

**Children’s relationship with a ‘non-resident parent’:
exploring the interplay of feelings, material
circumstances and wider social networks**

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INTRODUCTION

Across Europe, present day policy on family breakdown seeks to ensure that the process of separation and divorce pays particular regard to the welfare of any child involved. (Ruxton, 1996). Contact and residence are legal concepts that encompass a variety of living arrangements for children whose parents live apart but they also describe the framework for children’s lived experience of family life across households, and thus, are the frames within which children sustain and develop their relationships with their parents and in which parents meet their parental responsibilities towards their children (Wasoff, 2006). In Scotland, recent legislation gives the parent the right *‘if the child is not living with him, to maintain personal relations and direct contact with the child on a regular basis’* and confers a responsibility on parents for ensuring that contact (Section 2, Family Law (Scotland) Act, 2006). Where there is a dispute, the courts can provide a forum for coming to an arrangement, but in practice, the great majority of cases do not involve the courts or legal system, with most families reaching agreement without recourse to formal court processes (ESRC/Scottish Executive, 2006). Data from other EU member states and from Australia are consistent with this trend and on the whole, parents say these arrangements are satisfactory, in contrast to high levels of conflict in cases involving the courts (Bjornberg, 2002, ONS, 2003, Smyth et al, 2004, Statistics Norway, 2005). Nevertheless, a significant minority of children seem to have little or no contact with their non-resident parent. One leading researcher concludes that “although the benefits of continued involvement by both parents in their children’s lives outweighs the adverse effects of parental conflict in most cases, this is not true in a sizeable number of cases, in which the relationship with the non-resident parent is tenuous or poor and the effects of exposure to conflict are great” (Lamb, 2005). Another important dimension of post-divorce parenting relates to material well-being. It is well established that divorce is often followed by lone parenthood which can produce greater economic hardship for children and in many European countries is a direct route into poverty for children. We know little, though, about patterns and levels of private child support, that is, income transfers across private households, particularly from the non-resident parent to the resident parent, and how these compare in different countries (Wasoff, 2006).

Reflecting these policy concerns, until fairly recently, the research literature on non-resident parents has focused chiefly on the extent of contact between children and their non-resident parent and on the payment of support, with much less emphasis on the emotional closeness and psychological significance of these relationships (Dunn, 2004). With a few notable exceptions, previous research has also featured adults’ accounts of children’s difficulties and the quality of these relationships with much less attention paid to children’s views (Smart, Neale & Wade, 2001). These studies argue that contact with a non-resident parent is merely a starting point and that we can only understand the dynamics of post-separation parent/child relationships by taking due account of both the intrinsic nature of these relationships and the mechanics through which they are played out. Trinder and her colleagues, in

a study exploring how parents and children negotiate and experience contact after divorce, conclude that contact arrangements have to be understood in the context of a wider network of family relationships (Trinder et al, 2002). For many children these wider family relationships may constitute a powerful and subtle source of identity as well as forming a bridge between proximal family and the outside world (Pryor, 2003). In short, contact with relatives is a dimension of families that perhaps deserves more consideration in relation to children's post-separation lives than it has so far received. We also know that children's friendships can often be a key source of support at times of family change. For some, friends are an important source of confiding about family concerns (Dunn, 2004) and for others, friends can play an invaluable role in distracting children from family troubles (Neale & Smart, 2001). But we know relatively little about the interplay of children's relationships with their friends and their relationship with their non-resident parent. How, for example, does this affect the quality of these relationships?

METHODS

In this paper, we present data from 'Cool with Change' a Scottish study which explores young people's experiences of and perspectives on family change. In this study we conducted 55 semi-structured 1-1 interviews and 19 follow-up interviews with young people aged 11-14 from five Glasgow schools. The data we'll be looking at relates to participants talking about their relationship with a non-resident parent and 37 of our participants fall into this category. When we looked at these data, we noticed that the majority of these participants (25) used emotive language to describe how they felt about aspects of this relationship or expressed conflicted feelings or feelings of ambivalence. A sizeable minority (9), on the other hand, expressed no such ambivalence whilst a few others (3) seemed uncomfortable talking about their relationship with their non-resident parent. We wanted to understand more about the events and circumstances underlying these different dynamics and the factors that appear to influence these processes. We began by looking again at each transcript in turn and found that we could categorise our participants into 4 groups (See Appendix 3 for details of how we define these groups). The first group we describe as having a 'settled relationship' with their non-resident parent and as we might expect, this group comprises the 9 children whose accounts were devoid of strong, and sometimes conflicted, emotions. We also noticed that while some participants were able to resolve or become more comfortable with dilemmas and tensions in their relationship with their non-resident parent, others appear to find this much more difficult to achieve and these participants form our next two groups. The first of these groups we describe as 'experiencing ongoing problems with their non-resident parent and this group, together with the third group, whom we describe as having 'resolved initial problems' represent most of the participants who talked of this relationship in emotive terms. Our fourth group we describe as having 'no contact' at all with their non-resident parent and these participants were more or less equally divided in the way they spoke about this relationship – half appearing reluctant to discuss it at all and the other half using emotive language or expressing a degree of ambivalence. In the following section, we discuss each of these four groups in turn, using illustrative examples from our interview transcripts. We end our paper with a discussion about what these

