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Children's Perceptions of Closeness and Security in Relationships with Parents following Parental Separation

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.

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October 2004

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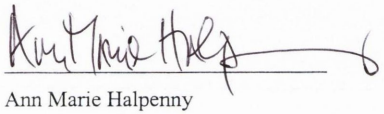

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Abstract

Much has been researched and written on the effects of parental separation on children's relationships with their parents. Notably absent from previous research is a focus on close emotional ties and feelings of security in these relationships. An absence of emphasis on the processes which underlie positive or negative experiences of ongoing relationships is also notable. The present study addresses these gaps in the research on parental separation by exploring children's experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents following parental separation. A primary goal of the present study is to understand and describe how children experience closeness and security in their relationships with parents post-separation. Moreover, the study seeks to explore and identify the configuration of influences which operate to enhance or inhibit closeness and security in relationships with parents in a post-separation family context. Insight into children's perspectives on family transitions is both invaluable and imperative in light of the increasing numbers of separated parents in Ireland and the relatively recent introduction of divorce.

The present study developed as part of a wider child-centred, qualitative, exploration of children's experiences of parental separation carried out by the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin. Central to the framework of the study is the view that children are competent in expressing their perceptions and feelings regarding their relationships with their parents post-separation. Conducted across two phases, approximately two years apart, the study aimed to capture dynamic and evolving patterns in relationships, influenced by shifts both in the age of the participants and in the ongoing family transition which shaped these patterns. Forty children (aged between 8 and 17 years of age in Phase I and between 9 and 19 years of age in Phase II) participated in both phases. Data on children's perceptions of the child-parent relationship in Phase I were analysed to identify themes for further exploration in Phase II of the study. The main objective in carrying out a second phase of data collection was, therefore, to provide elaboration and resonance on themes identified in the first phase of the study. A further objective of the second phase of data collection was to gather longitudinal data on certain aspects of the child-parent relationship following parental separation.

Key findings indicated that most children felt close to their parents and secure about their relationships following parental separation and these experiences were stable across both phases of study. Children's perceptions of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents were markedly different, with most children feeling closer and more secure in relationships with resident parents by comparison with non-resident parents. Children's feelings of closeness to parents were more obviously linked to experiences of everyday interaction with their parents while feelings of security were based on prior experience and associated expectations. Key factors contributing to positive experiences of closeness and security included positive patterns established prior to the

separation and experiences of accessibility, commitment and connectedness in these relationships post-separation. Frequency of contact between children and their non-resident parents was high across both phases of the study and was a prerequisite for closeness and security in these relationships. Risks to relationships were characteristically rooted in the relational history and pre-existing problems were clearly exacerbated by the stressors which children and their parents experienced in adjusting to post-separation family life. Risks were also strongly associated with explicit and ongoing inter-parental conflict, in particular where this conflict extended beyond the boundaries of the inter-parental dyad.

Parental separation, according to this study, does not inevitably represent a reduction in parental availability, where there is sufficient review and re-evaluation of relationships. The study highlights the need for greater emphasis to be placed on the factors promoting positive processes in relationships in diverse family forms and settings, in contrast to a preoccupation with differences between separated and intact families and the *negative* effects which parental separation may represent to children's lives. The study also highlights the need to shift the emphasis from one of solely *maintaining* contact with parents, especially in the case of non-resident parents, to one of developing relationships of mutual influence and inter-dependence. In this way we can shift our focus from a comparison between separated and intact families to a focus on the processes between children and their parents, regardless of family type, in order to understand how these relational processes can best be protected and enhanced.

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The study of the effects of parental separation on children's lives has become a major area of research in Western countries since World War II. Increasingly this research has been influenced by an awareness that children's lives are lived interdependently, influenced by and exerting an influence upon the world of shared relationships which they inhabit. Child Development research has come to place greater emphasis on the social context of childhood, and, in particular, on children's development within the family.

Children attach profound importance to their family relationships and to their lives within their families. Yet, increasingly, family life and relationships fluctuate and one family form may be replaced by another in a child's life. For many children, these changes in family structure take place at a very early age and the likelihood that children will experience multiple transitions has also become greater. Where the security of previously established family roles and relationships diminishes or disappears, the child's relationship with parents is likely to represent a potential source of security and continuity in family experience. According to Richards (1995), fear of parental loss following parental separation is best countered if there is continuity in relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. The present study makes a special contribution to the area of child-parent relationships following parental separation by focusing on the processes through which children maintain and develop their relationships with their mothers and their fathers following parental separation and, thereby, gaining greater insight into the meaning and significance, from children's perspectives, of concepts such as closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents.

The child's relationship with parents is an essential consideration within any exploration of children's adjustment to parental separation (Guidubaldi, Perry & Nastasi, 1987). Research evidence indicates that many of the potentially negative effects associated with parental separation and family instability can be mediated by the nature of immediate family relationships, especially the child-parent relationship (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999). Studies have also shown how, in times of family transition, more complex patterns of family interaction may develop, where previously established patterns in relationships are challenged and family members must re-negotiate and re-arrange relationships and family roles. Maclean & Richards (1999) describe a change in the parental relationship, often involving a split between the functions of social and biological parenthood for one parent, typically the father. Parental commitment may no longer be to one family unit but may be spread across two or more households. Adjusting to this revised but perhaps as yet, un-negotiated commitment, may create additional pressures for children and their

parents. Redefining child-parent relationships can, therefore, be stressful for both members of the child-parent dyad. As Emery (1999) points out, the effects of such re-negotiation are twofold. Children may be affected both by the process of change in the child-parent relationship and by the outcome of that change – the nature of the redefined relationship. The present study acknowledges this continuing dynamic between processes and outcomes in child-parent relationships following parental separation, through consideration of *how* relationships are experienced, interpreted and in some cases, re-invented by individual children within differing family contexts.

Most families successfully overcome the challenges which accompany parental separation and maintain established patterns within relationships or develop new ones. However, some families do not and this raises certain questions. How do children experience and negotiate changes in their relationship with their parents during and after parental separation? What are the conditions under which relationships between parents and their children are successfully maintained and developed? What are the consequences of poor family relationships for children's development in the context of parental separation? A greater understanding of the processes which influence, alter or maintain patterns of child-parent relationships following parental separation is fundamental in order to enhance the protective aspect of these relationships and children's well-being generally.

Shifting paradigms in the study of parental separation

Much research has been carried out to explore the psychological effects of parental separation on children's lives and most of the available information comes from studies carried out in the US and the UK. In the US, research has been ongoing since the 1960s and is most frequently conducted and discussed within the fields of Developmental Psychology and Sociology. The value of many of these studies lies in their ability to point us in the direction of the most significant challenges which children are faced with when the structure of their family life is altered dramatically by parental separation.

However, it is important, at this point, to highlight certain caveats when considering many of the findings associated with these studies. First, although perceptions of, and attitudes towards parental separation and divorce have evolved over the past four decades since the 1960's when work on the effects of parental separation began, much of the current research in the US continues to centre primarily and almost exclusively on outcomes for children. These are measured and evaluated in terms of quantifying categories of behaviour, with little emphasis on the processes underlying these outcomes and with few attempts to gain insight into the meanings behind the scores which children record on standardised measures. Equally problematic is an inherent assumption in many of these

studies that the experience of childhood and family life can be generalised at the expense of the individual and the particular, and classified as exclusively positive or negative.

Reflecting these concerns, Greene & Hill (2005) highlight a number of shortcomings in empirical research on children to date. These include a predominant emphasis on children as objects rather than as subjects of research studies, on findings which describe outcomes rather than processes in children's lives and on research which prioritises variables rather than persons. The authors point up the incompleteness of any research approach which fails to explore the content and meaning of the experiences of participants. Hogan (2005) reflects on the absence of emphasis within the field of Developmental Psychology on understanding children's subjective experiences – children's ordinary lives and their active participation in their social worlds. The author concludes that a developmental perspective on children's experience within psychological research is both possible and desirable and requires compiling appropriate research questions and creating and shaping effective methodological tools with which to explore these questions.

Research into the effects of parental separation on children in the UK has recently been informed and strongly influenced by research conducted within the realm of the Sociology of Childhood. Work within this field presents a challenge to many of the traditional assumptions about childhood and family life. First, concepts of family are no longer seen as given and fixed but as continually 'contested' (James & Prout, 1997) and re-negotiated, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between children, their biological parents and new family members. Studies of children in their family worlds increasingly embody this dynamic and emergent quality, uncovering experiences over time. Second, work carried out within the Sociology of Childhood has drawn attention to the importance of considering children as being active in the construction and determination of their own social lives (James & Prout, 1997). Allied to this perspective, there has been a shift away from research which articulates the view that adults can do justice to a representation of the child's world, without placing the child at the centre of that research. Increasingly, there is recognition and acceptance of the fact that children's perspectives often differ from those of adults and, therefore, merit inquiry in their own right, independent of adults' concerns. Finally, the growth of child-centred research has opened up new perspectives on children's lives which attach greater importance to children's resilience and competence in the face of family transition. In contrast to previous research which tended to portray post-separation childhood as largely involving 'outcomes of risk and harm', there is an increasing tendency to highlight mutual and co-operative qualities in children's relationships with their parents and other adults (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001). Child-parent relationships are seen as inter-dependent and reciprocal, with children offering and providing care and protection to parents, rather than merely receiving it.

Much research has been carried out to explore the psychological effects of parental separation on children's lives. The absence of empirical data on parental separation in an Irish context and in particular on children's experiences of family transition in Ireland makes it necessary to draw in the main on literature originating in the US and the UK, as most of the available and readily accessible information comes from studies carried out within these cultures. Nevertheless, there are significant cultural differences which must be taken into account when considering these previous research findings and their relevance to the Irish context. Not least is an acknowledgement that American culture has traditionally been individualistic in its emphasis, whereas in Ireland the family unit has arguably occupied a more central role in social development. Cultural norms, Irish family law and the Roman Catholic Church have had a profound influence on parental separation and divorce patterns in Ireland which distinguishes Ireland from other European countries and the United States of America. As highlighted by Hogan et al (2003), in Ireland the family has been protected under the Constitution, where it receives recognition as 'the natural and fundamental unit group of Society, as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent to all positive law' (Article 41.1.1). From a cultural perspective, it is, therefore, interesting to pose the question as to whether there are particular aspects to children's experience of parental separation in an Irish context, which mark out or distinguish them from experiences in other cultural contexts.

While there are likely to be substantial similarities between societies with regard to the roles and relationships within families, there are also likely to be important differences in the way these roles and relationships are shaped by culturally-specific values and traditions. For many years Irish legislation, policy and social attitudes reflected the conservative views of the Catholic Church on family affairs. The removal of the Constitutional ban on divorce in the Irish Republic was achieved relatively recently in a referendum in 1995, following many years of intense public debate. Ireland is, therefore, much later that other western societies in adopting legal procedures for the dissolution of marriage and the provision of legal sanction for remarriage. Clearly, the cultural and historical context in which Irish children and their families experience parental separation may set those experiences apart from experiences generated in different social and cultural settings.

Prevalence of parental separation

Research in the US suggests that between one and a half and two thirds of recent first marriages end in divorce (Bumpass, 1995; Martin & Bumpass, 1989). In 1960, in the US 73% of all children lived with their natural parents, whereas this figure was projected to be 56% in 1990. Bumpass & Sweet (1989) estimate that 44% of children born between 1970 and 1984 will live for a time in a single-parent family and Furstenberg, Morgan & Allison (1987) project that 60% of children born in the 1990's in the US will have this experience.

In Ireland, parental separation and divorce have contributed to a dramatic transformation in family structure and composition, in particular over the past decade. According to the most recent census data on separation in the Irish context, the number of separated persons (including divorced) increased by over a half between 1996 and 2002. This represents an average annual increase of 7.3% between 1996 and 2002, compared with 8.1% between 1991 and 1996. Prior to this, the numbers of separated persons had doubled, from 37,200 in 1986 to 87,800 in 1996 (Final Report of The Commission on the Family, 1998). However, within the overall separated category, the number of persons recorded as divorced more than trebled, from 9,800 to 35,100 between 1996 and 2002, reflecting perhaps the legalisation of divorce in 1997 in Ireland. As highlighted by Hogan, Halpenny & Greene (2002), these numbers reflect on families in which parents were previously married, but do not include those where co-habiting (non-married) couples shared the parenting of the child, as well as residing together, and subsequently parted. The authors point out that the numbers of children affected by parental separation in Ireland are likely to be greater than figures above suggest.

Of most immediate relevance, perhaps, is the fact that divorce was not voted in by Irish society until relatively recently, in 1996. Yet, by 1996 births outside marriage made up a quarter of all births in Ireland and lone parents (including separated and divorced parents) headed one in five families (O' Connor, 1998). The absence of divorce in Ireland until recently has had particular significance for children's experience of parental separation in Ireland. For example, Smart et al., (2001) draw attention to the fact that in the UK the legal concept of step-parenthood has been replaced, to a great extent, by more flexible and diversified relationships among original and new family members. Maclean & Richards (1999) highlight the need to develop a legal framework which can better support more flexible and complex parental relationships across household boundaries. In Ireland, partly due to the absence of divorce, despite the fact that family separation and divorce are more present in the public consciousness in recent years, the lack of opportunity to formalise new relationships through remarriage has meant that models of family life other than traditional models, have been neither clearly established nor visible in Irish society (Hogan, Halpenny & Greene, 2003). Consequently, the picture of post-separation childhood and family life remains, to a large extent, indistinct and undefined. The specific need for research into Irish children's experiences of post-separation family life is clear given these developments and the absence of studies focusing on parental separation in an Irish context. Beyond this, while much research has been carried out on parental separation in the US and the UK, few studies have focused on children's subjective experiences of close emotional relationships with parents post-separation.

Rationale for present study

Insight into children's perspectives on their family transitions is invaluable in light of the increasing numbers of separated parents in Ireland and the relatively recent introduction of divorce. Parental separation for children often represents their first experience of transition in close relationships. In Ireland, this transition provides few established or visible co-ordinates for children to refer to and to be guided by. Researchers and policy-makers have emphasised the importance of the child's perspective on parental separation and family change. Yet, little is known about how children actually negotiate their relationships with both parents, when one parent no longer lives in the family home. What do children value in these relationships with parents? How do children experience relationships of attachment following parental separation? What influences do children perceive as facilitating parental availability and responsiveness? Are there particular barriers to maintaining or developing children's relationships with both resident and non-resident parents?

The present study aims to address this gap in the research by drawing on the subjective experiences of children in their relationships with their parents post-separation. The concepts of closeness and security in relationships with parents, although central to an appraisal of the fundamental quality of the child-parent relationship, have rarely been the centre of attention of research on parental separation. A primary goal of the present study is to understand and describe how children experience the concepts of closeness and security in their relationships with parents following parental separation. A second goal of the study is to explore the distinctive configuration of influences which operate to enhance or to inhibit children's experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents following parental separation.

Research questions

How do children experience and understand closeness and security in child-parent relationships following parental separation?

What characteristics of the child-parent relationship contribute to closeness and security following parental separation?

How do children perceive the inter-parental relationship to impact on their relationship with parents following parental separation?

Are there developmental patterns in children's perceptions of closeness and security in child-parent relationships following parental separation?

The study is based on a wider exploration of children's experiences of parental separation in Ireland involving qualitative interviews with 60 children aged between 8 and 17 years of age (Hogan et al., 2002). A follow-up study involving interviews with 40 of these children was carried out 18 months to two years later by the present author alone. The present study draws on data from both phases of the research. Interviews were semi-structured and additional research tools were used to complement the interview material. A standardised measure – the Security Scale (Kerns, Klepac & Cole, 1996) was also used. Data were analysed using a template organising style of interpretation. Templates or codes are defined and constructed based on prior research and theoretical perspectives and on repeated readings of and reflection on the data (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1984, 1994).

Overview of Thesis

This chapter outlines some of the main trends and shifts in approaches to the study of the effect of parental separation on children's lives. Three main areas are highlighted. The first of these considers the importance of viewing parental separation as both a significant event in children's lives and as an ongoing process in family relationships and transition. Secondly, the importance of placing children at the centre of research which attempts to gain insight into the effects of parental separation on their lives is addressed. Finally, approaches which reflect the complementary notions of family structure and family process are discussed.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature exploring the effects of separation on children's close relationships with resident and non-resident parents. This review of the literature highlights the need to consider children's relationships with parents following parental separation as evolving through family transition over time and moderated by factors such as developmental status, gender and the inter-parental relationship.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of literature exploring children's perspectives on the effects of parental separation on their close relationships. Children's active role in sustaining and developing relationships with resident and non-resident parents following parental separation is explored. Emphasis is on children's individual perceptions of and responses to the changes which parental separation may effect on their relationships with parents.

Chapter 4 provides an outline of the design and methods adopted for the study.

The main focus of Chapter 5 is on how children negotiate revised patterns of contact with their parents. In particular, experiences of relating to non-resident parents now living physically beyond

the family unit, and experiences of care-giving relationships with resident parents in the home are explored. Contact with non-resident parents is explored across the dimensions of quantity, stability and quality. The second part of the chapter moves to a focus on care-giving relationships with resident parents and identifies patterns in these relationships across both phases of the study.

In Chapter 6, the focus moves to a more specific assessment of children's perceptions of closeness and security in relationships with resident and non-resident parents, using the Emotional Closeness Map (Smart et al., 2001; Sturgess, Dunn & Davies, 2001) and the Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996). Developmental patterns in perceptions of closeness and security are also explored.

Chapter 7 focuses in more detail on children's evaluations, understandings and interpretations of closeness and security with resident parents in an altered family environment. Drawing upon and building from themes explored in preceding chapters, perceived facilitators and barriers to closeness and security in relationships are identified and explored. Stability in patterns of closeness through the separation process is also explored. Finally, the chapter provides a focus on developmental patterns in relationships with resident parents.

Chapter 8 shifts the focus to explore the processes underlying children's experiences of closeness and security with non-resident parents. Perceived facilitators of and barriers to closeness and security are outlined. Stability in pattern of closeness throughout the separation process is explored. The chapter also provides a focus on developmental patterns in relationships with non-resident parents.

In Chapter 9 the focus shifts away from an exclusive portrayal of dyadic interaction to provide a focus on children's relationships with their parents within a network of relationships. In particular, children's perceptions of the effects of the inter-parental relationship on their own relationships with parents are explored. Moving beyond the immediate family unit, the influence of new partners on experiences of closeness and security in child-parent relationships is also explored. Finally, findings on concordance in patterns of closeness and security across other family relationships are presented and discussed.

The final chapter opens by revisiting the design and methodological framework against which the study was conducted and the research questions which guided the inquiry. The study findings are drawn together and discussed with reference to salient themes which emerged. Protective and risk factors to closeness and security in relationships with parents post-separation are outlined and discussed.

CHAPTER 1: APPROACHES TO STUDYING THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL SEPARATION ON CHILDREN

Introduction

Children attach profound importance to family life and relationships, which play a central role in their sense of well-being and identity. For a substantial minority of children, parental separation and divorce is a part of family experience. For many families it is a major life transition, with significant emotional, social and practical consequences. It can be seen as a process of transformation in personal and family life with far-reaching consequences for families and society as a whole, and with particular consequences for children's lives.

Dunn (1988, pp. 12) highlights the powerful influence which families exert on children's lives as follows:

> It is within the family that they [children] develop not only a sense of emotional security but powers of communication and language, a sense of self, and a growing understanding of the intentions, feelings and perceptions of others, and of the shared world of cultural rules and roles.

The author points out that many children now grow up in families which frequently undergo marked changes and argues that these dramatic changes can occur within the first years of children's lives. Such changes include the re-negotiation of relationships with parents, accommodating relationships with parents' new partners and, in some cases, learning to adapt to the presence of a step-parent and step-siblings.

A recent study of families and well-being in an Irish context indicated that family structure per se did not have a strong impact on well-being. Clearly, however, parents exerted a powerful influence on the well-being of their children, with parental behaviour strongly predicting children's well-being (McKeown, Pratschke & Trutz, 2003). However, we have little knowledge or understanding of children's everyday experience of family transitions, particularly in an Irish context. Social and demographic trends and characteristics reflect, and, to some extent, determine ideas about family and broader family relationships and community. Most Western cultures have experienced substantial transformation in the nature and structure of the family unit in recent times. Tovey & Share (2000) draw attention to some of the most notable changes which include a marked decline in marriage, birth and fertility rates, an increase in co-habitation, marriage and childbirth at a later age, increased births outside marriage, smaller family sizes, and greater numbers of people remaining single. The

authors point out that Ireland has experienced similar changes and transitions although there are some important differences such as, for example, the fact that family size is still larger than in many other countries. In their view, despite the greater acceptance of divorce and remarriage in Irish society, many people, if not most, continue to place more value on 'traditional' family forms, such as two-parent families where parents are married, than for example on lone parent families or families where parents co-habit but have never married.

The changing role of fathers in Irish society has received increasing attention from a number of researchers (McKeown, 2001; Kiely, 2001; 1995). According to McKeown (2001), the traditional role of the family in Ireland, where two parents live together and where the father is the sole breadwinner, is still the norm for around half of all families. However, almost 40% of Irish families have two parents working while more than one tenth of children live in one parent-households. Kiely (2001) points out that although the role of father as provider remains predominant in Ireland, attitudes to father involvement with their children have altered. In particular, the author highlights a shift from viewing the father, in the main, as an authority figure and provider, to a perspective which places greater emphasis on the contribution of fathers to care-giving within the family, and to increased emotional involvement with their children. This shift in perspective is likely to contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to greater contact by fathers with their children. Reflecting these trends of greater contact and involvement with children by Irish fathers, research has shown that non-resident parents, the majority of whom are fathers, maintain a relatively high level of contact with their children post-separation (Hogan et al., 2002).

A substantial body of literature, both empirically and theoretically based, considers the effects of parental separation on children's lives. Noticeably absent from this literature, however, is a consideration of some of the themes which Dunn (1988) emphasises at the beginning of this chapter in her account of the influence of family on children's lives. What are the implications of parental separation for children's experiences of emotional security in relationships with parents? How do children maintain and develop processes of communication and how do these processes influence, in turn, children's sense of self and well-being? Failure to address these questions is often a result of the constraints which particular approaches to the study of parental separation place on our understanding of such issues. A variety of approaches have predominated in the field. In order to build upon the knowledge generated from different approaches in previous research, these different approaches are reviewed in the present chapter and some of the main trends and shifts in theoretical perspectives on the effect of parental separation on children's lives are outlined. Three main areas are highlighted. The first of these considers the importance of viewing parental separation as both a significant event in children's lives and as an ongoing process in family relationships and transition. Secondly, the importance of placing children at the centre of research which attempts to gain insight

into the effects of parental separation on their lives is addressed. Finally, approaches which reflect the complementary notions of family structure and family process are discussed.

Parental separation as process and event

Much of the early research on the effects of parental separation on children's lives conceptualised parental separation as a discrete event, that shaped the course of children's lives (Richards & Dyson, 1982; Kiernan, 1997). Clarifying the distinction between these perspectives, Pryor & Rodgers (2001) refer to *trauma theory* approaches and *life-course perspective* approaches to the study of parental separation. The former maintains that the point at which one parent leaves the home is the most salient and most readily identifiable aspect of parental separation. In contrast to this, life course theories, as their name suggests, take a life course perspective. Risks to children come from multiple factors including life-course processes and contextual factors. Rather than focusing on a single event, a life course perspective includes considerations of developmental trajectories over time, including the family context and environment before and after parental separation.

Recent research tends to rely to a greater extent on life-course perspectives in order to capture and make sense of the social and psychological changes in family relationships and dynamics over time (Emery, 1999; Amato & Booth, 1996). More specifically, adopting a process approach to the study of children's relationships with their parents in the context of parental separation means acknowledging that children's responses to their parents' separation are context-dependent, fluid and emergent. Expectations built on past experiences of relationships with parents influence present responses to these relationships in new contexts and shape the potential for relationships with parents to continue to develop in the future. Present experiences of relationships are also perceived as significant and influential in their own right within a process approach.

Of particular significance to the present study is identifying an approach which allows us to move beyond a rigid perspective of the child-parent relationship as inevitably damaged or deficient due to the event of parental separation. Moving beyond this vantage point enables us to shift perspectives to a view of relationships as continuously evolving and developing in new contexts. The present study does not seek to dismiss or dispense with the knowledge that we have gained from considering parental separation as a discrete event, but rather questions the adequacy of such an approach alone, and seeks a more panoramic portrayal of the interplay of relational processes in the ongoing changing family environment post-separation. There is a danger that if we restrict our focus, scanning only the responses immediate to the event, we risk tipping the balance in favour of more deterministic, negative outcomes and simplifying or even ignoring the complexities within which these responses are embedded.

In keeping with this shift in emphasis, Arendell (1997, pp. 12) points out that recent research more commonly draws on, and contributes to the development of "conceptual frameworks that view the family as dynamic and emergent in character." Parental separation and remarriage are considered "not as single events but as part of a series of changes in family organisation" with factors promoting psychological well-being or problems in family members and relationships varying over time. Viewed from this perspective, it is the diversity of experience in family roles and relationships rather than the inevitability of negative outcomes that is of particular interest to researchers (Hetherington, 1993). Viewed from this perspective, there are also likely to be very substantial individual differences, both in the complexity of the circumstances surrounding parental separation and the nature of children's responses.

In order to gain greater insight into the particular emphases highlighted by different approaches to the study of parental separation, the following sections outline and discuss briefly some of the key findings from previous research on the effects of parental separation on children's lives. The first section focuses on findings which have viewed parental separation, for the most part, as an event in children's lives. This is followed by a consideration of findings adopting a process approach.

Previous research findings using an event approach to parental separation

The concept of parental separation as an event against which children's behaviour, educational achievement and socio-economic status were measured dominated much of the earlier research on the effects of parental separation on children's lives (Wallerstein & Kelly 1980; Fergusson, Horwood & Lynskey, 1994; Forehand, Neighbors, Devine & Armistead, 1994). Amato & Keith (1991) produced a meta-analysis of 92 studies including children residing with either divorced or continuously married parents and based on studies conducted in the 1950s through the 1980s. Findings from this first meta-analysis indicated that children whose parents had divorced recorded significantly lower scores on a range of indicators of well-being, including measures of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social relations and the quality of relationships with mothers and fathers. A more recent meta-analysis carried out by Amato (2001) indicates that children with divorced parents, as a group, are still doing less well across a range of measures than those children whose families remain intact. Similar to the first meta-analysis, more recent findings point to lower levels of success at school, increased behavioural and emotional problems, lower self-esteem and more difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Interestingly, the author points out that the gap in well-being between the two groups of children appears to have grown larger during the last decade and this gap is irrespective of gender or age. However, it is also noted that differences recorded are not very pronounced.

In the two years immediately following divorce, both boys and girls have been found to experience frequent emotional distress, psychological and behavioural problems and psychosomatic symptoms (Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1995, 1997). Academic achievement, intellectual performance and school performance usually decline, anti-social behaviour increases, especially among boys, and peer interaction skills decline. Such studies have proven invaluable in terms of helping us to understand the potential for parental separation to impact negatively on children's lives. However, most of these findings are gathered using standardised measures which explore children's responses at one point in time alone. In addition, these studies provide little insight into how such outcomes might be mediated within children's experiences of family life and relationships. Numerous authors have pointed out that such studies do not allow us to conclude that negative outcomes are associated directly with divorce itself, since divorce is associated with so many other prior and consequent events (Greene, 1995; Fawcett, 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

Clearly, there are many weaknesses in an approach which focuses exclusively on parental separation as an event which causes or contributes to negative outcomes for children's lives and which fails to engage with the detail of children's experiences in the process of parental separation. These limitations are counterbalanced, to a large extent, in research approaches which embrace the shifting and emergent properties of relationships within the process of parental separation, and which better enable us to capture the challenges and opportunities surfacing at different points throughout the process. The following sections consider some of the findings associated with such an approach.

Previous research findings using a process approach to parental separation

Process approaches to the study of parental separation shift our focus to an exploration of how children's responses to their new family contexts unfold over time and across changing experiences. Studies which adopt a longitudinal perspective allow greater understanding of the individual and unique trajectories experienced by children within the context of parental separation and divorce. Longitudinal datasets allow us to move both methodologically and conceptually beyond associations found in cross-sectional data to investigate trajectories of children's well-being and to explore how dynamic family processes unfold over time (Videon, 2002). Similarly, process approaches have enabled researchers to take a life-course perspective to studying family transitions and their impact on children and adults (Amato & Booth, 1996; Hetherington, 1993).

The following sections highlight findings under two key themes associated with the process approach to understanding the effects of parental separation on children's lives. The first of these is the notion of change and continuity in experiences of family life following parental separation. The second is the consideration of these experiences in light of the developmental status of children.

Processes of change and continuity in family life following parental separation

Prospective studies of parental separation and child-parent relationships have found evidence of problems in child-parent relationships from 8 to 12 years prior to divorce (Amato, 1996; Block, Block & Gjerde 1988; Shaw, Emery & Tuer 1993) and of problems in some children's behaviour development before parental separation (Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay & Vitaro, 1997; Block, Block & Gjerde, 1988). When antecedent levels of problem behaviours are controlled for, differences in problem behaviours between children from divorced and non-divorced families are greatly reduced (Cherlin et al., 1991; Guidubaldi, Perry & Nastasi, 1987). It is possible that difficulties within the inter-parental relationship and a fragile family history may have already taken their toll on children's well-being long before parental separation actually occurs. Static, cross-sectional slices out of the lives of parents and children in divorced or remarried families may provide a misleading impression of how risk and protective factors combine over time to influence the adjustment of children. These studies may also underplay children's ability to re-negotiate their circumstances over time.

One of the assumptions made in much of the earlier work on the effects of parental separation is that all of the effects can be explained in terms of the impact at the time of the separation. However, when measures of children's well-being prior to parental separation are included in models, researchers find the effects of divorce are substantially reduced and often become non-significant (Cherlin et al., 1991). Equally problematic is the assumption that poorer outcomes identified are inevitably a direct consequence of parental separation when in fact many problems are likely to be the result of the progression of family difficulties existing prior to parental separation. Importantly, process approaches open up possibilities for considering that, in the long-term, some children may benefit when parents physically separate, provided tensions and conflict within the home recede (Videon, 2002). Wheaton (1990) frames the effects of stressful life events within the context prior to the event. The author argues that instead of being uniformly stressful, some life events may be beneficial when individuals escape from a chronically stressful situation. Confronted with the challenges of adapting to family transition, children will respond differently at different stages of the process which they are experiencing.

Developmental status and timing of parental separation

A process approach to the effects of parental separation on children's lives considers the timing of life changes as a pivotal aspect of development that interacts with other aspects of an individual's experience (Pryor & Rodgers, 1998). Any consideration of the consequences of parental separation for children's lives over time must take into account both the age of the child at the time of the separation and the age of the child at the time of the assessment. These variables are often confounded with the length of time since the separation. In an Australian study of the effects of parental separation on children's lives, a comparison between children's responses at the time of the

separation and five years later showed a decrease in levels of distress and an increase in feelings of relief and gladness (Burns & Dunlop, 1999).

Developmental status shapes and informs children's responses to parental separation. Although age at the time of separation alone has not been clearly identified as a powerful predictor of positive or negative effects on children's lives in the long term, Pryor & Rodgers (2001) emphasise that the developmental period at which major life transitions occur will, to some extent, shape how children make sense of and react in the short term to changes such as parental separation and further new family arrangements. Research has found that younger children are at greater risk for long-term problems in social and emotional development than are older children (Furstenberg, Morgan & Allison, 1987; Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1999). Among the reasons put forward for the greater vulnerability of young children is that younger children may be less able to rationalise the causes and consequences of divorce, and may be exposed to a greater fear of loss of their parents after the separation. Parental separation at a young age may be an early phase of an ongoing cumulative process, rather than a risk factor by itself. What we understand to be the effects of parental separation on children who are young when their parents separate, may in fact, be due to other influences such as the fact that they are more likely than those who are older to spend long periods of time in a lone parent family and to experience multiple transitions (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Young school-aged children (5-8 year olds) typically react to their parents' separation with sadness, but, in contrast to younger pre-school children, will engage in less fantasy about the possibility that their parents will, at some later stage, be reconciled (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). Children in this age group describe missing their absent parent. In addition, these younger children may also be more likely to blame themselves for the divorce and have less access to protective resources beyond their families (Hetherington, 1989). In contrast to this, older children (9-12 year olds) are better able to find some meaning in what has happened and to feel some sense of mastery and control over the situation. Many will still describe feelings of sadness (Hogan et al., 2002) and may use anger as a way of expressing their more painful feelings of helplessness and sadness. Children in this age group are also more likely to align themselves with one parent or another.

Adolescents appear to be least affected by parental separation and divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Kurdek & Berg, 1983; Zill & Peterson, 1983). One possible explanation for this may be the relative maturity of adolescents which helps them to overcome these difficulties. Adolescents will also have greater access to emotional support from peers and others outside the immediate family unit (Crouter, Belsky & Spanier, 1984; Hetherington, 1989; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). It is also possible that some adolescents will already have experience in coping with stressful events which

may facilitate more efficient coping. Hogan et al., (2002) point out that children showed evidence of a change in their thinking and feelings about their parents' decisions and behaviours as they grew older, and as time passed since the separation.

In contrast to these findings, other studies have referred to a *sleeper effect,* with problems surfacing in adolescence and young adulthood - periods in which problems in adjustment may emerge or increase even when divorce or remarriage has occurred much earlier (Amato & Keith, 1991; Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington, 1993, Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Some studies suggest that adolescents tend to feel vulnerable in the domains of relationships, because these are the issues they are themselves confronting and because they are aware of their parents' subsequent relationships and their sexual component (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998; Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley & Barenbaum, 1997).

Clearly, these findings indicate that a preoccupation with whether parental separation is easier or more difficult for children at a particular age, obscures our understanding of the diverse ways in which children experience their parents' separation at different ages. Perhaps the most solid conclusion we can draw is that the experience of parental separation is different, but not necessarily harder, for different age groups (Stewart et al., 1997; Kalter, 1990).

Process and event as complementary approaches to the study of parental separation

Emery (1999) highlights the fact that parental separation is characterised by change and fluctuation in family circumstances. The author emphasises that the psychological effects of parental separation on children must, therefore, be considered at two levels. The first level is the process of adaptation to change, both in terms of changes in family structure, and in family interactions at the time of the separation and immediately after. The second level is the child's long-term adjustment to parental separation. Particular patterns of family interaction, as well as various characteristics of the child, are associated with more positive or more negative long-term outcomes. It is, therefore, necessary to identify and make sense of the continuing impact over time of parental separation and divorce as children grow older, and as changing family arrangements may require ongoing adaptation to further transitions in family life and relationships. A combination of event and process approaches to the study of the effects of parental separation on children's lives can, therefore, provide different but complementary insights into how family transition influences children's lives prior to, during and following parental separation. Clearly there is a need, as emphasised in a review of the literature, for studies to take on board children's responses *both* at the time of their parents' separation and over time in accordance with their changing developmental status

A second development in the study of the effects of parental separation is a move towards adopting child-centred perspectives in order to better understand the extent and nature of the effects of parental separation on children's lives.

Children's perspectives on parental separation

The issue of children's perspectives in the study of parental separation is addressed in more detail in Chapter Four. This section, therefore, briefly highlights key developments in this area which have influenced approaches to studying parental separation. Although a substantial amount of literature has accumulated about separation and its effects on children, there is still a gap in our knowledge about the child's view of divorce. Much of the available information on the effects of parental separation on children and adolescents comes from studies carried out in the US and UK. Early research on the effects of separation on adult and child adjustment tended to focus almost exclusively on outcomes measured by quantitative, standardised measures of children's well-being (Videon et al., 2002). However, much of this early work often ignored children's evaluations of these changes in their family life, children's perspectives on the challenges which they faced and children's accounts and interpretations of their experiences of parental separation. Information about children's responses to parental separation was typically reported by parents and professionals working with children in this area, with strikingly little attention paid to children's subjective perceptions. Yet, children's perceptions of the quality of their relationship play a critical role in influences on their well-being (Smart et al., 2001; Walczak & Burns, 1984). Children may have interests and experiences which are independent of their parents and other adults and it is, important, therefore, to give consideration to how best these interests can be voiced.

The role of children in family research

In an examination of recent attempts to reconsider the role of children in family research, Hogan, Etz & Tudge (1999, pp. 95) draws attention to:

> ...an acute shortage of information about children's everyday lives as children experience them; the people and relationships that engage them and the activities and issues that matter to them...we know little about what children do, think and feel in the course of their ordinary lives.

There are a number of possible reasons for an over-reliance on an adult perspective. At the root of many researchers' concerns are ethical issues. First, children may be seen as vulnerable in this process and should, therefore, be spared the stress and embarrassment that might result from talking about their parents' separation. In addition to this, parents, or adults in general, may mistakenly

assume that children know very little about the events surrounding the separation. However, findings from studies which have adopted a child-centred approach and have given children and young people a voice to express their responses to parental separation, would not seem to support either of these two possibilities (Walczak & Burns, 1984; Mitchell, 1985; Fawcett, 1999). Children appear to welcome the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns regarding this process and emphasise their desire for communication and consultation about parental separation. It is also possible that providing them with this opportunity may contribute to a more positive adjustment for these children.

A further possible reason for this reticence to explore children's perceptions of separation may have to do with the assumption that children cannot accurately reflect on their own feelings and experiences. Recently, this view has come in for criticism from a number of authors. Jenks (1992, pp. 11) suggests that:

> ...being a child, having been a child, having children and having to relate to children are all experiences which contrive to make the category available as normal and natural.

However, in his view, from within a variety of disciplines, perspectives and sets of interests "childhood receives treatment as a stage, a structured becoming, never as a course of action nor as a social practice" (Jenks 1992, pp. 13). Jenks goes on to argue that the child is judged to be more or less competent against the yardstick of an adult reality and this results in a situation where "the continuous lived social practice of being a child in relation to a specific meaning structure is ignored." This manipulation of the child within sociological and psychological theories condemns him or her to be what Jenks (1992, pp. 15) terms "an absent presence, a nominal cipher without an active dimension".

Children's lived experience of parental separation

Fortunately, there now appears to be a shift away from this deficit model of the child and childhood and a willingness to listen to the child's own account of his or her experience. A child-centred approach to the study of parental separation enables children to play an active role in discovering and describing new meanings and new interpretations of their unique experiences. Roche (1996) highlights the need for respect for the different lives led by children and their different, and, at times, inconsistent perspectives and voices. In keeping with this desire to represent beyond the average and uniform, qualitative approaches to the study of parental separation emphasise the diversity of each individual experience and open up possibilities for re-defining the parameters of our understanding.

Greene (1999, pp. 265) points out that there is now an increasing willingness to confront the complexities involved in understanding children's development and advocates using this changed consciousness and the experience accumulated over the past decades in order to acquire:

> an understanding of children which does better justice to their complex, changing and multiple ways of being in and with their worlds.

Regardless of the particular circumstances involved, parental separation is part of a process of family change which occurs at a time when adults are least likely to be able to support their children because of their own distress and anxiety, and this is another reason why it is important to gain some insight into what this experience means to children, how it can impact on their lives, what factors can contribute to a positive or negative adjustment to parental separation, and how best to support children whose parents have separated or are in the process of separating.

According to Wallerstein & Lewis (1998), in the first report from a 25-year follow-up longitudinal study of the responses of children and adolescents to parental separation, the dominant influence in thinking and research on divorce or parental separation has been the adult experience, and this has resulted in a tendency to focus on issues such as custody, contact and economic support. On the other hand, interviews with children in their study reveal that many of them focus on very different aspects of the separation process to their parents and to adults in general. Children and young people felt they had not been protected by their parents or the legal system and had been given little opportunity to express their views, or even a preference about plans. They complained about being silenced and expected to follow visiting or custody plans that had not been made with their wishes in mind, and which many found to be arbitrary and oppressive.

Accounts from British children have also emphasised a discrepancy between the adult and child perspective on parental separation. Interviews with young people, aged 16-18 years, and their parents resulted in very different accounts of the separation process (Mitchell, 1985). Parents seemed not to be aware of their children's need to understand what was happening and the importance for children of maintaining contact with both parents. In comparing children's and parents' experiences, family change can be perceived in profoundly different ways.

Acknowledging diversity and complexity in experiences of parental separation

A child-centred approach to parental separation also reflects what is widely recognised from other sources - a great variation in children's responses to divorce and separation and the fact that there is no single path along which these children progress. In a study of children and parents from 37

families in Northern Ireland, Fawcett (1999) highlights the uniqueness of each individual's circumstances and describes a range of responses to issues such as inter-parental conflict, parental distress, change in residence and contact arrangements. Conversations with older children also revealed concerns about self-esteem, parental and peer relationships and school performance. The uniqueness and complexity of each individual's story contributes to greater richness in our understanding of how children negotiate changes in family life. Without such insight there is a danger that we unthinkingly accept the kind of generalisations that readily emerge when using a quantitative approach based on statistical averages. As highlighted by Greene & Hill (2005), underlying these generalisations, there is often a preoccupation with variables rather than with persons. However, research designs built on an approach which provides children with a central role in gaining access to their own experiences of parental separation help to restore the balance and to represent the complexity characteristic of individual experiences.

Findings from studies adopting a child-centred approach have shown the importance of communicating with children, both in the sense of listening and being sensitive to their needs and in terms of clearly explaining what is happening. Facing children with the announcement that parents are splitting up is a daunting task. One reason for this may be the nature of the process of separation while others may be connected with uncertainty about how to involve the children (Walczak,& Burns, 1984). Interviews with children, aged between 10 and 13 years at the time of separation, revealed that one third of parents had not told their children about the reasons for their separation because they considered the child was too young or would be upset (Mitchell, 1985).

More recently, Cockett & Tripp (1994), interviewing children and adolescents in divorced and non-divorced families, draw attention to the importance of keeping children informed throughout the separation process. Similarly, Fawcett (1999) emphasises the need to understand what divorce means in the family. Findings confirm that although most children and young people were aware of difficulties in their parents' marriages, many were ill-prepared for the events which unfolded. Hogan et al., (2002) found that children faced difficulties in expressing their feelings where the family was in crisis. In addition, talking outside the family was further complicated by the fact that there was pressure to protect family 'privacy'. Central to any exploration of children's responses to and concerns about parental separation are methods and approaches which reflect an interest in and commitment to the realities of the world which they inhabit. Child-centred approaches represent a shift away from deficit models of childhood while paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of how children perceive their family relationships following parental separation.

This study of Irish children's experiences of parental separation can benefit from the invaluable knowledge generated from previous research carried out abroad. Consistent with trends reflected in

recent research abroad, there is a growing awareness among policy-makers and practitioners in Ireland of the need to include the child's voice and perspective in order to help us understand how Irish children experience changing family life. The present study addresses this need by exploring parental separation in an Irish setting from the perspective of the children whose lives it affects.

A third development within the literature on parental separation centres around the debate between perspectives which emphasise family structure, on the one hand, as exerting primary influences on children's adjustment following parental separation and, on the other hand, perspectives which emphasise family process as the most powerful influence on children's adjustment and well-being.

Family structure and family process

Much of our previous knowledge about the possible effects of parental separation and divorce on children's lives is based on findings from studies which tend to emphasise the importance of family type and structure for children's development with little or no consideration for the processes shaping children's responses (Demo & Acock, 1996). Much of the research carried out previously indicated that family type per se was a useful way in which to assess or evaluate the possibilities for children's well-being following parental separation. Findings tended to favour the traditional family with two biological parents as providing the optimal family environment and to suggest that any deviation from this family structure such as single-parent families or step-families was problematic for children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Simons & Beaman, 1996). Much of this early theorising about divorce and family structure, therefore, focused on father absence.

According to Arendell (1995), approaches which focus exclusively on the effects of family type are problematic because they neglect to distinguish between divorced and separated families and families headed by never-married mothers. A serious consequence of this failure to focus on the different processes at play within these differing family types is the false assumption that all children growing up in single-parent families are at risk for problems in adjustment (Blankenhorn, 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Popenoe, 1987), and that the absence of one parent in the home gives rise to inadequate family environments for children.

Previous research findings using a family structure approach to parental separation

The following section looks at findings relevant to parental separation which have emerged largely from research which tends to focus on the importance of family type or structure and its subsequent effects on children's well-being. Of particular relevance to children in separated families is, first of all, research on the significance of parental absence from the home reflected in research on single-

parent families and, secondly, research exploring children living in step-families following parental separation.

Single-parent families

McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), in an overview of the effects on children's well-being of growing up in a single-parent family, highlight three primary sources of negative effects for children in single-parent families. First of all, children in single parent families are often exposed to greater economic insecurity and have fewer financial resources to devote to children's upbringing and education. Secondly, parenting in single parent families is likely to be negatively affected by a reduction in parental resources resulting in reduced time and energy to nurture and supervise children. Thirdly, children in single-parent families tend to live in communities with inferior resources and they are also less likely to have the connections that will give them access to the resources that are available. These findings highlight important contextual factors which undoubtedly exert an influence on children's perceptions and experiences of growing up with one parent. Nevertheless, little information is provided on the processes of interaction and mutual influence of family members, which shape children's experiences within these contexts.

The transition to one-parent family status often occurs as a consequence of parental separation. Johnson (2003) emphasises that an important determinant of the vulnerability of the child following divorce, and the separation of the father from the household, is the developmental period in which the separation takes place. Furstenberg, Morgan & Allison (1987) found that 11-16 year old children who had infrequent versus frequent contact with their fathers were *not* at greater risk for psychological stress, academic problems or problem behaviour. Similarly, King (1994), using NLSY data on a sample of 5 to 9 year olds, found no relation between non-resident fathers' contact and their children's social and cognitive development.

On the other hand, Crockett, Eggebeen and Hawkins (1993) found that father presence during the first three years was positively related to child cognitive and behavioural outcomes at ages 4-6. Perhaps the presence of fathers early in life is more critical for children's development than later contact. Earlier evidence (Hetherington & Deur, 1971) suggested that loss of paternal presence prior to age 5 was more critical for children's social adaptation than later paternal loss. Finally, Mott (1993, 1994) found evidence that emotional development is more affected than cognitive development by father presence. This finding is consistent with the father's role as a play partner and the assumption that emotion regulation may be one of the lessons derived from this type of interchange (Parke & Sterns, 1993). Clearly, quality, not presence or absence alone, is important in assessing the impact of fathers. In a follow-up study of 18-21 year old children, Furstenberg and Harris (1993) found little impact of contact alone on young adults' outcomes but distinct beneficial

effects when the quality of the relationship was taken into account. Those who reported a strong bond or attachment with their father during adolescence had higher educational attainment, were less likely to be imprisoned and were less depressed. These effects were especially evident when fathers were living with their children.

Father absence/father presence

According to Johnson (2003), the argument regarding family structure and children's well-being has little to do with whether non-resident parents (usually fathers) make unique contributions to the development of their children. The literature suggests that family structure does determine father contribution and certainly father contact is enormously affected by family structure. However, in a father-presence paradigm, contact is but one portion of the contribution of fathers. The quality of the relationship is the greater part and this characteristic is not determined, although it may be influenced, by family structure. Pederson (1976) argued that understanding the developmental outcomes of children was not greatly informed by the father-absence paradigm. More specifically, understanding the psychological outcomes for children with respect to fathers was not aided by the father-absence literature which avoided the study of processes of father influence. Research on father-absence has more recently moved towards contextualising father-child interactions and care and moved beyond a reliance solely on family structure as an assumed indicator of meaningful child-father interactions. Current trends reflect greater emphasis on the study of father behaviours, attitudes and child-parent and inter-parental relationships and processes. In line with these trends, the present study focuses on understanding if, and to what extent, the quality of children's relationships with non-resident parents (typically fathers) is affected by the change in family structure which parental separation effects. A particular focus of the present study is exploring family processes in the context of family transition.

Step-families

A second focus of the family structure approach to understanding parental separation is research which centres on children's adjustment within the context of step-families. Some studies have shown that children living in step-families have more difficulties adjusting than those children living in single-parent families after parental separation (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985, Hetherington & Henderson, 1997, Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Youniss & Ketterlinus, 1987). Findings indicate that children of all ages initially find adjustment difficult and stressful following their parents' remarriage, but older children are especially likely to experience extended psychological problems (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Stevenson & Black, 1995). Some studies have also identified gender differences in adjustment to living within step-families, with boys more likely to form close relationships with stepfathers (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) and girls at greater risk for stress and behaviour problems (Bray, 1988; Lee & Burkham, 1994).

Research has also shown that over time a distant, disengaged parenting style remains the predominant one for step-fathers but conflict and negativity, especially between step-parents and step-daughters, can remain high or increase especially with adolescents (Brand, Clingempeel & Bowen-Woodward, 1988; Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). However, there is a danger that without insight into the processes at play, false assumptions regarding the influence of family structure on children's adjustment may be reinforced. For example, the difficulties children experience in step-families may be largely the result of their experiences during the process of their parents' separation (Furstenberg, 1988). Research has also identified that some children in step-families exhibit more behaviour problems before re-partnering or remarriage occurs. Nonetheless, a number of studies have shown that children in newly-remarried families show more problems than those in stabilised, divorced, one-parent households (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) or than those in longer remarried, stabilised stepfamilies (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

Previous research findings using a family process approach to parental separation

An exclusive reliance on family structure typologies obscures the dynamics and the evolving nature of transition within families. In contrast to studies which explore the effects of parental separation on children's lives using a family typology approach alone, recent researchers have found it more informative to conceptualise family transition according to the processes of interaction between family members (Degarmo & Forgatch, 1999). This shift in focus reflects an attempt to move beyond a static view of family structure based on comparing family typologies. By using methods that capture family processes, we can better understand the mechanisms that serve to protect or to threaten children's well-being in the context of parental separation.

Contemporary researchers have highlighted the differences between non-separated, separated and re-constituted families on process variables such as conflict, control and expression of positive and negative affect. The following sections look at two important aspects of family process variables relevant to parental separation and children's lives – parenting practices, following parental separation and the inter-parental relationship.

Parenting after separation

Studies neglecting to explore the powerful influence of family processes assume a simple association between emotional and behavioural problems for children and parental separation. Hetherington (1999) highlights the important role that dysfunctional family relationships such as conflict, negativity, lack of support and non-authoritative parenting, play in exacerbating the effects of parental separation on children's adjustment. The author goes on to point out that differences

between the adjustment of children in separated families and in non-separated families are reduced where parents are authoritative and family life is harmonious, warm and cohesive.

Commitment and the quality of parenting on the part of a non-resident parent is a more powerful predictor of children's well-being than parental presence alone (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Young, Miller, Norton and Hill, 1995). Parental support and control have been identified as key resources for children (Baumrind, 1968; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Key features of this support include responsiveness, encouragement, instruction and everyday assistance. These behaviours facilitate children's positive development by conveying a basic sense of trust, reinforcing self-concepts of worth and competence and promoting academic success. Through these processes, parents help children to internalise norms and engage in self-regulation.

A qualitative study of single-parent families carried out in the US found that the most salient problems for both single mothers and fathers were role and task overload and the development of a social life (Richards & Schmiege, 1993). For a small minority of parents health concerns and worries about children's behavioural adjustment were mentioned. The majority of both single mothers and fathers indicated that these problems became easier over time.

Parental distress is also an important factor to consider in children's adjustment following parental separation. Some parents cope with family transition with little apparent distress or disruption. However, many parents experience marked affective disruption and distress, and certain studies have found that it is parental response to stress and subsequent effects on the quality of their parenting that is most salient for children's adjustment (Bank, Duncan, Patterson & Reid, 1993; Forgatch, Patterson & Ray, 1995; Simons & Beaman, 1996).

Gender may also contribute significantly to influences on parenting in a post-separation context. As the majority of children tend to live with their mothers after separation, some researchers have suggested that the absence of a same-sex role model accounts for boys' more negative outcomes in response to parental separation (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Wallerstein, 1987). Social learning theory claims that growing up with a same-sex parent is especially important because children need a same-sex role model to imitate (Rossi, 1984). In addition, psychoanalytic and sociological theories argue that children need to identify with the same-sex parent for healthy emotional development (Freud, 1949; Parsons, 1964). A recent challenge to these findings is presented by Downey and Powell (1993), who examined the same-sex hypothesis in a sample of eight graders containing large numbers of both single parent mothers and fathers. Comparing means of the 35 social-psychological outcomes and educational outcomes, they did *not* find that evidence existed for a same-sex benefit for either girls or boys.

Inter-parental processes

Parental separation brings with it a fundamental change in family structure and dynamics between family members. Post-divorce family relationships between parents and between each parent and child have been identified as powerful influences on children's responses to divorce (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Highlighting the effects on children of family structure alone following parental separation inevitably focuses attention on the absence of family members without acknowledging the potential for continuity and positive development in relationships. Equally problematic in such an approach is the failure to highlight the important influence, positive or negative, of the continuing relationship between parents on the development of their children following parental separation (Whiteside, 1998). The ongoing parental alliance can have a profound influence on how well the child and the parent adapts to this change in family structure. Significant, but often underplayed, is the notion that family transitions also create possibilities for new, independent relationships with the child and new rules and behaviour towards each other (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Consideration of family processes opens up the potential for exploring these new relationships as they unfold and increases awareness of opportunities to re-create and re-invent relationships in revised family contexts.

Inter-parental conflict

Amato (1993) explores the extent to which family processes are linked to the impact of divorce on children and concludes that the strongest and most consistent support is obtained for the inter-parental conflict model. Conflict between parents has consistently been identified as a major contender in explaining links between family transitions and distress in children. According to Pryor & Rodgers (2001) there are two possible reasons for this. First, a large body of literature has documented the pervasive effects of family and inter-parental conflict on children in all families (Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990, Grych, Fincham, Jouriles & McDonald, 2000; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Grych, 1998; Emery, 1999). Secondly, it is rare for parental separation to occur without some level of conflict prior to, accompanying or following the transition.

Children's relationships with one or both parents may well be influenced by their experience of inter-parental conflict before and following parental separation. For some children, separation/divorce may represent the end of a prolonged period of conflict or even violence between parents and this will often affect their continuing relationships with parents. Children may not wish to maintain contact with a non-resident parent if they have witnessed this parent perpetrating violence. Similarly, children may try to protect a parent if they perceive that parent to be a victim of violence. There is no single response to their experience of inter-parental conflict. Nevertheless, marital conflict has been found to be especially harmful to children if it happens in their presence, involves physical violence, is about the children themselves or is unresolved (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Behaviour problems, anxiety and depression in children have been associated with such conflict (Grych, 1998,

Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) and these effects, in turn, are likely to have negative implications for subsequent child-parent relationships.

Exploring children's well-being post-separation over time, longitudinal prospective studies of divorce indicate that children's adjustment is more positive when removed from marriages where there is conflict (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Importantly, positive adjustment is only seen where conflict between parents is explicit and therefore distressing for children. Frequency of conflict may not be as damaging as the type of conflict between parents. Conflicts in which children are caught in the middle of loyalty struggles, where parents are disrespectful to each other, communicate through the children or fight about the children are most destructive to children's well-being (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991; Maccoby et al, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Children in families where there are high levels of conflict are not only more distressed but also may learn to exploit and mislead their parents and to escape monitoring of their activities when they are older (Hetherington, Law & O'Connor, 1992). Even when children are not directly involved in their parents' conflicts, the adverse effects of conflicts may be experienced through increased parental irritability and diminished monitoring, support and involvement (Patterson, 1991).

Developmental status has been found to shape, to some extent, the influences of conflict. Adolescents who perceive overt inter-parental conflict styles report lower levels of adaptation (Gable, Crnic & Belsky, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990) and this is related to increased internalising and externalising adolescent problem behaviours (Buehler, Anthony, Krishnakumar, Stone, Gerard & Pemberton, 1997). With regard to younger children, the indirect effects of parental conflict on children aged 6-8 years through disruption in family alliances and parenting were explored and findings suggest a causal link between conflict and parenting and subsequent family interactions (Kitzmann, 2000). However, in young children conflict does not appear to be such a powerful predictor as parenting and demographic factors (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen & Booth, 2000).

Many studies rely on second-hand accounts of the effects of inter-parental conflict on children rather than exploring these effects from the perspective of the children involved. A further problem is that in earlier studies pre-separation conflict was not distinguished from conflict accompanying separation, nor from post-separation conflict. Children also respond in different ways to parental conflict: factors such as the temperament of the child and the ability of the child to appraise the import of parents' fights influence their responses (Grych, 1998; Emery, 1999).

The well-being of a parent following parental separation can also have a significant impact on how well the child adjusts (Kalter, Kloner, Schreiser & Okla, 1989). Understandably, much work has

been focused on the potentially negative effects of inter-parental conflict on children's relationships with parents and on their general well-being. Work on more positive patterns of interaction between parents post-separation and the consequences for children's relationships with parents is not so prolific, although recent trends encourage greater emphasis on this area. Despite the fact that children benefit from co-operative, non-confrontational co-parenting relationships, only about one quarter of divorced parents manage to achieve such contact (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Co-operative co-parenting is likely to occur when family size is small and when there is little or no conflict at the time of the divorce (Maccoby et al., 1993).

Family structure and family process as complementary concepts

Models which include consideration of family structure and family process are more likely to capture the reality of post-separation family relationships than those which rely exclusively on structure or process alone. Amato (1987) argues that family structure and family processes are complementary rather than alternative concepts. In his view, family structure creates opportunities for certain types of interaction and places constraints on others (Amato, 1987; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Thompson, McLanahan & Curtin, 1992). In addition to this, the impact of certain family processes, such as non-resident parents' contact with their children, may depend on the family type (Amato, 1986). The author draws attention to the need to include family processes, such as conflict and parent-child relationships, to account for how children react to divorce.

Similarly, Demo (1992) points out that many of our research questions and concepts continue to reflect traditional notions of marriage and family, which impede and obscure our approach to and understanding of the connections between family structure, family interaction and child outcomes. According to the perspectives outlined above, children's well-being depends much more on lasting parental support and satisfying family relationships than it does on a particular family structure. Lack of parental supervision and control, persistent parent-child conflict, marital conflict and family violence have significant negative consequences for all children, regardless of the family type to which they belong.

Parental separation confronts families with changes and challenges, often resulting in complex alterations in family roles and functioning. These changes in family relationships can support or create barriers to the efforts of children to adapt to their new family situations. Viewed from a family process perspective, the impact of parental behaviour, changes in family structure, and parental distress on children's adjustment is largely mediated through family relationships and interactions between family members (Demo & Acock, 1996; Forgatch, Patterson & Ray, 1995; Hetherington, 1993; Simons & Beaman, 1996).

Family structure, family process and children's relationships with parents

Children, because of individual characteristics such as gender, temperament, personality, age and intelligence, vary in their influence on family process and their vulnerability or resilience in dealing with their parents' divorce and remarriage and subsequent changes in family roles, relationships and processes. Hetherington (1999) points out that simply knowing children's living arrangements tells us little about the family context in which children live. Children's responses to parental absence are influenced by the reasons for parental unavailability and the quality of family relationships (Demo, 1992). Recent studies draw attention to multiple interacting factors which appear to be linked to difficulties for children and increasingly highlight the importance of paying attention to processes such as family interaction and to variations in experiences and outcomes (Arditti, 1999; Booth & Dunn, 1994; Hetherington, 1993; Demo, 1992). Children who have had good and meaningful relationships with both parents before and after divorce tend to be better adjusted than those who do not (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hess & Camara, 1979; Wierson, Forehand, Fauber & McCombs, 1989).

Exploring the precise effects of relationship quality, Hess & Camara (1979) compared children's relationships with parents from separated families and identified three patterns of effect on children's well-being. The first group had a good relationship with both parents, the second had a positive relationship with one parent and a third group had a positive relationship with neither parent. Scores on stress and aggression in these children indicated that those children with positive relationship with both parents fared better than both other groups, although only slightly better than those children who enjoyed a positive relationship with one parent. Not surprisingly, those children who did not get on well with either parent recorded scores indicating the presence of problem aggressive behaviour. Significantly, and in keeping with an emphasis on family processes, aggressive behaviour in children was generally unrelated to family type but was more common in situations characterised by infrequent or low-quality parent-child interaction and parental discord.

The connections between children's well-being, child-parent relationships and inter-parental relationships are complex. Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan (1995) draw attention to the diversity in children's responses to their parents' marital transitions and the central role that involved, caring, responsive child-parent relationships play in the resiliency and adaptability of children in all families. Closeness to a non-resident parent and the quality of the parenting by the resident parent can explain some of the variation between children living in separated families and intact homes (Amato, 1986; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman & Conger, 1994; Tschann, Johnston & Wallerstein, 1989). For example, the differences in children's well-being within family type are greater than the differences between family types per se. These results suggest that increased attention should focus on children who live in differing family environments, with greater

consideration given to children's own perceptions and interpretations of their inter-personal relationships.

