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Title Page.

Lost Relationships;

An exploratory study of the factors associated with non-resident parents losing contact with their children following separation / divorce.

A thesis was submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment of the requirements for award of Masters in Child Family and Community Studies.

By

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Declaration:

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis toward the award of the **Masters (M.A.) in Child, Family and Community Studies** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part fulfilment of the award named above.

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Acknowledgements:

Education is the road to advancement, and my own road has been long and challenging. In completing this Thesis as part of a Masters programme, I have fulfilled a personal dream. Arriving at the finish line has only been possible through a combination of personal effort, encouragement and support from colleagues, lectures, friends and especially my wife and two children. To you all, I say thank you.

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Abstract.

Irish society, through its laws, institutions and civic organizations, promotes the primacy of the family, as the environment for the development of the loving, secure, supported child. Ireland, in keeping with most western societies, has witnessed a steady increase in family breakup since the 1960s. The impact of parental separation and family breakup on the child has been found, generally, to be very negative, with the exception of children in highly conflictual parental homes. Little attention has been paid to date, to the factors leading to loss of contact and to the views and experiences of absent parents, those who leave the family home and their children.

This study set out to explore the views of six absent parents, with particular reference to the key factors that lead to the loss of contact with their child, their understanding as to why this happened and from their personal perspective what they thought may help other parents in similar circumstances stay involved in their child's lives.

This paper set out to explore through qualitative, semi-structured interviews, the factors that influenced a small sample of non-resident parents' loss of contact with their children post family breakup (separation or divorce). Six participants were interviewed about their experiences of the loss of contact with their child. For five of the six parents in the study, there was clear evidence of a strong bond with their child prior to family break up. The factors that impacted upon the loss of contact with their child, arose under three headings,

- (1) Personal issues of the non-resident parent,
- (2) Inter-parental relationship pre-separation, and
- (3) External Factors.

Across the six case studies, common themes were identified, and conclusions drawn from these very personal stories. The study has the potential to benefit non-resident parents and their children, and to prevent the loss of such key relationships, particularly for the developing child.

Introduction

Generally parents desire the best for their children and most parents believe that they play an integral part in the delivery of that desire. Irish children interviewed in a study on parenting styles and discipline listed the following as the key tasks of parents;- basic care-giving, protection, breadwinning, guidance, authority, emotional support, shared activities, and facilitating autonomy (Nixon, Halpenny & Watson, 2010). These tasks are a challenge to any parent, and especially to a parent who does not reside with their child. Ricci (1997 pp.7) points out “Children love, want, and need both parents.” Parents are central to the child's well-being and development, and neither parent is ever forgotten by their child. Maintaining contact between the non-resident parent and their child, where this is in the best interest of the child¹, is of profound significance in terms of the child's future development. In Ireland in 2006, 18% of children lived in lone parent households, (State of the Nations Children's Health, 2008), compared to 25% in the United Kingdom for the same year. (UK Office of National Statistics, 2010). Studies differ on the percentage of children from separated and divorced families that lose contact with their non-resident parent. Hogan, Halpenny and Greene (2002) in a study of 60 Dublin children of divorced or separated families, found one third had no contact with their non-resident parent. Smyth and Wolcott (2004) in an Australian study found that 30% of children from separated parents had no contact with their non-resident parent. A study by Woodall (2009) in the UK, found the rate of non-contact by non-resident fathers with their children to be 38%. If we apply the lower Australian rate of 30% to the total number of Irish children in lone parent households (188,000 in 2006), it would mean approximately 56,400 children in Ireland have no contact with one of their parents. Amato, Emery, & Meyers, (2009) reviewed non-resident fathers contact with their children, across the USA, between 1976 and 2002. They found that an increasing number of such fathers, from 18% to 31%, had weekly contact with their child. While

¹ Children who experience, chronic levels of co-parental conflict, or are likely to be exposed to continuing domestic violence or child abuse, ongoing contact with both parents may be highly inappropriate

the increase is to be welcomed, it still meant that in 2002, 69% of these children did not have weekly contact with their non-resident father.

The effects of family breakup may impact upon the children at a number of levels. On a social and emotional behavioural plane, Lau (2007) noted lower levels of self esteem for children of divorced parents where inter-parental conflict continued post divorce. In earlier studies, Zubrick, Silburn, Garton, Burton, Dalby, Carlton, Shepherd, & Lawrence, (1995) reported higher rates of mental health issues for children of divorced parents, while Rodgers (1984) found higher levels of bed wetting for the same children. With regard to education, Albertini & Dronkers (2009) established that within Italian society, children of divorced parents attained lower educational levels than children from intact couples. This is in keeping with previous studies such as Zubrick, Silburn, Gurrin, Teoh, Shepherd & Lawrence, (1997) in Australia, who reported lower levels of academic confidence for such children, while in England, Ely, Richards, Wadsworth & Elliott (1999) found that children of separated parents obtained poorer results in state exams than children from intact families and that this effect had not lessened with the increased prevalence of divorce. Moreover, Amato & Hohmann-Marriott (2007) state that the children of divorced parents are more likely to have their adult relationships end in divorce, and Kieman (1992) noted higher rates of unemployment for adult children from divorced families. In studies of aggression and anti social behaviour higher rates of arrest, school discipline issues and truancy were noted for children from divorced families. (Dombusch 1985, Cockett & Tripp 1994) The research is consistent across the decades and around the globe, from England, Hong Kong, Italy, Australia, and America, divorce has been found to have a negative effect on almost all children.

However it is not true to say that the parents are always better off to stay together for the sake of the children. Work by Amato & Booth (2001) has shown that children of highly domestic violent households benefit if their parents separate, removing the children from ongoing exposure to high levels of parental conflict and its associated negative impact.

The ability to maintain the emotional bond between the non-resident parent and their child, following family separation, is dependent on a number of issues, such as

parents' views of a child's right to contact, non-resident parent's desire for contact, the nature of parents' separation etc. Trinder, Beek, and Connolly (2002) studied the issues that impact on whether contact was successful or not. They found that the factors influencing contact could be grouped under three headings, direct determinants, mediators and challenges. These will be considered in greater detail in the literature review.

Family breakup does not automatically have a negative effect on children, as Amato pointed out when addressing an international conference on Children and Divorce (2006); "Children adjust well to divorce if they have a reasonable degree of economic security following marital dissolution, if they are able to maintain close emotional bonds with both parents, if parents do not engage in prolonged hostile interactions that involve their children, and if children experience a reasonable degree of stability in their post divorce family lives." These factors, economic security, emotional bond with both parents, absence of parental hostilities, and stable family life post divorce, are all within the control of the parents. This begs the question, why are the outcomes for children from separated/divorced parents not better, given that their parents have control over the mitigating factors

Thesis focus

The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the factors that lead to the loss of a parental relationship to their children following family breakup, so that the knowledge gained may be of assistance and support to professionals and non-resident parents and their children. Much has been written on the effects of parental separation on the child. In the international context and specifically within Ireland, far less study has been undertaken from the perspective of the absent parent, on the issues that impact on whether they maintain, develop or lose their relationship with their child.

Parents desire the best for their children, and envisage themselves as an integral part of their child's life. Why then following family separation, do, at least 1/3 of parents (Hogan et al, 2002, Woodall 2009) lose contact with their children? This research sought to hear from non-resident parents what challenged them and ultimately led to the loss of relationship with their child.

Theoretical framework

The aim of the research was to explore and understand, from the viewpoint of the absent parent, the factors that led them to lose contact with their child. As such the study was exploratory in its nature. Punch notes that exploratory studies are generally qualitative in nature, “exploration is more likely to use the less structured field work techniques of qualitative research.” (2005, pp.16) In endeavouring to understand how and why the participants had arrived at a point in their lives where they had no contact with their child, the researcher adopted an interpretive perspective, specifically the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. As Shaw (2010, pp.178) points out, “IPA is a critical realist method which assumes that reality exists, but that our access to it is never direct. In other words, although we accept that events “actually exist” in reality, we realise that our own access to these events is through a particular lens, the personal perspective of the person describing the event at a particular place in time.” Hence in IPA, we are not simply seeking to understand people’s experiences at a particular point in history, but to understand it within a particular time in the participant’s life, in the social, cultural, political and economic context of the person. Fundamental to answering the core question of this research- how did non-resident parents lose contact with their child? - was the need to understand how the participants moved from a point of involved parenting to being absent from their child’s life. This necessitated the ability to aid the participants to express what they believed to be the key drivers that lead them to their non-involvement with their child. Highly structured interviews or questionnaires might have prevented the flexibility to explore nuances within the participants’ accounts. IPA and the semi-structured interview supported the researcher in exploring with the participants how the lost contact occurred and facilitated the participant share their personal story of loss.



Research aims and design.

Research Aims

The intention of this study was to increase the understanding of how non-resident parents loss contact with their children post family break up, and with this additional knowledge to be better able to support parents and children in similar situations. This study sought, from the perspective of absent parents, to identify the following;

- 1) The views and experiences, at first hand, of those who had lost contact with their children.
- 2) The factors that lead to the loss of the parent and child relationship,
- 3) Conclusions, based on the experience of the six case studies, that may aid other non-resident parents stay in touch with their children.

Research Design.

An extensive literature review was undertaken of the factors affecting whether non-resident parents maintain or loss contact with their children post family breakup. The knowledge gained then fed into the research methodology. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate and six participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview within an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach.

Organisation of thesis

This thesis is presented in six chapters, chapter one sets the rationale for the study and places it in an Irish context. This is followed by the second chapter which provides an overview the literature review undertaken on the core issues relevant to whether non-resident parents stay in touch with their child post family breakup. Chapter three sets out the methodology deployed in the research and the reasons why the specific approach was taken. This is followed by the fourth chapter, which presents the findings and common themes from the personal experiences of the participants as to how the participants lost contact with their children. Chapter five is an analysis and discussion of the findings. The final chapter provides a conclusion to the research and presents recommendations that may assist other non-resident parents from losing contact with their child.

Literature Review

Introduction.

In the following pages, I will begin by setting the context for child development within the family unit, this will be followed by an overview of changing role of the father within the family. There will then be consideration of the nature of family in Ireland in the 21st century including the issue of divorce and lone parent families. This will be followed by consideration of the effects of parental separation on the developing child. There will then be consideration of parenting styles and its impact on the child of divorced families. The literature review will conclude with consideration of the issues that impact on whether non-resident parents maintain or lose contact with their children.

Family as the context for development.

A child arrives into the world, totally dependent on others for its every need. Initially those needs are of a physical nature, food, shelter and warmth. Work by Bowlby (1969), Ainsworth (1967) and others, has confirmed the fundamental role that attachment, in the early months and years of the developing child, plays in the future achievement and satisfaction of life. The family forms the basis within which child development takes place. As Carr (2005 p.4) points out, adults take on the basic roles of parenting, which are to provide for the child's need with regard to safety, care, control & intellectual stimulation. Carr goes on to note that often the inadequate meeting of these needs can give rise to psychological difficulties during life.

How well parents meet the needs of their children greatly affects the development of the child. Child development does not take place in the absence of challenges arising in the lives of their parents. Hence when we consider the family as the context for child development, it is useful to consider the stages of the family life cycle and the varying demands that can be placed on different members of family, as they go through different stages of the family cycle simultaneously, such as leaving home, forming relationships, having children, the children as adults etc. (See Carter and McGoldrick 1999, Walsh 2003)

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) proposed that development is the outcome of the interaction between the individual and their environment. He stated, in his ecological model, that each person was influenced by their environment at four different levels the first of which is the microsystem. He defined this as "the complex relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing the person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977 p.514). Taking this definition, it is clear that for the child the microsystem is the family unit, particularly in the early years of life when the child's interactions may be exclusively with their parents and siblings. The ecological model goes on to list three further layers of influence, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem reflecting the influences of communities, organisations and society in general.

Previously the term 'family' implied the traditional view of the family as two married parents raising children together. It will become apparent, when considering the changing nature of families within an Irish context, that there are a great variety of family forms in current Irish society.

The role of fathers in the development of the child.

In reviewing the history of Child development theories Lamb (1981) noted the early focus on the mother infant relationship during the toddler stage and preschool years with the almost total exclusion of the father, as highlighted in the psychoanalytic and attachment theories. The Parsonian systems theory spoke of the father as a socialising agent, preparing the child for the world beyond the family home and their mother. During the 1970s the family systems perspective came to the fore (Lewis et al 1981) leading to the recognition that both mothers and fathers have direct and indirect influence on the child and their development. Traditionally mothers were perceived to provide nurture and care for their children in their interaction, while fathers spend most of their interaction with their children playing (Parke 1990).

Snarey (1993) stated that father child interaction contributes to children's social emotional development, their intellectual academic development and their physical athletic development. Work by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) moved the research perspective on fatherhood from one where fathers were measured by comparison to what mothers do, to one where father child interaction was valued, in its own right, for its nurturing role in the care and rearing of children. For a more detailed account

of this evolution, see Dienhart, Reshaping Fatherhood; The Social Construction of Shared Parenting. (1998pp.29-31) Similarly Pleck and Pleck (1997) spoke of the evolution of fatherhood to the role of co-parent, a theme at the centre of Dienhart's work.

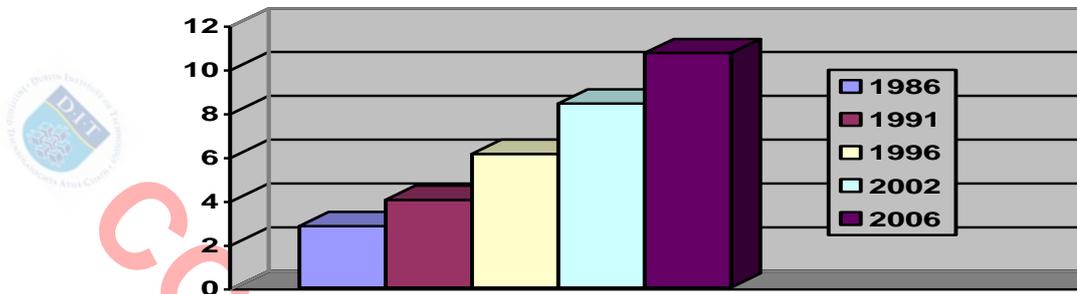
Researchers have moved from seeing the role of the father as peripheral to the developing child, to now being one of central importance for the child. In more recent work by Lamb (2010, pp.3) he describes fathers as "Companions, care providers, spouses, protectors, models, moral guides, teachers and breadwinners". Society is shifting in its understanding of the importance of fatherhood, but may still be somewhat behind researchers. It can be argued that Irish society, particularly in its institutions, has not made the same evolution. Ferguson & Hogan, when speaking of young unmarried fathers stated, "he has to overcome the immensely powerful pressure that exists to exclude him from his child's life" (2004 p.8) By this, he was referring to the legal system and statutory family support services within Ireland, it can be argued that little has changed in the intervening six years within the Irish context.

