# Contents

## CHAPTER 1  
**SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sole parents: changes and challenges</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian families</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parenting</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help and support for single parents</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation anxiety? Stop blaming one-parent families for all of society’s ills</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The financial impact of divorce</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia doing better for families</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent welfare: all pain and no gain</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents deserve support, not scapegoating</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lone parent families employment status</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking the big stick to single parents is not the answer</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the government wants to ignore about sole parents and jobseeking</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 2  
**SEPARATION AND SHARED CARE ISSUES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting after separation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting children and young people through separation and divorce</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation and children</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers spend most time with children post-separation</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child contact after separation</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parenting: coping as a non-resident parent</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared care time: an increasingly common arrangement</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-parenting: getting the balance right</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared care laws damaging many children</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared parenting: what’s really important when dads move out</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Exploring issues – worksheets and activities**  

**Fast facts**  

**Glossary**  

**Web links**  

**Index**
Single Parent Families is Volume 357 in the ‘Issues in Society’ series of educational resource books. The aim of this series is to offer current, diverse information about important issues in our world, from an Australian perspective.

KEY ISSUES IN THIS TOPIC
One in five Australian families with children under 15 years of age is now headed by a single parent, and the numbers are growing. Relationship breakdown, unexpected pregnancy, death – the reasons for single parent households are clear, but the challenges can be varied and complex. Lone parenting is different in a number of ways to being in a two-parent household and it can have its difficulties.

This book explores the changes and challenges for the parents and children of single parent households, and confronts the myths about single parent families. In particular, the book addresses the emotional impacts, financial costs and the issue of welfare dependency.

How do we support children and young people through separation and divorce? Although most single parents are mothers, shared care time is now becoming an increasingly common arrangement – what is the involvement of fathers in raising their children? How do you get the balance right in co-parenting arrangements, for the wellbeing of both parents and their children?

SOURCES OF INFORMATION
Titles in the ‘Issues in Society’ series are individual resource books which provide an overview on a specific subject comprised of facts and opinions.

The information in this resource book is not from any single author, publication or organisation. The unique value of the ‘Issues in Society’ series lies in its diversity of content and perspectives.

The content comes from a wide variety of sources and includes:
➤ Newspaper reports and opinion pieces
➤ Website fact sheets
➤ Magazine and journal articles
➤ Statistics and surveys
➤ Government reports
➤ Literature from special interest groups

CRITICAL EVALUATION
As the information reproduced in this book is from a number of different sources, readers should always be aware of the origin of the text and whether or not the source is likely to be expressing a particular bias or agenda. It is hoped that, as you read about the many aspects of the issues explored in this book, you will critically evaluate the information presented. In some cases, it is important that you decide whether you are being presented with facts or opinions. Does the writer give a biased or an unbiased report? If an opinion is being expressed, do you agree with the writer?

EXPLORING ISSUES
The ‘Exploring issues’ section at the back of this book features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book. The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.

FURTHER RESEARCH
This title offers a useful starting point for those who need convenient access to information about the issues involved. However, it is only a starting point. The ‘Web links’ section at the back of this book contains a list of useful websites which you can access for more reading on the topic.
Sole parent families in Australia

D emographic shifts in Australia over recent years have led to an increase in the number of households headed by a sole parent. These families accounted for 22% of all families with children under the age of 15 years in 2004-06, an increase from 14% in 1986-88 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2007). Numbers of sole parent households are likely to continue to increase into the future, with a projected growth from 838,000 households to almost 1.2 million households between 2001-2026, which represents a 42% increase (ABS, 2004).

The pathways to sole parenting are varied. De Vaus (2004) attributed the increase in numbers in recent years to a combination of issues such as divorce, breakdown of cohabiting relationships, women who have a child outside of a relationship, less repartnering and children delaying leaving home.

This draws attention to two important points in considering the lived experience of sole parents. The first is that although some sole parents make a choice to parent independently, many do not and are unlikely to have envisaged sole parenting as part of their future life plans. Secondly, not only are sole parents dealing with the day-to-day demands of their parenting role, but quite often with the additional fall-out from relationship breakdown. This may include not only mental and physical health impacts, but also the enduring and often difficult challenges that either co-parenting, or a lack of co-parenting, brings.

In addition to these more personal aspects of sole parenting, sole parent families are often at an increased risk of disadvantage in terms of employment, housing, income and social participation (ABS, 2007). The estimated risk of being in housing stress, for example, is highest for sole parents as compared to singles and couples with or without children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007).

In addition to these more personal aspects of sole parenting, sole parent families are often at an increased risk of disadvantage in terms of employment, housing, income and social participation.

Sole parents are more likely to be renting their accommodation (ABS, 2007; Butterworth, 2003) and insecure tenure (i.e., a lack of permanent housing) has implications for health and wellbeing. For example, security of tenure related to entry into public housing has been associated with improved health and wellbeing and increased family stability. Parents feel more in control, thus reducing chronic stress, and have more mental ‘room’ to focus on issues such as relationships and children’s education (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2006).

The presence and/or combination of relationship breakdown, parenting responsibilities and associated disadvantages may all serve to have a considerable impact on a sole parent’s psychological wellbeing. Loxton, Mooney, and Young (2006), using data from two cohorts of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ages 22-27 years and 47-52 years), found that the psychological health of sole mothers was poorer than that of other women of the same age, particularly for those

We should celebrate diversity and support the core functions of a family no matter what the structure, suggests Elly Robinson in this article first published in the Family Relationships Quarterly.
aged 47-52 years. Sole mothers aged 22-27 years were more likely to have experienced both suicidal thoughts and actual self-harm than other women of their age, and both groups were more than twice as likely to have experienced depression.

Butterworth (2003) also found that sole mothers were more likely to experience mental disorders and severe mental health and physical health problems, as well as having an alcohol or other substance use disorder and having previously experienced violence. The impact of sole parenting on fathers is also evident. Data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey indicates that single fathers with young children are the loneliest, and report the lowest levels of support and friendship of men and women in any household situation (Flood, 2005).

All of these factors would be expected to impact on the quality of parenting that sole parents may be able to offer children. However, whilst the children of separated families have a greater risk of adverse outcomes compared to children from intact families, the relationship is complex and the size of the differences in risks in relevant research is not large (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

One important factor that arises in Pryor and Rodger’s (2001) review of the literature is that children who experience multiple family transitions are at a greater risk of adverse outcomes. This emphasises the importance of family stability, whether a sole parent, step- or intact family. Other literature highlights the importance of caring and connectedness to parents and significant others which surpasses a range of demographic characteristics, such as single versus two-parent families, as protective factors against risk behaviours (Rayner & Montague, 2000). The level of material disadvantage in the family also appears to play a role (Spencer, 2005).

**Single fathers with young children are the loneliest, and report the lowest levels of support and friendship of men and women in any household situation.**

The overall message from the literature is that sole parenting per se does not necessarily lead to adverse outcomes for children. However, with increasing pressures such as housing and financial stress in the current economic climate, it seems timely to ask how sole parents can be supported to offer the caring and connected relationships that children need in increasingly challenging times.

Although a consideration of the child’s best interests in separated families is foremost, the health and wellbeing of the sole parent cannot be disregarded. It is also in the child’s best interests to have a parent who is coping and functioning well. If the parent is struggling to provide an environment that fosters caring and connectedness, other adults who are significant in the child’s life may need to be encouraged to take on this role.

Encouraging sole parents to maintain a sense of relativity may also help them to cope. For example, exposure to excessive amounts of television is considered to impact on children’s health. However, if it offers the only opportunity for a sole parent to complete household tasks without constant interruption, then a balance may need to be struck between activities that potentially impact on child health and dealing with parental stressors that may equally impact on child health.

An awareness of the particular and enduring challenges that sole parents face will assist policy makers and practitioners to address the needs of both sole parents and, by association, their children. Inherent in this is the need for professionals to be aware of and step back from their personal opinions on different family structures and approach the subject as dispassionately as possible (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

As Dr Jan Pryor stated at a recent families symposium, there are few scripts in place for how to behave in these changing times for families; we should celebrate diversity and support the core functions of a family, no matter the structure. A more empathic approach and an effort to focus on stability, connectedness and wellbeing, therefore, is a worthwhile focus for all families and children, irrespective of family circumstances.

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**REFERENCES**

In June 2011, there were an estimated 6.4 million families living in Australia with a total of 19 million family members. An estimated 3.4 million people were not living with family and of those 60% lived alone. The vast majority of families were couple families (84%). About 2 in every 5 couple families had dependants living with them (43%). The next largest group were lone parent families (15%) and 2 out of every 3 lone parent families had dependants living with them (67%). Of the 950 thousand lone parent families, 83% were single mothers. Of all families, 80% had at least one employed family member aged 15 years and over. Some 7% of families had one or more members unemployed. Just under half of all families had a member who was not in the labour force, while in 17% of all families every member was not in the labour force (for example, retired couples).

ENDNOTES
2. Dr Jan Pryor is the Chief Commissioner of the Families Commission, New Zealand, and Director of the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families at the Victoria University of Wellington. The Families Commission Research Symposium was held in Wellington, New Zealand on 18 June 2008.

Elly Robinson is Manager of the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse.
A growing number of children in Australia are being raised in single parent households. The breakdown of relationships causes some parents to choose to leave a two-parent relationship to become a sole parent. Others are left behind with the children when a partner leaves. Other people become single parents through a range of life choices and circumstances, including the death of a partner. Each path has its own issues to deal with.

Parenting alone is different in many ways to being in a two-parent household and it can have its difficulties and challenges. It can also have positive benefits such as being able to make your own decisions about parenting and having more time to spend with your children and develop a closer connection.

Children can have a very positive experience in a sole parent household. It’s important for them to know where they come from, and to know and love both parents without feeling guilty. Single parents usually find it helps to have a strong network of friends and family for support.

**HOW SINGLE PARENTING IS DIFFERENT**

Single parents have a different experience of parenting than two-parent families. While there are challenges and difficulties in being a single parent, there are also joys and benefits for parents and children.

**Some challenges:**
- Some single parents feel grief or loss over the breakdown of a relationship or loss of a partner. You might feel alone and isolated at times and miss having someone to share parenting with.
- Your child’s contact with and visits to their other parent, and movement between homes can become part of your lives and something you have to get used to. It’s important to work out how to do this well.
- Sometimes it’s stressful and tiring to care for children 24 hours a day without help, especially babies, toddlers, or children or young people with special needs or challenging behaviours. Ensure you are able to take breaks, talk to someone supportive or seek support from professionals.
- Single parent families often have less money than two-parent families where many have a double income.

Whatever the challenges it’s important to live your life in ways that shows your children you are happy. This will help them accept and value their lifestyle.

**Some benefits:**
- Some single parents feel happy and relieved to be on their own and out of a conflict situation. You may enjoy the freedom of making your own parenting choices without consulting or arguing with someone else.
- You may find you have more time for yourself and can choose how you spend your time.
- You may develop a closer connection with your child as you can spend more time together. Single parents often discuss things with their children that they might have discussed with the other parent, e.g. what to buy, where to go for holidays.
- Many children develop a broader range of skills by being more involved in the day to day running of the household, sharing chores and looking after themselves. While this is valuable learning, it’s important it doesn’t ‘take over’ and they still have the time to do the usual things of childhood, such as being with friends, playing sport, doing homework or just dreaming. If they have been given a lot of say at home, some children may have difficulty at school if they expect to be treated in the same way by teachers.

**WHAT PARENTS NEED TO THINK ABOUT**
- Children need the security of knowing you are the parent and the grown-up and it’s your role to look after them. It’s not a good idea to rely on your children all the time for company.
- For parents who have just separated or lost a partner, feelings can be very strong. This is also a very difficult time for children. Get support from other family members and friends or professionals, rather than talking with your children about your concerns.
- Children need to know that you need adult company too. Spend time with supportive family and friends.
Sometimes it can take a while for children to settle down after a family break-up. Children may need extra help and understanding from parents, other family members, carers and teachers.

Children are often trying to have a relationship with parents who live apart. They can feel disloyal and confused when they love both parents and have to listen to ‘put-downs’ from parents about the other. This is very distressing to children. They often want to defend the other parent but are afraid of getting into trouble. It’s most important to keep children out of issues between parents.

Develop a range of supports for your child. It may help to have the support of an adult who is the same sex as your child. Be choosy about who this is, and be confident they are trustworthy.

Give thought to and make plans for your children’s future in case anything should happen to you.

**CHILDREN’S BEHAVIOUR**

Some children are more likely to misbehave for the parent who has them most of the time and does most of the disciplining and daily routines. It’s often easier for them to behave better for the parent they see for a shorter time and do more fun things with.

It is often easier for one parent to be in charge of parenting including guiding what children can do. On the other hand, being responsible for all the discipline can be demanding. If your child moves between two homes it may be useful to talk to their other parent about some common limits.

Check with other parents if you are unsure about what limits are reasonable for your child. Develop limits and routines that will work for you and your child e.g. bedtime, computer access.

**VISITING THE OTHER PARENT**

It can be very difficult for parents to accept the excitement and joy a child shows when he is about to see the other parent. Feelings can run high for the parent who does the daily discipline and work, and has the main responsibility for a child only to watch that child go off for a fun time.

Children want to be able to love each parent without feeling guilty. Let your child plan and enjoy time with the other parent if you can. It will make a difference for your child to see that you are pleased about this contact.

Children who have no contact with the other parent need to have some understanding of where that person fits into their lives.

Make changeovers as natural and friendly as possible. If you are unable to do this, try to avoid contact with the other parent, e.g. pick-up at a neutral place or with a friend present. There are also Children’s Contact Centres where you can have changeovers without talking to the other parent.

Allow time for your children to ‘fit back into home’ when they return. Some children take a few minutes, others hours, and some take days to adjust. Some may act out, or become quiet and sad. Some need time to get used to the ‘swapping’. They may feel sad about leaving the other parent and guilty about feeling this way. They may feel disloyal to you. They might be upset if they did not have an enjoyable visit. If your child takes days to settle and this doesn’t improve over time, you may need to get professional help.

Talk happily about what has been happening at home while they have been away but not so they will feel they have been left out. Allow them to talk about what they have been doing. Don’t pressure them with questions, as they may ‘close up’ to protect the other parent.

Avoid using your children to find out what your ex-partner is doing and don’t use children to carry messages between parents.

**CHILDREN IN SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLDS**

Growing up in this type of home can be a very positive experience for children, who often have a close and special relationship with the parent. Sometimes children envy their friends in two-parent households,
but it may help them to know that all families have their ups and downs.
>
Following the loss of a parent and the family unit as they knew it, children require time to grieve. They need to feel supported in the range of emotions or behaviours they experience.
>
Children in single parent households are often more mature because of the extra roles they have. Let them know you feel proud of them.
>
Make sure they have time to spend with their friends.
>
If you are very close to your children, it may be hard for them to leave home when they are ready or they may feel guilty about leaving you on your own. Let them know that you have your own life to live and that you will be proud, not unhappy, when they grow up and are ready to make their own choices.
>
Take new relationships slowly, especially introducing the new person into your home. This may mean some sacrifices on your part. If you decide to have a partner, it can often create problems for your children. They may show this with behaviour and feelings, whatever their age. Talk things through with them, listen to how they feel and let them know that they are still just as important to you.

REMININDERS
>
Single parenting is difficult and challenging, but can have benefits as well
>
Being in a single parent home can be a very positive experience for children
>
Help your children feel proud of their lifestyle
>
Children need to know where they come from and who their parents are
>
Children need to be able to love both parents
>
without feeling guilty
>
Make sure you have your own life so your children can see you are happy.

CONTACTS

South Australia
>
Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting
>
Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606, 9 am to 4:30 pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre
>
Parents Without Partners: Tel (08) 8359 1552
>
SPARK Resource Centre: Tel (08) 8212 3266
Provides services for sole parents
>
The Second Story Youth Health Service has a Young Mums/Young Parents Project Worker on each of our sites. They provide counselling, group programs and health care.
   - Central: 57 Hyde Street Adelaide, Tel (08) 8232 0233
   - South: Beach Road Christies Beach, Tel (08) 8266 0653
   - North: Gillingham Street Elizabeth, Tel (08) 8255 3477
   - West: 51 Bower St Woodville, Tel (08) 8268 1225
>
Northern Parent Resource Program – for parenting courses and groups. Tel (08) 8250 6555
>
Centacare – for parent support programs, counselling and advice. Tel (08) 8210 8200, www.centacare.org.au
>
Children’s Contact Services: Tel 1800 050 321
For supervised changeovers and visits call the Family Relationship Advice Line, 8 am to 8 pm Monday to Friday and 10 am to 4 pm Saturdays (except national public holidays).

