



## Two homes, one heart

*With the number of Australian children of separated parents exceeding one million, there's much at stake when coordinating their back-and-forth movement between two homes, writes **Karen Fontaine***

A divorced Canadian couple made international headlines last month with the construction of a duplex-style home – at the centre of which are the bedrooms of their children, aged eight and ten.

Doors at either end of the duplex's central hallway lead to each parent's self-contained 'wing'. Each week, one parent has custody of the children; during that week the door to the other parent's wing is locked, maintaining a relative privacy for that parent. This arrangement provides stability for the kids, who don't have two homes but rather two parents who alternate their care from week to week.

It's certainly a novel approach at a time when parental divorce affects the lives of nearly one in five young Australians under the age of 20 – “a disruption related to long-term social and economic disadvantages”, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

This is a position supported by Sydney family law professor Patrick Parkinson. In a recent research paper entitled *For Kids' Sake*, Parkinson brought together extensive evidence showing that parental separation is a significant risk factor for children's long-term emotional wellbeing and educational performance.

Another expert, Dr Nicky McWilliam, a lawyer/mediator with Sydney Mediation Partnership, spends a third of her working week dealing with separating parents. She notes, “there are always issues with contact arrangements for the children”.

Unlike in times gone by, when children automatically lived with their mother and might have spent every second weekend with their dad, shared-care situations are becoming much more common, says McWilliam.

“Most of the time the children are split evenly from week to week and sometimes even from day to day,” she says.



In a shared-care situation, academic challenges can arise, says Jacqui Marquis-Conder, Principal Psychologist at Youth Psychology. This is particularly the case if there is a lengthy commute to one parent's home on some weekdays, allowing less time for homework.

“Routines are also usually different in each home and some parents are better than others at supervising homework,” says Marquis-Conder. “Academic challenges and even learning difficulties will most certainly arise if there are behaviour issues associated with unresolved and ongoing emotional distress.”

A recent study on the effect of divorce or separation on young children and older children found that, contrary to what many public policy makers believe, children are most affected by changes to their family structure in the first five years of life.

Leading a study of 3,492 children into how remarriage and integration into a blended family affected behaviour throughout their early and mid-adolescent years, Rebecca M. Ryan of the



Department of Psychology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. found that children of married parents demonstrated the most dramatic behavioural changes later in life if their parents divorced prior to their first year of school.

When handled sensitively, there are many benefits to shared care as it allows children to build meaningful and ongoing relationships with both of their parents, says Jacqui Marquis-Conder.

“Logistics aside, if parents are able to form an amicable shared-care arrangement, and work out a communication style that does not involve the children in their conflict, then shared care can be ideal for children as well as parents. It breaks from what is often single parenting after separation,” she says.

Interestingly, Ryan’s study also showed that children who are integrated into a new blended family have fewer behaviour problems than those who are not. “In fact, children of blended families actually receive protective benefits that seem to help them avoid some of the negative behaviors exhibited by children who remain in single-parent households,” Ryan says.

For Marquis-Conder, what this study highlights is that “step-parents and step- and/or half-siblings can play a very crucial role in a child’s life if they are able to form a relationship built on warmth and trust”.

“I have certainly seen many cases where a child has a warm, loving and close relationship with their step-parents and siblings and this certainly provides protective benefits and potentially increases the child’s resilience,” she says.

Dr McWilliam agrees. “I have dealt with parents whose separation caused a lot of hurt and anxiety but they have managed to sort out

two homes for the kids in a very loving and stable way,” she says.

“A lot of that, I think, is due to giving the kids lots of information – making them aware of what’s happening for the next hour, the next day, the next week, the next year – and doing a lot of talking and communicating.”

“It’s about explaining to the kids that although they are no longer in a relationship with the other parent, they respect that every parent has a different style. And no matter how young a child is, what’s bearing out from my practice is that that really makes a difference.”

Jacqui Marquis-Conder, Principal Psychologist of Youth Psychology, a private practice in Sydney (<http://www.youthpsychology.com.au/>), offers tips on how parents can ease the pressure on children for whom they share care:

1. Establish a shared-care arrangement that is **child focused** not **parent focused**. “A shared-care arrangement should always reflect the needs of the child first, not the parent. Parents need to ask themselves: ‘Is this about me wanting to get my way or have control of the situation, or is this about what is best for my child?’. For example, if the child must be at both before- and after-school care or do a very long commute in order to spend a particular day with a parent, is this actually in the best interests of the child? This is for the parents to decide, depending on their child’s age and particular needs.”
2. **Establish a routine**, particularly during the week. “This can be a huge challenge but if it can be achieved for both parents to enforce regular homework, meal, and bedtimes for their children, this will help the school week go smoothly.”
3. No matter how tempting, **never speak badly about the other parent to the children** (this goes for new partners as well). “This doesn’t mean that you have to say nice things about the other parent but in this case it is wise to follow the good old-fashioned advice ‘if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say anything at all’. This includes subtle jokes, hints or sarcastic comments – even very young children understand the meaning behind these! And do not under any circumstances share communication from the other parent with your child such as showing them email or text message correspondence.”
4. **Make pick-ups and drop-offs as stress free as possible for the children**. “If the conflict is so high that parents cannot even be in the same room, then try to establish a neutral pick-up and drop-off spot such as a public park or café. All heated discussions should be held well away from the hearing or sight of the children (whether in person, on the phone, or through text message).”