USE AND VALUE OF ICTS FOR SEPARATED FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the ways in which ICT usage impacts upon the communication patterns of young people from separated and intact families. Based on two research projects – one quantitative and one qualitative – it explores the ways in which young people both use and value mobile phones and internet access as means of intervening in family communication patterns.

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Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which young people – from both intact and separated families – use ICTs to support family communication, and looks at the value they give to such technologies in contrast to face-to-face communication.

It is based on data from two related projects:

- A quantitative study of uses of ICT by 150 12-18 year olds in Melbourne (mostly from the western metropolitan region) comparing attitude to, and use of, mobile phones and home internet by young people with separated parents and those with parents together. [1]

- A qualitative, focus group study undertaken with 50 undergraduates which explored the importance of access to home internet and mobile phones, and the significance of family breakdown for their relative importance

We expected to find greater differences in attitude and use when comparing young people with separated parents and those with parents together yet neither study indicates significant differences, except on affordability.

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[1] We use the term separation to denote the end of a relationship and a family. It thus incorporates both legal and defacto marriages, and points to the end of a set of relationships rather than the legal termination of marriage

We begin by offering a snapshot of the changes to family structure in contemporary Australia, and the foundational importance of communication. Following this, we look at the data arising from the quantitative study that considers patterns of usage, usage meaning, gender and age differences, and the distinctions between those from intact and separated families. We then give a short, in-depth account of what the young adults in our qualitative study had to say about mobile phones, the home internet and whether separation of parents has relevance to usage. And we conclude, drawing some key themes from both studies, and making some suggestions about further research and some recommendations for policy makers.

The Unclear Family

There is no doubt that we are living in a period of seismic change in terms of the family. This began with the Family Law Act of 1975 when `no fault' divorce became possible, ushering in a period where marriages were easily ended for the first time in history, divorce was relatively common, and there was little stigma attached to either.

Aside from the rush which followed the change in law, divorce rates have steadily climbed and currently sit at around 48 per cent of all marriages (ABS, 2004), a similar rate to equivalent Western nations. Analysis of the most available trends shows that the expectation of divorce is increasing, and approximately half of these divorces involve children under the age of

eighteen (ABS, 2004). HILDA [2] data shows that 28 per cent of all children under 17 do not live with both their natural parents. Of divorces involving children aged below 18 in 2004, the age of the youngest child was less than 5 years for 24.9 per cent of divorces, 5 to 9 years for 36.1 per cent, and above 10 years for 38.9 per cent (ABS, 2004).

The Importance of Communication

In post-divorce families, communication becomes a key determinant of family welfare as a whole – between absent parents and their children, between grandparents and grandchildren, even between siblings when they are not living together. The communication patterns which evolve amongst people living in a post-separation family are possibly the most contentious of all issues. This is perhaps unsurprising given that a `lack of communication' is the most common reason given for separation (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999) and families with a high degree of conflict prior to divorce are likely to continue this pattern of interaction afterwards, and those who had a non-conflictive, constructive communication and negotiation skills follow this pattern in the post-divorce family (Simpson, 1998: 82).

Traditionally, communication disputes have centred on the use of landline phones, in particular:

- The frequency of contact from the absent parent
- The blocking of incoming and outgoing calls by the present parent

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[2] HILDA stands for the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey* which is a large, ongoing project with regular sweeps conducted by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne.

- Lack of privacy

Currently there is an enlivened public conversation – attaching to certain political interventions – related to the desire for young people with separated parents to have the maximum possible ongoing communication with both parents (and with siblings if they are living apart because of separation). The Commonwealth Government, along with other stakeholders and experts, have raised the ongoing problem of fathers (in particular) who lose contact with their children after separation, or who have problematic contact, sometimes because of distance-issues, because of ongoing conflict, or both.

It is within this context of problematised, infrequent communication and the crucial importance of good quality, regular communication for overall emotional wellbeing and psychological health for all parties that the intervention of ICTs becomes interesting. Is it possible that they have the potential to significantly improve family communication?

Young People and ICTs in Australia: Some Key Sources and A Snap-Shot of Use

This study has drawn on various sources of information and we highlight some of these here. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) regularly provides data reports on household and business uses of ICT. The Commonwealth Government regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) reports annually on our levels of satisfaction towards telecommunications services and the performance of our media. The

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) provides quarterly complaints statistics.

We know from these sources that the majority of family households with young children have internet connection (and that high-speed broadband rates are growing rapidly), that most of these households have more than one TV set, and that most young people 15 years and older now have their own mobile phone (across the whole population mobile phones will reach saturation levels probably within a few years).

