This chapter examines factors linked with the different care-time arrangements that parents adopt (outlined in Chapter 6) and relates to policy objective 2 of the 2007 Evaluation Framework (Appendix B) concerning encouraging greater involvement by both parents in children’s lives after separation, and also protecting children from violence and abuse. Some of these factors help explain the arrangements that have been adopted and some are relevant to judgments about the appropriateness of different arrangements for children; for example: children’s ages, distance between homes, and indicators of dysfunctional family dynamics. These matters are clearly important for any assessment of the extent to which a fundamental aim of the reforms—encouraging parental involvement while at the same time protecting children’s wellbeing—is being met. The analysis is based on the first wave of the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families 2008 (LSSF W1 2008).

The following questions are addressed in this chapter:

- What are the socio-demographic characteristics and family dynamics of separated families with different care-time arrangements?
- Are some care-time arrangements more likely than others to be taken up by parents who had not yet sorted out their parenting arrangements at the time the LSSF W1 2008 was undertaken? Where arrangements had been sorted out, to what extent did the main means by which they were made vary with care-time arrangements?
- How flexible and workable do parents consider their parenting arrangements to be for themselves, their child, and the child’s other parent? Do parents’ evaluations vary according to how much time, if any, they spend with their child and according to whether this time involves overnight stays?
- To what extent does frequency of inter-parental communication (another indicator of parental involvement) vary according to the care-time arrangements adopted? To what extent does “out of sight” suggest “out of mind”?
- Finally, to what extent do the arrangements adopted appear to meet the fundamental objectives of the reforms—namely, promoting parental involvement while also protecting children from potential harm associated with such experiences as parental conflict, family violence, and mental health problems, substance misuse problems or other addictions experienced by parents?

### 7.1 Characteristics of parents with different care-time arrangements

This section compares socio-demographic characteristics of respondents in the LSSF W1 2008 with different care-time arrangements. All comparisons focus on nine groups of fathers and seven groups of mothers.\(^1\) The analysis also identifies the proportion of parents whose child

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\(^1\) This should not be taken to imply that any differences in arrangements necessarily reflect those that parents tend to adopt before they reach agreement and those that are subsequently adopted through the negotiation process. An alternative explanation is that the type of arrangements that are adopted by parents who quickly reach agreement may differ from those that tend to be adopted when negotiations and decision-making are protracted. Wave 2 of the LSSF will throw light on this issue.

\(^2\) As noted in Chapter 6, there were only 29 mothers (out of around 5,000 mothers) who reported that they never saw their focus child, and 38 who indicated that their child stayed overnight with them for 34–47% of
travels long distances for shared care-time arrangements—an experience that could be disruptive for the children, depending on various other factors, such as the frequency of moves, the duration of periods spent with each parent, the timing of moves relative to the school term, and the children’s ages. Pre-separation circumstances, such as reports of the level of each parent’s involvement in the child’s everyday activities, are also discussed. This information is important for understanding some of the circumstances that influence, or are influenced by, each parent’s level of involvement in their child’s life. It should be noted that the discussion in some of the following sections does not provide information on all care-time arrangements.

7.1.1 Parents’ and children’s ages

There is a clear relationship between the parents’ ages and their care-time arrangements. On average, the youngest parents were those whose child never saw his or her father (mean age: 34 years for fathers and 31 years for mothers). The average age of parents tended to increase with increases in the proportion of nights that fathers cared for their child, although this trend levelled out for fathers with equal or greater care time (mean age of such fathers: 37–38 years). On average, the oldest mothers were those whose child spent most or all nights with his or her father (mean age: 37 years).

As noted in Chapter 6, most children in all age groups spent more nights with their mother than father, with children under 3 years old being the most likely of all groups to spend all nights with their mother. Children of primary school age (5–11 years) were the most likely of all groups to experience equal care time, while children under 3 years old and those aged 15–17 years were the least likely to have such arrangements. Finally, children who were 15–17 years old were more likely than other children to spend most or all nights (66–100%) with their father, although most children in such care-time arrangements were under 12 years old.

7.1.2 Country of birth

Parents with equal care time were the least likely of all groups to have been born overseas (12–14%), while those who were most likely to have been born overseas were parents with the unusual arrangement of having the child living with the father but seeing the mother during the daytime only (28% of fathers and 34% of mothers).

7.1.3 Indigenous parents

Only a small proportion of parents were Indigenous. The representation of Indigenous fathers varied little across the care-time groups. Although applying to a small minority, mothers with daytime-only care were more likely than other parents to be Indigenous (14%, compared with 1–8% of other mothers and 0–7% of fathers).

7.1.4 Parental educational attainment

Care-time arrangements also varied systematically with the parents’ level of educational attainment. Figures 7.1 and 7.2 present these trends for fathers and mothers respectively.

Both mothers and fathers with a shared care-time arrangement (whether equal care time or shared time involving more nights with the mother or with the father) were the most likely of all groups to have post-school qualifications. For example, 19% of fathers and 22% of mothers with equal care time had a degree or higher qualification, compared with 5–13% of fathers and 4–14% of mothers without shared care-time arrangements.

Parents whose child spent most or all nights with the mother were more likely to have a low level of education, with 31–39% of these fathers and 30–41% of these mothers having left school before completing Year 12.

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3 The children of young parents, of course, tend to be quite young, and as shown in Chapter 6 (and in this section), children under the age of 3 years old were the most likely of all groups to be in the care of their mother for 100% of nights.

4 The multivariate analysis suggest that the relationship between education and shared care time continues to hold when controlling other characteristics of parents, age of focus children and main family law pathways used to sort out parenting arrangements (see Appendix E).
Fathers whose child never saw the mother were the most likely of all fathers to have left school before Year 12 (53%), while fathers whose child saw the mother during the daytime only, were the second most likely of all fathers to have left school early (44%).

These trends are consistent with those reported by Smyth, Qu, and Weston (2004), which were based on Wave 1 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.
7.1.5 Labour force status

Parents’ employment status varied with their care-time arrangements in understandable ways.

Fathers

The highest proportions of fathers in full-time paid work (80–81%) were those who cared for their child for 1–34% of nights (the traditional arrangement) or for 35–47% of nights (one of the shared care-time arrangements). The next most likely to be in full-time paid work were those with equal care time (75%). Between 87% and 89% of fathers in these three groups were employed either full-time or part-time (Figure 7.3).

The employment rate of fathers decreased as the number of nights they had the child increased beyond equal care time. For example, the following proportions of fathers were in paid work: 79% of fathers with shared care time involving the child spending more nights with the father than with the mother; 64% of fathers with the majority of care nights; and 60–61% of fathers whose child spent all nights with them.5

Among fathers whose child never stayed overnight with them, those who never saw their child were less likely to have paid work than those who saw their child during the daytime (74% compared with 83%).

The relatively high employment rates of fathers with shared care time are consistent with the fact that they had relatively high levels of educational attainment. The lower employment rates of fathers who had the child in their care every night are also consistent with the fact that these fathers had relatively low educational levels. In addition, the fall in the employment rates of fathers whose care time increased beyond equal time is consistent with their increased caring responsibilities. That is, their caring responsibilities may have reduced their capacity to work

5 The relatively low employment rate of fathers with 66–100% of care nights is consistent with data from the ABS Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey 2006–07, suggesting that sole fathers are less likely to be employed than couple fathers with dependent children (69% compared to 93%). Between 60% and 64% of fathers in the LSSF W1 2008 with 66–100% of care nights were employed and almost all would be classified as ‘sole fathers’—that is, they were not living with a partner (see Section 7.1.6). The parental responsibilities assumed by these fathers may well have combined with their relatively low levels of education (outlined in Section 7.1.4) to contribute to their relatively low employment rate.
or at least to hold a full-time job. Indeed, the part-time employment rate for these fathers was relatively high. In addition, some parents’ decisions about care-time arrangements for their child may be influenced by the employment status of each parent. For example, where the child’s mother is employed, fathers without paid work may be more likely to care for their child most or all nights.

**Mothers**

Across all care-time arrangements, mothers were less likely than fathers to be employed, and more likely than fathers to have part-time work (Figure 7.4).

![Figure 7.4 Employment rates, by care-time arrangements, mothers, 2008](image)

The employment rates of mothers were lowest for those who cared for their child every night (38–42%) and highest for those with shared care time (75–79%). As was the case for fathers, these differences are likely to reflect a combination of the effects of educational attainment levels and the impact of child care responsibilities on their ability to sustain employment, along with the impact that their employment status may have on decisions about care-time arrangements.

### 7.1.6 Post-separation re-partnering

In total, 14% of fathers and 6% of mothers were living with a partner at the time of the survey. Figure 7.5 shows that those most likely to be doing so were fathers who never saw their child (21%) and mothers who cared for their child for only 1–34% of nights (23%). Between 10% and 17% of parents with shared care-time arrangements had re-partnered, with the highest proportion being fathers and mothers with equal care time (17% of fathers and 14% of mothers).6

Despite their relative “freedom” related to not having their child stay overnight, only 10% of mothers with daytime-only care had re-partnered. As already noted, mothers with daytime-only care tended to be older than other mothers, and were more likely than other groups to have been born overseas and to have no post-school qualifications. As shown below, these mothers also tended to have low personal incomes (see Section 7.1.9) and around one-quarter were

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6 A proportion of the mothers living with a partner did not ever live with the other parent. The term “re-partnered”, as used in this report, includes both those who had lived with the other parent and who had never lived with the other parent.
living with at least one child who was not the focus child (see Section 7.1.7). Such factors are likely to lower their chances of re-partnering (see Birrell, Rapson, & Hourigan, 2004).

