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Shared Parenting: Mothers’ Experiences

“Experiences of Mothering:
How Mothers view their roles
in shared care arrangements for children
following relationship separation”

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- Table 1 – Types of shared care parenting arrangements following separation
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of women as parents following relationship separation. It aimed to investigate women's beliefs, attitudes, expectations and parenting styles, and how these may have been affected by relationship separation.

Through purposive sampling using public advertising and professionals working in the field ten women agreed to participate who were currently sharing the care of their children following relationship separation. The discussions included information about twenty children and twelve fathers and covered issues such as what kind of cycle of shared parenting they are now in, their expectations about shared parenting and their attitudes regarding gendered roles.

The study found a wide range of complex experiences, which were analysed in two ways. Firstly, themes arising from the questions were summarized. Each of the participants viewed their situations as sharing the care of their children despite varying proportions of time the children were in their care. They came to be in shared parenting situations in a variety of ways, which included by choice or imposition from legal intervention or from absence of fathers. These issues were further influenced by issues such as power difference, employment changes, loss, grief and guilt. The mothers expectations of shared parenting often involved them assuming care of the children or trying to act in the best interests of their children where possible. Women differed widely in their attitudes to gendered roles from traditional to collaborative notions of parenting both before and after separation. Some women found it difficult to have quality time with their children or away from their children if fathers were absent following separation.
Secondly, participants were grouped according to the types of shared care arrangements following separation. Significant differences could be seen between those who had equal involvement of both parents following separation, minimal involvement of father and reduced involvement of mother. These groups were then discussed regarding how they view 'family' now, what works well, power differences between parents and implications for policy.

This research has clearly identified that separating parents are not a homogenous group and contain a huge amount of diversity relating to how their relationships function, what their beliefs and attitudes towards parenting are, levels of power, control and violence and access to income. These issues all affect how post-separation parenting plays out. This study also highlights the need for care in assessing and re-assessing post-separation family situations and the conflicting understanding that can be gained from the differing views of the parties involved. Because of these points, universal one-size-fits-all approaches, whether legal or therapeutic, are unlikely to meet the needs and circumstances of all post-separation families.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

When parents live together their individual mother and father roles can continue full time simultaneously. This is not possible when separation occurs. The Care of Children Act 2004 (NZ Government, 2004) gives more emphasis to hearing from children and taking into account their wishes in these circumstances. Many express strong wishes to have ongoing contact with both parents (Smith and Gollop, 2001). As a result, shared parenting arrangements in various forms, are being encouraged by Judges and other professionals involved in the work of the Family Court.

At a meeting of the Invercargill Family Courts Association (April 2008) (of which I am a member) members expressed a general view that many mothers struggle with sharing the care of their children. I decided to focus this research on exploring the experiences and views of some mothers who are sharing the care of their children. I wondered if it might lead to better understanding of their experiences of parenting following separation, and if their views of mothering as a “gendered talent” or mothering as “conscious collaboration” impacted on their reactions (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.335). This is particularly relevant to my work with couples referred by the Family Court for counselling.

In many families before separation it is the mother who carries out most of the nurturing and parenting aspects of raising the children. Mothers are often more constantly aware of their children’s ongoing needs on a daily basis (Smart, 2001).

In my own personal situation I became the sole parent for my three young Ngapuhi sons following their father’s sudden death caused by a motor vehicle accident. I learned to be the only parent available to provide the nurturing role of mothering. This was natural for me, and it was what I had learned from my own mother, who has never been in paid employment since her marriage to my father began more than 55 years ago. I was left in this role whether I liked it or not. Similarly, many of the parents whom I work with now are left with some form of shared parenting. While this is different from my own personal situation, it is not what most chose from the outset of coupling up with a partner. However it is the place where more and more parents are finding themselves.
There are many losses associated with separation for all the family members involved and lots of knowledge to be gained about the process from mothers, fathers and children. However, I have chosen for this research to focus on the experiences and views of mothers only in shared parenting situations. This is not to say that the fathers and children are unimportant, but there is not room to cover all in this piece of research.

So my hope for this research of focussing on the views and experiences of mothers is to put together something that might be beneficial and useful to other separated mothers in understanding some aspects of the changes that occur – often unexpectedly – when relationship separation happens. I hope it will also be beneficial to fathers to gain insights and understanding of those changes. I also hope it will be beneficial to the many professionals who work with and assist couples and families as they move through the separation and rebuilding process and the changes along the way – including the many professionals who form part of the team in the Family Court process.

My interest in this topic comes from personal experience, but also from the family situations and circumstances I worked among while employed for almost 15yrs up until mid 2002 as Family Court Co-ordinator at the Family Court in Invercargill. My interest has been deepened by the couples I have worked with since that time as a counsellor and social worker in private practice.

It has been my intention to research a sample of the general population of New Zealand, which includes both Maori and European perspectives on these issues. Tolich (2002) suggests that the Nursing Council of New Zealand (1996) Guidelines for Cultural Safety in Nursing and Midwifery Education provide direction that can be adapted to situations outside of nursing. The goals of the Nursing Council with adaptations are as follows:

1. “examine their own realities and attitudes they bring to each new person they encounter in their practice (research encounter)
2. evaluate the impact that historical, political and social processes have on the health of all people (in terms of the research topic)
3. demonstrate flexibility in their relationships with people who are different from themselves” (Tolich, 2002, p.176).
The aim of these guidelines is to encourage self-reflection rather than learn about the other person’s culture (Tolich, 2002). The logic of this is that a person who recognises the impact of their own cultural background can be “culturally safe” in any situation while working with others (Tolich, 2002, p.175).

Therefore, taking the above comments into account and whatever my research will end up being, I am somewhat comforted to acknowledge that it will be my research, with my personal flavours and biases. I will be guided by what others have already discovered, but it will be grounded in my own self-reflection on my own cultural identity and experiences. Basically I view myself as a Pakeha which I describe as a New Zealander of European descent with a culture that is unique to this country and includes recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and living alongside Maori as the other partner to the Treaty.

Therefore my research is written and discussed in the way I view things. It is with the general population of New Zealand in mind, which includes my own dominant culture and those within this group who all have varying ways of viewing themselves along with Maori and other cultures who all have variations within them.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

Much has been written about the experiences of fathers following separation (Arendell, 1995; Lamb, 2004; Madden-Derdich and Leonard, 2000; Seltzer, 1991 and 1998), but not so much regarding the experiences of mothers. Over many years children have predominantly remained living with their mothers following parental separation, and fathers have become the visiting parents. As a result various movements have arisen for and by fathers, in efforts to claim or reclaim their role within their children’s lives (Smart, 2001).

This literature review tracks the changes to family law and the attitudes of society regarding the role of parents, in particular mothers, over recent decades. These changes have led to the co-parenting of children following relationship separation and some form of shared care arrangement. The focus of this research is to explore the experiences and views of mothers who are sharing the care of their children following relationship separation. Therefore this literature review is limited in its extent and coverage. The following headings have been used:

1. Family law in New Zealand – what has led to changes?
2. Our history – the roles of women and mothers
3. Shared parenting experiences
4. Other possible influences on mothers’ experiences
5. Mothering as a “gendered talent or a conscious collaboration”? (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.335).

Family Law in New Zealand – what has led to changes?

The Guardianship Act had been in force since 1968. Its review was influenced by proposals for shared parenting like the private members bill drafted by Act MP Muriel Newman, which sought “to improve the welfare of children whose parents have separated, by bringing greater equality to the role of parents within the family unit” (Newman 2000, http://menz.org.nz/Information/Newman%20Bill.htm#Shared). There was also dissatisfaction regarding the closed environment of the Family Court under the Guardianship Act 1968 and the need for the law to give a broader recognition of the various forms families take (Ministry of Justice, 2005).
Another influence in changing views has been the increasing research into child development. Kelly and Lamb (2000) address the “attachment processes, separation from attachment figures, and the roles of mothers and fathers in promoting psychosocial adjustment” ... [as well as] “implications for young children’s parenting schedules” (Kelly and Lamb, 2000, p.297 [mine]).

Kelly and Lamb’s (2000) study highlights the importance of the role of attachment between children and parents from the child’s perspective. This suggests that the role of mothers following separation will differ from what it was prior to separation especially in those situations where mothers, for whatever reason, took on most child-rearing responsibilities.

Kelly and Lamb (2000) go on to describe the historical focus of children’s living arrangements following parental separation (p.305). The recommendations and attitudes that came from this history is what the family court systems throughout the world including New Zealand have been founded on. The main aim of the prevailing law was to maintain mother-child attachment through sole custody. Anything more than brief visits from the other parent were heavily discouraged (Kelly and Lamb, 2000). However, now it is clearly shown that children form similar attachments to both parents from 6-7 months of age even where the father has limited contact (Kelly and Lamb, 2000).

The rise of feminism and changing pattern of relationships from firm gender roles to equality in relationships has widely influenced social opinions and legal outcomes. As a result the courts and the professionals connected to them have changed their views. However, society and the individual parents who are emotionally involved in the system are much slower at making change (Smart, 2001).

Kelly and Lamb (2000) can be used to support the belief that fathers should have more time with their children. It seems that many mothers however, are finding it much more difficult to relinquish time with their children. It may be that many feel almost cheated in some respects because the law at one time supported their almost exclusive and responsible parenting role and then very quickly changed (Smart, 2001).

The attitudes and judgements of others in society can be difficult for many to manage when they
are themselves struggling to come to terms with the changes that affect them when relationship separation occurs. Some authors explore these reactions, for example by suggesting that women engage in behaviour aimed at limiting fathers’ ongoing contact and the rejection of the non-custodial parent by the child (Allen and Hawkins, 1999). These two reactions have been called “maternal gate keeping” (Fagan and Barnett, 2003, p.1020) and “parental rejection” (Clarkson and Clarkson, 2006, p.251). These highlight some of the negative interpretations of women’s behaviour and assumptions. These social views impact on the thoughts and actions of many and influence behaviour and attitudes to others in one way or another often leading to judgemental statements and assumptions being passed on.

Fagan and Barnett (2003) “ask what influences mothers to engage in gate keeping behaviour and how are these associated with father involvement?” (p.1021). Gate keeping is defined as “mothers’ preferences and attempts to restrict and exclude fathers from child care and involvement with children” (Fagan and Barnett, 2003, p.1021). However this study sample was comprised only of fathers. Allen and Hawkins (1999) studied “how maternal gate keeping could be conceptualised and operationalised” (p.200). Both of these studies provide a negative focus on the role of mothers caring for their children. They give notions of power imbalance and deliberate acts by mothers to inhibit children’s contact and involvement with their fathers and other aspects of domestic life.

Clarkson and Clarkson (2006), in a New Zealand study, examine “children who reject one parent after parental separation ... and the major challenge this presents to the Family Court system” (p.251). This study also constructs women’s behaviour in negative manner because fathers have tended to be the rejected parent and it is often assumed mothers influence this. The rejection of fathers by children could come from traditional parenting styles where mothers have been the main caregivers of their children. There are many suggestions that children reject one parent to support the other in many kinds of intricate and complicated ways. The authors (Clarkson and Clarkson, 2006) suggest ways to prevent or manage parental rejection such as reducing delays in the court process and ensuring parent-child contact occurs and in some cases even changing the custodial arrangement.

This highlights the potential negative behaviour of mothers and points to controlling and
deliberate attitudes to exclude fathers from children's lives. This may be so for some situations, but these tend to be the situations that are referred to again and again to make a point and society in general, the onlookers, begin to form the view that it is normal. Women are seen as obstructive and controlling, and men as the helpless victim (Smart, 2001). During the course of my work I have come across many mothers who are fearful of being labelled in this manner because of the actions of a few. They are fearful that information can be wrongly used in the Family Court process so they try hard to do nothing.

Almost thirty years ago, Ricci (1980) says the reaction she got from her work “showed clearly that ending a marriage and reorganising family life was a far more complicated phenomenon than I ever would have guessed” (p.3). She realised that both parents were important to children following relationship separation, that the traditional approach to care arrangements did not work and that separated parents needed to know how to put an arrangement into practice for it to be useful. Ricci (1980) also notes “that fathers ... were just as important to children’s post-divorce adjustment as were mothers ... the traditional approach to custody just wasn’t working ... [and children were left] with overburdened mothers and dropout fathers ... a good and fair custody arrangement ... meant little if the parents didn’t know how to put it into practice” (p.3-4 [mine]).

There have been increasing studies regarding issues relating to the children following separation. Much is discussed about reducing stressors on children, which is determined by the type of relationship their parents have following separation. That is, if they communicate well and work in together regarding parenting issues, this will then benefit their children’s adjustment to their separation. Kelly and Emery (2003) for example, “reviewed from the perspective of (a) the stressors and elevated risks that divorce presents for children and (b) protective factors associated with better adjustment” (p.352). They note that parenting competence is reduced in the short term following separation but that children’s resiliency is related to a return as quickly as possible to full competent parenting through support and education. The very strong message of this study is that children benefit most by having strong relationships with both of their parents (Kelly and Emery, 2003).

Kelly and Emery (2003) suggest a number of protective factors have been identified that reduce the risk for children of separated parents. To summarise they suggest positive adjustment is more
likely for those children “living in the custody of a competent, adequately functioning parent (usually mothers)... [and have] timely and appropriate parenting of non resident parents” (p.356 [mine]). The risks for children were further reduced when parents were actively involved in their children’s lives and when there was adequate financial support for the children (Kelly and Emery, 2003).

Kelly and Emery (2003) also found that the level of conflict between parents affects their coparenting relationship. While “co-operative co-parenting” is ideal, more parents engage in “parallel parenting” (p.357), where parents engage in less discussion about children’s activities.

Kelly (2006) focuses on what is known about living arrangements following divorce, and argues “that traditional visiting patterns and guidelines are, for the majority of children, outdated, unnecessarily rigid, and restrictive, and fail in both the short and long term to address their best interests. Research-based parenting plan models offering multiple options for living arrangements following separation and divorce more appropriately serve children’s diverse developmental and psychological needs” (p.35). This research proposes that post separation arrangements in these current times need to be more flexible and easily adaptable to children’s changing needs in order to function effectively.

Smith and Gallop (2001) in a New Zealand study showed that children have their own perspectives that are useful for guiding separating parents. Their main finding was that children should be informed and be allowed some influence over the decisions that involve them. Nearly a quarter of the children involved in the research preferred their parents to not engage in hostile behaviour in their presence because that created a sense of conflicting loyalties and placed them in a difficult situation amidst the conflict (Smith and Gallop, 2001). Smith, Taylor and Tapp (2003) in another New Zealand study “argue that the assumption that it is a burden of responsibility for children to be involved in family or legal decision-making is problematic...The key issue is not the child’s competence, but the adults’ ability to provide a trusting, supportive and reciprocal relationship within which the child’s voice and participation can be facilitated” (p.201).

The Care of Children Act 2004 (NZ Government, 2004) has seen a change in law, which has led
to a change in practice in New Zealand. The purpose of the Act is to:

"promote children’s welfare and best interests, facilitate their development by helping to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for their guardianship and care and to recognise certain rights of children. As a result, the Care of Children Act reflects the changes in New Zealand society, recognises the diverse family care arrangements that now exist, promotes shared responsibility for the care of children, encourages parents and guardians to agree to their own arrangements and uses updated terminology that moves away from the idea of ownership" (Ministry of Justice, 2005, p.2).

The Act comes from a children’s rights perspective that attempts to promote the views and aspirations of children. It promotes “…co-operative parenting… and shifts the emphasis from parental rights to parental responsibilities” (Ministry of Justice, 2005, p.3). Terminology is changed, for example, ‘custody’ is referred to as ‘day to day care’ and ‘access’ is changed to ‘contact’. All of these arrangements are covered by a ‘parenting order’ rather than the separate ‘custody’ and ‘access’ orders of the past. The Act recognises the ongoing nature of both parents involvement in children’s lives and it provides resources to help parents and caregivers make their own arrangements for their children following separation rather than rely on imposed decisions made by the Court (Ministry of Justice, 2005).

