Parent–child contact schedules
after divorce

There seems to be a widespread belief in Australia that where parents separate, children usually see their father every-other-weekend. But is this the case? In this article, Bruce Smyth provides a "big picture" snapshot of contact schedules in Australia, and suggests the use of more creative, child-sensitive arrangements to help maximise the fit between children's and parents' needs after divorce.

BRUCE SMYTH

Most studies indicate that the interests of children post-divorce are generally best served when children can maintain continuing and frequent contact with both parents who can cooperate – or at least "encapsulate" their conflict (Kelly 2004a). This literature also suggests that it is the *quality of relationships* between parents, and between parents and children, that exerts a critical influence on children's wellbeing, not the *amount of time per se* (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

Of course, an emotionally close and warm relationship between parents and children requires time to sustain it, and the greater the range of contexts for interaction between parents and their children – sleepovers, sharing meals, doing homework – the better (Lamb and Kelly 2001). But where there is high and continuing co-parental conflict, or where children have experienced or are likely to be exposed to continuing domestic violence or child abuse, contact may be highly inappropriate and can have serious, long-lasting adverse effects on children (Cummings and Davies 1994; Reynolds 2001).

Not surprisingly, parents can share the care of children in many ways after parental separation. In Australia, five broad patterns of father–child contact after separation have recently been suggested: equal (or near) shared care; daytime-only contact; holiday-only contact; "standard" contact (every-other-weekend); and little or no contact (Smyth 2004). However, not much is known about the stability of each of these arrangements or the extent to which they affect child and parent wellbeing.

Ricci (1997) distinguishes five different types of parenting time: overnight stays, "together time"; "outside activity" time; holidays, "special days and recreational" time; and "away-from-both-parents" time.

• *Overnight stays* help foster the development of close emotional bonds between children and non-resident parents (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Warshak 2000). Time is usually less constrained and structured, allowing the dynamics that typically characterise family life to occur – such as putting children to bed, reading to them, saying good night, waking and dressing children, and starting the day with them over breakfast. Furthermore, it can take time for parents and children to get re-acquainted after not seeing each other for a while – even after a week or two (Smyth and Ferro 2003). Overnights also encourage children to feel that they have two homes, and that they are not just "visitors"; they can affirm non-resident parents' self-identity as a "parent" (Lamb and Kelly 2001; Ricci 1997); and they can allow resident parents to gain respite from the immediate responsibilities of care giving.

• *Together time* forms the hub of family life, and is critical for family wellbeing (Ricci 1997: 169). It can be focused one-on-one time (such as playing a game, talking in a car, reading a book together, or helping a child with homework), or involve sharing space together while doing independent activities (for example, where a parent works on the kitchen table but is still available to children who are watching television). Recent evidence, both in Australia and overseas, suggests that young people would generally like to spend more time with their parents, which clearly attests to the importance of "together time" (Pocock and Clarke 2004; Åman-Back and Björkqvist 2004).

• *Outside activity time* refers to activities that children and parents do together outside of the home. Sports activities, fishing, or music or dance lessons, for example, provide opportunities for children's emotional, physical, social and cognitive development, and give parents the chance to mentor, and to remain engaged with, their children. For Ricci, selecting, taking part in, and supporting suitable outdoor activities for children is an important dimension of parenting.
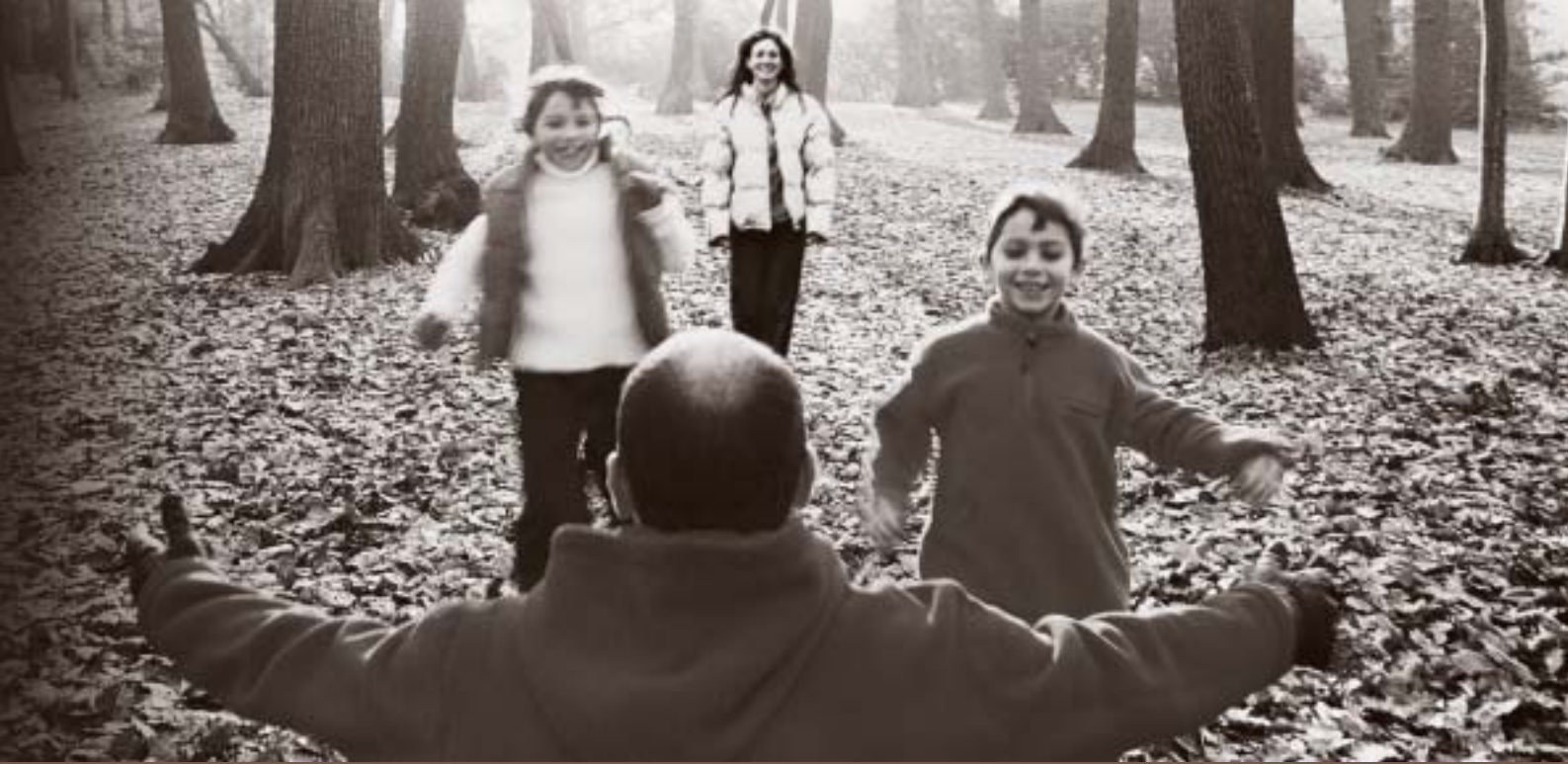
- *Special days and holidays* (such as birthdays, Mothers Day or Fathers Day, Christmas, long-weekends, and school holidays) foster the pursuit of mutually rewarding activities for children and parents. Such activities help parents to stay connected with children, break the grind of school and work routines, and can create positive life-long memories.

