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Children's & Mothers' Experiences of Parenting & Parent-Child Relationships in Lone-Mother Households

by

Elizabeth Nixon

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of a Doctor in Philosophy of the University of Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

This research was conducted in the School of Psychology and Children's Research Centre.

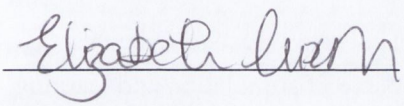
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Summary

This qualitative study of children's and mothers' experiences of living in a one-parent household set out to investigate how parenting practices and family relationships are negotiated, understood and experienced by children and their mothers in these family contexts. Underpinning the conceptual focus on parenting and family relationships is a substantial body of previous research, which has highlighted the significance of family processes in mediating the impact of family structure on the adjustment and developmental outcomes of single parent family children. The focus in the present study is on families where the child has grown up in a one-parent family from infancy, without the transition from a two-parent to a one-parent family. This represents a departure from the majority of research in the area, which has focused on children in single parent families following parental separation.

Central to the design of the study was a framework that considered families as dynamic, co-constructed and negotiated, and children as sentient meaning-makers of their experiences, rather than passive recipients of family influences. Experiences of parenting and family relationships were explored within a broader ontological framework, which affords a central position to children as agents in constructing and communicating their experiences. Conceptions of children as persons with agency who make sense of their experiences and create new meanings from interactions with their environment; and of childhood as an experience that is socially, culturally and historically located, underpinned the design of the study. In contrast to previous research, which has tended towards larger scale quantitative studies of children's outcomes and family processes, the present study is concerned with *lived experiences* of family participants, particularly those of children. The study relied upon open-ended methods that can capture the richness and diversity of children's and mothers' experiences. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 41 children and adolescents (aged between 7 and 17 years) who had lived in a one-parent household from infancy, and their mothers (38 mothers).

The findings from the study revealed that none of the families were engaged in a co-parenting pattern, where mothers and fathers equally shared parental care and authority. A model of solo parenting characterised the majority of the families, where care and authority were vested in the mother alone. Even where children had maintained contact with their fathers, the extent to which fathers engaged in a parenting role was limited. Fathers were not involved in childrearing decisions or in activities relating to monitoring and discipline and were more likely to assume a companionate or recreational role with their children. A key factor militating against co-parenting patterns was the absence of a history of shared residence between children and their fathers, where fathers were

required to establish their parental role beyond the household boundary and outside the context of daily care-giving routines from the outset.

Through an exploration of children's relationships with their mothers and non-resident fathers, the present study has elaborated upon processes underpinning positive and negative relationship experiences for children. Children's experiences of emotional closeness in their relationships with their parents were associated with experiences of connection in everyday interaction and experiences of commitment based on the relationship history and expectations around parental role obligations.

Central to children's experiences of closeness with their mothers was security in their mothers' availability, and well-established patterns of care throughout the child's life. Living together, often with no other individuals present, created a setting that was highly conducive to an exclusive and intense relationship, characterised by high levels of inter-dependence. Dynamics of power and dependence in the relationship reflected shifting patterns of vertical and horizontal interactions, where children adopted an ethic of care in their relationships with their mothers. From children's perspectives, a central aspect of growing up in a single parent household involved being responsive to the needs and limited resources of mothers.

The fragility of children's ties with their fathers and the risk that non-residence from the outset placed upon these father-child relationships was clearly illuminated by the high levels of non-contact between children and their fathers. Even though some fathers were absent from early in their child's life did not mean that children did not think about their fathers or experience a sense of loss and abandonment. Even where children had maintained contact with their fathers, it was a challenge for them to develop a meaningful relationship with him when contact occurred in somewhat artificial situations and relatively infrequently. Experiences of closeness to fathers were related to a sense of trust in their father's obligation to his parenting role and feelings of connection to each other. When contact arrangements were detached from care-giving activities and precluded immersion in each other's daily lives, a sense of connection could still be missing, despite regular contact.

The study has identified key factors that underscore closeness in children's relationships with their mothers and fathers, and has provided valuable insights into how parent-child relationships can be supported and nurtured across different settings. The study findings have also demonstrated the inextricable link between family structure and dynamic family processes. A key lesson arising from the present investigation is that consideration of the various contexts within which parent-child relationships are embedded is central to understanding how important and dynamic processes are facilitated and constrained within these families. Finally, the study has clearly illustrated children's capacity for and sense of agency, as they positioned themselves as obligated and mutual contributors to family life.

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is contemporary family life in Ireland. The research is qualitative and cross-sectional in nature and broadly examines the family experiences of single parents and children, where the child has grown up in a one-parent family from infancy[1]. The research takes places at a time in Ireland when the family has undergone a structural transformation involving considerable decline in the proportion of families composed of children living with both natural parents, coupled with a significant rise in the number of single parent and step-parent families. These demographic trends have sparked anxieties about the 'break-up' of the family and a huge interest in how various family forms impact upon children's well-being. Increasingly, there is a growing recognition of the incongruity between the ideological construct of the traditional nuclear family and the reality of the diversity, complexity and fluidity that characterises contemporary family life (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001). This research seeks to examine this reality from the perspectives of both mothers and children living within one particular single parent family context.

One-parent or single parent[2] families, broadly speaking, refer to those families where there is only one parent residing with dependent children, while step-families represent a further transition and evolution of the single parent family structure, as new partnerships are formed. Single parent family situations can arise due to a number of reasons, including the death of a parent, the breakdown of the parents' union or marriage, or having a child outside marriage. Commentators on the demography of the family have noted that the proportion of children living in single parent families has increased markedly around the Western world (Demo, Allen & Fine, 2000; Weinraub, Horvath & Gringlas,

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[1] It is important that the term "infancy" is defined and qualified in relation to the sample used in the present study. The term derives from the Latin word *in-fans*, meaning "unable to speak" (Burman, 1994) and is often taken to mean the first two years of life before spoken language emerges (Field, 1990; Bornstein, 2002). The children in the present study are described as having grown up in a one-parent family from infancy – this means that they had either never lived with both parents, or had lived with both parents during the first two years of life only. However, a minority of the sample (n = 4) did live with both parents until they were 2 ½ years of age. While this age technically lies beyond the parameters of what is normally considered the period of infancy, the term is 'infancy' is still used for ease of description, as the majority of the sample (n = 37) were living in a one-parent family from the age of two years or younger.

[2] Single parent is defined in the Collins English Dictionary as "a person who has a dependent child or dependent children and who is widowed, divorced or unmarried". The word 'single' here is not meant to refer to the marital status of the parent. The terms 'one-parent family' and 'single parent family' will be used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

2002). In the United Kingdom, for example, the proportion of single parent families with dependent children has more than tripled from 7% in 1971 to 24% in 2005 (Haskey, 1994; U.K. Office of National Statistics, 2005). Similar trends have been observed in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002), across Europe (Eurostat, 1998) and in Australia (Birrell, Rapson & Hourigan, 2002). In Ireland, the proportion of households with children headed by a single parent has similarly increased dramatically over the past number of decades. One indication of this demographic trend is the growing number of children born outside marriage (although many of these children may be born to cohabiting parents). Proportions of children born outside marriage remained static at less than 5% between the 1940s and early 1980s, but then increased to 16.6% by 1990 and to 31.1% in 2002. Figures from the most recent Irish Census in 2002 indicated that almost 17% of families with dependent children (less than 15 years) were headed by a lone parent, compared with 11% in the early nineties, and 7% in 1980 (Fahey & Russell, 2001; Ireland, Central Statistics Office, 2003). Census figures have also shown that 21.8% of *all* households with children were headed by a lone parent, representing a 20% increase from 1996 (from 125,500 in 1996 to 150,600 in 2002); with 87% of these single parent households being headed by a mother (Ireland, Central Statistics Office, 2003).

In addition to rising *levels* of single parent families, *patterns* of single parenthood have also shifted dramatically over the past few decades. Thus, premature death of a spouse/parent has now been replaced as the main source of single parenthood by new routes of entry via marital breakdown and non-marital childbearing (Fahey & Russell, 2001). However, whatever the underlying reason giving rise to the situation, the result for the child is the absence of one biological parent from the home. This absence occurs along a continuum, from the case where the child has never met the absent parent and perhaps has little or no information about him or her, to the case where both parents are actively involved in parenting the child, despite the fact that both do not live with the child simultaneously. The implication of this is that children living in one-parent families do not represent a homogenous group.

One primary goal of the current study was to investigate the phenomenological experiences of children who have been raised without a father in the home from infancy. Of particular interest was the child's experience of family *roles* and *relationships* within their specific family context. The child's experience of growing up in a one-parent family is likely to vary depending on the pathways to the parent's single parenthood. Thus, children in one-parent families are likely to face a variety of tasks or struggles ranging from mourning a parent's death through to adapting to visitation arrangements following parental separation, or wondering about the whereabouts of their absent father or what he is like. Divorce and living in a single parent family are two different experiences for children and may affect them in different ways (Weinraub et al., 2002).

Overall, there has been little attention to the *lived experiences* of children living in one-parent families. The small number of studies that have focused on this have been restricted to children who

had spent time living in a two-parent family. Indeed, the majority of research on one-parent family children has undoubtedly tended to focus primarily on children of divorce – i.e. children who had spent some time living in a two-parent family and subsequently experienced their parents' separation/divorce. The findings of existing research on children of single mothers who had lived with their father during their first few years of life cannot be generalised to children raised without a father from infancy (Golombok, 1999, 2006). To date, little research has focused on children who have been reared by their mother alone since infancy. This represents a significant gap in knowledge since studying this group of children provides the opportunity to examine the effects of being reared in a female-headed family, without the confound of parental separation, and possible accompanying conflict and disruption in family relationships and routines, which in themselves, may lead to difficulties for the child. This research aims to address this gap by focusing on children who have been reared by their mother alone since infancy.

The study sees the family context as the primary setting within which children are cared for and parented, and where first significant relationships develop. The study focuses on how both children and their mothers experience various family processes within the context of the specific one-parent family situation described. Of particular interest is the child's experience of being parented, the parent's experience of parenting alone within this family context and the nature of the parent-child relationship. The rationale for this conceptual focus on family processes comes from a burgeoning literature documenting the importance of family processes across different family types and how these relate to children's outcomes. Within different family structures, children's adjustment is especially associated with the quality of the parenting environment and the parent-child relationship. Parenting not only affects children directly, but also indirectly by modifying the impact of other ecological stressors, such as financial problems, which are associated with family transitions (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). A number of studies have documented the impact of *diminished parenting* – characterised by lower levels of control, an inconsistent family authority structure and insensitive parenting – in predicting children's adjustment in post-divorce and other single parent families (Shaw, Winslow & Flanagan, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Furthermore, significant links have been found between the quality of the parent-child relationship (both with resident and non-resident parents) and children's adjustment to the family context (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor & Bridges, 2004; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, O'Connor, Golding & ALSPAC Study Team, 1998; Florsheim, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998; Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Simons & Associates, 1996).

Much of the aforementioned research has been conducted within either the United States or United Kingdom. However, the Irish context may bring specific cultural and historical issues that are different from those occurring in the other countries, such as the United States or United Kingdom. For example, for many decades, harsh judgemental attitudes towards women who became pregnant

outside marriage prevailed in Irish society at large. State policies based on the Irish Constitution, which clearly afforded a prominent position to family based on marriage, coupled with the powerful influence of the social and moral teachings of the Catholic Church, served to pathologise and even criminalise single parents in Ireland (Kelly, 2005). The relatively recent introduction of divorce legislation into Ireland in 1997, only following a narrow referendum victory, further indicates that Ireland is far behind other countries in legislating for and accepting a diversity of family forms. Values and attitudes surrounding family and marriage in the Irish context may distinguish the experiences of Irish children and parents from those experienced in other countries and contexts.

This research embraces what could be described as a shifting paradigm for the study of families and children in families. Much of the previous research on children in single parent families was heavily influenced by the positivist framework which values "objective" accounts of events and relies upon parents as expert informants on family processes and children's outcomes. This approach is related to the predominance of an ontology of childhood in which children are assumed to be inferior to adults in terms of their abilities, they are viewed as "becomings" rather than "beings" in their own right (Morss, 1996) and as unreliable informants on their own lives (Hogan, Etz & Tudge, 1999). Recently, however, more constructionist theories of childhood have been advanced, where children are seen as active negotiators and co-creators of their own worlds (James & Prout, 1997). The implication of this is the repositioning of children as research partners, rather than objects of research and an interest in children's own perspectives and experiences of relationships, environments and events. This new way of thinking about children merged with the increasing recognition of the diversity and fluidity of contemporary family has created a fresh approach to studying 'children's families', as opposed to 'families with children' (Brannen & O'Brien, 1996). Within this approach, a handful of studies exploring children's values about family life, how they conceptualise various family forms, how they negotiate family roles, rules and relationships, and how they actively contribute to and influence family life have been carried out (Hogan, Halpenny & Greene, 2002; 2003; Moore, Sixsmith & Knowles, 1996; Morrow, 1998; O'Brien, Alldred & Jones, 1996; Smart et al., 2001). These studies have uncovered the enormous importance that children place upon family life and relationships and the important knowledge gains that can result when children's experiences and perspectives are sought (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

The present study relies upon in-depth interviews with single mothers and their children. The interviews are semi-structured in nature to allow for the examination of key issues while offering participants the opportunity to create a narrative about their subjective experiences. According to Kuczynski & Daly (2003), qualitative methods for the field of parent-child relations attempt to study the lived experiences of parents and children in their relationships and the meanings that they construct of those experiences from their own perspectives.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do children conceptualise the family and parenting roles?
2. How are parenting and care-giving roles constructed within these one-parent families?
3. What factors either constrain or facilitate positive experiences in children's relationships with their mothers and non-resident fathers?
4. How has the particular family context shaped the child-parent relationship?
5. Are there age-related patterns in children's experiences of roles and relationships within their families?

Outline of the Thesis

Chapters One and Two of the thesis constitute the literature review for the study, together setting the overall meta-theoretical, theoretical and conceptual focus for the study. In Chapter One, the literature that has developed to address the question of how growing up in a single parent family impacts upon children's well-being and development is broadly reviewed along with the main theoretical approaches that have informed research in the area. This chapter also presents the rationale for the study's conceptual focus on parenting and child-parent relationships. Chapter Two describes the development of a shifting paradigm for the study of contemporary family life and children in families. Ontological shifts in the conception of childhood and children emphasise the importance of placing children at the centre of research that attempts to gain insight into children's experiences of family life.

Chapter Three describes the methodological approach adopted for the study and describes how the research was conducted, including specific sample parameters, details pertaining to access and recruitment of the sample, description of research tools, and an account of the fieldwork process.

Chapter Four provides a detailed description of the families that participated in the research. In addition to describing the demographic profile of the children and their mothers, the nature of contact between mothers and children, and fathers is outlined. The second part of the chapter considers key structural contexts within which the families are nested, including household composition, employment and financial circumstances.

Chapter Five presents children's concepts of family and parenting roles and explores what family means to children. The second part of Chapter Five draws on the children's Closeness Maps (Smart et al., 2001; Sturgess, Dunn & Davies, 2001) to assess children's family networks, and perceptions of closeness to different family members.

Children's overall perspectives on their family networks provide a useful context for an in-depth exploration of caring and parenting roles within these families, which is the focus of Chapter Six.

This chapter considers how parenting and caring roles are carried out in these families, with a specific focus on the extent to which single mothers are alone in their parenting role, and the nature of fathers' involvement in parenting.

In Chapter Seven, the focus shifts to explore facilitators of and barriers to closeness in children's relationships with their mothers. A key focus of the latter part of the chapter is the manner in which both children and mothers perceive that the quality of their relationship has been influenced by the one-parent family setting.

Chapter Eight considers the nature of children's contact and relationships with their non-resident fathers. Children's perceptions of facilitators of and constraints to positive contact and relationship experiences with fathers are presented. For children who have never had contact with their fathers, their experiences of his absence are examined. This chapter also considers the mediating role that mothers play in facilitating or constraining children's relationships with their fathers.

Chapter Nine concludes the presentation of findings by building upon some of the key themes presented in preceding chapters to examine overarching themes in children's experiences of 'doing' childhood in a one-parent family, and negotiating the various challenges and opportunities that growing up in a one-parent family brings.

Finally, Chapter Ten of the thesis reconsiders the theoretical and methodological framework of the study and draws together the key findings in light of previous empirical and theoretical developments in the area.

CHAPTER 1: A FAMILY PROCESS APPROACH. PARENTING & FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

Introduction

Given that children are largely dependent on families for survival, nurturance and support, and spend a large proportion of their early years in the family context, it is widely acknowledged that the family is a highly influential context for development (Parke & Buriel, 1998). The demography of the family in Western societies has been changing significantly over the past number of decades. Marriage and childbearing is being delayed, rates of cohabitation, births outside marriage and divorce have increased; and single parent and step-parent families are a common part of our social landscape. More parents and children than ever before are experiencing organisations and transitions of the family associated with challenges and changes in roles, relationships and life experiences that can either undermine or enhance family members' well-being (Hetherington, 1999). Single parent families have emerged as a social issue, largely because the pathways into single parenthood have shifted (Amato, 2000). Initially, parental death was the most common route to this family form before it was replaced by parental divorce as the main cause of single parenthood. Now however, birth to an unmarried mother rivals divorce as a pathway through which children find themselves in single parent and other alternative family forms. Some conservative theorists (e.g. Popenoe, 1996) view single parenthood arising from non-marital birth and marital dissolution as voluntary and as a result of the individual choices made by one or other of a child's parents. For this reason, the aforementioned demographic trends are constructed as a moral problem, reflecting a cultural shift towards individualism and self-fulfilment, where parents place a high priority on their own needs (Glenn, 1996; Popenoe, 1996).

In response to these demographic trends and concern about the 'break-up' of the family, a strong interest has developed in how various family forms impact upon children's well-being. As a result, a plethora of research has examined children's adjustment across different family structures (Amato, 2000). Family structure has typically been defined as the number of parents present in the household, the marital status of the parents, and more recently, the sexual orientation of the parents (Demo & Cox, 2000). The aim of this chapter is to broadly review the substantial body of literature that has developed to address the question of how growing up or living in a one-parent family context impacts upon children's well-being and development. The main conclusions that have been drawn from the research in the area are highlighted and the main theoretical approaches that have

informed research in the area are reviewed. The chapter outlines the different approaches that have dominated the field, from the earlier studies addressing the impact of fatherlessness on children's lives to more contemporary approaches which have emphasised the heterogeneity and diversity of children's responses, the transitional nature of the single-parent family structure and the importance of family processes.

Outcomes for Children in Single Parent Families

As mentioned, the issue of how growing up apart from one parent may impact on children's lives has generated a considerable body of research over the last number of decades. The impetus for much of this research was the increasing numbers of children spending at least part of their childhood in single parent families and the concomitant popular belief that the optimal child-rearing environment occurs in families with two married parents who are biologically related to their children (Allen, Fine & Demo, 2000).

Countless studies comparing children from one-parent and two-parent families have been conducted, exploring a range of developmental outcomes in childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. Much of this early research, initiated after the Second World War but largely conducted in the 1960s and 1970s adopted a pathogenic or deficit perspective with the expectation that children living in one-parent families would fare worse than children living in two-parent families (Hetheringon & Stanley-Hagan, 1999a; Morrison, 1995). These studies also tended to use what Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) called a 'social address model', whereby children living in contrasting environments (or at different social addresses) – in this case, differing family compositions or structures – are compared on developmental outcomes and observed differences between the groups are interpreted as being the direct consequences of environmental differences. The focus of this approach was on children's outcomes – such as physical health, social and emotional behaviour, educational attainment and psychological well-being – and their relation to family structure.

Essentially the earlier studies were addressing the impact of growing up in a fatherless home, firstly predominantly arising from the death of the father, then later as a result of rising divorce rates and non-marital childbearing. The earliest reviews highlighted the complexity of the issue. Following their comprehensive review, Herzog and Sudia (1973) concluded that there was insufficient evidence to accept generalisations regarding the negative consequences of fathers' absence on children and that the impact of growing up in a fatherless home was strongly affected by the circumstances and environment of the family unit. Similarly, Cashion (1982), reviewing the social psychological research pertaining to female-headed families published during the 1970s, concluded that female-headed one-parent families were as successful as two-parent families, when not troubled by poverty.

Overall, the vast literature from sociologists and psychologists has shown that children who grow up in a single parent family are disadvantaged in many ways and do less well, on average, on a number

of developmental outcomes, relative to children who grow up with both parents (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Weinraub et al., 2002; Weinraub & Gringlas, 1995, Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Amato, 2001, Emery, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999a, 1997, 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Herzog & Sudia, 1973). A few key studies will be mentioned. With reference to children in divorced single parent families, Amato and Keith (1991a) conducted an extensive meta-analysis of 92 studies that compared children living in this type of single parent family with children living in continuously intact two-parent families on measures of well-being. More than two-thirds of the studies found that children from divorced families had lower levels of well-being than children from intact homes, although effect sizes from these studies tended to be of weak magnitude. More recently, Amato (2001) presented an update of Amato and Keith's (1991a) meta-analysis, where he analysed a further 67 studies that had been published during the 1990s. The conclusion from the updated meta-analysis was that children of divorced parents continued to lag behind children with married parents, on a variety of measures, including academic achievement, psychological adjustment, social relations and self-concept, although effect sizes remained small. However, it is important to note that the studies reviewed in this meta-analysis only considered children in divorced single parent families.

Following their extensive review of studies comparing outcomes for children from separated and two-parent families, Pryor and Rodgers concluded that:

> "The overriding impression from this compendium of studies spanning several domains of outcomes, is that differences between children from separated and intact families are seen in all areas considered as important aspects of individual, social, psychological and physical development, but the size of these differences is not large...Children from separated families typically have one-and-a-half times to double the risk of an adverse outcome compared to children from intact original families" (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001, pp 66).

Thus, children in separated parent families may be at risk, or in probabilistic terms, have a higher chance of encountering difficulties, than children reared in two-parent families. Moreover, these difficulties are likely to continue and manifest themselves in a variety of ways into adulthood, such as early child-bearing, depression, higher rates of divorce and lower occupational status (Amato, 1991b; O'Connor, Thorpe, Dunn, Golding & ALSPAC Study Team, 1999).

Of course, the reviews mentioned thus far pertain only to children from separated families, but as described earlier, children may find themselves in a single parent family situation due a number of reasons. To what extent do these conclusions hold for children who find themselves in a one-parent family for reasons other than parental separation? Unfortunately, as highlighted by Aquilino (1996) and Golombok et al. (1997), much of the research on outcomes for children from single parent families has either concentrated on situations where parental separation has occurred or has failed to take account of the route by which children find themselves in a single parent family and to

differentiate between children born to unmarried parents and children of divorced parents. Thus, even in research where multiple types of single parent families are included, they are often combined into one category or inadequately described, thus obscuring the variability of outcomes *within* single parent families (Amato, 2000). This problem was acknowledged early on when Herzog and Sudia (1968, 1973) highlighted the difficulty inherent in assuming a simple dichotomy between "broken" and "intact" homes. They counted at least seven types of father absence across the studies they reviewed and found that discrepancies in defining type of father absence made it difficult to compare studies. Thus father absence could be classified according to the amount and degree of separation, whether the separation was temporary or continuous, and the reason for the father's absence (for example, whether it was socially sanctioned or even honourable as in the case of military service or whether it carried some form of social disapproval).

In one early study, Ferri (1976) concluded that the *cause* of the single parent family situation was of crucial importance. Analysis of the development of a nationally representative sample of children from one- and two-parent families in the United Kingdom revealed that within the fatherless group, parental death was less likely to be associated with subsequent difficulties for children than either parental separation or being born to an unmarried mother. Ferri (1976) suggested that "illegitimate children" (pp. 147), despite their materially disadvantaged home environments, showed fewer adverse effects than children of separated parents, due to the stability of their family situation. Furthermore, she suggested these children had not 'lost' a father in the same sense as children who experienced marital breakdown.

A number of more recent studies that have taken account of the different routes into single parenthood have also revealed that the aetiology of the family situation can make an important difference to children's outcomes. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) used data from five nationally representative large-scale social surveys from the United States to compare children who were living with both biological parents at the age of sixteen with children who were living with only one biological parent at the age of sixteen. Children living with one of their biological parents were classified as living in either a "single parent family" (including separated, divorced, never married or widowed parents) or a "step family" if the resident biological parent was remarried. The analysis focused on three general areas of well-being or adjustment: educational attainment, participation in the labour force and early family formation. The authors found that growing up with just one biological parent approximately doubles the risk of dropping out of high school, even after controlling for parental race, educational level, family size and place of residence. Young men from one-biological parent families were about one and a half times as likely to be either unemployed or not in further education/training as young men from two-biological parent families, even when the sample was restricted to those who completed high school. Finally, growing up in a disrupted family (where biological parents are living apart) increased the risk of becoming a teen mother by a

substantial amount. Moreover, these authors concluded that the cause of the single parent family structure matters. Children raised by widowed mothers do better on most dimensions than children raised by other single mothers. Boys born to unmarried mothers do worse than boys who live with separated and divorced mothers. Perhaps, the authors suggested, these differences are partly a function of the differential treatment the various types of single-mothers tend to receive from society.

Similar findings emerged from Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen & Booth's (2000) study, which compared children under 3 years of age in two-parent families, where the parents had been continuously married, and children in single parent families, both where the mothers were never married and where the mothers were divorced. Two types of single parent families were included in an attempt to address the issue of whether possible differences in children's outcomes were due to the divorce process per se or a consequence of living in a one-parent household. Children were compared on a range of outcome variables, including cognitive and social abilities, behaviour problems, attachment security to mother, and behaviour with mother. Overall, the mothers in the single parent families were younger and had less education than the mothers in the two-parent families. Separated mothers also differed from the single never-married mothers in that they were likely to be older, and more affluent, both before and after the separation. There was no difference between these two groups of mothers in terms of education, child-rearing beliefs, or conflict with the child's father. In relation to child outcomes, children in both types of single parent families exhibited poorer performance on tests of cognitive development; they had poorer social abilities, more behaviour problems and less secure attachment to their mothers, than children in the two-parent families. Compared with children in single never-married mother families, children with separated mothers performed better on tests of cognitive and social abilities and had fewer behaviour problems. These differences were reduced when mothers' education and family income were controlled, although some significant differences between the two groups of children in one-parent families remained. Clarke-Stewart et al. (2000) concluded that children whose parents were separated were better off than children in never-married mother families, in term of their cognitive and social abilities, behaviour problems and interaction with mother, when they were three years old. Findings from this study highlight the importance of considering children in never-married mother families as a group with distinct needs and risk characteristics.

Carlson & Corcoron (2001) used data from the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the effects of various longitudinally defined family structures on behavioural and cognitive outcomes for children aged seven to ten years. Family structure was conceptualised in one of five ways: two parent all years, single parent all years, single parent to two-parent, two-parent to single parent and multiple transitions. The authors reported that children reared in two-parent families since birth were better off in terms of family income, home environment, maternal characteristics (such as psychological well-being and educational attainment) and cognitive and behavioural

outcomes, compared with children who spent some time in a single parent family. Among the non-intact family types, children raised in single parent family homes since birth appeared to be more disadvantaged on every dimension than children raised in the other three non-intact family types (single parent to two-parent, two-parent to single parent and multiple transitions). For example, children in continuously single parent family homes had higher levels of behavioural problems and lower cognitive test scores than children in the other three groups. Moreover, continuously single mothers had lower incomes, lower levels of educational attainment, and were at higher risk of depression than the mothers in the three other non-intact family types. The authors concluded that children who spend some time in a single parent home are at higher risk for poor behavioural and cognitive outcomes, and among children who spend any time in a single parent home, children reared in single parent homes continuously since birth are at greatest risk. These findings support those of Clarke-Stewart et al. (2000) and McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) who also found children in this particular type of single parent family to be at greater risk for maladjustment than children in other types of single parent families.

In contrast however, Aquilino (1996) reported that there are potential benefits to a childhood spent in a continuously one-parent home with no transitions. In his study he explored the complex sequences of household and family transitions among children born to unmarried mothers. He found that only about one in five spent their entire childhood living in a one-parent family, about thirty-five percent reported only one childhood transition, most often from a single parent family to a step-family, and about a quarter experienced more extensive transitions. The sequence, number, and to a lesser extent the timing of family transitions, had direct effects on life paths in early adulthood. The experience of multiple transitions and multiple family types was related to lower educational attainment and an increased likelihood that children would move out of the home at an earlier age. He argued that it is family transitions that are difficult for children and that stability of living arrangements should lead to better long-term outcomes.

Overall, most studies show that children from single parent families, as a group, exhibit more problems and have lower levels of well-being, competence and attainment than children from continuously intact two-parent families. The fact that children across different types of single parent families are at increased risk of problems indicates that there is something disadvantageous about the *structure* of single parent households (Amato, 1995). However, at this point, a number of caveats should be considered.

First, while much of this research may be useful for *describing* developmental outcomes of children in single parent families, reliance on a social address model is inadequate for *explaining* developmental outcomes – in the words of Bronfenbrenner & Crouter (1983):

> "No explicit consideration is given in research operations to intervening structures or processes through which the environment might affect the course of development. One

> only looks at the *social address* – that is, the environmental label – with no attention to what the environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing or how the activities taking place could affect the child" (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, pp. 361-362)

Thus, as Acock and Demo (1994) argue, using *family structure* as a social address is limited, as it tells us little about the dynamics of relationships within the family and with other relatives, what family members do together, childrearing attitudes and practices, and other important elements of the family and broader social context.

Second, many of these studies, particularly older ones, are methodologically weak, using small cross-sectional samples and single informants. In their review of contemporary research on divorce, Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan (1999a) emphasised the *diversity* of responses to parental divorce, changes over time in adjusting to divorce, and the role that interacting risk and protective factors can play. The importance of considering parental separation as an ongoing *process*, rather than as a single discrete event, has been highlighted (Emery, 1999). For example, several prospective research studies have indicated the importance of considering pre-separation difficulties in children's adjustment. Many of the difficulties evident in the divorced family may have begun in the conflict-ridden troubled two-parent family. Children's psychological adjustment in all types of families is partially a function of parental conflict and adequacy; and divorce sometimes brings relief from intense family distress (Emery, 1999).

Finally, as stated, most of the research has focused on the situation where the child had spent some time living in a two-parent family and then subsequently experienced his or her parents' separation. As we have seen however, when different types of single parent families are included, outcomes can vary depending on the circumstances giving rise to the situation (e.g. McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000). This suggests that different mechanisms may underpin the diversity in outcomes that are observed among the different groups of single parent family children. For example, Pryor and Rodgers (2001) highlight a conceptual distinction between *loss* and *absence* that might represent distinct psychological experiences for children in separated and never-married families. These authors suggest that for children in separated families, parental loss and absence typically go hand in hand. However, for a child whose parents remained together through most of his/her childhood years and then divorced, we might not expect the child to show adverse consequences of parental absence, but he/she may be affected by the experience of loss. In contrast, a child whose parents separated in infancy or one born to a single mother and who spends an entire childhood in a one-parent family would not experience a sense of loss, but may be affected by parental absence (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

This is not to argue of course that family structure per se is not an important indicator – perhaps research simply comparing outcomes of children from one- and two-parent family structures has

reached a point of limited return. Thus, what is it about the single parent family structure that places children at risk of poorer developmental outcomes? There is a need to unravel the various psychological experiences to understand what it is about the single parent family context that contributes to the at-risk status of these children (Weinraub et al., 2002). Furthermore, consideration of how the *meaning* of different family structures varies over time and across ecological niches (e.g. social class, country) is important. The next section of the chapter will consider two theoretical approaches that have been used to explain the at risk status that has been observed in children of single parents. The first approach focuses on the absence of a parental figure from the home, usually the father; while the second approach considers specific family processes within the single parent family.

Theoretical Approaches: Father Absence & The Essentialist Position

Since one-parent households are usually characterised by the absence of the father from the home, many of the problems that are evident in children of one-parent families are often attributed to this. A number of widely read books written in the United States during the last decade, notably *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence that Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (Popenoe, 1996), *Fatherless America: Confronting our Most Urgent Social Problem* (Blankenhorn, 1995) and *Fathers in Families: Paternal Factors in Child Development* (Biller, 1993), adopted what has been termed 'an essentialist position' on the role of fathers in children's lives (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Popenoe (1996) proposed that:

> "...a strong case can be made that paternal deprivation, in the form of the physical, economic, and emotional unavailability of fathers to their children, has become the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in America today" (pp. 9)

He went on to state that

> "The negative consequences of fatherlessness are all around us. They affect children, women, and men. Evidence indicating damage to children has accumulated in near tidal-wave proportions. Fatherless children experience significantly more physical, emotional, and behavioral problems than do children growing up in intact families. Many of these problems continue into their adolescent and adult years, generating steeply elevated rates of juvenile delinquency, crime and violence, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and substance abuse" (pp. 77)

There were three tenets to Popenoe's argument. In the first, Popenoe, drawing on an evolutionary perspective, argued that biological differences between men and women have created differences in parenting behaviours, and therefore, fathers have *unique* and *essential* contributions to make to their children's development. Secondly, he argued that the institute of marriage is the best way to maximise paternal investment in offspring by holding men to the reproductive pair bond. Popenoe also stated that males biologically unrelated to their children could not be expected to display the same motivation and dedication to rearing children as males rearing their own biological offspring.

Thus, he bestowed a privileged position upon the traditional nuclear family unit defined by the marriage of parents and their biological relatedness to their offspring.

Similar ideas were reflected by Blankenhorn (1995) who stated that fatherlessness was the most harmful demographic trend and the leading cause of declining child well-being in contemporary society. As a social role that obligates men to their biological offspring, the role of father, he argued, had been radically devalued and eroded. It is this assault on fatherhood as a social role and cultural norm that has led to the proliferation of violence and crime among young men and early childbearing among adolescent girls:

> "One primary result of growing fatherlessness is more boys with guns. Another is more girls with babies" (pp. 45).

These authors underscored the importance of distinctive maternal and paternal roles. They asserted that fathers are essential masculine role models for boys, male-relationship models for girls and protectors of their families. In boys seeking their male identity, fathers enable sons to separate from the mother and guide them into the community of men. For girls, a father plays an important role in shaping a daughter's sexual style and her understanding of the male-female bond. Women who have had good relationships with their fathers are likely to have a greater sense of independence and autonomy in later relationships with men and are less likely to engage in a quest for male approval, through, for example, promiscuous sexual behaviour (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996).

As a complement to the Blankenhorn, Popenoe and Biller's perspective, a plethora of research exists documenting the important contributions that fathers can and do make to their children's lives. What is it that fathers do for children that their absence could generate such negative consequences? This question is addressed in the following section.

Father Presence in Children's Lives

A substantial body of literature has accumulated over the last number of decades to understand the impact of father presence on children and families (Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth & Lamb, 2000). Father presence is more than just the antithesis of father absence (Johnson, 1996). Phares (1993) questioned the appropriateness of equating *absent* with *uninvolved* and argued that father presence and absence should be viewed in terms of father involvement along a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. Initially, the study of father involvement was concerned with the amount of time fathers spent with their children. This primarily quantitative approach was limited in that the focus was on direct interaction, with little attention paid to the quality of the time that fathers spend with their children. Since then, the concept of father involvement has been expanded beyond the component of interaction (defined as father's direct contact or engagement with the child through care-giving or sharing activities) to incorporate availability or accessibility (father's potential availability for interaction when direct interaction is

not taking place) and responsibility (the father's role in ensuring that the child is cared for and necessary resources are available for the child) (Lamb, Pleck & Levine, 1985). Within the component of direct contact, distinctions have been made among the types of activities in which fathers and their children engage (e.g. play, direct care) and between the quality and quantity of care (Parke, 1996; Palkovitz, 1997).

Levels of Father Involvement

According to Parke (2002) father involvement in two-parent families needs to be distinguished from the involvement of fathers who are not co-resident with their children. In terms of direct contact, research has indicated that, within two-parent families, fathers are spending more time with their children than previously, although this is still less relative to mothers. In his summary of data from the United States concerning fathers' engagement and accessibility, Pleck (1997) reported that fathers' engagement was 43.5% of mothers', and their accessibility almost two-thirds of mothers', proportions which represent clear increases in paternal involvement over the last number of decades. This increase has been partly linked to the growing involvement of mothers in the labour force, thereby altering the traditional role of fathers as the sole breadwinner in those families. Also, as expected, levels of engagement and accessibility were higher with younger children than with adolescents. In terms of responsibility, an often-neglected component in studies of father involvement, Pleck (1997) concluded that fathers' responsibility is lower than mothers' and lower than other components of their involvement. More recently, Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean and Hofferth (2001) found that the relative time fathers in two-parent families were directly engaged with children was 67% of the time that mothers were involved on weekdays and this rose to 87% of mothers' involvement on weekends. Levels of accessibility were higher than levels of engagement. Studies from other cultures also confirm these findings (Parke, 2002). In the U.K., Ferri and Smith (1996) reported that there was considerable variability in the extent to which fathers were involved with their children. The most egalitarian parenting and domestic arrangements were found in households in which both parents were in full-time employment, with fathers in such families more likely to play an equal part with their wives in child care and domestic work. However, even in families where both parents worked full-time, mothers retained disproportionate responsibility for these areas of family life (Eurostat, 1997). Similar trends have been observed in Ireland, where mothers reported that even when they were employed outside the home, the rates of participation by fathers in household and child care tasks remained below that of mothers (Kiely, 1996).

These findings should be considered in light of the caveat that even among fathers in contemporary two-parent families, substantial variability exists in the level and type of involvement observed (Jain, Belsky & Crnic, 1996). On the basis of narrative records of naturalistic observations of family interaction, Jain et al. (1996) identified four types of fathers among 69 maritally intact families rearing infants: caretakers (fathers who engaged mainly in routine and basic care activities),

playmates-teachers (fathers who participated mainly in playful interactions and engaged in instructional activities such as labelling and demonstrating), disciplinarians (fathers who engaged more in disciplining and controlling the child), and disengaged fathers (fathers who remained aloof from the child and failed to participate in many activities with him/her).

Much more research has been conducted exploring levels of paternal involvement, where, for whatever reason, the fathers are not co-resident with their children. In a recent Irish study, Hogan et al. (2002) reported that among their sample of children whose parents had separated, almost 70% saw their non-resident parent (in 90% of cases, this was the father) at least once a week and only 10% had no contact with their non-resident parent. Fawcett (1998) reported similar findings in her study of parental separation in Northern Ireland. One study from the United Kingdom indicated that 39% of children saw their fathers less than once a month, five years after the separation (Simpson, McCarthy & Walker, 1995). Also in the U.K., Maclean and Eekelaar (1997) reported that 27% of formerly married parents lost contact with their children following separation, while 5% had never had contact with their children. However, these findings represent tentative indications based on convenience samples.

Research from the United States has indicated a somewhat more pessimistic view, with results from several large national surveys reporting startlingly low levels of contact with children following divorce (Emery, 1999). Frequency of contact appeared to be strongly related to time since separation – Seltzer (1991) reported that half of fathers separated for 11 years or more saw their children once a year or less and only 12% saw their children once a week or more. Anyan (1998) reported that 52% of adolescents in New Zealand had seen their fathers in the previous year. Pryor and Rodgers (2001), however, have suggested that with the introduction of mandatory child support payments and more joint custodial arrangements, fathers are now more likely to maintain contact with their children than in the past.

In relation to father involvement among fathers who begin as non-resident fathers (as opposed to non-resident father involvement following marital breakdown), Lerman and Sorensen (2000) reported complex patterns. Among their sample of fathers in the U.S., nearly half of the fathers with non-marital children reported living with at least one child born outside marriage and an additional 21.6% reported visiting at least one non-marital child at least once a week. Many of those who did not have a close relationship with at least one of their non-marital children had married someone else and were living with a marital child. Examining patterns of father involvement over time, these authors found that the proportion of fathers who rarely or never visited rose sharply over time, from 18.4% at the first observation to 29.6% six years later, while the category of involvement defined as living with the child but not married to the mother declined from 22% in the first year to 5.6% six years later.

Based on a convenience sample, Speak, Cameron and Gilroy (1997) explored levels of young single non-residential fathers' involvement with their children in the U.K. Of the 68 fathers contacted for the study, 30 reported having little or no involvement with their children, while 31 saw their children at least once a week. Similarly, in the U.K., MacLean and Eeklaar (1997) reported that 65% of fathers who had never lived with their children had lost contact with them, while 55% of non-resident fathers who had cohabited outside marriage with the child's mother, had no continued contact with their children following separation. While their sample was based upon a representative sample yielded from a larger population screening exercise, much of the research on non-resident fathers and their non-marital children have been based on smaller convenience samples. However, it might be reasonable to suggest that estimates of father contact based on convenience samples of non-resident fathers only over-estimate the extent of involvement of non-resident fathers. To date, no research based on a representative sample of families in Ireland, has documented the frequency of contact between non-resident fathers (divorced and never-married) and their children.

Effects of Father Involvement on Children's Development

Most research on the consequences of father involvement for children's development has focused on direct effects (i.e. from father to child) (Pleck, 1997). A substantial amount of evidence has accumulated that demonstrates that positive paternal engagement is associated with positive outcomes among children, adolescents and young adults (Pleck, 1997). For example, Biller and Kimpton (1997) carried out an extensive review of research concerned with the father's role in school-aged children's cognitive, social-emotional, sex-role and moral development. They concluded that positive father involvement has a crucial impact on children's development enhancing the child's chances of developing a range of competencies, while inadequate fathering increases the child's risk for maladaptive outcomes. They argued that children benefit from positive experiences with both parents, each with something unique to offer their child:

> "Children who have the *two-parent advantage*....are exposed to a wider range of interests, activities, and adaptive behaviours, increasing the likelihood that they will have a broader repertoire of competences than those with only one psychologically active parent" (Biller & Kimpton, 1997, pp. 143).

Numerous studies have emphasised that availability, contact and parental involvement with fathers is associated with reduced aggression in boys (Santrock, 1977, Mott, 1994). Crockett, Eggebeen and Hawkins (1993) found that father presence during the first three years of life was positively related to the child's behavioural and cognitive outcomes at ages 4 to 6, while Hetherington and Deur (1972) found that paternal presence prior to age 5 was crucial for children's social adaptation. The benefits of direct contact between children and their fathers are likely to depend on what happens during that contact. Despite increases in fathers' involvement in the care of their children, little is known about what fathers actually do with their children (Davis & Perkins, 1996). Research based on two-parent

families has indicated that fathers were most active with their school-age children and tended to spend a greater proportion of their time with their children engaged in play activities than mothers, who tended to specialise in nurturance and care-giving activities (Lamb, 1997). This is not to suggest, of course, that mothers do not engage in play with their children. However, numerous studies have observed qualitative differences in the play interaction patterns of fathers and mothers: fathers were more tactile and physical while mothers engaged in more verbal, didactic and toy-mediated play (Lamb, 1977, MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Parke, 2002). According to Lamb (1997), the type of stimulating play that fathers tend to engage in may help to make fathers especially salient to their children and this enhanced salience may increase fathers' influence beyond what would be expected on the basis of the amount of time they spend with their children. Popenoe (1996) has suggested that children's specific play interactions with fathers may be important for the development of socially acceptable forms of behaviour, self-control and emotion regulation. More recently, Paquette (2004) has espoused the unique function of fathers' rough-and-tumble play to support anger regulation and modulation of intense affect, and has argued that fathers tend to be more involved (though not solely) than mothers in promoting children's openness to the world. However, Tamis-LeMonda (2004) and Roggman (2004) both caution against dichotomising the functions of fathers and mothers and emphasise the wide variation within family roles across historical and cultural contexts.

Less is known about how non-resident fathers and their children spend time together and the quality of their interactions. It has often been suggested that non-resident fathers are typically not involved in day-to-day activities such as homework and engage in only leisure activities with their children (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Stewart, 1999). Similarly, Simpson et al. (1995) reported that contact time between children and their non-resident fathers was frequently detached from daily care-giving routines and dominated by shared recreational activities. According to Amato and Gilbreth (1999), as a result of time constraints, fathers engage in leisure activities and are frequently indulgent and permissive to ensure that their children enjoy themselves during their limited time together. In their meta-analysis of 63 studies concerned with the relationship between the nature of contact with non-resident fathers and children's well-being, they concluded that how often fathers see their children is far less important than the father's engagement in authoritative parenting and the quality of the emotional ties that have formed between the father and child. Regular contact, while necessary, is not sufficient and does not guarantee the presence or development of a close parent-child relationship. Similarly, Furstenberg and Harris (1993), in their follow-up study of 18 – 21 year old children from single parent and two-parent families, found that frequency of contact with the father had little impact on their outcomes; however clear benefits emerged when the quality of the relationship between the child and the father was taken into account. Similarly, Dunn et al. (2004) reported that children's adjustment was related to child–non-resident father contact and the quality of

the relationship. Moreover, the associations between children's relationships with their fathers and their adjustment were stronger if the children were living in single parent, as opposed to step-parent families, that is, if they had only one father figure, and no step-father.

It is clear that conceptualisation of the father role has expanded such that 'responsible fathering' is constructed in terms of providing financial support, emotional support and care; and establishing legal paternity (Levine & Pitt, 1995; Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998). Lamb (1997) has argued that recognition of fathers' multiple roles is essential for truly understanding paternal influences on children's development. Unfortunately, most of the research on paternal influences has been less concerned with indirect patterns of influence. Economic support of the family constitutes one important way in which fathers can contribute to their children's well-being. For example, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that non-resident fathers' payment of child support was positively associated with measures of children's well-being, while many of the difficulties among children in families characterised by father absence have been attributed to the lower income levels of these families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). A second important indirect way that fathers may influence their children's development is through the nature of the inter-parental relationship. Several studies have demonstrated that the degree of support provided to mothers by fathers is related to measures of maternal care-giving competence (Parke, 2002). On the other hand, marital discord can indirectly influence children's adjustment, either because it causes direct stress for children who experience it or because it can disrupt parenting processes (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Cummings & Davis, 2002).

Father Absence & Gender Development

Gender development among children has been an important area of study within the father absence paradigm. This interest has arisen from the view that fathers have an important role to play in the male child's acquisition of appropriate gender-related behaviour, or as Burman (1994) states, may be reflective of "the homophobic worry that boys brought up by single mothers might be less masculine or become gay through lacking a male role model" (pp. 98). According to Golombok and Fivush (1994), gender development incorporates gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation. Gender identity refers to the individual's concept of himself or herself as male or female, gender role refers to those behaviours and attitudes which are deemed to be appropriate for males and females within a particular culture, and sexual orientation refers to a person's sexual orientation towards partners of the same or of the other gender. From a classic social learning theory perspective, parents play a key role in their children's gender development, both by acting as appropriate models of gender role behaviour and by differentially reinforcing behaviour of daughters and sons (Bandura, 1977). Psychoanalytic theory emphasised children's identification with the same-sex parent as a prerequisite for healthy emotional development. Boys, in order to resolve the conflict arising from the Oedipal conflict (conflict between sexual desire for the mother and fear of castration by the father), are

believed to separate from the mother and identify with the father adopting his male characteristics. Traditional psychoanalytic theories thus stressed the importance of the presence of heterosexual parents for the successful resolution of the Oedipal conflict. Chodorow (1978) argued that mothers' and fathers' differing parental roles (i.e. intimate involvement with mothers and remote distant relationships with fathers) promote girls' and boys' differential orientations toward expressive and instrumental functioning.

From the vantage point of both theoretical perspectives, children's observations of mothers' and fathers' family roles within families with non-traditional structures, including single parent families, may impact on their gender development. Biller (1993) claimed that without a masculine parental model boys would fail to acquire strong masculine identities while Popenoe (1996) argued that through identification and imitation sons learn from their fathers, as they cannot from their mothers, how to be a man, while daughters learn from their fathers, as they cannot from their mothers, how to relate to men.

Stevenson and Black (1988) carried out a meta-analysis on published studies comparing children from father-absent versus father-present households on measures of gender-typing (the extent to which a person conforms to prescribed male and female gender roles). They concluded that overall differences between father-absent and father-present samples were not large, with the best quality studies producing non-significant effect sizes (specifically, these better quality studies dealt with the duration of the father's absence, the presence of surrogate models, and were based on representative samples).

It has also been argued that children with lesbian mothers may show atypical gender development compared with children with heterosexual parents, perhaps either as a result of different patterns of reinforcement within the family or because of lesbian mothers' engagement in less conventional gender role behaviour themselves (Golombok et al., 2003). In their community study of children living in families headed by a lesbian mother, Golombok et al. (2003) compared 39 children living in lesbian mother families (20 of which were headed by a single mother and 19 headed by a lesbian couple) with children living in two-parent heterosexual families in which the children had lived with both parents since birth, and with children living in single heterosexual mother-headed families (where the children had lived with only the mother since the age of 18 months or younger). With respect to gender development, there were no differences in gender-typed behaviour between the children of lesbian parents and the children of heterosexual parents for either boys or girls. MacCallum and Golombok's (2004) study of a different cohort of children raised in fatherless families from infancy reported that boys in father absent families exhibited more feminine but no less masculine characteristics of gender role behaviour when compared with boys in father-present families. No differences emerged for girls. Based on a larger community sample, Stevens, Golombok, Beveridge and the ALSPAC Study Team (2002) investigated whether preschool children

in father-absent families were less gender typed than their counterparts from father-present homes and found no differences for either boys or girls. The authors concluded that the gender-role behaviour of preschool children develops typically despite the absence of a live-in father figure.

Aside from findings related to gender development, Golombok et al. (2003) did report a number of differences between children living in two parent (both heterosexual and lesbian couple) families and children living in single-mother families, with a more conflictual parent-child relationships among the latter group. Golombok et al. (2003) concluded that:

> "....the findings of the present investigation suggest that the presence of two parents irrespective of their gender, rather than the presence of a parent of each sex, is associated with more positive outcomes for children's psychological well-being than is rearing by a single mother. That is, it may be the involvement of a second parent rather than the involvement of a male parent that makes a difference" (Golombok et al., 2003, pp. 31)

Further support for this idea questioning the importance of the *gender* of the parent has arisen from research testing the same-sex-argument, which is the idea that boys may fare better living with their fathers, while girls profit more from living with their mothers (Downey & Powell, 1993). According to these authors, studies that demonstrate that girls fare better than boys from single-mother households, while not inconsistent with the same-sex argument, do not question whether males and females profit differentially from single-father versus single-mother households. Their analysis of data on almost 3900 children living with one parent revealed that none of the 35 outcome variables studied showed that both males and females significantly benefited from living with their same-sex, as opposed to their opposite-sex, parent (Downey & Powell, 1993). This suggests that children in single parent households do not necessarily benefit from living with the parent of the same sex and throws into question the importance of the gender of the parent for influencing child outcomes. According to Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell and Dufur (1998) it is difficult to assess the importance of the gender of the parent because in studies which compare children from single-mother and mother-father households, the absence of the father is confounded with the number of parents in the home. However, in their study comparing single-mother and single-father households they noted few differences between children living in single-mother versus single-father households. They failed to support the conclusion that mothers and fathers promote children's well-being in different ways and suggested that theorists such as Popenoe and Biller have over-emphasised the role of gender of the parents in supporting children's development.

Critique of the Father-Absence Paradigm

The father-absence paradigm attributes many of the problems evident among children raised in single parent families to the absence of the father from the home. According to Johnson (1996) however, the father absence paradigm is flawed in its construction of father roles, family functioning and child outcomes and limited by its emphasis on physical locale, and contact patterns of biological

fathers. The extent to which fathers have an important, valuable contribution to make to their children's development is undeniable, as a substantial literature exists that clearly attests to this. The crucial point however is the extent to which their contribution is *unique* and *essential.* Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) have argued that neither a father nor a mother is essential to the child and a wide variety of family structures can support positive child outcomes. They acknowledged that because of the stress involved in child rearing, from a resource perspective, two adults are better than one. Notwithstanding this, they claimed, neither the sex of the adult(s), nor the biological relatedness to the child is significant.

In a similar vein, Parke (2002) has noted that there is a good deal of redundancy between mothers' and fathers' impacts on children and there is less evidence that fathers make a *unique* contribution to children's development. Similarly, resonating Golombok's conclusions, Lamb (1997) has suggested that very little about the gender of the parent seems to be important and father absence may be harmful because many aspects of the father's multiple roles within the family, such as breadwinner, emotional partner and parent, go unfulfilled or inappropriately filled in these families. Related to this is the idea of social fathering – that is, the role of men, such as mothers' partners, stepfathers, grandfathers, or other relatives or friends who fulfil a father-role for children. Cochran, Larner, Reilly, Gunnarsson and Henderson (1990) found that relationships with men predicted better functioning for boys in single-mother households, but not for girls. Similarly, Florsheim et al. (1998)'s study of boys reported that the risks associated with single motherhood for boys were offset by the involvement of a male family member. However, it remains unclear whether the positive benefits arising from the presence of these additional adults are contingent upon the gender or specific role (step-father, uncle, mother's boyfriend) of the substitute 'father figures', or other roles that they fulfilled (Coley, 2001).

How important is father absence and family structure? The literature suggests that family structure does determine, to a large extent, father contribution, and certainly father contact is affected by family structure. While fathers are important as parents, complete or optimal parenting and child rearing is not however, limited to a particular family structure (Johnson, 1996). Drawing on a social network/resource perspective, Amato (1995) has argued that what is disadvantageous about the structure of single parent families is the child's access to social networks and resources. He contended that the greater the number of adults that provide both economic and interpersonal resources (such as support, regulation and positive role models), the more positive is children's development. In terms of economic resources, two parents in a household can earn more money than one parent; similarly, in terms of providing interpersonal resources, two parents are better than one. Not only can two parents provide more direct practical assistance, care and supervision than one, the indirect effect of support from one parent to another also confers benefits on the child. However, Amato (1995) maintained that other forms of two-adult households can be as effective as two-parent

households in terms of the provision of resources for children – it is the extent to which the single mother is parenting alone, rather than the absence of the father per se that is detrimental to the children (Kellam, Ensminger & Turner, 1977). What appears to be missing from the father absence paradigm however is consideration of the influences of discourses pertaining to father absence and the essentialism of father roles on the *meaning* of a father's absence for his child. Thus, discourses surrounding fathers and how a child makes sense of his/her father's absence are likely to be important.

Theoretical Approaches: A Focus on Family Processes

As reviewed earlier in the chapter, children and adolescents living in single parent families may be at increased risk for the development of emotional, behavioural and academic difficulties. In contrast to the "father absence" approach described above, which argues that these difficulties are due to the absence of the paternal figure from the home, a second perspective argues that it is necessary to look beyond family structure and father absence per se in order to understand why or how children from single parent families come to be at risk for maladaptive outcomes. Over the last number of years, contemporary researchers have gradually shifted the emphasis from family structure alone to examining family processes within different family types. This "family process" perspective investigates possible mechanisms by which father absence or the one-parent family structure may affect specific outcomes. This perspective asserts that circumstances that often accompany particular one-parent family structures, such as economic disadvantage, conflict between parents, disrupted parent-child relationships and parenting, may have more salient consequences for children's development, than family structure per se.

In relation to economic circumstances, for example, some of the association between family structure and children's outcomes can be accounted for by parents' social and economic statuses. All other things being equal, two-parent families are generally better off than one-parent families and one-parent families have a consistently higher risk of poverty. In the Avon Longitudinal Study on Pregnancy and Childhood, Deater-Deckard and Dunn (1999) reported that 35% of lone parent families lived in poor housing conditions, compared with just 9% of two-parent intact families, and 22% of stepfamilies. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) reported that 45% of lone mother families in the U.S. lived below the poverty line in 1992, compared with 8.4% of two-parent families. Similarly in Ireland, single parents have a lower social class profile than married parents, are disproportionately located in local authority housing, and have lower levels of educational attainment (Fahey & Russell, 2001). Despite the potential barriers that exist for single parents in Ireland, (such as lower educational levels, lack of affordable state supported childcare, potential loss of secondary benefits such as rent allowance), employment rates among single mothers are relatively high (38.2% of single mothers in employment compared to 41.5% of married mothers) (Fahey & Russell, 2001).

This increase in the participation of lone mothers in the labour market has been largely attributed to the introduction of the Community Employment (CE) scheme, where lone parents may retain their One Parent Family Payment (OPFP), yet have an opportunity to boost their income by participating in community employment. In 2002, half of all one-parent families relied upon OPFP as their main or sole source of income, and of those families in receipt of the OPFP, the largest proportion was never-married families (Government of Ireland, 2006). Maintenance payments from non-resident parents have typically not been a significant source of financial support for lone parents (Ireland, Commission on the Family, 1998). McKeown (2001) reported that between 20% and 30% of Irish single mothers were in receipt of maintenance from non-resident fathers, a lower proportion than corresponding figures from the U.S and U.K. Furthermore, as dual-earning families become the norm among two-parent families, the relative risk of poverty in one-parent families is likely to continue to rise (McKeown, 2001).

According to Pryor and Rodgers (2001), there is a good deal of consistency across countries in the socio-economic circumstances of single parent families, and the financial difficulties experienced by single mother families, in particular. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) suggested that economic disadvantage explains about half of the difference in the educational achievement of children raised in one- and two-parent families. McLanahan (1997), in her review of twelve studies, concluded that coming from a non-intact family (including single parent and stepfamilies) reduces a child's chance of success, even after low income is accounted for; thus family structure effects persisted after income was accounted for.

However, other research that has distinguished among different types of single parent families highlights the diversity of financial situations that single parents encounter. Research by Bock (2000) and Mannis (1999) has indicated that single women who intentionally become parents are usually older, well-educated and financially secure. Similarly, work by Weinraub and Gringlas and Golombok and colleagues have included samples of financially secure single mothers (Golombok et al, 1997; Weinraub & Gringlas, 1995). Thus, financial insecurity and lower income levels are not ubiquitous among all single parent families.

Deater-Deckard and Dunn (1999) have emphasised the diversity of risks and responses associated with single parenting, parental separation, remarriage and family reconstitution. Consistent with previous research, their study, based on a large representative sample of children in the U.K. revealed that a variety of risk factors, such as poverty, neighbourhood crime, violence, harsh and neglectful parenting, maternal depression, child gender, temperament and illness were all predictive of children's outcomes. However, their evidence suggested that problems in the parenting and home environment, specifically maternal negativity, depression, parenting stress and the use of physical punishment, were particularly important statistical predictors of children's adjustment. Importantly, patterns of prediction between these various risk factors and adjustment were similar across different

family types (including where single parents were divorced or never-married). Similarly, Dunn et al. (1998) found that older children's adjustment following their parents' divorce did not differ from the adjustment of children in other family forms, after taking into account the quality of the mother-child relationship, the mother's psychological well-being and other social risk indicators.

In their comparison of two-parent biological, adoptive, single-mother, step-father and step-mother households, Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey and Stewart (2001) concluded that processes occurring in all types of families were more important than family structure per se, for predicting well-being and relationship outcomes. They suggested that it is not sufficient to know that an individual lives in a particular family structure, without also knowing what takes place in that structure. Therefore, a key direction for future research is to investigate family processes, relationship quality and well-being across and within family structures. Similarly, Mc Keown et al. (2003) concluded that well-being of parents and children is shaped primarily by family processes, rather than by family type, defined in terms of parents' marital status. In their study, they found that once a number of key individual attributes, family processes and contextual effects were controlled, the particular type of family in which one is living has little or no impact on well-being.

Thus, the research has highlighted the significance of dynamic family processes in mediating the role of family structure in affecting children's development (Weinraub et al., 2002). Two related family processes have emerged from the literature as especially important. These represent pivotal aspects of the family environment and are the focus of the remainder of the chapter. The first is the quality of parenting that children receive and the second is the nature of the parent-child relationship.

Parenting in Single Parent Families

As mentioned, contemporary research has begun to explore parenting within the context of single parent families in an effort to unravel the psychological mechanisms through which family structure may impact upon children's development. Studies conducted on a wide range of species support the notion that parenting evolved because the accompanying behaviours – providing food and protection from predators – co-vary with the likelihood that offspring will survive into adulthood (Clutton-Brock, 1991; Westneat & Sherman, 1993). Adopting an evolutionary standpoint, Geary and Flinn (2001) proposed a model of human parenting behaviour based around the idea of natural selection resulting in the evolution of characteristics that co-vary with survival and reproductive outcome. In their view, parenting involves the protection and transfer of energy, information and social relations (e.g. status) to offspring to enable them to survive and to acquire vital socio-competitive competencies. The family and wider kinship networks function to create a facilitative ecology that supports the long developmental period. Thus, individual and cross-cultural variations in patterns of parenting dynamics are viewed as adaptive responses to different ecological and historical conditions. Harkness and Super (2002) emphasised that parenting is related to how the child's

environment of daily life is shaped by physical, economic and social characteristics of the society. What parents want for their children can be conceptualised in terms of a hierarchy of goals, ranging from ensuring basic survival to the attainment of locally relevant cultural values. Thus, culture and class help to shape and define what parents do and who they are (Bradley, 2002).

According to Arendell (1997), *parenting* is an umbrella term that encompasses the range of activities and skills performed by adults who provide child rearing and care-giving. She has suggested that parenting should be considered within a social constructionist framework – parenting is situated within a specific time and place and the activities and objectives of parenting can vary relative to the social context. This may explain why few attempts have been made to describe specifically the tasks involved in parenting. In one such attempt to classify the acts and conditions of care-giving and parenting[3], Bradley and Caldwell (1995) detailed a number of primary tasks that parents are required to carry out to facilitate their children's development in an appropriate way. According to their approach, optimal parenting (or caregiving) is best conceived of as a set of regulatory acts aimed at helping children adapt to their environment and successfully exploit the opportunities it provides. To promote optimal development, the parenting system must perform five kinds of regulatory acts or functions: *sustain* the child (to promote biological integrity), *stimulate* activity in the child aimed at enhancing cognitive/motivational integrity, *support* the child's self-sustaining capacities and tendencies, and finally it must *monitor* and *structure* the amount and patterns of experiences that the child is exposed to, to achieve an optimal fit between the child's own agenda and the agenda of those systems of which the child is a part. The authors note that the subcategories of care-giving tasks defined above are not fully independent of one another, but rather form part of an integrated system of inputs and control or regulatory mechanisms. For example, a single activity on the part of a parent may provide both stimulation and structure. However, the authors argue that discrete parts of the total activity can usually be identified as representative of one or another care-giving operation.

Another useful way of thinking about parenting was offered by McHale, Khazan, Erera, Rotman, DeCourcey and McConnell (2002). In their discussion of co-parenting (which they defined as the degree of collaboration and support between adults rearing children together), the authors ask where the lines of parental authority are drawn and question the applicability of the term co-parenting to single and step-parent families. For example, while single parents may share the child rearing load with other individuals such as grandparents, siblings, other relatives or friends, McHale et al. (2002) question the appropriateness of viewing these individuals as co-parents, fulfilling a parenting role. They argue that although these providers of support are vested with responsibility and some authority over the child, ultimately they are not privy to executive decision-making functions, and as

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[3] In their chapter and later writings on this proposed system, the authors use the terms 'caregiving' and 'parenting' interchangeably (Bradley & Caldwell, 1995; Bradley & Corwyn, 1999; Bradley, 2002)

such the single parent remains the one who bears the responsibility for ensuring that the child's needs are met. Similarly in step-families, they argue that if birth parents maintain strong coalitions with their birth children and exclude the step-parent from executive decisions, the step-parent never becomes fully integrated into the family as a co-parent. Executive decision-making and bearing ultimate responsibility for the child may be key functions that distinguish parents from other caregivers.

To date, there is no one definitive, consensual and comprehensive theory of parenting and how it shapes children's development. Instead, the most empirically sound theories of parenting focus on specific expressions of parenting, specific outcomes for children and hypothesised mechanisms between the two (O'Connor, 2002). According to Kuczynski (2003a) the whole field of parenting and parent-child relations can be divided into two eras, "before bi-directionality" and "after bi-directionality". The period "before bi-directionality" marked the first identification of many of the parenting variables, dimensions, strategies and styles that are still of interest today. The concern at this time was with the outcomes or end products of child rearing, and the associations between parent variables, conceptualised as antecedents, and child variables, conceptualised as outcomes. The models, such as those of Baumrind (1973) and Maccoby and Martin (1983), were unidirectional causal models (although much of the empirical research was correlational in nature) and were concerned with how parents influence their children (i.e. parent-effect models).

Interest in bi-directionality in parent-child relations and the power of children to influence their parents saw the replacement of parent-effect models with emergent child-effect, transactional, goodness-of-fit and family systems models. However, despite these conceptual advances, the reality is that in practice, unidirectional causal models (typically parent-effect models) are consistently reflected in how research questions are asked and analysed (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington & Bornstein, 2000). Thus, in the past, the majority of the mainstream parenting research was really concerned with how parents' behaviours, attitudes etc. influenced their children's outcomes. With the advent of *bilateral models* of parent-child relations, emphasising bi-directional causality, agency and power in the relationship, attention is shifting from parent-effects, to exploring dimensions of the relationship and how they impact upon children's outcomes (Kuczynski, 2003b). One illustrative example of this is the concept of parental monitoring, which has been reinterpreted in light of new interest in children's agency. Traditional conceptions of parental monitoring considered that parental knowledge about children's actions and whereabouts outside the home was the result of certain parental behaviours, such as asking children about their activities, tracking children's behaviour and keeping children under surveillance. However, a recent study found that parental knowledge does not necessarily come from surveillance and control, but rather from child disclosure and open communication between the parent and child (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). These authors have argued that parental monitoring should be reinterpreted as a quality of the parent-child

relationship, rather than as a parenting behaviour or action and reflect the movement from a "top-down" view of parenting to a more interactive view of parent-child processes (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000).

The majority of research that has explored parenting in single parent families has focused on parenting within the context of a single parent family following parental separation/divorce. Parental separation sets in motion a series of potentially difficult and stressful transitions, such as changing financial circumstances, changing residence, new working arrangements and negotiation of new parenting roles, as single parents adjust to combine child care, house care and breadwinning roles. The stresses associated with these changes may interfere with parents' ability to be competent parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). There has been a relative neglect of parenting processes within other types of single parent families [a notable exception is the work of Golombok], although many similar stressors associated with parenting alone may also apply in never married parent families. Before focusing on the research that has specifically examined parenting processes within the context of the one-parent family, an outline of key dimensions and approaches to studying parenting is provided.

Parenting Styles

A large number of studies have adopted a typological approach and examined parental behaviours that cluster into different styles or types of child rearing practices. A seminal contribution to this field was made by Baumrind who identified two major dimensions of parenting behaviour: parental warmth/acceptance and parental control. On the basis of these orthogonal dimensions three parenting styles were identified: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive (Baumrind, 1973). The *authoritarian* style involves rigidly reinforced rules with the context of low support and acceptance; the *authoritative* style, on the other hand, combines reasoned control with support and concern. The permissive style as identified by Baumrind was later expanded upon to distinguish between *permissive* or *indulgent* parenting which is associated with low levels of control combined with acceptance of children's behaviours; and *neglectful* parenting, characterised by low levels of control and low levels of acceptance (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). A plethora of research has indicated that authoritative parenting is linked with positive child outcomes and children's well-being in areas of social competence, behaviour and academic performance (e.g. Steinberg, Elmen & Mounts, 1989; Dornbusch, Ritter, Lederman, Roberts & Fraleigh, 1987; Shucksmith, Hendry & Glendinning, 1995; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch & Darling, 1992).

A number of studies have compared parenting styles in different family structures including one-parent families. For example, Avenevoli, Sessa and Steinberg (1999) reported that intact and single parent families differed in their levels of authoritative parenting, with intact families engaging in more authoritative and less neglectful parenting than single parent families, although the effect sizes

were considered to be quite small in magnitude. Baumrind (1991) reported that divorced parents are less likely to employ an authoritative parenting style than other parenting styles. Dornbusch et al. (1987) reported that single parents, both mothers and fathers, showed higher levels of permissive parenting, than parents from intact families. Single mothers showed lower levels of authoritarian parenting for their sons only while single fathers were less authoritarian for females and less authoritative for males. Other researchers have found that single mothers are more authoritarian than married mothers (Kelley, Power & Wimbusch, 1992; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn & Dornbusch, 1991).

These findings must be considered in light of criticisms that research relying upon these parenting styles has often been characterised by bias, where middle-class values and practices are seen as normative and the standard against which others are evaluated (Garcia Coll, Meyer & Brillon, 1995). This has presented problems when this typology is used to compare and contrast parenting styles and child development across different racial and socio-economic groups, for example. On the basis of group differences comparing parenting in more "mainstream" populations and minority populations, conclusions can result that parenting in minority populations is discrepant or perhaps even indicative of pathology (McGroder, 2000). Questions have now emerged regarding the seeming superiority of authoritative parenting practices among samples of lower income and minority families. For example, Baldwin, Baldwin and Cole (1990) discovered that children of poor minority parents were better adjusted when the parents adopted an authoritarian as opposed to an authoritative style. In her analysis of parenting practices among low-income, African-American single mothers, McGroder (2000) discovered four distinct profiles of parenting that were not readily comparable to traditional parenting styles: *Aggravated but Nurturant, Cognitively Stimulating, Patient and Nurturant;* and *Low Nurturance*, with the most positive child outcomes associated with Cognitively Stimulating or Patient and Nurturant parenting styles. Similarly, Brody and Flor (1998) observed what they termed a 'no nonsense' parenting style among rural African American single mothers that fell somewhere between the traditional authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles. Together, these studies suggest that parenting among minority populations may be inherently different from the standard four-style typology produced by Maccoby and Martin (1983) and emphasises the limitations of adopting such a typological approach.

In light of the above criticisms of the typological approach and the small number of studies that have directly explored parenting styles in single parent families, it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusions. Nonetheless, the research conducted to date suggests that single parents may engage in less authoritative parenting than parents from two-parent families. Avenevoli et al. (1999) acknowledged that parenting practices may vary among parents from different backgrounds and sought to examine how different types of parenting may be beneficial (or not) in certain ecological contexts and with respect to certain outcomes. Specifically, they examined the relationship between

four styles of parenting (authoritarian, authoritative, permissive and neglectful) and multiple indices of adolescent adjustment across various ecological niches defined by socio-economic status, ethnicity and family structure. They concluded that while adolescents experience different parenting styles in for example, two-parent versus single parent families, these differences tended to be small. Moreover, with only a few exceptions, the relationship between parenting style and adolescent adjustment was more similar than different across the various ecological contexts. Virtually regardless of family structure, ethnicity or social class, authoritative parenting was related to adaptive adolescent adjustment, with adolescents from authoritative homes displaying better emotional adjustment, higher self-esteem and better school performance. In contrast, adolescents whose parents engaged in neglectful parenting were more likely to be emotionally distressed, have lower self-esteem and poorer school performance. These findings were largely in agreement with those of Steinberg et al. (1991) and Amato and Fowler (2002) who found that parenting practices did not interact with parent's race, ethnicity, family structure, education, income or gender in predicting child outcomes. They concluded that a core of parental practices, characterised by spending time with their children, providing encouragement and affection, and holding appropriate expectations regarding following rules, benefit children across a variety of contexts.

Structure, Monitoring & Behavioural Control

Particularly during the period of adolescence, the increased time spent in unsupervised activities may make it more difficult for parents to exert behavioural control. Parents are challenged to find ways of monitoring activities, without being able to directly supervise or control these activities. Monitoring refers to parenting behaviours directed towards attending to and tracking the child's whereabouts, activities and adaptations (Dishion & McMahon, 1998). Lack of parental monitoring has been implicated in the development of anti-social behaviour in youths and as a result, more effective monitoring behaviour on behalf of parents has often been prescribed (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). For example, Snyder and Patterson (1987) suggested that parents should give their children rules about where they may go and with whom, and then check up or track compliance with those rules and take effective disciplinary action when the rules are violated. Stattin and Kerr (2000) have argued however that most studies of parental monitoring measure parental knowledge rather than parents' actual tracking and surveillance efforts. In their study, parental knowledge most often came from the child without any prompting (child disclosure) rather than their own active efforts of surveillance and control. Moreover, child disclosure was the source of knowledge most closely linked to measures of delinquency (normbreaking and police contact).

During the period surrounding a divorce or separation, parents demonstrate parenting behaviours characterised by decreased affection, communication, control and monitoring (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989; Wallerstein, 1983). For example, Hetherington et al. (1982) reported on a longitudinal study of 144 families, half married and half

divorced with custodial mothers. The families in the divorced group had been separated between 12 and 18 months at the time of divorce, and the children were 4 years of age. They were studied at 2 months, 1 year and 2 years after divorce. Divorced parents encountered a series of practical problems relating to household maintenance, economic stress and occupational difficulties. Generally, the households of divorced parents were characterised by disorganisation, with problems in coping with routine household tasks and the regulating and scheduling of events, such as mealtimes and bedtimes. However, many of these difficulties appeared transitory in nature and levels of disorganisation had significantly decreased by the second year. At both 2 months and 1 year after divorce, divorced parents made fewer maturity demands of their children, communicated less well with their children, tended to be less affectionate and displayed marked inconsistency in discipline and lack of control over their children, when compared with married parents. These patterns were particularly apparent when divorced mothers were interacting with their sons and may explain, in part, why the adverse effects of divorce are more severe and enduring for boys than for girls. Luckily however, these adverse parenting practices had improved at the end of the second year, when parents were demanding more appropriate behaviour from their children, were more communicative and nurturant, and had better control over their children than previously. Similar patterns were evident for divorced fathers in terms of maturity demands, consistency, and communication although the authors reported that with time, this group of fathers became more detached from and less nurturant with their children.

Hetherington et al. (1982) cautioned against interpreting disruptions in children's behaviour following divorce as solely attributable to poor parenting, especially by mothers of boys. Their observational data indicated that children of divorced mothers exhibited more negative behaviour than did children in non-divorced families, these behaviours were most marked in boys, and had largely disappeared among the girls and were declining significantly among the boys by 2 years after divorce. Given the high synchronous correlations between parenting in divorced mothers and observed negative behaviour in children at each time period, causal direction could not be identified – thus, children's behaviour was not necessarily as a consequence of changes in parenting, and may have been accounted for by the child's reaction to the separation and re-organisation of the family. The authors suggested that a coercive cycle between divorced mothers and their children had been established, possibly initiated by stresses and conflicts preceding the divorce. This coercive pattern of interaction was similarly described by Wallerstein (1983):

> "...our studies indicate that during the immediate aftermath to the separation and for the first year, the custodial parent tends to be less competent as a parent, less able to maintain the structure of the household, and less available to the children. The youngsters are irritable, edgy, and often accusatory and rebellious. The result is mounting disorder, less discipline, and less caretaking, which in turn heightens the anxiety of all the participants" (pp. 277-278)

The Hetherington et al. (1982) longitudinal study was later expanded and the sample of divorced parents and their children was followed up six years and eleven years following the divorce (Hetherington, 1988, 1989, 1993). Even six years following the divorce, divorced non-remarried mothers continued to exhibit many of the behaviours with their sons that were seen 2 years after the divorce. These mothers were ineffectual in their attempts to control their sons and were often involved in angry, escalating coercive cycles. Divorced mothers monitored their children less closely than did mothers in non-divorced families and many of the boys from divorced families were spending less time in the home with their parents. In contrast, few differences were observed between divorced mothers and their daughters and non-divorced mothers and their daughters (Hetherington, 1989). At the 11-year follow-up, when the children were approximately aged 15, divorced mothers of both boys and girls reported levels of parenting stress, which were higher than other groups (Hetherington, 1993).

A number of researchers have suggested that single mothers are less able to maintain an appropriate mix of autonomy-granting and control behaviour, which may explain why adolescents in single mother families are more likely to engage in disruptive behaviour or become involved with deviant peers (Turner, Irwin & Millstein, 1991; Munroe-Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1989; Steinberg, 1987). For example, Dornbusch et al. (1985) investigated adolescents' engagement in deviant behaviour among a sample of almost 7,000 12-17 year olds. The authors discovered that involvement in deviant behaviour varied as a function of family structure, with adolescents living in single-parent households more likely to engage in deviant activity. This, they suggested, was as a result of reduced levels of control of adolescents, especially male, among the single mothers. This trend of reduced control was offset at least to some extent by the presence of an additional adult in the single-parent household. Unfortunately, given the nature of the data collected it was not possible to determine the exact status of this additional adult (e.g. whether it was a grandparent, an uncle, a friend etc.). However, the positive effect of the additional adult in the household did not seem to hold for youngsters growing up in stepfamilies. This finding was also reported by Steinberg (1987) who concluded that adolescents growing up in stepfamilies – in the presence of an additional adult – were equally at risk for involvement in deviant behaviour as were their peers growing up in single-parent families. This may be related to the difficulty in negotiating the ambiguous parenting role for the non-biological parent in stepfamilies (McHale et al., 2002). Dornbusch et al. (1985) also reported that adolescents in mother-only households were more involved in decision-making. They suggest that mothers, faced with the difficulty of controlling an adolescent without a father present, are less likely to make decisions without input from the adolescent and are more likely to allow the child to make his or her own decisions.

In contrast to Dornbusch et al. (1985) and Steinberg (1987) however, Thomson, McLanahan and Curtin (1992) did not find differences between step-families and original two-parent families in

levels of supervision and parental control. Thomson et al. reported that among parents of children aged 15 to 18, both single mothers and single fathers implemented less restrictive rules and exerted less supervision and control than did married and step-parents and comparison of divorced and never-married single parents revealed no differences in levels of control or demands. The presence of other adults (such as step-parent) contributed to greater levels of supervision and control. This, they suggested could be attributed to the number of individuals in the house – a second adult can increase control and demands by observing and sanctioning children's behaviour and reinforcing the parent's authority. These findings could be interpreted in terms of Amato's (1995) resource theory, which asserted that the greater the number of adults relative to the number of children who live in a household, the richer is the potential base for the provision of economic resources, support, regulation, and positive role models to children, and the more positive is children's development.

Coley (1998) has argued that previous studies linking lack of discipline and control to deviant behaviour have tended to focus exclusively on the role played by custodial parents, especially the mother. Her study demonstrated the importance of discipline, warmth and control, both from non-residential fathers and other non-paternal men, including partners of the children's mothers, for the behavioural functioning and academic performance of single-parented children. However, as described previously in the chapter, when fathers do not co-reside with their children, a loss of their parenting role can result, and when contact time is limited, fathers are frequently indulgent and permissive (Simpson et al., 1995; Amato & Gilbreth, 2000).

Within the study of autonomy and control, a distinction can usually be drawn between psychological control/autonomy and behavioural control/autonomy. Psychological control refers to attempts on the parent's part to control the adolescent's feelings, thoughts and attitudes and suppress their desire for autonomy. Behavioural control, on the other hand, refers to the management of the adolescent's behaviours and activities (Barber, 1996). They appear to have different effects on development, with the adolescent adversely affected by psychological control – the absence of psychological autonomy – but positively influenced by behavioural control – the presence of demandingness. Lax behavioural control may leave the adolescent without adequate guidance and supervision, while too much psychological control may facilitate dependency and impede the development of psychological competence (Steinberg, 1990). According to Barber (1996) however, the construct of psychological control is often ignored or mentioned without elaboration.

In an attempt to explicate the relationship between the single parent family structure and the lack of control and discipline, Nock (1988) has argued that single parent families lack the generational boundaries characteristic of two-parent families, as the child and parent are drawn together more as peers. In the absence of a second parenting or authority figure, children may lack exposure to hierarchical models of authority relations in their families. The extent to which this is the case is dependent of course on the various resources available to the parents, as well as on the age of the

child. This peer-like relationship is often criticised for burdening or demanding too much of the child. On the other hand, Weiss (1979) argued that, particularly in single parent families where the parent works full-time, the possible re-organisation, reformation and resulting assumption of particular household and family responsibilities on the part of the child, might result in earlier maturity and foster a sense of independence and self-sufficiency within the child. Glenwick and Mowrey (1986) reported on one subtype of divorced family, which they had frequently encountered in their clinical work, where the intergenerational boundaries have blurred and the parent becomes a peer. The nature of this relationship represents the loss of the hierarchical structure in which one individual has authority over another (Weiss, 1979). The loss of this hierarchical structure makes possible (although by no means inevitable) the reversal of roles, in which the child takes care of the parent, providing practical and emotional support to the parent and assuming responsibilities of and for the parent. Although the single mothers in Weiss's study viewed the changes produced in their children/adolescents as a result of their new responsibilities to have been largely beneficial, some regretted that their children had not had a more carefree childhood. On the other hand, the views of the adolescents' themselves were more ambiguous and tended to see the experience as of mixed value. Weiss (1979) concluded that:

> "Adolescents appear capable of managing both greater responsibility and greater independence than they are ordinarily permitted. This is not to say that adolescents can forego parental support and investment, but rather that, so long as there has been no earlier deprivation of nurturance, and so long as some degree of parental support and investment remains available, adolescents can, in general, assume additional responsibility for the functioning of their households and themselves without sustaining harm to their development."(pp. 107-108)

In its extreme form, where a reversal of roles may occur, the child takes care of the parent, providing support and nurturance and assuming responsibilities of and for the parent. Barnett and Parker (1998) viewed this role reversal as a distinct type of parentification, which is the term coined to describe the expectation that one or more children will fulfil a parental role in the family system (Barnett & Parker, 1998; Byng-Hall, 2002). Children in post-divorce families may be at risk for assuming developmentally inappropriate expressive or instrumental responsibilities at home (Jurkovic, 1997). Instrumental parentification involves engagement in household tasks, earning income and taking care of siblings, while expressive or emotional parentification involves providing emotional support or acting as a confidant for a parent (Hetherington, 1999, Jurkovic, Thirkield & Morrell, 2001). Reporting on three studies of marital transitions, Hetherington (1999) reported that adolescents in divorced families were assigned more household tasks and expected to assume more responsibilities than those in non-divorced families. In terms of emotional parentification, mothers exhibited more than fathers and daughters encountered more than sons. In terms of family type, emotional parentification of girls by both parents was most likely to occur in high-conflict divorced families, next in high-conflict non-divorced families, then in low-conflict divorced families and least

of all in low-conflict non-divorced families. For boys, no conflict effect was observed, but sons in divorced families were more likely to experience support seeking and self-disclosure from mothers and fathers than sons in non-divorced families. In their analysis of late adolescent and young adult children of divorce, Jurkovic et al. (2001) found that this group reported more instrumental and emotional care-giving in a family context perceived by them to be less fair than individuals from non-divorced families. However, this limited body of research has focused on single parent families following parental separation (Wallerstein, 1985; Hetherington, 1999) and the extent to which these findings also apply for children in never married mother families remains unexplored.