As stated above the Care of Children Act 2004 (NZ Government, 2004) has a stronger focus on the rights of the child. Judge Boshier, Principal Family Court Judge of New Zealand (2005) says, “Children should be able to participate in decisions affecting them. This is important not only from a developmental perspective but also because of respect to their rights as citizens” (p.7). There is no doubt that the views of children are given more weight than previously. For example, previous phrases “if the child is able to express themselves… having regard to their age and maturity” have been removed as they implied that children were incapable of expressing their views (Boshier 2005, p.8). Parenting Plan information printed by the Ministry of Justice indicates that children want “things to be fair” and “to have lots of time with both of you” (Ministry of Justice, 2006, p.12).

It’s reasonably clear from the research that parents and the Court should actively consider shared
parenting of children up to a 50/50 living arrangement. American research (Kelly, 2006) indicates that this type of arrangement is the most beneficial for the children and is also what the children want. Research from New Zealand also supports this (Smith & Gallop, 2001).

Our history – the roles of women and mothers

However, while research and the law move towards 50/50 custody arrangements in theory, some women find this change difficult to put into practice. Therefore I believe it is important to look at our history to understand the present. The focus of the review in this section is limited to the roles of parents, in particular mothers and explains why it may be difficult for some to relinquish the expectations that have so strongly impacted on women and mothers of the past.

In 2001 Professor Carol Smart addressed the New Zealand National Family Law Conference on “Changing Family Relationships”.

This address gave a history in the development of the roles of mothers and fathers in the lives of their children over the last fifty years, and the family law focuses during that time. It highlights the dominant constructions promoted in law and society of mothers as the one to provide care and nurturing of children stemming from Victorian family ideals. However there have been subsequent changes regarding parents involvement in family life. Smart (2001) suggests “that what we have witnessed over time is a shift in prime focus away from the centrality of marriage towards the centrality of parenthood” (p.8). The type of change that has occurred places emphasis on the interaction of parents with children as being far more important than the marriage between parents. This also relates to the legal status of relationships.

I have chosen this address to be part of my literature review because Smart (2001) summarises the details of change regarding family dynamics and relates this to the law of the day. She details the Victorian era where gender completely determined the roles mother and father played in the lives of their children. She comments on the first and second waves of feminism, the men’s movements in the 1980’s and lastly the change of emphasis regarding parenthood. Alongside of this summary regarding family dynamics Smart (2001) also summarises the emphasis law had on families over the years. To begin with she noted that marriage legitimated family relationships,
which included husbands having ownership over wives and children. She concluded with the legal focus being on the rights of the child and responsibilities of parents to provide a nurturing and interactive environment to raise their children. However she also emphasised that while some facets of society and the law that supports it may have adopted the changes as detailed above, this is not necessarily the case. For many separating parents it often becomes very difficult to move through the separation process calmly and amicably as one may hope especially having regard to the influence this process has on the children involved. Smart (2001) also alludes to the emotional investment parents have in the context of their family and this makes the separation process difficult for many.

Furthermore, Smart elsewhere states:

"The social structure of families before separation or divorce tends to rely on mothers rather than on fathers carrying out parenting tasks for children...the parent separation highlights the extent to which fathers’ relationships with children are mediated by mothers and dependent on mothers’ facilitation. This does not mean that fathers do not love their children but it does mean that they often do not know them very well and are not sensitive to their needs, moods and tastes." (Law Commission 2002, p.55).

This observation explains why some mothers find it difficult to encourage a shared parenting arrangement for their children following separation. It appears that some take the view of ‘why should I assist them (the fathers) to have a relationship with the children when they haven’t bothered in the past’, and at the same time some fathers are paralysed to initiate their own parent-child relationship due to past reliance on mothers to make it happen. There is a huge emotional investment for both parents in these types of situations and it is due to these emotions that the law and professionals working in this field are required to be extremely sensitive and assist or facilitate change in a timely fashion to preserve dignity and relationships for all family members concerned.

This has been our history, which of course influences our present and future. This history assists our understanding and appreciation of the difficulties now facing both mothers and fathers regarding the changes that are being encouraged and often imposed by the legal system we have adopted. This is very important to understanding the dynamics of my research topic.
Shared parenting experiences

Opie (1988) studied shared parenting in a New Zealand study. This research involved a qualitative longitudinal study of eight separated couples, their children and current partners. She questions whether shared parenting is the best custody alternative. She says those endorsing shared parenting have maintained it as a viable alternative that can ensure the child maintains adequate involvement with both parents, and as the form of living arrangements post separation that promote the child's best interests (Folberg, 1984). It has also been promoted as an opportunity to reduce women's childcare responsibilities in order to allow more career opportunities beyond that of a full time mother. It also allows for ongoing father's involvement with their children as well as promoting a less hostile post separation relationship supported by legislation (Opie, 1988).

Opie (1989a) found that shared parenting is a complicated experience differentiated by gender. She concludes by stating that:

"...its benefits notwithstanding, should not be seen as the panacea for all separating families and certainly not as a means of resolving highly conflictual custody situations. Families embarking on this mode of custody need to have a realistic appreciation of the real positives and advantages and of the inherent limitations and to have thought carefully about their ability to sustain such an arrangement over some years. It is equally important that professionals working with separated families are sensitive both to the issues of gender and power which permeate familial structures, and are aware that the best interests of the child are not served by perpetuating a very unequal or very divisive adult relationship" (p.8).

Opie (1989a) states that shared parenting works best when both parents are positive about it, act respectfully towards each other and are able to co-operate with one another. Shared parenting becomes difficult for all parties involved when it is viewed as a way of exerting control over the other parent or when there is an ongoing high level of conflict between parents.

Opie (1988) states that for most of the women in the study, successful shared parenting arrangements relied on their willingness to relinquish the role of primary care-giver. It also required them to "...accept their ex-partner as an active parent in situations where most had some
doubt about that person’s parenting experience (Opie, 1988, p.277).

Opie (1988) notes that for most of the men in her study shared parenting required them to completely reorganise their homes and lifestyles. Opie (1988) notes that there were differences between the ways men and women described their concerns regarding each other's abilities to care for the children. Men tended to convey a more globally negative view of their ex-partner whereas in contrast the women’s comments were more specific and focused on issues of childcare.

Opie (1988) goes on to note that historical care arrangements should not be easily dismissed when moving to shared care arrangements. She describes how women expressed concerns about men's ability to suddenly have the full time responsibility of children when they have had little previous experience of this role. An acknowledgement of this previous highly gendered organisation of parenting roles needs to be taken into account by both parties. Men would benefit from up to date education and ongoing support to fulfil their new sole role which would help reassure their ex-partner. This would, in turn, assist women to relinquish some of their previous primary care-giving responsibilities. The findings of Opie (1988) support my suggestion that professionals working in the field would also benefit from similar education regarding the role changes that occur when a shared parenting arrangement begins.

While all the participants in Opie’s (1988) study eventually felt positive about their changing parenting arrangements many struggled with strong unexpected emotions. “These processes need to be recognised as legitimate ... and their expression not seen as masking a desire to control the other, nor as manipulative or punitive” (Opie, 1988, p.279). A particularly strong theme from her research was an unexpected and significant sense of loss and grief that a shared arrangement provoked. This emotional response did decrease over time as parents learned to fill up their lives with other things as a method of dealing with this emotional distress (Opie, 1989c). Opie (1989c) notes the tensions involved for women when the expectation was for the instant relinquishment of their mothering role and identity when they may have performed the majority of parenting tasks while their relationship was intact.

Smyth, Caruana and Ferro (2003) provide some insights from separated parents with 50/50 care arrangements in Australia. Their study was prompted by a parliamentary inquiry designed to
establish whether a legal default position of shared parenting should become part of Australian family law. To this end, Smyth et.al. (2003) interviewed a small number of parents who had a relatively equal childcare arrangement following separation.

They found that the following conditions aided favourable outcomes:

“geographical proximity; the ability of parents to get along and, at a minimum, to maintain a ‘business-like’ working relationship as parents (with children kept ‘out of the middle’); child-focused arrangements (with children’s activities forming an integral part of the way the parenting schedule is developed); a commitment by everyone to make shared care work; family-friendly work practices, especially for fathers; a degree of financial independence, especially for mothers; a degree of paternal competence” (Smyth et.al., 2003, p.55).

Smyth and Weston (2004) in a study of 50/50 shared care, examined separated and divorced parents views about “equal-time” parenting. They found that gender and custodial arrangements affected parents views, that is that “most separated fathers like the idea of equal time parenting whereas most separated mothers do not” (Smyth and Weston, 2004, p.14).

**Other possible influences on mothers’ experiences**

Some relationships are punctuated with incidents of domestic violence and ongoing power and control issues following separation. Two New Zealand authors have written extensively on this subject.

McMaster (1992) uses the term “self-righteous anger” to describe men’s anger (p.2). He says that abusive men often state that they have legitimate reasons for being angry and it is their right to be that way and should not be challenged. A “self-righteous” attitude maintains this behaviour, which does not consider the effect it has on others, especially partners and children. He also refers to the concept of “dominant story” (p.2). This notion refers to the idea that being angry is the “dominant story” for these men and this overshadows the stories of those that this behaviour affects. He identifies new challenges for men who share the care of their children as they take on full responsibility for the children during their care time, as well as learn to live alone and maintain a home, which includes employment and financial aspects (McMaster, 1992).
Douglas (1994) writes about the effects of domestic violence on women. She states that abuse occurs when normal everyday disagreements constantly result in one partner’s wishes always prevailing. She describes “abuse as being so painful to live with that most women cope by denying its impact” (p.48).

New Zealand law includes the Domestic Violence Act 1995 (NZ Government, 1995), which states certain types of violence are unacceptable to meet the threshold for a protection order to be granted. The protection of children from the respondents of protection orders is also covered within the law. Kelly and Johnson (2008) suggest more accurate differentiation between the types of intimate partner violence. They contend that family court decisions should take these different types of violence into account when deciding on parenting plans that protect children and support parent-child relationships. As parents are evaluated regarding the care of children it is important to bear in mind the complexity of individuality of situations. It is believed that one thing is clear: “the assessment of the violence must include information about its role in the relationship between the contesting parties. A narrow focus on acts of violence will not do. There is a need to err on the side of safety, particularly when information about the parents’ violence is limited and the court’s response is inadequate because of lack of appropriate personnel and screening procedures” (Kelly and Johnson, 2008, p.494).

McMaster and Gregory (2003) address the complexity of family violence and the various options used to treat it including couple counselling which has not historically been seen as a desirable option. However when combined with the initial and ongoing assessment of risk and safety this can be a useful option for some couples (McMaster and Gregory, 2003). These examples remind us that for some couples their post separation experiences will be marred by the experience of abuse that occurred within the relationship. However the ways abusive dynamics affect couples’ relationships is varied and requires a variety of intervention approaches.
Mothering as a “gendered talent or a conscious collaboration” (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.335)

Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) identify types of parenting and provide an understanding of motherhood and gender equality in their study of married, heterosexual couples with children no older than five years.

Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) suggest that the role of mothering after separation may be greatly influenced by the role of mothering prior to separation, and as such is extremely pertinent to my topic.

The couples were interviewed and coded into couple types based on the role of gender in determining their relationship dynamics. They describe these types as follows:

"Post gender couples assumed all tasks were shared and appeared to have consciously moved beyond gender as a mechanism for organizing their relationships.

Gender legacy couples did not cite gender as the basis for their division of responsibilities but appeared to use it by default and operate with hidden gender-based power structures.

Traditional couples consciously advocated and maintained a gendered division of labour and said each “role” (their term) was equal” (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.337).

Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) found two major themes: “tasks and relationship” (p.338). ‘Tasks’ described the way the parents cared for the children’s daily needs. As well as the day-to-day mundane work, this included being responsible for children’s whereabouts, routines, education of lifestyle habits and values. ‘Relationship’ described the way parents and children developed an emotional bond. This included “feelings of closeness, sense of understanding and knowing their children, enjoyment of time spent with children and a physical bond that was often expressed through touching” (p.338).

Their results indicated two ways of viewing the roles of mothering: “(a) mothering as a gendered talent and (b) mothering as conscious collaboration” (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.338). ‘Post gender’ mothers were differentiated from ‘traditional’ and ‘gender legacy’ mothers in that “both tasks and relational connections were shared between parents” (p.338). However,
this did not necessarily impact on the experience of a positive emotional bond with their children. For both ‘traditional’ and ‘gender legacy’ couples a strong belief that mothers have a specific gendered connection with children is fundamental to the dynamics of parenting that maintain ‘mothering as a gendered talent’. The consequence of this belief is inequity in the assignment of childcare work even when the couple were not aiming for this outcome.

Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) found that four processes seemed to maintain ‘mothering as a gendered talent’. Firstly, “partners believe mothers have natural connection with children” (p.339). This belief was based on an assumption that giving birth gave mothers this position. Secondly, “fathers step back” (p.339). As a result of the first belief fathers felt less confident about knowing how to respond to their children’s needs. The third process, “mothers organize time around children” (p.339). As a result of father’s withdrawal, mothers have little choice than to arrange their daily routines around the children. The fourth process, “mothers took continual responsibility” (p.340). This is in conjunction with the third process detailed above where mothers were continuously aware of their children’s needs regardless of their other responsibilities.

In contrast to this kind of mothering Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) found different processes that result in “mothering as conscious collaboration” (p.340). They note that these couples used “equality creating tactics” to counter both historical and biological differences. Firstly both partners take it for granted that responsibility for children will be shared. Secondly, biological differences are not allowed to interfere in equality of nurturing parenting behaviour. Thirdly, fathers assume responsibility for tasks and do not require mothers to oversee their completion. Fourthly, parents displayed an “openness to learning” (p.341). This meant that parents when faced with new challenges did not simply defer to the other parent, but sought to learn for themselves regardless of gender. Finally, when fathers were engaged with childcare tasks, mothers did not interfere and allowed fathers to take responsibility for the whole job.

This study highlighted the task-relationship cycle and equality. The division of tasks of childcare helped create, maintain and cultivate a continually growing emotional connection between parents and young children.
Furthermore Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) note that the ongoing “idealisation of motherhood” (p.343) is part of the reason for continuing gender inequalities. Some study participants were found to be in a self-reinforcing cycle where initial beliefs regarding women’s natural role as mother and nurturer resulted in mothers doing more childcare tasks, which in turn strengthened the mother-child relationship at the expense of the father-child one.

Other participants consciously resisted the ‘idealisation of motherhood’ when responding to childcare tasks and were able to deal with conflict which was viewed as in some ways inevitable when trying to form an egalitarian relationship.

Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) also note that the way motherhood is constructed in turn relates to how fatherhood can be viewed. They state that “to better understand parenting as collaboration, it will be necessary to continue to study fathers and how fathers and mothers create each other” (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.343). Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) go on to note with implications to this study, that the idea of ‘maternal gate keeping’ (Allen & Hawkins, 1999) is an interactive dynamic process between parents rather than something mothers did to fathers.

This study although limited in the subjects of research to heterosexual couples with young children, highlights the changes in thinking required to move from ‘traditional’ and ‘gender legacy’ to ‘post gender mothering’ and the conflict that arises for parents when they are not both making those changes. This requires a cognitive transition based on cultural and social change as it challenges the belief systems of individuals. A further area of study would be to investigate if similar results would be evident with couples living in de facto relationships, same sex couples, those with older age children and separated couples.

As I am researching in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand it is desirable to include a Maori perspective on these issues. Durie (2003) discusses the place of mother within whanau, hapu and iwi that is all relevant to living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Traditional Maori society was communal in which males/fathers and females/mothers, grouped together to undertake many tasks including communal care and parenting of the children. However males and females had quite different roles to undertake so the group remained healthy and worked well for all who
were part of it. Extended family forms also impact on post separation experiences for parents and children. It is important to note that for many families, the child is not considered simply the child of two parents and this might have implications for post separation child care arrangements.