- *Time away from both parents* can be particularly important for teenage children. But it is also important for parents, argues Ricci, to be aware of how much time children spend outside of both their care. The hustle and bustle of modern family life means that children may spend long hours home alone because of a long commute for a parent, a long working day, or a second or third job. Even with the rising number of parents who work from home, being a work-at-home parent doesn't necessarily mean "being there" or being available for children.

Ricci's "parenting time" dimensions point to the importance of both parents being able to share time with children in different ways, assuming of course that it is safe for children to do so and that the time parents and children spend together is positive. In some instances, neither may be the case.

Parent–child contact schedules

In recent years, drawing on the latest divorce research and a rapidly growing evidence-base on children's needs at different ages, several prominent American practitioner/researchers (Emery 2004; Kelly 2004b; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003; see boxed inset) have proposed a range of scheduling options. These (normative) options aim to help separated parents consider sensibly what arrangements will best meet their children's and their own needs, and seek to take account of a number of critical factors, most notably the level of parental conflict, children's ages and individual needs and temperament (particularly the child's ability to handle change), distance between households, and parent's work patterns.

The general thrust of these models is that: (i) the greater the anger between parents, the less flexibility

---

OTHER MODELS FOR SHARING THE CARE OF CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION

Emery's (2004: 177-197) model is one of the most conceptually advanced, comprising different timesharing schedules based on three "divorce styles" ("angry", "distant" or "cooperative") and six age groupings for children: infancy (0-18 months), toddler (18 months - 3 years), pre-school-age (3-5 years), early-school-age (6-9 years), late school-age (10-12 years), and adolescence (13-18 years). This model yields a range of schedule options, which can then be tweaked for other factors (such as physical distance between households, and children's individual needs). Holidays and vacations are treated as a special case in point. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003) adopt a similar framework based largely on children's ages, developmental stages, gender, and temperament. Emery's model is available on the web at http://www.coloradodivorcemediation.com/family/schedules.asp

Ricci's (1997) model makes use of broader timeshare splits for school-age children – such as one-day-a-weekend, 80/20, 70/30, 50/50, child-directed "open time between homes", or "bird nesting" (where children stay put and parents alternate in the primary home for set blocks of time). Like Emery (2004), Ricci suggests that holidays and special days be given careful consideration because of the symbolic value of certain days or periods for family members.

and fewer *direct* handovers recommended; and (ii) the older the children, the greater the potential options available and the longer the possible gap between each parent's time with children (that is, the more conflict and/or the younger the children, the greater the need for simplicity).
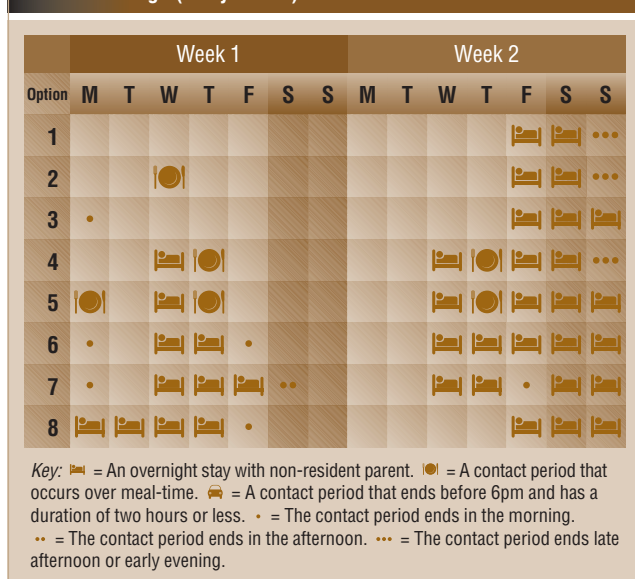
In addition, most models emphasise the importance of stability and predictability for infants and young children – including daily "together time" with each parent where possible, a predictable eating and sleeping routine, and limited overnight stays with the non-resident parent until children are older (Ricci 1997) – although there is ongoing lively debate about when overnights should start, and the *stability of place* versus the *stability of relationships* (see, for example, Gould and Stahl 2001; Lamb and Kelly 2001; Solomon and Biringen 2001; Warshak 2000).

While the various models differ, all share one fundamental philosophical tenet: that each child is unique, as is each family, and that it is parents who are generally in the best position to know which arrangement will work best for their children (Baris and Garrity 1988; Emery 2004). The models also emphasise that they are *options* – not prescriptive guidelines.

Kelly's (2004b) model is attracting wide interest. It aims to minimise long blocks of time away from each parent where practical and appropriate, and has eight different timeshare options for school-age children (aged 5-17 years). Figure 1 sets out Kelly's model using a visual scheme developed for this article.

Each option in Kelly's model carries with it various costs and benefits for different family circumstances, such as overly long gaps between contact periods, too constricted a range of contexts in which interactions can occur, too many transitions for children, handovers in the face of conflict, insufficient rest periods for a parent – or the reverse in the case of more family-sensitive arrangements. (See Kelly 2004b for an excellent summary of the pros and cons of these options under different family circumstances.)

Figure 1   Eight parenting time options for children of school age (Kelly 2004b)

Option	Week 1							Week 2						
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
1												🛏	🛏	•••
2			◉									🛏	🛏	•••
3	•											🛏	🛏	🛏
4			🛏	◉						◉	🛏	🛏	•••
5	◉		🛏	◉					🛏	◉	🛏	🛏	🛏
6	•		🛏	🛏	•				🛏	🛏	🛏	🛏	🛏
7	•		🛏	🛏	🛏	••				🛏	🛏	•	🛏
8	🛏	🛏	🛏	🛏	•					🛏	🛏	🛏	🛏

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. ◉ = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

The "standard package" of contact

While much is now known about the broad patterns of parenting after separation in Australia, the detail of when parent–child contact occurs remains poorly understood. For instance, the most recent Australian data (ABS 2004: 7) suggest that half of the 1.1 million children under the age of 18 with a natural parent living elsewhere (mostly fathers) see that parent "frequently" (6 per cent have daily contact; 28 per cent weekly contact; and 17 per cent fortnightly contact). However, the actual pattern of care remains unclear. There is some – albeit piecemeal – evidence, both in Australia and elsewhere, that the "standard package of contact" typically involves every-other-weekend (sometimes with extra nights mid-week) residential schedules for non-resident parents (see Ferro 2004).

Why might the every-other-weekend model be the "standard"? At least two (not mutually exclusive) possibilities exist.

Traditional sex roles and work patterns underpin one possibility. In families where parents remain together, fathers are traditionally seen as the main breadwinners while mothers tend to be the main homemakers and carers even if they do much paid work outside the home. The most common pattern is that fathers work full-time while mothers work part-time, especially when children are young (de Vaus 2004). Following parental separation, this role differentiation may continue: mothers usually remain the primary caregivers of children even when they also work to help support the household, while fathers continue to support their children financially, albeit with typically limited contact with their children. Weekends may be culturally prescribed as the only opportunity for a non-resident father who works full-time to care for his children. Alternating weekends also allows resident mothers to have some leisure time with their children.

Another possibility is that every-other-weekend schedules have evolved out of an absence of other possibilities. In the United States, Lye (1999) has suggested that parents have limited information about formulating creative and individualised parenting arrangements, and few places to seek help. Running on "automatic" in the confusion, pain, and stress of relationship breakdown, parents go along with what is suggested to them by legal professionals, who themselves lack more creative approaches. (Precedent creates a powerful mindset in the law and in its shadow.)

