

Annotation: Children's relationships with their nonresident fathers

Judy Dunn

Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, London, UK

Background: The frequency of parental separation means that increasing numbers of children have fathers who live in different households from mother-and-child; the significance of contact and relationships between children and their nonresident fathers for children's adjustment is receiving growing attention. Lessons from this research are considered. **Methods:** Recent meta-analyses and overviews of research, and key research projects, are discussed. Findings related to contact and relationship quality are the main focus of the annotation. **Results:** Economic support from nonresident fathers is related to children's well-being, and continues to be a key factor. Findings on contact are more mixed, especially from early studies; the effect size of associations between contact and positive child outcome has increased in recent research. Quality of child–father relationships is consistently related to adjustment outcome. Authoritative parenting, involvement and feelings of closeness are of particular importance in relation to adjustment, and these links are related to the quality of mother–nonresident father relations, and the mother–child relationship. Age differences, patterns over time, and gender are discussed; the perspectives of fathers and the problems they face in maintaining authoritative relationships are considered. **Conclusions:** The significance of child–nonresident father relationships for children's and fathers' well-being is clear and merits further research; fruitful new directions for such research, within the framework of other family relationships, are outlined. **Keywords:** Fathers, parent–child relationships, externalising disorders, internalising disorders, divorce.

Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the significance of children's relationships with their fathers for their development, well-being and adjustment. Most of this research has focused on families in which children are growing up with a father to whom they are biologically related (see Lamb, 1997, and Marsiglio, Amato, Day, and Lamb, 2000, for reviews). However, the frequency of parental separation and changing adult partnerships means that increasing numbers of children have fathers who live in different households from mother-and-child. After parental relationship breakdown, few fathers end up being the parent with whom children live (Berthoud, McKay, & Rowlingson, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). If their mothers have formed new partnerships the children may have stepfathers too, and thus may be growing up with more than one father-figure (White & Gilbreth, 2001). The question of how significant the contact and relationships between children and their nonresident birth fathers may be for the children's outcome has wide implications for practitioners and policy makers with responsibilities for children and families, and it is now receiving increasing attention from developmental researchers, family sociologists, and clinicians. What have we learned about the factors that are linked to individual differences in the relationship between child and nonresident father, and about the association between this relationship and children's adjustment?

Three issues have received particular attention: the significance of the economic support provided

by nonresident fathers, the frequency of contact between children and nonresident fathers, and the quality of the relationship between child and father. A key theme in recent studies is the last of these, and this is the chief focus of this annotation; evidence on economic support and contact frequency will be briefly reviewed first, as background to the consideration of research on the quality of the relationship between child and nonresident father. The complex and important legal issues raised by issues of contact and custody deserve separate consideration and are not included here, though such arrangements are of course likely to have an impact on father–child relationships (see Bainham, Lindley, Richards, & Trinder, 2003, for a recent discussion of these issues). Also not discussed here are the various intervention and prevention approaches developed; for a useful overview see Turner and Dadds (2001), for a comprehensive review of interventions and services for children of divorcing and separating parents in the UK see Hawthorne, Jessop, Pryor, and Richards (2003). For a review of policy issues see Emery (2001).

Economic support

Reviews of the literature on nonresident fathers' payment of child support have consistently shown that such support is linked to children's well-being, educational progress, and good health (Amato &

Gilbreth, 1999; Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987; King, 1994a, b; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thompson, 1994). McLanahan and colleagues reported, for instance, that household income after divorce explained about half the risk for low school attainment in the US, and Seltzer and Bianchi (1988) showed that income through child support payments from nonresident fathers is more strongly linked with children's outcomes than income from other sources. Amato and Gilbreth's recent rigorous meta-analysis of 63 studies found that, across studies, payment of child support was associated with children's academic success, and fewer externalising problems (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). The variability across studies in effect sizes was considerable, and gave the authors the opportunity to examine moderating variables, including the issue of whether child support is now less closely linked to child adjustment than earlier studies indicated, as hypothesised by Hernandez, Beller, and Graham (1995). The results show that payment of child support is as closely linked to children's outcome in the more recent studies as it was in the earlier research; it remains a key factor in children's well-being.

It has been argued that child support payment and child outcome are probably linked through the frequency of contact and the quality of child-father relationships (Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994); those nonresident fathers who have good relationships with their children are also more likely to have contact and to pay support (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Further research is needed to clarify the important question of how economic and relationship components are linked.

In considering economic support, the demographic profile of nonresident, unmarried fathers should be taken into account. A number of large-scale studies have reported data suggesting that *young* nonresident and unmarried fathers may have particular difficulty providing economic support for their children. In the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, for instance, men who had children before marriage had lower educational attainment, lower earnings, more unemployment and were more likely to live in poverty than men who did not have children before marriage (Nock, 1998). In the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, a longitudinal study of a cohort of New Zealand children followed up to adulthood, Jaffee and colleagues found that nonresident fathers in their mid-20s had lower socioeconomic status and more unemployment than resident fathers (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Taylor, & Dickson, 2001). Other research involving nonresident fathers of a wider age range also reports associations between low income levels, unemployment, and low contact levels (Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams, 1999; Simpson, Jessop, & McCarthy, in press).