We also know that almost all young people at school or in post-secondary education have access to the internet outside of the home (typically in schools and university libraries, but if required through local cyber cafes and municipal libraries)(Funston and Morrison, 2000). While the cost and reliability (from drop-out for instance) of internet connections is an issue for some families, the cost of phone bills, especially mobile phone bills, is a greater cause for concern and complaints (Funston and MacNeill, 1999).

Young people are more committed users of text messaging than older users (girls more than boys), in part because of the cheaper cost (compared to mobile calls) but also because of the convenience factor (and some cultural factors making txt a legitimate and attractive form of mediated communication). The 3G mobile phone, like digital TV (including new data-casting services), will predictably diffuse most rapidly amongst younger cohorts and amongst members of households with teenagers and young

adults, but income levels will obviously have some influence on take-up. Generally we know that poorer families, and households in the poorer suburbs and towns, have lower take-up of household internet (and broadband) (Funston and Morrison, 2000).

While far less pronounced than in most other countries, Australia does have something of a 'digital divide'. As 3G mobile telecommunications ramps up content delivery (possibly overtaking home internet use), new pockets of relative ICT poverty, and a new range of consumer issues, might well emerge with an impact on young people. We predict that porn-to-mobile, direct-marketing-to-mobile, and spy-ware infections of mobile (and other virus problems) will be a particularly problematic and troubling issues and that young people will, no doubt, get caught up, possibly impacting on relationships with parent/s. Already we have seen that camera-phone technology raced ahead of policy to deal with privacy abuse, and clearly younger people are more likely to be both victims of and perpetrators of inappropriate use.

There are several good secondary sources informing our research. For an international perspective we recommend Hans Geser (2004) *Towards a Sociological Theory of the Mobile Phone*. For an Australian perspective we recommend DCITA Communications Research Unit (2005) *The Social Impact of Mobile Phone Use in Australia: A Review of Data Sources*. And for a roadmap for further research we recommend the Australian Mobile

Telecommunications Association (2004) report by John Beaton and Judy Wajcman *The Impact of the Mobile Telephone in Australia.*

We also draw reader's attention to VicHealth (2005) *Young People, Wellbeing and Communication Technologies* prepared by Johanna Wyn *et al* of the University of Melbourne's Youth Research Centre. This report confirms that there are some significant research gaps, including the area of family formation differences, and young people's ICT use. And the report highlights considerable debate across research findings about the nature and significance of young people's use of ICTs; for their identity formation and for their sense of social inclusion and wellbeing. Notwithstanding these differences, the authors conclude their report by confirming their belief in the importance of ICTs in young people's lives, and cautioning us about the risks of a 'digital divide' amongst young people (2005:38):

> *It is impossible to conceive of young people's identity formation and social relations, including citizenship and civic engagement without taking into account the increasingly pivotal role played by ICTs. Digital communication technologies play an integral role in the inclusion of young people in our society. Many studies show how young people create a sense of control over their lives, and overcome the debilitating effects of discrimination through accessing information, communicating with others and gaining a sense of belonging through web-based and on-line communities.*

The Quantitative Study

The quantitative study entailed a survey of 150 young people aged 12 to 18 years, mostly living in the Western Metropolitan Region of Melbourne, and drawn from both intact and separated families. The participants were gathered using the 'snowball' method where members of the research team and

students from the university took surveys and invited people in their neighbourhoods, family and friendship networks if they would like to complete the survey. Standard ethics protocols were adopted to ensure that we received informed consent from parent/s and guardians, anonymity was guaranteed, and sealed envelopes were used for the return of the surveys.

Of those who participated, 80 per cent were at High School, 17 per cent were are TAFE and 3 per cent in full time employment. 55 per cent were female. The participants responded to between 30 and 40 questions, many of which tested their response to various statements about their usage intensity, usage breadth, meaning and value of home internet and mobile phone.

We were chiefly interested in the ways in which ICT usage differs between young people from intact and separated families. In particular, we wanted to establish to what extent (and in which ways) these technologies were beginning to creep into and mediate the relationships between young people and an absent parent[3]. This is an important issue given the growth in fluid family formations and ICT usage (amongst both adults and young people) and an area neglected in the literature. A key concern in this context is whether electronic communication can be as valuable as face-to-face contact. If it is, this has crucial implications for the ways in which post-separation, child-centred parenting is organised and perceived.