What are the consequences of parentification for children? The picture is complicated and somewhat more negative for girls, perhaps because they encounter it more often. Hetherington (1999) reported that high levels of both emotional and instrumental parentification were associated with depression and anxiety for girls and greater levels of social responsibility. High levels of maternal emotional parentification often created resentment and anger among the daughters, but moderate levels stimulated empathy and support. Boys were less likely to be leaned on for emotional support and moderate levels of instrumental and emotional parentification were associated with increased responsibility in adult sons. Boys were more sensitive than girls to emotional parentification by fathers and often rebelled and withdrew from the family when excessive paternal emotional parentification occurred. Jurkovic et al. (2001) reported that destructively parentifying patterns continued to characterise the family relationships of adult children of divorce who had reported high levels of caregiving during childhood. They argue that it is likely that children of divorce are at risk of becoming captivated by the parentified role into their late adolescent and early adulthood years.

What can we conclude about parenting in single parent families? The research to date suggests that parenting within the single parent family may be characterised by lower levels of authoritative parenting, and less supervision and control, and role reversal where the child assumes instrumental and expressive responsibilities within the family, sometimes to an inappropriate degree. Bearing in mind that much of the research has focused on one-parent families following parental separation we must also consider the fact that the research is referring to parenting by the custodial parent (and most frequently the mother). The extent to which non-custodial parents (usually the father) maintains a parenting role is questionable. While levels of non-custodial paternal involvement and associations with children's outcomes have been considered earlier in the chapter, it is worth re-stating here that much of the research on parenting by the non-custodial parent has been concerned with frequency of face-to-face contact and the payment of child support, with less attention paid to the quality and psychological significance of the relationship (Dunn et al., 2004). Past research (e.g. Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Stewart, 1999) indicates that non-custodial fathers often behave more as an adult friend or relative towards their children, than as a parent, and their involvement is often limited to leisure activities. However, Simons (1996a) has argued that in order for a non-custodial

father's parenting to impact on his child's adjustment, he must be more than a friend and entertainer – he must act as a parent. A father does not need to live with his child to engage in appropriate parenting behaviours, such as assisting with problems, providing encouragement, and enforcing discipline, but the likelihood of fathers engaging in these parenting behaviours is greater when they do. Simons and Beaman (1996) reported that dysfunctional parenting was highly prevalent among divorced fathers – more than 50% of the children from divorced families reported that their father never talked with them about problems and 70% stated that he never followed through on threats of punishment. Again however, little research has examined the extent to which non-divorced and other single fathers engage with their parenting role and remain involved in their children's lives.

A number of typologies have been developed to describe the extent to which both parents maintain involvement in their parenting role across the boundaries of different households. Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin and Dornbusch (1993) and Maccoby, Depner and Mnookin (1990) identified three post-divorce parenting patterns to describe the degree to which parents were supportive of each other's parenting endeavour: co-operative, conflicted and disengaged co-parenting. Co-operative co-parenting, where parents support each other's parenting efforts and discuss the child with each other, was most satisfying to parents and associated with positive adjustment to the divorce for the children. Disengaged co-parenting, similar to Furstenberg's (1990) model of parallel parenting, describes the situation where each parent adopts his or her own style and does not interfere with the other's parenting. This style became more common over time, as the children moved into adolescence. Finally, conflicted co-parenting occurred when parents often argued and frequently undermined the other parent's competence or standards and was most detrimental to the child. Even two years after the divorce, one quarter of the parents were involved in this type of co-parenting. Apart from experiencing the negative effects of exposure to ongoing parental conflict, many children experienced loyalty conflicts and were forced to serve as go-betweens. Buchanan, Macoby and Dornbusch (1996) reported that even initially co-operative parents were likely to become conflicted or disengaged over time, as parents enter into new relationships. Furthermore, although the disengaged style is not ideal, children can adjust well when parents do not interfere with each other's parenting efforts, conflict is low and children are not asked to act as go-betweens. Smart and Neale (1999) similarly identified three models of post-divorce parenting: solo parenting, where one parent is totally disengaged from parental care and authority; custodial parenting, where parental authority is vested with one parent, but parental care is shared; and co-parenting, where parental care and authority are shared between both parents. Furthermore, these authors highlight various factors that facilitate or militate against the different models of post-divorce parenting, including the quality of the inter-parental relationship, and each parent's commitment to continued engagement with their parenting role. To date however, no models of parenting have been developed that may apply specifically to parents who are not in a relationship from the outset. We know little about how

patterns of joint parenthood are initiated across the boundaries of different households from the beginning of the child's life.

In the next section, the factors that may operate within the single-parent family context to compromise the parenting process are considered.

What Influences Parenting?

Aside from the interest in how parental influence can be understood, personal and contextual factors that impact upon parenting also need to be considered. Bornstein (2001) suggested that three factors seem to be of paramount importance. Children themselves affect parenting. Parenting also draws on transient and enduring personality, intellectual, physical and emotional characteristics of the parent himself or herself. Finally, a full understanding of the determinants of parenting depends on the multiple ecologies in which parenting takes place, ranging from family structure, support systems, economic class, community and work ties, as well as the broader social, legal and educational institutions, natural ecology and culture. Belsky (1984), in his process model of parenting shown in Figure 1, suggested that a multiplicity of factors appears to influence how parents care for their children. Some of these factors reside within the parent themselves (such as their own experience of being parented), some within the child (such as temperament), and some are characteristics of the social context within which the parent and child are nested. He suggested that the three sources of influence (parent, child and social context) are not equally influential in facilitating or undermining parenting.

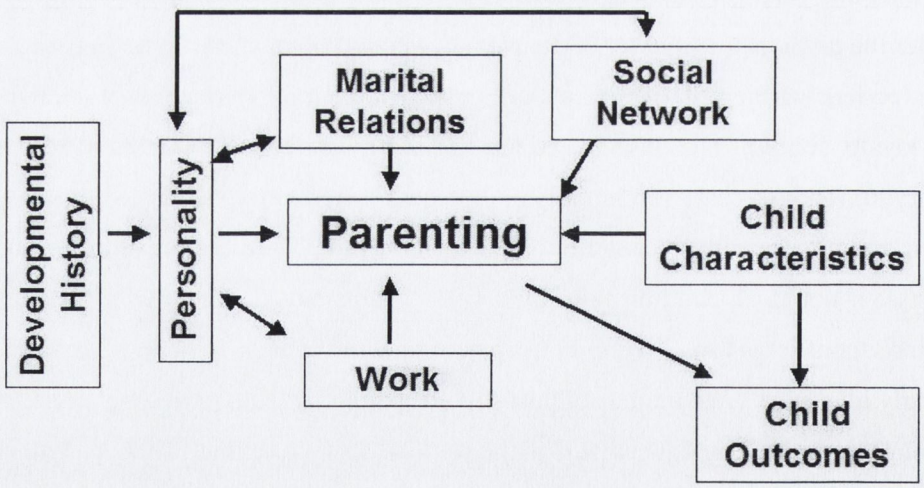


Figure 1: A process-model of parenting (Belsky, 1984)

Belsky posited that while in general an individual's development history will influence the way one parents, such influence is mediated by the individual's psychological well-being and personality. An abundance of evidence supports the notion that psychologically healthy parents tend to provide more

sensitive and responsive care to their offspring, thus promoting more positive developmental outcomes (Vondra & Belsky, 1993; Zahn-Waxler, Duggel & Gruber, 2002). The psychological resources that adults bring to their role as parents influence the way in which they function as parents.

In terms of the child's contribution, the characteristic that has achieved the most attention is temperament. Children with difficult temperaments may be more difficult to care for and may shape the quality of the care they receive, although what may be important is the 'goodness of fit' between the parent and child, rather than the child's or parent's personality per se. The concept of "good parenting" is also likely to depend, to a large extent, on the age and developmental status of the child under consideration. Obviously, the parenting tasks for a pre-schooler are likely to differ from those for an adolescent (O'Connor, 2002). For example, the family's transition from middle childhood into adolescence is accompanied by new issues and concerns for both parents and children alike. The personal developmental changes that the adolescent is faced with can often create a climate of heightened conflict and perturbation within the family context and make parenting the teenager a particularly challenging task (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Original psychoanalytic frameworks, such as that of Anna Freud, held that the normal developmental task for the adolescent was to detach from his or her parents (Blos, 1979). Rebellion from parents and concomitant parent-adolescent conflict was viewed as an inevitable and normative response to this process. Blos (1979) described the goal of adolescence as individuation, rather than detachment, where the adolescent developed a more distinct sense of him or herself as autonomous, competent and separate from his or her parents. According to Steinberg (1990), a key legacy of the psychoanalytic views of adolescent development is the belief that adolescent rebellion, conflict with parents and detachment are normal aspects of development. However, he argued that these may only be inherent features of families of adolescents with problems and may not apply to the population as a whole. New models of parent-adolescent relationships have acknowledged that the healthiest context for the adolescent's need for and process of individuation and establishment of a sense of autonomy is one of an emotionally close parent-adolescent relationship, where a sensible balance between autonomy and connectedness to the family can be achieved (Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

In terms of contextual influences, the presence of a supportive marital relationship and social network can buffer the parenting system against stress, possibly through impacting positively on the parent's psychological well-being. Numerous studies have revealed a relationship between the quality of the marital relationship and parenting (Belsky, 1990; Grych, 2002). Marital conflict can indirectly influence children's well-being through changes in the quality of parenting: affective change in the quality of the parent-child relationship, lack of emotional availability on the part of the parent, or adoption of less optimal parenting styles have each been implicated as a potential mechanism through which marital conflict can disrupt the parenting process. This association seems

to hold stronger for men than for women, suggesting that successful paternal parenting is more dependent on a supportive marital relationship than maternal parenting is (Parke, 2002). Belsky (1984) speculated that the marital relationship had the highest potential for exerting either a positive or negative effect on parental functioning. However, it is not just the quality of a parent's relationship with his or her partner that impacts upon parenting but also the availability and quality of relationships that parents have with friends, neighbours, relatives and even community resources and services. The evidence has indicated that more support and higher quality support is beneficial, especially when friends and relatives hold parenting values that are similar to the parent's own (Belsky, 1997).

In terms of broader ecological influences on parenting, McLoyd (1990) in her comprehensive review investigating the impact of poverty on children and families, argued that economic loss and poverty affect children's socio-emotional functioning in part through their impact on the parenting system. Specifically, poverty and economic stress diminishes parents' capacities for supportive, consistent and involved parenting and increases parents' tendencies to discipline children in a punitive and inconsistent manner. These parenting behaviours may stem partly from the depletion of parents' psychological resources, which renders them more susceptible to anxiety, depression, irritability and the effects of negative life events (McLoyd, 1990, 1998).

Factors Underpinning Differences in Parenting across Different Family Types

As the research to date suggests that parenting within the single parent family may reflect less supervision and control and lower levels of authoritative parenting, how can these differences in parenting across different family types be explained? A number of different elements of Belsky's model can be taken and investigated within the context of the one-parent family. In terms of the parent's emotional well-being, a plethora of research has indicated that single parents report more symptoms of depression and psychological distress than married parents (Amato, 1995). Within their sample of just over 6,000 families in the U.K., Deater-Deckard and Dunn (1999) reported that single mother families had significantly higher levels of maternal negativity, maternal depression and parenting stress than both non-step and step-father families, suggesting that families headed by a single mother represent a particularly high-risk group. Indeed, a number of studies have documented the psychological vulnerability of single mothers (Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995; Compas & Williams, 1990; McLanahan, 1983). The proposed pathway by which other negative contextual factors associated with the one-parent family situation affect parenting is through their impact on parental emotional well-being (Simons, Beauman, Conger & Chao, 1993). Both deterioration in economic circumstances and lack of social support have been identified as significant contributory factors to the increased levels of psychological distress among samples of divorced parents (Meneghan & Lieberman, 1986; Hope, Power & Rodgers, 1999). These findings are also applicable to samples of solo mothers, the term coined to describe mothers raising their children without a partner from birth,

where marital discord and family dissolution is not a feature. Weinraub and Wolf (1983) and Gringlas and Weinraub (1995) reported elevated levels of stress in the parenting role and reduced social support among solo mothers, even when there were no separation, divorce and custody difficulties and even when the mothers were older, well educated and from financially stable circumstances.

The diminished parenting of single mothers comes about largely as a consequence of the frustration produced by financial difficulties and stressful events and by the negativity and irritability that accompanies depression. Low financial and educational resources increase exposure to stress and reduce the availability of appropriate supports, both of which result in psychological distress for the parent which impacts negatively on parenting (Simons, Beaman et al., 1993; Simons & Johnson, 1996).

Single parents report higher levels of parenting stress, greater isolation and lower levels of social support available to them (McCashin, 1996; Gunnarsson & Cochran, 1990; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983; Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995). Although the marital partner may be the primary support system for parenting in two-parent families, when this is absent, as in single parent families, social network support may be a more critical determinant of quality of parenting for single parents (Belsky & Vondra, 1989). However, while social networks may be a more salient determinant of emotional well-being when marital support is low or absent, it is unlikely that it can compensate to any significant degree for the supportive functions served by a partner (Simons, Lorenz, Wu & Conger, 1993). However, research on social support may have oversimplified the complex nature of social networks. Wellman (1981) describes how social networks can simultaneously represent a source of both support and stress to individuals. In her extensive qualitative study of the 'social economy' of single mothers living in the U.S., Nelson (2005) highlights the "work of sociability" (pp. 5) as single mothers negotiate their web of relationships, in the context of constrained economic resources and commitment to societal pressure about what being a good mother entails. In the receipt of support from family members and friends, single mothers attempt to maintain an element of reciprocity in their relationships. Of importance to these mothers was their involvement in a community of need, where *reciprocal* relationships were established with other single mothers who shared similar circumstances, and reciprocal obligations were negotiated (Nelson, 2005). Overall, it is clear that various aspects of Belsky's model can be invoked to explain how parenting processes may be challenged (and compromised) within the one-parent family context.

Family Relationships in Single Parent Families

The second family process that has emerged as important is the quality of family relationships, particularly the child-parent relationship (Florsheim et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 1999). The impact of various risk factors that may be present in one-parent families, such as the complexity and the

transitional nature of the family situation or socio-economic disadvantage, may be mediated by the nature of the child's relationships with family members (Bray & Berger, 1993; Dunn et al., 1998; Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998). The first relationships that children form within their family context serve as important templates that can be used in the construction of future relationships (Hartup, 1986). Relationships exert powerful influences over the individuals participating in them, and also shape future relationships. Sroufe and Fleeson (1986) argue that expectations are the carriers of relationships – thus early relationships forge one's expectations regarding future relationships. It is assumed that previous relationships exert their influence on subsequent relationships through the attitudes, expectations and understanding of roles that they leave with the individual (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986).

For a long time, interest in relationships within the family involved a particular focus on the mother's relationship with the child, which was seen as a crucial context for development. More recently, the scope of the research has broadened and studies of fathers, siblings, and so on are increasingly common. It is likely that this expanded interest has come about as a result of theoretical developments in systemic theory and alertness to the importance of context (Minuchin, 1988). According to Sroufe and Fleeson (1988), a number of features make family relationship systems unique from other relationship systems: the gender and generational features of families, the enduring nature of family relationships and the special affective bonds that tie family members together. In this section, the literature that has explored the quality of parent-child relationships in single parent families will be discussed. Before reviewing the literature on parent-child relationships within single parent families however, it is worth considering first how relationships have been conceptualised in the research.

Conceptualising Relationships

The study of relationships and their influence on development has been hindered for many years by a neglect of conceptual challenges and complexities posed by the concept of 'relationship' (Reis, Collins & Berscheid, 2000). Most scholars now agree that interactions that take place between individuals over time are the building blocks of relationships. Interactions across both time and contexts are the defining characteristic of relationships and the dimension on which relationships vary from one dyad to another. Thus, properties of relationships arise from the *frequency, intensity, duration* and *impact* of interactions. The interactions engaged in reflect a range of diverse factors within and outside dyads, including for example physical characteristics of the child, parental child-rearing goals and characteristics of the social and physical environment within which the child and parent live (Collins & Madsen, 2003). However, dyadic interaction does not necessarily mean that a relationship will be formed – for interactions to serve as the basis of a relationship they must be assigned a *meaning*. Individuals need to interpret and internalise the interactions to form a representation or understanding of the relationship (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). According to

Kuczynski (2003b), a relationship develops between two individuals as they accumulate a history of interactions and begin to interject symbolic representations or expectancies of their past interactions into subsequent interactions with each other. Certain properties of social interactions serve to set close relationships apart from more casual affiliations. Thus, participants in a close relationship engage in interactions characterised by *interdependence*, where one partner affects change in the other and *reciprocity*, where the interchanges are mutually influential. Finally, these *enduring* interactions are internalised and organised into mental schema consisting of memories and affects, which shape expectations regarding future interactions (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997).

Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde (1986) suggested one possible framework for describing the features of relationships that are likely to be important for understanding their dynamics. Their framework focused not only on the constituent interactions of the relationship (such as the content, diversity, quality, and reciprocity and complementarity of the interactions) but also on more global features of the relationship such as intimacy and commitment. Youniss and Smollar (1985) have argued that it is through the study of interactions, either by observation or interviews/questionnaires that relationships can be understood. In their study, which attempted to understand how relationships with parents and friends develop during adolescence, they focused on a number of different interactive events. These included typical and enjoyed interactions, topics of and quality of communication, conflicts and procedures of resolution; and perceived obligations or perceptions of what each partner should do for each other to keep a relationship going in a positive manner.

Finally, according to Duck, Acitelli & Nicholson (2000) family relationships are not one consistent experience all the time. Researchers typically choose to focus their study of relationships into one summary experience, such as conflict, stability, security, or in the case of one study that explored children's perspectives on family relationships – closeness (Sturgess et al., 2001). However, just as relationships are difficult to describe and conceptualise for the purpose of research, assessment of their *quality* is equally problematic (Hinde, 1997). Experiences in relationships are not absolute, but depend upon the meaning for the participants themselves (Hinde, 1997). Thus, experiences of 'closeness' in a relationship could become negative, if those experiences were characterised by high levels of conflict or resulted in enmeshment or over-dependence.

Duck, West and Acitelli (1997) argue that no relationship offers one uniform or consistent experience all the time, as measures defining particular aspects of relationships would suggest. In daily life, children in a family face a variety of relationships that must be negotiated simultaneously and then these competing and complementary relationships must be combined to form a social network. The term "family relationship" is really a summary term that masks a variety of activities, motivations, experiences and directions of influence, and researchers studying family relationships must make choices about the aspects of the relationship that they wish to focus on. Circumstances

and activities of everyday life and everyday communication are the means by which relationships are lived out, or:

> "...the means by which emotions are conveyed, cognitions are represented, behaviors performed and explained, power is exercised and negotiated, norms are established, and thus relationships are conducted – indeed it is how they manifest their existence" (Duck et al., 2000, pp.181)

Thus, researchers are urged to focus on personal relationships as *lived* experiences of social life, explored through dialogue between the researcher and the participants (Duck et al., 2000).

Parent-Child Relationships

Kuczynski (2003b) has argued that the parent-child relationship differs from generic adult-child relationships for a number of important reasons: the variety of interactions that make up their relationship history, the close interdependence of behaviours, emotions, goals and needs of the individuals, and the involuntary nature of the relationship, knowing that partners cannot easily leave the relationship. Because of the close proximity and also the special motivations and societal pressures to form a relationship, parents and children interact much more frequently and in more goal-directed ways than individuals in other relationships (Berscheid, 1995). As a result of the immense quantity of interactions that make up their cumulative history of interactions, the parent-child relationship is distinctive from other relationships (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). Laursen and Bukowski's (1997) classification scheme for relationships have invoked dimensions of permanence, power and gender to differentiate among different types of relationships. In terms of the parent-child relationship, they suggested that stability and power represent key features of these relationships. Social and biological imperatives require commitment to these obligatory relationships, and continued transactions are assured, regardless of the outcomes of specific interactions. Furthermore, they suggest that parent-child relationships are based upon a hierarchical and vertical power structure, where parents dominate interactions and children are dependent upon their parents.

Researchers interested in the study of parent-child relationships have developed a number of conceptual models that can be used to account for the global features of parent-child relationships. Traditionally, however, various elements of the relationship experience – intrapsychic processes, behaviour, cognition – have been investigated separately with the individual as the primary unit of study (Radke-Yarrow, Richters & Wilson, 1988). However, relationships may be considered as totalities or wholes and as such are more than the sum of the parts and cannot be reduced to a property of the individual (Hinde, 1979). Maccoby (1999) has argued, for example, that much work on attachment, although it might be thought of as describing a relationship, focuses mainly on the two individuals involved: on the mother's responsiveness and the child's attachment security. Similarly, much of the traditional work on parent-child relations and the interactions that constitute them have been aimed at understanding childrearing activities of parents and the reactions of

children (considered previously in the parenting literature). However, such work does not describe the relationship as such, rather parents' and children's interactive characteristics are described separately (Maccoby, 1999; Kuczynski, 2003b).

Attachment theory represents one of the most important and widely studied conceptual frameworks for understanding the parent-child relationship. According to attachment theory, the infant-parent attachment relationship or attachment behavioural system is an evolutionary adaptive relationship whose principal function is the protection of the child (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Bowlby believed that repeated daily transactions between an infant and parent lead the infant to develop expectations about the parent's care-giving behaviour. These expectations are organised into internal working models or cognitive representations of the caregiver, the self in relation to the caregiver and the attachment relationship as a whole. On the one hand, sensitive and responsive caregiving makes possible a secure attachment and the development of internal working models of the self as worthy of the caregiver's sensitive treatment and of the care-giver as trustworthy and sensitive. On the other hand, insensitive caregiving leads to an insecure attachment, and to working models of the self as unworthy of kind treatment and of the caregiver as unavailable and unresponsive. These working models guide the development of subsequent relationships (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999). According to Sroufe & Fleeson (1986, 1988) other people are selected, responded to and influenced in ways that are compatible with previous relationships, thus the principal qualities of the infant-parent attachment(s) will be replicated in subsequent close relationships.

Contemporary models of parent-child relations assume a bi-directional, as opposed to a unidirectional model of causality, where the direction of influence was from the parent to the child. Since Bell's (1968) landmark study on the direction of effect of socialisation, the nature of study shifted from a unidirectional to a bi-directional perspective on parent child relations, where the behaviours of the parent and child are linked in cycles of reciprocal causality (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). The concept of bi-directional causality has been assumed by most contemporary models of parent-child relations, including transactional approaches (Sameroff, 1975), circular causality models, such as Patterson's account of coercive processes (Patterson, Reid & Dishion, 1992) and goodness-of-fit models (Lerner, 1993). However, despite these advances the concept of bi-directional causality has not been incorporated into empirical research. More recently, the concept of bi-directional causality has been proposed as part of a reformulated set of assumptions that make up the *bilateral* framework for understanding parent-child relationships (Kuczynski, 2003b; Kuczynski, Harach & Bernardini, 1999; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997).

In addition to bi-directional causality, a shift in thinking about *agency* and *power* in the parent-child relationship is encouraged. Where previous approaches considered parents as active agents and children as passive recipients of parental actions, a strong assumption of the bilateral model is that both parent and child are agents. One application of this idea is the burgeoning literature that has

explored children's perspectives on family, and the idea that children make sense of their own experiences and create new meanings from their interactions with their environments (Hogan et al., 1999). In relation to power, the assumption has been that power between parents and children is asymmetrical. While acknowledging that this is the case, Kuczynski (2003b) has argued that there are important "horizontal" features in contemporary power relations between parents and children, such as negotiation and friendship-like qualities in parent-child relationships. Kuczynski et al. (1999) suggested that the distribution of power in parent-child relationships could be interpreted as interdependent power asymmetry, which is the idea that both children and parents have resources to draw on in their relationship, despite absolute differences in power. The final facet to the bilateral model of parent-child relations is the importance of the parent-child relationship as a context for interactions in the present. The past history of the relationship contributes relationship expectancies to present interactions – parents and children interact with each other not only on the basis of immediately present stimuli, but also on the basis of expectations formed from previous interactions in the past and in other contexts of their relationship. Similarly, anticipation of the future course of the relationship may also contribute to interactions in close relationships. For example, knowing that the relationship will persist beyond the present may induce either partner to act in a particular way (Kuczynski, 2003b).

A Developmental Perspective on Parent-Child Relationships

Adopting a developmental perspective on parent-child relationships entails consideration of the way in which relationship networks are continually adapting to the changing capacities and needs of individuals. In their theoretical paper on close relationships, Laursen and Bukowski (1997) assert that relationships are organised as a function of developmental processes, while development itself is closely bound to experiences in close relationships. The developing capabilities of the child and parental adaptation to changes in children's behaviour mean that certain changes occur in parent-child interactions that are significant to the relationship (Collins & Madsen, 2003). In middle childhood for example, children spend less time with their parents, and the interactions are characterised by fewer displays of physical affection and negative emotions and fewer disciplinary encounters (Collins, Madsen & Stillman-Susman, 2002). The transition to adolescence represents a particularly challenging developmental period for the parent-child relationship. During this period, adolescents seek to become recognised as individuals, and achieve a sense of independence, and in this drive they need to differentiate themselves and become distinct from the persons they were in the parent-child relationship (Cooper, Grotevant & Condon, 1983). Youniss and Smollar (1985) have argued that transformation in family relationships at adolescence allows for the increasing independence of adolescents from parental authority and at the same time, for the construction of a self separate from parental influence. The shift from a structure of unilateral authority to cooperative decision-making and the possession of private lives apart from the family facilitates the individuation

process. However, while separation is occurring, a large proportion of adolescents still maintain close connections with their parents. The period of adolescence may be marked by temporary perturbations in the family systems as discrepancies may emerge between parents and adolescents in terms of their perceptions and expectancies of appropriate behaviour from the other individual. During the transition to adolescence for example, parents' expectancies about the behaviour of the other person are often violated, often generating conflict and turmoil, but also may stimulate parents and children to examine and negotiate their expectancies about the behaviour of the other person appropriately (Steinberg, 1990; Collins & Madsen, 2003).

Parent-Child Relationships in Single Parent Families

As stated previously, a substantial body of literature supports the notion that parent-child relationships constitute important influences on children's well-being and may be invoked to explain poorer outcomes among children living in single parent homes. As was the case with the parenting literature, much of the research on parent-child relationships within the context of the one-parent family has focused on the single parent family arising as a result of marital dissolution. However, a small number of studies that have investigated family relationships in continuously single parent families will also be discussed (e.g. Golombok et al. 1997; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Aquilino, 1994). In discussing parent-child relationships in one-parent families, distinctions are usually made between custodial or resident parents (usually the mother) and non-custodial or non-resident parents. In terms of custodial fathers, the relative neglect of these families in research has been highlighted and much less is known about relationships in father-custody homes than in mother-custody homes (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002).

Viewed from a process perspective, parental separation sets in motion a series of transitions, which are potentially stressful for family members, including the process of separation from an attachment figure, adaptation to new parenting roles, establishment of new patterns of contact with the non-resident parent, and frequently adjustment to new (often worse) financial and residential circumstances. Parental separation may negatively affect the parent-child relationship by impacting on the quantity, quality or timing of parent-child interactions. Relationships with resident parents may be affected by the difficulties for children in adjusting to the loss of one parent from the home, and the difficulties for parents in adjusting to new parenting roles. Relationships with non-resident parents may be affected by the decreased levels of contact and involvement in each other's lives and possible feelings of detachment and loss on the part of both the parent and the child. A substantial body of research has documented that custodial parents and children have less positive relationships in divorced than in two-parent families (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington et al., 1982; Hetherington, 1993; Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993; Fine, Moreland & Schwebel, 1983).

According to Emery (1999), little research has been conducted on children's attachments in the context of parental separation. However, divorce can affect children's attachments to their parents in a number of ways. First, divorce can lead to multiple separations from attachment figures; second, divorce can lead to insecure attachments to either primary or secondary attachment figures; and finally, the process of adjusting to parents' separation can be understood in terms of typical reactions to separation from an attachment figure. Changes in residence, family routines, other aspects of the physical environment, and the availability of parents to the child can increase separation distress. The attachment framework offers a clear rationale for providing children with stability and consistency in their newly negotiated relationships with parents, and also in their broader environment.

Short-terms effects of parental separation on the mother-child relationship have been documented by a number of studies (e.g. Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Hetherington et al., 1982; Hetherington, 1988, 1989, 1993). Hetherington et al. (1982) found that relations between custodial mothers (mothers resident with their children post-divorce) and their children deteriorated somewhat following the divorce. This poorer relationship quality was reflected in poor communication between mothers and their children, and a lack of affection towards the children. From the child's perspective, they, particularly the boys, refused to comply with maternal demands and displayed behaviour problems. Hetherington et al. (1982) found, however, that these patterns were temporary, with relationships improving over time. These authors highlight the importance of a positive custodial parent-child relationship. They argued that in families where both parents reside with the child, a positive relationship with one parent can reduce the impact of a negative relationship with the other parent, at least to some extent. This is less likely to be the case in single parent households however, where the child is less likely to see the non-custodial parent and where the non-custodial parent is not present to alleviate any negative behaviours on the part of the custodial parent. Therefore, in the absence of a second parent in the home, a negative relationship with the custodial parent could be particularly damaging for the child.

In terms of long-term effects, Fine et al. (1983) reported that individuals whose parents had divorced at least seven years previously perceived their relationships with both mothers and fathers less positively than participants from non-divorced two-parent families. Similarly, Zill et al. (1993) investigated prevalence of troubled relationships between youths and their parents in divorced and two-parent families. Their study was longitudinal in nature and analysed the quality of parent-child relationships at 12 to 16 years of age and again six years later at 18 to 22 years of age (an average time of 8 years and 14 years after the separation, respectively). Relationships were deemed "poor" if the youth gave a positive answer to none or only one of the following items: feeling close to the parent, satisfaction with the amount of affection received from the parent, desire to be like the parent and frequency of enjoyable interactions with the parent (this final item was replaced with an item

measuring how well the child could share ideas or talk with the parent at the second assessment). At both time periods, significantly more children from divorced families reported poor relationships with their fathers (the majority of whom were non-custodial). Divorce had no effect on mother-child relationships during early adolescence; however, significantly more youths from divorced families reported a negative mother-child relationship at the second assessment. According to Emery (1999), mother-child relationships in divorced families may be more vulnerable to disruption as a result of developmental tasks of adolescence, such as identity formation and autonomy seeking.

Steinberg (1990) also reported that strained or distant parent-adolescent relationships might be more prevalent in single parent households. He does acknowledge however, that parent-adolescent conflict is not the norm and variations within family structure are likely to be more substantial than differences between groups. He further qualifies his point by highlighting the fact that the category of adolescents in single-mother households includes some living with a separated or divorced mother, some with a widowed mother, some with a mother who has never married, and some with a mother and unrelated male partner. These diverse categories are likely to affect the nature of the parent-adolescent relationship, but have seldom been examined systematically (Steinberg, 1990).

Aquilino (1994) analysed the impact of childhood family disruption on young adults' relationships with parents among a sample of over four thousand young adults (ages 19 to 34). He found that childhood family structures have long-term implications for the quality of parent-child relationships. Compared with young adults from intact families, growing up in a mother-headed single parent family had little impact on quality of the parent-child relationships during adulthood. Adult children who lived in a single mother family from birth (never lived with a father or step-father) did not differ from children from two-biological parent homes in relationship quality or contact. There was a small significant difference for children who made the transition to a single-mother family following their parents' marital separation, with this group showing evidence of a poorer quality relationship, but no difference in terms of levels of contact. In terms of relations with custodial fathers, Aquilino found that (adult) children had slightly higher relationship quality with single custodial fathers than children from intact families.

Golombok et al. (1997) investigated the quality of the parent-child relationship among children raised by a single mother from the outset. These authors were also interested in investigating the influence of the mother's sexual orientation on children raised by a lesbian mother from birth. Their sample included 41 two-parent heterosexual families, 30 families headed by lesbian mothers, half of whom were living with their partner and half of whom were single parents, and 42 families headed by a single heterosexual mother. A standardised interview about parenting and mother-child interactions was used to assess quality of mother-child relationships. The researchers reported that mothers in father-absent households expressed greater warmth towards their children than mothers of children whose fathers lived in the family home. In terms of the quality of interaction between the

mother and child, mothers in the father-absent households reported greater mother-child interaction. Disputes between mothers and their children were more severe in these households. Finally, those raised without a father were more securely attached to their mother as assessed by the Separation Anxiety Test. The authors concluded that children raised in fatherless families were not disadvantaged in terms of the quality of their relationship with their mother, contradicting the commonly held assumption that mother-child relationships are more likely to be difficult in female-headed families. They suggested that this might be as a result of the mother's greater involvement with her child in the absence of the father. However, these findings should be interpreted in light of a number of caveats. In some of the lesbian families, another partner was present, thus father absence is not directly related to a one-parent family structure. Furthermore, it was unclear whether any of the 42 single heterosexual mother households had another adult present (such as a boyfriend). A follow-up report on this group found that at age 12, children's perceptions of mothers' availability and dependability was greater in the father-absent than father-present families (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). There was no difference between children of lesbian and heterosexual single-mother families, although some families in both of these groups had partners present at the time of follow-up. In terms of mother-child conflict, increased severity of disputes was found among the father absent families. However, conflict in a relationship does not inevitably diminish closeness in the relationship, and perhaps higher levels of conflict are associated with the higher rates of parent-child interaction that were observed.

Acock and Demo (1994) observed few differences between divorced mothers' and never-married mothers' relationships with children. They suggested that important aspects of parent-child relationships include the frequency of interaction, the range of activities in which parents and children participate together and the degree to which the relationships are enjoyable. Mothers in first-married families reported a higher frequency of enjoyable times with their children than both divorced mothers and mothers in stepfamilies, but not never-married mothers. There were no differences between both groups of single mothers and first-married mothers in terms of how often they played with or read with their child or had outings with their child. Both first-married and divorced mothers tended to praise and hug their children more often than continuously single mothers. Mothers in first-married families reported fewer disagreements with their adolescents than single mothers (both continuously single and divorced mothers). According to Acock and Demo, the picture that emerges is that mother-child relations in first-married families are somewhat more pleasant and enjoyable and less stressful. These trends, they suggested, are related to the stress of single parenting. In contrast, McKeown et al. (2003) reported tentative evidence that mother-child relationships tended to be stronger *outside* the context of two-parent married families. They suggested that never-married and divorced mothers may attempt to compensate for father absence by increasing their involvement with their children. However, evidence of a stronger mother-child

relationship was associated with less favourable outcomes for children's well-being. Mechanisms underpinning this effect remain largely unknown, but may relate to boundary issues discussed previously.

A series of qualitative studies have yielded mixed results on parent-child relationships in single parent families (Amato, 2000). Tense relationships are common, especially following divorce or re-marriage (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Other studies have found that many children develop close relationships with their custodial parent, sometimes acting as confidante (Weiss, 1979; Lewin, 1993). For example, one ten-year follow up study of children aged 2 to 6 at the time of their parents' divorce (aged 12 to 16 at the follow-up) found relationships with custodial mothers marked by closeness, appreciation for all she had done for them and concern for their mothers' vulnerability (Wallerstein, Corbin & Lewis, 1988). Hetherington (1999) also reported that divorced mothers often talked of their very close companionate relationship with their daughters and they frequently described the relationship as being more like a friendship or sibling relationship than parent-child relationship. Similarly, based on qualitative interviews with 58 young adult children who experienced parental divorce during their childhood, Arditti (1999) highlighted the sense of equality, closeness and interdependence that had developed between children and their mothers. Rather than conceptualising boundary and role shifts as indicative of pathology, these young people constructed shifts in their relationships with their mothers following divorce in positive terms.

Thus far, relationships between custodial parents and their children have been considered. In terms of non-custodial parents, most research has focused on fathers. Levels of contact, parenting and parent-child relations between non-residential fathers and their children have been considered earlier in the chapter. In terms of mothers, the scant research to date has indicated that non-custodial mothers have about twice as much contact with their children as non-custodial fathers and this contact seems to decline less over time (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). Furstenberg and Nord (1985) reported that non-custodial mothers were more sensitive to their children's needs, showed greater control and monitoring, communicated better with their children, were more supportive in times of stress, and were more interested in their children's activities than non-custodial fathers.

Overall, the literature on child-parent relationships in one-parent families, which has focused on situations where parental separation has occurred, has indicated that strained relationships are common immediately following parental separation as family roles, relationships, responsibilities and commitments are challenged and negotiated. Potential risks to children's well-being lie in relationship experiences with their single parents, where role boundaries become blurred and parents come to depend upon their children (Nock, 1988; Weiss, 1979). There is a dearth of research pertaining to parent-child relationships in other types of single-parent families, but the limited body of research indicates that children develop close relationships with their mothers (father-child

relationships across never-married single parent families remain unexplored) (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Aquilino, 1994). As of yet however, we know little about factors that constrain and facilitate positive relationship experiences for children with their parents, within these one-parent family contexts.

Conclusions

An increasing proportion of children in today's world will spend at least part of their childhood living in a one-parent family. The changing landscape of families has stimulated a concern with how living in different family forms affects children's development. The aim of this chapter was to review the body of literature examining how living in a single parent family impacts upon children's development. We can see that important lessons have been learnt and substantial gains in our understanding of the situation have been achieved, although a number of significant gaps remain. The earlier studies tended to emphasise family structure alone, where 'intact' families comprising children living with both biological parents were typically considered the benchmark against which other family types were compared (Allen et al., 2000). Also predominant was the somewhat pathogenic expectation that children living in one-parent family forms would be at risk of a range of developmental difficulties. Theoretically, it was argued that father absence was damaging to children because children would lack appropriate same-sex and other-sex role models, children should benefit from the resources of two parents and because fathers and mothers each have unique and essential contributions to make to their children's development. By and large, the evidence broadly supported this hypothesis with children of single parent families displaying a greater likelihood of difficulties with psychological, emotional and behavioural adjustment, educational attainment, later marriage and earlier childbearing, than children of two-parent families. And while the research has indicated that father presence has a very important contribution to make, the extent to which this role is unique to fathers and cannot be filled by substitute individuals remains open for debate.

More contemporary approaches have shifted emphasis from family structure alone to family processes. Specifically, the quality of family relationships and parenting have emerged as important mediators of children's well-being within different family contexts. These family process variables appear to be especially salient for children's well-being because they explain the link between family structure and child outcomes. Gradually, there has been a shift away from invoking family structure and parents' marital status per se as explanatory variables for understanding the impact of different family contexts on children's development. The picture that has emerged is that within the one-parent family, diminished parenting characterised by lower levels of parental involvement, control, discipline and monitoring is often evident. In a similar vein, strained relationships characterised by lower levels of support and communication and higher levels of conflict, are more prevalent within

single parent families following divorce and re-partnering, although to date, remain unexplored within continuously single parent families. These findings relating to compromised parenting and parent-child relationships provide the rationale for the present study's conceptual focus on parenting and parent-child relationships.

Acock and Demo (1994) have emphasised that variability within different family types is greater than variability across different family types – family structure per se tells us little about what is going on in the family context, such as the resources that are available to the family and the nature of family relationships, histories and trajectories (Demo & Cox, 2000; Aquilino, 1996). This does not mean, of course, that family structure is unimportant. A focus on family processes to the exclusion of family structure may represent a misinterpretation of the literature. Simons (1996b) has convincingly argued that just because there is greater variability within rather than across various family structures, does not mean that family structure is inconsequential for children's development:

> "Family structure does not become an unimportant construct simply because family relationships, such as quality of parenting, mediate their effect on children. Social structures always exert their influence through their effect on social interaction. In this sense, social structures and social processes are interconnected and inseparable phenomena... family structure is an important risk factor for child adjustment problems because it is related to family processes known to increase a child's chances for developmental difficulties" (Simons, 1996b, pp. 216)

The structure of the family serves as the context within which family roles and relationships are played out and family structure may represent a lens through which important process-oriented variables can be understood.

Despite progress that has been made in our understanding of how children in single parent families come to be at risk, a number of gaps remain in our knowledge. For example, although children reared in single parent homes continuously since birth may represent a minority of children born into a one-parent household, they have been relatively excluded from the research. As highlighted by Golombok (1999), these children experience one-parent family life without the confounding experience of separation and loss that accompanies parental separation and the transition from a two-parent to a one-parent household. The term 'solo mothers' has been coined to describe mothers who have reared their child from birth without a male partner, although families with 'unmarried', 'never-married' and 'continuously-single' mothers could also apply (Golombok, 1999; Weinraub et al., 2002). A number of more recent studies that have included different types of one-parent families have recorded differences across various one-parent family types (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Acock & Demo, 1994). A handful of studies have emerged that have included this particular group of single-parent families. In one early general population study in the United Kingdom, Ferri (1976) concluded that these children were as well-adjusted as children in father-present families. However, McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) found that boys born to never-

married mothers do worse than boys who live with separated mothers, on a range of outcomes. It is possible that different family processes account for different outcomes in continuously-single parent families and the divorced family context (Shaw et al., 1999; Gringlas & Weinraub, 1995). The relative neglect of this particular group of single parent family children in research represents a significant gap in our knowledge, and one that the present study aims to address.

A second limitation to be highlighted is the dearth of qualitative studies that could either elaborate upon findings from the typical large-scale quantitative studies or highlight new research questions for the future (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Qualitative studies in this area would greatly enrich our understanding of the nuances of children and parents' experiences of family life. A related limitation is the exclusion of children's own voices within the research. Together, these two limitations serve as the starting point for the methodological stance adopted for the present study, which is the focus of Chapter Two.

CHAPTER 2: CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY LIFE

Introduction

The previous chapter set the rationale for the current study's conceptual focus on family processes. The aim of this chapter is to present the rationale for the methodological approach which the current study is adopting. Much of the previous research on children in single parent families was heavily influenced by the positivist framework which values 'objective' accounts of events and relies upon parents as expert informants on family processes and children's outcomes (Fine & Demo, 2000). This approach reflects inherent ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of children and how children's lives can best be understood. Conceptions of children as incompetent, passive and dependent have resulted in the marginalisation of children in traditional research, where they are undervalued as sources of information about themselves (Hogan et al., 1999). The subjective experience and perspective of the child has been relatively neglected, representing a serious limitation in the body of literature to date. Recently, changing trends within developmental psychology, as well as an emergent sociology of childhood discipline, have resulted in shifts in how research on children in families is approached. This chapter describes the development of contemporary approaches for researching children in families and explores how this approach has informed our knowledge of children's experiences of family life.

Positioning the Child in Family Research

In this section, the emergence of a new approach, which affords children a prominent position within research on their lives, is described against the backdrop of more traditional research, which has marginalized children within the research process. As is the case with any research endeavour, certain meta-theoretical assumptions about the phenomena under study guide the research, although too often researchers fail to explicitly consider the fundamental assumptions and organising principles underlying their research (Winegar, 1997). Research with children has been guided by particular ontological assumptions about the nature of childhood and children, which have methodological implications for how research on children is conducted. Within each approach, these assumptions and methodological implications will be described.

Traditional Approach to Research 'on' Children

The study of children has traditionally been the domain of developmental psychology. As is the case with other branches of psychology, mainstream developmental psychology embraced a positivist,

natural science epistemology, which asserts that an objective reality exists and is out there waiting to be discovered and analysed (Greene, 2003). The consequence of this has been the search for universal laws, the delineation of 'normal development', an interest in the 'average child' and the objectification of children in research (Greene, 1999). The dominant model within developmental psychology of the child as research 'object' is characterised by a number of ontological assumptions about children, the nature of childhood and the nature of development itself (Hogan, 1998; 2005). Thus, childhood is seen as a phase of the lifespan that is distinct or in some way different from adulthood. Through the process of development, children are moving from childhood towards adulthood. This process of development is seen as universal, standard, predictable and progressive. This assumption of progress in development is perhaps the most basic presupposition of developmental psychology (Morss, 1990):

> "Perhaps the most fundamental assumption concerning an overall picture of individual development is that of *progress*. Derived from, or at least legitimated by biological sources, the notion that the individual gets better and better as time passes has been central to most developmental thinking" (Morss, 1990, pp 173).

Children are viewed as developing towards some end-point, according to universal age parameters and transgressions from this normative model are understood in terms of deviance. The end-point is seen as idealistic and superior in some way to the starting point – inherent in this is the assumption that children are unformed, incompetent, or as Morss (1996) states, they are seen as 'becomings' rather than 'beings'. Smart et al. (2001) described this view from developmental psychology as the 'embryonic' model where children start off as little more than simple biological organisms and then progress through a series of sequentially linked stages, from simplicity to complexity, from incompetence to competence, from irrational to rational behaviour. Children become 'projects' that must be managed until they achieve their full potential as adults. Children as embryonic adults are presumed to be biologically determined and natural and therefore universal (Smart et al., 2001). Related to this notion of universality is the idea of the isolable child (Kessen, 1979). The child is context-free, independent of location and historical time and thus universal. According to Greene (2003), this reductive view of the child as de-contextualised, existing in a timeless environment-free and culture-free vacuum, can be seen as yet another influence of the positivist orientation.

Within families, children have been assigned a position as dependents, under the moral and economic responsibility of their parents (Brannen, 1999). Children are on the receiving end of family values, objectified as the rationale for the adult 'doing' of family life, the 'project' around which families cohere (Smart et al., 2001). Qvortrup (1997) has noted that in European societies, children are conceptualised as 'dependents' and are best served if they subdue to adults', primarily parents' understanding of their best interests, leading to protective exclusion of children in real life. Children are described and examined as if they were mere extensions of their parents, a by-product of the family unit (Qvortrup, 1997). This tendency to submerge children in their families has been

called the *familialization* of childhood – children are seen to belong to their parents, not as autonomous actors, but rather as an extension of their family, reflecting their parents' social status, set of values and models of conduct (Makrinioti, 1994).

The set of ontological assumptions about the nature of children, childhood and development have methodological implications for how research on children is carried out. Viewed as 'embryonic persons' and 'projects', children are, by definition, marginal beings (Smart et al., 2001) and their role in research has been such (Hogan et al., 1999). The use of methods to study children and their lives has been heavily influenced by the positivist paradigm, which privileges quantitative experimental methods that aim to control possible confounding effects of the environment to achieve a true picture of the universal child. Early popular research methodologies included systematic observation and testing, often under controlled laboratory conditions (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000), to the extent that Bronfenbrenner (1979) famously described the mainstream study of development as "the science of the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time" (pp. 19). The use of controlled procedures and standardised measures, where children's performance is often compared to a standard or norm often based upon a dominant societal group, such as white middle-class Americans, is related to assumptions that childhood is context-free, the essence of the child is isolable, and that development is a universal process (Hogan, 1998; 2005). Furthermore, the view that childhood is distinct from adulthood and that children are qualitatively different from adults has led to the notion of developmentally appropriate tests for measuring various properties of children specifically tailored for use with children of differing abilities (Hogan, 1998; 2005). Finally, the view that the child is incomplete and incompetent has resulted in the exclusion of children's voices from research – children are assumed to be unreliable and incapable of providing adequate accounts of their experiences. Therefore, adult reports are frequently used as a proxy for children's experiences, or the benchmark against which the reliability of children's accounts is assessed (Hogan et al., 1999). In positivist terms, adults' experiences have been equated with objective reality while children's experiences have been constructed as unreliable (Hogan et al., 1999).

Taken together, these assumptions validate the status of "expert" that is often bestowed upon adults. If child development is thought to be a universal process, then the experiences of individual children, including the contexts and time period within which they take place, can be seen as irrelevant (Hogan et al., 1999). Given that all adults have been children and have experienced this 'universal' childhood previously, it is believed that they can act as reliable informants about it. The popular belief that children are somewhat 'unformed' and in a state of progression towards adulthood further endorses the marginalisation of children's own perspectives in research and the primary reliance upon adult reports and measures of child behaviour or outcomes as a substitute for children's experiences.

Challenges to the Traditional Model: An Alternative Approach to Research 'with' Children

Challenges to the dominant conceptualisations of childhood, children and development just described have originated both within developmental psychology itself and within the relatively new 'sociology of childhood' discipline. The new framework incorporates particular assumptions about the nature of childhood and children, which challenge the assumptions inherent in the positivist framework that has permeated the majority of research on children and their lives. One starting point for the new study of children and childhood lies in the critique and deconstruction of developmental psychology.

From the perspective of developmental psychology, Woodhead & Faulkner (2000) argue that recent insights from within the discipline have a positive role to play in shifting conceptualisations of children and childhood. Developmental psychologists are increasingly acknowledging the importance of considering the various contexts and historical periods within which development occurs. For example, it is recognised that behaviour, which is constructed as 'normal' and reflective of natural and appropriate development, is simply that which corresponds to certain norms and mores of a particular society (Greene, 2003). Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner were particularly significant opponents of the de-contextualisation of children and proponents of the view that children must be studied in their own context (Hogan, 1998). Bronfenbrenner proposed that particular developmental processes vary substantially depending on the characteristics of the person, the environmental contexts with which that person interacts, and the time periods during which development occurs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), while Vygotsky inspired a cultural approach, which emphasises that various contexts for child development are culturally constructed and shaped by human activities and creativities (Woodhead, 1999). A greater attention to context challenges the notion of a universal childhood and shift in thinking about the nature of development itself. Thus, according to Woodhead:

> "'Development' is about the acquisition of particular cultural skills and tools that are adaptive to a particular socio-economic context and historical epoch, not about a once-for-all universal process" (Woodhead, 1999, p. 10).

According to Greene (1997), with the appreciation of the importance of context and culture comes recognition of the plurality and diversity of children's experiences and an acknowledgement of the narrow focus of much of the child development work carried out to date. Indeed, the ever-changing nature of society calls into question the continued relevance of the study of children and their development, which has hitherto taken place over a small number of generations and within specific socio-cultural environments (Woodhead, 1999).

A further basic dichotomy which has been played out over the last century is between the view of the child as a passive object of socialisation forces versus the view of the child as an active agent in his or her development (Greene, 1997). In the traditional socialisation paradigm, the focus was very

much adult-centred, with research aimed at predicting child outcomes (Knapp, 1999). According to Thorne (1987), within the traditional paradigm, children were constructed as "the other" (p. 91), with little room for understanding children's consciousness and actions within their sometimes-difficult circumstances. Within developmental psychology, recognising the child as an active agent has resulted in attempts to theorise socialisation processes as bi-directional and transactional (Knapp, 1999). Indeed, the persistence of the active child in empirical research findings despite dominant cultural representations of a passive child necessitated the generation of new theory (Kuczynski et al., 1999). For example, as discussed in Chapter One, the active child is evident in contemporary models of parent-child relationships (Kuczynski, 2003c). How are children conceptualised as agents within these models? Knapp (1999) has cautioned that many bi-directional models of socialisation merely conceptualise the child as agent as an original, independent source of an event or effect, without defining the child as an agent with agency, an actor that acts, chooses or decides:

> "...it is not enough to see the child as the instrument or source of effects, but to theorize the child as agent, one must also conceptualise the child as an *active agent* – an agent that thinks, chooses, decides, prefers, values, and so on. In this view, the child is not merely the source of effects, but is an agent that acts" (Knapp, 1999, pp. 56).

Within developmental research, three distinct categories of agency can be recognised: agency as *autonomy*, agency as *construction*, and agency as *action* (Kuczynski et al., 1999; Kuczynski, 2003a). Autonomy refers to a universal motive to achieve personal control over interactions with the environment and to preserve the self from external determination by others. Construction refers to the cognitive feature of agency, the child's ability to make sense of his/her experiences and to create new meanings from interactions with their environments. Agency as action highlights the goal-directed, strategic and intentional aspects of behaviour. Knapp (1999) has argued that the fundamental element needed to define a social activity as the result of the agency of the child is to define it as an effect of an autonomous actor – thus for Knapp *autonomy* is the key defining feature of the agent. He further argued that the notion of *effectuality* is another defining feature of agency – thus the child as active agent is defined in terms of both autonomy and effectual action upon objects or other agents in their environment. Similarly, Kuczynski et al. (1999) discussed the idea of agency as *efficacy*, which in contrast to agency as action and construction, represents "the extent to which individuals experience themselves as effective agents with personal control over outcomes" (p. 28). An analogous distinction was drawn by Cummings and Schermerhorn (2003) who argued that agency-related processes may take diverse forms and modes of expression. Specifically, they distinguished between the child's *exercise of agency* or agentic behaviour and the child's *sense of agency,* the former referring to the child's tendency to act in a goal-directed way or to initiate action and the latter referring to a sense of efficacy or the perceived capacity to produce a particular outcome. Concepts of efficacy and a sense of agency resonate clearly with Bandura's (1977)

description of self-efficacy as beliefs about abilities and control that influence human behaviour, which are central to his cognitive social learning theory.

The view of the child as an agent represents a key feature of the renewed interest in childhood and children among sociologists. The sociologists of childhood have called for theorising the child as an agent in itself and for itself ("being") rather than as an object in transformation ("becoming") (Knapp, 1999). It is this characteristic above any other, according to Knapp, which defines the new sociological paradigm on childhood. Thus, the child is conceived of as a person, a social actor and does not have to be approached from an assumed shortfall of competence, reason or significance (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Under this new paradigm then, children are transformed from unfinished projects under adult control to fully social persons with the capacity to act, to interact and to influence the social world (Smart et al., 2001).

In addition to the view of the child as active agent, the idealogical framework for the sociological paradigm embraces other assumptions about the nature of children and childhood, described succinctly by Qvortrup (1996):

> "...a common core of features defining the 'sociology of childhood' can be distilled: that childhood should be studied in its own right, that children should be the units of observation; that children themselves should talk about their own experiences; that childhood should be seen as a part of social structure; that children should be studied in the present not only in relation to their future as adults; that childhood be seen in an intergenerational context" (Qvortrup, 1996, pp. xi)

Thus, the sociologists of childhood have also challenged the view that childhood is a universal and natural feature of human groups. According to James and Prout (1997), childhood should be understood as a social construction – thus childhood is interpreted, debated and defined in processes of social action (Corsaro, 1997). Childhood should no longer be regarded as a universal and unvarying experience for all children (James, 1998). The work of Ariès is taken as the starting point for the new sociological approach to childhood. He radically suggested that in medieval society, childhood did not exist in that children, the younger members of the society, were not granted special or distinctive status, thus throwing into question the universality of childhood (James, 1998). That childhood is understood as a social construction constitutes another key feature of the sociology of childhood discipline (Prout & James, 1997). According to Brannen (1999), once childhood is conceptualised as a status, rather than a transitory period, and once children constitute a visible group, it is possible to value children's productive contribution through their activity in schools, households and elsewhere.

Furthermore, according to this paradigm, children are worthy of study in their own right, not just as they progress toward adulthood, and should be looked upon as competent social actors, developing strategies which help them to negotiate and move between different contexts, constructing and

determining their own social lives and the lives of those around them (Prout & James, 1997; Brannen, 1999). As Mayall (1994) states:

> "it has been fruitful to study children as actors – as interactive agents who engage with people, institutions, ideologies to forge a place for themselves in social worlds, and who, by demonstrating interactive skills, propose themselves as worthy of inclusion both as individuals and as a social group alongside adult individuals and groups" (Mayall, 1994, p. 7).

To summarise, shifts in thinking about the nature of children, childhood and development within developmental psychology and the relatively new sociology of childhood discipline, have been outlined. Together, common assumptions underpin both approaches: children are repositioned as active agents, co-creators of childhood and society, and valuable informants about their daily lives and experiences. For research, the implication of this is a model of the child as research partner, where children's own perspectives, views, understanding, and experiences are accorded a prominent position (Hogan et al., 1999). Adherence to this position of children as research partners could potentially fill in a number of gaps that have been identified in our knowledge about children's lives, given that in fact "we know little about what children themselves do, think and feel, in the course of their ordinary lives." (Hogan et al., 1999, p. 95).

It is also interesting to note at this point that transformations in conceptualisations of childhood and children within various academic disciplines are also reflected in the policy domain. Within this context, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, is of major significance. Particularly relevant to research with children is Article 12, which refers to the child's right to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting them, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Similarly, the Irish Child Care Act (Government of Ireland, 1991) in relation to promoting the welfare of children, invokes the principle of giving due consideration to the wishes of the child. More recently in Ireland, the National Children's Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000a) was developed to provide clear directions to all those concerned with advancing the status and quality of children's lives in Ireland. Specifically, one of a number of national goals for children stated that children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. Another goal was that children's lives will be better understood, and will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and effectiveness of services (Government of Ireland, 2000a). Policy developments, such as these, have contributed to a growing appreciation of the need to focus explicitly on children's perspectives and experiences (Hogan et al., 1999).

Furthermore, within the practice domain, Davie (1996) described what he termed "an advancing trend" (p. 10) among professionals working with children, to listen to children's views and wishes, while Hennessy (1999) similarly argued that attitudinal change among professionals has resulted in

greater consultation with children about services provided for them. This re-positioning of children within the research, policy and practice domains require methodologies that can facilitate our access to and understanding of children's experiential life.

Methodological Implications

As stated, shifts in thinking about children and their role in society have methodological implications for how research with children is conducted. Thus, where in the traditional paradigm research was conducted *on* children, the new paradigm proposes research *with* children (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996; Mayall, 2000), or involving children as research partners (Hogan, 1998). Rather than dealing with children as objects of concern, children become more engaged as active participants in the research process (O'Kane, 2000). In this sense, adults attempt to enter into children's worlds to try to understand what it means to be a child and how children experience the world. A central tenet of this approach is the rejection of traditional practice where researchers have preferred to ask adult respondents, such as parents or teachers to report on children's lives, rather than to ask the children themselves. However, as argued by Scott (2000), the best people to provide information on children's perspectives, understandings and experiences are children themselves. The use of a qualitative approach, grounded in an interpretive tradition, concerned with how the world is interpreted, understood, experienced and produced (Smart et al., 2001) is compatible with a research endeavour aimed at understanding the unknown aspects of children's lives.

Hogan et al. (1999) have characterised our gap in information about children's lives in two ways. The first concerns how children spend their time and with whom (activities and interactions), while the second concerns more subjective aspects of children's experiential life (their understanding, views, motives and feelings). In terms of this dearth of knowledge however, studies incorporating children's own naturally occurring activities and narratives are increasingly being seen (Greene, 1999). Often, this can involve adopting particular methods, such as the use of naturalistic observation and ethnographic methods, which can provide a window into aspects of children's worlds, which have up until the present largely remained unexplored. For example, Dunn (1988) carried out detailed observational studies in family contexts to study children's development of social understanding. Corsaro adopted an ethnographic approach to study preschoolers' experiences of being a child in school and more specifically, their experience of the transition from preschool to elementary school (Corsaro, 1997; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). Prout and James (1997) strongly advocated the use of ethnographic methodologies for the study of childhood, suggesting that it gave children a more "direct voice and participation" (p. 8) in the production of research data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.

However, studying children's experiences or perspectives does not necessarily involve employing different or particular methods. Indeed, specific methods used should be determined by the research

questions of interest (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Greene & Hill, 2005), while also considering the question of developmental differences in levels of ability and understanding of the children participating in the research. As Qvortrup (2000) has argued, "no one method alone can produce all knowledge needed" (p. 78) and there are many different ways of gathering knowledge about children's lives. However, greater involvement by children in research requires the employment of methods appropriate to children's abilities, concerns and routines, and adequate to engage children in the research (Hogan et al., 1999).

While it is acknowledged that children may have different competencies to adults, this does not mean that their knowledge and competencies should be considered inferior to adults' (Neale, Wade & Smart, 1998). Children emerge as more competent and less limited in their abilities than initially believed, if appropriate methods of communication, and tasks and situations that make 'human sense' are used with them (Donaldson, 1978). These findings challenge the idea that children provide unreliable accounts of events or their own experiences, and importantly, bolster the argument that children have important contributions to make to research. Bruck, Ceci and Hembrooke (1998) concluded that children are capable of providing accurate, detailed and valid information, provided they are not influenced by suggestive interviewing techniques. Young children are more susceptible to suggestibility when interviewed by an adult than by a peer, and are more likely to be swayed when interviewed by an authority figure or adult with high prestige (Ceci, Ross & Toglia, 1987; Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Bruck et al. (1998) suggested that within the context of disclosure of child abuse, if children are interviewed under appropriate circumstances, children are competent witnesses with the potential to provide important evidence. Waterman, Blades and Spencer (2001), following a series of studies in which children were asked nonsensical closed and open questions, found that children were more likely to answer closed nonsensical questions (requiring a yes/no response) than open questions. If the nonsensical question required the children to generate their own response (an open question), the majority of the children indicated that they did not understand. In the case of closed nonsensical questions however, most children gave a *yes* or *no* response rather than indicating uncertainty. However, when children were asked to elaborate upon the reason for their *yes* or *no* response, the researchers discovered that many children had used the *no* response to indicate that they thought the question was silly or that they were unable to answer it. Waterman et al. (2001) concluded that question format may have a strong effect on children's tendency to admit when they cannot answer the question and cautioned that interviewers should use open questions whenever possible. It is incumbent upon researchers to attend to children's language use, conceptual meanings and their actions to form a picture, which adequately resonates children's own concerns and experiences (Christensen & James, 2000).

In summary, two contrasting models underpinned by different ontological and epistemological assumptions relating to childhood and children have methodological implications for the way in

which research into our understanding of children's lives is approached. These contrasting approaches are reflected in research relating to the subject area for this thesis. While much of the research conducted within the "mainstream model" (Hogan, 2005, p. 25) has been considered within the previous chapter, over the last number of years, a handful of studies, mostly conducted within the field of sociology, have eschewed the objectification of children in the research process and have adopted a qualitative approach to explore children's experiences of various family contexts. These studies are presented and discussed in the following section.

Family Research with Children

Traditionally, research on children and families has focused on the family's role as a socialisation agent and developmental outcomes for children. For example, a plethora of research has examined the effectiveness of various parenting styles over others, the impact of marital satisfaction and discord on children, and the effects of various factors, such as child characteristics, availability of support systems to parents, socio-economic status, employment patterns and family structure, on socialisation strategies within families (Parke & Buriel, 1998). For example, the vast body of research on the effects of parental separation and divorce reflect many of the assumptions inherent in the mainstream model, and through objectifying children in the research process, have neglected to take account of children's interpretations and experiences of their parents' separation. Indeed, children's subjective experiences of family life (including family transitions and separations) have received much less attention in the literature (Moore et al., 1996; O'Brien et al., 1996; Hill & Tisdall, 1997; Morrow, 1998). As stated, shifting the focus of research to children's subjective experiences involves a re-conceptualisation of children *in* families, rather than families *with* children (Brannen & O'Brien, 1996), or of families existing as they do, not *for* children, but *because* of them (Moore et al., 1996). Furthermore, given the increasing diversity in children's life-time family experiences, it is important to explore how children make sense of stories about family life, and how they construct their own ideas about their family life. This may be particularly important for children in single parent families, who are likely to experience more transitions and restructuring in household circumstances and family networks during their childhood, and perhaps more challenges to their constructions of 'family' than children who grow up in stable two-parent families. The following sections explore research, which has adopted this approach to explore children's concept of family, and subjective experience of family life.

Children's Concept of 'Family'

The earliest studies examining children's experience of family took place within developmental psychology. The concern with this body of work was not children's subjective experience of family life, but rather, children's age-related acquisition and development of their concept of family, approached from a cognitive developmental interest in how children's concepts of various

phenomena change over time. Findings from the research have traced an age-related and cognitive-development-related sequence in children's acquisition of the concept of family. In terms of defining 'family', Piaget (1928) identified three stages of development in children's concept of family: in stage one (7-8 years of age), family was defined in terms of co-residence; by stage 2 (9-10 years of age), the idea of biological relationship was used although co-residence was still salient. At the third stage (11 to 13 years), family was defined independently of place and was generalised to include all biological relatives, including members of the extended family. Much later, Mann, Borduin, Cone, Borduin and Sylvester (1992) similarly found that young children (5-6 years of age) tended to use common residence as their criterion for defining a family. Any relative who moves out of the house was no longer considered part of the family, while non-relatives who live together were seen as a family unit, because they share a common residence. As children get older, biological relatedness became increasingly important, and children were able to use biological relatedness in conjunction with co-residence to say for example that cohabiting unrelated individuals are not included in their family definitions. Newman, Roberts and Syré (1993) reported that 60% of their participants used affective criterion in their definition of family while 38% mentioned co-residence. In line with Piaget's findings, older participants (13 years upwards) were more likely to mention biological relationships and affective relationships. Newman et al. (1993) also reported age-related differences in children's understanding of concepts of divorce and adoption, with younger children for example showing no differentiation between adoption and birth and an understanding of divorce in terms of physical separation. Thus, as expected, as children get older, they do not rely solely upon concrete criteria (such as co-residence and biological relatedness) to define 'family' and are able to employ both greater complexity and more abstract criteria (such as affective processes) to achieve a sophisticated understanding of concepts such as family, divorce and adoption. However, both studies suggested that biological relatedness did remain an important criterion over time.

Despite exploring children's concepts of family and using children as primary informants, these aforementioned studies had limited scope to explore how children themselves construct their concepts of family, due to their use of a prescribed set of standardised questions. More recently however, a second line of research in this area has been more closely wedded to an interpretive epistemology aimed at understanding the representation of experiences. Here the use of qualitative open-ended methods has allowed researchers to access the nature and meaning of activities and relationships that together constitute children's experience of family.

These studies have qualitatively explored children's evaluations of various family configurations and using this approach has revealed the use of complex evaluative techniques, even among younger children. Studies have typically employed a vignette methodology, whereby children are presented with short stories or vignettes, representing a range of group constellations and children are asked to reflect upon whether a particular grouping constitutes a family. For example, Gilby and Pederson

(1982) varied dimensions of common residence, presence of children, single-parenthood, genetic or legal relationship, and sex of adult partners and asked participants whether the various family configurations constituted a family. A married couple with their children was considered a family by all of the participants. Also there were no significant age differences in the judgements about a childless married couple, a married couple with a child who was not their own, the inclusion of extended family members or in the acceptance of a group without love. However, younger children were less likely to accept extended and nuclear family members who were living apart to be part of the family. Consistent with Piaget's (1928) findings, co-residence or having contact was the criterion by which younger children distinguished family from non-family groups. However, fewer than half of the kindergarten children accepted a childless couple, a single-parent family, or a family that did not love each other as instances of a family, suggesting that younger children are sensitive to factors other than co-residence. For these children, although living together was a necessary condition for a cluster of people to be considered a family, it was not sufficient (Pederson & Gilby, 1986). Newman et al. (1993) reported that more than 80% of their participants accepted those configurations in which some biological component was present. Younger children (4-6 year olds) were less accepting than other children of family configurations which were 'incomplete' (e.g. one parent with a child, or siblings with no parents). Also, these children were less accepting of family configurations where the individuals were biologically related but did not reside with each other (e.g. extended family, single parent living away). A New Zealand-based study found that over 80% of their adolescent sample endorsed single parent households (both mothers and fathers), cohabiting parents, extended family members, and same-sex parents and children as families (Anyan & Pryor, 2002). The authors suggested that legal status and presence of two-parents were not important criteria at this age – these findings may reflect adolescents' increasing capacity to think beyond formal bonds and structural features. More recently, an extension of this research with a sample of younger children (mean age 11.9 years) revealed similar levels of acceptance of a range of family forms (Rigg & Pryor, 2007). Given that these studies have been conducted recently, these findings may also reflect these cohorts' exposure to a greater diversity of family forms typically seen in many Western societies.

In the United Kingdom, O'Brien et al. (1996) similarly employed a vignette methodology to examine children's concepts of family. Following the children's decisions on whether the various vignettes constituted a family or not, this research extended previous studies by exploring through discussion with the children, their justifications for their opinions. The vignettes, which covered a range of issues applicable to contemporary family life, such as gendered position of parents, single parenthood, the permanence of marriage and the nuclear family, were presented to children (age 7 to 14 years), who were then asked whether each of the scenarios represented 'a proper family'. Generally, the children endorsed the principle that there must be children for the unit to constitute a

family. Another principle that was strongly expressed, particularly among the younger children (age 7 to 10 years), was that parents should be married. Just under half of the younger children and almost three-quarters of the older children (age 14 years) accepted lone-mother and child households as legitimate family forms, although less than half of the children in both groups felt that non-residential fathers and their children constituted a family. The authors suggested that for some children a father is essential to family life, only when he is co-resident. These findings also indicated that the concept of the nuclear family remains a powerful image, despite the changing nature of contemporary families. Halldén (1994) similarly reported on the potency of the nuclear-family form, in relation to children's expectations about their future families. She explored children's expectations by having the children write stories about and draw pictures of their imagined future family. She argued that the children's narratives and drawings were built upon their subjective experiences of family life and were moulded in some way by dreams and fantasies about their future families. Over three-quarters of the children constructed their future family life as consisting of both parents living together with their children.

Morrow's (1998) study of how children define the concept 'family' used a series of vignettes similar to those used by O'Brien et al. (1996). She found that children generally had an accepting, inclusive view of what constitutes a family. Age trends were apparent, with younger children emphasising marriage and children as being necessary to define family. For the younger children, the nuclear family form was preferred, although they did endorse other family forms. Older children in contrast were more likely to highlight the nature and quality of family relationships as defining features. Participants' responses to the vignettes were explored using open-ended questions such as 'what is a family?' and 'what are families for?' The centrality of roles and relationships within the family emerged, with few children defining family *solely* in terms of structure. Almost half of the children defined family in terms of roles, relationships and structure, dominated by the notion that families should be happy. Morrow (1998) concluded that:

> "Overall, children's definitions did not centre around the 'nuclear norm'. For many children, 'family' consists of a wide range of people, and it is the roles that these people perform, and the quality of the relationships that define them as 'family'" (pp. 28)

Drawing on a similar methodological approach to Morrow (1998) and O'Brien et al. (1996), a recent study exploring Irish children and young people's concept of family indicated that the way in which family members cared for and loved each other represented key defining features of 'family'. Within this study, a minority of the children highlighted marriage in their discussion of divorce and unmarried cohabiting parents, and indicated that these family circumstances were characterised by a lack of stability and permanence (Nixon, Greene & Hogan, 2006). While these views reflect only a minority of the children's perspectives, it may be useful to interpret the salience of marriage and the two-parent family in light of the specific Irish context where Constitutional definitions of the family

are based on the institution of marriage and legislation for parental divorce was only passed within the last decade, following a narrow referendum victory.

One socialisation variable that may be particularly significant in shaping children's concept of family is their own family structure. It may be reasonable to expect that important aspects of children's personal experiences may mediate their developing understanding of the family. For example, literature that has generally examined the impact of specific experiences on children's concept formation has indicated that personal experience may contribute to a more comprehensive and complex understanding of specific phenomena. For example, in a study of conceptions of sexual abuse among matched samples of abused and non-abused children, Miller-Perrin, Wurtele and Kondrick (1990) found that children who had been abused had more accurate conceptions of abuse and perpetrators than non-abused children. Monaco and Gaier (1992) found that children whose family members had been directly deployed to the Gulf War displayed more knowledge about the geography of the region, details of deployment and military intervention, and the names of the leaders and countries involved, than children who did not experience direct family deployment.

Thus, it is possible that children who have experienced their own parents' separation or divorce develop a broader and more flexible definition of a family than children who are from two-parent households. On the other hand, children's exposure to non-traditional family structures in their interactions with friends and relatives, as well as through the media, impact on children's family concept development. Research on the impact of divorce on children's concepts of family has revealed no differences between children who have experienced divorce and their matched peers from non-divorced families, in the level of understanding about family or divorce (Newman et al., 1993; Mann et al. 1992). Mazur (1993) also found that children who experienced their parents' divorce did not express greater understanding of marriage, divorce and remarriage than children whose parents had not separated. Brodzinsky, Singer and Braff (1984) found that the experience of adoption as an infant is not associated with different or higher levels of understanding about adoption or different developmental processes in adoption concept formation. Similarly, Sherrill and Pinderhughes (1999) found that there were no differences between adoptees and non-adoptees in their basic understanding of family and adoption. However, differences did emerge in children's ratings of the acceptability and typicality of family constellations. Older adoptees were more likely to accept non-traditional family constellations, perhaps reflecting their varied birth family and foster care experiences.

Brannen, Heptinstall and Bhopal (2000) investigated whether children's own experiences of particular living arrangements were influential in moulding their views of the notions of 'a proper family'. Children in this study came from a range of family contexts, including families with two birth parents, lone parent families, step-families and foster families. Few children in this study referred to the nuclear stereotype of two parents and their children. Instead, ideas about what

constitutes a proper family were strongly grounded in their own family experiences, with a generally inclusive view of what counts as a family. However, these children did consider that a family without children did not constitute a proper family, but rather was "a family in the making" (Brannen et al., 2000, pp. 50). Similar findings were found by O'Brien et al., (1996) and Nixon et al. (2006). In the latter Irish study, one-third of the children did not endorse the childless couple as a family grouping, suggesting that a couple need something beyond each other, such as a child or a pet, to commit their life to. Similarly, Rigg and Pryor (2007) found lower levels of endorsement for groupings that did not include children.

In conclusion, children conceptualise 'family' in a flexible and inclusive way. The studies have generally found that children's concept of family does not rest solely upon structural features, such as biological relatedness or co-residence; rather processes of caring and love, and the quality of family relationships were given priority (Rigg & Pryor, 2007; Nixon et al., 2006; Brannen et al., 2000; Morrow, 1998; O'Brien et al., 1996). However, while few children defined family *solely* in terms of structure and in general were unlikely to use the stereotypical image of two parents and children, structural elements such as marriage, children and co-residence were considered to be somewhat important. In particular, children were sometimes regarded as essential defining elements of a family unit as the study participants emphasised the central role that they themselves, as subjective agents, play in family life. However, relational processes such as care, love, and support with family relationships also emerged strongly as significant features of 'a proper family'. Research exploring children's ideas about these aspects of family life are explored in the following sections.

Children's Perspectives on Family Roles & Relationships

James (2003) has argued that children's perspectives on parents are an "absent presence" (pp. 183) in the literature, and that sociological literature which does explicitly concern itself with children's views on parents, relate to children for whom parenting is under threat. Notably of relevance here are the relatively few studies, that have explored children's perspectives on post-divorce parenting arrangements (e.g. Mitchell, 1987; Neale et al., 1998). Also, as was the case with children's concept of family in general, a small body of research within developmental psychology has examined age-related changes in children's understanding of parental roles, approached from a cognitive developmental perspective. Early studies revealed that the father was perceived as more punitive, more feared and more dominating than the mother, who was perceived as more nurturing and caring, probably reflecting the traditional gendered division of labour within the family (Emmerich, 1959, 1961; Kagan, Hosken & Watson, 1961).

Later studies have revealed that while children may not have specific ideas about what does or does not constitute a family, their ideas about roles within the family, for example, what parents are 'for',

appear to be more specific (Brannen et al., 2000). In the Brannen et al. study, most children suggested that both mothers and fathers were equally important, although they usually went on to describe differences in terms of roles and relationships. Mothers were seen as providing emotional support, where fathers were described in terms of helping them to manage in the outside world (e.g. helping them to make the right decisions). Morrow (1998) also reported that mothers were important providers of emotional support, especially for the girls, several of whom described how they could talk to their mothers about any topic. Drawing on data from the Irish study of children's concept of family, Nixon, Hogan and Greene (2003) reported some age-related differences in how mother and father roles within the family are understood. Thus, the younger children (age eight years) described mother roles most frequently in terms of caring, ensuring the child's basic needs are met, and carrying out household duties, while for fathers, the roles of playmate and breadwinner/provider were important. For the older respondents, perspectives may become more comprehensive, with less of a focus on instrumental care-giving roles. Focus groups with 14-year-olds revealed how they believed parental roles should be shared between parents. Roles tended to be perceived as interchangeable between the mother and father and not exclusive to either parent, and the way in which parenting roles were fulfilled within a family depended on each individual family and the quality of relations therein.

In terms of other family relationships, there is a great dearth of research into the possible significance of relationships with extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins for children (Pryor, 2003) and children's perspectives on these relationships have been virtually ignored in the literature. One exception is Morrow's study, which found that children included extended kin in their definition of family and described them as important to them. The older children depicted their siblings in largely positive terms describing how they mutually supported each other (Morrow, 1998)

Hendricks (1999) explored New Zealand children's perspectives on fathers using a combination of qualitative methods to account for the broad age range of children included (age 4 to 18 years). Overall, children's perspectives of fathers were favourable – they viewed fathers as participating, or at least as having the potential to participate, in their lives in a variety of ways. Descriptions of fathers' activities showed that children's views on fathers do not adhere to stereotypical roles with many children reporting that fathers provide emotional support and engage in household chores. O'Brien and Jones (1995), in their study examining the meaning of contemporary fatherhood for children, found that compared to mothers, fathers were less likely to be used as confidants during periods of worry or stress. This pattern was more apparent for girls than boys. Other gender differences also emerged where girls expressed greater dissatisfaction with the amount of time their father spent with them and were more likely to feel that their father did not understand them. However, three main expectations of fathers emerged: economic provision, care and love, and involvement in the domestic life of the family. The young people in the study constructed

fatherhood as "central to the emotional and material dimensions of family life" (p. 34). Milligan and Dowie (1998) used focus group discussions to explore children's ideas concerning the roles of fathers as parents and what they felt they needed most from their fathers. What the children talked about most was their need for a role model, followed by (in order of priority to the children) their need for quality time with their father and their need for supportive behaviour. Children discussed their need for love and expressions of love and physical contact much less often. The children hardly alluded to the potentially different roles of male and female parent, in marked contrast to the adults interviewed who seemed to be highly aware of the possible gendered aspect of parents' roles. The authors concluded that desirable qualities in a parent were not related to the parent's gender and thus, there may be nothing unique which fathers as opposed to mothers provide, and when fathers involve themselves in a positive way with their children they are both hugely valued and valuable (Milligan & Dowie, 1998; Milligan & Smith, 1999).

With regard to the role of fathers *post-divorce*, O'Brien and Jones (1995) reported that almost all of the young adolescents in their study believed that fathers should remain in contact with their children and should continue to financially support their children after the divorce. Clark, Craig and Glendinning (1996) used a series of complex vignettes to examine children's attitudes to parental (primarily paternal) responsibilities and obligations in separated families. The majority of children believed that fathers had an obligation, rooted in biological terms, to provide financial support to their children. This financial obligation was also viewed as independent from the issue of who was responsible for the end of the parental partnership, i.e. regardless of whether the mother or the father had an extra-marital relationship. Furthermore, children believed that obligations of non-resident parents were not confined to providing financial support, but also extended to material and emotional support. These participants also expressed the view that children should be consulted about decisions affecting them, in relation to post-separation circumstances. All 33 children who participated in this study came from single parent families. The authors concluded that these children were clearly drawing on their own experience of what happened to them. In line with this, O'Brien et al. (1996) described a discussion centred around post-divorce family arrangements, in which two of the participants lived in nuclear family households and three children had separated parents. Both children in the two-parent families tried to argue initially that single mother and child households and non-residential fathers and their children constituted 'proper' family forms, while the other children, who had little contact with their non-residential fathers, successfully convinced them that parents, in particular fathers, were required to show caring contact with their children before they could be considered part of the family group. Indeed, it is probable that children's conceptions of normative family life are shaped to a significant extent by their own actual family circumstances.

Halldén (1994) uncovered interesting gender differences in relation to her young boys' and girls' narratives of their fictive future families. Among the girls' narratives, the relationship theme

emerged strongly, and conflict and caring rituals were described more often and in greater detail in the girls' writings than in the boys. The children's narratives also provided insight into their views about the distribution of power within the family. She noted that in line with Gilligan's theory (1993), girls take relationships into account and identify with the nurturing figure. Thus, girls tended to depict their main characters as caring nurturing adults who hold the power and the responsibility for the care of the family, whereas the boys often failed to identify powerful adults in their narratives. In the boys' writings, sometimes chaos was allowed to break out, control was bypassed or in other cases, conflict never broke out. Halldén suggested that boys avoided the question of power and authority and created a free space for children where they could not be controlled. In contrast, the girls depicted a strong mother character possessing power and child characters subjected to the mother's control and influence. Her study provided interesting insight into children's thoughts about family relationships, about how power is distributed among adults and children within the family and about conditions of dependency that are part of family life. Studies that have specifically addressed children's experiences of their own family lives, as opposed to concepts of family and family roles generally, have revealed how children's agency and power to negotiate within the family arena are realised in the processes and practices of everyday family life. These studies are discussed in the following section.

