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# putting the kids first

CARING FOR CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION

A REPORT FOR THE FAMILIES COMMISSION

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A REPORT FOR THE FAMILIES COMMISSION

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**FAMILIES COMMISSION**

**The Families Commission was established under the Families Commission Act 2003 and commenced operations on 1 July 2004. Under the Crown Entities Act 2004, the Commission is designated as an autonomous Crown entity.**

**Our main role is to act as an advocate for the interests of families generally (rather than individual families).**

Our specific functions under the Families Commission Act 2003 are to:

- > encourage and facilitate informed debate about families
- > increase public awareness and promote better understanding of matters affecting families
- > encourage and facilitate the development and provision of government policies that promote and serve the interests of families
- > consider any matter relating to the interests of families referred to us by any Minister of the Crown
- > stimulate and promote research into families, for example by funding and undertaking research
- > consult with, or refer matters to, other official bodies or statutory agencies.

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## PREFACE

An increasing number of New Zealand families are experiencing parental separation. Over 5,000 couples with children divorced in 2006 and an unknown number of unmarried parents separated. It is important that society understands and responds appropriately to the needs of these families.

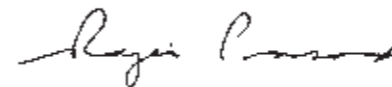
Most parents manage their separation and the care arrangements for their children, in private. Aside from counselling services, most separating parents don't use the Family Court. As a result, very little is known about how these parents successfully negotiate arrangements, what helps or hinders the process, and what decisions they make regarding their children.

This report is the first study to ask New Zealand parents how they made decisions about caring for their children post-separation. The report provides examples of the types of care arrangements separated parents put in place – from shared care or weekend stays, through to occasional or infrequent contact. Parents settle on arrangements that work for their particular circumstances and they told us good communication is vital. Parents also have varying needs for information and support services. Some benefit from the support of family and friends, others rely on professional services like counselling. The study demonstrates that many parents have an excellent and intuitive understanding of what is in the best interests of their children.

The findings will help the Commission, policymakers and service providers to better understand the experience and needs of separated parents. I hope that the findings are also useful for parents who are going through the process of separating, to show them some real-life examples of what other parents have done and have found useful to negotiate the care of their children post-separation.

We are grateful to the parents who volunteered to share their experiences as part of this study. By telling their stories, they have shown us how committed they were to putting the interests of their children first, and this is both admirable and encouraging.

The Commission has a second much larger study underway which will give us a broader view of the experiences of separated parents. The report is expected to be published early in 2009.



Rajen Prasad  
Chief Commissioner

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parental separation is a common occurrence in New Zealand and other Western countries, and parents who are unable to make decisions themselves about living arrangements for children are able to call on the services of the Family Court. Little is known, however, about how the majority of parents, who do not use the processes of the Court, make decisions about their children.

The aim of this study was to interview a sample of parents in order to generate information on:

- > the pathways through which these parents make decisions regarding post-separation parenting arrangements for their children
- > the arrangements that these separated parents come to regarding the frequency, amount and type of contact they have with their children
- > how well these arrangements work for these parents, and how and why the arrangements may have changed over time.

This study interviewed 39 separated parents (24 mothers, 15 fathers), including eight separated couples, to find out how they made these decisions. These parents volunteered to participate in response to newspaper articles about the study. Six were Māori, and six were Pacific people. In addition, representatives of the Family Court and five organisations that provide services and information for separating parents were consulted: Relationship Services, Citizens Advice Bureau, Skylight, Taeaomanino Trust and Birthright.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The sample was not representative of separated couples in New Zealand, as they were self-selected and were likely to be those who were articulate, had strong opinions and were satisfied with their own experiences. In particular, we asked for the involvement of parents who had made their own arrangements, and this probably resulted in the relatively high rate of shared care in our sample. Highly conflicted parents and parents who have little or no contact with their children are not represented in the sample. Consequently, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the total population of separated parents.

Almost all parents in the study had made their own care arrangements. In most cases, this meant both parents negotiated an agreement. In some cases, it was one parent who drove the discussions that led to the agreement. Parents who negotiated an agreement together typically discussed with each other how much involvement each parent wanted and what was in the best interests of their child(ren). Most of the parents we interviewed concluded that it was in the child's best interest to maintain contact with both parents.

Just fewer than half the parents we interviewed sought the assistance of a counsellor or lawyer to help them reach an agreement. The presence of a neutral third person seemed to help these couples focus on the needs of the children, and to put aside, for a time, their own relationship issues. The majority of parents interviewed had informal care agreements which were not formally recorded.

The parents in the study had a range of post-separation parenting arrangements at the time of the interview. Ten of the 31 families had shared care of children between parents (at least a 30/70 split between parents' households). Twelve of the families had children residing mainly with one parent, but children stayed overnight with the other parent at least every other weekend. There were six families with more occasional contact and a small group of three families with infrequent and irregular contact. The proportion of families with shared care in this study (32 percent) is much higher than that found in a recent Australian study (10 percent) (Smyth, Weston, Moloney, Richardson, & Temple, forthcoming). Most children had at least some overnight time with both parents.

Arrangements for the first two groups (shared and weekend care) were almost always reliably kept. However, that did not mean changes were not made, and some flexibility was common. These groups were also more likely to arrive at settled arrangements soon after the separation. The other groups (occasional and infrequent) seemed to be those where arrangements had changed substantially over time, mainly due to changes in parents' circumstances. Many families (22 out of 31) had changed their care arrangement in some way since the original separation. Reasons for changes included the need to find suitable accommodation, children's preferences, needing more social time or respite from the children, changes in work, moving house and re-partnering.

In those families where shared care arrangements had been made, children were very likely to sustain contact with all their extended family members.

Parents in the study identified a number of factors as important in influencing their post-separation parenting arrangements. The primary factor was the quality of the parental relationship. Parental co-operation was more likely to result in more shared care in this sample. Where parents were still conflicted, it was more likely that contact was more infrequent and/or irregular. Other factors included where parents lived in relation to one another, whether they had entered a new partnership, experiences of and advice given by family and friends, and parents' individual personal circumstances (eg mental health issues).

Nearly all the parents we interviewed were clear that children's needs and best interests took priority in their deliberations. Children's needs were identified as: maintaining contact with both parents, stability, and not being overly involved in making decisions about the care arrangements. There was a clear belief held by many of the interviewed parents, both mothers and fathers, that fathers should be significantly involved in the parenting of children post-separation.

Parents interviewed for this study had put in place a variety of arrangements to financially support their children. For over half the parents we interviewed, their work situation at the time of the separation was a factor in determining the care arrangements for their children.

The parents interviewed for this study collectively illustrated a range of parenting styles – from co-operative co-parenting, and parallel parenting, to parental disengagement. There were fewer examples of conflicted co-parenting, reflecting the selective nature of our sample and method of recruiting participants.

Generally, those with more shared care were happy with the arrangements. On the other hand, those with more intermittent contact were more likely to want changes – either greater or lesser contact between the child and the other parent.

Overall, there was a strong sense of self-sufficiency in the parents interviewed. They did not express a high level of need for more information. For many parents, sessions with counsellors were useful. Books, pamphlets and the internet were perceived as not easily accessible or available. Family and friends were seen primarily as sources of support rather than information. Lawyers sometimes assisted with finalising agreements; however, some parents expressed a reluctance to get lawyers involved in their separation.

When we asked what advice they would give to other separated parents, the parents in the study said parents should set aside their personal and relationship issues and focus on the needs of their children.

Key insights emerging from the interviews, combined with findings from the literature, are:

- > Parents are able to negotiate arrangements between themselves, given the right context and support.
- > The ability to set aside partnership and individual issues, and to give priority to children's wellbeing, is central to negotiating successful outcomes.
- > Respectful and businesslike communication is an important part of negotiating successful living arrangements.
- > Parents 'experiment' with different arrangements rather than putting themselves under pressure to 'get it right' the first time.
- > Flexibility and reciprocity in regard to arrangements appears to be beneficial, if parents can establish a co-operative co-parenting relationship that enables this.
- > Families settle on arrangements that work well for their specific circumstances – no one care arrangement will work successfully for all families.

Further research on post-separation care arrangements is needed that involves more representative groups of separated parents, including parents who have little or no contact with their children, highly conflicted parents, Maori and Pacific families and new migrant groups. Quantitative data would provide fuller information about the range of care arrangements that are experienced by separated families in New Zealand.





## 1. INTRODUCTION

With increased rates of divorce, and parental separation in the case of cohabiting couples, a growing number of New Zealand parents and children are affected by the dissolution of their parents' partnership. The changes brought about by this include fundamental factors such as changes of home and school, and relationship changes as parents renegotiate patterns of contact and, in many cases, re-partner after separation. Evidence suggests that, in the majority of cases, children live with their mothers and see their fathers in varying ways. In Australia in 2003, for example, 82 percent of non-resident parents were men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006), and in New Zealand, 82 percent of lone parent households were headed by women (Statistics New Zealand, 2007), suggesting that there could be about the same numbers of non-resident fathers in New Zealand.

Living arrangements are made by parents either independently or with the help of the Family Court. The majority of couples do not use the Court at all in deciding how to arrange their lives and those of their children after separation. In New Zealand, couples have access to counselling and mediation through the Court, with hearings before a Family Court judge when these avenues fail to help them to reach agreement. Those that reach a final defended hearing are a small proportion (six percent) of those that have made applications to the Family Court.

In New Zealand, we know relatively little about what arrangements are made by the majority of couples who do not enter the Family Court system, or how they make these arrangements. There is some earlier research on the care arrangements made by those who had contact with the Family Court (Lee, 1990; Maxwell, Robertson, & Vincent, 1990). Maxwell, et al. (1990) found that, in their sample of parents who had approached the Family Court (both for counselling and to make applications concerning property, 'custody and access' and 'domestic protection'), about half of all residence and contact issues were resolved privately without any help from the Court, with only a minority of separating couples seeking judicial intervention from the Court in resolving matters relating to children. They also found that those who were able to reach their own agreements about children were more likely to report being satisfied with the decisions than those who relied on counsellors, lawyers or judges in the making of a decision.

Lee (1990) surveyed divorcing couples who had obtained a dissolution of their marriage. Parents had been separated, on average, for about four years. Lee found that a sizeable proportion of children did not see their non-resident parent at all – one year after separation, 22 percent of resident parents and 16 percent of non-resident parents reported no contact between child and non-resident parent. Where contact was occurring, the majority of children tended to see their non-resident parent at least fortnightly – one year after separation, 50 percent of resident parents and 66 percent of non-resident parents reported this. In general, parents were satisfied with their current arrangements with round 26 percent of non-resident parents reporting being dissatisfied with the arrangements six months after separation, compared with 12 percent of resident parents.

In Australia, drawing on customised data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Smyth (2005) identified six patterns of parenting post-separation. Most common (34 percent of children) was what he termed 'standard' care, which involved a set schedule of every weekend or every other weekend with the non-resident parent (usually the father), staying one or two nights. Daytime-only care (16 percent of children) and holiday-only care (10 percent of children) were more common than 'shared' care, defined as at least 30 percent of nights with each parent (six percent of children). However, a quarter of the children had little or no contact with their

non-resident parent, and seven percent had occasional contact. Kelly (2007) suggests that these patterns are similar to those in the United States; we have no directly comparable data in New Zealand.

An important aspect of contact is whether or not children stay overnight with their non-resident parents. Furstenberg and Nord (1985) found that 20 percent of non-resident fathers and 42 percent of non-resident mothers never had their children to stay with them overnight, while in Australia, around a third of children who see their non-resident parent do not stay overnight with that parent (Smyth, 2004). This is likely to be very significant for fostering the relationship between children and the parents they do not live with, since staying overnight provides the opportunity for parenting that involves 'ordinary' activities such as preparing meals, getting children ready for bed and preparing them for school in the mornings.

The above information gives a picture of the arrangements in operation at a particular point in time. Comparing these data across time will enable researchers to examine changes in care arrangements in operation for different periods and to see if shared care is becoming more common. However, such data do not tell us if and how these individual arrangements change over time. While there is some evidence from overseas that some arrangements are more stable than others,<sup>1</sup> little is known about the factors that contribute to changes in arrangements.

The extent to which Australian and USA data apply to New Zealand is uncertain. For example, it is not known to what extent cultural factors play a role in determining post-separation parenting arrangements. Given New Zealand's Māori and Pacific populations, overseas data may be limited as a guide to the arrangements adopted by New Zealand parents.

## 1.1 WHY ARE POST-SEPARATION PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS IMPORTANT?

Research suggests that children can benefit from ongoing parenting relationships after separation. A meta-analysis by Amato and Gilbreth (1999) indicated that levels of contact, in themselves, do not make a difference to the wellbeing (for example, academic success or behaviour problems) of children after separation. They reported that the closeness of the relationship conferred some advantages to children, but that the factor that had most impact was the extent to which the non-resident parent was involved in day-to-day parenting of the child and thus able to be an authoritative parent (warm, monitoring, supportive). This involvement included monitoring, preparing children for school and tasks associated with overnight residence with that parent. There may, however, be a caveat to be applied to these findings. Amato and his colleagues did not distinguish between children living with a lone parent, and children living in stepfamilies; more recent studies suggest that, for children in stepfamilies, contact is important as a predictor of wellbeing (Pryor, in press).

Another meta-analysis that considered the impact of joint physical custody found that, even when conflict was taken into account, children in joint custody living arrangements were faring better (for example, in terms of self-esteem, family relationships and emotional adjustment) than those who saw little of their non-resident parent (Bauserman, 2002). Another intriguing finding in regard to living arrangements is that of Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000), who reported that

<sup>1</sup> For example, Krecker, Brown, Melli and Wimer, (2003); Maccoby and Mnookin, (1992); and Smyth, et al (forthcoming).



adult children of divorce who had experienced the 'default' position of staying with their non-resident parent every other weekend (one of the most common patterns in Smyth's sample) showed the most distress as adults. In contrast, those who either rarely saw their non-resident parent, or had very regular contact, reported less distress. Overall, research is indicating strongly that, unless there are issues of abuse or mental illness, regular and involved contact with non-resident parents is in the interests of children's wellbeing in both the short and the long term.

## 1.2 WHAT FACTORS ARE IMPORTANT FOR CONTACT WITH NON-RESIDENT PARENTS?

There is a considerable body of international research that addresses the factors that enhance or inhibit children's contact with their non-resident parents. The following seem to be the most significant.

### (i) Relationship between biological parents

Numerous studies document the positive association between the quality of this relationship and the level of contact between children and non-resident parents (Arditti & Bickley, 1996; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004; Flouri, 2006; Funder, Harrison, & Weston, 1993; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Interestingly, an English study of contact (Maclean & Eekelaar, 1997) showed that ongoing contact between children and non-resident parents improved the quality of the relationship between parents over time. It is important to note, though, that, in some cases, conflicted parents can maintain contact levels between children and non-resident parents, but that this conflict is related negatively to the quality of that relationship (Flouri, 2006).

### (ii) Partnership status

Parents are not always co-resident at the time of their child's birth. In the UK, Maclean and Eekelaar, (1997) found a continuum of contact, from less contact for those fathers who were not living with their partner at the time of the child's birth, through those who were cohabiting, to greater contact for those who were married. They found that the levels of commitment to children varied with the levels of commitment to the partnership, such that married parents were most likely to remain in contact with children after separation. Relationship status *at time of separation* does not appear to be so important, with Cooksey and Craig (1998) finding no differences in contact between formerly married and formerly cohabiting/non-resident parents.

### (iii) Payment of child support

There is evidence from the UK (Blackwell & Dawe, 2003) and the United States (Whiteside & Becker, 2000) that payment of child support by non-resident parents is associated with frequency of contact with the children. The direction of effects is not clear; those who pay child support may be encouraged to seek contact, or being in contact may promote payment of support.

### (iv) Length of time children have lived with parent

The age of children is only partly associated with levels of contact. What appears to be more important is their age at time of separation since this is related to the length of time children have lived with the parent. Non-resident parents are more likely to

stay in contact with children the longer they had lived with them. Conversely, the longer parents have been separated, the lower the levels of contact (Blackwell & Dawe, 2003; Flouri, 2006).

### (v) Geography

Distance between houses has an obvious relationship with contact, both direct and indirect – the further away a non-resident parent lives, the lower the levels of contact (Blackwell & Dawe, 2003; Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Smyth, 2004).

### (vi) Re-partnering

It is commonly assumed that, when either parent re-partners, contact between non-resident parents and children reduces. However, this seems not to be the case (Pryor, in press). When a resident parent re-partners, several studies (for example, Flouri, 2006; Maclean & Eekelaar, 1997) show either no differences in levels of contact or, in one study, *increased* levels of contact (Aquilino, 2006). Similarly, when a non-resident parent re-partners, contact seems to decrease only if that person has subsequent children with their new partner (Blackwell & Dawe, 2003). Overall, studies report no changes in levels of contact when non-resident parents re-partner (Pryor, in press). Different approaches to the measurement of parent-child contact may underpin these different findings.

## 1.3 INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AT SEPARATION

There is very little research that addresses the information needs of parents at separation, although there are increasing numbers of programmes available (for example, the 'Parenting Through Separation' programme run by the Ministry of Justice). Parents may also elicit information from books, the internet, the media and from family and friends. We do not know how useful parents find this information,<sup>2</sup> or about what information needs parents have in general.



<sup>2</sup> The 'Parenting Through Separation' programme is currently being evaluated.

## 1.4 HELP FOR PARENTS AT SEPARATION

There are a number of organisations that provide support to parents going through separation. Relationship Services is a national organisation that provides counselling services for couples throughout New Zealand. There are also private counsellors and psychologists in most areas, and they often provide services to both individuals and couples experiencing relationship breakdown.

There is also help for children. For example, Skylight is an organisation that provides services for children who have experienced loss of a parent, either through death or parental separation ([www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)). It provides support and advice for children and for their family members, and is based in Wellington.

Lawyers also provide services to those going through relationship separation. Lawyers who specialise in family law, in particular, are usually well informed about the processes of separation and the impact on children of parents separating.