Australia
>
Centrelink: Tel 13 13 05. Social security and child care payments
>
National Council of Single Mothers and their Children: Freecall 1300 725 470
>
Relationships Australia – for parent support programs and relationship counselling. Tel 1300 364 277, www.relationships.com.au

WEBSITES
>
Parenting SA – For other Parent Easy Guides including: Family break-up, Being a Dad, Being a Mum, Being a parent, Step-families, Families that work well, Discipline (0-12), Discipline (teens), www.parenting.sa.gov.au
>
Centrelink, www.centrelink.gov.au
>

SINGLE PARENT SUPPORT GROUPS
>
Parents without Partners, www.pwpaustalia.net
>
National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC), www.ncsmc.org.au

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HELP AND SUPPORT FOR SINGLE PARENTS

It can be hard to ask for help as a single parent. But looking for support doesn’t mean you’re not coping. In fact, it’s a smart thing to do for both you and your kids, advises Raising Children Network.

Children are a ticket to making new friends at first-time parent groups, playgroups, kindergartens, schools, or sporting and leisure centres. Invite people to afternoon tea, or to come for a walk – invitations out equal invitations in. Talk to other parents – you might be surprised at the family changes they have been through themselves.

Seek out support groups. Groups for single parents can be especially helpful for sharing ideas, feelings and experiences with others in the same boat.

Try online forums, chatrooms and social networking sites. Going online can help you connect with other single parents from Australia and around the world. Many single-parent groups have forums or chat rooms connected to their websites. You could also try social networking websites, like Facebook and MySpace. They can give you a chance to network with individuals and join groups.

Parents who get support use more positive parenting strategies, are better able to cope and are more consistent in parenting decisions than those who try to ‘go it alone’. Start by checking out our single parents forum at http://raisingchildren.net.au/forum/

Finding the right support
➤ It’s quality, not quantity. It makes no difference whether you have a few close friends or a large group. Both are equally good for your emotional health and wellbeing, as long as you feel you’re getting the support you need.
➤ Give and take. Reaching out for support – and saying yes when it’s offered – can be hard. You might feel like you should be able to cope on your own, or that you’re being a nuisance. But people like to help out. Also, giving and receiving support lets people feel good, see things in a different light, and forget about their own problems for a while.
➤ Stay positive. People who are critical, unhelpful or even hostile can have a bad effect on your self-esteem. Don’t hesitate to cut your ties to people and things that upset you. Instead, surround yourself with good company – people who have dreams, hopes and goals.
➤ Collect friends you can count on. Friendships can sometimes get lost in the process of separation and divorce. It can be hard to stay in touch with friends who don’t have kids when your child care duties have increased. It’s good to find ways to keep in touch with old friends and develop new relationships. If you find it hard to get kid-free time, try meeting for coffee at a child-friendly café, or meet at the park so the kids have something to do.

Sorting out your finances
As a single parent, you have three sources of income:
➤ Your own earnings
➤ Child support
➤ Government payments.

If you can get child support from your ex-partner, do so – but make sure it’s worth the effort.

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Support can come in the form of practical help to lighten the workload, or emotional support to help you cope with parenting alone.

Without the respite, I would not have been as calm a caregiver as I have managed to be. Isolation and children is a bad mix for any caregiver. Regardless of any other differences or similarities, no one understands being a single mum like another single mum.

Where to find support
➤ Make new connections in your local area. Local papers, councils and libraries often have information about neighbourhood houses, playgroups and toy libraries. Maternal and child health nurses can also be a valuable source of support and advice.
➤ Get involved with other parents.

People who can help you
Sometimes it’s difficult to think of someone to ask for a favour or talk to about what’s going on.

You could try:
➤ Friends – support from friends might be less complicated and emotional than support from family.
➤ Counsellors or therapists – they can offer help and neutral advice without any emotional involvement.
➤ Online or telephone hotlines or counselling – this might be good if you’re housebound a lot of the time.

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The mental health and wellbeing of Australian children is deteriorating and this is caused by a breakdown of two-parent families, according to a report released today by University of Sydney law professor Patrick Parkinson. The For Kids’ Sake report was commissioned by the Australian Christian Lobby and draws on previously published data. So what should we make of it? George Patton explains that the situation is a lot more complicated.

Is the wellbeing of young people declining?

We would need to have good records on children and young people’s mental health, wellbeing and behaviour going back 50 years to be clear about whether there has been a decline. At best these records go back about 20 years.

But there is a strong feeling that we’re seeing higher rates of emotional and behavioural problems in young people than we’ve seen in previous generations, across a range of areas:

➤ Self-harm has leapt into prominence in the past decade
➤ Patterns of drinking in young people have changed, with higher rates of drinking and more risky behaviour
➤ We’ve seen fluctuations in cannabis use, and other illicit drug use, which peaked around the turn of the millennium and has since fallen.

Young people are exposed to a more complex world than in previous generations. This brings terrific opportunities – and we talk a lot about the internet and social networks – but also emotional hazards.

There’s long been a generation gap between parents and their kids but the gap has become wider and it’s harder for parents to engage in the world of young people.

What do you make of Professor Parkinson’s claim that the rise in parental separation and an increase in single parent families is to blame? There’s no doubt that a young person’s relationship with their parents and siblings is really powerful driver of who they are, how they feel about themselves and how they behave. Kids who grow up in families where parents are separated tend to have more emotional and behavioural problems, and they tend to be more persistent. That doesn’t mean that families other than a ‘traditional’ two-parent family are bad places for kids.

Good parenting is based on the capacity of parents to communicate and connect with their children. They also need to set values, boundaries and rules – these are the kinds of things kids need when growing up.

What is known about the mental health and wellbeing of children in alternative family settings?

The last National Mental Health Survey of Children
and Adolescents dates back to 2000. It found kids were doing best in families where there were two biological parents together. They were doing least well in families where there was a single parent. Families where you had a step-parent or children moving between parents fared somewhere in the middle.

But despite alternative family structures becoming more common, they really haven’t been systematically studied. The next National Mental Health Survey of Children and Adolescents is currently being planned – and how kids fare in alternative family settings is a really important question for this survey to consider.

Are you concerned about stigmatisation of single parent families and alternative family structures when you see reports such as this?
One of the big dangers is making the parents of these families feel inferior and insecure – that’s the last thing they need.

These families have a different set of challenges. And stigma, not only for the parents but also for the kids growing up in those families, is one of these challenges.

The way families are forming has changed profoundly over the past few decades, in terms of the age at which we’re becoming parents, whether we choose to marry, whether a parent works, or both parents work, and the likelihood of parents being time-poor. These are all huge changes that have occurred within a relatively short space of time.

We’re also seeing new family structures emerge. As a society, we’ve moved beyond looking at a family merely in terms of two biological parents of different sexes living together. We’re facing a future where families will come in all shapes and sizes. So we need to think about new models to best support the changing needs of these such families.

Prof Parkinson argues that greater education and family support is needed to improve the health and wellbeing of children. Is he missing anything?
I’ve had a quick glance through his recommendations and I agree that we should be educating parents. But there’s a question about whether education will, in itself, be sufficient.

We need to be looking at the broader context in which parents are functioning.

The shape of families has changed. The role of extended family members as live-in caregivers has changed. Parents are working more and there are fewer opportunities for parents to come together with other parents in a way that is mutually supportive.

All these factors need to be considered.

There’s another group of parents that this report largely overlooks: the teenage parents, or the mums and dads who have dropped out of school.

They’re often not on a great life track in terms of their own emotional wellbeing and their own risky behaviours. They often don’t have great employment prospects.

These young people who become parents have particular needs. And their kids have particular needs that are different again. They need material and emotional support. Without this, education really isn’t going to make much difference.

Professor George Patton is Group Head of Population Health Studies of Adolescents at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute.

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THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF DIVORCE

Joint research led by the Australian Institute of Family Studies has found that equivalised household income after divorce declined for women but not for men.

The research found that some women were able to recover their income after six years through repartnering, increased labour force participation, and an increased proportion of income coming from government benefits. However, Australian Institute of Family Studies Director, Professor Alan Hayes said this is not the case for divorced women with dependent children.

“Divorced women with dependent children found it difficult to recover their income post-divorce. We know from other research that sole mothers with dependent children experienced difficulties combining paid work and family responsibilities with less support,” he said.

Divorced women with dependent children found it difficult to recover their income post-divorce.

“The study also found that divorced men and women had a lower household income prior to separation than those who remained married and this has a bearing on their financial position in six years.

“While divorced men and women had lower assets before they separated than those who remained married, the gap appeared to widen at least in the first six years after divorce.

“There is some evidence that the effect of divorce on assets lasts into older age and this negatively impacts on income in later life. But the long-term effects of divorce are largely offset by repartnering.”

Australian Institute of Family Studies Senior Research Fellow, Dr Lixia Qu said more Australians will experience divorce in the future and this has long-term financial implications for them and the Australian income support system.

“Divorce has a big impact on both men and women whose assets continue to fall behind married households and this impacts significantly on retirement income for divorced men and women who remained single, making them more reliant on government support to get by,” she said.

Joint researcher, Professor Matthew Gray of the Australian National University said while assets took a hit, most divorced women were able to recover their income position over six or seven years.

“This happens by a combination of increased employment rates, re-partnering and an increased level of government benefits. But many divorced women and men were left with a large and widening gap in their assets, compared to non-divorced contemporaries,” he said.

Professor David de Vaus of the University of Queensland explained that one of the factors behind this is likely to be that many divorced women and men missed out on the recent property boom, a period when many Australian households were able to build up considerable assets due to steadily rising house prices.
Divorce has a big impact on both men and women whose assets continue to fall behind married households and this impacts significantly on retirement income for divorced men and women who remained single, making them more reliant on government support to get by.

The joint research by the Australian National University, Queensland University and the Australian Institute of Family Studies drew on data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Study involving nearly 7,700 households and 14,000 household members from 2001 to 2010.

The research found that:
➤ Households with married and never divorced men and women aged 55-64 years have annual equivalised incomes of between $50,000 and $55,000, compared to income of between $38,000 to $40,000 for households headed by divorced single men and women of the same age
➤ Divorced single men and women have less household assets than married and never married counterparts both before and after divorce. However, the gap in household assets is much larger around six years after divorce ($360,000-$390,000) than before divorce ($180,000-$190,000)
➤ Men and women experienced a decline in their subjective wellbeing after separation. While there was an overall recovery within six years, men recovered less well than women.

The research was presented at the 12th Australian Institute of Family Studies' conference Family Transitions and Trajectories at the Melbourne Convention Centre from July 25-27, 2012.

Note: Equivalising household income adjusts household income to take account of the different needs of households of different size and composition. There are economic advantages associated with living with others, because household resources, especially housing, can be shared.

Australia performs well on a number of important outcomes of work-life balance: fertility (1.9 children per woman) is above the OECD average (1.7) and close to the replacement rate (2.1), the female employment rate (66.2%) has been rising steadily since the 1960s and is now well above OECD average (59.6%), and the gender wage gap (12%) is below average (16%). Part-time work is an important feature among employed women. But unlike many other OECD countries, mothers often return to full-time work once their children reach schooling age. The recent introduction of paid maternity leave will further help parents to reconcile work and family commitments.

However, joblessness among sole parent families is a significant problem. While it has increased since the early 2000s, at just over 50% in 2009 the sole parent employment rate is one of the lowest in the OECD, which contributes to an above average poverty rate for sole parent families. This issue is of particular concern as around 1 in 5 children live in such households, and projections show that the number is likely to increase by 20% over the next 25 years.

In the past, Australia provided prolonged periods of support to sole parents with very few work conditions attached, and subsequently their benefit dependency was high. More recently, the age of the youngest child at which parents are entitled to income support without them having to be available for full-time work and/or training was decreased. Australian policy should continue to support work, training or job search requirements for recipients of sole parent benefits.

Despite above average social expenditure on families, Australia spends less on childcare services than most OECD countries: 0.4% of GDP compared with the OECD average of 0.6%. This has contributed to low childcare enrolment rates for young children, with only 40% of children aged less than 6 years enrolled in formal childcare. Australia should consider extending its childcare support programmes to provide more help to working parents.

Australia does well for most of its children as measured by outcomes within the three key dimensions of material wellbeing, education and health. The child poverty rate has fallen over the last 10 years and is now below the OECD average, PISA reading scores are above the OECD average, older children are less likely to be out of education or employment, and the incidence of infant deaths has also seen a large decline.
There's something perverse about the Federal Government’s plan to cut the payments of more than 100,000 single parents – those already doing some form of paid work will be worse off, and those not yet able to get work will get no additional support.

“I am a classic case of a single parent who was penalised for working and now forced to live in near poverty conditions as I try and raise my child,” said one of a stream of emails received by the ACOS office following the Federal Government’s announcement that it’s going to strip away parenting payments from sole parents when their child turns eight.

Sadly, 40-year-old Alanna is not the only single mum in this predicament. Soon, the mother of 10-year-old Ben will be joined by another 100,000 single parents who are already struggling to make ends meet and give their children the same opportunities the rest take for granted.

Alanna would normally come under the so-called ‘grandfather clause’ but as she’s worked consistently for more than three years, she was forced to reapply, and then forfeited the benefit because she didn’t want to stop working.

When the work dried up more than a year ago, she was put on the lower-paying Newstart Allowance and now has to make do on the base payment of $265 per week, instead of $324 per week (under Parenting Payment Single).

Although she has skills and solid retail work experience behind her, she is finding it hard to get another look in. Not only are flexible working hours important for a sole parent, but as she says, “I’m also facing the twin problem of being labelled a single mum and seen as over the hill for many jobs I apply for.”

The fact is, single parents like Alanna are already required to seek part-time employment and half are already in some form of paid work. But the absurdity of the proposed change is that it punishes those already doing some form of paid work, and provides no extra support and assistance for others experiencing barriers to get into the workplace.

It is hard to see how dropping a single parent family’s income will increase their job prospects. The only thing it will do is create more hardship and poverty ...

A breakdown of what the government expects to take out of the hands of individual households from the change shows the biggest losers are those already in the workforce – those single parents who are working 15 hours a week, often in casual employment on the minimum wage, to feed, educate and house their family.

According to figures provided by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, those earning between $200 and $600 a week will have their disposable income slashed by between 11.1 and 12.8 per cent, or as much as $223 a fortnight.

And those who can’t get into paid work like Alanna, with no other form of income, stand to lose around $114.90 a fortnight.

The perverse outcome surely lays to rest the argument that the move is a workforce incentive measure. It is hard to see how dropping a single parent family’s income will increase their job prospects. The only thing it will do is create more hardship and poverty for families who are already struggling the most.

Community welfare groups have consistently argued that the things that will make a difference to the
employment prospects of single parents are things such as intensive career counselling and support, training for those with limited employment-related skills, affordable good quality child care, and ongoing jobs with predictable, family-friendly working hours.

But as far as we are aware, the only new investments in these services in this year’s budget directed to those affected by the proposed payment cuts is a $3 million telephone career-counselling service.

Some services for this group have been reduced. Around $50 million a year is being cut from Job Services Australia services despite the fact that the funding available to assist even long-term unemployed people is very thin: on average, enough to interview a ‘long-term’ unemployed person once every two months and spend $500 on training.

Budgeted increases in JET Child Care subsidies are due to higher demand, not an expansion of eligibility, and indeed both eligibility and the level of subsidy are being reduced. If nothing else, the plan illustrates the sheer inadequacy of the Newstart Allowance and the urgent need to increase it to a descent liveable level – more than the current below-poverty-line amount of just $35 a day ($38 a day for single parents). It’s true to say that if Newstart were an adequate income support payment, the plan to move more single parent families onto it would not be of such great concern.

The Government should beef up supports to assist single parents, especially those experiencing major barriers to entering the workforce due to limited skills, training, education, discrimination and lack of work experience.

