

**HOLDING THEIR WORDS:  
CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL SEPARATION  
AND DIVORCE**

Submitted by

**Barbara Ann Knight**

**Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Graduate Diploma of Arts (Social Welfare), Bachelor of  
Social Work (Australian Catholic University)**

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ACU Graduate Research Office  
Locked Bag 4115  
Fitzroy MDC  
Victoria 3156

## **Statement of Authorship**

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).

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## Abstract

Many children in Australia experience parental separation during their childhood, with one-quarter of Australian children under 18 years spending some of their childhood apart from one of their parents. Parental separation often precipitates significant changes to a child's relationships and physical environment. This can include changing schools, or living locations, and residing in two households. Relationships with parents, siblings, extended family, step-parents and step-siblings are also significant and present various challenges for children. These changes can be stressful and potentially impact on children's adjustment, development and long-term wellbeing. The consequences of parental separation can be long lasting, affecting children's wellbeing throughout their lives and into adulthood.

Current understandings of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children primarily draw on adult perspectives of children's experience, either through retrospective accounts of adults who experienced parental separation as children, or from adults, including professional and parental assessment of children's wellbeing.

This thesis aims to fill this gap by drawing on theory from Childhood Studies to explore how children experience and make sense of the changes that occur when parents separate. A qualitative approach was adopted to better understand children's experience. A child reference group provided advice and guidance at the beginning of this study and reflected on the findings near the completion of the study. Twelve children aged 8 to 13, participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. All children were recruited from a Family Relationship Centre (FRC) in Canberra, Australia, and all had been part of a group program or engaged in individual counselling under the Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP) framework. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This method ensured that the findings remained grounded in, and reflective of, children's perspectives and experiences. Systems theory was used during analysis to assist



with an understanding of how the impact of parental separation brings changes to both the micro and macro systems of children's lives.

A range of themes emerged across the children's experiences. Sadness and loss were evident in all the children's stories. For some, these feelings were ever-present and, at times, overwhelming. Many spoke of feeling left out and not valued in re-formed families. Children also identified the need for adults to: just listen; include them and give them a say in decisions about their lives; and provide information about what is happening in their families. Children highlighted the need to be engaged in family life and their need to feel valued. Children demonstrated a range of strategies to manage the changes and the difficult feelings, including seeking formal counselling/support, making decisions about contact with parents, seeking support from friends and developing internal cognitive strategies.

Changes in family formation brought about through parental separation have precipitated significant policy changes and reforms to the family law system in Australia. In this study, a number of children reflected on their experience of shared parenting, shared care and court mediation, providing a perspective on the way legislation and policy are experienced by children.

In exploring children's experiences and understandings of parental separation, this study extends and challenges dominant understandings of the effect of parental separation on children and builds knowledge of the supports required for children to manage and respond to these changes in their lives. This thesis makes an essential contribution to understanding the way in which children experience and make sense of parental separation. Drawing on the perspective of children, the thesis makes a further contribution to the development of policy in relation to families.

## **Contextual Explanation**

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

The Australian Commonwealth became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990. The UNCRC requires State Parties to be duty bearers in the upholding of the rights of the child. Of particular relevance to research with children, and informing the development of this study, are Articles 12 and 13:

Article 12 (1): State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (United Nations, 1989).

Article 13 (1): The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; the right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice (United Nations, 1989).

### **Supporting Children after Separation Program (SCASP)**

SCASP was launched in 2008. This program assists children from separating families to deal with issues arising from the disruption in their parents' relationship and to participate in decisions that impact on them. The objective of this program type is to "support children, within the context of their family, to manage and enhance their relationships during and after family separation" (McArthur et al., 2011, p. 8). Funding is provided to a range of Family Relationship Centers (FRC) where the program is "developed and implemented in response to the specific needs of the community" (McArthur et al., 2011, p. 14).

The children in this study had all participated in a group program or individual counselling within a SCASP framework.

# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Thesis

## Introduction to the chapter

Parental separation often precipitates significant changes to a child's physical environment and their relationships across a range of systems, both within the family and externally with peer groups, friendships, schools and community (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001). The changes that occur when parents separate potentially create a range of challenges for children. Children may need to respond to changes in their physical environment, which may include changes in location, living in two different households and attending different schools (Beausang, Farrell, & Walsh, 2012; Hans & Fine, 2001). The separation of parents may also create significant changes to children's relationships with parents, siblings and extended family members (Kunz, 2001; Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). Children respond to, and seek to make sense of, these changes in order to bring meaning to the changes in their lives (Jamieson & Milne, 2012). These changes can be stressful and potentially impact on children's adjustment and development, particularly if there has been previous or ongoing conflict or violence between parents (Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011; Francia & Millear, 2015; Kelly & Emery, 2003; McIntosh, 2003). With one-quarter of Australian children under 18 years spending part of their childhoods apart from one of their parents (Baxter et al., 2011; de Vaus & Gray, 2003), equating to 40,202 children affected by divorce in 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2016), parental separation and divorce has become a major social and policy consideration. This change in family formation has precipitated significant policy changes and reforms to the family law system in Australia and other Western countries.

Internationally and in Australia, concern has been expressed about the impact of these changes on children's wellbeing and their future outcomes in a range of areas, including children's behaviour; mental health; education engagement; social relationships; and

economic wellbeing (Amato, 1994; Amato, 2000; Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Mackay, 2005; O’Hanlon, Patterson, & Parham, 2007). In Australia, significant reform to family law, policy and the service environment occurred in 2006, in response to these issues and concerns and to address the potentially negative impact of parental separation and divorce on children (Bagshaw et al., 2011; Parkinson, 2013). These reforms shifted the focus from litigation in divorce and separation matters to developing cooperative parenting agreements through mediation (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Ruddock, 2005). The changes included a national network of FRCs that provide group programs and counselling for children, counselling for parents and parenting after separation group programs (Bagshaw et al., 2011).

International and Australian research exploring the impact of parental separation and divorce on children has primarily been based upon the views of adults, parents and professionals or the gathering of retrospective accounts of adults’ early experience of their parents’ separation and divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Mackay, 2005; O’Hanlon et al., 2007). Increasingly, there is recognition of the value of hearing directly from children about their experience of parental separation and divorce. Both internationally and in Australia, there is an increased research effort exploring children’s direct experience of these family changes, through hearing directly from children at the time of parental separation and in the years following these changes. These studies have often focused on single issues, for example: shared care and custody (Bergstrom et al., 2013; Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Neale, Flowerdew, & Smart, 2005; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016); and court processes and dispute resolution (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Carson, Dunstan, Dunstan, & Roopani, 2018) with little account of the broader experiences children may have (Bagshaw, 2007; Maes, De Mol, & Buysse, 2012). The findings from research with children are providing an opportunity for the development of more effective responses to children’s needs and experiences in these specific contexts, both at a policy and program level, and also when working with parents at the time

of separation and divorce (Brand, Howcraft, & Hoelson, 2017; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). The research is demonstrating that children are active participants in responding to these changes and have clear opinions of what would have been helpful at the time of the parental separation in a range of contexts.

Both research perspectives (retrospective and research with children) have consistently found that separation, and divorce is potentially a stressful time for children (Bagshaw, 2007; Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2002; Ducibella, 1996). Early research, focused on the potential outcomes for children through their life course into adulthood, concludes that parental separation and divorce has a range of negative impacts. Research with children, highlighting the perspective of an event in time and as it is experienced over time, demonstrates the active way in which children respond, make sense of, and adjust to these changes.

A noted absence in current research is exploratory research with children that takes the position where children determine the aspects of their experience that they want to talk about, rather than being directed by the adult researcher. This study takes a research position that is curious about, and supportive of, children describing their experiences of parental separation without a specific framework or context. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews provided an opportunity for children to describe how they experience and make meaning of the changes that take place in their families and environments when parents separate.

In the Australian context there is increasing recognition of the value of hearing from those affected by policy development, including children. In 2011 the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), now the Department of Social Services (DSS), funded this PhD scholarship for doctoral research to explore children's experiences of parental separation and divorce. DSS develops the policy and service frameworks for families in Australia. The scholarship recognised that

children who are directly affected by parental separation and divorce are rarely heard within the context of policy or service development. DSS outlined the purpose of the research as contributing to evidence-based policy development.

## **Research question and aims**

The research question was framed to facilitate a child-directed exploration of their experiences through semi-structured interviews:

### ***HOW DO CHILDREN EXPERIENCE AND MAKE SENSE OF PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE?***

Two aims provided a framework for the analysis of the interview data.

**Aim 1:** To hear directly from children, in their words, how they experience and make sense of parental separation and divorce.

**Aim 2:** To provide evidence of children's experiences of the impact of parental separation and divorce in order to inform the development of social policy, practice and service provision.

## **Significance of the study**

When parents separate or divorce, children experience change across a range of systems. The way in which change in one system, in this thesis the family, can impact on, or bring about changes in, another system (school or friendships, for example), demonstrates the far-reaching impacts of parental separation and the range of experiences that children may need to respond to and negotiate. In addition, parental separation and divorce can bring about the need to engage in new systems, such as courts, mediation, counselling and complex households.

For some children, families are not static in structure, and relationships within families continue to change over time. Parental separation and divorce is one element of the way in which families change and is often the beginning of a series of changes and fluctuations in family structure and relationships that continue across childhood into adulthood. Research has predominantly explored parental separation and divorce as the event to be understood, with links made to the impact on the wellbeing of children, at the time of separation and as adults. This PhD study conceptualises parental separation as a process that impacts on multiple systems and relationships over time. Exploring with children their experience provides an opportunity to develop an understanding of the way in which children respond to, and make sense of, changes in their family systems and the interplay across their social environments. This study was an opportunity to contextualise parental separation and divorce, not as a discrete event for children, but as part of the changing fabric of family that children experience.

In contrast to previous research with children which has explored the impact of parental separation in specific contexts or systems, the approach in this thesis was an exploration with children that is more general and open. Hearing from children about the nature of these changes and the way in which they experience the changes is an opportunity for adults, parents and policymakers to develop a deeper and more holistic understanding of children's experiences of these changes. In this study, the way in which children experience and make sense of parental separation, at the time of the separation and during the months and years following, was the focus. Children respond to what is sometimes unexpected, significant and rapid change in their family system, working to make sense of their experiences, sometimes with little scaffolding or support (Ducibella, 1996; Jamieson & Milne, 2012).

In Australia, at the age of 0–1, 89% of children live with both their biological parents, but by the age of 12–13, only 72% of children live with both their biological parents (Baxter, 2016). The middle years of childhood (age 8–14) may be a time of rapid and ongoing change for children in relation to their family formation and family relationships (Baxter, 2016). Current research studies with children in relation to family change are small in number and predominantly reflect an older demographic of children 12–18 years. This study interviews children of upper primary school age (8–14), contributing to the development of understanding of the way in which younger children experience family change resulting from parental separation.

Acknowledging that children will offer different accounts of their experiences of parental separation from the adult perspective strengthened the need for this current study. Hearing directly from children about their experience of family change, as it happens or is happening, provides adults with a better understanding of the needs and concerns of children. This understanding assists parents as they work to maintain and build relationships with their children post-separation. The study also provides the opportunity to reflect on the way in which current policy and services respond to children's needs at this time, from the perspective of children.

Australian research on children's experiences of parental separation is predominantly based on retrospective accounts or on professional and parental assessments, whose interpretation are necessarily influenced by their own views and circumstances and professional frameworks. Contributing to a lack of research with children are concerns about their vulnerabilities and their need for protection, given their age and developmental level (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Powell, 2011). Countering these concerns is an increasing recognition of children's agency and their rights as individuals (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Powell, 2011) which supports and promotes their active engagement in research. Research



with children is framed within these constructs of their rights and their need for protection, positioned as both vulnerable and with agency. This tension contributes to reluctance in research to directly engage with children around sensitive topics, such as parental separation. However, the relative paucity of children's inclusion in research is itself increasingly acknowledged as an ethical issue (Campbell, 2008; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). It is recognised that not hearing from children about their experiences of parental separation limits the capacity of policymakers and parents to support them in ways that are helpful in relation to post-separation adjustment.

This study considers the ethical framework for involving children directly in research, with a methodological approach that responds to this tension, supporting the agency and right of children to be heard - but for this to be done in a way that responds to their potential vulnerability. Drawing on a social work research perspective brings some of the concerns of engaging in research with children to the foreground, in particular, that social workers are obliged to bring about good and have a duty to avoid harm to others (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; Bogolub, 2010; Peled, 2010); this reflects the tensions in childhood research which positions children as either in need of protection or as capable of self-determination (Coady, 2010). The development of a methodology that responds to this ethical framework contributed to the development of a research methodology with children, by demonstrating how social work values and perspective can inform research. This study contributes to the development of methodological considerations when conducting research with children.

An important feature of this study is that it focuses on the experiences of a particular cohort of children. All of the children in this study have been engaged in counselling or group programs specifically for children who had experienced or were experiencing parental separation and divorce, through a FRC. Drawing on children engaged in a supportive

framework responds, in part, to the concerns around children's vulnerability by ensuring that they have access to consistent, safe support throughout the research process. It also acknowledges that the children participating in the research have engaged in programs and processes that enable them to process and articulate their experiences in a supported environment. Of further value in drawing participants from a recognised program is the capacity to invite children to reflect on their experience of these programs. A qualitative and exploratory approach in this research provides the opportunity for children to express their experiences of counselling and group programs from their perspective without the constraints of more focused evaluations. This provides additional and different information to that which may be acquired through an evaluation process. This is a critical contribution to the research, because little is known about the children who participate in these programs and the way in which they respond to their changing families. Situating a research study in a program context may also benefit program staff through dialogue, discussion and involvement with the research process.

Policy development in the Australian context in response to these changes to families demonstrates that policy is both a response and an attempt to shape social change. From this perspective, it is critical to provide research that focuses on hearing directly from those affected by changes to policy in the family separation context: the children. The perspectives and experiences of the children in this study can contribute to our understanding of the effects of parental separation for some children, leading to more robust consideration of policy and program service development that may more directly benefit children. The impetus of the research itself acknowledges the potential lack of child perspective in current policy and service development within the context of DSS. This current study provides an opportunity, through an exploratory and non-directive approach to research, to hear from children about what is important to them and, in this way, to develop insights about how current policy may be impacting on children's lives.

## **Why I wanted to do this study**

My interest in this area began when I was employed as a research officer (School of Social Work, ACU) in 2002. I was involved with the evaluation of educative group programs for parents who were experiencing separation and divorce as part of a Primary Dispute Resolution Project (funded through the Attorney-General's Department). This evaluation looked at parents' change and experience and I became curious as to how children were experiencing these changes and their relationships with their parents.

I have practised social work with adults in the mental health and criminal justice areas, where much of my practice has responded to the broad family context. A systems perspective in my work drew awareness to the way in which children are often not heard in these systems, or in the decisions that are made that impact on their lives. Through my social work practice, it became evident that children's experiences of the world in which they live are not often explored, known or considered within the context of developing policy or social work practice.

As a long-term carer, I have directly experienced the complexity of enabling young children's voices to be heard in the systems that impact on their lives. I have noted that there is often a disconnection between a policy that states it wants hear what children have to say, and the practice reality where children may be afforded very limited opportunity to make an effective contribution to the decisions that impact on their lives.

These experiences have led me to consider how we enable the voices of children to have authenticity in the wider social, political and policy discourses and how this can occur in a way that is safe and responsive to their wellbeing. Because of my research methodology, which recognises that children are active in making meaning of their experiences and contribute and respond to change, and drawing on my practice background, children's

experiences are to be at the forefront of this study. I take the position that adults (parents, practitioners and researchers) can learn from children's knowledge through deep listening. It is not only listening and hearing what children have to say, but also authentically considering this knowledge and experience in the development of practice, policy and services for children and their families. It is being genuine in wanting to know how children live and experience their worlds - and using this knowledge to affect change.

### **How I am going to answer the question**

This study takes a Childhood Studies approach, consistent with a research perspective that positions children as active in the construction of their lived experience and capable of articulating and describing their experiences. It positions children's social relationships and cultures as worthy of study in their own right, and children as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives (Prout & James, 1997).

Children who have been engaged in counselling or a group program specifically for children who have experienced parental separation are the focus of this study. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews, the study explores with children, how they make sense of, and respond to, changes in their lives when parents separate. The semi-structured interviews were developed through a child reference group, as a way of addressing the need for the interviews to be child directed. The interview structure and questions were broad and followed the child's line of communication, topics or issues raised.

Analysing children's accounts of their experiences, within a systems framework (discussed in Chapter Four) provides a way in which to make sense of the data and the children's stories. It recognises and values the perspective that children's engagement in a range of systems and environments can be affected by the changes taking place within their family systems. While Childhood Studies positions children's culture and social relationships

as actively constructed by children, the systems lens recognises that, within this perspective, children are interconnected across a range of systems and relationships, and their construction and meaning making is contextualised through systems and relationships (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Stevens & Hassett, 2012).

In answering the research question, the thesis contributes children's perspectives to current understandings of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children's lives.

This thesis is composed of a further seven chapters.

**Chapter Two** outlines the international and Australian historical context of family and family change. The chapter explores legislative, policy and service delivery responses to parental separation and divorce in the Australian context.

**Chapter Three** presents the findings from international and Australian literature on the effects of parental separation and divorce on children. The chapter explains how a shift to seeking the views of children directly, in addition to the retrospective accounts of adults of the effects, is necessitating a change in the way parental separation is considered in a social, policy and service delivery framework.

**Chapter Four** describes a methodology that draws on Childhood Studies (Corsaro, 2011; Lewis, 2002; Prout & James, 1997) and a constructionist framework (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Ife, 1997). This approach supports the aims of the study: to hear directly from children about their experiences in a way that is robust and actively contributes to the knowledge and understanding of children's experiences of parental separation and divorce.

**Chapters Five through to Seven** explore the findings of the study. Children's experiences of parental separation and the changes this has brought to their worlds, from their perspective, is described. The impact of their experiences on their relationships and sense of wellbeing is explored through their descriptions. The way in which children respond to these

changes and actively participate in the construction of their own social lives is outlined (Prout & James, 1997; Corsaro, 2011; Matthews, 2007).

**Chapter Eight** presents the findings of the study in the context of the Australian policy and social landscape. The value of hearing directly from children is highlighted through identification of the ways in which policy and service provision could potentially respond more effectively to children who experience parental separation.

## **Chapter summary**

In a context where there have been significant changes to the social environment in Australia and internationally, the impact of these changes on the family has been explored. A particular focus has been the formation and dissolution of families, through parental separation and divorce. Research has predominantly focused on retrospective accounts from adults about the impact of parental separation and divorce, focusing on long-term outcomes. Greater recognition of children as active participants in their social worlds has led to research being undertaken directly with children. As social policy responds to changing social situations, and also contributes to the way these changes are manifest and have impact, understanding the way in which children experience and make sense of these changes contributes to the development of more responsive policy and practice.

This chapter described how the current study was developed and its justification in the current research context of parental separation and divorce. The research question and aims of the study, outlined in this chapter, demonstrate the way in which this study approach contributes to a richer understanding of children's experiences from their perspective. This potentially builds a more comprehensive understanding of the changes that occur and the way in which children respond to, and make sense of, these changes. The present study provides

an opportunity to build on our understanding, as adults, of children's worlds when parents separate or divorce.

## **Chapter 2: Social, Policy and Legislative Context**

We [children] need to be ‘believed’ rather than just ‘listened to’ and need to have a voice and to have our needs and wishes considered (cited in Bagshaw et al., 2011, p. 59).

### **Introduction to the chapter**

The last six decades in Australia and the Western world have seen significant changes in family demographics resulting in a greater number of children experiencing complex family structures and relationships (Baxter, Edwards, & Maguire, 2012; de Vaus & Gray, 2007). In Australia, over 40% of children have experienced some form of family complexity before they reach the age of 13 (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2016). This chapter outlines the social and policy context in relation to the nature of families in Australian society who experience parental separation and divorce. Changes in social values are often reflected and translated through the way in which families function and are organised (Dinisman, Andresen, Montserrat, Stozik, & Stozik, 2017; Fogarty, 2006). The legislative and policy frameworks that have been developed in relation to parental separation and divorce will be contextualised through the discussion of social changes that have occurred in Australia. The chapter provides an exploration of the complexity of legislative and policy development, noting the various ways in which particular aspects of social change and social discourse have shaped and impacted on legislative and policy development in this area. How discussions have been shaped through various discourses, including the social discourse of the traditional family, the Best Interests of the Child (BIC) and the rights of the child, will be considered. The chapter explores the way in which children’s views and experiences have been considered in policy development over time. This perspective provides a deeper understanding of the broader context within which children live their lives.



## Social change

The nature of family structure and function has undergone considerable change in recent decades in the Western world, with more variability and complexity in families. Multiple changes have occurred in the Western world (including Australia) which have significantly impacted on the way families are formed and function, including: a fall in the number of household members; a decline in fertility and marriage rates; an increase in new forms of partnerships, such as unmarried cohabitation; an increase in divorce rate and separations; and an increase in single-parent households (ABS, 2007; Dinisman et al., 2017; Edgar, 2000; Ottosen, 2006; Weeks & Quinn, 2000; Weston, Stanton, Qu, & Soriano, 2001). Since the 1960s, these changes have occurred more rapidly, partly because of socioeconomic and technological factors (Dinisman et al., 2017). Fogarty (2006) asserts that, while significant changes have occurred in legislation and policy in the 30 years following the Australian *Family Law Act 1975 (FLA 1975)* and the introduction of the Family Court of Australia, the greatest change that has taken place in Australia is “in the values and attitudes of society” (Fogarty, 2006, p.24). In this way, changes to family law, policy and practice are situated within changing social contexts and the attitudes and values that underpin Australian society. These are not fixed or even easily identifiable, but acknowledgement of the constant flow and flux of society enriches our understanding of the way in which practice and policy are formed and developed over time, and - perhaps more significantly - the way in which adults and children experience and make sense of their social and family lives.

Moloney, Weston and Hayes (2013) identified four social changes as contributing to the development of policy and legislative responses to parental separation and divorce, all indicative of the way in which adults and children construct their understanding of family and their relationships:

- women’s increasing participation in the workforce

- changing perceptions of fatherhood
- the formal articulation of family violence and child abuse
- the increased emphasis on the rights of the child (p.110).

The impact of changes in women's social and public engagement on the formation and function of the family is discussed in the following section. Changing perceptions of fatherhood, responses to family violence and the impact of the children's rights discourse are considered later in this chapter, contextualised through the policy and legislative response to these discourses and social changes.

### **Changes in women's social and public engagement**

A significant change in social attitudes during the decades prior to the 1970s (and after) has been the challenge to traditional gender roles and patterns of family formation. One feature of family change has been the greater need and capacity to make choices in relation to family formation and family life. Where there were once clear rules about family formation and strict sequencing of events, relatively clear role prescriptions, and a separation of work and home, "there is now much more diversity and room for individuals to design their own rules and solutions" (de Vaus, 1997, p. 5). The changing patterns of family formation during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century may be linked to changing gender roles, where there has been a shift away from the male breadwinner role and female homemaker model, to a shared bread winning role (Qu & Weston, 2013; Weston et al., 2001). Women's increased participation in the workforce has been enabled through an increase in part-time and casual work and an expansion of work in industries such as community and personal services. Increases in housing costs, prolonged financial dependency of children, changes to child care, and national policies that have improved women's education and employment opportunities and wages, further contributed to women's participation in the workforce (Weston et al., 2001). The women's liberation movement has significantly contributed to changes in women's position and roles in society

and is no longer considered a fringe element of social discourse, with changes in social attitudes towards de facto unions, and unmarried motherhood not attracting the same social stigma that it did during the 1950s (Swain, 2012; Weston et al., 2001).

### **Changing views on marriage**

In Australia and in similar Western democracies, the institution of marriage began to change, during the 1960s, from an outwardly stable and predictable role-driven arrangement emphasising reciprocal rights and duties, to one in which the “rules of engagement between men and women in intimate relationships were becoming more fluid and more publicly and privately contested” (Moloney et al., 2013, p. 121). By the early 1970s the view of a need to preserve married life was at odds with the values of the Australian community. The shift in community values and renegotiation of the institution of marriage were influenced by the rising number of women in the workforce, the advent of the women’s liberation movement, and demands for child care, paid paternity leave and family friendly work places (Swain, 2012). Change in social values brought a critical reflection to the way in which families were formed and structured, their function and the meaning of marriage. Family and marriage, previously understood to be within the realm of religion, increasingly came to be seen and understood through a social science framework: having meaning and relevance from the perspective of the social life of groups and individuals (Moloney et al., 2013; Swain, 2012). The move away from fault as a determining factor in divorce application (discussed in the following section of this chapter) could be seen as a response to what Cherlin (2004) describes as the gradual deinstitutionalisation of marriage.

### **Changing perceptions and access to divorce**

The increase in the rate of divorce throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century represents a significant trend in the way in which families were being transformed and reflects the changing social attitudes towards marriage and family formation over time. It is one reflection of the changes

in the way marriage was being constructed and the changes to social values, including the influence of the women's movement and changing women's roles and participation in the broader social context (Kinnear, 2002; Swain 2012; Weston et al., 2001). The shift in the crude divorce rate (measured as the number per 1000 resident population) in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was negligible, rising to slightly over 1.0 per 1,000 resident population in the late 1940s, at the time partly reflecting the instability of wartime marriages and the disruptive effects of the war on marriage (AIFS, 2018; Kinnear, 2002). The crude divorce rate fell over the following decades, reaching 0.6 in the early 1960s (AIFS, 2018). A mixture of changing family responsibilities, the renegotiation of gender roles, and the increasing intolerance of violence and abuse in intimate relationships and in relationships between parents and their children was beginning to manifest itself in the late 1960s and “emerged in a variety of ways, including the demand in most Western countries, including Australia, for simpler more effective divorce legislation” (Swain, 2012, p. 120). Reflecting this social impetus, the crude divorce rate more than doubled in 1975 (1.8 per 1,000 resident population) just before the *FLA 1975* came into force (AIFS, 2018; Weston et al., 2001). Changes to the legislative framework for divorce occurred in 1976, with a significant impact on the rates of divorce, and this will be explored in the next section.

Parental separation, divorce and the reforming of families is a significant transition in family related trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the Western world. Changes in Australian divorce legislation and policy have both responded to social change, but have also contributed significantly to the way in which parental separation and divorce are constructed and managed. Within this context, legislation and policy respond to families who experience parental separation where there has been either a formal marriage or a de facto marriage.

## **Acknowledging and responding to the complexity of family**

In Australia, the nuclear family, comprised of a male and a female parent and two children, has been the dominant community standard of family formation, underpinned and supported by legal structures and cultural forms (Kinnear, 2002). However, as reflected in the Western world, there is increasingly less certainty about the idea of a standard family (Dinisman et al., 2017), with increasing complexity and diversity in the ways families are formed and live. In Australia diverse and complex families are defined as non-traditional and may include children living with a single parent; a non-biological parent; step or half-siblings; or a grandparent (AIFS, 2016). Further complexity and diversity in families is recognised where “young people live with step or blended families, same sex couples and non-parental and shared-care arrangements” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011, p. 10). The United States demonstrates similar diversification of families; in 1960, it was estimated that 27% of children resided in households headed by remarried, single, cohabitating or non-biological parents; by 2014, this estimate had grown to 53% of children (Pew Research Centre, 2015). The nature of these families often reflects a broad range of relationships that children have to respond to over time, including relationships with parents, siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings and step-parents. It is noted that families’ structures aren’t fixed, and, over a period of years, children may experience various types of complexity and transitions (Baxter, 2016).

Moloney et al. (2013) suggest that changes in the social environment and legislative and policy approaches to parental separation and divorce have had:

a profound impact on the way large numbers of men and women deal with intimate relationships, with each other and with their children, and on the way men and women construct the issues that arise when one or both of them decide that their relationship is no longer viable (p. 110).

The structural relationship between household circumstances and children's wellbeing is a current discourse, with an acknowledgement of the changes in the socio-demographic behaviours through which families are formed, dissolved and organised (Wu, Hou, & Schimmele, 2008). Families are not defined through marital status, but through relationships and structure. It is considered that family is one of the most important factors for children's wellbeing; various studies demonstrate that there is a link between the quality of the parent-child relationships and young people's wellbeing (Dinisman et al., 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2015; Quilgars, Serle, & Keung, 2005). In this study, the meaning of family and how it is experienced are explored directly with children. Family constitutes a site of power where children are traditionally not seen as active participants with authentic voices and not encouraged to express how they experience their families (Lunn & Munford, 2007, p. 67).

The following section in this chapter describes the legislative and policy frameworks developed in Australia in response to the changing social values and attitudes towards marriage and family. It demonstrates that policy and legislation have both responded to changing social realities as well as precipitating or creating social change.

## **Legislative and policy responses**

This chapter has described shifts in social attitudes throughout recent decades around a range of issues, which brought about changes to the way in which families were constructed

and institutions such as marriage considered, both in Australia and, more broadly, in the Western world. These changes, not just in attitude or values, but in the actual structure and way that society conducted itself (for example, the reality of women's participation in the workforce) put increasing pressure on social institutions, policy and governance to reflect and change in response to the different desires and needs of individuals and families.

Significantly, during the 1960s, change in both the attitudes and values of Australians translated to different practices related to families, how they are formed and live. The change has carried profound implications for people individually and for social policy more generally.

Under the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1961*, an application for divorce was based on fault, with spouses being seen as guilty or innocent of matrimonial wrongs such as adultery, cruelty and desertion (Harrison, 1993). Desertion was the most frequently used ground for divorce, followed by adultery. Petitioning for divorce before 1976 required most applicants to “find fault with their partner” (Moloney et al., 2013, p. 123). The allocation of fault affected matters of custody, property and maintenance, and the guilty spouse often experienced judicial consequences such as restricted/lost contact with children or losing the right to be financially supported (Harrison, 1993). An analysis of Australian divorce laws concluded that, until the 1960s, the key objective of divorce laws was “the preservation of social stability through the preservation of marriage and the control of sexuality” (Star, as cited in Moloney et al., 2013, p. 123). Reflecting the changing social attitudes described earlier in this chapter, attitudes to fault-based divorce were also changing, and the Australian Federal Government came under increasing pressure to introduce divorce legislation that was “more dignified and compassionate, that was not fault-based” (Weston et al., 2001, p. 19).

### ***The Family Law Act 1975 (FLA 1975)***

The introduction of the *Family Law Act 1975 (FLA 1975)*, which came into effect in 1976, changed the way in which divorce and separation were dealt with in Australia. The *FLA 1975* provided for divorce based on one ground, “irretrievable breakdown, as measured by at least 12 months of separation” (Weston et al., 2001, p. 19). The increasing diversity of family forms and the individualised nature of parenting arrangements in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have “vindicated the passing of divorce legislation that did not become entangled in the details of the relationship itself” (Moloney et al., 2013, p. 124). The legislation also provided for the establishment of a Family Law Court. This was a marked shift in the way in which matters of family were to be considered. There was an expectation that this would be a significant and positive change in the way in which family law matters would be dealt with, because it would provide the legal framework for responding to family law matters, including resolving disputes involving children and financial matters (Fogarty, 2001; Harrison, 1993). Although the central legal change, the abolition of fault-based divorce, was an issue being debated in many Western countries at the time, in Australia, the simultaneous agitation for a specialist family court marked a unique innovation. This would potentially provide for a break with the traditional adversarial model of justice and the development of a justice and court process more tailored for meeting the needs of persons experiencing family breakdown. It would reference new ideas about the role of counselling and social science frameworks to assess and meet those needs (Swain, 2012). Underlying the passage of the *FLA 1975* was a complex mix of forces: perhaps the most significant factor, as Swain (2012) notes, was the widening gap between a fault-based approach to divorce and changing social mores of Australian society.



### Impact of policy and legislative change 1976

One indicator of the demand for divorce procedures to be relatively simple and detached from considerations of fault was the dramatic spike in the divorce rate itself which occurred in the years immediately following the opening of the Family Court. In 1975, just before the passage of the *FLA 1975*, the rate of divorce was 1.8 per 1,000 resident population; in 1976, after the passage of the *FLA 1975*, divorce numbers increased to 4.6 per 1,000 resident population (AIFS, 2018). In part, the rise in the divorce rate at this time was indicative of a backlog of potential divorce applications re-filed under the 12 months' separation ground, rather than proceeding on fault-based grounds (Weston et al., 2001). While the divorce rate has generally levelled out, it has remained higher than before the *FLA 1975* came into operation, reflecting changing social attitudes to a range of social issues and the current legislative framework, all of which enabled divorce and separation to be a viable and supported response to parents separating. Since this initial spike post-legislative change, the crude divorce rate has fluctuated between 2.5 and 3.0 per 1,000 resident population (Weston & Qu, 2006) and in 2016 was 1.9 per 1,000 resident population (ABS, 2016). While, as has been outlined, the change in divorce laws reflected and responded to changing social mores and attitudes, a new discourse arose after the *FLA 1975*, reacting to the perceived increase in divorces being granted. This included concerns that the no fault divorce had weakened the institution of marriage by encouraging marriage breakdown (Harrison, 1993). The shifting discourses demonstrate the complexity and interrelatedness of policy, legislation and social values.

### Consideration of children

As I noted, 71% of children under the age of 15 in Australia live with both their biological parents, a rate that has been steady since 1997 (Baxter, 2016; Kinnear, 2002). Pryor and Rodgers (2001) suggest that the entire process of marriage breakdown, along with post-divorce circumstances and transitions is a crucial factor affecting children's wellbeing. In

Australia the number of children involved in divorce has increased from 26,800 in 1980 to 49,600 in 2000, with more recent estimates at 40,202 (ABS, 2016). These are children experiencing divorce, not parental separation. Noting the increase in numbers of cohabitating adults, and periods of separation prior to divorce, the number of children affected in any one year by parental separation would be greater.

Prior to the *FLA 1975*, under the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1975*, the allocation of fault affected custody, property and maintenance proceedings, and the *guilty* spouse could be punished through being refused contact with his or her children (Harrison, 1993). The *FLA 1975* addressed this aspect through provisions to include consideration of property disputes between non-divorced but married parties, together with spousal maintenance and child support for, and custody of, the children of a marriage or former marriage (Fogarty, 2006). While consideration of arrangements for children became more strongly emphasised in the legislation, the language of custody continued to reflect the perspective of children being owned by parents with decisions around custody and child support being determined primarily by adults. The shift to emphasising spousal maintenance and child support, however, became the foundation on which further legislative change would be built within a framework of parenting responsibilities and shared parenting in the 1990s (discussed later in this section), proposed as reflecting a need to consider children's interests in the making of post-separation arrangements.

One of the changes brought about by the Family Court was the availability of counsellors, within court both pre- and post-separation, who would provide detailed family reports for consideration in the legal processes, particularly around determinations of custody and parenting orders. This reflected a shift from a purely legal response to parental separation and divorce to one that took into account and considered the broader context of families including their economic, social and psychological circumstances (Fogarty, 2001; Swain,

2012). It was recognised that a number of matters are “not identifiable as propositions derived from legal principle ... for example the importance ... of bonding and attachment, and the significance of chronological and development age” (Kearney, 2014, p. 276). There was some initial opposition from the legal profession, but, over time, the court supported the integrity of family reports and their methodology, and lawyers recognised that social sciences had valid contributions to make to decision making around arrangements for families, particularly children, post-separation and divorce (Fogarty, 2001).

Because of the shift to incorporating a social science assessment and knowledge in some matters, it became evident that a Family Court presented an opportunity for children to be better heard in these proceedings. This was the beginning of more active consideration of children and their needs during parental separation. Initially, however, there is little evidence that children were actively involved in these processes, with family reports being prepared primarily with information from parents. Over time, considerations of the Best Interests of the Child (BIC) and the children’s rights discourse have required an active reflection of how to incorporate children more actively into family law processes. These concepts are further explored later in this chapter. The way in which children experience the implementation of the BIC and children’s rights is becoming more evident through research with children, and, as explored further in this thesis, there are suggestions that this concept may not be providing the safest or best efficacy for children in determining parenting agreements (Carson et al., 2018).

#### Impact of *FLA 1975* on the reforming of families

Improved access to divorce through the *Family Law Act 1975* provided the framework for remarriage to be a considered a viable option for people. As I noted, the separation of parents brings a range of changes to children’s lives: changes in physical environments, living arrangements, their relationships with parents and other family members and fundamental consideration of their sense of self in the world. Further complexity of families occurs for

children when either parent re-partners. Remarriage increased steadily throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Australia, with a marked increase from 14% of marriages in 1970 to 32% in 1980 (Weston et al., 2001), with the proportion of marriages involving remarriage for one or both partners levelling out at around 28% in 2016 (ABS, 2016). This does not reflect the number of parents re-partnering where formal marriage or formal divorce are not involved. Remarriage brings further changes to children's families, including changes to relationships with parents and developing relationships with step-parents and step-siblings, as well as broader changes in environments.

### Changes to other Legislation

Within the context of the *FLA 1975*, other legislation and social change contributed to enabling more people to proceed with divorce in the following decades. Changes to the Child Support Scheme, phased in over 1988 and 1989, substantially increased the amount, regularity and predictability of financial support from non-residential parents to their children. Increases in social security payments and allowances and the redesigning of the social security system to offer some support to non-traditional families, including the single parent payment, functioned further to destabilise the patriarchal family model (Harding & Szukalska, 1999). This economic support enabled women to leave unsatisfactory or violent marriages (Swain, 2012). Social changes such as the rise in workforce participation of mothers and increasing availability of child care led to higher living standards for sole parents and their children (Weston et al., 2001), increasing the viability of single-parent families. All of these factors acted as enablers for men and women contemplating divorce.

### Best Interests of the Child (BIC) and Children's Rights

Two principles concerning children have intersected in legislation and policy development regarding families. The principle of the BIC is enshrined in Australian Legislation, including in the *FLA 1975*, where it is positioned as the paramount consideration.

The principle is intended to ensure that the focus remains on children and their individual needs, with decisions being made on a case by case basis (Kelly, 1997). It has been an important consideration in legal decisions regarding children for over a century. The treatment of children's best interests in Australian family law has some similarities to child protection legislation in Australian states and territories (Thomson & Molloy, 2001). The United States has only within the last century introduced the concept of BIC to case law, and more specifically, as a primary influence in family law with regards to custody and access (Kohn, 2008). It has been suggested that the BIC is not fully scrutinised in decision making, with determinations of best interests often made by adults and adult assessments (Calderwood & Rajesparam, 2014).

Article 3 of the UNCRC states: "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" (UN, 1989). While Article 3 may support a judicial approach promoting BIC, it does not simply restate the welfare principle; historically, adults have been the sole arbiters of what constitutes a child's interest. Such an approach is inconsistent with the Article 3 requirement that children themselves be entitled to play a role in the identification of those interests. Article 3 has to be read through the lens of Article 12 of the UNCRC, which provides children with a right to express their views in all matters affecting them. Children's best interests are to be informed by children themselves, where they have the capacity to make such a contribution (Tobin, 2013). It follows that children may have different interpretations of what constitutes their rights and how they experience these rights. For example (and directly relevant to family law), Article 19 protects children against all forms of violence. Significantly, violence is not defined, and children may have different perceptions to adults of what constitutes violence and how they experience violence. Of relevance is the qualifier in Article 12 of the UNCRC, that a child's views will be given "due weight in

accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (Archard, 2004, p. 66), which could risk being interpreted to allow “adults to retain authority over children” (Archard, 2004, p. 66). How this tension may be experienced by children in family law processes can be elucidated by speaking directly with children around these experiences. Tracing further changes to the *FLA 1975* is an opportunity to view the way in which the discourse of the BIC and children’s rights is used as an argument for change, but also how these concepts are variously interpreted within the governing frameworks.