Findings

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[3] Absent means not seeing the child on a daily basis <u>at that time</u> and can thus include parents with very little contact or a great deal.

We know that Australia has almost reached 'natural saturation point' and will have 100% saturation by 2008 (currently 19.2 million subscribers). The data from the project is no different showing a high overall ownership rate by young people from both separated and intact families of 91%. Around half of our sample made eleven or fewer calls each week, 29% made between 11 and 20, 11% made between 21 and 50 and 6% made more than 51 a week.

The participants also made extensive use of text-messaging: 32% sent 10 or less, about 30% sent 11-20, about 21% sent 21-50 and around 9% sent more than 50.

The mobile phone, especially (and predictably) as the group ages, is an important technology for our participants. At age 15 around 86% of females agree or strongly agree with the statement that 'having a mobile phone is very important for me'. 75% of males agreed. At age 18 close to 100% of females with mobile phones agree or strongly agree, and 92% of males with mobile phones agree with the statement (and we note the phrase "very important to me"):

One of the key attractions of mobile phones for adolescents is privacy and this extends not only to friends but also to other family members. In separated families where there is conflict between parents, there tends also to be conflict centred on landline phones in that the residential parent acts as a gatekeeper who can police the frequency and duration of calls with the absent parent – or even block them completely. We found in our research for example, that

73.3% of adolescents from separated families saw mobiles as an important way of talking on the phone without other people listening compared with just 66.1% of those from intact families. This is supported by comments from the qualitative study:

> *Definitely the ability of parents to contact children makes the separation process easier. Parents can bypass the confrontation with ex-partners.* [F/25]

> *From personal experience I think mobiles are very useful because there is often tension between parents and calling a house phone can cause trouble so it's easier to call a mobile.* [M/21]

When asked about their use of mobile phones for contacting the absent parent[4] and members of their wider family, the data show that 70.1% of those in separated families agree strongly that they are important.

There is an interesting difference between males' and females' attitudes towards mobiles with more girls from separated families favouring mobiles overall for this purpose (71.4%) than boys (68.8%), whereas of girls from intact families 62.7% either agree or strongly agree and boys come in at 66.7%. This may well be because, as in other studies, the girls appear to use mobiles for text messaging more than boys and those from separated families even more so.

When the issue of cost is raised, we got quite different data from those from separated and intact families, with those from separated families showing higher levels of anxiety about managing the cost of their mobile bills:

The cost is a problem	Strongly	Agree	Total

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4 We suspect that if we had included the absent parent in the project – especially if they had provided the mobile phone for their child - that there would have been a high usage rate. In other words, that parents would contact their children far more often than the children might contact them by mobile.

	agree		
Parents separated	33.3%	26.7%	60%
Parents together	6.8%	12.7%	19.4%

This tells us is that whilst those from separated families only have a marginally higher use level, in this low SES sample, they have much greater financial problems with their use generated by a lack of financial resources and this, we believe is a significant disadvantage to these young people.

The internet, of course, must be seen as an additional supplement to this communication through MSN, email, chat rooms and voice-over-internet-protocol which can be further enhanced with webcams. As one respondent pointed out, in high-conflict families it can be even more useful for privacy since the contact cannot be traced through bills – and it is cheaper. In terms of separated families, of course, voice-over-internet-protocol can facilitate face-to-face (almost) communication between children and their absent parent – probably in the privacy of their own bedrooms.

At the age of 15 close to 100% of females with the internet connected at home either agree or strongly agree with the statement that having the internet at home is very important, as do around 88% of males. At the age of 18 around 90% of males and females agree or strongly agree with the statement.

Across the whole age range, of those whose parents are together, around 54% strongly agree, and 30% agree that 'having the internet at home is very important to me'. And when parents are separated around 79% strongly agree

and 14.3% agree with the statement. This suggests that the internet at home may be more strongly valued by participants with separated parents.

'Having the internet at home is very important for me'	Strongly agree/ Agree	Disagree/ Strongly disagree
15 year old girls	100%	
15 year old boys	88%	12%
18 year old girls	90%	10%
18 year old boys	90%	10%
Parents together	84%	16%
Parents separated	93.3%	6.7%

Yet although 75% of adolescents from separated families say they use email and MSN messenger more than a few times a day 60% also say they never use it to communicate with their parents – so whilst 15% do, the others are (perhaps not surprisingly) using it for private, cheap chat with their friends.