But change may be afoot. Drawing on interviews with legal professionals in Australia in the context of the Family Law Reform Act 1995 (Cth), Dewar and Parker (1999: 102) concluded that: "There is now a greater willingness to challenge the standard contact 'package' of alternate weekends and half school holidays, and to seek (and be granted) orders for longer weekend contact than previously (for example, Friday night to Monday morning), more midweek contact, and for contact with children at an earlier age than previously."

In New Zealand, Smith et al. (1997) reached a similar conclusion. They found that a number of lawyers believed there was now a much broader range of

post-separation care options for children, and that the prevalence of every-second-weekend schedules had given way to more flexible approaches.

Indeed it could well be that the changing nature of family life and patterns of women's and men's workforce participation (including an increased desire by, or the need for, many fathers to have a greater involvement in their children's lives) may be leading to a growing dissatisfaction with fortnightly contact arrangements (see, for example, Parkinson and Smyth 2004).

In the United States context, Lye (1999: xiii) recently concluded: "Many primary residential parents regard . . . [alternate weekends] as the most practical and workable schedule. But many non-primary residential parents regard every other weekend as too little time and inimical to real parenting. Some parents favour 50/50 arrangements, but most parents regard this as impractical and undesirable. There appears to be considerable support for arrangements that provide the non-primary residential parent with more time than every other weekend, while still having the child live most of the time in one household."

However, the extent to which prevailing post-separation (maternal) "sole custody" models of every-other-weekend contact are giving way to more flexible approaches is unclear because representative micro-data have never been collected on contact schedules.

Measuring parent–child contact

In their recent scholarly review of attempts to measure parent–child contact in the United States context, Argys et al. (2003: 19) conclude that: "Current data do not yet provide a consistent or clear picture of either the quantity or quality of interactions between children and their non-residential parents." Argys and her colleagues go on to make a plea for the collection of more detailed data on contact, and suggest a number of recommendations about what should be collected, how, and from whom. Moreover, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) have urged researchers to adopt more comprehensive measures of contact quality instead of relying on simple measures of contact frequency. And Melli (1999), another prominent American family law scholar, has argued that research into parent–child contact needs to recognise and take account of the multiple qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share the care of children.

But measuring the many activities that children and their non-resident parents can engage in when they are together, and the quality of these interactions, is no easy task. Naturalistic approaches take time, and their micro-perspective and use of small, *ad hoc* samples restrict the generalisability of findings. On the other hand, quantitative approaches have difficulty taking account of the complexities of modern family life, particularly where parents have separated. Siblings may have different care arrangements from each other, and multiple children from multiple unions are increasingly common. Mapping this degree of complexity takes survey time (and money) and

requires sophisticated conceptual and analytic frameworks, a number of which are still being developed.

One useful research tool for this kind of work is the time-use diary ("How much time is spent on different activities each day?"). However, the way that time-use data are currently collected means that we know very little about what non-resident fathers do with their children when they are together, and which days and times they are together. This is because non-resident children are essentially treated as "visitors" by existing time use coding protocols, and therefore cannot be identified in analysis.

An alternative approach to mapping parenting time is through the collection of children's contact schedule data from a national sample of separated/divorced parents. The Australian Institute of Family Studies has recently collected such data, which are presented in this article.

Two research questions (one descriptive, one suggestive) form the focus of the article: What is

In families where parents remain together, fathers are traditionally seen as the main breadwinners while mothers tend to be the main homemakers and carers even if they do much paid work outside the home.

"standard" contact, and how standard is it? Do some parents take more lateral approaches to structuring parent–child contact and, if so, what do these approaches look like? The answers to both questions have implications for parents, practitioners, legal professionals, and policymakers. But before exploring these questions, a brief overview of the research design may be useful.

New Institute data

This analysis draws on new data from the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project,* conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 2003. It focuses on the reports of 971 separated parents (56 per cent women; 44 per cent men) who had either separated or divorced (or had never lived together) and who had at least one child under the age of 18 years.

The majority of the parents had been married to the child's other parent (72 per cent); 23 per cent had been living in a de facto relationship but had not married the other parent; 5 per cent had never lived with the other parent. Parents who had lived together had been separated for an average of five years, with almost 12 per cent having separated for less than 12 months. Women ranged in age from 19 to 56 years (median age 38 years); men's ages ranged from 18-74 (with 95 per cent being no more than 55 years old; median age 42 years).

Eighty-four per cent of mothers were resident parents; 63 per cent of fathers were non-resident parents. The next largest group was resident fathers (17 per cent of fathers), while a small proportion of mothers were non-resident parents (5 per cent of mothers). Around 5-7 per cent of mothers and fathers reported "split" arrangements (that is, each parent had at least one child of the former relationship in their care). Thirteen per cent of fathers

Five methodological issues warrant brief mention.

First, the contact schedule questions yield "pseudo-time-use" data in the form of handover times, and the length of blocks of care by each parent. These data are collected in a 24-hour clock format. However, it should be noted that the actual parent–child activities that occur in the blocks of care are indeterminate – with the exception that an overnight stay has occurred. In this analysis two assumptions have been made: first, midweek contact between 3:00pm and 5:00pm (that is, contact of two hours duration or less) involves a drive somewhere; and second, midweek contact between 3:00pm and 6:00pm (that is, contact of three hours duration or so around meal times) involves a meal or snack. While there is likely to be some error in these interpretations, this approach attempts to give the flavour of some of the different qualitative dimensions of parenting time for non-resident parents in particular. Parent–child contact involves behaviour that is complex, dynamic and multi-faceted (Argys et al. 2003), and there is a strong push, certainly in the United States, towards research that tries to capture this complexity. The data presented here should be seen as part of the early groundwork to make qualitative in-roads to measuring parent–child contact, as crude as this approach might be.

Second, the samples of separated men and women in the survey are independent. That is, the men and women had not been married to each other. The analysis thus focuses on the reports of one parent – the parent who was interviewed – in examining post-separating parenting arrangements.

Third, for reasons of economy, where respondents had more than one child under 18 years potentially in their care, the methodology required respondents to focus on the youngest natural (or adopted) child. This means that the pattern of care reported may be influenced by the characteristics and needs older siblings.

Fourth, since not everyone is accessible by telephone, the omission of certain groups of people in the population not available through telephone surveys sets limits on the generalisations that can be made from the data to the Australian population at large.

Fifth and finally, the bulk of the findings are based on a relatively small sub-sample of 274 parents who reported the occurrence of face-to-face contact that is structured (has a clear set pattern: see Figure 2). Once these cases are subdivided into patterned clusters, many schedules include single instances of particular patterns of care. This is understandable. As noted by Ricci (1997), each child is unique, as is each family's circumstances. Parenting arrangements are likely to be highly idiosyncratic. The relatively small number of cases presented in the following analysis requires that the pattern of results be interpreted with some caution – particularly given that much of the analysis is based on a subjective visual interpretation of patterns in the data.

(n=57) and 7 per cent of mothers (n=37) indicated that the children lived with them for at least 30 per cent of the time (that is, parents had "shared care").

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

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

The survey sought information on a broad range of issues, including respondents' parenting arrangements, decision-making responsibilities, wellbeing, and demographic circumstances.