The Family Court plays an important role in helping couples settle post-separation parenting and financial matters. There are a number of services provided by the Family Court to assist separating couples. Those who approach the Court are initially offered counselling, aimed at helping couples to resolve issues and helping parents to make decisions about their children, which is provided free by the Court. If counselling does not help them resolve issues, they may then have a Court-ordered mediation conference (conducted by a judge trained in mediation) to help them reach agreement about outstanding issues. At any stage, the couple can reach their own parenting agreement. A parenting agreement cannot be enforced by the Family Court unless it is formalised through parenting orders. In fact, most couples settle either after counselling or mediation; data from the Ministry of Justice statistics suggest that less than six percent of those making applications to the Court go to a hearing before a judge. If mediation is not successful, a hearing may be held before a Family Court judge. The judge will hear from the parties, their lawyers and other professionals (for example, a psychologist, or a lawyer for the child). Judges will then make parenting orders that include details of the day-to-day care for the children and any regular contact with the other parent.

## 2. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This was an exploratory study utilising qualitative research methods, as there is little New Zealand information on post-separation parenting arrangements, including the factors that influence the amount, flexibility and quality of contact.

The main objectives of the research were to interview a sample of parents in order to generate information on:

- > the pathways through which parents make decisions regarding post-separation parenting arrangements for their children, including residence and contact
- > the arrangements that separated parents come to regarding the frequency, amount and type of contact they have with their children
- > how well these arrangements work for the parents, and how and why the arrangements may have changed over time.

The following questions guided the research:

- > What is the amount and timing of contact between non-resident parents and their children?
- > What factors influence the amount and timing of contact (for example, geographic location, age of children, re-partnering, parental conflict, labour force status, income and the level of support provided by other family members)?
- > Why do parents choose the arrangement they have? Was there consultation with the children, and what weight was given to this?
- > What helped and hindered the decision-making process around contact?
- > Did parents have access to any information or programmes that helped them come to their own arrangements? What information didn't they have that could have helped?
- > Did the pattern of contact change over time?
- > How satisfied were parents with the care arrangements?

In addition to finding out about the care arrangements made by a sample of separated parents, we contextualised this by interviewing organisations providing services and information to separated parents.

## 2.2 ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval for the research was granted by both Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee and the Families Commission Ethics Committee.

All participants were given information sheets outlining the aims of the study, what their participation would involve, that information would be confidential and that recordings of interviews would be destroyed at the conclusion of the research. All participants signed consent forms.

## 2.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERVIEW

A semi-structured qualitative interview was developed, based on the preceding research questions. The draft interview guide was piloted with three separated parents who were recruited through interviewer contacts. As a result of piloting, minor changes were made to the interview guide.

The interview with parents covered:

- > a description of the current contact arrangements
- > the nature of the parenting relationship between the ex-partners
- > the quality of the relationships between the parents, and between the parents and their children
- > the process by which decisions were made about the care arrangements
- > the level of satisfaction with the arrangements
- > the nature of any changes that had been made to the care arrangements over time
- > financial arrangements
- > demographic information, including the participants' age, ethnicity and highest educational qualification.

## 2.4 RECRUITING

A media statement released in late July 2007 was subsequently reported by both *The Dominion Post* in Wellington and *The New Zealand Herald* in Auckland. The statement called for separated parents to share their experiences of making decisions about living arrangements for their children. In particular, we sought parents who had not been to the Family Court (other than for initial counselling sessions); Pākehā, Māori and Pacific parents; and, where possible, both parents to be interviewed.

A second media statement was sent to community newspapers around the Wellington region in early October. The focus of this statement was to recruit more Māori and Pacific parents with children aged 18 years or younger.

Our Pacific researcher used his community networks to identify four Pacific separated parents for interview.

Information on the study was also posted on the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families website and the Families Commission website.

## 2.5 RESPONSE TO ADVERTISEMENTS

We had over 60 responses to the media statements. Most respondents found out about the research through *The Dominion Post* and *The New Zealand Herald* articles.

As we approached our target numbers, we checked the sample to ensure we had sufficient diversity. We had good responses from Pākehā parents and from fathers, and a range of children's ages were represented. We were lacking in Māori and Pacific informants, so subsequently focused the second media statement on recruiting Māori and Pacific participants and used our Pacific researcher to recruit Pacific separated parents.

## 2.6 INTERVIEWERS

Four interviewers were used, including a Pacific researcher who facilitated most of the interviews with Pacific participants. All those interviewed were asked if they had any preference for interviewers of a specific sex or ethnicity.

## 2.7 DETAILS OF THOSE INTERVIEWED

Interviews were completed with 39 separated parents. There were 24 interviews with mothers and 15 interviews with fathers. In total, eight separated couples (as opposed to separated individuals) were interviewed. Separated couples were not interviewed together. In total, 31 families were interviewed.

**TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES INTERVIEWED (n=31)**

	NUMBER OF FAMILIES
<b>Number of children in family</b>	
One child	8
Two children	16
Three children	5
Four or more children	2
<b>Sex of children</b>	
Male only	11
Female only	7
Male and female	13
<b>Age of youngest child at time of interview (years)</b>	
0-5	8
6-10	11
11-18	11
18 plus	1
<b>Time since separation (years)</b>	
0-2	6
3-5	11
6-10	11
11 plus	3
<b>Length of relationship (years)</b>	
0-2	2
3-5	5
6-10	9
11 plus	15

In the 31 families, there were 64 children, of whom 58 were aged 18 or under. There were 28 girls and 36 boys. At the time of the interview, their ages ranged from under one year old to children in their twenties. Thirteen of the parents reported that the other parent lived within five kilometres, 20 lived further away but within the same city, five lived in another town or city and one parent lived overseas. Sixteen of the parents were living with a new partner at the time of the interview, and four of them had stepchildren and four had new children from the current relationship.

At the time their parents separated, there were 13 families whose oldest child was aged five or under, 12 with an oldest child aged six to 10 years and six with the eldest child aged 11 or older. Twenty-three families had multiple children (including one family with triplets), and eight families had one child. Parents had been in a relationship, on average, for 11 years at the time of separation, and 23 of the couples had been married.

Interviews took around 40 minutes. Most interviews took place in parents' homes, in their workplace or in a neutral office space. There were three phone interviews.

Twenty-two participants lived in Wellington, 13 in Auckland, one in Christchurch, one in Palmerston North and two in rural areas. Most participants were aged in their forties (n=18), or thirties (n=14). Only two were in their fifties, and one was in her twenties. Age was unknown for four participants. Six of the participants were of Māori descent, six were Pacific people and the remainder were New Zealand European/Pākehā (27 participants). Participants were asked what their highest school qualification was. Nineteen had a university degree or higher, seven had university entrance, three had 6<sup>th</sup> Form qualifications, four 5<sup>th</sup> Form only and six had no formal educational qualifications.

None of those interviewed had difficulty with the interview, and most seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk to the researchers and share their stories. Thirty-one interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed. In the case of the three phone interviews and five face-to-face interviews that were not recorded, the interviewer took extensive notes.



## 2.8 CONSULTATION WITH ORGANISATIONS

To contextualise the information provided by separated parents, we consulted representatives from the Family Court and five organisations that provide support and information to separated parents. These were organisations that had been mentioned as providing services by those interviewed. The organisations were not asked about specific cases; we sought more general information about the services they provide. Representatives from the following organisations were consulted:

- > Relationship Services
- > Citizens Advice Bureau
- > Skylight
- > Birthright
- > Taeaomanino Trust.

The services offered by these organisations are briefly described in Appendix 1. The interview covered:

- > with whom the organisation works
- > the referral process
- > how the organisation advertises its services
- > how the organisation works with parents and families
- > the organisation representative's views on which parents work out their own arrangements
- > what hinders parents from making their own arrangements
- > what help and information separating parents need.

## 2.9 DATA ANALYSIS

Except for telephone interviews and some interviews with Pacific participants where the interviewer took notes, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was undertaken. Analysis included examining the extent to which results parallel or differ from overseas research (for example, Smyth's five post-separation patterns of care) and, for couples, comparison of any differences in the perceptions of ex-partners from the same family. Where possible, some assessment was made of the extent to which parenting arrangements differed for those with different levels of education and the extent to which cultural considerations determined arrangements.

Given the nature of the sample, we have not attempted a quantitative analysis of the issues covered in the interviews. Although the sample is a diverse group, all participants volunteered for the study, so we do not know how representative they are of all parents who separate and make their own post-separation parenting arrangements. The aim of this research was to identify the range of arrangements these parents adopted, how they were reached and parents' satisfaction with these post-separation arrangements. The results of the analysis should therefore not be generalised to the total population, but rather serve as a guide for further study. As we summarise in the final chapter, we hope the results also serve to provide information to parents about the variety of options available for post-separation

parenting, the sources of help in making these arrangements and the factors to take into consideration when working out the detail of any agreement.

Verbatim quotes from the parents we interviewed have been used throughout the report to illustrate the themes that emerged. Following each quote, information about the parent is provided in brackets. We have done this to provide some context about the parent, while also aiming to protect their confidentiality.

## 2.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE SAMPLE

Our research sought to exclude families who had been involved with the Family Court (other than for counselling sessions). In our sample, some parents had used Family Court-funded counselling, and two had attended mediation. Although we asked for parents who had not made applications to the Family Court, upon interviewing five parents, we found that they had been applicants or respondents in the Family Court. As these parents had initially made their own arrangements, these families were retained in the sample.

The majority of parents who separate do not require the assistance of the Family Court to decide on their post-separation parenting arrangements. It is likely that these couples have relatively low levels of conflict and have more amicable relationships, including a co-operative style of parenting, compared to couples who have applications heard in the Family Court. Our sample, then, includes very few highly conflicted couples.

We had a preference for interviewing both parents. This provides linked data on families, rather than separate data on resident parents and non-resident parents. We thought such data may be valuable for identifying similarities and differences in views (for example, levels of satisfaction) about the same care arrangements. We did not exclude people when their ex-partner did not consent to be interviewed. We generally relied on one parent to contact their ex-partner on our behalf, and this, of itself, necessitated that they had the willingness and ability to communicate with the other parent in an amicable way.

The majority of participants were recruited through newspaper articles. This excluded people who do not read *The Dominion Post*, *The New Zealand Herald* or their local community newspaper (either the paper or its web version). This recruitment method also leads to a self-selection bias. Participants' decisions to follow up on the newspaper article may be correlated with personality traits that skew the representativeness of the sample. For example, it is likely that people who had a strong opinion, felt knowledgeable, were articulate and felt successful and satisfied with their own experience of parenting apart were more willing to spend time being interviewed. This method of recruitment also probably led to fewer parents being involved in the study who had little or no contact with their children.

To boost the number of Pacific participants, our Pacific researcher used his community networks to identify and recruit separated parents from Pacific Island ethnic groups. This method of recruitment may have affected the type of Pacific parents who were interviewed, since parents of other ethnicities did not have such a personalised approach, instead responding to a media release. These families came from a relatively poor community and were of lower educational and socio-economic status compared to the New Zealand European/Pākehā participants.

We did not interview the children who were the subject of the care arrangement. We relied on their parents' perceptions of their satisfaction with the care arrangements and the quality of their relationship with their parents. Some research has been undertaken in New Zealand on children's perceptions of separation and their involvement in decisions about care arrangements (Smith & Gollop, 2001). The limitation with relying on parents' reports is that they may not accurately reflect the view of their children. However, many of the parents backed up their ratings of children's satisfaction and relationships with descriptions that supported these ratings.

It is also noted that the length of time since separation varied from less than two years (six participants) to over 11 years (three participants) – see Table 1. Consequently, some parents in our study were reporting on quite recent and new care arrangements, while others were reporting on arrangements that had been in place for some years. The latter arrangements may also have changed over that period.

### 2.11 SUMMARY

Because so little is known about parents who make their own post-separation parenting arrangements, it is difficult to judge the representativeness of our sample. Our study is likely to over-represent parents who feel they have negotiated successful care arrangements for their children post-separation and who have low levels of conflict with their ex-partners. We did, however, have some conflicted parents in the sample, and these provided a contrast to the other couples. The sample was also drawn mainly from two urban areas of New Zealand. Given the self-selective nature of the sample, the results of the analysis should therefore not be generalised to the total population.

## 3. HOW ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE

The decision to separate was not always a joint one, and the reasons for, and reactions to, the separation varied amongst the parents interviewed. However, once the decision to separate had been made, parents were faced with the need to make arrangements for the continuing care of their children. For some couples, the actual physical separation followed a few months after the decision to separate. Couples reported using this time to plan for the separation, and this included plans for the care of the children. This chapter explores how those arrangements were made and in particular, what assistance parents had in making their decisions.

### 3.1 HOW DID COUPLES MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT CARE ARRANGEMENTS?

Although one parent might take a lead in the decision to separate, parents typically reported that they were both involved in making the decisions regarding the care of the children:

We talked about it – what we were going to do, to be honest we did not have lawyers at the beginning. We had an agreement between us. It is a formal agreement now. We did get some pamphlets and stuff and info on relationship counselling and Family Court. We felt we were in control of things and happy how things were – it was amicable. (Mother, shared care of four-year-old) [Family 9]<sup>3</sup>

There was a discussion; it grew organically from both of us wanting to have the kids. We were keen that the separation should not have too much effect on the kids so, while things were acrimonious between us, we were keeping the kids out of that. We had a good start – we had a 50/50 thing within a few months, and the day varied over the years. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

In order to negotiate suitable arrangements, parents needed to be able to communicate with one another. As can be seen from these quotes, an important factor in the ability of parents to proceed with negotiations was their ability to put aside relationship issues. As another parent said (and this was independently repeated by her partner):

Forget about the reason that you are separating because, from my experience, you both have different reasons about why you are separating and there is no one reason – probably a whole host of reasons and there might be one thing that will stick in your mind the most – and you won't agree – because at the end of the day your kids love you both and you both love the children. That will never change. You have to do it for the sake of the children. It also prevents the kids from playing one off against the other. We have never had that. (Mother, two children with father two weekends in three) [Family 48]

The ability to compromise, particularly when it came to financial matters, was highlighted by some. For these parents, while they didn't really get what they wanted from their ex-partners, it was more important to keep the peace:

Look at the environment. If it means not having money for movies in the weekend and just having a nice happy situation with your ex, I think it is important. It was easier for me not to go after him for more money. Just to keep things nice and civil. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

When talking about how he paid his ex-partner while having equal care of their daughter, one father with shared care of one child said:

You can see that this is partly for the avoidance of conflict... I rolled over on things where other people actually said 'Why are you giving that up?' And I have said, 'Because you have to look at what it will cost to exert my rights.' Children aren't property and you don't have rights. People who want to assert their rights in those places are people who end up having protracted struggles. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

Another mother said:

I think if I had tried to fight for half the house maybe he would not have been so co-operative... If I fought tooth and nail, my life would have been a misery – it just wasn't going to be worth it, and I didn't want to be having bad feelings between us for the next 20 years and dealing with all of that – so to keep the peace, keep everyone happy. (Mother, two children with father every second weekend) [Family 27]

Parents described sitting down and talking through their options. Sometimes, one parent would obtain information, which they would then share with the other parent. They would then discuss their options and come to some agreement, at least on the initial arrangements. In five cases, one parent took a lead in making the arrangements, although there was still discussion between the parents. In only four cases did one parent effectively make the decision:

Well, we started off with him saying I am going to come and see her tonight or I am going to pick her up tonight, and then he'd ring back and say he was busy and couldn't do it. I put my foot down and said, 'Now pick three nights a week or pick the night that you have her.' He was a bit shocked because he has always been very controlling. I put my foot down and said this is not going to happen. He didn't have much choice. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

Parents described discussing a variety of issues with the other parent (these factors are reviewed in detail in Chapter 5). These initial discussions involved establishing how much involvement each parent wanted, and this was usually tied to what the parents perceived to be in the best interests of the children. Most of those interviewed, and almost all those with shared care, commented that it was in the child's best interest to maintain contact with both parents. This was often also expressed as a need for children to see their father. So while parents might want full-time care of the children, they acknowledged that the children had the need and right to have contact with both parents:

When [my husband] left us I never stopped him from seeing [our son], as he needs to know his father as he was growing up and I was happy for him to go and visit him. (Mother, child in father's care one weekend per month) [Family 54]

I think if I was being completely selfish, the only way it would be better for me was if he was one of the dads that had them every second week – I think, from the children's point of view, it would not be the best thing for them. They love their dad to bits. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 21]

Sometimes, the agreement to have shared care was based on the relatively high level of involvement by both parents in parenting the children prior to the separation. In other cases, the main carer acknowledged the right of the other parent to have a continuing involvement in their child's life.

<sup>3</sup> To protect confidentiality, names and places have been removed from the quotes. Who the quote is from and their post-separation parenting arrangement is detailed in brackets at the end of the quote. The final square brackets contain the code number of the family which can be cross-referenced to Table 2 pg 36.

Once parents had agreed to the relative distribution of care of the children, they then described negotiating the details of the arrangement. Factors considered included: parents' work hours, children's needs, financial arrangements, the relative location of the two households, the accommodation of each parent, whether partners had re-partnered and a variety of individual factors (for example, health) for each parent.

Although parents obtained information from various sources (for example, the Family Court, internet, books, lawyers or friends), over half the parents (17 of the 31 families) reported making the decision themselves, without the involvement of anyone else. The remainder had help from lawyers or counsellors. These parents took into consideration the information and advice but the actual discussion and decision-making was between the parents. In only two cases was the arrangement determined by someone else, and in both cases, this involved intervention by child welfare services.

It must be remembered that this is a self-selected sample and that we sought parents who made agreements between themselves. The sample was intended to exclude those who made applications to the Family Court, although many parents in the sample had used counselling services arranged by the Family Court.

Ten families used a lawyer to help draft their parenting agreement:

I came up with the agreement, we talked about it and sort of emailed back and forth. I took it to a family lawyer and got it drawn up. I said you have to take it to a lawyer, so she did and I paid for both. Get them to check it – make sure you are happy and we signed it. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]

Some parents also went to see a lawyer in order to find out about the law and their rights with respect to post-separation parenting. However, one parent stated very strongly that she had avoided getting lawyers involved because of the cost:

[My ex-husband] has a strong belief that he does not like lawyers to get any money so – I can't disagree with it – he felt that, rather than go through any legal process, we could work it out. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

Counselling was a major source of guidance for these parents; 14 couples sought the assistance of a counsellor. Counselling was used both in the lead up to the separation and after they had stopped living together. The pre-separation counselling tended to focus on their relationship, and the later counselling was more concerned with how to separate. Attending counselling was seen as a way of focusing on the parenting of the children, rather than the relationship. All but one of the parents involved had found it helpful in focusing their attention on the needs of their child(ren). Counsellors were seen to be impartial and as reminding parents to consider the perspective of the child.

