

# **Views of adolescents in separated families**

**A study of adolescents' experiences after the 2006 reforms to the family law system**

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**Australian Government**

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing. Views expressed in its publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.

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## Executive summary

A series of changes to the family law system in 2006 aimed to bring about a cultural shift in the management of separation, away from litigation and towards cooperative parenting. In particular, the 2006 changes to the *Family Law Act 1975* were intended to bring the views, feelings and experiences of children into sharper focus. The present study explores the experience of parental separation for 623 adolescent children aged 12–18 years, whose parents separated after the introduction of the family law reforms in July 2006.

The Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) commissioned the study.

With the backdrop of the family law reforms, the aim of the study was to describe how adolescent children view their experiences of parental separation. It is through the voices of these young people that we learn of their experiences of the process of parental separation and their own involvement in the decisions parents made about them following separation. Moreover, the findings in this study shed light on what adolescents wanted in their care-time arrangements, how they expressed their views, who they turned to for support, their relationships with parents and other family members, and their understanding of issues concerning parental conflict.

The AIFS Evaluation of the Family Law Reforms drew upon three projects, one of which involved a longitudinal study of 10,000 separated parents across Australia. Adolescent children from these families were recruited for a study of young people. The ages of the children at the time of the separation ranged from 9 to 15 years, with an average age of 11 years. All families were registered with the Child Support Agency. Telephone interviews were conducted with 623 adolescents, aged 12–18 years. For the purposes of data analysis, three care-time arrangements were identified from adolescents' self-reports: living mostly/only with mother; living mostly/only with father; and living equally with both parents (equal care time).<sup>1</sup>

## Key findings

In this sample of adolescents, 63% lived mostly/only with their mother, 20% lived mostly/only with their father, and 17% reported that they lived with each parents for much the same time.

## Involvement of parents in adolescents' lives

- The survey findings suggest that most adolescents remained involved with their other parent even though they were living mostly/only with one parent (usually their mother). Involvement included contact through phone or email, daytime-only activities, or regular overnight care.
- For adolescents who never saw their other parent (either overnight or during the daytime), there were often complex issues underlying this, including a history of family violence.

## Changes in care-time arrangements

- Whether living in equal care time or mostly/only with one parent, almost one in three adolescents experienced changes in the number of nights they spent with their parents within the first two to three years of parental separation.
- Importantly, changes in adolescents' care-time arrangements tended to reflect small changes in the number of nights spent with each parent rather than a change in the adolescents' primary residence.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, equal care time refers to the broad arrangement of 48–65% shared care time with the responding parent. Of the adolescents in equal care time, 73% were in 48–52% care, while 27% were in 53–65% care.

- While for most adolescents, the change was a positive experience, others found it difficult to adjust to new arrangements and schedules.

### **Adolescents' views on care-time arrangements**

- Most adolescents agreed that the decision on where they would live was very much what they wanted, and most adolescents were satisfied with the amount of time they spent with both parents, suggesting that, on the whole, parents tended to settle on arrangements that worked well for the adolescent's specific circumstances.
- The majority of adolescents also felt that they were able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to and relatively few expressed a desire to change their current arrangements.
- Most adolescents wanted a say in the decision about who they would live with, and the majority of adolescents achieved this by talking it over with their parents. However, more than one in three adolescents did not wish to be involved in the process of resolving parenting arrangements after separation. For some, this may have been to avoid having to "choose" between parents.
- Above everything else, adolescents most wanted flexibility in their arrangements. Being able to move between households on their own schedules was important. Adolescents who had equal care-time arrangements reported the greatest ease in seeing each parent in between things like doing schoolwork, playing sport or seeing friends.
- A number of adolescents found interruptions and changes to their care-time schedules difficult and somewhat stressful (24% of those who had experienced a change in care-time arrangements since their parent's separation). Of those adolescents desiring a change in the number of nights they spent with each parent, most wanted the change so that they could have a relationship with both of their parents. Others wanted more stability or consistency in their arrangements, particularly around the transition between households.
- Logistical and relationship challenges were the main obstacles for adolescents in seeing their other parent. Often parents lived some distance away or the challenge of coordinating busy parent and child schedules made care-time arrangements overly complex.

### **Supporting adolescents in separated families**

- Adolescents often turned to parents, friends and relatives for support during their parents' separation. They were most likely to talk to the parent they mainly lived with, while those with equal care time were just as likely to talk to their mother as they were to talk to their father (separately).
- For some adolescents, siblings and grandparents were also an important source of support, as were other relatives. The vast majority of adolescents found the support and advice of friends and family helpful.
- One in three adolescents had spoken with a counsellor about their parents' separation, including a phone or online counselling service like Kids Helpline. For many, speaking to a counsellor allowed them to talk through their feelings and to clarify issues around their parents' separation.

### **Having a strong relationship with parents**

- Feeling close to at least one parent was important in helping adolescents adjust to life after parental separation. A secure relationship with at least one or with both their parents was associated with greater self-rated school achievement, self-confidence and general happiness with life. Less secure relationships with both parents, however, were associated with poorer academic and psychological wellbeing in adolescents.
- Adolescents living mainly in one household often felt close to the parent they lived with, and their relationship with the other parent was often less close. Adolescents were most likely to confide in the parent with whom they lived most of the time.

- For adolescents with equal care time, the parent–child relationship often stayed warm, secure and trusting after the separation. Parents of adolescents with equal care time also tended to communicate more and were more satisfied with their child’s relationship with their other parent.

### **Becoming part of a step-family**

- Adolescents living mostly/only with one parent were more likely to have a non-resident step-parent than a co-resident step-parent, while adolescents with equal care time were just as likely to have either a co-resident step-mother or co-resident step-father.
- On average, warm relationships and trust were less common between adolescents and their step-parents, than with their parents. Adolescents with equal care time tended to have more of a connection with their step-parents than others. Likewise, adolescents who lived mostly/only in one household were more likely to have warmer relationships with their co-resident step-parent.

### **The importance of grandparents**

- Many adolescents reported that their relationships with their grandparents became closer after separation. Adolescents living with their mother were more likely to have closer relationships and more regular contact with their maternal grandparents than paternal grandparents, and the reverse was true for adolescents living with their father.
- For some adolescents, grandparents were also an important source of help, advice and support after parental separation.

### **Family finances and support for children**

- The vast majority of adolescents had a parent in paid employment, including both full- and part-time employment. However, more than one in four parents of adolescents expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their current financial situation.
- Adolescents living mostly/only with their mother had a higher risk of living in financial hardship due to diminished economic circumstances. Mothers with majority care made up the largest proportion of parents reporting financial difficulties and were more likely to be receiving government income support than others. They often had substantial re-establishment costs after separation, including expenses for things like household furniture and whitegoods. Mothers with the majority care were also more likely in the previous 12 months to have experienced financial difficulties, such as going without meals, having to sell something of value, seeking financial assistance from a welfare or community agency, or seeking financial assistance from family and friends.
- The majority of adolescents indicated that it was the parent they lived with most of the time who paid for their everyday expenses, such as clothing, schooling, leisure activities and spending money. Accordingly, adolescents were more likely to approach their resident parent when they needed extra money for something. Interestingly, fathers were more likely to be seen as contributing to school costs than mothers, while mothers were reported as paying for adolescents’ clothes more often than fathers.

### **Parental violence and conflict**

- Separation does not always reduce parental conflict. While most parents had either friendly or cooperative relationships after separation, some did not. Without knowing whether this was at a higher or lower level since the separation, for most of these latter parents, their discord concerned a general animosity toward the other parent, while for others, conflict stemmed from financial concerns, including the payment of child support.
- Some 35% of parents reported a distant relationship with the other parent, 12% a highly conflictual relationship and 6% a fearful relationship.



- Mothers with majority care of their adolescent were more likely to report experiencing angry or hostile relationships with their ex-partner.
- Of all parents, almost one in four experienced family violence (being physically hurt) before their separation. In many cases, children had witnessed some of the abuse or violence.
- Despite the fact that parents tried to shield their children from any ongoing relationship difficulties, many adolescents were aware when the conflict between parents continued after their separation. It would appear that these adolescents had a better understanding of why their parents could not live together as they expressed the greatest relief over their parents' separation and the least desire for a parental reunion.

### **Adjusting to life after parental separation**

- The diversity of families and children's situations means that there is no single post-separation arrangement that is in the best interests of all children.
- Older adolescents (aged 15+ years) responded somewhat differently than younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years) to the separation of their parents, with the latter group expressing more unease over their parent's separation than the former.
- Younger adolescents were also more likely to maintain a desire for their parents to one day reunite, perhaps reflecting an unconscious grieving for the loss of their parents' relationship. In particular, younger adolescents with equal care time were more likely to feel that it would have been better for *them* if their parents had stayed together.
- Boys seemed to be the most troubled by their parents' separation, being less likely than girls to express relief over the separation and more likely to desire a parental reunion.
- While, on the whole, adolescents across all care-time arrangements were just as well-adjusted as each other, boys with equal care time were more likely to report social adjustment concerns, as they were the least positive about their ability to get along with others. In addition, girls living mostly/only with their father tended to report lower levels of self-confidence than did others.
- The survey highlighted that changes in arrangements can be positive for some, but not others. Notably, the findings suggest that multiple changes in care-time arrangements in a relatively short period may affect adolescents' ability to cope after separation.
- Adolescent adjustment is likely to be supported through enhanced economic stability for both adolescents and their parents post-separation. As previously described, mothers in majority care made up the greatest proportion of parents reporting financial difficulties. It is well established that growing up in a household with low income can negatively affect the life chances and opportunities of children.
- The findings suggest that adolescent adjustment and recovery can be enhanced in several ways. This is most likely to occur when parents are able to minimise conflict and communicate regularly after separation. Parents can also play an important role in helping children understand what is happening, and provide support by talking to their adolescent.
- It is important for parents to remain sensitive and responsive to their children's needs, including providing flexible arrangements around the adolescents' schedule (e.g., doing schoolwork, playing sport, seeing friends). For some adolescents, this includes involving them in decisions about them, where appropriate; while for others, it is not being placed in a situation of having to "choose" between parents.
- Adolescent adjustment is enhanced when parents reach arrangements that promote a sense of safety and wellbeing. Where re-partnering occurs, supporting and developing quality step-parent–child relationships is important.
- At the same time, the survey findings suggest that promoting a warm, secure and trusting relationship with at least one parent is of great importance in helping adolescents adjust to life after parental separation.
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# 1 Introduction

Between 2006 and 2008, the Australian Government introduced a series of changes to the family law system.<sup>2</sup> The overriding aim of the reforms was to protect children's best interests. Other aims included moving away from long and costly court battles and towards more cooperative parenting solutions, with the help of dispute resolution services, and promoting shared parental responsibility in an environment where children are safe from violence and abuse. In addition, a new Child Support Scheme came into full effect in July 2008, designed to encourage shared parental responsibility, improve the balance between the interests of both parents, and focus on children's needs and the actual cost of raising them.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was commissioned by the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to conduct a survey of adolescents in order to gain insight into their opinions and experiences of their parents' separation and their post-separation circumstances, in the context of the reforms.

This report presents the findings from the Family Pathways: Adolescent Study. The study of adolescents in separated families is part of a series of surveys of separated families (the Family Pathways studies), which sought to capture the views and experiences of separated families in Australia. In particular, the Adolescent Study, conducted between October and December 2009, was nested within the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF), a national study of some 10,000 parents who separated after the introduction of the family law reforms in July 2006.

This report provides quantitative and qualitative information on the experiences and opinions of 623 adolescents whose parents separated after the introduction of the reforms in July 2006, along with contextual information provided by the parents of these young people.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1 Study aims

The nature of children's involvement in research has changed in recent times. Children and young people are now often seen as active participants in research, particularly around decisions that affect them (Powell & Smith, 2009). This is reflected in the Adolescent Study, which sought to place young people at the centre of the research on their experiences of the process of separation and their own involvement in the decisions that parents made about them following separation.

The study specifically sought to address several questions relevant to family law policy, including:

- How involved are parents in adolescents' lives following separation?
- How well do adolescents' care-time arrangements work?
- What do adolescents want in their care-time arrangements?
- Who do adolescents turn to for support when their parents separate?
- What is the quality of adolescents' relationships with their parents after separation?
- How do adolescents experience becoming part of a step-family?
- What role do grandparents play in adolescents' lives after separation?
- How does the economic status of parents after separation affect adolescent wellbeing?

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<sup>2</sup> These included the implementation of changes to the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) (*FLA 1975*) through the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) (*SPR Act 2006*), and increased funding for new and expanded family relationships services, including the establishment of 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) and a national advice line.

<sup>3</sup> Parent reports were collected as part of the LSSF in 2008 (Wave 1) and 2009 (Wave 2).

- How do adolescents experience parental violence and conflict?
- How are adolescents adjusting to life after parental separation?

## 1.2 Study methodology

The study focused on adolescents aged 12–18 years old whose parents had separated between July 2006 and September 2008. Telephone interviews were conducted with 623 adolescents from across Australia between October and December 2009. Details of the questionnaire development process undertaken prior to the interviews taking place are provided in Appendix A.

### Sample selection

The Adolescent Study was nested within the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families, a national study of some 10,000 parents who separated after the introduction of the reforms in July 2006. These parents had (a) separated from the child's other parent between July 2006 and September 2008;<sup>4</sup> (b) registered with the Child Support Agency (CSA);<sup>5</sup> and (c) were still separated from this parent at the time of the first survey in the second half of 2008.

Parents were asked a great deal about one child (the “focus child”) in both Wave 1 (W1) and 2 (W2) of the LSSF.<sup>6</sup> In the sample selection for the Adolescent Study, the focus child was considered first. However, in instances where this child was too young to participate at the time of the Wave 2 data collection (September to November 2009), a 12–18 year old sibling of this child was considered. If there were two or more such siblings within the household, one adolescent was randomly selected for interview.