Contact between children and their nonresident fathers

The evidence on the significance for children's outcome of the frequency with which they see their fathers is more mixed than the findings on payment of support. First, it should be noted that the patterns of contact may well be changing over time. In the early 1990s it was estimated that 35% of non-resident parents in the UK did not maintain contact with their children after divorce (Bradshaw & Millar, 1991), and that three-quarters of a million children in England and Wales did not have contact with their fathers (Simpson et al., in press); in the US, a number of studies reported that over half the children whose parents separated lost contact with their fathers completely by 10 years after separation (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991; but see Braver & O'Connell, 1998, for discussion of why contact may be under-reported in Furstenberg & Nord). Other studies report that 1 in 5 children see their nonresident fathers weekly (Thompson, 1986). Overviews of research suggest that children and their nonresident fathers may now be seeing each other more frequently (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Evidence that frequency of contact was associated with children's well-being in the earlier studies was inconsistent (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Munsch, Woodward, & Darling, 1995). In Amato and Gilbreth's (1999) meta-analysis, although contact was significantly associated with academic success and lack of internalising problems, the effect size was weak. And in recent UK studies, the associations are also inconsistent, and reasons for these inconsistencies not clear. Thus Smith and her colleagues in a community study of stepfamilies in London reported that contact patterns with nonresident fathers were not key to differences in children's outcome (Smith, Robertson, Dixon, Quigley, & Whitehead, 2001), while, in contrast, in a study focused on young children's accounts of their relationships with their nonresident fathers, frequent contact was associated with fewer externalising problems (Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2003). (Differences in samples, and in measurement of contact, may have contributed to the inconsistencies between the two UK studies.) Of course, the direction of effects here is not clear. It could be that nonresident fathers enjoyed and encouraged more frequent contact with their children in part as a consequence of the children's well-being and lack of problems, or that the contact between children and their fathers contributed to their adjustment; it appears likely that both processes are important.

Much of the variability in the relation between father-child contact and children's outcome is attributable to the year in which studies were conducted. Amato and Gilbreth (1999) showed in their meta-analysis that associations between paternal

contact and children's well-being have become stronger in the more recent studies. The effect size of the associations between academic success, externalising and internalising problems and father-child contact increased significantly in studies published between 1989 and 1998, as compared with the results of studies published between 1970 and 1988. Amato and Gilbreth suggest that recent cohorts of nonresident fathers may be more committed to the parental role.

Contact and father characteristics

Variability in the relation between extent of father-child contact and children's adjustment outcome may also be linked to the personality and adjustment of the father. We have noted that young nonresident and unmarried fathers are more likely than resident fathers to be unemployed and living in poverty; while relatively few studies have also included information on fathers' personality and behavioural characteristics, two large-scale studies – one in the US (Wilson & Brooks-Gunn, 2001), one in New Zealand (Jaffee et al., 2001) – have reported that among young unmarried and nonresident fathers, drug and alcohol problems, antisocial behaviour, partner violence, and depression or anxiety problems were more common than among young married fathers. These characteristics are likely to be linked to poor adjustment outcome for children (note that findings on young fathers, such as in the New Zealand study, do not necessarily generalize to older nonresident fathers).

A further study by Jaffee and colleagues based on an epidemiological study of 5-year-old twins in the UK made an important point concerning the link between fathers' antisocial behaviour and children's outcome: the results showed that the association was importantly linked to the extent of contact between child and father (Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi, & Taylor, 2003). In families in which the fathers engaged in very high levels of antisocial behaviour, children had the worst behaviour problems when the father was resident with the child (16% were diagnosed as having conduct problems at 5 years old). The children's behaviour problems were significantly worse than those of children whose fathers were highly antisocial but did not live with the children. Among the children whose fathers engaged in low levels of antisocial behaviour and had never lived with the children, less than 5% were diagnosed with conduct problems. There was a genetic contribution to the risk of children's antisocial behaviour (this being one of the very few studies of nonresident fathers which was framed in a genetically sensitive design); however, fathers' antisocial behaviour accounted for the children's behaviour problems independently of the genetic risk, particularly when they resided with the children and spent time taking care of them. When fathers engaged in high levels of antisocial behaviour, the more time the fathers lived

with their children, the more conduct problems the children showed.