The changing family context in Ireland.

The nature of the family unit has changed in Ireland and across the western world in the last 40 years. Ireland of the 1970s was dominated by the family unit based on marriage, where married adults lived with and reared their children. Up until 1997 there was no legal provision following the dissolution of the marriage for either party to remarry². There was provision through the district and circuit court to deal with the affairs of married couples who separated. Adult relationship break up is a feature in all societies. Lunn, Fahey & Hannan,(2010) in their analysis of the Irish census for 1986 to 2006, found a steady increase in the percentage of the adult population that were divorced or separated see figure 1.

² The ban on the provision of the divorce within the Irish constitution was lifted following a referendum in 1995 and legal provision for divorce was enacted in 1997.

Fig. 1 Percentage of people separate or divorced according to Census Data.



(Based on analysis of the information in Family Figures, Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland 1986-2006. 2010 P.45)

Ireland may not have had provision for divorce prior to 1997, however it is clear that the issue of relationship breakdown was evident in society and being dealt with, to a limited degree, by the legal system prior to the introduction of divorce. According to Fahey et al, the rates of relationship breakdown in Ireland 2006 was 10.7%. The figures for marriage break up in Ireland are low by western norms. Ireland and Italy tie at the bottom of EU countries for rates of divorce at 0.8 per 1000 people with the UK coming in 2.6 per 1000 in 2005. (Family Trends, 2010, P. 43)

The traditional family unit at the end of the 20th century was under strain by what Cabrera et al (2000) noted, as four significant social trends affecting child development and the roles of fathers, which were (i) increase in female participation in the labour market, (ii) increased absence of non-resident fathers in the lives of their children, (iii) increased involvement of fathers in intact families and (iv) increase in cultural diversity in society.

Although Cabrera's study was based in the USA, the same factors were clearly at play in the Irish context. Between 2001 and 2009, the number of females over 15 at work the Irish population increased by 27.5%. During the same period of time, the increase in the number of males at work was 12.5%. (CSO, 2010)

Regarding the absence of non-resident fathers in their children's lives, the most recent figures for children in one parent households in Ireland, come from the "State of the Nation's Children Report" 2008. It states that based on the 2006 census 17.8% of the

1,056,000 children (under 18 years of age) in Ireland, live in one parent households. This equates to approximately 188,000 children. One parent households occur due to a number of factors, such as parent relationship break down leading to separation and or divorce, death of a parent, and women choosing to have a child without intending to cohabit with the child's father. What is not clear from these figures is the number of these children who do not have contact with their father. In a study by Halpenny et al (2002) of 60 children from separated and or divorced families in the Dublin area, one third did not have regular contact with their non resident parent. A survey by Woodall (2009) sought the views of 4000 children and parents following divorce. It found that just over a third (38%) of children stated that they did not see their father again following family breakup. Based on these figures 33 to 38% of children in lone parent households have no contact with their non-resident parent.

There has also been a steady increase in the number of male lone parents. Fahey et al (2010) based on the Irish census of 2006, note that 9% of lone parents are fathers, approximately 10,000 in Ireland. In the USA in 2008, 17.4% of lone parents were male (Grall 2009), almost twice the Irish rate.

Pleck & Pleck (1997), spoke of the evolution of the fathering role, and society's changing expectations of fathers over the last 150 years. Initially there was the Colonial father, then the breadwinner father of the early 20th century. In the later part of the 20th century an expectation of the involved father became more prominent. In recent years, for some couples, roles have become less gender specific, with the man and woman taking on co-parenting roles, each equal in childcare and household tasks.

The final social trend noted by Cabrera, is that of increased social diversity. In 1996 Ireland saw the beginning of sustained period of immigration, the country went from one of emigration to immigration, over the 14 years up to 2009, 918,000 people migrated to Ireland (CSO, 2009). People who migrated to Ireland come from every country on the earth, practice all and no religion, and brought with them the great richness of their own cultures. Migrants now make up approximately 10% of the Irish population (CSO, 2009), and within the new cultural mix of the country, there are many forms of family, and variety of expectation of the parenting and child roles.

Traditionally in Ireland, marriage was part of the rite of passage to adult couple relationships and parenthood. Over the last two decades, there has been a steady increase in cohabiting couples, (9% of adult population in 2006), and in same-sex couple unions. For these two latter groups, the family unit is not based on marriage. (Family Trends, 2010 p.10)

Parental separation and its effects on children.

There are a broad range of areas in the child's life affected by parental separation, as highlighted by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological system. Cabrera et al, (2000) stated that there were five key areas of the child's life affected by parental absence; absence of a co-parent, economic loss, social stigma associated with lone parent, parental abandonment and parental conflict. Each of these key areas will be briefly considered;

With regard to absence of a co-parent, there is a greater burden for the lone parent of the stresses and strains associated with parenting, it is reasonable to assume that in the absence of a supportive co-parent, the lone parent experiences more frequent and higher levels of stress than a parent who is part of a supportive couple. McKeown stated, "The much greater risk of their (one parent households) children going into care in comparison to two parent households" (2000, pp.7). Secondly, the absence of a second parent also reduces the child's experience of an adult male or female role model in the home (depending on which gender parent is absent), and the absence of witnessing, at first hand, adult couple relationships.

Secondly the issue of economic loss resulting from parental separation may impact on outcomes for child. In the USA in 2007, 27% maternal lone parent families live in poverty compared to an average of 13% for two parent households (Grall 2009). Poverty is also associated with poor educational outcomes for children. Furstenberg in 1990 stated, "Fathers are beneficial to the material and educational well-being of children, the contribution of resources, both economic and psychological, from fathers may be the key contributing factor in the educational achievement of young adults" (McKeown, 2001, pp.17). Educational attainment remains one of the key indicators of future life achievement particularly in the area of work, and as will be discussed later, also in the area of stabled adult relationships.

A further issue is that of social stigma associated with lone parenthood. While generally speaking, the level of social disapproval toward lone parenthood is reducing, the children from such households may still experience emotional distress (McLoyd 1998). This distress may be experienced by the child in the absence of the second parent at key social events such as rights of passage rituals. Neugebauer (1989) states that the major effect of parental separation on the child is the loss of an emotionally supportive relationship for the child.

With regard to parental abandonment, a child may perceive and / or experience the absence of one parent as abandonment causing psychological stress for the child (Lamb 1999). In the absence of an understandable explanation for a child as to why the second parent is not present in the family home, children are prone to making up reasons and often taken unnecessary responsibility and blame.

Finally parental conflict has been found to exert a significant impact on the outcomes for children following parent separation and divorce (Amato & Booth 2001). Parents may live apart, and continue with high levels of conflict between them. Conflict before and/or after a breakup has detrimental effects on the social economic well-being and behaviour of children (Amato,1993, Fincham 1998). When parents continue to argue and be highly conflictual following separation, the child can perceive themselves as the source of the conflict.

It is clear that each of the areas outlined can affect the child of separated parents. What is difficult to measure is the combined impact of these factors on the developing child.

Children of divorced parents report higher rates of emotional behavioural issues, (Lau 2007) and increased incidents of mental health issues (Zubrick et al, 1995). They do less well than their peers from intact families in education (Albertini & Dronkers, 2009, Zubrick et al 1997, Ferri, 1984), while Kieman (1992) noted higher rates of unemployment for adult children from divorced families. It is clear that family break up can have a negative effect on the children of the family.

Parenting styles and its impact on the children of separated families.

One area which has received little attention in the literature is the role and impact of the parenting style experienced by children from their mother and father. Belsky (1984) suggested that the parenting is influenced by three key areas; parental characteristics and resources, social context in which the family live and the support available therein and finally the characteristics of the children. Belsky stated that the spousal relationship is the most powerful source of support for competent parenting. Work by Simons et al (1993), found spousal support was more critical than social network support for parents in delivering competent parenting to 12-year-olds. From this perspective, it is reasonable to assume, that the breakup of the parents relationship will have a negative impact on the support each parent receives from the other, reducing the effectiveness of their parenting.

An alternative model of parenting proposed by Baumrind (1971) examined parenting along two key dimensions; acceptance and support, in addition to control and monitoring. This model gave rise to four types of parenting style, the Permissive Parent who is high in acceptance / support and low in control. The second is the Disengaged Parent who is low in acceptance / support and low in control, with the third type called the Authoritarian Parent who is low in acceptance / support and high in control. The fourth type is the Authoritative Parent, this type is high in both acceptance / support and control.

Baumrind's concept of parenting styles, have been widely studied, in relation for their impact on children both in the general population and with regard to children from divorced families. The authoritative parenting style is associated with children developing greater social responsibility higher academic achievement and lower levels of internalising and externalising behaviour problems. Whereas the authoritarian, permissive and disengaged parenting styles have been linked to various problems in child development including lower levels of self-esteem, lower social confidence, poorer sense of social responsibility and poorer academic achievement, as well as higher rates of emotional and behavioural problems. (Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999; Hetherington, Henderson & Reiss, 1999, Querido, Warner, & Eyberg, 2002; Parker & Bauer, 2002)

A study by Campana, Henderson, Stolberg, & Schum, (2008), consider the relationship between maternal and paternal parenting styles, child custody and children's emotional adjustment to divorce. The study involved 518 children, between the ages of 10 and 18 whose parents had previously been married and subsequently divorced. The study considered the impact of parenting styles on children's emotional well-being, rates of aggressive behaviour, and the children's level of self-esteem. Its findings support the earlier studies, reporting the highly positive effects of authoritative parenting. It found that across the custody arrangements, (no custody, sole custody and joint custody) that children fared better if the custodial parent was authoritative, as opposed to authoritarian, permissive or disengaged. The nature of custody also seemed to impact on parenting style, sole custody mothers and fathers were more likely to be authoritative in their parenting style. No custody mothers and fathers were far more likely to be permissive in their parenting style. The study was unable to answer the question whether custody impacted on parenting style, or whether decisions around which parent obtained custody was based on which parent had the most appropriate parenting style.

Non-resident parents and factors affecting child contact.

Amato et al (2009) noted an increase in non-resident father weekly contact with their child from 18% in 1976 to 31% in 2002. The study also noted that contact was influenced by a number of factors, these included payment of child support, parents relationship status at time of child's birth, parental education, parents age at of childbirth, maternal re-partnering, and ethnicity. Payment of child support was found to be one of the greatest influences on whether the father had regular contact with the child, increasing the likelihood of regular contact by four times when compared to non-payment.

Considering parents' relationship status at time of child's birth, children born to married parents are twice as likely to have contact with the father following family breakup. Earlier when considering the change in the types and make up of the modern family, it was noted that Ireland is experiencing an increase in cohabitation, Amato (2009) shows that following the family breakup of cohabiting couples, their children are less likely to see their non-resident parent than the children of married couples who separate.

Amato also notes that higher parental education is positively associated with contact. More specifically, the higher the educational achievement of the parents the more likely they are to maintain contact with their children post separation. This is in keeping with other researchers (King et al 2004, Seltzer, 1991)

An additional issue impacting on contact is the parents age at time of childbirth. In the study young mothers report less father child contact than older mothers (Amato 2009) One of the issues of concern is that often early parenthood tends to be unplanned, as noted by Ferguson & Hogan in an Irish context (2004) Whereas parenthood in one's 30s and 40s is generally planned and this seems to lead to a higher level of commitment and engagement by both parents.

A further issue highlighted is that of maternal re-partnering. The study by Amato (2009) was based on the maternal feedback on rates of non-resident fathers contact with their children; hence they were only able to report on the effect of maternal re-partnering on non-resident fathers contact with their children, as opposed to paternal re-partnering. The study found that maternal re-partnering led to a decrease in the level of contact experienced by the child with their father. This is consistent with earlier studies such as Seltzer (1991) and Furstenberg et al (1983).

Finally with regard to ethnicity, Amato (2009) found that rates of contact differed across ethnic groups. Given the level of migration in Ireland over the last 10 years, it is reasonable to expect that ethnic and cultural differences may impact on the rate and nature of non-resident parents contact with their children in the near future.

Overall findings from Amato et al (2009) study show that there was an increase in contact between non-resident fathers and their children, which is to be welcomed, but also noted that in 2002, 29% of the children concerned, had no contact with their father. This is lower than the rates found in Ireland where in a small study of 60 children from separated families, Hogan et al (2002) indicated that 33% of children interviewed had lost contact with this parent. An English study in 2009 (Woodall) of 4000 family members affected by parental separation, reported a rate of non-contact of 38% as previously discussed.

Amato's study was quantitative in nature and it looked to identify common demographic factors affecting non-resident fathers contact with their children across a 20 year time frame. A study by Trinder et al(2002) in England took a qualitative

approach, involving interviews with the parents and children from 60 separated families with regard to contact, and the factors that influence whether contact was successful or not. This moved the focus from indicators as to whether contact may take place based on common demographic factors, to the specific issues which impacted upon contact being successful or not for particular families. Trinder found that the ability of children to maintain close emotional bonds with both parents is dependent on a number of issues. The issues were grouped into three areas of influence, direct determinants, mediators and challenges.

Direct determinants included the commitment to contact by both parents and the child (the child's commitment becomes more salient with age), role clarity for each parent e.g. is the non resident parent supporting the resident parent's decisions regarding limit setting or undermining them, the quality of relationship between the parents and between each parent and the child. The mediators included the parents beliefs discourse (e.g. the child has a right to a relationship with both parents), relationship skills of both parents, and the input of external agencies (courts, family access centres etc), and external support networks (friends and or family that may support assist with contact). The third area was challenges, this involved the nature of the separation (e.g. mutual agreement, sense of betrayal by one parent etc), new adult partners, finances (particularly if maintenance is not been paid), logistics (distance between non-resident parent residence and child's home, cost of transport, time schedules for child and parent etc), parenting style (similarity or differences between both parents and mixed messages to the child), and risk / safety issues (past abuse and or neglect by the non-resident parent)

The three areas must be viewed as a process over time, taking into account the child's age and stage of development at the point of separation and at the time of contact, coupled with the time since separation from the point of view of both parents and child. The study found that in the situations where contact was not happening, the primary reasons included lack of parents' commitment to contact, and parental conflict. It is clear from this study that maintaining contact post separation can be a significant challenge.

Introduction

This research is focused on trying to understand how a small number of parents lost contact with their children; the research adopted a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis. The aim was to understand the experience from the individual level, and to acknowledge that each and every case is different and unique. Therefore the study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) approach.