![Graph showing the proportion of re-partnered parents, by care-time arrangement, mothers and fathers, 2008](Figure 7.5)

**Figure 7.5** Proportion of re-partnered parents, by care-time arrangement, mothers and fathers, 2008

### 7.1.7 Presence of other biological children in the household

The fathers who were most likely to have no children in their household were those with the minority of care nights and those whose child never stayed overnight with them (90–94%). Mothers who cared for their child for a minority of nights were considerably more likely than fathers in this position to be living with a biological child (39% compared with 8%). The same applied to parents who saw their child during the daytime only: mothers with daytime-only care were considerably more likely than fathers with daytime-only care to be living with a biological child (27% compared with 6%).

In total, 25–29% of mothers with daytime-only care and mothers with the minority of nights had a full sibling of the focus child living with them. In other words, at least one of the former couple’s children was living mostly (or entirely) with the father and at least one was living mostly or entirely with the mother.

Parents with equal care time were the most likely of all groups to have full siblings of the focus child living with them (61–63% of these parents). The same care time schedules may have applied to all children in many of these families.

### 7.1.8 Distance between the two homes

Parents were asked to estimate the number of kilometres they lived from the other parent, and if they were unable to answer this question, to estimate the length of time it would take to drive to the other parent’s home. The kilometres and drive time estimates were then combined.

Figures 7.6 and 7.7 show that most parents in most care-time arrangements indicated that they lived within 50 km of the other parent (or one hour’s drive).

Shared care time was much more common when parents lived near each other than when they lived a considerable distance apart. Among those with shared care-time arrangements, over 50% lived less than 10 km or 15 minutes apart. Three-quarters (76–77%) of these fathers and 80% of these mothers estimated that they lived within 20 km or a 30-minute drive from the other parent, compared with 26–57% of other fathers and 34–63% of other mothers.
It may be disruptive for children with shared care-time arrangements to travel considerable distances between the two homes, especially given that many of their friends and any extracurricular activities are likely to be located near one of their homes. Only a small proportion of
fathers (5–6%) and mothers (3–5%) with shared care time lived at least 50 km apart or at least an hour's drive from the other parent.

Parents whose child never saw one of the parents were the least likely to indicate that they lived near the other parent.

7.1.9 Personal income and financial wellbeing

Figure 7.8 shows that mothers and fathers with equal care time and with shared care time involving more nights with the mother had the highest median personal incomes (mothers: $34,000 and $31,000 respectively; fathers: $52,000 and $50,000 respectively).

The median incomes of other mothers ranged from $23,000 for mothers who cared for their child during the daytime only to $27,000 for mothers who cared for their child most nights (i.e., 66–99% of nights).

Fathers who never saw their child and fathers who cared for their child for most or all nights had the lowest median incomes of all fathers ($30,000–35,000), while those with a minority of care nights (1–34% of nights) had the second highest median income ($49,000).

7.1.10 Pre-separation circumstances

Relationship status pre-separation and average length of relationship

Parents with equal care time were considerably more likely than all other groups to have been married to the child's other parent. Among fathers with an equal care-time arrangement, 72% had been married to the child's mother at the time of separation, 20% had been cohabiting and 2% had not been living with the mother (Figure 7.9). Among mothers, 77% had been married, 21% had been cohabiting and 2% had not been living with the father (Figure 7.10).

The pattern of relationship status at the time of separation was very similar for parents whose child either never saw the father or saw him during the daytime only. These parents were the least likely of all groups to have been married to the other parent and the most likely to have not been living with this parent when the child was born. In addition, much the same proportions of parents in these two groups had been married to the child's other parent or had been in a cohabiting relationship with this parent. Specifically, 37–39% of these fathers had been...
married to their child’s mother, 39–41% had been cohabiting with her, and 21–24% had not been living with her when their child was born. Of the mothers, 35–36% had been married to their child’s father, 38% had been cohabiting with their child’s father, and 26–27% had not been living with him when they gave birth to this child.

![Figure 7.9 Relationship status at separation, by care-time arrangement, fathers, 2008](image)

Source: LSSF W1 2008

**Figure 7.9 Relationship status at separation, by care-time arrangement, fathers, 2008**

The duration of the parental relationship before separation varied systematically with care-time arrangements. On average, the longer the duration of the relationship, the greater was the proportion of nights that the child spent with the father. For example, the average duration of...
relationships for fathers with no overnight stays was around 7 years, compared with 11 years for fathers with equal care time.

**Parental involvement in their child’s activities pre-separation**

Maintenance of a pre-existing meaningful and positive relationship with each parent is clearly important to children after parental separation (e.g., see Kelly, 2006) and reflects a key objective of the reforms. However, where a child’s relationship with one parent has been a distant one, there would need to be sensitivities around the rate at which children engage with this parent after separation. This section examines the extent to which post-separation care-time arrangements vary with each parent’s pre-separation involvement with the child, as reported by respondents.

Parents were asked to indicate how involved they had been in their focus child’s day-to-day activities before the separation, and also how involved their child’s other parent had been in this child’s activities. The response options were: “very involved”, “quite involved”, “not very involved” and “not at all involved”.

Views varied considerably according to the gender of respondents and their care-time arrangements. Figure 7.11 shows the proportions of fathers and mothers with each care-time arrangement who indicated that the father had been “very involved”, while Figure 7.12 shows the proportions who indicated that the mother had been “very involved”.

![Figure 7.11 Reports that fathers were “very involved” in the focus child’s day-to-day activities pre-separation, fathers and mothers, 2008](image)

Most parents across all groups indicated that they, themselves, had been very involved in their child’s day-to-day activities, with mothers being more likely to state this than fathers (86–93% compared to 56–67% respectively).

It is likely that the fairly small variation in self-reported involvement across care-time arrangements is partly explained by a social desirability bias (or “defensiveness”) on the part of the respondent—compared with these trends for self-reported involvement, fathers and mothers reports about their child’s other parent varied considerably according to care-time arrangements. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the latter assessments were to some extent influenced by systematic bias associated with post-separation care-time arrangements.

Only a minority of mothers in each care-time arrangement saw fathers as being very involved in their child’s everyday activities prior to separation (10–37%), but the more nights that the
fathers cared for their child post-separation, the more likely were mothers to report that their child’s father had been very involved. For example, this view was expressed by only 10% of mothers whose child never saw the father, by 21–22% of mothers with shared care-time arrangements, and by 32–37% of mothers whose child spent most or all nights with the father. Figure 7.12 suggests that mothers’ post-separation care-time circumstances are also related to their level of pre-separation involvement—if reliance is placed on the perspective of fathers. To some extent, the same is true if reliance is placed on the perspective of mothers, for a higher proportion of mothers in all groups with equal or greater care time reported that they had been “very involved” in their child’s day-to-day activities prior to separation, compared with mothers with only a minority of nights or no care nights (90–93% compared to 86%).

The difference in the reports of fathers and mothers about mothers’ level of pre-separation involvement was relatively small where mothers cared for the child on most nights (66–99% of nights) or where the father saw the child during the daytime only. Among those with such care-time arrangements, 92% of mothers and 78–83% of fathers reported that the mother had been very involved in the child’s everyday activities.

In other words, the perspective of each parent’s reports about their child’s other parent would suggest that care-time arrangements were influenced by mothers’ and fathers’ pre-separation level of involvement.

However, reports of both pre-separation level of involvement and post-separation care-time arrangements also varied in understandable ways with the child’s age. It is therefore very likely that the child’s age contributed to the relationship between actual pre-separation involvement and post-separation care-time arrangements. For instance, infants are more likely to be in the care of mothers both before any separation and afterwards. In the LSSF W1 2008, the proportion of fathers who saw their child’s mother as having been very involved in the child’s life prior to separation decreased as the age of the child increased, from 84% of those whose child was under 3 years old to 62% of those whose child was 15–17 years old (see Appendix E for further details). It has already been shown that, while most children of all ages were in the care of their mothers most or all nights, this was particularly the case for children under 3 years old, while a relatively high proportion of children aged 15–17 years were in the care of their father.

Separated parents in the General Population of Parents Survey (GPPS) 2009 were also asked about each parent’s involvement in their focus child’s day-to-day activities pre-separation, and both separated and non-separated parents were asked about the current level of involvement of

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**Figure 7.12** Reports that mothers were “very involved” in the focus child’s day-to-day activities pre-separation, fathers and mothers, 2008

The difference in the reports of fathers and mothers about mothers’ level of pre-separation involvement was relatively small where mothers cared for the child on most nights (66–99% of nights) or where the father saw the child during the daytime only. Among those with such care-time arrangements, 92% of mothers and 78–83% of fathers reported that the mother had been very involved in the child’s everyday activities.

In other words, the perspective of each parent’s reports about their child’s other parent would suggest that care-time arrangements were influenced by mothers’ and fathers’ pre-separation level of involvement.

