in chapter 12, also emerged in respondents' accounts of changes in the amount of contact where it was sustained throughout their childhood. Most respondents described contact reducing as they got older, reflecting other demands on their time. Some, however, for whom contact had not been a very satisfactory experience, while not terminating contact altogether, used their greater autonomy as adolescents to cut down on the amount of time they spent with the non-resident parent.

While some children are clearly able to exercise agency in limiting the amount of contact they have with a non-resident parent, they may have less power to increase it. Previous research with children and young adults consistently reports a proportion wanting more contact than they had (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Butler et al, 2003; Cockett and Tripp, 1995; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Fabricius and Hall, 2000; Finley and Schwartz, 2007; Funder, 1996; Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000; Lodge and Alexander, 2010; Marquardt, 2005; McDonald, 1990; Mitchell, 1985; Schwartz and Finley, 2005; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). This was also the case in this study. Forty per cent of those taking part in the telephone survey and a third of those interviewed face to face said that they would have liked more contact. However both our quantitative and qualitative data caution against equating this simply with wanting more time. Some of those interviewed in depth had wanted to live with the non-resident parent. No amount of contact would have met this need. Further, as we found in the telephone survey, most of the others had had discontinuous contact. Thus, their desire was coloured by regret that contact had not been more regular or sustained. Very few of those who were satisfied with the residence arrangements *and* who had had continuous and regular contact said they would have liked more contact than they had.

Those who felt they had had enough contact, who, it should be emphasised, constituted the majority of respondents, were divided into two groups: those who had not enjoyed the contact they did have and therefore would not have wanted more and those who had had a positive experience but found the amount sufficient for their needs. Typically these latter respondents had had high levels of contact, seeing their non-resident parent on between four and six days in a fortnight. However this was not invariably the case; some respondents said that relatively modest levels of contact had been sufficient for them. One size, then, does not fit all. Indeed, as we report in chapter 15, there was no consensus among respondents about the 'ideal' level of contact.

Nor was there a consensus about the need for contact to incorporate overnight stays, either in relation to respondents' own experience or, again as we report in chapter 15, in principle. For most of those who had had regular overnights, they had been important, for reasons which reflect many of the arguments put forward by the proponents of overnights as a vital part of promoting child well-being (Cashmore et al, 2008; Lamb and Kelly, 2001, 2009; Parkinson and Smyth, 2003; Warshak, 2000) i.e. enabling parent and child to interact in a more normal and varied way, helping the child feel they have two homes, and preserving and consolidating the relationship with the non-resident parent. For others they had been unnecessary. Few of those whose contact did not include regular overnights said they would have liked this, typically because they were not enjoying the contact they did have. The value of overnights, then, has to be seen in the context of the particular relationship between the child and their non-resident parent. If this is positive, if the non-resident parent ensures that their accommodation is comfortable and homely, and if the child's wishes about the length of stay are taken into account, then the research suggests that overnights can add an additional, richer dimension to contact which many children – but not all – are likely to value. Where these conditions do not obtain then overnights can be an imposition which may have the effect of damaging the relationship further.

Similarly, where relationships are positive, contact during the week can be valuable, shortening the interval between visits and facilitating the non-resident parent's involvement in the child's everyday life. Although only a few of our respondents had this experience they were typically positive about it, while some of those whose non-resident parent lived some distance away would have liked them to be nearer so that contact did not have to be limited to the weekend.

The importance of tailoring the arrangements to the needs and wishes of the individual child, a key theme in this research, also emerged from what the young adults had to say about the value of having structured contact arrangements. Some who had entirely ad hoc arrangements were pleased about this, indeed would have protested had they been tied down to a firm structure. Others longed for their parents to put more predictable arrangements in place and some of those who did have such arrangements said how important this had been to them. What was very clear, however, was that respondents did not want the arrangements to be set in stone. As other research has found (Butler et al, 2003; Smart et al, 2001) flexibility and responsiveness to the child's expressed views were key. Equally, there was no point in having set arrangements if the non-resident parent did not abide by them.

Chapter 11 Perspectives on the quality of contact

Anna was five years old when her parents separated. She lived with her mum and every Sunday, for the next nine years, her dad collected her and her younger sister and took them to his house where he lived with his new partner, her three children and two children from the new relationship, the first born only a month after the separation.

Anna recalls her experience of contact as being very negative. She saw her father - 'out of protest' - because her mother insisted on this, saying how important it was that she maintained the relationship. One of her earliest memories is sitting at the bottom of the stairs and having to be prised off the banisters to go with her father. Other vivid memories are sitting waiting while her father either turned up late, or not at all, and her parents having 'blazing rows' at the handover. Both parents badmouthed each other and Anna was aware that her father was not paying child support and her mother struggled financially for many years.

Anna never felt at home at her father's house, had a difficult relationship with his new partner who she felt resented her presence, and objected to being made to call her mum, send her mother's day cards and call her parents Nan and Granddad. On Sundays, she says, almost invariably all there was to do was go to a car boot sale or watch television. She would much rather have been at home with her friends. The only attraction, as she got older, was the presence of her stepmother's children. Their existence, however, was also problematic because she felt her father put them first, including buying them more expensive birthday and Christmas presents, and he never spent 'quality time' with her and her sister alone, they always had to compete for his attention.

Although Anna's mother told her that her father had been a 'brilliant dad' before the separation, Anna has no recollection of this and feels her father was not really bothered about seeing her, had turned his focus onto the new family and was never really 'a father' to her or bothered getting to know her. Her stepfather, who came into her life when she was nine, fulfilled this role. At the age of 14 Anna decided to stop the regular Sunday visits and to make her own decisions about whether and when to see her father. Although she has remained in touch this is more out of a sense of obligation than emotional connectedness and they now have little to say to each other. Her parents remain hostile to each other and after a couple of disastrous experiences Anna says she will not be inviting them both to the same social event again.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Susan's experience of contact, in contrast, was very positive. Indeed she considers her parents handled contact extremely well and there is nothing she would wish to have changed. Her mother left suddenly when she was 11, all three children remaining with their dad. She had contact every weekend, staying over once her mother got suitable accommodation, and when they were younger her mother came around to 'babysit' so her father could go out. Susan enjoyed the time she spent with her mother, who always made sure there was 'lots to do'. Her parents were civil to each other and neither ever said anything negative about the other in her presence. The arrangements were flexible and her mother was always willing to change if Susan had other things

to do. She had an easy relationship with her mother's new partner, who did not come onto the scene for some years, was introduced to her very gently and, in the early stages, was not around much during the contact weekends. Susan feels she has a good relationship with both her parents and is quite happy to invite them both to her forthcoming wedding.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Anna and Susan were superficially similar in that both had continuous contact which reduced over time. However their experiences were very different. Their accounts illustrate many of the key themes in our respondents' narratives about the positive and negative aspects of contact.

Making contact enjoyable

Like Susan's mother, some non-resident parents were seen to have made great efforts to arrange interesting and enjoyable joint activities during the contact time. These respondents talked about contact being 'fun', 'exciting', 'something to look forward to' and even 'like a holiday'.

Respondent I think because I wasn't seeing him every day he wanted to make the time I did see him really special. He did, it was nice. I enjoyed it. We did nice things together. Like he got me enrolled in guitar lessons so we'd go and do that together on a Saturday morning, then we'd go to the library, we'd visit grandma, we'd make tea together. Yeah, it was nice.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent We looked forward to it. He always used to do loads of stuff. ...He would basically give up his weekends to do things with us. He would take us for days out, Sunday morning I always remember a cooked breakfast, we'd all sit round the table eating breakfast....I liked all the things he did with us.

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

For others, however, like Anna, contact was often boring and respondents had little sense that the non-resident parent was trying – or perhaps did not know how – to make it rewarding for the child.

Interviewer What didn't work for you would you say?

Respondent Didn't work that when we got there, there was literally nothing to do, you might as well have stayed at home because you were just sat on the sofa watching telly, and after a while it got to that point where we weren't doing anything, and it was just like why are we here? Why did we agree to come, because what we're doing now we could have done at home?

Interviewer Were you actually spending time with him, or was he just...

Respondent He was in the house, he was there but not always sat with us, and it was like well why would you do that, why don't you take us out, you only see us once a month, if that.

Interviewer So you generally didn't go out and do stuff with him?

Respondent Not really. When we first started going up yeah all the time, but as it got...as we'd been up a little bit more, and it was literally just like yeah alright welcome, sit down, do what you like.

Interviewer Was it that kind of thing that stopped – when you say you started to get really bored and didn't want to go there?

Respondent Yeah and I think by that point I was a teenager and I was like 'I don't want to do this anymore, I can't be bothered, I don't want to sit in a car for three hours to drive there.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued but reduced)

Like this respondent, some interviewees said that things had been different when they had first started having contact but that the non-resident parent's efforts had not been sustained.

Respondent: Whenever we did something with my dad it was occasional. ...Every now and again we'd do something with him. ...When we did do stuff together it was great, we would go off and he would teach us about stuff, we'd go into the fields and it was really good. Me brother was probably looking at something else but I was listening. So when we did do things it was great, it was really good, but....

Interviewer There wasn't that much of it.

Respondent: No. If you said to him, 'can we do it again?' it would be 'don't expect it soon, will you?' As opposed to saying, 'great, we'll do it again next week'. ... It started off alright with country parks where they had proper scramble nets, that sort of thing, we used to go and do all that, it was always good but then it all faded out and disappeared, to occasionally. ...I suppose it was like a siding thing...well not so much siding, more trying to keep us to like him.

Interviewer But he did make an effort, when you were younger.

Respondent Yeah.

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

According to this respondent, a typical Sunday with his father and stepmother involved just going shopping.

Respondent We'd travel over to a town close by and it was shopping. The same routine – Tesco's, over the road to the retail park to Do-It All, furniture shop. Every single week. Then Dad would take us home.

Others similarly described having to fit in with adult priorities, being 'dragged round' antique sales, car boot sales or, most commonly, simply sitting in pubs for hours on end.

Respondents varied however, in the emphasis they placed on 'doing things', 'not being bored' and being the focus of the non-resident parent's attention over the contact period. One seemed rather ambivalent, wavering between feeling her dad could have made more of a fuss of her and acknowledging that this made her visits more 'normal', while another felt that actually what he wanted was a bit more normality.

Respondent We didn't really do a lot to be honest. More often than not I'd literally go around there, we'd have a bit of dinner, watch a DVD, maybe every now and then they used to sort of, I don't know take me down (X) to the (slot) machines or something, or say

if my brothers were about ...but it wasn't like 'oh well (respondent) is coming around so we've got to take her out somewhere fabulous or something', it was still quite normal, you know, it wasn't, there wasn't an event made out of it...there wasn't any concerted effort to say 'oh yes we've got to take her out and'...

Interviewer Do you think that was a good thing that it was 'normal'?

Respondent Yes, probably a bit boring for me every now and then because like it's not like exactly my house, I didn't have everything there with me, so yes every now and then it was probably a bit boring, but looking back at it obviously it was kept pretty standard and normal, so yes I suppose it was.

Interviewer Some people have the opposite kind of experience where they say contact becomes all about events and every time you go out with your non resident parent you're doing something, going somewhere.

Respondent Yes and I mean I suppose that's cool but then I kind of think well maybe they're making, why are they making so much of an effort?... I suppose if you're always out and about it's kind of more on mutual grounds, whereas at the end of the day it was my dad's so I was in my home to an extent, it was around me dad's, so no I suppose it was quite nice, probably just a bit boring being 12, 13, 14 year old girl...

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, reduced over time)

Respondent It felt sometimes because we always ended up going places and doing things that we had never done before it was dad trying too hard, it wasn't normal. If it had been more normal things...

Interviewer: Do you think it might have been better if you had been doing more normal things?

Respondent: Yes. Because then it's just normal, you're not thinking 'Why are we doing this?'

30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Indeed, for one person, her father's close attention had sometimes felt a bit overwhelming.

Respondent Dad paid a lot more attention to me 'what do you want to do, what do you want for tea' whereas my mum just used to let me get on with it. I'd come home from school, watch what I wanted on tele, do my homework in my own time, go upstairs and read a book. I just did my own thing. Whereas my dad, not that he tried to entertain me, but he was always asking me 'what do you want to do, eat', and things like that.

Interviewer Was that because there isn't the same routine when you go for a weekend, so there's nothing given, you had to decide it?

Respondent Yes and because I was an only child I've always been able to entertain myself, I've always been happy just doing my own thing and I've been able to amuse myself, and sometimes I'd think 'dad, would you just go away, I want to read a book'.

Interviewer Do you think that was because he wanted to make sure you liked going there?

Respondent He wanted to make sure I didn't get bored.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Others, while appreciating the efforts the non-resident parent had made, said it was unnecessary, just being with them would have been sufficient.

Respondent I just enjoyed being with my mum, just having that time with my mum. I know that my mum spoilt me and I know that she thought she had to but I think to me even if she hadn't spoilt me it was just about spending time with my mum.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Interviewer So (what were) the highlights of your contact visits would you say?

Respondent It was nice just seeing...every time we used to see our dad it was always the highlight, it was hanging out with my dad and that.

30287 (M, 8, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

While feeling bored might detract from children's experience of contact, in itself it was unlikely to make them want to stop going.

Respondent I always wanted to see my dad, even though we didn't generally do a great deal.

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent I would never had wanted to say I don't want to go, I would never have said I don't want to go to my dad's, would never have said that.

Interviewer Why would you not have said that?

Respondent Well partly because I didn't really feel that strongly about it and also because I would have been aware that that would have been quite a hurtful thing to say and I didn't not want to see my dad. I did want to see my dad but, I think irrespective of whether or not it would be boring I didn't want to stop seeing my dad or anything like that. It probably would have been boring at my mum's house as well to be fair.

Interviewer Was it important to you to go on seeing your dad?

Respondent Yes it would have been, yes.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, increased then decreased)

However the lack of child-focused activities could contribute to some feeling that the non-resident parent was not really committed to them, which, as we explore in chapter 14, could substantially affect the quality of the relationship.

Respondent The impression I got, because we used to go over every weekend, pretty much, but because he was paying maintenance, I got the impression it was because he'd paid that money he wanted us for that time, because he had paid for the time.

Interviewer: So he thought he was entitled to it because he'd paid?

Respondent Yeah. ...It was like we were there and it was inconvenient that we were there. But it just felt that he was owed our time.

Interviewer So he wanted the time but he didn't make it a positive experience for you.

Respondent: No, most of the time, my dad lives in a village so it's literally just fields for miles and me and my brother would just take off over the fields and come back when it started to get dark and took a telling off because we'd been out all day and made no contact with home.

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

We look further at this issue in the next section.

Demonstrating commitment

This theme of the non-resident parent's commitment to the child was also apparent in respondents' descriptions of various elements of their contact, in addition to whether the non-resident parent tried to make contact enjoyable. They demonstrated an acute perceptiveness over the extent to which s/he was making enough effort to see them, for instance, or welcomed their seeking unscheduled contact.

Respondent They divorced because he wanted time to himself, to be single again, and that included us children and it was not until years later when I was about 19 and I had a real bad meltdown and it suddenly dawned on him and then it changed and he's really been there for my brother, which is really back to front. It took that long but by that time it was too late for me... if it had revolved around what we wanted, not when he could fit us in.

Interviewer: Were you aware of that at the time or is that something that you've thought about only as an adult?

Respondent: 50:50.

Interviewer What did you think at the time?

Respondent: I was more insulted than anything...it's like he wanted to separate his new life and his children and his children were to fit just there and like every couple of months maybe we'd have a weekend with him, like Saturday, go home Sunday morning but we kept to that....And we would talk once a week. It would never occur to him to ring more than that. It was a set thing, a bit weird.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Respondent It was like we'd phone my dad up and be like, 'Dad can we come up this weekend?' He'd be like, 'I'm seeing my friends and my other friends are up, I've got friends up from X,' and you'd be like, 'Well I'm your kid, it's me that...' because obviously my time with him got less and less, if I got to a point where I was like 'I fancy going away for the weekend I do want to see my dad this weekend', I'd ring him and go, 'Dad can I come up?' He'd be like, 'Well I've got so and so up from X.' I'm like, 'Am I not a little bit more important than your friends?' And I think that annoyed me.

Interviewer You felt he should have prioritised?

Respondent Yeah, and he didn't. ... Not that he should drop everything for me, but that me and (my sister) should have been a bit more of a priority than any Tom, Dick or Harry who decided they wanted to go up and spend the weekend with him. But that was my point of view.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

The non-resident parent turning up late, missing or cancelling contact, which was a painful experience in itself for children, could also be seen as indicative of a lack of commitment. As Anna put it, 'it makes children feel like they've been pushed to one side'.

Respondent As I got older when he started letting me down a lot more, when he would ring and say, 'I'm busy I can't come,' and I just thought if he doesn't want to make the effort then I'm not going to do nothing the whole day, and then find out at the end that he's not...

Taking a longer view of contact

Interviewer *So it made you quite angry?*

Respondent *Yeah, because obviously you want to see your dad, if he kept letting you down it's...*

Interviewer *Did he warn you or did he just not turn up?*

Respondent *He just didn't turn up, he'd ring me about probably five o'clock in the evening, but by then at that age your day is finished, can't go out, can't do nothing.*

Interviewer *Do you look back and think 'he really should have made more time for me'?*

Respondent *Yeah, but now if I have kids I know what not to do.*

11445 (M, 8, 21, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

A few respondents also reported feeling they came second to new children in the non-resident parent's household or to that parent's new partner or partners.

Respondent *He used to treat us differently than he treated the other children. Even Christmas and birthdays we'd get something horrible and they'd get Nintendos and things like that. So yeah there was a lot of resentment.*

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent *Any boyfriend she'd drop everything and the boyfriend's first, you know. And that has always been her way, you know. She may not agree with that but that's what I've seen with my own two eyes and therefore that's what I believe, and it ain't like it's been once or twice, I've seen that repetitively for years....Even when I was there, if there was a boyfriend... 'so and so's coming' and she'd be gone, that would be it.*

Interviewer *Even though you were there, she'd go out?*

Respondent *Yes....It's always been boyfriend first then maybe...*

Interviewer *Maybe the kids.*

Respondent *You know, which ain't right, you know, whereas with my dad it's always been the kids come first no matter what, which is the way I think is right.*

30639 (M, 9, 35, several changes of residence, continuous contact but minimal with NRM)

In the telephone survey, as reported in chapter 6, only 37% of respondents said that the statement '*I felt the non-resident parent made time for me*' was very true, which was the smallest proportion giving a positive response to any question. Among those who had continuous contact it was one of six factors which proved to have a statistically significant association with respondents' evaluations of the quality of their contact. Our in-depth interviews shed some light on what they may have meant by that and why it proved to be such an important factor. '*Making time for me*' it appears, probably tapped into respondents' feelings about a very fundamental question '*Do you care about me? Do I matter to you?*' which might be encapsulated in the concept of the non-resident parent's emotional investment in the relationship. We expand on this in chapter 14.

The impact of the non-resident parent's new partner

In the telephone survey, the respondent's relationship with the non-resident parent's new partner also emerged as an important factor in their experience of contact – 67% of those who said that it was 'very' or 'fairly true' that they got on well with the non-resident parent's new

partner, for instance, described their experience of contact as very positive. Where there had been continuous contact those who said their non-resident parent had not re-partnered were most likely to say that contact had been very positive (54%), followed by those who said that it was 'very' or 'fairly true' that they had got on well with the new partner (43% and 44%), while only 24% of those who said it was 'not very true' and 15% who said it was 'not at all true' reported positive experiences.

Almost three-quarters of the interview sample said that their non-resident parent had re-partnered at some point in their childhood. Relationships with the new partner or, in some cases, partners, spanned the spectrum. At the positive end there were comments such as: '*I really liked her, she was lovely...she was good to talk to, she was really understanding*'; '*I liked her. She was nice*'; '*We've got a brilliant relationship, she's lovely, she really is*' and '*I get on with her really well.... she's a lovely lady, I do love her*'. Some were more neutral: '*She's alright*'; '*I get on with him OK, quite a good relationship I suppose*'; or merely indicated that it had not been an issue.

For others, like Anna, the relationship had been much more problematic. Some of this group of respondents said simply that they had not liked a new partner.

Respondent *I automatically didn't like her, pretty much I stayed out the way.*

Interviewer *Right from the start?*

Respondent *Yeah, I didn't voice it, I just thought 'not my type of person'.*

20246 (M, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Respondent *I wouldn't even speak to (X), her partner.*

Interviewer *Did you think he was to blame for the whole thing?*

Respondent *I just didn't really like him, but no. He wasn't really my cup of tea. I just wasn't keen on being there if (he) was there at the time.*

31624 (F, 11, 26, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Where respondents gave a more detailed account, the most common explanation was that the new partner was thought to resent the children and/or to be jealous of the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent or the time they spent together.

Respondent *We didn't like her and that was not because she was my father's new wife really, it's because of her...She was always, there was always, she was always thinking about she was feeling jealous of this or something, quite sort of demanding and needy about it, I think...It was almost like we were intruding on her life. She would rather probably have just had my dad on his own. With none of the sort of baggage that he came with.*

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, increased then decreased).

Respondent *I'm very, very close to my dad, extremely close, we do everything together, we still do, and she never liked that very much. So it took a couple of years we were both really... neither one of us particularly wanted to talk to the other..., she just didn't feel comfortable around me. She was fine with my little sister, because she's not as close to my dad, or at least that's the reason I see from it. I think that's probably what it was, because I am super close to my dad and always have been, so I think it was a bit*

Taking a longer view of contact

odd for her...Me and my dad were close that I was always hanging out with him and going round to see them.

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Interestingly, only one person attributed the difficulties to their own jealousy.

Interviewer *What about your dad's girlfriend?*

Respondent *Thinking about it now, that's the only time I didn't enjoy seeing my dad. That was when I was 12, 13. One of the reasons was that I didn't really like her....I think it was because I was aware that she was very much younger than my mum and she was taking dad's attention away from me. I didn't feel that with my mum's boyfriends, I didn't feel they were taking my mum away from me, from my dad maybe, but not my mum away from me. Whereas I felt she was coming in to take away something that was mine, it was my dad.*

31289 (F, 13, 29, change of residence mother to father, continuous contact each NRP).

Others were aware, however, that their own attitude and feelings contributed to the problems. In several instances respondents knew that the new partner had been on the scene when their parents broke up and were therefore pre-disposed to dislike him/her, irrespective of how they actually behaved, or were worried about upsetting the resident parent if they developed a good relationship.

Respondent *There was always the part of me that was 'I don't really like you because I know what you've done', and I always felt a little bit guilty every time I was there and I was having a conversation with her, because I'd literally just think 'you're not a very nice person because you were part of the reason my family split up', and I'd instantly think about my mum, and I'd be like 'I shouldn't be laughing with you, I shouldn't be having a conversation with you, I shouldn't like you, because you're a huge part of the reason that my dad left'. I'd always feel guilty afterwards for having a laugh with her, and she tried with me, I'll give her that, she did, she was nice and she'd always make sure that I felt welcome and that I was happy. But I was just 'no don't want to do it'. But she wasn't generally a bad person, she's not like the wicked stepmother or anything, she was fine in her own way.*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

In contrast, it was noticeable that in most of the cases where respondents described positive, or at least neutral, relationships, new partners were not implicated in the breakdown of the parental relationship or if they were, the child was not aware of it at the time, as in the case of Susan, whose experiences were outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Other factors affecting the relationship with the new partner were mentioned by a few respondents. One was whether the new partner was seen as attempting to take on a parental role.

Respondent *I get on with her really well. ...she's never tried to do anything, or, you know, she's not tried to take anyone's place, she's not tried to put herself out and do obvious things, she's just kind of been my dad's wife really. She is my step mum obviously but she's not tried to parent me as such if you know what I mean, she doesn't have any children of her own so it literally was her, she was single and met my dad, but yes I get on with her perfectly well.*

Interviewer But it's obviously quite important to you that she didn't try, you said she didn't try to parent you as such, she just...?

Respondent I think that was the right thing to do. ...I appreciated the fact that she just kind of did what she had to do, she took on board what she was getting herself into as it were and left the parenting to the parents really. I don't think I would have necessarily reacted negatively to her trying to sort of enforce things, but it was nice that she didn't try and sort of take it upon herself, she kind of left them to it.

13650 (F, 10, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent I didn't like the fact that his wife used to tell us off, because I used to think 'you're not my mum, you've got no right to'.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Another contributory factor was whether the new partner expressed hostile views about the resident parent to, or in front of, the child.

Interviewer You didn't get on with your dad's partner?

Respondent No, and I still don't. I tolerate her, that's about it.

Interviewer What was it you didn't like about your stepmum?

Respondent I think it was her general attitude. She used to badmouth my mum, even though 'why is it my mum's fault'. I used to ask those questions, and that's what got me pushed to one side. I used to ask 'why do you think that?' I mean if she had a reason and she'd told me the reason.

Interviewer What sort of things would she say?

Respondent Like, when A (mother's partner) came on the scene, after a little while they used to go off to different places and my mum started buying quite a lot of music. Cost nothing, the type of music my mum liked was extremely cheap. So she'd buy a load of CD's. Obviously when my dad turned up to pick us up he'd see a load of CD's, or see the carrier bag. And then when we were getting ready to go home it was 'make sure you don't bump into that Virgin Megastore lorry when you pull up outside'. She used to call A 'chopminty' something to do with him being Scottish and he was always splashing the cash. Most of the time it was jealousy. 'Well what have you got to be jealous of my mum about, you've got her husband'...She's got a very distinctive voice, it's quite loud and (mimics it) so it sort of sticks in your head. ...Loads of bits and pieces come flying out. My mum, when she started off with a car, me dad bought it but it was a second-hand car. She's still on the same deal so that she pays £100 a month and she's always got a new car. Every time she changed the car it was 'got a new car, must have some money'. It was like that all the time.

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

We did not specifically ask how the non-resident parent dealt with any difficulties in the child's relationship with their new partner and few respondents spontaneously commented on this. One, however, seems to have been very fortunate in the approach of both her parents to this sensitive issue.

Interviewer Did that (the difficulties with the new partner) make it pretty uncomfortable when you were going there?

Respondent No, because dad always made sure that we went no matter what. I'm not saying every Saturday we went she was in a mood, she wasn't. Sometimes she'd be nice. But he always made sure to take us away from it. So our time there was spent just with dad. If she didn't want to come then we'd go with dad.

Interviewer Were you able to talk to both your parents about that?

Respondent: Yeah, dad was very honest with us, he said he was trying to work it through with her. And mum knew there was problems because dad would tell her, because they'd still talk. So mum would ask us about dad and say 'if it gets too much for you, you don't have to go' but we knew that they'd talk so dad would come to our end and have us for a few hours if we couldn't go there because she was having a major strop that day. So we were always free to talk about absolutely everything.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

In contrast, Anna's father (in the case outlined at the beginning of this chapter) seems to have made matters worse by insisting she called her step-mother mum, while another respondent said that he and his non-resident father had never discussed the issue.

Interviewer How did he handle that, did he talk to you about it?

Respondent I don't think he really did much to handle it, no.

Interviewer He didn't.

Respondent Well he didn't directly address the issue that we perhaps didn't like his new wife very much, I don't think I've ever really spoken to him about it, I wouldn't bring it up with him.

Interviewer Right, so he just may not have been aware of your feelings, or do you think possibly he didn't want to...?

Respondent Maybe but, yes, I think he might have just not wanted to talk about it. It's much more awkward once you've talked about it.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, increased then decreased)

The impact on contact of difficulties with the non-resident parent's new partner varied. For some respondents it was just an irritant, something which made contact less enjoyable than it might otherwise have been, but which they just tolerated.

Interviewer How did it make you feel when she was being snide about your mum?

Respondent After a while you just put up with it. I think at first it probably irritated me, but she knew it, she knew it irritated me. But then after a while it was just 'here were go again'. I never really took much notice of it.

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

For others the effect was more substantial. Some respondents reported that they avoided seeing their non-resident parent when the new partner was going to be there, while a couple thought it had made the non-resident parent less committed to contact. One person said he thought a new partner had been behind his father's decision to move to the other end of the country, which resulted in contact becoming less regular and frequent. In a few cases

difficulties with the new partner contributed to, or even resulted in, contact being interrupted or even ceasing (as in case 20246, outlined in chapter 10).

Feeling at home

Another factor differentiating the experiences of the two respondents described at the start of this chapter, Anna and Susan, was whether or not they felt at home at the non-resident parent's house.

In the telephone survey, as reported in chapter 6, only 37% of respondents said it was 'very true' that they felt equally at home at both their resident and non-resident parents' houses, one of the lowest proportion of positive responses to any question. The proportion was higher among those who had continuous contact (46% compared to 20% of those whose contact was sporadic and 26% of those whose contact had been delayed). Even in this group, however, it was one of the factors which proved to have a statistically significant association with the respondent's evaluation of the quality of their contact.

Further analysis of the data from the telephone survey shows that, not unexpectedly, there was a link between whether or not respondents had regular overnight stays and whether or not they felt at home at the non-resident parent's house. Thus 53% of those with continuous contact who did have regular overnights said that the statement 'I felt equally at home' was 'very true for them, compared to 45% of those who stayed occasionally and only 24% of those who never stayed overnight. Similarly while only 20% of those with regular overnights said the statement was 'not very true' or 'not at all true' the proportion rose to 34% of those with occasional overnights and 44% of those who never stayed. (This association was statistically significant).

The relevance of overnights to feeling at home also emerged in the in-depth interviews. Indeed, as noted in the previous chapter, one of the reasons some respondents – such as Susan – gave for feeling overnights were important was because it made the non-resident parent's house feel more like a second home – *'a place you live, rather than just visit'*.

Respondent *I had a room there, it was, it made me feel like this was my home as well, you know, I'd stay there on set days, when I got there I had my bed, I had my teddy on my bed....So it gave me that sense of a home, so when I went and visited mum it wasn't visiting mum in her place it was this is, I'm going to stay in my other room tonight.*

Interviewer *Right, so it's your other house?*

Respondent *Exactly.*

Interviewer *So you really did feel you had two homes at that point?*

Respondent *Yes. So I walked around like I lived there rather than, you know, if I didn't ever stay there and if it was just visiting for a couple of hours on a day, I don't think I would have felt as comfortable there.*

Interviewer *Right, so that's important?*

Respondent *I definitely think I benefitted from having that.*

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

There are a number of possible reasons why those who routinely stay overnight are more likely to feel 'at home', not least the fact that they simply spend more time there. But it also makes it more probable that these children will have their own space, accumulate possessions, and generally 'colonise' the resident's parent's home to a greater extent than those who never stay or who do so only occasionally or infrequently. Of course, to some extent, there might be a vicious circle, with some never having overnights because they never feel sufficiently at home to want to do so. A number of those who said they had not felt at home, even though they did stay from time to time, made this point.

Interviewer *Do you think you felt at home in your dad's house?*

Respondent *No, no not at all.*

Interviewer *I mean things like having your own stuff there and that kind of thing...*

Respondent *No.*

Interviewer *You didn't have that.*

Respondent *No.*

Interviewer *Do you think that made a difference?*

Respondent *Yes definitely, I didn't have any of my stuff because obviously I didn't go down there enough to have that, I'd just like stay in the spare room.*

13494 (F, 2, 22, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time, holiday contact only)

Respondent *I used to visit my mum a lot in her flat and when I was there it was comfortable, full of her stuff, so it did feel very familiar but it wasn't home, it wasn't the home that I'd loved in my whole life.*

Interviewer *Is there anything that would have made it feel more like home?*

Respondent *If she'd had another bedroom and had done it out for us as like the children's stay-over bedroom, that would have been a huge improvement really. Or maybe had a few of our things around as well instead of just her stuff, her house, her new life. She could have gone about that differently.*

Interviewer: *So being present in her new life, in the home?*

Respondent *Yeah*

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased, never stayed overnight)

Staying over *per se*, however, was not necessarily sufficient to make a child feel at home, even if, as in the instance below, it happened regularly and frequently.

Respondent *Obviously it is my home but like mum's is my actual home, you know, I didn't, didn't feel 100% comfortable in their house, and I don't think it was necessarily anything that they did or didn't do, it's literally just because obviously your home is your home and it was dad and (new partner's), I'm going to dad and (new partner's), I'm not going home or anything like that, so...I can't even really pinpoint as to why it never really has, I just, it doesn't, as I say my brothers always say it as well, I always sort of ask 'oh can I make a cup of tea or something', I don't really know why because there's not really been anything dominant that I can think of to say, to make me feel*

like that, maybe it is just purely the fact that I only used to go around there like once a week.

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time, weekly overnights)

There was nothing in this young woman's account to suggest that her not feeling at home was related to the presence or attitude of her father's new partner. In other cases, however, this was clearly a factor, particularly when the non-resident parent had moved into the new partner's house, rather than vice-versa.

Interviewer In your telephone interview you said you didn't particularly feel equally at home at both places, would you say that was true?

Respondent Yeah it was...because it wasn't his house it was her's, and it was like you know when somebody says, 'Make yourself at home,' and you go 'god I'm not doing that', you just sit there and go, 'Yeah alright,' and it was like that. She was like, 'Make yourself at home,' and I was like, 'no' because I can't do half the things here that I'd do at home. Wouldn't curl my legs up on the sofa, sit there properly, and yeah I found it difficult being at her's, because it was her house, and he was like, 'No it's our house.' I'm like, 'Yeah, but it's not though, is it, it's her house, you just happen to live in it,' and it wasn't a family home. Yeah I found it weird being there, it didn't feel like a second home, which I genuinely thought it was how it should have been, it should have felt like I was coming to a second home and it didn't feel like that at all, it literally just felt that I was staying at some sort of B&B for a weekend. Because I was never completely relaxed, I never unpacked my suitcase.

Interviewer Presumably you didn't have stuff there and things around or anything like that?

Respondent No, nothing, we didn't have toothbrushes or anything there, everything came with us and everything came back with us. I'd never unpack my suitcase, always leave my suitcase packed, and they were like, 'Why do you do that?' 'Just easier.' But it was because I didn't feel comfortable to unpack it, because it was her house.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued).

Such comments are in line with further analysis of the data from the telephone survey in which only one in five respondents who said it was 'not very' or 'not at all true' that they got on well with the non-resident parent's new partner reported feeling equally at home at the non resident parent's home (14 of 71; 20%). This compares with 51% of those who said they got on well (39 of 76) and 40% (20 of 50) whose non-resident parent had not re-partnered. The association was statistically significant.

Somewhat surprisingly, in view of the findings from the telephone survey, only a few respondents in the face to face interviews made any reference to not feeling at home because the two households operated differently.

Interviewer Would you say you felt equally at home in both their houses?

Respondent Yes and no, I felt it was a completely different style of house at my dad's so although I didn't feel like I was not welcome, the style of living was so different it was a bit uncomfortable knowing, not so much how to react, but uncomfortable living in that lifestyle because I'd gotten used to living, sitting at the table and eating off your lap, 90% of the time I felt perfectly welcome it was just such a different lifestyle that I'd, not grown used to but, because I used to be like, I don't know when I live with my dad

that was the lifestyle anyway, but once I moved in with my mum, when they separated, because my mum sort of adopted of my step father, which is very middle class, very sit down, structured and...

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM).

Respondent It was one of those places where everybody knows everybody, the sort of people that your front door was open and they'll just let themselves in, that's the kind of place it was, because it was such a small village. Literally everybody knew everybody, so people were walking in through your back door, you'd come down the stairs and you'd find someone in the kitchen making themselves a cup of tea, and like, 'Who the hell are you, where did you come from?' They're like, 'I'm so and so from down the road.' What are you doing?' 'I'm just waiting for your dad.' 'He's gone to the shops, what do you want?' 'He's alright, he knows I'm coming.' To me that felt really weird, I'm like, 'Just wait outside like a normal person, or go home and come back.'

Interviewer But that's the way they lived their lives?

Respondent But that's the way it was, because they lived in each other's pockets, and for me that was really weird, because that's not what it's like here, people knock on the door, they don't just walk in and start making themselves a cup of tea, whereas that's really weird. For me it felt weird.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued).

In the telephone survey, however, as reported in chapter 6, 26% of respondents said that it was 'very' or 'fairly true' that they found it difficult having different ways of doing things in the two households. While this was not a factor which proved to be statistically significant in explaining why respondents' experiences of contact were more or less positive, further analysis of the survey data indicates that there was a statistically significant association between such difficulties and not feeling equally at home. Thus of those who said it was 'very true' that they found the differences difficult, two-thirds (14 of 21) said it was 'not very true' or 'not true at all' that they had felt equally at home, compared to only 23% of those who said it was not at all true that they had had such difficulties.

Finally, some respondents said they had not felt at home because the non-resident parent's accommodation was simply not 'homely'. As discussed in chapter 10, this was one of the reasons why some interviewees would not have wanted regular overnights. One respondent drew an interesting distinction between a house and a home.

Respondent I would say I felt equally at home (at each parent's house) but in very different ways. At my dad's, it's a bigger house, I had my own space so I felt that that was, even when I wasn't living there it was where a lot of my stuff had to stay so it was where I settled. But I don't think, but when I was living at my mum's and even just going to stay at my mum's it was a warmer more welcoming place even though I didn't have a space to put things, a bed to sleep in, it was all, and I mean at my dad's he made it quite clear that it was still his house even if it was my room so it was never like I would call it my home, I would call it my house but not my home.

31284 (F, 15, 29, change of residence father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

Parental conflict and hostility

In the telephone survey, as described in chapter 6, when respondents were asked what their parents could have done to improve their experience of contact, by far the most frequent

suggestion (38% of responses) was for them to have been less conflicted and more cooperative. We also reported a clear, and statistically significant, association between a respondent's evaluation of the quality of their contact and the extent to which they were exposed to conflict between their parents after separation. For example, where contact had been continuous:

- Only 7% of those who said there had been 'a lot of bad feeling' between their parents after separation described contact as very positive, compared to 48% of those who said they 'got on OK'.
- None of those who said their parents had had moderate to severe arguments were very positive about their experience, compared to 25% of those where there had been mild arguments and 48% who said their parents had not argued much.
- Only 8% of those who said it was 'very true' that one or both of their parents used to badmouth the other in the child's presence, and 25% who said this was 'fairly true' said their experience of contact had been very positive. This contrasted with 43% of those who said it was 'not at all true' and 50% who said it was 'not very true'.
- Only 11% of those who said it was 'very true' that they were asked to act as a go-between or keep secrets and 25% of those who said it was 'fairly true' had a very positive experience of contact, compared to 40% of those who said it was 'not very true' and 43% for who it was 'not at all true'.
- None of those who said they were caught up in parental arguments 'a lot' were very positive about contact, compared to 13% who said they were caught up a little, and 17% not at all.

Our interview sample spanned the spectrum of parental conflict. At one extreme were relationships, like that between Susan's parents, which appear to have been conflict-free or even amicable.

Respondent *They've never not got on, ever really, that I can remember....After it happened it was really weird, mum and dad would still see each other, but, how do I explain it? When my parents split up I think it's a case of friends marrying as opposed to something like that, because basically I just think they just didn't love each other anymore, because since they have split up they're really good friends. My mum still cuts my dad's hair, because mum was a hairdresser by trade, and they're friends, there's nothing... there's no, they don't hate each other or anything, and even then...*

Interviewer *Was that like that right from the start?*

Respondent *Even then when my dad would come and pick us up he wouldn't sit out in the car, beep his horn, and we'd come out, he'd come up and have a cup of tea, chat to my mum. There was no hostilities at all. It didn't really feel like they were separated, it's just we lived in different houses, because they still got on, it's not like friends of mine their parents can't even be in the same room with each other, it was never like that, not even from day one. It was just they were still friends, they got on, which they'd been knocking about with each other for 20 years before, up until this point, so it was like they were still friends, there was no reason not to be friends anymore, and it was just they had just fallen out, and for the sake of us who wants to see their parents arguing and have that?*

30287 (M, 8, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Such respondents often expressed their appreciation of how their parents had managed the situation, were aware that they were fortunate in comparison with others they knew, either as children or adults, and said that, if they were ever to become a separated parent, they hoped they would be able to do the same themselves.

Respondent I appreciate the fact that whatever did or didn't go on between them they kept it civil around me the whole time and that I was, again I wasn't restricted to seeing certain people, they were communicating, probably more so on mum's behalf. But nonetheless my dad was available to be spoken to and yes, so they did constantly communicate, they did make it a better environment. Obviously it's never going to be the most pleasant but it did make it easier for me because there wasn't really any horrible tension there.

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent I've seen people, some of my friends' mums and dads split up at the same time and they're still very bitter and hate each other. I think my dad was bitter sometimes, he'd make a snide remark every now and then, but he never badmouthed my mum to us. He probably did to my auntie B, probably let off some steam there, but he never did to us because I don't think he ever wanted us to have that relationship, to ruin our relationship. And my mum was exactly the same...there was never any spitefulness there at all, which is nice. I think this is where it differs with me from a lot of people, there was any spitefulness or badmouthing at all.

14300 (F, 12, 28, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent I'd like to be like my mum and dad where you can chat and get on

30622 (F, 8, 28, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP).

In stark contrast, at Anna's end of the spectrum, were respondents who lived with overt parental conflict for years.

Respondent They would argue all the time, every time they got near each other shout and bawl and carry on at each other...If they met at any time of the day, night or anything, they would just started tearing strips out of each other...they just hated each other. I think my mum hated him because of the way he treated her, and he hated her because she'd left him, so that's why it was.

Interviewer Did they get violent with each other?

Respondent I think it was just shouting, I think they probably might have pushed each other, and slapped each other about a bit, but nothing really, like knives or anything, because I know that can happen as well. ...A lot of the arguments were when he was drunk. There was one time he did turn up at the house and they did have an argument at my mum's house, and my dad was throttling my stepdad, as they do, and I came in and thought, 'oh let's stop it', so jumped off the arm of the sofa and kicked him in the head, and that was when his thumb broke and knackered his hand, but it stopped him killing someone. But he thinks it was just because he was squeezing so hard, but I'm not going to tell him it was me [laughs] yeah, I did a ninja kick across the floor.

Interviewer And you said they went to court?

Respondent Yeah there was a lot of... that's why they had no money left at the end because of all the arguments with the solicitors and stuff.

- Interviewer* *He went to court over you two, or over the house or over everything?*
- Respondent* *Over everything, probably to make it as difficult as possible for her. I don't think either of them ended up with much at all. I think the solicitors ended up with say 75%, and they had 12½ each.*
- Interviewer* *That really lasted throughout your teens?*
- Respondent* *Yeah, the only thing that stopped it is when my mum moved to (another area of the country), and they couldn't speak to each other again.*

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Between these two extremes were respondents who experienced a degree of conflict or conflict for a period. Some, for instance, reported conflict reducing over time or, conversely, deteriorating from a reasonably amicable start.

- Respondent* *After they separated, then I'd say there was conflict, yes, he was public enemy number one that was for sure, and obviously he wouldn't have been feeling too good back either, but never really, I'd say mainly conflicted, there ain't much harmony in that.*
- Interviewer* *Okay right, then it got better after a while?*
- Respondent* *Yes, I think once they was away from one another and they realised that was it, it's over, it's finished, you know, they just sort of got on with it. To which point then it was like, you know, he'd speak to her and she'd speak to him and it was sort of, I ain't going to say they was best friends, but I think it was oh, you know, this is it, we've got to get on for the kids sake and that was it, so...*

30639 (M, 9, 35, residence changed several times, continuous contact both parents but minimal with NRM)

- Respondent* *Ever since my dad remarried the whole contact arrangements were becoming more difficult and my dad was not talking to my mum about stuff so much and he would, yes they'd had a good relationship up until then, but it became very difficult for them to have a relationship once he remarried. So my mum didn't really, you know, she's a little bit wary of bad mouthing anyone but she did, she mentioned something, not really bad but mentioned some things, you know...*
- Interviewer* *About, about the new wife, or?*
- Respondent* *Well yes, she has, you know, she's never talked about it a lot, well probably more recently she's talked about it more, but yes she felt that basically the new wife was making things difficult and being quite, she wanted to have a friendship with my dad but basically the new wife didn't want that, just didn't want my dad even to really have any interaction with her.*
- Interviewer* *Okay, so before this woman came on the scene your parents had been getting on fairly well?*
- Respondent* *Yes although I know this second-hand, I didn't really, it's not something I could really see, I know this mostly from my mum who obviously has her own point of view and her own issues which are probably affecting what she says about these things.*
- Interviewer* *And she says that they were getting on?*

Respondent I think what my mum feels about it is that she kind of felt, wanted him as a friend and maybe that's kind of having your cake and eating it, I don't know, she valued that and he would have, you know, for many years he would never have gone 'I'm not associating with you anymore', but that she can't have that now because X, my dad's new wife won't...

Interviewer Won't have it?

Respondent Yes. It didn't stop us going over there, but...the kind of negotiations about stuff between my parents became a lot more difficult I think. Yes, I think my mum found she couldn't really have a proper, like a conversation with my dad about it because they'd have a conversation but then he'd go and speak to X and she would be unhappy about something and then they'd have to change it and he'd be behaving weirdly and he'd, for no apparent reason be unhappy about something that it was quite clear that it wasn't him necessarily that was unhappy about it.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact)

Parental conflict and hostility did sometimes result in contact not being established at the outset or subsequently being interrupted. In the main, however, it did not, which meant that it became a stressful but inescapable part of respondents' lives, sometimes extending into adulthood, as we shall see in chapter 14.

For respondents whose parents frequently argued with each other in front of them, handovers could be the worst part of contact, as it was for this young man, who wished that his contact could have taken place without his parents having to meet.

Interviewer Was there any aspect of visiting him that you didn't like?

Respondent No, not really, well apart from the fights at either end, but then... It would just be kicking off big time, and I tried my best to stop my brother from... he didn't know half the things that was going on.

Interviewer What did you and your brother do, did you...

Respondent I tried to get him out the way so that he wouldn't really know what was happening.

Interviewer So where did you go when these quarrels were going on?

Respondent Anywhere, out in the garden, there was a play area at the top, just anything.

Interviewer ...Was there anything that you would have liked to have been done differently by your parents?

Respondent Yeah, I think it would have helped if we were escorted by someone else to my dad's house, like someone else that could have taken us in between, to avoid the arguments...the less contact that they'd have had the better it would have been, as in zero contact, and it would have been a hell of a lot easier for us.

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Even if parents did not argue when they met – or indeed never met – respondents spoke about the stress of being exposed to their hostility through negative comments made by one about the other directly to them, or in their presence. Respondents spoke of nasty remarks, or name-calling - 'witch', 'dragon', 'evil' or 'the old saddlebag' - generally running down the other parent, criticising the way they did things, or just 'moaning' about them.