**Conclusion**

This literature review tracks the changes to family law and the attitudes of society regarding the role of parents, in particular mothers, over recent decades. Most family law in New Zealand has been governed by the Guardianship Act 1968 (now obsolete), which has become outdated. It is now clearly established that children form similar attachments to both parents from 6-7 months of age (for a review, see Lamb, 1997). Attachment between children and parents from the child’s perspective is important. More traditional approaches to arranging ‘custody’ and ‘access’ patterns are now viewed as “outdated, unnecessarily rigid and restrictive and were failing in both the short and long term to address children’s best interests” (Kelly, 2006, p.35). More recent approaches instead suggest a broader range of living arrangements are more suited in meeting children’s multiple and varied needs (Kelly, 2006). However, some women find it difficult to relinquish the expectations that have so strongly defined their role and identity in the past.

The research on shared parenting experiences highlights the complexity of this issue and emphasises the fact that there are no simple solutions or ‘right’ ways to share parenting. However, there are some common themes like ensuring ongoing open communication between separated parents which focuses on the children that assist in making shared parenting situations function well. Power and control tactics in varying degrees of abuse and domestic violence influence the way a shared parenting arrangement works which also highlights that there may be occasions where labels of ‘maternal gate-keeping’ and ‘parental alienation’ have been given to situations that may have been more appropriately considered as issues of power and control resulting in a focus of protection and safety.

Understanding our history and the complexity of family relationships is part of learning how parenting has developed and whether it is viewed as a ‘gendered talent’ or as a ‘conscious collaboration’. The research of Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) indicates that as long as motherhood is idealised there is difficulty in creating equality in parenting. Old patterns of gender and power collide with ideals of equality and highlights the changes in thinking required.
to move from traditional viewpoints and habits as well as the conflict that arises for parents when they are not both making the same changes. This cognitive transition requires a shift as it challenges the belief systems of individuals.
Chapter 3 – Design and Methodology

Introduction

“Social work research is another method that can help achieve social work’s emancipatory objectives” (D’Cruz & Jones, 2006, p.5). The intent and purpose of choosing this subject for my research project is to investigate the experiences of mothers who are managing the challenges of shared parenting following relationship separation. These women have historically been a marginalised group with little public voice. Therefore this research aims to present their views as part of social work’s emancipatory value base.

As already stated I am somewhat comforted by the comments of Tolich (2002) to acknowledge this is my research, with my own personal flavours and biases. I am guided by what others have already discovered, but it is grounded in my own self-reflection on my own cultural identity and experiences. As a mother myself with strong instincts to nurture and care for my children I have strong thoughts about the change of emphasis in the practice of family law regarding sharing the care of children in some of the situations I hear about. For example, “its not fair that mothers are being restricted in their role as a mother when that’s what they want to do.” My work as a counsellor with separating couples is basically to assist and empower them towards successful parenting regimes. I have recognised that these thoughts could affect my ability to remain neutral in my role as a counsellor and social worker. During the course of this research I have learned to think systematically when working through the information collected. I have learned to think more critically through reflection and reflexivity and give reasons as to my beliefs and actions. I believe I have become more self-aware and more socially self-aware of what it means for both parents, not just mothers, and children when relationship separation occurs and the children are raised in a shared care environment. This research has greatly assisted me to challenge my biases and hopefully it will assist others who are working in this field to confront their biases regarding parenting following relationship separation.

Study Design

The structure of this research is qualitative and is based on investigating the in depth experiences of a small number of participants (Davidson and Tolich, 2007). Qualitative research helps to access people’s life experiences in more in-depth ways than quantitative approaches. Qualitative methods also acknowledge the impact of the researcher on the collection of data from the
participants. I was aware throughout of being a woman and mother and how this may have
impacted on the way the participants might have responded to the questions asked during the
collection of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

My primary research questions were:

1. How do mothers experience and manage their parenting role following separation in a
   shared care arrangement?

2. How do these experiences relate to women’s beliefs and attitudes regarding their
   mothering role and identity?

Participants were invited to participate in an individual interview. The questions were open­
ended and designed to gain each individuals account of their own experiences. I used my own
interviewing skills to pick up on issues and expand as the interviews progressed. The main
themes were drawn from these interviews, collated and then posted to all participants who were
invited to give further comments. This was to give the participants a chance to contribute to
analysing the data without meeting each other, thus protecting their anonymity. Participants
were fully informed about the process and their written consent was gained before the interview
began.

I considered that the information I hoped to gain from the participants might be quite difficult to
obtain. Other professionals working within family law had expressed a general view that many
mothers were struggling with sharing the care of their children following separation. The
practice of the Care of Children Act 2004 (NZ Government, 2004) had resulted in separating
parents being encouraged to share the care of their children. I wanted to find out the views and
experiences of mothers and hoped this would include an awareness of individual participant’s
underlying beliefs, practices or instinctive learning that they had already gained.

The questions I have chosen have been to gain a general outline of each participant’s experience.
Firstly I thought it important to find out how the shared parenting and care situation had arisen.
This was to gain an understanding of how the situation we were going to discuss further come
about. To focus each of the participants I asked them to discuss their expectations of a shared
parenting and care arrangement. The final question regarding their present situation was to tell
me about the typical shared care cycle or routine arrangements they had set up with the father of their children. This question established that the participants considered a variety of arrangements as sharing the parenting and care of their children, which did not necessarily involve each parent having half time each with the children. While initially I had envisaged 'sharing' to mean both parents having a substantial amount of time each with their children. This was not specifically stated in the initial information circulated when recruiting participants. As a result the information collected and analysed has been wide and varied and added interesting dimensions and understandings to shared parenting and care situations.

The next group of questions were designed to gain an understanding of the beliefs each participant had about parenting and if they had noticed any changes. Firstly I asked what roles they thought mothers and fathers should play in their children's lives. And then asked if they had noticed any change in the way they mothered their children since they had begun sharing the parenting and care of them. This was followed by encouragement to discuss the changes before and after the shared parenting and care arrangement. For example, quality time they spent with their children. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's beliefs about their parenting role, I then asked if they had noticed any change in how they thought about mothering their children. For example, important things their child might need to know.

At the end of each interview I offered the participant an opportunity to include anything further they might like me to know. Most offered an explanation as to why they wished to participate in this research. As a result this additional information has been collated accordingly.

While the content of each interview was based around the same set of questions, the participants told their stories from their own points of view. Their narratives highlight what is important to them in their own situation of parenting in shared care arrangements (D'Cruz and Jones, 2006). By narrative, I mean the participants tell their own stories about what is important for them. The way this information is interpreted and put together examines the way women construct their own truths, according to available cultural constructs regarding gender (D'Cruz and Jones, 2006). Several individual stories together allows for an expression of culture and can give insights into everyday experiences including the way in which power is used and abused that may never otherwise be known. The interviews were all audio taped, transcribed, and initially sorted into
themes based on a grounded theory approach (Barbour, 2008). This approach attempts to build theory from the data in an inductive manner, creating themes that arise from the data (Barbour, 2008). The influence of feminist theory has been used as these themes have been analysed. This means I have a particular approach that attempts to validate the voice of women and views their experiences as important (Letherby, 2006).

Sample
It was important that the participants met certain criteria – they had to be mothers who were aged 21yrs or above, who had at least one child and who had experienced separation from their child/ren’s father. They may be living alone with their child/ren or with another partner, and who had some form of shared care of their child/ren with the child/ren’s father. ‘Shared care’ was not defined specifically, but was not limited to just 50/50 care arrangements. It was also open to arrangements that were agreed to by the parents as well as arrangements that were ordered by the Family Court.

Ethical Issues
One of the important things to think about when collecting information from participants and then collating and recording it is that they are people and they deserve much respect. Their stories and the hardships and difficulties from these stories are what makes them the people they are today. Thus, the way this information is collated and written for others to gain knowledge from is in a way that confidences are respected and anonymity protected. It is important to take every effort to ensure that no harm comes to them or their families. They have been informed of the process and their written consent gained (Davidson and Tolich, 2007).

Ethical Approval
Formal approval was granted from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Otago, New Zealand for this study to be carried out. At all times confidentiality and safe storage were maintained (see Appendix one).
Methods

Letters of Support

When preparing the application to seek approval for this research from the Human Ethics Committee letters of support were received from several sources in Invercargill. For example, The Family Courts Association, Southland District Law Society, Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, New Zealand Association of Counsellors and the researchers own clinical and cultural supervisors from her private practice work.

Sample of participants

The supporters were advised following acceptance of the research proposal by the Ethics Committee, and requests were made to them seeking suitable participants known to them from their own client base. To preserve the confidentiality of participants, letters giving a brief outline of the project were given to the supporters to pass on to parties that they thought may be interested. Included in these letters were contact details of the researcher and the interested parties themselves made contact if they wanted to become a participant. At the same time a very brief article was printed in the Southland Times weekly extra – The Eye, including similar introductory information. At no time did the researcher make initial contact to any prospective participants.

Ten women and mothers replied and sought to be participants in the research. Five of these almost immediately replied to the article in the Eye newspaper. The other five came from information that had been passed on from the professional sources that had previously offered support.

Data Collection

Each participant was contacted by telephone by the researcher and an interview was arranged and conducted at a time and place that they found most suitable. Some wished for the interviewer/researcher to visit them in their homes and others sought to come to her professional rooms. Each interview was audio taped. They ranged in length from 15 minutes to over 50 minutes. The same base questions were asked of each. In some situations areas and issues were extended on. This depended on each individual situation and the things each of them wished to
share with the interviewer. All were very open about their situations and shared freely the information they wished to be known.

Participants were informed at the time of the initial interviews that the interviewer would summarise and collate the data given by each. Main themes would be identified, collated and then posted to each participant for an opportunity to them to comment further. Two of the ten participants commented further.

Processing Data
Each interview was transcribed word for word and this covered pages and pages of valuable information. To make the step of analysing the data easier the transcripts were changed into textual format for ease of reading. The response from each participant was then sorted under headings relevant to the questions asked with an additional topic of ‘motivation for participating in the research’. The results of the research were summarised, collated and analysed.

Analysing Data
As the results of the research were being collated it soon became clear that there were common themes and situations emerging from some of the participants. So to organise all of the information two kinds of thematic description and analysis were used to structure and analyse the findings. The first used the interview questions themselves to structure the findings, with themes in the participants’ answers being identified from the data in response to the questions. This basic creation of themes and coding of data into each theme was done manually. The second kind of thematic analysis was done by creating groups who’s experiences of the level of involvement by the fathers of their children were similar to one another (for example, those who had basically equal involvement of both parents following separation were assigned to one group).

Then, the themes according to these groups were identified. This allowed a level of comparison between groups and in particular allowed my research question regarding practices, beliefs and attitudes to parenting to be explored. The content of these themes were then analysed both according to content and what discourses they represented regarding family form, what ‘works’, and power differences. Thus, these findings were treated as both relating objective facts and
creating particular discursive constructions, especially about family and parenting roles (Silverman, 2001). The creation of these themes from the data enabled some theoretical comments to be made in line with grounded theory approaches (Barbour, 2008).

These dual methods of description and analysis add depth and level of 'triangulation' of analysis. This allows for elements of both inductive theme development, and connections between kind of experience and beliefs, attitudes and perceptions to both be explored.

Some aspects of discourse analysis were used to analyse content, especially ideas regarding parenting ideologies. This is because it focuses on the everyday construction of sets of values, beliefs and practices and includes an explicit recognition of power differentials (D'Cruz and Jones, 2006).

As the stories of these participants unfolded it became important to include a feminist approach in this research as this theory focuses on female experiences and empowerment. Detailed knowledge about these participants circumstances have been produced which it is hoped will encourage political awareness and change in the situations for all family members who are part of a shared care arrangement following separation in the future (Davidson and Tolich, 2007).
Chapter 4 – Research Results

Introduction

There has been a wide range of circumstances experienced by the ten women and mothers who have participated in this research. An initial section covers the way participants have been grouped according to common themes arising from their situations. The findings are summarised using the initial questions as a basis for organising the data. An additional section has been added which summarises the motivation for volunteering to participate in this research. In the final section information from each group is organised under four main themes from the whole of the data collected.

Grouping of Participants

This study has involved the experiences ten mothers who share the care of twenty children altogether from twelve different fathers. It can be seen that the information collected from these ten participants is varied and diverse and for this reason I have decided to divide them into three different groups and then analyse their comments under four headings. The groups are:

1 ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father
2 Minimal involvement of father
3 Reduced involvement of mother

Table 1 – Types of shared care parenting arrangements following separation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mothers N = 10</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
<th>Boys under 5</th>
<th>Girls under 5</th>
<th>Boys 5 and over</th>
<th>Girls 5 and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1 – Equal Involvement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2 – Minimal Paternal Involvement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3 – Reduced Maternal Involvement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*one mother counted twice
Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father
This is a group of five family situations involving five mothers, five fathers and seven children – two infant girls, three school age girls, and two now living independently one male and the other female. One of these mothers is included in Group two in relation to her other children and their fathers.

I have grouped these situations together because of the equal or almost equal time parenting for both the mother and the father and consider the parenting style to be by way of collaboration. By that I interpret these situations as both parents sharing most of the responsibility of parenting and most of the day-to-day tasks of parenting.

Group two – Minimal involvement of father
This is a group of four family situations involving four mothers (includes one mother from group one), five fathers and nine children – three preschool boys, one preschool girl, three school age boys, and two school age girls.

I have grouped these situations together because of the minimal time the fathers of these children spend with their children. For some it is regular fortnightly weekend contact and for others it is irregular and unpredictable. I consider the parenting style to be traditional with the mother and father tasks and differences based on gender. The mothers find themselves running the homes and taking on most of the responsibility of parenting and most of the day-to-day tasks of parenting.

Group three – Reduced involvement of mother
This is a group of two family situations involving two mothers, two fathers and four children – three school age boys and one school age girl.

I have grouped these situations together because of the changes that have occurred for these mothers. Both have experienced an inability to reach agreement with their children’s father regarding the parenting arrangements of their children. Both have found their situations embroiled in the legal system and the family court, which has left both mothers very sad and hurt by the changes that have occurred in this process and their participation in this research reflects those emotions. The parenting styles of this group are more difficult to categorise. While the mothers have wished to include the fathers in childcare they have also been minded about safety
issues for their children and have sought among other things to have their fears minimised and their minds put at rest. Instead it appears their role as mother has been disregarded in one way or another almost to the extent it was more than a century ago when women and children were the possessions of males and if separation occurred the children stayed with the father and became his responsibility.

However, the participants arrived in these ‘grouped’ situations via different pathways. All of the ten mothers in this research consider they are sharing the parenting of their children with the children’s father. For six the involvement is on an equal or almost equal basis. In five of these situations the parents came to their own arrangements and form Group One.

For the sixth, the shared care situation was established with the assistance of the family court and has resulted in reduced involvement for the mother due to the employment rosters this arrangement is based on. This situation has formed Group Three along with another situation of extensive family court involvement which resulted in the mother having her time with the children reduced considerably as the result of a decision from the family court. These situations are punctuated with power and control issues which could have been misinterpreted as "parental rejection" (Clarkson and Clarkson, 2006) and "maternal gate keeping" behaviour (Fagan and Barnett, 2003; Alien and Hawkins, 1999).

The other group of four mothers form Group Two. There is minimal involvement of the fathers in this group and these mothers want to share the parenting care and responsibilities much more with them. They are all open and encouraging of more day-to-day tasks by their children’s fathers rather than them being the ‘weekend fun type dads’.

These variations add richness to this research and include a diversity that had not been contemplated when mothers in shared parenting situations were first sought as participants.
Summary of findings using initial questions as a basis for identifying themes arising from the data –

**Question one: How participants came to be in a shared parenting situation and the cycle of their arrangement**

Separations occurred in various ways. Assistance from the Family Court had been sought in many situations with six either requesting relationship counselling or being referred to counselling and two involving protection from domestic violence.

The main themes to emerge:

**A shared parenting arrangement by choice or imposed**

Three of the mothers interviewed negotiated suitable arrangements for shared care at the suggestion of the children’s father’s at the point of separation or soon after. In all of these situations the fathers sought more time with their children so they could participate in the children’s day-to-day activities. One of these mothers has this type of arrangement with her third child however the older two have minimal involvement with their father’s. In another situation similar negotiation continues as the separation is recent and the child quite young.

