The Meaning of Home for Children and Young People after Separation

Monica Campo , Belinda Fehlberg , Kristin Natalier & Bruce Smyth

Published online: 05 Aug 2020.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 173

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Meaning of Home for Children and Young People after Separation

Monica Campo, Belinda Fehlberg, Kristin Natalier and Bruce Smyth

University of Melbourne, Flinders University, Australian National University

ABSTRACT

This paper explores 68 Australian children and young people's understandings of what 'home' means for them after their parents' separation. Home – a familiar yet complex concept of great personal and social significance – has been a research focus for many other disciplines but not family law. We found that home, as an idea and lived experience, was complex. Children and young people's descriptions of home conveyed an interaction of tangible and intangible dimensions. Home was rarely defined by children and young people solely in terms of a physical residence; rather it was a fundamentally relational idea and experience, largely created through everyday interactions with significant others. Our study suggests that home is not simply the outcome of conforming to a defined list of 'good' post-separation parenting practices, or dependent on the amount of time spent at each parent's residence: it has an existential significance for children and young people that matters deeply to them.

KEYWORDS
Home; children's views; post-separation parenting

Introduction

What does 'home' mean to children and young people whose parents separate? Where do they feel most at home? Who and what helps them feel most at home? This paper explores 68 Australian children and young people's responses to these questions as part of the first major study to consider conceptually what home means for them after their parents separate.

Our starting point for this research was the observation that home – a familiar yet complex concept of great personal and social significance – had been a research focus in many other disciplines but not family law (Natalier & Fehlberg 2015, Fehlberg *et al.* 2018). Our initial review of the literature suggested five dimensions of home: a place to retreat; a site of psychological and emotional wellbeing; meaningful relationships; routines and rituals; and a physical dwelling (Natalier and Fehlberg 2015, see also Mallett 2004). Home is crucial for the development of trust in the constancy of people and things, a sense of self and belonging, the capacity for agency, and psychological wellbeing (Giddens 1993, Easthope 2004). While it follows that children and young people may suffer when their need for home is overlooked (James 2013, Fehlberg *et al.* 2018), their

experiences of home and homemaking have remained largely unexplored in family law research.

This is so even following family law amendments in many Western countries, including Australia, encouraging separated parents to share the care of children across time and households. Although the common pattern that children in separated families live primarily with their mothers and spend time with their fathers continues (Qu *et al.* 2014), shared time parenting has gradually become more common in many Western countries – but has recently plateaued in Australia and the USA (Smyth 2017). Although the child's 'best interest' is still the 'paramount consideration' when Australian family law courts make parenting orders (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) s 60CA), there is a tendency in practice to focus on 'clock-time' (Haugen 2010) – that is, the amount of time children spend with each parent – rather than the quality of time spent with each parent.

Researchers (e.g., Smart 2002) have developed nuanced accounts of children and young people's post-separation lives, highlighting the importance of implicitly 'home-like' qualities. The recurring message of this literature is that children and young people's experiences of post-separation living are fundamentally defined by relationships with parents, step-parents and to a lesser extent, siblings (Smart 2002, Neale and Flowerdew 2007, Davies 2015, Johnsen *et al.* 2018). Relatedly, children and young people value the times when their parents are focused on them in ways that facilitate meaningful connection (e.g., Smyth 2004, Haugen 2010, Campo *et al.* 2012). The literature also points to the physical, emotional and psychological challenges for children in moving across households (Smart 2002, Merla and Nobels 2019), including their difficulties in claiming their own space and believing they belong (Smart 2002, Davies 2015, Wade & Whitehead 2016, Palludan and Winther 2017).

More recently, we re-analysed interviews with 22 children and young people (Fehlberg *et al.* 2018) conducted as part of a previous study on post-separation parenting (Campo *et al.* 2012). We discovered that children and young people valued four conditions that aligned with dominant definitions of home: a sense of ease and comfort; feeling welcome; sharing meaningful, often mundane, experiences with their parents; and access to personal belongings. We concluded that home was generated primarily though relationships with parents, step-parents and step-siblings. Francia and Millear (2019), building on this work, drew on retrospective interviews with 17 young people. They concluded that children's sense of home after parental separation could be corroded by conflict between parents and changed parent–child relationships when a parent re-partnered. Home, however, has not yet been the explicit focus of research and so its meaning and relevance in children and young people's lives after parents separate remains elusive.

In this current study we discovered that home, as an idea and a lived experience, was complex, nuanced and sometimes messy. Children and young people's descriptions of home conveyed the complicated interaction of tangible and intangible dimensions. Very few defined home solely in terms of a physical residence. For most, home was a fundamentally relational idea and experience, referenced to the presence of significant others and the feelings and activities associated with them, and given meaning in the context of their specific and changing lives. We explore these ideas in the following paper, with reference to children and young people's understanding of home as an idea and the existence of specific homes in their own lives.

The study

Our analysis draws on interviews with 68 children and young people and 39 participants' parents who lived in mostly metropolitan and some rural and regional locations across three Australian states and territories. Interviews occurred between September 2018 and April 2019. Participants were recruited through social media advertisements (mainly Facebook), family and relationship support services, researchers' professional networks, and through a previous study of shared parenting by one author (Smyth).

To be eligible for inclusion, children and young people's parents: must have separated after 7 June 2012 when the most recent amendments to the parenting provisions in Australia's Family Law Act came into effect through the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011; were not in family law proceedings at the time of the interview; and spent some time with their children aged between 8–18 years. Children and young people did not need to spend time with both parents to participate.

Following ethics approval from all researchers' institutions, we interviewed parents and children and young people separately. Consistent with previous research (Campo *et al.* 2012, Kaspiew *et al.* 2015, Carson *et al.* 2018) we interviewed only one parent (the parent who had volunteered to participate in the study) but all siblings aged over 8 years were eligible to participate. Interviews typically occurred in participants' homes, with a minority occurring in another location convenient for the family. All participants were thanked for their time with a 30 USD (AU) gift card.

