

# Is it just a matter of time?

## How relationships between children and their separated parents differ by care-time arrangements

# 3

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### 3.1 Introduction

There has been increased emphasis in recent years on the importance of children in separated families spending substantial amounts of time with both parents. However, there has also been considerable debate about the role that time spent with parents plays in relation to child social-emotional wellbeing. This chapter explores whether children who spend relatively large amounts of time with both parents have better parent–child relationships than those who spend most time with one parent and little, if any, time with the other. Factors that may influence the association between care time and parent–child relationships—such as parental involvement in decision-making relating to children’s long-term welfare—are also considered.

In order to support equal involvement of both parents in children’s lives after parental separation, family law reforms introduced with the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) (*SPR Act 2006*), include a “presumption in favour of equal shared parental responsibility” (s61DA). This means that a court must make orders for equal shared parental responsibility unless it is shown that such orders would not be in the child’s best interests, or that the presumption should not be applied because of issues relating to child abuse or family violence. Where orders for equal shared parental responsibility are made, the parents are expected to make major long-term decisions about the child’s welfare together (Kaspiew et. al., 2009). In cases where equal shared parental responsibility is ordered pursuant to the presumption, the courts must consider orders for arrangements in which children spend equal or substantial amounts of time with both parents, where it is practical and, once again, the child’s best interests are taken into account (*SPR Act 2006* s65DAA). Such arrangements, whereby children spend equal or close to equal time with each parent, are now often referred to as shared care-time arrangements.

While shared parental responsibility and shared care-time are linked in the legislation and are often considered together under the term “shared care”, in this chapter, the main focus will be on shared care-time. However, the relationship between shared care-time and shared parental responsibility will be briefly examined.

Estimates of the proportion of children with shared care-time arrangements vary according to whom the informant is, the dataset that is being used, and how shared care-time is defined. Although only a minority of children currently experience shared care-time, there is considerable consensus that the adoption of this arrangement has been increasing progressively since well before the 2006 law reforms were introduced (Cashmore et al., 2010; Smyth, 2009; Weston, Qu, Gray, De Maio et al., 2011). Analyses using Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data from the Multi-Purpose Household Survey have revealed that 7% of children aged under 18 who had a parent living elsewhere spent 30–70% of nights with each parent in 2009–10 (ABS, 2011). Data from the Child Support Agency’s administrative database suggest that 12% of parents on the Child Support Agency caseload in 2008 had a shared care-time arrangement of 30–70% of nights (Smyth, 2009).

Not surprisingly, there has been substantial interest in the effects of post-separation parenting arrangements, particularly shared care-time, on children’s wellbeing leading up to and since the 2006 reforms. The evidence is conflicting, with some studies finding benefits for children who spend substantial periods of care time with each parent, and others finding very weak or no such relationships (see Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Bauseman, 2002; Cashmore et al., 2010; McIntosh,

Smyth, & Kelaher, 2010; Weston, Qu, Gray, Kaspiw et al., 2011). Weston, Qu, Gray, Kaspiw et al. found that fathers with shared care-time arrangements gave more positive assessments of their children's social-emotional wellbeing than those with less care-time, who were more likely to report learning difficulties, conduct problems and emotional symptoms in their children. However, as the authors noted, parents' levels of satisfaction with their care-time arrangements may colour their assessments of their children's wellbeing. Consistent with these results, Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, and Bridges (2003) found that more frequent contact with fathers after separation was associated with fewer externalising problems in children. However, Dunn et al. also noted that the direction of the relationship is not clear and it may be that fathers pursue more frequent contact with children who display fewer behavioural problems. Other studies suggest that the relationship between the *amount* of time children and fathers spend together and child social-emotional wellbeing is mediated by the *quality* of the time spent together (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Smith, Robertson, Dixon, Quigley, & Whitehead, 2001; Whiteside & Becker, 2000).

Although there is a large body of research examining the effects on child wellbeing of fathers' care time after separation, less attention has been given to the links between care time and aspects of parent-child relationships such as enjoyment of time together, particularly in the Australian context. One Australian study that briefly touched on this topic found that fathers in shared care-time arrangements reported having better quality relationships with their children than those in other care-time arrangements; however, no such differences were found for mothers (McIntosh et al., 2010). In the United States, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) argued that frequent interaction between children and their separated parents is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for developing close relationships, and that quality of time spent together is more important than quantity for building and maintaining relationships. Smyth (2009) similarly suggested that there is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the view that spending more time together leads to better child outcomes, but that spending time is needed in order to maintain "emotionally close and warm" relationships (p. 43).

