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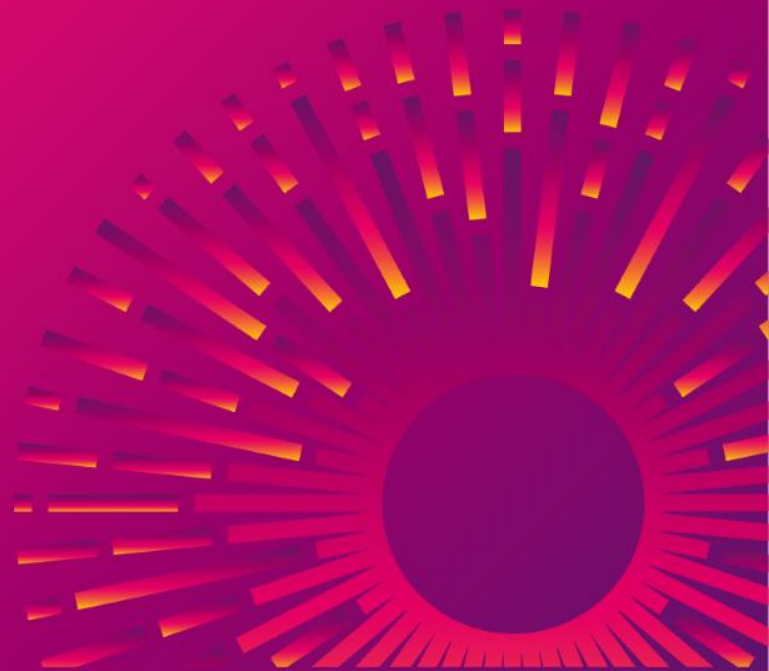


Discovering what
works for families

Parental separation and complex family needs in Australia

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) or the Australian Government.



Context – societal trends



- Rise in divorce
 - In Australia, around one-third of marriages end in divorce
 - Over one-fifth of children aged 0-17 years have a parent living elsewhere
- Changing parental roles
 - Women’s increased labour force participation, especially mothers
 - The weakening of the traditional ‘male breadwinner and female homemaker’ model and increase in dual income families (especially 1 full-time & 1 part-time).
 - Changing understandings of fatherhood
- Increasing recognition and intolerance of family violence
- Increasing emphasis on meeting children’s needs





Best interests of the children are of paramount concern

- Encourage greater involvement of both parents in their children's lives after separation, and also protect children from violence and abuse
- Encourage cooperative parenting after separation



Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF)



Wave 1 (around one and half years after separation)

- 10,002 separated parents:
 - who had separated after July 2006 and
 - whose case was registered in Child Support Agency in 2007
- Telephone interviews between August & December 2008
- Child-related questions focused on one child (0–17 years) in the family

Wave 2 (around two and half years after separation)

- 70% of parents followed up one year later (in 2009)

Wave 3 (around five and half years after separation)

- 58% of parents followed up in 2012
- 3,273 top-up sample





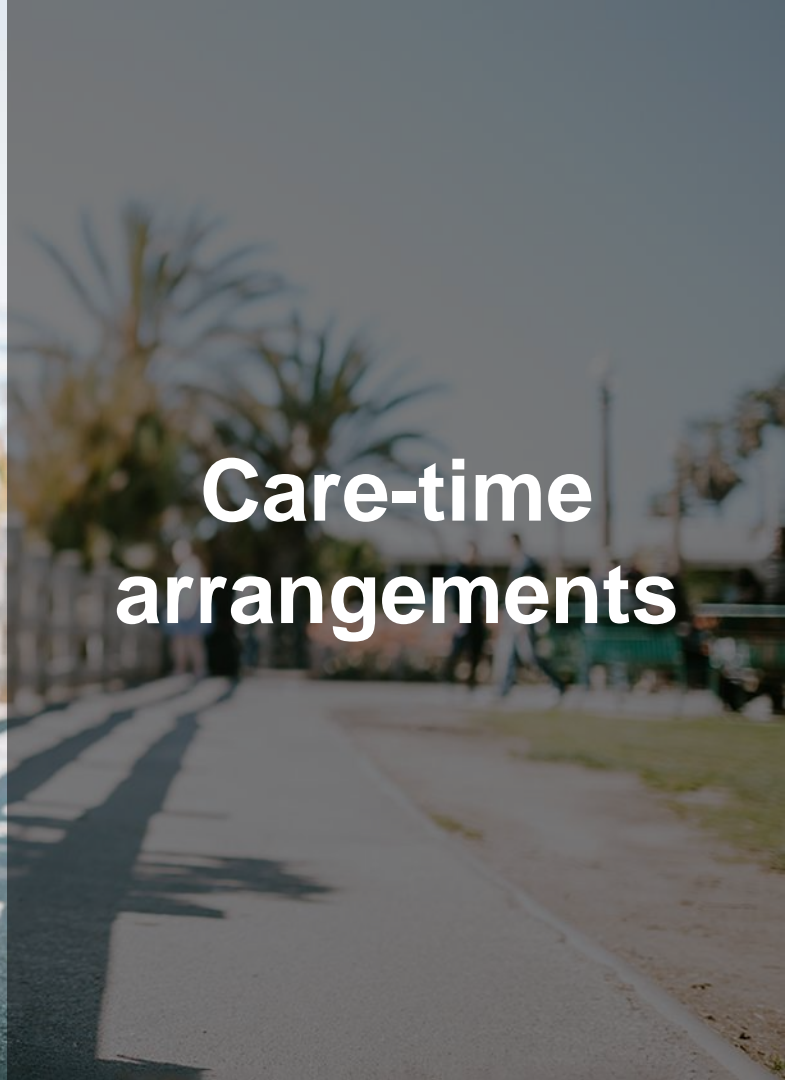
To what extent are children's needs being met in terms of the following:

- Parents' care-time arrangements
- Quality of inter-parental relationship
- Child support and financial circumstances

All of which concern dimensions of children's safety and security

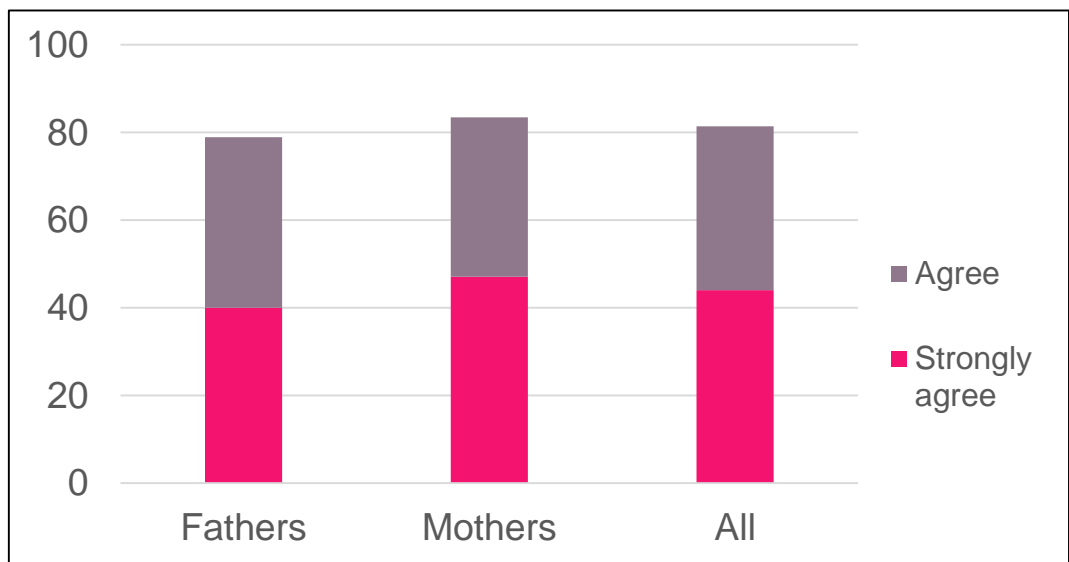


Care-time arrangements



Australian parents' views on the benefit to children of having both parents involved in their lives after separation

“Children usually do best after separation when both parents stay involved in their lives”



General population of parents survey 2009



Care time arrangements of children aged 0–17 years after separation



Care-time categories	Wave 1 %	Wave 3 %
Father never sees child	11.4	14.6
Father sees child in daytime only	22.2	10.6
Most nights with mother, some overnight stay with father	45.0	48.0
Shared time (at least one-third of nights with each parent)	16.1	20.2
Most nights with father	3.0	4.1
Mother daytime only	1.3	1.0
Mother never sees child	1.0	1.6