However, reports of both pre-separation level of involvement and post-separation care-time arrangements also varied in understandable ways with the child’s age. It is therefore very likely that the child’s age contributed to the relationship between actual pre-separation involvement and post-separation care-time arrangements. For instance, infants are more likely to be in the care of mothers both before any separation and afterwards. In the LSSF W1 2008, the proportion of fathers who saw their child’s mother as having been very involved in the child’s life prior to separation decreased as the age of the child increased, from 84% of those whose child was under 3 years old to 62% of those whose child was 15–17 years old (see Appendix E for further details). It has already been shown that, while most children of all ages were in the care of their mothers most or all nights, this was particularly the case for children under 3 years old, while a relatively high proportion of children aged 15–17 years were in the care of their father.

Separated parents in the General Population of Parents Survey (GPPS) 2009 were also asked about each parent’s involvement in their focus child’s day-to-day activities pre-separation, and both separated and non-separated parents were asked about the current level of involvement of
each parent in their child’s everyday activities. Unlike the separated parents in the GPPS 2009, all those in LSSF W1 2008 had separated after the reforms and most had quite young children (58% were under 5 years old).

Table 7.1 shows the patterns of answers provided by non-separated and separated fathers and mothers about the current level of involvement of each parent in their child's everyday activities, and the patterns of answers of separated parents whose focus child lived mostly or entirely with the mother (here called “non-resident fathers” and “resident mothers”).

Table 7.1 Parents’ current level of involvement in their focus child’s day-to-day activities and level of pre-separation involvement, reports by non-separated and separated fathers and mothers, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-separated fathers</th>
<th>Non-separated mothers</th>
<th>Non-resident fathers</th>
<th>Resident mothers</th>
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<td>312</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Notes: * Excludes parents who did not live with the other parent when the focus child was born. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: GPPS 2009

Despite the differences between the two samples in the GPPS and the LSSF, a similar pattern of results emerged in the reports of separated parents whose focus child lived mostly or entirely with the mother. That is, among participants in the GPPS 2009:

7 The classification of care-time arrangements was based on whether the parent indicated that the child lived mostly or entirely with them or the other parent, or whether the child spent roughly equal time with each parent. There were too few mothers with minority care time and mothers with equal care time (fewer than 40 in each category) to enable reliable estimates for these groups. No comparisons were therefore made of the views of fathers and mothers with these arrangements.
non-resident fathers were much more likely than resident mothers to indicate high paternal involvement in the child’s activities prior to separation (66% compared to 14%); 
resident mothers were more likely than non-resident fathers to indicate high maternal involvement in the child’s activities prior to separation (90% compared to 73%); and 
the level of agreement between the parents was greater for maternal than paternal involvement.

Compared with these GPPS 2009 trends for separated parents, the views of non-separated mothers and fathers regarding the father’s current level of involvement in the child’s everyday activities were more similar. Specifically:

- 36% of non-separated mothers and 53% of non-separated fathers reported high paternal involvement; and
- 87% of non-separated mothers and 84% of non-separated fathers reported high maternal involvement.

In other words, both non-separated fathers and non-separated mothers were more likely to report high maternal than paternal involvement in their focus child’s everyday activities, and mothers were less likely than fathers to report high paternal involvement—a trend that was also found for separated parents in relation to pre-separation involvement.

In summary, the trends emerging from the reports of respondents in the LSSF W1 2008 about the other parent’s level of pre-separation involvement in their child’s day-to-day activities are clearly consistent with how many nights each parent spends with their child post-separation. Where comparisons were possible, a similar pattern of results emerged for separated parents in the GPPS 2009. Such results are consistent with the hypothesis that pre-separation involvement contributes quite strongly to post-separation care-time arrangements. However, the age of the child would have influenced both the level of maternal (and paternal) involvement in particular and the post-separation care-time arrangement. Furthermore, high paternal involvement was more likely to be reported by non-separated fathers than non-separated mothers in reference to the current situation, and by non-resident fathers than resident mothers in reference to the pre-separation situation. This gender difference was much more marked for the separated parents.

7.2 Development of care-time arrangements: Process and evaluations

While parenting arrangements cover more than parenting time (e.g., they include responsibilities for contributing to decisions affecting the child’s long-term wellbeing), allocation of care time would be a central issue for many parents. This section, which is based on the LSSF W1 2008, focuses on the relationship between care-time arrangements and the following matters relating to sorting out parenting arrangements:8

- whether arrangements had been sorted out;
- the main pathway used;
- their perceived level of flexibility; and
- parents’ views about how well or poorly the arrangements were working—for themselves, the other parent and the child (all three parties).

7.2.1 Whether parenting arrangements had been sorted out

Figures 7.13 and 7.14 show the proportion of fathers and mothers in the LSSF W1 2008 who said that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements, were in the process of doing so, or had not yet begun the process.9

Most parents in most of the care-time groups believed that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements, with parents with shared care time being the most likely of all groups to report

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8 The care-time arrangements in this chapter refer to those that were occurring at the time of the survey, regardless of whether parents believed that these arrangements had been sorted out.

9 The response options were: “everything sorted out”, “in the process of sorting things out” and “nothing is sorted out”. It is assumed that respondents who chose the latter response had not yet begun to sort out their arrangements.
this (81–86% of fathers and 78–84% of mothers). In general, the more unequal the number of nights with one parent, the lower was the likelihood that arrangements had been sorted out. Parents whose focus child never saw his or her father were the least likely to report that arrangements had been sorted out (30% of fathers and 51% of mothers).

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

Figure 7.13 Whether parenting arrangements had been sorted out, by care-time arrangements, fathers, 2008

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008

Figure 7.14 Whether parenting arrangements had been sorted out, by care-time arrangements, mothers, 2008
However, parents with 100% of care nights were more likely than their counterparts with no care nights to report that arrangements had been sorted out. Specifically, the following proportions of parents reported that arrangements had been sorted out:

- 51% of mothers whose child never saw the father, compared with 30% of fathers who indicated that they never saw the child;
- 73% of mothers whose child saw his or her father during the daytime only, compared with 62% of fathers with daytime-only care; and
- 68% of fathers who indicated that their child saw the mother during the daytime only, compared with 65% of mothers with daytime-only care.

### 7.2.2 Main family law pathway used to sort out parenting arrangements

Parents who said that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements were asked to indicate the main way in which they had achieved this. The following list of ways of “sorting out” parenting arrangements were mentioned to respondents:

- counselling, mediation or a dispute resolution service;
- a lawyer;
- the courts;
- discussions between themselves;
- no particular way, it “just happened”; and
- some other way.

Figures 7.15 and 7.16 show the patterns of answers provided by mothers and fathers respectively with each of the care-time arrangements. Parents in most groups most commonly reported that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements mainly through discussions with the other parent rather than with the help of relationship services. This was reported by most parents (58–74%) in all except the following four groups:

- fathers and mothers who said that their child never saw his or her father (48% and 34% respectively); and
- fathers who indicated that their child never saw their mother or saw their mother during the daytime only (27–42%).

It has already been noted that the more unequal the number of nights with each parent, the more likely were the parents to indicate that their arrangements had not been sorted out (see Section 7.2.1). In addition, among those who indicated that their arrangements had been sorted out, the tendency for parents to state that their arrangements had “just happened” increased with increasing inequality in care-time arrangements. For example, this was reported by:

- 42% of fathers who said that the child never saw the mother, and 43% of mothers who said that the child never saw the father;
- 28% of fathers who indicated that they never saw their child and 23% who indicated that their child saw the mother during the daytime only; and
- fewer than 10% of parents with shared care-time arrangements.

Those most likely to say that they had mainly used family law system processes (i.e., counsellors, mediators or dispute resolution services, lawyers or the courts) were mothers with a shared care-time arrangement (30–32% compared to 8–19% of other mothers) and fathers whose child saw the mother during the daytime only (30% compared to 11–24% of other fathers).

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10 Only 28 mothers with daytime-only care indicated that they had sorted out their arrangements and outlined the main pathway they had adopted to achieve this. This is too small a sample size to allow statistically reliable estimates to be produced. The data for this group (along with the mothers with shared time involving more nights with the father and those who never saw their child) were therefore omitted from the analysis in this section.

11 As noted above, the pathways used by mothers in three care-time groups were not assessed because there were fewer than 40 mothers represented: those with 35–47% of care nights, those who saw their child during the daytime only and those who never saw their child.
Those least likely to report the use of these family law system processes were:

- fathers and mothers who indicated that their child saw the father during the daytime only (11% and 8% respectively);
- the “mainstream” group of fathers and mothers, where mothers cared for the child on most nights (14–16%); and
- fathers who reported that they cared for the child on most nights (15% compared with 19% of mothers who reported this).

Figure 7.15 Main pathway for sorting out parenting arrangements, fathers, 2008

Figure 7.16 Main pathway for sorting out parenting arrangements, mothers, 2008

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Source: LSSF W1 2008
Overall, 6–11% of fathers and 4–17% of mothers reported that they had sorted out their arrangements mainly with the assistance of counselling, mediation or dispute resolution services. Mothers with shared care time were more likely than other mothers to report this (12–17% compared to 4–7%). And the same direction of trends was apparent for fathers as mothers, although differences across care-time arrangements were not as great for fathers.