Adolescents were regarded as out-of-scope for contact if they were away for the duration of the survey or if they had a health condition or disability that prevented them from completing the questionnaire. Records were also designated as out-of-scope if it was not possible to determine the adolescents' living arrangements (e.g., the mother and father provided conflicting answers regarding who the child lived with).<sup>7</sup>

Based on these selection criteria, the total number of adolescents available for the Adolescent Study was 807 (see Appendix Table A.2 for details of interviews achieved). Of these eligible adolescents, 612 were focus children and 195 were siblings of a focus child.

### Recruitment into the study

Two waves of parent interviews were conducted: Wave 1 in August–October 2008 (on average, 15 months after separation) and Wave 2 in September–November 2009. At the second wave, permission to participate in the Adolescent Study was sought from parents with an eligible child in Wave 2. In the large majority of cases (81%), permission to interview an adolescent child was readily provided by parents.

A post-interview follow-up letter and an Adolescent Study brochure were mailed to all parents who gave their permission for one of their adolescent children to be interviewed. These letters introduced the survey, encouraged participation and provided a Freecall telephone number to sample members and their parents to assist with query resolution.<sup>8</sup> An approach letter and

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<sup>4</sup> All except 4% of the sample had separated between July 2006 and December 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The survey included both “private collect” and “agency collect” parents registered with the CSA in 2007.

<sup>6</sup> This child was the first child listed for the case in question in the Child Support Agency's database.

<sup>7</sup> This applied to only two adolescents, where both parents indicated that they lived with them for more than 50% of the time.

<sup>8</sup> The support staff who manned the Freecall number also offered (if needed) a comprehensive list of crisis support and counselling hotlines.

Adolescent Study brochure (see Appendix B) was also sent directly to the potential adolescent respondents prior to their telephone number being initiated for calling.

## Study design and procedures

As described above, recruitment of the adolescents occurred through parents participating in Wave 2 of the LSSF between September and November 2009. Adolescent data collection was conducted between October and December 2009. Of the 807 eligible adolescents, 623 were interviewed (representing a 77% participation rate).

Fieldwork and data management for both the parent and adolescent studies was undertaken by AIFS' appointed fieldwork agency.<sup>9</sup> A range of measures was adopted between the parent survey waves in order to maintain up-to-date contact information. These included sending a research update and an incentive to all Wave 1 parent participants, and providing a Freecall number and a website for respondents to update contact details. Other measures used during the course of fieldwork to make contact with as many sample members as possible included using the contact details of close associates of parents collected as part of the retention strategy in Wave 1 of the LSSF, leaving voicemail messages on mobile phones, and sending emails.

The most common final call outcome was a completed interview, with 77% of sample records resulting in an interview. Some 7% of respondents declined to participate: while in a further 3% of cases, a household member who answered the telephone refused to pass on the call to the respondent. In the remaining cases, respondents were either away for the duration of the survey or not able to be contacted.

## Ethical considerations

The AIFS Ethics Committee approved the survey methodology and content. Ethical considerations in undertaking the survey included:

- ensuring informed consent was obtained both from the parents who agreed to let us speak to their child, and the adolescent respondents themselves;
- ensuring the voluntary nature of participation was clearly understood;
- protecting the privacy and confidentiality of respondent information; and
- observing mandatory reporting requirements associated with the disclosure of current abuse.

A Freecall survey hotline number was available to potential respondents (and provided in the pre-survey letter) to provide a point of reference for query resolution and/or for any survey-generated requests for information relating to crisis and financial support services.

All interviewers were required to sign a deed of confidentiality that was specific to the project.

Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of mandatory reporting to the research team of any instances where interviewers became concerned for respondents' welfare. In addition, interviewers were provided with appropriate referral numbers to provide to respondents upon request or as required. These included:

- a project-specific Freecall number for questions about who is conducting the study and how the respondent's telephone number was obtained; and
- various age-appropriate counselling websites and helplines.

## Research measures

In addition to demographic information, adolescents and parents reported on a range of issues, including:

- care-time arrangements—how they were reached, and any changes since separation;

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<sup>9</sup> The Social Research Centre was appointed to collect data for the Family Pathways Studies.

- satisfaction with care-time arrangements and adolescent involvement in their determination;
- parent–adolescent relationships;
- parent–adolescent contact;
- grandparent–adolescent relationships;
- adolescents’ relationships with step-parents;
- post-separation parental relationships;
- help-seeking and support during and after family separation;
- adolescents’ feelings and perceptions about parental separation;
- adolescents’ health and academic performance;
- adolescents’ wellbeing and adjustment post-separation;
- parents’ post-separation financial status, economic satisfaction and re-establishment costs; and
- adolescents’ perceptions on their parents’ provision of financial support for everyday expenses.

## Comparison of sample and non-respondents

This section describes some key characteristics of the parents of respondents and non-respondents in the Adolescent Study.<sup>10</sup> Table 1.1 summarises selected characteristics for parents of adolescent respondents and non-respondents. In sum, there were no significant demographic differences between the two.

Across both groups, the average age of parents was similar, with most aged between 36–50 years of age. The responding parent in each group was mainly the adolescents’ mother. The majority of parents were Australian-born (82% and 83%), with approximately 2% being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island (ATSI) descent. The vast majority of parents had been married prior to separation (89–90%).

In terms of educational attainment, parents were similar. On average, almost one-third (32%) of parents had completed Year 11 or less, while 13% had finished Year 12 or equivalent. On average, more than one in three (35%) parents had a certificate/diploma or trade/apprenticeship level qualification, while between 16% and 19% of parents had attained a degree or higher level qualification.

Parents of adolescents in both groups were mainly in paid employment when first interviewed after their separation (LSSF W1 2008). At the second interview, some 12 months later (LSSF W2 2009), the majority of parents described their main source of income as a wage/salary, while between 20–23% received a government payment at the time of interview.

## A note on analysis

Three main forms of analysis were applied in this report:

- descriptive methods (numerical and graphical);
- analysis of variance (multivariate and univariate); and
- qualitative analysis.

While the report has sought to represent the views of adolescents who had experienced parental separation, the main interest is in understanding the effect of parental involvement after separation, evident through care-time arrangements, on various adolescent outcomes. As such, the study compared outcomes for groups of adolescents living mostly/only with their mother, mostly/only with their father and with equal care time. The adolescents in the three groups were similar to each other in respect to general background demographics and the experience of

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<sup>10</sup> Non-respondents were eligible adolescents, as defined in Chapter 1, who did not participate in the study.

parental separation after the 2006 reforms and, as such, were compared to evaluate the effects of parental involvement after separation (i.e., care-time arrangements) and, specifically, to explore the adolescent outcomes by which they differed.

**Table 1.1 Selected parent characteristics, by adolescent respondents and non-respondents**

	Non-respondents	Respondents
	%	
Responding parent of adolescent		
Mother	62.9	68.8
Father	37.1	31.2
Total	100.0	100.0
Age		
< 29 years	0.3	0.0
29–35 years	10.3	10.0
36–40 years	28.0	23.1
41–45 years	32.4	36.3
46–50 years	20.4	21.7
51+ years	8.6	8.9
Total	100.0	100.0
Country of birth		
Australia	81.5	83.0
Overseas	18.5	17.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Indigenous <sup>a</sup>		
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) descent	1.8	1.9
Highest educational attainment		
Year 11 or below	34.4	29.3
Year 12 (HSC)	11.6	15.1
Trade/Apprenticeship	9.9	9.1
Certificate/Diploma	28.2	28.1
Degree or higher	15.5	18.1
Other	0.3	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0
Employment <sup>a</sup>		
In paid work (including full and part-time)	77.6	79.9
Not employed	16.5	15.1
Stay at home parent	5.9	5.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Main source of income <sup>a</sup>		
Wage or salary	67.6	70.8
Own business or partnership	6.5	6.1
Government income	23.1	20.7
Other	2.8	2.4
Total	100.0	100.0
Marital status at separation <sup>a</sup>		
Married	89.7	89.2
Cohabiting	9.7	10.3
Other	0.6	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of respondents	184	623

Note: <sup>a</sup> Excludes a small number of parents who responded “don’t know” or refused the question. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

For the bulk of the report, where there was only a single dependent variable to be analysed, univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures were applied, with significant



relationships ( $p < .05$ ) identified in the report. For discrete variables,<sup>11</sup> crosstabs were used to generate information about bivariate relationships. These relationships are displayed in tables throughout the report. In Chapter 7, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was applied when significant differences between the three care-time arrangement groups on two or more related variables were investigated.

Interview statements collected from adolescents responding to open-ended items were coded and sorted to identify key themes. These themes are reported in the text and illustrated through examples of adolescents' statements.

Further explanation of analyses and related terms can be found in Appendix A: Technical notes.

### **1.3 Structure of this report**

This report is divided into chapters that correspond to the broad topics covered in the survey. While this first chapter outlined the purpose and methodology of the Adolescent Study, the remaining chapters address the following topics:

#### **Characteristics of adolescents and their parents**

This chapter summarises the demographic characteristics of both adolescent respondents and the parents from whom data were obtained (referred to as responding parents).

#### **Care-time arrangements**

This chapter focuses on adolescents' care-time arrangements. It specifically explores issues related to a key objective of the 2006 family law reforms—encouraging greater involvement of both parents in children's lives following separation, provided that the children are protected from family violence or child abuse.

#### **Adolescent involvement in care-time arrangement decision-making**

The chapter outlines adolescents' reports about their participation (and desire to participate) in decision-making related to their living arrangements after their parents separated. Adolescents' views of counselling/mediation experiences are also reported.

#### **Family relationships**

This chapter focuses on the family relationships of adolescents. The issues examined are:

- quality of relationships between parents (on average) 27 months after separation;
- family violence and safety issues; and
- relationships between adolescent and their parents, step-parents and grandparents.

#### **Economic wellbeing and support**

This chapter reports on indicators of the financial wellbeing of parents of adolescents, such as parents' financial status post-separation; reports from parents of substantial re-establishment costs; the prevalence of financial assistance sought by parents and indicators of financial difficulty; and parents' level of satisfaction with their current financial situation. It also looks at financial support for adolescents post-separation (in relation to everyday expenses), as reported by adolescents.

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<sup>11</sup> Discrete variables include those usually measured on nominal or ordinal scales (see Appendix A for further details).

## **Adolescents' health and wellbeing**

This chapter continues to explore aspects of parental involvement and how important parents are in helping children adjust to life after parental separation.

Specifically, the chapter reports on:

- adolescents' feelings about parental separation;
- adolescents' and parents' perceptions on health and schooling;
- links between care-time arrangements and adolescents' health and wellbeing;
- links between stability or change in care-time arrangements and adolescents' health and wellbeing; and
- links between closeness of the parent–child relationship and adolescents' health and wellbeing.

## **Summary of key findings**

This chapter synthesises the results and highlights their relevance to family law policy.



## 2 Characteristics of adolescents and their parents

A total of 623 adolescents (321 males and 302 females) participated in the Adolescent Study. Their parents separated between July 2006 and September 2008 and took part in Wave 2 of the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF W2 2009). This chapter summarises the demographic characteristics of both the adolescent respondents and their respondent parents.

Most adolescents (76%) were the focus children in the LSSF, with the remaining 24% being adolescent siblings of the focus children.<sup>12</sup>

### Key messages

- Adolescent respondents (321 male and 302 female) had experienced parental separation between July 2006 and September 2008.
- They were aged 12–18 years in 2009 and 9–15 years at separation. At the time of interview, 56% of adolescents were aged 12–14 years and 81% of parents interviewed were aged between 36–50 years.
- For most adolescents (89%), their parents had been married at the time of separation.
- The majority of adolescents (84%) had at least one sibling from their parents' union.
- Respondents came from across all states/territories of Australia and were registered with the Child Support Agency in 2007. For the vast majority of adolescents, the interviewed parent was born in Australia (83%), with 17% of interviewed parents being born overseas. Only 2% were of ATSI descent.
- Most of the adolescents were attending school or undertaking some form of training/study (94%). Only 6% of adolescents were not currently studying or in some form of training, and the majority of these were girls. More than a quarter of all adolescents (28%) were undertaking some form of paid employment.
- The main income for the majority of interviewed parents was a wage or salary. However, more mothers (29%) than fathers (10%) were receiving government payments as their main source of income.
- The majority of adolescents lived mostly/only with their mother (63%), with smaller proportions living mostly/only with their father (20%) or in an equal care time arrangement involving both parents (17%).

Key demographics for the entire sample of adolescent boys and girls are presented in this chapter, as well as selected demographics of the adolescents' responding parents.<sup>13</sup> The characteristics of adolescents examined in this chapter include: age and gender, education and employment, and the number of siblings from their parents' union. Characteristics of the responding parent of the adolescent include: age, being of ATSI descent, being born outside of Australia, education and employment, and relationship status at time of separation. These characteristics were measured after separation, either at the time of the first parent interview (LSSF W1 2008) or at the second parent interview (LSSF W2 2009).

### 2.1 Age and gender

Overall, 54% of the adolescents were aged 12–14 years at the time of interview, with the balance being 15–18 years of age. Across both age groups, the proportion of boys and girls was somewhat similar (see Table 2.1). Most responding parents of adolescents (81%) were aged between 36–50 years at the time of interview.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1 for how these adolescents were selected.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 3 provides further details of demographics according to adolescents' care-time arrangements, age and gender.

**Table 2.1 Age of adolescent respondents and their parents, by gender of adolescent**

	Boys	Girls	All adolescents
	%		
Adolescents' age			
Younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years)	56.0	52.4	54.3
Older adolescents (aged 15–18 years)	44.0	47.7	45.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Parents' age			
29–35 years	9.9	10.2	10.0
36–40 years	24.3	21.9	23.1
41–45 years	32.1	40.5	36.3
46–50 years	22.5	20.9	21.7
51+ years	11.2	6.5	8.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Mean (years)	43.1	42.5	42.8
No. of respondents	321	302	623

Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

## 2.2 Ethnicity

As shown in Table 2.2, the vast majority of adolescents had a parent who was born in Australia (83%), with the remaining 17% of responding parents being born overseas. Only 2% of adolescents had a parent of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

**Table 2.2 Country of birth and ATSI descent of adolescents' responding parent, by gender of adolescents**

Responding parents' ethnicity	Boys	Girls	All adolescents
	%		
Country of birth			
Australia	81.0	85.1	83.0
Overseas	19.0	14.9	17.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Indigenous <sup>a</sup>			
ATSI descent	2.3	1.6	1.9
No. of respondents	321	302	623

Note: <sup>a</sup> Excludes a small number of parents who responded "don't know" or refused the question.

