



# On laughter and loss: Children's views of shared time, parenting and security post-separation

Childhood

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## Abstract

Among the research, practice and socio-legal commentary on the substantial sharing of parenting time after separation, children's voices about their experiences remain overwhelmingly silent. This article draws on findings of a descriptive phenomenological study which investigated Australian school-aged (8- to 12-year-old) children's descriptions of two binary phenomena: security and contentment in shared time arrangements, and the *absence* of security and contentment in shared time parenting. Specifically, this article focuses on exploring parental behaviours and interactions recognised by children as sources of security in shared time lifestyles, through happy and needy times. Central to this is the juxtaposition of the child's experience of security and shared enjoyment with the present parent, against the absence of security emanating from unresolved longing for the 'absent' parent. The article provides an empirically derived formulation of children's advice to parents about shared time parenting, with relevance for family law related parent education forums.

## Keywords

Children and divorce, children's experiences, children's views of divorce, joint custody, shared care, shared parenting, shared time parenting

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Well, no I wouldn't really feel this (refers to drawings), 'cause if I was laying in bed, I would FEEL it, but then I'd just walk out to the hallway and go, 'Oh like Mum and Dad are you okay?' And they'd be like 'Oh yeah yeah yah', but if they weren't okay, I'd just like cuddle them before, if they actually do ... and then I'd go back to bed, go to sleep, and if I felt it again I'd just call one of them, I'd just call one of them.

To Giselle, her parents' togetherness under one roof is the source of both her security and safety, and their own. Without this, she is plunged into disorganising fear. She is not yet able to contain, dampen or indeed switch off her longing, as other subjects had learned to do.

## Discussion

This article has focussed on the behaviours of separated parents that engendered felt security and insecurity in their children, about living in substantially or equally shared time arrangements between their parents' homes. Through a descriptive phenomenological analysis of children's accounts, we provided concrete examples of how commonly cited parental attributes (such as cooperative, child-oriented and flexible co-parenting) are lived by the child, and how they impact security and contentment. In the children's descriptions of insecurity, we see the central place of longing for the 'absent' parent, and the load this creates for the child's ability to adjust well to both the parental separation and the shared time parenting arrangement. The power of the children's voices speaks for itself and points to several possible applications in practice.

This study suggests that the child's experience is more complex than often played out in the divorce literature, and particularly in debates about the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of shared time parenting presumptions and practices. No child in this study mentioned the allotment of time as having any bearing on their felt security. No child implied at any level that there was a 'better' or 'worse' parent. Instead, the children point to the origins of security within co-parenting availability and responsiveness. Even in longing for the absent parent, no judgment of the present parent was involved, and it was never about feeling unloved. Rather, in these moments of needing but not being able to be with the other parent, the support of their present parent was simply not 'enough'.

In no account were parents simply interchangeable in their capacity to soothe and comfort the child. Spending equal time with each parent did not resolve the child's longing for a preferred parent in a moment of need. Indeed, in the extreme case (such as for Giselle), shared time appeared to create two 'absent' parents, confining the child to a perpetual state of longing. Many of the children in this study attempted to 'switch off' from their distress. While adaptive in the moment, it raises questions about the sequelae of this coping style over time.

Phenomenologies of binary experiences such as security and its absence create light and shade, enhancing our ability to see what, experientially, lies beneath each. These findings suggest a set of parenting attributes which, from the child's perspective, are core to creating security and contentment in shared time parenting arrangements. These include parental willingness and ability to

- Be together from time to time in the same physical space, conflict-free in front of the child;
- Share simple enjoyment and pride in their child, on occasions of meaning to the child, such as school functions, sporting events, family gatherings;
- Create benign intimacy when together in the child's presence (such as genuine intent when saying hello, sharing a laugh);
- Enable the child to connect with the 'absent' parent, especially to reach out to this parent in times of need, without guilt or worry about hurting the other parent's feelings;
- Cultivate the sense of living in a separated but still integrated family (through actions such as joining together for events of significance to the child, and communicating openly to keep apprised of the child's day-to-day life); and,
- Prioritise the needs of the child.

Of course, many aspects of the relationship between parents' behaviour and children's sense of security may also apply to other living arrangements. One message from the study is that having shared time does not of itself produce security for the child. It would be useful to explore in future research whether similar or differing findings emerge from a sample of children who live in less equal time splits.

The child's voice on this topic shifts the focus from 'time' as a key determinant of security, to the enactment of the living arrangements by their parents, namely the ways in which each parent remains a sensitive, active, protective presence for the child. The child-generated messages from this study may have applicability to parent education and support programmes, post-separation. For example, this study suggests that many parents (even those who seemingly meet the profile of cooperative, child-oriented and flexible co-parenting) may benefit from specialised support to develop and maintain parenting arrangements (at any time level) which are responsive to their children's individual and evolving needs. This child-centred phenomenology may offer new tools to parents for enacting their parenting arrangement in a way that fosters their child's capacity for security and contentment.

In that light, we conclude with reflections inspired by the children in this study on the advice other children might give to their parents about creating a way to feel 'securely shared'. The following statement was written for parents by the authors, based on what our subjects told us, and in a style children might use:

When I feel securely shared, I know I don't have to constantly keep watch over how you will act when you are together (at places like handovers, or my school or sporting events). Knowing that you won't fight is really important. But that's not enough. I want to see you act in ways that show me that you can sometimes still laugh and have fun with each other, and share your pride and joy in me. When I see this, I relax and feel good, instead of being worried and watchful whenever you are together.

Sometimes when I am at your house, I might be feeling sad, or scared, or upset, and I might start to miss my 'other' parent. You and my other parent aren't the same, and you do things differently. There are times when I just need to reach out to the parent I'm not with, to help me feel okay again. When I feel like this, I want to know that it is alright for me to call, or even see

them – even though it is ‘your turn’ with me. It makes it really hard for me when I have to worry about hurting your feelings because I miss the other person, and just need them. I’m still a kid with two parents, and I can’t always get all my needs met by the parent I am with at the time. I will learn to cope with my grief, and I will adjust to you being separate, but there are some needs I can’t just switch off, without creating big problems for myself.

When I feel securely shared, I feel like I live in one world, not two. I feel like both my parents are in touch with, and responsive to most things I feel and need. You both make sure that my arrangements and the way you put them into place don’t bury me under emotional burdens. You’re not expecting me to live between two completely unconnected households. You make sure I’m not too weighed down with the practical problems of living in between two houses. You can come together and make sure that my arrangements are predictable, but flexible – both on a day-to-day basis, and as I grow and my needs change over time. Sometimes, my needs might be different from yours. When this happens, I’d be really grateful if you might put aside your own needs, and think honestly about mine, and what could help. There was this guy called Bowlby, who said the job of parents is to be bigger, stronger, wiser and kind. That about sums up what I’m asking for.

These are things that you can do to help me to thrive in shared time.

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## Notes

1. Defined in the 2008 Australian Child Support Scheme as a child spending 35% of their time (equivalent of 5 days a fortnight) with each parent post-separation.
2. A detailed methodological report of the research design and findings is presented elsewhere (Sadowski and McIntosh, in press).
3. From *The Bear Cards (new edition)*, published by *St Luke’s Innovative Resources* (2010). Available at [http://www.innovativeresources.org/Pages/Our\\_Publications/Card\\_Range.aspx?id=625437e6-2a1a-44b5-833b-8c6325853ccf](http://www.innovativeresources.org/Pages/Our_Publications/Card_Range.aspx?id=625437e6-2a1a-44b5-833b-8c6325853ccf)

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