A sole parenting situation was imposed on another mother when the father of her child ‘disappeared’ for the first seven years of the child’s life. She instigated shared care arrangements on the ‘return’ of the father. Two situations have had long term involvement from the Family Court with the mothers in these situations both feeling that their arrangements have been imposed upon them by Family Court Judges – one at a defended hearing and the other at a mediation conference. In the remaining three situations the fathers are having minimal involvement with their children. Two of these mothers are very tired and worn out caring for their children who are all aged between two and eight years. The children in the third situation are a little older and the mother has recently learned to accept the situation as “unlikely to change” (P9).

**Power difference between parents**

In the five situations where shared arrangements have been negotiated there appears to be very little power difference between the parents, although there were comments like “as usual it was me who did the compromise” (P5). In one of these situations the Family Court provided the stabilising factor initially for the family “because it was quite a messy break up, like quite
violent” (P4), but within a short time confidence and trust returned for the parents and they now operate a very flexible shared arrangement.

In the two situations where the Family Court was involved at the stage of mediation and defended hearing the power differences were huge and the mothers involved felt totally unsupported by the Court system. They both indicate that there were power and control issues while their relationship was still intact and continue to feel the fathers in their situations have the power and the Court system supports it. For example, “It’s pretty hard when the other side is just seeing it one sided and just wants everything their way – and you’re not getting any support from the system…” (P3). And, “This was the big thing he told the Judge – she even wrote that in her report (decision) – she felt their father would provide a good upbringing for them (details deleted for anonymity)” (P6). This mother thought the Judge would “see through” her children’s father by the way he was presenting at the Court, but soon realised she had to be “one step ahead of what you think is the right thing to do because its just turned against you” (P6).

The absence of involvement by the other five fathers could indicate their exertion of power by absence. It appeared that no matter what these mothers did they could not entice the fathers’ of their children to share the care and responsibility of their children other than in minimal and mostly inconsistent ways.

**Employment changes**

Eight of the mothers interviewed have employment outside of the home. The remaining two have younger children and are ‘stay at home mums’. Most of the eight mothers commented on how they have changed their employment hours or taken on jobs that have hours that are suitable to manage the care of their children. Half specifically commented how the care arrangements had to work around the father’s employment. Most felt that the fathers prioritised their work over the care of their children. One mother averages her hours out over a fortnight so on the week she has the children her hours are reduced. She works extra on the week she does not have the children. The downfall is she has very little time to herself.

Another mother is unable to take advantage of this type of opportunity as shared care works around the eight-day shift work roster of the father. On the other hand every time the father has the child he is not working and this suits him very well. This mother misses out on having her
child on a lot of her days off work. And she has to organise care after school when she is working and use up her leave entitlements to care for him when he is unwell. She has found additional difficulties with requests from her employer to work overtime and the effects this has on child support payments. Another has accepted a position within school hours. She has used up all leave entitlements caring for the children when they are unwell. If she is not there she is not paid. The children’s father has not been at all understanding of his children’s untimely illnesses and has stated “Couldn’t you give me more notice?” (P2) and then revs the car when he arrives to assist. Some of her family members provide the finance for her to stay at home and provide the childcare herself. Another mother initiated the shared care so she could further her education and develop a career. “There really wasn’t room for me to be able to be a parent as well as work almost full time and study full time – it was really crazy” (P7).

**Loss and grief**
Feelings of loss were experienced by all of these mothers. Some regarding their own losses around the reduced time they have with their children and others the losses experienced by their children who were missing out on having time with their fathers. This was not an issue for the mother of the child who had frequent visits to her father although it was an issue for her other two children who had minimal contact with their fathers. Another mother found that losses did not all occur at the initial separation and commented, “here is something else being taken away from me” (P1) as the father introduced a new partner and her family to their children. However she was able to “get past all the bitterness and being pissed off” earlier as she had realised separation was likely to happen. She thought it would be vastly different if separation had come as a shock and a shared parenting arrangement occurred straight away. Another mother believes “through no fault of my own I feel I’ve missed out on half of my child’s life…I do feel like I’ve been shafted” (P3). She keeps herself busy when her child is not with her. And another has strong feelings of sadness “I’ve managed to try and keep in their lives as much as I can even when I don’t have them” (P6).

**Guilt**
Many expressed disappointment that they were unable to give their children the kind of relationship they had hoped, with both parents living together. One mother tells her children, “It’s nothing about you, mum and dad don’t love each other anymore, but we still love you” (P5).
She does this to eliminate ongoing emotional difficulties for her children. Another stressed that her main concern is how the children will turn out and asks, “do I have to sacrifice my entire happiness for my children to be happy?” (P2). She thought reconciliation seemed like an easy solution because ultimately she wants her children to be happy.

Question two: What are these mothers’ expectations of shared parenting?

Mothers assume care of children
All assumed that they would be caring for the children following separation because they’d learned that was what mothers do. They did not want to exclude their children’s father they just assumed they would be the main caregivers. Some of their comments were, “I guess it’s an assumption that the mother takes the children” (P2), “being a women I assumed ...” (P3), “always thought I would have more parenting” (P6), and “the kids just stayed with me” (P1).

In the best interests of our children
In the five situations where the shared care arrangements were working really well, both parents’ focus was on the children. They made comments like, “as long as its ok for the kids” (P1), and “we got on the same canoe and rowed for the kids” (P5). One mother sought resource booklets from the Family Court. These helped both parents explain to their children together what was going to happen. Some of the resource information was specifically for children. The younger child wanted to know if there was “a playground near Dads” and the oldest “wasn’t too worried”. The mother “didn’t know whether to be a bit put out because she didn’t need me or quite proud because she’s got a grasp” (P1).

Communicate and support each other as parents
In the five situations that work well there was communication and support between the parents. However many indicated that this was something they had to work at to achieve. One commented, “the old saying you know communicate which is true though if you can just keep talking even if its only a little bit just keep those lines open it just makes it easier” (P1). She said it was important to keep the focus on the children’s interests rather than any of her own. She knew at the beginning of the separation her self-esteem was really low and she was quite vulnerable. She acknowledged and was pleased that her ex partner did not take advantage of this. She felt grounded in the knowledge that the situation was working well as the children were not
mixed up by the differences around each of their parent’s homes. For example, the different ways they got to school. She also commented that her children’s father was “always willing to talk” and added that they made sure the children were not around to hear what they discussed. A ‘communication book’ was the way another set of parents began sharing information about their child with each other. This assisted with the rebuilding of the parenting relationship following the father’s absence for some years. The book gave this mother an opportunity to express how she felt about his abandonment and her expectations around his reliability. Confidence grew as they talked more, as changeovers occurred and as the father got to know their child. This mother did not feel disadvantaged by how he parented their child. Neither of the parents worried about the court order that was initially put in place to stabilise another situation at separation. They now have very regular contact and freely discuss everything that affects their child. Another couple acknowledge they have their issues and agree their child will not be a pawn in any way between them. They have their child’s best interests foremost at all times.

The comments from the mothers where the situations were not working so well were quite different. It was obvious that communication and support for each other as parents was not present. One mother initially had expectations that the children’s father would be greatly involved in their care and in their lives, but soon learned that he was not forthcoming with anything that was going to be of benefit for her. In another situation where the father has minimal involvement the initial arrangement was for the children to see their father every second weekend as she said, “I will need a break and you will need to see them” (P2). Initially this mother agreed with that arrangement but now she “thinks it’s very unfair” and is unable to constructively communicate with the children’s father to change it. The mother whose two older children have minimal contact with their fathers has endeavoured to encourage them to be more involved especially now that she has experienced the benefits for herself and her younger child, however with little change. In the remaining situation where the father has minimal and inconsistent involvement with his children the mother feels powerless to improve communication and gain support from him and considers moving countries to be near her family where she will get support.

Communication and parental support is also not present in the two situations where there has been extensive Family Court involvement. One mother said, “we don’t communicate at all” (P3).
There was a court order that both followed and she felt it became more effective to have most of their discussions via email so they were documented. Following the decision from the Family Court the other mother continued to coach her daughter’s netball team so she could be involved in her daughter’s life as much as possible. She used to pick up a lot of the girls from school including her daughter and take them to practice. However she believes, when her daughter’s father learned their daughter was enjoying herself, he refused to let her go. “So it was so weird I was picking up other kids and not my daughter” (P6). The father turned situations regarding the mothers involvement with all three children into “this huge big story” that the mother felt was not helpful to any of them so she learned to reduce her contact. There was no direct communication between these parents and no support of the mother’s role in their children’s lives.

The involvement of new partners
Many have reported that the involvement of a new partner brings up new emotions and can influence the parenting relationship. One commented, “I got over myself” (P1), but found it very difficult when the new partner turned up unexpectedly to the children’s school interviews. Her positive approach allowed her to think of this person as being part of the children’s family now. However she continues to struggle with this person being involved in her children’s lives and sometimes feels “like someone is taking your place”. She has tried to discuss it with the children’s father, but “you don’t get very good response” so thinks she will continue to have these struggles. Another mother held open discussions with her daughter’s father and his fiancé about the fiancé step parent role. She felt it was good to voice her expectations and for his fiancé to realise he “had a commitment to (their child) as her father and also a relationship with me” (P7).

The comments above were from situations where the father’s had new relationship partners. One of the mothers commented about her experience when she formed a new relationship. She felt the new man was the strength she needed to help her out of the abusive relationship she had with her husband. However, the first thing her husband did was to turn their oldest son against her. She intercepted phone calls where he was saying to their son “you tell your mother to get f...’ and, ‘you don’t have to listen to a thing she says’ and ‘if you don’t like anything she says then run away’” (P6). As a result there has been no more meaningful contact with this son who was eleven years old at that time. The children’s father told her he would put her “six feet under and
that he would get the rest of the kids.” She believes “that was his whole mission in life then, was to destroy me and take my children off me.” And she believes that he succeeded in doing this with the help of the Family Court system.

Parents active in their children’s lives
Many saw it as important to be active in their children’s lives. Some would attend their children’s important events at school or sporting situations together and others would cross over and stagger their attendance so the children always had at the very least one of them present. Parent teacher interviews at schools seemed to be the most common time when parents would attend something together. Usually they travelled separately, but met up at the school and attended the same appointments. One commented, “that’s about the only parenting thing that we do together” (P3). One child requires frequent medication and has a bag that goes everywhere with her. The bag is named the ‘prickle bag’. Both parents actively care for their child’s medical condition, but often in different ways. They both attend specialist medical appointments and think this is really necessary so the specialist hears how the condition is managed in each living environment.

Routines and consistency
One mother believes the attitude of her child’s father really helps to make their situation work. He likes to stick to the routines that she has worked out for their young child and as a result the child is very happy in both homes. Another mother believes that it is better for children if there is consistency between homes regarding the expectations parents have of their children. She was referring to such things as having similar bed times, making sure meals are eaten, teeth cleaned, hair brushed and homework completed at each home. She also referred to expectations around respect for others including both parents and the kind of language used or not to be used as being similar. However, she also acknowledged that there were the usual differences that existed when the parents lived together. Sharing the celebration of Christmas was something else that continued to be the same after separation as it was beforehand and included the children spending some of Christmas Day with each parent’s extended family. In another situation it was very confusing for the children. The mother reported the father was very relaxed about teaching the children personal hygiene and the language used was not monitored. She felt “(their father) made it pretty sweet for them because they could do what they wanted” (P6) and saw this as a good
reason why they might prefer to be living at his home rather than hers where she set bedtimes and taught them skills to care for themselves. Another learned that in order to manage the care of her children, complete the household chores and work in paid employment that fairly strict routines were what worked.

**Discipline and trust**

Comments about discipline and trust were quite varied and depended greatly on the type of relationship that existed between parents. Where the arrangements worked well the mothers could discuss much more openly and confidently any discipline issues. The trust between these parents was such that it allowed for this difficult subject to be approached. One thought it important that any discipline that was in force at one home did not carry over to the other. And another whose child was very young hoped they could adopt similar rules in each home.

One mother acknowledged that she “expected all the rules to go my way” (P10). There was a huge difference in what the children were exposed to between these parents and this mother thought she was protecting her children. She learned that she had no control over what happened at their father’s home and says, “I had to just trust that they were okay and just have to let it go to a certain extent.”

The two mothers who live in parenting situations that came about from Family Court involvement feel very strongly that many of their concerns were not taken into account by the Judge with some of these regarding discipline and trust. One had concerns about the environment her child lives in, “not physical concerns, but the morality of the environment” (P3). This related to the other people living in the house rather than the father himself. The other was concerned that promises had been made to the Court regarding the after school care of the children that were not kept. She was also concerned how the father had undermined any attempt she had made to correct the children in particular their older son. She commented that he now has “everything that open, shuts and whistles” (P6).

**Question three: What roles do these participants think mothers and fathers should play?**

**Mothers’ roles**

Of the ten mothers who were interviewed, five referred to their role as a nurturing role. The others referred to their roles as being, active, equal and different to a father’s role, but not
exactly sure in what way. One was adamant that mothers do absolutely everything and found it frustrating that she had to revolve her life around the children. And the last felt that the mother’s role was to fit in with the father.

**Fathers’ roles**
There was a general feeling among all the mothers that father’s need to be there for their children. They can bring fun into the child’s life. They can be the disciplinarians. They go to work mostly in trade type employment. Others commented on fathers providing good role models to teach their children appropriate expectations and boundaries within relationships. For example, giving the children the opportunity to develop a relationship with a male in a healthy way. Many commented more on sharing the roles of parents as opposed to indicating specific individual roles. This was particularly so when the children were staying similar amounts of time in each parent’s home. One mother struggled with the lack of responsibility and support from her children’s father to the point where she commented, “I don’t see the point in having them (fathers) really, we work quite fine without one” (P2). She was continually frustrated when he put his interests before the children’s. Interestingly she went on to say that she did not blame him totally for not being involved with the children because she did everything herself before separation. He used to go fishing on his own then, but now he takes the children when he has them, rather than missing out on fishing altogether. She acknowledged that he has become more involved with the kids since separation and saw that as a benefit for the children.

**Shared roles**
In the situations where care is shared the mothers saw the individual parental roles also as shared. They commented that the needs of the children continue regardless of which parent they are living with, so the respective parents have to take care of all child needs as and when is required. Most thought it was necessary for both parents to be active and involved in activities concerning their children. They thought there should be no difference whether they were living together or apart. They did take an active role in ensuring that notices were readily exchanged so both parents were being adequately informed of up and coming events.
One father was beginning to share childcare tasks with his new partner. This mother began questioning whether this was her role and commented, “it’s his, they’re his kids, they want to spend time with you” (P1). Another thought it was important for both parents to show a “united
front” (P5) to their children. They continued to discuss issues about their children with each other following separation and the children sometimes didn’t like that because they knew that together their parent’s decision was final. These parents also backed each other up if their children showed a lack of respect for either parent. “Hey you don’t talk to your mother like that.” They also established clear boundaries about respect for each parent’s personal life regarding who visited each respective home. From the outset they made sure the children had their own bedrooms, toys and other belongings at each home. By doing this both parents houses felt like the children’s homes from the beginning of the separation. They also established clear understandings about the gifts given to their children including the value each parent could afford rather than allowing any form of competition to develop.

Another mother whose child was quite young thought ideally the roles would be equitable with decisions made in consultation. She thought both roles would have to be nurturing because they spend time with their child separately. There would be little difference in their roles especially at the young stage of their child. She thought it often ends up that mothers tend to do the day-to-day dull work and father’s have the fun times purely because of the traditional way time with children is divided up, but she hopes they both get to enjoy both aspects of parenting. Another mother was adamant that responsibility for parenting should be equal. Her view was that women and men behave and think differently so they’re going to have different ideas on how to raise children, but ideally parents should share the responsibilities of the day-to-day care. She said this did not happen before her separation so it does not happen now either.

**How do we learn how to parent?**

One mother commented that mothers have a lot of intuition and instinct to nurture their children and provide them with love, comfort, care and nourishment. She was concerned that separation, “doesn’t teach the children how to have healthy relationships in the future because they don’t have that role modelling with their parents” (P9). She has taken on the responsibility of teaching her children and saying to them “we don’t have this at home but these are the things you need to know about healthy relationships”. She thinks her children probably consider single parenting as perfectly normal and there is a chance they may end up in that type of situation themselves. Another commented that her parents did everything together, so she learned how to do both traditional male and female tasks and how to be independent. She learned from her childhood
things she thought her parents did well and continued these with her own children. This included being at home when her children arrived home from school rather than have them come home to an empty house or go to after school care.