One key informant suggested that, for those couples who can afford it, seeing a private counsellor is perceived as ensuring couples' privacy. This desire for privacy may have also been a factor in the degree to which parents were willing to involve others. A few parents mentioned being reluctant to involve family members, for example, as they preferred to keep the details of the separation to themselves.

Many found counselling helpful in reaching agreements:

The counselling was brilliant. It helped us focus on the issues. (Father who has care of three children three weekends in four) [Family 36]

I had never been a believer in counselling until then. In fact, the only reason I went to see her was that I was very ill. I couldn't separate what I wanted to do for the family and what I wanted. Within an hour of seeing a counsellor, I knew what I had to

do. If I hadn't done that, our relationship would have ended anyway but deteriorated to the point that it would be hard to rescue. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 21]

The [contact] visits were so erratic, and he was sort of sticking to the deal. I did make application through the Family Court for counselling in 2002, because I wanted there to be some consistency with the boys visiting their father. When he rings on a Thursday or Friday and says, 'Look, can't have the boys because I'm going to Taupo' or whatever, the boys would feel quite let down, and it just didn't seem fair. So I made an application [to the Court] so we could have counselling because we both know that we can't do it together – so we need mediation – and the outcome of that is that we did have an agreement that it would be every second weekend. It was okay, not flash – it was better. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

Although we sought to exclude parents who had made applications to the Family Court, upon interviewing five parents, we found that they had been applicants or respondents in the Family Court. Mostly, this was in response to the failure of an informal agreement or concerns about parenting:

We did go to Court – 1999 – yes, I had to – his father was taking him in the car, and was drunk, and I had to ring the Police. So I went to a lawyer. (Mother, child with father one weekend per month) [Family 54]

He has come in and tried to take me to Court at various stages because he has decided he didn't like the way I am doing things and he can do it much better. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]





Some parents we interviewed had considered going through the Family Court to help them make their care arrangement or settle some aspect of their separation (eg financial arrangements). These parents had decided not to go to the Family Court for different reasons. One parent had received informal advice from a lawyer friend:

Oh just informally [I] asked for some advice, because she was threatening that I would get no contact. And the advice I was given was stay away from the Family Court – no one ever wins. So I was keen not to go there. (Father, sees baby every second weekend) [Family 50]

One mother, when asked if she had considered going to the Court, stated:

I don't see the point in going [to] Court to rubber stamp something you can agree on. And from what I understand, you can spend a lot of money, get it stamped and it changes anyway, so what is the point? (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

In at least one case, prior experience of the Family Court with another child had put off a parent from using the Court in the current separation. The experience of a contested case in the Court left this parent with the feeling that the involvement of the Court would take away the parent's ability to decide the arrangements, and that others would be deciding on the arrangements for them.

Since 2006, the Ministry of Justice has funded a short course for parents, 'Parenting Through Separation'. Most of the parents interviewed in our study would have been separated some time before this course was available. Two parents mentioned having attended the course, and the impact of the accompanying DVD showing children talking about their parents' separation was seen as particularly powerful. However, one of the parents remarked it could be counter productive, with parents staying together because they feared the hurt it might cause to their children:

From the child's perspective, [the DVD] was good but if you have a parent that is undecided and wants to leave, then you see that video, then you would stay with your wife because you wouldn't want your kids to be hurt like that. You see it on the TV – so you would be unhappy staying with them because you saw how your children [could] suffer. (Mother, child with father every weekend) [Family 45]



### 3.2 HOW WERE AGREEMENTS RECORDED?

The majority of the families in this study had informal agreements, and these were not always formally recorded (for example, with their lawyer). When parents had a good relationship and had been separated for some time, there was generally an understanding between them as to what the arrangements were. As will be shown later, these arrangements were often quite flexible, although not to the extent that the arrangements were ignored. Those couples who had received assistance in reaching agreements (for example, from a lawyer or counsellor) were more likely to have their parenting arrangements recorded:

I took some advice from a friend who is a lawyer and he said to me just get things – whether informal or formal – just get them on paper.

[Interviewer] And have you done that?

Yes, I have sent through a couple of points to her – she agreed on some, and didn't agree on others. (Father who visits baby every second weekend) [Family 50]

Having a record of the agreement meant that there was less room for disagreement. This was particularly important for those couples who had found it difficult to reach an initial agreement. For example, those who went to counselling reported that the agreements reached were recorded by the counsellor. It was then possible for couples to refer back to this document if necessary.

Sometimes, the initial informal arrangements were not working and outside help was required, often to formalise and record the agreement:

We went to counselling just to have a mediator there so I could say it is not fair, on anyone, and if you can't see them, if you cannot commit to each fortnight, then let's work out what you can commit to... It was much, much better after that – it might also have been because it was in writing... I think he liked the idea of a piece of paper, and we both signed it and we had different things that we both agreed on. That worked quite well. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

Lawyers were also used in order to help draft agreements. Ten families used a lawyer for this purpose, often in addition to the lawyer's main role in drafting a property agreement. When couples had involved lawyers in formulating their agreements, they were not always aware of the status of the agreement. Some seemed to think that the lawyer had registered the agreement with the Court, but were not clear what this meant. It is likely that these were parenting agreements that were filed in the Court with a report on counselling, rather than formalised through parenting orders. When interviewed, one parent was able to refer to a written document, which was reviewed regularly.

### 3.3 SUMMARY

Almost all parents we interviewed had made their own arrangements. In most cases this meant both parents negotiated an agreement. For these parents, their ability to communicate effectively, to put aside personal issues and at times compromise, meant they could work out suitable arrangements themselves. In some cases, it was one parent who drove the discussions that led to the agreement. This tended to occur where the main caregiver was not happy with the looseness of the arrangements and wanted a more formal and structured arrangement.

Parents who negotiated an agreement together typically discussed with each other how much involvement each parent wanted and what was in the best interests of their child(ren). Most of the parents we interviewed concluded that it was in the child's best interest to maintain contact with both parents.

Just fewer than half of the parents we interviewed sought the assistance of a counsellor or lawyer to help them reach an agreement. The presence of a neutral third person seemed to help these couples focus on the needs of the children, and to put aside, for a time, their own relationship issues. For this study we sought to recruit participants who had not made an application to the Family Court, however, many had used the free counselling offered through the Family Court. Some parents had considered but then had expressly decided to avoid using the Family Court to help them make their care arrangement.

The majority of parents interviewed had informal care agreements which were not formally recorded (ie in writing, with a lawyer or through the Court). Having a formal record of the arrangement, often using a lawyer, seemed to be more important for couples who had found it difficult to initially reach agreement.

The findings here suggest a process whereby parents first agreed in principle about levels of contact, and then negotiated details according to context and circumstances. What seemed to be important was the ability first to agree on the principles; for example, that it was in the best interests of the child to maintain contact with both parents. From that agreement, parents were then able to make the final decisions about the arrangements themselves, sometimes after considering advice and information from others.

## 4. POST-SEPARATION PARENTING ARRANGEMENTS

This chapter begins by detailing the care arrangements that were in place at the time parents were interviewed. It then goes on to describe the changes in post-separation parenting arrangements that had sometimes occurred and discusses some of the reasons for these changes. The chapter ends with a discussion of the type of parenting activities engaged in by those parents who did not have the main care of the children. This section includes a discussion of the parenting style adopted by the two parents, and the degree to which they discussed parenting issues.

## 4.1 CARE ARRANGEMENTS

Parents were asked to describe the current arrangements for the care of those of their children who had a parent living in another household (some parents had new children with their current partner). The details of these arrangements for the 31 families are presented in Table 2. As can be seen from this table, there was a variety of post-separation parenting arrangements adopted by the families in the study. These have been grouped into the following four types of arrangement on the basis of the time allocation between parents' homes:

- > shared care
- > weekend contact with overnight stay
- > monthly contact
- > infrequent contact.

The first group had approximately shared care, which we have defined here as involving at least a 30/70 percent split between the parents' households (Smyth, 2005), including overnight stays. Ten of the 31 families (32 percent) had arrangements that met this criterion. As can be seen from Table 2, there was a variety of shared care arrangements, including: week on and week off with change-over on a set day of the week; with father six days in a row followed by with mother for eight days; father has child from Friday evening till Monday morning each week; mother has main care of daughter and father has main care of son (ie split residence):

We have one week on and one week off. Friday is change-over day. The parent who has them drops them at school Friday morning and the other parent picks them up after school on Friday. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 16]

[Our son] is with me Monday to Friday and [his father] takes him Friday night and brings [him] back Monday morning. (Mother, shared care of four-year-old) [Family 9]

At the moment, we have definite days, and it has been shared over a fortnight (seven days each) – at the moment, we have Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday – they stay with me. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

The second group of 12 families tended to adopt a more 'traditional' arrangement, with the child living most of the time with one parent and having weekend contact with the other parent. In all but one case, this involved overnight stays with the parent – the exception being a young child who was still being breastfed by a mother with the main care. In all but two of these families, the mother was the main carer:

So I have them from Friday to Sunday evening. We changed it to the boys coming to me two weekends out of three [instead of alternate weekends] – and it has always been 50 percent school holidays as well. That was the routine that became established. (Father who has two children two weekends in three) [Family 48]

They all go to his place every second weekend. They all go, even though they don't have to. He picks them up Friday night and brings them back Sunday night. (Mother, three children with father every second weekend) [Family 22]

So coming back to how much time does he spend with me – one week a month – or one week in four – and it now runs nominally from 5.00pm on a Sunday to 5.00pm on the following Sunday – subject to agreement of the two parties. (Father who has care of one child for one week in four) [Family 17]

I have them most of the time. [Their father] has them every second weekend, so he will pick them up from after school care on Friday night and bring them back to me Sunday evening every second weekend, and he has them every Wednesday night as well. (Mother, two children with father every second weekend) [Family 27]

The children in the third group of six families spent the majority of their time in the care of one parent, seeing their other parent about once a month or less. All but one of these families had included overnight stays, and although the contact was less frequent, there was an attempt to keep the arrangements regular:

Then I moved to [another city] in March 2005. I tried to see them every other pay (which is once a month) and then that sort of crept out to five or six weeks. Now, with the flights being cheaper, it is more frequent. Like in October, it will be every weekend. Then I won't see them until Christmas. They come up to [this city] (probably four times) but the majority of the time I go down there. (Father who has two children on average one weekend a month) [Family 3]

The last overnight visit [to their mother] was probably three months ago. This year he [my son] has only been there two or three times – whereas [my daughter] has been there a bit more – say 10 times. She has just started a part-time job in the weekends so... (Father who has main care, children have occasional contact with mother) [Family 41]



**TABLE 2: CURRENT PHYSICAL CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS (C INDICATES COUPLE INTERVIEWED)**

SHARED (AT LEAST 30/70 SPLIT OVERNIGHT)	
<b>Family 14(C)</b>	Father has six days in a row Friday to Thursday. Mother has eight days in a row. [Two children eight and 12 years old]
<b>Family 16</b>	Week on week off. Change over on Friday after school. [Two children seven and 11 years old]
<b>Family 21(C)</b>	Week on week off. Change over Saturday midday. [Two children seven and nine years old]
<b>Family 38(C)</b>	Share seven days each fortnight. Father Monday, Thursday, Friday nights and Saturday until pm. [Two children eight and 12 years old]
<b>Family 53</b>	With father four days a week. Depends on father's work schedule. [Two children 10 and 13 years old]
<b>Family 57</b>	At least six days a fortnight with father. Week – Tuesday overnight, Thursday-Saturday. [Three children three, eight and 10 years old]
<b>Family 5(C)</b>	Five days per fortnight with father – Thursday through Monday one week and Thursday only the alternate week. [Two children four and 12 years old]
<b>Family 9(C)</b>	Father has son every Friday evening through to Monday morning. [One child four years old]
<b>Family 43</b>	Overnight with father on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. [One child one year old]
<b>Family 30</b>	Mother has main care of daughter and father has main care of son. Daughter visits father approximately every second weekend, usually Friday overnight. [Two children 14 and 16 years old]
WEEKENDS (APPROXIMATELY 20/80 SPLIT)	
<b>Family 45</b>	Mother has main care. With Father Friday or Saturday night every weekend. [One child six years old]
<b>Family 44</b>	Father has main care. Mother has them Friday and Saturday nights every weekend. [Two children 10 and 11 years old]
<b>Family 36</b>	Mother has main care. Visit father three out of four weekends Friday-Sunday. [Three children 12, 13 and 24 years old]
<b>Family 48(C)</b>	Mother has main care. With father two out of three weekends Friday-Sunday. More up to children. [Two children 15 and 18 years old]
<b>Family 22</b>	Mother has main care. Visit father every second weekend. [Three children 14, 17 and 18 years old]
<b>Family 7</b>	Mother has main care. With father every second weekend. [One child eight years old]
<b>Family 24</b>	Father has main care. Mother has children every second weekend, but spends time at father's house with the children on weeknights. [Three children 11, 13 and 21 years old]
<b>Family 27</b>	Mother has main care. Father has every second weekend and Wednesday nights. [Two children eight and nine years old]
<b>Family 50</b>	Mother has main care. Father visits baby every second weekend. No overnights, has during the day. Baby lives in another city. [One child 10 months old]
<b>Family 17</b>	Mother has main care. Father has child one week in four. Father travels to another city and spends week there. Son visits father for a week in school holidays. [One child five years old]
<b>Family 34</b>	Mother has main care. Father picks children up from after schoolcare most days and has them for an hour or so, then has them on weekends when he can. No set times or days. [Three children]
<b>Family 32(C)</b>	Children now adults. When younger, mother had main care, father had children on weekends. [Five children]

**TABLE 2: CURRENT PHYSICAL CONTACT ARRANGEMENTS (C INDICATES COUPLE INTERVIEWED)**

OCCASIONAL – ONCE PER MONTH OR LESS	
<b>Family 3</b>	Live with mother in rural South Island, see father one weekend per month. [Two children eight and 10 years old]
<b>Family 49</b>	Mother has main care. Overnights with father about one per month, usually Saturday night. [Two children 14 and 15 years old]
<b>Family 54</b>	Mother has main care. Sees father approximately one weekend per month. Includes overnight. Sometimes sees for a few hours on a Sunday. [One child 13 years old]
<b>Family 56</b>	Mother has main care. Father of children is in prison and they did see him once per month until recently. [Four children 2, 7, 10 and 12 years old]
<b>Family 41(C)</b>	Father has main care. Sometimes weekend visit to mother and/or dinner Thursday night. Not fixed. Children partly determine contact. [Two children 14 and 16 years old]
<b>Family 1</b>	Currently daughter lives in Australia with mother. Father has contact during school holidays and whenever he can get cheap tickets for long weekends in between. [One child 12 years old]
INFREQUENT/IRREGULAR	
<b>Family 28</b>	With mother almost all the time. Very infrequent contact (1–2 times) in the last year. [Two children 15 and 17 years old]
<b>Family 47</b>	With mother most of the time. Been irregular. One boy does not see father, other lives with him Sunday to Wednesday when studying nearby. [Two children 14 and 16 years old]
<b>Family 55</b>	Two older sons live with mother's stepmother as a result of CYF action and Family Court orders. Youngest son used to see father, no overnights. [Two children four and nine years old]

Finally, there was a group of three families with children who were resident with one parent almost all the time and who had infrequent and irregular contact with their other parent. In this small group, the arrangements were not formalised, and contact was haphazard. As will be discussed later, these were families with parents who were finding parenting challenging and felt unsupported by the other parent. Care arrangements were additionally complicated by parents' and children's health concerns. One parent attributed a breakdown in arrangements to her husband's mental health problems:

He actually had a mental illness, (he still does)... [Parent-child contact] slowly dwindled off – like I said – once he moved in with this woman, the girls stopped wanting to go there – and then every now and again he would cancel and so we gave it away. He has hardly had any contact with them at all. I wouldn't even know where he lived. (Mother, two children have infrequent contact with father) [Family 28]

The description of these care arrangements provides the context for discussing the reasons parents came to these particular arrangements. The majority of the families in the study had either shared care or a more traditional 'every other weekend' arrangement, and this might be expected, given the aim of talking to parents who make their own arrangements. However, since we do not know what types of arrangements are being made by those who do not use the Court, we cannot assess the extent to which our sample of post-separation parenting arrangements is representative. Recent Australian data suggest that about 10 percent of parents share the care of their children post-separation – a much smaller figure than that obtained here (Smyth et al, forthcoming).

These groups of families could not be distinguished either in terms of the number and ages of the children, the length of the previous relationship or the time since separation. This type of analysis would require a much larger representative sample to identify any statistical differences in this respect. While the study was not designed to explore statistical trends or differences, information presented later nonetheless draws out some of the differences between these groups in terms of the quality of parental and parenting relationships and the factors that parents said contributed to specific arrangements.

Finally, where couples were interviewed (separately), we were able to compare the arrangements that they described. In all cases, each parent in the couple described the same post-separation parenting arrangement. This is not unexpected given the nature of our sample. Most of the couples interviewed had mutually agreed to the arrangements, and typically, these were clearly spelt out and regularly kept.

## 4.2 OVERNIGHT STAYS

Previous Australian research has found that up to a third of children who see their non-resident parent do not stay overnight with that parent (Smyth, 2004). In contrast, in all but three of the families in the current study, the children had overnight stays with their parents. The sample of families is not large enough to examine whether overnights varied by age, but where the care was shared, this included young children who stayed overnight with their father. For example, as one mother explained, the father of a one-year-old girl had shared care:

He has her Tuesday night, Thursday night and Saturday night through to Sunday evening. He does not finish work until 8.00pm. He picks her up and takes her home and puts her to bed and drops her back in the morning. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

In one case, the father did not have overnight care, and in this case, the child was young and still being breastfed. This father usually visited the child at her mother's home and occasionally took the child out to visit his family. He intended having overnight contact as soon as this was feasible. In the other two cases, one father was in prison, and for the other, intervention by the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services precluded overnight contact.



### 4.3 COMPLIANCE AND FLEXIBILITY

One of the potential frustrations for parents is the degree to which arrangements are kept. Changing agreed arrangements, with or without warning, can be a source of tension between parents. Parents in the current study were asked about the degree to which the agreed arrangements were kept, and also the extent to which it was possible to change the arrangements when required (ie their flexibility).