## 2.3 Education and employment

The vast majority of adolescent boys and girls were attending either primary or secondary school (89%). As seen in Table 2.3, only 6% of adolescents were not currently studying or in some form of training. Of all adolescents, 27% of boys and 30% of girls were also undertaking some form of paid employment. Table 2.4 reports the highest educational attainment and employment of the responding parent of the adolescents. Most of these parents had obtained an equivalent of Year 12 or higher education. On average, 15–21% of responding mothers and fathers had a degree or higher. For the vast majority of responding parents, their main source of income was a wage or salary. However, more responding mothers (29%) than fathers (10%) identified government support as being their main source of income.

**Table 2.3 Adolescents' education and employment, by gender of adolescents**

	Boys	Girls	All adolescents
	%		
Current educational engagement			
Primary or secondary school	90.0	87.4	88.7
Other studying/training <sup>a</sup>	5.6	4.7	5.2
Not currently studying/training	4.4	7.9	6.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Employed/has a paid job			
Yes	27.1	29.5	28.3
No	72.9	70.5	71.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of respondents	321	302	623

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Includes studying or training for a certificate, apprenticeship, diploma and degree. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Table 2.4 Parents' education and employment, by gender of parents and adolescents**

Parents' education and employment	Boys		Girls		All adolescents	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
	%		%		%	
Highest educational attainment						
Year 11 or below	25.7	27.7	27.0	32.4	26.3	30.1
Year 12 (HSC)	13.3	18.3	8.1	16.0	11.2	17.1
Trade/apprenticeship	25.7	3.5	23.0	1.9	24.6	2.7
Certificate/diploma	20.0	29.7	24.3	31.9	21.8	30.8
Degree or higher	15.2	20.8	17.6	17.8	16.2	19.3
Total <sup>a</sup>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Main source of income						
Wage or salary	72.3	65.1	74.7	69.4	73.5	67.3
Own business or partnership	17.9	1.4	10.8	5.1	14.4	3.3
Government income	7.1	33.0	12.0	24.1	9.6	28.6
Total <sup>a</sup>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of respondents	112	209	83	216	195	425

Note: <sup>a</sup> Excludes a small number of parents who responded "other", "don't know" or refused the question.

## 2.4 Siblings and parental marital status

The majority of adolescents had parents who were legally married at the time of separation (89%). As shown in Table 2.5, some 16% of adolescents did not have any siblings from their parents union, but most adolescents (73%) had one or two siblings.

**Table 2.5** Number of siblings and parental marital status, by gender of adolescents

	Boys	Girls	All adolescents
	%		
Number of siblings from focus union			
0	16.2	16.6	16.1
1	43.0	44.4	43.6
2	30.2	28.1	29.4
3	6.2	8.6	7.4
4+	4.3	2.3	3.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Marital status of parents at separation			
Married	89.7	88.7	89.2
Cohabiting	9.7	10.9	10.3
Other <sup>a</sup>	0.6	0.4	0.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of respondents	321	302	623

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Includes parents who never lived together and who separated before child was born. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

## 2.5 Care-time arrangements

### Care-time arrangements and age

The majority of responding adolescents were living mostly/only with their mother (63%). A further 20% of adolescents said that they were living mostly/only with their father, while 17% indicated that they lived equally with both parents.<sup>14</sup> As seen in Table 2.6, across the two major age groups, adolescents lived mostly with their mother, although most of those adolescents with equal care time were in the younger age group compared with those in other care-time arrangements. Adolescents living mostly/only with their father tended to be older adolescents.

**Table 2.6** Care-time arrangement, by younger and older adolescent groups

Care-time arrangement	Younger adolescents (12–14 years)	Older adolescents (15–18 years) <sup>a</sup>	All adolescents
	%		
Mostly/only mother	61.5	64.9	63.1
Mostly/only father	16.6	24.2	20.1
Equal care time	21.9	10.9	16.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>623</b>

Note: <sup>a</sup> Includes one adolescent aged 19 years at the time of interview.

### Parents' characteristics according to care-time arrangement

Table 2.7 reveals that for adolescents in majority care, the responding parent was the parent the adolescent usually lived with. For those with equal care time, more fathers than mothers were the responding parent in the survey.

<sup>14</sup> Adolescents were asked to report with whom they mostly or only lived. Response options were: mostly (or only) with mum; mostly (or only) with dad; or live equally with both parents.

**Table 2.7 Proportions of responding mothers and fathers, by adolescents' care-time arrangement**

Responding parent of adolescent	Mostly/only mother	Mostly/only father	Equal care time	All
	%			
Mother	98.7	1.6	36.2	45.5
Father	1.3	98.4	63.8	54.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>623</b>

In terms of other characteristics, parents across all care-time groups were overwhelmingly born in Australia and were married at the time of separation (see Table 2.8). More fathers of adolescents with equal care time had a degree or higher than fathers with majority care time (25% versus 15%). Across all care-time groups, more fathers than mothers had a trade/apprenticeship qualification. Similarly, for parents across all care-time groups, a salary or wage was their main source of income at the time of the second interview. However, mothers were more likely to be receiving government support than fathers and were less likely to be in business, whether they had majority or equal care time.

**Table 2.8 Select characteristics of responding parent, by adolescents' care-time arrangement**

	Mostly/only care time		Equal care time	
	Mothers <sup>a</sup>	Fathers <sup>a</sup>	Mothers	Fathers
	%		%	
<b>Country of birth</b>				
Australia	83.0	81.3	81.6	88.1
Overseas	17.0	18.7	18.4	11.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Highest educational attainment</b>				
Year 11 or below	31.5	31.1	21.9	13.5
Year 12 (HSC)	16.8	9.0	18.8	13.5
Trade/Apprenticeship	2.8	24.6	0.0	26.9
Certificate/Diploma	29.5	20.5	40.6	25.0
Degree or higher	19.4	14.8	18.8	21.2
<b>Total <sup>b</sup></b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Main source of income</b>				
Wage or salary	67.4	69.9	70.3	79.1
Own business or partnership	3.1	13.0	5.4	19.4
Government income	28.8	13.0	24.3	1.5
Other	0.8	4.1	0.0	0.0
<b>Total <sup>c</sup></b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Marital status at separation</b>				
Married	89.2	87.8	89.5	91.0
Cohabiting	10.3	11.4	10.5	9.0
Other	0.6	0.8	0.0	0.0
<b>Total <sup>c</sup></b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>67</b>

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Excludes a small number of parents (~ 1%) of adolescents in mostly/only care who were not the respective mother or father. <sup>b</sup> Excludes a small number of parents who responded "other". <sup>c</sup> Excludes a small number of parents who responded "don't know" or refused the question. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

### 3 Care-time arrangements

A key objective of the 2006 family law reforms was to encourage the involvement of both parents in their children's lives following separation, provided this is in the child's best interest. The focus of this chapter is on adolescents' care-time arrangements, whereby the parent is taking primary or immediate care of the child for significant periods of time. In the previous chapter, it was shown that the majority of adolescents lived mostly/only with their mother (63%), with smaller proportions living mostly/only with their father (20%) or in an equal care time arrangement involving both parents (17%). In this chapter, these care-time arrangements are explored in more detail.

#### Key messages

- For most adolescents, their parents' separation resulted in one parent becoming primarily responsible for their care. Across all age groups, this was most often their mother (64–66%).<sup>15</sup> The prevalence of adolescents living mostly/only with their father tended to increase with age, whereas adolescents with equal care time were typically younger adolescents aged 12–14 years.
- Overall, some 26% of adolescents never stayed overnight with their other parent, most often their father. Older adolescents (15–18 years) were more likely to never stay overnight than younger adolescents.
- Daytime contact with the other parent (without staying overnight) was relatively common for adolescents living primarily with one parent. Almost half of all adolescents saw their other parent during the day at least once a week or more often.
- The survey highlighted the importance of other forms of parent–child contact. Some 70% of adolescents living mostly/only with one parent reported that they talked to their other parent either on the phone or by email at least once a week or more often.
- On average, fewer than one in three adolescents had experienced a change in living arrangements since their parents separated. Changes in adolescents' initial post-separation care-time arrangements tended to reflect small changes in the number of nights spent with each parent rather than a change in adolescents' primary residence.
- Most adolescents who experienced a change in number of nights reported a positive experience that was more convenient and allowed them to see their other parent more. However, one in four adolescents experiencing a change in number of nights found it difficult to adjust to the new arrangements and schedules.
- On the whole, adolescents were satisfied with their current living arrangements and the amount of time they spent with their other parent. Most adolescents felt they were able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to and few expressed a desire to change their current arrangements.
- Adolescents with equal care time reported greater ease in seeing each parent in between things like doing schoolwork, playing sport or seeing friends than those who lived mostly/only with their mother or father.
- For adolescents who did not see their other parent, the main obstacles cited included physical distance, the parent or child not wanting/making contact; and a history of family violence.

In this report, the term “equal care time” is used where the adolescent reported they lived equally with both parents, and “mostly/only” care time is used where the adolescent reported they lived with one parent and only spent a minority of nights or no nights with the other parent. Unless otherwise specified, all findings are described according to three care-time arrangements reported by the adolescents (mostly/only with mother, mostly/only with father, and equal care time).

Adolescents were asked a variety of questions in relation to their care-time arrangements. These questions explored:

- current living arrangements;

<sup>15</sup> Except for age 14, where mother-majority care was 54%.

- daytime-only contact;
- other contact (not face-to-face);
- changes in care-time arrangements since parental separation;
- adjusting to changes in living arrangements;
- satisfaction with living arrangements and parental time;
- desire to change current care-time arrangements; and
- obstacles to seeing the other parent.

### 3.1 Current living arrangements

Care-time arrangements for adolescents were assessed in two ways. Adolescents were asked to report with whom they mostly or only lived, and the number of nights they usually stayed overnight with each parent.

Across all ages, adolescents were living mostly/only with their mother (see Table 3.1). The prevalence of adolescents living mostly/only with their father tended to increase with age, whereas adolescents with equal care time were typically younger adolescents aged 12–14 years.

**Table 3.1 Age of adolescent, by care-time arrangement**

Age in years	Mostly/only mother	Mostly/only father	Equal care time	Total	No. of respondents
	%				
12	64.8	9.3	25.9	100.0	108
13	66.7	17.1	16.2	100.0	111
14	53.8	22.7	23.5	100.0	119
15	65.2	23.2	11.6	100.0	69
16	63.6	20.5	15.9	100.0	88
17	65.4	24.4	10.3	100.0	78
18	65.3	32.6	2.1	100.0	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>63.5</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>622</b>

Notes: Excludes one adolescent aged 19 years at time of interview. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

The same proportion of boys and girls were with equal care time (16–17%) (see Table 3.2). A slightly higher proportion of boys than girls were living mostly/only with their father (23% versus 17%) and a slightly higher proportion of girls than boys were living mostly/only with their mother (67% versus 60%).

**Table 3.2 Gender of adolescent, by care-time arrangement**

Gender	Mostly/only mother	Mostly/only father	Equal care time	Total	No. of respondents
	%				
Boys	59.8	22.7	17.4	100.0	321
Girls	66.6	17.2	16.2	100.0	302

Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

The consistency of findings on care-time arrangements were examined by looking at the number of overnight stays adolescents reported with each parent. In sum, a high degree of consistency was apparent in adolescents' reports of who they lived with and the number of nights they said that they spent with their other parent.<sup>16</sup> Table 3.3 sets out the number of nights adolescents

<sup>16</sup> A small number of adolescents' reports did not match their description of who they mainly lived with. As adolescents were required to estimate the number of nights spent with each parent, their reports on who they mainly lived with were taken to be more accurate and are used throughout the report.

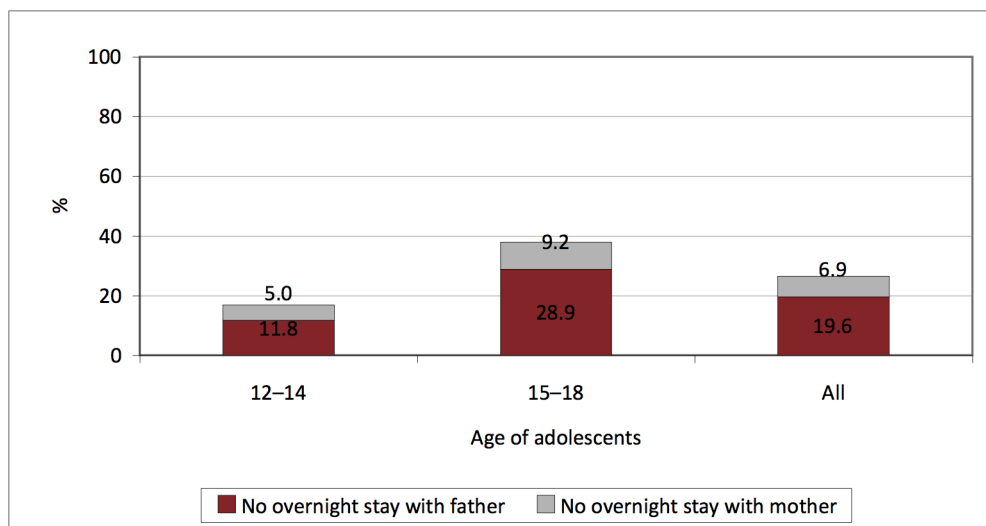
reported spending with each parent by their reported care-time arrangements at time of interview.

