

# It's my divorce, too

*For the children, divorce can be a minefield of parental absences, new homes, new rules – and even new family members. So it's just as well that these days, their needs take priority. By Claire Scobie.*

It's a nightmare for any parent: once the decision is made to separate, how do you tell the children? For one young boy in Sydney's eastern suburbs and his brothers, "that chat" came one weekend two years ago. "It was something really scary," says the 10-year-old. "Mum and Dad said, 'We'll need some time apart.' My brother, who was six, said, 'I feel like skateboarding.' He didn't get the blast then; he got the big bang a bit later."

The year 6 student had already known something was amiss because his parents had been disappearing into the garage in the weeks before. So he hid the baby monitor in there to find out what was going on: "I wanted to see – to record – and they were arguing. I don't want that again."

According to 2006 figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, about half the 50,000 Australian divorces annually involve children – a figure that doesn't include de facto relationships. Yet their voices are rarely heard.

Until now, much of the legal and psychological attention has focused on how a child reacts to the "big bang" and its aftershocks. However, new research from the US by psychologist Judith Wallerstein, who has studied the long-term effects of divorce for 25 years, suggests that the critical experience for the child comes much later, when new family units are being built. If there was any disparity in how siblings were treated by parents or step-parents in the new set-up, she reports, "one or more children showed serious psychological and learning problems".

In those cases where children are too young to

remember, the initial shock seems easier to bear. Ben Andronicus, 16, has no clear memories of his parents together as they split when he was three. He's convinced that it's "worked out better because I've grown up used to it".

Street-wise yet thoughtful, with blond hair and an earring, Ben divides his time between his dad, Philip Andronicus, 56, in Sydney's Darlinghurst and his mum, Nicola Tomlin, and half-sister, Indira, 9, an hour's drive away in Berowra. Until two years ago, he stayed with Philip, a builder, on weekends. Now it's a 50/50 split.

Since July 2006, a quiet revolution has been occurring in family law, following the amendment to the Family Law (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act. The changes recognise a child's right to have a meaningful relationship with both parents (except where violence or child abuse has been involved) and encourages mediation with the assistance of nationwide Family Relationship Centres.

"Instead of saying we'll ration out appointed time to Dad with access or visitation, we say we'll now start halfway," says psychologist Jill Burrett, co-author with Michael Green of the book *Shared Parenting: Raising Your Children Cooperatively After Separation*. But there's a long way to go: 80 per cent of children from separated families still live in sole-mother custody arrangements and as many as one third have little or no contact with their father.

"Children are happiest when their needs rather than the needs of their parents take priority," continues Burrett. "If children sense their parents want a 50/50 timeshare because each parent can't bear the →

