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Young people's reflections on their experiences of shared care and relationships with their parents

Tracy Merson^a, Keith Tuffin^a and Rachael Pond^b

^aSchool of Psychology, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand; ^bInstitute of Education, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study examined young people's reflections on their experiences of parental and child–parent relationships when raised in shared care with low inter-parental conflict, post-separation. *Background:* Shared care arrangements are becoming increasingly common. However, little research has been done about children and young people's perspectives and experiences of it. *Method:* In-depth interviews of one to three hours were conducted with 12 young people who were living or had lived in shared care arrangements in New Zealand. Transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. *Results:* The themes identified from participants' accounts pointed to the importance of each parent being committed to cultivating an emotionally positive relationship with their child in the context of an amicable, cooperative parenting alliance; and the requirement of parents and step-parents' sensitivity and care when a parent re-partnered. Participants struggled emotionally when these were not achieved. It was evident that participants were sensitive about parental tension and apportioning time fairly. *Conclusion:* More attention needs to be given to supporting separating parents to achieve quality relationships with their child and a cordial, child-focused parenting alliance. Further qualitative research about children and young people's experiences will be useful in confirming and extending these findings.

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Shared care; joint custody; children's experiences; young people's experiences; child–parent relationships; parental relationship; parental separation and/or divorce

Across developed countries, approximately 20% of children do not live with both parents in the same home, largely due to parental separation; the figures for some countries (e.g., Belgium, Lithuania, Latvia, and United States) are higher at 26% to 32% (OECD, 2018). Although sole parenting by the mother is most common, shared care has been steadily increasing (Fehlberg et al., 2011a; Smyth, 2017). Shared care (also known as joint physical custody, shared parenting, or co-parenting) refers to post-separation arrangements whereby children spend equal or significant amounts of time in their parents' respective homes. While caution needs to be exercised with cross-national comparisons because of international variation in the thresholds used to calculate the incidence of shared care

CONTACT Rachael Pond  R.L.Pond@massey.ac.nz

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(e.g. 25% to 50% time with each parent), available data indicates shared care accounts for 50% of post-separation arrangements in Wisconsin, United States, 37% in Belgium, 30% in the Netherlands, 22% in Canada, and 17% of arrangements in Australia (Smyth, 2017). For some countries, including New Zealand, the prevalence of shared care is unknown because no reliable data about this is collected (New Zealand Law Commission, 2017).

The increase in shared care (which is now levelling off in some countries) has been influenced by several factors, including women's greater workforce participation, fathers' increasing involvement in their children's daily lives, and heightening expectations that both parents will share the post-separation care of children (Fehlberg et al., 2011b; Smyth et al., 2014). In some countries, changes in family law may have contributed to increases in the incidence of shared care, however this is not always the case. For example, research on Australian trends found that legislative changes did not have a marked effect; that increases in shared care were mostly due to growing social support for fathers to share the care of children (Smyth & Chisholm, 2017).

Shared care is often argued to be better for children's psychological wellbeing than other post-separation arrangements. It offers children the opportunity to have a meaningful relationship with both parents, which children often want and benefit from (Fabricius, 2003; Maccoby et al., 1993) if they are not subject to a high level of ongoing parental acrimony (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008). Shared care demonstrates parental commitment and enables parents to participate in a range of activities and caregiving routines with children, while also enabling mothers to better engage in social networks and leisure activities outside the home than they would achieve otherwise (Botterman et al., 2015). Child-directed caregiving and activities are deemed important in facilitating closeness in child-parent relationships generally, and in child-father relationships specifically (Amato & Dorius, 2010; Vanassche et al., 2017). Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Sroufe & Waters, 1977) dovetails with these notions by claiming that the security of a child's emotional connection to their parents and their development of healthy independence depends on parent availability and responsiveness, which can be attained with both parents through quantity and quality time in shared care (Fabricius, 2003). Attachment experts emphasize the importance of quality interactions and avoidance of stress or conflict in the execution of any arrangement (McIntosh, 2011).

There is limited research assessing the relationship between shared care and children's wellbeing (Smyth, 2009). Findings are mixed. For example, studies have found better academic, psychological, and emotional outcomes (Bergström et al., 2013; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009; Westphal, 2015), better mental and physical health outcomes (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007), and lower rates of risk behaviour (Carlsund et al., 2013) for children, adolescents, and university students brought up in shared care compared to those in sole resident families. In contrast, others have found children's wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and general happiness to be similar across shared care and sole resident families (Neoh & Mellor, 2010; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). Intrapersonal factors (e.g. conscientious personality; Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014), interpersonal factors, parental sociodemographics, and conflict may make a difference in the relationship between post-separation arrangements and outcomes (Westphal, 2015).