The interviews were semi-structured, and audio-recorded with participants' permission. Slightly different interview schedules were used to guide parents and children and young people interviews, but each addressed the meaning and experience of home, daily living, care arrangements and relationships in each parent's house. Parents were also asked to provide some basic socio-demographic data, and information about care arrangements and family relationships. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to an hour.

This paper explores children and young people's answers to three questions central to the study: 'What does home mean to you?'; 'Are there people and things that help you feel more at home?'; and 'Where do you feel most at home?'. We conducted a thematic analysis, using NVivo to develop initial codes and then moving out of NVivo to conduct higher order analysis. Initial codes were developed collaboratively, refined by individual authors and then tested and finalised by all authors. Children and young people's responses to the specific questions were interpreted with reference to their interview as a whole and interviewer observations, and given context through parent descriptions of the family's socio-economic circumstances, history and current practices.

The sample

The research generated a purposive sample designed to prioritise meaning, process and diversity over generalisability. We interviewed 39 male and 29 female children and young people, and four fathers and 35 mothers. Most children and young people were of primary school age (8–12 years: $n = 44$), with remaining participants of secondary school age (13–18: $n = 24$). All children and young people were born in Australia, as were most of

their parents (with one parent born in New Zealand, one in Jamaica, and one in Malaysia); five children and young people identified as Aboriginal. Although we did not ask specifically about disability, our sample included several children and young people who were neurodiverse.

Forty children and young people lived in majority mother time arrangements (that is, more than 65% of time with their mother – consistent with the parenting time threshold used by Fehlberg *et al*. (2013), Qu *et al*. (2014) and Smyth *et al*. (2017) in Australia. Fifteen of these children and young people did not have any overnight stays with the other parent; of these, six had no contact with their father due to domestic and family violence, and five had no contact due to permanent family violence orders or 'no contact' family court orders. Nineteen children and young people were in equal shared time arrangements (spending at least 46% of the time with each parent) and seven were in substantial shared time (spending 35–45% of time with each parent) with mothers as the majority time parent. One young person lived mostly with a grandparent and spent time with each parent, and another lived mostly with his father and spent time with his mother. Thirty-two arrangements had been decided informally, with others determined by parenting plans or mediation (*n* = 20), court orders (*n* = 15; it was not always clear whether orders were by consent or judicially-determined) and one in accordance with the young person's choice; the remaining parents did not describe how arrangements were decided.

More than half (*n* = 38) of children and young people had experienced domestic and family violence (as reported by a parent; for ethical reasons, we did not directly ask children about this). This is consistent with patterns in larger Australian studies of post-separation parenting (e.g., Kaspiew *et al*. 2015). For the purposes of this study, domestic and family violence was defined as behaviours characterised by coercive control and including physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse. Thirty children and young people were spending time with perpetrators of domestic and family violence. Twenty parents said they avoided contact with the other parent, eight had no contact with the other parent (sometimes due to permanent family violence protection orders), 11 parents did not get along with the other parent and 26 parents reported getting along 'generally well' or 'really well' with their former partner; three did not answer this question. The length of time since separation ranged from six months to six years with an average of 3.5 years since separation.

Most of the children and young people had a parent reporting an annual personal income of between 41,000 USD and 80,000 USD before tax. The parents of a significant minority (*n* = 18) reported an income of under 40,000 USD and the parents of three children and young people earned over 100,000 USD per year. To provide context, the Australian median income is a little under 53,000 USD (ABS 2017) The parents of 25 children and young people described social security as their main source of income; remaining parents reported wages, self-employment or other sources of income, or did not disclose income source.

Most children and young people lived in a parent's owner-occupied (*n* = 36) or rented (*n* = 30) residence, and two lived with a parent in the home of an extended family member. Participants lived in a diverse range of accommodation, including houses, units, townhouses and rural properties. These varied from well-appointed surroundings in

middle-class suburbs to less affluent areas and dwellings that suggested far less access to financial resources.

The size and diversity of our sample incorporates many different experiences and perspectives. However, we do note that most of the child and young people in the study lived for most of the time with their mothers, reflecting patterns in the general population. We expect these living arrangements had some impact on how children and young people answered our questions. While there was some diversity in ethnic identity, all the children and young people in the study and most of their parents were Australian born – with a minority identifying as Aboriginal – and all were English speaking. As a result, this project cannot speak to culturally diverse meanings of home.

What does home mean to children and young people?

To capture children and young people's experiences of home after separation, we sought their definitions of home as an idea by asking, 'What does home mean to you?' Their answers expressed inter-related physical, relational and emotional dimensions of home.

Physical and material dimensions of home

Children and young people often linked home to a physical place and the personal belongings, household items or more generally, just 'stuff' it held. For instance, Dusty, in his early teens and living primarily with his mother commented, 'Home would be where your main possessions [are] and where you sleep'. Bobby, who had two mothers, lived with one and spent time with the other, offered a similar definition:

I: What does home mean to you?

Bobby: Street and number [gives address]. I think that's what my other mum's house is called.

I: So, you think about the addresses?

Bobby: Yeah.

I: Anything else that comes into your head when you think about home, ideas?

Bobby: Just some stuff that is in my house, or in the backyard or courtyard yeah that's pretty much it.

(Bobby, primary school age, mother time only.)

For some, a particular residence, most commonly the former family residence, was defined as home because it was the site of valued family and personal history. Polly, who was primary school aged and lived solely with her mother in the former family home, conveyed an acute sense that the physical held memories, making that place 'home':

> Well this home means to me that, well, before and after the separation it was, like, okay, it's the place I was born, it's the place I grew up in. Well, it's not really the place I was born but it was one of the second places that I was officially introduced to when I was a baby and I've been here for pretty much all my life.

When Kai (primary school aged, mother time only) was asked what home meant to him, he offered an answer that was simultaneously straightforward and held within it multiple dimensions that together created a holistic meaning: 'A house with food and a table and family and games and a room, and a kitchen and all that stuff'. The specifics of Kai's

definition differ from those of other participants but capture many of the elements evident across the group: physical spaces; relationships; and things to enjoy.