Children's views on contact

Most children are reported to want contact with their nonresident fathers, and to see them as part of their families. In an Australian study 91% included their nonresident fathers as part of their families (Funder, 1996). Losing regular contact with their fathers was cited by the children in one study as the worst aspect of the separation of their parents (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980). In Smith and colleagues' research in London, over two-thirds of children reported that they definitely enjoyed contact and a further 17% gave a qualified positive response. Negative feelings about contact were expressed by only 4%. Eighty per cent of children thought that the amount of contact they had was about right (Smith et al., 2001). Children who are resistant to contact cite a number of issues as reasons: their father's unreliability about arrangements, their own concern about their father's distress about the parental separation, feeling 'caught in the middle' of conflict between their parents, feeling their loyalties were torn between their parents, being unhappy about their father's new partner, new babies, or stepsiblings. When contact arrangements are disputed, children can suffer because their relationships with their nonresident fathers are disrupted and attenuated (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and because they are placed in the centre of intense conflict between their parents (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

Quality of relationships between children and their nonresident fathers

In contrast to the mixed picture of the significance of frequent contact for adjustment outcome, the *quality* of the relationship between child and nonresident father has more consistently been reported to be linked to children's outcome. Two recent overviews of the impact of family transitions on children's outcome have emphasised that we need to look 'beyond contact' between child and nonresident father to the quality of the father-child relationship (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). What aspects of this relationship are implicated in children's adjustment outcome, and what factors influence them?

Among the wide range of qualities of parent-child relationships that have been studied in relation to children's outcome in research on parents and children who live together, the significance of warmth and affectionate closeness, support, involvement, monitoring and authoritative parenting (rather than solely the *presence* of fathers) has been particularly stressed (Conger & Elder, 1994; Gottman, 1998;

Marsiglio et al., 2000; Young, Miller, Norton, & Hill, 1995; Stewart, 2003). Hostility between child and parent, and critical and punitive parenting have been associated with poor outcome. Support is growing for the prediction that these same dimensions are likely to be important for child–nonresident father relationships and children’s outcome (Amato, 1998; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Salem, Zimmerman, & Notaro, 1998; Simons & Associates, 1996; Young et al., 1995). Thus authoritative parenting by nonresident fathers (involving support, affection and limit setting), and feelings of closeness between child and father were associated with good outcome (academic success, lower externalising and internalising problems) for children in Amato and Gilbreth’s (1999) meta-analysis. These themes are illustrated in recent studies focused on children’s reports of their relationships, in which high warmth and low hostility were linked to good adjustment (Dunn et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2002).

The association between positive child–father relationships and children’s adjustment outcome is particularly clear for children in single-mother families (Dunn et al., 2003). In the US, ‘involvement’ of nonresident fathers (a relationship dimension that was based on items such as affectionate support, guidance and encouragement) with white adolescents in single-mother families was related to lower rates of delinquent behaviour (Thomas, Farrell, & Barnes, 1996), results that are paralleled in UK research on single-mother families (Dunn et al., 2003). The highest rates of problem behaviour in the study by Thomas and colleagues were found among white male adolescents who did not have the support of a nonresident father. However, it should be noted that the evidence on involvement between nonresident fathers and black teenagers in this study told a different story. For black male adolescents, there were fewer problems when nonresident fathers were *not* involved in single-mother families. These findings not only highlight the significance of race and gender, but also raise the issue of how the network of family relationships and support for single-mothers, and the emotional history of the relationship between child–and–father, and between the parents, are linked to the children’s outcome; these issues are considered below.

Factors associated with differences in child–nonresident father contact and relationship quality

First, is frequency of contact systematically linked to the quality of children’s relationships with their nonresident fathers? Alternative proposals have been made about the links. On the one hand, some research emphasises the significance of relationship

quality rather than child–father contact per se, and shows that children may continue to feel close to their nonresident fathers even when contact is low (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Munsch et al., 1995). On the other hand, it has been suggested that contact will be associated with a positive relationship between child and father, and in several recent studies positive relations between child and nonresident father were found to be correlated with frequency of contact (e.g., Dunn et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2001). In the study by Dunn and colleagues, children’s frequency of contact with their nonresident fathers was associated with both more positive *and* more conflicted relationships with their fathers. The variability in child–father relationship quality (and also in contact) remains high within different study samples – higher, for example, than in child–mother relationships (White & Gilbreth, 2001). Research in the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand has identified a number of factors linked to this variability (for review see Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Particularly clear are the links between children’s relationships with their fathers, and the various other family relationships in children’s worlds, which are considered next. These highlight how important it is to consider the child–nonresident father relationship within the framework of other family relationships, for example the relationships between father and ex-partner, between child and mother, and between child and stepfather.