- Interviewer* Did they actually bad mouth each other in front of you?
- Respondent:* Yeah...And that's a difficult thing to deal with. There is no one to side with and no-one you can tell.
- Interviewer:* So you end up carrying it all?
- Respondent:* Yeah...They don't think of the effects and the fact that I have to know that when I'm talking to the other person.
- Interviewer* Was it both ways?
- Respondent:* Yeah, pretty much. ...I'd have to hear mum talk to other people about it and then sit with dad and let him talk about it.
- Interviewer* It sounds like ...you were stuck between the two?
- Respondent:* Yeah, I did that as much as possible 'cos it was so difficult. Even now it's a difficult situation to react to. Do you say 'Yeah, she is like that sometimes or yeah he does do that' or do you just...most of the time I'd just laugh'.
- Interviewer:* As a coping mechanism?
- Respondent:* Yeah, it's far easier to laugh than it was to...
- Interviewer:* That's a lot for a teenager to live with and know what to do with isn't it?
- Respondent:* It didn't help me when I got into later life, I know that.
- 30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)
- Respondent* (After they separated) there was that era of nothing but negative and yeah, worse in some respects, because when they were together obviously there was some harmony and they did make up after arguments. But when it was just me living with my dad there was nothing but negativity towards my mum and my mum was the same back really....That was often the worst thing.
- Interviewer:* What did it feel like to be stuck in the middle of that?
- Respondent:* Not very nice at all. It was very difficult because I suppose it makes you feel not normal in many ways because there are many, many couples who split up and they seem to be mature enough to have some sort of communication, so it was very difficult because obviously we loved both of them very much and it's just, even now, it's not very nice where if I just mention my mum, if my mum gets mentioned, my dad makes some remark. I feel like telling him to shut up. I just think it's ridiculous really. I think it's really thoughtless and I would hate myself if I did that sort of thing, and ended up in that sort of situation, because it's literally being piggy in the middle you're only really hurting me and brother in the middle rather than each other.
- Interviewer:* I remember somebody saying to me once when one parent was slagging off the other, it was sort of part of themselves, because you are half of that person, it felt really destructive.
- Respondent:* Yeah, I definitely relate to that. Absolutely. In many ways they obviously chose to be together to create you and it almost feels as if, when one of them is slating the other, it's almost as if they're directing it to you.

31628 (M, 9, 25, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

As in this case, many respondents exposed to such behaviour reported feeling unable to even mention one parent in front of the other because of the reaction this would trigger. Some of them were further drawn into the conflict by being subjected to cross-examination about the other parent or their partner, or asked to pass on uncomfortable messages. Again respondent 31628 was particularly vocal about this.

Respondent *Often we'd have to convey information via me and my brother. ...like an example once when my dad said something about money-wise like 'you should ask your mum for some pocket money'. It was just horrible. I can't remember how old I was, about 12 or 13, and I remember we'd seen her for the day or the evening and I remember it was the last thing I did because I was just dreading it, because it just felt weird and I just said 'oh, dad thinks...I need some money for something and dad thinks you should give something'. It was just really awkward and horrible. I just felt really bad towards my mum that I was asking her and my dad thought she should chip in with something. My mum was perfectly fine about it and gave me some money. That made me feel even more guilty. I can see from my dad's point of view he wasn't being unreasonable, but it was just things like that, I felt a bit pressured into being in the middle.*

Interviewer *You're being asked to give the messages rather than them communicating.*

Respondent: *Yes, absolutely and as a child it's not easy, it's not like I could just say it was difficult. And you never want the other to feel that you're on the other side, that's a big problem. So if I wish things were different just definitely more communication between the two of them and not the jibes at each other.*

31628 (M, 9, 25, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Some respondents who were not generally directly exposed to any of these manifestations of conflict were nonetheless acutely sensitive to tension in the relationship.

Interviewer *Was there badmouthing going on, and putting down and things like that?*

Respondent *Not often, but it was avoided as a subject, if anyone else mentioned dad or anything to do with the divorce or whatever mum would, 'Oh well you know how that sort of thing goes,' an attitude. It wasn't anything specific was said or...*

Interviewer *But you weren't comfortable to talk about...*

Respondent *No, it was obvious to me even then that when mum spoke to an adult when we weren't there, it would have been dad bashing...She never did in front of us, and he stayed away from insulting her in any way...They never really slagged each other off but you could tell mum was more angry than she knew how to express sort of thing, and obviously when there were other adults around, she was upset or anything...I knew she must have people that she spoke to about dad, and...*

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

Being in the middle of conflicted relationships, as will be evident from the material already presented, put many respondents in a very uncomfortable and stressful position. In the main, however, it was just something they felt they had to put up with, learning to let it 'wash over' them. While one respondent said he had made it clear to his parents that he 'did not appreciate' their arguing in front of him, remarkably few seem to have told their parents how they felt about it.

Interviewer: How did you handle (the badmouthing)?

Respondent Just put up with it really. Never really said anything, because...I probably did once or twice but there would be quite a bad reaction from whoever really, because feelings were that deep I suppose. If I said anything to like dad probably his reaction, I can't really recall a time, but it would probably have been along the lines of 'well why don't you live with her then'. Something bitter and...If I had said I was upset, said something like 'I can't help that about my mum' he would probably say 'yes, I'm sorry, it's not you'. But then I can imagine if I had said something more annoyed at him then that might have been different, but if I had been upset and pointed it out then perhaps he would have realised.

Interviewer But it sounds as if you didn't feel able to convey to your parents that this was upsetting you.

Respondent: No, not in general. Like I say once or twice I probably did but in general I didn't like to really say, just 'cos on the one hand my dad was quite... the strict one, it was not often that I would cross him. And with my mum, she didn't do it as much. Sometimes she would make the odd dig but it probably wasn't enough to really say.

31628 (M, 9, 25, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

As we report in chapter 15, however, respondents had no such inhibitions in articulating what they wanted to convey to other separating parents about the importance of not exposing children to their conflict. As the following quotes make clear, they did not mince their words:

Respondent Get over yourselves basically, just don't make your kids suffer.

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Respondent Make sure that they don't have any conflict in front of the children at all. Always be on good terms and make sure that they, the children can see that you two co-operate together...

31442 (F, 3, 22, mother residence throughout, lengthy gap in contact, continuous once resumed).

The extent of the resident parent's support for contact

In chapter 4, we reported that, in the telephone survey, 56% of those whose contact had been continuous, delayed or sporadic said that the resident parent had encouraged their relationship with the non-resident parent 'a lot' (this question was not put to those whose contact had ceased). Twenty-eight per cent said they had done so 'a little', while 9% were reported to have done nothing to encourage it and 7% tried to undermine it. The extent to which the resident parent was said to have encouraged the relationship was significantly associated with a number of factors: the level of conflict in the parental relationship; whether domestic violence was an issue or the resident parent had serious worries about the other parent's care; the age of the child at separation and the closeness of the pre-separation relationship between the child and the parent who subsequently became the non-resident parent.

The attitude of the resident parent was associated with the contact pattern: those whose contact had been continuous were most likely to say the resident parent had encouraged the relationship 'a lot' (68% compared to 42% of those with delayed contact and 35% of those with sporadic contact) and least likely to say they had not encouraged it at all or tried to undermine it (9% compared to 22% and 34%). It also proved to be relevant to respondents' evaluation of the *quality* of contact, even where contact was continuous, as reported in

chapter 6. Thus 46% of those who said the resident parent encouraged the relationship ‘a lot’ reported that contact was ‘very positive’, compared to only 29% of those who said they had done so ‘a bit’ and a mere 11% of those who said they had not done so ‘at all’, although, oddly, of the very few who said the resident parent had tried to undermine the relationship, two reported contact to have been ‘very positive’ and no-one said it had been very negative.

The attitude of the resident parent was clearly important to the respondents in our face to face interviews. Those who positively encouraged contact, or at least did not put obstacles in the way, were much appreciated.

Interviewer What would you say were the positive aspects of contact for you?

Respondent ...The fact that my mum always encouraged it and made it easy to do it, I think that's so important because at that age you kick up if there's vibes of one person not wanting you to go and you're very worried about taking sides and there was never any of that so that was really good.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Respondent There was none of the ‘oh you can't go and see them because I'm not talking to them,’ rubbish, it was just generally normal, it just seemed normal.

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Such parents were also variously reported to have presented a positive image of the non-resident parent to the child, tried to work through resistance, mediated and smoothed over difficulties.

Respondent She was the one who was encouraging it. When I said I didn't want to she would sit there and talk to me about it and try and encourage it more. She thought it was really important that we had both parents involved...I think I blamed my dad for a lot of it, even though I was really close to him I blamed... it was his fault, it was his affair therefore it was his fault. In my head, I was very angry with him because he had broken up the family, and it was his fault...But he hadn't done anything to me, and my mum always said that to us, that, ‘he hasn't left you,’ and she always insisted, and she always told us that sort of thing, ‘it's not you he's left, it's not you, it's not anything to do with you.’

Interviewer So she was really promoting the relationship?

Respondent Yeah, that it wasn't his fault, because she knew that I was really... and my sister was taking my lead, because I was the older one and I was blaming him, and therefore she was blaming him. So mum did promote the fact that it wasn't him taking it out on us, it wasn't related to us, it was related to her. So she did let us know that he wasn't leaving us, although I think I did blame him for that quite a bit to start off with, it was you've left me, and they'd both say to us, ‘it's not you, it's not a personal attack on you,’ which is probably how I took it.

Interviewer Right from the start she encouraged you to see him?

Respondent Oh yeah, she would never have not encouraged us at all, no.

Interviewer She really knew that's what was going on underneath, even though you weren't coming out with it, she was very aware that you needed being told ‘don't take it out on him?’

Respondent: Yeah, she was quite aware of what was going on (with me).

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Respondent I know my dad wanted me to see her...he felt it was important for me to carry on seeing her, so he'd sometimes make me go and see her. I remember him being quite stern about something, because I would often swear at my mum while speaking to her, and he pulled me up on that and told me, 'actually no, regardless of what happened she's still your mum, you show some damn respect to her'...When I tried to engage in a conversation about how much at that time I hated mum and I was saying all these profanities about her, he stopped me there, 'Your mum is your mum, show her respect regardless.'

20156 (M, 9, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

It is important to note that resident parents who were seen to be supportive of contact were not, by any means, only those whose separation had been amicable, or who had instigated the break-up, or who had no concerns about the non-resident parent. This group also included those who had been deserted, those who were reported to have had worries about the non-resident parent's mental health or alcohol abuse and those who were said to have experienced violence.

The encouragement of the resident parent was not, however, always sufficient to ensure that contact took place or that it was a satisfactory experience for the respondent. As we discuss in chapter 12, some children held very negative views about the non-resident parent – perhaps because they blamed them for the separation or disapproved of some aspect of their behaviour –and proved resistant to the resident parent's attempts to persuade them otherwise or, in some cases, to insist on contact. Relationships in such circumstances were tense and contact could be delayed, disrupted or even come to an end. One young man, for instance, said his mother had not just encouraged him to have contact, but had insisted on it, despite his father's violence towards both her and the respondent. However his highly negative views of his 'crappy' father, forged prior to the separation, remained unchanged, not helped by the perception that his dad had not made much effort to see his children or to make contact enjoyable for them, and as soon as he felt old enough to refuse contact, he did so (see case 10901, chapter 12). Another respondent had had a good pre-separation relationship with her father but was turned against him by his behaviour.

Respondent Mum had gone out of her way to be reasonable....If my dad hadn't have been ill...I would have seen my dad every second weekend. It would have been, but his illness just dictated that me and him were finished, because he didn't have the capacity to know how to treat me right, and how to care for me, because he was so consumed with anger and hatred for everybody, and that went on for a long time....I didn't know what sort of games he'd play, and the problem is that he wanted to get back at my mum and unfortunately I was just a pawn in his game....All he ever wanted to talk about at the meetings, what mum was doing, if she had a boyfriend. We had builders in so dad was telling me how many men she slept with according to how many builders we'd had in the house, and how he'd known that because...he sat outside and looked. And he took pictures of our house, and on one of them you can see me in mum's bedroom wandering around and I just think, oh my god.

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

As reported in chapter 10, this respondent stopped contact with her father after he assaulted her at a contact centre, and maintained her refusal despite her mother's persistent efforts to change her mind.

The experience of Anna, respondent 30577, whose case was set out at the beginning of this chapter, raises an interesting issue. Anna's mother quite clearly encouraged her to have contact, indeed, from Anna's report, forced her to do so for years. (She also regularly took Anna to see her paternal grandparents which suggests a genuine conviction that contact was important). At the same time Anna was exposed to parental conflict in which both parents badmouthed each other.

Interviewer Did they slag each other off behind each other's back?

Respondent Oh yeah, he used to always refer to my mum as 'the witch'. (His new wife) did as well, yeah, 'we're going to take you back to the witch's now.'

Interviewer Do you think with that kind of relationship between them there would ever have been a time when you'd felt you could have enjoyed it, or do you think?

Respondent I think...if they hadn't have slagged off each other...if they'd said nice things about each other I would have probably enjoyed going up there more. Maybe I might have thought I've betrayed my mum if I'd actually enjoyed going up there, there would have been a feeling of betrayal, that I've betrayed my mum by going to the bad peoples' house.

30577(F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

This suggests that it is important for resident parents not merely to encourage contact with the non-resident parent but, if they cannot bring themselves to portray that parent positively, at least not to give the child a negative picture.

As in the telephone survey, few respondents taking part in the face to face interviews said that their resident parent discouraged or undermined contact, and/or the relationship with the non-resident parent.

Interviewer So you wouldn't say that your mum encouraged your relationship with your dad?

Respondent Oh god no, certainly not. I remember there was specific examples where she would come in and try and do these crude impressions of my dad, trying to mock him when he wasn't there, and I couldn't ever...bear in mind I was constantly telling her how I wanted to go and stay with dad, that wasn't so accommodating to her wishes so she never encouraged it.

Interviewer Did she talk negatively about him in front of you?

Respondent Yeah, always. There wasn't ever any positive thing that was said after the breakup.

20156 (M, 9, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Respondent I think he came down most weekends. My mum made it very, very difficult. She used to try and get me to go out. She used to pay my friends to take me out, take me swimming.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

- Respondent* *I think part of it was to give them time to talk on an adult side of it, but I do think part of it was so he couldn't see me and maybe put his views as much about how he viewed the situation.*
- Interviewer* *So he would come to see you and your mum would engineer it so that you would be out?*
- Respondent* *Yes.*
- Interviewer* *Would you say that your mum encouraged your relationship with your dad?*
- Respondent* *No. On the basis that she was always trying to get me to go out. There may have been other reasons, that they needed to talk, but I don't think it was encouraged.*
- Interviewer* *Did you feel able to talk openly about your dad with your mum?*
- Respondent* *No. She took down all the photos of him. I kept finding them and putting them back up and she'd take them down and hide them somewhere else. So no I don't feel like I could talk.*

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Some of these respondents were loath to be overtly critical, saying they could understand why that parent had behaved as they had. Nonetheless they clearly felt it had made contact difficult, or, very occasionally, impossible. In the most extreme example, one young man described how his mother's attitude resulted in him refusing contact for a couple of years.

- Respondent* *When issues were going on with the separation and stuff my mother painted a picture of my dad doing everything wrong. When you're at that age you learn how to dislike things....I've always liked him, I've always been close to him, but I was made to not like him, even though I always had a bond with him....We were given a picture of a monster really. It was just a picture of someone who did something really bad to us so we were just developed not to respect him so we wouldn't want to see him.. I think a solicitor asked us 'do you want to see your father' but through all the mental games played by both of them my mother made us say no, we don't want to see him.*
- Interviewer* *At the time, did you feel that was what you wanted or were you aware...?*
- Respondent:* *I was so young that without the changing opinion I would have wanted to see him because I had such a strong bond with him but with all the dirty laundry was put in front of us it kind of changed our opinions.*
- Interviewer:* *So you were then saying you didn't want to see him, but part of you was saying really I do?*
- Respondent:* *Part of me was lost. We just didn't know what to do. After months and months of being told that your father's done this, he's done that*

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact ceased when father moved abroad)

But, as discussed in chapter 13, this respondent also acknowledged that his father *had* behaved appallingly and he sympathised with his mother's response to his father's adulterous affairs and domestic violence. Some of the others reporting discouragement or undermining behaviour similarly indicated there had been concerns about domestic violence or excessive drinking, while others thought it was purely due to the resident parent's feelings about their ex-partner and the separation.

In any event, as we reported earlier in relation to encouragement by the resident parent, discouragement was not necessarily determinative. Most respondents reporting a negative attitude on the part of the resident parent nonetheless maintained a relationship with the non-resident parent. Of the cases cited above, for instance, respondent 20788 enjoyed what time he was allowed to have with his dad, and would have liked more, while respondent 20156 actually moved to live with his dad. Indeed, as we discuss in chapter 14, sometimes the greatest long-term impact was on the respondent's own relationship with the *resident* parent.

In between these two extremes of active encouragement and, far less commonly, discouragement, were resident parents who were portrayed as taking a more neutral, permissive, position, leaving it up to the child whether or not they had contact.

Interviewer *You said that in spite of things that had happened your mum was happy for you to see your dad. Did your mum encourage your relationship?*

Respondent *She didn't discourage it, but she wasn't proactive.*

Interviewer: *So she left it to you?*

Respondent: *Yes.*

20791 (F, 14, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact, reduced over time)

Respondent *She never tried stopping me, it was always, 'he's your dad, you can see him if you want.'*

11445 (M, 8, 21, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Since contact in some of these cases either ceased, was delayed or was interrupted, it might be argued that the underlying message was '*you can see your dad if you want but I would rather you didn't*', which had the effect of the child withdrawing from contact. However our data emphatically does not support this interpretation. Most respondents in those circumstances gave us perfectly understandable reasons for their position, such as parental unreliability, poor quality contact or even physical or emotional abuse. One of the respondents cited above (20791), for instance, had a non-resident father who was frequently drunk, sponged off her for money and subjected her to emotional blackmail by threatening suicide. She found the courage to stop face to face contact for a year, only resuming it out of a sense of obligation.

Interviewer *How do you feel in retrospect? You had four years, when you were still a child, of fairly unrewarding contact. Was it worth it? Would you do anything different, knowing what you know now?*

Respondent: *I think I wouldn't have wasted me time and I mightn't have had so much student debt if I hadn't given him so much money. I think I still feel some sense of obligation to me dad and I think that's what led the contact, the emotional blackmail that was coming from him. I'd like to think I would have told him to get stuffed and I wouldn't have anything to do with him, but I wouldn't have done that. Even now I still think he's got some sort of hold.*

20791 (F, 14, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact, reduced over time)

Domestic violence and specific concerns about parenting

Anna and Susan's cases, in other respects so very different, were similar in that neither involved domestic violence or specific welfare concerns such as child abuse, mental illness or substance abuse. As will be evident from the material presented above, however, some of our respondents were less fortunate. In the telephone survey, 21% of those who had on-going contact or whose main experience had been shared residence identified such issues. The proportion in the interview sample was about the same and, as in the survey sample, these respondents' experience of contact were typically quite poor. Indeed in most instances – as in cases 10901 and 20791, cited above, and as discussed further in chapter 12 - respondents themselves opted to end or suspend contact.

For a few respondents, concerns about violence, excessive drinking or bizarre behaviour meant that they did not feel safe with the non-resident parent. One young woman, whose father, as well as being violent to her mother, had knocked the respondent's front teeth out when she was three, had to steel herself to go and see him for a short visit about once a year. She remained afraid of him throughout the six years she and her sister had contact, even though he was now disabled and they only saw him at their grandmother's house. Those visits, she recalls, were 'very stilted'.

Respondent *I was frightened...I was still worried I think that he would trap us in the house, and he wouldn't let us go.*

Interviewer *So you really thought he might try and kidnap you on one of these visits?*

Respondent *Yeah, or he would at least trap us in the house. My grandmother is a tiny woman, she's not much taller than me, she's very petite and slender, she's not a match for him, so in our mind-set we were thinking if he really wanted to trap us he could, we're all tiny women and he could...*

Interviewer *So you had to really get up your courage to do those visits?*

Respondent *Yeah, but it was this sense of well he is still our dad, and from our grandmother we heard that he's not particularly good at walking anymore, and that physical frailty helped in a way of reassuring us that he wouldn't be able to overpower us. But there was still that kind of but what if he's faking it, or what if he can, he might sit on us or something, the logic went out the window but there was still that fear.*

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Had this respondent's father, who she described as 'an idiot', behaved more appropriately, it is possible that she and her sister would have been able to overcome their residual fear. Instead he seems to have done his best to reinforce it.

Respondent *The common thing was that we would go there, we'd make the effort to go down and see him, but as soon as he opened the door he would for fun try and hit us, because he got... it sounds so awful, but he thought it was really funny to scare us.*

Interviewer *How old would you be then?*

Respondent *11-ish.*

Interviewer *So you'd have made the initial contact, you'd phone him up to say, 'we're going to come round and see you'?*

Respondent *Yeah, we'd phone up my grandmother, his mum, and say, 'we're thinking about*

Taking a longer view of contact

coming down to see dad, mum's going to drop us off'. ... You would open the door, and instead of greeting us with a hug or a kiss or thanks for coming down, he would take a mock swing at us, and frighten the living daylights out of us. We'd say, 'Nan we want to go home, we want to go home, we want to go home' and it would last 10 minutes, and then that would be it for another year.

Interviewer Did any of the visits end up happily, can you remember?

Respondent I don't remember any of them ending up happily, I remember actually after a few years we were old enough that we didn't need our grandmother to drive us home, so we would walk home, and we'd be laughing on the way home, just saying 'can you believe this guy, we give him everything on a plate, we tell him that if he'll basically repent his sins type thing we would forgive him in a heartbeat,' and he goes and bloody ruins it again.

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Another young woman, who had regular weekend stays with her father, recalled how frightened she was of his angry outbursts when he was drunk, which he tended to be most evenings, as he had been when the family was still intact.

Interviewer So did he say horrible things to you or was it just constant criticism?

Respondent I don't really remember, I just remember silly things like he treated my brother differently to me and if he was going to blow up at someone it was at me and it wasn't necessarily criticising me but it was something to do with me, I'd done something wrong or... I just remember feeling very uncomfortable and I felt like it was unfair, like why was I being shouted at when (my brother) wasn't and he'd done exactly, we hadn't done anything differently and it was because of the drink. If he'd been shouting at me sober it would have been different, but because he was drunk when he was doing it and he used to go on and on and on and you couldn't stop him, I think that scared me. It wasn't like a normal parent telling a child off, it was a drunken, it was drunken abuse but not necessarily about me, just a constant barrage of shouting and I suppose it probably reminded me of when I was at home and it had been with mum and now it suddenly was on me and I didn't want to be that person that was getting that, so I took myself out of the situation. I couldn't cope with it, I was scared of him, I didn't, not physically, like I didn't feel like he was going to hit me or anything, not violent, but just the... I was too young to know what to say and it would just upset me.

Interviewer So when you, you'd go in on a Friday, were you aware of being anxious about what it might be like?

Respondent Not initially, but as the time went on, yes, especially as Friday when he picked us up it was already coming up to evening and it meant it was pretty much going to be guaranteed to start soon.

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

This respondent said she would have been prepared to continue with day-time contact, because by the time her father started drinking she would be going home. However her father's intransigence and his angry reaction, caused her to stop seeing him entirely.

For some other respondents, however, it was not that they felt unsafe, rather that the drinking or the history of violence affected how they felt about the non-resident parent, which then adversely affected their ability to derive much benefit from contact. One young woman, for

instance, describes being 'angry and frustrated' about her father's alcoholism, even though she never felt unsafe in his presence. She also described her father as 'an idiot'.

Respondent He was given chance after chance to change his ways, but he's a selfish person, and selfish people never change, they always think about what makes them happy, they never make anyone want to help anyone or they'll always pity themselves, and I hate... one of the things out of it, out of my whole experience has been is I hate people that self-pity themselves, oh poor me, just not the type of person I want to be around. ..He still drinks heavily, never learns, and he's... because my dad got with someone else, after they got divorced, and she died of sclerosis of the liver his partner, and that wasn't enough to change him, so I don't really like him. It's like your mother getting lung cancer and you carry on smoking, and if they died from it and you not stopping smoking it's like so disrespectful it's unreal.

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

What was noticeable about these cases, however, was that, irrespective of the nature of the concerns, they almost never occurred in the context of relationships which were otherwise strong nor where the non-resident parent was seen to be making an effort to make contact a rewarding experience for the child and to demonstrate their commitment. The young woman above, for instance (13667), said that at the age of 11 or 12 she used to have to go to find her father in the pub and would then spend several hours sitting there with him.

Interviewer Did he ever take you to the cinema or go bowling?

Respondent No, that's too nice, that's too normal.

Interviewer It would just be a question of...

Respondent My dad is the type of person that was born in X, lives in X, worked from X, grow old in X, die in X.

Interviewer It would be sitting in a pub in X with him?

Respondent Yeah.

Interviewer Nothing more?

Respondent No.

Interviewer For how long, how many hours did you have this?

Respondent I think we met him at 12 o'clock, probably leave about 6, go to the Chinese and go back to his.

Interviewer You'd be sitting around for six hours?

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Similarly, respondent 20791, whose father drank to excess, rang her up when he was drunk threatening suicide and borrowed money from her when he was broke, said all they ever did on contact days was go to pubs.

Respondent I never had what I would consider proper contact, proper time with him.

Interviewer *What would that have been?*

Respondent: *I suppose spending time together, having a cup of tea or a meal, going for a walk.*

However, she added,

But we probably didn't spend any time together when he was at home, either. He did some volunteer work when I was probably 10 or 11 and I can remember going with him a couple of times. That all went tits up, obviously, because of the issues he had. And now I'm wondering whether it was at that time I realised I wasn't going to have any proper time with my dad and maybe distanced myself a bit from him.

20791 (F, 14, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact, ad hoc, reduced over time)

Other respondents also described distant, fearful or hostile pre-separation relationships with the parent who became non-resident. Indeed several of them were cited in chapter 9 as examples of poor pre-separation relationships. The father of respondent 10901, for instance, dropped in and out of his children's lives. Respondent 13667 memorably described her father as '*just the man who lived there*', who was '*quite distant*' from the rest of '*our little family*', spent much of his time at the pub and when he was at home had his own little room to watch TV. Respondent 30483's father worked away much of the time, and when he was home was '*quite detached*'. Such relationships would have provided a very insubstantial foundation for post-separation contact, and even without the specific problems identified, contact was unlikely to be a positive experience.

There were only a few exceptions to this. One respondent, for instance, who terminated contact after her father assaulted her during a contact visit, had been very close to him before the separation, but was unable to cope with the dramatic change in his personality and behaviour in the aftermath. In contrast, another respondent, who had also been very close to her father, maintained a relationship and even enjoyed her contact visits, despite her father resorting to drink after the break-up. It was notable that this respondent was in no doubt about her father's commitment to his children either before or after separation. As she put it '*We were his life*' and '*he was a really good dad*'.

Summary and discussion

The data from the telephone survey suggested that a positive experience of contact was more likely when a number of conditions were met: a close pre-separation relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent; continuity of contact; little or no post-separation conflict between the parents; absence of concerns about domestic violence or the non-resident parent's care of the child; the resident parent's active encouragement of the relationship; the child's involvement in decision-making; the non-resident parent being perceived to have '*made time*' for the child; the child feeling at home at the non-resident's parent's home and either the non-resident parent not re-partnering, or there being a good relationship between the child and the new partner. This chapter, based on in-depth interviews, has confirmed and added to these findings, and provided a vivid and deeper understanding of the ingredients of successful and less successful contact.

We started the chapter by recounting the contrasting stories of Anna, whose parents seem to have followed a recipe, almost to the letter, for how to make contact a deeply unpleasant experience for her, and Susan, whose parents, whether by luck or natural good judgement, got it '*right*'. Susan always had plenty to do when she went to visit her non-resident mother, who arranged joint activities. Other respondents who were positive about contact similarly

reported their non-resident parent making the effort to ensure contact was an enjoyable, child-focused, experience. Trinder and colleagues (2002) report that younger children tended to enjoy contact that was activity-based, while research with adolescents has found that they looked forward to contact visits more if they were organised with a great diversity of activities (Struss et al, 2001). Buchanan and colleagues' study of litigated contact (2001) reports that half the children said the best thing about contact was what they did.

Contact was less pleasurable for those, like Anna, who were often bored, left to their own devices or had to fit in with adult priorities, including sitting in a pub for hours on end. Boredom has also been reported as a problem by researchers who have interviewed children and young people (Dunn, 2001; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Smart, 2000; Trinder et al, 2002). The fact that many of our respondents recalled this, often well into adulthood, indicates its salience. Not that they necessarily wanted their contact time to be a constant round of activities; some emphasised the need for a degree of normality (see also Butler et al, 2003) and, as research with children has found (Buchanan et al, 2001; McDonald, 1990; Walczak and Burns, 1984), for some the most important thing was simply being with the non-resident parent. However, as Wade and Smart point out, *'Spending time with a parent who...is unable to communicate commitment beyond the simple fact of their presence can...be painful'* ((2002, p16).

Children in intact families can also be bored of course; family life cannot simply revolve around them and they do sometimes have to fit in with what adults need or want to do. But where children only have a limited amount of time with one parent it is understandable if they want this time to be 'special' and want the non-resident parent to at least make some effort to accommodate them, rather than vice-versa. Whether or not children are bored, then, may not simply be a statement of fact, but also have a symbolic meaning, indicating whether they feel the non-resident parent cares enough about them to make the effort to make contact interesting. As Struss and colleagues comment 'it is reasonable to assume that children gauge the interest of their non-custodial parent by the extent to which the visit is organised, the diversity of activities and the high level of involvement by the parent' (Struss et al, 2001, p83).

Respondents also used other litmus tests to gauge the non-resident's parent's emotional investment in the relationship, which affected how positive an experience contact was for them. Making an effort to see the child, being willing to change their own arrangements to accommodate the child and keeping to agreed arrangements, were all viewed as demonstrating the importance of contact to the non-resident parent. As previous research has demonstrated (Dunn, 2003; Mitchell, 1985; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Smart et al, 2001; Walczak and Burns, 1984), parental unreliability with respect to contact can be distressing for children. Some can cope with this – in the telephone survey, 39% of those who had continuous contact but who said it was 'very true' that they could not rely on the non-resident parent seeing them when they said they would nonetheless said their experience of contact was very positive. However for some, like Anna, it was an indicator that they were peripheral in the non-resident parent's life.

Research with children indicates that they often feel marginalised by the presence of new partners or other children in the non-resident parent's household (Butler et al, 2003; Dunn, 2003; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Smart et al, 2001; Smith et al, 2001). Dunn, for example, (2003) reports that half the children interviewed felt they came second to new half siblings

and 45% to step-children. However, while some of our respondents – including Anna - said this had been an issue, it was not a major feature of the interviews.

The interview data, however, does bear out research with children on the challenges to contact posed by the non-resident parent's re-partnering (Butler et al, 2003; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Smith et al, 2001; Trinder et al, 2002) and also research with young adults (Ahrons, 2004). It is also very much in line with the findings from the telephone survey that where there was no new partner, or where the respondent felt they had got on well with them, contact was more likely to be a positive experience. It was noticeable, however, that those who reported difficulties almost never admitted to their own feelings of jealousy or being pushed aside underlying their dislike of the new partner (Ahrons, 2004; Smart et al, 2001) while acknowledging that their own feelings – about the new partner's responsibility for the separation, or anxiety about upsetting the resident parent – played a part. Typically respondents talked of simply disliking the new partner, or of being offended by their behaviour, such as trying to take on a parental role or badmouthing the resident parent. Such tensions could make respondents reluctant to visit the non-resident parent's home (see also Butler et al, 2003) or in some instances suspend or terminate contact. Other research has found that contact is less likely to be regular or frequent where the non-resident parent re-partners (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Wikeley, 2001). For the most part, however, it seemed it was just something respondents had to learn to live with. Research with children indicates that they rarely discussed the difficulties with either of their parents (Peacey and Hunt, 2009) and certainly few of our adult respondents said that this had happened.

The presence of a new partner was one of the factors affecting whether respondents felt at home at their non-resident parent's, another key theme in their descriptions of what contact had been like for them. This reflected the findings from the telephone survey in which those who reported difficulties with a new partner were least likely to say they felt equally at home and respondents who did feel equally at home were more likely to report that contact had been a very positive experience. Feeling at home was also linked to having regular overnight stays. Indeed for some respondents the main advantage of staying over was that they felt they had two homes rather than, as most children are reported to feel (Butler et al, 2003, p132), having one 'real' home, with the non-resident parent's home being somewhere they simply visited. Staying overnight, however, was not invariably a sufficient condition: it was also important that the non-resident parent's home was 'homely'.

Somewhat surprisingly only a few respondents in the face to face interviews mentioned difficulties arising out of different ways of doing things in the two households, since in the telephone survey there was a statistically significant association between this and not feeling equally at home. It is also an issue highlighted in some previous research – Smart and colleagues (2001, p130) report that adapting to different regimes could require '*an astonishing amount of flexibility*', that children '*almost became different people*' and that it could '*upset children's sense of ontological security*'. Although that research largely focused on children in shared residence arrangements, which may explain the difference, two studies of young adults, most of whom had been in more traditional arrangements (Ahrons, 2004 and Marquardt, 2005) also highlight the difficulties of adapting to different regimes and the risk of never fully belonging.

The importance of the quality of the parental relationship to children's experience of contact is a persistent theme in research with children (Bagshaw, 2007; Buchanan et al, 2001; Butler et al, 2003; Dunn, 2003; Hogan et al, 2003; Lodge and Alexander, 2010; Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Smart et al, 2001; Trinder et al, 2002; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Children struggle

when they are involved in their parents' battles by, for instance, hearing their parents denigrate each other, being quizzed about the other parent; being asked to pass on 'bad messages' or keep secrets; when they are unable to talk about one parent to the other; when their loyalties are torn; when they are not given the emotional permission to enjoy contact. Smart and colleagues (2001, p65) report that *'the most commonly expressed regrets...were that their parents could not get along better'*. Similarly, Butler et al (2003, p137) write of *'an overwhelming feeling...that it helped where parents could communicate and negotiate reasonably or were at least able to be civil to each other when making arrangements'*.

The young adults in our study, who had varying experiences of parental conflict, resoundingly endorsed these messages. Those fortunate enough, like Susan, to have parents who did manage to stay on reasonable terms were highly appreciative of this, often comparing themselves favourably to those with more conflicted parents. Those at the other end of the spectrum, such as Anna, were often trapped in chronic conflict. Even where conflict was not overt respondents were often acutely aware of the tension between their parents (Lodge and Alexander, 2010). As with difficulties with non-resident parents' new partners, however, respondents rarely seem to have discussed the distress the conflict was causing them with their parents.

Respondents' experiences of contact were sometimes negatively coloured by memories of domestic violence between their parents, their own abuse or the non-resident parent's excessive drinking or mental illness. For some this meant that contact felt unsafe; for others it affected the way they felt about the non-resident parent, which then impacted on their experience of contact. Their response bears out Sturge and Glaser's advice to the family courts that contact with a resident parent who has engaged in domestic violence is very often psychologically damaging (Sturge and Glaser, 2000). Typically the pre-separation relationship was already poor and post-separation there was often little sense that the non-resident parent was making an effort to make contact a positive experience for the child. Not surprisingly, almost all of these respondents had withdrawn from contact, either permanently or for a period. As Smart comments (Smart et al, 2001, p62), writing about children who had substantially reduced or broken off contact with an 'oppressive' parent: *'when one parent is systematically undermining or disrupting relations of care and respect in a family, children may opt to pare down their family and put their energies into developing and sustaining good family relationships with their remaining kin'*.

The issue of gate-keeping by resident parents in relation to children's contact has attracted a considerable amount of research attention, although often focused on restrictive, 'gate-closing' rather than facilitative, gate-opening, behaviours and typically limited to resident mothers. Data from the telephone survey confirmed the importance of this to both the continuity of contact and how positive an experience it was for respondents. Where contact had been continuous the respondent was more likely to say that the resident parent had encouraged the relationship 'a lot' than where it had been disrupted, while those who reported such active facilitation were also more likely to describe their experience as positive.

The qualitative data presented in this chapter reinforces these findings and supports Trinder's conceptualisation of the range of gate-keeping behaviours (Trinder et al, 2002; Trinder, 2008). Some described resident parents encouraging them to see the non-resident parent, sometimes when the respondents were reluctant to do so, speaking only of that parent in positive terms, never putting obstacles in the way and trying to resolve problems. These equate to Trinder's *pro-active gate-openers*. This group of resident parents included some

who were reported to have had concerns over the non-resident parent's ability to look after the child or where there was a history of domestic violence (*contingent gate-openers*). Some resident parents were said to have taken a permissive approach, neither encouraging nor discouraging contact but making it clear it was up to the child (*passive gate-keepers*). In some instances this approach allowed the child to delay, suspend or terminate contact. However it was very clear from respondents' accounts that they were not doing this in response to negative messages from the resident parent – all produced valid independent reasons for their own decisions. There were also a few examples of resident parents who were said to have discouraged or sought to undermine the relationship (*pro-active gate-closing*). While contact had not necessarily been disrupted it nonetheless made it very difficult. In some of these cases the resident parent had concerns about their ex-partner due to domestic violence or alcohol abuse (*justifiable gate-closing*); in others the respondent was not aware of any such concerns and attributed their behaviour to their feelings about the non-resident parent and the separation (*pro-active gate-closing*).

The material presented in this chapter, however, also shows that encouragement of the relationship is not necessarily sufficient to ensure that contact continues or is a positive experience for the child – some respondents described resisting the persistent efforts of the resident parent to persuade them to have contact. Conversely, discouragement by the resident parent did not necessarily result in contact being a negative experience or in it being disrupted.

What did seem clear, however, from both the quantitative and the qualitative data, was that gate-closing behaviour is unusual. As far as our sample of young adults were concerned, the norm was either for the resident parent to encourage the relationship with the non-resident parent or for him/her to allow the child to make their own decision.

Chapter 12 Children's Agency

The next two chapters discuss a number of questions in the in-depth interviews designed to address the fourth of our research aims – to consider how far children were able to express their own views about their post-separation upbringing and the extent to which those views were taken into account. Underlying this aim was a wish to explore how active a part children play in influencing their parents' post-separation arrangements. This chapter assesses the extent to which the respondents, as children, had been involved in the decision-making relating to their residence and contact arrangements. Chapter 13 explores whether respondents had been able to form their own views regarding these matters and their own current thoughts about consulting children.

Children's involvement in initial decisions about residence

Our research focused on contact arrangements rather than matters to do with children's residence arrangements. Nevertheless, respondents' recollections emphasised the strong linkage between the two issues. Deciding which parent would provide the children's principal home was the crucial precursor to organising contact – the one predicated the other. If parents later changed their respective roles, with the child subsequently moving their principal home from one to the other (as they did in 13 of our interview cases), contact arrangements with the now non-resident parent needed negotiating. Given this strong connection, we included in our in-depth interviews questions designed to explore matters to do with decision-making over residence.

Respondents often had no recollection of any real consultation, in the period around the separation, over where they were to live on separation. This matter was often just something their parents decided, or it just happened.

Interviewer *You were 9 when they separated, can you ever remember them sitting you down and explaining things to you?*

Respondent *No, I think it was more ... my mum just said, me and your father have decided that he is going to not live with us no more, and you will be staying with me,' and then I said to her, 'well how come?' And she just said, 'we just decided.'*

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Even some of those who had been teenagers when their parents separated seemed to accept that their residence arrangements had been driven by the practicalities of their parents' lives.

Interviewer *The fact that you stayed living with your mum do you know how that was decided or was it just...?*

Respondent *I think it was just space wise, I think we had the house, mum and dad had arranged that we kept the house until we'd finished school, so that we always had a roof over our heads. So I think it was just a space issue.*

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer *How was it decided that you would stay with your mum rather than your dad?*

Respondent *I don't know, I think it was just decided. Mum was at home by herself, mum was at home full time anyway, so I would imagine they wouldn't want to rock the boat. Dad worked, he earned quite well so he could still afford to support us.*

Interviewer But you don't remember there ever being an issue over it?

Respondent No, I can't remember there being debates about that. I think that's just what they decided.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

On the other hand, some of those who did recall having been consulted over their future residence arrangements clearly felt they had influenced their parents with their strong views on the matter.

Interviewer You said it was your decision who you lived with was it?

Respondent Yes.

Interviewer Would you say completely your decision or was it everybody making part of the decision or how was that?

Respondent I think if I'd have strongly said I want to live with my dad mum would have probably put up a fight, but as long as that was what I truly wanted I'm sure that's what would have been, but yes I believe it was my decision...

Interviewer Do you think at that age you were quite clear in your mind who you wanted to live with?

Respondent Yes, yes, yes. The way I saw my day-to-day and the way my life was it just was all with, not all, that's going to sound wrong, all with mum, but mum was always part of it, you know, dad was an evening, you know, I'd kind of go out with him of a weekend, like with my brothers and stuff and mum obviously, but mum was the one making me breakfast, getting me ready for school, picking me up, if I wanted to go around my mates house she was the one taking me, just generally being my mum...

10042 (M, 10, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

This choice was sometimes explained in terms of their pre-separation home, school, neighbourhood and friends, rather than which parent they would live with.

Respondent They said 'dad will be buying a new house and it's up to you if you want to live with dad or live with mum'. I decided I wanted to stay with mum, only because I didn't want to move house. I had my house and my bedroom and I didn't want to move. So if it had been my dad stayed in the house I would have stayed with him. It was purely that I didn't want my life to change.

Interviewer If your dad had stayed in the house you would have stayed with him?

Respondent Yes, because I just desperately didn't want to move house.

Interviewer What was that about - the stability?

Respondent Yes, I think so, my house and I had my best friend across the road and my school was within walking distance and I didn't want to go anywhere...they did go back and forth between for a while, thinking who's going to stay in the house. I said 'I'm not going anyway, this is my house, I'm staying here'.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

One respondent stressed that being given the choice over which parent to live with could be deeply problematic for a relatively young child. He had not expressed his true wishes when given such a choice aged 10 and had deeply regretted the decision he finally made.

Respondent I went through quite a rough period... We were both [respondent and younger brother] closer to my mum, they gave me like the choice, I think they gave my brother the choice as well. He wanted to go with mum and that was in my heart really where I wanted to go but as a youngster this is where it all went wrong really. I was given the choice but I felt like I had to stay with my dad – that one had to go with one and that one had to stay with the other because I didn't want dad to be hurt, but really ... I made a decision that has harmed me for the rest of my life. I then stayed with my dad and he couldn't look after me... it affected him so much that he couldn't even look after himself let alone a 10, 11 or 12 year old boy... All I remember is feeling it was my duty to stay with my dad. I wanted my little brother to have the priority parent and I felt that dad needed someone there with him, although I was closer to my mum.

30205 (M, 10, 28, residence changed father to mother; continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF)

Some felt that making such a choice might hurt the apparently rejected parent and for this reason, one respondent was grateful for not having been asked at all.

Respondent It wasn't discussed whether we wanted to live with mum. But I was quite happy to stay with dad.

Interviewer So if you had been asked you would have said dad.

Respondent Yes. And in fact I'm glad I wasn't asked because I think it might have upset people if you had said I want to live with...I was glad I didn't get asked. Definitely. Because I wouldn't want to upset mum or dad. Even though they would probably say we won't be hurt I know that they would be.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Bearing out these fears, one respondent found that choosing which parent to live with damaged her future relationship with the parent she had apparently turned down. The non-resident mother effectively cut off communication with her daughter for a period of two years after the respondent's 'decision,' aged eleven, to remain with her father.

Respondent Apparently I was asked at the time which parent I wanted to live with and I chose my dad. I don't remember being asked that but...

Interviewer Who told you that?

Respondent My mum.

Interviewer Was she cross about that – did she tell you subsequently that she had been cross?

Respondent Yes she makes it clear that I chose my dad over her – whenever it's come up. That's how it's been put.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Although for some respondents, choosing which parent they wanted to live had been damaging, others considered that they should have been given such a choice.

Interviewer *You moved to live with your dad when you were 16. It sounds as if you would have liked to move before that.*

Respondent *If I'd had the choice I would have stayed at the same school and lived with my dad... I know that my dad would have said yes to me living with him...*

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Children's involvement in initial decisions about contact

In the telephone survey, as reported in chapter 3, a very varied picture emerged of children's involvement in decision-making about contact. While respondents rarely claimed any responsibility for there never having been any contact or for contact being sporadic (9% and 13% respectively), they were much more likely to feel they had played some part in contact ceasing (33%) or starting after an initial delay (46%). Far more said they had been involved in the decision for residence to be shared (50%) and 65% of those who had had continuous contact throughout their childhood said they had been involved in the details of the contact arrangements. Most of this group who had not been involved in the decision-making (46 of 55, 84%) had felt that their parents had taken sufficient account of their wishes. As reported in chapter 6, this involvement appeared to be linked with this group rating their contact experience positively (82% of those who said they had been mainly or partly responsible for the contact decisions rated their experience of continuous contact as very or fairly positive, as did 72% of those who said their parents had taken due account of their views). The reverse also seemed to be true. Although relatively few of those who had had continuous contact (9) reported no involvement at all in the contact arrangements, none of them rated their experience of continuous contact positively. This suggests, at the very least, that an involvement in the decision-making gives children an investment in the arrangements – a reason to help make them work.

The in-depth interviews, in which we were able to look more closely at this issue, similarly revealed a very varied picture. At one end of the spectrum, the arrangements appeared to have been entirely determined by parents. At the other, they were very much driven by the children, including some cases where parents appeared to have completely abdicated responsibility.

Some respondents could not remember being consulted at all over the contact arrangements, particularly if they had been very young when their parents separated. As with decisions over future residence arrangements, this matter was just something their parents decided, or it just happened and the children complied unquestioningly. No real indignation was voiced over this lack of consultation; certainly none suggested that they had had a right to be involved in the decision-making – a right that had been infringed by their parents.

Interviewer *You have some memory of going back to stay [with father] in the holidays, do you have any sense of how that arrangement came about, why it was that you just went for holidays?*

Respondent *They would have discussed it between them, like whenever my dad was free and my mum maybe was doing something like, you know.*

Interviewer *Do you ever remember a time when you got involved in kind of making arrangements, or having a say?*

Respondent *No, I don't, no.*

Interviewer So pretty much they organised it between the two of them.

Respondent Yes and I kind of just went.

13494 (F, 2, 22, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer Would you have wanted to spend more time with your dad?

Respondent I would have gone every weekend.

Interviewer But you didn't say that?

Respondent No. I just accepted it was every other weekend.

Interviewer Did you feel you had no control over that, that this was something your parents had decided and you had to go along with that?

Respondent Yeah.