However, reading such descriptions as simply a list of things that make a home fails to capture the emotional weight of home for many participants. It was at that

point in the interviews – when we asked about what 'home' meant – that children and young people became most engaged with the questions we were asking. They spoke primarily of the intangible dimensions of home: a sense of ease and comfort; physical safety and emotional safety; and enjoying time with those around them. Relationships with others, most commonly family, underpinned these dimensions.

Relationship dimensions of home

Children and young people often explicitly referenced relationships – most commonly family – as core to what home meant. For example, Connor an older teenager living mostly with his mother, commented, 'I don't know, home is definitely like a family-oriented thing, so I'd say home is just wherever my family would be'. His definition was echoed by Willow, primary school aged participant living mostly with her mother, '[a]s long as you're with your family, I class that as a home.' For Makayla, in primary school and living solely with her mother, home meant being with family and the feelings of safety that engendered, 'Like, being near my family, like, it feels like a safe place to me, that's pretty much what I think'.

In children and young people's definitions of home, families were significant because of the emotional tenor and caring practices associated with those relationships. In Jackson's fulsome description:

> Well obviously home is, I guess, the whole rudimentary term, the place you live in and the people you spend it with. But I think it comes down to togetherness, honesty, I guess tranquillity as well. In a way it's nice to have things [to] be stable and trustworthy and there's no major issues that go on every now and then. I think peaceful, which might be opposed to what other people think, but personally I think, like, home is being at peace, hav[ing] somewhere to relax and spend time with the people you care about a lot. And regardless of whether or not the house is, like, amazing or something, I think that [it's] more a staging place where home could be anywhere from, like, a school to even a tent as long as you've got the right, I guess, ingredients to make it feel like a home.

(Jackson, late teens, mother time only.)

In Jackson's account, emotional connection, safety, and ease were understood with reference to his relationships with others – the people who he cared about and the people who cared for him.

Ease and comfort of home

A sense of ease and comfort was another clear theme across the group. Children and young people used descriptors such as 'comfortable' (Gab), 'relaxed and easy' (Augie) and 'chilled' (George). These feelings were the result of warm relationships with the people they cared about, as Laura articulates:

> When people just do the small things that are nice for you, like, you don't have to make a big gesture or anything, you can just smile sometimes and that makes me feel at home. When people are happy and not everyone's always stressed out, that makes me feel at home.

> (Laura, primary school aged, majority mother time.)

Other children and young people (*n* = 11) used words and phrases that echoed Laura's focus on happiness and specifically referenced enjoyment. For example, Tom articulated:

> Home means a place where loved ones are … and where I can have fun and want to be.

> (Tom, primary school aged, equal shared time.)

Tahlia linked a sense of being 'relaxed' with being around 'people I love', who together built a sense of connection:

> I don't know, I just come home and I feel relaxed, like, I get in and I'm comfortable. I don't ever want to get out or be away from here because I've got my own room. I've got that time and space to be on my own. I never feel trapped or anything, you know? I just get here and I'm relaxed and it's really good. I've got people that I love being around in the house and everyone is just working together really nicely. I think we all mesh well, and we're all open with each other and that's really nice.

> (Tahlia, early teens, majority mother time.)

Embedded in Tahlia's definition was of a sense of autonomy over one's space. For some, this perceived agency was reflected in an emphasis on having one's own space or time. Anouk, primary school aged and living only with her mother, described home as feeling that, 'basically I can relax there and I can do whatever I want'. Natasha, also in primary school and living in a complicated arrangement involving three residences, with her mother, father and extended family, said, 'I have a lot of freedom and I can do basically whatever I want'. Natasha's interview conveyed her sense of ease and comfort across the three different households in which she lived. Thus, for many of the children and young people in the study, home was partially defined by relationships that acknowledged young people's desire for autonomy.

Home as a safe place

Participants also included safety in their definitions of home. We didn't seek to define what safety meant to those children and young people who referred to it. However, it was evident that there were different but overlapping ways in which 'safety' was used. They included protection from physical and emotional harm, and a safe place to thrive, to be oneself and to let one's guard down without judgement. While our study did not specifically seek to examine the effect of domestic and family violence on children's understandings of home, its presence likely shaped their experiences given that the effects of exposure to domestic and family violence on children and young people include social, emotional, psychological and physical impacts, including trauma, that can continue after separation (Campo 2015, Kaspiew *et al.* 2017). While not examined in this paper, children and young people voluntarily described the absence of domestic and family violence once the parental relationship had ended as having a positive impact on home.

The importance of safety was evident in the following comment from Augie, whose father had been violent:

> [Home] means somewhere for me to stay, to feel protected I guess, yeah. I guess if I wasn't feeling safe then I'd want to feel at home, like if I was feeling threatened ... or something, yeah.
>
> (Augie, primary school aged, substantial shared, majority mother time,)

Similarly, Levi, whose mother disclosed a long history of domestic and family violence, emphasised the protective dimensions of safety:

> [Home is somewhere] where you can just run home and lock yourself in and just look at the outside world from a safe point of view. Like, it's the people in it that make you feel safe and welcomed.

(Levi, late teens, majority father time.)

Isla had lived in unsafe and unstable environments as a result of a long history of domestic and family violence and involvement of state child protection. Evident in Isla's description was the sense of having somewhere to thrive:

> [Home means a] safe environment where we can have fun and do a lot of things that we like to do, and to have shelter and family time, and sleep and that, and just probably help ourselves care for each, for ourselves, and organise a space for us to live in.
>
> (Isla, primary school aged, mother time only.)

Children and young people who had not experienced domestic and family violence described safety in ways that focused on the importance of being able to let down one's guard. For example, George, aged in his early-teens and living mostly with his mother, defined home as 'a place where you feel comfortable wherever, whenever, like if you're crying in the lounge room you feel like nobody would judge you'. Sofia, primary school aged and living in shared time arrangement, also drew on the idea of being accepted by others, describing a 'safe place where you can just go to relax and be yourself where nobody can ... judge you'.

