

Time to rethink *time*?

The experience of time with children after divorce

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“There is in the world a great and yet ordinary secret. All of us are part of it, everyone is aware of it, but very few ever think of it. Most of us just accept it and never wonder over it. This secret is time.” (Ende 1985: 55)

This article re-examines the notion of time in the context of post-separation parenting. “Time” in this context has largely been part and parcel of what Mason (2000) calls the “custody wars” – parents fight about it, courts divvy it up, and children long for it.

In this article, it is argued that much of the recent debate in Australia on the merits or otherwise of 50/50 shared care after separation is not about parenting time per se but about the *subjective experience of time* with children. Indeed two types of “time” may exist after separation, each largely gendered: for non-resident fathers, time with children is typically experienced as stilted, shallow, artificial and brief; for resident mothers, time with children may often be experienced as fluid, deep, demanding, and a given. Patterns of care after separation that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing. The article explores these ideas in the context of recent research into parent–child contact after separation.

Sharing the care of children

Parents can share the care of their children after separation in many ways. In Australia, at least six broad patterns of father–child contact after separation can be identified (see Figure 1).

These patterns, from most to least common, are:

- *“standard” contact*, in which children see their non-resident parent each weekend or every-other-weekend (34 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere);
- *little or no contact*, where children rarely (less than once a year) or never see their non-resident parent (26 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere);
- *daytime-only contact*, in which children see their non-resident parent only during the day (16 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere) – overnight stays may not occur because of co-parental conflict, a lack of space or inadequate accommodation, shift work, safety concerns, geographic distance, or for the sake of stability for children;
- *holiday-only contact*, where children see their non-resident parent only during school holidays (10 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere) typically because parents live a long way from each other;



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Third, similar to other developed countries, little or no face-to-face father-child contact is not uncommon (see, for example, Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams 1999; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992; Maclean and Eekelaar 1997). High levels of co-parental conflict, emotional and physical distance, new partners, and relative economic disadvantage feature prominently in the demographic profile of parents who report little or no father-child contact in Australia (Smyth 2004). The perceived "shallowness" of contact and feelings of being "cut out" of a child's life are mentioned by some fathers who no longer see their children (Braver and O'Connell 1998; Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993; Smyth 2004).

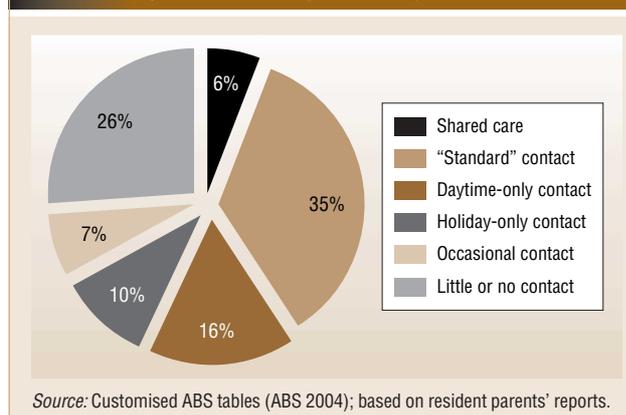
Fourth, in almost half the cases of "standard" contact with a set pattern, overnight stays typically occur on Friday and/or Saturday night each or every-other weekend (Smyth 2005). There is emerging evidence that a regime of every-other-weekend father-child contact may not be the best arrangement for the welfare of many children or their parents. According to Kelly (2004), a "12-day wait" may be too long for many children, and may diminish the non-resident parent's importance to his or her children (see also Warshak 2000). Every-other-weekend patterns also provide resident parents with little respite. Rigid weekend time can also interfere with children's social activities with friends and can generate resentment, especially by older children. Timesharing arrangements at the vanguard of child-responsive practice – such as frequent and brief contact with young children, and extended weekends and mid-week contact with older children – have recently been proposed to

- *occasional contact*, where children see their non-resident parent once every three to six months (7 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere) – sometimes reflecting an emotionally tenuous parent-child relationship; and
- *equal (or near) shared care*, in which children are in the care of either parent for at least 30 per cent of nights a year (6 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere).