Another 3–12% of fathers and 3–13% of mothers said that their arrangements were mainly sorted out with the help of a lawyer. While the highest proportion of parents reporting this pathway were mothers with equal care time (13%) and fathers with shared care involving more nights with him than with the mother (12%), these percentages were not markedly higher than those for some of the other groups. Those least likely to report that they had mainly used a lawyer were fathers and mothers whose child saw the father during the daytime only (reported by 3% of fathers and mothers taken separately). Again, these percentages were not markedly lower than some of the other percentages.

A further 2–12% of fathers and 1–7% of mothers indicated that they had sorted out their arrangements mainly through the courts. The highest proportion reporting this were fathers who indicated that their child saw his or her mother during the daytime only (12%) or not at all (9%). This was reported by 2–6% of other fathers and by 1–7% of mothers.

In summary, most parents in most groups reported that they had sorted out their arrangements mainly through discussions with the other parent, although the more unequal the care-time arrangements the more likely were parents to indicate that their arrangements had “just happened”. Up to 11% of fathers and 17% of mothers said that they had mainly used counselling, mediation or dispute resolution; up to 12–13% of fathers and mothers indicated that they had mainly used a lawyer; and up to 12% of fathers and 7% of mothers indicated that they had mainly used the courts. Taken together, those who were most likely to say that they mainly used family law system processes (i.e., counsellors, mediators or dispute resolution services, lawyers or the courts) were mothers with a shared care-time arrangement and fathers whose child saw the mother during the daytime only (reported by nearly one in three of such parents).

7.2.3 Perceived flexibility of arrangements

Having some level of flexibility of care-time arrangements can be important and it should be driven more by the needs of the children than those of the parents.

Immediately after ascertaining their care-time patterns, parents in the LSSF W1 2008 were asked to indicate the extent to which these arrangements were flexible and workable. It is likely then, that many parents focused exclusively on their care-time arrangements when answering these questions.12 Given time constraints, the meaning of “flexibility” and the extent to which any flexibility was influenced by the needs of the child or either parent were not ascertained. Figures 7.17 and 7.18 depict parents’ views about the flexibility of arrangements according to their care-time patterns and gender.

Most parents in all except one group indicated that their arrangements were somewhat or very flexible. Fathers who never saw their child formed the exception, with most of these fathers describing their arrangements as “very inflexible” (66%).

Perceptions of flexibility varied with care-time arrangements and gender of respondent. Parents with the majority of care time were more likely to believe that arrangements were flexible than parents with the minority of care time (e.g., where the father saw the child during the daytime only, 65% of fathers and 81% of mothers described the arrangements as flexible).

Among parents with shared care time, fathers were more likely than mothers to believe that arrangements were somewhat or very flexible (80–82% compared to 71–75%). Fathers with shared care time and those who cared for their child most nights were the most likely of all fathers to believe that their arrangements were somewhat or very flexible (80–82% compared to 31–76% of other fathers). Mothers who cared for their child most nights and mothers whose child saw the father during the daytime only were the most likely of all mothers to believe that arrangements were flexible (81% compared to 56–75% of other mothers).

12 Questions about whether parenting arrangements had been sorted out and the main means of achieving this were asked at a later time in the interview.
7.2.4 Perceived workability of parenting arrangements for respondent, their child and child's other parent

Parents were asked to indicate how well their parenting arrangements were working for them, their child and for the child’s other parent. The response categories were: “really well”, “fairly well”, “not so well” and “badly”.

Overall patterns of perceived workability

Figures 7.19 and 7.20 show the proportions of parents with each care-time pattern who indicated that the arrangements worked well (“really well” or “very well”) for the father and mother.
respectively, while Figure 7.21 shows the proportions who indicated that the arrangements worked well for their focus child.

For fathers

Parenting arrangements were most likely to be seen as working well for the fathers where the child experienced shared care time or spent most or all nights with the father. This was reported by 83–95% of fathers and 89–93% of mothers with such circumstances.

The greater the number of nights that the child spent with the mother compared with father, the less likely were parents to see the arrangements as working well for the father, and the greater
was the gender difference in evaluations, with fathers being less likely than mothers to see the arrangements as working well for the father. For example:

- where the father had daytime-only care, only 61% of fathers and 77% of mothers reported that the arrangements were working well for the father; and
- where the father never saw the child, only 21% of fathers and 49% of mothers provided such positive evaluations.

For mothers

Opinions about the workability of parenting arrangements for mothers also varied according to the number of nights that the mother cared for the child. For most care-time arrangements, fathers were more likely than mothers to believe that arrangements were working well for the mothers. Those most likely to believe this were fathers who either: (a) saw their child during the daytime only, (b) had the minority of care nights (1–34% of nights), (c) had equal care nights, or (d) had shared care involving more nights with the mother than father. Between 90% and 92% of fathers in these groups provided such positive appraisals.

The greater the number of nights fathers had relative to mothers, the less likely were fathers to indicate that the arrangements were working well for the mother.

With one exception (those whose child never saw the father), mothers in all care-time arrangements were less likely than fathers to believe that the arrangements were working well for the mother. For example, this was reported by 90% of fathers and 79% of mothers with equal care time, and by 72% of fathers and 61% of mothers whose child spent only a minority of nights with the mother (i.e., 1–34% of nights).

Mothers who cared for their child for most or all nights (66–100% of nights) were the most likely to believe that the arrangements worked well for them (83–86%). Only 78–79% of mothers with shared care time and only 52–61% of mothers with a minority of care nights or no care nights provided such positive appraisals (see Figure 7.20).

For the focus child

Parents with equal care time or greater than equal care time were more likely than other parents to believe that the arrangements were working well for their child (80–82% of mothers and 83–90% of fathers with equal or greater care time).
Those who were least likely to report that the arrangements were working for the child were fathers who never saw their child and mothers who saw their child during the daytime only (reported by 40% of fathers and 64% of mothers in these respective groups). In summary, parents with the majority of care time were more likely than parents with the minority of care time to believe that their parenting arrangements were working well for themselves, with the greatest difference being apparent for those whose child never saw the father. Fathers with shared care time were more likely than mothers with shared care time to believe that their parenting arrangements were working well for them, and a similar though less marked trend emerged in relation to views about how well the parenting arrangements were working for the child. Among respondents who provided an assessment of the workability of arrangements for their child’s other parent, those with the most care time were the least likely to see the arrangements as working well for the child’s other parent.

**Perceived workability for parents and child combined**

Parents may believe that parenting arrangements work well (i.e., “really well” or “fairly well”) for one, two or all three parties (mother, father or focus child), or for neither of the parents nor the child. There are eight possible sets of opinions regarding the parties for whom the arrangements could be seen as working well: “none of the parties”, “the child alone”, “the father alone”, “the mother alone”, “the father and child”, “the mother and child”, “both parents”, and “both parents and child”. These combinations of views held by parents with different care-time arrangements is examined below.

It should be noted, however, that 28% of all parents did not indicate how well the arrangements were working for one or more of the parties, with most of these parents declining to estimate how well the arrangements worked for their child’s other parent. The following two sets of opinions were provided by very few respondents: the arrangements worked well for their child alone (< 5%), and they worked well for both parents but not for the child (10%). The focus is therefore on the extent to which the other six sets of opinions varied according to the parents’ care-time arrangements.

Figure 7.22 shows the proportions of fathers with each care-time arrangement who expressed the six opinions, while Figure 7.23 provides the patterns of opinions of mothers.

The following trends stand out:

- The most common assessment was that the parenting arrangements worked well for all three parties. For example, between 70% and 80% of mothers and fathers with shared care time said that the parenting arrangements worked well for both parents and the child.

- The only parents who were less inclined to provide the assessment that the arrangements were working well for all parties were those whose child never saw one parent. Where the child never saw the father, 15% of fathers and 32% of mothers thought that their parenting arrangements worked well for everyone. In addition, 37% of fathers whose child never saw the mother thought that their arrangements worked well for everyone (there were not enough mothers in this group to provide estimates from the mothers’ perspectives).

- Parents with shared care-time arrangements were the most likely of all groups to believe that their parenting arrangements were working well for everyone. This view became less prevalent as care time was less equally shared.

- The most commonly held view of fathers who never saw their child (and who answered this question in relation to all three parties) was that their parenting arrangements were not working well for them or for their child but worked well for the mother. Although applying to a small minority, these fathers were the most likely of all groups to indicate that the arrangements were not working well for any of the three parties.

Such trends are not surprising given that most parents (and especially those with a shared care-time arrangement) reported that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements and most parents in most groups indicated that they had done so mainly through discussions with the other parent. Only 2–6% of parents with shared care-time arrangements indicated that they had mainly arrived at their arrangements via the courts. Where one parent never saw their child and

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13 Respondents whose child never saw one parent were the most likely to decline answering this question for at least one of the parties (46% where the child never saw the father and 50% where the child never saw the mother). In addition, 21–51% of parents in the other groups declined answering this question for at least one party.
where the mother had daytime-only contact, relatively low proportions of parents stated that they had achieved their arrangements mainly through inter-parental discussions and relatively low proportions said that their arrangements worked well for both parents and child.