accounts may tell us about aspects of the relationship between a child and their non-resident parent and how this is affected by the contexts within which it operates.

Settled Relationship (9)

We began by looking at the accounts of those children who appear to enjoy a settled relationship with their non-resident parent in order to try to identify factors that may have contributed to this. There's a fair degree of diversity amongst these participants, for example in relation to family structure - 5 live in lone parent households, 3 in step-families and one boy, Stewart, now lives in a lone parent household with his mother and his two half-siblings after his step-dad recently moved out. In some cases parents separated many years ago, in others it happened fairly recently. For some participants their father has re-partnered and had other children, for others, their father lives alone. In all but one instance, their father lives locally. Perhaps surprisingly, considering the lone parent status of 6 of these families, most appear to be relatively well off in terms of material resources. We used a series of proxy measures including car ownership, whether has own bedroom, number of holidays in past year, to categorise our participants according to 'relative affluence'. According to this measure, most of the participants in our 'settled' group were allocated to either our 'relatively affluent' or our 'middle group', with only 2 participants, Stewart and John, allocated to our 'relatively deprived' group. It is worthy of note, however, that in both cases, their father continues to make a significant financial contribution to the family:

He (dad) spends more money on me 'cause my Mum's not got a job and my Dad's got a job and I'm his only one. And Mum, my Dad just gives my Mum some money as well to help her out and that (Stewart, 11)

My dad, he pays for the house. He doesn't live in it any more but he still pays for it 'cause he doesn't want to see us out on the street which is kinda stupid 'cause he can't pay his own rent because he broke his leg recently and he has to drive a lot for his work, so he can't work overtime (John, 13)

John's comment in particular highlights that his father's actions, in addition to helping in a material way, also resonate at an emotional level and this is reflected elsewhere in both accounts. For these boys, it's not only about material well-being, it's also about respecting their father and occupying a special position in their father's life. Stewart's parents separated many years ago and since then, he has enjoyed a close relationship with his father with whom he stays every week-end. His parents also come together occasionally, for example, at school football matches:

*Do your family come and watch you play?(Interviewer)
Yes my Mum and my Dad, well sometimes my Dad can't make it but he tries his best to get there before the half time point (Stewart)*

While Stewart values opportunities for his mum and dad to get together occasionally, John highlights the importance of his friends knowing and liking his dad:

All ma pals have seen ma Dad you know, they all think ma Dad's a bit funny (John)

In both these accounts we begin to see how material well-being can make a positive contribution to a child's relationship with their non-resident parent but perhaps of more significance, we see that this factor alone does not fully explain the quality of this relationship. Rather, it operates in a broader context that includes other members of a child's family and friendship networks. For the other members of our 'settled' group, we see the importance of continued contact with members of their non-resident parent's wider family. In all cases, participants' accounts suggest that these relationships continue to flourish, sometimes from a distance:

I find it easier to talk to ma Dad's Mum 'cause I see her more often (Sinead, 13)

My dad lives in England but when I do see him we do loads of fun stuff together (Simon, 12)

And then you've got a little brother and sister as well (Interviewer)

Well, they're not, they're not my brother and sister. They're like, eh, my dad's children when he got married. But like, I still think of them as my little brother and sister and they're just quite fun (Simon)

For others, their father's new partner seems to operate as a bridge into new experiences:

I think Lena's (dad's partner) a bit closer to me than Steve (mum's partner) is 'cause I met her before I met Steve, so we got to know each other a lot better. And she gives me lots of shoes...but she's just a very interesting person. She's been around the world and she's, like, met the Queen and she's going to the party with Prince Charles and all that (Pattie, 12)

These data suggest that no one factor on its own can determine the quality of the relationship between a child and their 'non-resident' parent, rather it is the interplay of several factors. In our study, the accounts of children who appear to enjoy a 'settled relationship' with their non-resident parent differ in many respects but what they have in common appears to transcend the differences between them. All appear to enjoy a reasonable standard of living but in addition, all continue to enjoy social relationships with friends and wider kin as well as with their non-resident parent. Furthermore, these relationships are mutually supportive, nurturing and sustaining of each other. The same cannot be said of children in our largest group, those who appear to be experiencing ongoing problems with their non-resident parent.