**Table 3.3 Proportion of nights spent with each parent, by care-time arrangements, adolescents' reports**

Care-time arrangement	Mostly/only mothers	Mostly/only fathers	Equal care time	Total (% of all adolescents)
	%			
Never stays with father	30.8	0.0	0.0	19.4
87–99% with mother (1–13% father)	23.4	0.8	1.0	15.0
66–86% with mother (14–34% father)	42.6	0.0	2.9	27.4
53–65% with mother (35–47% father)	1.8	0.8	13.3	3.5
48–52% with each parent	1.4	0.8	73.0	13.4
53–65% with father (35–47% mother)	0.0	3.2	6.7	1.9
66–86% with father (14–34% mother)	0.0	33.6	1.2	6.9
87–99% with father (1–13% mother)	0.0	26.4	1.9	5.6
Never stays with mother	0.0	34.4	0.0	6.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>623</b>

Of note is that 26% of all adolescents reported that they never stayed overnight with their other parent. Of the adolescents living mostly/only with their mother, most stayed overnight with their father between 14–34% of nights per year. Adolescents who said that they were living mostly/only with their father were equally likely to never stay overnight with their mother or to stay with her for between 14–34% of nights per year. The majority of adolescents with equal care time (93%) spent between 35–65% of nights per year with each parent, while 73% reported a more comparable split of between 48–52% of nights per year with each parent.

Further analysis of adolescents who never stayed overnight with their other parent revealed clear age differences, with a greater proportion of older adolescents never staying overnight with their other parent (see Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1 Adolescents who never stayed overnight with their other parent, by age of adolescent**

### 3.2 Daytime-only contact

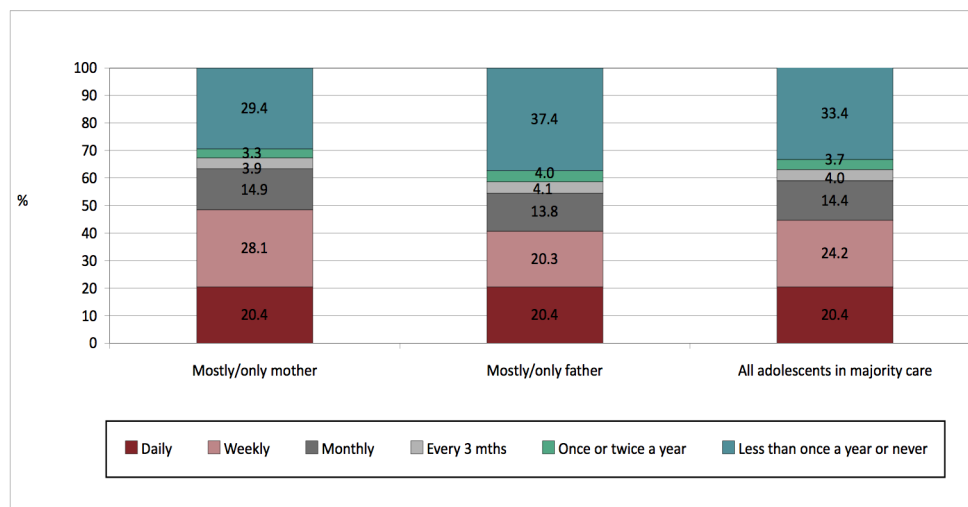
The preceding section described the proportion of nights adolescents spent with each parent. In this section, episodes of daytime contact not involving an overnight stay are reported. Adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother or mostly/only with their father were



specifically asked about the daytime contact they had with their other parent (without staying overnight).

Figure 3.2 shows that daytime-only contact with the other parent was common for adolescents living mainly/only with one parent. The most common response was that they saw their other parent during the day on either a daily or at least once a week basis (41–49%). A smaller proportion had daytime-only contact at least once a month (14–15%), while a substantial minority of adolescents saw their other parent during the daytime less than once a year or never (29–37%).

Further analysis revealed that of all adolescents, 9% neither stayed overnight nor saw their other parent during the daytime. This group were fairly evenly distributed between mother-only and father-only care-time arrangements.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

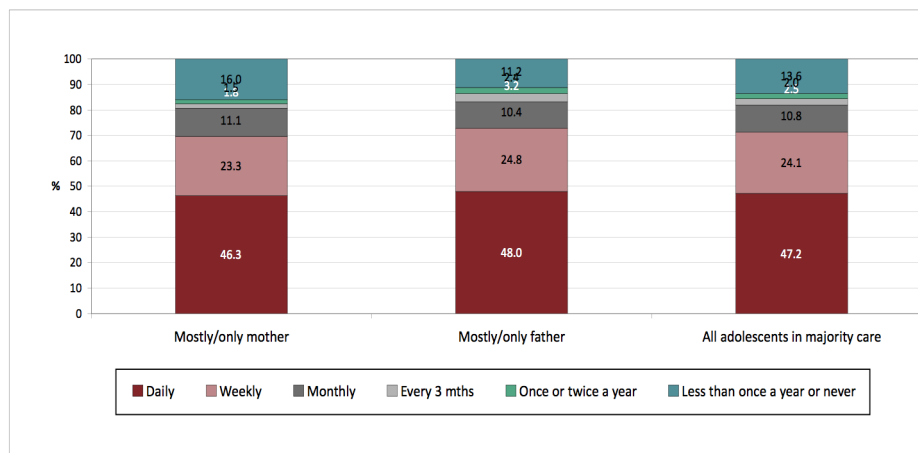
**Figure 3.2** Frequency of daytime-only contact with other parent by adolescents in majority care

### 3.3 Other contact (not face-to-face)

Adolescents living mostly/only with one parent were asked how often they talked to their other parent on the phone or by email. The findings reported in Figure 3.3 highlight the importance of this form of parent–child contact, with most adolescents (71%) reporting that they talked to their other parent either on the phone or by email at least once a week or more often.

Adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother reported talking to their father either on the phone or by email daily (46%) or at least once a week (23%). On the other hand, a further 16% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother reported speaking with their father on the phone or by email less than once a year or never.

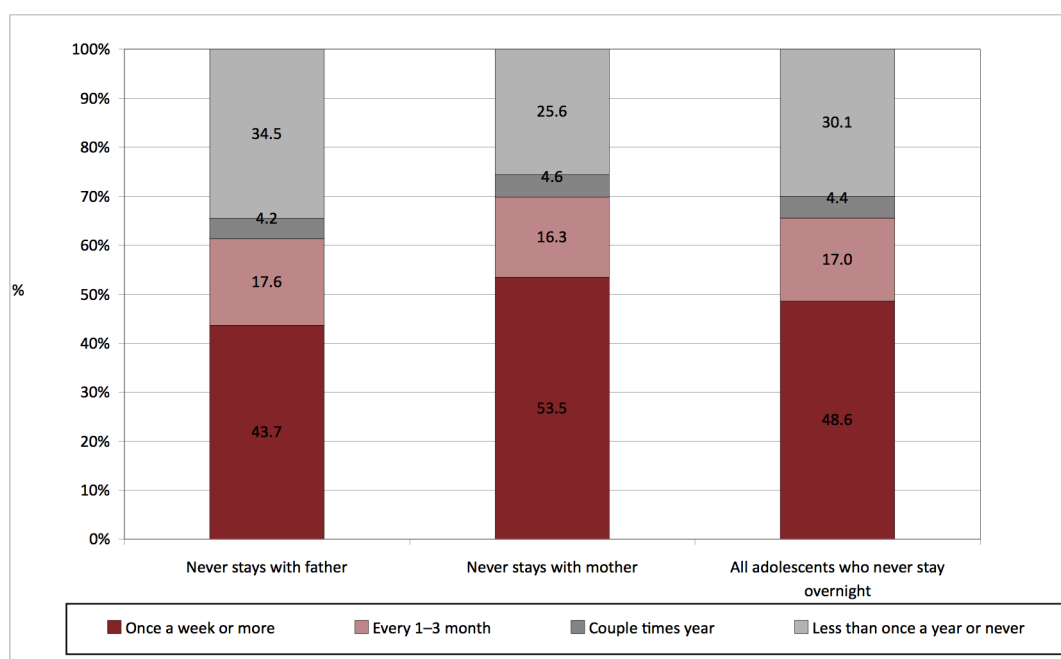
Similarly, nearly one in two adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father reported talking to their mother either on the phone or by email daily (48%), while one in four did so at least once a week (25%). Some 11% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father reported speaking with their mother on the phone or by email less than once a year or never.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 3.3 Frequency of other forms of contact (not face-to-face) with other parent by adolescents in majority care**

Looking now at adolescents who never stayed overnight with their other parent, further analysis revealed that many (44–54%) had regular contact with their other parent using phone or email, indicating that an absence of overnight stays did not mean a lack of contact. However, as shown in Figure 3.4, a number of these adolescents (26–35%) never stayed overnight and rarely (less than once a year) or never had contact with their parent using phone or email.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

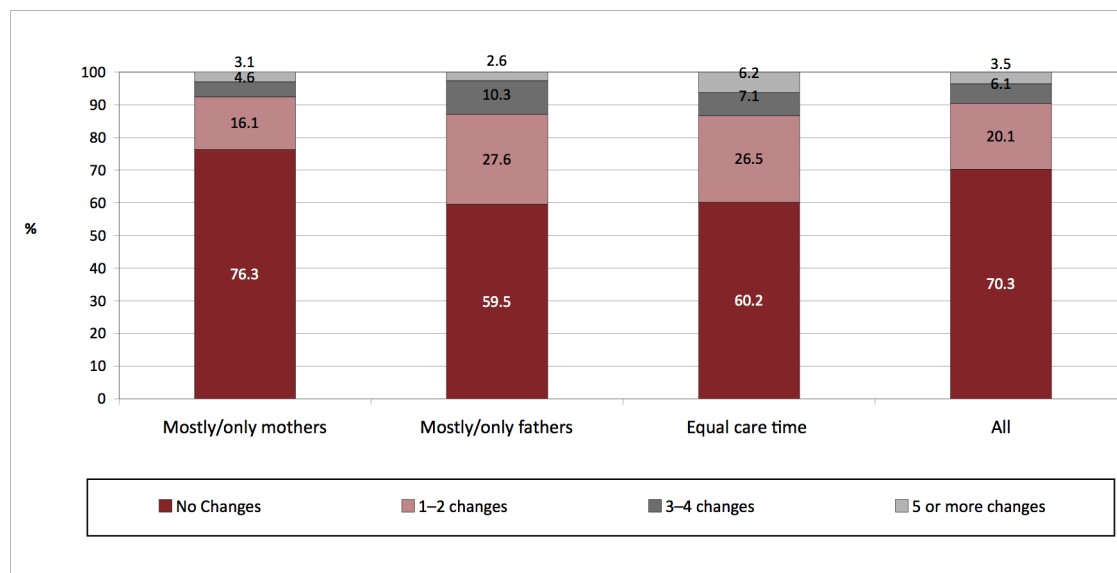
**Figure 3.4 Frequency of phone and email contact with other parent by adolescents who never stayed overnight with their other parent**

### 3.4 Changes in care-time arrangements since separation

This section examines stability or change in adolescents' care-time arrangements. The three broad care-time categories, as reported by adolescents, are used in the main analysis. Parent reports on changes in the number of nights adolescents spent with each parent are also used to further explore the stability or change in adolescents' primary residence.

Figure 3.5 shows the extent of change (at time of interview) in the care-time arrangements since separation. While the majority of care-time arrangements remained stable over the period since separation (that is, experienced no change), some 30% of adolescents reported a change in the number of nights they stayed with each parent since separation. Of these adolescents, around two-thirds (68%) had experienced one or two changes in their main living arrangements since their parents first separated.

Of note is that more adolescents living with equal care-time arrangements and mostly/only with their father reported changes in the number of nights they stayed with each parent since separation than did adolescents living mostly/only with their mother (40% vs 24%).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 3.5 Number of changes made in adolescents' living arrangements since separation, by care-time arrangement**

Parent reports on changes in the number of nights adolescents spent with each parent were also examined and they revealed a similar pattern to those reported by adolescents (Figure 3.5), with 71% of parent reports indicating no change in arrangements since separation, again indicating a fair degree of stability for most adolescents.<sup>17</sup> Based on the parent reports, where there were changes in arrangements there was no clear trend evident in the direction of change, with similar proportions of adolescents spending more nights or time with either their mother (15%) or father (14%).

To further investigate changes in adolescents' care-time arrangements, both adolescent and parent reports were used to examine any physical change in primary residence. Specifically, parents were asked to identify the location of their child's primary residence in LSSF Wave 1 (in 2008), while adolescents reported whom they mainly lived with (in 2009). As seen in Table 3.4, for the majority of adolescents (88%) there was no change in their primary residence since separation. A small number of adolescents with equal care time (3%) moved to living mostly/only with one parent or the other, while 5% of adolescents moved from living mostly/only with one parent (either mother or father) to equal care-time arrangements. Even fewer adolescents moved from living mostly/only with one parent to living mostly/only with the other parent (3%). In sum, changes in adolescents' care-time arrangements tended to reflect small changes in the number of nights they spent with each parent rather than a change in their primary residence.

<sup>17</sup> For the parent reports, the stability of arrangements was only available if the adolescent was the focus child.

**Table 3.4** Change in adolescents' *main* living arrangements since separation

	All adolescents %
<b>Moved from mostly/only mother ...</b>	
to mostly/only father	2.1
to equal care time	3.5
<b>Moved from mostly/only father ...</b>	
to mostly/only mother	1.1
to equal care time	1.8
<b>Moved from equal care time ...</b>	
to mostly/only mother	1.9
to mostly/only father	1.3
<b>No change</b>	
Same living arrangement	88.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### 3.5 Adjusting to changes in living arrangements

Adolescents who indicated that the number of nights they spent with each parent had changed since their parent's separation were asked if they found the change generally helpful or difficult and, if so, their reasons why it was helpful or difficult (through an follow-up open-ended item). Of those adolescents who had experienced a change in care-time arrangements since their parent's separation ( $n = 187$ ), 60% felt that it was very or somewhat helpful. In contrast, 24% felt that it was very or somewhat difficult.

