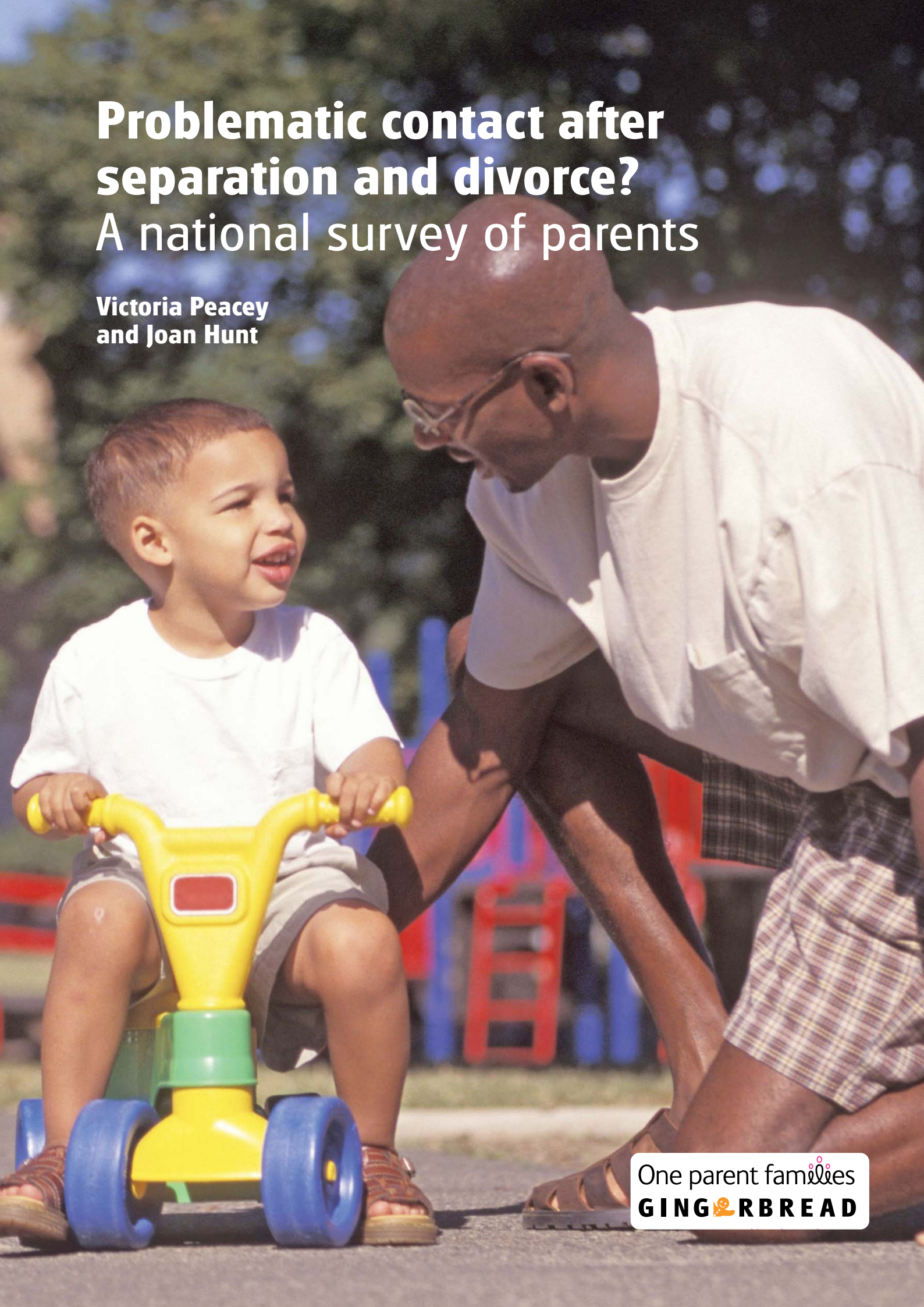
Problematic contact after separation and divorce?

A national survey of parents

Victoria Peacey and Joan Hunt



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Abbreviations used in the tables:
RP Resident parent **NRP** Non-resident parent

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Contents

1 Introduction

In families where parents have separated, children commonly live for most of the time with one parent (the resident parent). In the UK, the time they spend with the other parent (the non-resident parent) is now known as 'contact', although the older term 'access' is still sometimes used, while some organisations representing non-resident parents argue that a better description would be the more neutral term 'parenting time'. In some other jurisdictions, the preferred descriptor is 'visitation'. Contact is the word used throughout this report.

The study

This report sets out the findings of the first stage of a project exploring the nature and extent of contact problems in the general population of separated families and their relationship to contact patterns. This involved a quantitative, nationwide, face-to-face survey of 559 separated parents. The survey addressed the following questions:

1 What proportion of the separated population have experienced and are currently experiencing problems with contact?

2 What is the nature of these problems and their respective (reported) incidence?

3 Are there any broad differences between parents reporting and not reporting problems and the nature of the problems reported (e.g. gender, previous relationship status, years since separation, age of child)?

4 Is there a relationship between the problems reported, or their absence, and whether contact is continuing, its type and frequency?

5 What is the balance between problems being resolved and contact taking place: contact continuing but problems persisting and problems only ceasing because contact has ceased?

6 What proportion of non-resident parents allege contact denial or obstruction? What proportion of resident parents say they have stopped contact?

7 What proportion of resident parents perceive lack of commitment to contact on the part of the non-resident parent to be a significant problem?

8 What proportion of parents reporting contact problems have been involved in court proceedings/used professional advice?

The second stage of the project, which is still underway, involves qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of parents and children. A second report will be published which integrates the findings of the two stages.

Background to the research

Parental separation affects around three million of the twelve million children in the UK (DCA, DfES, DTI, 2004). Research indicates that while many children will experience short-term distress around the time of the break-up (Richards and Dyson,

1982), most are resilient (Kelly, 2000). Some, however, have long-term problems of adjustment (Amato and Keith, 1991; Buchanan and Ten Brinke, 1997).

Children's adjustment after parental separation is affected by a complex interplay of diverse factors (Kelly, 2000). One of the protective factors is a positive ongoing relationship with the non-resident parent (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). This can be misinterpreted as meaning that contact, *per se*, is a good thing, whereas the weight of research tends to show that it is the nature and quality of parenting by the non-resident parent that is crucial (Gilmore, 2006; Hunt, 2004).

Moreover some contact can be very damaging. In addition to the obvious risks from an abusive or neglectful non-resident parent, or being affected, directly or indirectly by domestic violence, research particularly highlights the more subtle dangers to children of being caught up in parental conflict (Harold and Murch, 2005).

Since it is impossible to maintain any relationship unless parent and child are in touch with each other, public policy has increasingly sought to promote contact. The Green Paper *Parental Separation: Children's Needs and Parents' Responsibilities*, for instance, states that the government 'firmly believes that both parents should continue to have a meaningful relationship with their child after separation, as long as it is safe' (DCA/DfES/DTI, 2004). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights both support the rights of the child – and in the case of the latter, the rights of the parent – to have contact. Unlike some other jurisdictions, there is no statutory presumption of contact in the Children Act, 1989, the key piece of legislation, which is based solely on the welfare principle, i.e. the paramountcy of the best interests of the child. However, where parents who cannot agree about contact take their disputes to court they are likely to encounter a strong pro-contact stance (Bailey-Harris et al, 1999). Indeed in their desire to secure contact for children, it is acknowledged that the courts have sometimes taken insufficient account of risks to children and parents (Advisory Board on Family Law, 1999).

Despite this strong emphasis on the potential value of contact there are many children who lose touch with their non-resident parent. Estimates, however, vary wildly across the various studies (Hunt, 2004) from less than 10 per cent (Attwood, et al, 2003) to 40 per cent (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991). This highest figure, however, is somewhat outdated, was based on a low response rate, and has not been supported by more recent research. Most estimates of the proportion of children who lose contact altogether conclude that the figure is around 30 per cent.

In the past, the primary explanation for lack of contact tended to be framed in terms of non-resident parents failing to keep in touch – the 'deadbeat dad' stereotype. Recent research indicates that this is still perceived to be a factor behind some cases where there is no contact (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003; Bradshaw et al, 1999; Eekelaar et al, 2000; Smart et al, 2005; Stark et al, 2001; Trinder et al, 2002; Wikeley, 2001). A nationally representative study by the Office for National Statistics, for instance, notes that among the minority of resident parents who were dissatisfied with contact, 31 per cent wanted more contact to be taking place (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). Similarly, a court-based study of contact disputes reports more resident mothers complaining that fathers failed to exercise the contact they had been awarded than non-resident fathers who complained about contact being thwarted (Smart et al, 2005). The failure to exercise contact has never been addressed in public policy and has been described as a 'invisible' problem (Smart et al, 2005).

In contrast, a competing explanation, obstruction by a hostile resident parent, is currently attracting considerable public and policy attention. The Children and Adoption Act 2006, for example, gives courts wider powers to prevent and deal with non-compliance with court orders. Opposition parties have sought more fundamental reform, a presumption of 'reasonable contact', with the aim of preventing contact denial by strengthening community expectations of substantial involvement by both parents in post-separation parenting.

Research with non-resident fathers in the UK reports that they perceive contact obstruction to be a common experience and a major reason for contact breakdown (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Mitchell, 1985; Lund, 1987; Kruk, 1993; Simpson et al, 1995; Wikely, 2001). Almost half the non-resident fathers with no contact in one study (Bradshaw et al, 1999) attributed this to the mother's unreasonable obstruction. While resident parents are less likely to acknowledge such behaviour, there is some evidence that these perceptions are not entirely illusory. 'Instances' are reported in several recent UK studies (Pearce et al, 1999; Smart et al, 1997; Smart et al, 2005), and a quarter of resident parents in a US study (Braver et al, 1991) admitted undermining or denying contact at some point, although it is not clear whether these figures refer to occasional or short-term denial or to entrenched resistance.

Little is known about the circumstances which give rise to contact resistance and the extent to which it might be deemed warranted. It has been variously attributed to genuinely held concerns about the behaviour of the non-resident parent; denial of the value of fathers to children; a means of retaliation; a form of mental disturbance; a response to chronic conflict, or a history of unreliable or unsatisfactory contact (Day Sclater and Kaganas, 2003; Kressel 1985; Mitchell, 1985; Pearson and Thoennes, 1998; Perry et al, 1992; Rhoades, 2002; Strategic Partners, 1998; Trinder et al, 2002; Turkat, 1997; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

While both the 'deadbeat dad' and the 'obstructive mother' paradigms probably contain an element of truth, in most instances the reality is likely to be far more complex. What is very clear from research is that establishing and maintaining satisfactory contact arrangements can present major challenges to both resident and non-resident parents and to their children (Bainham et al, 2003; Bradshaw et al, 1999; Smart et al, 2001; Trinder et al, 2002).

Quantitative research shows that some factors are consistently associated with ongoing contact: the parents having previously been married rather than cohabiting or never having lived together; a cooperative post-separation relationship between the parents; the child wanting contact; the non-resident parent living within a reasonable travelling distance of the child; the non-resident parent being in employment, having a higher income and education, paying child support and not having further children (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001).

As Trinder's work has shown, however, (Trinder et al, 2002) the fact that contact is *happening* does not necessarily mean that it is *working*. She defines 'working' contact as arrangements where: contact occurs without risk of physical or psychological harm to any party; parents and children are committed to contact and broadly satisfied with the current arrangements; and, on the whole, contact is a positive experience for all concerned. A wide range of factors were considered to influence the extent to which contact 'worked'. There were direct determinants (commitment to contact, role clarity, relationship quality); challenges (the nature of the separation,

new adult partners, money, logistics, parenting style and quality, safety issues); mediating factors which influenced how challenges were handled (beliefs about contact, relationship skills, the involvement of family, friends and external agencies). All these interacted over time. Trinder concluded that no single ingredient was responsible for making contact work or not work. It was the attitudes, actions and interactions of all family members that were determinative. Making contact work required the commitment of both adults and children. An important feature of successful arrangements was a parental 'bargain' whereby resident parents positively facilitated, rather than simply allowed, contact while, for their part, non-resident parents accepted their contact status.

Only 10 per cent of parents living apart in the UK have been to court to resolve disputes over contact (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). Those who do are likely to have experienced multiple problems. Trinder's study of litigating parents (Trinder et al, 2005) reports that, when they were asked to identify which out of 14 potential problems they had experienced, very few parents selected only one or two; the average was seven, with little difference between mothers and fathers.

The vast majority of separated parents, however, do not go to court over contact. Where contact is not taking place it seems likely that at least some problems have been experienced. But what about the others? Trinder has shown that even 'working' contact is not necessarily problem-free but can involve significant tension between the adults and that non-working contact does not necessarily come to court (Trinder et al, 2002). In the ONS study (Blackwell and Dawe, 2004) only between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of the parents had agreed arrangements and around three in ten were dissatisfied with the current position. This suggests that a fairly substantial proportion of the separated population may be experiencing contact problems at any one time and even more may go through a period when contact is problematic. A community study of divorcing parents in the US measured the prevalence of specified contact difficulties at three time-points in a large population of divorcing parents (Wolchik et al, 1996). Problems were found to be extremely common at all three points. The overwhelming majority of residential parents reported several problems, as did a smaller, but still substantial percentage of non-residential parents.

This project builds on the studies by Trinder and Wolchik to explore the incidence and nature of contact problems in the general UK separating population. It seeks to address a major gap in our knowledge of contact issues and thus make an informed contribution to the debate in this vital but controversial and emotive area of policy. A better understanding of which problems are widely experienced, and which problems are likely to affect contact, can only help in the design and delivery of services for children and separated parents and the development of public policy. Parents themselves can also benefit from an understanding of how problems affect contact and how the effects can perhaps be mitigated.

2 Methodology

The Omnibus survey

The data presented here comes from the responses of 559 parents to questions placed on the ONS Omnibus Survey. The survey was conducted in six waves, between July 2006 and March 2007.

The Omnibus survey is a multi-purpose social survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics. It uses random probability sampling stratified to obtain good coverage of Great Britain. Government departments, agencies and academics are able to purchase space on the survey to put their own questions to respondents. A typical wave of the Omnibus includes questions on between five to eight topics, plus questions which obtain a constant core of demographic and income data. (Further details on sample design are in Appendix 1.) Each 'module' is expected to take up no more than ten minutes.

Interviews take place face-to-face in the respondent's home or occasionally over the telephone. Interviewers use Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) to go through the survey and enter responses. The programme determines questions based on previous answers so that interviewees are only asked questions relevant to their circumstances. For some topics, respondents are invited to read the questions on the computer screen and enter their answers themselves directly into the computer. While this can increase error slightly it is useful when exploring sensitive issues. Respondents to our module on contact were invited to read the questions on-screen and enter their own answers, and 68 per cent of those who completed the questions on contact chose to do this. The remainder listened to the questions read out by the interviewer and the interviewer entered their responses.

Appendix 2 contains the questionnaire used. Resident and non-resident parents were asked broadly similar questions with some changes in wording where appropriate. In some cases questions were altered after the first wave, where preliminary analysis revealed that the data structure could be improved. Changes to the questionnaire are noted in Appendix 2.

The survey interviews only one adult per household. This means that the chance of selection is partly dependent on household size – people living in a large household are less likely to be selected than people who live on their own. A weighting factor is applied to counteract this (see further details in Appendix 1). Where percentage figures are presented in this report they have always been weighted with this factor. Bases are unweighted and as such represent the real number of respondents whose answers are depicted. For this reason we do not normally present the numbers against each percentage.

Respondents were asked about the contact arrangements and experiences of contact relating to one child only. Occasionally a respondent was both a resident parent for one child and a non-resident parent for another. These parents were asked about the child that they did not live with.[1] Parents who said that they shared the care of the child more or less equally were not asked further questions.

1 If there was more than one child there was no opportunity for respondents to choose which child they would discuss – the instructions were to answer in relation to the child whose first name was first in the alphabet. Randomising the selection after gathering details of all relevant children would have been difficult and time-consuming.

Rationale for selecting an Omnibus survey over other options

The decision to use an Omnibus survey was taken after thoroughly exploring other ways to obtain a representative sample of resident and non-resident parents in a cost-effective and timely way. Of the alternatives, a dedicated survey, using longer face-to-face interviews, would have been ideal, but since we estimated that the target group probably represented at most less than 20 per cent of the population, the costs were likely to be prohibitive (Bradshaw et al, 1999). While less costly, a random telephone survey has serious disadvantages in that firstly, not everyone has a landline, and mobile numbers are not accessible, and secondly, the generally lower response rates for telephone surveys might be particularly low for this sensitive subject. We considered tapping into existing surveys such as the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) or the Millennium Cohort. However, both are cohort surveys; ALSPAC does not include non-resident parents and the Millennium Cohort is only beginning to do so (and of course the children involved are still very young).

The most difficult decision was whether to use the Omnibus as a survey, i.e. a module on contact, supplemented by qualitative interviews, or purely as a screening tool to identify eligible parents, with all data being collected through telephone interviews (face-to-face being too costly for large numbers). The principal advantage of the first option was the likely high response rate to the contact module. ONS' experience is that once participants have agreed to be interviewed for the whole Omnibus survey, only a small proportion refuse individual modules (the contact study carried out by ONS for the Department for Constitutional Affairs (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003) obtained a 90 per cent response rate). Our reservations were the constraints of time (ten minutes maximum per module) and the cost per question. Also, the module would run alongside others on entirely different topics and participants might find moving onto such a sensitive subject difficult.

We did, therefore, explore the possibility of using the Omnibus purely to identify a sample. The main advantage of this option would be the longer time available for interview. In the end, however, we concluded that this benefit was substantially outweighed by the principal disadvantage: that the response rate is likely to be less than half that of the first option. ONS, for example, ran a screening survey on the Omnibus for a disability study. Only 62 per cent of respondents agreed to be re-contacted. There would be further drop out at re-contact stage. Bradshaw et al (1999) used both options in their study of non-resident fathers. The first (a module in the Omnibus with on the spot interviews) had a 56 per cent response rate. In contrast, when a (commercial) omnibus was used merely to recruit participants for interview only 40 per cent agreed to be re-contacted and interviews were achieved with only 30 per cent. Further, when MacLean and Eekelaar (1997) used an omnibus to recruit separated parents, a third were found to have wrongly identified themselves. Thus, though the achieved sample would be drawn from a representative sampling pool, we would have no way of checking how biased it was in terms of the characteristics of our target group. As this would seriously compromise the main purpose of the study, namely to obtain statistically robust estimates on the prevalence of contact problems in the population, we decided to use the ONS Omnibus as the survey vehicle despite the constraints it imposed (see below).

The questionnaire

The questionnaire was devised in consultation with our advisory group, which consisted of experts in family law, contact issues, and family policy. The advice of the research team on the Omnibus survey was also invaluable. A gap of several months was scheduled between the first and second waves of the survey to allow for preliminary analysis of the data and discussion about whether the questionnaire was achieving the aims of the project. Some changes were made to the questionnaire after the first wave. The changes were not extensive, focusing mainly on new questions for parents whose child had no contact, and are detailed on a copy of the questionnaire in Appendix 2. In some cases, the changes to the questionnaire, however, mean that the data for July 2006 is not comparable and not included, and this is clearly noted in tables and figures.

Response rates

Response rates to the Omnibus survey as a whole varied between 61 per cent and 68 per cent in the months when our questions were asked – a reasonable response for this type of research – and are detailed in Appendix 1. Response rates to the module on contact were slightly lower (64 per cent) as respondents were able to refuse to answer these questions while taking part in the rest of the survey. Appendix 1 looks briefly at those people who declined to answer questions about children living apart from them on contact. Non-resident parents' response rates were lower than hoped and this is discussed below.

Limitations of the methodology

As explained in a preceding section, our decision to use the Omnibus survey was taken after a careful weighing of the respective merits of the alternatives. We are, nevertheless, very aware of the constraints it imposed on the study, most notably the fact that we were restricted to a single module, which could not exceed ten minutes in length. Moreover, the costs were related to the number and type of questions, with those which invited a multiple response being more expensive than those which did not. It was necessary, therefore, to make some hard decisions about the topics which the survey would cover and which it would have to leave out.

The main aim of the survey was to ascertain the nature and extent of contact problems. Thus, we had to take a 'problem-focused' approach to designing the questionnaire which meant that many positive, unproblematic experiences of contact remain unexplored. We were particularly interested in what problems have been experienced, and whether these problems had affected contact. We were also interested in instances where the resident or non-resident parent had stopped contact. Areas that we were unable to include because of concentrating on these issues included: the effect of distance on contact, the frequency and nature of indirect contact, the nature and history of any child welfare concerns, satisfaction with aspects of contact other than frequency, child maintenance payments and the effect of problems on children. Our expert advisory group were able to assist us with the areas to focus on, although the responsibility for the final decisions rests with ourselves.

The Omnibus survey design also restricted the type of question that could be asked: 'open-ended' questions were not permitted. Thus, many of the questions dealing with a complex area had to be designed as multiple-choice answers, although an open response may have produced a more diverse range of replies. To some extent, results will be shaped by our early decisions over what to include as answer options, although in most cases we were able to include an 'other; please specify' option. The decisions about answer categories were given a lot of thought and again we benefited here from very useful suggestions from our expert advisory group.

Parents with more than one child were asked about the situation relating to one child only. There were good reasons for gathering data on only one child: repeating the set of questions for each child would have quickly become wearing for respondents with two or more children; it would have added significantly to the costs of the survey; and would have reduced the time available for other questions. However, it does mean that caution is needed when we discuss the results. We did not ask about every child in a family and parents' responses may be different when asked about different children, especially if they have children with more than one partner.

The questionnaire focuses on face-to-face or direct contact only. Indirect contact (letters, phone calls, emails, etc.) is also important for children and parents, especially where non-resident parents live far from their children, but we were limited in the number of questions we could ask and felt that direct contact was of greater importance for the study.

Early in the design of the survey, we decided against including questions for respondents who said they shared the child's care equally with the other parent. We expected that these parents would be a very small minority and that their situation was so different to the usual pattern of resident parent/non-resident parent care that many of the questions would require extensive re-wording. Given the financial limitations on the survey, we felt that investigating these parents further could not be a priority and they were excluded from the module as soon as an early question revealed that they were 'shared-care' parents. However, as discussed below, an unexpectedly high proportion of parents said that they shared care more or less equally, and unfortunately we lack useful information on these respondents. The report thus largely excludes these shared-care parents and as such cannot represent the experience of all separated parents.

This survey is also subject to the same shortcomings and sources of error as most survey research, including for example:

- Some individuals are selected for the survey but choose not to take part – this may mean participants are not representative of the whole population (discussed further below);
- Respondents who do take part are not obliged to be honest or accurate;
- Respondents may give inaccurate answers to present themselves in a good light or to comply with social norms;
- Respondents may misunderstand the interviewer's questions, or their answers may not be accurately recorded.

Questions about contact may be subject to additional pressures, which we were not able to measure. Contact arrangements can affect the child maintenance payments which the non-resident parent owes to the resident parent. At present the Child

Support Agency reduces the payment in stages if the non-resident parent cares for the child overnight once a week or more, on a regular basis. This may lead some resident parents to understate the amount of 'staying' contact and, vice versa, may cause some non-resident parents to exaggerate the frequency of overnight stays. Where the care of the child is shared equally, only one parent is entitled to Child Benefit and the benefits which are tied to this, and this may mean that some parents who do in fact share care would answer 'the child lives mainly or entirely with me' at the question checking for shared care.

Throughout this report we compare resident parents' answers with those of non-resident parents. However the two groups differ on other important dimensions as well as by their parent status. This is discussed further in Appendix 1.

Non-resident parent response rates

While designing the questionnaire, we were aware of previous research which has found much lower response rates among non-resident parents compared with resident parents (e.g. Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). We were concerned to avoid this as far as possible and carefully considered both the introduction to the survey and the question which established whether the respondent had any children living apart from them. The introduction to the module on contact stated:

> The next questions are asked on behalf of Oxford University and the charity One Parent Families. They are about children whose parents have split up and do not live together. As I said at the beginning of the questionnaire, all your answers are confidential.

Parents were then asked:

> Sometimes parents find it hard to talk about children who do not live with them, but we really need to hear from all separated parents so we can represent their views. Can I just check, do you have any children under 17 who don't live with you but live with their other parent for all or most of the time?

Thus we reiterated the promise of confidentiality, indicated that the questions were not being asked for the government, and acknowledged the importance of gathering non-resident parent's views and experiences. We hoped that this would help reduce the problem of low response rates among non-resident parents.

In the event, however, only 30 per cent of the respondents to the survey (169) were non-resident parents. One possible reason for this lower response rate could be that some men are unaware that they have fathered children. We think this is unlikely to be a significant factor – only 2 per cent of resident mothers in the survey said the father was unaware of the child's existence. Assuming that this means that 98 per cent of all non-resident fathers know that they have a child, lack of awareness is not an adequate explanation for the inclusion of over twice as many resident as non-resident parents.[2]

In principle, therefore, the sample should have included roughly equal numbers of resident and non-resident parents. Since this was not the case and, given that there is nothing in the sample design that would explain the difference, it must be mainly due to different response rates for resident and non-resident parents. Possible explanations for this include:

2 Resident parents who were widowed were identified in the initial questions and screened out; the relative high number of resident parents is not due to the inclusion of widow/ers.

- **A general problem with male response rates to surveys**
  Resident parents are overwhelmingly female; non-resident parents male. Analysis of demographic data on respondents to the whole Omnibus survey for the waves in which our module was included shows that for the age range 16–52, 56 per cent of respondents were women.[3]

- **A low response rate to the whole Omnibus survey amongst divorced and separated men**
  Marital status also had a noticeable effect on men's participation in the whole survey. In the waves which included our questions, of the divorced respondents in the 16–52 age group only 36 per cent were male, and 33 per cent of those who were separated from marriage were male. In other words, in the relevant age group there were nearly twice as many female respondents who were separated than male, and nearly twice as many divorced female respondents than male. This affects our survey because non-resident parents are largely divorced or separated men.

- **A lower response rate among never-married non-resident parents**
  The numbers of male and female never-married respondents in the overall survey were roughly equivalent (48 per cent of never-married respondents were male, 52 per cent were female)[4]. However, female resident parents were more likely to be never-married than male non-resident parents (49 per cent of female resident parents, 117, were never-married, compared with 28 per cent of male non-resident parents, 40).[5] It seems, therefore, that while never-married men were not really less likely to respond to the survey in general, never-married non-resident parents were disproportionately reluctant to take part, either in the whole survey or to our section of it. This relates to the next point:

- **Reluctance of some respondents to identify themselves as non-resident parents**
  Despite our assurances at the outset, some non-resident parents may have felt wary of disclosing information to interviewers who did after all work for the Office for National Statistics, a Government agency. The Child Support Agency is unpopular amongst many non-resident parents and they may have been concerned about identifying themselves, given that they had already supplied details of work arrangements and salary.

  Non-resident parents may also have declined to identify themselves because they did not want to talk about their relationship with their child, perhaps because it was a painful topic, or because they felt the questions were likely to be too intrusive. Non-resident parents could either deny having children living apart from them at all, in which case we have no way of identifying them, or they could have stated that they did have children elsewhere but then declined to answer further questions (just three people did this).

- **Particular reluctance of non-resident parents with no contact to take part**
  As can be seen from Table 2.1, where contact was taking place the ratio of resident to non-resident parent respondents was fairly constant, at around two-thirds to one-third. Where there was no contact at all, however, there was a very marked difference, with only 15 per cent of parents being non-resident. Again this may have been too painful an area to be discussed with strangers.

3 98 per cent of resident parents who took part in the survey were aged 52 or below, as were 94 per cent of the non-resident parents.

4 Based on respondents aged 16–52.

5 Excluding female non-resident parents and male resident parents.

Table 2.1: Proportions of parent types in each contact frequency band

How often does contact happen?	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Total (%)	Unweighted base
At least once a week	64	36	100	208
At least once a month but less often than once a week	65	35	100	102
Less often than once a month	65	35	100	85
No contact	85	15	100	161
Total (%)	70	30	100	556

Unweighted base and unweighted figures.

We would conclude that the comparatively low numbers of non-resident parents taking part in our survey is largely driven by three main factors, which probably overlap to some degree:

- the overall lower response rate to the whole survey for men, particularly divorced and separated men;
- a low response rate among never-married single men with children living apart from them, which may or may not be specific to our questionnaire;
- the reluctance of non-resident parents with no contact to take part in our study.

The third factor means that the survey included very few non-resident parents who said they had no contact with their child (20). This low base does present this analysis with some problems when we discuss parents whose child has no contact, and in general the data from non-resident parents without contact should be treated with caution.

Respondents to the survey: a profile

The main difference between the resident and non-resident parents surveyed is gender. As expected, resident parents were nearly always female and non-resident parents nearly always male, a statistically significant difference.[6] The gender difference was less marked among parents who reported that they were sharing care more or less equally, 28 per cent of whom were male (Table 2.2).

Non-resident parents were more likely to have re-partnered than resident parents (68 per cent of non-resident parents were living with a partner, compared to 29 per cent of resident parents).* Resident parents were less likely to have ever been married (41 per cent of resident parents had never married compared with 27 per cent of non-resident parents* with shared-care parents again being in the middle (34 per cent). However, in terms of the legal status of their relationship with the other parent of their child, there was no notable difference in responses, with approximately equal proportions of resident and non-resident parents having been married, cohabiting, or not living together, with the child's other parent. This information was not available for the shared care group.

6 In the remaining text, an asterisk indicates that the difference was found to be statistically significant at the $p<0.05$ level, using a chi-square or t-test as appropriate.

Table 2.2: Characteristics of survey respondents

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Shared-care parent report (%)
Sex			
Male	9	87	28
Female	91	13	72
Total (%)	100	100	100
Marital status			
Single, never married	41	27	34
Married, living with spouse	16	29	14
Married, separated from spouse	14	14	25
Divorced	29	30	26
Total (%)	100	100	100
Partnership status			
Living with someone as a couple	29	68	Not asked
Relationship with child's other parent			
Married	41	44	Not asked
Cohabiting outside marriage	18	14	Not asked
In a relationship but not cohabiting	9	6	Not asked
Brief relationship or no relationship	32	36	Not asked
Total (%)	100	100	
Child age			
0–4	17	14	Not asked
5–9	23	22	Not asked
10–13	28	25	Not asked
14–16	32	38	Not asked
Total (%)	100	100	
Age			
30 or under	22	15	14
31–40	38	40	39
41 or over	40	46	47
Total (%)	100	100	100
Educational qualifications			
None, or low GCSE	25	38	22
Good GCSE	34	25	38
A level or equivalent	20	15	16
Above A level	21	21	24
Total (%)	100	100	100
Employment status			
Working	64	77	75
Not working	36	23	25
Total (%)	100	100	100
Tenure type			
Own outright / with mortgage	43	52	53
Social renter	42	27	36
Private renter	15	21	11
Total (%)	100	100	100
Ethnic background			
White British / White other	91	89	85
Any other background	9	11	15
Total (%)	100	100	100
Base	390	171	76

Figures weighted for household size. Weights calculated separately for each parent type.

Overall, the children of the non-resident parent group appeared slightly older than those in the resident parent group (median 12 years old vs.11 years), although this was not statistically significant. The parents themselves also differed in age, with non-resident parents tending to be older (median age 40 years, compared with 38 years for resident parents), although this was not statistically significant. The median age for the shared-care parents was 39; unfortunately, we did not collect data on children's age from the shared-care parents.

Resident parents were more likely to have good GCSEs (or equivalent) or above than non-resident parents (38 per cent of non-resident parents did not have qualifications at this level, compared to 25 per cent of resident parents).* Parents with shared care were very similar to resident parents in this respect (78 per cent having good GCSE's or above).

Resident parents were less likely to be in paid work than non-resident parents (64 per cent compared with 77 per cent of non-resident parents,* three-quarters (75 per cent) of those with shared care were in paid work but this difference was not significant. Resident parents were also less likely to own or be buying their home (43 per cent compared to 52 per cent of non-resident parents)*. Over half of shared-care parents (53 per cent) owned or were buying their home but this difference was not significant.

3 Patterns of contact

Key findings

- Between 9 per cent and 17 per cent of parents shared the care of the child equally, or nearly equally, with the other parent.
- Fifty-two per cent of resident parents said they either share the care of the child equally, or that the child stays over with the other parent sometimes. Sixty-five per cent of non-resident parents said there is overnight contact.
- Forty-four per cent of resident parents said their child either splits their time equally, or sees their other parent at least weekly.
- However, 29 per cent of resident parents said that their child never sees their other parent, and 20 per cent of all resident parents said that their child has not seen their other parent since separation.
- Two per cent of all resident mothers said that their child's father does not know the child exists.
- Overall, non-resident parents tended to report more frequent contact, and more overnight contact, than resident parents.

The difficulties of capturing contact arrangements

The amount of detail we were able to capture about contact arrangements was necessarily limited. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Omnibus Survey does not permit open-ended questions, and including sufficient specific questions to present a comprehensive picture would have taken up a significant portion of the module and resulted in insufficient time to cover the rest of the topics which were our primary focus. Hence we confined ourselves to asking:

- whether parents had a shared care arrangement;
- whether there had ever been contact and whether it was currently occurring;
- how frequently contact was taking place at present;
- whether the frequency changed during holiday periods;
- whether the child ever had overnight contact.

We are aware that these measures cannot capture the full variety of contact arrangements. For example, a child who spends a few consecutive days each month with their non-resident parent, and a child who sees their other parent for an hour a month, would both fall into the 'at least once a month' category. The questions about overnight and holiday contact are an attempt to add some more detail to the responses.

Shared care

At the beginning of the questionnaire respondents were asked a question to identify those separated parents who were managing a shared care arrangement. The question was carefully phrased as follows and used a strict definition of shared care:

> Does the child split their time more or less evenly between you and the other parent? Caring for the child for one or two days and nights per week does not count as an even split. Please only answer yes if you each look after the child for three or more days and nights per week, or for around half the year each overall.

We were surprised at the results, which found that 12 per cent (unweighted) of all respondents who answered this question said 'yes, there is an even split'. Seventy-eight per cent (unweighted) of the parents who said that there was an even split were female.