To obtain the contact schedule data, six questions were asked of parents who reported that a set pattern of face-to-face contact was occurring: Is your contact arrangement based on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly schedule? Each [week/fortnight/month], how many blocks of contact usually occur? Thinking about [each] block of contact: What day of the week does contact usually start? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually begin? What day of the week does contact usually end? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually end?

This set of questions yielded data strings of temporal information, which were sorted into discrete groupings and then transposed onto a visual fortnightly grid designed for this research. (See the accompanying box for five methodological issues that should be noted.)

Findings are reported in three sections. The first examines some of the broad patterns of different types of contact (such as little or no face-to-face contact, overnight stays, and structured versus unstructured patterns of care). Section two systematically sets out the different clusters of contact schedules (from one-night-a-fortnight to 50/50 shared care). Section three explores some of the more lateral approaches to structuring the care of children.

(i) Different patterns of parenting

This first section provides a "big picture" of patterns of contact. Figure 2 shows the distribution of cases that fall into each category of care. One of the most striking features of the different patterns of parenting in Figure 2 is the marked difference in structured arrangements between overnight stays and daytime-only contact: almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of parents who reported daytime-only contact reported no set pattern in the contact arrangements, whereas

Figure 2   Different patterns of parent–child contact after separation*
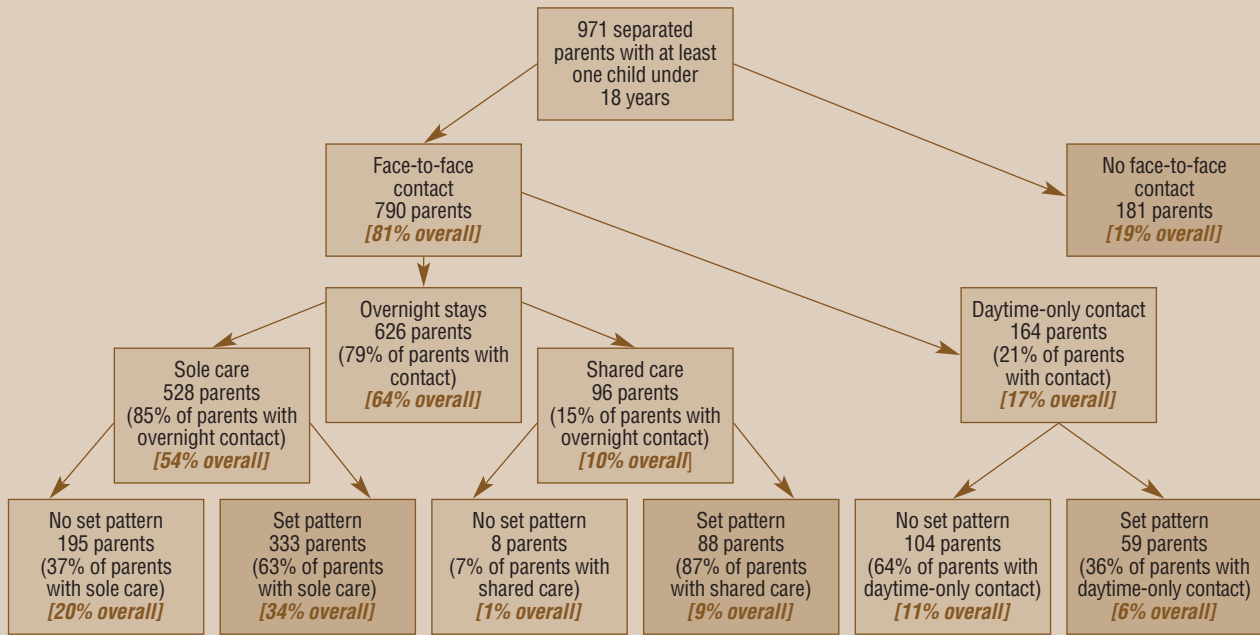
Note: *Most of the patterns refer to father–child contact, as reported by separated/divorced mothers and fathers.

the reverse was the case for those who reported overnight stays (67 per cent reported a set pattern of contact). Thus daytime-only contact looks to be a much more flexible and malleable arrangement than overnight stays. This makes sense: overnight stays need more planning, preparation, and supporting infrastructure than daytime-only contact, and children with this pattern of care are often very young or teenagers (Smyth 2004).

Moreover, in some cases, no set pattern of care may act as a marker for more troubled family dynamics (where safety concerns or high levels of parental conflict exist). In other instances, it may simply reflect highly cooperative, flexible arrangements in which parents live near each other and children have one primary home but come and go at their own choosing (as suggested by Ricci's "open time between homes" dimension). More work is needed to improve our understanding of the workings, context and diversity of daytime-only contact.

Figure 2 acts as the empirical backdrop for drilling down to the micro-data on when children spend time with each parent after parental separation. The following analysis is based on the reports of 274 separated parents (28 per cent of the total sample) who had regular overnight stays with children on a weekly or fortnightly basis and who had been married for at least 12 months. (Some parents could not provide enough information to enable a clear picture of their contact schedule to be ascertained; others reported monthly parent–child schedules or less frequent patterns of care.)

(ii) Different clusters of contact schedules

This section maps the detail of parents' arrangements using a cross-case analytic approach, whereby individual contact schedules are grouped into similar arrangements and then examined as a cluster. For clarity, each cluster is presented and annotated

separately. Fortnight-based schedules are presented first, followed by week-based schedules.
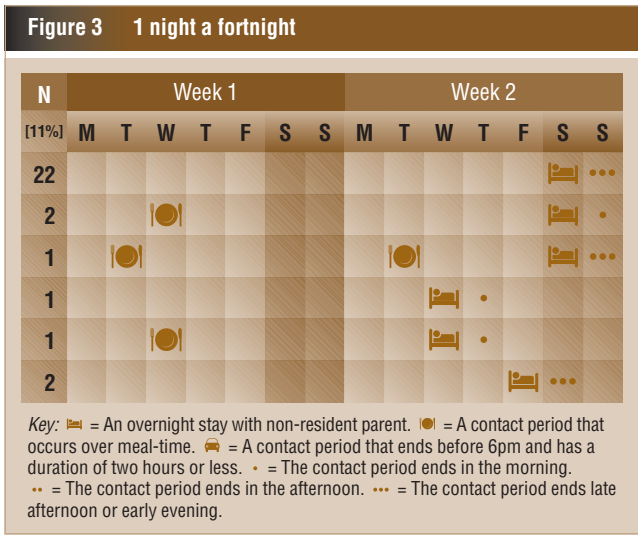
Overnight stays are depicted by a bed symbol, while daytime-only contact periods are represented by a meal or car symbol. The number of cases for each pattern appears in the first column of each figure; the total number of cases for each figure is given as a percentage of the total number of structured arrangements where contact was occurring on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