### **Amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975***

#### 1996 Amendments to the *FLA 1975*

In 1996, the Australian Labor Government altered the relevant provisions of the *FLA 1975* to introduce the concept of parental responsibility, emphasising the continued sharing of parental responsibility between parents. In effect, the provision encourages and promotes continued contact between both parents and their children post-separation for the purpose of joint parenting (Dewar, 2010). The provision shifted the focus from children as an issue of custody or ownership, to relationships between parents and their children. This provided for a significant shift to legal recognition of de facto relationships, decreasing the legal importance placed on the concept of marriage (Dewar, 2000). This led to an increased significance of the concept of parenthood as a legal status. Supporting this approach were changes made in Child Support legislation, where reference to the concept of marriage has been removed (Dewar, 2000).

A further intention of the 1996 amendments to the *FLA 1975* was to promote private agreement of arrangements and to shift attention to the rights of children, away from simply those of parents. While the best interests of children remained the paramount consideration in decision making, children were considered to have a right to contact on a regular basis with both their parents (Dewar, 2010). There had been a growing interest in shifting family law to

a rights based model: this included domestic political pressure from fathers seeking greater equality in legal treatment, including access to children (Dewar, 2010; Kaye & Tolmie, 1998), and increased relevance of human rights instruments, especially in matters concerning children (Dewar, 2010). A demand for regular access to children or a joint parenting arrangement can be reinforced by, or represented as, a claim that children need regular contact with both their parents and that this is their “basic human right” (Kaye & Tolmie, 1998, p. 179). The right of a child to have contact with both parents was a contested concept at this time, with a need for interrogation as to how equal rights are in the best interest of the child and how children benefit from the equal contact (Munro, 1992).

Changes to the *FLA 1975* were not unanimously supported, and there was consistent reporting on concerns about the deterioration of family and family values and the consequences that this would have on the general society. Social change is often conceived as a social problem that leads to the deterioration of family and society more broadly (Coltrane & Adams, 2003; Parkinson, 2011a). In the Australian community, there continues to be a pervasive perception that families who stay together and work things out are strong and resilient (Williamson, Charchuk, Kushner, Skypre, & Pitre, 2018), and the concept of intact whole families is used as a reference point which other family types are held up against (Parkinson, 2011a). Social research into the impacts of parental separation and divorce on children (outlined in the following chapter), which identified a range of potential and significant negative impacts throughout childhood and into adulthood, contributed to further considerations of policy and legislative change in 2006.

#### 2006 Amendments to the *FLA 1975*

In June 2003, the then Attorney-General and the former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs jointly referred to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs an inquiry into child custody arrangements in the event of family

separation (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). The committee's report, *Every picture tells a story*, was released in December 2003 and recommended a range of reforms to the family law system. In July 2004, the then Prime Minister released a framework statement which outlined the government's proposed response to the committee's report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). The government released a discussion paper in November 2004, inviting broad community consultation and submissions. These consultations assisted the government as it shaped a final response to *Every picture tells a story* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

In the consultations, one small focus group with children and several individual young people's submissions constituted the perspective of children in the formation of the response. The government's response outlined its support for a new approach to the family law system, one that, in the first instance, aims to help to prevent separation (reflecting a social discourse around the need to maintain families): where separation does occur, the aim was to help parents to agree on what is best for their children, rather than pursuing litigation in a court room (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

The Liberal Government amended the *FLA 1975* (Part VII) effecting significant changes to the family law system. This included changes to the way in which decisions about children's care arrangements are made; the way in which the BIC is determined; and a requirement that parents not affected by violence or abuse are required to attempt to settle their matters through a Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) service before initiating legal proceedings.

#### *Legislative framework for decisions about children's care arrangements*

The amendments introduced a new legislative framework for decisions about children's care arrangements, with a rebuttal presumption of equal shared parental responsibility for children and a linked directive to consider ordering an equal care time arrangement, or substantial and significant time with both parents, where no protective



concerns existed (Rhoades, Sheehan, & Dewar, 2013). The government proposed these changes to the *FLA 1975* from a perspective that it was in the child's interests, and it was their right, to have meaningful involvement of both their parents in their lives post-separation. An exception to the presumption of shared parental responsibility was made in the event of child abuse or violence (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

In Australia and other Western countries, concerns have been raised about the prescription of shared parenting and shared care arrangements, in that they may not reflect the diversity of parenting arrangements in families. There is also concern that legislation that promotes and simplifies a highly complex arrangement may reproduce an unequal gender relationship in parenting (Davies, 2013). Family law and child support legislation is underpinned by prescribed shared parenting, which links families by biological and economic bonds, but not necessarily by affection or through sharing a life together (Smart & Neale, 2000). The legislation is prescriptive in its definition of a parent, potentially perpetuating a cultural bias through not recognising that biological connection does not always equate with the role of parent in some communities (Dewar, 2000). There is a sense that these constructs aim to orchestrate a normative order for families in the context of separation and divorce, based on genetics and finances. While providing a framework for parental separation and divorce, changes to legislation and policy might reflect an attempt by the government to fashion the way they believe families should operate and re-form after parental separation and divorce. Modern family law appears to be prescribing ways to divorce well, or how the "fragmented family should reform itself" (Dewar, 2000, p. 69).

#### *Best Interests of the Child (BIC)*

In the context of the 2006 changes to the *FLA 1975*, criteria for determining child's best interests have become more complex. Prior to the amendments, there were 14 criteria set out by S68F of the *FLA 1975* to determine the BIC. These were increased to 27 by the 2006

amendments and were set out in the new section 60CC (Parliament of Australia, 2006). The two primary considerations which the court must take into account in determining what is in the child's best interests are: the benefit to the child of having a meaningful relationship with both of their parents; and the need to protect the child from physical or psychological harm, being subjected to, or exposed to, abuse, neglect or family violence (Parliament of Australia, 2006; Rhoades, Frew & Swain, 2010). The reforms were partly shaped by the recognition that, although the focus must be on the best interest of the child, many disputes over children following separation are driven by relationship problems rather than legal ones (Kaspiew et al., 2011; Rhoades, 2014).

The more prescriptive way of determining a child's best interest may serve to further silence children from expressing their views on their best interest. Legislative change in Australia and other Western countries is being fashioned to provide courts with the flexibility to discern what will be in the best interests of the child in each case (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts; 2011). The determining of the BIC is a complex process. An Australian survey of empirical studies found that practitioners routinely rated the risk to the child of the undermining of the relationship between the child and the other parent as the most important BIC consideration for custody decisions (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997). It was also considered in the interpretation of the BIC that preferences and views of older children were more important than the preferences or views of a younger child (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997; Ackerman & Pritzl, 2011; Gourley & Stolberg, 2000). These findings were not supported by the Harmer and Goodman-Delahunty (2014) survey of 710 Australian Practitioners working in child and family law, which found that the legislative criteria seen as most important for BIC were "those related to protecting the child from harm" (p. 264). Survey results reflected the view that greater weight should be given to protecting children from harm than having meaningful relationships with both parents. Similar to earlier studies, and reflecting a particular assumption about children, was the view and practice that the

child's age was a significant factor in determining the child's best interests (Harmer & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014). Determination of the BIC is a complex process:

...the decision is usually a snapshot in time in the lives of the child and those around him or her. It depends upon an interpretation of past events as a guide for the future, an assessment of future proposals (physical, social, moral) and the wishes and perceptions of the child ... against a background of inevitable change (Fogarty, 2006, p. 31).

As I discussed, understandings of the BIC are not static and are open to interpretation. The Women's Legal Services Australia (WLS) (2018) submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission's Issues Paper Review of the Family Law System concludes that "the presumption of equal shared parental responsibility has operated to impede a proper focus on the best interests of the child" (p. 25). The way in which children experience meaningful relationships with parents provides some reflection on legislation that positions shared parenting and shared care as ideals underpinning decision making and in the BIC. Children have stated that, while time is important, their primary focus was on parents being there for them, feeling prioritised and being cared for and about (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001; Trinder, 2009). From a children's perspective, post-separation parenting arrangements are an ongoing process, not just a one-off event (Trinder, 2009). In another Australian study, Judicial Officers have reflected that "it's not parenthood which is crucial to the best interests of the child, but parenting" (Yamada & Cain, as cited in Rhodes, 2014, p. 173).

### *Family Dispute Resolution*

The 2006 amendment added the requirement that parents not affected by violence or abuse must attempt to settle their dispute through a FDR service before initiating legal proceedings. It encouraged parents to consider substantially sharing parenting time when developing parenting plans outside the courts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). A network of 65 FRCs was the centrepiece of the reform, responding to the recommendation for the need

for a single entry point into the family law system. The FRCs were designed to provide information, advice and dispute resolution services to families, to help them reach agreement on parenting arrangements without the need to go to court (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005).

Funding was provided to establish a range of programs to assist families, including children during and after separation, with mediation and counselling alongside other support services such as parenting education and relationship skills courses (Rhoades et al., 2010). Changes were framed in a way that recognised the need to listen and respond to children's particular needs and experiences when parents separate and divorce. Significantly, language was changed from finding out children's *wishes* to giving weight to any *views* expressed by the child (Campbell, 2013). Parkinson (2015) cautions that, while there are some processes in the family law system for ensuring that children are listened to, this usually only occurs where there is disagreement between parents. Children may not be always visible in formal decision making processes. Informal decision making may also occur in families and would not be captured or known in the context of making family agreements, nor necessarily support a child's view or wish.

### **Evaluation of the 2006 Amendments and response to family violence**

The evaluation of the 2006 reforms to the family law system concluded that there has been "more use of relationship services, a decline in filings in the courts in children's cases, and some evidence of a shift away from an automatic recourse to legal solutions in response to post-separation relationship difficulties" (Kaspiew et al., 2011, p.16). The evaluation highlighted the fact that a significant proportion of separated parents are able to sort out their post-separation arrangements with minimal engagement with the formal system. However, Kaspiew et al. (2011) concluded that there is evidence of poorer wellbeing for children where there are safety concerns across the range of parenting arrangements, but particularly in

shared care-time arrangements, and that “effective responses should ensure that the parenting arrangements put in place for children in families with complex issues are appropriate to the children’s needs and do not put their short- or long-term wellbeing at risk” (Kaspiew et al., 2011 p. 16). Bagshaw et al. (2011) surveyed women and children about the effect of family violence on post-separation parenting agreements. They found that “women consistently said that fear of losing primary care of their children was a major factor influencing decision making” (p. 55) which may reduce their capacity to disclose family violence. One-fifth of women who accessed services post-2006 said that they felt forced to agree, or were bullied into agreeing, to equal time parenting arrangements, and a large proportion of all respondents said that concerns for their safety and the safety of their children were not heard or considered when parenting decisions were made (Bagshaw et al., 2011).

The BIC considerations require a framework for safeguarding children from harm. This is reflected in the present protective provision in the *FLA 1975*, which states that decisions should be made to protect children from harm caused by “being subjected to or exposed to abuse, neglect or family violence” (Parliament of Australia, 2006). According to Chisholm (2009), this formulation of harm has the potential for some decision makers to overlook the effects on children of other damaging behaviours, such as parental conflict and indifference. The way in which children experience harm may not be reflective of adult interpretations, with various parental/adult behaviours and interactions impacting on a child (Chisholm, 2009). Addressing these concerns, amendments were made to the definition of family violence in the *FLA 1975* in 2011, expanding the definition of family violence to include exposure to family violence and child abuse. Greater weight, when determining the best interests of the child, is now focused on protecting the child from physical or psychological harm, including the risk of being subjected to, or exposed to, abuse, neglect and family violence (Kaspiew, Carson, Coulson, Dunstad, & Moore, 2015).

The issue of family violence and the safety of children is an ongoing concern and consideration in the family law and policy context. The 2018 Australian Non-Government Organisation Coalition (NGO Coalition) submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women reflected that the current family law system in Australia is inadequate, failing to ensure the safety of women and their children fleeing domestic and family violence (Women's Legal Service, 2016). The report argued that the:

Family Law Act 1975 needs to be amended to better protect the safety of women and children by removing a presumption of equal shared parental responsibility and language of equal shared time to shift culture and practice towards a greater focus on safety and risk to children (Australian NGO Coalition, 2018, p. 25).

A submission by the Australian WLS to the Australian Law Reform Commission's Issue Paper on Review of the Family Law System highlighted a perception that the presumption of shared parental responsibility has led to decisions being made in favour of shared care for children and, in a context of the prevalence of family violence in family law matters, this presumption and its interpretation and implementation is putting children and women at risk (WLS, 2018).

While the community generally is aware of the prevalence of family violence, the family law system has difficulty identifying and assessing this risk of family violence early (Kaspiew et al., 2015). Shared parenting may be pursued by men who have perpetrated family violence as a way to continue to exert power and control over their families (WLS, 2018). It was found that three in ten separated parents had never been asked about family violence or safety concerns when using dispute resolution, lawyers and courts to resolve parenting matters (Kaspiew et al., 2015).

## **Children's involvement in family law policy development**

Those who develop policy are responding to a diverse and complex environment, including social changes, conflicting agenda, varying mandates, resource implications and political imperatives (Byrne & Lundy, 2015; Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016), as well as changing perspectives of how to ensure that those affected by policy contribute to its development (Devine & McGillicuddy, 2016). It is only relatively recently that children have entered the policy discourse as policy actors (Byrne & Lundy, 2015). Children were not directly involved in the evaluation of the 2006 Family Law Amendments, apart from one small focus group and several individual submissions; measures of their wellbeing were primarily based on parents' reports (Kaspiew et al., 2009). Meaningful and consistent engagement with children may be challenging in a policy environment such as Australia, where there is various Commonwealth and state legislation that governs children's lives. The move towards participatory forms of governance in practice has been accompanied by concern as to the meaningfulness of involvement in consultation processes (Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall, 2008). It is not clear what impact the views of children have had on the policy and strategies underpinning the current family law context, and there is little evidence of particular examples where their views have informed policy or legislative changes (Byrne & Lundy, 2015). However, a report outlining findings from interviews with 61 children whose parents had accessed the Australian family law system has recently been released (Carson et al., 2018), providing an opportunity to hear how children are experiencing the different aspects of the family law system, and with the potential to influence policy in this area. The findings of this report and findings from previous research on children's involvement in the family law system are discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter summary

This chapter provided an overview of the main social changes that occurred in Australia (and other Western countries) over the last six decades and have impacted on the way families have been formed and function over time. Legislative and policy responses have been described in relation to parental separation and divorce, contributing to greater diversity and complexity within families. The role of the concepts of the BIC and Children's Rights in the development of policy was discussed. In the context of changing perspectives of how to ensure that those affected by policy are given the opportunity to contribute to its development, it is noted that children are not routinely consulted on changes to policy, and that changes are often made without genuine understanding of how children are experiencing the policy frameworks that govern families.

The children in this current study were provided with an opportunity to speak about aspects of their experiences of parental separation that they choose and feel safe to share. Analysis of these data with an understanding of the current policy context provides an opportunity to understand how these experiences are impacted on by the policy and legislative frameworks. Further, all the children in this study will have participated in programs through a FRC. As part of the semi-structured interviews, they will be invited to reflect on this particular experience within the family law system, contributing to an understanding of how these programs are experienced by children.

The following chapter outlines research in relation to the impacts of parental separation and divorce on children.



## Chapter 3: What Does the Research Say?

In order to treat children ethically we need to be able to hear what it is they value and to be able to see how they make sense of their social world ... children have standpoints which are not the same as adult standpoints; moreover they know a great deal about parenting and its consequences (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001, p. 156).

### Introduction to the chapter

The previous chapter outlined the social changes that have contributed to structural and conceptual changes to families in Australia and across the Western world. The chapter described the legislative and policy reform from the mid 1970s in Australia which facilitated access to no fault divorce giving rapid rise to an increase in separated and divorced families and creating an environment for a diversity of family structure outside the nuclear family. Perspectives on the social meaning and impacts of divorce on family members have fluctuated and changed substantially as a result of social trends and the changes in legal and public policy (Kelly, 2003). There continues to be research, social commentary and discussion about the effects and impacts of parental separation on contemporary family life, the community and the wellbeing of adults and children (de Vaus, 2014; Kelly, 2003). The research and discourse around the impact of divorce and parental separation is complex. Some family scholars see the *breakdown* of the traditional family as destroying the basic fabric of society and contributing to a vast array of social problems that will carry on into future generations (Boney, 2003; Parkinson, 2011a). Others view diversity in families and shifting family relationships as opportunities for choice, new chances for fulfilment, individualisation, happier intimate relationships and the escape from unsatisfying, aversive family situations (Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011; Hetherington, 2003; Kelly, 2003).

This chapter discusses the research findings on the impact of parental separation and divorce on children, both at the time of the separation and during the years following. This review takes the position, now well recognised in the research, that parental separation and divorce is not a static event, but potentially creates a series of transitions for children throughout the months, and often years, following parental separation or divorce. This review presents two approaches taken in the research literature:

- Research *about children*. Characteristically done from a point of retrospection; speaking/doing research with adults who have experienced parental separation as children. This research approach also gathers data from other adults: school teachers, parents and counsellors, and often uses quantitative measures of child's wellbeing. This research perspective has been critical in opening a discussion and providing evidence as to the potential impacts of parental separation on children into the longer term.
- Research *with children*. In recent decades there has been an increased recognition that knowing and understanding the experiences of children, as children, is valid and critical to informing social and policy responses to families and the children in these families. This research perspective directly seeks the views of children while they are part of these changing families, both through qualitative and quantitative means. It becomes evident that children's perspectives enrich our understanding, not only of the impact of parental separation and divorce, but of the way in which children respond to the changing nature of their families, and the way in which they experience their worlds.

## **Research about children**

The significant changes to families in the decades following legislative and policy reform, and the increase in divorce and parental separation, generated interest and concern

about the impact of these changes on society, families and individuals, including children. These changes were the impetus for a range of research studies, initially from the United States, but increasingly from Australia and internationally. Research on the impacts of these changes on children was primarily developed from an adult perspective, based upon parental or professional perspectives of the impact on children's behaviour and wellbeing, or retrospectively with adults who experienced separation and divorce as children. The majority of these studies typically compared children from families in which parental separation and divorce occurred with children from continuously married families. This approach, at times, supported the modernist assumption that the traditional heterosexual nuclear family is the most effective family structure in which to raise children; this led early research approaches to conceptualise single-parent family households as deficient in their ability to satisfy the emotional, psychological, behavioural, social and economic needs of children (Blechman, 1982; Boney, 2003). There continues to be a social discourse, pervasive in Australia, comparing families that have two continuously married parents to families that have experienced parental separation, positioning the former as more beneficial to children (Parkinson, 2011a).

However, parental separation and divorce does create disruptions and changes to children's lives, which may include changing residence, neighbourhoods and schools, losing contact with friends and classmates, dealing with parents' new romantic partners or spouses and living with step or half-siblings (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Hetherington, 1989; Kelly 2003). Australian and international studies, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, identified risks and problematic outcomes for children and young people as a result of their parents' separation and divorce (Amato, 2000; Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Mackay, 2005). Research identified that the cumulative effect of multiple changes concentrated within a short period of time increases children's risk for a variety of problems (Amato et al., 2011).

Research during the 1990s and early 2000s concluded consistently that parental separation poses a risk to children's wellbeing across their life span (Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). Research concerning the psychological and social impact of parental separation and divorce on children illustrated the negative effect on children's behaviour, education and social relationships (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2003; Mackay, 2005; O'Hanlon et al., 2007). In summary, the studies from this period concluded that children of divorce were more likely to have behavioural, internalising, social and academic problems; to exhibit externalising symptoms, including conduct disorders, antisocial behaviours and problems with authority figures and parents; have lower academic performance; be two to three times more likely to drop out of school; and have double the risk of teenage childbearing (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Some studies indicated that they had more difficulty in their intimate relationships as young adults and more dissatisfaction with their marriages and were more likely to divorce (Amato, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Research using objective measures of psychological adjustment with adults who have experienced parental separation as children found that feelings of sadness, longing, worry and regret continued into adulthood (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In an American study involving several hundred college students, as many as half the young adults recalled distress and painful memories and experiences caused by their parents' behaviours and post-divorce custody arrangements. Substantial relationship loss and change, when compounded for some by continuing conflict or anger towards one or both parents, represented an ongoing unpleasant situation, as did the lack of control over the structures imposed on them following separation (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). However, painful reflections on a difficult past were not the same as an inability to relate and function competently in the present (Kelly & Emery, 2003); rather, they were an indicator of the emotional impact that parental separation can have over the life span. One perspective is that early experiences of moderate

stress may prepare young people to adjust and respond adaptively to the stresses encountered as young adults (Thompson, 2014). Data from an American Longitudinal study of Adolescent and Mental and Physical Health supported this research, demonstrating that family instability may be associated with negative behavioural and socioeconomic outcomes across the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Gaydosh & Mullan Harris, 2018). Significantly, in this study, there was no impact on young adults' physical health into adulthood. However, an earlier study found that parental conflict after divorce impacted on children's physical health and wellbeing (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). These findings put a focus on the complexity and dynamism of family change, recognising that families change over time and that there are various effects of these transitions on children's wellbeing into adulthood (Gaydosh & Mullan Harris, 2018).

For children who are adversely affected by the stress of parental separation, its influences have been found to persist well into adulthood (Amato & Keith, 1991; Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003; Hu, 2018; Huurre, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006; Mackay, 2005). Families are embedded in the contexts of neighbourhood, community and society, and these are also subject to change and impact on the wellbeing of children and families (Hayes, 2008). The disadvantages associated with parental separation are notably persistent through the life course and may have been present prior to parental separation and divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hu, 2018; Mackay, 2005).

The contribution of divorce ... to children's problems in later life is not nearly as great as might be inferred from findings that do not take adequate account of family conditions prior to separation. Parental separation does not occur randomly, and the causes that underlie it may also be part of the explanation of the apparent impacts on children (Mackay, 2005, p. 126).

The contemporary approach has shifted focus from the event of parental separation to the factors which may contribute to the poorer outcomes for children and factors which may be more protective (Kelly & Emery, 2003). It is recognised that parental separation is not a discrete event but an ongoing process of family change, transition and adjustment which children and young people respond to and interact with (Rodgers & Pryor, 1998). Parental separation is one contributing stressor for children (Taylor, 2013). This reflects consideration of the complex nature of children's lives and a shift from a causal affect paradigm, that is, that parental separation and divorce is the sole cause of negative outcomes. A range of factors impact on a child at any time during their childhood and contribute to more adverse or positive outcomes for their immediate and longer term wellbeing.

There is further consideration of the differences found between children in continuously married families and those in separated families, whether they only arise after the latter group of children experience the transition of parental separation, or whether they are present in some degree before separation (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Kelly, 2003; Mackay, 2005; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). The complexity in which parental separation and divorce contributes to poorer outcomes for children in a range of domains is explored in the following sections of this chapter through consideration of economic disadvantage; impact on education; the nature of parental relationships; parental conflict and family violence; and the quality of post-separation parenting.

## **Economic disadvantage**

It has been consistently found that the economic circumstances of families decline after divorce, especially among mother-headed families (Del Boca, 2003; Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Moxnes, 2003; Teachman & Paasch, 1994). The social impact of financial changes and economic stress are risk factors for children, with research highlighting the impact of economic decline on children's wellbeing after parental separation on a range of factors including education (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Booth & Amato, 2001; Hu, 2018). The decrease in the income and standards of living of women, and single-parent families, has been found to create significant economic disadvantage (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, as cited in O'Hanlon et al., 2007; Fehlberg & Millward, 2013; Moxnes, 2003). The consequences of reduced economic circumstances increase the stress for many children, through changes in residence, schools, friends and child care arrangements and reduced access to social activity and educational opportunities (Fehlberg & Millward, 2013; Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Kelly, 2003; Moxnes, 2003). Research has found that the economic consequences of marital disruption persist for at least the first two or three years following parental separation and divorce; and, without remarriage, there is no clear trend towards improvement in economic wellbeing for these first few years following parental separation (Dew, Britt, & Huston, 2012; Moxnes, 2003; Teachman & Paasch, 1994).

It has been found that low income and financial stress is a potential cause of family disruption, as well as a consequence of parental separation (Britt & Huston, 2012; Dew, 2009, 2011). It is possible that part of the *income effect* resulting in post-separated families experiencing poor financial outcomes (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) is due to pre-divorce differences in income and financial stress rather than post-divorce differences (Britt & Huston, 2012; Dew, 2009, 2011). Compared to children in continuously married families,

children who lived in families that experienced marital disruption were economically disadvantaged before the parental separation (Britt & Huston, 2012; Dew, 2009, 2011; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Teachman & Paasch, 1994). As discussed, financial disadvantage can affect a range of domains for children. The difference in income has been found to account for as much as half of the difference in school achievement and early childbearing of children in single-parent and two-parent families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

### **Educational disadvantage**

Studies have consistently identified an association between children whose parents have separated and lowered school achievement. Children from single-parent families and divorced families were twice as likely to leave school early, compared to children who lived with both parents (Amato, 2010; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). The disadvantage may be linked to a range of effects of parental separation, including fewer economic resources, less parental attention and psychological challenges associated with adjusting to parental separation, conflict between parents and new family arrangements (Amato, 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991; Astone & McLanahan 1991; Carlson, 2006).

Studies in non-Western countries are also demonstrating the complexity between parental separation and education outcomes. A recent study in China explored parent migration as a risk factor for divorce. The study concluded that a mother's migration increased the likelihood of adolescents leaving school early and also increased the likelihood of an adolescent going to a vocational high school rather than an academic high school (Hu, 2018). Reflecting early findings from Western countries, Hu's (2018) study found that this outcome may result from children's estrangement from their mother or father, and the resulting psychological distress, weakening their interest and connection to school. The study



also found that marital dissolution potentially puts economic stress on the family, increasing the risk of children not being able to access education. Parental remarriage may lead to an increase in siblings, impacting on family financial resources and, in the context of China, educational outcomes may differ according to gender, with “daughters receiving less educational investment than sons do in divorced families” (Hu, 2018, p. 3349). An examination of children’s academic engagement and performance demonstrates that there is not a simple cause and effect relationship between divorce or parental separation and educational attainment; however, it can be a significant contributor to a range of impacts that makes engagement with school and education more difficult for children.

### **The nature of parental relationships**

The relationship between the parents has been found to be a contributing factor to children’s adjustment to parental separation (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Booth & Amato, 2001; Sun, 2001). Issues between parents may have been present prior to the separation and may have been a contributing factor to the separation as well as the nature of the relationship post-separation. Data from two waves of longitudinal studies of high school students in the United States identified the parental characteristics that were risk factors for divorce as personal, sexual, psychological or financial problems throughout a marriage (Sun, 2001), with these problems continuing to affect children negatively post-parental separation. The degree of parental conflict, both prior to and post-separation has also been demonstrated to be a predictor of poorer post-divorce adjustment for children (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Booth & Amato, 2001; Sun 2001). Further, parental issues that contributed to childhood adversity, accounting for differences between people from divorced and non-divorced families, included: parental adjustment and quality of the parenting (Amato, 2010; Sun, 2001); residential arrangements and parental re-marriage (Kelly & Emery, 2003); parental alcohol and drug use; and mother’s depression (Rodgers, Gray, Davidson, & Butterworth, 2011).

The degree of parental conflict and family violence and parental adjustment to the separation which may impact on the quality of parenting are considered contributors to the way in which children adjust to parental separation.

#### Degree of parental conflict and family violence

Many families experience conflict both before and after separation. For some families, a prolonged period of conflict finishes when parents separate; in other cases, the separation itself can provoke conflict. Booth & Amato (2001) find that children tend to benefit from the divorce of parents in high-conflict marriages, because it removes them from an “averse, stressful home environment” (p. 210). The research has demonstrated, however, that children appear to suffer from the divorce of parents in low-conflict marriages (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Booth & Amato, 2001; Mackay, 2005). A divorce that is not preceded by a prolonged period of conflict may represent an event that is unexpected and unwelcomed. Children may feel that they have little control over it and, consequently, find the experience stressful (Amato, 2010; Booth & Amato, 2001). Longitudinal studies have provided evidence that, the more conflict there is post-separation and the more this involves the children, the more damaging it is to children’s wellbeing (Mackay, 2005; McIntosh & Long, 2005; Rodgers et al., 2011).

Conflicts take different forms, and some types of conflict are especially problematic for children. Hetherington (2003) found that parental conflict that is about the child or directly involves the child, conflict that is physically violent, threatening or abusive, and conflict in which the child feels caught in the middle have adverse consequences for children. A recent qualitative Australian study with 16–27 year old females concluded that it was not necessarily the conflict itself, but the way in which the conflict is handled, that affects the child; the quality of parental responsiveness and cooperative communication lays the foundations for positive or negative outcomes for a child (Francia & Millea, 2015). For some families,

parental separation can increase the intensity and risk of family violence impacting directly on children. Post-separation, ex-partners may begin a pattern of threatening children, as an extension of their previous family violence, in a way that continues the control and intimidation of the mother (Campo, Kaspiw, Moore, & Tayton, 2014). The very nature of parental conflict and violence post-separation is recognised to have a profound impact on children. Conflict and family violence may be contributing factors to a child's deterioration in wellbeing post-separation, rather than the parental separation itself, and the impact may continue into adulthood (Rodgers et al., 2011).

#### Parental adjustment and quality of the parenting

Although divorce marks the legal end of the marital relationship, the parenting relationship continues to be a crucial factor in the child's adjustment to family transitions (Markham, Hartenstein, Mitchell, & Aljayyousi-Khalil, 2015). Maintaining positive relationships with both parents has been shown to be an important factor in children's successful adjustment to family transitions. It has been found that children are more likely to maintain a relationship with both parents if there is an absence of ongoing conflict, parenting is shared, respectful communication occurs between parents, and material resources are evenly distributed (Francia & Millear, 2015). Comparing a range of post-separation parenting arrangements, Amato et al. (2011) found that children in a cooperative, co-parenting arrangement had the least number of behaviour problems (as reported by parents).

The quality of parenting prior to divorce has been shown to have a significant impact on post-divorce parenting. In a study involving 15 parents, it was found that parents held concerns about the other parent's ability to parent independently based on the history of parenting when together (Jevne & Andenaes, 2015). A longitudinal study of adolescents measured a range of wellbeing and social factors prior to and post-separation. The study found that, in those families where parental separation occurred, they were marked by less

intimate parent–parent and parent–child relationships and generally less involvement of parents in the children’s other life domains such as education, prior to the separation (Sun, 2001). The children in these families showed lower levels of wellbeing in multiple areas prior to the separation, and this continued into their post-separation lives (Sun, 2001).

Kelly (2003) described certain co-parenting relationships following divorce as being protective, including a cooperative co-parental relationship characterised by joint planning for the children, frequent communication and coordination of activities and schedules. Co-parenting compels both parents to be actively involved in their child’s life, to support contact with the other parent and to cooperate in the child’s best interests (Jevne & Andenaes, 2015; Ottosen, 2006). Jevne and Andenaes (2015) assert that, if this pattern of parenting has been present prior to separation, it is more likely to be present post-separation. It has been found that competent custodial parents and parenting, including low-conflict and cooperative approaches to parenting, are protective factors for enhancing children’s resiliency (Kelly, 2003). Where children maintain close ties with both parents within the context of cooperative relationships between parents, their wellbeing is supported (Amato et al., 2011). This is being proposed as a model to aspire to in the context of parental separation and divorce.

Consideration of the way in which families function, rather than the way in which they are structured post-separation, is considered a key to understanding the long-term wellbeing of children (Boney, 2003; Hayes, 2008; Lee & McLanahan, 2015). This shift in focus, regarding the impact of divorce and parental separation, from family structure to family functioning reflects a shift from a modernist research focus on deficits to examining the adaptive aspects of individuals (Boney, 2003). Rather than accepting a view that non-traditional family structures create deficits or negative consequences for children and families, research is exploring the “legitimacy and viability of multiple contexts for successful parenting” (Boney, 2003, p. 9). The way in which a family provides models of social and

behavioural adjustment may be a significant contributor to a child's ability to adjust to the changes in family structure and relationships, and it has been found that family structure instability can undermine processes of effective socialisation by parents (Lee & McLanahan, 2015).

The research about children consistently demonstrated that children's response to parental separation and divorce varies, with some children adjusting quickly and others showing long term problems (Amato et al., 2011). It has been found that the ongoing nature of change and stress experienced when parents separate and divorce may have a cumulative effect that can increase the negative long-term outcomes for children (Amato et al., 2011). The research indicated that the majority of children from divorced families are emotionally well adjusted (Kelly, 2007; O'Hanlon et al., 2007). Noting the diversity in outcomes for children, research focused more on the factors that produce variability in children's adjustment following divorce (Amato, 2010) and less on the differences between divorced and continuously married parents. This perspective has seen greater exploration in the research on accounting for these differences in variability, but also exploration of the factors that are protective and promote resilience and more positive adjustments (Boney, 2003; Jevne & Andenaes, 2015; Kelly, 2003).

A focus in the research literature on measurable wellbeing indicators from different informants in a child's life and on the retrospective accounts by adults of their experiences as children does not necessarily provide an understanding of the process and personal meanings that children attribute to their experience of parental separation and divorce (Jessop, 1994). Research that is undertaken with children provides a different understanding of the way in which children and young people respond and adjust to changing family circumstances. It provides an account, from their perspective, of the impacts of parental separation on their emotional and psychological wellbeing as a child. It is an opportunity to enrich the research

done about children in deepening the adult understanding of how children make sense of these changes. Potentially, through understanding how children experience parental separation, the sorts of relationships, processes and systems that enable them to adjust positively will become more apparent.

## **Research with children**

Seeking views and perspectives directly from children has become a legitimate and important way to conduct research. While this approach existed concurrently with the research explored in the preceding section, it has been strengthened through a shift in social perspectives on the rights of the child and the research paradigm of Childhood Studies (referred to in Chapter One and further explored in Chapter Four). The paucity of research with children relates partly to the way in which children and families are constructed in the broader social context, where the discourse around the family as a private domain has impacted on the facilitation and hearing of children's views and experiences within their families. Smart (2006) notes that young children are not expected to have coherent, linear stories to tell about their family history and relationships, suggesting that one reason for this is that "we do not encourage children to speak about the quality or shape of family relationships in 'public' because the family is still a private matter" (p. 156). There is recognition and evidence that children engage with, and contribute to, change within families in ways that may not be captured or understood through a primarily quantitative research approach that is retrospective or focused on adult assessments of children's wellbeing (Smart, 2006).

A landmark study was started in the United States in the early 1970s following the introduction of *no fault divorce* legislation. Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) undertook a longitudinal study following a group of 130 children (aged 3 to 18 at the time of the divorce) over 25 years to ascertain the long-term impacts of divorce on children. While there are some noted methodological concerns related to this study (Amato, 2003), the study is one of the

first to explore directly with children their experiences of parental separation and divorce. The study concluded that divorce can be a cumulative experience for children, with the impacts being felt throughout their childhood and into adulthood (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998), foreshadowing the need for policy to be responsive to children across their life span. Conclusions drawn from this study foreshadowed findings in more current research with children, in that the young people in this study felt that they were not protected by the legal system, which silenced them and expected them to follow visiting and custody arrangements (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998).

A shift in research approach on parental separation and divorce more generally focuses on changes in relationships between family members, rather than focusing on measurable individual outcomes (Boney, 2003). Valuing of the lived experience of children in their worlds opens opportunities to understand the way in which children make sense of these changes, how they respond, and the impact it has on their lives as children. The growth of life course perspectives on family change and an ecological approach enable an understanding of divorce, not as a discrete event, but as a process through which relationships change over time (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Haugen, 2010). This approach reflects the Childhood Studies perspective, which emphasises children's agency in negotiating their childhoods (Christensen, James, & Jenks, 2000; Smart et al., 2001). Together, these theoretical orientations point to the diversity and particularity of children's experiences of post-separation family life.

As parental separation and divorce became a way in which families are formed and re-formed, people have been negotiating ways of managing these transitions according to different sets of principles, making decisions about how to "reconstruct family living" (Smart, 2004, p. 407). Studies with children demonstrate that parental separation and divorce is a process that differs in meaning and effects for children (Sviggum, 2000) and that there is a range of factors that impacting on children in terms of the effects parental separation and

divorce have on them (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Children respond to, and make sense of, these changes and are not passive recipients of new families. Hearing directly from children enables us to consider how they make sense of family change and how they experience and respond to the impacts on all aspects of their lives. It brings their experience into the public discourse. Listening to children's accounts potentially enables a more child focused and appropriate response to children who experience these family changes, both at the level of intimate personal relationships within family systems and at a government policy and service level.

The majority of studies with children are qualitative in nature and generally reflect contemporary ideologies of children's rights, participation and the principles underpinning Childhood Studies. The research has generally focused on specific aspects of parental separation, including: contact with non-residential parents (Bagshaw, 2007; Campbell, 2008a; Campo, Fehlberg, Millward, & Carson, 2012; Goldson, 2006; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006; Maes et al., 2012; Taylor, 2013; Trinder, Beek, & Connolly, 2002); decision making within families and in more structured mediation and court processes that are making determinations in relation to parenting agreements (Butler et al., 2002; Campo et al., 2012; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006; Maes et al., 2012; Parkinson, Cashmore, & Single, 2005; Taylor, 2013); relationships with family and with peers (Maes et al., 2012; O'Hanlon et al., 2007); and means of support (Neale, Flowerdew, & Smart, 2005). Quantitative studies have also been undertaken with children, through surveys, often in relation to measures of various aspects of mental and emotional wellbeing, which provides a counterpoint to these measures from other informants (Turunen, Fransson, & Bergstrom, 2017; Baxter et al., 2011). There are few studies that have explored more broadly with children their experiences of parental separation and divorce. This current PhD study responds to this gap of exploratory research with children. Through semi-structured interviews, children were supported to decide what they wanted to speak about in relation to their experiences of parental separation and divorce.



Studies with children have found two consistent themes which children identified as contributing to more positive adjustment to parental separation and divorce. Children have indicated that it is the importance of relationships, rather than family structure itself (Cashmore, 2011; Demo & Acock, 1996; Moxnes, 2003; Smart, 2003; Taylor, 2013), that impacts on their wellbeing. Further, children have stated their need to understand what is occurring for their families and to have a sense of efficacy in the decision making processes (Bagshaw, 2007; Campbell, 2008; Moxnes, 2003; Taylor 2013).

In the context of the themes detailed above, the following areas have been explored in the research with children and have provided insight into the way children experience these changes in their families:

- children's experiences of communication and being heard
  - finding out about the separation
  - family decision making
  - involvement in court/formal processes
- contact with non-resident parent and shared care arrangements
- importance of relationships with parents
- the supports and strategies that children utilised.

These findings are discussed below.

### **Communication and being heard**

The nuances in children's experiences of communication, being heard, being listened to and having a sense of efficacy in their lives is intertwined and impacts on their sense of wellbeing. Research with children internationally and in Australia identified feelings of loss, sadness, insecurity and fear during the process of parental separation and divorce - often linked to their experiences of not feeling that they are being taken into account or provided with information and support in relation to what is happening to their families (Bagshaw,

2007; Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Butler et al., 2002). The feelings of loss and sadness that children described when parents separate were further associated with children not feeling they have had any information regarding what is happening or is going to happen to their family (Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, & Murch, 2003; Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011; Smart, 2003; Sviggum, 2000). An Australian study which interviewed 13 children aged 4 to 13 found that these children were more likely to “suffer from anxiety and depression, to exhibit distress, and to blame themselves for their parents’ separation” (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011, p. 489) when they felt that they had no information about what was happening to their families.