In response to the open-ended item, 101 adolescents provided comments on how they felt the change in living arrangements were helpful. Of these adolescents, one in three (33%) said it was helpful because it allowed them to see their other parent more often; for example:

Just because I get along with my dad better and I spend more time with him now, so it's better. [Female, aged 14 years, mostly/only with father]

Because I get to see both my parents and I love both my parents. [Male, aged 14 years, equal care time]

For another third of adolescents (31%), it was seen as an easier and more convenient arrangement; for example:

It fitted in with our parents better, with their work, and my sister and myself got to spend time with my dad more. [Female, aged 12 years, mostly/only with mother]

I am closer to school and am more stable. I wasn't stuck between two houses. I had to move from one house to the other and it was really annoying. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only with mother]

It's easier with school. I spend one week with each parent so it doesn't change all the time. It's also easier for our parents to commit to picking us up and dropping us off. [Female, aged 13 years, equal care time]

I went from going week on, week off, to seeing my dad every second week and it gave me more time to see my friends and do other things. [Female, aged 13 years, mostly/only with mother]

Forty-seven adolescent respondents provided comments on why they felt the change in living arrangements was difficult. Recurring themes in these responses included, missing a parent or sibling, and difficulty in adjusting to new living arrangements and schedules; for example:

Just because I miss my dad. [Female, aged 18 years, mostly/only with mother]

Because mum and I were really close and because we don't live together, that's the most difficult thing. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with father]

Because it was hard to have one family and then change it to two. [Male, aged 13 years, equal care time]

You get confused with what's happening on each week and it's really hard to see what you have to do. [Female, aged 14 years, mostly/only with mother]

Because we live in a totally different area and it's harder to adjust to live with separated parents. [Female, aged 13 years, mostly/only with mother]

Other adolescents explained that the changes in their living arrangements had been difficult due to conflict between their parents; for example:

Because it was so hard to get them to agree. [Male, aged 14 years, equal care time]

The tug of war between parents and putting the decisions on me. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only with father]

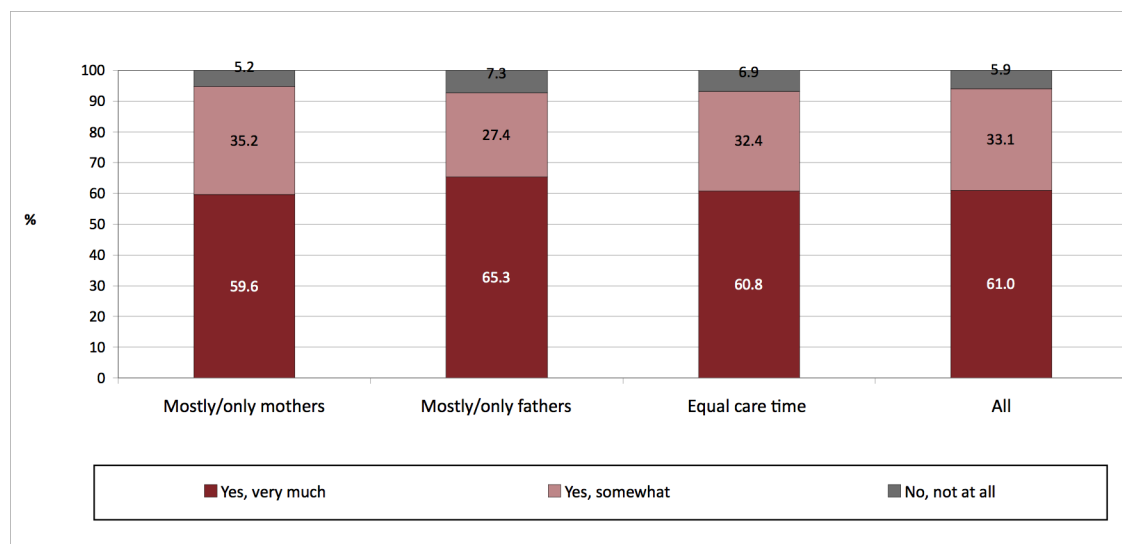
I didn't like taking sides. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with mother]

### 3.6 Satisfaction with living arrangements and parental time

The survey of adolescents in separated families explored how satisfied adolescents were:

- with their living arrangements after parental separation;
- the amount of time spent with parents; and
- their access to their other parent (for those living mainly with one parent).

Most adolescents indicated that the decision on where they would live was very much what they wanted (61%; Figure 3.6), one in three adolescents (33%) agreed that it was somewhat what they wanted, while 6% of adolescents felt the decision was not at all what they wanted. Figure 3.7 suggests that adolescents living mostly/only with their father provided the strongest affirmation of their current care-time arrangements.

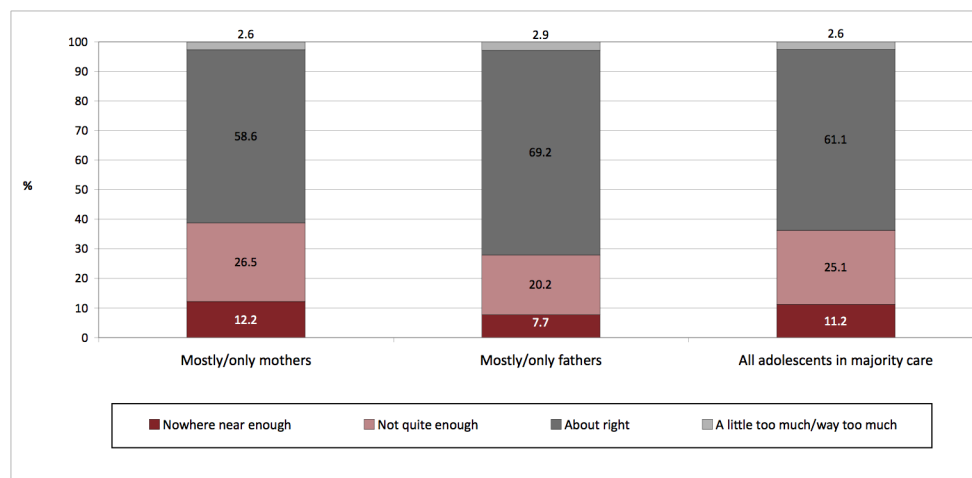


Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 3.6 Adolescents' satisfaction with living arrangements after separation, by care-time arrangement**

Adolescents who were living mostly/only with one parent and who had at least some face-to-face contact with their other parent were asked about their satisfaction with the amount of time their other parent spent with them. Response categories included: "nowhere near enough"; "not quite enough"; "about right"; "a little too much"; and "way too much". As seen in Figure 3.7, more than half of all adolescents (61%) felt that the amount of time their other parent spent with

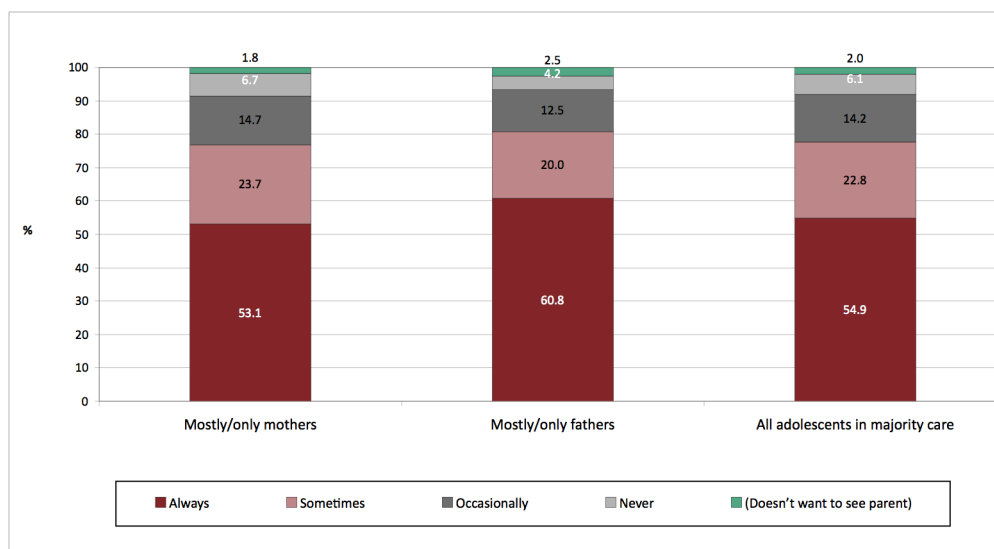
them was about right. However, more than one in three adolescents (36%) felt that the amount of time their other parent spent with them was not enough (either not quite enough or nowhere near enough). This was most strongly felt by those adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother (39%) compared to those who lived mostly/only with their father (28%).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

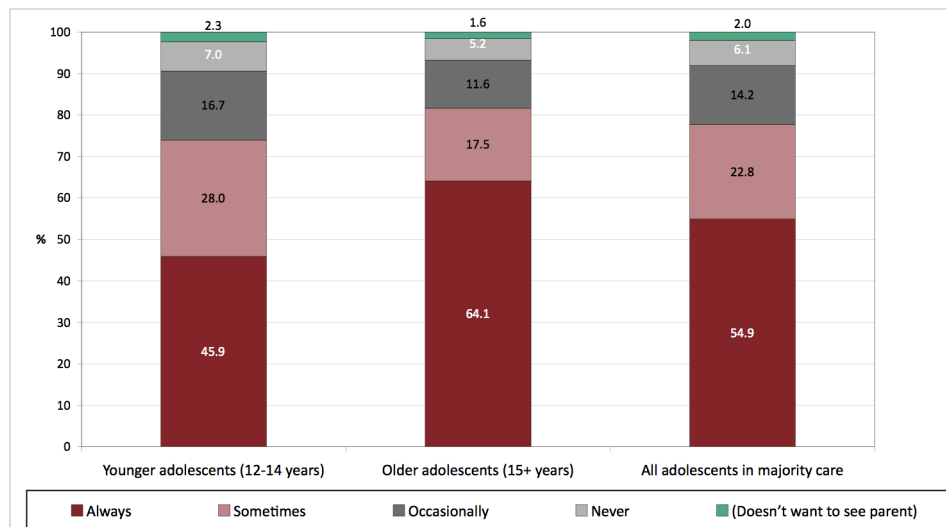
**Figure 3.7 Adolescents' satisfaction with the amount of time other parent spends with them, by care-time arrangement**

Adolescents who were living mostly/only with one parent were also asked if they were able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to. Most adolescents (53–61%) indicated that they were always able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to (Figure 3.8). However, almost one in five adolescents reported they were only occasionally or never able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to.



**Figure 3.8 Adolescents' reports of frequency of being able to see other parent, by care-time arrangement**

Clear differences were evident between younger and older adolescents. As presented in Figure 3.9, those aged 12–14 years reported considerably more difficulty in seeing their other parent when they wanted or needed to than did older adolescents (aged 15+ years). Most notably, only 46% of younger adolescents reported that they were always able to see their other parent when required or desired, compared to 64% of older adolescents.

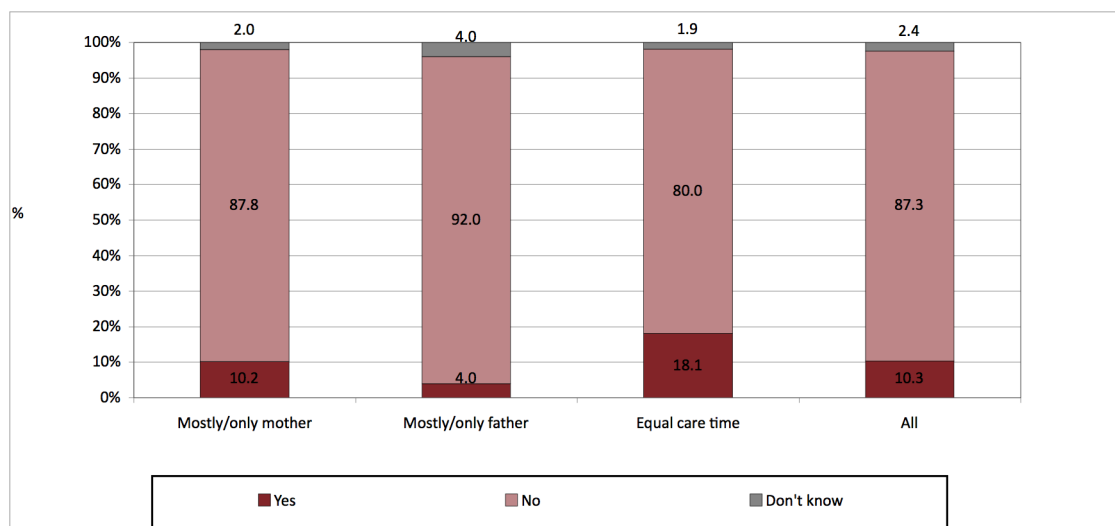


Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 3.9** Adolescents' reports of frequency of being able to see other parent, by age group

### 3.7 Desire to change current care-time arrangements

Thinking about their current arrangements, adolescents were also asked if they would like to change whom they lived with or the number of nights they spent with each parent. While the majority of adolescents (90%) did not desire a change in their current arrangements, the remaining 10% of adolescents did. As seen in Figure 3.10, the desire to change their arrangements varied depending on the adolescents' care-time arrangements. Adolescents with equal care time were more likely to want to change the number of nights they spent with each parent (18%), followed by those who lived mostly/only with their mother (10%). Of those adolescents wanting to change their arrangements, most had spoken to their parents about it and felt that their parents had listened to what they had to say.



