

# ‘Daddy doesn’t live here any more’

**W**HEN parents separate, most children end up living with their mothers. With the rapid rise in parental separation and divorce over the last two decades, this means that increasing numbers of children have fathers who live away – over 20 per cent of all dependent children in the UK, it has recently been estimated (National Statistics, 2003). How significant for children’s outcome and well-being is the frequency of contact and the quality of the relationship between children and their fathers who live ‘in the other house’? It is a question with major implications for policy makers, lawyers and practitioners (see the recent government consultation paper *Parental Separation: Children’s Needs and Parents’ Responsibilities*,



**JUDY DUNN** kicks off the Society’s ‘Year of Relationships’ with a look at children’s relationships with their non-resident fathers.

available from [tinyurl.com/5wnqc](http://tinyurl.com/5wnqc)) – one that is currently hotly debated, with fathers’ rights groups arguing with increasing militancy for more contact and custody.

What do we know about the links between children’s relationships with their non-resident fathers, and their adjustment? Does the picture from recent UK research parallel what has been reported elsewhere in the world, in particular in the US, where the bulk of research has been conducted?

Here I look at what children themselves say, before turning to father–child contact and economic support (the focus of most research attention and of legal wrangles), and then the growing and consistent evidence for the significance of the quality of non-resident father–child relationships.

## **What do children say about contact?**

In any debate on this issue it is important to establish at the outset whether children actually want contact with their fathers after divorce or separation. Most studies report that they do: in a recent London study (Smith *et al.*, 2001) only 4 per cent had negative feelings about contact. Losing contact with their fathers was seen by the children in one US study as the worst aspect of their parents’ separation (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980). Frequent themes in children’s concerns about contact include fathers’ unreliability about arrangements, feeling ‘caught in the middle’ between their parents, concern about witnessing their father’s distress, as well as being unhappy

## **KEY FINDINGS**

- A fifth of all dependent children live away from their fathers.
- Only 4 per cent of children have negative feelings about contact with their fathers.
- Links between contact and child adjustment have grown stronger over the years, suggesting non-resident fathers are becoming more involved with their children.
- Children with antisocial fathers have fewer conduct problems if they don’t live with them.
- Warmth, support, authoritative parenting and involvement are vital elements in a non-resident father’s relationship with their child.
- Conflict between non-resident fathers and their ex-partners can be particularly damaging for the child.
- How children respond varies with age and length of time since separation.
- Simply maintaining a relationship with the child after separation can be difficult, particularly when it comes to discipline and control.

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more frequently than children were in the 1970s and 1980s (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). And this contact seems to be having more of an effect: the links between contact and children's adjustment and academic success have increased in effect size over time. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) suggest that non-resident fathers in recent years may be more committed to involvement with their children.

The issue of direction of effects is also important: where a link between contact and adjustment is found, it could be that fathers enjoy and encourage more frequent contact as a consequence of their children's well-being and lack of problems, or that the father-child contact contributed to their well-being. Both effects are likely to be involved.

### What matters for adjustment?

Unlike the mixed evidence on the significance of frequency of contact there is a much more consistent story on the significance of the quality of father-child relationships for children's adjustment. The personality and adjustment of the father is key, and sometimes it is actually better for the father not to be around. For instance, in a large-scale study of five-year-old twins in the UK, a focus on fathers' antisocial behaviour showed that when the fathers engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour, more children whose fathers lived with them had conduct problems (16 per cent with conduct problems) than children whose antisocial fathers were not living with them, and than children whose fathers engaged in little antisocial behaviour and were not resident with them



'You only have to open your eyes to see what I call the "Sad Dads on Sundays Syndrome" – in my case Battersea Park – wander through it on a Sunday and just see misery' – Bob Geldof speaking on the Trevor MacDonald Tonight programme, 17 June 2002

about their father's new partner, babies or stepsiblings.

### Economic support and contact

On economic support, recent meta-analyses (e.g. Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) show that payment of child support is closely linked to children's adjustment, good health and academic success. It is plausibly argued that these effects are probably mediated through the quality of the father-child relationship and contact (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001) – fathers who have good relationships with their children are more likely to pay support. Demographics are important here: large-scale studies in the US, New Zealand and the UK have shown that young, non-resident fathers may have special difficulty providing economic support for their children, and that there are links between low income, unemployment and low father-child contact (e.g. Simpson *et al.*, 2003).

Evidence that the frequency of father-child contact is important for children's adjustment is more mixed than the evidence on payment of support. Could it really be that money is more important than the time a father spends with their child? The picture is muddled by differences in samples, in methods, in measurement. We should also note that the context is changing – children these days may be seeing their non-resident fathers

(Jaffee *et al.*, 2003). There was a genetic contribution to the risk of child antisocial behaviour, but the antisocial behaviour of resident fathers contributed to the children's behaviour problems independently of this genetic risk.

As for positive aspects of the relationship, the dimensions highlighted as crucial are warmth and emotional closeness, support, authoritative parenting (involving affection, support and limit-setting), and involvement (but see Welsh *et al.*, 2004 for conflicting findings). For example, when children were asked about their own relationships with their non-resident fathers in two recent UK studies (Dunn *et al.*, 2004; Smith *et al.*, 2001) these positive aspects of the relationship were linked to low levels of the children's adjustment problems. The links between warm affectionate father-child relations and children's adjustment are especially strong for children growing up in single-mother families.

However, father-child relationships differ markedly in quality (more so than mother-child relationships: see White & Gilbreth, 2001). The question of what accounts for this variability is an important one. What stands out in the recent research? Most importantly, the links with other family relationships.