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

As noted earlier, some children had been reluctant to question their parents' decisions about the residence arrangements for fear of hurting the feelings of one or the other. Some recalled a similar reluctance to question their parents' decisions over contact.

Interviewer And you just accepted it [contact arrangements]. Right, why do you feel you didn't have a choice, because... you were a teenager by this point?

Respondent Yes but I was still dependant on my parents, you know ... I would never have said I don't want to go to my dad's, would never have said that.

Interviewer Why would you not have said that?

Respondent Well partly because I didn't really feel that strongly about it and also because I would have been aware that, you know, that would have been quite a hurtful thing to say.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, increased then decreased)

In contrast, some respondents were essentially in the driving seat. Often this occurred in situations where both parents had remained living relatively close to each other, were on reasonably amicable terms, and happy to accommodate their children's wishes. In some situations the arrangements were very fluid. In others, there might be a schedule, but parents were willing to be flexible. These situations normally involved cases where contact was continuous, thereby reflecting the responses to the telephone survey, which showed that it was this group of respondents who reported a high degree of mutuality over how the details of the arrangements had been decided (chapter 3). This mutuality and flexibility clearly contributed to their enjoyment of contact.

Interviewer Basically it sounds as if you just saw your dad right from the start whenever you wanted to?

Respondent Yeah, whenever, if we rang up and said, 'look I want to see you,' we would. He would make time, if it was the middle of the day then he would make time, or if it was the end of the day, if we were ill from school and mum had to go to work or whatever he would come round in his lunch break and look after us while he could and stuff like that, yeah it was fine.

Interviewer *So he was always available?*

Respondent *Yeah, he would make himself available, he still had a key so he could still let himself in to see us and stuff like that, they were quite civil about it, there wasn't... there was nothing, they weren't screaming at each other or anything like that, so it was nice.*

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer *When your parents separated ... you were living so close that you could see your dad whenever you wanted to?*

Respondent *Yeah... if I wanted to see my dad I could just ride my bike to my dad's house, it's not like we lived here and dad over there, which happens... I could just walk to my dad's house.*

Interviewer *So it sounds as if it all happened really very easily, the fact that you stayed with mum and you saw your dad as often as you wanted, and that arrangement stayed as it was?*

Respondent *It was more it was scheduled, as I said, every Wednesday and then every other weekend, but if we needed to go and see dad he didn't live far away so we could...*

Interviewer *So you didn't have round table discussion about well not that weekend but let's have another weekend?*

Respondent *Not really no, it was just...*

Interviewer *Just happened, and...*

Respondent *And we could always call our dad, use the phone and that, it wasn't a problem.*

30287 (M, 8, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

In some cases, however, children might have to organise contact themselves if their parents' relationships had effectively terminated on their separation and nothing had ever been established. As noted above, almost a third of respondents in the telephone survey sample whose contact had been delayed claimed sole responsibility for getting it started. For one of the respondents in our in-depth interviews, it was not until he reached adolescence that he felt sufficiently motivated to get in touch himself.

Interviewer *Who made the decision to do that [to get in touch with his father]?*

Respondent *Me.*

Interviewer *Had you been thinking about it for a long time?*

Respondent *I think it was just that week, I just started thinking about it, I thought I'd just...*

Interviewer *Why do you think it was when you got to 13?...*

Respondent *... it's never made me feel any different, it's just somebody, well my dad kept being brought up in conversation, like in the family if somebody said something, and I couldn't... I didn't know him at all, and obviously being my dad I thought that I've got to find out what he's like one day. I found out ...*

11340 (M, 1, 20, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then ceased)

Feeling free to make their own contact arrangements could, however, produce problems. For one respondent, it was simply part of a chaotic situation in which neither parents seemed able to take responsibility for any aspect of parenting.

Respondent It was an arrangement I think that came out of a complete lack of a decision that it just was and in that way I think it put a lot of pressure on me and my brother to kind of try and organise ourselves....Looking back it was just a complete lack of parenting, there was just no one except that every now and again mum would make me feel guilty because I hadn't seen enough of her, so I was kind of trying to keep everybody as happy as I could and make sure I was spending enough time there to keep mum happy but it never really was enough time and she would get upset and then I'd have to deal with that, and then there was dad at home crying and I didn't really want to have to deal with that. So I was, I was having to manage... keeping the grown-ups happy and getting on with my own life...

Interviewer Overall who would you say in reality was responsible for whether contact worked or not, was it all down to you?

Respondent That was my sense, for all I know they were having a conversation, but my sense was that dad put no restrictions on contact, nor did he get involved in any way, we were just left to do whatever and mum, apart from saying she'd like to see more of us, a kind of guiltiness going around ... she didn't ever come to dad and say 'I need to see more of my children can you make sure they come around'. No there wasn't any of that.

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

For another, such parental abdication of responsibility led to the respondent's complete inactivity because his own teenage pursuits seemed more attractive than spending time with his non-resident father.

Respondent Oh yes I was allowed to see him and that lot but it was, I was more interested in going out with my mates and getting pissed basically.

Interviewer So did you see him very much to begin with?

Respondent No, no not at all basically. I'd never go around and see him.

Interviewer So if you wanted to see your dad at that time it was entirely down to you to make the arrangement, to organise it?

Respondent If I wanted to see him, yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer So it was always like that, it was just down to you entirely.

Respondent Always down to me, just, if it was my choice and at that age I didn't want to...

30178 (M, 14, 24, residence changed several times – mother-father-mother-father - continuous but minimal contact each NRP)

In between these extremes, one respondent recalled being asked her opinion, but more in the sense of her parents checking out that she was happy with the arrangements that they had already decided on.

Interviewer Okay. And how was that sorted out [contact visits to Mum], was that your idea or your dad's or your mum's?

- Respondent* No that was their arrangement. Dad played Bridge on a Wednesday night so that's what stemmed the Wednesday me going to mum's.
- Interviewer* Yes, yes.
- Respondent* And the weekends just made sense I guess every second weekend you just alternate weekends, but yes that was their decision. I think they probably asked me if I was alright because it was always a very, you know, thing, but I was a child that wouldn't have a problem with much, I was very agreeable, you know.
- Interviewer* So it might have been their idea but they would have said are you okay with that?
- Respondent* Yes they were quite, very inclusive in the discussions it was just, you know, they'd obviously decided how it was going to happen but when they told me it was always do you want this, is it, you know, and forever saying we still love you this doesn't mean we don't love you, we still love you.

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

Respondents' willingness to comply with their parents' contact arrangements

Respondents provided a mixed picture of their readiness to comply with the contact arrangements established by their parents. A reluctance to comply was in some cases attributable to a child feeling that his/her relationship with a non-resident parent was not a particularly satisfactory one. One respondent (Anna in the case outlined at the beginning of chapter 11) vividly remembered pleading not to have to go to contact but being made to go:

- Respondent* I remember sitting on the top or the bottom step of my stairs crying because I didn't want to go. My mum used to have to pry me off the banister. So it was a bit of, I don't know, I suppose as a five year old a bit of disappointment towards her because she'd made me go.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Some of those who had been nearing adolescence when their parents separated recalled that their attitude to contact arrangements had been strongly driven by their interpretation of the reasons for their parents' separation. Seeing the non-resident parent's behaviour through a moral prism, they held him or her entirely responsible for the breakup: through various kinds of bad behaviour, such as unfaithfulness, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, mental instability or combinations of these features. Their judgemental approach could completely thwart any contact arranged by their parents. One respondent's anger over her father's behaviour led her to refuse initially to have any contact with him.

- Respondent* That was a big part of it for me when he left, because I knew how hard it was for my mum with my sister, and literally I remember when he'd left and it was a few days, and I was just 'how could he do that?'. At the time it wasn't so much about the fact that he'd left me, it was about the fact that he'd left my mum and my sister, and I was so angry with him, I was 'how can you do that to somebody who is struggling to keep their heads above water anyway, and then to have a child with a severe disability who is in and out of hospital?'...We didn't know whether she was going to live or going to die....After a few days of processing it I was like how could he do that? He's got a child who might possibly die and he has just upped and left, and it made me really angry, and then I didn't speak to him for ages after that....I was angry at him for leaving me to deal with that, because part of me was going well what if she does die? I'm going to be the one that has to pick up the pieces, I'm the one that mum is going to have to lean on, and I was thinking I was a 12 year old child, I shouldn't

have to be under that much pressure.

Interviewer *So is it fair to say that you blamed him for the separation?*

Respondent *Yeah, completely. I thought he was a coward for feeling, I understand that people get into situations and they find situations hard, and it's a struggle to deal with anything, especially when you've got a child like that. But for him to walk out I thought was the lowest thing he could have ever done.*

Interviewer *Did he ever explain or did anybody ever explain to you why he did?*

Respondent *He left because he was having an affair and he wanted to be with this woman, and obviously this woman had no strings, she had no kids, nothing, she'd split up with her husband, she had a house, she was free... he didn't have to worry about anything because she would do everything for him, and it was like well....I couldn't leave, my mum couldn't leave... it was like we were in some sort of cage, he'd found the key and got out and locked the rest of us in and had gone, and he didn't have to worry because he didn't have to deal with any of it after that....He walked out and got a pretty easy life...I didn't see him for about a year...I was I didn't want to see him, and I didn't talk to him for about four or five months after I found out that he'd had an affair.*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

As discussed further below, this respondent's parents did not attempt to make her see her father against her will. Like some others, they seemed to have realised that coercion would be counter-productive. A number of respondents recalled with some appreciation their parents making it clear that they would not be forced into any arrangements with which they were not happy. The feeling of flexibility this imported into the arrangements was considered very important to their own willingness to co-operate with contact arrangements.

Respondent *I liked the fact that I was never dictated to that you have to do this, or you have to see your parents then and that kind of thing.*

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent *I appreciated the fact that I was left to make my own decision, I think I would have reacted differently if it was forced upon me that I was to spend more time with my dad, or they said right that's it, you're with your mum the whole time, I wouldn't have liked it. I liked the fact that I could say well actually no I do want to see my dad, and as I said although I had the specific time with him I'm sure that if I ever wanted to see him, or didn't want to see him then that would also be the case as well as with mum as well.*

Interviewer *So having flexibility.*

Respondent *Yes, I enjoyed it and I think it played a big part in me being at ease with the situation, obviously it upset me that my mum and dad wasn't together anymore and it did have a negative impact on the pair of them, obviously they were both upset, but for me it was good. Yes it was good for me, it was good for me personally.*

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

One respondent's mother seems to have been aware that any attempt to insist on her daughter having contact would have damaged their own relationship.

- Interviewer* *Your mum obviously didn't think an awful lot of your dad, and yet you were going for contact, how was that, did she ever try to stop it?*
- Respondent* *No, no, no, because it was my decision, it wasn't hers, I wouldn't let...*
- Interviewer* *Even when you were quite little?*
- Respondent* *If I want to do something I will do it, I won't let anyone stop me and I will do it....If I wanted to keep in contact with someone I will...Sometimes I just couldn't be bothered...*
- Interviewer* *Right. So nobody was making you go, it was your choice to go?...And she didn't make you go.*
- Respondent* *No.*
- Interviewer* *Do you think your mum should have pushed you more to go?*
- Respondent* *If she did I would have resented her to do that.*
- Interviewer* *Okay.*
- Respondent* *I think she was doing it more of so I wouldn't hate her. She'd do it in a way that would be comfortable for me, so it wouldn't be you're forcing me to do this I don't like it, so I'm going to dislike you.*

13887 (F, 1, 23, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

The respondent quoted earlier who had initially refused to have contact with her 'blameworthy' father (case no. 13892) recalled that being left alone to sort out her emotions for herself led her to reconsider her opposition to any contact with him.

- Respondent* *It took a lot of time for me to come round to the fact that I wanted to see him ... my mum had always said, "It's up to you, I'm never going to stop you from seeing your dad, I'm not going to stop you from speaking to him...when you're ready then you can go." But she said, "I'm not going to force you to go and see him," and I think that was the good thing, because I went in my own time, whereas had I been forced to go and see him I know that I would have never have gone back.*
- Interviewer* *You felt it was completely your choice?*
- Respondent* *It was.*
- Interviewer* *There was no pressure from either side?*
- Respondent* *No, not at all, wasn't forced from anyone. Mum never said, 'You have to go.' He never said, 'You have to go,' it was literally all in my own time. He would say, 'You're welcome, any time you want to come up I'll come and collect you, it's not a problem,' ...and I was never forced, which I think was a good thing, because I think had I have been forced I would have been more reluctant to go up again, because I'd be like, 'You forced me into this situation.'*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued).

Children's involvement in negotiating changes to residence and contact arrangements

It was apparent that most respondents tended to comply with what their parents had decided over both residence and contact - at least at first. But some later refused to co-operate; they simply decided not to continue living with the parent decided upon, or not to comply with the

contact arrangements – and sometimes they refused to comply with both. While the reasons respondents gave for such decisions were varied, two recurred in many of their accounts.

The first related to their increasing unhappiness with their relationship with one or both parents – so much so that they found the residence and/or contact arrangements overwhelmingly oppressive. As discussed above, some, when older, had seen their parents' relationship breakdown through a moral prism and had felt considerable anger over the non-resident parent's apparent culpability. Their anger led them to reject the initial arrangements: they refused to live with the parent concerned or to have any contact at all with him or her – or both. Others who started complying with such arrangements could not forget their anger, which led to later demands for changes both to residence and contact arrangements.

A second reason for a child wanting to change their arrangements related to one or both of their parents repartnering and to their relationship with the new partner. In some cases this relationship was very poor and greatly undermined their ability to tolerate the residence and/or contact arrangements.

A third reason did not figure in accounts of challenges to residence arrangements but was referred to very frequently in the context of changing the terms of contact arrangements. This related to children growing older and finding that contact arrangements they had tolerated when they were younger clashed with their social engagements.

Involvement in changes to residence arrangements

Respondents' accounts suggest that children decided to change their living arrangements far less often than the terms of their contact. Nevertheless a surprisingly large number of the interview sample (11; 22%) had changed their residence at least once, some several times. The practical difficulties involved in swapping homes probably partly explains why such decisions were normally only reached by older children. Often it is only on reaching adolescence that children feel sufficiently confident to demonstrate their growing capacity for autonomy by claiming the right to decide for themselves aspects of their future upbringing.

One respondent decided to change his residence arrangements because he wanted to be 'fair' to each parent, a decision, which, as discussed in chapter 10, he later regretted because of his father's continued violence towards his brother.

Respondent *I was about 15 when I decided to move in with my dad because I felt guilty that I'd spent all those years with my mum, it only seemed fair that I moved in with my dad, which was a stupid idea.*

Interviewer *And how old were you then?*

Respondent *I was about 15, 14 or 15 because by that point my dad was nowhere near as violent because after they separated he still was violent but nowhere near as bad...when I was about 14, 15 he was a lot better so I thought it seems only fair, I've lived with my mum for the last 6, 7 years then I thought oh I should live with my dad for a bit before I go moving out.*

Interviewer *And was that completely your decision at the time?*

Respondent *It was my decision...*

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM)

More often, however, such a decision was driven by a respondent's developing view that their relationship with the parent with whom they were living was becoming untenable.

Interviewer What was this about the computers?

Respondent He just, that was what he did with his time.

Interviewer Right.

Respondent He used to go to work, come back and play on the computer all night.

Interviewer Right, so you just felt?

Respondent It's like living with someone who's not there. It wasn't good.

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

Respondents' anger over how their parents' relationship had ended led some to vote with their feet. One such respondent recalled deciding one morning to leave her mother, who she blamed for the separation, and make a home with her father.

Respondent I hated it [the separation]; I really was really cross with my mum for many years. In the end when I was about 12, no about 13 I went and lived with my dad ... I just couldn't understand why she'd want to split up a happy family because it was all behind closed doors to me it just seemed like a really stupid thing to do. I know she had her reasons then but at the time, my relationship with my mum suffered quite a lot. I blamed her for it.

Interviewer There must have been something which made you decide that you wanted to go and live with him?

Respondent I used to hold it against her that they split up ... and I can't remember what it was but in the morning we had a big argument and I said 'Well I'm going to go and live with my dad, give me the bus fare' and she said 'If you wait until after I'll get [mum's new partner] to drop you off with your suitcase' and that's when I knew I was going. I still remember telling my dad.

14744 (F, 11, 29, change of residence mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Other children became increasingly unhappy with their living arrangements because of their inability to tolerate the presence of the resident parent's new partner. Occasionally the new partner might be seriously abusive; at other times, respondents merely disliked them.

Respondent This is when I was aged 10...I was locked in my room quite often, I remember trying to break out of my room, breaking the door in, and my mum's boyfriend would come in totally basically beating me up to put it politely. I told (dad) all about that and he said he had to take me back (to mum) otherwise he would be in breach of the court thing.

Interviewer Take you back home?

Respondent Yeah, and then when we got back home I remember having a very vicious argument with my mum in the presence of my dad, and I told her everything...telling her how much I hate things, how I hate being beat up by the boyfriends, how I didn't feel safe there, and then eventually I remember my mum agreeing that I could go and live with

(dad). So that was also I remember them drawing up an agreement between themselves...After (dad) got the written consent from my mum, he told me to go and pack my things. So I remember getting three bin bags, putting all my clothes and what I find in these bin bags and going out the front door with my dad.

20156 (M, 9, 25, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Respondent I lived with (mum) until I was 16 and then moved to my dad's.

Interviewer So all three of you gravitated back to dad?

Respondent Yes, none of us liked the man she was married to.

Interviewer Was that the problem?

Respondent Yeah. I left because I didn't really like him and there wasn't much work and I didn't want to continue in school so I came down to my dad's where there was more opportunity for work. That was one of the reasons but I preferred living with dad.

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Involvement in changes to contact arrangements

In the telephone survey, as reported in chapter 3, respondents who took main or sole responsibility for the contact ceasing or being sporadic cited several reasons for their decisions. Most of these related to concerns over their relationship with the non-resident parent and/or their new partner or children and to concerns over the contact experience, such as its lack of flexibility. Similar findings figured commonly in the in-depth interviews, with a variety of reasons being given for contact arrangements being challenged or ignored, although the most common reason for change was simply children getting older.

Anger over the non-resident's 'blameworthiness'

As noted earlier, respondents seemed to find it easier to challenge contact arrangements than residence. Their continuing anger over the non-resident parent's behaviour was one of the reasons they gave for contact becoming increasingly intolerable. One respondent described how she would go along to contact for a while and then find herself unable to continue.

Respondent My dad came every Saturday and took us out. I did that for a while and then I chose not to any more, I was too angry at him...After a while, I remember at the time I think a couple of times we went and stayed there for a night but I used to hate that so... I only did that a couple of times 'cos I hated it.

Interviewer You said that you stopped going because you were angry with him, is that right?

Respondent Yes.

Interviewer Were you angry with him for leaving?

Respondent Yes, everything, he didn't behave well ... not just getting this lady pregnant but he started smoking and just nasty things, he had been putting money aside, we had been broke for so long and then we found out that my dad had been earning extra and putting it aside and plus he was not personality wise he was not that great afterwards. He was even more selfish and started acting like a big kid again and I used to hate it.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Growing reluctance to have contact with the 'blameworthy' parent was sometimes reinforced by the fear induced by the way the parent still behaved. As reported in chapter 11, one respondent's residual fear of her violent father, who had assaulted her when she was three, was reinforced on the rare occasions they met, by him taking a 'mock swing' at her and her sister (case 30483).

Despite these negative experiences this respondent persisted with contact for several years before eventually giving up on her father.

Respondent But you kind of still care, so the onus was we ought to go and see dad, we ought to go and see him. But then he just wrecked it every time.

Interviewer How many times did you make these trips that ended up with you...?

Respondent We were right gluttons for punishment we were, we probably went about once a year for about five or six years, we kept trying...

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Other respondents with negative experiences similarly appeared loath to cut off all contact with their non-resident parents, despite their disapproval of their behaviour.

Respondent I saw him (alcoholic father) now and then.

Interviewer Who would arrange that?

Respondent Me, it was always left to me really.

Interviewer You'd phone him and say, 'shall we meet up?'

Respondent Yeah, or text him and say, 'can I come and stay?... I'd go and stay with him at weekends so I could still see my friends.

Interviewer When would you see him, would he come and collect you?

Respondent See him at his house, my nana's, or the pub. He used to always say to me, 'if I'm not in the X pub, I'm in the Y pub, if I'm not in the Y it might be your nana's, if I'm not at your nana's I'm at home.'

Interviewer You'd phone him, take the bus, go and find him. How many times a month would you do that?

Respondent Whenever I felt the need...if I couldn't stay at my friend's then I'd stay at his, because there was always...I'd find out where I could stay first, if I couldn't stay at my friend's I'd stay at my dad's, I know that sounds really bad but that's the way it was...on my convenience really, because I didn't really like him, I had quite a lot of hate for him. I feel like he owed me everything, if I asked him for a tenner he couldn't say no.

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

In some cases, the contact was maintained between them only at a minimal level. One respondent was so angry with her mother that she only saw her a couple of times a year from the age of 11 to 18.

- Interviewer* Was your attitude to her do you think loyalty to your dad, or you just didn't like her very much?
- Respondent* Bit of both really, yeah.
- Interviewer* From 11?
- Respondent* Yeah... I didn't have any faith in her really, it wasn't that she behaved so badly, I just couldn't understand why she was doing what she was doing.
- Interviewer* Did you ever talk to her about it?
- Respondent* No.
- Interviewer* Just felt very angry?
- Respondent* Yeah.
- Interviewer* During all that time [7 years] how often did you see your mum?
- Respondent* Twice a year maybe.

31624 (F, 11, 26, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Parents' new partners

The pleasure that some children had formerly derived from having contact with their non-resident parent could be seriously undermined by his/her relationship with a new partner who might be blamed for the problems that subsequently arose. In other cases, a child's loyalty to the parent they lived with conflicted with their ability to forge a relationship with the new partner. Unhappiness over these difficulties sometimes led to their refusing to co-operate with the original contact arrangements.

- Interviewer* So your loyalty to your mum around your dad's new partner was an issue for you in terms of having contact?
- Respondent* Yeah...
- Interviewer* Did you ever get time with him on your own or was she [dad's new partner] always around?
- Respondent* Before he moved in with her obviously, I think I made my feelings clear ... if I was going to see him I was going to see him not to see her. That was probably the way I said it.

30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

One respondent (Anna in the case outlined at the beginning of chapter 11) described her resentment at being forced into embracing a child/parent relationship with her father's new partner. This merely reinforced her later determination, aged 14, to end the regular contact arrangements and see him only 'when I had nothing better to do'.

- Respondent* He tried to get me to call her mum at one point, which just didn't happen, and he used to make us buy her Mother's Day cards and birthday cards and things like that....

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Attempts by a new partner to discipline a child could provoke extreme hostility due to the child considering this to be the preserve of their parents. As discussed in chapter 10, one respondent (case 20246) recalled a disciplining incident, which indirectly led to her decision to end contact with her father – a decision that she later greatly regretted.

Growing up

Most commonly, however, child-driven changes to contact arrangements were not provoked by a poor parent/child relationship, but simply by children entering their teens and finding that a social life with their peers often clashed with visits to the non-resident parent. The age at which children felt sufficiently mature to initiate such changes varied greatly, but most were between 14 and 17. Many respondents recalled parents realising, as their children got older, they were less likely to want to keep to rigid contact arrangements. Their accounts suggest that it was those children and parents who had enjoyed a strong and reasonably relaxed on-going relationship who had been able to negotiate these changing attitudes to contact without great difficulty.

Respondent It turned out every weekend [contact with father] but dad always said if you've got something you want to do instead you don't have to come. Because I played football quite a bit so when I was supposed to be there I'd drop (my brother and sister) off and then I'd go and play football and come back in the afternoon, sometimes it would be 6, 7 o'clock, I'd been out all day. But that wasn't a problem. If we wanted to be out we could be, we weren't ever forced to go. He said 'if you want to come, come, if you've got something you want to do with your friends, go with them'...I was quite comfortable with that, I thought that's given me a choice to do what I want to do. I always made sure I went there for the evening but that's because I had to be home in the evening, so I always went, I made it there eventually.

Interviewer Did it become a bit more...you said it tailed off a bit.

Respondent Yes, when I was 16, 17, it was more relaxed 'you come when you want, it's up to you'.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer At what age did it stop that he was coming every Sunday to collect you both?

Respondent Probably when we were a bit older, probably about 17.

Interviewer Who initiated... did you tell him that you'd got friends and you wanted to do other things?

Respondent Yeah, I think he realised, he just said, 'call me,' we got to the age where we was all going out, and he'd go, 'if you want to see me give me a call.' ...And I think at that age, 16/17 I started to go out and so I said, 'what are you up to?' He said, 'I'm...' so I'd go and meet him...Probably about 16, he'd always say, 'if you want to see me give me a call.'

Interviewer So didn't try to force it?

Respondent No.

30569 (F, 12, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, visiting only, every Sunday)

This group of respondents had very much appreciated parents who made it clear that they did not feel threatened by their children's social lives taking up time that had formerly been

reserved for them.

Respondent I was seeing my mum regularly, we were seeing her twice a week to start with then it went down to once a week as she moved further away, then it was once a fortnight and when I was a teenager it was whenever I felt like it.

Interviewer So it was pretty flexible.

Respondent It was very flexible. It was like well, I wanna do this this weekend mum and I never felt I'd be hurting her feelings by not going, which I know some people would. I knew she'd understand. She'd be completely OK. She'd say 'have a nice time, watch what you're doing, what are you wearing, let me know the gossip'.

14300 (F, 12, 28, father residence, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer Dad wasn't upset when you didn't go because you'd got parties and...

Respondent Yeah he probably was upset by it, he probably thought 'oh great', but I think also he probably understood that we're teenagers and that's what you do, you do kind of forget about your parents a bit and want to do your own thing as much as you want to hang out...

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Parental inflexibility

By way of contrast, other respondents reported finding it very difficult to persuade their parents to relax the terms of a contact arrangement despite their own obvious reluctance to comply with it.

In some instances it was the non-resident parent who was said to be determined to keep to the terms of the original agreement. Children were often clearly aware when a non-resident parent was so bound up in a conflicted relationship with the resident parent that he/she could not see matters from the child's point of view. One respondent recalled that her father's intransigence over overnight stays, combined with her fear of him, simply reinforced her own decision to terminate contact with him.

Respondent When the divorce had gone through it was a long time, it was about 2 years it took, he moved into his own house and then the drinking started again, and there was a lot of rage at my mum now and it started to get pushed onto me and literally just my brother could get away with blue murder and I got shouted at for all sorts of things. ... Until a time I said to my mum I don't want to go, like I'm scared of him because my mum wasn't there anymore and she told him that I didn't want to stay overnight, it wasn't I didn't want to see him and she said, I told, so she told him I didn't want to see him... He just turned nasty ... and he wrote a letter to me that said as far as he was concerned he didn't have a daughter, it was a very nasty letter... and he wasn't having any of it, he didn't understand, he wanted me to be there and that was that and he wasn't, like he just turned nasty and I didn't see him for probably over 10 years, had no contact... I went from everything to nothing, because as soon as mum broached the subject with him about changing the contact he turned nasty and because it got worse that scared me even more.

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Sometimes the non-resident parent's inflexibility was felt to stem from their fear that such changes would lead to their losing touch with their children altogether.

Respondent *Towards the end of me being at school I think, when all my friends were out together at weekends and I used to think...I felt a bit left out. All my best friends were saying 'we did this at the weekend, we did that' and I'm thinking 'oh, great, I wish I could do that sort of thing'...That was the point I said to my dad, 'my friends are going to town on Saturday, can I go with them? He'd be a bit huffy about it but then eventually agree to let me go but insist on taking me at this time and picking me up at this time, whereas my friends, they went shopping, they had lunch together, and got the bus home when they felt like it, which I thought a bit...getting towards me leaving school, I felt a bit stronger, and said 'I don't want to come this weekend, I'll come next weekend, but I want to do this, this weekend, or I'll stay Saturday night but not Friday and Saturday'. It did cause a bit of friction to begin with, with me finding my own voice, but I think eventually he started to respect me....I think what he was worried about was that I'd stop going completely... I think he thought that because I didn't want to go one weekend that I would never go again....He eventually said to me, 'OK, just come when you want'. At that point I used to go every other weekend. Then as I got older it got less frequent.*

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

In other cases, however, it seemed to be more that the resident parent was insisting on keeping to the contact arrangements or persuading the respondent that maintaining contact was the right thing to do, at least for the time being. This reflects the findings of the telephone survey in which over 60% of those who said they were mainly or solely responsible for contact not being continuous said that the resident parent had encouraged them to have contact 'a lot' (chapter 3). But many of their interviews make clear that they had not changed their own minds over the absence of any value to them of complying with contact arrangements that they themselves disliked, with a number sooner or later deciding not to continue doing so.

One respondent came under considerable pressure from her mother to maintain contact with her non-resident father, despite her own intense reluctance to do so. Only when she attained the age of 11 did her mother finally allow her to decide for herself whether to continue such visits.

Respondent *I mean all through the time it happened I asked, mum kept saying to me do you think you should see him now, especially see your grandparents because, you know, they're not as young as they used to be, they won't be around forever, I don't want you to regret it if anything happens to them...*

Interviewer *Do you think it was right when you were 11 that she said well you don't have to go if you don't want to?*

Respondent *... as soon as she said that I could say I didn't want to go and it was almost like she was giving me my way, but she didn't know how to cope with how upset I was, because I was hysterically upset time and time again ...*

Interviewer *But you don't particularly feel she did do the wrong thing.*

Respondent *No I think she did the right thing, she gave the decision to me and I mean every year, all the time she was constantly trying to get me to see him, not literally all the time but she was, she did keep saying to me are you sure you don't want to see him, it might do you good, yes but she's done her best...*

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Another respondent (Anna, in the case referred to at the beginning of chapter 11) had over some years tried to convince her mother that contact with her father and step-mother, both of whom she disliked, was no longer appropriate and eventually acted on her own initiative. As discussed, her case demonstrates the tensions sometimes underlying such strong hostility.

Interviewer As time went on did it become more difficult for your mum to make you go?

Respondent Yeah, because we used to...me especially because I was older I used to cry and ask... beg her not to go, and she used to say, 'it's really important that you keep seeing your dad,' and things like that. But it did get quite...

Interviewer How old were you round about that time do you think?

Respondent Probably about ten.

Interviewer So it went on that long?

Respondent It went on until I was about 14.

Interviewer But she was still keen for you to go?

Respondent Yeah, that's it, I think she was just really keen to keep up the whole, not the whole family thing, but she just wanted us to keep contact with our dad as long as possible...

Interviewer During all that time you were saying to your mum you really didn't want to go? So at 14 what happened? You said that it went on until you were 14?

Respondent Yeah, ... I was just like I don't want to go there anymore, and I just decided myself that I didn't want to go there every Sunday, and that I was old enough to make my own decisions, and got quite rebellious and just said no I don't want to go...

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Faced with parental inflexibility, some children had been reluctant to challenge the terms of their contact arrangements until relatively late in their teens. When they did, they simply voted with their feet.

Respondent When I was younger I was like forced to go, I didn't have a choice.

Interviewer Was this your mum saying this?

Respondent Yeah. 'Go, it's your father, sort of thing'. But when I got older and it was my decision, I decided not to.

Interviewer But this was your mum saying you should go?

Respondent Yeah.

Interviewer So she was encouraging you to go, to have a relationship with him.

Respondent Yeah.

Interviewer Even though he'd been violent to her, and he'd been violent to you?

Respondent Uh hum.

Interviewer But at the time you didn't want to go.

- Respondent* No. I didn't want to know.
- Interviewer* So when you were out with your dad, did you enjoy the time with him?
- Respondent* Not really. I was like counting the hours...
- Interviewer* Until you were back. So you never actually said 'I'm not going' until you were older.
- Respondent* Not until I was older.
- Interviewer* How old would you be then?
- Respondent* Probably about 15, 16.
- Interviewer* Was there anything that prompted you to say 'right, that's it'.
- Respondent* Not really. I think before I could say 'I'm not going' but then I'd have to go, but at that age I could say 'I'm not going' and go out with my friends.
- 10901 (M, 12, 22, mother residence throughout, ceased contact)

Summary and discussion

The term 'children's agency' has been used in many ways (Valentine, 2011). Within the context of family breakdown, Smart and colleagues note how in the late 20th century, researchers started to explore children's agency in a variety of contexts, focusing on 'how children negotiate rules, roles and personal relationships; how they create autonomy and balance this with their (inter) dependence; how they operate as strategic actors in different social contexts and how they take responsibility for their own well-being and that of others' (Smart et al, 2001: 12).

This approach is a useful one. Despite a wide range of responses to their parents' separation, the accounts of many of our respondents demonstrated their operating as 'strategic actors' in the post-separation context. Whilst some had had little involvement, a significant number of children had taken a very active part in negotiating, influencing and even directing relationships with their parents. It was frequently through their agency that arrangements for their upbringing took the shape that they did.

Whilst our main aim was to explore the extent to which respondents were consulted over their contact arrangements with non-resident parents, it proved unrealistic to concentrate on contact, without also exploring how the decision was reached for the child to reside with one parent or the other at the time of the initial separation. So our examination of decision-making in this area extended to both topics. Few respondents had been asked to choose which parent they would live with post-separation. For those who were, such a choice was far from straightforward. The fact that some were very aware just how hurt the 'rejected parent' might feel chimes with the findings of earlier research studies. These show how difficult children find such a choice given their loyalty to both parents and their reluctance to hurt either (Butler et al, 2003; Cashmore and Parkinson, 2009; Smart et al, 2001). Sometimes respondents' choices were driven by surprisingly practical considerations, such as a desire to avoid moving house, rather than to choose the parent with whom to reside.

Consultation far more commonly took place between parent and child over the establishment of contact arrangements. Those whose parents had remained on reasonably cordial terms and had lived relatively close to each other were usually in continuous contact with their non-resident parent. Some were given considerable freedom to organise their own contact, it

involving a high degree of mutuality and flexibility. These respondents clearly considered being allowed such responsibility contributed to the pleasure they derived from their contact; their comments reflected the telephone survey data which suggests that children's involvement in decisions about their contact arrangements is linked with a positive experience of contact. Others, however, found that being given complete freedom over such matters was only one aspect of a distressing lack of parenting. Whilst significant numbers of respondents considered that they had had a hand in the residence and contact arrangements made by them by their parents, a surprising number of parents apparently saw little need to consult them at all. This is perhaps more understandable in the case of decision-making over the children's future residence arrangements, since this may often have been a decision dominated by the parents' financial resources. A failure to consult children over their contact arrangements was less understandable, particularly in the case of those entering their teens. Sometimes there was consultation, but only of a token kind, with parents asking for a respondent's views on what had already been decided. Earlier research shows a similar picture, with some children being consulted, but others, particularly the younger ones, feeling strongly that they were only told when all the decisions had been made (Arditti and Prouty, 1999; Butler et al, 2003).

None of the respondents seemed outraged by their own parents' failure to consult them, despite many considering that, in theory at least (chapter 15), such consultation should always take place. Nor did they suggest that by not consulting them, their parents had infringed their rights as children. Any failure to mention Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (States Parties shall assure to the child capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child) is entirely comprehensible. But, given an increasing societal interest in the notion of rights, it seems unlikely that none had heard of the concept of children having rights. Smart and colleagues suggest that children are not as interested in rights as are adults – what they seem to want is 'social recognition, respect and inclusion, rather than simply legal rights.' They observe that 'As adults, we may interpret the solution to the problems we had when we were children as being housed in a package of legal rights akin to those we can exercise as adults, but actual children, during the course of their childhood, may not share this interpretation' (Smart et al, 2001: 109). This may be true, but even as adults, this group of respondents had not apparently developed a rights consciousness within the context of their own childhood.

Some respondents recalled that failure to involve them in any decision-making had later rebounded on their parents – with their objections gradually becoming more forceful. Indeed, rather than objecting to the initial residence and contact arrangements, respondents had seemed far more prepared to exert their independence at a later stage, perhaps at a point when it became clear to them that these arrangements were no longer tenable. It was often their growing view that their relationship with the non-resident parent was unrewarding that prompted action on their part, either in the form of increasing protest or a simple refusal to co-operate. Predictably, respondents reported that during their teenage years they felt increasingly able to challenge arrangements with which they were unhappy. Earlier studies with divorcing children show a similar pattern, with older children becoming increasingly resentful over various aspects of their lives, such as their relations with step-parents or with one or other parent's lack of flexibility and/or rigid parenting style (Cashmore and Parkinson, 2009; Smart et al, 2001; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1998).

Respondents often attributed unhappiness over their relationship with the non-resident parent to two factors: first, particularly as adolescents, their strongly critical views of the circumstances underlying their parents' separation; second, their difficulties with the non-resident parent's new partner. It was not uncommon for those respondents who had been entering adolescence when their parents separated to recall adopting a particularly judgmental approach to the non-resident parent's behaviour at the time of their parents' separation. They would blame him or her entirely for breaking up the marriage and resist any form of contact, at least for the time being. Such a response to parental 'culpability' has been noted in earlier studies (Ahrons, 2004; Butler et al, 2003; Cartwright and McDowell, 2008; Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000). As discussed in chapter 13, Kelly and Johnston describe such a child as an 'allied child', whose hostility underlies their wish for only limited contact with the non-resident parent. Their alliance with the resident parent often stems, if they are older, from their moral judgment of the latter's responsibility for causing the divorce and of their perception of the resident parent's need for their allegiance and support (Kelly and Johnston, 2001). Sometimes, of course, respondents' anger over the non-resident's culpability, was linked with a dislike of the non-resident parent's new partner, especially if the latter was seen as having been instrumental in the breakdown of the marriage.

A third, and by far the most common reason, however, for respondents wanting to see less of the non-resident parent was a much simpler one. As they got older, they were more interested in seeing their friends. Those who had formerly maintained very affectionate relations with their non-resident parent through regular contact arrangements became, as teenagers, reluctant to continue doing so when their social lives were threatened. Again, research with children shows teenagers reacting in a similar way (Butler et al, 2003). As Cartwright and McDowell observe, growing up is usually accompanied by growing competency. The life stories of the young adults in their study reflected their 'developing sense of agency'; as they got older they 'were actively doing their best to get on with their lives, friendships, schooling and interests' (Cartwright and McDowell, 2008:76). The respondents in our study quite rightly considered this to be a normal part of growing up; these expressions of independence are an important aspect of their capacity for autonomy as they proceed through adolescence.

Parental flexibility was clearly an important ingredient of children's willingness to comply with their residence and contact arrangements. Respondents emphasised how much they resented parents who attempted to force them to comply with arrangements with which they were unhappy. Contrarily, many stressed their appreciation when parents were willing to compromise, especially as they grew older. Smart and colleagues found that a child whose parents were prepared to adjust arrangements to accord with her needs did 'feel herself to be a person of equal worth within her family, with a voice and with the expectation that her view will be taken into account' (Smart et al, 2001: 116; see also Butler et al, 2005). Although none of the respondents used similar terms, their appreciation of their parents clearly stemmed from an awareness that they were being treated like individuals with a voice of their own.

Overall, respondents provided a great deal of evidence of children's capacity to act sensitively and responsibly in the aftermath of their parents' separation. Their ability to respond to their parents' continuing conflicts by making their own decisions over residence and contact was only too evident. They had a clear-sighted approach to their own needs that they often followed through in a particularly mature fashion.

Chapter 13 Listening to children

An overwhelmingly consistent message delivered by the respondents at many points in their in-depth interviews was that parents should consult their children over their post-separation residence and contact arrangements. This formed a particularly important part of their advice for any future separating parents, as we report in chapter 14. On the face of it, this would appear to be very good advice; children certainly cannot develop any capacity for independence and autonomy if their views are never sought. Practitioners who work with children recognize the importance of establishing children's wishes and feelings (Cafcass, undated guidance). The courts are directed by section 1(3)(a) of the Children Act 1989 to consider 'the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his age and understanding)'. When deciding how much weight to place on a child's views, however, this qualifying phrase is crucial, but may be difficult to interpret. There is an obvious temptation to discount the views of relatively young children - on the basis that they are too young to have any real opinions, that any views they express are not informed by any real insight into their situation, or that their ideas are shaped by those with whom they spend most of their time. Providing any definitive guidance is obviously impossible since all children are different. Nevertheless, we wished to gain the respondents' insights on the value of listening to all children, whatever their age. The first part of this chapter explores the extent to which they considered they had been able to form their own views, uninfluenced by either parent. It proceeds to discuss the extent to which the respondents now, from an adult viewpoint, thought children should be asked for their views and the ages at which those views should be followed, if at all.

Parental pressure and the validity of children's views

When considering children's involvement in the decision-making relating to residence and contact arrangements, we sought to assess the extent to which respondents felt that their views had been their own and not those of their parents. We considered this to be important because of the not uncommon assumption that in highly conflicted parental relationships, resident parents, particularly mothers, sometimes place their children under considerable pressure to resist contact arrangements for baseless reasons. It is argued that in some cases the child is even deliberately alienated from the non-resident parent, resulting in their suffering from 'parental alienation syndrome' (PAS) (see the claims made by Families Need Fathers, FNF 2008:17, and by Real Fathers for Justice, <http://www.realfathersforjustice.org>, last accessed 13/10/2012).

This was emphatically not a picture that emerged from our research. As discussed in chapter 3, the telephone survey showed very clearly that respondents most commonly held the non-resident parent responsible for contact not starting, being delayed, ceasing or becoming sporadic. The next most common answer was to take responsibility themselves for these contact difficulties rather than attributing it to the non-resident parent. None of those who had reached their own decision to stop the contact attributed this to concerns about upsetting the non-resident parent. Of those who said that they were themselves responsible for contact being sporadic, only three said that they reached this decision to avoid upsetting the resident parent, but all of them gave other reasons as well – such as a poor relationship with the non-resident parent.

The telephone survey produced no evidence of resident parents persuading children to resist contact without any basis. Indeed, on the contrary, it was notable that over 60% of those who

took responsibility themselves for contact difficulties (not starting, being delayed, ceasing or becoming sporadic), said that the resident parent had encouraged them to have contact 'a lot'.

The answers given by the respondents involved in the in-depth interviews confirmed this theme. No respondent told us about any resident parent manufacturing reasons for resisting contact with the non-resident parent, or for remaining on bad terms with the latter. Indeed, as noted in chapter 12, many children who had themselves disapproved of their non-resident parent's behaviour recollected being placed under considerable pressure by the resident parent to keep to the terms of the original contact arrangements. Resident parents were commonly described as encouraging respondents to maintain contact even in situations where the resident parent had good reason to oppose contact and when the respondents themselves questioned the value of maintaining contact.

Sympathy with the resident parent

Parental alienation (syndrome) is a highly controversial topic, as we discuss at the end of this chapter. However, most experts agree that a truly alienated child is one who persistently resists contact due to unreasonable negative views and feelings. None of our respondents met this criterion. A few said that the resident parent had presented a very negative picture of the non-resident parent (and vice-versa). But we did not encounter a single case where a respondent looked back and saw his or her targeted non-resident parent as a blameless victim or recalled a resident parent manufacturing spurious reasons for resisting the child's contact with an entirely innocent non-resident parent. Indeed it is notable from respondents' accounts that all the resident parents who were felt to have harboured unhappiness and bitterness over the breakup of their relationships did so for reasons that their children could easily understand and sympathise with: the non-resident parents had behaved badly in a variety of ways including infidelity, domestic violence, alcohol and/or drug abuse, mental instability or combinations of these features. In chapter 11, for instance, we described the experiences of one young man, who had no contact with his dad for a couple of years after the separation, because, he now feels, his mind was 'poisoned' by his mother, who presented his father as a 'monster'. Crucially, however, this respondent also acknowledged that his father *had* behaved reprehensibly.

Respondent *He had a couple of affairs. There was a lot of domestic violence. It's very understandable that she would be like that. So I don't hold anything against her. I don't say 'why did you do that to us, why did you make us do that'? I can understand why she did it. Because he did those things to her. The way he degraded her in those senses aren't nice.*

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact when father moved abroad)

As a young child this respondent clearly struggled to remain objective. A couple of other respondents caught up in highly conflicted relationships reported observing and sympathizing with the continued distress of the resident mother *or* father over the breakup. While retaining their own clear view of the situation, they had been reluctant to express their own views about contact for fear of distressing that parent even more.

Interviewer *But essentially at that age you didn't feel that you could do anything about the amount that you saw him [adulterous father]?*

Respondent *No, and to be honest I didn't contact dad unless I'd asked mum first, and mum was always around. I knew mum could hear me when I was on the phone to him, so if I'd*

have said anything, 'Mum's being a pain,' or, 'Mum won't tell me this,' I'd have upset her and she'd have... I wouldn't want her to confront me about it. Not that she would have done, but I wouldn't have known that at the time, and then when I was with dad, especially if I was round at dad's house with [dad's new partner] there, I wouldn't want to upset dad by upsetting [father's new partner], so I didn't mention it there either.

Interviewer *So it sounds like you were quite careful not to upset everybody else?*

Respondent *...I was sort being stuck in the middle, because I was living with mum and still being like dad. But then dad was stuck in the middle of [father's new partner] and mum, and not wanting to upset one over the other, mum because of us and [father's new partner] because of being [father's new partner] and being his partner and things. So I had to gauge one situation to another what I could say and what I couldn't say, and I think that just got me that frustrated I couldn't deal with it anymore ...*

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

Such cases, however, were exceptional in our sample. In the very few instances in which respondents described what might be seen by some as alienating behavior, most thought that they had retained their own views and had been able to express those views clearly.

Growing detachment

Respondents caught up in these highly conflicted situations recalled their growing awareness, as they grew older, not only of the way in which each parent was attempting to influence their views, but of their own ability to form their own opinions. In chapter 10 we discussed the views of one respondent, whose mother periodically stopped contact because of concerns over the care the children were receiving. This young man emphasised that at a relatively early age he was very able to decide for himself the value of retaining a relationship with his father. While acknowledging that in many respects his mother's worries were justified, he also considered that at times she over-reacted.