**Figure 7.22** Fathers’ views on whether the parenting arrangements were working well for them, the mother and the child, 2008

**Figure 7.23** Mothers’ views on whether the parenting arrangements were working well for them, the father and the child, 2008

**Workability of parenting arrangements according to age of the child**

Given concerns about the suitability of care-time arrangements for children under 3 years old, further analysis was undertaken regarding parents’ assessments according to the age of their
focus child. These assessments concerned the workability of arrangements for the child, regardless of whether assessments were provided for the respondent or other parent.14

Figure 7.24 shows the proportion of parents (fathers and mothers combined) in each care-time group who indicated that their parenting arrangements were working well for their child, according to the age of the child.15 More than half the parents in each group believed that their parenting arrangements were working well for their child.

Arrangements were considered to work well for the child by over 90% of parents whose child was under 3 years or 12–14 years old and was experiencing shared care time involving more nights with the mother (reported by 92–93%). In addition, such a favourable assessment was reported by 90% of parents whose child was experiencing equal care time and was 15–17 years old.16 Nevertheless, across all age groups of children, over 80% of parents whose child experienced equal care time believed that the arrangement worked well for their child.

Parents who were least likely to report that arrangements were working well for their child were those with a child aged 3–4 years or 5–11 years who never saw his or her father (54–57% of these parents).

7.2.5 Frequency of communication between parents about the child

Parental involvement implies more than just spending time with the child. “Involved parenting” would typically require considerable communication with the child’s other parent about the child’s everyday needs, interests and activities, as well as matters relating to the child’s developmental progress and wellbeing.17 Frequent “change-overs” in care time would typically entail

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14 The following proportion of parents were not able to provide an assessment of how well the parenting arrangement worked for the child: 11–15% of respondents whose child never saw one parent and 1–6% of parents with other care-time arrangements.

15 Excluded from Figure 7.24 are care-time arrangements when estimated by the age of the focus child for which there were fewer than 40 respondents.

16 Owing to the small number of cases, percentages were not derived regarding the assessments of the workability of arrangements by parents with a 15–17-year-old focus child who experienced shared care time involving more nights with one parent than with the other.

17 “Involved parenting” can entail constructive and/or destructive dynamics between the parents and between parents and their children. Parents’ perceptions of the quality of the inter-parental relationship, family violence
relatively frequent inter-parental communication, although some parents with such care-time arrangements may still manage to avoid talking to each other. And while long distances may prevent some parents from seeing their child very often, if at all, such distances do not necessarily prevent these parents from communicating with their child or with their child’s other parent.

What proportion of parents who never see their child in fact have no contact with the child’s other parent at all? What proportion of parents who spend a great deal of time caring for their child in fact rarely or never communicate with their child’s other parent? Such issues, which are addressed in this section, shed further light on the meaning of care-time arrangements.

Parents in the LSSF W1 2008 were asked to indicate how often they had communicated with the other parent about their focus child since the time of separation. Around two-thirds of fathers and mothers said that they communicated with the other parent about their child once a week or more frequently (68% and 64% respectively), with 83–86% indicating that they were in touch with the other parent about the child at least once a month. Only 7–10% said that they communicated with the other parent about the child less than once a month and another 7% said they did not have any contact at all. While 7% with no contact at all seems a small minority, it would represent the experiences of a large absolute number of Australian families.

Figures 7.25 and 7.26 depict the frequency of inter-parental discussions as reported by those with each of the care-time arrangements.

Parents who never saw their child were the least likely to be in frequent contact with the child’s other parent: most appeared to be in touch with the other parent less than once a month, if at all. Nevertheless, 66–76% of fathers and mothers whose child never saw one parent reported that some inter-parental communication about the child was taking place, with 36–43% reporting at least monthly communication on this issue.

Daytime-only care seems to reflect quite different experiences, depending on whether the parent with daytime-only care was the mother or father. Where the child had daytime-only care with the father, 70–71% of fathers and mothers indicated weekly or more frequent inter-parental communication. In contrast, where the child had daytime-only care with the mother, such frequent communication was reported by only 57% of mothers and an even smaller proportion of fathers (44%).

Similarly, the frequency of communication tended to be greater where the father rather than mother cared for their child for a minority of nights (i.e., 1–34% of nights). Where the child was with the father for a minority of nights, weekly or more frequent communication was reported by 70–72% of fathers and mothers. But where the child was with the mother for a minority of nights, only 59–61% reported such frequent communication.

Lack of inter-parental communication may be quite difficult for children who experience substantial time with each parent, although they may be better off under these circumstances if the relationship between their parents is acrimonious. Only 6–10% of fathers and mothers with shared care time indicated that they communicated with their child’s other parent less than once a month or never, while 79–82% of these fathers and 74% of these mothers reported that they were in touch at least once a week or more frequently.

Frequent communication may have favourable or unfavourable effects on the child depending on the tone of the communication or general atmosphere in which it takes place. For example, whether the exchange is characterised by a great deal of acrimony and distrust, or by mutual support and trust. The quality of the inter-parental relationship is an issue that is addressed in Section 7.3, while links between inter-parental relationship quality and children’s wellbeing is explored in Chapter 11.

### 7.3 Quality of inter-parental relationships

This section focuses on some family environment issues that are critical to children’s wellbeing, namely, the quality of the inter-parental relationship, parents’ concerns about their own or their child’s safety, reports of family violence before or during the separation, and reports of issues in the relationship before separation, such as mental health problems or issues relating to alcohol or drugs or (other) addictions. Links between each of these matters and care-time arrangements will be discussed in turn. Of central importance here is the extent to which the

and issues relating to alcohol and other drugs are highly relevant here and are dealt with in the next section.
care-time arrangements protect children from family dynamics that can pose a risk to their immediate and longer term wellbeing.

7.3.1 Views about the quality of the inter-parental relationship

There is ample evidence that children who are exposed to high levels of acrimonious conflict are at a greater risk of experiencing immediate and longer term adjustment problems compared...
with other children, although there is also evidence that other factors that may contribute to inter-parental conflict, such as a parent’s mental health problems and/or substance misuse, may also independently pose risks to children’s adjustment (e.g., see review by Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; see also Amato & Booth, 2001; Sobolewski & Amato, 2007). This section examines the general quality of the inter-parental relationship, as reported by parents with different broad patterns of care, while subsequent sections focus on other aspects of family dynamics, namely family violence and safety issues, mental health problems, and issues relating to use of alcohol or other drugs or other addictions.

Parents were asked to indicate whether their relationship with their child’s other parent was “friendly”, “cooperative”, “distant” or “fearful”, or involved “lots of conflict”. It is important to note that while relationships that are friendly would also seem likely to be cooperative, cooperative relationships may well occur in the absence of friendliness. Respondents who had a friendly (and therefore cooperative) relationship may have made a somewhat arbitrary choice between these terms when answering the question regarding relationship quality. And while high-conflict relationships would not necessarily involve fear, a fearful relationship seems likely to suggest a relationship involving a great deal of (overt or covert) conflict. In some cases, fear may drive a person to attempt to avoid any triggers of conflict.

The overall pattern of trends was similar for fathers and mothers. More than half the parents in most care-time arrangement groups described their relationship with the other parent as being either friendly or cooperative. Those who were least likely to report this were respondents whose child never saw one of his or her parents (24–31%), followed by parents whose child saw his or her mother during the daytime only (reported by 48% of mothers and 54% of fathers with this care-time arrangement) (Figures 7.27 and 7.28).

While most parents whose child spent the majority of nights with the father (i.e., 66–99% of nights) described the inter-parental relationship as either friendly or cooperative, it is worth noting that the inter-parental relationship was even more likely to be evaluated in such favourable terms when the child was in the care of the mother for most nights (the most common situation) than when the child was in the care of father for most nights. Such positive appraisals were also more likely to be reported by parents whose child was in the care of the father during the daytime only than by those whose child was in the care of the mother during the daytime only (67–71% compared to 48–54%).

In other words, except in those circumstances where the child never saw one parent, relationships were considerably more likely to be friendly or cooperative where the child spent most or all nights with the mother rather than with the father. Reasons behind this link are likely to be complex. For example, the circumstances that led to the unusual situation where the child is mostly with the father may have created a difficult-to-resolve wedge between parents. This wedge may have been strengthened by post-separation care-time arrangements in which the father has become the primary caregiver—a role that is traditionally seen as the essence of motherhood, despite the growing recognition of the importance of “hands-on” fathering (see Appendix A).

Highly conflictual or fearful relationships were most likely to be reported by parents whose child never saw his or her father (38–43%) or mother (31%, reported by fathers only), and by parents whose child saw the mother during the daytime only (25%). Such negative evaluations were provided by only 12–16% of all other fathers (including those who cared for their child during the daytime only) and by 15–16% of mothers who cared for their child most nights (i.e., 66–99% of nights) or whose child saw the father during the daytime only. However, 21–24% of mothers with shared care-time arrangements or who cared for their child for only a minority of nights (i.e., 1–34% of nights) maintained that their relationship with the child’s father was either highly conflictual or fearful.

Taken together, these results suggest the following:

- The parents of children who never saw one parent seemed the most likely to have a conflictual or fearful inter-parental relationship, followed by parents whose child saw his or her mother during the daytime only.
- While it is difficult to characterise the relationship between parents with shared care-time arrangements given the discrepancy between the views of fathers and mothers, most children with these arrangements appeared to be exposed to a friendly or cooperative inter-parental relationship. However, a substantial minority may experience frequent episodes of high
inter-parental conflict or an atmosphere generating fear in one parent. In fact, mothers with a shared care-time arrangement were less likely to report friendly or cooperative relationships than mothers who cared for their child most nights and those whose child saw the father during the daytime only (especially the latter group).