The obvious way out is for the Government to follow the recommendation of the Henry Tax Review and lift Newstart by $50 a week. This has the strong support of union and business groups, economists, and the whole community sector. The Government should also beef up supports to assist single parents, especially those experiencing major barriers to entering the workforce due to limited skills, training, education, discrimination and lack of work experience.

As another sole parent, Jacqui, wrote:

Sole parent’s battle, we battle everyday and being on our own, our children’s wellbeing is totally reliant on one person being able to provide. It is very hard to do that on a minimum wage, and nearly impossible to find stable full-time employment. Now that you are removing this safety net to the lower paid Newstart Allowance, it creates even more stress and uncertainty in our lives ... We are working, we are studying, and we are fighting like hell to bring up our children to be the next generation of Australia. Please rethink this change. The stress of the uncertainty and burden of poverty impacts our children and our health; it impedes our capacity to parent and provide a half-decent upbringing for our children.

Jacqui’s email to our office highlights the reality for a great many single parents, around 90 per cent of whom are women. We suggested she send it to our federal parliamentarians, including the Prime Minister and the Treasurer. For Jacqui and Alanna’s sake, and that of their children, and the other 100,000 single parent families, we hope our federal representatives in Canberra will listen.

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Opinion columnists and politicians often talk about the importance of contributing to society through paid work and taxes, and not expecting government support for every hardship life throws our way.

We hear it in terms like mutual obligations or social contract, or, as Bernard Salt puts it in *The Australian*, not succumbing to Special Disease and Victim Syndrome.

Much has been made of the terrible burden placed on the federal budget by those who need income support because their parenting responsibilities do not allow them to participate fully in the paid workforce.

Some columnists talk about single parents reliant on receiving welfare payments as if they are the “undeserving poor”. The reality is that most single people on Parenting Payment are women working hard to provide for their children – it’s just that they can’t earn much in the paid workforce.

This is in large part due to the combination of inadequate child care and school holiday programs, difficulty finding jobs with flexible hours, being solely responsible for every domestic task at home when the paid work day is done, and the effect on self-confidence and job readiness of being out of the paid workforce for a few years.

For single parent families, welfare benefits help close the gap between very low and median household income, which has a massive effect on their ability to pay for housing.

The problem with Census information on rent is that the figure given is the average, not the median. The median is more useful because it is the halfway point – half the households are paying less than the median figure in rent.

A better guide to the private rental market can be found in the *Australian Property Monitors Rental Report* for March 2012. Averaged across capital cities, median rent in Australian capital cities is now $421 per week for units and $481 for houses.

This means that the median income household cannot afford a median rent unit, and definitely not a house, without going into housing stress – paying more than 30 per cent of their income on housing.

In fact, you’d be lucky to find anything for rent in most capital cities for less than $370 per week (30 per cent of the median household income). And when you’re on a very low income, spending 30 per cent on housing doesn’t leave much for other costs of living like electricity, food, transport, and medical expenses.
According to the ABS report on Government Benefits, Taxes and Household Income 2009-10 released on July 5, 2012, single parents would earn just 36 per cent of the average equivalised private household income of couples with dependent children if they didn’t receive welfare support payments.

That’s just $369 per week. If they’re looking for a place to live for less than 30 per cent of their income, that means finding somewhere for less than $110 per week in rent. It’s just not possible.

With Parenting Payment and Family Tax Benefit, single parents on an average equivalised household income earn around $801 per week. That means they can afford to pay $240 per week in rent before they hit that 30 per cent stress point. Still not possible in most capital cities, but better than $110 per week.

This could be part of the reason why there are more than 44,000 women in Australia every night who “couch surf” because they can’t afford a safe place to live. It may contribute to the reason why 31 per cent of low income households couldn’t pay their electricity bill on time in 2009-10, or why 20.1 per cent sought financial assistance from family and friends.

And while we experience another freezing winter, 6.3 per cent of low income households can’t afford heating.

It is a disgrace that we as a society continue to allow single parent families to risk homelessness because of the inadequacy of current welfare payments. It is even more disgraceful that elements of the Australian community seek to further reduce the meagre welfare payments of single parent families by pushing more women from Parenting Payment onto the lower rate Newstart Allowance, and to push more teenage children from Family Tax Benefit onto Youth Allowance.

To classify those single parents as “undeserving poor” because they are not contributing to the economy through paid work negates the very real work they do in raising healthy, well-adjusted children under difficult financial circumstances. Single parents deserve support, not scapegoating.

Emma Davidson is a project coordinator at Equality Rights Alliance, Australia’s largest network of organisations advocating women’s equality, women’s leadership, and recognition of women’s diversity. Equality Rights Alliance is managed by YWCA Australia.


The Drum, Opinion | www.abc.net.au/unleashed
New legislation was passed last week to move single parents off the parenting payment, and onto the Newstart Allowance once their youngest child turns eight. Advocates for this change suggest that the legislation will push certain groups to get off ‘welfare’ and into work which will end “the corrosive aimlessness of welfare”.

We know that the Newstart Allowance is considerably less money than the parenting payment, and the government intends to save around $700 million through the shift. This measure, and others introduced earlier in the year to tighten the rules for teenage mothers, is specifically designed to actively combat ‘inter-generational welfare dependence’.

These policies commenced under the previous Coalition and Labor governments and aim to change the personal behaviour of certain groups who are seen as being reliant on welfare.

But does a big stick work?

A new report into poverty by the Australian Council of Social Service finds that almost half of all Australian children living in poverty are in single parent families; and 25% of single parent families live below the poverty line.

Almost half of all Australian children living in poverty are in single parent families; and 25% of single parent families live below the poverty line.

Our research at the Institute for Child Protection Studies has indicated that all parents, including single parents and young parents, are very aware of the role employment can play in improving their lives and the wellbeing of their children. Many young mothers are very keen to start planning for this next stage of their lives, including for education and employment. They take on board the idea that employment and training is a way out of poverty. Almost all the younger mothers involved in one study spoke of the wish to create a safe and secure future for their children, and their desire to find a good steady job.

The recent legislative changes regarding the need for young mothers (particularly single mothers) to engage in education and employment reflect a commonly held stereotype that these people are resisting pursuing these goals. However, the findings from a range of our studies refute this stereotype and provide a more nuanced understanding of the barriers that stand in the way of sole parents achieving their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children.

Our research has also shown that parents who are on the more ‘generous’ parenting payment already struggle financially, with many families concerned about not having enough money to ensure their children’s basic needs are met. A reduction in income support of up to $100 per week could have a significant impact upon parents’ ability to pay for normal everyday activities for their family, including services such as childcare.

The increased participation requirements attached to the Newstart Allowance may also, in some instances, compound financial disadvantage. Almost a quarter...
of the parents we interviewed had a child with special needs, including physical and intellectual disabilities, developmental delays, or serious behavioural, emotional, psychological or health issues. Parents spoke about the ripple effects that these unmet or ongoing needs had on their families. They experienced high levels of stress that placed pressure on family relationships, leading to an increased risk of family breakdown.

While health services, schools and other services play a critical role in assisting parents to meet the needs of their children, the increased participation requirements can place an increased burden upon these families, and particularly those with children or other relatives with special needs.

One single mother living in a regional town, whose 12-year-old son had a heart attack, was required to travel frequently to the capital city over many months for treatment. In the aftermath of this major life event, the parent reported constant battles with Centrelink about meeting her job-seeking requirements. She felt she needed to be there for her son and other children, and just needed more time.

Many of the families involved in our research experience multiple disadvantage and key barriers that prevent them from participating fully in society. Families experiencing these issues (such as domestic and family violence and mental health issues) also appear to be more likely to experience other problems, such as homelessness, severe financial disadvantage and children’s behavioural and emotional problems.

Governments can and should assist parents in poverty to develop and reach their goals, including employment.

Governments can and should assist parents in poverty to develop and reach their goals, including employment.

However, policy and service responses should be cautious about future directions which further stigmatise mothers, particularly young mothers. Doing so can actually undermine their willingness (and sometimes their ability) to engage with formal and informal support systems.

While the government seeks to save $700 million by reducing welfare payments, they might consider that further compounding the financial disadvantage of vulnerable children, young people and families will likely lead to a much higher long-term cost incurred in supporting these families who experience the fall out of reduced income support.

This article was co-authored by Erin Barry, Communication Co-ordinator at the Institute for Child Protection Studies. Erin has worked in peak bodies within the ACT youth and community sector for the past six years, undertaking a range of policy, advocacy, representation and sector/workforce development activities.

Morag McArthur is a Professor at the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University.
What the government wants to ignore about sole parents and jobseeking

The official claims that children benefit from an employed parent works for those who find good jobs. However, what if futile job seeking creates more stress and poverty for most of these families? Eva Cox writes

It is universally agreed Newstart is inadequate, especially for the long-term support of individuals or families. The government says their solution is for recipients to get a job, but that is not easy or even possible for many Newstart recipients. Of more than 600,000 people on the payment, about half are not even required to look for work because they can’t.

They may be in training, sick, in deep distress, volunteering, needing treatment or just too old, so are exempted but still on the same low payment. The government focuses public attention on the other 300,000 plus who are registered as job seekers, ignoring the other half on the inadequate payment, often for the long-term.

Many official job seekers will have serious difficulties finding a job, particularly sole parents with family constraints on time and location. They compete with the rest of the 600,000 unemployed people that the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates are active job seekers, as well as those in a job but wanting to move, those wanting more hours and those who would take a job if offered one but are not counted as looking.

So there may be a million job seekers, chasing around the current 160,000 registered job vacancies, and falling. Even if there are some unregistered jobs, there may be a ratio of six seekers for each job.

There are around 100,000 sole parents officially looking for the few flexible jobs that fit school type hours competing with others fitting parenting around paid work who have partners!

Sole parents have to deal with employer prejudices against sole parents, lack of child care and how to manage sick kids. Maybe 10% of them will find secure jobs, more may find some casual work, but their chances of finding the right jobs are not high.

There is also no evidence that cutting their income increases their employment rates, in fact it may decrease them – looking for work costs money. Their numbers may increase if some of the holders of part-time jobs cut hours or jobs because their lower income doesn’t cover the costs of working.

Therefore it is hard to justify moving sole parents onto Newstart for their own good. The lack of data suggests that there are few benefits and policy that devalues parenting roles may backfire in other ways.
Cutting sole parent payments devalues social relationships and redefines parents as individual economic units. The primary carer is still usually the mother, so the cuts are sexist.

It’s really hard juggling kids and work if you are the only adult there. They get sick, they need extra attention sometimes, they may have minor disabilities or problems at school. They need care in holidays and often before and after school, as jobs fitting into school hours are rare.

Children need predictability, as do mothers, but often casual workers lack the control over their hours. There are serious structural difficulties of finding jobs that fit family needs, the time demands of children and the difficulties of good solo primary parenting.

I can remember my time as a sole parent in the 1970s on the what was then labelled the Widows Pension, when I returned to university with a primary school aged child. I’d already had some years of juggling day care and jobs and knew how to work the system. Day care was virtually nonexistent but I wheedled a place in a SDN centre, so later expiated my guilt at queue jumping by taking on child care and welfare payments as my policy area in the newly formed Women’s Electoral Lobby.

I am therefore both emotionally and professionally aware of the problems women face in combining paid work and child rearing. As a feminist, I am both aware of the benefits that come from the right to paid work, but not coercion into crappy insecure jobs.

In the last ten years, I have undertaken two research projects with Kathleen Swinbourne and Terry Priest. The first was a qualitative research project that found sole parents want a job, but one that fitted children’s needs as good parenting was their priority, as it should be.

The next research project looked at the new welfare to work policy in 2005. It showed parents face serious difficulties finding suitable jobs. Some have come out of difficult and violent relationships, some have children with a disability but not serious enough for a carer payment; some have limited language skills, chronic ill health and other problems. All are treated as though it is their fault they can’t find work.

The Howard government reduced sole parent payments for new applicants once their child turned eight, and required they look for jobs once their child turned six. There are around 40,000 sole parents who have been transferred to Newstart but no evidence that this has improved their employment, compared to those still on parenting payment. They have already had two years of job seeking, so reducing their income does not create paid work.

The official claims that children benefit from an employed parent works for those who find good jobs. However, what if futile job seeking creates more stress and poverty for most of these families?

Many of those now transferred to Newstart are also older as they have been on the payments since before 2006! All this makes jobs harder to find, so they should be given an adequate income to live on. An alternate set of support carrots and changed employer attitudes would offer better outcomes.

Eva Cox is Professorial Fellow Jumbunna IHL at the University of Technology, Sydney.
INTRODUCTION

Separation and divorce are common phenomena in the community today, but still represent a major life stressor for the individuals involved. Approximately 43% of all marriages in Australia will end in divorce (ABS, 2000). Remarriage following divorce is common, but these marriages have the highest risk of divorce (ABS, 2000). In Australia, it is estimated that 50,000 children will experience the effects of separation and divorce each year (ABS, 2004). Approximately 50% of all divorces involve children under the age of 18 years (ABS, 2004). These figures are likely to be even higher when you consider the numbers of children in Australia born to people who are not actually married (cohabiting). Of all Australian families in 2003, 84% (4.6 million) were couple families and 14% (799,800) were one-parent families. Families with children made up 60% of all families (ABS 2003).

How are families best supported to make this life transition less stressful for all concerned, especially children? This paper summarises current research relating to parenting in the context of separation and divorce, and considers some of the services, policies and community-based interventions that might be supportive of positive parenting functions during such major life changes.

The majority of children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring emotional or behavioural problems (Amato, 2001; Kelly & Emery, 2003). But, although children’s resilience should not be discounted, children of divorced parents are still at twice the risk of problems as the non-separated community (McIntosh, 2005), due to a number of factors.

The association between intense marital conflict and children’s poor adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated, and children are found to have more psychological problems when their parents are in conflict, either during marriage or following divorce. We know that children who live with violence between their parents are at risk for psychological and behavioural problems. Separation and divorce can protect children from ongoing exposure to within-marriage conflict (and violence), but also have the potential to expose children to increased inter-parental conflict, particularly during the transition from marriage to separation.

Children need a secure emotional base after their parents separate, exactly as they needed before (McIntosh, 2005). Separation and divorce have the potential to disrupt vital parenting functions (Kelly, 2000). The major protective factors that facilitate children’s adjustment to divorce are low inter-parental conflict, effective and constructive resolution of conflict between the parents, the quality of the parent-child relationship, nurturing, authoritative parenting from at least one parent, and cooperative co-parenting with good communication (McIntosh, 2003). Recent reviews of the literature show that it has become increasingly clear that it is these family processes that contribute to determining children’s well-being and ‘outcomes’, rather than family structures per se (such as the number, gender, sexuality and co-habitation status of parents).

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Impact of divorce on separating partners

The stress of separation and divorce places both men and women at risk for psychological and physical health problems such as substance abuse, depression, and accidents (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989).

Separation and divorce invariably involve financial changes and economic stress, and different residence arrangements require different financial costs (Smyth, 2004). Women and children are more likely than men to experience financial hardship after divorce (Smyth & Weston, 2000).

Divorce also affects the couple’s relationship as parents and the way in which they fulfil their parental functions (Baum, 2003), and a period of less effective parenting often follows a divorce, for both emotional and practical reasons (Amato, 2000, Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Simons & Associates, 1996). For example, changes in living arrangements and household economics can directly affect parenting functions. Both residential mothers and fathers tend to feel overburdened by their parenting and life responsibilities following separation and divorce (Baum, 2003).

Parental roles have to be reconstructed. Some divorced couples establish collaborative co-parental relationships; others are in perpetual conflict over their children (Baum, 2003). Still others disconnect from one another, not only...
as spouses, but also as parents.

Adjustment among divorced individuals is positively associated with education (Booth & Amato, 1991), employment (Booth & Amato, 1991; Demo & Acock, 1996) and large networks of supportive kin and friends (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). Unhappiness, distress, depression and health problems largely subside two or three years after separation, and new relationships tend to predict adjustment to divorce (Amato, 2000). This finding is consistent with the adjustment of lesbian mothers post heterosexual relationships (McNair et al., 2002).

**The impact of divorce on children**

Resilience is the normative outcome for children, and most children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring behaviour problems (Amato, 2001). However, depending on other factors like inter-parental conflict, children of divorced parents have been found to experience substantial distress (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), and divorce is associated with an increased risk for a number of adjustment, achievement and relationship difficulties.