Four points need to be made about Figure 1. First, the figure creates the impression that patterns of parenting after separation are static, but often they are not. Indeed the frequency and nature of parent-child contact are necessarily grounded in the reality of children's changing needs as they grow socially and emotionally, as well as their parents' changing circumstances (including new partners, new children, new jobs, or just the need for change itself). Of course, high levels of parental conflict can act to ossify patterns of care.

Second, parents who exercise equal or near equal care of their children in Australia appear to be a relatively small, select group (Smyth, Caruana and Ferro 2004).¹ This is understandable: 50/50 care remains one of the most logistically challenging arrangements for children and parents (Irving and Benjamin 1995; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003). There are, nonetheless, signs that this pattern of care may be on the rise.²

Figure 1 Patterns of post-separation parenting experienced by children with a parent living elsewhere



help separated parents best meet their children's needs (for example, Emery 2005; Kelly 2004).

Parenting time and its discontents

More than three decades ago, Bernard (1972) pointed out that every marriage actually comprises two marriages – “his” and “hers”. The same could hold for divorce. For example, there is a tendency for divorced fathers to report higher estimates than divorced mothers of child support compliance and the frequency of father–child contact are examples of such differences (Ahrns 1983; Mizell 2002 – but for more complex analytic frames on differential reporting, see Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer and Tuschen 2004; Braver and O’Connell 1998).

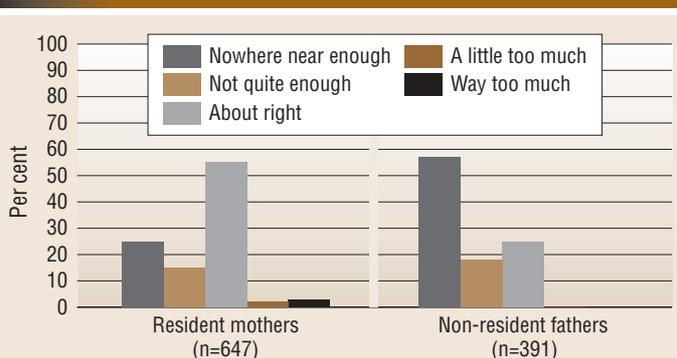
Perhaps something more fundamental is at play regarding women’s and men’s perception and experience of time with children after separation. Two recent studies of parent–child contact in Australia are intriguing in this regard.

Drawing on data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, Parkinson and Smyth (2004) found that resident mothers and non-resident fathers differed markedly in their level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact occurring. As Figure 2 shows, more than half (55 per cent) of the 647 resident mothers in the sample believed that the amount of contact was about right, while a similar proportion (57 per cent) of the 394 non-resident fathers believed that it was nowhere near enough. (It should be noted that the samples of men and women were independent – that is, the men and women had not been married to each other.)

Parent–child contact can be defined by varying degrees of time and type. To what extent do these patterns change when levels of satisfaction are disaggregated by these dimensions? Figure 3 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different thresholds of actual father–child contact.

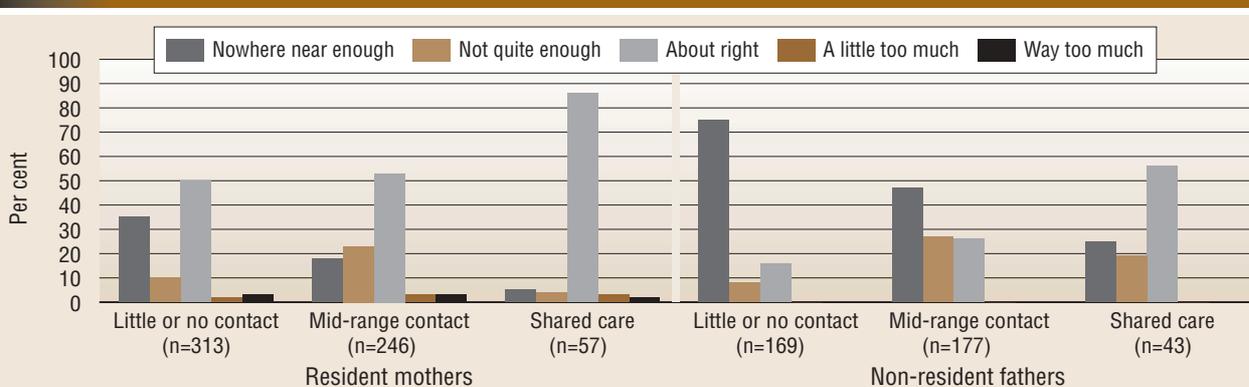
Three clear patterns emerged. Again, gender differences feature prominently. First, around half (50-53 per cent) of the resident mothers in the “little or no” contact or “mid-range” contact groups believed

Figure 2 Level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports



Source: HILDA Survey 2001.

