The idea that children of separated parents should spend equal time with each parent has generated much debate both in Australia and overseas. But what do separated and divorced parents themselves think about “equal-time” parenting? This article makes use of recent data from the Institute’s Caring for Children after Separation Project to answer this question.

BRUCE SMYTH AND RUTH WESTON

Aside from stimulating much needed debate about the potentialities and practicalities of equal-time parenting, the recent parliamentary inquiry into “joint custody” (see Caruana in this issue) has brought into sharp focus just how little is known about separated parents who opt for 50/50 care, the reasons they do so (and why others do not), and what separated parents and children think about this arrangement. The various positions of different advocacy groups on the issue of 50/50 care feature prominently in the media (for example, Swinbourne 2003; Williams 2003) and are typically split along gender lines, with fathers groups in strong support of the idea. Yet the extent to which these opposing views mirror those of separated mothers and fathers is unclear.

With less than 6 per cent of separated parents in Australia exercising shared care, the lack of information is not surprising. While recent Australian research suggests that achieving a high level of shared parenting post-divorce is demanding and may be available to only a small, select group of families (Smyth, Caruana and Ferro 2003), debate about the merits or otherwise of equal-time parenting is likely to continue – especially in the light of a rapidly growing “responsible fatherhood” movement, as documented by Mincy and Pound (2002) and Flood (2003).

Sharing the care of children after divorce is a relatively new idea. A century or so ago, children were “father’s property” after divorce given men’s capacity as breadwinners (Mason 1994). The pendulum then shifted from a paternal to a maternal presumption because of mothers’ primary role as nurterers; and then to “the best interests of the child” imperative which typically maintained mothers as primary carers (Mason 1994).

But increasingly a number of questions surrounding children’s best interests are being raised. What are children’s “best interests”, and who can determine them? How should children’s best interests be assessed, and aren’t children’s and their parents’ interests inextricably linked? While recent research suggests that many separated fathers and mothers would like more father–child contact (Parkinson and Smyth, forthcoming), whether this extends to a general desire among separated parents for 50/50 care is an important piece of missing information in the current policy context.

Indeed, 50/50 care may be perceived by many to be the “Rolls-Royce” model of post-separation parenting. It seems fair and simple. Those in favour of shared care focus on the benefits for children of maintaining a close relationship with both parents, while those opposed to it emphasise children’s need for stability and the potential harm for children of being exposed to ongoing high levels of parental conflict, neglect or mental health problems (Bauserman 2002; Brotsky et al. 1991).

But what do separated and divorced parents themselves think about “equal-time” parenting? What factors might influence their attitudes? This paper explores these questions by analysing data...
contact with unlisted numbers. The proportion of unlisted numbers has increased markedly in recent years, adding bias to samples drawn from electronic telephone databases.

To obtain the target sample, more than 163,000 telephone calls were made around Australia. Of these calls, 46 per cent (74,618) of households were not contactable (primarily because of no reply or because the number had been disconnected or was connected to a business). Of the households known to contain a person who met the sample selection criteria, around 35 per cent of respondents agreed to participate in the interview.

This analysis focuses on 1027 parents (56 per cent women; 44 per cent men) who had either separated or divorced (or had never lived with the other parent of their child) and who had at least one child under the age of 18 years. The majority had been married to the child’s other parent collected late in 2003 for the Institute’s *Caring for Children after Separation Project*.

Attitudes to 50/50 shared parenting are of interest not only as a window into current social values but also because laws applying to parenting require reasonably wide acceptance for their compliance and success. Providing a national benchmark on these attitudes is likely to contribute to informed debate on the issue of shared care. Such debate is important because the current and future wellbeing of children remains closely tied to the ability of parents to develop non-conflicted, healthy patterns of parenting. It is important to get the views of those who are closest to this issue since it is they who are most likely to understand the myriad of implications of exercising 50/50 care in the context of their own particular circumstances and the needs of their children.

**Caring for Children after Separation Project**

The survey was conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in September 2003. The sample was obtained through random digit dialling, and was stratified by gender and geographical location from the population of Australian households with landline telephones. Random digit dialling has a number of benefits, including the ability to make contact with unlisted numbers. The proportion of unlisted numbers has increased markedly in recent years, adding bias to samples drawn from electronic telephone databases.

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five categories were collapsed into three in this paper: agree, disagree, and mixed feelings.