In summary, children and young people in the study conveyed an idea of home that reflected the importance of relationships. This was most evident in their emphasis on connections with others, especially family, and implicit in their referencing of ease, autonomy and safety – all emotional states that are commonly engendered through our relationships with others. The material dimensions of home – as a place and its associated things – were inflected by those relationships and associated emotions. These themes were evident in participants' accounts of who and what helped them feel at home, and where they felt at home.

Who and what helps children and young people feel most at home?

Children and young people's responses to the question, 'Who and what helps you feel most at home?' highlighted the importance of those relationships most directly shaping their everyday lives. When asked whether there were people who made him feel more at

home, Brayden distinguished between the importance of his relationships and the relative unimportance of the physical dwelling in shaping where he felt at home:

> If Mum lived in a different house and we lived here, with whoever we would live with and it wasn't Mum or Dad, it wouldn't exactly be home because we're not living with the people who make our home 'home' because our home includes Mum here and Dad there. If they weren't there, then it wouldn't exactly be home.
>
> (Brayden, primary school aged, majority mother time.)

Fathers, and families more broadly, were important but children and young people more commonly described their mother as a person who helped them feel at home. For some children, the familiarity embodied in their relationships with their mothers strengthened their sense of home. Edie summarised the importance of that familiarity:

> Well my mum kind of makes me feel more at home because, like, she's just, I don't … *like* her more but like I've just spent more time with her than I have with Dad. Because he's in [a travelling profession] so he goes away a lot, so it's usually just Mum.
>
> (Edie, early teens, majority mother time.).

Siblings were also important people in helping children and young people feel at home, although we found a deeper level of ambiguity around how participants described their sibling relationships than has generally been discussed (e.g., Zartler & Grillenberger 2017). For some, every sibling helped them feel at home, while others selectively nominated certain siblings, and a minority did not mention siblings at all. This selectiveness perhaps reflected the ambivalence and volatility that can be elements of many sibling relationships. Summer, for example, enjoyed the company of her brothers but not her sisters:

> My siblings, definitely, my brothers, I enjoy hanging out with my brothers more than my sisters. I don't know why. I guess it's because my sisters are really annoying but my little brother's really cute and my stepbrother, he's really funny so that makes it nice.
>
> (Summer, primary school aged, majority mother time.)

While the simple presence of siblings could be important for children and young people's feeling at home, daily interactions also contributed. Ryan, in primary school and living mostly with his mother, nominated his younger brothers as people who made him feel more at home because 'they always laugh and scream and bash the table – it's just their daily thing'.

Even when siblings didn't live together, they could still evoke a sense of home. Rhys, in his late teens and living in an equal shared time arrangement, said his older sister no longer lived with either parent. Through their emotional closeness and memories of her constant presence in moving together between their mother's and father's residences, Rhys' sister remained a person who was central to helping him feel at home:

> I annoy the shit out of her but yeah, I love her very much and she's very important … I was always with her pretty much all the time, other than school obviously, because she would've been, when I was at Dad's she was at Dad's, when I was at Mum's she was at Mum's. So I was very close with her and she always, like, taught me what music to listen to and clothes to get and stuff like that. … Obviously she's, like, I'm just as close with her as I am with my parents,

but I just feel like I can't say home is either one of them, but her, well not her house, but I guess with her just as much.

A smaller number of children and young people mentioned extended family (including grandparents and cousins) or friends as creating a sense of home for them. These relationships had some similar qualities to those evident in relationships with immediate family members:

I: Are there people that make you feel more at home?

Jett: Well my cousins, especially my cousin [name]. He helps me get through all my stuff that I'm having a hard time with, and he makes me feel more loved and stuff.

(Jett, primary school aged, mother time only.)

I: Are there certain people that make you feel more at home?

Patrick: My parents, and while my friends because they like, because they're like good friends and all that, yeah. Like, whenever I be with my friends and like, I feel support[ed].

(Patrick, primary school aged, substantial shared time, majority mother.)

Emotional closeness and a sense of comfort extended to non-human relationships, with many children nominating their pets, especially dogs, as 'people' who helped them feel at home. These could be meaningful relationships for children and young people who had felt unsafe or unwelcome in the company of family members. Justin, in his early teens and living solely with his mother due to family violence, was reserved and answered most questions without emotion or interest but responded with warmth when talking about his dog.

I: Are there people that make you feel more at home?

Justin: My dog.

I: Why is that?

Justin: Because he's always happy.

Primary school aged Holly described a long history of feeling out of place in her fathers' dwellings, exacerbated in her current relationship with her father's new partner. Her pet dog was a constant presence in her life at her mother's and offered an easier source of connection:

I: Are there some people who make you feel more at home than other people?

Holly: Well I mean not many people do, but animals definitely.

I: Do they?

Holly: Yeah so [pet dog] makes me feel more at home, but [step mum's] cat didn't, didn't like me and didn't make me feel at home. She'd hiss at me.

(Holly, primary school aged, majority mother time.)

Children and young people did not generally mention personal belongings when asked what made them feel at home. This differed from earlier pilot work (Fehlberg et al. 2018), where we had found that access to things, especially electronic devices, was often the point

of discussion, possibly due to differences in socio-economic status between the two study groups and the greater prevalence and normalisation of technology in households since 2012 when the earlier data were collected. In this study, the exception was soft toys and beds for younger children and bedrooms (and associated 'stuff') for young people. For example, Hamish (primary school aged, mother time only) described, 'My teddy, [teddy's name]. I've had him ever since I was born, he's got no holes and he's really special to me.'

Similarly, there was a sense that Connor's personal belongings were imbued with a sense of comfort that helped make their location feel more like home:

> At my dad's place I don't think I have a bedroom there, which I guess is fair enough because I don't stay there. But at this place, all my stuff is here, and that's probably a big reason why I feel a bit more attached because I can come home, and all of my stuff is here. Whereas if I went to my dad's I'd have none of my stuff and I'd feel a bit more out of loop with things, or just a bit more out of my element.
>
> (Connor, late teens, majority mother time.)