![Figure 7.27 Quality of inter-parental relationship, by care-time arrangement, fathers, 2008](image)

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.
Source: LSSF W1 2008

![Figure 7.28 Quality of inter-parental relationship, by care-time arrangement, mothers, 2008](image)

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.
Source: LSSF W1 2008

18 The apportioning of time between parents with shared care arrangements varies considerably. Some children spend short periods in the care of one parent and therefore experience frequent “change-overs” and possibly a great deal of face-to-face, sometimes conflicted, contact between parents. Others may spend relatively long periods in the care of one parent and therefore experience relatively few “change-overs” and possibly what Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) refer to as “parallel” parenting.
7.3.2 Family violence and safety concerns

This section focuses on the reports of parents in the LSSF W1 2008 about whether they had been physically or emotionally abused by the child’s other parent before or during separation and whether they currently held concerns about their own personal safety or the safety of their child. Links between these matters and care-time arrangements are examined.

Family violence

Parents were asked whether they had experienced emotional abuse “at any time before or during the separation”, and whether they had ever been physically hurt by the other parent prior to separation.

For simplicity, the concept of “emotional abuse” is here restricted to threats, insults, the different forms of preventions, and damaging property, even though all forms of violence, including physical violence, can also be treated as “emotional abuse” in the sense that any episode of physical violence may be seen as a warning that it could reoccur. Victims may “walk on eggshells” in fear that events may trigger another episode of violence. Virtually all parents who reported physical abuse also reported at least one form of emotional abuse.

Figures 7.29 and 7.30 show the proportion of fathers and mothers (respectively) who reported the experience of physical hurt, emotional abuse alone, or no violence. Overall, high rates of violence were reported by parents. A higher proportion of parents reported having experienced emotional abuse alone than having experienced physical hurt. Importantly, there were two exceptions: mothers whose child never saw the father were more likely to report the experience of physical violence than emotional abuse alone (40% compared to 35%) and much the same proportions of mothers with a minority of care nights (1–34% of nights) reported each of these types of abuse (around 36%).

Fathers were less likely than mothers to report having experienced some form of family violence. This is true for all care-time arrangements. In addition, with the exception of parents whose child saw the mother during the daytime only, fathers were less likely than mothers with the same care-time arrangement to report having been physically hurt by the other parent.

Nevertheless, at least 24% of both mothers and fathers whose child spent most or all nights with the father (i.e., 66–100% of nights) indicated that they had been physically hurt. This was mentioned by 24% of fathers and 37% of mothers whose child spent most nights with the father, by 33% of fathers and 28% of mothers whose child saw the mother during the daytime only, and by 25% of fathers whose child never saw the mother. In addition, where the child never saw the father, 27% of fathers and 40% of mothers indicated that they had been physically hurt.

As noted above, among those whose child saw the mother during the daytime only, 33% of fathers and 28% of mothers said that they had been physically hurt by the child’s other parent. On the other hand, where the child’s time with the father was restricted to the daytime only, 12% of fathers and 21% of mothers reported having been physically hurt.

The above results indicate that mothers whose child never saw the father were the most likely of all groups to report having been physically hurt by the child’s father (40%), followed closely by mothers with only a minority of care nights (37%).

The parents who were the most likely to indicate that they had not experienced any emotional or physical abuse were those whose child saw their father during the daytime only (reported by 56% of fathers and 42% of mothers) and those whose child stayed with their father for a minority of nights (the mainstream group; reported by 50% of fathers and 36% of mothers). This means that parents with shared care time were more likely to report having been a victim of

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19 These issues covered the other parent: (a) preventing the respondent from the following: contacting family or friends, using the telephone or car, or having knowledge of, or access to, family money; (b) insulting the respondent, with the intent to shame, belittle or humiliate; (c) threatening to do the following: harm the child/children, other family/friends, the respondent, pets, or themselves; and (d) damaging or destroying property. See Chapter 2 for more detailed discussion of these issues.

20 Among parents whose child saw the mother during the daytime only, 33% of fathers and 28% of mothers said that they had been physically hurt, while 41% of fathers and 51% of mothers indicated that they had experienced emotional abuse alone.

21 Given that fewer than 40 mothers indicated that they never saw their focus child, reports of these mothers were not assessed.
family violence than parents whose child spent a minority of nights with the father or saw him during the daytime only.

For mothers, this trend largely resulted from the higher proportion of mothers reporting the experience of emotional abuse alone who had shared care time than one of the other two arrangements (46% compared to 38–40%). Similar proportions of mothers in each of these groups said that they had been physically hurt (24–25% of mothers with a shared-care arrangement and 21–24% of mothers whose child spent a minority of nights with the father or saw the father during the daytime only.

On the other hand, fathers with a shared care-time arrangement were slightly more likely than fathers in the other two groups to report the experience of emotional abuse alone (38–41% compared to 32–35%) and to report having been physically hurt (16–23% compared to 12–15%).

![Figure 7.29](image-url)  
**Figure 7.29** Reports of violence, by care-time arrangement, fathers, 2008

![Figure 7.30](image-url)  
**Figure 7.30** Reports of violence, by care-time arrangement, mothers, 2008
Safety issues

Parents were also asked whether they had any concerns about their own or their focus child’s safety as a result of ongoing contact with the child’s other parent. Around one in five parents expressed such concerns, with mothers being more likely than fathers to indicate these concerns (21% compared to 17%).

The proportion of fathers and mothers who reported such concerns are depicted in Figure 7.31. When interpreting these results, it is important to bear in mind that the safety concerns may relate to the respondents and/or their child, and may be derive from worries about the potential harm inflicted by someone other than the other parent, such as a new partner or a relative. It is also important to point out that safety concerns may derive from the view that the other parent allows the children to participate in activities that may result in their getting hurt. Nevertheless, as shown in Chapter 2, the vast majority of parents with safety concerns indicated that they had experienced family violence.

![Figure 7.31 Safety concerns associated with ongoing contact, by care-time arrangements, fathers and mothers, 2008](source)

Concerns about safety were most commonly expressed where the child never saw one of the parents (mentioned by 36–38% of such parents). In addition, safety concerns were expressed by around one-quarter of parents (mothers and fathers alike) in those unusual circumstances where the child spent only a minority of nights with their mother, or saw the mother during the daytime only.

Safety concerns were mentioned by a higher proportion of mothers than fathers, where the father saw the child during the daytime only (20% of mothers compared to 12% of fathers) or cared for the child for a minority of nights (19% of mothers compared to 13% of fathers).

Parents with greater sharing of care time were by no means immune from safety concerns: 16–20% expressed such concerns. These percentages are similar to that derived for mothers with the majority of care time (19%).

Violence was reported far more frequently than safety concerns. This may in part be because the question about violence related to the period before or during separation, whereas the question about safety concerns focused on the current post-separation situation. It is also the case that not all violence will lead to a parent having safety concerns. This is particularly the case given that violence includes emotional abuse.

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22 Where children never saw their father, 7% of fathers and 24% of mothers indicated that the question was not applicable. These respondents were treated as having no current safety concerns.
7.3.3 Mental health problems and alcohol or other drug issues

The final set of results in this chapter relates to reports of any pre-separation mental health problems or issues relating to the use of alcohol/drugs or other addictions. The question: “Before finally separating, were there ever issues with …?” was asked of each of the following: (a) alcohol or drug use, (b) mental health problems, and (c) another addiction. Respondents who said another addiction was apparent were asked to specify the nature of this addiction. Gambling was the most commonly mentioned of these. The question was asked in this way to minimise the chances of under-reporting of these issues, which tends to occur when a respondent is asked about themselves.

Mental health and drug issues were commonly reported by parents (Figure 7.32). The following trends emerged:

- With the exception of parents whose mothers saw the child during the daytime only, mothers were more likely than fathers to report such issues.
- Those most likely to report such issues were mothers whose child never saw the father (63%), fathers whose child never saw the mother (56%) and fathers whose child saw the mother during the daytime only (57%).
- In other words, the fathers who were most inclined to report such issues were those who cared for their child for 100% of nights.
- Those least likely to report such matters were fathers who saw their child during the daytime only and fathers who cared for their child for a minority of nights (i.e., 1–34% of nights) (32% in each case). In other words, at least one in three parents in each care-time arrangement mentioned the presence of these issues prior to separation.
- Therefore, where the child saw one parent during the daytime, the picture appeared to be considerably more favourable if this restricted time was with the father rather than with the mother.
- The same proportion of fathers who never saw their child and who had equal care time reported the presence of such issues (39%).

![Figure 7.32 Prevalence of mental health and/or issues relating to alcohol/drugs or other addictions before separation, by care-time arrangements, fathers and mothers, 2008](image)

Source: LSSF W1 2008

23 Given the close link between substance misuse and mental health problems (see Christie, Burke, Reiger, Rae, Boyd & Locke, 1988; Teeson, Hall, Lytnskey, & Degenhardt, 2000), the percentages of parents who indicated at least one of these problems were derived.
Chapter 7

7.4 Profiles of families with different care-time arrangements

So far, the discussion in the chapter has focused on various factors relating to socio-demographic characteristics, the sorting out of parenting arrangements and critical family issues that pose risks to children’s immediate and longer term wellbeing. The extent to which each of these factors varied according to care-time arrangements was examined sequentially.