**Figure 3.10** Adolescents wishing to change current living arrangement, by care-time arrangement

The most common reason cited by adolescents expressing a desire to change their current living arrangements was to stay overnight with their other parent more often than they currently were; for example:

I don't really see my dad as much as I'd like to. I'd just like to see him more. [Female, aged 13 years, mostly/only with mother]

Because I don't get to see him very much and because I'm always looking forward to seeing my dad like it's a holiday. I want to see him more. [Male, aged 12 years, mostly/only with mother]

Other adolescents wanting to change their current living arrangements explained that their desire was more to do with having stability or consistency in their arrangements; for example:

I like having a more permanent place; I don't like changing between two places. [Female, aged 15 years, mostly/only with mother]

Because it's a bit annoying moving so much from house to house, so it's harder for me to do as well as I could [at school]. [Male, aged 12 years, equal care time]

A few adolescents explained that their desire to change their current living arrangements was due to convenience, comfort and safety; for example:

Because I go to school near to mum's. I would feel a lot more comfortable and safe at my mum's house. [Female, aged 12 years, mostly/only with mother]

### **3.8 Obstacles to seeing the other parent**

This section provides information on the challenges of having different care-time arrangements, as reported by adolescents. Information was collected in two different ways:

- adolescents who never saw their other parent were asked to describe the main reason for this; and
- adolescents in all care-time arrangements (mostly/only mother, mostly/only father, and equal care time) were asked how easy or hard it was for them to see each parent in between things like doing schoolwork, playing sport or seeing friends.

Overall, some 7% of adolescents never saw their father, while less than 3% never saw their mother.

In total, 53 adolescent who never saw their other parent (either overnight or daytime contact) described the main reason for this. Common themes identified in these responses include the parent or child not wanting/making contact or a history of family violence; for example:

I chose. I don't particularly want to stay in contact with dad. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with mother]

Because of the things that would happen when we were a family all together, so I don't have any interest in seeing dad because he isn't a nice person. [Male, aged 16 years, mostly/only with mother]

I never really thought about seeing dad. He used to hurt me when I was little and only stopped last year. [Male, aged 12 years, mostly/only with mother]

Dad was an abusive man so I don't think he deserves it. [Female, aged 17 years, mostly/only with mother]

Dad used to hit me and abuse me. [Female, aged 15 years, mostly/only with mother]

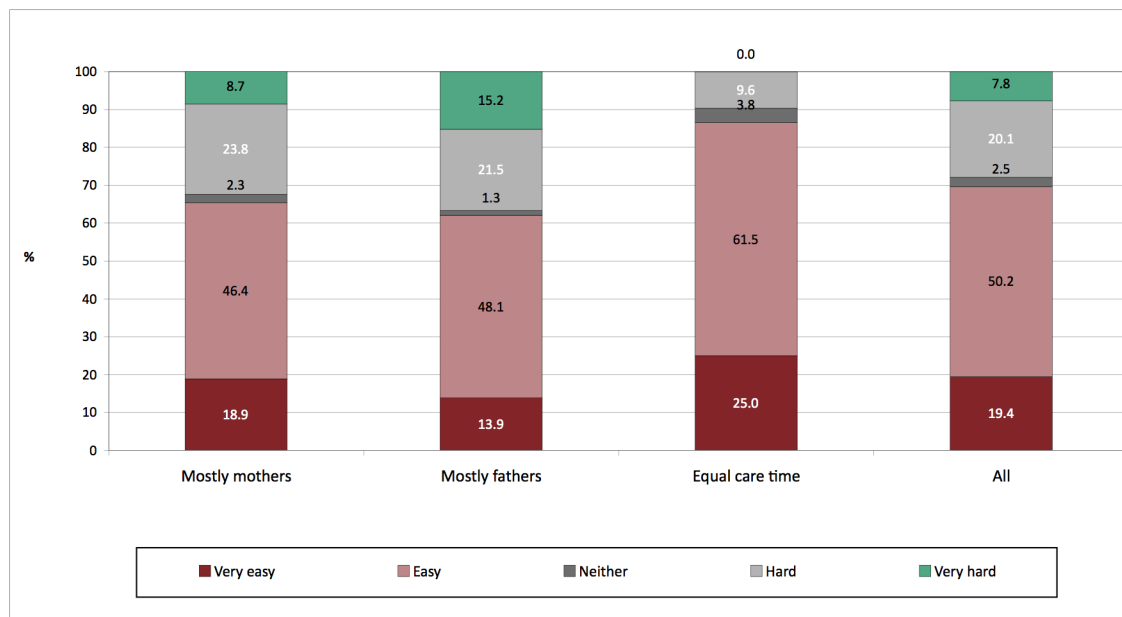
Because mum doesn't try to call us, we've tried a lot of times but it never seems to happen. [Male, aged 17 years, mostly/only with father]

I don't know—mum doesn't try to contact me. [Female, aged 18 years, mostly/only with father]

Adolescents in all care-time arrangements (apart from those who don't see their other parent at all) were asked how easy or hard it was for them to see their parent. As shown in Figure 3.11,



adolescents' ease in seeing their parents varied according to their care-time arrangements. Not surprisingly, those who had equal care-time arrangements reported that it was easy or very easy to see each parent in between things like doing schoolwork, playing sport or seeing friends (87%) compared with adolescents living mostly/only with one parent (62–65%).



Notes: Excludes adolescents who do not see their other parent. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 3.11 Adolescents' perceived ease in seeing their parents, by care-time arrangement**

A third of adolescents (33%) who lived mostly with their mother found it difficult (hard or very hard) to make time to see their father in between other commitments. Similarly, 37% of adolescents who lived mostly with their father found it difficult to make time to see their mother in between other commitments.

Adolescents who found it hard or very hard to see their other parent were asked to describe in what way it was hard. A total of 118 adolescents explained these difficulties. Distance between homes was a commonly cited reason for difficulties encountered (36%); for example:

If I just wanted to go and see him, I'd have to catch public transport and it would take three hours. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with mother]

Mum lives about three hours' drive away. [Male, aged 17 years, mostly/only with father]

However, for approximately three in five adolescents (61%), difficulties in seeing their parent stemmed from challenges in coordinating busy schedules and complex care-time arrangements; for example:

The days I have sport and stuff, dad's free; the days I have off, dad is working. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only with mother]

Just because when I'm busy she's not, and vice versa. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with father]

Because I have to work around dad's work roster and then my work roster and then my study roster. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with mother]

She's very busy and she doesn't always make time for me. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with father]

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday I have karate, and on the weekends I work and go out. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with mother]

My dad works different shifts and hours. [Male, aged 18 years, mostly/only with mother]

Because my father changes arrangements regularly. [Male, aged 14 years, mostly/only with mother]

## 4 Adolescent involvement in care-time arrangement decision-making

This chapter outlines adolescents' reports about their participation (and desire to participate) in decision-making relating to their living arrangements following their parents' separation. Adolescents' experiences of the family law system and counselling/mediation are also reported.

Parent data for the analyses were collected from the first and second waves of the LSSF. Findings are described here according to three care-time arrangements (mostly/only with mother, mostly/only with father and equal care time).

### Key messages

- The majority of adolescents (63%) wanted to have a say in the decision about who they would live with, and most (70%) reported that they did participate in the process—mainly by talking the decision over with their mother and/or father.
- One in four adolescents spoke to a counsellor or mediator. Only a few adolescents were involved in the trial process—through an independent lawyer to represent them or the opportunity to talk with a judge.
- Adolescents most often turned to parents, friends and relatives for support during the separation of their parents, while one in three spoke with a counsellor, including a phone or online counselling service like Kids Helpline.

### 4.1 Adolescents' input into care-time arrangements

The 2006 changes to the *Family Law Act 1975* were intended to bring the views, feelings and experiences of children into sharper focus. In particular, parents are asked to consider children's best interests and views when drafting a parenting plan. The Australian Government (2008) fact sheet for parents, *Parenting Plans: Information for Parents to Consider When Making a Parenting Plan*, states:

When you make decisions about your child ... the most important thing for you to consider is what is best for your child. Children have the right to know both their parents. They also have the right to be protected from harm. These are important things to think about. Other things you might want to think about include any views the child has expressed. (p. 2)

In this study, adolescents were asked about their participation in decision-making relating to their living arrangements after their parents had separated. Both the adolescents' desire to be involved in the decision-making and their actual experiences were investigated.

Nearly two-thirds of adolescents (63%) indicated that they wanted to have a say in the decision about whom they would live with, and even more said that they had a say in the decision (70%). Adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father (86%) were more likely to indicate that they had a say in the decision compared to those adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother (65%) and with both parents equally (68%).

Adolescents who indicated that they had a say in decisions about whom they would live with were also asked how they got to have a say (response categories included: "talk it over with mum and/or dad", "speak to a counsellor or mediator", "have an independent children's lawyer", "speak to a judge" or "something else").

Most of these adolescents (90%) indicated that they talked over the decision with their mother and/or father. Just over one in four adolescents (28%) spoke to a counsellor or mediator about whom they would live with (most of whom also talked it over with their parents), while few adolescents had an independent children's lawyer ( $n = 17$ ) or spoke to a judge ( $n = 2$ ).

One hundred and sixteen adolescent respondents also provided comments elaborating on how they felt when speaking to a counsellor or mediator. A positive feeling of comfort or helpfulness generated by talking to someone about their experience is a recurring theme in these responses; for example:

It was pretty good, because they were easy to talk to. [Male, aged 12 years, equal care time]

It helped make things clearer about what was going on. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only with father]

They really helped me getting over things and it was helpful having someone I was able to talk to. [Female, aged 12 years, mostly/only with mother]

At first, it was a bit embarrassing because I felt a lot of families don't do this, but after the second week I felt it was kind of normal and felt comfortable around the counsellor. [Female, aged 12 years, mostly/only with mother]

It was good, because it helped me deal with things. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only with mother]

I spoke to two different ones—the first time my mum was with me, the second time I was by myself. The second time was better. [Female, aged 17 years, mostly/only with mother]

I've always been very happy to speak with them, it made me feel more confident about what was happening. [Female, aged 16 years, equal care time]

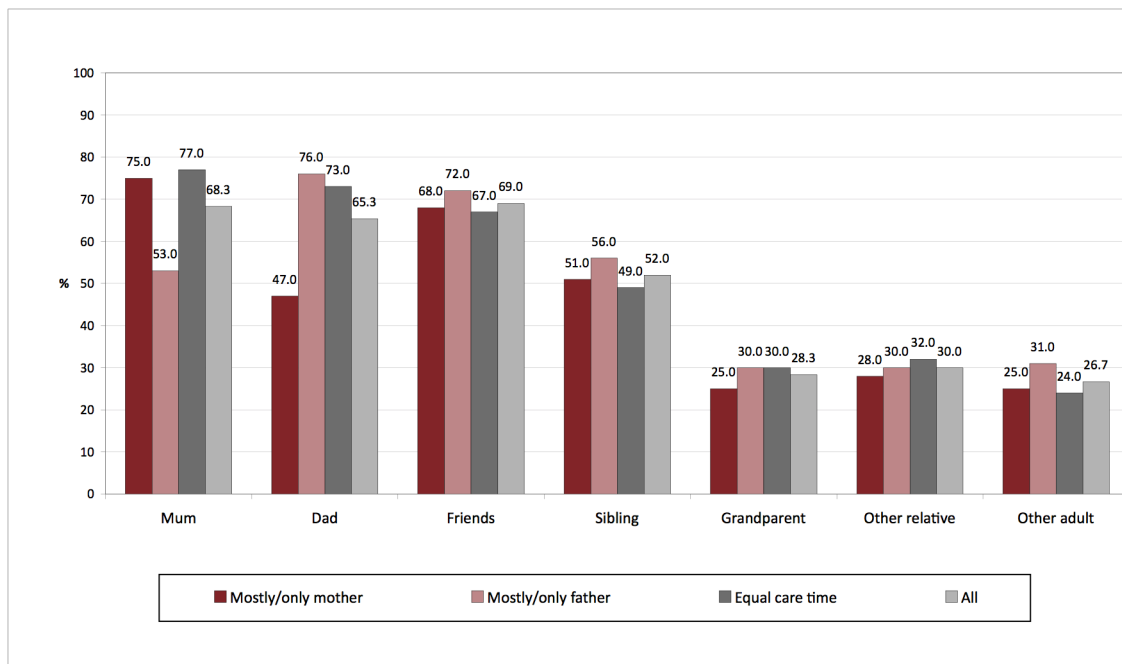
It helped me a lot. I could tell her anything. I could express my feelings and wouldn't feel bad for it. [Female, aged 12 years, equal care time]

## **4.2 Supports used by adolescents when their parents were separating**

Adolescents were asked who they spoke to when they needed advice or support about their parents' separation. A list of people was provided, covering the broad areas of family, friends and professionals. A follow-up question was asked to clarify how helpful each of these people were for the adolescent when their parents were separating.

Of all adolescents, most turned to friends (69%) and family (mother: 68%; father: 65%) for advice and support. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, adolescents were most likely to talk to the parent they mainly lived with. Those with equal care time were just as likely to talk to their mother (77%) and their father (73%). Across all care-time arrangements, about half the adolescents used a sibling for support.

Grandparents were also an important source of support for adolescents, with between 25–30% of all adolescents seeking advice or support from their grandparents during the separation. Support from other relatives also featured, with, on average, 30% of adolescents talking to another relative about their parents' separation.

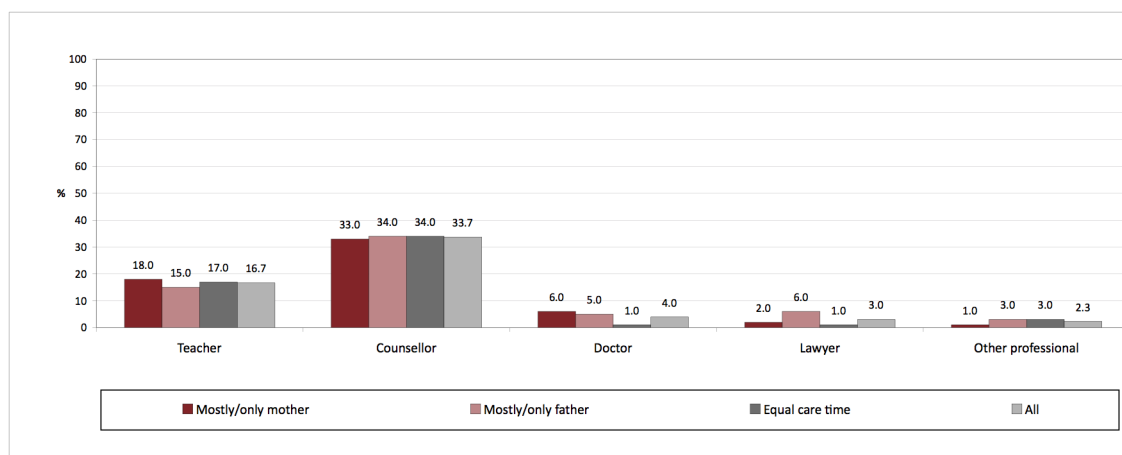


**Figure 4.1** Adolescents' sources of advice or support about parental separation, by care-time arrangement

Of the professionals that adolescents spoke to, a counsellor was the most common source of support and advice during their parent's separation (see Figure 4.2). One in three adolescents (34%) spoke with a counsellor, including a phone or online counselling service like Kids Helpline.