This estimate may be flawed as an estimate of the prevalence of shared care arrangements in the population, because of the low response rates among non-resident parents (discussed in Chapter 2). If the survey had included as many non-resident parents as resident, as it would have done if response rates had been equivalent, this 12 per cent figure would be reduced to 9 per cent (unweighted). An alternative way of thinking about shared care arrangements may be to consider shared-care parents as a type of resident parent, given that they are conceptually more similar to resident than to non-resident parents. If shared-care parents are grouped with resident parents, they form 17 per cent of all resident parents.[7]

Even if we take the lowest estimate of shared care, 9 per cent, this is still an unexpectedly high figure which needs to be tested in further research.

Parents who said they shared the care of the child evenly were not asked any of the other questions in the module. The reasons for excluding this group were, first, that we felt that they were a special case, worthy of a more in-depth investigation than we were able to conduct given the constraints on the study, and secondly, that they were likely to distort the data on contact. Had we anticipated that a substantial proportion of parents would report shared care, however, we would certainly have sought to gather more details on this type of arrangement.

Having taken that decision, however, the consequence is that for many of the topics covered by this report, we have no data on parents with shared care and they are therefore excluded from the analysis. We have, however, tried to take account of this group wherever practicable. It is particularly important to bear them in mind when considering the overall patterns of contact in the population of separated families. As we report later in this chapter, at the other end of the spectrum there were many families where a parent said that there was no contact at all between the child and their non-resident parent. One hundred and thirty-two resident parents reported this (35 per cent of those who were not sharing care), as did 24 non-resident parents (15 per cent of those without shared care) (Table 3.1, below). However, if we include the families with shared care, (treating those parents who reported shared care as resident parents), then the proportion of resident parents who state that their child has no contact decreases to 29 per cent.[8]

7 This 17 per cent figure weights shared-care parents in the same way as resident parents, depending on the number of adults in the household – see Appendix 1 for weighting details.

8 Parents with shared care are included in the group of resident parents for two reasons: firstly, because they are conceptually more similar to resident parents than non-resident parents. Secondly, the response rate of resident parents was much higher than non-resident and thus their answers are more likely to give an accurate picture of contact arrangements in the population. Shared-care parents are weighted in the same way as resident parents in the calculation of the 29 per cent figure.

Contact type and frequency

Our data on contact type and frequency comes from two questions:

How often do you/does the other parent see the child (during school term-time)?[9]

- Every day or nearly every day
- At least once a week
- At least once a fortnight
- At least once a month
- Less often than once a month but more than just a few times a year
- A few times a year
- Once or twice a year
- Only see child during the school holidays
- Not seen child in the last year but there has been contact in the past [10]
- Not seen child since separation/relationship ended

How often do you/does the other parent look after your child overnight?[11]

- Never
- Once or twice a year
- Only in the school holidays/a few times a year but not as often as once a month
- At least once a month
- At least once a week

As Table 3.1 shows, there was a clear disparity between the reports of resident and non-resident parents regarding whether there was any face-to-face contact and also whether there was overnight contact. Over a third of resident parents said that their child does not see their other parent at all, whereas less than a sixth of non-resident parents said they had no contact. Reports of overnight contact also differed considerably, with non-resident parents being much more likely to report that the child stays overnight with them (65 per cent vs 42 per cent of resident parents*).[12] These are large differences and demonstrate how vital it is to treat the answers of resident and non-resident parents separately in this type of research.

Table 3.1: Contact type

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report including shared care (%)
No contact	35	15	29
Visiting contact	23	20	19
Overnight contact	42	65	35
Shared care	–	–	17
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	389	167	465

Base: All parents.

9 'During school term-time' was asked only for those parents whose child was four or over.

10 Parents who said that there had been no contact in the last year are included in the 'no contact' group. This may slightly overestimate the proportion of families without contact as it is possible that contact does happen in some of these families but is extremely intermittent.

11 This question was only asked for parents who replied at the previous question that there was some contact at present.

12 Chi-square test significant at 0.05 level.

The importance of looking at responses separated by parent type is further underlined by Table 3.2, which looks at contact frequency. Excluding parents with shared care, resident parent responses split roughly into thirds; about a third reported no face-to-face contact, about a third frequent contact (at least once a week) and the remaining third said that contact falls somewhere in between – it happens, but less often than weekly. Non-resident parents were significantly more likely to report contact at least once a week, and to report that there was any contact at all.[13]*

Nearly half (46 per cent) of all non-resident parents said that they saw their child at least once a week, whereas only 34 per cent of resident parents said that contact was this frequent. Roughly similar proportions of each type of parent reported contact taking place less often than weekly.

If we include the shared-care parents in the group of resident parents, the proportion of children with either shared care or at least weekly contact rises to 44 per cent (from 34 per cent when shared-care parents are not included), and the proportion of children with no face-to-face contact falls to 29 per cent (from 35 per cent).

However, if we look solely at those parents who said that their child does have contact (Table 3.3), it is interesting to note that here, reports of contact frequency do not vary very much by parent type. Once the no-contact families are excluded, a similar proportion of resident and non-resident parents said that contact is at least weekly (52 per cent resident; 54 per cent non-resident parents); that contact is at least monthly (28 per cent; 23 per cent); and that contact is less frequent than once a month (21 per cent; 23 per cent). This tends to suggest that the discrepancy in the

Table 3.2: Contact frequency

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report including shared care (%)
Shared care	–	–	17
Every day or nearly every day	7	8	5
At least once a week	27	39	22
Not shared but at least weekly (grouped)	***34***	***46***	***27***
At least once a fortnight	11	12	9
At least once a month	7	8	6
Less than fortnightly but at least monthly (grouped)	***18***	***20***	***15***
Less often than once a month	10	8	7
Once or twice a year	3	11	3
Less often than monthly (grouped)	***13***	***19***	***10***
No contact	35	15	29
Total	100	100	100
Unweighted base	389	167	465

Base: All parents.

13 Chi-square test, $p<0.05$.

Table 3.3: Contact frequency: where any contact is taking place

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report including shared care (%)
Shared care	–	–	25
Every day or nearly every day	10	9	8
Not every day or nearly every day, but at least once a week	42	45	31
Not shared care, but at least once a week (grouped)	***52***	***54***	***39***
Not once a week but at least once a fortnight	17	14	12
Not once a fortnight but at least once a month	11	9	8
Not as much as once a week, but at least once a month (grouped)	***28***	***23***	***20***
Less often than once a month but more than once or twice a year	16	10	10
Once or twice a year	5	13	5
Less often than once a month (grouped)	***21***	***23***	***15***
Total	100	100	100
Unweighted base	257	143	333

Base: All parents whose child has contact with their non-resident parent.

reports of the two parent groups does not stem from one over-reporting and the other under-reporting contact frequency, but that non-resident parents without contact are substantially under-represented in the survey – a point raised in Chapter 2 (see Table 2.1).

Families without contact

Table 3.4 presents data from the parents who said that contact was not taking place, although it is limited by a low number of non-resident parents without contact. Again we find a discrepancy in the accounts of resident and non-resident parents, although this did not reach statistical significance. While nearly two-thirds of resident parents said there had been no contact since the parental relationship ended, just over half the non-resident parents reported this. Only one-third of resident parents said that there had previously been contact which had since lapsed. A few resident parents (8: 6 per cent of those whose child had no contact) said that the other parent did not know of the child's existence.

If these eight resident mothers are calculated as a percentage of all mothers who either have residence or shared care, it works out at two per cent. We believe this to be the first estimate of the proportion of separated UK families where the father does not know of a child's existence.

Table 3.4: Families without contact

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Not seen child in the last year but there has been contact in the past	32	46
Not seen child since relationship ended	63	54
Other parent is not aware of the child	6	–
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	132	24*

Base: Parents whose child does not have contact.
*Caution necessary due to low base

It is interesting to look briefly at those parents who said there had been no contact since the end of the relationship, although this is only possible for the resident parents as there were so few non-resident parents who reported no contact. A comparison of the families where there has never been contact, with those families where contact has ceased, shows some significant differences.[14] Thus, compared with families where there had been some contact but this had ceased, resident parents in families where there had never been any contact were:

- more likely to be younger* (31 per cent were 30 or under, compared to 12 per cent of those where there had been contact but this had ceased);
- less likely to be in work* (only 47 per cent were working compared to 74 per cent of the 'ceased-contact' parents);
- less likely to have been married to their child's other parent* (25 per cent had been married compared to 44 per cent of 'ceased-contact' parents);
- less likely to have good educational qualifications* (41 per cent had no qualifications or only low GCSEs, compared to 20 per cent of 'ceased-contact parents.

In families without contact, children's age and the time since separation were not associated with whether contact had ever happened.

Differences in the reports of resident and non-resident parents

As the figures presented throughout this section demonstrate, non-resident parents reported considerably more contact than resident parents, a pattern reported by several previous studies both here and internationally (Braver et al, 1991; Seltzer, 1994; Funder, 1996; Wikeley, 2001; and Blackwell and Dawe, 2003). There are a number of possible explanations for this:

- Differences in judgement (varying systematically by parent type) of whether to include a particular type or incidence of contact;
- Resident parents being reluctant to acknowledge the time that non-resident parents spend with children, and portraying them in a negative light;
- Non-resident parents portraying themselves in a positive light; and

14 Differences all significant at the $p<0.05$ level on chi-square testing.

- The non-resident parents who agreed to take part in the survey may have been those who were more engaged with their children.

Each of these explanations may contribute to the difference in reports of contact frequency. However, given the much lower participation rate of non-resident parents (see discussion in Chapter 2), we suspect that the last reason is the main factor behind the different patterns of response. Thus, we feel that here and throughout the report, the more accurate picture in terms of broad contact patterns is probably that presented by the resident parents. This is not because these parents are more 'truthful' reporters, simply that we consider that our sample is more representative of the population of resident parents than it is of non-resident, because the survey included fewer non-resident parents overall and few non-resident parents without contact. It is important to present both sets of data, but we would add the strong caveat that we feel that, for non-resident parents, the data is likely to be less representative of experience and opinion than it is for resident parents.

A more nuanced picture of contact patterns – overnight and holiday contact

Where children do have contact with their non-resident parent, in most cases this is likely to include overnight stays. Only 35 per cent of resident and 24 per cent of non-resident parents whose child had contact (excluding those who were sharing care) reported that overnight stays never happened. Of the children who did have overnight stays a substantial minority were having weekly overnight stays (Table 3.5; 31 per cent of resident and 39 per cent of non-resident parents reported this) and most were staying with their non-resident parent at least once a month (73 per cent of resident and 72 per cent of non-resident parents reported at least monthly stays).

Children who stayed overnight also tended to have more contact in the holidays (Table 3.6). Just over half of the resident parents (53 per cent) and 73 per cent of non-resident parents reported more contact in the holidays. Where there was frequent overnight contact (at least once a week) it was even more likely to increase

Table 3.5: Frequency of overnight stays, in families where there is overnight contact

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report including shared care (%)
Shared care	–	–	34
At least once a week	31	39	21
At least once a month but less than once a week	42	33	28
Only in the holidays or a few times a year	13	12	8
Once or twice a year	14	16	9
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	166	113	242

Base: All parents whose child stays overnight.

Table 3.6: Changes in contact frequency in holidays by parent type and contact type

	Contact type	A lot more (%)	A little more (%)	About the same (%)	A little less/ A lot less (%)	Total (%)	Unweighted base
Resident parent report	Visiting only	1	9	85	4	100	64
	Staying contact (any)	25	28	45	2	100	134
	Staying contact at least weekly	31	26	44	0	100	41
	Staying contact less than weekly	22	28	46	3	100	93
Non-resident parent report	Visiting only	5	14	48	34	100	21*
	Staying contact (any)	35	38	23	4	100	96
	Staying contact at least weekly	56	36	8	0	100	37
	Staying contact less than weekly	22	39	32	7	100	59

Base: Parents whose child has contact and who is over four.
*Caution necessary due to low base

in the holidays – 57 per cent of resident parents whose child had weekly overnight contact said there was more contact in the holidays, as did 92 per cent of non-resident parents.

In contrast, where there was only visiting contact, holiday times appeared to make little difference to contact frequency. Only 10 per cent of resident and 19 per cent of non-resident parents reported an increase and this was typically only a slight increase. At the other end of the spectrum, of the parents whose child only had visiting contact, 4 per cent of resident and 34 per cent of non-resident parents said that the frequency actually reduced during holiday periods (although the base for non-resident parents with visiting only contact is very low).

Is a simple measure of contact a fair reflection of arrangements?

We are aware that asking about contact frequency alone does not actually measure the amount of time a child spends with their parent – it may be a few minutes or a whole day.

Looking at the answers to the questions about contact frequency and overnight contact, we feel that, overall, contact for the children in the 'less often than once a month' category is not being significantly underestimated by the simple measure, nor is contact underestimated for the children with 'visiting only' contact. It is rare for there to be extra holiday contact when the 'baseline' is low. Only 7 per cent of resident parents whose child has contact less often than once a month said that there is more contact in the holidays (Table 3.7; 14 per cent for non-resident parents) and 68 per cent of resident parents whose child has contact less than once a month said that their child never has overnight contact (53 per cent according to non-resident parents; table not shown). It is also rare for contact to increase in the holidays if there is never any staying contact. Just 10 per cent of resident parents whose child has visiting only contact say that the frequency increases in the holidays, as do 19 per cent of non-resident parents with visiting only contact (Table 3.6).

There may be more of a grey area for the children in the 'at least once a month but not weekly' category. Forty-one per cent of resident and 58 per cent of non-resident

Table 3.7: Changes in contact in the holidays by contact frequency and parent type

	Contact frequency during term-time (grouped)	A lot more contact (%)	A little bit more contact (%)	It stays about the same (%)	Less contact (%)	Total (%)	Unweighted base
Resident parent report	At least once a week	21	27	51	1	100	105
	At least once a month but less than once a week	18	23	53	5	100	55
	Less often than once a month	2	5	88	4	100	38
	Total (%)	16	21	59	3	100	100
Non-resident parent report	At least once a week	36	43	17	2	100	68
	At least once a month but less than once a week	24	34	34	7	100	31
	Less often than once a month	14	0	48	38	100	18*
	Total (%)	29	34	27	3	100	100

Base: Parents whose child is over four and has contact.

*Caution necessary due to low base

parents in this group said that there was more contact in the holidays (Table 3.7), and 51 per cent of resident parents (62 per cent of non-resident) said that the child stayed the night at least monthly (table not shown).

Supervised contact

All parents who reported some contact were asked whether there was a legal order or a mutual agreement that someone else should be present when contact takes place.

As Table 3.8 indicates, this was very rare with only 3 per cent of resident and 2 per cent of non-resident parents reporting it. Where it was the case the other person present was usually the resident parent, a relative or a friend. Only 1 per cent of resident parents and even fewer non-resident parents said that a professional was present or contact took place at a contact centre. The small numbers of families involved means that we are unable to look at the characteristics of these cases in more detail. It is possible that in some families there were supervisory conditions attached to contact in the past which are no longer considered necessary, but we were not able to ask about this.

Table 3.8: Conditions for contact

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report including shared care report (%)
No supervision conditions	97	96	98
Yes – the resident parent must be present	1	1	<0.5
Yes – another family member or friend is present	1	<0.5	1
Yes – a professional person or contact centre staff are present	1	<0.5	<0.5
Yes – someone else must be present	1	0	<0.5
Don't know	0	2	0
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	257	143	333

Base: All parents whose child has contact. In shared care families we have assumed that there is no order or agreement for another person to be present during contact.

4 Factors associated with contact and contact frequency

Key findings

- Many parents were on reasonably good terms with their child's other parent. Fifty-three per cent of resident and 64 per cent of non-resident parents said that their current relationship was either neutral or friendly.
- Simple cross-tabulations initially suggested that many factors were associated with whether there was any contact and how often it took place. However, when all of these factors were taken into account in a regression analysis including all parents, only two factors remained consistently significant: whether or not the non-resident parent had re-partnered and the quality of the current relationship between the parents.
- When the non-resident parent had new children, this was associated with reduced chances of there being any contact. In families where there was contact, weekly contact was also less likely.
- Parents who said their current relationship with the other parent was hostile were much less likely to report any contact than parents who described their relationship as neutral. Where there was no relationship, it was very likely that contact was not happening at all.
- In families where there was contact, children whose parents were friendly were much more likely to have contact at least once a week. Children with 'friendly' parents were also much more likely to have any contact than those with 'neutral' parents
- Resident parents who had separated over five years ago were less likely to report any contact, and where there was contact, they were less likely to report frequent contact.

As reported in Chapter 1, research indicates that certain factors are associated with whether any contact takes place: the parents having previously been married rather than cohabiting or never having lived together; a cooperative post-separation relationship between the parents; the child wanting contact; and the non-resident parent living within a reasonable travelling distance of the child, being in employment, having a higher income and education, paying child support and not having further children (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001). There are also other factors on which the evidence is not consistent, with some studies finding an association, others not, with the following factors: the number of children in the family, the age of the child at separation; and the gender of the child or non-resident parent. Some studies report a link between contact and whether or not either parent has re-partnered; others that the critical factor is the birth of children to the non-resident parent's new relationship (see Hunt, 2003 for summary).

We were able to test some of these associations in this research. The results are set

out in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. The data is presented separately for resident and non-resident parents. It should be noted that participants were not asked to give information about their ex-partner (other than whether they had re-partnered and had new children) so the data presented here comes only from parents' information about themselves. The tables and the first part of the chapter deal only with simple cross-tabulations of each factor tested against whether any contact was taking place and contact frequency. Figures are weighted for household size but are not adjusted to take account of the influence of other factors or variables. In a later section we use regression analysis (see below for explanation) to tease out the relative effects of each factor. Statistically significant associations (chi-square $p<0.05$) are highlighted with an asterisk.

Socio-demographic factors

The child's age

There was no association between the age of the child (at the point the data was collected) and whether contact was taking place. For families where there was contact, the child's age was associated with contact *frequency*,* as reported by parents. As Table 4.1 shows, where there is contact, older children are less likely to have weekly contact (67 per cent have weekly contact at 0–4, 61 per cent at age 5–9, 49 per cent at age 10–13, decreasing to 29 per cent at 14–16, resident parent reports). Interestingly, the decrease in weekly contact is not reflected in an increased chance of monthly contact; rather that contact in the 'less often than once a month' category increases with the child's age. This may reflect a general decrease in contact frequency for all children as they get older – that is, children who had weekly contact may see their contact change to monthly, and those with monthly contact may see their contact change to less than monthly.

However, there was no association between age and contact frequency in the reports from non-resident parents. The difference in resident and non-resident parent reports may be partly because older children are often capable of arranging their own contact and their resident parent may be less aware of contact frequency. Alternatively, the likelihood that the survey picked up the more engaged non-resident parents means that we may be missing out parents of older children who have little contact.

We did not collect information about the child's gender.

Parental age and gender

The age of either parent was not associated with whether any contact was taking place. Nor was it linked with contact frequency as reported by non-resident parents. However, there was a link in the resident parents' data, with those aged 30 or under being the most likely to report at least weekly contact.* Children's age and parental age are likely to be connected; generally one would expect younger parents to have younger children and older parents to have older children, and thus it is not surprising that parental age is related to contact frequency if children's age is also associated.

The gender of either parent was not significantly associated with whether contact took place at all, or its frequency.

Table 4.1: Resident parents

	% reporting any contact	Contact frequency, where contact takes place				
		At least weekly (%)	At least monthly but not weekly (%)	Less often than once a month (%)	Total (%)	Unweighted base
Child's age						
0–4	68	67	20	13	100	80
5–9	66	61	30	9	100	105
10–13	70	49	28	23	100	103
14+	63	39	28	33	100	93
Parent's age						
30 or under	61	68	23	9	100	106
31–40	69	52	25	23	100	153
41 or over	64	43	31	25	100	130
Sex of resident parent						
Male	68	44	40	16	100	27
Female	65	53	26	21	100	362
Housing type						
Own or mortgage	76	50	31	19	100	147
Social tenant	51	59	20	50	100	174
Private tenant / other	74	44	31	24	100	68
Working status						
Working	71	49	29	22	100	236
Not working	54	58	25	17	100	153
Parental educational qualifications						
None, or low GCSE	55	50	28	22	100	88
Good GCSE	63	53	18	29	100	124
A-level or equivalent	69	54	30	16	100	74
Above A-level	76	53	32	15	100	81
Type of parent's relationship with each other						
Married	74	52	30	18	100	140
Cohabiting	69	50	33	17	100	77
In a relationship but not cohabiting	63	59	13	28	100	57
No relationship or only brief relationship	56	49	27	24	100	107
Time since separation						
2 years or less	77	68	26	6	100	93
3 to 5 years	69	62	24	14	100	79
6 years or more	63	41	29	29	100	205
New children from a new relationship?						
No new children	66	52	28	19	100	349
One or more new children	57	47	20	33	100	40
Resident parent's current relationship						
No new relationship	64	59	23	18	100	246
New relationship but not married	66	51	31	18	100	108
Married in new relationship	69	33	35	33	100	35
Non-resident parent's current relationship (RP reporting on ex-partner)						
No new relationship	87	71	14	14	100	85
New relationship but no new child	83	45	37	18	100	115
New relationship and a new child	76	40	37	23	100	43
Friendliness of relationship						
Hostile	66	46	39	15	100	61
Neither	85	38	29	33	100	74
Friendly	98	67	22	11	100	133
No relationship	19	18	32	50	100	112

Table 4.2: Non-resident parents

	% reporting any contact	Contact frequency, where contact takes place				
		At least weekly (%)	At least monthly but not weekly (%)	Less often than once a month (%)	Total (%)	Unweighted base
Child's age						
0–4	88	48	14	38	100	24
5–9	91	55	36	9	100	33
10–13	86	51	22	27	100	46
14+	83	58	19	23	100	63
Parent's age						
30 or under	85	62	19	19	100	20
31–40	88	54	21	25	100	65
41 or over	83	52	27	21	100	85
Sex of resident parent						
Male	86	54	23	22	100	143
Female	77	53	24	24	100	24
Housing type						
Own or mortgage	89	57	27	16	100	83
Social tenant	82	59	16	24	100	45
Private tenant / other	80	42	23	35	100	39
Working status						
Working	86	56	20	24	100	122
Not working	82	47	34	19	100	45
Parental educational qualifications						
None, or low GCSE	82	56	19	25	100	54
Good GCSE	88	54	29	17	100	46
A-level or equivalent	96	64	18	18	100	27
Above A-level	88	52	21	28	100	33
Type of parent's relationship with each other						
Married	89	61	23	17	100	73
Cohabiting	75	44	22	33	100	29
In a relationship but not cohabiting	75	47	27	27	100	21
No relationship or only brief relationship	90	51	23	26	100	44
Time since separation						
2 years or less	96	79	8	13	100	26
3 to 5 years	84	58	26	16	100	36
6 years or more	85	46	26	28	100	102
New children from a new relationship?						
No new children	87	58	23	19	100	141
One or more new children	76	36	24	40	100	26
Resident parent's current relationship (NRP reporting on ex-partner)						
No new relationship	95	57	17	26	100	44
New relationship but no new child	95	57	26	16	100	66
New relationship and a new child	82	52	37	11	100	30
Non-resident parent's current relationship						
No new relationship	91	53	25	23	100	75
New relationship but not married	87	63	29	8	100	65
Married in new relationship	77	46	14	41	100	26
Friendliness of relationship						
Hostile	87	54	25	21	100	30
Neither	94	48	32	19	100	35
Friendly	95	61	23	17	100	77
No relationship	46	31	8	62	100	25

Housing, employment and education

There appeared to be some association between contact and socio-demographic factors such as housing type and employment, although the pattern was not clear.

Resident parents living in social housing were significantly less likely to report any contact (51 per cent; compared with 76 per cent of owner-occupiers and 74 per cent of other housing types).* However, this pattern did not emerge from the non-resident parent reports, and looking at those families where contact was taking place, housing type was not associated with contact frequency.

The (self-reported) employment status of the resident parent was also associated with whether contact was taking place. Non-working resident parents were significantly less likely to report any contact (54 per cent reported some contact, compared with 71 per cent of working resident parents).* However, the employment status of the non-resident parent appeared to make no difference. In families where contact was taking place the employment status of either parent made no difference to contact frequency.

The resident parent's educational qualifications were also significantly associated with whether any contact was taking place; the higher the educational qualification, the more likely it was that contact would be taking place.* Beyond this, educational qualifications were not associated with how often contact occurred. The non-resident parent's education was not significantly associated with contact at all.

Factors associated with the parental relationship

Marital status

On the basis of resident parents' reports, the type of relationship the parents had previously had was significantly associated with the chances of contact happening at all.* The proportion of children who did have contact was highest where their parents had previously been married (74 per cent). This decreased to 69 per cent where parents had co-habited without marriage, to 63 per cent where the parents had been in a relationship but not lived together and to 56 per cent where there was said to have been no relationship. Non-resident parents' answers did not show this clear pattern but this may well be due to the small numbers of non-resident parents with no contact.

In families where there is contact, the previous marital status of the parents was not associated with how often contact takes place.

Interval since separation

Where contact was taking place the data from both resident and non-resident parents show the same pattern: the longer it had been since the parents separated the less frequent the contact. Children were most likely to have frequent (at least weekly) contact where parents had split up two years ago or less.* This pattern is likely to be related to the above finding that contact frequency is associated with the child's age (also noted by Peacey and Haux, 2007). There was also a trend for the interval since separation to be related to whether there was any contact. However, this did not quite reach statistical significance.

Time since separation is likely to relate to children's age, in the same way as parental age is related to children's age. All three of these variables are likely to be highly

correlated and as such it is not surprising that they are all associated with contact frequency.

The current relationship status of each parent

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show how contact is related to both parents' current relationship status. In some cases, of course, parents did not know whether their ex-partner was in a new relationship or had new children. These parents are excluded from this section of the table.

When parents were asked about their own situation, resident parents who had gone on to have further children appeared to be less likely to report that any contact was taking place than parents who had not had new children, but this did not reach significance. Neither was the presence of resident parents' new children related to frequency in families where contact was taking place. However, where non-resident parents reported that they themselves had new children, this was associated with less frequent contact,* although there was no significant association with whether contact happened at all.

According to parental self-reports, neither resident parent nor non-resident parent re-partnering was associated with a reduced chance of any contact taking place. However, differences in contact frequency were significantly associated with re-partnering for both types of parent,* with contact less likely to be frequent if the parent had remarried.

Parents were also asked whether their ex-partner had re-partnered, with or without a new child. Resident parents' reports of the other parent's relationship status did not show any association with whether contact was taking place. However, where there was some contact it did make a difference to frequency, with contact being much more likely to take place weekly when the non-resident parent had not re-partnered, according to the resident parent.* Non-resident parents were asked about the resident parent's current relationship status but no association was found between this and contact frequency or whether it took place at all.

This area is fairly complex and is explored further in the regression analysis later in the chapter.

The quality of the relationship between the resident and non-resident parents

There appears to be general agreement in the research literature that the relationship between the separated parents is a key determinant of whether contact takes place at all (see Hunt, 2003 for summary, and Peacey and Haux, 2007). Our respondents were asked to categorise their current relationship with the other parent, selecting from the following options:

- Very hostile
- Quite hostile
- Neither hostile nor friendly
- Quite friendly
- Very friendly
- No contact with other parent but relationship was hostile in the past
- No contact with other parent but relationship was not hostile in the past

These were subsequently grouped into: hostile, neither hostile nor friendly, friendly, no relationship.

Overall, as can be seen from Table 4.3, over half of the parents described their current relationship with the other parent as either friendly, or as neither friendly nor hostile (53 per cent of resident and 64 per cent of non-resident parents). Non-resident parents were more positive, with 45 per cent describing the relationship as friendly (compared to only 33 per cent of resident parents). A significant proportion of parents said they had no relationship with their ex-partner (30 per cent of resident and 17 per cent of non-resident parents). This is probably to be expected given the higher proportion of resident parents saying their child had no contact at all, and the likelihood that in most cases if the child is not seeing the non-resident parent then the parents will not be in touch either (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991). A sizeable minority in both groups said the relationship was hostile (17 per cent of resident and 19 per cent of non-resident parents).

Table 4.3: Parents' assessment of their current relationship with the other parent

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Hostile	17	19
Neither hostile nor friendly	19	19
Friendly	33	45
No relationship	30	17
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	380	167

Base: All parents.

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 look at how the parental relationship is related to contact frequency in this sample. On both resident and non-resident parent report, the quality of the current relationship was significantly associated with whether contact took place at all,* and where it did take place, relationship quality was also significantly associated with contact frequency.*

As might be expected, in families with contact children were most likely to have frequent contact where the parental relationship was described as friendly, with 67 per cent of resident and 61 per cent of non-resident parents reporting at least weekly contact. No contact was rare where parents were friendly (just two per cent of resident and five percent of non-resident parents). In contrast, where the relationship was hostile only 46 per cent of resident parents with contact reported at least weekly contact and 34 per cent of all resident parents said there was no contact at all (comparative figures for non-resident parents were 54 per cent and 13 per cent).

Despite this clear relationship, it is important to note that parental conflict does not necessarily lead either to the permanent breakdown of contact or to very infrequent contact. Where children were seeing their other parent, 17 per cent of resident parents reported that this was taking place in the context of parental discord (a hostile relationship) and a further 9 per cent said that there was no relationship with

the other parent. Non-resident parents' reports paint a similar picture: 19 per cent of those who were seeing their child reported a hostile relationship and 9 per cent reported no relationship with the other parent (table not shown).

Logistic regression

Having established the factors which, in our sample, were statistically associated with contact or contact frequency, we then used logistic regression analyses in order to assess the effect of each factor when the others were taken into account. See Appendix 1 for details of logistic regression and the interpretation of log odds ratios.

Factors associated with whether any contact was taking place

Table 4.4 shows the result of a model run to assess what factors predict whether contact occurs at all (regardless of frequency), based on data from resident parents only. The factors included were: parental age, gender and education; family housing type; working status, time since parental separation; marital status prior to separation, current relationship status of each parent; the presence of new children, the quality of the current parental relationship and time since separation.

In the table (and Table 4.5, below), ***bold italic*** indicates that the chance of contact taking place is significantly increased or reduced, when contrasted with the 'comparison' level of each factor. The comparison group is the first row relating to each factor and is assigned an odds ratio of one. For the other groups within each variable, a significant odds ratio between zero and one indicates that contact is less likely to be taking place than for families in the comparison group. A significant odds ratio over one indicates that contact is more likely to take place than in the comparison group.

Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: education of resident parent, working status of resident parent, sex of resident parent, age of resident parent and age of child.

A similar model based solely on data from non-resident parents was not possible due to the low numbers of these parents in the study who did not have contact.[15] Instead, we ran a model which included all parents (Table 4.5). This model included fewer variables because it was felt inappropriate to combine information from resident and non-resident parents into a single variable. For example, resident parent education may have an effect on contact where non-resident parent education does not, and creating a single variable may hide the effect. In this 'all-parent' model we included only variables which we hypothesised would be the same for a particular family whether it was the resident or the non-resident parent reporting the data. These were: marital status pre-separation, time since separation, child age, current relationship status, parent type and friendliness of the current parental relationship.

The first regression analysis, based on resident parents' answers only, was able to take into account more of the variables which appeared significant in the simple cross-tabulation analysis. Very few of the demographic variables remained significant in the regression model; most of the significant factors were related to the parents' relationships. The second model (based on all parents) was not able to include demographic variables other than the child's age. This second model shows a strong association with reports of any contact with parent type, but this is not surprising

15 This model was attempted but the answers were flawed.

Table 4.4: Logistic regression: factors associated with whether contact takes place at all (resident parent data only). Model 1.

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals
Quality of current relationship with NRP	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	***0.17***	***<0.01***	***0.06–0.53***
	Friendly	***6.71***	***0.02***	***1.31–34.46***
	No relationship with other parent	***0.03***	***<0.01***	***0.01–0.08***
NRP status	Not in a new relationship	1		
	In a new relationship, no new children	0.74	0.64	0.21–2.59
	In a new relationship with new children	0.27	0.07	0.07–1.10
	RP does not know NRP status	***0.23***	***0.01***	***0.08–0.69***
RP current relationship status	No new partner	1		
	New partner, not married	1.58	0.31	0.65–3.81
	New partner, married	***7.86***	***<0.01***	***1.93–31.93***
RP new child	RP has no new child	1		
	RP has at least one new child	***0.20***	***0.02***	***0.05–0.73***
RP's previous relationship with other parent	Married	1		
	Cohabiting	1.83	0.29	0.60–5.60
	In a relationship	***3.91***	***0.05***	***1.01–15.13***
	Not in a relationship	1.63	0.35	0.58–4.60
Time since separation	Two years or less	1		
	Three to five years	0.58	0.67	0.17–1.92
	Six years or more	***0.31***	***0.04***	***0.10–0.95***
RP housing type	Own / buying with mortgage	1		
	Social tenant	***0.35***	***0.04***	***0.13–0.96***
	Private tenant / other	0.61	1.36	0.41–4.50

Base: 354.

Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: type of relationship with NRP (married / cohabiting / not cohabiting / not in relationship), time since separation (two years or less / three to five years / six years or more), child age (grouped), resident parent current status (new relationship / new relationship with children).

given the strong indications throughout this analysis that non-resident parents tend to report more contact than resident parents.

The quality of the current relationship between the parents was a key factor to emerge from the analyses. In model 1, compared with parents who had a 'neither friendly nor hostile' relationship, resident parents reporting a hostile relationship were much less likely to say that contact was taking place. Where there was no relationship with the other parent the chances of contact were also much reduced. Conversely, a 'friendly' relationship was strongly associated with increased chances of contact taking place. Relationship quality also came out as an important factor in

Table 4.5: Logistic regression: factors associated with whether contact takes place at all (data from all parents).[16] Model 2.