Another gap in current research related to care-time arrangements is that studies rely on parent perspectives. The way in which care-time arrangements affect the aspects of parent-child relationships under examination may differ substantially according to whether the child or the parent is providing the report. For example, a qualitative study by the Social Policy Research Centre (Cashmore et al., 2010) suggested that children considered time spent together to be an indicator of parental love. In particular, children interpreted what they saw as their parents' lack of effort in making time for them as indicating reduced love for them.

This chapter uses data from the K cohort of *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* to examine the views of 11–12 year old children and their parents on their relationships with each other in relation to their care-time arrangements. The LSAC data provide a unique opportunity to examine parent-child relationships from both parents' and children's perspectives. Although the main focus is on children from separated families, those from not-separated families are included in some analyses to provide comparisons. Different aspects of relationships will be examined—three from parents' perspectives and three from children's—with similar but not identical items used for parents and children (see Box 3.1 on page 34). The items used focus on parent-child closeness, enjoyment in spending time together, and communication.

## 3.2 Care-time arrangements

This section begins with a discussion of the LSAC measures of care-time arrangements and then provides a preliminary analysis of patterns of care-time arrangements in the LSAC dataset.

### Measures of care-time arrangements

In each wave of LSAC data collection, information about the study child has been collected from Parent 1. Since Wave 2 (2006), attempts have been made to interview parents who are not living in the same household with Parent 1 (called the "parent living elsewhere" in LSAC-related publications). For consistency with other chapters in this report we refer to Parent 1 as the "resident parent" and the parent living elsewhere as the "non-resident parent".

In LSAC, both resident and non-resident parents are asked how many nights the study child stays overnight with the parent living elsewhere, and responses could be given as the number of nights per week, fortnight, month, three months, six months or year. The resident parent report is used to calculate the percentages of nights per year that the study child spends with their mother and with their father. The measures of care-time arrangements used in this chapter use these percentages and adopt the classifications provided by the Australian Government Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Support program (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2008).<sup>1</sup> The care-time categories were separated out to take into account whether the main care provider was the mother or father, resulting in the seven care-time arrangement groups listed in Table 3.1.

Care-time arrangement	Wave 1 (4–5 years) (%)	Wave 2 (6–7 years) (%)	Wave 3 <sup>a</sup> (8–9 years) (%)	Wave 4 (10–11 years) (%)
Shared care-time (35–65% nights)	5.0	6.1	8.4	10.2
Mother main carer, father regular care-time (14–34% nights)	35.0	35.1	36.0	31.7
Mother main carer, father relatively little care-time (< 14% nights)	34.0	36.6	36.4	29.2
Mother main carer, father no care-time	24.0	19.1	13.8	22.9
Father main carer, mother regular care-time (14–34% nights) <sup>b</sup>	0.6	1.7	1.8	2.1
Father main carer, mother relatively little care-time (< 14% nights) <sup>b</sup>	1.4	1.0	3.2	3.1
Father main carer, mother no care-time <sup>b</sup>	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	495	572	583	803

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Results for Wave 3 should be interpreted with caution as, for this wave only, Parent 1 was able to opt out of answering the questions about their child's parent living elsewhere. Many took up this option, resulting in a reduced and possibly biased group of Parent 1 respondents answering questions about their child's parent living elsewhere. <sup>b</sup> These groups are not included in further analyses in this chapter due to the low numbers of respondents.

Due to low numbers of children who had their fathers as their main carer, the three categories that include this type of arrangement (i.e., the father is the main carer and the mother has regular care-time, relatively little care-time or no care-time) are excluded from all analyses beyond those in Table 3.1. In addition, for simplicity, subsequent tables use shortened names for the care-time groups, referring to the different amounts of care provided by the father (e.g., the “regular care-time” group comprises children whose mothers provide the majority of care and whose fathers care for them overnight for 14–34% of nights per year). Therefore, the categories of care time used in the remainder of the chapter are:

- *shared care-time*—children who spend 35–65% of nights per year with each parent;
- *regular care-time*—children who spend 14–34% of nights with their father;
- *relatively little care-time*—where children spend fewer than 14% of nights with their father (including those who have daytime-only contact with their father);<sup>2</sup> and
- *no care-time*—where children see their father less than once a year or not at all.

In addition to the care-time categories for separated families, some tables include children whose parents had not separated, as a comparison group.

<sup>1</sup> These classifications are used by the Child Support Agency in assessing the amount of child support that should be paid and in determining a family's entitlement to Family Tax Benefit.

<sup>2</sup> Children who, on average, spent time with their parent living elsewhere one day a week or more without having any overnight stays were excluded from the analysis. It was not clear in which category these respondents would fit best, as the categories are based on overnight stays, but substantial daytime contact may also affect parent–child relationships.