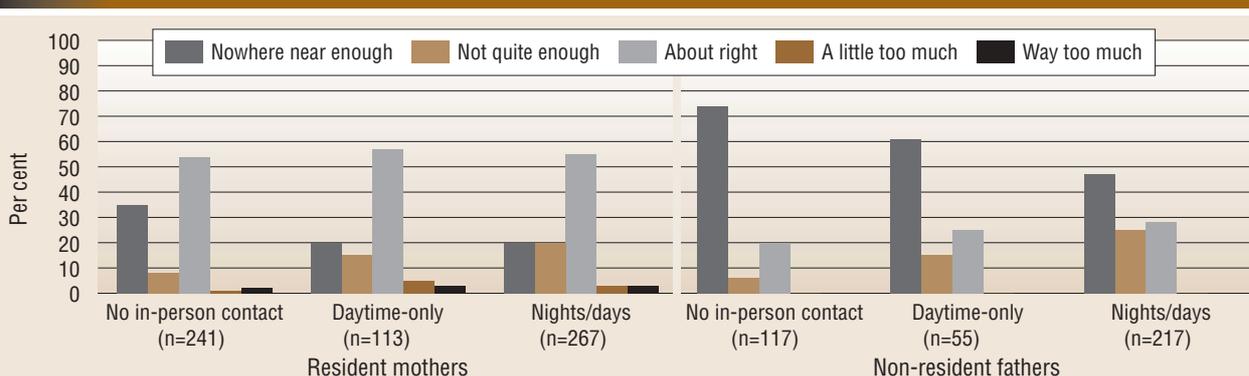
Figure 3 Level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact by number of days/overnight stays per year: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports



Note: Little or no contact = 0-17 nights/days; “mid-range contact” = 18-109 night/days; “shared care” = 110 nights. Initially the categories 0 nights/days and 1-17 nights/days were analysed as two distinct groups. But since both groups presented similar patterns, they were combined for the sake of simplicity.

Source: HILDA Survey 2001.

Figure 4 Level of satisfaction with father–child contact by type of contact: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports



Source: HILDA Survey 2001.

that the amount of contact was about right. By contrast, three-quarters (75 per cent) of the non-resident fathers who rarely or never saw their children believed that they had nowhere near enough contact (but note the 16 per cent who believed that this amount of contact was about right). Thirty-five per cent of resident mothers in the little or no contact group also thought that “not enough” father-child contact was occurring.

Second, as the amount of father-child contact increased, resident mothers and non-resident fathers were less inclined to believe that there was nowhere near enough contact occurring – though, predictably, this pattern was far more pronounced for men than for women.

Third, shared care – albeit the least common pattern of care – was the pattern in which resident mothers and non-resident fathers were most likely to believe that the amount of contact was about right (but this result should be interpreted with some caution because of selection effects and the small number of respondents in this group). That fathers with shared care were less likely than their female counterparts to believe that the amount of father-child contact was “about right” might depict a desire for full-time family life with children.

Does the type of contact matter? Figure 4 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different types of father-child contact.

Most conspicuous in this figure is that the majority of resident mothers appear relatively satisfied (“about right”) with contact regardless of its form – none, daytime-only, or night and day (54-57 per cent). Non-resident fathers, on the other

hand, appear to be more satisfied as the type of contact becomes qualitatively richer – from none, to some (daytime-only), to sleepovers (“nowhere near enough”: 74 per cent, 61 per cent, 47 per cent respectively).

These relatively gendered perceptions in relation to fathers’ time with children after separation are striking.

Recent attitudinal data are similarly intriguing. Smyth and Weston (2004) examined separated parents’ attitudes to 50/50 shared care after divorce (see Figure 5).