Despite the growing practice of shared care, little is known about children and young people's perspectives and experiences. So far, research including children's voices shows

that notwithstanding the challenge of physically and emotionally transitioning between homes (Carlberg et al., 2004; Smart et al., 2001), children appreciate that the arrangement offers an opportunity to have an improved relationship with each parent (Smart, 2002). Sadowski and McIntosh (2016) found that children's security and contentment was fostered by parental willingness and ability to be together, conflict-free, and to share enjoyment and pride in their child, for example, at family gatherings and sporting events. Children in that study placed much importance on their parents being able to laugh together, greet each other with genuine good feeling, and create a sense of an integrated family even though they were separated. Their security was also enhanced when their parents were willing to assist them to connect or be with their other parent in times of need; and when each parent was a sensitive, active, and protective presence for them. A review of the qualitative literature (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015) highlights that children are more likely to feel positive about shared care when: arrangements are flexible, child-focused, and support a continuous and meaningful relationship with both parents and their siblings; their parents respect and integrate children's feelings and concerns, get along, shelter them from conflict; and children have ongoing input into decisions about their living arrangements.

Considering that shared care is often argued to be in the best interests of children, it is problematic that children's voices are under-represented in the literature. To rectify this gap, researchers have argued that it is imperative that children's experiences and views be heard in the next phase of research (Berman & Daneback, 2020; Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Smyth, 2009). Hence, the present study is concerned with how children make sense of their experiences of shared care and the ensuing relationships with their parents. Our study takes advantage of there being a cohort of children who have grown up in shared care, and as young adults are able to reflect on their experiences. It is hoped that listening to their voices and understanding their perspective will illuminate important features of shared care. While many aspects of shared care were discussed, this paper focuses on their experiences of parental and parent-child relationships.

Methodology

Qualitative research allows for a variety of perspectives, and honours individuals' experiences even when they are divergent (Willig, 2011). The study was informed by phenomenology, postmodernism, and social constructionism. Phenomenological enquiry focuses on subjective experience, encouraging participants to elucidate their experiences in detail, and researchers to make these experiences visible (Langdrige, 2008). A postmodernist approach challenges the notion that households that deviate from the traditional heterosexual nuclear family are less able to provide for children's needs. Postmodern researchers are interested in how non-traditional families operate as legitimate sites for successful parenting (Boney, 2003). Postmodernism assumes that truth is socially constructed through social interaction. Gergen (1985) explains that social constructionism is concerned with how people describe and thereby construct their worlds and how their accounts are circumscribed by culture, history, and social context. The current study aims to reveal key features of the shared care experience, as reported by those who grew up with this family arrangement.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited using advertisements at a New Zealand university campus, community noticeboards, and through snowballing, a recruitment technique that uses personal networks to contact potential subjects. Participants needed to meet the following criteria: at least 16 years; in current or recent shared care for at least two years; and at least five years old when shared care began. Participants were in 'shared care' if they were with each parent for two or more days each week.

The number of participants was based on standards used in qualitative research and recruitment ceased when the authors agreed that the data were sufficiently rich and voluminous to enable an in-depth description of young people's experiences of shared care, replete with recurrences, variation, and nuances. The 12 participants (8 female and 4 male) included six teenagers, five young people in their early- to mid-twenties, and one person in her early thirties. Most had experienced shared care for many years. Seven participants had predominantly experienced a 50/50 shared care arrangement and five had close to a 70/30 arrangement. Ethnicity was not recorded. [Table 1](#) summarizes information about the participants; pseudonyms have been used.

Procedure

In-depth semi-structured interviews took place in participants' homes or a university office after participants had discussed the research with the first author, read written

Table 1. Participants' characteristics and shared care arrangements.