## Use of care-time arrangements

Of all the children with separated parents ( $n = 803$  in Wave 4), the proportion in shared care-time arrangements more than doubled between Wave 1 (2004), when the children were 4–5 years old, and Wave 4 (2010), when the children were 10–11 years old (Table 3.1 on page 31). Despite this, shared care-time arrangements were still used by only 10% of separated families in Wave 4. More common arrangements included mothers being the main care providers, with fathers providing regular care-time (32%) or relatively little care-time (29%).

The increase in shared care-time arrangements across waves is likely to be at least partly related to the age of the study children. Several studies have found that children aged younger than 5 years are less likely to be in shared care-time arrangements than those aged 5–11 years (Cashmore et al., 2010; Smyth, 2009; Weston, Qu, Gray, Kaspiew et al., 2011). The K cohort children in LSAC were within the peak age range for shared care-time in Waves 2 to 4, but not in Wave 1.

Another factor to consider in regard to the increase in shared care-time arrangements is when parental separation occurred. Is it parents who have separated more recently (particularly after the 2006 family law reforms) who are more likely to be using shared care-time arrangements and are thus driving the increase in shared care-time arrangements? More recent separation may also mean that, due to having spent more time living with their children, parents' relationships with their children are stronger and they are thus more likely to opt for shared care-time arrangements. To examine this further, Table 3.2 presents care-time arrangements in relation to when parental separation occurred.

**Table 3.2: Fathers' care-time arrangements at Wave 4, by when separation occurred, K cohort, Waves 1–4**

Care-time arrangement	When separation occurred ***			
	Before Wave 1 (2004) (%)	Between Wave 1 (2004) & Wave 2 (2006) (%)	Between Wave 2 (2006) & Wave 3 (2008) (%)	Between Wave 3 (2008) & Wave 4 (2010) (%)
Shared care-time	6.2	17.4	17.5	17.9
Regular care-time	27.7	40.1	43.4	41.0
Relatively little care-time	30.7	30.9	30.0	35.8
No care-time	35.4	11.6	9.1	5.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	386	109	109	109

Notes: This table excludes those who separated and re-united. Statistically significant differences are noted: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Not surprisingly, shared care-time arrangements were least common for parents separating before Wave 1 (i.e., prior to 2004), when the study children would have been 4 years of age or younger. However, there was little difference in the proportions using shared care-time for those separating prior to each of the three subsequent data collection waves. Therefore, these results indicate that the increase in shared care-time arrangements had begun before the 2006 changes to the family law system (which emphasised shared parental responsibility and shared care-time arrangements); otherwise we would expect lower proportions in shared care-time arrangements for those separating between Waves 1 and 2 (prior to the 2006 reforms) than for those separating between the later waves (after the reforms). These findings indicate that the increase in the incidence of shared care-time arrangements between Waves 1 and 4, presented in Table 3.1 (on page 31), may be the result of the cumulative effect of increased rates of take-up of shared care-time arrangements by newly separated parents that began prior to the reforms rather than an increased rate of take-up of such arrangements after the reforms were introduced. This is consistent with findings from previous research using Child Support Agency data and ABS data, which found that rates of shared care-time had been increasing prior to the reforms and that the increase did not appear to gain momentum post-reform (Weston, Qu, Gray, De Maio et al., 2011).

While the proportion of families in shared care-time arrangements differed little for parents separating after Wave 1, the proportion who had no care-time was lower for those separating later. This is reflected in the greater proportions of parents who separated later having children in regular care-time or relatively little care-time compared to those who separated earlier.

Relevant to our focus in this chapter on parent–child relationships is whether or not rates of take-up of shared care-time arrangements differed for boys and girls. Table 3.3 shows that 13% of boys in Wave 4 were in shared care-time arrangements, compared to 9% of girls. The flip-side of this is that girls were more likely to be in the “relatively little care-time” group. Girls and boys were equally likely to be in regular care-time. However, none of these differences were statistically significant.

Care-time arrangement	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Shared care-time	12.8	8.7
Regular care-time	32.6	35.1
Relatively little care-time	29.9	32.2
No care-time	24.7	24.0
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	389	366

Notes: This table only includes children from separated families.

### 3.3 Parent–child relationships

This section describes the relationship measures used in this chapter, and presents results on how separated/divorced parents and their children view the various aspects of their relationships with each other.

#### Measures of parent–child relationships

Different aspects of parent–child relationships are examined, from both parents’ and children’s perspectives. Three items from the Parental Warmth Scale (Sanson, 1995) were used for parents;<sup>3</sup> and for children, two parent–child relationship items from the Growing Up in Ireland study (2008),<sup>4</sup> as well as one item measuring social support were used (see Box 3.1 on page 34). It is important to note the differing response categories across the child measures and between the parent and child measures.