Experiencing ongoing difficulties (14)

Children in this group talked of ongoing problems and unresolved difficulties with a non-resident parent. We explored these accounts to try to identify events and processes that may give rise to these problems and to see if it may be possible to identify factors that appear to be hindering a successful resolution. As in our first group, there's considerable diversity amongst these

participants in terms of 'relative affluence', family structure and so on. For half of the participants in this group, the most common set of difficult circumstances related to problematic, sometimes illegal, behaviour of their non-resident parent (in all cases, their father). For some of these young people, a growing realisation of their father's violence has resulted in conflicted feelings about spending time with him. Theresa, for example, has lived in a step-family set-up for a number of years and she described her step-father as 'being like a dad to her'. We interviewed her twice over the course of a year and at the time of her first interview, she hadn't seen her father for several years after finding out about his violence towards her mother:

When I found out I was quite shocked because I didn't think my dad was like that (Theresa, 12)

By the time of her second interview, Theresa was seeing her dad every two weeks in response to him phoning and asking to see her. Theresa appears to have a close relationship with her mum and she has told Theresa that it's up to her to decide if she wants to see her dad. Theresa's mum now chaperones her on these visits.

In the face of past violence at the hands of Theresa's dad, she appears to have found a way of accommodating her concerns about Theresa's safety with her daughter's right to decide for herself. In spite of a long absence Theresa still feels close to her dad but she struggles to reconcile these feelings with his past behaviour:

Well ma dad's no really lived with me since I've been wee. But when I'm with him I feel dead close tae him. But then when I'm no with him I feel like there's something took away. ...There's something, there's something that wants me to, like talk to him, and at the other side that he's not been there for me...I'm sort of mixed (Theresa)

Most of the participants in this group expressed mixed and ambivalent feelings about spending time with their dad, and for a few, like Lesley, access was also constrained by their dad being in prison:

He's in Barlinnie (Scottish prison), my mum says my dad is not letting me go and see him, but I wanted to go and see him yesterday because it was fathers' day. But my mum says he won't send out a meeting form or anything like that, like a booking or anything like that..I think actually he deserved to go into jail for like, selling the drugs and all that, and I don't usually want to see him now because what he done and all that (Lesley, 12)

The family live in a poor area and appear to be suffering considerable financial hardship. We also interviewed Lesley's older sister, Kirsty, who is currently seeing a social worker and who appears to be socially isolated. Both girls fall into our 'relatively deprived' category and both alluded in their accounts to their mum using physical violence against them but both played this down, saying that their mum just 'tipped' them.

Other participants in this group complained about their current contact arrangements with their non-resident parent, expressing a wish to see more of their father. In most cases, their concern coincided with their dad re-partnering or having another child, and while participants tended to focus on the impact of this on how often they saw their father, it seems likely that underlying their concern with practical arrangements were complex feelings about where they stood with him. This may be particularly difficult for those young people who had renewed contact with their non-resident parent after a long period of not seeing them. Kenneth, for example, only began seeing his dad a couple of years ago but since then, his dad has re-married and moved further away:

He used to stay just outside Glasgow and I used to go every week-end but now I see him, like, every month, which is pretty rubbish. And he's got a new wife, so (Kenneth, 12)

Limited phone contact and a fragile relationship between both parents didn't help Kenneth's situation:

He phones sometimes but I've run out of credit so I haven't been able to phone him (Kenneth)

She says she needs to have a word with him 'cause it's not fair on me she said.. I think they had a fall out but I'm not sure what over.. I think it was 'cause my dad had moved down to Manchester, my mum's kinda been like that 'cause he doesn't see me that often (Kenneth)

For other participants, the introduction of a new partner and/or a half-sibling seemed to provide them with a hook on which to hang an enduring dislike or disappointment with their father. Kay's parents split up many years ago and since then she has enjoyed a close relationship with her mum, describing her as: 'like ma friend'.