Divorce is related to a greater risk of externalising problems (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991a). However, family processes, such as inadequate parenting and inter-parental conflict, not family structure alone, account for many of the externalising problems found among children (Emery, 1999).

When these associated factors are present, children of divorced families, compared with never divorced families can rate higher on the following dimensions:

- More likely to have problems in social and close relationships, such as those with their mothers and fathers, authority figures, siblings and peers (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1997)
- More likely to associate with antisocial peers (Amato & Keith, 1991a)
- More likely to use alcohol, cigarettes and drugs (Neher & Short, 1998)
- More likely to commence sexual activity earlier, to give birth to a child as a teenager, and to have more pregnancies outside marriage than children of non-divorced parents (McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Divorce has also been associated with child internalising problems (Amato & Keith, 1991a), such as depression and anxiety. Parental divorce in Australia has also been found to reduce children’s educational attainment, particularly the chance of completing secondary school (Evans, Kelley & Wanner, 2001).

Gender differences in response to divorce are not pronounced (Amato & Keith, 1991a). However female adolescents from divorced and remarried families are more likely than their male counterparts to drop out of high school (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

For some girls in divorced families who have been overburdened with responsibilities or emotional support of a parent, there is an increased risk of depressive symptoms, low self-worth, and a sense of inadequacy and failure, despite their achievements (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Boys are more likely than girls to benefit from being in step-fathered families (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993). Close relationships with supportive step-fathers are more likely to reduce antisocial behaviour and to enhance the achievement of step-sons than of step-daughters (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, 1993; Zimiles & Lee, 1991).

**Developmental differences**

Parental divorce can have differential effects across infancy and childhood, impacting on the differing developmental goals and age related needs of children at different stages of their psycho-emotional development. Chronic or frightening conflict beginning at an early age has significant developmental consequences, by virtue of its long-term impact on parenting and thus on a series of vital developmental processes in young children (McIntosh, 2003).

Infants (under 3) have biologically grounded needs for continuous, reliable care from a primary caregiver. Enduring parental conflict can disrupt attachment processes in infancy and toddlerhood in a number of ways, through parents’ pre-occupation with the conflict, parenting schedules that disrupt predictability of care, and direct witnessing of conflict by infants. All are associated with higher rates of disorganised and insecure attachments (Solomon & George, 1999; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson & Collins, 2005).

Parenting plans should aim to prevent increased challenge and risk for the infant at a time when social and emotional development are reliant on predictable, stable, responsive care (Klein Pruett, Ebling & Insabella, 2004). It is important for living arrangements post divorce to accommodate the developmental needs of infants, helping them to maintain their naturally occurring attachment hierarchy (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008), without undermining the infant’s psychological and neurological need for a continuous, reliable caregiving experience with
a primary attachment figure (Solomon & Biringen, 2001). Extended overnight time away from a primary parent is one factor that may erode security of attachment to that parent (Solomon & George, 1999). Studies suggest that attachments to other caregivers may not be similarly affected by amount of time spent together (Ainsworth, 1967; Solomon & Biringen, 2001), but that other qualities, particularly emotional availability and responsiveness, strongly predict the infant’s security in these relationships. Maintaining relationships with others in the infant’s attachment hierarchy is optimal when appropriate and possible (i.e., adequate cooperation between the adults, emotional maturity and availability of the caregivers, geographic proximity and a caregiving plan that does not fragment the infant’s schedule). Where practical, regular day contact and limited overnight contact may be of benefit to maintaining secure and trusting relationships with other members of the infant’s attachment hierarchy (Kelly & Lamb, 2001).

Preschool children (3-4 years) are less able than older children to appraise accurately the divorce situation, the motives and feelings of their parents, their own role in the divorce, and possible outcomes. They may blame themselves for the divorce, may fear abandonment by parents, may misperceive parents’ emotions, needs and behaviours, and may harbour strong fantasies of reconciliation (Hetherington et al., 1989). In the right circumstances (parental cooperation, responsive care, clear care patterns and emotional facilitation of the separation), kindergarten-aged children can often manage consecutive nights away from a primary caregiver (Klein Pruett, Ebling & Insabella, 2004).

For all infants and pre-school children, the pattern of care post-separation is best determined case by case, considering carefully the impact of all relevant factors, particularly the psychological capacity of each parent to maintain a care environment that supports the child’s core developmental needs (Smyth, 2004; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008).

Older school aged children (9-12) are more able to understand some of the reasons for the separation, but often in simple black and white terms. Approximately 25% will see one parent as the ‘good guy’ and the other parent as the ‘bad guy’, align with one parent (usually the mother or the residential parent) and blame or reject the other to reduce conflict and anxiety. These children tend to be most sensitive to whether an argument has been resolved or not (McIntosh, 2003). They may have a tendency to take responsibility for looking after their parents’ wellbeing. They are better able to talk about their feelings, so their concerns and how they are coping can be discussed. The primary feeling is commonly anger at one or both parents, but also shame, embarrassment, sadness, loneliness, fear, low self-esteem, powerlessness.

Adolescents may experience considerable initial pain and anger when their parents divorce; however they are better able to accurately assign responsibility for the divorce, to resolve loyalty conflicts, and to assess and cope with additional stresses such as economic changes and new family role definitions. Adolescence is a particularly challenging time in terms of their development, and this may exacerbate problems in adjustment in adolescents of divorced parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Many adolescents experience premature detachment from their families, which can lead to greater involvement with peers (Hetherington, 1987).

### Risk factors affecting children’s adjustment to separation and divorce

The degree of parental conflict is a major risk factor associated with children’s adjustment to divorce. The association between intense marital conflict and children’s poor adjustment has been repeatedly demonstrated. Children have more psychological problems when their parents are in conflict, either during marriage or following divorce (McIntosh and Long, 2006, Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Grych, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Such difficulties include higher levels of anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviour (Grych, 2005).

Psychological research has also uncovered the risks that litigation presents to children. There is an elevated risk of poor outcomes for children subjected to prolonged exposure to conflict from parents (McIntosh 2006).

Children exposed to multiple stressors and changes are at greater risk for poor adjustment following the separation or divorce of their parents (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989). Children who place some of the blame for the divorce on themselves tend to be more poorly adjusted (Bussell, 1995).

Children with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as social and emotional problems, are at risk of poorer outcomes following parental separation (Amato & Keith 1991b).

There is also evidence of an increased risk for children with a parent with a mental illness or personality disturbance, and this is worst for borderline and narcissistic personality disorders (McIntosh & Long, 2006). Children in that study with parents with a prodromal illness also had a poor outcome.

Children who become alienated (child unreasonably rejects one parent, usually due to the influence of the other parent combined with the child’s own contributions) and estranged from the non-residential parent (child, for good reasons, becomes reluctant or refuses to see the parent, typically because they have experienced poor treatment, been overwhelmed developmentally by the visiting arrangements, or suffered family violence) are also at high risk of poor adjustment (Kelly & Johnston, 2002). Early intervention (usually specialist intervention) in alienation and estrangement is advocated.

### Protective factors that facilitate children’s adjustment to divorce

The major protective factors that facilitate children’s adjustment to divorce identified in the research literature are the experience of low inter-parental conflict (Kelly & Emery, 2003), effective and constructive resolution of conflict between parents (Shifflett-Simpson & Cummings, 1996), the quality of ongoing family relationships, and
in particular, the parent-child relationship (Davies & Cummings, 1994), nurturing, authoritative parenting from at least one parent (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989) and effective co-parenting, with good communication and cooperation and little active undermining of the other parent (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Despite the fact that cooperative, mutually supportive and non-confrontational co-parenting relationships are clearly advantageous to parents and children (Hetherington et al, 1998), research indicates that between only 25 and 30% of parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship characterised by joint planning, flexibility, sufficient communication and coordination of schedules and activities.

Individual factors in children that buffer the negative impact of divorce include intelligence, easygoing temperament, specific talents, physical attractiveness, and the ability to respond effectively when confronted with stressful events (McIntosh, 2003).

**Children’s needs following separation according to developmental stage**

Across all age groups, what children need after their parents separate is exactly what they needed before: a secure emotional base. They need help to solve their problems, encouragement to learn, routines that help them feel in control, firm and loving limits to be safely independent, a trusted parent when they need to be dependent, and protection from trauma (McIntosh, 2004). These needs are more likely to be adequately met in a low-conflict environment, with a parent who is not continually stressed about ongoing unresolved issues in their relationship with their ex-partner.

In particular, infants need parents who are tuned into their needs. They need predictability, and a lot of time with parents who nurture them. They need parents who play with them, listen carefully to their efforts to communicate, and keep their world small and safe.

Adolescents need the daily stress in their life kept as low as possible. They need their parents to be available on a daily basis to listen and give support. They need predictable routines, and consistent rules and expectations. They need parents who are able to supervise them, and take a real interest in their life. Adolescents also need time and space to work out their own reactions to their parents’ separation. If pressured, they are likely to react with anger and rejection. Adolescents typically need flexibility in arrangements to allow them to participate in normal adolescent social activities and school events (Family Court of Australia, 2001).

**Impact of different care arrangements on children following separation**

Studies focusing on residential arrangements following divorce tend to show that school-aged children can fare better under shared (but not necessarily 50/50) living arrangements (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbush, 1996) rather than sole mother or father residency, provided certain conditions within the family dynamic exist to support that arrangement. Chief amongst these is parents’ ability to communicate adequately about the children, to plan together, to be responsive to the children’s needs and experiences, and to be flexible about changes to the schedule.

Other pragmatic factors include living near each other, and having adequate work flexibility to be available to the children as needed. McIntosh and Long (2006) found that long term mental health outcomes for children in substantially shared care are poorest for children under 10 years of age whose fathers had low formal education, who had a distant relationship with their mother, and whose parents remain in high conflict. It does not appear to matter whether children reside with a same-gender or opposite-gender parent (Downey & Powell, 1993). However, it is probable that especially cooperative and well-resourced parents are more likely to choose and be able to maintain shared residency than are other parents (Smyth, Caruana & Ferro, 2004).

Predictions about the nature of child adjustment following parental remarriage are unclear. Residential step-parents can add complexity to the adjustment scenario, but research shows that sensitive, emotionally available relationships that become forged between the adult and child can become protective (Musick, Meier & Bumpass, 2006; Smith, 2006).

**Interventions to ameliorate the impact of divorce on children**

Parenting programs following divorce have been shown to be effective in treating and preventing a wide variety of child adjustment difficulties. These interventions have essentially focussed on psycho-education and skills-based programs for parents following divorce, with program content based on demonstrating the links between divorce, parental behaviour and child adjustment (Kelly, 2000).

Prevention and early intervention parenting programs for ameliorating the impact of divorce on children have been supported throughout the literature (McIntosh, 2006, McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999), with outcomes including the reporting by parents of increased parental cooperation, restoration of parental alliance, improved children’s wellbeing, and a belief that early attendance at separated parenting programs will prevent or reduce enduring parental conflict. Research comparing collaborative forums for dispute resolution with litigation following separation found that parents who mediated their dispute had significantly lower conflict with each other, and that both parents were significantly more involved in their children’s lives (Emery et al., 2001).

In cases with a heightened risk of domestic violence, the appropriateness of divorce mediation needs to be considered by policy makers as well as at the service delivery level. The complexity of such concerns requires careful screening for current and historical safety issues, and modified mediation practices if mediation goes ahead.
It has been argued that power imbalances enhanced by domestic violence render mediation inherently unfair and unworkable, without significant accommodations to the process (Pearson, 1999).

**Conclusion**

Children and adolescents need a secure emotional base to thrive. They need a trusted parent they can depend on, protection from trauma, routines, firm and loving limits, help to solve their problems, and encouragement to learn. This need is the same whether children are living with both parents, or when parents are separated. Recent research has confirmed that children’s needs following separation are more likely to be adequately met in a low-conflict environment when the parents can communicate adequately about the children, plan together, be responsive to the children’s needs and experiences, and be flexible about changes to the schedule.

*For full article and list of references go to [www.psychology.org.au/publications/statements/parenting_separation/]({#})*

Adapted extract from *Parenting after Separation – A position statement prepared for The Australian Psychological Society* © The Australian Psychological Society Ltd [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)
Supporting children and young people through separation and divorce

AN INFORMATION SHEET FROM KIDS HELPLINE

Separation is often a very difficult time for everyone involved. It can mean large amounts of change, and new and sometimes scary challenges. This can often result in a lot of grief, which can feel similar to losing a loved one. Any change, loss surrounding the way things were, or loss of hopes and dreams, can cause grief, and each family member can react to it in very different ways.

The impact of separation on children and teenagers can be immense, and it is important for parents to consider how they will support their kids through this time. This can be challenging, especially at a time when they are also managing their own emotional pain.

Below are some tips that may help if you are going through a divorce or separation, and also supporting your child or children at the same time.

Communicate with your child about separation and divorce

Generally, parents who talk to their kids about their separation or divorce in advance find it helps their children to work through their feelings and prepare for change. Sometimes, parents may think it is better to protect children from what is happening because they want to avoid involving them in their relationship issues. While it is good to ensure kids are not involved in parental conflict, at the same time, if they are not told what is happening, their imaginations may fill the blanks. And imaginations frequently tell a story far worse than the actual truth.

The impact of separation on children and teenagers can be immense, and it is important for parents to consider how they will support their kids through this time.

Following are some ideas parents have found helpful when communicating with their kids about separation or divorce:

➤➤ Plan a talk with children about what is happening. This is best done at a time when there are no distractions. To help minimise confusion it is best that all family members (including both parents) are present. If one parent is absent it is important that a constructive image of the absent parent is maintained

➤➤ Find positive ways to start talking about the decision. For example, a starting point might be: “We’ve decided we’ll both be happier if we separate”

➤➤ Follow up by talking with each child individually, making sure they understand what is happening, and allowing them to ask questions

➤➤ Be honest but also tailor the level of detail according to a child’s age and emotional capacity. It is also important to be honest about whether there is any possibility of the relationship being reconciled

➤➤ Give kids a sense that both parents are coping with their emotions. This helps children feel more secure

➤➤ Remain respectful towards the other parent

➤➤ Reassure the kids that they are
not responsible for the separation
➤ Reassure the kids that they will continue to be loved and cared for by both parents, if this is the case.

**Emotions**

It’s helpful to be aware of how children and teenagers can react to loss or change. They will often move in and out of different emotions and may not always be able to clearly express what they are feeling and why. Talking about the separation can provide an opportunity for them to express their emotions and/or concerns about what is happening.\(^5\)

It is likely you will notice some changes in your children as they work through their emotions. Extra patience may be needed to support your children if their behaviours are challenging or difficult to understand.

You may find it easier to support your children through this time if you can:
➤ Recognise the many different stages and emotional responses to change or loss such as shock, denial, sadness, anger, blame and acceptance
➤ Allow them to work through their emotions
➤ ‘Role-model’ openness, honesty and healthy ways of communicating feelings
➤ Listen to your child and allow him/her to freely speak their mind without judgement
➤ Provide younger children with opportunities for play. Play is the language of young children and it is a way for them to express their emotions. Examples include drawing, play dough, puppets, collage or playing with dolls
➤ Be mindful that teenagers may need plenty of time with their peers to work through their emotions.

**Children and teenagers often feel torn in their relationship with each parent regarding living arrangements.**

**Living arrangements**

When a separation occurs, children often want to know where they will live, where their parent/s will live and how they will keep in contact with each parent.\(^6\)

Children and teenagers often feel torn in their relationship with each parent regarding living arrangements. If young people are handed the responsibility of deciding which parent to live with it can place an unnecessary burden on them at this time.\(^7\)

For example, they may:
➤ Experience feelings of guilt towards the parent they will see the least
➤ Choose to live with the parent they feel sorry for or wish to protect, rather than the parent they feel most comfortable with or that will best meet their needs
➤ Say what they think the parent wants to hear, not necessarily what they really want.

Often, parents find it can be much less stressful to plan immediate living arrangements before talking to their children about separating. Initially, you may find it helpful to plan the least disruptive living arrangements. You can let your children know that further discussion will take place down the track regarding more permanent arrangements.

When discussing permanent living arrangements it can help to:
➤ Involve each family member in the discussion process
➤ Listen to each family members’ input
➤ Weigh up all of the available options and input from each family member, and try to make the best decision based on this
➤ Consider the issue of pets
➤ Consider whether kids will be able...
to access their normal routine, peers and familiar resources
➤ Make other arrangements clear, such as who will take the kids to school, sports etc.