#### Finding out about the separation

The communication around the parental separation is experienced differently for children. They reflected on the way in which information was provided and whether they had access to adults who could help them process what was occurring, as having an impact on their wellbeing. The literature acknowledges the need for children to be informed by their parents about what is happening during the process of parental separation and divorce, but the reality for many children is that this does not happen as was noted in a study by Sviggum (2000). Sviggum spoke with 15 children aged 4 to 13. A scoping review of qualitative research with children (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012) found that children consistently highlighted the fact that they felt inadequately informed about their parents’ separation and the potential implications for their lives. In another study children described not remembering their parents telling them about the decision to separate (Hans & Fine, 2001). Children have revealed that, when parents did attempt to speak with them and explain decisions or changes, the children were not able to understand what they were told at the time, and the relevance for them was not always clear (Hogan, Halpenny, & Green, 2002; Maes et al., 2012; Smith & Gollop, 2001; Sviggum, 2000).

Some studies with children have identified the fact that it was important for children to understand the actual divorce and to develop an understandable story. This occurs, in the first instance, in dialogue with their parents (Brand et al., 2017; Butler et al., 2003; Maes et al., 2012). In terms of developing an understanding of the situation, studies have found that children often needed multiple opportunities to speak about the divorce; sometimes this was through other people, such as peers, grandparents, a friend or a counsellor (Butler et al., 2003; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Hans & Fine, 2001). An analysis of interactions with seven children (aged 18 months to 12 years) and social workers in the context of court procedures in Holland recognised that conversation is more than an opportunity for children to tell about their experiences: it is “a way of structuring one’s life ... it is a way to master feelings, to take a reflective position in relation to one’s problems” (Van Nijnatten & Jongen, 2011, p. 552).

These studies demonstrated that children are actively making sense of their experiences, and that the way in which the adults in their lives respond or support children can impact on their understandings of the changes taking place in their families. Being able to develop an understanding and feel supported by adults impacts on their sense of wellbeing, providing a different lens through which to consider wellbeing issues, which were first identified in the research about children.

### Children’s involvement in decision making

The literature about research that engages with children as active research participants shifts the paradigm of traditional child development theory by positioning children as competent actors who can communicate their experiences (Smart, 2004; Smith, Taylor, & Tapp, 2003). Children included in research have demonstrated the capacity to articulate the complexity of their relationships within families and the way in which they experience being heard and included in decision making and family life (Sibley, Fitzpatrick, Sheehan, & Pollard, 2018; Smith et al., 2003). In this context, however, it is considered that children’s

communications may need to be carefully facilitated and scaffolded, taking into account different capacities and developmental stages (Balen et al., 2006; Birnbaum & Saini, 2012; Fern, 2014; Hill, 2006; McNamee & Seymour, 2012).

The existing research shows that children have expressed a need for some measure of control in their lives but also have trusted parents to make good decisions and to provide guidance. An English study involving children aged 5 to 16 (23 children in focus groups; 146 children completing questionnaires) found that children may not always agree with parental decision making, but they were receptive to obtaining parental guidance and had a preference for joint decision making (Sibley et al., 2018). This finding reflected an earlier New Zealand study with 107 children aged 7 to 18 (Smith et al., 2003). Australian and international qualitative research with children (aged 6 to 19) found that children expressed a need to be listened to and to have a chance to be more actively involved in their changing families (Bagshaw, 2007; Goldson, 2006; Roy, McKinnon, & Yates, 2013; Smith & Gollop, 2001). Children described the way in which their sense of not being heard impacted on their emotional wellbeing, particularly around decision making within their families. This is particularly pertinent in decision making contexts around living arrangements and contact. Reflecting these findings, children described negative impacts on their emotional wellbeing when they were not included in decision making in various other domains of their lives. For example, children with medical conditions reported feelings of anger or sadness when excluded from decisions, instead preferring joint decision making with their parents (Beresford & Sloper, 2003; Coyne, 2006; Kelsey, Abelson-Mitchell, & Skirton, 2007; Runeson, Martenson, & Enskar 2007; Sartain, Clarke, & Heyman, 2000).

Current research demonstrates that children need to be supported in developing their views and provided a respectful space to express these views (Smith & Gollop, 2001; Smith et al., 2003). Children have reflected that, while they wanted to be involved, they did not

necessarily want to be responsible for decisions. They could be better helped to formulate and express their views and for these views, and these views should be taken into account (Bagshaw, 2007; Campbell 2013; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006; Kelly, 2007; Parkinson et al., 2005; Smart et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2003; Taylor, 2013).

Research with children demonstrates that children are involved in the process of their parents' separation and divorce, experiencing it both as an event and as ongoing transition with changes for some children in their family lives continuing throughout years after the event of the parental separation. In an English/Welsh study which interviewed 104 children aged 7 to 15, children described feeling that their experience is often not understood, valued or respected (Butler et al., 2002) and that they felt excluded from decision making in relation to their families post-separation. In another study, children described feeling that the adults showed little regard to the impact of decisions on their lives by not providing them with opportunities to express their views (Hans & Fine, 2001). A focus group with 22 children aged 11 to 14 found that children who feel that they are valued and that their needs and views are taken into account more readily view the arrangements that parents have worked out as being good for them (Maes et al., 2012). Being content with family arrangements was not related to the kind of arrangement or to having an active influence over the decision; it was about a feeling of being "taken into account" (Maes et al., 2012, p. 274).

In studies related to children's involvement in decision making about their lives post-separation children expressed consistent themes about the benefits of being involved. In an Australian study involving 47 children aged 6 to 18 children expressed the need to be acknowledged and a belief that their involvement in decision making would ensure more informed decisions and better outcomes (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008). Children also expressed the view that they had a right to "determine the arrangements that would affect them most" (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008, p. 95). In this study and a range of other studies,

both in Australia and internationally, children demonstrated sophisticated understandings of decision making, both the benefits and also the risks in the context of family post-parental separation. They specifically identified the feeling that being asked to make a decision around their preferences in living arrangements and contact could create feelings of anxiety and unease, in that they would feel caught in the middle and were concerned that they would disappoint one of their parents. They sometimes felt pressure exerted on them by one of their parents for a particular outcome (Hans & Fine, 2001; Maes et al., 2012). A study in New Zealand, involving interviews with 107 children aged 7 to 18, emphasised that it is the way in which children are supported and involved in post-separation family life that can impact on their emotional wellbeing and feelings of distress (Smith et al., 2003). Children in a range of studies stressed the importance of being consulted around concrete decisions, such as choice of residence and contact arrangement and decisions about living arrangements; but also, more generally, around feeling that they have been able to have a say about things that are important to them (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2008; Maes et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2003).

#### Experience of the court process

In studies where researchers have spoken with children, it has been found that their involvement in court decision making processes varies and their experiences are often mixed (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011; Taylor, 2013). An Australian study with 13 children aged 4 to 13 found that the children did not feel that they had a say in whether to be involved in court processes, both mediation as well as family law proceedings. These children stated that having a say about whether they participated or not was important (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011). An Australian survey of 55 children aged 7 to 16 who were provided with an Independent Children's Lawyer (ICL)<sup>1</sup> during court proceedings reported that, while they

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<sup>1</sup> The Family Court of Australia can appoint an independent children's lawyer (ICL) under s68L of the Family Law Act 1975 to represent and promote the best interests of a child in family law proceedings. ICL's are obliged

generally appreciated expressing their views about the separation and contact arrangements and being listened to, some children were left wondering why they didn't get the outcome they had wanted (Anderson et al., 2016). This reflected findings in an earlier study with ten children, provided with an ICL, who reported that they were unable to see how their views informed decision making processes and that they did not feel protected in the family law proceedings (Carson, Kaspiew, Moore, De Maio, & Horsfall, 2014). Children expressed concern about speaking with a lawyer with their siblings present. There were worries around the limits of confidentiality not being explained adequately for some children. Some did not feel the lawyer checked with them what they were going to present court, and they were worried that what they said would be told to their families (Anderson et al., 2016).

The revisions to the Australian *FLA 1975* in 2006 outlined in Chapter Two, which removed the requirements to ascertain children's wishes, replacing this term with the concept of views, reflected the shift towards recognising the importance of and imperative to, ascertain the views of children in matters that affect them (Campbell, 2013). A similar shift occurred in New Zealand, requiring a court to take into account the child's expressed views, regardless of the age of the child (Taylor, 2013). In a range of studies, children communicated the importance of their involvement in Family Court Hearings. Children have expressed the view that being involved in Family Court Hearings provided them with the opportunity to identify the people they loved and cared about and wanted to maintain a relationship with and to identify the adults they considered harmful, and to have this taken into consideration. They felt that the process acknowledged them as experts on these issues in their lives (Carson et al., 2014; Carson et al., 2018; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006; Roy et al., 2013). However, a number of studies with children found that children's expectations around the outcomes of their

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to consider the views of the child, but ultimately provide their own, independent perspective about what arrangements or decisions are in the child's best interests (Family Court of Australia, 2016).

participation in these processes were not being effectively managed (Anderson et al., 2016; Campbell, 2013; Carson et al., 2014; Carson et al., 2018). This was particularly highlighted in the context of a poor-contact and high-conflict landscape of family law decision making in Australia. An Australian pilot study with eight children concluded that children's participation rights and the benefits of such participation are often overlooked (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2011). Similar results have been found internationally (Taylor, 2017; Van Nijnatten & Jongen, 2011). A focus group of eight children aged 18 months to 12 years revealed that, while the right of children to receive and provide information about important decisions concerning their family is provided for, in that judicial and administrative proceedings provide opportunities for children to express their views, this rarely happens in practice. This opportunity is not necessarily reflected in out-of-court resolution processes, such as mediation (Van Nijnatten & Jongen, 2011). It is evident that the involvement of children in family law processes, (family mediation/dispute resolution and formal family law proceedings), provides an opportunity for children to express their views and potentially demonstrate some agency in decision making processes. Their experiences are mixed, and the processes do not necessarily provide children with a sense of having genuine input into decisions that affect them.

### **Contact with non-resident parent and shared care arrangements**

#### Contact non-resident parent

National and international studies have found that contact is mostly determined by parents, with children expressing the view that maintaining contact was mainly the responsibility of their non-residential parent. A small number of children described how they also played a role in negotiating the relationship over time (Hogan et al., 2002). In a New Zealand study which interviewed 107 children aged 7 to 18, the importance of relationships and the value of quality time were stated as positive aspects of contact with a non-resident parent (Smith et al., 2003). Particular challenges arose when there were inconsistencies



between different homes and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships with step-parents (Smith et al., 2003).

A Norwegian study that conducted in-depth interviews with 15 children aged 4 to 13, found that children consistently thought that parents needed to remain good friends when there was a non-resident parent with whom they had contact. The children stated that family arrangements were enhanced if children saw their parents together and participating in common activities more frequently (Sviggum, 2000). Children (aged 11 to 14) involved in a focus group reported positive contact with a non-resident parent when parents lived in nearby locations and were able to take into account practical issues and show some flexibility about the child's arrangement (Maes et al., 2012). Contact with a non-resident parent can be disrupted by the need of a parent to move locations, interstate or overseas. This can have mixed impacts on children and their relationship with a non-resident parent; however, a recent study found that, while there was some variation for children in how they experienced this relationship after relocation, for the most part this did not change the relationship with the non-resident parent in a detrimental way (Taylor, 2013).

### Shared care arrangements

As described in Chapter Two, a presumption to shared parenting underpins some of the changes to family law brought in by the Australian 2006 *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006*. When the rebuttable presumption of shared parental responsibility is upheld, the court is required to consider shared care arrangements, which have been an increasing post-separation arrangement for children in Australia and in the Western world.

In Sweden, where joint physical custody (shared care) is at 30% of post-separation arrangements, an extensive survey of children and young people measured elements of self-esteem, life satisfaction and wellbeing across different family types. The survey was

completed by 164,580 children in two groups, one group of children with a mean age of 12 and a second group of children with a mean age of 15. It was found that life satisfaction was lower among children in all types of non-traditional families, but, within these family types, higher life satisfaction was found among children in joint physical custody (Bergstrom et al., 2013). Differences in life satisfaction were found for different age cohorts, with 12 year olds being less satisfied than 15 year olds (Bergstrom et al., 2013), emphasising the individual nature of a child's experience and the intersection of developmental age and other factors that may contribute potentially contribute to their experience.

Factors that were found to contribute to higher life satisfaction in joint physical custody families in this study and subsequent studies (both Swedish and Australian) include the socioeconomic status of families and the way in which the care arrangements were agreed. In the Bergstrom et al. (2013) study, families were generally from more socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds, which might relate to higher reported satisfaction from the children and young people. A further contributing factor to reported higher life satisfaction may be related to care arrangements that had been freely chosen by both parents (Bergstrom et al., 2013). Other studies have demonstrated that, where care arrangements have been freely chosen by both parents, this may indicate better communication patterns and lower conflict between these parents than in arrangements that are court ordered, contributing to a child's measure of wellbeing (Bergstrom et al., 2013; Francia & Millear, 2015; Laftman, Bergstrom, Modin, & Ostberg, 2014). A further Swedish survey of 10 to 18 year olds (5,000 participants) concluded that living conditions, measured in social relationships, material and economic wellbeing and health and health behaviour, in joint physical custody were the same or better than in families with two continuously married parents (Fransson, Laftman, Ostberg, Hjern, & Bergstrom, 2018).

Qualitative studies with children provide an opportunity to explore the way in which they experience shared care, drawing attention to the complexity and non-static nature of these arrangements. Increasingly, studies with children suggest that the link between shared care and a child's wellbeing is not unambiguous and is impacted on by a range of factors. Narrative research, conducted in Sweden, with nine young people (aged 12–33 at time of the research, but aged 3–19 when in dual residency arrangements), highlighted that for some children, shared care arrangements may be marked by change owing to parents relocating, or if there is unresolved conflict between parents requiring renegotiation of arrangements over time (Forsberg et al., 2016). A number of children in this study described shared care arrangements as disruptive, traumatic and difficult to negotiate (Forsberg et al., 2016). The varied nature of shared care experience for children and the instability of these arrangements were also described by a group of children aged 10 to 18 who were interviewed and described their experiences of stress related to the shared care arrangements (Turunen, 2017).

Where children reported positive adjustment to their changed families, they talked about their family in the singular rather than conceptualising two separate homes and lives (Davies, 2013; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Trinder, 2009). An Australian study involving in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with 16 children aged 8 to 12 in shared care arrangements found that children described a sense of dislocation as family when they were not able to access or feel supported by a particular parent when they needed to have this support (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). Across a range of studies, this experience has been found to lead to feelings of not being secure in their family and to impact on a sense of belonging or of being a cohesive family (Forsberg et al., 2016; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). It was found that, if a child's need for reassuring contact with either parent remains unfulfilled, they described heightened arousal and disconnection from both parents, feeling vulnerable - which for some children merged into acute distress and trauma (Forsberg et al., 2016; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). These findings highlight the fact that the potentially

negative effect of parental separation and divorce is more complex than the event itself; for some children, the experience of their changing families, and a feeling of insecurity within co-parenting availability and responsiveness fundamentally change their sense of ontological security (Root, 2010; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). It is through relationship (with parents and others) that individual identity is formed and sustained over time, contributing to an individual's ontological security (Mitzen, 2006). These studies demonstrate that, from a child's perspective and experience, spending equal time with each parent does not necessarily resolve the child's longing for a preferred parent in a moment of need; nor does it create a sense of being a single family.

Findings from a range of studies with children suggest a set of parenting attributes which, from the children's perspective, are core to creating security and contentment in shared time parenting arrangements. This included children being most satisfied with shared care arrangements where parents lived in close proximity and parented cooperatively, without ongoing conflict (Campo et al., 2012; Davies, 2013; Fehlberg & Millward, 2013; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Trinder, 2009). Significantly, children's descriptions of positive shared care arrangements reflected patterns of care and connection found in healthy two-parent married families. This included children describing a good relationship with both parents, parents who have a close relationship with their children and are both involved in caring and leisure activities, and parents who have cooperative shared parenting arrangements in that they support their children's relationship with the other parent, including their emotional and physical movement between parents (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Trinder, 2009).

A common way for children to describe the way in which they accommodated shared care arrangements is out of concern and consideration of their parents. In a number of studies, children described shared care arrangements as being a fair approach and consistent with loving their parents equally (Campo et al., 2012; Cashmore et al., 2010; Haugen, 2010; Neale

et al., 2005; Neale & Flowerdew, 2007; Parkinson et al., 2005). Interviews with 60 children aged 11 to 17 in the United Kingdom found that some children considered putting aside their own needs or enduring arrangements that are inflexible and challenging to ensure fairness between parents, findings reflected in more recent studies with children (Neale & Flowerdew, 2007).

Children have identified, in a range of studies, difficulty in shared care arrangements due to conflict between parents and/or distance between parents' homes (Bauserman, 2002; Campo et al., 2012; Forsberg et al., 2016); inconsistencies in rules; moving between two houses; not having one's personal items; and difficulty keeping in contact with friends (Bauserman, 2002; Hans & Fine, 2001). The self-reporting of children on their wellbeing in more recent studies suggests that the drawbacks of shared care may be of lesser importance for self-esteem and wellbeing in young persons than close contact with both parents on an everyday basis (Trinder, 2009; Turunen et al., 2017).

### **Importance of relationships with parents**

As noted in the discussion above, children in a range of studies (where children were aged from 7 to 18) identified post-separation relationships between family members as critical to their sense of wellbeing and ability to make sense of the changes taking place in their worlds. It is the nature of the way families re-form and function post-separation and the nature of the relationships between children and parents that children consistently identified as having the biggest impact on their lives (Amato, 2010; Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Jackson & Fife, 2018; Maes et al., 2012; Moxnes, 2003). The way in which children respond to family transitions is a relatively unexplored area, with much of the research to date concerned with seeing parents as active agents and children as passive recipients of their parents' decision to divorce (Maes et al., 2012; Root, 2010). Research with children is finding that this relationship is bidirectional, the co-occurrence of both directions of influence, from parent to

child and from child to parent, in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003; Maes et al., 2012).

Smart (2004) and others, speaking directly with children, found that parental separation does not necessarily result in the loss of a parent but can fundamentally change the relationship with the parent, with children actively working to sustain relationships with both parents. Smart's research was groundbreaking, positioning children as active participants in their parents' separation and their families' restructuring. Smart (2004), through her direct research with children, demonstrated the validity of a Childhood Studies approach to research, finding that children and their experiences are not separate from the adult world, but are experienced in interaction with the adult world. This reflected a Childhood Studies approach to research and findings in other research, in that children's lives cannot be understood as separate from the lives of other family members or in isolation from an adult world (Christensen & James, 2008; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Moore, Noble-Carr, & McArthur, 2016; Wyness, 2012a). Researchers started to pay more attention to and take seriously what children said or did in social settings and contexts (Wyness, 2012a). This approach has brought a deeper understanding of how children learn to navigate through new sets of complex relationships, conflicting loyalties and changing alliances when parents separate and also when they re-partner, signifying the dynamic nature of family arrangements post-separation (Smart, 2004).

As outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis, divorce reform in Australia has emphasised the importance for children of maintaining contact with their non-resident parent. Studies with children support this approach, with some studies demonstrating that children described their mother and father as integral to their family and expressed the desire for both parents to participate in various activities together as a family (Maes et al., 2012; Sviggum, 2000). A range of studies have found that, from a child's perspective, having a good relationship with

both parents contributed to children feeling that they matter to their parents and that arrangements are made that are good for them and their sense of wellbeing (Campo et al., 2012; Maes et al., 2012; Trinder, 2009). Fundamentally, positive relationships with both parents enabled a child to continue to feel secure and safe in their world. Children described managing multiple transitions post-separation more positively owing to good quality family relationships and wider community relationships in which these are embedded (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Jackson & Fife, 2018). Children conceptualised family relationships as more significant for them than the structure of their family (Neale, 2001). Children reported that they value affection, emotional support and parents taking an active involvement in their lives in meaningful ways (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Smith et al., 2003). The importance of the relationship between parents in creating a sense of safety and security for children in shared care arrangements has been consistently expressed by children (Hans & Fine, 2001; Root, 2010; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016).

The relationship between parents has also emerged as a significant factor from children's perspective in their wellbeing post-parental separation. Children's wellbeing, as described by the children, suggests that, regardless of family type, children whose parents had a hostile inter-parental relationship tended to have poorer emotional wellbeing than children whose parents did not have a hostile relationship (as reported by the children and parents) (Baxter et al., 2011). McIntosh (2003) stated that the "intensity of parent conflict, the style of conflict, its manner of resolution, and presence of buffers to ameliorate impacts of high conflict are the most important indicators of child adjustment" (p. 70). These studies demonstrated that the child's experience of their relationship with their parent, and the way in which their parents continue to parent cooperatively, are central to the way in which a child will adjust to the changing family post-separation. Where harmonious or non-conflictual relations existed between parents themselves, children felt that they had more resources to

cope with change (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Smith and Gollop, 2001).

### **Support and strategies children utilise**

Research with children demonstrates that children are competent social actors who reflect and devise their own ideas and strategies for coping with family life after their parents separate (Butler et al., 2002; Hogan, Halpenny, & Green, 2003; Smart & Neale, 2000; Smith et al., 2003; Sviggum, 2000). Previous studies have shown how children utilised a range of informal supports, such as parents, grandparents and friends, when parents separate and divorce (Bagshaw, 2007; Smith & Gollop, 2001). Some children found limited support in the school environment, with support from teachers variable and counsellors generally supportive (Bagshaw, 2007; Butler et al., 2002), and other children accessed formal supports such as counselling (Bagshaw, 2007; Smith & Gollop, 2001; Taylor, 2001).

A review of 44 qualitative studies with children (involving 1,525 children) found that professional support was often inadequate during parental separation and divorce (Birnbaum & Saini, 2013). Some children reported that school and extra-curricular activities were positive experiences. Many preferred to talk to their friends rather than family or counsellors (Birnbaum & Saini, 2013; Neale & Smart, 1998). Children were aware that parents may not understand the impact a separation can have on their wellbeing, and this may impeded the parents' ability to help and support children (Smith & Gollop, 2001).

Studies have consistently indicated that children who participated in post-divorce programs, such as group programs or individual counselling, compared to those who didn't, displayed fewer maladaptive attitudes and beliefs about divorce, better classroom behaviour, less anxiety and depression, and improved self-concept (Amato, 1994; Newell & Moss, 2011). Some studies found that children are likely to benefit from the implementation of



policies that support and facilitate post-divorce mediation and psychoeducation for parents, alongside the provision of counselling for children (Amato, 1994; Brand et al., 2017).

## **Chapter summary**

Parental separation and divorce has become part of the social fabric of Australian society, a way which families form and re-form over time. Parents, researchers, practitioners and policymakers speak about, and respond to, concerns about the known negative impact of parental separation and divorce on families, children and the social environment. Research about children has concluded that children with divorced parents, as a group, continue to fare more poorly than children with continuously married parents. The adjustment of children following divorce depends on a variety of factors, including the level of conflict between parents before and after separation, the quality of parenting from both parents regardless of contact/living arrangements, changes in the child's standard of living and the number of additional stressors to which children are exposed, such as moving or changing schools. These effects are further mitigated or exaggerated, depending on how the parental separation or divorce plays out over the months and years following the separation. The impacts are not static or necessarily related to the event of parental separation but may be a response to ongoing transitions and changes that occur for children once their parents have separated or divorced.

Research with children contributes to adult understandings of the impact of parental separation and divorce on children. This research has provided an opportunity for adults to understand the way in which children experience these changes in their families and make sense of their families. Studies with children reflect their experience of relationship with parents post-separation as a major contributing factor to their wellbeing and ability to make sense of the changes to their worlds. Studies with children are supported by a dynamic approach to research in this area. The dynamic view of divorce conceptualises marital

dissolution as “a complex process that influences family dynamics, relationship, and household management over time” (Boney, 2003, p. 22).

It is acknowledged that, increasingly, research is being conducted directly with children. However, as previously noted, research in relation to parental separation and divorce has predominantly been done within a specific context, for example, a child’s experience of the Family Law Court or of shared parenting arrangements. In contrast, and contributing to current research with children, this study takes a general and open approach to exploring with children their experiences of parental separation and divorce. Children are encouraged to share aspects of their experiences of their choosing, providing an opportunity for adults to develop a broader understanding of the way in which children experience the changes that parental separation brings to their lives.

The following chapter provides more detail about the methodology and methods used to carry out the research in this study.

## **Chapter 4: Research Approach**

Will the benefits of the proposed research outweigh its risks to the participants?

(Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008, p. 490).

### **Introduction to the chapter**

In the first chapter of this thesis, I outlined the rationale for this study. My perspective, both personally and professionally, is that the views and experiences of children need to be explored, in order to enable adult understandings of the impact of parental separation on children and to inform policy development. Chapter Two explored the historical social changes that impacted on marriage and family and how these concepts have been constructed and changed over time. The change in social attitudes and in reality, reflected through policy and legislative change, then influenced further social change. It was noted in the discussion that policy and legislative change in relation to parental divorce and separation was made, primarily, in a context of adult perspectives. Only in recent decades has there been recognition of the need (and obligation) to speak with children about their direct experiences, as a critical element in the development of policy. Chapter 3 discussed the current literature on the effects of parental separation and divorce on children and established that, while there is considerable research with children within specific contexts (such as their experiences in Family Law Court process), there is limited research that seeks to understand the perspective and experience of children, while still in childhood and over time.

This current study responds to the gap in the research with children by adopting a phenomenological approach to answering the research question:

## **How do children experience and make sense of parental separation and divorce?**

This chapter, Chapter four, describes the research approach which supported the goal of seeking children's accounts and views of their experiences of parental separation. The conceptual framework, the guiding epistemology of constructionism and theoretical perspectives of Childhood Studies and systems theory, draws attention to the value of hearing directly from children about their experiences. It also brings to the fore an awareness of the broader context affecting children when they experience parental separation. This chapter describes the methods used for data collection and analysis, demonstrating that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an effective approach to analysing data for a small scale study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical framework for the study.

### **Epistemology**

Because the present study aims to highlight the value of children's views and experiences, as well as reflecting on these experiences and views within the broader context affecting children when they experience parental separation, an epistemological stance that recognised individual experiences was required. Constructionism provided this perspective, positing that "different people will construct knowledge in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon" (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Constructionism elicits and values individual experiences, asserting that the way in which individuals make sense of the world is valid, real and of interest to the research project (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998). This approach, in its acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of reality, also allowed for integration of the social work *person in environment* perspective (Creswell, 2009; Healy, 2005). That is, social work knowledge, our way of explaining the world, as well as social work skills and purpose "are substantially constructed in and through the environments in which we live" (Healy, 2005, p. 4).

Taking a constructionist approach assumed that individuals seek understandings of the world in which they live and work and that they develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the research to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Ife, 1997). This research explored with children their experiences of parental separation and the way in which these experiences shaped their understanding of the world in which they lived, including school and friendships. A focus on social processes and their individualised interpretation facilitated the foregrounding of “acknowledging and valuing the perceptions and lived experiences of people as valid contributions to the social work knowledge base” (Goodyer, 2013, p. 3).

While a constructivist framework is interested in the individual experiences of meaning making, an interpretative phenomenological approach provided an opportunity to critically view the data collected, and the individual experience, in a broader social and historical context. Creswell (2009) suggests that subjective meanings are in themselves negotiated socially and historically, and meaning is not simply imprinted on individuals but formed through interaction with others. A systems approach to understanding the data enhanced this exploration by providing a context in which to view children’s experiences, within a range of systems (Ford & Lerner, 1992).

This study aims to make sense of the multiple and varied understandings children have about the world and, specifically, their experiences when parents separate. Through understanding the meanings that others ascribe to their world, they develop a pattern of meaning to these experiences (Creswell, 2009). A constructivist perspective sees meaning and understanding about self and others as constructed through the processes of interaction among individuals (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). These interactions are shaped by the social contexts that children and researchers inhabit, “their prior experiences and the

way they understand the expectations of the research relationship” (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 59). Importantly, the research, while exploring children’s experiences of parental separation and divorce, will also be shaped by their experience of the research process.

## **Phenomenological approach**

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience and sits within a qualitative framework. It is characterised by “any work in research, theory or practice that emphasizes first person experience” (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, & McSpadden, 2011, p. 52). Husserl was a founding influence on the development of phenomenology (Husserl, 1927, 1999). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) described Husserl’s phenomenological approach as an examination of human experience, in that “we turn our gaze from the objects in the world and direct it inwards, towards our perceptions of those objects” (p. 12). Working from the abstract conceptualisation of Husserl, Heidegger (1962) developed phenomenology as an interpretative approach. This perspective of phenomenology conceives of human beings as being part of a world of objects, relationships and language and of their experience as temporal and in relation to these objects. Central to phenomenological inquiry is the interpretation of people’s meaning making activities (Smith et al., 2009).

In this current study, a phenomenology approach, as described and outline by Smith et al. (2009) provided a way in which to listen authentically to children. The goal was to capture the distinctive qualities in a child’s world, qualities that we may not remember as adults and that may, therefore be difficult for adults to conceptualise. Speaking directly with children provided the opportunity to clarify, describe and interpret children’s unique ways of attending to the world (Danaher & Briod, 2006). The “purpose is not to categorize and explain children’s behaviour and experience. Rather, it is to thematize (to structure the meanings) through descriptive methods, and so strengthen our sense of what it means to be a child, to live in the world as a child” (Danaher & Briod, 2006, p. 218).

Phenomenology focuses on the question of the nature, structure and essence of experience of a phenomenon for an individual or group of people (Crotty, 1998). In the current study, the phenomenon was parental separation. The study was interested in the way in which children experience this phenomenon and how they made sense of (gave meaning to) these experiences. Phenomenology focuses on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview. There is no separate (object) reality for people, only what they know their experience is and means. The subjective experience incorporates the objective thing and a person's reality (Crotty, 1998). A phenomenological approach enabled me to be aware of the way existing ideas may impact on the study's design, analysis and interpretation. While previous theories are acknowledged in the analysis of qualitative data, the final discussion, rather than being an exposition of the way in which the findings support the theory, is "a critical dialogue between the data, the emergent theoretical positions and relevant theoretical/conceptual frameworks" (Seibold, 2002, p. 3).

There is one final dimension that differentiates a phenomenological approach: the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are "bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon, for example the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother" (Patton, 1990, p. 70). In this study, IPA provided an interpretative lens; the drawing of emergent themes into superordinate themes provided an opportunity to theorise common essences to the experiences of the children involved in the research. IPA is an appropriate approach to analysis for a small sample in the research context. The issue is quality, not quantity, "and given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51).

## **Theoretical perspectives**

The theoretical framework is the foundation from which knowledge is constructed, and it served as the structure and support for the rationale of the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). As Chapter One outlined, this study takes a theoretical approach of Childhood Studies as the foundation for knowledge construction. This approach “supports the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance and the research questions” (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). The current study also drew on systems theory, reflecting the social work approach to the study: recognising that children are part of multiple systems and that these systems interact with and influence the way in which children experience and make sense of the world (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Stevens & Hassett, 2012).

Within the systems approach, the phenomenological framework of the study provided a platform for more nuanced exploration of children’s meaning making through “addressing the perceived experience and identity-based coping responses to these interlocking and complex systems” (Velez & Spencer, 2018, p. 77). A phenomenological approach to systems theory was explored and developed by Spencer (1995, 2008) and named phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST). The approach allows for the development of differences in how individuals make sense of the critical points of intersection of systems (Velez & Spencer, 2018). Spencer’s PVEST acknowledges the critical role provided by individuals’ own perceptions (Spencer, 1995, 2008). While it focuses on temporal and context-specific identify formation processes, it considers “structures, cultural influences, and individual perceptions of one’s self, significant others, life experiences, and the environments in which one lives” (Velez & Spencer, 2018, p. 79).

A Childhood Studies and systems perspective provided the opportunity for a critical approach to the study, moving beyond understanding and communication to incorporate action and change (Ife, 1999). A social work perspective that seeks to “promote social change



and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people”

(International Federation of Social Workers, 2016) further informed a critical lens to the study. The current research makes no grand claims of effecting major change, but it sought the opportunity for dialogue and reflection to take place across these systems (family, peer, friendships, court, school, service). This was achieved through the participatory nature of the research process, involving children in interview design and reflection on data analysis.

Further, an article will be developed from this research, providing an opportunity for policymakers in DSS to reflect on their current policy and program development through the lens of what children have to say about their experiences.

### **Childhood Studies**

Chapter One described the paradigm shift in the way children and childhood are understood and conceptualised which has influenced research approaches that actively engage children and young people. Childhood Studies is underpinned by a number of elements, essentially the idea that children’s “social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, and children as being active in the construction and determination of their own social lives” (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8). Childhood Studies positions children as social actors who are capable of making sense of and affecting their societies (Barker & Weller, 2003; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Corsaro, 2011; Lowe, 2012; Matthews, 2007; Wyness, 2012). It is this perspective that was of interest in this current study: hearing the way in which children experience parental separation and understanding the way in which children actively participate in this family change.

A Childhood Studies approach recognises the diverse experience of children and focuses on children’s rights, agency, voice and wellbeing (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Woodhead, 2008). Children’s voices and rights are seen to be silenced by traditional views of childhood, and this undermines the important contributions children can make to knowledge

(Bolzan & Gale, 2011; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). A Childhood Studies perspective sees children as social actors and holders of rights, rather than dependent on the private family (Mayall, 1994; Qvortrup, 1994). The belief that individuals seek to make meaning of and understand their worlds, reflects this approach to children and the study of childhood.

Children are seen as having agency, in that they are active in their worlds, not only creating meaning, but constructing the very worlds in which they live and relate (Corsaro, 2011). A Childhood Studies approach positions children with clearly articulated and demonstrated agency, often presented as a property that varies along a single dimension (Corsaro, 2011; Hammersley, 2017). The perspective of this study, drawing on a systems approach (outlined below), will enable an exploration of agency in a broader social and relationship context (Hammersley, 2017; Moore, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Wyness (2012) reflected that childhood is normally composed and constructed by adults. However, within Childhood Studies, researchers see children as co-constructors, being involved in the process of conception building (Christensen & James, 2008; Moore et al., 2016). This requires researchers to pay attention to and take seriously what children say or do in social settings (Wyness, 2012). Childhood Studies does not position children and their experiences as separate from the adult world, but in interaction with the adult world, because their lives cannot be understood as separate from the lives of other family members or in isolation from an adult world (James et al., 1998).

Childhood Studies has been criticised for focusing too much on individual agency, minimising the impact of relationships and the broader social context, and for downplaying children's vulnerabilities (Hammersley, 2017; Moore, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In the context of this study, a systems lens to analysis responded to this criticism because it enabled consideration of the impact of relationships and the broader social context on children's experiences. A systems approach reflected the ideas of relationality through a focus on, and

exploration of, the patterns of relationships between adults and children and their intersecting systems/worlds (Prout, 2011).

A Childhood Studies perspective was consistent with the qualitative approach taken in this study, in that it endeavoured to find out from the participants the nature of their experiences. It was consistent with the constructionist and phenomenological approach in assuming that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and actively construct meaning through interaction.

### **Systems theory**

Systems theory supported a constructionist approach, because it shifted attention from the cause and effect relationship to recognising the person and situation as an interrelated whole (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Stevens & Hassett, 2012). This approach enabled me to consider the impact of the various systems on a child's life and the way in which the child impacts on these systems in an interrelated way. The approach facilitated an exploration of the experiences of parental separation, shifting from the predominate discourse of negative effects on children, to a more curious approach interested in how children respond to, and effect change within, their systems. Emery (1994) suggested that divorce is best viewed from a family systems perspective which emphasises the importance of renegotiating relationship boundaries after divorce at the dyadic level between former spouses; this regulates the interaction that occurs among family members. Emery and Dillon (1994) further described dyadic relationships as being between parents, as well as between a parent and a child. Triadic relationships can also refer to the relationships between divorced or separated parents and their children (Emery & Dillon, 1994; Trinder, 2008). This approach supported an exploration with the children in this study of their broader social system (Payne, 2008), including the family system, as experienced by the children, and systems such as school, the court system and their peer and friendship systems. An individual experience cannot be explained as

simply a cause and effect paradigm; it is a result of interplay within a non-linear complex adaptive system, viewed as a constantly changing whole (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Green & McDermott, 2016; Stevens & Hassett, 2012). While it is a particular framework through which to explore data, a systems approach also provided a flexible exploration with children that was responsive to cultural diversity and different world views (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011). As noted, the phenomenological approach to the study enables the development of an understanding of the individual's own perceptions and meaning making within the context of the systems they variously interact within (Velez & Spencer, 2018).

The concept of ontological security, which asserts that individual identity is formed and sustained through relationships (Mitzen, 2006), is pertinent to a systems approach to analysis that focused on the impacts of the changes parental separation brings to children's relationships. Ontological security is the base from which individuals experience themselves as a whole, continuous person, rather than constantly changing, in order to realise a sense of agency (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 1965; Mitzen, 2006). Acknowledging that parental separation is not a static event, a systems approach enabled an exploration of the way in which the various systems a child is part of are affected by parental separation. This was consistent with a qualitative social work approach, which sees the contextual nature of social work place itself between different systems, with the conviction that societal problems cannot be understood outside the contexts in which they occurred (Green & McDermott, 2016; Healy, 2005; Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014).

In the context of this study, the interviews provided an opportunity to explore the changing context of the children's lives with a systems lens. A systems approach is congruent with an approach to research itself, which, in this study, was conducted in the context of multiple relationships (Graham, Powell & Taylor, 2015). Speaking directly with children offered an opportunity to explore the nature of their relationships across their systems,

parents, family members, the researcher, caregivers, counsellors, group facilitators and friendships.

## **Qualitative methodology**

The current research explored with children their experience of parental separation and how they make sense of, and construct meaning about, their experiences. To address the research question, a qualitative methodology was used to gain an in-depth understanding of children's experiences. The methodology is consistent with the epistemological and theoretical approach to this study. Qualitative methodology enabled the exploration of the experience of children of parental separation, understanding the way in which they construct and make meaning of these experiences and the way in which this relates to the social context of their lives. This underpinned the social research approach to the study (Sarantakos, 2005).

The present study situated children in a central position, acknowledging them as active creators of their worlds. A qualitative perspective was congruent with the aims of this present study, in that it sees human beings "create the meaning systems of events and with these they construct reality" (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 41). The current study did not seek to generalise from the findings of this study, but was interested in this particular group of children and their experiences.

A qualitative approach provided the framework for exploring the complexity of the children's lives. Complexity arises through the engagement of the different systems in which the children are involved. This approach is consistent with a social work perspective, in that social workers work with people where they interact with their different environments and often deal with complex life situations in their practice (AASW, 2010; Payne, 2008).

Qualitative research is particularly suited to social work research, in part because it allows for the "emergence of the complexity of human experience" (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008, p. 488).

Undertaking a qualitative approach to the study necessitated an understanding of how to address the assumption that all researchers bring an interpretative framework to their research, in that “qualitative research approaches fundamentally involve an interpretative process” (Grover, 2004, p. 81), reflecting the IPA approach taken in this study.

As noted, qualitative research does not endeavour to select a representative sample and in the context of this study, a small sample size (12 participants) was considered sufficient to provide a thick description of the child’s voice in parental separation. This approach is congruent with that IPA approach taken in this study, explored further in this chapter.

## **The question of ethics**

Rolfe and MacNaughton (2010) assert that ethical concerns must lie at the heart of our decision to research and the choice of research methods. The value of beneficence requires a social work approach: to use research to improve the condition of both the individual and society (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008). It was a goal of the current study to ensure that the research would be of value to the participants and the broader society. The provision of a policy and program response contributed to addressing this approach. As part of this study, I provided two seminars to DSS policy staff. The first seminar positioned the current theoretical developments around why it is important to speak directly with children in the context of both research and policy development. The second seminar outlined the methodological potential for including children in research as a way of informing policy development. I presented at the 13<sup>th</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, “Listening and learning: Children’s post-separation family life and policy development”. I provided a seminar to the FRC staff outlining the preliminary findings of this study as a way of enhancing their program development in a SCASP framework. At the conclusion of this thesis, I will write an article on the findings, which will include reflections for both policy and practice in the area of parental separation. In this way, the research has informed, and will inform, policy

development and considerations in DSS. The views and concerns of children about the effects of parental separation and divorce, from their perspective, will be distributed through the policy and program frameworks. It is the intention to provide a summary of findings directly to the child participants. This had not occurred at the completion of the thesis. Careful consideration will be given to how to proceed, noting the time elapsed between the original contact and interview with children and young people and the provision of the findings.