Fortnightly schedules

The first set of contact schedule grids (Figures 3-6) are based largely on a fortnightly pattern.
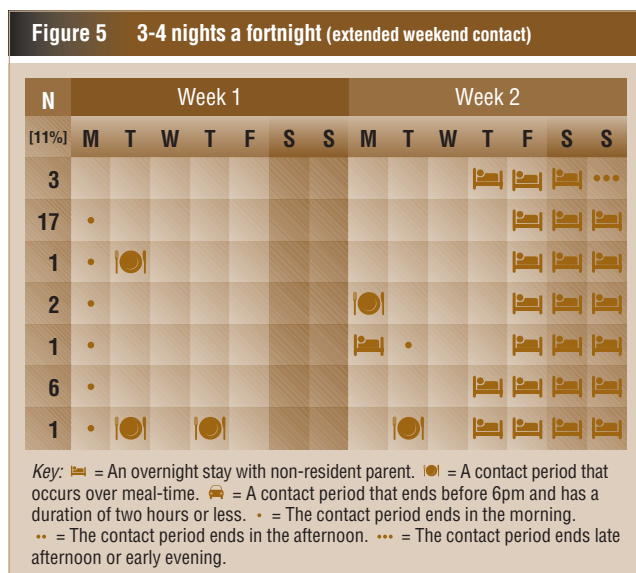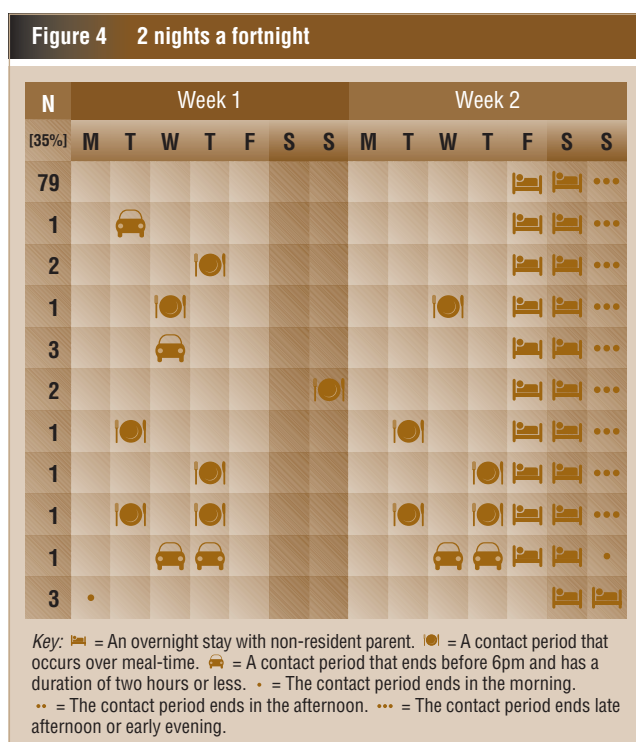
One-night-a-fortnight

Figure 3 shows that about 11 per cent of separated parents with structured arrangements (3 per cent of the total sample) reported that parent–child contact occurred every second Saturday night (or in a couple

Figure 3   1 night a fortnight

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🍽 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning.
•• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

of cases, every second Friday or Wednesday night, or every second Saturday night supplemented by midweek contact). A defining feature of this pattern of care is the long block of time each fortnight that children and their non-resident parent do not see each other – what Kelly (2004a) terms the "12-day wait".

Two-nights-a-fortnight

Figure 4 shows that around one-third (35 per cent) of separated parents with structured arrangements (10 per cent overall) reported that parent–child contact occurred in a block on Friday and Saturday night every-second-weekend. Again the defining feature of this pattern of care is the potential for long blocks of parental absence (a 10-day wait), although, in some cases (2 per cent) midweek contact helps to minimise the length of these periods. The first two rows in Figure 3 and 4 resemble Option 1 in Kelly's (2004b) framework; the other rows map Option 2 more broadly.

Figure 4   2 nights a fortnight

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🍽 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Figure 5   3-4 nights a fortnight (extended weekend contact)

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🍽 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

According to Kelly (2004b: 3), a 10-12 day wait may be "too long for many children, and may diminish the second parent's importance to the children – with fewer opportunities for involvement in their day-to-day, school and homework activities". Every-other-weekend arrangements also provide little respite for resident parents. At the same time, notes Kelly, this arrangement may be favoured where one parent has had little involvement with the children, work patterns constrain parenting time, or the infrastructure associated with having children overnight or for extended blocks of time make it difficult to give the children as much time with each parent as both they, and the children, may desire (see also Parkinson and Smyth 2004). This pattern may also be a useful transitional arrangement (Kelly 2004b).

Three–four nights-a-fortnight

Figure 5 shows that 9 per cent of separated parents with structured arrangements (3 per cent overall) reported that parent–child contact occurred in an extended block of time every-second-weekend – from after school on Friday night to before school Monday morning. In a couple of instances, this pattern was augmented by some midweek contact (rows 3-5 and 7). In another instance (row 5), a sleepover early in the second week was followed by a brief gap of several days, and then two adjoining sleepovers on the weekend: Friday–Saturday, or Saturday–Sunday. (This cluster, particularly row 2 in Figure 5, maps Option 3 in Kelly's model.)

The commonality across the cases in this pattern of care is that all of the arrangements involve at least one sleepover that precedes a school day. This means that non-resident parents are engaged in a broader range of activities in caring for their children – including bedtime and morning routines – than probably is the case over just weekends.

As noted earlier, there is emerging evidence that engaging in a multiplicity of contexts and activities with children is necessary for their social, emotional and cognitive development, and leads to deeper emotional ties between parents and children (Lamb & Kelly 2001). While large chunks of parental absence still occur in this arrangement, the inclusion of Sunday night or a midweek school night might help to offset the idea that non-resident parenting time is "fun time".

Kelly notes that extended blocks of time with an after-school pick-up and before school drop-off reduces the opportunity for parental conflict. Midweek transitions can fuel parental conflict at handovers, and midweek "together time" can feel shallow and rushed for children and non-resident parents – especially for homework. Nonetheless, the inclusion of mid-week transitions may be practical where one or both parents have demanding work patterns (Kelly 2004b).

The last two rows in Figure 5 essentially expand "extended weekend blocks" by adding Thursday night to "Friday-night-to-Monday-morning" arrangements – that is, *four-nights-a-fortnight* (2 per cent of parents with structured arrangements; 1 per cent overall). This addition adds another degree of contextual multiplicity to the pattern of care by including sleepovers that precede two school days –

one day at the start of the school week (Sunday night), and one day at the end of the school week (Thursday night) (see also row 5). This pattern affords a greater involvement of non-resident parents in their children's lives, while also minimising disruption to the school week for children. Such an arrangement is likely to have a qualitatively different feel about it than arrangements based only on every second Saturday or Friday/Saturday night.

Interpretative comment

It is important to note the bunch-up of cases in the above four patterns: a sleepover every-second Saturday night (22 cases: Figure 3); sleepovers every-second Friday and Saturday nights (79 cases: Figure 4); sleepovers every-second Friday night to Monday morning (17 cases: Figure 5); and sleepovers every-second Thursday night to Monday morning (6 cases: Figure 5). These common groupings bear the hallmark of "standard contact", and account for 45 per cent of the cases analysed here (13 per cent overall). Children and their other parent do not see each other for long periods of time in these arrangements (10-12 days).

Five-or-more-nights-a-fortnight

Figure 6 shows another 9 per cent of cases involving five or more nights every second weekend (3 per cent overall). These cases include "week-about" shared care arrangements (starting on Friday or Monday night; 12 and 7 cases respectively), or some other variant. (This pattern, particularly row 7 in Figure 6, maps Option 8 in Kelly's model.) Kelly notes that Friday night changeovers often work better than Monday night changeovers because the transition is more gentle – parenting time starts by "winding down" rather than "gearing up" (p.6).