Methodological issues

Five methodological issues warrant mention. First, the question on 50/50 care was asked at the start of the interview in an attempt to capture respondents' interest in the survey and to ensure that the question was answered by respondents who might end the interview prematurely. However, its early placement means that answers represent initial reactions only. Many respondents may have had little (if any) idea of what “equal time” parenting might mean at a practical level, and not had time to think this through.

Second, each respondent was a former partner from a former relationship (committed or otherwise). In no instance were both ex-partners interviewed. This means that differential reporting and any sample biases cannot be distinguished. Differential reporting by men and women is a common feature of research of this nature, while the sensitive nature of surveys of relationship breakdown may be off-putting to certain types of respondents (such as those who do not see their children or who do not provide financial support for them).

Third, since not everyone is accessible by telephone, the omission of certain groups of people in the population not available through telephone surveys sets limits on the generalisations that can be made from the data to the Australian population at large. While random digit dialling overcomes a number of sampling issues (such as accessing parents who have unlisted numbers because of the experience of abuse, and accessing parents who have recently moved residence and whose telephone numbers have not yet been listed), certain groups are nonetheless often systematically excluded, including the very poor, those with only mobile telephone numbers (which may include some non-resident parents who are highly mobile), and those who have hearing or English language difficulties (Bennett and Steel 1999).

Fourth, some groups (for example, non-resident mothers) in the following analysis are small in size, and the interpretation of results for these groups should be treated with caution.

Fifth, it should be borne in mind that the data presented in this paper are separated parents' views of abuse, and accessing parents who have recently moved residence and whose telephone numbers have not yet been listed), certain groups are nonetheless often systematically excluded, including the very poor, those with only mobile telephone numbers (which may include some non-resident parents who are highly mobile), and those who have hearing or English language difficulties (Bennett and Steel 1999).

Many fathers may feel that they have little opportunity to play an active role in their children’s lives following parental separation, and that equal-time parenting is a symbolic starting point for encouraging a parenting agreement.

“As you may know, the government is looking into the idea that if parents separate, children should spend equal time with each parent. That is, children would have two homes and would move between each. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?”

Five response options were offered: “Strongly agree”, “Agree”, “Mixed feelings”, “Disagree” or “Strongly disagree”. For conceptual clarity, these

(72 per cent); 23 per cent had been living in a de facto relationship with the other parent; 5 per cent had never lived with the other parent. Parents who had lived with the other parent had been separated for an average of five years, with almost 20 per cent having separated for 12 months or less. Women ranged in age from 19 to 56 years (median age=38 years); men’s ages ranged from 18 to 74 years (with 95 per cent being no more than 55 years old; median age=42 years).

The vast majority of mothers and fathers were resident and non-resident parents respectively (86 per cent of mothers and 86 per cent of fathers). The next largest groups were resident fathers (17 per cent) and non-resident mothers (12 per cent). Around 6–7 per cent of mothers and fathers reported “split” arrangements (that is, each parent had at least one child of the former relationship in their care). Another 7 per cent of fathers (n=33) but only 3 per cent of mothers (n=15) indicated that the children lived with them around half the time (“co-parents”).

The survey sought information on a range of issues, including respondents' parenting arrangements (including residence, contact and child support), decision-making responsibilities, well-being, and demographic circumstances. Following a short screening interview, respondents were asked:
of 50/50 care. Little is known in Australia about children’s views. While some interesting work is underway (for example, Parkinson, Cashmore and Single, forthcoming), information from children of divorce represents a crucial gap in our knowledge (Butler et al. 2003; Maclean 2003; Mason 1999; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001; Taylor 1999). Seeking children’s views can also be a powerful way of calling parents back to reality (McIntosh et al. 2004; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003).

Who is in favour of 50/50 care?
In the following analysis, we examine the importance of gender in predicting attitudes, and ways in which attitudes vary according to fathers’ and mothers’ residence type. We then examine the extent to which attitudes to 50/50 care vary according to other personal views and circumstances of respondents in the two largest groups: resident mothers and non-resident fathers.

Gender and residence
Attitudes to “equal-time” parenting varied markedly according to parents’ gender and their residence status. Two-thirds of fathers (69 per cent) and only one-third of mothers (31 per cent) agreed with the notion of “equal time” parenting after parental separation, with fathers in each residential arrangement group (as set out below) being more inclined than their female counterparts to agree with the notion of shared care.