This study received Ethics approval from the Australian Catholic University on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2012 [2012 216N] with the final ethics report approved 10<sup>th</sup> February 2016 (see Appendix A).

The core values outlined in The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Statement) are consistent with a social work research approach and include “respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, justice and beneficence” (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], 2007, p. 11). Mertens and Ginsberg (2008) state that most fundamental ethical question is: “will the benefits of the proposed research outweigh its risks to the participants and the groups(s) they represent?” (p. 490), reflecting the principle of beneficence fundamental to social work research and practice. The National Statement further describes research involving children and young people as raising three particular ethical concerns which are discussed below.

**Firstly, their capacity to understand what the research entails, and therefore whether their consent to participate is sufficient for their participants (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55).**

The concern about a child’s capacity to understand enables adults to act in a way which may limit or impede a child’s participation in research. Procedures for obtaining authorisations for research with children, including formal ethical applications, and recruiting

children through organisations and parental authority creates complexity (Martins, Oliveira, & Tendais, 2018) and potentially limits the participation of children.

In this current study, children who participated in the research were engaged in a conversation, sometimes several conversations, with me, around the research. I gave details as to what the research involved before consent was sought from the individual child. Throughout the research process and the interviews, the children were reminded and prompted that their consent was voluntary and that they had the capacity to withdraw from the research at any stage.

**Secondly, their possible coercion by parents, peers, researchers or others to participate in research (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55).**

Parents were firstly contacted by counsellors/program facilitators to gain their consent to be provided with information related to the research. Ideally both parents have agreed for their children to attend the SCASP program but in some situations, where there was high conflict and issues of safety, only one parent may have provided consent. The research approach to parental consent was guided by the current program status of consent. Where two parents had consented to the SCASP involvement, both were contacted in relation to the research. If one parent had consented, they were contacted for the purpose of the research with no attempt made to contact the other parent. It was considered that maintaining current parental boundaries and consideration of the child's safety were paramount to this approach. Parents, who agreed to consider the research, were contacted directly by the researcher. The research was explained to them, and a dialogue was included around consent and the voluntary nature of the research. The research was reliant upon parents speaking with their children about the research prior to contact being made with the children by me. This may have potential for both gatekeeping and coercion. Careful conversation about the nature of the research and the building of rapport and trust with parents addressed this potential risk.



Speaking directly with the children, once parental consent had been obtained, about the nature of the research and seeking their consent for participation enabled the space for a child to decide whether to participate, regardless of parental consent.

**Thirdly, conflicting values and interests of parents and children (NHMRC, 2007, p. 55).**

Of the parents contacted, two of the families stated that their children were not interested in participating in the study, potentially acting as gatekeepers. There is a risk that these children were not provided with an opportunity to have their voices heard in this research context. One of the parents took some weeks and a number of conversations before consent was granted to contact her child. She stated that, while she still had reservations about her child's participation, she saw her child as being at an age where she could make these decisions and would support the child's desire to take part in the study.

A Childhood Studies perspective proposes that, through participation, children, as participants will benefit through the very process of the research. Situating the research within the context of the FRC responded to concerns related to research being conducted in a safe environment. The children participating in the research had access to their counsellors and the program facilitators throughout the research process. Providing children with choice as to where the interviews were conducted and giving the option of having a safe person present throughout the interview strengthened the safety elements and promoted the ethical framework of enabling efficacy for the children with the research process.

### **Rights and protection**

Research with children is framed within the constructs of both their rights and their need for protection (Powell, 2011), with children positioned as both vulnerable and with agency. A recent study that interviewed parents, researchers, government and non-

government decision makers, children and ethics committee members demonstrated a level of concern that research with children, particularly around sensitive topics, will potentially cause harm (Powell et al., 2018). These tensions are created by attempts to balance the vulnerability of children and their need for protection, given their age and developmental level, with their rights as individuals (Birnbaum & Saini, 2012). Vulnerability is often regarded as interchangeable with the notion of lacking competence (Carter, 2009), and this risks researchers avoiding asking children how they feel about things and so keeping them silenced (Campbell, 2008; Carter, 2009; Skyrme & Woods, 2018).

From a rights based perspective, the position of children as social actors places them as a socially excluded, minority group struggling to find a voice, suggesting “an imperative to engage with children at an active rather than passive level” (Kellet, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004, p. 330). The UNCRC has been a significant factor in the growing concern for, and commitment to, facilitating children’s views on their needs and wishes. In particular, Article 12 (1) (2) places an obligation on decision makers to take into account the views and preferences of children (UN, 1989). Children are increasingly understood as rights bearing individuals rather than objects of concern (Bessant, 2006; Birnbaum & Saini, 2012).

As I noted above, the social work framework mandates an overriding responsibility to avoid harm and to do good, articulating the concept of beneficence (AASW, 2010; Bogolub, 2010; Peled, 2010). Acknowledging the tensions between the need for protection and children’s rights as individuals, a social work perspective focuses on developing ways to undertake research with children that ensure that this tension can be navigated.

Conceptualisations of vulnerability can lead to exclusions from both the benefit and risks of research (Hurst, 2015; Skyrme & Woods, 2018). Excluding children from contributing to research raises the question of the likely ethical consequences of not involving children (Graham, Powell, and Taylor, 2015a). Excluding children from research on issues such as

how they experience parental separation could potentially lead to more harm, in that inappropriate and unresponsive services may be developed to address what adults see as the concerns and issues (Davis, 2009; Tisdall, Davis, & Gallager, 2009).

Individual children should be afforded the opportunity to assess for themselves the potential risks and benefits of their involvement in any research project. Children have demonstrated their capacity to make meaningful decisions about what research to participate in and what information to share in interviews (Evang & Overlien, 2015; Hill, 2015). There are other aspects to the research approach that addressed the tensions of rights and protection, including “concepts of privacy, confidentiality and reducing the power imbalance between adult-researcher and children” (Noble-Carr, 2007, p. 7). The following sections explore these issues further.

### **Informed consent**

Underpinning ethics in research is the nature of consent. Martins et al. (2018) identified four elements to consent that bring it validity: being informed, explicit, renegotiable and free of coercion. Within the framework of Childhood Studies, it is recognised that children’s competence to consent to participate in research depends upon more than just their chronological age. There is growing recognition of the need to seek children’s consent in a credible way and frameworks are being developed to do this (Graham, Powell, & Taylor, 2015a; Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2018).

The need for parental consent may prevent children’s views from being heard in research (Moore et al., 2018), particularly around sensitive and difficult issues such as parental separation, and this may affect the representativeness of the available sample and the validity of the findings (Cashmore, 2006). In this current study, representativeness of the sample was not a goal. The issue of concern for research (including this current study) with children from families where parents separate is that very vulnerable children in high-conflict

families may remain unheard and not be provided with an opportunity to speak about their experiences.

Access to children for direct research faces challenges, not only from parents, but from other systems whose intention may be to protect children. This can include ethics committees (university and organisational), service managers and organisational staff. The reluctance to provide consent for children may silence children and young people, reproducing the power imbalances that often exist between children and adults (McNamara, 2011) by denying children the opportunity to make it known how they experience the environments, systems and relationships they interact with.

There is a distinction around the gaining of a child's consent or assent for the purpose of ethical research with children (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). Assent is sought, after written consent is obtained from a parent or legal guardian, by explaining to the child the purpose of the research project and their role in the process (Bessant, 2006; Dockett, Einarsdottir, & Perry, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2011; Lewis, 2002; Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). Within a Childhood Studies context, there is a perspective that children's consent (after parental consent) is achievable and desirable. Cashmore (2006) described this as an ongoing process, with the need for continuing consent which goes beyond the initial agreement to participate. Moore et al. (2018) described a six stage approach for gaining children's consent for research projects, reflecting the dynamic nature of consent being given and withdrawn by the children involved in the research.

In this current study, parents were first contacted by the program facilitators - from the FRC - with information about the research. This approach reflected a known primary challenge of research with children, of negotiating access through adults (Martins et al., 2018). One strategy is to initiate the communication through known mediators such as case workers or teachers. Parents spoke to their children and indicated, through written consent to

me, that they (the parents) consented to their children participating in the research. Jointly (through parents), interview times were set directly with some of the children. The initial stage of these interviews involved a discussion on consent and active facilitation of direct written consent. A number of children, accompanied by a parent, met with me prior to an interview time being scheduled, to discuss the research, their participation and consent. Children were provided with opportunities throughout the research process to withdraw their consent. At the end of the interview, consent and confidentiality were revisited, with me explaining (again) the way the interview material would be used. Children were aware that they could withdraw their consent again at this time.

## **Power**

The dominant tradition of social research reflects an absence of children's views and experiences, stemming from adults' perceptions that children are not competent to make sense of the adult world (Oakley, as cited in Mason & Hood, 2011). Research concerning children's issues has commonly been associated with forms of policy making that have embedded children in families and schools, not hearing their voices in their own right (Mason & Hood, 2011).

The methodological framework outlined for this current study attempted to draw attention to the underlying adult-child relationship power imbalance by making it explicit to the process; this also providing a way of addressing the potential issues between an adult researcher and children. The epistemological approach acknowledged children's agency but also attended to structural issues as they influence children's contributions (Mason & Hood, 2011). The research approach in this current study acknowledged and promoted the idea that it is "the children who have the expert knowledge of childhood itself – in a sense of what it is like to be a child – and that their voices have been muted within traditional research" (Harman, as cited in Kellet et al., 2004, p. 331).

Within the context of this study, forming a child reference group (discussed below) directly responded to a perspective of sharing power between the children in the research and the researcher (Moore et al., 2016). The children in the reference group were involved in the development of the research approach, including methods and interview schedules, and provided reflection on the emerging themes arising during analysis of the data.

## **Privacy**

A child having a private and safe place in which to speak with a researcher is a difficult ethical matter when interviewing children. Whether parents are present or not far from the interview process may influence the way in which the children relate to the researcher and influence what the child may decide to talk about. Some children may feel more comfortable with an adult caregiver present, and this will be part of enabling children to determine the way in which they participate in the research process. There is a need to ensure that the trust of both the children and the caregiver is developed in this research context. This may be done by providing them with appropriate choices for participation, while explaining the reasons why privacy is sought and the theoretical premise on which the research is being based, that is, one of recognising and respecting children's competence (Moore, McArthur, & Noble-Carr, 2009).

In the current study, a number of children chose to have an adult parent present during the interview. On other occasions, a parent chose to be partly present by staying nearby in an adjacent room. This position potentially impacted on what a child might feel that they could say in the interviews and raised a tension between children's right to privacy and a parental concern around wellbeing. In one interview, the parent insisted on staying, and it was difficult to ascertain from her children (two children were interviewed) whether they were comfortable with this. It is noted that in these two interviews both children would defer to the parent on occasion to assist with answering interview questions.

All the children chose pseudonyms to be used in the research and writing of the thesis, as a way of maintaining their privacy.

### **Confidentiality**

A concept related to privacy is that of confidentiality. While confidentiality is an important value, it did not override the duty to protect the welfare of the participant; but, conversely, I was mindful that protection should not unnecessarily override confidentiality. The limits to confidentiality were explicitly drawn prior to the research, with the ethics application and discussion with the FRC around their boundaries in the program context.

Children were informed about how information is gathered, recorded and reported on, what information would be kept confidential and what information could not be kept confidential. It was openly acknowledged that, while the presentation of the data would be coded with regards to not providing potentially identifying matter, this information may have caused concerns about the confidentiality of information provided, both for parents and children. Confidentiality was addressed in the child reference group to develop a child perspective on this issue and was further discussed with caregivers. The type of harms and concerns that may require me to speak with another adult was discussed with the children and their caregivers. This included if a child talked of feeling unsafe, being hurt physically or emotionally or witnessing violence between parents. I was clear that this would be done with the child, or with the child's knowledge with the intent of ensuring that they were safe.

It was noted that the limits of confidentiality are constructed through the research methodology and the legal and ethical provisions relating to the protection of research and mandatory reporting obligations (Cashmore, 2006; Powell, 2011).

## Methods

As was noted earlier in this chapter, the research itself drew on a systems framework, recognising that children's engagement and relationships across various systems will impact on their research experience and engagement. The communication between me, the researcher, and various systems involved, the children, parents, counsellors and group facilitators, was a critical dimension to this study. Building supporting and trustful relationships with children enabled them to feel comfortable in the research setting and facilitated the expressing of their opinions and sharing of personal information (Martins et al., 2018).

Coinciding with the development of Childhood Studies in relation to research approaches with children is the consideration of whether specific child methods in research are needed or whether existing methods can be used (Balen et al., 2006; Birnbaum & Saini, 2013; Fern, 2014; Hill, 2006; McNamee & Seymour, 2012). The need to create special research techniques for children is premised on the belief that communicating with them is more difficult (or different) than with adults and that special child research methods will somehow reveal some truth not accessible through talk. There is a risk that this approach constructs children as *other* in methodological terms, with a consequent need to use novel or different methods. Kirk (2007) argues that "this has the potential of diminishing the position of children as independent actors in assuming that they are not capable of ordinary conversation like adults or in engaging with the methods used with adults" (p. 1257). This current study took the qualitative perspective that the research is a negotiated and dynamic dialogue as well as a co-production of meaning (Abbott, 2012) shaped by the context and nature of each encounter.

There were two primary methods used with a Childhood Studies approach in this study:



A **reference group** of children was convened for the purpose of research design and development of interview questions. The reference group was further asked to reflect on the emergent themes arising from the analysis of the interviews.

**Semi-structured interviews** were developed reflecting the themes that emerged through the reference group as well as themes that have emerged through the literature review. These interviews were exploratory and child directed, using the learning from the child reference group as to how best to talk with children.

Both methods are discussed in more detail below.

## **Recruitment of participants**

### Engagement with a FRC

Addressing the concern for safe ethical research with children, participants were recruited to the study through a FRC that was providing a specialised program for children who had experienced parental separation within the SCASP framework. The centre provided therapeutic group programs and individual counselling to children aged 5 to 18. The SCASP is funded through DSS as part of the Attorney-General's Supporting Children after Separation Program – Family Law Services. The group facilitators and counsellors are social workers and psychologists. Families are self-referred or referred through the courts. One hundred and thirty five children and young people participated in the group program or individual counselling during the reference group and interview period of this research (Marymead, 2014, p.19). A number of the families had been experiencing conflict prior to separation and post-separation. Twelve of these children participated in research interviews and three in the reference group.

The participating FRC is a well-established not-for profit organisation that has been providing a broad range of services to children, young people and families since 1967 in the

ACT and Southern and Western Regional NSW. These programs have included Parent Education Groups; Child and Family Counselling; Disability Support; Family Support Programs; Foster Care and Respite Care; Indigenous Children's Programs; Kids' Companions; Kinship Service; Mental Health Family Support; Residential Care; Supervised Contact and Changeover; and Post Separation Support for children and their parents.

Recruited in this way, the children were connected with a known supportive and therapeutic environment, a protective factor in relation to having support prior to and post-research. This approach was guided by the AASW Code of Ethics, which states: "the social work profession ... provides humane service, mindful of fulfilling duty of care, and duty to avoid doing harm to others" (AASW, 2010, p. 12). It was also recognised that recruiting children in this way may reproduce the disempowering discourse of vulnerability (Skyrme & Woods, 2018) through the exclusion of children who are not connected to a service and might be considered more vulnerable. It is acknowledged that this approach was both a strength of the research and also a limitation.

Collaborating with the FRC also allowed for an exploration of one of the systems in which children are involved and the impact that this has on their wellbeing. This collaboration provided an opportunity for learning from each other, both for me, as the researcher, as well as for the FRC staff. This was an opportunity for practice development and social work research development.

### **Children's reference group**

Recruitment to the reference group began when facilitators of the FRC SCASP group program identified four children who had completed a group as potential participants. The facilitators approached the four families (through the adult carers) and told them about the proposed research. All four families consented to being contacted by me to discuss the research further. One family withdrew after further conversation with me, stating that their

son was “really busy,” and he did not feel that being part of the research would be of benefit. The other three families agreed for me to contact/meet and have further discussion about their participating in the research with their children. Three children agreed to participate in the reference group.

The children identified by the program facilitators were reported to be “a cohesive and engaged group of 10–12 year olds”. Through participating in the reference group, the facilitators saw the opportunity for the children to re-engage with the group and the program facilitator, because it had been six months since the completion of the group. This was seen by the facilitators as an opportunity to check in with the children post-group and gather further feedback on the outcomes for these children after having completed the group program.

The reference group met once prior to individual interviews being conducted, and then participants were consulted independently at the analysis stage of the research. On the day of the first reference group meeting, two children were available. I met with a third participant individually after the reference group and provided details on the ideas that emerged from the first reference group, incorporating their reflections and ideas.

The reference group formed part of the data collection for the research. It assisted in the development of an understanding of a children’s world view, enriching the exploration through the semi-structured interviews. The decision to have a child reference group arose from considerations of a Childhood Studies approach, because it provided the opportunity for a more inclusive approach with the participants, shifting from a purely researcher directed process (Lunn & Munford, 2007).

The children’s reference group provided the opportunity for those who were going to be involved in the research (that is, children) to contribute to the structure of the research, including the research questions and the content of the interview schedules. A children’s

reference group potentially addressed the exclusion of children from the earlier stages of developing research projects (Grover, 2004; Moore et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2018). The children's reference group was engaged at two stages of the research.

#### First meeting of Children's Reference Group

At the first meeting of the child reference group, participants were invited to comment on the proposed research question and to suggest ways in which it might be approached or stated that would make sense to children, rather than the adult-centric context of its construction. During the meeting children talked about:

- their experiences and understanding of research
- how to do research with children, including the language (how to ask children questions); what it means to be respectful and helpful; what concerns or worries might a child have talking with an adult researcher; what do children understand by the idea of confidentiality and privacy; and how to explain these limits
- whether the research question was a useful one and easily understood
- what questions would be good to ask other children which would contribute to the development of the interview schedules.

The conversation was tape recorded to enable careful capturing of the children's words and ideas. Using IPA, I analysed the transcript and identified emergent themes. From this, I developed superordinate themes which directly influenced the development of interview schedules. I sent copies of the emergent and superordinate themes to each participant and invited them to provide further comment on this analysis.

The reference group process contributed directly to the development of the interview schedules and consideration of how to create an environment where children would feel safe. This included advice from the reference group participants that it was important that children should have a choice of where children should meet with the researcher and who else they

may need present. I approached confidentiality and privacy directly with children, as advised by the reference group and provided a space for children to tell me what they understood by these concepts and what their expectations were in relation to the information they provided me with in the interviews.

### Second meeting of the Children's Reference Group

The reference group was invited to meet again after the initial analysis of the interviews, to provide feedback and reflect on the findings/themes that had been identified in the analysis of the data collected. Because the group had difficulty in meeting, the children were individually consulted. The reference group members were provided with a copy of the emergent themes from the interviews and invited to reflect on these themes. While a number of the themes were different from their individual experiences, they were able to articulate and reflect on how this theme may be relevant or experienced by other children. They were able to note that while there are similarities in experiences, children also had different experiences and made sense of their new families in different ways. This reflection from reference group members acknowledged that while themes can provide a helpful way of understanding the experiences of phenomena by a group of people, being able to hear and respond to the individual experience is also critical, contributing to the development of a deep and authentic understanding of the meaning a person makes of their place and experience in the world.

While I acknowledge that the children in the research project did not have the full capacity of co-researchers, the methodology and methods provided the children with an opportunity for a shared agency in the research made children's views and opinions about the research design visible (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012). I also acknowledge that the formation of a reference group as in the original research design plan was not fully realised; only two children meeting together in the first group, and then consulting individually with each

reference group member a second time. However, it was the experience in this study that the children engaged in this capacity as, perhaps consultants, more than reference group members, contributing to the research design and adding depth to the analysis.

### **Individual interviews with children**

#### The participants

As with recruitment of reference group participants, SCASP facilitators identified children engaged in the group program or individual counselling whom they assessed as suitable for the interviews. This is a noted common limitation to research with children, where adults choose participants they consider suitable, rather than providing an opportunity for all the children to consider participating in the research (Balen et al., 2006; Graham et al., 2015). The facilitators initially contacted the parents, providing them with information on the research. The parents advised whether or not they consented to be contacted by me. Where this consent was provided, I contacted the parent and talked more about the research and sent them further written information (see Appendix B). I requested that the parent speak with their children and, if there was interest, sought permission to speak with/meet with the children directly to talk about the research.

Engagement with parents was a considered process. I recognised that parents in this sample may be experiencing emotional distress, court processes (both formal legal proceedings and/or mediation and dispute resolution) and often difficult relationships with ex-partners and would want to ensure that their children's involvement in research would not be harmful to the children (Collings, Grace, & Llewellyn, 2016). Of the nine families referred for individual interviews, seven agreed to contact with their children, and all of these children participated in the interviews - 12 children in total. Of the two families that declined further contact after discussions with me, one made the decision based on current Family Court proceedings and concern that research material could be subpoenaed for court. The second

family stated that their two sons were not interested in the research. A parent's decision not to provide consent for their child to participate may be based on a range of considerations, including avoiding children's exposure to sensitive topics (Martins et al., 2018). A counterpoint demonstrating the complexity of parental consideration of consent was one mother who, over a period of eight weeks, continued to engage with me to discuss the research. Her daughter had stated that she wanted to participate, but the mother had reservations. She told me that she was concerned that participating in a research interview could be potentially upsetting for her daughter. In the last conversation, where consent was provided to speak with the child, the mother reflected that, if her child was old enough to make decisions about contact with the non-resident parent, then she was old enough to be making decisions about her involvement in research.

Twelve children were interviewed for this study. Eight were female and four male. One identified as Aboriginal and one was from a culturally diverse background (mother born overseas). Their ages ranged from 8 to 13 with the majority (eight participants) being between 10 and 13 years old. Ten of the participants had contact with their non-resident (or non-main) parent, with two participants actively choosing not to have contact. While all but one participant had experienced 50/50 shared care, there was only one participant currently in that contact arrangement at the time of interview. Length of parental separation or divorce ranged from 18 months to eight years. Four of the children reported ongoing emotionally threatening behaviour directed towards them by one of their parents and not feeling safe when in their care. The majority of the children had experienced multiple variations of living arrangements and a range of impacts on their environments in terms of relationships with friends and siblings. One child had experienced homelessness and multiple residential moves.

## The interviews

Interviews took place in the children's homes and took between 40 and 90 minutes. Parental presence was negotiated between the parent and child. Some parents requested to be in the room of the interview, other parents were in an adjoining room, and some parents were entirely removed from the space. I met with some children on two occasions before proceeding with an interview, facilitating the building of trust in both me and the process. I checked in with children prior to the interview using Pocket Emotion Stones (12 ceramic stone faces with different emotions) as well as taking general time to talk about their day and build rapport.

The program facilitators were aware of when each child was being interviewed, and this was followed up with the child at their next attendance at group or individual counselling (if they were still attending these programs). Children were also reminded at the end of the interview that they could contact their counsellor if they felt that they needed to talk to anyone in the days after the interview. The contact details for their counsellor/program facilitator were made available.

Different methods of structuring the interviews were available and offered to the participants (drawing/writing/time lines), with the majority of children choosing to speak directly with me and not engaging in other methods. While research with children requires flexibility and creativity on the part of both the researchers and their data collection approaches (Bessell, 2006; Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005), the experience in this study was that, because time was given to the building of rapport and trust with children, semi-structured interviews were an appropriate and rich method for data collection. It is recognised that the children's previous experience of counselling and group programs discussing issues around parental separation may have contributed to their comfort in participating in a research interview. The experience in this study reflects other research



where semi-structured interviews have provided the space for children to create a narrative about their experiences and their meaning for them (Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011; Hogan et al., 2003; Kelly 2007). Cultivating a rapport by conveying warmth and genuine respect and enhancing participants' control upholds meaning construction and involvement (Martins et al., 2018). A number of children utilised objects from their own environment to demonstrate some aspect of their experience. For example, one child read me a book that had been particularly helpful to her at this time. Another child brought out photographs to help her describe the nature of her relationships. Reflecting qualitative research with children in other studies (Abbott, 2012; Skyrme & Woods, 2018), the experience in the field was organic and responsive. Arriving in an often busy home environment sometimes required an immersion in the family dynamic and activity before the interview could begin. At the end of each interview, the participant was invited to reflect on what worked and what didn't for them during the interview process, strengthening the collaborative nature of the research.

As noted, all of the children in this study were recruited through the SCASP program as part of the ethical approach to the research, ensuring the children had access to support. At the conclusion of interviews and the reference group, the children were provided with my contact details and reminded that they could contact their group facilitator or individual counsellor. The children's group facilitator or counsellor actively contacted the children, either at their next scheduled meeting, or by phone in the week following the interview to discuss their experience of the interview. Parents were also provided with my contact details and encouraged to contact me if any concerns arose post interviews. All children were provided with a book voucher as a way of valuing their participating and thanking them for their time and generosity.

## Data analysis

### IPA

As I outlined earlier in this chapter, IPA is a phenomenological approach to qualitative research concerned with “persons-in-context or being in the world” (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 180), phrases which evoke the idea that “the individual and the social are mutually constitutive” (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 321) so you cannot meaningfully take a person out of context. IPA’s overriding concern is with exploring people’s lived experience and the meanings people attach to those experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 18). This is the phenomenological aspect and is a consistent approach to this study which took a Childhood Studies lens.

IPA acknowledges that researchers cannot directly access a participant’s world; rather, they make sense of the participant’s world using their own interpretative resources. This is the interpretative part, in that the researcher provides an analysis to make sense of the participant’s attempts to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Making sense of a participant’s concerns involves another dual analytic process: firstly, staying close to the participant’s account of their experiences, and representing their experiences in a way which is true to the participant’s understandings. This insider stance has been described as a hermeneutics of empathy (Smith et al., 2009). Secondly, stepping back from participants’ accounts, viewing the data through a critical lens and asking questions like: “what assumptions underpin this account? Why are they making sense of their experiences in this way (and not that way)?” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 181). This outsider stance has been described as a hermeneutics of suspicion (Smith et al., 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2013).

There are two levels at which themes are generated: emergent themes and superordinate themes. Both levels of themes are developed and completed for each data item, before the next data item is considered. This reflects IPA's idiographic focus and means that the individual case detail and variation retains a much stronger presence in IPA analysis. Once all data items have been examined, superordinate themes are compared across the whole dataset, to determine the final (master) superordinate themes that will be presented in the overall analysis. This comparison involves a further layer of refinement and a possible shift to more conceptual or theoretically informed themes (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Analysis of the interview transcripts**

All the children chose pseudonyms to be used in the research, analysis and writing of the thesis. There were 12 individual interview transcripts analysed using IPA. Eight individual interviews were conducted in the first phase of the field work. A preliminary analysis of these transcripts informed the interview schedules for the next four interviews. The twelfth interview was conducted with one of the children from the reference group, both as a critical reflection on the themes that were emerging as well as a fuller exploration of that particular young person's experience of parental separation.

Using the IPA model as described by Smith et al. (2009) I read each transcript through three times, each reading to identify a specific element: description; linguistic context; and conceptual ideas. I first read each transcript to describe the content, making comprehensive descriptive comments alongside the interview transcript. The second reading recorded linguistic observations and how the transcript reflected the ways in which the content and meaning were presented. In the third reading an interpretative approach to the transcript enabled a conceptual framework for each interview to be developed and from this process identification of emergent themes. I then undertook a process of collating all the emergent

themes, grouping them into like themes, and developing a set of superordinate themes. The superordinate themes link the participant's accounts of their experiences.

After the analysis of the first eight interviews, I discussed the superordinate themes with two children from the children's reference group. This assisted me to consider the efficacy of the process in terms of an adult perspective of developing themes. The two children found the emergent and superordinate themes consistent with their own experiences or those of children more generally.

I then conducted a further four interviews. Of these, two did not elicit rich data. Two siblings were interviewed jointly, with their two younger siblings being present. The siblings being interviewed were aged 6 and 9. The environment was one of heightened chaos, with everyone talking, one of the siblings jumping around on the furniture and one not speaking, focused on colouring-in a picture at the time. It was decided that these two interviews would not be part of the final analysis.

After the initial analysis, I undertook the above process a second time for all the interview transcripts. This provided for a review and redefining of superordinate themes, which resulted in the discovery of new, superordinate themes and a better clarity in the interpretative process of the themes. The superordinate themes provided the framework for the discussion in this thesis (Chapters Five through Seven).

## **Challenges**

### **Recruiting children**

Recruiting children for this study offered a challenge. Considerations of safety and wellbeing of child participants were at the forefront of designing a recruitment strategy. To draw children from a safe environment, an environment where they are connected with a supportive network, was considered a possible way forward. From this perspective, I decided

that the children invited to participate in this study would be connected to a program or counselling unit within an organisational context. This strategy, while addressing issues of safety and wellbeing for children, needed to consider the potential impact and constraints that the involvement of the agency may have on access to children.

Program staff made initial contact with potential families and in this way were gatekeepers in a research context. It was only after initial contact by the FRC program staff that families were then contacted directly by me to discuss the research in more depth and to explore the issue of consent for their children's participation. The benefit of recruiting children through a FRC was that they had access to counselling support pre- and post-interviews. Program counsellors and facilitators actively contacted children post-interview to check in with them, to ensure that there were no unresolved issues raised for them through the interview process.

Recruiting children engaged in a program or counselling presents a small cohort of children particular to this experience and not representative of all children who experience parental separation. As was noted earlier, undertaking recruitment from the perspective of vulnerability and protection excludes children considered more vulnerable and who have not been able to engage in a program at this time because of their family situations.

### **Partnering with a FRC**

Three non-government agencies that provide group programs and counselling to children who had experienced parental separation or divorce were approached as potential collaborators in the research. One organisation agreed to participate. It then took careful and considerate consultation with program managers and program staff, as well as a proposal to the Organisation's Ethics Committee, before agreement on the research was reached.

It is also pertinent to the ethical framework of the research to ensure that the organisation and the program itself benefit from supporting the research project. Through approaching and working with program facilitators openly and exploring the value of hearing directly from children about their experiences, I developed an open and collaborative approach. I have provided a seminar to the organisation's staff on the findings of this study.

The facilitators agreed to identify and contact families in the first instance to ascertain their interest in the research. Once this had been done, I contacted families directly. The potential risk of this process is in the identification of participants by program facilitators, because they contacted families that they felt would be suitable, potentially excluding other children within this specific cohort. The strength of this approach is that program facilitators had already established trusting relationships with families and lent credibility to both the research and the researcher.

### **Parents and caregivers**

A further challenge was working with parents and caregivers to enable contact with their children. Some families were happy for contact to be made after an initial conversation. However, several phone conversations and meetings had to be arranged with a number of parents and their children to further discuss the research. While this was a time consuming process, it ensured that parents and their children had the information they felt that they needed to make an informed choice around participation, strengthening the engagement in the research. Conversations with children prior to the interview contributed to the building of trust and rapport, which greatly enhanced the interview process.

A further challenge was to develop an understanding in parents of the research as a separate process to the group work or counselling that their children were receiving. It is critical that there is an understanding among parents and children that the purposes of counselling/group programs and research are different. As has been reflected in other

research, considerable time needed to be spent with parents and program workers to help them feel confident that steps have been taken to ensure that the children did not experience unwarranted stress or anxiety (Moore et al., 2018). This included explaining that children would be able to withdraw at any stage of the process and be supported to do so; explaining the potential positive affirming outcomes for children involved in research; and outlining the support that will be in place through follow up after the completion of the research.

Collaborative relationships were built with the FRC, the parents and the children. This helped to ensure that the process and methodology were not reproducing the power issues that are pertinent to children and adult interactions. Relationship development with the FRC staff and parents, while a time-consuming exercise, was a critical and ethical process, giving the research integrity and agency.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter outlined the research approach to this study. A Childhood Studies lens made it imperative that children were involved in the research in a way that is credible and valuing and ensured that their voices, perspectives and experiences are heard and recognised within the context of complex social and human relationships. Involving of children in interview design and seeking their views on the way to conduct interviews provided a potentially richer engagement with children. The aim of the methodology was to privilege the voices and stories of children, to develop a sense of how they experience parental separation and divorce as children.

While each child's experience is unique, many common elements were identified through the interviews. Consistent with an IPA approach, the exploration of children's individual experiences allowed the analysis to develop superordinate themes, enabling the drawing together of common elements for children of this experience.

The next three chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven) will present the findings from the research, seeking to answer the research question through exploring children's responses to in-depth explorative interviews.



## **Chapter 5: Findings—When a Parent Leaves**

Dad told us all to go into their room ... he spoke to us ... he left that night (Allison 12).

### **Introduction to the chapter**

Families are a complex network of relationships, experienced and conceptualised differently by the individual members of a family. Parental separation disrupts these relationships and connections, often necessitating a redefining of these relationships. Children actively respond to these changing relationships, attempting to maintain a sense of coherent identity and to express a sense of agency in their social worlds. This has implications for children and their sense of ontological security, because their identity and sense of belonging is shaped and maintained through relationships with others (Milne & Jamieson, 2012; Mitzen, 2006). As children described the event of parental separation and the implications that this had for them, their narratives wove across a range of environments, including families, schools, court and friendships. A systems framework enabled a deep exploration of the data, focusing on how these experiences impacted across the range of children's environments. A Childhood Studies perspective paid attention to how children made sense of these changes to their relationships and the way in which the children affected and contributed to the changes in their social worlds (Prout & James, 1997).

The three findings chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven) present the children's experiences in a number of ways. Chapter Five outlines how children described their experience of the event of parental separation and the changes this brought to their worlds. Chapter Six explores this more deeply through the emotional impact of children's experience of family separation. In Chapter Seven, children describe the supports and strategies they draw on in response to their experiences of change in their families and broader systems.

This chapter explores the ways in which children experience the event/decision/process of parental separation: the moment or process of one parent leaving the marriage or relationship. Seeking to understand the way in which children experience the separation when one parent leaves the family home builds a deeper understanding of how parental separation can affect children. This is the foundation on which children process and make sense of the changes that parental separation brings to their worlds and their experience of an agentic self over time.

Children in this study had different experiences of parental separation - the way in which this event occurred or unfolded over time, and, with it changes to a child's environment. Consistent with an IPA approach to analysis, superordinate themes were identified for this group of children and will provide the structure for discussing the findings in this chapter.

Children described:

- what it was like when they found out that their parents were going to separate
- the changes that occurred across their systems, including
  - living arrangements and physical environments
  - relationships within and across family
- whether and how they were involved in decision making at the time when parents separated and in the months and years following.

### **Finding out that parents were going to separate**

A number of children had clear memories of the event of parental separation, including the emotions that this experience elicited at the time. The emotional experiences will be discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis. While none of the children in this study

described a conversation with parents prior to the day when one of their parents left the family home, the experience on the day was varied. The unfolding of the separation presented different situations and considerations for the children in this study.

### **Parental separation occurs without warning**

He packed his bags and left (Donna 11).

Some children reported that they had no sense or warning that their parents were going to separate. Knowledge that their parents were going to separate occurred on the day a parent physically left the family home. These children experienced the separation as disruptive and distressing, necessitating immediate changes to the way in which their lives were organised.

Allison's (12) story is illustrative of the way in which, for some children in this study, the knowledge that parents were going to separate came as a shock. Allison described her first sense that something wasn't quite right as picking her dad up from the airport; on the trip home, her father "didn't want to sit in the front next to mum; he wanted to sit in the back". This was a noted change in behaviour from Allison's perspective. When they returned home, she described: "Dad told us all to go into their room ... he spoke to us and I ended up crying on Paul's [older half-brother's] shoulder and so he [dad] left that night". Allison was unable to recall any explanation being provided for the reason her dad was leaving and described this event as being unexpected and distressing. At the time of the interview, two years after her father left, she says that she still has no clear understanding of why her parents separated. She does suspect that it may be related to her dad re-partnering. Allison provided substantial description of the day when her father left the family home, reflecting on the impact this had on her at the time and continues to have, particularly in relation to not feeling that she has a clear explanation as to why they separated. Allison felt that the parental separation happened without prior warning or preparation. From her perspective, she had to make sense of the changes to her family without being provided with support or explanation from her parents.

Other children reported that they also had no prior knowledge that their parents were considering separating until the day that it occurred:

Dad just came back from work and then me and my brother were on the trampoline and then he came to say to us that he was going for a sleep over and stuff and then he went and packed his bags (Donna 11).

Donna (11) referred to this event as being a “surprise”. She recalled her father stating that he was going for a “sleep over”, a description that does not represent the true nature of the situation. At the time, Donna believed that her mother also didn’t know what was happening and that she and her younger sibling told her mother: “mum didn’t know at first for me and Max told her. Mum was doing the washing and so we told her”. Donna said she was a “bit annoyed” by the situation, particularly having to “tell my mum what was happening”. In Donna’s case, there was an immediate disruption to her family situation, and she could not recall any clear reasons being provided. In addition, she had to take on the role of informing her mother of the situation. From the child’s perspective, it wasn’t evident that her father’s leaving had been discussed by her parents. This may have implications for her ontological security, in terms of a disruption to a sense of her place in the social world of her family and trust in others (Jamieson & Milne, 2012).

Not being prepared for the event of parental separation was a common experience for this group of children. Fiona (12) recalled her mum and dad arguing and that “dad just left” and “things just changed”. Like Donna, Fiona had to tell others in her family situation that the family has changed and that their father had left the family home, stating that she told her sister that their “dad had left”. Children’s reactions and the way in which they cope with the major changes initiated by separation can be complicated by the feeling that their parents had not adequately informed them about the separation and divorce and future arrangements (Kelly, 2003; Westberg, Nelson, & Piercy, 2002).

## **Parental separation isn't a straightforward process**

I found out in my own way (Deidre 13).

Some children experienced the separation in a more gradual way, not recognising at the time of changed living arrangements that their parents had actually separated—experiencing the changes as necessitated by other circumstances. The physical separation of parents did not necessarily indicate to children the permanency of the separation. Deidre (13) recounted returning home from school to find her parents arguing. Her father told her he was going to go and stay with Nan and Pop. She said “I just kind of found out because my dad never came back”. There was no clear message for Deidre about what was happening or that her father was leaving. She came to this conclusion because he did not return home after a period of time. She reflected: “I guess I didn't really know what was happening”. For a period of time, she believed that her parents would get back together “so I thought if we moved to Canberra, they would still be together”. Some children actively try to make sense and meaning of their experiences, drawing on their own knowledge of relationships, when they feel that the parents/adults are not providing support or information about what is happening in their families. Striving for continuity of self-identity, Deidre formed the belief that her parents would get back together. This view enabled Deidre to manage the initial separation in a way that preserved a sense of knowing her place in the world.

Charlie was aged 9 when his parents separated. He is able to describe retrospectively (at age 13) why his mother left his father, and stated that “mum got really tired of her having to do all the work and that so she said she was taking me and so we went down to [a country town]”. He recalled his mother “telling me, and I was ok and I was feeling sad but I was hoping they would get back together”. However, it wasn't until some months after the initial separation of his parents that Charlie understood the permanency of the separation. This was

not the result of a direct conversation with either of his parents, but the re-partnering of his mother. This action indicated for Charlie the shift in his parent's relationship:

After she told me she was getting on with Jacob [Charlie's now step dad] I don't know how I felt then because (pause) just different I guess ... I asked her [if she was going to get back together with dad] and she said [this is] not really going to happen (Charlie 13).