For other children and young people, personal belongings were less important:

> I'm not someone who's, like, 'Oh need to have certain things around me' or 'I need to have a bed'. I mean, like, I can sleep on the floor if it meant that Mum and [sister] and Dad, I mean they're not going to be together obviously, but if they were all, if I could be around my family, you know, I'd sleep on the floor, yeah, no problem.
>
> (Rhys, late teens, equal shared time.)

Children and young people's descriptions of who or what helped them feel at home reinforced the relational elements of home. These relationships, in turn, were evident in where children felt most at home.

Where do children and young people feel most at home?

Our participants' responses to the question, 'Where do you feel most at home?' again highlighted the importance of relationships and associated emotions. Because home was fundamentally about relationships and emotions, there was not always a clear link between the places children and young people spent most time and where they felt home – and sometimes home was not referenced to a parent's residence.

Home as a parental residence

Most children, including those in equal shared time arrangements, described themselves as feeling more at home in one parent's home, most commonly their mother's:

> I mean if I think about home I think about Mum's place because I live here most of the time and Mum's place is like Mum's space.
>
> (Kiara, early teens, majority mother time.)

However, home wasn't only a matter of more time spent with primary carer mothers: the quality of care by, and relationships with, mothers was conveyed across children's and young people's accounts of home. Mothers were commonly described as creating homes,

both physically and emotionally, in a way that suggested warmth and attention to children and young people's needs. Participants' comments suggested a sense of home did not automatically emerge from familial and other relationships but was generated through effort and attention:

I: Is there somewhere that you feel most at home?

Owen: Somewhere that I feel most, like yeah, Mum's, just, like, whenever I'm close to Mum I feel really cosy, safe and happy. Like, I always give Mum a cuddle and a kiss, yeah, after school I'll do that.

(Owen, primary school aged, substantial shared time, majority mother.)

A mother's place as home was often described in terms of ease and comfort or emotional safety. Harry was in his early teens, lived mostly with his mother and was spending gradually less time with his father. He described a difficult relationship with his father and felt excluded due to the presence of his dad's new partner and her children. Harry felt most at home in his mother's house in light of the emotional safety, autonomy and care he experienced there:

I: And is there somewhere that you feel most at home?

Harry: Yeah probably like in this house [his mother's residence].

I: And why do you think that is?

Harry: It's just, like, a place that I can be open, there's always things that you need, there's things that you want as well.

I: Yeah so, it's the place you imagine coming home to? Are there certain things that make you feel more at home, wherever you are?

Harry: Probably just, like, not arguing around, not too many people I guess, and there's like not too many restrictions. I don't know. Because I just get, like, like I said, this weird feeling at my dad's house that just doesn't make it feel like home.

Experiencing a greater sense of home with one parent did not imply that children and young people felt no connection with their other parent. Archie, in his early teens, was spending time with his father on school holidays and living mostly with his mother. He described the idea of home as a place that was 'safe, kind of sanctuary you know you can just go to – I don't know, just be yourself kind of thing'. He experienced this most at his mother's residence, in ways that showed her work in creating a physical and emotional haven:

I: Is there somewhere you feel most at home?

Archie: Yeah, I would say probably my mum's, generally speaking.

I: Why is that?

Archie: Just because you know, house decorated, how it looks, how it feels kind of thing, general mood.

I: So, if you're going to describe the mood how would you put it into words? Could you?

Archie: Light and comfortable.

In contrast, when Archie spent time with his father, he was less comfortable in that residence. However, Archie's father built a sense of connection with him beyond the residence, away from his new partner and their young child:

> Archie: I'd say I kind of like going to my dad's place but, like, there really isn't much to do except, like, at his place there would be just on a computer or, you know, watching something maybe – that would be at his place so …
>
> I: So is it seeing your dad that you like at Dad's place … ?
>
> Archie: Oh, seeing my dad, I like that a lot – going to the movies, going to some sort of theme park – I really like doing that with him, yeah, that's usually quite fun.

Archie was clear that while his mother's house *felt* more like home, he enjoyed being with his father.

There were other children and young people who discussed feeling at home with their fathers even though home was mainly with their mothers. Stella was the eldest of several siblings each of whom had high needs and whose mother was struggling to cope with their significant demands and financial strain. Stella and her siblings spent every second weekend with her father in very cramped conditions. She described a close relationship with her dad and enjoying the time spent with him. Stella felt more at home in her father's *company* but at her mother's *place* which was the former family home where she had grown up:

> I: Is there somewhere that you feel most at home?
>
> Stella: I think it's [my mum's house], because there's a lot more space, and it doesn't feel like, with my dad's house it is a rental, and it doesn't feel like it's a rental or anything …
>
> I: Are there certain people that make you feel more at home?
>
> Stella: I think it's my dad, I don't see my aunty or grandma or grandpa a lot because they're always somewhere far away …
>
> (Stella, primary school aged, majority mother time.)

Stella and Archie's descriptions convey that 'feeling at home in a place' was not the sole way of enjoying and valuing a relationship with a parent.

While most children and young people in our study spent time with both parents, few referred to two residences when asked where home was for them. This was so even for most of those living in shared time arrangements (see, for example, Owen, earlier in this section). Summer, primary school aged, was one of the few to say that she had two homes. Summer was spending minority time with her father who had re-partnered. She had recently spent less time there due to her father's work commitments and logistics of travelling between houses. However, she felt at home in both places and described close relationships with her parents and step-mother:

> I: Are there places where you feel more at home?
>
> Summer: No, not really. I always feel like I've never really felt uncomfortable with where I am or anything. I've just always felt comfortable where I am but I do like being at home or like with friends, having lots of fun in the yard, much more than I like being in a classroom.