In sum, the central role of child-parent relationships in children's lives throughout the separation process cannot be over-emphasised. Increased focus on the child-parent relationship throughout the process of parental separation contributes theoretically to our understanding of children's experience of parental separation by specifying situations in which parental separation is damaging or advantageous for children (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). Their quality both reflects the effect and influence of other important stress factors, such as conflict and possible changes in economic circumstances, and may, in addition, serve to protect children from these stressors. In turn, the nature and quality of these relationships help us to understand more precisely, how parental separation can influence children's well-being in childhood and adolescence and extending into adulthood.

Conclusion

Children attach profound importance to their family relationships and their lives within their families. Increasingly, family life and relationships fluctuate and children may experience dramatic changes in family life from an early age. Much has been written about the effects of parental separation on children's lives; yet, we still have little insight into the richness and diversity of children's responses to their families post-separation. The present chapter has provided a focus on key developments shaping the study of the effect of parental separation. First of all, the limitations of earlier studies, which tended to emphasise the impact of parental separation as an event and measured outcomes for children against this one point in time, were highlighted. More recent research views the effects of separation as a long-term process and findings outlined highlight the importance of adopting longitudinal approaches in order to reflect the experience of parental separation more accurately and holistically. Secondly, the value of placing children at the centre of research which attempts to describe and explain their experiences is emphasised. It is clear from a review of the literature that greater appreciation of the subjective and unique experiences generated through child-centred approaches is the first step to a more complete understanding of the mechanisms underlying positive and negative outcomes for children. Finally, an approach to parental separation which previously tended to consider the effects for children exclusively in terms of the family type they lived in, is now being combined and expanded with an approach which places more emphasis on the family processes influencing children's well-being throughout the experience of parental separation. Central to these processes is the child-parent relationship.

Divorce and separation related transitions typically involve possible loss of contact or diminished contact with one parent and the potential for reduced parental availability and responsiveness, in

addition to many other stressors which may not be directly linked to child-parent relationships but which undoubtedly exert an influence (Hines, 1997). Within the framework of personal relationships, the most influential and enduring connection for children is usually in the relationships they have with their parents (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Much has been written about the strength of the child-parent relationship as a primary influence on children's social development, in general, and on the development of more specific relationship skills (Duck, 1997; Dunn, 1986). A primary question in research on parental separation and in the present study is to what extent, therefore, the child-parent relationship is affected by children's experience of their parents' separation. Consideration of findings generated in previous research abroad can help to guide and inform an exploration of children's relationships with parents following parental separation in Ireland. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on parental separation and children's relationships.

CHAPTER 2: PARENTAL SEPARATION AND CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on child-parent relationships and the possible effects on these relationships following parental separation. Studies have shown that much of the impact of risk factors associated with parental separation and family instability can be mediated through the nature of immediate family relationships, especially the child-parent relationship (Bray & Berger, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1999). In Ireland most recently, the profound importance of children's relationships with their parents has been highlighted in a study of the influences on family well-being (McKeown et al., 2003). Findings from this study indicate that the well-being of children is almost entirely and directly in the hands of their parents through whom almost all outside influences on their well-being are mediated. Of particular interest to the present study, was the finding that family type per se was not found to affect children's well-being once other explanatory variables, such as the quality of the child-parent relationship and relationships with extended family members, had been controlled for. These findings reinforce the importance of research which provides a focus on the quality of interaction between children and their parents rather than an exclusive focus on the impact of family type on relationships. Many writers have attempted to explore the nature of relationships in childhood. The following sections highlight particular attributes and dimensions of children's relationships which are worth considering in the context of the changes which may occur following parental separation.

Describing and defining close relationships

According to Hartup (1986, pp. 2), relationships are more than mere contexts for social learning; they are "gateways or channels to an ever-widening range of experiences". One of the key mechanisms involved in this connection between family and relationships in a wider context is the child's ability to internalise representations of relationships, which enables them to predict their own and others' responses in unfamiliar situations (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Clearly then, relationships include, not only what individuals do together, but their perceptions, fears and expectations about the future course of the relationship. This aspect of relationships may be of particular relevance following parental separation when children and their parents may no longer be in as close physical proximity as prior to the separation. Internal models constructed from relationship experiences, have a profound influence on children's expectations concerning the availability, responsiveness and attitudes of others in relationships as well as expectations concerning the self. Consistent with some

previous studies which have emphasised the importance of considering patterns of interaction prior to parental separation and their consequences for the quality of relationships post-separation, the present study underscores the importance of expectations built upon past experience and anticipations regarding parental availability and responsiveness.

A further point worth noting in the context of parental separation is that relationships are not static but dynamic and fluctuate with the passage of time (Hartup, 1986). However, according to Sroufe and Waters (1977), notwithstanding this dynamic aspect to relationships, it is important to acknowledge that relationships display coherence across contexts and stability across transformations and that qualities of these relationships may be maintained despite changing forms. These notions of past experience, and stability and change across time and changing circumstances, are of particular relevance to the present study, in light of the changes brought about by parental separation and the potential for continuity and change in these relationships.

Negotiation in family relationships

Finch and Mason (1993, pp. 60) argue that responsibilities between family members are not the straightforward products of rules of obligation, but rather are the "products of negotiation." The authors go on to clarify that by negotiation they mean that "the course of action which a person takes emerges out of his or her interaction with other people. It is, therefore, through human interaction that people develop a common understanding of what a particular course of action will mean." Finch & Mason (1993, pp. 61-62) also distinguish between *explicit negotiation* and *implicit negotiation.* Explicit negotiation involves, for example, family members openly consulting with each other in response to a particular event in family experience. Implicit negotiation, on the other hand, involves no open discussion, yet family members communicate with each over time and commitment develops "gradually, incrementally and perhaps almost unnoticed." In the context of parental separation, opportunities for implicit negotiation between all family members may be altered and even reduced, if non-resident parents are no longer as involved in the everyday family routines of their children as they had been prior to the separation. Research has shown how in times of family transition, established patterns in relationships are challenged and family members re-negotiate relationships and family roles (Minuchin, 1974). Few studies, however, have explored the process of such negotiation and re-negotiation in the context of parental separation. The concept of negotiation in child-parent relationships is, however, central to the analysis in the present study.

Dimensions of permanence and power in close relationships

Certain theorists have chosen to focus on dimensions such as permanence and power in close relationships and especially in relationships between children and their parents. According to Laursen & Bukowski (1997, pp. 755) "stability and power dominate the landscape occupied by

parents and offspring." Child-parent relationships are *obligated* and permanent in the sense that continued exchanges are assured as individuals are not free to leave the relationships and interaction takes the form of *closed field exchanges.* In contrast to this, in *voluntary* relationships, *open field exchanges* occur where interaction and exchange continue as long as they are perceived to be beneficial (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). The dimension of obligation is not present, or not as notably present, in, for example, relationships with those outside the family. Nor are voluntary relationships guaranteed to endure beyond the perceived usefulness of mutual exchange to each participant. The authors go on to point out that "social and biological imperatives require commitment to obligatory kin relationships, forcing parents and children to accept dyadic benefits in lieu of personal ones"(pp. 755). In light of the profound change in circumstances surrounding children's relationships with their parents in the context of parental separation, it is worth considering the possible effects of these changes on children's experiences of and feelings about permanence and obligation in relationships following parental separation.

Stein (1993, pp. 78) points out that despite the special nature of family relations, little attention has been given to the impact of mutual obligations that accompanies kin membership. Obligation has been described as the "glue" that connects generations as well as the "oughts" and "shoulds" that surround individual personal relationships. Finch & Mason (1993) draw attention to a gradual erosion of commitment, as determined by ties of blood, in family relationships following separation. Obligations to family and kin are no longer based on these commitments of blood relationships, but rather they rest increasingly on negotiated commitments worked out by and between family members (Finch & Mason, 1993). When parents separate, parental commitment may no longer be taken for granted as it may have been before the separation. The relationship between the child and the non-resident parent is likely to be profoundly affected by the perception that this relationship may no longer be assumed to continue, but is open to negotiation by both children and their parents.

The concept of power is also central to understanding children's relationships with their parents. Parent-child relationships are hierarchical and authoritative (Collins, Madsen, & Susman-Stillman, 2002). Their interconnections are complementary. Parents dominate interactions with children by virtue of greater power and wisdom and children depend on the control and guidance of parents. Steinberg (1987) for example, has shown how the physical and social emotional changes accompanying puberty influence changes in patterns of parent-adolescent interaction and lead to increasing emotional autonomy of adolescents and more individuated relationships with parents. One of the key components of *individuation theory* states that, as children move through adolescence, child-parent relationships must be re-negotiated to reflect the increasing symmetry in the relationship and the more adult-like status of the child (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Adolescents seek peer-like relationships with parents that allow greater involvement in decision-making and in their own

discipline. One result of this process is a continual transformation and re-negotiation of the child-parent relationship.

Kelley et al., (1983) define close relationships as ones involving a high degree of inter-dependence. Inter-dependence is reflected in four relationships properties: (a) individuals have frequent contact; (b) the relationship is of long duration; (c) the degree of mutual impact is strong and (d) the relationship involves diverse activities. These issues are of particular import given the changing context of child-parent relationships, both in terms of children's changing developmental status and the changes accompanying family life following parental separation.

Continuity and change in child-parent relationships

A life-course perspective on child-parent relationships emphasises the inter-dependence of the life histories of family members and the potential for both continuity and change in patterns of family interaction over the life course (Aquilino, 1997). Are strong emotional bonds in childhood a pre-requisite for later child-parent relations that are emotionally close? The author points out that the histories of family relationships are rarely taken into account when exploring this question. Addressing this absence of a focus on the history of relationships is particularly relevant to the literature on children's relationships with parents following parental separation and to our understanding of how these relationships evolve in the context of family transition.

Aquilino (1997) highlights two theories relating to individual development and change in child-parent relationships as follows: *parental expectancies theory* (Collins & Russell, 1991) and adolescent *individuation theory* (Grotevant & Cooper, 1986). In the first of these, parents must continually modify old expectancies to accommodate changes in children's physical, social and behavioural development. Challenges to parental expectancies tend to be greatest during times of rapid or abrupt changes in children's development. When previous patterns of child-parent interaction are interrupted by new behaviours that deviate from parents' expectations, internal conflict and emotional arousal occur. In order to accommodate these new behaviours, developing new expectations and creating new patterns of child-parent interaction may help to resolve difficulties in relationships. It is important to point out that this is not a uni-directional process and that it is undoubtedly equally important for children to re-negotiate their partnership with parents and to develop new expectations in response to changing family contexts. Successful re-negotiations are most likely to be achieved co-operatively and interdependently.

Re-writing family scripts post-separation

Considering the notion of continuity and change in relationships between children and their parents post-separation, it is interesting to reflect upon Byng-Hall's (1981, 1995) framework of family scripts. The author defines family scripts as "the family's shared expectations of how family roles are to be performed within various contexts." (Byng-Hall, 1995, pp. 4). The term *expectations* implies anticipation of what is to be said and done within family relationships, as well as family pressures to perform the roles as expected. For family scripts to remain helpful to the family, there have to be ways of updating them when necessary. This process involves a series of revisions or re-edits, in which the family improvises in response to changed circumstances. Any valuable innovations that emerge are then repeated and in time become part of the family expectations and so the script is re-written. Stability is partly provided by the family script being embedded in belief systems and practices which are shared with the extended family, the community and the culture. Central to the successful re-editing of family scripts is the adequate exchange of information between everyday experience of family life and the meanings attributed to the way family members interact. An important aspect of the relationship script is "interactional awareness" (Byng-Hall, 1995, pp. 39), which enables families to monitor what is happening while they interact. At a group level adequate family interactive awareness creates "a shared coherent perception of what is happening between those involved, based on compatible internal models of the relationship" (Byng-Hall, 1995, pp. 39). In considering the child-parent relationship following parental separation, the framework of family scripts reinforces the importance of reviewing old patterns or establishing new patterns within relationships for the effective exchange of information between family members.

Continued and effective exchange of information also contributes to feelings of security in family relationships. According to Byng-Hall (1995), the context in which uncertainty is experienced by family members provides a crucial variable in determining how the uncertainty is experienced and used. Is the setting secure in the knowledge of mutual trust and support? This makes it easier to take a risk and to do something differently. Or is it experienced as insecure, in which case the relationship itself might be felt to be threatened by any new turn of events. The author also draws attention to the interplay between authority and attachment systems in family relationships, asserting that feelings of insecurity can be generated in the context of parental uncertainty and preoccupation.

In the following section, the focus moves to consider salient aspects of Attachment Theory and the concept of a secure base before moving on to consider the effects of parental separation on these relationships.

Attachment and the child-parent relationship

One of the most important frameworks for conceptualising the child-parent relationship is Attachment Theory, developed initially by Bowlby (1969). According to Attachment Theory, internal cognitive models of the self and of the quality of relationships with significant others, developed during infancy and early childhood, remain important throughout the lifespan, organising and guiding social behaviour (Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, 1978). However, it is only in the past decade that child parent attachment has moved beyond a focus on infants alone to explored this relationship in elementary school children (Kerns et al, 1996), high school students (Armsden & Greenberg, 1997) and college students (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Kerns, Aspelmeier, Gentzler & Grabill, 2001).

The basic premise of Attachment Theory is that the quality of attachment relationships stems from interactions between infants and their care-givers, especially the degree to which they can rely on their attachment figure as a source of security and support. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that both children and adults differ as a function of their attachment style on a variety of important social indices, including friendship quality, social competence and levels of satisfaction and communication in their closest relationships (Schoenrock, Bell, Sun & Avery, 1999; Feeney, Noller & Callan, 1994; Kerns et al., 1996).

Much of the earlier work on attachment centred around the *physical* presence and availability of the attachment figure. For both Bowlby and Ainsworth, *to be attached* is to use someone preferentially as a secure base from which to explore. The term *secure attachment* refers to both skilful secure-base use over time and contexts in naturalistic settings and to have confidence in a caregiver's availability and responsiveness. However, parents may be physically accessible but emotionally absent for their children. To address this issue, Bowlby added a second criterion for attachment security. The child needs to experience a parent who is not only accessible but also emotionally responsive. The quality of day-to-day interactions, therefore, and not just major separation, influences children's attachment expectations. What this means is that when children or adults perceive their attachment figures as both available and responsive, they are more likely to feel secure. Similarly, how a child perceives a parent as being available and responsive depends not only on a parent being physically present or absent, but more importantly on the expectations of parental response. The concepts of emotional availability and responsiveness, emphasised in Attachment Theory, draw attention to the salience of the *quality* of relationships with parents post separation and to processes such as child-parent communication, which may facilitate more positive experiences within these relationships. Conversely, closed communication patterns in attachment relationships create risks for adjustment problems, not only by increasing the child's anxiety about the parent's availability but also by

contributing to a distortion in the expression of attachment-related emotions such as fear, anger and sadness (Kobak, 1999).

Byng-Hall (1995, pp. 104) defines a secure family base as "a family that provides a reliable network of attachment relationships in which all family members of whatever age are able to feel sufficiently secure to explore ... and which involves a shared awareness that attachment relationships need to be protected and not undermined." Importantly, the author also points out that children need to have a sense that relationships between adults are sufficiently collaborative to ensure that care is available at all times. A key factor in promoting a sense of security is feeling confident in a caregiver's availability and responsiveness.

Developmental patterns in attachment relationships

Attachment theorists argue that children's capacities to maintain and develop the attachment relationship can change with the increasing cognitive skills that accompany development (Marvin & Britner, 1999). With increased capacity to plan and negotiate plans about separations with parents, the child can understand better the continuity of the child-parent relationships in the physical absence of a parent. However, during middle childhood children remain vulnerable to a wide range of dangers and continue to use their attachment figures as secure bases from which to explore. The attachment behavioural system is no less important than earlier, in that school-age children still do not have the wisdom or knowledge to make decisions completely on their own regarding their activities, their supervision or their protection while away from their parents. Not only is it important for children to know where their parents are and to have a secure sense of the parents' accessibility but the parents themselves must know where the child is and who is responsible for the child's protection (Kerns et al., 1996).

Certain changes in children's experiences of attachment relationships at different ages are particularly relevant to the present study and to the effects of parental separation on children's relationships with parents. Most notably, the importance of physical proximity becomes less intense across middle childhood. Bowlby (1969) suggested that the availability of the attachment figure rather than physical proximity becomes a priority in older children and adults. Specifically, parental availability is experienced when there is a belief that lines of communication are open, that physical accessibility is possible and that the attachment figure will respond if called upon for help. Marvin & Greenberg (1982) suggest that this shift begins to take place during the late preschool years and continues to develop through the remainder of childhood, enabling children to maintain their attachment to their parents while being increasingly separated from them.

Attachment Theory underscores key issues in relationships with parents post-separation, by providing a framework against which to assess experiences of availability and responsiveness in an altered family context. While acknowledging the major importance of research on attachment in demonstrating links between quality of parent-child attachment and children's social relationships, Dunn (1986) argues that we also need to look beyond attachment, through research that takes a broader look at the nature of children's understanding of self and others. An emphasis on the meaning for participants of particular behaviour patterns and situations is essential to such an understanding. Dunn (1993) highlights the profoundly important influence on children's well-being of security in the child-parent relationship and the implications which the attachment relationship has for children's relationship with friends beyond the family. The author also advocates consideration of several other dimensions in child-parent relationships that are likely to be important for children's development, as, for example, the emotional nature of the relationships: differences in mutual warmth, expressed affection and conflict. Other dimensions include shared communication about feelings, shared humour and self-disclosure. Hartup (1986, pp. 2) draws attention to gaps in our knowledge of children's relationships with their parents, particularly in middle childhood and adolescence. The author highlights the lack of reliable instruments for measuring constructs such as "intimacy, reciprocity, commitment and disillusionment" in these relationships. In addition, insight into how interactions and exchanges in relationships are organised over time and of how one relationship may have an effect on other relationships facilitates greater understanding of the meaning of these relationships to children.

In the sections above, salient aspects of child-parent relationships have been outlined. These aspects include the significance of the child-parent relationship for children's social and emotional development, the dynamic and fluid nature of relationships, continuity and change and the importance of an ongoing review and re-negotiation in these relationships and, finally, the importance of relationships of attachment to parents. In this second part of the chapter, the focus moves more specifically to consider the potential effects of parental separation on children's relationships with parents.

Effects of parental separation on relationships with parents

Parental separation may negatively influence the child-parent relationship (Amato & Keith, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994) by affecting the quantity, quality or timing of parent-child interaction. Parents may have particular feelings of anger or depression at the time of the break-up which lead to preoccupation, emotional distance and diminished parenting (Amato, 2001). Infrequent and irregular contact with non-resident parents may create a sense of inconsistency. Resident parents may also

spend less time with their children as they are involved in rebuilding their own lives and may have increased involvement in work or other activities outside the home.

Adapting to the changes and challenges of parental separation is a process which takes place over time. Hetherington (1999) points out that there may be notable disruption in family roles and relationships, especially in the first year following parental separation. However, re-stabilisation and a new homeostasis in family functioning are usually achieved two to three years following parental separation and this is usually accompanied by an improvement in the child-parent relationship. The author highlights two main challenges for parents following separation: minimising the amount of conflict which the child experiences and maintaining or developing authoritative parenting practices, characterised by high warmth, communication, responsiveness, control and monitoring and low coerciveness.

A broader focus on the interplay between family interaction throughout the process and on extra-familial factors can help to shed light on how the well-being of children is affected as they negotiate the changes and challenges that follow parental separation (Hetherington, 1999). Findings from the US and the UK suggest that the nature of family transitions is such that a disruption in child-parent relationships is inevitable. In a review of child-parent relationships and divorce-related transitions, Hines (1997) suggests that parental separation may directly affect the ability of parents to interact with their children effectively. During the period of separation and two years following, there is a disruption in the child-parent relationship when parents are likely to be physically or psychologically unavailable (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1982; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Studies indicate that immediately after divorce or separation, both parents tend to be inconsistent, less affectionate and lacking in control over their children (Forgatch, Paterson & Skinner, 1988; Hetherington, 1991).

Prevalence of problems

As mentioned previously, problems in children's relationships with parents in the context of parental separation arise both as a result of the distressing event of physical separation from parents and as a result of the psychological influence on relationships of parental separation in the long-term (Emery, 1999). Children's continuing relationships with their parents are predictors of risk and resilience as strains are frequent particularly during the first years (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). According to Hetherington (1989, 1991, 1993), parents and children have less positive relationships in separated families and this is the case even many years after the separation has taken place.

Morrison & Coiro (1999) carried out a study of children's relationships with parents following parental separation, based on analysis of longitudinal data involving adolescents aged 12 to 16 years

of age at time one (an average of eight years following parental separation) and aged 18 to 22 years of age at time two (an average of 14 years following parental separation). Findings indicated that children's relationship with their mothers were substantially better in married and separated families than those with fathers. Parental separation had no effect on child-parent relationships during early adolescence. However, older children (18-22 year olds) reported a significantly higher level of problems in child-parent relationships than those in non-separated families. According to Emery (1999), this finding may be better explained by age effects, in that mother-child relationships in separated families may be more vulnerable in the face of the developmental tasks of early adult life, such as identity formation and autonomy seeking.

Pre-separation family processes

A growing body of research increasingly shows that many problems previously assumed to be due to divorce are actually present before parental separation. In a prospective study of divorce and child-parent relationships, Amato & Booth (1996) found evidence of increased difficulties in problems in child-parent relationships from 8-12 years prior to parental separation and these findings were consistent with other studies on the effects of parental separation on children's relationships with their parents (Block, Block & Gjerde, 1988; Cherlin et al., 1991; Shaw, Emery & Tuer, 1993). Looked at from this perspective, the effects of divorce are smaller than those reported in many cross-sectional studies, once pre-divorce child and family variables are taken into account. These findings underline the importance of gaining insight into some of the processes operating within the family prior to the separation. One possible approach, but difficult to carry out in practice, is the use of prospective data to better understand the links between parental marital quality, divorce, parent-child relationships and children's problems (Amato & Booth, 1996). Alternatively, retrospective inquiries into pre-separation relationship processes may provide some insight into the quality and influence of relationships prior to the separation. However, in carrying out retrospective studies, it is important to consider that perceptions of the quality of interaction may change over time, influenced by subsequent and current experiences (Duck, 1991; Duck & Pond, 1989).

One of the most obvious risks to the quality of child-parent relationships prior to parental separation is the extent to which there was a presence of inter-parental conflict. Amato & Booth (1996) found that the quality of the parents' marriage is linked with early problems in parent-child relationships and parental affection for children 8 years later. Hetherington (1999) draws attention to limitations in studies which have attempted to compare non-separated, high-conflict families with separated families without taking into account the level of conflict both prior to and following the separation. Importantly, but often sidelined, negative, conflictual relationships between separated parents may continue or even increase following the separation, which may well contribute to a reduction in the quality of child-parent relationships (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Masheter, 1991).

An early study of marital disruption, child parent relationships and behaviour problems in children found the level of contact with non-resident parents to be strongly and positively associated with how close the child felt to the non-resident parent, the majority of these parents being the father (Furstenberg et al., 1983). However, contact between these children and their non-resident parent was very infrequent with almost fifty percent of children having had virtually no contact in the year prior to the study. Only one in six of these children had seen their non-resident parent as regularly as once a week. Consequently, the quality of the child-parent relationships had deteriorated prior to the separation for most of these children.

Findings from studies outlined above reinforce the notion that the effects of parental separation on children's relationships are complex and exert an influence throughout the process of transition. Earlier studies reported outcomes for children based on measurement at one point in time alone, most frequently following the separation. More recent research emphasises the complexities of influence at play in children's relationships with parents in the context of parental separation. Processes of interaction prior to the separation, at the time of the separation and for many years beyond are viewed as contributing to a more comprehensive picture of how relationships evolve over time.

Closed and open family boundaries

Smart et al., (2001, pp. 45) use the terms "closed" and "open" family boundaries to illustrate children's conceptualisation of the web of family relationships post-separation. At the closed end of the spectrum were children who had a strong sense of tight-knit family unit that had been neither fragmented nor extended by their parents' separation. By creating a separate space for contact or re-creating a sense of the original family in their own homes, the children could enjoy a relationship with their parent which did not require them to enter a new family situation. Partner-child relationships tended to be highly contingent in these closely bounded families. At the open end of the spectrum were children who constructed their families in much more inclusive ways, the prime difference being the inclusion of their parents' partners as kin or even as parents. In effect, their families had been extended as a result of the separation.

Developmental patterns in the effects of parental separation on children's relationships

Parental separation and relationships with parents in middle childhood

Social awareness and self-awareness increase significantly during middle childhood (Guttmann, 1993). As children grow through middle childhood, greater social understanding increases children's awareness of relationships and an appreciation of the unique features of other participants in these interactions (Dunn, 1993; Selman 1980; Youniss, 1980). However, the increasing awareness of behaviours and feelings of others develops before the ability to fully interpret their meanings.

Consequently, children experiencing divorce in middle childhood may be aware of their anger at the departure of one parent from the home, but may feel reluctant to integrate this with their feelings of loyalty and fear (Guttmann, 1993). Hess & Camara (1979) & Wallerstein & Kelly, (1980) reported that negative short-term effects for children in middle childhood are related to the child's ability to understand the divorce and the quality of their relationship with their parents. Boys may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of parental separation than girls and to the subsequent disruption of interpersonal relationships. Children in middle childhood may be more likely to align themselves with one parent, often the resident parent, following parental separation. (Parish & Dostal, 1980). Alignment may help children to secure themselves against their own feelings of helplessness and anxiety by providing them with an acceptable target, in the form of the other parent, against whom they can vent their feelings of anger (Guttmann, 1993). Inter-parental conflict may seriously upset the way in which child-parent relationships normally lead to positive behaviour and well-being in children. Peterson & Zill (1986) describe the risk for some children of being placed in what they term a *double approach-avoidance conflict,* when their parents have separated. This term describes the particular situation which arises for some children when closeness to one parent introduces the risk of rejection by the other parent, and puts children in the impossible situation of having to choose between both parents.

Parental separation and relationships with children in adolescence

Increasing interdependence and mutuality rather than detachment and conflict characterise child-parent relationships in adolescence. Detachment from parents in adolescence does not sever child-parent attachment (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). Instead, autonomy introduces a new element into the child-parent relationship, namely that of interdependence. Pre-adolescent girls and their separated mothers often have close, companionate, confiding relationships; however, in adolescence there is a notable increase in conflict in these relationships (Hetherington, 1991, Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). In comparison with adolescents in non-divorced, two-parent families, adolescents in divorced families and in stepfamilies experience the highest levels of mother-adolescent disagreement and the lowest levels of parental supervision (Demo & Acock, 1996).

A US study found that about one quarter to one third of adolescents in divorced and remarried families, in comparison with 10% of adolescents in non-divorced families, become disengaged from their families, spending as little time at home as possible and avoiding interactions, activities and communication with family members (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994). This incidence is greater for boys in divorced families and for girls in stepfamilies. Other evidence suggests that child-parent relationships in divorced families continue to change into adult life (Amato & Booth, 1994). As adults, children from divorced families tend to be as close to one parent, typically the same gender parent as children in married families are to two parents. Because father-

child relationships are typically strained during childhood and adolescence, this suggests that adult sons from separated families move closer to their fathers and away from their mothers. In contrast, girls from separated families apparently remain close to their mothers despite the strains of adolescence, but they continue to be distant from their fathers.

Influences on relationships are, therefore, driven by children's age. Findings outlined above highlight the importance of acknowledging and accommodating the influence of developmental status on children's relationships with parents in the context of family transition. Children in middle childhood may focus more on preserving structures of power and of receiving rather than providing care. Children in adolescence may face particular challenges in coping with their own desire for autonomy within a changing family environment. Balancing autonomy with connectedness in relationships with parents may be promoted where there is a greater sense of inter-dependence in these relationships. Studies have shown that adolescents in divorced or separated families may be at greater risk for conflict with or disengagement from other family members. Problems may also be distinct for boys and girls within these relationships. Developmental status is also likely to influence the ways in which children and their parents interact following parental separation. In the following sections, closeness and security in relationships with parents post-separation are outlined and discussed.

Closeness to parents and children's well-being following parental separation

Do children benefit from having a close relationship with both parents in the post-separation family environment? The answer to this question is not straightforward. In a study carried out by Maccoby et al., (1993), although there appeared to be some advantages from being close to both parents, multiple regressions, using both the closeness of the relationship with the primary parent and that with the non-resident parent as joint predictors of adjustment, indicated that for mother-resident and dual-resident children, closeness to *mother* was the primary factor in their study. On the other hand, closeness to *fathers* had only a small relation to children's adjustment when considered alone and was not a significant predictor of adjustment once closeness to mother had been controlled. Conversely, closeness to mother was significant with father closeness controlled. For children living with their fathers as resident parent, closeness to mother and closeness to father was similar, but weak, in its power to predict adjustment. However, if a close relationship to both parents was maintained, adolescents in father residence were better adjusted than adolescents who were close only to their fathers or only to their mothers. Given the complexity of these findings and the paucity of studies focusing on closeness in relationships post-separation, further studies are needed to investigate *how* children experience closeness to parents post-separation and the implications of this closeness for their psychological development.

Attachment, parental separation and negative life events

To what extent are stressful attachment-related life events, such as parental separation, related to changes in attachment organisation over this interval. One assertion of Bowlby's theory is that attachment-related expectations and working models remain open to revision in light of changes in the availability and responsiveness of secure base figures. More specifically, attachment theory predicts both stability under ordinary circumstances and change when negative life events alter caregiver behaviour.

A study by Hamilton in 2000 examined the stability and continuity of attachment security beyond childhood in adolescents who had been reared in both conventional and non-conventional family contexts. Families were distributed evenly across five major lifestyles: single mothers, domestic living groups (loosely affiliated groups of non-related adults and children), communal groups, unmarried co-habiting couples and a comparison group of conventional two-parent families. It was expected that factors influencing a change in attachment would include disruption in the caregiver-child relationship through separation or loss and general family stressors, which may reduce the caregiver's ability to provide security. It was suggested that these factors were more likely to occur in the families with non-conventional lifestyles.

Findings in the Hamiliton (2000) study suggested that continuity of attachment does not seem to be a factor unique to conventional family structures. The quality of the relationship formed by infants with their mothers was associated with their attachment representations in adolescence. Changes in attachment classification to some extent were related to the presence or absence of negative life events. However, negative life events seemed primarily to *maintain* insecure attachments identified in infancy. Divorce rates were quite high in this sample and occurred in both adolescents with insecure and secure attachment representations. Three families of adolescents with secure attachment representations experienced divorce; these divorces happened late in childhood or adolescence and were reported to be relatively free of acrimony. In contrast, divorce in the families of adolescents who remained or became insecure was more likely to occur in early childhood (10 out of 13 divorces were in early childhood) and was often accompanied by parental reports of high degrees of marital conflict (eight families reported such conflict). Five of the mothers in these families, and none of the mothers of secure adolescents reported incidents of partner abuse. The author concludes that parental separation and divorce, as well as other negative life events in the families of adolescents with insecure representations, was likely to be tied to multiple negative life stressors, which in turn supported and maintained insecure parent-child relationships.

Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Albersheim Treboux (1995) also explored the effects of negative life events, including parental separation, on attachment representations. It was expected that changes are

not random but related to particular events which impact negatively on caregiver availability and responsiveness. Results suggested that processes contributing to stability were (1) consistency in caregiver behaviour across time, (2) a tendency towards persistence in early cognitive structures, (3) the relatively moderate intensity and low frequency of attachment-related stressful events in this middle-class sample (4) the effects of individuals on their environment and (5) stabilising effects of personality trait variables.

These studies make clear that attachment security can be stable from infancy through early adulthood and that change in attachment security is related to meaningful changes in the family environment. Both Waters et al. (1995) and Hamilton (2000) found that the majority of their participants maintained the same attachment status over time. Waters et al. (1995), studying an alternative lifestyle sample, also found that these negative life events operated primarily by maintenance of already established patterns of insecurity or by movement from secure to insecure patterns.

Weinfeld et al. (2000) investigated these same issues in a highly stressed sample in which attachment-related negative life events were far more frequent and more severe than in the Waters et al., (2000) and Hamilton, (2000) samples. The participants in this study did not maintain the same attachment classifications. These were not, however, random changes; change was associated with specific factors, such as maternal depression, factors which are likely to affect caregiver availability and responsiveness.

In contrast to this, other studies have suggested strongly that as an index of disruption in family life, economic hardship and decreased availability of caregivers, divorce provides the type of environment that could have an impact on early childhood attachments as well as influencing changes in representation. In one such study, adolescents experiencing parental divorce were more likely to show insecure attachment when they were 18 years of age, regardless of their attachment status at one year (Lewis, Feiring & Rosenthal, 2000). The authors point out that their findings are consistent with studies showing that marital conflict is related to insecure attachments (Howes & Markman, 1989; Waters et al., 1995). They go on to suggest that divorce represents a lack of parental availability and an increase in negative interactions between parent and child, thus increasing the likelihood of an insecure attachment and that divorce may provide the child with a model for showing that close relationships are not be counted on (Cummings & Davies, 1994; Harold & Conger, 1997).

Recent research highlights the primary role which processes of interaction, such as child-parent communication and inter-personal trust, play in contributing to a greater understanding of the many ways in which family transition can impact on the child-parent relationship. In the following

sections, the focus shifts to consider the role of such processes in children's relationships with parents post-separation.

Parental separation and child-parent interaction

Parental separation and communication in child-parent relationships

Findings in a study of child-parent communication and adolescent self-esteem in separated and adoptive families indicated that children in separated families had more difficulties in their relationships with both the mother and the father than their peers (Lanz, Iafrate, Rosinati, 1999). Children from separated or divorced families also reported more problematic communication with both parents. Two possible reasons were suggested for these findings. First of all, the fact that fathers are almost always the non-resident parent and, on average become less available to children (Seltzer, 1991) could raise difficulties in father-child communication. Second, with respect to communication with mothers, although these are the primary parental relationships, mothers are not always able to satisfy the relationship needs of their children completely. Many of the interactions between resident mothers and their children also occur in the context of the overwhelming and increased responsibility which the transition to being a single parent brings (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985; Hetherington et al., 1992) and this may lead to an impoverishment in relationships with resident parents.

Parental separation and trust in child-parent relationships

Parental separation may affect children's ability to trust their parents through the disruption of child-parent ties and children's apprehension about the permanence of relationships resulting from the experience of the breakdown in their parents' marriage. Changes following separation may also negatively impact children's other relationships. Where children move residence as a result of separation, these effects may be amplified, resulting in further disruption to children's relationships with extended family and friends (Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2000). These negative experiences may also contribute to feelings of distrust and uncertainty regarding the dependability of relationships. However, findings from a study of the effects of parental separation on interpersonal trust in adult offspring found that parental divorce was unrelated to offspring trust in romantic partners and only affected trust in mothers and others when it occurs very early in a child's life (King, 2002). This effect disappears when the quality of the prior child parent relationship is taken into consideration. In other words, any long-term effects of early parental separation can be compensated for if parents are able to maintain good relationships with their children. Importantly, however, the authors highlight that the one exception is trust in fathers where children of divorce are at a higher risk of mistrust. However, it is not clear from this study precisely what contributes to children's problems with trust in relationships with their non-resident parent. Greater emphasis on children's subjective experiences of trust in these relationships may help us to understand the reasons underlying such problems.

Relationships with resident and non-resident parents

Are there qualitative differences between how children relate to mothers and fathers? A review of the literature indicates that, in general, children spend more time with their mothers than they do with fathers (Parke, 1996; Russell & Russell, 1987). However, there are no differences in the extent to which mothers and fathers initiate interaction with their children when they are together (Noller, 1980, Russell & Russell, 1987). Fathers tend to engage in more play-related activities whereas mothers engage in more care-giving activities. There is also a greater likelihood of both positive and negative emotional expressions and conflictual interactions in mother-child rather than in father-child interactions (Bronstein, 1984; Russell & Russell, 1987), which may be due to the greater amount of time and greater diversity of shared activities involving mothers.

Recent evidence suggests that fathers may help adolescents develop their own sense of identity and autonomy by being more "peerlike" and more playful, which is likely to promote more equal and egalitarian exchanges (Larson & Richards, 1994; Shulman & Klein, 1993). Fathers more than mothers conveyed the feeling that they can rely on their adolescents, thus fathers might serve as a facilitating environment for adolescent attainment of differentiation from the family and consolidation of independence (Shulman & Klein, 1993).

Emery (1999) points out that child-parent relationships are not uniform across mothers and fathers, across separated families or even for one parent across time. Men and women have more difficulty in the parenting roles traditionally fulfilled by the opposite-gender parent (Chase Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Luepnitz, 1982). In addition, the challenges to maintaining and developing positive relationships with resident and non-resident parents may differ substantially. Relationships with a resident parent may be affected by the difficulties for children in adjusting to living with one parent alone, the increased responsibility on that one parent to respond to the demands that had previously been met by two parents in the home and generally adjusting to revised family rituals and routines. On the other hand, reductions in physical contact with non-resident parents may alter or diminish the quality of that relationship with this parent and influences may also arise from possible feelings of isolation and detachment on the part of this parent. Previous research indicates that separation weakens ties between children and non-resident parents more than resident parents regardless of the gender of the parent (Amato & Booth, 1994; Aquilino, 1994).

Relationships with resident parents

Approximately 84% of children reside with their mothers following divorce (Seltzer, 1994). A major question, therefore, is what are the effects on children's relationships with both of these parents, when one parent no longer lives in the home? Is there a difference in the perceived quality of relationships between children living with the same-sex parent as resident parent? With regard to the

second question, several studies have found evidence for better psychological adjustment among boys living with fathers and girls living with mothers (Camara & Resnick, 1987; Peterson & Zill, 1986; Warshak, 1986). However, Emery suggests that selection effects may help to explain these findings. In other words, men who are particularly involved fathers may be more likely to choose the role of resident parent with their sons. Similarly, men may be more likely to be resident fathers to their daughters when mothers have psychological problems (Emery, 1988).

Relationships with resident mothers

More recent studies have reported few differences favouring mother over father residence on various measures of adolescent psychological well-being (Buchanan et al., 1996; Downey & Powell, 1993). In general these and other studies document few differences between mother and father residence in terms of children's psychological adjustment. What appears to be more important is the quality of resident parenting, irrespective of gender. Qualitative, child-centred research in the UK highlights the importance for children of a relationship characterised by care and respect with both their parents, regardless of factors such as gender or how much time they actually spend with each parent (Morrow, 1998; Neale & Smart 1999).

Positive relationships with resident mothers are associated with close, supportive, authoritative mothers who are warm but exert firm, consistent control and supervision (Bray & Berger, 1993; Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody & Fauber, 1999; Hetherington, 1989, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Maccoby et al., 1993; Simons & Johnson, 1996). Problems in relationships with resident mothers become less pronounced over the course of two years following divorce. However, findings indicate that parenting styles remain less authoritative than those of non-divorced mothers, resulting in higher levels of problems in control and coercive exchanges, especially between mothers and sons (Hetherington, 1991). Even in adulthood, relationships between sons and divorced mothers are less close than those in non-divorced families, whereas differences in closeness are not found for daughters (Booth & Amato, 1994).

The emotional needs of parents and their children and possible problems of loyalty dilemmas in the child-parent triad will influence the extent to which the child-parent relationship becomes closer or more distant (Emery, 1999). Some children may take on a more adult role in the child-parent relationship as a result of increased responsibilities (Weiss, 1979). Hetherington (1999) suggests that the reversal of the child-parent role or 'parentification' is more likely to occur in the case of daughters rather than sons, and this is especially so in the case of separated families where there is high conflict. Separated mothers describe close, companionate relationships with their daughters and frequently describe these daughters as more like a friend or a sister. Parentifiying behaviour on the part of separated mothers, but not fathers, is associated with closer relationships with both sons and

daughters. On the other hand, very low confiding and low support-seeking is associated with distant, often rejecting or conflictual relationships between mothers and daughters. However, this is not the case for such behaviour on the part of fathers.

Longitudinal studies carried out by Hetherington (1989, 1991, 1993) allow insight into the changing processes of child-parent relationships following parental separation. One study was carried out two months after families had divorced and tracked the resident mother-child relationship over a period of six years (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982, 1985). Compared to relationships in intact families, relationships with resident mothers in separated families were less affectionate, more inconsistent and had poorer levels of communication. Relationship problems with sons were more pronounced than those with daughters. These problems were particularly evident in the first year after divorce and showed an improvement two years later. Six years following the separation, relationships with separated mothers were as affectionate as those with non-separated mothers. However, the level of difficulty in controlling sons and early maturing daughters was still greater in separated families. Numerous other researchers have documented troubles in the relationship between separated, resident mothers and their children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Thompson, McLanahan & Curtin, 1992). A particular concern is that some seemingly close mother-child relationships may be a response to the parents' needs and not the child's. Feeling responsible for the parent's psychological well-being appears to be linked to emotional parentification. Similarly other research indicates that teenagers are less well adjusted when they worry about and feel a need to take care of their parents (Buchanan et al., 1996).

Relationships with resident fathers

As mentioned previously, the majority of resident parents are mothers. However, there has been a substantial increase in the number of father-headed families in the US with numbers having tripled since 1974, making them the fastest growing new family type in the US (Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Research evidence indicates that boys and older children are more likely to live with their fathers as resident parent. In contrast to resident mothers, resident fathers are a very select group of fathers who may be more child-oriented than most fathers (Hetherington et al., 1998). Fathers who actively choose to be resident parents tend to have closer, more involved relationships with their children than those who have little choice as, for example, where mothers are unwell or unwilling to parent (Hanson, 1988; Mendes, 1976a, 1976b). Resident fathers have fewer financial problems but they may have more difficulties with new parental roles and responsibilities. Emery (1999) suggests that this may explain the fact that both male and female adolescents report feeling closer emotionally to resident mothers than to resident fathers.

As has been found with mothers, when resident fathers remarry, there are disruptions in father-child relationships, especially with daughters (Clingempeel, Brand & Ievoli, 1984). Fathers may alter their care-taking relationships more radically than mothers do because fathers are more likely to expect a stepmother to play a major role in household tasks and parenting (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995). However, in long-established stepfamilies, there are few differences in parent-child relations between remarried fathers and their resident biological children and those fathers and children in non-divorced families (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994).

All in all, problems in relationships with resident mothers and resident fathers tend to differ. Mothers have more problems with control and with assignment of household tasks whereas fathers have more problems with communication, self-disclosure and monitoring of their children's activities (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Furstenberg, 1988; Warshak, 1986). Moreover, fathers have special difficulties with monitoring adolescents' behaviour, especially that of daughters (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1992; Maccoby et al., 1993). However, once some form of stability is re-established, resident fathers report less child-rearing stress, better parent-child relations and fewer behaviour problems in their children than do resident mothers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Furstenberg, 1988). However, both sons and daughters report feeling closer to their resident parent than their non-resident parent, regardless of whether the parent is a mother or a father (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Maccoby et al., 1993; White, Brinkerhoff & Booth, 1985).

Relationships with non-resident parents

The question of non-resident parental involvement with their children is essential to an understanding of changes in the child-parent relationship following parental separation. In most cases, the non-resident parent will be the father, and studies in the US have indicated that over half of children whose parents separate had lost contact with their fathers completely, ten years after separation (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991). Recent studies in the UK, however, suggest that contact between children and their non-resident fathers is more frequent. In one study, only 39% of children, whose parents had separated five years previously, saw their fathers less than monthly (Simpson, McCarthy & Walker, 1995). A more recent finding is that only 5% of non-resident parents did not have contact with their children (Maclean & Eekelaar, 1997). Some studies suggest that older children are less likely to stay in regular contact with non-resident parents than younger children. This is because older children may have developed their own routines and may find it more difficult to accommodate visits to a non-resident parent (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Frequency of contact with non-resident fathers and the adjustment of children are usually found to be unrelated (Amato & Keith, 1991). Although obviously some degree of contact is essential, it seems

to be the quality of the relationship and the circumstances of contact rather than the frequency of visits that are most important (Amato, 1993; Emery, 1988; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Simons & Beaman, 1996). When non-resident parents maintain more parent-like contact, participate in a variety of activities with their children, and spend holidays together, the well-being of their children is promoted (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996). Some non-resident fathers may visit their children frequently but the range of activities may be restricted, ties of affection may be weak and relatively little mutual influence may occur. Simpson et al., (1995) describe such contact as *extrinsic* in that interactions do not form part of children's natural everyday routine and *recreational,* in that contact focuses on entertaining and occupying children rather than developing ties of mutual exchange and influence.

Under conditions of low conflict, the involvement of authoritative non-resident fathers can enhance children's adjustment (Hetherington, 1989), especially that of boys (Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993). In contrast, under conditions of high conflict, frequent contact with non-resident parents may exacerbate children's problems (Kline, Johnston & Tschann, 1991). While these studies provide us with valuable information regarding the many outcomes associated with frequency of contact with non-resident parents, more emphasis on the processes underlying these outcomes would facilitate greater understanding of how contact with these parents can best be developed.

Children's well-being and contact with non-resident parents

Some studies have found that there is no simple relationship between the levels of non-resident contact and child well-being (King, 1994), while others have reported both positive and negative effects (Amato, 1993). Pryor & Rodgers (1998) put forward possible explanations for these seemingly divergent findings. First of all, where children perceive their relationship with non-resident parents as negative or non-supportive, continued contact may serve only to exacerbate feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Secondly, where children experience continued inter-parental conflict following parental separation, maintaining contact can have a negative effect on the well-being of these children.

In the US, a curvilinear relationship has been found for levels of father-child contact and children's distress (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Interestingly, children seeing non-resident parents one to three times a month reported higher levels of distress than those who saw fathers either weekly or only a few times a year. Possible explanations are the fact that children who see parents very regularly experience little or less distress as a result of his absence and those children who have very rare contact learn to adapt to the absence of this parent. However, children whose parents maintain less frequent contact may perceive this contact as obligatory rather than chosen and as reflecting reduced commitment on the part of this parent.

Factors influencing non-resident fathers' involvement after parental separation

A decline in paternal involvement over time is related to a decrease in the quality and quantity of contact between the father and resident parent. This finding underscores the limitations of approaches which dismiss influences beyond the immediate child-parent dyad. Geographical proximity also facilitates non-resident fathers' regular visitation and shared participation in routine activities (Furstenberg, Morgan & Allison, 1987; Chase Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Hetherington et al., 1982; Hess & Camara, 1979). But close proximity is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for post-divorce father involvement (Arendell, 1995; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). The age of the child has also been found to be associated with father involvement. In the Stanford Custody project, parents were more likely to be disengaged if their children were older than if they had at least one child under the age of six (Maccoby et al., 1993) and sons rather than daughters (Marsiglio, 1991; Arendell, 1995). Finally, co-operation is highest and divorced fathers tend to be more involved with their children when neither parent has remarried and lowest only when the husband had remarried (Maccoby & Depner, 1990).

Arendell (1995) interviewed 75 non-resident fathers in a qualitative study. The following issues emerged as key influences on these fathers' contact and involvement with their children after separation. First of all, for some fathers, absence and disengagement were seen as acceptable under certain circumstances. Such absence was not always deliberate but evolved as time between visits was allowed to increase. A second influence according to these fathers was the collusion between some children and their mothers, which was due to the intense loyalty of these children to their resident parent and which contributed to increased absence and disengagement on the part of these fathers. Thirdly, some fathers withdrew from their children's lives in order to distance themselves from experiences likely to evoke painful memories.

The notion of the erosion of commitment resonates in Arendell's findings in interviews with non-resident fathers, and throws important light on the question of quality and quantity of contact between non-resident fathers and their children. For some of these fathers, despite the fact that they made efforts to see their children regularly and spend this time positively engaged in shared activities with their children, the sense that they were no longer truly a parent seemed to dominate their experiences. Arendell quotes Williams (1988, pp 2-3) as follows:

> Each of our identities ... is fulfilled by both the quality and the quantity of our experiences ... so too when fathers and mothers are wonderfully interactive, responsible and loving with their children two to three times a month, when they have been used to being with their children most every day, they no longer truly feel like a parent.

Quality of relationships with non-resident fathers

Parental separation and divorce has been found to be more consequential for fathers emotionally, psychologically and in many practical ways, than for mothers (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990). Previous research indicates that separation weakens ties between children and non-resident parents more than resident parents regardless of the gender of the parent (Amato & Booth, 1994; Aquilino, 1994).

An exclusive focus on father-contact fails to capture fully the nature of the father-child relationship following parental separation. Information on how fathers and children interact during visits, how children feel about these visits or the context in which these visits occur, is essential in order to be able to comment with confidence on the effects of contact on specific child outcomes. The strength of the emotional tie between children and non-resident fathers would appear to be a relationship dimension with clearer implications for children's well-being. When children feel loved and cared for by parents, their sense of emotional security is strengthened. Emotional security, in turn, helps children cope with stress and makes them less vulnerable to anxiety and depression (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Fathers who see their children regularly and frequently are more likely to develop close relationships with them, especially if they establish a home where the children can visit and stay overnight (Hess & Camara, 1979). However, despite the circumstances of their contact with their children, most non-resident fathers have a friendly, egalitarian, companionate relationship with their children rather than a traditional parental relationship (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978; Munsch, Woodward & Darling, 1995). They want their visits to be pleasant and entertaining and are hesitant to assume the role of disciplinarian or teacher. They are less likely than non-divorced fathers to criticise, control and monitor their children's behaviour or to help them with tasks such as homework (Bray & Berger, 1993; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Hetherington, 1991).

Relationships with non-resident mothers

Research has indicated that children report that non-resident mothers are more interested in and informed about their activities, are more supportive, sensitive and responsive to their needs, and are more communicative than non-resident fathers (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987). Findings also suggest that children report talking more about their problems and activities and feeling closer to non-resident mothers than to non-resident fathers (Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993). Studies have also found that non-resident mothers have more influence over their children's development, especially their daughters' adjustment than do non-resident fathers. When a resident father remarries, closeness to the non-resident mother can have some disadvantages because it is related to children's lack of acceptance of a stepmother. In contrast, there

is no association between the relationship with a non-resident father and building a close relationship with a stepfather (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; White, 1994).

In the sections above much of the material reviewed has focused on dyadic relationships and influences and effects on these relationships. In the final section of this chapter, the focus shifts to explore these effects within the broader context of family relationships and with particular emphasis on the potential influences of inter-parental relationships on children's relationships with their parents.

Effects of inter-parental relationships on child-parent relationships

The marital relationship is often viewed as the cornerstone of good family functioning and positive relationships between parents are associated with positive child-parent and sibling relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Hetherington, 1999). In contrast, inter-parental conflict is associated with high negativity, coerciveness and conflict in child-parent relationships (Simons & Beaman, 1996). Hetherington (1999) points out that the direct effects of inter-parental conflict on child adjustment are typically small or non-existent. The key to the link between inter-parental conflict and the quality of child-parent relationships lies in the quality of parenting.

Data from a longitudinal study on the development of mother-child relationships were used to examine four hypotheses of how the mother-child relationships may be related to the marital relationship (Engfer, 1988). The *spill-over hypothesis* suggests that the quality of marriage directly affects the way in which the mother relates to her child in both positive and negative ways. The *compensatory hypothesis* suggests that the mothers whose marital relationships are unsatisfactory may compensate for this through a stronger involvement with her children. A third hypothesis suggests that positive or negative aspects of the mother-child relationship may influence the course of the marital relationship. Finally, the *common-factor hypothesis* suggests that it is the simultaneous impact of maternal characteristics on the marital and mother-child relationships that is most important. The findings lent support to all these hypotheses on how the mother-child and marital relationship may affect each other.

Gender patterns have also been found in that poor relationships between parents and parental divorce are most strongly and consistently associated with sons' relationships with mothers and daughters' relationships with fathers. More specifically, low parental marital quality reduces the likelihood that sons will have close relationships with both parents. In the case of daughters, poor inter-parental relationships are associated with less close relationships to fathers but only slightly less close relationships with mothers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato & Booth, 1991; White et al., 1985).

In prospective studies of divorce and child-parent relationships, the linkages between marital discord and poor child-parent relationships were confirmed (Amato & Booth, 1991; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Parental marital happiness at time one predicted problems with the child-parent relationship at time two and parental affection for children eight years later. These results are consistent with previous studies (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994; Cooney, Hutchinson & Leather, 1995) and also provide support for hypothesis that quality of parents' marriage has consequences for later parent-child affections that are independent of early problems in child-parent relationship and parental separation.

A study of the post-divorce roles of mothers and fathers in the lives of their children indicated that the quality and quantity of communication between separated parents clearly diminished with time, and this was concomitant with a decline in attempts to co-ordinate rules between houses (Maccoby et al., 1993). Three co-parenting styles were identified. The first of these was termed co-operative, where parents talked with each other frequently about the children and argued seldom. A second group maintained contact but in a hostile mode. They argued frequently, challenged the other parent's competence and in a number of cases tried to sabotage a child's visit to the other parent. The third pattern identified was called disengagement where, even though children were spending time in both households, there was little or no communication between parents. This was more possible and more common when children were older. Over time the disengaged pattern became more common and the conflicted pattern less so. Although at both times 2 and 3 a little more than one fourth of the families with visitation or dual residence were maintaining a co-operative relationship, the authors point out that this does not imply a high level of stability or continuity in co-operative parenting across time. Rather, some parents become co-operative after an initial period of disengagement, others who start out co-operating become disengaged. It was rare for families who were conflicted at the time of the second study to have become co-operative 2 years later.

Maccoby et al. (1993) explored some of the factors associated with patterns of co-parenting. Age of the children was first explored, in that families with younger children are more likely to be conflicted and those with older children more likely to be disengaged. A second factor is family size in that larger families are more likely to have parents in conflict. A third factor, inter-parental hostility, expressed by either parent or both parents at each time period, strongly predicted the amount of co-parental conflict that occurred at the subsequent time period. Where parents lacked confidence in the other parents' parenting abilities, this also gave rise to more conflictual inter-parental relationships. Finally, new partnerships were associated with less co-operative parenting and both disengagement and co-parental conflict increased. The highest levels of co-operation were found among parents who had not entered a new relationship. According to Belsky, Youngblade & Rovine (1991), fathers were more intrusive and exhibited more negative interactions with their children if the marital relationship

was unstable or uncertain. Interpretation of these data is not that parental interaction declines with a declining marriage, but that insensitivity to and disengagement from one's partner appear also to become evident in one's relations with one's child.

Inter-parental conflict or violence

The importance of re-negotiating relationship boundaries after parental separation, within both child-parent and inter-parental dyads, is emphasised by family systems theory (Emery, 1994; Minuchin, 1974). Boundaries include the rules of relationship interaction between family members. Boundary ambiguity (Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Christopher, 1999), or the lack of distinct boundaries between inter-parental and child-parent interactions, may have serious implications for children's relationships with their parents post-separation. The period following parental separation may be a difficult one in which parents need to establish new co-ordinates for parenting together and independently. Central to the family systems model is the assertion that the failure to establish relationship boundaries that clearly define the former partner as a co-parent but not as a spouse is a major source of post-divorce conflict.

For some children, separation/divorce may represent the end of a prolonged period of conflict or even violence between parents and this will often affect their continuing relationships with parents. Children may not wish to maintain contact with a non-resident parent who they experienced as the perpetrator of violence or they may try to protect a parent who they see as a victim of violence. There is no single response to their experience of inter-parental conflict. Nevertheless, marital conflict has been found to be especially harmful to children if it happens in their presence, involves physical violence, is about the children themselves or is unresolved (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Behaviour problems, anxiety and depression in children have been associated with such conflict (Grych, 1998, Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) and these effects, in turn, are likely to have negative implications for subsequent child-parent relationships.

Child emotional security and inter-parental conflict

Inter-parental conflict has also been found to be associated with emotional insecurity in children. A recent series of studies have explored whether children's experience of inter-parental conflict increases their vulnerability to adjustment problems (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey & Cummings, 2002; Davies & Cummings, 1994). Findings indicated that parenting disturbances which accompany destructive inter-parental conflict were associated with greater insecurity in the child-parent relationship. Supporting the *emotional security hypothesis*, child reports of fear, avoidance and involvement were especially prominent responses to destructive inter-parental conflict. Child insecurity was found to mediate the link between parental conflict and child maladjustment, even after the effects of other parenting processes were taken into account. Parenting difficulties

accompanying inter-parental conflict were related to child maladjustment through their association with insecure parent-child attachment. Findings also indicated that family instability, parenting difficulties and child-parent attachment insecurity potentiated linkages among factors such as parental conflict, child insecurity and maladjustment. In contrast to this, family cohesiveness, inter-parental satisfaction and inter-parental expressiveness appeared to be protective factors in these mediational paths.

Conclusion

The child's relationship with a parent is undoubtedly one of the most influential close relationships they experience. Parental separation is accompanied by change and transition in family life and relationships, which, in some cases, involves lost or reduced parental availability and responsiveness. Studies have explored the power of the child-parent relationship to mediate positive or negative adjustment for children to their post-separation worlds. Studies have also shown that the child-parent relationship may be influenced, altered or maintained throughout the process of parental separation. The importance of viewing this relationship over time, before and after parental separation, and of taking into consideration possible moderating effects such as developmental status, gender, and the inter-parental relationship are emphasised by the findings outlined above. However, previous studies provide us with insufficient knowledge about the exact processes through which children's relationships with parents may be affected following parental separation. Strikingly absent in much of the literature reviewed in this chapter is a focus on the details behind the stated outcomes. We have little available knowledge of the main challenges which children cope with vis-à-vis their relationships with parents in the post-separation family environment. Significantly, we also have little available information from the perspectives of the children themselves. The following chapter looks at the value and importance of considering parental separation from the perspectives of the children whose lives they touch.

CHAPTER 3: CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL SEPARATION ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Introduction

This chapter focuses upon the effects of parental separation on relationships with parents, viewed from the perspectives of the children themselves. Some of the issues outlined and discussed in this chapter have already been presented in the preceding chapters. However, in the present chapter, the focus is upon how children themselves perceive these effects and how they respond to some of the challenges they face in relationships with parents post-separation. Until recently, most of the information we have about how parental separation influences the child-parent relationship has come from studies which have not consulted children directly, but have gathered information indirectly from parents and professionals working with children in the context of family transition. Much of this information has also been collected using standardised measures of children's well-being alone, without providing an opportunity for children to reflect and elaborate on their experiences of family change. More recently, studies have adopted qualitative, child-centred approaches, which create an opportunity for a more fine-grained, comprehensive portrait of family life to emerge.

In their exploration of family life for children following parental separation, Smart et al. (2001, pp. 16-17) highlight three important points. First of all, the authors emphasise the value of more nuanced and qualitative research which places children at the centre of research and encourages their active participation in studies which attempt to define and redefine family relationships and roles. Childhood is experienced most typically in the context of family. Families are also the context for developing close relationships with others and, in this way, discovering identities as children and as 'selves'. Secondly, it is no longer appropriate to define families as "naturalistic, bounded entities" whose membership and structural form is fixed and unchanging. Diversity and change in family life arises from many sources including divorce, separation and re-partnering. Families are, therefore, "fluid networks of personal relationships and practices." Commitment among its members is no longer based alone on relationships of blood and legality, but increasingly open to negotiation and understood to be "individualised, flexible and based on ties of affection" (Smart et al., 2001, pp. 17). This greater emphasis on the element of negotiation in family relationships serves to reinforce the value of exploring family relationships over time. As with all family relationships, the child-parent relationship can develop in different ways, take on different forms and, in certain circumstances, may be fragile. Thirdly, this changing nature of family commitment makes even more transparent the need for children's active contribution to family research. Families may be constituted in a rich variety of ways and research methods must respect and reflect the resulting "conceptual autonomy"

(Smart et al., 2001, pp. 8) of individual family members. Children's construction of family relationships may be unique to each individual child and this transformation in thinking about the family has created a climate in which the complementary insights of childhood and family research work together to illuminate the many complexities of development within this context.

Child and parent perspectives – divergent realities?

Children's responses to parental separation and their involvement in relationships with parents following parental separation are strongly influenced by the meanings which families have in general for them, and how those meanings change with their experience of family transition (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). There is now increasing recognition that children have divergent views and perspectives from those of their parents. Parents and children may have differing standpoints and insights and, as a consequence, parents may not always be able to assess accurately the effects of parental separation on their children's lives. Importantly, and sometimes under-emphasised in the literature on parental separation, children also actively influence parental responses through the expression of their own experience and perceptions.