John (11) was aged 4 when his parents separated and relocated to different cities for their work. John stated that, while his parents didn't reside together, he had not realised or understood the situation as parental separation or divorce. He described his "mum just started taking stuff to Canberra and I thought we were going on a holiday". He went on to say that his mum "sort of explained it to me", but he was left with the impression that his mother had moved to Canberra for work. His father had remained in another city for the same reason. John adjusted to the new living arrangements, having regular contact with his dad both in Canberra and in his dad's city of residence. John described finding out that his parents were divorced just prior to this interview for the research, at the age of 11. He stated that finding out this way is "why I ended up seeing a counsellor". John sought support to make sense of the changes to his family, reflecting findings in earlier studies which have concluded that children often need to be helped to make sense of the changes in their family lives (Crowly, 2013; Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Kelly 2003; Sviggum, 2000; Westberg, Nelson, & Piercy, 2002). John reflected that "it would have been better if I had known sooner". John's long-term understanding of the situation was disrupted with this new information about his parent's relationship. He describes needing to make sense of this new information in relation to his concept and understanding of his family. John had lived for seven years of his life with a particular understanding of his family structure; his parents were not separated or divorced, just needing to live apart. The new information, while not changing the way in which his

family functioned, changed his perception of the relationship between his mother and father. John reported being “distressed” when he found out the true nature of this relationship. The distress John experienced required understanding his family situation differently and this is further explored in Chapter Six.

It was the experience of children in this study that, in the absence of clear and accurate information as to the status of relationships, the children created their own explanations for, and understandings of, their family structures. Children would actively seek support, externally from family at times, to assist them to make sense of their experiences and the changes to their families. The way in which children seek and access support is discussed in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

### **Children sense that parents might separate**

I kind of knew it (Annabel 9).

Other children in this study recognised that the separation was going to happen at some time. They were aware of the deteriorating relationship between their parents and of aspects of their parents’ behaviour, such as becoming aware that a parent had a girlfriend. Some children said that they knew that the relationship between their parents was strained, and the separation was not unanticipated. Annabel, aged 9 (younger sibling of Allison) was aware that her father was seeing someone else and had described how she and her older half-brother kept this information from their mother stating “Paul [older half-brother] kept lying to mum kept covering up for dad”. Annabel is aware that, when a parent is seeing someone outside their marriage, there is a potential for the parents to separate. She stated: “I kind of knew it [that my parents would separate] when I found out that Dad and Nicky were going to hook up I thought mum is going to find out sooner or later” (Annabel 9). Annabel’s awareness of the way in which her father’s behaviour might impact on her parents’ relationship perhaps provided her with an opportunity to begin to make sense of the pending

separation and change in the relationship between her parents. In the interview, Annabel chose not to describe the actual day her father left the house, concentrating on the precipitating factors for the separation. This might reflect the processing and preparation that she may have been doing prior to the day of separation. It could be conjectured that children who experienced parental separation in this way had some time to prepare psychologically for the separation, maintaining a sense of agency in their construction of their worlds. Conversely, it may be that acquiring knowledge in this way, without parental support or parents providing explanation, may contribute to disrupting a child's sense of security in their family world. Annabel described having to hold the knowledge that a parent is "seeing somebody else" for a considerable period of time, making use of this information only when her parents separated as a means of developing an understanding of the event.

As noted, Annabel is the younger sibling of Allison (12), who had said that she wasn't aware of any of the context for the separation at the time. Sibling descriptions of parental separation reflect the way in which children's experiences differ, highlighting the need to consider children as having their own experience and sense of the world in which they live (Dunn et al., 2001; Steinbach & Hank, 2018). Children need to be responded to in the context of their own individual experiences.

### **A time of confusion**

It was sort of cloudy (George 11).

Two of the children were not able to recall the day that one parent left the family home or relationship. Siblings Gail (10) and George (12) don't recall how they found out that their parents were going to separate, with Gail stating that "it was a long time ago" that her parents separated and that she "can't remember". George stated that he didn't remember how he found out that his parents weren't going to live together, saying "it was sort of a cloudy time as a lot of things were happening". Without knowing the context of this separation, it is



difficult to draw any conclusions as to why they find recalling this change difficult. Perhaps George's description of it being "cloudy" suggests that there may have been a number of issues occurring at the time for the family, of which parental separation was just one element. Also, a child's memory may not be very strong if they were quite young at the time when parents separated.

Children's experience of finding out that their parents were going to separate varied for this group of children. From their perspectives, some of the children in this study were not prepared for, or supported through, the event of the parent leaving the family home and their parents separating. A number of the children were not able to provide a clear explanation as to why their parents separated either because they were not told or because they were too young to remember. Children may construct their own meanings about why a parent is absent, which do not necessarily reflect the reality of the parental separation. Over time, with access to new information, children processed and integrated new understandings of the family situation and the nature of their relationships.

## **Change across systems as a result of parental separation**

### **How children experienced changes to living arrangements**

For some of the children in this study, the day a parent left the family home brought unexpected and immediate changes to children's family living arrangements. Some learned of the separation as a parent packed their bags and left the family home. From that day, a number of the children had to adjust to spending time in two different households. As described above, none of the children in this study felt prepared for the event or had anticipated the event of separation in a concrete way. They described making sense of, and adjusting to, the situation as it unfolded.

The changes on the day of separation were often followed by a series of rapid changes to living situations. For some children, there was no initial stability following the parental separation. It involved changes to their living arrangements, including moving from the family home, sometimes followed by multiple moves. Charlie's (13) story illustrated the instability of physical location experienced by some children, the risk this posed to wellbeing and the impact on his relationships. Charlie described the four years since the parental separation as marked by changes of towns and, when settled in Canberra, of moves between suburbs:

Like we went from [various towns], I think we lived there for a while and then we went down to [a number of different Canberra suburbs] and now we are here I can't remember how long yes it has been a while I think I was in year 5 in [suburbs] and then I moved to [suburb] and um then I was in Year 5 as well and then when we went to [suburb] I was in Year 7 and then moved here and I am in Year 8 (Charlie 13).

His memory and narrative are quite sketchy during this discussion and his recall of location is processed through which year at school he was in at the time. This suggests that the use of time markers, such as school year, may assist in creating a cohesive narrative. He described how the years of moving were marked by instability and change, potentially creating further risk and stress: "like at one moment we were living in [suburb] and we almost ended up living on the streets".

The shifts in physical location impacted on Charlie's contact with his father during this time. His experience demonstrated the way in which the physical changes in the location of one part of his family system had implications for his relationship with his other family system (in this situation, his father):

Originally when we would travel from [one town] half way dad would drive half way from [another town]. We would meet up she [mum] would drive back and go back I would go back with dad like I think that was every second weekend ... it was a really long trip (Charlie 13).

Charlie's experience was reflected by other children in this study. A number of children described the impact of physical location on their connection with their fathers. John (11) reflected "I would like to spend more time with him [dad], I just like being with him". Deidre (13) described "long periods of time when I wouldn't see the other parent". Sometimes there were multiple changes within a short time frame, causing confusion for children. Annabel (9) described a range of changes to contact over an 18-month period, including sleepovers on weekends with her dad, spending some weekdays with dad, then contact ceasing for a time, mediation processes and the reinstating of contact.

Children who were living across two households (in various time configurations) described difficulties, including issues around being organised, attending usual activities or having their basic needs met. Donna's (11) experience of spending a weekend and part of the school week at her father's demonstrated the difficulties that some children encountered in relation to accessing their prior routines post-parental separation:

when I am at mum's I usually ride to school as it is basically just up the road ... but at his [dad's] place I wake up early and because they [her brothers] are having midnight umm ice-cream and stuff I have to wait for all of them [before being driven to school] (Donna 11).

The change in living arrangements resulted in children needing to fit in with new routines. Donna described how, when at her mother's house, she goes to "swimming early on Tuesday and Thursday mornings", but this isn't possible when staying with her dad. She described

how her school and social routines weren't incorporated into her time when residing with her father and said that she felt unsupported by her father to access these routines.

At their dad's house, Fiona (12) and her sibling are required to attend after school care, which had not been part of their pre-separation family routine. Fiona recalled wondering as a 6 year old, "why when at my dad's house I would have to stay at after school care until 6pm". The change in routine did not make sense to her: "I wondered why I just couldn't go to mum's who was home at the time". Fiona's experience suggested that children, even very young children, try to make sense of arrangements and can be left wondering and confused about these changing circumstances. The children in this study demonstrated the need to be supported to articulate their experiences; that they have clear things to say about a situation, but not necessarily the means to have these heard. The arrangement in place disrupted Fiona's meaning making, her sense of ontological security. She described wanting her parents to continue to provide her with the care that was established pre-separation, where she would be with either her mother or her father. Having to negotiate another environment for care, after school care, did not make sense to her or her world view.

In contrast to children who were struggling to maintain their routines and social connections, siblings Gail (9) and George (11) described a current arrangement that supported their maintenance of routine and social activity. Gail and George's father had visits in the family home, participating in the usual daily routines and activities both during the week and on weekends. This was a stable arrangement in place for "around two years". However, prior to this arrangement, the children had experienced various changes to contact. Initially, they had visited their father at his flat, but this had changed to their father having contact in the family home. Gail stated that "we used to have sleepovers at dad's place but we weren't allowed to after a while and we can't go over there now, so he comes over here to cook us dinner". She said that the change occurred when her dad was "getting really sick". George

stated: “well there has been quite a few continuous changes like dad couldn’t be in the house; dad could be there [in the house]”. The current arrangement, from George’s perspective, reflected the nature of relationships and routines prior to his parents separating. He stated that there is “not a huge difference in the way that we do things but like just a different plan goes into how we see people and how that is organised”, compared to life prior to his parents separating. George and Gail’s experience and positive adjustment reflect research findings that children who articulate positive adjustment to their family changes are able to conceptualise their family in the singular rather than two different homes and lives (Davies, 2013; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Trinder, 2009). Significantly, children’s descriptions of positive shared care arrangements reflected patterns of care and connection found in healthy, two-parent, married families. This included children describing a good relationship with both parents, parents who have a close relationship with their children and are both involved in caring and leisure activities, and parents who had cooperative shared parenting arrangements in that they support their children’s relationship with the other parent, including their emotional and physical movement between parents (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016; Trinder, 2009).

Children’s experience of changed living arrangements varied within this group. What is striking is the variability and changing structures within families post-separation. Changes to living and contact arrangements were often rapid, with little stability for periods of time. The change and instability impacted on children’s family systems, often making it difficult to keep in physical contact with a parent. Instability and change also impacted on children’s access to, and continuity with, their broader systems, such as school and sporting activities; this is further discussed in Chapter Seven. Where arrangements were described as stable for long periods of time, this did not necessarily indicate a positive situation for children.

## **Changes in relationships within and across family systems**

Children experienced a range of changes to their family and living situation throughout the months and, for some children, years post-parental separation. When describing the physical environments post-separation, children spoke about how this often necessitated changes in their relationships with parents and siblings, including experiencing the loss of contact with a parent; having less time with a parent; developing more stressful or closer relationships with siblings; and forming relationships with step-siblings and step-parents. These relationships figured significantly in children's accounts of their experiences.

Within the context of changing living environments, children described and reflected on their continual work to re-form, develop and maintain significant family relationships. Consistently with a Childhood Studies perspective that positions children as active in making sense of and constructing their social worlds (Barker & Weller, 2003; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Corsaro, 2011; Lowe, 2012; Matthews, 2007; Wyness, 2012) the children in this study described their active contribution and participation in the defining and redefining of their families and the relationships within these families.

### Relationships with siblings

Several children described changing relationships with siblings, both in terms of losing contact and connections, increased closeness or exacerbation of already difficult relationships. Allison (12) spent a significant portion of the interview talking about the impact of the parental separation on her contact with her older (half) brother, Paul. Her narrative asked us to consider the nature of sibling relationships and the way in which these are affected when parents separate. She described this relationship as close prior to separation: her explanation of the relationship exemplified the strong connection - correcting herself: "my half-brother but I like to call him my older brother, not my half-brother 'cause that's how I have known him most of my life". During the interview, she described in detail photos she

has of Paul holding her as a baby: “He’s [Paul] is standing there with mum and with mum holding me and him helping mum hold me and I have a few photos in my album where he’s feeding me”. Since the parental separation, Paul has moved interstate and is now residing with his mother, having very little contact with Allison. She described the relationship between Paul and their dad as difficult: “he doesn’t like talking to dad”, so all contact happens when Allison is at her mother’s residence where we “sometimes facebook”. Not only has Allison lost her brother through his physical relocation, but her ability to contact her brother and maintain this significant relationship is reduced because of the nature of the relationship between her brother and their father and Allison’s current living arrangements. Two years post-separation, Allison still feels this loss keenly. On the day of the interview she stated that she questions “when am I going to visit him ... when am I going to see him next”? Allison described the impact of the shift from physical closeness as well as the ability to communicate across the distances. Throughout the interview, she continued to come back to her half-brother as a reference point and this highlighted the significance of this relationship and the impact this loss of a relationship continued to have. Allison did not describe either of her parents as acknowledging the importance of this relationship or as assisting her to facilitate an ongoing connection.

In direct contrast to Allison, her younger sister Annabel (9) did not describe this relationship. When asked what she remembered about her half-brother or how she felt about not seeing him, she stated “nothing mmm no nothing”. Annabel was very articulate around other issues in this interview, but did not engage in descriptions of her half-brother. There may be a number of reasons for this: her relationship with her half-brother may not have been close; recalling the relationship and the loss of this relationship might be too painful; or, being younger at the age of separation, she may not have as clear a recall as her older sibling. What is typified by these sibling accounts of their relationship with their half-brother is the different nature of relationships between siblings and the varied way in which parental separation can

impact on individual siblings (Dunn et al., 2001; Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009; Steinbach & Hank, 2018).

Children described how the arrangements made post-separation potentially increased the intensity of relationships between siblings, sometimes in a negative way. Deidre (13) recounted that her “parents just think it is bad when we have to be separated. We were doing the same contact. It makes mine and [sibling] relationship worse”. While Deidre’s parents may be responding from a point of concern about the impact of the separation on their children, Deidre’s experience suggested that her parents did not necessarily understand the nature of her relationship with her sibling; she felt that they weren’t taking her needs into account in their decision making. The arrangement of contact with a parent at the same time as her brother continued for some years. The emotional impact this has on Deidre and the way she effects change will be explored in Chapter Six.

Experiencing parental separation together as siblings was also described as contributing to a stronger sibling bond. Fiona (12) described it as “having been through the same experience has made our bond strong, we always stuck together”. John (11) described his relationship with his older brother, who has lived in a different city since the parental separation (when John was 4 years old), as “very strong ... he is funny and he can drive me places”. While John and his older brother do not reside together, they still formed a strong relationship, perhaps as a result of their shared experience of parental separation. These findings reflect previous studies which explore the impact on sibling relationships, including feelings of increased closeness, bonding and providing support (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004).

Some children in this study actively made changes to their family arrangements, which also affected their relationships with their siblings. Donna (11) had made a decision not to have contact with her father, but her two younger siblings continued to have weekend



(sleep over) contact with their dad. Donna recognised that, for now, her and her siblings' needs were different in relation to contact with their father. Donna's decision and reflections demonstrated children's capacity to make decisions in their best interest through the asserting of their needs and rights to make their opinions known. Allison (12) also limited contact with her dad, while acknowledging that her younger sibling wanted increased contact. The ways in which siblings experience their relationships with parents are varied. Reflecting the findings in this current study, previous research with children has concluded that sibling relationships are potentially a powerful source of comfort, as well as stress, hostility and difficulty for children (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, Darlington, & Rogers, 2008; Sheehan et al., 2004). Through speaking directly with children, researchers ascertain the importance of understanding the variations in sibling relationship quality and their links with children's adaption and development.

### Step-siblings

In addition to changes to sibling relationships, children described various relationships with step-siblings and having to manage new living environments and new relationships. Some children in this study described the necessity of navigating and adapting to changes in family structures, often within days of the disclosure of the parental separation. For many of the children, these changes to family structure were not solid, but continued to change over the following months - and sometimes years - after separation. For some children, step-siblings were experienced as a positive extension of family:

We had three other girls my dad's fiancée's girls as well so we were technically having a week of sleepovers I get on with them really well especially Sam as she is around my age and really fun to be around (Annabel 9).

Dad re-partnered with aunty, two children of aunties and so they kind of became brother and sister to me (Charlie 13).

Some children described a deep understanding of the experiences of their new step-siblings, which enabled them to connect and form these new relationships. Charlie (13) reflected: "their [step-mum's] kids were sad because they had lost their dad and I am sad because I lost my dad". Charlie demonstrated his capacity to empathise with his step-siblings, enabling him to connect with them in a positive way. He clearly communicated to me his ability to understand how children may feel in these situations.

Children also described the intersection of different systems as playing a part in their relationships with their step-siblings. For some children, the extension of their stepfamily is an incorporation of their current social networks. Annabel (9) described her step-siblings as "friends"; they attend the same school and have a pre-existing relationship. She described at school a rule by which children in different year levels are not allowed to play together and reflects, "even though we see them every day at school I am not allowed to hang out with them". The intersection of these systems is complex, and children described making sense of different arrangements, not just in the home environments, but also in the school systems, where there is association with new members of their family.

### Extended family

Children also described losing connection with extended family members. Donna (11) described a loss of connection with her father's family: "dad's side is getting smaller as we don't really see them - they are moving away". Her mother's family does not reside in Australia; Donna stated: "on mum's side her side is mostly in [country of origin]". Donna

discussed using face book and skype to keep in contact with her extended family overseas. She noted that she has been to her mother's country of birth to meet her extended family on one occasion and feels quite "distant" from them now that she is back in Australia. Charlie (13) also spoke about attempting to maintain his cultural connection with extended family. Charlie described seeing his "pop" as important to him and says that they have a close relationship: he is "part of my [Aboriginal] culture." Charlie spent part of the interview describing photos of his pop and nan (who is deceased) demonstrating his close connections.

The family situation for the children in this study reflected dynamic changes in living arrangements and in contact with parents, siblings and extended family. The nature of children's relationship with their parents post-separation will be explored in the following section, as the way this relationship is experienced by children reverberates throughout their environments, systems and other relationships and has implications for their wellbeing.

#### Changes to relationships with parents

Fundamental to the children's experience of parental separation were changes to their relationships with parents. Children described being active in the negotiation of these relationships, demonstrating insight into how these relationships could impact on their wellbeing and their environments; this reflects the findings of previous studies with children (Amato, 2010; Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Jackson & Fife, 2018; Maes et al., 2012; Moxnes, 2003). A number of factors contributed to the changing nature of these relationships. Physical spaces - where a parent may move away from a child's location or the child may move away from a parent - would impact on the physical time a child could spend with a parent and, consequently, the nature of their relationship. The way in which a child experienced the parenting behaviour of a parent post-separation also had a profound effect on children's relationships with their parent. This was influenced by a parent's re-partnering; a parent having to manage a new family situation; or a parent being a

solo parent. Children also described the impact that a parent's behaviour and interactions had on other systems, such as their school or friendships, and how this influenced their relationship with their parent. The nature of the relationships between parents and their children post-separation is discussed in Chapter Six, because the children's descriptions of these changes were through the lens of the emotional impact on them, how it made them feel and implications for their wellbeing.

Children in this study demonstrated the capacity to describe the actions and the nature of relationships that indicated to them that each of their parents was still being experienced as a parent. Charlie (13), in his description of his father's lack of care for him, reflected that his father is not acting like a parent: "with their marriage they forget about being a mother and father first". Charlie demonstrated the capacity to understand and articulate his parents' perspective, while reflecting on the impact his parents' actions have on his wellbeing. Charlie demonstrated insight and understanding of the parent's position in the new world of family separation, noting: "it is important that like most parents worry if they get married they worry about their marriage it is important to be like a husband and a wife", but goes on to insightfully reflect "but it is more important to make sure you are not stopping being a father". Donna's (11) description of her experience in her father's household reflected this notion of a parent not parenting. The way in which her father overlooked her routines and social engagement was discussed earlier. Donna also described at length in the interview the way in which her nutritional needs were not met at her dad's house, stating that, even though he knew what food she liked to eat, he did not get it but gave her food she could not eat. She spoke about how she would pack food from her mother's house to take to her father's on contact visits, to ensure that she had the proper lunches and food she could eat. The children's descriptions of their needs not being met are related to their expectations of how parents should parent.

As described above, the situation for Gail (10) and George (12) was quite different, compared to other children in this study. The non-resident parent would spend considerable time in the family home, helping with meals and after school and on weekends, participating in the usual family activities such as sport and church. The nature of this arrangement had benefits for the parents and children in maintaining and continuing to develop their relationships. In this situation, both parents are able to continue to parent in a way that the children felt was responsive and connected.

### **Children's experience of decision making**

In this study, the emergence of the theme of children's involvement in decision making was related to decisions around contact with parents and siblings and living arrangements, fundamental changes in a child's world when parents separated or divorced. Children had various experiences of being involved in decision making, and this affected their sense of being able to create and contribute to the changes in their families. Some children explicitly described having "no say" in the initial family arrangements post-separation. As described earlier in this chapter, some children experienced initial arrangements without a sense of having any control or influence over these events. Other narratives reflected a sense that family arrangements were put in place without the child having input into the arrangements at the time. A number of children recounted an initial acceptance of the disruption of arrangements, which then changes as a child starts to experience negative impacts or difficulties with new arrangements and circumstances.

Being involved in decision making varied over the years post-separation, with children having different experiences of how this occurred. However, the overriding experience about the level of involvement in decision making was feelings of confusion and not feeling heard. The emotional impact of children's experience of decision making is explored in depth in Chapter Six.

Several children had experienced court mediation processes as a way of having a say about how they wanted contact arrangements to be structured. It was not always clear as to what aspect of the court process children were referring to in these narratives. For the purposes of analysis and discussion in this study, the position is taken that children are referring to mediation processes. Children predominately referred to the concept of mediation and court counsellors. Allison (12) described her experience as one where she “spoke with the lady, I said what I wanted to say”, and Donna (11) described when “we went to court family counselling and I no longer had to do the 50/50 thing”. Both Allison and Donna also described an environment and process that sparked negative interactions with parents. Allison described her father “telling me what to say”, and Donna expected that what she had said would be confidential, only to discover that her father read her transcript from her conversation with the court counsellor. Children described court mediation as not achieving the changes that they had anticipated. Some children said that even though they had contributed their view, the arrangements didn’t change and they didn’t understand why their wishes weren’t considered. Annabel (9) described seeing the court counsellor, but finding “nothing happened that I wanted”. Children’s descriptions of these processes highlight emotional and potentially physically unsafe processes which are further explored in Chapter Six.

Children described decisions being made about contact with no consultation or involvement. Annabel (9) talked about a series of changes to contact over time, where she felt that she was not involved in the decision making, only experiencing the results of these decisions. Initially she was aware that her parents attended court and “we were told to do week about” [one week with mum, one week with dad]. Further changes to arrangements occurred without any involvement or discussion with Annabel; she reflected: “and then, I actually have no idea of what happened in court for some reason we stopped mum doesn’t know either for some reason we stopped seeing dad for quite a while”. From Annabel’s

perspective, there is little support from her parents or other adults around the changes to contact, nor is there any explanation as to why these changes occurred. Her comment that “mum doesn’t know either [why arrangements changed]” reveals the potential for undermining feelings of security, when a child may not be able to rely on the adults in their life to assist with their understanding of situations. Annabel’s narrative described an experience where she feels that there was a lack of explanation around the changes in contact with her father. The children in this study reflected a need for support to make meaning of the changes that occur to their families when parents separate; when this support is not provided, children can be left wondering and trying to make their own sense and meaning.

For siblings Gail (10) and George (12), arrangements were made informally between the parents. Even though both siblings described the arrangements positively, they expressed uncertainty as to why they had not been consulted or their views sought. George stated that he “didn’t feel like he could say anything felt that I didn’t have a say in what was happening or why it was happening” and further “being able to talk about what was happening and why it was being changed would have been good”. He suggested that “if a decision is being made [explain to the child] why does it have to change from one plan to the other”. George’s comments suggest that having reasons to why things change would be helpful for children. Some children expressed the desire to be involved in decision making, but often their description of their experience was one of having decisions imposed upon them.

One child in this study described decision making around contact and family function being facilitated through a counsellor as part of the SCASP program. Fiona (12) described how the counsellor assisted her and her parents to discuss living arrangements, ensuring that Fiona’s stated needs were heard by both of her parents. Fiona said “I could speak to my parents without feeling guilty about what I needed”. The experience for Fiona was one of supported decision making, with her parents being able to acknowledge and respond to her

needs. In this study, the experience of children's involvement in decision making was diverse and facilitated through different means. Children did not always actively seek to have influence over decisions, but they expressed their desire to have had some influence and to be supported to develop an understanding of why and how decisions were made. Where children had been involved, particularly in more formal processes such as court mediation, there was an expectation from the child that the decision would be made incorporating their wishes. This was not how children's descriptions of the experience portrayed the outcomes. This raises the question: how do we ensure that children are aware of the nature and purpose of these processes and understand the extent of their influence?

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the way in which children described their experience of parental separation. The way in which a child experiences the day of parental separation is the foundation on which children build their understanding of their changing families. For some children in this study, the event of a parent leaving the family home occurred without warning or full explanation, bringing with it rapid changes to living arrangements and a sense of permanency to the separation. Children described trying to make sense of these changes and actively navigating changing relationships within their family systems. For other children, a parent leaving the family or taking the child and leaving the home didn't signify to them a permanent separation, and their understanding of the permanency of the separation occurred more gradually. In this study, all children described a lack of agency at this time, and described feeling like observers of the changes that were unfolding around them. The impact on a child's sense of ontological security and their engagement in the various systems was explored from the perspective of this point in time and how the changes that parental separation brings unfold in the weeks and years post-separation.



Children experienced varied living arrangements post-separation. For some children, living arrangements at the beginning of separation had lasted some years or were permanent at the time of the interview. However, stability in arrangements did not necessarily indicate that the arrangements were working for the children. Other children experienced multiple changes to living arrangements in short periods of time after the separation. Many children expressed confusion about these changes and did not feel that they had a say in what was happening. They often had little understanding of why the changes occurred. Where children's opinions were actively canvassed, the children described difficult environments which were emotionally and physically unsafe in terms of their relationships with a parent, even though they may have felt agency in the process and received the living arrangements that they desired.

Parental separation necessitated changes in relationships across their family and broader systems. Physical changes in access and contact and the accommodation of stepfamilies, all contributed to the nature of this experience. Children described ongoing renegotiation of these relationships, changes over time and decision making in relation to contact as a direct result of how they experienced these relationships.

Chapter Six will explore the stated emotional and psychological experiences of the children, related to the described experiences of parental separation for this group of children.

## **Chapter 6: Findings–How a Child Feels when Families Change**

Step into my shoes and see how it feels (Donna 11).

### **Introduction to the chapter**

Children reported a range of emotional responses when talking about their experiences of parental separation. Some emotions were immediate and transitory, with other emotional responses persistent and transformed over time. This chapter explores the emotional impact as reported by the children, drawing together similar themes across the interviews. The children's descriptions of their families' separation (Chapter Five) provide the lens through which the emotional and psychological impacts can be explored. A range of situations, experiences and relationships were described, enabling children to reflect on the emotional impact of parental separation.

Research, conducted with professionals and adults retrospectively, has consistently found that parental separation and divorce creates long term and negative impacts on children (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2003; Mackay, 2005; O'Hanlon et al., 2007). Speaking directly, children provided a range of perspectives on their experience of parental separation and how they made sense of these experiences. Exploring and documenting children's perspectives on parental separation enables us to develop an understanding of the impact on their wellbeing, from their perspective. It provides an opportunity to explore with children what stressors impact on their wellbeing and adjustment when parents separate (Boney, 2003; Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 2001; Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Maes et al., 2012).

Parental separation and divorce and the changes that occurred gave rise to a broad and deep range of feelings for the children in this study. While each child's reaction is unique, similar emotions were experienced by the children. Children described:

- sadness and feelings of loss
- feelings of confusion and uncertainty
- not feeling safe
- feelings of being invisible and of not being valued
- not being understood or heard by the adults in their lives
- feeling depressed, anxious and worried.

This chapter will explore each of these superordinate themes in depth.

### **Sadness and feelings of loss**

As previous research discovered, many children find the impact of parental separation stressful. It provokes feelings of sadness and loss, without necessarily developing clinical disturbances such as anxiety or depression (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Kelly, 2003). Feelings of sadness and loss permeated the stories of the children in this study. These feelings were often experienced at the time of separation but, for some children, sad feelings and intense loss were pervasive in the years following parental separation.

### **Loss of connection with a parent**

As I described in Chapter Five, the separation of parents often occurred on the day that children were informed. Some of the children recall feeling sad at this time and missed the parent who had left the home. Gail (10) stated: “when it first happened I was very young, I missed dad a lot because he used to tuck me in”. The loss of this secure routine is remembered as significant and suggests a loss of security. Being tucked in at night is a nurturing experience that can bring feelings of safety and security to a child’s world. Over time, these feelings were mediated through the provision of a different routine that re-established connection and security: Gail “would call him [dad] at night to say good night”. Whether this strategy was implemented by the child or her parent isn’t clear; however, the need to ensure

that children continue to feel connected and secure when parents separate is pertinently reflected in this child, who is able to recognise the importance of putting in place another way for this to happen. The remembered actions of a parent are missed, and this may leave a child with intense feelings of loss and missing their parent. It is not simply the physical presence of a parent, but what that presence brought with it, the actual care giving that a parent practised during that time together.

Losing connection with a parent because of changes in living arrangements and environments created feelings of loss for some children in this study. Fiona (12) described a situation that created feelings of sadness and distress; of the way in which the arrangements impacted on her, she stated: “I remember being upset at not being able to take my teddy bear from mum’s to dad’s house or take anything from mum’s to dad’s house”. Fiona described not being able to take items that made her feel connected to her mum’s house or that may act as an item of security for her when with her other parent. This is further exacerbated for Fiona by feeling that her mother is excluded from knowing about her life with her father. She recounted that her mother does not know where her father lives and is not allowed to visit and that this “was a concern” for her. When at her father’s house, she is not allowed to contact her mother. Fiona described feeling “sad and upset”, saying “how hard this was”. Fiona reported that these arrangements were distressing and disconnected her from a place which she identified as secure. Fiona’s experience reflected research which found that divorce becomes an ontological reality for some children when they experience radical changes to their families, colliding with their previous reality with feelings of how can the child *be* when their parents are not together (Root, 2010). Overlaid with Fiona’s emotional reactions is concern for her mother. Other studies with children in shared care arrangements indicate that this arrangement does not necessarily produce security for the child, but that what is important is the way in which each parent remains a sensitive, active and protective presence for the child (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). Reflected in Fiona’s story is the perceived denial of her

mother, unable to provide this ongoing presence when Fiona is staying at her father's residence.

### **Feelings of loss and sadness in relation to siblings**

As Chapter Five explored, parental separation can disrupt a range of other relationships, including between parents and their children and between siblings. Family structures can be complex prior to a separation, in that they may already comprise half-siblings or step-siblings. Allison (12) at first described being upset when she found out that her mum and dad were going to separate: "when mum and dad first split up I just ended up crying on Paul's [half-brother] shoulder". Her initial feelings of sadness at the parental separation shift to feelings of loss and sadness for her relationship with her half-brother, who left to live with his birth mother in another city. Significantly, her half-brother was also the person who, she felt, supported her when she was feeling sad or upset. Without him in the family, she is now having to develop other strategies or find ways to manage her emotions and feelings of distress. The feelings of loss are pertinent, two years post-separation, because she said: "Paul [half-brother] was the one who cheered me up every time I got sad and so now I have to cheer myself up or just stay sad until the next day" and wished that "mum and dad had never split up, Paul would still be here if dad hadn't moved out". Throughout this part of the interview, Allison was upset and teary. Feelings of sadness and loss permeated the conversation and were strikingly present and real for Allison. The separation occurred over two years prior to this interview, indicating the potential ongoing impact of parental separation on children's emotional wellbeing. Allison's longing for connection with her half-brother has not eased with time. She stated: "I miss him and wish he would just come back and I wonder when am I going to visit him, when am I going to see him next". Allison did not feel that her parents were supporting this relationship. She feels that her parents have created this situation where she has lost contact and support.

## **Delayed feelings of loss and sadness**

For some children, feelings of sadness were not reported as present at the point of separation. For Charlie (13) it happened some months after the separation, when he was made aware of the permanency of the separation. When his mother re-partnered, he realised that his parents would not be getting back together: “I felt sad and frustrated, I was sad they wouldn’t be getting back together. I was frustrated; I would never see him [dad] again”. This was related to the physical implications of the separation, of residing in different towns at the time, and a fear that he would lose contact with his father.

As I described in the previous chapter, John’s (11) parents separated when he was 6 years old, however, John thought that they lived in different towns for work reasons, and he did not conceptualise or understand the parenting relationship as one of separation. When John was 11 years old, he said, his mother clarified the fact that, through these years, his parents had been separated. The way in which John had been living with, and understanding his family and social relationships, was disrupted, requiring him to make new sense of his world and relationships. He recounted that, since gaining this understanding, he is “getting a bit sad sometimes” and must try to “cheer myself up”. It also heightened feelings of loss for him, in relation to his father, “I just like being with him, being around him, I miss him”. While the living situation itself didn’t change for John, the need to consider his family with a different lens brought reported feelings of sadness and loss.

Charlie and John’s narratives demonstrated that some children come to different understandings of their families over time; and at these points, children can experience intense feelings of sadness and loss. Evident in this study are the ongoing changes in both the physical environment and the psychological landscape of children’s lives, which impact on them.

## **Changes to parental contact arrangements**

Changes to parental contact arrangements often accentuated feelings of acute sadness, particularly when the child did not understand the reason for the changes. Annabel (9) didn't provide an account of how she felt when her parents first separated, but she was very clear about her feelings when contact arrangements with her dad changed and she was not able to see her father for a number of months. She reported: "I don't know why it changed [contact] and now I just cry myself to sleep". Her sadness is infused with confusion because, from her perspective, not even her mother knew why it had changed. She stated that she "was all confused and every couple of nights I would burst into tears and say when am I going to see my dad again"? The sense of not knowing when she was to see her father, or what the plan might be for contact, appeared to exacerbate her feelings of being upset and sad. There is a sense from Annabel that the adults [her mother] were not able to ease the pain of not knowing by providing an explanation for the changes. This may have implications for her sense of being secure in her world.

## **Deteriorating relationships with parents**

Children also described feelings of sadness and loss when the relationship with one parent deteriorated after parental separation, reflecting findings from previous research (Kalmijn, 2013). Donna (11) described the deterioration of her relationship with her father and the feeling that she could not build a bond with him, stating: "it's really hurtful [dad's behaviour toward her] and I've kind of given up like trying to make a bond I guess". Donna spoke about physically withdrawing from this relationship by not going on contact visits. Charlie (13) talked about feeling "excluded" and "left out" from his father's new family and also of being aware that his father wasn't providing financial support to his mother. He constructed this as his father not caring for him, saying to his dad: "if you really care you give mum the money". Charlie said "I was sad because I lost my dad" in the context of his

relationship with his father; he hadn't lost him physically, but rather emotionally and relationally.

### **Children express a sense of loss for “not being a family”**

A bit different, not a typical sort of family (Fiona 12).

In the context of broad social changes to family formation, children in this study expressed a sense of loss in not feeling they were a “typical sort a family”. This reflected a social discourse which positions a two-parent family as the standard by which other family types are measured, drawing on a range of studies delineating the negative impacts of parental separation on children (Amato & Keith, 1991; O’Hanlon et al., 2007; Parkinson, 2011a). Social discourse and norms of a typical healthy family are pervasive, and a number of children in this study demonstrated that the social discourse impacts on their ontological security. Children described how they find themselves in families that are often constructed negatively in the community discourse, where there is a perception that strong families are those that stay together (Williamson et al., 2018) and notions of being an intact family (Parkinson, 2011a). Chapter Two described how social policy has been shaped by these discourses, adding a further layer of complexity for children who are actively making meaning of their changing families. Deidre (13) talked about missing “being one big family, mother, father and brother together”. Fiona (12) stated that she “feels different at times” and “did not know many people at school who have lost a parent”. These feelings are accentuated when they have the experience of not being valued in the context of their new families.

A few children displayed a belief and a wish that their families would re-form. These children believed that the changes to their family were transitory, and that their family would re-form as it existed pre-separation. These feelings and wishes may arise because the changed family circumstances have not been made clear to the children. Or, as Deidre (13) expressed it (above), the perception of family social norms may support a child’s belief that their families



would re-form. Charlie (13) stated that he was feeling sad but “hoping they would get back together”. When it became clear that this wasn’t going to happen, when his mother re-partnered, he described “feeling different” and experienced feelings of “sadness” like those described by other children when parents initially separated. He recognised that his family was now “different” to other families. For Allison (12), two years after the separation, there were still feelings of “wishing it had never happened because I enjoyed life back then” and “I just love being a whole family and not just a family that lives apart. I just wanted it to be all fixed. I felt like I needed it to be ok”. A number of children stated that they did not realise that their parents had separated, even though one parent had physically moved out of the family home. They still believed that their parents were together, just living differently.

These descriptions and experiences suggest that some children actively wish for their families to be typical or continue to believe that they are whole and going to remain that way. For some children, the realisation of the separation occurs over time, which may be a strategy which the child employs to manage the difficult feelings, as Deidre (13) stated: “it was like a longer time that I found out I kind of like I wasn’t upset, like I found out and it was in my own way basically”. Some children may be actively resisting the changes to their family perhaps partly because of what these changes would mean in the broader social system.

As Chapter Five set out, family change through parental separation and divorce can disrupt relationships more broadly than those with parents, contributing to the sense of loss of a family or of what it means to be a family. Loss of siblings was articulated by Allison (12), who demonstrated this profound impact on her sense of family. Children described feelings of isolation, of not being included in the formation of new families; this impacted on their making sense of the new situation and what family might look like for them post-parental separation. Children are aware of what a family looks like in our social world. With parental separation, there is a destabilisation of a child’s sense of their place in the world. The social

construction of family and the lived experience of children when families are re-formed contribute to a disruption of children's ontological security.

Feelings of sadness and loss pervaded children's narratives in different ways and for different reasons. A unifying element in this study is the sense of loss: loss of a sibling, a parent, the way of perceiving what a family should be. These feelings aren't necessarily present at the point of parental separation, but they can emerge and re-emerge through the ongoing transitional nature of family change for these children.

### **Feelings of confusion and uncertainty**

Children described the way in which change was managed in their families and extended systems, creating a range of responses that impacted on their emotional wellbeing. As has been observed in previous research, when parents choose divorce, they "choose to be in the world in a different way, choose an action that allows each one's self to move into the future separate from the other" (Root, 2010, p. 33). This disrupts a child's sense of who they are in the world (ontology) and how to act in the world (agency), because, up to this point, their sense of being and agency is referenced within the framework of their family. While parents are negotiating and re-imagining their lives, children in this study feel uncertainty and confusion.

For some children the arrangement post-separation was stable and remained in place for some years. However, this didn't necessarily indicate that the child felt supported in these environments, or that the stability of an arrangement necessarily brought emotional certainty. As was reported in Chapter Five, Fiona (12) reflected that she would "wonder why" arrangements were in place for after school care, when she imagined that she could have been at her mother's house at this time (while dad was at work). There is little evidence from Fiona's (12) narrative that she viewed her parents as assisting her to make sense of her living

arrangements or as being aware of the concerns and questions she had in relation to the way their family was formed post-separation. Fiona's sense of place in the social world and sense of agency all played a part in the way she processed and experienced the parental separation and post-separation family arrangements. Fiona attempted to construct meaning about her social world and find her way in achieving change.