Kay feels very differently towards her father and her definition of what 'family' means to her reveals a lot about how she regards this relationship:

Em, it's got to be the people that come to Christmas dinner and people that are there for you. People that don't just come and see you, give you money and then leave again, that's what ma Dad does. He thinks that's the only reason I've got to see him it's for money, then he goes back to the pub (Kay, 13)

I don't see him that much, he always says he's too busy or he's working, but, he's in a relationship and he's always too busy with her and he won't come and see me. And I'm kinda, really annoyed with that (Kay)

Other young people, in particular those who appeared to have enjoyed a good relationship with their father prior to the arrival of a new family member, also found these circumstances difficult to accommodate but apparently for quite different reasons. Perhaps in this instance, the addition of a new family member had the effect of shattering their sense of being 'special' to their father:

Before Molly was born, I like, talked to them all and stuff. When Molly was born I quietened down and I don't really talk to them at all. I still see him, like, once a week, it's just that when I'm there, I don't really talk or anything (Kristina, 13)

Kristina also mentioned that she doesn't really talk to her mum about how she's feeling, preferring instead to confide in one of her friends whose mum and dad have also separated. Her mum's fiancée has recently moved into the family home and while Kristina talked warmly about him and her mum, perhaps it is difficult in these circumstances to discuss her feelings about her dad.

Others in this group also expressed disillusionment with their dad's behaviour. Julia's dad moved out of the family home fairly recently and since then, her dad has started seeing someone else:

He seems to have enough time for her (dad's girlfriend) but not enough for his own flesh and blood (Julia, 14)

Julia also spoke of feeling socially isolated at school. She talked about the impact on her personality of her dad leaving, and since then has radically changed her image, now sporting piercings on her face:

After my dad left I wasn't... I was loud and I suppose I wasn't as happy and up for doing as much things as I used to be, and they (Julia's friends) all just kind of got bored with that and just stopped hanging about with me, still haven't talked to me (Julia)

She also spoke of her mum struggling with money and having to work really hard to get by:

The reason I want to take a full time job for a year is because mum has got two minimum wage jobs, doesn't get paid a lot, she has helped me out with me going on holiday this year, a couple of people, and my sister going on holiday with her friends, she can't afford to even go to England or something herself because even to go somewhere close is quite expensive so I want to save up to take her on a wee holiday (Julia)

In Dominique's case, her non-resident parent is her mum who lives in England with Dominique's other siblings. Over the years, Dominique has lived in England but is now resident in Scotland with her dad who has since re-married but lives apart from his new partner. Dominique doesn't see her mum very often and phone contact is constrained by lack of resources:

*Do you get to speak to your Mum on the phone? (Int)
If I have credit on my phone I ring and she sometimes rings me (Dominique, 12)*

*Right, so do you have credit on your phone very often?(Int)
No (Dominique)*

As with our first group, trying to make sense of a child's relationship with their non-resident parent (in this case a relationship with ongoing problems), requires an appreciation of a complex interplay of factors. Issues relating to material well-being again emerge as significant, but these combine with relational processes which in turn have an impact on how children feel about their non-resident parent and the quality of this relationship. In contrast with our first group, these children do not, on the whole, appear to enjoy nurturing, satisfying relationships with their non-resident parent nor with wider kin. In particular, they do not appear to consider themselves as occupying a special place in the life of their non-resident parent. In Julia's case, difficulties with her dad have extended beyond her family life, and appear to be having an adverse effect on her wider social networks. We now turn our attention to a third group of participants in our study who talked of initial problems which have subsequently been resolved.

Resolving problems with a non-resident parent (7)

In this section we explore accounts where participants identify a set of circumstances which they present as initially problematic but which have since been resolved, or at least appear to be more liveable with. It is notable that none of the young people in this group were living with problems relating to domestic violence and other forms of illegal behaviour. However, on the face of it, in most instances, other circumstances and events they highlighted seem similar to those described by those young people who continue to experience ongoing problems. So what is it that has helped these young people to resolve initial problems with their non-resident father? If we more fully understand these processes then perhaps we will be in a better position to help those young people who find this difficult to achieve.

All but one member of this group (Danny) lives in a lone parent family and only one (David) falls into our 'relatively deprived' category. We saw that for some young people in our last group, accommodating members of a non-resident father's new family continues to be an ongoing problem. This often appears to adversely affect the amount of time they spend with their father, but perhaps more significantly, it brings to the fore complex and often contradictory feelings about where young people 'fit' in their father's life which are difficult to resolve. But this isn't always the case. David, for example, was shocked when he first found out that he had a half-sibling:

I had lost contact with my dad when I was 5 and I got back in contact when I was about 10 maybe. But, the first time I'd ever really seen him I was told that I had a wee brother and, you know, just finding out, it was like they had a whole other life over there and it was a wee bit of a shock to me (David, 12)