Good Communicators

There is a strong trend in our data for adolescents to argue that 'the internet' in all its manifestations is not as good as communicating face-face-face with their parents. Just 20% of those from separated families believe this to be the case whereas 30% from intact families found it just as good. This may well be because the latter group have much more frequent contact - and face-to-face contact - with both their parents so that it does not become a rare experience.

Nor do adolescents from separated families think that it is an important means of keeping in touch with the other parent – only 25%. This is confirmed by the data about conflict with parents about use of the internet to contact absent parents which is very low (unlike the landline, for example) – only 9.4 % argued that this was the case. Given this, it seems fairly clear that adolescents from separated families are not using the internet to communicate with an absent parent – if they were, it might assume the significance of the landline. The only exception appears to be when the other parent lives some distance away – especially if they live overseas as one of the participants from the qualitative study argues:

> *Staying connected is easier for many who live separately or long distance. It enables and children to have access to communication to the other 24/7 regardless of global location. Also, it is cheaper than fixed line long distance phone calls*

Finally, we asked about their perceptions of how well they talk with their parents. Perhaps surprisingly, in response to the statements 'I talk well with my dad' and 'I talk well with my mum', overall both males and females believe that they talk better with their mother than their father.

For instance, 36% of females with parents separated and 35.2% of females with parents together strongly agree with the statement 'I talk well with my dad' but 71% (SP) and 63% (PT) strongly agree that they 'talk well with my mum'. For males, 62% (SP) and 54% strongly agree that they 'talk well with my mum' but 50% (SP) and 30% (PT) strongly agree that they 'talk well with my dad':

'I talk well with my dad'	Strongly agree
Girls from separated families	36%
Girls from intact families	35.2%
Boys from separated families	50%
Boys from intact families	30%

'I talk well with my mum'	Strongly agree
Girls from separated families	71%
Girls from intact families	63%
Boys from separated families	62%
Boys from intact families	54%

It is possible that the last statistic could be, in part, an effect of males (and females) being less likely to live with their dad if the parents are separated, making the possibility of communication more vexed or disrupted.

In the following section, we seek to enrich these findings with data from a slightly older age group able to reflect on their current and past usage

behaviour - but more importantly, to reflect on the meaning and value of these technologies, and the way(s) in which they have facilitated or inhibited their communication patterns.

The Qualitative Study

After the conclusion of the quantitative part of the project, it was felt that we could enrich and deepen the findings through further work with people who were a bit older and who could reflect on their experiences. Our hypothesis was that this cohort would be in the position of having moved through a series of usage patterns in their adolescence and consequently be able to offer a more contemplative perspective on the ways in which usage mediates in family communication habits.

In 2005 we invited 50 undergraduates to answer three questions about their mobile phone and internet use, and they self-selected as participants. The great majority of these students were in the 18-25 age-band, and there was gender balance. The cohort for this study included a substantial proportion (more than 40 per cent) whose parent/s had migrated to Australia and who have languages other than English spoken at home. Like the participants in the quantitative project, at least half of our participants live in the Western Metropolitan Region.

Unlike our quantitative study, the participants were not asked, as a matter of ethics, to identify themselves as having experienced parental separation. We did, however, ask them to reflect on whether or not they believe separation

has any bearing on young people's mobile phone and internet use. In focus groups of 6-8, participants talked through issues raised by the following questions:

- If the home internet is important to you, why?

- If your mobile phone is important to you, why?

- Do you think young people whose parents are separated might have more need for the internet and mobile phones that those whose parents are together? If so, why?

Following the group discussion, they individually wrote answers to the questions. Some chose to identify their personal experience of separating parents in offering their observations about the importance or otherwise of ICTs.

We indicate here some broad tendencies in their answers, and then we offer a sample of their responses. We revisit these findings in our conclusion.

Is home internet important?

All the participants valued having the internet at home, and perhaps not surprisingly, given that this cohort were students, most stressed the usefulness of the internet for getting information for assignments, in a private, comfortable space:

> *Yes it is important mostly because it's convenient for research purposes for uni work.* [F/20]

> *Yes it's a quick and easy way to get information… easier and more convenient than going to the library and staying there for three hours. Plus, it's at home so it's a lot more comfortable.* [F/20]

Yes it is because I use the internet for research for my assignments for uni. …and I would prefer to do these things in the comfort and silence of my own home. [F/20]

I study multimedia at school and we are constantly using the internet so it's valuable for homework [M/19]

It is (important) with university – getting lecture notes, putting books on hold at the library, getting in touch with tutors [M/29]

Research at your fingertips… [F/20]