For children who had a step-parent living in their household at the time of the Wave 4 interview, it is not possible to determine whether they were referring to their step-parent or their parent living elsewhere when answering the parent–child relationship questions. As a result of this, children with a step-parent living in their household have been excluded from the child perspective analyses.<sup>5</sup> This may have an effect on the results, as the relationship between children and their separated parents may be affected by the presence of a step-parent in the home.

Also excluded from the analyses were non-resident parents who had little or no contact with their children. Children were not asked the relationship questions about these parents. In addition, most of these parents were not study respondents, often due to the resident parents not providing contact information. The exclusion of non-resident parents who had little or no contact with their children may provide a positive bias to the father reports.

#### Overview of parent–child relationships

Parents from separated families generally gave positive responses to the three parent–child relationship measures used, as shown in Table 3.4 (on page 34). Over 80% of mothers responded “always/almost always” or “often” for each of the three relationship measures. While there was no difference in the proportions of mothers and fathers reporting a high frequency of warm close times with their study children, over 90% of fathers reported that they “always/almost always” or “often” enjoyed listening to their children and doing things with them, and feeling close to their children when they were happy or upset, compared to 84–88% of mothers.

<sup>3</sup> The Parental Warmth Scale used in LSAC consists of six of the original scale’s nine items. Three single items and not the whole scale were used for the analyses in this chapter because the remaining three items are about parents displaying affection towards their children and as such are thus more about parenting style than relationships.

<sup>4</sup> See the Growing Up in Ireland website at: <[www.growingup.ie](http://www.growingup.ie)>.

<sup>5</sup> This problem was rectified for the Wave 5 data collection.

## Box 3.1: Parent–child relationship measures used

### Parent measures <sup>a</sup>

Thinking about [study child] over the last six months, how often did you ...

1. have warm, close times together with [study child]?
2. enjoy listening to [study child] and doing things with him/her?
3. feel close to [study child] both when he/she was happy and when he/she was upset?

Responses dichotomised into:

- *always/often*—for responses: always/almost always; often; and
- *sometimes/never*—for responses: sometimes; rarely; never/almost never.

### Child measures

Do you enjoy spending time with your mum/dad? <sup>a</sup>

Responses dichotomised into:

- *true*—for responses: definitely true; mostly true; and
- *not true*—for responses: mostly not true; definitely not true.

Do you and your mum/dad do things together that are just for fun?

Responses dichotomised into:

- *agree*—for responses: strongly agree; agree; and
- *disagree*—for responses: in between; disagree; strongly disagree.

If you had a problem, who would you talk to about it? <sup>b</sup>

Multiple responses allowed: mum; dad; brother/sister; teacher; friend; another relative (like grandparent, aunt, uncle or cousin); other.

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Responses were dichotomised due to small sample sizes and thus small numbers of respondents in each category. <sup>b</sup> For this item, we only consider whether or not children would talk to their mum or dad if they had a problem. The other response options are not used.

**Table 3.4: Separated parents' views on their relationships with their children, K cohort, Wave 4**

Relationship measure	Response	Fathers' views (%)	Mothers' views (%)
Have warm, close times together with child	Always/often	83.0	80.6
	Sometimes/never	17.0	19.4
	Total	100.0	100.0
Enjoy listening to child and doing things with him/her	Always/often	93.1	83.8
	Sometimes/never	6.9	16.2
	Total	100.0	100.0
Feel close to child both when he/she was happy and when he/she was upset	Always/often	91.3	87.5
	Sometimes/never	8.7	12.5
	Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations		489	767

Notes: Differences in the numbers of observations for mothers and fathers are due to missing data from parents living elsewhere, particularly those who had very little or no contact with their study child. The sample is restricted to those with valid care-time arrangement data.

Children in separated families were also generally positive about their relationships with their parents (Table 3.5 on page 35). Ninety-two per cent of children reported that it was “definitely” or “mostly true” that they enjoyed spending time with their fathers, and a similar proportion (95%) gave this response when discussing their mothers. In relation to doing activities for fun together,

responses about mothers and fathers were again similar, with 67% of children reporting that they “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they did activities for fun with their fathers and 63% reporting this in regard to their mothers. Rates of talking to parents about problems differed according to which parent was being referred to. Children were much more likely to report that they would talk to their mother (86%) than their father (61%).

Relationship measure	Responses	Father (%)	Mother (%)
Enjoy spending time with mum/dad	True	91.9	95.1
	Not true	8.1	4.9
	Total	100.0	100.0
Do things together with mum/dad that are just for fun	Agree	66.6	63.0
	Disagree	33.4	37.0
	Total	100.0	100.0
Talk to mum/dad if have a problem	Yes	61.2	85.8
	No	38.8	14.2
	Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations		444	623

Notes: Differences in the numbers of observations for mothers and fathers are due to missing data from parents living elsewhere, particularly those who had very little or no contact with their study child. The sample is restricted to those with valid care-time arrangement data.