Children's Experiences of their Family Life

A small number of studies have explored children's experiences of their own family life. Reflections on family life by children force us to challenge stereotypical assumptions that are often made about children in different family settings (Moore et al., 1996) and generally, children's stories have revealed that living in a specific family form does not imply a certain type of childhood (Moore et al., 1996). Studies that have explored children's experiences of family have generally considered a number of different facets such as the parameters by which children define their own family, and their experiences of family transitions, for example parental separation and re-partnering.

Children's Representations of their Family

Studies have generally found wide variation among children in how they define their own families, ranging from setting boundaries within their household to incorporating wider relationships within the community (Moore et al., 1996). For example, Brannen et al. (2000) found that considerable variability existed in children's family networks, in terms of family members with whom children had contact. Children were inclusive in their approach to their family networks, extending beyond members of the household to non-resident parents and relatives. Morrow (1998) also reported that children's definitions of their family reflected who was important, the role fulfilled by that person or group, and the quality of the relationships involved. Dunn, O'Connor and Levy (2002) used young children's drawings of their families to assess their representations of relationships with parents and

siblings. Children came from one of four different family types: two parent non-step families, single mother families, stepfather families, and stepmother/complex stepfamilies, in which there was a stepmother or both adult partners brought children from previous relationships. Children from the two-parent non-step families were less likely to exclude a family member from the drawing and more likely to place parents together than children from either of the stepparent families or single-mother families. The authors concluded that *biological relatedness* is the key feature identifying, though not necessarily explaining, children's exclusions of particular family members and togetherness of the parents in the drawings. For example, excluding non-biologically related siblings or stepparents may reflect the disengaged nature of the relationship. The authors furthermore found an association between exclusions of family members from the drawing and parent and teacher reports of behavioural or emotional problems. Dunn et al. (2002) suggested that excluding family members from drawings may be an indication of relationship conflict or some other aspect of family stress known to be linked with higher levels of externalising or internalising problems in children. It should be noted however that rates of exclusion of siblings and parents from the family drawings remained relatively low across the different family types.

O'Brien et al. (1996) similarly used children's drawing of their families to examine young children's accounts of their own families. The type of household that the children themselves were living in (with two-parents, with one parent with or without a partner, or with grandparents) emerged as a significant factor when examining who children included in the definition of their family. Thus, children living with one parent or with grandparents were more likely to produce family drawings that did not directly correspond to residents in their household. These children included individuals who were not co-resident more often, suggesting that extended networks may be particularly significant for children living in non-nuclear households. This was also confirmed by Clarke et al. (1996) who found that the children of single parents frequently and spontaneously included other family members, such as grandparents, in their account of their family. Similarly, Brannen et al. (2000) reported that children from a variety of family structures identified a wide range of people whom they considered important to them, which extended beyond their households and kin. Moreover, considerable variability in family networks existed within family forms, suggesting that family structure may not be the main force shaping children's contact with kin.

Neale et al. (1998) explored experiences of new family circumstances and co-parenting for 55 children and young people whose parents had separated or divorced. Representing their families through pictures, children mostly included both residential and non-residential parents, although some children who had no contact with their father excluded them from their drawings. The arrival of a new partner in the household had varying effects on the child's sense of their family, and this was dependent to a great extent on the nature of the relationship that had built up between the child and the new partner. However, invariably, the children did distinguish between new partners and

biological parents. In interpreting these findings, Smart et al. (2001) invoked the notion of 'open' and 'closed' family boundaries, raised by James and Prout (1996). Thus, at the 'closed' end of the continuum were children who had a strong sense of tight-knit family that had been neither extended nor fragmented by their parents' separation and differences in arrangements following the separation had little impact on how these children conceptualised their families. A sense of the original family and continuity from the pre-separation days had been preserved despite changes in the composition of the households. In other 'closed' cases, children re-constructed their families based in one household that excluded the non-resident parent, indicating the child's conscious rejection of this parent as a member of the family. At the 'open' end of the continuum, children conceptualised their post-divorce family in more inclusive terms, considering their parents' partners as family members or even parents, resulting in more complex and dynamic family networks. In particular cases where new partners had become family, children could not envisage returning to pre-separation families.

The findings emphasise the highly individualised ways in which children construct their families and how even siblings living together in the same household might develop different relationships with new partners or step- or half-siblings and thus construct their families differently. In line with both the O'Brien et al. (1996) and Morrow (1998) studies, Smart et al. (2001) reported that children conceptualised their families in terms of relationships characterised by care and respect, rather than formal structures:

> "It is not so much having a *real* parent that is important to children as having a *proper* parent, based on qualitative criteria of how family relationships should be conducted. The substantial numbers of children in our study who reported feeling positive about their family lives lived under a wide variety of arrangements but they shared one thing in common. Their families were characterized by good relations of care and respect" (Smart et al., 2001, pp. 58).

Beyond children's construction of family across different family types, a number of these qualitative studies have also unearthed challenges and opportunities experienced by children in the face of family transitions, such as parental separation and re-partnering.

Children's Experiences of Parental Separation and Re-partnering

The small number of studies which have taken account of children's views and experiences of family transitions address a significant gap that exists in current research on the effects of different family forms on children's lives, although for the most part these studies focus on post-divorce families. While much of the previous research on separated and divorced families focused on children's outcomes measured by quantitative standardised measures, the handful of studies that have examined children's *experiences* of changes in family have yielded valuable insights into the way in which these transitions are understood and negotiated by the children themselves. For example, in relation to co-parenting arrangements, Smart et al. (2001) reported that a number of children in their study reported difficulties switching from one household to another, where different routines and rules may

have been established. Nevertheless, most of these children viewed enduring these difficulties as worthwhile in that they facilitated sustaining a 'proper' parent-child relationship. Other difficulties arose for older children, as arrangements to spend time with the non-resident parent began to clash with demands of an expanding social life. Importantly, these authors concluded that children could either live happily or unhappily under a variety of custodial arrangements. Children suffered when they were caught in the middle of parental conflicts or constrained by overly rigid arrangements. Moreover, children in these situations may feel divided by conflicting loyalties to both parents, and may feel protective towards their parents and view them as vulnerable (Clarke et al., 1996).

In post-divorce families, Neale et al. (1998) also reported that children were aware of variations in quality of relationships that existed between themselves and their mothers and fathers, and mothers were seen as the parent that children were more likely to talk to. The quality of good or poor relationships with a parent was found to be largely independent of frequency of contact with them (in the case of non-resident parents) (Neale et al., 1998). In contrast, Dunn et al. (2004) found that more frequent and regular contact, including telephone conversations, between children and their non-resident fathers was associated with closer father-child relationships, as rated by the children. Moreover, these factors were associated with fewer adjustment problems in the children. However, as emphasised by the authors, the direction of effects here remains unclear – it could be that frequent regular contact arose as a result of a positive relationship between the father and child. On the other hand, it could be that the regular contact contributed to the closeness of the relationship. Clarke et al. (1996) found that children, who did not have regular contact with their non-resident father, rarely included him in their account of their family.

Brannen et al. (2000) interviewed children from single parent, step-families and foster-families about various family changes. Of relevance here are children's accounts of the departure of a birth father from the family home and the arrival of a step-father into the family home. While some of the children were too young to remember their father leaving, several children were able to give vivid accounts of his departure, all of whom recalled it as a painful experience. In contrast, the memory of a step-father moving into the family home was described in various ways – for some children it was a positive experience, for others it was described in more negative terms.

A number of studies have highlighted children's reports of little communication between themselves and their parents at the time of the separation (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor & Sturgess, 2001; Hogan, Halpenny & Greene, 2002; Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas & Murch, 2002). In the Dunn et al. (2001) study of 238 children from step-, single parent and non-step families, only five percent of children who had experienced their parents' separation reported that they had been fully informed and encouraged to ask questions. Many children in the study felt that they had not received sufficient explanation regarding pending changes to their family arrangements. These authors

emphasised the gap between what an adult thinks has been communicated to a child and a child's need to process the information in repeated conversations over time.

One Irish study, which explored children's experiences of their parents' separation, similarly found that many children reported feeling surprised and shocked at their parents' decision to separate and despite awareness of interparental relationship difficulties, were unprepared for the changes that were to come (Hogan et al., 2002). In line with Dunn et al. (2001), these authors also pointed up children's need for ongoing communication regarding changes within the family. Children in the Irish study experienced a good deal of continuity in core aspects of their lives following parental separation – for the majority of children, there was no change in residence or school, the source of their primary care-giving and contact with extended family members. Maintaining contact with the non-resident parent was important to all children, and children who had lost contact with their fathers expressed dissatisfaction about the separation generally and the visiting arrangements. Children in this study felt that their families were different from other families, a finding highlighted by their reluctance to discuss their parents' separation outside the immediate family. Hogan et al. (2002) attributed this to broader cultural issues, such as the value on privacy in matters relating to family relationships, or the fact that separation and divorce may continue to be a social taboo in Irish society. Both the Dunn et al. and the Hogan et al. studies have indicated the importance of the peer group and wider kin as a source of support to children at the time of family transitions. In both studies, children reported that grandparents and friends acted as confidants and key sources of support following the separation.

Studies which have explored children's experiences of their own family lives, such as those alluded to in the preceding sections, have brought a number of key issues to light. Children's representations of family life have suggested that the provision of consistent love and care is more important to them than family structure. Furthermore, eliciting their views on family life highlights their capacity to actively contribute to family life and importantly their awareness of that capacity. Brannen et al. (2000) provided an excellent example of this in their description of children's varying experiences of having a step-father move into the family home:

> "Children seemed to be suggesting that step fathers were under some pressure to justify or 'earn' their place in their lives by becoming interested in them and involved in their activities". (Brannen et al., 2000, p. 91).

Such conclusions suggest that obligation to family members is not assumed but rather dependent upon negotiations worked out by family members (Finch & Mason, 1993). Solberg's (1997) account of Norwegian children's family lives further draws attention to the idea that children's family relationships are interdependent and open to negotiation and change. Through her depiction of different types of parent-child relationships, ranging from relationships where the child is viewed as immature and in need of care and protection, to relationships where household responsibilities and

duties of self-care are placed upon the child, she illustrated how the children themselves were instrumental in shaping the nature of the parent-child relationship. Thus, depending on how parents viewed the child, children played a key role in negotiating valuable parent-free time at home, where they could be free from parental control and restrictions. These findings clearly point to the value of considering children as agents in their families.

Conceptualising Children as Agents within their Families

Children's ability and desire to actively contribute to family life has also come to light from those studies that have focused on children as decision-makers in the family. A number of studies have explored the extent to which children were involved in making decisions relating to post-divorce life, for example, relating to visiting arrangements with the non-resident parent. For example, Hogan et al. (2002) reported that the majority of children in their study were not involved in decisions about custody and access/visiting arrangements and were not consulted about their wishes – they had simply been informed about the arrangements. Similar levels of non-involvement and non-consultation were reported by Fawcett (1998) and Butler et al. (2002). Neale and Smart (1998) have argued that representations of children as subordinate within legal and sociological discourses constrain professionals to support and empower children to express their views and participate in family decision-making. They explored children's perceptions of their own right to participate in family decisions concerning them, by asking their participants, all of whom had experienced their parents' separation, what a hypothetical child should do if he/she had been asked to choose which parent to live with. Generally, the children viewed an autonomous choice on their part as difficult, but participation in joint decision making with family members as more appropriate. Thus, children simultaneously constructed themselves as both autonomous and dependent. They wanted to be judged as competent to evaluate their own family dynamic and relationships and decide what level of participation in decision-making, if any, is appropriate or desired. Importantly, this includes recognition of the child's right to decline participation in making important decisions or choices, as they may not always wish to be consulted or involved. Indeed, Hogan et al. (2002) reported that when asked about their desire to be consulted and involved in decision-making, some of the younger children in their study were not concerned that they had not been consulted regarding decisions about major family issues. However, the authors also note that children's involvement in family arrangements may need to be revised as children get older. In discussing decision-making in families more generally (rather than specifically regarding post-divorce family arrangements), Morrow (1998) reported that children wanted to have a *say* in decisions, rather than make the decisions for themselves. Thus, children expressed an awareness of the limits of their capacity to be independent and make certain decisions, depending on the nature and complexity of the decision.

Morrow (2003) used data from her study of children's conceptualisations of family previously mentioned (Morrow, 1998) to demonstrate how children exercise their agency within the family

context. The older children in her study described both active and passive forms of involvement in family life. Thus, while they were obviously recipients of much care, they also emphasised the contribution they made to family life. Principles of reciprocity and mutuality emerged in their description of family relationships, particularly in terms of siblings, but also in relation to parents. Similarly, Brannen et al. (2000) described how children were active contributors to care within the family, not only in material terms through household work and their own self-maintenance, but also through their understanding and support for parents. Their interviews were punctuated with examples of how children displayed considerable understanding of their parents' feelings and situations and sought to respond appropriately and sensitively. However, both the children themselves and their mothers indicated that childhood should be seen as a somewhat protected period, during which children should be largely free from work and too much responsibility.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to chart the development of contemporary approaches to researching children's family lives and to outline some of the recent research on how children themselves think about and experience 'family'. Traditionally research with children adopted a model of the child as the 'object' of research inquiry and did not seek to understand children's subjective experiences or daily lives from the child's own perspective. Within the psychological literature pertaining to children and their families, this omission represents a serious limitation in what can be known about family processes within the context of different family forms. Previously, family research offered little scope for placing children at the centre of analysis. Parents' voices have been given space within public discourse, and children's accounts of family life have been subsumed into those of their parents (Smart et al., 2001). Importantly we must remember however, that children and parents may interpret similar events very differently and as highlighted by Smart et al. (2001), "no matter how caring and considerate a parent may be, the child will have a story too which may reveal different priorities and experiences" (pp. 143).

More recently however, discontent with this prevailing framework for studying different aspects of children's lives has come to the fore, precipitating an interest in taking account of children's perspectives and their active contribution to the various contexts within which they interact on a daily basis. This re-positioning of children at the centre of the research process is related to broader shifts in how we think about children and childhood. Childhood, as an experience, is socially situated, not simply a natural or universal state arising out of children's biological condition (Prout & James, 1997). Children are seen as persons with agency, with the capacity to act autonomously and influence their social worlds. These changing conceptions of children and childhood have seeped into the context of research into children's family lives.

It is increasingly recognised that children are active agents within their families, not merely passive recipients of care. The studies reviewed which have adopted this child-centred approach to explore children's experiences of family life, have indicated that we can learn a great deal when children's own accounts of their understandings and experiences of childhood are given prominence. So what lessons have we learnt? Children conceptualise the 'family' with both flexibility and inclusiveness, rarely relying solely upon structural features, such as biological relatedness or co-residence. Children emphasised the value they placed upon relations of care and support, characterised by mutuality and reciprocity. Moreover, children recognised the pivotal role that they themselves play in family life. Their sense of agency and capacity as agents was reflected in the stories they told about their power to contribute to family life through household work and to negotiate their way through fluid networks of family relationships. Thus, family relationships are no longer rooted in ties of legality, duty and biological relatedness, but are increasingly understood to be open to interpretation based on ties of affection (Smart et al., 2001). However, this body of literature remains small and for the most part has focused on children who have experienced parental separation/divorce and re-partnering. Other family types remain unexplored from this perspective - a gap that the current study aims to address.

In many ways, a unified message has emerged from both chapters, as the research reviewed appears to converge on a similar conclusion – the importance of family processes. Thus, in Chapter One it emerged that family processes were the important mediators of children's adjustment across different family types. Studies reviewed in Chapter Two have indicated that similar family processes, such as the quality of family relationships and how love and caring roles are enacted within the family, are what children value most about family life. McHale et al. (2002) recently argued that children are active processors of their family lives, and that the interpretations they place on their family circumstances help to account for pathways between observed family dynamics and child outcomes. Greater awareness of how children negotiate and think about family dynamics will strengthen our understanding of the nuances and quality of children's family lives. The current study aims to adopt this child-centred paradigm to explore children's perspectives on and experiences of family life in a one-parent family. As will be highlighted in the following chapter, children's perspectives are complemented in the present study by parental perspectives, embracing the idea that multiple realities may co-exist and family life may be experienced quite differently by different family members. Thus, the inclusion of both children's and mothers' perspectives on their family experiences offers a powerful means to explore diversity and complexity in experiences. The following chapter details the methodological approach adopted for the study and describes how the research was conducted.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the family experiences of single parents and their children, where the child has grown up in a one-parent family from infancy. Given the increasing recognition of the diverse and complex nature of contemporary family life and the relative neglect of children raised in a one-parent family since infancy in the literature, this study specifically focused on how parent-child roles and relationships are lived out within this specific family context. This research sought to examine these lived experiences from the perspectives of both mothers and children. The study adopted a qualitative research design, which is appropriate for understanding and representing the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage and live through specific situations (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999).

This chapter describes the research design and methods used to explore the specific situation of the one-parent family context from both children's and parents' perspectives. The chapter begins by broadly discussing the nature of qualitative approaches to research. The parameters for defining an appropriate sample are outlined next and following this, the research methods and tools that were adopted for the present investigation are described in detail. The chapter then proceeds to discuss the fieldwork phase of the study including issues pertaining to the access to and recruitment of the sample, the data collection phase of the study, and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes by considering issues relating to the management and analysis of the information gathered throughout the fieldwork stage of the research.

Qualitative Research Paradigm[4]

A qualitative approach was adopted for the current study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), qualitative research, as a field of inquiry in its own right, encompasses a complex family of terms, concepts and assumptions, crosscuts many disciplines, fields and subject matters, and involves the

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[4] Guba and Lincoln (1994) have argued that the term *qualitative* (and *quantitative*) should be reserved for the description of method rather than paradigm, and that questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm, the worldview entailing fundamental ontological and epistemological assumptions that guides the researcher. Proponents of a qualitative approach within psychology however have used the term *qualitative paradigm* as an umbrella term to describe those paradigms that provide an alternative to positivism (e.g. Henwood & Nicolson, 1995; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994). These paradigms have typically privileged qualitative over quantitative methods.

employment of various research practices, always in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the subject matter under investigation. Despite the complexity of issues involved, the authors proposed a generic definition of qualitative research as follows:

> "Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5)

A qualitative paradigm to research is based on a philosophy of science that challenges the positivist notion of establishing laws based on objective knowledge or truth. Instead, the qualitative approach rests on the adoption of an alternative epistemological position, which suggests that knowledge and meanings do not merely reflect the world as it exists, but are produced by persons within social, cultural and historical relationships (Henwood & Nicolson, 1995). The qualitative paradigm, also termed the naturalistic or interpretive paradigm (Henwood, 1996), is based upon the search for *thick description* (Geertz, 1973), "seeking to represent reality through the eyes of participants and to be sensitive to the complexities of behaviour and meaning in context" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994, p. 227). A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate when the aim of a study is to explore and describe a little known phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and lends itself particularly well to understanding participants' perspectives (Elliot et al., 1999). A number of studies reviewed in the previous chapter utilised a qualitative approach to explore children's experience of parental separation and family life (e.g. Morrow, 1998; Smart et al., 2001; Hogan et al., 2002). This approach to research is commensurate with the paradigm outlined in the previous chapter, where it was argued that childhood and children's lives are socially and culturally situated, and therefore children are seen as the best informants on their own lives and experiences.

Under the rubric of qualitative inquiry, various philosophies differ in their perspectives on their aims and methods of qualitative inquiry, their ethical commitments, and their methodological and epistemological issues (Schwandt, 2003). While all essentially reject positivism and embrace relativism, the idea that reality can only be understood by means of participants' representations and constructions, each encompasses a different way of understanding what human beings are doing or saying (Robson, 2002). Thus, Guba and Lincoln (1994) and later, Lincoln and Guba (2003) presented *constructivism*[5], *critical theory,* and *participatory/ cooperative paradigm* as alternatives to

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[5] Schwandt (1994) has suggested that the meaning of terms such as *interpretivism* and *constructivism* "are shaped by the intent of their users" (p. 118) and are thus best regarded as guides to examples of a particular type of inquiry, rather than accurate descriptions.

positivism. The present study is closely aligned to the constructivist paradigm. The goal of constructivist inquiry is:

> "...variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor's definition of a situation, for *Verstehen*. The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118).

The ontological position of this paradigm is that reality is local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures). The epistemological position of constructivism is that the researcher and the researched are interactively linked so that "findings" are created as the investigation proceeds. Knowledge about this relativistic 'reality' is based on those constructions about which there is relative consensus among those competent to interpret the substance of the construction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist approach assumes a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures, and through interaction, the researcher must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and social actions of individuals (Schwandt, 1994).

Qualitative research is multi-method, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2003). Interpreting or attempting to make sense of individuals' experience of phenomena involves working with people and making efforts to draw together and represent the meanings they bring to these experiences. This process often involves using multiple methods and materials to further an in-depth understanding of some phenomenon.

Researching the World-as-Experienced

This study has been influenced by some of the principles inherent in a phenomenological research strategy. The goal of phenomenological research is to "describe the world-as-experienced by the participants of the inquiry in order to discover the common meanings underlying empirical variations of a given phenomenon" (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992, p. 1356). Similarly, Robson (2002) has described phenomenological research as follows:

> "Phenomenological research focuses on the subjective experience of the individuals studied. What is their experience like? How can one understand and describe what happens to them from their own point of view? As the term suggests at its heart is the attempt to understand a particular phenomenon. This might be, for example, the experience of a child with disabilities in a mainstream (or segregated) school classroom." (Robson, 2002, p. 195).

What exactly do we mean by experience? Greene and Hill (2005) argued that 'experience' is about how we interpret being consciously affected by an event. This interpretation takes place on a number of planes – as a reflexive mental process, and as an attempt to communicate experience to others. A third arena for the interpretation of experience takes place when one individual attempts to

understand another's original experiences. As researchers, we assume that children's (and parents') activities and verbalisations are products of, or in some important way, connected to their experience; thus it is possible to learn about their experience by enquiry into their active engagement with their worlds, and from their own reports on their subjective worlds (Greene & Hill, 2005). Danaher and Briod (2005) suggest that a phenomenological study of children aims to clarify, describe and interpret their unique ways of attending to the world, and essentially addresses the question: "What is it like to *be* a child? What does it mean to live in the special manner of a child?" (Danaher & Briod, 2005, pp. 218). The present study addresses a more specific question: *what is it like to be a child, living and growing up in a one-parent family?*

The Inclusion of Multiple Perspectives

Children who have grown up in a one-parent family are key informants for the present investigation. As highlighted in the opening chapters of the thesis, children's experiences have heretofore been defined in large part by adults. However, in order to understand the world-as-experienced by the child, we assume that we can gain access to the content and meaning of their everyday life, using methods such as observation and interviews with children (Tudge & Hogan, 2005; Greene & Hill, 2005). This assumption is commensurate with the relatively new framework for researching children's experiences of family life, as detailed in Chapter Two, and reflects shifting ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of children and how their lives can best be understood.

However, where studies mentioned in Chapter Two related to research concerned with *children's* concepts of family and experiences of family life, the decision was taken in the current investigation to interview and include *both* parents' and children's accounts of family life. The purpose of bringing together different perspectives in this way was not to reveal a more accurate 'truth' of events or feelings (Smart & Neale, 2001). Rather, the purpose was to highlight the way in which various perspectives can reflect different realities, each of which can enrich our understanding of particular phenomenon, such as living and being in a one-parent family. Within family sociology, Bernard (1982) first highlighted the different gendered experiences and realities that co-existed within one marital union when she talked about *his marriage* and *her marriage*. Emery (1994) likewise asserted that in terms of divorce various perspectives must be taken into account, reflecting the subjective reality of different individuals affected – the mother, the father and each of the children. A similar line of argument can be extended when considering experiences of the parent-child relationship – there is the parent's experience of the relationship and parenting and the child's experience of the relationship and being parented. Taking both experiences into account can provide a more complete picture of the relationship. The inclusion of both parents' and children's accounts can also be viewed from the methodological perspective of *triangulation*. Triangulation, the use of

multiple methods, empirical materials, observers and perspectives in a single study is best understood as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth and depth to any investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The use of multiple informants in a study is termed data triangulation. The concept originated in navigation, where multiple reference points were used to locate an object's exact position. Originally, the essential rationale was that if a number of different methods or sources of information to tackle a question are used, the resulting answer is likely to be more accurate – thus triangulation was a strategy of validation (Smith, 1996). Within research, this concept traditionally carried the assumption that there is a 'fixed point' or 'reality' to triangulate, or "the subject under study is necessarily objectivated" (Flick, 1992, p. 179). However, from the ontological position of *relative reality* characteristic of postmodern paradigms, objective reality can never been captured.

As an alternative to triangulation, Richardson (2003) proposed the notion of *crystallisation*, arising from the recognition that there are more than three ways (as suggested by triangulation) to view the world. In her words, "crystallisation provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic" (p. 518). Thus, what we see when we view a crystal depends on how we view it, for example, whether we hold it up to the light or not, thus crystallisation as a metaphor acknowledges the many different facets of the social world. Including multiple informants, such as parents and children, is akin to looking through the crystal at different angles. According to Flick (1992) we can triangulate, through for example the use of multiple methods or multiple informants, with the intention of adding breadth or depth to our understanding or to reveal multiple realities, but not for the purpose of validation or pursuing objective truth.

Parameters of Sample

Criteria for inclusion in the study were outlined at the outset before the process of access and recruitment began. The research was concerned with a previously neglected group of single-parent family children – those who have been reared in a one-parent family more or less from the beginning. While many studies define family structure in terms of the marital status of the parents, this policy was not adopted for the current study. Parents' marital status may not matter as much to children as the stability of the one-parent family situation, and the absence of the disruption that often accompanies entry into a one-parent family situation, for example, following parental separation and divorce.

For the purpose of the present study, the one-parent family situation was defined in the following way:

1. One biological parent has been absent from the home since the child was two-and-a-half years of age or younger.

This cut-off point was chosen following consideration of sample parameters used in two studies that included a similar group of one-parent family children. For example, Golombok et al. (2003) compared 7-year-old children in lesbian mother families with children in single parent and two-parent families. They defined their control groups of single parent families in the following way:

> "...families headed by single heterosexual mothers in which the children had lived with only the mother since the age of 18 months or older....the cutoff point of 18 months meant that the children had not experienced the potentially confounding effect of either a father in the home or parental separation in the 6 years prior to the study" (Golombok et al., 2003, p. 23).

Previously, Weinraub and Wolf (1983) investigated the functioning of single-mother families of children ranging in age from 2.25 to 4.5 years. In describing their sample, they stated:

> "...all mothers in this study had been living apart from the child's father for at least two years. For the most part, children were raised since infancy without a father ever living in the home. This is important because many studies of single parents confound parent status with the effects of divorce, separation or death (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983, p. 1298).

Thus, in the present study, the maximum age at the time of the father leaving was 2.5 years. Given the intention to interview the children themselves in the current study, and the fact that as time passes and the children get older, the possibility of the parent entering into a new relationship and possibly forming a step-family increased, the less restrictive cut-off point, similar to the one used by Weinraub and Wolf (1983) was chosen for the present investigation.

The issue of new partnerships and the movement of single-parent families into step-families also required consideration at the outset. Parents who had formed new partnerships and were co-habiting at the time of the study were excluded. However, given that transitions in and out of new partnerships are a possible feature of one-parent families, it was felt that it would be too restrictive to totally exclude families where any new partners had cohabited for a period of time. Therefore, the aim of the second criterion stated below was to exclude families where a new partner had been resident for a significant part of the child's life, but allowed the inclusion of families where partners had cohabited for a period. The second inclusion criteria was stated as follows:

2. There is currently no other partner in the home, i.e. step-father/step-mother or cohabiting partner. In cases where a previous partner (not biological parent of the child) had co-habited for a period, this arrangement should have ceased at least a year ago.

The aim was to recruit 40 parent-child dyads into the study. As one of the research questions addressed possible age differences in children's family experiences, a secondary aim was to include roughly equal numbers of children (boys and girls), from younger and older age categories. The younger age category included children attending primary level school, which children in Ireland attend between the ages of 5 and 12 years. The older age category included children attending

second level school, which children in Ireland attend roughly between the ages of 13 and 18 years. Given the potential difficulties inherent in interviewing very young children, children younger than 8 years of age were excluded from the study. The process of accessing and recruiting an appropriate sample is considered part of the fieldwork process, and is described later in the chapter. The next design issue to be addressed concerned the methods by which children's and parents' reports on their worlds could best be accessed and explored.

Qualitative Interview Method

Qualitative methods are privileged within the naturalistic, interpretive paradigm. Therefore, an interview method was chosen to explore children and parents' experiences. According to Mason (1996), the term 'qualitative interviewing' refers to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. A study focusing on individual lived experience typically relies on an in-depth interview strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The qualitative research interview has unique potential for gaining access to and describing the lived everyday world (Kvale, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). Mason (1996) has suggested that qualitative interviews are characterised by a relatively informal style and a thematic topic-centred approach, where the researcher has a range of themes or issues which she wishes to cover, but not necessarily a structured list of questions.

The interview schedule was semi-structured in nature to allow for the examination of key issues while offering participants the opportunity to create a narrative about their subjective experiences. Robson (2002) defined a semi-structured interview as one where there are predetermined questions, but the order and question wording can be changed depending upon the interviewer's interpretation of what seems most appropriate. Therefore the interview schedules were *flexible*, serving merely as guides in terms of question order or exact wording of the questions asked. Broadly speaking, they were designed to elicit detailed information on experiences of care-giving, parenting and the parent-child relationship within the one-parent family context. Two separate interview schedules were developed: one for the children and one for the parents, although similar issues were explored in both. Both interview schedules are described below.

Parent Interview Schedule

The parent interview schedule was made up of four sections. The first section was concerned with information relating to basic demographics of the family including information about household composition (currently and in the past), education and employment history of the parent, and financial circumstances of the household. In the second section, the parent was asked about the child's non-resident parent – the nature of the inter-parental contact and relationship, and the nature of the child's contact with his/her non-resident parent. The third section of the interview related to care-giving and parenting. While this was approached initially very generally by asking the parent to 'describe parenting without a partner in the home', parents were further questioned about a number

of core functions of parenting. These were derived from Bradley & Caldwell's (1995) classification of five primary care-giving tasks: provision of sustenance, stimulation, support, structure and surveillance. In addition, the questioning about parenting encompassed McHale et al.'s (2002) notion of parental responsibility and executive decision-making functions.

The final section of the interview schedule focused on the parent's relationship with his/her child. Again, this was approached initially from a general perspective ('how would you describe your relationship?'), but used Youniss & Smollar's (1985) selection of a number of key interactive situations. These included typical and enjoyed interactions, communication, conflict and perceived obligations. The parent interview schedule concluded by asking parents to reflect upon their relationship with their child, how it had been shaped by the one-parent family context and how they thought their child felt about living in a one-parent family. A copy of the parent interview schedule is included in Appendix I.

Child Interview Schedule

The child interview schedule comprised four sections, consisting of both closed questions to collect factual, descriptive information and more open-ended questions to allow for an in-depth exploration of particular issues (See Appendix II for complete interview schedule). The first section of the interview related to details about the child's household and family composition. In addition to being asked about who lived with them and for how long, children were also asked about their ideas about family in general, including what families are for, what children need a family for, and any particular thoughts or feelings evoked by the word 'family'. As an introduction to talking more specifically about their own family, children were invited to either draw a picture of their family (younger children), or complete the *Family Links Map*, where children were asked to complete the diagram by filling in names of those individuals whom they considered 'part of their family' (Teen Between, 2000) (See Appendix II for an illustration of the Family Links Map and accompanying instructions). Children were also invited to very broadly indicate the nature of their relationship with those individuals named on the map (in terms of whether they would describe the relationship overall as strong, weak, or stressed). A similar tool was used by Hogan et al. (2002) in their study of children's experiences of parental separation, and was adapted from a resource book for counsellors working with adolescents. Following completion of the map, the researcher prompted the children to describe those individuals who had been named on the map, by asking how they were related to the individuals, how often they spent time together etc., and why they described their relationship in a particular way. This initial part of the interview, particularly the time taken to fill and discuss the Family Links Map, allowed the children time to gradually adapt to the interview situation, and gave them the opportunity to discuss different family members. From the researcher's point of view, the Family Links Map provided a broad overview of the child's household and family situation, and network of family members, whom the child considered important.

The second section of the interview related to family relationships, specifically the child's relationship with the resident parent. This section opened by having the child complete the *Closeness Map* (See Appendix II for an illustration of the diagram and accompanying instructions). The Closeness Map consisted of six concentric circles, with the child represented in the centre of the innermost circle. The idea of the Closeness Map is the placement of family members in different positions on the map, thereby illustrating varying degrees of emotional closeness to individual family members. The children were instructed to place individual family members in the circles according to how 'close' they felt to each individual, with those closest to them being placed in the innermost circles. Smart et al., (2001), Brannen et al. (2000) and Sturgess et al. (2001) describe the use of a similar tool, also for the purpose drawing out young people's accounts of their families. In Smart et al. (2001) however, the maps were divided into two sections, the left side of the circles reserved for family members, and the right side for friends. In Sturgess et al. (2001) and Brannen et al. (2000), the circles were divided into four sections, representing family, friends, relatives and others (including teachers, doctors etc.). In this case however, children were just asked about family members, although it should be noted that the inclusion of individuals as 'family members' on both the Family Links Map and the Closeness Map was left open to interpretation by the children and in a number of cases, children included close friends, simply because those friends felt like part of their family.

Following discussion of the Closeness Map, the relationship between the child and resident parent was discussed in more depth. The discussion of the relationship was open-ended but the position of that parent on the Closeness Map was used an initial starting-point. For example, children were asked to describe what it meant to them to say that somebody was 'close' to them, and why they had placed their parent in that position. Following this, discussion of the relationship proceeded in line with the conceptualisation of relationships outlined by Youniss and Smollar (1985). As was the case in the parent's interview, children were asked about the following domains of the relationship: typical or enjoyed interactions, communication, conflict and perceived obligations.

The third section of the interview related specifically to children's concept of family and parenting roles and more specifically their views and feelings about living in a one-parent family, and their fathers. The nature of the questions relating to fathers was dependent upon whether children had previously mentioned their fathers and had included him on their Maps. The final section of the interview asked the children about daily care-giving routines, and issues relating to their discipline (including family rules, strategies of parental monitoring and punishment). Children were also asked about perceived support within the family (what types of support they receive from different family members). The interview concluded by asking the children to reiterate their views about one parent family life in general and inquiring whether there were any additional issues which had not been raised in the interview but which they considered relevant to their experience of family life.

Fieldwork Phase

The fieldwork phase of the research included access to and recruitment of the sample, and data collection involving in-depth interviews with children and parents. Both processes of sample recruitment and data collection took place simultaneously and are detailed in this section.

Access to & Recruitment of Sample

A combination of purposive and snowballing sampling procedures was employed. With purposive sampling, a sample is built up which fulfil certain criteria (i.e. those outlined in the previous section) or satisfy certain needs of the researcher. Snowball sampling refers to a more specific type of purposive sampling whereby the researcher identifies one or more individuals from the population of interest and after their participation, they are used as informants to identify other members of the population, who are then used as informants, and so on (Robson, 2002).

The process of gaining access to and recruiting an appropriate sample involved a process of negotiation with key gatekeepers and potential participants. At all times, the researcher remained flexible and open to the demands and suggestions of various gatekeepers. Regardless of the source of information about the study, it was left up to parents to contact the researcher if they were interested in the study – thus at no time was the researcher provided with contact information about families, without their prior knowledge and permission. The implication of this was that part of the recruitment work was conducted by various gatekeepers and while this left things largely out of the researcher's control, it also helped to ensure that parents who did contact the researcher or agree to have their contact details passed on to her, were genuinely interested in the research.

Two main avenues were explored with a view to accessing an appropriate sample. The first avenue involved contacting two national agencies. The first agency, Treoir, serves as a national information centre for unmarried parents and represents both statutory and voluntary agencies, which provide services for unmarried parents and their children. The second agency, Cherish, is an association for single parent families, working to improve the quality of life for single pregnant women and single parent families. Cherish operates a drop-in centre, where weekly meetings, counselling, and parenting and personal development courses are held. In both cases, following meetings with personnel from the agencies, they agreed to publish a small notice about the research in their quarterly bulletins, which were distributed nationwide to individual single-parent families or support groups that worked with single parents. As a result of the advertisement in the newsletter, a number of support groups that worked with one-parent families contacted the researcher and in those cases, the researcher met with group co-ordinators, explained the study in more detail and provided individual information packs, with stamped addressed envelopes. The workers agreed to target specific families and let them know about the study, and if parents were interested they could contact the researcher or agree to have their details passed on to the researcher.

The second avenue involved accessing families through schools. This involved a lengthy process, first writing to the principal or home-school-community liaison co-ordinators[6] of the school, then following up with a phone call and if the schools were in agreement, meeting with school personnel to explain the purpose of the study in more detail. Twenty-one primary level schools were approached and twelve agreed to facilitate the research. Seven second-level schools were approached and five agreed to help with the research. Schools were chosen across the county of Dublin, driven by a commitment to include a range of families from different social-economic backgrounds.

In facilitative schools, help was offered in one of two ways. In the first, the principal or HSCL co-ordinator agreed to target specific families, passing on information about the study directly to single parents (this occurred in one primary and two second level schools). In the second, a general letter about the study was sent to the home (in some cases by post, in other cases distributed through the children in the schools), asking parents, if they were interested in finding out more about the study and possibly participating to either return their details to the school or contact the researcher directly, either by post, or by telephone. With both the information packs and the letters, specific information about the sample was omitted – it merely stated that *"The study aims to find out about the experiences of parents and children, where the mother or father is parenting alone....If you are parenting alone and think you might be interested in finding out more about the study..."*. It was felt that the inclusion of specific exclusion or inclusion criteria would have resulted in an unwieldy letter, and so might prevent potential participants from expressing an interest in the study. (Copies of information packs and letters are included in Appendix III).

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[6] The home-school-community liaison co-ordinator (HSCL co-ordinator) is employed by schools to promote co-operation and involvement among school personnel, relevant community agencies and parents to facilitate and enhance children's educational progress.

Table 3.1 illustrates the number of schools that were contacted, the approximate number of letters that were sent to parents of the students, and the number of responses received.

Table 3.1: Details of response rates according to source of contact

Source of Contact	Approximate Number of Letters Distributed	Number of Responses Received (as % of letters distributed)
Primary Level School		
1*	18	8 (44.4%)
2	134	8 (5.9%)
3	425	12 (2.8%)
4	183	3 (1.6%)
5	140	6 (4.3%)
6	160	4 (2.5%)
7	100	4 (4%)
8	250	5 (2%)
9	306	2 (0.07%)
10	270	9 (3.3%)
11	164	4 (2.4%)
12	98	8 (8.2%)
Source of Contact	Approximate Number of Letters Distributed	Number of Responses Received (as % of letters distributed)
Second Level School		
1	776	60 (7.7%)
2	320	3 (0.09%)
3	390	8 (2.1%)
4*	6	3
5*	6	1
Agency Newsletters		7
Support Agencies		11
Snowballing		7

* In these schools, the principals or HSCL co-ordinators targeted specific single parent families.

The researcher received contact details (either through reply slips being returned to the schools, directly in the post, or by telephone) from 173 parents, all of whom were interested in finding out more about the research and possibly taking part. Of these 173 parents, 7.5% were fathers (n = 13). Of course, as was expected, given that single parents do not represent a homogeneous group, many of those who did contact the researcher were subsequently excluded from participating in the study, as they did not fulfil the criteria. For example, some of them were living with new partners, while others had begun parenting alone when the child was older. Following the receipt of contact details, the researcher proceeded by telephoning the parents. The aim of this phone call was to ascertain *as far as possible* whether the family would be suitable for inclusion in the study. A number of issues were of importance for determining suitability: that the parent had a child between the ages of 8 and 17, that there was no partner living currently in the home, and that the parent had been parenting that

child alone since the child was an infant (no older than 2 ½ years). At times, it proved difficult to clarify with the parent sufficiently specific details about their circumstances to determine whether they fitted in with the inclusion criteria. For example, parents were often quite vague about the age at which they began parenting alone or about their circumstances in relation to subsequent or current partners. It was important that this initial phone call was handled with adequate sensitivity to maximise the chance that the parent would consent to participate and so the researcher refrained from asking too many intrusive questions at this point. In cases where the researcher felt that the inclusion criteria were being met, as far as could be ascertained, the researcher proceeded to arrange an interview. Fifty-six families met the criteria for participation in the study (all headed by mothers).

Within the fifty-six families, there were 29 older children (15 boys and 14 girls) and 34 younger children (14 girls and 21 boys), who had all lived in a one-parent family since they were 2 ½ years of age or younger and there was no new partner currently living in the home. The researcher then proceeded to ask mothers whether they would grant permission to the researcher to invite their children to participate in the study. Four mothers, all of younger children (3 boys and 1 girl), denied this access to the researcher and so these families were not included. The reasons given by the mothers were protectionist in nature (Neale & Smart, 1998). The mothers felt that participation in an interview about living in a one-parent family might encourage their children to reflect upon sensitive or unresolved issues, which may be disconcerting for the child.

In the remaining fifty-two families, the mothers did give the researcher permission to approach their children. While it was the original intention of the researcher, not to interview any family members, without securing the consent of both mothers and children, this was not always possible. The process of recruiting both mothers and children required flexibility and the approach taken was negotiated between the researcher and the mothers. The process of recruiting children into the study was always influenced by a commitment to privileging their agency, offering them as much information about the study as possible and highlighting their right to decline participation.

Twenty-nine older children and 30 younger children from the 52 families were invited to participate. This invitation was approached in a number of different ways, following discussion with the mothers. In a small number of cases, it was not possible to proceed with the recruitment of children into the study, until the researcher had met with the mother. Thus, in some cases, the researcher had a chance to meet the children and adolescents during the time she was in the home interviewing the mother. In other cases, when the mother was in agreement, the researcher sent a letter directly to the child, explaining the study and requesting their participation (see Appendix III). The researcher then followed up with a phone call to the child a number of days later.

At all stages, the researcher was willing to provide a detailed explanation of the purpose of the research and examples of the kinds of questions that would be asked; and encouraged gatekeepers,

parents and children to ask questions about the study. Those parents who expressed any reservations about participation or having their child approached about the study were encouraged to take time to consider the option of their own or their child's participation. Similarly, those children and young people who had reservations about talking to 'a stranger' or 'an outsider' about their family life were encouraged to take time to think about their participation and discuss with the researcher and their mother what exactly participation would entail.

The recruitment of the children into this study was not straightforward. Particularly for the younger children, there is no doubt that this process was greatly facilitated when the researcher had met and interviewed the mother beforehand. Indeed, all but four of the mothers were happy for the researcher to invite their children to participate, and many made it clear that they would not encourage or discourage their children either way. The researcher emphasised to the children that their mother had granted permission to her to approach them, and that they could refuse to participate or indeed opt out of participating at any stage. Five of the younger children (3 boys and 2 girls) and ten older children (6 boys and 4 girls) from 12 families refused to participate. Thus, 25 younger children (14 boys and 11 girls) and 18 older children (8 boys and 10 girls), from forty families gave consent and were interviewed. No child opted out of participation once they had agreed.

In the cases of two of the younger boys, their mothers insisted upon sitting in on the interviews with their sons, thus, these families were excluded. The final sample consisted of 41 mother-child pairs, from 38 families (three sibling pairs were included). There were 23 younger children (12 boys and 11 girls) and 18 older children (8 boys and 10 girls) in the sample. Details of the source of contact of the 38 families included in the study are shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Sources of contact of 38 families included in the study

Sources of contact	Number of families
Primary Level Schools	19
Second Level Schools	13
Agency Newsletters	1
Support Agencies	3
Snowballing	2
Total	38

All letters and information packs that were used to recruit the sample of parents and children are included in Appendix III. Chapter Four provides a detailed descriptive account of the 38 families that participated.

Pilot study

During the recruitment stage, five families were identified who did not fit exactly with the study criteria. In three cases, a partner had been living in the home, but this arrangement had not ceased at

least a year prior to the study. In another case, the mother revealed how herself and her partner had separated when their daughter was two years old, but had then reunited and lived together for a period when the child was older. Thus, this child was older when her father left for the second time. In the final case, while the child had lived with one parent from the age of two, she had alternated between living with her mother and her father separately in the early years. When she was four years of age, following an acrimonious separation involving lengthy court proceedings, the father obtained custody of the children, and the child then moved from living with her mother into another house with her father.

The parents and one child from each family were invited to take part in a pilot phase of the study. The aim of the pilot study was to determine whether the research instruments and interview schedules were appropriate and effective in eliciting the required information. A small number of amendments were made following these interviews. Repetitious questions were omitted, and the order of questions was changed, so that more sensitive material was not addressed until later in the interview. The questions that were used with the younger children were checked to ensure that the language and concepts were accessible. While it was originally intended to only use the Family Links and Emotional Closeness Maps with children aged 10 to 14, it was found to work well with younger and older children as well. Furthermore, not all of the younger children wanted to draw a picture of their family, and these children seemed to enjoy and understand the use of the Maps. Finally, in terms of the parental interview, many of the probes were not required, as parents were willing and capable of forming a complete narrative of their experiences without prompting.

Data Collection

Following agreement to participate, interviews were set up between the participants and the researcher. The individual interviews with parents were conducted within a variety of settings, including people's homes, local coffee shops, hotel bars, and once, in an office in the researcher's workplace. The individual interviews with children were carried out in their own homes, or in the case of three younger boys, in the library of their school. At all times, the interview was between the researcher and the participant alone – either child or adult. In all cases, another adult was in close proximity, and the door of the room was left open. As stated previously, two parent-child dyads were excluded from the study, as the mothers were insistent upon sitting in on their children's interviews. All interviews were audio-taped. While the majority of mothers and all of the children and young people appeared to be relatively comfortable with this, three mothers asked for the tape-recorder to be switched off while they related a particularly sensitive or distressing incident or story, and this was done.

Interview Process & Role of the Researcher

There is an increasing recognition among researchers that interviews are not neutral tools of gathering information, but rather active interactions between individuals leading to negotiated, contextually based results. The nature of the social dynamic of the interview can shape the nature of the knowledge being generated (Fontana & Frey, 2003). Kvale (1996) has described the qualitative interview as "a construction site for knowledge" (p. 14), literally an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a subject of mutual interest. Miller and Crabtree (1999) describe the in-depth interview as a "constructed dialogue" (p. 101), and as a result no two interviews are the same. Miller and Crabtree (1999) suggested that the interviewer's role is:

> "...to assume a low profile but encouraging stance, to put the informant at ease, to acknowledge the value of the information and assign competence to the interviewee, to take on the role of the respondent...the interviewer should display desired enthusiasm; be nonjudgmental; show interest in the information as it unfolds; be empathic; and avoid forgetting previous answers, condescension, and rigidity" (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p. 101-102).

While the researcher aspired to assume this role in the interviews, the nature of the interview also depended on the participant's ease with the situation, and the nature of the relationship and rapport that had been generated between the respondent and the researcher. Moreover, the process of collecting data (and analysing data) cannot be considered as independent from the researcher, and the social categories to which the researcher belongs, such as age, gender and race (Emond, 2005). Furthermore, the way in which informants both construct and respond to the interview setting and the researcher cannot always be known. However, the following observations were recorded at the time of the interviews, and may provide some insight into the way in which the researcher was perceived by the mothers who were interviewed:

> During the course of the interviews, it was not uncommon for parents to ask me about my own background: many of the mothers were interested to know where I was from, where my interest in the study of parenting and children came from, and whether I myself was a parent. As an Irish female, in my mid-twenties, who had grown up in Dublin where almost all of the mothers were living with their children, there was some shared knowledge of local settings and discourses. On the other hand, given that I was not a parent, I was an outsider to the emotional and practical experience of being a parent.

Conducting in-depth interviews with children and young people requires special consideration; as well as the issue of children's perceptions of the adult researcher and the impact of participation in the research upon the child's world (Emond, 2005). Mayall (2000) has argued that it is impossible to eliminate differential power statuses of children and adults within the research context. Adults typically have authority over children, and children may be particularly susceptible to demand characteristics of the interview situation and may find it difficult to disagree or say things, which

they believe may be unacceptable (Greene & Hill, 2005). In relation to her own research with children, Thorne (1993) described the adoption of the *least-adult role* attempting to blend into their social world by occupying a position somewhere between their adult authority figures (teachers) and the children she was observing. The researcher in the current study, attempted as far as possible to minimise her status as an adult when interviewing the children:

> As a starting point, I was presented as a student, who needed their help, and was grateful for it. In other ways, attempts were made to present myself in the role of a less powerful adult: this involved dressing casually, and offering the children and young people choices about the time and venue for the interview, although in many cases the children consulted with their parents and acquiesced to parental suggestions. At the beginning of the interview, I emphasised that there were no 'correct' or 'incorrect' answers to my questions – it was not a test situation and I was simply interested in hearing their own views and ideas, whatever they may be. I also emphasised to the children that they could terminate the interview or request that the tape-recorder be switched off at any stage, and they did not have to answer a question if they did not wish to do so.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted within the parameters of the General Guidelines for Good Research Practice as outlined by the Trinity College Dublin, and the ethical guidelines for conducting research with children, as outlined by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin. These latter set of guidelines were derived from a set of four core values: expressing commitment to the well-being of the participants involved in the research process (beneficence); commitment to doing no harm to participants (non-maleficence); commitment to the rights of those involved; and being child-centred in its approach to research, listening to children, and treating them in a fair manner. The relationship between participants and researchers is characterised by honesty, where information about the nature, purpose and results of research studies are communicated to participants, in a comprehensible manner. Ethical approval for the study was also granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology, Trinity College, Dublin (See Appendix IV).

The principle of voluntary, informed consent was a central aspect of the recruitment process. As described, an attempt was made to ensure that parents and children were aware of the nature of the research, what participation would entail, and what would happen to the information collected during the interviews. This was achieved through the distribution of leaflets and letters to prospective participants, and open discussions between parents, children and the researcher. Upon agreement to be interviewed, parents signed consent forms indicating their willingness to be interviewed. They were assured that the information would be treated confidentially, and although the stories they told and information they provided would be used, they would not be identifiable in any presentation of

the content of the interviews. Parents also signed consent forms indicating their willingness to allow the researcher invite their children to participate. Parents were told that the information received during the child's interview would not be discussed with them, except in the event that the child disclosed information indicating that their safety was under threat in some way. However, this discussion with the parent would not take place without prior discussion with the child and the researcher's supervisors. A similar consent procedure operated with the children. They were informed that all information would be treated confidentially, and any identifying information would be changed in the dissemination of research findings. It was emphasised to the children that the information they supplied would not be discussed with their parents, except if they revealed information indicating that their safety was under threat (e.g. disclosure of child abuse). The researcher explained that if such a disclosure occurred, the issue would be addressed through discussion with relevant parties, but this would not happen without their prior knowledge. This situation did not arise during the course of the fieldwork (See Appendix V for copies of consent forms).

Data Management & Analysis

One of the challenges in the analysis of qualitative data is to use an approach that is appropriate to the research questions and responsive to the complexities of the data, while working within the parameters of accepted methods. However, as stated by Robson (2002, pp. 456): "There is no clear and accepted set of conventions for [qualitative] analysis corresponding to those observed with quantitative data". Within this context, the present study applied a form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which draws on components of different methods in order to ensure a systematic and sensitive approach, described in such a way as to allow the reader judge its appropriateness. Therefore, the method of analysis used strives to be both transparent and replicable.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, generating over 1,500 pages of interview transcripts. Each interview was assigned a unique identity code to protect the anonymity of the participants. This process of transcription offered the researcher the opportunity to immerse herself in the data. This familiarisation is an important component of the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first stage of data analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts and initial breaking down of the data into smaller, meaningful chunks. This process is similar to open coding in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and involves the attachment of tags or labels to chunks of transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initially, broad categories were derived using a combination of inductive and deductive procedures (Mayring, 2000). Some of the categories were determined beforehand from the literature review and corresponded to the questions and headings used in the interview schedule (deductive). Other categories however emerged following repeated readings of

the interview transcripts and identification of key concepts (inductive). The use of broad categories at this stage means that large amounts of text can be coded relatively quickly and segments are longer, with context preserved. Examples of these broad descriptive categories included: family concept, parenting roles, finance, father-child relations, mother-child relations, inter-parental relations, and views on living in a one-parent family. These categories contained all data pertaining to those particular topics and were not mutually exclusive, but represented an important first step in organising the data for further analysis, and generating initial impressions. This process led to the generation of a number of coding manuals, containing all data belonging to a particular category. These coding manuals are essentially data management tools (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) and enable the organisation of similar or related texts for ease in interpretation. These initial coding manuals were created using QSR NUD*IST Vivo data management software, which facilitated easy retrieval of meaningful chunks of transcripts.

Following this process, the identification of themes took place, where some data are classified as belonging to a particular theme while other data are excluded on the grounds that they do not belong to the theme in question. These themes must make conceptual sense, not only in relation to the data, but also in relation to other themes, and overall form more precise and complete explanations about the phenomena under analysis (Dey, 1993). As an illustration, conceptual themes such as "stability", "comparison with wider context" and "loss" were created, and excerpts from transcripts were stored under these labels when these concepts emerged. Essentially, this process involved searching for and reviewing themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The final phase of data analysis involved refinement of these themes and delineation of their specific properties, through the constant comparative method of analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby all items of data assigned to the same theme are compared. This allows the researcher to identify "the essence of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 92), and also to identify any sub-themes. For example, within the broader theme of "comparison to wider social context", sub-themes of "being different" and "similarity to others" were identified. Themes were constantly refined as analysis progressed and new concepts and the characteristics that comprised them emerged. The analysis also involved searching and accounting for negative instances to ensure that all evidence is confronted, not just data that fits with core themes and arguments (Seale, 1999). The final product from this process was a coding frame, which summarised the categories within the data, the themes within each category and any sub-themes identified within the themes. This coding frame is presented in Appendix VI.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the steps involved in the analysis process, and also highlights the stages at which methods of reliability were used, as described in the following section of the chapter.

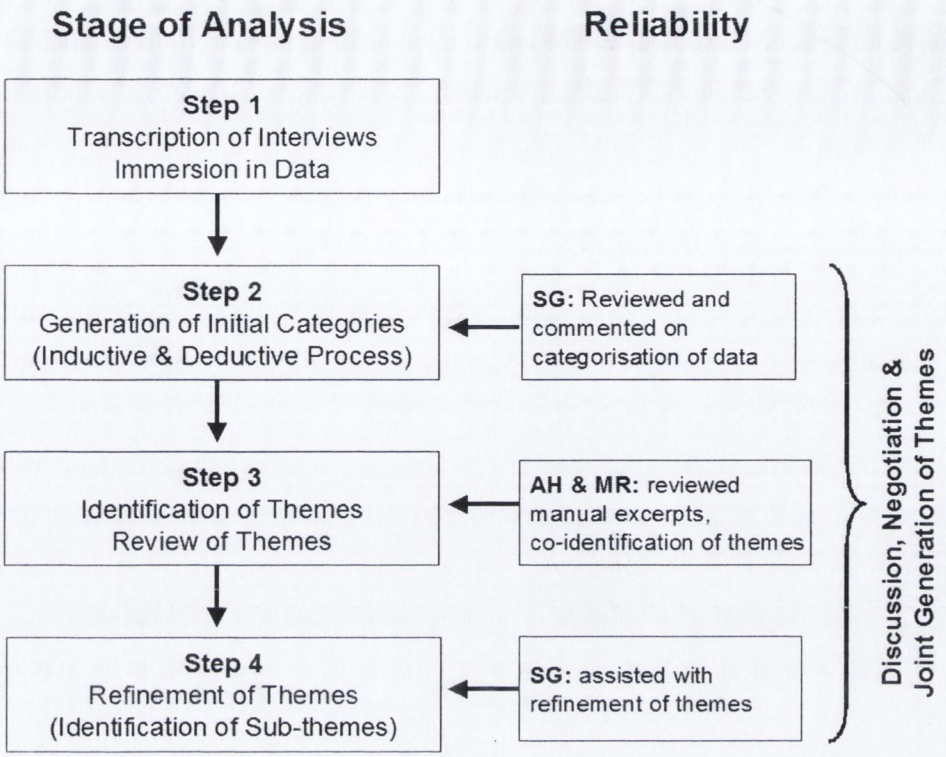


Figure 2: An outline of the stages of the analysis process

Finally, having identified themes and sub-themes within the data, the process of reporting findings highlighted the existence of *patterns and relationships between themes.* Identifying and reporting these patterns required an approach that is distinct from the aforementioned analysis process. Central to the identification of these relational patterns was the researcher's reflection upon the themes themselves, a process to similar to Busch et al.'s (2005) concept of relational analysis. To illustrate, younger and older children sometimes highlighted contrasting themes or specific discourses emerged in the description of experiences. These represented relational patterns that permeated the boundaries of different themes.

Issues of Reliability & Validity

Many writers have debated the appropriateness of concepts such as reliability and validity for qualitative research (Robson, 2002). On the one hand, these concepts, which have been wedded to a positivist epistemology, rely upon the idea of an objective reality or truth to validate knowledge Therefore, the transfer of terms to an interpretive paradigm based upon an alternative concept of reality is considered to be inappropriate (Tobin & Begley, 2004). On the other hand however, Morse (1999) has suggested that if concepts of validity and reliability are abandoned altogether, the concept of rigour, and therefore, integrity and competence, is also rejected. So long as the concepts of validity and reliability are placed within the epistemology of qualitative work and are appropriate to

the aims of the interpretive paradigm, they can still be usefully applied (Golafshani, 2003). Thus, while some qualitative researchers have rejected the terms completely in favour of others (such as trustworthiness, soundness, transferability, credibility), others continue to use the terms 'validity' and 'reliability' to denote quality and rigour, and *confidence* in the data, the process of analysis and the resulting findings. For the purpose of this description, in line with Robson (2002) and Lewis and Ritchie (2003), the terms 'reliability' and 'validity' will still be used.

Adopting Robson's (2002) concept of validity as credibility, Flick's (1992) concept of triangulation was invoked as the main strategy used to ensure the credibility of the data and to add breadth and depth to our understanding. In the present study, this involved the use of different data sources (mothers and children) and different methods of data collection (interviews and pictorial tools with children), thereby increasing the credibility of the findings. With the children, the use of separate research tools as well as the interview schedule contributed an added dimension to the investigation of their family lives. Furthermore, analyses of data from different sources and across diverse methods of inquiry enabled a more comprehensive and nuanced picture to emerge from the study findings.

Drawing upon Lewis and Ritchie's (2003) concept of reliability as "the replicability of research findings...the soundness of the study" (pp. 270-271), checks on the reliability of the process of data analysis and interpretation focused on coding and analysis as a group activity. Seale (1999) suggests that the development of coding schemes in which several researchers participate and seek to resolve differences of interpretation can facilitate the transparency of the interpretive work done in data analysis. In the present study, three individuals assisted with the analysis. One (SG) was a lecturer in Research Design and Analysis in a School of Psychology in a Dublin university, who had experience in conducting and teaching qualitative research methods. Two independent researchers, one a doctoral student with a background in social work (MR), the other a PhD graduate in psychology (AH), both with experience in qualitative research, were also involved. These individuals were familiar with the overall aim of the research and some underpinning theoretical principals. Firstly, SG reviewed initial categorisation of data offering comments on the classification of text and the labelling of categories. Following this, MR and AH were provided with excerpts of the coding manuals and came together to discuss their interpretation of the data with the researcher. This facilitated the identification of themes beyond those identified by the researcher alone, thus reducing researcher bias. Finally, SG assisted with the refinement of themes and delineation of sub-themes. At all points, where there was disagreement, consensus was achieved through discussion, negotiation and joint generation of themes (Bryman & Burgess, 1994).

In addition to these formal procedures used to enhance the rigour of this research, reflexivity also permeated the process of analysis. Within the qualitative tradition, the issue of *reflexivity* represents an important aspect of how analysis is conducted and interpretation is achieved, perhaps over and

above the issue of reliability (Alldred & Burman, 2005). As the researcher, I brought to the research, my own package of values, feelings and interests, constructed through my own history of childhood and family; and through my immersion in the research pertaining to the area. Therefore, the data are inevitably presented through the particular "lens" of the researcher. However, the use of multiple coders helped to highlight the way in which data are interpreted from multiple perspectives.

While these steps represent only some of the procedures that can used to enhance trustworthiness of the research and confidence in the findings, they were deemed to be the most appropriate. For example, given the number of families and individuals involved in the present study, procedures such as member checking or respondent validation would have demanded time resources beyond which were available. In addition, returning to a small sample of the participants would have had limited impact, given the breadth and variability of experiences described by participants in the present study. The implications of choice of procedures pertaining to reliability and validity will be considered in the discussion chapter of the thesis.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to describe the research design and methods used to carry out the exploration of children's and parents' experience of one-parent family life. The study is located within a qualitative paradigm, appropriate to exploration and understanding of subjective realities and lived experience. The chapter detailed the lengthy and arduous process of accessing and recruiting into the study a specific group of one-parent family children and their parents. By the end of the 14-month fieldwork process, a total of 79 in-depth individual interviews had been conducted with 41 children, who had all lived in a one-parent family since infancy, and their mothers (38 mothers).

The remaining chapters present the outcomes of the analytic process of making sense of the participants' narratives. In the chapters that follow, the accounts of both mothers and children have been reflected. However, given the breadth and complexity of issues and the number of families under consideration, their narratives are represented in a partial and fractured manner. While dominant themes are obviously important, the presentation of the findings also attempts to convey the complex and sometimes contradictory perspectives of the study's participants. Written representations of participants' experiences are supported by direct quotations, which have not been changed in any way except to preserve anonymity. In addition, relational patterns between themes are described. Numerical data and descriptive statistics are presented where quantification of the information was possible (for example in terms of the frequency of contact between children and their fathers, age of participants, income level).

CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY'S FAMILY CONTEXTS

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the thirty-eight families that participated in the research, and to highlight the key structural contexts within which the family roles and relationships are nested. Firstly, the basic demographic profiles of the children[7] and mothers are provided. Following this, the nature of the contact between mothers and non-resident[8] fathers, and between children and fathers is described. The chapter proceeds to consider broader family and household contexts, including details relating to siblings, partners, and the composition of households.

The chapter concludes by considering the educational background and employment circumstances of mothers, and financial circumstances of the families. These structural contexts represent important constraints and resources in both mothers' and children's lives. The contexts of the families as described in this chapter highlight that the sample of one-parent families was not homogeneous. However, in all situations, the two inclusion criteria as outlined in the previous chapter were met.

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[7] Throughout the chapter (and in subsequent chapters), the terms 'child' and 'children' are used to refer to the forty-one children and adolescents who participated in the study – literally the offspring of the parents – despite the fact that the terms 'young people', 'adolescents', and 'youth' might be more appropriate to describe the older age group (ranging in age from 13 to 17 years).

[8] A note about terminology: Buchanan et al. (1996) used the term 'residence' to refer to arrangements regarding the child's *living arrangements*. Specifically, they considered three residential arrangements, primary mother residence, primary father residence (both sole residence) and dual residence, where the child's residential time is shared equally between two parental households. In contrast, 'custody' is a legal term typically used to describe post-divorce *parenting arrangements*. A distinction is made between *physical* custody, pertaining to decisions about children's residence and their time with each parent, and *legal* custody, referring to parental authority to make major decisions (Emery, 1999). In joint physical custody, children spend approximately the same with each parent, thus joint physical custody is, in principle, equivalent to a dual residence arrangement. However, Buchanan et al. (1996) reported in their study that parents with joint physical custody often only shared joint legal custody, with residential arrangements resembling sole residence arrangements. Thus, terms relating to custodial arrangements may carry some ambiguity and not resemble actual living arrangements. In the case of the current sample, all children were in sole residence arrangements, living the majority of their time, with their mothers. For this reason, the terms 'resident mothers' and 'non-resident fathers' are used and terms pertaining to custody are not used.

One biological parent (in all cases the father) had been absent from the home since the child was an infant, i.e. since two-and-a-half years of age or younger; and there was no other partner, currently or in the past year, residing in the home.

Profile of Children

Forty-one children, including three pairs of siblings, from 38 families participated in the study. There were 20 boys and 21 girls in the sample. For the purpose of analysis by age, the children were divided into two broad age categories relating to whether they were attending primary school or second-level school. There were 12 boys and 11 girls in the younger age group, and 8 boys and 10 girls in the older age group. The ages of the younger children ranged from 8 to 12 years, with a mean age of 9.91 years (s.d. = 1.53). The ages of the older group ranged from 13 to 17 years, with a mean age of 15 years (s.d. = 1.57). The three sibling pairs were all in the older age group and each pair of siblings had the same father. These details are summarised in the table below:

Table 4.1: Age and gender details of the children (n = 41)

	Frequency (%)	Gender Breakdown	Age Profile
Younger Age Group	23 (56%)	12 boys	Range: 8-12 years
		11 girls	Mean: 9.91 years (s.d. = 1.53)
Older Age Group	18 (44%)	8 boys	Range: 13-17 years
		10 girls	Mean: 15 years (s.d. = 1.57)

Profile of Mothers

Age

Thirty-eight mothers participated in the study. The ages of the mothers ranged from 28 years to 52 years, with a mean age of 39.97 years (s.d. = 6.33). Half of the mothers (n = 19) had only one child, eleven of them had two children, while the remaining eight mothers had more than two children each. For those 19 mothers with more than one child, eight of them had more than one child by the same father, while in 11 cases there were two fathers involved.

Length of Time Parenting Alone

The length of time the mothers had been parenting without a partner in the home varied considerably and depended on the age of their children. Parenting alone was not a new experience for any of the mothers - just over two-thirds of the parents (n = 26) had been parenting alone for 10 or more years. The mothers had been parenting alone for between 7 and 17 years, with a mean time of 11.4 years (s.d. = 2.89).

Routes into Lone Parenthood

The various routes into single parenthood are often defined in terms of the parents' marital status. However, among the sample, the routes into single parenthood were complex, and all mothers could not be easily categorised into groups according to their marital status. In cases where the mother had children by two fathers, it is possible to describe their route into lone parenthood in two ways, each relating to the particular father involved. Here however, the route into single parenthood is described only in terms of the fathers of the children interviewed: six mothers had been married and were subsequently divorced from the fathers, while one mother had been widowed following her husband's death. Thirty-one of the mothers were not married to the father of the child/children interviewed. As far as could be ascertained, none of these mothers had decided a priori to become single parents.

Contact with Fathers

This section is concerned with the contact with fathers, and the previous history of co-habitation with fathers. Inter-parental contact is considered separately to children's contact with their fathers. As indicated above, the majority of fathers and mothers had not been married to each other (n = 31). The remaining fathers and mothers had been married – in six cases the parents had divorced, and in one case, the father was deceased. Three other fathers had died subsequent to the separation from the child's mother. Children were aged three, three and nine years, respectively, when this happened, and none of these fathers had been married to the child's mother.

History of Co-habitation

Half of the mothers (n = 19) had lived with the father of the child at one point – those mothers who had been married to the fathers cohabited with them during the marriage (n = 7) and 12 of the unmarried mothers. Thus, 19 of the unmarried mothers had never lived with the father of their child.

From the child's perspective, 24 had *never* experienced living with both parents. This includes 21 children of the 19 unmarried mothers who had never cohabited with the father, and 3 children, whose father left the home during the mother's pregnancies (2 of these mothers were married). For the 17 children who had lived with both parents, the age of the child at the time the father left ranged from 8 months to 2 ½ years, with a mean age of 19.5 months (s.d. = 8.3). Thus, the children in the current study had lived apart from their father from a very young age. These details are summarised in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: History of cohabitation between mothers, children, and fathers

	Children	Mothers
Cohabited with Father	17	19 (7 married, 12 unmarried)
Did not cohabit with Father	24	19 (all unmarried)

Nature of Contact between Mothers and Fathers

The most striking feature of the inter-parental relationship was the lack of regular contact and involvement in each other's lives. Patterns of mother-father contact are summarised in the table below:

Table 4.3: Frequency of contact between mothers and fathers (n = 34)[9]

Nature of contact	Frequency
No contact since pregnancy or shortly after birth	10
Complete loss of contact over the years	7
Occasional phone-call/meeting relating to father-child visits	15
Weekly contact	2

Three broad patterns of contact were observed. Firstly, almost half of the mothers reported that they had not had contact with their child's father, either since the child's birth or in the last number of years. The second pattern of inter-parental contact was characterised by occasional conversations by telephone and/or brief face-to-face meetings when the child was being collected from or dropped for a visit with the father. Three mothers mentioned occasionally sharing special occasions together with the child, such as Christmas Day or the child's Communion Day. Five mothers referred to one or two holidays, where they had spent a number of days with the father either when the child and mother visited the father abroad, or the father travelled to Ireland to visit the child.

Finally, there were two exceptions to the general pattern of distance and non-involvement that characterised the nature of the inter-parental contact. In one case, the mother and father had re-kindled their relationship within a year prior to the interview and spent time together almost every weekend. Prior to this, the mother and father had remained distant since their child's birth and had only sporadic contact with each other. In another exceptional case, the mother and father had very regular contact relating to the child, by means of three or four telephone conversations per week.

Nature of Contact between Children and Fathers

In terms of the frequency and patterns of child-father contact, two distinct categories emerged: Half of the children currently had *no* contact with their father (n = 19), while the other half had maintained contact over the years. The table below illustrates the frequency of contact between children and their non-resident fathers.

[9] Thirty-four mothers are considered here, as four fathers were deceased.

Table 4.4: Frequency of contact between children and fathers (n = 37) [10].

Level of contact	Frequency
Never met	6
One memory of ever seeing father	4
Contact ceased in previous years	9
Occasional contact – less than once a year	2
Occasional contact – once/twice a year	5
Contact at least once every one to three months	3
Contact at least once every one to two weeks	8

Among the children who had no contact with their fathers, six of the children had *never* met their father, and four children each had one memory of seeing (but not meeting or being introduced to) their father. Nine of the children recalled having had face-to-face contact with their father in the past but this had subsequently ceased at least one year prior to the interview. For five of these children, contact had only been maintained during the early years of their lives.

The remaining 18 children currently had contact with their fathers, and within this group there was considerable variation in terms of the frequency of contact. Just under half of these children met their fathers on a weekly or fortnightly basis, and for some of these children, this involved an overnight stay with their fathers. For the majority of these children, this pattern of contact had remained relatively stable throughout their lives. In all of these cases, the father lived near the Dublin area. In three cases, the children spent time with their fathers at least once every two to three months. Here, fathers lived outside Dublin, in other parts of the country and visits involved spending long weekends or part of school holidays together.

In seven cases, fathers lived abroad, a situation which no doubt constrained contact with their children. All of these children had occasional contact - five children saw their father approximately once a year, and face-to-face contact usually involved an annual trip to their father's home. The remaining two children's fathers also lived abroad – in New Zealand and the United States – and both of these children only saw their fathers once every couple of years. Despite seeing their fathers irregularly, these children and fathers maintained contact through letters, e-mails and telephone calls. The nature and patterns of contact as described above represent an important context for the development of close father-child relationships, as considered in Chapter Eight.

[10] Thirty-seven children are considered here, as four fathers were deceased.

Family & Household Composition

Presence of Siblings

In terms of siblings within the families, a complex and diverse picture emerged. Here we are considering full siblings (where two children have the same biological parents), half siblings (where two children share one biological parent) and stepsiblings (where two children do not share a biological parent, but are related as a result of their respective parents' relationship with each other). The table below illustrates the different categories of sibling relationships of the children in the study.

Table 4.5: Frequency of different categories of sibling relationships (n = 41).

Type of sibling relationship	Frequency
No siblings at all	12
Full sibling only	6
Half sibling only	14
Full + Half sibling	7
Full + Step sibling	2
Total	41

Twelve children had no siblings at all. Fifteen children had full siblings; of these six had full siblings only, seven had a combination of full and half siblings, and two had full and stepsiblings. Fourteen children had half siblings only. Thus, over one third of the children had half siblings only, while almost one-third had no siblings at all.

Where children had half siblings, in some cases, they shared the same father, in other cases, half siblings shared the same mothers: in six cases, the children had half siblings where they had the same mother; in nine cases, children and their half siblings shared the same father; while in a further six cases, children had two sets of half siblings, firstly where they shared the same mother but not father and secondly where they shared the same father but not mother.

For the two children with stepsiblings, this situation arose as a result of their fathers' relationship with women who already had children.

Patterns of Contact among Siblings

There was wide variation in terms of the frequency and patterns of contact between siblings, and clear differences emerged, depending on whether siblings shared the same mother or father. For example, in all 12 cases, where the mother had a child by another man, the child had lived and grown up with the half sibling(s), and so may not have distinguished them as such (i.e. half as opposed to full siblings). In 15 cases, where the half sibling was from the father's relationship with another woman, there was less homogeneity in terms of the siblings' relationships. In six cases, the child

had never met or was not aware of the existence of half siblings, in eight cases the child had some contact with their half siblings, while in one case, the child lived with his half sister.

Current Household Composition

In terms of current household composition, half of the households consisted of *just* the mother and the child (n = 19). In a further 15 cases, the household consisted of the mother, the child, and siblings (full or half and ranging in number from one to three other siblings). In the remaining four cases, the mother and child lived with a combination of siblings, grandparents and uncles.

Changes in Household Composition

Overall, the lives of these children appeared to be characterised by considerable patterns of change in terms of the composition of households, and where they lived. Household composition tended to change over time for a large majority of the children, predominantly with the birth of younger siblings and departure of older siblings, but also with the passage of new partners, family members and friends into and out of the home (the movement of fathers out of the home has already been considered). Ten of the children experienced a change in household composition with the arrival of one or more new siblings, while four of the children experienced an older sibling leaving the home. In seven cases, other family members (e.g. uncles) or mothers' friends lived in the household, but in most cases this was relatively temporary, ranging from six months to one year.

There was surprisingly little movement of new partners (i.e. not the father of the child) into and out of the home. Only five mothers (all of older children) cohabited with a new partner (all male) for a period during the child's lifetime including two situations where the partner stayed six months, and three other situations, where the partner stayed one year (when child was six), three years (when child was six to nine), and four years (when child was 8 to 12 years), respectively.

Eight mothers were currently in a relationship – in these situations the new partners (all men) were not cohabiting. Finally, in four cases, the children had spent their early years living in their grandparents' home, before their mothers established a separate household.

Changes in Residence

In addition to changes in household composition, about three-quarters of the children had experienced at least one change in residence (n = 31). Thirteen children had moved house only once, six children had moved house twice, while twelve children had moved house more than twice. For 11 children, at least one of their changes in residence also involved moving back to Ireland from abroad, where they had lived for a number of years since the time they were born. Thus, four children returned from England (three of them before the age of 3, and one child when he was 11); three children returned to Ireland from the United States (one at the age of 4 and two at the age of 7); while two other children returned from Canada (having also lived in New Zealand) and Italy,

respectively, before their second birthdays. Such changes may reflect a degree of instability in the family lives of these children, related to living in rented accommodation, and the dissolution of the parental relationship.

Education, Employment & Financial Circumstances

This section considers the education profile of the sample of mothers, along with the employment, financial, and housing circumstances of the families. Further to a basic description of families' circumstances, the *significance* of these distal contexts clearly emerged from the mothers' analysis – in short, the variation in these contexts mattered for the roles and relationships within the families.

Education

The sample of mothers was characterised by considerable variability in terms of education levels, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 4.6: Highest level of education initially achieved by mothers (n = 38)

Education Level	Frequency
Primary Level only	3
Completed Intermediate Examinations	9
Completed Leaving Certificate Examinations	16
Third Level Qualification	8
Nurse Training	2

The ages at which mothers completed education ranged from 14 to 26 years, with a mean age of 18.22 years (s.d. = 2.74). Three mothers had left school initially with no qualification; nine mothers had left school after their Intermediate Certificate examinations, around the age of 16. The remaining 26 mothers all completed second level school and sat their Leaving Certificate examinations, around the age of 18. Of these, ten went onto college or university (three achieving a post-graduate qualification) and two completed training as a nurse. Twelve parents returned to education at a later stage, all after they had become parents. Of these, three had left school before their Leaving Certificate but went on to complete college diplomas and in one case, a primary degree. Three mothers who had previously attained their Leaving Certificate went on to complete either a primary degree or post-graduate degree and six mothers who had received primary degrees proceeded to obtain post-graduate degrees.

Employment Circumstances

The majority of the mothers was in employment. Only four mothers were not working outside the home – one was a former school teacher who had retired due to ill-health, one was recovering from a

substance use disorder, one was caring for an incapacitated parent and one had no financial need to work.

The remaining 34 mothers were in either full- or part-time employment. Half of the mothers (n = 19) worked full-time, equivalent to approximately 40 hours per week, while 15 mothers worked part-time (20 hours per week)[11]. In the majority of cases where the mothers worked only part-time, their work hours coincided with the time during which their children were at school, thus eliminating the need for after-school care.

Working fewer hours also ensured that mothers earned below the ceiling level to allow them to maintain some of their State Benefit (One-Parent Family Payment [OPFP][12]). It was clear that the employment options of some of these mothers were constrained because of the restrictions around how much money they could earn without losing their OPF payment, as well as the cost of child-care:

> *"The rent combined with childminding, I can't afford [to work full-time]... so the only way I can work is to work part-time...because then I retain some social welfare benefits..."* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

As one mother indicated, being a single parent, you have to be in a position to pay for the privilege of working. Simply put, some mothers could not afford to work full-time or in certain types of work.

> *"My right as a citizen to work is taken away by two factors, private rent and childminding. They don't add up to a normal wage, you can't do it on one wage, and my thing has always been that if I got social housing and my rent would go down and then I would be able to afford childminding...but those two things have been the combining factor in stopping me from being able to work full-time and being independent of State help"*

In terms of childcare, 14 parents, 12 of whom worked full-time, availed of after-school care. In 11 cases, a grandparent or a childminder provided this care; in two cases the children attended a nursery after school. Only one mother, who worked full-time, needed to avail of full-time crèche care for her

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[11] Four mothers who worked part-time were employed as part of the Community Employment Scheme. These schemes are in place to provide up to 20 hours per week employment to individuals who are long-term unemployed, including recipients of the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). Sponsors from the non-profit voluntary sector or community groups run the schemes and the jobs involve working within the community. All four mothers worked as Special Needs Assistants within local primary schools. Four other mothers, currently in employment had previously been employed as part of the CE scheme and were offered either full- or part-time employment arising from their CE scheme job placements.

[12] The One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) was introduced in 1997 to replace the original Lone Parent's Allowance and Deserted Wife's Benefit, different payments to single parent families allocated on the basis of whether the parents had previously been married.

3-year old child. Particularly for the mothers of the younger children, their participation in the labour market was highly dependent upon the availability and affordability of child-care. In the absence of State-funded child-care, many of the mothers depended upon the provision of informal care within their social networks to enable them to work. This issue will be considered in Chapter Six.

Financial Circumstances

Half of the mothers were in receipt of financial support from the State, although all of these mothers were in either full or part-time employment. Eighteen mothers were in receipt of the OPFP, and one mother was in receipt of a pension from the state. All had been in receipt of the benefit more or less since they began parenting alone[13]. Of these, 13 were working part-time and 3 were working full-time. As a result, these mothers were in receipt of a smaller OPFP amount, adjusted on the basis of their wages. Not surprisingly perhaps, mothers in receipt of the OPFP had lower levels of net income per month than mothers not in receipt of benefits, as summarised in the table below.

Table 4.7: Levels of net income per month (n = 37)[14]

	Levels of Net Income per month (€)			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
In receipt of OPFP	1544.75	233.41	1083.00	2000.00
Not in receipt of OPFP	2401.06	759.06	1400.00	4500.00
Total group	1985.13	708.81	1083.00	4500.00

It was clear that financial circumstances varied considerably within the sample. Some families were confronted with considerable financial difficulties, as mothers' narratives indicated the extent to which they struggled financially, surviving *"on a wing and a prayer"* and *"from hand to mouth"*.

> *"We were really penniless, I mean poverty they say does not exist, but it does, I mean really, like I'd chop up firewood, I had to get funding from the Vincent de Paul for the crèche...it was a bit like, to buy a brush was like, it was the difference between eat that week or not, you know so stupid things like scouring pads become big major things in your life"* (A2016, mother of 16-year-old girl)

Over a quarter of the mothers, primarily of younger children, described how they just about scraped by each month, with every cent accounted for and limited manoeuvrability in terms of their monthly budgets. This meant that any unforeseen circumstances, such as illness or the need for household

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[13] Three other mothers, all of children within the older age group, had previously been in receipt of OPFP prior to commencing full-time employment.

[14] This analysis excludes one household which lived off a trust-fund, amounting to almost €400,000 per annum, which the mother had inherited following her father's death.

repairs, could create problems. For example, one mother described how she could not afford to become ill or take a day off work. Other consequences of such financial difficulty included not being able to pay bills on time, and the need to borrow money for certain events, such as Christmas, and going back to school. A number of mothers described how they had been or were in arrears on their rent and bills, or were constantly in debt. Three mothers currently or in the past relied upon charitable donations. Living on the OPFP payment alone was simply not viable without earning some extra income. Doing some *"cash-in-hand"* work such as cleaning, childminding or offering student accommodation facilitated better financial security.

