Two homes, one heart

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leading a study of 3,492 children into how remarriage and integration into a blended family affected behaviour throughout their early and mid-adolescent years, Rebecca M. Ryan of the
Jacqui Marquis-Conder, Principal Psychologist of Youth Psychology, a private practice in Sydney (http://www.youthpsychology.com.au/), offers tips on how parents can ease the pressure on children for whom they share care:

1. Establish a shared-care arrangement that is child focused not parent focused. "A shared-care arrangement should always reflect the needs of the child first, not the parent. Parents need to ask themselves: ‘Is this about me wanting to get my way or have control of the situation, or is this about what is best for my child?’ For example, if the child must be at both before- and after-school care or do a very long commute in order to spend a particular day with a parent, is this actually in the best interests of the child? This is for the parents to decide, depending on their child’s age and particular needs."

2. Establish a routine, particularly during the week. "This can be a huge challenge but if it can be achieved for both parents to enforce regular homework, meal, and bedtimes for their children, this will help the school week go smoothly."

3. No matter how tempting, never speak badly about the other parent to the children (this goes for new partners as well). "This doesn’t mean that you have to say nice things about the other parent but in this case it is wise to follow the good old-fashioned advice ‘if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say anything at all’. This includes subtle jokes, hints or sarcastic comments – even very young children understand the meaning behind these! And do not under any circumstances share communication from the other parent with your child such as showing them email or text message correspondence."

4. Make pick-ups and drop-offs as stress free as possible for the children. "If the conflict is so high that parents cannot even be in the same room, then try to establish a neutral pick-up and drop-off spot such as a public park or café. All heated discussions should be held well away from the hearing or sight of the children (whether in person, on the phone, or through text message)."