Smyth and Weston (2004) found that around three quarters (73 per cent) of non-resident fathers in Australia, compared with around one-quarter of resident mothers (27 per cent), agreed with the idea that children should spend equal time with their parents after separation. But the similarity of response between non-resident mothers and non-resident fathers, and between resident mothers and resident fathers, should be noted. These data suggest that it is not so much respondents’ gender that predicts attitudes to 50/50 care but parents’ residence status (resident or non-resident). In

other words, living with or apart from children may matter more than gender – though obviously both are usually closely intertwined.

At one level, both sets of data simply provide further evidence of the tendency for resident and non-resident parents (and thus most women and men) to see things differently. At a deeper level, perhaps these data reflect a different subjective experience of time with children. Maybe there are critical patches in time and space that allow children and parents to connect in deeper and more meaningful ways.

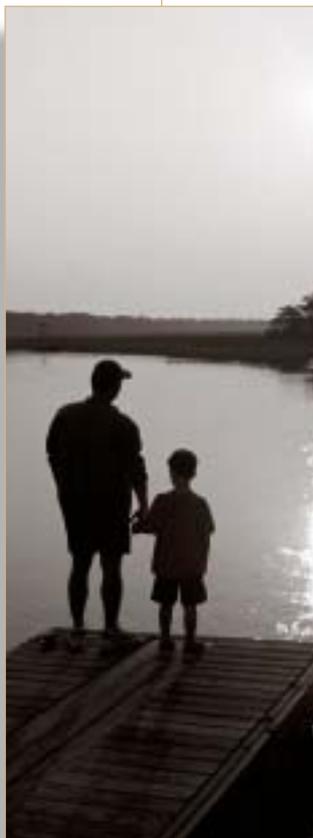
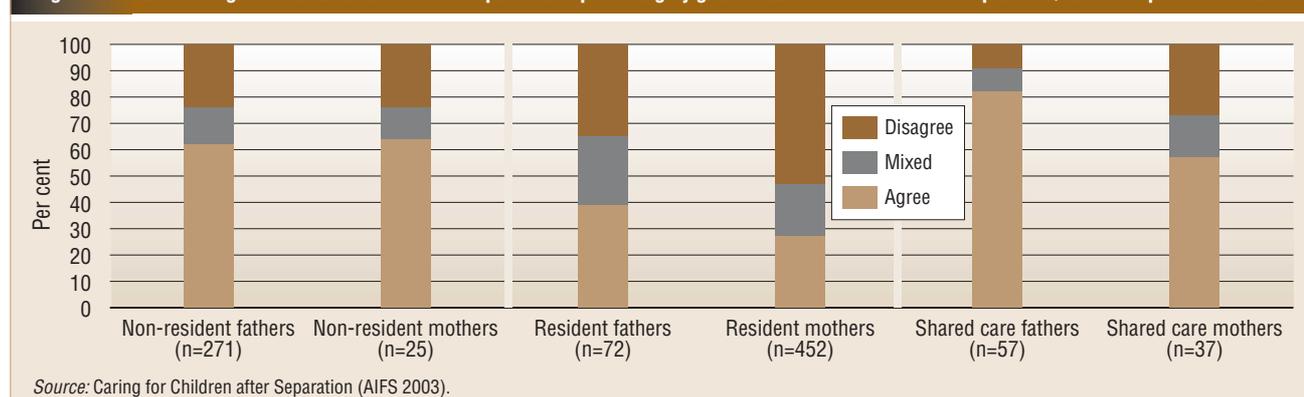


Figure 5 Level of agreement with the idea of “equal time” parenting by gender and residence status: Separated / divorced parents’ views



It's about time ...

Time is our most precious resource. It is a crucial element in forging and strengthening family relationships, particularly with children. Most of us live in the hope that we can grow old and grey with those around us whom we love.

Increasingly, the dimension of time is becoming an important lens for understanding the social world (Adam 1991). Gendered conceptions of time have featured prominently in this emerging vista, with time-use studies providing many insights (see, for example, Craig 2002; Folbre and Bittman 2004).

Most studies show that a chasm often exists between women's and men's experience of time at home and with children (Thompson and Walker 1991). Women's time is more "pressured" than men's in terms of the density and intensity of family work, while any leisure time is much more "fragmented" (Sullivan 1997: 221). And in the context of time with children, mothers spend much of their time with children as the primary carer while fathers tend to play with children, generally in the presence of the child's mother (Craig 2002; Thompson and Walker 1991).