Contact with friends and family did feature in responses, but this tended to be a second-mentioned benefit:

It is also partly for recreational purposes. Contact with friends. [F/20]

I also use the internet to chat to friends (MSN) [F/20]

Keeps in touch with my friends … it's for fun, chatting, email etc. [M/19]

Keep in touch with my overseas mates via email, and would probably lose touch if it were phone or mail only. [F/26]

Keeping in touch with friends overseas. [M/29]

Fast, relatively cheap way to stay in contact with friends and family who are living overseas. [F/20]

"My source of information; interaction with others from around the world; my link with family and friends; knowledge; sharing/transferring information and discussions; internet telephony; chatting. [M/30]

Is your mobile phone is important to you?

Typically, respondents emphasised the usefulness of having a mobile for making arrangements and for keeping up social and family contact. There were also some who mentioned the security or safety issue. We can also see a somewhat more enthusiastic set of responses:

Mobile phones allow everyone who owns one to stay connected any time of the day, regardless of where you are; as you are able to carry mobile phones anywhere. Also, with new technology, a wide range of

services are being made available to mobile phone users. Without my mobile phone, I would die! [F/19]

Allows method to communicate with other people. The technology rapidly grew at one stage I felt it wasn't necessary, now it's become like a second skin. Can talk to friends any time without disturbing their own families. It allows a feeling of safety at your fingertips. [F/22]

Yes (my mobile is) *extremely important, helps me to plan my day and be organised, as it is easy to contact people anytime through messages. Also, with travelling to uni often, my family and work can contact me during the day.* [F/20]

For security. And it is time saving when I need to know information from people, rather than travelling to ask a question (because I am still on the road a lot). [F/21]

Yes because my parents like to keep in contact with me to make sure I am safe, or nights out and I'm able to be contacted via mobile phone more because I am not home a lot. [F/21]

I don't use my mobile all that often because I'm trying my best to not pay the bills all the time. The telcos have enough money without my lousy little contributions. Oh it's good if you're getting mugged or organising a night on the tiles (you can use the net for that anyway). [M/21]

The Importance Of Mobiles And Internet Access For Those From Separated Families

For around half of the respondents, they could not see any particular difference in needs amongst young people with parents together, and those with parents separated, although some of the negative responses were rather equivocal, or disapproving of any notion that ICTs can substitute for face-to-face contact and communication. We offer a sample of the negative responses first, some of which carry with them a desire to distinguish between 'want' and 'need':

No, although mobiles/internet can be used for communication, they are used for many other things too such as general entertainment. I don't see why children with separated parents might NEED it more

than others. Only maybe if one of their parents lives overseas or interstate, and chatting online is cheaper (than fixed phone). [F/21]

Maybe, if the other parent lives far away it could be a good way to keep in touch. Otherwise I don't see any real needs that would determine whether they NEEDED IT or not. [M/19]

Not necessarily. Landlines are still available for regular contact. However, if the family situation between the parents is difficult then mobile phones enables contact with privacy and sometimes in secrecy, unfortunately. The internet can also provide regular contact in private. [F/25]

Depends on the distance. If they are interstate or overseas I would say definitely. However they are being used as almost second nature anyway so I'm not sure if there would be more need or use of either than before separation. [M/29]

No. I think that both groups should have the same access to mobile phone, internet… these technologies/tools should not be given such importance and be relied upon to provide whatever it is that separated and non separated parents need to communicate with their children. [F/30]

No, there is no need for a mobile because they could just use the landline to get in touch or just use a pay phone!!! [F/20]

For around half of the respondents there was a strong sense that young

people from separated parents might have a greater need for the internet, but

more particularly, for the mobile phone. Again, some of the answers were

somewhat equivocal. It is worth pointing out here that several respondents

draw on direct experience of parental separation. There are some responses

that emphasise the practical or logistical reasons why the separated cohort

might have greater need of the technologies because of their more

complicated arrangements, or where one parent lives a long distance away.