In Chapter Five, a number of children were quoted as saying that changes being made to arrangements without explanation created stress, uncertainty and confusion for them. Earlier in this chapter, George (12) described himself as feeling confused about the decision that he would not have contact at his father's house stating: "I did not really have a say in what was happening or why it was happening". George's younger sibling, Gail (10), was also not clear about why changes occurred reflecting: "I don't know why it changed" but later connecting this with "dad got sick" as a possible explanation. Children in this study were actively constructing a narrative to account for the changes in their lives. Even when arrangements were satisfactory, children felt excluded, not valued, and they were confused when changes were made without consideration of their views. George stated: "I would like to have been able to talk about what was happening and why it changed, that would have been good".

### **Mediation (Family Court)**

As Chapter Two discussed, the mediation court process provides a supported avenue for children to express their views and to potentially have some agency in decision making processes about their families. How children in this study experienced court mediation differed; for some children, it increased feelings of confusion. Annabel (9) was involved in court mediation and said that she "saw this lady and got to talk to her, but nothing happened that we wanted". Annabel expressed feelings of confusion about this process; she felt that her expectations were not managed effectively. Annabel is part of a process where she is able to

express her views, but is confused as to why her wishes did not appear to be taken into account in the final decision. It may be that Annabel's age was a consideration for the decision makers, reflecting studies where the views of younger children are not as valued as those of older children in court mediation processes (Harmer & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014). There is a risk that a child will feel devalued by these processes, believing that their views are not important or valued by the adults. This is reflected in Annabel's (9) narrative: "what is the point [of participation in court mediation processes if we] don't get what we wanted". The impact of participation in court mediation on children's wellbeing will be further explored in this chapter in the section on feelings of safety.

### **Impact of feelings of uncertainty and confusion in other systems**

The sense of confusion and disruption that changes to contact arrangements or decisions around family arrangements can impose on children's external environments was also evident through the children's experience in this study. Annabel (9) stated that she was so preoccupied with trying to work out what was happening in terms of contact arrangements each day that "at school I just couldn't concentrate on my work". As noted, she felt upset by the changes to contact arrangements and has actively implemented strategies to manage these difficult emotions. She described trying to "concentrate on the good things not just the bad" and "I try to concentrate on something else when I am sad". Annabel experienced feelings of sadness and a preoccupation with the "bad things", and it takes considerable energy and active distraction to enable her to shift these feelings. Important domains, such as school and friendships, are affected by the emotional impact described by children in this study in relation to the parental separation. For some children, the emotional distress and confusion they experience in their home environments because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of contact and living arrangements potentially impacted on their cognitive and emotional capacity across other life domains.

Similarly, Allison (12) stated that she deliberately puts “away my confused thoughts and just trying to focus on the positive”. She consciously tried to change her thinking and address her difficult emotions through distraction: “I just don’t want to concentrate on this thinking”. This study demonstrates findings reflected in previous research, that some children are able to draw on cognitive strategies to assist them to manage their confused thinking; those children demonstrated a resilience that enables them to adapt to distressing disturbances to their family systems (Masten, 2014; Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). Children actively tried to concentrate on positive aspects of their lives when they were unable to address the confusion. Some of the children in this study do not see their parents as assisting them to process and make sense of the changes taking place in their families. Chapter Seven will explore the role that other significant adults can play in helping children to make sense of the changes in their families’ lives.

### **Feelings of not being safe**

A number of the children in this study spoke about times and experiences when they did not feel safe. This was sometimes in relation to physical safety with a parent, expressing fear of their (in this study) father’s aggression and behaviour. Emotional safety was also compromised for children and impacted on their ability to express how they were feeling or what they needed. These feelings arose in a number of contexts, in formal processes such as court mediation and also sometimes as part of their interactions in their families or in school environments.

### **Family Court mediation processes**

Chapter Five described the engagement with the court mediation process for a number of children in this study. It was not always clear from the children’s narrative what stage of the legal process they were referring to, what is significant to this study, is the way in which

the children experienced being involved in a process that invited their opinions about post separation arrangements. The involvement in a formal process of expressing their views and needs in relation to contact and family arrangements is a significant factor in the children's narratives and provides a reflection on how children can experience these processes—how these processes make children feel. As well as expressing feelings of confusion around decisions that were made, children also described feeling emotionally unsafe through these processes. Allison (12) described how the very process created feelings of unease and concern in her, including feelings of coercion and pressure from her father prior to speaking with the court counsellor. She indicated that her father was “telling me what to say, telling me to say I wanted to stay with him and not my mum, that I am scared of my mum and stuff like that”. As she tells this story, she reflected that she doesn't have any concerns with her mum, but “I am scared of my dad, and after I said I was scared [of dad to the court counsellor] I didn't want to go back to dads”. The court mediation processes around parenting agreements aim to elevate the voice of children into the decision making process (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010), and Allison did display confidence in this system by letting the court counsellor know what it is like for her, stating: “I just ignored what he [father] wanted me to say”. She felt confident to express what she needed, to the court counsellor, even though she recognised that it might have a negative impact on her relationship with her father. Allison goes on to say “I didn't want to go back to dad's after the report came back and after he had read it because I was scared of what he might say”, and her fear is realised: “he started blaming me that it is all my fault I don't get to see him all the time and it's all my fault for everything”. The court mediation process is one that encourages and supports children to speak and be heard, but it may have unsafe consequences for some children and impact on their relationships with their parents.

Donna (11) also described conflict with her father post-separation, exacerbated through the court mediation process. She had believed that what she said to the “court

counsellor was going to be confidential”, reflecting the expectations a child might have of a formal process, one that promotes children’s voices in the decision making around contact and family arrangements. This belief and expectation of the process enabled Donna to feel secure in putting across her view and her needs, stating that she “felt heard by the court counsellor”. However, Donna thinks that her father found out what she said, “as he went back in there for another 30 minutes and then I think that is when he found out”. Donna’s need for a safe place to speak of her experiences was compromised, and this had significant ramifications for her emotional wellbeing and her relationship with her father. She stated that her father told her “to fuck off, you stabbed me in the back”. During the interview she described that the day when her father said this to her as the “worst day of my life”. Donna sometimes felt distressed by these interactions and spoke about accessing the Kids Helpline<sup>2</sup> on one occasion. Conflict with her father was also present prior to the court mediation. This will be outlined in the following section.

Both Allison and Donna reported that, initially, they felt safe speaking to the court counsellor about their experiences and wishes. Both had some level of belief that what they spoke about would remain confidential. They both described experiencing this process of speaking out as increasing conflict with a parent. Both Donna and Allison made decisions to limit or cease contact with their father after this process, despite court orders being in place for contact. Their experience demonstrated the way in which involvement in one system can have significant consequences in their familial system and potentially impact on the longer term relationship with a parent.

### **Conflict with a parent**

Much research has explored the nature of the relationship post-separation between parents as having an impact on children’s wellbeing, particularly if there is conflict between

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<sup>2</sup> Kids Helpline is Australia’s only free, private and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/about/about-khl>

parents (Baxter et al., 2011; Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 2003; Mackay, 2005; McIntosh, 2003; Sun, 2001). Ongoing conflict between parents post-separation has been demonstrated to have a range of negative effects on children (Baxter et al., 2011; Hetherington, 2003; McIntosh, 2003). Two of the children in this study described specific incidents of conflict and violence occurring pre-separation, between their parents or by a parent toward a sibling. There were further stories of more generalised conflict in family homes pre-separation for other children. In this study, the children who spoke of conflict with a parent were referring to their fathers. While two children explicitly commented on conflict between parents, the children in this study predominantly focused on the nature of their direct relationship with one of their parents, the parent/child dyad, and how this changed or how they were trying to navigate this new terrain. Understanding the dyadic relationship from the child's perspective demonstrates the profound effect that this relationship may have on a child's sense of self, wellbeing and safety.

For some children, conflict directly with their father occurred prior to the parental separation. Donna (11) recalled her father being “angry and just yelling for no reason” and needing to support her younger brothers: “I went up to them for they were upset”. While this description may not have been indicative of ongoing conflict in the home environment, Donna's experience of ongoing conflict post-separation suggests that it may have been an entrenched pattern when she was living with both her parents. Post-separation, Donna continued to describe incidents of abusive behaviour from her father, saying that “he got angry and started swearing at me over the phone” in the context of changing contact arrangements. These experiences were distressing for Donna and impacted on her wellbeing to the extent that she actively sought support from services like Kids Helpline to talk through the emotional impact of these interactions. She described ongoing conflict with her father directly, and her father's conflict with her other systems, including her friendships, which will



be discussed later in this chapter. Donna's experiences are indicative of the way in which parental relationships potentially affect children's other systems.

Like Donna, Annabel (9) described conflict with her father in the family context both pre- and post-separation. There were different forms of conflict. Pre-separation conflict was between her half-brother and father and their mother. She talks about a range of incidents, all marked by "dad would always yell at mum and dad would yell at Paul [half-brother] and it was like he just kept yelling". Conflict escalated to Police involvement on a number of occasions. Annabel described feelings of being scared at these times and "running down the street to my godmother's house". Post-separation, in the context of changing contact arrangements, she described being "scared" of having sleepovers at her father's. She stated: "I find him kind of mean, even though we don't have to see him as much it is still painful, he still yells at us". From Annabel's narrative, it does not appear that the adults are hearing or understanding the fear and anxiety that she is experiencing, directly related to her father's presentation of aggression. Faced with school holidays where she is required to spend a week with her father, she stated: "I don't really want to do week about on the long holidays, I am scared, because we haven't done it for nearly a year and so not sure what is going to happen". Significantly, children's feelings of anxiety sometimes come from a place of being scared; and, for the children in this study, feelings of being unsafe do not appear to be recognised or acknowledged by the adults in their lives.

Some children in this study did not describe conflict with a parent pre-separation, instead focusing on the conflict which occurred after parents separated. As discussed in the previous section, for Allison (12), the court mediation process created conflict with her father, where she reported that her father's response was to "blame me for the changes [to contact]". She stated that she was "feeling scared", that she is "scared of her dad".

For a number of children in this study, the conflictual nature of a relationship impacted on the child's ability to bond with a parent and, at times, created internal conflict for a child. As Annabel's (9) narrative clarifies, she has expressed conflicting emotional responses, upset and scared to see her dad on the one hand (as described earlier in this chapter) and extremely upset when contact is stopped to the point where she would "cry myself to sleep wondering when I would see dad again". This experience has been reflected in other studies with children, which found that conflictual relationships between a parent and child post-separation impact on the attachment relationship with a parent (Baxter et al., 2011; Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005).

### **Contact arrangements experienced as not safe**

Ideas of safety and security were also present in descriptions of living arrangements. Fiona (12) was in a stable shared care arrangement for six years. However, the stability of this arrangement did not translate to feelings of security for Fiona or impact positively on her wellbeing. Reflecting the findings of Sadowski and McIntosh (2016) that children "in shared care arrangements if unable to gain access to comfort from an absent parent when physically or emotionally upset, would impact on their feelings of security" (p. 83). Fiona described how, when at her dad's house, she "wasn't allowed to call my mum". She said that she just wanted to be able to "tell her about my day". This upset her and created anxiety which became, over time, as described by Fiona, depression. Fiona's experience suggests that shared time parenting doesn't in itself produce security or promote wellbeing for a child. Sadowski and McIntosh (2016) concluded that the key determinant of security is the way in which a parent "remains a sensitive, active, protective presence of the child" (p. 83). This finding is relevant for the children in this current study, who expressed feelings of being unsafe and not secure, in various living arrangements. Safety and security for children in this study was not necessarily built around the structure of living arrangements or contact arrangements, but

around the nature of their relationship with each parent and how this was supported outside physical contact.

## **Feelings of being invisible and not valued**

Always remember to be a mother or father first (Charlie 13),

Children described feelings of being invisible or not valued in their families post-separation. When parents separate and families change, relationships with parents and with siblings are affected, bringing about a shift in the way in which a child may experience these relationships and leading to complex emotions. I use the term *feeling invisible*, because two of the children in this study used this language to describe their experiences with one of their parents. It is a strong image and description of their feeling of little worth in the relationship with their parent or in their family.

Several children described not feeling part of the usual family routines in new families. This created feelings of exclusion, sadness and upset. Allison (12) described a morning where “one morning I didn’t get breakfast, dad usually makes us all breakfast and this morning he made the others [siblings and step-siblings] breakfast and not me”. When a child feels that they are not included in family routines or nurturing actions by a parent, the child may experience this as a loss and feel a lack of security or understanding of the relationship. As a child experiences new family formations, they respond to changes in their parent, because the parent themselves will be experiencing changing relationships post-separation. Allison’s (12) feelings are intense: “sometimes at dad’s I felt like I was invisible, dad’s new partner and dad would concentrate on the others and not me so I felt really invisible”. Allison’s feelings of being invisible arose directly from the way she perceived her father and stepmother responding to the children in the house. She describes the way in which her parent now parents differently with his new partner and the redefining of roles and

responsibilities which impacted on Allison's sense of being in this family. She feels that she is overlooked and unnoticed. It has been observed in previous research that parents can choose the relationships in new families, but children have no real choice at all. They may be expected to treat the step-parents and step-siblings as family when they may feel little connection to these people (Root, 2010).

Allison (12) further described the situation: in there are lots of children, and she feels lost in this family. She described the family as being "crowded", suggesting that she feels that there is no room for her, that she is not noticed, and stating that "sometimes I just didn't really want to go over there it was really crowded". Allison described an experience of losing connection with her father and a sense that he didn't give parental care, to the point where she stated: "I don't like spending time with him". Allison described feeling that she has to "be responsible for everything", a sense at both a practical and emotional level. For some children, the feeling of not being cared for or nurtured in line with expectations they have from a parent is profound.

Charlie (13) experienced changes in both his parents' families, with the inclusion of step-parents and siblings. He described not being included in family rituals like Christmas in his father's household, and reflected that he "felt left out cause the kids there they got heaps of stuff for Christmas and I didn't get much". His response to this was to text his dad the following Christmas as a way or mitigating the expected hurt he would experience of feeling he is not valued in this family, "now I message my dad and say don't worry about getting me anything [for Christmas], just spend it all on the kids, cause that is what you usually do". Charlie is pre-empting his exclusion and disappointment by sending this message, but he may also be trying to communicate with his father about his feelings. Charlie (13) also described the relationship with his stepmother as difficult, reflecting: "I don't care about [stepmother] I really hate her now". He asserted that his family with his mother and step-dad is one of

feeling belonging: “I have this family here [my mum’s family] so doesn’t matter so much [that I don’t see my dad]”. Charlie focused on the fact that his resident family is enough; he will concentrate on the family he feels valued within. In this way, he demonstrated the capacity to actively engage in creating and transforming his relationships and systems. Charlie, like other children in this study, described seeking relationships that support a sense of a place in the social world, supporting the notion that the nature of personal relationships is fundamental to ontological security (Jamieson & Milne, 2012).

From the experience of children in this study, it appears that some parents may not be aware of how their actions impact on their child’s feelings of connection and emotional wellbeing. This relationship, between a parent and child, particularly when there is a shift in how families are organised and formed, is a critical element for children’s sense of ontological security and wellbeing. The impact for children in this study of being overlooked in common family rituals such as dad preparing breakfast, or being part Christmas gift giving, is reflected through feelings of being invisible, not feeling cared for or valued in these new families.

The experiences the children in this study had in their families had a critical impact on the ongoing nature of their relationship with a parent. Children responded to feelings of exclusion, of not being cared for or valued, through re-evaluating these relationships. They responded to their feelings of being excluded and not part of their new families in ways that helped them to manage the emotional impact of these situations. Both Allison (12) and Donna (11) sought changes to contact with their fathers through a court mediation process, in direct response to their feelings of exclusion and distress experienced in their fathers’ families. Children in this study reflected previous research findings which concluded that one of the psychological resolutions for children who feel rejected by a parent is to cease contact (McIntosh, 2003).

Children demonstrated that they will make decisions about relationships and actively seek relationships that provide them with a sense of belonging. As Charlie (13) stated: “I am sort of left out [of his father’s family] but I have this family here, [mother and step-dad] so doesn’t really matter, my life is better here with [mum and step-dad]”. The father’s actions, as viewed by these children, increased feelings of dissonance in their relationship, and children sought adult relationships that provided the core parenting that they described as creating a sense of belonging and care. The children in this study demonstrated the capacity to actively invest in or build relationships to achieve a sense of wellbeing and meet their goals, reflecting findings in other research which positions children as active agents in negotiating and making decisions around the nature of their relationships with parents, where these relationships may be deteriorating (Kalmijn, 2013).

The decisions around maintaining or ceasing a relationship with a parent are difficult for children and may in themselves have an emotional cost. Charlie (13) reflected that “it might sound wrong I would rather not have dad in my life”. He indicated that he was conflicted and hurt and that part of him wanted to stay connected with his father, but he had to look after his own emotional wellbeing. He spoke of his mother’s family as the family where he feels included. Children are able to reflect on the need for deep and meaningful relationships. Charlie stated “just asking a kid if they are ok isn’t going to help, like you have to actually talk and bond”. The notion of building bonds recurred through a number of the children’s stories, indicating that children understand the need to work and build relationships with parents, particularly when there have been changes to the family systems. Charlie has been able to start building this bond with his step-dad, acknowledging: “I have told him that we fight because we haven’t fully bonded yet, me and my uncle we can get along really well at times we can, but we haven’t fully bonded like me and my mum”. Charlie may be compensating for the deteriorating relationship with his father by intensifying the relationship with his other parent and stepfather, a noted pattern in other research which concluded that,

from a children's point of view, "the disadvantages of having a poor relationship with one parent after divorce can be compensated by a stronger bond to the other parent" (Kalmijn, 2013, p. 897).

Donna (11) described "giving up on trying to make a bond" with her dad, reflecting her understanding that relationships require work. For a child, coming to a point of not engaging with a parent, not trying to build a relationship, is often contextualised through a range of interactions and relationship difficulties; not a one-off experience, but an accumulation of negative experiences. Donna stated: "it's really hurtful and I get sick of it ... with him saying all that stuff to me", suggesting that there had been a range of experiences that brought her to making this decision.

Parental separation affects the relationship between a parent and a child, and the nature of these changing relationships has emotional implications for children and their sense of being in the world. For children in this study, there was a critical sense of a parent not being able to parent them, to act and respond like a mother or father, which had implications for how they experienced their families. Accordingly, for them, the quality of their relationship with parents was more of a concern than the living or contact arrangements within families, reflecting findings from previous research with children (Cashmore, 2011).

### **Feelings of not being heard by the adults in their lives**

Throughout this chapter, a recurrent theme for the children in this study has been a feeling of not being heard or understood by the adults in their lives, both in formal processes and within their families. Emerging from this study is a sense that children may be given the opportunity to speak, but don't feel that what they say is actually heard. Examples of children utilising other strategies to get parents to hear what they are saying have also been described, including *acting out* behaviour and decisions to cease contact.

Children in this study also described the way in which a parent reacts to their behaviour as creating stress and disruption to the relationships between parents and children, in the context where the child feels that the parents have misinterpreted the reason for the behaviour. Charlie (13) talked about taking up smoking as a “way of coping with the stress of separation”. He described how the adults (mum, dad, step-dad and step-mum) getting together to discuss the situation. He felt that the adults “were not listening” and that they “never understood what I was trying to say, they weren’t paying attention”. This experience compounded feelings of being isolated from the adults in his life at a critical time, and he reacted: “I really don’t care what they were thinking, I was going to tell them to go away and just let me do what I want”. As described by Charlie, the response from the adults was not what he required or what he expected from parents. Charlie was seeking support and understanding around the issues he was experiencing as a result of their decision to separate.

Some children said that they were not being provided with any opportunity to be heard. George (12) felt that he had little control over the way his life was arranged and said that he would have welcomed some involvement in these decisions. George was able to articulate how he would like things to be different, what he misses in the current arrangements; he stated that it would be good if “we could be able to if we were able to have an environment where we could go with dad like to his place”. The children in this study demonstrated the capacity to express their needs and ideas around what would work for them or what they would like to be considered when adults were making arrangements about their lives. For some children, their experience was one of not being asked in the first place, of not being provided with the opportunity to be heard, creating feelings of being devalued and being unable to affect the changes occurring in their lives.

Children in this study demonstrated that they will use a variety of means to communicate with parents and adults – being heard and listened to isn’t just about



conversation and words, in these children's experiences. It is deeper; it is about an attempt by adults to understand what they are saying, linked to the way in which they are experiencing the parental separation. The range of ways in which children express their *voice* is pertinent; as has been asserted in other studies, "the voice of a child is not always a voice" (Mackay, 2001). Children's voices are diverse. They can manifest as silence, as action, or as behaviour, and adults need to be aware of the many ways in which children may be expressing their needs.

Deidre's experience of facilitating change in living arrangements clearly demonstrated the way in which children have diverse ways to communicate when they feel the adults/parents are not listening to them. As described earlier, Deidre (13) and her younger brother initially lived in a shared care arrangement between their parents. This did not work from Deidre's perspective because she did not get on with her brother and believed "he doesn't care about me either and in fact, it was making mine and his [sibling] relationship worse". However, when she tried to tell her parents that she didn't want to have contact at the same time as her brother, she felt that her parents "just think that it's bad that we have to be separated like that", and the contact arrangements did not change. Over a two-year period, Deidre described having to "act out" in order to get her parents to consider changing the contact arrangements. Her parents interpreted this as "because I was affecting him apparently as I was calling him names, I was apparently giving him stress". Deidre is prepared to wear the label of her behaviour because it had an impact, and the contact arrangement works better for her now. But there is an emotional and relationship cost for her. Changes were made in her living arrangements prior to the separation of the siblings "because they felt my behaviour was unsafe so they moved me to another parent and that made me feel upset". She reflected she didn't "feel good enough in a way" and further: "I guess when that happened [changes to arrangements] I felt like I was unloved and stuff".

Children's experiences of decisions being made around contact with parents highlighted some of the potential impacts on a child's wellbeing in relation to the way in which children feel heard or valued in the decision making process. Some children may develop their own narrative, related to their own feelings of self-worth and blame, in relation to the changes being made. As Deidre reflected, her parents now "see me as the problem". It was at this time that Deidre engaged with the SCASP group, her parents' response to her behaviour. Not being heard or understood has the potential to create stress and emotional harm for children. As Deidre demonstrated, children will respond and mediate their behaviour and actions within this context of attempting to be understood.

### **Reporting feelings of depression, anxiety, worry and distress**

Like if kids are sad and want to talk about something, if left too long it could lead to something bad like suicide (Charlie 13).

The children in this study both experienced and were able to express the potential depth of emotion that children may feel, including risks to their emotional and physical safety. Some of the children were very aware of the way in which feelings of exclusion, sadness and loss could potentially have more serious implications for their wellbeing, as Charlie's quote above demonstrated. Children want and need the adults in their lives to notice this potential and to be actively supporting them during these times of family change. A number of children in this study reported impacts on their psychological wellbeing, including feelings of depression, anxiety and worry. For some children, these emotions were more pervasive than the sadness that most of the children described at the time of parental separation or intermittently in the years following, suggesting the potential for some children, after the initial emotional disruption to develop more long-term and serious wellbeing issues. Previous research also notes this (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 2003; Mackay, 2005; O'Hanlon et al., 2007). Children also felt the impact of a desire to emotionally

protect parents, putting their own distress aside because of not wanting to upset their parents, or being worried about how a parent was coping. In this current study, the impact of putting their own needs aside contributed to increasing feelings of anxiety and depression for some children.

The way in which parental separation is experienced by a child can have more profound implications than might be expected from this disruption to their emotional wellbeing. Fiona's (12) experience was described earlier and demonstrated that, for some children, not having a sense of continuity between living environments creates feelings of distress. The sense of disconnection from the absent parent can in itself be a cause of stress and upset for a child, and, if not noticed by the parents or actively facilitated, increases the potential for a child to develop more serious mental health concerns (Afifi & McManus, 2010). Fiona is able to reflect on the way in which her sadness and upset had developed into a more concerning mental health issue. She described, at around the age of 11, becoming anxious and depressed and actively seeking support for these issues.

Sadness and loss are consistent feelings for children when their parents separate and there are changes to family. When children begin to describe different feelings, there is a heightened risk for these children of developing more significant mental health issues or having their emotional wellbeing more negatively affected. A shift into more pervasive negative emotions and responses may be attributable to a range of factors, including individual temperament, as well as the impact of parental separation (Magnuson & Berger, 2009; Ruschena et al., 2005). Children described feeling "scared" about upcoming contact with a parent, particularly when there had been uncertainty and changes to contact with a parent. Feelings of uncertainty and of the unknown exacerbate children's feelings throughout the separation process. During the interview, Annabel (9) was visibly upset and teary when talking about the upcoming contact. She reiterated that she was "scared" and spoke of her

uncertainty about being with her dad for a long period of time. As was described in early sections of this chapter, the relationship and contact with her father had been unpredictable, and sometimes there has been conflict. These are elements that potentially increase a child's susceptibility to longer term and more complicated emotional effects on their wellbeing (Baxter et al., 2011; Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1989).

For some children, the loss of other significant relationships within the family can be an issue and it is increasingly being recognised that the complexity of these family relationships impacts on children's wellbeing (Brown, Manning & Stykes, 2015). There is a risk that, if the impact and importance of these relationships are not addressed or noticed by the parents in these families, the feelings of distress and loss may become pervasive and impact on longer term mental wellbeing (Hetherington, 1989). If children aren't supported to manage these changes to relationships or the emotions they feel at the loss of a relationship, these emotions can be persistent over time and leave a child feeling unsupported or unable to manage emotionally. As was described earlier, Allison (12) talked about the loss of her half-brother, who moved towns after the parental separation, indicating that he had been a primary emotional support throughout her childhood. Since her parents had separated, she reported very little contact with her brother and indicated that this still caused great emotional distress for her. Now, in the face of the changes that parental separation brings to a child's world, she has also lost the person who had been a constant in her life. While she did not name her feelings as depression [not here], she exhibited elements of feeling "down", of pain and hurt that affected her in the long term (were not passing), and she was struggling to manage her emotions without this presence in her life. For Allison, the feelings of sadness and difficulty in regulating this emotion in the longer term may continue to affect her emotional wellbeing, as evidenced by her speaking, two years post-separation, of this situation with her half-brother as still causing an emotional impact.

Some children responded to difficult emotions through withdrawing, physically (for example, staying in a bedroom when on contact) or psychologically, by choosing not to have contact with a particular parent. Withdrawal could be seen as either an active response to a difficult situation or emotion, or an indication of emerging wellbeing issues. Allison (12) described feelings of isolation and being of little value in her father's residence. Her experience was significant, impacting on her sense of wellbeing. She described "withdrawing" to her room and not participating in the routines of the household. For Allison, this may have been a coping strategy, but the potential impact of this withdrawal and of becoming more isolated within the household on her emotional and psychological wellbeing needs to be considered.

Donna (11) also described a form of withdrawal: a withdrawal from the relationship with her father. Her narrative around this decision is marked by ambivalence and a sense that this is the only course of action for her at this time. When asked whether she would like to have contact with her father, she said "not really". Charlie (13) also expressed a wish not to have contact with his father owing to feeling of no value in his father's new family. Again, this is an active response to the situation; however, the withdrawal may also be symptomatic of other mental health or emotional issues. Both these children talk about "not making a bond" with their fathers signifying the deeper emotional impact of their relationships with their parent post-separation.

The potential for the development of longer term wellbeing issues for the children in this study may not necessarily relate directly to the parental separation itself, but rather to the way in which they experienced their ongoing relationships with parents and the interactions of these relationships with their external systems.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter explored the emotional responses of children when parents separate, both at the time of separation and over time, in the context of ongoing changes to families. Children described initial feelings of confusion, sadness and loss. For some children, these feelings were reported continuing post-separation. This applied particularly in cases when there was uncertainty, ongoing changes to contact and living arrangements, or conflict with a parent, or where children did not feel included in decision making or felt excluded from new families. Children in this study talked about the need to be listened to, to feel safe and secure in their relationships, to have predictable living arrangements, to be included in new family rituals, and to be supported to maintain their social connections and friendships and regular routines. These contributed to their wellbeing and sense of being part of a family.

Chapter Seven will explore the supports children identified as being helpful in assisting them to manage the difficult emotions and changes to their families which they experienced when their parents separated. Children used a variety of strategies and accessed various supports to assist them to process their experiences and effect change within their family systems.

## **Chapter 7: Findings–Children’s Experience of Support**

Don’t ever stop helping us to access [support] if we need it (Fiona 12).

### **Introduction to the chapter**

The children in this study were all recruited from a SCASP and had participated in either a group program or individual counselling. A number of the children had accessed both streams of support. Children spoke about the support that assisted them to manage their emotions and responses to parental separation and their changing families. Support was described as internal resources and individual resilience, as well as external support from various environments. The nature of support differed for children, reflecting the theoretical approach to this study of constructionism (as outlined in Chapter Four) which aims to elicit and value individual experiences, asserting that the way in which individuals make sense of the world is valid and real (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998). Some of the children did not feel the adults in their lives listened to them, and the support that they needed was not provided. They felt, at times, that adults lacked awareness and understanding of their experiences. As Donna (11) reflected, “adults may be well meaning, but can make things worse if they don’t listen”. When feeling that their parents aren’t able to provide the support they need, children described seeking support from other sources. The diverse range of support that children described is framed through a systems perspective (as outlined in Chapter Four). This enabled the development of an understanding of the dynamic nature of children’s experiences, the different systems they are engaged with, and how these interrelate. A systems framework values the interrelatedness of the various aspects of a child’s environment and positions the situation as an interrelated whole (Compton & Galaway, 1994; Stevens & Hassett, 2012). The following discussion of supports demonstrates the diversity of children’s experiences within a systems framework. This facilitates an exploration of the experiences of parental separation,

shifting from the predominate discourse of negative effects on children to a more curious approach, interested in how children respond to, and effect, change within their systems.

Children in this study were able to articulate the way in which events and relationships impacted on their wellbeing. They highlighted the fact that, if adults are prepared to engage with children and their communications and develop an understanding of children's experiences, they may be able to assist children to access the support they need. The experience of being part of a group or speaking with a counsellor may have enhanced the experience and capacity of the children in this study. This chapter elucidates what children say that they need when parents separate and they experience family change. Through children's descriptions of their experiences of parental separation and family change, a range of ways in which they can be supported, both practically and emotionally, emerged. Children described support accessed through:

- parental relationships
- siblings
- extended family
- counselling and group programs
- the school environment
- friends and social networks.

## **Parental relationships**

We can't find another parent (Deidre 13).

In Chapters Five and Six children spoke about the nature of their relationship with their parents post-separation as a critical influence on the way in which they adjust to, and make sense of, the changes in their worlds. The children described how the nature of these relationships impacted on their sense of ontological security; how they make sense of family;



and their connections across their external systems. The children's experience of these relationships affected their feelings of value, self-worth, safety and connection to family. The nature of a child's relationship with a parent may influence the way in which children feel supported and may contribute to their need to seek support through other avenues. In this study, the relationship between a child and their parent was experienced by some children as having an impact across a range of systems—sometimes experienced as supportive of these systems, at other times creating discord and disconnection from systems that are important to the child, such as friendships and school. The way in which a relationship with a parent, or a parent's relationship with a child's external system, can contribute to accessing or diminishing support is discussed later in this chapter.

Children in this study recognised that adults and children experienced the world differently. Deidre (13) stated that “you need to think what it is like for the child because our experience is different to what it is for an adult”. Some children experienced this as a strength and support within their family system and described actively seeking parents' help to make sense of what was happening in their families. Annabel (9) stated that she would advise a friend: “if you don't understand, talk to your parent”. There was an expectation that parents would provide support during times of family change; that is, consistent parenting, with attention to children's physical, emotional and social needs. The children were prepared and able to talk about their experiences and expected that the adults would listen and understand their perspectives and provide support. In this study, the experience of being part of a group program or accessing counselling may have contributed to their expectations around adult support. For other children in this study, difficulty accessing support from their parents led to a referral to SCASP, as will be outlined later in this chapter.

## **Siblings**

An understanding of the role of sibling relationships for individual children can assist the adults to consider how to provide support to these relationships that strengthen connection. Children spoke of the support from siblings. Annabel (9) described how, at the initial separation, she could only “talk to my mum and sister”. Fiona (12) reflected that she and her sister “stick together”, that they “have been through the same experience and this has made our bond strong”. It has been found that parental separation can increase feelings of closeness, bonding and support between siblings in some cases (Abbey & Dallos, 2004; Jacobs & Sillars, 2012; Poortman & Voorpostel, 2009; Sheehan et al., 2004). John (11) also described support from his relationship with his older brother. Although the brother does not reside with him, John described the support and relationship as “very strong”.

Some children felt that their parents did not recognise the importance of sibling relationships or assist in maintaining these relationships. As was outlined in previous chapters Allison (12) felt that contact with her half-brother post-separation was not facilitated by her parents, despite this being a significant and supportive relationship for her prior to parental separation. A shift in her family system when her parents separated has significantly impacted on her support from her half-sibling. Within this family, Allison’s younger sister did not describe the same closeness and sense of loss around her older half-sibling, demonstrating that individuals within the same family, may experience connectedness and relationships differently (Jacobson & Rowe, 1999).

## **Extended family networks**

As earlier sections explored, children reported feelings of disconnection, invisibility and not being understood by the adults in their lives. These feelings emerged as significant factors in how children responded to and managed the changes taking place in their family

systems. Beyond their direct relationship with parents, other adults in their extended family systems potentially provided security, connection and understanding for a child. Allison (12) identified her godparents as a long-term and continuing support, providing a sense of continuity around her family changes, because “they just live down the road and we usually go down for dinner”. This had been a longstanding relationship. She had described going to her godparents’ house to seek safety pre-separation, when there were altercations happening in her home between her parents and brother. This has remained a safe place post-separation, enhancing and holding a sense of security for her.

A number of children identified a loss in connection to relationships that existed prior to parents separating, causing feelings of isolation and disconnection. Donna (11) reflected that “dad’s side is getting smaller as we don’t really see them, they are moving away”. Chapter six described her fractured relationship with her father, which is possibly a contributing factor to her ability to remain in contact with this part of her family. She spoke of her mother’s family as mostly still residing in her mother’s country of origin and of having to use technology to communicate. The experience she described was one of a diminishing family support network and a growing sense of isolation. This may limit Donna’s capacity to maintain supportive relationships within the familial network. The reduced contact with extended family is, in part, a direct result of the separation, with the relationship with her father reportedly contributing to the capacity for Donna to access this part of her family.

Children also described defining their family post-separation. They reported creating boundaries around the systems that are important to them, at a time when family boundaries are being renegotiated and re-formed post-separation. This included extended family systems. Charlie (13) described being close to his “pop” and spending time with him. He identified his pop as “where my Aboriginality comes from: and said “I visit him often”. Charlie feels that his father and stepmother are infringing on his family, in that they “are trying to get pop to

like them more than me and mum they visit him all the time”. Charlie stated that he wants to say to them “this is mine and I don’t want you anywhere near it.” Charlie expressed the need for this relationship to remain safe for him and not be influenced by his father, and he is responding by actively seeking to put in place boundaries around his family.

### **Access to counselling and group programs**

At different times we need counselling or support (Fiona 12).

All the children in this study had participated in a group program or individual counselling within the SCASP framework. A number of children spoke about requesting counselling, while other children reported that parents suggested they attend a group or counselling. Access to these programs occurred at various times, often some years after the parental separation. All the children in this study expressed the view that these interventions were helpful on a range of levels, and this will be further explored in this section.

### **Group programs**

Children in this study reported that being in a group with other children who had experienced parental separation was an affirming experience, particularly for those children who did not know many other children in similar circumstances. Fiona (12) stated that it helped her to “develop an understanding that parental separation is ok, happens for other children too”. Participating in a group program was also reported to disrupt feelings of “not being a whole family” (Deidre 13) and other negative perceptions of families that may be prevalent in social discourse where parents have separated. Group programs provided some children with an opportunity to develop an understanding of how and why they were experiencing difficulties in their lives. Deidre (13) reflected that being part of a group “just made me understand more what I was going through hard stuff because of that [parental separation]”.

Children reported that they found it helpful to speak with other children who had similar experiences and to hear how they were managing family change. Allison (12) reflected: “I liked how we chatted and spoke about, how people feel sometimes”. Gail (9) stated: “it was good to talk to other children who know what it is like [when parents separate]”. The aim of the groups was to provide safe places for children to express how they feel and share the emotional impact of parental separation. These children experienced participation in a group program with skilled adult facilitators as an opportunity for the exploration and processing of the impact of parental separation on their lives and relationships. This has been reflected in an evaluation of SCASP, which found that the program gave children “a safe place to talk about their lives” (McArthur et al., 2011, p. 8). The evaluation further stated that the existence of this program required the development of a very skilled children’s workforce which provided quality practice with children (McArthur et al., 2011, p. 14).

Participating in group programs has been found to assist adults and children in developing a sense of mastery and being expert in their own experiences and knowledge (Gitterman & Knight, 2016; Lee, 2017; Wolan, Delaney, & Weller, 2015). Having this knowledge recognised and valued by the adults in their worlds significant for children. Gail (9) described at length one particular game:

We did like a game show there was one child that was a host and they would send questions to the iPad and there were geniuses on the stage and they would read out the questions, so it was like people from home sending in questions for help and we would get to help them (Gail 9).

The experience of children in this study demonstrated that the SCASP group programs fulfilled a number of potential functions for these children. They enabled children to have a safe place to express and explore their feelings; provided an opportunity to develop a better

understanding of what is happening to their families; and created a sense of mastery and confidence in their own knowledge, aligning with the aims of the program (McArthur et al., 2011). Connecting with other children in similar circumstances also enabled children to see that their families are part of a broad range of “normal” family in the bigger social context of family change; this was reported by children in this study and also found in previous studies (Lee, 2017; Wolan et al., 2015).

### **SCASP counselling**

A number of children accessed a SCASP counsellor prior to attending a group program, or instead of a group program. Individual counselling played a range of roles in children’s lives in this study. Children talked about the way in which these adults (the counsellors) supported them to recognise and manage their difficult emotions related to parental separation and the ongoing issues with their relationships with parents. John (11) stated that his counsellor “helps with feelings of sadness” and that he was thinking of returning to counselling because “I feel I need to ... that I feel like sad sometimes”. Children in this study sought out the environments and adult support that they find helpful, that are able to help hold them during times of emotional distress. Charlie (13) said that the counsellor “helped me to manage my emotions” and significantly “to think about what is important to me”. There is a sense from Charlie’s experience that the counsellor assisted him to recognise that his needs and wants are valued and important. Later in Charlie’s narrative, he stated that he would say to a friend: “If your parents don’t care for you, just try to get on with your life, and do the things that you like to do, what is good for you”. Charlie is perhaps able to provide this reflection because he has had the support of a counsellor. It may be that the support he received from the counsellor enabled Charlie to come to this place where he can acknowledge the hurt and pain caused by his relationship with one of his parents, but be able to assert that he needs to make decisions about his own wellbeing. One role of counsellors is to assist

children to make sense of the situation and to determine what they need, and then to help children to facilitate these changes.

An environment that validates and supports children can provide safe ways for children to discuss and make changes to their situations. Fiona's (12) engagement with a counsellor was at her request when she recognised that she was feeling "anxious and depressed". Through her work with the counsellor, Fiona was able to determine what aspects of her family situation were causing her distress and, through supported facilitation with her parents, to bring about changes to her living situation. Counselling or group programs which support a child or a child's views to be heard by their parents, have been shown to improve relationships within family systems (Bunston, Pavlidis, & Cartwright, 2015). Fiona (12) reflected that after this process, "it works better now, there is better communication between my parents and they are more focused on the children and their needs". As noted earlier in this chapter, adults (in this case the counsellor) can support and facilitate understanding across children's systems through genuinely listening and understanding the child's experience.