Although David talks of 'losing contact' with his dad, it is perhaps significant that in the absence of actual physical contact, he 'kept alive' this relationship by keeping treasured photos and mementos. When David began seeing his dad again, he faced another challenge – how to maintain a close relationship whilst separated by hundreds of miles (his dad lives in London). However, David and his dad, with the support of his mum and other family and friends, have set up a range of different ways of maintaining contact:

I spend time with my gran and granddad, on his side at their house up north (David)

I take a train up to London maybe every fourth month or whatever and I speak to him regularly on the phone and we text each other and things like that. I have contact with him regularly, he phones me every other day and I can text him or phone him whenever I want to (David)

David also talked about a forthcoming holiday with his dad's family which he hoped would help him to forge a relationship with his new half-brother on his dad's side:

I don't really see him that much and I'm uncomfortable in that situation. I'd love to see him but obviously I'm going to spend a fortnight with him in Spain, get to know him the same as Dylan (new half-brother on mum's side)

Danny also talked about initial problems relating to time spent with his dad and his new family, but his situation differs from David's in that he comes from an affluent background (his dad is a consultant) and he has been in regular contact with him since his parents separated around six years ago:

I don't really get on with my step-mum that well and sometimes it means I don't have that good a relationship with my Dad which upsets me quite a lot (Danny, 12)

We interviewed Danny on two occasions and at his second interview, he reflected on these earlier comments. His remarks perhaps point to the potential significance of how young people want to portray themselves to others:

When I last spoke to you I used not to like my step-mum but I like her better now and stuff. When Connor and Peter stayed at my dad's house, em, I think I'll be honest about it, I think most of the time I started to like my step-mum a lot earlier than I wanted to admit but just because I thought it'd make me look good and it'll make me look as if I've got a really hard life (Danny)

The role that Danny's mum played in helping him to reflect on how he might feel in the future also appears to have helped Danny to resolve these early problems:

My mum was always like, whenever I said I didn't want to go, my mum would always say, 'You say that now but when you're older, if I say to you 'OK Danny, you don't need to go', when you're older and you say you've not got a relationship with your dad any more you'll feel guilty and you'll wish that you had gone and even though sometimes you don't like your step mum, she's a nice person, most of the time to you'. And she just said things like that and so I kept going and I think because I kept going, even though I didn't want to, that it made me like it (Danny)

Danny also spoke warmly about a family holiday he had recently spent with his dad's family and other relatives. As in David's case it would seem that holidays can play a key role in nurturing a child's relationship with their non-resident parent but also in facilitating relationship-building with other family members. Having friends to stay is also a significant development in Danny's relationship with his dad and his new family, one that requires accommodation by all parties. Again, we see different players in Danny's social networks co-operating in ways that help to develop and sustain his relationship with his non-resident parent and his new family.

Pauline also found her dad getting together with a new partner difficult to get used to.

She lives with her mum and her sister in a lone parent family, and she spoke about how she felt when her dad re-partnered:

I was kinda let down 'cause it was, like, soon after Mum and Dad split up, but I did feel awkward at first. We didn't really, weren't really used to my Dad being with someone else (Pauline, 13)

A year or so later, Pauline's dad and her step-mum got married and Pauline spoke with great pride about being a bridesmaid at the wedding. She also spoke warmly about the recent birth of a half-sibling:

It's more fun .. my dad and step-mum are like, they, I think they're happier (Pauline)

So what accounts for this change of heart? Pauline talked about spending a lot of time with relatives on her dad's side as well as with her step-mum's parents so she is clearly embedded in her dad's new family, and she talked about the value of having a close friend who has experienced similar circumstances. Another clue may lie in how Pauline describes her relationship with her dad:

I get on with him (dad) well 'cause we're both quite laidback so we don't really take much seriously, we just kinda joke about most of the time so it's quite good ... he's more like my brother than my Dad I think (Pauline)

Perhaps Pauline has re-situated herself in relation to her father and this has helped her to resolve earlier uncertainties about where she 'fits' in her father's life in the aftermath of him establishing a new relationship. Her important role at her dad's wedding reflects the 'special' place she continues to occupy in his life but she likes to think of him as more of a 'brother' than a father.