Agreeing on living arrangements can be a difficult process for parents.9 Specialist services such as Relationships Australia are available to provide professional assistance to separating parents. See Further Information for contact details.

Provide younger children with opportunities for play. Play is the language of young children and it is a way for them to express their emotions.

‘Parenting partners’
It helps kids when parents can manage separation and learn how to work things out with minimal conflict – sometimes known as being ‘parenting partners’.10

‘Parenting partners’ refers to parents who are able to:
➤ Make time to communicate effectively. If face-to-face communication is difficult, the phone, email or SMS can be used

➤ Collaborate on decisions affecting children and follow through on agreements. Some parents may be able to meet and work through agreements, while others may need to draw up separate plans, and adjust these until both parties agree
➤ Manage conflict in effective ways and role model this to their children
➤ Follow through on handover arrangements and remain calm and courteous during these times. If handovers are difficult, use neutral handover locations
➤ Understand that the other parent may have a different parenting style and different rules in their house, and respect this difference. Know that children can adjust to this
➤ Avoid undermining the other parent.

Of particular importance are the following points:
➤ Avoid involving children in, or allowing them to overhear ‘parent’s business’
➤ Avoid using children to deliver messages
➤ Avoid ‘pumping’ kids for information about the other parent
➤ Use respectful language when talking to their children about the other parent
➤ Allow children to maintain a relationship with the other parent wherever it is safe for them to do so and make it clear that they don’t have to take sides.

Although these can be difficult tasks for most parents, and require substantial effort, they can be very helpful strategies when supporting children and teenagers over the long term.11

Allow children to maintain a relationship with the other parent wherever it is safe for them to do so and make it clear that they don’t have to take sides.

Look after yourself
Separation is usually a difficult process for all involved and there are often many ups and downs. Parents can sometimes become so focused on supporting their children through this change, they overlook their own needs. It can be helpful to remember that if you take care of yourself you will be in a better position to adjust to change and support your children.

The below ideas may be helpful:
➤ Maintain your health through good eating habits and exercise
➤ Take care with smoking, drinking, gambling and overworking
➤ Allow trusted friends and family to help with any extra parenting responsibilities
➤ Take time out, and work through your emotions
➤ Have a neutral person or confidant to talk to that will listen and understand, for example, a friend or a counsellor. This will help minimise the risk of turning to children as confidants
➤ Make time for friendships. This is important as separation can create changes in current social networks
➤ Maintain familiar routines and continue doing things that you previously enjoyed, such as social activities, sports, hobbies, etc.12, 13

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Safety
Safety should never be compromised. If abusive or violent behaviour is threatened or initiated:

- Contact local police if a serious threat to safety exists
- Initiate legal action if required, for example court orders can be taken out or charges laid
- Inform your state child protection service of your concerns for your child’s safety
- Seek professional help.14,15

FURTHER INFORMATION
If you have any concerns about your child and their ability to cope with separation, you can call Parentline on the phone numbers below:

- Parentline Queensland and Northern Territory – 1300 30 1300
- Parentline Victoria – 13 22 89
- Parent Helpline South Australia – 1300 364 100
- Parent Line New South Wales – 13 20 55
- Parent Help Centre Western Australia – (08) 9272 1466 or 1800 654 432
- ParentLink ACT – (02) 6205 8800
- Parentline Tasmania – 1300 808 178

USEFUL LINKS

- Relationships Australia – Managing Separation
- Australian Government Child Support Agency – Separation Resources
- Parenting SA – Thinking Divorce?
- Parenting SA – Family Break-Up
- Parenting SA – After the Break-Up
- Parent Easy Guides
- Child Support Agency – has a range of publications and fact sheets for parents

and teens on separation and divorce, child support, finances, etc. Information for teenagers can be found at www.youth.csa.gov.au

REFERENCES


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One of your first considerations will be your children. The first question you’ll have to resolve is whether your children should stay with you or your partner. This is a difficult decision to make and it can be helpful to weigh up practical considerations such as where you plan to live, your children’s schooling, your work and your financial situation. You may be entitled to financial help from Centrelink, and a financial counsellor can help you to budget for the additional costs that come with separation.

Commonly held myths

➤ Children are irreparably damaged by family breakdown
➤ Women who work and place their children in care are bad mothers
➤ The new family laws mean that courts will automatically order children to spend equal time with each parent.

And the reality ...

➤ Children are neither totally fragile nor absolutely resilient. You and your ex-partner can help your children feel more secure by not criticising each other or fighting in front of them
➤ Financial security of the family is important for the children’s wellbeing. Children are resilient and childcare including out-of-school hours care offers many benefits
➤ Most children want and need contact with both parents. Family law says equally shared parental responsibility is in the best interests of the child. This does not mean children will automatically spend equal time with each parent. It is likely to mean parents must discuss and agree on big decisions about the children.

How can I help my children understand and cope with separation?

Children will be affected by separation, but not always in a negative way. Whatever the case, there are some things you can do to help:

➤ Keeping in mind your children’s age and level of development, talk openly with your children. Answer their questions honestly and, where appropriate, involve them in decisions that affect them
➤ Encourage your children to talk to friends who have also gone through a separation
➤ Try to minimise the changes to your children’s environment and daily routines
➤ Maintain relationships with relatives and friends from both sides of the family
➤ Try and establish a good working relationship with the other parent. While disagreements may be an unavoidable at this time, try not to involve your children in the disagreements or to use your children as a ‘messenger’ between you and your partner. You might consider seeing a counsellor to help you better manage your ongoing relationship with your partner.

For more information and age-appropriate resources and publications for your children, visit the webpage My family is separating – now what? at www.familyseparation.humanservices.gov.au and select the Emotional Support and Support For Children tabs (Department of Human Services).

Children and separation: a guide for parents is available from the Family Law Courts website at www.familylawcourts.gov.au

Sorting it out without going to court

If you are able to reach agreement with your partner about future arrangements, there is no need for you to go to court. However, it may be a good idea for both of you to create a parenting plan by writing your agreement down, signing and dating it. Although this is not a legally enforceable document, your parenting plan will be considered if you need to go to court later.
Parenting plans cover such things as:
- Where your children will live
- Who your children will have contact with, when, and how often
- Where your children will spend holidays, birthdays and other significant days
- Financial support
- How to change the plan and how you will both resolve disputes
- How decisions about the children’s education, health and religion will be made.

You might like to seek assistance from a Family Relationship Centre or a family lawyer in drafting your plan.

If there has been child abuse or family violence, or there is a risk of it, you do not have to go through dispute resolution.

What if my partner and I can’t agree

The family law system encourages couples to resolve their disagreements about children without going to court. If you and your partner cannot agree, then before going to court you will generally be required to attend ‘family dispute resolution sessions’, where a mediator will ensure that both parents’ views are heard and options for agreement explored. Family Relationship Centres will provide or put you in touch with someone who provides these services. You should still seek legal advice before attending family dispute resolution.

If there has been child abuse or family violence (which means any behaviour that makes you fear for your safety), or there is a risk of it, you do not have to go through dispute resolution. If, however, you would still like to try dispute resolution, you should discuss your concerns with the Family Relationship Centre and see what they can do to ensure that you can have your say in a safe environment. For more information see the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (DVRCV) information sheet Preparing for mediation: tips for women who have experienced domestic violence available at www.dvrcv.org.au

You also don’t have to go through family dispute resolution if the matter is urgent, for example if a child needs to be protected or has been abducted.

If you decide not to participate in family dispute resolution based on either of these grounds, the court will need written notification from you that you have attended a Family Relationship Centre and you have information about the services that they offer. You do not need a certificate from a Family Relationship Centre if you have experienced family violence.

For more information about family dispute resolution contact a Family Relationship Centre or visit www.familyrelationships.gov.au

What if I have fears for my child’s safety?

If you believe that your child is unsafe you need to get urgent legal advice. You may consider making an application for an intervention order on their behalf to protect them. An intervention order is granted by a Magistrate to stop someone behaving in a certain way and keep people safe from physical or psychological harm if there is a real risk of this occurring. For more information see the WIRE information sheet Getting legal advice.

What if my child may be taken overseas?

If either parent wants to take their child overseas, both parents must provide permission and sign an Australian passport application. If one parent refuses to sign, the other parent can apply to a court to have the passport issued. Australian courts do not have a say over foreign passports being issued by other countries’ embassies.

If you are worried that your child will be taken overseas you need to get immediate legal advice. An urgent application to the Family Court can be made for court orders to prohibit the children from leaving the country. For more information on international child abduction contact the Family Court and see International Social Services at www.iss.org.au

How does the court decide what is best for my child?

Anyone concerned with the welfare of a child can apply for a parenting order. Applications are usually made when parents cannot agree on arrangements for their children, or when changed situations affect existing parenting plans or orders.

A judge makes a parenting order based on what is best for the child. Except in the most exceptional circumstances, this includes having contact with both parents. This is not affected by reasons for the break-up, except when the circumstances impinge on the best interests of the child.

Where there is no family violence or child abuse the court will make an order for Equal Shared Parental Responsibility. This type of order means that major long-term decisions about children must be made by both parents jointly. The court will also decide whether it is practical and in the best interest of the child to live with both parents equally or to live with one most of the time and spend substantial and significant time with the other. In making this decision, the court will consider a broad range of issues including any views expressed by the child, the nature of the child’s relationship with each parent, the capacity of each parent to provide for the child’s needs and the likely effects of any changes in the child’s circumstances.

If there has been violence in your family, you need to get legal advice about how this will affect your application for a parenting order.

Am I entitled to receive child support?

If your children are living with you, the other parent is required to contribute towards their care and upkeep until your child turns 18, or longer if they are completing tertiary education or have special needs.
If you or your partner starts a new relationship that includes other children, this may affect the arrangements that have been made for your children, including support payments.

The Child Support Agency will calculate how much you should receive and will collect the money for you. In some instances the Family Court will determine the level of child support.

If you or your partner starts a new relationship that includes other children, this may affect the arrangements that have been made for your children, including support payments.

The amount of child support is calculated using a formula based on the number of children, the parents’ income and how care is shared. For more information contact the Child Support Agency or visit www.csa.gov.au

Same-sex couples

Regardless of how children are conceived, the right of the child to know both biological parents is protected under the Family Law Act. This can get complicated where there are biological and non-biological mothers and fathers involved. For information and to find gay-friendly legal professionals visit www.over-the-rainbow.org

Getting legal advice

The law is complex and, for most of us, quite confusing. It is vital to get as much information about your rights and entitlements as soon as possible, even if you and your partner are getting on well and agreeing. Getting legal advice does not mean that you have to ‘get nasty’ or go to court; it just means being properly informed. For tips on seeking legal advice see the WIRE information sheet Getting legal advice.

Where do I go for help?

Information and support for women

- WIRE Women’s Information and Support, 1300 134 130, www.wire.org.au
- Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, 03 9654 0622, country toll free 1800 077 374, www.csmc.org.au
- Counselling Services (call WIRE 1300 134 130 for contact listings in your area)
- Department of Human Services Victoria, My family is separating – what now? www.familyseparation.humanservices.gov.au
- Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, 03 9486 9866, www.dvrcv.org.au
- International Social Services, 03 9614 8755, toll free 1300 657 843, www.iss.org.au
- National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line, toll free 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)
- Relationships Victoria, 1300 364 277, relationshipsvictoria.com.au
- Women’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service Victoria 03 9322 3555, country toll free 1800 015 188, www.wdvcs.org.au

Support for children

- Family separation: a guide for teens, youth.csa.gov.au
- Headspace, Australia’s National Youth Mental Health Foundation website, www.headspace.org.au
- YouthBeyondBlue, 1300 224 636, www.youthbeyondblue.com

Legal support and advice

- Community Legal Centres, 03 9652 1500, www.communitylaw.org.au
- Family Law Courts, 1300 352 000, www.familylawcourts.gov.au
- Law Institute of Victoria Legal Referral Service, 03 9607 9550, www.liv.asn.au
- Online Application for Divorce and Information, www.divorce.gov.au
- Victoria Law website – plain English resource about Victoria’s legal system and issues with directory of legal sector agencies and links to resources in other languages, www.victorialaw.org.au
- Victorian Legal Aid, 03 9269 0120, country toll free 1800 677 402, www.legalaid.vic.gov.au
- Women’s Legal Service Victoria 03 9642 0877, toll free 1800 551 800

REFERENCES


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Children in separated families still spend considerably more time with their mother than their father despite 2006 family law reforms that promoted shared care arrangements, a new study has found.

Traditional care arrangements involving more nights with the mother than the father remain the most common.

The study by the Australian Institute of Family Studies reveals about 80 per cent of children spent most nights of the year with their mother and one-third of children never stayed overnight with their father.

The national study involved 10,000 parents who had been separated on average for 15 months and involved children aged up to 17 years old. The study follows the 2006 changes to the family law system encouraging greater involvement of both parents in their children's lives after separation.

Australian Institute of Family Studies Director, Professor Alan Hayes said although children spent more time with their mother than their father following a family break-up, most parents in the study believed the arrangements worked well.

“The study found that traditional care arrangements involving more nights with the mother than the father remain the most common for children of all age groups, but particularly for preschool-aged children,” he said.

“However, the study showed that across all age groups, most parents believed that their arrangements were working in the best interests of their children.”

The proportion of children who spent most or all nights with their father increased as the children got older.

The key findings of the study include:

➤ One-third of children never stayed with their father, with 11 per cent never seeing their father and 23 per cent seeing their father only during the daytime
➤ 16 per cent of children experienced a shared care arrangement (35-65 per cent of nights in the care of each parent)
➤ Shared care was most commonly experienced by children aged 5-11 years old
➤ The proportion of children who spent most or all nights with their father increased as the children got older
➤ The youngest (under 3) and the oldest (15-17 years) groups were the most likely to never see one parent, with this parent far more likely to be the father.

One of the study’s authors, Ms Ruth Weston said the study revealed parents with shared care arrangements were most likely to believe their arrangements were working well for all parties.

“The study shows that the level of satisfaction of parents about the care arrangement of their children is lower when the time spent with
the children is less equally shared,” she said.

“Fathers with shared care were more likely than the mothers with these arrangements to indicate their parenting arrangements were flexible.

“Not surprisingly, parents who never see their children most commonly indicate that their parenting arrangements were not working well for them or their children.”

“The study shows that overall the different care arrangements did not affect the wellbeing of the child unless there had been a history of family violence.”

Ms Weston said the study also revealed parents who adopted shared care arrangements tended to have a higher socio-economic status.

Parents with shared care arrangements are more likely to have been very involved in their children’s life before separation.

“Parents with shared care arrangements are more likely to have been very involved in their children’s life before separation, live less than 10 km or a 15 minute drive from the other parent, to have been married to the other parent, and to have higher income levels,” she said.

“These parents also indicated they had arrived at their shared arrangements through discussions with the other parent rather than use the court system, although they may have sought some formal assistance”.

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**PARENT-CHILD CONTACT AFTER SEPARATION**

Facts and figures from a family characteristics survey by the Australian Bureau of Statistics

**NUMBER OF OVERNIGHT STAYS PER YEAR: ABS 2009-10**

Children aged 0-17 who had a natural parent living elsewhere: Number of overnight stays per year (ABS 2009-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nil nights</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-35 nights</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-72 nights</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73-109 nights</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110-181 nights</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>182+ nights</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Reported by resident parents.


**FREQUENCY OF FACE-TO-FACE PARENT CHILD CONTACT: ABS 2009-10**

Children aged 0-17 who had a natural parent living elsewhere: Frequency of face-to-face contact between parent-child (ABS 2009-10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily/weekly</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortnightly</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once every 3-12 months</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a year/never</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Reported by resident parents.


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Australian Bureau of Statistics | www.abs.gov.au
Managing and coping as a single parent, with less contact with kids, requires understanding, empathy and resilience. Juggling all the demands of single parenting can be exhausting, confusing or frustrating.

With careful planning and by adopting a flexible, collaborative approach, both your kids and you can thrive positively. It is a matter of taking care of your kids and of yourself too.

**First concern**

Above all, the first concern should be what is best for kids. In general, parenting agreements or formal care determinations are now formed in the best interests of the children, rather than battles regarding who is right, who can justify claims, or who is more demanding.