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals around OR
Parent type	Resident parent	1		
	Non-resident parent	***2.94***	***0.03***	***1.14–7.57***
NRP status	Not in a new relationship	1		
	In a new relationship, no new children	0.41	0.06	0.17–1.03
	In a new relationship with new children	***0.23***	***0.01***	***0.08–0.66***
	RP does not know NRP status	***0.18***	***<0.01***	***0.07–0.46***
Quality of current relationship with other parent	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	***0.20***	***<0.01***	***0.08–0.51***
	Friendly	***3.92***	***0.04***	***1.04–14.81***
	No relationship with other parent	***0.03***	***<0.01***	***0.01–0.07***

Base: 539.

model 2, which included both resident and non-resident parents, with hostility or 'no relationship' again being associated with reduced chances of any contact, and a friendly relationship associated with increased chances of contact.

Whether or not there is a relationship with the other parent is likely to be related to whether the resident parent knows if the non-resident parent has re-partnered or has a new child. Resident parents who did not know this information were also much less likely to report that contact was taking place. Where the non-resident parent has re-partnered with a new child, the trend is for contact to be less likely. Although this did not quite reach significance in the first model, when all parents were included (model 2) it became significant.

Resident parents who have had new children are considerably less likely to report that contact takes place at present (model 1). However, it is interesting to note that whether the resident parent has re-partnered or not is not associated with the chances of contact, except where the resident parent has married that partner. Married resident parents are much more likely to report that their child sees their other parent than parents who have not re-partnered. Also surprising is the finding from the first model that resident parents who were in a non-cohabiting relationship with the other parent are more likely to report that contact is taking place than parents who were married to each other before separation. This is surprising, given that the cross-tabulation above (Table 4.1) showed that, before other factors are taken into account, ex-married resident parents are the most likely to report that contact takes place. An association with relationship type was not found in model 2.

Although the association between time since separation and the chance of any contact did not quite reach significance in a simple cross-tabulation, once other factors are taken into account it does become significant in model 1. Parents who separated six or more years ago were less likely to say that their child had any contact

16 This is the only regression model presented in this report which includes data from all parents. This is because models based on resident parents can take more variables into account than 'all parent' models, and because presenting several regression models in each chapter would become confusing.

than parents who separated recently (two years or less). Time since separation was also entered into the 'all parents' model but was not found to be a significant factor here.

Finally, one socio-demographic variable was significant in model 1; resident parents living in social housing were less likely to report any contact than parents who owned or were buying their homes. The other socio-economic variables (education and employment status) which had shown an association with the chances of contact in the simple cross-tabulations earlier did not remain independently significant in this regression analysis.

Factors associated with contact frequency

A similar model, based only on data from resident parents (Table 4.6), was run to assess the predictive factors for whether contact takes place frequently (that is, weekly or more often, compared with less often). Respondents who reported no contact were excluded from these models in order to capture the factors influencing frequency rather than the factors which influence whether it happens at all.

Many of the same factors associated with whether or not contact was taking place were also associated with contact frequency. Thus the non-resident parent's current relationship was important: where s/he was in a new relationship with new children, frequent contact was less likely. In addition, a new relationship without new children for the non-resident parent was also associated with less frequent contact; this is

Table 4.6: Logistic regression: factors associated with weekly or more frequent contact (resident parents reporting any contact only)

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals
NRP status	Not in a new relationship	1		
	In a new relationship, no new children	***0.32***	***0.01***	***0.13–0.78***
	In a new relationship with new children	***0.24***	***0.01***	***0.08–0.70***
	RP does not know NRP status	***0.28***	***0.01***	***0.11–0.75***
Status of current relationship with NRP	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	1.25	0.65	0.47–3.32
	Friendly	***3.32***	***<0.01***	***1.57–6.99***
	No relationship with other parent	***0.21***	***0.03***	***0.05–0.84***
Time since separation	Two years or less	1		
	Three to five years	0.58	0.30	0.21–1.62
	Six years or more	***0.19***	***<0.01***	***0.07–0.54***

Base: 257.

Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: RP age (grouped), RP education, RP housing type, RP current status (no new relationship / new relationship / new relationship with new children), RP sex, age of child (grouped), type of relationship with NRP (married / cohabiting / not cohabiting / not in relationship), RP working status (working / not working), RP marital status.

interesting because it was not associated with the chances of contact happening at all. Once again, if the resident parent did not know whether the non-resident parent was in a new relationship, contact was less likely to be frequent, although the lack of knowledge is more likely to be a consequence than a cause of infrequent contact.

Although, as reported earlier, parental hostility was associated with reduced chances of contact happening at all, where there was contact, it was interesting that it was not associated with less frequent contact. However, if the relationship was friendly, contact was much more likely to happen at least weekly, compared with the 'neutral' parents, and if there was no relationship at all contact was less likely to happen frequently.

Parents who had separated six or more years ago were less likely to report frequent contact. We suggested earlier that the simple associations between time since separation and contact, and between the child's age and contact, were likely to be related. However, in the regression analysis, the association between children's age and the chances of frequent contact were only a trend, which did not quite reach statistical significance.

5 Satisfaction with contact frequency

Key findings

- Levels of satisfaction with contact frequency were generally low: including families with and without contact, only 35 per cent of all resident parents and 27 per cent of all non-resident parents said they felt contact frequency was about right at present.
- Even in families where there was contact, only 44 per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents were happy with the current frequency. In these families, 37 per cent of resident and 73 per cent of non-resident parents wanted contact to take place more often.
- Satisfaction with contact frequency was linked to how often contact took place: parents who reported at least weekly contact were the most likely to be satisfied although 31 per cent of resident and 65 per cent of non-resident parents with weekly contact still said they would prefer more contact.
- Parents whose child had overnight contact at least once a week were most likely to be happy with contact frequency.
- Taking all the factors into account, for resident parents with contact, higher satisfaction with contact frequency was more likely where the current parental relationship was not hostile, where children were older, and surprisingly, where parents were never in a relationship together.

Parents were asked 'On balance would you like to see your child/the other parent to see your child more often or less often?' The first section of Table 5.1 includes all parents, whether or not contact is currently taking place. It indicates that few parents, resident or non-resident, were happy with the situation as it stood, with just 35 per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents saying that they felt things were about right. Non-resident parents overwhelmingly wanted more contact (73 per cent) but so did a substantial minority of resident parents (31 per cent). In contrast, nearly one-fifth of resident parents said that they would prefer no contact at all (18 per cent), although where there was contact, hardly any (4 per cent) of resident parents wanted no contact at all.

The remainder of Table 5.1 breaks responses down to look at satisfaction according to whether contact was or was not taking place. Most resident parents whose child had no contact felt comfortable with the situation, with just 21 per cent saying they would prefer there to be contact. In contrast, non-resident parents who did not see their child were generally unhappy with the current state of affairs, with 81 per cent saying that they would like contact,[17] although a small minority (3; 19 per cent) said they felt this was right for them. It should be noted, however, that the base for non-resident parents with no contact answering this question is very low (just 19 respondents).

17 Resident / non-resident parent difference significant at the $p<0.05$ level, chi-square test.

Where the child in question was seeing their other parent, non-resident parents were also most likely to say that they wanted there to be more contact (73 per cent), with only 27 per cent happy with the current situation, and none saying they would prefer less. Resident parents were more likely to say they were happy with the current position (44 per cent) and 12 per cent said they would prefer less contact or none at all. However, well over a third of the resident parents (37 per cent) said they would like there to be more contact.

The study which Blackwell and Dawe (2003) reported on for the then Department of Constitutional Affairs asked about satisfaction with contact overall, which is different from satisfaction with frequency. The two sets of findings are therefore not directly comparable. However, it is interesting to look at similarities and differences. They found that 72 per cent of resident and 69 per cent of non-resident parents were either satisfied or very satisfied with contact arrangements, much higher

Table 5.1: Parents' wishes for contact frequency

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
All parents (whether contact is taking place or not)		
More often	31	73
Less often	7	0
Things are about right at the moment	35	27
Would prefer no contact at all	18	0
Don't know	11	1
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	324	131
Parents whose child has no contact		
More often	21	81
Things are about right at the moment / would prefer no contact or less contact	62	19
Don't know	17	–
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	99	19*
Parents whose child has some contact		
More often	37	73
Less often	8	–
Things are about right at the moment	44	26
Would prefer no contact at all	4	–
Don't know	8	1
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	257	143

Base: All parents, excluding RPs who said the other parent is not aware of the child. 'No-contact' parents were not asked this question in July 2006 and so the 'all parents' section does not include data from July 2006.
*Caution necessary due to low base

percentages than our figures for satisfaction with contact frequency (35 per cent and 27 per cent).

Only those parents in the Blackwell and Dawe study who were not satisfied were asked how contact arrangements could be improved. Eleven per cent of both the 'unsatisfied' resident and non-resident parents said that they wanted contact to happen, and 34 per cent of resident and 17 per cent of 'unsatisfied' non-resident parents said they wanted it to happen more often. Given the low proportions of 'unsatisfied' parents of both kinds, this equates to approximately 3 per cent of all resident and non-resident parents wanting contact to happen at all, and 10 per cent of all resident and 5 per cent of all non-resident parents wanting contact to take place more often (our estimates).

These figures are very different from ours (31 per cent of all resident and 73 per cent of all non-resident parents in our sample wanted more contact) and underline the sensitivity of answers generated by survey research to the questions which respondents are asked. Many of the respondents to the 2003 survey may have been broadly satisfied but still would have liked the frequency of contact to change. However, because of their answer to the earlier question they were not directed to the question on how things could have been improved.

However, the findings of the two studies are similar in one respect: they both found higher satisfaction levels amongst resident parents. In our survey, resident parents were much more likely to say that they were happy with the way things were at present than non-resident parents. Where there was no contact, 62 per cent of resident parents were happy with this, compared to only 19 per cent of non-resident parents, and where there was contact, 44 per cent of resident parents felt the frequency was about right, compared with 26 per cent of non-resident parents. Blackwell and Dawe found that where there was no contact, 67 per cent of resident parents were satisfied, compared with 22 per cent of non-resident parents. They did not present overall figures for parents where there was any contact.

We can break down our data on parental satisfaction with contact frequency by the amount of contact their child was having (Table 5.2). Resident parents whose child had at least weekly contact were the most likely to say they were happy with the current arrangement (55 per cent felt things were about right). Where there was overnight contact at least once a week over two-thirds of resident parents (68 per cent) said that they felt things were about right, with nearly all of the remainder (22 per cent) saying they would prefer more contact.

As the amount of contact decreased, satisfaction levels with contact frequency also dropped, for both resident and non-resident parents. In these families where contact was taking place, no matter what the frequency, it was quite rare for resident parents to say that they would have liked less or no contact, and no non-resident parents at all said that they would have preferred less contact.

Table 5.2 once again illustrates the finding that non-resident parents are much more likely than resident parents to say that they would prefer more contact. Even where the child was having overnight contact at least once a week, nearly two-thirds of non-resident parents wanted more.

Blackwell and Dawe also found that both resident and non-resident parents were more likely to be satisfied with arrangements where contact was frequent, and where there was contact, that satisfaction levels fell as contact frequency decreased. They

Table 5.2: Families where there is contact: parents' wishes for contact by current contact frequency and overnight contact

Parents' wishes for contact	Contact frequency			Is there overnight contact?	
	At least once a week (%)	At least once a month, but not weekly (%)	Less than once a month (%)	Overnight contact at least weekly (%)	Any overnight contact (%)
Resident parents					
More often	31	44	42	22	37
Less often	7	14	3	8	7
Things are about right at the moment	55	37	23	68	52
Would prefer no contact at all	3	0	12		2
Don't know	4	4	21	2	2
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	142	66	49	54	166
Non-resident parents					
More often	65	79	84	63	70
Things are about right at the moment	35	21	13	37	30
Don't know	0	0	3	0	0
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	81	36	26	46	113

Base: All parents, excluding RPs who said the other parent is not aware of the child. 'No-contact' parents were not asked this question in July 2006.

also found that dissatisfaction levels rose as contact frequency decreased – similar to our finding that, where there is contact, both types of parent were more likely to say they would like more contact as contact frequency decreases.

What factors are related to satisfaction with contact frequency?

Table 5.3 presents the results of a logistic regression model assessing the factors associated with resident parents' satisfaction with contact frequency. It includes only resident parents who reported contact was taking place. A similar model based on non-resident parents' answers produced no significant factors; we believe this is because there were fewer non-resident parents to enter into the model.

Actual contact frequency was, as expected, significantly related to satisfaction with the amount of contact. Compared to parents whose child had at least weekly contact, parents whose child had less contact were significantly less likely to be happy with contact frequency.

It is interesting to note that even with contact frequency controlled for, there were still several factors which were significantly associated with satisfaction. The quality of the parental relationship was a significant factor once again, as one would expect. Parents who felt that their relationship with the other parent was hostile, or who had no relationship with the other parent now, were less likely to be happy with contact frequency than those reporting a neutral relationship. Parents of older children (aged

Table 5.3: Logistic regression: factors associated with satisfaction with contact frequency (resident parent data – ongoing contact only)

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals
Contact frequency	At least once a week	1		
	At least once a month but not as often as once a week	***0.39***	***0.02***	***0.18–0.86***
	Less often than once a month	***0.21***	***<0.01***	***0.08–0.60***
Child age	0–4	1		
	5–9	1.49	0.51	0.46–4.76
	10–13	***4.74***	***0.03***	***1.13–19.84***
	14 or older	***5.48***	***0.02***	***1.30–23.14***
Status of current relationship with NRP	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	***0.21***	***0.01***	***0.07–0.64***
	Friendly	0.67	0.33	0.30–1.45
	No relationship with other parent	***0.24***	***0.04***	***0.06–0.92***
Previous relationship with other parent	Married	1		
	Cohabiting	1.64	0.30	0.64–4.20
	In a relationship but not cohabiting	3.15	0.06	0.95–10.48
	Not in a relationship	***3.39***	***0.01***	***1.30–8.84***
Resident parent's highest qualification	No qualifications, or low GCSE only	1		
	Good GCSE or equivalent	0.89	0.82	0.34–2.31
	A level or equivalent	1.52	0.41	0.56–4.13
	Above A level	***2.95***	***0.04***	***1.03–8.40***

Base: 223.

Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: NRP current status (no new relationship / new relationship / new relationship with new children), RP housing type, RP sex, time since separation, RP working status (working / not working), RP age (grouped), whether RP has a new child, RP current status (no new relationship / new unmarried relationship / new married relationship).

ten or above) were more likely than parents of children under five to say that things were about right at the moment. Surprisingly, parents who said that they had never been in a relationship with the other parent were more likely to be happy with frequency than those parents who had been married, although Table 4.1 shows that contact frequency did not vary much by the type of relationship the parents had.

Only one socio-demographic factor reached significance in this model – resident parents with a high level of education (above A level) were more likely to be happy with contact arrangements than parents with no, or poor, qualifications.

6 Contact trajectories

Key findings

- Parents who reported that the amount of contact has remained constant were in the minority, accounting for only 32 per cent of all resident and 28 per cent non-resident parents (in families where there has ever been any contact).
- Reports of decreased contact were more frequent than reports of the amount of contact increasing. Where there has been contact in the past, 51 per cent of resident parents reported that it had decreased or stopped, as did 42 per cent of non-resident parents.
- Older resident parents were more likely than younger ones to say that contact had decreased, and resident parents of older children were more likely to report a drop than those of younger children.
- Non-resident parents who had subsequently married were more likely to report a drop in contact than those who had not.

Changes in the amount of contact

Where contact was taking place parents who had separated over a year ago were asked 'Would you say that the amount of time you spend with your child / the other parent spends with your child has increased, decreased or stayed about the same compared with the first year after you finally separated?' As the first two columns of Table 6.1 indicate, where contact was ongoing a substantial minority of both resident and non-resident parents reported levels remaining the same (40 per cent of resident and 37 per cent non-resident parents). However, a majority in both groups reported change, although its direction was different. While in the non-resident parent group the proportions experiencing increased and decreased contact were about the same (29 per cent and 31 per cent), resident parents were much more likely to say that contact had decreased (38 per cent) than increased (17 per cent).

The last two columns of Table 6.1 are based on all families who had ever had contact, including those where contact had happened in the past but had ceased by the time of the interview. Including these families makes it even clearer that while in many families contact levels remain the same (32 per cent of resident and 28 per cent non-resident parents reported this), it is more common for there to be change and where there is change it is most likely to take a negative trajectory.

Table 6.2 shows how current contact frequency is related to changes over time. It is interesting to see that some parents appear to have started off with, and maintained, quite high levels of contact: 64 per cent of resident and 63 per cent of non-resident parents who said that the amount of contact had stayed the same reported contact on at least a weekly basis. At the other end of the spectrum some children seem to have had quite low levels throughout. Where levels had remained stable 10 per cent of resident and 13 per cent of non-resident parents reported contact less than once a

month, while even where the amount of contact had increased, in around one in ten cases it had still not progressed beyond that point.

Table 6.1: Changes in the amount of contact over time

	Contact is ongoing		Some contact since separation (contact may not be ongoing)	
	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Increased	17	29	14	26
Stayed the same	40	37	32	28
Decreased	38	31	34	34
Contact has stopped	0	0	17	8
Variable / Don't know	4	4	4	4
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	209	126	246	137

Base: All parents who separated over a year ago.

Table 6.2: Current contact frequency and changes in the amount of contact over time

	Changes in amount of contact		
Contact frequency	Increased (%)	Same (%)	Decreased (%)
Resident parent report			
At least once a week	64	64	21
At least once a month	25	25	34
Less often than once a month	11	10	45
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	37	86	73
Non-resident parent report			
At least once a week	62	63	33
At least once a month	30	24	25
Less often than once a month	8	13	43
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	39	48	35

Base: All parents whose child has contact, and who separated over a year ago. Parents answering 'Don't know' or who answered 'It's been variable' to the question about change are excluded.

Parental satisfaction with stability and change

Where contact was taking place, non-resident parents typically wanted more contact, regardless of whether and how the amount of contact had changed over time (Table 6.3). The largest majority wanting more contact, as one would expect, was found in the group which reported that contact had decreased over time (87 per cent of whom wanted more contact). Surprisingly, where contact had increased, the proportion wanting more was not substantially less (75 per cent) and these parents were more likely to say they wanted more contact than parents who reported that the frequency had stayed the same. This, on the face of it, slightly odd finding may be because the non-resident parents with increased contact had been pushing for more contact and had been only partially successful.

Of the resident parents, those who said that contact had decreased over time were the most likely to say that they would like more frequent contact (51 per cent). Most of the remainder (35 per cent) said they felt things were about right at the moment, although a few said that they would like even less, or no, contact (13 per cent). Where the child's contact had increased or stayed the same, resident parents were less likely to say they wanted more contact. Answers from the parents reporting increased contact and those reporting consistent contact were very similar – around one-third would have liked more, around one-half were happy with the way things were, and the rest (21 per cent and 16 per cent) wanted less or no contact.

Table 6.3: Parental satisfaction with contact frequency by changes in amount of contact

	Changes in amount of contact		
Contact frequency	Increased (%)	Same (%)	Decreased (%)
Resident parent			
More often	32	33	51
Less often	12	11	7
Things are about right at the moment	47	51	35
Would prefer no contact at all	9	5	6
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	36	82	63
Non-resident parent			
More often	75	59	87
Things are about right at the moment	25	41	13
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	39	48	35

Base: All parents whose child has contact, and who separated over a year ago. Parents answering 'Don't know' or who answered 'It's been variable' to the question about change are excluded.

Factors associated with stability and change

Table 6.4 below summarises the factors which were significantly associated with changes to contact in a simple chi-square test. In most cases a significant effect was only found in the data from resident parents, probably because the number of non-resident parents was much lower.

The resident parent's age was significantly associated with changes in the amount of contact.* Older parents (41 or over) were the most likely to say that contact had decreased (49 per cent), and the least likely to say that it had increased (12 per cent). The youngest parents in the study (aged 30 or under) were the most likely to say that contact had remained the same (61 per cent), and relatively few said that it had decreased (17 per cent).

The children's age was also significantly associated with changes.* A decrease in the amount of contact was most commonly reported by resident parents who had older children. Fifty-two per cent of resident parents with a child over 13 reported this. The younger children (aged nine or below) were most likely to have seen their contact increase.

Resident parent's reports of contact change were also significantly associated with whether they were previously married to the other parent.* Interestingly, ex-married parents were the most likely to say that their child's contact had decreased over time, whereas the parents who were most likely to say that contact had increased were those who used to be in a relationship with the other parent but not cohabiting. Resident parents who were never in a relationship with the other parent rarely reported that contact had increased (11 per cent). However, it is interesting to see that many said it had stayed the same (53 per cent), and the proportion of never-in-a-relationship parents who reported that it had decreased (36 per cent) was still less than the proportion of ex-married parents reporting a drop (47 per cent). The patterns here suggest a 'regression to the mean' effect, i.e. it could be that the children of ex-married couples start off with more contact than other children, but that this is then more likely to decrease over time to an average level. Conversely, children of parents who had not been married may be more likely to start off with less contact and then see their contact increase to the average over time.

From the non-resident parent data, just one factor was significantly associated with changes: whether they had re-partnered.* Being in a new relationship itself did not appear to be associated with change, but where the non-resident parent had married, contact was likely to have decreased (56 per cent), with just 8 per cent reporting that it had increased. The resident parent's current partnership status was not significantly associated with changes to contact.

Other factors which were tested but did not reach significance,[18] or where base numbers were too low for significance testing to be reliable[18] were: time since separation, sex of parent, housing, employment, and education of parent, whether the respondent had a new child, and quality of current relationship between the parents.

Of course, change in the amount of contact is not the only possible change that could happen to contact arrangements. However, it was the only one we were able to measure given the time constraints on the survey. We should also point out that a decrease in the amount of contact does not automatically mean that the child-parent relationship has been affected; nor does it mean that contact decreased against the will of either parent or child.

18 Factors where a test was valid but non-significant. Resident parents: new partner, time since separation, housing type, parent's work status, parent's education, parent has new child, quality of current relationship between parents. Non-resident parents: parent age, housing type, parent's work status, parent's education, parent has new child.

19 Factors where a test was not valid due to low bases. Resident parents: sex of parent. Non-resident parents: child age, parents' previous relationship, time since separation, sex of parent, quality of current relationship between parents.

Table 6.4: Factors significantly associated with changes in contact (resident and non-resident parents)

	Increased (%)	Stayed the same (%)	Decreased (%)	Total (%)	Unweighted base
Resident parents					
Parent age					
30 or under	22	61	17	100	42
31–40	22	39	40	100	78
41 or over	12	38	49	100	76
Child age					
0–4	26	56	19	100	30
5–9	27	48	25	100	54
10–13	12	43	46	100	62
14 or over	14	33	52	100	50
Parents' previous relationship					
Married	13	40	47	100	82
Cohabiting	25	47	28	100	32
Non-cohabiting relationship	36	28	36	100	28
Not in a relationship	11	53	36	100	54
Non-resident parents					
New partner					
Not in a new relationship	34	42	23	100	54
In a new relationship	44	44	20	100	42
Married to new partner	8	42	56	100	26

Base: All parents whose child has contact, and who separated over a year ago. Parents answering 'Don't know' or who answered 'It's been variable' to the question about change are excluded.

Because older children are less likely to have frequent contact it may be assumed that their contact has decreased as they age, and that age is the main driver of change. However, the effect of age may hide the influence of other factors on contact, and the data in Table 6.4 suggests that the nature of the parents' previous relationship and any new relationship are also influential. We attempted a regression analysis to look at whether any factor remained significantly related to decreased contact when the others were taken into account. Somewhat surprisingly, no factors came out as significant, not even age. This may have been at least partly because low numbers of parents (about 200) were available for input into the model.

7 Making decisions about contact arrangements

Key findings

- Nine per cent of resident parents and 8 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact arrangements had been decided in court.
- Court-banned contact was very rare. It accounted for only 7 per cent of cases in which resident parents reported there was no contact and 4 per cent of those in which non-resident parents did so. Overall, including the parents with shared care, only 2 per cent of the parents surveyed said that there was no contact because of a court order.
- Where there was no contact, resident parents were most likely to say this was because the other parent was not committed to contact. Non-resident parents were most likely to say it was because they lived too far from the child. Very few non-resident parents who did not see their child said that it was because the resident parent was reluctant to allow contact.
- Where children had contact, just 8 per cent of resident and 9 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact arrangements had been decided in court.
- Contact was least frequent when there was no clear arrangement in place.

One of the most striking, and frequently quoted, findings in the Blackwell and Dawe research for the DCA was the very low proportion of separated parents who had gone to court over contact (10 per cent). Our findings confirm that where contact is occurring, the arrangements are most likely to have been arrived at informally, and where it is not this is very rarely because of a court decision.

The questions put to our respondents concerning how decisions had been made about contact were different according to whether contact was, or was not, taking place. The parents where there was contact were asked: 'How did the current arrangements for your child to spend time with you/for your child to spend time with the other parent come about?' Where there was no contact, parents were asked 'Whose decision was it that you should not see the child / that the other parent should not see the child?' Answer options to the two questions overlapped to some degree but not entirely (see the questionnaire in Appendix 2) and so the two groups are mostly treated separately here.

It is theoretically possible that the wording of the question put to respondents may have under-estimated the proportion of parents who had ever used the legal system over contact. They may, for instance, have been to court or used a solicitor in the past, although the current arrangements were made informally; or they may have selected an answer option indicating that the arrangements were made by themselves and/or the other parent even though this was in the context of legal

advice or court proceedings. The closeness of our findings to those of the previous ONS survey (Blackwell and Dawe, 2003) suggests, however, that they do not significantly under-estimate the proportion using the courts and our qualitative interviews indicate that they are also a reasonably accurate representation of the use of solicitors to agree on contact.

Determination of arrangements where there is contact

Where contact was taking place just 15 per cent of resident and 12 per cent of non-resident parents said that they had made these arrangements through the legal system. Eight per cent of resident and 9 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact arrangements had been decided in court, with a further 7 per cent of resident and 3 per cent of non-resident parents saying they had been reached with the help of a solicitor but not involving court proceedings (Table 7.1).

It is also remarkable how few respondents reported that contact arrangements had been determined in a one-sided way. For these parents whose child had ongoing contact, the most popular response for both types of parent was 'sorted out between myself and the other parent on our own' (37 per cent of resident and 44 per cent of non-resident parents).

Two other points stand out from this data. Firstly, a sizeable minority (25 per cent) of both resident and non-resident parents said that there was no clear arrangement in place, which suggests that contact in these cases may not have been regular or predictable. It is not possible to ascertain from our data whether this was because the parents were operating a very flexible and mutually satisfactory regime to suit their circumstances (Trinder's 'fitted in' category [Trinder et al, 2002]), or whether

Table 7.1: How did current contact arrangements come about? (Parents with contact only)*

	Resident parent (%)	Non-resident parent (%)
No clear arrangement in place	25	25
Developed over time	14	14
Decided in court	8	9
Mainly my decision	5	0
Mainly the other parent's decision	3	5
Mainly the child's decision	7	4
Sorted out between myself and other parent on our own	37	44
Sorted out with help of family/friends	2	2
Sorted out with the help of legal advice	7	3
Other	1	0
Unweighted base	256	143

Base: All parents with contact.
*Respondents could choose as many options as applied so percentages sum to more than 100 per cent. In fact very few respondents chose more than one.

contact was 'sporadic' (defined by Trinder as a an irregular and infrequent pattern reflecting failed attempts to establish a predictable pattern). However, the data does suggest the second option is more likely, as the parents with no clear arrangement are less likely to have frequent contact than any other group, with only 27 per cent of these resident parents reporting that contact takes place at least once a week (Table 7.2).

Secondly, 14 per cent of both types of parent in Table 7.1 said that arrangements had developed over time, a rather unclear category which may suggest that contact just 'happened' rather than being 'decided', or that contact had evolved over time.

Table 7.2 indicates that contact was least frequent where there was no clear arrangement in place. Only 27 per cent of resident and 29 per cent of non-resident parents in this group said that contact was occurring at least weekly (less than any other group) and 41 per cent and 56 per cent respectively said that it was less than monthly (more than any other group).

Beyond this, the way that arrangements were determined seemed to have little association with contact frequency, although parents who said that the courts or legal advice were involved were slightly less likely to report weekly contact.

Table 7.2: Contact frequency and determination of contact arrangements (contact only)

Contact frequency	How were contact arrangements arrived at?				
	No clear arrangement	Developed over time	Court or legal advice	Sorted out between us on our own	Other
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Resident parent report					
At least once a week	27	63	51	61	58
At least once a month	32	4	38	33	11
Less often than once a month	41	33	11	6	31
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	57	26	34	92	34
Non-resident parent report					
At least once a week	29	60	47	66	77
At least once a month	15	27	41	24	15
Less often than once a month	56	13	12	10	8
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	31	15*	16*	63	13*

Base: All parents with contact. Parents who chose more than one answer excluded (21 parents excluded).
*Caution: low base

Determination of arrangements where there is no contact

The picture presented by parents whose child had no contact was similar in only one respect to families where there was: very few reported that the decision had been arrived at through court proceedings (eight of the 120 resident parents, 7 per cent; and only one non-resident parent; 4 per cent), (Table 7.3). Among the remaining

Table 7.3: Whose decision was it that there should be no contact?

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Mainly my decision	24	19
Mainly other parent's decision	52	54
Mainly the child's decision	11	4
Agreed between myself and the other parent	5	19
Decided in court	7	4
Total	100	100
Unweighted base	120	23*

Base: All parents where there is no contact, excluding those resident parents who said the father was unaware of the child. July 2006 data excluded.
*Caution: low base

cases there was little evidence of mutual agreement (just four non-resident [19 per cent] and seven resident parents [5 per cent]) said that they had agreed with the other parent that there would be no contact. Several parents said it was their own decision (four non-resident and 32 resident parents; 19 per cent and 24 per cent). Eleven per cent of resident parents, but only four percent of non-resident, said the decision had been mainly the child's.

The most common response was to say there was no contact because of the other parent's decision (52 per cent resident and 54 per cent non-resident). Once again we must point out that the number of non-resident parents without contact was very low, and the reasons given here for a lack of contact may not be representative. Many of the resident parents felt that the lack of contact was due to the other parent's decision but only one non-resident parent said it was mainly their choice. It is possible, of course, that social desirability effects are at work here to an extent, since non-resident parents might find it difficult to admit that they had decided it would be best not to see their child, for whatever reason. It is also likely that, as we have suggested earlier, the non-resident parents who agreed to take part in the research, were the more committed parents.

Considering the whole survey sample, including parents with shared care and those reporting contact as well as those reporting none, just 2 per cent of resident parents and less than 1 per cent of non-resident parents said that their child had no contact and that this was due to a court decision (table not shown).

Why did contact cease altogether?

In addition to finding out *how* the decision had been made that there would be no contact we were interested in *why* this was the case. Unfortunately, constraints of space on the survey meant we were limited to one question exploring this area, which restricted the number of options available. An open question would have been more useful but, as explained earlier this was not permitted on the Omnibus. This is a sensitive topic and understandably, some reticence was evident in the responses, with 17 per cent of resident parents and 23 per cent of non-resident parents declining to answer. The

complexity of this area is also evident in the fact that 10 per cent of resident and 26 per cent of non-resident parents gave 'other' answers that could not be recoded into the existing categories or were not numerous enough to warrant the creation of a new category (Table 7.5). These included, from the resident parents: 'because he's an idiot', 'danger to myself', 'I dislike his new wife', 'father is an alcoholic', 'currently in prison', 'disappeared', 'didn't want anything to do with the child', 'too violent and chose not to have contact (living abroad)'. Non-resident parents' 'other' answers were all distance-related and recoded into a new 'living too far away' category.

According to the resident parents, the most common reason for no contact was the other parent's lack of commitment (45 per cent cited this reason). Unfortunately, the information from non-resident parents about the reasons for no contact is limited by the low number of respondents. However, the most common reasons that they gave were distance (given by four parents, 26 per cent), bad feeling between the parents and feeling that it was better not to see the child (each given by 23 per cent of parents). Due to the low numbers we feel that this is unlikely to fairly reflect the views of all non-resident parents who do not have contact.

The 14 per cent of resident parents who said that there was no contact because they had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child were asked in a later follow-up question what these concerns were. A routing error in the original design of the survey meant that this was only asked in four waves, resulting in just 11

Table 7.5: Why is there no contact?

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Bad feeling between the other parent and I	15	23
The other parent not committed enough to contact	45	3
RP had concerns about care/treatment of child	14	
NRP thought it better if they didn't see child	7	23
RP reluctant to allow contact	9	19
The child is reluctant	14	6
RP worried NRP might not return child	4	6
NRP felt excluded from child's life	0	19
Disputes about child support payments	7	0
Living too far away**	1	26
Not seen child since birth / father is unaware of the child	18	6
Other reasons	10	0
Prefer not to say	17	23
Unweighted base	105	18*

Base: All parents without contact. Respondents could choose all the options which apply and so percentages sum to more than 100 per cent.
*Caution: low base
**'Living too far away' was a new category created after analysis of the 'other reasons' answers and was not offered to respondents as an answer option

responses. Answers given included 'they don't look after the child properly' (six parents), 'drug or alcohol abuse' (four and two respectively), and 'they say negative things about me to the child' (four).

Earlier we reported that a high proportion (63 per cent) of resident parents whose child has no contact said that there had been no contact at all ever since the separation. Table 7.6 looks at the reasons behind a lack of contact and contrasts families where there has never been contact with those where it broke down. It includes only resident parents as there were too few non-resident parents without contact to break down further into smaller groups.

There are few large differences between the reasons for contact ending and the reasons why there was never any contact. By far the most common reason for both were the resident parent's perception that the other parent was not committed enough to contact, which was cited by nearly half. Where there had been contact in the past, very few resident parents said that contact ended because *they* were reluctant about contact, whereas 13 per cent of parents where there had never been any contact said that this was a factor. The child's reluctance to take part in contact, and the resident parent's concern about the child's safety, were also more likely to be cited as reasons for contact breakdown than for cases where there had never been any contact.