On the whole, the arrangements in the first two groups (shared care and weekends) were regularly kept to by the parents. Two parents reported that their ex-partner was sometimes unreliable, with children being returned later than arranged:

The other night, he came out to take her out for his birthday dinner and that was cool. No problem. Says he will be back by 7.00pm. So I'm sitting here at 8.00pm, waiting, waiting. I've been texting him, 'Where are you with my daughter?' – and he came back at 8.30pm. He said, 'Why are you angry?' and I said, 'You told me you were going to be back by 7.00pm.' (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

However, in the latter two groups (occasional and infrequent), greater dissatisfaction was expressed. Parents complained that the agreed arrangements were not being kept. For example, one parent described how she had made an agreement with her husband once they separated, but that his mental illness, frequent changes of relationship and moves had all contributed to infrequent and irregular contact. The agreement had almost never been in effect.

Having arrangements that were reliably observed did not preclude some flexibility. Where parents were on good terms, there was also often the ability to change the arrangements. For example, if the children had events (for example, sports) that necessitated changes, the arrangements might be suspended for a week. If a parent's work meant they had to be away when they were scheduled to have the children, the other parent might have the children. In some cases, such flexibility took the form of reciprocity, where a parent would return the flexibility shown by the other:

Like on my week off, I might babysit so she could go out and vice versa. Also if there was a special occasion coming up or some work commitment, [my wife] was a shift worker, so if she had a night shift coming up – then we have had extra nights and generally we try to be accommodating of each other. If everybody owes favours, then everybody gives favours. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

Yes, he has them on Wednesday nights, although, if I asked to change nights, he would do that or if he had to do something, we are flexible. (Mother, two children with father every second weekend) [Family 27]

For those arrangements that had been in existence for a longer period, and where the children were older, there also tended to be greater flexibility:

Yes, as long as we get some warning. And that goes both ways. [Their mother] is quite willing to talk about swapping nights – it seems to be working out. The kids like to know where they are on a certain night – 'Right, we are at Mum's tonight so we go to after school care', and that sort of thing. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

Sometimes parents would look after the children so the other parent could attend a social, work or family function:

He had a function to go to last week and said, 'I forgot to ask you to look after the kids', and so I said OK – that's the way we conduct it and things aren't an issue. (Mother who has care every second weekend and contact during the week with three children) [Family 24]

Yes, there is a lot of flexibility. There has been a few times when I have to go out of town for work and she will have the kids those nights, and then we might swap a day. I drop the kids off and it is fine. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

A few parents had no fixed arrangements; these tended to be cases where previous arrangements had not been kept to and one parent was the main carer (ie not shared care). In these cases, the parent with the main care felt it was easier not to have fixed arrangements, rather than having the stress of an agreement that was not being kept:

It is just easier to keep it flexible. Easier for me, less stressful, if we just fit in. [My son] is fine. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

On the other hand, where the relationship between parents was difficult, any changes to arrangements, no matter how temporary, could result in additional conflict. Two of the six families with occasional contact reported no flexibility, compared with none of those with shared care. For example, one parent had to make a quick trip overseas to visit an ill relative and so missed his scheduled contact time with his child. However, when he requested extra time from his ex-partner on his return, she refused.

In general, some flexibility in the arrangements was seen to be desirable by parents interviewed, but this relied on good communication between them. Flexibility seemed to work when plenty of warning was given of changes, they did not happen too often and they were reciprocated.

### 4.4 HOLIDAYS, SPECIAL OCCASIONS AND EVENTS

The arrangements described so far concern the day-to-day care of the children. Parents were also asked about holidays and special occasions, such as birthdays and Christmas. All those with shared care maintained their arrangements throughout the holiday period. On occasion, they might negotiate to have the children for a longer period in order to take them on holiday. Those with weekend contact were more likely to report sharing the holidays (five of the 12 families), rather than maintaining weekend-only contact. For those with less contact, holiday times were often specifically included in the agreements:

If they want to go on holiday, like [their father] is going to take them away on holiday, they normally ask if I mind and it is not an issue. (Mother who has care every second weekend and contact during the week with three children) [Family 24]

Parents were also asked about the arrangements they had for special occasions, such as Christmas and birthdays. Some had fixed arrangements:

Where we had the shared custody thing going on, it was always my turn, your turn, so that pattern will persist. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

We both like to have [our son] for Christmas – one of us will have him (wake up here) until lunch time and then he will go to the other for lunch. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

Others had more flexible arrangements:

We have talked about it. I was concerned about what is going to happen at Christmas. I think what we are going to do is find out his family's meal time and then get together and then we are going to find out my family's meal time and get together – half a day each. (Mother, shared care one young child) [Family 43]

Oh for Christmas Day – we generally try and share that year about but that is something that we never really discussed right at the beginning. It is probably in the last couple of years that we have done the year about bit. Generally this is how it is now. I think the boys are due to go [to their father] Christmas this year. If [he] has something on, then it won't happen, so it is usually fairly loose. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

In this last case, birthdays were always spent with the mother:

The birthday celebration is always with me, but if we go out to their dad's the next time or maybe just prior to their birthday, he would take them out to dinner or buy a present. But the actual birthday itself is not shared, not that there is any animosity, it is just not something that happens. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

On the whole, though, parents made arrangements to share birthdays:

Birthdays – I arrange them and we all do them as a family together. Christmas – we alternate, so one year, one has them Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, and then the other has them Christmas afternoon. The following year, the other way around. And we do the same with New Years. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

Kids' birthdays it is usually whichever house they are in on the day – the other parent goes over and takes the present first thing in the morning – that's cool. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 16]

For older children, in particular, attendance at sports or cultural activities can be an issue for some parents and lead to conflict. Many of those we interviewed mentioned that both parents were able to attend children's sporting events on the weekend. One parent contrasted her and her ex-partner's ability to jointly attend events with her previous observations of other couples:

Yes, and we both go to rugby and watch the kids, and the kids have made the comment that, 'Oh Mum, I'm glad you can all come and stand together and talk to each other.' Because we have seen people, like a few years ago [my son's] friend – the parents separated and they would stand at opposite sides of the rugby field. And one time they had a screaming match in front of all the kids and it was embarrassing for that poor child. We just don't do it. (Mother, two children with father two weekends in three) [Family 48]

It also needs to be noted that some siblings may have different patterns of contact with their parents. On the whole, those in the study described similar arrangements for siblings. In three families, siblings had minor differences in contact, and in only one were the differences major. However, in some cases, either through different needs of the children (for example, work, sports or leisure activities) or through a child's reluctance to visit (explored later in the report), the arrangements might be different:

They visit, on average, one Saturday night a month – they generally go together but not always. [One son goes] about once a month and his brother about once every 6–8 weeks. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

## 4.5 OTHER CONTACT

Face-to-face contact was not the only form of contact between children and their parents post-separation. Parents also used a variety of means by which to stay in contact with their children including email, phone calls, texting, letters or postcards and, in one case, video conferencing. These other forms of contact were particularly important when contact was less frequent or parents lived further apart. However, even those with shared care could still maintain other forms of day-to-day contact with their children:

Occasionally I will talk to them on the phone but it is usually event-specific, like if something is happening in their lives and I want to find out about it, rather than ringing up and saying goodnight every night. They are with their mother and they go off and do whatever, and there is not really any contact unless they have left something at my house or the other way around. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

Phone, and email as well when she could read. To start with, I would telephone her every day but you actually get out of that habit. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

Regularly weekly phone call – we have a set time for that and as time permits – she has a cell phone that I call her on. Email sometimes. Communication is frequent. Letters – because it's special. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

I have video contact with him twice a week – we had one this morning. It has just moved to mornings – we start at 7.45am and finish at 8.30am. (Father who has care of one child for one week in four) [Family 17]

Parents were asked whether children were still maintaining contact with their extended family, for example, with paternal aunts, uncles and grandparents (or, where the father was the main carer, their maternal grandparents). In most cases, for the shared and weekend contact groups, contact with grandparents continued much as it was prior to separation. In some cases, children had more contact as parents received support from their family after separation. On the other hand, four of the nine in the occasional or infrequent contact group were not having contact with grandparents or extended family.



As will be discussed in Chapter 7, extended family sometimes provided information and advice to separating couples. In relation to the actual arrangements made, extended family members occasionally assisted with the contact arrangements.

The following example shows how paternal grandparents can assist with ongoing contact. In this case, the mother thought it was important that the child had contact with his father's family:

No, I had to force [his father] to get him to take [my son] to his parents – he wouldn't at first, I don't know why. (Mother, child with father every weekend) [Family 45]

In this case, the father had a gambling problem and so the mother had arranged for the father's father to take control of his wages and to pay child support to the mother (via payment of half of her rent). She was also concerned about her ex-partner's drug use and had encouraged her ex-in-laws to have the child for one of his nights with his father.

## 4.6 CHANGES IN PHYSICAL CONTACT OVER TIME

The arrangements shown in Table 2 were those currently in effect at the time of interview. Since most couples had been separated for some time, these do not necessarily reflect those that were in operation in the immediate period post-separation. All parents were asked to describe the arrangements over the post-separation period and to indicate when and why they had changed. The families fell into three groups:

- > those who had maintained the arrangements (nine families)
- > those who had made some minor changes within a relatively short period of the separation (eight families)
- > those who had made a major change to existing settled arrangements (14 families).

Parents typically described an initial period of uncertainty about parenting arrangements, and many had temporary arrangements. These temporary arrangements were often related to the need for one partner to find suitable accommodation; for example, accommodation that had enough rooms for children to stay overnight:

I was quite happy for that to happen [mother to move to her parents and have main care]. I was in no position – I had nowhere to live, and there was no way I could look after them. (Father who sees two children on average one weekend a month) [Family 3]

The reaction of children to the initial arrangements sometimes led to slight changes; for example, in terms of the timing of change-over. Parents' own needs also led to some changes; for example, the desire to free up parents' time so they could have social time free of childcare responsibilities:

Initially I was having them every weekend, [I'd] pick them up Friday nights and drop [them] back Sunday afternoons. This was every weekend. It worked but I was finding I was not getting any social life. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

Other parents had settled arrangements, but needed to change them because of changes in parents' circumstances. For example, changes in work circumstances might lead to changes in the number of days spent with the parent or in the change-over days or times.

A further reason for changing arrangements was when one parent moved. One mother had moved to Australia, with the result that the father, who had shared care of his daughter week about, now only saw her during the holidays:

[Going to Australia] came up in early 2006, and I thought I can't keep following her around everywhere... [my daughter], at that point, decided she wanted to live with her mother and what we arranged was that she would stay with me full-time until the end of the year so she could finish school [end of 2006] – last year of primary school – and so sometime in early January, I put her on a plane to [another city]. Since then, she has come over to visit during the school holidays. We have been to see her once. And we have also managed a couple of long weekend visits for her to us. Cheap flights and so forth. And I have arranged with my boss to have Australian school holidays off. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

Re-partnering could also lead to a change in arrangements. This was often driven by the children's reaction to their parents' re-partnering, for example; where a father re-partnered and the children did not get on with their new stepmother or stepsiblings.

Initial arrangements were often refined through experience and changing circumstances. As this example shows, one parent's changing circumstances meant a shared care agreement was rarely in operation:

It was a 50/50 arrangement but it didn't last very long. It was week about. [My husband] moved a lot, he bought a house but it was back on the market before he settled on it and then he went and flatted somewhere where he couldn't have [our son] except for the odd couple of nights – and then he moved in with a girlfriend, and once he was there, she could assist in looking after him so [care] went to the week about. When that relationship ended, he moved out again and couldn't have him stay. The agreement was 50/50 but everybody who knew [my husband] knew that would not stand for very long because it is not convenient. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

In at least one case, the new partner was actively supportive of the father's contact:

Yes, my new partner is completely happy about the contact and encourages it. But I just don't like my children to think that my partner's four-year-old has become the centre of attention – all my focus should be on my children when they visit. (Father who sees two children, on average, one weekend a month) [Family 3]

Issues could also arise if the new partner was expected to play a role in parenting the children. Sometimes, difficulties arose between the new partner and the other parent:

It has made things different – and more complicated I think. My new partner would prefer [my ex] to be out of our life altogether – that would be the ideal but she realises with the two kids that it is not going to happen. I have made that quite clear that the kids are going to be part of my life. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

In this case, the father's new partner was initially reluctant to pick up the children from school, but over time, she had developed a close relationship with them and was actively engaged in their care when they were resident in the household.



Parents who initially had major care of the children sometimes found this tiring and stressful, and this led to them asking their ex-partner to take more responsibility and to have the children for more hours:

Well, during that year, they were seeing me every fortnight, they were coming every second weekend, and there were issues when I was dropping them off at their mother's. They didn't want to be dropped off and they were upset. That was making her upset... She asked me to have them. She said she wasn't coping... (Father, two children spend every weekend with mother) [Family 44]

For some parents, these demands and difficulties with the children had led them to ask their partners to take on full-time care of the children. At times of considerable stress, one parent's health had deteriorated, and they needed their ex-partner to give them respite from childcare:



When we initially separated, they stayed with me – he left – and two years ago, they lived with him for six months, so from 2005 living with him.

[Interviewer] Why did that change happen?

I was finding it very difficult at that stage in my life and I was very angry, and he actually had an illness, (he still does). He seemed to be okay during that period, and I needed a break. (Mother, two children have infrequent contact with their father) [Family 28]

There was a range of other reasons for changes in arrangements. For example, one couple changed from a Sunday change-over to a Friday change-over:

The only change we have made is that it used to be Sunday afternoon [change-over]. The reason we changed that was probably at my instigation because you would find that you got the children on Sunday afternoon and you had no idea what sort of weekend they had had ... they could arrive completely ragged, and you had to deal with that and get them ready for school. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 16]

In another case, a mother felt that her daughter, who had been living with her father, needed her mother's care:

Two years later, I was concerned about my daughter needing her mother around, and I was feeling a lot better so she moved in with me here. She moved in here six years ago. Four years here and two years prior to that she was with her dad. (Mother who cares for daughter and father cares for son) [Family 30]

For those with shared care, most changes were negotiated between parents. What often drove the change was the perception that a new arrangement might improve the quality of contact with the children. For example, two couples increased a father's share of care in order to give him more time with the children. In the following example, the parents agreed on the need to increase the father's share of care:

The difference now is that we do a shared custody, but it has been a huge priority for us that he remains involved as he was before – when we were together. What has changed is that, when we first separated, he had them every weekend, and I had them through the week, and then we changed to shared custody. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

I would have had the kids full-time but she was not going to give them up. It was all give and take, and she still wants me to have involvement with the kids. It has worked out well for her as well as she has got more free time. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

In another case, a father increased his contact from weekends to a week about arrangement after his daughter asked for more contact.

While changes for those with shared care were often planned, changes for those with less frequent and less regular contact were often the result of unforeseen changes in parents' lives (for example, separation from a new partner, health problems or job loss).

Only one couple seemed to have a regular review of their post-separation parenting agreement, and this was, in part, because they did not always agree on what the arrangements should be. However, discussions with parents suggested that they sometimes had some informal system for monitoring their arrangements. For example, some parents we interviewed reported that as their children grew older they checked with them to see if the arrangements were working. Recent work in Australia (Smyth, 2004) recommends that parents review their agreements periodically, especially as circumstances change (for example, as children get older).

In some cases, the decision to separate had preceded the actual separation by some months, with time being taken to find suitable nearby accommodation. During this period, parents often discussed the post-separation arrangements:

Well, he wanted to leave the relationship in November prior to the January 2006 but we stayed together over Christmas because of the girls – we started talking about how the whole custodial thing might work. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

We had quite a long lead-in time to [the separation] as I didn't leave until April and we could explain what was going on to [our son] – he came house hunting with me. (Mother, shared care of four-year-old) [Family 9]

For those parents, the pre-separation discussions tended to produce more permanent arrangements. For half of those with shared care, those arrangements had remained unchanged, sometimes over more than 10 years:

We have one week on and one week off. It has been like that right from the start. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 16]

## 4.7 SUMMARY

The parents in the study had a range of post-separation parenting arrangements at the time of the interview. Ten of the 31 families had shared or substantially shared care of children between parents. Twelve of the families had children residing mainly with one parent, but children stayed overnight with the other parent at least every other weekend. Finally, there were six families with more occasional contact and a small group of three families with infrequent and irregular contact. The proportion of families with shared care in this study (32 percent) is much higher than that found in a recent Australian study (10 percent) (Smyth et al, forthcoming).

Most children had at least some overnight time with both parents. Previous research tells us that this is measurably good for children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) since it sets a context in which children are actively parented by the non-resident parent, and involved parenting is beneficial for children.

Arrangements for the first two groups (shared and weekend care) were almost always reliably kept. However, that did not mean changes were not made, and some flexibility was common. As long as changes were signalled and agreed in advance, and did not happen too often, flexibility seemed to benefit the families. It was notable too, that, especially for parents whose relationships were amicable, reciprocity was evident. If one parent showed flexibility in response to the needs of the other, then this was reciprocated.

The shared care and traditional weekend groups were more likely to arrive at settled arrangements soon after the separation. Where parenting was shared, generally small changes to details of the timeshare schedule (for example, days or times of change-over) were made, rather than substantial changes in quantum or frequency of contact. The other groups (occasional and infrequent) however, seem to be those where arrangements had changed substantially over time, mainly due to parents' more significant changes in circumstances.

It was notable too, in this sample, that in those families where shared care arrangements had been made, children were very likely to sustain contact with the extended family members of their non-resident parent. Given that extended family, especially grandparents, are important sources of support for children after parental separation, this is a positive finding.

Many families (22 out of 31) had changed their care arrangement in some way since the original separation. Reasons for changes were brought about for a variety of reasons, including the need to find suitable accommodation, children's preferences, needing more social time or respite from the children, changes in work, moving house and re-partnering.

These findings suggest that many parents are able to be flexible and adaptive in making and sustaining living arrangements for their children post-separation. Those who were able to negotiate, to try different arrangements and to respond to changes adaptively, were those who appeared to manage post-separation parenting successfully.