IPA is idiographic in its method. That is to say it takes the individual experience as its base. Two people may experience the same event but view it in very different terms. As Gee, Micheals and O'Connor note, "People's texts.... function at many levels and are the product of a person's entire set of political and psychological conditions and entities." (1992, pp. 233)

At a phenomenological level, its primary focus is on understanding the meaning of human experience. The idiographic and phenomenological combination facilitate the bringing together of the person's experience and the person's own understanding of that experience. On the interpretive side it recognises the importance of the analytical process when conducting research with people by people, the role of the researcher in the analysing the data. (Shaw, 2010). In keeping with the IPA approach, qualitative semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection.

Glossary of terms.

For clarity and shared understanding within the research, the terms child, resident parent, non-resident parent and lost contact were defined as follows;

- Child: The offspring of the resident and non-resident parent, under the age of 18 years.
- Resident parent: Mother or father living and raising the child.
- Non-resident parent: Within this study, non-resident parents were defined as adults who do not live with their child(ren)
- Lost Contact: was defined as no contact between the non-resident parent and their child by verbal, written or electronic two way communication, during the previous 12 months.

Sampling approach and process

The researcher aimed to sample a small heterogeneous group of non-resident parents with a range of experiences of family breakup and loss of contact with their child(ren). The criteria for inclusion in the study was the participant had to be a parent to a child under the age of 18, reside in a different household to their child, be separated or divorced from the child's other parent, and have had no contact with the child for a period in excess of 12 months³. The sample size was limited by two main factors; time and recruitment. Due to the confines of completing the research within the overall framework of a taught masters program, the research was limited to a seven-month time frame. A second limiting factor on the sample size was the difficulty in reaching this hidden group within society. Societal expectations of parents, in terms of raising their children well, are very high. Family breakup, although accepted as part of modern society, is still relatively low in Ireland, by comparison to other western countries. Hence one would expect a reluctance on behalf of non-resident non-involved parents, to come forward and engage in research. For these reasons, the task of recruiting participants for the study was a particularly challenging one.

Gaining access to the sample

A multi-faceted approach was taken to recruiting the sample of non-resident non involved parents. The recruitment took a three pronged approach, and was conducted between February and May 2010. The first step was to raise public awareness of the study, followed by distribution of information to targeted social service providers who may come in contact with the sample group, and thirdly, develop a working partnership with a key agency engaged with the sample group.

Public awareness of the study: The researcher contacted three weekly newspapers that operated within the county the research was being undertaken in. He provided a

³ One of the participants in the study, did not fully meet the criteria, his daughter, whom he had lost contact with in her childhood, was 22 at the time of the study. However he was included in the study because of his past experience and he was also at risk of losing contact with his second child, who was 5 at the time of the interview. He was also included due to the significant contribution of his narrative to the study, and the great difficulty in accessing the target group.

300 word article, outlining the context of the study, and a request for anybody interested in partaking in the study to contact the researcher. The article was published in two papers on the 13th and 20th of March 2010. (See appendix 1) One person contacted the researcher following the articles. However as the person was a resident parent, they did not meet the criteria, and therefore were not included in the study.

Targeted social service providers: The researcher contacted the staff members of various social care service providers including, child protection, probation, education, family research centres, Traveller support initiatives, and family support staff of the health service, by email (See appendix 2). The email outlined the context of the study and gave a description of what was being undertaken. The email recipients were requested to refer suitable clients for participation in the study. A number of recipients of the email contacted the researcher. For some of the services, the request was passed to their ethics group for consideration, others declined on the basis it would breach client confidentiality. In total 133 individual professionals were contacted by e-mail seeking candidates from the sample group. This part of the recruitment process yielded one candidate for the research.

Partnership with a key agency: In the county the research was conducted in, there was a unique project, within the context of family support, which aimed to support and assist men in their fathering role. During 2009, the project had undertaken some work in supporting non-resident parents reconnect with their children through a supported access service. The person facilitating the project was informed of the study and agreed to identify possible candidates during the course of their work. The contact with the key agency generated five candidates for the research.

Ethical issues and confidentiality

The study was undertaken in keeping with standards of ethics for research within the Dublin Institute of Technology. The researcher was acutely aware of the basic principle within social care of cause no harm, and that the issues under consideration may have brought up difficult emotions and unresolved issues for the participants. Prior to taking a participant on for the study, the researcher explained to the referrer the content of the interview. The referrer became a “gatekeeper”, part of their role was to ensure that only candidates with a reasonable level of emotional stability engaged in the research. At the end of each interview, the researcher ensured that each

candidate had the contact details of the key referral agency should they wish to seek personal support, following the interview.

Informed consent

As part of the ethics of research, Gomm highlights the importance of informed consent as participants need to be aware of what they exposing themselves to.

“To know what they are letting themselves in for before they make the decision to cooperate” (Gomm, 2004, pp307). Each participant completed an informed consent form, which stated the purpose and reason behind the research. The form also covered, the length of time required, confidentiality, their voluntary participation, how to withdraw from the study at any time if they so choose and the contact details for the researcher and his supervisor, should they wish to withdraw at a later point (See appendix 3).

Data collection

The fieldwork comprised of semi structured interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted in either the home of the participant or at the premises of the key referral agency. The location of the interview was decided in consultation with the participant. The participants were interviewed in private and each interview was recorded for later transcription.

An important element in facilitating the participants to fully share their stories was the creation of a relaxed, non-judgemental, non-threatening, informal setting, for the interview is to be conducted in. As Denscombe (2007) points out, some of the key skills for successful qualitative research interview include being attentive, sensitive to the feelings of the interviewee, using prompts and probing appropriately, exploring the logic that underpins the main points raised, checking for consistency and being sensitive to the interviewee’s desire to please or avoid. The researcher had over 20 years work experience in social care settings. His experience included, discussing very sensitive personal issues with adults and adolescents. His skills of active listening and assisting people to articulate difficult emotions were fully utilised during the data collection.

Research Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used with each participant (See appendix 4). The interview topics were identified following examination of the literature regarding the issues that impact on whether non-resident parents maintain contact with their child, following parental relationship breakup. The first interview was a pilot for the initial designed interview topics and structure. This interview was reviewed and minor amendments were made to the run of topics within the interview. The questions were designed with the aim of allowing the participant to reflect on the following areas;

- Nature of relationship with child prior to the family breakup including level of direct care;
- Nature of relationship with child since family breakup and last contact with child;
- Nature of relationship with their partner prior to conception;
- First signs of difficulty within the partner relationship and nature of relationship breakup;
- Current standing of relationship with ex-partner;
- Consideration of what may have assisted in staying in contact with their child;
- Any advice they would give to someone today in a similar situation.

The questions were open and explorative in nature, in keeping with semi-structured interview techniques. The manner of the interviews was relaxed and focused. The interview was designed to create a narrative through which the non-resident parent could share their subjective experiences of losing contact with their child. Allowing the parent to describe events, encounters, the emotions they feel, and the relationships they have, (Shaw 2010), in keeping with the experiential account nature of IPA.

Data analysis

The data were qualitative, consisting of the transcripts of the interviews with non-resident parents. The participants' transcripts were analysed in full, by repeated reading of the transcripts and listening to the interviews, enabling the researcher to identify common themes and sub themes across the participants. The data were analysed, in the first instance, in keeping with research questions identified in the study design.

This study engages with the three scientific levels of knowledge. Punch (2005) outlines these as, data level I-discrete facts, a number of discrete facts come together to form data level II-empirical generalisation, and then a number of empirical generalisations come together to form Explanatory Theory. The research pulled together the discrete facts from each of the case studies, bearing in mind the three areas of influence on maintaining contact between non-resident parents and children proposed by Trinder et al (2002), and finally considered them in light of the aim is of this research.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodological approach and its justification used in this research, and the sample criteria and recruitment of participants. The ethical framework was established, including the steps taken toward the care of the research participants.

It is important to highlight at this point that an account of the case histories of each participant is presented in appendix 5 and should be read prior to reading the analysis and discussion presented in chapter four.



CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction⁴

In general, the findings show that the participants had bonded with their child prior to separation, and subsequent to leaving the family home the participants made efforts to stay involved in the lives of their child. The loss of contact with their child had significant negative impact on the non-resident parent from feelings of devastation, to increased alcohol and drug misuse, to admission to psychiatric care. The factors that lead to the loss of relationships included personal issues, such as childhood trauma, gambling and drug abuse. At the inter-parental level, the relationships were, in all but one case, in difficulty prior to the birth of their child, and among the sample group there was a very high level of domestic violence within the relationships.

The last area to emerge from the data was the influence of external factors, particularly the protective nature for the child of the grandparent input, and the absence of external supportive agencies contribution into the destructive inter-parental dynamics with their corrosive effect on the children, within the six cases considered. The data was analysed by multiply reading of the transcripts, and re-listening to the taped interviews. The common themes and trends that influence the participants loss of relationship with their child were grouped under four areas, nature of the parent child relationship, personal issues, inter-parental relationship, and external factors.

⁴ N.B. Academic thesis writing conventions and the limitation on the number of words permitted for a MA thesis dictate that a chapter presenting a summary of the case histories of each participant cannot be included in the main body of this work. The case summaries have been included in appendix five, and as pointed out at the end of the last chapter, it is recommended that that readers read these case histories before moving on to read the thematic findings, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by each participant

Participant characteristics at the time of their child's birth.

Gender.

Five men and one woman took part in this research, and all had lost contact with their child.

Parent age profile.

The six participants split into an older and young sub-group with regard to their age at the time of the birth of their child. In the older group the parents average age at the birth of their child was 33 years, for the young group the average was 22 years.

Relationship duration at time of conception.

Two of the pregnancies occurred within the first four months of the relationship, two within two years of the relationship and the last two were within long term (7 years +) relationships.

Planned or unplanned pregnancy.

Half of the pregnancies were planned, 2 in the older sub-group and 1 in the younger sub-group, the remaining three were unplanned.

Age of child when they lost contact with their parent.

The parent's age at time of conception directly related to the child's age at loss of relationship with their parent, within this sample. Within the older parent group, each parent lost contact with their child in their middle childhood years, ranging from 7 to 9 years of age. Within the younger group of parents, each parent lost contact within the child's first two years of life, and for each of these three participants this was their first child.

Among the study participants, it had been 7 years, on average, since they last had contact with their child, varying from 2 to 15 years across the group.

Parent and child relationship.

As part of the interview process, each participant was asked about the child they had lost contact with. The questions considered the child's personality, how involved the parent was in their direct care, whether they were involved in disciplining the child, and if they thought their child would want to have contact with them. The purpose of these questions was to ascertain the quality and nature of the parent child relationship prior to separation.

Emotional bond and involvement in direct care of their children prior to separation.

Five of the six parents, describe themselves as hands-on direct parents, when they were living with their children. The sixth parent did not have the opportunity to live with his son, and therefore could not comment. As each participant shared their story, many gave an indication of the quality of their emotional bond to their child. It was clear for some of the participants that the emotional bond occurred the moment they saw their child for the first time. Ian described his first encounter with his daughter as;

“ The next thing she opened her eyes, a, the heart fell out of me, if I'd never seen the child I would have been okay, I fell in love with the child”.

For Mandy the birth of her third son was an emotional experience;

“I was crying with happiness.”

Eddie lived with his son for the first six months of his life and described his son as;

“He was a bit of a character, he'd, from what I can remember, he'd play up now and again, but generally he'd be settled.”

Parenting style and nature of engagement between parent and child prior to separation.

The only parenting style to come across amongst the participants was with the older parents and it was permissive, i.e. high in acceptance low in authority. The three parents who lost contact during their child's middle-childhood years describe themselves more as friends to the child than a parent.

"I was I was playful with the children, ... more of a mate or a friend.... playing down at their level then maybe a big father figure."

When Ian was asked about being strict with his daughter, when required, he stated;

"I can't be, I was bet stupid as a child."

The three younger participants did not allude to their parenting style, and this may be explained by the fact that they had less contact time with their child, (in one case only during supervised access) and for two of the participants it was at least six years since they lived with their child.

Effect of separation on the non-resident parent.

The breakup of the adult relationship and the loss of contact with their child was devastating for most of the participants. Five of the six parents struggled to adjust to the pain and loss that they experienced. Among this five, three increased their alcohol use, one increased his drug use, and one parent required psychiatric care. The participants comments regarding the aftermath of their breakup included;

"Devastating in the beginning, em you know I would have went through a lot of emotions and pain in the beginning and then I just had to kind of bury it and now it's kind of come up again you know"

"It was tough"

The parent who increased his drug use stated;



“I found that way,(drug use) I could loss myself”

Efforts to maintain contact with their child, following separation.

Five of the six participants made efforts to maintain contact with their child, after separation. In 4 of these 5 cases, the attempt to maintain the parent child relationship was blocked by the resident parent. This rejection compounded the devastating effect the separation already had on the non-resident parent, and ultimately, led to a non-resident non-involved parent, or from the child’s perspective abandonment.

Two of the parents described sending letters and presents to their children, only to have the items returned or withheld from their child. As one of them stated,

“In the early days there would have been maybe a phone call or a text, very early, probably in the first 5 or 6 months and then I would have sent presents to Aidan which she’d sent them back to me parents house and that sort of thing.”

Anniversaries and special occasions were particular times that triggered efforts to make contact between the participants and their children. For the female participant, the first Christmas following her family breakup, she did not have an opportunity to give her son a present. She tried to give presents to him on his return to school, in the New Year. She approached him as he left school. However her ex-partner blocked her and ushered their son away. She was left standing outside the school, in view of other parents and pupils, with her arms laden with presents and crying.

Another participant spoke of how, as his daughter approached her 21st birthday, she made contact with him. They met and began to communicate;

“Her mother had control of all the purse strings; you know she was in college and she more or less said to her ' if you're going to meet your father again, your out on the street'. And that happened about two years ago. She met me in (town) on her 21st birthday and her mother phoned her and said 'you're with your father now, but if you meet him once again you're out on the street' and she was crying, She was in the bedroom when she took the call and I went in and I looked at her and there was tears all over her. She said I don't think I'll be able to meet you again.”

It is his strong belief that his ex-wife thwarted his efforts to stay involved in his children's lives, following their separation, and over time he drifted away.

It is clear within the stories that each parent felt the rejection of their efforts to stay connected to their child deeply. The perspective of the four parents detailed above is that the custodial parent prevented them from seeing or staying in touch with their child. The study did not have the opportunity to explore with the children or the custodial parent their understanding of what prevented the non-resident parent maintaining contact with their child.

In one of the two remaining cases in the study, a child was born and placed in foster care, without his father's knowledge. When the father became aware of his son, he sought and obtained contact and guardianship. However as contact developed, so too did the pain for the father, and he struggled to maintain the relationship, leading to the father's withdrawal, as he said,

“Then I got guardianship of him through the courts so that helped me more so then I started getting to see him every 2 weeks and then I stopped for a while like. I stopped going down because I couldn't handle it. It was tough.”