Patterns of agreement and disagreement on the quality of relationships with parents were explored in a sample of parents and young adult children (Aquilino, 1999). Data on child-parent closeness, contact, control and conflict were collected. Findings indicated that there were systematic differences in these two groups' perspectives on the nature and quality of relationships, with approximately half of the parents and children from the same family showing high levels of agreement. In particular, children and parents appear to have divergent views on issues of control and conflict. A study of primary school children's coping in the context of parental separation concluded that an excessively single-minded focus on parental separation as a major trauma in the lives of children was much more in line with adults' perceptions than with children's (Wade & Smart, 2002).

Smart et al., (2001, pp 143) draw attention to the fact that parental accounts of family life are inevitably and unquestioningly given space in the public arena, and more particularly in the separation and divorce process. The authors question why it is that a greater range of children's narratives and experiences has not become part of the public discourse and suggest that:

> The subsuming of children's accounts into those of their parents in the public sphere is an unintentional way of silencing children and denying their accounts both validity and independent existence.

Approaches to research on children's lives are needed which allow children to occupy their own "biographical and sociological positions"(Smart et al., 2001, pp.143) and to speak independently from these positions. In support of such approaches, studies have found that parents tend to over-estimate the negative effects of divorce and parental separation on children's behaviour and to under-estimate the effects on their emotional well-being (Robinson, Scanlan, Douglas & Murch, 2003). Similarly Cockett & Tripp (1994) point out that, while there appears to be a good deal of consensus between children and their parents over most practical aspects of children's lives, there is a marked difference in their emotional response to the separation process. Children's appraisals of what happens in the separation process are often, therefore, quite different from those of adults involved in the same events (Mitchell, 1985).

Notably, a discrepancy was also found between mothers' and children's perspectives in a study of perspectives on post-divorce fathers. Many of the mothers reported negative feelings about the quality of co-parenting and about father participation in child-rearing. In contrast, children very frequently chose to include the father in a story completion task and enacted positive family and spousal re-unifications (Bretherton, Page, Golby & Walsh, 1998). These findings collectively underscore the importance of understanding and expressing the experiences of family change and transition for children from the perspectives of children themselves.

Children's perceptions of continuity in relationships with parents following parental separation

Parental separation raises the complicated question of who children perceive to be members of their family. Biological relationships are no longer contained in one residential unit and new family members may be introduced into this unit. Funder (1996) used a family sculpture technique with 105 children in order to explore how children after parental separation identified family membership. Findings showed that nearly 20% included original nuclear family members and biological family members only; 41% represented broader membership including biological family members, extended family members and stepfamily members; 21% included nuclear family members and stepfamily members (both resident and non-resident parents) and the remainder included an extensive group of individuals, including friends and pets. McGurk & Glachan (1987) studied children's expectations of continuity in their relationship with parents following parental separation. They identified three levels of understanding in these children's accounts: an unquestioned belief in the continuity of relationships with parents; the assertion that continuity was dependent on the place of residence, positive affection towards the children involved, or subsequent marital status; and recognition of the permanence of parental relationships, accompanied by differentiation of relationship and role. Children from separated families tended to show more mature levels of understanding than children

from intact families. The authors concluded that the experience of parental separation provides children, including very young children, with a greater understanding that a parent may need to live outside the family home and that affectional bonds can be maintained, despite the absence of shared residence. Overall, findings on children's expectations regarding the continuity of relationships following parental separation are complex and reliant on a wide range of interacting features.

Children's views on care in family relationships

Recent studies have explored how children experience care in their relationships with parents in different family forms. One such study involved interviews with one thousand children between the ages of eleven and thirteen who were invited to give their views on being parented and cared for and about their own contribution to care and family life (Brannen, Heptinstall & Bhopal, 2000). These children viewed their parents, especially mothers, as being the most important people in their lives. Children who were not living with their fathers were less likely to mention them than those that were. Other findings indicate that most children play a full and active part in family life, contributing to household decisions, doing housework and also providing care and support for family members. The potential for greater mutual influence between children and their parents in the context of shared residence is raised by these findings.

While children regard themselves as being the care priority for their parents within their families (Brannen et al., 2000), many studies emphasise the reciprocal nature of children's relationships with parents. In a study of family life following parental separation, children clearly regarded themselves not simply as recipients of care and respect, but aspired towards active participation in establishing and maintaining mutually supportive relationships with their parents and families (Smart et al., 2001). Listening to children's accounts of their family experiences allows greater insight into the active and often unacknowledged roles which children play in the process of their parents' separation; roles which include carer, conciliator, advice and support provider (Robinson et al., 2003).

Significantly, children do not wish to be seen as passive victims of the breakdown in their parents' relationship but as participants and actors in the transition and ongoing reconstruction of family life. Most children value positive caring relationships with parents and highlight the importance of affection, mutual respect and support between all family members (Smart et al., 2001). For children of separated parents, it was important for non-resident parents to demonstrate clearly their desire to care for and have committed contact with their children after separation.

So far the emphasis has been on looking at relationships of care with parents post-separation. Of particular relevance to this study is understanding how children experience feelings of closeness and security when their parents no longer live together. In the following sections, children's perceptions of closeness in these relationships is outlined and discussed.

Children's constructions of close relationships

How do children conceptualise closeness in their relationships with parents? The considerable influence of developmental status and gender was illustrated in a study of closeness, authority and independence in relationships between teenagers and parents, and children and their parents. Adolescents described 'closeness' in terms of an ideal of companionship between friends and equals. In general, participants emphasised the benefits of being part of a family (Langford, Lewis, Solomon & Warin, 2001). Reasons for these responses included viewing the family as a source of care and support, the consistent and reliable presence of family at all times and families as a centre of communication. A strong value was placed on spending time together as a distinct group, but this was particularly from the perspective of parents. Clearly then, closeness, as conceptualised by children, adolescents and by their parents, may emphasise differing aspect of quality and contact between family members.

Increased maturity on the part of teenagers, and parents being more accommodating to the needs and wishes of their children, enhanced feelings of closeness for adolescents. Among those children who identified an individual in the family to whom they were closest, three times as many identified mothers over fathers in this role. For girls, open communication with mothers featured highly in descriptions of close relationships with parents, while for boys the sense that parental control was diminishing seemed to have a positive effect on these close relationships. Other responses indicated the greater centrality of peers rather than parents.

Experiences of closeness with parents are likely to be shaped by developmental patterns, therefore, with younger children placing more emphasis on closeness through direct dependence on parents, while older children may associate closeness with more interdependence and reciprocity in these relationships. The possible impact of parental separation on perceived closeness in relationships is discussed in the following section.

Children's perceptions of relationships with parents following parental separation

To what extent does parental separation and the change in family arrangements and roles which accompany it, influence children's perceptions of closeness to their parents. Family type was not

found to predict closeness and warmth in relationships with mothers in a recent UK study of children's experiences within different family types, including stepfather, stepmother and single parent families (Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999). In addition, children and parents in single parent families described more shared family activities.

Importantly, the authors highlight the enhanced power to predict adjustment outcome by the inclusion of children's perspectives on their relationships. When the children's views on their relationships were taken into account, the prediction of behaviour problems was significantly improved, beyond the prediction made when the other known family factors were taken into account. The children in this sample who placed their resident step-father as *not close* were around three times more likely to be experiencing behaviour problems than those who placed him centrally on the map.

Children's views of their closeness to parents were more negative in families where parents themselves had experienced adversities in their earlier lives or had had several changes in relationships. Children's views of their closeness to fathers (either birth or step-father) were strong predictors of children's adjustment, even when other features of the family situation, such as low income, were taken into account. Findings also indicated that feelings of warmth, closeness, companionship and confiding were less common between children and their step-parents than with biological parents. Other studies have found more marked differences between children's evaluations of closeness to parents in separated and intact families. In one such study, children from separated families rated mothers as low on communication and positive affect and fathers as low on communication, involvement and positive affect (Fine, Moreland & Schwebel, 1983).

An emphasis on the child's own perspective on relationships reflects a growing awareness and acknowledgement of how influences operate and flow from child to parent and from parent to child. In a qualitative study of children's perceptions of the effects of parental separation, Walczak & Burns (1984) draw attention to a number of differences in children's abilities to understand and relate to their parents after parental separation. For *younger* children, aged six and seven, it was particularly difficult to make sense of the fact that their parents were living apart. These children had difficulties formulating their own opinions and tended to ally themselves with the parent who they had most interaction with, which in most cases was the resident parent. *Older* children, aged eight to eleven years, were better able to comprehend what had happened within their families and were more capable of showing independent thinking. As a consequence, they were not so dependent on the views of either parent, but were capable of choosing to develop a positive relationship with one or both parents, irrespective of the response of the other parent.

Adolescent children, aged twelve to seventeen years, were particularly sensitive to their relationships and to the changes in them. Many referred to greater closeness with parents than in two parent families. These older children had acquired the ability to rationalise their parents' separation and were better able to think in terms of compromise, considering their relationships with parents from various points of view, even when these were not in accordance with their own views. However, it was also within this age group that anger with parents was most apparent and this anger was expressed in response to the perceived rejection by a parent or the unfair treatment of another parent. In some cases, these older children had chosen not to continue a relationship with their parent. In general, adolescent relationships with parents following parental separation were on more equal terms and they showed great concern for the wellbeing and happiness of their parents.

Perceptions of relationships with resident parents

Implications for relationships with resident parents and non-resident parents may be distinct. While children might, in principle, value their parents equally and wish to relate to them in the same way, this does not always happen in practice, both in terms of how different children in a family are treated and the relative responsibilities of the parents (Smart et al., 2001). In a study carried out in Northern Ireland, most of the children interviewed perceived positive, supportive relationships with resident parents (mothers) during and after their parents' separation (Fawcett, 1999). Key features of these relationships included open communication, emotional closeness and positive treatment by these parents. The main concern of young people with less than satisfactory relationships was conflict, which generally arose in connection with minor everyday matters.

Do children perceive differences between mother-headed and father-headed post-divorce family arrangements? With respect to monitoring, Maccoby & Mnookin (1992) found that two to three years after separation, adolescent children reported that their fathers were slightly less likely than their mothers to know where they were and what they were doing. These findings were reported mainly by girls living with their fathers (Buchanan et al., 1992). Children (mostly adolescents), living with their mothers as resident parent, described feeling closer to this parent than those living with their fathers as resident parent in a study carried out by Maccoby et al., (1993). In addition, girls living in shared parenting arrangements felt closer to their fathers than those living in father residence alone. However, the authors draw attention to the fact that despite exceptional cases where children perceived difficulties in confiding in parents or in capturing their parent's interest or attention, the majority of these children reported positive, close relationships with resident parents, regardless of gender.

Perceptions of relationships with non-resident parents

Studies exploring children's relationships with non-resident parents reflect a wide variety of responses to the relationship following parental separation. Regardless of the circumstances, however, the issue most important to children is not simply one of frequency of contact, but the extent to which fathers take an interest in their children. In a study of children and parents' experience of contact after parental separation, there was much variety in the frequency and nature of children's contact with non-resident parents (Trinder, Beek & Connolly, 2002). Many children expressed great sadness at the absence of their non-resident parent from the home and expressed dissatisfaction at the quality of time which they spent with these parents. Unreliability and lack of commitment on the part of non-resident fathers emerged as a significant risk factor in these children's accounts and this is consistent with findings from other studies (Brannen et al., 2000).

Children's perceptions of contact with non-resident parents

Loss of regular contact with non-resident parents has been described by many children as the most difficult aspect of parental separation to adapt to (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980). Wade & Smart (2002) point out that for many children, parental separation is not accompanied by substantial change either because the non-resident parent remains highly committed to the child-parent relationship or because the relationship prior to the separation was already characterised by parental absence. The authors point out that children's perceptions of diminishing involvement with a parent are highly individual in terms of children's differing expectations. For those children who experience parental separation primarily as the loss of a valued relationship, the emotional price is high. The authors also point out that feelings of uncertainty and insecurity are often in response to children's perceptions that parental attention is inevitably shifting away to new interests and new family ties.

Wade & Smart (2002) distinguish three broad categories of children's experiences of relationships to their parents post-separation. The first of these comprises children who benefit from close, supportive relationships with both parents and who feel confident that their relationship with both resident and non-resident parents will remain central. A second category includes children who experience disappointment and distress as a result of one parent (usually the non-resident parent) indicating reduced involvement and interest. A third group of children indicate uncertainty as to whether they have ever had close, significant ties with one or both parents. Children who have positive relationships with a remaining parent often choose to focus on developing and enhancing that relationship, although many show signs of distress at this perceived lack of commitment and care on the part of non-resident parents.

Children's desire to continue contact with their non-resident parents following parental separation predominates in findings (Walczak & Burns, 1984; Mitchell, 1985). In a study of Australian

children's responses to relationships with non-resident parents, the great majority of these children included the non-resident parent as part of a family portrait (Funder, 1996). A similar US study found that non-resident fathers were less likely to be included as someone who could be relied on for help than a father living in the home (Munsch et al., 1995). However, it seems that differences in perception were more to do with the extent to which the parent was engaged in children's lives. Children who regarded a non-resident parent as central to their lives, considered that they received the same, or in certain cases, greater levels of support than children who nominated their resident fathers as important. Quality of interaction, therefore, as opposed to frequency alone, appears to drive many of the influences on the child-parent relationship following parental separation.

Children's perceptions of the quality of relationships with non-resident parents

A study carried out in Northern Ireland revealed that a minority of children reported positive, supportive relationships with fathers during and after the separation (Fawcett, 1999). A key feature of positive relationships with non-resident parents was shared activities. However, many children highlighted difficulties in these relationships and these were related to poor communication, lack of emotional closeness, lack of shared time and negative treatment, in terms of violence or substance abuse. Children with more frequent contact were generally more positive about these relationships, while infrequent contact gave rise to feelings of disappointment and resentment.

Consistent with these findings, in a study of the post-divorce roles of mothers and fathers in children's lives, Maccoby et al., (1993) found that adolescents reported somewhat closer relationships with their resident rather than their non-resident parent although differences were not great. Surprisingly, even a fairly small amount of contact seemed to be sufficient to maintain close relationships as seen from the adolescents' perspectives. Adolescents who saw their non-resident parent for several weeks in the summer, while having relatively rare contact during the school year, nevertheless reported quite close relationships. Interestingly, the authors point out that for those children who saw their non-resident parent infrequently, their relationship with that parent was, to some extent, influenced by the resident parent's attitude toward the absent parent. However, when these adolescents had more than occasional contact with the outside parent, even if it was only for several weeks in the summer, they were able to build a relationship with that parent that was relatively independent of the other parent's attitude to their former spouse. The interplay between the amount of time, the quality of time and experiences of inter-parental attitudes is complex. What does emerge from previous research is that close relationships are more easily maintained in circumstances of frequent or fairly frequent contact. The present study provides further exploration of these issues from the perspectives of children in order to investigate the relationship between these variables.

In general, parental monitoring by the resident parent was not perceived as being affected by the children's contact with their non-resident parent. Nor was there any evidence of loyalty conflicts influencing closeness in relationships where there was a high level of contact with non-resident parents. Significantly, closeness to mothers and closeness to fathers were positively correlated, which suggests that continuing to see a non-resident parent does not typically impact negatively on relationships with resident parents and may, in fact, have the opposite effect. What we do not learn from these studies is how children experience contact with their non-resident parents on a regular basis, and what factors they feel promote or obstruct positive relationships with these parents. Clearly, further research in this area is required in order to understand these issues more comprehensively and from the perspective of the children themselves.

Children's reflections on what matters in relationships with parents following parental separation

Walczak & Burns (1984) draw attention to the many worries and concerns which children experience about the continuity of child-parent relationships as a result of parental separation. The majority of children expressed some feelings of insecurity and anxiety about these relationships. The main sources of concern were uncertainty regarding which parent the child would live with and negotiating trusting relationships with the parent no longer living in the home.

Children emphasise the importance of post-separation relationships with their parents according to Walczak & Burns (1984), who suggest that children's adjustment to their parents' separation is significantly influenced by communication and the post-separation relationship, rather than the pre-separation relationship with both parents. Positive relationships included perceptions of parental involvement and interest in their lives and were also associated with positive perceptions of parental well-being. They found there was a strong connection between feeling close to a non-resident parent and frequent regular contact for younger children and flexible contact for older children. The authors highlight the fact that the importance to children of the continuity in relationships with both parents cannot be over-emphasised. The sudden disruption of a significant, child-parent bond, especially in circumstances where children have few opportunities for communication or comfort, can give rise to feelings of anger and sorrow. Findings such as these direct our attention to the importance for children of communication at the time of the separation and the need to understand children's reactions to parental separation in the context of their relationships with their parents and relationships beyond the family.

Children's perceptions of communication with parents

The importance of child-parent communication in relationships with parents following parental separation has been highlighted in previous research (Hogan et al, 2003; Fawcett, 1999). The value of open communication between children and parents was highlighted in a study of teenagers' beliefs and values concerning family relationships (Lanz et al., 1999). According to adolescents, increased communication facilitated a sense of companionship between parents and teenagers, which affirmed their maturity as growing towards adulthood and reduced explicit demonstrations of parental control.

A retrospective study carried out by Walczak and Burns (1984), involving interviews with 100 adults whose parents had separated before they reached the age of 18, revealed poor communication between them and their parents about the process of their parents' separation. A small number of children were very appreciative of the sensitive and considerate way in which their parents had talked to them. The quality of communication between the child and parent determined, to a large extent, the quality of the relationship with these parents following parental separation. Poor communication had an adverse effect on relationships which were described as positive before the separation. Conversely, poor relationships prior to the separation improved, in some cases, as a result of more open communication between children and parents following the separation.

More recent studies have also documented difficulties in child-parent communication in post-divorce families. Smart et al. (2001) draw attention to the fact that lack of communication on the part of parents was not always intentional, but often due to parents' own preoccupations or their desire to protect children from the problems of the separation process. For these children, the most difficult aspect of this lack of communication was the resulting sense of powerless in the face of changing events in their family lives. In a study of children's perspectives on family relationships and friendships in the context of differing family types, children reported a limited extent of communication with parents (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor & Sturgess, 2001). Within family types, confiding was more likely to happen with biological parents - both fathers and mothers- rather than with step-parents. Children in single-parent family types did not differ in how frequently they confided in parents or the broad measure of their positive relationships with their mothers from those in non-step families. In addition, these children engaged in more shared family activities than in other family types, which may reflect greater companionship in activities between children and their single parents. A clear message from these children's narratives was the significance of communicating reassurance about the continuity of their relationships with parents and of clear and unambiguous boundaries across relationships.

Perceptions of commitment and trust in relationships with parents following parental separation

Wade & Smart (2002) suggest that the concept of childhood dependency and the privileged status of parent-child relationships give rise to expectations that it should be a parent who children will rely on in times of distress. However, the authors draw attention to the fact that, in the context of parental separation, many children describe feelings of inhibition about approaching their parents with their anxieties and may wish to avoid causing additional and avoidable distress to their parents. Pryor & Rodgers (2001) argue that parents are not always emotionally available to talk to their children when they separate, as they may be coping with their own distress and this may create barriers to children seeking their support and protection. Studies have shown that many children report coping almost entirely alone and some studies have shown relatively low levels of confiding in mothers at an intimate level (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Neugebauer, 1989) despite the fact that mothers are the most likely people for children to confide in on minor matters (Dunn et al., 2001).

Relationships with parents may be further complicated in the context of parental separation. One of the core difficulties which children may experience is negotiating relationships with two people whose lives are no longer shared and who often feel resentment and hostility following the demise of their relationship. Smart et al., (2001, pp. 147) define parental manipulation as:

> persistent attempts to turn children into allies and to provide them with limited and partial accounts of events that they can have no way of independently verifying

Parental manipulation and *negative alliances* with one parent may constitute barriers to children's ability to establish trusting relationship with both parents. Studies have indicated that children value highly an ethic of fairness, of care and respect in their family relationships following parental separation and that such an ethic is essential for trusting relationships to be developed or maintained. Children's development in the context of their families takes place within a network of close family relationships, with significant adults, typically parents, playing a central, influential role. As mentioned previously, one of the most distinctive features in accounts of positive relationships with parents was an awareness that one or both parents were actively committed to continuing their relationships with their children. For those children who were struggling to maintain positive relationships, patterns of diminishing contact with a parent outside the home were particularly troubling.

Children's perceptions of the effects of inter-parental relationships on child-parent relationships

Studies have shown that children value civil relationships between family members (Mitchell, 1985; Maccoby & Depner, 1992; Fawcett, 1999, Hogan et al., 2002), yet this is not always practically possible for inter-parental relationships following parental separation. Significant unhappiness is experienced by children where they continue to witness open conflict between their parents following parental separation. This is one of the main reasons why children might seek to change residence or reduce contact with a parent (Smart et al., 2001). A minimum requirement for children's comfort and security is that parents contain their disputes and avoid creating situations where children are forced to align with one parent or act as a mediator in the inter-parental relationship.

The inclusion of children's perspectives in studies allows us greater insight into understanding the precise mechanisms through which the inter-parental relationship may affect children's relationships with their parents. Maccoby et al., (1993) pose the question as to whether the effects of inter-parental conflict on children's relationships and adjustment following parental separation are due to the indirect effects through deterioration in parenting or if they are due to more direct effects. Evidence is stronger for direct effects of the inter-parental relationship on children's relationships with these parents as, for example, higher levels of conflict between parents were associated with greater perceptions by children of feeling caught in the middle of their parents' relationship, which, in turn, was strongly associated with maladjustment (Buchanan et al., 1991). Maccoby et al., (1993) suggest that adolescent perceptions of closeness in their relationships with parents were strongly linked to the quality of the relationship between the parents, with hostility between parents reducing the likelihood of children reporting close relationships with parents.

The significant and determining effect of negotiation between all family members following parental separation is underlined by a recent UK study of children and parents' experience of contact with non-resident parents following parental separation (Trinder et al., 2002). Making contact work required the commitment of both adults and children. This commitment was accompanied by an implicit agreement contracted over parental roles in which non-resident parents accepted their status as parent outside the home and resident parents co-operated in facilitating contact with these parents. Active facilitation was vital in ensuring that children had 'emotional permission' to enjoy this contact. In cases where contact was successfully maintained, conflict between parents was low or suppressed and parents had a balanced understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses. A presumption of 'good intentions' meant that differences in parenting styles were accepted as legitimate or could be resolved without undermining contact with another parent.

Conclusion

A review of children's experiences and perceptions of their relationships with their parents substantiates the notion that children's relationships with their parents are profoundly interdependent, with influences operating from child to parent and parent to child, within and beyond the dyadic partnerships of child-mother, child-father relationships. Child-centred perspectives emphasise that, overall, children desire continuity in their relationships with parents post-separation, while at the same time, acknowledge the need to adjust to, and actively negotiate, interaction in an altered family context. Absent from these studies, however, is a portrayal of children's subjective experience of family interaction in the context of family transition and the present study addresses this gap in the available research. One of the most distinctive features in accounts of positive relationships with parents was an awareness that one or both parents were actively committed to continuing their relationships with their children and the value of parental reassurance and open communication were strongly emphasised. Children's narratives draw attention to distinctions between experiences with resident and non-resident parents. Developmental patterns in shaping experiences were also evident. The present study builds upon these findings and aims to focus in depth upon how children experience their relationships with both resident and non-resident parents, and how these experiences differ according to the differing ages of the participant children.

CHAPTER 4: METHOD

Introduction

This chapter provides details of the design and methodology adopted in the study. The chapter begins by summarising some of the principles of and approaches to qualitative research, which have influenced the design and structure of the present study. Information specific to the design and methodology is then presented. Ethical considerations are also discussed. The chapter concludes with an outline of the management and analysis of data.

Qualitative research

Denzin & Lincoln (2003, pp. 13) define the word qualitative as implying "an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency." The authors elaborate by stating that qualitative research emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationships between the researcher and what is studied and the situational constraints that shape their inquiry. The nature of such an inquiry is value-laden in that researchers seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. Qualitative research lends itself to "understanding participants' perspectives, to defining phenomena in terms of experienced meanings and observed variations, and to developing theory from field work" (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, pp. 215-216). Elliot and his colleagues argue that the value of any chosen method can best be evaluated in light of its ability to provide meaningful and useful answers to the questions that motivated the research in the first place.

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 phenomena.

The design and methodology of the study is influenced and informed by many of the principles and assumptions of empirical phenomenological research which aims to describe the world-as-experienced by the participants in order to uncover the common meanings underlying a given phenomenon (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992). Smith & Deemer (2003, pp. 428) assert that any discussion of criteria for judging social and educational inquiry must confront the issue of relativism. They highlight the recognition that "as knowing subjects we are intimately a part of any

understanding we have of what counts as knowledge, or of any claim we make to knowledge" and go on to postulate the need to change our imageries and metaphors from those of discovery and finding to those of constructing and making.

> The legacy of all of this, of course, is that we no longer can talk in terms of a foundational epistemology and a direct ontological realism. There is no possibility of theory-free observation and knowledge, the duality of subject and object is untenable, no special epistemic privilege can be attached to any particular set of methods, and we cannot have the kind of objective access to an external, extra-linguistic referent that would allow us to adjudicate from among different knowledge claims.

Central issues become those of how we as individuals make judgements, which we all must, and the extent to which we allow our judgements to move into a public space, which to a certain degree we also must, to engage the judgements of others.

Study Design

The present study is qualitative and embedded in a child-centred approach, highlighting the importance of placing children at the centre of research which attempts to explore and understand their experiences. Hogan et al. (1999) draw attention to the fact that although developmental psychologists have focused on children rather than adults in family research, they have tended to underestimate the ability of children to provide reliable accounts of their own experiences. The authors also point out that one of the most serious limitations to the design of much research with children is that children's responses are often compared to and validated against adult reports of the same phenomena. The present study attempts to overcome these limitations by relying exclusively on the experiences of the children involved.

One of the main developments in the evolution of the study of family transition is the consideration of parental separation as both a significant event in the lives of family members but also as a process which unfolds over time. In keeping with this development, the present study adopts both a cross-sectional approach and a longitudinal approach to exploring children's perceptions of the effects of separation on their close relationships. The sample included children of two different age-groups (children aged 8-11 representing middle childhood and 13-17 representing children in adolescence), with a view to exploring developmental patterns in children's experiences of child-parent relationships post-separation. Children's experiences of parental separation and their perceptions of the influences on their close relationships were examined over two points in time (18 months to two years apart).

Background to present study

The present study evolved as part of a wider investigation into children's experiences of parental separation, covering a wide range of themes relating to children's experiences of the separation process (Hogan et al., 2002). This study was carried out by the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College and funded by the Department of Social and Family Affairs as part of their Families Research Programme.

Data pertaining to children's perceptions of their relationships with their parents in this wider investigation, constituted data for Phase I of the present study. Data collected in Phase II of the study focused exclusively on children's relationships with their parents. Data on children's perceptions of the child-parent relationship in Phase I were analysed to identify themes for further exploration in Phase II of the study. The main objective in carrying out a second phase of data collection was, therefore, to provide elaboration and resonance on themes identified in the first phase of the study. A further objective of the second phase of data collection was to gather longitudinal data on certain aspects of the child-parent relationship following parental separation.

Incorporating longitudinal data into the study of child-parent relationships and family transition facilitates greater insight into the unfolding process of parental separation and of children's responses to ongoing changes and adjustment. Such an approach can also better reflect children and young people's developmental changes throughout this process. The benefits of adopting a longitudinal approach to the study of parental separation is endorsed by Fine & Demo (2000, pp. 155) in the following extract:

> Consistent with our view that divorce involves an extended process with ongoing changes and adaptations to new circumstances, we find considerable value in longitudinal research designs, whether implemented in the context of a quantitative or qualitative approach. We will be better able to capture the nuances and complexity of the divorce process when we attempt to understand people's experience in more than one time period.

Approach to sampling - Phase 1

The present study used purposive sampling, which in contrast to conventional probability sampling, is not designed to generate a large representative sample but to include a relevant range of cases or examples and to incorporate different experiences and processes (Smart et al., 2001). In keeping with the aim of the present study, such an approach to sampling facilitates exploration, interpretation and representation of the richness of individual experience.

Sample recruitment

The sample was identified and accessed, as part of the original study, through a range of sources, including school principals, guidance counsellors, home-school liaison teachers and professionals involved in the provision of support to children whose parents have separated. A total of 105 schools in the Dublin region (37 primary schools and 68 secondary schools) were contacted by telephone and by letter and details of the study were sent to principals, guidance counsellors and home-school liaison teachers working within these schools. Leaflets outlining details of the study were circulated to schools and agencies for distribution to families and other professionals (see Appendix 1). Two agencies, Teen Between (a counselling service specialising in providing support to children whose parents have separated) and Barnardos (an agency involved in provision of support to children and their families) had representatives on the Advisory Group to the initial study. Other agencies, such as Teen Counselling (counselling service for teenagers) and Rainbows (peer support programme for children whose parents are separated and children who are bereaved) were contacted by telephone and a meeting to discuss the details of the study was arranged. A large number of schools was contacted by letter and by telephone and details of the study were also sent to principals, guidance counsellors and home-school liaison teachers working within these schools. When children indicated their willingness to participate in the study, consent was sought from their resident parent. Parents were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendices 2 and 3). Details of the sources of sample recruitment are provided in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Sources of sample recruitment

Source	Number of children	%
Rainbows	22	55
Teen Between	6	15
Teen Counselling	5	12.5
Guidance counsellor	2	5
Family Centre	1	2.5
Women's Aid	1	2.5
Counsellor	1	2.5
Primary Schools	9	22.5
Secondary Schools	11	27.5
Missing Data	2	5
Total	60	100

Participants

A total of sixty children took part in the original study. A sub-sample of forty of these children took part in Phase I and Phase II of the present study. These 40 children are the sole focus of the analyses in the present study. Children were distributed between two age groups (19 aged between 8-11 years of age and 21 aged between 13-17 years of age), which allowed for the exploration of possible developmental differences in children's perceptions of the effects of parental separation on their relationships with parents. Details of the distribution of children by age and gender in both Phase I

and Phase II of the study are set out in a section entitled Profile of Participants, presented at the end of this chapter. Details of the length of time since the separation for participants in both phases of the study are also presented in the profile of participants.

Research Instruments – Phase 1

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed by the research team involved in the original study (see Appendix 4). Members of the research team were Dr. Diane Hogan, Ann Marie Halpenny and Professor Sheila Greene. The interview schedule covered many aspects of the parental separation process. The interview schedule was designed to encourage children to describe narratives related to the process of their parents' separation. In the first part of the interview, children were asked to talk about their families, what they remembered leading up to the time of their parents' separation, their relationships with parents before the separation and their relationships with other family members such as siblings and extended family members at this time. The second part of the interview covered information relating to children's perceptions of practical changes following their parents' separation. Children were asked to describe their perceptions of changes in family routines and responsibilities, changes in residence and economic status and perceived changes in family relationships and friendships following their parents' separation. A third part of the interview explored children's understanding of the separation process, the nature and extent of information available to them at the time, and communication with parents and other family members and friends. Children's understanding of the legal significance of parental separation and divorce was also explored. A fourth part of the interview invited children to describe their feelings and responses to parental separation. A Feelings Checklist (see Appendix 5) was used and children were encouraged to elaborate on their feelings regarding the changes they had experienced. A final section looked at the kind of support, both formal and informal, which was available for children during and after their parents' separation. The interview transcript was analysed in full with a particular focus on information salient to children's relationships with parents and peers.

Drawings of family and Family Links Map

Before each interview younger children (8-11 year olds) were invited to draw a picture of their family. This gave the child an opportunity to relax and become accustomed to the researcher as very often the child and researcher chatted informally while the child was drawing. On completion of the drawing the child was asked to talk about their drawings, which gave them an opportunity to describe their families in a less structured manner than within the interview format. A Family Links Map (adapted from Teen Between Workbook) was also developed by the researchers (see Appendix 6). This was used with older children (13-17 years) before the interviews. Children were invited to represent members of their family by writing the names or initials of each family member and to

indicate the nature of their relationship with them (strong, weak, stressed). Once again, this instrument gave children the opportunity to adapt gradually to the interview process and created an opportunity for them to talk in an informal manner about their family relationships. Both the family drawings and the Family Links Map allowed children to convey an overall impression of their families and family arrangements.

Feelings Checklist

A Feelings Checklist (see Appendix 5) was developed by the researchers as a tool to supplement qualitative interviews with children about the feelings they experienced in response to their parents' separation. In keeping with the design and methodology adopted throughout the study, the main focus of this part of the interview was on children's subjective accounts of their feelings rather than on a quantitative assessment of these feelings using a standardised measure. The primary reason for including the checklist was, therefore, as an aid to children when focusing upon and talking about their feelings. The researchers invited children, first of all, to reflect on the particular feelings they had experienced at the time of or since their parents' separation. When children had been given time to reflect on and respond to this question, the researchers explained that they would read through a list of feelings and children could indicate whether they had experienced any of these feelings in response to the separation. Children were encouraged to elaborate on these experiences if they so wished, with regard to their understanding of why they experienced these feelings and whether these feelings had changed since the time of separation. However, the researchers were aware of the potential for children to become upset when talking about their experience of distress and were very sensitive to instances where children seemed hesitant or reluctant to discuss feelings further. The checklist included the following feelings: anger, confusion, embarrassment, fear of loss, guilt, loneliness, relief, surprise, sadness, worry about parents, and worry about the future. Following a pilot study, the researchers felt that some younger children might have difficulties understanding some of the feelings on the checklist, and visual representations of these feelings were also presented alongside the Feelings Checklist.

Five-Field Map

At the end of each interview, children were asked to fill in information on the five-field map. This instrument was adapted from the Four Field Map[1] (Sturgess et al., 2001) to elicit and reinforce information relating to children's perceptions of available support at the time of and since their parents' separation (see Appendix 7). Five key areas of support were identified as follows: family, relatives, friends and neighbours, and school and support services. Children were asked to rate these areas of support according to whether they had experienced them as having *helped a lot, helped a*

[1] The field of available support services was added to the Four-Field Map

little or didn't help. Having indicated the level of support they had experienced from each of these domains, children were encouraged to elaborate on the ways in which support from these sources was helpful and also on any possible additional support which they felt could be provided.

While the above research instruments were designed specifically for exploring children's experiences of separation in the initial study (Hogan et al., 2002), analyses in the present study have drawn, in part, on findings elicited with the aid of these instruments. However, most of the analyses for the first phase of the present study focused on data collected from the main body of the interview schedule.

Procedure– Phase I

Pilot study

A pilot study was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the research instruments and subsequent amendments were made. Firstly, as the researchers felt that the interview schedule was repetitive in parts and the duration of the interview was excessive (over one hour), the interview schedule was adjusted accordingly and, where possible, repetition was omitted. Secondly, the interview for the younger age group was adapted and simplified in accordance with the developmental status of that age group. Questions were shortened and language which was more readily accessible was used throughout the interview schedule. Thirdly, as some younger children had difficulties understanding some of the feelings indicated on the feelings checklist, visual representations of these feelings were also presented to these children. Finally, on reflection, researchers felt that certain questions were phrased too rigidly and adjusted these questions to allow for more flexibility in children's responses.

Main phase of data collection

Data were collected over the period from June 2000 to June 2001. Interviews were carried out in schools, agencies and in the family home according to the wishes of the children and their families. Interviews were carried out by two researchers, Dr. Diane Hogan and Ann Marie Halpenny. Five children were interviewed but these interviews were not included in the final database for the following reasons. Two children (siblings) were interviewed but the researchers felt that, as these children were very young when their parents had separated, the interview was, in the main, not relevant to their experience of family life. In addition, family arrangements were further complicated by the fact that their mother's new partner had been living in the family home for some time. A further two children (siblings) were interviewed in the family home and their mother remained in the room throughout the interview process. These interviews were not included in the database, as it was considered important that children felt sufficiently comfortable to describe their experiences of their parents' separation without the constraint of other family members being present. Finally, one child

was interviewed but due to an error, the interview was not recorded in full and was consequently not included in the database.

The researchers spent some time at the beginning of each interview talking to each child about the research process and the overall aims and objectives of the study. It was explained to children that tape-recording the interviews would allow the researchers the opportunity to later transcribe the interview and children were asked how they felt about their interview being recorded. When the researchers were satisfied that the children clearly consented to having their interview recorded, the tape-recorder was switched on. All interviews began by asking younger children to draw a picture of their family and older children to complete the Family Links Map. Children were then encouraged to describe what they had represented and, in many cases, this allowed researchers to gain an overall sense of family life before, during and since the separation. Researchers then asked children to talk a little about their personal details, age, school class and hobbies and interests. The interview then progressed through the narrative of parental separation, children's experiences of practical changes since the separation, children's understanding of the separation process and children's experiences of available support, both formal and informal, throughout the process. The interview then concluded with the Five Field Map which allowed children to further reflect upon the nature of and extent to which they had felt that support was available to them, and to comment on aspects of that support. At the end of each interview children were given an opportunity to ask researchers for clarification on any areas or aspects of the study which they were uncertain about.

Sample Recruitment – Phase II

As with the first phase of interviews, the sample was contacted again through a number of sources, although in the majority of cases, the researcher had access to contact information for the families who had taken part in the first phase of the study. Leaflets outlining details of the follow-up study were sent to families and a separate information sheet was prepared for the children and their families, providing details of the aims of the follow-up study and what participation would involve (see Appendix 8). Parental consent forms (see Appendix 9) and child consent forms (see Appendix 10) were enclosed with this information and families were invited to indicate their willingness to participate by filling in these forms and returning them to the researcher. Alternatively, families had the option of contacting the researcher in order to obtain further information before making a decision. In many cases, it was necessary for the researcher to contact the families by telephone some time after summary information had been sent out and to discuss the possibility of inviting their child to take part in the second phase of the study.

Despite the fact that much of the contact information for participants was available to the researcher, the process of contacting and recruiting the sample for the second phase of interviews was slow and recruitment and data collection took a further six months (June 2002 - December 2002) to complete. Some of the main difficulties in accessing the sample included the fact that many families were on holidays during the early phase of recruitment, some families had moved house, some families were experiencing further transition in their family arrangements and many children in the older age group were working and, therefore, not at home when contact was made.

Contact was made with 56 of the 60 families who had participated in the original study. In the case of three of the four families who could not be contacted, the family had moved house and no further contact information was available. The remaining family was still living at their previous address but did not respond to several attempts to make contact with them. The researcher made contact with a further two participants through the gatekeeper who had previously initiated contact. A total of fifty-four participants were contacted personally by the researcher. Forty of these participants agreed to take part in the follow-up study. Of the remaining fourteen children who did not take part in the second phase of the study, the following information is available. Two of these children, one in the older age group and one in the younger age group were contacted. Both indicated their willingness to participate but wished to do so at a later stage. When contacted later, however, both seemed hesitant about taking part and, due to time constraints, it was decided not to proceed with the recruitment drive. Four boys in the older age group did not wish to take part in the second phase of the study. It was clear to the researcher, based on information from the first phase of interviews and from conversation with parents, that family circumstances were particularly complex in these cases. One child's resident parent had been extremely distressed as a result of the separation; two children's non-resident parents had no contact with their families and in a fourth family, the father had returned to the family home but the child was distressed about this development. One girl in the older age group felt that she was now too old to participate in the study (19 years of age) although the researcher reassured her that this was not the case. Three boys in the younger age group did not wish to take part in the second phase of interviews. In the case of one of these boys, two of his siblings agreed to take part in the pilot study for the second phase of interviews. Finally, four girls in the younger age group did not wish to take part in Phase 2 of the study. One of these children had agreed to take part but changed her mind on the day of interview. A second child was coping with the return of a non-resident parent from abroad and subsequent increased contact and involvement in her life. The two remaining children simply stated that they did not wish to take part in the follow-up study. Details of contact with participants and agreement to participate are presented in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2.

Table 4.1: Source of contact with participants

Source of contact	Number of children.	%
Contact made directly with family	54	91
Contact made through gatekeeper	2	3
Contact not possible	4	6
Total	60	100

Table 4.2: Number of children who agreed to participate in Phase II of study

Details of Participants	Girls	Boys	Older	Younger	% Original Sample
Agreed to participate	25	15	21	19	67
Not willing to participate	7	9	5	11	27
Not contactable	4	0	3	1	6

Participants

A total of forty children took part in the follow-up study and this represented 67% of the original sample. As in the first phase of interviews the children were distributed between two age groups (21 children aged between 14 and 19 years of age and 19 children aged between 9 and 13 years of age). Details of the distribution of children by age and gender are set out in a section entitled Profile of Participants at the end of this chapter.

Research instruments – Phase II

Interview schedule

The interview schedule (see Appendix 11) was designed, in the main, by the present researcher under the supervision of Dr. Diane Hogan and Professor Sheila Greene. The interview was semi-structured and was developed to briefly review selected material from the first interview, to cover in further detail some of the themes and concepts which had emerged from this first interview and to expand on this material by exploring new themes and concepts related to the question of children's relationships with their parents. The interview began with some informal questions about children's background, such as age, school class, school examinations, and moved on gradually to ask participants if they could identify anything in family arrangements that they perceived as a significant development for them since the first interview. The researcher then explored children's constructions of closeness with parents in the context of parental separation using the Emotional Closeness Map (see Appendix 12) as an auxiliary tool.

Emotional Closeness Map

[Adapted from Emotional Closeness Map (Smart et al., 2001) and Four Field Map (Sturgess et al., 2001)]

The map consists of six concentric circles with the child represented in the innermost circle and five surrounding circles. The researcher gave children a blank map and asked them to represent people from their immediate family in the surrounding circles, with those closest to them in the innermost circles. The researcher explained to children that they could choose to represent their family by, for example, writing their names or their initials in the circle where they wished to place them. According to Sturgess et al., 2001, family members placed in the innermost circle are given a score of 8, those in the next ring a score of 4 and then 2, 1 and 0 respectively.

The researcher then talked to children about what they had indicated on the map, inviting them to focus on the different people they had included. In particular, children were asked to reflect on what kind of things had prompted them to place their parents in the circles they had chosen. The researcher then asked children to describe situations where they felt close to parents and, conversely, situations where they experienced difficulty feeling close to one or both parents. As the aim of this activity was to explore perceptions of closeness to parents in the context of parental separation, the researcher explored closeness to resident parents first of all and then progressed to a focus on non-resident parents. Having responded to these questions, children were then asked whether, and to what extent, they felt that their parents' separation had impacted on their experience of closeness to them. A second emotional closeness map was then presented to the children and they were asked to represent their parents in one of the circles, in terms of their closeness to that parent *before* the separation. This activity concluded with a discussion of the resulting representation and attempted to identify patterns of change and continuity in these close relationships.

The interview then moved on to cover children's perceptions of parental availability and responsiveness both before and since parental separation. As with the previous sections, a clear distinction was made between resident and non-resident parents and the researcher covered material on each parent separately. In particular, this section covered information on care-giving, contact with non-resident parent, parental responsiveness to needs, parental awareness of child's well-being and the perceived influence on relationships with parents of new family members, such as new partners and their children.

The next section of the interview focused on children's perceptions of trust and reliability and explored perceptions of available parental support and protection in times of stress.

The following section of the interview focused on children's communication patterns with their parents. This section allowed children an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which they felt they could communicate with both parents, both in terms of talking to them about the separation and, in a more general sense, talking to parents about their everyday lives. The importance for children of communication with parents and others was also explored in this section.

The interview then progressed to a focus on the inter-parental relationship before, during and since the separation. Children were asked to talk about how they remembered their parents living together before the separation. Perceived changes in the nature of the inter-parental relationship were also covered. This section also focused on the perceived effect of the inter-parental relationship on children's closeness and security in their relationships with parents and on their general well-being and adjustment to parental separation.

The final part of the interview served to draw the interview to a close and very briefly reviewed some of the information regarding perceptions of closeness and security with parents in the context of parental separation.

In addition to the interview schedule and the research tools described above, children's perceptions of security with their parents in the present study were assessed separately for each parent using the Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996) (see Appendix 13). It is important to point out that this scale was included largely as a quantitative adjunct within a qualitative design study. In other words, additional quantitative methods served to complement the predominantly qualitative methodology. Child-parent attachment has rarely been studied using qualitative methodology of the type used in the present study. It was, therefore, considered necessary to introduce a standardised measure of attachment, based on a particular set of variables as specified by attachment theory, in order to obtain an objective assessment of children's 'felt security' in their relationships with parents following parental separation. Denzin & Lincoln (2003, pp.188) state that the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects

> ...an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation. The combination of multiple methods ... is best understood then as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth and depth to any investigation.

In writing about her experience of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, Brannen (1992, pp. 32-33) suggests that a multi-method strategy provides greater insight into differing theoretical perspectives:

> I would now argue, far from inducing theoretical eclecticism, a multi-method strategy can have quite the opposite effect. Indeed it can serve as an exercise in clarification ... With multiple methods, the researcher has to confront the tensions between the different theoretical perspectives while at the same time considering the relationship between the data sets produced by the different methods.

The following section summarises details of the Security Scale.

Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996)

Child attachment security was assessed separately for each parent using the Security Scale, a 15-item, forced choice, self-report measure, with higher scores indicating more secure attachment. As noted by Kerns et al. (1996), items on the security scale tap the degree to which children believe a particular attachment figure is responsive and available, children's tendency to rely on the attachment figure in times of stress and children's reported ease and interest in communicating with the attachment figure. The scale was originally developed for use with children between the ages of 10 and 12 years of age but has been adapted for use with older adolescents. Evidence for the reliability and validity of this measure has been provided by Kerns et al. (1996). In studies examining children ranging in age from ten to twelve years of age, the Security Scale showed high internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha = .93, and a high test-retest correlation over a short-time interval, r(30) = .75. The Security Scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the present study with Cronbach's alpha = .87 for items relating to security with mothers and an alpha of .88 for items relating to security with fathers. An alpha of .82 was recorded for items relating to perceptions of dependence on mother while an alpha of .76 was recorded for items relating to perceptions of dependence on father. With regard to internal consistency on scale items in the sub-scale availability, an alpha of .76 was recorded for items relating to perceived availability of mother while an alpha of .83 was recorded for item relating to perceived availability of fathers in the present study.

In addition children's reported security to mother was related to, but not redundant with, other perceived qualities of the mother-child relationship (Kerns et al., 1996). Child security scores on this scale have also been significantly correlated with ratings derived from the Separation Anxiety Test (Slough & Greenberg, 1991). The Security Scale yields scores on a single, continuous dimension of security. The 15 items on the scale are scored from 1 to 4 (from least to most secure) with scores averaged to derive a final score.

The items are administered in the *some children ... other children* format (Harter, 1982). Within this format, children are presented with two types of children. They are asked to decide which of these

two children is most like them. They are then asked to endorse whether they are *sort of like* or *really like* the child they have indicated. For example, for the item *some children do not really need their mothers for much* BUT *other children need their mothers for a lot of things* – a child would first of all decide which statement is more true of them. They would then rate whether the statement is *really true* or *sort of true.* While administering the scale, it is important to make sure that children understand the rating instructions. Having explained to children what is involved, the researcher asked children to fill out a sample item and checked to make sure that children have only endorsed one answer for each question. Children are then asked to complete the measure (see Appendix 13).

Procedure – Phase II

Pilot study

A pilot study was carried out in June 2001 and only one adjustment was made to one of the research tools. The Emotional Closeness Map had previously been designed to include children's representations of close friends in addition to family members. However, this activity proved to be excessively time-consuming and it was decided to omit it from the study.

Main phase of data collection

Data were collected between June 2002 and December 2002. In the second phase of interviews children were given the option of having the interview in their homes, their schools or in the university in which the research was being carried out. Six older children and three younger children chose to be interviewed in their schools; eight older children and thirteen younger children chose to be interviewed in their homes; seven older children and two younger children chose to be interviewed in the university. Finally, one child was interviewed in his mother's place of work.

Interviews generally opened with some background questions to allow the child and the researcher time to establish rapport and to give the child an opportunity to adapt to the interview process. In order to establish a sense of familiarity with the child and to review some of the salient information from the first interview, the researcher highlighted one or two points raised by children in the previous interview and asked them to comment on them in the context of their present situation. Children were then given some time to represent family members on the Emotional Closeness Map, followed by discussion of their representations on this tool. The interview progressed gradually through a discussion of the children's perceptions of parental availability and responsiveness since the separation, parental trust and reliability in times of stress, and communication patterns with both resident and non-resident parents. Children were then asked to reflect and comment upon the inter-parental relationship and any perceived influence on their relationship with both parents. The researcher then asked children to focus on their relationships with friends outside their family and to

comment on any perceived effects on these relationships as a result of their parents' separation. A concluding section briefly reviewed the main points raised in the interview. The researcher adopted a flexible approach to the interview process and to using the interview schedule, allowing the participant to talk at length and, where relevant, to introduce material not covered on the interview schedule.

Ethical considerations

Research with children requires full consideration of the particular ethical issues which may arise throughout the research process. Procedures relating to ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, and ensuring children's safety and well-being throughout the process, were incorporated into the design of the present study. Approval for the study was received from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology, Trinity College, Dublin for Phases I and II of the present study. Guidelines for research with children, according to the policy of the Department of Psychology, TCD, were adhered to in both phases of the study. The following sections outline measures taken to ensure best practice in each of these areas.

Informed consent

The question of informed consent is particularly salient in the case of doing research with children. Children may not receive information first-hand and may not be fully aware of their right to refuse to participate in a research study, if requested to take part by a parent or an adult figure of authority. In both phases of the present study, therefore, efforts were made to ensure that children were fully aware of the nature of the research, what their participation would involve and what would happen ultimately to the information which they contributed. This was achieved, on the one hand, by developing leaflets outlining details of the study, which were distributed to families, with accompanying letters of consent for both children and their parents. Once parents had consented to their child being interviewed and a time and venue had been agreed, researchers once again verbally explained the principal research aims and procedure to each participant. Children were assured that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and that they could withdraw at any time during the process. It was also made clear to all children that, should they not wish to respond to a particular question, they could indicate this to the researcher. Finally, as the interview process was drawing to a conclusion, researchers encouraged children to ask for any further clarification on the research process.

Confidentiality and privacy

Participant children and their families were assured from the outset that all information which they chose to contribute to the research would be held in the strictest confidence. The following

procedures were followed in order to ensure maximum confidentiality and privacy. Firstly, all cassettes and interview transcripts were given an identity code and were stored in a secure filing cabinet in the researcher's office. Secondly, in both phases of the study, children were allowed to choose the venue for the interview, taking into account where they would feel most at ease to talk about their parent's separation and where they would be guaranteed the privacy they desired. In the first phase of the study, this was often negotiated between the gatekeepers and the families involved. In the second phase of the study, the researcher negotiated the venue directly with children and their families. Thirdly, the purpose of the present study was fully explained to children and their families, both in written and verbal formats and it was, therefore, apparent to children and their families that reports and presentations using the information collected would be available to the public. However, it was clearly pointed out that where this was the case, quotations and other information contributed by participants, would be anonymised.

Ensuring children's safety and well-being

One of the main concerns for the researchers throughout the research process was the potential for children to become distressed as a result of being interviewed about the transition in their family lives. While it was not possible to offer counselling to children immediately after the interview, children and their families were made aware of support services available to them on a 'fast-track' basis, to avoid prolonged waiting lists. Counsellors, guidance counsellors in secondary schools and those involved in the Rainbows programme in primary schools were also made aware of the potential for children to become distressed, and agreed to monitor children for a period after the interview to provide support and advice if necessary.

Data management and analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were stored and analysed using a combination of QSR NVivo, Microsoft Word and SPSS 11 computer software packages. Once transcribed in full, all interviews were allocated an individual identity code to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Data were analysed using a template organising style of interpretation. Templates or codes are defined and constructed based on prior research and theoretical perspectives and on repeated readings of and reflection on the data (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1984, 1994). The complete analysis process of organising, connecting and corroborating data involves (a) creating a code manual or code scheme (b) hand or computer coding the text, (c) sorting the segments to get all similar text in one place and (d) reading the segments and making the connections that are subsequently corroborated and legitimised.

A preliminary code manual may be based on an initial conceptual model and/or literature reviews. Changes may then be made to the initial a priori code manual after some exploration of the data has taken place. In the present study, the code manual was created using the QSR NVivo data management package. Many of the codes in the present study were implicit in the semi-structured interview, corresponding to specific research questions in the present study and generated from the theoretical framework of the study, while others emerged from preliminary analysis of the data. The method of analysis was, therefore, both inductive and deductive in its approach.

Coding was carried out, in the main, using QSR NUD*IST Vivo (NVivo) data management package. Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS11.The coding process was strongly influenced by the techniques and procedures outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1998) for developing grounded theory although the approach to data collection was not grounded theory. The coding process was carried out at three distinct levels. Firstly, data were analysed using an open coding technique, which involved using a priori codes and developing new codes from the data to select and organise the text into broad categories of meaning. A second level of coding developed sub-categories from these original categories in order to form more precise and complete explanations about the phenomena under analysis. This level of coding is termed axial coding by Strauss & Corbin (1998) in that coding is around the axis of a category to add depth and structure to the category and to systematically develop and relate categories. As coding progressed, new concepts emerged which involved continued revision of the coding manual. The third level of the coding procedure involved selective coding, which was used to integrate and refine established categories in order to form a larger theoretical scheme.

Reliability

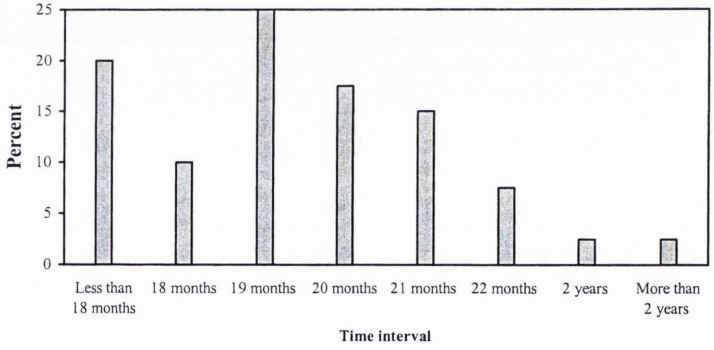
Checks on the reliability of data analysis and interpretation were conducted using two principal methods. The first of these was method triangulation, which involved using different strategies of data collection. The use of multiple measures and research instruments ensures that the variance reflected is that of the trait or treatment and not that associated with the measures (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). As mentioned previously, the use of multiple methods or triangulation, contributes an added rigour and dimension to an investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The present study incorporated a number of research instruments, additional to the core interview schedule, including a standardised measure of security in children's relationships with parents. Analysis of data across these complementary methods of inquiry enabled a fuller, more contextualised picture to emerge across the study findings.

The second method applied as a check on the reliability of data was the establishment of inter-coder agreement in relation to the coding of the interviews. A second researcher, with previous experience of qualitative research and with knowledge of the theoretical framework of the present study, carried out inter-rater coding on 10% of both the open coding and the axial coding of interviews. The inter-rater reliability coefficient was established at 93% for open coding and at 84% for axial coding of interviews in the present study.

Length of time between interview one and interview two

Interviews in the first phase of the study were conducted between June 2000 and June 2001. Interviews in the second phase of the study were conducted between June 2002 and December 2002. The majority of the interviews in the second phase of the study (77.5%) took place between 18 months and two years of the first phase of interviews.[2] Details of the length of time between interview one and interview two are presented in Figure 4.1 below.

Figure 4.1: Time interval between Phase I and Phase II interviews



Profile of Participants

Age of participants in Phase I

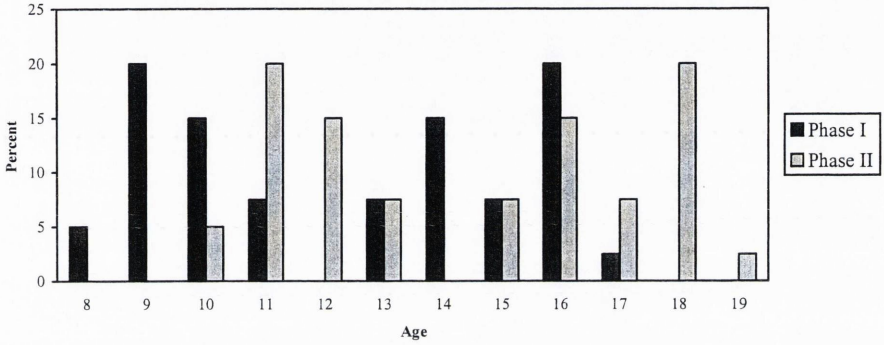
Forty children participated in both phases of the present study. The older age-group included 21 children and the younger age-group included 19 children. The mean age of children in the younger age-group was 9.5 years of age (SD. 0.90) at the time of the first interview. The mean age of children in the older age-group was 15 years (SD. 1.22) at the time of the first interview.

[2] Eight interviews took place just under 18 months (one after one year and two months; five interviews after one year and five months; and one interview was carried out just over two years after the first interview).

Age of participants in Phase II

Forty children took part in the second phase of interviews. The mean age of children in the younger age-group was 11 years of age (SD. 0.82) at the time of the second interview. The mean age of children in the older age-group was 16.5 years (SD. 1.20) at the time of the second interview. Details of children's ages in the second phase of the study are presented in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2: Age of participants in Phase I and Phase II



Gender of participants

Twenty five girls (62.5%) and fifteen boys (37.5%) took part in the study. Among the older age-group of children, 13 (43%) were male and 17 (57%) were female. Among the younger age-group, 11 (37%) were male and 19 (63%) were female. These details are set out in Table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3: Distribution of age-group by gender

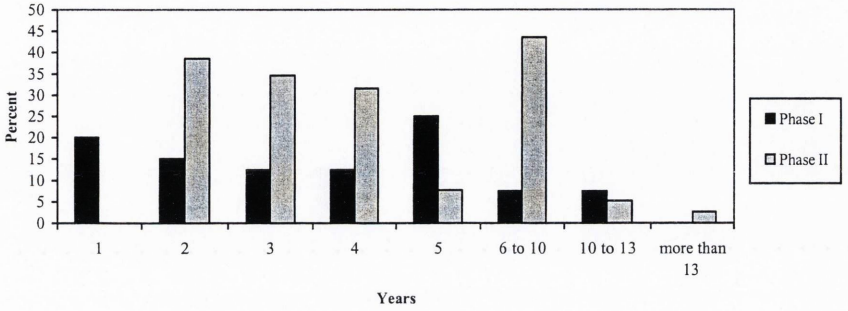
Age-group	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Younger age-group (8-11 years)	6	13	19
Older age-group (13+ years)	9	12	21
Total	15	25	40

Length of time since separation in Phase I and Phase II

Parental separation is a broad term which covers a range of family circumstances and arrangements. For the purposes of the present study, parental separation is defined as the time at which spouses established separate accommodation. According to these criteria, the majority of the participants' parents in the present study (88%) had separated within five years of the time of the first interview and within seven years of the time of the second interview. The range in the number of years since

the separation was one to thirteen years in the first phase of interviews and two to fifteen years at the time of the second interview. Details of the time since separation are presented in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3: Length of time since separation in Phase I and Phase II



Conclusion

The need for qualitative and child-centred approaches to the study of child-parent relationships post-separation has been emphasised in the literature review. Moreover, the need to consider parental separation both as event and as process unfolding over time has been highlighted. Addressing this gap in the literature, the present study adopted a qualitative, child-centred approach to explore children's relationships with parents post-separation. Central to the design of the study was a focus on the inter-subjective experiences of children and on the meanings which they construct in response to these experiences. In keeping with the focus on parental separation as both event and process, the study was conducted across two phases in time, between 18 months and two years apart. Forty children aged between 8 and 17 years of age at the time of the first interview, and representing children in middle childhood and adolescence, participated in both phases. In addition to the semi-structured interview and research tools used, a standardised measure of security was also used in the second phase of the study. In the following chapters, findings from these two phases of data collection are outlined and discussed.

CHAPTER 5: EVALUATING CLOSENESS AND SECURITY IN RELATIONSHIPS POST-SEPARATION

Introduction

This chapter presents findings on children's perceptions of closeness and security in relationships with parents following parental separation. Initial exploration of children's experiences of closeness and security in relationships with resident and non-resident parents involved assessing perceptions of quality in these relationships with the aid of the Emotional Closeness Map[3] and the Security Scale[4]. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS11 (See Appendix 14). In the following section, an overview of findings, providing a preliminary measurement of experiences of closeness and security is presented.

Current feelings of closeness to parents

All children (n=40) completed the Emotional Closeness Map, representing their perceptions of current closeness to their resident parents, while a total of 38 children represented their non-resident parent on the map[5]. Resident parents were placed in the innermost circle by a very substantial majority of children (80%), representing the closest position to parents on the map. By contrast, non-resident parents were placed in the innermost circle by a minority of children (37.5%), signalling a divergence in experiences of closeness to resident and non-resident parents. A further four children (10%) placed their resident parents in the second innermost circle, representing *quite close* relationships while non-resident parents were represented as *quite close* by twelve children (30%). Negative experiences of closeness to parents were also indicative of divergence in patterns with resident and non-resident parents, although the discrepancy was not so marked. Resident parents were placed in the outermost circle, representing the least close position to parents, by four children (10%). Non-resident parents were represented in the least close position to parents by thirteen children (32.5%).