At the other end of the spectrum, a number of mothers worked as teaching, health and business professionals, and had no financial concerns. Just over one-quarter of the mothers described themselves as comfortably positioned in financial terms.

Receipt of Maintenance

Another source of 'income' to be considered is the payment of maintenance from the non-resident fathers[15]. Almost one third of the mothers were in receipt of maintenance from the father (11 out of 34). The amounts paid ranged from €110 to €390 per month, with a mean of €233.80 (s.d. = 78.12). In two exceptional circumstances, the non-resident fathers also paid the rent or mortgage every month. The mean length of time that the mother had been in receipt of maintenance was eight years (s.d. = 5.98). Four mothers had only recently (in the previous two years) begun to receive maintenance payments, following court proceedings, while two mothers who had previously received maintenance from their children's fathers were no longer in receipt of this. In one case, payment ceased when the father moved back to his home in France, in another case, maintenance was surrendered when the mother and her children moved away from the father in the United States back to Ireland. Of the eleven mothers that were in receipt of maintenance payments, three had been married to the father previously, while eight had never been married to the father.

Housing Tenure

Another important implication of the financial circumstances of these families (and indeed more general economic conditions) related to their housing situations. In terms of housing tenure, half of the households were owner-occupiers – in sixteen cases, mothers were re-paying a mortgage on the house, while three mothers owned their property outright. Fifteen households lived in rented accommodation – seven were renting privately, while eight were renting from their local authority (public housing). Four mothers and their children were living in the mother's original family home.

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[15] In four cases the fathers were deceased, thus these families were excluded from this analysis (n = 34).

The amount and proportion of net income that was paid each month towards housing costs depended to a large extent on whether the mother was paying a mortgage or rent to a private landlord or local authority[16]. On average, 18.5% of net income each month was used for rent or mortgage re-payments. Mothers who were renting within the private sector tended to pay the largest proportion of their income on rent. The proportion of net income that was allocated to housing costs is illustrated in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8: Housing costs per month as a proportion of net income

	Percentage of Net Income per month			
Housing Cost	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Mortgage re-payments	17.39%	7.19	5.8%	28.5%
Rent to a private landlord	37.18%	11.07	20.8%	44.0%
Rent to a local authority	10.89%	4.52	5.6%	19.6%
Total group	18.45%	10.86	5.6%	44.0%

Living in one's own home was a favourable situation, particularly as a number of the mothers stated that over time, mortgage re-payments represented a lower proportion of their rising incomes. Furthermore, owning property created a sense of *security*, where families were not vulnerable to a volatile rental market and the demands and restrictions imposed by landlords. This mother described her daughter's reaction after she bought a house:

> *"When we moved into the house the first thing [child] said was 'can we stay here forever now' and I noticed immediately she came to be a lot happier because always living in rented houses, don't be painting on the walls, don't, don't dirty the carpets, don't do this, don't do that...and she could have her own room. I bought her bunk beds because she always wanted bunk beds you know"* (A1002, mother of 12-year-old girl)

The seven families living in privately rented accommodation expended on average the highest proportion of their income on rent - two mothers in this group were awaiting new apartments from their local authorities in new housing schemes that were under construction at the time of the interviews. While those mothers who were not entitled to such housing did not relish the prospect of remaining in private-rented accommodation, this seemed inevitable, given the current housing market[17]. As one mother who worked as a free-lance graphic designer described:

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[16] In two exceptional circumstances, the non-resident fathers paid the rent or mortgage every month, thus these households are excluded from the analysis.

[17] Measures of the increase the price of houses in Ireland reveal an annual rate of national change in the latter years of the 1990s at over 20% per annum, although the rate of growth has slowed somewhat in more recent years (Duffy, 2002). Rapid increases have raised concerns about the affordability of housing for home buyers in Ireland (Fahey, Nolan & Maitre, 2004).

> *"The practicalities of ever being able to afford somewhere secure is not realistic...I would be quite strict with myself on spending and one of the reasons why I would never over stretch the mark in terms of going into the property housing market because of the fear of putting myself in a vulnerable position and ending up in B&B accommodation"* (A2009, mother of 14-year-old girl)

Inadequacy in terms of space was a theme reiterated by a number of the mothers who were dissatisfied with their rented accommodation, but had no option to rent a bigger apartment or house because of the high cost of renting accommodation in Dublin. Two mothers were required to share a bedroom with their daughters, which both mothers admitted was a less than optimal situation:

> *"We basically have a bedroom that's been divided with a partition...and that has become a very big problem for Bella in the last year, very big problem. And I've lost interest in this place...we really need to move, we really need to move, we really need to have separate accommodation and separate rooms, it's been very difficult...it's a tension that's there"* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

While living in privately rented accommodation, which was inadequately maintained, over-crowded and expensive created difficulty, renting within a local authority scheme was not without problems. Three mothers illuminated difficulties, not with the properties per se, but with the areas in which the properties were located. Generally, the areas in which these families lived were characterised by high levels of disadvantage. As one mother described: *"you put all the dregs of society into one place...feeling they're useless"*. Two of the mothers described how their children did not play outside or socialise in the area because it was unsafe.

Working Hard...Staying Poor?

One notable feature about descriptions of the family financial situations was how they were subject to change over time. The majority of mothers who described financial troubles had younger children, while half of the mothers described how their financial situation had eased over time, as their children became older. A number of factors accounted for this. Firstly, as a result of further education, re-training, and community employment schemes, many of the mothers had taken up employment during the period of unprecedented economic growth in Ireland, where job opportunities were abundant[18]. A number of other mothers attributed the easing of their financial situation to job promotions and salary increases. With such increases, the cost of mortgages and child-care became proportionately lower, thereby leaving more disposable income. However, confounding these external factors was the fact that their child was getting older. As children progressively spent longer hours in school, mothers had greater flexibility to pursue education

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[18]The term Celtic Tiger was coined to describe the success of the Irish economy since the beginning of the 1990s. During the economic boom, which has been unsurpassed in Ireland's history, unemployment fell to 3.5% by 2002, average wages grew, and public spending increased significantly (Sweeney, 1999).

courses and employment opportunities, without the need to pay for child-care. However, alleviated financial pressure was not ubiquitous, and six mothers indicated that despite continued years of hard work, their financial situation was not improving. This was partly related to the increased cost of living, and the fact that as children got older, they became more expensive to feed, clothe and entertain. For these mothers, although their disposable income may have increased in absolute terms, the demands on their budget had concomitantly increased, leaving them no better off.

In summary, it was clear that economic resources represented highly significant contexts for the development of roles and relationships within the family. The absence of a second parent meant either the absence of a second income, or the need for childcare outside the home to enable the mother to work. Constrained economic resources intensified the work required to sustain the family and often presented challenges to mothers' relationships with their children. For example, having to share a bedroom in rented accommodation exacerbated conflict between one mother and her teenage daughter; while working long hours reduced other mothers' accessibility and availability to their children.

> *"I hate to say this, but it really does all come down to money...In the early years, I certainly didn't get to enjoy as much time with her as I would like to have, but that was based on the financial situation, it really does come down to ... being able to have the money to pay for all the things that you need to do and to spend time with them at the same time and obviously as the years have passed.... I've been able to spend more time with her and holidays, the kind of things that normal families do...the financial is a huge huge huge factor"* (A2011, mother of 16-year-old girl)

Constraints (and opportunities) presented by the diversity of financial, housing, employment and childcare circumstances represent an important backdrop to children's and mothers' experiences of family life.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to provide a broad descriptive overview of the families that participated in the study. Living in a one-parent household was a familiar arrangement to all participants: the majority of the child's life was spent in a one-parent household, and parenting without the father in the home was a long-standing and established parenting arrangement for all of the mothers interviewed – over two-thirds of the mothers had been parenting alone for over ten years. Despite some variation in the routes into lone parenthood, the majority of mothers had never been married to their child's father, and only half had ever co-habited with their child's father. All of the children interviewed for the study had spent the majority if not all of their lives, living apart from their fathers. Twenty-four children had always lived in one-parent households, and while 17 had lived with both parents, this arrangement had ceased at least six months before the child's third birthday.

Many of these children did not remember a time when their fathers lived with them, and only a small number of the children could recall vague memories of their fathers living in their home.

Fathers played a peripheral role in the lives of the mothers – almost half of the mothers had no contact with their child's father. In the majority of the remaining cases, occasional contact was maintained for the purpose of facilitating contact between the child and father. Half of the children currently had no contact with their fathers, reflecting patterns of diminished contact over the early years of the child's life, or the absence of the father from the beginning. More consistent and frequent patterns of contact characterised another quarter of the children, the majority of whom spent time with their fathers at least once a month. In the remaining cases, fathers lived abroad, and occasional patterns of contact had been maintained consistently over the years. Generally, the patterns of inter-parental and child-father contact observed within the sample were low compared with other Irish research. For example, Hogan et al. (2002) reported that two-thirds of the children in their study saw their non-resident parents (mostly fathers) at least once a week, while Fawcett (1998) reported that two-thirds of her sample of teenagers in Northern Ireland had regular contact with their non-resident parents and only one in ten adolescents had no contact at all. The sample of non-resident fathers in the current study were distinct from the samples in the aforementioned studies, in that fathers had spent little time, if any at all, residing with their children during the early years, the majority of parents had not been married to each other, and only half of the fathers and mothers had ever cohabited.

In addition to frequency of contact with fathers, various other factors contextualise the way in which family roles and parent-child relationships operate within these family contexts, including living arrangements, presence of siblings, employment arrangements, and financial circumstances. By far the most common living arrangement consisted of mother and child living alone, accounting for half of the households. In only four cases the mother and her child lived in the mother's original family home. This may relate to the older age profile of the children as this arrangement may be more common among single parents of younger children – indeed, four other mother-child pairs had previously lived in the mother's family home before the establishment of a separate household as children became older.

Almost one-third of the children had no siblings at all, while the remaining children had either full or half siblings, or a combination of full and half, and full and stepsiblings. The nature of sibling contact varied considerably, and to a large extent, this appeared to depend upon whether the children shared the same father or mother. In seventeen households, children lived with their siblings, while at the other end of the continuum, a small number of the children were not even aware of the existence of half siblings (where they shared the same father). There was little movement of new partners into the household, and less than one in ten children experienced the arrival and subsequent departure of a new partner from their home.

Over two-thirds of mothers had completed second level education and many mothers had returned to education to pursue third-level qualifications. Almost all of the mothers worked outside the home, although over one-third was employed on a part-time basis only. Working part-time enabled mothers to maintain their entitlement to social welfare payments, while also largely eliminating the need to pay child care costs. Less than one-third of the mothers received regular maintenance payments from fathers, perhaps reflecting the peripheral role of many of these fathers in the lives of their children. This trend is in accordance with previous Irish research, which estimated that only one-fifth of OPFP claimants were also in receipt of maintenance, and therefore maintenance payments from fathers do not represent a significant source of income for single parents in Ireland (Government of Ireland, 2000b). Half of the mothers were in receipt of benefits from the State, although the majority of these mothers also worked outside the home. Half of the families had purchased their home, while fifteen families were living in rented accommodation.

Where previous research indicates that single parent families are economically disadvantaged compared with two-parent families, and that lone mothers are less likely to be in paid employment, are more likely to be in receipt of state benefits and live in rented accommodation, and have lower levels of educational attainment compared to married mothers (McCashin, 1993; Haskey, 1993; Fahey & Russell, 2001); these trends were only somewhat reflected in the present sample. For example, just less than one-third of mothers had not completed second level education, in contrast to Fahey and Russell's findings that two-thirds of unmarried mothers had not completed second level education. Furthermore, almost all mothers in the study were in employment, contrary to McKeown et al.'s (2003) finding that half of all one-parent households have no earner. This may suggest that the sample in the current study represents an unrepresentative group of single mothers.

However, given the variable length of time mothers had been parenting alone (from 7 to 17 years), mothers' reflections on past and present circumstances indicates that previous contexts of disadvantage were subject to improvement, as children get older. For example, almost one-third of the mothers had returned to education *after* becoming parents, some completing second level education, and others proceeding onto third level. As soon as children started school, the need for full-time child-care was reduced, and access to training and employment increased, within a labour market where opportunities were plentiful. As McCashin (1996) has argued, single parents' non-participation in the labour market is largely associated with the age of children, and should not be assumed to be a permanent status for the majority of single parents. It may be that the present sample of single mothers are not unusual in any particular regard – their seemingly higher rates of labour market participation and educational attainment may be a function of the older age of children in the study, and their process of working their way out of the cycle of disadvantage often associated with single parenthood

Thus, while the sampling approach did not deliberately attempt to achieve this, the sample of mothers in the current study reflects a diverse group that includes a well-educated, financially secure group of single parents. As will be highlighted in the chapters that follow, family roles and relationships are constructed within and inextricably linked to these webs of diverse circumstances. However, this diversity also has implications for the generalisability of the findings of the study and the extent to which the families in the sample are considered to reflect single parent families in Ireland generally. These issues are considered in the final chapter of the thesis.

CHAPTER 5: CHILDREN'S CONCEPTS OF FAMILY, PARENTING ROLES & THEIR FAMILY NETWORKS

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore what family means to these children and to provide an overview of who is significant to them in their families. The chapter begins with a discussion of how children understand what 'family' is and how they define it. Related to this is how children conceptualise parenting roles. Together, these general concepts of family and parenting roles serve as a backdrop against which children's family experiences are reflected upon and evaluated. At the same time, their particular family situation and experiences operate as a lens through which general ideas about family and parenting roles are first constructed and repeatedly re-assessed. Following this general consideration of concepts of family and parenting roles, the chapter proceeds to examine the data from children's Family Links and Emotional Closeness Maps which provide an overview of how children define their own family network. The outline of children's normative views of family and parenting roles, and significant others in their family network provides a context for the in-depth exploration of roles and relationships within these family contexts that unfolds in the remaining chapters of the thesis.

Concept of Family

The starting point for this analysis is an exploration of children's description of what 'family', in general, represents. Following a review of the themes that emerged from this section of the interviews, two major sub-themes were identified: the structure of the family unit and the processes that take place within the family unit.

Family as Structure

Children's general concept of family coalesced around *structural* features, which represented whether an individual would be considered a member of the family or not. Many of the children referred to concepts of co-residence and biological relatedness, although they further qualified this by stating that neither were necessary prerequisites for defining family. A number of children referred to their own individual family members, including siblings and parents (both resident and non-resident), and in the case of a small number of children, family members who had died. However, the idea that structure was not fixed was clear, and some emphasised the *variability* and *flexibility* of family structure.

> *"I don't know how you would define family because you know it's such a broad term these days, you know before it used to be like two parents you know and kids, but now it can be all over the place you know, like grandparents and grandchild, you know because I've come in contact with all sorts of different family structures"* (C2016, girl, age 16)

However, the description of family in terms of structural features was less common than the conceptualisation of family in terms of *process*.

Family as Process

Children defined family in terms of its function and emphasised the importance of family for children's survival and optimal development. Family processes, such as 'looking after', 'loving' and 'taking care of' were frequently mentioned and supplemented with many examples of how such functions were carried out. A range of care-giving functions emerged, with many of the children referring to the fulfilment of basic biological needs through the provision of food, shelter and clothing. In addition, they also mentioned the provision of less essential material goods, such as money for entertainment and education purposes, and toys and videos.

> *"I'd say a family was that people that look after you and feed you and take care of you and clothes you and gives you food"* (C1112, girl, age 11)

Children also emphasised the supportive function of families, and the numerous ways in which this support was manifested, including helping through communication, sharing, problem-solving, guidance, and encouragement.

> *"We, children need a family for em, you know they always have someone to talk to ...and if you're like going for exams or something then you'd be getting some support from your family"* (C1116, boy, age 12)

A final category of response related to the notion of the family as a safe-haven, where children could feel a sense of security, stability and protection from danger, a place where their fears could be allayed:

> *"Knowing that you're going to be safe.... security"* (C2007, girl, age 13)

In defining family, it was apparent that the functions fulfilled by family members were more significant than what a family 'looked like'. Underpinning this attention to family processes, a number of additional themes, highlighting the *quality* of relations between family members, as opposed to the mere functions of family members, emerged. For example, principles of *mutuality* and *reciprocity* permeated a small number of the children's narratives relating to family process. They talked about how family members loved, cared for and helped *each other*, and within this discourse, children were not inevitably positioned as dependants.

> *"It's people who live together and they love each other and they get along with each other and they help each other"* (C1009, girl, age 12)

The idea of togetherness or whole family being together also appeared to be important, with children describing family celebrations and gatherings with big groups of people, characterised by a sense of inclusiveness where "nobody gets left behind".

A final theme mentioned by a small number of the children referred to the *unconditional* nature of family relationships, perceptible through a sense of reliability and dependability among family members and possibly related to the longevity and permanence of the relationships:

> *"Family are there to like take you in, even when you're down, the lowest part of your life, if you've fallen down or you're out with someone, your family is there for you all the time, no matter what you've done"* (C2106, boy, age 15)

In summary, children's constructions of family were characterised exclusively by a positive emotional tone - family was described as a safe-haven for children, where their practical and emotional needs were met, and mutual and unconditional relationships developed. Children's concepts of family were centred on two organising themes – family as structure and family as process. In terms of structure, certain parameters for the inclusion/exclusion of individuals as family members were elucidated, including biological relatedness and co-residence. However, these parameters were further characterised by a degree of open-endedness and flexibility. The most dominant theme in defining family related to process, where family was primarily defined in terms of the ongoing role of family members to care for and look after each other, through fulfilling basic care-giving needs and providing emotional and practical support. Certain qualities inherent in family relationships also emerged – principles such as unconditionality and reciprocity characterise the nature of these relationships and signify what is important to children about family. No clear developmental or gender patterns emerged in children's concept of family.

Perspectives on Parental Roles

Discussions around parental roles involved consideration of maternal and paternal roles separately, as well as comparisons between the two, and assessment of the relative importance of one over the other. Each will be considered in turn.

Mother Roles

In terms of mother roles, many of the responses and themes indicated the multi-faceted role which children expected mothers to perform. Table 5.1 illustrates the frequency of common descriptions of mother roles, for younger and older children.

Table 5.1: Frequency of common descriptions of mother roles for younger and older children

Description of Mother Role (Total Responses)	Younger Group	Older Group
Emotional Support/Advice (20)	8	12
Basic Care-giving (14)	11	3
Love & Care for you (13)	11	2
Practical Help (5)	3	2
Discipline/Authority Figure (5)	2	3
Protection/Keep Safe (3)	3	–
Breadwinner/Provider (2)	1	1
Playmate/Companion (1)	–	1

These responses were grouped into two broad categories, namely, mother as *carer* and mother as *figure of authority and protection*. Within the *mother as carer* category the supportive role of mothers was described in both practical and emotional terms. In terms of practical roles, common descriptions included provision of food, clean clothing, shelter as well as nursing when the child is sick, helping with homework, and transporting the child various places. The emotional significance of the mother to the child emerged clearly in the children's narratives: children described a 'mother' as a provider of comfort and affection, advice, somebody to confide in who listens to problems. More generally, notions of a loving and caring figure emerged, alongside descriptions of the closeness that existed between the children and their mothers:

> *"Well because I think they need a mam, is because children can't cook or like go out and buy stuff and do it, or put on washes like to do clean clothes for us and all... then to cuddle up with or watch a movie with, that's what I think em kids needs a mam for...that she usually sits down with us, tells us stories and cuddles up to us any time we're sad or lonely or need her"* (C1012, girl, age 11)

Within the *mother as authority figure and protector* category, a small number of children described the mother's role in terms of discipline and monitoring behaviours, and her role as protector and breadwinner of the family:

> *"Well they should tell the children what to do, not leave them* [do] *what they want to do"* (C1007, girl, age 8)

Finally, a number of additional themes highlighted the diversity of children's perspectives on mother roles. One younger boy described his mother's role in terms of a gatekeeper role, where she could facilitate contact between himself and his father. One older girl described how mothers should exhibit a quality of selflessness, always making sacrifices and prioritising the child's needs above their own. Another older girl highlighted the important role of the mother in encouraging independence and autonomy, appropriate to the age of the child:

> *"Em, she's caring but not em, she doesn't try and wrap you up in cotton wool. She like understands that you're growing up, she knows where to draw the line but she doesn't draw it too soon"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

In summary, a concept of mother as carer and nurturer was dominant in the children's narratives. However, her role was not restricted to the provision of emotional and practical support, but also encompassed the provision of financial support, a sense of safety, protection and authority. No clear gender patterns emerged. However, basic care-giving activities of the mother role were mentioned more frequently among the younger group. This may relate to the fact that as children get older, they may be more likely to carry out tasks such as preparing their meals or doing their own laundry.

Father Roles

The table below illustrates the frequency of common descriptions of father roles, among younger and older children. The most common descriptors of father roles were: *father as carer*, followed by *father as playmate/companion* and *father as breadwinner.*

Table 5.2: Frequency of common descriptions of father roles for younger and older children

Description of Father Role (Total Responses)	Younger Group	Older Group
Emotional Support/Advice (9)	3	6
Basic Care-giving (3)	3	–
Love & Care for you (9)	7	2
Practical Help (1)	–	1
Discipline/Authority Figure (1)	–	1
Protection/Keep Safe (3)	1	2
Breadwinner/Provider (7)	5	2
Playmate/Companion (8)	6	2

Children generally believed that fathers were there to care for, love and emotionally support their children, and in this respect, primary mother and father roles were similar. Despite this overlap, further distinct descriptions were used in the children's narratives about father's roles in the family. For example, provision of practical help and basic care-giving by fathers was not a dominant aspect of the father role, perhaps reflecting the children's experiences with non-resident fathers who were often detached from daily care-giving routines. Similarly reflecting the nature of their own experiences with their fathers, the younger children in particular frequently described the father role in terms of a playmate, or companion for entertainment activities. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, where children spent time with their fathers, their contact was dominated by recreational activities and holiday periods together.

> *"I think a dad is more like the sporty one to maybe take you out to a park and play tennis or something"* (C1009, girl, age 12)

Children also frequently described the father role in terms of a breadwinning role, a role not generally referred to for mothers, despite the fact that all mothers were fulfilling this role within their own family contexts, and none of the fathers were:

> *R: What do you think a father's role in a family is?*
>
> *C: Well when I go and see my dad he doesn't have that much of a role in it but I don't think, my opinion of fathers is they don't do a lot but that's not making a generalisation there, I know some great dads and all but I would see them as being just working and saying the same old stuff like 'ah it's the wife's duty to look after the kids'* (C2115, boy, age 17)

Another theme used to describe the father role was that of protector, a source of safety and security:

> *"Female support if great and all, really good, but for different types of situations, if you have a male who is comforting you, it's much more powerful sometimes, than a female, like he when he'd hug you if you were really upset, if it was that type of hug that you wouldn't be able to get out of even if you wanted to, like you'd easily break away from a woman's hug, so it's that sense of safety...you know so security"* (C2015, boy, age 17)

The father as authority figure also figured within one older boy's narrative, perhaps reflecting stereotypical views of the father as disciplinarian.

> *"Well he's probably be like the primary authority figure, you know to kind of lay down the law or whatever, especially if like I'm just guessing, if it would come to a son or whatever you know"* (C2104, boy, age 14)

Together these themes conjure up the image of the father as a powerful authoritative figure within the family. However, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, fathers were rarely involved in these aspects of the parenting role or were not breadwinners in their families. In these instances, perspectives on the father role may be based on traditional discourses about fathering roles. Furthermore, while the majority of children were able to describe how they conceptualised the father role, it should be noted that two younger and two older children stated that they did not know what the fathering role entailed, as they had not experienced this directly for themselves.

In summary, dominant father roles encompassed concepts of fathers as carers, playmates and breadwinners. Given the nature of the parenting role that the fathers of these children adopted, it was clear that children's perspectives of father roles were constructed on the basis of direct experience as well as normative stereotypical views about what the father role entails. No clear gender differences emerged. The caring and playmate aspects of the father role were more frequently mentioned by the younger children. This may reflect the nature of the younger children's interaction with their fathers during contact time, and that they are largely dependent upon parental figures to carry out practical care-giving tasks, such as preparing meals.

Mother & Father Roles: Interchangeable or Distinct?

As indicated previously, some overlap emerged in children's descriptions of mother and father roles. The extent to which children considered parenting roles as genderless and did not differentiate between mothering and fathering may influence whether they feel they are missing out due to their father's absence from the home. The table below illustrates the common descriptions of both mother and father roles. For ease of comparison, percentages are provided, rather than frequencies, as fewer responses relating to the father role were provided overall.

Table 5.3: Percentages of common descriptions of mother and father roles

Description of Role (Total N)	Mother Role (N = 63 responses)	Father Role (N = 41 responses)
Emotional Support/Advice (29)	32%	22%
Love & Care for you (22)	21%	22%
Basic Care-giving (17)	22%	7%
Breadwinner/Provider (9)	3%	17%
Playmate/Companion (9)	1.5%	20%
Discipline/Authority Figure (6)	8%	2%
Protection/Keep Safe (6)	4.5%	7%
Practical Help (6)	8%	2%

Direct comparisons between mother and fathers roles indicated the extent to which children believed that roles were equivalent, or unique to each parent. Related to the perception that mother and father roles are interchangeable or distinct, is the relative importance of either parent over the other and the perception that either or both are necessary for children's development. Given that these children were living apart from their fathers, and that many had no contact with their fathers, of particular interest here were their perspectives on the importance and necessity of fathers.

By and large, children's perceptions on mother and father roles appeared to be broadly similar: love, care and expressive aspects of caring were dominant features of both roles. The equivalence of mother and father roles was also apparent when children either compared mother and father roles, or directly stated that father roles were equivalent to mother roles:

> *"I don't know, same like, the two parents are the same because they can both get jobs, they can both cook, they can both clean"* (C1116, boy, age 11)

Importantly, where father and mother roles were perceived to be interchangeable, the sense of one parent being necessary or essential was diminished. Over half of the children stated that fathers were not necessary, and in the majority of cases, this related to the fact that maternal and paternal roles were interchangeable. Thus, it was important that various parental duties were carried out, but

whether it was mother or father who fulfilled the role mattered less. These children drew few distinctions between the mother and father roles, and perceived mothers and fathers as equally necessary, or unnecessary. For example, this 12-year-old boy suggests:

> *"[Children] don't need to just have a father and a mother and like because it doesn't, it doesn't matter who you have as long as you have like a mother or a father, because like you could live with a foster family or you could live with your aunt or your uncle or your granny or your granddad...as long as you have a family like to support you and to encourage you to do things then you'll be fine...they don't need this big family with a mother and a father and a brother and a sister"* (C1116, boy, age 12)

While the majority of the children who believed that fathers were not necessary attributed this to the interchangeable nature of parenting roles, it was clear that a small number of children downplayed the importance of fathers, based on their own fathers' lack of availability to them. For example, two younger children who stated that fathers were not necessary drew this conclusion based on negative constructions of father roles, characterised by lack of involvement of their own fathers in their lives. In other cases, the children's own experience had clearly engendered a sense that fathers were not necessary: these children felt they had survived this far into their lives without a father, and so were 'living proof' that fathers were not necessary:

> *"I've lived I don't know how long of my life without a dad and I never felt I needed one" (C1009, girl, age 12)*

Eight of the older children and seven of the younger children stated that fathers and mothers had distinct roles to play. Therefore both parents were important, and fathers were necessary in children's lives. This perceived need for fathers related to parenting roles specifically associated with fathers:

> *"I think every child needs to have a mother and father, especially a boy because like he can't go out fishing and hunting and everything"* (C1103, boy, age 12)

> *"I think the father's role is important as well because you need that kind of strong like safe figure, I'm not saying a mother can't do that, but you do, I think you need a father figure"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

Five of the children, two girls and three boys specifically referred to how fathers were particularly important for boys.

> *"I think younger children, especially boys, I think boys, yeah, I don't know, I don't think girls need fathers that much, do you know what I mean but I think little boys do"* (C2005, girl, age 15)

This suggests that children not only conceptualise parenting roles as gender specific, they also considered that boys and girls have needs that are specific to their gender. In this way, the matching of specific aspects of the father role with specific needs of boys is considered important. As will be

discussed in Chapter Eight, not all of the children who believed that fathers were necessary had contact with their fathers – therefore, these children may have had a sense that they were missing out on those aspects of the parenting role that are particular to fathers.

Related to the necessity of fathers and mothers in children's lives was an evaluation of the relative importance of mothers and fathers. Seventeen of the children suggested that mothers were more important than fathers, possibly reflecting their own experience of being parented primarily by their mother. The elevated importance of mothers was also attributed to the greater care-taking role that mothers take in relation to their children – mothers were perceived as being more involved with their children and more capable in this domain:

> *"I just think that mothers are just so important because they know like, they have all, like I don't want to sound stereotypical or anything but I mean they know how to do things perfectly, you know like that kind of thing, to communicate...when you're younger, the father like he would know how to do, but he wouldn't have the right touch kind of thing...I just think that girls are apparently more in touch in with their feelings...because they let their emotions show and everything, they'd just be better parents"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

Three children offered the biological connection between mother and child as a rationale for their ideas. Thus, because mothers give birth, a strong "maternal bond" and "special connection" exists between mother and child. This 9-year-old boy, having stated that mothers were more important than fathers, continued:

> *"Well I don't really want to say this, but cos, they're, the mams give birth here and all that, and you sort of love them more than your dad"* (C1104, boy, age 9)

In evaluating the relative importance of mothers versus fathers, a small number of children emphasised that there was variability from one family context to another, which was dependent upon the individuals involved and the relationships inherent in the family. There was recognition that their experience with mothers and fathers may not reflect what happens in other families. In one case, this was explicitly coupled with the acknowledgement that her father in particular did not meet her expectations of what the paternal role represents:

> *"I think a father is the same [as a mother], someone who puts their own needs aside, and em really sort of cares about you, support you...not someone who's in, idyllic or inhuman or anything, like you know, but someone who just is a genuinely sort of, genuinely loves you and wants to look after you...I mean my dad does love me and he does care about me but he doesn't put, he's never really selfless you know, he doesn't sort of go you know I'm going to sort of sacrifice this for you.... He does care and he does want to sort of look after me to a certain extent but what my idea of a father is, does not fit the profile of what he is"* (C2016, girl, age 16)

In summary, fifteen of the participants stated that children in general did need a father in their lives, highlighting that both parents were important, or that children needed two parents. This perceived

need for fathers partly related to parenting roles that were distinctive to fathers. In contrast, over half of the children stated that fathers were not necessary. In some cases, this related to the fact that maternal and paternal roles were interchangeable. In other cases, however, children's own family experience, characterised by a lack of father's involvement in their lives, was associated with a sense that fathers were not necessary. Almost half of the children suggested that mothers were more important than fathers, possibly reflecting their own experience of being parented primarily by their mother. Mothers were perceived to be more involved in caring for their children and capable in this domain, and a small number of children suggested that because mothers give birth, a strong "maternal bond" and "special connection" exists. Overall, no clear gender or developmental differences emerged in evaluating the necessity and relative importance of mothers and fathers. In evaluating the relative importance of mothers versus fathers, a small number of children emphasised that there was variability from one family context to another, which was dependent upon the individuals involved, and quality of the relationships inherent in the family. In the next section, attention is turned to these relationships and an overview of significant others in children's family networks is provided.

Children's Family Networks

Two research tools, the Family Links Map and the Closeness Map, as described in Chapter Three, were used to identify who was significant to the children in their families, and to elicit broad descriptions of the quality of their relationship with those individuals. As a starting point, children completed the Family Links Map, to identify members of their family network. Details of the individuals that children included are illustrated in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Details of the individuals that children included on their Family Links Maps

Relatives included on Family Links Map	Frequency
Mother	41
Father	18
Siblings (co-resident)	22
Siblings (not co-resident)	7
Maternal Grandparents	33
Paternal Grandparents	8
Aunts/uncles/ cousins on mother's side	22
Aunts/uncles/cousins on father's side	7

All children included their mother and their siblings, if they lived together, while 18 of the children included their father on their Family Links Maps. There was a direct relationship between children's inclusion of their fathers on their Maps, and the nature of children's contact with their fathers. Seventeen of the 19 children who had no contact with their fathers omitted him from their Maps,

while almost all of the children who did have contact with their fathers included him on their Maps. This suggests that some level of contact represents a necessary pre-requisite for fathers to be considered part of the family, and membership in a family network is not secured by virtue of biological relatedness alone.

Further analysis of individuals included on the children's Family Links Maps indicated that mothers, co-resident siblings, and maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins on the mother's side of the family, were most commonly identified as part of the children's family networks. Given that children were more likely to have regular contact with their maternal grandparents and other relatives on their mother's side of the family, this finding highlights the significance of such contact on children's relationships with family members. Extended family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were also frequently included on the children's Family Links Maps. Generally, it was more common for children to include relatives on their mother's side of the family than paternal extended family. Only eight children included paternal grandparents, compared with 33 children who included at least one maternal grandparent. Similarly, with regard to aunts, uncles and cousins, 32 children referred to relatives on their mother's side of the family, compared with seven children who considered their father's siblings as part of their family. A small number of children included other individuals, such as their own friends, friends of their mothers, and fathers of their (half) siblings. One child also included her cat.

In terms of the Emotional Closeness Map, representing children's *perceptions of closeness* to various family members[19], similar patterns emerged. Thirty-nine of the 41 children represented their mother in the innermost circle next to them, indicating a close relationship between themselves and their mothers. One teenage girl and one teenage boy both placed their respective mothers in the second circle. One older girl placed her mother's name transecting the five circles, highlighting the fluctuating nature of the relationship, which appeared to be characterised by both closeness and frequent conflict.

In contrast, 23 children omitted their fathers from both the Closeness Map and the Family Links Map (in four of these cases, fathers were deceased). Where children omitted their fathers from their Closeness Maps, this indicated the absence of emotional connection for these children to their fathers, and almost all of these children did not have contact with their fathers. Only 18 of the children included their fathers on their Closeness Maps. Seven of these children represented their

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[19] As highlighted in Chapter Three, the aim of the Closeness Map was to gain insight into children's experiences of emotional closeness to different family members. However, it is acknowledged that placement of an individual in a particular position on the Map does not guarantee that children are interpreting 'closeness' in Emotional Terms. Indeed, younger children in particular may interpret 'closeness' in purely physical terms.

fathers in the innermost circle, while a further six children placed their father in the second innermost circle, indicating a moderately close relationship with their father. The remaining five children placed their fathers in outer circles, in two cases, fathers were placed in the outermost circle, representing the least close position. Almost all of these children had contact with their fathers, but the variability in where children placed their fathers on their Closeness Maps indicates that factors over and above having contact underpin children's experiences of closeness with their non-resident fathers. These issues are considered in Chapter Eight.

Children's representations of closeness to parents indicated a notable difference between perceptions of closeness to mothers and fathers. Patterns of placement of mothers and fathers on the Closeness Map are illustrated in Table 5.5 to highlight the divergence in representations of closeness to each parent.

Table 5.5: Placement of mothers and fathers on children's Closeness Map

Placement on Closeness Maps	Mother Role[20]	Father Role
Inner Circle	38	7
2nd Circle	3	6
3rd Circle	1	1
4th Circle	1	2
Outer Circle	1	2
Omitted	–	23[21]

Where children did place their fathers on their Maps, eight of the 41 children positioned their mothers and fathers in the same circle on their Closeness Map, suggesting that the remaining children experienced differential closeness in their relationships to their mothers and fathers. In all of these cases, children reflected closer relationships with their mothers than their fathers.

In addition to the placement of mothers and fathers on the Closeness Map, it was clear that children experienced varying degrees of closeness to other relatives and friends, who were part of their family networks. Table 5.6 summarises the various individuals, and their placement, on the children's Closeness Maps.

[20] One teenage girl included her mother in each circle, hence the total exceeds 41.

[21] This included four children whose fathers were deceased.

Table 5.6: Placement of significant family members on children's Closeness Map

Nature of Relationship	1st circle	2nd circle	3rd circle	4th circle	Outermost circles
Siblings (co-resident)[22]	11	6	3	1	
Siblings (non-co-resident)[23]		2	3	3	
Maternal Grandparents	11	8	10	5	1
Aunts/uncles/cousins (mother's family)	13	17	9	2	5
Paternal Grandparents		3	3	2	
Aunts/uncles/cousins (father's family)			3		

Three categories of individuals emerged as particularly family network members for these children: siblings who were either currently living with the child or had lived with the child previously, maternal grandparents, and children's aunts, uncles and cousins, from their mother's side of the family. Individuals from the father's side of the family figured less prominently. Paternal grandparents were included by only eight of the children, and most often in the outer circles, highlighting children's perceptions of a less close relationship with paternal grandparents than with maternal grandparents. Step- and half-siblings, who had never lived with the children, also appeared more frequently in outer circles. A number of other individuals were also mentioned, each by a minority of the children. These included child's friend (n = 4), mother's friend (n = 2), stepmother (n = 2), nieces and nephews (n = 2), childminders (n = 2), mother's partner (n = 1), school principal (n = 1) and pet cat (n = 1). Furthermore, these individuals tended to be placed in the mid- to outer-circles. While no clear gender patterns emerged in children's consideration of their family networks, a number of developmental trends were apparent.

Developmental Patterns in Children's Family Networks

Two key age-related trends emerged in children's perspectives on their family networks. Generally, younger children tended to place maternal grandparents and other relatives in the inner circles, while older children were more likely to place these family members in the mid- to outer-circles. For example, among the children who included maternal grandparents in the 1st and 2nd circles, 15 were in the younger age category and only four were in the older age category. In contrast, 11 of the older children placed maternal grandparents in the outer circles, compared with only five of the younger children. This trend reflects the significance of maternal grandparents in the lives of the younger children in particular. Such perceptions of closeness to grandparents among the younger children may be related to the role of some grandparents in providing regular care to the child.

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[22] These include siblings that the participants had previously lived with or were currently living with

[23] These are siblings that the participants had never lived with, and in all cases, were half or step-siblings

Similar trends emerged in relation to the placement of other relatives on the mother's side of the family, in that the younger children were more likely to place these individuals in the 1st and 2nd circles, and the older children more likely to place them in the outer circles. Thus, 17 of the younger children placed aunts, uncles and cousins in the 1st and 2nd circles compared with 11 of the older children, while three of the younger children placed aunts, uncles and cousins in the outer circles, compared with eight of the older children. Such patterns may reflect diminishing levels of closeness between adolescents and extended kin. This trend may also reflect the expansion of the non-familial world in later childhood and adolescence, where family members represent a decreasing proportion of the adolescent's social experiences (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Furman, 1989). During the period of adolescence, relationships between children and their father's side of the family may become increasingly difficult to maintain. Indeed, only three of the adolescents placed relatives from their father's side of the family in the mid- to outer-circles, indicating less significant emotional ties. In contrast, three of the younger children placed their paternal grandparents in the second circle on their Maps. However, as emphasised previously, overall, relatives from the father's side of the family were represented on only a small number of the children's Maps.

Summary

The Family Links and Emotional Closeness Maps were primarily intended as a tool to elicit discussion around significant family members. The data yield interesting insights into how children conceptualise their family network. It was apparent that children generally conceptualised their family as existing across numerous households – in only a minority of cases did children solely include the family members with whom they resided. Mothers emerged, in almost all cases, as the most significant individual for these children being positioned in the innermost circles, indicating a close emotional relationship. Maternal grandparents and other relatives from the mother's side of the family also figured prominently in the children's representations of their families, albeit more frequently among the younger group. About one-third of the children placed their fathers in the inner circles, indicating a perception of a *close* or *quite close* father-child relationship. In terms of paternal extended family, however, the picture was characterised as one of exclusion or more distant ties. Furthermore, step-parents, partners of parents, and step- or half-siblings with whom the children did not reside, were not commonly included, or were included in the outer-most circles, nor were households that fathers had established alone or with new partners considered a second home for the children. In this respect, a number of the children's family constructions were characterised by closed boundaries that had not been extended by new partnerships.

Conclusions

One of the main aims of the present study is to explore how children, who have lived almost entirely in a one-parent family, construct the concepts of family and parenting roles. One of the key

messages that emerged from this chapter is the importance of the concepts of care and relationships, in their construction of what being part of a family and being a parent entails. In describing the concept of family, two key constructs – process and structure – appeared to be important. These themes were broadly reiterative of ideas that have emerged within the few contemporary studies that have explored children's concept of family (e.g. Morrow, 1998; O'Brien et al., 1996, Brannen et al., 2000). The functions of family and family processes of support and care were more prominent than structural features. As well as describing important functions fulfilled by family members, discussions of family processes encompassed more *qualitative* features of how family roles were played out. Qualities such as mutuality, reciprocity and unconditionality constitute the essence of these relations of care. Discussions of parental roles indicated that children considered mother and father roles to be largely equivalent and interchangeable. Related to this was the viewpoint that neither parent was indispensable. While it was essential that parental roles were carried out, whether it was a mother or a father who fulfilled parental duties towards children was less significant. Despite these perspectives, many of the children did consider that mothers were more important than fathers, which is likely to be related to their experience of being reared primarily by their mothers. A number of the children suggested that childrearing came more naturally to mothers, who exhibited more ability than fathers in parenting. While mothers were largely portrayed as nurturant and caring figures, a number of distinct father-related roles emerged, including father as playmate, breadwinner and in the case of some of the older children, father as protector and authority figure. In the absence of highly involved fathers, children's ideas about the father role may be more stereotypical or in the case of those with limited contact with their fathers, may reflect their relationships based on recreational activities.

An initial exploration of children's family networks indicated that mothers were clearly positioned as the individual to whom the children felt the closest, while only half of the children considered their father as part of their family, and one-third described their relationship with their father as close. A range of other individuals was also considered to be part of the child's family network. Siblings with whom the child had lived, and relatives on their mother's side of the family were most frequently included, while fathers, siblings with whom the child had never lived, and paternal extended family figured less prominently in children's representations of their family networks. The concept of open and closed family boundaries (Smart et al., 2001) provides a useful framework within which children's representations of significant family members can be considered. It was clear that children rarely restricted their concept of family to those with whom they resided. The inclusion of households of extended family members (most notably grandparents and relatives on their mother's side of the family) reflects that their families existed across numerous households and their family concept was not constrained by household boundaries. However, for a small number of the children, households that fathers had established with new partners and children were rarely considered a

second home for these children, and in this respect, these new households and partnerships had not been assimilated into their concept of family.

This chapter has sought to provide a context for the analysis of roles and relationships presented in the rest of the thesis. This chapter has highlighted the significance that children attach to care, love and support in their concepts of family and parenting roles. An examination of their family networks indicates that their family lives were not lived according to household structures and family is not synonymous with household. Rather, network boundaries were defined loosely and inclusively, extending to siblings, non-resident fathers, grandparents, relatives, step-parents and beyond. However, the extent to which individuals in the family network are available to these children and care for them in a practical sense is important. The next chapter describes how care-giving roles and parenting operate within these children's families, and specifically considers the extent to which these children and mothers are 'going it alone' in their family roles.

CHAPTER 6: GOING IT ALONE? CARE-GIVING AND PARENTING IN SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

Introduction

The significance of family processes, such as parenting and care-giving, as the mechanism by which family structure may impact on children's development has emerged in the body of research to date and the previous chapter has highlighted how family processes represent a defining feature of children's concept of family and parenting roles. This chapter addresses how caring and parenting roles operate within these one-parent families. Despite the specific criteria determining how families were recruited into the study, the description of these family contexts has revealed the range of settings and circumstances within which children and their mothers conduct their family lives. Furthermore, children's descriptions of their family networks, as outlined in the previous chapter, indicate loose and inclusive boundaries. Such variability highlights the need to go beyond the taxonomic group 'single parent family' to unpack the *meaning* behind living in a single parent family. The focus of this chapter is on the extent to which single parents are 'going it alone' in their parenting role. The chapter draws together data from both mothers' and children's interviews, and acknowledges how aspects of family life are constructed and experienced differently by different family members (Smart & Neale, 2001). Consideration of both perspectives enables exploration of shared understandings and experiences, as well as divergences in emphasis and perspectives. Through analysis of narratives around key features of the parenting role, it is possible to examine the extent to which various parenting tasks are shared and whether boundaries are drawn around any aspects of the parenting role. Given that these mothers have been parenting without the father in the home from early in the child's life, the extent to which the mothers and fathers are co-parenting is of particular interest. Overall, through describing how various parenting tasks are carried out, we can address the extent to which mothers within these family contexts are parenting alone, and are supported in their parenting role.

Daily Care-giving Routines

This section of the chapter describes how the daily care-giving routines within the families are managed. Daily care-giving routines encompassed a range of activities, such as preparing the child's meals and lunch for school, doing laundry, transporting the child to and from school, arranging after-school and social activities, looking after the child when ill and helping with homework. In addition to practical functions, daily care-giving routines also encompassed the provision of emotional support, such as listening to problems and giving advice.

Mothers' Perspectives

Descriptions of daily care-giving routines clearly indicated that the mother was positioned as the primary care-giver in these families. However, there was some degree of variability in terms of the extent to which others were involved in practically looking after the children, representing a continuum along which mothers received support. In two cases where mothers resided in their original family home with their parent(s), daily care-giving activities were more or less equally distributed between the mother and the child's grandparents. These mothers represented one extreme in terms of receiving support in care-giving routines. At the other end of the continuum, one-fifth of the mothers described themselves as *sole carers*. In these cases, no other individual was *regularly* involved in the day-to-day care of the child, although occasionally a family member or friend might be available if necessary. These mothers either worked from home, or worked during the morning period only.

> *R: Can you tell me a little bit about who looks after* [child's name]*?*
>
> *A: No one... I'm 24 hours, seven days a week, fortunately enough I have a few friends you know if Kate is off school and I'm not, they'll take her or, but nobody, nobody looks after them.* (A1010, mother of 9-year old girl)

Some mothers of the younger children described how they received assistance with daily care-giving tasks, such as picking the child up from school, preparing the child's dinner, helping the child with homework and looking after the child if they were sick from school. As stated in Chapter Four, the working arrangements of 12 mothers[24] necessitated the use of after-school care. After-school care was provided by grandparents for five of the study children – in three of these cases mother and child were residing with the grandparent(s). Only one grandparent was paid for her child-minding work. It was clear that the provision of informal 'free' child care by relatives enabled the mother to work, where it may not otherwise have been viable. Six children were looked after by the childminder in the childminder's home, and one child was cared for in a nursery after school. Five children were collected from school by either a grandparent, aunt or childminder, three mothers picked their child up themselves, while in the remaining cases, children made their own way home from school, either to their own home, their mothers' workplace, or their childminders'/ grandparents' house. None of the children in the older age-group received after-school care, and one 12 year-old child from the younger age group remained home alone after school until her mother returned from work. Where children did receive after-school care, tasks such as preparing the child's dinner and helping the child with homework were shared between the childminder/grandparent and mother, depending upon the

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[24] Fourteen of the mothers altogether availed of child-care, in two families, child-care arrangements related to younger children who did not participate in the study. Therefore, only 12 children in the study were looked after by somebody other than their mother after school.

time at which the mother returned from work. Where children were sick and not able to attend school or had to leave school early, for the most part, mothers could leave work early or take annual leave from work. Grandparents and childminders were also available to assist on these occasions. Finally, four mothers referred to how their older children assisted with the care of younger siblings. Generally, however, this help was confined to less formal care-giving arrangements, such as babysitting occasionally in the evenings. Older siblings were usually not involved in daily care-giving routines, such as picking younger siblings up from school, assisting with homework or preparing meals.

Children's Perspectives

Children's descriptions of daily care-giving routines closely mirrored accounts of their mothers, and without exception, children referred to their mothers as their main carers. In addition to regular after-school arrangements, children also described who looked after them on weekends and during holiday times. Children's descriptions of daily care-giving routines also highlighted the significant role taken by relatives in this regard, particularly grandparents. Two-thirds of the younger children referred to their grandparents as regular carers, while one-third mentioned aunts/uncles and one-third childminders. Older siblings, mothers' friends, fathers and partners of mothers appeared to be less significant as regular care-givers.

As expected, older children required less direct practical care, although it was clear that they still relied upon their mothers and other family members. While paid childcare and extended family (most notably grandparents) were key sources of practical help in terms of daily care-giving routines for younger children, this had also been true for the older children when they were younger. In reflecting upon previous care-giving routines and arrangements, grandparents and childminders again emerged as significant providers of care, each being mentioned by one-third of the older age group. Older siblings also played a care-giving role – this emerged both in descriptions of how children were cared for by their older siblings, and also how the older age group adopted a care-giving role with their younger siblings.

Father's Role in Care-giving Routines

A notable issue was the striking *absence of the father* in the descriptions of daily care-giving routines. Analysis of the mothers' interviews indicated that even in cases where fathers had regular contact with their children, they did not appear to contribute to the daily care of the child. Generally, fathers did not become involved in activities such as picking the child up from school, or assisting if the child was sick in school. Only one mother referred to how her child's school had his father's telephone number, which they could use in the case of an emergency, when they could not contact her or the childminder. The involvement of fathers in daily routines however was not fixed and was amenable to change, as relationships developed, as described by this mother:

> *"His dad brings, picks him up from hockey on a Monday and that has been happening for the last three weeks. There's nothing on a routine basis, ever"* (A2115, mother of 17-year-old boy)

Fathers as regular providers of care figured somewhat more prominently in the children's narratives, although only in a small number of cases. For these children, this marked a divergence from the accounts given by mothers. Three of the younger children, all of whom had frequent contact with their father (i.e. at least once every one to two weeks) described how their fathers looked after them, while in their care. Four of the older children, who had maintained contact with their father throughout their childhood and adolescence, indicated that he had looked after them when they were younger, and still occasionally did so.

Developmental Patterns in Care-giving Routines

An important developmental theme also emerged in the narratives about descriptions of care-giving, resulting from both decreased demand for direct practical care as children got older and greater levels of independence and care-taking on the part of the children themselves. Demands with regard to care-giving were largely dependent upon the age of the child, with younger children requiring more direct practical care than older children. For example, all of the older children made their own way home from school and no after-school care was required. In contrast, more of the younger children had to be brought to and from school, and 12 of the younger children were in some form of after-school care. This mother described how this situation had changed, as her son became older:

> *"Thankfully the nightmare of the logistics of getting somebody to mind him was over, though for the first two years of secondary school, I still had the summer as a nightmare....I would have put him into things like summer camps em which again was good and not good because they invariably started at ten and finished at three so it was really awkward for the working day"* (A2106, mother of 15-year-old boy)

Parenting an older child required less physical care and attention; however, demands in terms of physical presence were replaced with new parenting challenges, as indicated in particular by mothers of the adolescents:

> *"It used to be physically having to be there and now you have to be emotionally there and focused"* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

A number of the mothers described how as their younger children's worlds expanded in terms of school and leisure activities, they were required to attend to additional issues, such as school-work, bullying, and friendships. With the period of adolescence came a new set of concerns surrounding contact with smoking, drinking, drugs, and sexual relationships and friendships and the challenge of setting appropriate boundaries and limitations within a supportive and loving context:

> *"From 10 onwards, I consider the toughest years... the emotional complications as they grow into adolescence is different...the physical dependence is something that can be*

easily handled and it just becomes different, as they grow into adolescence, their needs, their emotional needs and their guidance needs are different and they actually do need you to be there, they need support, constant support and encouragement" (A2011, mother of 16-year-old girl)

It was also clear that as children got older, the dynamics of care and dependence were open to change. Older children adopted a more active role in their own care, as illustrated by independently getting to and from school, and in the case of the older children being left alone for periods of time, both before and after school. Some mothers described how their teenagers were largely independent, engaging in high levels of self-care, such as doing their own laundry and cooking their own meals. A number of the children had decided that they no longer wished to attend after-school care, and so began to take care of themselves after school before their mother returned from work:

"She had a minder till she was em ten and then she said I don't want to go to those babies anymore, because she used to be minded with Alex [3-year-old sister]....she said 'I'm not going up there [the minders] for breakfast anymore' because I'd have to be dropping them off at half seven, and em so I teach her to keep all the doors locked and not to answer the phone except to me" (A1002, mother of 12-year old girl)

On some occasions, these self-care activities appeared to be initiated on the part of the children, as illustrated by the quote above. This level of independence and self-care shown by the children and young people also appeared to be related to absence of a second parent figure to rely upon. For example, the challenge of co-ordinating travelling to and from school and after-school care arrangements, while simultaneously working full-time, was emphasised by a number of mothers. One option to alleviate these difficulties was for the child and mother to establish patterns of care where children took on particular roles and responsibilities.

"There'd be small little things that you know people don't think about in two parent families because you've one or other of them to mop up the problem but you know I'm at work and I get a call because he's forgotten his lunch... he might have been kind of walking home or doing things on his own, at a much younger age than other children would have been. He was very self-sufficient and I mean he had to be....he would have definitely been a latch-key kid for a lot of the time" (A2106, mother of 15-year-old boy)

Children also modified the demands for care that they placed upon their mothers in accordance with their mother's accessibility. For example, two of the older children indicated that if they were sick in school, they would *"just stick it out"*, because of the logistical difficulties that would be involved in being collected early from school:

"I'd probably try and make it convenient for her and do it on her lunch break but em, yeah, it probably would be, like she might say, it depends on how like sick I was, she could say she'd come and pick me up or if I was just feeling really really crap and wanted to go home, she'd either tell me to stay there or get the bus home. (C2011, 16-year-old girl)

Examples such as these illustrate how parent and child roles and patterns of caring are influenced by the availability of resources and the absence of a second parent figure or other carer. The implications of this for children's experiences and relationships within their families will be explored in later chapters.

Summary

Description of care-giving routines and arrangements from both mothers and children's interviews situated mothers as the primary providers of care in almost every household. Two exceptions occurred where mothers were residing in their original family home with their parent(s) – here daily care-giving was more or less equally distributed between mothers and grandparent(s). These families represented one extreme of a continuum, along which mothers were assisted in caring for their children. Varying degrees of practical support in terms of taking care of the children were available to the majority of the mothers. Both children and mothers identified grandparents as key providers of care, followed by other family members (such as aunts) and childminders. Fathers and older siblings were less prominent in this regard. One fifth of the mothers identified themselves as *sole carers*, where there was no other individual regularly involved in caring for the child.

One striking finding related to the absence of fathers from mothers' accounts of care-giving routines, and even where fathers had regular contact with their children, mothers did not consider that fathers contributed to the daily care of the child. In a small number of cases, where children had regular contact with their fathers, they described how their fathers cared for them at these times. However, fathers were not generally assimilated into daily care-giving routines. It was clear that children adopted a more active role in their own care as they got older, and in a number of cases, the absence of an alternative support figure besides the mother necessitated arrangements where children took greater responsibility for their own needs.

Discipline & Monitoring Activities

A key concern is the extent to which parental roles of discipline and authority were shared among mothers, fathers and others involved in the care of the child. Negotiation and management of regulations, expectations and issues of discipline reflect the structure of authority within these families and represents an essential feature of the hierarchical organisation within the family. The hierarchical structure of the family is important to consider, as previous research has suggested that the absence of a second adult from the home is likely to result in blurred generational boundaries and lack of hierarchy in the home (Nock, 1988). Analyses of how and by whom issues of discipline and authority were handled within these families revealed different concerns and points of emphasis between children and mothers. Salient within the children's interviews were the specifics of the regulation of and expectations surrounding their activities and behaviours. In contrast, for mothers, two issues were prominent in relation to discipline: firstly, the extent to which this aspect of the

parenting role was shared with fathers and other caregivers; and secondly, how the disciplinary role was negotiated and managed.

Exclusive Nature of the Disciplinary Role

Mothers' narratives strongly reflected their role as primary figures of discipline and authority for their children. A dominant theme highlighted by half of the mothers was how this aspect of the parenting role was *exclusive* to the mother and less likely than more general care-giving roles to be shared with others. The exclusive alignment of the disciplinary role to the mother was clearly linked to the absence of a second parental figure from the home; and further linked to the mothers' choices about seeking assistance in this regard and constraints in the absence of appropriate support.

One key factor that underpinned the exclusive nature of the disciplinary role was reluctance on the part of mothers to share or invite others into the role, when others' values, expectations and disciplinary strategies were discrepant from those of the mother. In this regard, an *exclusive* disciplinary role was positively constructed by a number of the mothers:

> *"I think with regard to disciplining a child, I think it's personally a lot easier, just from my own point of view I don't have to consider a third person you know or how they would discipline a child, or what they would think or you know and like that too, I don't have [child] coming back and saying to me 'well my dad said I can do this'"* (A1007, mother of 8-year-old girl)

Thus, possible divergent values and opinions of a second parent did not have to be taken into account, mothers did not have to compromise or change their approach to suit anybody, and the opportunity for children to negotiate restrictions and punishments by playing one parent figure against another was eliminated. When the disciplinary role was encroached upon, as illustrated in the cases below, problems could emerge. One mother described how her family monitored her role in monitoring her child, thus undermining her confidence in her parenting ability:

> *"Sometimes I think the family does interfere too much...the sister would ring, do you know Leanne is up the town on her own...did you give her permission to go....I mean of course I gave the child permission. I won't like to swear but do they think I'm that bad of a parent...that's one thing that annoys me sometimes" (A1005, mother of 12-year-old girl).*

Two mothers reflected how disjuncture between her own and her mother's approach to discipline created confusion for her children, when different boundaries and limits were set within different contexts:

> *R: Does anybody else play a role in their discipline?*
>
> *A: My mum does yeah...and in saying that it has caused friction in the past...I can see her point of view, if they're misbehaving at home, in her home...she has to discipline them in some way...but mam goes too quick...she'll always punish the kids, like she's punished me, and it's the old fashioned way. It does cause friction in the house...to the point that I can see where*

the kids are coming back to me confused, like what is it we are being punished for...and you just have to kind of keep talking through the whole thing you know (A2001, mother of 17-year-old girl)

"Dad he'll pick them up from school but he'll have minimal contact with them really, he's not a satisfactory babysitter...he'll be in the other living room and he probably won't come out unless somebody screams...so they're minding themselves really...it can be frustrating to try and put like a set of boundaries or rules in place and then find out that somebody else who was supposedly taking responsibility for them...isn't" (A1001, mother of 11-year-old girl)

Such discrepancies also created difficulties for mothers in enforcing their authority, where children set one carer or parent in opposition to their mother. These difficulties also emerged in mothers' discussions relating to fathers' involvement in discipline, and will be discussed later in the chapter.

Thus, mothers operated in a somewhat exclusionary manner and drew boundaries around the extent to which others were permitted to discipline and exert authority over their children. However, the exclusive nature of the disciplinary role was not always a matter of choice on the part of mothers. Given the demands and challenges of disciplining a child alone within a single parent family context, one-fifth of the mothers expressed the view that this domain of parenting would be easier for them if they had a second supportive parenting figure. They reflected how exclusively setting and enforcing limitations and restrictions was particularly challenging when there was no "back up" authority figure present. Two of the mothers specifically emphasised that they missed having a male authority figure for their children:

"It's hard when it comes to em discipline, they walk all over you, you know, you have a heart, you have a soft spot, do you know what I mean, it's very very hard...he misses out on that male figure" (A1104, mother of 8-year-old boy)

Having others involved in a disciplinary role was perceived positively when others were invited in, and help was delivered in a manner that supported rather than undermined the mother's approach. It was clear that under these conditions, a number of the mothers did willingly involve others in this role. For example, two mothers highlighted that when their child was being cared for in another person's home (by the childminder after school for example), the right to discipline her child was passed over to that individual. This was clearly related to mothers' trust and confidence in the individual and the complementary nature of both approaches. This mother described how she had willingly shared her disciplinary role with her childminder, when her child was younger:

"I just trusted her completely, obviously she was an older mother than I was, she had four children of her own, there was just a way about her...whatever her rules were and whatever her discipline was, was fine with me, now she never, always discussed things with me, it was never an issue but I trusted her completely" (A2011, mother of 16-year-old girl)

A small number of mothers described how they occasionally called upon a relative or close friend to assist with a *specific* disciplinary issue. A clear gender pattern emerged here. It was mothers of boys who sought specific support in the disciplinary role, rather than mothers of girls. This suggests that mothers may feel that they need more support in the authority domain with sons than with daughters. Furthermore, support figures that were called upon were invariably male, and included children's uncles, grandfathers or older brothers. Indeed, only one mother described how she called upon her children's father to assist in disciplining their older sons. However, in the absence of other appropriate *like-minded* authority figures, the exclusive nature of the mother's role was not always a matter of choice.

Children's Perspectives

Children's perspectives on how discipline and authority were managed within their family broadly reflected mothers' accounts. Thus, children almost exclusively referred to their mother as the principal figure of authority and discipline, although in a small number of cases, younger children indicated that childminders and grandparents would occasionally chastise them. In some cases, other caregivers such as childminders or grandparents did not directly discipline the child themselves, but mothers were informed about misbehaviour. For the older children, where it was less common for other individuals to be involved in the daily care of the child, the disciplinary and authority role appeared to be even more exclusively aligned to the mother.

Children's perspectives on the exclusive nature of the mother's disciplinary role varied. Dealing with one parent led to either greater or less leverage for children to negotiate disciplinary issues. On the one hand, the absence of a second parent figure meant that the word of one parent was final, affording children little opportunity for negotiation:

> *"Say someone would go and say ask their mum can I do something and then they'd say no and then they'd ask their dad and their dad would talk to their mam and they'd be allowed to do it"* (C2113, boy, age 13)

On the other hand, children perceived that in the absence of a second parenting figure to reinforce and ideas and demands of the first parent, children were better positioned to exert influence over mothers:

> *"I think it's better I really do. I don't know why, probably because I haven't had both parents, but it's better when it's one child and a single parent because it's fairer they can't back each other up, if there's two parents they always back each other up, it's easier (*C2007, girl, age 13)

Thus, the likelihood for vertical authority exchanges to give way to more horizontal exchanges was enhanced by the absence of a second parenting figure, and the exclusive nature of the mother's disciplinary role.

Father's Role in Discipline

Mothers and children were in broad agreement about the nature of the father's disciplinary role in the family. Mothers' perceptions of themselves as primary figures of discipline represented a key feature of her parenting role. This theme strongly emerged in discussion around the involvement of children's fathers in discipline, and further emphasised the exclusive nature of the mothers' role in this regard. Generally, where fathers had contact with their children, they were not considered as disciplinary figures, and only one mother indicated that she actively sought support from her children's father, as issues arose. Mothers reflected how fathers did not support their disciplinary role, and had divergent perspectives on how issues should be handled. For example, one mother described how her child's father failed to monitor the child's activities when she visited him, and did not support her methods of discipline, while two other mothers described how their children's fathers adopted an approach that diverged from their own approach. This mother described her difficulty in enforcing a disciplinary role with her children, when disagreements arose between her and her ex-husband regarding how to approach specific issues:

> *"There used to be quite a lot of conflict about parenting skills, like Martin [children's father] wanted to smack, I didn't and you know you can't on the spot resolve a problem when we're arguing how to resolve it and that can be quite frustrating, and amazing that you know this person you had a baby with doesn't even know where you're coming from"* (A1010, mother of 9-year-old girl).

A rights discourse permeated how some of the mothers described their role as an authority figure – they were entitled to engage in this role with their children. By the same token, a father's right to discipline the child was open to question:

> *"I don't think he has the right to, you know I think he gave up that right when he fucking went off and he slept with other girls and ruined my family, I think he took away any right of like chastising PJ....he really did and being in somebody's life every second weekend...I think you can't really you know you can't be a parent...properly"* (A1123, mother of 8-year-old boy)

This issue of 'right to discipline' also emerged when one mother described how the father of her younger daughter attempted to adopt a disciplinary role with her son, who was not his child:

> *"He [father of younger child] did give a little bit of discipline there, but then, if he steps out of line, I would say, here, don't say anything to him, he's not your son...and that's actually why he doesn't come to see Georgia [younger child] anymore, he said something to Ryan [older child] one day and I said here hold on, don't speak to him like that"* (A1104, mother of 9-year-old boy)

Children's narratives similarly illuminated the non-involvement of fathers in discipline. A number of the older children reflected that fathers did not attempt to adopt to adopt a disciplinary role with them. One older girl described her father's reluctance to be strict and enforce rules with her:

> *"My dad never gives out to me, like mom is kind of the strict person, like if my mom was getting mad, I would not be afraid of my dad getting mad at me but I would of my mom...like if my dad ever got mad at me, he'd apologise afterwards and be really sad.... I guess cos he only is here for a little while so he doesn't want to be mad at us"* (C2002, 16-year-old girl)

In a similar vein, four other adolescents indicated that their fathers did not adopt a disciplinary role. These children highlighted their fathers' inability or unwillingness to exert authority with their children: fathers were described as being too easy-going or too pre-occupied with other things. One adolescent boy described how *"my dad is crap at discipline"* while one older girl described how her father did not engage with her in this way:

> *"When I was around with my dad he was usually distracted with other stuff, it wouldn't matter, you know, I mean I think he used to smoke and I think when he found out I was a smoker he was proud, and that was really freaky, so I gave up completely afterwards...I won't do it [smoking] around my dad because I'm too scared that he's going to turn around and pat me on the back you know and that freaks me out"* (C2016, 17-year-old girl)

Only two younger boys indicated that their fathers attempted to discipline them. Interestingly, both of these boys expressed dissatisfaction with this situation and paid little attention to him when he did so:

> *"I am bold for me da, but I just don't listen to him....I don't listen to him because he doesn't listen to me"* (C1123, 8-year-old boy).

Fathers' lack of willingness to adopt a disciplinary role with their children as highlighted by a number of the adolescents may reflect the influence of mothers' attempts to exclude fathers from this role and/or children's rejection of this aspect of their fathers' role. It may also be based upon fathers' conceptualisation of their parenting role and the nature of the relationship roles that have developed and been negotiated between fathers and their children.

In summary, within many of the family contexts, the disciplinary and authority role was largely confined to the mother. Children's narratives also positioned mothers as the primary, if not exclusive, figure of authority and discipline for them. For many of the mothers, a boundary around their disciplinary role was tightly drawn, unless other significant care-givers were invited to intervene on specific occasions. Where other care-givers intruded into this role, this was responded to with resistance, particularly when discrepancies emerged between mothers' and others' expectations and approaches. A rights discourse permeated how a number of the mothers discussed their role as authority figure, particularly with regard to the role of fathers and other partners. The issue of disciplining and monitoring a child particularly within the single parent family context was a challenging one. Here some mothers reported how a second parenting figure would be invaluable in terms of providing support and "back up" around such issues. On the other hand, a number of the

mothers emphasised the advantage of not having to consult another person regarding discipline issues or compromise their beliefs and approach. The approaches taken to discipline within these families are considered next.

Approaches to Discipline

Being the figure of authority and discipline incorporates not only the establishment of parameters around activities and appropriate behaviour, but also strategies of monitoring and punishment. Discussions with mothers around the nature of discipline and authority within the household assumed a somewhat divergent emphasis from the children's interviews. Where mothers focused on the nature of the disciplinary role and the strategies of supervision and punishment that they used, the specifics of the regulations and expectations surrounding their activities and behaviour were salient within children's interviews.

Children's Perspectives

As stated, dominant within children's descriptions of the approaches to discipline were rules and regulations that were imposed. Two-thirds of the younger children specified certain restrictions around their activities, which appeared to be underpinned by mothers' motivation to protect their children and keep them safe: *"I'm not allowed go out when it's dark and when I was smaller I wasn't allowed turn on the gas"*. Certain areas of the neighbourhood were off limits to them, such as the shopping centre, busy road, park area and the local disco. Similar, but less clearly defined restrictions were emphasised by the adolescents. Both younger children and adolescents were required to be home by a specified time, keep their mother informed of their whereabouts and be contactable by mobile phone. One-third of the younger children also referred to expectations around housekeeping issues, such as not being allowed to play outdoor games in the house (such as football, skateboarding and other rough-and-tumble games), keeping pets restricted to certain areas of the house, and a requirement to keep their bedroom or play area clean and tidy. This latter response regarding tidiness was emphasised only by girls. A final pattern of response was classified as expectations regarding how the child should behave. Here the younger children discussed rules prohibiting bullying behaviour, fighting, swearing, tell lies, playing with fire and smoking. Among the adolescent group, expectations that they refrain from involvement with drugs, alcohol and cigarettes were also commonly mentioned – one older boy described *"the three rules... no drink, no drugs, no girls"*.

In terms of the *types* of punishments that were enforced with the younger children, the most frequently mentioned involved the use of negative punishers – depriving the child of a favourite toy or activity. One-third of these children were "grounded" and not allowed outdoors to play, or they were banned from watching television or playing computer games, or a time-out period in their bedroom was enforced. A second style of discipline involved the use of positive punishers – here the

child was given extra chores to carry out around the house. Finally, a number of the younger children indicated that their mothers' approach involved reasoning with the child and explaining the effects of their behaviour on others:

> *"She punishes me like she keeps me in for a few days and she'll tell me not to do it and she'll make sure I understand what I did wrong, and she tells me how people can get hurt by doing it"* (C1103, 12-year-old boy)

The principle of deprivation was also commonly employed as a punishment tool with the older age group. Here certain privileges were removed (such as pocket money) or being allowed out to socialise with friends. However, attempts at parental control and punishment became more amenable to negotiation and compromise as children got older (this issue will be re-visited later in the chapter).

Mothers' Perspectives

Where mothers did discuss specific rules and regulations, attention to expectations regarding children's behaviour towards others was prominent, rather than restrictions they placed on children's activities, whereabouts and associates. Showing respect to others, no bad language and no fighting with siblings were the expectations that were commonly mentioned by the mothers of the younger children. For the older group, expectations regarding curfews and alcohol and drug-related behaviours were clear. However, less clearly defined limitations regarding where adolescents spend their leisure time and with whom were delineated. Thus, given the expanding social world of their adolescent children, mothers realised that boundaries are more difficult to monitor and enforce. For example, while all mothers wished to become acquainted with their children's friends, this became more difficult as children got older:

> *"I know a good few of them [children's friends] although now that they're in secondary school they're getting to know more people and it's not as easy to know them because teenagehood is a very delicate process and you don't want mother hovering around too much and knowing too much....although I do try to make contact with parents...and at least talk to them on the phone, sometimes meet you know, but it certainly, I wouldn't know a lot of the friends at the moment" (A2013, mother of 13-year old boy and girl)*

Various strategies of punishment were employed by the mothers in their disciplinary role. A small number of the mothers also described general principles underlying their disciplinary approach, such as disagreement with the use of physical or corporal punishment, or a positive approach to discipline, where positive behaviours were reinforced and negative behaviours were typically ignored rather than punished:

> *"I always thought that rewarding good behaviour is a thousand times more effective than punishing bad behaviour... I've typically, I've let those [misbehaviours] go on the grounds that you know you can't be perfect all the time"* (A1122, mother of 9-year-old boy)

As emphasised previously, disciplining a child in the absence of a second parent or any support figure was challenging for some of the mothers. In these cases, their approach to discipline was impacted upon in different ways by their aloneness in this aspect of their parenting role:

> *"I think as a single parent you have to take an easy tack because otherwise you've no further resources to call on"* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

> *"Because I'm in total responsibility, the strictness that I would have with her in terms of, it's certainly driven by, I think if I was involved or had married very quickly or there was a partner, the joint responsibility would make it easier...would make us both feel more at ease"* (A2011, mother of 16-year-old girl)

Generally, accounts of disciplinary strategies were resonant of children's accounts – the use of deprivation of a certain toy, activity, mobile phone, or pocket money; time-out, and "grounding". More commonly mothers of adolescents described an authoritative-type approach to discipline – here parents exercised their control in a rational and democratic manner through discussion and negotiation:

> *"I don't allow my children to do stuff without it being questioned and discussed and negotiated and possibly compromised over and a certain amount of planning being involved...I would prefer that the children didn't grow up thinking they could just have things when they want them and as they want them"* (A2013, mother of 13-year old boy and girl)

It was clear that disciplinary approaches were not mutually exclusive, and depended on the specific situation, the quality of the parent-child relationship and the developmental status of the child. Thus, approaches to discipline by mothers of adolescents shifted in response to demands of the adolescent context, and the changing nature of the parent-child relationship. Indeed, specifically among the adolescent group, the quality of the mother-child relationship emerged as an important influence on the disciplinary approach adopted by the mother.

Trust, Discipline & the Quality of Mother-Child Relationships

Where mother-adolescent relationships were characterised by a sense of trust, more commonly used disciplinary approaches involved open discussion, negotiation and compromise. The negotiation of restrictions through reasonable discussion was linked to a sense of responsibility and an awareness and understanding among the adolescents of their mother's perspective. The adoption of a discipline-by-reasoning approach was related to the quality of the relationship, and particularly the sense of trust and openness of communication that existed. The significance of these core relationship concepts and their relation to the disciplinary style used, are highlighted by the following two quotes, both from mothers of adolescent boys:

> *"He's not a difficult child to discipline...we would communicate very well. We would talk about any issues, anything that he wasn't doing that I wanted him to do or if he was*

bad mannered or whatever, I would actually say you know....I would leave it with him and he'd come back and he might say you were right about that mum" (A2115, mother of 17-year-old boy)

"They probably think I'm giving out to them all the time, I'm not really, I suppose I trust them" (A2117, mother of 14- and 15-year old boys)

The salience of the quality of the mother-child relationship in relation to approaches to discipline and punishment also emerged within the narratives of the adolescents. Where parent-child relationships were characterised by a sense of trust, adolescents described an absence of specific rules. Here rules and expectations between child and parent were implicitly understood, and where children had earned or not lost their mother's trust, rules were open to negotiation. Furthermore, discussions around boundaries and expectations were characterised by a sense of give-and-take and openness:

"She trusts me a lot cos she's seen that I don't drink, all my friends do, I'm pretty strong like I don't drink or smoke or anything, which she kind of gives me a lot more trust, so I could stay in town, get the [train] at eight, come back here by nine....all my friends have to be home earlier, but I think I've pretty much earned that trust. Em she doesn't really have any rules. Just except for always have my mobile with me" (C2007, 13-year old girl)

The mother of this girl describes the situation in a similar way:

"I never have to discipline her, ever, she's a very, I've always had a...very simple way of seeing it, and if you're reasonable with me I'm reasonable with you and I don't like taking a disciplinarian role, I don't think that engenders any sense of self and responsibility... She doesn't buck against me and I try not to annoy her... and for us it seems to have worked so far that the reasonable route is found and we negotiate things" (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

The importance of this sense of trust also emerged when adolescents described how they experienced feelings of guilt when they let their mother down, or violated her trust in some way:

R: How would you be punished?

C: Em, well that's the thing you see, she hasn't really been there, so self-motivation you know, just her disappointment would be enough of a punishment probably (C2117, 14-year-old boy)

In contrast, where a sense of mistrust had arisen, resulting from previous violation of rules, elevated levels of control occurred. This 14-year-old girl had been caught smoking by her mother, and as a result, perceived that her mother did not trust her:

"It's a bit annoying but she's kind of, if I'm going to my best friend's house she'll always call her mum up and have a chat as well...but em I think she's doing that to make sure that I go to that house and not to someone else's house...she doesn't trust me, she still doesn't trust me" (C2009, 14-year-old girl)

Thus, both mothers and adolescents reflected the salience of the quality of the relationship in how matters relating to discipline and authority were managed. However, while mothers largely exercised their control in a reasonable and democratic manner, through communication, compromise and negotiation with their children, her right to exercise authority was maintained. Three of the older girls reflected how their mothers imposed strict boundaries around where, when and with whom they could 'hang out', and how efforts to negotiate with their mother were futile. Two of these girls believed that their mothers' strictness was directly related to becoming pregnant at an early age.

> *"One thing that would be in her head quite a lot, would be the fact that because she got pregnant so young, she's afraid the same thing will happen to me...which because I know how it affected my mum and the way, like everything stopped when she had me, I don't want that at all"* (C2011, 16-year-old girl)

Thus, these mothers were aware of the risk that their daughters too could become pregnant at an early age, and wanted to prevent this from occurring.

Developmental Patterns in Discipline & Monitoring

Clear developmental patterns permeated the themes relating to discipline and monitoring activities. While they have been highlighted throughout the previous section, two key patterns are briefly summarised here. The first developmental pattern relates to the exclusive nature of the disciplinary role. Within many of the family contexts, the disciplinary and authority role was largely confined to the mother. As children got older, domains of discipline became even more exclusively aligned to the mother, as adolescents were not likely to be regularly cared for by other individuals. The second key pattern related to the increased salience of the quality of the mother-child relationship in how matters relating to discipline and authority were addressed, as children got older. Of particular importance were qualities of trust and openness in communication in the relationship, which appeared to underpin an approach based on negotiation and compromise, rather than the exercise of parental control. The changing nature of parental disciplinary and authority roles afforded an important opportunity for power dynamics to shift, and children to exercise their agency. Although such an approach was not ubiquitous among the adolescent-mother dyads, its visibility among the adolescent group indicates that structures of hierarchy within these families may shift over time. However, it was also clear that the use of authority also represented a frequent catalyst for conflict in the mother-child relationship, an issue which is considered in detail in Chapter Seven.

In summary, for many children, behaviour and activities both within the home and in neighbourhood contexts with friends were regulated by particular restrictions and expectations. Younger children indicated that their activities were restricted to certain safe areas of their neighbourhood, and they were expected to be home by a certain time, when out playing with friends. Similar restrictions applied to the older group, where curfews were also imposed, and expectations regarding staying away from drugs, alcohol and smoking were commonly mentioned. The mothers' narratives focused

upon strategies of supervision and punishment, rather than the restrictions and expectations they imposed. The most commonly used strategy involved inhibiting the child from engaging in a desired activity, such as watching television or going out with friends. The use of a 'discipline by reasoning' approach was common, particularly among the mothers of the older age group. Here mothers exercised their control in a reasonable and democratic manner, through communication, compromise and negotiation with their children. The adoption of such an approach was related to the quality of the mother-child relationship, where a sense of trust and open communication characterised the relationship.

Decision-making & Responsibility

Questions around decision-making roles and the issue of responsibility for the child were primarily addressed within the mothers' interviews. As was the case with the disciplinary role, these roles represented a key aspect of the mothers' parenting role. Consequently, the extent to which mothers perceived themselves to be alone in this regard was salient in terms of how they experienced parenting within a single parent family context.

Without exception, mothers described themselves as the sole bearers of responsibility for their children and as such, all decisions relating to their children's lives rested with them. A small number of the mothers described how they had become so accustomed to making decisions alone that they generally did not rely upon others for advice or support. Indeed, some of these mothers described how as a result of making decisions alone over many years, they could never envisage sharing that responsibility and decision-making role with any individual.

However, almost half of the mothers did regularly consult family members and friends when faced with a decision, although a number of the mothers qualified this by emphasising that any decision was ultimately theirs to make. Frequently such discussions involved mothers' mothers, siblings, and close friends. As children got older, they were also consulted as part of the decision-making process. For example, most of the older children had an opportunity to state which second-level school they wished to attend.

Father's Role in Decision Making

Almost one-quarter of the mothers described the role of their children's fathers in the decision-making process. For the majority of these mothers, however, his role in this regard was described primarily in terms of non-involvement and exclusion. His participation could be described in one of two ways: in seven cases, fathers were not consulted as part of the decision-making process but in some cases he was informed of decisions only after they had been made. Only two mothers, both of older boys, described how certain issues (such as what second level school their child would attend)

were discussed with their children's fathers. Despite this consultation, mothers reserved the right to veto fathers' suggestions:

> *"If [child's father] had his way he may have had him in an Irish speaking school you know in primary school and I would have made the decision to have him in a multi-denominational school. Now he didn't disagree with it but I would say he knew that he wasn't having a decision on it. I didn't give him the decision. But we did talk about it, we did talk about schools and we didn't have a row about it or anything like that"* (A2115, mother of 17-year-old boy)

Of course this issue did not arise in a significant number of cases, where there was little or no contact between mothers and children, and fathers (18 cases), or where fathers were deceased (four cases). In the remaining cases, where there was contact, mothers did not mention the involvement of fathers in either making decisions or consultations around decisions, suggesting that fathers did not play any role in this regard. The exclusion or non-involvement of fathers in making decisions was related to the fact that mothers perceived themselves as the main carers. This also appeared to be linked to mothers' perceptions of fathers' involvement in their children's lives or fathers' parenting values. Mothers generally reported fathers to be uninvolved or not sufficiently involved in their children's lives to warrant a role in decision-making. Some mothers commented that they did not share the same parenting values and approach to regulation, supervision and punishment as the fathers – here fathers were described as *"not having a clue"* or *"having a different take on things"*.