## 5. FACTORS INFLUENCING ARRANGEMENTS

This chapter focuses on the factors that the interviewed parents reported as influential in their decisions regarding the post-separation parenting arrangements. Parents were asked to identify any factors that had influenced the post-separation parenting arrangements and any factors that had led to changes in the arrangements. However, before exploring the individual factors, it is important to note that it was often multiple factors that influenced the final arrangements. The following quote illustrates this well:

He was quite keen to do shared custody, and I did a little bit of research about what was best for the children. I also talked to some friends who had been through separation who were two or three years down the track and what had worked and what hadn't worked ... and the information that came back to me was that the kids, especially [my daughter] being so little, needed a home base. [She needed to spend] most of the time in [her own] home and have security. [My husband] was moving into a two bedroom flat where they would have to share a room. When they stayed with me, they still had their own rooms. It was around upheaval and insecurity for them because their dad was leaving. I didn't want us to pack up and live in a new place either. I wanted to keep things as much the same as I possibly could for them. I put it to [my husband] that I would prefer that we did a nine/five split over a fortnight – I would have the children nine days and he would have them five. And I also recommended to him that he have them every Thursday night as well, so I could do things. He was fine with that. So as he physically left the home, we started that arrangement, and I was on the DPB at the time, so I took about three or four months off when I wasn't working because of the stress of it all. And I also had information around child support that I got. I was aware that, even with a nine/five day split, I was still entitled to child support. I would have financial security. So weighing it up I decided that was the best way to go. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

In this case, it is clear that a number of factors influenced the final post-separation parenting arrangements; the father's wishes to share care, advice from friends, the children's age and need for stability, accommodation, the mother's need for time out, financial arrangements and personal adjustment to the separation. These and other issues are discussed below.

## 5.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS

Although not always explicitly stated, the ability of parents to get on, to focus on the needs of the children and to put aside any personal issues when discussing post-separation parenting arrangements was very important for this group of parents. Many parents we interviewed had mixed feelings towards their ex-partner. We did not ask specifically about why separation occurred. In some instances, parents told us, but in other instances, they did not. We can assume, though, that the nature of the separation might be at least partially related to parents' ability to parent their children co-operatively.

Where there were strong feelings arising from the separation (for example, of betrayal and hurt), these appeared to interfere with communication and the focus on the parenting arrangements. Only three of the couples with poor post-separation relationships had managed to make their own arrangements *without* the assistance of a lawyer or counsellor.

One father described how he had to put aside his feelings of anger towards his partner in order to make the post-separation parenting work:

I was extremely angry and very bitter but I just pretended I wasn't for [my daughter's] sake. I kept my eye on the prize. And I also kept telling myself that I wanted to be free of that relationship and be myself again. If I was continuously angry, then I was still entangled and at her mercy. For my own sanity I had to let it all go.

[Interviewer] Did you do that yourself or did you get others to help?

I did it myself. It helps to have a philosophy and separate out what you are feeling and what you are trying to do. I am now relaxed. The point is, after months and years of faking forgiveness and good nature – largely I feel it, and I don't think about the things that trouble me from that period any more. Those feelings are only destructive, and I have to think, 'What is the impact on acting on things, what impact will this have on [my daughter]?' (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

Another father put it this way:

It is the baggage that creates the tension. I've been told not to buy into any of the emotional stuff – keep it really clear. As a male, you get hot under the collar when someone challenges you about what you are not good at, and at times, I have had to bite my lip. It is about having some good communication. (Father who visits baby every second weekend) [Family 50]

These observations match those of staff we interviewed at several organisations. They highlighted the importance of the ability of parents to communicate effectively with one another:

The ability to communicate is really important, as is the ability to separate out the parent from the partner role.

There is a group of people who have not learnt the ability to communicate and so they can't sit down, compromise and work these issues out. And so they have to rely on someone else to do this stuff for them.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, parents in 14 families had gone to counselling. Counselling did not necessarily resolve issues to do with their relationship with their partner, but it did help couples to reach post-separation parenting agreements. Counselling enabled parents to separate out their own relationship issues and to concentrate on the needs of their children. Previous New Zealand research has also shown that couples value counselling provided by the Family Court (Maxwell & Robertson, 1995).

These findings support Smyth's (2004) finding that couples with shared care "adopted a working businesslike relationship as parents – that is, they seem to be able to put aside any relationship issues for the wellbeing of their children" (p 126). In listening to the stories of the parents we interviewed, we could see how they had moved from their couple relationship, through the conflict and upheaval of separation, to a place where they were very focused on the needs of their children.

Emery (2004) identifies three styles of divorce: co-operative, angry and distant. The majority (17 of the 22 families) of those with shared care or traditional weekend care described getting on amicably or having a good relationship with their ex-partner (co-operative style):

We do quite easily go from each other's places as well. He was around here Monday night, just talking through work stuff – our relationship is good – [while] we are not living together, [we are] really good friends. (Mother, shared care of four-year-old) [Family 9]

Those parents with shared care were more likely to have continued regular contact and described their relationship as being one between friends. This contact usually concerned discussing the children and care arrangements, but could also involve offering support. These parents often lived close to one another and would drop in to each other's house, sometimes unannounced.

There was a small group of parents whose ongoing relationship was difficult, and this sometimes impacted on their parenting relationship. For example, in one case, the parents did not talk to one another, but managed to maintain the parenting arrangements. However, things had come to a head recently, and they were reviewing the arrangements with the help of a Family Court counsellor:

*Our (parenting) agreement has never been refreshed, which is now a problem because there are some different perceptions about what it should be – it's also ambiguous. . . (Father who has care of one child for one week in four) [Family 17]*

In a few cases, parents had very little contact with ex-partners. If contact was very irregular and the other parent was living a transient lifestyle, parents might not know how to contact their ex-partner. When there was infrequent contact, most parents described being upset because they felt their children were being neglected by the other parent. This added to already strained relationships.

Even when parents did not get along, they were usually aware of the harm that open conflict could have on their children. Some reported trying to protect children from parental conflict:

*We have an understanding that we don't refer to each other disparagingly. [My daughter] is entitled to retain respect for both parents. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]*

Parents used a variety of methods to maintain contact with one another about the children, with phone calls and email the most common. Some parents found email preferable as it avoided disagreements and enabled more distant consideration of issues. Parents with good relationships often attended important appointments together; for example, children's medical or hospital visits or meetings with teachers.



Not surprisingly, many parenting relationships and personal relationships changed over time. A few parents described an initial post-separation period where the parents and children would meet once a week for a meal. This had usually stopped after a short time as parents realised it was unrealistic:

*Initially, we would have dinner together, he would bring back fish and chips – that lasted about six or seven months, and it stopped because we realised it was never going to work out. (Mother, two children with father two weekends in three) [Family 48]*

Where we interviewed both members of an ex-couple, there was very little variation in the accounts of how the care arrangements were made. They tended to identify the same factors as being important in the making of the current arrangements. They agreed on the need for children to see both parents and that it was in their best interests to do so. They also said that their ex-partner knew what they thought and wanted. When there were differences in the factors identified by the members of the couple as being important, these tended to involve personal issues and experiences with family and friends; for example, their experience of their own parents' separation.

## 5.2 LOCATION AND ACCOMMODATION

Fourteen of the 22 families with shared care or weekend contact mentioned that the relative location of parents' households was important in determining post-separation parenting arrangements. Many non-resident parents had made a conscious effort to move into accommodation that was near to the family home or the main carer's home, in order to make contact easier for the children. In particular, being close to the child's school greatly assisted with contact and gave more flexibility in terms of change-over days and times. For example, it would be very difficult for a school-aged child to be in a week-about arrangement with parents who lived in different towns, although, in one case, a child had attended kindergartens in different cities. The father in the following example made sure he lived close to his daughter:

*When I moved out of the place we were living in, I got my own place quite close to where her mother was living, within five minutes' walk, and walking distance of her school. And I straight away got one with an extra bedroom, for a child's bedroom. So as soon as I had myself sorted out, we then arranged that she started staying every other week with me. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]*

In another case, the mother moved, but made sure she was close to her ex-husband, in an effort to encourage him to have contact with his sons:

*I knew, if I moved out of the area, the boys were likely to lose their father altogether – and also I was hoping that the marriage was not necessarily over – I kicked him out – said, 'Sort yourself out and then we will see where we go.' (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]*

However, her ex-husband re-partnered, and she found living in the same community too difficult. As a result, she moved to another area in the city, but not so far away that it reduced contact between the father and children.

Another parent commented that they preferred their ex-partner to live in another area, as this reduced the possibility of their meeting. As she said, “We didn’t want to bump into one another.” Whilst it might assist the care arrangements if parents lived close together, it could also have the negative effect of increasing tension. These trade-offs were part of the considerations when settling on a post-separation parenting arrangement.

In another case, the father had actively helped his ex-partner to find a place near to his house, to assist with their shared care arrangement. However, this closeness could cause difficulties, such as when his son turned up on his doorstep after arguing with his mother. In this case, the parents had made it clear to their son that this was not acceptable and that he had to work out disagreements with the parent he was living with.

One initial solution adopted by one of the couples interviewed in this study was to have the children staying in the family home, and the parents moving in and out on a week about schedule (‘bird nesting’). This lasted for four months:

*We ended up hiring an apartment just around the corner from home and we took turns at living at the apartment and at home – so we had week about with the children but the children stayed where they were. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 21]*

Inevitably, where parents lived in different towns, face-to-face contact was more intermittent. A typical pattern in these cases was for monthly weekend contact, with longer periods of contact over the holidays. At the most extreme, parents might live in different countries, further limiting the opportunity for contact.

The nature of new accommodation was also important. As the first quote in this section illustrates, parents were aware of the need to have sufficient bedrooms for children to visit for overnight stays. If space was limited, this made overnight contact difficult. Although few parents currently had problems with having enough bedrooms or inappropriate accommodation, such as flatmates, when it did occur, it had often delayed or prevented fuller contact by some non-resident parents until they had sorted out their living arrangements:

*I was in no position to have them full-time – I had nowhere to live, and there was no way I could look after them. (Father who sees two children on average one weekend a month) [Family 3]*

The importance of the physical distance between parents’ households has also been noted (for example, Smyth, 2004). Those with shared care were more likely to live in proximity (<10km) compared to those with relatively little contact. In this study, proximity of households and proximity to schools were important factors in enabling parents to maintain a shared care arrangement.



### 5.3 CHILDREN’S BEST INTERESTS AND WISHES

As many of the earlier quotes illustrate, in all but two cases, parents mentioned the need to ensure that the arrangements were in the children’s best interests:

*His mother was less comfortable and less happy with that arrangement, but she has never let on, because that’s the best thing for her son. Top priority is our son ... it was about striking a balance that was best for all of us with [our son] as a priority. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]*

Many parents felt strongly that it was in the best interests of their children to maintain contact with both parents:

*[Interviewer] So from your point of view, [seeing her father] is what was driving the contact?*

*Yes, I felt horrible – my god, she is forgetting her dad. My brother would come around and she would be like, ‘Dada’ and we would say, ‘No, that’s uncle, that’s not your dad.’ (Mother, shared care one young child) [Family 43]*

*When [my husband] left us, I never stopped him from seeing [our son], as he needs to know his father as he was growing up, and I was happy for him to go and visit him. (Mother, child with father one weekend per month) [Family 54]*

Parents also felt it was in their children’s best interests to maintain stability in terms of where they lived and the arrangements for their care:

*We sat down and did what was best for the children and made sure they were stable. (Mother who has care every second weekend and contact during the week with three children) [Family 24]*

To some extent, children’s needs were seen to vary with age, and these might impact on details of the arrangements. As shown in Chapter 2, the age of the children when parents separated varied, with some children being very young and others older.

Children were not interviewed in this study. We asked parents about whether they involved their children in the decisions about care arrangements. None of the children, even those who were teenagers when their parents separated, were reported as having played an active part in determining the arrangements at the time of the separation. This was mainly because they were seen by their parents as being too

young to be burdened with the decision-making. More common were parents telling children that they were going to separate and informing them of the post-separation arrangements:

Well, she was only five years old and ... to make her choose at that age it is too big a burden to place on a small child. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

[Interviewer] Did you talk to your son about what was happening?

We took him around house hunting, and we tried very hard to keep any of the stress involved – even though it was very amicable, there is still stress – to try and keep the stress away from him. ‘There’s going to be some changes, and you will have two houses instead of one’, and in the end it worked quite well. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]

Older children were, however, more likely to be consulted about changes in the arrangements:

[Interviewer] When you changed from weekends to shared care, did you talk to the kids?

Initially, [our daughter] wasn’t too sure about it – [our son] didn’t care, he was happy to come and spend more time with me. My daughter was worried about not seeing her friends so much. We told her we would give it a try and we would sort something out. (Father, shared care of two children aged eight and 12) [Family 14]

Other research has indicated that, while children want to know about what is happening in their families and, in many cases, want to be consulted about decisions, almost none want to take responsibility for making those decisions (Brannen, Heptinstall, & Bhopal, 2000; Smart & Neale, 1999). Being involved in the decision-making process has been found to be measurably good for children; those who are listened to and consulted show better adjustment than those who are not (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Walczak & Burns, 1984).

Parents acknowledged that it was appropriate for arrangements to change in line with the older children’s needs; for example, to take part in work, organised sports and leisure activities, or to socialise with friends:

[My eldest son] works on a Saturday so doesn’t go out there [to his father’s] now. They used to go on a Friday and come back on a Sunday. It has been limited there, and the fact that they are getting older and doing their own thing... The boys, if they are going out to their father’s, they will arrange it themselves and then let me know. (Mother, two children with father one weekend per month) [Family 49]

My son is a very busy teenager so now there is actually no system at all for him, and his father actually now completely and utterly bypasses me on any arrangements. He does it directly with his kids, which, at times, is not helpful. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]

I would have been happier having her longer – two weeks on and two off – but [her mother] wouldn’t agree. And actually, several years later, I thought we could talk to [our daughter] about it and see what she thinks and she said no if [she] had to be away longer she would miss either one of us. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

There were also instances where children were reluctant to have contact with a parent:

Towards the end of last year, [my son] decided – and earlier on, there were some weekends that he didn’t go – he refused to go. I don’t know what was going on but [his stepmother] has mentioned that they did have patches where [father and son] were arguing. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]

The importance of children’s best interests has been highlighted by earlier research (for example, Smyth, 2004). As Smyth comments, children’s best interests vary by factors such as their age, temperament, developmental stage and individual needs and wishes. Parents in the current study mentioned this as their main concern when making post-separation parenting arrangements. Very often, best interests were seen as the child having contact with both parents, but the need for stability and predictability of arrangements was also mentioned.

For many parents interviewed, concern for their children’s best interests included watching for any signs the child was having problems adjusting to the post-separation arrangements. Some parents were concerned at the child’s reaction to the separation, and they had arranged for counselling for the child. Sometimes, these concerns had arisen well after the separation:

Just thinking about it, we did have counselling – we sent our son to counselling because we thought he may have issues about the break-up and things. We weren’t sure what was going on in his head about the whole thing, and I suppose if anything had come out of that, in terms of spending more time with one or another, then we might have changed that. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

My boys did a course through Skylight – it was good. Someone put me on to it... I put the boys in there straight away and I think it helped them. They were both initially quite angry, and it made them realise that it was okay for them to be angry, but they felt guilty being loyal to their dad. If he didn’t want to see his dad, then it was okay. (Mother, two children with father one weekend per month) [Family 49]

## 5.4 NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Some of the earlier quotes have indicated that new partnerships can impact on post-separation parenting arrangements. In 19 of the 31 families, at least one parent had re-partnered. While it was the case that arrangements sometimes changed when a parent re-partnered (in eight families), at least as often, for those in this study, the arrangements remained the same. Some of the fathers mentioned that, when they re-partnered, they had made it clear to their new partner that maintaining regular contact with their children was important.

Some of the re-partnered parents also had stepchildren, and some had new children. One father commented on the difficulty of managing relationships between all the children:

Things are okay now. It was difficult. My kids absolutely hated her kids – her kids always liked my kids, but my kids – resentment rather than anything else. (Father who has main care, occasional contact with mother) [Family 41]

Fathers’ new relationships and children could also result in strained relationships between children and their parents. This is illustrated by the following quotes by mothers about their sons and their re-partnered fathers:

But [my son] doesn't like the [father's new children] at all – sees them as getting the attention and he doesn't get any. He needs a bit of one-to-one with his dad, and he is not getting it. (Mother, two children with father one weekend per month) [Family 49]

One of the reasons [my son] decided not to go to [his father's] was that he was a teenager – there were younger children in this family, and he was fed up with younger kids. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]

New partnerships could also complicate parents' relationships:

I did say if [my daughter] ever calls [the father's girlfriend] 'Mum', you are to say, 'That is not your mother.' The one thing that I was afraid of was that he was going to get really close to his girlfriend and then they are going to want my daughter and start a new family without me – no, it's my daughter and you are not taking her off me. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

While a review of research on stepfamilies (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001) has highlighted the difficulties faced by parents and children in stepfamilies, overall, these parents managed new partnerships and relationships with their children remarkably well. While it was initially thought that entering a new partnership reduced contact, more recent studies have found that re-partnering has a negligible effect on contact (Pryor, in press).



## 5.5 ATTITUDES TO THE CARE OF CHILDREN POST-SEPARATION

Traditional attitudes to childcare by fathers have changed in recent years, with increased expectations of fathers' involvement in the day-to-day parenting of children (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). There was a clear belief held by many of the interviewed parents, both mothers and fathers, that fathers should be involved in the parenting of the children post-separation. Five of the 10 families in the shared care group explicitly mentioned the need for children to have contact with both parents, and three mentioned the need to see their father. In fact, in one case, a mother went to the Family Court in an effort to get her ex-husband to see her sons.

Sometimes, as the following quote illustrates, mothers were not sure that fathers would maintain initial shared care arrangements:

He suggested week about. I agreed because I thought it would be a short-term thing and he would find it quite difficult, but in actual fact he has been amazing. So it has continued that way. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 21]

Despite the above quote, a few mothers expressed concerns regarding fathers' parenting abilities and influence on the children. For instance, one mother remarked:

I would be comfortable if he had him less, really. It is just influences. I don't see anything positive to come in terms of role modelling and what he can offer. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

Many of the mothers in the study saw it as the right of fathers to have contact with their children and felt that it was important for their children that they maintained contact and had a good relationship with their father:

Regardless of the problems between her father and myself, it is nothing to do with her, and she should not lose out on her father because I'm grumpy with him or whatever. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

In some cases, fathers were more involved with their children than they had been prior to the separation:

[Interviewer] So do you think he is more involved now than he was?