Table 7.6: Why is there no contact? (Families who have never had contact and families where contact used to take place)

	Resident parents only	
	There has been contact in the past (%)	No contact since parental relationship ended (%)
Bad feeling between the other parent and I	16	16
The other parent not committed enough to contact	49	48
RP had concerns about care/treatment of child	20	12
NRP thought it better if they didn't see child	9	7
RP reluctant to allow contact	2	13
The child is reluctant	20	12
RP worried NRP might not return child	4	4
NRP felt excluded from child's life	0	0
Disputes about child support payments	11	5
Living too far away*	0	1
Not seen child since birth / father is unaware of the child	0	16
Other reasons	7	12
Prefer not to say	16	20
Unweighted base	46	116

Base: All resident parents without contact. Respondents could choose all the options which apply and so percentages sum to more than 100 per cent.
*'Living too far away' was a new category created after analysis of the 'other reasons' answers and was not offered to respondents as an answer option

8 The extent and nature of contact problems

Key findings

- A fairly substantial minority of separated parents said they had not experienced any significant problems with the other parent or with contact since separation (where there had been at least some contact since separation, 26 per cent of resident and 30 per cent of non-resident parents had experienced no problems).
- Most families, however, do run into problems. Of those who reported there had ever been any contact 23 per cent of resident and 26 per cent of non-resident parents said that a problem had affected contact, and a further 28 per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact had stopped or had been suspended because of problems.
- Where contact was ongoing the most common problems reported by resident parents were disputes around child support (41 per cent), bad feeling (30 per cent) and the other parent's inflexibility, unreliability or lack of commitment (42 per cent). Twenty-nine per cent had concerns about the child's welfare or their own safety.
- The most common problems reported by non-resident parents who had contact were similar: disputes around child support (34 per cent), the other parent's reluctance to allow contact (30 per cent); the other parent's inflexibility, unreliability, or lack of commitment (29 per cent) or bad feeling (27 per cent). Twenty-four per cent had concerns about the child's welfare or their own safety.
- Families who were most likely to have experienced problems were those where the current parental relationship was hostile, where separation had occurred over five years ago, and where the resident parent was not working.

Drawing on the research literature on post-separation parenting, and in conjunction with our advisory group, we devised a list of potential difficulties which might impact on contact. Respondents who said contact was currently taking place were presented with the full list, with some differences according to whether they were a resident or non-resident parent.[20] They were first asked to indicate which, if any, of these potential problems they had experienced since the separation. Then, for each difficulty identified, they were asked to specify if it was a current or past problem; whether it was affecting contact now or had affected contact in the past, and whether the problem had stopped contact altogether now or in the past.[21]

Parents who reported that contact was not taking place had to be treated differently. They were first asked why contact had stopped (as reported in the previous chapter) and were then asked to identify any other problems they had experienced which had

20 The questions are not reproduced here due to their length but they can be found in Appendix 2 (see MAP_18M, MAP_19aM and MAP_19bM).

21 Some parents said that a problem was stopping contact at present, but had said earlier that contact was taking place at least once or twice a year, or more frequently. Where parents indicated that a problem was stopping contact at present, we treated this as a temporary suspension and did not recode the contact frequency reported by these parents. It is possible that in some families this temporary stoppage would become permanent, but given that they had previously specified that contact was ongoing we did not feel it was appropriate to change their answers to 'no contact'.

not stopped contact. Due to space limitations, they were not presented with all the choices given to parents where contact was taking place. We were limited to one question about the reasons behind lack of contact and one question about other problems which were not the reason for contact stoppage.[22]

Since we knew our list of potential problems could never be comprehensive, all parents had the opportunity to describe any other problems which had had an impact on contact. Where possible these answers were recoded into the existing answer options.[23]

The incidence of problems which might affect contact

As Table 8.1 shows, even where contact was continuing, most parents had experienced at least one of the problems which could potentially have an effect on contact: less than a third of both resident and non-resident parents said they had not experienced any problems. Moreover, 42 per cent of resident and 45 per cent of non-resident parents said that such problems had either affected contact or caused it to stop for a period. These figures are really quite high and indicate that while most families are maintaining children's contact with their non-resident parent, doing so is by no means straightforward.

If one considers only those parents who say they are currently experiencing problems, the figures are still very high. Nearly half (47 per cent) of all resident parents whose child currently has contact said that there are problems at present, as did 43 per cent of non-resident parents (table not shown).

Clearly, moreover, figures based solely on parents whose child has contact are likely to underestimate the extent of problems in the general separating population. As the 'no-contact' parents were presented with different questions in the survey it is not possible to make a precise comparison. However, we feel it is reasonable to assume that where there has been contact in the past but it has ceased, those parents will have experienced a problem which affected contact. On that basis, as Table 8.2 shows, the proportion of parents experiencing at least one problem with the potential to affect contact rises to 73 per cent of resident and 71 per cent of non-resident parents. Fifty-one per cent of resident parents reported that at least one problem

Table 8.1: Incidence of problems affecting contact (where contact is currently taking place)

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
No problems reported	29	32
Problems reported but never affected contact	28	22
At least one problem has affected but not stopped contact	25	25
At least one problem has suspended contact temporarily	17	20
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	225	112

Base: All parents with contact. July 2006 data excluded as parents were not asked whether any other problems had affected contact.
Problems and their effects could be current or in the past.

22 See MAP_31M / MAP_32M and MAP_31aM / MAP_32aM in Appendix 2.

23 It should be noted that we did not ask 'Has contact ever stopped temporarily, or is it stopped temporarily at present'. We asked whether particular problems had happened and whether these had lead to no contact. However, we also asked a 'round up' question to check whether any other problems had caused contact to stop temporarily and so we feel confident that the survey has captured all those parents where contact had been suspended due to problems.

Table 8.2: Incidence of problems affecting contact (all cases where there has ever been contact)

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
No problems reported	26	30
Problems reported but never affected contact	23	17
At least one problem has affected but not stopped contact	23	26
At least one problem has suspended contact temporarily	15	19
At least one problem has stopped contact altogether	12	8[24]
Total	100	100
Unweighted base	255	120

Base: All parents with contact, and all parents where there is no contact now but there has been contact after separation in the past. Assumes that in cases where contact had stopped there had been at least one problem. Problems and their effects could be current or in the past. July 2006 data excluded as parents were not asked whether any other problems had affected contact.

affected contact and 28 per cent said that a problem had caused contact to be suspended or cease altogether. The proportions are very similar for non-resident parents (53 per cent reported that a problem affected contact and 28 per cent that a problem led to contact stopping, temporarily or permanently).

Table 8.2 also suggests that even where there are problems which might derail contact they do not necessarily do so. This applied to 23 per cent of resident and 17 per cent of non-resident parents. A further 23 per cent of resident and 26 per cent of non-resident parents said that there had been problems which had an impact on contact but did not lead to it stopping altogether. However, there was a substantial proportion of parents (28 per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents) who said that problems had led to contact stopping, in some cases temporarily (15 per cent of resident and 19 per cent of non-resident parents) but in others for good (12 per cent of resident and 8 per cent of non-resident parents).

The type of problems experienced

Table 8.3 shows all the problems which resident and non-resident parents had experienced since separation, regardless of whether contact had been affected by these issues. It indicates both a high incidence of problems experienced post-separation, and a wide range of problems. It is interesting to note that for both types of parent, the most frequently-reported problem was disputes around child support (reported by 41 per cent of resident and 34 per cent of non-resident parents). Bad feeling was the second commonest problem reported by resident parents, and the third-commonest problem for non-resident parents (30 per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents), although it was not as common as perhaps one might have anticipated in a population of separated parents. The answer option 'bad feeling between us' was left to parents to define for themselves and we did not define what we meant by 'bad feeling' in the questionnaire.

Both types of parent were quite likely to indicate that they felt that the other parent's

24 Table 8.2 includes non-resident parents without contact and as discussed above, we are concerned that such parents are under-represented in the survey. We feel that the proportion of non-resident parents who have experienced contact ceasing altogether because of problems may be underestimated here.

Table 8.3: Problems experienced by parents whose child has contact at present

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Welfare and safety concerns		
I have had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child	20	23
The other parent has said they are concerned about my care or treatment of the child	5	6
I have had concerns about my own safety	10	3
The other parent has said they are concerned about their own safety	–	0
I am worried the other parent will not return the child	12	–
Any concern about own safety or other parent's care	***29***	***24***
Commitment and flexibility		
The other parent is not committed enough to contact with our child	22	5
The other parent has been inflexible about contact arrangements	21	23
The other parent has been unreliable about contact arrangements	29	14
Other parent has been uncommitted, inflexible, or unreliable	***42***	***29***
I have been reluctant to let my child see the other parent	21	–
The other parent has been reluctant to let me see the child	–	30
The other parent thought it would be better if they didn't see the child	8	–
I thought it was better if I didn't see the child	–	5
I have been unable to keep to agreed arrangements	2	4
Difficulties around control		
I have felt excluded or pushed out of my child's life	–	25
The other parent says they feel excluded or pushed out of my child's life	4	–
I feel the other parent is trying to interfere in our lives	10	–
The other parent tries to interfere with contact	–	12
Other difficulties		
Disputes about child support payments	41	34
Serious disagreements about how to bring up the child	17	17
Bad feeling between us	30	27
Child has been reluctant to see the other parent / to see me	26	3
Difficulties with my new partner or the other parent's new partner	14	11
Other problem	23	31
Any problem	71	68
No problems	29	32
Unweighted base	257	143
Unweighted base for 'Other problem' and 'No problems' [25]	225	112

Base: All parents with contact. Percentages add to more than 100 per cent as parents could choose all the answers which applied. Problems and their effects could be current or in the past.

25 In the first wave of the questionnaire parents were not asked whether there had been any other problems which affected contact, and so for these parents we are unable to be confident that there were no problems at all. The base for these figures excludes the first wave (July 2006) is therefore slightly different.

attitude towards contact was problematic. Nearly a third (30 per cent) of non-resident parents said that the other parent had been reluctant to let them see the child; fairly close to the proportion of resident parents who said that they had felt reluctant about contact (21 per cent). Resident parents were quite likely to choose at least one of the choices which were critical of the other parent's attitude: 22 per cent said they felt that the other parent was not committed to contact; 21 per cent that the other parent was inflexible about contact; and 29 per cent that the other parent had been unreliable about contact. Non-resident parents' answers were similar in that 23 per cent said that the resident parent had been inflexible. However, they were less likely to say that the other parent had been unreliable (14 per cent compared with 29 per cent), and few non-resident parents (5 per cent) said that the other parent was not committed to contact (although this is very similar to the popular option 'the other parent was reluctant to let me see the child'). Overall, 42 per cent of resident and 29 per cent of non-resident parents said that the other parent was 'unreliable' about contact, not sufficiently committed, or inflexible. These figures increase to 43 per cent of resident and 39 per cent of non-resident parents if one includes cases where the non-resident parent says the resident parent was reluctant to allow contact, or where the resident parent says the non-resident parent felt it better not to see the child.

It was very rare for either type of parent to say that they themselves had been unable to keep to agreed arrangements. It was also quite unusual for parents to say that the non-resident parent had felt it better not to see the child – 5 per cent of non-resident parents said they had felt this way, and 8 per cent of resident parents said that the non-resident parent had felt this.

A surprisingly high proportion of both types of parent (given that these are all parents whose child was still having contact with their non-resident parent) said that there had been at least one welfare or safety concern. Twenty-nine per cent of resident parents said they had been concerned about one or more of the following: the other parent's care (20 per cent), their own safety (10 per cent), or that the other parent would not return the child (12 per cent). Twenty-four per cent of non-resident parents said they had been concerned about the other parent's care (23 per cent) or their own safety (3 per cent). Parents who expressed concern about the other parent's care of the child were asked a follow up question later in the survey to determine the nature of their concerns. This is explored in a later chapter.

Feelings of marginalisation were a significant problem for non-resident parents. A quarter of those who had contact with their child said that they had felt excluded or pushed out of their child's life. This tended not to be recognised as a problem by resident parents, just 4 per cent of whom said that their child's other parent had complained of this.

Other difficulties included serious disagreements over how to bring up the child (17 per cent of both types of parent), and difficulties with new partners (14 per cent resident, 11 per cent non-resident parents). An interesting finding was that a quarter (26 per cent) of resident parents said that their child had been reluctant about contact, but very few non-resident parents (3 per cent) reported that their child had not wanted to see them. It may be difficult for non-resident parents to say this, or they may be unaware of any reluctance. On the other hand, resident parents may be overstating children's reluctance. We were not able to investigate how frequently these children were resistant to contact, how consistently or strongly it was expressed

or the reasons behind their feelings. However, it does demonstrate that even in families where contact is ongoing, children's unwillingness to go, at least some of the time, can be an issue.

Looking at the high proportion of parents reporting an 'other problem', it was clear that the questionnaire had not covered all the possible issues. Parents were asked to describe these other problems and where possible their answers were recoded. However, this was rarely feasible and the numbers were not sufficient to create new categories. The 'other problem' answers are shown in Appendix 2, but included: difficulties around children's health or disabilities, children living abroad, erratic behaviour on the part of the other parent, and involving children in parental arguments.

Finally, we should point out again that there was a substantial minority of parents whose child has contact, for whom the process of establishing and maintaining contact appears to have been problem-free (29 per cent of resident and 32 per cent of non-resident parents).

Factors associated with problems

A logistic regression model was run to look for overall patterns in the families where resident parents reported one or more problem (Table 8.4). Once again, the quality of the current parental relationship showed a strong association with the chances of a problem being reported. Resident parents who felt that the current relationship was hostile were much more likely to report a problem, and parents with a friendly relationship much less likely to do so, compared with those parents with a 'neutral' relationship.

Parents who had separated over five years ago were more likely to report a problem than parents who had recently separated (two years ago or less). Of course this may simply mean that these families had had more time in which a problem could have arisen, rather than that those with more recent separations were less prone to problems.

Resident parents who were not in work were also more likely to report that there had been a problem, compared to those who were working. Interestingly, ex-married couples had no added protection against future problems. Indeed, counter-intuitively, the reverse was true, with those parents who had been in a relationship but not cohabiting or married being less likely to experience a problem than those who had been married.

(In Chapter 9 we report the results of a similar model looking at predictive factors for families where contact had been *affected* by problems).

Table 8.4: Logistic regression: factors associated with report of one or more problems (resident parents with contact only)

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals
Quality of current relationship with NRP	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	***17.42***	***0.03***	***1.24–243.40***
	Friendly	***0.13***	***<0.01***	***0.05–0.37***
	No relationship with other parent	0.54	0.45	0.11–2.64
Time since separation	Two years or less	1		
	Three to five years	2.18	0.18	0.70–6.84
	Six years or more	***9.93***	***<0.01***	***2.66–37.09***
RP employment	Working	1		
	Not working	***4.74***	***<0.01***	***1.68–13.44***
RP's previous relationship with other parent	Married	1		
	Cohabiting	1.32	0.66	0.38–4.56
	In a relationship	***0.20***	***0.03***	***0.05–2.82***
	Not in a relationship	0.37	0.08	0.12–1.13

Base: 239.

Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: NRP status, RP education, RP housing status, RP age, child age, RP current partnership status, RP new child status.

9 Which problems affect contact?

Key findings

- Nearly half of all respondents whose child was seeing their non-resident parent said that contact had been affected by problems at some point (42 per cent of resident parents and 45 per cent of non-resident parents).
- Of the families reporting that there was normally some contact, 6 per cent of resident parents, and 8 per cent of non-resident parents, said that all contact was suspended at the moment because of problems.
- For resident parents, the most common problems affecting contact were the other parent's unreliability and lack of commitment, the child's reluctance around contact, and bad feeling between the parents. For non-resident parents the most common problems were the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact, inflexibility, bad feeling between the parents and marginalisation.
- Resident parents were more likely to report that problems had affected contact if they had re-partnered and had new children, if they were not working, if contact took place less than monthly, and if the relationship with the other parent was hostile.
- In families where a problem had affected contact in the past and the problem still persisted to the present day, it was likely that children's contact would still be affected. It was rare for parents to 'learn to live with' problems which had had an impact on contact. However, many parents reported that the problems which affected contact in the past were no longer an issue.

When parents whose children had ongoing contact identified a problem which might have affected contact, they were asked whether it was a current problem and if it was affecting contact at the moment, and whether it had been a problem in the past and if it had affected contact then. The impact of problems on contact was larger than we had anticipated, given that these families were sustaining contact. Overall, nearly half of all non shared-care families where contact is happening at present said that it had been affected or was being affected by problems, the proportions being very similar in the two parent groups (42 per cent of resident and 45 per cent of non-resident parents).

Almost a quarter (23 per cent) of all resident parents whose child was seeing the other parent said that contact was *currently* being affected or disrupted by problems and 40 per cent said that at some point in the past a problem had affected or stopped contact. Non-resident parents were more likely than resident parents to say that contact was affected at the moment (31 per cent, in contrast to 23 per cent). However, when asked about the effects on contact in the past, the proportion saying that that their contact had been affected or stopped was virtually identical (40 per cent of resident and 43 per cent of non-resident parents).

We were not able to explore what parents meant when they said that contact had been affected. It could mean that contact took place as normal but that it was more fraught or difficult or that the frequency or duration of contact changed. It could also mean that contact changed in some more qualitative way – perhaps activities or the location altered or it became more or less beneficial for the child and the parent. However, we have assumed here that if a problem has affected contact, it is likely to have been a negative effect.

As discussed earlier, some parents said that a problem was stopping contact at present, although in response to earlier questions they had indicated that contact was occurring at least once or twice a year, or more frequently. We have taken this to mean that for these families, contact was currently suspended because of problems, but that the parents did not consider this to be permanent, and throughout this report we use 'suspended' contact to describe these families.

Problems which have ever affected contact

Table 9.1 presents data on the problems which have affected, or are affecting, contact in cases where contact was normally taking place. Later in this chapter answers are broken down to look at past problems separately from current problems.

The problems most likely to affect contact, according to resident parents, centred around the non-resident parent's attitude. Seventeen per cent of resident parents said that contact had been affected because the other parent was unreliable about the arrangements, and 15 per cent because the other parent was not sufficiently committed. A quarter of resident parents (25 per cent) said that contact had been affected by at least one of these problems at some point.

For non-resident parents, the predominant issue also centred around the other parents' attitude. Twenty-six per cent of respondents said the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact had affected contact. Nearly a third of non-resident parents (32 per cent) said that their contact had been affected by at least one of the following: reluctance to allow contact, inflexibility, unreliability, or lack of commitment.

A very wide variety of the answer options listed in the questionnaire were selected. In addition, 6 per cent of resident and 4 per cent of non-resident parents reported 'other' problems. However, this is substantially less than the proportions ticking this box in response to the question about problems with the potential to affect contact, as reported in the previous chapter. It would seem, therefore, that we did cover the range of problems that do affect contact reasonably well.

Problems affecting contact now

Resident parents' perceptions of current problems affecting contact

In cases where contact was normally taking place, almost a quarter of resident parents (23 per cent of 224) said that contact was being affected (17 per cent) or suspended (6 per cent) by problems at present.

As Figure 9.1 shows, there was no one particular problem which really stood out as affecting contact at the time of the survey, and none were reported by 10 per cent or more of the group. The most common problems were perceptions of the non-resident

Table 9.1: Problems that have ever affected contact (contact ongoing)

Problem	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Welfare and safety concerns		
I have had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child	10	9
The other parent has said they are concerned about my care or treatment of the child	2	2
I have had concerns about my own safety	6	1
The other parent has said they are concerned about their own safety	–	0
I am worried the other parent will not return the child	5	–
Any concern about own safety or other parent's care	***14***	***10***
Commitment and flexibility		
The other parent is not committed enough to contact with our child	15	2
The other parent has been inflexible about contact arrangements	11	15
The other parent has been unreliable about contact arrangements	17	10
Other parent has been un-committed, inflexible, or unreliable	***25***	***18***
I have been reluctant to let my child see the other parent	11	–
The other parent has been reluctant to let me see the child	–	26
The other parent thought it would be better if they didn't see the child	5	–
I thought it was better if I didn't see the child	–	2
I have been unable to keep to agreed arrangements	1	2
Difficulties around control		
I have felt excluded or pushed out of my child's life	–	17
The other parent says they feel excluded or pushed out of my child's life	1	–
I feel the other parent is trying to interfere in our lives	4	–
The other parent tries to interfere with contact	–	9
Other types of difficulties		
Disputes about child support payments	7	13
Serious disagreements about how to bring up the child	6	7
Bad feeling between us	12	17
Child has been reluctant to see the other parent / to see me	13	3
Difficulties with my new partner or the other parent's new partner	7	5
Other problem	6	
Contact ever affected by a problem	**42**	**45**
Base	257	143
Base for 'contact has ever been affected by any problem'	224	107

Base: All parents with contact. July 2006 data excluded for 'contact has ever been affected or suspended by any problem' as parents were not asked whether any other problems had affected contact. Problems and their effects could be current or in the past. Percentages equal more than 100 per cent as parents could choose all the options which applied.

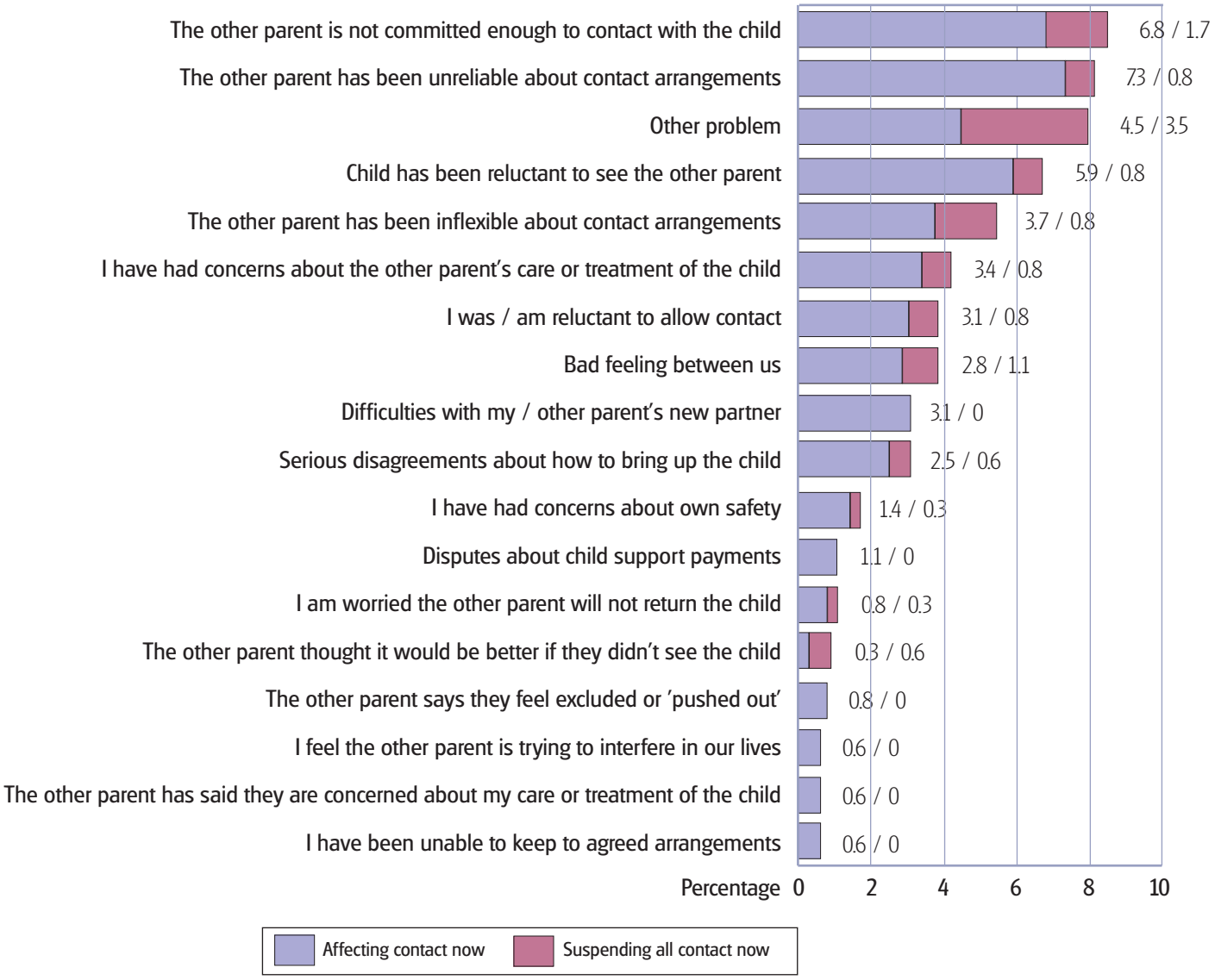
parent being unreliable (8 per cent) or uncommitted (9 per cent); overall, 11 per cent chose one or both of these options. Seven per cent reported that it was the child's reluctance which was affecting contact or causing it to be suspended. Only 4 per cent (nine) said that contact was currently affected by their own reluctance to let the child see the other parent; much lower than the 21 per cent who said that they were or had been reluctant to allow contact at some point (Table 8.3).

There were also very few cases where welfare concerns were said to be currently affecting contact. Just 4 per cent of all resident parents (ten) reported that contact was affected because they were worried about the other parent's care of the child, and only 1 per cent (three) said contact was affected because of fears about abduction. Two per cent said contact was affected because of fears for their own safety.

It is also notable that very few (two parents; 1 per cent) reported that child support disputes were affecting contact and none said that it was suspending contact at present.

In the next section we look at the degree to which the most common problems actually have an impact on contact.

Figure 9.1: Problems affecting contact now: resident parents (contact normally occurring)



Base: n=225 for 'other problem' and 'any problem' (excludes July 2006) ; n=257 for each individual problem.
Parents whose child has contact.

Resident parents' experience of current problems with the potential to affect contact and their actual effect

Table 9.2 looks at the main problems with the potential to affect contact currently experienced by resident parents, and examines how likely each problem is to be actually affecting contact at present. (Since the numbers in some groups are very small we have included only those problems which were reported as current by 10 per cent or more of resident parents).

It can be seen that although disputed child support was the most common of the current problems reported by resident parents (reported by 17 per cent of all those whose child had contact), it was actually the least likely to have an impact on contact. Only 6 per cent of those who said that there were arguments about child maintenance said that this was affecting contact. Bad feeling between the parents, which was nearly as common a problem (16 per cent) was much more likely to affect contact (in 24 per cent of these families). It should be noted that this still means that three-quarters of resident parents who said that bad feeling was a current problem did not feel that it was affecting contact.

Concerns about the other parent's care were rarer (10 per cent) but had more impact, with 44 per cent of those identifying this as a current issue saying it was affecting contact. The child's attitude was even more influential; half of the 34 resident parents who said that the child was reluctant about contact at present said it was affecting contact.

The problems most likely to be affecting contact at present were those related to the non-resident parent's perceived attitude; if the resident parent felt that the other parent was currently inflexible or not committed to contact, (each accounting for 14 per cent of cases with current problems) contact was more likely than not to be affected (58 per cent and 60 per cent respectively).

Having explored resident parents' perceptions of current contact problems we repeat the process with non-resident parents.

Table 9.2: The chances of common problems affecting contact at present (resident parents)

	Number reporting as a current problem	% reporting as current problem	% reporting contact affected by problem	Risk of problem affecting contact
	Unweighted base	(%)	(%)	(%)
Child support dispute	43	17	1	6
Bad feeling between the parents	39	16	4	24
Concerns about NRP's care*	23	10	4	44
Child is reluctant about contact	34	14	7	50
NRP inflexible about contact	27	14	8	58
NRP not committed to contact	33	14	9	60

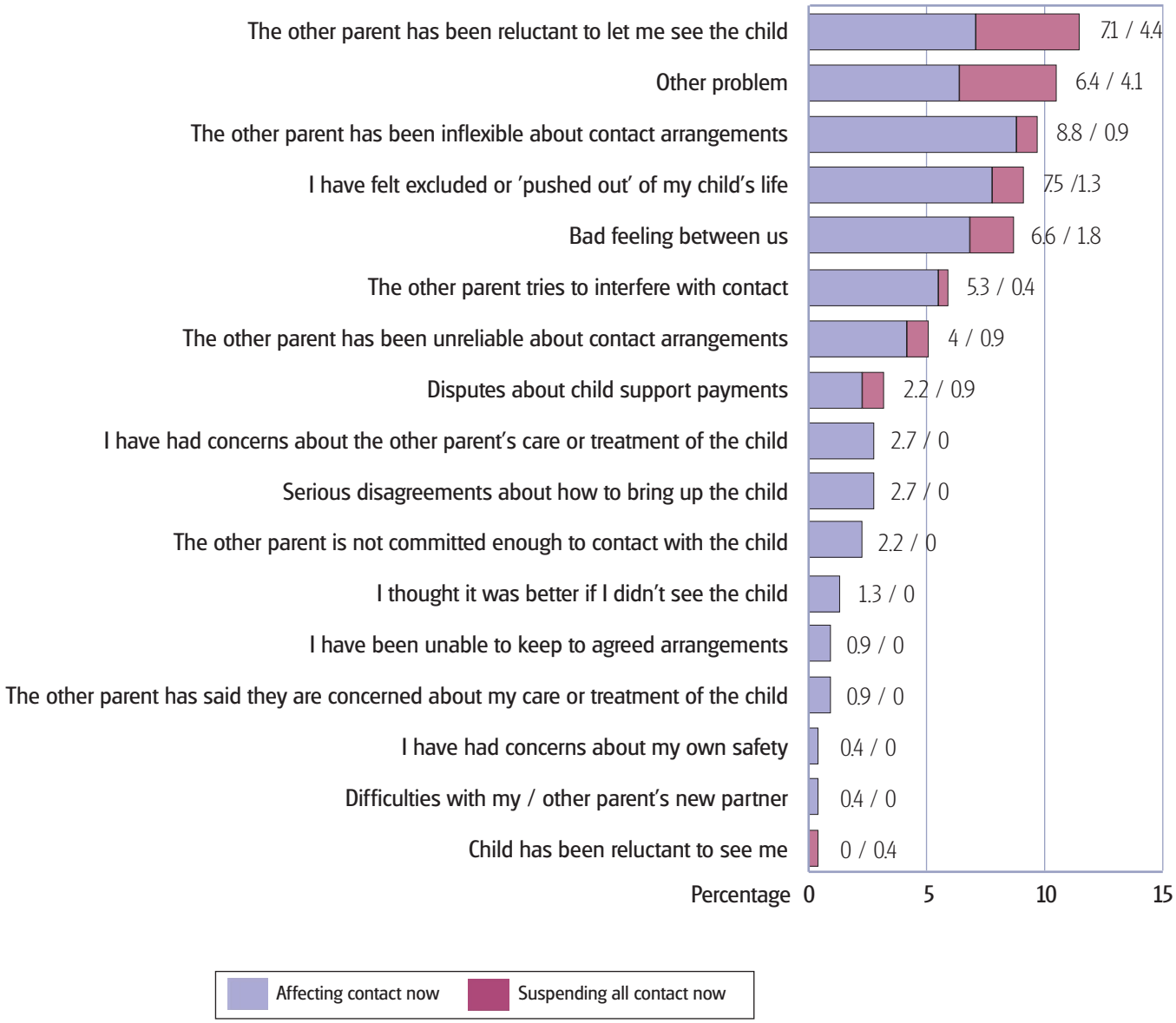
Base: Resident parents reporting any contact. Table only includes problems reported by 10 per cent or more of respondents.
*Caution: low base

Non-resident parents' perceptions of current problems affecting contact

Thirty-one per cent of all non-resident parents with contact said that problems were causing contact to be suspended (8 per cent) or otherwise affected (22 per cent) at present. (Again we have made the assumption that this former group regarded the 'stoppage' as merely temporary).

There was a clearer pattern to non-resident parents' reports of which problems were affecting contact. The single most influential current problem was the resident parent's perceived reluctance to allow contact; 12 per cent (17) said this was having an effect at present. This was closely followed by the resident parent's inflexibility around contact (10 per cent; 13), the non-resident parent's feelings of exclusion (9 per cent; 14), and bad feeling between the parents (8 per cent; 12).

Figure 9.2: Problems affecting contact now: non-resident parents (contact occurring)



Base: n=113 for 'other problem' and 'any problem' (excludes July 2006); n=144 for each individual problem. Parents whose child has contact.

Non-resident parents' experience of current problems with the potential to affect contact and their actual effect

Table 9.3 looks at the main problems currently experienced by non-resident parents and what proportion of those problems were affecting contact at present. As with the resident parent data, we have included only those problems which were reported by at least 10 per cent of parents. Even so, it should be noted that the numbers are very low and as such should be regarded as indicative, rather than a good measure of the risk associated with each problem.

As Table 9.3 shows, all the current problems commonly reported by non-resident parents had a high risk of affecting contact. Of the 19 who said the other parent was interfering with their contact, half said that this was causing contact to be affected or suspended. Bad feeling between the parents, and feelings of exclusion from the child's life, were even more likely to be affecting contact (68 per cent and 74 per cent of cases). The problem most likely to have an impact, perhaps not surprisingly, was where the resident parent was thought to be reluctant to allow contact, (97 per cent said it was affecting contact).

From this analysis of the commonest problems experienced by parents, it appears that non-resident parents are more likely to find that problems affect contact than resident parents. Alternatively, non-resident parents may be less likely to report problems which are not influencing their contact.