Fictitious name	Age	Gender	Age at separation	Shared care arrangements
Andrew	16	Male	13	50/50 shared care, week about, along with sister.
Ava	25	Female	10	Every Wednesday and second weekend with father until starting university; remainder with mother. Same for brother.
Emma	32	Female	5	Up until 7 years old, stayed with mother during week and father for weekend; then 50/50 shared care, week about. Same for brother.
Harper	17	Female	15	50/50 shared care, week about, along with twin sister Sophie (also a participant, see below).
Henry	18	Male	12	50/50 shared care: Mondays and Tuesdays with mother, Wednesdays and Thursdays with father, Fridays and weekends alternated between parents. Since university, mostly with father and every second weekend with mother. Same for sister.
James	22	Male	12	50/50 shared care, week about, until he started university.
Jennifer	26	Female	4	Wednesday nights, and every second weekend with father; and at least one day each weekend at sporting events and practices with father. Remainder of time with mother. At age 12, after parents remarried, full-time with mother. Same for sister.
Lucy	22	Female	11	Initially spent weekdays with father and weekends with mother. This changed to a 50/50 split. Same for sister and dog.
Madison	21	Female	11	Every Friday and second weekend with father; remainder with mother. Same for sister.
Michael	18	Male	<4	Flexible arrangement with weekends, extra days, and some holidays; occasional weekends after age 11 due to mother's alcohol misuse; ended at 15 years old when mother died.
Olivia	18	Female	5	Wednesday and Saturday nights with father, and remainder with mother, until moving to start university. Same for brother.
Sophie	17	Female	15	50/50 shared care, week about, with twin sister Harper (above)

information about the study (including their rights), and willingly signed a consent form. Participants were asked to describe: their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in relation to shared care, how they retrospectively made sense of the change in the parenting/living arrangement, the advantages and disadvantages of living in shared care across two homes, their parents relationship over the period of shared care, how shared care affected/affects their relationship with each parent, how their shared care experiences have impacted their life, and what advice they would give others. While most participants had current or recent experiences of shared care, their reflections extended back over a number of years. Relationships with their parents were explored as were other relationships that significantly impacted on living arrangements. The interviews were one to three hours and audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in preparation for analysis. The study was deemed to be low risk, which meant that the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University was notified but a full ethics application and formal approval was not necessary.

Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) informed the analysis and key themes were identified inductively. The first stage involved engagement and familiarization with the data through transcribing, reading, and re-reading the interview transcripts. Second, basic features of the data were identified through coding. Third, codes were collated into a thematic map after which these themes were refined, leaving only the key themes which were well supported by the data. The fourth stage involved further refinement and labelling of the key themes. Each theme elaborated on the nature of the relationships between parents and young people in the context of shared care. The final stage involved writing up and contextualizing the themes in the light of the extant literature. All authors were involved in checking, refinement, and writing up of the themes.

Findings

Five themes about the relationship between children and parents were identified: (a) shared care offered a deeper knowledge of each parent and an appreciation of parents who demonstrated commitment, (b) the emotional experience of the time together determined the quality of child–parent relationships and this varied in child–parent relationships, (c) having an amicable parent–parent relationship contributed positively to experiences of shared care and child–parent relationships, (d) children were sensitive to parents’ feelings when apportioning time, and (e) re-partnering affects the experience of shared care and parent–child relationships. Quotes are used to represent young people’s voices and provide evidence of identified themes.

I know and appreciate my parents better this way

Several participants felt they developed more intimate relationships with parents due to shared care. Instead of experiencing their parents as a dyad, they got to know them as individuals during their time together:

I think maybe know them better 'cos I have, they'll have, I have a week with just one of my parents, so I get to know what they do and everything a bit better. (Andrew)

It's sort of annoying sometimes 'cos you have to move around and stuff but I sort of like it more 'cos you can get to know each parent better, like I talk to Mum more and Dad. I still find it better. (Sophie)

As shown here, the advantage of coming to know both parents was sometimes described to outweigh the inconvenience of transitioning between homes. Shared care involves a commitment to regular day-to-day care of one's children. Lucy explained how parental effort and commitment to her and her sister resulted in a close relationship with both parents. Notably, her father continued to be the primary caregiver when her parents separated – having Lucy, her sister, and their dog during the weekdays while her mother worked and had them during the weekend.

They were really clear about wanting to make it as easy as us as possible, like not wanting to disrupt our lives ... My relationship with my father now is really, really good. We are super, super close. Little bit characterised by this thing of reciprocity, like I just feel like he just gave me so much and now it's my turn. Compared to my peers I noticed that I have a really strong sense of duty, especially to my Dad, also to my Mum, my god, to both of them, and I think it's weird 'cos it felt really hurtful at the time, but looking back it's like going through that experience with them highlighted that they were our parents, and they were looking after us and they were providing for us and making an effort for us and so in a weird paradoxical way I saw how much more I owed them I think ... When [Dad] had his stroke I felt it really strongly. It's like you bathed me as a baby and you know brought me up and everything and now it's my turn kind of to look after you a bit. (Lucy)