The last parent was subject to a safety order with regard to his child's mother. He understood this to mean he could have no contact with his ex-partner and therefore his child⁵. According to Edmond;

“So I actually stayed away from her for the five years and I was talking to a friend of mine who knows all about this and he was good friends with Judge (Name) and he said the way the 5 year ban works is that you have to stay away for a further 5 or 6 months after that so it's about 5 ½ years of her life that I missed.”

⁵Safety Orders are issued by District Courts as a measure to protect the safety of a person from their partner. A safety order does not prohibit contact between the persons subject to the order. It can and is often issued to people living together.

Maintenance support.

Only two of the six parents were contributing to their child's upkeep via maintenance payments. Both of these parents had attended court to seek access to their children with limited success. In these two cases, while courts had directed that access should take place, there was difficulty in enforcing the courts wishes. One parent had offered to pay maintenance, but the offer was declined. Another parent stated that he was not paying it and it was up to his ex-partner to come looking for it.

"Well it's not my fault she never came looking for maintenance"

Personal issues

Family Background / Own childhood

Two of the participants spoke of their own childhood traumas. Ian described experiencing physical abuse, as he stated:

"I was bet stupid as a child, both in school and at home."

Mandy's childhood trauma was different as she stated:

"I was abused as a child by (family member), Noel knew about this. I was on and off depression tablets. Noel would have been only the 2nd man I was with in my life and even to undress and sometimes to be intimate was kind of awkward for me"

Mandy's mother also suffered mental health issues during Mandy's childhood.

The participants were not asked directly in the interview about their own childhood.

Both of the participants described above offered the information as part of their individual understanding of how their life had developed.

Substance misuse

Alcohol misuse featured in four of the six participants' lives, with one of the four also being a chronic illegal drug user. One parent described himself at the time of his relationship with his son's mother as:

"I would have been an untreated compulsive gambler and an untreated alcoholic at the time do you know? So eh, I suppose that would have led to a lot of eh a lot of the difficulties yeah."

For these four participants, their substance misuse seemed to form part of how they coped with stress, so during the escalation phase of their relationship difficulties and in the aftermath of their family breakup, their substance misuse increased, as two of them commented:

"I started drinking and then drink led to more drink and more drink you know and rows and then fights and things getting worse and worse"

"He'd (child) be crying sometimes saying he wanted to come back with me for the day. I just found that very hard and I was kind of a heavy drinker at the time so it was hard to do both and I chose the wrong one"

One of the four concerned stated that two years after the relationship breakup he gave up drink and has been dry since.

Participant's mental health

Serious mental health issues were present for one participant and apparent for two others. One had experienced sexual abuse as a child, and attended counselling during her early adulthood. The stress of her relationship breakup triggered an admission to psychiatric care. A second participant had experienced physical abuse in his childhood and at times, he was a regular user of illegal drugs. During his relationship with his daughter's mother, he hid his drug use and minimised his drinking.

A third participant stated that at the time of his relationship with his son's mother:

"I would have been kind of living a double life.(Gambling and alcohol misuse) So I couldn't necessarily be totally honest with her".

Neither of the latter two participants were in receipt of psychiatric treatment for their drugs, drink or gambling. It is reasonable to expect that their mental state would have been under serious stress as they tried to hide the extent of their behaviour from their partners.

Relationship skills

The interview did not seek to measure the relationship skills of the participants. However, as they shared their experiences, some insight to their ability to develop and maintain close relations came through. One participant stated that he would not have another close relationship as:

"The only people I did trust stick a knife in me.....I can't trust anyone, I can never see myself in another relationship"

He went on to say that he has no friends in the town where he lived. Another participant spoke about his way of addressing difficulties in his relationship as:

"Any time I saw a tantrum coming I walked because I don't retaliate on a woman."

His approach seemed to be avoidance, which also reflected how he dealt with the 'nagging' of his mother when he lived in her home with his partner and child. Two of the participants, both in the older sub-group, have not developed new partner relationships since their individual separations, whereas both their ex-partners have. The other four participants, in the study, have developed new relationships since separating with the mother of their child. One of the four spoke of being in a loving relationship of the manner he had always aspired to. However, the other three gave no indication of the quality of their new relationship.

Inter-Parental relationship

Nature of the couple relationship prior to birth of the child.

Five of the six relationships, described by the participants, appeared to be under strain prior to the birth of children. For one participant, the first row occurred on the night he met the mother of his child. They went on to spend seven and half years in a cycle of arguments, separation and getting back together, until finally, he left for good. He was clear that the responsibility for the difficulties in the relationship were shared:

“You can't blame her for everything, I can be fairly stubborn myself.”

Another participant stated:

“When I look back now and weigh it up, you know, it was a kind of dysfunctional relationship from the start”

One relation appeared to be built on lies from the start. The participant was aware of only one of her four children previous relationships, during their relationship. He states that he was naïve:

“It was really my first relationship I ever had like - proper relationship like.”

One couple entered marriage under societal pressure, as he put it:

“We felt pressurised into marriage because she fell pregnant and we felt like we were up against the clock.... (I) was wanting to be a gentleman.”

They went on to spend 15 years together as husband and wife, much of which he described as very unhappy, as he felt trapped in a loveless, abusive relationship.

One participant was in a relationship for two years when his partner became pregnant. His commitment to the relationship is questionable. She had her own apartment, where he stayed at weekends, when she became pregnant he states:

“I thought there was no point in moving with her and having to pay €50 - €70 a week when I hadn't got it. I wanted to build on my future basically.”

They went on to move in together when his mother took them in to her home. For the sixth couple, their relationship appeared to have a number of steady years before difficulties emerged.

“The relationship was brilliant. No problems at all.”

The difficulties appeared to be a combination of social isolation due to a house move, conflicting expectation of parenting roles and her underlining mental health issues.

Domestic violence

There was domestic violence within four of the six relationships of the study participants. For two of the four the nature of domestic assaults was severe. One participant described two incidents where, following arguments with his partner, she required hospital treatment, once for a possible broken neck and the second time for a broken arm. He reported that his daughter's grandmother instructed him:

“Told me to leave her (mother of his child) before I killed her.”

A second participant living in a domestic violent situation was the victim at the hand of his wife. He described one incident as follows:

“One morning I was sleeping in the bed my eldest son had come around (the side of the bed) and was going to play with me and without any warning she just grabbed a big shoe came in beside me and gave me a full blast on the face just inches from my sons face”

One participant spoke of slapping his partner when he found her in bed with another man, he also stated that this was the only time he hit her. However, she obtained a five year safety order against him, which would seem harsh for the one incident he describes.

In the final account of domestic violence, the participant spoke of a period when she was at home recuperating and struggling to do daily household tasks. She described an incident where she slapped her son and a second incident when she threw a vanity mirror at him. She also mentioned that she had slapped her partner on one occasion. There was no mention of domestic violence by the two other participants.

Nature of separation

None of the participants described an orderly end to their relationships. In all their stories the arguments and fighting had been going on for a number of months to years before the final separation occurred. For some of the participants there was the big argument which led to the separation:

“Get the f--- out of this house and don't come back if you're doing this (having an affair) behind my back”

For some it seemed the logical next step on the path out of a highly dysfunctional relationship. In one case the separation appeared to happen without clear expectation or notice;

“She just never came back and that was the last I heard of her for a good long time”

Re-partnering.

One of the participants reported that re-partnering was a barrier to him maintaining contact with his child. Among the resident parents of the case studies, two have formed new partnerships, three had not, and one was unknown. The opposite was almost the case for the non –resident parents, two had not formed new relationships and four had. The non-resident parent, who saw it as contributing significantly to why he did not maintain contact with his son, stated that his new partner had difficulty

with him taking a day out to travel and see his child while he had a young baby at home:

“She (the mother of his daughter) wasn’t too happy with me travelling down to see that other child when I had another child at home so like it’s hard to work around the two of them.”

External factors

Grandparent input.

For five of the six participants in the study the input of grand parents was perceived as protective toward their grand child and or their adult child. The input of grand parents included providing a home for their adult children, partner and grandchild, in another case it involved child minding and child supervision while the parents worked. One participant described the input of her son’s grandfather as thus:

“There were times that Mark would not only play over at granddads but he would stay over quite a lot because he wouldn’t want to leave his friends in the evening. He would prefer to stay in his granddad house and bring his friends into his granddad’s house as if it was his house.”

For some of the participants the intervention of their ex-partner’s parents was directed at reducing the amount or risk of domestic violence by either giving direct advice to cease a behaviour or by trying to persuade a an adult child from maintaining a relationship. As one participant put it with regard to his ex-partner:

“She would have had a lot of support from her family, now I didn’t really get on with her parents, which was a big issue, there was a lot of conflict there with her mother and father and you know (me).”

In the case were there was no grandparent input, the participant stated that his ex-wife had blocked contact with his parents during their marriage, something he seemed to regret.

External agencies involvement.

The most common outside agency involved across the participants were the courts. Five of the participants, went to court in relation to family law addressing issues of access, guardianship and safety orders. Four of the five that went to court found the outcome unsatisfactory. Two of the participants used the courts to ensure they had access to their children. For both of them there were difficulties in ensuring the child's custodial parent followed through on the directions given by the court regarding access. One of these participants described his experience of court as such:

"It's like the man is pronounced guilty until proven innocent"

One parent obtained guardianship of his son through the courts. While another parent lost guardianship of her son, via a court order while she was receiving in-hospital psychiatric care. She described her notification of the court order as follows:

"I was given a form in the lobby of the hospital on (date), it was stamped from this judge in (Town) court saying Noel had full custody. So I didn't even have a chance to go to the court to prove anything or to say anything..... So from that day to this I'm fighting for custody."

Only one participant had tried to use the Family Mediation Services Agency. His efforts were unsuccessful as his ex-wife refused to engage in the process. The other five participants showed no awareness of the services of the Family Mediation Service or the possible use of counselling or mediation ahead of engaging with the adversarial nature of solicitors and courts.

Advice to others in similar situations

Each participant was asked based on their experience, what advice they would give to others in similar situations. The common thread through the responses of the five fathers was stay in touch with your child. As one of them put it:

“What I have said is to stay close to your kids. In the heat of the moment it's not always easy to do that when you're separating you know. But through all the legal stuff stay in touch with them cause they'll always be your kids and you'll always be their dad.”

“Put an end to it before it even starts. (losing contact).....Advice to other people would be to try and stay in touch with your child.”

The second and third pieces of advice offered by the participants were to act rationally and get advice, both of which were summed up by one participant who stated;

“Get professional advice from someone that eh could help them and don't make any decision in the heat of the moment. Think it through and think of what it would be like in a couple of years down the line – what would you be thinking then.”

The advice given by the mother in the sample was more by way of a reflection on her own specific circumstances, and included items such as not moving from her family home. What was clear from the views of all the participants was that they regretted losing contact with their child.



Introduction.

This study set out to seek the views and experiences, at first hand, of those who had lost contact with their children. Appendix five presents a summary of each participant's experience in a case study fashion. This chapter will discuss the findings in the present study and reflect on these findings with reference to previous research, with a view to highlighting key factors contributing to the loss of the parent and child relationship.

Findings indicate that there was a clear bond between the non-resident parent and their child prior to loss of contact. The study also noted that the loss of the parent child relationship had a strong impact on the non-resident parent. The factors that led to the loss of the relationship with the child by the participants, were grouped under three headings as follows: personal issues of the non-resident parent, nature of inter-parental relationship prior to family breakup, and external factors. Each heading will be considered in turn, after first reviewing the limitations of the study.

Study limitations

Given the structure of the research, it is easy to claim, that in examining the factors that led to the six participants losing contact with their children, from the perspective of non-resident parents, this study potentially lacked the voices of the children and their resident parents. This charge is true as the purpose of the research was specifically to explore the loss of parental relationship for the child, from the perspective of the non-contact, non-resident parent. As the voice of the absent parent is rarely heard, it was considered that the exclusive focus on this voice could be very informative in understanding the dynamic of how such relationships are lost. In fully understanding the absent parent perspective, we may be better placed to support non-resident parents maintain contact in the future.

Consideration was given to the fact that four of the six participants had contacted the referral agency looking to establish or reconnect with their children, through its supported access programme. The desire on behalf of the four participants, to re-engage and have contact with their child does not subtract from the experience of how

they lost contact originally. It can be argued, that in some ways their stories have more to tell us, as they show, that even with a desire to have a meaningful relationship with one's child, that desire may not survive the breakup of relationship with the child's other parent.

The sample size in the study was small. Hence the finding presented may be seen as indicative for parents in similar situations, but can not be considered as representative of all parents in this context. The six cases presented show that each parent (see appendix 5) wanted a relationship with their child, and the factors that led to the loss of that relationship were unique to each participant.

Participant relationship characteristics at the time of their child's birth.

Within this study the age of the non-resident parent at the time of their child's birth, collated directly with the point at which they lost contact with their child, with younger parents being more likely to lose contact with their children. The three older participants in the study (average age of 33 years) lost contact with their child, during the child's middle childhood (average child's age of 7.6 years when contact ceased). While the three younger participants (average age of 22 years) all lost contact when their child was still a toddler (before the age of two). Ferguson & Hogan (2004) noted the greater challenges faced by young men in staying in contact with their child post couple breakup. Studies by Amato et al (2009) and Quinton, Pollock & Golding (2002), both noted that the younger the non-resident parent the greater the risk of losing contact with their child.



Parent child relationship.

According to the views of these non-resident parents, there was a strong bond from the parent to the child. The loss of the parent child contact had a devastating impact on the absent parent. As one parent stated:

“I would have went through a lot of emotions and pain in the beginning and then I just had to kind of bury it and now it’s kind of come up again you know”

The ‘kind of come up again’ referred to the participant’s efforts, at the time of the study, to start contact with his son. His feelings once buried, were resurfacing after eight years as he tried to establish contact with his son. The participants’ experience of loss and emotional turmoil are in keeping with findings by Bradsha, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams (1999), and Simpson, Jessop, & McCarthy, (2005), which noted that the transition to non-resident parenthood was a deeply distressing experience for men. Studies by Santora and Hayes (1998), and Badcock (1997) report the psychological and emotional pain experienced by non-mothers. Arditti and Madden–Derdrich (1993) argue that the loss may be greater for non-resident mothers as it challenges the perceived natural role of women to be mothers, raising issues of identity and guilt.

Non-cooperation by resident parents with regard to maintaining contact was significant for each participant. All bar one of the participants made efforts following their separation to make contact with their child. It was the experience of the participants that the resident parent blocked their efforts to maintain a relationship with their child. For two of the participants, even where access was ordered by the courts, there was difficulty in enforcing of the court order. Dunn (2004) similarly suggests that many non-resident fathers lose contact with their children despite the father’s wish to maintain contact. Research by Trinder et al (2002) highlighted that the two principal factors leading to non-contact post divorce were highly conflictual parents and the lack of commitment to contact by the non-resident parent. Given the very high levels of conflict present in the participants’ relationships prior to separation, it is not surprising that they report a lack of cooperation on behalf of ex-partners to contact with their child.