Another shared her philosophy around raising children, which she has developed from her own experience and includes a system where there is a lot of family and village support for the parents. This mother and another commented on how they received and valued the advice given to them by the Plunket Nurse who came to their homes, weighed the baby and checked on routines, etc.

**Can mothers teach fathers how to do daily tasks?**

There were two completely opposing views/perspectives regarding fathers attending to the daily tasks, showing diverse experiences. The first demonstrates how a mother encouraged and taught the father how to do the daily tasks for their daughter right from birth. She realised he was quite nervous so they talked about him bathing her, changing her and having her sleep in his bed. She trusted him completely and said “you’re her father you don’t need to worry about anything – you’re her Dad and you’re not doing wrong by that” (P4). She thought he was worried about what society might think.

The second comment was more about helping with household chores than childcare. This mother thought a woman was, “lucky if you strike a man that’s interested in doing that stuff” (P7). She said she soon realised that she could not force her expectations on anyone when she tried to get the father of her child to take on more work around the house.

**Question four: Have participants noticed any changes in the way they mother?**

**Relaxed attitude**

When the participants were asked if they noticed any changes to the way they mother their children three particularly made comment that they were much more relaxed. One thought it was because she didn’t have the children full time now so she was conscious of spending good quality time with them on the week she did have them. She thought she had higher expectations before separation and was now more relaxed and encouraging of them to help her bake and not concerned so much about the mess these kinds of things created. Another thought she was more
relaxed when her child was in her care because she would do what she liked without anyone else questioning or making comments. Another felt she was definitely much more relaxed when she made comparisons to her older children. She said she only gets a break from the older ones every second weekend whereas she misses the younger one because she spends more time with her father. She does not have time to get annoyed or impatient with the younger one like she does with the older two. Other comments about noticed changes include one mother who is more aware of her child’s needs and tries to compensate by being more affectionate than she usually is towards her. While another thinks that she is a better mother than she was before separation. She feels more confident and gets a sense of satisfaction and pride that she can do it alone. And another is saddened by the change that reduced time with her children has affected her. Before separation the children were all encouraged to do something in the arts and she spent a lot of time ensuring they got to activities. This is not possible now as she has them one school night a week. She does as much with them on that night as she can, but they have stopped most of their other out-of-school interests.

**Fatigued mothers**
The three mothers who longed for the fathers of their children to have more involvement with their children, and the mother who had two older children who had limited time with their respective fathers, were tired and worn out and presented with very strong sense of frustration. They generally longed for time on their own just to relax, have coffee on their own and not have to worry about the needs of their children. This was particularly so with those who had younger pre school children.

**Mother’s quality time**
Two mothers commented specifically about having quality time. The first really looked forward to having every second weekend childfree. “It was awesome I really enjoyed it” (P7). The second never got a break before separation. Now she has every second weekend childfree and says, “I love my children, but it’s a brilliant weekend when they are not here” (P2).

**Children’s difficult behaviour**
Three mothers commented specifically about their child’s difficult behaviour. The first was surprised when she learned that her child was the naughty one at preschool. It was at this time
that she realised she had to be more assertive with routines and expectations of her children to make it all work. Another mother felt some of her child’s difficult behaviour occurred when the child’s father insisted she decide which parent to live with. She was nine years old at the time. The mother thinks she burned her bridges at one parent’s home so she didn’t openly have to make the decision to live with the other parent. The other mother keeps in touch with the Child Youth and Family Service regarding the bullying her oldest son is doing on the younger two while they are in the care of their father. She is very distressed about this situation.

Some mothers do all the work
Two mothers expressed how exhausted they were from caring for their children. Both had limited support and involvement from the children’s fathers. The first says, “there’s no point of me being here, the bottom of the world, because the only reason I’m here is so they would see their dad” (P10). She commented how hard it was for her to be everything to her children. The second mother gives mixed messages in her statements about having to do all the work. She says she can look after the children better so she really wouldn’t like them to spend increased time with their father. Initially the father came to her home to spend time with the children and would give them a bath in the evening. However, she “spent the next day cleaning it up because he had fun” (P2). On other occasions when he had the children for the weekend she has prepared a casserole so they ate well, all their dirty washing comes home to her after each visit and on occasions he has phoned and asked if he can bring them home a few hours early at the end of his weekends. There have been occasions when she has asked for him to care for the children so she can have coffee with a friend and he has refused because he thinks of it as babysitting.

What is said around the child
All of the mothers interviewed appeared to have a keen awareness of how adult’s comments can affect children and were aware how difficult it could be at times not to say things around their child. For example, when a child mentioned her father’s new partners family, when a child talked about what happened at the other parent’s home or angry feelings in relation to a child’s father.

Question five: Changes in the way participants think about mothering

Willingness to do it
Two mothers made comments regarding the importance of having a willingness or positive
approach to making their particular family situation work for all family members. One admired those mothers who were able to have shared care arrangements with their ex-partners. She thinks it takes a real willingness in the first place to participate positively in a family situation that has the potential to have very complex and difficult situations. The other felt that it was very important for the children to see the healthy co-parenting, which did not mean they had to necessarily like each other.

**About fathers involvement**

Five mothers made specific comments about how they think about the father’s involvement in the lives of their children that differs from their own involvement. Many of their views were of father’s self-centredness and failings to appreciate the difficulties of parenting particularly when they did not share parenting responsibilities. Many commented on the fun things that happen at father’s homes. Another thinks that her child’s father is strict, more so than she is. Another mother believes the father of her children distances himself from them so he won’t feel the loss and she thinks fathers are able to do this while mothers are not. Another believes that fathers have more employment opportunities elsewhere and find it easier to leave their children, whereas she would consider her child’s ongoing contact with her father rather than an employment opportunity elsewhere for herself. She struggles to understand why fathers find it a lot easier to separate from their children than mothers.

**About mothers involvement**

Seven mothers made specific comments about how they view their involvement in their children’s lives that differed from the father’s involvement. One mother was worried that her children would never think she was fun because she was so busy that they never saw her having any fun especially with them. Another thought that she has bonded better with the one who has very frequent time with her father especially when she compares the kind of bonding she has with the two older children who only see their fathers every second weekend. She often feels irritated by the others and she thinks this is because she has very little time without them. She does not like making comparisons about her children, but reality is that she is more relaxed with the child who is parented half time each than she is with the others who are with her twelve days out of fourteen. She would like the fathers of these children to share care to.
Another commented “I feel a little like they’re not my children sometimes” (P1). This mother felt like she was switching herself on and off between the time she had the children and the time she did not. This led her to feel like she was looking after somebody else’s children because they were not with her all the time. She felt quite sad and that she had lost the mothering part of herself. She also commented that she was worried her children would become bored when they were with her and not want to spend time with her because she could not ‘compete’ with their father, but felt encouraged when she heard one say, ‘I like coming to mums because it’s nice and quiet’.

Another felt she had to prove to herself and others including her parents that she could manage mostly on her own. She is aware that statistics indicate that children particularly boys need a male role model. However she thought she could step into both roles and do what fathers do as well as be the children’s mother. She thinks that the boys she knows who are raised by mothers alone are more caring and nicer to women. She was also adamant that she was never going to belittle the children’s father but rather look for positives in the situation. Another thinks she is more lenient with her child than his father and is aware they are becoming more like ‘buddies’ as he gets older. Another taught her children to perform both traditional male and female tasks so they would be ‘fiercely independent’. She felt this would make them stronger and better equipped for their future lives. Another worries that her daughter may become a young mother and is adamant she will support her more than her own mother did her. Another thinks that a mother never walks away from being a parent.

**Level of responsibility on mothers**

Most of the mothers interviewed made comments about the level of responsibility they felt in parenting their children. The level that rested with them was magnified many times with the three who had very limited father involvement. One mother took on extra work so her children did not miss out and they called her ‘the budget queen’. Their father always paid maintenance, and believed that was all that was required. She did not agree with his opinion but respected it. Another mother always hoped and believed that her children’s father would eventually become more involved with their children and allow them to co-parent in a healthy way, but now realises she is the only decision maker for the children and how this impacts on the role modelling her children get. Another mother thinks parenting is all up to her in many ways even though they
have discussions and make decisions together. She does not have the confidence that things will be taken care of regarding their child. Another has realised if she chose not to care for her children they would have no one. She has decided to accept that they are her responsibility. Another has accepted that she has to do it by herself. Her children’s father only offers financial assistance when the children are without something when he has them.

**Personal growth**

There was a strong sense among participants that their own personal growth was important and one of the key factors to helping their shared parenting situation work well. The comments from one, “I’ve done heaps of counselling and heaps of personal work on myself to get over myself” (P7). Another commented, “I’ve recognised that as a mother I have to actually grow as a person” (P9). She wants to help her children develop healthy coping mechanisms and realises she has a huge responsibility by way of role modelling to them. Another felt she had become stronger and more capable of standing up for herself and thought it was good for her children to see this. And another who became very upset at times while she was telling her story commented, “I should be over it by now” (P6). It transpired that her inability to be there to protect her children, as she had done before separation, was the most difficult aspect for her to move on from.

**Question six: Motivation to be included in this research**

Most of the participants in this research indicated their reasons for doing so and are summarised below along with additional comments from a few who raised issues that they felt very strongly about.

1. Half time each situation that works well.
2. Minimal support and involvement from father – mother would like to learn new ways and ideas from others that may also work for her family.
3. Mostly half time each situation that works well with youngest child compared to every second weekend with the other two children who have different fathers.
4. Half time each situation that works – This mother came “here to bat for the fathers”. She felt very strongly that mothers needed to make sure they included their children’s fathers in the lives of their children. She was aware of situations where she believed mothers had ‘poisoned’ the children against their fathers and this abhorred her.
5. Court mediation - difficult to work around the eight-day work roster of the child’s father.
This mother wanted to make her experience at the Family Court known so that others would be more informed and aware if they were faced with a similar situation. She felt the Judge at the first mediation made it quite clear to her that she was being unreasonable. She had suggested a half share week about arrangement, but the father of her child wanted the change every four days to fit in with his work roster because he worked four days and then had four days off. It was indicated to this mother that it was easier for her to fit in with his work schedule than for him to fit in with hers. She feels this has been very unfair. The Judge at the second mediation seemed more understanding regarding her circumstances, but she had already conceded on some points and felt unable to revisit those points. She felt quite intimidated by the Court process especially when she was feeling like she was being the unreasonable parent. In her mind the whole situation had been caused by her child’s father’s infidelity. She was disappointed that the Judge did not want to hear about this situation or any of the concerns she attempted to raise about the environment their child would be in while living at his fathers.

Court hearing – the Judge’s decision virtually reversed parenting arrangements leaving this mother devastated and with minimal time with her children. This mother also wanted to share her experience so others could be more prepared if they faced a similar situation. She stated adamantly, “the Courts to me were an absolute farce.” She thought the applicant in any proceedings at Court had the leading hand, in this case her children’s father, and as a result there was no interest in anything she had to say. She felt her children’s father was out to destroy her and get the care of their children basically at any cost. She felt there were two things that she did not do well. She did not involve her family in any way as witnesses or for support and her lawyer did not prepare affidavits of reply to statements made by the children’s father. The Judge interviewed the children in the company of the Lawyer for Child. She learned later they had been prompted and replied to the Judge’s questions in the way they thought they should. There was a psychologist appointed by the Court to prepare a report and she felt “he made sense” with the information recorded in his report. But this report was “basically ignored” by the Judge. The father had engaged the services of a child psychotherapist to give evidence on his behalf. This person had been involved with the children without the mother’s consent. Every time this mother attempted to explain to the Judge about the children’s father’s mental health and psychological abuse of herself and the children she was shut down, “answer the question.” She would like to appeal the decision of
the Court but does not think the children would be able to tell the Judge anything different than they did on this occasion. She would encourage the Court in future situations to look into “why we are leaving.” She did not wish to end her marriage, but could not live any longer the way it was.

7 Sharing care with changeovers being every two-three years while the other parent had every second weekend contact. Not the normal type of shared parenting arrangement, but it worked for this family.

8 Recent separation – care ideas to share and hoping both would be fully involved in their child’s life including sharing parenting.

9 Recent acceptance of virtual sole care and responsibility and importance of her role as her children’s parent. She has reflected on the level of responsibility, which extends to her lineage ahead and the future of her family in the generations to come.

10 Difficult to manage parenting situation and disappointment that father’s involvement and responsibility is minimal.

Summary of findings organised into participant groupings –
The information collected from the ten participants is further organised by themes in relation to each of the participant groupings. The three themes chosen are as follows:

1 What does ‘family’ mean now?
2 What works well?
3 Power differences

What does ‘family’ mean now?

Group one – ‘Equal involvement of mother and father
Many of the mothers in this group were quite resourceful and did not let things like distance between homes prevent shared care. The changeover times were much less frequent. In their study Smyth, Caruana and Ferro (2003) suggested it was easier if parents lived near each other and had a commitment to make shared care work. The mothers in this group agree totally with this suggestion.
**Group two - Minimal involvement of father**

These mothers were longing and sometimes with almost a sense of begging that the fathers of their children take on more responsibility and share in the care of the children. While they loved their children dearly, they longed to be freed of the constant childcare responsibilities. Most of the father’s involvement was minimal. Some were caring for their children every second weekend and for others the contact was much less often and more unpredictable.

**Group three - Reduced involvement of mother**

Both of these mothers struggle to identify what ‘family’ means for them. It is difficult for them to accept the situations they are now in. They would like to discuss and negotiate arrangements and situations regarding their children, but they find their opinions are of little value or go unheard by the fathers of their children. They feel totally undervalued and almost like the ‘enemy’. For example, one mother suggested a week about 50/50 shared care arrangement when she realised the child’s father wanted more involvement with their child than the initial ‘couple of days a week’. She said, “we are the ones doing the five day week (meaning herself and the child) and he was the different one…but the Courts didn’t quite see it that way.” This father worked an eight day roster and the mother felt pressured into agreeing to a four day cycle for their child. This meant the child was always with the father on his father’s days off, but it did not work this way for the mother.

Comments from another mother, “He took me to Court and got the children to lie. They made up a big scheme that I was a hitting mother and the Judge believed them with the help of a psychotherapist (engaged by the father)…he had them every second weekend and Thursday in between, so the Judge basically reversed the whole thing (the order), but I’m safe enough to have them week about during the holidays…I was in an abusive marriage…he’s very controlling and I basically lived a life of…being on a seesaw…waiting for the explosion and then you’d get the apologies”. As this mother says the whole situation has been reversed. She has been seen as abusive and manipulative rather than the children’s father. He has been viewed as hard working and hard done by rather than the mother.
What works well?

Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father

This group felt that one of the fundamental components is about having a ‘willingness to do it’. Among others things this involved allowing oneself to become vulnerable at times so constructive challenges and difficulties are open to resolution. It involves searching for a solution to the ways of doing things rather than trying to win a battle with the other parent. When there is a winner there is also a loser and that makes any situation unequal.

Many of the mothers considered that if the father wanted to have equal or almost equal time with their children then they should both be active in their children’s lives. This included attending and taking an interest in their schooling as well as sporting and other activities outside of school. For example, supporting and watching sports games, dancing practices, theatrical productions at school, attending medical appointments and school parent teacher interviews together.

Group two – Minimal involvement of father

There seemed to be a process the mothers in this group worked through from feeling totally frustrated and let down by the fathers lack of support and involvement with their children to one of acceptance that ‘this is the way its going to be’. Once accepting the realisation that her children really only had one parent to rely on and make all the decisions for them, there seemed to be a sense of peacefulness and calm. This was a time then to relax and get on with the job of raising these children and consciously making choices that the children would benefit from in the long term. The point of acceptance often came at a time when one also became more aware of self. For example having or taking the opportunity to explore ones identity, values and beliefs, dreams and aspirations as well as hopes for the future, making plans and setting goals. However, just because a feeling of acceptance had developed did not mean the father would be excluded totally from the children’s lives. There was awareness also that any involvement by the father in the children’s lives was better than none and involvement was encouraged accordingly.