Factors associated with father not seeing child



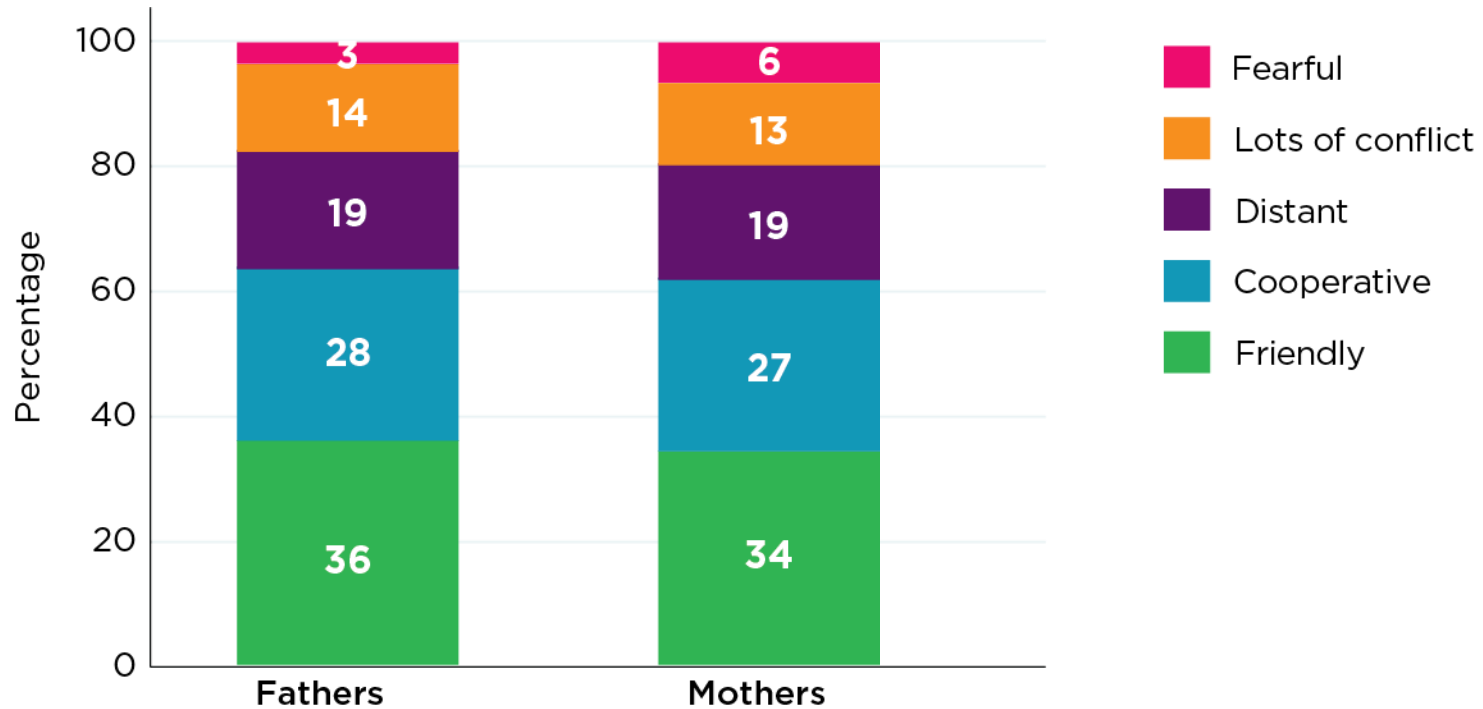
- **Child's characteristics**
 - Young child
- **Father's characteristics**
 - Not living with mother when child was born
 - Lower income
 - Younger age
- **Distance between the two homes**
 - The further away from 20 km
- **Current Inter-parental issues**
 - Inter-parental relationship: lots of conflict, fearful
 - Inability to reach parenting arrangements





Inter-parental relationships

Perceived inter-parental relationship, W1



Safety concerns



- Safety concerns relating to ongoing contact with the other parent
 - Approximately one in seven fathers
 - where concerns almost always focus on the child alone
 - One in five mothers
 - where similar proportions express concerns for child alone and for both child and self



Pre-separation: Mental health & addictions; and family violence



	Fathers (%)	Mothers (%)
Mental health and addition issues		
Mental health problems	22.7	29.1
Alcohol or drug use	20.1	36.5
Gambling	0.8	1.8
Other addictions	2.5	3.2
Any of the above	35.2	50.2
Family violence before/during separation		
Physical hurt	16.8	26.0
Emotional abuse, no physical hurt	36.4	39.0
Either	53.2	65.0

Complex relationship dynamics



Toxic inter-parental relationships

(inter-parental conflict or fearful relationship, safety concerns, etc.)