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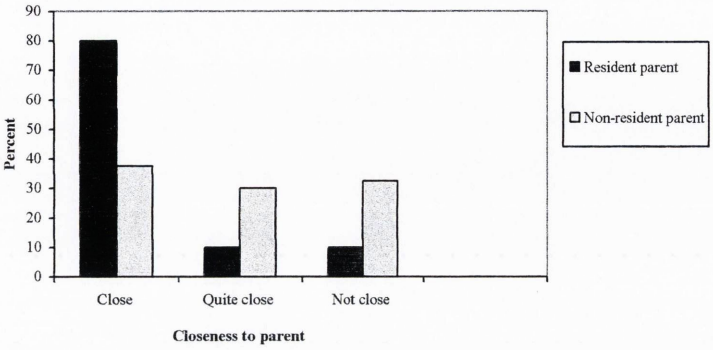
[3]The Emotional Closeness Map (Smart et al., 2001; Sturgess et al., 2001) consists of six concentric circles with the child represented in the innermost circle and five surrounding circles. The researcher gave children a blank map and asked them to place or represent people from their immediate family in the surrounding circles, with those closest to them in the innermost circles. Children were told that they could write the actual names of people in appropriate circles in order to represent them. Alternatively, they could use terms such as *mother, father, sister brother.* Family members placed in the innermost circle were given a score of 8, those in next ring a score of 4 and then 2, 1 and 0 respectively.

[4] Items on the Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996) tap the degree to which children believe a particular attachment figure is responsive and available, children's tendency to rely on the attachment figure in times of stress and children's reported ease and interest in communicating with the attachment figure.

[5] Two children, both male and both in the older age-group chose not to represent their non-resident parent on the map as they had not been in close contact with this parent for many years.

Findings on closeness to resident and non-resident parents are presented in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Current closeness to resident parents and non-resident parents



Feeling close to resident and non-resident parents

Children's representations of closeness to parents indicated a significant difference between perceptions of closeness to resident and non-resident parents[6]. Based on this preliminary assessment, with 80% of children representing their resident parent in the closest position to them, there is little evidence in the present study findings to suggest that parental separation presents a significant risk to experiences of closeness to resident parents. Patterns in closeness to non-resident parents, however, prompt further exploration.

In order to further unpack the meanings behind children's reported scores, children were asked to reflect on closeness to both parents prior to the separation and to represent these experiences using the Emotional Closeness Map. In this way, the study sought to uncover possible connections between experiences of parental separation and changes in representations of closeness to parents.

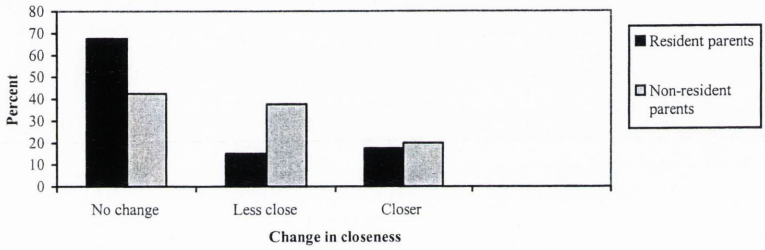
A comparison of representations prior to and following the separation point to substantial stability and enhanced closeness to parents following parental separation, and this is most clearly manifest in closeness to resident parents. Taken together, these findings alone indicate that just over 80% of children perceived relationships with resident parents to be as close or closer subsequent to the

[6] The pattern in these results was as follows: just under half of the children (49%) reported feeling closer to their resident parent than to their non-resident parent. A slightly smaller proportion of children (44%) reported no difference in their feelings of closeness to resident and non-resident parents. Finally, a small minority (7%) of cases reported feeling closer to non-resident parents than to their resident parents.

separation. Closeness to non-resident parents was perceived as stable or enhanced for over 60% of the present sample. Importantly, it is probable that these figures underestimate the extent to which children experience more positive relationships with parents following parental separation, as many children represented their parent or both parents in the closest position to them both prior to and following the separation.

Clearly, negative effects on closeness were more pronounced in the case of relationships with non-resident parents. Fifteen children (37.5%) indicated less close relationships with non-resident parents following the separation. In contrast to this, a small minority of children (15%) perceived their relationships with their resident parents to be less close.

Figure 5.2: Changes in closeness to resident parents and non-resident parents post-separation



In sum, continuity in experiences of closeness to parents predominates following parental separation in the present study. However, there are substantial and significant differences in perceptions of closeness with resident and non-resident parents[7]. A considerably high proportion of children (37.5%) reported feeling less close to their non-resident parents following the separation while only a small minority of children reported feeling less close to their resident parent.

Feelings of security in relationships with parents

All children (n = 40) completed the Security Scale[8] for resident parents while 38 children completed the scale for non-resident parents[9]. Children's perceptions of security in relationships with resident and non-resident parents reflected overall patterns recorded in perceptions of closeness to parents

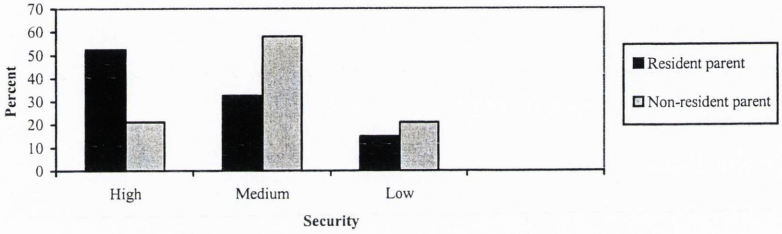
[7] See Appendix 14 for results of statistical comparisons between these scores

[8] Items on the security scale (Kerns et al., 1996) tap the degree to which children believe a particular attachment figure is responsive and available, children's tendency to rely on the attachment figure in times of stress and children's reported ease and interest in communicating with the attachment figure.

[9] Two children, both boys and both in the older age-group, did not complete the scale for their non-resident parents as they had had little or no contact with their fathers for a number of years.

and there was a strong correlation between scores across these two measures. More specifically, just over half of the children, (52.5%), recorded scores indicating a high level of security in relationships with resident parents, while only one fifth of participants recorded similar levels of security with non-resident parents. However, there was little discrepancy between scores indicating low levels of security, with 6 children (15%) reporting these scores with resident parents and a slightly higher proportion of children (20%) reporting scores indicating low levels of security in relationships with non-resident parents. Perceptions of security with resident and non-resident parents are displayed in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3: Security with resident parent and non-resident parent

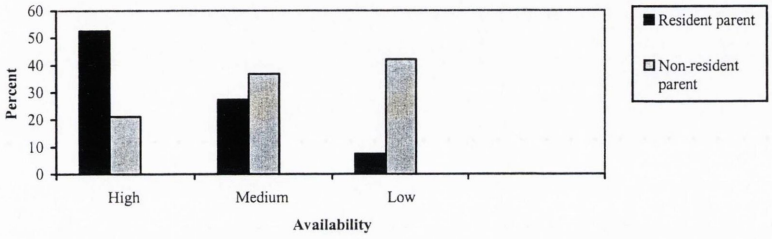


Scores on security with resident parents were significantly higher than scores on security with non-resident parents, a pattern similarly depicted in findings on closeness to parents[10]. Deducing from the very small number of children (n=2) recording higher scores on closeness to their non-resident parents than to their resident parents, children's experiences of closeness to parents appear to be more closely linked to children's daily experiences, interactions and co-residence with these parents. In particular, feelings of closeness to parents as represented in the present study appear to be linked to immediate experiences and, consequently, are more sensitive to influence and change as a result of parental separation. This is borne out by the finding that well over one third of participant children in the present study (37.5%) viewed their relationships with their non-resident parents as less close following parental separation. Feelings of security with parents, on the other hand, may be more closely linked to knowledge, expectation and anticipation based on prior experience and, therefore, are less subject to influence and instability.

[10] A more detailed focus on this pattern indicates that the majority of children (60.5%) reported greater security with resident parents than with non-resident parents. However, in contrast to findings on closeness to parents, a substantial minority of children (30%) had higher scores on security with non-resident parents than with resident parents. Finally, a minority of children (10.5%) reported no difference in security with non-resident parents and resident parents.

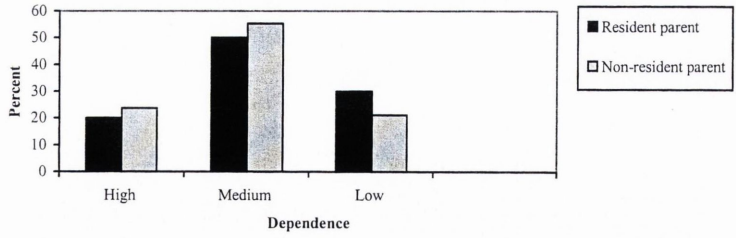
Scores on security were further broken down under two sub-scales of the Security Scale[11] (Kerns et al., 1996) focusing on the concepts of availability and dependence on parents. Children's perceptions of parental availability were significantly higher in relationships with resident parents when compared with non-resident parents as displayed in Figure 5.4 below[12].

Figure 5.4: Availability of resident parent and non-resident parent



This difference was not reflected in perceptions of parental dependence[13]. Scores on the dependence sub-scale stand out in stark contrast to scores on previous constructs, in that there is little difference in positivity recorded for resident and non-resident parents[14]. Moreover, there is some indication of greater positivity in scores on dependence recorded for non-resident parents. Findings are displayed in Figure 5.5 below.

Figure 5.5: Dependence on resident parent and non-resident parent



[11] The first sub-scale, dependence, reflects whether children themselves seek or value parental help (nine items). The second sub-scale, availability, reflects whether children perceive their parents as available (six items). See Appendix 13 for details of sub-scale items.

[12] See Appendix 14 for results of statistical comparisons between these scores

[14] See Appendix 14 for results of statistical comparisons between these scores

In striking contrast to findings on experiences of closeness to parents post-separation, which indicate substantially greater closeness in relationships with resident parents than with non-resident parents, findings on security in relationships post-separation signal greater complexity in experiences and interaction. Experiences of parental availability and their contribution to feelings of security in the child-parent relationship display a similar pattern to experiences of closeness with both parents, with a notable difference between experiences with resident and non-resident parents, conveying significantly more positive feelings in relationships with resident parents. However, experiences of parental dependence and their contribution to feelings of security in the relationship show an appreciably divergent pattern. There was no significant difference between scores recorded on dependence with resident and non-resident parents. In addition, a slightly higher proportion of children experience greater dependence on their non-resident parent than on their resident parent. This finding concurs with the notion outlined above that feelings of security with parents are likely to be, to some extent at least, more stable, permanent and reliant upon knowledge of prior experience and anticipations about future experience. In other words, knowledge that a parent can be contacted and the expectation that a parent will respond if needed, may contribute to the more positive scores recorded on measures of security with non-resident parents. Alternatively, it is possible that dependence on non-resident parents is less salient for children in situations where resident parents provide primary support and care and, children are, therefore, less likely to record negative scores.

Developmental patterns of closeness and security with parents

Possible interaction between the developmental age and stage of children and the effects of parental separation on relationships with parents was also explored in the present study. Data were analysed cross-sectionally to explore possible differences in effects on children in middle childhood and adolescence. The influence of developmental shifts on perceptions of closeness and security to resident and non-resident parents was particularly notable in the analysis of qualitative data. Age differences were not so marked in quantitative assessments of closeness and security. Children in the younger age-group perceived slightly higher levels of closeness and security with both parents than children in the older age-group. Differences were slightly more pronounced for perceptions of security in relationships with resident parents with 63% of younger children having scores in the higher range on security in comparison to 43% of older children. Younger children also recorded higher scores on the dependence sub-scale with non-resident parents than older children (32% and 16% respectively). However, older children reported higher scores on the availability sub-scale in relationships with resident parents.

As will be seen in subsequent sections and chapters, children in the older age-group invested increasingly in relationships outside the immediate family and this may help to explain this

difference in scores on security and dependence. A second point worth highlighting is that greater dependence on both resident and non-resident parents is reflected in young children's strong associations between care-giving and closeness to parents, which will also be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. Related to this point, older children recorded higher scores on perceived availability of resident parents than younger children. One possible explanation for this is that, as will be seen in Chapter 7, there was much stability in care-giving relationships with resident parents in the present study. However, resident parents were also perceived to be less available for a number of reasons and it is possible that reduced availability may be more difficult for younger children than older children to accommodate in relationships of care. Furthermore, older children may have more resources to compensate for reduced availability in relationships with resident parents, such as greater skills in communication, which may allow for more reciprocity in these relationships.

Patterns of relating to parents in adolescence

Developmental differences in children's perceptions of relationships with their parents following parental separation were also evident across the two phases of the present study. At the time of the second interview, children's ages ranged between 10 and 19 years of age. Patterns identified reflected findings typically found in studies of adolescents drawn from intact families. The following section briefly summarises key issues.

De-idealisation of parent

A number of children described aspects of their relationship with their parents which suggested that their perspectives on these relationships were influenced by their increasing maturity. Older children were less idealistic about parental qualities and there was evidence that they were learning to appreciate their parents as *persons* rather than as *parental figures*. This is exemplified in the following quote by a girl in the older age-group who had experienced fluctuation in the quality of her relationship with her non-resident father. However, at the time of the second interview, she described a very positive relationship with her father which she describes as follows:

C It's only recently in the last two years that we've actually been getting closer together

R: Ok and what do you think is making that happen?

C: He's understood me more and I've understood him more ... like we've both grown up a lot ... I see things now with a grey area now not only black and white.

R: Ok tell me a little more about that. How do you mean?

C: I think like when I was younger I used to think my da was like an icon ... I wanted to be like him but I don't want to be like him ... but I love him for

C: I think like when I was younger I used to think my da was like an icon ... I wanted to be like him but I don't want to be like him ... but I love him for what he is and who he is so I think kids should be able to look up to their dad. (Girl, aged 19, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

Some children were also able to reflect more objectively on the process of parental separation in the second phase of the study. There was evidence that they had reflected on the implications of parental separation, both on their own lives and on their parents' lives. In the following extract, a boy in the older age-group expresses his thoughts about his parents' separation and emphasises that, as he now perceives it, he can better accommodate the breakdown in his parents' relationship:

I looked at my mum and dad's relationship as an idea of what I would have had ... it's not as big as people make it out to be ... it's just it's the equivalent of breaking up ... it's a bit more serious because they are adults and you see they think it's serious which makes it serious to them ... but, say it was a teenager, they [teenagers] would find their problems serious. It is more serious because they have been married but, then again, that still doesn't change a lot. It's not like the biggest thing that will ever happen to you. Getting married is but splitting up isn't ... it happens a lot. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation – Phase II)

Individuation

There was also greater evidence at the time of the second interview that children in adolescence were developing identities independent of their families and this had some influence on the development of their relationships with parents. In some cases, increased independence and autonomy created difficulties for closeness to parents. This boy in the older age group described how his relationship with his mother, which had been very close when he was younger, had now become more difficult and more distant:

I don't know ... is it a bad thing? I don't think so. I think it's because I have started to believe in my own opinions. Like, me ... it's who I am and not my mam. That's what I was when I was younger ... well, that's what everyone is when they're younger. Like I wouldn't say that my mam was my best friend ... but she was there with me all the time. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Another child in the older age-group described making independent decisions about his contact with his non-resident parent:

I don't care like I see him all I need ... I'm grown out of it now ... I'm getting older now. (Boy aged 17, 4 years since separation – Phase II)

> They [friends] are growing more away from their family than I would be because I have to be there because of the situation. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Increased symmetry in relationships with parents

For other children, growing older enabled them to develop a greater sense of interconnectedness with parents as increased maturity meant that they had more in common:

> Yeah, ... 'cause I'm growing up and I've more time with her and she's got like ... like we have most of thinking in common like because like she likes to go for long walks and things. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Intimate relationships

Patterns of relating to parents in the second phase of the study were also influenced by the fact that a number of children in the older age-group were involved in intimate relationships. These relationships had some effects on the extent to which children continued to depend on their parents or looked beyond family relationships for support and advice. In general, intimate relationships appeared to have a positive effect on children's relationships with their parents. A singular example was the case of a boy in the older age-group who had described a very negative relationship with his mother at the time of the first interview. At the time of the second interview, he spoke of his mother in more positive tones and this appeared to be related to his experience in his relationship with his girlfriend.

> Although like I give out about her and she done everything ... I'd rather live with me mam than me da. Because she's me ma like ... she raised me up, she'd know more about me than anybody in the world would. And I'd be close to her like ... I'd tell her things that I wouldn't tell me dad things although he'd be me best friend or whatever ... things that I can't tell him. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Increased involvement in relationships beyond the family also meant that he was no longer so distressed about the absence of his father from the home:

> I just drop up and see him during the day or anything ... I don't see him as much as I used to anymore 'cause I'm busy you know ... I'm always out with me girlfriend or whatever. I'm grown up now you see ... I just have to move away from things. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Conclusion

Four key findings emerge from a review of children's appraisals of closeness and security in relationships with parents post-separation. First of all, in contrast to previous research, the present study found that many children felt that the quality of closeness in their relationships with their parents[15] remained stable following parental separation. Secondly, where children perceived parental separation to have affected the quality of closeness negatively, these effects were most pronounced in the case of non-resident parents. Thirdly, a minority of children described feeling *closer* to one or both parents following the separation. Finally, there was less discrepancy between perceptions of security[16] with resident and non-resident parents when compared with closeness to parents. Related to this, a substantial minority of children reported feelings of greater dependence on non-resident parents than on resident parents.

Evaluating children's experiences of closeness to parents using quantitative methods alone affords limited insight into the multiple processes and influences underlying positive and negative experiences in children's relationships with parents. In the following chapters, a broader focus is provided on the meanings which these experiences hold for children and on children's interpretations of closeness and security in relationships with parents.

Understanding how children interpret and review their experiences contributes to greater accuracy, not alone in depicting the child-parent relationship post-separation, but also the resources which children and their parents generate through interactions as these relationships unfold. Through further analysis of qualitative data in children's narratives focusing on perceptions of closeness and security, the study seeks to draw out and describe key factors associated with the successful negotiation of closeness and security in relationships with parents in altered family contexts.

[15] As measured by the Emotional Closeness Map
[16] As measured by the Security Scale

CHAPTER 6: REVISED FAMILY CONTEXTS FOLLOWING PARENTAL SEPARATION

Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is on how children negotiate revised patterns of contact with their parents such as, for example, experiences of relating to non-resident parents now living physically beyond the family unit and experiences of care-giving relationships within a single-parent family setting. A critical element in capturing and understanding the power, influence and responses of children in child-parent interactions is the relationship context. According to Duck (1993), contexts are neither an inert background against which relationships develop nor the sole cause of relationship processes. Instead, contexts are integral parts of relationships. Parental separation often involves a re-organisation of family rules and routines, which guide and inform interaction between family members and which are altered when family members no longer live within a shared household. The primary aim of this chapter, therefore, is to provide further details regarding the context of child-parent contact, interaction and care.

Much of the emphasis provided by previous studies of relationships with non-resident parents has been on identifying and assessing frequency of contact with these parents. Recognising the need to include more sensitive indicators of the quality of contact than frequency alone, the present study explores contact with non-resident parents across three dimensions: *quantity, continuity and quality*. Children's experiences of this contact and the context in which it takes place are traced across both phases of the study. The second part of the chapter moves to a focus on care-giving relationships with resident parents and identifies patterns in these relationships across both phases of the study. A final section briefly draws together and highlights key issues emerging from these findings.

Revised relationship contexts with non-resident parents post-separation

Dimensions of contact with non-resident parents

Frequency of contact

The frequency of children's contact with non-resident parents was examined in both phases of the present study. Quantitative data on frequency were analysed using SPSS11.

Frequency of contact in Phase I

Most children (72.5%) had regular, frequent contact (i.e. minimum of one weekly visit) with their non-resident parent at the time of the first interview. Fifteen children (37.5%) had contact with this

parent more than once a week and fourteen children (35%) had contact once a week. One child (2.5%) had contact once a fortnight; two children (5%) had contact once a month; three children (7.5%) had contact several times a year and one child (2.5%) had contact once a year. Four children (10%) had no contact with their non-resident parents at the time of the first interview.

Frequency of contact in Phase II

A slightly smaller majority of children, (67.5%), had regular, frequent contact with non-resident parents at the time of the second interview, 18 months to two years later. Eighteen children (45%) had contact with this parent *more than* once a week and nine children (22.5%) had contact once a week. Six children (15%) had contact once a fortnight; two children (5%) had contact several times a year. Two children saw their non-resident parent less than once yearly at the time of the second interview. Two further children (5%) had no contact with non-resident parents at the time of the second interview. Finally one child's father, who was non-resident at the time of the first interview, was living back in the home at the time of the second interview. Details of children's contact with non-resident parents in Phase I and Phase II are presented in Figure 6.1 and frequency of contact with non-resident parents across the two time phases of the study is presented in Table 6.1.

Figure 6.1: Contact with non-resident parents – Phase I & Phase II

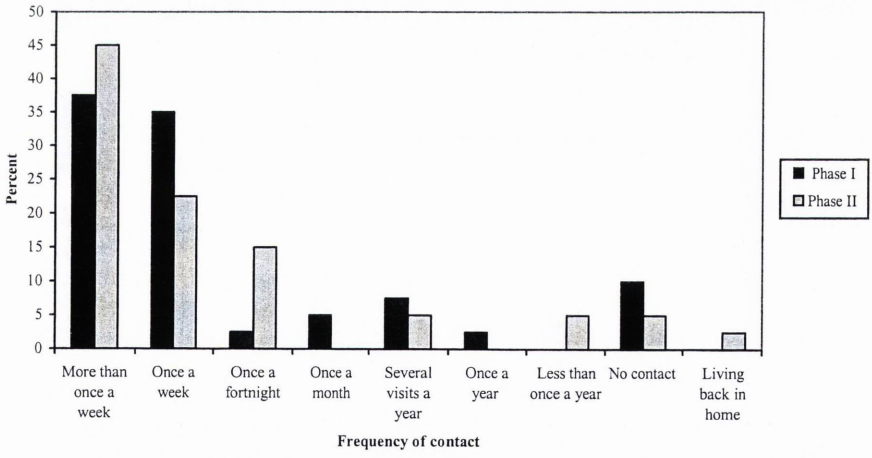


Table 6.1: Contact with non-resident parents – Phase I and Phase II

Frequency	Phase I		Phase II	
	No.	%	No.	%
More than one visit per week	15	37.5	18	45
One visit per week	14	35	9	22.5
One visit per fortnight	1	2.5	6	15
One visit per month	2	5	0	0
Several visits per year	3	7.5	2	5
One visit per year	1	2.5	0	0
Less than one visit per year	0	0	2	5
No contact	4	10	2	5
Living back in the home	0	0	1	2.5
Total	40	100	40	100

Accumulated evidence on contact in the present study conveys an overall portrait of relatively high frequency of contact with non-resident parents, with approximately 40% of children seeing this parent more than once a week and a further 20-30% seeing their non-resident parent once a week. Geographical proximity to the home of the non-resident parent was strongly associated with high levels of contact[17]. A minority of children saw their parent several times a year and this pattern of contact was associated with parents living abroad. Finally, approximately 10% of children had no contact with their non-resident parent at the time of the first interview. This number was reduced to 5% at the time of the second interview but a further 5% of children saw their non-resident parent less than once yearly in Phase II of the study.

Significantly, risk factors potentiating absent or diminishing contact were: (i) the separation taking place when the child was very young and little or no subsequent contact being maintained; (ii) parents living abroad and (iii) children actively choosing not to maintain contact with a parent due to problems of parental substance abuse.

Stability of contact across Phase I and Phase II

Continuity and change in the patterns of contact across the two phases of the study were also examined. Most notably, frequency data across both phases point to a slight reduction in the proportion of children who had frequent contact with their non-resident parents. However, the portrayal of contact in exclusively quantitative terms disguises the individual patterns of alteration across the two phases of the study and the variation and complexity of the circumstances influencing

[17] However, there was individual variation in these patterns with one family organising contact on a fortnightly basis, despite the fact that the non-resident parent was living at a substantial distance from the children.

this change. To gain greater insight into these influences, the present study explored factors underlying these patterns and contributing to change across the two phases. Three clear patterns in frequency of contact were identified: *consistent and committed contact* (65%), *diminished contact* (20%) and *increased contact* (15%).

Consistent, committed contact

Consistent, committed contact was fundamental to positive experiences of closeness and security with non-resident parents and this finding permeated narratives across both phases of the study. For the majority of children, frequent, regular contact with non-resident parents was unchanged over the two time phases. A significant fear for many children in the present study was fear of loss of a parent following separation, as evidenced by findings in the original study, from which the first phase of data were collected (Hogan et al., 2002). Almost one quarter of children had experienced this fear. As the process unfolded across the two phases of the study, however, anxiety and insecurity about the future permanence of relationships with non-resident parents in the first phase of interviews became less acute through positive experiences of contact with this parent over time.

R: So would you say you feel less worried than when we spoke that last time?

C: Oh yeah much better ... [laughs] I don't know I think that just back then it was the same year and I didn't like ... now it's been a few years and all like ... that's probably why

R: Ok so that's a very interesting point ... how does a few years make a difference?

C: You get more used to it and ... [pause] ... and you just ... like when it started off you just didn't know what was going to happen but then after a few years you got ... you knew more like. (Boy, aged 12, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Diminished contact

Diminished contact with non-resident parents signalled problematic experiences of closeness and security in relationships. Eight children (20%) described reduced contact with their non-resident parents between the first and second phase of the interviews. Two distinct patterns in experiences of diminished contact should be emphasised. The first of these patterns involved substantial reductions in contact associated with increased disengagement in these relationships over time. Two children described this pattern of reduced contact, with a reduction from contact once a month and several times a year to having contact less than once a year with their non-resident parent. A second pattern for six children was less dramatic in that reduction in contact was from seeing their parent more than once a week to once a week and from seeing them more than once a week and once a week to once a fortnight. This second pattern in reduction was attributed by children to practical circumstances, such

as a parent working longer hours. Significantly, children's responses to these distinct patterns were noticeably different with more negative consequences for experiences of closeness and security associated with the first of these patterns. The processes underlying these patterns of reduced contact and their implications for closeness and security in relationships are discussed in later sections of this chapter. See Table 6.2 below for details of reduced contact across both phases.

Table 6.2: Reduced contact with non-resident parents across Phase I and Phase II

Reduced contact with non-resident parents		
Phase I	**Phase II**	**No.**
More than once a week	Once a week	1
More than once a week	Once a fortnight	1
Once a week	Once a fortnight	4
Several times a year	Less than once a year	1
Once a month	Less than once a year	1

Increased contact

Increased contact with non-resident parents across the two phases of the study was experienced by a minority of children (n=6, 15%). Increased contact was in the context of existing regular and frequent contact, and was associated with children's increased autonomy with age and greater collaboration or co-operation between parents. For four of these children, contact had increased from seeing their non-resident parent once a week to seeing them several times a week. For one girl in the older age-group, her father, whom she had chosen to have no contact with at the time of the first interview, was in fact living back in the home at the time of the second interview. See Table 6.3 for details of increased contact with non-resident parents across Phase I and Phase II.

Table 6.3: Increased contact with non-resident parents across Phase I and Phase II

Increased contact with non-resident parents		
Phase I	**Phase II**	**No.**
Once a week	More than once a week	4
No contact	Once a week	1
No contact	Living back in the home	1

No contact

The most significant risk to relationships with non-resident parents post-separation is the potential for contact with a parent to cease. Four children in the first phase of interviews had *no contact* and no involvement with their non-resident fathers at the time of the first interview. Two of these children continued to have no contact at the time of the second interview. In the case of children who had resumed contact with non-resident parents, one younger child who had no contact at the time of the first interview, was having regular contact with this parent at the time of the second interview. A second child in the older age-group, who had chosen to have no contact with her father at the time of

the first interview, was living with her father at the time of the second interview as he had returned to live in the home. See Table 6.4 below for details of children who had no contact with non-resident parents.

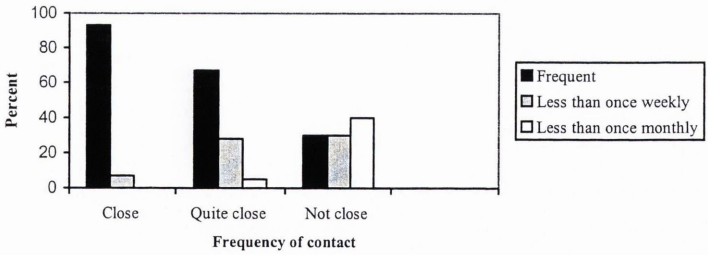
Table 6.4: No contact with non-resident parent across Phase I and Phase II

No contact with non-resident parent		
Phase I	**Phase II**	**No.**
No contact	No contact	2
No contact	Once a week	1
No contact	Living back in the home	1

Correspondence between frequency of contact with non-resident parent and closeness and security in child-parent relationships

Frequency of contact with non-resident parents was significantly correlated with children's perceptions of closeness as measured by the Emotional Closeness Map (Spearman's rho =.504, N = 40, p = .001, two tailed). Among those participants who indicated *close* relationships with non-resident parents, 93% had frequent contact[18] with this parent. A majority of participants who perceived their relationship as *quite close* (67%) also had frequent contact with their non-resident parent. A minority of participants indicating *not close* relationships with non-resident parents (38%) had frequent contact with this parent. All participants who recorded diminishing or absence of contact with non-resident parents recorded scores in the lower ranges on closeness with these parents. Perceptions of closeness to non-resident parent by frequency of contact are presented in Figure 6.2 below.

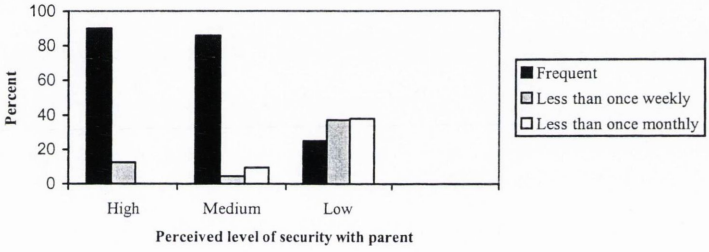
Figure 6.2. Closeness to non-resident parent by frequency of contact



[18] Frequent contact is defined as one visit per week or more.

Frequency of contact with non-resident parents was significantly correlated with children's experience of security in the child-parent relationship as measured by the Security Scale (Spearman's rho = .448, N = 38, p = .005). Among those participants who had high scores on security with non-resident parents, 87% had frequent contact with this parent. A majority of children who had scores in the middle range on the Security Scale (82%) also had frequent contact with non-resident parents. A minority of children who had scores in the low range on the Security Scale (25%) had frequent contact with their non-resident parent. Significantly, all participants who had diminishing or absent contact with non-resident parents recorded scores in the lower ranges on security with these parents. Perceptions of security with non-resident parents by frequency of contact are displayed in Figure 6.3 below.

Figure 6.3: Security with non-resident parent by frequency of contact



Clearly, these findings demonstrate that a high level of contact with non-resident parents is strongly correlated with close, secure relationships with non-resident parents. Fundamental to all close relationships with non-resident parents in the present study was the feature of regular, frequent and consistent contact with this parent. Nevertheless, positive experiences of closeness and security relied on a more complex configuration of factors and frequent contact alone did not predict positive experiences. A minority of participants recorded low scores on closeness (17.5%) and security (12.5%) with their non-resident parents, despite frequent and regular contact. Factors associated with low scores on these constructs were: *perceived lack of engagement and commitment* and the *relational history*. These factors are explored in more detail in later sections in this chapter and in the following chapters.

Quality of contact with non-resident parents

Extrinsic, recreational contact

Inter-personal and emotional processes in relationships with non-resident parents were notably influenced by the nature of interaction and exchange in contact with these parents. Simpson et al,

1995, pp. 55) describe the deep sense of loss experienced by non-resident fathers as they became "uncoupled from the exceedingly complex constructions which are typically labelled 'home' and 'family'." Children's narratives in the present study provided resonance for these accounts and described interaction within relationships, to a large extent, as disconnected from the predictability of established rules and routines of family experience. Most striking in children's narratives were descriptions of time spent with non-resident parents expressed in terms of *extrinsic, recreational exchanges,* a term used in previous research to designate the nature of interaction in contact with non-resident parent (Simpson et al., 1995). This was particularly the case for younger children. Among the most frequently mentioned activities for younger children with non-resident parents were sport and playing computer games. Some older children also described going to football matches and other sports events with non-resident parents but older children were more likely to spend time talking to parents. Children were typically aware of the difficulties experienced by their non-resident parent and demonstrated the ability to cope with adjustment to multiple alterations and modifications in their contact with non-resident parents outside the home. However, awareness of the artificial nature of the environments in which exchanges were maintained was pervasive across narratives. Older children articulated the essence of these experiences more precisely, as illustrated by this extract from an interview with a boy in the older age-group:

> C: It was always a weekend ... it was like a ... he was like a *weekend daddy* that's what it was; it was a *weekend daddy*.
>
> R: Ok and what would you do with him?
>
> C: He'd probably bring us out ... he spoiled us and that ... like he'd bring us to parks and there was one stage where we done everything and he used to bring us down to the country to things we hadn't done but then we had done everything ... everything ... even the Viking tour around Dublin ... like we done that twice [laughs]. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Extended family members were regularly included in children's depictions of time spent with non-resident parents as a number of these parents had moved back to live with their parents since the separation, and continued to live there at the time of the second phase of interviews. For younger children, it is possible that these settings provided more familiar, sheltered and predictable environments for children to engage with their parents.

> I like going out with him ... I like sitting down in his house and then like his mam really cares about me so like she says "Will I make them something to eat? Will I pack some lunch for you to go out with?" and me da says "no, they're alright". (Girl, aged 10, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

This emphasis on recreational activities in time spent with non-resident parents persisted across both phases of the study. Increasing age and maturity, for some children, presented complications for continuing contact as young people felt they had grown out of certain activities which they had enjoyed when younger but which they no longer felt drawn to. This experience is described by a boy in the older age-group:

> C Well, like, when he does come down he does be all nice to us and he'll ask us do we want to go to the swimming pool with him but like I don't really want to now ... like I used to always want to go.
>
> R: Why not?
>
> C: [long pause] I'm just grown out of it like that. (Boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation – Phase II)

There was no clear evidence in the present study that the predominantly extrinsic nature of relations in contact with non-resident parents had significant negative effects on children's experiences of closeness and security with these parents. However, it is possible that the lack of opportunities for more natural and intrinsic interactions exerted subtle unfavourable and injurious influences on the quality of relationships, and this is supported in the present study by the notable divergence in positive experiences of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents.

Connected, extensive contact

A small but substantial number of children conveyed the sense of connected, extensive contact with non-resident parents. Key factors determining greater possibilities for engagement in these cases were situations where non-resident parents had established *independent residence* and the existence of more *open boundaries* between re-constituted families in the present study. With regard to the first of these, independent residences were experienced more as a second home by children where new rules and routines could be established in more predictable and private settings and where relationship scripts could be reviewed and revised against the background of such repetition and ritual. Moreover, extended weekend stay-over visits with non-resident parents within such settings provided optimal space and setting for connectedness in relationships with non-resident parents, as illustrated by the following extract:

> Sometimes when I go back to his house, if it's just me and my dad and he has [inaudible] so we might get some food and some drinks and we just sit there on the couch and we'd watch some movies together and it's just a sense of ... it's just like when you're with your friend except when you're with your dad there's less talk and you just know ... you're close ... he's there and you don't have to worry about anything ... you don't have to say anything just to know that you're okay. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation – Phase II)

Interestingly, evidence of opportunities for greater inter-dependence and more natural and autonomous connection was described in contact with non-resident mothers in the present study. It is important to reserve comment with regard to contact with non-resident mothers as they represented a very small minority of non-resident parents in the present study (n=3; 7.5%). Furthermore, all children living with resident fathers were in the older age-group which may have facilitated more autonomous and independent patterns of contact with non-resident parents. All non-resident mothers had established their own independent residences in the present study and narratives included reference to continued nurturance and opportunities for preserving family rituals, valued by children in these settings. An illustration of this is provided in the following extract from a girl in the older age-group:

> Like, I can go down to her house and do whatever I want. Like, sometimes we sit in and watch videos and sometimes I even stay over in me mam's house. Like, we can watch videos or we go to the pictures or we go out ... like, we go out for something to eat. Or if I'm sick ... I always if I'm sick, like, I go down to me mam's ... like me mam will put me to bed and give me a hot water bottle and always give me strawberry ice cream and strawberry jelly. Like, she used to give me that when I was a kid. (Girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

This is not to suggest that the quality of relationships with non-resident mothers was more positive than that experienced with non-resident fathers, but rather to emphasise that children valued the protection and preservation of established rituals while being open to re-creating new routines in their revised family contexts. Extended visits over weekends in the setting of independent residences were experienced by the majority of children and clearly interaction was more relaxed and spontaneous generated within these settings. Against a framework of more predictable, ritualised patterns of interaction, greater opportunities for resolution of conflict and misunderstandings were generated as evidenced in this extract from a child in the younger age-group:

> Well, I remember this one fight that I had with him [non-resident father] and I wrote a note. I didn't say I was sorry - I just said "would you mind putting the pizza on now?" And he started laughing and he knocked on my door and he left the thing outside. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

A second point worth highlighting is the significance of open boundaries between re-constituted families in the present study. As outlined in Chapter 2 Smart et al., (2001) describe children's perceptions of *open family boundaries* as those situations where children's conceptions of family life were inclusive of their parents' new partners and other new family members. In general, open boundaries were the minority in the present study and this raises questions of the cultural influences operating on interchanges across household boundaries. A small number of children described ease

of interaction between themselves, their non-resident parents and other new family members such as non-resident parents' new partners, step-siblings and half-siblings. It should be emphasised that overall these patterns were rare but are worth highlighting in view of the strong association between such patterns and positive experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents. Significantly, such positive experiences were characteristically in the context of co-operative inter-parental relationships. Behaviours typical in these contexts included non-resident parents moving back into the family home to provide care-giving in the absence of a resident parent and ease of movement between family units as illustrated below:

> Well, he [non-resident parent] comes down to me and I see him Wednesday and Friday evenings and then he goes home then but, like, Saturday and Sunday, like, I go down to him and it's just like home. (Girl, aged 19, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

Proximity of residence of non-resident parents was significant but not essential to this sense of connection in visits to non-resident parents. In general, the present study findings indicate that greater risks to loss of contact are created in contexts where non-resident parents live abroad or at some distance from the child. However, a minority of children managed to preserve qualities of inter-connection and engagement despite physical distances. This girl in the older age-group had maintained close contact with her father despite the fact that he was living abroad.

> C Well, it's been grand. I went over to see him for two weeks just two weeks ago and that was really good 'cause he was off work and we went out all the time and I went over there at Easter and Christmas as well and last summer, so I spend a lot of time with him during the holidays.
>
> R: And how do you feel now with him?
>
> C: I think it's ... ehm ... I have a good relationship with him ... probably now 'cause I'm older now as well. (Girl, aged 18, 15 years since separation - Phase II)

Disengaged contact

Disengaged contact was characterised by a lack of connection and evidence of few or no shared activities during time spent with their non-resident parents. This quality of contact was most typically described in the context of infrequent and inconsistent visitation patterns, often because a non-resident parent was living abroad. Contact was *maintained* at a minimum under these circumstances, although never assured, and there was little sense in associated narratives that the parent in question was aware of the significance of this lack of effort for the child. Disengaged contact was construed by children to signify lack of willingness on the part of their parent to re-

negotiate commitment in the new family environment created by parental separation. Such patterns were sustained and reinforced across the two phases of the study.

> C: Yeah, I knew there'd be contact but I wasn't sure of how much, 'cause of how he's [non-resident father] kind of unpredictable.
>
> R: Ok, and now how do you feel, do you feel that the contact is clear enough to you, or would you like it to be a little bit more?
>
> C: Oh, definitely a lot more, but I think I'm sort of real upset and angry so I kind of don't ... but I'd say definitely more effort could have been made on his part. (Girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

In the case of this girl in the older age-group, her father had lived abroad for some time and frequency of contact had diminished over the two phases of the study, with contact being maintained approximately once a year:

> I kind of thought things would be more or less the same actually but I didn't expect ... I just assumed that he'd live in Dublin at the same time so I was a bit kind of shocked when he was living away. Like, he lived away for two years and then it kind of became a static, permanent thing. Like this wasn't temporary "Oh, I'm going off. I want to learn painting." This was "I want to try it this way and this is becoming a pattern and I introduced it sneakily to you so you wouldn't even know" so a bit resentful over that. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Disengaged contact was not associated exclusively with infrequent contact. For younger children, apprehensions regarding parental commitment were, in some cases, associated with the presence of a parent's new partner or new family members, where boundaries between re-constituted families were closed and more impermeable. Despite having contact with a non-resident parent once or more frequently per week, a small number of children expressed the view that their non-resident parent was not fully committed to this contact. The importance of commitment in facilitating sufficiently secure relationships for new patterns in relationships to be negotiated was pervasive throughout narratives in the present study and is addressed in greater depth in subsequent chapters. Younger children were particularly sensitive and discerning in the presence of new family members and articulated the need for dedicated, prioritised time for interaction with their non-resident parents. This is illustrated in the following two quotes from children in the younger age-group:

> I don't think he really wants to bring us out like because sometimes he has his girlfriend or he goes out to the pub instead of bringing us out. (Girl, aged 10, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

> I got back from my swimming and I didn't really feel ... like I didn't really want to go swimming again and I just saw the text message and I phoned my dad and he said "Oh, well then you can sit on the bench and watch myself and [step-siblings]" and I was a bit upset about that because it's not his time with his kids ... it's his time with me. (Girl, aged 11, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

An integral experience within these disengaged patterns of contact was lack of communication and connection, as interactions were portrayed as pre-determined and pre-meditated rather than generated from the flow of more flexible, everyday routines. Within such contexts, children were critical of the absence of meaningful interaction and lack of effort to establish new patterns in relationships. Compounding dissatisfaction and experiences of disengagement and disconnection for children were the added complexities of ongoing family transition and adjusting to new family members against a background of growing insecurity about relationships with these parents. These difficulties are illustrated in the following extract from a girl in the older age-group who on review of her relationships with her father post-separation, described the potential for increased communication and dedicated time with him during Phase I of the study:

> R: Do you think the separation has had an effect on your relationship with your father?
>
> C: It's stronger...definitely stronger.
>
> R: Why do you think that is?
>
> C: Because we share so much now ...like he shares his secrets and I share mine and we get on very well...well, not secrets, you know but we have things that we tell each other. (Girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation - Phase I)

However, at the time of the second interview, her father had had a child with his new partner and despite frequent and regular contact with this parent, there was evidence of more disengaged interaction between them:

> It's really boring ... it feels as if we're playing happy families ... I just play with Laura [father's new child] ... he watches tv and I watch tv. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

A small number of older children expressed the view that their non-resident parent made little effort to engage actively with them. This child described such contact in the following extract:

> Last week I was down with him for about half an hour and we didn't even talk to each other ... I just asked could I have a packet of crisps and he said 'right' ... that's all he said, like. (Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Fragile contact

Most damaging and injurious to relationships with non-resident parents were violations of agreements and arrangements preserving and protecting contact with children. Contact was defined as *fragile* where children had inconsistent and infrequent contact with non-resident parents and where parents were perceived to lack commitment to continuing relationships with children. In the following section consideration is given to those cases where contact was experienced as diminishing substantially and to the minority of cases where children had no contact with non-resident parents. Significantly, contact which diminished substantially (i.e. where children had little or no contact with non-resident parents at the time of the second interview) was most often in the context of problematic relationships in the first phase of the study. Multiple and diverse circumstances influenced negative processes in relationships and it is, therefore, difficult to represent precisely the factors which contributed to these outcomes. Consideration of certain details in relational histories of participants helps to throw some light upon the mechanisms underlying significant difficulties in these relationships.

Duck (1993) points out that celebrations are a vital part of relationship development and serve as important symbols of the relationship, marking significant events in the history of the relationship. Within contexts where contact was rare, such celebrations enabled child-non-resident parent dyads to highlight connections and share in family ritual. Conversely, failure to mark these occasions was interpreted as a significant absence within these relationships. One girl in the older age-group had spoken of falling out with her father during the first interview as he had failed to acknowledge her sixteenth birthday.

> C At the moment I'm not even speaking to him.
>
> R: And why, if you want to tell me?
>
> C: Because he ... he forgot my sixteenth birthday. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Lack of communication consolidated fractious interactions in relationships with non-resident parents and conflict, which appeared to centre on simple misunderstanding became intractable with the passage of time. In the particular case outlined above, the non-resident parent lived abroad and the frequency and quality of contact with this girl's father had deteriorated across the two phases of the

study, as expressed in her negative expectations about future developments in the second phase of interviews:

> Well, if it stays like this it's just going to get worse 'cause I mean I'm not going to talk to him 'cause I'll be doing my Leaving Cert so I'm not going to be even thinking about it. I'm not going to be thinking "I have to ring my dad ... I haven't talked to him in such and such a time like" I'm just not going to think about it ... not going to bother any more. Like, if he's not going to make the effort - I'm not ... it's okay. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

A similar pattern of disillusionment was developing for a younger girl in the second phase of interviews, whose father was not Irish and who also lived abroad. Despite several arrangements for him to come and visit, she had not seen him for three years at the time of the second interview.

> C: He [father] might be coming over to see us this Thursday, but I don't really believe that 'cause he says that all the time. For the last three years he has been saying that.
>
> R: Ok and then what happens?
>
> C: He just doesn't come. (Girl, aged 11, 7 years since separation – Phase II)

Narratives on contact with non-resident parents indicate that children interpret the decision of a parent to remain within proximity as concrete evidence of commitment to their relationship. This is particularly well-illustrated in the case of two girls in the older age-group, both of whom shared a feeling of affiliation with their non-resident parent but each of whom experienced a very different set of events in their relationships with this parent. For one child, the decision of her father to leave the country when she was young was tacitly understood by her to represent a lack of commitment and consideration for their relationship and she expressed her feelings across both phases of the study as follows:

> I feel my dad could have sort of made the effort maybe to say 'well, until you're 18 I'll stay in Dublin' and then you can, you know ... I felt that that on his part was something that was done wrong. (Girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

Reinforcing this finding that parental choices regarding place of residence were interpreted as actively contributing to belief in parental commitment, the following extract describes a sense of security and safety in the knowledge that a parent would remain present at least during the period when the child was growing up:

> I knew I would be [able to continue the relationships with father] ... after he was offered a job in Canada but he turned it down because he said he wanted to see us growing up ... I kind of knew he'd stick around [laughs]. (Girl, aged 14, 7 years since separation - Phase I)

The significance of problematic relational histories in mediating and determining the quality of current relationships post-separation was strongly reinforced by the present study findings. Negative experiences of inter-parental conflict prior to the separation, perceived ongoing and explicit hostility on the part of a non-resident father and the perception of fragile commitment throughout the history of the relationship created a significant obstacle to the development of close affectional ties in these relationships. A striking illustration of such problems was underscored in the narratives of two female siblings in the older age-group, who were experiencing problematic relationships with their father at the time of the first interview. One of them described it as follows:

> The first year was grand then afterwards he just didn't have time for us and ... he was always pretending he was away when he wasn't really away. (Girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

Problems persisted and had amplified at the time of the second interview and she described the frequency and quality of contact with this parent diminishing over time:

> To be honest I do not care ... you get so used to it. That's the thing that's sad like I'm actually used to it and I'm not like missing out on anything and I haven't lost anything either ... to be honest, like I actually do not want to speak to him. I've never, ever said that before. I really figure now I've gotten past this month without having a word with him or seeing him and I've coped grand. (Girl, aged 16, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Correspondence between frequency of contact and developmental status

To explore the possibility that children's contact with one parent living outside the home may vary according to their developmental status, frequency of contact data were further analysed for possible age differences. Two findings are worth noting. First of all, a slightly higher proportion of younger than older children (74% and 66% respectively) had frequent contact[19] with their non-resident parents at the time of the first and second interview and this difference remained stable across both phases of the study. Equally notable, and somewhat contradictory, is a pattern of increased contact with increasing age, which also emerged in the second phase of the study and may be explained, in part, by greater independence and autonomy in children in the older age-group. More specifically, of

[19] Frequent contact was defined as one weekly visit minimum

those children who had increased contact with their parent from once weekly to more than once weekly, the majority were in the older age-group. Significantly, increased contact with increasing age is, according to the present study findings, only likely to occur where frequent and regular patterns of contact have already been established. Conversely, where commitment to the relationship was fragile, older children were more likely to withdraw from the relationship, by choosing not to maintain or to reduce contact.

The driving influence of developmental status in relationships became evident across the two phases of the study, with transition into adolescence for some participants shaping contact with non-resident parents in terms of greater involvement with peers.

> You tend to want to go out with your friends more than you do with your parents ... you want to go out at week-ends and go shopping and go out at night. Like, seeing as I'm going into sixth year now I'll have study to do so I'll find it harder to go out, like, even with my friends, like, to go out 'cause I'm going to be studying ... it does get a bit harder, like, when you're older to go and see your dad. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Equally influential were older adolescents' involvements in their own intimate relationships, which exerted some influence on patterns of contact with parents.

> I just drop up and see him [non-resident parent] during the day or anything ... I don't see him as much as I used to anymore 'cause I'm busy you know ... I'm always out with me girlfriend or whatever. I'm grown up now you see ... I just have to move away from things. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Nevertheless, the expanding influence of peers on contact did not appear to alter or determine the *quantity* of contact with non-resident parents. Rather, increased exposure to relational dynamics beyond the family had a more subtle and modifying effect on the contact which adolescents and young adults had with these parents. The influence of peers on perceptions of relationships is particularly well-exemplified in the following quote from a girl in the older age-group:

> To be honest with you it was my best friend who drew my attention to it ... she said he [non-resident father] was very controlling over what we were going to do. And I think it really took someone outside of the picture to really make me sit back and go 'you know what, you're right' because of course I'm not going to listen to my mum. She's biased in a way 'cause if she's against him, I'm against her, if she's with him, I'm against her anyway, you know. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Correspondence between frequency of contact and gender

Findings on contact with non-resident parents by *gender* indicate that there was a slight difference in frequency of contact by gender at the time of the first interview with boys having more frequent contact with non-resident parents than girls (73% and 68% respectively). This difference had intensified at the time of the second interview with a higher proportion of males than females (80% and 64% respectively) having frequent contact with non-resident parents. This pattern raises questions about the particular vulnerability of older females for reduced contact with their non-resident parents.

Summary

In brief, frequency of contact with non-resident parents in the present study was relatively high across both Phase I and Phase II of the study. Approximately three quarters of the participants in the first phase of the study were having frequent contact with their non-resident parent. This figure was slightly reduced in the second phase of the study but the overall pattern of contact was stable, and a small number of children were having increased contact at the time of the second interview. The developmental status of children had some bearing on patterns of contact with a tendency for greater frequency of contact among children in the younger age-group. However, increasing contact with non-resident parents was also associated with increasing age at the time of the second interview, highlighting the potential both for increased contact with non-resident parents for children in adolescence and greater risk for children to actively withdraw from unsatisfactory or distressing relationships with these parents. A prerequisite to increased contact was an established pattern of consistent, frequent and regular contact with a non-resident parent. Frequent contact with non-resident parents was clearly a first step on the route to close and secure relationships. However, frequent physical contact alone was not enough to maintain positive experiences of closeness and security. Where contact was experienced and understood as a spontaneous initiative on the part of a parent, perceptions were more positive. However, where frequent contact was experienced as an obligation on the part of a parent, with little obvious effort to communicate actively with children, negative perceptions tended to predominate the relationship.

Revised relationship contexts with resident parents post-separation

Simultaneously with the negotiation of new contact arrangements with non-resident parents, children also adjust to living with only one parent in the home. The departure of one parent from the home and the consequent shift and transposition in roles and responsibilities were explored from the perspectives of the children, across Phase I and Phase II of the study. Care-giving was explored across children's perceptions of receiving, providing and contributing to care on a daily basis, throughout the separation process.

A primary theme which emerged in analyses of care-giving relationship in the home post-separation was the sense of continuity and security facilitated by these relationships. The present study findings indicate that for younger children, care-giving may be particularly important in mediating closeness to resident parents, as narratives highlighted the significance of continuity in positive experiences of care-giving, and care-giving was identified as facilitating closeness to parents by substantially more younger than older children and by all the boys in the younger age-group.

The provision of care to children by resident parents was interpreted as a sign of parental involvement and concern, and was conceived of as a relationship which children, themselves, invested in actively. For many of the children in the present study there was substantial *continuity* in their experiences of instrumental care provided by resident parents throughout the separation process. At the time of the first interview, most children (87.5%) indicated that their primary care-giver was their resident parent, which for 88% of respondents was their mother. Three children (7.5%) were living with their fathers as resident parents. All of these children were in the older age-group. Two of these three children experienced this as a change in the role of primary care-giver. All younger children and a majority of older children (90%) reported no change in the parental role of primary care-giver since the separation.[20]

There was little change recorded in parental care-giving roles over the two time phases of the present study. At the time of the second interview, all children were receiving primary care-giving from their resident parents with the exception of one child, who continued to live with his aunt as primary care-giver since the separation.

Perceived stressors on resident care-givers

The potential for increased stress on the care-giving role of resident parents was widely acknowledged by children. Three key factors emerged as perceived additional stressors on the revised parental role: *the auxiliary role of the non-resident parent prior to the separation, increased financial stress on resident parents* and *parental illness or distress.*

Children's narratives provided clear affirmation of their facility for selfless reflection beyond the effects of the separation on their own lives, and of their ability to empathise with resident parents. Many children placed emphasis on the auxiliary role played by non-resident parents in care-giving prior to the separation and on this parent's consequent withdrawal from care-giving following the separation. Children were aware of the potential for resident parents to be over-burdened and to

[20] Among the four participants reporting change in the care-giving role of their parent following separation, two cases involved resident parents taking over from non-resident parents; one case involved a child living with extended family members as primary care-givers and one case involved care-giving being partly provided by a non-resident parent, as the resident parent was in hospital.

experience task-overload as a consequence of reduced assistance from a second parent and this awareness was perceptible in the narratives of both younger and older age-groups. Extracts from these two children in the younger age-group illustrate this awareness:

> My mam used to wash the dishes and my dad used to dry them, my dad used to sweep up and my mam used to clean like everywhere ... But now I've to help my mam. (Girl, aged 9, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

> It was a bit hard for my mum 'cause she had two babies ... two kids to mind ... me and [child's sister] ... and she didn't have dad ... my dad to help her. (Girl, aged 9, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

Increased financial stress[21] and parents working outside of the home, or retraining[22] in order to return to work, were also perceived as contributing to altered patterns of care-giving, resulting from the separation. However, there was little or no suggestion on the part of children that this was a source of major disruption to them or presented obstacles to close relationships. Rather, family routines were described as altered and generated active co-operation on the part of children themselves.

> So it's sort of different now because we have to clean up after ourselves and all, and it sort of changed because me ma used to always do that sort of thing. (Girl, aged 10, 3 years since separation - Phase I)

In a minority of cases, children were coping with parental illness or distress which was depicted as more problematic for parental care-giving, producing greater disruption to family routine and requiring greater re-organisation of resources.

Shifting structures of power in care-giving relationships

Children's agency, as family members with the ability to make sense of their new family environments and to initiate and undertake new roles in these revised contexts, emerged as highly salient in their re-negotiation of care-giving roles with resident parents. Most children experienced and expressed the need to adjust to a change in family ritual and routine and were active in initiating and undertaking new roles and responsibilities in response to increased stress on resident parents. Negative perceptions were the exception and children appeared to be most significantly affected in the first phase of the study, with evidence of more stability and of children accommodating to their changed roles and responsibilities in the second phase of the study.

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[21] Almost half of the participants (45%) referred to increased financial stress on resident parents
[22] Just over one third of participants (37%) referred to resident parents working outside the home

Three categories of experience emerged from axial coding on children's narratives of care-giving relationships as follows: *minimum disruption* in care-giving, *increased inter-dependence* in care-giving relationships and *disequilibrium* in care-giving relationships.

Minimum disruption

The first category involved perceptions of continuity in care-giving relationships with the majority of children perceiving very little disruption to care-giving relationships across both phases of the study[23]. In exceptional cases care-giving on the part of the non-resident parent continued as described by this boy in the older age-group:

> It's like me da still lives with me 'cause he comes up and talks to me every day and all and looks after me and me sister, picks me sister up from school and that. (Boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation - Phase I)

While continuity was the overall image portrayed of care-giving, inherent in children's narratives was an awareness of a subtle shift in parental responsibilities and, in some cases, a transposition from being a subordinate partner in family organisation to one of more equal status with the parent in the home.

Increased interdependence

The second category of experience involved increased inter-dependence in relationships with resident parents post-separation. Children, especially those in the younger age-group, valued receiving care, but equally all children actively contributed to continuity in family routines in their altered family environment. There was a strong sense that, for some children, relationships with their resident parent shifted in terms of the power structure of these relationships. Children acknowledged that their contributions to care-giving in the home resulted in feelings of greater reciprocity and equivalence. These altered care-giving contexts enabled children to actively negotiate and invest in relationships of care with resident parents in particular. Closeness and security were facilitated through this investment and increased inter-dependence in these relationships, as will be seen in later sections.

This child in the older age-group, reflected on how she had taken on adult responsibility at the time of and following the separation:

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[23] The majority of participants (65%) perceived little or no change in care-giving relationships following parental separation, while a small number of participants (13%) indicated that their non-resident parent continued to provide care-giving from time to time within the home.

> I actually felt I took over that role at that time ... I felt that there was only me and me mam and me little sister ... that I had to be just like an adult but, like, me ma told me that I didn't but I just thought I did to help her. (Girl, aged 19, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

Experiences shared with a single parent in the home increased symmetry and interdependence in relationships with resident parents.

> Like maybe we're a bit closer because ... like, if me dad would have been there maybe we wouldn't have had that ... because like I'm the oldest ... like she asks me things ... me brother and sister is still too young but she can talk to me about some things. (Boy, aged 16, 12 years since separation - Phase II)

Perceptions of increased interdependence in care-giving relationships persisted across both phases of the study. Children continued to be aware of transformations in the context of the absence of a non-resident parent's contribution to care-giving. Children also described continued contributions to care-giving tasks within the home in order to alleviate increased responsibility for resident parents, as illustrated by these two girls in the younger age-group:

> I help her by cleaning my room so she doesn't have to do that and I hoover and I empty the dishes and I make her tea. (Girl, aged 11, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

> Well, sometimes when she comes home ... she cooks the dinner for me and I help her with the house and I set the table and hoover around and things and she puts me to bed at night sometimes ... so it depends. (Girl, aged 11, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

The ability of children to interpret, to create new meanings from and to re-invent their own roles within care-giving relationships was implicit in most children's accounts. Increased interdependence in relationships conferred on children a sense of increased autonomy and power in these relationships and appeared to facilitate a greater awareness and development of children's own resources. A combination of an enhanced awareness of their own individual resources and the shift in developmental status of children provided a context for reflection and appraisal of the significance of these experiences, as illustrated in the following extract from a girl in the older age-group:

> I'd try to have the house clean and that when she came home and like some of my friends they would never do anything in the house like cook or ... they would never know how to use the washing machine and their ma does everything ... yeah, it's

> made me closer to my mam and ... it has made me stronger as a person. (Girl, aged 18, 15 years since separation - Phase II)

Care-giving relationships continued to be influenced to some extent, although typically not negatively, by ongoing family transition. One boy in the older age-group, however, who had described continuity in care-giving in the home by his non-resident father at the time of the first interview, no longer had access to this care at Phase II as his father was no longer available during the day.

> Now, see he's [non-resident father] at work like he used to work at night time when he was a bouncer but now he's a regular job and he works during the day and that and like he used to mind me and me bro every day when me ma was at work but now he doesn't any more 'cause he's at work now. (Boy, aged 17, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Adapting to the loss of his father's continued care was further complicated by family circumstances in which this boy's mother had a new baby, a context which gave rise to increased responsibility and additional work outside the home which he describes as follows:

> I can make me and me bro something to eat and things like that and if she's ever stuck for money like I can get her some ... It's all really the same only like I look after the house and all. Like, me ma runs the house but, like, I look after it and lock it up at night. (Boy, aged 17, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Disequilibrium in care-giving relationships

The third category of experience was characterised by a combination of specific challenges, resources and developmental contexts which combined to create greater disequilibrium in a minority of care-giving relationships post-separation. A small number of children experienced what might be termed a *power reversal* in their care-giving relationships with their resident parents. Care-giving relationships were categorised as unstable where children expressed their experience of increased pressure and anxiety resulting from changes in care-giving relationships following parental separation[24]. Pressure and anxiety were evident where children took over or undertook substantially increased household and child-care tasks within the home following parental separation.