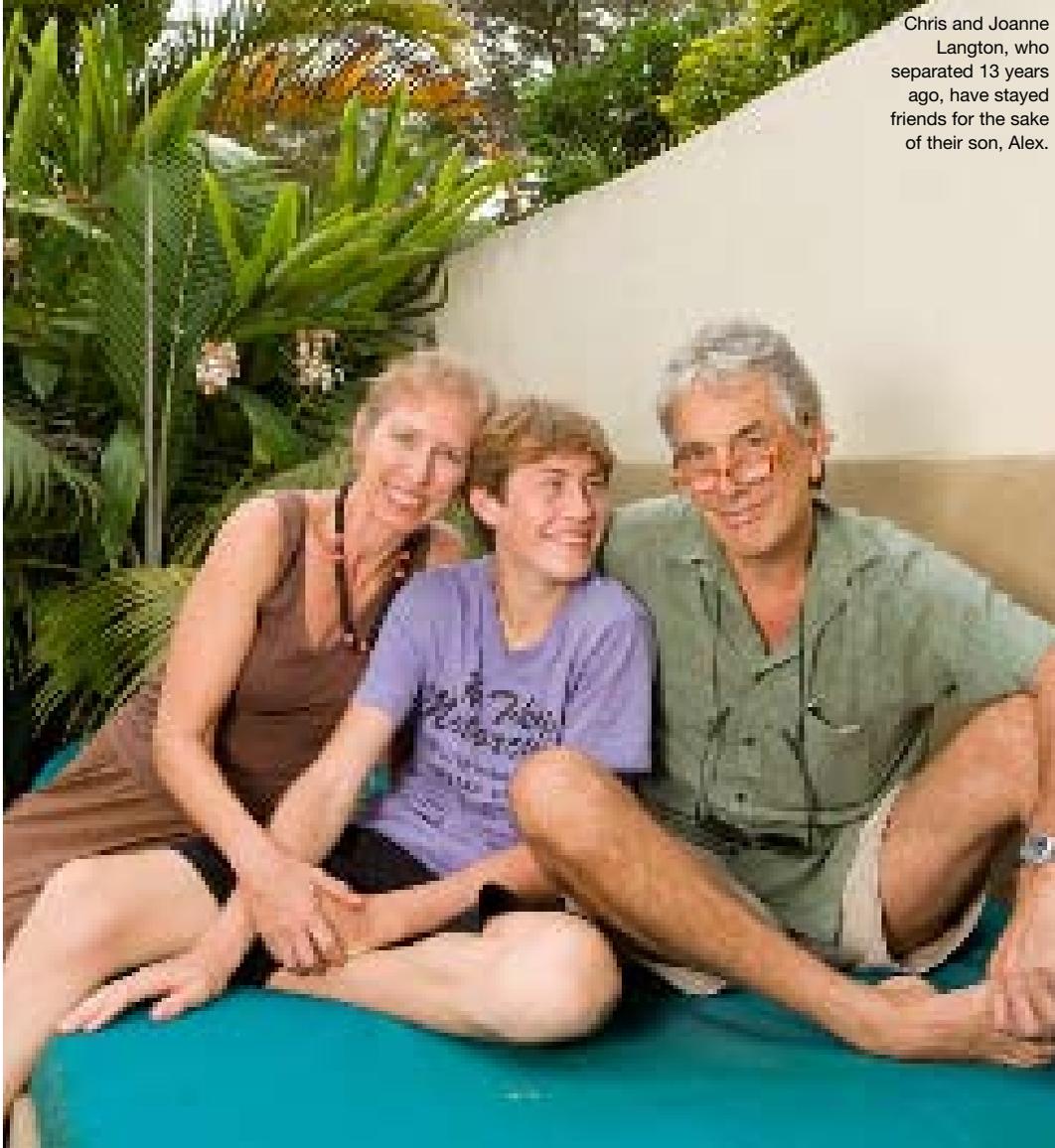


Photography: Pip Blackwood



**“It’s more difficult now I’m older. I can’t tell Dad stuff – who I like, boys – like I could before. But I like that I get two sets of clothes.”**

Pre-teen Juliette Morse (at home in Sydney with her dad, John) alternates between her parents’ homes.



Chris and Joanne Langton, who separated 13 years ago, have stayed friends for the sake of their son, Alex.

**“My parents split when I was a teen. With the hindsight of what happened in my family, I knew it would be much better if we all got along.”**

three older sons from his first marriage. Morse, who collects Aboriginal art, has exposed Juliette to different cultures through their travels around Australia. Meanwhile, she plugs him into the pre-teen world.

But dads can be embarrassing. “He sings and dances in front of my friends,” she rolls her eyes. “It’s more difficult now I’m getting older. I can’t tell Dad stuff – who I like, boys – like I could before.” It’s not uncommon for fathers to have a harder time relating to their adolescent daughters as they grow up: the girls would prefer to be out shopping with mum.

John indulges his daughter, complains his ex; Juliette says her mum is strict. Two homes means two sets of rules. “In traditional families, mothers are good at the warm, fuzzy things; fathers at fun and discipline,” says Jill Burrett. “Both need to become all-rounders when they separate. The mother’s got to be tougher than before.”

Two homes mean parallel, shiftwork parenting. You’re either on or off duty. It’s also two of everything. “I like that. I get two sets of clothes,” says Juliette. “If they were together, I wouldn’t spend as much time – quality time – with them as I do.” But being a yo-yo is tiring – especially for early teens whose hormones are haywire. For Ben, having two houses is ideal. “My friends are jealous. You can be irritated by parents, so 50/50 is just right. Just before the part where it gets irritating, you swap.”

Shared parental care also doesn’t work where there’s ongoing conflict, says McIntosh. “These children live between two deeply divided worlds and they become a divided – rather than a shared – child. They have to cross a no-man’s land and put up with hostile fire from one parent about the other.”

Indeed, exposure to conflict is the clincher, says Dr Susie Sweeper, a psychology lecturer at Deakin University’s school of psychology, who also runs post-separation parenting groups at the Family Mediation Centres in Victoria. “Arguing when the child has gone to bed doesn’t mean they’re not listening,” she warns. “A telephone conversation with a best friend bagging the partner is still exposure.”

As children don’t have the developmental tools to deal with or even understand their emotions, trauma-type reactions can develop: anxiety, aggression, rejection of one parent. The boy, now eight, whose response to his parents’ split was to want to go skateboarding, says, “It took some time to realise Dad wouldn’t be back. I didn’t really feel angry, just frustrated.” A year after the separation, his mum reported more tantrums. Two years on from “that →

thought of the other having more time, the children feel more like possessions to be fought over than people to be loved.”

This sense of being an emotional football is deeply corrosive. Ben says that he “never had divided loyalties” and loves both his parents equally. He believes that’s because, generally, they got on. That is until last year, when they fell out over financial issues. “Then I was in the middle,” he says, grinning sheepishly. “So I could get away with a lot – I’d say I was at one place when I wasn’t and they wouldn’t check because Mum wouldn’t talk to Dad.”

“It was horrible. Poisonous,” says Nicola Tomlin, his 48-year-old mother. “It was very hard on Ben, who was shocked to see how angry [with Philip] I was.” Tomlin took two part-time jobs on top of her day job as an editor and Ben had to take on more responsibility, babysitting his younger sister. His schoolwork suffered. “Year 9 he was all over the place,” says Tomlin. “One time he was out till 2am. Then I had to have words with his father.”