## How do parent–child relationships vary by care-time arrangements?

We begin this section by examining how parents’ views on their relationship with their child vary by care-time arrangements, separately for mothers and fathers, and then turn to exploring children’s perspectives.

For those in separated families, fathers’ views on their relationships with their children varied little by care-time arrangements (see Table 3.6 on page 36). Post hoc analyses revealed that the only significant difference found across all three relationship measures was that fathers who provided relatively little care-time for their child were less likely to report experiencing “warm and close times” with their child than those who were in shared care-time arrangements or those who provided regular care-time (shared care-time:  $p < .05$ ; regular care-time:  $p < .001$ ).

When comparing these results to those of the not-separated group, the findings may seem a little surprising. At face value, it appears that not-separated fathers were not as positive about their relationships with their children as separated fathers, regardless of care-time group. Fathers from not-separated families reported significantly lower frequencies of having warm, close times together, enjoying listening to and doing things with him/her, and feeling close to him/her when he/she is happy and upset, compared to those from the separated family groups.

Limitations on the amount of time fathers from separated families can spend with their child may affect the way in which the relationship questions were answered, particularly considering that the relationship measures focus on the time spent together and use measures of frequency rather than focusing on ratings of the quality of the relationship. Fathers from separated families may answer questions related to the time they do have with their children in a more positive light than those who are not separated and do not experience the same time-related limitations.

Also, the way in which time with children is spent may differ between fathers from separated and not-separated families. Family separation may result in fathers changing their priorities. Having distinctions between when children are and are not available to spend time with them may mean that fathers from separated families are more likely to spend the time they have with their children doing fun activities and having dedicated time with them, promoting positive views about the time spent together and feelings of closeness. This was reflected in findings from a qualitative study by Smyth, Caruana, and Ferro (2004), in which parents in 50–50 care arrangements noted that the time they had apart from their children allowed them to have a social life and to organise the time in their week, enabling them to spend more “quality time” with their children during their care time.

**Table 3.6: Parents' views on their relationships with their children, by fathers' care-time arrangements, K cohort, Wave 4**

Relationship measure	Responses	Shared care-time (%)	Regular care-time (%)	Relatively little care-time (%)	No care-time <sup>a</sup> (%)	Not separated (%)
<b>Fathers' views</b>						
Have warm, close times together with child ***	Always/often	83.4	91.3	73.0	–	71.3
	Sometimes/never	16.6	8.7	27.0	–	28.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	100.0
Enjoy listening to child and doing things with him/her ***	Always/often	93.7	94.2	92.6	–	78.9
	Sometimes/never	6.3	5.8	7.4	–	21.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	100.0
Feel close to child both when he/she was happy and when he/she was upset ***	Always/often	93.3	92.1	90.9	–	83.2
	Sometimes/never	6.7	7.9	9.1	–	16.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	100.0
No. of observations		88	203	150	–	2,473
<b>Mothers' views</b>						
Have warm, close times together with child	Always/often	85.0	80.1	83.0	74.0	80.5
	Sometimes/never	15.0	19.9	17.0	26.0	19.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Enjoy listening to child and doing things with him/her *	Always/often	85.6	85.7	85.5	77.8	87.0
	Sometimes/never	14.4	14.3	14.5	22.2	13.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Feel close to child both when he/she was happy and when he/she was upset	Always/often	93.5	88.6	86.0	83.2	89.2
	Sometimes/never	6.5	11.4	14.0	16.8	10.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations		93	255	236	154	3,125

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Results for fathers' views for the "no care-time" group are not available due to those with no care-time with their father not being asked the relationship questions. Statistically significant differences are noted: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

Selection bias may also be contributing to these results. Non-resident parents (who are mostly fathers) may be likely to answer the survey if they have a positive relationship with their children, thus resulting in a positively biased sample of separated fathers. As a result, the views of not-separated fathers may seem more negative because they are more representative of the population.

The findings in relation to mothers' views revealed no significant differences across care-time groups for each of the three relationship measures. However, it is interesting to note that mothers reported lower frequencies on all three relationship measures if their child's father had no care-time (this difference may have been significant with a larger sample size).

In moving on to children's views, it is important to note the differences in measures used. Although the concepts being measured are quite similar, children responded using rating scales rather than measures of frequency. Therefore, comparisons between parents' and children's views of parent-child relationships should be made with caution.