Interviewer *Did you feel like she was justified in her concerns?*

Respondent *Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes like if he was to get violent, aggressive or not feed us at all, then yes, but sometimes she just stopped contact for seemingly minor, very minor reasons...*

Interviewer *You said you weren't happy with the fact that your mum stopped the contact, were you actually able to tell her that?*

Respondent *I did tell her several times ...my mum's like no, no because he never feeds you...*

Interviewer *Do you feel like she listened to you at all at that time?*

Respondent *No, not at that age because for me this is when I was somewhere between 10 and 12 possibly a bit older, so she didn't really listen to, she would listen if it was something bad to say, such as my dad's doing this and she'd take notice to protect us, but if it was something good she would sort of take it with a pinch of salt and be like no you're still not seeing him... most of the time I understood part of the reason why she was denying access ...the only difference it's made is it's changed my opinion about my mum slightly because until she started denying access for reasons I didn't agree with. I'd seen her as sort of perfectly innocent... and at that point I started to see her as someone who can be a bit vindictive and a bit over the top...*

Interviewer *And what age do you think that begins to change?*

Respondent *Probably at about 12, 13 I started to question what my mum was saying, and saying well is she really right in this, but certainly by the time I was 14, 15 yes I was, I had my own mind ...*

Interviewer *And you said it was your decision then to go and move in with your dad?*

Respondent *Yes I was about 15 when I decided to move in with my dad...because at that point my dad was nowhere near as violent ...*

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM)

The child's view in court proceedings

The respondent cited above was one of the very few interviewed in depth who had been involved in court proceedings. This group's recollections suggest that they seldom had more than a hazy knowledge of what these legal proceedings were about. From their accounts, the litigation often seems to have involved disputes about property and maintenance, with few recalling being the focus of legal proceedings themselves. Even when they did, they were unclear over the details. Some recalled efforts having been made by court appointed officials to establish what views they themselves had regarding the outcome of parental disputes over their upbringing; but again many were very vague over how that had occurred.

Interviewer *And did you get involved in the courts?*

Respondent *I think once we did get someone come out and ask us, you know, what it's like around our dad's and if we wanted to see our dad, and I vaguely remember just talking to them and saying yes we do want to see our dad and my brother.*

Interviewer *You can't remember who that was?*

Respondent *No, a very, very, very vague memory of just someone asking me about whether I wanted to see my dad or not, which is probably one of the more substantial cases where they sort of investigated whether we actually wanted to, especially when we were older... they may have done every time I just don't remember it, I only remember it once.*

Interviewer *And every time it went to court your dad was given contact again?*

Respondent *Every time, I can't recall a single time he hasn't been given the access back. I think once he was given the access back with supervision again for a very, very brief period, for a few weeks he was given supervision access again, and I think that was when he got violent, obviously I went home and told my mum he got violent and so she told them and that's probably when he went back to supervision....*

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM)

Most of those asked about this in the in-depth interviews were satisfied that their views had been accurately established and conveyed to the court. This accords with the responses to a similar question in the telephone survey.

Interviewer *So you think he brought the court proceedings to get you and your sister transferred into his care do you, is that what the Cafcass lady was asking you about?*

Respondent *Well yes, she was always saying, 'who do you want to stay with? Do you want to continue seeing your dad?' ...*

- Interviewer* Did you ever say to her, 'yes I would like to live with my dad'?
- Respondent* I did at the beginning, and as she explained that I might not be able to because of the way dad is [mentally disturbed], and I said something flippant like, 'oh is it because he tried to smack my mum?' And she was like oh, because she didn't even know about that...
- Interviewer* Did the Cafcass lady also ask you about whether you wanted to see him on a regular visiting basis?
- Respondent* Yeah, and that's what we'd set up until obviously he was violent (towards the respondent herself at the contact centre) and then I just stopped all contact.
- Interviewer* Was she [the Cafcass officer] nice?
- Respondent* She was lovely yeah, good at her job, I just felt sorry that she... because she had a lot, she had to go to a legal hearing because of everything dad had accused her of, and obviously I had to make a statement to say that she hadn't lied, and I had to sign all the documents to say that I really had said that. It was just so long drawn out, it was just absolutely...
- Interviewer* So you thought she really listened to you
- Respondent* Oh yeah, she said what I wanted to say, and by the end of it dad didn't like it because I was telling him to leave me alone, and he couldn't believe that I was saying that.

31016 (F, 5, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

One respondent, however, who said he had been coached to produce an answer dictated by his mother, was very critical of the process.

- Interviewer* Were you trying to say actually what I want is...
- Respondent* Yeah, to go and live with my dad. But that wasn't happening, and I think in the end I just broke down...I was told by my nan and mum, 'You'd make it a lot easier and a lot quicker if you just actually told the welfare officer that you want to live with me.' So I remember then being off school the following day and I remember being coached as to what I was supposed to say to the court welfare officer.
- Interviewer* And is that what you did?
- Respondent* She [Mum] got residence, she got awarded the house, and we had a fortnightly contact with my dad...I think a lot more consideration should have been given to my wishes as a child. ...I wish the court officials wouldn't have had such a blinkered approach to my wishes at that age...I just think there was a very strong prejudice towards the mother, and I really think that prejudice caused us a lot of unnecessary suffering...
- Interviewer* Do you feel then that there was still a bias from the court welfare officer that you saw? Or do you feel that was more to do with pressure?
- Respondent* I think with regards to the court welfare officer I saw I think there was a bias there because the way I think the thing should have been approached is you analyse all the evidence then make a conclusion, whereas they had already made their conclusion, they were just sifting through all the evidence, and when I did a u-turn and actually said, as opposed to I want to live with dad, I want to live with my mum, that's the thing that tipped it.

Interviewer ... after you were living with your mum, when you went through that awful period with her new [violently abusive] partner, and you got to the point where you felt able to say, actually I'm not happy about this and I want to go and live with my dad, did you feel that you were [then] being listened to?

Respondent I think towards the end they had to take a lot more notice of me, but in the initial stages when I first said I wanted to live with my dad, this is when I was living with my mum and grandmother, there wasn't enough emphasis given to those things, and it was only a year later when it was.

20156 (M, 9, 25, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact with NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Another respondent, who had not had the services of a court appointed officer to elicit her views on the outcome of the court proceedings, emphasised how difficult she found it to give an objective answer to a question posed by her own mother, rather than by an outsider.

Respondent Yeah, I can remember going to the court, I didn't go in to the actual room, but I was in the waiting room, and I can remember my mum asking me, 'who do you want to live with?'... And she says, 'there's no wrong answer,'... And me thinking about it, and I've never told her this, but honestly thinking well you're in front of me I can't say my dad can I? But I don't think I would have said my dad anyway, I think I would have gone with my mum.

20246 (F, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Involving children in decision-making – Advice for parents

Respondents were invited to provide advice for separating parents generally over how to establish workable contact arrangements. Many respondents had strong views over the extent to which children should be consulted over residence and contact arrangements, but their views were very varied. Although respondents did not always make it clear that they were drawing on their own experiences when answering our hypothetical question, their personal circumstances often suggested that they were doing so.

There seemed to be widespread agreement that children should be consulted over their residence and contact arrangements, although not necessarily be allowed to decide them. But that aside, the range of views was considerable. Many thought giving children such choices depended on their age, but differed over the age at which this was appropriate. Others felt that it was never right to expect children to choose between parents, whilst others again thought this was reasonable.

Age as the deciding factor

Of those who thought that the child's age was the important factor, several gave answers that appeared to tie in with their own childhood experiences. For example, one respondent, whose parents had separated when she had been very young herself, maintained that you would probably get a more sensible answer from younger children.

Respondent ...you should ask the child, even if they're a child and they don't know very well what's best for them.

Interviewer So even quite young children you'd say should have their views?

Respondent Like if age 5, ask them at that, not younger because they really don't know, any younger than that, but age 5 plus I'd ask them.... Would you like to spend time with

your dad today, would you like to spend time with your mum today? If they say yes or no then let them do it.

13887 (F, 0, 20, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Another respondent, who, as discussed below, now regrets his teenage freedom to socialise with his friends rather than visit his father, counselled caution over taking full account of teenagers' ideas.

Respondent When it gets to over 13 they'll come up with silly ideas I think to suit them, to play, to get out of it as much as they can, but the younger ones come out with more sense, the younger ones are cleverer than you think and they're the ones that have got the most sensible ideas. The older ones are the ones that are trying to suit their social lives, or how much money can they get out of each one and stuff like that. Under 12, 13 I'd say they're the ones to listen to...don't let them think they've got control, but listen, like say right we're thinking of doing this, or this is what's happening, we're thinking of you staying with your mum in the week and come and see dad at weekends....

Interviewer It's not necessarily letting them decide.

Respondent No don't, listen to what they say, don't let them decide, but see what input and then go from there because two adults you should be able to come to some sort of agreement to keep everyone happy. You're not going to keep everyone happy but as long as the kids are happy that's the main thing, it's your decision to split up so you've got to deal with the consequences haven't you.

30178 (M, 14, 24, residence changed several times - mother – father- mother-father, continuous but minimal contact each NRP)

By way of contrast, a respondent who, at the age of 10, had been required to choose which parent to live with, considered it was only appropriate to consult older children.

Interviewer What do you think about the degree to which a 10 year old should be involved in decision making?

Respondent ...I think if the children are below maybe 13 or 14 that the decision should almost be made for them but not in a way that goes too far the other way but that the parent should know which one they are closest to they should ...maybe see a counsellor at school or someone who could help them to make the decision.

Interviewer It sounds like you are saying that it's important that they are involved in the decision.

Respondent Yes and be seen as the most important things in the whole situation...

Interviewer So you want to make the children the priority and make the arrangement the best for them.

Respondent Yes ...the younger they are, the more important that is I think. Maybe when you are 13 or 14 they can ask you straight out who you really wanted to be with, then you would be strong enough to know.

30205 (M, 10, 28, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF)

Another, who had, aged 11, organized her own contact with her alcoholic father, appeared to distinguish between decision-making and consultation. Although an 11 year old was too young to be asked for a decision, she thought they should be consulted at that age, but that

their views should be overridden if considered unreasonable in the context of their long-term welfare.

Interviewer *How old do you think the child should be before they're asked?*

Respondent *16 definitely, yeah 16.*

Interviewer *That old?*

Respondent *Yeah.*

Interviewer *You wouldn't ask an 11 year old?*

Respondent *At 11 year old I can't even remember being able to tie my own shoelaces let alone make up my own mind.*

Interviewer *You wouldn't have liked to be asked?*

Respondent *Yeah, I would have liked to be asked, I wouldn't like anything forced on me, I would, but if it's unreasonable what they're saying and very childish then I'd take it out of their hands, because stuff like this is really important and it does affect the rest of their lives.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Strength of feeling

The respondent above made it clear that she would not have welcomed being forced into any contact arrangements. She also had firm ideas about age. For some respondents, however, the important factor was not age but how strongly the child was indicating that s/he did not want to comply with contact/residence arrangements. One respondent, whose non-resident father had been an alcoholic, was adamant on this point.

Interviewer *If you'd really not wanted to go, how old do you think you should have been before your parents would take any notice of you? If you say, 'actually I don't want to go and see him because I don't like seeing him drunk'?*

Respondent *That should be any age, if they just turn round and say, 'I just don't want to go,' and if the child doesn't feel safe around a parent they shouldn't have to go.*

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Another (Anna in the case outlined at the beginning of chapter 11) who had strongly objected to being forced to maintain contact with her non-resident father, expressed a not dissimilar view.

Interviewer *If they'd sat you down when you were ten, having had these regular Sundays, and they'd sat you down and said, 'well now you've had four years/five years of this, what do you think about it?' What would you have said?*

Respondent *I don't know, I think I would have probably said that I didn't want to see him anymore, that's what I think I would have done.*

Interviewer *Do you think they should have taken notice of that?*

Respondent *Yeah, they should, because dragging a child off a banister to make her go and see her dad, that should be itself saying that she doesn't want to go and see them, but yet I*

Taking a longer view of contact

was made to go there every Sunday. If I was in the same situation I would read those signs.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

When asked for advice for parents making contact arrangements, this same young woman re-emphasised her view that coercion was not appropriate. Looking back she did not consider she had gained any long-term benefit from being forced to continue contact with her father.

Respondent Obviously make sure the child is at the centre of it all, it's not about what the parents want, it's about what's best for the child, and just don't force them to do anything they don't want to, and listen to them, don't just think that because you're sending them up there once a week that's your part and you keep in contact, because sometimes no contact is better than bad contact.

Her opposition to coercive contact may have been influenced by the fact that her current relationship with her father is not a particularly good one.

Respondent Obviously if anything happened I would be upset because he's my dad, but there's no bond there, I couldn't tell him anything personal or anything like that.

Whilst this respondent was opposed to any form of coercion, another suggested adopting a more nuanced approach to children's objections to contact through discovering the basis for their stance.

Respondent I know people dismiss what children say because they say they don't know what they're talking about. But I feel there's always some logic in what they're saying. I would take in what they're saying but I would try to give them another option. If they say they don't want to see their father I would try and find out why they're saying that and like give them another way of looking at it, so the child is making the most informed decision they can make at that stage of their lives. Because normally when kids say something and you make them think about it, they will think about it if you put it into perspective for them. If they do think about it then I think they will make a better decision. Kids have a tendency to make more rash decisions when they're younger so I would just try to get them to make sure they've thought it through properly.

10901 (M, 12, 22, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Decisions about residence

There was considerable divergence over whether it is ever appropriate to expect children to decide which parent they wanted to live with. Within the context of a court hearing, one respondent could see little problem over his being asked to make such a decision.

Respondent ...Now I chose to live with my dad and the two girls at the time had chosen to live with my mum, being younger, and it went to a thing where I remember my dad had got to go to court and he sat me down and he said 'who do you want to live with' and he said 'at the end of the day in the court they're going to ask me' and he said 'it's your decision', and I said 'well I want to stay with you' and the court went along with that, 'if he wants to stay with the dad then he stays with the dad' and the two girls stayed with me mum, which was fine.

Interviewer You were asked which parent you wanted to live with, do you think it was right that you were asked?

Respondent Yes I do think it's right, I don't think it's right for somebody in a courtroom to make a decision based on hearsay, it should be down, even now I still think if it goes to a courtroom I still think you should ask the child.

Interviewer At whatever age or would you say...?

Respondent I wanted to live with my dad and that was it and I understood that... like I say I was 11 and I understood it ... I suppose 11 is as good an age as any.

Interviewer Do you know if they actually agreed on that, did they fight it out in court or...?

Respondent It went to court and the custody was agreed that my dad got me and my mum got the girls.

30639 (M, 9, 35, several changes of residence, continuous contact but minimal with NRM)

Another, who would have liked the freedom to live with her father, thought that children needed more information about their ability to make choices.

Respondent You shouldn't just keep your children in the dark about things. And also children should get information as well. Because I just thought it was law that you lived with your parents until you were 16...I didn't think you had a choice and you do.

Interviewer How would you do that?

Respondent Maybe the internet, maybe teachers at school.

Interviewer Would it have helped you?

Respondent To know that there was support outside the family, yeah. I probably would have been able to say to a teacher, 'the man my mum's married, I don't like him, I'm having a rough time'. Because then they might have said 'well you know you could always live with dad'. I would have gone, can I really, I have that choice? And I would have phoned up my dad and said 'can I come now, I'll pack my bags and come. If someone had told me that I had that option when I was 14, to not move away (with mother) for the third time, but to stay with my dad, stay in the same school, then I would have done.

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

But others again thought that making choices between parents was damaging for a child, at least without parental reassurance over the possible outcome.

Respondent I don't think you should ever sit a child down and say, 'who do you want to live with?'

Interviewer Why would you not want to say that?

Respondent Because I remember, when I was younger, silly things you talk about, it was well before they split up, going to my sister and saying 'well if mum and dad ever split up and they ask who I want to live with I'll say I'll live with grandma until they get together again'. Because I don't think I ever want to be thought of picking a favourite. Who do you want to live with? It's the person you favour most. You want to live with your mum because I love her more than you dad. That's what I always felt it was saying. So I never wanted to have that situation...

14300 (F, 12, 28, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Regrets

A few respondents considered that they should not have been allowed to make decisions at too young an age – decisions that they now regretted.

As discussed above, the absence of coercion was considered by some respondents to be an extremely important ingredient of good contact arrangements. Nevertheless, for one respondent, his complete freedom to visit his father only when he pleased, was now a matter of considerable regret.

Interviewer *So it was always like that, it was just down to you entirely.*

Respondent *Always down to me, just, if it was my choice and at that age [14] I didn't want, not that I didn't want to, I regret it now because we, the way we are now with could have been much better off now if I'd made the effort to go, can we go and do this dad, can we go and do that, but it was always going out with my mates...*

Interviewer *Okay, so there was virtually no contact.*

Respondent *No contact, but that was out of my choice, but he didn't make the effort to come and see me either... and there weren't mobiles then...*

Interviewer *Do you, looking back now do you wish that things had been different with your dad in that way?*

Respondent *Yes definitely...It suited me not to have contact, yes, but looking back at it now I do wish it was different...*

30178 (M, 14, 24, residence changed several times - mother – father- mother-father, continuous but minimal contact each NRP)

Another respondent, at the age of 10, told her father that she never wanted to see him again. Although this was said in the course of a blazing parental row in the street (the background to which is described in chapter 10), her father took her at her word and never contacted her again. She greatly regretted breaking off contact, partly because she believed that her father would have protected her from being subsequently sexually abused by her mother's partner.

Respondent *No... a kid can't make a decision like that [stop contact with the non-resident parent].*

Interviewer *You're saying to me actually this was such a bad decision I made, and I realised later when I was older?*

Respondent *Oh huge, really bad decision, I wish I'd never done it, I really wish I'd never broken contact, no matter how, I don't know, I would rather just put up with...*

Interviewer *Do you think children of that sort of age [aged 10] have the mental facilities to cope with that kind of decision?*

Respondent *I don't think so, no...I don't think your average kid, they're more interested in seeing what happens if I rolled down this hill...*

20246 (F, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

As discussed above, there was no clear consensus over the appropriateness of children choosing which parent they wish to live with. One respondent's experience suggests that making such a choice often involves conflicted loyalty and can lead to regrets. He considered that, as a 10 year-old faced with such a choice, he should have had the various options

explained to him, including the possibility of his mother caring for both brothers, rather than mother and father taking one brother each. He later greatly regretted feeling obliged to choose to live with his father because of his belief that this was fair.

Respondent ...I would have liked some reassurance off my mum... if they were thinking they were doing the right thing giving me a totally open choice I would have liked my mum to say 'There's no pressure, you don't have to go anywhere, don't feel that you have to go with one or the other (parent).' Perhaps being told that it's OK for two to go with one, that doesn't matter, just to be told that there was no pressure or expectations on me or just some reassurance in my decision making instead of it being totally open. I then could take time to think through in my own head these pressures.

30205 (M, 10, 28, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF).

Summary and discussion

The first part of this chapter explored the extent to which respondents considered they had been pressurised into adopting opinions about their residence and contact arrangements. They provided very clear evidence that all but the very young had been well able to withstand parental pressure to adopt a view that was not their own. Their ability to do so was unaffected by their comprehending, and often sympathising with, their resident parent's distress over the non-resident parent's reprehensible behaviour. Even those who had been very young at the time of separation, developed, as they got older, a clear capacity to assess objectively the value to themselves of retaining and developing their own relationship with the non-resident parent. Those who recalled resisting contact with the non-resident parent considered that they had had good reasons of their own for doing so. As discussed in chapters 11 and 12, many could recall their resident parents persuading them to maintain contact when they themselves could see little value in doing so.

Of the respondents involved in the in-depth interviews, few had been aware of their parents going to court over arrangements relating to them. Indeed, very few parental disputes ever get to court (only around 10% of the separating population go to court to resolve disputes over contact: Blackwell and Dawe, 2003; Lader, 2008; Peacey and Hunt, 2009) and with a general withdrawal of legal aid from private law cases (the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012), it is possible that even fewer will do so in future. Nevertheless, much of what the respondents had to say about the extent to which they had been able to remain free of parental influence has clear implications for judicial practice.

If and when a contact dispute gets to court, the judiciary have made clear their view that contact between the child and non-resident parent is immensely important. Indeed, they traditionally assume that it is 'almost always in the interests of the child that he or she should have contact with the other parent' (*Re W (Children)* [2012] EWCA Civ 999, per McFarlane LJ, at [38]). Only if there are 'compelling reasons to the contrary' does this 'general principle' not apply (*Ibid*, at [56]). This *de facto* contact presumption (Hunt and Macleod, 2008: 222) means that unless the child is a mature teenager, a child's opposition to contact may be ignored. The courts operate on the basis that the long-term benefit to the child of enjoying a relationship with the non-resident parent will outweigh the child's short term distress over being forced into unwanted contact arrangements (*Re H (Minors) (Access)* [1992] 1 FLR 148). Further, they may assume that children do not always appreciate what is in their own best interests. At one point, it was not uncommon for any resistance to contact on the part of a relatively young child to be interpreted by the courts as being attributable to

the ‘implacable hostility of the residential parent’ (eg per Balcombe LJ in *Re J (a minor)* [1994] 1 FLR 729, at 736: a decision involving a 10 year old boy who had very unhappy contact experiences with his father). Today, in cases involving resistant children, the courts may, if the parents have sufficient funds, encourage the involvement of a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist to work with the child to overcome his opposition (eg *Re S (Contact: Intractable Dispute)* [2010] EWCA Civ 447, [2010] 2 FLR 1517, per Thorpe LJ, [3]-[7]: decision involving a 12 year old boy who opposed contact. See also *Re W (Contact: Joining Child as Party)* [2001] EWCA Civ 1830, [2003] 1 FLR 681). But if the child is very young, the child’s own viewpoint may be omitted from consideration entirely, (eg *Re C (Residence Order)* [2007] EWCA Civ 866, [2008] 1 FLR 211: the Court of Appeal confirmed an order requiring the mother to transfer immediately her four year-old daughter’s care to her father, with whom she had no relationship at all, in response to the mother’s continued refusal to comply with a series of contact orders. No evidence was apparently called for or considered on the child’s state of mind).

On the basis of this research, we would question whether the courts should be so sceptical of placing weight on the views of children involved in such parental disputes. In general, the respondents in our study who had been involved in high conflict parental separations showed a very clear ability to clarify for themselves the merits of the non-resident parent’s position. As many of the respondents indicated, even quite young children may form clear views of their own, based on a mature interpretation of their parents’ weaknesses. It appeared from their recollections that if asked they would have been quite capable of explaining their own views extremely sensibly. This being so, it is unwise for a court to override a child’s opposition to contact on the assumption that it stems solely from the residential parent’s unfounded hostility. The courts’ ideas about a child’s long-term needs, which they sometimes assume are not fully appreciated by the child, may lead them to overlook the importance of discovering what the child is saying about the non-resident parent’s behaviour *as a parent* and not as a protagonist in a parental dispute.

Judicial comments on the weight to be given to a child’s resistance to contact with the non-resident parent commonly arise in the context of resident mothers refusing to comply with contact orders. The English courts already have an array of wide powers, such as fines, compensation orders and even imprisonment as sanctions for breach (Fortin, 2009, chapter 13). Transferring the child’s care to the non-resident parent is currently considered to be a remedy of last resort – even a draconian one (*Re C (Residence Order)* [2007] EWCA Civ 866, [2008] 1 FLR 211, per Ward LJ, at [28]). Nevertheless, in rare cases, usually those where the courts accept that the child has been deliberately alienated against the non-resident parent, a court may consider such a step to be justified (eg *Re S (Transfer of Residence)* [2011] 1 FLR 1789. See also *V v V (Contact: Implacable Hostility)* [2004] EWHC 1215 (Fam), [2004] 2 FLR 851; *Re C (Residence Order)* [2007] EWCA Civ. 866, [2008] 1 FLR 211); *Re M (Children)* [2012] EWHC 1948 (Fam)).

As this chapter has shown, none of the respondents in this research study could be labeled ‘alienated children’, in the sense that term is defined below: their mothers’ negative views and feelings had not been unreasonable. Nevertheless, increasing attention is being drawn to the topic of PAS in this country, with suggestions that it is on the increase (see the claims made by Families Need Fathers, FNF 2008:17, and by Real Fathers for Justice, <http://www.realfathersforjustice.org>, last accessed 13/10/2012). In the USA, the concept attracts considerable attention (see the volume of material in the special issue (2010) *Family Court Review* 48 devoted entirely to this topic. See also Fortin, 2009, chapter 8) with

specialists suggesting that the term ‘alienated child’ is itself controversial. Most agree that genuine cases of parental alienation only ever occur in very high conflict parental relationships and that they are often difficult to diagnose correctly. Kelly and Johnston emphasise the importance of distinguishing the alienated child (one who persistently resists contact due to unreasonable negative views and feelings) from other children who resist contact ‘for a variety of normal, realistic, and/or developmentally expectable reasons.’ They describe children’s relationships with their parents after separation as being on a spectrum from positive to negative. It is only at the far end of negativity that they locate the truly alienated child. Next in terms of negativity is the child estranged from the non-resident parent due to the latter’s behaviour – violence, abuse or neglect. These ‘estranged’ children may only feel safe to reject the non-resident parent entirely once the separation has occurred. About the middle of the spectrum is the ‘allied child’ who only wants limited contact with the non-resident parent. The child’s alliance with the resident parent may stem from their moral judgment of the other parent’s responsibility for causing the divorce and of the resident parent’s need for allegiance and support (J Kelly and J Johnston, 2001: 251). This concept of the ‘allied child’ applies well to those of our respondents, who, as discussed in chapter 12, recalled having refused to have anything to do with a non-resident parent because they blamed them for breaking up the family. Kelly and Johnston’s emphasis on the need to differentiate alienated children from those who are responding normally to a variety of situations is now widely accepted (Fidler and Bala, 2010; Walker, Brantley and Rigsbee, 2004).

The absence of robust research evidence on the outcomes for the children involved in transfer of residence orders (Fidler and Bala, 2010: 33-55) is a worrying aspect of the use of such orders even in extreme cases of parental alienation. Its absence certainly suggests that it would be a mistake for the English courts to increase their use. Nevertheless, the consultation on the planned changes to the Children Act 1989 seemed to envisage this happening. It stated that where there is

‘wilful obstruction of contact by a parent with whom a child lives, the courts have been prepared, in appropriate cases, to order a change of residence so that the child lives with the other parent. The parent who has obstructed contact may then have an order providing for the child to have contact with them instead...where a change in living arrangements is consistent with the child’s welfare, it is important for parents to understand that this is a real possibility...’(DfE and MoJ, 2012: 8.2).

This suggestion may have been influenced by developments in Canada. Fidler and Bala (Fidler and Bala, 2010) urge the Canadian courts to be more willing to countenance early intervention in severe cases of parental alienation. On the basis that many alienating parents have a personality disorder, they argue that their alienating behaviour constitutes a form of emotional abuse against which children must be protected more readily. Consequently in their view, whilst children’s own feelings and ideas are important, they should not be determinative. They argue that a residence transfer order may be the only effective way of enforcing a contact order. In their view, the long-term benefits to the child of having a relationship with the non-resident parent may outweigh the short-term emotional risks involved in being taken away from the non-resident parent (Fidler and Bala, 2010). Observing the English courts’ reluctance to use such orders, Bala suggests that the English judiciary should be more realistic over the need for more robust enforcement measures (Bala, 2011).

The material presented in this chapter on respondents' recollections suggests that it would be quite wrong for the English courts to assume more readily, without the assistance of a very careful and full assessment of the child's state of mind, that his/her resistance to contact is attributable to the non-resident parent's 'wilful obstruction'. Under present day conditions such an assessment is often unavailable. Since, as is well known, Cafcass currently has insufficient resources to service routine assessments of the child's family background under section 7 of the Children Act 1989, the court may be reluctant to order a welfare report (Family Procedure Rules 2010 Practice Direction 12B, *The Revised Private Law Programme*, rule 5.4). Cafcass officers may attempt to establish the child's wishes and feelings, through a 'wishes and feelings report' (Cafcass, undated guidance). But this may be based on a relatively short assessment of the child's wishes, or in some cases even over the phone (Thiara and Gill, 2012: 100). Separate representation is far more likely to ensure that the child gets a proper hearing but since there are insufficient resources for children to be routinely separately represented in private law parental disputes, an order for separate representation is seldom made (Family Procedure Rules 2010 Practice Direction 16A). Consequently, the courts are often unlikely to obtain a full picture of the child's relationship with the non-resident parent from the child's own viewpoint, before making a contact order. This is despite the fact that Article 12, to which the UK is a signatory, provides children with the opportunity of being heard in any judicial proceeding, directly or through a representative.

Genuine cases of parental alienation are rare and, as demonstrated in this chapter, were certainly not evident in our respondents' recollections. In any event, since they are difficult to diagnose, a court's failure to establish the real reason for the child's resistance to contact may lead to matters such as abuse and/or domestic violence being overlooked. Drozd and Olesen (2004) point out the potentially damaging outcome for children if the courts get it wrong. If alienation is wrongly diagnosed, children can be removed from victimised mothers who are simply seeking to protect their children by resisting contact. Kelly and Johnston also emphasise that in the USA, 'too often in divorce situations, all youngsters resisting visits with a parent are improperly labelled alienated. And frequently, parents who question the value of visitation in these situations are quickly labeled alienating parents' (J Kelly and J Johnston (2001: 251). Given the real risks of too readily labelling a parent who resists contact as an alienating parent, the English courts should remain wary of making such a diagnosis and reluctant to make residence transfer orders more frequently.

The second part of this chapter deals with more general issues relating to seeking out children's views on a variety of matters. Probably reflecting their own widely differing childhood experiences, respondents gave very diverse answers to a hypothetical question regarding the appropriateness of consulting children over their residence and contact arrangements. The ages at which they thought children should be consulted also differed enormously, with their own experiences having apparently influenced their answers. Interestingly, none suggested that children have a *right* to be given such choices (see also chapter 12). There was, however, an overwhelming view that children should always be consulted over all the arrangements being made for their future by their parents. This is, of course, part of Scottish law, which requires all parents when reaching any major decision relating to the child to 'have regard so far as practicable to the views (if he wishes to express them) of the child concerned, taking account of the child's age and maturity... a child twelve years of age or more shall be presumed to be of sufficient age and maturity to form a view' (Children (Scotland) Act, 1995, section 6). Perhaps not surprisingly, however, none of our respondents mentioned this. There was also considerable opposition to children being forced

into contact arrangements against their will, with the sensible suggestion that the reasons for a child's resistance should always be fully explored. Again, this finding has particular resonance for children whose parents take their disputes over contact to court. It was notable that one respondent did not consider even from her perspective as an adult that she had benefited from being forced to maintain contact with her father.

Although there was general agreement that children should be consulted over residence and contact arrangements, some respondents were keen to point out that being consulted is very different to be given the power to *decide* such matters, particularly if children are very young. This approach accords with research with 'divorcing children' showing children's own appreciation of the importance of this distinction (Smart et al, 2001), with some considering it important *not* to be given final choices of this kind (Butler et al, 2003; Cashmore and Parkinson, 2009). As family practitioners point out, children's decision-making can be vulnerable to external factors that may only have a short-term impact (Cantwell and Scott, 1995). Indeed for some respondents, it was some of these external factors which led them to reach decisions that, with adult hindsight, they now greatly regretted.

The question whether children should ever be allowed to decide matters had a particular significance within the context of being given a choice over which parent they wanted to live with. Again there was no clear agreement whether this was ever appropriate. Whilst it was not always viewed as being problematic, some respondents could see the difficulties for a child in reaching such a decision. Perhaps surprisingly, some respondents had actually been given such a choice (discussed in chapter 11). One respondent found that her mother's feeling of rejection because she had chosen to live with her father had damaged their relationship. As is clear from the quote towards the end of this chapter, another greatly regretted the choice he had made. Research studies with 'divorcing children' note children's reluctance to feel responsible for choosing between parents, given their loyalty to both and the obvious risk of hurting the apparently rejected parent (Butler et al, 2003; Cashmore and Parkinson, 2009; Smart et al, 2001). Perhaps predictably, given these dangers, practitioners who interview young children are frequently reminded of the risks involved in expecting them to express preferences regarding their parents (Cashmore and Parkinson, 2009; O'Quigley, 2000).

On the other hand, Smart and colleagues found that 'divorcing children' sometimes have a very robust approach to the idea of children making 'wrong' decisions. Some took the view that it was better to allow children to make mistakes than to force them into an arrangement with which they were unhappy (Smart et al, 2001: 100). Such an approach has merit. The respondents in our study were dealing with parents whose continuing problems sometimes undermined their capacity to parent adequately. The damage that some respondents subsequently suffered as a result of decisions they now regretted was often mainly attributable to parental deficiencies, over which their children had had no control at all. In the context of parental frailty, it may be quite impossible to protect children from making what they subsequently consider to have been mistakes.

Chapter 14 Post separation changes in parent-child relationships

Changing relationships between parents and children are a very normal part of the process of growing up. Respondents were generally well aware of this and felt that some of the highs and lows they reported might have happened irrespective of their parents' separation. However, it was also clear from respondents' accounts that separation posed a number of particular challenges to developing parent-child relationships. As reported in chapter 9, respondents described a significant amount of emotional distress after the separation, typified by feelings of loss, abandonment and self-blame. There were notable changes in parenting style, with a loss of structure and boundaries. Many respondents also experienced their parents being emotionally unavailable to them as they struggled to deal with their own emotions and changed circumstances. Some blamed the non-resident parent for the separation or were critical of the way they had behaved.

The picture that emerged from our respondent's recollections shows parent-child relationships being affected in both positive and negative ways. Overall, their accounts suggest that relationships with non-resident parents were more frequently affected than those with the resident parent. In this chapter we outline the factors identified by respondents as contributing to changes in their relationships with each of their parents.

Relationships with the non-resident parent in childhood

The relationship between the non-resident parent and child can crucially affect the child's enjoyment of contact. Conversely, the experience of contact may affect the relationship. At the beginning of chapter 11, which explored the factors underlying 'good' and 'bad' contact, we recounted the very different experiences of Anna and Susan, who both stayed in touch with their non-resident parents throughout their childhoods but whose contact had had a very different quality. Anna, who was extremely negative about contact, thought that her relationship with her father had 'if anything, got worse' over the years.

We'll sit and have tea and it's quite quiet, uncomfortable silences... Even last time we went out we went into (X) for a drink and me and my dad never spoke the whole night. It's just very odd.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time).

Susan (respondent 14040), however, for whom contact had been very positive, remained close to both her parents, who were still very involved in her life.

A key theme in the telephone survey, as reported in Chapter 7, was the continuity of pre and post separation relationships between the respondent and the parent who became non-resident on separation. Many of those interviewed in-depth also said that relationships had remained much the same, as we describe later in this chapter. Where relationships had changed, typically they had deteriorated. However this was not invariably the case. We begin our analysis of the qualitative data on post-separation relationships with the exceptions who said that their relationship had improved.

Improved relationships with the non-resident parent

In Chapter 11 we described the importance to respondents of the perceived commitment to contact by the non-resident parent. In addition, data from both the telephone survey and interview sample reflects respondents' need to feel that the non-resident parent made time for them, reinforcing perhaps their sense that they are loved and cared for and kept in mind when

they are apart. Consistent with these findings, where respondents felt that there had been an improvement in their relationship with their non-resident parent after the separation, the most common factor contributing to better relationships was the perceived emotional investment of the non-resident parent in the relationship. Improvements were thus often attributed to spending more time together than they had done previously, getting to know each other better and having more shared experiences than they had done pre-separation.

Respondent I'd say if anything the relationship with my dad improved because there was more structured time there. At home you knew he was there, he was working, I knew he was busy. But always seeing him Wednesdays and Saturdays there was more time to see him. Because when dad was at home Saturdays we used to go to see my mum's mum, so those Saturdays would be spent away from home and dad would be doing his DIY, whatever, he'd be away doing man things. So if anything we saw him more when they were separated and my relationship with my dad did get better.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Where relationships had improved, respondents also felt that their non-resident parent had made an effort for their time together to be child focused, that the parent had listened to them, attempted to identify their needs and take them into account in the way they parented and the time they spent together.

Respondent I liked going to see him of a weekend, at that point, because we always went out and did stuff. It was nice, fun. And it was nice because I'd never had that much fun with my dad when he lived with us.

Interviewer It sounds as if your relationship got better.

Respondent It did, a lot better. A lot, lot better.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer What was your relationship like with your dad in those years you were having contact, did it change at all?

Respondent We probably spent more valuable time with each other than what we did at home.

Interviewer So do you think it improved your relationship?

Respondent Yeah, because we were with him 24/7 for that weekend whereas at home we were like just there.

30622 (F, 8, 28, change of residence Mum to Dad, continuous contact each NRP)

Some of those who had been living with a high degree of conflict between their parents prior to the separation also reported that the separation had had a positive impact on relationships. For these respondents the sense of relief that the conflict was over allowed space for relationships to continue and develop.

Respondent I just remember thinking great, he's out the house. We can actually stop arguing now and it was really peaceful and weird, I used to find myself thinking there's something really wrong, because it was just relief I think, pure relief, not relief that my parents had split up, no one would ever wish that on anything, but I think I was relieved that they couldn't personally get at each other in front of me and [sister]. I don't think that they realise what it does to the children, they don't realise that they're point scoring,

they don't realise that they're upsetting people, all they care about is getting their own back I think.

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

A few respondents felt that they had had to 'look after' the non-resident parent after the separation – emotionally as well as physically. This usually had the effect of bringing them closer together.

Interviewer Did you feel that you then had to look after him because he was so upset?

Respondent Yeah, I think I've always...I think that's why I'm so close to him, because I did feel sorry for him, I can understand why my mum did leave him, because I don't think I would have put with a relationship like that, but I did feel sorry for him.

30569 (F, 12, 30, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Finally the following respondent considered that the separation, in the context of a positive experience of contact, had actually allowed her to build a stronger relationship with each of her parents.

Interviewer How important do you think the contact arrangements were for the relationship you've got with your dad now?

Respondent I think they definitely helped build a really strong relationship whereas I feel if we had carried on living the way we did and they hadn't got divorced I think maybe I wouldn't be as close to my dad. And I maybe wouldn't be as close to my mum either. I don't know how it would have gone, whether I would have stayed close to my mum because my dad was the way he was or whether we would have drifted apart because I thought my family situation was so strange.

Interviewer Do you think your experience of contact has contributed to that, has improved your life.

Respondent Yes, I think so. Because I've been able to develop such a good relationship with both my parents. Whereas if contact had been different I maybe wouldn't have been able to.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Deteriorated relationships with the non-resident parent

As in the telephone survey, however, most of the interview sample who reported changes in relationships with their non-resident parent after the separation described relationships which had deteriorated. A range of factors were felt to have contributed to difficulties in the relationship. As described in chapter 9, a number of parents suffered significant psychological problems as a result of the separation, including mental health problems, depression, problematic drinking and drug use. Respondents' accounts suggest that the deterioration in relationships often resulted from such difficulties. Where parents were suffering from mental health problems, the nature of the illness had the effect, in respondents' eyes, of causing those affected to withdraw and disengage from relationships with their children.

Respondent My dad's depression...I think it was a couple of years... and looking back on it now, I've seen photos of him, he sort of put on a lot of weight, he was sort of taking

medication, he wasn't well, he really wasn't well... he is an outgoing guy, you know, he's not the life and soul of the party but you'd always have a good drink with him, you'd always have a good laugh with him and that just stopped, he just, yes it just wasn't my dad.

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Some respondents experienced their parents' anger about the separation being expressed through problematic behaviour. A number of non-resident parents were said to have resorted to excessive drinking, drug use or violence. The fear experienced as a result of the unpredictability of their parents' behaviour was often found to be intolerable by respondents, who themselves reported withdrawing from the relationships.

One respondent, previously quoted in chapter 12 (14004), described how her father's drinking had turned to violence, first towards her mother and then towards her. Because of her increasing fear she told him that she no longer wanted to go for overnight stays. Her father reacted to this with aggressive behaviour, reinforcing her fear, which resulted in them not seeing each other for over 10 years.

Interviewer And over all the years you didn't have contact you didn't sort of think maybe I should go back and see him, or?

Respondent I hated him for a while...I was upset and then it turned to anger that he'd done this and I didn't feel like I had a dad, I didn't want to have a dad, as far as I was concerned he could be dead ... and then I got to a point where I didn't care, I didn't feel enough about him to hate him, I just felt neutral, like sorry for him, it was sad that it had happened but it had ... I didn't want to see him, absolutely adamant I wasn't going to see him

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

In other cases, respondents felt the separation had caused changes in their parent's personality or general behaviour that they did not like and could no longer relate to.

Interviewer If you think back to your relationship with your dad during that time compared to what it was like before they separated, would you say that your relationship changed?

Respondent Much worse, it was never the same again, ever.

Interviewer What do you put that down to?

Respondent He was not anything that I thought he was. He changed a lot. He wasn't strong. He just ended up being really, really weak and I hated that and he wasn't strong for me, it didn't feel like, I dunno, the relationship just changed completely and I was angry at him and I started not to like him.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

In a few cases, the behaviour of the non-resident parent had become so severe that police involvement was necessary. For example in one case, there had been an injunction taken out against a father who spent years stalking his daughter after she refused to see him because of his unpredictable and aggressive behaviour towards her.

The attribution of blame was a common theme in respondents' accounts of deteriorated relationships. Some reported experiencing strong feelings of anger towards a non-resident parent - either because they felt that parent was to blame for the separation or because of the way they had treated their other parent. As reported in chapter 12, attributions of blame often led to respondents refusing to have contact with a non-resident parent, at least for a time, particularly when they had been unable to express these difficult feelings directly to the blameworthy parent. One respondent (13892), previously quoted in chapter 12, passionately blamed her father for the separation; she felt utterly shocked and outraged by his leaving her and her mother alone with her seriously ill disabled sister who was in and out of hospital. Another expressed her fury with her father in equally fervent tones.

Interviewer *How did you feel about your dad as a result?*

Respondent *I hated him, absolutely couldn't stand him at all, I hated him, I still don't much like him now to be honest with you, but I get on with it because I know the world isn't all about me really.*

Interviewer *You really blamed him for the break-up?*

Respondent *I totally do blame him because he was given chance after chance to change his ways, but he's a selfish person, and selfish people never change, they always think about what makes them happy, they never make anyone want to help anyone or they'll always pity themselves... just not the type of person I want to be around.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Respondents were often aware that their reluctance to have contact with a non-resident parent was either entirely or in part because of unresolved feelings of blame towards that parent.

Interviewer *Do you feel that part of your reluctance was that you blamed him for the separation?*

Respondent *Yeah, I think it was yeah, because I knew my mum, obviously I spent the majority of time with my mum, I saw my mum hurt and I saw my mum cry, and I saw her struggle and obviously I saw my dad what I thought was this life of luxury with his new wife, and the new children and stuff like that.*

30577(F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Where there was on-going acrimony between parents, this often had an additional and detrimental impact on respondents' relationship with their non-resident parent. As reported in chapter 11, it could make contact less enjoyable or make children reluctant to have contact. The following respondent describes how persistent bad feeling between her parents had negatively changed her relationship with both of them.

Interviewer *Did she meet up with him as well?*

Respondent *No never, never really did, they saw each other through windows of cars, when they dropped me off or whatever. I didn't want them to get in the same room, I still don't want it now, I'm still not over it, I still don't want them in the same room. I like them separate, I like them much better when they're separate. When they're together I don't like either of them.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

We highlighted earlier in this chapter the importance of the perceived emotional investment of the parent in improved parent-child relationships. In line with this, the most common factor identified in respondents' accounts of deteriorated relationships was what the young people perceived as the lack of emotional investment. A number felt that their non-resident parent had not been interested enough in them or made sufficient effort to spend time with them and continue to know them, leaving them with a sense that they were not loved or cared about.

Respondents *I have no reason to want to know my dad anymore. He wasn't interested enough to ask me about my interests back then, even though I didn't really have any because I was a child, but why should he want to know now instead of wanting to know me more back then, if you know what I mean.*

Interviewer *Tell me a bit more about that, because you were having contact with your dad up to the point you were 17, but you don't feel he was interested in you?*

Respondents *No, well you know when parents go to the teachers and they do a review thing? He never did that, he never ever went, not once, and I thought that was a bit strange. He never got like interested enough to know what I was doing...he never asked normal questions like fruit-wise what fruit did you like, like normal things, or vegetables or food in general or what's my favourite colour, what was, like things you should know about your child. I just found it a bit strange that he didn't know that stuff.*

13887(F, 0, 20, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Interviewer *There was really no point at which during your teenage years you were missing your dad?*

Respondent *No, I was really very detached from him and felt that I didn't have a dad, I was quite clear that a dad was someone who was involved in their children's lives and actually made a positive contribution to them, and as far as I was concerned that didn't exist with my dad.*

30483 (F, 9, 30, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Lack of emotional investment was also felt to be demonstrated by non-resident parents who left it up to the young person to contact them and make the arrangements rather than actively managing contact themselves.

Interviewer *Do you think your dad would have wanted to see you more?*

Respondent *No...not because he wouldn't want to just because he doesn't think like that...He wouldn't have probably even noticed. Which as a child I found, you know, difficult, but any child would.*

Interviewer *So were you typically making the running all the time then, you were sort of ringing up and saying dad can I come over, or I'm coming over?*

Respondent *Hmm, and any time I did, oh yes it would be great to see you, you know I'd love to see you. So it wasn't like I was, he didn't want to, it was just purely the lack of thought but that's just his nature more than anything.*

Interviewer *Would you have liked him to make more effort?*

Respondent *Yes, yes...as a child I would have loved him to be ringing me up. It would have been nice to think that, you know, having me around had an impact,*

which I now know did as at that age you, I tended to feel a bit like not bother, so.

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

This concept of emotional investment was also linked, although not reliant on, the respondents' need for 'quality time' with their non-resident parent. As discussed in chapter 11, it was not enough for young people to simply have time or share space with their non-resident parent. They wanted to feel understood by their parent and engaged with at an emotional level. It was important that time spent together was child-focused and wherever possible involved engaging in shared interests.

Respondent If when we saw him it had been more about making us feel nice, you know little things like we used to go to his place or go up the town but he never had anything planned for us to do, we'd sit and watch TV all afternoon, there was never any like, meaningful time and you could do that anywhere. At the end of the day you never get into a real life, you never get the chance to bond properly, you have to re-bond. The others were young enough so that they could adjust a little bit easier, my brother definitely even though he struggled later on.

Interviewer Do you think that would have made a difference?

Respondent Yeah. Like if he actually paid attention to who we were and what we were into and things like that.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

One area which respondents felt had caused difficulties in the relationship was where they had experienced change in the way they were parented by the non-resident parent. The majority of these felt that after the separation their non-resident parent had simply stopped parenting them in the way that they had before. This was particularly noticeable in cases where the non-resident parent was the mother. As discussed in chapter 9, in these cases the mother's absence created considerable difficulties for resident fathers trying to maintain the household. But for the young people themselves, the change was often devastating. They experienced a particular sense of loss for the mothering they once had and still felt they needed.

Interviewer What about her role as a mother to you in that time?

Respondent Pretty much gone completely really. If anything in between her starting to leave and leaving completely she almost relinquished all those roles that had gone completely and been taken over by my dad and (sister), (brother) and myself all just pitching in together. She lost all of that and almost to the point where we were good friends I guess, because she wasn't my mum anymore. She was, but she wasn't there doing the mum stuff that she should have been. She was just there in her flat doing her own thing and seeing her as and when...she did nothing in a mumsie way towards me after that really other than a few shopping trips.