These various sets of analyses will now be used to provide a profile of families in which the child experienced the following care-time arrangements: the sharing of time between the parents, never seeing the father, being with the father during the daytime only, and spending most nights or all nights with the father. The mainstream group (children in the care of their mother most nights) is not specifically described but is used as one of the bases for comparison.

This approach has two key advantages: (a) it helps us understand why parents adopt different arrangements; and (b) it sheds light on the different circumstances to which children with different care-time arrangements are exposed, including some that may protect their wellbeing and others that may jeopardise it.

7.4.1 Where the child experienced shared care time

Consistent with the Child Support Agency’s classification, 35–65% of nights with each parent was considered to involve shared care-time arrangements in this report. Chapter 6 showed that this type of arrangement has become increasingly prevalent and was experienced by 16% of children in the LSSF W1 2008. Given that 35–65% of nights includes arrangements that can deviate considerably from equal or near equal care time, families with these arrangements were divided according to whether the child spent 48–52% of nights with each parent (here called "equal care time" or simply "equal time") or more nights (53–65%) with one parent. Chapter 6 showed that most children with shared care-time arrangements experienced either equal time with each parent or spent more nights with the mother than father (i.e., 53–65% of nights with the mother and 35–47% of nights with the father).

Characteristics

On average, the parents with shared care time were older than those whose child spent most or all nights with the mother, but a little younger than those whose child spent most or all nights with the father. They were the most likely of all groups to have primary school age children, although at least one in five had children aged 3–4 years old. These parents also tended to have higher socio-economic status as measured by their educational attainment and incomes, with mothers with equal care time being among the most likely of all maternal groups to have full-time work (although this applied to a minority only).24 Parents with equal care time were also considerably more likely than all other groups to have been married to the child’s other parent and, along with others with less equal but shared care-time arrangements, they were the most likely of all groups to live within 10 km of the other parent (or within a 30-minute drive).

Across all care-time arrangements, the reports of mothers and fathers about their child’s other parent’s level of involvement in the child’s everyday activities prior to separation suggest that parents with shared care-time arrangements were more involved than those with a minority of care nights or no care nights, but less involved than those with most or all care nights. This pattern of results for parents with shared care, compared with parents with a minority of care nights, is consistent with the intent of the reforms, which under section 60B(1) aimed to ensure “that children have the benefit of both of their parents having a meaningful involvement in their lives” and which under section 60CC(2) supported “the benefit to the child of having a meaningful relationship with both of the child’s parents”.

Parenting arrangements

Parents with shared care-time arrangements (whether equal or involving more nights with the mother or father) were the most likely to state that their arrangements had been sorted out, and although applying to a minority, these parents were among the most likely of all groups to have used some form of formal assistance in sorting out their parenting arrangements. The fathers with shared care time, whether equal

24 The other group with a relatively high rate of full-time work was mothers with a minority of care nights.
or unequal, were more likely than the mothers to see their parenting arrangements as flexible. (For other arrangements, the parent with the majority of care was more likely than the parent with the minority of care to believe that arrangements were flexible.)

Like most parents with other care-time arrangements, parents with shared care-time arrangements tended to provide favourable assessments about how well their arrangements were working for their child—a trend that was apparent for children in each of the five age groups examined. Furthermore, of those with shared care-time arrangements who provided assessments for both parents and their child, most indicated that the arrangements were working well for all three parties. Once again, this trend was apparent across all age groups of children.

Although shared care-time arrangements were unusual for children under 3 years old and typically involved more nights with the mother than father (i.e., 53–65% of nights with the mother), most parents with a child under 3 years of age believed that the arrangements were working well for their child, and most of those who provided the necessary assessments tended to believe that they worked well for all concerned.

**Family dynamics**

Fathers and mothers with shared care-time arrangements were the most likely of all groups to indicate weekly or more frequent communication with their child’s other parent about issues relating to their child. Most described the relationship as either friendly or cooperative, and parents with shared care time were among those most likely to report such positive relationships.

Mothers with a shared care-time arrangement were less likely to report friendly or cooperative relationships than mothers who cared for their child most nights and those whose child saw their father during the daytime only (especially the latter group).

Parents with shared care time were among the least likely to report: (a) the existence of mental health problems or issues relating to alcohol or drugs or (other) addictions in the family prior to separation, and (b) concerns about their own or their child’s safety linked with ongoing contact with the other parent. However, these problems were reported by some parents with shared care time. Indeed, nearly half the mothers and 36–47% of fathers with shared care time reported mental health problems or issues relationship to substance misuse or (other) addictions and 16–20% of fathers or mothers expressed safety concerns. Furthermore, nearly one-quarter of mothers and 16–23% of fathers indicated that they had been physically hurt prior to separation, and fathers and mothers with a shared care-time arrangement were more likely to indicate that they had experienced some form of family violence prior to separation than parents whose child saw the father during the daytime only.

**7.4.2 Where the child never saw the father**

Around 8% of fathers and 13% of mothers indicated that their child never saw the father.

**Socio-demographic characteristics**

Along with those whose child saw their father during the daytime only, parents whose child never saw the father were the youngest of all groups and the least likely to have been married to the child’s other parent. Their focus child in most cases was under 3 years old. They were also among those least likely to have post-school qualifications and the mothers were considerably less likely than other mothers to be in paid work, with the exception of those whose child saw the father during the daytime only. Together with those whose child never saw the mother, these parents were the least likely to live within 20 km of each other and a substantial minority lived 500 km or more than six hours drive from the child’s other parent. The fathers were the most likely of all fathers to be living with a partner, and the vast majority of fathers did not have any children in their household. The median personal income of the fathers was among the lowest, while that for mothers fell between the levels derived for other female groups.

According to the reports of mothers and fathers about how involved the other parent was in the child’s everyday activities prior to separation, most mothers whose child never saw the father had been very involved, but few fathers who never saw their child had been very involved. Indeed, these fathers were the least likely of all fathers to be seen by their child’s mother as playing much of a role in their child’s everyday activities.
Parenting arrangements

Whereas most parents believed that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements, fewer than one-third of fathers in this group and only half the mothers (whose child never saw their father) held this view. Of parents who had sorted out their arrangements, these fathers and mothers were considerably more likely than most groups to report that the arrangements “just happened”. Mothers were more likely to report that their arrangement “just happened” than to indicate that they had occurred mainly through discussions with the child’s father.25 Perhaps not surprisingly, most fathers believed that these arrangements were inflexible. Mothers whose child never saw his or her father were more likely than other mothers to believe that the arrangements were “very inflexible”, although they were considerably less likely to believe this than the fathers who never saw their child.

Respondents with these arrangements tended to describe their inter-parental relationship negatively and that they appeared to be in a “winner versus loser” situation regarding the workability of the parenting arrangements for themselves and their former partner. Unlike all other groups of fathers, most who never saw their child argued that the current arrangements worked “badly” for them. Fathers in this group who indicated their views on how well the arrangements worked for all three parties most commonly said that the arrangements worked well for the mother alone. Few mothers in this group agreed with this assessment, and these mothers tended to report that the arrangements worked well for them and their child, or for all three parties.26

Family dynamics

Around one in five fathers and one in four mothers in this group said that they never communicated with the other parent on matters relating to their child. These parents were the most likely of all groups to indicate this.

Both the mothers and fathers in this group were inclined to report that their relationship with their child’s father was “distant”, “conflictual” or “fearful”, rather than “friendly” or “cooperative”. In addition, they were among those who were most likely to report that their partner had physically hurt them prior to separation and to report safety issues linked with any ongoing contact with the other parent.27 The mothers in this group were the most likely of all parents to report that, before separation, there were mental health problems and/or alcohol or other drug use issues.28 However, the fathers were less likely to report this than these mothers and some of the other groups of fathers.

7.4.3 Where the child saw their father during the daytime only

Around 15% of fathers and 24% of mothers claimed that the child saw their father during the daytime only.

Socio-demographic characteristics

These parents were similar to those whose child never saw the father in the following ways—they tended to: (a) be relatively young and to have children under 3 years old, (b) have either never lived with their child’s other parent or have separated before the child was born, and (c) have no children in their household. They appeared to be of a slightly higher socio-economic status than those whose child never saw the father, as measured by their educational attainment and median personal income, but they were not as well off as some of the other groups. However, they were considerably more likely than those whose child never saw the father to live within 10 km of the other parent or within a 15-minute drive, and most lived within 20 km or up to a 30-minute drive.

25 Inter-parental discussions represented the most commonly mentioned main pathway adopted by all other groups.
26 It should be noted that 43% of fathers and 47% of mothers whose child never saw the father did not provide an assessment regarding how well the arrangements were working for all three parties.
27 The safety issues referred to those linked with ongoing contact. Where the child never saw their father, 7% of fathers and 24% of mothers indicated that the question was not applicable. These respondents were treated as having no current safety concerns.
28 The precise question was: “Before finally separating, were there ever issues with alcohol or drug use, mental health problems or another addiction?”
Regarding parental involvement in the child's everyday activities prior to separation, mothers' reports suggested that fathers with daytime-only care were just as likely to be very involved in their child's life prior to separation as fathers who cared for their child for a minority of nights. However, these fathers were less likely to be very involved than fathers with greater care time. The fathers' reports suggest that most mothers whose child saw their father during the daytime only were very involved prior to separation.

