

## **Family Structure, quality of the co-parental relationship, post-separation parenting and children's emotional wellbeing**

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Children who experience parental divorce are more likely than those in intact families to experience a range of emotional and behavioural adjustment problems, and to perform less well academically. As adults, they are also more likely to divorce and become single parents themselves than those who grew up in intact families (see reviews by Amato 2000; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998). While differences between divorced and intact families are typically modest, with much overlap apparent, the absolute number of children adversely affected by divorce is substantial (Amato 2000).

Regardless of whether parents separate, the quality of parental relationship is important to children's wellbeing. Studies on intact and separated families indicate that acrimonious parental conflict increases the risk of children experiencing socio-emotional problems – problems that can be long-lasting (see Amato & Booth 1997; Jenkins & Lyons, 2006; Sarrazin & Cyr 2007).

It is therefore not surprising that research suggests that pre-separation difficulties, including heightened parental conflict and children's pre-existing adjustment problems, contribute to the risk of children's negative outcomes observed post-separation (Amato & Booth 1997; Ambert 1997; Cherlin et al. 1991). Parental separation, after all, is but a step in the longer process of relationship breakdown and readjustment, and the outcomes for children depend on their experiences during the entire process.

Few studies on the consequences of parental separation for children have exclusively considered young children. This paper takes advantage of a recent Australian child cohort study – the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) – to examine the links between children's emotional well-being and: (a) family type, along with the quality of the co-parental relationship where children are living in intact families; (b) the frequency of contact with the parent living elsewhere, and (c) the quality of the co-parental relationship post-separation for children who maintain some contact with their non-resident parent. The LSAC is an extremely useful dataset for this analysis, given that it has a large sample and contains information on child outcomes provided by a range of informants (the children themselves, both parents (where resident) and a teacher.

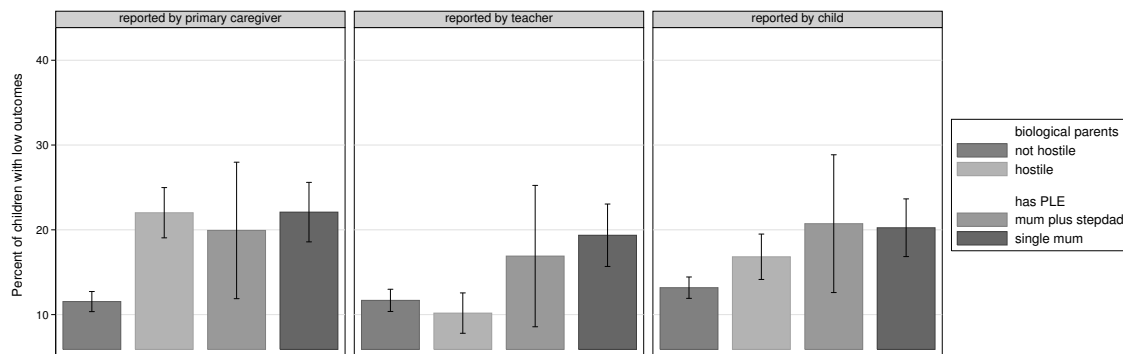
This paper makes use of the older of the two LSAC cohorts – those aged 4-5 years at Wave 1, and uses the second wave of data, when these children were aged 6-7 years, to identify different family types and measures of child wellbeing. The *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SDQ) was used to identify children with emotional difficulties (see Sanson, Misson, Wake, et al. 2005). The relevant subscale captures, for example, the extent to which children have worries or fears, are unhappy, and/or are nervous or

clingy. These questions were asked of parents (we use the primary carer’s response)<sup>1</sup> and teachers. Children with emotional wellbeing scores in the bottom 20 per cent of the distribution were described as having low emotional wellbeing. In addition, children were asked how often they felt (a) scared or worried, (2) sad or (3) angry or mad. Combining these items, those with highest scores (top 20% of the frequency distribution) were said to have relatively low child-reported emotional wellbeing.

The co-parental relationship was classified as hostile or not on the basis of the following two questions asked of the parents: (a) How often is there anger or hostility between you? (b) How often do you have arguments with your partner that end up with people pushing, hitting, kicking or shoving? Response options were: never, rarely, sometimes, often, or always. For the present analysis, relationships were classified as hostile if a parent reported that either one of these experiences occurred at least “sometimes”.

Of the 4,341 children at Wave 2, 3,640 (84%) were living with both biological parents, 560 (13%) were living with a single mother, and 103 (2%) were living with their mother and a stepfather. The small number who were living in other family types are not included in this analysis.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of children with low wellbeing according to the status of the informant and family type. Intact families are subdivided according to the quality of the relationship between the parents (hostile or not).