It is unclear from this study whether the payment of maintenance would have assisted the participants to stay in touch with their children. Amato (2009) noted that payment of child support (maintenance payments) was a very strong indicator (increased the likelihood by a factor of 4) that contact would continue following separation. Two of the participants were paying maintenance and both reported difficulty in maintaining contact with their children despite court ordered access. One who had lost contact with his first daughter, for whom he had not paid maintenance, and was struggling to stay in touch with his second daughter, for whom he did pay maintenance. He was considering stopping payment as a way to force his ex-partner to discuss the access with him.

“I haven’t seen the child since Christmas. It’s getting easier now. I am going to stop the maintenance I want her to bring me to court.”

For this father there was a clear link between paying maintenance and seeing his daughter. Seltzer, Schaeffer, and Charng, (1989) describe visitation and child support payment as ‘complementary activity’ (1989, pp1013) This perspective may lack an understanding of the importance of contact from the child’s point of view. Dunn, Cheng, O’Connor, and Bridges (2003) noted that regular contact with non-resident fathers was associated with less externalising problematic behaviours for children of divorced parents. In the best interest of the child, contact should be seen as a child’s right and maintenance support should be viewed as a parent’s responsibility. The Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 was amended in 1997⁴, requiring the court, when considering contact orders to view contact and the child maintaining a relationship with both parents to be in the child’s best interest. The child’s right to contact with their non-resident parent should not be compromised by the parent’s failure to meet their responsibility with regard to maintenance support.

⁴ Section 11D as inserted under section 9 of the Children Act 1997

Personal issues

The personal issues which seemed to impact on maintaining contact post separation across the six participants in the study included their own childhood experiences, substance misuse, participant's mental health and their relationship skills. The two parents that reported very difficult childhood experiences (physical abuse for one and sexual abuse for the other) both appeared to be the most psychologically distressed of the six participants. Dube, Anda, Felitti, Chapman, Williamson, & Giles, (2001) in a study on childhood abuse, household dysfunction and suicide, noted that physical abuse in childhood increased the likelihood of drug abuse in later life and also increased attachment and trust issues for the individual. Their findings mirror the experience of the participant who reported physical abuse in his childhood.

The experience of sexual abuse in childhood was associated with mental health issues in later life for one participant within the study. This is consistent with Polusny & Follette (1995), who reviewed studies looking at the long term impact of childhood sexual abuse and found that adult survivors reported higher levels of general psychological distress and psychological disorders, as well as higher rates personality disorders.

Alcohol and drug misuse were contributory factors to the adult relationship break up within the study and the subsequent loss of child contact. Alcohol misuse was reported by four of the six the participants in the study. The Health Service Executive report entitled Alcohol Related Harm in Ireland (2008) noted, "Alcohol harm to others beside the drinker is a contributory factor in assaults, domestic violence, road crashes, marital separation and divorce, child neglect, poverty and abuse"(2008, pp3) The report viewed alcohol misuse as a factor in relationship breakdown, echoing the experience of the participants. Within the study two participants described their drinking as a coping mechanism for difficult situations. As Kassel, Jackson, and Unrod.(2000) found, drinking to cope with stress is ultimately a maladaptive

response. Alcohol and drug misuse are often used to hide or bury problems as one participant stated, with regard to how he coped after losing contact with his daughter;

“I found that way, (drug use) I could loss myself”

McKeown, Pratschke, & Haase (2003) in their study of family wellbeing noted that families that achieve high on family well being were those families that were able to discuss their issues and problems openly. It was clear from some of the participants in this study, that they lacked the personal skills necessary for dealing with conflict in the most appropriate way culminating in relationship breakup and loss of contact with their child.



Inter-Parental relationship

There were three issues that emerged in the study with regard to inter-parental relations that impacted on non-resident parent contact post separation as follows, the nature of the couple relationship prior to the birth of the child including the presence or not of domestic violence, nature of separation and the effect of re-partnering on maintaining contact.

This study found that there was a direct correlation between high levels of parental of conflict, and loss of contact between non-resident parent and their children. The participants to this study all evidenced a medium to high level of conflict in their relationships, and therefore it would be expected that they were more likely to lose contact with their child post separation. Similar findings are reported by Trinder et al (2002), Amato & Booth (2001) and Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner, & Williams, (1999). Inter-parental conflict those not always end when parents separate and the damage to the child of the relationship can continue during post separation conflict. –Pryor et al (2002) as well as Amato & Keith (1991) have both shown that post separation parental conflict is linked to poor adjustment for child.

Within the participants' relationships another issue which emerged was the level of domestic violence. Two participants were involved in severe acts of domestic violence, one as the victim and the other as a perpetrator. Two further participants described incidents of less severe violence. Some of this violence occurred in the presence of the child. Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to present with behavioural, cognitive and emotional issues.(Amato 1993, Fincham 1998, Rodgers 1984, Dube et al 2001) Studies by Hester and Radford (1996) along with Humphreys and Harrison (2003) and others have shown that post separation contact can be used by the ex-partner to continue the abuse of their former partner. Amato and Booth (2001) noted that in highly abusive inter-parental relationships, the child's well being may be better served if the parents separate. From this understanding, it can be argued that the loss of parent contact for the child of at least one of the participants (the perpetrator of severe domestic violence), may have been in the child's best interest. It can also be argued that resident parents from such high conflictual relationships are protecting their children by refusing contact.

None of the adult relationship endings within this study were conducive to maintaining contact between the non-resident parent and their child post separation, as all the endings seemed abrupt and unplanned. Bokker (2006) and Trinder et al (2002) both note that how the parental relationship ends affects the likelihood of contact. A study by Emery et al (2001) demonstrated the very positive effects that mediation at the point of court proceedings in family law can have on the long term relationship between non-resident parent and their child, increasing the likelihood of contact post separation greatly. Mediation can help move the parents beyond their entrenched embattlement toward each other and to consider what is in their child's interest. According to Murphy and Caffrey (2010) of the 25,057 applications before the Family Courts in Ireland in 2008, only 5.9% sought mediation in 2008 post separation.

Within this study re-partnering by either parent had only a slight impact on contact between the non-resident parent and their child. A study by Amato et al (2009) found that custodial mothers reported that their re-partnering had a negative impact on their child's contact with their father. Within this study sample, two of the custodial parents had re-partnered, three had not and one was not relevant as the child was in foster care. Custodial parent re-partnering for the participants was not reported as an impact on contact within this study. A study by Dunn et al (2004) of the influences affecting the child & non-resident father relationship when the child was living with a step father, stated that the key indicator to the child and non-resident parent relationship was the nature of the interaction between the mother and the non-resident father. In Dunn's work it appears as if the ability of the mother to have a reasonable relationship with her ex-partner is almost a signal to the child that it is okay for them to also have a reasonable relationship with their non-resident father.



External factors

There were two mediating factors that surfaced in the analysis of the data gathered within this study they were the protective role played by grandparents and the input of external agencies to the family breakup process. Five of the six participants spoke of the input of grandparents into their situations. The views of the participants toward the grandparent input varied, but in all cases the influence of the grandparents can be seen as been protective toward either their adult child or protective toward their grandchild. These findings are supported by the work of Timonen, Doyle, and O'Dwyer, (2009) which considered the role of grandparents in separated and divorced families in an Irish context, where they reported the very supportive nature of grandparent input. Trinder et al (2002) describe grandparent as a mediating influence on whether contact was maintained post separation. In one of the cases within this study, the grandparent's input led to the child and her mother maintaining contact with the paternal grand mother during the five and half years when the father had no contact.

External agencies failed to capitalise on opportunities to reduce the conflict within the parental relationships and steer parents toward better outcomes for their children within this study. Five of the six participants had been involved in court with regard to their child or ex-partner, yet only one participant had endeavoured to seek a supportive external agency input post his family separation. It would appear that for the study participants, that the only place for addressing issues with their ex-partner was the place of last resort, the courts. A study by Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, and Dillon, (2001) demonstrated that five hours of mediation in high conflict family disputes given at the point to going to court had a very positive impact on non-resident parent child contact up to 12 years after the mediation. Mediation, family therapy or counselling were not availed of in any of the cases within this study. The under-utilisation of such services is in keeping with findings by Murphy and Caffrey (2010) which, as reported above, indicated very low take-up of mediation services. Children adjust better post separation if they are confident of their non-resident parent's ongoing contact and commitment to them. (Amato 2006, Hogan et al 2002). Mediation can help move the parents beyond their entrenched embattlement toward each other and to consider what is in their child's interest.

Advice to others in similar situations.

Finally there are clear messages from the study participants to other parents in similar situations which include parents should stay close to their children physically and emotionally. Emotional closeness can support authoritative parenting -Baumrind (1971)- which as Campana et al (2008) highlighted is associated with positive outcomes for children. Participants also recommended that parents should stay calm and not react in the heat of the moment, which is in keeping with McKeown et al (2003) in that a calm disposition assists in resolving problems and thereby improving family well being. The final recommendation from the participants was to seek advice from professionals. As one participant stated:

“Think it through and think of what it would be like in a couple of years down the line – what would you be thinking then.”

The participants’ advice was simple and direct. The challenge for people in the process of a relationship breakup is to think in a calm logical way and plan for the future. The temptation is to act out of the emotional hurt and devastation that the parent is feeling, and do things that are later regretted for a life time.



Introduction

In Ireland in 2006, approximately 56,400 children under the age of 18 had no contact from their non-resident parent. This group of children are at higher risk of developing emotional and behavioural issues, and underachieving academically. They may go on to have less satisfying adult lives with increased risk of mental health issues and broken relationships. Currently there is very little social service provision to support these children to understand their circumstances and almost no services dictated to supporting them and their non-resident parent to reconnect.

This study set out to gather the views and first hand accounts of absent parents, to understand from their perspective how they lost contact with their child. It was intended that the information gained would enlighten service providers and aid other non-resident parents to stay in touch with their children. The study sample was small and therefore the findings can be seen to reasonable indicators for reasons why some non-resident parents loss contact with their children.

The study established that the participants had all bonded with their child prior to separation. Five of the six participants had made efforts to maintain their relationship with their child post separation and their efforts had been prevented by the resident parent in four of the five cases. Each of the participants felt the loss of contact with their child deeply. The loss of their relationship was a result of a combination of personal issues, inter-parental relationship and external factors.

The common advice from the participants to other non-resident parents at risk of losing contact with their child was to stay close to their child physically and emotionally, stay calm and do not act in the heat of the moment and seek professional advice.



Recommendations.

The following recommendations are intended to reduce the likelihood of non-resident parents losing contact with their child post separation from their partners.

Personal Issues.

- 1) Non-resident parents should be supported and encouraged to address personal issues which may impact upon their ability to maintain a meaningful relationship with their child.
- 2) Resident parents should seek to facilitate their ex-partner to stay connected and involved in their child's life.
- 3) Services should be available to all family members to address the effects of separation and loss for the child, the resident and non-resident parents.
- 4) Break the link between maintenance payment and access. Access to both parents is a child's right (when it is in their best interest) and should not be affected by the parent's ability or desire to pay maintenance. Maintenance payment is an adult's responsibility to their child.

Inter-parental relationship.

- 5) Parents displaying signs of domestic violence (both victim and abuser) should be encouraged to attend communication and preventative programmes, such as MOVE (Men Overcoming Violence).

External Supports

- 6) Mediation before court. Prior to parents seeking court direction on child care and access issues, the parents should be directed to avail of a set number of hours of mediation from trained mediators.
- 7) Public awareness programmes. Greater public awareness should be developed with regard to the available support services for couples heading to family breakup, such as the Family Mediation Service.
- 8) Increase public awareness of the responsibility of parents to put the medium and long term needs of their children at the centre of their planning when parents go through their adult relationship breakup.
- 9) The protective role of grandparents toward their grandchildren should be acknowledged and supported.

Additional Recommendations.

This research was with a small sample group. Non-resident parents are hidden within society. Further studies in this area could help to raise awareness and aid service development and planning. Such studies should seek to establish the following;

- The amount of lost contact prevalent among children within single parent and reconstituted families.
- An Irish study of parents and children from separated families to obtain their views on the issues impacting upon contact and what services may be useful.
- A review of the family law courts processes and whether the current system is best placed to meet the needs of children with regard to family breakup.

Update on research participants who had sought supported access from the referral agency.

Four of the research participants had contacted the referring agency seeking a supported access service so that they could reconnect with their child. The interviews for this study took place ahead of any intervention by way of supported access. Over the four months since the interviews were conducted for this research, three of the four participants have started to see their child. In the three cases where access commenced it was with the agreement of the resident parent. In two of the three cases agreement was reached on foot of court proceedings initiated by the non-resident parent. In the third case agreement for access was reached on the intervention of the referral agency. The fourth case is on-going.



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Appendix 1 News Paper Article.

Lost Relationships:

What are the factors that lead some children to lose contact with their parent following family break up?

Parents want the best for their children, and for most of us that means being part of their life as they grow and develop. Today in Ireland, close to 1 in 5 children grow up in single parent households, that's over 180,000 according to the 2006 census.

Of these 180,000 children, 60,000 to 90,000 have no contact with their non-resident parent. Some claim the greatest affect of family break up on children, is the loss of an emotionally supportive relationship with the absent parent.

Shay Fulham is the Project Manager with Navan Springboard Family Support Services. He is currently undertaken research into the factors that lead to the loss of this key relationship for children. Through taking the stories of separated parents who are not in touch with their child, Shay intends to identify the core factors that lead to the loss of this relationship in an Irish context. With the information acquired, Family Support Services will be better able to support children and parents following family break up in the future.

If you are a parent living apart from your child and not in contact with them for a year or more, Shay would like to hear from you.

You can get in touch with Shay at Navan Springboard on ph 046-9078220 or by email shay@springboardnavan.ie

This research is part of an MA Shay is undertaken in Child, Family and Community Studies with the Dublin Institute of Technology



Appendix 2 Email to colleagues.

Lost Relationships;

Explorative studies into why some separated non-resident parents lose contact with their children.

Dear Colleagues,

As many of you will know, my name is Shay Fulham and I work as the Project Manager, of Navan Springboard Family Support Services. Since September 2008 I have been undertaking a part time MA course in Child, Family and Community Studies with the Dublin Institute of Technology. As part of this course, I am currently about to undertake a research project focusing on why some parents lose contact with their children following separation / divorce.