Table 9.3: The chances of common problems affecting contact at present (non-resident parents)

	Number reporting as a current problem	% reporting as current problem	% reporting contact affected by problem	Risk of problem affecting contact
	Unweighted base	(%)	(%)	(%)
Resident parent interferes with contact*	19	11	6	51
Bad feeling*	19	12	8	68
NRP feels excluded from child's life*	20	12	9	74
Resident parent is reluctant to allow contact*	18	12	11	97

Base: Non-resident parents reporting any contact. Table only includes problems reported by 10 per cent or more of respondents.
*Caution: low base

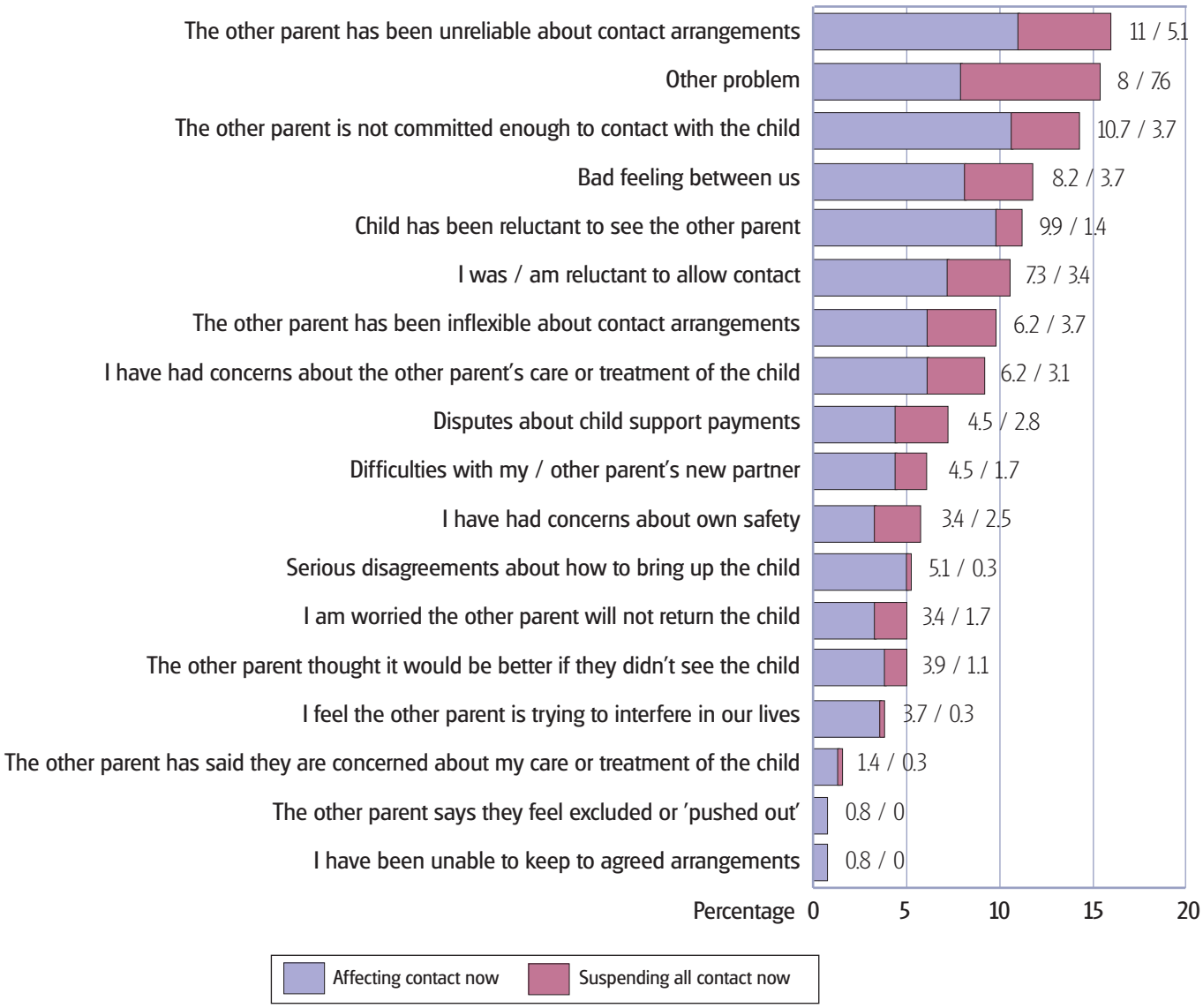
Problems affecting contact in the past

Resident parents' perceptions

Overall, 40 per cent of resident parents whose child has contact at present said that contact had been suspended in the past because of problems (15 per cent) or affected without being suspended (25 per cent). In some cases, of course, these issues would still be affecting contact at present and in a later section we look at the extent to which problems have persisted.

As Figure 9.3 shows, once again the most common problems affecting contact in the past from the resident parents' perspective were the unreliability (16 per cent) or lack of commitment (14 per cent) of the other parent. Welfare concerns had an impact for a significant minority with 5 per cent citing fears that the child would not be

Figure 9.3: Problems that have affected contact in the past (resident parents, contact occurring)



Base: n=225 for 'other problem' and 'any problem' (excludes July 2006); n=257 for each individual problem. Parents whose child has contact.

returned, and 9 per cent reporting worries about the other parent's care. Six per cent reported that worries about their own safety had affected contact.

Child support disputes were more likely to affect contact in the past than at present, with 17 resident parents (8 per cent) saying that these had either affected contact (10; 5 per cent) or caused it to be suspended (7; 3 per cent).

Ten per cent of resident parents said that their child's reluctance had affected contact in the past, although just 1 per cent (four) said this had caused contact to be suspended. Bad feeling between the parents was another important factor, with 12 per cent of resident parents saying that this had affected contact, including 9 (4 per cent) who said it had resulted in contact being suspended.

Resident parents' experience of past problems with the potential to affect contact and their actual effect

Table 9.4 looks at how likely common problems were to affect contact in the past. Once again, the most 'influential' problems from the resident parents' perspective were those relating to the other parent's perceived attitude to contact. Where they were seen as having been unreliable or not committed, past contact was very likely to have been affected (67 per cent and 75 per cent).

The resident parent's self-reported reluctance about contact, where this was a problem, was also a significant risk to contact, with 57 per cent of parents who reported this also saying that it had affected contact. Children's reluctance carried a very similar risk (56 per cent).

A comparison of the effect of past problems with current problems (Table 9.3 above) indicates that where families have experienced child support disputes in the past, this problem was more likely to affect contact than where there are current arguments about this. Child support disputes, where they occurred, were reported to have affected contact in 29 per cent of cases in the past, compared to just 6 per cent of those where it was a problem at the moment. A similar pattern was found with bad feeling, which was quite frequently reported as a problem but was more likely to have affected contact in the past than at present. Other than this, among the problems experienced by more than 10 per cent of the sample in the past as well as at present, there was little difference in terms of the problem's propensity to affect contact.

Table 9.4: The chances of common problems affecting contact in the past (resident parents)

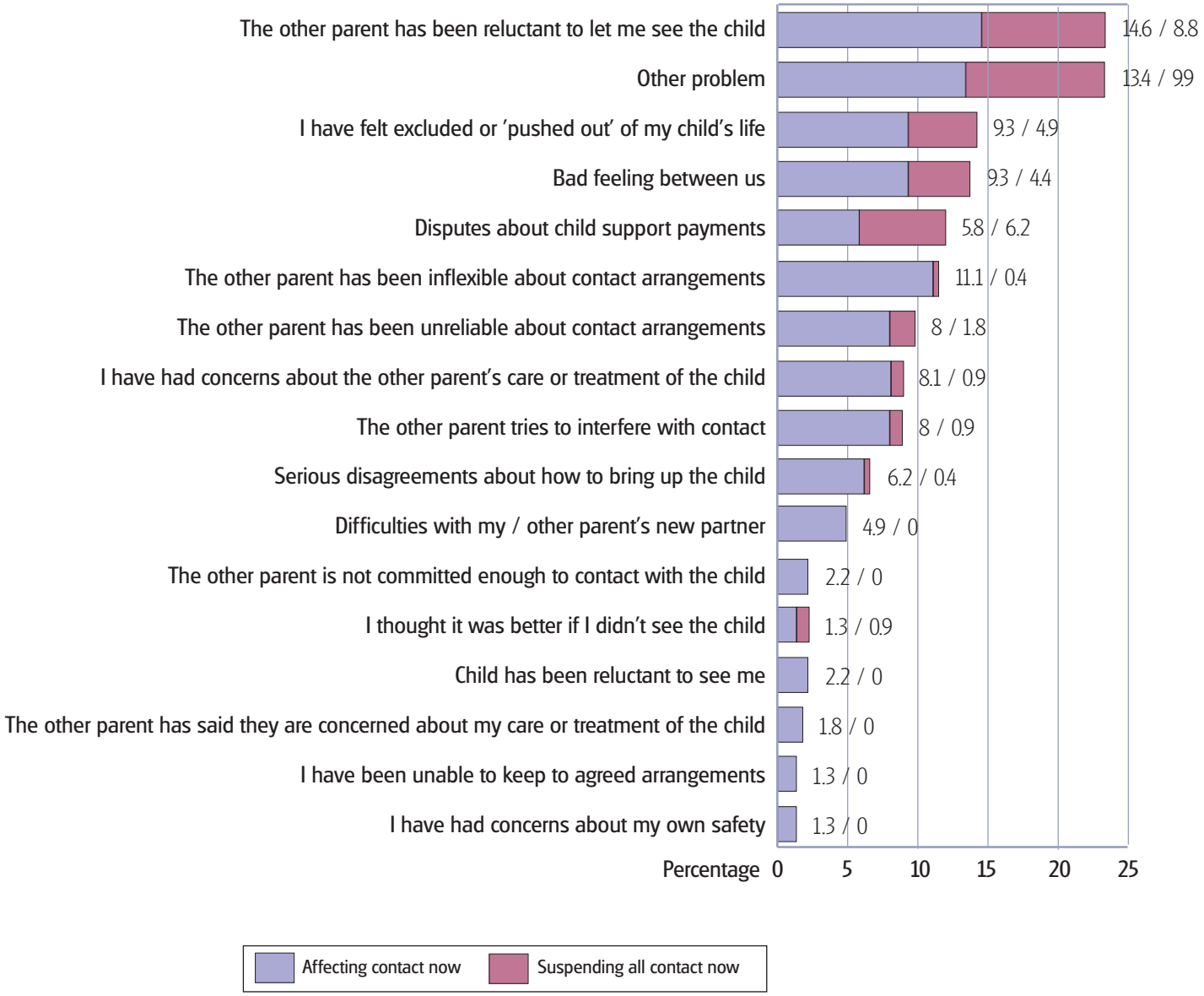
	Number reporting as a past problem	% reporting as past problem	% reporting contact affected by problem	Risk of problem affecting contact in the past
	Unweighted base	(%)	(%)	(%)
Child support dispute	59	25	7	29
Disagreements about how to bring up the child	33	12	5	44
Worried NRP wouldn't return child	28	11	5	46
Bad feeling	55	22	12	55
NRP inflexible about contact	44	18	10	55
Concerns about NRP's care	42	17	9	56
Child reluctant about contact	49	20	11	56
RP reluctant to allow contact	43	19	11	57
NRP unreliable about contact	60	24	16	67
NRP not committed to contact	47	19	14	75

Base: Resident parents reporting any contact.Table only includes problems reported by 10% or more of respondents.

Non-resident parents' perceptions of problems affecting contact in the past

Forty-three per cent of non-resident parents said that their contact had been suspended (15 per cent) or otherwise affected (28 per cent) by problems in the past. The most influential single problem from their point of view was the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact, cited by 23 per cent of all non-resident parents who were currently seeing their child. Other common problems which had affected contact in the past were feelings of exclusion and bad feeling between the parents (each affecting contact for 14 per cent of non-resident parents), and child support disputes (affecting contact for 12 per cent of non-resident parents).

Figure 9.4: Problems that have affected contact in the past (non-resident parents where contact is occurring)



Base: n=113 for 'other problem' and 'any problem' (excludes July 2006); n=144 for each individual problem. Parents whose child has contact.

Non-resident parents' experience of past problems with the potential to affect contact and their actual effect

Table 9.5 below gives estimates of the risk to contact associated with the commonest problems experienced in the past. Overall, risks of various problems affecting contact appear to be slightly higher than those reported by resident parents. For this group of non-resident parents, some of the common past problems were also common in the present. For these problems (bad feeling, feelings of exclusion, and the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact) the risks associated with each problem were similar. Where the resident parent was felt to be interfering with contact however, there was a greater risk to contact in the past (77 per cent) than where the problem was current (51 per cent).

Table 9.5: The chances of common problems affecting contact in the past (non-resident parents)

	Number of parents reporting issue as a past problem	% reporting issue as a past problem	% reporting contact affected by the problem	Risk of problem affecting contact
	Unweighted base	(%)	(%)	(%)
Disagreements about how to bring up the child*	18	12	7	53
Child support dispute	32	22	12	55
NRP's concern about RP's care*	24	16	9	57
Bad feeling	28	21	14	64
NRP felt excluded from child's life	29	20	14	72
RP unreliable about contact*	21	13	10	73
RP interferes with contact*	19	12	9	77
RP inflexible about contact*	23	15	12	79
RP reluctant to allow contact	38	26	23	90

Base: Non-resident parents reporting any contact, n=143. Table only includes problems reported by 10 per cent or more of respondents.
*Caution: low base

Resolving problems

We looked at the most common problems reported to have affected contact in the past to see firstly whether the problems had persisted, and secondly whether they were still affecting contact.

On the whole, as Table 9.6 shows, the findings are quite positive in that for every common problem which had affected contact in the past there was around a 50 per cent chance (and often more) that the problem would either no longer be an issue or would at least be no longer affecting contact. Thus only 31 per cent of resident parents said that bad feeling was still affecting contact and while more non-resident parents reported this (42 per cent) it still represents a substantial reduction. Similarly only 38 per cent of non-resident and 37 per cent of resident parents said that the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact was still a problem affecting contact.

Nonetheless it is clear that in a substantial proportion of cases the problems have persisted and continue to affect contact. It was fairly unusual for a problem to still be

evident but not to be having an impact on contact. However, there were two important exceptions to this. The first is parental bad feeling, where 29 per cent of resident and 16 per cent of non-resident parents said that bad feeling was still present but was not affecting contact. Similarly 28 per cent of resident parents said that the child continued to be reluctant about contact but that this was not actually affecting contact. Of course, one has to wonder what the children might say about both these situations, how far they were aware of parental bad feeling and what they thought about going to contact when they did not wish to.

Table 9.6: Persistence of problems which affected contact in the past

	Problem still affecting contact (%)	Problem still present but not affectingcontact (%)	Problem no longer present (%)	Total (unweighted base)
Resident parents				
NRP unreliable about contact	48	7	45	39
NRP not committed to contact	51	16	33	35
Bad feeling between parents	31	29	41	29
Child reluctant about contact	43	28	30	27
RP reluctant to allow contact	37	16	47	25
Non-resident parents				
RP reluctant to allow contact	38	2	60	33
Bad feeling between parents	42	16	42	18*
Felt excluded from child's life	47	3	50	20*

Base: Parents with ongoing contact. Problems which had affected past contact for less than 10 per cent of the sample are not shown.
*Caution: low base

Are parents who use the legal system more likely to have problems that affect contact?

Parents who reported that they had used the courts or lawyers in deciding contact were much more likely than other parents to have experienced problems which affected or stopped contact[26] (Table 9.7). This is consistent with conventional wisdom, that parents who use the legal system to deal with disputes over children are those with more severe or more entrenched problems.

However, it is notable that even those parents who did not use the legal system were still quite likely to report that their child's contact had been affected by problems (35 per cent of all resident and 42 per cent of all non-resident parents where there was current contact). Thus problems with contact are by no means limited to families who invoke the law. Looking at the data in a different way (table not shown), just 30 per cent of resident and 18 per cent of non-resident parents who reported that contact had been affected by problems had used the courts or lawyers to arrange contact.

It should be borne in mind here that we were not able to collect information on the severity or duration of problems. It is possible that the problems experienced by the families using the legal system were also more severe and/or longer lasting than in the families who made arrangements in a different way.

26 Significant at the $p<0.05$ level on a chi-square test for resident parents, not significant for non-resident parents, due probably to low bases.

Table 9.7: Problems affecting contact by use of the legal system

	Resident parent		Non-resident parent	
	Arrangements **not** made through lawyers or court (%)	Arrangements made through lawyers or court (%)	Arrangements **not** made through lawyers or court (%)	Arrangements made through lawyers or court (%)
Contact has been affected	35	80	42	75
Contact has not been affected	65	19	58	25
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	192	33	98	14*

*Caution: low base.
Base: All parents with contact at present. July 2006 data excluded.

Are the problems which cause contact to stop altogether also the problems causing temporary suspension?

Comparing the reasons for the complete lack of contact, with those behind a current or previous temporary suspension of contact, it can be seen that there are some interesting similarities (Table 9.8). The four problems most likely to stop contact completely, according to resident parents, were a lack of commitment on the part of

Table 9.8: Temporary and permanent cessation of contact

	No contact at all		Contact suspended now or in past	
	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Bad feeling between the other parent and I	15	23	17	20
The other parent not committed enough to contact	45	3	24	0
RP had concerns about care/treatment of child	14	0	20	0
NRP thought it better if they didn't see child	7	23	5	4
RP reluctant to allow contact	9	19	18	49
The child is reluctant	14	6	11	2
RP worried NRP might not return child	4	6	8	**
NRP felt excluded from child's life	0	19	0	27
Disputes about child support payments	7	0	15	35
Not seen child since birth / father is unaware of the child	18	6	**	**
Other reasons	10	26	54	62
Prefer not to say	17	23	**	**
Unweighted base	105	18*	46	31

Base: All parents with no contact at present, or where contact has been suspended at present or in the past.
**Not offered as an option
*Caution: low base

the non-resident parent, bad feeling, concerns about care and the child's reluctance. Three of the four problems most likely to suspend contact were the same. The only difference was that the resident parent's own reluctance about contact replaced the child's reluctance.

According to non-resident parents, the problems most likely to have caused contact to stop altogether were: bad feeling, the non-resident parents feeling that it would be better not to see the child, the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact, and feeling excluded from the child's life. Again three of the top four problems which had caused contact to be suspended were the same (bad feeling, feelings of marginalisation, and resident parents' reluctance to allow contact), the difference being that the non-resident parents feeling it would be best not to see the child was rarely given as a reason while disputes about child support, which did not appear at all in the list of reasons for contact stopping altogether, emerged as a common reason for contact being suspended.

Factors associated with problematic contact

Many families do not find that problems affect or suspend contact. However, knowing which factors make children's contact more likely to be affected can be useful in planning services for separated families.

Table 9.9 presents the results of a logistic regression analysis conducted to look at the factors which are associated with 'problematic contact', that is, contact which has ever been affected or suspended by a problem. Once again, because of the small numbers of non-resident parents, it uses data only from resident parents.

The quality of the current parental relationship was quite strongly associated with the chance of contact having been affected. Resident parents who reported a hostile relationship were more likely to say that contact had been affected by a problem, when compared with parents reporting a neutral relationship. There was also a trend for parents with a 'friendly' relationship to be less likely to report having had problems, although this did not quite reach significance. This association of the quality of the parental relationship with problematic contact is not surprising, given our previous findings on its association with contact frequency and satisfaction. One would also expect parental hostility to be correlated with the existence of problems, though, of course, whether it is the cause or effect of those problems could not be determined in this research (and might be difficult to disentangle in any research).

Resident parents whose child sees their other parent less than once a month were also more likely to report that problems had affected contact, compared with families where the child sees their other parent once a week or more.

In the previous chapter we reported that resident parents who were not in paid work were more likely to report problems with the potential to affect contact. They were also more likely to have experienced problems which affected contact.

A similar model was computed to look at the factors associated with contact suspension due to problems. However, the only significant factor to emerge from the analysis was an increased chance of suspension where the parental relationship was hostile.

Table 9.9: Logistic regression.: factors associated with contact that has ever been affected or suspended (resident parents with ongoing contact only)

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals
Status of current relationship with NRP	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	***5.49***	***<0.01***	***1.76–17.13***
	Friendly	0.45	0.06	0.19–1.03
	No relationship with other parent	0.99	0.99	2.56–3.83
Contact frequency	At least once a week	1		
	At least once a month but not as often as once a week	1.61	0.28	0.68–3.80
	Less often than once a month	***3.81***	***0.01***	***1.14–10.86***
Resident parent work status	Working	1		
	Not working	***3.81***	***<0.01***	***1.66–10.45***

Base: 213. Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: NRP current status (no new relationship / new relationship / new relationship with new children), RP education, RP housing type, time since separation (grouped), whether RP re-partnered, whether RP has new child, RP age (grouped), RP sex, parental relationship (married / cohabiting / in a relationship not cohabiting / never in relationship), child age (grouped).

10 Concerns about the other parent's care

Key findings

- Where the child was seeing their other parent, nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of resident parents had concerns about that parent's care.
- Over one in ten resident parents whose child has contact expressed serious welfare concerns about the other parent's care: drug abuse (5 per cent); alcohol abuse (10 per cent) mental illness (3 per cent); child abuse (1 per cent).
- Where resident parents had concerns about serious welfare issues, however, children were no less likely to be staying overnight with their other parent, although the majority of these parents said they would prefer less contact or no contact at all.
- Where contact was ongoing in the context of the resident parent's serious concerns, over half of these parents had not used the courts or legal services to make contact arrangements.
- Non-resident parents with contact were equally likely to have concerns about the other parent's care: 23 per cent had some concerns and 9 per cent had concerns about a serious welfare issue.

At a number of points in the questionnaire, parents had the opportunity to mention whether they had ever had concerns about the other parent's care of the child. Those who did so were then asked further questions to explore the nature of those concerns.

It is important to note that because of the way the questionnaire was structured, the data presented may underestimate the extent of particular problems in the whole parent group. A resident parent, for example, might have been worried that the child was mixing with unsuitable people when with the contact parent. However, unless they had previously said that they had some concern about that parent's care, they would not have been directed to the question where they were specifically asked about particular concerns.

Resident parents' welfare concerns

Twenty-four per cent of resident parents with ongoing contact (52) and 28 per cent of those without contact (29) said that they had had concerns about the other parent's care of the child at some point. This figure mainly comprises parents who identified such concerns in response to the questions about contact-related problems, but is also boosted by a few parents who said they had prevented contact, or were reluctant to allow contact, because they were 'worried about the child's safety', or 'worried that the other parent would not look after the child properly'.

The questions were different depending on whether contact was occurring or not, and because of this the results are presented separately.

Resident parents whose child has ongoing contact

The frequency and nature of welfare concerns

As can be seen from Table 10.1, column 1, in half of the cases in which contact was continuing and the resident parent had expressed concern over the other parent's care of the child, those concerns included what one could clearly categorise as serious welfare issues: alcohol abuse (46 per cent), drug abuse (24 per cent), mental illness (14 per cent) and child abuse (5 per cent).

In comparison with these issues some concerns, such as lack of routine (mentioned by 46 per cent of these parents) seem relatively minor, although they are clearly important in terms of the developmental needs of the child. In others it is impossible to judge without more detail: 'they don't look after the child properly' for instance, may mean no more than giving the child food that the resident parent does not approve of, or may be as serious as putting the child at risk of serious harm.

The most frequently mentioned problem was 'they say negative things about me to the child'. While this clearly presents a different type of risk to children from having a parent who is a substance abuser, that risk is far from negligible, given the research which demonstrates the adverse effects on children of being caught up in parental conflict (for overview see Harald and Murch, 2005).

Table 10.1: Concerns expressed by resident parents whose child has contact

	Number expressing concern	As % of RP's with welfare concerns	As % of all RP's where contact ongoing
Drug abuse by the other parent	12	24	5
Alcohol abuse by the other parent	22	46	10
Mental illness of the other parent	9	14	3
Child abuse	2	5	1
Any of the above	***26***	***50***	***11***
Child mixes with unsuitable people	10	19	4
Lack of routine with the other parent	24	46	10
They don't look after the child properly	19	38	9
They say negative things about me to the child	29	56	12
They are too harsh with the child	6	10	2
Other concerns	9	15	3
Prefer not to say	4	6	1
Unweighted base	55	55	257

Base: Resident parents whose child has some contact. Percentages are weighted and sum to more than 100 per cent as parents were able to choose all the answers which applied. Concerns may be current or in the past.

Resident parents with welfare concerns expressed on average (mean) 1.0 concerns about the more serious welfare issues and 1.9 concerns about the other issues. Overall, where parents expressed concern about welfare, a mean of 2.8 different problems were identified.

Column three in Table 10.1 presents the same data but takes as a base the whole group of resident parents whose child has contact, in order to put the concerns in a wider context. It shows that 11 per cent of all resident parents whose child has contact voiced concern about at least one serious welfare issue regarding the other parent's care. The most common serious concern was alcohol abuse (10 per cent), followed by drug abuse (5 per cent) and mental illness (3 per cent), with a small proportion (1 per cent) saying they were worried about child abuse. Other than the serious welfare issues, around one in ten of all parents whose child had contact felt that the other parent did not look after the child properly and a similar proportion said that the other parent had been derogatory about them to the child.

As all the data presented here is from self-report, we were not able to check whether the concerns listed by parents were valid concerns, nor were we able to check the degree or severity of the concerns which parents listed. Also important to note is that parents were asked this question if they said they had ever had concerns about care and some of these concerns are therefore likely to be historical.

The effects of resident parents' concerns on the type and frequency of contact

Where resident parents had serious concerns about the other parent's care (alcohol or drug abuse, mental illness, or child abuse), contact appeared to take place less often, although the picture is not clear, probably due to small bases, and a chi-square test found no significant difference at the 5 per cent level.

Looking at the association of concerns with contact type (Table 10.3) it is interesting to see that the resident parents' concerns are not associated with whether there was staying or only visiting contact (although since the number of parents expressing concern is quite low this limits the confidence that can be placed in the percentages). Where parents whose children's contact is ongoing expressed at least one serious concern, 61 per cent of them also reported that the child stays overnight with their parent; a figure not very different from the 63 per cent of parents without concerns who reported overnight contact. This finding is unexpected – we would have

Table 10.2: Contact frequency and resident parents' concerns about the other parent's care

Contact frequency	No concerns expressed (%)	Only less serious concerns expressed (%)	Serious concerns expressed (%)
At least once a week	53	57	38
At least once a month	26	18	48
Less often than once a month	21	25	14
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	202	29	26

Base: Resident parents where contact was ongoing. Concerns may be current or in the past.

Table 10.3: Contact type and resident parents' concerns about the other parent's care

	No concerns expressed (%)	Only less serious concerns expressed (%)	Serious concerns expressed (%)
Visiting contact only	37	22	39
Overnight contact	63	78	61
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	202	29	26

Base: Resident parents where contact was ongoing. Concerns may be current or in the past.

anticipated finding that children would be much less likely to have overnight contact when their resident parent had concerns about serious welfare issues. Low numbers mean that we cannot look at this in more detail to see whether particular concerns were more likely to be associated with visiting-only contact.

Table 10.4 compares resident parents' concerns about the other parent's care with their satisfaction with contact frequency. Over half of those with serious concerns (52 per cent) would have preferred contact to be less frequent or not happen at all, compared with 5 per cent of those who did not express concerns. However, a significant minority (31 per cent) of parents with serious concerns would have liked contact to take place more often; a surprising finding.

Table 10.4: Resident parents' wishes for contact and their concerns about the other parent's care

Preference for contact frequency	No concerns expressed (%)	Only less serious concerns expressed (%)	Serious concerns expressed (%)
More often	38	42	31
Less often	3	8	38
Things are about right at the moment	49	42	10
Would prefer no contact at all	2	4	14
Don't know	8	4	7
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	202	29	26

Base: Resident parents where contact was ongoing. Concerns may be current or in the past.

For some parents it was possible to determine whether their concerns about the other parent's care were current concerns or historical. The number of parents here is very low; we are only able to determine whether concerns were current or past for 19 of the 26 parents who expressed serious concerns about the other parent's care. Of these, 15 had concerns at present. Where there were serious concerns at present (and the child was having contact with the other parent), eight parents (60 per cent) said that their child was staying overnight with the other parent while six (38 per cent) reported at least weekly contact and 14 (94 per cent) at least monthly. Nearly three-

quarters of these parents (11; 71 per cent) said that they would prefer their child to have no contact at all or to see their other parent less often.

A comparison of Table 10.4 with Tables 10.2 and 10.3 suggests that if contact was taking place, the fact that the resident parent had current serious concerns about contact did not reduce the frequency of contact or the chance that contact included overnight stays, but that resident parents were not necessarily happy with this.

In some cases, contact in the context of serious concerns is likely to be happening because it was ordered by a court. Resident parents whose child had contact and who expressed serious concerns were more likely to have had contact arrangements determined by the court (28 per cent of such parents [6] said contact was court-determined, compared with 4 per cent [6] of those who did not express such concerns). They were also more likely to say that arrangements had been sorted out with the help of legal advice (21 per cent of resident parents with serious concerns [6] compared with 5 per cent of parents without concerns, [9]; Table 10.5).

However, Table 10.5 also indicates that many families where the resident parent has serious concerns are never involved with the legal system. Half of all resident parents with serious concerns about ongoing contact (49 per cent) did not use the courts or legal advice to arrange contact. Unfortunately we were not able to ask more in depth questions to check how these parents were dealing with these issues. However, we are concerned that such a high proportion of parents with serious concerns (around alcohol or drug abuse, mental illness or child abuse) may not have had access to support and advice.

We recognise that serious concerns in the context of ongoing contact is a sensitive issue, and would point out that the base of resident parents reporting serious worries was fairly low, and caution against relying on the data too much in this area. Also, once again, we must emphasise that we were not able to check how well-founded parents' concerns were. Nonetheless, the findings that where serious concerns exist, contact is still often taking place, and often overnight, and that these families are unlikely to have used the legal system to determine contact, are interesting and important points, worthy of further investigation.

Table 10.5: Resident parents' concerns and how contact arrangements were made

	No concerns expressed (%)	Only less serious concerns expressed (%)	Serious concerns expressed (%)
There is no clear arrangement in place / It developed over time	42	30	28
Sorted out with the help of legal advice	5	4	21
It was decided in court	4	7	28
Sorted out between myself and other parent on our own	37	30	10
Other	12	29	13
Total (%)	100	100	100
Unweighted base	201	29	26

Base: Resident parents where contact was ongoing. Concerns may be current or in the past.

Four per cent of resident parents where contact was usually taking place said that concern about the other parent's care was affecting or stopping contact at the moment, and 9 per cent said it had affected or stopped contact in the past.

Resident parents whose child has no contact

The survey included 105 resident parents[27] whose child did not see their other parent. These parents were a little more likely to voice concerns about the other parent's care of the child – 28 per cent expressed concern compared with 24 per cent of resident parents whose child did have contact. Nine per cent identified a serious welfare issue (drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness, or child abuse), slightly less than those families where contact was ongoing (11 per cent, Table 10.1).

In 14 per cent of the 105 cases (15) where the child had no contact, concern about the non-resident parent's care was the reason, or one of the reasons, for this. Unfortunately, the number of parents who said contact was not happening for this reason is too low to analyse in depth, although the parents were asked what kind of concerns they had and were able to choose as many answers as applied. Eight reported at least one serious welfare concern (drug abuse [4]; alcohol abuse [3]; mental illness [3]). Six said they were concerned the other parent didn't look after the child properly, three said the other parent was too harsh, and four that the other parent said negative things about them to the child.

Non-resident parents' welfare concerns

Twenty-three per cent of non-resident parents with some contact said that they had concerns about the other parent's care of the child at some point (non-resident parents without contact were not asked this question). Where parents expressed concern, they were asked the same follow-up question as resident parents to determine the nature of their concerns. However, it should be noted that since the numbers of non-resident parents who said that they had concerns was very low (32, unweighted), the data here should be treated with caution.

Non-resident parents' concerns were much less likely than those of resident parents to involve serious welfare issues (33 per cent compared with 51 per cent; [Table 10.6]). Eight per cent of those with concerns referred to alcohol abuse (compared to 45 per cent of resident parents) and the same proportion to drug abuse (compared with 26 per cent). The proportion with concerns about mental illness, however, was similar (12 per cent, compared with 14 per cent), while non-resident parents with concerns were more likely than resident parents to have concerns about child abuse (18 per cent compared with 5 per cent).

By far the most common concern voiced by non-resident parents was 'they say negative things about me to the child', (59 per cent of those who expressed any concern), followed by 'they don't look after the child properly' (47 per cent) and lack of routine (43 per cent). These proportions are fairly similar to those found among resident parents (52 per cent, 38 per cent and 45 per cent respectively), and at the very least would seem to be indicative, for this sub-group of parents who expressed concern, of a mutual lack of confidence in the other parent's parenting and conflicted parental relationships.

Non-resident parents cited, on average, a very similar number of concerns as resident parents in response to this question – a mean of 2.9 different concerns compared

27 Unweighted figure, excluding July 2006

with 2.8 for the resident parents. However, the mean number of serious concerns was less: 0.5 compared with 1.0 for the resident parents.

As column three, Table 10.6, shows, when the incidence of any individual problem is calculated as a percentage of the whole group of non-resident parents with contact, it can be seen that none exceeds 13 per cent (saying negative things about the parent), and the overall incidence of serious concerns among non-resident parents with contact is 9 per cent.

Table 10.6: Concerns expressed by non-resident parents who see their child

	Number expressing concern	As % of NRPs expressing concern	As % of all NRPs with contact
Drug abuse by the other parent	3	8	2
Alcohol abuse by the other parent	3	8	2
Mental illness of the other parent	6	12	3
Child abuse	4	18	4
Any of the above	***12***	***33***	***9***
Child mixes with unsuitable people	11	31	7
There is a lack of routine with the other parent	14	43	10
They don't look after the child properly	14	47	11
They say negative things about me to the child	19	59	13
They are too harsh with the child	6	14	3
Other concerns	9	25	6
Prefer not to say	4	10	2
Unweighted base	32	32	143

Base: Non-resident parents with some contact. Percentages sum to more than 100 per cent as parents were able to choose all the answers which applied. Concerns may be current or in the past.

Given that there were only 32 non-resident parents who expressed concern about the other parent's care, we felt the data was insufficient to look at how contact type and frequency related to these concerns in the way that we were able to for the resident parents. In addition, although non-resident parents' concerns may well affect the relationship between the parents, which may then impact on contact, their concerns about the resident parent's care are less likely to affect contact directly than where it is the resident parent who is worried.

How do parents manage their concerns?

Of the 26 resident parents with serious welfare concerns, just three said that contact was supervised; that is, that there was a legal order or mutual agreement that somebody else should be present when contact took place.

It was not feasible to attempt to explore this further in the quantitative survey. However, it is a key element in our ongoing qualitative interviews with parents. This qualitative work is also looking at parents' awareness of, and use of, services that can support contact where there are serious welfare concerns.