Relationships between nonresident fathers and their former partners

The extent of cooperation, support, and communication between nonresident fathers and their former partners is consistently found to be positively associated with the pattern of contact between child and father, and with the quality of the child–father relationship (Arditti & Bickley, 1996; Dunn et al., 2003; Funder, Harrison, & Weston, 1993; Gorell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, & Burchardt, 1998; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Smith et al., 2002; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Evidence that supportive coparenting involving mother and nonresident father was linked to father–child contact, the involvement of nonresident fathers with their children, and better parent–child relationships, initially reported in the research of Hetherington et al. (1982), has accumulated in recent studies. Whiteside and Becker (2000), in a meta-analysis of studies involving children whose parents separated before the children were 5 years old, explored a variety of path models involving parent–child relationships, parental alliances, and child outcome. Maternal warmth, positive father–child relationships, and *cooperation between parents* were associated with children’s cognitive and social skills. The path analyses indicated that there were indirect effects of the coparent alliance (cooperation) on child–father relationships and child outcome. The

general point that the relationships between child-and-father or child-and-mother are linked to the quality of the parental alliance is echoed in a recent UK study in which mothers' contact with their ex-partners, and the parenting support they received from those ex-partners, were correlated with the contact between child and father, and with the positivity in the child-father relationship (Dunn et al., 2003). Smith and colleagues also found similar associations between mothers' reports of 'amicable' or neutral relations with their former partners, and low levels of hostility in the child-father relationship (Smith et al., 2001). Nonresident fathers' involvement was reported to have positive effects on maternal psychological wellbeing in a study of single black mothers and children (Jackson, 1999).

The evidence on conflict between former partners, father-child contact and relationships, and children's outcome is somewhat more varied than the findings on interparental support. There is a large literature on the association between interparental conflict both before and after parental separation, and poor child outcome (Amato, 1993; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). There is also evidence for the effects of parental conflict and separation on children's adjustment after separation being mediated by parenting by the custodial parent: for example, a study of adolescents in the first year after divorce showed that the impact of conflict between parents on adjustment problems was mediated by maternal rejection or withdrawal (Faubert, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990). A second example highlighted the role of mother-child conflict as mediator of the impact of interparental conflict (Forehand et al., 1991). Evidence that inter-parental conflict plays a mediating role between nonresidential father-child relationships and child outcome is less clear. Interparental conflict was reported to be associated with lack of closeness to nonresidential fathers, and to perceptions of discrepant parenting in adolescents (Buchanan et al., 1996), but specific mediating links were not tested. It could be that characteristics of the noncustodial parent in high-conflict families contributed to the adolescents' emotional distance from the nonresidential parent in particular.

Interparental hostility in Whiteside and Becker's (2000) meta-analyses played a central role in the association between father-child contact and relationship quality, and Funder and colleagues found that fathers' feelings of anger, hurt, blame and revenge were strongly predictive of whether they saw their children at all (Funder et al., 1993). However, some studies found no associations between interparental conflict and child-father contact (Simpson, McCarthy, & Walker, 1995), and in Smith's study, the majority of parents who had negative feelings towards their ex-partner described their children's relationships with the nonresident father as warm. The extensive evidence on the links between exposure to inter-parental conflict and children's

adjustment outcome, which is drawn from observational, experimental and interview studies (Grych & Fincham, 2001), and especially the data from children's reports on conflict between their parents, remind us that children are very sensitive to tensions and conflict between their parents, and very distressed by such conflict. Conflict between single mothers and their ex-partners may be particularly important in relation to children's negative outcomes, as a number of studies indicate (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Arditti, 1995; Dunn et al., 2003; King, 1994a, b).

'Gate-keeping' by mothers?

The close association between mothers' relationships with their ex-partners and children's contact and relationships with their nonresident fathers, and the sensitivity of children to tension and conflict between their parents, imply that parents can have a powerful role in influencing their children's views of the other parent, and in affecting the child's views on contact with the other parent. To what extent 'gate-keeping' by mothers influences child-father relationships is not always easy to establish. In children's own accounts of their relationships with their nonresident fathers, it is particularly difficult to draw inferences about the extent to which such 'gate-keeping' is exercised; the children themselves rarely discuss their contact with their nonresident parent in these terms. While some alienating processes may well be common among angry, divorcing or separating parents (Bradshaw & Millar, 1991; Bradshaw et al., 1999; Simpson et al., in press), the idea that the notion of 'parent alienation syndrome' (Gardener, 1993; Hobbs, 2002a, b) is appropriate or useful is not widely accepted. The term refers to a systematic denigration and undermining of the nonresident parent, to ensure that contact does not take place. Hobbs commented that the 'symptomatic behaviours that combine to form this syndrome' include evidence that 'the child is aligned with the alienating parent in a campaign of denigration', 'rationalisations for denigrating the target parent are weak, frivolous or absurd', and 'animosity towards the rejected parent lacks the ambivalence of normal relationships'. Anger and frustration, resentment and distress are common among separated parents; however, the elevation of alienation to an illness, and to a 'syndrome', is not generally recognised by psychiatrists in the UK or the US, and has been described as an unhelpful concept, more usefully described as 'implacable hostility' (Sturge & Glaser, 2000).

It is worth noting that children's opportunity to communicate with both sets of parents about issues that trouble them remains important. Children who felt that they could talk with a parent about problems in the 'other' household were more likely to feel positive about dividing their lives between two

households (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001). As a methodological point, it is clear that it would be particularly helpful to have the views of *both* ex-partners in studies of problems over contact, to clarify the extent to which mothers' placing obstacles was related to fear of conflict, intimidation or abuse.