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time)

Interviewer I think that was the only problem I had when my mum and dad split up, at one point I felt I'd lost my mum but got more of a friend, which is nice at times but I felt I'd lost the mother figure slightly. And it wasn't until I've moved in here (with mum), when I was 23, that all of a sudden I had a mother again, who kept saying 'tidy your bedroom, will you do this'. Even now it's will you please tidy your bedroom'.

Interviewer That's a very interesting comment. What was missing?

Respondent I think it would have been the discipline, that side of it. Because it was all fun at my mum's, all fun and games, there was no....

Interviewer So it was a fun time, it was really enjoyable, but it wasn't a normal mother-child relationship

Respondent Yeah, it wasn't like that at all.

14300 (F, 12, 28, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent It was sort of sad times in a sense because it was a different relationship, it wasn't my mum who was there in the morning and that sort of thing and there at night and do things like make my lunchbox for school, those things that your mum would do. So that was a totally different relationship, we'd go out and do things together, that's all it really was I suppose. I suppose it's affected our relationship to this day really in the sense that there were certain parts she did really well when she lived with us but then when she left certain aspects of what she did as a mother stopped from the age of 9, 10.

31628 (M, 9, 28, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Another factor which was commonly reported as having a negative impact on the relationship with the non-resident parent was the advent of a new partner which, as reported in chapters 11 and 12, could create difficulties over contact and sometimes interfere with or disrupt parent-child relationships.

Interviewer What would make it better, if you could wave a wand what would happen?

Respondent I'd just like him to do normal things with me, just to not be so distant from me, and not to have his girlfriend butt in at anything I ever said. She's just a bit of a nuisance really.

20292 (M, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact reduced over time)

Interviewer And what do you, what do you think it's all about?

Respondent What, why he stopped speaking to me?

Interviewer Yes.

Respondent I think it was probably his girlfriend to be honest, but, because it was all fine and then they kind of got together and then it kind of went downhill.

13494 (F, 2, 22, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Unchanged relationships with the non-resident parent

As in the telephone survey, respondents who described unchanged relationships fell into two distinct groups: those who had been close before the separation and remained so, and those whose relationships had been more distant and did not improve. For some of this latter group, as discussed in chapter 9, the separation had not been particularly traumatic since the non-resident parent had not been very involved in their life prior to the separation anyway and that continued to be the pattern.

Respondent Well he didn't really have an input in our lives, so him not being there didn't really change much, yeah... Yeah, it's like from the start he wasn't that involved, so him going didn't really affect me in any... affects... you know.

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, ceased contact)

Respondent You don't miss what you don't have. If it had been the situation where your dad was there every day and suddenly he's not, it would be a different thing, they'd probably miss him, and it would probably affect them, but I grew up predominantly without a father so I don't think it affected me too much.

10901 (M, 12, 22, mother residence throughout, ceased contact)

Respondent In hindsight I don't think a lot really changed for me, the only difference being is that because obviously when they were together he would be away for exercise, so I don't think a lot really impacted upon me.

20246 (M, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Others described relationships in which there appeared to be little emotional connection before or after separation.

Interviewer Can you remember what your relationship with him was like during those years?

Respondent We never really were close. We're alike in that way. We don't discuss emotions. It was 'I need a hand with this' or 'I've broken this'. It was more about other things. We would avoid the relationship as such and get on with whatever. As far as I can remember it was always like that.

Interviewer: Did it change at all?

Respondent: I think it pretty much stayed like that.

30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact)

The following respondent told us about her relationship with her father which was not close prior to the separation due to a number of factors, including his perceived lack of interest in spending time with the children:

Interviewer How close would you say you were to him at that time [prior to the separation]?

Respondent At that point no, we weren't very close. We were closer when I was younger...but as I got older and obviously as he was working away, we weren't close at all to be honest...I think as a kid you do think that both your parents should be there unless you were brought up with just your mum or just your dad....From my point of view it was 'you're home now you should spend time with your kids', from his point of view it was, 'I've been driving for six/seven days straight, I'm tired, I need to catch up on paperwork,' and all that sort of thing. So it was different things from different points of view, but no, we weren't very close, but then I think obviously there were reasons for that, I think we both had different views.

Interviewer You're quite different?

Respondent Yeah, we are different people, and I think that probably didn't help. I was quite scared of my dad when I was little, and I think that made things harder. He was quite intimidating, and he was a big bloke, quite tall, quite stocky, and I was obviously a little child, and to have someone stand over you was quite scary.

She went on to tell us that despite maintaining some contact with him throughout most of her childhood the nature of their relationship never really changed.

Interviewer *So you don't have that same kind of relationship with him, just wanting to be with him, spending time with him?*

Respondent *I'm not fussed, which sounds horrible like I don't care if I see my dad or not, it's not that, but I think because I grew up without him there so often it's just the norm, so used to it. I've seen so little of him over the years that it literally is just like 'well that's the way our relationship is'.*

13892 (F, 11, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

In contrast other relationships were unchanged because they were strong and durable. Forty four per cent of those in the telephone survey who described their pre-separation relationships as very close described post-separation relationships in the same way. In line with this, in the interview sample, relationships which were described in very positive terms prior to the separation appeared more robust in the face of some of the challenges presented by attempting to maintain relationships in difficult circumstances. In the following case the respondent recalled a very close pre-separation relationship with his non-resident father, who had been actively involved in his day-to-day-life. He goes on to describe a warm and close post-separation relationship despite his father's alcoholism, having to move some distance away, and his difficult experiences of on-going parental conflict throughout his childhood.

Interviewer *How important was it for you to have had that relationship with your dad, that regular time with him?*

Respondent *Oh yeah, essential...definitely.*

Interviewer *Can you imagine what it would have been like without if your mum hadn't...*

Respondent *Horrible, I know even at 19 when we moved up here and I wasn't near him it was horrible, because I'd speak to him on the phone and he'd be crying, and it's just... even now when I go and drop him off in X to get the bus back he cries. It's just...*

Interviewer *So really affectionate?*

Respondent *Yeah, and it's just like losing us again for another time, you can see it in his face.*

Interviewer *You know he really loves you?*

Respondent *Yeah, I don't know why because...*

Interviewer *And you always did have that?*

Respondent *Yeah, from day one, as soon as we were born we were his life, that's the way it should be with kids though isn't it really?*

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact)

Relationships with resident parents in childhood

Overall, as was found in the telephone survey, relationships with the resident parent appeared to be more stable over time than those with the non-resident parent, with respondents reporting less overall change. Where relationships had improved or deteriorated, however, respondents were able to identify some of the factors which had contributed to this.

Improved relationships with the resident parent

One of the factors identified as contributing to improved relationships with the resident parent was the increased amount of time spent together.

Respondent *My relationship with my mum when they split up was brilliant and it probably hadn't been before although then I probably would have said I got on really well with her. We get on really well now, my mum's my best friend and she has been since it happened but before that I wouldn't have said that our relationship was very good. We spent a lot of time together after the separation because she was in more and I was and I think that's when we really bonded and our relationship became what it is now.*

20791 (F, 14, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

The following respondent highlights the value of getting to spend time with her resident parent on a one-to-one basis.

Respondent *I suppose we did become closer because my dad wasn't an active role between the three of us anymore, I suppose people have different relationships and they react differently in specific company. I think we still would be very, very close, but if it was me, my mum and my dad I don't think necessarily it would be as strong.*

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Deteriorated relationships with the resident parent

In some instances the relationship with the resident parent appears to have deteriorated because that parent was displacing the blame and anger they felt towards their ex-partner onto the children.

Interviewer *So your dad, you said very close in the very early days and then after the separation when you were living with him how would you say your relationship was with him during that time?*

Respondent *Just horrible, just horrible, if he wasn't shouting at me and blaming me, he was asking me to do things for him with regards to talking to my mum about things, or he was crying and I was trying to comfort him to some extent. And there was, I mean most of the time I think I just tried to avoid him, and there was, I think there was a breaking point where he started yelling at me and I started talking to myself and I think that frightened him, and after that he left me alone a little bit more...it's a very, very difficult relationship.*

31284 (F, 15, 29, change of residence father to mother, continuous NRM, interrupted NRF)

Where young people experienced the parent they lived with badmouthing their ex-partner, this often provoked strong feelings of anger and resentment which could affect their relationship with the resident parent.

Interviewer *Do you think the bad mouthing, the negative talking about your dad, and the mocking and that kind of thing, did that affect your relationship with your mum do you think?*

Respondent *Oh yeah tremendously, because I think when anybody talks about your parent badly, regardless of what situation it is you always go on the offensive, and nobody lets you talk about your blood in an adverse manner.*

20156 (M, 9, 25, change of residence mum-dad, continuous contact NRF, interrupted NRM)

Similarly when respondents were expected to act as a go-between or take messages between parents this could create additional difficulties in the relationship with the resident parent.

Respondent *Being in the middle of it all, I mean like I said I was in the middle of it in that dad would ask me to say things to my mum but I wouldn't say them, or I would say them to her in a, 'you wouldn't believe what he's asked me to tell you' kind of way so it was never a serious sitting mum down and going, you know, 'he's said he'll take you back'. I just, no, but then he would want to know what she'd said and I'd have to kind of cobble together an answer that didn't really hurt his feelings, so yes there was a lot of kind of...*

Interviewer *Is that the kind of thing that you think made, made it difficult for you to just be with one or the other and move between them, was it that you were carrying this kind of go between role in a way?*

Respondent *Yes, it made the relationship with my dad very difficult because he was asking quite a lot of me, not so much from my mum because she had no messages to send back so it wasn't like I had to deal with that, but yes it kind of, I'd say it probably, the messages he was asking me to deliver tainted my relationship with him more than the contact with my mum. But I can imagine that had I had to deliver those messages, or had I wanted to deliver those messages, that would have made it very difficult to see my mum.*

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

Parent-child relationships in adulthood

One of our aims in talking to young adults whose parents separated in their childhood was to explore their experiences of, and perspectives on, longer term relationships with parents. To this end we asked respondents to tell us about any further changes in relationships throughout their childhood and about their current relationships with their parents. Overall, data from the telephone survey suggests that relationships with resident parents were generally more positive and stable over time than those with non-resident parents. Consistent with this, in-depth interviews showed that further changes in relationships were more often reported in relationships with non-resident than with resident parents.

Interestingly, the telephone survey data demonstrates that, where there were changes in relationships with non-resident parents in adulthood, they were slightly more likely to improve than deteriorate. This is in contrast with the pattern shown in changes from pre to post-separation relationships where relationships with the non-resident parent most commonly deteriorated. Half the survey respondents reported changes in the closeness of relationships with the non-resident parent in adulthood. Of these, 28% said that they were now closer to their non-resident parent, compared to 22% who said that they were less close or no longer in touch (in contrast to only 8% who reported closer relationships and 45% who reported less close post-separation relationships than they had prior to the separation).

In the interview sample, there were also a large number of respondents who reported no further changes in the closeness of their relationship with their non-resident parent into adulthood. Where further changes in relationships were apparent, it was clear that, in some cases, relationships had got worse. However, more strikingly, some of the difficulties experienced in parent-child relationships after the parent's separation were gradually overcome, and many felt that the relationship with their non-resident parent had improved over time.

Improved relationships with non-resident parents in adulthood

A number of factors were identified as helping to improve previously poor relationships. Perhaps the most striking message was that time was a great healer. Some of those who had experienced difficulties in their relationships throughout their childhood found that a new perspective gained in early adulthood meant that relationships improved and new relationships could be formed.

Interviewer *So do you see him more now than you did when you were having contact (as a child)?*

Respondent: *Yeah, I probably talk to him more now. As I've got older I've let go of the grudge at him and [girlfriend who dad left to live with]. There was always tension whereas now I've just let it go. Maybe I blamed her to start off with and him so I guess that's why I didn't spend time with them but now I've sort of let it go because there's no point, it's never going to change now. I've matured a bit, well I've tried. It's just getting older.*

30203(M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

There was certainly a sense that once the initial emotional reaction to the separation had passed, and young people were able to let go of some of the upset and anger they felt, relationships could resume and find a way forward.

Interviewer *It's actually got your relationship on a better sort of level now?*

Respondent *It's allowed me to just say goodbye to all of that upset that I'd stored...and move on from it.*

13878 (F, 12, 26, change of residence father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

As respondents got older, particularly into early adulthood, they described having a new perspective on what had happened, having a greater understanding of their parents' actions, being able to forgive them for their behaviour and being able to 'let go' of blame and grudges.

Interviewer *So it sounds like you still feel very much that he was to blame, it was his decision, but that your understanding of the reasons why changed as you got older?*

Respondent *Yeah, part of me understands. I'll never understand why he had the affair, I'll never understand that part. But I understand why he found it hard, and I understand why maybe he thought here's my option, here's my chance to leave.*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

Respondent *Yeah, I think when I was younger when they were freshly thinking about the idea, going through it, I think I blamed my dad for a lot of it, even though I was really close to him I blamed...it was his fault, it was his affair therefore it was his fault. But I think after the years passed and I sort of got more information about it...I don't think it was completely my mum's fault, I think it was probably both of them, but I can see now...the reasons why my dad did what he did, it happened and even though he knows, and obviously I know that it was wrong and it's not exactly how you're supposed to do it, but I can see why, what drove him to it, that kind of thing. So although I don't blame my mum, and I don't blame my dad, but I can see where they both went wrong, I can understand it a little bit better.*

14303 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Interviewer *Did you feel like you ever blamed one party or the other?*

Taking a longer view of contact

Respondent No. I always looked at it as if to say that my dad done wrong by cheating on my mum but I think that my mum made him feel that he had to, not have to but I think that she, you know, I think that she was just as much to blame for the relationship from the way that she was, just because she didn't do anything physically, you know, she put a lot of strain on the relationship.

Interviewer Did you always feel like that or do you think you've been able to make sense of that since you've been an adult?

Respondent I don't think I really thought about it when I was younger, I think I've made sense of it as I grew up...yes. And just by realising how my mum actually is, because I can see it, you see, I can see.

31442 (F, 3, 22, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

This respondent explained how her recent acceptance of her parents as the people they are, letting go of judgement on their behaviour and emotionally 'moving on' had allowed her relationship with them to improve in adulthood.

Interviewer Why do you think you've now got the good relationship with your dad back? What changed?

Respondent I think over the last few years we've just had...whatever conversations we've had about it have all been more or less rounded up to the point that mum is mum and dad is dad and life is just about difference and tolerance of other people's attitudes towards things, and she's always going to be my mum and he's always going to be my dad, and I don't have to like their opinions on things or anybody else's. But it's more of an understanding that it's not important how I would deal in the same situation as such, it's more important how I deal with the situation how it is, and if mum thinks she's doing the right thing, and at least she means well...So it's more of a realisation that everybody has grown up now and it's done and dusted now. Whatever you've learnt from it you've learnt from it but there's no point in carrying anything negative from it, because well that's up to you, negativity carries on to other relationships and other family and the future and things, and there's no need, if you don't have to then there's no point in dragging it out.

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

The following respondent highlights the importance of an on-going cooperative parental relationship for helping maintaining positive parent-child relationships.

Interviewer Do you think that's made a big difference to you the fact that they get on so well.

Respondent Oh god yeah.

Interviewer Do you think it would have been different if they didn't get on?

Respondent Yeah because we wouldn't be able to do those big family things that we do now, so yeah it would be a case of what are we going to do, mum's going to be there and dad's going to be there.

Interviewer Does that help your relationship with both of them?

Respondent Yeah, because you'd be stuck in a middle of an argument otherwise. We've not had to experience it but I don't think I'd like to.

30622 (F, 8, 28, residence changed mum to dad, continuous contact each NRP)

In some cases, respondents reported that improvements in relationships had occurred where there had been a significant and positive change in the behaviour of the non-resident parent. A number, for example, were said to have become less aggressive or violent.

Respondent *My relationship with my dad changed a bit over the years mostly because the less aggressive he got the more close we got I suppose, I wouldn't say we're close, close, but at first the aggression just made me very wary around him and although I wanted to see him we weren't particularly close, I was just too wary that he might lose his temper, and as his temper got better we got a bit more close and we'd talk a bit more sensible conversations, adult conversations to the point now we just sort of, we get on alright, yes we get on perfectly fine I suppose.*

Interviewer *So would you say you're closer to him now than you ever were before?*

Respondent *Yes but that's mostly due to the fact that he's not violent anymore and he's more like he should have been the whole time. Yes, he's got a temper on him, but he's not violently tempered now, he's just got a temper.*

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM).

It was apparent from respondents' accounts that there was a great will amongst some young people to maintain relationships with their non-resident parents, even when the parents had shown previously poor behaviour or made very little emotional investment in their lives. In some cases it was remarkable what young people were prepared to put up with and the efforts they would go to in pursuit of maintaining parent-child relationships.

Interviewer *Are you glad you stayed in contact with him?*

Respondent *Yeah I am, of course I am, I couldn't get rid of him to be honest with you, even if I wanted to. I'd probably get rid of him for about six months and think to myself I want nothing to do with him, and then I'd probably cave in after seven, and then contact him. I've got a conscience, I've got a conscience.*

Interviewer *He's still important, you feel he's your dad and you ought to be in touch?*

Respondent *He is my dad, yeah, I've got nothing I can change, he's my dad I love him, the same as my mother's my mother and I love her, nothing I can change, the past is the past, just need to get on. What makes us weak makes us stronger, what knocks us down get back up again.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence in late teens, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

There was a clear sense that in some cases respondents were attempting to make up for what they felt they had lost in their relationship with their non-resident parent during their childhood. The following young woman had a period of nearly four years of no contact with her father between the ages of 7 and 11 because of a controlling resident step-father. At the age of 22, and pregnant with her first child, she still went to stay with her father once a fortnight to make up for what she felt was lost time with him in her childhood.

Interviewer *Did you do that because it was particularly important to you to maintain that relationship with your dad?*

Respondent Yes, yes I think that I wanted to make up for what we didn't have so, but we do have a really strong relationship now, so that's nice because it didn't feel like that when you used to go around at first and obviously once we had that break because we were so young when we went again and started to actually to gain access, I felt like we had to make a whole new relationship up because we didn't know each other.

31442 (F, 3, 22, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

A positive message relayed by some respondents was that even the most damaged relationships can sometimes be repaired. An important factor in this was the ability of the parent involved to take some responsibility for what had happened and, where appropriate, to apologise.

Interviewer What's your relationship with your mum like now?

Respondent Strangely it's quite positive with her now, it's probably because I had that big gap. I remember when I actually started resuming contact with her she actually said sorry for a lot of the things that happened, and she's actually specifically said sorry about the way the divorce happened, so in that respect I think it was very...things have got a lot better between us. I call her every other day now, I see her quite regularly, and I think it's all quite...it's probably a lot more stronger than it ought to be. It's a bit of an anomaly actually how things have come along, because there's one stage where I just didn't want to know her, but now I really don't know what happened when I was aged 17 when I first made that call to her, I think I may have just been reminiscent of the time before the divorce, and I tried to remember that more.

20156 (M, 9, 25, change of residence mother to father, continuous NRF, interrupted NRM)

Where relationships had been damaged in childhood, respondents also recognised that maintaining a degree of contact left open the possibility of repair later in life.

Interviewer Do you think that the contact that you had growing up has affected the relationship with your dad?

Respondent I would say it made a difference, it made, I mean if I were to have no contact god knows where my relationship would be, I probably wouldn't have one because I wouldn't know, I probably wouldn't dare see him because my last memory of him would be of him being violent and I wouldn't know if he's got better or not, and I don't know how long it would take for me to get the courage to go see him knowing he might be violent still.

Interviewer Do you think if you had different contact or more contact you might have had a better relationship with him or do you think it just is...?

Respondent More steady, yes, but I wouldn't say more often, just more reliable, if the contact had been more reliable then the relationship may have been better, because a lot of the time he was losing his temper was over the lack of contact so he may not have been quite so bad for that. And it would have made it more stable so I would have got to know him a bit more rather than seeing him a bit then not seeing him for a while, then seeing him in a bit of a grump then not seeing him for a while. So yes I think more stable would have helped, not necessarily more often so much because a lot of problems in the relationship between me and my dad is my dad, not so much how I see him but the fact he is who he is.

20255 (M, 8, 28, mother residence apart from a brief period when lived with father, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM).

One of the most positive influences on parent-child relationships in adulthood was the arrival of grandchildren. Quite a number of respondents now had children of their own and, in some cases this had provided a reason for those who were no longer having contact to get back in touch. Parents were also often reported as visiting respondents more often to see the grandchildren and becoming more involved in their lives by helping out with childcare. This was mostly experienced as a positive thing and helped improve relationships.

Respondent *It's meant that I've seen more of him and I find the more I see of him, the easier the relationship is because we haven't got to pack the nastiness into like a three monthly visit, we can get it all out of the way in a weekly, so it's less horrible over a shorter period of time if you like... if you get one nasty comment a week it's better than saving them all up for a three monthly visit, so yes I see more of him so it, but that is mostly because he has (grandchild) and I do dread the time when she goes to school so he's not having her anymore and I wonder how I'll find the time to fit him in and how that's going to work and I'm not quite sure how that will be.*

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

Interviewer *What would you say your relationship with your dad is like now?*

Respondent *Very good.*

Interviewer *So it's better.*

Respondent *Yes a lot better, it's back to how a father and son should be. Have a good laugh, have a few beers together, he comes down, his grandkids are the main thing, both of them... they're his life now them two, obviously we come in the package but he does a lot for us now.*

30178 (M, 14, 24, residence changed several times - mother-father-mother-father, continuous but minimal contact each NRP)

Interviewer *Do you see him much now?*

Respondent *I see him once a week because he has my daughter, before that, before she was born I would see him hardly at all, ... every now and again I'd get a phone call... I now see him once a week, sometimes it's okay, sometimes I get the feeling that I'm completely irrelevant and that he wants to see his granddaughter.*

31284 (F, 15, 29, change of residence father to mother, continuous NRM, interrupted NRF)

Interviewer *Since you left home, in terms of how much you've seen your dad, has that remained roughly the same or have you seen him more or less?*

Respondent *Since I had the kids to be fair I've probably seen him a lot more, he loved the idea of being a granddad, I think it made him feel all prestigious as well, so 'I can now have grey hair and it will look fine because I'm a granddad'.*

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

On-going poor relationships with non-resident parents in adulthood

By no means all relationships had improved in adulthood, however. There were a number of cases in which respondents' relationships with the parent they had not lived with still had on-going difficulties and where respondents still seemed to be feeling a sense of anger and blame.

Interviewer Do you still blame your dad?

Respondent Yeah, but I think of that as a bit of old news really, I don't mind the fact that they're separated, that's not my problem at all, I don't mind that bit. It's just the fact that he's never ever around, that really annoys, really, really, it still to this day really gets my back up at times. Because I think all the important things, and it stacks up -he won't be around for Christmas, he won't be around for birthdays, he won't be around if I graduate, won't be around if the boys have done well at work, and it just all stacks up, he's never around.

20292 (M, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

The theme of emotional investment, or more importantly the lack of it, which was such a key motif in respondents' accounts of post-separation relationships in childhood, was still very apparent in their descriptions of adult interaction. Poor on-going relationships often involved parents who were seen as unwilling to make the effort necessary to maintain emotional bonds with their children.

Interviewer How do you think your relationship with your mum will be in the future?

Respondent I fear it will get worse. The older I'm getting the less I like her, even just as a person really. If I wasn't related to her I wouldn't know her. She doesn't fit into my category of people I would socialise with.

Interviewer Do you think that the resentment is more about the fact that she left or that once she left she didn't make enough effort to see you and wasn't involved in your life?

Respondent I think if she'd have tried harder in the first place it would have seemed as though she had made an effort and the whole contact thing. I guess I was happy at the time just sorting it out amongst ourselves but it would have been nice if she had said 'Next week I want you to come over these three days'. I would have felt better, looking back on it now, actually I did all that myself and being so young and naïve and vulnerable anyway and having to sort out stuff.

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time)

Even many years after the separation there was evidence of enduring conflict in parental relationships and, as adults, some respondents were dealing with the difficulties of parents badmouthing each other or feeling like they had to act as a go-between.

Interviewer And how would you say life is for you now?

Respondent In terms of relationship with my mum and dad, my relationship with my dad is less of a father daughter relationship and he probably tells me things which he shouldn't... he'll discuss if ever they've had a fallout, he'll talk to me and then on the flip side my mum does it as well, not badmouthing or slagging off, but for want of a better word he'll bad mouth my mum to me but then my mum will badmouth my dad in the other ear.

Interviewer So do you still feel like a go-between between them?

Respondent Very much so. Very, very much so.

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact amount unchanged)

Some respondents, of course, had lost contact with the non-resident parent in their childhood.

As in the telephone survey, a few of these had been in touch as adults. However, unlike in the survey, no-one said they had established a close relationship. Rather it left them feeling that they did not know one of their parents anymore and that there was a lack of emotional connection.

Respondent I have got a relationship with my dad now, I do see him, maybe twice a month, which...but he's not, I don't have, I don't feel like he's my dad, he's someone I see but I don't have the same feelings for him as I did, and I don't have the same feelings as I do for my mum because my mum has now become my everything, and she, I mean she raised me if you think from the age of 11 to 20 odd, I had no contact with him, so like I see him as I said but I don't feel the same as one would probably feel about their dad normally.

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Those who still had no contact as adults expressed a range of feelings, from acceptance tinged with regret to satisfaction.

Interviewer Do you think if you'd seen him more, if things had been different and you'd seen him more regularly and spent more time with him, do you think you would have had a different relationship with him now?

Respondent Yeah, definitely, I think if we saw more of each other we would have got to that point where we were close, and we would have developed things in common, and we would have had that father-daughter relationship. But yeah, and I think I'd miss him more now than I do, because we would have been closer, but the fact is we're not and it's not one of those things that I get upset about anymore, I used to all the time, if anyone would mention my dad I'd be in floods of tears.

13887 (F, 0, 20, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Interviewer If he turned up tomorrow would you be thrilled to bits or...

Respondent I don't know, I'd probably be just... don't know, he would just be another person really, I haven't seen him, although he's my dad he'd just be another person really that I know.

11445 (M, 8, 21, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Interviewer How did you get on with your dad?

Respondent Not very well. I don't really have a relationship to this day...I've chosen not to, to be honest... partly because I didn't agree with how he lived, how he went about his life and partly because of the domestic violence that I grew up around.

Interviewer If he had made more effort, if he had wanted to see you more, would you have wanted to see him?

Respondent Well that's the question I ask myself a lot. If he'd actually made an effort, if he was here a lot, but I think I came to the conclusion that I didn't like the person he was anyway.

Interviewer So really, your views haven't changed over time since you became an adult, you haven't got a different perspective on it all.

Respondent I keep looking at it and try to look at it from another angle but I still keep coming back to the same conclusion, so I wouldn't say my views have changed, I would say

Taking a longer view of contact

I've taken in more information and more possibilities as to why it could have been different, but it still comes to the same conclusion, that he was a pretty crappy father.

10901(M, 12, 22, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Relationships with resident parents in adulthood

As reported earlier, childhood relationships with resident parents were mostly positive and remained reasonably stable over time. This pattern continued into adulthood. In the telephone survey 91% of respondents reported that they had either a very close or fairly close relationship with their resident parent in adulthood (see chapter 8). Just 7% said that they were not very close and only 3% that they had not been close at all. In addition, where the respondent was in touch with both parents in adulthood only 37% reported that they were equally close to both parents, 51% said that they were closer to the resident parent and only 12% reported feeling closer to the non-resident parent. Further data from the telephone survey on changes in the closeness of the relationship with the resident parent shows that three-quarters of respondents said that their relationship with their resident parent did not change in closeness as they became adults. Of those that did report a change, 15% said that the relationship had become closer, with only 10% saying it had become less close. Furthermore, those who said that the relationship had been very close in childhood were most likely to report that the relationship had stayed the same (90%) or become closer.

In the interview sample the majority of respondents similarly reported no change in their relationship with their resident parent. In the small number of cases in which respondents felt that there had been a change most described a more positive or improved relationship. Such cases involved previously difficult or strained relationships which had improved when the respondent had eventually moved out to live independently, thus allowing more space in the relationship, or those which had been helped by a new focus in the relationship such as the arrival of a grandchild.

Interviewer *Has your relationship with your mum changed at all?*

Respondent *It's got better'... Now that I've moved out and I'm independent it's got better... I think like before like everyone has arguments with their parents and now I don't really have arguments 'cos I'm not living there. If there is anything we don't agree we just don't agree and we get on with it rather than having an argument and the argument gets worse because you are under each other's feet and stuff.*

30979 (F, 13, 19, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent *She [mum] came back into my life after I got pregnant, It was easier to talk to her after I'd moved out.*

Interviewer *How often did you see her then?*

Respondent *A lot. Once actually physically I don't live with her anymore, it was fine, I could phone her, because we don't do apologies, my mum doesn't do apologies, she doesn't give them and she doesn't take them very well either really... but it was a lot easier then because we weren't under each other's feet, she didn't have to know where my washing was, and I didn't have to tell her it doesn't matter where my bloody washing is, and just stupid little arguments didn't add up to big ones. She felt happy with the fact if I phoned and I wanted something she could give it to me and she felt better for having done something for me than having argued with me.*

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then continued)

Occasionally, respondents suggested that the relationship with their resident parent had become closer as a consequence of having no relationship or a distant relationship with the non-resident parent. In these cases the resident parent could be seen as taking on the role of both parents, meeting all the respondent's needs and strengthening their alliance.

Interviewer *I rely on my mum heavily now. So it did make me more, like whilst it made me more independent in one respect it made me more reliant on my mum, like she did become like my world and now if I have a problem my mum's the first person I would turn to.*

Respondent *Yes, so you've had a good relationship all the way through with your mum.*

Interviewer *Yes and it has probably been strengthened by the fact that she was mum and dad to me.*

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Occasionally, indeed, it could produce a relationship which the respondent recognised as overly close. This was the case for the following respondent who had spent her life living in fear of her father, who had been physically abusive to both her and her mother.

Respondent *I suppose because I was so frightened of my dad, and because I have such a bad relationship with my dad, I think I went the reverse with my mum, incredibly close to my mum, would never ever ever want to do anything that would cause her hurt or stress or anything, and I had real issues with going away to university and being away from her, and even I've moved up here, but that was only... I went to Australia for a year, I went because I broke up with a partner, but in hindsight it was the best thing I ever did because I never thought I could live so far away from my mum on my own. I was 24 when I went and I was still having anxiety about my mum dying, about being apart from her. I still think today if she dies tomorrow am I going to regret that I've not spent enough time with her. So I think conversely because I had such a rubbish relationship with my dad I'm incredibly close to my mum, I don't know if that's completely healthy either that I'm so reliant on my mum.*

30483 (F, 9, 30, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Changes in residence and the impact on the relationship with the resident parent

We have already reported in chapter 12 that quite a few of the interview sample had changed residence at least once during their childhood, typically because the relationship with the resident parent had become untenable or because of a problematic relationship with a resident parent's new partner. It was interesting to note in respondents' accounts of their relationships in adulthood that where there had been a change in residence due to a difficult relationship with the resident parent, those relationships often remained difficult into adulthood. Relationships with the previously resident parent were rarely improved by this change but instead became difficult relationships with now non-resident parents. Some of those who changed residence also suggested that they had always had a better relationship with the first non-resident parent and would often have preferred to live with them in the first place, but for a variety of reasons this had not been possible.

One such respondent, who initially chose to live with his father, but had really wanted to be with his mother and brother, became increasingly unhappy as a result of his father's poor parenting – often being left alone at home for hours while his father drank at the local pub. After he changed residence he only had occasional contact with his father and it was apparent that there were still unresolved difficulties in the relationship with his father in adulthood.

- Interviewer* *What is your relationship with him like now?*
- Respondent* *I don't know. A bit cold really. He's not very caring and doesn't show his feelings or anything.*
- Interviewer* *Do you feel like he has supported you trying to get your life back on track?*
- Respondent* *A little bit. As time has gone on he has got a bit better.*
- Interviewer* *Has it stayed the same through that or has it improved as he has got a bit more supportive of you?*
- Respondent* *Kind of stayed the same really, not much has changed.*
- Interviewer* *Do you think it will always stay the same?*
- Respondent* *I think the only way it would change is if I ever sort of confronted him about the past really.*
- Interviewer* *So part of your relationship with your dad is about how you feel and him and working through some of the stuff in the past?*
- Respondent* *Yeah.*

30205 (M, 10, 28, residence changed father to mother; continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF)

Another respondent said that when they lived together she and her mother had always 'clashed big style' and went on to describe a relationship in adulthood which had not really changed – she felt that was simply the way they would always be.

- Interviewer* *Do you still go down and see your mum?*
- Respondent* *Yeah, I was there at the weekend.*
- Interviewer* *What's your relationship like with her now?*
- Respondent* *OK. We still clash and sometimes my mum can pick up the phone and we can be on the phone for hours but if you put us in a room together for hours we would probably have a row.*
- Interviewer* *Why do you think that is?*
- Respondent* *Because if somebody says something to me I can't keep my mouth shut and I'll say something back and that will cause her to snap and then I snap.*

30622 (F, 8, 28, change of residence Mum to Dad, continuous contact each NRP)

Similarly, another respondent, who had originally lived with her mother, but because of their constant arguments eventually moved to live with her father, still reported on-going difficulties in her current relationship with her mother.

- Interviewer* *OK, thinking about now, as an adult, how would you describe your relationship with your mum now?*
- Respondent* *She's not the easiest person to get on with anyway if I'm honest. She's very controlling. I mean I'm 29 and I smoke and she doesn't know. That's what I mean. Whereas my dad he'd say 'You're stupid' and leave it at that but my mum is like*

constant nagging 'Oh you're a bad mum, how could you do that' ...but yeah she's just very controlling.

14744 (F, 11, 29, change of residence from Mum to Dad, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Parental attendance at special events

One aspect of adult parent-child relationships that we explored with our interview sample concerned whether they felt able to invite their parents together to celebrate special events. In many cases the response was positive - it was clear that parents had moved on from previous conflict, or were, at least, able to put their differences aside and be civil to one other when celebrating significant events in the lives of their children.

Interviewer *So when you got married or big family events do you feel comfortable inviting them both to the same things at the same time?*

Respondent *Yep. If I had a dinner party or barbecue I wouldn't hesitate in inviting them all. I couldn't see the point in not inviting them. If they haven't sorted out their issues by now then what can I do?*

Interviewer *But they generally behave with each other?*

Respondent *Yeah, it's absolutely fine. My dad would never say a bad word or cause an incident anyway and my mum just sits there on her icicle box on her own.*

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time).

A number of respondents, however, due to on-going hostility between their parents, found great difficulty in even contemplating having to invite their parents to the same event.

Interviewer *I've got a question here about whether you would feel able to invite your parents to a special event such as your wedding?*

Respondent *Christ, I have thought about that, Christ, I don't know how that would work out, I don't know what I would do. I feel like I'm going to have to do two or three weddings.*

Interviewer *You really could not bring them together.*

Respondent *No. I don't know how to do it because what would happen is they wouldn't communicate, they wouldn't talk and I think my mother would go 'why have you invited your father' and it would just be a mess. Or the other option that has come to me is that none of them are getting invited.*

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, contact delayed then face to face contact ceased when father moved abroad)

There were a number of special days that caused conflict for respondents who wanted to share important events with both parents but were anxious about how they might behave when they were together including weddings, christenings and children's birthdays. For one respondent the prospect of his forthcoming graduation was causing great anxiety.

Interviewer *Do you ever have any social functions or anything where they come, I don't know, things like graduation?*

Respondent *Yeah, that's something I've got to deal with quite soon actually, I know there's going to be an event in February when I'm graduating. I really don't know what's going to*

happen and I don't know how to approach it because I think in all honesty I want both of them to be there, my dad probably more than mum to be there, but I don't know, because she's remarried again, they haven't spoken since, I don't think there's any love lost between them. But I don't know how on earth that's going to go down.

Interviewer *It sounds like the prospect of having two of them at the same place is something that could potentially be...*

Respondent *Yeah, it's going to be tricky I know that much, I know I don't feel comfortable seeing them together anymore, which is quite strange ... but actually the prospect of seeing them in the same room now it makes me feel uneasy.*

20156 (M, 9, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

It was apparent that in many cases problems occurred because of difficult relationships between parents and each other's new partners.

Interviewer *If there was a really important event for you, or which you wanted to celebrate, would you feel you could ask your dad to it knowing your mum would be there?*

Respondent *Not now. We got engaged three years ago and we had an engagement party and it ended up in a bust up between my dad's wife and my mum. My dad's wife, my partner's parents, and my mum and stepdad paid for it, and my dad didn't ask her to contribute or anything, she didn't expect him to, but his wife... the party was a bit rubbish, the DJ was rubbish, it was a horrible party, and basically my dad's wife was slagging off the party saying that it was not very good and things like that, so my mum had a drink and they both ended up having a fight. So that's why... we're getting married next year, but we're running away to Italy and my dad's not invited.*

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondents had come up with various strategies for managing hostile relationships between parents or with new partners. In some cases they had planned events meticulously so that those who were likely to cause problems could avoid coming into a contact with one another.

Interviewer *How is it when they're together?*

Respondent *If I can dilute the situation with other people as much as possible then that's good, so big parties I can put them at either side of the room and it's fine. They don't really talk to each other and if they do it's snide comments and it's all very, dad tends to go very quiet when mum's around, mum tends to get very loud and assertive... it does kind of make me cringe and I never feel quite comfortable with the two of them in the same room.*

Interviewer *So if you're planning an event or a big family get together, does that make it difficult for you?*

Respondent *It's difficult, I tend to think when I'm inviting, it's like when you do your place cards and you think 'oh I don't want to sit them next to', you're always thinking 'well who can I sit next to her so she won't talk to him and who can I sit with him'. And the more people I can invite the better because the more chance there is that they won't have to speak to each other.*

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted NRF)

It was not unusual however, for respondents to feel that they had to take more drastic measures to avoid anticipated conflict, such as having individual celebrations with each parent, postponing their wedding indefinitely or going away and getting married without telling anyone.

Respondent *I actually got married just over two years ago now, and we just got married without telling anybody.*

Interviewer *Because of the worry about who to invite and who not to?*

Respondent *Yeah, how hypocritical having my dad walk me down the aisle... and where would I sit them, polar ends apart or what would you do?*

31624 (F, 11, 26, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Summary and Discussion

This chapter has examined what respondents told us about their experiences of changing parent-child relationships following parental separation. Chapter 11 began to link some aspects of contact and parent-child relationships. Respondents demonstrated, for example, that a lack of child focused activities on contact visits and failure to demonstrate commitment to contact had the potential to affect relationships negatively. This chapter looked at parent child relationships in more detail and examined further how on-going relationships between parents and children might be related to contact.

One of the most striking findings arising from respondents' accounts of their relationship with their parents was the degree to which the quality of parent-child relationships remained consistent over time. At repeated points in respondents' interviews it was apparent that parent-child relationships after separation strongly reflected the quality of relationships prior to the separation, whether those relationships were good or bad. While good pre-separation relationships seemed able to tolerate the challenges arising from parental separation, poor pre-separation relationships often remained that way and appeared less sustainable in the face of difficulty. Earlier studies have shown similar patterns in parent child relationships following separation (Butler et al, 2003; Whiteside and Becker, 2000). Consistent with the findings of Ahrons (2004) who found that relationships with mothers (who were typically the resident parent) remained stable over time, our findings also showed that relationships with resident parents were more stable than relationships with non-resident parents, which were more often affected by the separation. Importantly, where relationships with non-resident parents changed, they also tended to deteriorate rather than improve.

Respondents were clear in their conviction that a major factor contributing to changes in their post-separation relationships with their non-resident parent was what they perceived as the emotional investment into their relationship by their parent (or lack of it). Previous research has highlighted the importance of the active involvement of non-resident parents in the day to day lives of their children (King, 1994; Dunn et al, 2004; King and Sobolewski, 2006; and Whiteside and Becker, 2000). Some of the key aspects of contact which were described by our respondents as demonstrating the investment of their parent were spending time together, having shared experiences and getting to know each other better. Critically, time spent together needed to be child focused, with children's needs taken into account. The importance of non-resident parents who are seen to be invested in their children's emotional lives could not have been more clearly stated by our respondents. The perceived emotional investment of the parent was strongly associated with a feeling of being loved and cared for. Previous research with children from separated families supports this view. Arditti and

Prouty (1999) suggested that a lack of effort by the non-resident parent was associated in the child's mind with lack of love. Ahrons (2004) found that the way in which children make sense of lack of contact has a great impact on self-esteem and that when a child feels that a parent doesn't want to see them they are likely to question their self-worth and ability to be loved.

Consistent with this theme, a key message from respondents' accounts of improved relationships was the perceived availability and responsiveness of the parent. Children wanted to feel 'kept in mind' by their non-resident parent when they were not together, to know that they would 'be there' in times of need and to feel like a welcome part of their parent's life when they spent time together on contact visits. The perceived availability of parents in this way seems clearly linked to the emotional security of children. These ideas have been well documented in attachment theory research in which the responsiveness and availability of the parent are seen as particularly important to children's representations of their parents - children who receive sensitive care-giving construct internal models of the parent as warm and responsive and of themselves as worthy of love and support (Bradley et al, 1997, Ainsworth et al, 1978, Bowlby, 1973). Further research in this field has also identified the importance of the parent operating from the perspective of the child, demonstrating concern for the child's well-being, valuing being with the child, being accepting of the child and sensitive to their needs (Bretherton, 1985). Specifically in relation to contact, Fabricius (2003) has shown that an important aspect of parental responsiveness is the flexibility to adjust to child's needs and wishes. In their recent model of how parenting time is related to children's health outcomes Fabricius and colleagues (Fabricius, et al., 2010; Fabricius et al., 2012) explore these ideas further, focusing on the quality of non-resident parent involvement and how it relates to parenting time. They highlight the key role of parental responsiveness (defined as the father's tendency to respond when the child expresses wants or needs) independent of time spent together which "*can occur with or without face-to-face interaction, and can be manifested in deeds or words*" in building emotionally secure relationships, which in turn help ensure positive child outcomes.

As well as the over-arching investment of the parent in the relationship with their child, a number of other factors were identified by respondents as contributing to changes in relationships after separation. Many of these are consistent with, and build on, the findings of the pilot study to this research (Fortin et al, 2006). Particularly notable was parental conflict and the detrimental effect of on-going hostility between parents on parent-child relationships. This has been well documented in previous research. Butler et al, (2003), for example, showed that a reduction in parental conflict was key to improved parent-child relationships after separation. Specifically in relation to respondents' experiences of contact in the present study we heard many accounts of young people experiencing parents badmouthing each other and this usually had a detrimental impact on relationships with parents – most notably with the badmouthing parent. Arditti and Prouty (1999) also found that badmouthing undermines relationships with both parents and that children are often drawn to the non-badmouthing parent. Attributions of blame by respondents, particularly towards the non-resident parent, were a key factor in poor on-going relationships - a finding which has already been noted in chapter 12 of this report and in earlier studies (Butler et al, 2003, Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000; Ahrons, 2004; Cartwright and McDowell, 2008). Feelings of blame towards a parent often led to a reluctance, or in some cases a refusal, to have contact with that parent or 'got in the way' of being able to enjoy spending time with them on contact visits. This was particularly notable when respondents felt unable to express their feelings directly to the parent they perceived as 'blameworthy'.

Both here and earlier, in chapter 9, we have heard respondents' accounts of the high levels of distress experienced by parents and children during the process of, and in the aftermath of, separation and divorce. This sometimes resulted in parents or children withdrawing from the relationship with one another. In some cases this was a temporary solution to managing the difficulties of being with someone whose immediate distress had caused them to behave in a difficult or unacceptable way. In a few cases however, the withdrawal led to a more long term disengagement from the relationship and a lengthy cessation of contact. Our respondents told us that significant changes in parenting also had an impact on their relationships with their non-resident parent, most notably on those with a non-resident mother. These respondents experienced a sense of loss for the kind of caregiving that they no longer received but particularly needed during this time of uncertainty and adjustment. The advent of a new partner often also had a detrimental impact on parent-child relationships. Remarriage or re-partnering has previously been associated with a deterioration in children's relationships with their parents following divorce (Ahrons, 2004), particularly when the new partner attempts to act as a parent or is introduced into the family in a clumsy way (Butler et al, 2003). Consistent with what our respondents told us, Arditto and Prouty (1999) reported that new partners were experienced as an obstacle to their on-going relationship with a non-resident parent, especially when they felt in competition for their parent's attention.

The messages that emerged from respondents' accounts of their relationships with parents into adulthood were largely positive and provide hope that even the most damaged parent-child relationships can be repaired over time. In line with Hetherington and Kelly (2002), we found that relationships with parents often improved in young adulthood, albeit that relationships with fathers remained less close than with mothers. Time proved to be a great healer and changes in relationships with non-resident parents showed a tendency to improve in adulthood. Relationships benefitted from new perspectives gained with age, a greater understanding of their parents and their behaviour, and a remarkable capacity to forgive on the part of the young adults. Research by Arlitti and Prouty (1999) and Ahrons (2004) shows a similar pattern. The key seems to be that damaged relationships can be repaired over time where parents and children are committed to the relationship, are both willing to engage in problem solving or where they can find a new focus on which to rebuild their relationship.

Chapter 15 Adult reflections

Young adults whose parents divorced or separated during their childhood are uniquely placed to advise future generations of separating parents how to design workable contact arrangements - and also how to avoid making a distressing situation worse for their children. With this in mind, towards the end of the interview, respondents were asked to answer a series of questions from their current perspectives as independent adults, often with homes of their own, some even with children. Some of these questions were theoretical, asking them to think about issues that they themselves had not necessarily dealt with as children. Other questions sought their views on how their own parents might have better handled their childhood situations. When answering them all they very obviously drew on their own experiences. Much of the respondents' advice on various aspects of contact arrangements echoed their own contact experiences as children. These recollections have already been considered in considerable depth in earlier parts of this report. Consequently to avoid repetition, the first part of this chapter provides only an overview of their advice for separating parents on how to manage contact arrangements more effectively. The second part is devoted to a topical issue that does not receive detailed coverage elsewhere in the report. It discusses the respondents' responses to a theoretical question on the feasibility of shared residence arrangements. The chapter concludes by briefly discussing the way the respondents dealt with participating in the research interviews and their reflections on the experience of retrieving childhood memories.