Lucy recognized that her parents consciously decided about their parenting ethos and prioritized their children's needs. The enduring effort of both parents before their separation and through shared care enhanced their roles. In particular, she shared how the amount of time her father devoted to caring for them each week resulted in a particularly strong emotional bond. Several participants suggested that shared care resulted in enhanced paternal relationships, more than might have been achieved otherwise. Indeed, the data suggested that shared care can offer two 'psychological parents' (Steinman, 1981), where children are attached and loyal to both parents as they understand that their parents have made a sustained effort to maintain joint parenting and provide them with the full range of parenting functions, including nurturance, guidance, and discipline. This had profound meaning for some participants. However, close personal relationships with two psychological parents were not guaranteed during shared care. As suggested by the next theme, the degree to which parents provided nurturance was variable, and this affected participants' attachment and loyalty to a parent.

Child–parent relationships suffer if the quality of time together is poor

While shared care offered participants plenty of time to bond with each parent, it was the *emotional experience* of that time that determined the quality of child–parent relationships. Positive emotional experiences led to satisfying parent–child relationships and experiences of shared care. However, relationships suffered when participants experienced insufficient quality time or mistreatment while together. Madison's excerpt is

used to illustrate how having plenty of time with a parent through shared care is not enough; it is how that time was spent that mattered:

Interviewer: So you said at the time your relationship with your father wasn't the best, so you were about 11 then, so what was going on there do you think?

Oh initially we had quite a good relationship like I was like daddy's girl kind of thing ... But because he owned his own business, I guess he threw himself into that, so when we went and stayed with him on Saturday mornings we would go with him and we would open the shop and we would be there all day and it got to the point when I would get sick of sitting in front of computers and entertaining myself and that kind of thing. I kind of decided to resent him for that I guess, so I kind of detached myself. (Madison)

In this case, the participant's relationship with her father was reported to be affected by poor quality time together. She contrasted this with the quality time and close, meaningful relationship she had with her mother.

A small number of participants mentioned that they were exposed to regular adverse circumstances, distressing behaviour or mistreatment by a parent whilst in their care. Emma, aged 32, gave an account explaining how her father's psychologically abusive behaviour during shared care caused much distress and detrimentally affected their relationship:

I had this particularly traumatising memory, I was probably between 11–14 ... I'd gotten in trouble with Dad and he was like I don't want you, I'm going to ring your Mum to see if she can have you ... Dad sat there on the phone, Mum denies this, so whether he was making it up or not, but he sat there, he was talking to her, 'She doesn't want you, she's really embarrassed of you, embarrassed to be seen by you, you're fat,' ... So that was probably the hardest thing, you know, when he did stuff like that ... You don't tell your child that the other parent doesn't love you ... That was really traumatising ... He was very psychologically manipulative ... I just had to harden up and carry on ... I had such severe lack of validation ... He literally stripped away my personal boundaries and just invalidated my whole perception of life. (Emma)

Emma reported that her father's manipulative behaviour during their time together had a long-term negative effect on her mental health and her relationship with him, although she explained that she has since found a way to make the best of it and uses what she learned to guide her young son's shared care arrangement. A couple of other participants also discussed how their relationship with a parent was negatively affected by unsatisfactory emotional experiences of their time together. James said he struggled through his adolescent years because his mother was depressed and over-reactive, which left him taking care of her and feeling unnurtured and emotionally neglected. Michael also shared significant challenges. He explained how his mother's alcohol misuse and mental health issues resulted in a chaotic, unstable home environment, poor care, and emotional neglect – which led to him spending progressively less time with her.

In summary, children's wellbeing and parental relationships in shared care seemed to depend on the quality of the time together. Participants reported disappointment or suffering if time in shared care with a parent was characterized by insufficient quality time together, neglect or mistreatment. While shared care can enhance relations, these young people's accounts indicate that it does not guarantee loving, secure attachments between children and parents; attachments are dependent on positive emotional experiences while together.

Quality of the parent–parent relationship makes a difference: getting along matters

Participants' accounts made it clear that they were not exposed to a *high level of ongoing* inter-parental acrimony or conflict. Those who had been exposed to conflict, usually around the time of separation, found it stressful and were relieved when their parents found ways to better manage it.