For one participant in this third group, though, the birth of a new half-sibling has helped her and her sister to manage and live with negative feelings about their dad:

Because with Seamus, I don't like that name, but with him there it sort of takes the burden off me and Constance of being all the attention and that makes things a wee bit easier (Kathy, 11)

I don't really get on that well with my dad... to tell the truth, I don't really like my dad. I just, usually feel uncomfortable with him and like, I don't call him dad, I call him Patrick (Kathy)

Kathy's remarks also imply a re-positioning of herself in relation to her dad, a distancing process which perhaps also helps her to manage these visits. Kathy's mum also appears to have helped her to manage her difficult feelings about her dad by agreeing that she and her sister need only visit their dad every third week-end instead of every second week-end.

So, what can we learn from these accounts? As with our other group, events such as the re-partnering of a parent or the birth of a half-sibling can throw into relief complex emotional difficulties in a relationship with a non-resident parent. What's different is that this third group of young people appear to have gone about resolving these initial difficulties in ways that enhance this relationship, or in Kathy's case, making difficulties more liveable with. Most significant in this process appears to be the interplay of material resources (which facilitate contact and relationship building) together with the support and cooperation of members of a child's wider social networks. It is the interplay of these processes operating at different levels that appear to affect a young person's capacity to nurture and maintain a close relationship with their non-resident parent. This is not to imply that we should always strive for this goal – there are circumstances where it is not in a young person's interests to see their non-resident parent, for example, when domestic violence is an issue and when the young person expresses a clear wish not to see their father (see example below). But in many instances, children do want to maintain a close relationship with their non-resident parent in spite of difficulties and tensions and it is these relationships that this paper addresses. Before going on to discuss this further, it is important to acknowledge that there is another group of young people that we have not yet considered – those who have no contact at all with their non-resident parent.

Children who have no contact with their non-resident parent (7)

In our study, a fourth group comprising 7 young people had no contact at all with their 'non-resident' parent. Four of these children live in a lone parent family and three in a step-family and without exception, all fall into our 'relatively deprived' category. Three children said little or nothing at all about their relationship with their non-resident father in their interview. All of these children displayed signs of feeling uncomfortable with this line of questioning and in light of their discomfort, we chose to move on to safer ground. Three girls and one boy spoke a little about their absent father, allowing us to look a little more closely at this relationship and the contexts within which it operates.

Julie lives with her mum in a lone parent household and has a close relationship with her mum and a number of other adult relations. She knows that her father lives locally and when she got older, her mum told her about the circumstances surrounding her parents' separation, something she didn't expand upon. She has never spent any time with him but her comment below suggests a degree of ambivalence about this. As in our other accounts, other

factors, in this case Julie's mum's attitude to contact, also had a bearing on this relationship:

My mum doesn't want me to see him and I don't really want to (Julie, 10)

Stuart and his older brother have lived with their mum and step-dad for five years. He enjoys playing football with his friends and regularly sees his maternal grandparents and his step-dad's parents. He is also close to his mum's brother and is in contact with other relatives of his mum's and his step-dad's who live away. He hasn't seen his dad since his parents separated and asked about his dad around a year ago. He knows his dad's name and where he used to live but has no current contact details for him. He displayed some ambivalence about potential contact with his dad, replying to a question about this by saying that he would 'kinda' like to see him and later in his account:

My mum just told me everything and now I don't really care (Stuart, 11)

Cheryl, a survivor of her dad's domestic abuse, seemed content not to have any personal contact with her dad, although her remarks suggest that it's important for her to understand why he behaved the way we did:

He used to batter us all the time – I don't know why, probably doesn't like girls, babies and that, 'cause he used to love my big brother, and he still loves my big brother, he sends letters and that. Sometimes he writes about me, asks how I am and all that...I don't know if he's still alive, that's what I wrote on my form. My mum said he's still alive but I don't, like, speak to him. So, that's all about my dad (Cheryl, 11)

Cheryl continues to struggle with behavioural problems which often bring her into conflict with her mum. Her wider family appears to be fragmented with some relatives treating Cheryl and her mum as though they're 'invisible'. She's been seeing a social worker for the past year or so.

In one unusual case, far from expressing dissatisfaction at not seeing her father, Lizzie described how her father, against her wishes, continues to demand access to her. Her parents split up some years ago under acrimonious circumstances and her contact with her father and her attitude towards him have been erratic over the years:

I didn't see my dad, but then I wanted to, then he doesn't want to see us because he was bad, but then I sort of wanted to see him again (Lizzie, 12)

I won't even look at his face, I've ripped up all his pictures and everything

We interviewed Lizzie on two occasions over the course of a year and at both interviews, she expressed a very clear preference for not seeing her dad. In previous years, she had visited her dad and his new family but she didn't enjoy these occasions and talked about them being 'bad to her'. At the time of the second interview she seemed to feel more fearful of him and was becoming more and more socially isolated:

I wanted my mum to phone up a lawyer and get like, a restraining order, so he wouldn't come near me. But mum says she's not going to do that, but I think my mum's already asked and she said that they can't do that because that's a fathers instinct to go and get their kid but I don't want him to come and try and find me. I want him to leave me alone and they're not going to do anything about it so I'm not going to. And my childhood is getting wasted because I can't go out anymore 'cause he'll be there waiting on me (Lizzie)

Lizzie's predicament was further exacerbated by the attitude of a close friend whom she used to turn to for support. This girl continues to see her non-resident parent and can't understand why Lizzie isn't prepared to give her dad another chance. This perhaps helps to explain why Lizzie has sought support elsewhere, although with little success. By the time of her second interview, she had tried phoning ChildLine but couldn't get through, and had written to a magazine problem page but had to wait five months for a reply. She appeared to harbour a general distrust of adults after failing to receive the support she feels she needs from her mum:

I don't really trust anyone, I just kinda keep it all to myself. 'Cause I talked to my mum, like, about feelings I have and stuff and she tells me to grow up and not to be silly and it's just fears and just stuff like that (Lizzie)

These accounts, although few in number, reflect the diversity of influences that young people who have no contact with their non-resident parent have to weigh up and engage with. Some found it difficult to talk about their non-resident parent at all, and we can only speculate about what lies beneath this reluctance. For Julie and Stuart, their mother's attitude towards their father may be a contributory factor in their ambivalence about whether or not they want to spend time with their father. Cheryl and Lizzie, on the other hand, are clear that they do not want contact with their father. In Lizzie's case, her father's repeated efforts to see her against her wishes are clearly having adverse effects on Lizzie's emotional health and she may benefit from support that helps to reduce her exposure to these difficult circumstances.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have explored the accounts of young people talking about their relationship with their non-resident parent. By comparing the accounts of those who continue to struggle with aspects of this relationship with the accounts of those who appear to have a 'settled relationship' with their non-resident parent and those who have successfully resolved initial problems, we hope to gain a clearer understanding of the processes involved in overcoming difficulties that may arise in this relationships and how children's connectedness with their non-resident parent is affected by the social contexts within which it operates. In particular, we hope to gain a more nuanced understanding of how a child's relationship with their non-resident parent may change over time and is subject to a complex interplay of social and material factors.

We know from the literature that the quality of these relationships matters more than the mechanics through which they are played out, and our data support this. Even although children often engage discursively with this by talking about contact arrangements, when we look further we can see that underlying these practical concerns lie complex emotional processes. Thus, many of our accounts suggest an ongoing process in which participants struggle with unfolding events that have an impact on their relationship with their non-resident parent. In our study we see a number of instances in which children appear to be trying to make sense of where they 'fit' in this parent's new life and some have greater success than others in squaring this up. We also see that these emotional processes do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, they are affected by a complex interplay of social and material factors which may either exacerbate or help to resolve the difficulties that children struggle with in their relationship with their non-resident parent. Those children who continue to struggle with problems in this relationship are invariably also trying to deal with other adverse circumstances. Our data suggest that a specific group of young people for whom this may be a particular problem are those whose non-resident parent is in prison or for whom domestic violence is an issue. For other children poor quality relationships between their non-resident parent and other family members appears to be a key stumbling block, and some children may also become socially isolated from their friends, and hence more vulnerable. Trinder and her colleagues have alerted us to the importance of the relationship between contact arrangements and the wider family networks within which these arrangements are embedded but we would suggest that children's friendship networks are equally important. However, just as family dynamics can be facilitative or, conversely, can work against children developing and maintaining a mutually satisfying relationship with their non-resident parent, so too can children's friendships have an impact in either direction. We have seen that close friends can be protective and supportive, especially when they are integrated with children's family networks. In some instances, though, where relationships with friends are complicated by difficult dynamics in a relationship with a non-resident parent, this can lead to greater social isolation.

Our data also appear to show that children who enjoy a level of material well-being which enable them to go on holiday with their dad's new family, keep their mobile phone in credit so that they can keep in touch, etc. have a greater capacity to transcend difficulties in this relationship. However, material resources alone are not enough. Of much greater significance is how these resources are used to enhance a child's experience and sense of being embedded in a network of social and family relationships. Children who enjoy these benefits seem to have a greater capacity to resolve the emotional ups and downs that invariably accompany the arrival of a new family member. Some rely on the support of friends and family to help them maintain their social identity. Others engage in a process of reconstructing or re-situating themselves in the wake of the ongoing transformation of their family environments. But as noted above, this is not a stand alone process – these children appeared to be fully integrated into their non-resident parent's family

network and to enjoy close friendships, sometimes with other young people who had experienced similar life events.