It is worth noting that midweek contact on the "off" week is generally not reported, perhaps because the blocks of contact are regular and substantial enough to be self-sustaining. Equal parenting time involves many logistical and relationship challenges, and appears to be adopted by a relatively small group of mainly well-educated, dual career, parents with primary school aged children in Australia (Smyth 2004).

Weekly schedules

The remaining contact schedule grids (Figures 7-10) are based largely on a weekly pattern. The advantage of weekly schedules over fortnightly ones is that it is easier for young children to remember which day or night they are with mum, and which day or night they are with dad (Emery 2004). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2003: 180) note how one young child suggested the use of a *blue* lunch box for a pick-up by dad and a *red* lunch box for a pick-up by mum.

One-night-a-week

Figure 7 shows that about 7 per cent of parents with structured arrangements (2 per cent overall) reported that parent–child contact occurred every Saturday or Friday night (supplemented by instances of mid-week contact in some cases). In many ways, one sleepover each week essentially mirrors every-other-weekend schedules but is simply more frequent.

Figure 6 — 5+ nights a fortnight (~50:50)

Key: ⊨ = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. ◉ = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Figure 7 — 1 night a week

Key: ⊨ = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. ◉ = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Figure 8a — 2 nights in 1 of the weeks

Key: ⊨ = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. ◉ = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Two-nights-a-week

Figure 8a shows that contact typically occurred in a block on Friday and Saturday night at least once every second weekend, augmented by one or two sleepovers during the other week (4 per cent of structured arrangements; 1 per cent overall).
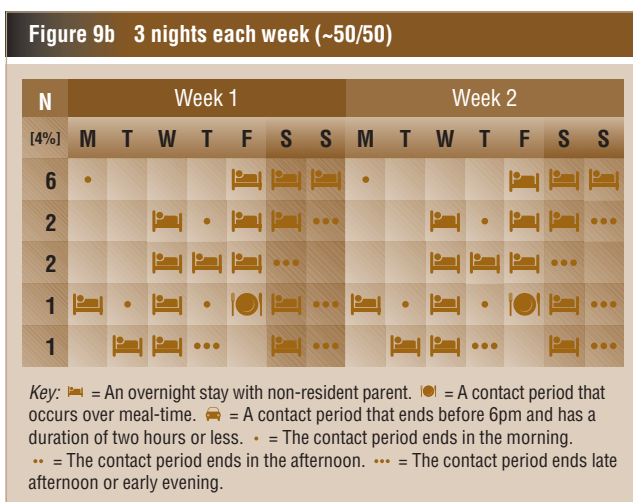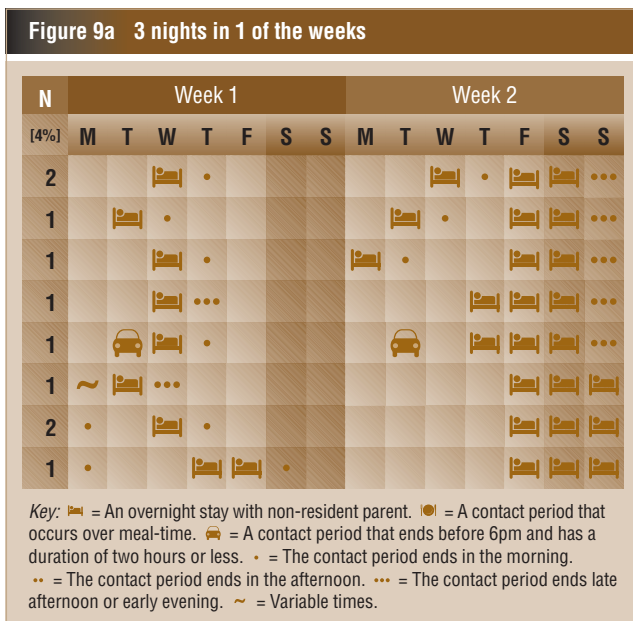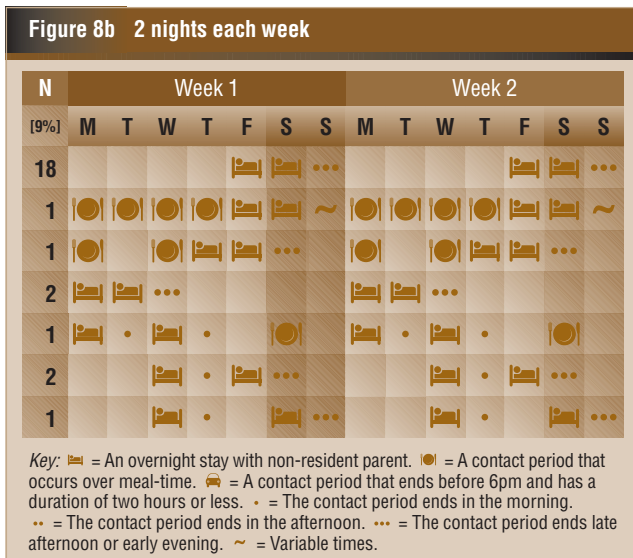

Figure 8b   2 nights each week

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🍽 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening. ~ = Variable times.

Figure 9a   3 nights in 1 of the weeks

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🍽 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening. ~ = Variable times.

Figure 9b   3 nights each week (~50/50)

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. 🍽 = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning. •• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

Figure 8b shows that sometimes the schedules involved two nights each week (comprising 9 per cent of structured arrangements; 3 per cent overall) but none on Saturday or Sunday night (such Monday and Tuesday nights, Wednesday and Friday nights, or Thursday and Friday nights). Work or social patterns might shape these arrangements.

These two groupings involved much heterogeneity in schedules, although a Friday–Saturday regime still features prominently, again perhaps a remnant of an "every-other-weekend" mindset.

Three-nights-a-week

Figure 9a shows this grouping (4 per cent of cases in Figure 9a; 1 per cent overall) typically involved a block of contact occurring on Friday and Saturday night at least once every second weekend. In many of these cases, a third night (mostly Sunday but sometimes Thursday or Wednesday) extended the block of care (see the first row in Figure 9b). (The schedules in Figure 9a, for example, see row 2, map Option 4 in Kelly's model.)

Figure 9b shows that the three-night-block pattern adopted in Week 1 was repeated in Week 2 (4 per cent of structured arrangements; 1 per cent overall); otherwise, the midweek sleepovers were duplicated each week, and weekend sleepovers were added only every second weekend (see, for example, the first three rows in Figure 9a).

These two grouping are a good example of the highly structured nature of arrangements, even though there is much diversity in the schedules, each individual case is highly patterned within itself. This makes sense, of course, given the need to have structure when trying to balance children's schooling and parents' work commitments. Sleepovers need predictability to facilitate preparedness.

It is also worth noting that even with a fair amount of face-to-face contact occurring, reasonably long periods of time (up to 8 days) can still occur where children and non-resident parents do not see each other.

Four-or-more-nights-a-week

Figure 10 shows a grouping largely comprising parents who adopt an equal (or near-equal) timeshare arrangement (6 per cent of structured arrangements; 2 per cent overall). Again, there is a mix of arrangements; in some cases the bulk of contact occurs in one week, with some sleepovers occurring in the other week (see rows 1 to 3); in other cases, blocks of time are essentially mirrored weekly (such as Saturday night to Wednesday morning, Thursday night to Sunday morning, Tuesday night to Saturday morning; or Tuesday night plus Friday night to Monday morning) (see rows 4, 7 and 9). Long blocks of parental absence are less likely to occur in these arrangements. Such schedules are interesting in that they are more complex but afford more frequent contact between children and both parents. (This cluster encompasses approximations of Options 5-7 in Kelly's model.)