Some participants' parents were committed to co-parenting yet had residual tension from their relationship and/or separation (labelled *tensely committed* parents by Trinder et al. (2002)). Such participants were usually aware of the tension and felt discomfort when parents were together, even when attempts were made to hide it. This is illustrated by Harper's and Madison's extracts:

Mum just doesn't want to see him 'cos it hurts and then Dad is just annoyed with it I guess ... It would be nice if they were friends but (laughing) a bit difficult just 'cos it's just weird if they are both there at that same time, just that awkward politeness, you can feel the tension (laughing). I don't like it when it's awkward, like if you want them both to come to something, and even if they will, it's just kind of awkward and that's not nice. Sometimes they're not that awkward, they are just polite but I am just standing there I just feel really weird about it. (Harper)

I don't expect them to talk at my 21st. From my perspective it's quite difficult trying to make sure they are going to be okay at the same time, from their perspective it's quite difficult to be in the same room together 'cos they've got whatever tensions are happening. (Madison)

Other participants also reported heightened awareness and discomfort in situations when parents with remaining tension were present. Participants felt a responsibility to make sure they were both alright.

Some participants discussed situations where they felt exposed to their parents' dissension, most noticeably when their parents made disparaging comments about one another or expressed negative feelings towards one another:

Mum has been very vocal about the things that she doesn't like about Dad whereas Dad is 'I don't want to cloud your vision of your Mum' but then will make cynical comments and things but he's way more sensitive about it, about not being derogatory about her. I don't really like people being put down generally but your parents they're supposed to, you are the product of them loving each other, it's like hearing your own purpose negated or something. (Lucy)

The only thing that sort of got to me was how they sort of, my Mum would be sorry for us and would go on and on about it and cry and stuff. My Dad would get a bit cold about it and my Mum sort of thing. So that's the only thing I didn't like was how they treated each other ... In some ways the only thing that was bad was when they let it out. I didn't mind the other stuff really. (Thomas)

Like Lucy and Thomas, other participants found it upsetting to hear parents criticizing or upset with each other. It could erode their sense of wellbeing and security.

Some participants enjoyed the benefits of having parents with a friendly, co-operative co-parenting relationship (labelled *reconfigured continuing families* by Trinder et al. (2002)). This is illustrated by Olivia and Ava's excerpts:

They always just got along ... Dad kind of said to me it was like how they wanted it to be. So like whenever Dad would come and pick me up he would always come inside and have a little chat to Mum while we would get our stuff, he would never just wait in the car and not come inside or anything. They would text or call if there was something about us that they needed to talk about. All my step-parents all get along, so on Christmas morning Dad and my step-mum would come to my house with Mum and my step-dad. And my brother was there, we would just have all four of them. And everyone all gets along. They buy presents for each other and it's kind of from us as well ... I definitely am thankful that they all get along. (Olivia)

They were pretty good generally and they're still pretty good. They are cordial with each other. They went to a party together last weekend ... Lots of family and friends. And they were fine. They have never been hostile towards each other or anything. There was never any real animosity between them and they were always quite supportive of each other as co-parents even though they weren't together. (Ava)

The absence of parental animosity made it easier for participants when their parents were together at events. These participants felt grateful for the co-operative co-parenting alliance.

When participants were asked what advice they would give to parents in shared care arrangements, they emphasized the importance of a good-natured and cordial parenting relationship, and for any parental relationship strain to be contained and addressed by parents:

Probably just to set a good example when relating to the other person. Like my parents did, they obviously were always friendly and civil like even if you can't be friendly at least be civil. Kids are probably going to lean more towards one parent I think so encourage them to still have a good relationship with the other person. (Ava)

How do I put this? Keep your emotional stuff to yourself as much as you can. Don't try to involve your kids in your feelings ... Work through your own stuff 'cos it does impact your kids. And also get help for your kids as well. (James)

In summary, it was clear that experiencing an amicable and co-operative parenting alliance fostered children and young people's wellbeing in shared care. Participants' accounts indicated that they were negatively impacted by parents being openly hostile or disparaging toward each other, and they reported heightened awareness about parents' feelings and interactions when parents with unresolved relationship tension were together at events and change-overs.

Children are sensitive to parents' feelings when apportioning time

Participants' accounts indicated their sensitivity to parents' feelings when they were apportioning time with them at special events (especially with parents who avoided contact with each other) or on days they were assigned to be with the other parent. At events, participants felt particularly awkward when parents sat separately, and they had to choose with whom to sit.