Fathers' new families

When nonresident fathers form new unions, do they see their children less often? Data from two waves of the US National Survey of Families and Households show that fathers with new unions report seeing their children as often as those without new unions. Rather, it is the number of new biological children in the fathers' new household that reduces the odds of fathers' frequent in-person contact with their nonresident children (Manning & Smock, 1999).

Child–father relationships and contact after domestic violence

Children who have witnessed violence between their parents, or have been victims themselves of violence or abuse, may have mixed responses to contact with their fathers after the parental separation (Chetwin, Knaggs, & Young, 1998). Some are relieved at the separation and do not want contact (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001; Gorell Barnes et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2001). While it is generally recognised that in such cases the priority should be ensuring the protection of children from emotional and psychological damage (and not insisting that children should have contact with their fathers), it is also argued that children have a right to maintain their relationship with their fathers, that without contact they may either idealise or demonise their fathers (Gorrell Barnes et al., 1998) or blame themselves for their fathers' absence (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Ways of monitoring child–father contact in these situations are currently being explored.

Pre-separation relationship between nonresident fathers and their children

To what extent is the relationship between child and father after parental separation predicted by the child–father relationship before the family change? Findings are mixed, and information on the levels of involvement before separation has usually been collected retrospectively. There is little systematic information on how fathers' parenting practices change after separation – and whether such changes are linked to the pattern of contact and childcare they experience. In Whiteside and Becker's (2000) meta-analysis of the data on children who were under five when their parents separated, the involvement of fathers with their children before separation from the children's mothers was related both to the frequency of their contact and to the quality of the

father–child relationship after separation. A study of fathers who did not want contact with their children after divorce reports that they were less involved with the children pre-separation (Grief, 1995). However, other research suggests that fathers who were disengaged from their children after parental separation had been especially strongly attached to their children before the family change (Kruk, 1991). It may well be that the circumstances of the separation, and factors occurring after the separation, are particularly important in influencing the way in which the relationship between child and father develops after the separation (Lamb, 1999). For some fathers, the relationship with a child after separation may involve changes in the parenting role, with new responsibilities – the creation, maintenance and negotiation of new kinds of relationship (Simpson et al., in press).

The general point is that the emotional histories of child–father relationships need to be taken into account, if we are to understand associations between nonresident father–child relationships and children's outcome. For example, in their comparison of adolescents growing up in black and white single-mother families, Thomas and colleagues showed that the risk of extremely negative outcomes for white teenagers was greater if their nonresident fathers were not involved with them, but that the risk of problems was lower for black adolescents if their nonresident fathers were not involved (Thomas et al., 1996; consider here the parallel point made in Jaffee and colleagues' (2003) study of antisocial fathers described above, in which children were less likely to be diagnosed as conduct disordered if their antisocial fathers were nonresident). Thomas and colleagues point out that although the majority (77%) of the black single-mother families were formed by mothers who had never married, the majority of the white single-mother families had been married and had divorced (84%). They speculated that the adolescents who had experienced parental divorce may have had 'deeper and more ambivalent bonds with their nonresidential fathers', and may have been more resentful, rebellious after the separation, and thus more likely to become delinquent.

Associations between children's relationships with their nonresident fathers and their mothers

Are children who have warm supportive relationships with their mothers likely to have positive relationships with their nonresident fathers? Positive correlations between these relationships (found in research on families where parents have not separated) might be expected in terms of attachment theory, or social learning theory, or on the grounds that children's personalities and behavioural characteristics play a significant role in each of their developing relationships. Moderate positive correlations have been reported for affection, closeness and

supportive dimensions of child–parent relationships in several studies (e.g., Dunn et al., 2003; White & Gilbreth, 2001), and in patterns of conflict in child–mother and child–father relationships. These associations raise the question of whether the links between nonresident father–child relationship quality and good outcome of children are independent of the quality of the children's relationships with their mothers. When studies report that a warm father–child relationship is associated with good adjustment outcome in the children – is this to be explained in terms of the children's relationships with their *mothers*?

The research findings are mixed, on this question. The beneficial effects on children's adjustment outcome of a good relationship between child and nonresident father appeared to be more independent of the mother–child relationship than were the effects of a good relationship with the stepfather, in White and Gilbreth's (2001) study of adolescents in stepfamilies. Other research reports that the relationship between child and nonresident father – closely linked to the quality of the child–mother relationship – did not make a contribution to the variance in children's adjustment that was independent of the relationship with the mother. Rather it was the positivity in children's relationships with their mothers that was key (Dunn et al., 2003). Contact with the nonresident father (closely linked to the mothers' contact with her ex-partner) did, however, contribute independent variance to the children's adjustment. These differences in research findings may reflect the different ages of children in the samples, with the younger children's relationships with their mothers of key importance, and with the adolescent–father relationships in White and Gilbreth's study of greater relative independence.