I think so. I think so. Because he feels guilty that he is not here with her. Even though things were not working between us, even when we were together he couldn't be bothered, because I was in the house to do everything. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

He is more involved now with [our son] than he was. Before in the weekends, I was always there to pick up the slack whereas now it all falls on him. He is much more hands on now. (Mother, child with father every second weekend) [Family 7]

Another father never questioned that he would have anything other than shared care:

I like children. In fact, if it wasn't for me, we would not have had [our daughter] at all. I guess I just always assumed that that is how [shared care] would be. (Father who initially had shared care, now sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

The families in the current sample had a relatively high rate of shared care and are therefore not likely to be representative of all separated families. Both mothers and fathers reported an interest in active parenting by fathers, and those cases where



non-resident parents seemed ambivalent were the exception rather than the rule. In fact, parents with the main care of children sometimes reported disappointment that the non-resident parent was not more involved – see also Parkinson and Smyth (2004). These findings reflect those of Smyth (2004) who found that, for “fathers with shared care, their own need to be involved as a parent seems to be a motivating factor for 50/50 care, while co-parent mothers appear to be motivated by the rights of both the child and the father to continue their relationship” (p 126).

## 5.6 EXPERIENCES OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Some parents used the experiences of friends and family as reference points in making their arrangements. Often, this involved reflecting on friends’ or family members’ own experiences of separation. Sometimes, these were viewed as positive examples of how to make successful arrangements between parents, but parents also mentioned seeing examples where friends’ separations had shown them how *not* to do things:

I do have a friend who has been through the Family Court [with her son] – he has now just turned five, and finally the parents are starting to get along, so I watched them and their arrangements. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

Some parents had also experienced their own parents’ separation, and this had played an important role in how they dealt with their own separation. This experience also had a special relevance, since it enabled parents to look at the separation from the perspective of the children. They were more likely to consider how the post-separation arrangements might impact on the children. In particular, they felt that it was important to minimise parental conflict:

Both of us came from broken homes – my parents were still together but shouldn’t have been. That experience – we could bring that to the table saying, ‘This is how it affected us and we don’t want it for our son. This is just us parting and for it to have as little effect as possible.’ People forget what it was like for them as a child and how out of control you can feel as a child. (Mother, shared care of four-year-old) [Family 9]

## 5.7 SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Nine parents mentioned that support from their family and friends was important in helping them reach a suitable post-separation parenting agreement. The provision of emotional support was the main factor mentioned, and occasionally, friends or family had supplied helpful advice. In one case, a sister-in-law had intervened to de-escalate a potential point of disagreement.

As mentioned earlier, however, some parents did not want their family to be involved:

I found the whole thing deeply shameful frankly, so I did not want to confide in people anyway. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

[Interviewer] Were your family involved, did you discuss it with friends?

Not really. My family weren’t keen on him. If I was to go to them and ask for their opinions on anything, they would just say, ‘Tell him to f... off.’ My family, sisters-in-laws, I didn’t really ask for their input. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

However, the support of family and friends was often important, even though they were not necessarily involved in negotiating the agreement:

My family were really helpful – I couldn’t have done it without them. Huge support from my parents ... and probably talking to friends, not a lot of my friends are separated ... it was good to talk to them, and it also gave me that sense of what is going to be is going to be – I’ve seen people battling for years, and I didn’t want to do that. Friends were a great support as well. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

Another mother mentioned that she had actually got support from her ex-husband’s family:

My father-in-law has helped me some of the time, and there has been a time when I have borrowed money and paid it back. [My] mother-in-law does little things – she lives around the corner. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]



However, advice from friends and family was often seen as conflicting and unhelpful. For example, one Pacific parent found that she was getting conflicting advice from her family and her church. Another parent noted that friends' advice was not always helpful:

I have had friends say, 'You are paying too much – she should go and get a job – you are paying well over the odds', and I've said, 'F... off – it's not about her or me – it's not about the money thing.' Some of [my wife's] friends said, 'Why are you being very generous agreeing to his terms and conditions?', and I thought, well, both sides express concerns, then we are probably right in the middle. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]

Yeah, some of my older children said, 'Don't you give him to his father', and that was the first thing they said – yes, there were people who said don't give [your son] away – it was friends that actually said it, two friends in particular. (Mother, child with father every weekend) [Family 45]

It was sometimes felt that the advice of family and friends did not take into account the parents' and their ex-partners' specific circumstances. In particular, it did not account for the negotiation that occurred between parents and the balancing of their and the children's needs, with the day-to-day reality of life. For example, one parent commented that friends felt he should insist on his 'rights' as a parent, but he felt it was important to be flexible and to give in on some issues in order to maintain a civil relationship with his ex-partner and to protect his child from parental conflict.

Friends and family can be an important source of support and advice, but parents reported that they had relatively little effect on the actual parenting arrangements that were made. In part, this may be because relationship separation is seen by some parents to be a very private decision. For others, it was the shame associated with having a failed relationship. Parents are perhaps more likely to use family and friends in other contexts (for example, choosing a childcare service – Robertson, 2007) as sources of information and support. Parents who are separating may thus be more inclined to turn to independent professionals for help rather than partisan family and friends.

## 5.8 PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

There were also a number of factors that were specific to the individual circumstances of particular parents. For example, four parents had significant mental health problems, and these resulted in difficulty in making and maintaining post-separation arrangements:

If we had got on better – he is mentally ill – there are times when it was horrific – he suffers from bipolar disorder – it was diagnosed after we separated – he has always been a bit unusual, but he got really bad – with his highs and his lows. (Mother, two children have infrequent contact with father) [Family 28]

In other cases, these difficulties might put children off visiting their parent:

Yes, he is old enough to see Dad and his girlfriend, drinking and fighting – I think last year he started saying things like, 'Mum, I don't want to go to Dad's house any more because he is always drunk in the weekend.' (Mother, child sees father one weekend per month) [Family 54]

Some parents had experienced past relationship separations, and these coloured their approach in the current negotiations. For example, one mother had separated from the father of her two daughters when she was in her early twenties. She had tried to cut off her children's contact with their father. She approached her current separation very differently, insisting that her son continue to have contact with his father, even though he was not particularly reliable:

[Interviewer] And what about your own past experience, did anything of that come into it – to the arrangements...?

Yeah, my three girls – the father – I wouldn't let him see the children, it was totally different. I was young, I was still a baby myself. I was 16 when I had the oldest one. That separation happened quite quickly because I found him in bed with my best friend, and I brought the kids home and I knocked on the door and ... so that was bitter because that was my first relationship and the father of my children, and I wanted revenge and I never let him see the kids. (Mother, child with father every weekend) [Family 45]

My son is from my first marriage in the UK. When I took him [after the relationship breakdown], I had a nightmare time through the Courts with him so I didn't want to do the same thing – and that was the reason why we did things the way we did – to talk about it. I realised what conflict can do. It's not the Courts, it's the people going through it and not getting their own way can get very nasty. (Mother who has care every second weekend and contact during the week with three children) [Family 24]

Another father had never known his own father, and this had motivated him to play a continuing role in his children's life.

The majority of those who had made shared care arrangements were in the higher education group. Given the self-selecting nature of the sample, it is difficult to generalise this result, but it suggests that higher education may be associated with an ability to negotiate shared parenting post-separation. There are a number of possible explanations for this association. First, higher education may be associated with greater income and thus ability to afford shared care (for example, two large houses, a choice of location and proximity, two sets of clothes and toys and so on). Second, as suggested by two key informants, those with higher levels of education may be better at communicating and negotiating with the other parent than those with less education.

Smyth, (2004) also found that those who had shared care arrangements were more likely to be well-educated, have dual careers and to be financially secure. The qualitative interviews in this study would tend to support that finding.



## 5.9 CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the current study, there were six Pacific and six Māori parents. Our key informants and cultural consultants indicated that, traditionally, both Māori and Pacific peoples give importance to the role of extended family (for example, whānau and aiga) in caring for children whose parents have separated. Parental separation and the care of the children is not seen as a private matter confined to the parents, but a concern of the wider family, who play an active role in determining post-separation parenting arrangements.

Some of the Māori parents indicated that they were not particularly embedded in their culture and, when asked, did not feel that cultural considerations featured in their deliberations. One parent, who had little contact with her family, specifically excluded her whānau from involvement in the deliberations. On the other hand, she had involved the father's family in ensuring the child had contact with his father's extended family.

Compared to the Māori parents we interviewed, the Pacific parents appeared to be more embedded in their culture, with many being closely associated with the local Pacific churches. Some found this had helped during the separation:

*Yes, it was. And I felt my church were saying lots of prayers and I felt that. I was in a difficult situation, it was very hard. It was sharing with my friends – it has helped. (Mother, child with father one weekend per month) [Family 54]*

Most of the Pacific participants were first generation immigrants to New Zealand and thus more likely to maintain their island cultural traditions. However, it was sometimes difficult to practise these traditions in New Zealand. Whilst in the islands,

separations are the concern of the wider extended family, and there are established processes for negotiating post-separation parenting – New Zealand culture and its adversarial legal system potentially conflicted with these. For example, there were fewer extended family present in the community, which limited parents' ability to turn to them for support.

One parent felt that she wanted to have more of a say in the arrangements than she might have been allowed within the cultural traditions in operation on her home island:

*I spoke to my pastor and my family.*

[Interviewer] Did this help?

*Sometimes, but sometimes I disagreed with what they said, so we decided. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 53]*

A related issue with the Pacific families in the study was that most of them were in the lower income and education groups. Income constraints might play a role in restricting the options for Pacific parents. For example, most Pacific families were in rented accommodation and could not afford to choose to live in large houses and at specific locations. As we have seen, overnight contact with the other parent is helped when they have sufficient bedrooms.

Finally, with regard to cultural issues, with intermarriage there is always the possibility of conflicts over parenting within different cultures. One Pacific father acknowledged that, although his daughter was still young, this was likely to be an issue in the future for himself and his Māori ex-partner:

*I guess that culture will impact on other things – like what education and philosophies that we will be following. With her being Māori, there will be a strong Kōhanga Reo, and me being Tongan, we are looking at a clash – two trains heading towards each other... We are both quite strong in what we believe, and you know, I think we have been quite diplomatic about leaving that stuff until when it comes up. We have bigger fish to fry in the meantime. (Father who visits baby every second weekend) [Family 50]*

The sample in the current study was not designed to identify any statistical trends in relation to whether different cultural groups have a preference for a particular type of care arrangement, or process for making decisions about care arrangements. We know relatively little about the way in which different cultures in New Zealand manage parental separation and the continuing care of their children. Traditional cultural norms would suggest that extended family have a greater role in ongoing childcare for children of Māori and Pacific parents, but this would depend, in part, on the degree to which parents hold to these norms. This is an important area for future research.

## 5.10 FINANCIAL MATTERS

In this section, we examine the potential influence of financial matters on the making of post-separation parenting arrangements. We describe the financial arrangements parents had to support the children (ie child support) and, in some cases, parents (ie spousal support). We discuss the extent to which parents were happy with these arrangements and whether or not they had influenced post-separation parenting.

### Current financial arrangements

The financial arrangements made for the children of the separated parents we interviewed largely fell into three categories:

- > fixed and regular contribution (including child support)
- > payment for specific items
- > no contribution.

Generally, the amount and type of financial contribution matched the type of care that was provided. That is, if care was shared, then an exchange of financial support was not likely, but if one parent had main care, then the other parent would contribute to their household. The following quote illustrates this:

[Interviewer] In terms of supporting you, does he contribute financially?

He does now. Initially he didn't when we did 50/50. No money changed hands at all. Then when he stopped doing 50/50 and [our child] was in after school care, each of us paid for the week that we had... [then I changed jobs and] my salary was a bit less and that is when I made the call to him – you have to pay more – and he agreed. (Mother, child spends every second weekend with father) [Family 7]

#### Fixed regular financial contribution

Many participants reported paying or being paid a fixed and regular amount of money to support their children.

Many of the arrangements either used or were based on the Inland Revenue Department's child support system. Child support can be used in the following ways:

- a. When a custodial parent is on the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB), the non-custodial parent is required to pay child support as calculated by Inland Revenue Department (IRD) to offset the benefit cost (IRD assesses and collects).
- b. IRD transacts payments from and to separated parents based on the child support calculation (when neither parent is on the DPB) (IRD assesses and collects).
- c. IRD transacts payments from and to separated parents that have been mutually agreed but are not based on the child support calculation (private arrangement, IRD collects).
- d. Separated parents base their financial contribution on the child support calculation and transact payments by themselves, independent of IRD (private arrangement based on IRD assessment, private collection).

Parents in our research provide examples of options a, b and d.

Nine parents were on the DPB, or had at some stage been on it, and their ex-partners paid child support to IRD (option a):

I was on the DPB at the time [of the separation] ... and I also had information around child support that I got. I was aware that, even with a nine/five day split, I was still entitled to child support. I would have financial security. So weighing it up, I decided that was the best way to go. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

Some of the main caregiving parents, in addition, received financial support over and above the child support payment.

One resident parent used IRD to transact payments for her children using the child support system but was not on a benefit (option b):

We do it through the IRD. We don't have anything private – we tried it and it didn't work... I deal with the IRD. [It] keeps things tidy. No problems. He pays. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

A number of parents based their financial arrangement on the child support calculation, but did not use IRD to transact the payments (option d):

We came to an arrangement where we would work on a voluntary agreement in terms of child support but based [on] IRD child support. Neither of us wanted IRD to be involved ... so each year from when we separated, I would contact IRD and just get the calculation – fortnightly payments. It was all based on that – no other contributions. When they were with me and we went away on holidays, I paid for it. (Father, two children spend two weekends in three with father) [Family 48]

We got on the website and figured out how much he had to pay in child support. He has paid me privately. Never been a problem. (Mother, three children with father every second weekend) [Family 22]

In two instances, the custodial parent had previously been on the DPB, and the non-custodial parent had been paying child support to IRD. When the resident parent's circumstances changed (for example, returning to work), the non-resident parent continued to pay the child support amount but they moved to an informal arrangement outside the IRD system.

Three ex-couples had negotiated their own arrangements. One ex-couple had agreed that the mother stay at home until the child went to school, and in return, the non-custodial father (who had the child every weekend) would pay all their living expenses.

Other participants said:

I am giving her \$500 a fortnight, and that is voluntary. Based on IRDs child support, it would be \$180 a fortnight, so I am giving a lot more. I am doing it because I want to. (Father who visits baby every second weekend) [Family 50]

When we do have the occasional blow up, I do think if I went through IRD I would get another \$170 a month and not have to ask. (Mother, child spends every second weekend with father) [Family 7]

One participant described an arrangement where both parents regularly contributed an equal amount into a shared bank account to cover medical, school and activity fees.

#### Payment for specific items

Some participants did not pay, or were not paid, a regular or fixed amount, but had an agreement that specific items would be paid for. The types of things included: school fees, books, uniforms, private schooling; childcare; activity fees such as sports or music lessons; clothes and shoes; pocket money; broadband internet connection for video contact; plane fares; and medical insurance.

Some participants reported an agreement that big bills would be split in half; for example, anything over \$100, such as sports fees.

### **No financial contribution**

Three participants reported that they received no financial support from their ex-partners:

No, she has not paid anything since about April. I paid a lot of money when I left for a long time, and then when I had one of the children, I was still paying a lot of money – almost guilt money – but now it has changed and I have both the kids. (Father who has main care, children have occasional contact with mother) [Family 41]

He has not been paying anything – I don't know if he is working – he is up and down as far as being able to hold down a job. (Mother, two children have infrequent contact with father) [Family 28]

One participant had two children, and each parent cared full-time for one child:

In some respects, I had ulterior motives when I split them up. I knew he would never pay money for them if I kept both of them. It would be a problem; he is not good with money, so there would always be problems. Sometimes the money would come and sometimes not. There would have been dramas – easiest way was to split, and then no one had to part with money. You looked after the child you had and it worked a lot better. (Mother who cares for daughter and father cares for son) [Family 30]

### **How money can influence decisions about care arrangements**

While, on the whole, the amount and type of financial contribution matched the type of care arrangement, for at least one ex-couple, money – especially a lack of money – clearly determined the care arrangement that was agreed upon:

When we split up, we didn't really appreciate how the government would step in with support, [ex-partner] was on DPB at the time. I made the decision to take on the family debt so she could have money to look after the kids properly. What I didn't realise, I would have the child support as well, so it pretty much screwed me. Initially, I was having them every weekend, pick them up Friday nights and drop back Sunday afternoons... The government did make some leeway because I took on the family debt – I talked to IRD. Only for the first two years, and then they said they could not consider it any more. It was very hard to pay off and pay child support as well. Every cent was gone, nothing extra... I had to make a choice whether I moved into a flatting arrangement – which would limit my access to the kids. I was a bit stuck. I love having the kids – the thought that I had to move, it didn't make sense.

So [my ex-partner] and I discussed it and, looking through all the fine print, if I had the children 40 percent of the time, it qualified as a shared care arrangement so basically that was the six-day set up – to save the child support money. Payments were reduced, and I could still afford to have the house for them to stay at. I was at [ex-partner's] mercy almost as to whether she would agree to that. But I did not mind upping the care for them. So the way that the child support is set up actually forced me to take this option. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

The costs associated with running two separate households are significant, especially households that can both accommodate children staying overnight (in the Australian context, see Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, 2005). A number of participants commented on the financial strain accompanying separation:

I was working part-time when we separated, earning very little money. You divide stuff up, and then the kids blow up the microwave etc. I was earning about \$27,000. I am good with money, but that was hard. I got a family support tax credit and I could manage. (Mother, three children with father every second weekend) [Family 22]

And it wasn't easy to start with financially. Well initially, I was paying child support which was crazy and blew me out the window at one stage. (Father, children spend weekends with father) [Family 32]

One father with shared care of two children said:

It is a potential source of tension, going forward... I want to get off this \$2,000 payment a month because it is dragging me down to a particular level where I am not saving... The apartment is not large. The girls have been sharing a room. I have been trying to find something else... There is a huge step up [in rent] for the extra privacy she needs, becoming a teenage girl now. I am mindful of it... There are a lot of hardships and sacrifices, inconveniences that I was happy to deal with for six to eight months. Now I am at a point – what next? Where to from here? More quality into the home life. I need to look at how I do that... Part of me is reluctant of course [to negotiate changes] because I don't think our communication in the relationship is strong enough to do that reasonably... (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

Some participants were dissatisfied with the financial arrangements they had in place or had experienced some difficulties working these through at some time. A number of participants had, at some time, either paid or received child support through IRD. While many of these participants did not otherwise comment on their dealings with IRD, two participants (one non-custodial father and one custodial father) reported having had a frustrating relationship with IRD in the early days of their separation. One found they were not receiving their correct child support entitlements and had a difficult time getting action from IRD to right the situation. Another non-custodial father said of IRD staff:

They put on so much unnecessary stress, they don't help... I was prepared to pay my bit. Their attitude is... I suppose they deal with arseholes trying to wriggle out of things. (Father, children spend weekends with father) [Family 32]

Property settlements did not feature as a factor in determining care arrangements for the families in this sample. However, ongoing financial support did depend on the type of care arrangement, with those with shared care being understandably less likely to exchange financial support. The method by which any support was exchanged varied and depended on whether the parent with the main care was receiving support from the government (for example, the DPB), in which case payments were made through IRD. Although at least one parent mentioned settling for shared care in order to avoid child support, in the main, this was not a factor influencing arrangements, rather the post-separation parenting arrangements were agreed and the financial arrangements followed.