Summer mentioned the couch at her mother's and her father and step-mother's lounge room and her bedrooms in both homes as important spaces for connection and privacy, respectively. Her experiences were different in each house, but her father, mother and step-mother all worked to create a sense of ease, connection and fun – a sense of home.

Home not as a parental residence

For some children, home was disconnected from a parental residence. Sometimes this appeared to be linked to sadness about their parents' separation and associated change. Logan was in primary school and living in a complicated shared time arrangement. Logan's mother had recently moved from the large former family home to a smaller, more affordable residence. Logan expressed a sense of sadness about moving from the former family home to this current home:

> I just didn't worry about the old house because I was kind of sad moving because I really liked that house because it was bigger …. And I got used to it [the new house] pretty quickly but then I just kept getting reminded about the old house.

Throughout the interview, Logan spoke with more detail about the former family home than either parent's current residence and seemed disinterested in the everyday places of his life. This perhaps influenced his response when asked: 'Is there a place you feel more at home?'

> Logan: No.
>
> I: Are there any people that make you feel more at home?
>
> Logan: Mum and Dad do, and Grandma and Grandpa.

Even though Logan was unable to say where home was, his answer here does suggest that relationships with his family offered him a sense of home. While not a specific place, home was something that Logan experienced in his life through the presence and efforts of his parents and extended family.

Sometimes ambivalence about parental residence was engendered through difficult relationships. George, in his early teens and living with his mother most of the time in the former family home, spoke of challenges in that relationship. He had equivocal feelings about the house he predominately lived in: it was 'home' because he had lived there his whole life and it held so much of his family history but simultaneously the house held bad memories of conflict between all current and previous members of the household. These difficult relationships corroded his feelings of comfort and belonging in the house:

> I'm sort of conflicted about calling this [mother's residence] my home. I mean this is my home but I, that's why I'm, like, conflicted about saying that this feels completely like home because I have lost a lot of trust in my mum and communication isn't so good between anybody.

George experienced a greater sense of connection with his father but did not feel comfortable at his house. After a long period of unstable accommodation, his father had recently moved into his girlfriend's home. George felt unwelcome and unsafe there

due to the presence of his father's new partner and lack of a bedroom, bed and privacy. There were other places where George felt more at home because he felt emotionally safe:

> George: Yep definitely, maybe like at one of my mate's places, that's a really good place because there's no conflict. I don't have to deal with conflict there and everything's chilled and stuff. I feel safe there. I guess that could be another home sort of thing.
>
> I: Are there people that make you feel more at home?
>
> George: Yeah, I guess. People that I trust and feel safe with. Yeah, there's a couple of people.

In the presence of conflictual relationships with his parents, George sought a stronger sense of home elsewhere.

As George's comments suggested, sometimes home could be in unexpected or non-conventional places – but not always because of difficult relationships. Remi, in primary school, spent equal time with both parents following a period of parental separation under the one roof. His father had recently rented an apartment which lacked an outdoor area and offered limited personal space: Remi shared a bedroom with his father there. When at his mother's place (the former family home) he had his own bedroom and there was a large garden, but also the knowledge that this house would soon be sold. Despite clearly articulating what home meant and who helped him feel at home, where Remi felt was home was unexpected:

> I: What does home mean as an idea or as a thing for you?
>
> Remi: Oh just a place to relax and to settle down after school or to watch TV or something.
>
> I: And is there somewhere you feel most at home?
>
> Remi: My bedroom.
>
> I: So your bedroom where?
>
> Remi: At my mum's place but not my dad's place – well, I feel most at home at the park even though it's not really home. It's in the neighbourhood though, it's just across the street.
>
> I: And why do you feel at home in your bedroom here and in the park near your dad's?
>
> Remi: Because my bedroom, no one's ever there really except for my brother sometimes – my mum when she's asking me a question. And the park, there's loads of trees fresh air, there's a playground to play on, sometimes I can kick the football.
>
> I: Are there people who make you feel more at home?
>
> Remi: My brother and my mum and my dad.
>
> I: And why is that?
>
> Remi: Because they're always at home. They're my family and I'm always near them.

Remi's comments remind us that the idea of home, while important, may not be the only useful lens for understanding children's and young people's lived experiences of parental separation. At a time when there were many changes in Remi's life, he understood home more expansively and in a way that was not solely linked to a residence that he would soon lose or one that was difficult to be in.

For other children and young people, home existed most intensely in memories rather than current circumstances. Isla had experienced a traumatic early life including many moves, unsafe environments, a history of domestic and family violence and state child protection involvement. There had been no contact with her father for many years due to a permanent family violence intervention order. She had also experienced more recent domestic and family violence within in her home. Isla's nostalgic and emotional description of a place she lived in when she was younger was at odds with her own descriptions of pre-separation family life:

> There was this place called [name of street] and we lived there with Dad before he left, and I used to have a friend that lived across the road and then we'd walk to school every day, which was in [name of town] and also it felt more like home because it wasn't, like, we didn't have like heaps of cool stuff … because I had this climbing tree that, thinking tree, that I would go in, and down the road there [was a supermarket], a playground and down the street was another person we knew, and he was really close to our family kind of, because he went to our school and we were friends with him for a long time.

(Isla, primary school, mother time only.)

For Isla, a past imagined home was recalled in a current context of violence, sadness and loss. She remembered her family relationships in the past as more connected than they were now. The role of memory, nostalgia and an idealised projection of what home could or should be like were elements of Isla's descriptions. Isla's memories are a reminder that for the children and young people we spoke to, home was a resonant idea – but one that could be complex in its manifestation as a place. Regardless of the site, home was built and girded by the relationships with people who mattered most in children's and young people's lives.