The separation process

As discussed in chapter 9, many respondents described a happy childhood suddenly marred by a complete disruption of their lives, with their parents undergoing what had often seemed to be a very abrupt separation. Parents who had formerly appeared to be happily running their families in tandem were now apparently unable to live with each other and were often locked in dispute. In these circumstances, respondents had predictably felt bewildered and distressed. Given this very common picture, it was not surprising that a very frequent piece of advice for separating parents was not to involve their children in their arguments. This also tied in with the data from the telephone survey in which many commented that their parents' handling of their separation could have been improved on by maintaining a better relationship with each other.

Respondent If they want to discuss things, to do it away from the children...If you're going to have conflict, don't do it in front of the children. Just keep it away from them. And try to be amicable in front of the children. Because it's not going to do them any good to hear parents arguing.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Several respondents emphasised that bewildered children often think that their parents' separation is their fault and advised separating parents to reassure them that this is not the case.

Respondent Don't use your kids as a tool to play off, try not to argue in front of them and make sure they know you both love them completely and it isn't their fault.

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact)

This respondent also voiced the view that being given a proper explanation of what had gone wrong between their parents might prevent children thinking that the separation was all their fault.

Interviewer *What do you wish your parents had done differently for you?*

Respondent *To have been given, as much as its right not to have been told exactly what has gone on, to have been given a bit more information to try and reassure that it wasn't anything that I had done wrong.*

Even if their children are very young, separating parents should realise the importance of explaining what has gone wrong between them to their children.

Interviewer *Do you have any advice for children whose parents are separating?*

Respondent *Ask questions. I think no matter how young they are they still deserve to know. Because with me it was just up and go. If someone had sat me down and said...even a young young child, for the mother to say, they still understand mummy and daddy don't love each other any more, so we're not going to be in the same house but you're going to see mummy and you're going to see daddy and we love you very much. Even a young child can understand that.*

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Sadly, children may sometimes attribute the absence of any explanation of their separation to their own lack of importance in their parents' lives.

Respondent *Mostly not knowing what was going on made me feel less important to the whole situation I think, it was 'well I can do what I want because I'm not important to the relationship, I'm not important enough to know what's going on between the two of them'.*

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

Support for children

Several respondents pointed out that children often feel extremely lonely without anyone to confide in over their distress at their parents' separation. They considered that children should be encouraged to talk to someone neutral about their unhappiness, with some suggesting that there should be a form of dedicated external support service for the children of divorced and separating parents.

Respondent *The divorce affected us but nobody spoke to us, and I don't know whether it would have been nice to. I mean it's different because if there'd been a custody (dispute) I'm sure someone would have spoken to us, but because there wasn't that we just, I know that I felt a bit alone, like mum saw a solicitor, dad saw a solicitor... there was no neutral person, it was always dad's friends, mum's friends, like...*

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face to face contact ceased)

Respondent *I should have actually talked to someone [about the continuing impact of the parents' separation]... I bottled everything up and it just, I'd explode in my room on my own and that was awful, I should have actually talked to someone, but I didn't trust anyone enough to talk to them... But I should have... it's gut wrenching not talking to someone.*

13887 (F, 0, 20, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Given her own experience, one respondent suggested that the professionals who have contact with families going through family breakdown should take much greater responsibility for checking the children's welfare.

Interviewer What do you wish had been done differently in your case?

Respondent I wish someone had noticed... I think there's a whole extended network of people out there that just didn't, teachers at school that saw my school work dropping off, and extended family who were very much there to support my dad, but yes, I just, I just wish someone, that there was someone that was keeping an eye on these things and seeing how things are working out. Because I think if it's not contested and it doesn't go to court, it's left, it's considered to be functioning and it's all fine. And there was a long period of time where it wasn't functioning, it was all horrible ... it just seems that children come into contact with so many professionals over their lives and not one of them ever really takes any great degree of responsibility for thinking 'what's going on with this family?'.

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother; continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF)

Another's experience suggested that schools should provide more support for the children of separating parents.

Interviewer Did anyone at school pick up on the fact that your parents had separated?

Respondent Not that I was aware of. Other than my friends. The teachers never spoke to me about it, never said how are things at home.

Interviewer Would you have welcomed that?

Respondent Yeah, I think if anyone takes an interest in your life it's always good.

Interviewer Would it have helped you?

Respondent To know that there was support outside the family, yeah. I probably would have been able to say to a teacher, the man my mum's married, I don't like him, I'm having a rough time.

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Consulting children

A very frequently repeated form of advice for separating parents was, as discussed in chapters 12 and 13, that children should be involved in the plans being made for their future. More particularly, they should always be consulted over their contact arrangements.

Interviewer And is there any advice you could give to separating parents about how to manage contact arrangements and what's important?

Respondent Yes, to actually talk to the children and all sit down together if possible and ask the children what they would like first and then build on what they've said.

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time)

This respondent also distinguished between consulting children and allowing them to decide matters for themselves, a matter discussed earlier in chapter 13.

Respondent Obviously they can't make that decision being children but their input I think you definitely at least how to find out how they felt or how often they would want to see them and would you mind staying all weekend or would you want to come home night times ...

Interviewer So making sure that what they want is part of the decision making process?

Respondent Yes.

Separating parents should be reminded that listening to their children focuses parents' attention away from themselves. They should also take account of their children's needs changing as they get older.

Interviewer If you were talking to a couple who are separating now, what advice would you give.

Respondent I would say listen to your children, see what they want. And also, rather than thinking about what you want, think about what your child might want rather than 'I want you this day and I want him that day'. And think about how it affects them as they're getting older as well, how the arrangements might change. I'd definitely think about how it might change. Rather than having the arrangements set in stone. Because they [the child] are going to change, it's not going to work forever. So to be adaptable is quite important.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

One respondent advised children to make sure that their parents know their wishes regarding their contact arrangements.

Interviewer And what would you say to a child whose parents are separating?

Respondent Don't be afraid to tell your mum and dad what you want out of the relationship. If you want to see dad more then tell mum. Always make sure you get what you need out of it. Don't be afraid to say, just because they've made the rules up for you, if you want it changing tell them and hope they will do that for you.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Contact

The importance of contact

Respondents were overwhelmingly of the view that contact between child and non-resident parent is of fundamental importance - on a scale of 1-5, with 1 meaning very important and 5 not at all important, most selected 1, a few 2. They also agreed that contact should be arranged as soon as possible. This was considered to be essential to reassure children not only that their non-resident parent had not disappeared but also that he or she still loved them.

Respondent I'd say just so you know they're there, because a child only has a certain degree of knowledge about the world, I can look back on this now with the knowledge that I've got being a young adult. At the time a child doesn't have that so, you know, it could be quite scary and quite detrimental to a child I think having a parent just disappear from the home and not being able to speak to them or not having that contact, pretty much not daily but every couple of days. I think, you know, it would be detrimental to just that, whatever that inner thing is, knowing that someone's still there and someone still loves you.

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother. continuous contact each NRP)

Another explained the importance of contact by relating it to her own experience with her non-resident mother.

Respondent I was very close to my mum. First of all I think I needed to know that she still loved me, even if she didn't love my dad any more. And that I was still important even if she wasn't living with me. That was very much the first part of it.

14040 (F, 11, 29, father residence throughout, continuous contact reduced over time)

Even those whose own experience of contact with their non-resident parent had not been very happy endorsed its theoretical value for children generally. One respondent was particularly angry with his non-resident father for losing touch with him.

Interviewer Looking back if he rang on your door tomorrow how would you react?

Respondent 'If you come anywhere near me I will punch you in the face.'

But he was in no doubt of the importance for a child to have contact with the non-resident parent, depending on that parent's willingness. Such a link was worth maintaining, at least so that the child would know who his or her parents were.

Respondent I think it is, usually I would say very important, but I would say it's important, because it depends on the dad, if the dad... if it's a father who's willing, who wants to see their child...

Interviewer Why do you think it's important?

Respondent Because at least you know who your parents are....

32024 (M, 2, 22, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Indirect means of keeping in touch were not considered to be nearly as satisfactory as face-to-face contact.

Interviewer Does that relate to what you said earlier about, from a child's point of view, contact being important for a child to know that they are loved by that parent. Do you actually need to see and spend time with them to believe that?

Respondent Yes 'cos there is no other way. All the presents and cards and text messages and phone calls in the world doesn't beat face to face. You don't even have to talk, just to be there makes a massive difference.

30203 (M, 14, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

It was stressed that since each parent brings a different dimension to their children's lives it is important for both to continue being involved after parental separation.

Respondent I just think it's so important to know that you've got two people there, because you need your mum for some things, you need your dad for some things.

31016 (F, 9, 18, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Circumstances in which there should be no direct contact

As noted above, there was overwhelming agreement that in normal circumstances the non-resident parent should always have direct contact with the child. But respondents were also in

general accord that in some circumstances there should be none. All emphasised that there should be no direct contact if the non-resident parent was abusive.

Interviewer Are there any circumstances in which you think there shouldn't be contact?

Respondent I think if there's abuse in the family.

Interviewer Abuse of the child or abuse of the parent?

Respondent Both. I don't think it's good for any child to stay in a situation where it's going to be detrimental to their mental or physical health. I think if one or other of the parents is being abusive then I don't think they've earned the right to see their children.

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Others wished to be even more restrictive, on the basis that physical safety is not the only factor justifying there being no contact. The quality of contact may be so poor that it has nugatory value for the child. For example, it was suggested that a non-resident parent's antagonism to the resident parent can be so corrosive that it is against the child's best interests for the contact arrangements to remain in place.

Interviewer Are there any circumstances in which you think there shouldn't be contact?

Respondent Well there's the obvious isn't there, there's abusive parents and, but just, I think there needs to be quite a bit of weight on emotional abuse, I think if a parent just cannot behave and cannot stop putting the child in the middle of things and putting pressure on them to deal with things and say things and getting, I mean I've heard stories of parents that get the child to search the other parent's house to see if they can find evidence of other boyfriends...they need to understand that you can't behave like that and if they continue to behave like that, it's so not in the best interest of the child. And in that situation I think it could get to a level that's just poisonous and that point of contact at least needs to be supervised... if the parent that isn't present loves them and wants to see them and can behave in an appropriate way then I think it's really, really important, but equally I recognise that some people can be a really poisonous influence on other people's lives and I don't think it's important at all costs.

31284 (F, 15, 29, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact NRM, interrupted contact NRF)

Another similarly considered that in some circumstances, no contact is better than very poor contact and stressed that the value of contact and its continuation should be assessed from the child's perspective, not from the parents'.

Respondent ...it's not about what the parents want, it's about what's best for the child...don't just think that because you're sending them up there once a week that's your part and you keep in contact, because sometimes no contact is better than bad contact.

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Flexibility and structure

A common theme running through the discussion in earlier chapters was the need for contact arrangements to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate children's own needs. This message also emerged in respondents' more general reflections.

Interviewer Do you have a sense of what you feel the ideal contact arrangements should be in

terms of frequency and regularity, and things like that?

Respondent *Personally I think what I would like to see ... if anybody else was in this predicament, I would like to see it less regimented, there's the strict structure they give to you sometimes. I would like to see less of that.*

20156 (M, 9, 25, residence changed mother to father; continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

The following respondent's message was that her satisfaction with her own contact arrangements lay in the fact that they had been sufficiently flexible to accommodate her wishes and did not involve coercion.

Respondent *I never felt under any pressure whatsoever to do something other than what I wanted to do. I was lucky that my parents were understanding enough to be like, 'Look she doesn't want to come up this weekend,' or, 'Look she does want to come up this weekend, can you make some time?' And it was nice to know that my parents were supportive enough to just go, 'Yeah, that's fine, whenever.' ... I didn't feel pressure from either of them, which was...*

Interviewer *One side or the other?*

Respondent *No, I was very lucky in that sense.*

Interviewer *It's an important message to take away...*

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

Whilst many stressed the need for flexibility, others emphasised that children, particularly when they are young, value the routine of regular contact arrangements.

Respondent *It should be the same every week. And I think that's what was important for us, that we knew, every other weekend we were going to see my dad.*

Interviewer *So the regularity of that was important.*

Respondent *Yeah, it was important, it's really important. I think routine, especially for younger children, is fantastic, because that's how they know where they are and they don't have to ask all the questions.*

31289 (F, 13, 29, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Respondents also stressed the importance of non-resident parents sticking to the contact arrangements and not letting children down.

Respondent *Keep the arrangements and if you can't come for any reason let the child know why, don't just not turn up because it makes them feel like they've been pushed to one side.*

30577 (F, 5, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

The amount of contact

Views about ideal contact arrangements varied considerably. Indeed, it was emphasised how difficult it would be to produce a blue-print for what might be considered as ideal given that all children and families are different.

Interviewer Do you think there are any ideal contact arrangements for somebody the age you were?

Respondent No, because everyone's different. And it depends on your relationship with both your parents as well. Because if I hadn't got on with my dad for example then maybe I wouldn't have wanted to go every weekend and I would have kicked up a fuss about it. Or if I hadn't got on with my mum, I maybe would have wanted to see my dad more.

Interviewer So it's all very much dependent on relationships and circumstances.

Respondent Definitely.

20792 (F, 13, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

This respondent clearly considered that what might be ideal for one child would not suit another. Nor was there any consensus over the ideal *amount* of contact. Some thought that ideally the child should have contact with the non-resident parent on two or three days a week, others that every other weekend was a minimum requirement. The most common view was that regular weekly contact was ideal. Again, this lack of consensus reflected their view that a one-size-fits-all solution is simply inappropriate.

Nor did respondents agree over whether overnight stays should be part of an ideal contact arrangement. For some they were an important means of introducing normality into the child parent relationship.

Respondent I think that overnight thing is key, because you do the whole – you don't really get put to bed when you're 14 but you do that whole wake up, get breakfast, do shopping. I think they are key.

30128 (M, 13, 28, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Others stressed, however, that it is the non-resident parent's involvement in the child's life that is more important.

Interviewer Do you think overnight stays are important or does it not really matter?

Respondent It doesn't really matter. Maybe once on the weekend but I don't think it really matters as long as they are there picking up from school or taking to school or whatever.

Interviewer It sounds like your saying that being part of everyday life is the important thing?

Respondent Yeah.

30622 (F, 8, 28, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact each NRP)

Respondent Try to keep things as normal as possible. Of course they're not going to see the father as much as they would, but I think keeping regular contact that's the most important.

Interviewer Would you say staying overnight contact was important, would that be in your list of ticks?

Respondent I don't know, I think it's more the fact that you see that person, it fills that hole. So I think a weekly contact, I think that's the minimum.

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Another pointed out that overnight stays could be damaging if they distressed a child.

Interviewer What about overnight stays?

Respondent Not necessarily. I think that should be down to the children. I think that is quite scary to start with.

Interviewer Do you think that's true at all ages?

Respondent Even at that age my brother [aged 3] knew where he wanted to be and what he wanted to do. I know it's really young but if you've got a child that's crying and doesn't want to leave its mum I think it's wrong to take it and give it to the dad. I think you've got to base it on how the child is coping and reacting.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Several observed that whether or not overnight stays are possible, these days non-resident parents should take advantage of modern forms of technology to fill the gaps between visits.

Interviewer Do you have any sense of the ideal kind of frequency, how often it should be, or how long or that kind of thing?

Respondent I'd say seeing the non-resident parent two, three, times a week ...I don't necessarily feel it's massively important to stay over the house... even if it's actually still just seeing them for a few hours one evening or what have you, still just having that conversation, that involvement with each other's lives...So I'd say a few times a week, so not necessarily where they're having to stay over, but just having that constant face-to-face communication. Obviously technology plays a big part in it now with texting, e-mailing, phoning, Facebook, it obviously all helps and it does make it that much easier, but there's nothing like sitting down, having a cup of tea, having a hug, you can't beat it...

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Respondent At least, at very least on weekends, that's at very least, it should be every weekend, that's the very least it should happen.

Interviewer Should it be staying the night with the father?

Respondent It depends on their own situations and stuff, but at the very least it should be weekends, it should be nearly every day, it should be always calling round, they should be always ringing up, you should always, if you can't be there, there are other ways. There are things like these Skype social networks and stuff like that, there is a lot of stuff they can do, it's a lot easier.

20292 (M, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

The quality of contact

There was a strong view that separating parents should keep in mind the potential quality of the contact experience between children and non-resident parents. A good relationship could not be established or maintained without the non-resident parent demonstrating his/her involvement in the children's lives – what we have called their 'emotional investment' in the relationship. As noted above, some but not all felt that this involvement could be established more easily if overnight stays were part of the contact arrangements. A number considered that it would be easier if the parents stayed living relatively close to each other.

Respondent It would have been nice having things to do and the parents should get involved in real stuff not just about taking you away from your normal routine, stuff you need to do, homework and everything. It takes you away from all that and you spend time in a void somewhere else and then going back again. I think you should be able to merge the two.

Interviewer So getting the other parent involved in your everyday life?

Respondent Yeah, stupid things like you should be told to take your homework with you. It should be like a normal evening arrangement. And not for the other parent to be so far away. If my dad had been in the same town it would have been a lot easier. You could have had the choice then, gone round any night of the week. We didn't have time together to get comfortable like a family does.

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Interviewer If you were a separated parent, having children and having to decide about contact arrangements would you think you would do it in the same way, or would you do it differently to the way...?

Respondent Yes I probably would, I wouldn't want to move away, like what my mum did, I don't think I could do that, simply because, well you don't know the circumstances but it is just harder isn't it in general, just having to come all the way up here and back down and stuff, yes that's the thing I'd do differently, I wouldn't move away. see them more often and just, you know, be in the same place.

13494 (F, 2, 22, mother residence throughout, continuous reducing contact)

It was also pointed out that teenage children may find it particularly difficult to cope with their parents living long distances apart.

Respondent I think that as they go into secondary school children want their independence more ...but with things like that it would depend on distance, if parents lived close together then every weekend would continue to be good as long as the child could see his friends. But I can see a child beginning to resent it, a teenager beginning to resent every weekend if they had to go away from all their friends

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, respondents were keen to stress the importance of parents not arguing in front of their children. More specifically, as chapter 11 describes, contact visits can be spoilt by parents' ongoing conflict and hostility. This common concern underpins some strongly worded advice to separating parents that they should work hard to ensure that any contact arrangements they establish are not undermined by their own inability to get on.

Respondent: Think about the children's feelings, don't make shots at the other parent because it's pointless and it hurts the child's feelings, and try and at least be as civil as possible, no matter what's happened, how hurt you are, sort of, however you can get over it to an extent and don't let yourself damage the relationship, because obviously with me it became something where I would try and avoid the subject of the other, so I would want the child to be able to speak freely, that sort of thing.

31628 (M, 9, 25, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Respondent Put the child's needs first... Don't whatever you do or whatever hate you might have against that person, don't make the child suffer because of your hate.

20156 (M, 9, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Virtually all this advice was encapsulated in three simple sentences from one respondent.

Keep in contact with the child and talk to each other a lot about what's going on. Have an agreed plan, have an agreed plan about what you're going to do with your child for the next week, two weeks to a year, what do you want to happen. Don't involve your child in your arguments, keep them away from it and talk to them about what's happening, you know, remind them that it's, you know, what is going on and that old story, you know, keep on telling them that you love them and it's not their fault.

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

Views on shared residence

The research was conceived at a time when there was growing controversy over whether the law should be changed to encourage separating parents to arrange for their children to spend equal amounts of time with each of them through what is often described as 'shared parenting', or what we term as 'shared residence'. As noted in chapter 1, the controversy has gained pace with the government now intent on introducing legislation which will amend the Children Act 1989 by placing on the courts a duty to consider the benefits of children having a continuing involvement of both parents in their lives. Some consider that this legislation will lead to the courts making far more shared residence orders than before in situations where they may be of dubious benefit to the children involved. With this controversy in mind, we had thought, in designing the research, that we might be able to provide policy-makers with some empirical evidence on how such arrangements are viewed retrospectively by those who have experienced it. In the event, however, we were unable to obtain adequate qualitative data on this group to produce a sufficiently robust assessment of their experiences. While around 10% of the survey sample (36) said they had spent some time in shared residence arrangements only 18 said this had been their main arrangement and only three of these had been continuously in shared residence. Of these 18 only five were potential interviewees in that they were both contactable and had parents who separated after the Children Act 1989 and our final face-to-face interview sample included only two people with any experience of shared residence.

Although the absence of sufficient interviewees was disappointing, it was not altogether surprising, given that our respondents were children at a time when the idea of dividing children's time equally between their parents was a relatively novel one. When designing our face-to-face interview schedule, therefore, we decided to include a question seeking interviewees' views on the theoretical value of the concept of shared parenting, which was typically worded as follows

Some people argue that when parents separate it should be assumed automatically that a child spends half the time with one parent and half the time with the other, that's what they call shared parenting arrangements, where it's effectively a kind of 50/50 split. It doesn't have to be that, but essentially rather than having one home where you visit, both places are considered home and you spend equal amounts of time. So it might be that you lived one week in one house and one in the other, or half the week in each or however it would work, but that generally it's that kind of idea. What do you think about that kind of arrangement?

When answering our questions, despite all but two not having experienced shared residence themselves, the respondents took time to reflect carefully on the idea. In doing so they emphasised that they were drawing on the lessons they had themselves learnt about the key qualities of beneficial contact arrangements. The answers discussed below provide a careful and insightful assessment of the apparent advantages and disadvantages of shared residence. This assessment was proffered by a group of young adults who had themselves experienced a broad variety of contact arrangements and who had formed very clear views of what might work and what might not. As their comments below bear out, however superficially attractive, the concept of shared residence was not generally considered to be a sensible starting point for determining post-separation arrangements for children.

Agreement with the shared residence proposal

The concept of shared residence was favoured by some on the basis that it would ‘normalise’ the relationship between the child and each parent, and help the child feel more settled in each home and less like they were ‘visiting’ one of their parents.

Respondent *I think that sounds quite nice actually. Yeah. As long as you know what’s going on and where you stand it would work.*

Interviewer *What do you think that would have been like for you, in your circumstances?*

Respondent *I think it would have felt more settled instead of just having to visit my mum at her flat or meet her in town or something to actually go somewhere where I go and hang out and relax myself, not just perch like a visitor.*

12925 (F, 13, 27, father residence throughout, continuous contact, increased over time)

Interviewer *What do you think the benefits (of such an arrangement) are to the child?*

Respondent *The benefit to the child, well firstly you get to see both parents an equal amount of time, that’s the obvious thing. The effect of that is you don’t feel you give a massive emotional investment to one of the parents. Whereas if you only saw one of the parents every now and then they stop being so much of a parent and just start being almost a relative. I think initially when I started seeing my mum again it was she didn’t feel like a mum, she felt like a relative, almost like an auntie or something you would visit.*

20156 (M, 9, 25, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

For some the advantages of shared residence centred on ideas about fairness, although notably this fairness was viewed from the perspectives of the parents, rather than those of the child.

Respondent *I think it would have been good probably.I think so, yes. I think probably that would have been my, if you’d asked me that’s what I would have said, but that’s because that’s the logical answer, it’s fair, it’s fair.*

Interviewer *Because it’s fair, it’s fair to who?*

Respondent *Parents.*

Interviewer *What about the kids?*

Respondent *I wouldn’t have minded either way I don’t think, but then would I have actually*

mindful in practice? I don't know. If you'd asked me at the time I would have said fine, yes.

20571 (M, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, increased then reduced)

Respondent Yeah, I think that sounds fair, especially being a parent myself, I think both parents bring their own things to the child and you need to experience both really.

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Even amongst those expressing positive views, however, there were some caveats. For example, it would have to be introduced when the children were young.

Respondent I think if it's implemented young enough and effectively enough so that it's smooth transitions, and everyone is well aware and going to support the child then yeah I think so. Yeah I do, I think it's necessary because that will then become the child's norm, and they'll think nothing of it, and that's what they need.

31016 (F, 9, 18, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

The parents' geographical proximity was also thought to be an important element of a successful shared residence arrangement. One of the few respondents who had any experience of shared residence arrangements and who was positive about the concept, had spent much of his pre-teenage years in the West Indies, alternating on a six monthly basis between his parents, who lived only a few streets apart.

Respondent It was alright, I wasn't really having any problem with it. It was in the same area so it wasn't far away, it was quite easy to pop round to my mum's, it wasn't a big problem, not an issue ...And my dad he would come around and visit even when I'm not at his.

Interviewer Some people say that that sort of arrangement means you don't feel at home in either place and other people say actually you've got two homes.

Respondent To be honest I didn't actually think about it like that because growing up as a young West Indian, we didn't really think the way kids over here think. I think the mentality is a bit different...to us that wouldn't be a problem, it just felt normal because it was walking distance in between so it wasn't a problem.

Interviewer So you were able to keep the same friends?

Respondent Yeah, keep the same friends. And extended family, on my mum's side and my dad's side, we all lived in the same area as well so my cousin, my aunts, my uncle, they all lived nearby. Everyone around was still...even though I was with my mum at certain times and my dad at certain times, I still had my family and friends around.

30239 (M, 3, 23, shared residence followed by residence with mother, then father and back to mother; - no face-to-face contact with either NRP since parents living in different countries)

The second respondent, who had experienced shared residence briefly in her teens, was also positive about the idea. Prompted by her alcoholic father's extreme distress over the death of his second wife, she had, for a time, split her week between her parents, who lived a train journey apart, staying with her father on Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights. Her views suggest that for a teenager the success of such an arrangement depends on two factors: their willingness to comply with it and their ability to organise a complicated schedule of stays with both parents, alongside a busy school life.

Respondent It was such a mad time, I was waking up in (X), going to the train station, going to (Y), and getting off the train at (Z). I was in three places. Just getting by in school was hard enough for me.

Interviewer That was through your choice?

Respondent Yeah I think so, yeah it was actually, yeah it was my choice.

Interviewer How did you manage with schoolwork and clothes? And having the things at the right place?

Respondent I did my best, oh no I was the master of that, I am the master of you give me a train ticket to anywhere I'll be fine, don't worry about me, I'm absolutely fine.

Interviewer But you had a toothbrush and things at each end?

Respondent Oh yeah, of course I did yeah, I had clothes at my dad's and then clothes at mums, so I had school shirts at my dad's, school shirts at my mum's. I sent my dad out one day to buy me a load of school shirts and stuff, just keep them there just in case, you never know what will happen.

Interviewer You really organised yourself?

Respondent Yeah, it seemed unorganised to most but to me it was very organised and normal.

Interviewer A 50/50 sharing arrangement really worked for you for a time?

Respondent Yeah, I think so, a bit of an adventurous streak I would say.

13667 (F, 11, 22, mother residence changing to shared residence, then back to mum. Interrupted contact NRF)

Respondents who disagreed with the shared residence proposal

Some of those who disagreed with the shared residence proposal also emphasised the logistical difficulties of shuttling between two homes unless parents are in very close geographical proximity, particularly once children get to school age.

Respondent I don't think it can work, especially if they're living in different areas, how would they get to school? And I don't think it could or would work.

20138 (M, 12, 29, mother residence throughout, continuous contact)

Respondent I suppose it could work if they live in the same area, but if they're not... it's not do-able. School arrangements alone would be ridiculous, I don't know, I just think it's a silly idea, it's not worth it to me.

20246 (M, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

The most commonly cited reasons for opposition to the proposal, however, were that children require continuity in their lives, need routine and normality and that living in two homes would be destabilizing. Having two bases with different sets of possessions or possessions split across two places was considered difficult and confusing. The stability and security needed by children as part of their developing sense of identity was seen to be best served by having one permanent 'home'.

Respondent I think it's ludicrous [the concept of shared residence], I don't think it's fair to expect a child to have two lives essentially. Our home was with mum because we had all our

stuff there, it was our home, we visited dad's, it wasn't home because we had to take our stuff, we didn't leave everything there. And I don't think it's realistic to assume you could have two homes that you could pick up every other week for instance. I mean with some people it might work, I'm not saying, but I think in general it's ridiculous to think that it would work.

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout, face-to-face contact ceased)

Respondent I think... that unstabilises them, doesn't give them a set home, definitely not, or that wouldn't me if I thought about that, I'd be like oh I've got my clothes packed for this bit and now I'm packing up and I'm going over here.

Interviewer Could you have imagined in your situation that kind of arrangement working for you?

Respondent No I would have thought that would have been like too much, I wouldn't have had no sense of security really, no.

31442 (F, 3, 22, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Respondent I think I just wanted one place maybe, one home, all my clothes in one wardrobe. My friend (who had a shared residence arrangement) had two wardrobes and she goes 'I used to get dressed in the morning and think 'I'll wear that green top' and then go 'no I won't because it's at the other house'. I can't imagine that, it would drive me up the wall. It used to drive me up the wall packing every weekend to go to my mum's.

14300 (F, 12, 28, father residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

In particular those opposing the proposal were concerned about the detrimental impact on children of having to live what was considered to be 'split' lives – both in practical and emotional terms. Some respondents described the difficulties for children of having to adapt to households which could be very different; sometimes requiring them to adjust to different styles of parenting, parental values and expectations in behaviour.

Respondent It means the child has to live two lives, one life with the father, one life with the mother. I think it strains that child as well having to adjust, and it means the child doesn't get into the regular routine of growing up, kind of like there's too many disruptions I feel like, going this back and forth, yeah.

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Respondent I think it would have been difficult for me, not, just purely because it wasn't a little bit different it was so different, my dad was so lower class and my step dad was so middle class it was a drastic change not a slight change, which would make it difficult... I think they'd have to be fairly similar, you couldn't get away with completely different... it would be very confusing and very difficult. And also age - I mean by the time I was about sort of seeing my dad more regularly I was a bit older but if you were 5 or 6 I can't see how you'd be able to understand it.

20255 (M, 8, 28, residence changed mother to father; continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM).

Some opposed the concept of shared residence precisely because they considered that the parents' separation should change the child's life as little as possible. Prior to separation, most children have two parents with different parental roles, usually with one being the primary carer. There was a strong feeling that post separation arrangements should, as far as

possible, reflect those pre separation relationships and times spent with each parent, rather than expect the children to adjust to additional changes.

Respondent *I think if my mum and dad had 50/50 access I'd have seen more of my dad than I ever did before anyway, and I would have felt it was unnatural, and it was unreal, and it was forced, and it wouldn't have felt right.*

Interviewer *So you think in a way, it sounds like you're saying that the contact and the time spent should reflect the way it was before?*

Respondent *Yeah, I think it should make it feel as natural and as normal as possible for the children, I think it's more important to them to feel that everything can carry on between their parents and the children as it did before, even if it doesn't between the parents, and I think being split between them does make it feel unnatural and it makes you feel like an object, rather than part of a family still.*

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

Underlying many critical comments was the strong view that a one-size-fits-all arrangement for children and families was inappropriate. For example, it was feared that a shared residence arrangement would ignore the fact that children seek different things from each of their parents and that it is the quality of the relationship that is important.

Respondent *No, I think that sounds unreasonable, I think of course there's always going to be one parent, for me it was the mum, for others it might be the father that looks after the child, so you can't just say you have to look after equally, I don't see the whole point of that. I think it's the fact that if they have regular contact with both parents, so I don't think it makes a difference of how much of that person, I think the difference is the fact that you make contact, so the child knows they have two parents, not that they have one.*

20214 (M, 9, 19, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Respondent *I think it's a lovely suggestion, but I don't think it's practical at all, because I think every child will have a parent that they feel closer to, or a parent that they use for different purposes. You may go to your father for affection and actual physical contact, but you might go to your mother for help with homework, and if you've got a court of law saying, 'well actually you've had your allotted 50% time, you need to be seeing dad now otherwise I'm going to go to prison or the police are going to come round.' How is that helpful to the child?*

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

This respondent also feared that a shared residence arrangement might not be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the needs of individual children.

Respondent *Every family is unique, every child is unique, so how you can say well you've got to spend an allotted time with each parent and if not then the court will have something to say about it, is ridiculous.*

As noted in earlier chapters, many respondents stressed their appreciation of parents not attempting to force them into contact arrangements with which they were unhappy. Dislike of coercion also underlay opposition to the idea of shared residence. It was considered that it would be demeaning for a child to be forced into a shared residence arrangement, indeed that it might do more harm than good to the child-parent relationship.

Respondent Well I don't think that's right, it should be up to the individual, if they want to spend more time with their dad they do, if they want to spend more time with their mum they do, so it shouldn't be, I don't think that's right. If I got forced to spend half my time with my dad and half my time with my mum I'd think of them both as strangers really because I wouldn't know one more than the other.

13887 (F, 0, 20, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Respondent I think I would have felt pushed into it, I think I would have felt a bit of a charity case to say I have to be with this parent at this time and I have to be with this parent at this time. It would have been I know I'm with my dad this week and I know I'm with my mum this week, as if... it would have made it feel more to be like neither of them wanted us either way I think, as a kid. Obviously as an adult it seems like the best alternative that they both have shown them the same residence and things, but I think as a kid...

31258 (F, 14, 28, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

Ambivalence about the idea of shared residence

There were some who were ambivalent about the concept; they were ready to acknowledge the theoretical benefits of shared residence but doubted its feasibility – with their doubts echoing many of the reasons for disagreement set out above.

Respondent In principle it's fine if the reason for divorce isn't too severe and both parents are perfectly capable of looking after the child for long periods of time and it doesn't affect school, then there's no reason why you couldn't do it. But I think it might be too much hassle constantly moving between two houses unless both houses had all, two sets of clothes, two sets of beds, two sets of everything and you were very close locations then it would probably be fine. But having not experienced it, I don't know.

20255 (M, 8, 28, residence changed mother to father, continuous contact NRF, interrupted contact NRM)

Respondent It might work for some kids, that wouldn't have worked for me, and it's not always possible, do you know what I mean? You're not always going to get that chance. I think it all depends on where the parents live, whether the child wants to spend that much time with the other parent, and what type of person the other parent is, they could be horrible.

13892 (F, 11, 23, mother residence throughout, delayed contact)

As indicated by the two comments above, a variety of ingredients were considered to be essential to the likely success of shared residence. The geographical proximity of the parents' accommodation was often mentioned, together with the willingness/ability of parents to provide two sets of childhood equipment, such as furniture and clothes, and continuity of schooling.

Respondent If it's practical and it's not ... obviously you've got school so it depends where they live, so if it's practical and it's not going to disrupt the child then fantastic, (but) generally if parents split they tend not to live up the road from one another so getting them to school and to see their friends...

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

Some were of the strong view that such an arrangement could only work for parents who separated on extremely amicable terms.

Respondent I'd like to say yes that I think it should be split, you know, each parent should be given their opportunity because that's pretty much what I've experienced to a certain degree, and I think I benefited from it and I think my parents have as well. The problem is if you've got, you know, my parents split was very amicable, if you've got a couple splitting and one of them is very resentful of the other, the child could become influenced by that, whereas my parents didn't ever have a bad word really to say about the other. Not all splits are like that, I think I was quite fortunate with that. I think the common thing would be...

Interviewer Yes, so you feel it would depend on, on the level of conflict?

Respondent You'd hope that parents would have the sense to say well if we're both getting on enough we will split the time, but if we're not we're not going to.

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother, continuous contact each NRP)

Others emphasised the importance of the relationship the child had with each parent and what the child felt about the proposed arrangements, while a few were concerned that the arrangements might be driven primarily by parents' wishes.

Respondent I think it would be good, again, it depends I suppose on their relationship to each parent, you wouldn't want to make the child feel uncomfortable, if they necessarily didn't want to be with their parent, if it was more of a, probably not the right word, but more of a selfish perspective, like the parents say well that's my child so I want them for half the time where not necessarily the child wants to do that.

13650 (F, 10, 23, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Ambivalence also sprang from concerns about the rigidity of shared residence arrangements. To succeed, a shared residence arrangement had to be flexible enough to accommodate the child's needs.

Respondent I think it needs to be flexible, I'm going to contradict myself as I said it should be Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday at Mum's, Thursday, Friday, Saturday at Dads. There needs to be a bit of leeway that's right for the child, not just to suit the parents.

Interviewer: It sounds like you're saying it should be regular and predictable every week but with a degree of flexibility?

Respondent: Like so that if I was ill and wanted my mum and I didn't want my dad, so if it was the case of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday at dad's and I was poorly and all I wanted was mum, that's what I mean by flexibility. My needs as a child to go and be with mum.

Interviewer: So not so rigid that it's set in stone?

Respondent: Yes.

20788 (F, 10, 26, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, amount unchanged)

One respondent stressed that whatever the theoretical benefits of shared residence, it was essential for such an arrangement to fit the circumstances of each case, which are infinitely varied.

Respondent But for each case it's very different. You can't just generalise. People are very different... It has to be a case by case situation. They have to negotiate their own way.

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, face-to-face contact ceased)

Reflections and memories

At the start of this study, we had two particular concerns about undertaking research with a group of young adults whose parents had split up during their childhood. The first was that interviews about their past would bring back distressing memories, thereby making the interview experience a very painful one. The second was that the respondents' childhood memories would be too hazy for them to recall anything of real value to a project about contact arrangements.

In relation to the first concern, all respondents were asked how they had found the experience first of the telephone survey and then of taking part in the face-to-face interview.

Respondents' recollections of responding to the telephone interview were commonly very positive.

Respondent The person [interviewer] was female and she sounded young and quite nice on the phone so I didn't mind answering, and also she explained why you were doing it so well to the point that it was research and what have you and so you knew quite clearly that it wasn't for any other reason. You weren't giving information to somebody who's going to go and use it for the wrong reasons, so I didn't mind.

13878 (F, 12, 26, residence changed father to mother, - continuous contact each NRP)

Respondent I think perhaps talking on the phone to someone you can't see is maybe easier than talking face-to-face, because being upset in front of someone is perhaps worse than being on the phone... I can imagine for some people it would be, it would be quite difficult. But I do remember the person on the phone was very nice, and there was empathy in their voice, it wasn't just reading a list of questions and...

14004 (F, 9, 25, mother residence throughout face-to-face contact ceased)

Others, however, found talking about personal matters easier on a face-to-face basis than over the telephone.

Respondent It was kind of weird, talking over the phone, not seeing someone and trying to give a good personal account of personal things. I do prefer talking face to face.

Interviewer But it wasn't upsetting.

Respondent No

10901 (M, 12, 22, mother residence throughout, contact ceased)

Some respondents had clearly found it distressing talking about their childhood experiences in the face-to-face interviews, although none asked to terminate the session. A number had locked away their more painful memories and found it difficult to uncover what they had tried hard to forget.

Interviewer How have you found talking about it all? Has it been difficult?

Respondent *It's been quite difficult for me to remember everything. Because it's something I've already lived the emotions of and it's just been locked away, it's finished. And now I have another issue. So it's the remembering it.*

11351 (M, 8, 22, mother residence throughout, face-to-face contact ceased)

Respondent *I feel like I've dealt with it and come to terms with it, but it's not very often I would talk about it. So yeah definitely a little bit uncomfortable I guess. There's still a big part of you that wants to shield what actually happened.*

31624 (F, 11, 26, father residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Others, however, had found taking part in the face-to-face interviews a very helpful experience.

Interviewer *How have you found it?*

Respondent *Pretty good. I thought I would be a bit more... its emotional stuff to talk about but I haven't really thought about it for a long time and sometimes it's good to think about things and know what was wrong. I can remember some of the things clearly. From my young, young childhood I've got quite big gaps but because it happened at the age it did...[respondent was 11 when parents separated] it was quite a good age to be able to remember from. It's a horrible thing for anyone to have to go through and there's nothing that's going to make it easy.*

14362 (F, 13, 26, mother residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Interviewer *How have you found it looking back and telling me about it all?*

Respondent *Quite nice actually to get it all out, talk about it in a way. I think it's quite therapeutic actually, it's been like therapy for me. I feel good now, yeah, it's good to talk about horrible things and make jokes of it.*

13667 (F, 11, 22, residence changed mother to father and back to mother, interrupted contact NRF, continuous contact NRM)

Respondents were asked whether they considered that their childhood memories were accurate. Many pointed out that peoples' powers of memory vary enormously. Furthermore, as the comments set out above make clear, some had protected themselves against distressing memories by locking them away. The fact that they were able to retrieve them during the course of the interview suggests that these memories were never very far beneath the surface. The following observations probably encapsulate what many children's memories achieve for them. This respondent, an only child, was 10 when her mother told her that she was leaving. Her memories of this painful event had become hazy whilst the details of other events occurring at about the same time, such as her dog's death, had been brought into clear focus.

Respondent *I think some things I remember with clarity, some things definitely I remember with clarity but I think that – with the whole thing when mum told me that – that's a very muzzy memory.*

Interviewer *Do you think it's muzzy because you couldn't cope with it?*

Respondent *Possibly, possibly as well it's the whole thing at the time, I didn't really understand what she was telling me and there wasn't enough significance for it to have sunk in. Do you know what I mean, I think over my dog dying because I really remember that and the Christmas with my relatives, I remember that clearly and I think a lot of that*

was because, I'm not sure that my mum really explained to me very clearly. I don't know whether she didn't intentionally not explain it to me or I just couldn't understand the bits that she was discussing....

30742 (F, 10, 29, father residence throughout, interrupted contact)

Many, however, had memories that went back to when they were very young and most thought that the details of what they could remember were quite accurate.

Interviewer *How far back, how old do you think you can remember back to?*

Respondent *I can remember my dad, no real meaningful thing, but I can remember my dad getting out the shower in our old house and we moved from our old house when I was... it was the November before I was four, so I was three years and eleven/ten months. That's probably one of my earliest memories of seeing my dad getting out the shower, and it was quite a happy memory, I remember thinking oh that's dad, he's got a yellow towel, that's interesting.*

30483 (F, 9, 27, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

Respondent *I remember important days like when we left, I can't remember huge details, and I don't think I've given any huge details, but you can remember certain events that occurred within that. My first memory is learning to tie my shoes at four.*

20246 (F, 8, 28, mother residence throughout, all contact ceased)

The following comment reflects the way that many of the young adults interviewed had managed to cope with the memories of their parents' separation whilst getting on with their adult lives in a purposeful and courageous manner.

Interviewer *Have you found any of talking about it upsetting?*

Respondent *Not really, the only upsetting thing is that it happened, we can't change that, I didn't have an unhappy time, it was all good. I would have preferred if they were together and stuff, and sometimes I wish they were, but sometimes then again I think I'm doing alright. I still see my dad, I still see my mum, do you know what I mean? If it's not broke don't fix it.*

30287 (M, 8, 25, mother residence throughout, continuous contact, reduced over time)

Summary and discussion

This chapter provides an assessment of the answers to a series of more theoretical questions included at the end of our face-to-face interviews. As explained at the start of the chapter, these questions invited respondents to reflect more generally on children's contact arrangements, whilst drawing on the lessons they had learnt from their own experiences.

A question asking respondents to give advice to parents on the process of separation produced some clear and specific messages. First was the emphatic advice that parents should not argue in front of their children – a not altogether surprising message in view of the survey data showing that the experience of contact was inversely linked with the level of parental conflict (chapter 7). A large body of earlier research evidence indicates that children not only find parental conflict extremely distressing (Butler et al, 2003; Emery, 1982; Harold et al 1997; Harold and Murch 2005) but that they often respond to such conflict with a range of psychological problems (see research summarized in Harold and Murch 2005; see also Harold and Leve, 2012). Second was the view that it is damaging for parents to keep children

in the dark over their separation and without any explanation for it. This reinforces previous research (Butler et al, 2003; Angarne-Lindberg et al, 2009) suggesting that contrary to parents' own expectations, children are often completely unaware of their pre-separation problems. Consequently they are greatly shocked by the separation and feel let down by the absence of discussion or explanation; the absence of explanation being particularly regrettable given that they can avert any feeling of guilt children may have about what has happened. The suggestion that bewildered and shocked children often need someone to talk to about what has happened has been a constant feature of research with 'divorcing children' (Angarne-Lindberg et al, 2009; Butler et al, 2003). Although not all children want this sort of intervention (Butler et al, 2003; Smart et al 2001), the view of some respondents that professionals, such as teachers, should be far readier to provide support, is compelling.

A strong and consistent message, repeated at many points of the interviews, was that separating parents should always consult their children, whatever their age, over all aspects of their residence and contact arrangements. Although, as discussed earlier in chapters 12 and 13, we found that children had often played a pivotal role in these arrangements, this constantly repeated message indicated the respondents' view that parental consultation with children should occur far more routinely than at present.

Questions about the value of contact between a child and a non-resident parent elicited a near unanimous response. Irrespective of their own childhood experiences, good or bad, virtually all the respondents emphasised that, in principle, maintaining contact between a child and the non-resident parent is of fundamental importance. In this respect, their views were consistent with many studies with children indicating the value that they place on keeping this relationship intact (Dunn, 2001; Dunn, 2003; Walczak and Burns, 1984) and with similar findings in studies with young adults of divorcing parents (Fabricius, 2003; Finley and Schwartz, 200; Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000). Maintaining this parent/child link was seen as an important way of establishing the parent's identity for the child. Face-to-face contact was considered to be essential, whilst, as in earlier studies involving children (Butler et al, 2003), telephone contact and other indirect methods were considered to be a good stop gap. Advice on the type of contact arrangements most likely to meet children's needs contained a theme reiterated throughout this report – that contact arrangements should be flexible and not involve coercion.

Questions about what contact arrangements might be regarded as ideal predictably provoked a range of answers, with little agreement over ideal amounts of contact. Indeed there was a reluctance to produce a blue-print for ideal arrangements, on the grounds that children should not be treated as a homogenous group. The most commonly voiced view was that regular weekly contact should be regarded as a good starting point. Whilst sufficient regular contact was clearly considered to be an important ingredient of ideal contact arrangements, the emphasis was always on the quality of the parent-child relationship. The strong view was that a good parent-child relationship can only be achieved through the non-resident parent's emotional investment in the children's everyday lives. This notion accords with research indicating that it is responsive involved parenting that is key to maintaining a high quality relationship between non-resident parent and child (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999; Arditti and Prouty, 1999; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; King and Sobolewski, 2006). Consistent with recent research findings (Cashmore and Parkinson, 2008), some considered that overnight stays contribute greatly to such involvement; others disagreed, maintaining that a non-resident parent's active involvement can be maintained through a variety of other means. Whilst respondents thought that ideally, regular contact arrangements should be part of the

child's routine, considerable emphasis was also placed on the non-resident parent keeping to the agreed arrangements. Again, earlier studies with children bears out the importance of the non-resident parent reliably complying with arrangements and thereby not disappointing the child (Wallerstein, 2005).