Interpretative comment

As with the "every-other-weekend" patterns outlined earlier, the bunching-up of certain patterns

provides telltale clues of the conceptual scaffolding underpinning the arrangements. Three clusters stand out: an overnight stay every Friday *or* Saturday night (10 cases: Rows 1 and 2 of Figure 7); overnight stays every Friday *and* Saturday night (18 cases: Row 1, Figure 8b); and overnight stays every Friday night to Monday morning (6 cases: row 1, Figure 9b). These clusters around weekends mirror similar but less frequent fortnightly patterns outlined earlier. They too bear the hallmark of "standard contact", and account for 12 per cent of the cases analysed here (4 per cent overall). It is worth noting that these schedules and their fortnightly counterparts account for over half (57 per cent) of the contact schedules involving structured arrangements (16 per cent overall).

Put simply, in the majority of cases where face-to-face contact is occurring and there is a set pattern to the arrangements, contact typically occurs every second weekend on Friday and/or Saturday night (in some cases extending to Sunday night) or every Friday and/or Saturday night. This suggests that even where contact is relatively frequent and predictable, considerable time can pass before children and their non-resident parent see each other again.

But it is also important to note that in 43 per cent of the schedules examined, every-other-weekend or every-weekend routines had been augmented or replaced by more complex arrangements – raising the possibility that a subtle shift may be occurring towards higher levels of involvement by non-resident fathers.

Temporal shifts in parenting time cannot be tested because representative detailed contact schedule data have not been available to date. However, it is worth noting that a small but discernible increase appears to have occurred over the past six years in the proportion of non-resident fathers playing a greater role in their children's lives (compare ABS 1997 with ABS 2004), including an increase in the number of parents with equal (or near equal) care of their children (roughly 3 per cent in 1997 compared with 6 per cent in 2003).

The changing nature of work and family life may be fostering clear expectations of high levels of continued parental involvement and responsibility for children by both parents, regardless of parents' relationship status. Contact schedule data hold much promise for exploring temporal shifts in patterns of parenting after separation.

Age of children, conflict, and other issues

Outside of the tendency for children under three years to have daytime-only contact (and not to be featured in the preceding schedules based on overnight stays), no other clear pattern emerged with respect to children's ages. The relatively small number of cases in each cluster, and the omission of information about older siblings, are methodological issues that work against the ability to observe clear patterns in relation to key correlates (such as children's age and developmental stage).

Children's temperaments and needs are complex, dynamic and multifaceted, as is the array of other factors that needs to be considered. Many factors are likely to be involved in shaping each pattern of care. Looking for simple one-to-one relationships may not be a fruitful approach to take given the complexity of the parent–child contact domain. In many ways, the analysis presented here should be viewed as preliminary and explorative. More analysis of these data which explores potential links between parental conflict, safety issues, and different patterns of care is currently underway.

Much of the research into divorce has either failed to measure parent–child contact altogether or has opted for simple measures of contact frequency or quantity – at the expense of missing the potentially more important domain of the nature and quality of interactions.

Child support issues also warrant a brief comment at this point. Any significant shifts in post-separation patterns of parenting are likely to have important implications for child support and income support policy. While an examination of the links between child support and parenting time is well beyond the scope of this article, financial issues are likely to be an important practical thread running through the various contact schedules presented. Child support and income support policy are typically based on overnight stays. The above data, however, suggest that patterns of care may be more complex than this (Parkinson and Smyth 2004).

Figure 10 4+ nights in 1 week (~50/50)

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. ◐ = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning.
•• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

(iii) Lateral approaches to structuring the care

Figure 11 in this section sets out some of the more novel and imaginative contact schedules from those reported by parents and shown in Tables 3-10 in a bid to encourage parents to devise parenting plans that best suit their children's and their own needs. Many separated parents may opt for every-other-weekend schedules because they are simply unaware of other feasible alternatives (Lye 1999; Smyth 2004). Legal professionals who provide assistance to separated parents (such as judges, lawyers and mediators) may be in a "similar (conceptual) boat".

Example 1: extended weekend contact: The first row in Figure 11 shows an extended block of contact every-other weekend, beginning on Thursday night and ending Monday morning at school. The feature of the schedule is that two of the four overnight stays involve the setting up of school days (which might include homework to be handed in, the provision of playlunch and lunch, organising school clothes and sports gear, and so on). A Thursday night meal in the "off" week reduces the potentially long break between the single extended block of care each fortnight. While this arrangement may require a little more work, it is likely to have a qualitatively richer feel about it than a regular weekly Friday–Saturday night schedule.

Example 2: near equal care: The second row in Figure 11 shows an extended block of contact every-other weekend, beginning on Thursday night and ending Monday morning at school. Meals every couple of days break the otherwise eight-day wait between extended blocks of care. This pattern is likely to require a fair degree of cooperation, commitment, and financial resources to make it workable.

Example 3 and 4: every-other-weekend but with midweek contact: The third row in Figure 11 shows an every-other-weekend arrangement (Friday and Saturday night), but with regular midweek contact after school every Wednesday and Thursday night. This contact might involve "outside activity time" and "together time", which might facilitate greater opportunities for building

emotional bonds with children. The same holds for Example 4.

Example 5: split "week-about": The last row in Figure 11 shows a "week-about" 50/50 arrangement (Monday night to the next Monday morning) but the Wednesday of that week is swapped with the other parent so that there is some contact every week with both parents.

These real-world examples are far from exhaustive. Nor are they meant to be prescriptive. Obviously there are many other possibilities. A simple brochure of different parenting plan options that separated parents, mediators and legal professionals could access easily would have much utility in the Australian context.

Of course, some separated parents may not want to be "boxed-in" to a fixed schedule since the arrangement that is most likely to be child-responsive and to approximate traditional family life is one where children move freely between households – or remain in one household – when they choose to, and where it practical and safe to do so.
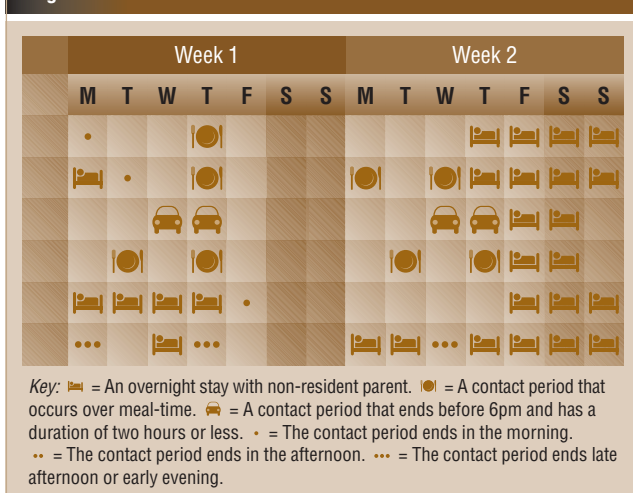
Conclusion

The extent to which every-other-weekend schedules form the "standard package" of contact in Australia has for the most part been unclear because representative micro-data on contact schedules have never been collected. The data presented here break new ground in this respect.