This chasm in experience may expand on parental separation . . . but not necessarily. Increasingly, many fathers are saying that they want to be more – if not equally – involved in their children's lives after divorce. But given the generally lopsided contributions of mothers and fathers to family work and children prior to separation, it is understandable that the desire of some fathers to want to start from an equal footing in relation to caring for children after separation appears to anger some mothers. Why the sudden shift by many fathers?

Ruptures in time

Alheit (1994) has suggested that two types of time are constantly experienced: "everyday time" (comprising the taken-for-granted routines of everyday life) and "life time" (comprising both future time and the past). Each type of time supports the other – one provides the detail, the other the big picture. Everyday time has practical expediency, while life time is a sequentially experienced contextual frame. Alheit contends that crises can trigger a (retrospective and prospective) "biographical stock take". Suddenly the future looks different, and the past warrants re-evaluation.

Alheit (1994: 310) writes:

"Crises . . . always affect the substance of our biography because they put at risk any reconstructable or anticipated continuity of self-plan. And we are no longer 'the same person' as we were before the onset of crisis . . . [Crises] throw our biographical assessments into question, refuting entirely the expectations that we had nurtured for our further life."

Relationship breakdown is one such crisis that can challenge a projected future – a future with a partner and with children. It can also "rupture" time. As Game (1997: 116) points out: "time is unhinged" by

ruptures or disruptions to the future. She suggests that a crisis can release:

". . . time that has been frozen in the routines of everyday life, a time which . . . is 'made invisible' by 'Habit'. Something is cracked open and the flow of time is there again. But this moment in which time is announced is also an overturning: it is time unhinged."

Separation is likely to be one such critical juncture or jolt that can "unhinge" time. Whereas marriage may tend to mask the gendered nature of domestic life because of the fruits of complementary pursuits (breadwinning and caregiving), for many fathers, separation may expose what was once experienced as a given: the presence (or at least the availability) of children as part of the daily routines of family life. Many non-resident fathers as a consequence of seeing their children only on weekends, during the day, or in school holidays, report that their time with children feels stilted, brief, shallow and artificial (Braver and O'Connell 1998; Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993; Smyth 2004). For these fathers, separation abruptly changes the subjective experience of time with children.

Separated fathers' feelings of disconnection with children have recently been given voice in Australia by grass-roots fathers' rights groups, a number of whom have sought to introduce a legal presumption of 50/50 parenting time after separation (see, for example, Williams 2003). While this proposal was recently rejected by the Australian Government in favour of a presumption of "shared parental responsibility" (Commonwealth of Australia 2003), the need for family law professionals to encourage parents to consider sharing the care of children to a much greater degree remains a feature of the most recent round of proposed family law reform. It is important to note that the family law system in Australia, like similar systems elsewhere, is still grappling with how best to hear children's voices in the push towards shared care (May and Smart 2004; Moloney and McIntosh 2004; Smart 2002; Smith, Taylor and Tapp 2003).

What is most striking about the recent debate in Australia on shared care after divorce is that it has largely centred on numbers – 50/50, 80/20, 70/30, and 60/40 time splits – and on "mathematising" parenting time. Of course, time is typically expressed in quantity, which makes number essential in its articulation (Zerzan 2005). But this apparent preoccupation with time as a number in family law (the "legality" of time) rather than a subjective experience (the "emotional experience" of time) means that separated parents can lose sight of what is most important to their children – spending time in a broad spectrum of activities and experiences with their parents. The importance of breadth and depth in caring for children is now examined.

The need for a multiplicity of times

Most studies indicate that the interests of children post-divorce are generally best served when children can maintain ongoing and frequent contact with both parents who can cooperate – or at least contain their conflict. However, where abuse, violence or

persistent high levels of parental conflict are evident, parent–child contact may be highly inappropriate.

A solid body of data also suggest that it is the *quality of relationships* between parents, and between parents and children, that exerts a critical influence on children’s wellbeing, not the *amount of time per se* (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Of course, an emotionally close and warm relationship between parents and children requires time to sustain it. “Quality time” needs time.

According to Kelly and Lamb (2000), the greater the range of contexts for interaction between parents and their children, the better. They suggest that different contexts facilitate children’s social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as afford greater opportunities for parents to build emotional bonds with their children.