Currently in Ireland, 18% of all children live with one parent. Of these 180,000 children, between 50% and 75% have no contact with their non-resident parent. Neuberg (1989) claimed that separation / divorce involved the potential loss of an emotionally supportive relationship for children. Many of you will know from your day to day work, the stress, pain, negative effect on educational attainment and general well being, that such a loss can have on the developing child.

In order to better understand the factors which contribute to such lost relationships, I wish to meet and interview parents who have lost contact with their children.

Hopefully, from speaking with these parents, I can identify how and why some children lose these key relationships. Possibly from this knowledge we may begin to identify ways to support parents and children so as to reduce the likelihood of such loss for future families facing separation / divorce.

So how can you help? I need you to speak with parents that you know, who have lost contact with their child, and ask them if they would help me by participating in this study. All personal details will be kept strictly confidential; the process will involve a one off interview with myself, which should last about an hour.



If you, or any parents you are involved with, would like to talk to me further about what the project involves, I would be very happy to do so. You can contact me by email at sefulham@esatclear.ie or Mobile No.

As I am under some pressure due to time constraints, I would be very grateful if you could speak to such parents and ask them to contact me by the 31/3/10. Hopefully, with their input we may be able to make the situation better for children and parents in the future.

Thank you for your help, please contact me if you have any questions about this study.

Regards

Sé Fulham

No virus found in this incoming message.

Checked by AVG - www.avg.com

Version: 9.0.725 / Virus Database: 270.14.147/2628 - Release Date: 01/17/10

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Appendix 3 Participant Consent Form

 ***Lost Relationships;*** *An explorative study of the factors that cause some parents to lose contact with their children following separation / divorce*

Letter of Consent for Research Participants

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of this research study: The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the factors that lead to the loss of a parental relationship to children of family breakup, so that with the knowledge gained, child and family support services are better placed to assist the maintenance of parent child relationship post family breakup.

Time required: Once you agree to take part in this study, an hour of your time will be required for an interview with the researcher. This interview will be arranged at a time and a place that suits you. Following the interview the researcher may be in touch with you by phone to confirm information.

What's involved: With the knowledge gained from the study it is hoped that family support services will be better able to target their services to support non resident parents stay in touch with their child. At a personnel level, the interview will ask you to discuss issues, with regard to your child. The interview will cover three areas;

- 1) Nature of your relationship with your child's other parent, prior to the birth of your child, following the birth of your child and since family break up.
- 2) Nature of your relationship with your child prior to and following family break up.
- 3) What you think may have been beneficial to aid you in your relationship with your child, and to other people in a similar situation to yourself.

The consideration of the three areas may give rise to uncomfortable feelings for you. The interview will be conducted in a sensitive and caring manner.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your information will be assigned a code name, any personally identifying information will be reframed to protect your identity and / or that of your child and / or their other parent,[e.g. Patrick stated “While I was Chairperson of Beaubec GAA Club” could be presented as Mark was heavily involved in a local sports group]. Your name will not be used in this study.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions I ask you. You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence, you may withdraw by phoning or emailing the researcher or research supervisor, at the numbers below.

Research Contact details;

Researcher:

James (Sé) Fulham
Student of MA in Child,
Family and Community Studies
Ph; Mobile no.
Email sefulham@esatclear.ie

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Annmarie Halpenny
Lecturer
Dublin Institute of Technology
Ph;01-4024255
Email annmarie.halpenny@dit.ie

Agreement:

I have read the information described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the study and **I have received a copy of this information.**

Participant: _____ Ph. No. _____

Date: _____

Researcher: _____ Date: _____



Appendix 4 Interview Schedule

Lost relationships; Participants interview structure.

Part One; Purpose and Consent

Explain the research focus to the participant;

“By taking the accounts of a number of parents that are not in touch with their child, I hope to identify the core factors that lead to the loss of the relationship. With the information gained, family support services will be better placed to support parents and children following family break up in the future.”

The research is confidential, go through the consent form and get signed.

“The interview will be recorded for writing up and analysis.”

Part Two; Interview

Section 1; Background.

Nature of relation with co- parent prior to conception.

What was your relationship status prior to conception, short term, cohabiting, married etc;?

How long were you together?

When did you first notice difficulty in the relationship?

How many children did you have with your separated partner?

What ages were the children when you broke up?

What ages are the children now?

What led to the break up?

Was the break up sudden or protracted? (Conflictual relationship?)

How long have you been separated?

How would you describe your relationship with the child's other parent now?

Have you a separation agreement? Did you attend court regarding your break up?

Section Two; Relationship with your child.

Did you live together before / after the birth of the child?

Tell me about your child - what are they like?

How would you describe their personality?

How would you describe your relationship with the child prior to break up? (playful, warm, friendly, absent, children seen & not heard)

How much time would you have spent with your child/children on average on a daily basis before the separation?

Were you involved in their daily care-giving at any point?

Were you involved in discipline with regard to the child?

When did you last have contact with your child?

Can you tell me a little about why you have not stayed in contact?

Do you think the child would like to have contact with you?

How do you feel about this loss of contact?

Section Three. Learning and the future.

Following the break up of your relationship, is there anything that may have helped you to stay in touch with your child?

If you were to give advice to some else who has just left their family home what would it be?

Are there any services out there to support non-resident parents to stay in touch with their child?

.

Is there anything you wish to add or say as we head to a close with the interview?

Part Three Closure.

Thank the participant, check that they are not feeling upset or distressed after the interview, see do they need follow up support.

Leave business card so that they can get in touch in the following days if they wish to.



Appendix 5 Case Studies.

The following pages will set out a brief summary of the stories of each of the participants in this study. Their stories are presented to demonstrate the complexities, variety and individuality of each parent's experience of how they came to loss contact with their child. Each story is presented in turn, and without comment.

Ian's story.

Ian had been recruited for the research, via the email recruit campaign to social care professionals. The interview was conducted in his sparsely furnished, local authority apartment, where he lives alone. At the time of the interview, Ian was 50 years of age and the father of two girls. Irene was 22 and believed to live in England where she was born. Ian has had no contact with Irene since she was seven years of age. His second daughter, Orla was five years old, and his contact with her was intermittent. Ian has not been in a relationship since he left Orla's mother, some years earlier. Ian left school when he was 12 years of age, during his short years in school, he fell behind in reading and writing, which led to his early departure from school, in his view. He described his upbringing as tough, with regular fights and corporal punishment at home and in school.

"I was bet stupid as a child, both in school and at home."

At 16 years of age, Ian left Ireland and went to work on the building sites of London. During his mid twenties, while in London, he went out on a blind date, and met the mother of his first daughter. On the night they met, they had an argument, their relationship was fractious from the start and remained so throughout. According to Ian, Iris was looking for someone to father a child with her, and little else. Iris already had a son who was two years old at the time. Shortly after meeting, Ian moved in with Iris and her son. Within a couple of months, Iris was pregnant, during the pregnancy there were many arguments between the expectant parents. Ian left Iris's home, and returned to living in a caravan on a building site.

One evening while at work Ian was informed there was a woman in the building site canteen looking to see him. It was there, surrounded by his colleagues, that Iris informed him, that he had become a father. Ian said he would call to see his daughter the following evening. Iris left the canteen, and five minutes later, she returned and presented Irene to Ian. Ian was shocked and didn't know what to do.

“The next thing she opened her eyes, a, the heart fell out of me, if I'd never seen the child I would have been okay, I fell in love with the child”.

Following this, Ian moved back in with Iris and her two children. Over the following seven years, Ian and Iris maintained a very fractious and occasionally violent relationship. During the interview, Ian described two incidents when Iris required hospital attention following fights, once requiring a neck brace and a second time breaking her arm. Ian stated,

“Iris's mother told me to leave her before I killed her”

Over their relationship, Ian describes effort by Iris to influence his behaviour and occasions when he would leave the family home. According to him, the normal way that Iris would entice him back to the home, was to put Irene on the phone or bring Irene to him. On one occasion, Ian left and returned to his family home in Ireland. One evening he returned to his parent's home to find Iris and Irene at the kitchen table. He returned with them to England. Iris stated;

“You will never be able to stay away, you love Irene too much”.

Ian heard this as a threat, and so when he did leave for the last time, he refused to take any phone calls or contact from Iris. Subsequent to their separation, Ian sent a birthday card to Irene on her next birthday. Ian received a curt letter back, stating that all mail will be withheld until Irene's 18th birthday. This angered him and in the 15 years since, there has been no contact. Ian claims,

“Every morning, every night, Irene comes into my head”.

During the interview Ian stated that he had considered making contact with Irene, but;

“I would be terrified, I couldn't just walk to the door and say hi babe.... I am a coward”

With regard to his relationship with Iris, Ian noted that the relationship breakdown was to a large degree, his fault. Ian alluded to his over use of alcohol and drugs.

“You can't blame her for everything, I can be fairly stubborn myself.”

“I was as wild as a march hair.”.

Many years after his return to Ireland, Ian fathered a second daughter, Orla. Ian met Orla's mother-Anne, while they were both taken drugs in the house an acquaintance. Anne was 28 at the time and had two daughters, Ian he was 44. Ian was present for Orla's birth and described it as;

"It was like getting a bucket of nothing throwing over you, you could feel it wash over you,... a sensation went through me"

He stated, that following the birth of Orla, he went home and intended to change his ways with regard to his drug taking, however this was not to be. During the first year of Orla's life, there were arguments between Anne and Ian, he also continued to be a very regular user of illegal drugs. Ian was considering leaving, when Anne's mental health deteriorated and she required psychiatric inpatient care. Her health was influenced by her and Ian's drug taking. Part of her recovery, involved Ian leaving the family home.

Following their separation, Ian had been to court to arrange access and maintenance payments. Although he is due to see his five-year-old daughter every Sunday, at the time of the interview, it was over six weeks since he had last seen her. Ian described how between Christmas and the New Year, when Orla had come to stay with him, he made a Christmas tree of balloons. In the centre of the tree were Orla's presents. To obtain the presents, Orla had to burst the balloons with a pin on the end of a stick. Ian smiled and laughed while telling this tale. One of the presents was a smile pink guitar. On a previous visit to her father's home, Orla had shown great interest in seeing Ian attempting to play his guitar.

On the day of the interview, Ian had received a text message form Anne, stating that the family were away on holidays and Orla would not be able to see Ian, on the coming Sunday, as planned. This annoyed him, he said he had no advance warning and did not know where they were on holidays.

Ian stated that contact with Orla, was more problematic now because he no longer had a car to go and collect her from her mother's home. Ian lived approximately 45 km from his ex-partner's home, a 35 minutes drive by car. However there is no direct public transport route, and the same journey by bus, would take up to three hours one way. When the interview was concluded, and the researcher was leaving the apartment, Ian showed him photographs of Irene and Orla, that were in a picture frame on the hall table.

Eddie's story.

The interview was conducted in the front room of Eddie's home. The house was well furnished. At the time of the interview, Eddie was 29 years old, he had an eight year old son Aidan, who beyond passing once in the street, he had not had any contact with since he was six months old. Eddie is currently in a relationship and cohabiting with his partner.

At the age of 20, Eddie was working on building sites, earning good money, and driving a car. One day he called into a corner shop, and was smitten by a 17-year-old shop assistant, who served him. Over the coming weeks, Eddie made numerous visits back to the shop, and eventually Amy agreed to go out with him. Within six months Eddie and Amy moved into an apartment together. Unknown to Amy, Eddie was a compulsive gambler, and developing a serious drink problem. In hindsight, Eddie admits;

"I would have been heavily into gambling at the time and I would have been trying to hide that from her, I suppose so I would have been kind of living a double life."

Within a few months of living together, the young couple decided to have a baby. At the time of his son's birth, Aidan, Eddie was experiencing stress and mood swings from his gambling and drinking habits. He saw the birth of his son as a way to bring Amy and himself closer together. Shortly after the birth of Aidan, the arguments and tension between the young parents increased. Eddie noted that Amy was more withdrawn than usual. When he wasn't at work, Eddie described himself as a hands' on father, involved in the feeding and changing of his son. Amy, as an 18-year-old mum, sought assistance from her mother and father, whom Eddie did not get on with. Seven months after the birth of Aidan, Eddie and Amy separated. Amy returned to her family home with Aidan. Eddie was 21, a compulsive gambler and heavy drinker, he was also involved in crime, as a way to meet his lifestyle expenses.

Following the relationship breakup, Eddie endeavoured to stay in touch with his son, and made arrangements to visit Aidan in the maternal grandparents home. Sometimes when he called, Aidan and Amy would not be there. On occasion this led to Eddie becoming annoyed and abusive toward Amy's parents. This led to the calling of the police, to remove Eddie from the property.

The five months following the relationship breakup, Eddie's life become more chaotic, he was facing criminal charges and the prospect of a prison sentence. Eddie chose to avoid court and he emigrated for the next five years.

During the initial six months when he was aboard, Eddie tried to contact Amy by phone calls and text. He sent presents to his son, which were returned to Eddie's parents home. Through his solicitor, Eddie offered to pay maintenance for Aidan's upkeep. This was also rejected. This impacted on Eddie and he stated that *“(It was) Devastating in the beginning, ... I would have went through a lot of emotions and pain, I just had to kind of bury it”*

For the following five and half years, four years while he was aboard and 1.5 years since he returned to Ireland Eddie made no effort to contact Amy or Aidan. In the six months prior to the interview, Eddie through his solicitor, had sent a letter to Amy requesting to see his son. When asked why he now wanted to see his son, Eddie replied, that he wanted to see him for himself. Also that once he got serious about his recovery, he began to wonder about what life was like for Aidan, and particularly regarding not knowing his father.

The reply from Amy to the solicitor's letter, although initially negative, stated that before they would consider the request, they would have to be assured that Eddie was no longer gambling or drinking, and that he had undertaken a parenting course. Eddie contacted the referral agency to do a parenting course, which he had completed by the time of the interview. Eddie is hopeful that he can get to see his son in the coming months.



Anthony's Story

Anthony was 25 years old and living in his parent's house, when he met Kate. She was 24 years old and was the mother of a two year old baby girl. Kate lived in Limerick. During the initial months of their relationship, Anthony and Kate saw each other at weekends, and spoke by phone during the week. After six months, they decided to move in together. Kate left Limerick with her young daughter and moved in with Anthony, who was still residing in his parent's home. Within a short time, the young couple were arguing, some of which relate to Anthony's parents. After two months Anthony's parents asked Kate to leave. As Anthony stated, *"They got fed up with her lies and they knew she was lying to me, but I couldn't see it coz all I was thinking about was the 'love part'."*

Anthony put his relationship with Kate before his parents, and the two of them moved into an apartment on their own. Kate brought her daughter back to Limerick and left her with her maternal granny. She stated to Anthony, that the reason for this was to give them a chance to work things out and settle down. Over the next four months, the arguments between the couple continued. Anthony also states that he was drinking excessively. He also said that during the four months, Kate was unfaithful to him on two occasions.

