

# Children's living arrangements after parental separation

Most children live with their mothers after parental separation and little is known about those who live with their fathers. Are they older? Are they boys? What proportion move from living with one parent to the other, and who is more likely to do so?

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Each year, nearly 50,000 children under 18 years of age experience the divorce of their parents. However, this figure fails to capture the number of children who experience parental *separation*. Some married parents who separate will not divorce for several years, if at all; some will reconcile for a time, at least; and some parents who separate will have been cohabiting rather than married. Whatever the marital status background, the way in which parenting arrangements are managed is likely to have a critical impact on children's wellbeing.

Most children live with their mother after parental separation or divorce, although estimates of the exact proportion vary. According to a survey conducted in 1997 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1998), 88 per cent of children under the age of 18 who had a natural parent living elsewhere were living with their mother. This survey was based on the reports of resident parents only.

These trends are consistent with the reports of mothers, but not fathers, who participated in a 1997 survey of divorced parents conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. In this survey, 87 per cent of the mothers reported that their children were living with them, whereas only 73 per cent of the fathers reported that their children were living with their former wife (Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg 2001).

In the Institute's 1997 survey, Smyth et al. (2001) found that the children's living arrangements tended to be stable over the five years since the parents separated. Only 20 per cent of mothers and 23 per cent of fathers reported that children's living arrangements at the time of interview differed from those in place at the time of separation (on average, some five years earlier). The reports of both mothers and fathers suggested that it was the mother who was the more influential in shaping decisions on children's living arrangements. Thus, it is not surprising that fathers were much more likely than mothers to express a desire for change in existing arrangements.

Nevertheless, some children live with their father after parental separation or divorce and others may spend substantial time with each parent (ABS 1998; Smyth et al. 2001). Little is known in Australia about the nature of other factors associated with children's

living arrangements. For example, are older children more likely to live with their fathers than younger ones? Are boys more likely to live with their fathers than girls? Are changes in living arrangements more likely to occur for older than younger children? What happens when resident parents find new partners? That is, how often does repartnering result in children moving out?

These questions are examined using the data from the *Caring For Children after Separation* survey conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in August to October 2003.

## *Caring for Children after Separation* survey

The Institute's *Caring for Children after Separation* survey involved telephone interviews with a national random sample of 455 male and 572 female parents who had at least one child under the age of 18 years and who was not living with the other parent of that child. Most of the parents had divorced (72 per cent), 23 per cent had been cohabiting, and 5 per cent had never lived with the other parent. (See Smyth and Weston in this issue for more details about the sample and response rate.) Note that mothers and fathers in the sample were independent – that is, not previous partners of each other.

In the survey, respondents were asked about each of their children's place of residence at the time of the interview, and immediately after parental separation (or after birth for the small group who had never lived with the child's other parent). If a respondent had children of different partners and had separated from more than one of these partners, then the residence questions focused on the children born of the most recent former relationship.

Because siblings do not necessarily live together after parental separation, the analysis for this article focuses mainly on the whereabouts of each child, both upon separation and at the time of the interview. This analysis focuses on 1774 children aged under 18 at the time of interview. Information was sought about these children's living arrangements at two time points – at separation (n=1774) and at interview (n=1634; information for 140 children was missing).

It should be noted that there were some gender differences in reporting children's living arrangements



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after separation. According to fathers’ reporting, for example, 22 per cent of children were living with them at the time of interview. Mothers reported that 8 per cent were living with their fathers. It is unclear whether this disparity was due to sample selection (for example, resident parents may have been more likely to agree to participate in the survey than non-resident parents), or due to the parental perception on children’s living arrangement (for example, parents may have exaggerated how much time the child was with them).

Nevertheless, the general patterns on children’s living arrangements discussed below were similar by mother report and father report. Thus in the following analysis, living arrangements of children reported by mothers and fathers were combined.