It's happened a couple of times with production things, they came on the same night and I don't know who to sit with and it's awkward because I want to sit with both of them. So with the production I went with Dad but then I met Mum at the beginning and then Dad, and in the middle I tried to find Mum, and it was just awkward. (Harper)

For my 21st I made a booking for a restaurant and they sat at opposite ends of the tables. It was kind of a bit awkward thing for my sister as well 'cos it was like who does she sit with 'cos I was in the middle with my friends but then where does that leave her, is she picking a parent? So she sat next to me in middle so she wasn't picking (laughing). Mum arrived a lot earlier than Dad did, so I talked to Mum when she arrived, and then Dad arrived and I think at this point I went and sat with him, and that kind of thing. (Madison)

As evidenced by Harper and Madison's extracts, participants tried to balance time with each parent at events to avoid showing any favouritism. Sometimes participants wished parents had a good enough relationship to sit together.

Some participants also felt awkward going out with one parent when it would encroach on their time with the other parent:

If you want to do something with Dad and you're at Mum's, it's a bit awkward asking, like you are taking out their time and you feel a little sad about that. It's okay but you just have to think about what you are doing a bit more. (Sophie)

Interviewer: Is there anything else you don't like about it?

When my Dad and my Mum both ask me to do something like go out with them on the same day and I have to decide and tell one of them if I can go or something. (Andrew)

As illustrated by Sophie and Andrew's excerpts, participants were mindful of their parents' feelings and tried not to disappoint one parent or the other.

In summary, participants were sensitive about apportioning time fairly between parents. They seemingly realized the emotional significance of time with each parent and did not want to disappoint or hurt a parent by showing favouritism.

Re-partnering affects the experience of shared care and parent-child relationships

For many participants, one or both parents re-partnered over time. This resulted in additional structural changes to the family and the complexities of being in a blended family. While some participants reported that they formed good relationships with a parent's new partner, others described it was more challenging. They explained that this was due to jealousy over having to share their parent with others, a poor relationship with a step-parent or step-siblings, and/or lack of protection or sensitivity from a parent in dealing with any arising issues. When a step-parent developed a discordant relationship, participant accounts indicated that it could profoundly affect the child's parental relationship and the shared care arrangement. This is illustrated with Jennifer, who previously had a very close relationship with her father:

Dad and Nina got married when I was 12 ... She was really nice when they started going out. She used to do lots of girly things with us ... And then slowly after they got married, all within probably six months, we were kicked out and we weren't allowed back there. She got rid of all our stuff, sold it to the neighbours ... our trampoline and all our toys and things went over there. And then one day I came back and my bedroom was all re-wallpapered, all my stuff was gone and it had a double bed in it ... That was an awful time for me. I got really homesick for Mum's place every time I had to go to Dad's. I got really scared, couldn't sleep ... She just kind of pushed us out. We had to eat our meals at five o'clock and go and sit in the lounge and go to bed early and not really eat with them or anything

and she had these two cups that had 'guest' on them and that's all we were allowed to drink out of – the guest cups ... Dad was very passive about it all. As an adult I have been angry towards him for that. He didn't stand up for us. He took her side and he let it all happen ... Our relationship is pretty bad now. (Jennifer)

As mentioned in Jennifer's excerpt, the new partnership resulted in a loss of belonging, the breakdown of shared care, and the disintegration of her relationship with her father. Ava also felt shared care was impacted when her father formed a new relationship:

Mum's house was definitely more home than Dad's, particularly because he had another partner and her kids lived there, and there was always a bit of a clash there. I think we clashed more with his partner than with her kids. She's very particular about her house, so we definitely clashed a few times over that. And my Dad is very non-confrontational, he hates any kind of conflict, so if he has the opportunity he won't engage with any of that at all, so I think that was a bit of a struggle sometimes for both of us, my brother as well, like he didn't enjoy being there ... I enjoyed spending time with my Dad but not with my pseudo step-family ... Our relationship is fine now ... I don't know, it was probably my frustration with my Dad's partner and having to share that space ... and having to share my Dad. (Ava)

As seen in Jennifer's and Ava's excerpts, passivity or unwillingness by the parent to intervene exacerbated the issue, which remained unaddressed and meant time in shared care was stressful and unpleasant.

Some participants, including Lucy, acknowledged feeling jealous of their parent's new relationship:

Our relationship kind of started building again from there 'cos it had been pretty shit to be honest ... Me and my sister were heinously jealous of Mum's new husband. He just took all her time, and we moved in with him and she threw out all of her old furniture, and she lied to us about having a new boyfriend, and we were just loyalists to our father through and through, you know, yeah there was so much jealousy, so much jealousy and just that it was instant you know, it was like straight away when they were together. (Lucy)

As shown in Lucy's excerpt, a parent's new relationship could infringe on their own time with a parent and result in jealousy. Again, insensitively managing the integration of a new relationship reportedly worsen the experience.