were closely linked with

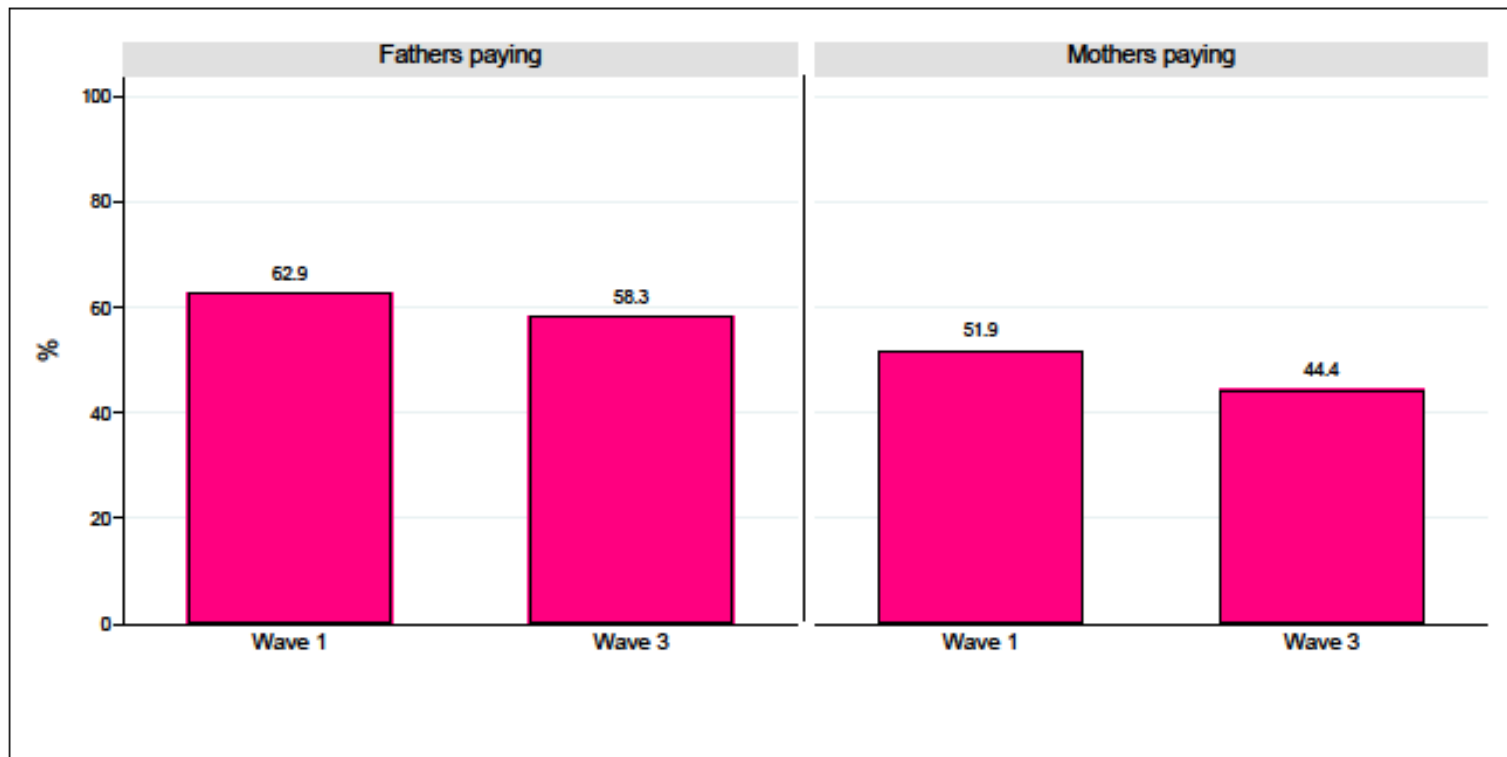
- pre-separation:
 - mental health and addiction issues
 - family violence
- parents' ability to reach parenting agreements after separation, and
- no/little contact between the non-resident parent (often father) and children





Financial wellbeing

Full compliance with child support liability



Family income



Equivalised family income

- “Very poor”: below 50% of the median of all Australian household income
- “poor”: between 50% and 59% of the median of all Australian household income



Financial status of parents



	Fathers		Mothers	
	W1	W3	W1	W3
Very poor	22.5%	22.7%	54.0%	47.4%
Poor	5.9%	7.2%	14.0%	11.6%
Not poor	71.6%	70.1%	32.0%	41.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Factors associated with mothers living in poverty after separation



- Working part-time or not employed
- Lower level of education
- Remaining single
- Resident parent
- Not receiving child support



Conclusion



- Most parents appear to be working towards meeting the following developmental needs of their children:
 - Continuing to share involvement in the children’s lives
 - Exposing them to a cooperative interparental relationship, devoid of toxic circumstances such as addictions, family violence etc.
 - Providing them with financial security



Conclusion



- However, not all children benefited in these ways.
- There is a strong need to identify the toxic circumstances experienced by these children as early as possible and to implement effective prevention and intervention strategies.
- More broadly, a greater emphasis is required regarding societal-level prevention and early intervention strategies relating to mental health and addictions and violent behaviour.
 - Such strategies may also lower the rate of parental separation and support parents to develop cooperative inter-parental relationship after separation.