## **5.11 WORK**

All parents make choices about how they will balance the care for their children, earning an income and developing a career. These decisions often need to be revisited when a couple separate. For 19 of the 31 families, the work situation of the parents at the time of separation was a factor in deciding the care arrangements for their children post-separation:

Well, I was working part-time. I was the primary caregiver – a stay at home mum. We had rental properties, and I managed all of those. I said to him that the girls would live with me – I was the parent. (Mother, three children with father every second weekend) [Family 22]

I wasn't working and I don't remember who said what but it just made sense. [Our youngest child] was a baby, and they were both babies, and I was home during the week, and then he would have them in the weekend so we just fell into this – I was absolutely exhausted and [the baby] wasn't sleeping. I was more than happy to have the weekend. (Mother, two children with father every second weekend) [Family 27]

[Interviewer] Why did you choose that particular arrangement?

I don't know, it suited us at the time. Their mum was working part-time while the boys were at primary school. So she could take care of them during the week. (Father, two children spend two weekends in three with father) [Family 48]

The reason it happened is because I was doing night work when we separated, and the oldest one would have been 14 years old, and I didn't want to make her a full-time babysitter. I just used to commute in the morning – took them everywhere – when we separated, it was easier for the kids to stay where they were and me to shift. (Mother who has care every second weekend and contact during the week with three children) [Family 24]

Some parents wanted their children to be cared for at home rather than in childcare, and this was factored into their post-separation care arrangements. One ex-couple agreed that the mother continue to stay at home until the child went to school, and in return, the non-custodial father (who had the child every weekend) would pay all their living expenses:

We sat down and talked about it. I pay for everything. I pay [ex-partner's] rent and money on a monthly basis for them to live on, and then I top up for other things for [our child]. And my rationale was that he has his mother 24/7 especially before school. And when we looked at it, if she was to work part-time with me working full-time, any associated child care – it is so expensive that you end up no better off and having no time with his mother. As far as I am concerned, that is a no-brainer. So in the end, that was part of our separation agreement. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]

Another custodial father said:

When they came to live with me I stopped work and went on the DPB and basically I have been on that ever since ... from the outset, I said that I would rather look after my children than other people. (Father, two children spend every weekend with mother) [Family 44]

Some parents who were in paid employment commented on how family-friendly or flexible their employers were. For example, one custodial mother was thankful for being able to negotiate a 9.00am start so she could drop children at school at 8.30am. One father had this to say:

What was annoying is on the Friday afternoon, they shut the daycare centre at 5.00pm ... because I am in a senior management role, if I need to leave early, I say I have another appointment. I don't say I have to get to daycare. There is sympathy for women in management, in this position. It's worse for me because there is an expectation that I have a nanny, or girlfriend, or partner who can do this – and I take it seriously. It is not an option paying [someone else to do] this for me. I've managed so

far. It has been a source of anxiety – some jobs you have to be there for long hours or you are not in the game sort of thing. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

Another ex-couple was able to have a 50/50 care arrangement because they were both self-employed and had flexible work days.

## 5.12 SUMMARY

This chapter has identified a number of factors that the parents interviewed reported as important in influencing their post-separation parenting arrangements. The primary stated factor that came through from the interviews was the quality of the parental relationship. All parents had issues relating to their separation from their partner, but their ability to put these to one side and effectively work with the other parent in a businesslike manner was seen by our sample as pivotal to the success of any arrangements. Parental co-operation was also more likely to result in more shared care in this sample. Where parents were still conflicted, it was more likely that contact was more infrequent and/or irregular.

A number of other factors were important in negotiating care arrangements, including where parents lived in relation to one another, whether they had entered a new partnership, experiences of and advice given by family and friends, and parents' individual personal circumstances (for example, mental health issues). These factors could operate to hinder contact (for example, living in different cities) or promote contact (for example, work flexibility). Further, there were usually a number of interacting factors that needed to be taken into account in making arrangements. Balancing different factors and needs was often required, and this required parents to be willing to make trade-offs.

Nearly all the parents we interviewed were clear that children's needs and best interests took priority in their deliberations. Children's needs were identified as: maintaining contact with both parents, stability and not being overly involved in making decisions about the care arrangements. Some parents also talked about needing to fit the care arrangements around their children's work, sporting and leisure activities.

There was a clear belief held by many of the interviewed parents, both mothers and fathers, that fathers should be significantly involved in the parenting of children post-separation.

Parents interviewed for this study had put in place a variety of arrangements to financially support their children. Many participants reported paying or being paid a fixed and regular amount of money to support their children, often calculated using IRDs child support formula. For over half the parents we interviewed, their work situation at the time of the separation was a factor in determining the care arrangements for their children.



## 6. RELATIONSHIPS AND SATISFACTION WITH THE ARRANGEMENTS

This chapter describes the parenting activities engaged in by parents and explores the nature of their parenting relationships. Parents' and children's satisfaction with the current arrangements is then discussed, and their preferred changes are presented.

## 6.1 NATURE OF PARENTING ACTIVITIES

In order to assess the degree to which parents were engaged in actively parenting the children in their care, we asked them what they did with the children when they had them in their care. Parents described engaging in a full range of day-to-day parenting activities. Given that the children were usually resident for a number of days at a time, it would have been difficult for parents to be disengaged from parenting. In particular, those with shared care needed to maintain the child's routines of school, activities and home life. For example, children needed feeding, washing, help with homework and transporting to sport. The nature of the care provided varied with the age of the children, and those with adolescent children were less actively involved in parenting.

In a few instances, parents reported that they were not happy with the care offered by the other parent. For example, one parent complained that she had to do all the child's washing. In another case, a mother complained that, when spending time with his father, her son spent most of his time in front of the television:

*When he is at his father's, it is quite easy to put a DVD or computer on for him and leave him to it. The previous house his father had he put a TV in his bedroom, which made it obvious he was spending time in the room. (Mother, child spends every second weekend with father) [Family 7]*

Parents with less frequent contact were more likely to indicate that contact involved special activities (for example, holidays and outings). For example, one father travelled to see his children in another city once a month, and these visits typically involved them going away on a trip together. Even in these instances, however, the parent needs to provide day-to-day care.

## 6.2 THE PARENTING RELATIONSHIP

Post-separation parenting has been characterised by researchers as either being co-operative co-parenting, conflicted co-parenting or parenting in parallel (Kelly, 2007). Co-operative co-parenting occurs where parents are both able to set aside their differences and to work together and agree on the parenting of their children without conflict. Conflicted co-parenting, on the other hand, is characterised by poor communication and frequent conflict. Parents who parent in parallel have little communication about their parenting styles, and parent in parallel in their homes but without conflict. Research indicates that co-operative parenting is likely to be more beneficial to children, as is avoiding exposing children to interparental conflict (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Of course, parallel parenting can be beneficial where high levels of interparental conflict exist – in the hope that the relationship will improve with time.

Eight of the 10 families with shared care, and six of the 12 with weekend care, described a predominantly co-operative parenting style, with regular consultation about parenting issues:

*Yes, basically because we have the same philosophy about bringing the boys up etc, like when my eldest wanted to start going to parties – I had a discussion with him about what I thought the rules should be – like not walking home, not drinking etc, and I had a discussion with my ex about what I had said to our son, and he agreed. So anything that has come up, we have always stuck together when it comes to making a decision – about the kids and what they are doing. (Mother, two children spend two weekends in three with father) [Family 48]*

*We always had similar views – how to parent – in that respect it was quite easy – although I think he probably lets [my son] watch too much TV – I am probably the stricter one. It's just little things. I don't butt in unless he asks me. I don't say do it this way. The rules are not dramatically different. And the things I do, work for five days during the week, so his father takes them on board as it works for him too. We have stayed consistent. (Mother, shared care of one child) [Family 9]*

The father confirmed their co-operative approach to parenting:

*His mother has consistency and rules – we talk a lot about making sure we are saying the same things ... we usually exchange texts or emails on how he is doing... I am sure we'll do the parent-teacher stuff as the relationship is strong enough that we will both go together. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]*

These parents had relatively high levels of contact and consultation with the other parent. When important decisions needed to be made, they would both have input into the decision and might both make relevant enquiries. A typical example was the choice of schooling for their children. Parents also discussed the standards of behaviour they expected of the children, although they did not necessarily exercise the same degree of control:

*Well, we do have some deep philosophical differences, which is one of the reasons we separated, but luckily not too many differences on the approach to children, so I guess that the kind of base arrangement went like this – our daughter knows that we talk to each other behind her back – that's the first thing, so there is to be no playing off – 'Dad lets me do blah blah'... second, it is okay to have minor differences between households, as long as they are consistent within the household, 'So, my house my rules – I don't care what your mother does.' Likewise, in her house, I don't expect her to enforce my rules. So things like what time dinner is served, what time you are allowed to do this kind of thing. On agreeing on more major things, [my ex-partner] and I talk regularly anyway – and we attend parent-teacher stuff at school all together – bit intimidating for the teacher. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]*

When this father was asked to characterise the parenting relationship, he said:

*Somewhere between parallel and co-parenting. Typically, what will happen is that one of us gets an idea, like swimming lessons, and then we talk about it – who will fund it and commitment to it. So by and large, unless something contentious comes up, we will truck along. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]*

Of course, just because parents co-operated with parenting, this did not mean they always agreed on parenting issues. Many parents described the occasional disagreement over parenting issues. However, they also reported being able to resolve these disagreements, either by further discussion and negotiation, or by one parent giving in to the other parent or 'letting it go':



Yes, we reach a consensus. We tend to work through things. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 38]

We don't disagree too much. I might have been concerned about time they have missed school. Apart from mentioning it, there is not a lot I can do about it ... just let it go. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

Other parents also described a style that involved parallel parenting on a day-to-day basis, but a co-operative style when it came to major decisions. In these cases, households might have different rules or standards for the children (for example, different bed times), but when it came to educational or medical decisions, parents reached a decision together.

However, even where care was shared, one parent sometimes had main responsibility. For example, one mother commented that:

It's more what I say goes really. I'm Mum and I am with her all the time – since the day she was born... I'll listen to his opinion. If he has a valid point, I will take it into consideration, but if he is just being silly, I won't. (Mother, shared care of one young child) [Family 43]

There were only two families that could be categorised as having conflicted co-parenting. For example, one couple had shared care of their two children:

It is co-parenting by email a lot of the time. It's functional. I think it is easier for her to articulate those things every week – you need to know whatever about medication etc, something happening at daycare – so it is the communication channel. I found the first year very difficult communicating with her. I think she is still very angry and upset. She has good periods and bad periods. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 50]

It is likely that the low rate of conflicted co-parenting reflects the selective nature of the sample. Those parents in the sample who had conflicted relationships tended to include a parent who was not involved in parenting decisions and who had infrequent contact, and these are described below.

Two parents in the study described a solely parallel parenting style, where parents were both actively involved in a range of parenting activities, but did things separately. In these cases, there was no or very minimal consultation about such things as behavioural expectations and standards. Parents had sometimes made separate arrangements to get school reports, for example. These parents occasionally had disagreements that required them to seek assistance to resolve issues. In the most conflicted cases, this involved approaching the Family Court for either counselling or parenting orders.

Finally, there were a few cases where one parent disengaged from parenting decisions. In these cases, children's contact with this parent was usually infrequent. Six of the nine families with occasional or infrequent contact described a pattern where one parent made all the decisions, without consultation with the other parent. This does not imply that infrequent contact necessarily results in minimal involvement in decision making by the other parent, as in some cases, parents took care to consult about important decisions. There was also one case where a father with weekend overnight contact was relatively disengaged:

[Interviewer] So when he is with his dad, do you know what sort of things they do?

Watch TV.

[Interviewer] Anything else?

No.

[Interviewer] Doesn't sound like you are too happy about that?

No, I have rules here and his father doesn't. (Mother, child sees father every weekend) [Family 45]

I think he assumes that the boys are in my care, that I would [make medical decisions]. And he trusts my judgement as well. There is not a lot of communication that goes on. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

I have made the decisions and then talked to him, to get support at times, and that has not worked. Initially with [my son] starting school, it was left up to me. He said, 'You are the one doing it, you decide.' (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]

Sometimes parents' frustrations with their ex-partners' lack of support and involvement over the years led them to take on the main decision-making role. One mother described their parenting relationship as non-existent:

There was something that he said, 'Well, you can't just go and do these things without consulting me' – he needed his ears syringed – and I said, 'Well, he can't hear. I'm not going to make a phone call to get your permission.' I just operate as if [his father] is out of the picture. (Mother, child spends every second weekend with father) [Family 7]

There were also examples where the resident parent made decisions (for example, schooling or medical decisions) and informed the other parent of their decision. They felt that they had implicit authority to make these decisions as they were caring for child(ren) day-to-day:

We don't really sit and discuss things together over the children. If there is an issue, I will say this is the option sort of thing, but there have been no real issues really... Things are basically decided by me and then I tell her. (Father, two children spend every weekend with mother) [Family 44]

Where couples were interviewed, it was possible to compare their reports of the post-separation parenting relationship. In almost all cases, they were in agreement as to the degree to which they co-parented their children. Once again, this high level of agreement may simply reflect the voluntary and high functioning sample of couples we interviewed, rather than the degree of agreement amongst couples generally.



### 6.3 SATISFACTION WITH ARRANGEMENTS

On the whole, most of the parents interviewed were satisfied with the current arrangements, even when acknowledging their limitations. Only two of those with shared or weekend care said they were not happy. Partly this reflects the selective nature of our sample, but also the fact that many of the couples had arrived at the current arrangements after a number of years of trial and error:

There are some upsides to shared custody, for example, you are effectively child free for half the time and go and do the things that you want – it is not all bad. (Father who sees daughter in holidays and occasional weekends) [Family 1]

[Interviewer] Are you happy with the arrangements?

Yes, I would prefer to have the children all the time but then again, she probably does as well. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 21]

[Interviewer] How happy you are with these arrangements?

I'm fine. It's entirely up to the children if they decided they wanted to go and live with their mum – they are old enough now to make the decisions. (Father who has main care, children have occasional contact with mother) [Family 41]

Although these parents were satisfied, it can be seen from these quotes that parents sometimes wished for changes in the arrangements, but acknowledged that this might not be fair to all involved. For example, they might want the day that change-over occurred to be different so they could have more social time on the weekend. It was also relatively common for parents to express a preference to have the children in their full-time care. Once again, these parents acknowledged that this was not realistic as they also felt it was important that their child have contact with their other parent. The difficulties in balancing these different needs (the parent, their ex-partner and the children) is an issue that will be returned to later.

Those who were not satisfied tended to come from the group where contact was less frequent. Five of the nine with occasional or infrequent contact were not satisfied with the current arrangements. Some parents felt totally unsupported by the other parent and would have liked the other parent to be more involved in their child's life. For example, one mother was asked if she spoke to her children's father about their parenting:

I would if he was an involved father, and I am having problems with my kids – he can offer nothing and giving nothing, not just the financial aspect, no emotional support or practical support – no. The man I am seeing at the moment, he can offer some practical support but he cannot get involved. I cannot ask him, it is unfair. (Mother, two children have infrequent contact with father) [Family 28]

Parents also indicated that children appeared to be happy with the current parenting arrangements. All of the shared and weekend care group reported that the children were happy, while four of the nine in the occasional or infrequent contact group were not happy. Some parents mentioned their children's difficult relationship with the other parents' new partners and children, and some of the older children preferred to see their non-resident parent less often.

Most parents described very positive and warm relationships between children and their parents and noted that this was most often the same for each child. In the rare circumstances where things were difficult, this was usually when parents were having trouble with adolescent children who were acting out. Where there was more than one

child, although they generally had equally good relationships with parents, there were some cases where one child had fallen out with the parent they visited. Sometimes this led to a break in contact:

The relationship deteriorated between [my son] and his father, and he stopped seeing him for about a year (my son did that at 10 or 11 years old) about 2001 – a year after we had separated. There was no contact for a year ... they had an argument where [my older son] just didn't see him for a year. It hit him pretty hard. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]

### 6.4 SUMMARY

The parents interviewed for this study collectively illustrated a range of parenting styles – from co-operative co-parenting, and parallel parenting, to parental disengagement. There were fewer examples of conflicted co-parenting, reflecting the selective nature of our sample and method of recruiting participants.

Most parents were involved in actively parenting their children when they had them in their care. Parents, especially those with shared care, also shared parenting responsibilities and consulted about major decisions in their children's life. Those parents with the main care of the children also reported consulting with the other parent about important decisions regarding their care, although sometimes one parent was left to make these main decisions.

In families with less frequent and irregular contact, one parent tended to take on the main parenting responsibilities, and visits with the other parent mainly involved fun or leisure activities. In the latter group, the parent with contact was more likely to be disengaged from parenting decisions.

Generally, those with more shared care were happy with the arrangements. While they might have wanted slight changes, they could see that the arrangements were generally working for all involved. On the other hand, those with more intermittent contact were more likely to want changes – either greater or lesser contact between the child and the other parent.