Results in Table 3.7 (on page 37) show that while there were no significant differences for relationships with mothers across the care-time groups on any of the three relationship measures, this was not the case for fathers. Children whose fathers provided relatively little care-time were significantly less likely to report that they enjoyed spending time with their father or to agree that they did activities just for fun with him, compared to those in the groups with higher levels of father care-time.

These findings may indicate that having relatively little care-time with fathers impedes children's abilities to build or maintain enjoyable relationships with their fathers. Similarly, larger amounts of care-time with fathers, such as shared care-time, may facilitate the building and maintenance of strong relationships. Supporting this, Smyth, Caruana, and Ferro (2003), when reflecting on findings



from their qualitative study on parents' views of their shared care-time arrangements, identified that the "quantity time" gained from equal care-time arrangements becomes "quality time" as fathers are able to "envelop and embed in their children's lives" (p. 19).

Another possible explanation is that children with less care-time may be more likely than those in the other care-time groups to have already had more strained or distant relationships with their fathers prior to separation. Supporting this, Weston, Qu, Gray, Kaspiew et al. (2011) found that parents with minority care or no care-nights with their children were less likely to be described by their children's other parent as being "very involved" in their lives prior to separation compared to those with other care-time arrangements.

<b>Table 3.7: Children's views on their relationships with their parents, by fathers' care-time arrangements, K cohort, Wave 4</b>						
<b>Relationship measure</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Shared care-time (%)</b>	<b>Regular care-time (%)</b>	<b>Relatively little care-time (%)</b>	<b>No care-time<sup>a</sup> (%)</b>	<b>Not separated (%)</b>
<b>Relationship with father</b>						
Enjoy spending time with dad ***	True	96.2	93.9	87.4	–	97.2
	Not true	3.8	6.1	12.6	–	2.8
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	100.0
Do things together with dad that are just for fun ***	Agree	69.0	75.4	60.5	–	74.7
	Disagree	31.0	24.6	39.5	–	25.3
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	100.0
Talk to dad if have a problem ***	Yes	72.0	63.2	48.0	–	71.6
	No	28.0	36.8	52.0	–	28.4
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	–	100.0
No. of observations		74	174	131	30	3,119
<b>Relationship with mother</b>						
Enjoy spending time with mum *	True	97.7	95.9	95.3	94.5	97.4
	Not true	2.3	4.1	4.7	5.5	2.6
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Do things together with mum that are just for fun	Agree	69.9	63.5	61.5	62.1	66.4
	Disagree	30.1	36.5	38.5	37.8	33.6
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Talk to mum if have a problem	Yes	85.8	85.6	87.7	89.3	89.9
	No	14.2	14.4	12.3	10.7	10.1
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations		74	210	211	118	3,124

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Results for fathers' views for the "no care-time" group are not available due to those with no care-time with their father not being asked the relationship questions. Statistically significant differences are noted: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

Results for whether or not children talked with their fathers when they had a problem show similar patterns to those for the other two relationship measures; however, the positive relationship with greater amounts of care-time was more pronounced. Children whose fathers had larger amounts of care-time were more likely to report that they would talk to their father when they had a problem, with those whose fathers had little or no care-time being the least likely to talk to their father, and those who were in shared care-time arrangements being the most likely. Results for the not-separated group were very similar to those for the shared care-time group.

It may be the case, therefore, that the amount of time children spend with their fathers after separation is important for their relationship. Fathers with shared care-time arrangements and those in not-separated families may be more accessible to their children when the children find themselves needing to talk to someone. Increased time together may also facilitate the building of closer, more trusting relationships.

However, there are likely to be other factors that influence the relationship between care-time arrangements and children's relationships with their fathers. For example, the nature of the father-child relationship prior to separation is likely to be important. Children in shared care-time arrangements may have had closer relationships with their fathers prior to their parents' separation. In support of this, McIntosh et al. (2010) found that fathers with shared care-time arrangements were more likely to report that prior to the shared care-time arrangement being established they could "understand, comfort and enjoy their child" (p. 43) compared to those who established other care-time arrangements.

Characteristics of the children may also contribute; that is, those with certain characteristics may be more likely to be in shared care-time arrangements and may also have closer relationships with their fathers. This doesn't seem to relate to the gender of the child, because while boys may be more likely than girls to talk to their fathers if they have a problem, no significant difference was found in the care-time arrangements used for boys and girls. However, replication of these analyses with a larger sample of children in shared care-time arrangements may result in significant differences.

Findings shown in Table 3.2 (on page 32) may also help explain the relationship between care-time arrangements and father-child relationships. Children whose parents separated more recently (i.e., after Wave 2 or Wave 3) were more likely to be in shared care-time arrangements. These parents may also put extra effort into maintaining relationships and helping children through the period of transition into separation. Also, children may reflect more positively on their relationship with their father if the separation was recent.