> I would have to clean up me room and do me homework and I'd have to do the dishes like dry the dishes ... I'd have to help my sister, get changed, help her with her homework and things for school. (Girl, aged 8, 2 years since separation - Phase I)

[24] Six children (15%) described instability in care-giving relationships following parental separation.

> I had to take more responsibility ... my da [resident parent] wasn't able to give us as much attention as he used to be able to 'cause he didn't have as much free time as he has now. We had to do ... go to a certain time to do our homework 'cause he [father] had to help me and my sister where he used just be able to come in from work and help me because my mam used to help my sister. (Girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

Two children who described instability in care-giving relationships at the time of the first interview were living with their fathers as resident parents. One adolescent boy, who was living with his father and six siblings, described his experience of care-giving and his concern that his non-resident mother was not making sufficient effort to remain in contact with his younger siblings:

> Because she's [non-resident mother] not seeing her kiddies as often as she should, you know. I keep telling her ... if there's only one or two kids it would be grand but, because there's half a dozen (laughs), it makes things awkward. (Boy, aged 16, 1 year since separation – Phase I)

The majority of children who described instability in care-giving relationships during the first phase of interviews, described re-organisation of roles and greater stability in care-giving responsibilities within the home at the time of the second interview. This girl in the older age-group described how her mother, who was ill as a consequence of her distress at the time of the separation, was now back in the home:

C: My dad was coming home and like he was taking time off work to come back home and make sure that I had everything and that everything was alright.

R: Ok, and then for a period of time you lived with a friend, is that right?

C: Yeah, it was while my mum was in hospital probably from about April until July.

R: Ok, so since your mum has been back she has been the one cooking and all of that kind of thing?

C: Yeah. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Clearly, the experiences of altered power differentials and evolving patterns in interdependence, brought about by specific circumstances in care-giving following parental separation, were complex, individual and changed over time. In an interesting reversal of the patterns described in experiences of disequilibrium in care-giving relationships, one child in the older age-group described her difficulty in adjusting to the reduced constraints of her care-giving environment, as her siblings were

now older and less dependent upon her and her father's partner had taken over part of the responsibility for care-giving. These developments combined to require the further re-organisation of care-giving relationships and reduced involvement in child-care tasks for this child. Paradoxically, adjusting to the reduced constraints of her environment proved difficult for her, as she explained at the time of the second interview:

> Me sisters, like, I know that they don't need me but then that hurts 'cause like I was there for so long. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Resident fathers

Three children were living with their fathers as resident parent and primary care-giver across both phases of the present study. All of these children were in the older age-group and two of them were female. These children's accounts of closeness to resident fathers highlight the importance of parental role and involvement in children's lives, rather than the influence of gender alone, as exerting a powerful influence on experiences of closeness to resident parents. Striking in these narratives was the ability of children to interpret the new family circumstances in which they find themselves and to actively respond to their own interpretations of these changes. This girl in the older age-group expresses the importance for her of comfort and security with a parent rather than any consideration of gender of parent:

> It's the child's choice if they want to live with their ma or their da and like if they chose their da they chose their da for a reason and if they chose their mam they chose her for a different reason. I chose me dad 'cause I get on better with me dad and the factors of being a girl [laughs] never actually came into it ... well, it did come into it but it wasn't as important; it was more like I wanted to be happy and where I felt safe. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

A second female living with her father also underscored the importance of role as facilitating closeness in these relationships and reflects on the fact that her father had, to some extent, taken on the role of both mother and father in their relationship:

> He's a mother-father put together that's what I call him ... that's the way I think of him anyway ... Like, in the fact that I'd talk to me da about anything ... anything ... girl problems anything ... anything I swear to God like anything. (Girl, aged 15, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

In each of these families, the non-resident mother had regular contact with the child. All three children spoke of the increased responsibility for their fathers since their mothers no longer lived in the home.

Contrary to previous studies which have indicated that children feel less close to a resident parent in father-headed rather than mother-headed families (Maccoby et al., 1993), there was no difference in patterns of closeness and security in the case of resident fathers in the present study. However, the number of children living with resident fathers in the present study (n=3) is too small for solid conclusions to be drawn. Two of the three children living with their fathers as primary care-givers had close, secure relationships with their resident fathers. One boy in the older age-group, who was also living with his father, indicated that he had never had a close relationship with this parent, but continued to maintain a close relationship with his non-resident mother.

Correspondence between care-giving and closeness and security in relationships with resident parents post separation

The association between care-giving and positive experiences of closeness and security in relationships with resident parents was strongly underlined by the present study findings. There was evidence of a strong association between qualitative perceptions of care-giving and closeness to resident parents and scores recorded on the Emotional Closeness Map. A large proportion of children (91%), indicating an association between care-giving and closeness to resident parents, recorded high scores on the Emotional Closeness Map with this parent. Intensified appreciation of the ongoing care provided by resident parents was apparent in children's narratives. To some extent, it seemed that altered contexts and routines uncovered an awareness and appreciation that had previously been "taken for granted" and considered as an inevitable part of the child-parent relationship:

> Just like knowing that he never gave up no matter what like ... he was always there no matter what like ... he never said "Oh well it's the woman's job to mind the kids" and walked out on us. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Reflection on the shared experience of parental separation, and increased empathy with and understanding of the particular difficulties faced by lone parents in the home, strengthened emotional ties, even in cases where children were experiencing problems within relationships with resident parents. This boy in the older age-group was experiencing difficulties in his relationship with his resident mother at the time of the second interview but acknowledged her continued involvement in care-giving throughout the separation process:

C: She cares ... she provides for us

R: Ok, when you say 'she cares for us' how do you know she cares for you?

C: 'cause if she was any other person after all that trouble she would have left...I would have ...well, actually I would. I know that sounds horrible but I would. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

In brief, stability and permanence in care-giving relationships with resident parents was characteristic of most children's narratives on care following parental separation. Children's narratives on perceptions of care-giving post-separation were a testament to the significance of continuity in these experiences for stability and security in relationships with resident parents in particular. Discontinuity was the exception rather than the rule and changes were generally in the direction of improved quality in relationships. Many children pointed out that they had taken on added responsibilities within the home to assist their non-resident parents. Additional household tasks and increased responsibility for care within the home appeared to provide children with a sense of greater inter-dependence in these relationships.

Two findings are particularly worth highlighting. First of all, analysis revealed that added responsibility for children in the home following parental separation was associated with high scores on both measures of closeness and security with resident parents, to a greater extent than other categories of care-giving experience. One possible explanation for this is that where children had added responsibilities, relationships with resident parents were described as more symmetrical and horizontal in structure, with children being included in some aspects of decision-making. Secondly, disequilibrium in care-giving experiences in the first phase of the study was not associated with lower scores on measures of closeness or security in the second phase of the study. Instability appeared to be temporary and associated with more recent experiences of parental separation.

Conclusion

The primary aim of the present chapter is to focus attention on the revised relational contexts in which children maintain, develop or in some cases withdraw from relationships with parents post-separation.

Frequency of contact with *non-resident* parents was high and relatively stable across the two phases of the study, with a tendency towards slightly reduced contact with increasing time since separation. According to Emery & Forehand (1996), the most optimistic estimate of contact with non-resident parents was that following divorce approximately one third of children see their fathers once or twice

per week. In the present study, twice as many children (65%-70%) were seeing their non-resident parent at least once a week and most were seeing them more frequently.

Developmental patterns were evident in these findings. However, it is not possible to state clearly whether contact increases or decreases with age. Children in the younger age-group had more contact with non-resident parents and this is consistent with previous research (Walczak & Burns, 1984). Paradoxically, a small number of children had increased contact with their non-resident parents and these children were in the older age-group. There was also evidence of older children becoming more involved in their own relationships with peers and moving beyond prescribed activities with their non-resident parents. What we can deduce from these findings is that there is both a potential for increased contact with increasing age and the potential for diminishing contact with increased age. The key to either one or other pattern lies in the quality of established patterns and the expectations, needs and dynamics which they generate.

There was a strong correlation between frequent contact with non-resident parents and positive experiences of closeness and security. Particularly vulnerable for experiences of no contact and loss of closeness and security with non-resident parents were those children whose parents had separated when they were very young and where there had been a shorter relational history. Children's narratives on the quality of contact portrayed, in the main, a picture of contact based on *extrinsic, recreational* activities, consistent with previous research (Simpson et al., 1995). Problems with such contact were expressed to a greater extent by children in the older age-group, who described feeling less comfortable or having 'grown out of" participating in activities which they experienced as being prescribed by their parents. Findings in the present study concur closely with recent research (Hogan et al., 2002; Jessop, 1999; Smart et al., 2001) which clearly underscores the need to move beyond the aim of merely *maintaining* contact with non-resident parents, if we wish children to develop close, secure relationships with parents with whom they no longer share residence.

These findings reinforce the sense that children's relationships with parents following parental separation are unique when considering permanence in relationships and the notion of *obligated* and *voluntary* commitment (Laursen & Bukowski 1997; Finch and Mason, 1993), as outlined in Chapter 2. Many aspects of a child's relationship with their non-resident parent fall outside or somewhere between these dimensions of obligated and voluntary relationships. Continued interaction for children with non-resident parents is not assured to the same extent as in non-separated families. No further contact following parental separation was experienced by a small minority of children in the present study. Nevertheless, the possibility for interaction being withdrawn by a non-resident parent influenced and, in some cases, dominated children's expectations and fears, when first faced with the separation of their parents. The importance of reviewing, re-evaluating and, where necessary,

renegotiating new relationships with parents following parental separation is underpinned by such consideration.

It is not possible to over-emphasise the central role played in the present study by continued and committed care-giving facilitating positive relationships with parents, particularly *resident* parents. Younger children in particular drew upon their experiences of care-giving when describing feelings of closeness with resident parents. Similar views have been expressed by children in a study of care carried out in the UK (Brannen et al., 1999). Children perceived themselves as active contributors to care and active participants in family life. However, children also indicated that they felt it was the role of parents to provide primary care in the home. These findings were strongly supported in the present study, with altered routines prompting greater appreciation of the provision of continued care in the home. Consistent with this finding, James (1998) highlights the fact that for children, and particularly young children, the provision of meals and gifts and comfort in times of illness or distress are interpreted as signs of parental care, of a relationship which they, as children, also have an active investment and involvement in.

Equally significant was the subtle but influential shift in the structure of power in many children's experiences of care-giving relationships with resident parents post-separation. As participants in an increasingly inter-dependent relationship, shaped both by the altered circumstances of living with one parent following the separation and by the changing agendas of children's developmental status, children generated new resources which helped them to construct new roles and increasingly shared responsibilities with both resident parents and other siblings.

Added responsibilities in the home following parental separation appeared to facilitate closeness and security in relationships with resident parents. Significantly, more negative experiences of instability in care-giving at some point in the separation process did not appear to have negative implications for experiences of either closeness or security with resident parents, as measured in the second phase of the study.

The present study findings suggest that it is precisely through the concrete experience of everyday activities that children develop more reciprocal, inter-dependent relationships with their parents. Weiss (1979) found that growing up in a single-mother household resulted in children's earlier maturity. Children shared managerial responsibility for the household with resident parents and child-parent relationships were more symmetrical, resembling a partnership and with evidence of a less authoritarian power structure than in two-parent families. Continued contributions to care-giving in the home on the part of non-resident parents occurred in a small number of cases and this promoted an overall sense of continuity in family routine and a greater sense of closeness and

connection to this parent for children. Contact which is based on mutual arrangement rather than spontaneous interaction, may not provide an optimal context for the development of interdependence. In the present study, there was evidence that where children perceived dependence on non-resident parents to be mutual and more symmetrical, greater closeness was facilitated. Conversely, it is the absence of this everyday interaction that may contribute to a sense of reduced connectedness in relationships with non-resident parents following parental separation, and this will be addressed in subsequent chapters. As will be seen in Chapter 8, developing bonds of inter-dependence may be more difficult when contact with a parent is on an occasional basis and outside the context of family rituals and routine which may help to foster them.

CHAPTER 7: RESIDENT PARENTS - FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO CLOSENESS AND SECURITY

Introduction

In this chapter, the analysis moves to a more concentrated focus on the concepts of closeness and security in relationships with resident parents in an altered family environment. Reflecting on patterns in these relationships, accumulated in both present and past experience, and mindful of the particular context of parental separation in which present and past interactions have evolved, children review and evaluate experiences of closeness and feelings of security with their resident parents[25]. Drawing on assessments outlined in Chapter 6, the study seeks to explore and make sense of underlying processes, contexts and patterns through a focus on the narratives surrounding these appraisals. Key themes associated with children's perceptions of positive and more problematic experiences of closeness and security are identified, which help to shed light on how children construct, maintain and re-negotiate these concepts with resident parents in changing family contexts. As in preceding chapters, the focus is both cross-sectional and longitudinal, highlighting developmental patterns in experiences at one point in time, reflecting further on past and present interactions and providing an added dimension to these experiences by looking at these processes across the two phases of the study.

Assessments of closeness and security indicated positive experiences for the majority of children in relationships with resident parents and much stability in the pattern of closeness to resident parents across both phases of the study. A minority of children, however, had substantially low scores on these constructs in relationships with resident parents. Three children in the older age-group lived with their father as resident parent. Two of these three children recorded positive experiences as measured by these instruments and both of these were girls. One boy in the older age-group recorded substantially lower scores on closeness and security with his resident father. Positive and negative experiences, elaborated upon in the second phase of the study, were closely linked to the relational history. The chapter begins with a focus on narratives which explored children's perceptions of key features in relationships and enabled children to review the development of their relationships across interactional histories.

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[25] Preliminary assessments of closeness and security were carried out with the aid of the Emotional Closeness Map (Smart et al., 2001; Sturgess et al., 2001) and the Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996). Appendix 14 provides a detailed account of children's scores on the Security Scale and the Emotional Closeness Map.

Influences of relational histories

One of the most striking features of children's narratives across both phases of the study was the significant role which perceptions of past interactions and the history of the relationship in general played in determining perspectives on present interaction. Children's narratives portrayed an image of their relationship through an accumulation of past, present and future anticipated experiences, and these images were largely consistent throughout these time phases. This is not to underplay the extent to which relationships were open, flexible and subject to change and influence from the surrounding context of family transition. However, core developments across these relationships were, for the most part, inherent in narratives stretching back to children's memories of these relationships in the distant past. The central importance of this dynamic across past, present and future is particularly well illustrated in the following extract which is taken from an interview with a girl in the older age-group in the first phase of the study:

> I'd say it's [relationship with resident father] still the same ... I was always a daddy's girl do you know. Me da always said to me that I would always run to him for something and if he wasn't there then I'd run to me ma ... like I never knew it but like even when I was younger in pictures I'm always with me da ... like I have a few with me ma but I'm more or less always hugging and jumping into me dad's arms and that. Like me da says I always had a good relationship with him. (Girl, aged 15, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Children brought to these assessments individual feelings, needs, and attitudes. Expectations, generated from these experiences of parental availability and parental responses, were consistent across both phases of the study for the majority of children. Children themselves actively made connections between their present perspectives on relationships and their recollection of the history of the relationship:

> I have more in me memories to me mam. Like me mam has always been there and I respect her for that ...like no matter what she's always been there and I respect her for that. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Similarly, children were guided by past experience when expressing expectancies about future developments in these relationships.

Facilitators of closeness and security in relationships with resident parents

As previously outlined, three major themes were identified with regard to processes facilitating positive experiences of closeness and security in relationships – *accessibility, commitment and connectedness*.

Accessibility

Continuity in parental accessibility was associated with positive experiences of parental availability, which contributed to feelings of closeness to resident parents in a range of ways. Narratives on accessibility spanned a very broad range of experience, most reflecting more than mere physical presence of parents and extending to expressions of reciprocal interaction between children and their parents. Children construed continued acts of presence and care in the home as indicative of closeness and reliability in relationships, particularly within the context of parental separation, as described by this girl in older age-group:

> I probably got closer to my mum because of the separation ... because she is there for me ... like, she is the one who is looking after me or whatever ... caring for me ... she's the one who I come home to and if I have a problem, she is the one I will go to because she's here ... so I've gotten closer to mam. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation – Phase I).

The dynamic and emergent nature of children's relationships with parents was emphasised in accounts of accessibility to parents. Children's perspectives evolved and changed over time according to their own accounts and these influences allowed them to see their parents in a different light. For many children, the experience of parental separation intensified children's awareness and appreciation of their access to their resident parents. Re-evaluating experiences of accessibility to resident parents served to increase affiliations and to introduce new perspectives and possibilities into expectations for the future of these relationships. The active role played by children and their willingness to re-evaluate and re-negotiate their relationships with parents following parental separation was strikingly apparent throughout these accounts.

> I've definitely built a new relationship with my mam ... definitely much closer ...more open. It's kind of weird but it's more like a friendship ... like the mother-daughter thing ... we still have the mother-daughter kind of thing going on but like it's still kind of a friendship ... 'cause we do such and such together ... going shopping and talk to each other ... you know boys and stuff it's kind of the same as with my friends in school. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

This was not the experience of all children, however, and more negative experiences are addressed in later sections.

Particularly striking in these narratives was the strong association between positive perceptions of accessibility to resident parents and experiences of intimacy and familiarity with these parents. While children's feelings of intimacy and familiarity were, in some cases, associated with their experiences of close communication and intimate exchange with resident parents, this was not

inevitably so. In other cases, children highlighted features such as mutual knowledge and awareness which appeared to afford greater comfort and ease in relationships. Such awareness also appeared to contribute to an overall sense of shared perception of what was happening in their relationships and in the surrounding context of their lives.

> It was different if my dad hadn't got us and me ma did ... I'd say it would be the opposite way 'cause I'm around him 24/7. Because like I'm around me da 24/7 for the last 7 years. I haven't been out of his sight ... so I would be more close to me da and I know me da more than anyone else would you know ... better even than me mother [laughs]. (Girl, aged 15, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Conveyed in this extract above and in many children's accounts of accessibility to resident parents was a sense that, following parental separation, children experienced the time they spent with their parents more intensely. Narratives on adapting to living with one parent highlighted this sense of being together "every minute of the day": Frequency and ease of accessibility to resident parents were reviewed and re-interpreted by children in light of the transformation in family environment which many continued to negotiate. "Seeing someone every day" was subjectively understood by these children as setting the context for closer relationship as evidenced by these extracts:

> C: Because like I see [mother and sibling] every minute of the day ... and I know everything about them and that ...
>
> R: Okay, but say you see a lot of your dad and that so why is that different do you think?
>
> C: I don't really know like ... it's sort of that ... he doesn't really live with us like so I just ... don't really know. (Girl, aged 10, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

> You know, if you're living with her you'd see her every day and, you know, if you see someone every day you're going to be closer to them than if you only see them the odd day. (Boy, aged 18, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

A significant sub-theme associated with experiences of accessibility in relationships with parents was the extent to which children experienced parents as being aware of central events and experiences as they unfolded in children's lives and of corresponding awareness on the part of children of what was happening in their parents' lives. The majority of children (62.5%) indicated that their resident parent was aware of their well-being and of key experiences in their daily lives. Children attributed this knowledge and awareness to shared experience through co-residence rather than, for example, experiences of closeness in these relationships.

> I think she would know probably because I live in the house with her but like I wouldn't really talk with her about how I feel ... I prefer to talk to my sister. (Boy, aged 16, 13 years since separation - Phase II)

> If I come back from horse-riding and I'm sort of upset a little bit and she'd know and I probably wouldn't even be ... like I probably would have tried to hide and she would just know like. (Girl, aged 10, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Byng-Hall (1995, pp. 39) defines family interactive awareness as facilitating "a *shared* coherent perception of what is happening between those involved, based on compatible internal models of the relationships". Such awareness in family relationships post-separation facilitates the creation of shared understandings and meanings which, in turn, enable "new, coherent story lines" to be scripted between family members. Accessibility to resident parents as described by most of the children appeared to create such opportunities for new meanings to be constructed and exerted a considerable influence on processes of interaction between children and parents.

Open and easy communication patterns were also associated with greater awareness of children's well-being. The influence of child-parent communication on children's experiences of close relationships with parents following parental separation was examined across both phases of the study. Axial coding generated two categories of quality of communication with parents - ease of communication and restricted communication. There was a strong association between positive experiences of availability and accessibility and ease of communication in relationships with resident parents. Ease of communication with parents was operationalised as patterns of communication where children described being able to talk with their parents freely, without reference to any restraint. In a close relationship, conversation is both *indexical*, in that it conveys the emotional status of the interaction and *instrumental*, in that practical, functional everyday information is exchanged (Hinde, 1997). Ease of communication in the present study involved communication which was both indexical and instrumental and was associated with the provision of information, explanation and reassurance as the following extracts indicate[26]:

> She was always there and she always like, she knew if there was something wrong as well, she could tell by the behaviour or the way we were acting. And even if we said there was nothing wrong she'd sit down and go "Is it about your father?" and she goes "I'll tell you about it." (Girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

[26] The majority of children (52.5%) indicated that they could communicate freely with their resident parents at the time of the first interview.

The importance of child-parent communication in keeping children informed about what was happening in the separation was also evident in children's narratives in the second phase of interviews[27]. Shared family routine and ritual fostered a sense of familiarity and intimacy with resident parents and it was most often in this context that children described being able to communicate with ease.

> If I'm upset or worried about anything, I'll tell her and like she'll try to sort it out or say 'nothing will happen to you so don't worry'. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Significantly, open communication with parents was viewed as strongly associated with positive experiences of closeness and security in relationships, with approximately 80% of children who described open communication patterns recording high levels of closeness and security in their relationships. Developmental status influenced patterns of communication to some extent, with a slightly higher proportion of older than young children[28] (53% and 47% respectively) associating closeness in relationships with communication. There was also a stronger association between closeness and communication among females in the present study[29].

Accessibility over time

The influence of time on children's relationships with their parents became more distinct when viewed across both phases of the study. Ease of access to resident parents, ease of communication and the resulting awareness of what was happening in each others' lives, enhanced established close patterns in relationships across the two phases of the study and contributed to a greater sense of affiliation in more problematic contexts. This is illustrated in the following examples of two children in the older age-group who were experiencing difficulties in their relationships with their mothers across both phases of the present study. One of these children, a boy in the older age-group had described his relationship with his resident mother as "stressful" at the time of the first interview.

C It's like awkward like ... She's so awkward ... She can't give a straight answer. She'd tell lies all the time.

R So say if you ask something ...?

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[27] Over half of the participants (57.5%) in the second phase of the study indicated that they could communicate freely with their resident parents

[28] Data on talking to and confiding in resident parents were further analysed on an age-group basis. A slightly higher proportion of older than younger children (57% and 43% respectively) identified this dimension of closeness to their resident parent.

[29] Data on talking to resident parents were also analysed by gender. A higher proportion of females than males (46% and 20% respectively) associated talking with closeness to resident parents.

C Yeah, ... you could ask her a question like [and she'd answer] 'I don't have to tell you like. Mind your own business'. And some simple question, like, turns into a big, huge argument. (Boy, aged 16, 4 years since separation – Phase I)

There was evidence that problems continued to persist in this relationship at the time of the second interview. However, in contrast to the very negative portrayal of his mother in the first interview, his response to her was clearly influenced by his re-assessment over time of her contribution to his well-being, highlighting among other features of the relationship, her continued accessibility:

C: Although like I give out about her and she done everything ... I'd rather live with me mam than me da.

R: Why is that?

C: Because she's me ma like ... she raised me up, she'd know more about me than anybody in the world would ... And I'd be close to her like ... I'd tell her things that I wouldn't tell me dad although he'd be me best friend or whatever ... things that I can't tell him. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

A similar influence was apparent in the narrative of this girl in the older age-group, who had described a very close relationship with her non-resident father in the first phase of the study. In contrast, she had described her relationship with her mother as difficult at times, due to her mother's changing moods since the separation. In Phase II of the study, she emphasised the substantial influence which accessibility to her mother had exerted on her outlook.

The fact that I know she's always there for me and she's done so much for me ... My dad's more easy-going but my mother is my mother. She's always been there for me and she helps me. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Children's accounts of closeness to resident parents indicate that, contrary to notions documented in the literature, contact and frequent interaction alone play an important role in shaping and predicting the quality of interactions between children and their parents. Accessibility, as portrayed in the present study, may be best understood as generating a setting in which close, secure relationships are fostered.

Commitment

One of the most notable features of children's narratives on their relationships with parents was an assertion, both explicit and implicit, of commitment to continuing relationships with both resident and non-resident parents, despite the change in family structure. Parental actions and behaviour were

also frequently read and understood in terms of the commitment which they represented. The following sections focus on commitment as a facilitator of closeness and security in these relationships.

Commitment was expressed through children's perceptions and interpretations of parental actions, intents and attitudes, denoting both the desire and expectation that relationships would continue or, conversely, signalling the potential for relationships to cease. Assumed to be obligatory in family relationships, commitment is likely to be less predictable and less socially regulated in relationships with parents post-separation. Importantly, this shift in emphasis from relations of obligation to less predictable and prescribed rules of commitment was a challenge for children and their parents in the present study. Clearly, the action alone of choosing or agreeing to remain as resident parent, conveyed a sense of commitment to the parental role on the part of that parent for many children. Children actively reviewed the continued acts of care in the home by resident parents in light of their altered family contexts and this review enhanced feelings of closeness to parents across both phases of the study. An illustration of this is provided in the following extracts from a child in the older age-group who was living with her resident father.

> I realised that I loved him much more because he took us all and he didn't have to. (Girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

> Just like knowing that he never gave up no matter what like ... was always there no matter what ... he never said 'Oh well it's the woman's job to mind the kids' and walked out on us. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Living with children, interpreted as a choice to be available and committed to the relationship, conferred on resident parents the right to exert parental authority and to be involved in making decisions which had direct significance and implications for children's lives. This is illustrated in the following extract from a boy in the older age-group

> I usually ask my mum about things I'd like to do ... like, if I want eyebrow piercing or a tattoo I have to ask my mum because she lives here and she has to make the decision ... my mum has that right because my dad doesn't live here ... it's easier ... it's easier for him to make a quick decision because he doesn't always have to think ... he's not always thinking about where we are or what we are doing ... my mum has to be doing that so it's harder for her to make decisions like that. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation – Phase II)

Having a child's "best interests at heart" was also communicated through continued commitment from resident parents and the influence of this experience extended across parental roles. This girl in the older age-group talks about how her resident father was stricter than her non-resident mother but stresses her belief that this was a necessary part of his role as parent in order to provide guidance:

> I think he always had our best interests at heart and he knew, like, what way he wanted us to turn out so like he knew what he was doing. If he didn't give out to me when I was younger, like, I wouldn't have known the difference, do you know what I mean? (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Children's perceptions of parental commitment were closely linked to positive experiences of parental support in these relationships. A large body of research identifies parental support as a key resource for children, facilitating children's positive development by conveying a basic sense of trust and reinforcing self-concepts of worth and competence (Baumrind, 1968; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). Parental support was explored across both phases of the present study and was reflected across a number of behaviours such as responsiveness, encouragement and everyday assistance.

Children identified a strong association between positive experiences of commitment and experiences of *support and responsibility* in relationships with resident parents. Parents conveyed their commitment to children through being readily accessible and willing to respond should children need emotional guidance. Parental support was examined retrospectively to explore perceptions of support at the time of the separation and more generally in children's everyday experience since the separation. Children's experience of parental support at the time of the separation was explored using the Five Field Map, in which children were asked to rate the extent to which they had received support across five domains, including their immediate family. Parental support was rated on a three-point scale: *helped a lot, helped a little and didn't help*. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS11. The majority of children (60%) indicated that their resident parent had *helped a lot* at the time of the first interview. Parental reassurance of continuing commitment and involvement in children's lives was the main source of parental support experienced by children, as illustrated by the following extracts from interviews:

> Well, because, like, I thought that I wasn't going to be able to see my dad and I knew that I was going to be staying with my mam and then when my mam explained everything to me and the Rainbows teacher explained everything to me ... then ... like, I didn't really mind. (Girl, aged 8, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

> I knew like, they said 'even though we won't be living in the same house we're both your parents, and we'd still always be there.' (Boy, aged 13, 3 years since separation – Phase I)

There were developmental patterns in perceived support in that a higher proportion of children in the older age-group than in the younger age-group (66.7% and 52.6% respectively) experienced their resident parent as having *helped a lot* at the time of the first interview.

Acts of support were interpreted as gestures of commitment to continuing relationships and to the well-being of the child. A majority of children in the present study had availed of formal support services at some point in the separation process. In all cases, access to this support was facilitated by resident parents as described by children in the following extracts from interviews:

> Mom just said to us that it [support service] would help us a great deal, help us with our relationships with dad and mom, like we didn't have a problem with mom but dad, our relationship with dad was very rocky. (Girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

The majority of children who perceived their resident parents to have supported them, also indicated closeness to these parents. Perceptions of support in Phase I of the study were also associated with perceptions of greater security in Phase II. Children were also asked to reflect on whether they felt their parents' separation had impacted on patterns of parental responsiveness to need. Analysis of responses involved open coding in NVivo for continuity and change in experiences of dependence on parents. The majority of children (57.5%) indicated that the separation had not affected their resident parent's ability to respond to their needs. In their accounts of parental responsiveness, a small number of participants indicated that this aspect of their relationship with their resident parent had been enhanced as a result of the separation. Shared experience of the separation process and of a resident parent's efforts to reassure and protect children at times of distress were some of the aspects of the relationship valued by children, as this girl in the older age-group describes:

> I don't know … like I've always been … maybe more positive because of the stuff that happened she was very protective of us. Like if we had fights with our dad she'd get very angry with him and comfort us more. Maybe, like if they hadn't separated it might have been different but I don't know I think it's more positive. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

A further sub-theme associated with commitment was *trust* in relationships. Trust depends to a great extent on learning experiences in the course of the relationship and can contribute positively to clear expectations and agreement about goals (Hinde, 1997). Trust is also likely to foster greater flexibility

to accommodate change in relationships. Significantly, trust in relationships provided a further dimension to positive experiences of commitment in relationships with resident parents, with the majority of children (80%), and all children in the younger age-group, describing positive experiences of trust in their relationships with resident parents within the revised family schema. Belief in parental commitment was reinforced for many children by the continued presence of their resident parent in the home and enhanced by the experience of living closely with one parent. Greater intimacy and consequent positive experiences of trust with resident parents were strongly associated with experiences of commitment:

> I guess it's because I kind of feel it's the two of us against everything, do you know ... 'cause like we've had no-one else but the dog to talk to in the house ... it's more even than trust. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

> Maybe I can trust her more 'cause like she's the only one I have been with ... like if there were two people it might have been a bit of both. (Boy, aged 16, 12 years since separation - Phase II)

Clearly, the salience of parental commitment, as demonstrated by findings in the present study, cannot be over-estimated. Faith in parental commitment provided children with greater flexibility to accommodate to the changes they were experiencing within the context of family transition. Positive experiences of parental commitment were likely to facilitate clear expectations and agreement of goals within the relationship. Of great significance to children in the present study was the experience of parental behaviour and intent, which communicated assurance of the continuance of these relationships and optimised their properties. As outlined above, therefore, the key elements of commitment for children were in their experiences of the continued presence in the home of their parent and the continued care which these parents provided, and experiences of parental support and trust in these relationships.

Commitment over time

The passing of time and changing circumstances also affected perspectives and experiences of commitment and responsibility. In the extracts below, a child in the younger age-group during the first phase of the study describes her resident mother as too busy at times to be able to talk to her about her problems:

> R: Ok, were you able to talk to your mum at that time?
>
> C: Well my mum was really busy ... we had homework and everything. (Girl, aged 9, 3 years since separation - Phase I)

At the time of the second interview, in contrast, she describes her mother as better able to respond to her needs and expresses her appreciation of this commitment on the part of her mother:

> My mum ... well, it's just that she's there ... she wouldn't be off doing other things ... she'd never be too busy if you said "Look mum I really need to talk to you. Would you mind? Could I talk to you whenever you're free?" and like at that moment she would just sit down no matter what she was doing and she'd say "Yeah, let's talk about that". (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Dedication of resident parent(s) was valued across a range of circumstances. As in the case of accessibility, knowledge and appreciation of the continued commitment of a parent helped to create a sense of affiliation, even in relationships where children had experienced or were experiencing troubles. In the following extract, this boy in the older age-group lived for the most part with his resident father, although he expressed the wish in both phases of the study, to live with his non-resident mother to whom he was particularly close. In the second phase of the study, it was clear that he appreciated the practical assistance which his father was always willing to provide and these gestures of assistance conveyed a sense of commitment to his well-being:

> Well, that he's here and that he's trying to raise his family and I'm here and I can practically do what I want and if I'm ever stuck for money he gives it to me ... or like he'd drop me anywhere and collect me from town or collect me from [girlfriend's house]. (Boy, aged 18, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

Connectedness

Connectedness is defined as the degree to which children and parents sustain engaged and dynamic interaction in their relationships and "a connected thread of communication when they interact" (Dunn, 1993, pp. 24). Connectedness in the present study was expressed in a number of ways, through open communication patterns, shared interest or activity and warmth and affection in relationships. Extending across the history of relationships, connectedness was described by many children in their reflections on past experiences with their resident parents. In many of these portrayals, memories of specific events provided illustrations while in other cases, this dimension of the relationships was less tangible.

Shared interest and perceptions of shared temperament formed part of the portrayal of relationships of connection with parents. In many ways, this aspect of the relationship did not obviously appear to be significantly affected or influenced by the experience of parental separation, although it was evident that shared residence, and the consequent ease of access and interaction, provided optimal opportunities for connectedness to be sustained and developed over time. In the following extract, a

girl in the older age-group describes connectedness in her relationship with her resident father. A sense of shared interest, humour and ease of connection was expressed across both phases of the study as follows:

> Like me and me da have loads in common 'cause like I love the radio and me da loves his music as well so like the two of us love it ... like if I had the radio me da wouldn't mind that ... wouldn't be cranky but others would be saying 'Oh get that music off, will you?' And like all my friends just come up to my house and they all just say 'Oh, I'd love to have your dad as a da and he's deadly and all and they love me da. (Girl, aged 15, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Positive and connected interaction in relationships also facilitated clarity in parental role and the combination of these features allowed sufficient balance and flexibility for children, especially older children, to develop autonomously while remaining connected to resident parents:

> The kind of person that my mom is like she has the authority that I know not to push the boundaries with her ... that kind of mother-daughter relationship, you know ... it's very much you know there is no crossing there 'cause you know we really do have a good balance there and especially since there is just two of us. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Patterns of connectedness for younger and older children were distinct with younger children expressing this feature within the framework of more vertical and less equal power relations. Experiences of care and the provision of comfort and reassurance fostered connectedness in relationships with resident parents, as conveyed in the following extract from a child in the younger age-group who expresses a sense of connectedness in her relationship with her mother and younger sister:

> Sometimes we play and we play mess-fighting [laughs]. And then sometimes we just talk to each other. 'Cause like I see them [mother and sibling] a lot ... loads of times and when I feel really down like they'll always comfort me ... like my mam always comes over or my sister always comes over and gives me a hug or a kiss. (Girl, aged 10, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

There were also developmental patterns with older children engaging in more extensive communication, as described by this girl in the older age-group:

> Well, I can tell her everything ... everything I want. I can talk to her like if it's to do with sex, drink, anything about my friends, anything in my life ... I go straight to my mum and tell her exactly what's going on and she'll sit down and listen to me and she'll say 'do this, do that'. She trusts me and I trust her with everything ... she makes you feel safe as well when things are going wrong with your friends. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

However, communication played a significant role in fostering ease and connectedness in all relationships with parents. Confiding in resident parents was associated with feelings of trust and it was of central importance for children to feel that what they talked about would not be relayed beyond this exchange with their parent, as expressed by this child in the younger age-group:

> I can talk to her about anything and I know she won't go spreading it around and I just feel comfortable and I feel protected around her. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

The importance of having someone to confide in within the realm of the family was highlighted by many children. The following extract from a girl in the older age-group identifies links between her experience of being able to confide in her mother and perceived closeness to her parent:

> I see it as important to have someone in your family that you do that with and I see it as a bonus that it's my mum because I ... like, for me, my mum is such an important figure as it is ... to have that that I can pretty much say anything that I want and I can trust that you know ...that's why I would say my mom is one of the closest people to me. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Connectedness in relationships was also associated with greater ease in communicating negative affect to resident parents. Communicating sadness, anger and feeling upset with a parent were associated with closeness and security, in that the majority of children (80%, 77% and 71% respectively) who reported ease of communication of affect, also had high scores on closeness and security. A minority of children who described restricted patterns of communication with resident parents also had high scores on these constructs. These findings indicate that although ease of communication may facilitate closeness and security in relationships with parents, reluctance to communicate distress is not, in all cases, an obstacle to positive experiences of closeness and security. Connectedness was equally present in relationships with resident fathers and with resident mothers and influences were reciprocal as illustrated in the following quote:

> Do you know the way you might be with someone and you might keep it from your dad? I'd actually tell my dad before I'd tell anyone else ... like my dad's my mam and my mam's my dad and like any trouble my dad has he always comes to me and explains and talks to me. (Girl, aged 14, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Connectedness over time

Relationships of connection with resident parents were largely consistent in quality across both phases of the present study. As previously outlined, shared residence generally created opportunities for mutual influence in relationships and this was a salient feature in fostering experiences of connectedness. There was some evidence that, where such relationships had been established, opportunities for stronger bonds of inter-connection were forged across the two phases of the present study. In particular, developmental patterns were evident in relationships between older females and their resident mothers, with whom participants had developed more companionate relationships of connection.

> Me and my mam are pretty close in personalities and there's a lot of similarities like and I like the same things and the same sort of movies and that so we get on a lot, like we go to plays and things together and we're both interested in drama 'cause like I do drama and my mum is interested in drama so we like to go see stuff. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II).

However, developmental status exerted more problematic influences in other relationships and these examples underscore the significance of tracking the development of quality in relationships across time. In the following extract a boy in the older age-group describes how his relationship with his mother, with whom he had been very close as a younger child, had become problematic, due to a combination of changes in the developmental agenda as he grew older, coupled with difficulties adapting to the separation of his parents:

> If she said the world was flat I'd believe it ... I was such a mammy's boy ...I loved her to bits but when you grow up and meet new people and you start having your own opinion and my opinion and her opinions clashed and that's why there has been tension as well 'cause we think of separate things. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Barriers to closeness and security in relationships with resident parents

As previously outlined, parental separation represents an environment in which commitments, obligations and responsibilities alter over time in ways that may impinge on this relationship. Interpreting and establishing meanings from experiences in relationships with parents, children generated specific themes associated with problematic relationships post-separation. Axial coding on

children's narratives surrounding perceptions of closeness and security identified three major themes across an array of individual meanings and patterns as follows: *balancing old and new patterns* in relationships post separation, *fragile commitments* and *ongoing or unresolved family transition.*

Balancing old and new patterns

Context as a powerful influence on relationships was clearly demonstrated in the present study. Shared context, as, for example, the shared experience of adapting and adjusting to the transition from two-parent to single-parent families, generated specific and recurring themes. Bridging the gap between established, familiar patterns and less-defined, novel patterns within a changed and, in some cases, changing context was difficult for children who had no previous models within their relationships to be guided by. According to Byng-Hall (1995) based on experiences of living together as a family unit, a particular repertoire of actions and expectations evolves, informing interactions and responses so that each participant in the relationship can be aware of and adjust their scripts where necessary so that they are working towards a common end. This repertoire may no longer be entirely relevant or helpful in guiding interactions post-separation. Some children were explicit in expressing the sense that their family worlds became more fragmented following the separation, moving from one parent's house to another and with little connection between these worlds, as expressed in the following extract:

> I think it makes a big difference ... 'cause it's much easier ... just say in school for Christmas we always make a card and I always just hated that 'cause I didn't know who to give it to ... 'cause you only made one card. It's stupid things like that because you don't know who to give it to but other people in the class they don't have to worry about that ... they don't know how hard it is for you. (Girl, aged 10, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

Narratives on relationships with resident parents highlighted little negativity in these relationships as viewed by the study participants. Balancing old and new patterns in these relationships, children appeared to actively revise expectations in response to the altered family contexts of single parents. The rules of relationship interaction, established through the history of family routine and ritual, continued to provide a framework against which relationships developed and to regulate the nature of interaction that children experienced with these parents, although there was also evidence of substantial re-negotiation. Role identities were clear, however, and, as a result, family relationships generally continued to be functional and satisfactory.

As outlined in Chapter 7, these altered family contexts provided the setting for a subtle shift in responsibilities and, in some cases, partnerships of more equal status were established with the parent in the home. Parental role identities for resident parents remained clearly identified in the

main. While children openly acknowledged that resident parents had the right to exert authority, and this was often in contrast to non-resident parents for whom this right was no longer a given one, a small number of children signalled their preference for being parented by two parents rather than one. Overall, the sense communicated in narratives was that pressure was greater on a parent when they were operating on their own in the home and some children missed the presence of a second voice to support or counter family decisions, as illustrated by these extracts from children in the older and younger age-groups:

> If my parents were both still living in the same house ... it wouldn't just be my mum's decision that would stand the whole way through. They'd both have to speak about it ... like they couldn't just ignore each other's opinions so they'd have to think about it much more carefully than I think they do at the moment because my dad can just say 'yes' and my mum can just say 'no' but that's without each other's input. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

> My mam wouldn't have had to be as hard on all of us 'cause my dad was there and we were all a family. (Girl, aged 11, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

> 'Cause if my dad was there I don't know ... I'd have a lot more freedom because like she always needs someone around to make her feel safe as well. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Ambivalence permeated narratives on living in the home with one parent and balancing old and new patterns in an altered family context. Being able to communicate internal responses to the unfolding external family drama helped to foster more positive understanding between children and their parents by providing an opportunity for a shared coherent perception of what was happening. Where communication patterns were more restricted, it was more difficult for children and parents to develop new patterns and meanings within their interaction. Children described relationships where there were opportunities for exchanges of information between themselves and their parents as contributing to a more successful renegotiation of relationships. Quality of communication was significant in predicting levels of conflict in these relationships. Frequent conflict in relationships with resident parents was reported by 25% of children and was associated with more restricted patterns of communication in these relationships[30]. More open patterns of communication were also associated with higher levels of conflict resolution in relationships. In the following extract, a boy in the older age-group, who was experiencing ongoing conflict and trouble in his relationship with his

[30] 80% of children reporting high frequency of conflict in relationships with parents also reported restricted communication patterns

mother, highlights a reluctance on the part of his mother to accommodate and communicate about his distress:

> C She asked me if I was okay and she knew that I would say 'yeah' 'cause I would and I wouldn't tell that I was [upset]. And she knew that. And it was weird that she knew.
>
> R: How do you know that she knew that?
>
> C: 'Cause it was just ... just like instinct ... I just knew. She'd be gone before I could say anything 'cause she knew I wouldn't say anything. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Unresolved ongoing family transitions

Unresolved or ongoing family transition were associated with, first of all, experiences of unresolved inter-parental conflict and ongoing hostility and, secondly, the experience of events such as new partners and children within these partnerships. Transition in family environments was, to some extent, ongoing for all children in the present study, as roles and relationships continued to evolve across both phases of the study and many years beyond the point of separation. Signals of greater problems in coping with transition were identified through axial coding on children's narratives. Problems were shared to some extent across relationships with resident and non-resident parents. However, differences in emphases and influence were also substantial. As previously noted, the history of relationships between children and their parents was profoundly influential on the perceptions and experiences of children in these relationships. For some children, difficult patterns had been established extending far back in past experiences and were represented as being exacerbated by the intensification of divisions in affiliations between family members. One boy in the older age-group describes this in the following extract:

> There's sides ... like there's mam and dad ... I'd be mam's side and Paul, the one just older than me would be split in the middle and then David would be with dad and Robert would be split in the middle. (Boy, aged 18, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

The notion of *sides* and *negative alliances* in family affiliations was expressed to a greater extent by older than younger children. Divided loyalties were also associated with greater conflict in relationships with resident parents than with non-resident parents in the study:

> C We fight we have very bad fights 'cause we're just so close ...
>
> R: Okay and what would you fight about?

C: About my dad really

R: Yeah, okay so that just adds to the tension a bit, does it?

C: Yeah, sometimes when I'm on the phone to my dad she might be like 'Oh you were talking really nice to your dad today' [imitating mocking sweet voice] (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Inter-parental relationships exerted considerable influence on the dynamics across all family relationships and more in-depth analyses of these influences are presented in Chapter 9. Disparagement of one parent by another was also associated with negative alliances and was experienced as perturbing and distressing for all children. Children were openly affected by and critical of parental behaviour which was interpreted as belittlement or vilification of the other parent. Clearly, these findings point up the significance for these children of parents drawing distinct boundaries between interaction with their ex-spouse and interaction with their children.

> No, no like that's the thing ... like, he [non-resident parent] isn't ... when I go over there like he doesn't talk about ... like anything about her but like me mam is always talking about dad like ... how he left and how she brought us up and why do I have such a good relationship with him and why do I love him and things like that. (Girl, aged 18, 15 years since separation - Phase II)

Ongoing, explicit inter-parental conflict and hostility, which permeated interaction within the child-parent dyad, was strongly associated with negative experiences of closeness and security with resident parents.

There was also evidence that ongoing inter-parental conflict and hostility was damaging to children's experiences of trust in these relationships. A small number of children indicated that they had more positive experiences of trust with their resident parents as a consequence of the reduction in or absence of inter-parental conflict, as described by this child in the younger age-group:

> I wouldn't trust her so much when she was fighting with my dad ... I didn't really ... I didn't trust her. (Girl, aged 13, 2 years since separation - Phase II)

Negative experiences with resident parents were rarely expressed in children's narratives. Yet, significantly, boundary ambiguity, and the ensuing overflow of hostile attitude and interaction between parents into child-parent relationships, was most frequently described by children who experienced lower levels of closeness and security in relationships with resident parents. In general,

such ambiguity also created greater tension across all family relationships resulting in children feeling caught in the middle of inter-parental hostilities:

> In my situation there is no right decision ... there is the wrong decision or the other wrong decision and you get punished either way ... the mum decision and the dad decision. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

> I was always the football in the middle ... I was getting bounced around from side to side like ... I'd be hearing stories off one of them and hearing stories off the other like since I'm nine and all of that ... like, I seen all the rows and that ... like it was happening when I was a child. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Boundary ambiguity and related issues are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 9, which provides a broader focus on children's relationships with their parents within the network of family relationships. In addition to the challenge of dealing with ongoing inter-parental conflict, ongoing family transition for four children was associated with the birth of new children to their parent and a new partner. For two of these four children, this event appeared to intensify tensions and have a negative effect on communication patterns. Mutual awareness on the part of children and their parents was also perceived to be negatively affected by these experiences:

> C: Because ... I feel that it's awkward to talk to my parents about things ... and when they were separating or even ... say when the child [father and new partner's baby] was born ... when you find out about the new baby
>
> R: Could you talk to your mum and dad about that?
>
> C: My Dad would get angry and my mum would get upset. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Developmental patterns were also apparent to some extent in difficulties with resident parents in that older children elaborated more explicitly on difficulties with resident parents than younger children did. Difficulties with resident parents were attributed to developmental pressures and the desire to be independent associated with adolescence, in addition to the strain of family transition. These two children in the older age-group describe increased conflict with their resident parent as follows:

> Well, [we fight] because of everything ... because my father lives across the road, because I'm a teenager ... 'cause she thinks I'm a teenager and I'm going to do all these things and she thinks that I'm always on my dad's side. In this situation I have to be mature about everything and I feel that there's just so much responsibility on me and I have to think before I make any decisions or say anything ... when ... things ... it's coming to a boil like the court-case ... my mother is saying my father is a bastard

and my dad is saying my mum is a bitch. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Basically, it's me I have grown up and I feel that like I need more freedom and my mam keeps saying 'Oh, be in at this time and be in a that time' and I don't want to because I'm working and I'm finished school and I sort of feel that because I'm finished school there is more responsibility now to go out and seek new things because basically I won't be in school every morning like. So me and me mam fell out ... yeah, 'cause it all deals back to my mam and dad and my mam not feeling as important as my dad and things like that. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Boundary ambiguity

Where difficulties were expressed explicitly with resident parents, these were typically in circumstances in which children shared a strong affiliation and, in some cases, developed a *negative alliance* with a non-resident parent and, conversely, harboured negative attributions with regard to a resident parent. In particular, a small number of children assumed that resident parents were in some way responsible for the departure of their non-resident parent and hostilities ensued, as illustrated in this extract from an interview with a boy in the older age-group, who expressed these feelings across both phases of the study:

I felt as though she took my best friend in the world away from me. I was devastated ... it was the worst day in my life that day, yeah, ... it still hurts. I still think about it now the day that he left. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

As previously mentioned, the act of remaining in the home and, consequently, continuing in the role of primary care-giver, was interpreted by many children as a signal of commitment unaffected by the event of parental separation. Moreover, parental separation appeared to heighten, for children, this awareness of commitment on the part of resident parents. However, experiences of fragile commitment with resident parents, while rare in the present study, and interpreted as part of a history of a fragile relationship rather than resulting from the separation, were distressing and troubling for children and persisted across both phases of the study.

Fragile commitment

Perceptions of fragile commitment with resident parents were often related to feelings about new family members and were more frequently associated with children in the younger age-group than in the older age-group. In the following extracts, two girls in the younger age-group communicate their insecurity vis-a-vis their mothers' relationships with partners:

> Well, sometimes they [mother and partner] sit on the same couch and there is not enough room for me. (Girl, aged 11, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

> Like, I feel that she puts the others first ... I have no-one kind of. 'Cause they're always together and like if I want to talk to her he's always there and I just don't want to talk to her around him. (Girl, aged 11, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Exceptionally close relationships with non-resident parents and the consequent experience of the loss of this parent amplified a sense of frail or fragile commitment on the part of a resident parent. The complexity of these experiences - the feelings generated and the interpretations generated - made it difficult to distinguish and to disentangle inter-connecting influences. Divided loyalties and more negative alliances were strongly associated with the experience of fragile commitment to a resident parent, but these instances were infrequent. A small number of children[31] felt that their resident parent was not sufficiently aware of their well-being. Parental detachment on the part of their resident parent was described by two children (both male) in the older age-group. One of them describes this experience as follows:

> C: I don't know if she does really [know how things are] ... if she did she wouldn't do the type of things she does like ... never been there for me or whatever you know.
>
> R: Okay ... can you give me an example?
>
> C: She went away for two weeks ... she goes away about five times a year and I didn't want to be left on me own ... she was only back about a week and she went away again. Like she went away last summer and the summer before like and didn't bring me anywhere. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

Conclusion

A core aim of the present study is to uncover some of the key processes which foster positive experiences of close relationships with resident parents following parental separation and, conversely, to identify risks to maintaining close relationships.

A key finding in the present chapter, reflected and reiterated in narratives throughout the study, is the significance of past experiences and relational histories in shaping and, to some extent, determining current experiences of quality in relationships with resident parents and this is consistent with recent,

[31] 7.5% of participants perceived lack of parental awareness of their well-being on the part of their resident parent

more qualitative approaches to studying children's experiences of parental separation (Smart et al., 2001; Robinson et al., 2003).

Parental accessibility and availability on the part of resident parents contributed significantly to feelings of closeness and security in relationships post-separation. Key components of experiences of accessibility with resident parents included *being present, acts of care, mutual awareness* and *open communication.* These findings provide support for the argument that shared residence, and its associated obligations and rituals, exerts a substantial influence on the quality of relationships with parents. Duck (1993) describes how established family ritual and routine provide opportunities for individuals, child-parent dyads and other family members to explore, develop and reinforce their unique and collective identities simultaneously. Such opportunities are likely to be of profound importance to children's experiences of family life post-separation.

Commitment played a central role in narratives across both phases of the study and this is not surprising given the potential for a shift in emphasis from relations of obligation to less predictable and prescribed family scripts. Key components of commitment in relationships with resident parents were *parental support, parental role and authority* and *trust in relationships*. Of particular note was the ability of children, both in the younger and older age-groups, to review and re-evaluate their experiences of their relationships with resident parents. The act of remaining in the home was considered and acknowledged as a demonstration of commitment in the post-separation family context. For most children experiences of dependence on resident parents were positive and reciprocal, further enhanced by interdependence in managing family routines. Resident parents were identified as the primary sources of support and resident parents were, on the whole, conferred with the right to exert parental authority and control.

Clearly, parental separation also represents a risk for acute and persistent conflictual relationships to develop, most notably in the context of negative triadic interaction and of fragile relational histories. Importantly, a minority of children experienced intense and persistent negative experiences in their relationships with resident parents following parental separation and across both phases of the study. The complexity and contextualised nature of individual circumstances are difficult to do justice to. However, a number of core issues emerged as central to negativity in relationships with resident parents. Intense, chronic hostility between children and their resident parents was most often associated with difficulties beyond the child-resident parent dyad. Emery (1992; 1999) asserts that intimacy and power remain the major issues around which family members must re-negotiate the parent-child-parent triad. The author goes on to distinguish between *loyalty dilemmas* which refer to intimacy conflicts in triadic interactions and *alliances* which refer to triadic power struggles. There

was clear evidence of both processes in relationships with parents for a minority of children in the study.

Negative alliances and divided loyalties were found to be highly significant in potentiating hostile interaction between children and their resident parents. It was difficult for children to resolve the problems associated with affiliating with both parents. Anxiety, anger and sadness were some of the most common affective reactions that children reported when they were exposed to such conflict of loyalty. Significantly, these negative experiences were amplified and perpetuated in the presence of boundary ambiguity, or lack of clear boundaries between child-parent interaction and inter-parental interaction. Boundary ambiguity was found to represent a greater risk in relationships with resident parents than with non-resident parents. Of less significance for everyday interaction were difficulties, linked in the main to the particular challenges for children of adapting to living with one parent, although such difficulties were not associated per se with negative experiences of closeness and security in relationship. However, it likely that they serve to exacerbate existing problems.

Perceptions of closeness and security with resident parents were perceived to be more positive by children in the younger age-groups, although differences were not marked. Interestingly, developmental differences were more marked with regard to problematic scores on security with resident parents, with almost one quarter of children in the older age-groups recording scores in the lower ranges on this construct, in contrast to a very small minority of children in the younger age-group (5%) who had low scores on security with resident parents. These findings are worth considering in light of studies which have found negative effects of parental separation on attachment representations for children in adolescence (Woodward et al., 2000; Lewis et al, 2000). Two factors may contribute to an understanding of these developmental differences. First of all, the process of individuation in the context of adaptation to fragmented family experience was a challenge for children growing through adolescence. Secondly, increasing sophistication in cognitive ability enabled children in the older age-group to assess their relationships with resident parents more critically and against the broader experiences of relationships with other family members and peers beyond the family unit. Younger children in the present study drew more exclusively on immediate experiences of care-giving and continuity in family ritual and routine.

Gender patterns were also evident in the present study. Almost twice as many girls as boys (64% and 33% respectively) recorded scores in the higher ranges on closeness with resident parents. There was also evidence of an interaction between gender and age in perceptions of closeness and security. Findings indicate more positive experiences of closeness and security for boys in the younger age-group and for girls in the older age-group in relationships with resident parents. Risks to positive

experiences of closeness and security with resident parents were identified most notably among boys in the older age-group and girls in the younger age-group.

Data presented in this chapter indicate that most children have close and secure relationships with their resident parents in a post-separation family context. These findings underscore the value of qualitative approaches when exploring relationships with parents post-separation and highlight possibilities for children's enhanced relationships with their parents which do not emerge or are not accessed due to the constraints of more quantitative study designs. Equally notable, findings in the present study reflect the ebb and flow of circumstances surrounding relationships and the consequent flux experienced by children and parents in relationships across the process of separation.

CHAPTER 8: NON-RESIDENT PARENTS – FACILITATORS AND BARRIERS TO CLOSENESS AND SECURITY

Introduction

In this chapter, the focus shifts to explore the processes underlying children's perceptions of closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents. Prior research has fore-grounded the significance of quantity or frequency of contact with non-resident parents, but has often neglected to go beyond these patterns to explore the processes and contexts which foster continuity in close relationships with these parents. In this chapter, patterns of closeness and security[32] are further explored as children reflect on and review their experiences, both past and present, of relationships with parents now living outside the family home. As in the case of resident parents, a number of themes associated with children's perceptions of positive and more problematic experiences of closeness and security are identified, which facilitate insight into fundamental processes and mechanisms linked to favourable and more negative outcomes. The analysis is both cross-sectional and longitudinal, focusing on developmental patterns in experiences at one point in time, and providing a depth of perspective across both phases of the study.

Importantly, and consistent with most research on non-resident parents, the majority of non-resident parents were fathers (93%) in the present study. Following parental separation, the risk of non-resident parents moving outside the web of family ties becomes a major concern. Clearly, findings in the present study, based on the perspectives of children themselves, indicate that parental separation represents a significantly greater risk to the quality of relationships with non-resident parents than with resident parents. Notwithstanding the fact that the majority of children recorded scores in the higher ranges in perceptions of closeness and security, there was a significant difference between positive experiences with resident and with non-resident parents and just over one third of children perceived their relationships to be *less close* with non-resident parents following the separation. It was not feasible to explore perceptions of security prior to the separation but findings suggest less disparity overall in perceptions of security with both parents. It is possible that parental separation represents a more serious risk to experiences and feelings of closeness to non-resident parents, as feelings of security may rely to a greater extent on the relational history and the consequent internal representations and expectations which develop throughout this history.

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[32] Patterns of closeness and security, as measured by the Emotional Closeness Map and the Security Scale, were presented in Chapter 5.

Facilitators of closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents

In the following sections, qualitative accounts provide greater insight into more subtle distinctions in experiences of closeness and security. As in the exploration of processes in relationships with resident and non-resident parents – processes underlying successful and more problematic relationships with non-resident parents are discussed with reference to the themes of *accessibility, commitment and connectedness* in these relationships.

Accessibility

Accessibility to non-resident parents is central to much of the literature on parental separation and for many children in the present study, adjusting to the change brought about by one parent no longer living in the home, proved to be the most difficult task in their experiences of family transition[33].

> R: So what would you say is the biggest change for you?
>
> C: The fact that my daddy doesn't live there ... doesn't come home after work ... that's strange.
>
> R: And what do you think helps you get over that most?
>
> C: Nothing helps me get over it because it's always there but I ... just deal with it. (Girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation – Phase I)

Accessibility to non-resident parents was not interpreted as "always being there" as in the case of resident parents, but rather represented being able to access a non-resident parent with ease and when necessary. Clearly, accessibility to non-resident parents was understood as extending beyond mere physical contact to a sense of dependence and reliability on parents in times of need, and this was highly valued according to children's accounts. In the following extracts, two boys in the older age-group describe feeling secure in this knowledge that their non-resident parents remain available despite no longer living in the home:

> Because he's there for me all the time ... always there for me ... he never lets me down and I have a laugh with him. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation)
>
> I don't know ... that he's there sometimes ... like if I wanted to go somewhere and I gave him a ring I know that he would come down for me. (Boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation)

Significantly, increased accessibility to non-resident parents was a consequence of the separation for a small number of children. Parental absence from the home prior to the separation and spending

dedicated time with non-resident parents following the separation, contributed to these perceptions, which spanned a range of different contexts and circumstances. In one family, contact with a non-resident father involved travelling every second week-end to a distant part of the country where their father lived and seeing him in Dublin on alternate weekends. Interviews with this child in the first phase of the study revealed her concern about not seeing her father as often as before the separation. However, at the time of the second interview she felt very positively about her accessibility to this parent.

> I would feel always, like, happy and things when I saw my dad 'cause I hardly ever saw him and now I see him, like, basically all the time. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

The ability of children to interpret and create meaning from parental behaviour was striking, and perhaps most notably so in the narratives of children in the older age-group, as illustrated by this boy, reflecting on the responses of his non-resident father:

> They cared for us a great deal and just after the separation my dad offered to take us places a lot more like ... like before he would say "well, maybe if I can at the week-end" because like my dad would be at work but then it was like for a few weeks after it was like 'Would you like to do this? Would you like to do that? Do you want to go here? Do you want to go there?'(Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation)

Accessibility was, for many children, an indication of assurance and of obligation to commitment in these relationships. Where children expressed greater appreciation of accessibility to non-resident parents, this was linked to the experience of missing a non-resident parent and, consequently, valuing time spent with this parent.