Not all participants saw the introduction of new partners negatively; some enjoyed the new dimension that was added to their lives, as is illustrated here:

Yeah I get along with them really well, I call them by their first names ... Leanne always wanted children and so me and my brother were like her children, we always got on really well. She would always kind of look after us and so would Pete my step-dad. He never wanted children and we were quite young when he got with my Mum, like when they got together ... and so it was kind of like a sacrifice he made to be with Mum but now we are older so it doesn't matter (laughter). But he was always so lovely to us and he'd always looked after us so yeah. (Olivia)

As shown here, participants adapted better to changes in the family when they felt a new partner cared for them. Sometimes, accepting a parent's new partner took time:

In the beginning it was fine. Then I had this stage, 'Oh I just don't like you' and I told Dad and he was like, 'Oh that's natural.' But it didn't last very long. She's a nice person, and then I just, she's fine ... It's just like having a flatmate. I felt like I should hate her or something but

I didn't, and then also if I hate her Dad will be upset, and I didn't actually hate her or anything, so I did what I felt like and now I'm fine. (Harper)

Loyalty to a parent and societal expectations made adjustment difficult. Fortunately, as is the case for Harper, support by a parent (e.g. explaining how her reaction was normal) created space for her to develop a relationship with the new partner and adapt.

In summary, participants recalled that adjusting to a parent's new partner and their children could be challenging. For some, the involvement of a new partner directly and detrimentally affected shared care and the relationship with the parent. For others, it enriched their lives. Pivotal to the success of adaptation was the re-partnered parent's love, sensitivity, and protection, and the new partner's interest and care for them. In some cases, it also required participants to shed societal stereotypes about step-parents and deal with the fierce loyalty they felt towards the parent who was being 'replaced'.

Discussion

The young New Zealanders in this study provided in-depth accounts of how they experienced the relational dimension of shared care. Although a relatively small study, these young people's voices give insight into the experience of living in this family structure. The study adds to the local (New Zealand/Aotearoa) databases/understanding and contributes toward the 'next phase of research' that has been deemed imperative; that children and young people's voices be heard, to inform those who work and live in this post-separation arrangement (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Smyth, 2009).

A key contribution of the work is its focus on looking at how dual households have been navigated by participants whose retrospective accounts provide insight into the strengths and limitations of shared care. While supporting the view (Braver & Lamb, 2018) that shared parenting can be beneficial for children of separated parents, the study goes beyond claims about the advantages of shared parenting and provides insiders' perspectives on a number of key issues. Steinbach's (2019) review similarly acknowledges this positivity but notes how the literature is confounded by conceptual, methodological and contextual heterogeneity. Hence, he concludes that the risks and benefits of shared care remain unclear. Another contribution of the current study is to cast light on risks and benefits for those who, as adults, have been able to look back on their experiences of shared parental care.

Participants reported that time with each parent in shared care gave them the opportunity to intimately know and experience a high level of commitment from both parents. This commitment and prioritization of their needs had profound meaning for some participants who seemed to experience what Steinman (1981) calls two 'psychological parents'; where they are attached and loyal to both parents as they understand that they have made a sustained effort to maintain joint parenting and provide them with the full range of parenting functions.

However, shared care itself did not ensure a close, positive relationship with secure attachments between children and their parents. Participants' accounts strongly suggested that a parent's commitment and nurturance are necessary; that the quality of the relationships mattered to everyone. When time and interactions were poor

quality, either because a parent was described as manipulative/abusive or unavailable/inattentive during time together, the shared care was experienced negatively, and parent–child relationships suffered in the short and long term. Our findings strongly concur with the Smart (2002) and McIntosh's (2011) argument that it is the quality of relationships, not the formal structure of residence and contact that creates a sense of wellbeing, contentment, and security for children.

Pivotal to participants' wellbeing was the amicability of the parent–parent relationship. Participants experienced distress or discomfort when a parent became visibly upset with the other parent and/or expressed negative feelings about them. Furthermore, participants who were aware that their parents harboured unresolved relationship/separation issues (even if conflict was suppressed) expressed a heightened awareness and concern about their parents' interactions and emotions when they were present together. This contrasted with how comfortable participants felt when parents had a friendly, cooperative alliance. In the literature, encapsulation of conflict has been identified as a key protective factor for children in post-separation arrangements (Fehlberg et al., 2011a; Kelly & Emery, 2003; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008). Furthermore, with evidence that children are acutely attuned to and deeply concerned about the emotional states and feelings of their parents (Kenny, 2000; Smart, 2002), it is important that parents show good will towards each other, and foster an environment where children feel comfortable when they are together (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016).