11 Stopping contact

Key findings

- Thirty-seven per cent of non-resident parents said that the other parent had stopped them spending time with their child at some point. Just 11 per cent of resident parents said that they had ever stopped contact.
- Where contact had been stopped, it was generally occasionally rather than a persistent problem. Twenty-three per cent of non-resident parents said that contact had been stopped occasionally, and 13 per cent said contact had been stopped 'quite often' or 'all contact is/was blocked'.
- Resident parents who said they had ever stopped contact gave a variety of reasons for doing this. Over a third (36 per cent) said it was because they were worried about the child's safety. Twenty-nine per cent said it was because of the child's opinions. Eight per cent had stopped contact because they were worried about their own safety.
- Less than one in five parents where contact stoppage had been a problem had been to court over the issue.

As noted in Chapter 1, the issue of contact being unreasonably stopped by resident parents has recently attracted a good deal of attention. However, little is known of the extent of this problem or the circumstances in which it occurs.

In an attempt to measure the incidence of contact stoppage parents were asked:[28]

> Has the other parent ever stopped you spending time with your child when this had been agreed or ordered,[29] even if only once? / Have you ever stopped your child spending time with the other parent when this has been agreed or ordered, even if only once?
>
> Please choose all that apply
>
> - No, this has never happened
> - At the moment contact is blocked occasionally
> - At the moment contact is blocked quite often
> - All contact is blocked at the moment
> - Contact has been blocked occasionally in the past
> - Contact has been blocked quite often in the past
> - All contact has been blocked in the past

28 This question should have gone to all parents, whether there was contact at present or not. Unfortunately, in the first two waves only those parents whose child was currently seeing their non-resident parent were asked this question. Subsequent waves included all parents at this question.

29 We asked 'if contact had been agreed or ordered' because we wanted to include only those incidents which had stopped a scheduled meeting from taking place. We felt that asking simply 'Has the other parent ever stopped you spending time with your child' was too broad and would include many non-resident parents who would have liked more contact but had not actually experienced obstruction when contact was scheduled to happen.

How common is contact stoppage?

Overall, as one would expect, resident parents were much less likely to say that they had ever stopped contact (11 per cent) than non-resident parents were to report that their contact had ever been stopped (37 per cent).

Throughout this report we have noted that figures and trends often differ between resident and non-resident parents. Previously, we have suggested that due to the higher response rate among resident parents, the figures based on their reports are likely to present the more accurate picture. However, the position in relation to this particular question is complicated and we do not think we can say this. It is possible, of course, that non-resident parents may be more likely to view any failure of contact as an instance of contact stoppage on the part of the resident parent so that their reports over-estimate the incidence. On the other hand, one can imagine that some resident parents will be reluctant to say they have stopped contact, so that their reports could be an under-estimate. Further, since, as we have emphasised throughout, the non-resident parents taking part in this study appear to be the more engaged parents, it is possible that the 'true' extent of what is perceived to be contact obstruction in the separating population may be even higher than the 37 per cent reported by our respondents.

As Table 11.1 indicates, unsurprisingly, non-resident parents without current contact were most likely to report that contact had been stopped at some point (seven out of 13). What is surprising, perhaps, is that the figure was so low, implying that contact stoppage by the resident parent is by no means the only reason why contact does not take place; more complex and subtle processes are likely to be occurring. Moreover, not all those reporting that contact had been stopped said that all contact was blocked now, or had been blocked in the past. However, because so few non-resident parents without contact took part in the survey, the base numbers here are extremely low and the findings should be treated with caution.

A substantial minority of those non-resident parents who did have contact also reported that it had been stopped at some point (34 per cent). While most of this latter group indicated that the problem lay in the past, 8 per cent of all non-resident parents who usually had contact said that their contact was being stopped at present, including 3 per cent who said that all contact had stopped.

The proportion of resident parents reporting that they had ever stopped contact was similar whether contact was usually happening at present or not (13 per cent of resident parents with current contact said that they had stopped contact at some point, compared to 11 per cent where there was no contact). However, in cases where contact was currently taking place almost all resident parents were referring to occasional stoppage of contact (12 per cent) whereas where there was no contact 7 per cent said they had stopped all contact, only 4 per cent referring merely to 'occasional' stoppage.

Table 11.1: Reports of contact stoppage by parent type and contact

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parents report (%)
All parents		
No, this has never happened	89	63
At the moment contact is blocked occasionally	<0.5	3
At the moment contact is blocked quite often	0	1
All contact is blocked at the moment	2	5
Contact has been blocked occasionally in the past	7	20
Contact has been blocked quite often in the past	0	4
All contact has been blocked in the past	2	3
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	250	102
No contact		
No, this has never happened	89	50
All contact is blocked at the moment	3	25
Contact has been blocked occasionally in the past	4	0
Contact has been blocked quite often in the past		19
All contact has been blocked in the past	4	6
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	79	13*
Some contact		
No, this has never happened	87	66
At the moment contact is blocked occasionally	1	2
At the moment contact is blocked quite often	0	3
All contact is blocked at the moment	<0.5	3
Contact has been blocked occasionally in the past	11	19
Contact has been blocked quite often in the past		2
All contact has been blocked in the past	1	6
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	257	143

Base: All parents except those where the father is unaware of the child. The 'all parents' and the 'no contact' category excludes data for July and October 2006 as the 'no-contact' parents were not asked this question in those waves.
*Caution: low base

Why is, or was, contact stopped?

Resident parents were asked why they had stopped contact, and non-resident parents if the other parent had said why they were stopping contact. Table 11.2 looks at the reasons behind all contact stoppage (the first two columns) and then the reasons behind more frequent contact stoppage (where it is or has been stopped more often than 'occasionally': columns 3 and 4). As can be seen, the base numbers of parents

Table 11.2: Reasons for contact stoppage

	All cases where contact 'ever stopped'		Contact stopped more often than 'occasionally'	
	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
NRP not making agreed / ordered child support payments	15	4	0	0
The child had other things they wanted/ had to do	16	20	13	15
The child did not want to see NRP	18	8	0	10
The child did not like NRP's new partner	5	6	0	3
RP wanted child to build relationship with their new partner	3	8	13	13
There was too much bad feeling between us	15	25	19	18
RP worried that NRP would not look after child properly	24	7	19	10
Our views about how to bring up the child are too different	6	5	6	0
RP was worried about child's safety	27	2	38	0
RP was worried about their own safety	8	4	19	8
RP felt parents lived too far apart**	**	9	**	10
Other reason	15	42	13	33
Prefer not to say	19	13	31	15
Any safety concern (RP worried that NRP would not look after child properly, and / or RP worried about child safety)	36 (16)	–	38 (4)	–
Any effect of child's views (Child had other things to do, child did not want to see NRP, child did not like NRP's new partner)	29 (13)	27 (16)	13 (1)	20 (6)
Unweighted base	46	49	12*	20*

Base: All parents who had stopped or experienced stopped contact. Percentages sum to more than 100 per cent as respondents could choose all the answers that apply.
**Category emerged from non-resident parents' 'Other' answers. Not offered as an answer option to the resident parents.
*Caution: low base

who said there had been more than occasional stoppage are very low and we would advise caution when looking at these figures.

The primary reason offered by resident parents for stopping contact was concern about the child's safety and/or care when the child was with the other parent. Thirty-six per cent of those who had ever stopped contact (16 out of 46 respondents) gave one or both of these reasons, as did 38 per cent of those who had stopped contact more than just occasionally (four out of 12) (Table 11.2).

All parents who said that they were worried about their child's safety in response to this question were asked a follow-up question later to get more information about the nature of these concerns (see Chapter 10). At this follow-up question, seven out of the 16 parents (48 per cent) who said they had stopped contact because of worries about the child's safety or the non-resident parent's care gave at least one 'serious welfare' reason, that is, they were concerned about the other parent's drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness, or their abuse of the child. Once again, some of the other concerns may also have involved serious welfare issues but those categories were broader and could also include less serious matters.

Beyond this, resident parents gave a wide range of reasons for stopping contact. Twenty-nine per cent of those who had ever stopped contact said that this was partly because of the child's opinions about contact. It should also be noted that in a few cases (8 per cent of those who had ever stopped contact, and 19 per cent of those who had stopped it more often) it was because the resident parent was worried about their own safety.

Non-resident parents also said that there was a wide range of reasons given to them for stopped contact. Twenty-seven per cent of those who had had their contact stopped at all said that this was partly due to a child's opinions, and a similar proportion (25 per cent) cited bad feeling between the parents.

For both groups, it is noticeable that there were many 'other' responses that could not be recoded into the existing categories, or grouped together. Several parents also declined to give a reason. The 'other' reasons included, for resident parents: not wanting the child to spend time with the other parent's new partner; the other parent's attitude to contact; and a desire for a regular structure to the child's life. 'Other' reasons given by the non-resident parent included: the other parent's personality or mental illness; too many conditions placed on contact; and problems with new partners.

Was contact stoppage dealt with by the family courts?

Parents were asked: have you ever been to court because the other parent has stopped you seeing your child / says you stopped them seeing your child?

- Yes, once
- Yes, more than once
- No, but I have threatened the other parent with court action over this
- No, but the other parent has threatened to take me to court over this
- No, but I have been to court over other problems to do with contact
- No, never been to court over contact[30]

Respondents were routed to this question if they were resident parents who said that they had stopped contact, or non-resident parents who said that they had had their contact stopped. As Table 11.3 indicates, the numbers who had been to court on this matter were very low – only six resident and nine non-resident parents. This represents 19 per cent of all resident parents who said they had ever stopped contact and 18 per cent of all non-resident parents who experienced contact stoppage. Four of the resident parents and four of the non-resident parents had been to court after 'occasional' stoppage and the remainder because of a more persistent issue.

30 Answers presented in table are grouped due to low bases. The routing of this question means that resident parents who said previously that they had never stopped contact were not asked whether they had been to court over stoppage or alleged stoppage. It is possible that some respondents had been taken to court over perceived stoppage despite answering that they had never stopped contact.

Table 11.3: Was contact stoppage taken to court?

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Yes, once	12	7
Yes, more than once	7	11
No, never been to court over contact obstruction	81	82
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	46	48

Base: All respondents who said they had stopped contact (RPs) or that they had had their contact stopped (NRPs).

Of the parents who reported that there had been some stoppage, those whose child had contact at present appeared more likely to have been to court over the issue than parents whose child did not (table not shown). However, base numbers were too small for this trend to reach statistical significance. While the small numbers involved mean that little weight can be placed on this finding, it perhaps provides some indication that going to court can be effective in restoring contact in the face of resistance by the resident parent.

Based on the parents who were asked this question, it seems that families where contact stoppage has been a problem only rarely make their way to the family courts. Unfortunately the numbers of parents who have been to court over stoppage are so low that it is not possible to conduct further analysis to investigate whether they were different in any way from the families where stoppage did happen but was not dealt with by the courts.

Contact stoppage and child maintenance

Parents were also asked whether contact stoppage had made an impact on child maintenance payments. Table 11.4 below indicates that where contact had been stopped, resident parents were more likely than non-resident parents to say that payments had stopped or been reduced. Very few non-resident parents said that child

Table 11.4: Effect of stoppage on child maintenance

	Resident parent report (%)	Non-resident parent report (%)
Yes – child support payments were stopped or reduced	16	2
Yes – child support payments restarted or increased	2	2
No – there was no agreement or order to pay child support	59	39
No – payments continued as normal	23	57
Total (%)	100	100
Unweighted base	46	49

Base: All respondents who said they had stopped contact (resident parents) or that they had had their contact stopped (non-resident parents).

maintenance had been affected in any way by contact stoppage, and, overall, Table 11.4 indicates that contact stoppage is quite unlikely to affect maintenance payments, where these are due.

Table 11.4 is also further evidence for our hypothesis that this survey did not manage to secure the cooperation of a representative number of less-engaged non-resident parents. Just 39 per cent of non-resident parents answering this question said that there was no child support payable. However, data from other sources indicates that only around a third of resident parents receive any child support from the other parent (Department for Work and Pensions, 2007) and thus we would have expected the proportion of non-resident parents saying that there was no agreement or order to pay child support to be closer to two-thirds.

12 Parental attitudes to contact

This chapter looks briefly at those families where one parent feels that the other has a poor attitude to contact. Chapter 11 has dealt with one possible variant of this: contact stoppage by the resident parent, reported by 37 per cent of non-resident parents. Perceived problems with the other parent's attitude to contact, however, has been a consistent theme in this report. Thus:

- Where no contact was taking place 50 per cent of resident parents said this was because of the non-resident parent's lack of commitment (45 per cent) and/or their choice not to see the child (7 percent). Twenty-one per cent of non-resident parents said there was no contact either because the resident parent was reluctant to allow it, or because the resident parent was not committed to contact. (Chapter 7).
- Where there was contact 43 per cent of resident parents said that the non-resident parent was or had been one or more of the following: unreliable (29 per cent), uncommitted (22 per cent), inflexible (21 per cent), or had felt it better not to see the child (8 per cent). Thirty-nine per cent of non-resident parents said that the resident parent was or had been at least one of the following: reluctant to allow contact (30 per cent), inflexible (23 per cent), unreliable (14 per cent) or not committed to contact (5 per cent). Twelve per cent of non-resident parents said that the other parent had tried to interfere with contact and 25 per cent that they had felt excluded or pushed out of the child's life (Chapter 8).
- Problems with the perceived attitude of the other parent were the most likely to affect contact. Where contact was taking place 17 per cent of resident parents said that it had been affected at some point because of the non-resident parent's unreliability and 15 per cent because of their lack of commitment. Twenty-six per cent of non-resident parents said contact had been affected by the resident parent's reluctance to allow it (Chapter 9).
- Such attitudes carried the highest risk of any problem that contact would be affected. In 55 per cent of the cases where the non-resident parent was described as inflexible about contact, 67 per cent of those where they were unreliable, and 75 per cent of those where they lacked commitment, contact was said to have been affected. The risks of contact being affected where the problem was perceived to lie in the resident parent's attitude were even higher: reluctance to allow contact (90 per cent risk), inflexibility (78 per cent), interference with contact (77 per cent), unreliability (73 per cent), feeling excluded (72 per cent) (Chapter 9).

In the further analysis in this chapter we use the phrase 'a poor attitude' to indicate that a parent felt that their child's other parent was either uncommitted, unreliable or inflexible about contact. Resident parents who said that the other parent thought it best not to see the child are also included in this grouping, as are non-resident parents who felt that the resident parent was reluctant to allow contact. It is important to stress that these are parents' own perceptions and cannot be validated against an external measure.

Table 12.1 displays contact frequency and parents' wishes for contact by whether they perceive the other parent as having a poor attitude to contact. It can be seen that resident parents giving answers which indicated this also tended to report less

frequent contact,[31] a pattern that is not significant in the answers of non-resident parents. Resident parents reporting a poor attitude were also more likely to say that they wanted more contact, as were non-resident parents.[32] Resident parents who felt that the other parent had a poor attitude were more likely to say that contact had decreased over time (58 per cent compared with 25 per cent of those who did not report a poor attitude).[33]

Taken together these findings suggest that one of the main reasons behind infrequent contact is the non-resident parent's attitude (perceived or real) to contact. Sixty-five per cent of resident parents whose child had less than weekly contact and would like more frequent contact said that the other parent had a poor attitude to contact (table not shown). As reported in Chapter 7 the most common single reason given by resident parents for no contact was the non-resident parent's perceived lack of commitment.

Table 12.1: Reports of the other parent's attitude to contact by: frequency, wishes for frequency and changes over time (parents with contact only)

	Resident parent report		Non-resident parent report	
	No 'poor attitude' (%)	'Poor attitude' reported (%)	No 'poor attitude' (%)	'Poor attitude' reported (%)
Actual contact frequency				
At least once a week	64	36	58	48
Less than weekly but at least once a month	21	35	20	29
Less often than once a month	14	29	22	23
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	150	107	105	38
Wishes for contact frequency				
More often	26	52	58	95
Less often	6	10	0	0
Things are about right	59	23	41	5
Would prefer no contact	3	6	0	0
Don't know	6	9	1	0
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	150	107	105	38
Changes in amount of contact				
Increased	15	22	24	40
Stayed about the same	60	20	46	26
Decreased	25	58	31	34
Total (%)	100	100	100	100
Unweighted base	113	83	90	32

Base: All parents with contact at present.

31 Significant at the 0.05 level on a chi-square test, resident parents only.

32 Significant at the 0.05 level on a chi-square test, for both resident and non-resident parents.

33 Significant at the 0.05 level on a chi-square test, resident parents only.

The impact of a perceived 'poor attitude' on contact

The association of a perceived poor attitude with less frequent and decreased contact, described above, is not necessarily causal. However, where an attitude problem was described, the survey did ask about the impact that this had on contact that was ongoing. Parents who reported any of these four attitude problems were quite likely to say that contact had been affected as a result. Of the resident parents who reported an attitude problem on the part of the other parent, 62 per cent said that contact had been affected or stopped altogether by one of these problems. Of the non-resident parents who reported that the other parent was inflexible, unreliable, uncommitted or reluctant, 84 per cent said that one of these problems had affected or stopped contact (table not shown).

13 Summary and discussion

This report has detailed the findings of a national survey of 559 separated or divorced parents with a child under the age of 16. This was the first part of a study examining the incidence, nature and impact of problems relating to contact between children and the parent with whom they do not live. In order to provide a context to the data on contact problems we have also looked at the frequency and type of direct contact; how the contact arrangements were made; and parental satisfaction with contact. Subsequent stages of the study involve in-depth interviews with parents and children, and this report is currently in production.

Debates around contact are often complex and polarised, and contact itself is also often presented as complex and conflicted. This research has demonstrated that, in fact, most children are seeing their non-resident parent fairly regularly, and although problems are common, and in some cases there are worrying safety concerns, half of all separated parents say that their child's contact has never been affected by problems.[34] Difficult contact, or no contact at all, is certainly not the inevitable outcome after parental separation; many families appear to be managing contact quite well.

In any discussion of children's contact, it is crucial to remember that contact happens after the end of the parents' relationship, and the ending of a relationship almost inevitably involves conflict and strong emotion. It is not realistic to expect everyone to feel warm, positive and co-operative towards their ex-partner, although this does not mean that parents cannot move towards a more neutral, child-focused, relationship. It is important to acknowledge the emotional dimension of contact, and the findings and comments presented here should be read with this in mind.

This research has produced a whole raft of findings on contact in the general separating population, which we hope will serve to inform the development of policy. Using a high-quality national sample of separated parents means that we have been able to produce reliable results which can hold up under scrutiny. The main limitation of the research is that, in common with previous studies, the sample substantially under-represents non-resident parents. Although we did what we could to reassure non-resident parents that their answers were confidential and important, it is not possible to force people to take part in a survey when they do not wish to. The final sample included over twice as many resident as non-resident parents, and contained very few non-resident parents who did not see their child. This report contains repeated caveats on the findings relating to non-resident parents, particularly when looking at families which do not have contact. We are aware that we are unlikely to be presenting the full picture or accurately representing the experiences of non-resident parents, especially those who do not see their child. These parents' voices are important and we did not wish to exclude them, but conventional survey research appears to be unsuccessful at obtaining the views and experiences of non-resident parents who have no contact, or who are relatively disengaged from their children. We would suggest that other methods of recruitment and research need to be developed to properly research non-resident parents' views on contact and perhaps this is best done by independent researchers who would be viewed as neutral or sympathetic by non-resident parents.

34 According to resident parents.

Key findings

These are the key points to emerge from the research. A more detailed breakdown of each point can be found at the end of this chapter.

Contact patterns

1 An unexpectedly high proportion of parents reported that they shared care more or less equally with the other parent.

2 The majority of children have face to face contact with their non-resident parent although a substantial minority do not, of whom most have never had contact since their parents separated.

3 Where there is contact, the most common pattern is weekly, but there is wide variation. The frequencies reported by resident and non-resident parents whose child had contact were very similar.

4 Where there is contact it will typically include overnight visits, usually at least monthly.

5 Children who have overnight contact tend to have more contact in the holidays, but those with only visiting contact typically do not.

6 Contact is rarely stable over time and is more likely to reduce than increase.

Parental satisfaction with whether contact was taking place and its frequency

7 Where there is no contact almost all non-resident parents, and a sizeable minority of resident parents, are dissatisfied about this.[35]

8 Where contact is taking place, most parents are comfortable with this although many, particularly non-resident parents, are dissatisfied about its frequency. Typically, dissatisfied parents, both resident and non-resident, want there to be more contact, not less.

9 Satisfaction with contact frequency reduces in line with frequency for both resident and non-resident parents. However, non-resident parents are more dissatisfied than resident parents, and the majority of non-resident parents want more contact irrespective of how often it currently takes place.

10 Dissatisfaction levels are highest, for both resident and non-resident parents, where contact has decreased over time. However, even where it has increased most non-resident parents, and a substantial minority of resident parents, still want contact to be more frequent.

The incidence, nature and impact of contact problems

11 The majority of separating parents are likely to experience problems with the potential to affect contact and in a substantial proportion contact is affected or stopped, even if only for a period.

12 Although parents experience a wide range of problems with the potential to affect contact, the most frequently-reported problems are very similar for both resident and non-resident parents.

13 Certain problems are more likely to have an effect on contact than others.

14 Where contact is ongoing many problems which have affected contact in the past

35 Caution: low base number of non-resident parents without contact.

are no longer doing so in the present.

15 Where a problem is no longer affecting contact this is most likely to be because the problem has gone away. However, in some instances it is still a problem but not having an impact on contact any more.

16 The problems which have caused contact to stop completely are very similar to those which cause it to be temporarily suspended.

Concerns about the other parent's care

17 A substantial minority of both resident and non-resident parents have had concerns at some point about the other parent's care of the child. Some of these involve serious welfare issues.

18 Substantial contact can be taking place despite serious and current welfare concerns. Many resident parents are not happy with this.

19 While other concerns about the child's care may be less grave, they are not minor, and some may verge on serious welfare issues or have major implications for the child's physical or emotional well-being.

Concerns about parental safety

20 In a small, but not insignificant, minority of families contact is taking place where one of the parents has had concerns about their own safety.

Stopping contact

21 A significant minority of non-resident parents reported that their contact had been stopped by the resident parent at some point, although total or persistent blockage appears to be comparatively unusual.

22 Resident parents are much less likely than non-resident parents to say that they have ever stopped contact.

23 Contact is stopped for a wide range of reasons.

Attitudes to contact

24 Perceived problems with the other parent's attitude to contact are a major issue for parents.

25 Problems with the perceived attitude of the other parent are more likely than any other problem to affect contact.

26 Many children are likely to express reluctance to have contact at some point. For some the problem is persistent and can affect contact or cause it to be suspended or cease.

Parental relationships

27 Many parents are on reasonably good terms with each other although some have no relationship at all and a sizeable minority are hostile.

28 The quality of the parental relationship is an important factor in whether there is any contact and its frequency. However, some children are having quite substantial contact despite a hostile parental relationship.

29 Bad feeling is one of the commonest problems reported by both resident and non-resident parents.

30 Where there has been bad feeling but contact continues, in many instances it diminishes over time or ceases to affect contact, although it still affects contact in a substantial minority of families.

Use of the legal system

31 Only a minority of separating parents use the legal system to sort out contact arrangements.

32 Parents who use the legal system are much more likely to be those with problems but most parents with problems, including serious welfare issues do not use the legal system.

33 Even where contact stoppage is an issue this is rarely taken to court.

Factors independently associated with contact, satisfaction, and problems

34 Regression analysis indicated that eight factors were associated with whether contact took place, its frequency, parental satisfaction with frequency, the experience of problems with the potential to affect contact, and whether any problems did affect contact. The only factor associated with every one of these was the quality of the current parental relationship.

Discussion

Contact frequency

This report has dealt largely with contact frequency and the factors which are associated with whether contact is taking place, and if so, how frequently. However, frequent contact is not the same thing as good contact. While contact is necessary for a supportive relationship between parent and child, we would not say that children who see their other parent several times a week necessarily have a better relationship than those who have contact once or twice a month. Assessing 'quality' contact or the strength and nature of the parent-child relationship is really beyond the scope of quantitative research, especially as a parent's experiences and opinions will often be very different to the child's. This is an area that we will explore further in our ongoing work, where we are talking to parents and children about their experiences of contact: what is successful and what has caused problems.

One of the main points to emerge from the survey is the wide variety of contact arrangements which exist in Britain today. We found a much higher proportion of families with shared care than we expected (around one in ten). However, of the families who do not have shared care, over a third of all children never see their other parent, a similar proportion do see them but less often than once a week, and the remaining approximate third have relatively frequent contact, at least once a week.[36] There is certainly no 'normal' pattern of contact emerging from this data.

Whether contact happens at all, and its frequency, appear to be related to numerous factors in a simple analysis. However, logistic regression allows us to see which factors remain significant when other variables are accounted for. Although regression does not tell us about causal relationships, the analyses presented here

36 According to resident parents.

indicate that the quality of the parental relationship is a key factor. Parents who reported a hostile relationship were much less likely to report that contact was taking place (compared to the 'neutral' parents), and much less likely to be happy with the current frequency of contact. They were also much more likely to report at least one problem, and much more likely to say that their child's contact had been affected by a problem.

Parental hostility or friendliness

Other variables were also significantly associated with a range of outcomes, including both parents' new relationships and new children, the time since separation, and the type of previous relationship with the other parent (married, cohabiting, etc.), and in some cases indicators of socio-economic status. However, although these other factors were important, they are all factors which are either fixed or very difficult to change. The quality of the current relationship between the parents, on the other hand, is one factor which has potential for change, if one hoped to increase the number of children having frequent and problem-free contact.

Improving the relationship between separated parents is not likely to be easy, however. Many parents who have been separated for some time will have entrenched attitudes and hostility towards the other parent. There is also the problem of whether any intervention aimed at improving the relationship would be welcome, as well as the more obvious practical difficulties with determining the best type of intervention, and then funding it.

However, both our survey results and preliminary findings from qualitative interviews with parents indicate that the nature of separated parents' relationship can change with time. The survey showed that in many cases bad feeling between the parents either disappeared or ceased to affect contact. Some of the parents we have spoken to as part of the qualitative research also describe an initial hostility which has faded with time. Others, inevitably, have described how efforts to stay friendly or neutral have deteriorated so that the relationship is now hostile. The qualitative research may provide some ideas around how parents could be helped to develop a neutral, or friendly, post-separation relationship or at least prevent hostility affecting contact, and most importantly, the child. Such support would perhaps be best targeted at parents who are in the process of separating, but should not be focused solely on those who are divorcing (59 per cent of resident and 56 per cent of non-resident parents in this sample were not married to their child's other parent), nor should it be focused mainly on those who seek help from solicitors since the survey indicated that this is quite rare.

Changes to contact

It is important to note that although families where the parents have a hostile relationship are more likely to experience problems, they are not the only ones to do so. It is relatively unusual for parents to say they have not had any problems with the other parent since separation (only 26 per cent of resident and 30 per cent of non-resident parents reported no problems). Moreover, over half of the parents whose child did have contact at the time of the survey said that contact had been either affected or stopped by problems at some point. We were surprised that so many children have had their contact affected by problems and it suggests that for many children contact is changeable and sometimes fragile.

Changes in contact were explored in Chapter 6, where we found that half of children who have ever had contact now had less contact than previously, or none at all. Around a third of children had about the same amount of contact now as when their parents first split, and a small remainder had more contact now than previously. Changes in amount of contact were associated with other changes over time – older children were more likely to have seen a decrease in contact, and where the non-resident parent had moved on and re-partnered, children were less likely to see them than before. However, changes in amount do not necessarily mean changes in quality, and there are many reasons which could cause a change in the amount of contact; increased demands on the child's time as the child ages, for instance, the chance that one parent will move further away, and possibly the non-resident parent feeling that contact is too emotionally demanding. Problems between the parents may also mean that children see their contact decrease.

Parents whose child's contact has decreased were the most likely to say that they would like more contact, and non-resident parents were considerably more likely than resident parents to say that they wanted more contact. The finding that so many parents, resident as well as non-resident, would like contact to happen more often can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, that the desire for more contact stems from a parental belief that contact has positive benefits, and that these parents want to make contact happen and make it successful. Secondly, that there are barriers, or constraints, which prevent contact from happening as frequently as the respondents would have liked. These barriers are likely to be varied and we would warn against simplistic interpretations which argue either that non-resident parents who want more contact are being denied it against their will, or that resident parents who want more contact find that the other parent is reluctant to spend more time with the child. In the survey we were not able to investigate why contact did not happen as often as parents would have wished, although this is something we will be exploring in the qualitative interviews. However, the constraints are likely to include: distance and transport problems, parental commitments such as work and family, children's commitments such as school, friends, family and their own interests and activities, children's attitudes and feelings about contact, as well as reluctance or lack of commitment on the part of one parent.

The voice of the child is missing from this analysis and it should be pointed out that children's wishes for contact will not always mirror those of their parents. Children may well have a desire for more contact, or for less, than their parents wish for. Also, parents' wishes for changes in contact frequency may reflect the impact contact has on their own life, as well as reflecting their wishes for their child. For example, resident parents may want more contact because it offers a break from childcare, or they may want less because it is disruptive to their family's lives. And for some families, the calculation of child maintenance payments may also be a factor which influences parents' wishes for the amount of contact; the Child Support Agency's formula reduces the amount payable as the amount of overnight contact increases. The qualitative part of this study looks at this in more detail and will include data from interviews with children.

Families without contact

The most extreme change to contact frequency is found in those families where the child used to have contact but no longer sees their other parent at all. Around one in

ten of all separated parents, (including those at the other end of the spectrum with shared care), said that their child falls into this category.[37] The resident parents of these children were most likely to say that there was no contact because the other parent was not committed to contact, and very few (2 per cent) said that it was because they themselves were reluctant to allow contact.

While the proportion of children who have no contact was similar to the estimates from several other studies, we were surprised that so many children had never had any contact. Where there was no contact, nearly two-thirds of children had never seen their other parent since the end of the parents' relationship.[38] Clearly, for a significant number of children, contact never gets off the ground at all and this appears to be a greater problem than contact breakdown, which highlights the need to target the initial period of separation. The resident parents in these cases were most likely to say that the lack of contact was due to the other parent's lack of commitment. It was also notable that socio-economic status was linked to whether there had ever been any contact: the resident parents who said that their child had not seen the other parent at all since separation were more likely to be out of work, and less likely to have good educational qualifications.

One of the main aims of this research was to discover the incidence of contact stoppage. It was quite rare for resident parents to admit to stopping contact. However, reports of contact stoppage were much more common from the non-resident parents, with 23 per cent saying their contact had been stopped at least once, and a further 13 per cent saying it had been stopped 'quite often' or 'all contact is / has been blocked'. This is a very sensitive area, and as we have pointed out, some resident parents may be reluctant to admit to stopping contact, and some non-resident parents may be assuming their contact is stopped unreasonably when this is not the case. However, we also feel that the incidence of stoppage could be an underestimate, given that several findings suggest that the non-resident parents who took part in this research are the ones who are more engaged and committed to contact.

Where resident parents admitted to stopping contact, it was often for reasons which seemed, at least on the face of it, to be reasonable. Thirty-eight per cent of parents who had stopped contact more often than 'occasionally' said it was due to a safety concern. In terms of analysing the data, it was unfortunate that there were such low numbers of parents who had experienced stopped contact or stopped it themselves, as we are not able to place too much confidence in this data or analyse it in more depth.

Contact stoppage was only rarely dealt with by the family courts, with less than one in five parents going to court over stoppage where it had occurred. The survey found a low number of parents who had been through the courts over stoppage and thus we are not able to say whether these families were different in some way – whether they had experienced more stoppage, or had had many other problems – than the parents who did not go to court. However, it is clear that the courts see only a minority of families where contact stoppage has occurred or has been alleged.

There has been much debate recently around whether the courts are of use in dealing with contact obstruction, resulting in the Children and Adoption Act (2006) which gives further powers to the family courts to tackle the problem of non-compliance with contact orders. Although these provisions of the Act have not yet been implemented, this survey provides an indication that the courts can already be effective in restoring stopped contact, given that where there had been stoppage, the

37 According to resident parents.

38 According to resident parents.

families with contact at present were more likely to have been to court than the families with no contact at all. Further light will be shed on this issue when the findings of a recently completed study on applications for contact orders are published (Hunt and Macleod, forthcoming). However, the numbers of parents reporting stopped contact were so low that this was not a significant difference, merely a trend. We were not able to investigate how parents dealt with stoppage, or accusations of stoppage, other than by using the courts, although this is something we shall be exploring in the qualitative interviews.

Attitudes and commitment to contact

Contact stoppage is linked to the resident parent's attitude towards contact. In families where there was contact at present, 30 per cent of non-resident parents said that the other parent was currently or had been reluctant to allow contact, and nearly all of these parents (26 per cent of all non-resident parents with contact) said that contact had been affected by this. Resident parents whose child had contact were also quite likely to say that they had been reluctant to let their child see the other parent, with 21 per cent saying that this had been an issue. However, resident parents were not so likely to say that contact had actually been affected – just 11 per cent said that this had affected contact. Reassuringly, however, reluctance to allow contact was not a permanent problem for many families; the majority of parents who said it had affected contact in the past said that it was not affecting contact at the time of the survey.

A reluctant attitude to contact on the part of the resident parent is clearly an important factor in a substantial minority of families, particularly according to non-resident parents' reports. However, it does seem that contact stoppage on the part of the resident parent is not one of the main causes of contact ceasing altogether; in families without contact, the resident parent is no more likely to admit to stopping contact, and only 21 per cent of non-resident parents without contact said that this was because the resident parent was reluctant to allow it, or because the resident parent was not committed to contact.