> When we get together we have more fun 'cause like we make up for the time we don't see each other. (Girl, aged 12, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Greater appreciation of time spent with non-resident parents was almost always in the context of frequent, regular contact with this parent following the separation.

Perceptions of accessibility to parents was also associated with perceptions of greater parental awareness of what was happening in the lives of children. The quality of parental awareness of children's well-being was also explored in the second phase of the study. Despite the fact, however, that the majority of children had frequent and regular contact with non-resident parents, less than one

third of participants (27.5%) believed that their non-resident parents were aware of their well-being or of key experiences in their lives[34]. These findings are significant given the importance for children and their parents of being able to monitor developments within their lives and sustain meaningful exchange. Equally notable is an appreciable contrast between perceptions of resident and non-resident parental awareness, consistent with a divergence in findings on closeness to resident and non-resident parents. However, the majority of children articulated the view that non-resident parents were both accessible and reliable should they be needed:

> I'd tell him about it if I was ever in trouble or ever needed anything he'd come up and make sure I was alright. Anywhere I have been like in the country or in another country he'd come over and make sure I'm alright. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

A further 10% of children indicated that parental awareness on the part of their non-resident parent was mediated primarily by their resident parents and for these children there was no indication that they felt uncomfortable about this format of interactional exchange:

> R: Ok, and what about your dad would he know those things ... like, would he know you're doing the Leaving Cert. and that?
>
> C: Yeah, like me ma would tell him and when I do see him I could tell him. (Boy, aged 16, 5 years since separation – Phase II)

As in relationships with resident parents, the influence of positive experiences of accessibility and availability of non-resident parents extended to the quality of processes of interaction between these parents. A significant majority, (90%) of children who described ease of communication with non-resident parents, also experienced frequent contact with this parent. The present study findings indicate, therefore, that accessibility, while in no way guaranteeing more positive experiences of communication with parents, is nonetheless fundamental to these experiences.

As with resident parents, ease of communication was characterised as *indexical*, involving exchanges of emotional content, and *instrumental* in terms of exchanging information about everyday events in children's lives. One of the mechanisms through which accessibility to non-resident parents facilitated closeness was in creating opportunities for more spontaneous, everyday conversation, which was a major contributor to the quality of relationships by providing a basis for mutual understanding and closeness. The most important issue for children when seeking support and

[34] Over half of the children (57.5%) interviewed felt that their non-resident parent would not be aware of their well-being or of key experiences in their lives.

opportunities for confiding was that of trust in the knowledge that a parent would not relay information beyond the child-parent dyad. Given the absence of experiences of intimacy and familiarity in narratives on relationships with non-resident parents, it is likely that positive experiences of communication with these parents exerted a significant influence on feeling close to this parent:

> It's like me da still lives with me 'cause he comes up and talks to me every day and all. (Boy, aged 15, 2 years since separation - Phase I)

> I talk to him about everything ... yeah, I'd actually talk about everything ... I tell him things before I tell my mum. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Risks to open communication patterns, especially at the time of the separation and for some years following, were manifest in these narratives. Factors contributing to difficulties in open communication patterns included the desire on the part of children to shield their parents from awareness of their distress and anxiety about the separation. Children devised ways of disguising their own distress and of avoiding direct communication about their difficulties. However, ease of communication, in turn, was also associated with closeness through the facilitation of higher levels of conflict resolution with both resident and non-resident parents. These issues are highlighted in the following extracts from children in the younger and older age-groups:

> C: I'd tell me da more stuff about boyfriends than I would me ma
>
> R: Ok and has it always been that way?
>
> C: No, it used to be when I was younger and after me da left, like, I didn't talk with him much ... it's only recently in the last two years that we've actually been getting closer together. (Girl, aged 19, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

> I just kind of find it hard to like fight with my parents for too long 'cause they always talk to you ... my dad always does that ... he always makes you make up by talking to you so you eventually end up talking to him. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Accessibility over time

Responses to and perceptions of accessibility to non-resident parents also developed and evolved over time and across the changing circumstances of individual children. The experience of continued, consistent accessibility to a non-resident parent reassured some children, who had

previously been anxious and concerned about the loss of this parent. This boy in the younger age-group had conveyed this sense of uncertainty and insecurity about the future of his relationship with his non-resident father at the time of the first interview. More positive experiences and expectations of this relationship with his father were conveyed by this child in the second phase of the study. Seeing his father on a regular basis in a revised context fostered greater certainty about the future of their relationship, as illustrated in this extract:

> I don't know ... I think that just back then it was the same year and I didn't ... you get more used to it like ... like when it started off you just didn't know what was going to happen but then after a few years ... you knew more, like. (Boy, aged 10, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

As mentioned previously, in a minority of cases, boundaries between re-constituted families were open and more flexible, enabling the continuity of continued care-giving in the family home by a non-resident parent, which, in turn, contributed to greater ease in the connection between children and this parent. However, this pattern of care-giving was rare in the present study, with approximately 12.5% of children describing this trend. One example of this was a child in the younger age-group who described how her father came over to look after herself and her siblings if her mother was going away:

> Me ma's going away in April with her boyfriend and me da's coming over with us and he's going to have to spend a fortune bringing us out and me nannie's going to come over to have her meal sometimes. (Girl, aged 12, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

The openness in family boundaries described by this child was relatively rare in the present study. In the case of this child, both parents were living with their new partners and at the time of the second interview, her father and his partner had had a new baby. Ease of access to both her father and his new family increased feelings of closeness between them over time and she described how she appreciated this accessibility as follows:

R: Ok and how often would you see your dad now?

C: Nearly every day ... yeah, like he does be on his bike from work so he calls over ... I don't know it's just when you're there with them like you sort of take them for granted like ... yeah, like 'cause you do watch things on the telly ... just say children like and they would only have one parent and they wouldn't get to see their dads. (Boy aged 13, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Accessibility, therefore, and children's interpretations of this presence of a parent in their lives, played a significant role in shaping influences on children's relationships with their parents in the present study. However, there is a danger that in focusing exclusively on accessibility, we lay excessive emphasis on more rigid structural influences such as frequency of contact with parents and shared residence, without acknowledging the agency of both children and their parents in negotiating close relationships across many contexts following parental separation, and the dynamic processes at play in their exchanges.

Commitment

Children's commitment to the continuity of their relationships with non-resident parents was striking across both phases of the present study. Similarly, parental actions and behaviour were frequently read and understood in terms of the commitment which they represented. The development of commitment in relationships following parental separation was, therefore, worked out and actively negotiated by both the child and the parent in their interactions. The following sections focus on commitment as a facilitator of closeness and security in these relationships.

The significance of demonstrations of commitment was amplified in relationships with non-resident parents. The option to withdraw from or to demonstrate less commitment to relationships with non-resident parents marks an important distinction between this relationship before and following the separation and this sense was perceptible in many narratives throughout the research process. This finding raises the concern that children's resources and energy, and that of their parents, may be channeled exclusively into *maintaining* contact rather than developing meaningful relationships with non-resident parents. Children were, in the main, unambiguous about their wish to sustain regular contact and showed the desire and ability to play an active role in negotiating this commitment. Frequency of contact was fundamental to this sense of commitment post-separation. Nonetheless, recognition of children's successful adjustment in the present study was paralleled with an awareness that many children have persistent and distressing concerns about the separation of their parents. Significantly, negative experiences of commitment were also amplified in these altered contexts and where non-resident parents failed to keep promises or communicated a sense of being unavailable to children, these messages were interpreted to represent more fragile commitments on the part of these parents.

> He [non-resident father] rings my phone up now and again and leaves messages ... but unless he actually rings when I'm there and I have to pick up like I'd probably like to say a few things to him but he'll never listen ... he'll never listen to a word you have to say ... he'll say he understands and the next day he's forgotten everything you've said so ... I really don't know where this is going. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Notwithstanding positive findings on children's perceptions of parental availability in times of stress, the majority of children in the present study indicated that their relationships did not allow sufficient mutual influence for relationships of substantial inter-dependence to be developed. As previously outlined, little attention has been paid to the benefits and processes, as, for example, feelings of solidarity and connectedness, which flow from the presence of family obligation and responsibility in relationships among family members (Duck, 1993). In the present study, the absence of dependence on a parent was associated with perceived lack of commitment on the part of this parent and the nature and context of the contact with this parent:

C: It [lack of dependence on non-resident parent] probably is because of the separation and it's probably because I don't see him ... like he probably could I just don't know like 'cause I don't see him

R: So is it just a question that your dad doesn't live here or is it something more than that?

C: I think it's more than that ... he kind of doesn't make the effort either ... it's like he doesn't want to so. (Boy, aged 11, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

As a rule, where difficulties arose in relationships with resident parents, children made it clear that it was up to their parent to make the effort to maintain the relationships and, in extreme cases, children withdrew from the relationships.

Clarity of parental role and parental authority, in contrast to relationships with resident parents, were not clearly associated with positive experiences of commitment in relationships with non-resident parents. The present study findings suggest that parental separation represents a potentially major challenge to continuity in parental role for non-resident parents. For most children and non-resident parents, relational scripts regarding parental roles remained blurred and undefined following parental separation. Most significantly, however, those parents who chose to remain at a distance following the separation and not to attempt to sustain their role as parent to their children, were criticised by children for this lack of continuity:

Yeah, not a good dad ... and I don't think that's good enough ... do you know? Like, I don't think it's good enough to put yourself before your kids at such a young age. Like I nearly ideally would have liked him to stay in Ireland until I was 18 and I think that's very important because you know to help your child develop ... like, I totally developed now you know through my mum ... it was so funny. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

The salience of parental role, and the particular difficulties in sustaining parental role identity for non-resident parents is discussed in more detail under findings on *barriers* to close, secure relationships.

Commitment was further linked to experiences of parental support and responsibility, although to a lesser extent than in narratives on relationships with resident parents. Demonstrating continued concern for the well-being of the family post-separation by providing practical assistance was understood and interpreted to signify voluntary and continued commitment to family relationships:

> He was there like if we needed his help like if me mam needed a new car he'd try and go and find a car like that's good value. (Girl, aged 14, 7 years since separation - Phase I)

As with resident parents children's experience of parental support at the time of the separation was explored using the Five Field Map.[35] Just under one third of the participants (32.5%) felt that their non-resident parent had *helped a lot* at the time of the separation, suggesting that twice as many children in the present study experienced very positive support from their resident parents when compared with non-resident parents. Developmental patterns were also evident with a slightly higher proportion of children in the older age-group (38%) than in the younger age-group (26%) indicating that their non-resident parent had helped a lot.

Children were also asked to reflect on whether they felt their parents' separation had impacted on patterns of parental responsiveness to need. Responses from just over half of the participants indicated that they did not perceive parental separation to have impacted on their non-resident parent's responsiveness to their needs. For these children, perceptions of dependence on non-resident parents were positive despite changed circumstances. Regular reassurances, communicated verbally and through acts of support, indicated commitment to relationships despite an altered family context:

> But like if I ever needed anything he said 'just come on the phone and I'll sort things out ... I know that I'm down here and you think I can't do anything about it but I can actually do things about it ... just because I'm not with you there doesn't mean that I can't do anything about it'. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

> 'Cause my dad does be there ... like I used to think that he wouldn't be before my ma and dad separated but you sort of understand it more if it happens to you. (Girl, aged 12, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

[35] Children were asked to rate the extent to which they had received support across five domains, including their immediate family. Parental support was rated on a three-point scale: helped a lot, helped a little and didn't help.

Accessibility, as previously outlined, was a prerequisite for experiences of committed relationships but, despite frequent contact, a small number of children expressed the view that their non-resident parent was not sufficiently attuned to be able to respond to their needs:

> I don't think he'd know how [to help]. You'd ask him ... I think the only way he knows how to respond to our needs is materially ... like if we need money or stuff like that, then, yeah ... but when it comes to just needing support and saying 'I'm proud of you' and stuff like that he's not really great in those kind of areas ... emotionally wise he doesn't give us very much. (Girl, aged 16, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

In most cases, such experiences had their origins in the past history of the relationship and these cases will be discussed in more detail in later sections of this chapter. Importantly, children's responses also indicated that they were aware of difficulties experienced by non-resident parents in terms of maintaining mutual understanding and dependence in relationships:

> My dad is still my parent and he still looks after me and he, like, makes sure that I have everything that I need and stuff. I'd say it is difficult for him to ... he finds it hard to deal with things that I come out with and he's trying to figure what he can do about it. I'd say that's hard for him. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Commitment over time

Commitment in relationships with non-resident parents was, therefore, interpreted and negotiated across time - both across the changing family context which parental separation brought about and across the changing developmental status of the participants. Continuity in patterns of commitment was predominant, both in positive experiences of commitment and negative experiences as outlined in later sections. However, altered circumstances across the two phases of the study also provided a pathway to revised choices and perceptions of greater commitment as illustrated by this girl in the older age-group whose father was overcoming a problem with alcohol abuse in the second phase of the study:

> Like what he [non-resident parent] did to our family and like chose drink over our family ... like he knows and he accepts that he is sorry for everything he did do and he's really like ... better than ever now and he kind of appreciates us. Because he's making an effort I'll make an effort. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Connectedness

Connectedness was expressed to a less extent in relationships with non-resident parents than with resident parents. However, patterns of experience were similar to those with resident parents, where

children represented this feature as extending from the distant past, suggesting a more permanent quality to this aspect of the relationship and one which was not so susceptible to effect from parental separation. Images and impressions of connectedness were expressed in a range of ways. This child in the younger age-group indicated her experiences and memories of closeness to her non-resident father as follows:

> My mam told me that, like Katie [sibling] is younger than me but my dad would always have me in his arms and Katie would be walking along on the street. (Girl, aged 11, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Although she no longer lived with her father, her portrayal of their current relationship, at the time of the second interview, signalled continued emotional connection and exchange:

> Because we're like ... he [father] knows ... he understands ... he knows. It's like he can read my mind and know what I'm thinking and if he's upset I know he's upset and if I'm upset he knows I'm upset. (Girl, aged 11, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Connectedness, spontaneous and enduring in these images, created and reinforced strong emotional ties between children and their parents. In the following extract, a girl in the older age-group describes this aspect of her relationship with her father:

> We always need to be reminded that we're loved and just like my dad ... like he might be different to other people's dads but like I connect with my dad ... he could pick me up and swing me round, hang me upside down and do anything he wanted ... just we always had fun. (Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Connectedness in relationships with non-resident parents was also portrayed across the process of the separation and was generated through events prior to the separation, as, for example, in the narrative of this boy in the older age-group who described supporting and encouraging his mother to move beyond her relationship with his father:

> I'm the only one that would encourage her [non-resident mother] or say to do this and go and stuff and she'd be 'yeah, yeah' but then she wouldn't and she could never find the courage and that ... but eventually it happened and then I'd just look for any excuse to cause hassle for the few days after she went. She has a heart like you know like and she'd talk about stuff and I suppose I could talk to her about anything yeah particularly because we used to talk about what was going on ...we used to talk about everything like what she planned on doing and all that, and stories of the kids and what am I going to do. (Boy, aged 18, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

Admiration for a parent, enhanced through appreciation of what non-resident parents had lived through, fostered and promoted connectedness in relationships with non-resident parents as illustrated in the following extract:

> 'Cause I look up to me da and I'm so proud of him ... he'd be like me idol. 'Cause like I realise everything that he's been through ... anyone else would have cracked up. Like he's been through so much ... been to hell and back. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation – Phase II)

By contrast, there was clear evidence that in many cases the settings and circumstances in which much of children's contact with their non-resident parent occurred did not encourage or promote connectedness and these features are discussed in later sections of this chapter.

Connectedness over time

Narratives on connectedness in relationships indicated that such experiences were rooted in the relational history and children reflected on experiences in the past to illustrate this feature of their relationship with non-resident parents. In general, relationships characterised by connectedness preserved this quality across the separation process, although there was evidence that changing family contexts and the departure from the home of a very close parent was a particularly difficult experience for children, with negative implications for relationships with resident parents as well as non-resident parents. An illustration of this was provided by a girl in the older age-group, whose father had moved out of the family home many years previously:

> I was always like in his room and looking at his stuff 'cause he always had these really fun gadgets and stuff and I'd be in there messing with that and having the time of my life and I really did look up to him. I really felt close to him and he would always be pushing me to do better in a good way and saying "well maybe try this" or whatever and I really looked up to him and he really inspired me at such a young age or whatever. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

However, at the time of the first interview, difficulties in her relationship with her father were notably perceptible. By the second phase of interviews, contact with her father was minimal and she anticipated diminishing contact as a future outcome in their relationship. As with resident parents, these gradual but dramatic changes in relationships with children were influenced both by the particular circumstances generated by the separation and also by the changing developmental status of children, growing towards adulthood.

Barriers to closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents

Balancing old and new patterns

A pivotal challenge to balancing old and new patterns in relationships with non-resident parents was the task of redefining boundaries and rules determining the structure of this relationship and delineating the revised 'psychological territory' (Gutmann & Rosenberg, 2003) of individual family members in relationships. An overarching theme, which represented a significant difficulty for children and parents in these contexts was negotiating a revised understanding of the parental role of non-resident parents. Re-definitions of the rules regulating relationship interaction with non-resident parents were not explicit and, clearly, role expectations in these relationships were experienced as altered. A number of factors contributed to the difficulty in maintaining an established parental role in this new context. Central to experiences of altered contact with non-resident parents, were children's perceptions of reduced awareness of their well-being and of everyday events in their daily lives on the part of non-resident parents. As a consequence children felt uncertain about how to regulate their interaction and experienced their parent as uncertain in their parental role, as illustrated in an extract from this boy in the older age-group:

> So for him being a dad ... he didn't know what he was supposed to do ... like we don't know what he is supposed to do because our parents separated so it's not like ... you do need him 'cause he's there to talk to you ... to do things for you and it's just we don't do as many things with him as other children would. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation – Phase II)

Yet, paradoxically, the importance for all children of parents demonstrating their willingness to remain in the role of parent was also reflected throughout their narratives. The failure of parents, both resident and non-resident, to clearly define boundaries of authoritative relationships, individually or co-operatively, was associated with greater ambiguity and uncertainty in children's perceptions of parental authority.

> He's trying to be your friend more than he is a parent and that can be ok to a certain extent but at some stage you just want a parent to turn around and say 'no' to you sometimes like ...so I don't know ... I can be uncomfortable sometimes ... like I'm not very affectionate towards him as I am with my mum like. (Girl, aged 16, 7 years since separation – Phase II)

Lack of clarity in the role of non-resident fathers was particularly difficult and associated with less security where there were new family members, especially, step-siblings. In the following extract this girl in the younger age-group contrasts her perception of her father's parental role vis-a-vis his step-children:

C: It's like basically losing a child ... you don't have a child any more really ... and that's why he treats the kids Jack and Luke [step-siblings] like his own kids.

R: Ok ...and do you feel he does that ... treats them like his children?

C: Yeah, he looks after them and he does occasionally give out to them ... he used to really give out to me but he doesn't give out to me any more. (Girl, aged 11, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

Significantly, children wanted their parents to maintain a solid presence and traditional parental role and were very sensitive to any efforts on the part of a parent to forge or force closeness by adopting the role of friend. Older children were more likely to comment on this quality in the relationships, as illustrated by the following extracts:

> Dad is more ... he tries to be more like our friend than our father ... like he does that kind of thing ... loving and caring ... but he'd let us drink and whatever ... you know the usual stuff ... like we had a very good holiday but it just ... you just kind of want him to be a bit more like a father in some ways. (Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

> I hate it when he tries to act young ... it's just unbelievably annoying when he tries the scam "Oh I seen this girl and she was asking about you" Things like that like that really gets ... like there's no need to get like that but I think just he's your dad and you're not suppose to act cool. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

A second major challenge to balancing old patterns in new contexts with non-resident parents was the task of redefining the boundaries of emotional intimacy in these relationships. A recurring theme in the present study was children's perception that reduced involvement in family activities, rituals and routines amplified the emotional distance between children and non-resident parents and restricted opportunities for the development of intimacy and familiarity in these relationships. Intimacy and power are two basic dimensions of family relationships around which the family's boundaries are defined and which have important implications for the family and its members' functioning (Emery, 1994). Ease of interaction, generated in everyday contact with resident parents, and facilitating a sense of security and belonging in these relationships, was much less explicitly expressed in relationships with non-resident parents and some children spoke tacitly about how they experienced this absence as a loss:

C: Well, I really miss ... I really miss living with him I really do ... it's definitely not the same.

R: Why do you think that?

C: Yeah, well, they don't see so much stuff going on at home so they mightn't remember ... so he doesn't really know everything that goes on. I could tell him what is going on but he wouldn't really see it from my point of view. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Importantly, perceptions of reduced interaction and inter-connection were also associated with perceptions of less inter-dependence across these relationships. Social roles, including the parental role, generate normative expectations about appropriate behaviour (Duck, 1993). Less clarity in parental role in the relationship between children and their non-resident parent made it necessary for children and parents to negotiate their own personal relationships within the context of changing roles. "Felt obligation" (Stein, 1993, pp.79) or the expectations for appropriate behaviour as perceived within the context of personal relationships, was experienced as diminished by some children. These children felt that they had less access to knowledge about the everyday needs of their non-resident parents so that not only were their non-resident parents not aware of their well-being, but that they as children had no sense of their parent's needs. The negotiation of felt obligation takes place in the context of routine interactions over the course of the relationship and is communicated implicitly through this interaction. Evidence that the absence of everyday interaction influenced perceptions of dependence and interdependence was reflected in children's narratives:

Well, if you live with a person you obviously have more needs from the person you're living with. (Boy, aged 18, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

To be honest I would never have a problem where I would need to trust him ... and that's probably a good thing 'cause you know ...like he's just not a part of those everyday things and it's more like temporary situations like and holidays and stuff where I never really have any big ... you know. (Girl, aged 16, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Communication was perceived to play a significant role in influencing these experiences. Reduced predictability and continuity in everyday interaction, despite relatively frequent contact with these parents, reduced the sense of security through the perception that a parent was not attuned to what was happening in the lives of their children. Alterations to this pattern of contact and the absence of a parent's presence in the home were experienced as a loss and created obstacles to ease of communication for some children:

Like, I'm really close to my dad but I don't see him all the time so like I can't really ...'cause like when I do see him I don't feel like just talking to him ... I only have a few hours so like I just want to have fun and it's just that well I have already talked

about it with me mam so I don't really talk about stuff like that with him. (Girl, aged 11, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

The salience of communication and, in particular, spontaneous everyday conversation was strongly conveyed in the present study. Many children felt that the separation had impacted on their possibilities for everyday conversation with non-resident parents as they saw their parents only at particular times. Topics of conversation were less spontaneously generated as parents were not always in tune with what was happening in their daily lives. In the present study, ease of opportunity for conversation on routine everyday matters was reduced where children were seeing parents on an arranged basis. Such arrangements, while valued and appreciated highly by children, did not always foster opportunities for conversation and children identified more negative changes and difficulties in communication as a result of the separation. The following extracts provide examples of children's experiences of and responses to these changing circumstances:

> If my dad rings me and says "how's school?" I say "fine like ... we done a test like" and he says "Oh great" and then we talk about the next thing but if he was at home with us like I wouldn't say he'd ask me that you know what I mean ... like how was things going and then talk about something else we'd be like talking for like longer, you know. (Girl, aged 11, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Appropriate timing for exchanges between children and their non-resident parents was highlighted through many of the interviews with children:

> I'd say I could talk to him then but ... because he's not living here any more or I don't see him or I don't talk to him, like it's harder to talk to him; it's harder to pick up the phone and kind of say "hey, how is it going?" It's kind of hard to sort of do that sort of just do that like ... It's easier when you're kind of there and you can see them and it's "Oh so how is life today?" and you can have a proper conversation instead of just on the phone going "Oh!"(Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation – Phase II))

Balancing old and new patterns in differing circumstances, as in the case in relationships with resident and non-resident parents, demands different resources to deal with these challenges. Redefining boundaries of parental role and authority in relationships with non-resident parents generated a specific set of challenges for children in the present study and represented significant obstacles to close and secure relationships with these parents. Related to this, the absence of opportunity for shared ritual and routine and the consequent absence of opportunity for inter-dependence in relationships with non-resident parents contributed substantially to the difficulties in bridging the gap between old and new patterns in these relationships. Restricted knowledge on the

part of the child regarding the whereabouts of a parent and the consequent lack of predictability with regard to contact on an everyday basis was interpreted as a significant barrier to close, secure relationships and one child described his perception of the changes in his relationship with his non-resident father as follows:

> They're outsiders ... they become the outsider... Because they're doing more things then ... they're not living at home. They're out and they're out meeting other people as well. So it's hard to ... like I used to find that with me dad when he was working ... like me mam was trying to track him down. (Boy, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Unresolved ongoing family transitions

As with resident parents, children experienced boundary ambiguity or lack of a clear boundary between inter-parental and child-parent dyads as a barrier to close, secure relationships with non-resident parents, although consequent conflict was less marked than in relationships with resident parents. One reason for this may be the fact that children spend significantly more time with resident than non-resident parents, creating more frequent opportunities for conflict to arise. Past experience and the accumulated history of negative triadic interaction, however, was aggravated in some cases by the context of parental separation. These patterns were most apparent among the older age-group of children and among females. Most striking was an increasing sense that past divisions and partitions grew deeper and intensified where conflict within these alienated units was not resolved. In the following section, a girl in the older age-group describes how her father had created a division between him and the rest of the family in the pre-separation period:

> It was almost like he got ... like, put a dividing line with my mum, my brother and myself on one side and himself on the other and that is nearly his own downfall because, as a result, you know, we were already a little unit without maybe realising it ... yeah, he needed his space, you know. He had his studio upstairs and then that sitting-room was his, you know. It was the way he liked it and that kind of thing so there was very much a division there. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

> You know it was always me and me ma against me da ... always. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

A significant corollary of increased divisions in relationships between family members living together as a unit and parents residing elsewhere is the risk of non-resident parents being experienced and perceived as outsiders to this unit, with a gradual erosion of feelings of commitment on the part of both children and parents. Specific and complex configurations of influences converged to

potentiate this risk. Past experience, with its contribution to expectation and anticipation of future interaction, exerted a profound effect on these developments, with children experiencing negativity with non-resident parents in the face of unresolved family transition, opting to reinforce ties with resident parents and other family members and gradually withdrawing from relationships with these parents.

Negative attributions on the part of children towards non-resident parents also contributed to greater distance in these relationships. For many children, especially at the time of the second interview, a substantial period of time had elapsed since the actual event of parental separation and, as is evident from preceding chapters, children displayed considerable personal resources in re-negotiating roles and relationships in their altered family schema. Moreover, patterns altered and there was a sizeable amount of fluctuation in interactions, especially between children and their non-resident parent. For a substantial minority of children, negative attributions toward non-resident parents regarding the cause of the separation, had triggered conflict and caused relationships to become more distant. In most cases, where other circumstances fostered resolutions, this distance was overcome. However, even at the time of the second interview, traces of these responses remained. Striking in these narratives was the sense that children's anger was, for the most part, attributed to a parent undermining the cohesion of the family unit, or failing to exhibit loyalty to another parent. Rarely did children portray themselves as victims of the breakdown in family relations.

> I always thought my dad was ... like, I never thought my dad would do that to my mum and then I saw him with completely different eyes. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

C: I just wouldn't feel like it [talking to non-resident father] 'cause like he was the cause of the separation.

R: And when you say you felt angry with him did you actually stop seeing him?

C: No, just stopped talking to him. Me da ... I don't think he has hurt in him ... like I don't see him hurt ever. (Boy, aged 17, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Family configurations also continued to change across the separation process and the two phases of the present study. Clearly, new family members posed a greater threat to relationships with non-resident parents than to relationships with resident parents and this may be by reason of their contribution to perceptions of reduced obligation and commitment to original family members. It is worth considering the effects of co-residence and frequent, everyday interaction on these relationships in light of findings on relationships with non-resident parents in the present study. New

partners of resident parents had more opportunities for regular, spontaneous contact and interaction with children, which may have contributed to greater ease in adapting to their presence. Four children experienced further transitions in family composition between the first and second phase of the study with three fathers and one mother having new children with a new partner. For two older females this transition was expressed as very challenging, with difficulty resonating across all family members. Closeness to this parent and previous security were negatively affected by the arrival of new children, as expressed by this girl in the older age-group:

> Like every Sunday like ... my dad and I go to Coffee Society in Ranelagh 'cause I love it there and M comes and I love M to bits ... but lately we just seem to be having more arguing. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

As with resident parents, a prime difficulty for children was not wishing to cause further distress to a parent by communicating their own anxiety or upset.

> But you see I never used to tell my dad that I was upset...you see, my dad didn't know, like he just, 'cause he used to say 'are you okay?' and I'd say 'yeah' but I didn't really tell him. (Girl, aged 9, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

> It was probably just like both of them. Because I've heard stories from both of them, but like I don't know which one kind of to believe and which one not to believe ... So like I don't know whether it was a bit on both their parts or whose fault it was. (Girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation - Phase I)

Fragile commitments

Negotiating and re-writing the script for commitment within the revised format of relationships with non-resident parents was more challenging for children and their parents. No longer assured as fixed and enduring but viewed as fluid and open to negotiation, children's confidence in the commitment of their non-resident parent was highly salient to positive experiences of security in these relationships. Undoubtedly the interchanges, attitudes and expectancies internalised throughout the history of the relationship were highly influential, and, in the main, experiences of fragile commitment were embedded in a problematic history. An example of this is described in the following extract from a girl in the older age-group who, together with her sibling, described difficulties with relating to their non-resident father, prior to the separation and subsequently, across both phases of the study.

C Like I suppose we did get on with dad but I can't really think of it 'cause we just actually didn't really see him that much.

R Why was that?

C He was just ... he wasn't up when we went to school in the morning ... he was home late ... we were in bed when he came home ... on Saturdays he had golf so we wouldn't really see him and on Sundays he'd sleep till one, come up for lunch and then fall asleep again on the couch. (Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

Clearly, experiences within this relationship and the context of parental separation triggered a gradual review by these children of the family scripts in this particular family context. At the time of the first interview, there was evidence that both siblings were struggling to maintain contact and to sustain meaningful interaction with this parent:

> I think we've learned how to cope with him because he used to disappoint us a lot and hurt us and I think he just, even he scared us sometimes as well and I just think we learned to cope with him and what to expect with him ... not to expect too much. (Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

This process continued across both phases of the study and at the time of the second interview, increased conflict and ongoing experiences of impaired commitment incited more negative, unpromising responses:

> It's [arguing with father] probably an annual event at this stage ... usually we let it lie after some stage but this time it's kind of different and I don't know ... I think I've changed 'cause usually I'm the one who lets it lie and act normal and stuff but this time it got to me so I haven't really made the effort and I haven't spoken to him. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Significantly, infrequent contact with non-resident parents predicted perceptions of fragile commitment to a great extent. Where children described this experience, in most cases contact had deteriorated and in four cases there was little or no ongoing contact with parents. Exceptions to this were a minority of children who conveyed a sense that their non-resident parent made little effort to sustain meaningful contact despite frequent visits. For a small number of other children, patterns in commitment fluctuated, with children reflecting on broken promises and commitments in the past.

> That's 'cause my dad is real like ... he doesn't care too much about us like ... he doesn't really bring us out. I don't think he really wants to bring us out like 'cause sometimes he has his girlfriend or he goes out to the pub instead of bringing us out. The last time we went out my mam had it planned and then he rang her and my mam was really annoyed. (Girl, aged 10, 4 years since separation - Phase II)

Disengaged patterns of communication were also strongly associated with experiences of fragile commitment and these patterns typically had existed prior to the separation and were evident across both phases of the study. In the following example, this girl in the older age-group describes the superficial nature of communication with her father in the first phase of the study:

> And I still to this day haven't really [talked to him], like he kind of says, the thing about him sort of asking am I ok, like he'll say 'I'm doing such and such, is this okay?'...So I kind of am sitting there going 'no' but 'yeah that's fine' so. And that still is ... and because I sort of I feel a distance towards him, I feel like I can't sort of grab him and say 'no don't do that, I don't want you to do that.' (Girl, aged 17, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

At the time of the second interview, this sense of disconnection had intensified and was a source of anger as illustrated in the following extract:

> I felt really let down by him gradually and I'm kind of more angry with him ... like I'm getting more angry with him and then I think of him letting me get more and more angry. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Developmental patterns in relationships with non-resident parents

Data were further analysed on an age-group basis to explore possible differences in experiences of closeness and security by developmental status of the participants. As noted in Chapter 5, positive experiences of both closeness and security were higher among children in the younger age-group. Developmental differences were more marked for perceptions of closeness than for perceptions of security, with 43% children in the older age-group recording scores in the lower levels on closeness and this represented twice the proportion of younger children recording these scores (21%). Qualitative data presented in Chapter 5 and throughout the findings chapters in the present study underscore the increasing ability of children in adolescence to critically appraise their relationships with parents and to re-conceptualise these relationships using references to parents as *people* as well as *parental figures*. This is clearly articulated by a girl in the older age-group in the second phase of the study:

> At this stage in my life I am formulating opinions and these are the opinions I'm going to have of these people for the rest of my life and they're kind of separate ... I've got conflicting ideas to my parents and that's something that's very new so yeah I think it's really, really important ... like this is the important time to get all of this stuff sorted out or even get closure so that the stress and all the frustration and confusion can be out of the way, you know. (Girl, aged 18, 15 years since separation - Phase II)

As evidenced most notably in the second phase of interviews, children in mid-and late-adolescence had accumulated a wealth of experience in social interaction beyond the immediate family unit, including, in several cases, their own intimate relationships, all of which combined to exert a powerful influence on their relationships with parents. Older children developed resources, perceptible across the two phases of the study, which enabled them to actively choose to distance themselves from unsatisfactory relationships with non-resident parents, or, conversely, to invest greater time and resources in enhancing relationships with parents.

Less divergence was evident, from a developmental perspective, in perceptions of security with non-resident parents, with 26% of children in the older age-group, compared with 16% in the younger age-group, recording scores in lower ranges on security with non-resident parents. This finding is in contrast to findings with resident parents, where scores on security showed greater divergence in terms of developmental patterns. Taken together these findings indicate the potential for more significant negative effects of parental separation on security in relationships with parents in adolescence, with approximately one quarter of children in this age-group recording low scores on security with resident and non-resident parents. This difference was similar for perceptions of dependence in these relationships. However, a marked difference was recorded between older and younger age-groups in perceptions of parental availability, with over half of the participants recording scores in the lower ranges on availability of non-resident parents, while just under one third of younger children recorded scores in the lower ranges on this sub-scale. Overall, these findings serve to reinforce the notion that closeness in relationships with non-resident parents appears to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of parental separation, and this vulnerability seems to increase with increasing age, perhaps where opportunities for more meaningful interaction and appropriate engagement are not negotiated in relationships. On the other hand, negative perceptions of security were most notable among children in the older age-groups, with most negative experiences being recorded for parental availability rather than dependence and responsiveness, underscoring the salience and significance of past experience and internalised representations which may serve to preserve feelings of security with these parents.

Gender patterns in relationships with non-resident parents

A number of interesting gender differences emerged in analysis by gender of relationships with non-resident parents. Boys experienced substantially more difficulties in developing *close* relationships with non-resident fathers than did girls. Almost half of the boys in the study had scores in the lower ranges on closeness with non-resident parents and this compares with just under one quarter of girls recording negative experiences of closeness with this parent. Conversely, a higher proportion of girls than boys (28% and 8% respectively) recorded scores in the lower ranges on *security* with non-

resident parents. As previously outlined the Security Scale is made up of two subscales, one measuring perceived dependence upon a parent and the second measuring perceived parental availability. No boys in the study had low scores on dependence in these relationships. However, just under one third of girls in the study had scores which indicated negative experiences of dependence in relationships with non-resident parents. Moreover, over half of the girls in the study had low scores on perceptions of the availability of their non-resident parents and this compares with only 15% of boys perceiving negative scores on parental availability. Processes underlying these scores may reflect more general differences across gender with respect to experiences of closeness to parents, with females associated with higher levels of closeness in relationships with parents (Forgatch et al., 1995).

Conclusion

In this chapter the focus of analysis shifts from processes facilitating closeness and security in relationships with resident parents to the underlying mechanisms linked to perceptions of closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents. Key findings emerging from this chapter are, first of all, the need to review and, where necessary, update the family scripts which have guided children's relationships with their non-resident parents throughout their relational history. For most children, frequency of contact across both phases of the study helped to create a context in which uncertainty and apprehension were replaced by more stable expectations and anticipations of future relationships. Children were generally secure in the knowledge of mutual support and trust in their relationships with both parents.

Parental accessibility and availability on the part of non-resident parents also contributed significantly to children's feelings of closeness and security in relationships post-separation. Key components of experiences of accessibility with non-resident parents for children included *being present* and *opportunities for repetition and rehearsal of new routines.* Children's experiences of parental commitment to continuing relationships were central to positive experiences of closeness and security with non-resident parents. Key components of commitment in relationships with resident parents were *frequent and consistent contact* and *reliable parental support* when needed. However, children's narratives emphasised the importance of re-defining and re-framing the boundaries of intimacy and power in relationships with non-resident parents and this is consistent with previous research (Emery, 1999; Haggerty, Sherrod & Garmezy, 1996). The absence of involvement in daily routines and family rituals increased emotional distances and deepened relational divides between many children and their non-resident parents. Related to this distance, the absence of an adequate exchange of information regarding everyday experience of family life gave rise to a blurring of parental role and authority.

The concern that fathers and non-resident parents in general move out of the web of family ties and obligations expressed in much of the literature on non-resident parents was substantiated to a great extent in the present study (Simpson, McCarthy & Walker, 1995; Finch & Mason, 1993). While frequency of contact was found to be high across both phases of the present study, there was a notable and, in some cases, very subtle movement of non-resident parents beyond the boundaries of the original family unit. Significantly, the present study findings suggest that even in cases where non-resident parents are seeing their children frequently, there is a risk to processes such as intimacy, mutual awareness and opportunities for everyday conversation and communication and these contribute substantially, although perhaps indirectly to less positive experiences of closeness, trust and security.

Similar to narratives on relationships with resident parents, the accumulation of past experience exerted a powerful influence on present experiences of closeness and security in these relationships. At greatest risk for no contact with non-resident parents were those children whose parents had separated when they were young and whose non-resident parent had consistently neglected to maintain contact with a child or children. The prevailing view of the consequences of this loss of contact is that the removal of a father's influence has negative effects on the well-being of children and also on their behaviour (Bradshaw, 1998).

A notable finding in the present study was that of persistent anger experienced by a minority of children, across both phases of the study, towards fathers who were seen as providing neither care nor understanding and with little input into the parenting of their children post-separation. As outlined in Chapter 6, patterns of contact continued, in the main, over the two years spanned by the present study and where contact was perceived to have diminished owing to reduced commitment, children expressed this anger more forcefully and interpreted and expressed such parental behaviour as rejection. Emery, Fincham & Cummings (1992) draw attention to the power of parents perceived as uncaring to produce a sense of continuing anger in their children, a power he suggests is equally significant as the ameliorative role of positive parenting during divorce.

In contrast to narratives on relationships with resident parents, children in the present study rarely described feelings of interdependence in relationships with non-resident parents. An important consideration in these relationships is the appropriateness and conduciveness of settings and circumstances to effective exchanges in interaction. Where children did not have opportunities to develop more natural and spontaneous interaction with non-resident parents, the result was often a lack of awareness on the part of both non-resident parents and children of the everyday events in their lives. Lack of opportunities for mutual accommodation in these relationships had serious

implications for some children's relationships with non-resident parents as portrayed through children's narratives.

Developmental differences were evident, with younger children perceiving closer relationships with non-resident parents than children in the older age-group. Older children developed resources, and these were perceptible across the two phases of the study, which enabled them to actively choose to distance themselves from unsatisfactory relationships with non-resident parents, or, conversely, to invest greater time and resources in enhancing relationships with parents.

An interesting gender pattern emerged with regard to experiences of closeness and security with non-resident parents. Boys experienced more difficulties than girls in developing *close* relationships with their non-resident parent. However, this pattern was reversed for experiences of *security* with a higher proportion of girls than boys recording low scores with this parent. Moreover, while no boys recorded low scores on dependence, just under one third of girls recorded low scores on this aspect of the relationship with non-resident parents.

Clearly, the interplay between context, relational history and current interaction with non-resident parents was complex. As evidenced by the data presented in this chapter, altered family contexts are an influential determinant of the quality of relationships with non-resident parents following separation. The absence of predictable rules and family rituals was a major challenge for children and their non-resident parents to maintaining or developing closeness in their relationships. Moreover, narratives across both phases of the study reveal, in a number of cases, subtle but significant differences in the nature and quality of interaction between children and their mothers and children and their fathers, and these must be given due consideration in any analysis and discussion of these findings.

CHAPTER 9: RELATIONS AMONG RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

In this chapter, the focus shifts from an exclusive portrayal of dyadic interaction to provide a focus on children's relationships with their parents within a network of relationships. Clearly identified in preceding chapters is the notion that family relationships operate within a framework of the whole family, influenced by relationships of inter-dependence and inter-connection. In focusing exclusively on the child-parent relationship in the present study, it is important to acknowledge the considerable influence which other relationships, within the family and beyond, exert upon children's relationships with their resident and non-resident parents. Thus, the focus broadens to encompass insight into children's relationships with parents as perceived within this wider network. The question of inter-dependencies among sub-systems within the family is explored, although sources of influence among these sub-systems can only be implied in a limited way in the present study, given the absence of more comprehensive data.

Sources of influence explored in the present chapter include children's perceptions of the effects of the inter-parental relationship on their relationships with parents, the potential influence of new partners on experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents, concordance in the quality of relationships with resident and non-resident parents and concordance in experiences among siblings.

Perceptions of the effects of inter-parental relationships on relationships with parents following parental separation

Children's perceptions of inter-parental relationships were explored across both phases of the study. Three categories of inter-parental interaction[36] were found as follows: *inter-parental co-operation, inter-parental collaboration and inter-parental conflict.* Operational definitions of inter-parental co-operation involved perceptions of parents maintaining or developing positive contact after the separation. Parents were described as having direct contact and communication with each other on a regular basis and, in some cases, non-resident parents continued to play an active role in some aspects of care-giving following the separation. Operational definitions of collaborative inter-parental relationships involved relationships where communication was maintained in order to make arrangements. Children did not describe negative interaction between parents in collaborative relationships and their accounts conveyed a sense that both parents were making efforts to maintain a

[36] Note that these categories of interaction refer to children's perceptions of their parents' relationship at the time of interviews and, therefore, post-separation.

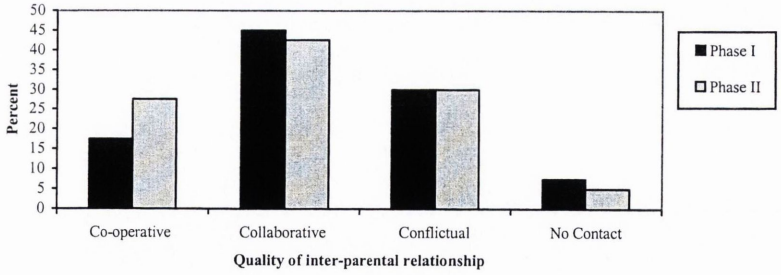
sense of continuity and connection in their parenting following separation. Finally, conflictual inter-parental relationships were operationalised where children referred to frequent episodes of conflict between their parents and to their own feelings of discomfort in the presence of such conflict. A fourth category involving parents who had no contact since the separation was also included.

Collaborative inter-parental relationships

At the time of the *first interview* almost half of the children (45%) described inter-parental relationships which were classified as collaborative. Just under one third of children (30%) described relationships between their parents which were classified as conflictual. A minority of children (17.5%) described relationships between parents which were classified as co-operative in the first phase of the study. Three children (7.5%) indicated that their parents had no contact at the time of the first interview.

At the time of the *second interview*, most children (42%) described inter-parental relationships which were classified as collaborative. A higher proportion of children (27.5%) described relationships which were classified as co-operative in the second phase of the study than in Phase I, while fewer children (25%) described inter-parental relationships classified as conflictual in the second phase of the study. The number of children whose parents had no contact at the time of the first study decreased slightly from three children to two children (5%) in the second phase of the study. Details of these findings are presented in Figure 9.1 below.

Figure 9.1: Children's perceptions of inter-parental relationships in Phase I and Phase II



Patterns reflected in data on inter-parental relationships across the two phases of the study are notably positive, with an increase in the number of co-operative relationships between parents, combined with evidence of a slight decrease in the number of conflictual relationships between parents. Moreover, there was also a slight decrease in the number of parents who had no contact across the two phases of the study. These findings suggest a more positive trend than previous

research which has indicated less stability or continuity in co-operative inter-parental relationships across time (Buchanan et al., 1996; Maccoby et al., 1993). Maccoby et al., (1993) found that while some parents become co-operative after an initial period of disengagement, other inter-parental relationships deteriorated from co-operative relationships to becoming disengaged. The notion of inter-parental relationships deteriorating over time post-separation was not supported in the study findings, with children describing the majority of their parents' relationships as consistently stable or increasingly co-operative or collaborative across the two phases of the study. It is essential to bear in mind, however, that categories of inter-parental relationships reported in the present study are based exclusively on children's accounts, and it is possible that they are coloured to some extent by children's desire to represent the inter-parental relationship in a positive light. Secondly, a number of children who were not willing to take part in the second phase of the study were experiencing inter-parental conflict at the time of the first interview. The sample, therefore, may not fully reflect the extent to which the inter-parental relationship fluctuates or deteriorates following parental separation. In the following sections, details of the quality of inter-parental interaction are outlined and illustrated with extracts from children's interviews.

Co-operative inter-parental relationships

Seven children (17.5%) described inter-parental relationships which were categorised as *co-operative* at the time of the first interview. Strongly associated with this pattern in inter-parental relationships was the presence of more open boundaries between re-constituted family units. Previous chapters have discussed the notion that cultural influences may play an influential role in determining the extent to which flexible, permeable boundaries develop between original and newly established family units in the context of parental separation. The dispersion of biological relationships across more than one residential unit following parental separation in the present study was not accompanied by openness in boundaries between these families. In the rare cases where open, more flexible boundaries existed, children described how their non-resident parent continued to contribute to family routines by remaining practically involved:

> He was there like if we needed his help like if me mam needed a new car he'd try and go and find a car like that's good value. (Girl, aged 14, 7 years since separation - Phase I)

Co-operative patterns of responsibility were described by children where non-resident parents contributed to instrumental care-giving in the family home as described by this child in the younger age-group:

> And when me mam goes off, me dad comes down and minds us, and he takes us off and cooks our dinner. (Girl, aged 9, 1 year since separation - Phase I)

The importance of an ongoing positive parental alliance for children was reflected in their positive responses to continued shared responsibility and care. Much research has indicated negative consequences as a result of change in family routines following parental separation (Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan, 1999). A focus on children's perspectives on inter-parental relationships provides insight into how children experience the variety of ways in which parents maintain contact in family life post-separation. Consistent with research which underscores possibilities for new rules and behaviour between parents and new, independent relationships with the child (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), findings in this study showed that, given the appropriate circumstances and the necessary supports from parents and other family members, children demonstrated their ability to be flexible and to adapt to changing family configurations. Some children described how their non-resident parent moved into the home to take care of them while their resident parent was on holidays as follows:

> Me ma's going away in April with her boyfriend and me da's coming over with us and he's going to have to spend a fortune bringing us out and me nannie's going to come over to have her meal sometimes. (Girl, aged 10, 3 years since separation - Phase I)

Co-operative relationships were not determined solely by inter-parental engagement but were suggested in children's descriptions of how parents interacted with each other, as the following extracts show:

> They're great friends ... they often joke ... but like I'd say that's only because of us. (Boy, aged 12, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

> Yeah, they're still friends. He still comes down to pick me up and then they do, they have a talk and all. (Boy, aged 14, 3 years since separation - Phase I)

Co-operative inter-parental relationships increased across the first and second phase of the study. Four children described more positive relationships between their parents across the two phases. A total of eleven children (27.5%) provided accounts of their parents' relationship which were classified as co-operative at the time of the second interview. All inter-parental relationships categorised as co-operative in the first phase of the study were also described as co-operative in the second phase of the study. The value of inter-parental co-operation for children's sense of well-being was reflected in children's responses to more positive inter-parental interaction in the second phase

of the study. An extreme example of this was one child whose parents had a conflictual relationship at the time of the first interview. At the time of the second interview, she indicated that her parents were living together and she described her response as follows:

> I just like it when they're doing their own bits and pieces ... just different little things like shopping but just it's different now. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Adapting to fundamental structural changes in the family system following parental separation was aided by positive, non-confrontational inter-parental relationships and these findings are in line with studies which have asserted the important influence on children's development of continuing parental alliances (Whiteside, 1998). Findings are also consistent with research which highlights parental well-being as having a significant impact on how well the children adjust (Kalter, Kloner, Schreiser & Okla, 1989). While most children in the study understood and accepted that their parents would no longer be together and that their happiness no longer depended on being together, inter-parental co-operation was interpreted as an indication of parental well-being and satisfaction:

> I kind of feel like they're getting on but when they were together I feel like happy now ... like not ... not that they're together but just that they're both happy. (Girl, aged 11, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Parental co-operation in the present study was not related to family size, in contrast to research which has indicated that it is more likely to occur when family size is small (Maccoby et al., 1993).

A strong association was identified between close, secure relationships with resident parents and perceptions of inter-parental co-operation. All children whose parents had co-operative relationships in the first phase of the study had high scores on closeness and security with resident parents. Findings were similar in the second phase of the study, with all children but one whose parents had co-operative relationships following the separation, having high scores on closeness and security with their resident parent. With regard to relationships with non-resident parents, no children who indicated inter-parental relationships of co-operation recorded scores in the lower range on closeness and security in relationships with these parents. The association between co-operative inter-parental relationships and positive perceptions of closeness and security, as measured by the Emotional Closeness Map (Smart et al., 2001; Sturgess et al., 2001) and the Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996) was reinforced in children's narratives. Children described co-operative contact between their parents in very positive terms. Moreover, inter-parental co-operation for children was valued as an indicator of increased well-being of their parents and of greater commitment to family relationships

in general. Furthermore, some children interpreted inter-parental co-operation as signalling protection on the part of their parents and it is possible that such perceptions may contribute to more positive perceptions of security in relationships with parents.

Clearly, these findings challenge previous research which indicates that there is no clear link between the quality of the inter-parental relationship following parental separation and children's adjustment (Forehand et al., 1990) and that the direct effects of inter-parental conflict on child adjustment are typically small or non-existent (Hetherington, 1999). One of the limitations of much previous research, however, is that the effects of inter-parental relationships on children's adjustment are explored through the use of standardised measures alone, without taking into consideration the child's lived experience of inter-parental co-operation or discord.

Collaborative inter-parental relationships

A second category of inter-parental relationships was defined as inter-parental collaboration. Nineteen children (47.5%) described inter-parental relationships which were categorised as collaborative at the time of the first interview. Two primary features associated with this category of inter-parental relationships were *shared participation in family ritual* and *co-operative involvement in children's adjustment to parental separation*. As mentioned previously, the distinction between collaborative relationships and co-operative relationships centred on the level of positive interaction and engagement between parents. Although collaborative relationships did not usually involve parents having direct contact with each other, in many cases the family came together for special occasions. The significance of family ritual as providing continuity and contributing some sense of coherence to experiences shared by family members was conveyed in children's narratives.

> ... but like, when it came to birthdays and confirmations or whatever, they got on well. They came out for the meal or whatever together ... and that made it easier in some ways. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation)

The importance of shared family ritual in supporting positive family relationships has been acknowledged previously in the present study and in previous research (Simpson, Jessop & McCarthy, 2003). While it is noted that in most cases, continuity in shared family routine will not be a practical possibility following parental separation, the present study demonstrates the value of sustaining shared family occasions and rituals where possible, for strengthening internal ties between family members and contributing positively to children's sense of well-being. Shared family ritual among family members post-separation also served to heighten awareness for children that dyadic relationships with resident and non-resident parents were embedded within a network of other family relationships, as illustrated in the following extract from the narrative of a girl in the older age-group:

> Well, they talk on the phone and all now and like when the Christening was on there a few weeks ago, like me ma came up to the flat, which she never did in her life like in five years, she never came up to the to the flats or anything. She wouldn't come up 'cause me dad's family's there, you know that way. But she came up for her tea and all and she was grand, and me dad said 'thanks for coming'. (Girl, aged 13, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

A second feature identified in collaborative inter-parental relationships was willingness and facilitation on the part of resident and non-resident parents in assisting children to maintain and develop more positive relationships with a second parent. In many cases, resident parents provided reassurance and facilitated arrangements about children's contact with their non-resident parent. As emphasised by Emery & Tuer (1993), the triangle formed by the two parents and the children must be re-defined in post-separation families. While marriage and parenting are inextricably linked in two-parent families, parent-parent and child-parent relationships remain tied together following parental separation and divorce. Narratives in the present study indicated that, from the perspective of the majority of children in the present study, non-resident parents were psychologically present despite their physical absence in the family unit. Thus, conceptually and practically, the feelings, thoughts and actions of children were closely linked to the broader family network in which they were embedded. Clearly, efforts on the part of one parent to demonstrate respect for a second parent were highly appreciated by children, as evidenced by the following extracts in which children described how their non-resident parents encouraged them to support and co-operate with resident parents as follows:

> My dad helps me see that and he helps me see that when my Mum is doing everything out of the book. (Girl, aged 14, 1 year since separation - Phase I)

> I mean, my dad talks to me, he says I'll have, I'll have to start doing more, I'll have to help around the house and things, he talks to us more about helping and looking after us. (Boy, aged 13, 3 years since separation – Phase I)

Seventeen children (42.5%) described inter-parental relationships which were classified as collaborative at the time of the second interview. There was more evidence in the second phase of the study of parents consulting each other on matters of care and responsibility. This child in the younger age-group describes how her parents consult each other about issues related to her well-being.

> They would talk to each other on the phone if something happens ... like if I hurt myself my mum would ring my dad and tell him and if I hurt myself, my dad would

> always ring my mum and tell her ... they don't fight on the phone. (Girl, aged 11, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Significantly, the presence of inter-parental conflict alone did not determine negative experiences of closeness and security. As outlined in previous chapters, children found inter-parental conflict most distressing and damaging to their relationships where negative interaction 'spilled over' into interaction between children and their parents. Children sometimes described collaboration between parents in the context of tension existing between parents, but with evidence of an effort on the part of both parents to behave with respect in the presence of children:

> They'd be more civil like ... sometimes they can get on ... like when things like ... my grandmother died or my grandfather died like ... dad went to the funeral and my mam went to the funeral like vice versa so they got on ok ... things like that but ... [pause] they're civil to each other but like it's kind of like ... you would never know they were married before. (Girl, aged 18, 7 years since separation - Phase II)

Increased collaboration between parents contributed to reducing tension and apprehension generated by the presence of divided loyalties. Re-negotiating new boundaries of intimacy in the parent-child-parent triad was a challenge for many children, even in the context of positive parenting alliances. Loyalty conflicts in the present study centred on issues such as the amount of time a child spent with a non-resident parent, one parent deriding a second parent in the presence of the child and, in some cases, children feeling uncomfortable when, for example, they were communicating on the phone to a parent in the presence of a second parent. Such dilemmas were less acute for children in the context of more collaborative interaction between parents, as described as described by this child in the older age-group:

> I don't have to choose and I don't have to be real, like, cautious about everything. (Girl, aged 16, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

In brief, collaborative patterns of interaction between parents were predominant across the two phases of the present study. There was a slight reduction in the number of children who described collaborative inter-parental relationships in the second phase of the study but this was due to a shift from collaborative styles to co-operative styles of interaction. The association between positive experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents and inter-parental collaboration was not so pronounced as in the case of inter-parental co-operation. Nevertheless, the majority of children whose parents had collaborative relationship in both phases of the study, had high scores on closeness and security with their resident parents and scores in the high or medium range in

relationships with non-resident parents. Among the perceived benefits of inter-parental collaboration, children described reduced anxiety and apprehension and the possibility of the participation of all family members in shared family occasions.

The distinction between inter-parental co-operation and inter-parental collaboration in the present study is significant and one which previous research has often neglected to include, focusing exclusively on relationships of conflict or co-operation. Inter-parental co-operation was strongly associated with positive experiences of closeness and security with both resident and non-resident parents in the present study, and these findings serve to reinforce the value of parents re-defining and clarifying the boundaries between their relationships with their ex-spouse and their relationships with their children.

Inter-parental conflict

Inter-parental conflict has been emphasised in much of the literature on the effects of parental separation on children's lives. Twelve children (30%) in the present study described inter-parental relationships which were categorised as conflictual at the time of the first interview. A significant feature of environments in which inter-parental conflict persisted was boundary ambiguity between inter-parental and child-parent dyads, strongly associated with the presence of negative alliances and loyalty dilemmas. Inter-parental conflict declined across the two phases of the study with ten children (25%) describing their parents' relationship as conflictual at the time of the second interview.

As previously outlined, loyalty conflicts and dilemmas were the reality for many children in the present study. However, these problems were particularly perceptible in the presence of inter-parental conflict. These experiences and their effects on children's relationships with parents highlight the impasse often present when attempting to re-define boundaries in relationships across family members following parental separation. Anger on the part of parents is likely to be a necessary part of adapting to the break-up of the marriage. However, findings in the present study clearly indicate the profound difficulties which children experience post-separation in the face of such hostilities. Direct effects of inter-parental conflict on children's well-being were evidenced by descriptions of increased anxiety and apprehension in the face of contact between parents.

> If they were always fighting you'd be worried like ... like say when my dad takes us out like will I stay with my mam or stay with my dad but if they're not fighting you can just say we can just go with me dad 'cause like they're not fighting. (Girl, aged 9, 1 year since separation - Phase I)

> I think that's because I won't have to be worrying about them all the time ... like 'Ah, no ma, don't ring now, me da is in the height of it'. (Girl, aged 13, 4 years since separation - Phase I)

Less direct effects, such as feelings of coercion and betrayal of one parent for another, were also understood to be a consequence of inter-parental conflict. This young child expresses these effects and there is evidence that she has difficulty putting her feelings into words as follows:

> If they were fighting again ... like my dad would tell me ... like my mam would tell me like ... they'd try and make me ... like go against each other ... I don't know how to say it. (Girl, aged 11, 1 year since separation - Phase I)

Boundaries remained indistinct for some parents across the two phases of the study, despite increased distance from the event of parental separation. While this was the experience of a minority of children, in some cases children described extremely insensitive and inappropriate intrusiveness on the part of one or both parents:

> It kind of hurts me in a way 'cause you know it's like she will come in and make a face and go "it's your dad" and "Oh daddy's little girl" but like she does it in such a way that I know she's trying to get at me, you know ... she makes it out that I'm the bad one talking to my dad after what he's done. (Girl, aged 17, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

> My mam has changed a lot, 'cause there's a lot of screaming down the phone and arguing, never talking to my dad, never ever, only answering the phone saying 'Oh yeah, it's your dad' and all that. It's just made a lot of change. (Girl, aged 9, 7 years since separation - Phase I)

Persistent and, in some cases, increased boundary ambiguity, as identified in the present study, is not consistent with previous research which asserts that it is during the first year following parental separation that notable disruptions in family roles and relationships occur, with a re-stabilisation in relationships taking place two to three years following parental separation (Hetherington, 1999). There was some evidence to support this, with more positive inter-parental relationships developing across the two phases of the study. Nonetheless, the qualitative and longitudinal approaches of the present study uncovered persistent and intense manifestations of inter-parental conflict in a minority of cases, many years following the event of parental separation.