Kate went home to Limerick one weekend and didn't return. Anthony was surprised when she did not return, over the subsequent weeks, Anthony accepted the relationship was over. As he packed up the apartment, he came across letters that Kate had received from social workers. It transpired, that Kate had four children the eldest three of whom, were in the care of the state, while Kate was living with Anthony. Her youngest daughter was also under social work supervision while she lived with Anthony.

Approximately 12 months later, Anthony received a phone text message from Kate. The text informed him that he was the father of a six-month-old baby boy named Ryan. At this stage, Ryan was also in state care. Anthony was shocked.

It took him two months of perseverance with the social department, to get to see his son. During the following 18 months, Anthony was vetted by social workers, and he had supervised access with Ryan every three weeks. He applied for and obtained

guardianship of Ryan, through the courts. Following the granting of guardianship, Anthony's access visits with Ryan moved to fortnightly. On the days of the visits, Anthony would leave his home at 6 am, travel to Dublin and then on by train to Limerick. He saw Ryan in the early afternoon for two hours, and then began the long journey home. Social workers visited Anthony's parents' house, to assess its suitability for Ryan to have overnight stays with Anthony and his grandparents. Ryan was just over two years of age when Anthony stopped visiting.

"I stopped going down because I couldn't handle it. It was tough..... I just ruined it" Anthony lists the travel time, the financial cost, the emotional strain, and his drinking as the reasons why he broke contact.

"He'd be crying sometimes saying he wants to come back with me for the day. I found that very hard."

Six months later, Anthony contacted the social work department, seeking to see Ryan again. With some reservation, they approved and Anthony visited Ryan twice more, before a case conference was held to plan for Ryan's ongoing care. At the case conference, it was decided that Anthony could see Ryan every three months. This was not what Anthony wished for and he did not return to see his son.

"I stopped seeing him altogether because they (social workers) done that."

At the time of the interview for this research, it was over two years since Anthony had seen his son. At the time of his last contact, Ryan was living with his older half sister in foster care. Anthony describes the care of the foster parents as very good. They put Ryan to bed each night with a prayer for his "Daddy Anthony", in Anthony's words they were "great foster parents"

Anthony stated that part of the difficulty in maintaining the contact with Ryan on the second occasion was his new partner's attitude, as he put it,

"She wasn't too happy with me travelling down to see that other child when I had a child at home."

Anthony's daughter was just born when he tried to re-establish contact with Ryan.



Liam's Story

Liam was 49 years old and the father of three children at the time of the interview for this research. His children were, Henry was 15 years old and has not seen his father in 7 years, Mary was 23 and she has not had contact with her father since the day of her 21st birthday and Adam was 21 and not seen his father for 7 years.

Liam met Becky when he was 20 years old, she was 25. They dated for four and a half years, before Becky became pregnant. As Liam states;

"We felt pressurised into marriage because she fell pregnant and we felt like we were up against the clock.... (I) was wanting to be a gentleman."

Within the first eight years of their marriage, Becky gave birth to 3 children, a girl and then two boys. Liam describes himself as a father, who played football with his sons, and helped his daughter with her studies.

"I was I was playful with the children, ... more of a mate or a friend.... playing down at their level then maybe a big father figure."

To the outside world, the life of Becky and Liam appeared normal, they were a couple in the mid-30s raising three young children. Behind the facade, Liam describes a loveless relationship, in which he was also the victim of domestic violence. This led him to seek solace in alcohol.

"I wasn't the ideal partner for her and she told me that. She never loved me and she never would love me."

Liam describes the adult man and woman relationship as, *"the blanket of your life"* for him marriage was the blanket in which his life was wrapped, he was in a loveless marriage and therefore, for him, a loveless life. He states, as their marriage went on, it effected him more and he developed a vicious cycle of drinking on his part, and then arguments between him and Becky. The arguments had a violent component, according to him;

"I was never violent, I never struck my wife but sure as hell she struck me loads of times with anything she could get hands on, saucepans or anything."

Becky's verbal and physical abuse was not restricted to just Liam. Liam sought protection through the courts, and obtained a safety order. The final instant that pushed Liam to leaving the family home, involved an assault on him as he lay in bed. He describes laying in bed one morning, and Adam coming to play with him. Without warning, Becky picked up a shoe, and slapped Liam in the face with it. Adam was



only inches from his father's face when this happens. Liam went to the police, to seek enforcement of safety order, he gave a statement, and asked Adam to show marks on his body he had received as a result of slaps from his mother. The police asked Liam to sign the statement, and said once it was signed, Becky would be arrested and taken to prison. Liam refused to sign, as he was concerned for the children, and the impact it may have on them, to see their mother arrested, and taken away by the police. He stated that following this incident, Becky had all the authority in the house. The physical assaults, and the arguments continued. Liam reached a point where;

“ For the children's mentality and their well-being and I had to leave.”

After 15 years of marriage, Liam moved out of the family home and went to live in a small rural cottage, feeling very sad, lonely, and worried for the safety of children. He made contact with the Family Mediation Service on two occasions to try and reach a reasonable separation with Becky. She refused to attend on both occasions.

The two years after leaving the family home Liam continued to drink. He moved house twice, before moving in, with his sister. During this time Liam's father passed away, at which point Liam gave up alcohol and has not drunk since. Becky and Liam got divorced. During divorce proceedings, the judge directed that the parents addressed Liam's access to children. Despite Liam's requests, regular access never took place. Liam went on to find a new partner, and found the type of loving adult relationship he had always aspired too. ('the loving blanket')

Over the years, Liam made efforts to see Mary and Henry. On the last occasion he saw Henry, they spent the day together in a leisure complex. Before returning Henry to its mother, Liam called into his sister, so that Henry may meet his aunt. The visit went well, and Liam dropped Henry home. Later on, Becky rang Liam, complaining that he had taken their son to the home of an alcoholic (Liam's sister) and refusing to let Liam take Henry out again. That was seven years ago and Liam has not seen his son since. 18 months ago Liam made contact with Henry, through the internet, Henry seemed very positive about the contact, asking, *“Long time no hear’*. After a short period, there were no responses to Liam's messages. Liam believed, that Becky found out about contact, and stopped it.

Two years ago, Mary, his only daughter, made contact with Liam, and requested to see him. Mary was coming up to her 21st birthday. Liam met her on a number of occasions. Mary was studying in college and living in an apartment. On the day of

Mary's 21st birthday, Liam called to give her a present. While in the apartment, Mary got a phone call from her mother. She went into a bedroom to take the call. Following the call, she came out to her father, with tears running down her face. Her mother told her, that if she wanted to see her father, she would stop all support to Mary, and that she would be out on the street. Once again, Liam withdrew from his daughter's life. Recently, Liam initiated court proceedings, to obtain access to Henry, who was then 15 years of age, he waits and hopes for a favourable outcome.

Mandy's Story

Mandy was 48 years old and the mother of three boys. Brian who was 27, and Jerry who was 25. Brian and Jerry were born to Mandy with her first husband. Mandy's youngest son, is Mark, he was 11 years of age and has not seen his mother or half brothers in two years.

Mandy grew up with her siblings, in a large local authority estate in Dublin. Her father never worked, and her mother suffered poor mental health during Mandy's childhood. Throughout Mandy's middle childhood years, she was sexually abused by a family member.

Mandy married in her early 20s, and had two children, Brian and Jerry. Her husband was an alcoholic and this led to the relationship breaking up. Following their relationship broke up, Mandy and her husband co-parented their two boys, they spent weekdays with their father and weekends with their mother. Mandy worked full-time and following the separation from her husband, she returned to living in her parents' home.

Six years later, Mandy's parents passed away and her new partner, of some years, Noel, moved in with Mandy. Two years later, Mandy was 38 and having an unplanned pregnancy. Mandy and Noel, considered terminating the pregnancy and chose not. Mandy remembers the day Mark was born;

“ I was crying with happiness and sadness(at the thought) that I could have done away with him”

In 2005, Mandy and Noel, decided to make a new life for themselves and Mark, by selling up Mandy's parents house and moving to a small country town 50 miles outside of Dublin. Mandy states that Noel was more intent on the move than she.

She sold the house and moved into a larger home in the small country town. Mandy found a new home very isolating. She battled with depression, which had been a feature throughout her life due to her abusive childhood, (in Mandy's opinion). Noel was self employed and had great flexibility about his working hours. Mandy describes him, as a very hands-on father, he dropped and collected Mark from school, and always done his homework with him. Mandy felt inadequate with regard to Mark's home work.

Shortly after Mandy, Mark and Noel, arrived in their new home, Noel's parents separated. His father moved down to the same town. He provided childcare for Mark, when Noel and Mandy were working. Mark started to spend most afternoons in his grandfather's home, as there were more children for him to play with, many from his school. Mark also started to stay over in his grandfather's house one or two evenings a week. Noel began to socialise with his brother, who had moved down with their father.

In 2006, Mandy was knocked down by a car. She suffered serious injury and was in hospital for three months. She returned home in a wheelchair and required assistance with daily tasks. During this period, while she battled her physical and mental health issues, Mandy's temper could be short with Mark. On one occasion she threw a tea towel at Mark, on another occasion she threw a small mirror at him. These incidents led to arguments with Noel.

Mandy's medical treatments were on going during the subsequent two years. Her sister came down to help in the home, while Mandy was recuperating. On two occasions, Mandy caught Noel and her sister in compromising positions, leading to further arguments and difficulties in the relationship. Mandy also heard stories in the town, of Noel and his brother womanising.

One evening during 2008, a row developed between Mandy and Noel. It culminated in Mandy telling Noel to; *"Get the f--- out of this house and don't come back if you're doing this (having an affair) behind my back"*

During the argument Mark was in his grandfather's house. Noel left and went to his father's house. Mandy packed up his things and dropped them to his fathers house. When she got to the house, Noel had left and gone to work, (she assumes) she asked Noel's father for help, he refused to get involved. Mandy felt that Mark's grandfather

was restricting her entry to the house .She left Noel's things there. She expected Noel and her son to return home within a few days.

Noel came back to their home, only to collect items. These visits often lead to arguments. On one occasion, Noel was refusing to engage with Mandy in an argument and walked out of the house. Mandy followed Mark down the main street of the town, dressed in her nightgown. She collapsed in the street and an ambulance was called. Mandy was admitted to psychiatric care, and spent the following month in hospital. During this time she was served with court papers, stating that Noel was the sole guardian of Mark. Three months after her first admission to psychiatric care, Mandy had a "nervous breakdown" resulting in a three-month stay in hospital. She rang Noel, and begged him to bring Mark up to see her over the Christmas period. Noel refused to do so, stating that he would have nothing to do with her while she was in psychiatric care. Mandy has not spoken with Mark, her son, in two years. She had battled in the courts for over a year to see her son, to no avail at the time of the interview.

Edmond's Story

Edmond was 33 years old and the father of a 4 year old boy and 8.5 year old girl. He lived with his son and his son's mother. The only contact Edmond had with his daughter, Karen, in the last 6.5 years, was when he spoke to her briefly, at a family funeral two years previously.

At the age of 22, Edmond started a relationship with Yola, who was 19, from Latvia. She was a migrant worker in Ireland. Edmond spent the week working and living with his parents, at the weekends he stayed with Yola. As the couple approached going out together for two years, Yola found out that she was six months pregnant. Initially Edmond chose not to move in with her, preferring to stay at home and save toward a deposit for a house. Edmond's brother, broke the news of Yola's pregnancy to their mother. She invited Yola to move into the family home, which she did. The family home was in a large country town.

After Karen was born, Edmond and Yola stayed in his family home for nine months.

Edmond states that he got fed up coming home from work to;

"Constant hassle with my mother nagging all time"

The young family then moved to a small rural cottage, 6 miles from the nearest town.

Neither Yola or Edmond had a car. This made transport to work, and household shopping difficult. Arguments developed between the young parents, he complained that on her days off from work, Yola did not attend to the house;

"I come home in the evening and nothing is done."

According to Edmond, Yola preferred to bring Karen to see her granny or go shopping. Edmond states that on his days off he took care of the house. He saw the commitment of the house as part of the commitment to the relationship. The arguments between the couple grew, and after a year of living in the rural cottage, Yola left with Karen and moved into a nearby town. Yola's new accommodation was a house sharing arrangement. During their initial breakup, Edmond kept regular contact with Yola, including minding Karen on his days off. At this point in time, Karen would have been two years old. After 2.5 months, Edmond joined Yola and Karen in the house.

Edmond said to Yola on his return;

"I will give you one chance, slip up on this and it's (we are) gone for good"

Edmond describes himself as a hands-on father, very actively involved with his daughter's day-to-day care. During the next few months things between Edmond and Yola seemed to be okay. He was working in construction at the time, and this involved long days.

One evening, after 18 hours away at work, Edmond came home and headed to bed.

When he entered the room, he found Yola in bed with another man who also lived in the house. Karen was asleep in her cot, in the same room. Edmond assaulted the man and Yola, he stated he slapped her on the face. He said to the Yola;

"It's over, you got your chance"

The following day, Edmond collected all his belongings and moved back to his parent's house. Yola initiated court proceedings, and obtained a safety order against Edmond. The safety order was for five years. Edmond states, he understood the safety order, to prohibit him from making contact with Yola, and therefore he could not make arrangements to see his daughter. In the years that followed, Edmond occasionally passed his daughter in the street, sometimes she called out for him. Yola



maintained contact between Karen and her paternal granny and aunty, by calling regularly to their home.

As a result of Yola staying in touch with Edmond's family, she and Karen attended the family funeral, where Edmond last saw and spoke with his daughter over two years ago. Six months after the lapse of the safety order, Edmond initiated court proceedings to arrange access for him with Karen. He was hopeful of a positive outcome.

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Appendix 6 Sample of Interview transcription.

23rd March 2010 – Meeting with Eddie

SF: Good evening Eddie thanks for taking the time to do the interview.
[A few minutes were taken to recap the purpose of the research and explain the informed consent form. Once this was done and Eddie was happy to be part of the process the interview was conducted.]

Tell us a bit about that relationship and how you came together .

Eddie: How we met in the beginning?

SF: Yes

Eddie: I would have met Amy on the off chance by pulling into a service station where she worked just getting petrol and that's how I would have got in contact with her. I suppose I would have kinda fancied her or fell for her or whatever.

SF: The spark was there?

Eddie: Yeah and then I would have called into the service station a few times to see her and that and then we became friends and then we got together.

SF: In terms of when she became pregnant, were you living together or were you just going out?

Eddie: No we were living together

SF: And were you living together for long at that stage?

Eddie: Yeah we were together, how long were we together at that stage? Hmm over a year. I'd say a little over a year.

SF: So you were living together for a year at that stage?