Relationships with nonresident fathers and with stepfathers

The proportion of children with a nonresident father who experience the addition of a stepfather to their family worlds is estimated to be around two-thirds in the US (White & Gilbreth, 2001). How does this step-relationship affect the contact and relationship between child and nonresident father? The evidence is clearer for contact patterns than it is for relationship quality. A negative correlation between the mother having a new partnership or remarriage, and the extent of contact between child and nonresident father has been widely reported (Bronstein, Stoll, Clauson, Abrams, & Briones, 1994; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). In terms of the quality of children's relationships with their fathers and stepfathers, differing predictions have been made. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), with a small clinical sample, concluded that when children's relationships with their nonresident fathers were troubled and distant, the relationship with the

stepfather could be more positive and contribute to good outcome. Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) concluded that the better a child's relationship was with his/her nonresident father, the more negative the relationship with the stepfather.

However, more recent studies tell a different story, with little association found between the quality of relationship children formed with their fathers and stepfathers (Buchanan et al., 1996). And similar lack of correlation was reported for a national cohort sample in the US (White & Gilbreth, 2001). Interestingly, the variance was substantially greater in the child–nonresident father relationship than in children's relations with mothers or stepfathers. A small number of children had very poor relationships with their fathers – while for many, relations were excellent. It may be important to distinguish between the various dimensions of child–father relationships, in considering patterns of relationships with two father-figures. For the positive aspects of the child–father relationships, Dunn and colleagues report similar findings of no association between child–nonresident father and child–stepfather relationships (Dunn et al., 2003). In this respect, it seems, the relationships with father and with stepfather were independent of one another. However, conflict in the relationship between child and nonresident father was correlated with conflict in both child–mother and child–stepfather relationships. Direction of effects in these patterns is not clear: however, the notion that difficult children contribute to negative relations with all three parents by eliciting similar responses from each person is plausible (Caspi & Elder, 1988).

What conclusions can be drawn concerning the outcome of children who have two fathers? Having a good, supportive relationship with a noncustodial father is linked to good adjustment outcome, and so too is a good relationship with a stepfather. A warm, close relationship with either father-figure is associated with adjustment. The associations with outcome of the two father–child relationships appear to be independent; the effects of a close relationship with a nonresidential father do not depend on whether the mother has or has not formed a new partnership, though the impact of a difficult, conflicted child–nonresident father relationship on child adjustment appears to be particularly marked if the mother does not have a partner.

Patterns over time may well be significant here. Although relations between child-and-nonresident father were associated with behavioural adjustment in stepfamilies early in the stepfamily formation in one study, 4–5 years later, no association between quality and frequency of contact and children's behaviour was found (Bray & Berger, 1993). By then, children's relationships with their stepfathers were more important in terms of adjustment – a finding that highlights the importance of longitudinal research on these issues. In White and Gilbreth's

(2001) study of adolescents, the average age of the child at separation was 4 years, and the time since the father had lived with the child was 10 years: this long time period and the children's young age when their father stopped living with them may have contributed to the 'weaker' effect of the nonresident fathers' relationships compared with those of the stepfathers.

Fathers' perspectives on their relationships and contact with their children

It is often assumed that fathers who have lost contact with their children after separation have lost interest in their children, and have abandoned their responsibilities for support and care of those children. Yet the research of Simpson and his colleagues which investigated fathers' views in depth showed that around 60% of the fathers who never or rarely saw their children after divorce said they wished to see their children, and were in dispute with their ex-partners about contact (Simpson et al., 1995; Simpson et al., in press). Many claimed that they had tried to maintain positive relationships, and had given up in frustration. Similarly, Bradshaw and colleagues reported that the most common reason given by fathers for their lack of contact was that their ex-partners had obstructed their access (Bradshaw et al., 1999). The accounts of fathers after separation provide further evidence that the relationship between fathers and mothers is crucial as a determinant of the contact and relationship between child and father.

Fathers' accounts highlight a number of other issues that increase the difficulties faced by fathers in maintaining their relationships with their children after separation. Employment status and financial problems are important. Employed fathers were twice as likely to have regular contact with their children as unemployed fathers in one study (Bradshaw et al., 1999); in Simpson and colleagues' (Simpson et al., 1995) study, three-quarters of the unemployed fathers rarely or never had contact with their children, and those in nonmanual employment had more regular contact than those in manual occupations. Income levels were positively related to more frequent contact. The housing circumstances of the separated fathers were also related to contact, as they were often inappropriate for family life (Simpson et al., in press). New partners for nonresidential fathers also created tensions in children's relations with their fathers (Bradshaw et al., 1999; Simpson et al., in press; Stark, Laing, & McCarthy, 2001).

These issues also contribute to the difficulties many fathers face in relation to maintaining or developing the relationship qualities that are important for children's adjustment outcome. The evidence that 'authoritative parenting' by nonresident fathers is central for children's adjustment is accumulating

(Amato & Gilbreth, 1999); but for fathers who only see their children intermittently, who are unable to have their children to stay overnight because of their housing circumstances, who are distanced from the day-to-day routines and important events in their children's lives, it may be particularly difficult to deal with disciplinary or control issues in an authoritative manner. As several men in Simpson's research pointed out – they had eschewed a disciplinary role, and described their children in terms of 'good friends' or 'mates' (Simpson et al., 1995).

