

Children's Perspectives On Relationships with Non-Resident Parents Following Parental Separation

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Introduction and Overview

Divorce and parental separation typically involve possible loss of contact or diminished contact with one parent and the potential for reduced parental availability and responsiveness. The primary aim of the present paper is to explore whether and in what way children perceive the nature of their relationships with their non-resident parents to alter, in the context of a changed family environment following parental separation. Much of the emphasis provided by previous studies of relationships with non-resident parents has been on identifying and assessing frequency of contact with these parents. Strikingly absent from these studies is a focus upon close emotional ties and experiences of security in children's relationships with parents no longer living in the family home. Drawing on the perspectives of children themselves, this qualitative study explores experiences of closeness and security with non-resident parents post-separation. Children's narratives and perspectives on quality in their relationships with non-resident parents provide us with greater insight into factors which may facilitate or obstruct positive experiences of closeness and security with non-resident parents, within the changing family situation which parental separation brings about.

Research Context

The study is based upon a wider investigation into children's experiences of parental separation (Hogan, Halpenny & Greene, 2002) conducted in the Irish Republic where divorce was introduced as recently as 1996. Little research on parental separation has been carried out in an Irish context. Consequently, we know little about the nature and quality of children's contact and interaction with non-resident parents and the picture of post-separation relationships with parents no longer living in the home, remains, to a large extent, indistinct and undefined. Much of the available information comes from studies conducted outside Ireland. Recent studies exploring relationships with non-resident parents reflect a shift beyond examining contact with these parents to focus upon more dynamic variables such as quality of interaction and parental involvement (Smith, 2004; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor & Bridges, 2004; Simpson, 1998; Pryor & Rodgers, 1998).

Method

The study adopted a qualitative, child-centred approach. Central to the framework of this research is the view that children are competent in expressing their perceptions and feelings regarding their relationships with their parents. Qualitative interviews were carried out with 40 children (aged 8-17 years) across two phases approximately two years apart, aiming to capture dynamic and evolving patterns in relationships, influenced by shifts both in the age of the participants and in the ongoing family transition which

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shaped these patterns. Such a focus on children's personal accounts of their close, emotional relationships with their parents is in keeping with the growing recognition of the need to re-introduce an emphasis on personal meaning and experience in research and the need to look at subjective experiences of children rather than attempting to objectify those experiences (Greene & Hill, 2005).

Key Findings

Contact with non-resident parents was relatively high, with approximately 65% of children seeing this parent at least once a week. The repetition and consistency of routines associated with contact with non-resident parents provided a base for relationships for the majority of children to remain secure. However, children's experiences of closeness and security with resident and non-resident parents were markedly divergent, with significantly higher levels of closeness and security recorded in relationships with resident parents compared with non-resident parents. As children elaborated on their experiences of relationships with non-resident parents, a key feature in understanding this divergence was the perceived absence for opportunities and experiences of intimacy and familiarity. Related to this finding children described feelings of greater inter-dependence and reciprocity in their accounts of relationships with resident parents than in relationships with non-resident parents. Ongoing inter-parental conflict, in particular where boundaries between child-parent and inter-parental dyads were indistinct, was also associated with less closeness and security in relationships with non-resident parents. Children's perceptions of key factors facilitating or impeding closeness and security in their relationships with their parents are outlined and discussed.

References

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