Subsequently, his parents are talking again and Philip pays for his son’s private education. There’s a downside, though, for Ben, who “has to deal with us being a team again,” laughs Tomlin.

Although the law promotes shared parenting, it’s

a model that doesn’t always work with infants, “who can inadvertently lose attachment with both parents,” says Dr Jenn McIntosh, adjunct associate professor at La Trobe University’s School of Public Health and the clinical director of Family Transitions, a family psychology consultancy. “It’s a huge developmental dilemma for infants and toddlers when given shared time between parents. A two-year-old can’t cope with four overnights away from their primary carer. It’s terribly important for adults to get the pace right. Teens often cope better – or with their feet.”

When John Morse, 61, and Lucy Markovich, 40, separated after seven years in 2000, they eased into co-parenting as their daughter, Juliette, grew older. “I felt very strongly that I didn’t want to be a father who got access every second weekend,” says Morse, chairman of Tourism Victoria. Juliette, now 10, generally spends one week each with her parents. “Sometimes she’ll spend more time with her mum. She’s old enough to have a say where she wants to be under our guidance.”

Wearing a flowery dress in the backyard of Morse’s downtown Sydney terrace, the sparkly Juliette poses for the camera while her dad looks on dotingly. “I don’t have a nine-to-five job. I’ve got time to give her my undivided attention,” says Morse, who also has

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chat”, he and his two brothers now see their father every weekend and things have settled. “I’m sad because I don’t see Dad as much,” he says. “I miss him [but] I feel happy in myself. I’m less frustrated.”

Sweeper’s advice is to make the post-separation relationship as businesslike as possible: texts, emails, shared contact schedules. “Our research shows that if there’s poor communication between parents after separation, it will generally not improve over time.”

When architect Chris Langton, 58, arrives at the house of his ex-wife, Joanne Langton, in Mullumbimby, northern NSW, he flops on the sofa. “It’s absolutely cool for him to come in the house, jump in the pool,” says his 16-year-old son, Alex, at my look of surprise.

Chris is a firm believer that most damage after a break-up happens in the first few weeks. “I was conscious about being very cool,” he says, helping himself to a biscuit. “When you’ve crossed the line in the sand and phoned the lawyer, you’re gone. It becomes adversarial.” This reactive time is the *raison d’être* for Family Relationship Centres, according to McIntosh. If couples can get in early and brainstorm, it can prevent the wrong die being cast.

When the Langtons separated 13 years ago, they were in the planning stages of building a house. “Chris was my architect,” says New York-born Joanne, 55. “I thought it would be better to stick with him to avoid ill will. My parents split when I was a teen, it was acrimonious, so I’ve seen the other side of things. With the hindsight of what happened in my family, I knew it would be much better if we all got along.”

Chris built the house and Joanne kept the fridge – with Chris’s favourite mayo in stock. When Alex was younger, his father would stay over on Christmas Eves. “On Christmas morning, we’d wake up early and he’d do a gourmet breakfast,” says Alex, a gentle lad with cornflower-blue eyes.

Even when Joanne, a yoga teacher, got together with her partner, Jeff Dawson, nine years ago, things didn’t change. “When Chris felt like it, he’d drop by and drive Alex to school,” she says. On weekends Alex would stay with his dad on his bush property. “I thought it was great when Joanne started living with Jeff,” says Chris. “She became more relaxed.”

Such inclusiveness is, sadly, uncommon. Parents often worry, says McIntosh, “about being usurped by the new partner. But the children are very clear on who’s who.” When the new partner becomes permanent, an entirely different dynamic begins. Data from Wallerstein’s latest 10-year study, which

Ben Andronicus, 16, spends equal time living with his mother, Nicola Tomlin, and his dad, Phillip Andronicus, in Sydney.



investigates step-parent and child relationships with siblings in the post-divorce family, shows “the struggle with the step-parent can have a negative long-term impact. Jealousy is there but it’s also whether the step-parent is emotionally available or has a perfunctory role,” says McIntosh. “When it does develop, it’s wonderful. It can also be a burden.”

One mother – who was raising her two children with the father of one – broke down when she told me: “I had to make a choice – either live in a house where my two children were treated completely differently and sacrifice one or bring them up alone. I chose to bring them up alone.” She hasn’t brought anyone into their lives since.

Of those children I interviewed, the majority had issues with their step-parent. In many ways, it’s unsurprising: step-parents and children come together as strangers. Juliette finds it difficult that her mum

has an on-off relationship with her partner, Brycen, the father of her baby stepsister. “They are together and then they’re not. That’s hard.” Alex Langton describes his relationship with stepdad Jeff as “better when I was younger. We’re different personalities.”

The truth is, “a majority of children hold onto a fantasy of their parents’ reconciliation, even though they doubt it will occur in reality,” says McIntosh. “These yearnings in children are archetypal – a longing for their inner world to be reconciled.”

Juliette’s chocolate-brown eyes soften: “If it was different, I’d want my parents to be together.” She lowers her gaze. “Sometimes we go out for dinner but never as a family, because we aren’t a family. And that’s kind of sad.” ●

The Family Relationship Advice Line (1800 050 321) is available from 8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday, and 10am to 4pm on Saturday, except public holidays.