Long-term research through the Family Court also shows that kids thrive best when everyone operates according to what is in their best interests, rather than battles regarding who is right, who can justify claims, or who is more demanding.

**Managing and coping as a single parent, with less contact with kids, requires understanding, empathy and resilience.**

Further, maintaining regular contact with your kids can help, but don't rely on them too much. When your kids return, let them know that you were okay and involved in everyday routines, but avoid loading them with concerns about your sadness. Kids like to know what their parents are up to, so making regular phone calls, taking photos of your activities and keeping a journal can help, e.g. a dad I saw recently made sure to take photos of the new puppy arriving, having its first night in its bed, etc, when timing meant his daughter couldn't be there for the arrival.

**Seeking support**

It is important to have some support for yourself. Further, if you are upset or distressed at this time, seek professional help, rather than 'dumping' or using your kids as counsellors, once they return.

Finding other social interests, talking with friends, keeping busy, exercising and avoiding any self sabotage like excessive drinking at these emotionally trying times, can all be beneficial.

Parents generally want what is best for their kids. However, coping as a single parent, in a more non-resident parent role, can be a huge emotional, physical and personal challenge, for both you, as a parent, as well as for your kids. An article from KidsLife by psychologist Ian Wallace
Stay informed
The limited contact of old style parenting arrangements, such as only seeing a parent every second weekend, made it difficult for parents and kids to develop really good attachment, especially where a parent and a child might not have seen each other for 12 days.

However, in some cases, limited contact is all that is possible. In such cases, keeping yourself informed is critical. Ask school to send you copies of reports, as well as school newsletters, sports notes, etc. Also, try to seek out information from other sources, such as notes from other activities your kids might be involved in, like dance class newsletter, when martial arts grading is, netball news, etc.

Unless ordered otherwise by the court, parents have been legislated the right to be involved, such as accessing copies of school reports. You will feel more involved if you know what is going on during the week and you will find it easier to converse and catch up, when equipped with information. Your kids will feel you are more interested if you can begin conversations, rather than ‘grilling’ them, as to what is happening, e.g. “... I saw you had swimming carnival this week, how was that ... ?”

In general, more recent parenting arrangements have recognised the above problem, resulting in more kids seeing the non-residential parent preferably during the week. It is important that you don’t just use this as play time or catch up time, for dinner out. Preferably, you should be taking a mid week opportunity to help your kids with homework, help with assignments, or to practise for activities.

With careful planning and by adopting a flexible, collaborative approach, both your kids and you can thrive positively. It is a matter of taking care of your kids and of yourself too.

Similarly, you might drive and help out with a sports team. It is important that your kids see you as involved, supportive and worthwhile in these everyday roles. Similarly, your kids can still do chores and contribute to the household, as though they were at your home every day. While they might complain, it helps them feel a part of the household.

During mid week visits, there is nothing better than family meals, discussion and sharing around the dinner table, rather than screens dominating these precious times. When sharing, avoid discussing or investigating what is occurring in the other house, rather keep focused on your kid’s activities, interests and news.

It can be tempting to catch up and make up for time lost, especially when your time with your kids might be limited. However, your kids need a balance of some fun activities and some regular activity, rather than always spoiling them on the weekend. Otherwise, you are at risk of your kids seeing you as just a benefactor, whom they will become frustrated with when you don’t indulge them.

You are better off providing genuine regard, positive recognition and genuine involvement in family activities, such as helping mum cleaning out the car, or helping dad with making dinner, as well as playing together.

Stable, consistent routines
Your kids need stability and like their own place. Wherever it is
possible, try to have stable, consistent routines, both in terms of when movement occurs and what routines you follow. Avoid being late or changing pick up times. Above all, avoid conflict in front of your kids at this time, no matter how justified you feel in arguing. If you can’t avoid arguing, arrange a neutral place or at worst, most areas have Family Contact Centres, to avoid such problems.

Many parents need support, guidance and even professional help. As dads are more often in this role, but aren’t often so good at discussing emotions, they might need more encouragement to seek support.

Many of the kids that I talk to hate having to pack up and not having their own space. Where possible try to have your kids carry as little as possible. Your kids will prefer to have their own clothes, toys and possessions at your house. They will settle in easier if they have their own drawers or cupboard, as well as their own private space. Even in smaller units or houses, a special corner for their possessions will help your kids adjust.

Parents who are separated often have different beliefs, opinions and views. Not surprisingly then, you may not agree with your ex-partner’s view of parenting. It can understandably be very tempting to criticise, when parenting conflicts with your beliefs or values. Worse, it provides a great opportunity for kids to divide and conquer.

Rather, avoid criticising your ex-partner and just focus on consistent rules in your home. Kids can adjust to different rules in different environments, if they are consistent in each place.

Being a single parent in a non-resident arrangement can be trying. Therefore, many parents need support, guidance and even professional help. As dads are more often in this role, but aren’t often so good at discussing emotions, they might need more encouragement to seek support.

Finally, with good communication, cooperation and sharing, you can have a very significant, positive and rewarding role in helping raise your kids.

Article written by Ian Wallace, Consultant Psychologist and regular contributor to KidsLife. Ian is the author of ‘You and Your ADD Child’ and co-author of ‘Coping With School’.

Just how common is shared care time for all children under 18 years of age, regardless of their parents’ timing of separation? Is this arrangement becoming increasingly common?

One of the objectives of the 2006 changes to the family law system was to encourage greater involvement of both parents in children’s lives following separation, provided that the children are protected from family violence, child abuse or neglect (see Kaspiew et al., 2009). Parental involvement entails such matters as: (a) taking primary or immediate care of children for significant periods of time (care time), including overnight stays where possible; (b) making a significant contribution to decisions affecting children’s general lifestyle and welfare; and (c) providing financial support for the children.

While the changes were designed to encourage parental involvement generally, they were also specifically designed to encourage shared care time where such arrangements are reasonably practicable and in the child’s best interest (see Box 1). The term ‘shared care’ typically refers to circumstances in which children spend a similar number of nights with each parent. In the new Child Support Scheme, introduced in 2008, shared care is defined as the child spending 35-65% of nights with each parent. This threshold of time is used in the present article and is called ‘shared care time’ to emphasise the fact that caring involves more than just spending time with children. For example, supporting children financially and making decisions affecting them are clearly important aspects of parental care. Prior to the 2008 changes, shared care time was usually taken to represent at least 30% of nights with each parent.

The 2006 reforms to the family law system were introduced in the context of the changing roles of parents in intact families, with mothers increasing their participation in paid employment and many fathers playing a more active role in their children’s lives. For example, among parents with a child under five years old, the time fathers spent on child care increased between 1992 to 2006, although the time they spent on domestic tasks such as shopping, cleaning and laundry did not change (Craig, Mullan, & Blaxland, 2010).

This article examines the extent to which there have been changes in the proportion of separating families experiencing shared care time since 1997. Given that the question of the impact of equal or near equal care on children’s wellbeing has been hotly debated, especially for very young children (see Burrett & Green, 2008; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008), particular attention is given to trends in equal care time for children of different ages (here defined as the child spending 48-52% of nights with each parent). Addressing this question entails the challenge that there are few comparable datasets covering different periods.

**Box 1**

The aim of encouraging greater parental involvement is reflected in the 2006 changes to the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (FLA), including the introduction of a presumption in favour of ‘equal shared parental responsibility’ (FLA s61DA(1)), with a nexus between the application of the presumption and considerations in relation to time arrangements (FLA s65DAA).

The presumption may be rebutted by evidence satisfying a court that it would not be in a child’s best interests for both parents to have equal shared parental responsibility (FLA s61DA(4)), and it is not applicable where there are reasonable grounds to believe that a parent has engaged in child abuse or family violence (FLA s61DA(2)).

Where orders for shared parental responsibility are made pursuant to FLA s61DA(1), the courts are obliged to consider whether making orders for children to spend equal or substantial and significant time with each parent, would be reasonably practicable and in the child’s best interests (FLA s65DAA).
DATA SOURCES

There is now a small number of datasets that can be used to address the question regarding changes in shared or equal care time. These include survey data collected by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), administrative data from the Child Support Agency (CSA), and from court files.

Data on the care time arrangements developed by parents who separated after the 2006 law reforms were collected in the first wave of the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families, undertaken by AIFS in 2008 (LSSF 2008). This survey was conducted as part of the AIFS evaluation of the changes to the family law system.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics collected data on care time in its Family Characteristics Surveys, undertaken in 1997 and 2003, and its Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey in 2006-07 (for details, see ABS, 2005; 2008). The 1997 and 2003 surveys were conducted prior to the 2006 changes to the family law system, and the 2006-07 survey at around the time the changes took effect or shortly after. The care time data derived from the three ABS surveys are comparable with each other, but are not directly comparable with the information derived from the LSSF 2008. For example, the ABS surveys focused on children under 18 years old whose parents were not living together, regardless of how long they had experienced this situation, whereas the LSSF 2008 focused on parents who had separated after the introduction of the reforms.

Trends in shared or near-shared care time (30-70% of nights with each parent) (Smyth, 2009) – based on the CSA administrative dataset for the period 2003 to 2008 – are reported below. Finally, rates of different care time arrangements apparent in court files for children’s matters that were initiated and finalised pre-reform and those that were initiated and finalised post-reform are compared.

TRENDS APPARENT IN THE DATASETS

The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (Wave 1)

Children who stayed overnight with each parent for 35-65% of nights per year were classified as experiencing shared care time. However, this classification includes children who spend considerably more time with one parent than the other, as well as those who spend close to half the nights with each parent. The experiences of children with these two arrangements may differ markedly. We therefore also examined trends in the proportion of children experiencing equal care time arrangements.

Parents in the LSSF 2008 had been separated for an average of 15 months at the time of the interview. In total, 16% of the children were in a shared care time arrangement, with 7% experiencing equal care time. Children were, on average, relatively young: 59% were under 5 years old and only 5% were 15-17 years old. Equal time was most commonly experienced by children aged 5-11 years and 12-14 years (11-12%), followed by those aged 3-4 years (9%), then teenagers aged 15-17 years (6%). Equal time was in place for only 2% of children under the age of 3 years.
The ABS Family Characteristics surveys

The three ABS Family Characteristics surveys conducted between 1997 and 2006-07 are the only national surveys in Australia with comparable samples, thereby allowing assessment of change. They suggest that the proportion of children experiencing shared care time was increasing before the reforms were introduced, albeit from a very low base (from 3% in 1997 to 8% in 2006-07). Indeed, a much higher proportion of children in each survey rarely or never saw one parent than experienced a shared care time arrangement.7

Figure 1 shows the proportion of children in four different age groups with equal care time arrangements in 1997, 2003 and 2006-07. The proportions with equal care time in the 1997 survey were very low, with negligible differences apparent across the age groups (all less than 1%). The largest increase in equal care time between 1997 and 2003 was for children aged 5-11 years (from 1% to 5%) and the smallest was for children aged 15-17 years (from less than 1% to 2%). In other words, equal care time arrangements, although very uncommon, appeared to be increasing before the 2006 reforms were introduced.

Between 2003 and 2006-07, there was overall a relatively small increase in the proportion of children with equal care time, with a greater increase being apparent for children aged 0-4 years (0.3% to 3.7%) and children aged 5-11 years (2.5% to 5.4%).

As noted above, these trends refer to all separated families with a child under the age of 18 years, some of whom may have been separated for many years. The parents of the vast majority of children represented in the 2006-07 survey would have been separated prior to the 2006 changes. However, the younger the child, the shorter would have been the duration since the parents’ separation. Indeed, parents of children under 12 months old would have been separated post-reform (assuming they had been living together when their child was born).

The Child Support Agency administrative database

Using the CSA’s earlier and broader definition of shared care time (30-70% of nights with each parent) and data provided by the CSA, Smyth (2009) found that the proportion of existing cases entailing this care time arrangement increased by one percentage point each year from June 2002 (6%) to June 2008 (12%), while the proportion of new cases with shared care time arrangements increased by one to two percentage points each year (from 9% by June 2003 to 17% by June 2008). Specifically, Smyth derived the following proportions of new cases in the CSA system entailing the child being in the care of each parent for 30-70% of nights: 6% in June 2003, 11% in June 2004, 13% in June 2005, 14% in June 2006, 16% in June 2007, and 17% in June 2008.8

These results suggest that, during the period in which the reforms were rolled out (from July 2006 to June 2008),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1: CARE TIME ARRANGEMENTS FOR CHILDREN SUBJECT TO PROCEEDINGS WITH FINAL ARRANGEMENTS, PRE- AND POST-REFORM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-REFORM</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care time arrangements (% of cases where contact hours specified)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of contact hours specified</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with mother – spend 0-34% with father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with father – spend 0-34% with mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-65% time with each parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of contact hours not specified</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with mother – time with father as agreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with father – time with mother as agreed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with mother – no information on time with father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live with father – no information on time with mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of children</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Time arrangements based on future arrangements in last order or judgement on file. Weighted percentages. Pre-reform figures are sampled from the Melbourne and Perth registries. Post-reform figures are sampled from the Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Sydney registries. Percentages may not total 100.0% exactly due to rounding.

Source: Court files from Family Court of Australia, Federal Magistrate Court and Family Court of Western Australia.
there was no evidence that the increase in such care time arrangements had gained momentum. It remains possible, of course, that a lagged effect becomes apparent in the future – that is, the effect may be slow to develop.

Court data

The vast majority of parents organise their arrangements without using the court system. Only 3% of parents in the LSSF 2008 sample who had sorted out their arrangements nominated courts as the main pathway used to make their parenting arrangements (Kaspiew et al., 2009, p.66). Indeed, another key aim of the reforms was to encourage parents to come to an agreement themselves on the best arrangements for the children, perhaps with the support of family relationship services if they could not achieve this alone.

Table 1 shows the prevalence of different care time arrangements apparent in two samples of court files for children’s matters: those initiated and finalised prior to the 2006 reforms and those initiated and finalised after these reforms were introduced. It should be noted that some court files had no reference made to the number of hours that the child was to spend with the other parent, while arrangements were unclear in some other files (e.g., the file notes containing the specification, “live with mother – time spent with father as agreed”). Given this lack of clarity, two sets of statistics were derived for each dataset: (a) the number of children who were allocated shared care time as a proportion of all children whose time with each parent was clearly specified; and (b) the number of children who were allocated shared care time as a proportion of all children.

A higher proportion of children’s matters cases resulted in orders for shared care time post-reform than was the case pre-reform. When calculated as a proportion of cases where contact hours were specified, shared care time increased from 16% pre-reform to 23% post-reform, and, when calculated as a proportion of all cases, increased from 9% to 14%.

However, court files on children’s matters include cases in which the parents agree on parenting arrangements and are seeking a consent order (here called ‘pure consent’), cases in which parents come to an agreement after proceedings have commenced, and cases requiring judicial determination. Some judicially determined cases may involve two otherwise well-functioning and involved parents being unable to agree about care time arrangements. On the other hand, the AIFS evaluation suggested that parents who enter the court system are more likely than other parents to allege violence and other dysfunctional behaviours and are more likely to be in high conflict (Kaspiew et al., 2009). It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that shared care time would be less common appropriate for cases requiring judicial determination than for cases in which the parents reach agreement by consent (‘consent cases’).

A key question, then, is whether the increase in shared care time applies more to consent cases than judicially determined cases. In fact, the data suggest that a greater increase in shared care time has occurred for judicially determined cases than for those in which parents reach agreement by consent.

The proportion of judicial determination cases resulting in shared care time increased from 4% pre-reform to 34% post-reform, when calculated as a proportion of cases where contact hours were specified. When calculated as a proportion of all judicial determination cases, shared care time increased from 2% pre-reform to 13% post-reform.

When calculated as a proportion of consent cases in which contact hours were specified, shared care time increased from 17% pre-reform to 22% post-reform, and when calculated as a proportion of all consent cases, shared care time increased from 10% to 15%.

Conclusions

Several sources of data suggest that the prevalence of shared care time arrangements, including equal care time, has been increasing, although such arrangements remain the minority. According to administrative data from the CSA, among parents who have registered with the CSA, shared care time rates increased slightly but progressively between 2002 and 2008, and the increase did not gain momentum after the 2006 reforms were introduced. In addition, surveys conducted by the ABS suggest that such arrangements, including equal care time, had been increasing since the late 1990s (when equal care time in particular was rare).