Bearing Sole Responsibility

As stated previously, mothers described themselves as the sole bearers of responsibility for their children, and had the *"final say"* regarding decisions. Overall, bearing sole responsibility for their children was a key aspect of their construction of their role as single parents, illuminated in situations where decisions had to be made. How they felt about this varied over time, and depended upon the magnitude of the decision to be made, the degree to which they doubted or were assured of their capacity to make the best decision, and the availability of support to them in the decision-making process. From one perspective, mothers felt empowered by this level of control: this position endowed them with a freedom to go their own direction without having to negotiate or compromise on their decisions and values, or argue with or take account of another's perspective. From another perspective, a small number of the mothers described the pressure that accompanied this level of responsibility:

> *"...his whole being is your responsibility you know and how he turns out as a person is your responsibility....making the decisions is a hard thing to do but I think you know and I think maybe other mothers would say, you do it but whatever you think is the best, you know you just do and whatever and if it doesn't fucking work out at least you can look back and say well I did what I thought or I felt as a mother, but it is very hard and it can be very scary like, you know it can be really scary"* (A1123, mother of 8-year-old boy)

The implication of not sharing the responsibility for decision-making was that mothers were entirely accountable and responsible for the outcomes, positive or negative, of all decisions made:

> *"The responsibility is all yours and although it's very difficult at times and you're trying to make a decision and you wonder if it's the right decision or not, and you don't really have anyone to discuss it with, a partner so to speak of, obviously you discuss it with friends etc, but em the good thing is you don't have to communicate that...if there are decisions you need to make and you don't want anyone else's opinion on it, and you know it's the one you want, you don't have to try and agree and it's good and bad.....the decision falls with me and if there's a problem, then it's my decision and ultimately you have to stand up but at the same time when you make a decision and it works out and things work out you get all of the credit"* (A2011, mother of 16-year-old girl)

As with the disciplinary role, having the final say regarding decisions relating to their children's lives rested with the mothers alone. While others were invited into the role for the purpose of consultation as part of the decision-making process, the ultimate responsibility always remained with the mother alone. Despite the involvement of family members and friends in decision-making processes, a number of the mothers highlighted how such support was not deemed equivalent to what might be provided by a partner and/or child's father. A concept of 'equal investment' in the child was raised here. Thus, while family members and friends provided certain degrees of support, mothers perceived that their investment in the child was not the same as that which committed parents or partners might provide:

> *"...even though I've got family and I've got a good family, em you always feel that you've nobody to turn to, yes I can turn to me sisters and I can turn to me brothers, like that's grand, but you don't have that emotional support of a father that would love your children the way you would love them"* (A1117, mother of 8-year-old boy)

> *"You'll always have your family but it isn't the same as having somebody to sit down with when the child is gone to bed and discuss things with"* (A1007, mother of 8-year-old girl)

In summary, mothers were positioned as the sole decision-makers and bearers of ultimate responsibility for their children. In describing the decision-making process, the majority of mothers described how issues were frequently discussed with various individuals - most commonly, female family members, such as mothers and sisters, and friends. In a number of cases, where there was contact between mothers and fathers, fathers were informed of decisions after they had been made – generally input from fathers was either not requested beforehand or not taken into account in any case. Consequently, full responsibility and accountability was also confined to mothers alone. These aspects of the parenting role were *not* shared between mothers and fathers and/or other family members. This decision-making role and the level of responsibility, which accompanied it, was a key theme in how mothers described their parenting role.

Aloneness & Experiences of Support

Having described the nature of care-giving, discipline, and decision-making roles that together constitute the parenting role, it was clear that the distribution of caring and parenting roles beyond the mother was limited in some of these families. In considering some of the factors underpinning this, *availability* and *quality* of support represented an important context which influenced the extent to which other family members and fathers were involved or invited to share in the role of looking after the children. Almost half of the mothers emphatically stated that they did not feel supported in their parenting role, thereby heightening their sense of aloneness in their parenting role. Three main themes were identified in relation to this: the availability of support, perceived quality of support on offer; and barriers to active support-seeking behaviour in mothers.

In terms of the availability of support, as noted previously in the chapter, one-fifth of the mothers described themselves as sole carers, where no individual was regularly involved in the day-to-day care of the child. This mother described her situation when she returned from abroad with her children:

> *"I had no family, I hadn't any friends from when I was younger, so I was starting all over again so I didn't have any support at all so literally I couldn't go out...I could never have a day where somebody else picked them up from school. There was never a day, I never had a day off."* (A2010, mother of 17-year old twin girls)

However, all mothers in the study had at least one other individual to turn to for assistance, if the need arose, and many mothers regularly did seek support. Support manifested itself practically through the provision of direct care for the child as previously described; while emotional support was characterised in terms of receiving advice around discipline issues and decision-making, and being encouraged and praised. Grandparents and paid childminders were highlighted as significant providers of direct care, while one-third of mothers referred to both family members and friends as significant providers of emotional support, advice, and guidance. In particular, a number of the mothers mentioned being part of a network of single mothers. A minority of families also assisted mothers financially on a regular basis. Two mothers referred to support they received from their partners, while only one mother referred to the support she received from her children's father.

While one-third of the mothers referred to family as a source of support, a number of mothers described this support as *"minimal"*, *"occasional"* and *"limited"*. Restricted opportunities for family members to provide support on a regular basis arose where family members lived in other parts of the country, or abroad, or in cases where mothers did not have close relationships with their extended family and were not in regular contact with them.

Despite the availability of some form of support to all parents, half of the mothers expressed that they did not *feel supported* in their parenting role. This highlights that feeling supported was not only related to the ready *availability* of support, but also to the perceived *quality* of the support on

offer. As indicated previously in the chapter, in many cases, certain aspects of the parenting role were reserved for the mother alone yet boundaries between regular providers of care and the mother could become blurred. Where this occurred, or there were inconsistencies between the care-giver and the mother's approach, problems arose:

> *"I mean they're [mother's parents] are helpful in a practical way in picking up the kids...then there are other strings attached as well...I don't really feel like [supported], they're quite intrusive my parents you know so if em they want to everything, they feel it's their right to know everything...if I do something that my parents don't agree with, like I got the kids a pet cat and they said that I shouldn't have done that...they started refusing to pick them up from school, so you know they'll do it but it's a cost you know so I don't feel their support"* (A1001, mother of 12-year-old girl)

Similarly as previously reflected in the chapter, father involvement was frequently constructed as being unsupportive, based on perceptions relating to fathers' distinct parenting values, and lack of reliability. Thus, the extent to which the support offered facilitated or undermined the mothers' parenting role was influential in terms of whether mothers availed of support on offer.

Over one quarter of the mothers referred to a *reluctance* to actively seek support. Furthermore, the implication here was that support was only provided if sought. There were a number of reasons why mothers generally did not seek help. As a result of parenting alone thus far, mothers felt they could manage adequately on their own – they had learnt how to support themselves. A number of the mothers qualified this by stating that they knew they could request assistance from their family, if they were really in need, but generally would not be inclined to do so. However, because these mothers displayed competence and independence, offers of support were even less forthcoming. As one mother pointed out: *"if you show any signs of capability, you're really left to your own devices"*. Two mothers indicated that a reluctance to ask for support was driven to some extent by a sense of pride – they felt that to have sought support would have been a sign of weakness, and they *should* be capable of managing on their own:

> *"I think my tendency would have been to push everyone away even though I actually really really needed them...In the early years I think I would have suffered an awful lot from pride and wouldn't have asked for help anyway...I mean there were times...when I would have been counting pennies on the table thinking do I have enough money to buy a pint of milk and I would have never dreamt of picking up t he phone or going to somebody and asking. They [family] never, to this day, they don't know that I struggled to that extent"* (A2106, mother of 15-year-old boy)

Where families and friends did engage with mothers and their children in a supportive manner, there was little doubt about the significant role that such individuals played in their lives. For example, five of the mothers described how childminders had become significant figures for the child, as a result of their continuous involvement in the child's life. Where children were looked after in a family home, they were exposed to a different family context and were treated as a member of that

family. One mother described how she felt that this opportunity for her child to experience another family was particularly important, because she and her son lived alone:

> *"He's quite happy there and I think it's good for him as well. I think it would be a bad thing to have you and the one child constantly together, I think they need, you know they can experience a different type of family as well"* (A1116, mother of 12-year-old boy)

Generally the single parents placed considerable value on their social networks – certainly amongst those whom they considered supportive. Social networks played an important role in providing both practical and emotional support, and less frequently, financial assistance. Where supportive and forthcoming social networks were unavailable however, aloneness in the parenting role was further heightened. Indeed for the majority of mothers, *aloneness* was a salient feature of their parenting role. Only one mother remarked how she imagined that her experience of parenting would be similar if she was parenting with a partner. The salience of aloneness and loneliness was clearly perceptible in mothers' discourses around parenting:

> *"Parenting alone, is lonely, is alone, you are alone, you know that's why they say lone parents, 'cos you are alone and that loneliness is a killer"* (A1021, mother of 9-year-old girl)

> *"I have found it very very lonesome, very em you know I mean times when I would just be so distressed, although I knew that my children were very healthy, I wanted somebody to say that to me"* (A2014/2113, mother of 13-year-old twin boy and girl)

Experiences of loneliness were further highlighted during times of celebration or when certain milestones were achieved, when there was no other individual who held equal regard for the child to share such occasions with:

> *"At the time it's very difficult and you always want somebody to show off to and there isn't anybody. I think that's quite the hardest thing you know about it. You know, learning to walk and talk and the teeth and all that, you've nobody to say anything to, because nobody else is interested"* (A2010, mother of 17-year-old girls)

By far the most common discourse used to describe their experience of parenting alone was one of strain, pressure and stress. Phrases such as *"exhausting"*, *"tough"*, *"draining"*, *"overwhelming"* and *"worrying"* were commonly invoked, with three mothers describing parenting alone as analogous to living in hell or in an asylum. One mother described her experience in the following way: *"Hell, hell on earth I would say...very difficult on me mentally, emotionally, physically"*. Another mother constructed parenting alone as an unending sequence of challenges to be met:

> *"It's tough, it's bloody tough...I mean there just never seems to be the situation where you get an easy ride, whether it's you know the education, whether it's social...you're constantly trying to find ways to keep communication open and make sure that she's not falling into a pit and you know you're doing that on your own, plus keep down the day job, plus keep house and get the shopping and have a life, God forbid"* (A2009, mother of 14-year-old girl)

Indeed, in the absence of support, the *endless* and *relentless* nature of the parenting role offered rarely any opportunities for respite.

> *"Sometimes it's a bit like holding onto a wheel that's moving a bit too fast. You never seem to get on top of it."* (A2016, mother of 16-year-old girl)

> *"There was always a feeling of you know, you never completed, your tasks were never done, you know there was always something that you had to kind of, there was always demands like...you have your own well and that's it. And if its' dry, that's too bad, you have to keep going"* (A2106, mother of 15-year-old boy)

However, discourses around aloneness in parenting displayed a complex weaving together of a diversity of elements and experiences. Thus, parenting alone was also construed as preferable to parenting in an abusive or unsupportive partnership, or in the partnership they had been in with their children's fathers. Here themes around having freedom of choice and control, which previously emerged in discussions of decision-making and disciplinary roles, were reiterated:

> *"I'd say it's preferable to an abusive situation, preferable to being with somebody how is half there and half not there. To thinking that somebody is going to support you and then they don't. At least when you're not expecting anything from anyone, you're not being let down, em it's preferable to being with who has maybe a different set of values and ideas to you in parenting and em so there aren't arguments as to what way to parent, you're in control of your own destiny and you're in control of your own finances, how meagre they might be, you're still in control of them. And you're not taken away emotionally from your child"* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

For a number of the mothers, parenting alone was all they had ever known. As stated previously in the chapter, given the independence and freedom of choice they had become accustomed to as a result of this constancy, sharing this role now would be difficult, or not possible – as one mother described: *"To have somebody with me as a co-parent is beyond the bounds of my imagining"*. In some cases, the benefit of the exclusive role was that all rewards, achievements and celebrations did not have to be shared with a second parent. Being alone in her parenting role also meant that the mother's role was an exclusive one: as will be discussed in the next chapter, this carried clear consequences for relational dynamics of interdependence and closeness between children and mothers.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to address how care-giving and parenting roles operate within the one-parent family context and the extent to which mothers were alone in their parenting role. A tendency to describe lone parents as a taxonomic category disguises the nuances and variability that characterise how parenting processes operate within these family contexts. More detailed qualitative exploration of parenting and caring within these family contexts uncovers what actually goes on in

'living' and 'doing' single parent family life, and the extent to which single parents consider themselves to be alone in their parenting role.

One key message to emerge from this chapter was that mothers perceived themselves to be parenting alone. The present chapter has revealed that mothers were positioned as the primary carer for their children, although care of the child was regularly shared between the mother and various caregivers, including grandparents and paid childminders. Nevertheless, other aspects of the parenting role were less likely to be shared, and it was along these domains of the parenting role that mothers constructed their role as single parents. Thus, regardless of the extent to which others were involved in the daily care of the child, the *responsibility* for ensuring childminding arrangements were in place always rested with the mother. Without exception, mothers described themselves as the sole bearers of responsibility for their children, although others were regularly consulted for advice and support. Similarly, disciplinary roles and decision-making functions were closely aligned to the mother and in some cases, exclusively so. In the absence of a parenting partner, aloneness in the parenting role was further exacerbated when other family members and fathers undermined or conflicted with the mother's parenting goals, values and approach.

These findings provide strong support for McHale et al.'s (2002) argument that executive decision-making and bearing ultimate responsibility for the child are key functions that distinguish parents from other caregivers. Thus assistance from others, even when delivered in a supportive manner, was not considered equivalent to co-parenting. The concept of 'equal investment' was used to differentiate the parenting role from other care-giving roles. Although certain aspects of the parenting role were shared among family members, mothers did not perceive that investment shown by such individuals was equivalent to the commitment that would be displayed by the child's second parent. Aloneness was a salient feature of mothers' parenting roles, and discourses pertaining to loneliness and stress were referred to by over half of the mothers. However, aloneness also brought with it freedom, choice and control, as mothers did not have to compromise or take account of potentially disparate values and opinions of a second parenting figure.

Patterns of distribution of care, authority, decision-making and responsibility in the present study indicated that mothers were largely engaged in a solo model of parenting (Smart & Neale, 1999). Smart and Neale's typology of post-divorce parenting, based on elements of shared parental care and parental authority/decision making, argues that co-parenting only occurs when both parents are involved in care and authority; and that solo parenting occurs when parental care and authority are not shared between parents. One significant finding from the present study was that fathers were largely disengaged from their parenting role. In only a minority of cases were fathers involved in regular care, and they were rarely involved in a disciplinary role. Different points of emphasis emerged however, as a number of young children described their father's role in their care, alongside other family members. From a small number of children's perspectives, the father's role as in

matters relating to authority and discipline was open to question, as fathers either demonstrated reluctance to punish and enforce rules with their children, or children exercised their agency by rejecting fathers' attempts to adopt this role with them. Of particular interest is the implication of the nature of the fathers' parenting role for children's relationships with their fathers, an issue which is addressed in Chapter Eight of the thesis. Overall, drawing together the perspectives of mothers and children yielded high levels of convergence in descriptions of how caring and parenting roles and routines operated within these families. However, discrepancies between mothers and children's accounts also highlight the salience of different issues from the perspectives of various family members.

No clear gender differences emerged across the children's accounts. However, it was mothers of boys rather than girls who sought support relating to discipline and authority, and support was usually sought from male relatives. This may suggest that mothers feel that a degree of gender matching is important, and that boys in particular lack the influence of a male authority figure. It is important to be cautious in interpretation however, as these mothers represent only a small minority of mothers in the sample.

Developmental changes as an influence on parenting and caring roles were evident in the chapter. Children's needs in terms of practical care changed as children got older and with the necessity for regular carers largely removed in adolescence, the aloneness of the mother and the exclusive nature of some aspects of her parenting role were further heightened. Children's capacity for agency emerged in their ability to take on increasing responsibility for their own needs. The availability of resources and absence of a second parent figure or other carer in the home yielded opportunities for children to adopt a more active role in their own care and paved the way for dynamics of authority, hierarchy and dependence between children and mothers to become more reciprocal and interdependent. As will be seen in Chapter Seven, it is through the experience of everyday care and interdependence that close relationships developed between these children and their mothers. Conversely, Chapter Eight considers how the absence of fathers' engagement in care-giving routines contributed to less positive relationship experiences, generally characterised by reduced dependence and connection.

CHAPTER 7: RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the nature of children's relationships with their mothers. Little is known about *qualitative* aspects of the relationships that single mothers have with their children, especially from children's perspectives (Arditti, 1999; Guttman, 1993). The factors that both facilitate and constrain positive close relationships between children and their mothers are explored. Of particular concern are the processes and contexts that underpin these relationships, and the qualities that living in a one parent family bring to mother-child relationships. In accordance with Laursen and Bukowski's (1997) assertion that different environments present different challenges and relationship opportunities, one primary aim of the current study was to consider the extent to which child-mother relationships are influenced by the one-parent family context and the absence of a second parental figure from the home. While this theme is explored throughout the chapter based on children's narratives, this question is also addressed more specifically towards the end of the chapter, drawing on mothers' perspectives. Finally, the chapter concludes by considering age- and gender-related trends that emerged – however, where differences are prominent, they are also highlighted throughout the chapter.

The chapter begins with an identification of the key themes that are linked with children's perceptions of positive and negative relationship experiences with their mothers. As indicated in a previous chapter, the mother was a highly significant individual for all of the children – almost all of the children represented their mothers in the closest position to them on their Closeness Maps, suggesting a high level of emotional closeness[25], and all mothers identified themselves as the primary carer of their children. Children described their relationships with their mothers in terms of the content and diversity of interactions, characterised by shared activities, open patterns of communication, conflict, and care-giving activities. Underpinning these interactions, various processes emerged that were associated with largely positive relationship experiences for these children.

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[25] As stated previously, placement of an individual in the inner circle on the Closeness Map is not a guaranteed reflection of the highest level of emotional closeness, particularly for younger children. However, discussion of the Closeness Map, and the nature of the children's relationships with their mothers indicated a high level of emotional closeness between children and their mothers.

Factors Underpinning Positive Relationship Experiences

Underlying the various patterns of interactions that constituted children's relationships with their mothers, three factors emerged that were associated with children's experiences of closeness in their relationships with their mothers: physical presence and accessibility, sense of commitment, and intimacy and connection. Each is considered in turn.

Physical Presence & Accessibility

Living with one's parent provided an important context for closeness in the child-mother relationship. A relationship history characterised by *close physical proximity*, spending time together, and continued patterns of care throughout the child's life indicated to the children their mothers' accessibility and availability to them. For example, one 9-year-old girl described how: *"I've more love for my mum because I'm with her most of the time"*; while one 9-year-old boy compared closeness to his mother with his closeness to his father: *"A teeny bit closer to my mum because she's right beside me"*. The issue of physical affection and proximity was particularly salient among the younger children who described feelings of security and happiness in her presence and loneliness in her absence: *"I always feel safe when my mam is with me"*.

However, the theme of accessibility went beyond physical presence of mothers to include children's sense of security and trust in their mothers' ongoing availability to them, should any need arise. As a result of the constancy of their mothers in their lives and the past history of interactions, there was a security in knowing that she was *"always there"*.

> *"Because I feel close to her and she's always been the one who's been able to help me through things, so I kind of feel safer with her" (C1009, girl, age 12)*

Being together provided a necessary context for *doing* together – such as engaging in shared activities, communicating what was happening in each other's lives, and importantly for mothers to continually care for and support their children. Almost one-third of the children relayed accounts of how their mother was available to them, as a source of comfort and security if they were sick, upset or hurt in some way:

> *"Like if I was upset, she like let me stay and sleep on the floor in her room so that if I woke up crying or anything I could talk to her"* (C1118, boy, age 12)

> *"Well I being my age, I have a lot of difficulties in life, I'm getting tangled up in a web of things, I have a few after-school activities, problems in school, friends...and she's always there for me giving advice, trying to help"* (C1001, girl, age 11)

Previous experience of continuous presence and patterns of caregiving and support in times of stress contributed to their feelings of closeness, where children had developed an expectation that their mother was available and accessible to them.

The association between accessibility of mothers and children's experiences of closeness in the relationship was further highlighted in those situations where mothers were perceived as being less available. Where mothers worked long hours and the amount of time spent together was limited, children perceived their mothers as being less available to them. Lack of availability affected relationships in a different ways, but in a small number of cases, diminished closeness was the result. Children found it difficult to keep their mothers informed of what was happening for them on a day-to-day basis and to stay tuned into what was happening in each other's lives:

> *"Spending less time with someone affects the relationship you know, I'd say...We'd have a closer relationship* [if they spent more time together] *because obviously we'd know more about each other, she'd be more involved in activities, homework, eh school so"* (C2117, boy, age 14)

> *C: ...Hard to talk to sometimes because she doesn't understand the way I live.*
>
> *R: What do you mean by that?*
>
> *C: Well she doesn't know what goes on during the day...so I feel lonely sometimes. Sometimes when I have no school she spends some time with her friends, that she could also do in her spare time at work and all, and I might want to talk to her* (C1008, girl, age 9)

As indicated in Chapter Four, the household context for many of the children was one characterised by strained financial circumstances, and the necessity for mothers to work outside the home. Despite the potential risk to the closeness of the relationship as described above, most children accommodated to the mothers' lack of availability due to work commitments, recognising that options were constrained, given that there was only one parent (and wage earner) in the home. For example, one teenage girl described how her mother's lack of availability enhanced her appreciation of her mother when they spent time together. One mother had reduced the number of hours she worked so that she would be more available to her children:

> *C: Like our mum, she changed her job and even though, it had better hours and she gave it up so that she could spend more time with us...but there's going to be a lot less money*
>
> *R: How do you feel about that?*
>
> *C: I feel, yeah I think that we are kind of tighter on money...but it's great to have the extra time with her because usually we only to get to see her very....yeah, and but now we get to see her five days a week* (C1001, girl, age 11)

This girl clearly valued the opportunity to spend time with her mother and the benefits of increased accessibility to her mother outweighed potential financial shortcomings. Moreover, the mother's choice to reduce her working hours to be there for her children indicated that she also attached great importance to spending time with her children every day, over and above the financial reward of working for that time.

Children's accounts also conveyed a sense that having their mother around set the context for experiences of intimacy, communication, and shared activity. Living together (sometimes exclusively, with no other individuals present) contributed to high levels of familiarity and comfort in each other's company. Almost half of the children, the majority of whom lived alone with their mothers, referred to a strong sense of "togetherness" that existed in the relationship. Furthermore, in the absence of other individuals in the household, the tightness of the bond may have been heightened.

Obligation & Commitment

A second key theme, which underpinned children's positive relationships with their mothers, was that of commitment and a sense of obligation. Commitment has been defined as one's desire or intent to continue in a relationship (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997), and was perceptible in the children's narratives around parental actions and attitudes, and the clear role obligations and expectations that had been established. Children's perceptions of commitment in their relationship with their mothers were closely linked to their experiences of her accessibility and her constancy of care throughout their lives. Descriptions of their mothers as selfless, making sacrifices, and working hard for them assured these children of their mother's commitment to them and continued availability:

> *"She's the one who's kind of always there...nothing is too much trouble, she always says 'I'm always for you'"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

> *"Just the fact that I know she's there, she's always going to, no matter what, she will always be there, which I really really like"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

As indicated in Chapter Five, children's concept of mothering, dominated by a caring and nurturing role, reflected their experiences of support and caring in their relationships with their mothers, and these previous experiences of care and support conveyed a sense of commitment to the parental role on the part of these mothers. Many of the children referred to the fact that their mother was the main person who looked after and cared for them. Daily care-giving routines constituted a highly prominent function of their interactions with their mothers, with more emphasis upon these functions for the younger children (referred to by almost three-quarters of the younger group; and almost half of the older group). The reduced salience of basic care-giving interactions among the older group may be an indication that adolescent-mother relationships had become less organised around dependency and care-taking, or the type of dependency may have shifted:

> *"There's a dependence on her on a certain level, like I'm really independent but like, like I do my own washing and my own stuff since I was very small and I never got my room tidied or anything like that...but it's more than that like, I don't need lifts going anywhere, if I'm going out, but there's a dependence on her for guidance or advice, so that's why* [he feels close to her]*"* (C2115, boy, age 17)

Developmental differences will be re-visited later in the chapter. In addition to a basic care-giving role, over half of the children also perceived continued emotional and practical support as further evidence of their mothers' dependability and commitment:

> *"I can tell her anything, she sorts them out for me if they're a problem or she just, if I told her something that I did that was good, she'd be like very good, and she'd give, she'd tell me congratulations and everything. Me and me ma have a very open relationship, like we tell each other everything, she's always been there and I can always talk to her"* (C1103, boy, age 12)

All of the children described positive experiences of commitment in their relationships with their mothers. This sense of commitment represented one feature of the permanence and stability that dominated the mother-child relationship. Laursen and Bukowski (1997) assert that parent-child relationships are obligatory, and that social and biological imperatives require commitment to these relationships. Continued transactions are assured because individuals are not free to leave the relationship; in this regard – this specific relationship context granted freedom to engage in conflict, a feature that may not have characterised many other relationships for these children. This teenage girl contrasts her relationship with her mother and her relationship with her grandmother in terms of this sense of assured continuity:

> *"Because I couldn't lash out at them* [grandparents], *you know you'd have a fight with your mam, I couldn't do that to my granny or anything"* (C2001, girl, age 17)

Thus, given the involuntary and obligatory nature of these parent-child relationships, children believed in the continuity of the relationship, regardless of the outcomes of individual social interactions. Key features of commitment for children came about from their experiences of the ongoing availability of their parent, continued care of the parent, and experiences of parental support and responsiveness in these relationships.

Intimacy & Connection

A third key theme underlying positive relationship experiences for children and their mothers related to intimacy and connection in the relationship. As stated previously, established patterns of care conveyed a sense that mothers were accessible and dependable. Furthermore, being together and sharing every day routines and activities set the context for familiarity and predictability with other. The sense of connection in the relationship between children and mothers was perceptible across a number of domains of interaction, including shared activities and open patterns of communication.

The most frequently mentioned aspect of the children's relationships with their mothers related to shared activities. Overall, two-thirds of the children highlighted this theme. In terms of how the children and mothers spent time together, the focus of discussion for the younger children was on recreational pursuits and the activities they enjoyed together:

> *"It's kind of hard to explain the relationship between a mother and a child, a lot of the time people would just say 'I love my mom, now can I go onto my dad or something', but it's easy just to say that, but it means so much more than that and you can't really put into words...we go on these girls days out sometimes, I know that can't make a relationship work between a mother and a child, doing nice things, but most of the time, she takes us out to nice places"* (C1001, girl, age 11)

Shared activities involved excursions during the weekend, school holidays or after school, and other activities which occurred on a more regular basis, included trips to the cinema, going shopping, going out for dinner, swimming, and trips to the park or playground. Shared activities and excursions outside the house appeared to be less salient in terms how the adolescents defined closeness in their relationships with their mothers. In addition to the range of activities engaged in outside the home, about one quarter of the younger children alluded to activities they enjoyed with their mothers at home, such as cooking together, watching television and playing games. Apart from the fun and enjoyment derived from sharing recreational activities, these experiences provide an important context for the development and expression of other aspects of the relationship, including communication and support functions.

Spending time in each other's company did not solely revolve around enjoying time in activities together. As indicated previously, care-giving activities constituted an important component of children's interactions with their mothers, and a companionate relationship developed from just being at home together. Engagement in more mundane, routine activities and being around each other at ordinary uneventful times was conducive to intimacy, ease of interaction and communication, and a sense of familiarity with each other:

> *"We've always been close together and she knows what my feelings are and stuff...one time when I was getting bullied and I never told her there was something wrong with me and she knew"* (C1005, girl, age 12)

Communication patterns played a key role in the establishment of intimacy and a sense of connection in relationships with mothers. The themes of authenticity, openness and reciprocity in the children's communication interactions with their mothers were indicative of the broader dynamics within the relationship and the nature of the communication was a key marker for the quality of the relationship as a whole. One girl described how she felt closer to her mother than her grandmother because *"I can tell me mam anything but I can't tell me nannie anything"*. Overall, openness of communication appeared to be highly valued in the relationship, contributing to feelings of closeness particularly where interactions were characterised by high levels of symmetrical understanding and mutual openness.

In terms of closeness, particular emphasis was placed upon being able to confide in their mothers, share personal information and elicit advice on personal matters. Almost all of the older children, and about half of the younger children described ease of communication with their mothers as a key

element of the close relationship. In particular, the children and young people highlighted that conversations assuming a problem-based focus were a regular occurrence, where guidance and advice were sought:

> *R: When you say you feel close to her* [mother], *what do you mean by that?*
>
> *C: Well just that like, I can sort of tell her everything I think. Because she doesn't really give out when you say something to her, she listens and then....the time when I had a fight, she told me to stay away from her [friend], she'd say just don't hang around with her because if she keeps getting you into trouble you're best off to stay away from her"* (C1006, girl, age 10)

Concerns about family emerged as one component of these conversations, and related to new partners, siblings, and children's contact and relationships with their fathers. For example, one girl described how she felt upset when she learned about her mother's new boyfriend and repeatedly needed to discuss this with her mother, until she eventually began to feel re-assured that her mother's relationship with her boyfriend would not encroach upon their relationship. However, it was also clear that such issues were occasional rather than everyday topics of conversation. In addition, a number of the adolescents specifically highlighted certain problems that they regularly discussed with their mothers, such as difficulties with boyfriends, stress at school or issues with friends.

Conversations concerned with routine, mundane everyday matters also constituted an important part of the communication interactions. Fitch (1998) has highlighted the significance such everyday trivial, task-focused, and gossipy conversations as the means by which relationships are conducted. For example, children described how they talked about "*what's happening*", "*everything and anything*", "*all sorts of stuff*" and "*what's wrong*".

> *C: We just talk about different things like I tell her what I'm going to do when I'm up in my friends or we talk about what we're going to do and all*
>
> *R: Do you ask her for advice about things then?*
>
> *C: I don't really ask her for advice because there's not really much, there's not really much to ask her about because I just go to school and watch telly...no problems, except for homework"* (C1116, boy, age 12)

Spontaneous discussions relating to what was learnt at school, news about friends, plans for recreational outings, and homework were nested within the security of domestic routines. Thus, availability and physical presence of mothers, as previous described, afforded a context for spontaneous and conversational forms of communication that are conducive to keeping up with the rhythms of each other's lives. For example, almost one fifth of the children indicated that they talked more with their mothers than their friends did, partly arising from spending time in each other's company, and partly because often there was no other individual present. Furthermore, these patterns of conversation flowed from interaction and were not artificial in nature; rather they were permeated with meaning and emotion:

"We're able to sort of talk about things you know in a, in an emotional manner and not like in a sort of detached thing" (C2016, girl, age 17)

C: I think I talk to her a bit more, because other people have kind of fake relationships, do you know the way they say, oh hi, how are you, it's kind of fake, you know, they don't really talk about things, they just come in for food and go out again, kind of thing, I don't know

R: Why do you think it's different between you and your mum?

C: Because I have to stay in more and just that kind of things and there's kind of the two of us (C2009, girl, age 14)

The significance of ease, familiarity and synchronicity in communication further emerged within the narratives of a minority of children, when they expressed how their mothers were not tuned into what was happening, or did not understand matters from their perspective. In particular, two of the teenage boys highlighted that their mothers were intrusive and asked them too many questions, which contributed to a reluctance to talk openly with their mothers and share their experiences:

"If she just kind of sits there and says nothing then it's pretty easy to talk to her but if she wants to go ahead and like start asking loads of questions it becomes sort of awkward then" (C2104, boy, age 14)

It was clear that their evaluation of the communication in the relationship was at least partly related to the amount of time spent in each other's company, and their household structure. However, this context did not inevitably lead to more open communication – for example, one boy stated that he and his mother did not talk to each other very much, because they had less to talk about because they spent so much time in each other's company. In summary, in the majority of cases, shared activities and established care-giving routines set the scene for open patterns of communication, high levels of comfort and familiarity with each other and experiences of intimacy, connection and closeness in the relationship.

Factors Constraining Positive Relationship Experiences

Generally, children described positive relationship experiences with their mothers, underpinned by experiences of accessibility, commitment, and a sense of intimacy and connection. However, analysis of the children's narratives also identified a number of processes relating to conflict and parental authority that negatively impacted upon the relationship.

Parental Authority & Conflict

Authority-related exchanges and conflict in the relationship represented sources of emotional distancing between children and their mothers. As previously described in Chapter Six, mothers' narratives strongly reflected their role as figures of discipline and authority for their children. The imposition of various rules, restrictions and expectations and the employment of monitoring and

disciplinary strategies precipitated conflict and in some cases created barriers to open communication in the relationship. The unilateral authority dimension that frequently characterises parent-child relationships and conflict were identified as key constraints to positive relationship experiences.

While a minority of the children indicated that conflict occurred only on an occasional basis, the majority of the relationships were characterised by moderately frequent minor conflicts that appeared to be resolved quickly and effortlessly. However, a small number of the relationships between adolescents and their mothers were characterised by especially frequent conflict, where they described conflict on a daily basis with their mothers. Descriptions of the form that conflict took varied from relationship to relationship:

> *"She shouts at me, I get grumpy, I stamp up the stairs, and slam my door and that's what gets her to shout at me again". (C1120, boy, age 10)*

> *"We both get really really sarcastic, we never raise our voice, we never get physical obviously, we never even stand up, we just, we get basically cheeky, obnoxious, sarcastic"* (C2007, girl, age 13)

Conflict concerning relatively mundane day-to-day issues, such as household chores, homework/studying, television and fighting with siblings were prevalent. However, conflict centred in and around the household was often considered to be about trivial matters. For example, one 12-year-old boy described how he and his mother argued about *"Different things that there's no point in arguing about but like it just happens"*, while a number of the children described arguing about *"silly things"* or *"just little things like that which don't matter at all"*. In these cases, resolution of the conflict appeared to be generally smooth and in some cases, almost effortless. For example, a number of them described how it was not necessary to apologise, that the conflict tended to subside with time or *"fizzle out"*:

> *"We don't, we don't really say sorry or anything, just kind of over a period of time, it kind of gets you know, it goes down like"* (C2009, girl, age 14)

Being together at home, while creating a context for closeness in the relationship, also presented opportunities for conflict to arise. One teenage girl described how spending large amounts of time together in their small apartment generated feelings of tension in the relationship. Another consequence of being together was that each individual was affected by the other's mood and stress levels, which potentially precipitated conflict. One adolescent boy described how *"she gets mad at us for no reason, like she'd think we were doing something"*, while a 10-year-old boy attributed some conflict to his own mood*: "Like cos sometimes when I get tired I get kind of like, if I lose anything or something I get angry"*. In other cases, it was clear that stress in either individual exacerbated stress in the other, thus leading to conflict:

"She still says it's my mood swings, and I'll say it's her stress, but I think it's a bit of both. It's when she gets stressed out, you know she will blow the lid at you for anything and when she gets stressed out I get stressed out so you know we're both kind of on edge and about to blow" (C2005, girl, age 15)

Mothers' exercise of authority and the expectations and boundaries set in place represented an important source of conflict in the relationships. A small number of the younger children took responsibility for the disagreements, attributing them to their own actions such as *"being bold [naughty]"*, *"being badly behaved"* or *"not doing what you're told"*. Restrictions, such as not being allowed out, created conflict particularly when children disagreed and attempted to exert change over the boundaries that had been set in place:

R: What kind of things might you fight about?

C: Just about what I can do and what I can't do and what my boundaries are and sort of that kind of thing. (C2113, boy, age 13)

As indicated in Chapter Six, the manner in which dynamics of authority and power are negotiated and managed is closely linked with the relationship history and the trust and openness that characterised the relationship, particularly within the adolescent group. It was clear that for a minority of the adolescents, conflict with mothers was associated with intense affective reactions. For example, one girl whose relationship with her mother was characterised by high levels of conflict described their fights as being *"fairly vicious"*, while a small number of the adolescent described how they sometimes left their home for a period of time following conflict with their mothers: *"I usually storm out and go to a friend's house, come back in a few hours like when everything has cooled down like"*. Furthermore, the absence of another adult potentially intensified the conflict: *"If we ever do actually have a real go at each other like arguing, there's no one else to bounce off, you know, no one else to talk to"*.

Finally, another consequence of parental authority was the emergence of boundaries around what were appropriate topics for discussion with their mothers. Unwillingness to disclose information about certain issues related to rules and restrictions that were imposed by their mothers, and potential disciplinary consequences. Thus, children concealed information about activities that would meet with disapproval to either avoid being punished or disappointing their mothers. For example, discussing sex and boyfriends/girlfriends was considered embarrassing or weird, and *"stuff that you're not supposed to do"* (such as drugs and alcohol) constituted topics that were not discussed with their mothers. As one 17-year-old girl stated, she would not talk about *"things that might disappoint her* [mother]*...if I were to you know do things that were not exactly legal"*.

In summary, experiences of conflict and parental authority represented a barrier to closeness and open communication for children in their relationships with each other, particularly when conflicts occurred on a frequent basis and were emotionally charged. However, conflict is neither inimical to

closeness nor inevitably harmful to the relationship, particularly when positive conflict resolution skills involving negotiation and compromise have been developed (Collins & Laursen, 2000). It was clear that despite these experiences of conflict and parental authority in the relationship, the quality of the relationship mediated the significance of these negatively toned exchanges and children still characterised their relationships with their mothers as close. This highlights that the relationship is not one consistent experience all of the time, and particular aspects of the relationship, both positive and negative, are inevitably fore-grounded at different points in time (Duck et al., 2000). This point was exemplified by one teenage girl whose mother's name traversed the various circles on her Closeness Map, indicating the simultaneous experience of good and bad aspects of the relationship. This girl's mother similarly stated: *"I'm either the most wonderful mother or the most horrible mother"*.

Relating in the Context of the One-Parent Household – Children's Perspectives

This section of the chapter considers how the child-mother relationship is shaped by the characteristics of the environment, and specifically the absence of the second parent from the home and the single parenting role of the mother. As indicated in Chapter Six, given the absence of a second parenting figure, certain aspects of the parenting role were exclusively ascribed to the mother, such as discipline, decision-making and authority. In these respects, the nature of the mothers' role, being unlike the role played by anybody else in these children's lives, engenders an exclusive and unique quality to the relationship. Coding of the children's narratives on their relationship with their mothers also highlighted how the structure of the household and family set the context for dynamics of inter-dependence, symmetry and power within the relationship, with implications for the quality of the relationship.

"Just the Two of Us"

As stated previously, living together, often with no other individuals present, contributed to high levels of familiarity with each other. Almost half of the children made reference to a "togetherness" that existed between themselves and their mother, while other children specifically referred to the *exclusive* nature of their relationship with their mother, described in terms of *"Just the two of us"*. Generally, the exclusive nature of the relationship was associated with heightened feelings of closeness. For example, one child stated: *"I just feel a lot closer to her because it's only her"*, while one teenage girl stated the following:

> *"I think it's the fact that like she spent all my life with me, I mean she had her other friends around, I don't know, she'd had boyfriends or whatever, I presume she has, but it's mainly been only, I know it sounds really spoiled and all, but I think that it's, it's just the fact that it's just me and her, that's kind of why our relationship would be so strong, it always has been"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

Almost all of these children lived alone with their mothers, with no siblings or grandparents present. Thus, the sense of exclusiveness could be attributed not only to the absence of a second parent from the home, but also to having no other individuals in the household. However, this theme did not emerge solely among children who lived alone with their mothers. Even when other individuals did co-reside, the importance of spending time alone with their mothers *"only me and her"* and *"just us two"* also emerged. Three of the younger children, whose siblings also lived at home, highlighted that it was important to spend time with their mothers alone, when her attention was exclusively focused on them and not divided among her children.

Children's perceptions of the exclusive nature of the relationship was also drawn out when they hypothesized how the dynamic of the mother-child relationship would shift, if their father or a second parental figure had been present. For example, one teenage boy reflected that he would not know his mother as well as he did, had his father been present, while another teenage boy suggested that having his father around might have ameliorated the intensity of the relationship with his mother, with implications for the closeness of the relationship:

> *"I would have had the same kind of relationship with her if my dad was here, I know that, but it would have been neutralised a bit by my dad, not a hundred percent like it, but seventy-five percent of something of our relationship. I wouldn't have had as close a relationship as I do with her now"* (C2115, boy, age 17)

Overall, the exclusive nature of the mother-child relationship was associated with high levels of familiarity and intensity in feelings of closeness in the relationship. In accordance with this, it was considered that the presence of other individuals would lead to greater complexity within the family dynamic, a challenge to existing roles, and the potential for greater conflict: *"If there was another one there, it would just add another chemical into the formula"*.

> "[The relationship] *wouldn't have been much different* [if another parent was present] *because of the person she is, but I suppose it would change a bit because you'd have other people's opinions, which I think is actually one of the reasons why people begin to loathe their parents because like one parent might say if she goes out such and such a place and the other might say, absolutely no way, and shift like"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

> *"I think that if he were around, I know there would be a lot more arguments...for all I know that it could bring out a totally different side to her, the way she, I could look at the way my mum treats my dad the way they talk, and I could say that brings out a totally new side, I didn't know that my mum acted like that when she lost her temper or something"* (C1001, girl, age 12)

Generally, the *exclusive* nature of the mother-child relationship, arising from a history of shared residence and ongoing patterns of care, in the absence of other individuals (fathers, and sometimes siblings) was constructed in positive terms for the overall quality of the relationship. However, some children did indicate that the quality of the relationship would not necessarily have changed had other individuals been present in the home. Thus, the quality of the relationship was not solely

attributed to the exclusive nature of the relationship. Instead, they recognised that a variety of aspects of their relationships with their mothers had been shaped by their living arrangements, patterns of care, and the absence of their fathers from the home.

The theme of exclusivity also emerged in narratives around dynamics of dependence in the relationship. Based on a relationship history characterised by ongoing patterns of care, where mothers were perceived to be readily accessible, available and committed to their obligations inherent in the parenting role, children readily acknowledged their dependence on their mother. However, in the absence of a second parental figure, some children expressed how their mother was the *only* recipient of their needs and demands.

> *"She's been like both my parents all my life, so like some people wouldn't talk about their mum to some things, they wouldn't talk about their dad some things, but she's both so I talk to her about all things with her, so then she pretty much knows everything about me"* (C2106, boy, age 15)

> *"If there was two parents, I'd talk to my dad or my mum and then, like everything goes to my mum, everything I say I tell to my mum, rather than telling it to a different person"* (C1009, girl, age 12)

While this was conducive to connection, intimacy and closeness in the relationship, other implications arose in terms of the significance of the relationship and their role in the relationship. A sense of *inescapability* surrounded a small number of children's relationships with their mothers. For example, some of the children expressed that it was *essential* for them to develop a positive relationship with their mothers, because she was their *only* parental figure:

> *"I've had to* [get along with my mother] *if you know what I mean. She's the only person I've been living with all these years like so and all she's done for me"* (C2104, boy, age 14)

> *"I don't really have a choice because she lives here and kind of takes care of me and stuff"* (C2014, girl, age 13)

> *"I think like because over the years when we've been living together just the two of us, we've learnt how to, you know, we've kind of established that it's just the two of you know so, we have to learn to kind of get on with each other"* (C2104, boy, age 14)

The discourse here about "choice" and "having to get on" suggests experiences of constraints in their relationships with their mothers, and in the availability of sources of care and support. For example, this teenage girl recognised that her choice of relational resources was constrained by not having two parents in the home:

> *"The only way I see it is like with my nannie and granddad, like when I'm with me grandda like or me nannie when you kind of like, you'd ask your granny something, she'd go ok but don't tell your grandda, and then when me granddad comes in, I'd probably go off and do something with him. When the two of them are together you*

> *kind of pick and choose...that's it like, that's all you have* [when you only have your mum]" (C2001, girl, age 17)

Given the absence of a second parental figure from the home, some children experienced limitations in terms of the support that was available to them in the home, despite their mothers' ongoing commitment and accessibility. As they recognised that they could not always rely upon her for support, dynamics of dependence shifted to give way to reciprocity, mutual support and an ethic of care in their relationship with their mother.

Negotiating Dependence & an Ethic of Care

Patterns of dependence in mother-child relationships yielded to dynamics of inter-dependence and mutuality, particularly as children got older and acknowledged that mothers' resources were limited in some ways at certain times. This was perceptible in the way in which children reduced the demands they placed on their mothers and adopted an *ethic of care* in their relationship (Mason, 1996), where *active support* as well as *sentient activity,* or thinking and feeling in the activity of care, are considered.

Modifying Demands

In terms of children's dependence on their mothers, children were cognisant of their mother's workload, stress level and limitations in her capacity to address their needs. Constraints in mothers' availability and resources were attributed to the aloneness of the mother in her parenting role. For example, this boy was acutely aware of the stress his mother was under, as she was parenting him and his twin sister alone, with little support from family: *"She obviously gets like well there's two of us, so she gets twice as much, and there's one of her, so she gets four times as much like"*. As a result, he modified the demands he placed upon his mother in accordance with perceptions of her availability and resources:

> *"I'd have to put more stress on her like rather than like if my dad was here, I could just sort of spread it. So like I can't talk to her about everything because then she'd have to like think about everything"* (C2113, boy, age 13)

Reluctance on the part of this child to discuss problems or concerns reflected boundaries that he imposed around the manner and extent to which he relied upon his mother, and the emergence of less open patterns of communication. This theme was evident in other cases: for example, six children (three younger children) indicated that issues relating to their father were off-limits for discussion with their mothers: *"she just doesn't want to hear about me da"*. Here children had tuned into a discomfort for their mothers around the issue, and wanted to avoid upsetting her:

> *R: Can you give me examples of the kind of things you might talk to her about?*

C: Like you know, boyfriends trouble and stuff like that, and I wouldn't talk to her about me own da like ok because like I wouldn't like to upset like...I just keep that to meself really" (C2001, girl, age 17)

Motivation for the children's modification of demands was largely protectionist in nature, to prevent undue worry or upset for their mother. This child illustrated her attempts to modify the emotional demands she placed upon her mother by concealing her true feelings at times:

"I have to be careful if I say anything about me feeling down because last year I was pretty down and I had to go like and see counsellors and stuff and she gets so worried... I pretend that I'm not sad sometimes because it just worries her so much...I don't like to worry her, I think if I'm sad that's mine to deal with, she doesn't have to worry about it all the time" (C2007, girl, age 13)

Overall, this theme emerged more clearly, though not exclusively, among the group of adolescent children. The extent to which shifts in dependence from mothers were related to the absence of a second parent from the home was not clear in all cases. However, it is likely that even within the context of increasing adolescent autonomy, concern regarding over-loading their mothers motivated them to either source support outside the home, or deal with their issues privately.

Voluntary Active Support

Dynamics of reciprocity and interdependence within the relationships emerged in children's discussion of care-giving and support roles. Children not only took on increasing responsibility for their own well-being as previously described, but also translated concern about their mothers' feelings and circumstances into voluntary active support. Even among the younger children, displays of considerable attentiveness towards their mothers resulted in their provision of support and care within the family:

"If she's stressed at work, if she has to meet a deadline or something, she can come back and I can help her out with stuff around the house and everything...I'd bring her up a cup of tea or whatever and put my brother into bed" (C1001, boy, age 12)

"I go down the town for her and do her shopping and wash the dishes and sometimes I'll hoover, clean the bathroom and stuff" (C2009, girl, age 14)

Similarly, another girl described how she tried to *"help her more as I get older and not to rely on her so much"*. Almost all of the children referred to an obligation upon themselves to provide some form of domestic labour in the household, including household chores, care of siblings, and outdoor tasks (such as washing the car or helping in the garden). Such obligations are important because they serve as a guide for their future role within the relationship (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Analysis of children's perceived obligations and role expectations in their relationship reflected their self-initiated efforts to meaningfully contribute to family life and the running of the household, and to complement their mother's care-giving role.

In addition to practical support within the household, children's ethic of care was perceptible in the way in which they acted as sources of emotional support and advice for their mothers. In this way, communication exchanges between mothers and children exhibited a degree of symmetry and mutuality, with children willing to listen to their mother's worries and concerns.

> *"During family deaths, because there's a lot of death in my family, and either she'd be more sad or I'd be more sad and we'd just kind of comfort each other, which is nice. When my aunt died, it was all shocking and she was all upset and I kind of stayed strong for her"* (C2007, girl, age 13)

> *"She needs support, emotional support, someone to root for her really. She needs another sort of adult to discuss with and I am sort of like that and I have been like that for along time you know, just discussing things like bills in the house"* (C2016, girl, age 16)

According to Weiss (1979), children in one-parent families are frequently assigned rights and responsibilities in the household that are not distinguishable from the parent's own. The above quotation suggests that this had occurred for this adolescent girl, who had either adopted or been given the status of the other adult within her family.

The provision of emotional support occurred more frequently among the older group. Almost half of the adolescents reported that they frequently listened to their mothers' worries and offered advice.

> *"All the time yeah...if she needs to tell me she'll tell me and I don't mind at all. Because I don't mind listening, if she feels the need to tell me, obviously she needs to get it off her chest sometimes, so I just take it on board but I forget it the next day like"* (C2115, boy, 17 years)

While three of the teenagers described how their mothers might tell them about *some* upsetting difficulties they were experiencing, the remaining adolescents perceived no boundaries around issues that their mothers discussed with them. Three of the teenage girls described how they gave their mothers advice about relationships, boyfriends, and other family issues. This degree of openness appeared to be perceived positively by this group. For example, two of the girls stated that: *"I don't really mind, I think she does it for me as well so I do it for her"* and *"It works both ways"*. Such reciprocal interchanges are indicative of children's capacity to operate within a relationship structure where transient shifts in power yielded opportunities to listen, advise and support.

In contrast, seven of the younger children indicated that their mother never discussed her problems with them, while a further two elaborated upon this by stating that their mother might discuss some issues with them, but certainly not all issues. Furthermore, many of these children expressed the view that they were satisfied with this, it was their mother's right to decide, and that they did not want to hear their mother's private concerns. Only one 12-year-old boy stated that he and his mother told each other everything. While mothers appeared to be more willing to disclose their own issues and problems with their adolescent children than with their younger children, the provision of

emotional support was by no means confined to the older group. For example, one 12-year-old girl stated that:

> *"I'd probably stay in and have a chat with her about how school and how work is going, I can't just pelt her with my problems, I have to take part in her life too"* (C1001, girl, age 12)

In summary, children's relationships with their mothers were characterised by shifting dynamics of inter-dependence and reciprocity. Acknowledgement of the limitations to mother's resources and an awareness of her emotional needs prompted changes not only in the demands children placed upon their mothers, but also in levels of support they provided. A picture of how they voluntarily contributed to the running of households emerged in the practices of everyday family life. An ethic of care was reflected in how they positioned themselves as obligated and mutual providers of practical support and care within the family. Finally, these examples illustrate shifting dynamics of power in the mother-child dyad and children's capacity for agency.

Agency, Power & Hierarchical Structure

Parent-child relationships are usually considered in terms of an asymmetrical distribution of power and unilateral authority (Maccoby, 1999; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). It was clear that, for some of the parent-child dyads, conceptualisation of an asymmetrical, vertical and static difference in power was inadequate to appropriately capture many of the interdependent exchanges within the relationship. Children's agency emerged in how they affected parents, and how they operated as initiators rather than simply recipients of influence, as vertical interactions gave way to an increasingly horizontal power structure. A plethora of concrete examples revealed how horizontal qualities within the relationship were manifested. As indicated in the previous section, dynamics of reciprocity, interdependence and mutuality emerged in children's descriptions of their interactions with their mothers. Thus, on occasions, children operated as equal-partners in the relationships, taking responsibility for their own needs and accommodating to their mothers' needs. Displays of awareness and concern about their mother's stress and workload were met with voluntary active practical and emotional support.

These power shifts within the relationship were more common among the adolescent group. This may have been related to shifting perceptions of their mother solely as a parental figure, to a person in her own right, with an appreciation of her own needs and limitations:

> *"I don't hold back, like think of her as someone I just talk to, like a normal person"* (C2106, boy, age 15)

> *"I've started looking at her more as a teenager kind of, not really, cos I used to look at her as, like on a pedestal, she's my mum you know. And now she's just kind of like my friend, not really mum anymore. So she's not really, a different person, she's just a person, who happens to be my mother"* (C2010, girl, age 17)

Previous research has suggested that the absence of a hierarchical structure in single parent families allows children to define themselves as peers of the parent, and results in intergenerational boundaries becoming blurred (Glenwick & Mowrey, 1986; Weiss, 1979). Four girls directly likened their relationship with their mother to one with a friend, or a sister:

> *"A lot of kids would say their mum is really uncool or something, I don't want a mum that is, that I try, that I am ashamed of, I want a mum that can be a friend to me. Yeah I think she's pretty much as equal as a friend, I think I can open up to her like my friends, well maybe I'd confide in my friends a little bit more" (C1001, girl, age 12)*

> *"She's not really like my mum, like we go shopping together and we go for walks together. We're more like friends kind of" (C1009, girl, age 12)*

Numerous descriptions emerged of friend-like exchanges within their relationships, where agency, influence and power appeared to be more horizontal in nature, as opposed to vertical, asymmetrical and unequal, typically characteristic of parent-child relationships. However, when horizontal qualities occurred in these relationships, they did so within the context of a largely vertical relationship, by virtue of their mothers' role as parent and authority figure, as acknowledged by these teenagers:

> *"She's kind of like, she's more like a sister than a mother, but at the same time she still like kind of does everything she's supposed to do kind of thing you know....Like I feel closer to her than I would, most people would to their parents. She'd be like a sister, but at the same time she's still my mum and she's still you know, the discipline, the rules, the everything, you know"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

> *"It's not equal, that's not... it is kind of like sisters but it's not, it's like, it is parent-childish, but it's on the border, it's like if she was a well older sister, like a well older sister, who was like a mother, mother role...because she is, when it comes down to it the authority in the house and she does, she, it's, I'm easily reminded that she is sort of the person who is there, she does, she provides for me, she looks after me, you know, it's not like in the way that if we were really equal then I would be doing the housework as well and stuff like that, but I don't do a lot of that and she does sort of my, she makes food for me, and looks after me and treats me like a kid you know...and she has the authority there you know"* (C2016, girl, age 17)

Thus, rather than viewing these *relationships* as horizontal and egalitarian, horizontality occurred at the level of interaction within a context of overall asymmetry in the relationship, and resonates the idea that power in parent-child relationships has both vertical and horizontal aspects (Kuczynski, 1997). The influence of shifting dynamics of power and symmetry on the quality of the relationship was also explored. Although children experience a degree of psychological equality when horizontal interactions occur with parents, some horizontal qualities may be inappropriate, when for example, role reversal occurs or children feel overwhelmed by the demands placed upon them and their own needs are not met. In only a minority of cases did the needs of parents appear to be more extreme:

> *"She says that she always need me that like I'm basically keeping her alive, I don't know what that exactly means but where would she be without me and stuff like that, she probably wouldn't be here, she'd be somewhere else and not very happy. I basically keep her here and keep her strong most of the time, I'm kind of more like the positive one"* (C2007, girl, age 13)

However, the way in which children responded to this varied, and generally they did not appear to be burdened by it. In one case, a teenage boy expressed concern about leaving his mother, despite her insistence that this was not his concern. Furthermore, he attributed her dependence upon him to the absence of other individuals from the household.

> *"I think she relies on me more than if there was two people, I think she probably relies on me a bit more because there's only one... when I grow up, she'll be here on her own, I really really don't want that to happen. She said it's not really your problem but I can't help but feel it is, because I'm leaving, leaving her here. I worry about it a lot more recently because I realise I've been out more and that's what it's going to be like, she's upset that I'm going out so what'll she be like when I'm gone completely so I'm kind of worried about that"* (C2106, boy, age 15)

Generally, taking account of each other's needs and feelings of mutual obligation and trust were associated with positive effects for closeness and intimacy in the relationship:

> *"This is kind of two ways, because when she's kind of sick or has a head-ache when she comes in, you can find it hard then, but in a way you're brought closer because you have to look after her then"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

Only one girl reflected a degree of discomfort that arose from her mother's openness with her. Thus, while she drew boundaries around issues she would discuss with her mother, her mother did not appear to recognise that certain topics were uncomfortable for her daughter to be open about:

> *"The thing is my mum is sometimes too open about some of that stuff and it's like come on, I mean she'll kind of say, you know I started going out with one of my boyfriends and she's like there's condoms under the sink and I'm just like please don't say that. It's like I'm not going to tell you, I mean you're not going to know anything. She's kind of like you know she's very open about that stuff, it's kind of like you know it's not exactly where I'm coming from"* (C2016, girl, 17 years)

In this context, this girl considered these peer-like and horizontal exchanges as inappropriate, and at times she struggled to maintain a vertical dynamic in the relationship with her mother. While she did describe her relationship with her mother as *"like sisters"*, vertical authority-related interchanges still remained.

As indicated previously in the chapter, the exercise of the unilateral authority on the part of mothers was identified as a barrier to closeness, as children described feeling less close to their mothers when she asserted her authority over them and restricted their activities. However, these types of exchanges may re-establish a vertical power structure, and protect against parent-child boundaries becoming permanently blurred or even reversed. Nevertheless, analysis of children's narratives

around conflict and conflict resolution also reflected how these types of interactions represent an arena for children to exercise their children's agency and power within the relationship. For example, the source of much conflict within the relationship originated within the child's non-compliance and defiance, and represents their attempt to exert control in their lives. Furthermore, a minority of the teenage girls described how they frequently *withheld* from engaging in conflict to avoid negative consequences in terms of being allowed to go out with their friends:

> *"I start to but then I get told that she doesn't like my tone and em, if I like start shouting at her again, I won't be allowed out on Saturday, so Saturday is the only day I actually go out so that doesn't happen"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

This exemplifies the way in which young people can exercise their agency within their relationships, by deciding *not* to initiate or engage in direct confrontation in order to maintain autonomy and some control over their social activities. Furthermore, resolution of conflict often involved some element of negotiation and did not rest with either the mother or the child, rather it was shared between them both: *"Most of the time she ends up saying sorry or I end up saying sorry"*.

Of key concern in the present study is the manner in which children's relationships with their mothers have been shaped by their family contexts. A number of the children acknowledged that they had no experience of another family form and could not hypothesise whether or how their relationship would have been different, had their father or another parent been present. It appeared that living with one's parent in the absence of another parent figure and sometimes other individuals provided an important context for closeness and interdependence, and a sense of "exclusiveness" surrounded many of the relationships. Roles and responsibilities were established within the particular confines of each household. As children acknowledged the limitations of their mothers' resources and the demands of her single parenting role, transient shifts in power paved the way for children to exercise their agency and reciprocate in turn by caring for their mothers and positively contributing to the household. Despite the indication that parental authority represented a catalyst for conflict in the relationship, the maintenance of an authority structure also served an important purpose, and protected against role-reversal and parent-child boundaries becoming permanently blurred. The issues of boundaries and power also emerged significantly within the mothers' interviews. In the next section of this chapter, attention is turned to mothers' reflections upon their relationships with their children, with a specific focus upon their experiences of relating with their children within the context of the one-parent household.

Relating in the Context of the One-Parent Household – Mothers' Perspectives

Reiterating many of the themes that emerged in the children's narratives, all of the mothers described close relationships with their children. Relationships were characterised by a diversity of types of interactions and functions, and high levels of interdependence. Analysis of mothers' discourses

revealed that the relationship was of huge emotional significance to them, infused with unconditional love, pride and fun. Of key concern in the analysis was whether qualities of the relationship were attributable to the specific context within which the relationship had developed and was lived out. Living apart from the child's father did not inevitably shape the quality of the relationship – three mothers reasoned that the relationship would have been similar, had another parent been present. For others however, the *aloneness* of the mother and child was a pivotal feature of their relationship context:

> *"It would make me closer to him because of the fact that he hasn't got a father* (A1118, mother of 12-year-old boy)

> *"That's a positive thing about being on your own with your son, you're so much in tune with them, you know you really are and we are so close you know"* (A1123, mother of 8-year-old boy)

Three key themes permeated mothers' interviews about relating with their children in the context of an absent father. Two of these themes resonate clearly with themes highlighted in the children's interviews, and reflect the *exclusive* nature of the bond between mother and child and the *hierarchical structure* and *generational boundaries* in the family. The final theme is concerned with how mothers related to their children in the context of competing demands for the time and energy needed to sustain the family, and efforts to compensate for the absence of fathers.

Exclusive Quality of Relationship

As previously outlined, the exclusive quality of children's relationships with their mothers emerged as a key theme within the children's narratives. In the absence of a second parenting figure from the home, the exclusive nature of the mother's role was associated with high levels of dependence on the mother, and connectedness in the relationship. The exclusive and central role of the mother to the children also permeated mothers' narratives: *"I've just literally been her world, I've been everything to her, the good times, bad times"*; *"I'm all she's got"*; *"I'm just totally their focus, this is what they revolve around, and this is what revolves around them"*. However, as the latter quote indicates, this dependence was not unidirectional, and the central role of the children in the mothers' lives was also emphasised: *"She kept me going"*; *"I say to her if you hadn't been born, I'd probably be dead"*. The absence of partner, and in many cases other children from the home meant that neither children nor mothers had to compete for each other's attention; in this respect the exclusive nature of the relationship was clearly associated with household structure:

> *"He sees himself as having pretty much exclusive rights to me and I think where, particularly when he was a little younger, he found it difficult was if it was a situation in which other adults were looking for me to relate to them and he found that difficult…if he wanted me he should be able to talk to me or have me do things for him"* (A1122, mother of 9-year-old boy)

Two mothers emphasised that their focus on the child was not distracted by the presence of a partner, and potential conflict that might bring, while three mothers described how their children felt that the arrival of a new partner on the scene had threatened the exclusive nature of their relationship.

Underpinning the exclusive nature of the relationship were high levels of connectedness and diversity of interaction, encompassing care-giving and support interactions, shared recreational activities, and just being around each other, at uneventful times. Hinde (1997) argues that the diversity of interactions in a relationship provides a route to greater mutual understanding, connectedness and sharing of experiences. Five mothers suggested that they spent more time with their child and engaged in activities that they would not otherwise have done, had a parenting partner been present:

> *"You tend to take more of an interest in everything that they do. I think it's just because in a couple you probably would have things spread, you know so one parent would maybe do sports or whatever and the other parents would do something else"* (A1111, mother of 9-year-old boy)

The association between the exclusive nature of the mother-child relationship and the absence of the child's father was further confounded in many of the families by the absence of siblings, as emphasised by five mothers:

> *"I would not have had the same relationship with him if it wasn't just the two of us...It would be a more balanced relationship if I had had a partner or if he had had other siblings, because he has felt like an only child"* (A2115, mother of 17-year-old boy)

However, while the exclusive nature of the relationship was linked with positive relationship experiences and closeness, associated constructions of the relationship as somewhat imbalanced or overly intense were less positive: *"We're like a wedded couple here and I don't think that's healthy at all"*. One cause for concern arising from this was the limited dynamics within the household. In the absence of any other individual (adult or child), relationship dynamics in the household were constrained to those generated by the mother-child relationship. Generally mothers reflected upon this in a negative way: the mother of the boy cited in the first quotation below also indicated that her child was more introspective and intently focused on her, because of the limited dynamic in the household:

> *"I'm all that's between him and the outside world. We're just the two of us, there's no overheard life of each other, you know only the life of the other if they choose to talk about it"* (A1113, mother of 10-year-old boy)

> *"She hasn't had the benefit of two people drawing different sides of her personality out and encouraging different aspects of who she is"* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

Such limited dynamics were also clearly negatively reflected in the nature of the conflict that characterised the relationship. Six mothers indicated that the presence of other individuals in the

household would ameliorate the intensity of the conflict with their children: *"There might have been less out and out battles if there was somebody else to step in on them".*

Another key theme related to dynamics of dependence in the context of the exclusive, intense relationship – mothers reflected concern about their child's sole reliance upon her, the absence of a substitute figure for the child to call upon for support, or worry about what would happen to the child, in the event of something happening to her. Two mothers, both of younger children, described how they made specific efforts to expand their child's social networks beyond school and home by providing their children with various other social outlets. Facilitating their child's independence in this way was important so that an appropriate balance between connectedness and separateness could be achieved. However, it was clear that dynamics of dependence, and possible over-dependence could work both ways. There was also potential for each individual to become over-exposed to each other, and of particular concern to mothers was that their child would be exposed to adult problems, and would take on responsibility for their mother's well-being:

> *"I think it can be very intense and especially when you're same sex and I think that she's had to listen to too many family problems and then she has nobody else to talk to about that, within the family situation, whereas if you have a sibling you can discuss these things with them or if there was another adult then she again would have a kind of a little separate dynamic"* (A2007, mother of 13-year-old girl)

That the intensity of the relationship would not yield to burdensome dependence on the part of *either* child or mother clearly emerged in the mothers' narratives – thus maintaining an appropriate balance between independence in their own lives, and connectedness to their child was considered important:

> *"I want her to have that independence I think it's very wrong to have a child and then when they're kind of 14, you're sitting there saying 'oh you're leaving me on your own'"* (A1007, mother of 8-year-old girl)

> *"I think the only way to make it easier for the child is for you to become a very active busy occupied person so that your life becomes very full and they don't feel obliged to fill it up for you"* (A2007, mother of 14-year-old girl)

In summary, resonating the themes in the children's interviews, mothers characterised their relationships with their children as intense and exclusive; attributed not only to the absence of a second parent from the home, but also to having no siblings in the household. In some respects, mothers associated the exclusive nature of the relationship with heightened experiences of closeness. Mothers reflected how they were more involved in their children's lives, and shared a greater diversity of interactions than they might otherwise have done. However, the intense nature of the relationship was associated with concerns for a number of the mothers: children's sole dependence on the mother and potential over-exposure to household responsibilities and adult concerns, constrained dynamics in the household, and an inappropriate balance between connectedness and separateness in the relationship. Keeping check on the intensity of the relationship appeared to be

one feature of the mothers' parenting role. Associated with this was a theme relating to structural hierarchy in the household, and the maintenance of clear distinctions between parent roles and child roles. This theme is considered in the next section.

Hierarchy & the Distinction of Parent and Child Roles

A second key theme to emerge concerned the distinction between mother and child roles and the maintenance of clear generational boundaries and a hierarchical structure within the household. In all but four of the households, where mothers were living in their original family home, the child-to-adult ratio was either equal (n = 17), or greater than one, where siblings were present (n = 17). In this context, the challenge of maintaining clear boundaries and distinctive parent and child roles was illuminated. Shifting boundaries were clearly interactionally-based, dependent upon actions of one partner and re-actions of the other. Mothers described two patterns of actions taken by children, underpinned by either a motivation to care for or protect the mother, or a motivation to exert control over the mother, which impacted upon dynamics of dependence in the household. For example, unbidden, some children adopted a more adult-like role with their mothers in response to their awareness of mothers' resource limitations. These actions reflect an ethic of care in how they related to their mothers, as previously considered in the Chapter. A number of the mothers described how their child was protective of them, actively caring for or worrying about them:

> *"She's very together and she's very sensible...she takes on the role of nearly mothering me and she'll hoover and she'll offer to do these things...I think had there been two parents there that the other parent would have kind of maybe been the one to help out doing those things, I feel it isn't right, I notice her saying things like 'oh don't fall, mind yourself'"* (A1007, mother of 8-year-old girl).

Another manifestation of children caring for their mothers was accommodating their reliance upon her, in light of her stress and work load. Mothers reflected an awareness that children took on greater responsibility for their own needs:

> *"She's very sensitive to the fact that everybody wants something from me so she tries not to want to ask too much of me, so I have to watch that she doesn't retreat you know because she feels everybody else is getting things from me"* (A2010, mother of 17-year-old girl).

These issues clearly mirror children's accounts of how they negotiated their dependence on their mother in the context of her single parenting role, and actively supported their mothers. In cases such as these, counter-actions by mothers provided reassurance to the child and re-affirmed distinctions between their respective parent and child roles:

> *"I do think she's a bit protective of me, I do have to say, 'don't worry about me, you know I'm your mother, or you don't have to worry about what's happening to me'"* (A1002, mother of 12-year-old girl)

On other occasions, where children attempted to exert control over their mothers, the authority aspect of her parenting role was called into play to re-dress the hierarchical structure of the relationship:

> *"Both of them in fact try and play husband to me on occasion, not very often when it suits they do, they're not allowed, they're put back in their box" (A1103, mother of 12-year-old boy)*

Indeed, the authority dimension of the mothers' parenting role played a key function in re-establishing parent-child boundaries. This clearly converges with children's perspectives on how authority-related exchanges not only represented a catalyst for conflict in their relationship with their mother, but also served to re-affirm an overall context of asymmetrical parent and child roles:

> *"It's equal to a certain extent but at the same time I'm her mother you know, I'm older than her, I'm the householder and with certain things, my word would be final"*
> (A1006, mother of 10-year-old girl)

In two cases, shifting parent and child roles appeared to be quite extreme, where for example, children did not wish to leave their parents alone, or did not want their parent to go out and be apart from them. In one case, the child appeared to control her mother: she refused to sleep alone and became distressed when her mother went away or socialised without her. This mother found it difficult to enforce boundaries on her child's behaviour and activities. In the second case, the mother described how her children were: *"Very, very, very protective, like not sitting in and not really going out, that used to happen"*. In this case, the mother was in treatment for substance abuse disorder, and she and her three children were in the process of establishing new routines and role structures following a period of considerable chaos. It was clear that in both families, generational boundaries had become dissolved. In less extreme cases, however, where mothers were aware of their child's tendency to attempt to control or to worry, her actions operated to counter-act the reversal of parent and child roles.

Weiss (1979) highlights that the structure of the single-parent household makes possible the development of a parent-child relationship in which children and parents share similar rights and responsibilities. However, it was clear that generational boundaries and the extent to which responsibilities and roles are potentially inter-changeable were salient issues for mothers. In addition to children's efforts to adapt their demands, or adopt specific controlling or caring roles with their mothers, clear actions on the part of mothers were also related to the boundary structure in the household. Mothers either actively endeavoured to *prevent* children from taking on more adult-like roles in the first place, or exhibited considerable dependence on their children, thus facilitating the child's role as partner in the family. Five mothers specifically indicated that they made a conscious effort to prevent their child from taking on adult roles in the family. This was related to the mothers'

clear distinctions between parent and child roles and the importance of preserving a worry-free childhood for their children:

> *"At the end of the day they're children and I say that in terms of the fact that they need their childhood and if my children ever grow up and feel responsible for me then I would consider myself to have failed in raising them"* (A1120, mother of 9-year-old boy)

> *"You have to keep them as children and not another adult in the house, while they are very clear that I'm their mother and I'm in charge, we actually have a type of peer relationship as well, which is where, they're as good as everybody else, even though I'm in charge and I'm older and I'm their mother, that doesn't mean I can negate their rights"* (A1103, mother of 12-year-old boy)

Mothers were aware of the demands they placed upon their children and the degree to which their children were exposed to their worries or concerns. For this reason, some reservation in the extent to which they discussed personal concerns or worries with their child was a guiding principle. The maintenance of distinct adult and child roles determined the parameters of communication:

> *"I don't think he worries about me because I wouldn't discuss you know I wouldn't look at [child] as another adult where you tell him everything that goes on in the house or anything that you're worried about because I don't think that's fair, I mean he's a child, he's not the extra support in the house" (A1116, mother of 11-year-old boy)*

> *"I don't offload my problems on her or anything, I don't expect her to be an adult or anything like that"* (A1006, mother of 10-year-old girl)

Another mother described how she deliberately avoided sharing managerial responsibility of her youngest daughter with her eldest daughter:

> *"I actually made a real effort not to let her become kind of a second mother to [younger sister]"* (A2001, mother of 17-year-old girl)

However, while the importance of not relying upon children for practical and emotional support was advocated, practically this could be a difficult principle to adhere to. As previously described by children, relationships were characterised by continuous presence in each other's company, conducive to conversing and sharing activities. In the absence of a parenting partner, children and mothers became close companions, and children were attuned to mothers' moods and worries:

> *"In a way the children are company, which is a thing I feel I have to be careful of, because they're children in their own right...I should try and look after my own social life and have my own friends and not lean on the children, because that's not right"* (A1002, mother of 12-year-old girl)

Patterns of conversing often took on an adult form, although were not necessarily adult-focused in nature: "*I communicate with her like she's an adult just in pure desperation of wanting adult conversation*". Maintaining the conversation at a level appropriate to the child's level of

understanding was not always easy, but generally mothers indicated that they *tried* not to discuss their problems with their children:

> *"If you're in the house on your own, you've nobody else to talk to you are going to talk to the kids. Now you won't necessarily talk to them in the same way as you talk to an adult, unless they get you on a really bad day and you forget who you're talking to"* (A1103, mother of 12-year-old boy)

Preserving a vertical hierarchy was a challenge, and it was clear that in a minority of cases, mothers did at times exhibit considerable degrees of emotional dependence on their children. What also emerged however was that such boundaries did not remain static but were interchangeable over time:

> *"[Child] would say to me, mum we're such good friends as well, you know, em I think I've treated, I've given her, rightly or wrongly, I think I've burdened her with some more responsibilities than I would have"* (A2012, mother of 13-year-old girl)

> *"It's like sisters, mother daughter, sometimes she can be the mother, and we sort of interchange roles...she acts as a calming influence so it's like she's taking a role of disciplining or being the balance there, which is good I think but it's like expecting something of her that maybe she shouldn't be doing, because she's still a teenager"* (A2016, mother of 17-year-old girl)

Both mothers in the above examples were attuned to the potential for their children to feel overwhelmed or burdened by the extent to which they involved them as equal partners in the household. The 17-year-old daughter of the mother cited above similarly questioned the appropriateness of the peer-like nature of her relationship with her mother at times. Three mothers reflected with regret that their vulnerability had been exposed to their children from an early stage:

> *"The one thing that I would feel a small bit of regret for, would be, he has seen me em he's seen a parent have to work really really hard, long hours and very hard on my own and struggle with em no money and making ends meet. He's seen that at a closer, closer than maybe another child would be where there would be other people to distract things... So he now had a lesson, he may have had the realisation earlier than I would have wanted him to have as a parent, that adults are not invincible, and that's quite a scary thing as a child" (A2106, mother of -15-year-old boy)*

In summary, the issue of distinctive parent and child roles was prominent in the mothers' narratives. In line with children's perspectives, mothers also described how they actively negotiated dynamics of dependence within the family. Thus, mothers reflected how children modified their demands, or acted to control, or protect or worry about her, sometimes to an inappropriate extent. Actions to re-assure children, avoid over-exposure to parental worries and prevent children from taking on too much household responsibility served to preserve clear generational boundaries in the household, and inhibit children from becoming over-burdened. In the context of a household structure with no partner with whom to share concerns or household responsibility, clear role boundaries were sometimes difficult to maintain. This process of negotiation of dependence was not ubiquitous – five

mothers clearly emphasised that lines of care-giving and authority were always maintained in the family.

Compensating for Absence

A final theme to be considered was the way in which single mothers assumed a particular set of roles with their children, in the context of material constraints and the role played by their child's non-residential father. Concerns about achieving *balance* between connectedness and separateness in their relationships with their children within these contexts have already been described. However, not only did mothers attempt to achieve a balance in their roles between themselves and their children, balance *within* their role was also important.

An overarching theme here was that mothers were affected by their own expectations to conform to a standard of good mothering. Whatever that entailed may have varied, but always implicit in mothers' accounts was the importance of putting their child's needs first and being available to their children. Competing demands that characterised their daily lives resulted in conflict between their desire to be available to their children and attentive to their needs and the efforts required to financially support the family and carry out household chores. It was within this context that certain choices were made, and the "cost to the children" and financial toll on the family were balanced. For example, two mothers decided to work morning time only or work from home because of the importance of being physically available to their children:

> *"That's why I took on minding kids in my own home because at least then if mine need me I'm there for them, I just felt if they're not to not to have a father they need me to be both and for the time being at least until she's a little bit older, I think that's important that there is somebody consistently there for them"* (A1014, mother of 11-year old girl)

Another mother described how she had cut down her hours at work because she wanted to spend more time at home with her children. Three other mothers described how they had given up working late nights and night shifts because it impacted negatively on their children:

> *"Working the nights...it was a nightmare, because when I worked nights, you'd come back to your day time job which is your kid, your gaf [home] and everything else... I mean I'd no time for him, I'd be giving out to him, I'm tired and I just wasn't able for it you know"* (A1123, mother of 8-year-old boy)

Such choices were made, despite the financial implications for the family: *"I would have lived in poverty...I would not have worked and left the kids"*. Where mothers did not make this choice and worked longer hours, the implications for their children and their relationship with their children was a paramount concern. One mother described how she regularly *struggled* with the choice she made to work a 55-hour week, and the implications for the quality of her relationship with her children.

> *"At a cost, it's always my children that are affected you know...I felt guilty all day today, I would love, I was trying to think in my diary how I could exit out to come over*

and pick [child] up but in the end I said, look, put it out of your head" (A2117, mother of 14- and 15-year old boys)

These narratives underscore the perceived importance of mothers' availability and accessibility to their children, a factor which children themselves clearly identified as facilitating closeness in their relationships with their mothers.

In the context of some resource limitations, five of the mothers described feelings of guilt in relation to not being able to fulfil their children's needs and expectations. Always having to say 'no' and not being able to treat their children led to feelings of sadness and guilt for these mothers. While some mothers conceded that their children did not ask for much or understood that they did not have much money, two mothers admitted that not being able to meet their children's demands created tension in the relationship:

R: Is there anything that you argue about?

A: Money...if PJ wants things, he called me a meanie one time, it nearly broke me bleeding heart because he asked for something and I just hadn't got it to get him, I just hadn't got it and em he called me a meanie...I think he's starting to understand a little bit more now, you know em he didn't for a long time (A1023, mother of 8-year-old boy)

Six mothers described how they indulged their children in order to compensate for the time and resources which they dedicated to competing demands:.

"I used to worry about [child] that you know she had no father....being a single parent I'd feel quite guilty, if I used to go to the shops and she wanted something I'd give it to her" (A1002, mother of 12-year-old girl)

"I would be protective of them, and I think em you can go overboard with them in the sense of making up for probably not having the other parent" (A1117, mother of 9-year-old boy)

For a small number of mothers, feelings of guilt emerged with an acknowledgement that they may not be able to meet all of their child's needs and expectations, and related feelings of doubt around whether they were doing enough for their child. Thus, despite having a close relationship with their child, a number of mothers believed that parenting alone was not an ideal situation and it was preferable for a child to be raised by both parents, both from a resource and a relational perspective: *"I do think children are better with two parents"*.

The important need to achieve balance and contrast in dealing with their child was not easy being the *only* parent: *"It's very very stressful that way, you're walking a tightrope"*. In discussing these issues, mothers highlighted the requirement upon them to be the good and the bad parent, the male and the female parent, the parent who enforces rules and authority, while simultaneously being a source of comfort and support:

> *"It's like being the good and the bad, you have to be both and it's trying to get the balance right. You can't keep coming down hard on them...so you always feel you have to sort of get the balance right, you have to be loving and caring, but you also have to be firm and hard with them as well, if you're to teach them anything"* (A1117, mother of 9-year-old boy)

Nelson (2005) suggests that single mothers develop some aspects of their maternal roles in response to the role played by non-residential fathers. In line with this, mothers in the study described how they strived to compensate for the missing parent; however, concepts of what this entailed were nebulous and not well-defined. Indeed, a number of mothers previously highlighted how they were more involved in certain aspects of their children's lives than they might otherwise have been. The absence of a male figure was emphasised by a small number of mothers, and was particularly salient for mothers of boys. A clear gender issue emerged here.

Contrasts between how males and females might approach certain issues were highlighted, and with the absence of a male parent figure in the home, a number of mothers experienced feelings of guilt and anxiety over whether their child was missing out on something. The gender of the child, as well as the gender of the parent (i.e. the maleness of the absent parent) emerged as significant in the assessment of children's needs, as well as the ability of the mother, being female, to meet those needs:

> *"Being a female I cannot give boys all they need. Maybe it's the same, you know, there's a whole lot lacking and I am quite tom boyish and I'm very sporty and I could play football with them and I could do, play tennis, and you know all that sort of thing, but I'm not male, and it was so hard to come to terms with that, I'm not a male and they need male energy"* (A2115, mother of 17-year-old boy)

One mother described her anxiety as a female over how to handle her teenage son's period of puberty and developing sexuality. Other mothers underscored certain qualities that a male parenting figure might bring to interactions with their children, for example, the ability to adopt a different approach to discipline, as previously described. Two mothers also worried that their sons were missing out certain activities that would typically be shared with another male figure, such as playing football or fishing.

In summary, this section highlighted how the single mothers' role and relationship with her children were nested within a context where competing demands for her time and energy resources were part of the daily activities of family life. Parenting alone resulted in competing demands for time and resources simultaneously coupled with an all-encompassing parent role that attempts to compensate for the absent parent. Achieving a delicate balance between being the good and the bad parent was an important context for the relationship, as were the compensatory strategies that were employed to substitute for their children's missing or largely absent fathers, and limited financial resources.

Developmental & Gender Patterns

This final section of the chapter considers the nature of developmental and gender patterns in relation to child-mother relationships. Two key developmental patterns emerged in terms of children's relationships with their mothers. The first was concerned with the shifting salience of *communication* and *shared activities* in the relationship for younger and older children. Shared activities, such as excursions outside the house, represented an important part of how younger children described their relationships with their mothers. In contrast, half of the adolescents indicated that they did not want to spend their free time with their mothers. The importance of the peer group emerged here – for example, a number of the teenagers stated that they preferred to spend time with their friends than their mothers, and whether they spent time with their mothers depended on what other options were available to them, or the mood they were in. Furthermore, with more demands on their time, such as a longer school day, and more homework and after-school activities, coupled with a preference to spend their free time with their friends, the amount of time mothers and teenagers spent together engaged in recreational activities, appeared to decrease. Also reflecting a shift in the nature of the mother-child relationship over time, twice as many of the older group than the younger group highlighted the significance of open patterns of communication that characterised the relationship. However, younger children's communication interactions with their mothers were generally open with few restrictions around topics that were excluded from discussions, while adolescents drew tighter restrictions around what they would discuss with their mothers. Together these trends suggest that the constituent interactions of relationships change over time. However, this was not inevitably indicative of diminishing levels of closeness between adolescents and their mothers, and both groups of younger children and adolescents characterised their relationships with their mothers as close.