Some of the non-resident parents who report that the other parent is reluctant to allow contact could perhaps be mistaking the child's reluctance for the parent's reluctance. Over a quarter of the resident parents whose child has contact at present said that the child had been reluctant to see their other parent, and around half of these said that the child's reluctance had affected contact. Twenty per cent of resident parents whose child used to have contact, but no longer did so said that the child's reluctance was one of the reasons contact had ended. However, non-resident parents were much less likely to say that their child had been reluctant about contact, or that children's reluctance had affected contact or caused it to end. We were not able to establish whether these children were persistently reluctant to see their other parent or whether it was more of an occasional reluctance, perhaps affected by other demands on their time. Neither were we able to establish the degree to which children's reluctance was affected by their parents' attitudes. This is an area which clearly requires more research.

Chapter 12 looked at the effect which parental attitudes can have on contact. In families where contact was taking place, a large proportion (43 per cent) of resident parents felt that the other parent's attitude was, or had been, deficient in some way – that they were uncommitted, unreliable, inflexible, or that the contact parent had felt

it best not to see the child. Resident parents reporting one or more of these 'attitude problems' were less likely to have children with weekly contact. Over half of these parents wanted more contact, but in fact it was likely that contact had decreased over time for these families. A similar proportion of non-resident parents were critical of the resident parent's attitude to contact, but the link between resident parents' attitudes and contact frequency and change was less clear.

Resident parents' admissions of contact stoppage were less common than non-resident parents' claims that their contact had been stopped, but for both types of parent, the perception that the other parent has a poor attitude to contact was considerably more common. A poor attitude to contact appears to be very influential; as well as being linked to less frequent contact, parents reporting an attitude problem are very likely to say that it has affected contact. Attitudes to contact can often be critical ; 50 per cent of resident parents whose child had no contact said it was because their child's other parent was not committed to contact or had chosen not to see the child. Information about how children benefit from good supportive contact may go some way to convincing sceptical parents (of both types) that good contact and a good continuing relationship between the non-resident parent and the child are possible and desirable, and that it is worth making an effort to stay committed and reliable. It may well be useful to point out the ways in which contact can benefit the resident parent as well. For non-resident parents, information and suggestions about how to make contact successful for everyone involved may help improve contact for families.

The impact of problems on children's contact – frequent but not catastrophic

Among the families where contact was taking place, problems were very common. Nearly half of both resident and non-resident parents whose child has contact said that there were problems at present. Where problems existed alongside ongoing contact, it was quite likely to be affected, with 23 per cent of resident and 31 per cent of non-resident parents saying that it was affected by problems at present. However, despite the high proportion of families experiencing problems, and the impact that problems had on contact, the majority of parents where there was contact reported that it was unaffected by problems at the time of the survey (although the proportion of families where contact had *never* been affected by problems was considerably lower).

It is clear that separated families are quite likely to encounter problems which affect their child's contact with the non-resident parent. In fact problems might be regarded as normative. However, the families discussed here are those where contact problems have not been fatal to contact; at the time of the survey it was still seen as ongoing, although in some cases the issue had led to contact being suspended. Identifying cases where suspension leads to termination would require longitudinal data which it was not possible to collect. However, we feel it is likely that some of these families would see contact end altogether, given that the most frequent reasons behind temporary suspension are very similar to those given for cases where there is no contact at all (bad feeling, the resident parent's concerns about the other parent's care or their reluctance to allow contact and the non-resident parent's perceived lack of commitment or feelings of marginalisation.

Some 'risk factors' for contact were clear from the data, in addition to the friendliness or otherwise of the parents' current relationship. Non-resident parents' lack of commitment is a clear risk factor, and an important one given that it was cited as a

problem by nearly a quarter of all resident parents whose child had contact. If the resident parent thought a lack of commitment was a problem, it was very likely to affect contact. And if it had affected contact in the past, there was a relatively high chance that it would still be having an effect at the time of the survey.[39] A lack of commitment was also the single most common reason behind a lack of any contact at all, according to resident parents.

Children's reluctance about contact is also an important risk factor, cited as a problem by a quarter of all resident parents whose child currently has contact, it had affected contact at some point in half of those families.[40] It was also a factor for some families where there was no contact at all.

The resident parent's reluctance about contact was the most important risk factor to emerge from non-resident parents' reports. Many (30 per cent) non-resident parents who were seeing their child said that the other parent's reluctance had been a problem, and where it was a problem it was very likely to affect contact. It was also a fairly persistent problem; 38 per cent of non-resident parents who said that it had affected contact in the past also said that it was still affecting contact at the time of the survey. Resident parents' own reports also highlighted it as a risk factor. A significant minority had been reluctant about contact and this was quite likely to affect contact when it arose. However, the resident parent's reluctance about contact did not stand out as the main reason behind complete cessation of contact, suggesting that reluctance may diminish with time or that it is something that parents are able to accommodate.

Some problems which we might have expected to be risk factors for contact appeared to have little influence. Child maintenance disputes were the commonest problem mentioned by both resident and non-resident parents. However, it was relatively unusual for this problem to affect contact; although 43 per cent of resident and 34 per cent of non-resident parents cited it as a problem, very few said that it had affected contact at any point. Very few parents of either type said that a dispute about child support was one of the reasons for the lack of any contact. Despite a perception that parents sometimes trade cash for contact, it seems that the vast majority keep the two issues separate.

Bad feeling between the parents was mentioned as a problem by 30 per cent of resident parents and by nearly as many non-resident parents (27 per cent). In families where contact was taking place, parents were largely able to prevent bad feeling affecting contact and in the majority of cases it was unaffected. In some families it did have an impact on contact (12 per cent of families according to resident parents, 17 per cent according to non-resident), but it was unlikely to suspend contact. Neither did bad feeling stand out as a main reason behind the complete absence of contact.

Safe contact

The factors described above are risky in the sense that if that issue occurs, it is likely to affect contact, not that they are a risk to safety. But of course for a minority of children whose non-resident parent is not able to care for them appropriately, contact is not safe or beneficial. Twenty four per cent of all resident parents whose child had contact said that they had had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child at some point. Some of these concerns were very serious: 26 resident parents in this survey (11 per cent of all resident parents whose child had contact)

39 According to resident parents.

40 According to resident parents.

said that they were, or had been, worried about either alcohol or drug abuse, child maltreatment, or the other parent's mental illness. The majority of parents with serious welfare concerns would have preferred less contact, but contact was still happening in these families, and in most cases included overnight stays.

Children's safety is not the only safety issue around contact. Pre-separation domestic violence is a significant problem among the population of separated parents (Walby and Allen, 2004) and in many cases it continues to be a threat after separation. In this survey, one in ten of all resident parents whose child has contact said that they have had concerns about their own safety since the separation, and this had been a factor which affected contact for 6 per cent of all families, according to resident parent reports (some non-resident parents were also worried about their own safety but this was much less common).

We were concerned to find that overall, nearly a third of resident parents whose child has contact had current or past concerns about the safety of that contact: either because of the other parent's care or treatment of the child, their own safety, or fears that the other parent would not return the child. We do not know which concerns were current and which were in the past, but a very important point to emerge from this survey is that such concerns, including serious concerns, are not rare among families whose child has unsupervised contact with the other parent. Moreover, in around half of the cases where the resident parent has had serious welfare concerns, courts or solicitors have not been involved in deciding contact. This raises the question of whether these families have been able to access the help or support that they need to ensure that contact is safe and beneficial for the children involved.

Beyond contact to shared care parenting

The high proportion of parents reporting shared care was surprising. The survey was not designed to estimate shared care families and as discussed, there were several ways to look at these families in the data. However, even the most conservative estimate showed that nearly one in ten of all separated families are operating a shared care arrangement, by which we mean that the child is spending an average of at least three days and nights per week, or the equivalent over the year, with each parent. We were not expecting to find so many families with shared care, and because of this we did not include questions to explore their arrangements any further.

Clearly more research is needed to test out this unexpected result and, if confirmed, to investigate the circumstances in which parents are sharing care, their experiences, and most importantly, their children's. It would also be interesting to compare this group with families who have more conventional arrangements and to investigate the factors which facilitate and hinder shared care and the long term outcomes for children. At present, for instance, parents with a shared care arrangement are not able to split benefits such as child tax credits or child benefit, and it would be interesting to look at the extent to which this is a barrier to parents who do not currently share care equally but would like to do so, as well as whether this can be a problem or a source of tension for families who do share care.

Non-resident parents who are not aware of the child's existence

At the other end of the spectrum from the shared care families are those families where one parent is unaware of the child. Two per cent of resident mothers said that their child's father did not know that the child had been born. We were not able to

investigate why the father had not been told. We believe that this is the first estimate of the proportion of separated families where the non-resident father does not know he is a parent. It is perhaps lower than would be expected given the current concerns about family breakdown. However, it nonetheless raises questions regarding children's right to a relationship with both parents, and also adds context to the debate around compulsory joint registration of births – the recent proposal to require mothers to name the father on the birth certificate.

Detailed key findings

Contact patterns

1 **An unexpectedly high proportion of parents reported that they shared care more or less equally with the other parent.**

- Twelve per cent of all those responding to the survey said they had shared care arrangements.
- Even if allowance is made for the disproportionately low numbers of non-resident parents taking part in the survey, this still works out at 9 per cent. If one regards all parents with shared care as resident parents, then 17 per cent of resident parents are sharing care more or less equally.

2 **The majority of children have face to face contact with their non-resident parent although a substantial minority do not, of whom most have never had contact since their parents separated.**

- Across the whole sample, 71 per cent of resident parents, including those with shared care, said that their child had direct contact with the other parent.
- If the shared-care parents are excluded, 65 per cent of resident parents, and 85 per cent of non-resident parents reported some contact.
- Of the resident parents who said there was no contact at the moment, most said there had either been no contact since the parental relationship ended (63 per cent) or that the father was not aware of the child's existence (6 per cent).
- The small number of non-resident parents without current contact taking part in the study were more likely to report there had been some contact in the past but the majority said there had not (54 per cent of 24).

3 **Where there is contact, the most common pattern is weekly, but there is wide variation. The frequencies reported by resident and non-resident parents were very similar.**

- Forty-two per cent of resident and 45 per cent of non-resident parents reported seeing their child at least once a week, although not nearly every day.
- Ten per cent of resident and 9 per cent of non-resident parents said there was contact daily or almost daily.
- Sixty-nine per cent of resident and 68 per cent of non-resident parents reported at least fortnightly contact.
- Eleven per cent of resident and 9 per cent of non-resident parents said contact was less than fortnightly but at least once a month.

- Twenty-one per cent of resident and 23 per cent of non-resident parents said contact took place less often than monthly, including some (5 per cent resident; 13 per cent non-resident) who said it was only once or twice a year.
- If the parents who reported shared care are included as resident parents the data indicates that 76 per cent of children were having at least fortnightly contact and 64 per cent weekly.

4 Where there is contact it will typically include overnight stays, usually at least monthly.

- Sixty-five per cent of resident and 79 per cent of non-resident parents whose child had contact (but were not sharing care) said this included overnight stays.
- Where there were overnight stays 31 per cent of resident and 39 per cent of non-resident parents said this occurred at least once a week with 72 per cent and 73 per cent respectively saying it was at least once a month.
- Thirteen per cent of resident and 12 per cent of non-resident parents said overnight stays only happened in the holidays or a few times a year.
- Fourteen per cent and 16 per cent said it only happened once or twice a year.
- If the parents who reported shared care are included, then 55 per cent of children with contact were having overnight stays at least once a week, and 83 per cent at least once a month.

5 Children who have overnight contact tend to have more contact in the holidays, but those with only visiting contact typically do not.

- Fifty-three per cent of resident and 73 per cent of non-resident parents whose child had overnight contact said there was more contact in the holidays. Extra contact in the holidays was even more likely where overnight contact usually took place at least weekly (57 per cent resident parent; 92 per cent non-resident parent).
- Where contact was on a visiting basis only 10 per cent of resident and 19 per cent of non-resident parents said it was more frequent in the holidays and 4 per cent of resident and 34 per cent of non-resident parents said it actually decreased.

6 Contact is rarely stable over time and is more likely to reduce than increase.

- Where there has ever been contact only 32 per cent of resident and 28 per cent of non-resident parents who had been separated for more than a year said that the amount of contact had stayed the same.
- Fifty-one per cent of resident parents and 42 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact had reduced or stopped; only 14 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively, said that it had increased, with the remainder saying either that it had been variable or being unable to answer.
- Even where contact was ongoing only 40 per cent of resident and 37 per cent of non-resident parents said the amount of contact had stayed the same; while 38 per cent and 31 per cent said it had reduced and only 17 per cent and 29 per cent said it had increased.

- Some children appear to have had quite high levels of contact throughout (64 per cent of resident and 63 per cent of non-resident parents who said contact had stayed the same reported contact at least weekly).
- In contrast, 10 per cent of resident and 13 per cent of non-resident parents who said contact had stayed the same reported that contact took place less than once a month.

Parental satisfaction with whether contact was taking place and its frequency

7 Where there is no contact almost all non-resident parents, and a sizeable minority of resident parents, are dissatisfied about this.

- Almost all of the 19 non-resident parents who had no contact (81 per cent; 16) expressed dissatisfaction about this. Only three did not.[41]
- Most resident parents whose child had no contact (62 per cent of 99) were comfortable with this. However, 21 per cent said they would like there to be contact and 17 per cent were uncertain.

8 Where contact is taking place, most parents are comfortable with this although many, particularly non-resident parents, are dissatisfied about its frequency. Typically, dissatisfied parents, both resident and non-resident, want there to be more contact, not less.

- Only 4 per cent of resident parents whose child had contact would have preferred there to be none. None of the non-resident parents said this.
- Only 27 per cent of non-resident parents were happy with the current frequency; with 73 per cent saying they would like contact to happen more often and none less frequent.
- Resident parents tended to be more satisfied with contact frequency (44 per cent). However, 37 per cent said they would like it to happen more often, with only 8 per cent wanting less.

9 Satisfaction with contact frequency reduces in line with frequency for both resident and non-resident parents. However, non-resident parents are more dissatisfied than resident parents, and the majority of non-resident parents want more contact irrespective of how often it currently takes place.

- Where contact was taking place weekly or more 55 per cent of resident parents expressed satisfaction. This dropped to 37 per cent when contact was less than this but at least monthly; and to 23 per cent when it was less than monthly. The comparable figures for non-resident parents were 35 per cent, 21 per cent and 13 per cent.
- The most satisfied parents were those where there was overnight contact at least weekly (68 per cent of resident and 37 per cent of non-resident parents).
- Sixty-five per cent of non-resident parents who had contact on at least a weekly basis and 63 per cent of those who had at least weekly overnight stays wanted to see their children more often.

41 Caution: low base number of non-resident parents without contact.

- A substantial minority of resident parents whose child had at least weekly contact also said they would like contact to be more frequent (31 per cent). However, 10 per cent would have preferred there to be less frequent contact (7 per cent) or no contact at all (3 per cent). Similarly 22 per cent of those where there were at least weekly overnight stays said they would like more frequent contact. However, 8 per cent would have liked it to be less often.

10 Dissatisfaction levels are highest, for both resident and non-resident parents, where contact has decreased over time. However, even where it has increased most non-resident parents, and a substantial minority of resident parents, still want contact to be more frequent.

- Where contact was happening but its frequency had reduced, only 35 per cent of resident parents were satisfied with this, compared to 51 per cent of those where it had stayed the same and 47 per cent of those where it had increased.
- Similarly only 13 per cent of non-resident parents whose contact had become less frequent said they were happy with this, compared with 25 per cent of those where it had increased and 41 per cent where it had stayed the same.
- A strikingly high proportion of non-resident parents whose contact had increased (75 per cent) wanted contact to be more frequent, as did 32 per cent of resident parents.
- However, 21 per cent of resident parents where the frequency had increased would have preferred contact to be less frequent (12 per cent) or not to take place at all (9 per cent) and even where contact had decreased, 7 per cent would have liked it to reduce still further and 6 per cent to cease completely.

The incidence, nature and impact of contact problems

11 The majority of separating parents are likely to experience problems with the potential to affect contact and in a substantial proportion contact is affected or stopped, even if only for a period.

- Where contact was ongoing only 29 per cent of resident and 32 per cent of non-resident parents said they had not experienced any problems.
- If one assumes that where there had been contact but this had ceased then this will have been because of a problem, the proportion of parents who did not experience any problems decreases further to 26 per cent of resident and 30 per cent of non-resident parents.
- Fifty-one per cent of resident and 53 per cent of non-resident parents whose child had ever had contact said that problems had affected contact at some point. Twenty-eight per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact had stopped or been suspended because of problems.
- Even where contact was currently taking place 42 per cent of resident and 45 per cent of non-resident parents reported contact having been affected by problems, with 17 per cent of the former and 20 per cent of the latter saying that contact had actually stopped for a period.
- Twenty-three per cent of resident and 31 per cent of non-resident parents whose child usually had contact said that a problem was affecting contact at the

moment, or even causing it to be suspended (6 per cent of resident and 8 per cent of non-resident parents with contact said it was suspended at present).

12 Although parents experience a wide range of problems with the potential to affect contact, the most frequently-reported problems are very similar for both resident and non-resident parents.

- For resident parents whose child usually had contact, the most common problems with the potential to affect contact were disputes around child support (41 per cent), bad feeling (30 per cent) and the other parent's inflexibility, unreliability or lack of commitment (42 per cent). Twenty-nine per cent had concerns about the child's welfare or their own safety.
- The most common potential problems reported by non-resident parents who had contact were disputes around child support (34 per cent), the other parent's reluctance to allow contact (30 per cent) and the other parent's inflexibility, unreliability, or lack of commitment (29 per cent). Twenty-four per cent had concerns about the child's welfare or their own safety.

13 Certain problems are more likely to have an effect on contact than others.[42]

- For resident parents, the problems which carried the highest risk of affecting contact *in the past* were the other's parent's unreliability or lack of commitment. Sixty-seven per cent of resident parents who said the non-resident parent lacked commitment said this had affected contact, as did 67 per cent of those where s/he had been unreliable. The child's reluctance about contact, the resident parent's reluctance, the resident parent's concerns about the other parent's care and the other parent's inflexibility all carried a somewhat lower risk of affecting contact in the past (55 per cent to 57 per cent). At the other end of the spectrum, disputes about child support, which were the most commonly experienced problem, carried the lowest risk of affecting contact in the past (29 per cent).
- Disputes about child support, although also the most common current problem (17 per cent) were even less likely to be affecting contact as far as resident parents were concerned (6 per cent of those reporting this to be a problem). Bad feeling between the parents (the second most commonly reported current problem; 16 per cent) carried only a one in four risk of affecting contact (24 per cent). Concerns about the other parent's care were rarer (10 per cent) but more influential (44 per cent risk). Of the other current problems, the child's reluctance around contact carried a high risk of affecting contact (50 per cent), as did the non-resident parent's inflexibility (58 per cent) and their lack of commitment (60 per cent), although each of these problems was only reported by 14 per cent of resident parents.
- For non-resident parents all problems carried a higher risk of affecting contact than when a problem was reported by resident parents. The problem which carried the highest risk of contact being affected in the past was the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact (90 per cent of those reporting this said that contact had been affected). Feelings of marginalisation, the resident parent's inflexibility about contact, their unreliability and their interference with contact all carried a risk of between 72 per cent and 79 per cent, with bad feeling coming in at 64 per cent. All the other problems were only slightly more likely to affect

42 Risk estimates are based on fairly small numbers and should be viewed as indicative of risk rather than absolute measures.

contact than not (53 per cent to 57 per cent), with disputes about child support again carrying one of the lowest risks (55 per cent).[43]

- For non-resident parents who said there were current problems, there were four which affected more than 10 per cent of the group. Of these, the one which carried the highest risk of affecting contact was again the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact (97 per cent). Where there was bad feeling, contact was affected in 68 per cent of cases; with marginalisation carrying a 74 per cent risk and the resident parent interfering with contact a 51 per cent risk.[44]

14 Where contact is ongoing many problems which have affected contact in the past are no longer doing so in the present.

- For every common problem which had affected in the past there was around a 50 per cent chance, or better, that it would no longer be doing so in the present, on both resident and non-resident parents' report.
- Of the resident parents who identified the non-resident parent's lack of commitment to contact as having affected contact in the past, 49 per cent said it was no longer affecting contact. All the other problems had even higher 'resolution' rates: unreliability (52 per cent), the child's reluctance (57 per cent), the resident parent's reluctance (63 per cent) and bad feeling (69 per cent).
- For non-resident parents, 'resolution' rates ranged from 53 per cent (feeling excluded from the child's life) to 62 per cent (the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact) with 58 per cent reporting that bad feeling no longer affected contact.[45]

15 Where a problem is no longer affecting contact this is most likely to be because the problem has gone away. In some instances, however, it is still a problem but not having an impact on contact any more.

- Where past problems had been resolved, it was more likely to be because the problem was no longer an issue, than because it was still an issue that no longer affected contact. Thus, 45 per cent of resident parents who said the non-resident parent's unreliability had affected contact in the past said s/he was no longer unreliable compared with only 7 per cent who said it was still a problem but no longer affected contact (the remainder said it was still a problem and still affected contact). Similarly, 60 per cent of non-resident parents who had cited the other parent's reluctance to allow contact in the past said this was no longer a problem, with only 2 per cent saying it was an issue but did not affect contact.
- The most notable exception to this was the child's reluctance, which was less likely to go away. Of the resident parents who said the child's reluctance had affected contact in the past, 30 per cent said that this was no longer a problem, but almost as many (28 per cent) said it was still an issue although it did not affect contact any more.
- Twenty-nine per cent of resident parents who said that bad feeling had impinged on contact in the past said that it was still an issue, although it no longer affected contact. More parents (41 per cent) said it was not a problem anymore.
- For every common problem which had affected contact in the past, there was a minority of parents saying that it was still an issue but no longer affecting contact.

43 Caution: low bases for evaluation of problems' risks according to non-resident parents.

44 Caution: low bases for evaluation of problems' risks according to non-resident parents.

45 Caution: low bases for evaluation of resolution of problems according to non-resident parents.

(Proportions ranged from 7 per cent to 29 per cent for resident parents and 2 per cent to 16 per cent for non-resident parents.)

16 The problems which have caused contact to stop completely are very similar to those which cause it to be temporarily suspended.

- The four problems most likely to stop contact completely, according to resident parents, were a lack of commitment on the part of the other parent, bad feeling, concerns about care and the child's reluctance. Three of the four problems most likely to suspend contact were the same. The only difference was that the resident parent's own reluctance about contact replaced the child's reluctance as one of the top four.
- According to non-resident parents, the four problems most likely to have caused contact to stop altogether were: bad feeling, their own feeling that it would be better not to see the child, the resident parent's reluctance to allow contact, and feeling excluded from the child's life. Again three of the top four problems which had caused contact to be suspended were the same. The difference was that suspension was rarely caused by the non-resident parent's feeling it would be best not to see the child, while disputes about child support emerged as one of the top four reasons for contact being temporarily suspended.[46]

Concerns about the other parent's care

17 A substantial minority of both resident and non-resident parents have concerns at some point about the other parent's care of the child. Some of these involve serious welfare issues.

- Twenty-four per cent of resident parents whose child has contact said they had had concerns about the other's parent's care of the child. In at least half of these the concerns involved what would clearly be regarded as serious welfare issues: drug abuse (24 per cent of all those with concerns), alcohol abuse (46 per cent), mental illness (14 per cent) or child abuse (5 per cent) with typically only one concern being mentioned. Overall, 11 per cent of all resident parents whose child has ongoing contact were concerned about at least one serious welfare issue, the proportions being: drug abuse, (5 per cent), alcohol abuse, (10 per cent), mental illness, (3 per cent) and child abuse (1 per cent).
- In addition, 28 per cent of resident parents whose child did not have contact said they had had concerns about the other parent's care of the child. Nine per cent of all resident parents whose child had no contact had a concern about a serious welfare issue.
- Thirty-sixper cent of resident parents who said they had ever stopped contact said this was because of concerns about the child's safety. Of these almost half identified a serious welfare concern.
- Non-resident parents were equally likely to express concerns about the other parent's care (23 per cent) although slightly fewer (33 per cent of those expressing concern, 9 per cent of all non-resident parent's with contact) involved serious welfare concerns.

46 Caution: low number of non-resident parents with no contact.

18 Substantial contact can be taking place despite serious and current welfare concerns. Many resident parents are not happy with this.

- Twenty-six resident parents whose child had contact said they had serious welfare concerns about the other parent's care of the child. In 61 per cent of these cases the child was having overnight contact, in 38 per cent of cases there was at least weekly contact and in 86 per cent at least monthly contact.
- Over half of these parents (52 per cent) said that they would prefer there to be less contact or no contact at all.
- Only three of these resident parents said that the other parent's contact was supervised.

19 While other concerns about the child's care may be less grave, they are not minor, and some may verge on serious welfare issues or have major implications for the child's physical or emotional well-being.

- The most common single concern expressed by resident parents whose child has contact was that the other parent says 'negative things about me to the child' (56 per cent of those who identified any concern, and 12 per cent of all resident parents). Other common concerns included lack of routine (46 per cent of those with any concern; 10 per cent of all resident parents), 'they don't look after the child properly' (38 per cent; 9 per cent), 'child mixes with unsuitable people' (19 per cent; 4 per cent), and 'they are too harsh with the child' (10 per cent; 2 per cent).
- 'Badmouthing' was also the most common concern expressed by non-resident parents (59 per cent of those who voiced any concern; 13 per cent of all non-resident parent's with contact), followed by 'they don't look after the child properly (47 per cent; 10 per cent), lack of routine (43 per cent; 10 per cent), 'the child mixes with unsuitable people' (31 per cent; 7 per cent) and 'they are too harsh with the child' (14 per cent; 3 per cent).

Concerns about parental safety

20 In a small, but not insignificant, minority of families contact is taking place where one of the parents has had concerns about their own safety.

- Ten per cent of all resident parents whose child was having contact reported they had had concerns at some point about their own safety.
- Six per cent of resident parents said fears for their own safety had either affected (3 per cent) contact or caused it to be suspended in the past (three percent). Two per cent said it was currently affecting contact or causing it to be suspended.
- Eight per cent of resident parents who said they had ever stopped contact, and 19 per cent of those who had done so more than occasionally, said this was because of fears for their own safety.
- Three per cent of all non-resident parents who were having contact said they had had fears for their own safety at some point and 1 per cent said this had affected contact. None said that this had ever caused contact to be suspended.

Stopping contact

21 A large minority of non-resident parents reported that their contact had been stopped by the resident parent at some point, although total or persistent blockage appears to be comparatively unusual.

- Thirty-seven per cent of non-resident parents said that the other parent had stopped them spending time with their child at some point. However, only 13 per cent said that this had happened quite often or that all contact had been stopped in the past or was currently stopped. Twenty-three per cent said that contact had been stopped but that it had only happened occasionally.
- Non-resident parents without current contact were most likely to report that contact had been stopped at some point (seven out of 13). None of these said that contact had been stopped only occasionally although two said that it had happened quite often rather than all contact being stopped.[47]
- Thirty-four per cent of non-resident parents who usually had contact said that it had been stopped at some point. Most indicated that the problem lay in the past. However, 8 per cent said contact was being stopped at present including 3 per cent who said all contact was currently suspended.

22 Resident parents are much less likely than non-resident parents to say that they have ever stopped contact.

- Eleven per cent of all resident parents said that they had stopped contact at some point (13 per cent of those where contact was ongoing and 11 per cent of those where it was not).
- Where contact was currently taking place and resident parents said they had stopped contact at some point, almost all of these parents were referring to occasional stoppage of contact (12 per cent of all resident parents said they had stopped contact occasionally). Where there was no contact, 7 per cent said they had stopped all contact, only 4 per cent referring to 'occasional' stoppage.

23 Contact is blocked for a wide range of reasons.

- The most common reason proffered by non-resident parents for contact being blocked was the child's views (27 per cent of those who had ever had their contact blocked and 20 per cent of those whose contact had been stopped more than occasionally). Almost as many (25 per cent where contact had ever been stopped and 18 per cent where this had been more than occasional) attributed it to bad feeling between the parents. None of the other possible reasons suggested attracted more than 10 per cent of responses.[48]
- The primary reason given by resident parents was concern about the child's safety and/or care when the child was with the other parent (36 per cent of those who had ever stopped contact and 38 per cent of those who had stopped contact more than just occasionally. Almost half of these parents cited a serious welfare concern i.e. drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness or child abuse.
- Twenty-nine per cent of resident parents who had ever stopped contact said that this was partly because of the child's opinions about contact, although this accounted for only 13 per cent of instances where contact had been stopped more than occasionally.

47 Caution: low base of non-resident parents without contact.

48 Caution: low base for either type of parent where contact has been stopped more often than 'occasionally'.

- Bad feeling was cited by 19 per cent of the few resident parents who had stopped contact more than occasionally. The same proportion referred to fears for their own safety. Thirteen per cent said they wanted the child to build a relationship with their new partner. None of the other reasons were given by more than 10 per cent of respondents.
- Fifteen per cent of resident parents who had ever stopped contact said they had done so because the other parent was not paying child support. None said they had stopped contact more than occasionally for this reason.

Attitudes to contact

24 Perceived problems with the other parent's attitude to contact are a major issue for parents.

- Where no contact was taking, place 50 per cent of resident parents said this was because of the non-resident parent's lack of commitment (45 per cent), or their choice not to see the child (7 per cent).
- Twenty-one per cent of non-resident parents without contact said there was no contact because of the resident parent's reluctance to allow it or because the resident parent was not committed to contact.[49]
- Where there was contact, 42 per cent of resident parents said that the non-resident parent was or had been one of the following at some point: unreliable (29 per cent), uncommitted (22 per cent) or inflexible (21 per cent). The most common current problems affecting contact were the non-resident parent's unreliability (8 per cent) or lack of commitment (9 per cent).
- Tweny-nine per cent of non-resident parents with contact said that the resident parent had at some point been either inflexible (23 per cent); unreliable (14 per cent) or not committed to contact (5 per cent). Thirty per cent of non-resident parents with contact said the resident parent had been reluctant about contact. The resident parent's reluctance to allow contact was the most common current problem affecting contact cited by non-resident parents (12 per cent). Twelve per cent of non-resident parents with contact said that the other parent had tried to interfere with contact and 25 per cent that they had felt excluded or pushed out of the child's life.

25 Problems with the perceived attitude of the other parent are more likely than any other problem to affect contact.[50]

- In 55 per cent of the cases where the non-resident parent was described as having been inflexible about contact in the past, the resident parent said that contact had been affected by this issue. Also, according to resident parents, if the other parent was unreliable in the past this had affected contact in 67 per cent of cases, and if the other parent lacked commitment, contact had been affected in 75 per cent of cases.
- According to non-resident parents, the risks of contact being affected where a past problem was perceived to lie in the resident parent's attitude were even higher: reluctance to allow contact (90 per cent risk), inflexibility (79 per cent), interference with contact (77 per cent), unreliability (73 per cent) and feeling excluded (72 per cent).

49 Caution: low base of non-resident parents without contact.

50 Risk estimates are based on fairly small numbers and should be viewed as indicative of risk rather than absolute measures.

- Of the resident parents who reported an attitude problem, current or present, on the part of the other parent, 62 per cent said that contact had been affected or stopped altogether. Of the non-resident parents who reported this 85 per cent said that one of these problems had affected or stopped contact.

26 Many children are likely to express reluctance to have contact at some point. For some, the problem is persistent and can affect contact or cause it to be suspended or cease.

- Where there was no contact, 11 per cent of resident and 4 per cent of non-resident parents said this had mainly been the child's decision.[51] The child's reluctance was given as a reason for no contact by 12 per cent of resident parents where there had never been any contact and 20 per cent of those where contact had broken down.
- Where contact was taking place 7 per cent of resident and 4 per cent of non-resident parents said the contact arrangements had mainly been decided by the child.
- Twenty-six per cent of resident parents whose child was having contact, but only 3 per cent of non-resident, said the child's reluctance to go for contact had been a problem at some point. 13 per cent of resident parents (3 per cent of non-resident) said this had affected contact.
- Where the child's reluctance had affected contact in the past 43 per cent of resident parents said it was still doing so; with 28 per cent saying it was still a problem but it was no longer affecting contact and 30 per cent that it was no longer a problem.
- Fourteen per cent of resident parents said that the child's reluctance was a current problem, half of whom said it was affecting contact.
- Twenty-nine per cent of resident parents who said they had ever stopped contact and 27 per cent of non-resident parents who had ever had their contact stopped said this was at least in part because of the child's views.

Parental relationships

27 Many parents are on reasonably good terms with each other although some have no relationship at all and a sizeable minority are hostile.

- Fifty-three per cent of resident parents and 64 per cent of non-resident parents said their current relationship with the other parent was either friendly (33 per cent resident parents; 45 per cent non-resident parents) or neutral (both 19 per cent).
- Thirty per cent of resident and 17 per cent of non-resident parents said they had no relationship.
- Seventeen per cent of resident and 19 per cent of non-resident parents said their relationship was hostile.

51 Caution: low base of non-resident parents without contact.

28 The quality of the parental relationship is an important factor in whether there is any contact and its frequency. However, some children are having quite substantial contact despite a hostile parental relationship.

- If the parental relationship was hostile, or non-existent, contact was much less likely to be happening than where it was neutral or friendly.
- Where no contact was taking place 15 per cent of resident and 23 per cent of non-resident parents said this was because of bad feeling. Bad feeling was equally likely to be responsible for no contact ever taking place or contact starting and then breaking down.
- Contact was much more likely to be taking place weekly where the relationship was friendly than where it was merely 'neutral'.
- Where contact was taking place parental hostility was not associated with infrequent contact. 46 per cent of resident and 54 per cent of non-resident parents who described a hostile relationship said contact was taking place at least weekly, higher than the proportions reporting a neutral relationship (38 per cent and 48 per cent respectively).

29 Bad feeling is one of the most common problems reported by both resident and non-resident parents.

- Thirty per cent of resident and 27 per cent of non-resident parents whose child was having contact reported that there had been bad feeling between them at some point. This was the second most commonly reported problem for resident parents and the third for non-resident parents.
- Sixteen per cent of resident and 12 per cent of non-resident parents said that bad feeling was a current problem.
- Twelve per cent of resident and 17 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact had been affected by bad feeling at some point with 4 per cent and 8 per cent saying it was currently affecting contact.
- Where bad feeling was a problem, 55 per cent of resident and 64 per cent of non-resident parents said it had affected contact.
- Twelve per cent of resident and 13 per cent of non-resident parents whose child was having contact said the other parent said derogatory things about them to the child.