CONCLUSION

A child's relationship with their non-resident parent is best understood as dynamic and changing over time and subject to a complex interplay of social and material factors. The emotional ups and downs that inevitably form part of this evolving relationship are more easily managed in circumstances where children enjoy a level of material resources that enable them to maintain contact with this parent but more importantly, where this relationship is embedded within a mutually supportive network of social relationships. Our data also seem to support the idea that for some children, the trust implicit in a relationship between a child and their parent may be eroded or called into question when a parent moves out of the family home and begins to form new relationships, and that changes such as these may require some form of resolution (Bondi, 2003). How a child feels about where they 'fit' in a non-resident parent's life appears to be closely related to how connected they feel to this parent and this can be helped or hindered by a child's social and material circumstances. This does not imply that we have to embrace a pessimistic view of this relationship. Rather, it's to suggest that it is also important to acknowledge the emotional dimensions of this relationship and to offer appropriate support to children when they require it. In conclusion, the accounts provided by our participants offer a rich and nuanced insight into the relationship between a child and their non-resident parent and how this relationship is affected by social and material circumstances. Perhaps an important step forward in nurturing and supporting such relationships is to find another way of describing them because it seems clear that the term 'non-resident' parent fails to capture both the complexity and the connectedness of this relationship in a child's life.

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APPENDIX 1

Participants and their relationship with a ‘non-resident parent’ (n = 37)

| Pseudonym | Age | Relationship with nr parent | Times Interviewed |
|------------------|------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Hassan | 12 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| John | 13 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| Matthew | 12 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| Raymond | 13 | Settled relationship | 2 |
| Terry | 13 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| Stewart | 11 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| Simon | 12 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| Pattie | 12 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| Sinead | 11 | Settled relationship | 1 |
| | | | |
| Theresa | 12 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Brian | 12 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Julia | 14 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Kirsty | 14 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Lesley | 12 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Dominique | 12 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Kristina | 13 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| Kay | 13 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 1 |
| Kenneth | 12 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 1 |
| Joanne | 11 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 1 |
| Peter | 11 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 1 |
| Sarah | 11 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 1 |
| Kathy | 11 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 1 |
| Karen | 13 | Experiencing ongoing difficulties | 2 |
| | | | |
| Rachel | 12 | Initial problems resolved | 2 |
| Danny | 12 | Initial problems resolved | 2 |
| Graham | 13 | Initial problems resolved | 2 |
| Farah | 12 | Initial problems resolved | 1 |
| David | 12 | Initial problems resolved | 1 |
| Martin | 12 | Initial problems resolved | 1 |
| Pauline | 13 | Initial problems resolved | 1 |
| | | | |
| Jed | 11 | No contact | 1 |
| Cheryl | 11 | No contact | 1 |
| Rob | 11 | No contact | 1 |
| Julie | 10 | No contact | 1 |
| Chantelle | 11 | No contact | 1 |
| Stuart | 11 | No contact | 1 |
| Lizzie | 12 | No contact | 2 |

APPENDIX 2

Different types of relationship with a ‘non-resident’ parent (n = 37)

| Settled Relationship | Ongoing Difficulties | Initial problems resolved | No Contact |
|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| 9 | 14 | 7 | 7 |

APPENDIX 3

Typology of relationships with a ‘non-resident’ parent generated from data from 37 participants in the Cool with Change research project

(adapted from Trinder, ‘Working and not working contact after divorce’, 2003)

SETTLED RELATIONSHIP

When the child’s account is suggestive of all of the following:

- Contact occurs without apparent risk of physical or psychological harm to all parties
- All parties appear to be committed to contact
- All parties appear to be broadly satisfied with the current set of arrangements and do not seek significant changes
- Contact appears to be, on balance, a positive experience for all parties

EXPERIENCING ONGOING DIFFICULTIES

When the child’s account is suggestive of at least one of the following:

- Contact appears to pose an ongoing risk of physical or psychological harm to the child
- Not all parties appear to be committed to contact
- At least one party seeks significant changes to existing contact arrangements
- Contact is, on balance, not a positive experience for all parties

INITIAL PROBLEMS RESOLVED

When the child identifies a set of circumstances which they present as initially problematic but which have since been resolved or which appear to be more liveable with

NO CONTACT

When a child has not seen their non-resident parent since the time of their parents’ separation or in the last 2 years