The second key issue relates to changing dynamics of dependence in the relationship as children got older. Themes relating to the negotiation of dependence emerged more prominently among the adolescent group, particularly in how they accommodated their demands in line with perceived availability of resources, dealt with their issues privately and sought support outside the home. However, even younger children expressed an obligation to provide care and contribute in the family, and while displays of voluntary active support were evident across both age groups, the provision of emotional support occurred more frequently among the older age group. Dynamics of mutuality and reciprocity were more characteristic of mother-adolescent interactions than young children's interactions with their mothers. For example, mothers exhibited more willingness to disclose personal issues with their adolescent children than younger children. This also emerged clearly in the contrast between the mothers' authority role with their adolescent children and their younger children, as highlighted in Chapter Six. Only among the older age group did the themes relating to the inescapability of the relationship, and concerns around maternal dependence and role

equivalence emerge. However, these themes were only perceptible in the narratives of a small number of adolescents.

From the perspectives of mothers, the importance of maintaining a balance between separateness and connectedness, and keeping check on the exclusive and intense nature of the relationship was salient to mothers of both younger and older children. However, it was within the unfolding reality of increased adolescent autonomy and reduced physical dependence of the adolescent that patterns of mutual dependence within the family, and role boundaries were further illuminated for mothers of adolescents.

In terms of gender patterns, one key gender difference was perceptible in the narrative of the adolescent boys and girls. Communication emerged as a more significant aspect of girls' relationships with their mothers, being referred to by twice as many girls than boys. However, no clear gender differences emerged in terms of boys' and girls' perceptions of the closeness of their relationships with their mothers, nor in the extent to which boys and girls adopted caring roles with their mothers. From the mothers' perspectives, few differences emerged in how mothers described their relationships with their sons and daughters. A small number of mothers highlighted the gender mismatch between themselves and their sons; and specifically that their children may miss out on certain gendered aspects of the parenting role, which they associated with fathers.

Conclusion

This chapter was concerned with the nature of children's relationships with their mothers, with a focus on factors that facilitate and constrain positive relationship experiences for the children; and the qualities that living in a one-parent family bring to the relationships. As indicated in Chapters Five and Six, mothers were the main, if not sole, providers of care for these children, and representations of their mothers on their Closeness Maps reflected experiences of closeness in their relationships with their mothers. A key finding in the present chapter is that closeness in children's relationships with their mothers is facilitated by a relational history characterised by continued patterns of care and support, and security in ongoing parental availability. Close physical proximity nested in the familiarity and predictability of daily care-giving routines was integral to patterns of open communication and experiences of companionship, intimacy and connectedness.

A core aim of the present study was to explore the way in which the one-parent family context has shaped children's relationships with their mothers. In these particular households, living together usually with no other adults present, and often with no other children present, created a setting that was conducive to both parent and child being highly involved in the life of the other and high levels of interdependence. Children generally considered that the exclusive nature of the relationship was associated with connectedness, intimacy and intensity, and facilitated closeness in the relationship.

Mothers' narratives on their relationships with their children similarly reflected the exclusive and intense nature of the relationship, which fostered diversity in interaction, and high levels of connectedness. However, relating in this context also represented a risk for limited dynamics in the household, exacerbation of conflict, and the potential for over-dependence on each other. A key concern for both children and mothers was that in the absence of a second parental figure, mothers frequently represented the *only* recipient of children's needs and demands, and thus children were highly dependent upon their mothers. Both mothers' and children's concerns about maintaining an appropriate balance between connectedness and separateness also reflected the potential for children to become over-exposed to adult problems and take on responsibility for their mother's well-being.

The findings presented in the present chapter highlight that relating in the context of constrained material and relational resources yielded opportunities for shifting dynamics of dependence between children and mothers. In the face of competing demands for mothers' time and energy, children adopted an ethic of care within their relationship, either accommodating their own needs, or initiating efforts to actively care for their mothers and contribute to the household. These findings clearly resonate with Smart et al.'s (2001) account of children not as mere recipients of care, but as active participants in family life, responsive to opportunities to contribute to the well-being of those for whom they care.

Dynamics of power and hierarchy within the household were also clearly associated with patterns of dependence between mother and child. Key components of these dynamics included the interplay between vertical and horizontal interactions, and the maintenance of distinct parent and child roles in the household. Much of what has been written about children's relationships with their parents in the context of a one-parent household reflect these themes. Where previous research has suggested that single-parent families lack a clear echelon structure and intergenerational boundaries (Weiss, 1979; Nock, 1988; Glenwick & Mowrey, 2001), findings from the present study suggest that mothers worked to re-affirm clear distinctions between parent and child roles, and *prevent* intergenerational boundaries from becoming blurred. Thus, in only a minority of cases did parents struggle with the negotiation of boundaries and patterns of dependence, and exhibit more extreme needs upon their children. Similarly, a small number of children expressed concern about what they perceived as over-dependence by their mothers. Overall, however, illustrations of children's capacity for and sense of agency were striking in how they positioned themselves as obligated and mutual contributors to family life; and peer-like exchanges were generally associated with closeness and intimacy in the relationship.

Underpinning less positive relationship experiences were authority-related exchanges, which represented a frequent catalyst for conflict in the relationship, and created barriers to open communication. However, the significance of the quality of the relationship in mediating both the manner in which matters of discipline and authority are managed, and the impact of the conflict

clearly emerged. Thus, where positive relationships had developed, experiences of conflict and parental authority did not affect the overall quality of the relationship. Indeed, authority-related exchanges represented an important opportunity for dynamics of power within the mother-child relationship to shift – these typically vertical exchanges may serve to re-establish the mother's parenting role with her child, and protect against parent-child boundaries becoming reversed or blurred. In this way, authority-related exchanges, despite their potential for precipitating conflict in the relationship, may represent an important protective mechanism by which boundary ambiguity can be resolved, and an appropriate balance in caring and dependence roles can be achieved for both mother and child.

Some developmental trends emerged within the findings. It was not the case that quality of children's relationships with their mothers improved or diminished with age. Rather, the salience of constituent interactions of the relationship shifted: shared activities representing an important aspect of younger children's relationships with their mothers, while openness in communication was salient to adolescents. The potential for role shifts to occur and inter-generational boundaries to become nebulous appeared to increase in the adolescent years, as their ability to care and contribute to the household changed, along with increased expectations on them to take additional responsibility. Overall, facilitating increased adolescent autonomy in the context of a relationship characterised by high levels of inter-dependence and exclusivity was of concern to a small number of mothers. Arising from potential role shifts and increased emotional demands on their children, mothers were cognisant of their need to facilitate their adolescents' autonomy. Few clear gender differences emerged, and from both children and mothers' perspectives there were no distinctions between boys' and girls' relationships with their mothers. A minority of mothers were concerned that their sons may be missing out on specific aspects of a fathers' parenting role, and questioned their ability to meet all of their sons' needs.

Within the context of the one-parent household, children and mothers enjoyed close and companionate relationships, underpinned by continued presence in each others' lives, mutual obligation and connection. A clear interplay emerged between the quality of the relationship and the context of the relationship, a context characterised by co-residence, absence of the second parenting figure and constraints on family resources. The next chapter considers how living apart influences children's relationships with their non-resident fathers.

CHAPTER 8: RELATIONSHIPS WITH FATHERS

Introduction

This chapter considers the nature of children's relationships with their non-resident fathers and the factors which either facilitate or constrain positive relationships between children and their non-resident fathers. Increased emphasis within the literature on the *nature, circumstances* and *continuity* of non-resident parent contact, as opposed to just frequency of contact at one point in time, is also reflected in the present chapter. *Both qualitative and quantitative* descriptions of children's contact with their fathers, along with children's perceived levels of closeness to their fathers as represented on their Emotional Closeness and Family Links Maps provide an initial context within which children's experiences of their relationships with their fathers can be understood. A number of themes associated with children's perceptions of their father's role in their lives, and experience of their relationship with their father are identified. For children whose fathers are present to various degrees, these themes highlight the processes underlying positive or negative relationship experiences. In contrast, for children whose fathers are absent, the mechanisms through which they understand and reconcile their fathers' continued absence from their lives, are examined.

It is important to consider the specificity of the sample with regard to the role of the non-resident fathers in these children's lives. Unlike most previous research in the area, these children had never lived with their fathers, or had only lived with their fathers at a very young age (up to less than two-and-a-half years). As research on parental separation has indicated, when a parent leaves the home, the quality of the child's relationship with that parent is at risk of deterioration, but whether or not this happens depends upon sustained patterns of contact and care, and the relationship history established prior to the separation. Within the present sample, patterns of contact and care, and a relationship history between father and child had to be established and develop across different households, even different countries, from more or less the beginning of the child's life. With this in mind, it is likely that the absence of a history of shared residence may have further exacerbated the risk that non-residence presents to the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Child-Father Contact

Having contact and spending time together represents one basic aspect for the development of a close relationship and not surprisingly a clear link emerged between children's frequency of contact and the quality of their relationship with their father. The frequency and manner in which children have contact with their non-resident fathers was varied and constituted not only face-to-face contact, but contact via other means such as telephone calls, e-mails, and text messages. Child-father contact

is described along a number of dimensions: in terms of the *frequency* of contact, *stability* and *change* in frequency of contact, and the *nature* of the contact[26].

Generally, in terms of visiting each other and spending time together, frequency of contact between children and their fathers was low. Less than one-quarter of the children had face-to-face contact with their fathers at least once a month (n = 8), and just over half of the children had no contact whatsoever with their fathers (n = 19). The table below illustrates current levels of face-to-face contact between children and their non-resident fathers.

Table 8.1: Frequency of current levels of father-child face-to-face contact (n = 37).

Frequency of contact	Frequency	Percent
No contact	19	51%
Less than once a year	2	5%
Once/twice a year	5	14%
Once every one to three months	3	8%
Once every one to two weeks	8	22%

In addition to considering the amount of face-to-face contact, change and continuity in patterns of contact were also examined. Combining the analysis of quantity and continuity in patterns of contact, two clear patterns emerged: absence & diminished contact (51%) and maintained contact (49%). For the first group, children had no contact with their fathers, reflecting either father absence from the beginning, or diminishing contact over the years eventually leading to disengagement. For the second group, contact had been consistently maintained over the years, although some variation was evident within the group in terms of the regularity, nature and quality of contact.

Absence & Diminished Contact

Half of the children (n = 19) currently had no contact with their father and are hereafter referred to as the *non-contact group*. Among this group, some had never met their father, while others had previously had contact with their fathers when they were younger, which had reduced and eventually diminished altogether over the preceding years. Table 8.2 illustrates the history and changing patterns of contact among the non-contact group.

[26] Within this analysis, four children whose fathers are deceased are excluded, reducing the sample size to 37.

Table 8.2: History and changing patterns of contact among the non-contact group (n = 19)

Frequency of contact	Frequency	Percent
Never Met	6	32%
One memory of seeing father	4	21%
Contact ceased eight or more years ago	5	26%
Contact ceased at least two years prior to interview	3	16%
Infrequent sporadic contact due to living in close proximity to each other	1	5%

One-third of this group (n = 6) had never met their father, while four children recalled vague memories of having met or seen their father on one occasion only. Eight children within this group had previously had contact with their fathers when they were younger, which had reduced and eventually diminished altogether over the preceding years. For five of these children, contact had ceased at least eight years ago, when the children ranged in age from 4 to 8 years, while for three of the children, contact had ceased at least two years prior to the interview. For example, one 17-year-old girl, whose parents had never lived together, had regular contact with her father until she was 5 years of age. At that stage, her father emigrated from Ireland to England and contact ceased until she was 14, when he initiated contact with her again. After that, they met up a number of times, but this contact had subsequently ceased and apart from receiving one letter from him, there had been no contact in two years leading up to the interview. These cases illustrate that patterns of contact were open to change as the children got older and circumstances shifted in both the children and fathers' lives. In all cases, these changing patterns reflected a *decrease* in contact and disengagement from each other as time passed, facilitated by factors such as fathers living or moving abroad, lack of shared relationship history and patterns of care, and children choosing to discontinue contact. In six of these eight cases, fathers were living or had moved abroad, and within the fragile context of having never shared a residence coupled with living in different countries, contact between these children and their fathers was not maintained.

In one exceptional case, the boy and his father lived on the same estate. There had been no contact between them for many years due to his father's previous substance abuse problem, although the boy and his brother did see their paternal grandparents and aunts/uncles at Christmas and special occasions. Now, since his father's recovery, the boy saw his father occasionally on the estate where they both lived. However, these chance encounters were solely as a function of the proximity of their homes; they barely spoke to each other and they did not spend time together.

In summary, apart from the four children whose fathers were deceased, half of the children were characterised as having no contact with their fathers. Almost half of them had either never met or had seen/met their father on one occasion only. For the other half of the non-contact group, there had been some contact earlier in the child's life, but for the majority of these children there had been

no contact for at least eight years. For a smaller number of these children, this contact had ceased more recently (but at least two years before the interview).

Maintained Contact

For half of the children (n = 18), a relationship with their fathers had been maintained over the years, and at the time of interview, these children considered themselves to have contact with their fathers. These children are hereafter referred to as the *contact group*. However, in terms of the frequency and nature of the contact, there was considerable variation within the group.

Frequency of Contact

Table 8.3 summarises the frequency of contact between children and the fathers, among the contact group.

Table 8.3: Frequency of contact among the contact group (n = 18)

Frequency of contact	Frequency	Percent
Meet at least once every one to two weeks incorporating an overnight stay	4	22%
Meet at least once every one to two weeks with no overnight stay	4	22%
Meet at least once every one to three months – long weekends & mid-term breaks from school	3	17%
Meet once or twice a year – trips abroad to meet their fathers for weekends or holidays	5	28%
Meet once every couple of years – trips abroad for holidays	2	11%

Just under half of this group (n = 8) visited their fathers on a weekly or fortnightly basis. For half of this group, this time spent together incorporated an overnight stay in their fathers' home. A clear link emerged between frequency of contact and father's place of residence, as in all cases of regular contact, fathers lived in Dublin and surrounding areas. These eight children represent the group with the most frequent and stable patterns of contact as such arrangements appeared to have been fairly consistent throughout the children's lives. There was one exception to this however, where contact had only recently been initiated when the child's mother and father re-kindled their relationship. Previous to this, the girl only recalled having seen her father on a small number of occasions from afar.

In an additional three cases, children saw their fathers at least once every two to three months, spending long weekends or mid-term breaks from school with him. In these cases, the fathers lived outside Dublin, in other parts of the country, and some of these children had telephone contact in between these periods. A further five children saw their father approximately once a year. In all

cases, these fathers lived abroad – two in the United States, two in the United Kingdom and one in France. The remaining two children's fathers also lived abroad – in New Zealand and the United States. Both children only saw their fathers once every couple of years – indeed, one 12-year old boy had only met his father on two separate occasions, spending several weeks together each time. Despite relatively infrequent face-to-face contact within this group, these children and their fathers generally maintained some contact by other means. For example, one teenage boy whose father lived in the United States and whom he visited every summer for six weeks kept in regular contact via e-mail and weekly telephone calls. Another child, whose father lived in the United Kingdom, received phone calls from his father every few weeks.

For those children who were classified as having contact, almost half of them had weekly or fortnightly contact with their fathers, often involving an overnight stay with their father. For the remainder of this group, contact was less frequent, and on a small number of occasions, occurred less than on an annual basis, although contact was maintained by other means. In the majority of these cases, fathers lived abroad, or outside the Dublin area. Geographical distance seemed to constrain contact between children and their fathers; however, it was possible to sustain the relationship across the boundaries of different countries.

Nature & Circumstances of Contact

Analyses of children's data on their fathers clearly indicated that merely describing the frequency and regularity of contact is insufficient to capture how their time together is spent. For example, where do they go, what activities do they engage in together and are there other people present and involved? Together, these nuances may influence the significance of this contact for the child and the perceived quality of the relationship with fathers living outside the family home.

For one group of children, spending time together involved weekly or fortnightly visits usually to their fathers' residence, and frequently incorporated an overnight stay. In all but one case, these visits took place at the weekend. One boy stayed with his father one mid-week night, an arrangement, which he appeared to find disruptive to his routine:

> *"Sometimes I'd like them to be living together...you wouldn't have to be shifting to different places all the time"* (C1113, boy, age 10)

The range of activities children engaged in during these times varied according to the age of the child, and whether other individuals were present or not. For example, one teenage girl who visited her father every second weekend did not specifically go anywhere or spend time together with him. Rather, she socialised with her friends as she did every weekend, but used her father's rather than her mother's house as a base. She also played with and took care of her half sister, who was three years of age, and occasionally went out with her stepmother. She particularly enjoyed the freedom permitted by her father, which was in direct contrast to the restrictions imposed by her mother. One

nine-year-old girl who spent every Friday night with her father and his wife and her children played and went out with her step-sister on Saturday, rather than specifically going somewhere with her father. In these situations, these regular visits with their fathers were not dedicated to spending time exclusively together. However, these children were exposed to and assimilated into their father's family and home life, and children's relationships with stepparents, and half and stepsiblings could be forged. Indeed, the presence of step-parents and siblings may have had positive implications for their relationship. For example, one girl remarked how her contact arrangements with her father had become more regular and steady since her father had married. In other situations, where children spent time *alone* with their fathers, generally these times were given over to watching television or films, playing card games or sport, or going out for dinner or to the cinema. This devotion of time occurred more frequently when fathers lived alone and no other children were present.

For those children who spent their holidays with their fathers, it appeared that fathers more or less allocated these periods to spending time with their children. For example, trips were arranged for holiday periods, or fathers took annual leave from work. *Exclusive* father-child time was very much dependent upon whether the father had a partner and other children, and whether extended family were in the vicinity– in these cases children had the opportunity to spend time with their siblings, and paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Generally, spending holiday periods with their fathers was perceived very positively by these children, where fathers and children had an opportunity to relax together and have fun.

In summary, in the majority of the contact group, fathers and their children spent time together at weekends and holidays from school. Moreover, their direct father-child contact appeared to be dominated by recreational activities. In a smaller number of cases, contact was not given over to spending time exclusively together. Where fathers had formed new partnerships, children became assimilated into these families, engaging in activities not only with their father, but also with their father's partner and step- and half-siblings, and friends in the area. Where fathers lived abroad, direct contact occurred exclusively over holiday periods and for the most part, involved children travelling to meet their fathers. Apart from the one case where the child spent a weekday night with his father, fathers were not involved in weekday routines relating to school, homework, after-school activities, and bed- and meal-times. According to Simpson et al. (1995), involvement in daily routines of childcare and home-making is integral to bonding and intimacy between a father and his children. Given the absence of participation in daily routines and the lack of opportunity to be around at uneventful regular times, interaction can become contrived and lack continuity, undermining the closeness and quality of the relationships.

Closeness & Quality of Relationships with Fathers

In this section, children's experiences of closeness in their relationships with their fathers, is examined. Representations of their fathers on their Family Links and Closeness Maps indicated clearly children's perceptions of the quality of the relationship and whether they considered their father to be part of their family. Eighteen children included their fathers on their Family Links Maps highlighting that generally these children considered their father to be part of their family. Eighteen children also included their fathers on their Closeness Maps, thereby providing an indication of feelings of closeness to their fathers. There was a striking correspondence between categorisation into the contact/non-contact groups and the inclusion of fathers on the Family Links and Closeness Maps. Table 8.4 illustrates the link between frequency of contact children had with their fathers and where they placed their fathers on their Emotional Closeness Maps.

Table 8.4: Frequency of child-father contact and children's inclusion/placement of their fathers on their Emotional Closeness Maps

Level of Contact	Omit	Outer Circle	4th Circle	3rd Circle	2nd Circle	1st circle
Never met (n = 6)	6					
One memory of ever seeing father (n = 4)	3	1				
Some contact in past, none in previous 8 years (n = 5)	5					
Some contact in past, none in previous 2 years (n = 3)	2				1	
Occasional chance encounters (n = 1)	1					
Meet every couple of years (n = 2)	1	1				
Meet once or twice a year (n = 5)					2	3
Meet at least once every one to three months (n = 3)					1	2
Meet at least once every one to two weeks (n = 8)	1		2	1	2	2

All but two of the children in the *non-contact group* omitted their fathers from both their Family Links and their Emotional Closeness Maps, indicating that those children for whom contact with their father was lost did not consider their father to be part of their family. Two younger girls, one of whom had only one memory of ever seeing from afar (but not meeting) her father placed him in the outermost circle on her Closeness Map (indicating a not close relationship), while another 9-year-old girl placed her father in the second circle on her Closeness Map, despite not having seen her father in the previous two years.

In contrast, all but two of the children in the *contact group* included him on both of their Maps. Thus, for these children, some level of contact did not necessarily ensure that children considered their fathers as part of their family. In one of these cases, the boy's father lived in New Zealand and they had only spent several weeks together on two occasions, and maintained infrequent contact via

email, letters and telephone calls. In the second case, the girl had weekly contact with her father yet did not consider him part of her family, perhaps because he had only come into her life more recently.

As indicated in Table 8.4, the majority of the 18 children who included their fathers on their Emotional Closeness Maps placed him in either the innermost or second circle, suggesting they considered themselves to feel close to their fathers. However, among the contact group, the relationship between frequency of contact and feelings of closeness was not straightforward, and even among the group with the most frequent pattern of contact, there was variation. Having frequent contact did not ensure the relationship would be considered a close one, while having infrequent contact did not necessarily mean that the relationship could not be close. For example, three of the younger children who saw their fathers only once or twice a year considered themselves to feel close to their fathers, placing them in the innermost circle. In contrast, three of the eight children who saw their fathers on a weekly or fortnightly basis placed their fathers in either the third or fourth circles on their Closeness Maps, while one girl who saw her father every week omitted him from her Map altogether.

Taking the findings from the non-contact and contact groups together, it appears that some level of face-to-face contact represents a *basic prerequisite* for the establishment of a relationship between children and their fathers, and for children to consider their father as part of their family. However, maintenance of consistent (though not necessarily regular) face-to-face contact is *not sufficient* to ensure a close father-child relationship. The findings point to the importance of exploring beyond frequency of contact to consider what actually transpires during the child-father interactions, which reflect relationship processes underlying feelings of closeness. In analysing children's narratives about their fathers, it was possible to identify factors that either facilitated or constrained positive relationship experiences for these children.

Constraining & Facilitating Factors

In identifying factors that either facilitated or constrained positive relationship experiences, distinctions between children describing both positive and negative relationship experiences were explored and contrasted. The themes of *commitment* and *connection* in these relationships were isdentified as key relationship processes underlying experiences of both positive and difficult relationships with their non-resident fathers.

Commitment

Where children perceived that their fathers engaged in behaviours that demonstrated commitment to the relationship, this facilitated feelings of closeness in the relationship. Those children who had a positive sense of their father's commitment to the relationship placed him in the first circle on their Closeness Maps. Certain behaviours and actions on the part of the fathers, such as regular phone

calls, text messages, emails, and arranging and financing trips abroad to visit, were interpreted as signs of a father's commitment to the relationship:

> *"I couldn't really say I feel sad because, actually my dad said in the summer I go over every summer and my dad says that if I lived over in America, then I would be seeing him even less because he gets time off work when I go over, especially"* (C1001, girl, age 12)

> *"My dad was very ill, he wants to go over* [to France] *staying with his brother and his sisters and everybody. That makes him sound like a bad father but he's not, because he likes me, he loves me he pays for me to go over and everything"* (C1111, boy, age 8)

Actions such as those described above served to assure the child of the father's sense of commitment and obligation to their relationship. Other behaviours, such as regular phone calls at pre-arranged times heightened the child's sense of accessibility to their fathers, and represented a sign of commitment to the relationship. Furthermore, where children perceived that fathers made an effort to maintain involvement in their lives, their sense of missing out on something was lessened.

In contrast, a number of the older children described negative experiences of commitment, where children perceived that their fathers invested little time or effort on them, were unreliable and failed to keep arrangements or promises that were made, or refused to provide financial support:

> *"I did get upset at Christmas, when he went about two months without em, calling me or texting me, and when he starting texting me again out of the blue, I just go, I got absolutely sick of him, I mean he used an excuse one night for not ringing, he said his house had burned down, which I think is completely stupid. That's no excuse, he still should have rang me, no but I mean he's always doing things like that. Ah the problem is that he's never ever kept, he'd say he's gonna come over, never comes over, that kind of thing"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

These children placed their fathers in the outer circles on their Closeness Maps, or omitted him altogether. One 17-year-old boy drew parallels between his relationship with his father and the father-son relationship depicted in the song "Cat's in the Cradle"[27].

> *C: Maybe like that song, it's about the son growing up and eh the dad didn't have enough time, and he came back and he was going through the stage of the son's life where he first walked, first went to school and then eh wanted to play ball but he couldn't play ball with him and then when he finally turned around and realised that when he saw his son, his son didn't have time to see him.*
>
> *R: And do you get the sense that your dad is kind of too busy for you, is that it?*

---

[27] A popular American song by Sandy and Harry Chapin, Cat's in the Cradle (1974) tells the story of a boy who tries to spend time with his father, but always finds him too busy. When the boy grows up and the father gets older, the father wants to spend time with his son, but his son always has other things to do.

> *C: He doesn't really make an effort, like we'd never go to football matches or anything like that* (C2115, boy, age 17)

One 13-year-old girl described her mistrust in her father's level of commitment to herself and her mother. Her mother and father had re-initiated their relationship, after many years of conflict, a situation which she found difficult to adjust to:

> *"I usen't to like the idea at all of them getting back together in the first place and I kind of got alright with it now...It was mainly because I didn't trust him at all"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

Where children were uncertain of their father's commitment to their relationship, feelings of dependency and trust were lessened, and consequently feelings of closeness diminished. In this way, a sense of commitment, established through regular effort on the part of the father to maintain contact, facilitated closeness in the relationship. In contrast, a perceived lack of commitment constrained closeness in the relationship, and on occasions, led to feelings of disappointment in their fathers, and even rejection. The theme of commitment to the relationship also emerged for a minority of the non-contact group, where their father's lack of engagement over the years resulted in the permanent and obligatory nature of the relationship being questioned. For example, one teenage girl decided that she no longer wished to maintain a relationship with her father, due to his unreliability and inconsistency with regard to contact with her:

> *"My dad is kind of like every couple of years he'll get in contact with me and I just got sick of that and I just stopped replying...I got a new phone and he doesn't have that number so he can't contact me"* (C2011, girl, age 16)

This example speaks to the voluntary and impermanent nature of the father-child relationship within these families. Such relationship characteristics have not typically been considered within the domain of the parent-child relationship. Moreover, this and other similar cases illustrate children's agency within their families, as they took the lead in resolving problematic relationships with their fathers, through ceasing to maintain contact.

Connection

In addition to signs of commitment to the relationship, feelings of connection and familiarity with their fathers emerged as significant themes in discussing the quality of their relationships with their fathers. Importantly, the data indicated that for the majority of the children, there was a *lack of connection* to their fathers, and a sense of familiarity with each other and connection could still be missing, despite regular contact. Generally, these children felt that their fathers lacked awareness of what was happening for them in their day-to-day lives. As stated in the previous section, the nature of the contact restricted opportunities for fathers to participate in care-giving routines, which bring about familiarity with each other and predictability in interactions.

However, this lack of connection and familiarity was not limited to only regretting that their fathers did not know them very well. Rather, children recognised that this connection and familiarity operated as a two-way process and a small number of children also expressed disappointment that their father was something of a stranger to them:

> *"I never see him and I don't really know much about him so he's not much of a family to me when I think about it...I wish I still lived with me dad but it doesn't bother me hugely that I don't but I miss him at times"* (C1003, 12-year-old boy)

This 11-year-old girl described how despite spending one night a week with her father, she did not feel that she knew her father very well and he did not appear to at ease around children, and in a parenting role:

> *"I don't, I don't see as much of him and I don't know as much about him... it's kind of disappointing the fact that I don't know much about my dad. I don't know as much... my dad doesn't usually give out to me cos eh doesn't really know how to act around children"* (C1014, girl, age 11)

This contact was still important and it was clear that she still valued the time she spent with him, stating that without this: *"I'd feel kind of a bit left out that I didn't have a dad, if I didn't know him".*

The specific nature of the sample and specifically that these children had, either never lived with their fathers, or had only lived with their fathers during their infancy, may account for the lack of familiarity and involvement reported by the children. Having never lived together, their relationships may be missing a history of shared experiences, and role expectations may not have clearly developed for either child or father. The significance of never having shared a residence was emphasised by this 17-year-old boy, when he talked about the lack of connection between himself and his father:

> *"It would be easier to negotiate a relationship with a parent that has moved out of the house because they know them inside the house and now they know them outside the house. I only really know my dad outside the house, so it's a bit weird, but it would be easier for them [children who had lived with their fathers prior to their parents' separation], I think but it would also be very strange for them too"* (C2115, boy, age 17)

Perhaps arising from the aforementioned feelings of disconnection, communication between children and their fathers was generally not characterised by ease of mutual exchanges, particularly in relation to emotional content. Within the context of pre-arranged contact time, spontaneous, meaningful communication exchanges may be less likely to occur (Simpson et al., 1995). Living apart from their father had distanced him from what was happening in their day to day lives, and impacted not only on possibilities for conversations but also on acceptable topics for conversations:

> *"I don't tend to talk about in depth talks, like I talk about, he's very clever you see, so we would talk about, I don't know, history or something, geography or something.*

Something like that to pass the time, other than sport, I would be stuck to talk to him" (C2115, boy, age 17)

"Talk to him about some things, you know if I was, I'll give you an example, I was singing in a concert for the school, I told him about that...not about sort of personal life, because obviously I don't see him that much, so he can't be as keyed in as people who are" (C2118, boy, age 14)

Thus, children enforced clear boundaries around topics they would discuss with their fathers, and for the most part, this was related to fathers lacking familiarity and involvement with their day-to-day lives. Of course, it is also likely that a two-way process was in operation: the quality of the communication exchanges in the relationship *contributed* to lack of familiarity and connection experienced by many of the children. Restricted knowledge about each other's lives and reserved patterns of communication were sources of emotional distancing between children and their fathers, and a sense of dependence was not fostered. Almost half of the contact group described negative experiences of connection in the relationship, and only one of these individuals placed their father in the innermost circle. This suggests that a negative experience of connection constrains feelings of closeness in the relationship.

Similar issues emerged among the sub-group of non-contact children, who previously but no longer had contact with their fathers. While these children had memories of what their father was like, shared times were remembered in terms of feeling strange or awkward. One teenage girl described the last time she met her father as *"terrible"* and *"awkward"*, while one of the younger children described how *"my dad was over here the last time and it felt weird...it didn't feel very right"*. She explained that this was because she not accustomed to having her father in her house. In another case, the boy decided that he did not feel comfortable in his father's presence and so actively decided that he no longer wanted to be in his father's company. He was seven years old at the time and had not talked to his father since, despite the fact that his brother had weekly visits with their father. The last time he spent time with his father, he described the following:

"I remember the day I decided not to, I sort of thought, I think I said, I want to get collected, ok, and I said well I want to get collected now...I just thought that maybe that, I couldn't, I can't explain, I never felt that I was in danger or anything like that, I just never felt comfortable being there. Just maybe anxious...I'd never really gotten to know him as a dad, he was sort of more a person you know...and he was a liar and he was making a lot of stuff up, and I thought, right enough of this" (C2118, boy, age 15)

In fact, this child, having cut contact with his father expressed how he now felt that he had no dad:

"I never considered myself as having had a dad...I don't say my dad, if I was mentioning, I'd say Killian's [brother] dad, I never say my dad".

For this group of children, despite having memories of shared times, descriptions of meetings as feeling *"weird"* and *"awkward"* signify the lack of connection and familiarity with each other.

Despite previous contact, the relationships were not characterised as close and a father's absence over previous years resulted in him not being considered part of their family. This is further highlighted by the children's omissions of their fathers from their Closeness and Family Links Maps.

In summary, perceived levels of commitment and connection were key features in determining the quality of the relationship. Only a small number of the children expressed confidence in their father's commitment to the relationship, as evidenced by efforts made on his part to sustain the relationship. The majority of these children however described relationships characterised by negative experiences of commitment and a general lack of connection to each other.

Making Sense of Relationships with Fathers: Emotions & Resolutions

In terms of the meaning and significance of these relationship experiences with their fathers, feelings of disappointment, frequently coupled with an acceptance and realisation of the kind of person their father was, dominated the narratives, particularly among the older children. The lack of connection and familiarity with each other generated an emotional distance between children and their fathers, and a disappointment that he was failing to fulfil his fathering role. Where children were aware that their fathers were not meeting their expectations regarding a fathering role, a small number found it difficult to define the nature of his role in their lives, or even how to address or talk about him:

> *R: How would you describe the role that he plays?*
>
> *C: Difficult to answer...like an older friend, except more of a connection, kind of like an uncle but more, but less than a father"* (C2117, boy age 14)

> *"I never really called him dad, I never really called him anything like that. It's like one of those situations where you don't know, you don't know, you know when you're in a situation with someone and you don't know what to call them, do you call them Sir, Mr. Murphy, or their first name"* (C2118, boy, age 15)

Realisation and acknowledgement of their fathers' shortcomings was met with either an acceptance or rejection of their father as a person who could play a meaningful role in their lives. In the first instance, this teenage girl has come to terms with her father as a *"complete person"*, and while she does not necessarily hold him in high regard, still actively sustains a relationship with him:

> *"It's really hard to look on him as a role model as a man... it's like as a person I'd say you know he's fine and I'm close to him but I couldn't really sort of connect to him properly as a father role model if you know what I mean. I used to be like, I used to be a complete daddy's girl, you know when I was a kid, but then you kind of, kind of go, you wake up and you realise that you know. I was suddenly sort of thrown into the reality of sort of the person that my dad is and I think it's kind of, it's good because I know, you know, I know him better now and I know him as a complete person and not you know in an idyllic form, and I've come to accept it" (C2016, girl, age 17)*

In contrast, this girl and her father have little contact, a situation, which has undoubtedly caused her much pain and hurt. Her acknowledgement that her father will never change and that she is better off having no contact reflects her current position in making sense of her relationship with her father.

> *C: I used to love him to pieces but then he lied to me all the time and then he was a dick whenever I rang*
>
> *R: Do you see things with you and your dad improving as you get older?*
>
> *C: No...just the way they are, I think that's, I don't think my dad could ever grow so...it was more of a relief [having no contact] because the other way hurt me far more, I don't really think about him all that much anymore, I don't think he hurts me anymore "* (C2005, girl, age 15)

What these young people may be reflecting is an ambiguity about the status of their relationships with their fathers. Thus, despite contact either now or in the past, their relationship with their fathers may have lacked patterns of interacting that typically fit the societal prescriptions for a father-child relationship. It may be that as children get older, they assess their father's behaviour more objectively, and distance themselves from parent-child role prescriptions.

Another teenage girl who evidenced a sense of mistrust in her father's commitment to her and her mother, with whom he had re-kindled a relationship, was satisfied to accept her father as part of her life, as she viewed the relationship in terms of particular benefits to herself. For example, when asked how she felt about a possible move outside Dublin to live with her father, she responded in terms of material gain, rather than the possibility of spending time with him:

> *"That would be grand because I could have my ponies and loads of dogs and it wouldn't really bother me if he was there because he has to work all day anyway"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

A minority of the children, particularly among the younger children, who had contact with their fathers and felt their fathers were accessible and committed, evaluated their relationship in broadly positive terms and were accepting of their situations and their fathers. Generally this contact and level of engagement was sufficient to ameliorate a sense of missing or loss for these children. However, a number of them acknowledged that their relationship was not emotionally equivalent to their relationship with their mother:

> *"I always thought I was really close to him when I was again a little younger...I know that when I get together in the summer then we're always, I always miss my mum and it's always that my dad comes second then, and when I'm over here with my mum, I'm supposed to miss my dad more, but I don't feel that way"* (C1001, girl, age 12)

As children get older and continue to reflect upon their father's role in their lives, whether these younger children will continue to make sense of their relationship with their fathers in this way or not, remains to be seen. A number of the older children were accepting of the reality of their fathers as people, and worked towards building a relationship, defined by their own terms. Others dealt with

this reality by rejecting the possibility of contact, seeing oneself as being better off without him. These developmental differences will be considered later in the chapter.

Presence of Absence

This section draws together key themes identified among the 19 children who had experienced either father absence or diminished contact with their fathers. For some of these children, themes of loss and absence were salient. Thus despite their father's physical absence, fathers were psychologically present, reflected in the children's discussions of their thoughts about him, an interest in knowing more about him, and expressions of feelings of loss, sadness and anger. For other children, their father's absence was met with indifference and did not occupy any significant place in their lives. A number of distinct issues emerged in the children's discussions about their fathers, relating to memories, photographs, and stories they had heard about him. To varying extents, this information assisted children to make sense of their father's absence, and their feelings relating to him.

As a starting point, clear differences emerged within the group in terms of the extent of the information they had about their fathers. For six of the children, fathers had been physically absent for their entire lives, while a further three children recalled one memory of having seen their father when they were younger. These memories were vague however, and in two of the cases the children were not told whether the men in the "stories" were their fathers or not, nor did they attempt to elicit more information from their mothers.

> *"There was this man, me mam didn't like, me mam met him and I think they got married, I don't know, and that they had a row and threw him out and the stereo over there, that was his I think and then me two uncles came up and asked him to get out because he was sitting in the garden like sitting down, 'oh please take me back, please take me back'. And we were looking out the window and I goes 'mam, who's that man? Who's that man?' and all, and she goes 'nothing, it's just me friend asking can he come in, but I have yous here so I can't let him in'"*(C1012, girl, age 12)

This suggests that there may have been lack of communication between these children and their mothers relating to fathers. Alternatively, the true identity of the man was not a concern to the children – in the absence of other information (such as photographs) these one-off vague memories served the purpose of assisting the children to tell a story about their fathers.

Among the six children who had never met their fathers, half of them talked about photographs they had of their fathers, although one younger girl was not sure that the individual in the photograph was actually her father: *"I've seen pictures but she's [mother] never said to me if it was him or not"*. These photographs may have an important role to play in facilitating children to create memories about their father's role in their past: *"According to some of my baby photos, I think my dad used to live here for a little while after I was born"*. The significance of having a physical representation of the father was further highlighted in the case of one young boy who did not have a photograph of his

father. For this boy, his father's appearance and the extent to which he physically resembled his father was a salient issue to him. The issue of physical appearance may have been heightened for this child, because his father was of a different race and so this boy looked quite different from his mother. Furthermore, he identifies never having seen his dad as the worst thing that ever happened to him thereby highlighting the significance of his father's absence for this boy and his sense of loss.

> *C: Once we had to do this article on what was the worst thing that ever happened to you...and I just wrote 'dad'...because I never ever seen him. My mam always says he looks like me.*
>
> *R: Do you ever talk to your mam about it?*
>
> *C: Sometimes, I'd go, 'mam, where's my dad' and she'd go '[child's name], I don't know'...Cos my mam doesn't know either. I wish she did know because then I'd ask her what did he look like and then if she had his number I'd take it off her and I'd say 'dad, send me a photo' and hang up"* (C1104, boy, age 8)

At this point in the child's development, his thinking remains rooted in the concrete physical world: his sense of missing something was tied in with his difference in appearance from his mother, and his probable physical resemblance to his father. In a similar vein, one 13-year-old girl, who had never met her father but had seen photographs of him once, indicated that her physical resemblance to her mother *lessened* her sense of missing something – her thinking had advanced to hypothesise that if she had physically resembled her father (as the boy resembled his), her sense of loss in relation to her father would have been heightened:

> *"My mum has brown eyes but I have blue. So he had blue eyes, but a part of my eye is brown so even the one thing I have from him is still pretty much my mom's so that's why it's kind of easier because if I looked completely different to my mom, it would be a little odd...it would feel like something is missing but I just look like my mom"* (C2007, girl, age 13)

Interest in fathers extended beyond the realm of physical appearance to entertaining thoughts about his character, or about the possibility of actually meeting him and what that might entail: *"I think about all the things I can do with my dad and all sorts of stuff"; "I think that he's going to be a nice person and really happy"*. Two girls expressed a desire to seek out their fathers and meet him in the future. In one case, the child was dissatisfied with her mother's attempt to delay her quest to meet her father, and so she had turned to another family member for support:

> *"...she [mother] said that she'd let me meet him when I get older so I'm going to wait...I have another auntie, Sandra, I talk more to her, she said that em that the two of us will go up one of the days without mammy knowing and we'll meet him and then my mam will be happy for me to meet him and then so"* (C1005, girl, age 12)

The second girl indicated that her desire to meet her father was not to form a relationship with him, but rather to satisfy her curiosity about him and meet her half brothers and extended family:

"I'd love to meet my brothers and my grandparents and more cousins, as long as he doesn't have to have any impact on my life, just like to say hi, I still exist...satisfy curiosity and possibly, not just once, possibly go visit a couple of times...but other than that, I don't really want him around."(C2010, girl, age 17)

In the absence of any information (however vague and sparse), a sense of missing something or a curiosity remained. In contrast, for those children who previously had contact with their fathers, the significance of previously meeting, and knowing his identity and the circumstances surrounding their one-parent family situation was clear:

"I think once it's not a big mystery, it's alright like once they know...I think it was important more the circumstances why he wasn't there, but not really who he was...like if when I was younger, I wouldn't have recognised him if he walked down the street, on closer inspection I might. I think it's more the circumstances that, like, you didn't just arrive by the stork basically" (C2012, girl, age 13)

Children appeared to find whatever information they had useful in helping them to make sense of their father's absence from their lives or their own sense of loss surrounding his absence:

"It's good to know that like he was like an orphan, he went to an orphanage and he had a pretty hard life, his mum just left him there, he went to one of those orphanages for kids that have done bad things when he didn't, so I know he's had a pretty tough life which make it easier, it doesn't exactly given an excuse but it does make it easier to accept the fact [that he was not around]" (C2007, girl, age 13)

"Because I have something to direct whatever I'm feeling towards...if I didn't it would probably be, you always like to know the answer to a question to I suppose that's why. If you don't like someone for have someone to, for whatever reason, you'd have someone to go, oh yeah, that's who I don't like, instead of having some faceless person" (C2118, boy, age 15)

While some information may have sufficed for some children, other expressed dissatisfaction with the information they had, and for these children, unanswered questions may always remain. Thus, despite their father's absence from these children's lives (sometimes from before birth or infancy), a father figure is psychologically present in their minds. Children fore-grounded different emotions in how they reflected upon their fathers' absence from their lives and feelings of abandonment, anger, sadness, loss and disappointment permeated many of the narratives. For example, this 8-year-old girl described her sadness in response to her father's denial of her existence to his parents:

C: My dad was trying to ring her and she [mother] answered the phone and then he was giving out because he didn't want his parents to know that he had child or a wife, and then my mam just wanted to send pictures so they'd know, and no like. He shouldn't have, he should have told the truth

R: And how did you feel about that, that he didn't tell them about you?

C: I felt sad, because he didn't really show anybody that he had a daughter" (C107, girl, age 8)

Another older girl responded to her father's departure from her life, before her birth, in the following way:

> *R: If you had some questions for him, what do you think they would be?*
>
> *C: Why did you run away? Look at me, I'm cool and gorgeous and beautiful and you never should have left me living with my mom, leave us some money at least...the stupid bastard* (C2010, girl, age 17)

These children's insistences that *"he should have told the truth"* and he *"never should have left me"* reflect their stance regarding how their father *should* have behaved with respect to them and their clear non-acceptance and disapproval of his behaviour. One child, who had never met her father, described how she made sense of her father's absence through fantasising about him being in the pub. She interpreted her father's absence as a sign that he did not care about her or her family, which she in turn reciprocated by not caring about him:

> *"Because my dad is usually, I don't know this but I think this that my dad goes off to a pub and he doesn't care about us, so...I didn't know me dad and I don't care about him because I didn't know him"* (C1012, girl, age 12)

Among this non-contact group, however, such themes and emotions were not ubiquitous. Other children exhibited no curiosity about their fathers or indicated that the issue of fathers was not something they thought about. For example, when the issue of fathers was introduced in the interview a number of the children stated that did not mind not seeing their father. One 8-year-old boy simply stated: *"I didn't have a dad"*. Another 11-year-old boy said that he never talked about his father with his mother, suggesting he had no desire to know anything: *"I don't think I really want to know anyway"*, while one teenage boy stated that: *"I wouldn't really think of myself as having a dad"*. It may be that these children are reflecting a sense of denial about the loss of their father, or indeed may not experience his absence as a sense of loss.

Mothers as Mediators between Children & Fathers

Another potentially important source of influence on the nature and quality of children's relationship with their father lies extraneous to the dyadic interaction between children and their fathers. Consistent with a perspective which views the family as a system of inter-connected relationships, the nature of the inter-parental relationship represents an important context within which the father-child relationship is either facilitated or constrained. Based mainly on data from the mothers' interviews[28], it was clear that in the majority of cases mothers and fathers had become largely disengaged from each other, having either completely lost contact, or sustaining minimal levels of

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[28] N = 34 mothers, (based on a total sample of 41 children – 4 families where fathers are deceased – 3 families where siblings were interviewed).

contact (largely by telephone) relating only to visitation arrangements with the child. A clear association emerged between the nature of the mother-father relationship, and subsequent patterns of contact between fathers and their children. Among this group, given that children had lived without their fathers at home from a young age, the opportunity to develop a relationship independent of their mother's involvement was limited, thereby potentially heightening the significance of the inter-parental relationship for the children. For example, 10 of the mothers had no contact with their children's father either since their pregnancy or very shortly after the birth. In all of these cases, children have either had no contact with their fathers, or one vague memory of ever seeing him. In a further 7 cases, inter-parental contact had ceased over the preceding years, and an associated loss of contact for the children was also observed (although, as will be presented, loss of contact between children and fathers did not necessarily originate with loss of contact between parents). Among the contact group, the nature of mother-father contact remained distant in the majority of cases, with phone calls and occasional face-to-face contact while the child was being dropped off or collected. In two exceptional cases, mothers have more regular contact, and these children see their fathers at least once a week.

Table 8.5: Nature of mother-father contact and relationship with child-father contact [29]

Frequency of Mother-Father Contact		Frequency of Child-Father Contact				
	Total	Never Met/One memory	No contact now	Less than annually	Every 1 to 6 months	Every 1 to 2 weeks
No contact since pregnancy or shortly after birth	10	10				
Complete loss of contact over the years (including access withdrawn)	7		9			
Occasional phone-call/meeting relating to father-child visits	15			2	8	6
Telephone contact every second day	1					1
In a relationship together	1					1

While there was a clear relationship between mother-father contact and the nature of children's contact with their fathers, the mother's role within the father-child relationship can be conceptualised in terms of whether she facilitated the relationship or placed constraints around the relationship. In addition, it was clear that her role within the relationship was subject to change and frequently it appeared that as time passed, mothers withdrew from their role as mediators of the child-father

[29] Discrepancies in figures can be accounted for by the three sibling pairs. Also, in the case of one of the sibling pairs, the mother maintained minimal contact with the father relating to visiting arrangements for one of her sons. However, her other son had decided to cease contact with his father when he was younger.

relationship. Finally, among the non-contact group, mothers represented an important and sometimes the sole link that children had to their fathers, and so by providing information and telling stories about fathers, could assist children in making sense of their father's absence from their lives.

Mothers as Facilitators

While this theme emerged strongly among the contact group, the question of facilitating contact was also a theme among the non-contact group. Within the non-contact group, mothers were aware of their children's potential desire to know about their father and possibly meet him at some point in the future. In these situations, mothers were either willing to facilitate contact wherever possible or felt that they could not consider their children having contact with their fathers. For example, following an expression of interest among their teenage daughters, at the time of the interview two mothers were actively assisting their daughters in tracing and establishing contact with their fathers (both children had never had any contact with their fathers). However, both mothers expressed deep concern that the fathers would not be interested in developing a relationship with their daughters, potentially leaving the girls feeling disappointed and rejected:

> *"I've always talked to them about it, but I'm not heavy on the negative side because I don't think that's productive but I do say to them, I've always said to them that you know one day you know you can I'll help you to find him and all that but you know I can't tell you what his reaction is going to be so but I think secretly all kids think the reaction is going to be brilliant. So I think that's going to be quite hard"* (A2010, mother of 17-year old girl)

Even without an expression of interest on the part of the child, another mother reassured her child that establishing contact would be possible, despite believing that the father would not be interested: *"I've told him [child] if he ever wants to contact him [father] there's no problem but he [the father] doesn't want to know. He doesn't want to know him"*. However, among the remainder of the non-contact group, mothers were not open to facilitating contact with their children's fathers and perceived a number of barriers to contact, as will be discussed in the following section.

Among the contact group, it was clear that mothers had played a key role in facilitating children's relationships with their fathers. In its most active form, such facilitation ranged from financing children's trips abroad to see their fathers to transporting children to and from their visits with their fathers to telephoning their children's father to remind him about their birthdays. A number of mothers emphatically stated that they tried to promote father involvement in their children's lives, believing that it was important for children to develop a relationship with their fathers. Moreover, while their desire for children to develop a relationship with their fathers was compromised by a fear that children would be hurt and disappointed with this relationship, these mothers believed that it was better for children to discover this for themselves. This also removed the likelihood that the children would place blame upon the mothers for the potentially poor relationship with their fathers:

> *"Even when she was small, I pushed for father participation, because I just figured no matter what goes between us it's important for them to have, for her to have a dad. And I mean I suppose at least she got to know him because kids they tend to think that the mother has done something or you're holding it away, why can't you get back together, and it's quite difficult to not put him down and say he's a gobshite. So for her to know and then eventually she sort of got to know what he was like and so like it's different, it's her opinion about what he is"* (A2016, mother of 16-year-old girl)

> *"I think had I not, had I cut the children off, remember they were very very young, I think they would have him up on a pedestal and they would be imagining their father as being somebody that he really wasn't so, I suppose from day one I felt that despite, you know the way [father] treated me, I felt that they had an entitlement to know their father and draw their own conclusions" (A2117, mother of 14 and 15-year-old boys)*

Frequently however, facilitation of the relationship took a more passive form. For example, two mothers had placed the father's telephone number beside the telephone, so that children could contact him at any time, without her involvement. Also, mothers could facilitate in a less proactive way, for example, by permitting younger children to go and meet their fathers in accordance with the arrangements that fathers and children had made with each other; or by not placing barriers in the way of such contact. Although such facilitation might be perceived as minimal, possible reasons underpinning a less active facilitation was concern about children's safety and well-being during their visits with their fathers. As an example, one mother became anxious during her child's weekly visits with his father, who drinks heavily: *"I'd be far happier [about the contact] when he's sober, just do you know the whole safety issue. And also do you know as a role model it's not great"*. The involvement of mothers often became more peripheral as time passed, children got older and patterns of contact and relationships became established – the mother's role shifted from one as facilitator to observer of the father-child relationship.

Mothers' Withdrawal from Facilitation

This conceptualisation of the mother role within the father-child relationship was observed within eight of the families of the older children, but less frequently among the younger age group. There were a number of reasons underpinning mothers' increasingly passive involvement in the child-father relationship. Three of the mothers observed a lack of commitment and effort on the part of the father, and as a result withdrew from their role as facilitator, leaving it to the father:

> *"He would leave it up to me if I would be willing to do it, but I won't bother. Initially I did, and I thought why am I doing this, this is his visitation, so let him organise it" (A1001, mother of 11 year old girl).*

A second reason underlying mothers' adoption of a less active role in the father-child relationship related to the fact that as children got older, the father-child relationship became increasingly independent: contact time and the relationship could be negotiated separately between father and

child. In these cases, mothers sustained the relationship in as far as was possible, and when they considered their children were old enough, responsibility for contact was handed over.

> *"It's always been me. I just kept it up because I needed her to have the choice, just keep the doors open. Then she can decide herself you know what to, what to do with it, but he really, I knew he couldn't do it himself, so she needed to know how he was so I just kept it up"* (C2005, mother of 15-year-old girl)

In one case, the mother's role in the child-father relationship was explicitly discussed and negotiated between mother and child, and resulted in a withdrawal of her involvement in their contact arrangements:

> *"I did say to [child] you know I could bring your father to court and I could actually organise that you know that he sees you more often and I've also said to him I can talk to your father and say em, talk to him about seeing you more often. This would be with [child] being quite upset a number of times over his lack of connection with his father. We've had to have pretty frank conversations about it, and em he has said to me, mum I don't want you to talk to him, and so I've honoured that pretty much, I don't interfere with their relationship at all now"* (A1115, mother of 17-year-old boy)

In five cases, mothers were almost forced to withdraw from influencing their child's relationship with their fathers as children chose to take charge of how they their father fitted into their lives - in two of these cases, children were only seven years of age at the time. Children's exercise of agency within their relationship with their father had resulted in the cessation of contact between children and their fathers – a response either to less than satisfactory displays of commitment to the relationship, or a perceived lack of connection. According to the mothers, when children themselves decided that they no longer wished to sustain the relationship, any attempt at facilitating a relationship became futile:

> *"She has no desire to have contact with him, she has kind of made up her own mind, I would have never influenced it, like when she questioned things about him, I always said he was wonderful. I mean the last time she heard from him was about two years ago, em he promised he'd ring her the next week and she recognised he didn't ring and up to that, she would have always wanted to send the odd card or picture, but after that now she doesn't, I actually asked her at one point did she want to send a card and she said no, he doesn't bother to send me one"* (A1007, mother of 8-year-old girl)

In cases where children and their fathers had consistent contact, mothers became increasingly removed from the relationship, as children got older. Either through a lack of interest on the part of mothers, or through children's attempts to separate their distinct relationships with both parents, less information became available to mothers about the time shared between children and their fathers:

> *"I'd just rather not talk about him, and I, the kids know that that they obviously know they, so they just, they'll say oh something exciting about their dad or this or that, they'll give me some news but they know I'm not really interested. I would think I'm stopping them expressing themselves"* (A1010, mother of 9-year-old girl)

In only one case, a mother expressed that her daughter attempted to keep her relationships with each parent separate, due to the conflictual nature of the inter-parental relationship: this meant that the mother no longer asked her daughter about her weekends with her father and her daughter in turn, did not offer up any information. In explaining the reasons for this, she stated:

> *"I think she's [daughter] just protecting herself, she doesn't want to get caught in the cross fire. I would try to keep it [talking about father] to a minimum. I know that I get criticised you know she has mentioned on occasion a thing that would say about me. You know there's things that I would like to know but I don't want to intrude and I feel like it is awkward for her, you know she obviously has loyalties to both of us and then not at all, and I you know I think she's in a difficult enough position"* (A2009, mother of 14-year-old girl)

In summary, consideration of mothers as facilitators or former facilitators (now observers) suggests that most commonly mothers adopted a position whereby they encouraged in as far as possible their children's relationship with their fathers. While facilitation varied in the extent to which it was active or reactive, the basic premise underlying this approach was that fathers were important, and children would benefit from having contact, in spite of potential negative relationship experiences.

Mothers Placing Constraints on the Child-Father Relationship

This theme encompasses the mother's role in placing constraints around the child-father relationship. Within five families (one with two children in the study; all within the non-contact group), it was clear that mothers would not under any circumstances facilitate a relationship between the children and their fathers. In all but one case, this decision was driven by a desire to protect their children from violence, abuse, or feelings of abandonment that ensued from a father's hitherto lack of commitment to the child. Although mothers' desires to protect their children represented the over-riding motivation to constrain the child-father relationship, the demands on them to implement these constraints were nevertheless difficult:

> *"I think one of the reasons why I find, well I did find at that time that it was very difficult was that in my heart I wanted him to be part of the children's life and you know I had that moral struggle within me of the children knowing their father or having or you know that they should know their father or whatever, but it was the, it was the circumstances that eh that brought it to the stage that I refused him access were em security and safety and that type of thing you know so I feel that I had to make, I had to take steps that went against my own value systems that I had in order to survive. And survive is the word because both psychologically, physically, emotionally and in every way I was being, I was just being destroyed"* (A2113, mother of 13-year-old boy)

In one unusual situation, a mother did not think that it would be appropriate to contact her child's father, as he may be in a relationship and have children:

> *"I haven't seen this man in twelve, thirteen years, I don't know, this fella could be married now, he could have a family of his own, and I don't know, I feel I wouldn't like to wreck his family"* (A2005, mother of 12-year-old girl)

Communication between mothers and their children around these issues was not always open. Thus, not all of the children in these families were aware of what had happened in the past – three of these children reflected that they did not discuss their absent father with their mother, and two of these children expressed a desire to know more about their fathers. Indeed, the child of the mother quoted above indicated during her interview that she was going to meet her father, with the help of her aunt, without her mother knowing. It was clear that the combination of children's curiosity to know more about their fathers, coupled with mother's reluctance to disclose information and the withdrawal of access had generated tensions within the child-mother relationship.

Placing constraints around the father-child relationship did not only occur among the non-contact group. In a number of situations, while not restricting contact altogether, mothers had imposed conditions upon contact between children and their fathers. Specifically, these mothers insisted that unless contact was managed in a consistent, committed and considerate manner, it would be discontinued: *"It told him that it was all or nothing, he had to make a commitment to be consistent and otherwise it wouldn't [work]"*.

> *"There was a time when we first split up he would just, whenever it suited him, you know it could go, like I think the longest it went was about three weeks but I was on the phone saying, don't you dare ignore that child and think you can just come in and out of his life and do whatever, it's not fair, he's a little boy, he needs his da you know"* (A1123, mother of 8-year-old boy)

Finally, barriers to contact were open to change as perceived risks to children's well-being were removed. For example, as a result of one father's recovery from a substance abuse problem, the potential for contact had been revived:

> *"I think it's important that they know who he is, now whether they have contact with him now is a different story. I would have no problem with him having contact with them. He's got his life back together, he's you know he's working away and things so I would have no problems with him having contact with them"* (A1117, mother of 9-year-old boy)

In summary, a small proportion of the mothers had placed barriers around children's contact with fathers. Motivated by a desire to protect their children from perceived risks associated with contact, these mothers were not open to entertaining thoughts of contact in the future. Moreover, in a smaller number of cases where contact did occur, mothers insisted that continued contact was dependent upon consistency and reliability on the part of the father.

Mothers as a Source of Information about Fathers

Finally, the role of the mother as a source of information about fathers was less related to children's contact with their fathers, but served an important purpose in assisting children to make sense of their father's role in their lives, or indeed their father's absence. This mother role was of particular

significance among the non-contact group, where mothers sometimes represented the only link that children had with their fathers, and an important source of information and stories about their fathers.

In the majority of cases, mothers appeared to be open with their children, answering their children's questions in as far as was possible, and as was appropriate to the child's age. Inherent in many of the explanations was a conscious decision on the part of the mother to portray fathers in a positive light, and a reassurance that the children were not to blame for his absence or for them not being together. As an example of a typical explanation, this mother stated: *"I was quite open, what I said to him was that the two of us just didn't get on and we split up and that it had nothing to do with him"*

> *"I would just explain to him the situation, I wouldn't paint a bad picture but you know I'd just give him the facts, once you explained to him, you know people don't always get on. He's never asked to see any photos of him so and you know that's kind of going to be up to him"* (A1116, mother of 12 year old boy)

In two exceptions, mothers were reluctant to discuss their children's father with them and somewhat denied their children's desire to know about their fathers.

> *"You give a made up story, don't you. He knows where he's from but with regards to anything else, no. He was four and actually he asked quite a lot and I basically told him something different you know. At the end of the day I do say to him you don't need anybody else, you have me, I just don't play football you know"* (A1104, mother of 9-year-old boy)

In other cases, *some* information, regarding for example infidelity or abuse, was held back until the child was older and more able to fully understand:

> *"He asked me why we split up and what was the reasons and eh was it cos of him, was it his fault, you know but I told him it wasn't his fault and I didn't tell him why we split up because I'm not going ot lie to him either, I'm not going to tell him one story now and then in a couple of years tell him the real truth you know I told him, when he's good and ready to understand I'll tell him"* (A1123, mother of 8-year-old boy)

It appeared that children were generally provided with the information they required at particular points in time, but mothers were aware that more information and questions could come at a later stage:

> *"I think that potentially is going to be an issue for him, that why wasn't he around when he was younger, again it's, it's not that I think all the questions have been answered, I think it's probably just they've been answered for now, and when he reaches a new age, you know when he gets older he'll have more questions"* (A1122, mother of 9-year-old boy)

While the majority of the mothers appeared to be relaxed and comfortable around talking about fathers; for a few mothers, communication around the topic was less open: *"I'm dreading one day she'll come and say mammy I just want to know and that's it. And I just don't know where to start"*. In these families, the interviews with the children indicated that they were aware of their mother's

reluctance to talk about their fathers, and so they withheld from asking questions. However, this did not dampen their curiosity, with two of these children expressing a desire in their interviews to know more about their fathers.

Experiences with Fathers & Perspectives on Father Roles

As noted in Chapter Six of the thesis, children and young people's concepts of family and parenting roles serve as a backdrop against which their subjective family experiences are reflected upon and evaluated. Simultaneously, their own family circumstances and relationships with parents represent a framework through which concepts of family and parenting roles are constructed and re-constructed. This section focuses on the way in which children's experiences and relationships with their fathers may have shaped their concepts of fathering and their ideas about the significance of fathers in children's lives.

As a starting point, four children stated that they did not know what a father's role in a family entailed – this they attributed to their lack of exposure to a father figure. Among the remaining children, four significant descriptions of father roles emerged, each accounting for about one fifth of the responses depicting the father role: loving and caring, emotional support and advice-giving, breadwinner/provider and playmate companion (three-quarters of the 'playmate' descriptions came from younger children). The first two roles were also frequent representations of the mother roles, suggesting that for some children, mother and father roles are interchangeable. The latter two descriptions however were unique to the father, with neither "breadwinner" nor "playmate" emerging as strong descriptions of the mother role (3% and 1.5% of the responses, respectively). While 11 of the children's fathers did provide some financial support to the child and mother, none of the children's fathers were truly engaged in the role of breadwinner to the family. Indeed, this theme did not emerge significantly among the children whose fathers paid regular child support, suggesting that this construction of the father role was not based on direct experience. A similar finding emerged with regard to the second role that emerged more commonly for fathers than mothers – the role of playmate. Seven of the eight children who described the father role in this way belonged in the non-contact group, suggesting that this conceptualisation of the father role is based on stereotypical assumptions, rather than direct experience. This might have been contrary to what was expected, given that among the contact group, recreation and leisure were key components of their shared time. Dominant constructions of the father role may reflect stereotypes about the role of fathers in families – concepts of fathers as providers reflect the traditional gendered division of labour within the household, while play interactions are seen frequently seen as a central component of father's direct involvement with their children (Roggman, 2004; Popenoe, 1994). Notwithstanding the salience of these stereotypes for the children however, traditionally "female" expressive roles of caring and providing emotional support were also frequently mentioned as

features of the fathering role. Among the children who did have contact with their fathers, descriptions of fathers as caring figures emerged as strongly as for mothers. However, the parent's role in fulfilling basic needs (such as feeding, clothing, looking after when ill) was less frequently mentioned for fathers, perhaps reflecting their fathers' detachment from daily care-giving routines.

In the absence of highly (or even minimally) involved fathers, the relative comparison of mother and father roles, and the perceived importance of fathers in children's lives are important issues to be considered. With regard to these questions, a clear link emerged between children's experiences with their fathers and their perspectives on the comparison and relative importance of mother and father roles. Over one-third of the children (n = 15) stated that fathers were important and children did need a father in their lives – either because children need both parents, or because mother and father roles are distinctive and therefore fathers have a unique contribution to make to their children's lives. Ten of these children had some level of contact with their fathers, suggesting that for these children, their varying patterns of contact had generated a sense that fathers were necessary and important to children. Moreover, eight of these children placed their father in either the first or second circle on their Closeness Maps, indicated that they considered themselves to feel close to their fathers. Thus, despite negative experiences of commitment and connection described by some of the children, the involvement of fathers in their lives was considered necessary and worthwhile to some extent. Among the remaining five non-contact children, their belief that fathers were necessary coupled with their fathers' absence from their lives, may have contributed to a sense of loss or missing out on something.

Almost half of the children stated that fathers were not necessary – this response occurred almost exclusively among the non-contact group. For these children, their father's absence may have prompted a sense that fathers were not necessary, although as indicated previously, some of these children did indicate that fathers are important. A small proportion of children viewed mother and father roles as interchangeable – in this sense neither fathers nor mothers were essential, as long as there was one parent to fulfil parental roles and responsibilities. Such findings should be considered in light of the caveat provided by a number of children who emphasised that the relative importance of mothers and fathers varied from one family to another – importantly, they acknowledged that their experiences with their mothers and fathers did not necessarily reflect what happened in other families.

Developmental & Gender Patterns

This final section of the chapter considers the nature of gender and developmental patterns in relation to children's relationships with their fathers, and how they make sense of those relationship experiences. Firstly, no clear gender patterns emerged in the nature of children's relationships with their fathers; or in how they perceived their relationship experiences or his absence. However, a

number of developmental trends were apparent. Firstly, there were no age-related patterns in terms of frequency of contact – a similar proportion of the younger children and older children had no contact. For children for whom contact had ceased, again similar proportions of children were represented across the two broad age categories. Among the older children who had previously but no longer had contact, this contact had ceased at least eight years prior to the interview, when the children were younger, while among the younger children, contact had ceased more recently. These findings suggest that if contact is to eventually diminish altogether, this is likely to happen early on, at least before the onset of adolescence. If on the other hand, contact can be facilitated and maintained throughout childhood, it is likely that some degree of contact will continue into adolescence.

Secondly, in terms of perceptions of closeness to father among the contact group, a clear difference emerged between the two age groups (as indicated previously, the majority of the non-contact children omitted their fathers from their Closeness Maps). These diverging patterns are illustrated in the table below.

Table 8.6: Position of Fathers on Closeness Maps, according to age category of children, and frequency of contact among the contact group (9 children in each age group)

Position of Father on Closeness Map	Younger Children		Older Children	
	Frequent Contact (at least once every three months)	Less Frequent Contact (once every six months or less)	Frequent Contact (at least once every three months)	Less Frequent Contact (once every six months or less)
Omit		1	1	
Outer Circle				1
4th Circle			2	
3rd Circle	1			
2nd Circle		1	3	1
1st Circle	3	3	1	

Thus, the younger children were more likely to place their fathers in the 1st circle, indicating a close relationship, while the older children were more likely to place their fathers in the outer circles, indicating a less close relationship. This suggests that regular contact (though not necessarily frequent) and feelings of closeness to father are related for the younger children, and perhaps maintenance of some form of contact may be sufficient for younger children to feel close to their fathers. In contrast, there appeared to be more variation among the older group in terms of their feelings of closeness in their relationship, suggesting that perceptions of closeness are related to factors beyond frequency of contact and as children get older, they become more discerning in how they evaluate the quality of their relationships with their fathers.

Thirdly, in terms of the factors constraining and facilitating positive relationship experiences, younger children reported positive experiences of commitment and negative experiences of connection. For the older children, negative experiences of both connection and commitment were reported. These age-related patterns may reflect the way in which children of different ages conceptualise relationships from the quality of daily interactions at a concrete level to more abstract and complex aspects of relationships. Thus, it may be that experiences of connection in a relationship are based on the ease of actual interactions and exchanges of everyday experiences between children and their fathers. These are concrete experiences that may be more easily accessed and evaluated by younger children, as well as older children. In contrast, experiences of commitment become apparent over time through a concerted effort to maintain the relationship. Reflection about an individual's commitment to a relationship and the implications for the relationship in terms of accessibility, trust and dependence may only be possible as children get older. It may also be that younger children did not reflect negative experiences of commitment, as the degree of effort their father has heretofore shown is sufficient for their needs at this stage.

Finally, in terms of the meaning and significance of children's relationship experiences with their fathers, it was clear that the process of understanding emotions and reflecting upon their father's role in their life or absence from their life was underway for many of the older children. In contrast, this did not emerge as clearly in the narratives of the younger children, who communicated facts around their relationships with their fathers or their father's absence, but were less likely to discuss their feelings and resolutions in relation to this.

Conclusion

This chapter was concerned with the nature of children's relationships with their non-resident fathers, with a focus of analysis on the processes underpinning positive and negative relationship experiences. There was substantial variability within the sample in terms not only of children's frequency of contact with their fathers, but also in terms of the stability, nature and circumstances of contact between children and their fathers. Together, these factors serve as the backdrop against which relationship are lived out and experienced, and so are important to consider in any investigation of children's relationships with parents across the boundaries of different households. Frequency of contact with non-resident fathers was generally not high for the present sample of children. Other Irish research involving children of separated and divorced parents has reported much higher levels of contact between children and their non-resident fathers – Hogan et al. (2002) reported that two-thirds of children saw their non-resident parents at least once a week, while Fawcett (1998) found that only 11% of her sample of adolescents had no contact with their non-resident parents. Patterns of contact in the current study exhibited an opposite trend, with half of the current sample having no contact at all, and only one-fifth seeing their fathers at least once every two

weeks. The primary difference between this sample and the samples considered in the other studies was that children in the present study were young when the separation had occurred, and there had been a short relationship history established prior to living in separate households, if this occurred at all. These findings suggest that the absence of a history of shared residence between fathers and children may exacerbate the risk that non-residence places upon the maintenance of the contact between parents and children. Moreover, even where contact is maintained, the absence of shared residence may give rise to a lack of clarity around roles and expectations that guide relationships into the future, thereby presenting further challenges to the development of a *close* relationship for children and their non-resident fathers.

There was a strong relationship between contact with fathers and experiences of closeness. This trend emerged strongly among the non-contact group who almost unanimously omitted their fathers from the Closeness Maps and did not even consider him to be part of their family. This reinforces the children's ideas, reflected earlier in the thesis, that family is fluidly defined on the basis of quality of inter-individual care and relations, rather than by pre-defined labels such as "father", based solely on biological relatedness. In terms of the contact group, some trends emerged according to *frequency* of contact and positive experiences of closeness. More significant however, was the *consistency, nature and circumstances* of contact and their relationship to perceptions of closeness in the relationship. The findings suggest that it is a challenge for children to develop a meaningful relationship with their non-resident father when they only see their fathers relatively infrequently in somewhat artificial situations. Children's narratives indicated that the time shared with fathers was dominated by leisure and recreational activities, with fathers rarely becoming involved in daily routines relating to care-giving, school and after-school activities. This finding is consistent with other research on the nature of children's contact with their non-resident fathers (Simpson et al., 1995). Furthermore, the context of their contact meant that fathers did not have the opportunity to be become assimilated into daily care-giving routines. In addition, for many of the families, physical distance precluded a regular pattern of contact with the many of the fathers either living abroad, or in a different area of the country. The context of the contact had an important bearing on children's assessment of their fathers' availability, commitment, and dependability and the quality of the relationship.

In particular, negative experiences of *commitment* and *connection* constrained the closeness of children's relationships with non-resident fathers. Where contact coalesced around recreational activities and outside the boundaries of daily routines, fathers were not available to hear about and react to the day-to-day events that happen in children's lives. Opportunities for spontaneous provision of care and support are integral for intimacy and interdependence to develop, and as a result of the absence of these types of everyday interactions, relationships were characterised by a lack of connectedness and interdependence, and fathers were not perceived as being a ready and

obvious support to children. Aside from the issue of connection and inter-dependence, a number of the children struggled with their father's lack of commitment to their relationship. Where patterns of contact were fragile and not well established, children expressed feelings of disappointment, hurt and anger. These findings highlight the need to move beyond solely maintaining contact between children and their fathers to establishing relationships that make children feel connected to their non-residents parents, and secure in their parents commitment to them.

Some developmental trends emerged within the findings. It was not the case that contact increased or decreased with age, as a similar proportion of younger and older children had contact. However, among the group of non-contact children contact had ceased many years preceding the interview, suggesting that maintaining contact throughout the early years of childhood bodes well for sustained contact into middle childhood and adolescence. The main developmental difference that was observed related to children's perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their father. Despite the maintenance of contact, more of the older children expressed feeling less close to their fathers than other family members, while more of the younger children perceived that that they had a close relationship with their fathers. This suggests that contact may be sufficient for positive perceptions of the relationship among the younger children. However, as children get older, their needs and understandings around their relationships may shift, thereby leading to dissatisfaction with the nature of their contact and relationship with their fathers. However, this was not inevitable, as some of the older children did express that they felt close to their fathers – here well-established patterns of contact had generated a sense that fathers were accessible and committed to the relationship.

In terms of the group of children for whom contact had ceased, or who never had contact with their fathers, experiences of loss were apparent for some of the children. Just because fathers were absent did not mean that children did not think about them as reflected in children's expressions of loss, sadness, and anger. These findings clearly contradict Pryor & Rodger's claim that children whose parents separated in infancy or born to a single mother and who spend an entire childhood in a one-parent family do not experience a sense of loss, although they may be affected by parental absence (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Children engaged in an active process of making sense of their father's absence, a process which appeared to be facilitated by whatever information was available to them, be it photographs, stories from the past, or vague memories. Here mothers had a potentially important role to play in providing information to children – however, some mothers were reluctant to openly discuss the issue, while some children were also reticent about asking too many questions.

The findings to emerge from the chapter also highlight children's agency within the family. Many of the children experienced a sense of ambiguity around the role of their father in their lives, as he was either absent from their lives, or was not living up to their expectations as prescribed by the "father" label. However, where children had come to accept the nature of their relationship with their father,

they organised and negotiated their relationships in a manner that was optimal for them, even to the extent of choosing to have no contact. Where relationships are not assured, and obligations inherent in parent-child role prescriptions are not met, children considered the relationship as *voluntary* and *impermanent*, no longer rooted in ties of biology, societal prescriptions and obligations. In contrast to the way in which relationships with parents are usually considered (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Finch & Mason, 1993), these features have now come to underpin children's relationships with parents, in the context of non-residence, and the absence of an extensive relationship history.

CHAPTER 9: 'DOING' CHILDHOOD IN A ONE-PARENT FAMILY

Introduction

'Doing' childhood in a one-parent family refers to the active way in which children make sense of their family life, negotiate various challenges and opportunities that living in a one-parent family brings and attend to the "complex business of living in a...family" (Smart et al., 2001, p. 68). This chapter draws together overarching themes which permeate children's narratives around family life. Together, they reflect the various discourses that are used by the children to describe their childhood in the context of a single parent household. Attention in the present chapter is re-focused on family structure as a lens through which childhood is experienced. While children's experiences are coloured by the positioning of the family unit within systems of relational and material resources, previous chapters have indicated that household structures render some roles and qualities of relationships more likely than others. For example, living apart from each other militates against connectedness in father-child relationships, while living alone together facilitates exclusiveness and intensity in mother-child relationships. This chapter examines various challenges that are faced in 'doing' childhood and family (Smart et al., 2001; Nelson, 2006) in the context of a one-parent household.

Four key themes emerged, indicating the diversity of perspectives and the myriad of situations encountered by the children in the sample, and the various meanings attached to living in a one-parent family. It is important to note at the outset that a number of the younger children simply stated that growing up in a one-parent family was not something they had ever considered prior to participating in the research. Thus, children's perspectives on family must be considered within the context of their whole lives. When asked her impressions about living in a one-parent family, this girl replied:

> *"I don't know, I love my family, I like living with my mum. I like the area where, like I've loads of friends around here."* (C1006, girl, age 10)

However, as the previous chapters have indicated, household structure did have clear implications for the day-to-day running of the household, and explicit links were drawn between the absence of a second parent from the home and roles and relationships within the family, and the nature of children's relationships with both parents. Children relied upon various discourses in reflecting upon childhood in a single parent family, relating to broader contexts and discourses, constrained

relational and material resources, absence and loss, and stability and change. These themes are explored in the chapter.

Stability – "All I've ever known"

Almost one third of the children, mainly in the older age group, referred to the constancy and stability of their one-parent family situation. This sense of stability may be related to two factors: fathers' continuous absence from the home, and the infrequent movement of new partners in and out of the home. Living apart from their fathers was something familiar to these children, and all they had ever known. Where children and fathers did co-habit for a short period early in the child's life, it is likely that his departure happened before close inter-dependent relationships with their children had developed and before clear role expectations had been established:

> *"It doesn't really bother me at all, I suppose it might have been different if I'd had two parents from the start, but em I don't really give it that much thought at all...it's what's normal for me"* (C2118, boy, age 15)

> *"I think it's just normal for me like...it's never actually affected me though, because like it's not as if he left me when I was, I have no memory of him like being there, so like I see him, but you never miss him, there's no reason to miss him because there's nothing to miss"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

In relation to the absence of her father from her life for the first ten years of her life, this girl suggested that she did not miss something that was never present for her in her life in the first place. The *stability* of their situation and continuity in their family form was equated with a sense of normality. This discourse relating to stability and continuity further emphasises the importance of considering children who have lived their entire life in a one-parent family as a distinct group of single parent family children. A number of the children drew comparisons between their one-parent family situation and single-parent family situations arising through more recent parental separation. As a benchmark, their own family situations compared favourably primarily because of the stability of their situation: they did not have to experience the 'break up' of another family form, and circumstances that precede (such as parental conflict) and follow (such as departure of one parent from the home):

> *"I think that would kind of mess you up a bit more, living with them very young, because you have time to get used to it and just when you're getting used to it, it breaks apart, falls apart"* (C2106, boy, age 15)

> *"I talk to all my friends and they all have either two parents or a divorce, I would hate to be in a divorce family...I'd say that's probably the worst situation...And they always say how complicated it is because one parent has one view than the other and they get into fights, I just wouldn't, I'd hate to be in a fighting family where the two parents fight, it just wouldn't make me feel comfortable"* (C2007, girl, age 13)

A second factor contributing to children's sense of stability in their family unit was the infrequent movement of new partners in and out of the homes of these children – in only a minority of cases had a mother's new partner co-habited for a period. As noted in Chapter Four, five of the mothers had previously had male partners who had lived with the children, ranging from periods of 6 months to four years. Three of these children had little to say about this – either because they could not remember (in two cases the children were toddlers) or in the case of two children, had easy-going though not particularly close relationships with their mother's partner. Only one older girl spoke in negative terms about her mother's boyfriend, and in this case, his departure from the home brought welcome relief. However, the majority of children experienced neither the arrival nor departure of other possible parenting or stepfather figures from the home. While children did experience a number of structural changes in the composition of their households, (such as the arrival of new siblings) and changes of residence, it appears that their sense of family had been preserved. Living in a one-parent household was *"all they had ever known"* and as a result, they had not directly experienced an alternative against which to evaluate their circumstances.

Change – Extending Family Boundaries & New Partners

Despite the stability in terms of father absence from the home, living in a one-parent family also brings with it the potential for new partnerships for parents and evolution of new family forms and relationships. Many of the children had directly experienced this either as a result of either or both parents forming new relationships, while others had clearly contemplated the possibility.

Fathers & their Partners

As far as could be ascertained[30], a quarter of non-resident fathers had established and remained in a new relationship and in a small number of cases had children with their new partners. Overall, these new partnerships appeared to impact little on the children's lives, possibly related to the fact that their fathers were not residing with them and in many of these cases, child-father contact was relatively infrequent. In almost all cases, children spoke positively about their fathers' new partners and step or half siblings. Indeed two children included step-mothers on their Family Links and Closeness Maps and eight children included step- or half-siblings from fathers' subsequent or previous relationships, although most frequently these individuals were placed in outer circles. In only two cases did children appear to be assimilated into their fathers' families. These children had regular (at least monthly) contact with their fathers, which presented opportunities for relationships to be forged with stepmothers and siblings. There were exceptions however to this positive pattern –

[30] Where there was no father-child or inter-parental contact, information was unavailable regarding their fathers' relationships.

specifically in two cases, older boys did not get along well with their fathers' partners. In many cases, however, children had neither the opportunity nor desire to become acquainted with their fathers' partners or families. It was clear that the potential for a web of relationship with stepmothers and siblings spanning the boundaries of different households was not realised for many of the children.

Mothers & their Partners

Of more immediate impact to children's everyday lives was the potential for their mother to form a new relationship. Eight mothers were currently in new relationships with men – in these situations the new partners were not cohabiting. Three themes permeated children's narratives relating to mothers' actual (in eight cases) or potential new partnerships: threats to exclusivity in the mother-child relationship, resource benefits that a new partner may bring to the family, and children's sense of agency in relation to mothers' partnerships.

At the outset, a minority of the children did not appear to be open to their mother forming a new partnership: in particular two of the younger boys were resistant to the idea, while three of the older boys intimated that it was highly unlikely that their mother would establish a new relationship. The dominant feeling surrounding the issue of a new partnership was one of wariness, with a number of the children envisaging that they would experience it as *"weird"* or *"strange"*. This was reinforced by the acknowledgment by a number of children that it might take time to adjust to the situation as the new relationships were negotiated and evaluated. The possibility of change in household structure brought about by the formation of a new partnership was primarily considered in terms of the impact that the new relationship might have on the mother-child relationship, and specifically the threat to the exclusive and close relationship that existed between children and their mothers, and the potential for a new partner to *"break the kind of bond up"*.