It has been demonstrated that counselling support directly related to parental separation and family change results in children displaying fewer maladaptive behaviours (Amato, 1994; Newell & Moss, 2011). One of the outcomes of the SCASP initiative required the development of a very skilled children's workforce which provided quality practice with children (McArthur et al., 2011). As indicated by the children in this study, SCASP counsellors did support and work with children to enable them to develop an understanding of the parental separation itself and what this means for their sense of family. John (11) was told six years after the parental separation that his parents were actually separated; he had been living with the world view that his parents were still together, just living in different cities. He indicated that this created a profound disturbance to his understanding of his social and family world and impacted on his emotional wellbeing. His mother suggested that he see a counsellor, to

which he eventually agreed. John reflected that the counsellor “helped explain the situation, what divorce meant, she explained it to me”. The experience of children in this study suggests that adults can be instrumental in assisting children at times of confusion, when their sense of security in their family worlds is disrupted. This may need to come from an external adult, someone not connected with the family system, but someone who is skilled and knowledgeable when working with families experiencing change.

Children also described the way in which their engagement with a counsellor helped them to develop concrete strategies to explore their experiences and emotions. Fiona (12) stated: “I found art this last lot of counselling has encouraged me to draw and paint and I love it and find it a good way to express myself or get out the feelings art has been helpful”.

Children also reflected that counselling was helpful around a range of issues, not always specifically about parental separation. George (12) stated that: “I have been involved in a little individual counselling, but wasn’t as much about that [parental separation], it had something to do with this, but a more general scale”. Parental separation is going to have an ongoing influence on children’s lives and their families, and counselling in this context is a recognition that children may not want the separation to be the primary focus, and may not actually see it as the reason for their presenting issue—keeping in mind that the broader context, of family change and shifts in family and parental boundaries, is far more nuanced and perhaps a more holistic way of approaching children. As evidenced through the experience of children in this study, counsellors within the SCASP are well placed and skilled to provide this holistic approach to children’s lives.

There is value in counsellors with specific skills and knowledge of separation and divorce. As this group of children demonstrated, and as is reflected in other research, talking to someone with this knowledge and skill base can be of benefit (Amato, 1994; Newell & Moss, 2011). The children’s experience also demonstrated that this assistance can occur at



various stages, soon after the separation or some years after the separation and divorce. Fiona (12) described it this way:

I think adults need to know that it isn't all bad for kids, but it's always there and at different times we need counselling or support. So don't ever stop helping to access if needed. But don't force kids to go to counselling.

## **The school environment**

### **The role of teachers**

Children had varied experiences of the school environment as a source of support. For some children, teachers provided a safe environment and actively supported them with resources to help with processing the impact of parental separation. Allison (12) described a teacher providing her with a book called "Mum and Dad Glue" (Gray & Wildish, 2010) which she found particularly helpful:

It was really good I read it I have read it quite a few times at school and it explains—at the beginning everything in the life is broken, but the end of the book it is all mended, I love this book (Allison 12).

Significantly, Allison read this book aloud during the interview, pausing to explain how various aspects of the story related to her experience. Allison stated: "I told mum about [the book] too". The teacher provided Allison with a resource that is able to situate her experience in a broader discourse, as Allison stated: "I am going through the same as that little boy, I just wanted it to be all fixed, I felt like I needed it to be all ok and that I can relate to the book by my life". For Allison, having a teacher who was aware of potential resources that might be helpful for a child provided an opportunity for support and connection. Allison was able to share this story with her mother; potentially strengthening her mother's understanding of Allison's experience, and, as stated, to use this story as a way of demonstrating her

experiences in the context of this research. Donna (11) reflected that she would advise a friend to “maybe tell a teacher” if they were finding it hard when their parents separated, suggesting a level of trust in these adults to provide support and understanding.

Some of the children in this study did not find the way a teacher responded to their situation as supportive. They reported that a teacher’s response could exacerbate their feelings of difference. Fiona (12) reflected: “teachers aren’t always helpful when they single you out”. Some children described not knowing their teacher and not feeling they could talk to them. Annabel (9) said that “it was at the beginning of the year, I didn’t really know my teacher so I couldn’t talk to her”. Previous studies have found that children are ambivalent about teachers as source of support, with some children finding that teachers were helpful; some glad that the teachers knew about the separation because it helped to explain behaviour changes, and other children finding that teachers could be insensitive and contribute to their feeling worse (Butler et al., 2002).

### **School based counselling**

Previous research has demonstrated that counselling in the school environment can provide positive outcomes for children in a range of areas that impact on their individual wellbeing (Hanley, Sefi, & Lennie, 2011) and improvements in relationships within family (Kernaghan & Stewart, 2016). However, some research has found that counselling intervention can have mixed and negative results for children (McConnell & Sim, 2000) reflecting the experience of some children in this current study. Those children were clear that counselling in a school environment would not be appropriate for them. Charlie (13) stated that he had been offered counselling at school but felt that being at school was not the place to talk about his issues: “being at school would be an interference”. For Charlie, there was value “of having a place to talk that was and is completely separate to the school environment”. Charlie was able to explain that school was not the place for him to talk about his family life;

he saw value in being able to do this in “another system” outside of school. Fiona (12) saw a counsellor at school but reflected that this “wasn’t helpful, it made me feel different having to leave the classroom”. Her experience of this being unhelpful was not related to the counselling itself, but to the way in which the process was experienced by her. A number of children in this study reflected on their direct interactions with a school counsellor. Annabel (9) stated: “we had a school counsellor we used to go and see but he wasn’t any use, he would just do meditations” and “this was not helpful, it was kind of silly”. Donna (11) also described an unhelpful interaction with a school counsellor, where the counsellor got her files mixed up with her brother’s and she didn’t feel that the counsellor “cared about me at all”. The children’s experiences in this study suggest that having a choice about where and how they access counselling would be of benefit to them.

### **Other adults in the school environment**

The systems that children are engaged with potentially provide support in a variety of ways to a child going through parental separation and family change. Deidre (13) described a supportive school environment in her new school and having a place to talk with the school nurse:

I talk to the school nurse like every couple of weeks like she worries about me sometimes and that’s good I get upset really easy and emotional really very easily and have a bad day and I just talk to her and she helps with everything (Deidre 13).

The support children received that worked for them may not necessarily have been from a counsellor or teacher in a school but from some other form of allied health professional. Children’s access to safe and understanding adults in their systems provided children in this study with spaces to process their difficult emotions and make sense of family changes and the impacts across their systems. Consistently with findings in previous research (Bagshaw,

2007), children found that adults who helped them were able to listen to them, believe them and understand their perspectives.

## **Peers, friends and social networks**

She [friend] would be the one I would go to talk to (Allison 12).

In this study, children spoke about friendships, referring to relationships where experiences and feelings were shared. Friendship is positively associated with psychological wellbeing (Tome & Gaspar de Matos, 2012). When peer groups are referred to in this study, this is in the specific context of research that is being cited, or when a child described the relationship as with a peer. Peer group refers more generally to the social group of people who have similar interests, age, background or social status, with members of this group likely to influence the person's beliefs and behaviour (McMillan, Felmlee, & Osgood, 2018).

### **Positive friendships**

For some children, friendships provided support. This was particularly true when there had been similar experiences within their friendship group. Friends provided a place where children felt that they could talk about their experiences and, significantly, have their experiences understood. Where friendships had been well established prior to the parental separation, children in this study reported the benefit of these relationships and their positive impact on their wellbeing, demonstrating that children respond to and seek strong relationships outside their family systems.

Allison (12) identified strong and significant friendships that pre-dated school. These had been developed over the long term and provided a natural support for her when her parents separated. Some within her friendship group had also experienced separation and divorce, providing her with a group of friends that have some understanding of the emotional impact and can support her through her difficult times. She described one particular friend:

“her parents are split up, she lives with her mum, and she’s been there for me most of the time”. Allison had described her relationship with her father as particularly difficult (noted in Chapter Six), leaving her at times feeling “invisible” and disconnected. Significantly, she seeks out a particular friendship when feeling like this, and the friend provides her with a sense of being understood and connected: “She [friend] knows how my dad is and because she knows I don’t like spending time with him, she always asks, I would always go and talk to her.” Allison described her friend as open, available and safe, and said “I just went to her and asked can I talk to you and she said of course”. Children’s experience of support from friends influenced their own behaviour and approach to their role in supporting friends. Donna (11) reflected that, if one of her friends experienced parental separation she would say to them, “if you need someone to talk to, you can come to me”. There was recognition among the children that the adults may not necessarily be able to provide the support a child needs, and this was reflected in the way that they would respond if they knew that a friend’s parents had separated. Charlie (13) stated that he would ask his friend “what is wrong and tell them I am here if they feel insecure with their parents, I would try to look after them”.

### **Building friendships over time**

For some children in this study, the parental separation occurred when they were of preschool or early school age, and significant friendships had not developed. Initially, friendships as a means of support were not significant for these younger children; however, this would change over time. Fiona (12) who was aged six at time of separation, stated: “I was younger; I did not know many people at my school who had lost a parent”. Significantly, when she entered high school, her friendships become more important, and there was a sense of being able to share their experiences. She stated: “peers have been helpful now I am in high school and I know more kids in similar circumstances”. Fiona’s experience demonstrated the dynamic nature of systems and the way in which support of various systems can change over

time. Annabel (9) recalled that initially, when her parents separated, she didn't have anyone to talk to at school. She said that she "didn't know my teacher or anyone in class" and could only "talk to my mum and sister". Several years after the separation she said, "it is different, I know everyone in my class". She feels better connected. It may be that over time she has been able to develop friendships that were not present when she was younger, and this is now a protective and supportive factor for her. Children identified the value of having friends who share their experience or are able to understand them. The continued engagement in these systems enabled children to continue to build and sustain their self-identities and social connections.

While moving locations because of the separation of parents can be experienced as a negative for some children, in terms of moving away from friendship groups, the move was positive for one child in this study. John (11) moved cities when his parents separated and stated that "like when I came here I met new friends". The research approach which underpins this current study and which aimed to speak with children about their experiences enabled this complexity of experience to be heard and known.

### **Friendships at risk**

Parental separation had a negative impact on the ability of some children in this study to remain connected with friends. Changes to routines, precipitated by changes to living arrangements, could make it more difficult for children to access their usual activities with their friends. Donna (11) described, earlier in this chapter, not being able to access her extracurricular activities, like swimming, when at her dad's house, and this impacted on her social and peer connections. Moving location may impact on a child's peer relationships and friendships, as in Charlie's (13) situation, where the first four years post-separation was marked by multiple moves, both between towns and within cities.

The potential loss of these important connections was a recurrent theme for some of the children in this study. Children described the way in which parental interaction may impact negatively on their friendships and compromise their potential to access support and develop supportive relationships. In an earlier section of this chapter, Annabel (9) described the time it took to build up her relationships and expressed concern about her father's impact on these relationships—owing to his behaviour in the school system. She stated: “now barely any of the parents like my dad” and “I can't have any friends over as the parents don't like him anymore”. Donna (11) described a similar situation, where her father's interaction in her school and friendship system impacted on her access to previously supportive friendships. She stated that, owing to her father's behaviour, parents of her friends were reluctant to have her over or involved with their children, particularly during the weeks when she was staying with her father. There is considerable impact on Donna's social networks owing to the strained relationship between her father and her group, leading to her being excluded from friends' birthdays and gatherings. Donna believes that it is because of her father's behaviour toward her friends' parents that her friendships are being compromised and she is being excluded from her friends. After not being invited to a birthday party, Donna goes on to describe the ongoing sense of exclusion, in that her friends “they got photos on their iPad, about having all this fun and they are all gossiping about it”. She also indicated that her father's behaviour had an impact on her broader school system: “even the teachers do not like him”. The children's experience in this study suggested that the way in which a parent conducts themselves in the children's environments can have a direct impact on the children's connections to their external systems, including friendships, potentially excluding children from protective and supportive networks.

## **Friendship connection across systems**

Friendships can also facilitate connection across systems, including the family system, and enhance the relationships for a child within these systems. This provided a sense of connection, continuity and security for a child, particularly in a world where there are significant changes brought about by the parental separation. Allison (12) described how she started Karate with a friend and how her family then joined in the activity: “I started it [karate] then [sibling] wanted to do it and then someone convinced my mother to do it and then I actually started with one of my friends”. This is now an activity that the family engages in together and which includes friends from the child’s friendship group. Activity as part of the family and extended social network is reported as a positive for Allison. In this circumstance, her parental relationship enabled the active inclusion of friends into the family system, engaging in the broader social system together.

## **Chapter summary**

In this study, children displayed a range of strategies to manage the impact of parental separation. Children described their experiences of parental separation as a state of being in the world, rather than a static time and place, in that the changes it brings to their families and relationships continue to change over time. With this perspective, some children may seek and need support at different times throughout the years post-separation. The children in this study demonstrated that they are not passive recipients of changes in their worlds, but actively negotiate, respond and create meaning in their worlds, often in interaction with the adult world. They sought assistance from the adults in their lives to make meaning of these changes and they actively find support across other systems.

The various systems that children are engaged with provide various support for children, and children in this study talked about the nature of support through siblings,



extended family, friends, schools, counselling and support groups. Children also described a range of individual strategies that they developed, primarily in relation to processing and responding to difficult emotions and stress resulting from the parental separation and family change. These strategies were sometimes developed with assistance from the adults in their worlds, but also through their own inner resources.

Chapter eight takes the children's reflections, articulated in the preceding three chapters, as the basis on which to detail the conclusions of this study. The discussion outlines the way in which children's experiences of parental separation can be given value and voice in the adult world of parenting, policy development and professional practice.

## **Chapter 8: Discussion**

Don't guess what they feel, listen to what they say (McCrum, 1993, p. 12).

### **Why I wanted to speak with children**

In the course of my social work practice, it became evident that children's perspectives and accounts of their experience were often missing from social discourse and policy and service development. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to take into account the views and experiences of children when developing policy and practice, to ensure that the service response is meeting their needs (Graham, 2011; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). This study was partly initiated by the Australian Government DSS in recognition of, and acting on, their current policy framework, which makes explicit the recognition of the need to hear and respond to children's particular needs and experiences when parents separate (Kaspiew et al., 2009).

This thesis has noted a large number of (mainly quantitative) studies into the effects of parental separation and divorce on children concluded that there are long-term negative impacts on their wellbeing across the life course. These research findings have contributed to changes in policy as governments attempt to respond to the needs of children when parents separate. More recent research has involved the views of children, which have provided a different perspective on the effect that divorce and parental separation has on children. These studies provided an account of the way in which children experience and are affected by their changing families. Through the emergence of children's perspectives of their experiences, there is a growing recognition that children are competent, interacting with and creating their social worlds. Children are articulate in describing the effects of change on their lives and identifying the support they need at these times. Focusing on children and what they need at

these times reflects a Childhood Studies approach which is concerned with the present experience of children (Corsaro, 2011).

In the context of parental separation, social discourse and policy development have partly been framed through the reported negative impacts of this family transition for children (Parkinson, 2011; Parkinson, 2013; Rhoades, 2014). I was curious about how children would describe these experiences, wanting to hear directly from them about the impact of this family change and to develop insights into the ways in which adults, parents, policymakers and service providers could learn about children's experiences. I wanted to pay attention to themes that would contribute to a better understanding of children's experiences, to inform policy and service development. It was not the intent of this research to privilege one perspective over the other, the child over the parent. It is the position of this research that all people, children and adults, are interdependent and inhabit interrelated systems. The risk has been that, previously, the perspective of the adult has been privileged over that of the child. This research attempts to open a dialogue across the systems, through bringing the children's perspective of how they experience parental separation to the fore.

Children, as part of our communities, have the right to make it known to the adults how they experience parental separation; the impact of that parental separation has on them; how they make sense of these family changes; and what it means for their wellbeing. As I outlined in Chapter Two, a rights based perspective on children's participation has been underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). What children think that adults should know about their experiences is of critical importance; for, if we keep children in silence we limit their contribution to our (the adults') understanding of their lives (Brand, Howcroft, & Hoelson, 2017). Children are active participants and contributors in their family and broader systems. They not only make meaning of the changes that occur through parental separation, but contribute to these changes and the relationships

within these families. Understanding their experiences may enable the adults to respond in ways that facilitate positive wellbeing.

Through bringing children's perspectives into the research field, this study contributed to disrupting, and inviting reflection on, the current family and social discourse. Children in this study described feeling that their families post-separation were not whole, were different to most families. These perceptions reflected the impact that the social construction of intact families in research and social discourse may have on children's experiences of their own families. Negative social discourse about the nature of separated families influenced the way in which children processed their experiences and may have contributed to negative outcomes in their wellbeing. Ensuring that this experience, of language and social perceptions, is made known to policy and programs may assist in creating a shift in the way in which diverse families are conceptualised and in the language used to describe complex families. Policy not only has a role in the development of programs to address a social need, but is also a potential influence on changing social perceptions and norms.

The **first aim** of this study was to hear directly from children, in their words, how they experience and make sense of the changes that parental separation brings to their worlds.

As explained in the Methodology chapter (Chapter Four), within a Childhood Studies framework, a systems approach to analysis provided a lens through which to explore how the relationships children have, particularly in this context with their parents, mediate and impact on their experience and world views. It is within this context that children described how they experienced, responded to, contributed to and affected change.

The **second aim** was to provide an account of children's perspectives of the impact of parental separation, in order to inform the development of social policy and practice.

Approaching policy and practice development in the context of the lived experience of children may contribute to addressing the factors that impact on children's wellbeing in families where parents have separated. As outlined in Chapter Four, a social work perspective seeks to understand the contemporary context of human life and its inevitably increasing complexity with a focus on efforts to work with evolving systems, identifying the "spaces around and within which human action takes place" (Green & McDermott, 2016, p. 2428). In this current study, the various spaces children spoke about included schools, friendships, court mediation, counselling, group programs and their families. The findings from this study reflected, by taking this social work perspective, a focus upon the "constantly changing and mutually influencing interdependency between person and environment and what this means for the planning and design of service responses to today's social problems" (Green & McDermott, 2016, p. 2428).

There were two overarching themes that emerged binding the findings chapters, and these themes inform this discussion.

The **first theme** is the nature of children's relationships with their parents post-separation and the way in which these relationships mediate and impact on their experiences and their wellbeing. This intimate system has a profound effect, for the children, on their other systems of participation (school, court, friendships), highlighting the interrelational aspect of children's worlds.

The **second theme** that emerged is the way in which children experience and express agency (as described in Chapter Four) within their families and broader systems. Children are not passive bystanders but actively participate in their family systems, making sense of changes, contributing to change, and developing strategies and responses to manage these changes. Agency isn't a discrete action that is undertaken, but an essential element of our

being in the world, existing, creating and participating. The way in which this is experienced varies, depending on the nature of the system and the interaction of systems and relationships.

Reflecting the analysis in the preceding three chapters, this discussion is situated within a systems framework, recognising that children's lives intersect with multiple systems, and their experiences of parental separation have implications across these systems. Within the family system, parental separation impacts on what may previously have been quite stable boundaries, at both a dyadic (parent/child) level (Emery, 1994) and triadic (parent/parent/child) level (Emery & Dillon, 1994). The application of family systems theory (as described in Chapter Four) in social work research provided a perspective that individuals in crisis should be evaluated within the family system and that interventions should "involve the whole family in order to have any effect on the individual in question" (Sutphin, McDonough, & Schrenkel, 2013, p. 501). The experience of children in this current study demonstrated the interrelatedness of the various systems in family and how intervention or change within one system affected other environments and systems the child is engaged with.

## **How this study contributed to our understandings of children's experience of parental separation**

### **Disrupting the social discourse**

Speaking with children provided the opportunity to reflect on current social discourse surrounding the impact of parental separation on children and the community. Research has consistently constructed the experience of parental separation as having a significant negative impact on children's wellbeing (Amato & Keith, 1991; Dinisman et al., 2017; O'Hanlon et al., 2007) and leading to a disruption and deterioration in social cohesion (Parkinson, 2011a). These research findings have been taken up in media and by social commentators and have influenced policy development: positioning diversity of family formation against an ideal

norm often referred to as intact families. In this study, children's accounts of their experience disrupted and challenged the social discourse and narrative of parental separation. While their direct account of their experience often described loss, pain and confusion, and evidence that their wellbeing and mental health were affected, children in this study generally reflected a narrative of managing the changes and feelings that it will work out over time.

As Chapter One established, all the children had participated in a program for children who had experienced parental separation. It may be that this assisted the children to begin a process that positions parental separation as a normal family transition. Participation in this program may also have developed in these children a language and confidence to speak about, and reflect upon, their experiences. The children's responses to being asked what they would say to children in a similar situation reflected a narrative of an emotional upset as survivable and part of the life experience. Children acknowledged that parental separation can be difficult but revealed a sense that, at times and over time, it was manageable – although it continued to bring difficult emotions and to impact on their wellbeing. Some children in this study described making sense of changes to their families, actively managing and contributing to the changing family relationships. It is noteworthy that children felt that they had to actively manage their own wellbeing and developed strategies for this. A number of children reflected a sense of having some agency and contribution in the process of family change. Having a sense that they can be a family in the broader social discourse is a critical factor for children's ontological security, which can be disrupted during the changes brought about through parental separation.

Chapter Seven showed the children in this study reflecting that participating in group programs and counselling (specifically designed for children who have experienced parental separation) may have contributed to their being able to develop different perspectives of the changes happening in their families and to their ability to respond to these changes. Parental

separation is a reality for many families and children, and positioning this transition as negative in social discourse may in itself have a negative impact on children's wellbeing. Children in this study reported not feeling like a whole or typical family. These feelings may be contributed to by a social discourse that positions separated families as not whole or healthy or intact. Children in this study reflected that they actively participated in the construction of their families post-separation. Some of the children were able to assert that it gets better and to identify what children primarily need during these times of change in their families: security in relationships, information and a genuine attempt by the adults to understand the child's perspective.

In the development of policy and practice frameworks, consideration could be given to the way language is used and how families are framed, in particular, around preferred/more healthy models of family. This is a broad social discussion and consideration that is relevant to research, schools, practitioners and service providers. Change to their family structure and relationships is the reality for many children. Through a policy and social discourse that considers, promotes and supports the reality of diverse families, children who are having to manage the very significant impacts of parental separation may, at the very least, not feel that there is something wrong or not whole about their changing families.

## **The contribution to knowledge**

### **Childhood Studies**

This study was undertaken in the context of a Childhood Studies perspective. The methodology chapter acknowledged some tensions in this approach, and this is reflected in this current study. The study makes a contribution to the ongoing development and critical approach to Childhood Studies.



**Studying children in their own right:** Consistent with a Childhood Studies

perspective, the findings in this study demonstrated that children's experiences are different to adults', and that children are themselves aware of the different perspectives that children and adults bring to an experience. This finding supported an approach that children and their lives need to be studied and understood independently from the adult experiences. However, the argument that children are worthy of study in their own right, from a Childhood Studies perspective, risks positioning children outside the social systems they interact with, not acknowledging the relational nature of experience. There is also the potential to position children as an homogenous group through taking this perspective. As I described in this study, children demonstrated that their experiences and perceptions are relational, that they define themselves, their experiences and actions in a complex system of relationships and interactions. An intersectional theoretical perspective provided a way to explain the varied findings of children's experience in this study, in that it rejects essentialist assumptions that all members of a particular group are the same (Oxman-Martinez, Krane, Corbin, & Loiselle-Leonard, 2002). This element of Childhood Studies (studying children in their own right) is repositioned to acknowledge that children provide a critical perspective on their experiences and are worthy of study from their perspective. This addressed the potential homogenous element of Childhood Studies, opening a critical perspective that acknowledged diversity in children's experiences. This finding supported a critical position on Childhood Studies as proposed by Prout (2011), who argued for a shift from seeing childhood as an essentialised category towards seeing it produced within a set of relations.

A Childhood Studies approach describes childhood as socially constructed. The experience of the children in this study supported an approach that positions children as active in the construction of their own social lives. This is not a new concept. It has been part of anthropological and historical discourse which takes the approach that the lives of children need to be investigated in the context of the wider societies or historical periods in which they

live (Hammersley, 2017). The findings in this study do, however, challenge the duality of social constructionism as described by Prout (2011) that “the plurality of childhoods co-exist, overlap and conflict with each other” (p.7), suggesting that there are multiple layers to a child’s experience of their worlds. The investigations of this study support this concept of interrelatedness, bearing out the concept that all phenomena are relationally produced. For some of the children in this study, the nature of their relationships with parents and in their family systems has an effect on, and is interrelated with their broader social, school and friendship systems. For other children, their involvement in systems outside the family provided a buffer or alternative avenue in which to exist separately from their family system. Christensen, James and Jenks (2004) described the locales of childhood as being understood by paying attention to the flows that transverse them. Prout (2011) summarised it: “people cross boundaries, bringing with them different ideas, experiences, ideals, values and visions and different material resources” (p. 11). In this current study, children’s interactions with other systems, such as court mediation, shaped and informed their experiences inside their family systems.

**Agency:** Childhood Studies positions children with clearly articulated and demonstrated agency. Agency is often presented as a property that varies along a single dimension and in a specific context (eg., the court mediation process) (Corsaro, 2011; Hammersley, 2017); However this study concluded that agency plays itself out in a variety of ways and that the children demonstrated agency in different ways. The findings in this study reflected an increasingly critical approach to Childhood Studies which has claimed that the focus on individual agency minimises the impact of relationships and the broader social context and downplays children’s vulnerabilities (Hammersley, 2017; Moore, 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In this current study, rather than a discrete narrative on agency or feelings of powerlessness, children’s experiences were contextualised in their relationships and social systems. Children demonstrated their interrelatedness to others, their considerations and

awareness that their actions have an impact on others and across systems. For the children in this study, agency wasn't a discrete action, but an integral quality and aspect of their social experience.

This perspective is supported by previous studies, which have concluded that agency exists within a context of interactions and relationships (Jamieson & Milne, 2012; Oswell, 2013; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Agency in these studies is not about empowering children or giving them a sense of positive action, but demonstrating that children continually attempt to make meaning of their experiences and their relationships, and this informs their actions and interactions. Children make decisions and take actions that they have determined are in their best interest, which may conflict with, or impact on, an adult's perspective and action. As Twum-Danso (2009) articulated, one person's exercise of agency almost always impacts on that of others. It is noted that, in other studies, children often accept that they won't be the decision maker, but expect that their wishes and views will be considered (Butler et al., 2003; Cashmore, 2011; Taylor, 2001).

**Understanding children's lives:** Hammersley (2017) stated that there is an assumption made by some who take a Childhood Studies approach that adults cannot gain an understanding of children's lives and that children find it easier to understand each other (Kellet et al., 2004). Children in this current study acknowledged the benefit of attending programs with other children who had experienced the same event of parental separation, as there was a shared understanding of these experiences. However, the children also reflected that parents and adults could provide support and information about the situation. Children also stated and demonstrated that counsellors provided safe places for them to speak and actively assisted them in processing, understanding and bringing change to their situations. The experiences of the children in this study indicated that adults can not only develop an understanding of how it is for a child, but assist a child to process and make meaning of the

situation. Children in this study believed that adults can understand their lives, if they take the time to genuinely listen to, and engage with, them. Where adults failed to listen to children or seek to understand their experiences, children described feeling despair and anger. Children in this study demonstrated that they do have knowledge about how they could be supported when experiencing parental separation, how relationships and environment could be more positive and contribute more actively to their wellbeing. These skills and knowledge may be partly attributable to having being a member of a group or receiving counselling as have been found in previous studies (Amato, 1994; Lee, 2017; Newell & Moss, 2011). An adult being able to actively listen to children and their account of their experience is the foundation for developing this understanding.

The Childhood Studies perspective that adults cannot gain an understanding of children's lives has, in part been the impetus in the research field to look at ways of engaging children in designing research and being co-researchers; it underlined the development of child specific methods in research (Birnbaum & Saini, 2013; Fern, 2014; Hill, 2006; McNamee & Seymour, 2012). However, this current study did not bear out this assumption. In this study, children chose almost exclusively to speak with me directly in the interview process. While a range of other activities or ways of talking were provided to children, they all chose to have a conversation or to utilise objects from their own environments (photos, books, music) to facilitate understanding between the adult researcher and their experiences as children. The experience in this study supports an approach that sees participants in research "not as mere instruments of research"; as "engagement needed to occur in a relational way" (Miller, 2014, p. 828). A key principle from this study is that children be provided with choice around how they participate. The study also demonstrated that it is possible to recruit children to a study that explores a sensitive subject such as parental separation, and that children actively participate in the research and choose ways in which they want to communicate/speak with the researcher directly.

## **The emergence of Intersectionality theory**

Consistent with an inductive methodology, during the data analysis, it is not unusual for a theoretical perspective that has not framed the research, to emerge, deepening the understanding and interpretation of the data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). During the analysis of the data from this study, a further theoretical perspective, intersectionality theory, enabled a deeper explanation of children's experience and the findings. Intersectional theory provided a way to explore and explain the diversity of children's experiences, drawing on the perspective that individuals exist at the intersection of various dimensions, including race, class and gender (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). Within this study, while it has been possible to develop themes across the children's narratives, their experience, reactions and ways of coping were diverse. Children are not a homogenous group, demonstrating the way in which these experiences can affect children differently. Intersectionality theory enables us to understand this finding in a little more depth and supports an approach that sees speaking with children as critical. Intersectionality requires acknowledgement of the interrelatedness of the various aspects of a person's identity (Goldberg & Allen, 2018).

This perspective assists in the emergence of increased visibility of diversity among children, in order to facilitate a more in-depth understanding of their experiences and the creation of more relevant research and effective policies (Etherington & Baker, 2018). Measuring the impact of parental separation on children retrospectively or through adult observations and quantitative measures may not provide for the complexity of experience. There is a risk that the one aspect focused on becomes thought of as the sole cause for the reduction in wellbeing (Baxter et al., 2011). Intersectionality draws our attention to the varied nature of existence, not just the personal aspects such as culture, disability, race, age or gender, but the broader structural existences, of family violence or sexual abuse, that may in fact be contributing to a child's overall wellbeing, with parental separation and divorce just

one aspect of their broad environment (Etherington & Baker, 2018; Jessop, 1994; Lepinard, 2014).

Intersectionality provides a lens through which to explore the notion of agency more broadly than the Childhood Studies approach. In relation to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), and relevant to the context of family separation, intersectionality frames young people as “intimately and actively involved in the IPV that is occurring in their families, in that they interpret, predict, and assess their roles in causing a fight, worry about what will happen and engage in problem solving” (Etherington & Baker, 2018, 58). Questions about family violence are reportedly not routinely asked of families or children engaged in court processes when parents separate, and children may not be able to speak of these issues because of ongoing risk; these children are managing a vast array of experiences and existences (Rodgers et al., 2011). Similarly, the children in this study demonstrated active interpretation, prediction and assessment of their roles and relationships in the context of family separation across their systems.

### **Systems theory**

Family separation is usefully perceived as part of a social shift in family formation. It is no longer an unusual event, but has become part of the broader social fabric, contributing to a rise in the diversity of family formations. In this context, it is recognised that family separation is not the end of the family’ relationships continue beyond the physical boundary of the home. Parent–child relationships continue after parental separation, and the lives of parents continue to be bound together by their continuing obligations as parents (Emery & Dillon, 1994; Marschall, 2014; Parkinson, 2014). Life course perspectives on family change; a systems approach offer new ways forward in understanding the experience of parental separation or divorce. These approaches enabled an understanding of divorce, not as a discrete event signalling the rupture and breakdown of family life, but as a process, through which

many relationships are transformed and endure (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003). A systems perspective provided a critical lens on Childhood Studies. While a systems perspective positions children with agency, consistent with a Childhood Studies approach, systems theory opens curiosity and is explicit about the nature of interrelationships and the way these experiences shape and form understandings.

Speaking with children and listening to their experiences across their systems provided validity to an approach that draws on systems theory when exploring their worlds with children. Children in this study reflected an awareness of a systems perspective in their lived experiences, describing how one system (parent/dyad) impacts on other systems (school/friendships), and children demonstrated keeping different aspects of the systems separate.

### **Ontological security**

Children in this study spoke of what is theoretically framed as ontological security, in that there was a disruption to their sense of being in the world (Jamieson & Milne, 2012). This was in relation to what it means to be a family: children's relationships with parents and their sense of a home. Ontological security is the sense of wellbeing that arises out of a person's trust in the constancy of the people and things that constitute their social and material environment (Giddens, 1993). Children in this study described the disruption to security (in personal relationships and material environments) and their active engagement in negotiating these changes and working towards re-establishing a sense of security at an emotional and material level. It is helpful for children if the adults in their lives are aware of the disruptive potential of parental separation and work to ensure that they maintain safe, secure and predictable connections with their children, regardless of the physical nature of the family formations.

Children will construct their family formation through their experiences, having their security in relationships and family destabilised and rebuilding their ontological security. In this study, children spoke about actively building bonds and relationships with the adults whom they experienced as safe, responsive and interested, at times with step-parents at the expense of birth parents. Children will actively form and build connections with the adults in their lives who can provide a sense of ontological security. Children will seek out the adults who can continue to be a parent to them. For children in this study, continuing to experience adults as parents brings safety and security to a child's changing world.

While the concept of home was not explicitly explored with the children in this study, through reflections on their relationships with parents, the nature of home and the child's sense of place in a home emerged as a central consideration for the children. Home becomes important for generating ontological security because it can offer constancy, autonomy and security (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Some of the children described the way in which their parent, in the context of a new family structure, was not able to meet their needs. This created a sense for some children of these families not providing a home. In particular, being excluded from family routines; not being able to maintain their pre-separation routines outside the family; and not having their needs and preferences in terms of food or activity responded to in a considered way impacted on a child's sense of having a home. A sense of home and the ontological security it may generate are a necessary foundation for the development of identity, a sense of belonging and the capacity for social agency (Giddens, 1993; Hulse & Saugeres, 2008; Natalier & Fehlberg, 2015; Noble, 2005).

### **Family connectedness**

Related to children's feelings of ontological security and providing a further way to interpret the data from this study, learnings from family connectedness literature were drawn on in the analysis of the data. Family connectedness assisted with further understanding the



experiences of children and their relationships with parents (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Crespo, Kielpikowski, Jose, & Pryor, 2010; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Houlberg, Henry, Merten, & Robertson, 2011; Woodman & McArthur, 2018). The children spoke about their feelings of connection to parents, siblings and family units. A family connectedness framework enabled some reflections on the way in which parental separation can disrupt children's feelings of ontological security. It is posited by Root (2010) that the *self* is formed within the belonging and meaning provided by the family, and the threat of a lost place or purpose may create a sense of a lost self.

The nature of parental relationships with children impacted on children's sense of security and wellbeing and their engagement with external physical environments. Parental separation fundamentally changed relationships with parents and, within the family, between siblings, step-siblings and half-siblings. Theories of family connectedness are relevant in these findings and provided a further explanation of the children's accounts of their experiences. Family connectedness is "a whole-family variable that refers to the family's sense of belonging and being psychologically close in ways perceived and defined" (Crespo et al., 2010, p. 1394) by the individual members of the family. While there are many variables that impact on children's wellbeing, the importance of family connectedness for individual wellbeing and mental health is widely acknowledged in the literature (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Houlberg et al., 2011; Mueller, Bridges, & Goddard, 2011). Feeling connected to family provided children with an important and stable foundation of support and warmth for positive development, managing changes and challenges during childhood and building a sense of self (Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009; Crespo et al., 2010; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Houlberg et al., 2011).

Being connected and feeling valued are central to young people's mental health, wellbeing and identity development (Butcher, 2010; McWhirter & Townsend, 2005;

Woodman & McArthur, 2018). Significantly, and indicated by the experiences of children in this study, family connectedness is a holistic construct that refers to the entire family, rather than to specific relationships within the family (King, Boyd, & Pragg, 2018). Children in this study who did not feel that they belonged or were connected with one of their families, described not only the nature of their relationship with the parent in these families, but the way in which the parent responded and cared for siblings and step-siblings, as impacting on their feelings of connectedness.

Maintaining and rebuilding family connection during periods of parental separation can be challenging. Parental separation precipitated a range of changes in a child's environment: the reforming of relationships with parents; the inclusion of step-parents, step-siblings and half-siblings; changes to physical locations and routines. In a previous study, interviews with children about the meaning of *family time* highlighted the fact that the home, traditionally understood through the concept of stability, is also for children a place that is given meaning through the comings and goings of different family members as they move in and out of the spaces we call home (Christensen, James, & Jenks, 2000). This finding was particularly relevant for the children of this study, where the space described as home was varied and involved various relationships that were changing and being renegotiated. This may disrupt family connectedness for a time and require children to re-build a sense of connection. It is this differing complexity that children respond to and negotiate in the context of their lived experiences within the family. This current study contributed to discussion on what makes children feel connected to family. Children in this study described needing to feel valued by their parent/s, including step-parents, and to feel part of the family, regardless of the configuration or physical structure of the family, particularly being included in family routines and celebrations. Feeling connected required being able to actively bond with the parent and/or step-parent and to have their pre-separation routines and physical needs valued and supported. The support of parents assisting children to maintain positive connections to

their schools and friendships also contributed to their feelings of connection to parents and families.

## **The contribution to policy**

Children's participation and consultation in policy matters is now well established and supported in varied ways across health, education and social welfare both overseas and in Australia (Graham, 2011; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). The *National Framework for Protecting Australian's Children 2009–2020* described children's right to participate in decisions that affect them as one of the principles to guide government actions (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 12). This principle reflected the perspective that the safety and wellbeing of children are inextricably linked with developing opportunities for their participation in decision making processes that affect them (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). It has been argued that most forms of participation have been less successful in overall policy frameworks that affect children's wellbeing (O'Kane & Karkara, 2007).

Understanding the way in which children experience parental separation and their views on what would be helpful for children at this time provided crucial information for policy development. Acknowledgement and recognition of the diversity of children's experience draw attention to the need for positioning families as diverse and varied in a policy context.

## **Policy development**

Children in this study expressed the desire to contribute to an understanding of children's experiences of parental separation in a bigger picture or a policy context. They stated that, if their participation would benefit other children in similar circumstances, then they would participate in this research: that this was important to them. This suggested that some children would be willing participants in the processes that inform policy and practice,

provided that they can see the potential for change and recognise genuine listening to their points of view and experiences.

Studies that ask children what they think would be helpful for parents/adults to know about their experiences reflected some aspects of the current policy framework. Children have asserted that they should be consulted about decisions that impact on their lives (Bagshaw, 2007; Parkinson et al., 2005); that they should have someone they could talk with about their adjustment problems, like parents, friends, a counsellor or a judge (Bagshaw, 2007); and that parents should avoid bringing children into the middle of the conflict (Clarke, 1999).

Parkinson et al. (2005) reported that children's advice for other children was not to let their parents decide on contact arrangements alone, and that children should be included in decisions: further, that they should be offered the opportunity to share their views and feelings with their parents, provided that this did not compromise their relationship with their parents. This current study supported the findings of those other studies. When children in this study were asked what they think it would be useful for parents to know, they stated that children should have access to support (counselling); that parents should be parents first; that children should have efficacy in decision making processes; that these processes need to be safe for children; and that children need to be involved in decisions about contact arrangements.

In this current study, a tension emerged between children needing to feel that their parents continued to be a parent, but at the same time needing a sense that they as children have some influence, that in a safe environment their views and wishes are listened to and taken into account. These elements are reflected in the current policy framework and are directly experienced by children through court mediation processes and in accessing counselling programs that enable facilitated communication with parents in a safe way. That the children in this study felt it necessary to highlight these areas suggests that the way in which children are experiencing these provisions, in particular, decision making, isn't

necessarily being supported in the most constructive or safe way for children. While it might be supported in policy and practice, it is perhaps the implementation of, and access to, these services and supports that need to be addressed.