Note: PLE refers to parent living elsewhere

**Figure 1 Child emotional wellbeing by family type and status of informant**

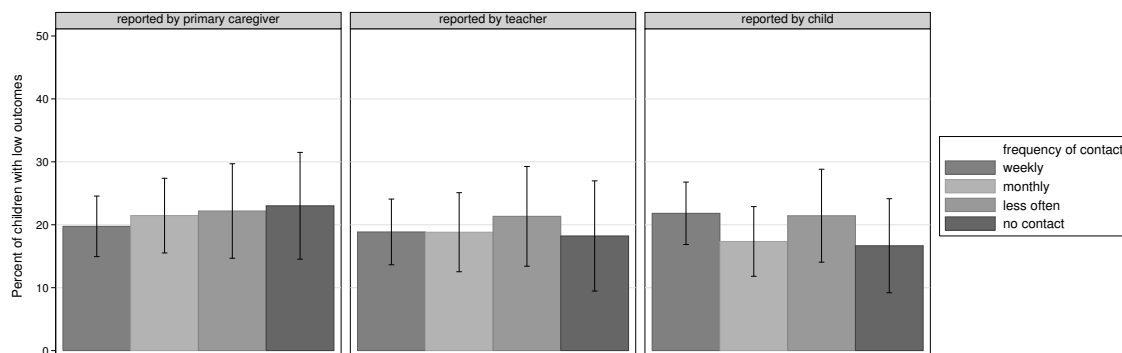
According to the reports of primary caregivers and children, children in non-hostile intact families were significantly less likely to have low emotional wellbeing than those in hostile intact families. However, significant differences between these groups were not apparent according to teachers’ reports. According to parents and children, children with a parent living elsewhere were more likely to have low emotional wellbeing than those in intact families involving a non-hostile co-parental relationship. However, the standard error for stepfather families is too great to compare the wellbeing of these children with those living with a single mother.

<sup>1</sup> For simplicity, primary caregivers will be referred to as “parents”.

The paper focuses mostly on the relationship between the wellbeing of children of separated parents on the one hand and (a) frequency of contact with between the children and non-resident parent, and (b) the quality of the co-parental relationship for children who see their non-resident parent at least once a year. While many Australian children maintain regular and relatively frequent face-to-face contact with their non-resident parent (with one-third seeing their parent on a daily or weekly basis), around one-quarter of children rarely or never see their other parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2004).

Previous research into the links between frequency of post-separation parent-child contact and children’s wellbeing has yielded mixed results. In an examination of 63 studies on non-resident fathers, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) concluded that, in general, the frequency of contact with the non-resident father was not directly related to children’s wellbeing. Nevertheless, a recent study by Fabricius and Luecken (2007) suggests that the overall amount of time that children lived with their father after parental divorce was positively associated with their relationship with their father, which in turn was related to better child outcomes.

As shown in Figure 2, the present analysis yielded no significant differences in children’s emotional wellbeing according to the frequency of contact with their non-resident parent.



**Figure 2 Children’s emotional wellbeing by contact with non-resident parent**

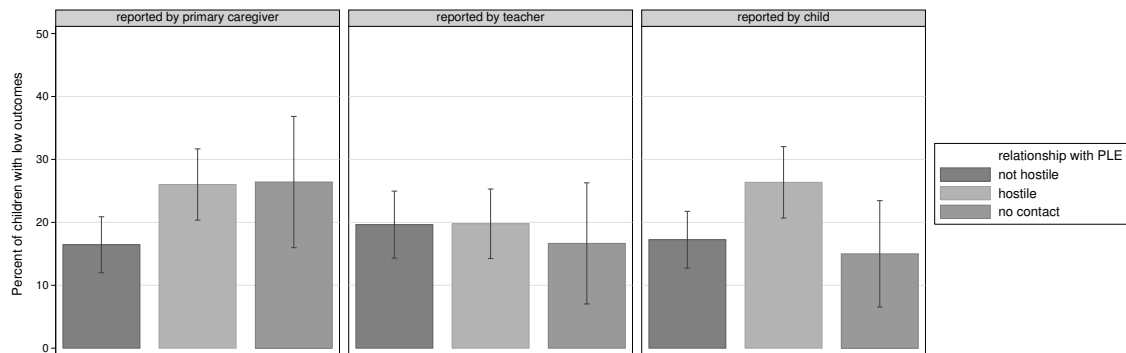
However, the frequency of contact does not capture the full nature of the relationship. The quality of the co-parental relationship may also be important. Conflict between separated parents can have a negative impact on children’s well-being (e.g. Harper & Fine 2006), although this is not universally found (e.g. King & Heard 1999; see Amato & Gilbreth 1999). Rodgers and Pryor (1998) maintained that what matters most is how conflict is managed. Children are likely to have poorer outcomes when conflict between separated parents is displayed violently and “poorly resolved”, and children are “caught in the middle”.

Children of separated parents were therefore grouped according to whether they had any contact with this parent and, if so, whether the relationship between resident and non-resident parent was hostile or non-hostile. Three groups were compared, two of whom saw their non-resident parent at least once a year, while the third saw their parent less than once a year or never. The group of children who saw their parent at least once a

year were subdivided according to whether the co-parental relationship was hostile or non-hostile.

Figure 3 shows that children in separated families in which the relationship between separated parents was hostile were more likely to have low emotional wellbeing compared to children who experienced a non-hostile co-parental relationship, as reported by the primary caregiver or the child. Teachers' reports revealed no significant differences. Children with even less contact or no contact at all did not differ significantly from either of these two other groups.

**Figure 3 Child emotional wellbeing by conflict between resident and non-resident parent**



In the paper, these relationships are explored further by taking into account such variables as child characteristics (gender, temperament), parental characteristics (age, education), and home education environment (number of books in the home). The results show that, after such variables are taken into account, differences according to family type were far smaller, and usually non-significant. These other characteristics explain far more of the variation in child wellbeing, regardless of the source of the information.

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