### **Living arrangements of children**

In line with previous research, the *Caring for Children after Separation* survey suggested that the vast majority of children aged under 18 years lived with their mother at the time of interview (about 79 per cent). Fourteen per cent of children lived with their father. Only 5 per cent of children spent about equal time with each parent. Other arrangements such as living with grandparents or other relatives or living independently applied to less than one per cent of the children.

The tendency to live with mothers was a little stronger at the time of separation than at the time of interview: at separation, 87 per cent of the children lived with their mothers (compared with 79 per cent at interview), 10 per cent lived with their fathers (14 per cent at interview), and less than 3 per cent spent about equal time with each parent (5 per cent at interview).

While most children lived with their mother, the children’s age appeared to play a significant role in shaping alternative arrangements. As Table 1 shows, the proportion who lived with fathers at the time of the interview increased with the children’s age. For example, 22 per cent of children aged 15–17 lived with their father, while only 9 per cent of children aged under five years did so. In addition, 4 per cent of children aged 15–17 lived independently.

Children’s gender appears to have little if anything to do with decisions about whether they live with their father or mother (or whether they live independently as teenagers). Among children aged 12 to 17 years, boys were slightly more likely to live with their fathers compared with girls (21 per cent compared with 15 per cent), although the difference is not statistically significant. For younger children, the proportion living with their father was 12 per cent and 11 per cent for boys and girls respectively.

As noted above, siblings within a family do not always have the same living arrangements. Nineteen per cent of mothers and 27 per cent of fathers with two or more children in the survey reported

**Table 1 Children aged under 18 years: current living arrangement by age**

	0-4 (%)	5-11 (%)	12-14 (%)	15-17 (%)
With mother	85.7	81.3	79.3	68.1
With father	8.8	12.3	14.3	21.7
About equal time with both parents	3.2	5.8	6.1	4.6
With relative including grandparents	0.8	0.3	0	1.3
Independently	0	0	0	3.8
Other	1.6	0.4	0.3	0.5
Total	100	100	100	100
Number of children	251	759	391	373

that their children have had different living arrangements after separation. In most cases, these children were split between parents.

### Changes in residence

Consistent with the earlier research noted above, the *Caring for Children after Separation* survey suggests considerable stability in children's living arrangements. However, it is important to point out that there were data on the whereabouts of the children at only two points in time (upon separation and at the time of the survey). Thus the level of stability in arrangements is likely to be somewhat overstated. For simplicity, it is assumed in the following discussion that changes in residence occurred only for those who had different living arrangements over the two time points examined.

Only 10 per cent of the children were reported to have changed residence – that is, they lived in different households at the time of separation and at the time of the parental interview. (The percentage is slightly higher – 12 per cent – if children whose parents had separated for no more than one year are excluded.)

Changes in residence were the most likely to have occurred for those aged 15–17 years at the time of parental interview than for younger children. For example, 21 per cent of children aged 15–17 had different residence at the time of interview than at separation, compared with only 8 to 10 per cent of children aged 5–11 and 12–14. Although the possible length of time since parental separation was shorter for younger than older children, these results continued to hold when differences in the duration of separation were controlled. In other words, the tendency for older than younger children to experience a change in residence could not be explained in terms of differences in the duration of their parents' separation.

Nevertheless, the longer the time since parental separation, the greater are the opportunities for a change in residence. Seven per cent of children whose parents had separated for two to three years had changed their residence compared with 13 per cent of children with parents who had been separated for a longer period of time. The time since parental separation beyond three years does not appear to affect numbers experiencing a change in

residence. However, these differences become non-significant after controlling for children's age.

This survey also suggests that re-partnering by resident parents operates as a trigger for some children to move out to alternative arrangements. Of children who lived with mothers soon after the separation, 13 per cent of those whose mothers had repartnered had moved out, compared with only 6 per cent of those whose mothers had remained single. Similar patterns occurred for children who lived with their father soon after separation: 21 per cent of those whose fathers had repartnered had moved out compared with 10 per cent of those whose fathers remained single. Application of multivariate analysis suggested that these results could not be explained in terms of differences between these groups in length of time since separation or age of the children.