Between 15% and 18% of adolescents spoke with a teacher, while only a few adolescents spoke with:

- a doctor or another health person (1–6%);
- a lawyer, including a children's lawyer (1–6%); or
- other professional (1–3%).

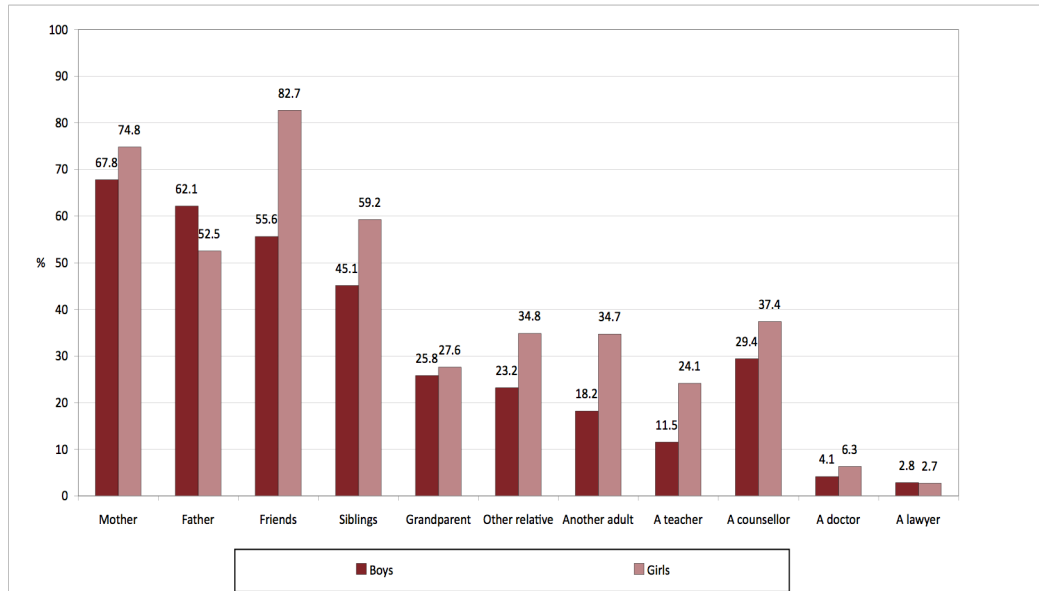


**Figure 4.2** Adolescents' sources of professional advice or support about parental separation, by care-time arrangement

On the whole, adolescents found talking to someone else about their parents' separation helpful. There was very high agreement about this (> 90%) among those adolescents who spoke with friends, their mother, their father, a grandparent, another relative, a teacher or a doctor. Of those

adolescents who spoke with a counsellor (including a phone or online counselling service), 74% agreed that they found it helpful.

Analysis by gender revealed that, for the most part, adolescent girls tended to seek help more than adolescent boys (Figure 4.3). For example, adolescent girls were twice as likely to seek advice or support about their parent's separation from a teacher than adolescent boys. Adolescent girls were also more likely to talk to a friend (83%) than adolescent boys (56%).



**Figure 4.3 Adolescents' sources of advice or support about parental separation, by adolescents' gender**

There was also a preference among adolescents to talk with the parent of the same gender. More adolescent girls than boys (75% vs 68%) spoke to their mother for advice or support about the separation. Conversely, slightly more adolescent boys than girls (62% vs 53%) sought advice or support from their father.

## 5 Family relationships

The quality of relationships between parents and children and between parents themselves is important in helping children adjust to life after separation (Hawthorne, Jessop, Pryor, & Richards, 2003). This chapter focuses on how separated families of adolescents were relating. The issues examined in this chapter are:

- the quality of the relationship between parents, on average, 27 months after separation;
- family violence and safety issues; and
- relationships between adolescents and their parents, step-parents and grandparents.

### Key messages

- Adolescents with equal care time were more likely to have parents who had frequent communication than adolescents with majority care time, irrespective of the quality of the parents' post-separation relationship.
- Almost one in four parents of adolescents (24%) experienced family violence (being physically hurt) before their separation. Many of these parents reported that their children had witnessed some abuse or violence.
- The findings highlight that parental separation does not always reduce parental conflict, with more than one in six parents reporting conflicted relationships after separation. For many of these parents, general animosity or financial issues were the main sources of conflict.
- Mothers with majority care of their adolescents were more likely to report anger or hostility in their relations with their child's other parent.
- Findings reveal that for adolescents with equal care time, the parent-child relationship often stayed warm, secure and trusting after the separation. Parents of adolescents with equal care time also tended to be more satisfied with their child's relationship with their other parent.
- Adolescents living mainly in one household often felt close to their live-in parent; however, their relationship with the other parent was less assured.
- One in every five adolescents was living in a household with a step-parent. Adolescents with equal care time were equally likely to have either a step-mother or step-father. In contrast, adolescents who lived mostly/only in one household were least likely to have a live in step-parent.
- The study highlights that a range of complex relationships can emerge when a parent re-partners. On the whole, adolescents with equal care time tended to have more of a connection with step-parents than others. Adolescents who lived mostly/only in one household were more likely to have warmer relationships with their co-resident step-parent than their non-resident step-parent.
- Care-time arrangements of the adolescent affected their contact with grandparents and their subsequent importance in their lives. Adolescents living with their mother were more likely to have closer relationships and more regular contact with their maternal grandparents than paternal grandparents, and the reverse was true for adolescents living with their father. Notably, adolescents living mostly/only with their father were especially likely to express a desire to see their maternal grandparents more often.

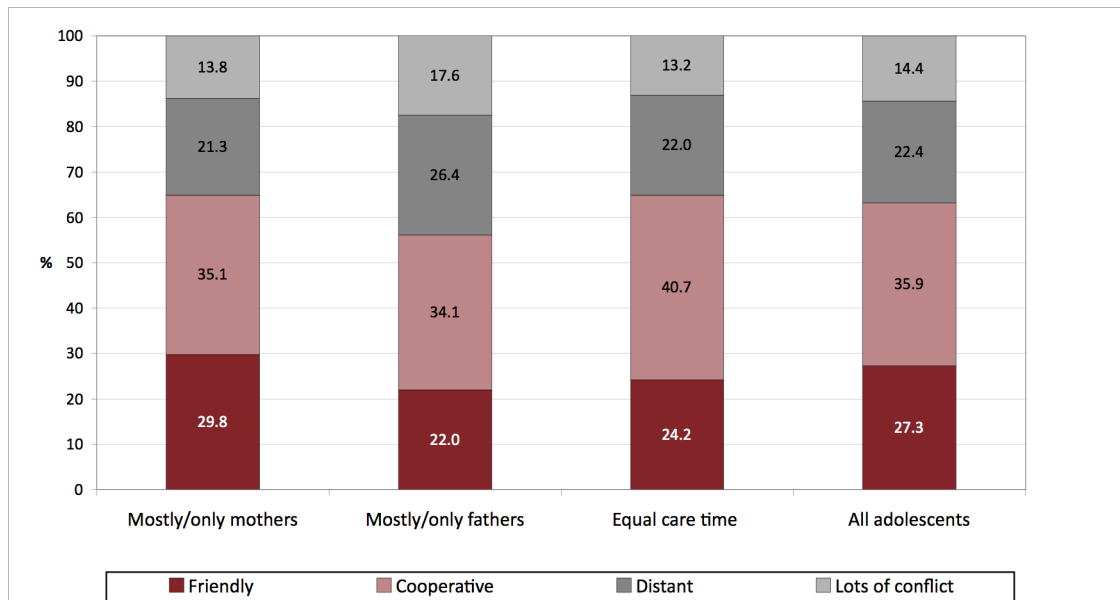
### 5.1 Quality of relationships between parents after separation

The degree of parental conflict, either during a relationship or following separation is a major risk factor associated with children's adjustment to parental separation (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Grych, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children's adjustment has been found to improve when conflict declines after separation (Kitzmann & Emery, 1994), although separation does not always reduce parental conflict.

In order to gain insight into the quality of post-separation parental relationships, both adolescents and their parents were asked to describe the current quality of the inter-parental relationship, including how often parents usually talked to each other. Parents of adolescents indicated how often they communicated with each other about their child in the 12 months preceding the second interview. Unless otherwise described, findings are summarised according

to the adolescents' reported care-time arrangements at the time of interview (mostly/only mother, mostly/only father and equal care time).

Adolescent responses describing the current post-separation relationship between their parents are shown in Figure 5.1. Adolescents' assessments of their parents' relationships were similar across all care-time arrangements. Most adolescents (63%) described their parents' relationship as either friendly or cooperative, one in five adolescents (22%) described it as distant, while one in seven (14%) indicated that their parents' relationship contained lots of conflict.

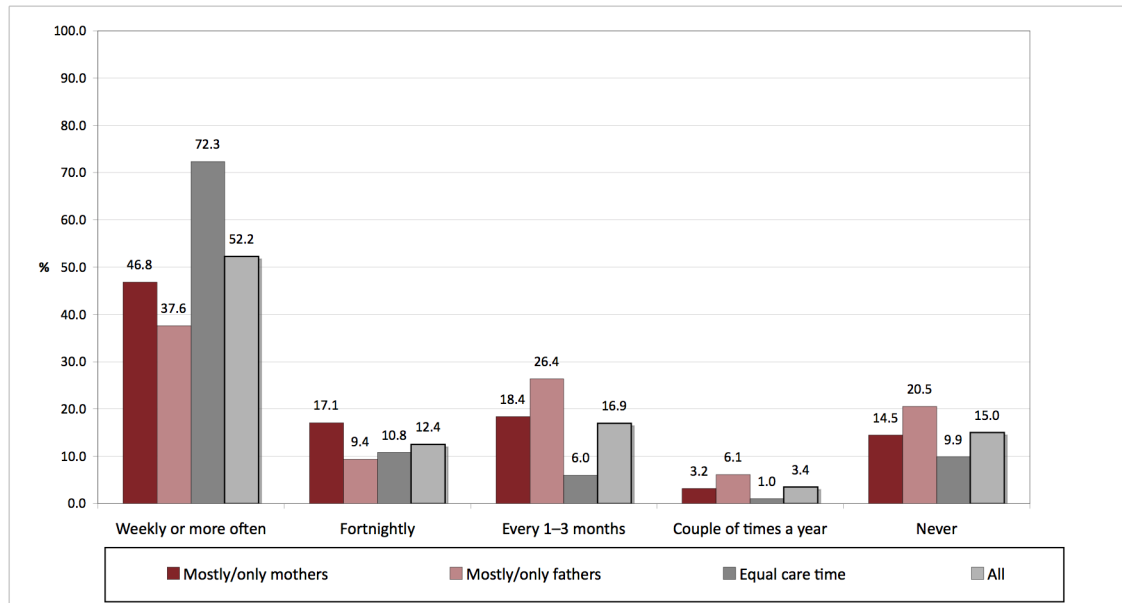


Notes: The "fearful" response category used in the parent interview question was not included in the Adolescent Survey.  
 N = 501. Adolescents whose parents communicated less than once every six months were not asked this question.  
 Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.1 Adolescents' assessments of the quality of their parents' post-separation relationship, by care-time arrangement**

While adolescents did not differ according to care-time arrangements in their assessments of their parents' post-separation relationship, they did in their assessment of their parents' frequency of communication. As shown in Figure 5.2, adolescents with equal care time were considerably more likely to report that their parents communicated regularly than those adolescents living mostly/only with one parent. More than 70% of adolescents with equal care-time arrangements reported that their parents communicated either at least once a week or more often, while less than half of adolescents living mostly/only with one parent (38–47%) reported that their parents communicated this often. These findings suggest that equal care-time arrangements call for parents to talk regularly, irrespective of the quality of their post-separation relationship.