30 Where there has been bad feeling but contact continues, in many instances it diminishes over time or ceases to affect contact, although it still affects contact in a substantial minority of families.

- Of the resident parents who said bad feeling had affected contact in the past, 41 per cent said it had ceased to be a problem and 29 per cent that although it was still a problem it no longer affected contact.
- A similar proportion of non-resident parents said that bad feeling had ceased to be a problem (42 per cent). However, where it continued, non-resident parents were more likely than resident parents to report that it still affected contact (42 per cent compared with 31 per cent). Non-resident parents were less likely to say that it was still around but not affecting contact.[52]

52 Caution: low base of non-resident parents who reported bad feeling affecting contact in the past.

Use of the legal system

31 Only a minority of separating parents use the legal system to sort out contact arrangements

- Only 9 per cent of resident and 8 per cent of non-resident parents said that contact arrangements had been decided in court.
- Court-banned contact was very rare, reported by only 7 per cent of resident parents who said there was no contact and 4 per cent of non-resident parents.
- Where there was contact just 8 per cent of resident parents said the arrangements had been decided in court with a further 7 per cent saying they were made through a solicitor. Nine per cent of non-resident parents said the decision had been made in court with an additional 3 per cent using a solicitor.

32 Parents who use the legal system are much more likely to be those with problems but most parents with problems, including serious welfare issues do not use the legal system.

- Eighty per cent of resident and 75 per cent of non-resident parents who said the contact arrangements had been made through a solicitor or court reported problems affecting contact, compared with only 35 per cent and 42 per cent of those who did not use the legal system.
- Only 30 per cent of resident and 18 per cent of non-resident parents with problems affecting contact had used the legal system.
- Forty-nine per cent of resident parents with serious welfare concerns about ongoing contact did not use the courts or legal advice.

33 Even where contact stoppage is an issue it is rarely taken to court.

- Only 19 per cent of resident parents who said they had ever stopped contact and 19 per cent of non-resident parents who had experienced this said they had been to court over the issue.
- Resident parents were more likely to say they had only been to court once over this issue (12 per cent) whereas non-resident parents were more likely to report repeat proceedings (11 per cent).
- In most instances where the courts had been involved, contact stoppage was a recurrent rather than an occasional issue.
- Where parents reported contact had ever been stopped, those who were currently having contact appeared more likely to have been to court than those without contact, although this was not statistically significant.

Factors independently associated with contact, satisfaction, and problems

34 Regression analysis indicated that eight factors were associated with either whether contact took place, its frequency, parental satisfaction with frequency, the experience of problems with the potential to affect contact, and whether any problems did affect contact. The only factor associated with every one of these was the quality of the current parental relationship.

- The length of time the parents had been separated was associated with whether there was any contact, its frequency, and experiencing problems which might have an impact on contact, but not with parental satisfaction or problems which did actually affect contact.
- Previous marital status was associated with whether there was any contact, parental satisfaction with frequency, and experiencing problems with the potential to affect contact. However, the association was not what might have been predicted; if the parents were previously married or cohabiting, this did not improve frequency, satisfaction or the chance of experiencing problems. Rather, if the parents were previously in a relationship without cohabitation this was linked with a greater likelihood of contact taking place and problems being less likely. Parents who were never in a relationship were more likely to be happy with contact frequency. There was no association with the frequency of contact or problems affecting contact.
- If the non-resident parent had re-partnered and/or had further children this reduced the chances of there being frequent contact. There was no association with satisfaction with contact frequency or problems.
- Whether the resident parent had married and/or had had further children was associated with whether there was any contact, with marriage increasing, but new children decreasing the chance of there being contact. There was no association with any other outcome.
- Contact was less likely where the resident parent lived in social housing.
- Where the resident parent was not working they were more likely to experience problems with the potential to affect contact and problems which did affect contact.
- Resident parents with educational qualifications at A level or above were more likely to be satisfied with the frequency of contact.

Appendix 1

Sample design

Each wave of the Omnibus survey selects 67 postal sectors within the United Kingdom. The postal sectors are stratified by: region, the NS-SEC categorisation of the household reference person, and the proportion of people who are over 65. After this stratification, postal sectors are selected with probability proportionate to size, and within each sector 30 addresses are selected randomly, using the Postcode Address File of 'small users', which has a higher coverage of private households than any other available frame. If an address contains more than one household, the interviewer uses a standard procedure to select where to interview.

Response rates

Where a household contains more than one adult member, one person only is selected for interview. The selection is made with the use of a Kish grid. Interviewers are not allowed to choose who to interview and household members cannot offer to take the place of a selected person who has refused.

Although 2,010 addresses are selected each month to take part, some of these are business or empty addresses. These addresses are classed as ineligible and are eliminated from the sample before response rates are calculated. Many of the remaining addresses will be households where the selected person declines to take part in the interview, or where the interviewer is unable to make contact with the residents. These are classed as refusals or non-contactable and their lack of response is included in the overall response rate.

Table A1: Response rates

Survey month	Response rate to overall survey	Eligible households	Achieved interviews
July 2006	68%	1868	1264
October 2006	67%	1819	1224
November 2006	61%	1836	1124
December 2006	63%	1830	1150
January 2007	66%	1818	1197
March 2007	65%	1675*	1088
Total	65%	10846	7047

* Some postcode sectors in March were not allocated to interviewers and so the number of eligible households for this month is lower.

Sixty-two participants declined to answer the screening questions (MAP_1, MAP_2 and MAP_8: do you live with a child but not with that child's other parent, do you have a child that lives with their other parent but not with you, do you share care of

the child), or they ended the survey before that point. The overall response rate to the contact questions is thus 64.4 per cent (6,985 / 10,846).

These 'refusers' were more likely to be female (68 per cent were female compared with 56 per cent of those who did not refuse) and less likely to be in paid work (41 per cent were working compared with 71 per cent of those who did not refuse). They were also less likely to be married (22 per cent of 'refusers' were married and 42 per cent of those who did not refuse were married). There was no clear difference in age.[53]

Weighting

The methodology used in the Omnibus survey requires interviewing one adult per selected household. People in households with a small number of adults therefore have a higher chance of inclusion in the survey than people living in larger households. Weight A is applied to correct for this unequal probability and is calculated by dividing the number of adults in the sampled household by the average number of adults per household for that survey month.

Resident parents are more likely than non-resident parents to live alone, and both types of parent are more likely to live alone than the wider population – see Table A2 below. As resident and non-resident parents were our only respondents of interest, using the weight supplied with the data would have been inappropriate as this weight was calculated based on the household size of the whole survey sample. Instead, we recalculated weighting factors, using the same methodology, for resident and non-resident parents separately. The weights are scaled so that when the data is weighted, the total number of each type of parent is the same as when it is unweighted. The weights used are shown in Table A3.

Table A2: Resident and non-resident parents' household size

Household size (number of adults)	Resident parents (%)	Non-resident parents (%)	Whole sample (including those who were not eligible for questions on contact) (%)
1	68	57	34
2	26	34	51
3	5	5	11
4	1	4	4
5 or more	1	1	1
	100%	100%	100%

53 Figures are based on adults aged between 16 and 52.

Table A3: Weights applied to respondents by household size

Household size (number of adults)	Weight for resident parents	Weight for non-resident parents
1	0.71	0.64
2	1.43	1.27
3	2.14	1.91
4	2.86	2.54
5	3.57	–
6	–	3.81

Differences in respondents

As a group, resident parents differed in some respects from non-resident parents in some important ways that may be related to contact.

Non-resident parents were more likely to have re-partnered than resident parents (63 per cent of resident parents said they were not in a relationship, compared with 45 per cent of non-resident parents). Related to this, resident parents were more likely to be the only adult in the household (68 per cent, compared with 57 per cent of non-resident parents). Nearly half (47 per cent) of the resident parents had never married, compared with just over a quarter (27 per cent) of the non-resident parents. However, when parents were asked about their relationship with the other parent of their child, there was no notable difference in responses, with approximately equal proportions of resident and non-resident parents having been married, cohabiting, or not living together, with the child's other parent.[54]

Overall, the children of the non-resident parent group were significantly older than those in the resident parent group (median 12 years old vs. 10, $p<0.05$). The parents themselves also differed in age, with non-resident parents tending to be older (median age 40 years, compared with 36 years for resident parents).

Analysis

Logistic regression analysis shows the importance of factors in the context of all the factors entered into the model, and therefore highlights the relative importance of different variables to the outcome. The outcome for each model is always binary, e.g.: some contact vs. any contact, frequent contact vs less frequent contact. Thus, for example, we can see whether the chance of contact happening at all is related to whether the parents used to be married, while taking into account any effect of children's age, parents' new relationships, or the sex of the non-resident parent (among others). Logistic regression uses a comparison level for each variable, so for example, when looking at the effect of relationship quality, parents who describe their relationship as 'neither friendly nor hostile' are compared against parents with a hostile relationship, and against parents with a friendly relationship. Regression analyses presented here have all been performed on weighted data.

54 This is surprising because one explanation for the lower non-resident response rate mightbe that we were missing out on the never-cohabiting non-resident parents, but this does not seem to be the case.

Logistic regression analysis produces a table showing the odds ratio associated with each level of each variable, the probability that the odds ratio is significantly different from 1, and 95 per cent confidence intervals around each odds ratio (OR). The comparison group always has an OR of 1. The OR indicates the relative odds of the outcome for that level of the variable, relative to the comparison level. In Table 4.7 (reproduced below), the OR associated with a friendly parental relationship is 6.71. This means that taking into account all the other variables in the model, the odds of any contact happening are 6.71 times greater where the relationship is friendly, compared to where it is neutral. A significant OR above one indicates a positive relationship – here, that contact is more likely to happen – and the larger the value, the stronger the effect.

An odds ratio between zero and one indicates a negative relationship. Therefore, in the table below, the OR associated with a hostile relationship indicates that the odds of any contact happening when there is a hostile relationship are 0.17 x the odds of contact when the relationship is neutral. For odds ratios between zero and one, the closer the OR is to zero, the stronger the relationship.

Odds ratios are *not* the same as probability or relative risk. It is beyond the scope of this Appendix to describe odds ratios in depth, but the following website gives a good explanation: www.childrensmercy.org/stats/journal/oddsratio.asp.

Reproduction of Table 4.7: Logistic regression. Factors associated with whether contact takes place at all, resident parent data only

Factor		Odds ratio	p	95% confidence intervals
Quality of current relationship with NRP	Neither friendly nor hostile	1		
	Hostile	***0.17***	***0.01***	***0.06–0.53***
	Friendly	***6.71***	***0.02***	***1.31–34.46***
	No relationship with other parent	***0.03***	***0.01***	***0.01–0.08***
NRP status	Not in a new relationship	1		
	In a new relationship, no new children	0.74	0.64	0.21–2.59
	In a new relationship with new children	0.27	0.07	0.07–1.10
	RP does not know NRP status	***0.23***	***0.01***	***0.08–0.69***
RP current relationship status	No new partner	1		
	New partner, not married	1.58	0.31	0.65–3.81
	New partner, married	***7.86***	***0.01***	***1.93–31.93***
RP new child	RP has no new child	1		
	RP has at least one new child	***0.20***	***0.02***	***0.05–0.73***
RP's previous relationship with other parent	Married	1		
	Cohabiting	1.83	0.29	0.60–5.60
	In a relationship	***3.91***	***0.05***	***1.01–15.13***
	Not in a relationship	1.63	0.35	0.58–4.60
Time since separation	Two years or less	1		
	Three to five years	0.58	0.67	0.17–1.92
	Six years or more	***0.31***	***0.04***	***0.10–0.95***
RP housing type	Own / buying with mortgage	1		
	Social tenant	***0.35***	***0.04***	***0.13–0.96***
	Private tenant / other	0.61	1.36	0.41–4.50

Base: 354.

Other variables included in the model which did not reach significance: education of resident parent, working status of resident parent, sex of resident parent, age of resident parent, age of child.

Bold italic text indicates statistical significance at the p · 0.05 level.

Appendix 2: Survey questionnaire

Notes:

Question wording changed at many questions depending on whether the respondent was a resident or a non-resident parent. Where the wording was dependent on parent type, both questions are presented here, and the abbreviation RP or NRP indicates whether the question was for resident parents or non-resident parents. **Bold text** indicates that the wording changed further depending on previous answers.

MAP_X denotes the question number. These are not always in numerical order, as many questions were moved around during initial design of the questionnaire.

Many questions are routed from answers to previous questions. Question routing information is above each question, in this format (example): **ASK IF:** *MAP_4 is not 'No relationship'*

Some answer options include the text (spontaneous only). These are found in the early questions before the computer was handed over to respondents who opted to complete the survey themselves rather than reply to the interviewer's spoken questions. 'Spontaneous only' options were not offered to respondents and were only chosen by the interviewer if the respondent's answer made it clear they applied.

The questionnaire below represents the questions asked in the last five waves. The first wave (July 2006) was different in some important respects. Analysis of data from the first wave revealed some areas where the questionnaire could be improved. Where changes have been made these are explained in footnotes.

ASK ALWAYS:

Intro

The next questions are asked on behalf of Oxford University and the charity One Parent Families. They are about children whose parents have split up and do not live together. As I said at the beginning of the questionnaire, all your answers are confidential.

Press <1> to continue

ASK IF: *Respondent has already been identified as the parent of a child in the household*

MAP_1

Can I just check, does the other parent of your **child/children** live with you?

- Yes
- No
- Yes for some children, no for others (Spontaneous only)
- No – the other parent has died (Spontaneous only)
- No – I adopted the child on my own or used donor insemination and there is no other parent (Spontaneous only)
- No, but my new partner became the legal parent of the child through adoption (Spontaneous only)

ASK ALWAYS:

MAP_2

Sometimes parents find it hard to talk about children who do not live with them, but we really need to hear from all separated parents so we can represent their views. Can I just check, do you have any children under 17 who don't live with you but live with their other parent for all or most of the time?

Note to interviewer: Please code as yes if the respondent has at least one child not living with them who has not been legally adopted by the other parent's new partner.

- Yes
- Yes, but the other parent's new partner has legally adopted the child/children
- No
- Don't know (Spontaneous only)

ASK IF: *Respondent has at least one child living with them where the other parent does not live with them, OR has a child living apart from them who lives with the other parent (answers from MAP_1 and MAP_2)*

Intro1

RP: I would like to ask about the child who lives with you.
NRP: I would like to ask about the child who lives with the other parent.

If you have more than one child in this situation, can I ask about the child whose name comes first alphabetically. For example, if your children are called Andrew, Alison and Peter, then you should answer about Alison.

Press <1> to continue

ASK IF: *Respondent has at least one child living with them where the other parent does not live with them, OR has a child living apart from them who lives with the other parent*

MAP_8

Can I just check does the child split their time more or less evenly between you and the other parent?

Caring for the child for one or two days and nights per week does not count as an even split. Please only answer yes if you each look after the child for three or more days and nights per week, or for around half the year each overall.

- Yes, there is an even split
- No, child lives mainly/entirely with me
- No, child lives mainly/entirely with the other parent
- The other parent is not aware of the child

The rest of the questionnaire only goes to respondents whose answers to MAP_1, MAP_2 and MAP_8 indicate that they are either resident or non-resident parents.

If a respondent is both a resident parent and a non-resident parent, this questionnaire asks about the child(ren) that they do not live with – that is, it treats them as non-resident.

Separated parents with shared care of the child are excluded. Resident parents who say that the other parent is not aware of the child are also excluded.

The next set of questions are for you to fill in yourself on the computer.

If resistance/distress about using the computer then the interviewer can suggest that they carry on asking the questions.

- Self-completion accepted and completed
- Completed by interviewer
- Section refused

Two practice questions follow here so the respondent has an opportunity to get used to using the laptop to enter data. The questions are not reproduced here.

MAP_3

How old is your child now?
Enter a number between 0 and 16

MAP_4

What kind of relationship did you have with this child's other parent?

If you are still married to the other parent please select married/in a civil partnership

- Married/in a civil partnership
- Living together but not married
- In a relationship but living apart
- In a brief relationship
- No relationship

ASK IF: *MAP_4 is not 'No relationship'*

MAP_5

In what year **did your relationship with the child's other parent end / did you finally separate**

If you can't remember the exact year, please give us your best guess

Enter year

MAP_6

Can I ask which of these best describes your situation at the moment?
Please don't choose option 3 unless the children are biologically yours or you have formally adopted them.

- Not in a relationship
- In a different relationship but with no more children of my own from this relationship
- In a different relationship and with a child or children of my own from this relationship

---

MAP_7

And do you know which of these best describes the situation of the other parent at the moment?

Please don't choose option 3 unless the children are the biological children of the other parent, or the other parent has formally adopted them.

- Not in a relationship
- In a different relationship but with no more children of their own from this relationship
- In a different relationship and with a child or children of their own from this relationship
- Don't know

MAP_12

How would you describe your relationship with the other parent at the moment?

- Very hostile
- Quite hostile
- Neither hostile nor friendly
- Quite friendly
- Very friendly
- No contact with other parent but relationship was hostile in the past
- No contact with other parent but relationship was not hostile in the past

---

Intro2

The next few questions are about how the child who lives with you but does not live with their other parent divides their time.

The next few questions are about how the child who lives with their other parent divides their time.

Press <1> to continue

MAP_9

RP: How often does the other parent see the child **(during school term time)**?
NRP: How often do you see the child **(during school term time)**?

- Every day or nearly every day
- At least once a week
- At least once a fortnight
- At least once a month
- Less often than once a month but more than just a few times a year
- A few times a year
- Once or twice a year
- Only see child during the school holidays
- Not seen child in the last year but there has been contact in the past
- Not seen child since separation/relationship ended

Ask if: *The child is over 4 (answer in MAP_3)*
AND There is some contact, and not just in the school holidays, at MAP_9

MAP_10

RP: And does the other parent see the child more or less often during the school holidays?
NRP: And do you see the child more or less often during the school holidays?

- There is a lot more contact in the holidays
- There is a little bit more contact in the holidays
- It stays about the same
- There is a little bit less contact in the holidays
- There is a lot less contact in the holidays

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*

MAP_11

RP: How often does the other parent look after your child overnight?
NRP: How often does the other parent look after your child overnight?

- Never
- Once or twice a year
- Only in the school holidays/a few times a year but not as often as once a month
- At least once a month
- At least once a week

Ask if: *There has been no contact in the last year, or since the child was born (at MAP_9)*

MAP_13

RP: Can I ask, whose decision was it that the other parent should not see the child ?
NRP: Can I ask, whose decision was it that you should not see the child?

- Mainly my decision
- Mainly other parent's decision
- Mainly the child's decision
- Mainly the decision of friends or relatives
- Agreed between myself and the other parent
- Decided in court according to my wishes
- Decided in court against my wishes

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*

MAP_14

RP: How did the current arrangements for your child to spend time with the other parent come about?
NRP: How did the current arrangements for your child to spend time with you come about?

Please choose all that apply

- There is no clear arrangement in place
- It developed over time

- It was decided in court according to my wishes
- It was decided in court against my wishes
- It was mainly my decision
- It was mainly the other parent's decision
- It was mainly the child's decision
- Sorted out between myself and other parent on our own
- Sorted out between myself and other parent with the help of family or friends
- Sorted out between myself and other parent with the help of legal advice
- Other

Ask if: *MAP_14="Other"*

Spec14

Please explain how the current arrangements came about

Type in your answer.

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*
AND Respondent is a non-resident parent

MAP_15a

NRP: Is there a legal order or mutual agreement that someone else has to be present when you spend time with your child?

- No
- Yes, the other parent
- Yes, other family member or friend
- Yes, a professional person or contact centre staff
- Yes, someone else
- Don't know

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*
AND Respondent is a resident parent

MAP_15b

RP: Is there a legal order or mutual agreement that someone else has to be present when the other parent spends time with your child?

- No
- Yes, myself
- Yes, other family member or friend
- Yes, a professional person or contact centre staff
- Yes, someone else
- Don't know

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*
AND The parents separated over a year ago (based on answer to MAP_5)

MAP_16

RP: Would you say that the amount of time the other parent spends with your child has increased, decreased or stayed about the same compared with the first year after you finally separated?
NRP: Would you say that the amount of time you spend with your child has increased, decreased or stayed about the same compared with the first year after you finally separated?

- Increased
- Decreased
- Stayed the same
- It's been variable
- Don't know/not sure

MAP_17[55]

RP: On balance would you like the other parent to see your child more often or less often?
NRP: On balance would you like to see your child more often or less often?

- More often
- Less often
- Things are about right at the moment
- Would prefer no contact at all
- Don't know

Ask if: *No contact since separation or no contact in the last year (at MAP_9)*
AND Respondent is resident parent

MAP_31M[56]

RP: Why does the other parent have no contact with the child? Please code all that apply.

- Bad feeling between the other parent and I
- The other parent was not committed enough to contact with our child
- I had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of our child
- The other parent thought it would be better if they didn't see our child
- I am reluctant to let my child see the other parent
- The child is reluctant to see the other parent
- I'm worried the other parent won't return the child
- Other parent says they felt excluded or 'pushed out' of my child's life
- Disputes about child support payments
- Never had any contact since the child was born
- Prefer not to say
- Other reasons – please specify

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55 In July 2006 parents whose child had no contact were not asked this question.

56 This question not asked in July 2006

Ask if: *MAP_31M = ''Other reasons''*

Spec31M

Please give other reason.

Ask if: *No contact since separation or no contact in the last year (at MAP_9) AND Respondent is resident parent*

MAP_31aM[57]

RP: People often experience many difficulties on separation, although usually there are just a few main reasons why contact with the child stops. In addition to the reasons why contact stopped, did you experience any of these problems as well?

- Bad feeling between the other parent and I
- The other parent was not committed enough to contact with our child
- I had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of our child
- The other parent thought it would be better if they didn't see our child
- I am reluctant to let my child see the other parent
- The child is reluctant to see the other parent
- I'm worried the other parent won't return the child
- Other parent says they felt excluded or 'pushed out' of my child's life
- Disputes about child support payments
- There were other problems but these did not stop contact
- Did not experience any of these problems
- Prefer not to say

Ask if: *No contact since separation or no contact in the last year (at MAP_9) AND Respondent is non-resident parent*

MAP_32M[58]

NRP: Why do you have no contact with the child? Please code all that apply.

- Bad feeling between the other parent and I
- The other parent was not committed enough to my contact with our child
- The other parent said they had concerns about my care or treatment of our child
- I thought it would be better if I didn't see our child
- The other parent has been reluctant to let me see our child
- The child is reluctant to see me
- The other parent is worried I might not return the child
- I have felt excluded or 'pushed out' of my child's life
- Disputes about child support payments
- Never had any contact since the child was born
- Prefer not to say
- Other reasons – please specify

Ask if: MAP_32m="Other reasons"

Spec32m

Please give other reason.

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57 This question not asked in July 2006

58 This question not asked in July 2006

Ask if: *No contact since separation or no contact in the last year (at MAP_9) AND Respondent is non-resident parent*

MAP_32aM[59]

NRP: People often experience many difficulties on separation, although usually there are just a few main reasons why contact with the child stops. In addition to the reasons why contact stopped, did you experience any of these problems as well?

Please choose all that apply.

- Bad feeling between the other parent and I
- The other parent was not committed enough to my contact with our child
- The other parent said they had concerns about my care or treatment of our child
- I thought it would be better if I didn't see our child
- The other parent has been reluctant to let me see our child
- The child is reluctant to see me
- The other parent is worried I might not return the child
- I have felt excluded or 'pushed out' of my child's life
- Disputes about child support payments
- There were other problems but these did not stop contact
- Did not experience any of these problems
- Prefer not to say

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*

Intro3

RP: The next few questions are about problems you may have experienced since your separation. Some questions ask about 'contact' – this means the time the other parent spends with your child, not your contact with the other parent.
NRP: The next few questions are about problems you may have experienced since your separation. Some questions ask about 'contact' – this means the time you spend with your child, not your contact with the other parent.

Press <1> to continue

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*

MAP_18M

Since **you separated / your relationship finally ended**, have you ever had any of the following difficulties? Please include problems in the past as well as current problems.

Please choose all that apply.

- Disputes about child support payments
- Serious disagreements about how to bring up the child
- I have had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child
- The other parent has said they are concerned about my care or treatment of the child
- The other parent is not committed enough to contact with our child
- The other parent has been inflexible about contact arrangements
- The other parent has been unreliable about contact arrangements

59 This question not asked in July 2006

- I have been unable to keep to agreed arrangements
- Bad feeling between us
- None of these

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*
AND Respondent is resident parent

MAP_19aM

RP: And have you had any of these difficulties? Again, please include problems in the past as well as current problems.

Please choose all that apply.

- Child has been reluctant to see the other parent
- I have been reluctant to let my child see the other parent
- The other parent thought it would be better if they didn't see the child
- Difficulties with my new partner or the other parent's new partner
- I have had concerns about my own safety
- Other parent says they feel excluded or 'pushed out' of my child's life
- I feel the other parent is trying to interfere in our lives
- I am worried the other parent will not return the child
- Other difficulty
- None of these

Ask if: *MAP_19aM = ''Other difficulty''*

Spec19aM

Please record other difficulty.

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*
AND Respondent is non-resident parent

MAP_19bM

NRP: And have you had any of these difficulties? Again, please include problems in the past as well as current problems.

Please choose all that apply.

- Child has been reluctant to see me
- The other parent has been reluctant to let me see the child
- I thought it was better if I didn't see the child
- Difficulties with my new partner or the other parent's new partner
- The other parent has said they are concerned about their own safety
- I have been concerned about my own safety
- I have felt excluded or 'pushed out' of my child's life
- The other parent tries to interfere with contact
- Other difficulty
- None of these

Ask if: *MAP_19bM = ''Other difficulty''*

Spec19bM

Please record other difficulty.

Ask if: *MAP_18m includes ''Disputes about child support payments''*

MAP_20[60]

You said there have been disputes about child support payments. Is this affecting contact at the moment?

- It's a problem at the moment but isn't having an effect on contact with the child
- It's affecting contact now but it hasn't stopped it completely
- It's stopped all contact now
- There's no contact now but for other reasons
- It's not a problem at the moment

Ask if: *MAP_18m includes ''Disputes about child support payments''*

MAP_21[61]

And has it affected contact in the past?

- It was a problem in the past but it had no effect on contact with the child
- It's affected contact in the past but not stopped it completely
- It's stopped all contact in the past
- It wasn't a problem in the past

MAP_20 and MAP_21 are repeated for each problem that was identified at MAP_18M, MAP_19aM and MAP_19bM

Ask if: *There is some contact (at MAP_9)*

MAP_33[62]

Apart from the problems above, have there been any other problems between you and the other parent which affected or stopped contact, either at the moment or in the past?

- Other problems are stopping contact now
- Other problems have stopped contact in the past
- Other problems are affecting contact now but not stopping it completely
- Other problems have affected contact in the past but not stopped it completely
- No other problems

This question goes to all resident and non-resident parents, whether there is contact or not.

MAP_21[63]

(You said earlier that the other parent was reluctant to allow contact)

RP: Have you ever stopped your child spending time with the other parent when this has been agreed or ordered, even if only once?
NRP: Has the other parent ever stopped you spending time with your child when this had been agreed or ordered, even if only once?

60 The order of the answer options was changed after July 2006. In July 2006 'It's not a problem at the moment' was the first option offered.

61 The order of the answer options was changed after July 2006. In July 2006 'It wasn't a problem in the past' was the first option offered.

62 This question not asked in July 2006

63 In July and October 2006, MAP_21 was only routed to parents whose child has contact

Please choose all that apply

- No, this has never happened
- At the moment contact is blocked occasionally
- At the moment contact is blocked quite often
- All contact is blocked at the moment
- Contact has been blocked occasionally in the past
- Contact has been blocked quite often in the past
- All contact has been blocked in the past

Ask if: *Respondent is resident parent AND*
Contact has ever been blocked at MAP_21
OR "I have been reluctant to let my child see the other parent" at MAP_19aM
OR "I am reluctant to let my child see the other parent" at MAP_31M)

MAP_22M

RP: Can I ask why **you stopped contact / didn't want the child to see the other parent**?

Please choose all that apply.

- They had not been making child support payments as agreed or ordered
- The child had other things they wanted/had to do
- The child did not want to see them
- The child did not like their new partner
- I wanted my child to build a relationship with my new partner
- There was too much bad feeling between us
- I was worried that the other parent would not look after the child properly
- Our views about how to bring up the child are too different
- I was worried about my child's safety
- I was worried about my own safety
- Other reason
- Prefer not to say

Ask if: *MAP_22M="Other reason"*

Spec22M

Please give the other reason why you stopped contact/didn't want the child to see the other parent.

Ask if: *Respondent is non-resident parent*
AND Contact has ever been blocked at MAP_21
OR "The other parent was reluctant to let me see the child" in MAP_19bM or MAP_32M

MAP_23M

NRP: **Why did the other parent say they were refusing contact / Why did the other parent not want you to see the child?**

Please choose all that apply

- I had not been paying child support as agreed or ordered
- The child had other things they wanted/had to do

- The child did not want to see me
- The child did not like my new partner
- They wanted my child to build a relationship with their new partner
- There was too much bad feeling between us
- They were worried that I would not look after the child properly
- Our views about how to bring up the child are too different
- They were worried about my child's safety
- They were worried about their own safety
- They felt that we live too far apart
- Other reason
- Prefer not to say

Ask if: *MAP_23M="Other reason"*

Spec23M

Please give the other reason why the other parent said they were refusing contact.

Ask if: *Respondent is non-resident parent AND*

MAP_23 contains an answer which is not "Prefer not to say"

MAP_24

And do you think that this was the real reason / these were the real reasons?

- This was the real reason / These were the real reasons
- This was part of the reason but not the whole story
- This was not the real reason / These were not the real reasons

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Ask if: *Contact has ever been blocked (at MAP_21)*

MAP_25

RP: Did this have any effect on the child maintenance or child support which the other parent pays?
NRP: Did this have any effect on the child maintenance or child support which you pay?

- Yes – child support payments were stopped or reduced
- Yes – child support payments restarted or increased
- No – there was no agreement or order to pay child support
- No – payments continued as normal

Ask if: *Contact has ever been blocked (at MAP_21)*

MAP_26

RP: Have you ever been to court because the other parent says you stopped them seeing your child?
NRP: Have you ever been to court because the other parent has stopped you seeing your child?

- Yes, once
- Yes, more than once
- No, but I have threatened the other parent with court action over this

- No, but the other parent has threatened to take me to court over this
- No, but I have been to court over other problems to do with contact
- No, never been to court over contact

Ask if: *"I was worried about my child's safety" in MAP_22M*
OR "I have had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child" in MAP_18M
OR "I was worried that the other parent would not look after the child properly" in MAP_22M
OR "I had concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of the child" in MAP_31M

MAP_27M

Earlier you said there were **concerns about the other parent's care or treatment of your child and/or you were concerned about your child's safety.** Did these concerns relate to any of the following?

Please choose all that apply.

- Drug abuse by the other parent
- Alcohol abuse by the other parent
- Mental illness of the other parent
- Child abuse
- Child mixes with unsuitable people
- There is a lack of routine with the other parent
- They don't look after the child properly
- They say negative things about me to the child
- They are too harsh with the child
- Other concerns
- Prefer not to say

Ask if: *"Other concerns" IN MAP_27M*

Spec27M

What is the other concern which you have?

Ask if: *"The other parent has been unreliable about contact arrangements" in MAP_18M*

MAP_28M

You said the other parent has been unreliable or broken agreements about contact. What kind of problems do/did you experience?

Please choose all that apply.

- They cancelled arrangements
- They cancelled arrangements without telling me
- They wanted to make arrangements at very short notice
- They brought or returned the child earlier or later than agreed
- They refused to return the child or threatened to keep the child
- Other problem

Ask if: *MAP_28M = "Other problem"*

Spec28M

What is the other problem which you have experienced?

Ask if: *"The other parent has been unreliable about contact arrangements" in MAP_18M*

MAP_29

How often was/is the other parent unreliable or difficult?

- Nearly all the time
- Most of the time
- Quite often
- Not very often

Ask if: *Respondent is non-resident parent AND*
("Mainly my decision" (not to see the child) at MAP_13 OR
Would like to see the child "Less often" at MAP_17 OR
"I thought it was better if I didn't see the child" at MAP_19bM OR
"I have been unable to keep to agreed arrangements" at MAP_18M OR
"I thought it would be better if I didn't see our child" at MAP_32M)

MAP_30M

NRP only: You said earlier that **it was your decision not to see the child / you thought it better not to see the child / you would prefer to see the child less often / you have not been able to keep to agreed arrangements.** Why is this?

- Please choose all that apply.
- Visits or activities are too expensive
- The child lives too far away and it is difficult to see them
- I find it upsetting to see my child
- I feel shut out of my child's life
- The other parent uses access to the child to manipulate me
- The other parent makes financial demands I can't/don't want to meet
- I'm not confident about looking after my child
- There are too many rules about how I can spend time with my child
- I have other children or a new partner that I need to spend time with
- Other reason
- Prefer not to say

Ask if: MAP_30M= "Other reason"

Spec30M

Please give other reason.

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One Parent Families|Gingerbread is the leading national charity working to help the UK's 1.9 million lone parents and their children. We believe in a fairer society for all families, in which people bringing up children on their own are recognised for their positive contributions and where they and their families can thrive and enjoy equal opportunities financially and socially. One Parent Families|Gingerbread has headquarters in London and a network of regional offices in Wales, Manchester, the North West and the South East.

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One Parent Families|Gingerbread has a strong campaigning tradition and its policy and research work has helped to shape much of Government policy relating to lone parent families in recent years, including the planned changes to the CSA, the New Deal for Lone Parents programme, and the establishing of a national minimum wage. If you are interested in receiving our regular Policy e-bulletin, please subscribe at www.oneparentfamilies.org.uk/policy

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