## 7. INFORMATION NEEDS AND ADVICE

In New Zealand and elsewhere, information for separated parents is not consistent in its provision (Hawthorne, Jessop, Pryor, & Richards, 2003). We have little information either on the needs of parents or the availability and accessibility of information. In practice, at the time of separation, parents have little guidance about *where* to seek information; it is likely that many get this from lawyers, general practitioners or Work and Income – all institutions or professionals that are often the first ports of call. The programme 'Parenting Through Separation' has recently been established for separating couples in New Zealand by the Ministry of Justice. It is, however, too soon to gauge the uptake or efficacy of this, and only two parents in this study had used it.

Other potential sources of information are books, the internet and families and friends. In this study, we asked parents where they turned to for advice and information, and what advice they would give to other separating parents.

## 7.1 SOURCES OF INFORMATION

### Counselling

Parents in 14 families reported using counselling (often through the Family Court), with all finding it helpful:

*I went to the free counselling session that the Court provides. Relationship Services – I talked to them about how to deal with it. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 5]*

*I think it had a lot to do with the counsellor we first had because there was such an emphasis on keeping our relationship okay – I thought our relationship was over and she said, 'No, your relationship is never over, you have children'... Within an hour of seeing a counsellor, I knew what I had to do. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 21]*

### Books and pamphlets

Only two parents said they had read books about separation, and two commented on the need for a good New Zealand book:

*Yes I think there is a huge gap in the book market for a good, basic, how to do this in a grown up sensible manner. And living arrangements ... personal anecdotes would be handy and real practical stuff ... have not found anything like that. I've looked reasonably hard, too. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 16]*

As with books, only three people mentioned having used pamphlets.

### Friends

Both fathers and mothers turned to friends for advice, sometimes choosing those who had already been through a separation. Often, however, they said that friends were most useful for support rather than advice. Indeed, there was considerable reluctance to take advice from friends.

### Family

Several parents turned to extended family members for advice, including aunts and uncles. As with friends, though, many were more likely to regard family members as sources of support rather than advice, especially if their parents were seen as taking partisan positions:

*No, Mum and Dad had no involvement in that at all. They were very pro me so they had no involvement, and even to this day ... they are very opinionated about it because I'm their girl. When it came to helping to make arrangements – no. (Mother, children see father once a month) [Family 49]*

### Internet

Only three parents said they used the internet to find information – one of these reported that it was not at all helpful, and another pointed out its limited ability to be of use when someone does not have access or cannot read.

### Lawyers

As noted previously, 10 families had sought advice from lawyers when they were working out their care arrangement. Those who saw a lawyer did so for a number of reasons – to obtain information, to get an independent check on their agreement and to formally record their previously worked out agreement.

*I am happy I went to a lawyer because she gave advice; it doesn't mean you have to go to the Court, but it means you have things in writing. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]*

Sometimes, lawyers were contacted some years after the separation. However, some other parents reported a reluctance to turn to lawyers for advice. Parents reported avoiding lawyers because of their cost and because it was felt that involving lawyers would foster a litigious process. One mother said:

*As soon as you speak to a lawyer, they basically want to go into attack mode. 'Right, well take this and that.' And I went through that, and thought this is insane – all we will do is fork out thousands of dollars for the lawyers to have a paper war. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 16]*

## 7.2 NEED FOR INFORMATION

Several parents expressed a need for more or better information, or were critical of what was available. Parents often needed information on child support and the DPB. Others wanted to understand the legal situation, although, because most made the arrangements themselves, this was not as important as if they had been in disagreement. Many parents, however, said they did not need any more information than they had, and some felt they could make decisions with no outside help at all.

### 7.3 ADVICE FOR SEPARATING PARENTS

We asked participants what advice they would give to parents who are separating now, based on their own experiences. Overwhelmingly the most common suggestion was to set aside personal and relational issues and to focus on the needs of children:

The top of the list is making sure that your child's interests are at the top of the list. And your own individual circumstances – be it broken hearts, wounded pride, frustration and anger – is nothing. Pales into insignificance. (Father, shared care of one child) [Family 9]

Always put your kids first. Work out something that makes the transition smooth. Even if you have to compromise yourself... For the kids, it's about the kids. (Mother, children spend weekends with father) [Family 32]

Another group of parents focused on the relationship between parents. This included advice not to criticise the other in front of children, not to be vindictive, to keep communication channels open and remain civil:

It's hard not to be resentful around the kids and not engage in mud slinging... I've lost it a couple of times when stressed and (have) said things – like, 'If your bloody father hadn't left...', but that is as far and as frustrated as I have got. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

Put aside the anger you have for the ex-partner because the kids need stability and [need to] feel that they are loved by both parents. And they need consistency ... they are not fodder for your arguments ... forget about the fights with the ex – it's over – just sort out the kids' arrangements calmly and quietly. Yelling reduces hearing... If necessary write letters to each other. (Mother, three children with father every second weekend) [Family 22]

You have to forget the personal hurt – try and get past it and imagine a future where you can be civil. You are never going to be best friends. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 21]

Open lines of communication with each other ... most important is the communication. It was always really important that the kids saw us agreeing. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

It could be difficult if the parents were not talking to each other or were hostile – almost impossible. It's a matter of picking the battles about what is important and (knowing when) you need to take a stand. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

Another set of responses related to self-care – finding time for yourself, and finding and using support networks were mentioned as important:

I think you need to arrange time for yourself. Initially, I did want the kids as much as possible, which is why I had them every weekend ... I think you need time for yourself – it is getting the balance right. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

[You need] a good support network of friends, and use the resources that are there. (Mother, shared care of two children) [Family 14]

I think the biggest learning point is that it is hard to make good decisions when you are carrying extra baggage. It is about sorting it out first, dealing with it ... so when talking things through, our baggage is left at the door. (Father who visits baby every second weekend) [Family 50]

One father emphasised the need to be able to rely on yourself:

The one piece of advice ... is don't ever consider something like this unless you know you are completely self-sufficient. Don't listen to friends saying you should leave. You have to be comfortable emotionally with your decisions. You need to know you can rely on yourself 100 percent. Be honest with yourself. (Father, shared care of two children) [Family 5]

A mother made a similar comment:

Don't listen to other people ... listen to your own instincts. Follow what you believe to be right and are comfortable with. (Mother, two children with father every second weekend) [Family 27]

Finally, some parents commented on the challenges of dealing with separation well:

People have looked at us and said you have been so civilized about this, but in some ways, it is harder – handled so well – it has been more difficult. (Mother, shared care of one child) [Family 9]

If the father had disappeared off the scene, it would have been far easier – let things die in that way to build a new life. Seeing the person all the time – the emotions take a lot longer than the actual facts. (Mother, two children with irregular contact with father) [Family 47]

### 7.4 SUMMARY

Overall, there is a strong sense of self-sufficiency in the words of these parents when asked about their information needs. We were surprised at the low level of expressed need for more information and that the needs that were expressed were primarily for factual information about financial matters. For many parents, sessions with counsellors were useful in spelling out options for living arrangements for their children. Books, pamphlets and the internet were perceived as not easily accessible or available. Family and friends were seen primarily as sources of support rather than information. Lawyers sometimes assisted with finalising agreements; however, some parents expressed a reluctance to get lawyers involved in their separation.

When we asked what advice they would give to other separated parents, the parents we interviewed, in the main, reflected the advice often given by counsellors and researchers. They said parents should set aside their personal and relationship issues and focus on the needs of their children. Putting children's needs first is particularly challenging when parents are feeling angry, guilty, rejected or depressed. Yet most of these parents managed to do just that, albeit with difficulty at times, and they were articulate about how hard it was to do it well. Similarly, self-care is an important component of managing separation well, and this was advocated by the parents in this study.



## 8. LESSONS LEARNED

The parents in this study were self-selected and were eager to participate. Nonetheless, the stories they told were not those of trouble-free pathways to reaching and sustaining decisions about living arrangements for their children. Although some had made arrangements soon after separation that remained in place, others had changed over time, and some took their time in reaching arrangements that worked for the family. Smyth and Moloney (in press) have recently suggested that parents 'experiment' with arrangements until they find those that work best for them.

Two-thirds of the families, at the time we interviewed them, had arrangements whereby the children saw non-resident parents at least once every two weeks. Within this group, there was a diversity of arrangements in operation, ranging from the traditional every weekend with the father, to parents caring for their children on alternating nights. Parents had also used a number of other arrangements; for example, one set of parents initially alternated weeks in the family home, with the parents moving in and out of the home each week. Some of the changes over time were relatively minor (for example, change-over days), but in other cases, the parent with the main care changed. It was notable that many of these parents described responding flexibly to changes, sometimes at some personal cost. Some also showed a degree of reciprocity with their ex-partners; if one was flexible in agreeing to changes because of personal circumstances, then the other reciprocated on another occasion.

The rate of shared care in our study (where children spent at least 30 percent of their time with each parent) is considerably higher than a recent Australian study (Smyth, 2004). The families who self-selected into our study are characterised by having co-operative relationships between parents (often even after the involvement of a new partner), the ability to discuss and negotiate and positive parent-child relationships. Perhaps most importantly, nearly all the parents we interviewed believed firmly that the children's needs should take precedence over those of the parents, and this conviction influenced their willingness and ability to set aside differences with their ex-partner.

It is evident, too, that they were not taking an 'easy' option when they negotiated the care arrangement. Several commented on how challenging it was to separate well, and this was related to how difficult – yet important – it was to set aside adult issues in the interests of their children.

As a consequence, perhaps, of their belief that children's issues take priority, many parents in our study reported little need for information or programmes. This finding may not translate to all separated parents – parents who are less able to make arrangements themselves will probably benefit from accessible information. Some parents in our study expressed a need for just that.

It is also notable that the source of help most frequently used was counsellors who, in many cases, provided both the knowledge and support parents needed to make their decisions. Counsellors helped parents to focus on the needs of the children, setting aside their relationship issues, in order to reach a parenting agreement.

Factors identified by the parents in our study as important in influencing their post-separation parenting arrangements included the quality of their relationship with their ex-partner, geographical distance between parents' houses, children's needs and wishes, attitudes to childcare, financial considerations, new partnerships, experiences and support of family and friends, work constraints and personal circumstances (for example, health problems). A number of factors influenced the final arrangements, and sometimes, trade-offs needed to be made.

The parents interviewed in this study generally shared a conviction that their children's needs were the highest priority, and this was a major factor from which their actions followed. The parents we interviewed acknowledged the importance of the children having quality time with both parents. They were also able to put aside personal issues for the sake of reaching agreement and maintaining a co-operative parenting relationship. Their willingness to seek counselling, and their avoidance of potentially litigious pathways, were also key factors.



## 8.1 KEY INSIGHTS

Although our sample was not representative either of all separating couples or, indeed, of all those who separate without using the Family Court, our data provide some insights in identifying key factors in negotiating 'successful' decisions about living arrangements for children post-separation. The following points incorporate information from our sample and indicators from previous research.

1. Parents *are* able in many instances to negotiate arrangements between themselves, given the right context and support. It is not possible in every situation, however, and parents should not feel as if they have failed if they cannot manage the process between them. Many of our interviewees described the very real challenges of 'separating well'.
2. The ability to set aside partnership and individual issues, and to give priority to children's wellbeing, is central to negotiating successful outcomes.
3. Respectful and civil communication is an important part of negotiating successful living arrangements, and is sometimes made more possible if ex-partners communicate in a businesslike manner. Communication by email and other indirect methods is sometimes helpful if direct contact (for example, face-to-face or by telephone) is difficult.
4. Parents in this sample often took time to reach optimal arrangements. They 'experimented' with different arrangements rather than putting themselves under pressure to 'get it right' the first time. This approach needs to be set beside children's need for stability. A possible solution to this potential dilemma is to keep talking to children so that they know what processes are being followed. Parents here also noted the usefulness of reviewing arrangements from time to time to make sure they were working for everyone.
5. Flexibility and reciprocity in regard to arrangements appears to be beneficial, if parents can establish a co-operative co-parenting relationship that enables this.
6. A range of care arrangements were made by the parents interviewed for this study. On the whole, the different arrangements seemed to work well for the parents and their children. Families settle on arrangements that work well for their specific circumstances – no one care arrangement will work successfully for all families.
7. For the parents in this sample, a lack of information was not a particular issue. Many used counsellors effectively, and this suggests a need to continue to promote use of Family Court counselling. The 'Parenting Through Separation' courses also need to be promoted. Consideration may need to be given as to whether the Family Court is the most appropriate pathway for these types of services, especially where separated parents are amicable and not litigious. Efforts to promote the Family Court as non-litigious in this regard are to be encouraged. For some parents, however, the need probably remains for more easily accessible information via books, pamphlets and websites.

## 8.2 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

We know very little about how the majority of New Zealand couples negotiate post-separation parenting agreements. This study shows that some, at least, are able to negotiate arrangements between themselves and to maintain and modify these arrangements for many years. Sometimes they sought help to reach agreement, with the most effective support being counselling. With the human and financial cost associated with contested care of children, it is important to promote the fact that couples can successfully negotiate arrangements with appropriate support and information.

In the public debates concerning childcare after separation, reference is often made to standard arrangements, such as every second weekend contact. However, the group of parents who took part in this study made diverse living arrangements for their children, based largely on their circumstances but driven by their ability to put their children's interests first. Parents also showed that such arrangements can have some degree of flexibility and may need some modification over time. It is evident that there is no one solution that is either best or that works for all parents.

Further research is needed that involves more representative groups of separated parents. This is important in order to gain a wider and more generalisable picture of how parents make, and can be helped to make, optimal arrangements for their children after separation. In particular, further research is needed about separated parents who have little or no contact with their children, and highly conflicted parents. In turn, this calls for quantitative survey data that includes a wide range of patterns of care and an assessment of their efficacy for the families involved. Given that good and useful information is helpful, it might be important to examine, in more depth, what kinds of information are both accessible, affordable and of use to parents at the time they separate.

We need, too, to know a great deal more about the experiences and arrangements made by Māori and Pacific families and new migrant groups of families. Finally, studies with longitudinal components that follow changes in arrangements over time would yield valuable information for policy-makers and those who support separating families.

Our hope is that the voices of the parents we talked to in this project will empower other families who are separating to understand and explore the many options and possibilities for caring for children after separation.



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# APPENDIX 1

## RESOURCES FOR SEPARATING PARENTS AND CHILDREN

### Citizens Advice Bureau

Citizens Advice Bureau is a community-based non-government organisation providing a free, impartial and confidential service of information, assistance and referral to people throughout New Zealand – <http://www.cab.org.nz>

### Birthright

Birthright is a not-for-profit organisation that was started in 1955 to provide practical and emotional support to sole parents in order that they, and their children, realise their potential – <http://www.birthright.org.nz>

### Counsellors and Psychologists

New Zealand Association of Counsellors and New Zealand Psychological Society – <http://www.nzac.org.nz>  
<http://www.psychology.org.nz>

### Family Court

General information on the Family Court and links to information, Court locations, pamphlets and forms – <http://www.justice.govt.nz/family/home.asp>

Also see the Government pages of the phone directory, under the Ministry of Justice.

### Lawyers

Family Law Section of the NZ Law Society. Their website has a link to a search of their membership database – <http://www.familylaw.org.nz>

### Parenting Through Separation

General information – <http://www.justice.govt.nz/family/what-familycourt-does/parenting/default.asp>

List of providers by area – <http://www.justice.govt.nz/family/what-familycourt-does/parenting/programmes/default.asp>

### Relationship Services

Relationship Services is a non-government, not-for-profit agency offering a professionally skilled counselling service throughout New Zealand – <http://www.relate.org.nz>

### Skylight

Skylight provides unique support to children, young people and their families/whānau through change, loss, trauma and grief, whatever the cause – <http://www.skylight.org.nz>

### Taeaomanino Trust

Taeaomanino Trust was established in 1993 as a charitable trust to service and support the social, health and education needs of the Pacific population of Porirua. The Trust was the first Pacific provider and the only one to be established in the Wellington region. Today the Trust has 25 Pacific staff. Its offices are based in Porirua City, phone (04) 237 4216.

Taeaomanino Trust provides the following services:

- > Parents As First Teachers
- > Family Start
- > Figota/Child and Adolescent Mental Health
- > Social Workers in School
- > Autalavau/Youth Programme
- > Alcohol and Drug Counselling
- > Family Violence
- > Home-based Support
- > Post-Crisis Abuse Counselling
- > Taeaomanino Research

## Families Commission research reports

- 1/05 *Review of New Zealand Longitudinal Studies*, Michelle Poland and Jaimie Legge, May 2005.
- 2/05 *Review of Parenting Programmes*, Anne Kerslake Hendricks and Radha Balakrishnan, June 2005.
- 3/05 *Beyond Zero Tolerance: Key issues and future directions for family violence work in New Zealand*, Janet Fanslow, August 2005.
- 4/05 *Focus on Families: Reinforcing the importance of family*. Families with dependent children – Successful Outcomes Project. Report on literature review and focus groups, Katie Stevens, Marny Dickson and Michelle Poland with Rajen Prasad, October 2005.
- 5/05 *Methodologies for Analysing the Impact of Public Policy on Families: A conceptual review*, Jacqui True, October 2005.
- 1/06 *What Makes Your Family Tick?* Families with dependent children – Successful Outcomes Project. Report on public consultation, Robyn Seth-Purdie, Andrew Cameron and Francis Luketina, March 2006.
- 2/06 *Review of the Empirical Literature Assessing the Impacts of Government Policies on Family Form: A report for the Families Commission*, Jeremy Robertson, Vanessa Rogers and Jan Pryor, April 2006.
- 1/07 *When School's Out: Conversations with parents, carers and children about out of school services*. A Families Commission report, Donella Bellett and Marny Dickson, February 2007.
- 2/07 *Moving On: Changes in a year in family living arrangements*. A Families Commission report, Michelle Poland, Andrew Cameron, Karen Wong and Michael Fletcher, February 2007.
- 3/07 *It's About Time: Towards a parental leave policy that gives New Zealand families real choice*. A Families Commission report, Marny Dickson, Helen Moore, Karen Wong and Susie Johnston, August 2007.
- 1/08 *Elder Abuse and Neglect: Exploration of risk and protective factors*. A report for the Families Commission, Kathryn Peri, Dr Janet Fanslow, Dr Jennifer Hand and John Parsons, January 2008.

Reports are available on the Commission's website [www.nzfamilies.org.nz](http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz) or contact the Commission to request copies:

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***The Couch* website**

[www.thecouch.org.nz](http://www.thecouch.org.nz)