Conflict in inter-parental relationships was associated with children's experiences of feeling 'caught in the middle' of their parents' relationships and of difficulties of alignment or negative alliances with one parent, as the following extracts from interviews illustrate:

> They don't even look at each other ... like if you put them in a room together ... I'd hate to see what would happen. It's me ... it's all through me I feel like I'm piggy in the middle. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

One child pointed out that the dilemma of 'taking sides' was likely to continue into her adult life:

> Even when you're older you're still going to have to ... like just say your parents didn't like to talk at all ... at your wedding you're going to have to pick like who's walking up with you and who's going to sit beside each other and all that. So like your mam mightn't want your dad to be there and your dad mightn't want your mam to be there and it's just going to cause so much hassle that you have to go through. (Girl, aged 14, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

Inter-parental conflict was also identified as an obstacle to shared family experiences. Cummings and Davies (1001) argue that children do not just react to the occurrence of inter-parental conflict but also to the meaning of such conflict, especially the extent to which it threatens the safety of their emotional life and the integrity of their family system. In contrast to the experiences of children whose parents were in co-operative or collaborative relationships following parental separation, the presence of inter-parental conflict was a barrier to any shared family routine or ritual and this appeared to have an effect on children's post-separation adjustment, as described by this boy in the older age-group:

> That's what annoys me most ... because they aren't like a normal separated couple. They do anything. If she was "come on in for a cup of tea or something" like. They could be friends, but she doesn't want to. (Boy aged 16, four years since separation – Phase I)

This child described how she found it distressing that the two people closest to her were in conflict:

> R: Why would it [conflict] be upsetting?
>
> C: 'Cause like the two people that I just love the most don't get on with each other. (Girl, aged 11, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

In brief, approximately one third of children described inter-parental relationships which were classified as conflictual at the time of the first interview. However, there was evidence of a slight decrease in inter-parental conflict at the time of the second interview. The meaning of conflict between parents for children was expressed in a number of ways. For some children, inter-parental conflict was experienced directly when their parents engaged in hostile interaction or communication. For other children, the effects were more indirect and gave rise to feelings of divided loyalties and consequent anxiety.

Inter-parental conflict was strongly associated with lower scores on security with resident parents. A substantial majority (83%) of children who had scores in the low range on security with resident parents, also described inter-parental relationships which were classified as conflictual. Similarly, 75% of children who recorded low scores on security with non-resident parents, also described conflictual inter-parental interaction. These findings are consistent with findings from other research indicating that perceptions of closeness in relationships with parents are strongly linked to the quality of the relationship between the parents, with hostility between parents reducing the likelihood of children reporting close relationships with parents (Buchanan et al., 1996).

Conflict between parents did not in all cases have a negative effect on relationships with parents. Approximately 50% of children whose parents had conflictual relationships, also recorded high scores on closeness and security with resident parents. In contrast, no children indicating conflictual inter-parental relationships recorded high scores on closeness and security with non-resident parents. The key to one or other outcomes in the presence of inter-parental conflict was the extent to which parents succeeded in maintaining some distance between their relationships with former spouses and their relationships with their children.

Exploring the inter-parental relationship from the perspective of the child allows us to gain greater understanding and insight into the mechanisms and processes through which inter-parental conflict undermines closeness and security in children's relationships with their parents. Previous research has conceptualised the effects of inter-parental conflict on children's well-being as two general processes (Emery, Fincham & Cummings, 1992; Kitzmann, 2000). The first of these is a direct process through which a child may witness inter-parental conflict and experience emotional distress and physiological arousal effects. Consistent with this view, children in the study described increased anxiety and tension as a consequence of continued inter-parental conflict and hostility. Feelings of anxiety and tension, in turn, gave rise to less openness and ease in interaction with parents. The second process through which inter-parental conflict can affect children is indirectly by means of "a spillover of tension, negativity and coercive patterns from the marital dyad to each parent-child dyad" (Kitzmann, 2000, pp. 4). In the present study, children's views on their parents' interaction

following parental separation strongly support the notion of direct and indirect effects on children's well-being. As highlighted above, inter-parental conflict operates both to heighten feelings of anxiety and apprehension in children and further as a disruptive influence on relationships between children and their parents.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the quality of the inter-parental relationship was strongly linked to the *frequency of contact* with non-resident parents. All children who described relationships between their parents which were classified as co-operative, had contact with their non-resident parent at least once a week. A smaller proportion of children who indicated collaborative relationships between their parents (70%) also had contact with non-resident parents at least once a week. Finally, of those children who described inter-parental relationships classified as conflictual, only half had frequent and regular contact with their non-resident parents.

Developmental patterns and the effects of inter-parental relationships

Increased maturity and autonomy for some children in the older age-group was associated with greater control over their involvement in inter-parental relationships. As children grew older, they became more competent in dealing with inter-parental conflict by withdrawing from negative dynamics, as described by this girl in the older age-group.

> Like I would just listen and not get involved. Like, I'd just say to me ma and da "if the two of you want to talk, just go ahead but don't get me in the middle". (Girl, aged 15, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

More critical and evaluative responses to parental behaviour were also demonstrated by children in the older age-group in the second phase of the study. In the following example, one child in the older age-group indicated that as she grew older she became more discerning about aspects of her parents' relationship and more critical of her father's behaviour towards her mother:

> Because it makes a difference the way I look at my parents, first of all, ... you know I was very ashamed of my dad [when my parents met] ... he was acting, you know, just making snide comments and laughing at her [mother] for wanting to be a good parent and seeing that as kind of as something to be ashamed of or something that was less than what he was doing just because he is going out and getting what he wants to get out of life which I don't really think he is ... I don't know who he's trying to fool you know. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Hetherington (1999) suggests that children of different ages differ in their awareness of and ability to cope with interpersonal conflict but that no one age-group is likely to be more affected than another. While older children have a larger repertoire of coping responses, they are also more likely to be aware of the causes and consequences of conflict.

There was also evidence of an interaction between gender of parent and gender of child in the perceived negative effects of inter-parental conflict on child-parent relationships. Interestingly, inter-parental conflict was identified as impacting negatively on *security* in *boys'* relationships with their resident mothers. All of the boys who perceived low levels of security with their resident parents, also indicated conflict in the inter-parental relationship. However, inter-parental conflict was not strongly associated with low scores on security with resident parents for girls. Conversely, a minority of boys who indicated the presence of inter-parental conflict recorded scores in the low range on security with non-resident parents, while the majority of girls (71%) describing inter-parental conflict also recorded low scores on security with non-resident parents. These findings are consistent with research which indicates that poor relationships between parents and parental divorce are most strongly and consistently associated with sons' relationships with mothers and daughters' relationships with fathers (Maccoby et al., 1993). In contrast, other research asserts that emotional security is more strongly related to child adjustment and inter-parental conflict for girls than for boys (Davies et al., 2002).

Closed and open family boundaries – new family members

In the course of interviews, children were asked about the presence of new family members in their post-separation family arrangements and to reflect on their response to this change in the configuration of family members. It is not possible to estimate exactly what proportion of parents were involved in new relationships as the available information is based on children's reports alone. Neither is it possible to estimate to what extent parents were living with new partners, as in many cases, children, especially younger children, were unclear about the new living arrangements of their non-resident parents. This may reflect an unwillingness on the part of the child to talk about the presence of their parents' new partners. On the other hand, it may also reflect a desire on the part of a parent to conceal this information from a child in order to protect the child from distress. To some extent we can imply that such lack of clarity about revised family arrangements may reflect a difficulty for some children in talking openly about the presence of new partners, consistent with the findings in the present study that boundaries between re-constituted families remain relatively closed and impermeable. This extract from a boy in the older age-group illustrates this reluctance to openly discuss his parent's separation and his mother's new partner with his close friends:

> It used to be horrible ... the day me da left I never really said anything to them and I'd be mortified sitting in the field and all that and it would be so embarrassing and they'd be saying "who's that [mother's new partner] over there going in to your house?" and I'd say "I haven't a clue" ... like every week and all I used to be so embarrassed. But, like, they knew everything but I never said anything to them about me da leaving or anything like that. (Boy, aged 18, 6 years since separation- Phase II)

According to the accounts of children in the present study, approximately 20% of children were living in families where their resident parent was involved with a new partner at the time of the first interview. This figure had increased to 45% at the time of the second interview. With regard to partners of non-resident parents, 52% of children indicated that their non-resident parent was involved with a new partner at the time of the first interview and this number had increased to 67% at the time of the second interview.

Children's responses to their parents' new partners were mixed. Pryor & Rodgers (2001) point out that establishing relationships between children and their parents' new partners is among the most complex of all challenges in post-separation family life. The authors attribute such difficulty to the absence of mutual growth and adaptation in these relationships. Secondly, relationships with new partners are all the more complex as children generally have a biological parent of the same sex still involved in their lives. Difficulties adjusting to and interacting with new partners in the present study were most frequently in relation to partners of non-resident parents. There were no clear gender differences in these responses. A slightly higher proportion of older children than younger children (23% and 10% respectively) indicated difficulties with non-resident partners.

Negative responses to new partners

Many children maintained, and expressed the wish to continue to maintain, clear boundaries between biological family members and the partners of their resident and non-resident parents. For younger children these boundaries reflected the fear that familiar parental roles would be discontinued or replaced by new family members, as illustrated by the following quote:

> C: He still will be me daddy ... I think now that if me mammy gets another boy ... I think that he will be me new daddy and it's me old daddy wouldn't be me daddy
>
> R: And how do you feel about that?
>
> C: Upset ... because I want me old daddy instead of me new one. (Girl, aged 8, 2 years since separation - Phase I)

Children also feared that attention would be taken away from them where new partners were introduced. Responses were more complex where new partners had children of their own. For this child, apprehensions about his father's reduced commitment and affection were intensified by a number of factors, including the presence of his father's partner's children:

> She like ... she just like really annoys you and all that and ... she'd be giving out to you about small stuff and then her daughter would do it and like she wouldn't get given out to. (Boy, aged 12, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

These findings reflect similar findings in a UK study in which children asserted that they found it difficult to accept discipline from a step-parent and also reported feeling displaced by the children of their parents' new partner (Dunn et al., 2001). Children's reflections on their parents' new partners, and on adapting to the presence of new children within these partnerships, denote a range of responses. The meaning of these experiences for each child depended upon an array of circumstances and concerns. In the following example, this child in the older age-group describes a lack of understanding on the part of her friends to the meaning, for her, of the birth of her father's new baby:

> And like all my friends were "why it's a baby it's going to be brilliant!" and I was like "Would you like it if your father *[laughs]* ran off with another woman and had a child?" No ... they really wouldn't understand ... my closest friends only understood. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation – Phase II)

A second child responded very differently to her father's new child. The context of her response was markedly different from the first child in that family boundaries appeared to be more permeable. As outlined in Chapter 2, Smart et al., (2001) use the terms 'closed' and 'open' family boundaries to illustrate children's conceptualisation of the web of family relationships post-separation[37]. The child in question described her contact with her non-resident father as including features of both 'open' and 'closed' family boundaries. For example, this child saw her non-resident father, his partner and their new child on a regular basis in their home. At the same time, a separate space was preserved for her relationship with her father as this child also had contact with him in the original family home, independent of his new family. The relationship between her parents was classified as co-operative across both phases of the study. She describes her response to the news of her father's child as follows:

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[37] At the closed end of the spectrum were children who had a strong sense of tight-knit family unit that had been neither fragmented nor extended by their parents' separation. At the open end of the spectrum were children who constructed their families in much more inclusive ways, the prime difference being the inclusion of their parents' partners as kin or even as parents.

R: So how did you feel when you heard?

C: I felt great 'cause I love babies ... and she [father's new partner] was showing us all the clothes and things and that. (Girl, aged 12, 5 years since separation - Phase II)

Fear and insecurity in the face of new partners persisted into the second phase of the study with children apprehensive that affectional ties to them would be replaced by new partners as described by this boy in the younger age-group at the time of the second interview:

> Well, sometimes I think he might prefer her [new partner] than us like. (Boy, aged 12, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

> Well, yeah ... naturally like she'd be ... she'd be you know if I was living here we'll say still she'd be spending time with him and "what about me ... like I'm jealous!" [laughs] Ah, it's only natural like 'cause she definitely would pay more attention to him than to me and all this. (Boy, aged 18, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

In both the first and second phases of the study, children identified more difficulties in adjusting to and getting on with the partners of their non-resident parents than with the partners of resident parents. This is likely to be due in some part to children's heightened sensitivity to the continuing commitment of non-resident parents. The role of implicit negotiation of commitment, as defined in Chapter 2 by Finch & Mason (1993), is important to bear in mind in considering children's diverse responses to the partners of their resident and non-resident parents. According to this notion, it is through continued interaction that children develop an understanding of what the presence of new partners will mean to their relationships with their biological parents. Opportunities for developing such an understanding are likely to be more frequent where children are in daily contact with their parent, as parental commitment may be communicated "gradually, incrementally and almost unnoticed." (Finch & Mason, 1993, pp. 60). Conversely, where children have less contact with their parent, they are likely to be more sensitive to small gestures which may communicate diminishing commitment. Likewise, in the context of reduced contact with children, parents may be less aware of how children interpret the presence of a new partner and the consequences which may flow from their behaviour with this partner. In the following extract, a girl in the older age-group describes the effect of one such incident:

> I was playing in [a show] in the Point Theatre and I asked him if he could go and he told me no, he couldn't go, because he was bringing [his girlfriend] to Galway so I wouldn't talk with him because of that. (Girl, aged 19, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

Consistent with the view that commitment is negotiated over time, however, there was also evidence that difficulties and insecurities associated with new family members, which had existed at the time of the first interview, had been resolved at the time of the second interview. This child described a more positive relationship with both her father and her father's new partner in the second phase of the study:

R: Ok, and is that important to get on well with his partner?

C: Yeah, it is important 'cause like I didn't get on with her before ... we had a little falling out and it caused problems between meself and me da so ever since we've been back talking again everything has been great between me and me da. (Girl, aged 19, 9 years since separation - Phase II)

A third reason for negative responses to new partners was that, following the separation, some children had become accustomed to living with one parent and had adapted to the changes which had accompanied their parents' separation. For these mostly older children, the introduction of a new partner represented a further disruption to the re-established family routines. Faced with their changed family context, children emphasised the importance for them of continuity in patterns which had been negotiated and established over time *since* the separation. Thus, for many children, the introduction of a new partner was initially perceived as an intrusion and a disruptive influence. Ongoing family transition was also likely to generate fears of recurring breakdown and separation, as illustrated by the following extract:

C: No I wasn't happy about that [new partner] at all

R: Why not?

C: 'Cause I felt like things were sort of out of control ... out of my sort of reach now, things were happening now. Like the separation had been the last thing and now things were taking another step on ... and sort of the family was separating even more and it kind of made me a bit anxious. (Girl, aged 19, 6 years since separation - Phase II)

Other difficulties experienced included the perceptions that new partners were prioritised with regard to spending time with non-resident parents, feeling excluded from the re-constituted family territory which non-resident parents inhabited and negative attributions with regard to the break-up of parents. Boundary ambiguity between inter-parental and child-parent relationships also increased difficulties in developing close relationships with new partners:

> I'm in the middle here. L [father's new partner] like told me that she loved me and I didn't say anything back to her 'cause I was a bit upset at the time but I think I could love her 'cause she's really nice and ... she gave out to me the other week ... but I just kind of accept that. I don't talk about it with my mother ... I kind of play a face and say to my mum "L is so annoying" and that will make her happy so. (Girl, aged 16, 3 years since separation - Phase II)

Similarly, responses to the partners of non-resident parents were more negative where this partner was perceived to be an obstacle to frequent and regular contact, as illustrated in the following two extracts:

> We used to go on Mondays, Thursdays and every second week-end we'd see my dad and every second weekend we'd stay in his house but now we see him usually on Tuesdays, on Saturdays and that's it. We can only see him on Saturdays because he's up with her on Sundays so we don't get to see him as much because like this weekend he has to go away so we can't see him all week-end and like I'm only going to get to see him once this week. (Boy, aged 15, 5 years since separation)

Positive responses to new partners

Where children developed positive relationships, or at least positive perceptions of new partners, a number of factors were also at play. Many children mentioned feeling happy about the fact that their parents were now happier with a new partner, and this seemed to be generally in situations where they had seen a parent suffer or experience distress as a result of the separation or of an unhappy marital relationship:

> As far back as I can remember. I was afraid a bit because I was afraid that mammy would get hurt again, because when they went out before she was like really upset when they broke up ... but I think she kind of, she is more in control of it now ... and like I'm happy for her to be happy. (Girl, aged 16, 13 years since separation – Phase I)

Secondly, the importance of negotiation in relationships between children and new partners was emphasised by children's descriptions of the manner in which a parent informed them about a new partner or introduced them to a new partner, as illustrated by this girl in the older age-group:

> The first time she introduced us, like mom introduced us to him, he wasn't forceful, he wasn't like trying to buy our love or anything, you could actually see he was very nervous. Because he knew if we didn't like him, that was it, because mom said that to us from the very moment. (Girl, aged 16, 5 years since separation - Phase I)

There was also evidence that some children developed close and positive relationships with their parents' partners. However, in all cases, children's relationships with these partners were described in terms of 'friendship' or 'being like a sister' rather than as a step-parent. As mentioned previously, most children's accounts of their experiences with new family members are characterised by ambivalence and it is difficult to identify exclusively positive or negative patterns. For many children, however, it is likely that the presence of new partners in their parents' lives signalled the possibility that their parents would not be reunited and raised questions about the future and permanence of their own relationships with these parents.

C: I watched a lot of cartoons and all and at the end it's always a happy ending like.

R Right, that's true. So you thought they would be

C Back together.

R And what do you think now?

C I don't think they're going to get back together.

R Why not?

C Because they both have girlfriends and boyfriends. (Girl, aged 10, 3 years since separation - Phase I)

The presence of new partners was clearly associated with experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents. Three of the four children (75%) who perceived low closeness in relationship with their resident parents, indicated that their parent was involved with a new partner in the second phase of the study. Similarly, four of the six (68%) children who perceived low security in relationships with resident parents, also indicated that their parent was involved with a new partner. The effects of new partners on security in relationships with non-resident parents were more pronounced. All children who perceived low security in relationships with non-resident parents indicated that their parent was involved with a new partner. The effects of new partners on perceptions of closeness to non-resident parents were not so marked, with 69% of children who perceived low closeness in relationships with non-resident parents, indicating the presence of a new partner.

The importance of clarifying and re-negotiating roles with children following parental separation is underscored by findings in the present study, which suggest that experiences of security in relationships with parents may be negatively affected by the presence of new partners. Maclean & Richards (1999) emphasise the need to give more consideration to practical matters arising in new family arrangements, such as the impact of step-children and new partners on children. Clarifying

the role of new partners in family settings following parental separation may have particular significance in an Irish context, as, for some children, the concept of new family members is one which is relatively novel and unfamiliar (Hogan et al., 2003). Partly as a consequence of the recent introduction of divorce in Ireland, the re-formulation of family settings and the re-definition of the role of new family members, in terms of step-mother and step-father, is one which has not yet become established nor visible to the same extent as has been described in the literature on stepfamilies in the UK and the US.

Concordance in patterns of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents

To what extent were positive and negative experiences of closeness and security with one parent associated with experiences with a second parent? In this section findings are presented on patterns of closeness and security in relationships with resident and non-resident parents in order to explore concordance in the quality of relationships with these parents. Eighteen children (45%) perceived high levels of both closeness and security in relationships with their resident parents, while five children (12.5%) perceived high levels of closeness and security with non-resident parents. Four of the five children (80%) who perceived positive closeness and security with their non-resident parents, also perceived positive closeness and security with their resident parents.

With regard to negative experiences of closeness and security, four children (10%) perceived low levels of both closeness and security in their relationships with resident parents while eight children (20%) perceived low levels of closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents. Negative experiences of closeness and security with one parent were not associated with negative experiences of closeness and security with a second parent.

Concordance in patterns of closeness and security among siblings

The present sample included five sibling groups and patterns of closeness and security were explored across these sibling groups. There was a high level of concordance among siblings in patterns of closeness and security in relationships with parents. In all but one group, children perceived high levels of closeness and security in relationships with resident parents. There was also a high level of concordance in patterns of closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents among siblings. Two sibling groups had identical pattens of closeness and security with non-resident parents in the present study. There was some variation in perceptions of closeness and security with non-resident parents among other sibling groups. Two female siblings, in the younger age-group, indicated distinctly different experiences of closeness and security with their non-resident parent.

One child perceived positive experiences of both closeness and security with her non-resident parent while the second child perceived negative experiences of both closeness and security with this parent. Two further sibling groups indicated different experiences of security in relationships with non-resident parents but there was concordance in experiences of closeness in these groups.

Thus, most siblings had similar experiences of closeness and security in their relationships with their parents. These findings lend support to the value of qualitative accounts of children's experiences of parental behaviour and parental involvement and support following separation. The present study findings also draw attention to the need to go beyond a focus on parental behaviour alone, to include consideration of individual qualities in both children and their parents and the contexts in which they relate. More diverse methods of research are required in order to expand upon and explore further and more comprehensively the child-parent relationship following parental separation.

Conclusion

A key objective of the present study is to gain insight into how children experience their relationships with both parents following parental separation in the context of the broader family system. Possible inter-dependencies among these dyadic systems were explored and potential sources of influence across relationships were identified. Influences were explored across the child-parent relationship, inter-parental relationships and relationships with new partners. The importance of viewing the child-parent relationship within the framework of other family relationships was highlighted in a number of different ways by findings in the present chapter.

First of all, a clear association was found between closeness and security in relationships with parents and co-operative inter-parental relationships. Related to this, children's experiences of explicit inter-parental conflict were linked to problematic experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents. This was most notably so where there was a *spillover effect* of tension and negativity from the inter-parental relationship to children's relationships with their parents, consistent with findings in previous studies (Kitzmann, 2000; Engfer, 1988). Such an effect was apparent in loyalty divisions where children had difficulties resolving problems of affiliation to one or other parent. Spillover effects were also manifest in the development of negative alliances, where children became extremely close to one parent to the exclusion of a second parent. These findings address an important gap in previous research by providing a focus on children's subjective accounts of their experiences of inter-parental conflict and by contributing to our understanding of the different ways in which children experience and interpret the inter-parental relationship following parental separation. Children's narratives underscore the need for parents to delineate more clearly the boundaries between the child-parent dyadic system and the inter-parental dyad. Consistent with

this finding, more recently there has been an emphasis on conceptualising divorce and parental separation as a developmental process that requires the ongoing re-negotiation of roles and relationships, both at the individual and dyadic levels (Emery, 1994; Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Christopher, 1999).

Secondly, children expressed their ambivalence about experiences of new partners and other new family members such as half-siblings and step-siblings. Difficulties were most apparent in children's relationships with non-resident parents where the presence of new partners was associated with more negative experiences of security in these relationships. These findings emphasise the importance of re-negotiating commitment in child-parent relationships in response to ongoing family transition and the presence of new family members. The absence of opportunities for a gradual negotiation of commitment was identified as a source of insecurity for children when faced with the new partner of their non-resident parent.

Thirdly, co-operative and collaborative inter-parental relationships were associated with higher frequency of contact between children and non-resident parents. While acknowledging the post-separation realities of difficult inter-parental relationships, children's personal accounts of how they experience these relationships demonstrate that they are accepting of the absence of face-to-face contact between their parents, yet value highly civil and respectful relationships between their parents. Links between the inter-parental relationship and children's contact with their non-resident parent in the study draws attention to the manner in which patterns of relating within one dyadic system alter and influence patterns in other dyadic systems and across family relationships as a whole. For example, Trinder et al., (2002, pp. 45) point out that children's contact with their non-resident parents is:

> A relational process, in which the attitudes, actions and interactions of all family members, that is resident and contact parents and children, combine to shape contact.

Most importantly, the authors point out the limitations of an analysis of successful or less positive affiliations between children and their parents following parental separation which relies exclusively on the actions of a single individual in order to explain the processes at work.

Finally, the present study revealed some concordance in patterns of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents. Positive qualities in relationships with one parent were reflected in positive qualities in relationships with a second parent. Dunn (2003) suggests that such concordance may be explained in terms of *attachment theory* or *social learning theory* or on the grounds that

children's characteristics play a role in the quality of their various relationships. By contrast, however, negative experiences with one parent in the present study were not associated with negative experiences in relationships with a second parent. The presence of negative alliances, where children aligned themselves with one parent to the exclusion of a second parent, contributes partly to an explanation of these patterns. Other sources of influence included increased inter-dependence and consequent closeness and security in relationships with resident parents, in situations where non-resident parents were no longer in contact. These findings reinforce the value of drawing together an array of children's perceptions, attitudes and expectations about parental behaviour which enhances our understanding of the linkages and inter-connections between these behaviours and the quality of relationships which children experience with their parents.

CHAPTER 10: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

A prime concern at the core of this study has been to uncover whether and in what way the nature of children's relationships with their parents alters in the context of a changed family environment following parental separation. Much has been researched and written on the effects of parental separation on children's relationship with their parents. Strikingly absent from previous research is a focus on close emotional ties and feelings of security in these relationships. Equally problematic, is the absence of emphasis on the processes which underlie positive or negative experiences of ongoing relationships. The present study addresses these gaps in the research by exploring experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents post-separation. Mindful of the potential for distortion in research which is driven by a focus on a single point in time, the present study, conducted across two phases approximately two years apart, aimed to capture dynamic and evolving patterns in relationships, influenced by shifts both in the age of the participants and in the ongoing family transition which shaped these patterns. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed: How do children experience and understand closeness and security in child-parent relationships following parental separation? What characteristics of the child-parent relationship contribute to closeness and security following parental separation? How do children perceive the inter-parental relationship to impact on their relationships with parents following parental separation? Are there developmental patterns in children's perceptions of closeness and security in child-parent relationships following parental separation?

Findings relating to these questions were outlined and discussed in the present study, beginning with a focus on the altered contexts of contact and care in which children continue relationships with parents post-separation. Children's appraisals of the processes contributing to closeness and security in relationships with parents were then presented. Finally, the focus of the study moved beyond dyadic influences and immediate family dynamics to a focus on perceptions of the inter-parental relationship and relationships with new partners. This concluding chapter now draws together and reflects upon these findings in light of the specific research questions directing the inquiry and the theoretical framework against which the study was carried out.

Revisiting the theoretical framework

Close emotional ties and experiences of security in the child-parent relationship post-separation are explored within a theoretical framework which assigns a central role to children themselves in depicting and conveying their experiences. Relationships are conceptualised and considered as

involving mutual influences across their long-term history. A pivotal element of this history is the experience of parental separation, conceptualised as exerting an influence both as a discrete event in the lives of children and as an ongoing process.

Previous approaches to the exploration of parental separation provide a useful template which helped to shape and influence the initial design and data collection and later the analyses and presentation of the material. Three developments in particular within the literature on parental separation have informed the present study: Conceptualising parental separation as process and event; the dialectic between family processes and family structure; and a focus in contemporary research on children's perspectives on post-separation relationships. These developments have, in turn, contributed significantly to the present study's portrait of children's relationships with their parents post-separation.

Central to the framework of the study is the view that children are competent in expressing their perceptions and feelings regarding their relationships with their parents post-separation, in contrast to research approaches in the past which relied exclusively on adult reports. Adopting a qualitative approach and focusing on the processes and dynamics in relationships between children and their parents, the study presents a challenge to certain assumptions inherent in previous research in the area of parental separation and its effects on children's lives. Most notably, the study challenges the assumption that children are inevitably 'victims' of their parents' separation and passive in their contribution to their adjustment to family transition. Children's descriptions of their relationships with their parents following parental separation demonstrated the ability of most children to review, re-evaluate and, in many cases, re-create their relationships with their parents post-separation. Moreover, the child-centred, qualitative approach adopted, highlighted the extent to which many children and their parents successfully negotiate their relationships post-separation. Studies which rely exclusively on standardised quantitative data offer limited opportunities for children to expand and elaborate upon their own views and to express the meanings that their experiences hold for them in their own words. Such a focus on children's personal accounts of their close, emotional relationships with their parents is in keeping with the growing recognition of the need to re-introduce an emphasis on personal meaning and experience in research and the need to look at subjective experiences of children rather than attempting to objectify those experiences (Hogan, 1998).

The design and methodology of the present study have further been influenced and informed by many of the principles and assumptions of empirical phenomenological research, based on the premise that much of what we term 'reality' is subjective and constructed from the meanings and interpretations which are contributed by those who experience it (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The study aimed to understand how children interpret their relationships with their parents following

parental separation and to capture a sense of the everyday, inter-subjective world in which these relationships evolve. Relying on children's subjective accounts of their experiences and on the individual meanings and interpretations which emerge from their narratives, the study sought to create a portrait of children's relationships with parents in a post-separation context.

Patterns of development in children's relationships with parents post-separation

Based on children's descriptions of their relationships with parents, four patterns or typologies of development in children's relationships with their parents post-separation emerged. Firstly, many children in the study described developments in their relationships with their parents which indicated that they were *moving beyond the separation* in their relationships with *both* parents at the time of the second interview. For these children, perceived closeness and security in relationships with both parents was high and interviews with these children revealed that they were accommodating to the new relationships which they had negotiated or established with both of their parents since the separation. Secondly, the risks for children that accompany parental separation were also evident in the present study, most particularly for children's relationships with non-resident parents. Just over one fifth of the children were *struggling to resolve problems* or to adjust to more negative changes in their relationships with one parent, typically in relationships with non-resident parents following the separation. A further one fifth of children also described relationships with their parents which indicated that they had *pared down to one* relationship (Smart et al., 2001) and were experiencing close and secure relationships with one parent, typically their resident parent, following the separation. These children had come to terms with, or were in the process of adjusting to, the *absence* of a relationship with a second parent. However, as demonstrated clearly in the present study, problematic relationships are not inevitable and, in many cases, difficulties were rooted in the history of the relationship prior to the separation. Children's relationships with their parents in the present study operated within a framework of the whole family, and the effect of the inter-parental relationship on these relationships was very evident. A third category included a minority of children, who described relationships with both parents which indicated that they felt *caught in the middle* of hostile inter-parental interaction. These children reported explicit and ongoing inter-parental conflict and were also experiencing conflict with one or both parents. Most significantly, ongoing inter-parental conflict in which children were involved or, were consistently exposed to negative behaviour on the part of one parent toward another, was found to be damaging to experiences of closeness and security. Finally, a small number of children described relationships with both parents which indicated that they were *coping with multiple stressors* in post-family life. For these children, complex and individual family circumstances demanded continuous adjustment on their part. However, these children were also very hopeful that their relationships with their parents would develop positively over time. As previously mentioned, some children experiencing

parental separation within the context of extreme and multiple disadvantage were unable or unwilling to participate in the second phase of the study. In order to shed further light on these patterns the following sections present findings on children's lived experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents post-separation.

Children's experiences of closeness and security in relationships with parents post-separation

Three key findings are outlined in this section. First of all, many children felt close to and secure about their relationships with both parents following separation and these experiences were stable across both phases of the study. Secondly, children's perceptions of closeness and security with *resident* and *non-resident* parents were markedly different, with most children feeling closer and more secure in relationships with resident parents by comparison with non-resident parents. Thirdly, children's feelings of closeness to parents were more obviously linked to experiences of everyday interaction with their parents, while feelings of security were based on prior experience and associated expectations.

With regard to the first finding, according to children's accounts, many children perceived closeness and security[38] to be high and stable with resident parents and non-resident parents across Phase I and Phase II of the study. As outlined above, the present study, involving a small sample of children but providing in-depth analyses of their perceptions and experiences, uncovers positive qualities and aspects of these relationships often not accessed by the constraints of more quantitative approaches using larger samples. Such positive aspects included children's greater appreciation of continued care-giving by resident parents and increased interdependence in these relationships for some children. Contact with non-resident parents was frequent and regular for most children and in some cases children had more dedicated time with one or both parents following the separation. Only by clearly identifying the positive experiences of children in their relationships post-separation, can we hope to facilitate and build upon these positive experiences.

However, children's experiences of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents were markedly divergent, with significantly higher levels of closeness and security recorded in relationships with resident parents compared with non-resident parents. Negative experiences of closeness were found predominantly in children's relationships with non-resident parents and these findings warrant serious consideration, given the number of children in the present study who highlighted difficulties. These findings also support a number of previous studies which have

[38] Measured by the Emotional Closeness Map (Smart et al., 2001; Sturgess et al., 2001) and the Security Scale (Kerns et al., 1996).

asserted that parental separation represents a substantially more serious risk to children's relationships with non-resident parents than with resident parents (Dunn et al., 2004; Trinder et al., 2002; Dunn et al., 1999; Fawcett, 1999). However, the present study goes beyond merely stating or supporting the presence of this particular risk for relationships with non-resident parents. As children elaborated on their experiences of relationships with non-resident parents, a key feature in understanding this risk was the perceived absence for opportunities and experiences of intimacy and familiarity. Related to this finding children described feelings of greater inter-dependence and reciprocity in their accounts of relationships with resident parents than in relationships with non-resident parents. These features of relationships with parents are addressed in more depth in the following section. As noted in Chapter 2, while children might, in principle, value their parents equally and wish to relate to them in the same way, this does not always happen in practice (Smart et al., 2001), and it is important for us to understand more precisely what factors underlie these differences.

A third finding related to children's assessment of closeness and security post-separation is that experiences of closeness in relationships in the present study were linked more perceptibly to ongoing and repeated daily interaction and interchange and were, consequently, more sensitive to influence and change as a result of parental separation. Feelings of security with parents, on the other hand, were more closely linked to knowledge, expectation and anticipation based on prior experience and, therefore, may be less subject to change and instability brought about by separation. Hinde (1997, pp. 84) points out "family relationships are fashioned out of the minutiae of daily commerce and interaction and with this comes mutual familiarity and predictability". Where relationships with non-resident parents involved frequent and consistent contact and were developed in settings conducive to continuity in everyday activities and interaction, children perceived high levels of closeness in these relationships.

Security, on the other hand, was facilitated to a greater extent through the relational history and the inner representations and expectations which had evolved throughout the course of the relationship. As noted by Kobak (1999) in Chapter 2, security does not entirely depend upon a parent being physically present or absent but more importantly upon the expectations of parental response and the quality of parent-child communication. Support for this argument is further provided through the finding in the present study that there was little difference in the extent to which children felt they could depend on their non-resident parent compared with dependence on resident parents, as measured by the Security Scale and supported in children's qualitative accounts. Gendered influences were also evident in the present study with no boys recording low scores on dependence with their non-resident parents. These findings are worth considering in light of previous research which indicates that parental separation and other negative life events operate primarily by

maintenance of already established patterns of security and insecurity (Waters et al., 2000; Hamiliton, 2000). Where such events are associated with a change from secure to insecure representations, this change is associated with multiple difficulties and specific factors, such as maternal depression, factors which are likely to affect caregiver availability and responsiveness (Weinfeld et al., 2000).

Frequency of contact was also important for experiences of security and the repetition and consistency of routines associated with contact with non-resident parents provided a base for relationships for the majority of children to remain secure. Consistent and regular contact was required in order to preserve pre-existing expectations and for children to predict that support from their non-resident parents was readily available, if and when it was needed.

Summary

Children's narratives on closeness and security in relationships with parents indicated that most children experienced close, secure relationships across both phases of the study, and these findings stand in contrast to research which envisages inevitable decline and deterioration in relationships with parents post-separation (Lewis et al., 2000; Hetherington, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994). Children described markedly different experiences of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents. Findings in the present study also point towards a possible distinction in the effects of parental separation on security and closeness in these relationships. The importance of understanding and facilitating, where appropriate, positive experiences of closeness and security with both resident and non-resident parents is emphasised in a substantial body of literature, indicating that closeness to a non-resident parent and the quality of the parenting by the resident parent can explain much of the variation between children living in separated families and intact homes (Amato, 1986; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Dunn & Deater-Deckard 2001; Simons et al., 1994; Tschann et al., 1989). To explore these experiences further, the following section looks in more detail at some of the processes which children perceived as facilitating and, conversely, obstructing closeness and security in relationships post-separation.

Family processes: Protective and risk factors

Children's ability to successfully negotiate their relationships with parents in the context of parental separation is likely to be influenced by the presence of both risk and protective factors. Studies on children's adjustment to parental separation have largely focused on individual risk factors, such as age, gender and temperament, and processes in the family context (Rodgers & Rose, 2002). Protective factors are sometimes conceptualised as being on the opposite end of the continuum from risk factors, but have also been defined as factors that moderate the effect of one or more risk factors

(Rutter, 1988). As previously outlined, protective factors identified in children's narratives clustered around the themes of accessibility, commitment and connectedness.

Protective factors

Accessibility

Parental accessibility was a critical factor in facilitating close, secure relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. In contrast to studies which have questioned the significance of frequency of contact with non-resident parents following parental separation (Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg et al., 1983; King, 1994), in the present study the link between frequency of contact and quality of contact was very evident. A key to this link was in the emphasis which children placed on the importance of appropriate *timing* of interaction, consistent with findings in previous studies (Amato & Keith, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994). More specifically, children had difficulties where interaction was confined and prescribed by pre-arranged rather than spontaneous contact. Regular and repeated interaction and interchange were represented as fostering ease of communication and greater awareness of what was happening in each other's lives in relationships with both parents. For resident parents, this mutual awareness was maintained and developed within the context of established daily routines. Relationships with non-resident parents depended more upon the establishment of new patterns and routines. While frequent and regular contact was fundamental to the creation of such patterns, the quantity of contact alone did not predict positive experiences.

Children's narratives on accessibility to *resident* parents emphasised the importance of continued care-giving as facilitating closeness and security and this was most particularly in the case of young children. There was an association between experiences of intimacy, familiarity and accessibility to resident parents and, conversely, the lack of opportunity for such experiences with many non-resident parents. Intimacy has been defined as a closeness which is beneficial to both child and parent (Fingerman, 2001). Intimacy also facilitates a sense of security and belonging – a perception that one is cared for deeply (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Clearly, accessibility per se did not facilitate feelings of closeness and intimacy in the present study, as frequent contact with either resident or non-resident parents was not associated with closeness for all children.

It is useful to reflect on the metaphor of family scripts and the need to update and continuously re-enact or re-create these scripts in order to clarify the link between accessibility and intimacy in relationships. As previously outlined in Chapter 2, family scripts can be defined as "the family's shared expectations of how family roles are to be performed within various contexts" (Byng-Hall, 1995, pp. 4). Of particular relevance to the present study is the notion that "the successful re-editing of family scripts lies in the adequate exchange of information between everyday experience of family life and the meanings attributed to the way that family members interact" (Byng-Hall, 1995,

pp. 57). In the present study, children emphasised the importance of open communication patterns and of parental awareness of their well-being in facilitating an effective exchange of information. Where children perceived non-resident parents to be out of touch with the everyday events in their realities, and they, themselves, described a lack of information about the everyday whereabouts of their parent, opportunities for negotiating new patterns and for developing a mutual understanding of these patterns were not available. Moreover, the context in which relationships developed influenced the extent to which children and parents could review and revise their relationships post-separation. The altered contexts in which children interacted with non-resident parents, involving less frequent interaction and recreational activities, were not always conducive to the development of mutual influence in these relationships. Consequently, for some children and their parents, information continued to be processed in ways which created obstacles to the development of new routines and their associated meanings.

Previous research has highlighted the role of parental availability and accessibility in mediating child adjustment across a number of diverse areas. Exploring the potential mechanisms that may mediate the relationship between family disruption and child adjustment, Lee & Gotlib (1991) propose that diminished parental availability is a characteristic present in all forms of family disruption (Cox & Owen, 1993; Howes & Markman, 1989; Waters et al., 1995). Findings in this study strongly contest this deterministic view that parental separation inevitably predicts experiences of reduced availability with parents. For the majority of children, relationships were perceived to be stable and consistent across the process of the separation. However, findings in the present study underscore the necessity to draw distinct and discrete conclusions when considering the effects of parental separation on relationships with resident and non-resident parents. Such distinctions are more noticeably present in recent research (Amato & Booth, 1994; Aquilino, 1994; Smart et al., 2001) highlighting the limitations and inevitable distortion of studies failing to clarify this distinction. Where such distinctions are not clearly drawn, we have little precise information on how relationships with resident and non-resident parents can best be protected and enhanced. Without this information, negative experiences of closeness and security with parents, and especially with non-resident parents, are likely to be perpetuated.

Commitment

Children's perceptions of commitment in post-separation family contexts clustered around two fundamental dimensions, one pertaining to issues of *support* and the other pertaining to issues of *parental role* or *parental authority* in relationships with parents. Children interpreted support across a number of parental behaviours such as, parental interest in children's well-being and everyday activities, open communication patterns, organising shared activities, praising and encouraging children and showing affection and love. Resident parents were clearly the primary source of support

for children at the time of the separation. Children's accounts of parental support in the study provide resonance for findings in previous research, indicating the importance of close, supportive and authoritative relationships with parents post-separation and especially with resident mothers (Bray & Berger, 1993; Forehand, et al., 1990; Hetherington, 1989, 1993; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Maccoby et al., 1993; Simons & Johnson, 1996).

As noted previously, there was less divergence in children's perceived dependence on resident and non-resident parents and, in general, children had positive expectations of receiving parental support from a non-resident parent when required. Moreover, a small minority of children recorded higher scores on dependence in relationships with their non-resident parent than with their resident parent. Interestingly, positive experiences of dependence in relationships with non-resident parents were experienced by all of the boys in the present sample.

These findings highlight the potential for building stronger ties between non-resident fathers and their sons. Findings also emphasise more generally the importance of promoting relationships of mutual obligation and influence post-separation in order to build upon and maximise the potential for continued security in children's relationships with both resident and non-resident parents.

According to children's accounts, parental commitment was linked to a parent's right to exert authority and control in relationships with *resident* parents, and especially in the narratives of children in the older age-group. However, little emphasis was placed on this aspect of the relationship with non-resident parents. It is not possible to draw solid conclusions regarding experiences of parental control and authority in the present study, as this was not a specific aim of the study and more precise measurement and inquiry would be necessary in order to comment more specifically on the concept of parental authority post-separation. However, these findings are consistent with research suggesting that non-resident fathers have decreased influence over their children after divorce (Amato & Booth, 1994; Aquilino, 1994) and that a major component of the parenting role is no longer exercised by non-resident fathers.

As highlighted at different points throughout previous findings chapters, opportunities for maintaining and, in particular, developing levels of parental involvement and responsibility were compromised to a greater extent for non-resident parents due to the nature of the contact they had with children, which often involved arranged activities which did not naturally form part of children's daily routines. In some cases, these difficulties were exacerbated by ongoing conflict between parents. Consistent with this finding, previous research has asserted that the majority of non-resident fathers establish companionate relationships with their children rather than traditional parental relationships of authority (Arendell, 1997; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Munsch et al., 1995). Descriptions of visits with non-resident parents conveyed little sense that fathers maintained or assumed their roles as exerting control and monitoring their children's behaviour. However, it is

beyond the scope of the present study to declare with any certainty the extent to which this is borne out by the reality as perceived by fathers themselves, as the present study provided a preliminary and peripheral exploration of these issues.

Connectedness

Connectedness in relationships with both resident and non-resident parents also facilitated positive experiences of closeness and security with parents and was linked closely to the relational history. Children's descriptions of feeling connected with parents underline the need to be inclusive of the range of dimensions which the child-parent relationship incorporates, dimensions that include both emotional and cognitive aspects such as mutual warmth, expressed affection, shared communication about feelings and shared humour (Dunn, 1993). Reciprocity and inter-dependence in relationships with resident parents, facilitated through shared experiences of everyday care and interaction with these parents, provided opportunities for connectedness to develop, while facilitating a sense of autonomy, especially among children in the older age-groups. Assuming greater responsibility for household tasks was viewed by some participants as enabling increased independence. In addition, having responsibility for a share of household tasks may have served as a counter-balance to the complexities and challenges of adapting to living with and relating to one parent in the home rather than two. Consistent with this, Amato (1990) found that the number of household responsibilities which children were assigned was associated with greater autonomy in their relationships with parents.

Duck (1993) points out that there has been little acknowledgement of the positive aspects of solidarity and connectedness that may be associated with family responsibility and obligation. Negative aspects of obligation are emphasised by researchers when obligation is contrasted with affection or other motives for family interaction (Walker, Pratt, Shin & Jones, 1990). Findings in the present study suggest that consideration needs to be given to finding ways of maintaining and reinforcing ties of obligation and responsibility in child-parent relationships, especially in the changed context within which relationships with non-resident parents develop post-separation.

Summary

In brief, following parental separation family roles and responsibilities may shift in response to the multiple changes which family transition brings about. Parental accessibility and availability in the present study were closely linked to positive experiences of closeness and security. Accessibility was associated with intimacy, mutual awareness and inter-dependence in relationships with resident parents. Frequent contact with non-resident parents was also closely linked to closeness and security but the nature of contact, and the settings in which it took place, were not always conducive to creating and developing feelings of inter-dependence in relationships. Commitment, which children

perceived to be facilitated through parental support and clarity in parental role, exerted a positive influence on these relationships. Connectedness, which children typically described as rooted in the relational history, contributed to close, secure relationships. For children, and adolescents in particular, taking on new roles or responsibilities was perceived less as a loss of parental support than as an opportunity to demonstrate independence or competence.

Risks to child-parent relationships in post separation families

A number of risks to children's positive experiences of closeness and security with parents also emerged from children's narratives. Key problems were negative relational histories, ongoing and explicit inter-parental conflict and lack of opportunities to maintain and develop feelings of inter-dependence and intimacy in relationships with non-resident parents. Amato (1993) points out there are interactions between stresses and resources such that the presence of one resource, for example a supportive parent, may compensate for low household income, and the total configuration of stresses and resources is important for assessing a child's situation.

Risks to positive qualities in relationships are best described with reference to resident parents and non-resident parents separately. Nonetheless, there was an interplay of influence beyond dyadic interactions as emphasised in the preceding chapter and risks are best understood within the framework of the wider family network (Davies et al., 2002). A fundamental premise of the present study is that parental separation should be viewed as a process characterised by a sequence of potentially stressful experiences that are set in motion before the separation and continue to unfold following the separation. In keeping with this conceptualisation, where relationships of trust and reciprocity had been established prior to or had been developed following the separation, there were less perceptible negative effects on experiences of closeness and security with parents.

Resident parents

Patterns of ongoing, hostile interaction between children and their *resident* parents were rooted most notably in a fragile relational history. Negative alliances, characterised by extreme closeness to a non-resident parent and consequent negative attributions towards a resident parent with regard to the causes of the separation, were strongly associated with negative experiences of closeness and security. Risks to the quality of relationships were heightened where negative alliances and inter-parental conflict were experienced concurrently. More specifically, extremely close relationships with non-resident parents and the presence of inter-parental conflict, compounded by the absence of clearly delineated boundaries between child-parent and inter-parental dyads, was a strong predictor of negative experiences of closeness and security in relationships with resident parents. Adolescent children expressed these problems to a greater extent than younger children and this is consistent with previous studies where, in comparison with adolescents in intact families, children in separated

families experience high levels of mother-adolescent disagreement (Demo & Acock, 1996). These findings support the argument, reflected in a body of literature exploring the effects of parental separation (Maccoby & Mnookin., 1992; Masheter, 1991) that *explicit* hostilities extending beyond the actual event of parental separation, represent one of the most serious risks to the quality of relationships with parents post separation.

A less significant but more pervasive risk to the quality of relationships with resident parents was the challenge which children experienced in adjusting to being parented by one parent rather than by two. Experiences of parental authority were, for some children, more difficult, exerted in the altered context of single parenting. In contrast to experiences of parental authority prior to the separation, the absence of a second parent to collaborate in decision-making and to counterbalance or contribute to resolving conflictual interaction post-separation, was a challenge for many children. However, these challenges were not clearly associated with negative experiences of either closeness or security in relationships with resident parents. It is likely that enhanced feelings of inter-dependence in relationships with resident parents acted to counter and contain more complex negative responses to this challenge.

Risks to the quality of relationships with *resident fathers* showed no notable difference when compared with resident mothers. Given the very limited number of resident fathers in the present study, it is impossible to indicate with any certainty whether there is a substantive difference in the nature of experiences of quality in these relationships. Levels of closeness to these fathers were proportionately similar by comparison with closeness to mothers. Negative experiences of both closeness and security were rooted in the relational history and were compounded by extreme closeness to a non-resident mother. Interestingly, however, scores on *security* were proportionately low in relationships with resident fathers, by comparison with resident mothers, providing limited and very tentative support for previous studies which indicate less positive outcomes for relationships with resident fathers than with resident mothers.

Perceptions of *closeness* to resident mothers and resident fathers in the present study were similar and this is notable given the distinct variation in experiences of closeness to resident parents (mostly mothers) and non-resident parents (mostly fathers). Hetherington et al., (1998) point out that, when compared to resident mothers, resident fathers are a unique and select group of fathers, whose choice to take on the role of resident parents is an active and well-deliberated decision, often preceded by a relational history which includes exceptional involvement with their children and experience in nurturance and support (Hanson, 1988; Mendes, 1976a, 1976b).

Non-resident parents

Risks to emotional closeness were more clearly pronounced and identifiable in relationships with non-resident parents in the present study. Relationships were most significantly damaged or at risk of deterioration in those contexts, experienced by a small but substantial minority of children, where there was no contact, or seriously declining contact, with parents. Children experiencing parental separation at a young age, where the interactional history of the relationship was short, unpredictable or discontinued, were particularly vulnerable for loss of contact with non-resident parents. The significance of established patterns of closeness and security acting as buffers for children against the potential risks associated with parental separation is underlined by this finding. These findings do not entirely support previous research, in which parents were more likely to be disengaged if their children were older than if they had at least one child under the age of six (Maccoby & Depner, 1990). Consistent with the findings of the study, however, Walczak & Burns (1984) found that older children in adolescence had acquired the ability to rationalise their parents' separation and were better able to think in terms of compromise, considering their relationships with parents from various points of view, even when these were not in accordance with their own views. As in the present study, greater sophistication and ability to rationalise in the abstract, facilitated more independent and autonomous negotiation of relationships with non-resident parents. Paradoxically, however, it was also within this age-group that anger with parents was most apparent.

Children, and adolescents in particular, expressed deeply embedded anger and feelings of rejection in response to loss of contact or reduced contact with non-resident parents. These sentiments persisted and, in some cases, escalated across both phases of the study, underscoring the link between quantity and quality of contact and interaction with parents. However, it must also be acknowledged that the direction of effects in the association between contact and relationship quality remains unclear. On the one hand, it could be that non-resident fathers enjoyed and encouraged more frequent contact with their children as a consequence of the positive, warm and affectionate relationship they enjoyed together; on the other hand, it could be that the contact contributed to the children's friendly relationship with their fathers, or that both processes are important (Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor & Bridges, 2004).

A second risk, more subtle in effect, yet thoroughly pervasive throughout children's narratives in the present study, was the negative effect on processes such as intimacy, open communication patterns, trust and mutual awareness. According to the perceptions of a substantial proportion of children, fathers, and non-resident parents in general, gradually became peripheral to central developments in children's lives and ties of obligation and reciprocity were steadily eroded. These effects were more notably perceptible with regard to experiences of closeness in relationships than in experiences of security. As in the case of resident parents, children clearly described more problematic relationships

in the context of explicit ongoing inter-parental hostility. The mechanisms through which such processes were affected were most notably lack of apt opportunities for an effective exchange of information and consequent lack of opportunities for relationships of mutual influence and inter-dependence to develop.

Finally, the nature of interaction, and the setting and venues in which contact was maintained in relationships with non-resident parents, played a significant role in determining the quality of relationships. Strikingly present across most narratives was a sense that children experienced their contact with non-resident parents as an effort to *maintain* rather than to develop and build stronger relationships of multiple dimensions. Within such contexts, opportunities for meaningful and mutual influence to occur were limited, preventing, to a great extent, the potential for ties of inter-dependence and inter-connectedness to develop and to be enhanced. The particular challenges identified in the present study to meaningful, involved interaction and contact in relationships with non-resident parents resonate through previous research in this field (Arendell, 1995; Dunn et al., 2004; Williams, 1988).

Children described more autonomous and less artificial patterns of contact with non-resident *mothers* than with non-resident *fathers*. However, given the very small number of non-resident mothers in the study, any comparison of patterns across non-resident fathers and mothers must be considered with caution. Residential settings and the provision of care-giving fostered these positive patterns. All non-resident mothers had established their own residence, independent of extended family members, and children moved with greater ease and with more autonomy within these settings. Nurturing continued in cases of illness and this was not expressed in narratives on relationships with non-resident fathers. Such a finding, although based on a very small sample of non-resident mothers, reinforces the message that difficulties in non-resident relationships may be linked to the nature of established interaction between fathers and their children and may be compounded and exacerbated by the altered context which parental separation brings about. Consistent with this, previous research has indicated that children report that non-resident mothers have higher levels of interest in their lives and have more knowledge of their well-being; are more supportive, sensitive and responsive to their needs; and are more communicative than non-resident fathers (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993; Santrock & Sitterle, 1987). Previous research also suggests that relationships with non-resident mothers are closer and that non-resident mothers have more influence over their children's development, especially their daughters' adjustment, than do non-resident fathers (Lindner-Gunnoe, 1993).

Risk factors operating in relationships with both resident and non-resident parents

As noted above, a clearly distinct set of risk factors operated and exerted influence on relationships with resident and non-resident parents independently. Notwithstanding these differences, certain risk factors were common to relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. For all children, although many sought to conceal this difficulty from their parents, adjusting to more fragmented routines and family rituals, and moving from one residence to another, created a sense of family life distributed in 'bits and pieces' rather than in one coherent family unit. Narratives emphasised the challenge for participants of fragmented and dispersed family experiences resulting from parental separation. There was no clear association between this experience and negative experiences of closeness and security. Nonetheless, it merits consideration as contributing to the stressors which may serve to potentiate the risks outlined above. Secondly, divided family contexts created dilemmas, which are likely to deepen already established fissures in family experiences and obligations. These patterns were evident across both phases of the study, and most likely continued indefinitely beyond the scope of the present study.

Re-negotiating relationships of permanence, intimacy and power post-separation

Fundamental to the portrait of family life post-separation which emerged from the present study, is the significance of re-evaluating, re-negotiating and reframing the co-ordinates on which these relationships are constructed. According to these findings, children view regular contact as a highly significant contributor to positive experiences in relationships but clearly demonstrate in their narratives that contact alone does not guarantee closeness and security in relationships between non-resident parents and their children following parental separation. Consistent with a large body of research (Amato, 1993; Emery, 1988; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Simons & Beaman, 1996), non-resident fathers and mothers contributed positively to children's adjustment to new contexts, only if emotional ties between children and their parents were strong and where parents were actively engaged in their children's lives. As highlighted in previous research, where relationships with non-resident parents were maintained under circumstances of weak affectional ties and interaction generating few possibilities for mutual influence to occur (Maccoby et al., 1993), the risk to continuity and development in these relationships remained high. Risks to clearly defined and delineated parental roles were also identified as significant for relationships with non-resident parents in the present study, and these risks were greater in the case of non-resident fathers when compared with non-resident mothers. Relationships with resident parents continued to develop through routine everyday interaction, interaction which enabled children and parents to update information and awareness of their relationship continuously. Similarly, continuity in care-giving relationships was highly valued by children. As pointed out by James (1998, pp. 192):

> It is clear that the love and care which parenting brings is experienced by children concretely through the ebb and flow of everyday activities in which they also have a part to play.

Continuity in care-giving routines also helped to reassure children of the stability of certain family routines and rituals and allowed them the opportunity to review and re-negotiate their relationships against this familiar framework. Renegotiation of relationships with parents centred around questions of the permanence of relationships post-separation and around establishing new patterns and boundaries in relationships of intimacy and power.

Permanence in relationships with parents post-separation

One of the central difficulties for many children in accommodating to an altered experience of permanence in relationships with parents, and most notably with non-resident parents, was that for many children, the focus of interaction in relationships shifted from an emphasis on continuity and development in relationships to an emphasis on *maintaining* contact in settings which were experienced as artificial and non-conducive to exploration and improvisation. Fear of loss, experienced by just under half of the children in the wider investigation from which the present study evolved (Hogan et al., 2002), is likely to predominate, determine and underscore children's relationships with non-resident parents, most notably at the outset of the process of parental separation.

Children negotiated commitment in relationships with both resident and non-resident parents in the present study. Located between the *closed field exchanges,* where continued interaction and exchange are guaranteed and *open field exchanges* where interaction and exchange continue as long as they are perceived to be beneficial (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997, pp. 755), children were highly sensitive to continuity and commitment in family relationships. There was evidence of a perceived erosion in this commitment by non-resident parents for a substantial minority of children, as highlighted by Finch & Mason (1993) in the context of family transition. Findings in the present study indicate that children experience their relationships with non-resident parents as falling outside the realms of closed, obligated relationships, associated with family relationships. Questions of the frequency and quantity of contact with a parent, expectations about the appropriate levels of communication and personal sharing and expectations about the provision of assistance in times of need – all of these features of children's relationships with their parents, previously dictated within a framework of unquestioned permanency and the predictability of anticipated futures, were up for review in the altered family context of parental separation.

Intimacy in relationships with parents post-separation

As previously outlined, risks to the quality of closeness and security were greater for children's relationships with their non-resident parents and a powerful influence on positive experiences were opportunities for feelings of intimacy in these relationships. Key processes which contributed to these experiences for children in the study were open communication patterns and positive experiences of mutual awareness, facilitated by frequent contact and interaction. Shared residence, and the interaction generated in this context, helped to shape parental roles and the expectations that surrounded these roles. Conversely, the removal of the established framework within which relationships were founded and developed, created barriers to ease and intimacy for children and expanded emotional distance in relationships. This was not the case in all relationships where patterns established post-separation facilitated more intimate interaction than patterns established prior to the separation. According to Emery (1988), as parents struggle with re-defining the boundaries of intimacy, children are confronted with loyalty dilemmas and may be drawn into alliances. Even in friendly divorces, the emotional distancing that naturally takes place between parents upsets the homeostatic balance in family relationships. Such patterns were noted in a minority of children's relational histories with their parents and these patterns were associated with the presence of boundary ambiguity and more negative triadic interaction.

Power in relationships with parents post-separation

Finally, the importance of re-negotiating and clarifying boundaries of power and authority in relationships with parents post-separation was clearly highlighted in the present study. As noted by Madden-Derdich & Leonard (2000), societal norms defining post-separation roles and relationships are not well-established. In particular the parenting role of the non-resident father becomes ambiguous. Consistent with this, according to children in the present study, indistinct parental roles and the consequent lack of opportunities for authoritative parenting and more interdependence within these relationships, contributed to feelings of ambivalence and lack of clarity. Clear boundaries of power and authority post-separation also have implications for security in children's relationships with parents. As outlined in Chapter 2, Byng-Hall (1995) emphasises the interplay between authority and attachment systems in family relationships. Consistent with the author's view that feelings of insecurity can be generated in the context of parental uncertainty and pre-occupation, children described feeling less secure where boundaries of parental roles and authority became indistinct post-separation.

A greater focus on building relationships of interdependence, where there are possibilities for mutual exchange and influence between children and their parents, is likely to reduce the gap between previous and current experiences of permanence, intimacy and power in relationships with parents post-separation. The relational history prior to the separation, the influence exerted by the role of

mother and father on the child-parent relationship prior to the separation, the subsequent roles of resident and non-resident parents and the contexts in which relationships continue, all have a part to play in the development of relationships of mutual influence. These issues are discussed in a later section in light of the research and policy implications of the present study.

Inter-parental relationships and perceived effects on child-parent relationships

Two key findings related to the inter-parental relationship are worth noting. First of all, consistent with previous research, it was found that the presence of ongoing inter-parental conflict post-separation represents a significant risk to the quality of relationships between children and their parents (Amato & Booth, 1991; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1988; Grych & Fincham, 1990). However, this risk was only evident when there was a 'spillover' (Engfer, 1988) effect beyond the boundaries of the inter-parental relationship into interactions between each parent and child. More specifically, where negative interaction between parents was not contained within the boundaries of that relationship and where parents did not make clear distinctions between their relationship with each other and their relationship with their child, children experienced more difficulties in relationships with one or both parents. Effects were most notably manifest in negative alliances where closeness to one parent is associated with the exclusion of a second parent. Intense feelings of divided loyalty were also evident where there was a 'spillover' effect. The particular risks represented by the presence of inter-parental conflict and hostile interaction operated across relationships with both parents, although the effects were more acutely experienced in the context of relationships with resident parents, most likely because children have more frequent interaction with these parents.

In keeping with this finding that boundary ambiguity between inter-parental and child-parent dyads operates to potentiate difficulties in relationships, Peterson & Zill (1986) describe the risk for some children of finding themselves in what they term a *double approach-avoidance conflict,* when their parents have separated. More precisely, in such interaction, closeness to one parent is associated with the risk of rejection by a second parent. Arendell (1995) also highlights the intense loyalty of some children to their resident parent, which contributes to increased absence and disengagement on the part of non-resident fathers, in situations where mothers are troubled by children's contact with their fathers following parental separation.

A second finding on the effect of inter-parental relationships was that *co-operative* inter-parental relationships were associated with closer and more secure relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. According to the children in the study, co-operative inter-parental relationships increased slightly across Phase I and Phase II of the study. As outlined in Chapter 9, positive

relationships with both resident and non-resident parents were closely linked to co-operative relationships between these parents. These findings emphasise the potential benefits of co-operative parenting or co-operative parental involvement in children's lives post-separation.