Discussion and conclusions

Home has been a shadowy presence in the literature on children and young people's post-separation lives and notably absent in the Australian family law context (Natalier and Fehlberg 2015). We found, however, that how children and young people describe home conveys a clear sense of what matters to them when parents separate. Consistent with dominant definitions (Mallet 2004), their descriptions reflected a continuum of physical and intangible dimensions. However, home for our participants centred on relationships more than physical space or material possessions (Smart 2002, Fehlberg et al. 2018, Francia and Millear 2019). The physical dimensions of home held significance for children and young people, but more as a repository of memories and as an expression of relationships past and present. They mattered most when children and young people interpreted them as holding evidence of their parents' attentiveness or lack of attentiveness to their needs. Children and young people emphasised the everyday ways in which their closest relationships were supported and nurtured. Again, this is consistent with previous research (Campo et al. 2012, Davies 2015, Fehlberg et al. 2018)

Given that home for the children and young people in the study was very much about relationships and feelings, it was also more messy, complex and nuanced than dominant Western cultural imagery might suggest ('Home sweet home', 'Home is where the heart is', 'There's no place like home'). As Smart (2002) has recognised in her work on

children's post-separation lives more generally, feelings of deep distress, loss and conflict, as well as warmth and love were embedded in these relationships. These feelings informed children and young people's experiences of home.

Our participants' accounts conveyed that, in the words of Smart, 'home is no more static than personal relationships' (Smart 2007: 167). Because home is about relationships, it can change. Where and with whom children and young people felt at home could shift with common post-separation life events such as parents re-partnering and moving house. Sometimes children had, and then lost, a sense of home through transitions or changed family circumstances. There may be times when parents' own needs and desires for home can be in tension with those of their children. This was most acutely suggested when parents re-partnered, had to sell the family home or change parenting arrangements (Davies and Christensen 2018, cf. Francia and Millear 2019). Our participants' descriptions suggested that attentiveness in ways that might seem mundane to adults could help reduce the impacts of that tension: a cuddle on the couch, walking the dog, conversation over a meal, and making space for children's personal belongings. Common to all was a responsiveness to the specific needs and desires of that child or young person and an implicit message that they were valued and welcome. Participants were keenly aware of the distinction between what Christensen (2002, p. 35) referred to as 'proximity' (physical closeness) and 'presence' (being 'emotionally and mentally aware of, and alert to, one another'). Lack of attentiveness resulted in children and young people feeling an absence of connection and belonging. This observation held true regardless of participants' socio-economic background and parenting time arrangements. While the importance of attentiveness seems implicit in previous research, in our study its significance crystallised.

For most children and young people, home was one place connected to a parental residence. However, because relationships were central, experiencing home in one place did not exclude feeling at home with others. Spending most time with one parent did not determine the capacity for the child or young person to experience their other parent's residence as home, or to feel 'at home' with that parent (this was consistent with our previous analysis). Similarly, shared time did not necessarily equate to two homes. It was parents' openness to opportunities for 'being-in-the-moment' time (Smyth 2004) and willingness and capacity to focus on their children – to creating space to be with them – that children and young people noticed and valued. While attentiveness is likely to be easier for parents when they and their children are embedded in each other's everyday lives, children and young people also experienced this with parents outside of majority and shared time arrangements.

Our study also suggests the need to be sensitive to the existence of home beyond parental residence. While this idea has been explored in previous research on children's geographies (e.g. Harden 2000), it has not been acknowledged as an element of children and young people's post-separation lives. We found that sometimes children and young people conveyed a sense of disconnect from where their parents lived, for reasons including a sense of loss arising from the separation and associated changes and difficult relationships with parents and step-parents. Home still mattered, but might be found in unexpected places, such as a friend's place or a park. Our sense is that when children and young people look for home in unexpected places, there is a need to be sensitive to the possibility that they are experiencing change or their needs are not being met.

A distinguishing feature of this study was the presence of past or ongoing domestic and family violence in the lives of more than half of the children and young people we interviewed. Some participants directly spoke of that violence as shaping their experiences and understandings of home, but many did not. We suggest, however, that so many children and young people's emphasis on safety reflected their experiences of violence. While home as a haven is a well-recognised dimension of home (Mallet 2004), our findings here suggest this may have a greater significance for children and young people than has been recognised. Wardhaugh's (1999) comments about the meaning of home for women experiencing homelessness and domestic and family violence were true for our participants: 'safety and risk, security and fear, privacy and invasion' will sometimes exist in tension within the one space. Children and young people were also acutely aware of positive changes in their home life if violence ended – an issue we will return to in a later paper. Given that experiences of domestic and family violence are widespread in separated families there is a need to move beyond thinking about safety narrowly as a risk factor when parenting arrangements are made. Safety – emotional and physical, as protection and the basis for autonomy and growth – is a core component of many children and young people's lived experiences post-separation and needs to be valued and recognised as such.

Towards the end of our last study, we questioned what distinction could be made between home and positive post-separation parenting (Fehlberg *et al.* 2018, p. 21). The latter has been consistently defined to include effective discipline, parental warmth and involvement in children's lives (Amato and Keith 1991, Kelly and Emery 2003). In this study, we found that a sense of home could exist in situations where mothers or fathers did not entirely conform to positive post-separation parenting. Home is not simply the outcome of conforming to a defined list of parenting practices: it has an existential significance for children and young people that matters deeply to them. Tellingly, children and young people were most engaged when they had the opportunity to speak explicitly about home at a more abstract level and as an experience, rather than when they were answering questions about their everyday lives designed to help us understand parenting practices. This leads us to suggest that good post-separation parenting is what parents ideally *do*, while home is what children and young people *feel*.

Home, then, warrants attention independent of concrete questions around parenting time arrangements and practices. This prospect is challenging given ongoing emphasis on spending residence-based time with parents. While we acknowledge the sense of connection that can develop and be maintained through residence-based time, this is a narrow way of ordering children and young people's post-separation lives. As family law professionals and parents, we need to make space for children and young people's lived experiences and move beyond preoccupation with 'clock and calendar' time (Haugen 2010) or so-called 'spreadsheet parenting'. Home is an idea that resonates with children and young people and offers a way of re-framing the current dominant focus. This might be facilitated by incorporating the questions that provide the focus of this paper into the questions that we ask of children and young people when determining their care arrangements: What does 'home' mean to you? Who and what help you feel most at home? and Where do you feel most at home? Listening to these answers will be

demanding – as Smart (2002) notes, 'children give complex accounts that may not fit neatly into either adult or legal agendas' and 'there are the problems of how to hear what is being said and then what to do with the diversity of accounts likely to be expressed'. Deep listening, however, must occur if we are to develop our thinking in new and more child-responsive ways.