And intimacy too may be lost. The poignancy with which men report the loss of their involvement in daily routines with their children – bath-times, meal-times, bed-times, helping with homework – is notable (Simpson et al., in press). The flow of communication between father and child, the fine-grained interaction between them, the mutual familiarity and predictability of their daily lives together are core to their relationships; this communication may be hard for either father or child to maintain on infrequent, intermittent time together. The accounts of some fathers in this situation do, however, suggest that new kinds of emotional closeness can develop with their children – their role changes from that of an 'in-house' father to something less clear cut but nevertheless important as someone 'being there' if needed by the children (Simpson et al., in press).

If children regularly stay overnight, their fathers may become involved in caring for them in ways that they did not experience before their separation. This single-handed parenting can, for some, lead to a closer and more involved relationship than child and parent had before the parental separation. However, there has been very little systematic research on how fathers' parenting practices change after separation, and what factors influence such changes.

Finally it is important to note that continuing contact and involvement with their children is linked to fathers' feeling more competent, having better self-esteem, feeling happier about family relationships; they are also less likely to experience adjustment difficulties after separation (D'Andrea, 1983; Guttman, 1993; Stewart, Schwebel, & Fine, 1986) And a national cohort study in the US has shown that involvement of nonresident fathers with their children enhances men's chances of forming new unions. Fathers who visited their children at least monthly were found to have over three times the chance of forming a new cohabiting union than fathers who did not visit their children – even when an array of sociodemographic variables were taken into account (Stewart, Mannock, & Smock, 2003).

Patterns over time; significance of children's age

In comparing the links between adjustment outcome and the quality of children's relationships with their

nonresident fathers and stepfathers, we noted that there was evidence for changes over time – with the relations with nonresident fathers becoming less closely linked to adjustment outcome as the years since parental separation increased. There are three different issues to consider here, if we are to understand how patterns of relationships between children and their nonresident fathers change over time. First, there is the age of the child when the father separates from the mother. This is likely to affect the form of children's response to the family transition: for instance, inter-parental conflict is a less powerful predictor of children's adjustment for children who are younger at parental separation (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000). Clearly, children's ways of coping with family stress change as they develop, and their understanding of their parents' emotional responses becomes more sophisticated. With age, they are less likely to blame themselves for the transition, for instance (Kurdek & Berg, 1987; Mazur, 1993). Studies of children's appraisal of marital conflict using an experimental setting with vignettes show that 7–12-year-old children are less likely to blame the *children* in the vignettes for marital conflict than are younger children (Grych, 1998); for further consideration of developmental changes in children's appraisal of inter-parental conflict, see Grych and Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001).

Age at parental separation could then potentially affect the quality of the child–father relationship after separation. One study found that age was unrelated to the positive aspects of the relationship, but that conflict with the father decreased with age (Dunn et al., 2003). However, it is important to note that the effects of the quality of the father–child relationship on adjustment outcome did not differ with children's age in Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis (1999), nor in White and Gilbreth's (2001) study, nor in the meta-analysis of Whiteside and Becker (2000).

A second issue is the duration of time that has passed since the parental separation. Conflict between parents tends to decrease with time since the separation (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001), and this may affect the child–father relationship. However, if conflict continues at a high level, adjustment problems may be particularly evident more than two years after separation (Hetherington, 1999). It is likely that, in practice, duration of time since separation will be correlated with children's age.

A third issue concerns stability over time in the individual differences in children's contact with their fathers and in relationship quality. In recent studies, moderate stability in contact and in both positive and negative aspects of the child–nonresident father relationship have been reported over 2-year and 4-year periods (Dunn et al., 2003; Iervolino, O'Connor, & Dunn, 2003). It may well be that there is greater stability in child–father relationships in the

recent cohorts studied than reported in earlier research (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Gender

No evidence that gender modified the link between quality of child–nonresident father relationship and children's adjustment was found in the meta-analytic and large-scale studies: boys did not benefit more than girls from father involvement (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; White & Gilbreth, 2001; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). However, mixed findings on contact are reported. One study reported that fathers were much more likely to stay in touch with boys than with girls (Simpson et al., 1995), while another reported that fathers saw their daughters more than sons (Seltzer, 1991). And the significance of father involvement for adolescents in single-mother families may differ by gender. A three-way interaction involving gender, race and father involvement in predicting delinquency was reported by Thomas and colleagues (1996). And those that study the impact of inter-parental conflict on children's relationships have argued that exposure to such conflict may be especially deleterious for cross-gender relationships (Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993); the importance of including both child and parent gender into analyses is emphasized.