Group three – Reduced involvement of mother

In this group the time the children spent with each parent was set out in orders made by the Family Court. This meant that someone else had decided, or the mothers felt that someone else
had decided how their family arrangements would work. They also changed what they believed about their meanings associated with parenting expectations as a necessary narrative task. They felt that having the orders was good because they knew where they stood.

**Power differences**

**Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father**

For this group of mothers the difference in power between themselves and the father of their children was minimal. Neither felt disadvantaged by the influence of the other. There were many differences to work through and decisions to make regarding their children and the mothers felt their opinions were valued and they were part of all decisions regarding the care and well being of their children.

**Group two – Minimal involvement of father**

It seems these fathers basically assume the mothers will always be there, that they would not desert the children and they will always be there to take on the care and responsibility for their children. This included any difficult behaviour that the children may exhibit. The mothers were left to find ways to manage this and many found this particularly difficult.

**Group three – Reduced involvement of mother**

When separation occurred for these women, the power and control tactics used by their ex partners continued into every situation regarding the ongoing care and responsibility of their children.
Chapter 5 – Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

Shared care parenting is happening whether we like it or not. It is not written directly into family law, but it is becoming an increasingly common practice with the support of the legal system. The Care of Children Act 2004 emphasises the rights of the child and assists parents and families to focus on the children. It encourages "co-operative parenting" and changes the focus of parents from "rights" to "responsibilities" towards their children. This is exciting and supports the attempts made by the women’s movement of the 1970’s to involve fathers in childcare (Smart, 2001). Women at that time realised the responsibility of caring for children was enormous and should be shared with men. The comments in the 1970’s were referring to families that remained together rather than separated families. The Care of Children Act 2004 encourages the ongoing role of both parents in their child’s life following separation and it encourages and incorporates tools to assist parties to come to their own agreements regarding arrangements for their children. Fathers are generally more involved with their children now and many want to continue doing this following separation. Smart (2001) suggests this may be because being a parent is ongoing whereas a marriage or relationship may not be. For this reason it seems more investment is being placed on the parent-child relationship as a source on ongoing satisfaction. A number of writers suggest that children view their parents in an equal way. (Kelly, 2005; Smith and Gallop, 2001). These views also form the basis of the Parenting Plan information from the Ministry of Justice.

Many women struggle to share the care of their children with the other parent following separation for varied reasons. Shared care is slowly becoming a reality in our society. It is slowly becoming the “social norm”, and expected to happen following separation. However, the comments of Opie (1989a) that “shared parenting, its benefits notwithstanding, should not be seen as the panacea for all separating families and certainly not as a means of resolving highly conflictual custody situations.”(p8) should not be forgotten. Smart (2001) suggests that we can change family law, but it takes time for our society to understand and change accordingly. All of the mothers interviewed assumed they would have the most caregiver responsibility for their children following separation. This does not mean that they wanted it to be that way, or that they wanted to exclude the father, but that they assumed it would be this way as most stated because “that’s what mothers do”. This “ideology of motherhood” referred to by Smart (2001, p.13), is what our society has learned to expect. Smart (2001) goes on to suggest this expectation has
developed over generations with many and varied influences, and this traditional approach is now being questioned and changed as there are more and more relationship separations and men and women have different expectations of each other, themselves and their children.

During the course of the interviews I used a narrative approach (D'Cruz and Jones, 2006) to allow the participants the opportunity to focus on their own particular view of their shared parenting experiences. This was to allow them the opportunity to freely express themselves in their own way, to understand their beliefs and thoughts about the mothering role, and link it to wider, often conflicting discourses about mothering.

Themes for Analysis
The information collected from the ten participants is analysed under the same three headings as the previous section with an additional section covering ‘Implications for Policy’.

What does ‘family’ mean now?

**Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father**

All of the mothers in this group (five) assumed they would care for the children and were prepared to do that. Some were surprised when the fathers wanted to be involved as well in the day to day caring of the children as well as daily responsibility, but quickly adapted to this idea so their children still had both parents in their lives and caring for them in the most ‘normal’ way possible. This differs from Opie (1989b) who comments “that the decision by, in nearly all cases the women, to establish a shared parenting arrangement” (p.48). In this study men and fathers have initiated sharing the care of their children and is an example of change within society that has occurred over the last twenty years.

This group recognised the changes of boundaries around the meaning of family, that is, the mother, father and children no longer live under one roof. Mother and father live in different homes and the children travel between them. There was a lot of encouragement for the children to consider each parent’s home as their home too. This meant that the children were encouraged to accept that they have two homes. This reflects wider societal changes in family and gender roles. This is in complete contrast to the historical focus as described by Kelly and Lamb (2000) where it was considered important for children to have one home which was usually with the
mother. In these situations long visits with father were not persuaded. The current importance on children’s involvement with both parents and the changing family law focus is reflected in the Care of Children Act 2004. For example, “stronger focus on the rights of the child ...[and] places the best interests and welfare of the child as the over-riding principle for parents, guardians and other decision-makers (s4)” (Care of Children Act 2004: A Guide for provider and interest groups, p.3[mine]). In addition to this, the views of the mothers in this study construct “mothering as conscious collaboration” as described by Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005, p.335). These mothers operate under a “post gender” model where they share parenting duties (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005). It seems that gender has little emphasis on the way they view their parenting relationships.

In some situations one or both parents had chosen new partners. These people and their children and extended families then became part of the children’s family. However the mothers did not consider these people as part of their family, but respected they were part of the children’s family.

The mothers in this group expressed a range of emotions that they had noticed since the shared parenting began. They missed their children and felt a sense of grief and loss when they were in the father’s care. There was also a sense that the children belonged to someone else. Opie (1989c) describes the feeling of loss from her study as being “totally unexpected and very painful” (p.59), which is similar to this group. However, at the same time this group felt the break away from the children strengthened the bond between themselves and their children. The break provided space and allowed them time to relax and look at situations more objectively. Some juggled work commitments so they worked more during the time without the children and less when they had the children. This enabled them to spend as much time as possible with the children. Smyth, Caruana and Ferro (2003) also found that parents re-arranged their work hours to accommodate children’s needs in similar ways to the women from this group.

This group of mothers recognised the roles of mother and father as shared and similar rather than different. They realised their children’s needs are continuous rather than stopping and starting as they move from one home to the other. It appeared logical to them that because their children’s needs are continuous then the parenting of them by either their mother or father needed to be
similar in order for the children's needs to be constantly met. These parents viewed their separation as being from each other, but not from the children. The concept of the 'best interests of the child,' which forms part of most research on this subject, appears to be readily accepted by this group of mothers. This is in contrast to the comments from Opie (1989a) "...it is often difficult to separate the child's interests from parental interests" (p.4). This is another example of changes within society that have occurred over the last twenty years.

This group of mothers generally had a relaxed attitude and made the most out of the time they spent with their children. They enjoyed their children's company.

**Group two- Minimal involvement of father**

Like the mothers in the previous group these women (four) assumed they would care for the children following separation. However they also expected the fathers to be there and share that responsibility in more ways than what is currently happening. They are a very tired and fatigued group of mothers, especially the ones with younger children.

These mothers have found themselves "mothering by way of gendered talent" rather than "conscious collaboration" as described by Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005, p.335). Either they have or their children's fathers have, traditional beliefs about each parent's role based on gender. Due to the minimal involvement of the fathers these mothers cared almost solely for their children because there was no alternative. It seemed the fathers did not view their relationship with their children as important (Smart, 2001).

This group of mothers felt overworked and overloaded with responsibility. They felt they worked really hard caring and raising the children and made all the decisions regarding the children. They wanted the fathers to share in these decisions. It seemed that no matter what they did they could not entice the fathers to become more involved in the daily lives of their children. Ricci (1980) details a process of "reinvolving the dropout parent or becoming reinvolved" (p.232) based on family law in America which is different to New Zealand family law. However it appears mothers and children in the situations described within this group could benefit from intervention supported by the legal system to reinvolve fathers. Many mothers in this group began to think that they were better off without father involvement but presumed that any
involvement from the father for the children must be better than none. There was a sense of rejoicing when contact came from the father and extra effort was made by the mothers to ensure the children had time with their father and they in turn had some well-deserved time on their own.

This group generally thought the fathers provided some light relief and fun times for the children and were often resentful that they found it difficult to have fun times as well, due to the overburdening workload of continuous childcare. They had no choice other than to recognise the roles of mothers and fathers as different and the part they play in their children’s lives as different.

There was a very strong sense of loss and grief among the mothers of this group also. This appeared to be about the way the family was working or not working following separation. It was like the fathers had separated from their children as well as from the mothers of their children. The sense of loss and grief was expressed by the mothers as hopelessness and despair in some situations and a real feeling of frustration and helplessness at finding oneself in this position. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) describe a traditional father who saw his “role as someone that will back or support the mother” (p.340). They suggest that when parenting was based on gender the actions of the fathers were as a result of what they perceived as requirements from the mothers rather than meeting their own children’s needs. As a result the fathers’ connection with their children was through the mothers and was not as open as the mothers’ connection with their children. When fathers have this traditional belief system it is very difficult for them to have direct and meaningful relationships with their children following separation because the chain of father to mother to children has been broken among the adults. This suggests that the mother is no longer the middle link to support and foster the father to child relationship.

When the realisation and acceptance that this was how the situation would be then the mothers developed a sense of peacefulness and calmness that reflected on the children’s behaviour as well. When the mothers were expressing their intense feelings of frustration and of being trapped the children’s behaviour was noisy and difficult. Mothers became aware of their own role modelling to their children. They also became aware and saddened that their children could well grow up thinking that it was ‘normal’ to live in a single parent situation.
Many of the comments from this group of mothers are reflected in comments from Ricci (1980) about the way family life is formed following separation. Among other things Ricci (1980) realised “that fathers - with and without custody - were just as important to children’s post-divorce adjustment as were mothers ... [and] the traditional approach to custody just wasn’t working. Countless girls and boys were left with ‘responsibility mommies’ and ‘recreation director daddies’ or worse, with overburdened mothers and dropout fathers” (p.3 [mine]). Kelly (2006) suggests for the greater number of children the conventional childcare arrangements between parents are no longer what children need. Kelly and Emery (2003) suggest that “boys and younger children” adapted better to the changes following separation when they had a predictable and meaningful routine with their fathers.

It is incredible that almost thirty years on from initial research this group of separated mothers are sharing the care of their children in this traditional way. They would prefer increased involvement and responsibility by their children’s father, but this is not happening and they have little choice than to virtually parent alone.

**Group three – Reduced involvement of mother**

Like all the other mothers those in this group (two) also assumed they would care for the children following separation and continue to provide a loving family home for their children. However, they now feel the fathers of their children, supported by the legal system, have forced them into their current situations where they have reduced time to provide that loving family home. They try to cram as much caring and loving as they can into the reduced time they have with their children.

Both of these mothers have felt powerless in the separation process and forced into parenting situations that greatly restrict meaningful involvement with their children. Smart (2001) suggests that the parent-child relationships are seen as very important from the parents point of view as adult relationships are less likely to last. There are strong feelings from this group of mothers that the fathers of their children have strived for what they want which seems like ‘ownership’ of the children and as a result destruction and upheaval of the mothers relationship with the children. Opie (1989a) suggests that shared parenting in not a way to sort out separating family
situations where there is a lot of conflict. There are certainly high degrees of conflict reported from within the situations in this group, including historical controlling and emotionally abusive behaviour from the fathers towards these mothers prior to separation. Kelly and Johnson (2008) suggest family court decisions should take into account different types of violence when deciding on parenting plans that protect children and support parent-child relationships. These mothers felt, the domestic violence, and in particular the emotional violence they had been exposed to was not acknowledged by the family court system. This meant that, in their view, the resulting orders were dictated by the father’s opinions, which was experienced by the women as an extension of their previous dominating behaviours.

McMaster and Gregory (2003) suggest that as varied and complex as domestic violence is, couple counselling is one intervention that can be used successfully, with thorough initial and continuous assessment of risk to safety for all parties. McMaster and Gregory (2003) further suggest the couple counselling approach is most effective when the parties have learned behavioural and cognitive dynamics of domestic violence which can be gained from stopping violence education programmes. Relationships are generally viewed as a two-way equal type of interaction. This is not so where a relationship is punctuated with domestic violence. For example, when a victimised party is reluctant to communicate the problem can be viewed as theirs. Stopping violence education programmes help educate participants about the roles people undertake in these very complicated relationships so the accountability and responsibility squarely rests with the abuser or perpetrator of the abuse or violence.

Like the other groups there are strong feelings of loss and grief for this group as well. This is mostly around the destruction of the family unit and a sense of not yet knowing what ‘family’ now means for them. There is virtually no cohesion between each parent’s homes and extended families. There are two separate ‘camps’ and the children are moved between them. Somehow the children are expected to adapt to each situation. The mothers realised this is most difficult for the children and make every effort to keep exchanges between themselves and the children’s fathers ‘hidden’ although at the same time are well aware that the children feel the tension between their parents. The mothers are extremely saddened by these situations and did not expect this would be the kind of life their children would end up in.
Reflected in the comments of these mothers are further realisations from Ricci (1980). She suggested separated parents needed to know how to put a childcare arrangement into practice for it to be useful. While the traditional approach described by Ricci (1980) of reorganising family life following separation was not the approach taken by the legal system and family court in reorganising the situations in this group, the feelings expressed from these mothers reflect two points highlighted by Ricci (1980). These points are “a confrontation with many traditional values and beliefs ... [and] the settlement alone meant little if the parents didn’t know how to put it into practice” (p.3-4 [mine]). The Court has endorsed the view that the employment schedules of the father have been given priority over the mothers. This initially follows the traditional view that men’s work is more important than women’s, but fails to consider the mother’s need also to provide an income to support herself and her child as well as work that around care arrangements for the child. A non-traditional view has been taken by the Court in ensuring the father has care of the child when he is most able to provide that care, but a traditional view has been taken regarding the lack of importance of the mother’s employment. The mother is expected to manage the childcare when she is working and has the child in her care, whereas the father always has the child on his days off. These conflicting discourses still appear to disadvantage women in these kinds of situations.

In the other situation from this group where the care arrangements were completely reversed, giving the father the majority of childcare time and the mother minimal, one wonders if whichever party presents a better picture by way of evidence in the courtroom ‘on the day’ is the one that ‘wins’? When viewing this situation whatever happened to the conciliatory function of the family court? It is also wondered how the implications of domestic violence were considered by the family court when reaching its decision in this situation?

Again thirty years on and similar issues are present which prevent the harmonious reorganisation of family life following separation in these situations.
What works well?

Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father

As one may imagine most of the people involved in ‘group one’ were happy with the situation and as a result most of the comments about what works well came from this group.

Sharing the parenting of children on an equal or almost equal basis is not an easy task for anyone. In the study of Opie (1989a) the women recognised they needed to be prepared to change their initial care tasks, recognise their ex-partner as an involved parent and have faith in the new arrangement as well as manage their own self doubts. This group echoed these comments. The aim of this group is to feel equal between them as parents and to work in partnership with each other in a similar way to the “post gender couples” described by Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005, p.337). This group of mothers fit into this “post gender” category because they recognise the fathers of their children have developed the same kind of relationship connection with their children as they have.

Most of the mothers in this group found it easier when they focussed their actions and intentions on ‘the best interests of our children’. By keeping the children as their focus they could ‘pass’ on issues that otherwise they might have pursued in discussions with their ex partner and lead to distance and difficulties. Nearly a quarter of the children involved in the study of Smith and Gallop (2001) made comments about conflict between parents. They offered advice to avoid conflict especially in front of them and suggested not to put each other down or place them in the middle in such a way that might affect their relationship with either parent.

This group of mothers felt it was really important to keep the lines of communication open. This led to an increase in confidence and trust with each other as separated parents and gave opportunities to build on their abilities to parent together. The study of Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) did not include separated parents (p.336). This information adds to that study and demonstrates how separated parents can parent collaboratively. Ricci (1980) comments “very often it isn’t what is said, but the way it was said that causes the trouble between parents” (p.100). Other studies, Opie, (1988), Smyth, Caruana and Ferro (2003) and Smyth and Weston (2004) have not specifically covered the aspect of communication between parents. This group of mothers have emphasised the importance of keeping the lines of communication open and that
supports the emphasis early studies have placed on communication.