Acknowledgments

Disclosure statement

References

Amato, P. and Keith, B., 1991. Parental divorce and the wellbeing of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 110 (1), 26–46. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.110.1.26

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Characteristics of Employment*. Cat. No. 6333.0. https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6333.0Main±Features1August%202017?OpenDocument (accessed 08/12/19)

Campo, M., *et al.*, 2012. Shared parenting time in Australia: exploring children's views. *Journal of Social Welfare & Family Law*, 34 (3), 295–313. doi:10.1080/09649069.2012.750480

Campo, M. (2015). *Children's exposure to domestic and family violence*. Child Family Community Australia Paper No. 36, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia.

Carson, R., *et al.* (2018). *Children and young people in separated families: family law system experiences and needs*. Final Report, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia.

Christensen, P.H., 2002. Why more 'quality time' is not on the top of children's lists: the 'qualities of time' for children. *Children & Society*, 16 (2), 77–88. doi:10.1002/chi.709

Davies, H., 2015. *Understanding Children's Personal Lives and Relationships*. Palgrave McMillan.

Davies, H. and Christensen, P., 2018. Sharing spaces: children and young people negotiating intimate relationships and privacy in the family home. *In*: T. Skelton, S. Punch, and R. Vanderbeck, eds.. *Families, Intergenerationality and Peer Group Relations*. Springer, Singapore, 27–49.

Easthope, H., 2004. A place called home. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 21 (3), 128–138. doi:10.1080/14036090410021360

Fehlberg, B., *et al.*, 2013. Post-separation parenting and financial arrangements: exploring changes over time. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 27 (3), 359–380. doi:10.1093/lawfam/ebt008

Fehlberg, B., Natalier, K., and Smyth, B., 2018. Children's experiences of 'home' after parental separation. *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 30, 3–21.

Francia, L. and Millear, P.M., 2019. Less house, more home: adolescent and young adults' experiences of home following parental separation. *Family Law Review*, 8 (1), 1–13.

Giddens, A., 1993. *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Stanford University Press, California, US.

Harden, J. (2000). There is no Place Like Home. The public/private distinction in children's theorizing of risk and safety, Childhood, 7, 43–59

Haugen, G., 2010. Children's perspectives on everyday experiences of shared residence: time, emotions and agency dilemmas. *Children & Society*, 24 (2), 112–122. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2008.00198.x

James, A., 2013. Home talk: girls talking about family togetherness. *Home Cultures*, 10 (3), 315–328. doi:10.2752/175174213X13739735973462

Johnsen, I.O., Litland, A.S., and Hallström, I.K., 2018. Living in two worlds – children's experiences after their parents' divorce – A qualitative study. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 43, 44–51. doi:10.1016/j.pedn.2018.09.003

Kaspiew, R., *et al.*, 2015. *Evaluation of the 2012*. Family Violence Amendments: Synthesis report. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia.

Kaspiew, R., Horsfall, B., and Qu, L., 2017. *Domestic and family violence and parenting: mixed methods insights into impact and support needs: final report*. Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, Sydney, Australia.

Kelly, J.B. and Emery, R.E., 2003. Children's adjustment following divorce: risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Social Science*, 52 (4), 352–362. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00352.x

Mallett, S., 2004. Understanding home: a critical review of the literature. *The Sociological Review*, 52 (1), 62–89. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x

Merla, M. and Nobels, B., 2019. Children negotiating their place through space in multi-local, joint physical custody arrangements. *In*: L. Merla and B. Nobels, eds.. *Families in Motion: ebbing and Flowing Through Space and Time*. Emerald Group Publishing, UK, 79–95.

Natalier, K. and Fehlberg, B., 2015. Children's experiences of 'home' and 'homemaking' after parents separate: A new conceptual frame for listening and supporting adjustment. *Australian Journal of Family Law*, 29, 111–134.

Neale, B. and Flowerdew, J., 2007. New structures, new agency: the dynamics of child–parent relationships after divorce. *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 15 (1), 25–42. doi:10.1163/092755607X185546

Palludan, C. and Winther, I.W., 2017. 'Having my own room would be really cool': children's rooms as the social and material organizing of siblings. *Journal of Material Culture*, 32 (1), 42–50.

Qu, L., *et al.*, 2014. *Post-separation parenting, property and relationship dynamics after five years*. Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia.

Smart, C., 2002. From children's shoes to children's voices. *Family Court Review*, 40 (3), 307–391. doi:10.1111/j.174-1617.2002.tb00842.x

Smart, Carol, 2007. *Personal life. New directions in sociological thinking.*. Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

Smyth, B., 2004. Time to rethink time? The experience of time with children after divorce. *Family Matters*, 71 (Winter), 4–10.

Smyth, B., 2017. Introduction to the special issue: special issue on shared-time parenting after separation. *Family Court Review*, 55 (4), 494–499. doi:10.1111/fcre.12299

Smyth, B. and Chisholm, R., 2017. Shared-time parenting after separation in Australia: precursors, prevalence, and postreform patterns. *Family Court Review*, 55 (4), 586–603. doi:10.1111/fcre.12306

Wardaugh, J., 1999. The unaccommodated woman: home, homelessness and identity. *Sociological Review*, 47 (1), 91–109. doi:10.1111/1467-954X.00164

Whitehead, D.L., 2016. Is shared custody the 'alchemy' of family law? *Canadian Family Law Quarterly*, 35, 1–29.

Zartler, Ulrike, and Grillenberger, Katrin. (2017). Doubled homes—doubled social ties? Children's relationships in post-divorce shared residence arrangements. *Children & society,* 31, 144–156.