It is also important to remember that in addition to the concept of shared care (i.e., equal amounts of care time), there is the related concept of shared parental responsibility, which refers to parental involvement in making decisions about children's lives. Therefore, it may be the level of parental involvement and joint decision-making and not just the amount of care time that is driving the results. For example, if children see their fathers being more involved in making decisions about their lives, they may be more likely to approach them when they have a problem.

Exploring all of these hypotheses is outside the scope of this chapter. However, due to the close links in the legislative framework between parental involvement in decision-making and care-time arrangements (as described in section 3.1), it is an important factor to consider here.

## 3.4 Parental involvement in decision-making

The relatively small sample size of children in shared care-time arrangements means that we cannot simply add parental involvement as another dimension to our existing analyses. Instead, in this section, care-time arrangements and parent-child relationships from children's perspectives will each be examined separately in relation to parental involvement in making decisions about the children's lives.

### Measures of parental involvement in decision-making

Where children had a parent living elsewhere, both parents were asked to identify who was mostly involved in making decisions about four specific aspects of children's lives: education, health care, religious or cultural activities, and sporting and social activities. A set of five response options was used: "mainly me", "mainly child's other parent", "both of us equally", "whichever parent child is with at the time", and "someone else".

For the current analyses, the Parent 1's responses to the four items were combined to obtain a single measure of parental involvement.<sup>6</sup> Parents were placed in a "both parents" category if the response "both of us equally" was given to at least three of the four decision-making areas or there was an equal split across decision-making areas (e.g., if responses for two of the decision-making areas were "mostly mother" and two were "mostly father"). "Mostly mother" was the category given when mainly the mother made decisions in three of the four areas and "all mother" included families where mainly the mother made decisions in all four areas. "Mostly father" and "all father" were

<sup>6</sup> The report from Parent 1 was used due to the lower numbers of parents living elsewhere being interviewed, not because the report from Parent 1 was considered more reliable. Both parents reported involvement in decision-making based on their own perceptions.

similarly coded. The response option “whichever parent child is with at the time” was considered the same as “both of us equally” if the child was in a shared care-time arrangement. Otherwise, the parent with the most care time was considered to be the main decision-maker for that particular aspect of their children’s lives.

## How does parental involvement in decision-making differ by care-time arrangements?

Results presented in Table 3.8 suggest a strong relationship between care-time arrangements and parental involvement in decision-making. Those in shared care-time arrangements were much more likely than those in any of the other care-time groups to have both parents involved in decision-making. They were more than five times more likely to have both parents involved than those in the regular care-time group, and more than five times less likely to have all decisions made by the mother. Only 5% of those in the “little or no care” group had both parents making the decisions.

Parent making the decisions about the child	Shared care-time (%)	Regular care-time (%)	Relatively little care-time (%)
Both parents	57.4	10.9	4.7
Mostly mother	26.3	33.8	16.7
All mother	9.2	55.4	78.6
Mostly father	3.5	0.0	0.0
All father	3.6	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	74	204	189

Notes: This table only includes responses from separated families. Results for the “no care-time” group are not available due to mothers not being asked about the involvement in decision-making questions in cases where the study child had no care-time with their father. Percentages may not total exactly 100% due to rounding. Small numbers in some cells mean that accurate significance testing could not be conducted.

## What is the relationship between parental involvement in decision-making and parent–child relationships?

Positive correlations were found between father involvement in decision-making and parent–child relationships (Table 3.9 on page 40). While overall these correlations weren’t found to be significant, larger sample sizes may have produced significant results.

Children whose fathers had no involvement in decision-making (the “all mother” group) were least likely to enjoy spending time with their father. However, whether the father was an equal partner in decision-making (the “both parents group”) or took a secondary role (the “mostly mother” group) made little difference to the results on this relationship measure. What was important was that he was involved to some extent.

For children who did things for fun with their fathers and talked to their fathers about their problems, the level of father involvement in decision-making also appears to be important. Children whose fathers and mothers were equally involved in decision-making were the group most likely to report that they did things for fun with their father and that they would talk to their father if they had a problem. Those whose mothers were making all of the decisions were least likely to report doing these things, and the “mostly mother” group fell in between the other two groups.

In regard to mother–child relationships, children were less likely to do activities for fun with their mothers if their mothers made all the decisions. However, children were less likely to talk to their mother if they had a problem if both parents made the decisions.