This research therefore adds to the literature on parental conflict (Miller et al., 2010) which contextualizes the ways in which children make sense of conflict in a developmental frame, with adolescents and older children increasingly having the abstract ability to understand more nuanced dynamics and develop more sophisticated coping mechanisms. Most of our participants were in, or approaching, adolescence when their parents separated, and this may have contributed to their resilience. They may also have benefited from being spared from sustained high-level conflict, as parents were reported to largely minimizing conflict and acrimony. The retrospective nature of this study enabled participants to look back and provide a well-considered mature orientation which emphasized the importance of managing conflict and getting along.

Noteworthy is the evidence that participants were sensitive to parents' feelings when they were apportioning time with them at special events (especially with parents who avoided each other) or on a day they were assigned to be with the other parent. Smart (2002) and Haugen (2010) suggest children are often aware that time is loaded with emotional significance when they are being 'shared' post-separation, and they do not wish to upset either parent. Similar research recommends that parents providing shared care need to be flexible and openly support children to contact or spend extra time with the other parent if the child wants this (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Haugen, 2010; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016).

Consistent with previous research (Stokkebeek et al., 2019), participants clearly demonstrated sensitivity to the quality of their parental relationships. This included generalized awareness of parental hostility, disparagement, and tension (even when an attempt was made to conceal it), and sensitivity to parental feelings at joint gatherings. The issue of divided loyalties is common in shared care research (Johnsen et al., 2018), which aligns with the tensions involved in living two lives and having two homes. Of particular concern for participants was the issue of time loyalty at events

with both parents attending and the need to manage divided loyalties by balancing time with both parents.

For some participants, the psychological demands of living in dual households were particularly challenging when one or both parents formed a relationship with a new partner. The new blended family involved new partners, and sometimes new step-siblings, which could add a dimension that was enjoyable and enriched family life. Equally, this structural change could become a source of conflict and disruption of previously harmonious relationships. As Campo et al. (2012) discovered, a poor relationship with a new step-parent or step-sibling could derail the enterprise of shared care. A further dynamic which could threaten this delicate balance was parental unwillingness or passivity when the child sought support over a domestic issue involving either the step-parent or step-siblings. This suggests the need for greater awareness of children's experiences of remarriage/repartnering, and transitions and issues which require sensitive management.

While we acknowledge the limits of generalizability, we believe that these themes may resonate with at least some young people living in low-conflict shared care arrangements. There is clearly still much to learn. Not only should other qualitative studies be conducted to verify and extend these findings, future research could seek to better understand whether the ratio of shared care with each parent has any impact on children's and young people's experiences. Future research could also examine shared care and the associated parental and child-parent relationships from the perspective of children and young people of different cultural backgrounds and developmental stages. Sadowski and McIntosh's (2016) study is an example of a study that used the voices and illustrations of children aged 8–12 years old to illustrate parental behaviours that contribute to children's contentment/distress and security/insecurity in shared care arrangements.

Future research also needs to hear the voices of children who have experienced shared care when parental acrimony or conflict (attributable to one or both parents) is apparent to children or encapsulated to varying degrees, especially considering that there is a subgroup of high-conflict parents who choose or are ordered to share the care of their children. These studies should aim to represent children's experiences and factors that engender children's material and psychological wellbeing (including children's security, contentment, and sense of self-worth).

In conclusion, this research has responded to the call for more research to flesh out the limited knowledge base about children in shared care, including research about interpersonal relationships from the perspective of children who live in two homes (Berman & Daneback, 2020). The current study has contributed to this gap in the literature with some key thematic dealing with interpersonal relationships between the child, their parents, and the possible involvement of step-parents and step-siblings. The findings tentatively suggest that although shared care can enhance child-parent relationships, it has varied and complex effects on children and works best when each parent is committed to cultivating a positive relationship with their child in the context of a friendly, cooperative parenting alliance. Also important is the sensitivity and love of parents and 'step-parents' towards children when a parent re-partners. This is important for key decision-makers, professionals, and parents to consider. Parental support could be provided via the family court and community support services, in counselling/therapy, and through resources made available to separating parents. In Australia, where legislation encourages consideration of shared care, the provision of

accompanying community-based services to help separating/separated parents work constructively together for the good of their children has been praised (Smyth et al., 2014). It is hoped that appropriate parental encouragement and support, and a better understanding of children and young people's multi-faceted experiences of shared care, will lead over time, to an improvement in children and young people's post-separation arrangements and experiences of shared care.

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