Among the children whose mothers were in relationship at the time of the interview, two teenage girls reflected this concern in their interviews. One girl, who had a close but conflictual relationship with her mother described how her mother's new relationship with her partner had left her feeling somewhat unwanted. She felt that she had been displaced within the family unit, and described feeling how her mother's boyfriend wanted her *"out of the picture"*. Related to this, another teenager whose mother and father had recently rekindled their relationship after many years of both conflict and disengagement expressed concern about the impact on her relationship with her mother, largely arising from her distrust of her father and disapproval of the relationship. Despite these difficulties however, both girls conceded that they were happy for their mothers to have found a partner with whom to share their time.

Also perceptible among the children's narratives was a cost/benefit analysis of the contribution that potential or actual new partners could make to the family. Three of the children whose mothers were

in a relationship at the time of the study considered the new partner in terms of the material and relational resources which he could bring to the family. Children welcomed the idea of companionship and support for their mothers and envisaged that a new partner could ameliorate the financial and emotional stress experienced by their mother:

> *"If my mum met someone or something, yeah definitely, I wouldn't mind at all, it would be just someone to keep her company...I think she finds it kind of difficult sometimes. You see I think she kind of wants someone here to, to help her and to have a second income so she doesn't have to go to work everyday." (C2106, boy, age 15)*

As previously noted, children were clear that the introduction of a new partner had the potential to reshape the dynamics within the family system, and impact upon their relationship with their mother. While this was associated with a sense of wariness, among a small number of the older children possible shifts in role were framed positively. As noted in Chapter Seven, children frequently became sources of both practical and emotional support for their mothers. With the advent of a new partner, it is possible that this responsibility would shift away from the child, onto the partner.

> *"When she was dating him and eh I, my role was kind of taken away for a while, I mean that was kind of good because I'd become kind of responsible and you know but then I kind of had to sort of let go and went out and went crazy and was able to do all completely irresponsible things which felt quite good"* (C2116, 16-year-old girl)

A partner could relieve feelings of responsibility that children held for their mothers. Another teenage girl suggested that her mother would be happier in herself if she was in a relationship, and that this would benefit their relationship.

> *"I think if she had someone here like a boyfriend or something I think I'd be allowed out more because she'd be happy and things and she'd have someone else"* (C2009, girl, age 14)

This girl envisaged that if a partner was present, the mother would be less focused on her, and she would be granted more autonomy. Thus, a small number of the older children perceived that the benefits of their mother having a partner could potentially extend beyond the mother herself and have a positive impact on the child's role in the family and the nature of the mother-child relationship.

Finally, children's narratives relating to new partnerships for mothers represented one of the most marked examples of their sense of agency within the family. Thus, the process of mothers entering into a relationship with a new partner was one that involved not only mothers and their partners, but also the children themselves. Importantly, children perceived that their acceptance of any new partner would be important to their mothers and that their perspectives were valued. Thus, to some extent children positioned themselves as a central agent in the establishment of a new partnership for the mother. Concerns surrounding new partners were largely related to the quality of relationships

between the partner and the mother, and between the partner and themselves. From their perspective, it was incumbent upon the partner to prove his or her worth. Thus, how the partner behaved was important in terms of how tentatively he or she integrated his/her way into the family unit and the sensitivity with which he or she was introduced to the child:

> *"I don't know if that will happen but em if she does, if they come into the house and if they're arrogant or if they feel they can take over, then I, like I feel that if someone was to sort of come in, it would be me to sort of, I feel that I'd be the spokesperson for them to get out, or I'd be the one who'd like, like sort of protect her...you know if they were a nice person, fair enough but I probably wouldn't feel comfortable with the whole situation because I'd feel that my house had been taken over by some person"* (C2118, boy, age 15)

In a similar vein, one adolescent boy described with disapproval how a male friend of his mother, who had come to stay, behaved in an over-intrusive manner:

> *"...he took on a father role even though he wasn't having a relationship with my mum and it really annoyed me...but I can't say that for somebody else who would come in...as long as like I would be a bit wary at the start of course" (C2115, boy, age 17)*

Extending the boundaries of their family to include a new partner was a process that could take some time through evaluation of the perceived impact and benefits of the new relationship. Role ambiguity surrounding the new partner was also possible. In particular, among children who had contact with their fathers, consideration of the role adopted by the new partner in relation to the role of children's biological fathers clearly emerged. Thus, acceptance of a new partner could be dependent upon there being no adverse implications for the children's relationships with their fathers:

> *"I wouldn't mind, as long as I'd still get over to see my dad, I wouldn't call him my dad...or I'd call him dad number two, have two dads"* (C1111, boy, age 9)

A minority of children highlighted the distinction between the possible role that new partners could play and the role that was assigned to the biological father. Thus, only one child described how she considered her mother's boyfriend as fulfilling some form of father role. Two children emphasised that any new partner would *not* be seen as a replacement for their own father. For example, one teenage girl who had only occasional contact with her father when she was younger, described how she had *"never considered him [mother's new partner] a dad"*.

In summary, contrasting discourses of stability and change permeated children's narratives about growing up in a one-parent family. That they had not remembered the departure of their father from the home contributed to the sense of continuity in their family lives, and as such they distinguished themselves from children who find themselves living apart from a parent following the dissolution of a previously experienced family form. However, the potential for change and evolution of new family forms was also realised, if not experienced, by many of the children. While the arrival of new

partners rarely resulted in the re-constitution of their families, it was also clear that their families were not static. The potential to negotiate acceptance of new partners, contingent upon the impact on existing relationships and resources within the family unit, reflects a model of family characterised by open boundaries. Furthermore, one of the most consistent patterns in the children's accounts was the central role that they played in defining their families and negotiating family boundaries.

Negotiating Family between Two Homes & Two Parents

Sustaining contact and close relationships with both mothers and fathers is considered to be the ideal family practice when parents live apart. However, various methods and resources are needed for children to successfully negotiate moving across the boundaries of two households, and manage the relationship between parents, who may be disengaged or conflictual. This theme emerged within the interviews of the small group of children who had regular contact with their fathers. A clear finding to emerge was that moving across the boundaries of different households presented practical and emotional challenges and required careful adaptation to the demands of different contexts.

Practical challenges were highlighted by only a minority of children who had at least monthly contact with their fathers. For these children, routinely travelling between their own and their father's home had the potential to create practical difficulties, and feelings of dislocation. One teenage boy described how, when he was younger, he *"felt like a yo-yo going back and forth between them"*. One younger child, who had weekly contact with his father, appeared to find shifting between two households tiresome, although he weighed up the cost of this difficulty with the benefit of seeing his father from week to week:

> *"Sometimes it's ok and sometimes I hate it.... Sometimes I'd like them to be living together...say if I'm in a bad mood, I don't want to go over to [Father's] and sometimes I don't want to come over here again....just don't like moving from one place to another...but I'd still like to see the other parent"* (C1103, boy, age 10)

In addition to logistical difficulties inherent in moving between two homes, children also had to adapt to different routines and styles of parenting. Three children discussed how their mothers and fathers exhibited divergent styles of involvement and discipline. For instance, one younger girl described how her father was far more lenient and relaxed than her mother, even irresponsible at times. While she enjoyed activities with her father, she could not help feeling guilty and worried about her mother's disapproval of her activities while on holidays with her father:

> *"I know that if I said to my dad, 'no my mum said I shouldn't do it', he would say well she's not here you're in my hands now. She makes the rules when you're over with her, you're on your holidays now you should do something spontaneous, have fun"* (C1001, girl, age 11)

One teenage girl experienced obvious discrepancies between her mother's and her father's styles of discipline:

> *"I'm looking forward to going down to my dad's, because he'll give me money and things and down in my dad's house, I'm allowed stay down till whenever really, like I'm allowed stay out till quite late"* (C2009, girl, age 14)

Her father's lenience alongside her mother's strictness meant that she had to adapt her behaviour depending on what home she was in. The transition between her mother's home and her father's home was further complicated by having to monitor and manage interaction between her parents:

> *"He always gives out about her and then he'll always say to me, oh you're just being like your mother, stubborn or something, and she'll always give out about him...and they'll put me in the middle sometimes like to ask, if my mum is asking for money for the dentist or something... and then my dad will give out about her and oh I'm not giving her money...I'll have to put it in a nice way to say back to my mum"* (C2009, girl, age 14)

It should be noted however that the majority of children did not experience inter-parental tensions, largely due to high levels of disengagement between mothers and fathers, and father's lack of involvement in a parenting role. Furthermore, given the high levels of inter-parental disengagement, the majority of children were not required to mediate the inter-parental relationship – their relationships with both parents were clearly separate. Further underpinning this separateness, children restricted the extent to which they talked about their fathers with their mothers, as previously highlighted in Chapter Seven.

Lack of parental engagement also meant lack of overt hostility and conflict. Through experiences with friends and on the basis of what they knew about their parents' relationship, many of the children were keenly aware of the potential of inter-parental conflict and disharmony. The *absence* of conflict in their family was referred to by eight of the children, primarily among the older group.

> *"I think in many cases my life would be a million times worse because my mother would just kill my father every single day of the week...I think I'm better off because my dad would be dead at this stage...and I would be a lot more miserable because you know the fights and everything and I would just go insane"* (C2005, girl, 14 years)

These children realised that as a result of their parents living apart and in some cases having little to do with each other, the potential for conflict was ameliorated, if not totally eliminated (where there was no inter-parental contact). In contrast, one child whose parents had an amicable relationship and spoke frequently by telephone expressed his desire for his parents to be reunited – in the *absence* of conflict, the reason why his parents were not together were less obvious to him.

In summary, the minority of children who had frequent contact with their fathers were also presented with various challenges and opportunities. Moving across the boundaries of different households presented opportunities for children to be assimilated into their father's family and develop

relationships with extended family, stepmothers and siblings. However, children were also required to adapt to changing demands and parenting styles of mothers and fathers, and mediate the inter-parental relationship. For the majority of children however, lack of inter-parental engagement ameliorated the potential for conflict – children appreciated that inter-parental conflict was not a characteristic of their daily lives.

A Resource Perspective

A resource perspective permeated many of the children's narratives, and a key theme to emerge was that 'doing' childhood in a one-parent family frequently means daily realities characterised by constrained resources. Amato (1995) points out that the disadvantage associated with the structure of the single-parent household can be understood from a social network and resources perspective: children's development is closely bound up with the number of adults who are part of the child's social network and the quantity and quality of resources they provide. Previous chapters have highlighted that even in the context of broad family networks as defined by children, mothers perceived themselves to be largely alone in their parenting role. Children's home environments with their mothers were characterised by exclusiveness and high levels of interdependence, as children accommodated their own needs in the face of competing demands for their mother's time and energy. In line with Amato (1995), children differentiated between constrained economic resources and interpersonal resources in their families. Similarly, Nelson (2006) also differentiated between the economic/material resources, and the relational resources or social economy of single mothers families.

Material Resources

Living in a one-parent family had practical implications for the financial and housing situation of the family, and the work situation of the mother. Poor housing conditions were mentioned by four of the children, all of who lived in rented accommodation. Two of the children highlighted difficulties with their neighbourhoods, related to living in council housing estates; while two teenage girls referred to difficulties in sharing a confined living space with their mothers, and the tension and conflict generated as a result. Even young children showed awareness of limited financial resources, and drew clear links between the absence of the second parent from the home, and daily realities of living in a poor neighbourhood, in poor housing, and/or on a constrained budget. Ten children mentioned the strained financial circumstances of their families, describing *"living on a tight budget"* and having *"money worries"*. One teenage girl described her experience of living in abject poverty for about five years of her life:

> *"Trying to survive and we have done, on the one-parent family income is ridiculous...it was just like counting pennies to eat, I had no, no new clothes and I was twelve, thirteen year old teenager, going to like a school with no new clothes, no new shoes...what I*

remember was like five years of basic greyness...we had to scrimp and save to get a bus" (C2016, girl, age 16)

Of the ten children who discussed this issue, nine were girls, and seven were from the older age category, suggesting a possible age and gender difference: as children get older, they may become more aware of financial issues; and girls may be more attuned to the availability of material resources in the family.

Relational Resources

In addition to household contexts characterised by strained financial and material resources, children also experienced limitations in the availability of relational resources and support. Two key factors underpinned their experience of constrained relational resources: the absence of other individuals, including fathers and siblings from the household and limitations in their mothers' resources, and the availability of support, particularly for their mothers.

Themes relating to absence have previously been considered in Chapter Eight, specifically in relation to children's fathers. Despite the continuity of their fathers' absence from their lives, physically absent fathers were not necessarily psychologically absent, as children worked through processes of making sense of their father's absence from their lives, dealing with feelings of sadness, anger, rejection and disappointment:

"It's never been anything else for me so whatever, sometimes I do wish, you know sometimes I have looked and really thought it was a bit of a, I don't know, I wouldn't say waste, but a bit of a disappointment, shame almost, that you know there was no dad or anything but you know, I don't think, most of the time I'm ok because I've never known anything else so" (C2005, girl, age 15)

Expressions of wishing for things to be different, or a sense of 'missing' something further pinpointed the sense of absence. However, as indicated previously within the Chapter, without the dissolution of a previous family form, or the departure of their father from the home, children do not necessarily experience the acute sense of loss that children experience when their parents separate and one parent departs from the home (Smart et al., 2001).

Discourses relating to absence extended beyond the father to include the absence of other individuals. Thus, a minority of children felt a sense of absence, not because they missed their father *per se*, rather they felt they were missing out on other relationships. One child expressed fear about missing and losing contact with her extended family in America with whom she had contact during her trips to see her father. Children also described the absence of siblings and other people in general. Two of the children who had no siblings and lived alone with their mothers described their families as small and wished for additional members for the family:

C: It's pretty small...only me and me mam in the house...

R: Who else would you like to be here?

C: Me da and brother and sister...Because it feels so empty in the house. (C1119, boy, age 7)

"Sometimes I get lonely because my cat's sometimes boring when she sleeps around too much, that's why I'm encouraging her[mother] to adopt a younger brother or sister" (C1008, girl, age 9)

Thus, while this was a context for exclusivity in children's relationships with their mothers as outlined in Chapter Seven, living alone with one's mother was also lonely for a small number of children. That their households were small, often containing only mother and child, was associated with a discourse pertaining to loneliness and emptiness. In this way, children may be reflecting experiences of constraints in the relational resources in their families.

A second factor underpinning children's experiences of constrained relational resources was their perceptions of the stress and lack of support experienced by their mothers. Without another adult in the household, there was no division of labour, except when children are assigned or take on additional responsibilities in the household. Findings described in Chapter Seven indicated that when children perceived that their mothers were under stress, they adopted an ethic of care in their relationship with their mothers and accommodated the demands they placed upon their mothers. Thus, a context of constrained relational and material resources for the mother also resulted in perceptions of limitations in resources available to children.

A "stress" discourse, similar to the one used by mothers, emerged clearly in children's narratives. Sixteen children described the one-parent family situation as difficult and stressful for their mothers: *"a lot of responsibility, a lot of pressure, a lot of stress, a lot of work, and not a lot of time for herself"*. Children understood that mothers were required to work long hours without choice, often at the expense of spending time with them at home:

"I'd say it was quite difficult for her when I was younger because you know having to leave her kids and go to work and then come back and not seeing them for that long, I'd say that was difficult for her" (C2117, boy, age 14)

A number of the children further identified constraints in the emotional support available for their mothers: their mothers missed adult company, were lonely or were in need of emotional support. Perceptions of maternal stress were also coupled with the perceived need for support for their mothers. The majority of the children expressed a belief that their mother did not wish to be parenting alone and found it difficult. A number of the children explicitly stated that their mother would prefer, although did not necessarily *need*, the support of a second parenting figure that could shoulder some of the workload. Two of the younger boys stated that their mothers would get along better if their fathers were living in the household and available to provide assistance and support. A

small number of the children clearly identified sources of support that had been readily available to their mothers throughout, notably grandparents and fathers:

> *"I'd say she'd prefer if my dad was here... because she'd have more help raising me and all that type of stuff... I'd say raising a kid is very hard" (C1111, boy, age 9)*

Mothers' need for support also emerged in the children's narratives relating to the establishment of new partnerships, as previously highlighted in this chapter. It should be noted that there were a small number of children who did not identify their family situation as stressful for their mothers. Among the older children, one boy stated that when he was younger, he had not been conscious of his mother's stress and workload while a further two children did not construct their mothers' workload or parenting role as stressful.

In summary, the absence of other individuals from the household and perceptions of maternal stress underpinned perceptions of constrained relational resources. This had clear implications for both the child's role within the family, and the nature of the mother-child relationship. One clear feature of 'doing' childhood in a single parent household was attending to the needs and well-being of mothers, in the context of competing demands for mother's time and energy.

Societal Discourses

A final overarching framework within which children's experiences of living in a one-parent family were deeply embedded was that of local and national contexts and discourses around single parent families. Many of the children considered one-parent families as relatively commonplace in Ireland, which served to normalise their experience. Thus, not only was their family situation all they had ever known and normal for them, it was also normal within a broader context.

Of particular salience was the peer group context, where comparisons were drawn between their own home situations and those of their classmates and friends. For example, one older boy stated that among his friends his situation was not unusual:

> *"Everyone else, I've only got one friend who's had a successful, their parents have like a successful marriage like so it's normal to me"* (C2006, boy, age 15)

Although most of the children knew of one-parent family situations within their peer group, meeting other children who had encountered their *specific* one-parent family experience was less likely. As previously indicated in the Chapter, their specific situation compared favourably with children who had experienced their parents' separation.

Overall having this shared context with peers appeared to be helpful. Having friends or classmates in similar situations meant that they were *"not the only one"* and if issues arose, they could discuss them with friends who shared similar family contexts. However, family situations were not

frequently discussed among groups of friends. Living in a one-parent family was *"not a big deal"* among friends, and this perception was probably related to the fact that so many were in a similar situation.

A less dominant discourse relating to broader contexts reflected a feeling of difference, and some experiences of stigma or assumptions relating to single parent families. Initially, a small number of the children had found it difficult to explain their situation to their friends:

> *"When I was in primary school, nobody knew because I didn't know how to explain it...and I didn't like it then because it never bothered me the actual situation but they seemed to make a big song and dance about it, they said, oh your mum couldn't have had you if she wasn't married...they seemed to have a stereotype that a family wasn't a family unless it had a mum, a dad, a brother, a sister...there was no such thing as half brothers in the primary school"* (C2012, girl, age 13)

However, despite some levels of discomfort, only one child specifically conveyed how she *disliked* her family situation, because it was different from other children in her class who lived with their fathers:

> *C: I wouldn't be someone with only one parent, which sometimes I dislike because it's different*
>
> *R: What do you mean it's different?*
>
> *C: Well in my whole class I'm surrounded by people who have their dads living with them...and I get jealous of them sometimes.... because em they have someone else to talk to and I don't really.* (C1008, girl, age 9)

A small number of the children discussed attitudes they had encountered relating to their father's absence from the home. In particular, they experienced a sense of sympathy, or pity, which they rejected:

> *"Everybody says it's <u>terrible</u>* [child's emphasis] *not having your dad living with you, and I go 'no actually it's pretty good'"* (C1111, boy, age 8)

In another case, an older girl, who had experienced psychological problems in the past year, expressed irritation about how everybody related her difficulties to her one-parent family situation, despite her protestations that this was not the case. Another older girl described how when she was younger, other classmates felt sorry for her. This theme indicates a sensitivity and possible negativity, which permeate societal views on single-parent families. One boy described how he would be reluctant to tell people that he lived in a one-parent family, indicating a possible sense of stigma. Indeed, a minority of the children discussed mixed societal attitudes that they had encountered.

> *"I just think that you know the stigma that goes with it and the whole fact that you think that single mothers are these like harlots who just kind of go around trying to get you know a certain amount of money and houses and stuff, I think that is ridiculous and I*

have come in contact with people who are like oh your mother is a single parent you know where's your dad, stuff like, it's ridiculous, it's kind of like they're racist towards you" (C2016, girl, age 17)

In summary, it was clear that contradictory messages prevailed in broader contexts and children had a range of experiences relating to this. On the one hand, single parent families were perceived as a widespread, accepted and normal phenomenon, while on the other hand, a small number of children experienced a feeling of difference or a stigma attached to living in a one-parent family.

Conclusion

The narratives and discourses surrounding 'doing' childhood in a one-parent family highlight the complexity and diversity of issues that arose for children. The most common discourse that emerged related to the constancy and stability of their family situation. This underlines the value of considering this group of one-parent family children as distinct from children of divorce or separation, who have experienced the departure of one parent from the home, and a relinquishment of one family or household form for another. Indeed, many of the children drew favourable comparisons between their continuous one-parent households and families where children experienced their parents' separation at an older age. Consideration of the peer and wider context served as an important reference point for them. A sense of normality surrounding children's family experiences stemmed not only from the stability of their situation, but also from exposure to similar situations within the peer group, or in the wider community. However, a small number of the children perceived a sensitivity and possible negativity permeating other people's views of single parent families.

Children's narratives about growing up in a one-parent family also reflect their roles as active contributors and agents in their families, as they negotiated family roles and dealt with transitions. The potential for family boundaries to be extended through the establishment of partnerships for either or both parents reflects one of the most challenging family transitions for children (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). New family members were not commonly assimilated into children's concept of family, although in a minority of cases where fathers had married and had children, children incorporated these individuals into their family network. The majority of children however expressed ambivalence about fathers' partners and other new family members. In this respect, children's family boundaries remained closed (Smart et al., 2001). Consideration of the potential shifts in dynamics in the household underpinned children's responses to new partners for their mothers; and acceptance of a new partner was contingent upon successful negotiation and clarification of an appropriate role for the new partner. Children positioned themselves as central figures in this negotiation process. Furthermore, the manner in which children negotiated transitions between different households reflected the separateness of children's relationships with their mothers and fathers and their adaptations to different role demands within different contexts. Only a minority

of children were confronted with the challenge of mediating the inter-parent relationship, and inter-parental conflict was not a salient feature of children's lives.

Finally, 'doing' childhood (Smart et al., 2001) and 'doing' family (Nelson, 2006; Naples, 2001) was performed and constructed within the constraints of material and relational practices, that are deeply embedded in the daily realities of life. Discourses relating to stress reflected children's experiences of the limitations in time and energy that mothers could allocate to their children, especially in the context of full-time employment, low levels of support, and constrained financial resources. A clear developmental and gender difference emerged here – awareness of constrained financial resources was reflected more commonly among the adolescent group, and among girls. Discourses reflecting experiences of absence and missing indicated the significance of conceptual ideals of family, family with fathers, extended kin, and siblings. This highlights how children's concept of family represents an important backdrop against which 'doing' childhood in a one-parent household is experienced.

CHAPTER 10: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Several decades of research evidence has established that growing up within a one-parent family represents a significant risk factor to children's development (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Amato & Keith, 1991a; Amato, 2001). More recently, the evidence has converged upon the consensus that the particular circumstances that often accompany one-parent family structures such as the quality of parenting and the nature of relationships within the family, represent key mechanisms by which family structure exerts its influence on children (Lansford et al., 2001; Simons & Johnson, 1996; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Knowing that growing up in a one-parent family represents a risk factor for children's development, and that particular family processes mediate the influence of family structure does not in itself tell us about the various ways in which parenting practices and family relationships are negotiated, understood and experienced by children and parents within various one-parent family contexts. Within many contemporary Western societies, the changing landscapes of family demographics has given rise to greater heterogeneity and complexity with respect to how families are defined and how parents' and children's roles and relationships within families are organised. However, as suggested in the literature review, the heretofore emphasis in the research on outcomes and more recently on processes has been embedded within meta-theoretical and methodological frameworks that give prominence to larger scale quantitative-based studies. *Lived experiences* of family participants, particularly children, have to a large extent been neglected within this body of research, thus missing dynamic aspects of how relational partners manage their relationships and roles.

The present study broadly aimed to address this gap by *qualitatively* exploring children and mothers' experiences within a one-parent family context. In light of previous research, which calls into question the implied uniformity of experiences of different types of single parent families (e.g. McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Weinraub et al., 2002), the focus in this research is on families where *the child has grown up in a one-parent family from infancy*. Attention to this particular group of single parent family children represents a departure from the majority of research in this area. While generally there has been much research on single parent families, most of the work has either examined single parent families following parental separation, where children experience the departure of one parent from the home, or has failed to disaggregate different types of one-parent families, thus obscuring heterogeneity within these family types. Apart from a handful of studies, most notably the work of Susan Golombok on 'solo' or continuously single mothers raising their children without fathers from infancy, little research has examined the experiences of this group.

Golombok (1999) has argued that consideration of this group is important not only because they represent an increasing proportion of children living in one-parent families, but also because they differ from children of separated parents in a number of important ways. Thus, an examination of this specific category of one-parent families represents a significant gap in the research that this study has sought to address.

In light of the lessons learned from previous research about the significance of *family processes*, a conceptual focus upon parenting and child-parent relationships was adopted for the present study. Moreover, the study is positioned within a meta-theoretical framework that firstly eschews the assumption that families can be objectified, and secondly rejects the conceptualisation of children as passive recipients of family influences. The starting point for this study considered families as dynamic, co-constructed and negotiated; and children as sentient meaning-makers of their experiences. This position privileged a *qualitative methodological* approach, thus marking a divergence from much of the previous psychological research in the area.

Specifically the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do caring and parenting roles operate within the one-parent family? What factors influence how these roles operate? To what extent do mothers feel they are parenting alone?
2. How do mothers and children describe their relationships with each other? What role do they perceive the particular family context has played in shaping their relationship?
3. How are relationships with non-resident fathers organised, and what factors either constrain or facilitate positive relationships for children with their fathers?
4. What do children think about growing up in a one-parent family, and how do they construct the concept of family and parenting roles?
5. Are there age-related patterns in children's experiences of roles and relationships within their families, and in how they think about their family situation?

In this final chapter, the key findings that have emerged from the research are drawn together and considered in light of previous empirical and theoretical work within the area. The chapter concludes by reviewing the strengths and limitations of the present approach, and the broad implications of the study.

Patterns of Parenting

A clear starting point for understanding children's families was an analysis of how caring and parenting roles function in these families. Previous research has highlighted the significance of parenting processes in mediating the impact of family structure on children's outcomes (Simons and Associates, 1996; Hetherington, 1999). However, in contrast to previous approaches, the purpose in

the present study was not one of evaluation of parents' behaviour and its relation to children's outcomes, or even a taxonomic classification of parents' behaviour according to a particular style. Rather, the aim was to capture the construction and organisation of caring and parenting roles within these families, and to highlight how parenting processes are constrained and shaped by family structure. A structural definition of a family as a single parent family (or household) does not always concur with functional and emotional aspects of family (Amato, 2000). Therefore, the extent to which children in these families are actually parented by a single parent reflects the appropriateness of the category to which they are assumed to belong.

At the outset, it was clear that none of the families were engaged in a co-parenting pattern, where mothers and fathers equally shared parental care and authority. Based on mothers' and children's descriptions of care-giving, discipline and decision-making roles, two typologies of parenting arrangements emerged in the present study, each underpinned by particular settings and circumstances.

Solo Parenting

A model of solo parenting was in place in almost all of the families, where care and authority were vested in the *mother alone* (Smart & Neale, 1999). Mothers were positioned as the primary carers of their children, and within this typology, fathers were largely absent from children and mothers' lives. In just under one-quarter of cases, mothers represented the sole carers of their children, where no other individual was regularly involved in the care of the child. However, many mothers did receive assistance with childcare (sometimes daily), from grandparents and paid childminders. A second feature of this typology related to the authority dimension of parenting, encompassing decision-making and disciplinary roles. It was clear that in the absence of a second parent figure from the home, responsibility for discipline and decision-making rested with the mother alone. Despite the provision of care and support from other family members, their role in relation to the child and mother was not one of co-parent. Care-givers are not co-parents, since *ultimate responsibility* and *executive decision making* about how childcare and parenting should be structured and carried out characterised the mother's role alone (McHale et al., 2002).

Three factors predisposed families to a pattern of solo parenthood. Of key significance to solo parenting in the present study were levels of father-child contact, the nature of the inter-parental relationship and perceptions of paternal commitment. Frequency of contact between children and their fathers was low in the current study, with only one-fifth of the study's children having contact at least twice a month, and half of the children having no contact whatsoever. Among half of the non-contact group, contact had occurred after the child's birth but had later diminished, situations similar to "false starts" and "interrupted contact" described by MacLean and Eekelaar (1997). Indeed, levels of contact in the present study are similar to those of a sample of children who had

never shared a household with their fathers, as described by MacLean and Eekelaar (1997). However, compared with other Irish research, levels of father-child contact among the present sample are considerably lower than those reported in two studies of post-divorce families (Hogan et al., 2002; Fawcett, 1998). Patterns of contact in these studies were almost reversed in comparison with the present study, with the majority of these children seeing their non-resident parents at least once a week (Hogan et 2002; Fawcett, 1998). Therefore, it is important to examine what factors might be associated with the non-exercise of contact among the present sample.

The profile of the sample in the current study exhibits many of the characteristics of families where the risk of fathers losing contact with their children is heightened. Previous research has highlighted a number of factors that reliably predict the loss of contact between children and their non-resident parents. These include younger age of children at the time of separation; fathers not residing with the child's mother at the time of the birth, parents cohabiting rather than being married, geographical distances between parents' homes, and the payment of child support (Maclean & Eekelaar, 1997; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Simpson et al., 1995; Seltzer, 1991; McHenry, McKelvey, Leigh & Wark, 1996). Many of these factors were features of the current sample – all children had lived without their father in the home from an early age, half of the children had never lived with their fathers, over 80% of the parents had not been married to each other, only half of the parents had ever lived together, two-thirds of the fathers did not pay child support, and over one-third of the fathers lived in a different country. Given the prevalence of predictors of non-involvement within the sample, it is clear that the risk of losing contact was borne out for many of the families.

Findings from the present investigation also indicated the significance of the inter-parental relationship in mediating children's contact with their fathers. Indeed, a close association emerged between mother-father and child-father contact. This is consistent with previous research, which has illustrated an association between father-child contact and the nature of the relationship between parents (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Simpson et al., 1995; Maccoby et al., 1993). Among the present sample however, given that children and their fathers had never shared a household (or only shared for the early period of the child's life), the influence of the inter-parental relationship on the father-child relationship may be heightened. In situations of non-contact, the inter-parental relationship was characterised by total disengagement – half of the mothers in the non-contact group had never had contact with their children's father since the pregnancy or birth of the child. However, as suggested by Smart and Neale (1999), solo parenting does not simply arise as a default pattern of care when fathers fail to sustain contact. This was also reflected in other cases among the sample, where, motivated by protectionist concerns for their children's safety and well-being, non-contact and thus solo parenthood was a matter of positive choice for mothers. In support of previous research which has indicated that fathers may *opt out* of contact arrangements and abdicate their parental commitment due to a range of competing financial, practical and emotional commitments

(Simpson et al., 1995; Smart & Neale, 1999), mothers' and children's perceptions of lack of commitment among fathers and a failure to fulfil his parental obligation also underpinned solo parenting patterns in these families. In some cases, inter-parental and father-child disengagement and deteriorating levels of contact over time arose in response to perceptions of fathers' lack of reliability and interest, and inconsistency in contact.

Shared Parental Care

A second typology of parenting that characterised a minority of families was one where parental care is shared between both parents, but parental authority resides with the mother alone. Previous research has classified this as a custodial parenting arrangement, where children clearly live with one parent and visit the other (Smart and Neale, 1999). This model *technically* applied to half of the group where children and fathers had maintained contact.

In terms of parental authority and decision-making, clear consensus from both mothers and children indicated that parental authority was not shared with fathers, and his responsibility for his children was restricted to those periods when the child was in his care. Divergent parenting values and different standards and approaches to discipline meant that mothers did not seek support from fathers in this domain. Similarly, some children rejected their father's attempts at discipline, but more often reflected that their fathers were reluctant to adopt a disciplinary role.

However, classification of parental care as shared is more problematic, especially when father-child contact is sporadic and relatively infrequent. Based on both mothers' and children's perspectives, the extent to which fathers who see their children only occasionally are engaged in shared parental care is highly questionable. Children whose fathers lived abroad, or whose contact was restricted to holiday periods did not generally include them in their descriptions of those who actively cared for them. It was only one-fifth of the children whose fathers took care of them at least once a fortnight for a period of time (overnight or for an afternoon). However, even in these situations, fathers' care was undertaken on a fragmented and part-time basis and opportunities for fathers to engage in a parenting role were significantly constrained. While fathers took care of and were responsible for their children during their contact time together, they were generally not involved in weekday routines relating to homework, school-related activities, after-school activities or daily care-taking activities. Nevertheless, where regular contact did occur, children did consider that both parents took an active role in caring for them. Thus, based on children's perspectives, a model of shared parenting (defined by shared care, but not authority) applied to the one-fifth of the sample, where children had consistent and regular patterns of contact with their fathers that were at least partly embedded in normal weekday or weekend routines.

In contrast, fathers were largely absent from mothers' descriptions of parental care, and mothers did not consider that fathers shared parental care, *even in situations of regular contact.* In line with

previous research (Smart & Neale, 1999; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Maccoby et al., 1993, 1990; Furstenberg, 1990), mother-residence – father-contact arrangements were characterised by high levels of inter-parental disengagement, where there was little communication or contact between parents. Even where inter-parental contact did occur, this usually pertained solely to contact arrangements. Despite some levels of contact between children and fathers, mothers generally did not consider that fathers shared *responsibility* for childcare, and still constructed their parenting role as a solo one.

Indeed, of key significance to mothers in the present study was the notion of parental responsibility – being solely responsible for making decisions and ensuring their child was safe and cared for was always central to their construction of their role as a single parent, despite sharing (to varying degrees) parental care with fathers. These findings can be interpreted in light of McHale et al.'s (2002) distinction between co-care-givers and co-parents; and their caution about the application of co-parenting constructs to individuals who, despite sharing parental care, do not share parental responsibility. Corroborating these themes, the present study found that even when support with care-giving and discipline was forthcoming from family networks and friends it was generally not deemed to be equivalent to that which a co-parent might provide.

Overall, these findings pertaining to patterns of parenting highlight the complexity involved in classifying parenting arrangements across the boundaries of different households. Categorising parenting typologies in accordance with crude dichotomies such as contact/no contact is clearly inadequate to capture the complex distribution of caring and parenting roles within these families, the dynamics underpinning those roles, and the meaning of various roles to individuals. The divergent perspectives of mothers and children on the *meaning* of father's care clearly illustrates that "what we see depends upon our angle of repose" (Richardson, 2003, pp. 517). Where participants' accounts are at variance to each other, the value of the methodological approach that brings together different perspectives is illuminated. Broader issues pertaining to the methodological approach are considered later in the chapter.

Fathers as Parents

The aforementioned patterns of parenting evident in the present study clearly indicated that the extent to which fathers engaged in a parenting role was limited. Unlike the solo parenting pattern, some level of commitment on the part of fathers to sustaining their involvement in their children's lives underpinned the mother-residence father-contact model. However, fathers were not involved in childrearing decisions or in activities relating to monitoring and discipline, which have been identified as key aspects of the parenting role that distinguish a parent figure from other regular care-givers (McHale et al., 2002; Smart & Neale, 1999). For the majority of children who had

maintained contact with their father, his input in terms of power, authority, control and decision-making was low.

These findings are in accordance with previous research, which indicates that non-resident fathers do not engage in many components of the parenting role, such as childrearing decisions and discipline, and are more likely to assume a companionate, recreational role rather than a parenting role (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Seltzer, 1991; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Simons & Beaman, 1996). However, as Simons and Beaman argue:

> "If a non-residential father is to influence his child's psychosocial development, he must be more than an entertainer. He must engage in the behaviours that we have identified as the components of competent parenting" (Simons & Beaman, 1996, pp. 97)

Research on post-separation parenting of non-resident fathers has further indicated that continued involvement in parenting is heavily influenced by the father's involvement *prior* to the separation. Specifically, where fathers have had peripheral involvement in childcare prior to the separation, the maintenance of a close inter-dependent relationship and engagement in the parenting role following separation is less likely (Halpenny, 2005; Lamb, 1999; Grief, 1995). The consideration of this finding in light of the sample of families included in the current study is important. One specific factor that may have militated against a co-parenting pattern within the present sample was the absence of a history of shared residence between children and their fathers. Having never shared a residence, fathers and their children missed out on early opportunities to establish intimacy and familiarity through daily routines. There was no *pre-separation history* between fathers and their children to facilitate the development of clear parent and child role expectations and serve as a script for the relationship into the future. Fathers were required to establish their parental role beyond the household boundary and removed from daily routines, from the outset. Based on their study of parental obligation across different family types, Maclean and Eeklaar (1997) have observed that marriage represents a more successful context for the initiation of joint parenthood than either unmarried cohabitation, or no history of cohabitation. This observation is supported by the findings from the current study where the majority of families did not appear to establish a framework that facilitated joint parenthood.

It is important to acknowledge that mothers' perspectives on parental responsibility and fathers' parenting roles contribute only a partial understanding of this issue. Given that fathers themselves were not interviewed, the present investigation could not explore factors predisposing fathers to a lack of commitment to their parental obligation, or the degree to which fathers felt excluded from their parenting role by mothers, despite willing commitment. Previous research has indicated that this may be a fruitful line of inquiry. For example, Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found discrepancies between resident and non-resident parents' reports of involvement in decision-making, while other research has indicated that mothers and fathers often describe post-divorce living

arrangements of their children in different ways, with parents either understating the contribution of the other parent, or over-stating their contribution relative to the other's account (Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer & Tuschen, 2004). As highlighted by Simpson et al. (1995), fathers who cut ties from their children may struggle with hostile relationships with their children's mothers or with their children, or may abandon contact in light of practical and financial constraints.

In summary, previous research has suggested that a mother-resident father-contact model of single parent families takes account of a child's need for two parents and ensures continuity with both parents (Smart & Neale, 1999). However, where contact is undertaken on a fragmented basis, diminished forms of parenting can occur (Simpson et al., 1995; Simons & Beaman, 1996), with implications for the quality of children's relationships with their non-resident parent. An important context for the interpretation of findings pertaining to children's relationships with their fathers was the considerable diversity within the sample in terms of father absence and the nature of child-father contact.

Child-Parent Relationships

Three key findings emerged in relation to children's relationships with their parents. Firstly, all children experienced close relationships with their mothers, but experiences of closeness in their relationships with their fathers reflected more diversity. Feelings of closeness to fathers were not as consistently high as feelings of closeness to mothers and about one-third of the children who had contact with their fathers reported negative experiences in their relationships with fathers. Half of the children did not consider their father to be part of their family.

Secondly, based on a perspective that closeness in relationships implies inter-dependence between individuals, which is manifest in frequent and diverse interactions over an extended period of time (Hinde, 1997; Kelley et al., 1983), closeness in children's relationships with their parents was intricately related to the context within which each relationship was conducted. Living together meant that children and their mothers were in close physical proximity to each other, setting the scene for frequent, diverse and enduring interactions that constituted their inter-connected daily routines.

In contrast, a context of not sharing a residence, often coupled with inconsistent and infrequent contact, clearly restricted opportunities for certain types of interactions to occur between children and their fathers, with implications for the quality of the relationship. Not sharing a residence, and indeed having never shared a residence, meant that father-child interactions did not occur by default, but were contingent upon some organisation and facilitation by fathers, children, and sometimes mothers. Indeed, that half of the children currently had no contact with their fathers highlights the fragility of these ties, and the risk that non-residence from the outset places upon these parent-child relationships (MacLean & Eekelaar, 1997). It is clear that *frequency* of contact does represent an

important context for children's relationships with their fathers. A striking finding is that children without any contact did not even consider their father to be part of their family. However, the variability in terms of the consistency, nature and circumstances of children's contact with their fathers and the way in which this underpinned positive or negative relationship experiences, over and above frequency of contact, further highlights the importance of considering underlying relationship processes. The significance of the nuances of children's contact with their fathers is consistent with research that indicates that it is not the amount of time that children spend with their fathers but how they interact with each other that is important (King, 1994a, 1994b; Amato, 1993; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000). These findings further corroborate the need for researchers to move beyond solely emphasising the *amount* of face-to-face contact and considering father absence/presence as a simple dichotomy, and instead focus on the psychological significance of the relationships and levels of closeness (Dunn et al., 2004; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Thirdly, given the different contexts within which children's relationships with their mothers and fathers have developed (within and outside the home), it is important to understand clearly whether different processes shape children's relationships with their parents across these contexts. Children's feelings of closeness in their relationships with their parents were associated with two specific relationship dimensions: experiences of *connection* in everyday interaction, and experiences of *commitment*, based on the relationship history and expectations around the relationship. These relationship processes, as emerged in the children's narratives, were perceived to either underpin or undermine positive experiences for these children in their relationships with their parents.

Connection in Parent-Child Relationships

Of central significance to children's relationships with their parents were experiences of connection in the relationship. Dunn (1993) has highlighted that connectedness has rarely been considered as a dimension of children's relationships with their parents, yet the findings from the current study indicate that it is a key factor that underpins, and indeed distinguishes, children's relationships with their resident and non-resident parents. Underlying children's experiences of connectedness in their relationships was an ease of communication, awareness and understanding of each other, and self-disclosure and intimacy. In contrast, a lack of connection was reflected when communication exchanges were constrained in depth and spontaneity, and when shared experiences were limited.

A sense of connectedness in relationships with mothers clearly facilitated experiences of closeness. Being at home together and sharing the same physical space in the context of everyday routines was conducive to familiarity, predictability and comfort in each other's presence. Pivotal to experiences of connectedness between children and mothers was security in their mothers' accessibility and availability to them, and well-established, continuous patterns of care throughout the child's life. Consistent with this perspective, Duck et al. (2000) emphasise the significance of "commonplace

circumstances and activities of daily life that actually serve as the conduct of relationships" (pp. 181). Communication embedded within the security of domestic routines, took on an effortless and spontaneous form and represented a crucial dimension of the close connection that had developed between children and their mothers. Furthermore, drawing upon Hinde's perspective (1997), the *diversity* of interactions between children and their mothers appeared to give rise to high levels of mutual understanding and sharing of experiences. Thus, in addition to time spent at home together, outings and other engagements that form part of family and home life provided further opportunities for intimacy and fun between children and mothers. For many of the children in the present study, living arrangements constituting the child and mother alone further heightened the sense of togetherness and inter-dependence that characterised their relationship.

These findings clearly support previous research, which has similarly found that child-mother relationships in father-absent households are characterised by high levels of interaction and involvement (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; McKeown et al., 2003); companionship (Hetherington, 1999) and mutual openness (Weiss, 1979). Similarly, relationships characterised by closeness and appreciation for each other are consistent with the findings of other investigations (Wallerstein et al., 1988; Arditti, 1999; Smart et al., 2001). However, the present study has gone beyond much of this research by considering the *meaning* that children themselves attach to everyday activities and continued patterns of care as key factors contributing to connection and closeness in their relationships with their mothers.

In contrast, a lack of connectedness represented a clear risk to closeness in children's relationships with their non-resident fathers. Children did not perceive high levels of closeness in relationships with their fathers, where their fathers were detached from everyday activities and were not assimilated into the ebb and flow of everyday life. The findings indicated that the settings and circumstances within which children and their fathers interacted may not have been conducive to the establishment of inter-dependence and a strong sense of connection. Much father-child face-to-face contact time consisted of visits at the weekend dominated by recreational activities. These types of arrangements are commonplace between children and their non-resident fathers. Given the limited time non-resident fathers may spend with their children, fathers may strive to make visits interesting, fun, and conflict-free, as other researchers have suggested (Grief, 1997; Stewart, 1999). However, children described how their fathers were not attuned to what was happening in their day-to-day lives and communication in the relationship was constrained. Feelings of being disconnected coupled with a lack of openness in communication were nested within contact arrangements that took on a narrow focus and precluded immersion in the ordinary uneventful happenings of daily life that breed familiarity and predictability.

These findings mirror those described by Simpson et al. (1995) in their study of the experiences of non-resident fathers. They suggested that *daily routines* are central to processes of intimacy and

bonding between a father and his children. Emphasising the significance of seemingly insignificant mundane everyday activities, Simpson et al. propose that "family relationships are fashioned out of the minutiae of daily commerce and interaction" (pp. 59). In a similar vein, Cooksey and Craig (1998) indicate that father-child contact that is solely centred around shared activities rather than conversational forms of communication such as using the telephone, may not be as conducive to keeping up with "the rhythms of the child's life" or exchange of advice (pp. 187). This was clearly corroborated by the children in the current study who suggested that in the context of pre-arranged contact time that was divorced from routine, communication took on a planned or contrived form, rather than being spontaneous and permeated with emotion and meaning. For these children, the nature of their contact reflected fragile ties and lack of continuity in interaction, and consequently, a diminished sense of connectedness in the relationship.

This issue of familiarity and ease with each other similarly emerged among some of the non-contact group. Some of these children described an increasing estrangement between themselves and their fathers, as the intervals between contact periods grew longer and each became increasingly peripheral to developments in the other's life, until contact ceased altogether. In summary, the findings from the current study have highlighted that a lack of connectedness represents a risk factor to the quality of children's relationships with their non-resident fathers. Furthermore, the nuances of children's contact with their fathers vary in the extent to which they create an artificial setting for the conduct of the relationship, or a context that is conducive to intimacy, familiarity, and inter-dependence being established.

Commitment in Parent-Child Relationships

Children's experiences of their parents' commitment to their relationship and obligation to their parenting role also reflected underlying features of a close and secure relationship. Laursen and Bukowski (1997) consider that commitment in a relationship is related to the constructs of voluntariness, obligation and kinship in the relationship, and reflects a key component of the permanence of the relationship. In terms of parent-child relationships, they suggest that stability and obligation represent organising features. Indeed, these themes clearly emerged in children's narratives surrounding their relationships with their mothers. The stability and constancy of mothers' presence in children's lives and continued experience of care and support throughout their lives had assured children of their mothers' availability and accessibility to them, and created an expectation that this role would continue into the future. In only a minority of cases, children perceived that mothers were not always readily accessible to them – however, they accommodated to this and acknowledged that their mothers were not available because they were fulfilling other aspects of their parenting role, such as working to financially support the family. Given the solo nature of the mothers' parenting role and the long relational history between children and their mothers, children had developed clear role expectations that their mothers would continue to be their

primary source of support, advice and care. In essence, children were clear that their mothers were wholly committed to fulfil their parental obligation. Consistent with these findings, Arditti (1999) reported that perceived availability of the mother as a source of support and care underpinned young adults' experiences of closeness to their mothers following parental separation, while MacCallum and Golombok (2004) similarly reported high levels of availability among single mothers in father-absent households. A number of studies which have highlighted disruptions in child-parent relationships in the aftermath of parental divorce invoke reduced parental availability as an underlying risk factor in these situations (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Hetherington, 1999). In line with these studies, the present investigation determined that parental availability promotes closeness and inter-dependence with mothers.

In the context of living apart, accessibility to fathers was clearly constrained, but not totally precluded. It was clear that effort on the father's part to sustain the relationship facilitated feelings of closeness. Thus, children interpreted regular phone calls, text messages and emails from their father as a sign of their father's commitment to the relationship, which contributed to a sense that fathers are accessible and available. In fact, these actions served a dual purpose: not only did they reflect a father's investment in the relationship, but they also fostered the development of inter-dependence and connection in the relationship. Thus, the establishment of routines on the part of fathers (such as a regular telephone call or daily text message) was conducive to fathers and children becoming aware of and involved in commonplace circumstances and activities in each other's daily lives and provided a forum for fathers to offer support and advice to their children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). The findings from the study highlight that regular engagement in communicative interaction between children and their fathers represents a potential mechanism through which interdependence and connection can be nurtured, when face-to-face contact is not possible. At the same time, fathers are signalling their intention to preserve the relationship. Indeed, for a minority of children in the current study, fathers had managed to convey a sense that they were available to their children and committed to maintaining the relationship, despite physical separation from them.

However, negative experiences of fathers' commitment were more common and were experienced by children who had maintained contact with their fathers, as well as those for whom contact had ceased. Children's perceptions that their fathers invested little time or effort in them or were unreliable meant that feelings of trust and dependence were not fostered and feelings of disappointment, anger and rejection were deeply entrenched in their narratives. In support of these findings, Dunn (2003) has similarly indicated that effort and commitment on the part of non-resident fathers to make a family life for their children is of real significance to children, and that children reported negative relationships with non-resident fathers who were unreliable and frequently cancelled visitation arrangements (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001).

Parental Obligation & Children's Concepts of Parenting Roles

As highlighted in the previous section, a central issue underlying children's relationships with their parents was the extent to which mothers and fathers exhibited commitment to their parental obligation. Of relevance to children's experiences of parental obligation are their general constructions of the roles that mothers and fathers are expected to perform. The findings from the study highlight the complex interplay between children's normative and experiential accounts of parenting roles. Overall, children's normative accounts of parenthood reflected considerable overlap in the roles that they expected mothers and fathers to perform - loving and caring for children represented key parenting tasks for both mothers and fathers. Further support for a genderless view of parenting emerged when children did not differentiate between mothering and fathering, and endorsed the interchangeable nature of parenting roles. These findings concur with those of Brannen et al. (2000), who also described children's normative views of parenting as 'gender free' and reflective of egalitarian views of gender relations. Furthermore, accounts of indistinguishable mother and father roles in the present study have demonstrated that some children themselves clearly reject the essentialist position relating to the unique contribution of fathers in children's lives (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

However, some gendered divisions of parental roles were also perceptible across children's narratives. In these situations, it was clear that children's differentiation between mothers and fathers was based to an extent on traditional views on parenting roles – for example, breadwinning roles were more commonly assigned to fathers than mothers, despite the fact that in these children's families all mothers held responsibility for the financial welfare of the family, while none of the fathers did. Fathers were also more commonly regarded as partners in play and leisure activities than mothers were, possibly reflecting traditional and stereotypical distinctions in mother and father roles (Clarke-Stewart, 1982). However, it was also clear that concepts of mother and father roles also reflected their experiences of parenting in practice. For example, a minority of children drew solely upon their family experiences in their construction of father role. Their daily reality of an absent father was associated with having *no concept of what a father role might entail.* Similarly, but in less extreme cases, children's experiences of father absence or disengagement were associated with beliefs that fathers were redundant and lacked significance for children. Brannen et al. (2000) similarly reported that among the children in their study who no longer lived with their birth fathers, several were critical of fathers and downplayed their significance for children.

Overall these findings support the limited number of previous studies which have asserted that ideological representations of what parents ought to do, do not always match with children's experiences of *parenting in practice* (Morrow, 1998; Smart et al., 2001). Brannen et al. (2000) reported that while an equal *potential* to parent was reflected in children's normative concepts of interchangeable parenting roles, differences in parenting practice clearly emerged, with implications

for children's family networks and quality of relations. Morrow (1998) reported that *in reality* children's needs for direct care and emotional support were more usually fulfilled by mothers than fathers. Smart et al. (2001) also indicated that while children may wish to value and relate to both parents, practice and reality often reflect something different.

The interplay between normative concepts of parenting roles and their relation to children's relationships with their parents is an important but relatively unexplored issue. As noted in Chapters Seven and Eight, perspectives on role obligations and expectations underpinned children's experiences of commitment in their relationships with their parents. Specifically, a mismatch between their concepts of fathering and their experience of a disengaged and uncommitted father represented one source of loss for these children. On the other hand, it was also clear that concepts of father and mother roles were based on children's experiences in their families, and thus consideration of mother and father roles as interchangeable, (and therefore neither unique nor essential) may serve as a protective mechanism for children whose fathers are absent from their lives. This issue is addressed in the following section.

Father Loss & Absence

Related to aforementioned experiences of commitment and connection in father-child relationships were children's expectations regarding their father's role in their lives. The majority of children in the study expressed clear ideas about what constituted parental roles and obligations. Hence, they further interpreted a lack of connectedness and commitment in their relationships with their fathers as a failure on his part to specifically fulfil his obligation as a *parent figure*. Specifically, older children expressed greater dissatisfaction with their relationships with their fathers than younger children. The exact reasons underlying adolescents' decreased satisfaction with their relationships with their fathers remains unclear – with more sophisticated cognitive capacity and greater awareness of their emotional needs, adolescents' relationships with their fathers may be more open to scrutiny and comparison with their other relationships. The non-involvement of fathers in daily care-giving routines channelled the role of the father in these children's lives into a nebulous un-prescribed role, as fathers were clearly disengaged from the complex constructions of home and family life. A number of the children expressed a sense of loss and disappointment in their fathers, and these feelings were dealt with through either a process of acceptance of their father as a person who could play some role in their lives, or rejection.

Themes of loss and absence were prevalent throughout children's narratives relating to their fathers. This signalled a clear contradiction to Pryor and Rodgers' (2001) suggestion that children born to a single mother or whose parents separated in infancy would not experience a sense of loss, but may be affected by parental absence. Children experienced both a sense of loss and an awareness of absence, which were manifested in various guises and reflected in their talk around missing their

fathers, the question of his identity, fantasies about meeting him, the sense of ambiguity surrounding his role in their life and the realisation of failed expectations. This resonates with previous research on parental separation which highlights that children often grieve for their absent fathers following separation and that such loss is characterised by a sense of ambiguity (Afifi & Keith, 2001; Smart & Neale, 1999). Thus, while children did not experience or did not remember their father *leaving* their home, many still experienced discontinuity and diminution in their contact with their fathers, and a relationship characterised by a degree of *uncertainty*. Such uncertainty may serve to undermine the quality of the relationship and erode a sense of interdependence and connectedness in the relationship (Afifi & Keith, 2001).

Among the children who have never met their fathers, some were drawn to thinking about the relationship that never was, and of what a father or *their* father is like or does. Here the sense of loss is tied into something that has never been known for the child, but which can become conceptually constructed and idealised. Moreover, because the absent parent was still alive for the majority of children, the potential for contact that has not occurred may convey a message of abandonment and rejection to the child. Indeed, it was clear that a number of the children did feel a sense of rejection, anger and disappointment. Given the ambiguity embedded within the loss, there are no societal prescriptions for how to deal with the sense of loss, as occurs with parental death, for example; and perhaps less acknowledgment of the loss. What emerged was that children were making sense of their father's absence from their lives and their loss in different ways – while some had come to negotiate a relationship with their father based on expectations built from history of interaction in the relationship, others were piecing together the information they had to construct their own story about him. Not only did children experience emotional loss as a result of their fathers' absence, they also experienced a need for more information to satisfy their curiosity. Related to these findings, Dunn et al. (2001) have highlighted the importance of clear communication between parents and children as children process parental absence and family change. In the context of researching children's experiences of family transitions, Dunn et al.'s findings emphasised that a gap often exists between the parents' perception of what has been communicated to the child, and a child's need to process information through repeated conversations over time.

While there is recognition of the loss that children experience following parental separation, (and death), the findings from the study have indicated that there needs to be an acknowledgement of the loss that children experience when one parent is not present to fulfil their parenting role, even if they never had a relationship with that absent parent. Given that most children had formulated a clear concept of what a father role entails, that their biological father was not fulfilling that role, represents a source of loss for them, in that their conceptual ideal is not being met.

Mothers as Parents: Negotiating Dynamics of Dependence & Authority in Mother-Child Relationships

Experiences in relationships with mothers stand in stark contrast to children's experiences of their relationships with their fathers. The solo nature of the mother's parenting role, as previously discussed, was clearly associated with dynamics of the child-mother relationship. Without exception, mothers were central to children's daily care-giving routines, and as discussed previously, continuous patterns of care throughout the child's life had assured children of their mothers' commitment to her parental obligation and underscored a high degree of connectedness in the relationship. The findings resonate with similarly positive reflections of child-mother relationships in father-absent homes (Golombok et al., 1997; MacCallum & Tasker, 2004), although these studies relied upon a somewhat different methodological approach to the one used in the present study. To date, there is little published research on parenting of mothers of older children in continuously single one-parent households with which to compare the findings of the present study. Much of the research on parenting in single parent families highlights that the quality of parenting diminishes post-separation, although in many instances the quality improves over time as re-organised roles are negotiated and stabilise within the family (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). These findings may have little applicability to the present sample especially when a solo parenting role is established from the outset.

Of all aspects of parenting and the parent-child relationship in single-parent families the issue of authority and hierarchy in the household has received the most attention in the literature (Weiss, 1979; Nock, 1988). Issues pertaining to dynamics of structure or hierarchy in the household are relevant not only to parental control and discipline, but also to dynamics of dependence. Previous research has indicated that an altered hierarchical structure in single-mother households facilitates closeness and mutual support in the mother-child relationship (Arditti, 1999). In the present study, the exclusive nature of the mother-child relationship which permeated both mothers' and children's narratives was attributed not only to the absence of a second parent from the home, but also to the absence of other individuals (half of the households consisted of mother and child alone). For the children, the exclusive nature of the relationship was deemed to facilitate closeness in the relationship, although a sense of inescapability permeated a minority of children's narratives. Related to this, children experienced some constraints in the relational resources that were available to them, particularly within the confines of their household. In addition, where household contexts were characterised by strained financial and material resources, a stress discourse emerged in children's narratives. Without another adult in the household, there was no individual with whom labour could be divided. In light of these constraints, patterns of dependence yielded to high levels of inter-dependence in the mother-child relationship, where an ethic of care was reflected in children's interactions with their mothers. Thus, not only did children adjust the demands that they

placed upon their mothers in accordance with perceptions of her availability and resources, they also represented a source of care and support for their mothers. Perceptions of mothers as individuals with their own needs and limitations were associated with inter-generational boundaries becoming blurred, as relationships with mothers were likened to one with a peer or sister. Overall, a central aspect of the experience of 'doing' childhood in a single parent household involved accommodation to maternal stress and being responsive to the needs and resources of mothers. These findings are largely consistent with those of Weiss (1979) who indicated that the structure of the one-parent household results in the establishment of a partnership, where children have rights and responsibilities in the household that may not markedly diverge from the parent's own. Furthermore, other authors have similarly described relationships between children and their single mothers as peer-like (Nock, 1988; Weiss, 1979; Glenwick & Mowrey, 1986). These findings also resonate with contemporary approaches to considering the parent-child relationships in terms of horizontal qualities (Russell, Pettit & Mize, 1998), and the agency and power that children bring to the relationship (Kuczynski, 2003b).

However, in contrast to some previous research which has focused upon extreme cases of hierarchy breakdown in families resulting inappropriate and pervasive role reversal and parentification (Glenwick & Mowrey, 1986; Jurkovic, 1997 Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein, 1985), a key finding relating to mothers' experiences of their relationship with their children was the importance to them of maintaining a clear distinction between their role as a parent, and their child's role as a child in the family. Mothers expressed concern about how their children protected and worried about them and how children had taken greater responsibility for their own needs. An important aspect of the mother's parenting role involved monitoring the degree of horizontal interactions and the extent to which they allowed their child become a friend and confidant. While this was a challenge for some mothers, especially in the absence of a supportive network, it was only in a minority of cases that children appeared to feel burdened by the nature of their role in the family.

One clear finding that emerged was that discipline-related aspects of the mother's parenting role played an important part in affirming distinct generational boundaries. As indicated previously, the disciplinary role was a key aspect of the mothers' parenting role, one that was managed exclusively by mothers in many situations. Where previous research has indicated that single parents find it difficult to maintain control in light of increased parental stress and deteriorations in supervision and monitoring (Nock, 1988; Weiss, 1979; Dornbusch et al., 1985), these studies may reflect difficulties specific to post-divorce families. Mothers may struggle with re-establishing authority and discipline post-divorce, particularly if this had previously been the fathers' domain of parenting. The findings from the present study complement these findings, as mothers described the challenges and demands of disciplining a child alone in the absence of a supportive "back up" figure.

Notwithstanding these challenges however, it was clear that the majority of households did not lack an authority structure. Indeed, the authority structure in the household emerged as a key precipitant of conflict within the mother-child relationship, and for a minority of adolescents, conflicts with mothers were classified as intense and emotionally charged. A minority of mothers and children reflected that the nature of conflict in the relationship was intensified in the context of an absent second parenting figure who could potentially act as mediator. This finding mirrors that of MacCallum and Golombok (2004) who reported more serious disputes and greater irritability and loss of temper during disciplinary interactions between mothers and children in father-absent than father-present families.

However, there was variation in the extent to which the authority exchanges took the form of horizontal or vertical interactions. Among families with younger children, authority-related exchanges occurred within a context of vertical interactions which were driven and even heightened by the sense of total responsibility that mothers held for their children. However, it was also clear that bi-directional processes involving discussion, compromise and negotiation were characteristic of many authority-related exchanges, particularly in contexts of openly-communicative and trusting mother-child relationships. Parental expectations were implicitly understood, rules and restrictions were open to negotiation, and children (usually adolescents) reciprocated by taking on board their mothers' perspective, and displaying a sense of responsibility. Thus, an absence of a *vertical* authority structure worked well in these families, owing largely to the quality of the child-mother relationship, characterised by mutual trust and understanding, and a sense of maturity and responsibility on the part of the child (most commonly adolescents). These findings can be interpreted in light of recent theoretical advances in the conceptualisation of parental monitoring and supervision strategies (Kerr & Stattin, 2003; Brody, 2003). These authors suggested that it is the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, and specifically the flow of communication in the relationship, which underpins more effective parental control strategies and lower levels of deviant behaviour among young people.

Overall, the findings pertaining to the dynamics of dependence and authority need to be considered in light of what is known about developmental change in the patterning of interactions between children and their parents over time. In the present investigation, it was clear that dynamics of mutuality and reciprocity were more dominant within mother-adolescent relationships than between mothers and their younger children. Shifts with respect to dynamics of dependence were reflected in the changing nature of the mother's parenting role, where daily care-giving routines constituted a less prominent function of mother-adolescent interactions. Consistent with the perspective of Sroufe and Fleeson (1986), the parent-adolescent relationship became less organised around the dependency of the child and care-taking activities of the parent, yielding to interactional dynamics that reflect higher levels of inter-dependence. For example, mothers were more willing to disclose personal

information to their adolescent children, and seek emotional and practical support from them. By the same token, adolescent children were more cognisant of their mothers' stress and well-being and were motivated to protect and support their mothers. Power shifts also occurred more frequently within the mother-adolescent relationship, and the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship underscored the increased use of negotiation, discussion and compromise as parental strategies of discipline and monitoring. These findings clearly resonate with previous research on the changing nature of parent-adolescent relationships, such as Youniss and Smollar's (1985) view that a shift from unilateral authority to co-operative negotiation reflects an adolescent's increasing understanding of his/her inter-dependence within the family and need for autonomy and independence alongside the parent's willingness to maintain close ties with his/her teenager.

Overall, patterns that were observed in dynamics of dependence and horizontal-related authority exchanges between mothers and adolescents are consistent with the literature on developmental shifts in parent-child relationships from childhood to adolescence. Therefore, the key question for the present study is the extent to which dynamics of inter-dependence and reciprocity in mother-adolescent relationships merely represent well-documented developmental changes in these relationships or reflect processes that can be attributed to the structure of the household. While a definitive conclusion is not possible given the lack of evidence based on other family structures, findings from the present study indicate that these dynamics are at least partly accountable for by the absence of a parenting partner for the mother. It was clear that dynamics of reciprocity and inter-dependence were not solely confined to mother-adolescent relationships, but also characterised mothers' relationships with their younger children, suggesting that horizontal dynamics are not simply a function of developmental change in the parent-child relationship. To varying degrees, mothers and children moved functionally between vertical and horizontal interactions in their relationship. Where previous research has indicated that horizontal interactions are an appropriate feature of parent-child relationship, affording children an opportunity to behave or be treated as an equal and experience psychological equality (Russell et al., 1998; Kuczynski, 1997), the maintenance of an *appropriate balance* between horizontal and vertical dynamics was a challenge for the families in the present study.

In the absence of a second parenting figure, children expressed how their mother was their *only* recipient of their needs and demands. Children clearly responded to this by accommodating their demands in accordance with the resources available to their mother. Not only did children take on increasing responsibility for their own well-being, they also perceived an *obligation* to provide domestic labour in the household, and emotional support to their mothers. While it could be argued that children in other household structures may well contribute to family life in similar ways, it is suggested that horizontal level interactions may occur to a greater extent and at an earlier stage in one-parent households. Children were keenly aware of the stressful nature of their mother's solo

parenting role and participated in various aspect of family life that they may not otherwise have been exposed to, had a parenting support figure been present to share the management of the household with the mother. However, given the absence of evidence based on other family structures, it is not possible to conclusively state that such dynamics are unique to this specific family context.

The link between family structure and dynamics of inter-dependence was also salient to mothers. As stated previously, one concern for mothers was the extent to which they exhibited both practical and emotional dependence upon their child, and allowed their child to become a partner in the management of the household. In the context of a household structure with no partner with whom to share concerns or household responsibility, as mothers worked to be a source of both nurturance and discipline for their children, clear role boundaries were sometimes difficult to maintain. An important caveat in the interpretation of these findings however is the lack of evidence about whether mothers in other family structures experience similar challenges in the maintenance of role boundaries.

The emergence of adolescence served to highlight dynamics of dependence within these one-parent households. Contradicting the perspective of early theorists on an inevitable dramatic deterioration in parent-adolescent relationships, the findings of the present study did not reveal diminished levels of closeness between adolescents and their mothers. In contrast, the study supports recent writings on the transformational and inter-dependent nature of adolescent relationships with their parents (Steinberg, 2000; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), where continuities in emotional bonds in parent-adolescent relationships coexisted alongside changes in the forms of interaction and expression of affect (Collins & Laursen, 2000). However, it was within the context of adolescent development that *concerns* about the balance between connectedness and autonomy became salient for mothers and adolescents alike. As increasing proportions of adolescents' time were devoted to extra-familial relationships, in line with previous research (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Furman, 1989), the potential challenges of ensuring appropriate balance between separateness and dependence were highlighted. While this was only reflected by a minority of adolescents themselves, the connectedness-separateness balance more commonly characterised mothers' experiences. Indeed, some mothers of younger children actively worked to expand their child's social world to ameliorate the intensity of the mother-child relationship, and facilitate an appropriate balance, especially as their child approached adolescence.

Without comparison studies based on a range of family types, it is not possible to conclusively state that horizontal interactions are more characteristic of mother-child relationships in one-parent households than in other types of households. However, findings from the study do suggest that the child's role within the family accommodates to the absence of a second parent figure or adult in the household. A larger comparison study involving children and parents from different family structures would enable the findings from the present study to be interpreted in light of a broader

understanding of family dynamics in contemporary families. Given that the focus of much research is on single parent families, a particular gap exists in our understanding of child-parent dynamics in two-parent families. Increasing demands and pressures upon parents' time in contemporary society apply not only to single parents but also to two-parent families, many of whom are now dual-earner families. Understanding the interplay between horizontal and vertical dynamics between children and their parents, across *a range of family types* is an important concern for future research.

Children's Concept of 'Family' & Cultural Considerations

As outlined in the opening pages of the thesis, the Irish context is characterised by unique cultural and historical qualities that continue to prevail discourses and attitudes pertaining to family (Daly, 2004). Conservative perspectives on family changes (evidenced for example by the relatively recent legislative change allowing for divorce in 1997) suggest that Ireland lags behind its European counterparts and other Western societies in accepting a diversity of family forms. In particular, the proportion of children living apart from one parent presents a challenge to concepts of family within a context where family is not only regarded as the key societal institution as enshrined within the Irish Constitution, but *family based upon marriage* is afforded a prominent position. Broader contexts and discourses pertaining to family emerged in the present study, as many children were cognisant of how their household and parenting arrangements within their family diverged from or fitted with societal models of family. Feeling different and encounters of stigma or negative attitudes relating to single parent families occurred, but only in a small number of cases. Such experiences perhaps reflect that, despite changing demographic trends, the largest proportion of families with children in Ireland continue to be characterised by the traditional nuclear family structure of children living with their married biological parents.

Generally, however, exposure to similar situations within their neighbourhood or school contexts normalised children's experiences of living in a one-parent family – in this case, diversity in family forms represented part of the children's social landscapes. Furthermore, children in the present study clearly rejected a unitary concept of family and embraced a variety of family forms. In line with previous research, children's views of what makes a family and family life coalesced around structural and process features (Brannen et al., 2000). The meaning of family was strongly grounded within experiences of care, security, support and love, and while children spontaneously referred to household structure and biological relatedness, family was by no means constrained by structure, as parameters defining the inclusion or exclusion of individuals were flexible and variable. These findings clearly support previous research on children's concept of family as broad and inclusive, where different family forms constitute family (Nixon et al., 2006; Moore et al., 1996; Morrow, 1998; Brannen et al., 2000).

The inclusive nature of children's concept of family further emerged in children's representations of their own family networks, where stepparents, stepsiblings, family friends and pets were included by a small number of the children. Thus, ties that were identified as significant were not restricted to household members, biological or kin relations. However, that children also excluded disengaged fathers from family networks and did not always assimilate new partners and stepsiblings into their family networks also highlighted that network boundaries were contingent upon qualitative differences in their relationships and were not defined by legal or blood ties. Frequency of contact emerged as an important pre-requisite for belonging to children's family networks – thus maternal grandparents and relatives were assigned an important position within children's representations of their family networks; in contrast, paternal grandparents and relatives were less commonly included, reflecting less consistent patterns of contact and fragile ties.

Drawing upon Smart et al.'s (2001) concepts of open and closed family boundaries, most children in the present study described their family networks in terms of 'closed' family boundaries that had not been extended to incorporate new partners. In a minority of cases however, where children had consistent and frequent contact with new partners and siblings across different households, network boundaries were open to reflect active ties. Together, these findings highlight that family networks are by no means a function of particular structural family form and even within one family structure there are different ways of constituting family. Moreover, experiential accounts of family networks and boundaries did not always concur with their normative concept of family as a broad and inclusive entity – it was the quality of relations that underpinned the boundaries around children's family networks. In addition to variation in the constitution of children's family networks, variation existed *within* children's family networks in terms of differential experiences of closeness to family members. Thus, not only is it important to distinguish between those who are named and not named as family members, consideration of which network members are significant to children in a practical sense and of issues pertaining to access and activity within family networks are also essential.

Re-visiting the Methodological Approach

Critique of both the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology of the study is essential in evaluating the confidence that can be placed in the findings. One of the key methodological strengths of the study was the inclusion of both children's and mothers' experiences of family life. Indeed, priority was given to children's experiences and perspectives on their families and for this reason, a number of families were excluded from the study because mothers, while willing to participate themselves, did not grant permission for their children to be invited into the study. Affording a central position to children *and* mothers in this exploration of family roles and relationship clearly illuminates children's and parents' ability to generate narratives that both

complement and supplement each other's insights, together creating a richness and depth that is currently lacking in our understanding of family processes.

However, as previously highlighted in the chapter, the exclusion of non-resident fathers' experiences leaves an essential piece of the picture missing. Indeed, the experiences of non-resident fathers remain relatively unexplored in the literature to date (Simpson et al., 1995). In light of previous findings that concordance between mothers and fathers' accounts on family can be low (Lin et al., 2004; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), the exclusion of fathers' perspectives has precluded investigation of potential divergent agendas and points of emphasis between mothers and fathers. Just as children and mothers sometimes reflected upon their relationships in different ways, it is possible that a father's standpoint on his relationship with his child would diverge from the child's account. However, these issues were not explored within the present study but represent a worthwhile avenue for future research.

One of the key challenges in conducting research of this type is of gaining access to children for participation in research. Securing the consent of children's gatekeepers can be difficult, particularly when the research process is poorly understood, the researcher is unknown to the parent, or the topic of the research is perceived to be private and sensitive. Through the course of the interviews, many mothers revealed that they knew little about what their children thought about living in a one-parent family or about their fathers – thus the researcher was probing into an aspect of their child's life that was in some ways unknown to them. However, the inclusion of both mothers' and children's perspectives, while fitting with the broader conceptual framework for the study, also proved to be advantageous from the point of view of recruitment of children into the study. Inviting mothers into the study as participants simultaneously paved the way for negotiating with mothers as gatekeepers to their children. Thus, through their own contact with the researcher, the likelihood that mothers would allow the researcher to also invite the children to participate in the study was heightened. That almost all mothers were willing to explain the research and offer their child the chance to participate clearly attests to this. However, while agreement by mothers was a necessary first step, every effort was made to ensure that children's participation in the study was a decision based on their informed consent. While there was a possibility that children felt coerced into taking part in the study by virtue of the fact that their mothers had consented, that a number of children declined to participate, indicated that this was not the case.

In terms of the methods that were used, a number of issues are noteworthy. The use of pictorial tools (i.e. Family Links and Emotional Closeness Maps) as part of the child interview appeared to work well in accessing children's sense of family and feelings of closeness to family members. However, caution must be exercised in how these tools are interpreted. The placement of an individual in a particular position on the Map does not necessarily indicate that children are reflecting their *emotional* closeness to that person. Indeed, for a small number of the younger children, discussion

of the Closeness Maps suggested that 'closeness' was initially being interpreted in purely physical terms. Thus, although these tools serve as a useful starting point for discussion and appeared to stimulate children's thinking about their family relationships, follow-up probing is essential to unpack the meaning behind what is reflected on these tools.

Another issue that emerged related to the nature of questioning about children's fathers in their interviews. In fact, children were asked very few direct questions pertaining to their fathers. This reflected the researcher's reluctance to probe into what was perceived as a sensitive issue which children may not have considered for themselves. However, despite the limited degree of questioning about children's relationships with their fathers or their experiences of his absence, children's narratives yielded a wealth of data on this topic. It is possible that an even richer account of children's experiences with their fathers could have been generated, had more direct questions been used.

A methodological limitation of the study is the snapshot perspective generated through *once-off interviews* with mothers and children. A longitudinal approach could more usefully capture ongoing transitions in family life and facilitate more in-depth exploration of the nuances and complexity of family processes (Fine & Demo, 2000). Methodologically, interviewing individuals over time aids with the development of rapport with the researcher, and may result in the generation of narratives that better depict the multi-dimensional and complex nature of individuals' experiences.

Issues pertaining to access to the sample and the profile of the final sample achieved are associated with the representativeness of the sample, and the extent to which findings from the study can be generalised to the population of mothers parenting alone from the outset in Ireland. The sample achieved in the present study was largely the product of a purposive sample and snowballing techniques, and was not a clinically focused group. Indeed, that only four of the 37 families were recruited through contact with support agencies meant that families presenting with difficulties and in need of support did not dominate the sample. The majority of the sample of families was recruited through contact with schools. While this may represent the best way to access the general population of children, it may only have been families who were functioning well that opted to participate. Therefore, the extent to which findings based on the present sample of families can be generalised to other lone parent families may be limited to some extent. Given that the sample was not specifically sourced in a way that highlights difficulty, a useful adjunct to the present investigation would be to focus on the recruitment of families through support groups, and clinical or counselling services. Inclusion of families recruited through a broader range of recruitment avenues may facilitate our understanding of dynamics and family processes that are perceived to hinder family functioning in some way.

However, it is clear that the recruitment process accessed a *range* of families characterised by diversity in experiences. Analysis of different aspects of the demographic profile of the families highlight that they were not a homogeneous group in terms of socio-economic status, maternal age, employment status and housing tenure. The *diversity* of the sample in terms of the extent of parental absence, the nature of children's contact and relationships with their fathers, and the varying household compositions of the families is an important backdrop for the interpretation of the findings from the study.

In terms of considering the representativeness of the sample accessed, existing data on incidence of lone parenthood is somewhat crude in Ireland, with different sources yielding different estimates. Furthermore, all lone parents are grouped together in administrative data, thereby obscuring different demographic phenomenon (Fahey & Russell, 2001). There is a dearth of information on the paths of entry into lone-parenthood, the differing degrees of "loneness" that may characterise one-parent families, and the nature of the contact between children and their non-resident parents. Moreover, basic factual information is lacking about the profile of older lone parents, and the way in which social and economic characteristics of lone parents change over time, as children get older. As such, the demographic profile of the population of lone parents with older children remains relatively unknown, which limits the extent to which the representativeness of the sample can be evaluated. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that generalisation achieved through quantitative research methods, based on representative samples and statistical probability is very difficult to achieve for qualitative researchers. Nevertheless, they argue that qualitative research can be effective in achieving 'transferability' of findings to other settings or situations. Ultimately, they argue, the researcher can only "provide the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether the transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 316). Therefore, readers must make judgements about the relevance of findings to settings beyond those studied (Seale, 1999).

A final methodological issue to be considered relates to the methods used for establishing confidence in the findings. Processes and procedures such as triangulation of methods and data sources facilitated the establishment of credibility of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The reliability and transparency of the analysis process was achieved through the use of multiple coders, and establishing coding and analysis as a group activity (Seale, 1999). Overall, *reflexivity* represented an important aspect of how the analysis was conducted and interpretation was achieved. However, it is acknowledged that other procedures such as member checking or the use of inter-rater reliability *following* the analysis process would also have been beneficial. In terms of member checking, given the breadth of experiences of the families involved in the present study, it was considered that selecting and returning to a small sample of participants would have had limited usefulness. Nevertheless, it may have been a worthwhile endeavour. The use of inter-rater reliability checks

following the analysis process was also considered. However, given the complexity of the analysis process and the volume of data generated, the use of multiple coders *at the time of analysis* was considered to be a more useful approach to take. However, it may have been useful to involve a fifth coder, following the analysis process, to establish an inter-rater reliability coefficient.

Re-visiting the Theoretical Framework

Central to the investigation of family processes in the present study were contemporary models of parent-child relationships, which emphasise the transactional nature of parent-child relationships and dynamics of agency and power that children (and parents) bring to their relationships (Kuczynski, 2003). In contrast to dominant parent-effect models and typological approaches to the study of parenting (e.g. Baumrind, 1973), children are explicitly regarded as active agents in their own development, strategically influencing rules, roles and relationships within their families (Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003; Smart et al., 2001). One of the key illustrations from the present study is that children's *agency as construction* (Kuczynski et al., 1999) is reflected in their competence as meaning-makers and narrators of their experiences. The study revealed not only how children interpret their relationships with their mothers and fathers as they evolve in the context of everyday patterns of care-giving, shared activities and communication, but also how they actively negotiate roles and relationships within their families. Thus, children positioned themselves as central agents in their own families and the use of open-ended qualitative interviews with the children revealed insight into their strategic action within their families. Secondly, children's *agency as action* (Kuczynski et al., 1999) was reflected in how they actively contributed to family life through household work, caring for siblings, and providing emotional support to their mothers. Childhood agency and competency were also pivotal features of children's concepts of family. As discourses pertaining to *mutuality* and *reciprocity* permeated the children's narratives, they did not frame themselves as dependents, victims or mere passive recipients of care. Children's agency was also reflected in how they weighed up potential costs and benefits of particular relationships, and opted-out of relationships that were perceived to be harmful in some way. For example, children felt little sense of obligation towards their non-resident fathers, many of whom were disengaged from their children. Relationships with fathers were not based on a sense of duty and biological relatedness, but were voluntary, and open to interpretation based on ties of affection and closeness. Similar ideas were expressed with regard to children's relationships with new partners. Family networks were not necessarily altered by parental re-partnering, and assimilation of new partners into their family network was contingent upon the quality of the relationship and perceived benefits that the new partner would bring to the family. However, while children perceived that their perspectives on their mothers' partners were important within their household, their agency was also constrained by their desire for their mothers to be happy, and by the structures imposed by their mothers.

Together these findings support the theoretical model of the child as competent actor, which underpinned the methodological approach taken in the study, where children's own perspectives and experiences were given prominence (Hogan et al., 1999). Furthermore, illustrations of children's agency as action and construction in the practice of family life clearly resonate with the conceptions of children as agents, which permeate contemporary theories on parent-child relationships (Kuczynski, 2003b). The findings from the study also indicate that children in single parent families find themselves involved in more adult-like roles than they might have adopted in a two-parent family: for example they may be assigned, or voluntarily adopt, positions of heightened responsibility within their household. Therefore, children's competence is also a function of a range of life experiences, interactions and influences; a product of the dynamic interplay between the individual and their context (Smart et al., 2001).

Related to these issues is the inextricable dynamic that emerged between family processes and the structure of the family. A key debate within the literature has been concerned with the relative value of examining family structure versus family process effects (Fine & Demo, 2000). Simple family structure comparisons, criticised for attempting to isolate family structure effects from other possible differences between groups, have given way to a more fine-grained analysis of family processes across family types. Drawing on research that highlighted the significance of family processes in mediating the impact of family structure on children's outcomes, the study took as its conceptual focus parenting and family relationships. However, just as an exclusive focus on family structure conceals important dynamics and transitions in families, to regard family structure as separable from and unconnected to family processes would have obscured an important dialectic between family structure and processes (Simons, 1996b). Therefore, a key framework underlying the present study was that structure and process are complementary (Amato, 1993). While the conceptual focus of the present investigation was on family processes, the structure of the family remained central to understanding how important processes were facilitated or constrained within these families.