Establishing similar routines and having a sense of consistency between homes makes it easier for the children, but at the same time recognising that there will be differences and that difference is important too. This included parents trusting each other including each other’s reliability around times and expectations they have about their children. These parents tended to discuss all of these issues as and when they felt the need rather than withholding and suppressing small problems that can quickly fester into huge difficult situations. They had a common understanding about discipline or consequences for unwanted behaviour. When withdrawing privileges for something that happened while with one parent it is worth considering whether that extends to the other parents home or whether the period of withdrawal ceases before the next changeover time. All of these are examples of co-operative co-parenting. Kelly and Emery (2003) suggest there is a lot to be gained for children when parents plan arrangements together and are open to changes when they need to be.

These parents helped each other to learn the tasks of childcare when there was doubt. They reassured each other that what they do with the child is acceptable. For example, encouraging a father to change his baby daughter’s naps, as well as bathing and dressing her. These mothers spoke of some father’s reluctance to do these tasks for their children particularly girls more so than boys because of the perceptions of society. They encouraged each other to focus on what was important for the family rather than be influenced by others. These actions are part of the “openness to learning ... conscious collaboration” style of parenting (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005, p.340-1). “Collaborative” parents in the study of Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) spoke of what they were learning rather than withdrawing from childcare because they did not know what to do.

Most of the mothers were aware that ‘life goes on’ and another partner sooner or later will be introduced into the lives of their children. They think it is important that the fathers continue to be involved in the day-to-day care of the children rather than the new partner. Smith and Gallop (2001) suggest that children like to be informed about things that involve them and to have the opportunity to have their say and feel like they are being understood about these decisions. These mothers believe the children want to have quality time with their fathers and quality time
involves the routine daily tasks rather than one off treat type activities. The mothers found it most difficult when new partners attended school parent teacher interviews especially if they were not informed in advance.

When the parenting role is shared with the fathers like this group is, the mothers learned that they did not have to do everything for the children. They have time to themselves to enjoy things that do not involve the children. This construction of having legitimate needs outside of their mothering role allowed them to pursue other interests that enabled them to bring life and vitality back to the family unit, which they also felt benefited the children. They bring new experiences into the family that adds to abilities to extend thinking and visions. Taking care of oneself and ones own needs makes for a better person and having time to do it they felt was wonderful.

**Group two – Minimal involvement of father**

Despite the fact that this group of mothers were generally overworked and tired there are a few things they shared that helps their situation work better. They generally have very busy lives especially with young children when the mothers are employed as well. They find the setting and keeping of routines to keep on top of the household chores, children’s homework and activities really useful. This includes things like making sure the clothes are washed and dried each day, children’s clothes are set out and school lunches made the night before really helped. One of the things that make it really difficult for this group is the lack of slack or free time available to them to manage the expected but unpredictable times of sickness. At these times mothers become really stretched and often called on their own extended family for assistance and support rather than relying on the fathers of their children who often did not appreciate or understand the difficulties mothers face. The statements from these mothers are very similar to the statements from “traditional and gender legacy” couples in the research of Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005). They suggest when motherhood was organised by way of gender fathers felt on the outside, even when it was assumed that gender was not the way childcare was arranged. A number of mothers in the Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) study viewed the unequal arrangements in parenting as unfair. These statements are very similar to the situations described above by this group of separated mothers.

There was some similarity with those in this group and the former group who had become more
aware of self. This awareness seemed to develop once a sense of acceptance regarding their situation had been reached. In other words the expectations they had about the shared involvement of their children’s father had changed. This is a cognitive task where they changed what they believed about their meanings associated with parenting expectations in order for them to emotionally move on. Through the actions of the children’s fathers they had to change the way they viewed ‘good’ parenting and the importance they put on the co-parenting relationship. When this awareness had been reached the task of parenting seemed easier because the family atmosphere contained a sense of peacefulness.

**Group three – Reduced involvement of mother**

Although the arrangements for the children of this group have been determined by the family court there were times when either parent sought to negotiate changes to the days or times of changeover. These changes were usually due to special events occurring within each other’s families or the like. These mothers found the best way to communicate with their children’s father was by email or text messages. By doing it this way, points of discussion were recorded and made it more difficult to manipulate understandings. This is similar to one of the conditions Smyth, Caruana and Ferro (2003) found that aided favourable outcomes for separated parents, “the ability of parents to get along and, at a minimum, maintain a “business-like” working relationship as parents (with children kept ‘out of the middle’)” (p.55). These mothers report that the orders of the court allow them to conduct the “business-like” type of relationship referred to even when they find it difficult to get along with the other parent.

There was also a feeling in this group of mothers that they had developed a more relaxed attitude towards parenting and felt this was because there was no one around to criticise them any longer. Douglas (1997) states “at first we may be able to shrug off criticism and see it as an attack that is not based on truth ... before long our partner’s cruel words begin to take their toll, and our defences and confidence inevitably begin to crumble” (p.37). These mothers felt more relaxed and began to believe in themselves following separation and the absence of ongoing criticism.

**Power differences**

**Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father**

Any difficult behaviour from the children was worked on by both parents with one supporting the
other to ensure the children learned acceptable ways. These comments describe the way this group of mother’s function in relation to gender difference and power as detailed by Opie (1988). They feel their actions and concerns are noticed and understood by the fathers of their children and they know that they have power to effect change as change is required within the reorganising of their family’s situation.

One issue raised by this group was about where the parents might live in relation to employment opportunities and how much influence each might put on continued equal or nearly equal time with the children. There was a feeling that fathers could be more likely to move away to seek employment opportunities outside of the district whereas mothers would give priority to living closer to fathers so the children could maintain their relationship with them. This was a general view that mothers were probably more likely to limit advancement in career opportunities than fathers.

**Group two – Minimal involvement of father**

The mothers in this group felt totally powerless as far as involving the fathers of their children more in the lives of their children. They have tried all sorts of things to minimise the work for the fathers by doing things like preparing food to go with the children and accepting all the dirty washing back at the end of visits. It really seemed for these mothers that the fathers were exerting their power by having minimal involvement with their children, using their power by absence and by leaving most of the responsibility of raising the children to the mothers. These actions are similar to those described by McMaster (1992) relating to the tactics men use to control others. For example, “minimising ... not hearing the concerns of others ... using children ... making the other person feel guilty about the children ... male privilege ... sticking to strict male/female roles ... making big decisions without consulting others” (p.30).

The absence of these fathers may also be understood when considering the focus of “mothering as a gendered talent” as described by Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005, p.338). When gender is used to organise parenting it is assumed that only mothers’ have innate childcare skills that are necessary for the child’s survival and fathers’ lack these skills and are incapable of ongoing childcare. With this traditional parenting practice the children become more interactive with mothers’ than they do with fathers’, which results in the father-child relationship being assisted by
the mother. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) suggest the continued involvement for fathers following separation is difficult when parenting is by gender. For change to occur the fathers would have to learn how to take care of their children’s needs themselves rather than answering to them through the mother and the mother would need to step back and allow this to happen. How can these parents be taught parenting as a “conscious collaboration”, which involves a cognitive shift in traditional beliefs?

At times mothers become so disillusioned and disappointed with the lack of meaningful involvement of their children’s father and they begin to find subtle ways to exclude the fathers. Are there times when energy levels are so low that the disruption to their very tight routines becomes impossible to manage and therefore easier to find subtle ways to exclude the fathers? They feel they have been let down so many times when good intentions have failed to be consistent and predictable. These women have to provide an income and budget on meagre earnings as well as take care of the household chores and care for the children. They have many full time jobs within these tasks and they are expected to do them all with minimal support from the children’s fathers. It has been suggested by Fagan and Barnett (2003) and Allen and Hawkins (1999) some mothers engage in “gate keeping” behaviour to restrict and exclude fathers from involvement with the children. Is it this type of situation that awards mothers with the label of “maternal gate keeping”? This label provides a negative focus on the role of mothers caring for their children and suggests deliberate acts by mothers to inhibit involvement by fathers. This is not what this group of mothers are reporting. They have tried everything they know of to try to involve their children’s fathers more in the lives of their children.

**Group three – Reduced involvement of mother**

It appeared the mothers in this group lived in a relationship with their children’s father that was dominated by power and control well before separation. There appeared to be examples of many situations that characterised psychological abuse. Situations were minimised, denied or blamed on others that were used to manipulate and play emotional mind games that left these women often questioning their own reality and sense of well being. Kelly and Johnson (2008) define this type of abuse as “coercive controlling violence” (p.481). They suggest abusers use various psychologically abusive control tactics that they think will work for them. These are effective without the use of physical force especially if there has been a physical element used in the past.
Opportunities were taken by fathers’ to actively disrupt the mother’s attempts to manage the children’s difficult behaviour rather than working together to instil the good behaviour. Conflict occurred in front of the children. The mothers’ in this group reported being ‘put down’ by the other parent in front of the children. The children are often the topic of the conflict and the conflict interfered with the children’s relationship with both parents. These last few points are the very things many of the children in the study of Smith and Gallop (2001) did not want to happen between their parents.

Most of the examples of behaviour that characterise psychological abuse used in these situations now would probably fall under the threshold for the legal intervention of a protection order. The Domestic Violence Act 1995 contains certain implications for a perpetrator parent’s ongoing contact with their children. The mothers in this group do not wish to have these types of restrictions imposed on their children’s father often thinking that would enflame a difficult situation even more. However, they do wish to be freed of the constant manipulation and feelings of being undervalued in their role as the other parent.

One of the more obvious ways that the value of the mother was diminished was around employment. The father’s work was considered more important and less flexible than the mother’s and they felt this was reinforced by the legal system. As a consequence the mothers are left feeling like they are being unreasonable if they do not agree to the fathers’ wishes around care times that suited his employment to the detriment of their own.

This group of mothers describe situations when children begin rejecting one parent. They resist spending time with the rejected parent. In the past it has often been fathers who have been rejected. Clarkson and Clarkson (2006) suggest that “parental rejection” needs to be prevented or managed so as not to support the rejection (p.255). Sometimes the child can be forced to have contact with the parent they do not want to have contact with. This could be for short visits or longer visits and includes totally changing care arrangements. This view is taken so children have time with both of their parents.

Changing care arrangements by order of the family court has occurred within this group of
mothers and has left feelings of devastation and being totally misunderstood. Have the actions and behaviour of the mother in this situation been interpreted as one of "maternal gate keeping" and encouraging "parental rejection" to such an extent that the family court has ordered a change in care arrangements leaving her with very minimal time with the children? What consideration has been given to the "psychologically abusive control tactics" used by the father against the mother? Have the legal system and the family court been cleverly manipulated in similar ways to this mother? Douglas (1994) describes ways that children can be manipulated against their mother. She suggests "while some controlling men see their children as competitors for our attention, others see them as allies in their fight against us. Our partner may undermine our authority over our children by deliberately setting them against us. He may seduce them to his 'side' with gifts, money and attention; treat them as his confidants, or set them up in a role that rivals ours" (p.44). Among other things this group of mothers describe children's belongings supplied by the father as 'having everything that opens, shuts and whistles'. They describe an older child enforcing everything the father asks of the younger children in a way that mirrors the task of the other parent. Have the "psychologically abusive control tactics" of the father been so cleverly used that the facts have been twisted so the mother is misinterpreted and blamed for all the problems while he appears innocent?

**Implications for policy**

**Group one – ‘Equal’ involvement of mother and father**

Shared parenting works well for this group of mothers. While Opie (1989a) suggests shared parenting is better for children, it also is good for mothers and fathers. She suggests the father's role in childcare continues and at the same time a mother’s responsibility decreases which often results in opportunity for women to pursue an alternative career. So what can we learn from this group? Is it parenting by collaboration and learning from each other, sharing ideas and teaching each other that works? As well it may be having the willingness and common focus of the children as opposed to their own individual interests that works to? These are qualities that are already present rather than skills that have been learned following separation. So how can these qualities pass onto others?

**Group two – Minimal involvement of father**

All of the mothers in this group expected the fathers to be there and share the responsibility of
raising their children. Therefore, "mothering as a conscious collaboration" must include the willingness of both parents to participate and parent in this way. It is not something that mothers can do alone without the involvement of the fathers. Because women tend to be the default caregivers they can be forced to continue parenting alone if the fathers choose not to engage. For the situations of these families to be different it requires both parents to participate.

What would happen to the children of this group if the mothers were like the fathers and did not take on the care and responsibility of their children? Ricci (1980) details a process to re-engage the other parent. This could be a process the legal system assists this group of mothers to follow so their children could have increased involvement with their fathers’ and they could have relief from parenting responsibilities.

The financial aspect of care for children can be enforced through child support legislation, but at present there is nothing to cover the emotional elements, the care elements and day-to-day wellbeing and needs that children have unless the father shows willingness.

Kelly and Emery (2003) suggest that boys and younger children adapted better when they had a predictable and meaningful routine with their fathers. They further suggested that fathers’ involvement influenced children’s success in education.

There are nine children represented from this group of mothers and six of them are little boys. This is nearly half of the children from the entire study. Is there anything the legal system and larger macro-systems within society can assist children in this type of situation? Research indicates these children’s options are very limited and they may find themselves behind other children due to the circumstances of their family situation. It seems they are without choice.

**Group three – Reduced involvement of mother**

As mentioned already in this study, for a long time the legal system and family court in New Zealand looked after children by focussing on children having a home with one parent, usually the mother, and minimal visits to the other parent. Now it is clearly researched that this is not the best arrangement for children. So the law changes and those working within the legal system change, but it is much more difficult for some parents to change. The parents are emotionally
connected to their situations whereas the professionals working within the system are not. It is much easier for them to impose change than it is for those emotionally connected to receive and adapt to the change.

The mothers in this group did not wish to establish an exclusive home for their children. However they did hope for support from the legal system and family court to have certain issues acknowledged and understood within that system. They expressed concern that they were not given the opportunity by the family court to explain from their perspective why the separation had occurred. If they had been given this opportunity they could have raised issues around the unhealthy power and control environment they lived in. Of course the children also lived in this unhealthy environment and these mothers were there to protect their children when the relationship was still intact. Now they are not. Douglas (1994) describes the ways abuse affects women. She states “many women remain silent about their difficulties because they feel ashamed and are fearful of being met with disbelief, blame or scorn if they confide in other people” (p.23). The mothers in this group had decided not to be silent any longer. They were no longer in the homes to protect their children while with the father and hoped the legal system would provide that protection. However, they felt ‘shut down’ by the family court and continue to be concerned regarding safety aspects of the environment their children live in while with the father. They feel the unhealthy power and control behaviour is condoned by the legal system and they are powerless to make any difference. In fact they feel viewed as being difficult and unreasonable and standing in the way of the children having meaningful contact with their fathers. The mothers themselves feel misunderstood and vulnerable. They feel they have become victims to some of the negative assumptions society has given to women and mothers.

It has already been highlighted in this study that Fagan and Barnett (2003) and Allen and Hawkins (1999) suggest some mothers engage in “gate keeping” behaviour to restrict and exclude fathers from involvement with the children. Because of their concerns regarding the unhealthy power and control environment as detailed above are these mothers being labelled as “maternal gatekeepers”? Is the concern these mothers have regarding how their children may be affected and influenced by that environment minimised to such an extent that it leaves them feeling everything is totally switched around so it becomes their behaviour that is interpreted as unacceptable? Is this a fair deal? Is this seen as “gate keeping” type behaviour that they might
benefit from? Mothers want to feel believed and understood by the legal system including the judiciary, when they disclose power and control tactics that influence and affect themselves and their children. It is time that happened.