Father absence and girls' sexual activity

Before turning to the methodological issues raised by the research discussed, it should be noted that a quite different line of recent enquiry has focused not on the extent/frequency of contact or relationship quality, but on the significance of father absence for girls' sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy, framing the enquiry within an evolutionary model. Two prospective studies of girls in community samples in the US and New Zealand, followed from 5–18 years, reported an association between father absence and elevated risk for early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy (Ellis et al., 2003); such an association has been widely reported in earlier studies, and chiefly interpreted as due to the adversities and stresses that co-vary with father absence. Ellis and colleagues reported that this risk remained when co-varying family, social and personal adversities were controlled, indicating that the impact of father absence operated (at least partially) independently of life-course adversities. They also reported that girls whose fathers were absent before the age of 5 years were particularly at risk. The mechanism underlying the association with father absence remains quite unclear: Ellis and colleagues provide a thoughtful consideration of alternative interpretations of the findings.

Methodological issues, and limitations

Most of the research on children's relationships with their nonresident fathers has involved interviews and self-reports: direct observation is rare, and would be most useful if the quality of child–father relationships is to be studied in detail. Among the methodological concerns raised by the study designs most frequently employed, sampling and selection effects, and the issue of who is the informant on fathers, stand out.

Sampling and selection effects

Most studies of nonresident fathers are based on samples of children selected in terms of family structure. In these cases, it may be difficult to locate nonresident fathers, and the sample is likely to include chiefly those nonresident fathers who are still in contact with their children. The representative range of fathers – in terms, for instance, of educational level, occupation and financial situation, personality and characteristics such as antisocial behaviour – may well be missed, and biased statistical estimates and inadequate power to detect moderator effects may result. The need for a representative range of fathers is clear; however, this will be hard to achieve, given the evidence that nonresident fathers (especially very young fathers) differ from those in stable cohabiting or married relationships on a range of experiences and characteristics.

If information on fathers is obtained from mothers, the bias associated with nonresponse from fathers is lessened; however, mothers may not have contact with their former partners, or may not wish researchers to contact them. And, of course, the issue of whether mothers provide reliable reports on their former partners remains a serious one, considered next.

Who is the informant?

Clearly, the best design would be for data to be obtained from fathers, mothers and children, and from observations; however, it should be noted that there is evidence that mothers' and fathers' accounts of fathers' antisocial behaviour are highly correlated (Caspi et al., 2001), as are accounts of men's violence (Moffitt et al., 1997). As for children as informants, research on adolescence and middle-childhood frequently includes interviews and self-report data from the children themselves; recently, a variety of other techniques, such as family maps and family drawings, have also been employed with much younger children. These techniques have been shown to be useful, giving the investigator the perspectives of children themselves on their family lives and relationships, and providing predictive power in terms of the children's later adjustment (Dunn, O'Connor, & Levy, 2002; Sturgess et al., 2001).

Children's accounts highlight important family issues not necessarily illuminated by adult reports, such as the significance of closeness to grandparents (Lussier et al., 2001) and friends (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001).

One further methodological limitation deserves comment: as in most family relationship research (for a notable exception see Reiss et al., 2000), the significance of genetics in explaining connections between nonresident fathers and child outcome is rarely investigated; the twin study of antisocial behaviour and father–child contact described above (Jaffee et al., 2003) is a welcome exception.

New directions

It is evident that there is much still to be learned about how the family transitions that so many children experience affect their relationships with their fathers. It is still the case that relatively few studies of young children include all the child's parental relationships (Whiteside & Becker 2000), yet the importance of framing research within the network of family relationships is clear, and the mutual influence of these relationships evident. The significance of the emotional history of child-and-father deserves careful attention, especially in relation to decisions about father–child contact and relationship quality following domestic violence, child abuse, and severe psychiatric problems. Clearly, the impact of custody arrangements on the quality of children's relationships with all their parents deserves attention. Longitudinal research is urgently needed on these issues. Promising directions in current research include the following:

- The development of multilevel analytic strategies that permit the investigation of differences *within* families in the sequelae of parental separation (we know that siblings differ in their adjustment following parental separation), and make possible appreciation of the relative significance of individual child characteristics such as temperament, and family characteristics such as SES (O'Connor et al., 2001).
- A concern with the identification of which conditions are linked to children functioning well, when other risk factors are high.
- A new interest in children's interpretation of events – such as parental conflict – as mediating the impact on adjustment (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandes, 2001).
- A recognition of the particular vulnerability of children and mothers in single-mother families to difficulties in their relationships with the nonresident fathers.
- A concern with the potential importance of different aspects of the child–father relationship, rather than solely with contact or broad dimensions of the relationship.

- A recognition of the difficulties faced by nonresident fathers in maintaining and developing close relationships with their children.
- An appreciation of the importance of conducting research within genetically sensitive designs that permit assessment of the contribution of genetics to the relations between nonresident fathers and their children (Reiss et al., 2000).

Correspondence to

Judy Dunn, Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, UK; Email: judy.dunn@iop.kcl.ac.uk

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