There are also some responses that emphasise the privacy issues, especially

where there was ongoing unhappiness or disputes between the separated

parents, or where other parties (new parental partners for instance) might

interrupt the young person's privacy. There were also some responses which

emphasised the greater need that people in the separated cohort may have to feel that they can readily make (reassuring) contact. We also see in some responses (and this is where this group in the qualitative study provides a more reflective and mature response) the desire or need of the parents to have direct and easy contact with their children (for instance, when a visit to the other parent is occurring). The issue of affordability, and generally lower incomes in the single parent household, also comes up in several of the responses (see Funston and MacNeill, 1999). We found that the mobile phone featured as far more significant than the internet. We offer a small sample of responses here:

> *Staying connected would be easier for many who live separately or long distance. It would enable parents and children to have access to communication to the other 24/7, regardless of global location. Also it (the internet) is cheaper than fixed line long distance phone calls.* [F/19]

> *Some break-ups between parents are messy and parents are not always able to see their children. By having access to the internet and mobile phones they are able to continue the bond when their child is not with them at home.* [F/21]

> *In homes with a single parent they have less of an income to support online internet. Apart from that it would have no effect on using the internet more.* [M/25]

> *Definitely, the ability of parents to contact children makes the separation process easier, parents can bypass the confrontation with ex partners.* [M/21]

> *It depends upon the relationship that the parents have. If they have no problem with each other in regards to the care and upbringing of the child then it wouldn't be a great thing to have. But if their parents did not get along and the child is stuck in the middle of everything then, yes, the use of mobiles and the internet could be of great use."* [F/20]

> *Depends if they want to stay in touch. It is a good idea because it gives them an easier way of communicating with their parent. It is a good idea to have a mobile because they can check up on them, even if they're not with them physically.* [F/21]

To keep in touch when they physically cannot be together for longer periods of time. In case of emergencies, when the parent with custody cannot tend to children. It's much easier to reach each person through their mobiles than a house phone. Internet is not as important unless a parent is living overseas, then emails would be used more frequently than mobiles. I've never heard of a parent 'chatting' to his or her child over the internet, or using emails more often than mobiles when they live in the same state. [M/24]

The only thing that might make a difference is to allow them to contact the non residing parent without the knowledge of the at home parent. Also with less parental contact and influence there is possible a need to feel connected through other means. Secrecy with the internet, you can't track the contact through the bills. [F/37]

Conclusion

We were surprised that the participants in our quantitative study, whilst clearly enjoying a high level of ICT usage, did not appear to use it for contact with their parents beyond using it for instrumental communication which is quite different from the ways in which they use it for contact with their friends. It is clear that they value ICTs a great deal and use them differently with their family member and their peer groups (instrumental vs gossip).

Overall, both groups place a high importance on face-to-face communication - those from separated families particularly so. It is very clear that there is no technological fix for an absent parent. They also value the privacy which ICTs provide more strongly than adolescents from intact families - probably because it enables them to circumvent the landline phone and the resident parent's knowledge of the call. It also enables them to make private arrangements with the non-residential parents. Finally, adolescents from separated families report much greater difficulty dealing with mobile phone bills and we speculate that this arises from their being relatively less well-off than their intact peers.

Our data show, like so other many studies (see Gahler, 1998, Smart and Neale, 1999, Hughes, 2005) that separation seems to bring with it a range of higher and better quality communication levels (according to the respondents). Given their fondness for ICTs which is higher than for those from intact families we guess that ICTs have helped in terms of breadth of communication and, just possibly, depth. In the light of these findings, it

seems reasonable that access to ICTs should be a factor under consideration for low-conflict separating and separated parents.

Clearly, and as indicated by both our older participants in the qualitative study and the younger participants in the quantitative study, young people rely on, and strongly value, the home internet (especially for their study and information needs) and their mobile phones (especially for their friendships and family contact). These ICTs play a role in identity formation, social inclusion, wellbeing, and possibly play quite complex roles in their mental health. For these reasons alone, it appears apposite to address these issues in much more detail in future work.

With regard to the policy considerations, the key message from these findings is that decisions made in the family court, and made by those responsible for ensuring that children/teenagers have good communication with other family members, should not over emphasise the importance of ICT mediated communication given that is less highly valued than face-to-face communication although widely used.

Overall, it is clear that for young people from both intact and separated families, mobile phones were far more valued than the internet as a means of communication - texting particularly so. The constraining factor within this nexus (perhaps not surprisingly) is affordability. This affected those from separated families in particular given their relatively lower income levels – especially for those from low SES cohorts to begin with. Provision of the

foundations for frequent and high-quality family communication, then, includes the centrality of mobile phones, and the capacity to financially accommodate its use.

Yet policy makers should not assume that communication is necessarily or essentially problematic – at least from the point of view of these young people. We were happy and surprised to see that they mostly felt they were communicating well with their families irregardless of the current relationships, or past relationships, of their parents. Despite the variations in ICT usage according to family background and affordability, overall they were enthusiastic and judicious users of these technologies who valued face-to-face interaction most of all.

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