All respondents agreed that there are circumstances, such as those involving abuse of the child and or parent, where contact should not take place at all. The view that an abusive non-resident parent should never be allowed direct contact with a child accords with the growing body of research showing very clearly that exposure to child abuse produces long-term psychological damage in its victims (Chichetti and Carlson, 1989; Jones and Ramchandani, 1999; Jones, 2008). Some respondents also indicated that such a prohibition should be more widely drawn. If the contact might provide or is providing a damaging psychological experience for the child, it is not in his or her best interests for it to become established or to continue. Furthermore, as discussed earlier (chapter 12), many respondents considered it wrong to force a child to continue with contact arrangements against his or her will. Acceptance of such views does not appear to drive the English courts' current practice when dealing with parental contact disputes. They commonly adopt the view that the long-term benefit of having a relationship with the non-resident parent will outweigh any distress they experience at being forced to comply with unwanted contact. Research by one of our team shows that if and when such cases get to court, resident mothers come under considerable pressure to allow direct contact, with supervised contact being the preferred alternative option. The possibility of the court refusing any contact seems to have been virtually ruled out and indirect contact is usually confined to exceptional cases. In that study, only 7% of the cases reviewed ended with an order for indirect contact, with a further 7% ending with an order for no contact. Seventy nine per cent of completed cases ended with an order or agreement for face-to-face contact, with 49% involving staying contact, 20% involving unsupervised contact and 4% supervised contact (Hunt and Macleod, 2008: 32 and 340; see also Perry and Rainey, 2007: 29 and Fortin, 2009: 506-507).

The question designed to explore respondents' views about shared residence arrangements becoming a routine option for separating parents produced an array of extremely thought provoking responses. Fabricius and colleagues argue that there is a strong consensus among the general public in the U.S. that under normal circumstances, equal parenting time is best for the child (Fabricius et al, 2012). Those taking part in our in-depth interviews, however, were relatively sceptical over the value of introducing such an approach. A number could see the advantages of such an arrangement, particularly in terms of fairness to each parent. But even those respondents who favoured the concept of shared residence often added caveats. One respondent who, as a teenager, had split her time between her parents, stressed that the arrangement's success had depended on her own willingness and her ability to cope with a complicated schedule, taking in both parents' homes and school life. It is notable that Baroness Hale of Richmond recently warned the courts not to make a shared residence order without first ensuring that the children's own views on such an arrangement have been obtained. As she pointed out, they are the people who will have to divide their time between their parents' homes (*Holmes-Moorhouse v Richmond-Upon-Thames London Borough Council* [2009] UKHL 7, [2009] 1 FLR 904, at [36]). Other respondents considered that its practical operation would depend on the parents living relatively close to each other. A further qualification was that the parents should remain on good terms. This latter view ill-accords with the developing practice of the English courts when dealing with parental contact disputes - which is to make far greater use of shared residence orders even in cases involving highly conflicted parents (eg *A v A (Shared Residence)* [2004] EWHC 142 (Fam) [2004] 1

FLR 1195; *AA v NA (Appeal: Fact-Finding)* [2010] EWHC 1282 (Fam) [2010] 2 FLR 1173). This judicial belief that shared residence orders can be educative and induce parental co-operation (eg *Re P (Shared Residence Order)* [2005] EWCA Civ 1639, [2006] 2 FLR 347, per Wall LJ, at [22]) is controversial (Newman, 2011; Bevan, 2012), and not one apparently shared by respondents in this research study.

Although some were sympathetic, greater numbers of respondents were totally opposed to the idea of shared residence, their most frequently cited reason being their anxiety over its destabilizing impact on children. Many expressed concerns about such an arrangement interrupting the children's schooling. They were, however, particularly worried about the way in which children's sense of identity, indeed their emotional stability, might be disrupted by splitting their lives between two different homes, with two sets of clothes, possessions and friends. A number of respondents disliked the apparent inflexibility of a shared residence arrangement, given that every child has very differing needs. Inevitably there were some who neither totally favoured nor totally opposed the notion of shared residence. Their principal reasons for being unable to wholeheartedly support the proposal were similar to those given by its strongest critics: concerns about disrupted schooling, shuttling between homes and the need for more flexibility. Having devoted considerable thought to its implications for future generations of children, who like them, would experience their parents' separation, respondents were largely opposed to the concept of shared residence. Overall, the most common view was that it would be a great mistake for the law to be changed promoting this form of parenting.

These sentiments echo the conclusion reached by Fehlberg and Smyth after conducting a rigorous assessment of the existing research evidence on the impact of shared residence arrangements on children (Fehlberg and Smyth 2011; see also Gilmore, 2006). In their view the evidence suggests that this sort of arrangement can work well for a very narrow group of families: where the parents are well educated and well-resourced, have flexibility of working hours, and live close together; where the non-resident parent was already involved in the children's daily care prior to separation; where their children are of primary school age or over. It suggests that children themselves are predisposed to the arrangements when they themselves are involved in the decision-making; their parents are flexible over the details; and their parents are on good terms. Although Fehlberg and Smyth consider that shared residence can work well for this specific group of families, they warn of its risks for children in other situations. In the light of the large body of recent Australian research evidence (discussed below) together with older research material, they warn that it should not be adopted in families where the mothers express on-going safety concerns, where there is high on-going parental conflict and/or where the children are very young (Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011).

There was little indication that, when answering this hypothetical question about shared residence, our respondents were aware of the increasingly polarised debates over the merits of introducing legislation encouraging parents to share their children's time between them more equally. Those like Fabricius enthusiastically endorse the concept of shared residence, strongly urging the US courts to consider allocating more equal parenting time as the preferred option for separating parents (Fabricius et al, 2012; see also Bauserman, 2002). This approach is, however, countered by those in a growing number of countries, worried by the impact of such arrangements on the well-being of the children involved. In the first place, there is considerable unease over introducing a formula across the board for all children based on ideas about 'fairness' to adults. Marquardt opposes such an adult-focused formula

which she considers treats children as possessions to be divided up; in her view their individual welfare requires a far more nuanced approach (Marquardt, 2005; see also Day Sclater and Kaganas, 2003). Admittedly children are themselves willing to engage with concepts of fairness and equal treatment when considering parenting arrangements (Smart et al, 2001; see also Butler et al, 2003 and Butler et al, 2005). Nevertheless, Norwegian research suggests that children are not always consulted before parents put such arrangements into place (Skorton and Barlindhaug, 2007). Furthermore, when drawing on follow-up research with a group of ‘co-parented children’, Smart warns that, as they grow older, some children with such arrangements become unhappy with inflexible sharing regimes which ignore their need for respect and growing independence (Smart, 2004). The children involved in her research also described the practical difficulties of shuttling between two different houses, with others noting the emotional difficulties involved in switching roles between two different households with very different regimes and environments (Smart et al, 2001). Swedish research demonstrates similar difficulties experienced by some Swedish children, who on reaching their teens, felt locked into inflexible shared residence arrangements which appeared to exist for their parents’ benefit rather than their own (Newman, 2011: 257).

There are concerns in both Sweden (Newman, 2011) and Denmark (Busey, 2012) over the unintended effects of shared residence schemes, with the Danish Parliament recently agreeing to reverse the legislation introducing it. Of particular value, however, when considering the risks of shared residence arrangements is the research evidence emerging from Australia where extensive legislative reforms were introduced in 2006. It suggests that what amounts to a legislative shared care presumption has led to shared residence arrangements being adopted in circumstances which are damaging for children – for example where they involve highly conflicted couples and families for whom there are safety concerns (Kaspiew et al, 2009. See also Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011; Rhoades, 2010; Rhoades, 2012; Trinder, 2010). Particularly worrying is the evidence that involving highly conflicted parents in shared residence arrangements can expose children to harmful levels of stress, particularly if they are very young (Fehlberg et al, 2009; Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011; McIntosh et al, 2010; Trinder 2010). As discussed in chapter 1, it was these concerns that led both the House of Commons Justice Committee and the Family Justice Review to reject the introduction of legislation encouraging shared residence arrangements (FJR, 2011: 4.23; Justice Committee, 2011: 56-57). The weight of evidence against a wider adoption of shared residence arrangements suggests that our respondents were wise to conclude that legislative encouragement would be a mistake. A one-size-fits-all approach to children who are all different could not, in their view, work satisfactorily.

The questions at the end of the in-depth interviews about childhood memories were answered with great willingness. Indeed, the researchers are indebted to a group of young adults who might well have refused to cooperate with an interview designed to uncover childhood memories, some of which could be painful. As in other studies with young adults some respondents had undoubtedly found the interview distressing (Arditti and Prouty, 1999; Cartwright and McDowell, 2008). But none withdrew and several even said they had found it helpful to remember and talk about unhappy events – sometimes for the first time. To a certain extent, the questions about the respondents’ powers of recall were otiose. Without exception, every respondent had, when answering earlier questions about their childhood experiences, already provided the interviewer with an enormous volume of detailed material. This vast store of memories reflected their obvious ability to remember and reflect on what had happened to them. Although research has shown that children’s retrospective reports are reasonably faithful (Brewin et al, 1993), some of these accounts might not have been entirely

factually accurate. But like others seeking the views of young adults, we were interested in the respondents' own perceptions of their childhood experiences and their interpretation of them – 'rather than whether such perceptions represented some absolute truth' (Ahrons, 2004: 58). In any event, their own thoughts about the accuracy of their childhood memories and on the manner their memories functioned produced some fascinating answers, not least on the way that some memories had become less accessible than others.

The way the respondents answered this series of questions on childhood memories at the end of the face-to-face interviews supports our view that young adults whose parents separated in their childhood are an excellent, but often untapped, source of advice for future generations of separating parents.

Chapter 16 Conclusions

As a growing number of researchers have noted, there are important advantages in studying young adults, as well as the children of divorced and separating parents. Although their perspectives are informed by their childhood experiences (Fabricius, 2003), they can look back on their childhood at one step removed from the impact of their parents' difficulties. Whereas children are influenced by the here and now and are unable to look at the complete picture, 'young adults, in retrospect, can offer a more mature, global, educated opinion' (Derevensky and Deschamps, 1997: 108). Furthermore, they 'can more readily recognise and express subtle feelings, thoughts and memories' (Laumann-Billings and Emery, 2000, p673; see also Schwartz and Finley, 2005). These comments are borne out by the manner in which the young adults in our study handled our enquiries. It was particularly valuable for a study assessing contact to obtain information from young adults about their childhood experiences of contact arrangements and to track the way these experiences had fed into their relationships with their parents through their post-separation childhood and then into adulthood. We could thereby clarify what features of the contact arrangements that they had experienced worked or did not work both in the long and short term.

Having reflected on their own experiences, their thoughtful responses demonstrated their sensitivity, maturity and the value they placed on assisting the research. They convey a unique and important message, which if acted upon by separating parents, practitioners and policy-makers, should enable children to enjoy as happy a relationship as possible with both their parents after their separation.

The following discussion presents some of the important and strong themes emerging from this valuable store of recollections.

Key themes

Children as social actors with independent perspectives

First and foremost amongst the many themes that can be highlighted is the way in which children emerged from the material as people in their own right, playing a sometimes unacknowledged but immensely important role in their developing story. The material we collected shows children behaving as independent actors, with clear views of their own and, perhaps more importantly, with a capacity for critical observation seen most potently when focused on their parents' behaviour.

Throughout their recollections was a constant reminder that for many respondents, the most shocking event in their lives was their parents' separation (chapter 9). This produced a profound change in their lives and in their responses to the outside world, school life, wider family members and friends. The fact that many parents had not warned their children about their impending separation and failed to explain to them the reasons for this created the perception that they were only incidental to their parents' lives – that they were not important enough to warrant an explanation (chapter 15). Separation not only caused considerable distress, it also provoked a more subtle change in many of the children, in so far as it appeared to sow the seeds of a surprisingly early ability for independent thought, even in those who were quite young at the time. Whilst the realisation that parents are fallible human beings may not often occur to children in intact families until they reach late adolescence, many of our respondents had fast developed this knowledge after their parents separated. It was perhaps the shock of the separation itself (chapter 9) that was sufficient to jolt them out of a childlike acceptance of both parents as *parents*, into a far more critical state of mind.

Their recollections were often starkly objective, with even quite young children seeing each parent as an individual with strengths and weaknesses. Although their affection for each parent often survived displays of what appeared to be extraordinarily poor parental behaviour, their critical faculties were sharp; they showed an impatience and lack of sympathy for perceived weakness or poor behaviour, or a combination of both (chapters 9, 12 and 14). Thus the non-resident parent who had apparently been responsible for the break-up of the marriage, or who had lapsed into depression or alcoholism as a result of the separation, while sometimes shown understanding, was more often painted in a very poor light. Equally some respondents were acutely aware that one, or sometimes both, parents had simply stopped doing their job as parents. They described in critical terms depressed parents turning to them for support rather than the other way round and parents ceasing to fulfil their parenting role (chapters 9 and 14). They were particularly impatient with parents who regularly bad-mouthed each other and who involved their children in their fights (chapter 11).

The material on the impact of parental separation (chapter 9) shows respondents developing a perspective of their own about their lives, with an insight into their own needs, which seemed, from some of their accounts, to be entirely at odds with their parents' own perceptions. Indeed, it was not always clear whether parents were aware how critical their children had become or whether they realised that their children were no longer simply passive members of a formerly united household. When it came to describing their experiences of contact with the non-resident parent (chapters 10 and 11), respondents often described how acutely sensitive they had become to subtle signs that might indicate the strength or absence of their non-resident parent's emotional investment in their relationship together. They could sometimes make excuses for the parent whose lack of imagination led to 'boring' contact visits. Far less sympathy was shown where this was felt to be attributable to a parent's innate selfishness and/or a failure to discover where their children's real interests lay. Although surprisingly large numbers of respondents described tolerating long hours spent in pubs, they had been clearly aware that this was not for their own benefit and that their relationship with their non-resident parent was not improved by such sessions. Equally, a non-resident parent's refusal to sacrifice time with a new partner to see more of their children was seen in a poor light. They were particularly resentful of non-resident parents who seemed unable to see contact arrangements through their children's eyes, for instance when their refusal to adjust the schedule led to children missing sporting activities or social events with their friends (chapters 11 and 14). As respondents themselves stressed, post-separation relationships with non-resident parents often deteriorated as children got older (chapter 14), particularly if the non-resident parent was perceived as making little effort to keep the relationship alive. On entering adulthood, some respondents remained very critical of parents who still failed to invest their relationship with any real warmth or closeness.

At the same time, whilst children's critical powers should not be underestimated, nor should their powers of appreciation. Respondents often recorded their deep and abiding affection for their parents, an affection which survived all manner of bad behaviour. Indeed, it might surprise the parents of this set of young adults to be told that their children, even when quite young, had often been well aware of their loneliness and depression, and had fully appreciated the efforts many had made to overcome their own distress in order to fulfil their parenting role adequately. They applauded resident parents who made considerable efforts to keep the household together and non-resident parents who worked hard to make contact visits enjoyable and rewarding for their children. Appreciation and even affection was shown for step-parents who had joined households without making them, as children, feel like outsiders.

The research data demonstrates that children can behave extremely responsibly as independent actors – if and when they are allowed to do so. Significant numbers of respondents involved in the telephone survey (particularly those whose contact had been continuous or had lived mainly in shared residence arrangements) felt that they had been involved in decision-making (chapter 3). The in-depth interview sample, however, painted a less rosy picture (chapter 12) and we were surprised to be told of parents' quite common failure to consult respondents, despite their being old enough to have clear views of their own and being the principal players in these arrangements. Respondents recalled simply being expected to comply with decisions over their future day-to-day care and the organisation of contact with their non-resident parents. Such parental behaviour is unlikely to reflect parents' anachronistic view that children are possessions to be parcelled out between them. Perhaps it stems instead from their mutual distress over the separation itself and a wish to spare their children involvement in painful discussions. Whatever the reason, it is a mark of children's innate willingness to fall in with their parents' wishes over most things that respondents' recollections were not replete with recrimination and indignation over what seemed to be a very common failure to consult them at all over residence and/or contact. None of the in-depth interview sample suggested that this parental behaviour had infringed their childhood right to be consulted under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. One should not be surprised that none showed such a detailed knowledge of international conventions. Nevertheless, given that some were highly educated and professionally well qualified, it seems unlikely that none had ever encountered the idea of children being rights holders. As Smart and colleagues similarly concluded (2001), it seems that they simply did not conceive of such a notion being of any relevance in the context of their own family life.

We discussed earlier the way in which respondents appeared to develop a critical awareness of their parents' strengths and weaknesses in the aftermath of their separation. Their perceptiveness over such matters often explained why an initial willingness to cooperate with residence and contact arrangements later turned sour, with respondents taking advantage of their growing age and sometimes size by simply refusing to be coerced into continued compliance (chapter 12). On entering adolescence some appeared to become increasingly disillusioned by what they saw as the non-resident parent's weaknesses. Failure to overcome depression, alcoholism, drug abuse in the aftermath of parental separation or to change violent behaviour was disapproved of and led to respondents refusing to keep to contact arrangements with which they had earlier complied. Step-parents were sometimes seen as spoiling contact visits by preventing older children having one-to-one time with their non-resident parents. On entering adulthood, some respondents certainly did become less judgmental over what they saw as the new partner's culpability for breaking up their parents' relationship. But adolescents often appeared unable to set aside their feelings of anger over such behaviour and simply stopped visiting their non-resident parent, sometimes completely, at other times for short or long periods. Such decisions seemed often to be underpinned by respondents' hostility directed at their non-resident parents for their apparent inability to mend their ways or to put matters right with the resident parent.

Typically contact diminished as respondents moved through their teenage years, often purely for developmental reasons. Many respondents described relationships which, during their adolescence, remained affectionate and close. However, although the relationship remained important to them, they often preferred spending time with their peers. Their decisions to reduce contact sessions which interfered with their social life were often met by parental understanding and a willingness to adjust expectations in the light of their growing maturity

and independence. The fact that this set of respondents later grew into adulthood with an affectionate and secure relationship with their non-resident parents is obviously a matter of personal satisfaction to them, as well as conveying an important message to all separating parents.

As we have discussed, respondents' recollections of their family life show how quickly children form an independent perspective on their relationships within the family and develop a capacity for critical thought and observation. This was a particularly strong feature of the material in chapter 13. One of the aims of our study was to explore the truth of a common assumption amongst pressure groups representing non-resident fathers that children often resist contact because their resident mothers pressurise them into doing so. Whilst it is undeniable that sometimes children are manipulated by resident parents, and we had two or three examples in this study, it insults the intelligence of the majority of the children of separating parents to suggest that this happens more than very rarely. Our findings did not paint a picture of respondents who, as children, were passive creatures with ideas and opinions easily malleable by strong resident parents intent on sabotaging affectionate relationships between them and their non-resident parents. As discussed below, resident parents were rarely seen as undermining or preventing contact. But more to the point, respondents' accounts portrayed themselves as independent actors, with views of their own on the value of maintaining relationships with their non-resident parents. If and when they found the contact intolerable, they had clearly thought out reasons for withdrawing from it, which usually had little to do with the resident parent's attitude. Extreme disapproval of the way in which the non-resident parent had apparently broken up the family was sometimes an aspect of an adolescent's deeply moralistic approach to life. This was an independent view and not the response of a brain-washed child. Dislike of the format of the contact visit itself, or distress over their relationship with the non-resident parent's new partner, were similarly independent responses, certainly beyond the control of the resident parent.

Admittedly, at times respondents' resistance to contact had been influenced by their sympathising with a resident parent who, in their own view, had been badly treated by the non-resident parent. In a smattering of cases, as very young children, they had felt obliged to adopt the resident parent's own opposition to contact, but they usually did so fully aware of what they were doing and why. Far from being brain-washed, they had retained their critical faculties and, as they got older, were able to state clearly what their true views were. For example, a capacity for independent thought was displayed very clearly by the respondent who could sympathise with his mother resisting contact when his father had been violent or aggressive on contact visits or had failed to feed him and his siblings adequately, but not when she stopped contact for what, in his opinion, were much more minor reasons (chapter 10).

The importance of retaining a relationship with both parents

When couples with children separate today they confront two important questions. First, are both parents going to be more or less equally responsible for the child's day to day care or is one parent going to be the primary carer? Second, if the latter, what relationship, if any, is the child to have with the other parent and how is that to be secured? The vast majority of respondents in our study had parents whose decision-making over these matters was simplified by an assumption that one of them – usually, but not always, the mother – would provide the children's day-to-day care and the other, typically the father, would become the contact parent (chapter 2).

Today, although such an assumption remains common, some parents decide to share their children's day-to-day care between them equally, although this very much remains a minority choice (chapter 2). Our research was with a group of young adults who were children at a time when shared residence was relatively rare. Only a very small number of those taking part in the telephone survey (18; 5%) said they had experienced this as their main arrangement and only three had been in such an arrangement throughout (chapter 2). Of those who did, it seems unlikely that many encountered the same sort of shared residence arrangements that today's generation of separating parents sometimes put in place – where children spend equal amounts of time in the care of each parent in turn, sometimes alternate weeks with each, sometimes dividing the days of each week between each. The vast majority of the respondents in our study recalled more traditional arrangements: residence was established with one parent and (in most instances) the other had contact.

The contribution contact, *per se*, makes to children's well-being is a controversial issue (chapter 1). The young adults taking part in our face to face interviews, however, when asked about the theoretical value of contact (chapter 15), overwhelmingly stressed its importance. When asked to rate the importance of contact on a 1-5 scale, where 1 was very important and 5 not at all important, almost all selected 1 and all the others 2. This reflected their strongly held view that the parent/child link is an important one that is worth working hard to preserve. In the view of one respondent, at the very least it establishes for the child who his or her parents are. Another suggested that mothers and fathers make different contributions to children's lives and both are necessary. Most commonly, contact was seen as necessary to reassure children that they are still loved by, and important to both parents.

As explained in chapter 1, the in-depth interviews were confined to respondents who had had some contact, and were typically still in contact at the point they reached 18, which may have coloured their views. However data from the telephone survey indicates that respondents who had never had contact, or lost contact, also thought that in principle, contact was important. Admittedly only a minority said that as children they had been 'very unhappy' about the loss of contact or that as adults, they regretted its loss 'a great deal'. Nonetheless, only half said that it was never an issue. In addition, over half said that if they were ever to be a separated parent they would ensure their child would have contact or more contact than they had had. And this answer was even given by a substantial number of those who had not identified the lack of contact as a problem for themselves. In total, four-fifths of those who had never had any contact, or whose contact had ceased, either indicated unhappiness as children, regret as adults or a resolution to ensure their children remained in touch with both parents, should they ever separate.

It was also notable, moreover, that among our face to face interviewees, even those whose memories of contact were not particularly happy, were equally insistent on the value, in principle, of maintaining contact. Indeed some of them had demonstrated their commitment to the principle by persisting with relationships which carried little enjoyment, and, for some, even fear. While some eventually withdrew, others recollected having maintained contact throughout their teens with a violent, alcoholic or egocentric non-resident parent, often attributing this to a feeling of duty. Even as adults they were in no doubt that if they received a message indicating that the parent was now ill in hospital, they would go to him or her immediately; failure to do so would carry feelings of considerable guilt. For these respondents, it seemed, the child/parent link carried an importance of its own. The blood tie between them was apparently enough to impose on them feelings of conscience, guilt, duty and loyalty – but not necessarily affection. They felt a need to preserve the relationship

through their childhood and into their adulthood, even if it was not close now and never had been.

These respondents appear to have continued with contact at all costs for the sake of retaining their family ties. For others, however, the importance they placed on contact *per se* was a theoretical position that had had no reality in their own lives. Respondents not unusually told us of contact arrangements that had distressed them deeply, which many continued only until they felt old enough to end them. Indeed, there was general agreement that while contact was very important, there are circumstances in which it was contraindicated, although their ideas as to what those circumstances were varied. Suggestions included abuse of the child, severe parental conflict, domestic violence and contact which is so poor that the child is deriving no benefit from it. As one young adult said - 'no contact is better than bad contact'.

If we are to take seriously the advice that on the one hand contact is in principle very important but on the other that sometimes no contact is better than bad contact, we need to know what makes contact work for children. Illuminating this issue was one of the principal aims of this study.

The ingredients of successful contact

Making contact happen

The first essential ingredient of successful contact appears to be continuity. Most of those taking part in the telephone survey had at least some contact with their non-resident parent after separation. However, less than half had continuous contact throughout their childhood: for some there was a lengthy delay in establishing contact; for others it was interrupted, and for some it ceased altogether. Those whose contact had been continuous were much more likely than those in any of the other groups to be positive about their experience.

It is of course arguable that where contact is a positive experience for the child it is more likely to be sustained by the child's own volition, so that continuity flows from a positive experience rather than contributing to it. In support of this interpretation is the fact that, as noted above, some respondents did report suspending contact which was unsatisfactory for them. However, other data indicates that this is not a sufficient explanation. In fact most of those who had had sporadic contact did not claim responsibility for the irregular nature of the contact but blamed the non-resident parent. Further, those whose contact had been disrupted were most likely to say that they would have liked more contact and several of those taking part in the face to face interviews expressed their sadness that the non-resident parent had not been a more consistent presence in their lives. It seems likely that both processes were occurring: good contact is more likely to be sustained, but continuity of contact is a key ingredient of a positive experience.

Why was contact not more regularly maintained? Although it is often suggested that resident parents undermine contact, as we discuss further below, very few of our respondents thought this had been the case. Rather, the vast majority (62%) said that the main or sole responsibility for contact not being continuous lay with the non-resident parent. Respondents gave four main reasons for the non-resident parent's behaviour, both as they understood it as children, and their current understanding as adults: not being sufficiently interested in the respondent; not wanting to pay child support; difficulties due to the non-resident parent's new partner; and logistical difficulties because of distance, work or accommodation. A strikingly large percentage (77% as children; 70% as adults) cited one of the first two reasons, each of

which might be interpreted as a lack of commitment to the child. In contrast only a minority (27% as children and 28% as adults) thought the non-resident parent's reasons had been child-focused: i.e. that they had thought it was best for the child, or what the child wanted.

Apart from the respondents' interpretation of the reasons for contact not being continuous, analysis of other material from the telephone survey indicated that the likelihood of contact being established and maintained was associated with a constellation of pre- and post-separation factors. Those who had had continuous contact were typically born to married parents, were aged five and above when the separation took place and already had close relationships with the parent who subsequently became non-resident. They were also more likely to report low levels of post-separation conflict between the parents; no concerns about domestic violence or the non-resident parent's capacity to care for the child; and encouragement of the relationship by the resident parent. Many of these factors were linked. In particular resident parents were more likely to be described as having encouraged the child's relationship with the non-resident parent where they had no concerns about domestic violence or the care of the child, where the pre-separation relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent was close and levels of post-separation parental conflict were low. Even so, as noted above, overall, very few resident parents were said to have been mainly responsible for contact not being continuous.

Making contact work

While continuity would seem to be an important ingredient in positive contact, it is not a sufficient condition. As noted above, respondents to the telephone survey who had had continuous contact were much more likely than other respondents to be positive about contact. Nonetheless, only 39% said their experience had been *very* positive, and while few (4%) said it had been fairly or very negative, 21% said it had been mixed and 35% described it as only *fairly* positive. Sustaining contact, therefore, as other researchers have pointed out, is not the same as making it work. The process is far more nuanced than that.

All but two of the factors identified in the previous section as linked to the continuity of contact also differentiated between those who were positive about contact and those whose experience had been less satisfactory (the exceptions being the parents' previous marital status and the age of the child at separation). First, a constant theme emerging from this study has been the importance of the pre-separation relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent. Eighty five per cent of those who said their pre-separation relationship had been very close also said that contact had been very or fairly positive, compared to only 69% whose relationship had only been fairly close and a mere 27% of those with less close relationships. Second, the data highlights the significance of parental conflict: 52% of those reporting no conflict described their experience as very positive, compared to 32% where conflict had been low, 17% moderate and none of those where there had been high conflict. Third, the existence of serious concerns on the part of the resident parent about the other parent's care of the child or domestic violence: those respondents who reported such issues were half as likely to describe their contact as very or fairly positive as those where they were absent. Where there were such concerns, resident parents were less likely to actively encourage the relationship - the resident's attitude to the contact being our fourth factor linked with a positive experience of contact. Forty-six per cent of those who said the resident parent had encouraged their relationship with the non-resident parent 'a lot' reported a very positive experience of contact, compared to only 29% of those who had only done it 'a bit' and just 11% where they had not done it at all. Active undermining, however, which was

extremely rare in this group – and far from common across the whole sample – was equally likely to be linked with a positive experience of contact as with a more negative one.

We know from the telephone survey that a number of other factors were linked with how positive an experience contact had been. Involvement in decision-making, for instance. As discussed above, those taking part in the face to face interviews displayed a strong conviction that involving them in decision-making over their residence and contact arrangements was highly desirable. The survey data shows the value of doing so, in terms of positivity about contact. Eighty two percent of those who said they had been mainly or partly responsible for the arrangements described contact as very or fairly positive, as did 72% of those who felt their parents had taken account of their views. By way of contrast, none of those who said neither was true were prepared to endorse their contact experience so positively. Repartnering by the non-resident parent was also strongly linked with a less positive experience. Where this had not occurred, 53% of respondents said contact had been very positive, compared to 43% who said they got on well with the new partner and less than a quarter of those whose relationship was poorer. Feeling equally at home at each parent's house was also linked to assessments of the contact experience. Fifty five per cent of those who said this was very true said contact had been very positive, falling to 33% where it was only 'fairly true', 16% not very true and 19% not true at all. Finally, the respondent's views on whether the non-resident parent had 'made time' for them was an important factor: 60% of those who said this was 'very true' said contact had been very positive, compared to 20% who said it was only fairly true and none of those who said it was not very true or not true at all.

The material from the face to face interviews very much supports the survey findings about the ingredients of successful contact. Respondents were more likely to enjoy contact with non-resident parents with whom they had enjoyed a good pre-separation relationship. They also appreciated having parents who had managed to remain civil with each after they separated, while others spoke vividly of the corrosive effect of parental conflict. For some, the experience of contact was contaminated by memories of domestic violence, their own abuse, or the non-resident parent's drinking or out of control behaviour. Others recounted difficulties with the non-resident parent's new partner or how they had never felt at home at the non-resident parent's house.

Very significantly, the interview data also highlighted two components of successful contact which were not captured in the telephone survey. First, respondents placed considerable weight on their perceptions of the extent to which the non-resident parent had made an effort to make contact an enjoyable, child-focused experience. It was not that they had wanted contact to be unrelenting fun, or for the non-resident parent to spend lots of money on them. But being bored, ignored, or expected to fit in with adult priorities undoubtedly detracted from the experience of contact. It could also contribute to a feeling that they did not matter that much to the non-resident parent. This in turn links in with the second ingredient identified by the face to face interviews: the importance of the non-resident parent demonstrating their commitment to, and interest in, the child. The message underlying many respondents' recollections was that the enjoyment of contact largely depends on children feeling reassured that the non-resident parent has a genuine emotional investment in their lives. As noted earlier, respondents were acutely sensitive to indicators that this was not the case: a parent who did not know their children's likes and dislikes, who forgot their birthday, who was not interested in what they were doing at school, who put new partners and/or other children in their household first, who imposed their own leisure time activities on their

children; who left it to their children to keep in touch, who did not turn up when they were supposed to or was not prepared to accommodate the child's desire to fit in other activities.

None of this will come as any surprise to researchers who have interviewed children about their experience of post-separation parenting arrangements. Indeed, as is evident from chapters 6 and 11 in particular, the congruence between what these young adults told us about what made contact a more or less rewarding experience for them and the messages from children taking part in a whole range of research projects was quite remarkable.

The relative unimportance of the amount or type of contact

How important are the structural aspects of contact: how often contact occurs; whether there are overnight stays; whether there is a contact schedule or more ad hoc arrangements? The variation in our research sample on each of these elements enabled us to shed some light on this controversial issue.

First, frequency. In common with most other researchers who have interviewed children or young adults, we found that a substantial number of respondents to the telephone survey (40%) would have liked more contact than they had had. However both the quantitative and the qualitative data show that this was not simply a matter of wanting to increase the frequency; the longing often appeared to stem from more complex reasons (chapters 5 and 10). Thus in the telephone survey, it was those whose contact had not been continuous who were most likely to want more contact, ranging from 39% where contact had ceased to 67% where it had been sporadic. In these cases much of the dissatisfaction seemed to reflect a wish that contact had been sustained rather than disrupted and consistent rather than unpredictable. In contrast, among those whose contact was continuous, just 27% felt they had not had enough contact. Similarly, in the interview sample, around a third said they would have liked more contact. Some of these respondents, however, had really wanted to change residence and it was clear that no matter how much contact they had had it would not have been enough. Very few of the rest who wanted more contact had experienced regular unbroken contact. It was very unusual for respondents to voice a desire for more contact where they had been satisfied with the residence arrangements *and* had had regular and continuous contact.

Frequency is not entirely irrelevant, of course: data from the telephone survey shows that, where contact was continuous, respondents with high levels of contact were most likely to feel it was sufficient. Of those with contact on more than six days in an average month only 14% would have liked more, compared to over half of those who saw the non-resident parent less than once a month, with the level of dissatisfaction being about the same (36%-40%) for the intermediate frequencies. However this data also shows that no particular frequency was optimal. For every level of contact apart from the most minimal (i.e. less than once a month) the majority of respondents to the telephone survey said they thought the amount had been about right for them. Similarly, in the interview sample, while those who had a positive experience of contact and were satisfied with the amount were typically seeing their non-resident parent on at least four days each fortnight, this was not always the case, and for some quite modest levels of contact were sufficient. Moreover, as noted in chapter 15, there was no consensus among respondents about the ideal level of contact.

How should we interpret the finding that where contact was continuous (but not in other groups) higher frequencies were associated with more positive experiences of contact (chapter 6)? It could mean that frequent contact is more likely to produce a rewarding

experience or alternatively, that where contact is rewarding for children they, and perhaps their parents, are more likely to ensure that it is a frequent experience. In reality both processes probably operate, with a dynamic interaction between the two over time. This interaction, however, also has to be seen in conjunction with a third factor: the previous relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent. As noted above, those who reported very close pre-separation relationships tended to report more positive experiences of contact. They also tended to have more frequent contact. When the pre-separation relationship was taken into account, the association between frequency and the experience of contact was no longer statistically significant. Indeed, where previous relationships had been very close, the few who saw their non-resident parent on less than five days a month were actually more likely to report a very positive experience of contact both than those who had contact on between five and six days a month and those with more frequent contact.

The pre-separation relationship also helps to explain the apparent association between frequency and the closeness of the post-separation relationship. As noted in chapter 6, almost all of those who had contact on more than six days in an average month described their post-separation relationship as very or fairly close, the proportion generally declining as the amount of contact reduced. When account was taken of the pre-separation relationship, however, the association was no longer significant. Nor did frequency emerge as a significant factor in explaining why some relationships became less close post-separation or why, in a few cases, they improved (chapter 7). The most that can be said is that where relationships are already close, high levels of contact *may* help to sustain that closeness.

Contact which includes overnight stays is clearly qualitatively different from that which is limited to visiting only and in the telephone survey respondents who had regular overnights tended to be more satisfied with the amount of contact they had had, irrespective of its continuity (chapter 5). However overnights *per se* did not emerge as a significant factor in explaining differences in either how positive an experience contact was for respondents, or the closeness of their relationship with the non-resident parent, when other factors, such as the continuity of contact, were taken into account (chapters 6 and 7). Moreover, there was no agreement among those taking part in the face to face interviews as to its importance, either in principle, or to their own particular experience (chapters 10 and 15). Most of those who had regularly stayed overnight spoke warmly about the value of this in terms of making them feel at home, rather than just a visitor, allowing for more varied and normal interaction, and helping to sustain a relationship they valued. For others it was not particularly important, if enjoyable, while some recalled weekend visits with little enthusiasm or even dread. Further, most of those who only had day-time contact would not have wanted to stay because the contact they did have was not enjoyable. The clear message from the in-depth interviews was that the value of overnights cannot be judged in isolation but has to be considered in the context of the relationship between the individual child and their non-resident parent, the child's wishes and the non-resident parent's circumstances and behaviour.

There was similarly no consensus among those taking part in the face to face interviews about the importance of having a regular contact schedule rather than ad hoc arrangements (chapter 10). The predictability of a schedule could be appreciated, longed for or resented; ad hoc arrangements welcomed or seen as putting too much responsibility on the child. Nor did the data from the telephone survey indicate any association with either how positive an experience contact was for respondents, or the closeness of their relationship with the non-resident parent, once the continuity of contact was taken into account (chapters 6 and 7).

What was evident, however, was that if there was a schedule it was important that the non-resident parent did not let the child down by cancelling, failing to turn up or regularly being late. At the same time, the schedule needed to be flexible and responsive to the child's wishes and changing needs.

Two key points emerge from our analysis of the significance of the structural elements of contact. First, that they seem to be less important than other factors, such as the continuity of contact, the pre-separation relationship between the child and the non-resident parent, and the quality of contact. Second, that there is no blueprint for contact which will work for all, or even the majority of children. Respondents were satisfied with different levels of contact and did not agree about what the ideal would be. They disagreed about the importance of overnights and about the need for structured arrangements. This highlights what we consider to be one of the central messages of this study, that each child is an individual and that contact arrangements need to be tailored to their unique needs and circumstances. Indeed this was a message that respondents themselves articulated: a 'one-size fits all' solution was simply impossible. It was this view that led some to oppose the idea of legislation which would introduce a presumption of shared residence. This, many thought, would fail to accommodate children's uniqueness and risk imposing on all children an arrangement which would suit some but not others.

Not only do parents need to acknowledge children's individuality, they also have to be prepared to adapt to their changing needs as they get older. Some respondents recalled their parents accommodating the fact that the terms of the original contact arrangements, though suitable for them when they were small, were often not realistic once they started socialising with their peers and encountering more demanding school-work and after-school activities. But we were also told of parents who refused to make any changes in the original contact arrangements, insisting for example, on weekend arrangements which clashed with parties or other activities or insisting on the child continuing to stay overnight when they were unwilling to do so.

The role of the resident parent

Week in and week out, parents attending our meetings report that their former partner is refusing to allow them contact with their child(ren). Sometimes this is done to conceal a new relationship, or as a tactic in financial bargaining during a divorce, or because the arrangements are felt to be 'too irksome'. In other cases it is done out of malice, with one parent using the children to hurt their former partner. (Families Need Fathers website, <http://www.fnf.org.uk/law-and-information/contact>, accessed 16.10.2012)

Do resident parents frequently deny or discourage contact for no legitimate reason, as this extract from the Families Need Fathers website suggests? On the contrary, one of the clearest findings from our research was how rarely this group of young adults reported this happening. Just over half of those taking part in the telephone survey (202) experienced some disruption to contact. Only 8% of them, however, (17) said that the resident parent had been mainly responsible for this, as compared to 62% who blamed the non-resident parent (chapter 3). None of those whose contact had ceased said this had been due to the resident parent and among those who had never had any contact it was only 15%. Similarly, it was unusual (7%) for respondents to say that the resident parent had tried to undermine their relationship with the non-resident parent (chapter 4). Even where contact had been either delayed or sporadic, only 14% reported this. Furthermore, where this was said to have occurred, it was often in the context of a history of violence or concerns about the capacity of the non-resident parent to

care for the child. While respondents did not always agree with how their resident parent had behaved, most could appreciate the reasons for their actions. It was exceptional for a respondent to say that the resident parent had tried to undermine their relationship purely because of their own feelings about the separation (chapter 11).

Indeed, far from active undermining or contact obstruction being common, a strong and consistent theme in both the survey and the interview data was the extent to which resident parents were thought to have supported the child's relationship with the non-resident parent. Over half the participants in the telephone survey who did not lose contact (56%) said that the resident parent had encouraged the relationship 'a lot', while many of those who had taken the decision to stop contact themselves said that the resident parent had tried to persuade them to continue (chapter 4). Similarly, in the interview sample, many respondents expressed their appreciation of resident parents whose encouraging attitude had made it easy for them to have contact, while others, who had been less keen on seeing their non-resident parent, referred to resident parents emphasising the importance of maintaining a relationship, presenting a positive image of the non-resident parent and trying to smooth over difficulties (chapter 11).

Where the resident parent actively encourages the child's relationship with the non-resident parent, contact is more likely to be a positive experience for the child (chapter 6). However it is clearly not enough in itself: in the telephone survey, for instance, 35% of those who said the resident parent had encouraged the relationship 'a lot' said their experience of contact had only been 'fairly positive' while 16% said it was 'mixed' and 4% 'fairly negative'. Similarly, several of those interviewed face to face (chapter 12) described only continuing with contact because the resident parent wanted them to and stopping it when they were of an age to make their own decisions. It is also interesting that active discouragement did not necessarily have the effect of undermining the child's relationship with the non-resident parent or of preventing them enjoying contact.

Continuity and change in relationships between parents and children

Every child will experience changes in their relationships with their parents during childhood. Adolescence in particular brings adjustments to parent-child relationships, as older children naturally spend less time with their parents and more time with their peers. The material from this research demonstrates very clearly that the process of parental separation brings additional challenges to maintaining positive parent-child relationships. Respondents recounted living through frequent episodes of parental conflict leading up to, during and after the separation. The separation itself, even when anticipated, was usually experienced as a shock and the parent who left the family home often moved some distance away. The material clearly sets out the context in which post-separation relationships had to be negotiated. Most respondents were living in an atmosphere of emotional turmoil and distress, often feeling upset, bewildered and angry and frequently suffering from low mood and mild depression (chapter 9). A number were either blaming themselves for what was happening in their family or experiencing strong feelings of anger and blame towards one of their parents (chapter 14). Relationships at this time were clearly vulnerable and it was apparent that there were already problems in some respondents' relationships with their parents (chapter 9). One of the biggest challenges identified by respondents at this time was the diminished parenting they experienced. Data from the face-to-face interviews illustrates parents shifting their focus from their usual mode of parenting to concentrate on the major task of adjusting to new family life whilst attempting to cope with their own distress. The children often suffered from

a lack of support, often feeling unwilling to burden their already distressed parents and sometimes not knowing who else to turn to (chapter 9).

It was clear that numerous factors had the potential to affect relationships between children and parents during the process of parental separation. Given this, one of the most striking findings from this research was the level of continuity in the relationship between respondents and the parent who subsequently became their non-resident parent. The research very clearly suggests that the key to a close post separation relationship was the quality of relationship established in pre-separation family life. The data from the telephone interviews (chapter 7) showed that pre- and post-separation relationships were highly correlated. The interview material (chapter 14) confirmed these findings, with many respondents reporting that the closeness of their relationships had stayed the same after the separation. This was good news for those who had established a positive parent-child relationships prior to the separation. These relationships were clearly more durable and able to withstand many of the difficulties and challenges posed by separation, including the detrimental impact of a parent's alcoholism, having to live with enduring parental conflict and coping with maintaining a relationship when a parent moved a great distance away. We saw earlier that good parent-child relationships were also linked to a positive experience of contact. Sadly, but consistent with this finding, those who had not established close relationships prior to the separation were unlikely to do so afterwards. Respondents told us that living through parental separation simply highlighted and sometimes exacerbated existing difficulties in their relationships; consequently poor relationships rarely improved.

Respondents' accounts of their relationship with the previously non-resident parent suggest that the pre-separation relationship between parent and child had a deep-rooted and continuing impact on their lives. Not only was it related to whether respondents were in touch in adulthood, it was also linked to the closeness of relationships. In the telephone survey, relationships with the non-resident parent in childhood often, but not invariably, predicted relationships in adulthood. This was particularly the case where relationships in childhood had been close. Similarly, in the interview sample, a large number of respondents reported no further changes in the closeness of their relationship with their non-resident parent into adulthood. These findings highlight the importance of nurturing positive relationships between parents and children from the earliest opportunity.

The material on parent-child relationships also shows that relationships with non-resident parents were less stable over time than those with resident parents. Moreover, where relationships with the non-resident parent changed they were more likely to deteriorate, with only a very few (8%) indicating an improvement. The telephone survey indicates that, where the pre-separation relationship between the child and the (future) non-resident parent had been very or fairly close, those who had lived with the same parent throughout were more vulnerable than other respondents to becoming less close post-separation. This risk was reduced, however, where contact was continuous, it was a positive experience for the child and there was little conflict between the parents (chapter 7).

The face to face interviews pointed to additional factors that respondents felt had contributed to relationships becoming more distant. Parents suffering with mental health issues or exhibiting specific problematic behaviours such as drinking and drug use often led respondents to withdraw from relationships. Attributions of blame were common and sometimes led to a refusal by the young person to have contact with the blameworthy parent. Importantly, the interview data tell us something extra about the meaning for respondents of

their parent's behaviour which was not captured in the telephone survey. At a time when children were surrounded by so much uncertainty, they needed to feel loved and cared for and emotionally secure. As we have already noted, it was a feature of successful contact that children were able to perceive that the non-resident parent was making a genuine investment in their lives. This factor also appears to underlie the way in which child/parent relationships can improve or deteriorate. Children searched for evidence they were still important, that their parent was concerned about them, that they enjoyed spending time with them and that they were aware of and responsive to their needs. When asked about why relationships with non-resident parents had deteriorated, the young adults in our research consistently described what can be understood as the lack of emotional investment of the parent in their relationship (chapter 14). This was measured in respondent's eyes by parents who failed to demonstrate a willingness to want to spend time together, who did not understand the importance of engaging in shared, child focused activities or by a feeling of not being understood by their parent. Linked with this idea, the interview data emphasised the importance of parental availability and responsiveness. Children needed to feel that they were 'kept in mind' by their non-resident parent when they were not together, to know that they would 'be there' in times of need and to feel like a welcome part of their parent's life when they spent time together on contact visits. Feeling emotionally secure in their relationship was an essential part of maintaining the bond with the parent with whom they no longer lived.

In contrast to the material on parent-child relationships in childhood, the data from the telephone survey on relationships in adulthood showed a rather different pattern – where there were further changes, relationships with non-resident parents were slightly more likely to improve than to deteriorate (chapter 8). The face-to-face interviews shed some light on the basis for these improvements (chapter 14). We described earlier how, as children, respondents had developed a critical stance from which they interpreted and assessed their parent's behaviour during and after the separation. Some young adults, having largely moved on from the upset and anger they had felt as children, appeared to have developed a more mature and compassionate frame of mind. It also seems that many parents who themselves had adjusted to their new lives and reached a state of psychological equilibrium were once again in a position to be responsive to their children's needs and provide support when needed. Finally, a number of respondents reported that having their own children had not only changed their perspective on their parents but that the grandchildren often provided a new focus on which to re-build previously problematic relationships, particularly when a parent assisted with child care.