It is the intermingling of different activities and the different experiences of time that diverse contexts bring that form the hub of family life, and which are critical for family wellbeing. For instance, *overnight stays* allow for the experience of mundane everyday routines, as well as special moments – such as putting children to bed, reading to them, saying good night, and starting the day together over breakfast. *Focused one-on-one together time* (such as playing a game, talking in the car, reading a book together, or helping with homework) sends a clear signal to children that they matter. *Outdoor time* (such as fishing, netball, or hiking) provides opportunities for children’s emotional, physical, social and cognitive development, and give parents the chance to mentor, and to remain engaged with, their children. *Fun time* (such as long-weekends and school holidays) or *special time* (such as birthdays, Mothers’ or Fathers’ Day, and Christmas) foster the pursuit of mutually rewarding experiences for children and parents, help create bonds between each and symbolise those bonds, and can create positive life-long memories.

But while these, and other, types of time are important for children’s and parent’s wellbeing, one type of time warrants special attention: *being-in-the-moment time*. This type of time involves unstructured, spontaneous, intimate time where a parent and child are free to “hang out”, talk about things, or engage in activities that are important to them (such as a teenage daughter talking about boyfriend problems while her father peels potatoes). Post-separation parenting arrangements that involve thin slices of parent–child time, such as daytime-only contact each Saturday afternoon, work against the experience of

“being” time as this type of time needs to feel natural and unimpeded to create the conditions for free-flowing interpersonal engagement.

In many ways, “being-in-the-moment” time represents the Holy Grail for many separated parents and their children because it brings into awareness the kind of closeness, warmth, and mutual understanding that remain elusive when parenting from a distance. Fluid, meaningful time cannot be scheduled, especially with children. It needs to be cultivated.

Could it be that the desire for 50/50 care of children after divorce by many non-resident fathers is really a proxy for the yearning for “being” time with children? More broadly, could the apparent obsession with numbers (hours, days, time splits) in the context of caring for children after separation reflect a deeper concern about what that time might mean: time to develop more closeness with a child; time to continue or generate an intimate satisfying relationship; time to strengthen, enhance or even to maintain one’s identity as a “father” or “mother”?

Time as a lock ... and a key

For Kearl (2005), time is the “container” of social activities. It is thus also the container of emotional bonds. After separation, time is the gateway into the development or sustainment of close emotional bonds between children and their parents, especially where together time occurs across a range of time–space contexts (sleepovers before a school day, sharing meals, doing homework, doing “day-to-day stuff”, and having fun).

While parenting time after separation may largely be based on calendar and clock time, parent–child contact can nonetheless be structured in ways that encourage the experience of different types of time with children – ways that create the likelihood of “being-in-the-moment” time. Structuring parenting time in such a way that allows time to be porous is often not easy after separation because of the difficulties inherent in allocating time to meet the diverse desires and needs of all family members. But it is possible.

In exploring different patterns of parent–child contact after separation, Smyth (2005) found that a sizeable proportion of contact schedules involved arrangements that were far more complex than traditional every-other-weekend approaches. The critical thing to note about these more complex arrangements is that they are structured in such a way as to involve a range of time–space experiences (without putting children at risk, one would hope).



After separation, time can be a lock – and a key. Some resident mothers may be *locked into* long periods of time with children with little room for respite and reflection. Likewise, some non-resident fathers may be *locked out of* less bounded time with children – constrained by snippets of weekend time with their children. But time can also be a key into new ways of being with children. Parents need to be encouraged to think more laterally about what arrangements might work best for their children and themselves. Arrangements that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children's and parents' wellbeing.

This article has sought to highlight the importance of "being" time with children in the hope that what matters is how time is spent and experienced, not just how it is allocated or distributed.

To return to Ende (1985: 55):

"Calendars and clocks exist to measure time, but that signifies little because we all know that an hour can seem an eternity or pass in a flash, according to how we spend it. Time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart."

Endnotes

- 1 Shared care seems to be adopted by mainly well-educated dual career separated parents who live near their former partners and who have primary school aged children. Both parents tend to be able to adopt a working businesslike relationship as parents, have flexible work arrangements (such as being able to work from home), and adequate to high socio-economic resources.
- 2 In 1997, only 3 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere were reported by resident parents to be in the care of either parent for at least 30 per cent of nights ("shared care"); this increased to 6 per cent in 2004 (ABS 1998, 2004).

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