Future monitoring of trends will throw light on whether the increase in shared care time has begun to gain momentum since these sets of data were collected and whether the reforms have led to changes in the proportion of children who never see one parent.

A comparison of pre- and post-reform court files concerning children’s matters suggests that the proportion of children who are allocated shared care time has increased considerably. This increase has been greater where the orders have been judicially determined than where they have been made by consent. Given the small,
incremental increases in shared care time among the separated population at large, this legislatively driven trend may have significant implications for the children in such arrangements to date, shared care time appears to be mostly, but by no means entirely, selective of families for whom such arrangements work well. This could change. Although most parents who choose shared care time believe that it worked for them, this arrangement does not work for some families (Weston et al, 2011; Cashmore et al, 2010).

It is important that such trends and their associated implications for children continue to be scrutinised, so that policies can be established or modified to protect and promote the wellbeing of children.

ENDNOTES

1. In this article, the term ‘care time’ is used to describe the face-to-face contact that separated parents have with their children and includes both overnight stays and daytime-only contact.


3. This survey involved telephone interviews with 10,002 parents (with a child under 18 years old) who separated between July 2006 and September 2008 (with only 4% having separated in 2008). Interviews took place between August and October 2008, up to 26 months after separation (average duration of separation = 15 months). The sampling frame for the survey was parents who were registered with the Child Support Agency and included both agency collect and private collect customers.

4. Additional differences between the ABS and LSSF surveys included the following: (a) unlike the ABS samples, the LSSF sample was drawn from the CSA database; (b) the parents in the ABS surveys indicated the care time arrangements of all their children under 18 years who were in their household, whereas the LSSF parents focused on one child only, regardless of the living arrangements of this child; (c) the ABS surveys involved face-to-face interviews whereas the LSSF involved a telephone interview; and (d) the questions used in the surveys differed slightly from each other.

5. The pre-reform sample covered the two-year period prior to the implementation of the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006 (Cth) (SPR Act 2006) (739 files), while the post-reform sample covered matters filed and determined after 1 July 2006 (the date the amendments came into effect) (985 files).

6. Where parents had more than one child, they were asked to indicate the care time arrangements of the first child listed in the CSA database (here called the ‘focus child’). The ABS surveys, on the other hand, derived information about the arrangements in place for all children living in the household.

7. According to the three ABS surveys, the proportion of children who never saw one parent (or saw this parent less frequently than once per year) ranged from 27% (in the 2003 survey) to 30% (in the 1997 and 2006-07 surveys), and there was no evidence of consistent change over the ten-year period.

8. The percentages for 2004-07 were provided by Associate Professor Bruce Smyth through personal communication. We are grateful to him for providing these data.

9. The pre-reform figures are from cases sampled from the Melbourne and Perth registries. The post-reform figures are from cases sampled from the Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Sydney registries. The sensitivity of the estimates to the inclusion of the additional registries for the post-reform estimates has been tested by comparing the pattern of care time arrangements from just the Melbourne and Perth registries with the patterns when arrangements from all registries are considered. The estimates from the restricted number of samples are broadly similar to those derived when all of the registries are used. Therefore the data from all of the registries were used when examining the extent to which care time arrangements had changed.

REFERENCES


Ruth Weston is Assistant Director (Research), Dr Lixia Qu, Dr Rae Kaspiew and Dr Lawrie Moloney are Senior Research Fellows, and John De Maio and Kelly Hand are Research Fellows, all at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Professor Matthew Gray is Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University.
It’s not easy to create new parenting arrangements when a relationship breaks down. You might both want as much time as possible with the kids, or your ex-partner might not want to see them. You might see equal time as a fair solution – then again, you might not have the resources to do this.

Establishing co-parenting
Whatever your situation, you and your ex-partner need to make firm decisions about how you’ll parent your children now. You might be able to sort this out together. If you can’t, you can contact one of several support agencies for help. Here are some other tips for setting up your new arrangements.

Develop a co-parenting plan
A parenting plan is a useful way to set out the details of your new relationship. To create one, you and your ex-partner need to discuss your rights and responsibilities with regard to your kids, and set up a way to work out disputes.

As long as your children are safe and secure, different parenting approaches and styles can help children learn that different rules apply in different situations.

A shared parenting plan should address:
- A custody or visitation schedule
- Education
- Finances
- Children’s medical needs or concerns
- Discipline and household rules
- Holidays and special events
- Decision-making guidelines.

Have a contingency plan
Once your arrangement is in place, you need to agree on what happens if one of you needs to change plans or has a change in circumstances. You might be able to discuss this in person, on the phone or via email.

If you can’t talk by yourselves, seek help – perhaps from a family dispute resolution practitioner.

Aim for a flexible attitude
It benefits everyone to be a little bit flexible about your arrangements. For example, if your ex-partner is sometimes late for pick-ups, it might help to be ready with alternative plans. Try to keep in mind that getting upset about a change your ex-partner makes will only make it difficult the
next time you need to change things.

Your plans will also need to adapt as your children grow and their circumstances change – for example, when they start school or take up a new sport.

Try to accept different parenting styles

Your ex-partner’s parenting style might take some getting used to, especially if your ex-partner has different values or beliefs.

One way to deal with this is to work out whether you don’t like your ex-partner’s style because of your preferences or because of essential requirements.

For example:

➤ Preference: ‘I don’t like our daughter eating so many sweets at her other parent’s place’
➤ Essential requirement: ‘Our child must have an insulin injection every day.’

If you don’t like something because of your preferences, you might be able to let it slide. Then you can concentrate on things that affect your child’s health and safety.

As long as your children are safe and secure, different parenting approaches and styles can help children learn that different rules apply in different situations.

Keep your ex-partner up to date

Children benefit when their other parent knows about their interests and keeps in touch. Even if other parents live far away, kids still benefit from regular email, phone and letter contact, particularly if it goes both ways.

Plan ahead for tasks and events

You might want your children’s ex-partner to be involved in or take responsibility for tasks like maternal and child health visits, school outings or child care events. You can also contact your child’s school to make sure your ex-partner gets duplicates of school records.

All this helps your ex-partner be more involved in your kids’ lives, which is good for everyone.

Give your ex-partner some time to learn the ropes

Until your separation, you might have done most of the caring for your children. In this case, some ex-partners might take a little time to get the hang of a one-on-one relationship with their children.

With all these decisions, try to step into your children’s shoes and figure out what will work best for them. You might have to make some compromises.

Be prepared for some negative feelings

When your children are with their other parent, you might feel a sense of loss, loneliness and disappointment. Planning ahead can help you cope when your children are away.

If possible, agree in advance on the kind of contact you will have with the kids during these periods. For example, you might have goodnight phone calls, emails or text messages. Try to put on a happy face for your children – this will help them with the transition.

It’s great if your children are loved and cared for by their other parent, and are safe in that person’s care. Kids need time with both parents – and time apart from them can give you a chance to rest, relax and pursue relationships, hobbies or interests.

Dealing with special celebrations

Sometimes the biggest days of the year – for example, special religious festivals or holidays – are the hardest times to work out parenting plans that suit everyone. Being alone on a significant day, without your child, is difficult for many separated parents.

Some parents split special days in half. For others, it works better to alternate parenting on special days every year. You can also hold celebrations before or after the special day. If you can, hold on to some traditions that you previously shared, like opening presents in bed in the morning or sharing a special dessert.

It can also help to talk with your kids in advance about what the arrangements will be for their birthdays and other special days.

You might find you need to talk to your children’s other parent about when you want to give gifts and what sort of gifts are suitable. For example, you might decide only on special occasions, or small gifts once a month. Try to share information about the larger gifts you might buy for a special occasion, to avoid doubling up.

With all these decisions, try to step into your children’s shoes and figure out what will work best for them. You might have to make some compromises.

When your ex-partner can’t be involved

Sometimes keeping your kids in contact with your ex-partner isn’t possible, or might not be possible for periods of time.

This could happen if:

➤ Your relationship involved violence or abuse
➤ Your ex-partner has died, is in prison or has moved far away
➤ Your ex-partner chooses not to have contact with the children.

In cases like these, your relationships with other trusted adults can help. They can offer care and support and be role models for your children. These people might be members of your extended family, close friends, teachers, neighbours or coaches.
Shared care laws damaging many children

WHAT WE NEED ARE LAWS THAT REQUIRE US TO DETERMINE CHILDREN’S BEST INTERESTS ON A CASE-BY-CASE BASIS WITHOUT PRECONCEIVED IDEAS, ASSERTS BELINDA FEHLBERG

Relationship breakdown affects many Australian families. About 40 per cent of marriages end in divorce and the rate of de facto relationship breakdown is higher. The family law system has a more direct and personal impact on our lives than most other areas of law. Yet in the lead-up to the election, we heard almost nothing about family law reform.

In the meantime, the Howard government’s 2006 shared parenting changes to the Family Law Act continue to damage a significant minority of children.

For example, a case recently before the Full Court of Family Court of Australia, known as "Collu & Rinaldo", involved a four-year-old child who had been travelling month-about between Sydney (where his father lived) and Dubai (where his mother lived) for 14 months, while the case awaited court hearing. Why is our family law system so poorly resourced that a case like this must wait so long to be heard? And what encouraged the parents and their legal advisers to think the care arrangements for this child were acceptable, until the appeal was expedited after “medical evidence was presented about trauma the child suffered during a flight from Sydney to the UAE”?

Such arrangements may suit parents, but this case – and the research – show the psychological damage that can result from constant disruption and lack of stability for such young children.

Earlier this year, I wrote about key findings of reports by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Chisholm Inquiry. These reports, both commissioned by the federal Attorney-General’s Department, showed that shared parenting time is not working well for a significant minority of Australian children. They showed that fathers have been encouraged to seek shared care and more mothers now feel pressured into it. They also showed that shared care is now used by a substantial minority of parents with significant problems (such as high parental conflict, substance abuse and/or mental health issues). It is being agreed to by parents and, even more often, ordered by courts in cases where it seems not to be in children’s best interests, partly due to community and professional misunderstandings about what the law says.

Shared care of itself is not necessarily better for children than other care arrangements. Given this, there seems to be no justification for our current legislative approach, which encourages parents in this direction.

We now also have three more recent reports commissioned by the federal Attorney-General’s Department and released in July, which, in different ways, establish the same points.

Most significantly, a report by clinical child psychologist...
Dr Jennifer McIntosh and colleagues underlines the significant negative impact of shared care arrangements on children under the age of four “regardless of socio-economic background, parenting or inter-parental cooperation”.

A report by social work professors Dale Bagshaw and Thea Brown and their colleagues on parents’ and children’s perspectives on family violence and family law in Australia underlines yet again that the family law system does a poor job of supporting and assisting victims of family violence. There were major criticisms of the way violence was dealt with in mediation. In court, those reporting violence felt their reports were “disbelieved, minimised, or sometimes accepted but put to one side in the ultimate decision”.

Of course, shared care can work well for some families – typically a small select group who decide this for themselves and without reference to what the law says.

Finally, a report from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales is broadly consistent with previous research finding that shared care is experienced differently by mothers and fathers and is most problematic when mothers have serious concerns about their children’s safety or there is high parental conflict. The report concludes that factors such as the level of parental co-operation and conflict are more important than the structure of parenting arrangements. In other words, shared care of itself is not necessarily better for children than other care arrangements. Given this, there seems to be no justification for our current legislative approach, which encourages parents in this direction.

In the lead-up to the election, the Gillard Labor government indicated that it was considering the recent reports before responding but was committed to “further improving” the family law system. The Liberal Party said nothing about shared parenting or family violence reform. The position of the independents isn’t clear. Most clearly in favour of reform have been the Greens, who called in January this year for change “as a matter of priority in light of the findings of the Chisholm report – highlighting that the Greens opposed the Howard government’s amendments at the time because of these very concerns”.

However our government is structured in the coming weeks, it should act on consistent evidence showing us that a significant number of children are being damaged by our shared parenting laws. What we need are laws that require us to determine children’s best interests on a case-by-case basis without preconceived ideas, and laws that require us to take family violence seriously at every step along the way.

Professor Belinda Fehlberg is professor of law at Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne specialising in family law.

First published in The Sydney Morning Herald Opinion, 26 August 2010
The media often blames a lot of society’s problems on the breakdown of traditional family structures and the increase in single parent homes.

When fathers no longer live at home, policy makers focus on child support and residential arrangements as the best ways to help children and parents cope after separation. Courts allocate time with children to each parent, and governments legislate child support payments based on time allocations.

QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

Research increasingly suggests that the quality of non-resident fathers’ relationships with their children is as important as the time they spend together.

A 1999 review found that children had fewer behavioural and emotional problems when they had a close relationship with a non-resident father, or when their father had a warm affectionate parenting style balanced by consistent expectations and limit setting.

Our new research extends these findings. We examined the wellbeing of 302 8 to 9 year old children with a non-resident father, using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. We defined wellbeing as the absence of behavioural and emotional difficulties, and measured it using the results from a standard questionnaire used to pinpoint problems in this area. We considered a wide range of factors as potential drivers of child wellbeing, including socioeconomic circumstances, mothers’ and fathers’ parenting practices, mothers’ and fathers’ mental health, and parental conflict.

CONFIDENCE AND ENGAGEMENT

The key finding was that children were better off when their fathers were confident in their parenting role, when they were highly engaged in parenting decisions, and when they exhibited positive parenting behaviours.

Children had fewer behavioural and emotional problems when they had a close relationship with a non-resident father.

Importantly, these relationships occurred irrespective of the amount of father-child contact, suggesting that fathers can enhance child wellbeing even if the time they spend with their child is limited.

We also found that non-resident fathers sometimes reported better parenting than resident fathers. They reported higher warmth toward their children, and were more likely explain the consequences of behaviour with their child.

Clearly, then, not all non-resident fathers fit the stereotype of being disengaged dads.

POLICY ISSUES

These findings have implications for Australian policy. Just over 1 million, or 22% of Australian children aged 0-17 years had a non-resident biological parent in 2006-07, and the majority (82%) of these parents were fathers.

Governments then would help a large number of children by encouraging positive involvement with their non-resident fathers.

Some policy changes have already been made. The Family Law Amendment of 2006 encouraged long-term involvement of both parents by encouraging shared parenting responsibility.

Several government departments have also released publications aiming to help families reduce conflict, and maintain positive relationships after divorce. For instance the Child
Support Agency released *Me, my kids and my ex: forming a workable relationship for the benefit of your kids* which gives practical tips to both parents.

These are coupled with policies that encourage father participation more generally, such as the introduction of paid paternity leave.

**PRACTICAL CHANGES**

One area where policy change could be particularly useful is in helping services engage with non-resident fathers. Schools and health care services often communicate primarily with resident parents – making it hard for non-resident parents to stay informed.

Parenting support services also tend to focus on mothers, meaning that fathers either feel unwelcome, or find the service irrelevant. Support programs designed specifically for non-resident fathers would be helpful. Importantly, these programs should be held in out-of-work hours to cater for fathers working full-time.

**SEPARATE OR TOGETHER?**

Our study also compared children with non-resident fathers to those who live with both biological parents.

As other research has shown, having a non-resident father negatively affects a child’s wellbeing compared with those living with both parents. However, we found that this difference was fully explained by things that go alongside parental separation – such as economic hardship, family conflict and poor parent mental health.

Family structure *per se* did not independently contribute to child wellbeing.

A number of social commentators have recently re-engaged in media debates about the supposed negative effects on children of being raised in separated and single parent households.

Our findings highlight the misleading nature of such blanket claims. We found that where there was no economic hardship, no family conflict and where parents had good mental health, children with separated parents were doing well.

The findings suggest that discouraging parents from separating is unlikely to improve child wellbeing. And as recognised by the recent Family Law Amendments, the best interests of the child must be a central consideration in determining post-separation arrangements.

**Acknowledging that non-resident fathers are important for more than just their child support payments may also affect children’s wellbeing.**

Across all family types, there is consistent evidence that children are harmed by exposure to inter-parental conflict.

**Better Support**

Stigmatising separated parents may hurt children by undermining parents’ confidence. Instead, we should support separating parents by recognising and trying to minimise the adversities they face.

Acknowledging that non-resident fathers are important for more than just their child support payments may also affect children’s wellbeing.