Figure 1 sets out the percentages of men and women in the different residence types who agreed, disagreed or expressed mixed feelings about notions of “equal time” parenting. The mothers with shared care arrangements are not represented given that there were so few of them.

The notion of 50/50 care was endorsed by 41 per cent of resident fathers and 27 per cent of resident mothers; by 74 per cent of non-resident fathers and 60 per cent of non-resident mothers; and by 77 per cent of fathers and 48 per cent of mothers with “split” arrangements. And while 91 per cent of fathers with shared care arrangements endorsed the notion of shared care arrangements, 9 of the 15 mothers with such arrangements provided such support (not shown in Figure 1). The most pronounced gender difference emerged for split arrangements, with fathers far more in favour of shared care than mothers (77 per cent compared with 48 per cent).

Although mothers in each residence type tended to be less inclined than their male counterparts to support the notion of shared parenting, respondents’ views were also linked with residence status. As indicated above, 50/50 care was favoured by most co-parents (both men and the small group of women) as well as non-resident parents, and only a minority of resident parents – regardless of gender.

In sum, attitudes to 50/50 care were linked to both respondents’ gender and their residence status. This pattern of care was supported more by fathers than by mothers in each residence type, and more by co-parents and non-resident parents than by resident parents. However, where children were split across households, attitudes appeared to vary primarily along gender lines. It is noteworthy that the views of the two largest groups – non-resident fathers and resident mothers – diverged considerably. Resident mothers were the least likely of all groups to support the idea of 50/50 care.

Other factors
Attitudes to 50/50 care are also likely to vary by factors other than parents’ gender and residence status. We thus examined a number of other potential...
Factors, most of which fell into two broad clusters: socio-demographic circumstances (such as age of youngest child, personal income, education and employment status), and parents’ views on other issues related to post-separation parenting. Given the need for large numbers in order to make valid inferences, we focus on the two most common groups of parents – resident mothers (n=482) and non-resident fathers (n=310).

For resident mothers, but not non-resident fathers, attitudes to shared care varied significantly with age of youngest child: mothers with children under six years old were more likely than other mothers to reject the notion of 50/50 care. (Other inter-related temporal factors such as age of the respondent and time since separation also varied with attitudes in ways consistent with the pattern that emerged for age of youngest child.) Mothers with younger children in their care may have been particularly sensitive to the dependency of young children on them when evaluating the general principle of shared care.

Table 1 lists other socio-demographic factors that were significantly related to attitudes towards shared care for one or both of the groups. Some of these factors are self-evident, while others require some explanation.

For resident mothers, the principle of 50/50 care was particularly likely to be rejected by those who had new children (that is, born of a new relationship). These trends are understandable. Mothers with new young children may consider these children’s needs first, and reject the complications that may accompany 50/50 care of their other children.

The principle of 50/50 was also likely to be rejected by those who reported a great deal of current conflict with their former partner. Such an arrangement is likely to be difficult to manage in high conflict situations and may exacerbate existing conflict given the many logistical challenges that confront co-parents. High levels of conflict may also arise from some mothers’ desire to restrict contact. Such mothers would also be particularly likely to oppose a 50/50 type arrangement.

Table 1: Attitudes towards 50/50 care: Reports of resident mothers and non-resident fathers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Resident mothers (n=482)</th>
<th>Non-resident fathers (n=310)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| City     | 31    | 19    | 50      | 100   | 100 (285) | 69    | 14    | 17      | 100 | 100 (188) | p  
| Country  | 22    | 19    | 50      | 100   | 100 (195) | 80    | 14    | 17      | 100 | 100 (122) |
| Education |        |       |         |       |       |       |       |         |       |       |       |
| No degree | 28    | 22    | 51      | 100   | 100 (382) | 75    | 12    | 14      | 100 | 100 (260) |
| Degree(s) | 24    | 19    | 57      | 100   | 100 (95) | 65    | 25    | 10      | 100 | 100 (48) |
| Age of youngest child |        |       |         |       |       |       |       |         |       |       |       |
| 6+ yrs | 29    | 23    | 48      | 100   | 100 (343) | 74    | 14    | 12      | 100 | 100 (234) |
| Has a child born of a new relationship |        |       |         |       |       |       |       |         |       |       |       |
| Yes     | 12    | 19    | 70      | 100   | 100 (43) | 78    | 11    | 11      | 100 | 100 (37) |
| No      | 30    | 21    | 50      | 100   | 100 (439) | 73    | 14    | 13      | 100 | 100 (273) |
| Conflict with other parent |        |       |         |       |       |       |       |         |       |       |       |
| High    | 18    | 25    | 57      | 100   | 100 (122) | 77    | 13    | 9       | 100 | 100 (97) |
| Low     | 33    | 21    | 46      | 100   | 100 (292) | 72    | 13    | 14      | 100 | 100 (174) |