### **Court processes and decision making**

Children's experience of their participation in court processes, specifically mediation, was described by a number of children in this study and reflected comments by children about their involvement in decision making. It was not always clear from their narratives if their involvement was at mediation or formal proceedings, however, the critical element being their experience of a process that sets out to listen to their views and opinions. Court mediation acts on the principle that children have a right to be heard and that they should have the opportunity for their views to be given on matters that impact on their lives. It is a process that visibly promotes a child's sense of agency in decision making. Some children in this study indicated that they did not always feel safe in this process, and there was some confusion and upset about outcomes and who had access to the information they had provided to the court counsellor. Children's expectations of the court mediation process were not always met. This has been reflected by children in previous studies, which reported that children found the court process confusing and difficult; that they were not well prepared or informed about the purpose of the consultation, their role and the implications of their involvement (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010); and that children wanted to be listened to and heard and to know who would have access to their information (Anderson et al., 2016). A process that promotes children's involvement and agency in decision making needs to be managed in a way that is emotionally safe for children, with a good understanding of how children might conceptualise confidentiality and privacy in these contexts.

Policy and practice around court mediation processes need to reflect due consideration that children's sense of safety be preserved and protected, as experienced directly by children.

The system needs to be able to recognise and respond to the broader context of children's lives. It should be aware of the factors that can impact on the way in which children experience these processes and that, where their voices may be encouraged, speaking out may actually be creating a sense of not being safe or secure. There is scope in these processes to ensure that children feel supported and that counsellors and the courts and mediation services are aware of the way in which involvement in their system has ramifications for children across all systems, independent of the actual agreement that is reached in terms of contact and family arrangements.

Some children in this study reported that they were not clear on what to expect from being part of these processes. Some children expected that they would achieve what they wanted in terms of contact arrangements, and this did not occur. Other children thought that what they said was going to be confidential, only to discover that their parents had access to their transcripts: this then had a negative impact on their relationships. A survey of 94 family consultants expressed concern that a lack of confidentiality was potentially detrimental or had adverse repercussions for other persons, including children (Altobelli & Bryant, 2014). How to present processes clearly to children and ensure that they have an understanding of the potential positive and negative aspects of participation is a necessary consideration.

From a practice perspective, there is scope for counsellors and mediators to review how to promote and support the realistic representation of the process to children, understanding children's concepts of agency and confidentiality. As Chapter Two explored, the principle of the children's best interest is one of the guiding frameworks for determinations around decision making for children when parents separate. In this current study children spoke of not feeling that their views were taken into account and of their sense that their experiences of their family were not considered valid in court/mediation processes.

Ensuring that children have some determination in the formation of what constitutes their best interests could be further explored in this context.

The competencies of children are not static and will manifest differently in varied contexts and situations (Watson et al., 1999). Alderson (1993) discusses how “children become competent by first being treated as if they are competent” (p. 173). A parent enabling her child to participate in this study reflected that she (her daughter) is old enough to make decisions about seeing her father, and so she is old enough to make decisions about participating in research. This demonstrates the way in which a parent can facilitate and support the development of competency and decision making capacity. Inflexible age and stage-based restrictions can “miss contextualized abilities and these abilities can be encouraged, in part, through qualitative research processes that accommodate difference” (Skyrme & Woods, 2018, p. 364-5). The active participation of children in this current study clearly demonstrated children’s capacity to make decisions about their engagement and participation in the various systems of their worlds. The qualitative research process valued and responded to children’s needs and ways of communicating, recognising and supporting the abilities of all children.

### **Shared parental responsibility**

As I outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis, The *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006 (Cth)* provided a presumption in favour of parents having equal responsibility for making decisions on issues that have long-term implications for their child’s welfare. The underlying assumption is that the parents have the skills and experience to enact this parental responsibility. The current policy, based on a presumption for shared parenting arrangements reflects Ahrons, (1994) conception of a *good divorce* in that “a family with children remains a family ... the parents – as they did when they were married – continue to be responsible for the emotional, economic and physical needs of their children”

(as cited in Amato et al., 2011, p. 2). This perspective assumes that the parents had a shared parenting relationship pre-separation and, consequently have the skills and knowledge to continue to parent in this way post-separation.

For children in this study, the sharing of parental responsibility between parents was at times problematic. The difficulty some parents (the fathers in this study) had in providing the day-to-day care to their children and with their required interactions in the child's systems, such as school, indicated that, pre-separation, this was not necessarily their sphere of interaction or responsibility; this suggests that fathers may have been less involved in their children's lives during marriage or partnering (Kalmijn, 2013). From the perspective of a number of children in this study, their fathers struggled to provide safe, nurturing and socially connected environments. The presumption for shared parental responsibility can impact on the nature of relationships between a parent and a child, as exemplified in this study, where a parent's inability to parent in this way impacted negatively on their relationship with their child. Other studies have also found that a child's relationship with a parent is negatively affected when the parent does not seem able to meet the parenting needs, often in the context of a shared parenting arrangement (Poortman, 2018; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016). In a policy environment where shared parental responsibility is a presumed starting point when parents separate, the children's experience of shared parenting responsibility suggested that individual family needs, parenting strengths and the need for support all deserve to be considered carefully. The current Family Relationship Service system works on the assumption that parents need assistance: the children's perspective of their experience of parenting may provide some further insight as to how the current system could meet this need.

Current research suggests that a shift of focus to shared parenting (as outlined in the *FLA 1975*), where the maintaining of cooperative co-parenting relationships focuses on the wellbeing of the child, rather than on the actual configuration of the family, is of significance



to a child's adjustment and wellbeing when parents separate (Markham & Coleman, 2012). This approach needs to be supported, but cautiously and contextually, noting the experience of these children with parents who do not have the skills or knowledge and may not be actively supported in what might be a new parenting role.

The experience of children in this study and in previous studies suggested that the concepts of shared parental responsibility and shared parenting are more complex than that allowed in legislation here and in England and Wales. Currently, shared parenting and shared care is based on an assumption of a triadic relationship in families (biological parents, parent and biological child) which does not necessarily accommodate the complexity of family as described by children. Through reflection on children's experiences of their families in shared care arrangements, it has been suggested that emphasising families rather than parenting would permit a consideration of the "roles, availability, willingness to help and proximity of these contributions to the shared care arrangements; it allows for equal consideration of the emotional and practical needs of any step-and half-siblings alongside children who are experiencing the shared care" (Davies, 2013, p. 11). At a policy level, conceptualising shared parenting as shared care families would allow for additional family members' resource needs and the resources available to meet these needs to be made visible (Davies, 2013). Families are complex and diverse; if the legislative and policy context fails to respond to this, it fails to develop policy in a context of children's lived experiences.

A broad conceptual shift in family policy around the definition of family and who in a child's system contributes to shared parenting would encourage a consideration of children's meaningful family relationships when decisions are being made about shared arrangements (Davies, 2013) and potentially other areas of family policy that affect children, for example, the child protection system and the out-of-home care system.

## **Contribution to practice**

### **Group programs and counselling**

All the children in this study had participated in either a group program or individual counselling for children and young people who had experienced parental separation and divorce (SCASP). They all reflected that this experience was helpful, in a range of ways. They described the benefit of group programs as being with peers with similar experiences and helping to normalise their experiences; sharing experiences with other children; building peer relationships; and just having fun! Their experiences were reflected in findings from previous studies, which indicate that children who participated in post-divorce programs, compared to those who didn't, displayed fewer maladaptive attitudes and beliefs about divorce; better classroom behaviour; less anxiety and depression; and improved self-concept (Amato, 1994; Newell & Moss, 2011). All the children in this study who attended group programs talked about the benefits and the positive nature of being with children in similar circumstances. This provided a supported opportunity for children to process their family change and to be contextualised, in that it occurs in other children's lives. It confirmed that family change is a normal part of lived experience, and families do take different forms.

Individual counsellors assisted children with child/parent and parent/parent relationships; communication between parent and child; explaining the situation to the child; and assisting with the development of strategies to manage difficult emotions. These findings reflected previous research, that individual counselling can improve children's wellbeing and their relationships within families (Hanley et al., 2011; McConnell & Sim, 2000).

Access to counselling and group programs for children in this study occurred at different times post-separation. In designing and funding support programs for children, there needs to be recognition given to the ongoing and varied impact of these changes and

acknowledgement that children may need to access services at different times. Group programs and individual counselling need to be readily available at different times/stages for children and located more broadly across the Australian community. Continuing to support, fund and expand these programs across the country should be seen as a priority, with a view as to providing support to children in families that may be more difficult to engage. Particular consideration needs to be given to those children who find it difficult to access services. A review of SCASP identified a range of children who do not have access to these programs, including children whose parents are in conflict or who refuse consent; children who have suffered trauma; and children in families with high and complex needs (McArthur et al., 2011).

The children in this current study all described the benefit of participation in these programs, and it is noteworthy that a number of the children described conflict between parents and from parents towards them, suggesting that children who are experiencing conflict in their families may find participation in SCASP helpful. Determining how to enable children from these other groups to access these programs needs to be a priority. Owing to the complexity of their situations, they may not be able to access services or support from mainstream services. Currently, access to SCASP programs for children requires the agreement of both parents. This requirement potentially restricts access to programs and support for children in families where parents separate and there is conflict between parents. As another barrier, SCASP is only available in limited geographical places.

Providing support and services to families in high conflict is an unmet need (Kaspiew, De Maio, Deblaquiere, & Horsfall, 2014). How to facilitate children's access to counselling and group programs, regardless of the level of parental conflict, needs to be considered. Children in this study benefited from these programs, and those children who find themselves in families where there is ongoing conflict or violence may be limited in their access to

appropriate services. There is a need to develop service models designed to specifically address the multiple needs of families affected by concerns relating to family violence/abuse, safety concerns, conflicted and/or fearful relationships and their frequent correlates, or mental ill health and/or substance abuse (Qu, Weston, Moloney, Kaspiew, & Dunstan, 2014).

Children in this study were clear about the settings and systems in which they felt comfortable accessing counselling and support. For some children, keeping the family context separate from the school environment was important. The theme is one of providing children with access and support to counselling across different environments, because some environments will suit a child better. While it is important for adults to facilitate access to counselling for their children, they need to be mindful of what might be the most helpful context for their particular child.

In the family context, extending the role and range of community-based counsellors in facilitating communication within families and initiating change may be warranted. In this study, they provided a safe, supported way in which children's voices could be heard, their experiences understood and change facilitated across their systems. The direct practice within these programs is a robust way of promoting and implementing the broader overarching goal of providing opportunity and valid ways for children's voices to be heard, for their experiences of their lived worlds to be taken into account.

### **Facilitating friendships**

Children also spoke of the importance of friendships with children who had been through similar experiences as a means of emotional support. The facilitation and support of friendships is an area that can be nurtured and recognised by parents and other adults in children's lives. Children in this study sometimes felt that the adults in their lives, including their parents, did not understand the significance of friendships or support their development and maintenance. Parents who may not have been involved in the school system pre-

separation may experience difficulty in navigating these systems, not recognising the children's perspectives and experience, negatively impacting on a child's connection to their supportive environments. This may lead to further feelings of exclusion and isolation, as well as impacting on their relationship with their parent. Consistent with previous research findings (Beausang et al., 2012), there is a case for further investigation into the intersection between family and school, looking at the way in which the systems impact on each other, and how the education system may be able to support children from their perspectives in relation to peer and friendship networks.

Caution in convening peer support groups in the school context should be noted, with several of the children in this study deliberately keeping their home concerns separate from their school environment. Other children found seeing a counsellor in the school environment as unhelpful and in some ways, as outing them to their friends, exacerbating their feelings of difference. Schools may want to consider developing an approach around the recognition and celebration of family diversity more generally. Recognising the diversity of family forms and the many transitions that children may be experiencing in their familial relationships, schools could develop an awareness of how social constructs (like mother's day or father's day) could exacerbate a child's feeling of exclusion or difference.

### **Social work practice**

Social work is deeply embedded in the ongoing processes of constructing and reconstructing childhood, through social workers taking an active part in carrying out the policies and practices that affect the everyday lives of young people (Nybell, Shook, & Finn, 2009). In this study, social workers facilitated the group program and provided individual counselling. All the children in this study reflected the pivotal nature of these programs and counselling. Social workers played a critical role by being an adult who assisted children to make meaning of the current situation and develop strategies to manage difficult situations

and emotions. Social workers were active in the facilitation of communication between parents and their children, working to ensure that children's perspectives were clearly heard and responded to when the children gave permission for this process.

In the context of a policy framework that notes and encourages the hearing of children's voices and facilitating agency, the social worker role is not just in the implementation of the current policy but in being instrumental in ensuring that this aspect of policy is genuinely put into action. Consistent with a rights based and constructionist framework, social work needs to "employ an understanding of children that acknowledges them as citizens who have opinions about the services they receive and who are entitled to exercise their participatory rights" (Goodyer, 2013, p. 395). The Australian Social Work Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) requires social workers to consider both micro and macro level understandings of people and the situations they encounter. This includes an obligation to work with the macro or structural issues that children may encounter in the context of parental separation, including their experiences of the legal and legislative frameworks.

Direct social work practice, as experienced by the children in this study, reflected the pivotal role social work has in supporting families to reconstruct themselves. Social work practice with children who are experiencing parental separation aims to assist a child to understand what is happening within their family, to build on identity formulation and to prepare for a transition in a new family (Costello, 2003; Falberg, 1994). The experience of the children in this study reflected these outcomes. Engagement with a counsellor, in a program specifically for children who had experienced parental separation, assisted children in this study to understand what was happening, to articulate their needs and identity in the family and to understand and process transitions.

## Chapter summary

Parental separation is part of the social fabric, and the way in which families are formed and re-formed can be contextualised within a range of other social changes. This present study provided a critical insight into the way in which children experience parental separation. This study situated parental separation into a broader social context of family change and recognised that parental separation is not an exception to children's experiences, but a change in family structure that many children will now experience. Family changing, separating and reforming is occurring in an increasingly different array of configurations, and, for some children, there are multiple changes throughout their childhood.

The findings in this study have emerged through a process where children have been able to speak directly about their experiences, the process of the separation and the emotional impact of these changes to their lives. The children have demonstrated the way in which they respond and act within these changing family situations, showing their capacities to be fully integral to family systems and the changing environments that parental separation brings.

I think adults need to know that it isn't all bad for kids, but it is always there (Fiona, 12).



Retrieved from

[http://www.google.com.au/search?tbm=isch&hl=en&source=hp&biw=1920&bih=875&q=children&gbv=2&oq=children&aq=f&aqi=g10&aql=&gs\\_l=img.3..0110.1022.3058.0.3294.12.10.0.1.1.2.297.1628.0j2j5.7.0...0.0.fTuRpwtv5U4](http://www.google.com.au/search?tbm=isch&hl=en&source=hp&biw=1920&bih=875&q=children&gbv=2&oq=children&aq=f&aqi=g10&aql=&gs_l=img.3..0110.1022.3058.0.3294.12.10.0.1.1.2.297.1628.0j2j5.7.0...0.0.fTuRpwtv5U4)



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## **Appendixes**

**A: Ethics Final Report Approval**

**B: Individual Interviews**

**C: Child Reference Group**

**D: Findings Information Pamphlets**

# Appendix A–Ethics Final Report Approval

2012 216N Final Report Approved

Reply all |  Delete Junk |

2012 216N Final Report Approved



Ms Pratigya Pozniak <pratigya.pozniak@acu.edu.au>

Wed 10/02/2016, 9:41 AM

Prof Morag McArthur <Morag.McArthur@acu.edu.au>; Barbara Knight; +1 more



Reply all

Dear Morag,

Ethics Register Number : 2012 216N

Project Title : Holding their words: Children's experiences of separation and divorce

Thank you for returning the Final Ethics Report for your project.

The Deputy Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee has signed off on this project as completed. It has now been recorded on the Ethics Register as COMPLETED AND CLOSED.

We wish you well in future research projects.

Kind regards,  
Ms Pratigya Pozniak

Ethics Officer | Research Services  
Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)

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## **Appendix B–Individual Interviews**

- **Information letter to parent and guardians**
- **Consent for parents and guardians**
- **Information pamphlet and consents–children**
- **Interview schedules**
- **Demographic data collection forms**
- **Children’s information pamphlets and Consent Forms**



## **INFORMATION LETTER TO PARENTS AND GUARDIANS**

### **RESEARCH PROJECT: Children's experiences of family change**

**PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR:** Professor Morag McArthur

**STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Barbara Knight

**PROGRAM IN WHICH ENROLLED:** Social Work PhD

Dear Parents and Guardians,

We are writing to invite you to consent to your child participating in a research project about how children make sense of the experience of family change when parents decide that they can no longer live together. This letter is designed to provide information to help you decide whether you want your child to contribute to this research.

Through the project, we hope to find out more about what things help children to manage the changes that happen in families when their parents decide that they are unable to live together. Finding out from children what is helpful to them is important for their wellbeing as it provides parents and service providers with ideas about how to support children during these periods of change.

This research is conducted as part of a Social Work PhD degree and is designed to gather information that will be useful to parents, organisations that provide programs for families such as Marymead, Government policy makers and counsellors who are supporting children during periods of family change.

Children and young people will be invited to participate in a number of ways throughout the project. We are seeking your consent for your child/ren to participate in individual conversations (interviews) with the researcher.

#### **Individual Conversations (Interviews) with children**

This stage of this research involves talking to children individually about how they experience family change and the things that are helpful to them during this time. We would very much appreciate hearing your child's experiences and ideas.

The interview will usually take around an hour of your child's time. The interviews will take place at Marymead either prior or after the completion of a group session, or another time/location that is convenient for yourself and child. It is not envisaged that parents will remain with the child during the interview, however the researcher will respond to what a child may request to ensure the interview process is comfortable for them, including having another person present of their choosing.

Your child will be encouraged to only participate in a manner they are happy with and for as long as s/he is comfortable. The interviews will be audiotaped to ensure that the researchers have an accurate record. If your child requests that the tape be stopped, the researcher will do so and will take notes instead. The tapes will be used by researchers when writing the research report and will not be accessible to anyone outside the research team.

There are no foreseeable risks with this project. The researcher is an experienced social worker with a range of practice and research experience, including working with families and children where parents have a mental health issue, and children whose parents have been involved in the community corrections system. The researcher has direct care experience with children who have intellectual difficulties and who have experienced traumatic events and has been involved in therapeutic programs with these children.

The researcher will proactively ensure that the child/ren are feeling ok to continue with interviews or any part of the research through a range of methods used when talking with children (for example, emotion cards, STOP/GO cards). Marymead supports the research process and is prepared to provide support to any child or parent who has concerns throughout this process.

Your child's participation will contribute to building important knowledge about how children make sense of family change. Individual participants may benefit from the time to reflect on the things that have been helpful to them and the knowledge that they are helping other children by sharing their experiences. All children will be offered a book voucher to thank them for their time.

The attached consent form asks for consent from you for your child/ren to be involved in individual conversations with the researcher. If you agree for your child to be a participant, the researcher will contact you directly to answer any further questions and to discuss an appropriate time/place for an individual conversation to occur with your child.

The results of this research will be presented in a PhD thesis. We may also develop some articles which we will publish for others to read. There will be a presentation to the policy unit and an article developed for FaHCSIA. A booklet outlining the main ideas and themes that emerge will be developed and presented to children and families who have nominated to receive this information.



However, we will ensure that nothing in the report, articles, presentations or booklet will identify particular children or families.

Young people and their families have the choice about whether or not to participate- it is completely voluntary. Your child can withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason; including after the activities have begun. The decision for your child to participate or not in the research will have no impact on the programs or service you and your family may be engaged with at Marymead.

Information provided by young people and families will remain confidential unless researchers are concerned about the health or wellbeing of children. If a child discloses that they are being harmed, researchers are obliged to report their concerns to the appropriate authorities.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the Principal Supervisor:

Professor Morag McArthur  
Australian Catholic University  
Institute of Child Protection Studies  
223 Antill Street  
Watson ACT 2602  
Phone: 02 6209 1225

At the end of the project, we will send interested families a summary of our findings. If you would like a copy of this summary, please check the box on the attached consent form.

This project is conducted with the approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University. The research has also been approved by the CEO, Marymead Child and Family Centre.

If, during the course of the research, you have any complaint about the way that you have been treated or if you have a query that you think has not been dealt with by the project researchers, you may contact:

Human Research Ethics Committee Chair  
Research Services  
Australian Catholic University

**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B





Strathfield Campus

Locked Bag 2002

STRATHFIELD NSW 2135

Ph: 02 9701 4159

Fax: 02 9701 4350

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the result of your complaint.

If you are willing to consent to your child participating in this research, please complete and sign both copies of the attached Consent Form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the Principal Supervisor or Student Researcher using the attached prepaid envelope or return it to the program facilitator of the KAYAK program. Please provide a contact number on the consent form so that we can communicate with you and confirm the date, venue and time of the interview.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Morag McArthur

Principal Supervisor

Ms Barbara Knight

Student Researcher



**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B



## INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

### CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS

*Copy for researcher*

TITLE OF PROJECT: HOLDING THEIR WORDS: Children's Experiences of Family Change

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: dr. Morag McArthur

NAME OF STUDENT RESERACHER: Ms Barbara Knight

I, ..... (parent / guardian) have read (or had read to me) and understood the information provided in the *Letter to Parents/Guardians*. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that my child, who is nominated below, may, if they agree, participate in (please tick):

Individual Interviews with the Researcher

Once consents have been returned, you will be contacted by the researcher to organise an appropriate time for the individual interviews to occur.

Realising that I can withdraw my consent at any time, I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify my child in any way.

I would like a summary of the report to be sent to me at the end of the project.

**Australian Catholic University Limited**, ABN 15 050 192 660  
**Canberra Campus(Signadou)**, 223 Antill Street, Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
PO Box 256 Watson, Australian Capital Territory 2602, Australia  
Phone: (02) 6209 1225 Fax: (02) 6209 1216  
CRICOS registered provider: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B



(Please provide your email address here if you would like to receive a summary of the report:

---

NAME OF PARENT / GUARDIAN: .....

SIGNATURE: .....

DATE: ...../...../.....

NAME OF CHILD: .....

SIGNATURE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR.....

DATE...../...../.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER:.....

DATE...../...../.....

If consenting to individual interviews, please indicate where you would like the interviews to take place (Organisation/home/other location)

---

Please provide a phone contact number:

---

# **Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce**

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## **INTERVIEWS**

The following is a loosely developed set of questions that aims to encourage children to explore their families, the changes that have occurred through separation and/or divorce and how these changes have impacted on them in a range of areas, and those things that have helped them to respond to change.

### **Introduction:**

- About the project
- Participant's rights
- Participants consent
- Gift voucher
- Ice breaker – talking cards / about me?
- Go through main conversation areas prior to commencing to enable participant to identify any areas they don't want to talk about

### **The Interview**

#### **Part 1: family and family change:**

Invite participant to tell me about themselves (life story, open ended question to enable interview to concentrate on the aspects of their life that are important to them)

Invitation to describe who is in their family? (will use a pictorial/drawing/family tree/buttons (cite Leanne Robin's) method if the child chooses)

Can you tell me about the relationships in your family? Who is important? Who do you see a lot of? Who do you think about? Who would you like to see more?

## **Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce**

---

Do you remember what it was like when you lived with both your parents?

Is there anything different about that time when you lived with both your parents that you might want to draw/tell me?

Do you remember how you found out that your parents would no longer be living together?

Can you tell me a little about how you felt at this time? (use funky fish or stones)

Were there things/people that helped you at this time?

(What advice what would you say to parents who are thinking about separation or getting a divorce)

(What do you think they should say to their children at this time?)

(What do you think is important for them to know about how kids might feel?)

What things are different now, to when you were living with both your parents?

What is ok? What isn't so ok? (Funky Fish Feelings as a prompt)

(What problems do you think divorce causes? In what ways might divorce help a family?)

Is there anything you would like to be different?

Is there anything you would like your parents to know that would help you feel ok about not living with both your parents? (or frame as is there anything that would be helpful for parents to know when they decide to separate or get divorced about how their child/ren may feel or what they may need at this time?)

Tools that will be available for child/young person to use during this conversation

Use: life story (can you tell me about yourself)

## **Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce**

---

Use: family tree/drawings /eco map / button eco map (cite Leanne Robins)

Use: "My life graph" worksheets (significant events, turning points)

Use: Funky Fish Feelings, Stones

Use: Vignettes ... ask what a hypothetical child would do in 'such and such' a situation .....

### **Part 2: Questions to gather information on how organisations may support children who have experienced parental separation or divorce:**

Is there anything that people who run programs for children who have experienced their parents not living together should know that would be helpful for kids in this situation?

What support could they provide?

What would you like people who make policies or decisions about how families can be after parents separate to know?

Throughout the conversations the researcher will hold in mind issues that are drawn from research and explore these with the participant if the opportunity arises in the child's narrative to further explore these particular issues:

How children describe and experience the impacts of separation and divorce on their social relationships (with friends and peers) and their emotional well-being.

What do children think the economic impact of separation and divorce has been on their households in which they live?

How do children make sense of their relationships with parents and other family members, including siblings and grandparents, through changed family structure (for example: shared

## **Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce**

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care arrangements, contact arrangements, maternal employment and other changes to family structure that may be result of separation and divorce)?

How are children adapting to different schedules, moving between houses, different rules and physical spaces and different disciplinary styles?

What are the policy and service implications of these experiences?

### **End of Conversation**

Researcher will summarise back some of the main themes/ideas that have emerged through the conversation and invite 'anything else you would like me to know or others to know about your experience of separation and divorce'?

Just before we finish I wonder if there is anything you would say to another child who is going through a similar experience, something that may help them at this time ("ending on a positive note, acknowledging their expertise" (Liamputtong, 2013, p.62)

After the interview/debrief with participant (Liamputtong, 2013, p.62)

Where there parts of our conversation that were particularly hard for you to talk about? How did this make you feel?

Check in how they are feeling now (funky fish) and strength based sentence stems.

Need to take time to thank the participants and reconfirm how their contribution will help the research (Daley 2007 in Liamputtong, 2013, p.63.

# Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce

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## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

IDENTIFIER #: \_\_\_\_\_

This information is collected by the researcher to get a general understanding of the characteristics of children participating in this study and check whether children from similar backgrounds experience family change in a similar way. For example this will help the researcher see if, in general, females identify different things that assist them to manage family change, to what males may identify.

NB: Depending on permission of parents, this information may be gathered through the parent interview and/or information provided to the KAYAK program by the families.

### 1. Gender

- Male
- Female

### 2. Age

- 9 years
- 10 years
- 11 years
- 12 years

### 3. Type of School

- Public
- Catholic
- Independent

### 4. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

- Aboriginal



## Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce

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- Torres Strait Islander
- Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- No

### 5. Do you identify with a culture other than Australian?

- Yes (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- No

### 6. What language do you speak at home?

- English
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### 7. How many months/years have your parents not lived together?

- Up to One Year
- 1-2 years
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### 8. How many siblings do you have?

- 1
- 2
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### 9. Which parent do you currently live with?

- mum
- dad
- shared (please specify e.g.: 50/50 ) \_\_\_\_\_

## What are my Rights?

If you choose to participate in the project you have a number of rights about how you get involved. These are:

- the right to be informed about the project and your involvement in it.
- The right to choose whether you get involved and whether you want to continue your involvement
- The right to be treated with respect and to not be harmed or negatively affected because of your involvement
- The right to not be discriminated against because of who you are or what your background is
- The right to benefit from the project
- The right to stop at any time
- The right to complain if you're not happy about how you are treated.

### How do I get involved?

If you want to take part, let your parent or guardian know.

If you and your parent/guardian agree to your participation, Barbara will talk to you and your caregiver to work out a time that suits you both to meet.

Both you and your parent/guardian will need to sign a consent form.

### What if I have any questions?

If you have any questions you can ask your parents to contact Barbara on 6209 1227 She's in charge of the project and can give you any information you might need.



We think the best people to help us design the project are children and young people who've gone through it themselves!

You are invited ...

To talk to a researcher ...

So adults can learn what it is like for a child when their parents separate



▶ The project is called:

**Holding their words**

## ▶ What is the Project About?

When parents separate things can be really tough for children.

Barbara is a student at the Australian Catholic University and is designing a project to find out what it's like for kids when their parents separate. We want to talk to young people aged 8-12 years who can help us out!



**What does an individual conversation look like?** Barbara would like to talk with you, either on your own or with someone you choose.

She would like to find out what you think adults need to know about how children feel when parents separate.

She will ask some questions, and you can choose to talk, draw or do an activity to help Barbara understand the things you want to say!

We want to hear your ideas and opinions!

**What do YOU think is really important for adults to know about how kids feel and the things that are helpful during this time.**

**Why would I want to do this?**

You will be part of a really important project which will give you a chance to help kids and young people whose parents have separated.

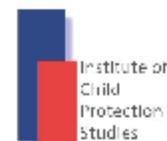
**We need your ideas and opinions** so together we can make this project the best it can be. We really value your time and knowledge and we will say thanks by giving you a gift voucher!

**Can I change my mind?**

Your involvement in this project is completely up to you. You don't have to take part if you don't want to, and you can change your mind at any time.

**Is what I say confidential?**

The only people who will know what you say are the researchers. The only time we would tell anyone else is if we're worried that you or someone else isn't safe. If this happens we'll talk to you about it and together we can decide what might need to happen next.



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## Consent of Participants

I ..... (participants name) understand what this research project is designed to explore.

I understand that the researcher will contact myself and my parent/s inviting me to an individual conversation/interview with her.

I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time without having to give a reason for my decision.  
I understand that the information from my individual interview will be used in a way that does not identify me.

I consent to:

Participating in an individual conversation with Barbara

NAME OF PARTICIPANT AGED UNDER 18: .....

SIGNATURE: .....  
DATE: ..... DATE: .....

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (or SUPERVISOR): .....

SIGNATURE: .....  
DATE: .....

STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

SIGNATURE: .....  
DATE: .....





Individual Conversations

**HOLDING THEIR WORDS**

Finding out from kids what young people and children have to say about their experiences of family change when parents separate and/or divorce

## Consent of Participants



I ..... (participants name):

I feel OK talking to Barbara today  
YES ..... NO

I feel that I understand what this conversation is about  
YES ..... NO

I feel OK about Barbara recording the things I say  
YES ..... NO

I feel OK for Barbara to use what I say to help with understanding how Kids feel  
YES ..... NO

I feel that I could tell Barbara if I don't feel like talking  
YES ..... NO

I am happy for Barbara to contact myself and my parent/s after the conversation to check in with how I am feeling or if I have anything I would like to say further after the conversation.  
YES ..... NO

Child's Signature: .....

Researchers signature: .....

Date: .....



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Individual Conversations

**HOLDING THEIR WORDS**

Finding out from kids what young people and children have to say about their experiences of family change when parents separate and/or divorce

## **Appendix C–Child Reference Group**

- **Agenda**
- **Summary of reference group outcomes**



# Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce

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## CHILDREN'S REFERENCE GROUP

### AGENDA

Welcome and Introductions (Sentence Stems)

About the study

Key research questions:

*What is the experience of parental separation and divorce like for children and young people?*

*What do children and young people think adults should know about their experiences?*

Why a reference group and what the role is:

- Essentially to guide and help researchers
- How many times they will meet and why
- Any changes they would like to make to this plan (re: role of group and proposed meeting times)

Consent and follow up forms, explanation of rights and confidentiality, vouchers (Done at prior conversations individually with children and their parents) – this is re-cap

Demographics survey (may be done at individual meeting)

What does the term research and researcher mean to you? How could I explain my role to children?

### Brainstorming activity

- Things children and young people think about and feel when they find out their parents are going to separate
- Ranking exercise (what is most important/less important)
- What do children and young people feel adults don't understand about their experiences?

## **Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce**

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- What sorts of things/people/activities are helpful during this time?
- What would be different if you were younger?

### Considerations when doing the Interview

What could we do to make the interview more comfortable for children and young people?

What do we need to be careful about asking?

What is really important for us to ask?

Where would be the best place to have the interview?

Would it be helpful to have a support person with you?

How do you think it would be if the researcher participated in the SCASP program prior to having individual interviews with children?

Thinking of children younger than yourself, what things might a researcher need to think about if doing an interview?

Interview questions

Are there any activities you think would be fun to use? (funky fish feelings, deep speak, picture this)

Anything we've missed?

**Closure** (Funky Fish Feelings)

## Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce

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### THEMES AND IDEAS FROM REFERENCE GROUP 01 AUGUST 2013

Adults/parents may make assumptions about siblings wanting to reside together, or may make this decision assuming it is in the best interest of the children/young people. This fails to take into account the individual child's need and experience.

Not understanding how a child or young person is feeling, that it is different to how an adult might be feeling.

How the child or young person finds out about the separation and divorce – for some it is a surprise, for others it has been spoken about for some time before it eventuates.

Impact of parents re-partnering, this can be seen as the confirmation that the separation/divorce is final. A parent re-partnering may also bring other children into the family context and impact on the child's relationship with their parent in this situation.

When does the child or young person know it is *forever* rather than holding hope that parents may get back together? Do adults/parents need to be aware that for some children there is ongoing hopeful thinking that a family will get back together and that for them there may be a need for parents/adults to be clear about the expectations for their family?

We talked about the things that may help young people and children when experiencing family separation and/or divorce. This is of course diverse as each individual child will find things that are helpful for them and their particular experience. Children and young people in the reference group and through the initial interviews found that the following has been helpful:

Knowing that others are going through the same thing. This is sometimes facilitated through being part of a group for young people/children, or through peer relationships at school where friends are going through a similar family situation.

## **Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce**

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Having people (adults) who you know and can trust, who you can talk to about what is happening.

Interests outside the family or school – such as singing, drama, sport.

Feeling that they have some efficacy in decision making about their lives

It became apparent through the discussion and through the context of engaging with this group of young people, that the separation and/or divorce of parents requires ongoing, and potentially lifelong negotiation of these relationships for these children and young people. In addition to the more usual challenges and processes of childhood and young adulthood, these young people face changes to the fundamental relationships in their lives which will entail the child/young person having to negotiate relationships in an ongoing, changing way (as new partners, changes of locations etc.).

Children and young people also described the way that the stress and emotional issues that a separation and/or divorce may cause them, impacts on their other environments, particularly for this age group in their school environments. School can either be a protective factor, or in some experiences, be a place of ongoing tension and difficulty where relationships are difficult to negotiate. This may be exacerbated by changes of school necessitated by the separation or divorce of parents and changing living locations.

Early interviews are highlighting the issue, to what is extent are schools (teachers and counsellors) aware of the significant impact on young people of the changes to their family on their capacity to be resilient and ok in the school environment.

Ideas for conducting interviews with young people and children

In relation to conducting individual interviews with young people and children, the ideas around good research included:

## Children's experiences of parental separation and divorce

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Being clear about what the research is about and who you are as a researcher, what you are doing there. This would be particularly necessary if researcher was going to be part of a group process. There were examples of research being done in school where *researchers* just sat in classrooms observing the children, and one young person noted how uncomfortable this made them feel and that also all the kids would be on their best behaviour.

It is important that children and young people know what is going to happen to the information, and to discuss the limits and ideas around confidentiality.

In terms of the environment it was agreed that this is an individual issue and children should be encouraged to let researchers know where they are comfortable, whether this be in their own home, a space elsewhere and also to feel that they are able to have someone stay with them if they wanted.

Barbara Knight

21/08/2013



## **Appendix D–Information Pamphlets**

- **Parent Brochure:** What children wanted parents to know?
- **Service Provider Brochure:** What children wanted service providers to know?

Um probably that they should tell each other like talk about it first ... and then probably sit down in a room together ... and then tell the kids ... or if they have got questions or want to talk separately chat without the kids there (Donna, 11)

Don't call it "handover" I hate that, felt like I was just something to hand over to a parent ... we use to do it in front of Woollies and it was horrible, better now as we go from house to house with each parent and my parents talk and it is better now, more ok (Fiona, 12)

Yeah, It is important that like most parents worry if they get married they worry about their marriage it is important to um to be like a husband and a wife but it is more important to make sure you are not you stop like it is important to be husband and wife but you shouldn't stopping, stop being a father or mother first (Charlie, 13)

*"Adults may be well meaning, but can make things worse because they don't listen ... they don't know what would be helpful" (Donna, 11)*



They (children) need to have their time with mum and time with dad, to grow up with both of them (Gail, 10)

**Children Speak ...**

**So adults can know what it is like for a child when their parents separate**



▶ The project is called:

**Holding their words**

## ▶ What is the Project About?

When parents separate things can be really tough for children.

Barbara is a student at the Australian Catholic University and designed a project to find out what it's like for kids when their parents separate.

Children were asked what they thought adults/parents should know about their experiences!



*If the child if their kid looks sad talk to them don't just look at them, actually talk to them don't say oh are you ok or whatever that's not going to help like you have to actually talk and bond (Charlie, 13)*

*Um (pause) they should they should pay child support for one ... Because that can help the child's future particularly if the parent puts it towards their the kids bank or whatever, they should care for the kid, and matters, make sure that that ' the only thing they should be caring about like (Charlie, 13)*

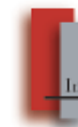
*Like they can find another partner but we can't find another parent (Deidre, 14)*

I think adults need to know that it isn't all bad for kids, but it is always there and at different times we need counselling or support ... so don't ever stop helping to access if needed, but don't force kids to go to counselling (Fiona, 12)

*Um that to get kids involved in like not as much or as little as they feel as they um as the child is comfortable to do (George, 12)*

*Well ... um ... mostly about how you would like things to happen and why and yeah a bit like if a decision is being made why does it have to change from one plan to another (George, 12)*

that it is really hard and you like have to step into their shoes and see how it feels I am not saying that it is like they shouldn't choose it but that they just should think through how their kids are going to feel (Deidre, 14)



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Charlie (13) engaged in counselling this year (four years after separation and divorce) at his mother's suggestion. While first reluctant he stated it was very worthwhile, helped him to manage his emotions and to think about what is important to him. He said that he had been offered a school counsellor at times, but felt that being at school was not the place to talk about his issues/problems, that being at school would be an interference. Stated that value of having a place to talk that was and is completely separate to his school environment.

Stated that the current counsellor he sees "every one should see him, for he is just awesome and very helpful, has really helped him". (Charlie, 13)

I liked the I liked how we chatted and spoke about what how people feel sometimes and what people like and we sometimes did types of games to deal with to do with separation (Allison, 12)

*I think quite true ongoing experience it just doesn't end, it stays with you (Adam, 13)*



Found art this last lot of counselling has encouraged me to draw and paint and I love it and find it a good way to express myself or get out the feelings art has been helpful (Fiona, 12)

## Children Speak ...

### What was helpful from programs and counselling ..



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**Holding their words**

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"It was Good" (Annabel, 9) (to see a community based counsellor)

*The counsellor ... helped to explain the situation ... Also helps with feelings of sadness ... she explained it to me ... yeah (was it helpful seeing her) yeah (John, 11)*

I go to a group at ... It was just really fun and there were nice people and we did some activities to do with that (separation) (Gail, 10)

You guys (Group Program) helped me a lot going through some of the stuff ... Yep that helped a lot and then I guess it just made me understand more that I was going through hard stuff because of that ... and I didn't have to be upset because and stuff like that and still be happy about like (Deidre, 14)

*Researcher: and how is that? (seeing a counsellor)? Gooood (Isaac, 8)*

Yeah I enjoyed everybody there (at the group) and they were really good ... And I also enjoyed being there around everybody (Allison, 12)

I have been involved in a little individual counselling (yeah) but that wasn't as much about .. it had something to do with this, but a more general scale (George, 12)

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