But while increased time together may help strengthen father-child relationships, allocating more time together is not enough. We need to help separated parents ensure that this time is a positive experience for children – free from family conflict, and with a parent who is confident, skilled and engaged with their parenting role.

*Nina Lucas is Masters candidate at La Trobe University and Jan Nicholson is Adjunct Professor at Queensland University of Technology.*


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EXPLORING ISSUES

ABOUT THIS SECTION
‘Exploring issues’ features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book.
The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.
As the information in this book is gathered from a number of different sources, readers are prompted to consider the origin of the text and to critically evaluate the questions presented.
Does the source have a particular bias or agenda? Are you being presented with facts or opinions? Do you agree with the writer?
The types of ‘Exploring issues’ questions posed in each Issues in Society title differ according to their relevance to the topic at hand.
‘Exploring issues’ sections in each Issues in Society title may include any combination of the following worksheets: Brainstorm, Research activities, Written activities, Discussion activities, Quotes of note, Ethical dilemmas, Cartoon comments, Pros and cons, Case studies, Design activities, Statistics and spin, and Multiple choice.

CONTENTS

BRAINSTORM 50
WRITTEN ACTIVITIES 51
RESEARCH ACTIVITIES 52
CASE STUDIES 53
DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES 54
MULTIPLE CHOICE 55-56
Brainstorm, individually or as a group, to find out what you know about single parent families.

1. What is a single parent family?

2. What is a shared care arrangement? Give some examples.

3. What is a non-resident parent, and what are some of the problems they can face?
Complete the following activity on a separate sheet of paper if more space is required.

A growing number of children in Australia are being raised in single parent households. Make a list of the challenges and benefits of being in a single parent family – for both parents and children.

**CHALLENGES**

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**BENEFITS**

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RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Research information, support organisations and services for the following situations. Compile a list for each situation and include the kind of support that is provided and the relevant contact details.

1. Separation and divorce can be a very stressful time for parents and children. Major decisions and arrangements will need to be made during this time. These could include; where children will be living and who they will be living with, possible changes to schooling, new financial arrangements, etc. What information and support is available to assist during separation and divorce?

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2. Being a single parent can be difficult and it can be hard to know who to ask for help. Getting support can be the best thing to do for parents and children. This could be in the form of emotional or financial support, or even help in finding new friends. What kinds of support are available for single parents?

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Create case studies for the following situations. Consider issues such as welfare payments, employment opportunities, child care options, possible prejudices, etc.

1. A single mother looking for employment who is the primary carer of two children aged 4 and 9 years.

2. A single non-resident father looking for employment who is in an equal shared care arrangement with a 5-year-old child.
DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Do you think Australia’s current welfare payments for single parent families offer adequate financial support? Form two opposing groups and compile a list of points with which to debate the arguments for and against the current welfare payment system for single parent families.

YES: Increase welfare payments for single parents. Why?

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NO: Do not increase welfare payments for single parents. Why?

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Complete the following multiple choice questionnaire by circling or matching your preferred responses. The answers are at the end of the next page.

1. What percentage of Australian single parent families live below the poverty line?
   a. 2%
   b. 5%
   c. 25%
   d. 30%
   e. 45%

2. Approximately what percentage of Australian marriages end in divorce?
   a. 4%
   b. 14%
   c. 24%
   d. 40%
   e. 50%
   f. 60%

3. Research findings indicate that approximately how many Australian children aged 0-17 years had a non-resident biological parent in 2006-07?
   a. 100,000
   b. 500,000
   c. 1 million
   d. 1.8 million
   e. 2.2 million

4. How many single parent families were there in Australia, as of June 2011?
   a. 250,000
   a. 550,000
   a. 750,000
   b. 950,000
   c. 1.1 million

5. What percentage of one-parent families in Australia were headed by mothers, as of June 2011?
   a. 23%
   b. 38%
   c. 48%
   d. 58%
   e. 83%

6. The Child Support Scheme introduced in 2008 defines shared care as the child spending what percentage of nights with each parent?
   a. 15-50%
   b. 25-55%
   c. 35-65%
   d. 30-70%
   e. 50-100%
Complete the following multiple choice questionnaire by circling or matching your preferred responses. The answers are at the end of this page.

7. Respond to the following statements by circling either ‘Reality’ or ‘Myth’:
   a. Children are irreparably damaged by family breakdown. Reality / Myth
   b. New family laws require that courts will automatically order children to spend equal time with each parent. Reality / Myth
   c. Most children want and need contact with both parents. Reality / Myth
   d. Women who work and place their children in care are bad mothers. Reality / Myth
   e. Children are resilient and childcare, including out-of-school hours, offers many benefits. Reality / Myth

MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWERS

1 = c ; 2 = d ; 3 = c ; 4 = d ; 5 = e ; 6 = c ; 7 – a = myth, b = myth, c = reality, d = myth, e = reality.
Numbers of sole parent households are likely to continue to increase into the future, with a projected growth from 838,000 households to almost 1.2 million households between 2001-2026, which represents a 42% increase. (p.1)

A study found that the psychological health of sole mothers was poorer than that of other women of the same age, particularly for those aged 47-52 years. (p.1)

Sole mothers are more likely to experience mental disorders and severe mental health and physical health problems, as well as having an alcohol or other substance use disorder and having previously experienced violence. (p.2)

Single fathers with young children are the loneliest, and report the lowest levels of support and friendship of men and women in any household situation. (p.2)

In June 2011, 84% of families were couple families. About 2 in every 5 couple families had dependants living with them (43%). The next largest group were lone parent families (15%) and 2 out of every 3 lone parent families had dependants living with them (67%). Of the 950,000 lone parent families, 83% were single mothers. (pp.3, 16)

A growing number of children in Australia are being raised in single parent households. (p.4)

Single parent families often have less money than two-parent families where many have a double income. (p.4)

Children in single parent households are often more mature because of the extra roles they have. (p.6)

Parents who get support use more positive parenting strategies, are better able to cope and are more consistent in parenting decisions than those who try to ‘go it alone’. (p.7)

Divorced women with dependent children find it difficult to recover their income post-divorce. (p.10)

Joblessness among sole parent families is a significant problem. While it has increased since the early 2000s, at just over 50% in 2009 the sole parent employment rate in Australia is one of the lowest in the OECD. (p.12)

The child poverty rate in Australia has fallen over the last 10 years and is now below the OECD average. (p.12)

Employment among single parents generally increased as the age of the youngest dependant increased, with 73% of single parent families whose youngest dependant was 15-24 years old having an employed parent, compared with 35% whose youngest dependant was under 5. (p.16)

There are more than 44,000 women in Australia every night who ‘couch surf’ because they can’t afford a safe place to live. (p.16)

Almost half of all Australian children living in poverty are in single parent families; and 25% of single parent families live below the poverty line. (p.17)

There are around 100,000 sole parents officially looking for the few flexible jobs that fit school type hours competing with others fitting parenting around paid work who have partners. (p.19)

Sole parents have to deal with employer prejudices, lack of child care and how to manage sick kids. (p.19)

Approximately 43% of all marriages in Australia will end in divorce. (p.21)

It is estimated that 50,000 Australian children will experience the effects of separation and divorce each year. (p.21)

Approximately 50% of all divorces in Australia involve children under the age of 18 years. (p.21)

The stress of separation and divorce places both men and women at risk for psychological and physical health problems such as substance abuse, depression, psychosomatic problems, and accidents. (p.21)

Parental divorce in Australia has been found to reduce children’s educational attainment, particularly the chance of completing secondary school. (p.22)

Research indicates that between only 25 and 30% of parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship characterised by joint planning, flexibility, sufficient communication and coordination of schedules and activities. (p.24)

Regardless of how children are conceived, the right of the child to know both biological parents is protected under the Family Law Act. (p.32)

Children in separated families still spend considerably more time with their mother than their father despite 2006 family law reforms that promoted shared care arrangements. (p.33)

A study has revealed 80% of children spend most nights of the year with their mother and one-third of children never stayed overnight with their father. (p.33)

Fathers with shared care were more likely than the mothers with these arrangements to indicate their parenting arrangements were flexible. (p.34)

Parents with shared care arrangements are more likely to have been very involved in their children’s life before separation, live less than 10 km or a 15 minute drive from the other parent, to have been married to the other parent, and to have higher income levels. (p.34)

In the new Child Support Scheme, introduced in 2008, shared care is defined as the child spending 35-65% of nights with each parent. (p.38)

Prior to 2008 changes, shared care time was usually taken to represent at least 30% of nights with each parent. (p.38)

The largest increase in equal care time between 1997 and 2003 was for children aged 5-11 years and the smallest was for children aged 15-17 years. (p.40)

Between 2003 and 2006-07, there was overall a relatively small increase in the proportion of children with equal care time, with a greater increase being apparent for children aged 0-4 years and children aged 5-11 years. (p.40)

About one-quarter of teenagers aged 12-14 in separated families either never see their father, or only see him in the daytime. This rises to over a third for those aged 15-17. (p.44)

A 1999 review found that children had fewer behavioural and emotional problems when they had a close relationship with a non-resident father. (p.47)

Just over 1 million, or 22% of Australian children aged 0-17 years had a non-resident biological parent in 2006-07, and the majority (82%) of these parents were fathers. (p.47)
Glossary

**Blended family**
A couple family containing two or more children, of whom at least one is the natural child of both members of the couple, and at least one is the stepchild of either member of the couple.

**Carer**
A person who provides care for someone else’s child or children in their own home, or in the case of in-home care, in the child’s own home.

**Couple family**
A family based on two persons who are in a registered or de facto marriage and who are usually resident in the same household. A couple family without children may have other relatives, such as ancestors, present. A couple family with children may have adult children and/or other relatives present.

**De facto relationship**
Also known as ‘cohabitation’. A couple living together in a consensual union when not legally married to each other (that is, when not in a registered marriage).

**Dependent children**
All family members under 15 years of age; family members aged 15-19 years attending school or aged 15-24 years attending a tertiary educational institution full-time (except those classified as husbands, wives or lone parents).

**Family**
Two or more persons, one of whom is aged 15 years and over, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering; and who are usually resident in the same household.

**Formal care**
Regulated care away from the child’s home. The main types of formal care include before and/or after school care, long day care, family day care, occasional care and preschool.

**Household**
A group of two or more related or unrelated people who usually reside in the same dwelling and who make common provision for food or other essentials for living; or a person living in a dwelling who makes provision for his or her own food and other essentials for living without combining with any other person. Thus a household may consist of: one person; one family; one family and unrelated individual(s); related families with or without unrelated individual(s); unrelated families with or without unrelated individual(s); and unrelated individuals.

**Informal care**
Non-regulated care, arranged by a child’s parent/guardian, either in the child’s home or elsewhere. It comprises care by brothers or sisters (including step siblings), care by grandparents, care by other relatives (including a parent living elsewhere), and care by other people such as friends, neighbours, nannies or babysitters.

**Intact family**
A couple family containing at least one child who is the natural or foster child of both members of the couple, and no child who is the stepchild of either member of the couple.

**Marriage**
The legal union of a man with a woman.

**Non-dependent children**
In couple or one-parent families, sons or daughters who are aged over 15 years and who are not full-time students aged 15-24 years (except those classified as husbands, wives or lone parents).

**Non-resident parent**
A term used to describe the parent with whom the child spends the least amount of time.

**Parenting**
The fulfilling of the role of parent. A parent can be a father or mother, a protector or guardian.

**Shared care**
When a child is considered a dependent child of two families, such as when separated parents share the care of a child.

**Single parent**
Also known as ‘lone parent’ or ‘sole parent’. A person who has no spouse or partner present in the household but who forms a parent-child relationship with at least one dependent or non-dependent child usually resident in the household.

**Single parent family**
A family consisting of a lone parent with at least one dependent or non-dependent child (regardless of age), who usually resides in the household. The family may also include any number of other dependent children, non-dependent children and other related individuals. There are a number of varieties of single parent families; those resulting from divorce, parents who never married, as well as a widowed parent. In single parent families the other parent not living with the family may have little or no involvement in the child’s life or may be highly involved.

**Step family**
A couple family containing one or more children, at least one of whom is the stepchild of either member of the couple and none of whom is the natural or foster child of both members of the couple.
Websites with further information on the topic

Better Health Channel  www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Parenting and Child Health  www.cyh.com.au
Department of Human Services (Australian Government)  www.humanservices.gov.au
Dads in Distress Support Services  www.dadsindistress.asn.au
Family Relationships Online  www.familyrelationships.gov.au
Kidslife  www.kidslife.com.au
Mensline  www.mensline.org.au
National Council for Single Mothers and their Children  www.ncsmc.org.au
Parenting SA  www.parenting.sa.gov.au
Parentline  www.parentline.org.au
Parentlink ACT  www.parentlink.act.gov.au
Parenting Research Centre  www.parentingrc.org.au
Raising Children Network  http://raisingchildren.net.au
Relationships Australia  www.relationships.com.au
Shared Parenting Council of Australia  www.spca.org.au
Stepfamily Association  www.stepfamily.asn.au
Lone Fathers Association of Australia  www.lonefathers.com.au
Parents Without Partners  www.parentswithoutpartners.org
Positive Shared Parenting Alliance  www.positivesharedparenting.org

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## Index

### C
- child abuse 31, 38 *see also* domestic and family violence
- child care 12, 14, 20, 30, 38, 44
  - lack of 15, 19
  - support programmes 12
- children
  - adolescents 22-25
  - behavioural problems 5, 8, 22-25
  - best interests of 2, 30-31, 33, 35, 38, 43-44, 45-46, 48
  - communicating with 26-29
  - developmental issues 18, 22-24
  - education 1, 15, 22, 31, 43
  - emotional problems 8, 21, 27
  - health issues 2, 18
  - living arrangements 21-22, 24, 27-28
  - mental health issues 8-9, 24, 45
  - negative feelings of 44
  - psychological problems 23, 45
  - preschool-aged 23
  - support through separation and divorce 26-29
  - wellbeing of 8-9, 17, 30, 31, 38, 42, 47, 48
- child support payments 31-32, 47-48
- conflict, inter-parental 21-23, 47-48
- consent order 41
- co-parenting 1, 21, 24, 43-44
  *see also* shared care arrangements

### D
- day care  *see* child care
- divorce 1, 7, 10-11, 21-23, 26, 45, 47
  *see also* separation
  - financial impacts of 10-11
  - impacts on children 22-25, 26-29
- domestic and family violence 2, 18, 21, 23, 24-25, 31-32, 34, 38, 41, 44, 46

### E
- employment issues 1, 12, 13-14, 16, 17, 19-20
- prejudice 19-20
- Equal Shared Parental Responsibility order 31

### F
- family
  - breakdown 8, 18, 30
  - characteristics 3, 16, 34, 39-40, 42
  - structures, alternative 8-9
- *Family Law Amendment 2006* 41, 47-48
- family law
  - dispute resolution 24, 31, 43
  - reform 33, 38-39, 40-42, 45-46
  - system 30-32, 33, 35, 38-39, 45-46
- father-child relationships 2, 33-34, 38, 41, 47-48
- financial issues 1, 7, 21, 30, 38, 43

### H
- housing issues 1-2, 15

### L
- legal issues 29, 30-32, 35, 45-46
- Longitudinal Study of Separated Families 39-41

### N
- Newstart Allowance 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20 *see also* welfare payments

### P
- parents

### W
- welfare payments 12, 13-14, 15-16, 18, 20
  *see also* Newstart Allowance, Parenting Payment

non-resident 35-37, 47-48
- primary 20, 23
- parenting arrangements, traditional 33, 36 *see also* shared care arrangements
- parenting order 31
- parenting partners 28
- Parenting Payment 13, 15-16, 17
  *see also* welfare payments
- parenting plan 22, 30-31, 43-44
  *see also* shared care arrangements
- poverty 12, 13-14, 15, 17-18, 19-20
- relationship breakdown 1, 45
- single parenting
  - benefits of 4, 6
  - challenges of 1-3, 4, 6
  - education for 9, 14, 17, 22, 24, 43
  - mental health issues 2, 18, 47-48
  - support for 4, 7, 30, 37
- same-sex couples 32
- separation 7, 8, 10-11, 21-25, 26-29, 30-32, 33-34, 35, 38, 40, 44, 47-48
  *see also* divorce
  - impacts on children 21-25, 26, 38
- shared care arrangements 24, 33-34, 35, 38-42, 45-46, 47
  *see also* co-parenting

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