Numerous examples of family process-family structure interactions permeated the findings. At the outset, parent and child roles and relationships were constructed within a diverse web of circumstances, many of which were influenced by the absence of a second parent from the home. For example, economic circumstances of the households were directly influenced by the absence of potential for a second income and/or the need to pay for childcare, a well-documented finding in the research literature (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). While many of the families managed well financially, other families suffered from more constrained economic resources. Consistent with findings of Nelson (2005), the effort of holding down a job while raising children alone created a "daily time bind" (pp. 201) for mothers. In all cases sustaining the family was never without concerted effort on the part of the mother, often at a cost to her availability and accessibility to her children, and potentially the quality of the relationship.

Mothers' experiences of solo parenting were deeply embedded within a family structure that militated against co-parenting arrangements. Of particular significance was the prolonged absence of the father from the home, and in half of cases no history of shared residence between mothers and fathers. Unlike single parent families that are established following the dissolution of a family structure where both parents are directly and actively involved in raising the children, families in the present study did not successfully initiate patterns of co-parenting across household boundaries. As Simpson et al. (1995) highlight, co-parenting arrangements require substantial emotional and practical efforts and consistent inter-parental negotiation of parental roles. However, given the fragile nature of the inter-parental relationship (indeed if a relationship ever existed in the first place), the challenges of co-parenting may have been too great.

The solo nature of the mothers' parenting role, which prevailed in the majority of families, was often associated with experiences of aloneness, loneliness and stress for mothers, despite the availability of support. In light of previous research, which highlights the complexity involved in mothers' social networks (Nelson, 2005), the present study illustrated that availability and perceived quality of support were important factors that influenced support-seeking behaviour among mothers. Where the mothers' parenting role was supported rather than undermined, social networks represented an important source of relational resources. However, 'doing' family (Nelson, 2005; Naples, 2001) within a one-parent structure meant that mothers were often faced with some material and relational constraints.

Corroborating the limited body of previous research which has explored children's experiences of 'doing post-divorce childhood' (Smart et al., 2001); children's narratives yielded clear illustrations of how household structure impacted upon some of their experiences of childhood (implications of non-shared-residence on children's relationships with their fathers have already been considered). Unlike the children in Smart et al.'s (2001) study, dealing with separation was not a challenge faced by the children in the present study. However, dealing with new partners and coping with practicalities of moving across different households were common across both studies, although only for a minority of children in the present study. The findings from the study clearly support this theoretical position that family processes are inextricably linked to family structure, and while the impact of family structure is mediated through family processes, these processes in turn are constrained and facilitated in different ways by the structure of the household (Simons, 1996b; Amato, 1993; Fine & Demo, 2000).

Findings from the current study also highlight some limitations with respect to existing conceptual frameworks. The psychological processes that children engage in as they make sense of their family contexts represent an important, yet neglected aspect of family research. For example, children's perceptions of the significance and essential nature of mother and father roles play an important part in how they understand and evaluate their relationships with their parents. The findings from the

study suggested that disparity between their concepts of father roles and their experience of an absent father represented a source of loss for these children. However, consideration of either parent's role as non-essential also ameliorated the sense of loss that children may experience. Thus, it appears that general concepts of father and mother roles represent an important framework for the evaluation of their mother and father's commitment to their parental obligation, and specifically the *meaning* of parental absence. As McHale et al.(2002) have similarly argued, the interpretation that children place upon their family dynamics represent a key mediating mechanism underpinning observed pathways between family circumstances and developmental outcomes. To date however, these interpretations remain poorly understood.

Furthermore, findings relating to children's experiences of their relationships with fathers clearly contest Laursen and Bukowski's (1997) claim that permanence and obligation represent defining dimensions of parent-child relationships. A shift away from thinking about the parent-child relationship along these dimensions is clearly warranted, particularly when parents live outside the family home. To date, little has been written about commitment in parent-child relationships, perhaps indicating an unquestioned belief that parent-child relationships are obligatory (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997; Maccoby, 1999), underpinned not only by biological relatedness, but also deeply engrained social norms, which reflect the importance of parent-child relationships (Bainham, 2003). The discussion of commitment in relationships has been restricted in the main to marital relationships (Hinde, 1997), while obligation is usually considered in terms of wider kin relationships (Finch & Mason, 1993). However, the *impermanent* and *involuntary* nature of the parent-child relationship is illustrated in the current study not only in the way in which children perceived that their fathers did not display commitment to maintaining the relationship, but also in the way children themselves thought and acted as if they were free to leave the relationship. Therefore the findings of the current study highlight that these components of relationships need to be re-considered with regard to child-parent relationships that increasingly operate beyond the well-established boundaries of one household with two parents.

Implications & Future Research

A number of implications for how researchers and policymakers conceptualise contemporary family life and relationships arise from the findings of the study. Firstly, patterns of joint parenthood were not likely to be established where parents lived apart from each other, early in the child's life. Previous Irish research, pertaining specifically to post-divorce families, revealed comparatively higher rates of contact with non-resident parents than research in the U.K. or U.S. (Hogan et al., 2002; Fawcett, 1998; Halpenny, 2005). These authors suggested that culturally specific experiences, such as strong family values and close geographical proximity underpinned high levels of contact. However, it is clear that these culturally specific factors did not apply to the same extent in the

present sample. That *unmarried* fathers in Ireland are afforded no legal rights in relation to their children may legitimise the disengaged pattern of parenting adopted by many fathers and undermine traditional family values that exist. Thus, the existing legal framework in Ireland does not support joint parenthood among unmarried parents. Furthermore, given that many fathers of children in the present study lived abroad, cultural influences and values may carry less significance.

While the promotion of marriage or co-habitation merely for the purpose of establishing shared parenting roles may not always be in the best interests of the child or the parents themselves, establishing clear parental obligations for both mothers and fathers, regardless of their marital status or living arrangements, may result in increased patterns of father involvement and even shared parenting arrangements. A legal framework which accords no recognition to the rights of the unmarried father not only erodes a man's identity as a father, but also militates against continued parental involvement. Therefore, this legislative position may represent one important starting point for change, and importantly may help to promote the idea that marriage is not a necessary condition of parenthood. Similarly, this may promote the view that a parent's commitment to his/her children is separate from commitment to the other parent.

Secondly, the examination of factors underpinning children's differential experiences of relationships with mothers and fathers have provided clear insight into how parent-child relationships can best be protected and nurtured across different settings. Prevention of role reversal and over-burdening of children clearly emerged as concerns for mothers who were parenting alone; and represented a possible risk to children's relationships with their mothers. The importance of supporting parents in their solo parenting role, in ways which boost their confidence as parents rather than undermine their parenting efforts, may prevent inter-generational boundaries from becoming inappropriately blurred and children being drawn into peer-like relationships with their mothers, characterised by extreme and pervasive levels of horizontal interaction and role reversal. In terms of father-child relationships, the importance of processes underpinning closeness between children and their fathers highlighted the need to move beyond solely maintaining father-child contact, particularly as children get older. Specifically, more consideration needs to be given to the settings in which contact takes place to maximise opportunities for intimacy, openness in communication and a sense of connection. However, the findings also illustrate that an absence of face-to-face contact does not preclude children's security in their father's commitment to his parental obligation – of key significance here was effort on the part of fathers to keep regular contact with their children, through email and telephone contact for example. These findings highlight particular strategies that may promote positive relationships between children and their non-resident parents.

The findings pertaining to how children dealt with the absence of their father indicated that children commonly engaged in an active process of making sense of their father's absence. Importantly, some children only knew their father through their mothers' accounts, but in some cases, little

information was available or forthcoming and children were reluctant to ask too many questions. Themes of loss and absence were prevalent, particularly among the child for whom contact with fathers was lost, or non-existent in the first place. Even though children may never have known their father, a sense of loss and ambiguity surrounding the loss was evident. Clearly, an acknowledgement of children's loss and open communication surrounding children's fathers may help children to cope with feelings of hurt and abandonment. Important messages from the adoption literature may have relevance in these situations of father-absence. Just as adopted parents are encouraged to tell their children as much as possible about their birth families (Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990), so too should parents consider the implications of not giving their children information about their biological father. These findings may have broader relevance to other family forms, such as those created through assisted reproduction techniques (Golombok, 2006). As parenthood becomes increasingly fragmented (Cook, 1999), the findings from the present study highlight the potential implications of depriving children of knowledge about their absent biological parents.

Key findings that have emerged from the present study represent important starting points for future research endeavours across a range of family settings. These include further investigation of children's sense of agency in their families particularly in relation to potential new partnerships for their parents; the delicate balance between vertical and horizontal relationship dynamics; processes of commitment and connection in parent-child relationships, and discrepancies between children's and parents' perspectives on family processes. Fruitful lines of enquiry for future research include the need to expand upon studies such as this, to explore the implications of other family relationships on children's experience of family life. More specifically, the single parent family structure may represent a starting point for the formation of a re-constituted or blended step-family. Follow-up studies of samples such as these may help to highlight how children manage transitions in their families. For example, the findings from the study indicated some potential difficulty in the acceptance of new partnerships, particularly in light of the exclusive nature of their relationship with their mothers. One difficulty in interpreting the findings pertaining to father loss and absence in the present investigation is the absence of a social father, in addition to the absence of a biological father. Therefore, it is not clear the extent to which issues of loss would be as salient, had a substitute father figure been in place. This remains an important area for future investigation. Greater awareness of how children negotiate and think about family dynamics will strengthen our understanding of the nuances and quality of children's family lives, and stimulate the development of policies and intervention programmes that are more responsive and relevant to children's needs and concerns.

The exclusive focus in the present study on children's relationships with their parents occurred at the expense of consideration of children's relationships with siblings and wider kin. A family systems

perspective clearly considers the parent-child relationship as only one of a number of relationships embedded within a broader web of relationship, which influence and are influenced by each other. However, the majority of research on family relationships in single parent families has focused on the parent-child relationship, and relationships between children and their grandparents and among siblings, for example, have not been widely studied (Deater-Deckard, Dunn & Lussier, 2002; Pryor, 2003). Findings from the present study highlight that siblings and relatives occupy a prominent position in children's family networks. However, the dearth of research on broader relationship systems within families, especially in those cases where fathers have been continuously absent for most of a child's life, make it difficult to be conclusive about the benefits of these relationships to children and adolescents in single parent families (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). More research is clearly needed to unravel the mechanisms by which relationships with siblings, grandparents and relatives operate and facilitate adjustment within different family types. Finally, a future study which involves comparison between children in different types of one-parent and two-parent families could help us to definitively state whether these processes are specific to one-parent families, or characterise other family types also.

Conclusion

In exploring the experiences of children being raised in a one-parent household, and their mothers, against the backdrop of a society which continues to privilege a traditional family form, this study has revealed the diversity and complexity that characterises contemporary family lives. By assigning a central place to the experiences and voices of children in the research, the study has validated an ontological position of children as co-creators and narrators of their experiences who navigate their worlds as active agents. By focusing solely on children who have grown up in a one-parent family from infancy, the study has rejected the assumption of uniformity of experience implied in much of the research that disregards the myriad of routes into lone parenthood. The study has illuminated the constant interplay between family structure and process, where living in a one parent family creates opportunities for certain types of interactions and places constraints on others. The findings from the study highlighted how an absent father from the outset or from early in the child's life made the establishment of a pattern of joint parenting between mothers and fathers highly unlikely. Furthermore, the absence of a history of shared residence between fathers and children not only intensified the risk that non-residence placed upon the maintenance of the contact between fathers and children, but also resulted in missed opportunities for fathers to establish intimacy with their children through care-giving, and clear parental role expectations. Models of parent-child relationships within these families pinpointed the significance of care-giving routines for children, where a sense of security in their parents' commitment to them was fostered, and a sense of connection with their parents was established through familiarity and ease in each other's presence. The study has drawn attention to the many challenges facing children who grow up in a one-parent

family, such as operating within the constraints of limited material and relational resources and coping with experiences of loss when one parent remains absent from their lives. On the other hand, the study has highlighted children's active participation in family life, as they positioned themselves as obligated and mutual providers of practical support and care working to create and sustain meaningful relationships in their family.

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APPENDIX I: PARENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Section 1 Background & Household Composition Details

This section relates to details about the educational background and composition of your household.

1. What age are you?

   How many children do you have?

   Details about Children (starting with eldest)

   Child's Name, Gender, Age (yrs and months), Residence (changes), Father?

2. Apart from yourself and your children (recorded above), does anybody else live in your home?

   Who (Relation), For how long?, Anybody else ever lived in the household?, How long ago was that? Why did they move?

3. At what age did you finish education?

4. Which of the following categories applies to you?

   Completed Primary School, Some secondary school, Completed Secondary School, Third Level (please describe), Other Qualifications (please describe)

   Since then, have you returned to education/training?

5. Are you currently in employment?

If NO

   Have you ever been in employment since your child was born?

   What age was your child when you started working?

   What age was your child when you stopped working?

   What did you work at?

   How many hours a week did you work at that time?

   Why did you stop working?

If *YES*

   What do you work at?

   How many hours a week do you work?

   What time(s) do you start work?

   What time(s) do you finish work?

   Do you work weekends/shift/shift work?

How long have you worked at this job?

What did you do beforehand?

How many hours a week did you work at that time?

Why did you change jobs?

6. What is your take-home pay each week/month?

7. Are you in receipt of any state benefits? (list all that apply)

Lone Parents Allowance, Children's Allowance, Rent Supplement/allowance

How much do you receive each week? (for each type of benefit)

Are you in private/local authority accommodation?/Home owner?

How much of your income/money goes on mortgage/rent?

8. Do you receive any financial support from child(ren)'s father(s)?

How often? How much? How do you receive this money? Would you receive any extra for Christmas/birthdays?

9. Thinking now of your household's total income, from all sources and from all household members, you say that your household is able to make ends meet?

With great difficulty, with difficulty, with some difficulty, fairly easily, easily, very easily

10. Has your household been in arrears at any time in the last 12 months, that is, unable to pay as scheduled any of the following? (yes/no/na)

Rent for accommodation

Mortgage repayments

Utility bills (electricity, gas)

Hire purchase instalments or credit card debts or other loan repayments

Hospital or medical bills

Has the household had to go into debt with the last 12 months to meet ordinary living expenses such as food, Christmas, back-to-school expenses, rent or mortgage?

Has your financial situation changed over the last few years?

In what way – is it harder, easier, the same? For what reason(s)?

Section 2 Contact with Child's Father

This section relates to the nature of the contact (if any) that you have with your child's father, and the nature of the contact (if any) that your child has with his/her father.

1. Do you have any contact with the child's father?

   What is the nature of the contact (telephone calls, letters, face-to-face meetings)? How often does this contact take place? (for each kind), Have you always had contact with child's father, since his/her birth? (If no, why not? How was contact initiated?)

   If mother has no contact, why not? When did contact cease?

2. Would you like the contact between yourself and the child's father to be any different?

   Do you see it changing in the future? In what way?

3. Does your child have contact with his/her father?

   What is the nature of the contact (telephone calls, letters, face-to-face meetings)? How often does this contact take place? (for each kind)

   For face-to-face contact:

   Where do they meet?

   Who else is present (e.g. father's partner, other children)
   Does your child have any involvement in another family life/feel like they are part of two families?

   What do they do together?

   When they meet, how long, on average, do they spend together?

   How often does this contact take place?

   Does your child ever stay overnight with his/her father? If yes, how often?

4. Who takes responsibility for maintaining contact?

5. Are there any barriers to your child's contact with his/her father? (what factors facilitate or hinder contact?)

6. Has the contact between your child and his/her father changed over time?

   In what way? What was the nature of the contact before? For what reasons, do you think, contact has changed?

7. Do you think your child would want the contact now to be any different?

   In what way?

8. What meaning do you think contact has for your child/children?

Do you think it is important to him/her? (E.g. if child misses contact for some reason, how does he/she react?)

9. How do you think the contact will be in the future?

10. How do you/would you feel about your child's contact with his/her father?

How do you/would you feel about your child having no contact/no relationship with his/her father?

Section 3 Care-giving & Parenting

This section relates to care-giving & parenting. The questions are particularly concerned with issues of support in care-giving and parenting roles.

1. Describe what it is like to be parenting without a partner in the home.

   What is positive about the experience?

   What is negative about it?

   Is it enjoyable? What makes it like that?

   Is it a burden? What makes it like that?

2. Tell me a bit about who looks after (child's name).

   Who makes your child's dinner/main meal on schooldays/at weekends?

   If your child was sick and needed to go to the doctor, who would take him/her?

   Would there be anybody else you could call on, if you weren't available?

   Who helps your child with his/her homework?

   Who makes arrangements for childcare? Either formal or informal? Does the father have any role?

   Who has responsibility for school matters? Does father/other relative have any role?

3. Can you describe what would happen if a big decision had to made about your child?

   Examples

   Who would you discuss it with?

   Would the child have any role to play in the decision? (esp re contact and relationship with father)

   Roles of other possible people

   Does the ultimate decision lie with you?

   Does this make it easier/more difficult?

4. Tell me about discipline with your child…

   What happens if your child does something wrong?

How does that work for you? Do you find it difficult/easy?

Is this effective?

Are there times when you feel it's not working?

Does father/other relative have a role to play in this?

Has it become easier/more difficult over the years?/as the child gets older?

5. Do you feel that you are supported in your role as a parent?

Can you tell me about that? Describe the types and sources of support... (If you yourself needed a break, would you have anyone to call on?)

How does this make you feel...supported?/not supported/ lonely/isolated/burden of responsibility? Do you feel you have enough contact with people outside? Friends/other parents? Support/Contact with extended family/father's family?

Support from child (responsibility for siblings, chores)

6. Describe how (child) spends their time...what about spending time together

Apart from going to school, how does your child spend his/her time (in the afternoons, evenings, weekends)?

Who brings/collects him/her to these activities?

What about you spending time with your child?

(Do you ever go out anywhere with your child? Where?/ How often?/ Can you think of an example lately when this happened? What about if child wanted to see a particular film?)

Do you know your child's friends? (How well? How often would you see them?)

Does the child have a chance to spend time in the house alone/without you there? How often? Who would be there?

Does the child ever stay overnight anywhere else? How often?

How do you celebrate special occasions? (Christmas, birthdays, what do you do? With whom?)

7. Who does your child depend on?

In times of stress? Examples?

If they were upset about something?

If something good happened to your child (e.g. they won a prize at school), who do you think they would want to tell?

Section 4 Parent-Child Relationship

This section relates to the mother's perception of the relationship between herself and her child.

1. How would you describe your relationship with your child?

   Tell me about how you and your child get on with each other.

   Has it always been that way, or has it changed over the years?

   Can you describe how? For what reasons?

2. What things do you enjoy doing together?

3. Tell me about arguments that you might have...

   Are there any sources of tension in the relationship? Tell me about those.

   What kind of things do you argue about?/Any particular issues that you argue about often?

   How are these arguments usually resolved?

4. Do you find it difficult or easy to talk to each other? Tell me about that.

   Does your child talk to you about their personal issues? What kind of things? Has it always been this way/changed over the years?

   Do you talk to your child about personal issues?

5. Is there a difference between how you relate to this child and his/her siblings/your other children? Tell me about that.

6. Would you say the fact that you are parenting alone has any impact on your relationship with your child?

   Can you tell me about that?

   Can you imagine how your relationship might be different if there were two parents there?

   Do you think your relationship with your child is different from friends' relationships with their children?

   How do you think your child sees the relationship?

   Has this changed over time? In what way?

7. What views and feelings do you think your child has about living in a one-parent family?

   Does your child ever talk to you about it?

   Does your child ask you questions about it?

   Do you yourself feel that it is an issue for him/her? Tell me more about that.

   Does your child compare his/her family with their friends' families?

Do they have a sense of themselves as being in any way different?

8. Having talked about the relationship, what would you pick out as being the most positive aspects of the relationship?

What about the negative aspects of the relationship?

Has your relationship always been this way/changed over the years?

In what way? What contributed to this change?

Is there anything about the relationship with your child that makes it unique?

Do you think this has anything to do with the fact that you are parenting your child alone?

APPENDIX II: CHILD/YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Section 1: Background & Family Composition Information

This section relates to details about the child's household and family composition

1. What age are you?
2. What class are you in?
3. Who lives here with you?

   Are you related? How? How long have you lived here? Was there ever somebody else who used to live here who doesn't live here anymore? When/Why did they move?

4. Today we're going to be talking about family and I am interested in hearing your ideas about family. What do you think about when I say the word "family"?

   (Prompt for descriptions – verbal and images, feelings evoked).

5. What do you think children need a family for?
6. Now I am going to ask you about your family…

(Younger children) Draw picture of family – Tell me something about your family and the people in your family who are important to you

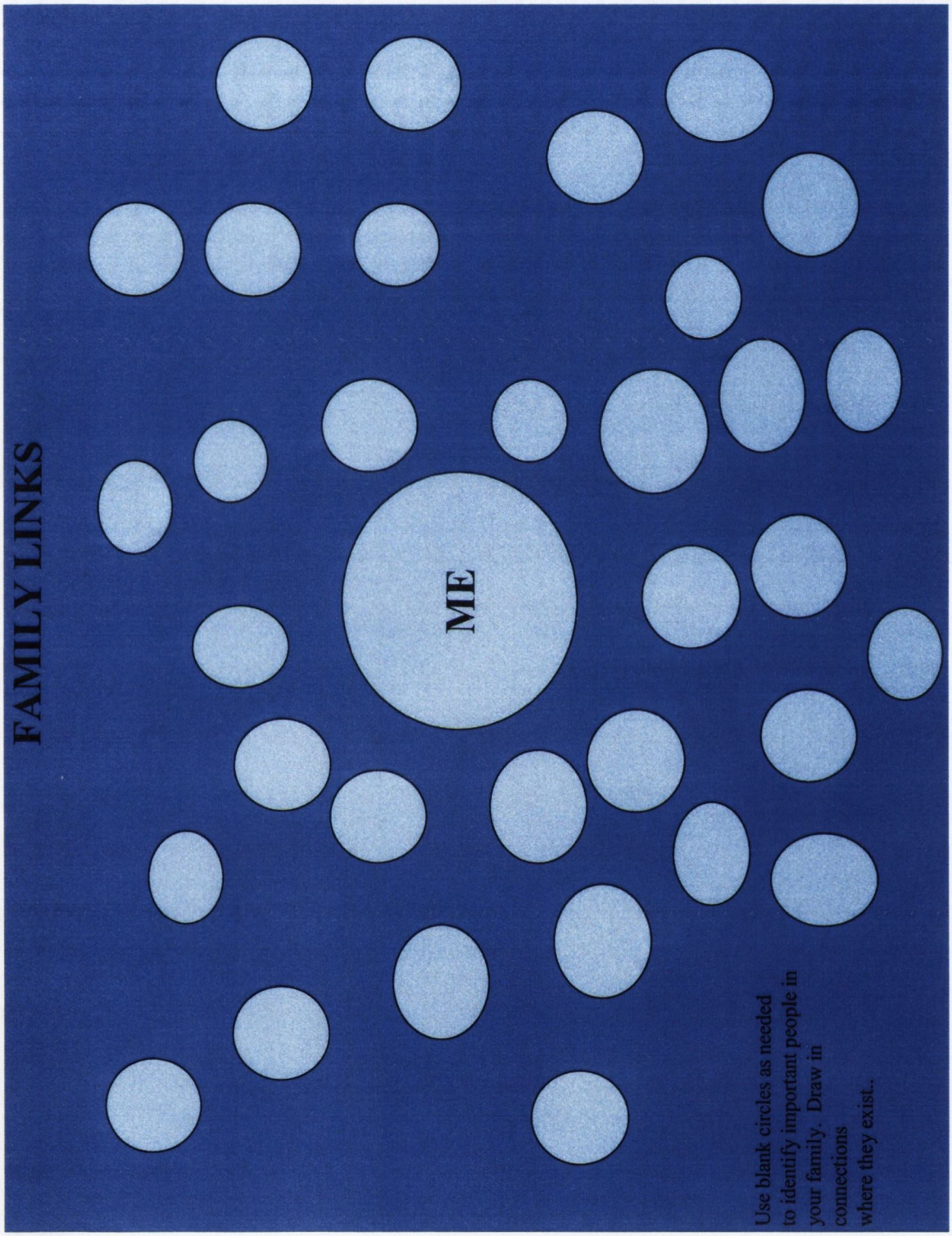
(Older children) Family Links Map – Use blank circles as needed to identify important people in your family

Check: family members living in same household as child and relationship to child.

Check: other people living in child's household, or there most of the time, who are not mentioned by the child as part of his/her family.

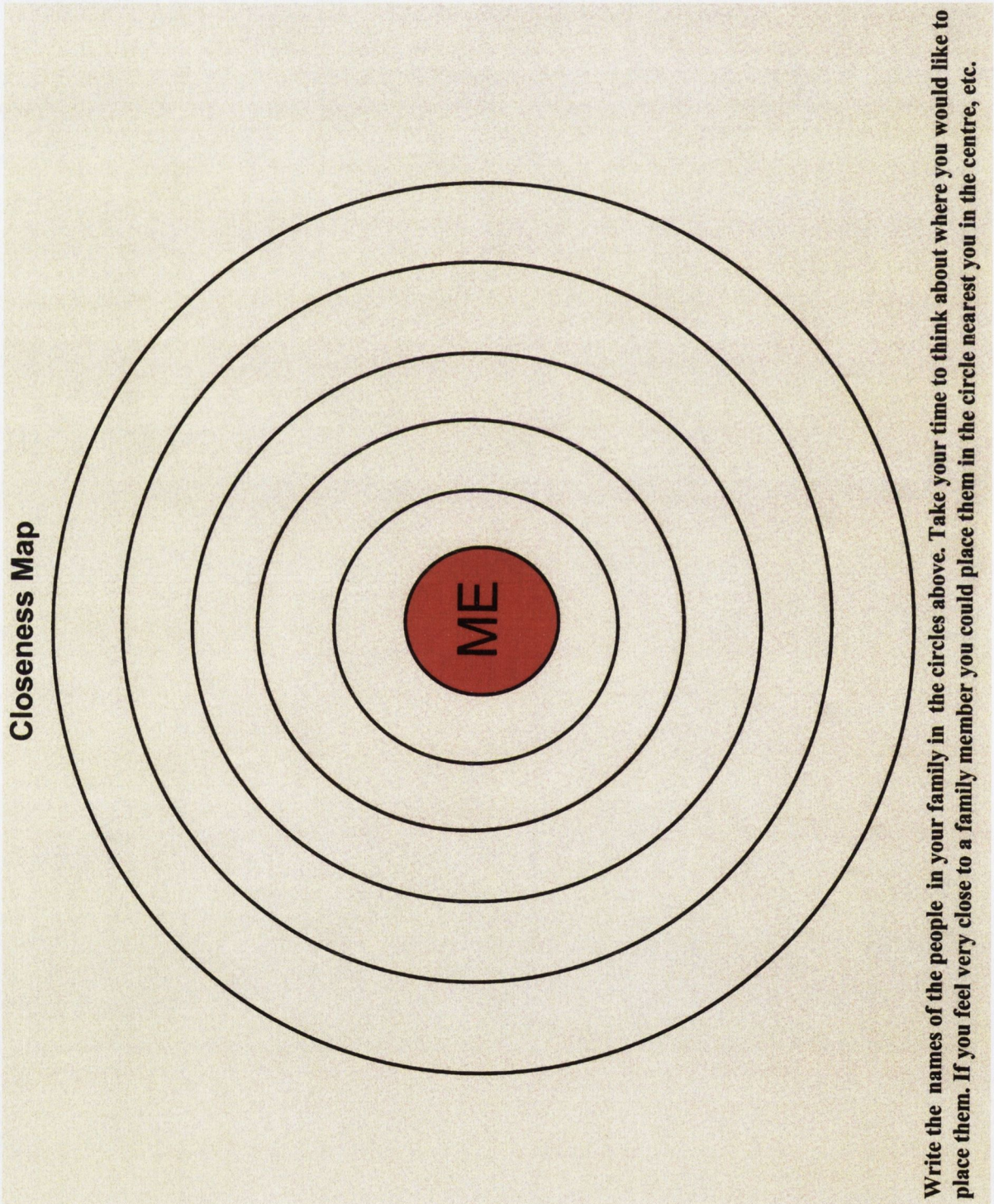
Check: family members not living in same household as child and how they are related to child, how often child sees them – where, when, what they do together.

Family Links Map



Emotional Closeness Map

Write the names of the people in your family in the circles above. Take your time to think about where you would like to place them. If you feel very close to a family member you would place them in the circle next to you in the middle, if you didn't feel close to them at all, you would place them in one of the circles further away from you.



Section 2 Relationship with Mother

This section relates to the child's perception of their relationship with their mother.

1. Closeness: You have placed your mum/mother/ma/mam (whichever term child uses) in this circle. Would you say you feel *close* to her?

   What do you mean by that? Maybe think about what things made you decide to put her in that circle.

   What kind of things does she do that make you feel close/not close to her?

   Could you give me some examples of situations or times when you feel close to your mum?

   Is there anything that makes it hard for you to feel close to her?

2. Responsiveness to Needs/Perceived Obligations:

   What do you think children need a mum for? What do you think a good mum should be like?

   What things do you need your mum for?

   What things does your mam do for you?

   Can you give me some examples?

   Will that be different/stay the same when you get older? (in what way?)

   Would you say your mum knows how things are for you? How you're feeling? Can you tell me about a time when your mam knew what you were feeling?

   What kind of things do you think your mum might need from you?

   What things do you do for your mum?

3. Enjoyed Activities: Do you do things together? How do you spend time your together?

   How often?

   What is this like? (Boring, rather be with friends?)

   What are your favourite things to do with him/her?

4. Communication: What do you and your mum usually talk about?

   Can you give me examples?

   Is it easy to talk to her or is it hard sometimes to talk to her?

   Do you think she listens to you? How do you know?

   Do you ask for her advice?

   Do you tell her private things?

   What things would you not like to talk to your mum about?

   Do you ever feel you have to watch what you say? Why?

Are there times when you can't talk to her because you're afraid you'll upset her?

Do you think you talk to your mum the same/less/more than your friends talk to their mums?

Do she tell *you* her problems?/private things? Would you like her to more/less?

5 Conflict: Do you ever have arguments or fights with your mum?

Tell me about the worst one you can remember.

What kind of things do you fight about?

How often?

What do you do to make up?

6 Other Family Relationships: What other people in your family would you say you feel close to?

Is how you feel towards them different to how you feel towards your mum?

Do you think there's a difference between how you feel close to (other family member) and your mum?

7 What's the best thing about you and your mum?

What's the worst thing about how you get on with your mum? Would you like things to change?

What do you think makes your relationship with your mum special?

Has it anything to do with the fact that your dad is not around?

Section 3 Concept of Family

This section relates to the child's concept of family and family roles.

1. You were saying earlier that you thought a family was … If you were describing *your* family to somebody, what would you say?

2. What do you think about your family and the way you only live with your mum (and whoever)

Do people ever ask you about this? Tell me about that

How would you explain this to somebody?

Do you ever talk about family with any of your friends?

Do any of your friends have families like yours, where there is only one parent living in the house?

What do they think about it?

Do you ever talk to your mum about family and the fact that she is the only parent in the house?

What do you think will happen with your family in the future? (New people coming in?)

3. You were saying earlier that you thought a mother's job was to....

   What do you think a father's job in a family is?

   Do you think mothers or fathers are more important or are they just the same?

   Do you think children need to have a father? Why?

Section 4 Care-giving & Parenting Arrangements

This section asks the child about who looks after them in their family.

1. Daily Care-giving Routines

   Tell me about who looks after you at home....

   What does she/he do? How do they do this?

   Has it always been this way?

2. Does anyone else ever help with this?

   Who? Why ? How often?

   Do you think she has enough help?

3. Prompt for examples of care-giving...

   Who prepares your lunch for school?/makes your dinner/main meal on schooldays?

   If you were sick in school, what would happen? Who would look after you, if you had to stay home from school because you were sick?

   If your mam was going out/out working in the evening, who would look after you?

   Where? How often? Stay in house alone? Friends come around?

   Do you ever stay overnight in somebody else's house? Where? How often? Why? Who decides?

4. Is there ever a time when (main care-giver) is not able to take care of you?

   Why not? How often? Who would step in?

   Who do you like looking after you the best? Why?

   Who do you not like looking after you? Why not?

   What do you do when you get home from school/ at weekends?

5. After school activities? Who do you do these activities with?

   How often?

   Who brings/collects him/her to these activities?

   Who pays for this? Who decides that you can do these activities?

6. Discipline: Tell me about the kind of things you're not allowed do....if you do something wrong and you get caught, what happens?

   Example?

   How are you punished? By who? Does this work? Anybody else involved in discipline? Do you listen more to one person?

7. Support: Who do you rely on? Who would you go to for help/in a time of stress?/ if you were upset about something? Who would you talk to about a problem?

   Examples?

   Is it easy to tell that person?

   Why would you go to that person? What would they do?

   If you were in trouble in school, would you tell anyone? Would you be afraid to tell someone in case you got into more trouble?

   If something good happened, who would you want to tell?

8. Ideas about living with one parent

   How do you feel about the fact that your mum is the only parent living in your house?

   Can you imagine what might make things easier for your mum looking after you?

   Does this mean that there are things you have to do to help? Tell me about that How would you explain this to somebody?

   Would you like there to be another person there? Would that make things easier for your mum?/more difficult for your mum?

   Do you ever talk about family with any of your friends?

   How do you think your mum feels about being the only parent in the house?

APPENDIX III: INFORMATION LEAFLETS & LETTERS OF INVITATION

Information Leaflet about Study

Research Study on Parenting Alone



Research by:
The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin.

Can you help me?

- I am carrying out a study of parents who are parenting alone and their children. I am interested in talking to parents who have been on their own for most of the time since their child was young.
- I am interested in finding out about the different types of support that mothers or fathers receive in caring for their children.
- I am also interested in talking to children and adolescents to find out about their ideas about family and who looks after them in their family, in addition to their mother or father.
- The study will provide valuable information about the varying experiences of parents who are parenting alone and their children, in Ireland. Hopefully the information will be useful for those who are developing services for lone parents.
- If you are **parenting alone** and have a **child between the ages of 7 and 17**, I would be very interested in talking to you.
- Participation in the study would involve a 40-60 minute meeting with me. This can take place in your home, or wherever is convenient for you.
- All information will be completely confidential and your name or any identifying details will not be used on anything that I write about the research.

If you are interested in finding out more about the study and/or possibly taking part, please return your contact details in the S.A.E. or contact me: **Elizabeth Nixon @ [telephone no]**

Letter of Invitation to Parents, Distributed through Schools

The Children's Research Centre,
Trinity College,
Dublin 2.

Tel: [01] 608 29 01
Fax: [01] 608 23 47
Email: ccentre@tcd.ie

Date

Dear Parent,

I work with the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin, and am writing to tell you about a research study that I am doing. The study aims to find out about the experiences of parents and their children, where the mother or father is parenting alone. I am particularly interested in finding out about the support that lone parents receive in caring for their children. It is hoped that the study will provide valuable information about the varying experiences of lone parents in Ireland.

[Name of School Principal] has kindly agreed to facilitate this research by sending letters to all parents of students attending the school, on my behalf. I am hoping to talk to mothers or fathers who are parenting without the support of a partner in the home. I am also hoping, at a later stage, to talk to some young people to find about their experiences.

Participation in the study would involve a 40-60 minute meeting with me, either in your home or in the school if it can be arranged, or wherever is most convenient for you. All information will be completely confidential and your name or any identifying details will not be used on anything that I write about the research.

If you are parenting alone and think that you might be interested in finding out more about the research, I would be very grateful if you could fill in your details below and return the slip to the school, as soon as possible. Alternatively, you may prefer to telephone me directly at [telephone number], or the project supervisor, Dr. Diane Hogan at [telephone number], or write to me at the address above.

Many thanks for your consideration in this matter.
Yours sincerely,

_____
Elizabeth Nixon,
The Children's Research Centre.

✂----------

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____

Tel. No. _____ (day) _____ (evening) _____ (mobile)

Child's Name: _____ Child's Age: _____

Letter of Invitation to Children, Delivered through Parents

the children's research centre
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
research for children and young people



Dear

My name is Elizabeth and I work in the Children's Research Centre, in Trinity College. I am doing a research study to find out about families, who have one parent living with the children. This information will help us to understand what it is like for parents and children in these families.

I have already talked to your mum, as part of the study, and I would really like to talk to you as well. Your mum said that it would be ok for me to ask you to talk to me.

If you did agree to talk to me, I would be asking you to tell me what it is like to live in your family. You would not have to talk about anything that you did not want to talk about. Everything that we talk about would be kept private and nobody would know that you took part in the study. This chat might take about 45 minutes.

I will ring you in the next day or so, to see if you would be interested in talking to me.

I really hope you will agree to talk to me and I look forward to meeting you,

_____

Elizabeth Nixon,
Children's Research Centre.

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: +353-1-608 2901 Fax: +353-1-608 2347 Email: ccentre@tcd.ie http://www.tcd.ie/Childrens_Centre/

APPENDIX IV: COPY OF LETTER OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Department of Psychology

University of Dublin, Trinity College
Dublin 2, Ireland

Tel: +353 1 608 1886
Fax: +353 1 671 2006

Head of Department: Professor Ian Robertson

Department of Psychology
Ethics Committee

April 10, 2002

Dear Elizabeth Nixon,

The Department of Psychology Ethics Committee met recently to consider your application for approval. The Committee decided to approve your application provided the following conditions are met. It is not necessary to resubmit to the Committee.

- Clarify your definition of 'solo' mother families in the Information Sheet. The current phrase 'children who have lived with the mother and the *mother has never married'* is not a workable definition since it does not imply the presence or absence of a father (or father figure).

- To maintain confidentiality, the letter of consent should be returned to the researcher and not to the principal of the school.

- Be aware of personal security risks when agreeing to interview in private home. Please let your supervisor know your whereabouts and expected return time when testing off campus.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Newell

Dr. Fiona Newell
(on behalf of the Department of Psychology Ethics Committee)

APPENDIX V: CONSENT FORMS

Parent Consent Form

the children's research centre
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
research for children and young people



Parent Consent Form

I give my permission to Elizabeth Nixon to interview me _____

(parent's name) for a research project on family life in a one-parent family.

I understand that all information from the interviews will be completely confidential and used solely for the purposes of the research. This means that the information may be used for any presentations or reports that Elizabeth writes about her research, but any identifying information will be changed.

Signed _____

Date _____

Elizabeth Nixon – Ph.D candidate (Tel. 01-6082901)
Supervisors: *Dr. Sheila Greene (Tel. 01-6082901)*
Dr. Diane Hogan (Tel. 01-6082589)

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
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Parent Consent Form for Child

the children's research centre
TRINITY COLLEGE Dublin
Research for children and young people



Parent Consent Form for Child Consent

I _____ (parent's name) give my permission for Elizabeth Nixon to interview _____ (child's name) for a research project on children's experience of family life in a one-parent family.

I understand that

- ID codes will be used so that no child can be identified by anybody other than Elizabeth Nixon and her research supervisors
- All information covered in the interview will be completely confidential and used solely for the purposes of the research. If Elizabeth is using information for presentations or reports based on her research, all identifying information will be changed
- (Child's name) can tell Elizabeth if there are any questions he does not wish to answer and is free to withdraw from the interview at any time if he wishes
- If (Child's name) says something that causes Elizabeth to be worried about his/her safety or well-being, she will have to tell this to a parent but not without letting (Child's name) know beforehand.

Signed_____

Date_____

Elizabeth Nixon – Ph.D candidate (Tel. 01-6082901)
Supervisors: *Dr. Sheila Greene (Tel. 01-6082901)*
Dr. Diane Hogan (Tel. 01-6082589)

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: +353-1-608 2901 Fax: +353-1-608 2347 Email: ccentre@tcd.ie http://www.tcd.ie/Childrens_Centre/

Child Consent Form

the children's research centre
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
Research for children and young people



Child Consent Form

I _____ agree to talk to Elizabeth Nixon, as part of a research study on family life in a one-parent family.

When I talk to Elizabeth, I understand that:

- Elizabeth will give me a code name so that nobody will know my real name
- Everything that we talk about is private – just between Elizabeth and I. She will not discuss the information with anybody else apart from her supervisors.
- I will only talk about what I want to talk about and I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to.
- I can stop talking to Elizabeth or turn off the tape-recorder at any time.
- If I tell Elizabeth something that makes her worry about my safety, she will have to talk to someone who looks after me (for example, my parent). She will not do this without letting me know first.

Signed_____

Date_____

Elizabeth Nixon – Ph.D candidate (Tel. 01-6082901)
Supervisors: *Dr. Sheila Greene (Tel. 01-6082901)*
Dr. Diane Hogan (Tel. 01-6082589)

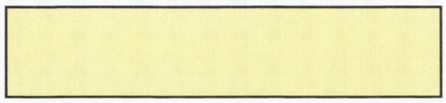
The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: +353-1-608 2901 Fax: +353-1-608 2347 Email: ccentre@tcd.ie http://www.tcd.ie/Childrens_Centre/

APPENDIX VI: CODING FRAME

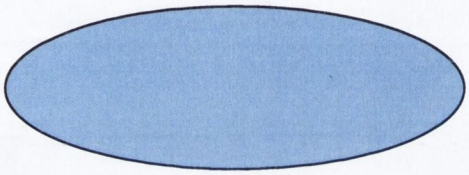
Demographic Profile of Participants & Family Contexts

Demographic Profile of Children	Age Gender Class in School	
Demographic Profile of Mothers	Age Number of Children Marital Status Routes into Lone Parenthood Length of Time Parenting Alone	Nature of Mother's Relationship with Child's Father
Household Composition	Presence of Siblings in Household Presence of Grandparents in household Presence of other individuals in household (including new partners)	Nature of Sibling Relationship (full, step) Stability/Change in Household Composition
Contact with Fathers	History of Co-habitation with fathers Frequency of mother-father contact Frequency of child-father contact	Stability of Patterns of Child-Father Contact
Education & Employment	Highest level of education completed Employment Circumstances (full, part-time)	Return to education Changes in Employment over Time Need for Child Care
Financial Circumstances	Receipt of OPFP Receipt of Maintenance from Fathers Housing Tenure	Financial struggles Changes in Financial Circumstances over Time Changes in Residence

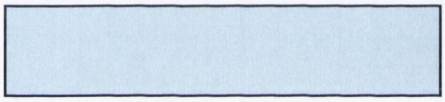
Legend for Coding Frame



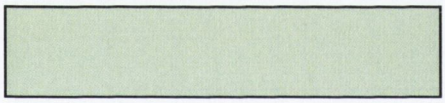
Initial Categories



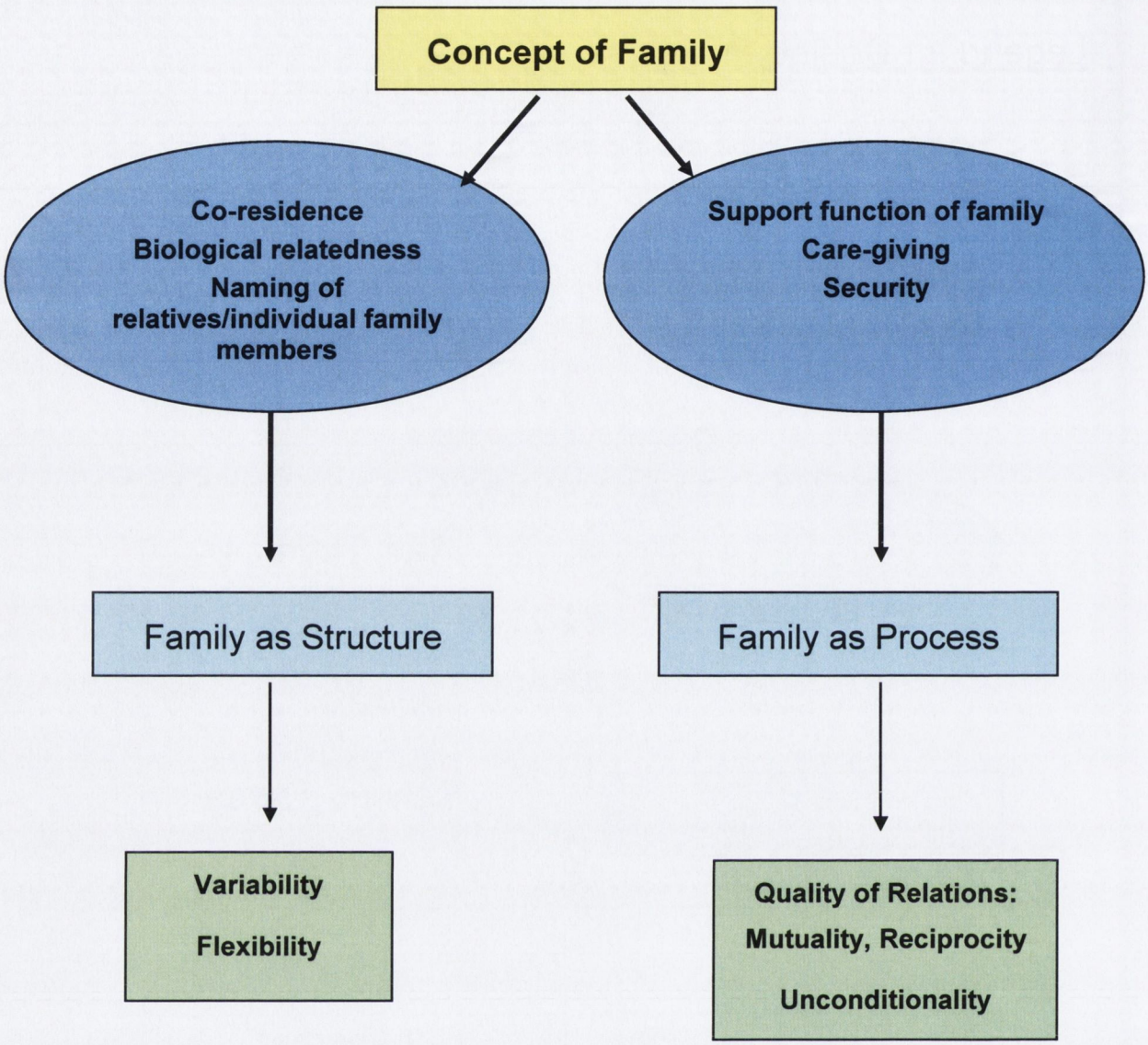
Raw Themes

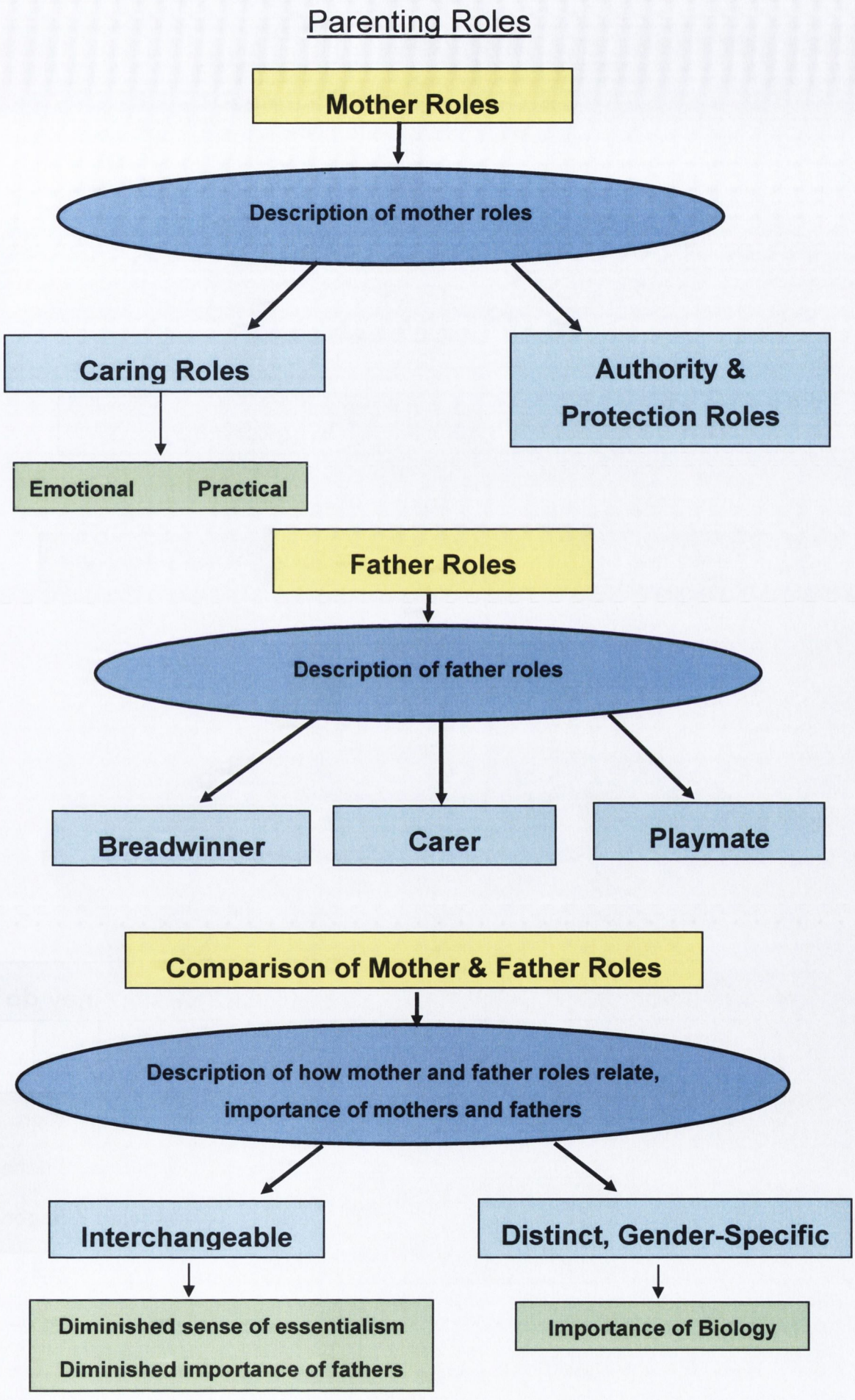


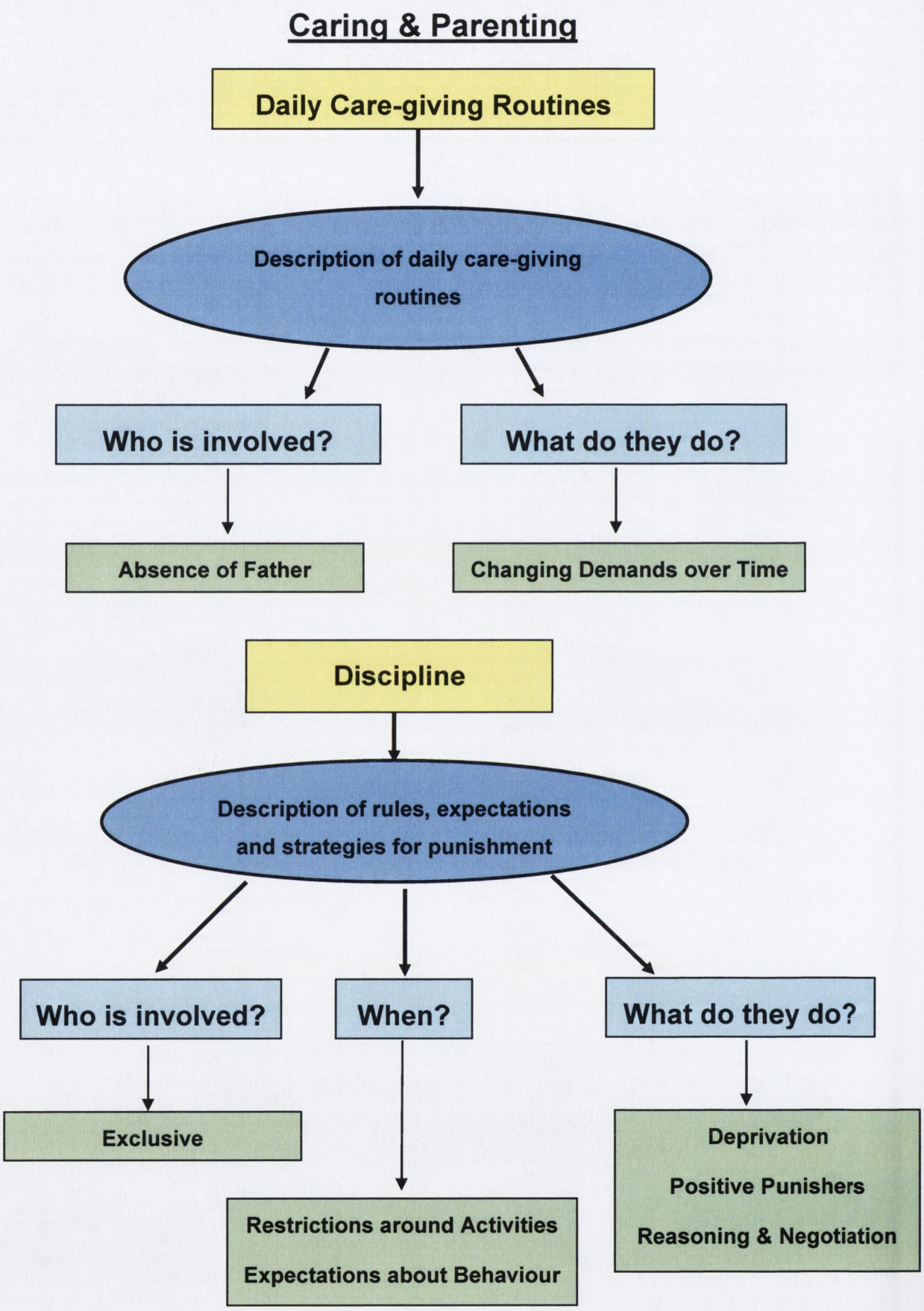
Refined Themes

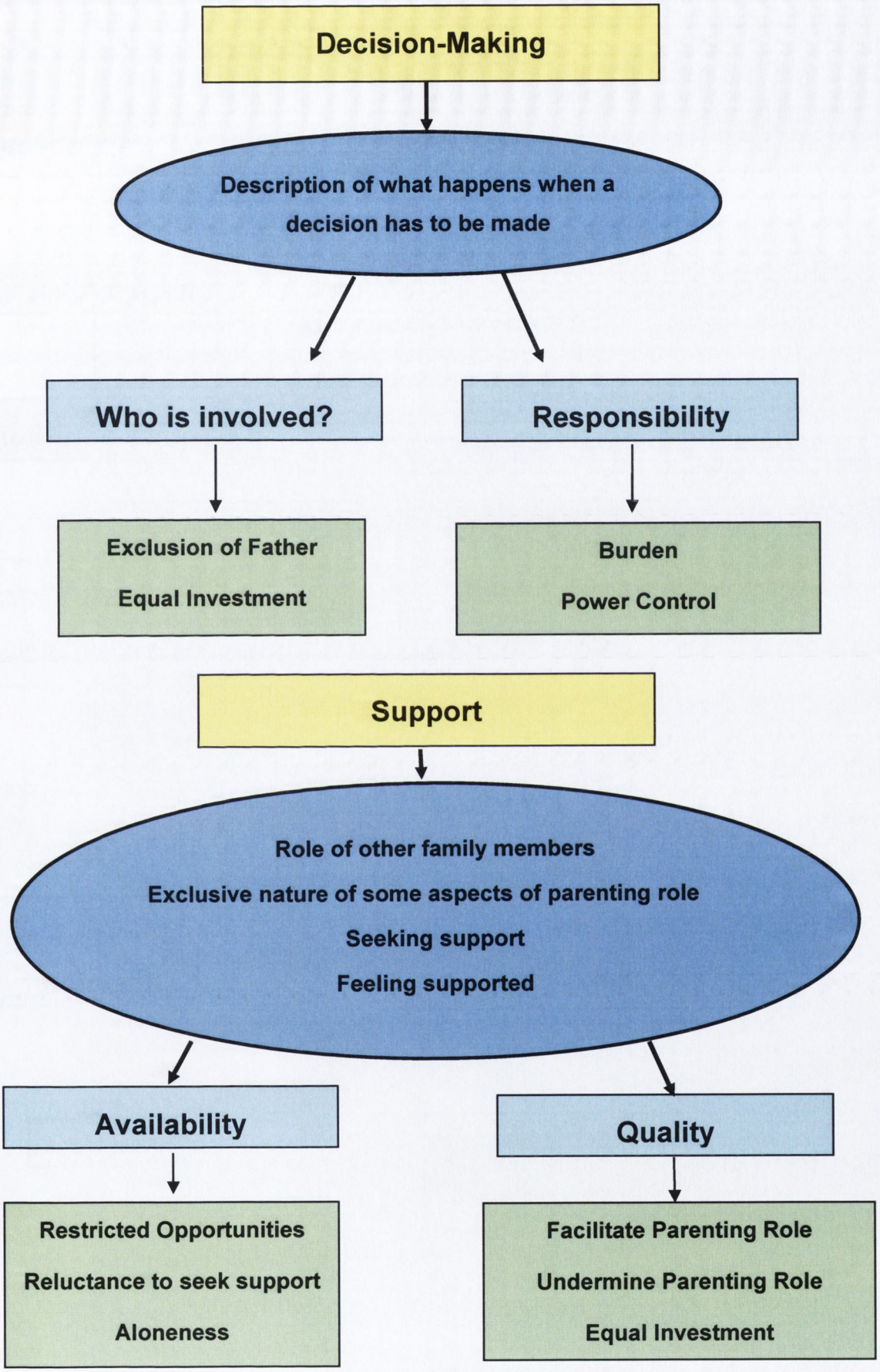


Sub-themes

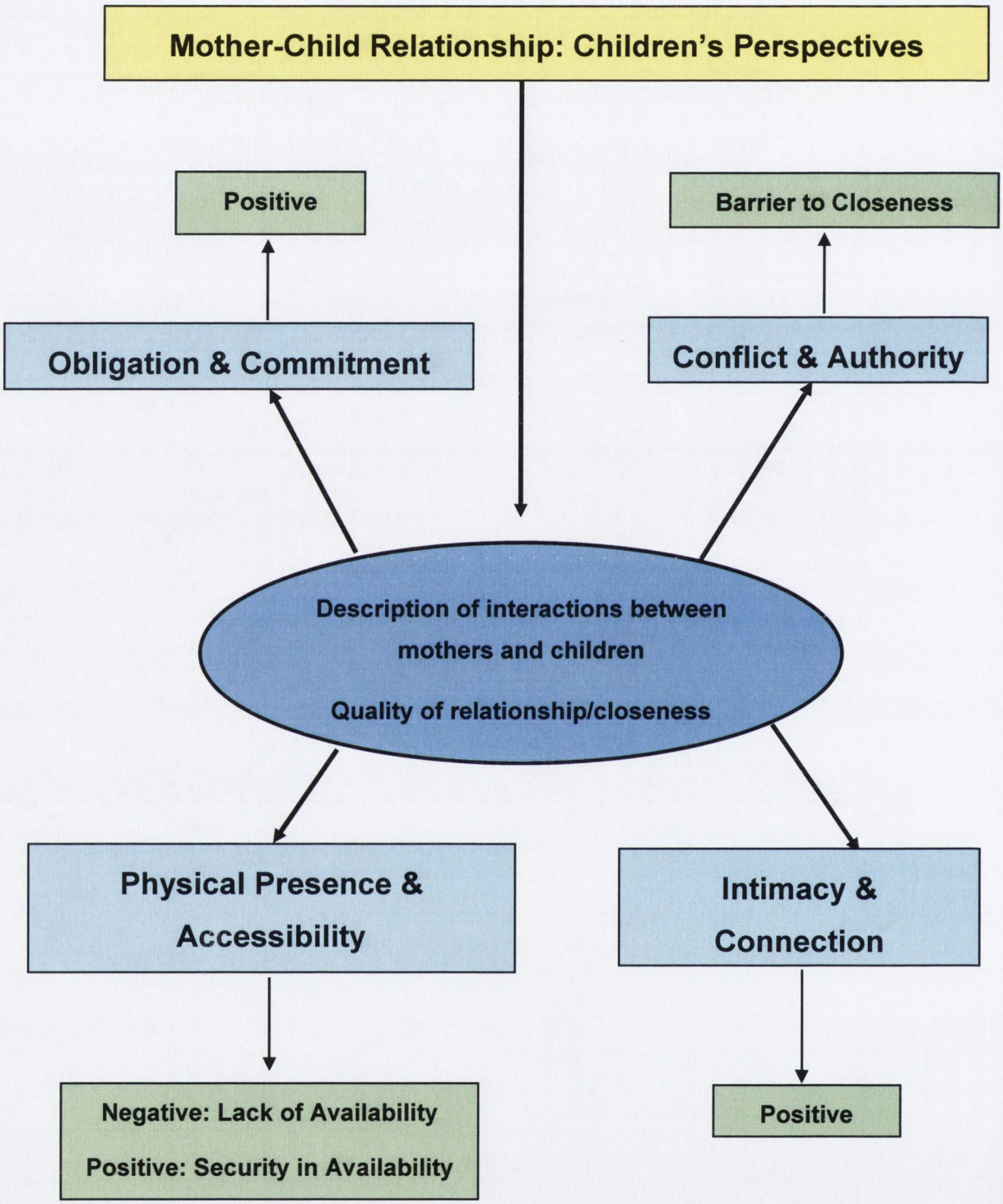

Concept of Family
Co-residence
Biological relatedness
Naming of relatives/individual family members
Support function of family
Care-giving
Security
Family as Structure
Family as Process
Variability
Flexibility
Quality of Relations:
Mutuality, Reciprocity
Unconditionality

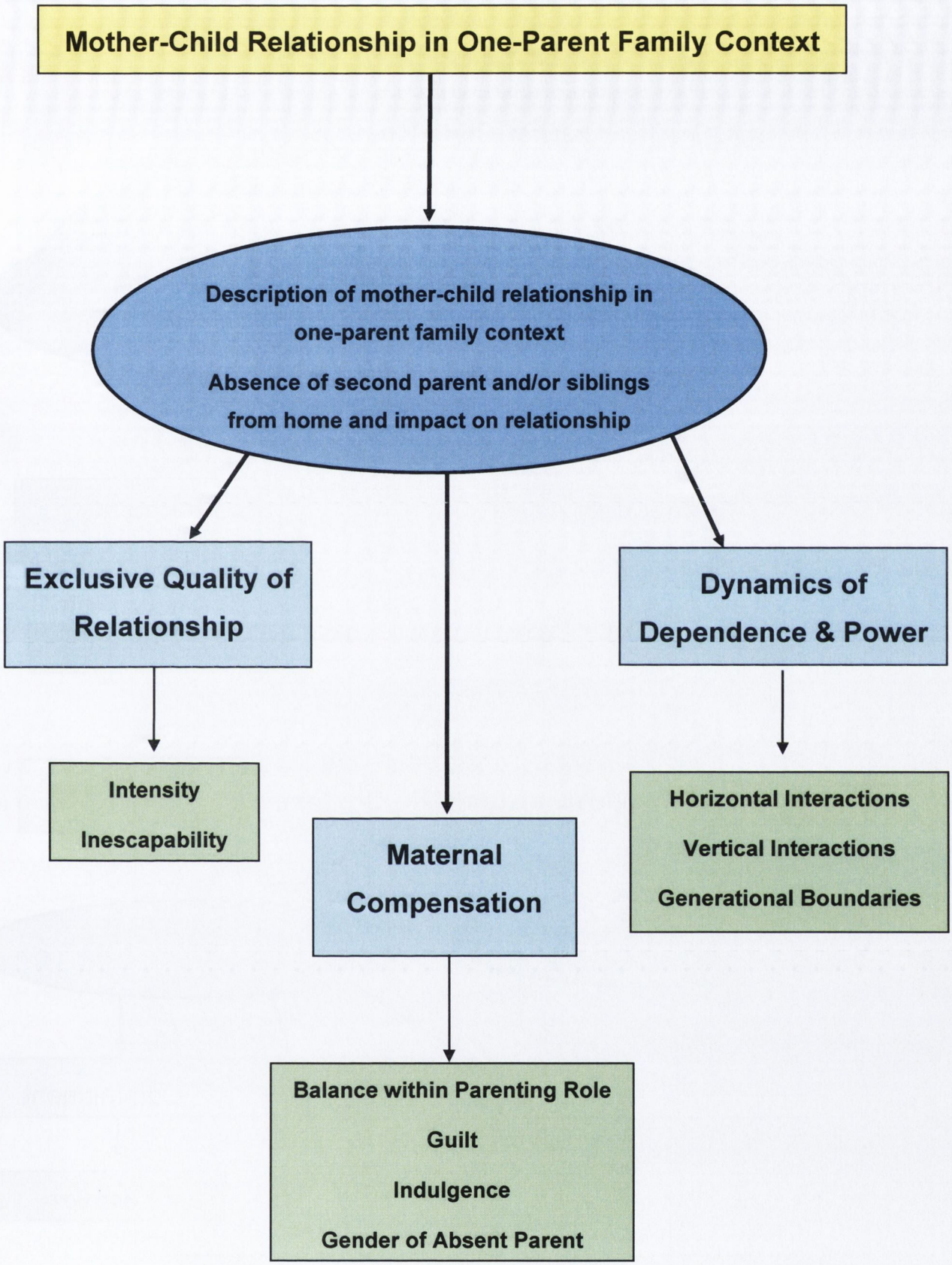

Parenting Roles
Mother Roles
Description of mother roles
Caring Roles
Authority & Protection Roles
Emotional
Practical
Father Roles
Description of father roles
Breadwinner
Carer
Playmate
Comparison of Mother & Father Roles
Description of how mother and father roles relate, importance of mothers and fathers
Interchangeable
Distinct, Gender-Specific
Diminished sense of essentialism
Diminished importance of fathers
Importance of Biology


Caring & Parenting
Daily Care-giving Routines
Description of daily care-giving routines
Who is involved?
What do they do?
Absence of Father
Changing Demands over Time
Discipline
Description of rules, expectations and strategies for punishment
Who is involved?
When?
What do they do?
Exclusive
Restrictions around Activities
Expectations about Behaviour
Deprivation
Positive Punishers
Reasoning & Negotiation

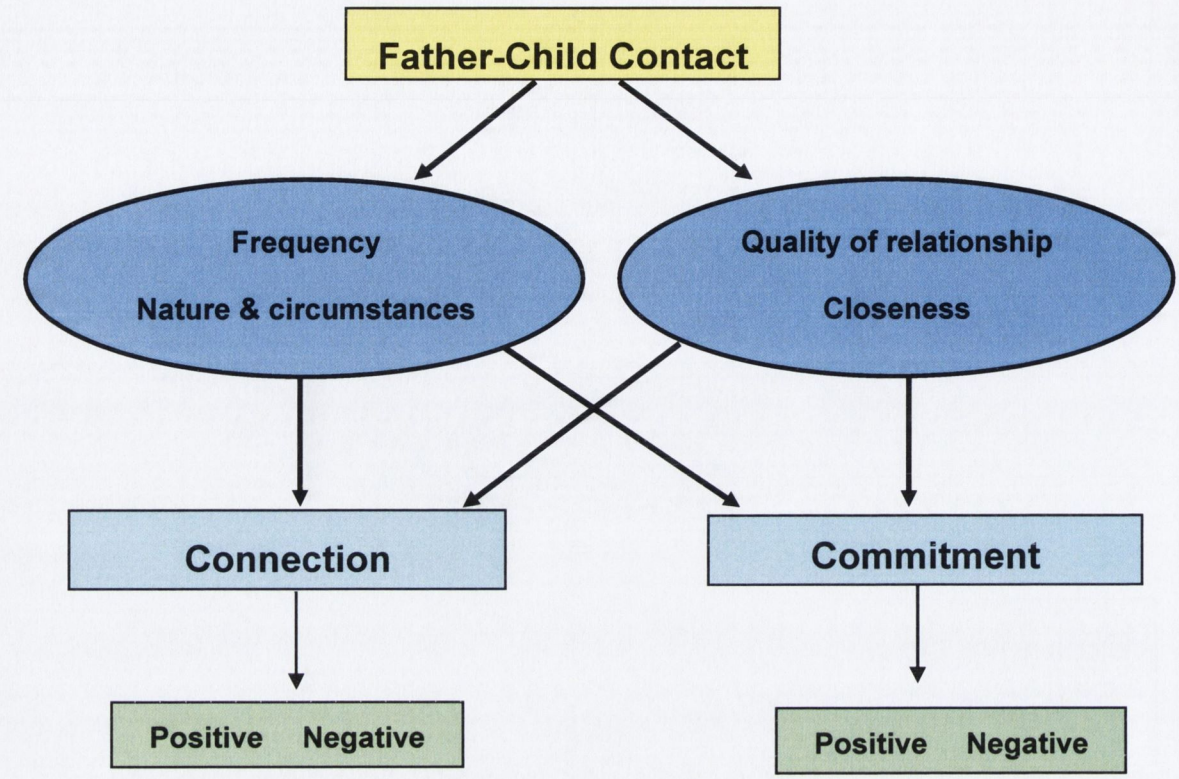

Decision-Making
Description of what happens when a decision has to be made
Who is involved?
Responsibility
Exclusion of Father
Equal Investment
Burden
Power Control
Support
Role of other family members
Exclusive nature of some aspects of parenting role
Seeking support
Feeling supported
Availability
Quality
Restricted Opportunities
Reluctance to seek support
Aloneness
Facilitate Parenting Role
Undermine Parenting Role
Equal Investment

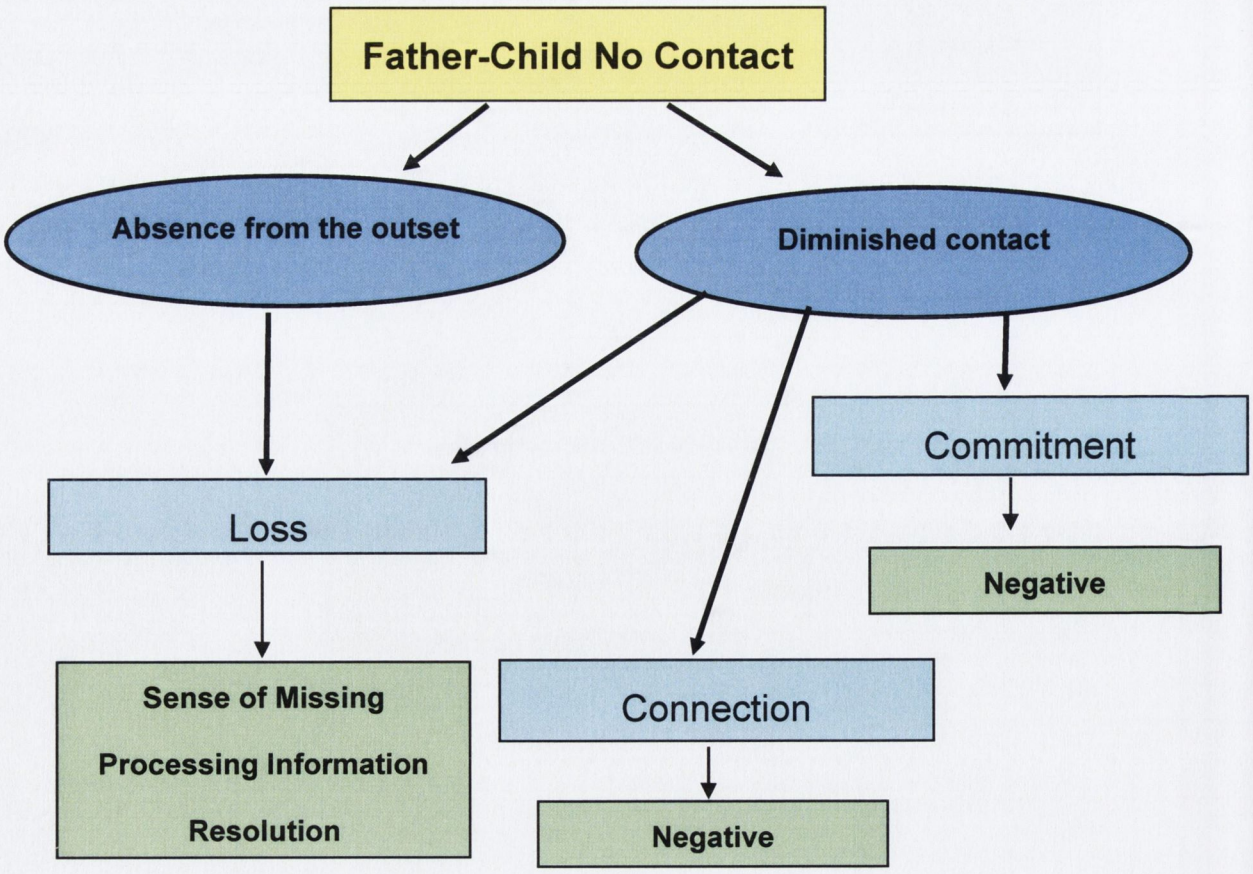
Mother-Child Relations

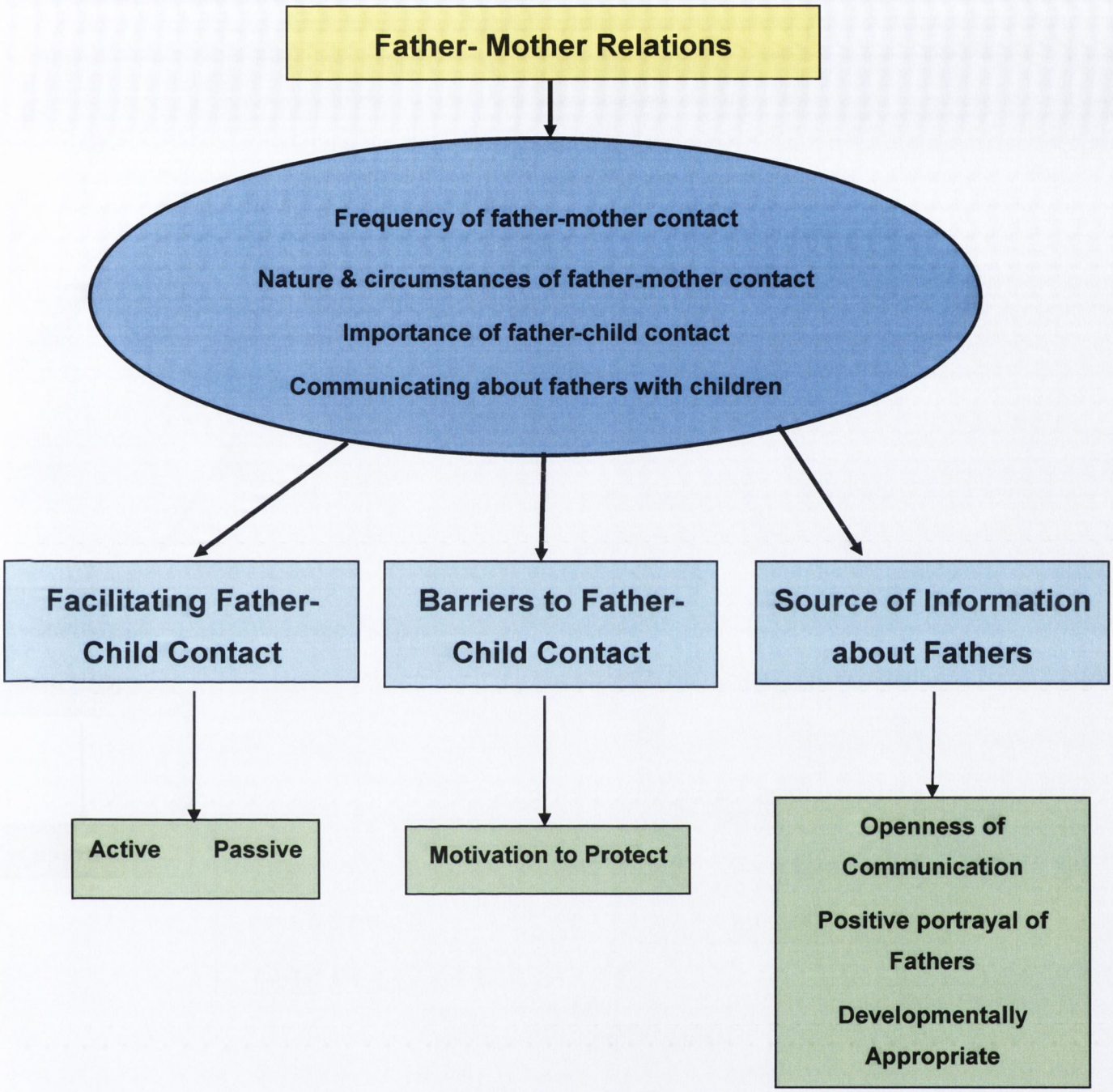


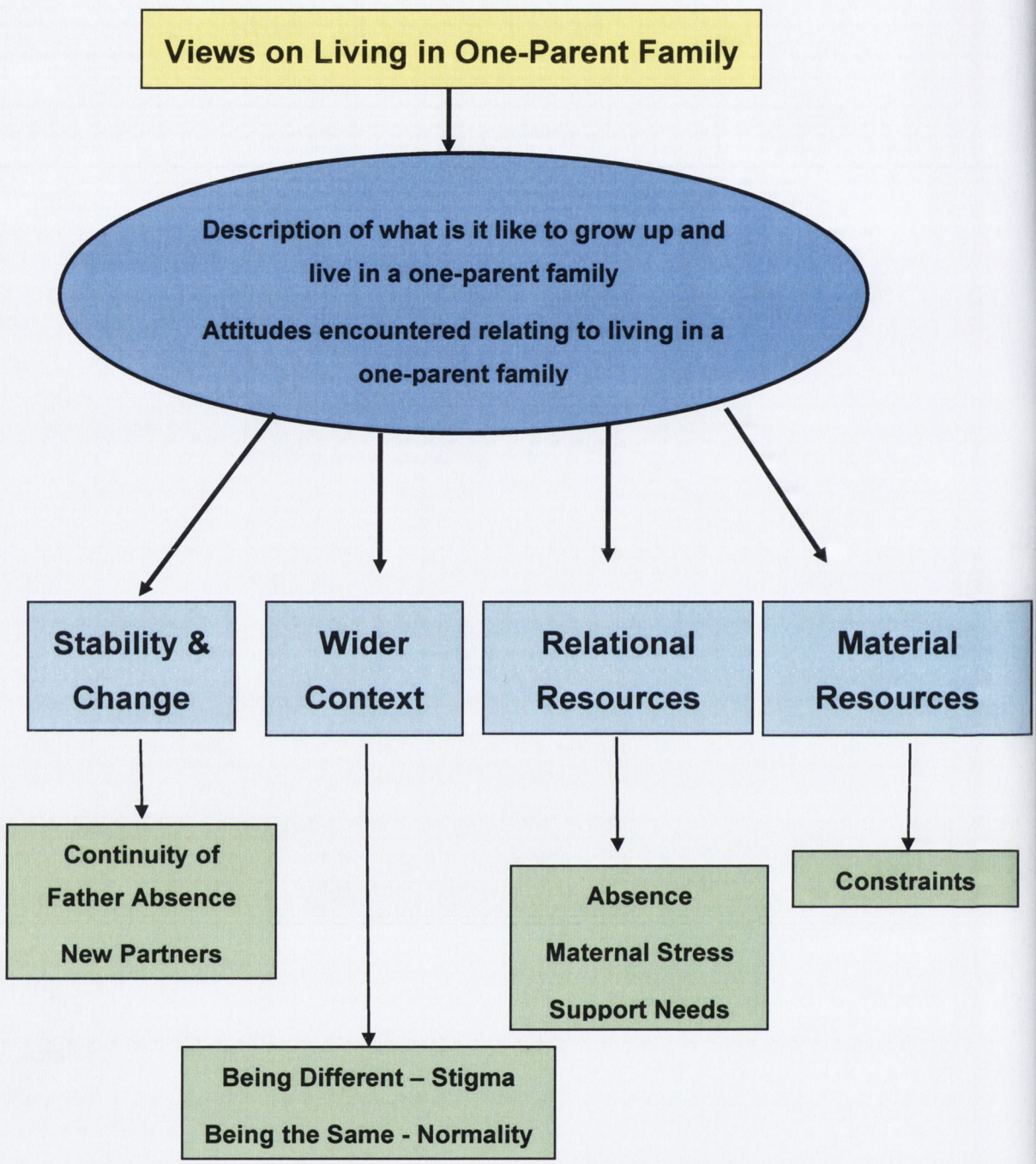

Mother-Child Relationship in One-Parent Family Context
Description of mother-child relationship in one-parent family context
Absence of second parent and/or siblings from home and impact on relationship
Exclusive Quality of Relationship
Intensity
Inescapability
Maternal Compensation
Balance within Parenting Role
Guilt
Indulgence
Gender of Absent Parent
Dynamics of Dependence & Power
Horizontal Interactions
Vertical Interactions
Generational Boundaries

Father-Child Relations






Father- Mother Relations
Frequency of father-mother contact
Nature & circumstances of father-mother contact
Importance of father-child contact
Communicating about fathers with children
Facilitating Father-Child Contact
Barriers to Father-Child Contact
Source of Information about Fathers
Active
Passive
Motivation to Protect
Openness of Communication
Positive portrayal of Fathers
Developmentally Appropriate


Views on Living in One-Parent Family
Description of what is it like to grow up and live in a one-parent family
Attitudes encountered relating to living in a one-parent family
Stability & Change
Wider Context
Relational Resources
Material Resources
Continuity of Father Absence
New Partners
Being Different – Stigma
Being the Same - Normality
Absence
Maternal Stress
Support Needs
Constraints