Various family situations can undermine the capacity of the family to provide a secure base, and can thus contribute to increased insecurity among family members. According to Byng-Hall & Stevenson-Hinde (1991), the breakdown of the parental relationship clearly represents a major risk in that it creates a source of potential loss or unavailability of an attachment figure. In the following section, findings relating to children's experiences of attachment relationships with their parents post-separation are discussed.

Relationships of attachment

The importance for children of family members ensuring that relationships of attachment were protected was strongly emphasised in these findings. As previously outlined, children were highly sensitive to demonstrations of commitment on the part of parents to preserving the security of family environments. Conversely, children interpreted as rejection the persistent failure of a parent to respect and preserve the well-being of the family and the consistent undermining of relationships and ties of attachment between family members. A number of key findings are highlighted below.

Firstly, the concepts of parental availability and responsiveness, central to positive experiences of 'felt security' in relationships with parents, were explored. A number of points are worth emphasising in this context. Most children continued to experience their resident parent as available following the separation. However, despite the fact that the majority of children had frequent and regular contact with non-resident parents, many children indicated low scores on perceived parental availability of this parent.

Secondly, children's narratives suggest that they were more likely to feel *close* to parents they shared a home with. The main factor contributing to these feelings in children's accounts was the optimal setting which sharing a home provides for feelings of interdependence and mutual awareness to develop. However, shared residence may not be as significant to children for feelings of *security* in relationships with parents. It is possible that 'felt security' in relationships is facilitated to a greater extent through the memories, perceptions and affect generated throughout the relational history. In support of this argument, despite the pervasive difference in perceptions of experiences in children's relationships with resident and non-resident parents across a number of dimensions in the present

study, children described no such difference in perceptions of dependence[39] in relationships with resident and non-resident parents. Moreover, some children described more positive experiences of dependence on their non-resident parents when compared with dependence on their resident parents. Security in relationships with non-resident parents was likely to be facilitated through the internalisation of past experiences of parental dependence and support, current experiences of continuity in parental commitment and contact, and a continuing sense of mutual 'felt obligation', despite the reduced opportunities for relationships of inter-dependence and inter-connection characteristic in many narratives in the present study.

Thirdly, one of the possible risks to attachment relationships explored in the present study was the sense of insecurity which may arise when children experience uncertainty about the ability and resources of parents to care for them in situations where parents themselves are preoccupied with other issues and may not be relied upon to help (Byng-Hall, 1995). Two situations in particular may be considered in light of this possibility. The first of these is the relationship which children have with resident caregivers following parental separation. For the majority of children in the present study, there was little evidence of a negative impact on security with resident parents, despite the substantial increase in stress and responsibility which these parents were experiencing. Family environments, described as unstable and disrupted in the first phase of the study, were described in terms that suggested substantial re-stabilisation and re-organisation of roles and responsibilities at the time of the second interview, and these participants recorded positive scores on security with their resident parents. Scores on security with non-resident parents in these family environments were in the lower ranges but it is difficult to assert that this is as a direct consequence of such instability or whether other processes were operating to determine these outcomes.

A fourth point is the significant interplay between systems of care and authority identified in the present study and these systems have been described as mutually reinforcing the capacity to provide security within the family (Byng-Hall, 1995). Parental involvement in daily care-giving bestowed on parents the right to exert authority. Conversely, a major challenge to closeness and security in children's relationships with non-resident parents was the blurring of the parental role in these relationships. One particular strategy for dealing with insecurity, which represents a serious challenge to authority in a family context, is that of *capturing* whereby an insecure individual may attempt to capture another member of the family, excluding others from access to that member in an attempt to guarantee care for themselves (Byng-Hall, 1995). In the present study, a small number of children, developed *negative alliances,* characterised by extreme closeness with a non-resident parent and resulting in the reduction of authority of the excluded parent, in this case the resident

[39] As measured by the Security Scale (Kerns et al, 1996)

parent. Negative alliances were also prevalent in relationships with resident parents and the exclusion of non-resident parents from the domain of parental authority can be considered as a potential strategy for dealing with insecurity in children's relationships with these parents.

A fifth point concerns the presence of inter-parental conflict, which has been hypothesised as representing a risk to children's emotional security in children's relationships with parents through consequent disturbances to parenting processes (Davies et al, 2002; Davies & Cummings, 1994). Consistent with the *emotional security hypothesis,* where children were exposed to ongoing and explicit inter-parental conflict or hostility, and where inter-parental problems were not contained within the boundaries of the inter-parental relationship, children felt less secure in these relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994). However, the direction of effects in these perceptions may be unclear and children who have negative relationships may be biased in their representations of inter-parental relationships, perceiving them to be conflictual.

Finally, the present study provides some evidence to support the notion that, where children had previously experienced extremely close relationships with a non-resident parent, negative consequences sometimes ensued for closeness and security in relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. Pryor & Rodgers (2001) raise questions with regard to the effects on attachment relationships of parental separation and the significance of the nature of early attachments. One of these questions centres on whether it is more significant for a child to 'lose' a non-resident parent to whom they are securely attached than one to whom they are less securely attached. Clearly, the present study provides some support for this notion, although negative effects under these circumstances, were more consequential for relationships with resident parents. In general, where children had established secure relationships with non-resident parents prior to the separation, security with these non-resident parents was not visibly impaired. The significance of relational histories in the present study can be interpreted in light of models of relationship history in attachment theory. The quality of relationships in the early history of family life operated to exert a powerful influence on experiences of closeness and security throughout the process of parental separation.

It should be pointed out that a small number of participants, experiencing multiple negative life stressors, including family histories of domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse and personal histories of suicidal behaviours, were not in a position to participate in the second phase of the study. It is therefore not possible to state with conviction that parental separation per se operates to impact negatively on security in relationships with parents. What these findings cumulatively appear to suggest, however, is that negative effects of parental separation on security in children's relationships with their parents are likely to be linked to multiple negative life stressors, as, for

example, multiple difficulties in family history and the presence of destructive, persistent inter-parental conflict. Consistent with this, Hamilton (2000) concluded that parental separation and divorce, as well as other negative life events in the families of adolescents with insecure representations, was likely to be tied to multiple negative life stressors, which in turn supported and maintained insecure parent-child relationships.

Parental separation as process and event

A number of findings in the present study confirm the view that parental separation is best conceptualised using both event and life-span perspectives. The concept of parental separation as a crisis period surrounding the departure of one parent from the home (Rodgers, 1994) was, to some extent, consistent with the portrait conveyed by children in the present study. Such a conceptualisation is supported by earlier research (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Hetherington, 1993) which identifies the period immediately following the separation as a particularly vulnerable one for children, owing to the increased stress on parenting practices at this time. Such a conceptualisation, however, reflects but one segment of children's experiences of relationships with parents post-separation in the present study. The ebb and flow of family contexts and circumstances found in the present study, and the consequences for interactions between children and their parents, compel a focus beyond a single point in time in order to gain a more holistic understanding of experiences.

The salience of the relational history was strikingly evident in the study. Processes prior to the event of parental separation exerted a powerful influence on children's perceptions of the quality of relationships with parents in both phases of the present study. This influence was perceptible across the majority of experiences portrayed, but was most notable in problematic relationships. Most children who recorded lower scores on measures of closeness and security with either one or both parents, elaborated on these perceptions to reflect a problematic relational history and this is consistent with findings in recent research (King, 2002; Hamilton, 2000). Similarly, children who perceived positive experiences of closeness and security in relationships with their parents post-separation, drew on positive experiences within these relationships prior to the separation. Significantly, however, and under-emphasised in previous research, where problems existed or where commitment was perceived to have been fragile or impaired prior to the separation, undoubtedly and in all cases, relationships deteriorated following the separation. Existing positive relationships clearly facilitated further positive experiences and this cannot be over-emphasised. Similarly, the risk of negative effects of parental separation on children's relationships with their parents was potentiated where the relational history was a fragile one. Parental separation is, therefore, best understood as representing a serious risk to a deterioration in the quality of relationships with parents where there is already evidence of complication or antipathy. While the

separation per se may not be the underlying cause of deterioration, adjusting to the altered context which accompanies parental separation exacerbates difficulties and disillusionment.

Children's relationships with their parents in the present study were not static but dynamic and fluctuated over time and with changing circumstances. Similar to processes occurring in intact families, a dialectical interplay of interpersonal processes, external volatile circumstances and changing developmental status influenced children's experiences in relationships with parents over the two phases of the present study and throughout the separation process. Beneath the overall impression of coherence and consistency, children articulated and conveyed through their narratives substantial fluctuation and unpredictability. This was evidenced in some cases by accounts of phases of intense conflict and misunderstanding, aggravated by the circumstances surrounding the separation and evolving beyond this to greater reciprocity and understanding in relationships.

Ongoing family transition and the influence of new family members on family dynamics and individual dyadic relationships between children and their parents also contributed to a portrait of flux and instability in interaction and the quality of relationships. In a very small number of cases, exceptional developments within family circumstances, as, for example, the severe illness of a non-resident parent leading to his return to the family home, and the death of a partner of a non-resident mother, generated a transformation in these relationships. For these children, a combination of the experience of an ongoing change in family structure and the children's increased competence and understanding over the two phases of the study underlines the importance of considering the process of family transition over time. As mentioned above, patterns of contact between children and their non-resident parents continued in the main over the two years spanned by the present study and, where contact was perceived to have diminished owing to diminished commitment, children expressed anger more forcefully and interpreted and expressed such parental behaviour as rejection.

Developmental Patterns

The influence of children's age on their perceptions of close emotional ties and security with parents following parental separation was perceptible both cross-sectionally across the different age-groups in the first and second phases of the study and when considered longitudinally, focusing on developmental changes between the first and second phase of interviews. Developmental differences were most notable in perceptions of security, with older children being less likely to feel secure in their relationships with parents than younger children. Adolescent children also described more problematic relationships with *non-resident* parents. Moreover, gender effects interacted with developmental patterns to reveal greater risks for boys in the older age-group in relationships with resident parents and greater risks for girls in the older age-group in relationships with non-resident

parents, consistent with findings in previous studies (Maccoby et al., 1993; Buchanan et al., 1996). Significantly, however, all of the boys in the younger age-group in the present study recorded high scores on closeness and security with their resident parents, indicating increasing distance with increasing age in boys' relationships with their resident mothers in the present study. These findings support previous research which suggests that sons from separated families move closer to their fathers and away from their mothers as they grow into adulthood (Amato & Booth, 1994). All of the boys in the present study, who had contact with their non-resident parent[40], also indicated that they had positive experiences of dependence on their non-resident parent. One notable difference in the present study, however, was that boys in the older age-groups experienced more difficulties in developing *closeness* in relationships with their non-resident parents than did girls in the older age-group.

Children's age was also influential in determining the mechanisms through which intimacy was fostered in relationships, with younger children drawing more heavily upon concrete experiences of care-giving and nurturance, while older children emphasised the importance of processes of communication and mutual support. In keeping with this finding, older children were found to be more likely to experience both greater difficulties in these relationships while, at the same time, showing greater resources for actively re-evaluating and re-thinking core aspects of their relationships with their parents.

Balancing autonomy with connectedness in adolescents' relationships with parents was easier to achieve in the present study where there was a greater sense of interdependence in these relationships. Laursen & Bukowski (1997) assert that *voluntariness* in relationships with parents, the extent to which children opt for continuing relationships with parents and where they determine to a greater extent the nature and frequency of this contact, is characteristic in relationships throughout adolescence. Younger children in middle childhood in the first phase of the study, and approaching early adolescence in the second phase of the study, focused more on preserving structures of power and on receiving rather than providing care, which may enhance the possibilities for closeness and security with resident parents. Consistent with these findings, studies have shown that adolescents in divorced or separated families may be at greater risk for conflict with or disengagement from other family members (Amato & Booth, 1994; Hetherington, 1999). However, the findings of this study diverge from previous findings in highlighting the potential *both* for increased positivity and increased negativity in relationships with parents in adolescence when compared with relationships in middle childhood.

[40] Two males in the older age-group had no contact with their non-resident parent

Cultural considerations

The significance of cultural factors influencing the family environments resulting from family transition is also raised by these findings. Children's contact with non-resident parents was high[41] across both phases of the study, reflecting the high level of contact between children and their parents in the original study (Hogan et al., 2002). As previously mentioned, the most optimistic estimate of contact with non-resident parents was that, following divorce, approximately one third of children see their fathers once or twice per week (Emery & Forehand, 1996), and a recent study in the UK reflects these expectations with 33% of children having contact with non-resident parents 'once per week or more' (Dunn et al., 2004). Figures in the present study suggest that twice as many children have frequent contact with non-resident parents and it is worth considering the cultural influences which may contribute to this comparatively high frequency of contact between children and their non-resident parents in the present study. One possibility is that the strong tradition of family influence and experience in Irish society encourages greater contact between children and their non-resident parents than in other cultural contexts, such as, for example, the UK or the US. Allied to this positive finding on frequency of contact with non-resident parents was the finding in the wider investigation[42], from which the present study evolved, that children also experienced much stability in terms of continued and frequent contact with extended family members (Hogan et al, 2002). Taken together these findings go some way towards supporting the notion that culturally-specific experiences of family life and family relationships are significant determinants of the quality of these relationships in a post-separation context. A second consideration is that Ireland is a relatively small country where, following parental separation, children are likely to remain in close geographical proximity to their non-resident parents and this will naturally facilitate more frequent contact. However, factors other than culturally-specific factors may also be at play in the present study. Most notably, the majority of participants in the present study had established a relationship with their non-resident parent prior to their parent leaving the home, as most of the separations had taken place not more than five years at the time of the first interview.

As outlined in Chapter 2 and Chapter 9, 'closed' and 'open' family boundaries provide a way of distinguishing children's differing conceptualisations of the web of family relationships post-separation. In the present study, most children spoke of their families in terms that suggested 'closed' family boundaries. It is possible that cultural and historical developments in an Irish context, such as the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and the relatively late introduction of divorce to Irish society, shaped children's responses to interchange in biological family relationships and relationships with new family members following parental separation. These influences may serve to preserve more fixed and impermeable boundaries between these different family settings. In the

[41] 65% of children were seeing their parents once a week or more
[42] *Children's Experiences of Parental Separation* (Hogan et al, 2002)

present study, the presence of new partners, particularly the partners of non-resident parents, was strongly associated with low scores in security. Yet, despite these findings, a small minority of children who described ease of contact with new family members across different households also described positive experiences of closeness and security with both parents.

As previously outlined, researchers abroad and most notably in the UK (Maclean & Richards, 1999; Smart et al., 2001) highlight the need to develop a legal framework which can better support more flexible and complex parental relationships across household boundaries. In Ireland the lack of opportunity to formalise new relationships through remarriage has meant that models of family life other than traditional models, have not yet been clearly established in Irish society. Recognition of this need to broaden definitions of family in Ireland to be more inclusive of diverse family forms is clearly evident in family policy initiatives (Daly, 2004). Greater emphasis on the notion of kinship in Irish family relationships is also emphasised, in contrast to a narrower focus on relationships between nuclear family members.

Strengths and weaknesses of the present approach

A primary strength of the study is inherent in the design and methodology adopted, with the aim of exploring individual and subjective accounts of children's close, emotional relationships with parents post-separation. Adopting a child-centred, qualitative approach, the study gained greater insight into the richness of detail surrounding children's individual and unique relationships with their parents post-separation. Drawing principally upon children's qualitative accounts of these relationships, but supplementing these accounts with quantitative assessments, the study contributes to established findings in previous studies by drawing out and elaborating upon some of the processes underlying these outcomes. Thus, while a number of studies have identified greater risks to relationships with non-resident parents, few studies have specified the processes contributing to this risk, particularly from the perspective of the children whose lives are affected. Nor have studies explored in detail children's experiences of intimacy, mutual awareness and inter-dependence in a post-separation context. Similarly, the study provides valuable insight, not alone into the overall patterns of contact with non-resident parents across the two phases of the study, but goes beyond to explore a number of individual patterns which are often disguised or concealed by the larger picture. Moreover, understanding how children experience the *quality* of contact which they have with parents post-separation, provides greater insight into patterns of contact which evolve over time. A number of points contributing to the strength of the study are outlined below.

Of utmost significance to the strengths of the present approach, relying exclusively on children's own perspectives of close relationships with parents post-separation has contributed to the richness

of the narratives and the portrait of children's relationships with parents in a number of ways. As previously outlined, researchers from within a variety of disciplines, perspectives and sets of interests (Greene, 1999; Hogan, 1999; Jenks, 1992; Roche, 1999) have provided a challenge to the view, inherent in a *deficit model* of childhood, that children may not be competent to represent their own experiences accurately and articulately. The approach to the present study, placing children at the centre of this exploration of their close relationships with parents post-separation, provides a striking testament to children's ability to review, re-evaluate and, to some extent, re-create their relationships with their parents in the narratives generated throughout the research process. The individual perspectives of these children are invaluable in light of the variation in family experience portrayed in the present study and the ever-changing experience of family life in the broader social context. Embedded within individual and unique relational histories, these portraits of children's relationships with parents illustrate the many complexities of family experience post-separation. Secondly, a focus on internal processes and close, emotional ties between children and their parents is rare in the literature on parental separation. Drawing upon the views and perspectives of children and involving children across a range of ages, in middle childhood, adolescence and approaching early adulthood, the study identified a number of risk and protective factors associated with closeness and security. Insight into these influences contributes to our understanding of how positive experiences of children's emotional ties with parents can best be promoted. Moreover, given the range of ages included in the sample, and the changing developmental status across the two phases, we can better appreciate the distinctive influences which children's age exerts on their close, emotional experiences with their parents. Focusing upon these internal processes, the study has also identified a distinct set of influences operating upon closeness and security with both resident and non-resident parents. This is in contrast to much previous research which has tended to generalise with regard to parental influences, rather than specifying the distinct influences of resident and non-resident parents. These findings draw attention to the confounding effects of child gender, parental role, parental gender and residential status, both prior to and following parental separation.

Thirdly, as outlined above, the approach to the present study, carried out across two phases approximately two years apart, facilitated greater insight into the ongoing flux and transition in family life which parental separation typically involves. Many previous studies adopting a longitudinal approach have involved large samples and incorporated mainly quantitative methods in their inquiries. In contrast, a qualitative approach involving a relatively small number of participants has enabled the present study to explore the complexity of individual changing family circumstances and the miscellany of responses generated. Importantly, beyond the added dimension which such an approach contributes to our knowledge of protective and risk factors in children's experiences post-separation, interviews with children across both phases of the study, serve to remind us of the highly relative nature of any information generated at a particular point in time. While children's narratives

in the study showed substantial consistency across the two phases, returning to the participants at a second point in the process allowed the researcher to achieve a more wide-angled perspective on the lives and events that were described and served as a caution against representing subjective accounts taken at one point in time as *absolute* realities.

Finally, and related to the point above, by choosing to rely on the perspectives of children alone and on their interpretations of their experiences, the study findings provide a counterbalance to the excessively narrow-minded focus on parental separation as a major trauma in the lives of children. Previous research has shown a discrepancy between mothers' and children's perspectives. In a study of perspectives on post-divorce fathers, many of the mothers reported negative feelings about the quality of co-parenting and about father participation in child-rearing. In contrast, children very frequently chose to include the father in a story-completion task and enacted positive family and spousal re-unifications (Bretherton et al., 1998).

A number of limitations[43] merit consideration in the present study. Firstly, an exclusive reliance on children's perspectives may distort and preclude a more objective representation of the child-parent relationship. Several observations are worth considering in this context. Concordance in child-parent perspectives, and especially in the case of adolescent participants, has been identified as low across a number of studies on a variety of family interaction characteristics. For example, children tend to report higher levels of family conflict and parental control than do parents (Pelton & Forehand, 2001; Jessop, 1981; Olsen et al, 1983). Adolescents tend to view the family more negatively than do their parents (Ohanessian, Lerner, Lerner & von Eye, 2000; Feldman, Wentzel & Gehring, 1989; Noller & Callan, 1986). Similarly, recent studies find a general lack of agreement between parents and children in their basic values (Whitbeck & Gecas, 1988).

Secondly, accessing the *subjective* experiences of children across a range of ages is a challenge which requires careful discernment with reference to the skills and resources which we bring to such a process, not alone across the process of gathering data, but through the analysis and the writing up of findings. As Greene & Hill (2005, pp.7) point out

> Even where our focus is on the understanding of one human being's actions and motivations, his or her account of their own experience should be seen as but one source of information, one which may be valid as an experience but suspect as a source of complete understanding.

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[43] Limitations related to the use of visual research tools such as the Emotional Closeness map to assess perceptions of closeness to parents have been previously outlined and discussed in Chapter 4.

In light of this, the authors advocate that what we should aim for is an *increased* level of understanding of children's experience and the ways in which they process their experiences, mentally, physically and behaviourally, while always mindful of the *partial* nature of such understandings. It is important to acknowledge that this portrait of relationships is but one particular interpretation of a complex network of relationships and perspectives.

Thirdly, consideration of children's narratives on their relationships with parents also requires us to bear in mind that children tend to be protective of the well-being of their parents and may respond cautiously to an exploration of behaviours and experiences in this sensitive context. Allied to this consideration is the subjectivity of the researcher, in terms of the particular configuration of beliefs, expectancies and life experiences which they choose to draw on throughout the research process.

A further limitation to the study is that, although the present sample was accessed through a range of sources, a major resource in sampling access was a number of professional organisations providing specific counselling services for children whose parents have separated[44]. Consequently, there is a danger that those children who participated in the present study were not representative of a more general population of children who have not had access to such services. Some of the children in this study may have been more rehearsed and proficient in the expression of their views on the experience of parental separation. Findings must also be viewed in light of the knowledge that children who have accessed a counselling service are, therefore, more likely to have presented with intense or acute difficulties in coping with the separation of their parents prior to attending such services. Conversely, consideration must also be given to the fact these children have also availed of the aid and assistance of therapeutic programmes, in which they have previously dealt with the challenges and barriers to positive experiences in family life post-separation.

The selective attrition of the sample across the two phases of the study has some negative implications for the findings generated. A striking example of this is the fact that a number of children, experiencing parental separation within the context of extreme and multiple disadvantages, were unable to participate in the second phase of the study. Reasons included increased mobility of such participants who were no longer contactable at the time of the second interview, and more individual, chronic ongoing family transitions which made it excessively troubling for children to be involved or, in some cases, for their parents to consent to their involvement. The absence of this invaluable information generated in these more complex and difficult circumstances merits serious consideration in the discussion of these study findings.

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[44] 75% of children who took part in both phases of the present study had attended a counselling service.

Finally, the present study and the emerging analyses and text are based on the life experiences of a limited number of children, many of whose non-resident parents lived in relatively close proximity to them. Clearly, it is not possible to generalise to children's experiences within the wider population, or to those experiences generated in different cultures and communities.

Summary

The present study clearly demonstrates that children do not see themselves, nor indeed wish to be represented, as passive victims of their parents' separation. Children's competence in articulating the complexity of their experiences was very evident in their narratives. Moreover, their depiction of themselves throughout these narratives was as subjects and agents, with the ability to exert an important influence on their relationships with parents post-separation. Many children experienced close, secure relationships with both parents, especially resident parents, with a small number of children perceiving more positive relationships with their parents since the separation. Factors facilitating closeness and security for children were positive established patterns prior to the separation and experiences of accessibility, commitment and connectedness in relationships post-separation. Frequency of contact between children and their non-resident parents was high across both phases of the study and was a prerequisite for closeness and security in these relationships.

Risks to relationships were characteristically rooted in the relational history and pre-existing problems were clearly exacerbated by the stressors which children and their parents experienced in adjusting to post-separation family life. Risks were also strongly associated with explicit and ongoing inter-parental conflict, in particular where this conflict extended beyond the boundaries of the inter-parental dyad. Children's age was also important in shaping experiences of closeness and security, with younger children perceiving closer and more secure relationships with both parents than older children. However, a small number of children had increased contact with their non-resident parents across the two phases of the study and these children were all in the older age-group. The risk of *no contact* with a non-resident parent was greatest for children whose parents had separated when they were young. Children who had no contact or diminishing contact with their non-resident parents expressed their distress and anger in response. There was also an age and gender interaction in effects with older boys describing more difficulties in experiences of closeness with both parents and older girls experiencing more difficulties in experiences of security with non-resident parents.

Risks to children's relationships with non-resident parents were significantly higher than with resident parents. A key factor contributing to this difference was the nature of contact which children described as mostly involving recreational activities and lacking opportunities for the further development of relationships of inter-dependence and obligation. By contrast, care-giving

relationships with resident parents and the negotiation of new roles and responsibilities in the home gave rise to feelings of increased inter-dependence and mutuality in children's relationships with resident parents. Finally, children's constructions of closeness in relationships with parents were closely associated with ongoing and everyday interaction and were more perceptibly open to influence as a result of parental separation. Children's experiences of security, on the other hand, were linked more closely to past experiences and to the expectations and anticipations which these experiences had generated.

Implications and future directions

In Ireland, over the last decade in particular, we have witnessed a growing emphasis on including children's views as part of research and policy development. However as pointed out in the National Children's Strategy (Ireland, 2000), despite this interest there continues to be limited empirical data and research-based knowledge on issues concerning children and their families in Irish society. In order to improve the quality and effectiveness of services provided to children and their families, research-based knowledge incorporating children's views and experiences is urgently needed. Acknowledgement of the importance of children's perspectives is now increasingly reflected across a broad spectrum of fields. Family life experiences are complex and, as evidenced throughout this study, children, as reflexive, participating agents in the unfolding story of family life, can greatly contribute to our understanding of the complexities surrounding experiences of close, emotional ties in changing family circumstances, through their narratives on these relationships. In these final sections, implications for future research and policy development are addressed with reference to key findings in the present study.

As outlined above, many children who participated in the study described relationship patterns with parents indicating the successful re-negotiation of these relationships with both parents. The challenge remains to draw on these experiences of successful relationships post-separation and to apply what we know presently to policy and practice in family life. Although our knowledge in this area is still imprecise, these findings alone provide sufficient knowledge to begin to guide and inform policy and practice. Children's narratives emphasised a number of important components building up to the successful negotiation of post-separation relationships with their parents. The importance for both children and their parents of their relational histories was underlined and commitment to preserving and protecting positive qualities in these relationships was of paramount importance. Of equal significance was the need for flexibility to review and re-think relationships within the new contexts in which these relationships evolved. Given the potential anxiety and uncertainty surrounding issues of permanence in relationships post-separation, the importance of facilitating committed relationships of interdependence and mutual support, across child and parent

gender and across parenting role, emerged as highly salient in these findings. Children's views and perspectives provide a starting point from which to develop a broader research agenda. As highlighted in the findings of the present study, the successful re-negotiation of relationships post-separation is a 'relational process' (Trinder et al., 2002, p. 45) and developing policies informed by consideration of the attitudes and perspectives of all family members is the key to protecting family relationships across diverse family contexts. Further qualitative studies, focusing on the perspectives of children, resident parents and non-resident parents, are needed to explore experiences of family obligation, interdependence and support in post-separation family environments.

The particular risks for children brought about by parental separation, most particularly for children's relationships with non-resident parents, warrant serious consideration in future research and policy development in Irish society. Two distinct concerns are emphasised in relationships with non-resident parents in the present study. The first of these involves the loss of contact between a child and their parent. The emphasis on *maintaining* contact between children and non-resident parents, reflected in much previous research in the area, continues, therefore, to be highly salient. We know with some certainty that frequent and regular contact is a pre-requisite for children to closeness and security in relationships with their non-resident parents. We also know that, where this contact breaks down or diminishes, children struggle to make sense of this loss, and risks appear to be greatest for children whose parents separate when they are very young. Many of the difficulties which children expressed in the present study resonate with experiences of children and non-resident parents in the UK (Dunn et al., 2004; Trinder et al., 2002). However, we have no available empirical research exploring the experiences of Irish fathers and non-resident parents and this is a gap which urgently needs to be addressed.

A second concern is the *quality* of contact and interaction facilitated for children and their non-resident parents. As noted in the present study, children expressed difficulties in developing relationships of intimacy and familiarity with their non-resident parents. The settings in which relationships with non-resident parents continued were often not conducive to an effective exchange between children and their parents. Related to this, lack of clarity regarding parental role and parental responsibility influenced the development of greater inter-dependence in relationships between children and their non-resident parents. These findings reinforce the need to give serious consideration to the confounding influences of parental role and child and parent gender, when developing policy responses to the effects of parental separation on children's relationships with parents. Simpson et al., (2003, pp 203-204) point out that:

> Despite the many problems that come with parenting at a distance, increasing numbers of men do create, negotiate and maintain new kinds of relationships with their children and their former partners...and overturn an opposition which defines men through a rhetoric of rights, autonomy and entitlement and women through an ethic of care and responsibility for others.

The importance of exploring and creating new patterns of relating in post-separation family life is reflected in a recent report on family life in Ireland (Daly, 2004). The urgent need for further research on children and parents' experiences of relationships with non-resident parents was emphasised, in particular the need to review concepts of access and parental responsibility. The need for serious consideration of continuing gender differences and expectations in parental roles was also underlined with recommendations for an increasing focus on the emotional input of fathers to family life in contrast to their traditional role as economic provider. These concerns are reflected in other family policy documents (Fahy 1998; Fahey & Russell, 2001; McKeown & Sweeney, 2001). There is obviously a range of opinion in response to these issues but no research-based knowledge specific to the Irish cultural context currently exists.

The need to consider children's relationships with their parents post-separation against a framework which takes into account the influences of all family members, was reinforced by findings in the present study. Acknowledging the realities and challenges to co-operative inter-parental relationships post-separation, the extent to which children valued respectful relationships between their parents in post-separation family life cannot be over-emphasised. The Family Mediation Service, set up in 1986 and formally established as part of the Department of Social and Family Affairs in 1998, facilitates a non-adversarial approach to post-separation family arrangements (Hogan et al, 2002). The need for counselling and other assistance to help couples and families move forward after divorce or separation is also underlined by the present study. Further studies of co-parenting experiences post-separation in an Irish context are needed to draw on the experiences of parents who have succeeded or can help to identify key difficulties in sharing the parental role in the altered family context following separation. The difficulties of moving between households and of fragmented family experiences associated with shared parenting have already been addressed. Yet, despite the inconvenience of certain post-separation arrangements, children clearly prioritised continued and positive experiences with both parents. According to Trinder et al. (2001), children do not need their parents to have face-to-face contact in order for their own contact with a parent to continue and, in the main, are accepting of a parent's reluctance to engage with another parent. Most significantly, parents need to avoid explicit, ongoing inter-parental hostility; and where it continues, ensure that its effects are not felt beyond the boundaries of the inter-parental relationship.

Finally, complex and individual family circumstances were experienced by a small number of children in the study. The needs of children coping with an additional layer of problems, including alcohol and drug abuse and the mental health problems of their parents, must be given special consideration in light of these findings. Where psychiatric problems are the root cause of parental separation, the provision of family support services and counselling for all family members is desirable. The establishment of the Family Support Agency in 2003 represents a positive development in the provision of support for families in Ireland, ranging from family mediation, marriage and relationship counselling to developing family and community resource centres throughout the country (Government of Ireland, 2001).

Conclusion

A general model of children's relationships with parents post-separation can be developed around the concepts of facilitators and barriers. Most children were successful in adapting to and re-negotiating the terms of their relationships post-separation. Striking also was children's undiluted commitment to the continuity of relationships with both parents. Parental separation, according to this study, does not inevitably represent a reduction in availability, where there is sufficient review and re-evaluation of relationships. Greater emphasis on the factors promoting positive *processes* in relationships in diverse family forms and settings is needed, in contrast to a preoccupation with differences between separated and intact families and the *negative* effects which parental separation may represent to children's lives. A primary focus in such an approach is to shift the emphasis from one of solely *maintaining* contact with parents, especially in the case of non-resident parents, to one of developing relationships of mutual influence and interdependence. In this way, we can shift our focus from a comparison between separated and intact families, a distinction which has permeated previous research in the US and, perhaps to a less extent, in the UK, to a focus on the processes between children and their parents, regardless of family type and upon how these relational processes can best be protected and enhanced. Much of the knowledge that we have from previous research in the area has focused on comparing outcomes for children in separated and intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Maccoby et al., 1993). These studies are invaluable in providing insight into the possible difficulties which arise for children in the context of post-separation family life. However, as highlighted by researchers associated with these studies, most of the differences that have been identified are slight. There is a danger, therefore, that studies which focus exclusively on comparisons between differing family structures may obscure or disguise the success which many children and their parents experience in their relationships post-separation.

Single and fixed notions of the concept of family are increasingly being replaced by more fluid and diverse family settings. Richards (1987, pp. 313) points out the 'facility' of an understanding of

family as represented by marriage and parenthood alone. According to the author, from the point of view of psychological work, the important point to emphasise is that the family is:

> A social institution which is defined by the actions and beliefs of those who take part in it. Thus, if we wish to study families, we must begin to investigate the meaning they have for parents and for children and the part they play in their lives. How does an individual define his/her family and how does this relate to his/her living circumstances? What contacts exist with non-resident kin and what obligations are there? Who provides aid at times of difficulty? Who attends marriages and funerals?

If we accept this broader definition of family, we must also acknowledge that frameworks/contexts conducive to the sharing of these beliefs and attitudes among family members post-separation need to be created and promoted. Clear, qualitative differences in experiences of relationships with resident and non-resident parents following parental separation have been identified in the present study and in much research in the area. Focusing on the specific sets of influences which operate within these relationships can contribute to building positive experiences in relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. Security and attachment relationships do not appear to be negatively affected by the process of parental separation per se. Dependence on non-resident parents appears to be less negatively affected than, for example, processes of intimacy. To build upon such a finding, developing stronger ties of obligation on the part of non-resident fathers would help to preserve and enhance feelings of security for their children with these parents.

The importance of viewing the child-parent relationship within the framework of other family relationships is highlighted in a number of different ways by findings in the present study: Children's accounts of inter-parental interaction in the present study clearly demonstrated an association between these experiences and their perceptions of closeness and security in their own relationships with parents. Their narratives underscore the need for some parents to delineate more clearly the boundaries between the child-parent relationship and the inter-parental relationship. The actions and interactions of all family members, resident and non-resident parents and children, therefore, work together to influence and shape post-separation relationships. Finally, developing and promoting greater reflection, in the wider social context, upon the many meanings which families may represent, and the relationships generated across these varying family forms, may contribute to greater mutual influence and ease of contact across different households.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Newsletter for agencies/schools

Children's experiences of parental separation

This project is being carried out by the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College, Dublin in association with ACCORD, Barnardos and Teen Between. We are also working with representatives from the Family Mediation Service. Work began on the project in November 1999 and it is due to be completed in July 2001. The project is funded by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

Parental separation is part of a process of family change, which is distressing for both adults and children. Changes occur at a time when adults may be least capable of supporting their children because of their own distress and anxiety. The project aims to gain an understanding, from children's own perspectives, of the impact of parental separation on their lives, relationships, school experiences and lifestyles. In addition, we will explore children's experiences of support services and examine implications for a child-centred approach to family policy.

Children in middle childhood (8-10 years) and adolescence (14-16 years) will be interviewed using qualitative methodology. In-depth individual interviews with children and adolescents will explore

- children's accounts of events at the time of their parents' separation
- the impact of this process on their everyday lives
- their understanding of and beliefs about parental separation
- their feelings about the separation process
- how they coped with the changes which resulted
- their contact with and experience of support services.

A key objective will be to identify children's support needs, both formal and informal, at critical times both during and after the process of parental separation.

This study has the potential to add a new dimension to Irish Family Policy. It asks children to tell their own stories of their experience of parental separation and, specifically, to give their

perspectives on services and systems existing under current policy provision. In this way, it will contribute a highly valuable element to the direction of future policy provision – that of children's own voices.

Can you help us?

- We wish to include 30 children aged 8-10 and 30 aged 14-16
- We would be interested in interviewing one *or more* children in a family
- We would like to contact some children who are receiving support through a service and some who have not received any such support to date
- We would like to include children from a range of different social and economic backgrounds
- We would be very grateful if you could assist us in identifying children to participate in the study.

The study will be approached from the ethical standpoint that children who may be vulnerable must be offered support in relation to research participation. Children will be interviewed in supportive environments, provided by the partner agencies. If children wish to discuss further the feelings that arose during the research sessions, we will refer them to an appropriate service.

Diane Hogan_____

Ann Marie Halpenny _____

Sheila Greene_____

Children's Research Centre, TCD

Appendix 2: Request for Parental Consent

REQUEST FOR PARENTAL CONSENT

The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin
In association with ACCORD (Dublin), Barnardos and Teen Between.

Date:

Dear Parent

We are carrying out research on the experiences and views of children whose parents have separated. Through this research, we hope that support and services for children and families will be improved. Your help and contribution is very much needed and appreciated.

There are two parts to the study. First, we are asking parents to fill out a short questionnaire. Second, we will be talking to children about what their parents' separation was like for them, how they felt about it and what other people can do to help in this situation. If you are interested in taking part, please sign the attached form. This indicates your agreement to complete a questionnaire and your consent for your child to be interviewed.

All of the information will be completely confidential. Your child and family will not be identified in any reports on the project.

If you have any questions about the research please ring us at 01-6082958 or 01-6082901 and if you would like, we would be glad to meet you to tell you more about what we are doing.
Many thanks for your help.

Yours sincerely

_____

Diane Hogan
Ann Marie Halpenny
Sheila Greene

Appendix 3: Research consent Form

I, ...[parent's name] give my permission to the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, to

I. Questionnaire……[parent's name]

II. Interview……[child's name]

Signed .....

Date .....

Witnessed ……

Appendix 4: Children's Interview Schedule

Personal Details

Age

Place in Family

Place of Residence

School

Hobbies

Description \ Narrative of Separation Process

- ❑ Family composition and roles of family members before separation
- ❑ Contact and relationships with family members at that time
- ❑ Perceptions of parents' relationship at that time
- ❑ Communicating news of separation
  - *Who communicated news?*
  - *When was news communicated?*
  - *How was news communicated? What information was given?*
- ❑ Telling others \ Not telling others
- ❑ Reactions of others
- ❑ Memory of separation event
- ❑ Role of young person in decision-making (e.g. custody, visiting)
- ❑ Family status at present \ New family circumstances
- ❑ Who could you talk to at the time?
- ❑ What kind of support was available?
- ❑ What additional help would you have liked?

Practical Consequences of Parental Separation

- ❑ Family routine
- ❑ Residence
- ❑ Contact and relationships with family\friends
- ❑ Economic circumstances
- ❑ Holidays
- ❑ Household\family responsibilities
- ❑ School performance
- ❑ Who did you talk to about these changes?

- What kind of support was available to help you with these changes?
- What kind of support was taken up?

Understanding of Parental Separation

(When first aware of parents' marital difficulties, when told about parents' separation and/or when parent left)

- Cause of separation (fault, blame)
- Nature of separation (temporary\permanent)
- Parental relationship
- Legal implications and processes (e.g. family mediation)
- View of separation as natural and acceptable vs. stigmatised
- Beliefs and expectations regarding
  - custody
  - contact with non-resident parent
  - continuity of parental relationship
  - future family composition
- What helped you to understand your parents' separation?
- What could have helped you understand your parents' separation better?

Feelings about Parental Separation

(When first aware of parents' marital difficulties, when told about parents' separation and/or when parent left)

- Fear of loss
- Worry about future
- Worry about parents
- Relief
- Anger
- Sadness
- Guilt
- Loneliness
- Happiness
- Surprise
- Embarrassment
- Confusion
- No feeling

(Explain source of possible responses)

Coping with Parental Separation

- Awareness of support services
- Main sources of support (formal \ informal)
- Main difficulties experienced
- Personal coping strategies
- Communication with others (close family, extended family, friends)
- Contact with services
- Support within school
- Lack of support
- Suggestions regarding additional support that could have been provided

Overall assessment of support and support needs – Five field map

Appendix 5: Feelings checklist



Put a tick beside any of the feelings listed below which you experienced as a result of your parents' separation

	Often	Sometimes	Never
Fear of loss	☐		
Worry about future	☐		
Relief	☐		
Anger	☐		
Worry about parents	☐		
Sadness	☐		
Guilt	☐		
Loneliness	☐		
Happiness	☐		
Surprise	☐		
Shame	☐		
Confusion	☐		
No feeling	☐		

Appendix 6: Five Field Map

Appendix 7: Family Links Map

FAMILY LINKS

Use blank circles as needed to identify important people in your family. Draw in connections where they exist. Use different types of lines to indicate the nature of the link or relationship.

_____ = **strong**

---------- = **weak**

= **stressful**

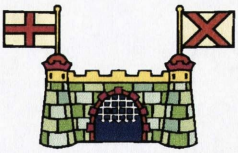
Appendix 8: Leaflet outlining details of Phase II

Background	**What to do if you'd like to take part**
In 2000/2002, you took part in a study in which we (The Children's Research Centre) interviewed 60 children and young people about their experiences of parental separation. We have put together the ideas and opinions expressed in these interviews and a report has been submitted to the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. This report will be published in September/October 2002 and we hope that your perspectives can influence the decisions and directions of future family policy.	If you would like to take part in the second part of this study, you could discuss it with one or both of your parents. Both you and your parent(s) would sign a consent form, which states that you are happy to take part in the research. I will be happy to interview you at any time over the coming months and wherever you choose for the interview to take place. The interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes.
Continuing the research My name is Ann Marie Halpenny and I carried out the interviews with many of the children and young people. I am working as a researcher in The Children's Research Centre, TCD and also completing my Ph.D thesis in the Department of Psychology, TCD. I am very interested in continuing this research and am particularly interested in talking to children and young people about their relationships with their parents following parental separation. I am hoping to interview many of the same children and young people. The interview will be very similar to the one we did before.	**Your contribution to the study is much appreciated** We very much enjoyed talking to all the participants in the study last year. We feel that listening to children and young people can tell us so much about what they think and how they feel about their experiences of parental separation. I hope that you will agree to take part in this second phase of interviews. If you would like more information, you can phone me on these numbers: 01-6083912/01-6082901 or contact me at the following address: Ann Marie Halpenny The Children's Research Centre, Aras an Phiarsaigh, Trinity College, Dublin 2.

Appendix 9: Parental consent form

Trinity College, Dublin.

Department of Psychology



Children's Research Centre

I _____ (parent's name)

give my permission for

_____ (child's name)

to take part in research on children's experience of child-parent relationships following parental separation.

I understand that

- ID codes will be used so that no child can be identified by anybody other than Ann Marie Halpenny and her research supervisors
- All information covered in the interview will be completely confidential and used solely for the purposes of the research. If Ann Marie is using information for presentations or reports based on her research, all identifying information will be changed
- (Child's name) can tell Ann Marie if there are any questions she/he does not wish to answer and is free to withdraw from the interview at any time if she/he wishes
- If (child's name) says something that causes Ann Marie to be worried about her/his safety or well-being, she will have to tell this to a guidance counsellor/parent but not without letting (child's name) know beforehand.

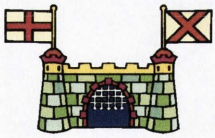
Signed_____

Appendix 10: Child consent form



Trinity College, Dublin.

Department of Psychology



Children's Research Centre

_____ agrees to talk to Ann Marie Halpenny as part of a study on children's relationships with their parents following parental separation.

When I talk to Ann Marie I know that

- My name will not be known to anybody except Ann Marie
- Everything we talk about will be private and she will not discuss the information with anybody else apart from her supervisors
- I will only talk about what I want to talk about
- If I tell Ann Marie something that makes her worry about my safety or well-being, she will have to talk to someone who looks after me (for example, guidance counsellor/parent). She will not do this without letting me know beforehand
- I can tell Ann Marie at any time if I don't want to continue the interview
- I can ask Ann Marie if I want to see the interview when it has been typed

Signed_____

Date_____

Appendix 11: Interview Schedule: Phase II

Participant number :	Time since separation:
Initials:	Resident parent
Age:	Location:
Date of Birth:	Date of interview:

A. Review of previous interview

- Highlight key issues raised in previous interview

B. Emotional closeness map

Ask child/young person to spend some time thinking about who they feel close to in their immediate family and why they might feel this closeness. Show the emotional closeness map. Ask children to concentrate on their parents first of all and to place their parents in one of the circles, according to how close they feel they are to this parent. Explain that if, for example, they feel very close to their parent, they could place them in the circle closest to them. If they feel quite close to parents, they can place them in one circle away from them, etc. Ask children/young people to think about siblings and place these on the map according to how close they feel to them. When child/young person has completed map, allow them a few minutes to think about what kind of things helped them choose where they would place different family members

Closeness to mother

- ❑ Constructions of closeness to mother
- ❑ Facilitators of closeness
- ❑ Barriers to closeness

In answering, think about what kind of things made you decide to place your mum in the circle above? What kind of things make it difficult to be close to your mum?

Closeness to father

- ❑ Constructions of closeness to father
- ❑ Facilitators of closeness
- ❑ Barriers to closeness

In answering, think about what kind of things made you decide to place your dad in the circle above? What kind of things make it difficult to be close to your dad?

C. Continuity in closeness to parents

- Perceptions of continuity and change in experiences of closeness to parents following parental separation

D. Caregiving
  - Preparation of meals
  - Assistance with schoolwork
  - Perceptions of change and continuity
  - Involvement of non-resident parent in caregiving

E. Contact with non-resident parent

Frequency and consistency
  - Frequency on weekly basis
  - Contact setting
  - Stability in contact since Phase I
  - Child's response to present contact arrangements

Activities with non-resident parents
  - How time is spent with non-resident parents
  - Presence of other family members
  - Child's response to activities with non-resident parent

F. Parental responsiveness to needs of child
  - Child's perception of resident parent/non-resident parent's response to need
  - Change and continuity following parental separation
  - Reciprocity in responding to need
  - Single-parent responding to needs of child
  - Responding to needs of child while living outside family home

G. Parental awareness of child's well-being
  - Child's perception of resident/non-resident parents' awareness of their well-being
  - Change and continuity following parental separation
  - Parental awareness of well-being at time of the separation
  - Facilitators of parental awareness
  - Perceptions of parental protectiveness
  - Child's awareness of parental well-being

H. Trust and reliance in relationship with resident/non-resident parent

- Perceptions of trust in relationship with resident/non-resident parent
- Perceived effect of parental separation on ability to trust parent
- Facilitators/Barriers Barriers to trust
- Reciprocal patterns of trust
- Reliance on resident/non-resident parent in times of stress
- Perceived effect of parental separation on ability to rely on parent
- Facilitators/Barriers
- Reciprocal patterns of reliance

I. Communication with resident/non-resident parent

- Frequency of communication with resident/non-resident parent
- Ease and openness in communication with parents
- Communication at time of separation
- Confiding in parents
- Communicating affect to parents
- Perceived effects of parental separation on communication
- Perceived importance of communication with parents
- Facilitators/Barriers

J. Conflict with resident/non-resident parent

- Frequency of conflict with resident/non-resident parent
- Factors contributing to conflict with parents
- Change and continuity in patterns of conflict with parent following parental separation
- Conflict resolution

K. Inter-parental relationship

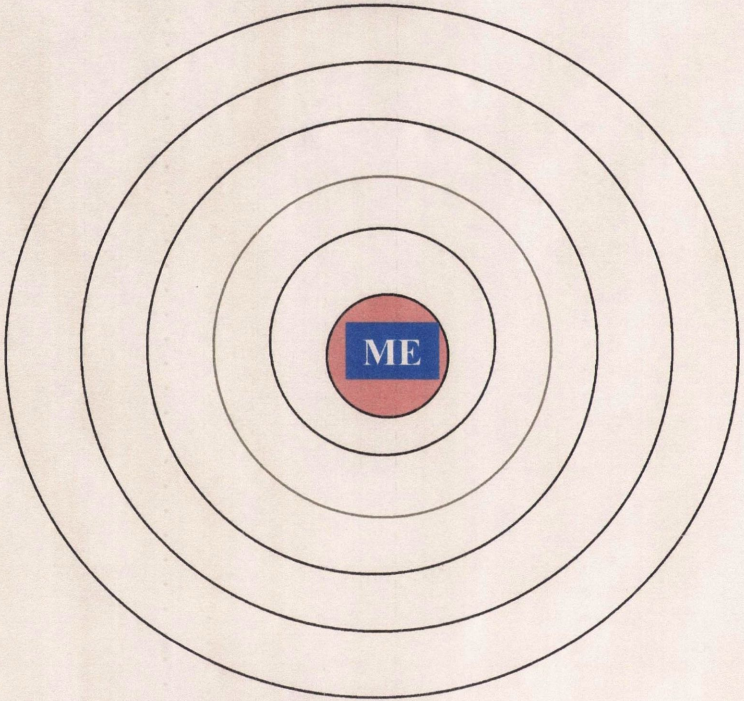
- Perceptions of parental relationship prior to separation
- Perception of parental relationship following separation
- Extent and nature of contact between parents currently
- Child's response to inter-parental relationship
- Experience of divided loyalty
- Expectations regarding future of inter-parental relationship

L. Concluding section

- Perceived effect of parental separation on other relationships (e.g. friends, other relationships)
- Particular challenges of experience of parental separation and growing through adolescence
- Has the experience of relationship been primarily one of continuity of previous relationship or of developing new relationships with parents
- Recap on key issues in closeness and security with resident parents
- Recap on key issues in closeness and security with non-resident parents

Appendix 12: Emotional Closeness Map

EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS MAP



Write the names of your immediate family members (mum, dad, sisters and brothers) in one of 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 could place them in the circle nearest you in the centre, etc.

Appendix 13: Security Scale

(Mother)

(Kerns, Klepac & Cole, 1996)

1. Some children find it easy to trust their mam **BUT** Other children are not sure if they can trust their mam

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

2. Some children feel like their mam interferes when they are trying to do things **BUT** Other children feel like their mam lets them do things on their own

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

3. Some children find it easy to count on their mam for help **BUT** Other children think it's hard to count on their mam for help

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

4. Some children think their mam spends enough time with them **BUT** Other children think their mam doesn't spend spend enough time with them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

5. Some children do not really like telling their mam they are thinking or feeling **BUT** Other children do like telling their mam what what they are thinking or feeling

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

6. Some children do not need their mam much **BUT** Other children need their mam for lots of things for

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

7. Some children wish they were closer to their mam **BUT** Other children are happy with how close their they are to their mam

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

8. Some children worry that their mam does not love them **BUT** Other children are really sure that their mam loves them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

9. Some children feel like their mam really understands them **BUT** Other children feel like their mam does not really understand them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

10. Some children are really sure their mam would not leave them **BUT** Other children sometimes wonder if their mam might leave them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

11. Some children worry that their mam might not be there when they need her **BUT** Other children are sure that their mam will be there when they need her

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐ *sort of true* ☐ *really true* ☐

12. Some children think that their mam does not listen to them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT Other children do think that their mam listens to them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

13. Some children go to their mam when they are upset

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT Other children do not go to their mam when they are upset

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

14. Some children wish their mam would them more with their problems

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT Other children think that their mam helps help enough with their problems

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

15. Some children feel better when their mam is around

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT Other children think do not feel better when their mam is around

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

(Father)

1. Some children find it easy to trust their dad

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children are not sure if they can trust their dad

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

2. Some children feel like their dad interferes when they are trying to do things

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children feel like their dad lets them do things on their own

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

3. Some children find it easy to count on their dad for help

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children think it's hard to count on their Dad for help

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

4. Some children think their Dad spends enough time with them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children think their dad doesn't spend spend enough time with them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

5. Some children do not really like telling their what they are thinking or feeling

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children do like telling their dad what dad they are thinking or feeling

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

6. Some children do not need their dad much

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children need their dad for lots of things for

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

7. Some children wish they were closer to their dad

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children are happy with how close their they are to their dad

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

8. Some children worry that their dad does not love them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children are really sure that their dad loves them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

9. Some children feel like their dad really understands them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children feel like their dad does not really understand them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

10. Some children are really sure their dad would not leave them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children sometimes wonder if their dad might leave them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

11. Some children worry that their dad might not be there when they need him

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children are sure that their dad will be there when they need him

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

12. Some children think that their dad does not listen to them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children do think that their dad listens to them

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

13. Some children go to their dad when they are upset

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children do not go to their dad when they are upset

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

14. Some children wish their dad would help them more with their problems

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children think that their dad helps them help enough with their problems

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

15. Some children feel better when their dad is around

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

BUT

Other children think do not feel better when their dad is around

sort of true ☐ *really true* ☐

Items on the Dependency subscale: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 15.

Items on the Availability subscale: 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14.

Appendix 14: Scores on Security Scale and Emotional Closeness Map

Preliminary categorisation of map placements into five levels of closeness yielded a mean score for current closeness with resident parent of 6.96 (S.D. 2.21, range 2,8) indicating that children generally perceived their relationships with resident parents to be close. A mean score of 4.67 (SD. 2.93, range 0,8) for current closeness to non-resident parents was recorded. Details of these findings are presented in Table A1 below.

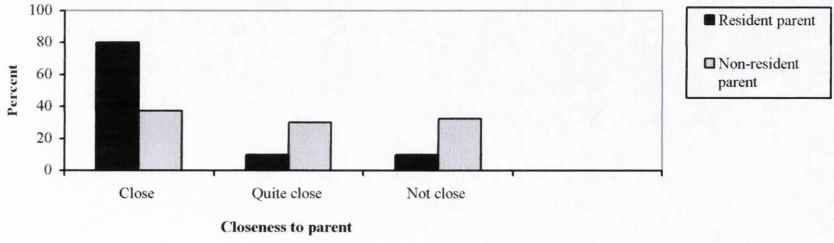
Table A1. Mean, range and standard deviation for scores on Emotional Closeness Map

	Mean	Standard deviation	Range
Resident parent	6.96	2.21	2-8
Non-resident parent	4.67	2.93	0-8

As the majority of children (80%) placed their parents in the two innermost circles, representations of closeness to parents on the map were divided into three categories as follows: *close* as represented by placing a parent in the innermost circle, *quite close* as represented by placing a parent in the next outermost ring and *not close* for all other placements and for parents not represented on the map at all.

A large majority of children (80%) represented their resident parents as being close to them while a minority of children (37.5%) represented their non-resident parents as being close to them. Four children (10%) represented resident parents as being quite close while twelve children (30.0%) represented non-resident parents in this category. Finally, four children (10%) represented their resident parent as not close to them while thirteen children (32.5%) represented their non-resident parents as being not close to them. Findings on perceptions of closeness to resident and non-resident parents are presented in Figure A1 below.

Figure A1. Current closeness to resident and non-resident parents



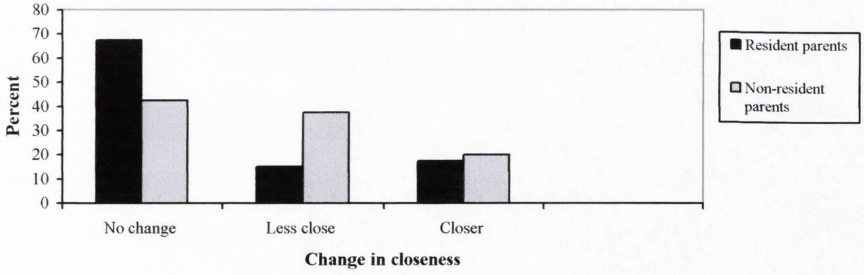
Differences in closeness to resident and non-resident parents

In order to examine differences between children's representations of closeness to resident and non-resident parents, a Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was carried out. A significant difference was found ($z = 3.092$, N – Ties = 22, $p = 0.002$, two tailed). The largest single group (49%) reported closeness to non-resident parent less than closeness to resident parent. A second group (44%) reported no difference between closeness to non-resident and resident parents. Finally, 7% of cases had higher closeness scores for the non-resident parent than the resident parent.

Continuity and change in perceptions of closeness to parents following parental separation

Children were asked to reflect on closeness to both parents prior to the separation and to represent these experiences using the Emotional Closeness Map. The majority of children (65%) perceived no change in closeness to resident parents following the separation while 42% of children perceived no change in closeness to non-resident parents following the separation. Thirteen children (32.5%) indicated a change in closeness to resident parents following the separation. Seven children (17.5%) perceived their relationships with their resident parent to be closer, while six children (15%) perceived their relationships with their resident parents to be less close. Over half of the participants (55%) indicated a change in closeness to their non-resident parent. Fifteen children (42.0%) perceived their relationship with non-resident parents to be less close following the separation while eight children (20%) perceived their relationship to be closer. These findings are represented in Figure A2 below.

Figure A2: Changes in closeness to resident parents and non-resident parents following parental separation



Perceptions of security in relationships with parents following parental separation

All children (N = 40) completed the Security Scale[45] for resident parents. Two children, both boys and both in the older age-group, did not complete the scale for their non-resident parents as they had had little or no contact with their fathers for a number of years. Scores recorded on the scale are presented in the following sections.

The Security Scale yields scores on a single, continuous dimension of security. The 15 items on the scale are scored from 1 to 4 (from least to most secure) with scores averaged to derive a final score. In the present study, the mean average score recorded for each item on security with resident parents was 3.30 (SD 0.60, range 1.60, 4.00) while the mean average score for security with non-resident parents was 3.03 (SD 0.65, range 1.60, 3.93). These results are presented in Table A2 below.

Table A2: Mean, range and standard deviation for scores on Security Scale

	Mean	Standard deviation	Range
Resident parent	3.30	0.60	1.60-4.00
Non-resident parent	3.03	0.65	1.60-3.93

Scores on the security scale were further categorised into high, medium and low scores to enable cross-tabulation to be carried out.

Differences in perceptions of security with resident and non-resident parents

In order to examine differences between children's experiences of security with resident and non-resident parents, a Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was conducted. There was a significant difference at the 0.05 level between children's perceptions of security with resident and non resident parents ($z = 2.095$, N – Ties = 34, $p = 0.036$, two tailed). The largest single group (60.5%) reported security of non-resident parent less than security of resident parent. A second group (29%) had higher scores on security with non-resident parents than with resident parents. Finally, 10.5% of cases reported no difference in security with non-resident parents and resident parents.

[45] Items on the security scale tap the degree to which children believe a particular attachment figure is responsive and available, children's tendency to rely on the attachment figure in times of stress and children's reported ease and interest in communicating with the attachment figure.

Perceptions of dependence and availability in relationships with parents following parental separation

To examine children's perceptions of availability and dependence in relationships with resident and non-resident parents in the present study, scores were divided, following Lieberman, Doyle & Markiewicz (1999), into two sub-scales, separately for each parent. The first sub-scale dependence, reflected whether children themselves sought or valued parental help (nine items). The second sub-scale, availability, reflected whether they perceived their parents as available (six items).

Dependence in relationships with parents following separation

A mean average score of 3.16 (SD 0.67, range 1.70, 4.00) was recorded for perceived dependence on resident parents, while a mean score of 3.05 (SD 0.65, range 1.55, 4.00) was recorded for non-resident parents. Data were further analysed for differences between children's perceptions of dependence on resident and non-resident parents. A Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was conducted. No significant difference was found between perceptions of dependence on resident and non-resident parents ($z = .423$, N – Ties = 21, $p = 0.673$, two tailed). The largest single group (45%) reported no difference between dependence on non-resident parents and resident parents. A second group (29%) reported dependence on non-resident parents greater than dependence on resident parent. Finally, 26% of cases reported dependence on non-resident parents less than that of resident parents.

Availability in relationships with parents following separation

A mean average score of 3.31(SD 0.60, range 1.60, 4.00) was recorded for perceived availability of resident parents. With regard to availability of non-resident parents, a mean average score of 3.03 was recorded (SD 0.65, range 1.60, 3.93). Differences between children's experiences of availability of resident and non-resident parents were examined. A Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test was conducted and a significant difference was found at the 0.05 level ($z = 2.861$, N – Ties = 33, $p = 0.04$, two tailed). The largest single group (66%) reported availability of non-resident parents less than availability of resident parents. A second group (20%) reported availability of non-resident parents greater than that of resident parents. Finally, 13% of cases reported no difference between availability of non-resident parents and resident parents. Details of scores on perceptions of dependence on and availability of resident and non-resident parents are presented in Table A.3.

Table A3: Mean, range and standard deviation for scores on Dependence and Availability

	Dependence			Availability		
	Mean	Standard deviation	Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Range
Resident parent	3.16	0.67	1.70-4.00	3.31	0.60	1.60-4.00
Non-resident parent	3.05	0.65	1.55-4.00	3.03	0.65	1.60-3.93

Association between closeness and security

The association between perceptions of closeness and security in relationships with resident and non-resident parents was examined using Spearman's rho (a non-parametric test of correlation). There was a significant positive correlation between security in relationships with resident parents and closeness to resident parents (rho = .401, N=40, p = 0.010, two-tailed). There was also a significant positive correlation between security in relationships with non-resident parents and perceived closeness to non-resident parents (rho = .376, N = 38, p = 0.020).