**Table 3.9: Children’s views of parent–child relationships, by parental involvement in decision-making, K cohort, Wave 4**

Relationship measure	Responses	Both parents decision-making (%)	Mostly mother decision-making (%)	All mother decision-making (%)
<b>Relationship with father</b>				
Enjoy spending time with dad *	True	98.7	94.8	88.3
	Not true	1.3	5.2	11.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Do things together with dad that are just for fun	Agree	77.9	70.0	63.5
	Disagree	22.1	30.0	36.5
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Talk to dad if have a problem*	Yes	74.3	63.6	54.3
	No	25.7	36.4	45.7
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations		70	96	222
<b>Relationship with mother</b>				
Enjoy spending time with mum	True	93.5	94.2	97.0
	Not true	6.5	5.8	3.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Do things together with mum that are just for fun	Agree	74.4	65.5	57.7
	Disagree	25.6	34.5	42.3
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Talk to mum if have a problem *	Yes	77.9	88.4	88.0
	No	22.1	11.6	12.0
	Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations		75	120	313

Notes: Results for those whose fathers made most or all of the decisions are not available due to low numbers of respondents in these two groups. Statistically significant differences are noted: \*  $p < .05$ .

The relationships between care-time arrangements and parental involvement in decision-making are not surprising given that spending more time with children can facilitate involvement and that these two factors are linked in legislation (as described in section 3.1). What is not clear from these results is if parental involvement in decision-making increased as a result of the shared care-time arrangement or if those in such arrangements were already more involved prior to separation. The AIFS evaluation of the 2006 reforms suggests a number of precursors to shared parenting prior to separation or divorce (Kaspiew et. al., 2009).

The findings also indicate that both amount of care time and parental involvement in decision-making are likely to be important for developing strong relationships between fathers and their children after parental separation. However, the relative effects of care time and parental involvement on parent–child relationships is unclear. Does care time merely facilitate greater father involvement, which in turn results in stronger father–child relationships, or is increased care time predictive of better parent–child relationships even when parental involvement in decision-making is taken into account? Additional analyses would need to be conducted to unpack this further.

## 3.5 Summary and discussion

This chapter has explored whether or not children with relatively large amounts of care time with both parents have better parent–child relationships than those who spend most of their time with their mother and little, if any, time with their father, using both parents’ and children’s perspectives on relationships. For fathers, those who were separated gave more positive reports on each of the aspects of the parent–child relationship measured, compared to those who were not separated, regardless of care-time arrangements. These findings may reflect differences in the way in which

separated fathers' time with children is spent compared to that of not-separated fathers. It is also likely that the measures used may have affected the results, as the responses were given in terms of amount of time rather than a rating of the quality. Also, while the first two relationship items—how often parents have warm, close times together with their study child, and how often they enjoy listening to their study child and doing things with him/her—are likely to indicate parent–child closeness, they may have also captured aspects of quality time, as they refer to *how* time is spent together. Therefore, further work is needed to see whether these findings hold when other measures of parent–child relationships, such as a rating of parent–child closeness on a 10-point scale, are used.

For children in separated families, those spending more time with their fathers, such as those in shared care-time arrangements, reported more positively on each of the relationship measures than those with less care-time. However, what is not clear is whether being in shared care-time helped fathers and children to build and maintain their relationships or whether those who already had stronger relationships were more likely to adopt shared care-time arrangements. Analyses that take into account pre-separation parent–child relationships and/or the amount of involvement fathers had in their children's lives prior to separation may help unpack this. Unfortunately, the small sample of children in shared care-time limited opportunities to conduct such analyses in this chapter; however, these analyses may be possible in the future using LSAC data, once the B cohort reach 10–11 years of age and their data can be combined with the K cohort data, substantially increasing the sample size.

The differences in findings from parents' and children's perspectives highlight the importance of examining different viewpoints in analyses related to parent–child relationships and care-time arrangements. Differences in the measures used (see Box 3.1 on page 34) may also have contributed to the differing results; therefore, future analyses using the same measures and response categories for parents and children would be beneficial.

Findings also indicate that parental involvement in decision-making may play a role in the relationship between care-time arrangements and parent–child relationships. Additional analysis, such as regression analysis controlling for parental involvement in decision-making, will be needed in order to unpack this further. Such analyses may be possible in the future using LSAC data, when the B and K cohort data can be combined and the sample size is large enough to produce reliable results.

Other factors that may mediate the relationship between care-time arrangements and parent–child relationships, such as the quality of the relationship between the parents, would also be worthwhile to consider in future analyses. Past research suggests that the levels of conflict in parental relationships may be strongly related to care-time arrangements used and may also affect children's abilities to form strong bonds with each parent (Cashmore et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2011; Weston, Qu, Gray, De Maio et al., 2011).

In relation to post-separation parent–child relationships, these analyses indicate that the amount of time spent with children matters. However, other factors, such as parental involvement in decision-making, appear to be just as important.

## 3.6 References

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