### Connections with other family relationships

How children get along with their non-resident fathers is particularly clearly linked to the various other relationships in their family worlds – especially the relationships between father and ex-partner, and between child and mother. For example, cooperation, support and communication between non-resident fathers and their former partners – the children's mothers – are consistently found to be positively associated with warmth and affection in the child-father relationship. In their meta-analysis of studies involving children whose parents separated before they were five years old, for instance, Whiteside and Becker (2000) showed that there were indirect effects of cooperation between parents on both father-child relationships and children's developmental outcome. Conflict between non-resident fathers and their ex-partners is associated with poor child outcome, though some studies suggest this effect is mediated by the crucial relationship between child and mother, which is itself more likely to

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have problems if there is parental conflict. The impact of parental conflict on children's adjustment has been repeatedly shown in observational, experimental and interview studies (Grych & Fincham, 2001), and children's own reports highlight how sensitive children are to such conflict.

Are children who get on well with their mothers likely also to be close to their fathers? If so, are the links between father-child relations and children's adjustment to be explained by the children's relationships with their mothers? Evidence from research is mixed here. In one study of adolescents in stepfamilies (White & Gilbreth, 2001), a good relationship between non-resident father and child was associated with good adjustment outcome independently of the mother-child relationship (more so than was the child-stepfather relationship). Studies of younger children are not consistent on this point – suggesting that for younger children the relationship with the mother may be of key importance.

What about the situation of children whose mothers have formed new partnerships – those who have both a non-custodial father and a stepfather? Having a good relationship with a non-resident father is associated with well-being, and so too is a good relationship between child and stepfather; these links with adjustment outcome appear to be independent. While the positive warm aspects of the two father-child relationships are not linked, conflict in the relationship between child and non-resident father is reported to be correlated with conflict in both child-mother and child-stepfather relationships. The direction of effects in these patterns is not clear, but the notion that difficult children contribute to conflicted relations with all three parents is plausible.

### Patterns over time

Relations with non-resident fathers become less closely linked to adjustment as the time since separation increases. Parental conflict tends to decrease with time, which is likely to affect the father-child

relationship. Children's age at the time of separation is likely to affect the way that they respond to separation: conflict between parents is a less powerful predictor of adjustment for younger children than for those older at the time of separation, while younger children are more likely to blame themselves for the family change. But the large-scale meta-

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analyses found that links between father-child relations and adjustment did not differ with children's age (e.g. Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

### Fathers' perspectives

Research that examines in depth the views of fathers has highlighted two centrally important issues (e.g. Simpson *et al.*, 2003). The first is the difficulties faced by fathers in maintaining their relationships with their children after separation. Unemployment and financial problems are key, with the limited housing circumstances that follow. Unemployed fathers and those in manual occupations are more likely to lose contact with their children. Fathers who only see their children intermittently, and are distanced from the everyday events in children's lives, not only miss the intimacy of daily routines but also find discipline and control issues harder to deal with. It is much harder for them to be the 'authoritative' fathers whose children are on average less troubled.

The second issue is that fathers' accounts further underline the significance of the relationship between father and ex-partner. Around 60 per cent of the fathers in one study who rarely or never saw their children said they wished to see their children but were in dispute about contact (Simpson *et al.*, 2003). The frequency of

disputes about contact, and blaming the ex-partner for obstructing access to the children, demonstrates yet again how the relationship between father and child depends importantly on that between father and ex-partner.

### Controversies and new directions

There are clear gaps and shortcomings in research that attempts to understand what will support the relationship between non-resident fathers and their children. Sampling and selection effects are real problems: studies are likely to include only those fathers who are still in contact with their children (and that leaves out a substantial proportion – estimates vary between 11 and 40 per cent of separated fathers) and are unlikely to be representative. Informants are likely to be mothers rather than fathers, and observational methods are rarely used. A variety of techniques for getting children's perspectives on family transitions have been developed and provide predictive power in terms of later adjustment (e.g. 'family maps': Sturgess *et al.*, 2001; semi-structured interviews: Dunn & Deaker-Deckard, 2001). These accounts highlight family issues that adult accounts have missed – such as the importance of closeness to grandparents and friends.

Controversies abound. To what extent do mothers exercise 'gate-keeping' and influence their children's feelings towards their fathers? What about the protection of children who have witnessed domestic violence? The emotional history of father-child relationships before separation is rarely studied or included in research, and yet is likely to be central in the relationship with adjustment outcome. Findings on gender are mixed and inconsistent. New ideas on the significance of father absence for girls' sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy have been raised, framed within evolutionary models (Ellis *et al.*, 2003), and need further investigation.

There's clearly a great deal to be learned about how the family changes that so many children experience affect their relationships with their fathers. A general message is that this research needs to be framed within the network of family relationships, and that the impact of custody arrangements on the quality of children's relationships with all their parents deserves attention. Collaboration between psychologists and those involved

## WEBLINKS

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 Families Need Fathers: [www.fnf.org.uk](http://www.fnf.org.uk)

in the law is proving fruitful and generative (see Bainham *et al.*, 2003). Exciting new directions in this research include the use of multilevel modelling strategies that enable us to investigate differences within families in children's relationships and outcome, a focus on children's interpretation of events as mediating the effects on their adjustment, a recognition of the particular vulnerability of children in single-mother families to difficulties in their relations with their fathers, and of the difficulties faced by non-resident fathers in developing close relations with their children. The message that the relationship between child and father predicts children's well-being even if the two are in different households deserves attention from psychologists (clinical, developmental, social) and from those concerned with the law and family policies.

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