Eddie: Yeah at that stage we probably living together for about 6 months but we were together over a year.

SF: Were you engaged?

Eddie: No No.

SF: At what point in terms of living together, she becomes pregnant, at what stage in the relationship would you sense there was difficulties that things weren't going well.

Eddie: I suppose, looking back now, things weren't really. after a couple of months, looking back now with a clear head, but at the time you know as far as I was concerned things were you know honky dorey. But when I look back now and weigh it up you know, it was a kind of dysfunctional relationship from the start. I would have been heavily



into gambling at the time and I would have been trying to hide that from her I suppose so I would have been kind of living a double life. So I couldn't necessarily be totally honest with her

SF: And that would have been part of the difficulties in the relationship.

Eddie: Yeah it would have been part of it, there would have been a lot of stress and mood swings on my behalf you know.

SF: And in terms of when your child was born. What happened after that?

Eddie: After Aidan was born em after Aidan was born I would have been em kind of in a battle with myself, in my own head about really was it the right thing to do because the idea came up of having a child and like I thought it'd be em.... What's the word I'm looking for? Em not so much the right thing for us at the time but it's brought us closer together. Em it..

SF: It would be good for the relationship??

Eddie: Yeah it'd be good for the relationship you know I thought maybe it may you know it might make things a lot more permanent like.

SF: And what age were you at the time?

Eddie: I was em ...Aidan is eight in August .. So I would have been 21.

SF: At what stage did you break up?

Eddie: We broke up 6 months after Aidan was born. Em.. 6 or 7 months after Aidan was born it could have been maybe about 8; I'm not a 100% sure.

SF: Looking back now, what do you think led to the break up?

Eddie: Ah there was a lot of eh, as I said it was a dysfunctional relationship on both parts and I suppose I can only speak for myself but on my half you know there would have been a lot of eh anger there untreated and em I suppose I'm in recovery for my addiction so you know look I would have been an untreated compulsive gambler and an untreated alcoholic at the time do you know? So eh I suppose that would have led to a lot of eh a lot of the difficulties yeah.

SF: If I'm getting you right the gambling meant there was a bit of a double life?

Eddie: Yeah

SF: You know she knew one part of you but there was a part of you she didn't know?

Eddie: Yeah that's right.

SF: And then Aidan comes along. The three of you are re-adjusting. You know Aidan is living and yourself and Amy are re-adjusting to having a baby there.

Eddie: Yeah



SF And during those few months when Aidan arrived would there have been a few arguments between yourself and Amy or did it just all come to a head at some point.

Eddie No there would have been a few arguments and eh there would have been a lot of tension there. I think she would have been em – after Aidan was born she was a bit kind of withdrawn as well.

SF How old was she at the time?

Eddie 18

SF So the two of you were living in a place of your own or were you living with her parents?

Eddie No living in a place or our own

SF And were either of your families nearby or..

Eddie Yeah her parents were nearby, they were in (Town Name) and my parents were in (Town Name).

SF So you would have had a bit of support?

Eddie Yeah well she would have had a lot of support from her family now I didn't really get on with her parents which was a big issue, there was a lot of conflict there with her mother and father and you know.

SF They didn't like this fella that took their baby daughter away?

Eddie Exactly yeah exactly, and there would have been a few arguments with them along the way too.

SF So you are apart at this stage about 7 or 7 ½ years?

Eddie I'd be apart yeah 7 years.

SF And what's your relationship like now with Amy?

Eddie I haven't seen her eh since em ... after the break up shortly after that I moved to America. I lived in America for a period of time and came back 2 years ago.

SF So in the last 2 years does she know you're about or?

Eddie Oh she does yeah – she knows now because I've made arrangements with my solicitor to look to see him. (Aidan)

SF So the 5 years you were in America it was just a blank time in terms of communication with each other?

Eddie In the early days there would have been maybe a phone call or a text, very early, probably in the first 5 or 6 months and then I would have sent presents to Aidan which she'd sent them back to me parents house and that sort of thing so...

SF There was a very clear message there?

Eddie Yeah a very clear message so I suppose then it was just kind of I let go of the whole situation.

SF And has she ever looked for maintenance or

Eddie No, no, I offered when I was in America, I got my solicitor to write to her asking for her bank account details so that I could make payments and eh her solicitor wrote to my solicitor saying that she didn't want any contact. Didn't want anything got to do with..

SF Feel free not to..- Any of the questions I have to ask you – feel free to ignore them.

Eddie Yeah

SF It's an unusual person that refuses money

Eddie Yeah

SF Would she come from a family that were well off or

Eddie Yeah she would oh yeah she would have come from a family that would have been fairly now they wouldn't be like eh they'd be you know, I suppose they'd be well off eh comfortable but em it would have been kind of em "oh don't accept anything from him".. "if you need anything, I'll help you out". That could have been part of it. I'd say they had a role to play because I believe her mother did a lot of the minding of Aidan in the early stages.

SF So there was not formal separation agreement or maintenance agreement?

Eddie No, no.

SF And in terms of the 6 months after Aidans birth when you were living together, what type of character, how would you describe Aidan?

Eddie Oh god he was a dote. He was a dote.

SF And would you have had much involvement in his kind of practical care, you know the changing of the nappies and...

Eddie Oh god I would yeah I was hands on, I would have been all hands on and eh I adored him like.

SF And in terms of, although it's very hard to say, if you were describing him as a baby, would you say he was easily settled or what kind of a personality had he got?

Eddie Yeah I'd say, I suppose he was a bit of a character, he'd, from what I can remember, he'd play up now and again, but generally he'd be settled and you know.

SF Em have you seen him since you've been back at all?

Eddie I just passed him on the street once.

SF How was that?

Eddie Tough, tough.

SF He wouldn't have known you?

Eddie No no he wouldn't have, no no.

SF So you'll wait and see how you get on in Court?



Eddie I'll wait and see how I'll get on, They wrote a letter and they said point blank that they didn't want me to have any contact but at the end of the letter they said if they were to, if they were to, I don't have a copy of the letter, I think it's in my mothers, if they were to think about it there'd be strict conditions – that I prove that I don't gamble or drink anymore - that I complete a parenting course and that em and something else.

SF And how do you feel about those stipulations, for want of a better word?

Eddie Well look at the end of the day I suppose I can see where they're coming from, you know I have to hold my hands up and I can see yeah where they're coming from but I'd have no problem meeting the....

SF Do whatever as the man says?

Eddie Yeah exactly yeah.

SF Sorry I'm just checking my questions here.

Eddie Yeah

SF So in terms of Aidan, you have any understanding of what his expectations are at this point?

Eddie Oh no I wouldn't know, no. Eh wouldn't know, no.

SF Given that you have instigated a court proceeding, that says to me that you want to see him so in terms of the loss of the relationship for you, how would you describe that?

Eddie Oh, devastating in the beginning, em you know I would have went through a lot of emotions and pain in the beginning and then I just had to kind of bury it and now it's kind of come up again you know. I suppose I'd have a lot of fear of rejection now in case maybe he mightn't want to see me and maybe he'd be, she could tell him that to say that you don't want to see him or you know or I mightn't be allowed see him through the courts you know so there'd be a lot of fear there.

SF A lot of stress?

Eddie Yeah there'd be a lot of stress yeah.

SF And have you any sense of how she's doing or what she's doing?

Eddie No I wouldn't know what she's doing no nothing.

SF Is there anything specifically that triggered the desire to get back in touch?

Eddie I suppose when I got serious in my recovery and em you know that eh I suppose I started thinking of what he's thinking, you know how it is for him maybe at school, you know. Father's day and you know that kind of thing. Coz I always said years ago growing up, I wouldn't know what it would have been like for me to not have a father growing up you know so, I suppose I would have been thinking what he's thinking plus the fact that eh that I want to see him myself.



SF And if you were, thinking back to what you were saying earlier about working on the building sites, if you were to meet a 21 or a 22 year old today who was in a similar situation to where you were 8 years ago, is there any service that you think they should go to, is there any advice that you think you could give them?

Eddie If he was planning on having a child?

SF No say you met a 22-year-old today who was in a relationship, who had a child and he was struggling in the relationship and contemplating leaving her.

Eddie Well you know, in my case you know em for me em, I had to leave for me, you know. It was a period in my life where I was in trouble with the Guards, I had a serious court case, em I would have been involved in crime to finance my gambling em so I suppose for me at that time I had to take myself away or I would have been dead or in prison for a long period of time, but for a 21 or 22 year old now circumstance would be to get you know get professional advice from someone that eh could help them and don't make any decision in the heat of the moment. Think it through and think of what it would be like in a couple of years down the line – what would you be thinking then.

SF Given what you said about the addiction and the court case pending, its hard to see how you may have done it differently, but in hindsight of 7 years on or 8 years on, is there anything that you think that if you were faced with today you might do differently?

Eddie Oh yeah I eh I suppose looking back now, given that situation and the frame of mind I was in, it was the right thing to do. I wouldn't change that; I would have been no use to anyone, not even Aidan. In that frame of mind I would say I would be a threat to people around me so I wouldn't change leaving.

SF It was the right thing at the time.

Eddie It was the right thing to do, without a shadow of a doubt. I was calling out to her house to see him and she wouldn't be there, then her father would ring the guards and this sort of thing and I'd probably drink on that then and be fuelled with anger and ring her and threaten her, you know that sort of thing so.

SF How long after Aidan was born did you live together?

Eddie For how long after? 7 or 8 months.

SF And how long after that was it when you went to America?

Eddie I went when Aidan was 1.

SF So another 4 or 5 months later?

Eddie Yeah.

SF And from Amy's parents point of view, they probably seen you as a nuisance for that 4 or 5 months?

Eddie Eh well eh eh – nuisance would be I tried to say to her “look can I see him” – “yeah you can see him at 8 o'clock” – I'd call to the house and



she wouldn't be there, "am in Blanchardstown shopping" or "look we'll have to make other arrangements" – there was nothing set in concrete and she kind of played on it as well type of thing to eh I suppose show me up or..

SF I suppose that at one level from the grandparents point of view, I'm thinking they might have seen you as a nuisance and another point of view they could also say that this fella wants to see his kid. You know that you were travelling out of your way and you were phoning.

SF Eddie in terms of this interview, I don't have any other questions to ask you – is there anything else you want to say to finish up?

Eddie No that's the story – that's all basically

SF Thank you very much.

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Effect of separation on the non-resident parent.

Eddie: Devastating in the beginning, em you know I would have went through a lot of emotions and pain in the beginning and then I just had to kind of bury it and now it's kind of come up again you know. I suppose I'd have a lot of fear of rejection now in case maybe he mightn't want to see me and maybe he'd be, she could tell him that to say that you don't want to see him or you know or I mightn't be allowed see him through the courts you know so there'd be a lot of fear there.

Anthony: I just stopped seeing him because I was finding it very hard like the travelling because I wasn't working at the time, I didn't have the money to go down and stay down there so every time we went down it was going down there, spending time with him and then coming home and he wanted to come with me – he'd be crying sometimes saying he wanted to come back with me for the day. I just found that very hard and I was kind of a heavy drinker at the time so it was hard to do both and I chose the wrong one and just kept drinking and stopped seeing him then which was wrong like. Then after a few months, after about 6 months I started again. I got lucky I suppose, I rang up the social workers and said “look I'm interested this time – I won't let you down”. And I did the exact same thing again.

*Ian :*I found that way,(drug use) I could loss myself

Liam: it was just a relief to be away from her but it was an awful sadness that I was away from my children and as well as that you know the safety of the children you know she used to strike the children as well if the children had any sympathy for me she would just strike out you know she wouldn't think twice



Efforts to maintain contact with their child, following separation.

Eddie: In the early days there would have been maybe a phone call or a text, very early, probably in the first 5 or 6 months and then I would have sent presents to Aidan which she'd sent them back to me parents house and that sort of thing so.

Liam: Yeah I met with Mary on a few occasions -Her mother had control of all the purse strings, you know she was in college and she more or less said to her ' if you're going to meet your father again, your out on the street'. And that happened about two years ago. She met me in (town) on her 21st birthday and her mother phoned her and said 'you're with your father now, but if you meet him once again you're out on the street' and she was crying, She was in the bedroom when she took the call and I went in and I looked at her and there was tears all over her. She said I don't think I'll be able to meet you again.

Liam: I was worried about this(Contact with his children) and about making too much of an effort to contact with the children because I was afraid of the repercussions for them, you know if they showed too much of an interest in me. I was just caught between two stools. Wanting to meet them and then thinking of the consequences you know for them. Maybe not about any physical abuse cause that's probably only when I was there but the mental abuse you know.

Anthony: With a lot of perseverance, like I kept ringing up social workers and because there were so many in Limerick, I gave them names and the date of birth of my child and the date of birth of my ex partner and said " look I'm just interested in seeing my child ". They said they'd look into it and they'd get the head man in HSE in Limerick to ring me back and if they can find out where they are. And they did, they found out and they let me see him.

Anthony : Then I go guardianship of him through the courts so that helped me more so then I started getting to see him every 2 weeks and then I stopped for a while like. I stopped going down because I couldn't handle it. It was tough.

Anthony: I feel very bad about it, I feel like that, well I wouldn't like it, I know that he's going to hate me for it when he gets older like for stopping seeing him and all that like you know. So I want to sort it out like, I want to start seeing him again but I want to make sure I'm ready for it. Do you know what I mean because I'm after giving up all the alcohol and all that. I started to work around em, my partner at the

moment is better and hopefully if I work around things and get things sorted out at home for us then I could have the head to go down there and start seeing him.

Edmond :So I actually stayed away from her for the five years and I was talking to a friend of mine who knows all about this and he was good friends with Judge (Name) and he said the way the 5 year ban works is that you have to stay away for a further 5 or 6 months after that so it's about 5 ½ years of her life that I missed.”

Mandy: I was given a form in the lobby of the hospital on (date), it was stamped from this judge in (Town) court saying Noel had full custody. So I didn't even have a chance to go to the court to prove anything or to say anything..... So from that day to this I'm fighting for custody, I've never seen Mark or approached him. Nothing's being done; I'm kind of in and out of courts, like no one is listening.

Interviewer: So you're a good 20 months on, nearly 2 years?

Mandy: Yes.

Edmond: It's just that I've missed so much of her life. I want to make it back to her. You know to build bridges with the little one and to let her get to know me to let her know who I am, I'm her father and to let her know she has a step brother, I'm the father to the two kids. (Re making contact now)

Liam: It was written into the divorce - the two of us were supposed to sort it out with regard to access to the children. I kept requesting access and phoning her up and everything and she kept on with all the verbal abuse. So I couldn't get any access and that's when I went to my solicitor. I went to pursue but I didn't get it. Maybe I should have done more but I was afraid for their wellbeing and not me own.