The above comments place women and mothers into a very negative light regarding controlling and deliberate attitudes to exclude fathers from children’s lives. This may be so for a few in the past and these are the situations referred to again and again to make a point. As a result, society creates a discourse of mothers as using ideas attached to their traditional role to unfairly exclude men. Mothers who have genuine concerns that they would like to raise regarding the care environment for their children are seen in a negative light. Many mothers are fearful that the information they give will be wrongly used by the legal system in the family court process. The mothers from this group are a prime example. One begins to wonder if the conciliatory approach by the family court is at times compromised to one of adversary and competition. An adversarial system is prone to manipulation by the most powerful partner as this is the most familiar way of operating to him. Specific points of law become more important than understanding the complex situation that relationship separation brings when it is punctuated with intimate partner violence. This illustrates the wider debate about the causes of intimate partner violence and in what ways the law might respond to it. While on the one hand, power and control of women by men is used to explain it, on the other, ‘family violence’ as being mutual does not identify gendered relationships as causative. This means the legal system struggles to deal adequately with the vast range of experiences and ‘causes’ for each relationship. Kelly and Johnson (2008) make it clear the assessment of violence must include information about its role in the relationship between the contesting parties.

There was concern raised about the evidence given to the family court by specialists. It appeared the evidence from the person contracted by the family court to provide a specialist report was given less credence than the evidence from a person engaged by one parent. A person contracted by the family court gains information from relevant sources including interviews with the children and both parents whereas a person engaged by one parent gives opinions based on information from that parent as well as the children, but excludes the other parent.

The court appointed person could have assessed the role of violence in the relationship between
the parents. This kind of assessment would not have been possible by the other person because one of the parents was excluded. In a more general way the court appointed person would have given a more unbiased opinion than the one engaged by one parent. Standards and guidelines that prevent the opinions of specialists being used in this way, which is almost against each other, would be most beneficial.

In addition it is hoped there could be increased understanding by all the professionals working in the family court including the judiciary of power and control issues, in particular the psychologically abusive tactics individuals use that may not meet the threshold of a protection order. Recent research has highlighted “the value of differentiation among types of intimate partner violence” (Kelly & Johnson, 2008, p.477). While shared parenting may be the best option for children, Opie (1989a) states “it is equally important that professionals working with separated families are sensitive both to the issues of gender and power which permeate familial structures, and are aware of that the best interests of the child are not served by perpetuating a very unequal or very divisive adult relationship” (p.8).
Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Brief summary and suggestions

As previously stated this research involved ten mothers who have twenty children from twelve fathers. The five situations from group one worked the best. This involved half of the mothers and about a third of the children. The other almost two thirds of the children, thirteen in total continue to live in situations that are difficult.

I wonder if the time has come to develop parenting programmes that look in depth at the styles of parenting and in particular programmes based on cognitive theory that challenge beliefs and behaviours around “collaborative” and traditional “gender based” parenting. Many parents find themselves living in society where the law is encouraging “collaborative” style parenting, but many have grown up with the “traditional gender” values and beliefs.

The programmes suggested are similar to the stopping violence programmes that have been established as a result of the introduction of the Domestic Violence Act 1995. These programmes challenge traditional male beliefs as detailed by McMaster (1992) and provide a way to replace these old beliefs with new ones of gender equality. In a similar way the beliefs about “traditional gender” styles of parenting could be challenged and replaced with beliefs that enhance “collaborative” parenting styles. Just as individuals require cognitive change to understand the meaning of domestic violence they also require the same cognitive change to enhance “collaborative” parenting styles. It requires more than education (Smart, 2001). It is expected that the behaviour of society will change just because the law has changed. These expectations are difficult to obtain when individuals are unaware of how they can make these changes. Can the law provide a way to incorporate and assist the change? For example, making referrals to parenting programmes that enhance “collaborative” parenting styles, and offering counselling to assist those parents who feel they have been forced into change.

Without these changes we continue to have two kinds of problems. Firstly, children missing out on the influence of their father in their lives as in ‘group two,’ where the fathers seem to have viewed their relationship with their children pre-separation as via the mother and therefore post-separation their link to their children is lost. Secondly, in ‘group three’ there are distraught mothers, damaged children and fathers who are likely to continue to live their lives through power
and control behaviour towards women. It appears one way they do this is to control the childcare arrangements post-separation through both personal and legal avenues.

If there are referrals to counselling or parenting education programmes where individuals belief systems are recognised and carefully challenged both parents could gain an understanding of the changes required to move towards a “collaborative” parenting style where their children as well as themselves would benefit (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005).

This research has clearly identified that separating parents are not a homogenous group and contain a huge amount of diversity relating to how their relationships function, what their beliefs and attitudes towards parenting are, levels of power, control and violence and access to income. These issues all affect how post-separation parenting plays out. This study also highlights the need for care in assessing and re-assessing post-separation family situations and the conflicting understanding that can be gained from the differing views of the parties involved. Because of these points, universal one-size-fits-all approaches, whether legal or therapeutic, are unlikely to meet the needs and circumstances of all post-separation families.
Bibliography


allegations of domestic violence: the need for differentiated approaches to parenting plans’, *Family Court Review*, (46), pp. 500-505.


Appendix 1

Application to the University of Otago HUMAN Ethics Committee for Ethical Approval of a Research or Teaching Proposal involving Human Participants

PLEASE read carefully the important notes on the last page of this form. Provide a response to each question; failure to do so may delay the consideration of your application.

1. University of Otago staff member responsible for project:
   (surname) (first name) (title)

   Keddell Emily Lecturer

2. Department: Social Work and Community Development

3. Contact details of staff member responsible: Ph: 03 479 9019

4. Title of project: 08/081

   "Experiences of mothering: how mothers view their roles in shared care arrangements for children following relationship separation."

5. Brief description in lay terms of the purpose of the project:

   To explore the experiences and views of mothers who are sharing the care of their children following relationship separation.

6. Indicate type of project and names of other investigators and students:

   Staff Research

   Student Research

   Student – Jan Young – No other investigators will be involved

   Multi-Centre trial

7. Is this a repeated class teaching activity?
If applying to continue a previously approved repeated class teaching activity, please provide Reference Number: 08/081

8. Intended start date of project:
   1 August 2008

Projected end date of project:
   1 December 2008

9. Funding of project.

   Is the project to be funded:
   
   (a) Internally
   
   (b) Externally

   Please specify who is funding the project:

   Student

10. Aim and description of project: (Clearly specify aims)

   This project is a Dissertation to complete my MSW.

   When parents live together their individual mother and father roles can continue full time simultaneously. This is not possible when separation occurs. The Care of Children Act 2004 gives more emphasis to hearing from the children and taking into account their wishes. As a result some form of shared parenting for families following separation is being encouraged by Judges and other professionals involved in the work of the Family Court. At a recent meeting of the Invercargill Family Courts Association members expressed a general view that many mothers struggle with sharing the care of their children. I want to explore the experiences and views of some mothers who are sharing the care of their children. I think this could lead to better understanding of their beliefs about parenting, eg mothering as a gendered talent or mothering as conscious collaboration (Cowdery & Knudson, 2005). This is particularly relevant to my work with couples referred by the Family Court for counselling.

11. Researcher or instructor experience and qualifications in this research area:

   Emily Keddell, BA, MCApSc (Lecturer)

   Jan Young, DipCSWk, MGNZ Couns, Registered Social Worker (Experience – 22yrs social
work and counselling – including 15yrs in the Family Court and the last 5yrs in private practice). Finalist MSW.

12. Participants

(Participants means any person whose behaviour, actions, condition, state of health the researcher proposes to study; or whose personal information the researcher proposes to collect or use)

12(a) Population from which participants are drawn: (in particular, please specify whether any of the following might participate: minors, prisoners, hospital patients, or anyone whose capacity to give informed consent is compromised in any way)

The study includes mothers who are separated from their partners or spouses and who have shared care of their children with the previous partner or spouse.

12(b) Specify inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion –

(a) mothers who have at least one child,

(b) who have experienced separation from their child/ren’s father. They may be living alone with their child/ren or with another partner, and

(c) who have some form of shared care of the child/ren. Shared care may be 50/50 but it is not a requirement that it is. This arrangement may be Court ordered or not.

Exclusion –

(a) Mothers with significant mental illness or cognitive impairment.

(b) Mothers who already have a professional relationship with interviewer.

12(c) Number of participants: (where a sample size calculation is appropriate i.e., for quantitative research, it should be provided)

Minimum of 6.

12(d) Age range of participants:

21yrs and above

12(e) Method of recruitment:

Advertising in newspapers and local newsletters.

Word of mouth to other professionals – eg. Lawyers, counsellors and social workers who are members of the Family Courts Association. (Letters of
12(f) Please specify any payment or reward to be offered:

Where Mothers incur travel costs to attend the interview reimbursement is offered.

13. Methods and Procedures:

This research is qualitative in structure. Participants will be invited to participate in an individual interview. The questions are open-ended and designed to gain each individuals account of her own experiences. I plan to rely on my own interviewing skills to pick up on issues to expand on as the interview progresses. The main themes will be drawn from these interviews, collated and then posted to all participants who will be invited to give further comments. This is to give the participants a chance to contribute to analysing the data without meeting each other, thus protecting their anonymity.

When first approached participants will be fully informed about the process and their agreement will be sought. They will be encouraged to make suggestions that will increase their comfort and avoid harm to themselves. The information will include the location of the interview, eg. in their own homes or at the interviewers professional rooms, and that the interview will be tape recorded. The choice not to participate could be exercised at any time. This may be not to participate in any question they find objectionable. Reimbursement of travel is applicable when costs are incurred. It is not dependent on full participation.

During the course of these interviews I plan to use discourse analysis to focus on the language participants use to talk about their shared parenting experiences. This is to uncover the language used to form and understand their beliefs and thoughts about the mothering role.

The Questionnaire format is attached. I plan to interview each participant and transcribe each interview myself. As the interviews are transcribed I will analyse the answers to each question and identify the main themes to each answer. These will be collated and sorted into themes, then posted to all participants for further comment.

I plan to use narrative and quotes within the text taking care to use pseudonyms rather than participant's real names to disguise their identity and protect them from harm. The quotes will mainly be brief and illustrative.

14. Compliance with The Privacy Act 1993 and the Health Information Privacy Code 1994 imposes strict requirements concerning the collection, use and disclosure of personal information. These
questions allow the Committee to assess compliance.

14(a) Are you collecting personal information directly from the individual concerned?

YES

14(b) If you are collecting personal information directly from the individual concerned, specify the steps taken to make participants aware of the following points: (you should make participants aware of these points in an Information Sheet for Participants; a suggested template is attached):

- the fact that you are collecting the information:

Participants will be made aware that the interviews are being taped and will later be transcribed.

- the purpose for which you are collecting the information and the uses you propose to make of it:

Participants will be informed that the information is being collected to form the research required to complete my dissertation.

- who will receive the information:

The information will be received by myself and my supervisor in its raw form.

- the consequences, if any, of not supplying the information:

Participants may decide not to proceed with this study at any point along the way and there will be no adverse consequences.

- the individual's rights of access to and correction of personal information:

Individuals have a right to access and correct their own information at any time during the five years that it is stored.

14(c) If you are not making participants aware of any of the points in (b), please explain why:

N/A

14(d) Does the research or teaching project involve any form of deception?

NO

14(e) Please outline your storage and security procedures to guard against unauthorised access, use or disclosure and how long you propose to keep personal information

The data generated will be stored in a locked cupboard at my office. I am the only person who has access to this office. The completed data will be archived for five years in a space provided by the Social Work and Community Development Department of the University of Otago.

14(f) Please explain how you will ensure that the personal information you collect is accurate,
up to date, complete, relevant and not misleading:

All individual interviews will be recorded and fully transcribed.

14(g) Who do you propose will have access to personal information, under what conditions, and subject to what safeguards against unauthorised disclosure?

Emily Keddell and Jan Young will have access to personal information to complete this research.

14(h) Do you intend to publish any personal information and in what form do you intend to do this?

There will be some personal information such as gender, number and ages of children collected. Any identifying information will be changed and made anonymous, eg. taking care to use pseudonyms rather than participant's real names to disguise their identity. Only the person themselves will recognise their own comments in the direct quotes that will be used.

14(i) Do you propose to collect information on ethnicity?

No

15. Potential problems:

These participants will be discussing information of a personal nature so there may be occasions where they would like the assistance from professional services. I will put my many years of experience and training into practice and be available to discuss their needs and refer them to the appropriate agency as required in these situations.

16. Informed consent

These forms are attached.

17. Fast-Track procedure  Do you request fast-track consideration?

NO

18. Other committees

If any other ethics committee has considered or will consider the proposal which is the subject of this application, please give details:
19. Applicant's Signature: .................................................................

Date: ..................................................

20. Departmental approval: I have read this application and believe it to be scientifically and ethically sound. I approve the research design. The Research proposed in this application is compatible with the University of Otago policies and I give my consent for the application to be forwarded to the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee with my recommendation that it be approved.

Signature of *Head of Department: .................................................................

Date: ..................................................

*(In cases where the Head of Department is also the principal researcher then the appropriate Dean or Pro-Vice-Chancellor must sign)

Please attach copies of the Information Sheet and Consent Form
Appendix 2

Experiences of mothering: how mothers view their roles in shared care arrangements for children following relationship separation

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

What is the Aim of the Project?

This research is being undertaken as part of the Dissertation for the completion of the Masters in Social Work Degree course.

What Type of Participants are being sought?

The study includes mothers aged 21yrs and above who are separated from their partners or spouses and who have shared care of their children with the previous partner or spouse.

What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The general themes from all individual interviews will be collated and posted to all participants who will be invited to comment further. It is anticipated that the initial interview will be approximately one hour. The written response at a later date is not intended to be an onerous task and is hoped will take a similar length of time to complete.

The interview would be conducted at a convenient time to yourself in your home, at the interviewers professional rooms or any alternative venue where you feel most comfortable.

You are invited to make suggestions that will minimise any possible discomfort or potential harm to yourself that you may foresee.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

Information about your own shared parenting situation, including any expectations you may have had about shared parenting. The differences in the roles of mothers and fathers, and changes you may have noticed in the way you mother your children. What you have noticed about the way you think or the beliefs you have about the way you mother your children.

This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

These data will be collected to explore the experiences and views of mothers who are sharing the care of their children following relationship separation.

The data will be collated and analysed and written up in a format that will be available to others interested in

Reference Number 08/117
July 2008
shared parenting. During this process the student and her supervisor will be the only people who have access to the entire data.

The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library, (Dunedin, New Zealand), but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned below will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information and will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

Reasonable precautions will be taken to protect and destroy data gathered by email. However, the security of electronically transmitted information cannot be guaranteed. Caution is advised in the electronic transmission of sensitive material.

**What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Jan Young - Student or Emily Keddell - Supervisor

Department of Social Work and Community Development

University Telephone Number: 03 479 9019

Email:

emily.keddell@otago.ac.nz

Jan-young@xtra.co.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee
Experiences of mothering: how mothers view their roles in shared care arrangements for children following relationship separation

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

☑ My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

☑ I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;

☑ The interviews will be taped and transcribed.

☑ Personal identifying information and audiotapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any other data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which they will be destroyed;

☑ This project involves an open-questioning technique where the precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.

☑ I am invited to make suggestions that will minimise any possible discomfort or potential harm to myself that I may foresee.

☑ I am entitled to the reimbursement of any transport costs incurred by me during my participation in this project.

☑ The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

☑ I understand that reasonable precautions have been taken to protect data transmitted by email but that the security of the information cannot be guaranteed.

I agree to take part in this project.

 .................................................................................................................................
 .................................................................................................................................

 (Signature of participant)                      (Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee
Appendix 3

Experiences of mothering: how mothers view their roles in shared care arrangements for children following relationship separation.

Questionnaire format – brief notes to be completed by myself as I interview each participant. Interviews to be audio-taped and transcribed by myself at a later date.

Statistical Information:

Number of Children:

Gender and Ages of Children:

1. Tell me about how you came to be in a shared parenting situation?
2. What expectations did you have about shared parenting?
3. Tell me about a typical shared parenting cycle?
4. What roles do you think mothers and father should play in their children’s lives?
5. Have you noticed any change in the way you mother your children since beginning the shared parenting?
6. If you have noticed changes, tell me about these. Eg. Quality time spent with children
   a. Before –
   b. After –
7. Have you noticed any change in how you think about mothering your children?
   Eg. Important things your child need to know
8. Is there anything further you may like to contribute?