Alongside some improvements in relationships with non-resident parents, however, the material from the telephone survey also showed that, as adults, respondents were more likely to be close to the previously resident parent and many had poor or non-existent relationships with the non-resident parent (chapter 8). Those taking part in the face to face interviews described three key factors which were associated with poor on-going relationships with (previously) non-resident parents (chapter 14). The first was enduring parental conflict. All too often, respondents were still living with protracted battles between their parents - in some cases more than 20 years after the separation. There were frequent references to parents bad mouthing one another and respondents still feeling caught between antagonistic parents. As young adults, respondents described the difficulties of bringing conflicting parents together for special events such as graduations, weddings and christenings. A number had grown used to having multiple celebrations at Christmas or for children's birthdays when they felt unable to bring parents together under the same roof. The second factor was the lack of emotional investment which, as we have seen, was so important to respondents' emotional security. The

theme of emotional investment, or more importantly the lack of it, was still very apparent in their descriptions of adult interaction. Poor on-going relationships often involved parents who were seen as unwilling to make the effort necessary to maintain emotional bonds with their children. The third factor was often linked with the second: some respondents were, as adults, quite unable to set aside their childhood anger over the non-resident's earlier behaviour.

One of the most positive messages that emerged from our research, however, was the potential for even the most damaged relationships to be sustained and sometimes repaired in the longer term. Most notably, as we have previously highlighted, this seemed to be dependent on respondents' dedication to maintain the parent/child link and their efforts in preserving relationships with parents, even when there had been repeated challenges and difficulties in doing so. The continuity of contact in childhood was key. Where a respondent had persisted with contact despite a distant or difficult relationship there was at least the possibility of keeping relationships alive.

Even where there had either never been any contact, or where contact with the non-resident parent had ceased in childhood, the research shows there was still a real possibility of re-establishing a relationship in adulthood. Just over 40% of those in the telephone survey who had never had or ceased contact in childhood had some contact with their non-resident parent since becoming adult and, of those, 60% were still having some form of contact at the time of interview. Most of those who had re-established contact told us that it had been their idea to get back in touch. Respondents in the interview sample clarified that, in the majority of cases, those who were not having contact at the time of interview had made a conscious decision that they did not want to see their non-resident parent. Some were still living in fear of a previously violent parent, others were still harbouring strong feelings of blame and a few felt that they simply no longer knew the parent and so had no foundation on which to re-build the relationship. An important factor in whether respondents were willing to re-establish a relationship was whether the non-resident parent was able to take responsibility for their part in the relationship breakdown and be prepared to make the effort necessary to re-build the relationship.

The changing perspectives of children and young adults

Earlier studies have shown that one benefit of seeking the views of young adults is that they are able to evaluate their childhood experiences from a different and more objective standpoint. One of the aims of this study was to assess the extent to which this group of young adults could look back on their childhood experiences of parental separation and its aftermath and tell us whether their ideas about what had occurred had changed and why.

The data produced by the telephone survey on who had taken responsibility for making decisions about contact (chapter 3) was particularly interesting in that it produced some notable indications of the impact of adulthood on respondents' perceptions of past events. As noted earlier, respondents typically held their non-resident parent responsible for contact not being continuous. These respondents were asked what they understood as children to have been the reasons for this and what they now thought as adults. A comparison of their responses shows that for 40%, adulthood had produced a rather different interpretation. Some had, as adults, changed from a fairly positive interpretation of the non-resident's reasons for failing to maintain contact (e.g. logistical difficulties; problems occasioned by a new partner) to a negative one (lack of interest, reluctance to pay child support) while almost equal numbers changed in the opposite direction. Intriguingly therefore, these young adults had reconsidered their childhood view of adult behaviour and had adjusted them in the light of

their present perspectives. This does not suggest that research with children in the immediate aftermath of their parents' separation produces inaccurate information. Children paint their own valuable picture of what they see at the time. Nor does it suggest that children, on becoming adults, rewrite their past. Nevertheless, it is notable that after a relatively short period elapsing between childhood and adulthood, these respondents were now presenting rather different assessments of what had happened. They had not necessarily acquired any greater understanding of past events, merely a different one.

The data on decision-making relating to contact arrangements (chapter 3) also threw an interesting light on respondents' own decision-making over contact and the extent to which their attitudes had changed. Fifteen percent of respondents in the telephone survey whose contact had not been continuous took responsibility for that disruption. Some attributed their decision to their view that the non-resident parent had been to blame for the separation. This was a topic that also came up relatively frequently in the face to face interviews (chapters 12 and 14). As discussed above, it seems that extreme disapproval of the non-resident parent's actions was sometimes an aspect of an adolescent's deeply moralistic approach to life. The result was that some refused to have anything to do with the non-resident parent, sometimes for very long periods. The interviews suggest that even in adulthood some respondents never lost their disapproval of the non-resident parent's behaviour, with no improvement in their relationship together and in some cases, its deterioration (chapter 14). For others, however, it seems that the black and white attitudes normally associated with adolescence were followed by a rather more tolerant and sympathetic outlook in adulthood. Thus some respondents acknowledged that, as adults, they were beginning to appreciate that what had appeared to them to be wholly reprehensible behaviour, was at least comprehensible, taking account of the circumstances and of their parents' own personalities. As noted above, greater acceptance of their parents' frailties had sometimes led to an improvement in their relationships with their non-resident parents in adulthood. With maturity, some respondents even realised that their parents had been incompatible from the start and could now understand and accept what had led to their separation. These responses do not suggest that on reflection respondents now realised that as children they had adopted a factually inaccurate interpretation of past events, rather that, as adults, they had become less judgemental.

In the telephone survey most of those who said they had been mainly responsible for contact not being continuous said that, as adults, they had no regrets about this. (chapter 3). Nevertheless, one third did and whilst it was rare for the face to face interviewees to express specific regret over decisions that they had made over residence and contact arrangements, when they did so, this regret was keenly expressed (chapter 13). Some had chosen which parent to live with, a choice they now felt had been a poor one. Others had refused to start contact arrangements at all or had brought contact to an abrupt end. For one, the explanation for making a disastrous decision over which parent to live with was that he had not been given insufficient information about the alternatives. A number felt that they had been allowed to reach these far reaching decisions at too young an age. Despite this, respondents unanimously considered that parents should consult children more, rather than less, over important aspects of their upbringing (chapter 13). But they were also fully aware of the crucial distinction between consulting children and allowing them to make decisions. We discuss the implications of these findings below.

Implications

Implications for separating parents

No one can disguise the fact that many children find it extremely hard to cope with their parents' separation and that some experience long-term adverse outcomes. Many parents will be only too well aware of the emotional costs to their children of their separating and feel extremely worried and guilty about it. Nevertheless, this study produced a great deal of material from which parents can take heart. It indicates that a substantial number of respondents felt their parents had done a very good job on separation, and afterwards, and had tried to protect their children from as much distress as possible. The telephone survey shows that, when asked what their parents could have done to improve their childhood experience of contact, 42% of respondents said 'nothing' (chapter 6). Where contact was on-going, six in 10 said that the amount of contact they had had was sufficient (chapter 5), and 58% that contact had been very or fairly positive (chapter 6). Seventy five percent of respondents were, as adults, currently in touch with their former non-resident parents and 70% of this group counted their relationship now as close or very close.

Despite these positive messages, however, our material also confirms earlier research that many children need their parents to manage the separation process far better. The in-depth interviews reflected how shocked respondents had been by their parents separating and how their distress had been exacerbated by a lack of warning and by seldom being given any real explanation for it. In the absence of preparation or explanation, some not only felt that their world had come to an end, but also assumed that the separation must have been their fault. It is regrettable that parents so seldom, it appears, think fit to prepare their children for what they know may be a devastating blow. They may assume that their conflicts are so very obvious that their children would have guessed what the outcome would be, or perhaps they hope to shield them from the event until the last possible minute. Whatever the case, a common piece of advice given by respondents to future generations of separating parents (chapter 15) was that they should take the time to warn their children beforehand of the impending separation and explain to them properly the reasons for this.

However carefully prepared, most children will find their parents' separation a difficult blow. Whilst this is the time when children most need parents who are loving and responsive, our research findings suggest that parents sometimes are not able to provide the support their children need. And understandably so, given that they not only have to deal with the practical aspects of establishing two separate households, but also have their own distress to contend with. As discussed above, children may be far more perceptive than parents imagine. Respondents described parents' own patent unhappiness resulting in them becoming emotionally unavailable just at the time when they were most needed. Some parents appear to have simply discontinued their parenting role, while others turned to their own children for support, sometimes even using them to talk through their problems. For a good number of parents, separation was reported to have triggered serious depression, mental illness, alcohol and/or drug abuse (chapter 9). Respondents often found it frightening to encounter parental frailty in the place of infallibility; this was exacerbated if they watched their parents' personalities changing for the worse. Although parents sometimes had relatives and friends available to provide support, this was not always the case. Nor was it apparent from respondents' accounts that parents had often turned to professional agencies for help. Had they done so, or sought help earlier than some of them appear to have done, this might have enabled them to support their children more effectively.

Parents also need to be aware that their children may need additional help, perhaps from other family members or from external agencies. Not surprisingly, many respondents mentioned how alone they felt after their parents' separation. Some had felt obliged to hide their own distress from depressed parents struggling to maintain family life and jobs. They pointed out that whilst parents could talk to other adults over their problems, children often had no-one to confide in (chapter 15). Indeed, a number were now suffering psychological problems as adults and attributed this to having bottled up their childhood distress.

As the in-depth interviews showed (chapter 9), for some respondents, their parents' separation was a relief, in so far as it meant an end to living in the middle of a battle-ground. This, however, was not always the case, with some parents continuing their conflicts long after their separation, and in some cases well into their children's adulthood. Again our findings confirm earlier research showing with great clarity how damaging parental conflict can be for children and more particularly that it has an adverse impact on children's experience of contact (chapter 6). As commented above, many of those taking part in the telephone survey were quite satisfied with the way their parents had handled contact. But of those who had suggestions to make for improvement, by far the most frequent was for their parents to have been less conflicted and more cooperative. Similarly, of those who said that, if they were ever to be a separated parent, they would handle things very differently from the way their parents had done, the most common observation was that they would maintain a better relationship with their ex-partners than their own parents had managed. The face to face interviews reflected a similar view (chapter 11) - that parents' ongoing conflict had seriously undermined many respondents' enjoyment of contact with the non-resident parent. They reported having been considerably distressed by parents who argued in front of them at handovers and who constantly badmouthed each other at other times. Some felt that as adults it would be quite impossible for them to invite both parents to important events in their lives, such as weddings or christenings. Others who had done so, recalled how embarrassing it had been that their parents had been unable to socialise with each other in a civilised fashion (chapter 14). Given their relatively common experiences of parental conflict at some stage of their lives, it is of little surprise that respondents' advice for future generations of separating parents was unanimous: do not argue in front of your children; try to at least to appear to be on good terms; co-operate over matters to do with your children's upbringing.

One of the most emphatic messages that respondents wished to convey to parents was that once separation has occurred, children need to understand that they remain loved by both parents. Contact is a vital element in this. As noted above, whatever their own experience, those taking part in the face to face interviews had no doubt that in principle contact was very important to children, although also recognising that in some circumstances it was not advisable. Since, in the telephone survey, most of those who did not have continuous contact blamed the non-resident parent for this, often attributing it to a lack of commitment, the clear implication from our data is that non-resident parents need to do their best to stay in touch with their children after separation and thus demonstrate their continuing investment in their lives. Resident parents also need to play their part, as, our data shows, many were already doing. Both the telephone survey and the face to face interviews show how important it is that the resident parent actively encourages the child's relationship with the non-resident parent.

Residence and contact arrangements need to be sorted out as soon as possible - but in consultation with children. As discussed above, separating parents may not always realise just how quickly children develop a capacity for independent and critical thought at a relatively

early age. As respondents made very plain, children often have an extremely clear perception of their own needs, in terms of their future upbringing which parents need to take seriously (chapters 12, 13 and 15). No respondents suggested to us that they had a *right* to be consulted. Nevertheless, parents should note that the UK is a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12 of which gives children who are capable of forming their own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, ‘their views being given due weight’ in accordance with each child’s age and maturity. This provision makes no attempt to give children the right to reach decisions for themselves over matters affecting them, but it does give them the right to be consulted, depending on their age and maturity. Although there has been no legislative attempt to translate Article 12 into a legal duty on English parents to consult their children, it is notable that Scottish law has done just that. All Scottish parents are obliged, when reaching any major decision relating to their children to ‘have regard so far as practicable to the views (if he wishes to express them) of the child concerned, taking account of the child’s age and maturity....’ Furthermore, Scottish parents must assume that once their children have attained the age of 12, ‘they are of sufficient age and maturity to form a view’ (Children (Scotland) Act 1995, section 6).

Our research suggests that the children of separating parents want their parents to act in the spirit of this legislation, which has a laudable aim - to ensure that the interests of those who are the focus of adult decision-making are not completely overlooked. Like Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it does not give Scottish children the right to determine matters to do with their upbringing, but, depending on their age and maturity, the right to be consulted. Parents can also be assured that there are advantages in consulting their children, not least as a means of ensuring their co-operation with the residence and contact arrangements. The telephone survey suggests that those respondents who had been involved in decision-making over their future had a more positive contact experience (chapter 6). Perhaps children have a greater investment in arrangements that they themselves have played a part in establishing. Evidence from the in-depth interviews also demonstrated how, as children got older and physically larger, they could effectively sabotage residence and contact arrangements by voting with their feet (chapter 12). When stressing the importance of parents consulting children more over residence and contact arrangements, respondents emphasised that they were fully aware that consultation is very different to giving children the right to make decisions for themselves (chapter 13). Some voiced reservations over children being allowed to determine all matters for themselves. Whilst it was relatively common for respondents to reach decisions of their own regarding their contact arrangements, it was unusual for such freedom to extend to decision-making over which parent they wished to live with in future. The experiences of those few respondents who reached such decisions suggest that parents should avoid giving children choices that can have gravely damaging repercussions. Children are usually well aware of how hurtful such a choice can appear. The apparently rejected parent may find it extremely difficult not to allow any feelings of rejection to undermine their future relationship with the child. Furthermore, children may blame themselves for their own choices that subsequently appear to have miscalculated the resident parent’s character – with the result that making a home with him or her is a deeply damaging experience.

Whilst some respondents were uneasy over children being given choices, they also considered that it would be quite wrong to force children into complying with arrangements with which they are unhappy. Parents might reason that such advice is inconsistent with the discussion above, which stresses that consulting children is not tantamount to giving them the final freedom to choose. They might point out that if children cannot be coerced, this

amounts to giving them a final right of veto. We would counter this by arguing that consulting children in a genuine manner is unlikely to produce contact arrangements that are so inimical to them that physical coercion is the only means of fulfilling their terms. Many respondents had considered that maintaining their tie with their non-resident parent was so important that they were willing to continue with contact visits that they did not themselves rate particularly highly. This preparedness to persevere with contact arrangements that carry little obvious benefit suggests that if and when children do finally say no, their reasons for doing so should be taken very seriously and explored thoroughly. Respondents' experiences suggest that contact arrangements involving physical coercion will not enhance the child's short or long term relationship with the non-resident parent.

Our findings reflect a need for residence and contact arrangements to be established as soon as possible. However they have not produced a blue-print for what those arrangements should be. Rather, a strong theme of respondents' advice for future separating parents was that since all children are different, no set of arrangements perfect for one child will be totally appropriate for another. Parents, in consultation with their children, need to construct individualised arrangements tailored to the needs and circumstances of their family.

In some circumstances it may be appropriate, and agreeable to all involved, for the child's time to be split, more or less equally between the parents, at least for a period. Too few of our respondents had experience of shared residence for us to gain a robust view of the merits of such arrangements. However it was notable that, when asked their opinion about this model, many respondents were keen to express strong reservations over the way in which it might unsettle children, with neither parent's house feeling like home. Some suggested that it might be successful but *only* if the children are happy with the arrangement *and* the parents can ensure the following: they live very close to each other; children can attend the same school; they are on good terms; they can provide their children with two sets of rooms, clothes and school equipment. If the children are teenagers they need to have the capacity to cope with a complicated schedule involving moving between two households alongside the demands of school and be willing to continue doing so. Many parents will be unable to fulfil all these requirements.

Our findings emphasise that for many children there is considerable value in retaining the traditional form of residence and contact arrangements in which the child mainly lives with one parent but has regular, positive contact with the other. In this study 83% of those who lived with the same parent throughout were happy about this. Seventy-three per cent of those who had unbroken contact said they had enough contact and 74% that contact had been a very or fairly positive experience. Almost all (98%), were still in touch with the previously non-resident parent as adults and 76% said that their relationship was very or fairly close. Two-thirds said that if they were to be a separated parent they would handle things pretty much as their parents had done and only 14% said they would do things very differently. Parents can therefore be reassured that traditional arrangements do work.

As noted above, however, it is not sufficient for children merely to have contact. Parents will also want to ensure, as far as possible, that it is a positive experience and one which benefits their children. The young adults taking part in this study were keen to emphasise to future separating parents that there is no blue-print for an ideal set of arrangements. All families are different and so are children. On consulting their children, parents may discover that they have a very clear idea of what sort of contact they want – how often it should take place, what days of the week and whether it should involve overnight stays. In any event, parents will

often need to establish a schedule so that their children fully understand how the contact arrangements will work. If their children are too young to consult, parents should be aware that whatever arrangements they put in place may need adjusting as the children get older. Well before they start socialising with their peers during their teens, children often have after school activities and hobbies, all of which they may resent missing in order to keep to the terms of an early and now inappropriate contact schedule. Indeed, respondents often emphasised how much they appreciated parents who were flexible about contact arrangements and did not complain when visits had to be re-arranged.

When deciding what to do with their children on contact visits, non-resident parents should bear in mind that children do not necessarily want them to spend lots of money on the occasion or to make every visit a special event. However they do want the non-resident parent to make an effort to make contact enjoyable for the child. As noted above, children are quick to notice signs indicating whether or not the non-resident parent has a real emotional investment in their lives. By showing a continuing interest in their school work by, for example, attending parent evenings and helping with homework; by demonstrating a knowledge of their likes and dislikes in terms of food; by remembering their birthdays and giving them well chosen birthday and Christmas presents - all these are signs which will reassure the children that they are important and loved. Contrarily, their attitude to the non-resident parent will not be enhanced by contact which largely consists of visits to pubs or sessions sitting in front of the television. Indeed, they may well perceive the non-resident parent's failure to ensure that they get something out of the contact visit, rather than simply turning up, as an example of his or her lack of commitment to them. Our findings also suggest that non-resident parents should be sensitive to children's need to have some time together without new partners or other children, and make it easy for children to be open about any difficulties they are experiencing over the contact arrangements. They should additionally think about how to ensure that their children feel at home in their house. Feeling at home is a subtle concept which is difficult to define; for example it involves the child feeling sufficiently relaxed to consider that they can help themselves to a cup of tea without asking first. It need not necessarily involve their having their own bedroom, although this might assist and might also encourage them to want overnight stays with the non-resident parent.

In sum, our findings suggest that children are more likely to rate their experience of contact with the non-resident parent as being positive if a number of factors are present: the parents involve their children in the decision-making; the pre-separation relationship between the child and the parent who subsequently becomes non-resident was very close; there is little or no post-separation conflict between the parents; there is no domestic violence and the resident parent does not have serious concerns about the care the non-resident parent can provide; the resident parent actively encourages the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent; the non-resident parent makes time for the child and is emotionally involved in the child's day to day life; the child feels equally at home in both the resident and non-resident parent's home; the non-resident parent either does not repartner or the child gets on well with their new partner.

Children fortunate enough to have parents able to ensure that all these conditions are met are likely to enjoy the contact they have with their non-resident parent and benefit greatly from the arrangements put in place.

Implications for service provision and service providers

The messages to parents set out in the preceding section are also clearly of relevance to a wide range of practitioners, agencies and voluntary organisations involved with separating families. Many of the messages, of course, will be familiar, since much of what our respondents had to say, particularly about contact, has also emerged in previous research with children. The list is a long one: avoiding the damaging effect of parental conflict; the importance of giving children explanations and consulting them about, but not making them responsible for, decisions; the need to tailor and adapt the contact arrangements to the changing needs and wishes of the individual child in their particular family; the factors which make contact a positive experience for the child; the need for the non-resident parent to demonstrate commitment to the child and for the resident parent, unless it is not in the child's interests, to actively encourage the relationship. However the fact that essentially the same powerful messages were conveyed by young adults able to consider their whole experience with the benefit of hindsight, emotional distance and maturity, is telling and can, hopefully, be put to constructive use by those who provide information, advice and assistance to parents.

The research, however, also has some more direct implications in terms of service provision for children and parents in dealing with the impact of separation and the process of negotiating post-separation relationships. Our respondents left us in no doubt that separation caused emotional turmoil and distress for all family members. For children, this was intensified when they felt they had been left to deal with their feelings alone. Parents who were children's usual source of support were often temporarily unavailable in the aftermath of their separation, overwhelmed by their own practical and emotional problems. Many told us that no-one had spoken to them directly about how they were and, given the diminished parenting that some were receiving, they simply did not know where to turn to for help. A number told us that, looking back now, they wished they had talked to someone rather than bottling up their feelings - they sometimes recognised that things hidden away because they felt unable to talk about them had contributed to severe emotional difficulties later in life. In such cases respondents highlighted the need for alternative forms of support they could access themselves. A few suggested that they would have liked a dedicated external support service for the children of separating parents. This suggestion was also made by some respondents who had found themselves having to make difficult choices about where they would live and how they would spend time with their non-resident parent, trying to make decisions that were 'fair' to everyone, balancing the needs of each of their parents, sometimes at the expense of their own. They were clear that they would have benefitted from better support in making such decisions, particularly in being helped to think through all of their options as well as the potential outcomes.

Given that the parental separation had occurred for most respondents at least 10 years before our interviews took place, such services may or may not have been available. But if they were our respondents either did not know about them or feel confident to approach them themselves. Few felt that their school had offered what they perceived as the neutral and trusted person they would have liked to talk to. Support services provided by schools have no doubt changed in recent years, with many now housing a dedicated counselling service. It will be important that young people feel able to access such services, whatever the nature of their problem, without the risk of such approaches becoming known to their peers. It was encouraging that those respondents who had been able to access professional support from external services were overwhelmingly positive about the support they received and highlighted the real benefits to their psychological well-being of simply being able to talk to a

trusted adult about how they were feeling. The gains of simply being listened to and feeling that they had been heard were notable.

Parents were still the first line of support for most young people, who needed understanding and reassurance at a time of great uncertainty. It was clear, however, that while parents may have been trying to support their children as best they could, many had become much less emotionally available to their children as they struggled to deal with their own difficulties. Respondents vividly described the distress their parents had experienced, even if they had tried to hide it, with some becoming depressed, even threatening suicide, others turning to alcohol. This is clearly an important public health issue, which needs to be addressed, not just by providing appropriate medical and therapeutic treatment for specific problems but also by ensuring that separated parents, resident and non-resident, have access to emotional support outside their own families and social networks. Parents need this support in their own right. They also need it as a means of improving their parental functioning so that they can better support their children and improve their relationships with them. Our research shows that some children were reluctant to have contact because of the way a non resident parent had reacted to the separation. For others, the quality of their contact was negatively affected by ongoing parental hostility and conflict. While the message of reducing children's exposure to conflict is integral to many services working with separating families – such as mediation and parent education programmes – some parents will be so overwhelmed by their own distress that they are simply not able to take in, or act on that message. They need access to services that will help them cope with the transition to their radically changed life. Others may need opportunities to develop skills in co-parenting and managing conflict. Enabling parents to deal with separation more effectively, therefore, is also likely to ensure that more children retain a relationship with the non-resident parent and that contact is a more positive experience for them.

Finally, a key theme in this research has been the importance of the pre-separation relationship between the child and (future) non-resident parent. Close relationships are more likely to survive the challenges of separation; poor relationships are unlikely to improve. Hence efforts to ensure that children have positive relationships with both parents post-separation have to reach back into intact families, encouraging the involvement of both parents in the joint task of bringing up children.

Implications for the courts

Very few of the respondents in our study reported that their parents had gone to court over the arrangements for residence or contact. Nonetheless, the findings of this study contain much of relevance for the courts, with two main themes being of particular importance. First, as noted above, the research shows that there is no single formula for successful contact. Hence it is vital that court orders are tailored to the needs of the individual child in their particular family circumstances. Second, the research also demonstrates the importance of taking the child's wishes into account in crafting contact arrangements. Both these imperatives are embedded in section 1 of Children Act 1989. Section 1(1) lays down the fundamental principle that the courts must give paramount consideration to the welfare of the individual child. Section 1(3), the 'welfare checklist' sets out a list of factors the court should consider, the first of which (section 1(3)(a)) is 'the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his age and understanding)'. In determining what order to make, or indeed whether to make any order at all, the court currently has unfettered discretion, although, as we discuss below in relation to policy makers, it may be seriously undermined if legislation currently under consideration is introduced.

Tailoring orders to each individual child's needs

Our findings suggest that the judiciary should not assume that court orders will necessarily benefit children in the short or long run without a careful and detailed assessment of their individual needs. When dealing with disputed contact cases, the courts appear to be well aware of the research indicating that children often find their parents' separation and divorce a damaging experience and that long-term adverse outcomes can be mitigated if they are able to enjoy a positive relationship with both parents afterwards. Unless there is contact between the child and the non-resident parent, such a relationship is unlikely. Hence the courts, it is generally recognised, operate on an assumption that contact between the child and non-resident parent is immensely important and it is 'almost always in the interests of the child that he or she should have contact with the other parent' (*Re W (Children)* [2012] EWCA Civ 999, per McFarlane LJ, at [38]). Only if there are 'compelling reasons to the contrary' does this 'general principle' not apply (*ibid*, at [56]). This approach may lead the courts to override a child's resistance to contact on the basis that the child cannot appreciate what is in his or her own best interests - furthermore that the long-term benefit of having a relationship with the non-resident parent justifies any short-term distress the child suffers when forced into unwanted contact (chapter 13).

The young adults in our study were unanimously of the view that, in principle, contact between child and non-resident parent is of enormous importance and that ideally arrangements for continuous contact should be established as soon after parental separation as possible. On this basis, our findings would appear to be entirely consistent with the courts' existing approach to contact disputes. Furthermore, we can appreciate that the contact 'presumption' presents to warring parents a clear message that they should put their own quarrels to one side and enable their children to enjoy the company and affection of both. Nevertheless, the research evidence we present in this report suggests that the courts should adopt a more nuanced approach to these disputes. The respondents in our study were keen to emphasise that *in principle* contact between child and non-resident parent is of immense importance. But this was a theoretical position that, for a good number, had had no practical reality in their own lives. It was not unusual for respondents to tell us of contact arrangements that had distressed them deeply but with which some had felt obliged to continue; others, when older, had simply discontinued contact. Very few had been involved in post-separation contact with abusive parents but those that had naturally found it particularly distressing. Indeed, all were agreed that where there was abuse, contact arrangements must be out of the question (chapter 15). But they went further and emphasised that it is often against a child's best interests to continue contact arrangements from which he or she derives no value. Notably from their viewpoint as young adults, they could *not* see any long term value of being forced to continue with distressing contact. In other words, they considered that in some circumstances no contact was better than bad contact.

If, as we suggest, the courts are to take seriously the advice that on the one hand contact is in principle very important but on the other that sometimes no contact is better than bad contact, they need to know what makes contact work for children. Illuminating this issue was one of the principal aims of this study. Before setting out how our findings may assist the courts, we must remember the special impact that court orders have on children. An inappropriate contact order can lock a child into a distressing and inflexible arrangement over which he or she has no control. It is also worth noting the type of cases the family courts commonly confront when dealing with parental disputes about children. The parents who seek the courts' assistance are a tiny minority of the separating population and are often highly conflicted. Their children may have lived under the psychologically damaging strain of

constant parental hostility for many years. Whilst some disputes arise from parents' enmity and inability to compromise, others involve allegations which, if true, suggest that the non-resident parent's care of the child is damagingly poor or even that the child's safety would be endangered by contact with him or her. In all these, it is vital that the courts make an order appropriate to the child's special circumstances.

One of our clearest findings is that it depends entirely on the child and parents in question whether contact will be a positive experience for the individual child. It is not therefore enough for the courts to assume that the child will inevitably benefit in the long-term from the contact established by a contact order. Our findings suggest that this often depends on the quality of the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent *pre-separation*. A poor pre-separation relationship is unlikely to improve. Where the pre-separation relationship was close then a contact regime providing the non-resident parent with ongoing involvement in the child's life through generous contact or even a shared residence arrangement might indeed be beneficial for the child. But even in those cases, one cannot predict the likelihood of the child rating any contact between them positively without a number of other interlocking factors being present: the child being involved in the decision-making; little or no post-separation conflict between the parents; no domestic violence or serious concerns about the care the non-resident parent can provide; active encouragement of the relationship between the child and the non-resident parent by the resident parent; the non-resident parent demonstrating that the child is important to him/her; the child feeling at home in the non-resident parent's home; the non-resident parent either does not repartner or the child gets on well with their new partner (chapters 6, 9 and 14). If all these factors are present, it is likely that the child/parent relationship will not deteriorate and may even improve into adulthood. Given the type of parents using the courts, it is unlikely that many of these factors will be present for their children.

These findings suggest that to accede to a non-resident parent's request for a contact order on the assumption that it will undoubtedly benefit the child may often be unwise; at times such an order may be seriously damaging. Indeed, the current operation of the contact presumption in many of the highly conflicted cases that confront the courts may produce orders which ill accord with the legislative direction not to make any order unless the court 'considers that doing so would be better for the child than making no order at all' (Children Act 1989, section 1(5)). It is also arguable that the courts' current practice of virtually ruling out the use of no contact orders, and reserving indirect contact orders to the most exceptional cases should be reconsidered (chapter 15). A further implication of these findings is that the courts cannot be confident that contact orders will be of any real benefit to the children unless they have a great deal of information about the children. Those best able to provide much of this information are the children themselves. If old enough they alone can inform the court about many of the factors listed above: whether they had enjoyed a good pre-separation relationship with the non-resident parent; whether any contact arrangements will inevitably involve them in continuing parental conflict; whether their current relationship with the non-resident parent is an abusive one; whether they feel at home in both houses.

It is, of course, one of the objectives of section 1(3)(a) of the Children Act 1989 that the courts should gain much of this kind of information in the course of seeking 'the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his age and understanding)'. Regrettably, despite this legislative direction, the courts are often unlikely to obtain a full picture of the child's relationship with each parent *from the child's own viewpoint* (chapter 13). Given the severe shortage of Cafcass officers in many localities,

the courts may often manage without any detailed assessment of the child's family background under section 7 of the Children Act 1989 (Family Procedure Rules 2010 Practice Direction 12B, *The Revised Private Law Programme*, rule 5.4). Although Cafcass officers may attempt to establish the child's wishes and feelings, through a 'wishes and feelings report' (Cafcass, undated guidance), this may be based on a very short, even relatively cursory, assessment of the child's wishes. Whilst separate representation would ensure that the child gets a proper hearing, there are insufficient resources for children to be routinely separately represented in private law parental disputes; indeed such an order for separate representation is seldom made (Family Procedure Rules 2010 Practice Direction 16A).

Taking into account children's wishes

There is a further difficulty inherent in the direction in section 1(3(a) of the Children Act 1989 in that its wording suggests that the child's wishes and feelings can be discounted because of his or her age or understanding. Case law suggests that the courts are tempted to disregard the views of a child who is strongly opposed to contact, particularly if the child is relatively young. They do so on the basis that the child does not appreciate what is in his or her own best interests, and that, in any event, the child's views are not his or her own – rather that the child is being manipulated by the resident parent (chapter 13). There appears to be a growing perception amongst the fathers' pressure groups that parental alienation is a relatively common phenomenon (sometimes referred to as Parental Alienation Syndrome [PAS]), a perception which may encourage non-resident parents to use such an argument when applying for contact orders against the wishes of their children. Reported cases involving children strongly resisting contact seem most likely to arise when a resident parent (often, but not always a mother) opposes a non-resident parent's attempts to enforce an existing contact order. The applicant may argue that the child's resistance stems from the resident parent's own hostility, indeed that the child has been deliberately and systematically alienated against the non-resident parent. If it is accepted that this alienation has occurred, a small but steadily growing number of cases (chapter 13) suggest that the courts are more ready to turn to their 'remedy of last resort' for the mother's disobedience – which is to transfer the child's residence to the non-resident parent. The government's recent consultation suggests that the courts should consider extending the use of such orders in cases where there is 'wilful obstruction of contact by a parent with whom a child lives' as long as this is consistent with the child's welfare (DfE and MoJ, 2012: 8.2).

This encouragement to the courts to extend the use of transfer of residence orders is worrying. In the first place, since we have no robust research evidence indicating what the outcomes are for children on their receiving end (chapter 13), we cannot be sure that they achieve better outcomes. Furthermore, in our study the proportion of resident parents who opposed the child having contact was very small (8%) and very few had no good reason for doing so. Additionally resident parents commonly encouraged continuation of contact even in cases where the respondents themselves had strongly objected to it (chapters 11 and 12). Our findings also provide a more powerful reason for courts resisting such encouragement – this is that the children involved are probably not alienated at all but often have good reasons of their own for their resistance to contact.

Contrary to the implication underlying the term 'parental alienation', the young adults in our study had not, as children, been passive objects easily manipulated by strong resident parents. There was clear evidence that all but the very young had been well able to withstand parental pressure to adopt a view that was not their own. Their ability to do so was unaffected by their comprehending, and often sympathising with, their resident parent's distress over the non-

resident parent's behaviour – including serious domestic violence, alcohol abuse and/or an inability to care adequately for the children. Even those who had been very young at the time of separation, developed, as they got older, a clear capacity to assess objectively the value to themselves of retaining and developing their own relationship with the non-resident parent. Those who recalled resisting contact with the non-resident parent considered that they had had good and independent reasons of their own for doing so. Their resistance to contact was usually entirely unrelated to the resident parent's own feelings. Rather it stemmed from their own deep disapproval of the non-resident parent's apparent culpability for breaking up their parents' relationship. Respondents recalled having, as adolescents, a deeply moralistic approach to such behaviour, which sometimes led to their flatly refusing to have anything to do with the non-resident parent. They often voiced extreme anger over such behaviour; some, even as adults, remained unable to forgive it (chapter 14). Many could, however, recall their resident parent trying hard to persuade them to maintain contact when they themselves could see little value in doing so (chapters 11 and 12). These findings have an obvious bearing on the courts' treatment of such cases. It is notable that there is a growing concern in the U.S.A that the courts there are failing to identify the real reason for a child resisting contact and concluding that their resistance stems from alienation by the non-resident parent (chapter 13). Given the English courts' frequent inability to obtain detailed assessments of the children involved in contact disputes, a similar danger could arise here – with children's reasons for resisting contact not being explored sufficiently extensively before transfer of residence orders are made.

In a more general context, it is arguably unwise for a court to ignore a child's opposition to contact on the assumption that it stems solely from the residential parent's unfounded hostility. The child may be saying something important about the non-resident parent's behaviour *as a parent* and not as a protagonist in a parental dispute (chapter 13). But whether or not this is the case, the clear message from our research is that the views of children involved in parental disputes should always be taken into account. The young adults in our research consistently reaffirmed their firm opinion that children should be consulted over the residence and contact arrangements that they are expected to comply with. We argue elsewhere in this chapter that parents and policy makers should take account of the fact that the UK is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12 of which gives children who are capable of forming their own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, 'their views being given due weight' in accordance with each child's age and maturity. It proceeds to provide them with the opportunity of being heard in any judicial proceedings, either directly or through a representative or appropriate body. We have suggested to policy makers (see below) that more resources should be made available for the courts to obtain adequate information about the child's background, including a clear picture of their views on the parents' dispute. In the meantime, there seems little justification for courts being exempt from the need to abide by the terms of Article 12. The stretched resources of Cafcass should not prevent the courts resisting strictures about lack of resources and more routinely calling for welfare reports under section 7 of the Children Act 1989 or ordering separate representation for children.

There is also the question whether it is ever appropriate for a court to make a contact order overriding children's opposition to the contact, given that it may involve physically forcing them to take part in an activity they find untenable. The court may assume that the long-term advantages to the child of having an on-going relationship with the non-resident parent will overcome their short-term distress over being treated in this way. But courts receive no feedback indicating whether their assumptions turn out to be well-founded. The respondents

in our study were strongly opposed to the concept of children being forced into contact arrangements against their will. Some were clear that they had gained no long-term benefit from having been forced to continue contact with a non-resident parent. A number of respondents were, however, keen to distinguish between the need to consult children and allowing them to decide matters for themselves. Furthermore, some respondents now regretted having made decisions that they now considered had been mistaken. There is probably no final answer to this problem; one can only hypothesise that it is more important to allow children to make mistakes in their lives than to force adult choices on them in circumstances where there is no guarantee that the adults' approach is a more appropriate one. The picture of children being subjected to physical force to fulfil judicial notions of what will ultimately benefit them is an unpalatable one. In those circumstances, children may have a far more realistic view of what would be in their own long term best interests than anyone else.

Shared residence orders

In the final section of this chapter, dealing with the implications of the research for policy-makers, we consider in detail the government's planned legislation amending the Children Act 1989 in the light of our findings and voice our concerns that it will result in shared residence orders becoming the norm. Although few of our respondents had experienced such arrangements they did proffer their general views on the wisdom of such a model, which have a bearing on the courts' increasing readiness to utilise these orders (chapter 15) even when parents are highly conflicted and live far apart.

A number of respondents favoured such an arrangement, but *only* if parents could fulfil a number of pre-conditions: they live very close to each other; children can attend the same school; they are on good terms; they can provide their children with two sets of rooms, clothes and school equipment. One respondent who had had a short period alternating between her parents' houses considered that, as a teenager, her own willingness to enter into such an arrangement and her ability to cope with a complicated schedule were important ingredients of its working successfully. It was notable, however, that far more respondents opposed shared residence arrangements becoming more commonly established. Although a frequent concern was the possible impact on school work, criticism focused most strongly on the way that such an arrangement might destabilize children, with their being forced to lead split lives shuttling between two different households, neither of which could be clearly designated their 'home'. These views suggest that the courts need to adopt a more cautious approach. The judicial view that such orders can educate parents to adopt a more co-operative approach reflects an especially adult perspective. It is, above all, vital that the courts ensure that children's views are always obtained before they contemplate making a shared residence order and are carefully evaluated, not dismissed out of hand as reflecting undue influence from an unreasonably hostile resident parent.

Implications for policy makers

The research findings on the support needs of children and parents strongly endorse the government's declared intention to increase service provision for separated and separating families and we welcome the announcement of increased funding for this. Similarly, our findings that positive relationships post-separation are rooted in pre-separation family life indicate that policy initiatives to encourage the involvement of fathers in the upbringing of children in intact families are sensible. Indeed we suggest that more needs to be done through, for instance, more generous paternity leave and flexible working.

However our data emphatically does not support another limb of the government's family policy strategy - the government's announced intention to amend the Children Act 1989. This research study was initiated at a time when there was considerable controversy over whether legislation should be introduced encouraging separating parents to share their children's time between them equally. As noted in chapters 1 and 15, this controversy has gained pace with the government now intent on introducing legislation which will amend the Children Act 1989 by placing on the courts a duty '*as respects each parent ...to presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of that parent in the life of the child concerned will further the child's welfare.*' (Draft clause 2A Children Act 1989; see also DfE 2012b). At present, section 1 of the 1989 Act directs the courts, when deciding what order to make, to give paramount consideration to the child's welfare. This 'paramountcy principle' ensures that the courts have an unfettered discretion to make whatever order they think fit to address each child's individual needs. A legislative formula of the kind proposed is controversial. Critics point out that it will result in a dilution of the courts' discretion, in so far as it directs them to adopt an unjustifiable preconceived position in relation to the welfare of all children – that they all will benefit from the involvement of both parents in their lives. Critics also argue that it will be extremely difficult for the courts to interpret such a formula without their orders making specific reference to the amount of time each parent spends with the child. Indeed, any order regarding a parent's involvement in a child's life without any estimate of time spent with the child is inconceivable. Given that the courts' focus will be on time, it is feared that court orders will inevitably involve *more* generous amounts of contact time, with shared residence orders becoming the norm in all but exceptional circumstances, thereby being made even in some situations where they will not benefit the children themselves.

Arguably, such changes will have little impact on the general population of separating parents since so few of them take disputes over their children to court. Nevertheless, changes in the law for the few can produce subtle changes in public opinion and may also influence practitioners such as mediators and lawyers. Critics fear that any new legislative direction will have unintended consequences by influencing the behaviour of the general separating population. It takes little account of the experience abroad where various shared parenting regimes have been introduced in a number of countries with worrying results (chapter 15). The proposed changes might, as in Australia, produce a situation where non-litigating parents misunderstand the law and interpret it as giving all parents a right to equal time, or as creating a presumption favouring equal time. Parents might start establishing shared residence arrangements in circumstances where they do not benefit their children, for example, where their relationship is highly conflicted, their children are very young and/or their children are at risk of harm (chapter 1).

One of our study's most important messages is that all children are different. Each child develops at different rates, each forms a different personality and each has a different way of coping with change and distress. Legislation committing the courts to operate on the basis of a presumption that the involvement of both parents in the life of *every* child after separation will, bar the most exceptional circumstances, promote *every* child's welfare does not accord with our findings. Rather they show that whether post-separation contact is a positive experience for the individual child depends entirely on the child and parents in question. In particular, it often depends on the presence of a number of inter-related factors, including the absence of conflict or domestic violence between the parents *and* the quality of the pre-separation parent child relationship. Good pre-separation parent child relationships were linked to respondents reporting positive contact with their non-resident parent. The contrary was also true: those parents who had not established close relationships prior to the separation

were unlikely to be able to do so afterwards. Consequently our findings suggest that to institute a regime providing the non-resident parent with ongoing involvement in the child's life through generous contact arrangements or even a shared residence arrangement may indeed be beneficial for the child if their pre-separation relationship had been a good one and if this is what the child wants. However, given a poor pre-separation relationship combined with other factors, such as the child's own reluctance, continuing parental conflict and domestic violence, such greater involvement may be of little benefit to the child and at times it may be seriously damaging. Some of the respondents in our study had had contact with the non-resident parent imposed on them and had been forced to continue with it, despite considering that they derived little benefit. They emphasised that it is often against a child's best interests to continue contact arrangements from which he or she derives no value. In other words, they considered that in some circumstances no contact was better than bad contact.

New legislation of the type proposed holds a further difficulty. Its undoubted aim is to encourage the courts to make more orders for more generous contact than they do already and to do so more often. Our research suggests that without knowing a great deal about the child's family background, including such matters mentioned above, for example, the child's pre-separation and existing relationship with the non-resident parent, the courts cannot be confident that such orders will benefit the children involved. Any confidence would be particularly misplaced without the courts having information about the child's own views on the matter. Cafcass has insufficient resources to service routine assessments of the child's family background under section 7 of the Children Act 1989. Consequently the court may decide not to delay matters by ordering a welfare report (Family Procedure Rules 2010 Practice Direction 12B, *The Revised Private Law Programme*, rule 5.4). This means that the courts are often unable even to fulfil the obligation placed on them by section 1(3)(a) of the Children Act 1989 to consider 'the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his age and understanding)'. In some cases Cafcass officers may attempt to establish the child's wishes and feelings, through a 'wishes and feelings report'. This may however be based on a relatively short assessment of the child's wishes, in some cases even over the phone (chapter 13). Separate representation is far more likely to ensure that the child gets a proper hearing. However, since there are insufficient resources for children to be routinely separately represented in private law parental disputes, an order for separate representation is seldom made (Family Procedure Rules 2010 Practice Direction 16A). Consequently, the courts are often unlikely to obtain a full picture of the child's relationship with the non-resident parent from the child's own viewpoint, as opposed to that of either parent, before making a contact order.

As noted above, one of the implications of our research for parents is that they need to consult their children before they establish any residence or contact arrangements. We reinforced this by suggesting that they should heed the fact that the UK is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12 of which gives children who are capable of forming their own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, 'their views being given due weight' in accordance with each child's age and maturity. It proceeds to provide children with the opportunity of being heard in any judicial proceeding, directly or through a representative or an appropriate body. We would therefore argue that the courts should also be placed in a position where they can observe the rights of children, as protected by Article 12. We suggest that more resources should be made available for Cafcass to ensure that the courts have sufficient information about the child's

background, including accurate information about the child's views on their parents' dispute, before deciding whether or not to make the order sought.

A further concern of critics of the planned legislative changes is that it risks the courts responding to the new provisions by increasing their use of shared residence orders. The parents of the young adults in our research study separated at a time when relatively few were considering shared residence arrangements for their children. But although very few respondents were able to provide us with first-hand information about shared residence, they were able to reflect on the advisability of such a regime being introduced more widely (chapter 15). These young adults' views were carefully considered and were informed by their childhood experiences of a wide variety of residence and contact arrangements. Some could see the potential advantages of a shared residence arrangement, with its particular appeal to perceptions of fairness to each parent. As the discussion above noted in relation to parents, a number favoured such an arrangement only if a number of conditions could be fulfilled, such as parents being on good terms, not a condition which courts currently abide by.

Rather more respondents were opposed to the idea of shared residence arrangements becoming more commonly established. Their main concern focused on the instability in children's lives that such an arrangement might introduce. They were not only worried about its impact on school work, but also about the way in which children would be forced to lead split lives, sometimes in very different households. They particularly disliked the concept of children having two homes. In their view, children need stability and security when developing their sense of identity and this meant having their home and room and clothes in one place. This notion of a child's identity being linked with ideas about where 'home' is also arose in the context of discussing the advantages and disadvantages of overnight stays (chapter 11). In both contexts, respondents' comments reflected the store they placed, as children, on having their own bedrooms and their own 'things'. Even if shared with siblings, this was their own space set apart from their parents and they clearly valued their ability to develop their own identity through spending time there and accumulating their own clothes and possessions. Above all, they disliked the way that the concept of introducing shared residence more generally seemed to ignore the fact that all children are different – what might be appropriate for one child would be an anathema for another.

Our findings emphasise that for some children there is considerable value in retaining the traditional form of residence and contact arrangements. As long as the contact with the non-resident parent was continued without interruption and was conflict-free, respondents were more positive about such contact than those who were in shared residence (chapter 6). It may be that the success of this traditional form of arrangement can be attributed at least in part to the fact that children know where their home is – in one place, rather than two.

It is arguable that policy makers who wish to establish an ideal way of organising children's lives post-separation, are ignoring each child's uniqueness. Our respondents' accounts stressed that a 'one size fits all' solution is simply inappropriate because children and their circumstances, are all different. Their views suggest that any legislative direction to the courts to consider that a child's welfare is furthered by involvement in the child's upbringing of each parent is unfounded. It commits the courts to adopting a simplistic, broad-brush approach to the subtle complexity of child-parent relationships rather than, as the Children Act currently requires, making decisions based on the interests of an individual child in the context of a particular family. In its present form, section 1 of the Children Act 1989 ensures

that each child's individuality is respected by the courts, in so far as any order the courts make must be designed specially with this child's particular needs in mind. Parliament should consider very carefully before removing this essential safeguard.

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