Notes: # p<.10; * p<.05; ** p<.01; t-test of mean age of youngest biological child of target union was used.
While most non-resident fathers agreed with the notion of 50/50 care, support was stronger among rural than urban dwellers, among fathers without (rather than with) tertiary degree qualifications, and among those whose parenting arrangements required some court involvement. While no obvious explanations suggest themselves in relation to the first two of these patterns, issues surrounding contact would have been a common reason for the use of formal legal processes. That is, we would expect fathers who want greater time with their children to be over-represented among those who pursue such processes. The flip side of this pattern of results might be expected to apply to resident mothers (with those with court involvement being less likely than other mothers to accept the principle of 50/50 care), and while the percentages shown are consistent with this expectation, the results were not statistically significant.

Table 2 shows the extent to which attitudes to 50/50 care corresponded with five other views concerning post-separation parenting (three tapped satisfaction with the decision making processes about contact and the way it was working, and two tapped attitudes about the relationships between contact and child support payments).

For fathers, attitudes to 50/50 care varied significantly with each of the three satisfaction measures: compared with other fathers, support for 50/50 care was greater among those who were dissatisfied with how contact was decided, the amount of father–child contact occurring, and how well the contact arrangements were working for them. These issues are obviously inter-related. However, for resident mothers, satisfaction with the amount of contact was the only one of these three domains linked with their views about 50/50 care. Like non-resident fathers, resident mothers who were unhappy with father–child contact were more likely to be in favour of 50/50 care. Nevertheless, regardless of how they viewed current levels of parent–child contact, support for 50/50 care applied to only a minority of the mothers.

The two questions tapping parents’ views about whether child support and contact should be linked were: should those who do not pay child support be allowed to see their children?; and should those who are prevented from seeing their children have to pay child support? (It is noteworthy that most fathers, and only a minority of mothers, felt that contact and child support should be linked. It is possible that this pattern of results is influenced by question order.)

The pattern of results on both issues was consistent for resident mothers. Mothers who believed that non-payment of child support should result in contact being withheld were more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Attitudes towards 50/50 care by satisfaction with, and attitudes to, father–child contact: Reports of resident mothers and non-resident fathers</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Resident mothers (n=482)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Attitudes to 50/50 care</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfaction with how contact decided</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfaction with amount of contact</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How contact arrangements are working for respondent</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Really well / Fairly well</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not so well / Badly</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If child support isn’t paid, contact shouldn’t occur</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If contact is obstructed, child support should not be paid</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>26</td>
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Notes:

a “Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way decisions are made about the children?”

b “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of contact (you/name of target partner) (have/has) with [youngest target child’s name] during the year?”

c “How is the current situation in relation to contact of the contact (shared parenting) arrangements working for you?”

d “Parents who are prevented from seeing their children should not have to pay child support?”

incliend than other mothers to oppose the notion of 50/50 care. On the other hand, a disproportionate number of mothers who endorsed 50/50 care believed that non-resident parents should not be required to support their children financially if contact is prevented. In other words, 50/50 care was more popular among mothers who valued father–child contact for its own sake than among other mothers. By contrast, fathers’ views of any linking of contact and child support were unrelated to their attitudes to 50/50 care.

Several factors that we expected to be statistically related to attitudes to 50/50 care were not. These factors included distance between parents’ households, the amount of father–child contact, the type of contact (for example, daytime-only contact versus sleepovers), the amount of child support being paid, personal or household income, level of education, concern about violence or children’s safety, re-partnering status (respondent or former partner), and housing tenure. It is unclear to what extent this lack of association arises from the general nature of the questions rather than being specific to respondents’ own circumstances.