Three clear findings emerged. First, there is much diversity in the arrangements that parents make. The rich tapestry of variation is indeed striking. Second, overnight stays appear to anchor around Saturday nights, followed by Friday nights and then (as unfolding extended blocks of time) Sunday nights, and then Thursday nights. Weekly contact loosely duplicates this pattern, but with some minor variation in one of the two weeks. Third, 45 per cent of the schedules involved the "standard package" of contact that occurred every second weekend on Friday and/or Saturday night (with no midweek contact) while another 12 per cent of schedules involved overnight stays every Friday and/or Saturday night (again with no midweek contact).

This suggests that every-other-weekend or every-weekend models remain pervasive, and that even where face-to-face contact is reasonably frequent and predictable, five to twelve days can pass before children and their non-resident parent see each other again. At the same time, it is important to note that in 43 per cent of the schedules, every-other-weekend or every-weekend contact schedules had been augmented or replaced by more complex arrangements. It should also be remembered that a sizeable proportion of separated parents have arrangements that have no set pattern (39 per cent of those who reported that parent–child contact was occurring), or have no arrangements in operation because little or no face-to-face contact is occurring (19 per cent in this sample). Thus a range of other arrangements is at play outside of every-other-weekend models.

The work of several prominent practitioner/researchers (for example, Ricci 1997; Kelly 2004b) points to the importance of both parents being able

Figure 11   Some ideas …

	Week 1							Week 2						
	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S

Key: 🛏 = An overnight stay with non-resident parent. ◖ = A contact period that occurs over meal-time. 🚗 = A contact period that ends before 6pm and has a duration of two hours or less. • = The contact period ends in the morning.
•• = The contact period ends in the afternoon. ••• = The contact period ends late afternoon or early evening.

to spend time with children in different contexts (such as overnight stays, doing homework, eating icy-poles at the park, and so forth) – assuming, of course, it is safe for children to do so.

But thinking through how to develop creative, child-responsive parenting arrangements in the often emotionally charged context of relationship breakdown is no easy task. As Ricci (1997: 168) points outs: we are not programmed to disassemble the time that we spend with loved ones into discrete pieces. Yet parental separation – whereby one family unit needs to be restructured into two stable functioning units, including setting out the parenting arrangements – demands this with all its complexities and challenges. Separated parents should be encouraged to consider some of the recent options proposed by Kelly (2004), Emery (2004), and others, so that children's needs remain paramount in the "remaking" of families.

The richness of the contact schedule data presented here suggests that researchers should consider the routine collection of such data where they are interested in research on children and parents after divorce. Much of the research into divorce has either failed to measure parent–child contact altogether or has opted for simple measures of contact frequency or quantity – at the expense of missing the potentially more important domain of the nature and quality of interactions.

Parent–child contact typically acts as the gateway into the development or sustainment of close emotional bonds between children and parents after divorce. While every-other-weekend models may operate for practical reasons, as a vestige of the past, or by default, the data presented here suggest that many separated parents are indeed looking for more creative way of sharing the care of children after separation – ways that are hopefully responsive to their children's needs and wishes. More work is needed to improve our understanding of how society can better support this positive pursuit.

References

Åman-Back & Björkqvist (2004), "Parents' assessments of how much time they spend with their children at different ages", *Psychological Reports*, vol. 94, pp. 1025-1030.

Amato, P.R., & Gilbreth, J.G. (1999), "Non-resident fathers and children's wellbeing: A meta-analysis", *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* vol. 61, pp. 557-573.

Argys, L.M., Peters, H.E., Garasky, S., Nepomnyaschy, L., Sorensen, E. & Waller, M. (2003), "Non-residential parenting: Measuring contact between children and their non-resident fathers", Paper presented at the Measurement Issues in Family Demography Workshop, Maryland Population Research Center, University of Maryland, November 13-14, Bethesda, MD.

ABS (2004), *Family Characteristics Australia 2003,* Catalogue No. 4442.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

ABS (1998), *Family Characteristics Survey 1997,* Catalogue No. 4442.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Baris, M.A. & Garrity, C.B. (1988), *Children of divorce: A developmental approach to residence and visitation*, Psytec, Illinois.

Dewar, J. & Parker, S. (1999), "The impact of the new Part VII Family Law Act 1975", *Australian Journal of Family Law,* vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 96-116.

Emery, R. (2004), *The truth about children and divorce: Dealing with your emotions so you and your children can thrive,* Penguin, New York.

Ferro, A. (2004), "Standard contact", in B. Smyth (ed.), *Parent–child contact and post-separation parenting arrangements,* Research Report No. 9, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Gould, J.W. & Stahl, P.M. (2001), "Never paint by the numbers: A response to Kelly and Lamb (2000), Solomon and Biringen (2001), and Lamb and Kelly (2001)", *Family Court Review,* vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 372-376.

Kelly, J. (2004a), "Enhancing resilience in children's adjustment to separation and divorce: Research updates and implications for work with parents", Paper presented at the Family Services Australia Conference "Pursuing Excellence in Family Services", Darling Harbour, Sydney, 21 October.

Kelly, J. (2004b), "Child custody parenting plan options (for children of school age)", *Divorce Resolutions: Colorado Center for Divorce Mediation,* accessed on 1/1/04 at: http://www.coloradodivorcemediation.com/family/parent_plans.asp

Lamb, M.E. & Kelly, J.B. (2001), "Using the empirical literature to guide the development of parenting plans for young children: A rejoinder to Solomon and Biringen", *Family Court Review,* vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 365-371.

Lye, D.N. (1999), *The Washington State Parenting Plan Study: Report to the Washington State Gender and Justice Commission and Domestic Relations Commission,* Washington Courts, Washington State.

Melli, M.S. (1999), "Guideline review: Child support and time sharing by parents", *Family Law Quarterly,* vol. 33, pp. 219-234.

Parkinson, P. & Smyth, B. (2004), "Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with father–child contact arrangements in Australia", *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 289-304.

Pocock, B. & Clarke, J. (2004), *Can't buy me love? Young Australian's views on parental work, time, guilt and their own consumption,* Discussion Paper No. 61, The Australia Institute, Canberra.

Pryor, J. & Rodgers, B. (2001), *Children in changing families: Life after parental separation,* Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.

Reynolds, J. (2001), *Not in front of the children? How conflict between parents affects children*, One Plus One Marriage and Partnership Research, London.

Ricci, I. (1997), *Mom's house, dad's house: Making two homes for your child,* Simon & Schuster, New York.

Smith, A.B., Taylor, N.J., Gollop, M., Gaffney, M., Gold, M. & Henaghan, M. (1997), *Access and other post-separation issues,* Children's Issues Centre, Dunedin.

Smyth, B. (ed.) (2004), *Parent–child contact and post-separation parenting arrangements,* Research Report No. 9, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Smyth, B. & Ferro, A. (2002), "When the difference is night & day: Parent–child contact after separation", *Family Matters,* no. 63, pp. 54-59.

Solomon, J. & Biringen, Z. (2001), "Another look at the developmental research: Commentary on Kelly and Lamb's 'Using child development research to make appropriate custody and access decisions for young children'", *Family Court Review,* vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 355-364.

Wallerstein, J.S. & Blakeslee, S. (2003), *What about the kids? Raising your children before, during and after divorce,* Hyperion, New York.

Warshak, R.A. (2000), "Blanket restrictions: Overnight contact between parents and young children", *Family and Conciliation Courts Review,* vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 422-445.

Bruce Smyth is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and Project Manager of the *Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project* in the Institute's Family and Marriage research program.