Parenting arrangements

While most parents in this group believed that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements, the mothers were more likely than the fathers to report this. Although most fathers in this group considered that their current parenting arrangements were flexible and workable for them and their child, the proportions of fathers who considered the arrangements to be inflexible and not working well for them and their child were the second highest of all groups. The mothers were also the second most likely to report that the arrangements were not working well for the child's father, although again, this view was held by a minority of mothers in this situation. Both fathers and mothers agreed that the arrangements worked well for the mother. Of those who provided the necessary assessments, both the fathers and mothers tended to believe that the arrangements worked well for all three parties. This is a different picture than that provided by parents whose child never saw his or her father. Nevertheless, respondents (fathers and mothers alike) whose child saw the father during the daytime only were less likely than respondents whose child stayed overnight with each parent to provide such favourable assessments.

Family relationship dynamics

Unlike parents whose child never saw his or her father, both fathers and mothers in this group believed that their relationship with their child's other parent was friendly or cooperative and these parents were among the least likely of all groups to consider the relationship to be distant, conflictual or fearful. On the whole, parents in this group were no more likely than most of the others of the same gender to report safety issues, violence inflicted by the child's other parent, or pre-separation mental health problems or issues relating to alcohol or other drugs.

7.4.4 Where the child spent most or all nights with their father

Chapter 6 showed that only 5% of children spent most or all nights with their father (i.e., 66–100% of nights). In the present chapter, parents with these arrangements were divided into three groups, covering cases where the child: (a) spent a minority of nights with their mother (i.e., 1–34% of nights), (b) saw her during the daytime only, or (c) never saw her. Given that there were only 29 mothers who never saw their child, no attempt was made to describe any trends for these mothers. Rather, analysis focusing on circumstances in which the mother never saw the child was based on the reports of the relevant fathers.

Socio-demographic characteristics

The parents in these three groups tended to be among the oldest, and although the focus child in most of these families was under 12 years old, these families were the most likely of all care-time groups to have focus children aged 15–17 years old. However, one in three focus children in families whose child saw the mother during the daytime only was under 3 years old. Among those families in which the child saw the mother during the daytime only, a relatively high proportion of mothers and fathers were born overseas, and although applying to a small minority, a relatively high proportion of the mothers who saw their child during the daytime only were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

The two groups of fathers who cared for their child for 100% of nights were the most likely of all fathers to have left school before completing Year 12 without obtaining any post-school qualifications. Fathers in these two groups were the most likely of fathers to have no paid work, followed by fathers with most care nights. The mothers with a minority of care nights, on the other hand, were among the most likely of all female groups to have full-time paid work. These mothers were also the most likely of all female groups to have been living with a partner at the time of the survey. A substantial minority of mothers with 1–34% of nights or who saw their child during the daytime only indicated that they were living with at least one full sibling of their focus child. That is, the focus child lived mostly or entirely with the father, while at least one of the child's siblings lived with the mother.

The mothers with daytime-only care were more inclined than mothers with a minority of care nights to report that they lived within 10 km or a 15-minute drive of the child's father, although distance estimates
of fathers who reported such arrangements did not vary. On the other hand, over half the fathers whose child never saw their mother estimated that the two homes were 50 km or more apart or one or more hours’ drive away from each other.

The parents in these three groups (where mothers had a minority of nights, had daytime-only care or who never saw their child) tended to have low personal incomes compared with most other groups.

Respondents’ reports about the other parent’s level of involvement in their child’s everyday life suggest that, where the child spent most or all nights with his or her father, the fathers were more likely to have been very involved in their child’s everyday activities prior to separation than other fathers and the mothers were considerably less likely to be very involved compared with most other mothers.

Parenting arrangements

Unlike fathers who never saw their child, most fathers whose child never saw their mother believed that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements, although they were less likely than several others groups of fathers to believe this. The same applied to parents whose child saw his or her mother during the daytime only.

Among those who had sorted out their arrangements, the two groups of fathers with 100% of care nights were more inclined than most male groups to indicate that they had used formal help (family relationship services, lawyers or the courts) to assist with this endeavour. In fact, across all groups of fathers, the proportion of fathers who reported that they mainly used a court to sort out their arrangements was highest among fathers whose child saw the mother during the daytime only. Nevertheless, only a small minority of parents indicated that they had mainly sorted out their arrangements via use of a court.

Most parents with these three arrangements believed that their parenting arrangements were flexible, although the proportions stating this were higher where the child spent some nights, rather than no nights, with the mother. The fathers in these three groups were more likely than the mothers to indicate that the arrangements were working well for them and their child. Nevertheless, among parents who provided assessments about how well the arrangements were working for all three parties, both mothers and fathers whose child spent a minority of nights with the mother or who saw the mother during the daytime only, most commonly reported that the arrangements worked well for all three parties.

Family relationships

Where the child never stayed overnight with his or her mother, frequency of communication between the parents about the child tended to be low relative to most other groups. In addition, relationships with the other parent were relatively poor, especially in the groups where the child never stayed overnight with the mother. Rates of safety concerns (for the respondent or child) relating to ongoing contact were relatively high, especially among fathers whose child never saw the mother.29 The three groups were also among the most likely to indicate that their child’s other parent had physically hurt them prior to separation and that mental health problems or issues relating to alcohol or other drugs were apparent prior to separation.

29 Trends for mothers who never saw their child were not derived owing to the small number of mothers represented in this group.

7.5 Summary

This chapter compared parents with different care-time arrangements on several dimensions relating to socio-demographic circumstances and pre-separation circumstances, the sorting out of arrangements, and family dynamics. The chapter provides insight into some of the factors that facilitate or impede more equitable sharing of care time, while at the same time highlighting cases where: (a) having little, if any, time with a parent may well be in a child’s best interests; and (b) having a shared care-time arrangement may not be in children’s best interests.

Families with different care-time arrangements varied considerably across a range of circumstances. For example, there was a close link between post-separation care-time arrangements and respondents’ reports about the other parent’s level of involvement in the child’s everyday activities prior to separation. From this perspective, post-separation care time increased with increases in pre-separation involvement.
Families in which the father did not have the focus child stay overnight can be divided into those who had daytime-only care and those who never saw the child. The mothers and fathers with these arrangements tended to be relatively young and were the least likely of all groups to have been living with the child’s other parent at the time the child was born. While there were clear socio-demographic similarities between these two groups, distance between the two homes, the sorting out of parenting arrangements and family dynamics were quite different.

Firstly, fathers who never saw their child were less likely than those with daytime-only care to live within 20 km or a 30-minute drive from the child’s mother (with around one-third of the former group living at least 500 km or a 6-hour drive from her). These fathers were also more likely than those with daytime-only care to have re-partnered.

Secondly, parents whose child never saw his or her father were less likely than those whose child experienced daytime-only care with the father to indicate that their parenting arrangements had been sorted out, and where arrangements had been sorted out, those whose child never saw the father were less likely to indicate that this had been achieved mainly through discussions with the other parent. In particular, they were more likely to report that the arrangements had “just happened”.

Thirdly, regarding family dynamics, parents whose child never saw the father reported less frequent communication with the other parent, were more likely to describe the inter-parental relationship as highly conflictual or fearful, and were less likely to view it as friendly or cooperative. Consistent with this, both the fathers and mothers in these families were more likely than those in families in which the child saw the father during the daytime only to report that they had been physically hurt by the other parent. The former group of fathers were also more likely than the fathers with daytime-only care time to indicate that they had experienced emotional abuse alone.

Concerns about their personal safety or the safety of their child relating to contact issues were more likely to be expressed by mothers and fathers whose child never saw the father, than by those whose child saw the father during the daytime only. The former group of parents (especially the mothers) were also more likely than the latter group of parents to indicate that there had been mental health problems, substance misuse issues or (other) addictions before separation.

Overall, families in which the father had daytime-only care seemed similar in terms of these family functioning issues to those in which the father cared for the child for a minority of nights (1–34% of nights), while those in which the child never saw the father tended have more problematic family functioning issues than most other groups.

Parents with shared care-time arrangements were as likely or more likely than parents with other care-time arrangements to believe that their parenting arrangements were working well for the child, mother and father (reported by 70–80% of parents with a shared care-time arrangement who provided assessments for all three parties). While most parents with shared care-time arrangements reported friendly or cooperative relationships, in some areas, they were more inclined to report problematic family dynamics than parents in families in which the father had fewer overnight stays or daytime-only care (especially the latter group). For example, compared with families in which the father had daytime-only care, both mothers and fathers with shared care-time arrangements were more likely to report having experienced some form of family violence prior to separation.

For the most part, pre-separation experiences of violence and of issues relating to mental health, substance misuse or other addictions, along with current safety concerns associated with ongoing contact with the other parent, were more commonly reported by parents whose child never saw the father or had limited or no time with the mother than by other groups of parents. Although this is consistent with the aim of the family law system to protect children’s wellbeing, the other side of the coin is that there are some children in shared care-time arrangements who have a family history entailing violence and a parent concerned about the child’s safety, and who are exposed to dysfunctional inter-parental relationships.