Discussion

Considerable diversity of views exists in relation to the notion of 50/50 care among separated and divorced parents. The level of debate on this issue is thus not surprising. The views of separated parents vary markedly along gender and residence status lines. Our data suggest that most separated fathers like the idea of equal-time parenting whereas most separated mothers do not; most parents with it, like it (although there were few co-parent mothers reporting on this); most non-resident parents are in favour of 50/50 care whereas most resident parents are not; and the small group of fathers and mothers with split care (where at least one child lives with each parent) differ markedly in their views. For each of these residence types, fathers were more likely than mothers in the same residence type to be in favour of 50/50 care.

No clear and simple pattern emerged in relation to other socio-demographic factors. For resident mothers, children’s ages seemed a critical factor—perhaps reflecting mothers’ sensitivity to the dependency and stability needs of very young children in their care. Resident mothers’ attitudes towards 50/50 care also varied according to the level of current coparental conflict they experienced and according to their satisfaction with current contact arrangements. Finally, mothers’ attitudes towards 50/50 care were consistent with their views on whether or not contact and child support should be linked: those who were not in favour of a link between contact and child support were more likely than other mothers to support 50/50 care arrangements.

Unlike resident mothers, non-resident fathers tended to support the notion of 50/50 care regardless of any perceived nexus between contact and child support. Although the vast majority of non-resident fathers favoured 50/50 care, this was particularly the case for fathers who were dissatisfied with the way in which contact was decided, the amount of contact that was occurring, and how the contact arrangements were working for them.

Gendered agendas?

Why might gender be the key predictor of attitudes to 50/50 care? Is it because mothers perceive shared care to be too disruptive to children? Are mothers more inclined than fathers to believe that children are typically best raised by mothers given that it is mothers who still do the bulk of raising children? Is it because fathers believe that more time leads to better outcomes for children, and that 50/50 care is thus the best and fairest arrangement in this respect? Or is it that fathers feel that they are at a disadvantage when trying to negotiate an active role in their children’s lives after relationship breakdown?

Rather than focus on gender politics or view the marked gender disparity in attitudes as yet another example of the “custody wars” (see Mason 1999), we interpret the data in the context of the changing nature of parenting and modern family life.

Specifically, the marked rise in the proportions of married or partnered mothers in paid work—and thus the increased tendency for couples to share in the important family role of breadwinning—has contributed to a fundamental shift in conceptualisations of fatherhood (Minsey and Pound 2002), and a related increase in so-called “gender equity” attitudes (de Vaus 1997).

But while men and women tend to believe that both parents and couples should share equally in the everyday care of children if they are both in full-time paid work, mutually reinforcing customs, practices, and behaviour necessarily lag. Thus mothers are still doing the lion’s share of nurturing children, although fathers of young children today are doing more in this area than was the case for their own fathers (Craig 1999; Fuligni and Brooks-Gunn 2004; Pleck 1997).

It is perhaps from the vantage of being the primary carers of young children, and as a consequence being especially sensitive to children’s needs, that mothers are more likely than fathers to oppose the idea of 50/50 care. They may perceive shared care to be too disruptive to children. On this issue, it is noteworthy that mothers’ views about 50/50 care seemed be influenced by their own children’s ages and stages, and the level of inter-parental conflict.

For most fathers, the disconnection from their children that relationship breakdown often brings may be a central factor explaining the appeal of 50/50. Indeed fathers’ attitudes appeared to be tied in with their dissatisfaction with contact and with the decision-making processes that occurred in relation to contact. The strong desire by fathers for 50/50 care may reflect what Walker (2003: 403) calls a “radiating message”. In this context, the message would be something like “I want to be more involved in my children’s lives”, and may well be a reaction to the apparent shallowness of every-other-weekend contact schedules that have arisen from traditional (maternal) sole custody models of post-separation parenting.

Many fathers may feel that they have little opportunity to play an active role in their children’s lives.
following parental separation, and that equal-time parenting would be “a symbolic starting point for encouraging a parenting agreement that fosters clear expectations of high levels of continued parental involvement and responsibility for children by both parents that are in their children’s best interests” (AIFS 2003: 3). All this would be reinforced by the above noted societal changes in attitudes about gender roles.

The often interlocking nature of gender and resident status means that the vast majority of men live apart from their children for much of the time, and therefore many want (or appreciate having) more time with their children. By contrast, most of those who have the children in their care for the majority of the time – mainly mothers – see things differently. Of course, the apparent simplicity of such gendered attitudinal data in relation to 50/50 care belies the complexity of balancing children’s and parents’ interests and needs. Children’s voices are needed on this issue, and are likely to add to its complexity.

References

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