While more children lived with their father at the time of interview than at the time of separation, Table 2 also suggests that a change in residence was more likely to be experienced by the children who lived with their father rather than mother soon after parental separation. Most commonly, the change involved moving to live with the other parent (applying to 15 per cent of those who lived with their father upon separation and only 5 per cent of those who lived with their mother upon separation).

### Summary

The process of relationship breakdown can be the most painful experience encountered in life. Any dreams of working together to raise a happy and healthy family, and of growing old together as a couple, are dashed – and in their place, there is often much hurt, bitterness, and resentment, particularly for a partner who did not want the separation (Weston 1986). The distress experienced by separating couples is often exacerbated not only by the need to make decisions about “who gets what” in terms of property, but most particularly by parenting issues – who the children should live with, how much contact the non-resident parent should have, how to cope with any lost opportunity of being part of the children's everyday lives and of watching them grow up day-by-day, and how to handle the children's distress at a time that is marked by so much personal turmoil for the parents themselves.

Thus, making arrangements for the children represents one of the key challenging issues facing parents who undergo separation. While this challenge can be extremely difficult for parents, it is also central to the children's wellbeing. Issues about children's residential arrangements, contact with their non-resident parent, and child support are at the heart of these parenting arrangements. However, arrangements that are in children's best interests may change as children grow older and as their parents follow different pathways.

In the *Caring for Children after Separation* survey, the residential arrangements set in place at the time of separation tended to be the same as those at the time of interview. At both periods, the majority of children lived with their mother and only a small proportion of children lived with their

**Table 2** Children's living arrangements at the time of separation and interview

Arrangements at interview compared with separation	Upon separation	
	Living with mother (%)	Living with father (%)
The same	91.7	83.4
Different	8.3	16.5
Total	100	100
<b>Where change has occurred</b>		
Moved to the other parent	4.9	14.7
About equal time with both parents	1.5	1.8
Other	1.9	0
Total	8.3	16.5
Number of children	1417	163



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father. Several factors appeared to be related to the living arrangements of children. First, older children were more likely to live with their father than younger children. This is not surprising, given the greater dependency of young children on their primary care giver, the associated high level of caring responsibilities carried by this parent, and the fact that it is almost always mothers who assume most of these responsibilities prior to any separation. While social norms still favour children living with their mother after separation (Pryor and Rodgers 2001), this may be more so for younger than older children.

A change in residence is also more likely to be experienced by older children. In particular, children are more likely to move out to alternative arrangements where a resident parent repartners. This highlights the dynamic and complex nature of stepfamily relationships and processes. It is also consistent with prior research findings that children in stepfamilies tend to leave home at younger ages than children who live with both parents (see Coleman, Ganong and Fine 2000).

While overseas research suggests that fathers are more likely to spend time with children in all-boy households than in all-girl or boy-girl households (Cooksey and Fondell 1996) and that fathers are more likely to gain “custody” of boys (see Pryor and Rodgers 2001), the boys in this study do not appear to be significantly more likely to live with their father than girls.

While only a small proportion of children appeared to have changed residence between the time of parental separation and the survey, it should be noted that the *Caring for Children after Separation* survey did not capture all changes between the two points of time. Thus, it is likely to

understate the extent of residential changes that children experience after separation.

Governments in the western world are confronted by the challenge of how to foster the continuing involvement of both parents in children’s lives after separation. Despite a groundswell of support for fathers’ active involvement in children’s lives beyond their traditional role as an economic provider, children are still most likely to reside with their mother after parental separation. While the notion of shared care arrangements has attracted a great deal of attention recently, this analysis shows that currently children are more likely to spend time living with their father than to be in a “shared care” arrangement. Thus, it is important that the needs of children who live with their fathers as well as the needs of resident fathers and non-resident mothers are not overlooked in research and policy.

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