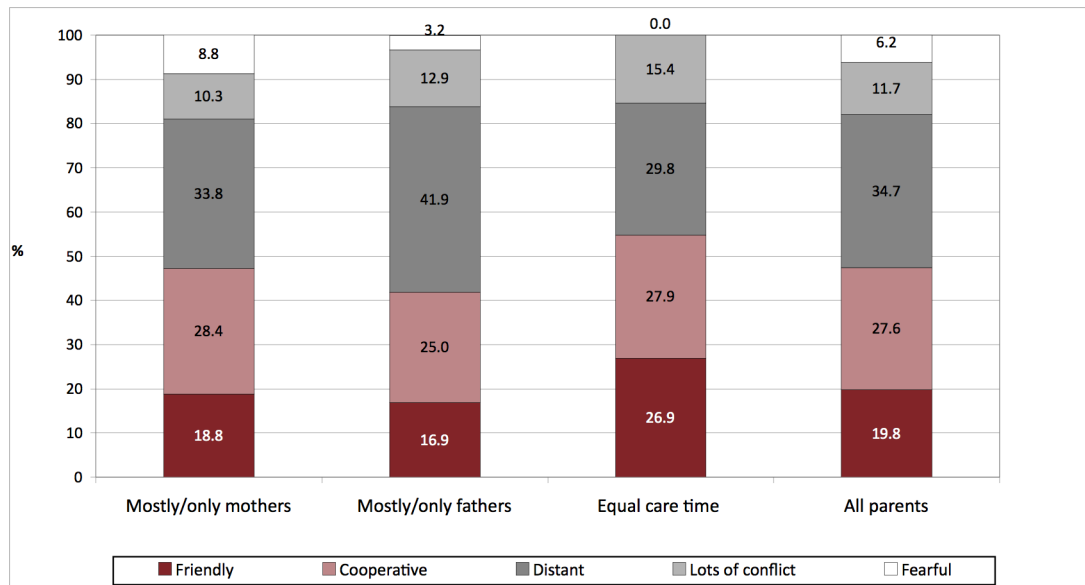




**Figure 5.2 Adolescents' reports on frequency of parental communication after separation, by care-time arrangement**

Overall, parents of adolescents tended to describe their current relationship with their child's other parent in more moderate terms than did adolescents (Figure 5.3).<sup>18</sup> Fewer parents indicated that they had a friendly relationship with the other parent (20% compared to 27%), while just over one in four parents rated their relationship as cooperative compared to one in three adolescents. More parents than adolescents (35% vs 22%) described their current inter-parental relationship as distant: while a similar proportion of parents and adolescents described the relationship as conflictual (12% vs 14%). However, like adolescents, parents' assessments of their inter-parental relationship after separation did not vary according to the adolescents' care-time arrangements.

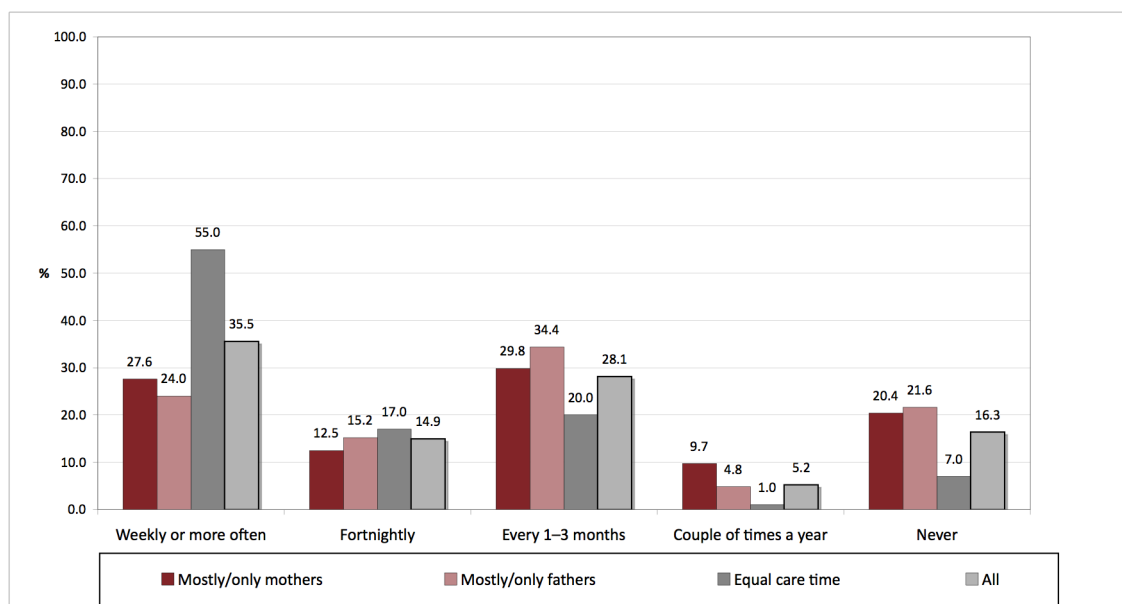
<sup>18</sup> The parental responses to this item included an extra category of "fearful", although this should not have impacted on the distribution of responses at the more friendly end of the response categories.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.3 Parents' assessments of the quality of their post-separation relationship, by care-time arrangement**

The frequency of communication in the preceding 12 months, as reported by parents, varied depending on the adolescents' care-time arrangements. As shown in Figure 5.4, parents of adolescents in equal care-time arrangements were significantly more likely to report that they communicated regularly than were parents with majority care. A greater proportion of parents with adolescents in equal care-time arrangements than those with majority care reported that they communicated at least every week or more often (55% vs 24–28%). Conversely, a greater proportion of parents with majority care than those with equal care time never communicated (20–22% vs 7%). These findings are also consistent with adolescents' reports, again suggesting that irrespective of the quality of parental relationships, equal care-time arrangements seem to necessitate that parents talk more often.



**Figure 5.4 Parents' reports on frequency of child-focused communication after separation, by care-time arrangement**

## **5.2 Parents' reports of family violence, conflict, anger and hostility**

The following section examines parents' reports of the incidence of family violence (including in the presence of children) before and during separation, and in the 12 months preceding the second survey. It also reports on the proportion of parents experiencing highly conflictual or fearful relationships, and the main reasons for their conflict; the level of disagreement between parents about issues concerning their adolescent child; and how often there is anger or hostility between parents.

In relation to family violence, parents of adolescents were asked in Wave 1 (2008) whether the other parent had ever abused them emotionally at any time before or during the separation, and whether their child's other parent had ever hurt them physically before the separation. In Wave 2 (2009), parents were asked whether they had been emotionally abused and/or physically hurt by their child's other parent in the preceding 12 months. Those who indicated that they had experienced physical violence were also asked whether any abuse or violence was ever seen or heard by the children. Emotional abuse was examined through several items in reference to the behaviour of the other parent: (a) preventing the respondent from contacting family or friends, using the telephone or car, or having knowledge or access to family money; (b) insulting with an intent to shame, belittle or humiliate; (c) threatening to harm the child(ren), other family/friends, the respondent, pets or themselves; and (d) damaging or destroying property.

Nearly one in four parents of adolescents (24%) indicated that their partner had physically hurt them before their separation. A relatively high proportion of parents who reported physical violence also reported that the children witnessed some abuse or violence (76%). Considerably fewer parents of adolescents (3%) reported that their child's other parent had physically hurt them during the 12-month period preceding the second interview (on average 27 months after the time of parental separation). However, of these parents, more than two in three indicated that their children had seen some abuse or violence.

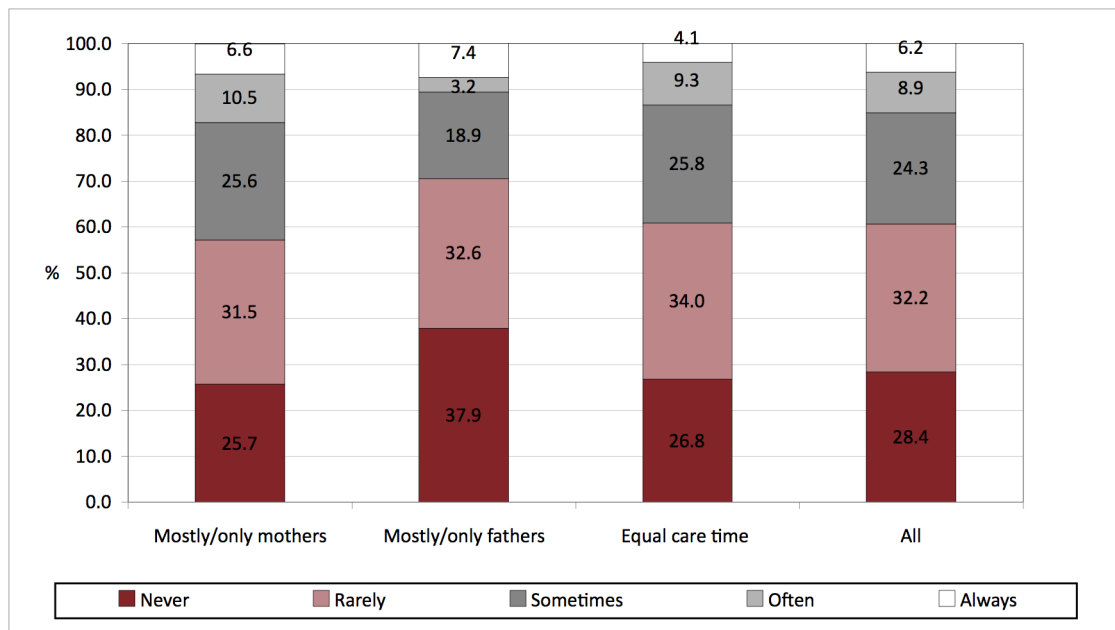
Parents' descriptions of their inter-parental relationship quality after separation were used to identify those experiencing highly conflicted or fearful relationships. Conflicted or fearful relationships were found across all care-time arrangements, with over one in six parents reporting highly conflicted or fearful relationships (18%).

Of the parents reporting conflicted relationships, 68 elaborated on the main reason for the conflict in a follow-up item. The most commonly cited reasons for conflict were: a general animosity towards their ex-partner (29%); financial reasons, including the payment of child support (19%); disagreement over the children or issues with parenting arrangements (12%); and aggression, including anger issues and domestic violence (10%). A small number of parents cited poor communication (7%) or mental health issues or substance use issues (4%).<sup>19</sup> Several parents cited various "other" reasons for conflict (19%); however, these could not easily be classified.

Parents were also asked how often there was anger or hostility between them. Responses were reported on a five-point scale ("never", "rarely", "sometimes", "often", "always"). Of all parents, most indicated that there was never or rarely any anger or hostility between them. However, results varied depending on the adolescents' care-time arrangements. As seen in Figure 5.5, fathers with majority care were more likely than parents with other care-time arrangements to report that they never or rarely experienced anger or hostility with their child's other parent. Conversely, mothers with majority care and parents with equal care were considerably more likely to report some level of anger or hostility (either sometimes, often or always).

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<sup>19</sup> Including alcohol use issues.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.5** Parents' reports of frequency of anger or hostility between parents, by care-time arrangement

### 5.3 Adolescents' relationships with their parents

Adolescents and their parents were asked various questions to assess the quality of their relationship with each other. Parents were asked about their satisfaction with their own relationship with their adolescent child, as well as their assessment of the other parent's relationship with their child.<sup>20</sup> Adolescents were asked about their feelings of closeness and level of confiding in their parents. They were also asked about their ability to talk openly to one parent about their other parent.

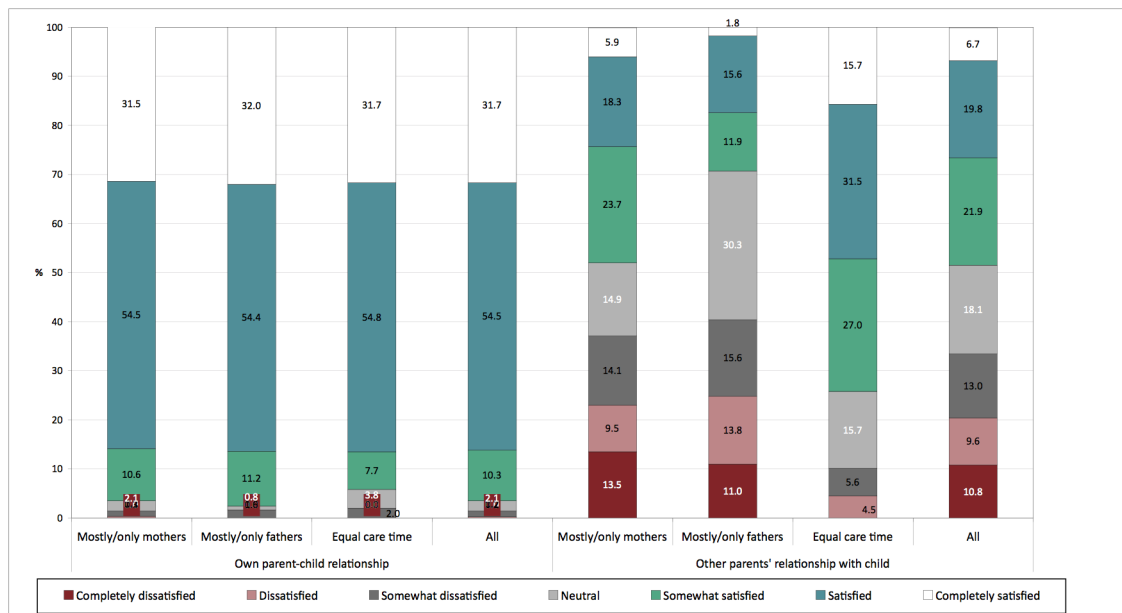
Parents of adolescents rated their level of satisfaction (on a scale of 0 = "completely dissatisfied" through 10 = "completely satisfied") with their own and the other parents' relationship with the child. The following seven categories were used to describe level of parent satisfaction: "completely dissatisfied" (0); "dissatisfied" (1–2); "somewhat dissatisfied" (3–4); "neutral: neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (5); "somewhat satisfied" (6–7); "satisfied" (8–9); "completely satisfied" (10).

Parents' satisfaction with their own relationship with their child was similar across all care-time arrangements (Figure 5.6). The vast majority of parents were satisfied or completely satisfied with their own relationship with their adolescent child (86%). A small proportion of parents (10%) were only somewhat satisfied, while very few (1%) were dissatisfied with their relationship with their adolescent child.

However, ratings by the respondent parent of the other parent's relationship with the adolescent child varied depending on the adolescents' care-time arrangements. Those with equal care time were the most satisfied with the other parents' relationship with the adolescent (47% either satisfied or completely satisfied), compared with 17–24 % of parents with majority care. At the same time, parents with majority care-time arrangements were much more likely than those with equal care-time arrangements to rate the relationship between their adolescent child and the other parent as completely dissatisfied or dissatisfied (23–25% vs 4.5%). Consistent with this, a

<sup>20</sup> Some parent interview questions pertained to a specific focus child and data were analysed accordingly. Results for adolescents who were the focus child and those who were siblings of the focus child were found to be similar; accordingly grouped results are reported here.

greater proportion of fathers with majority care were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (neutral) compared to parents with other arrangements (30% vs 15–16%).

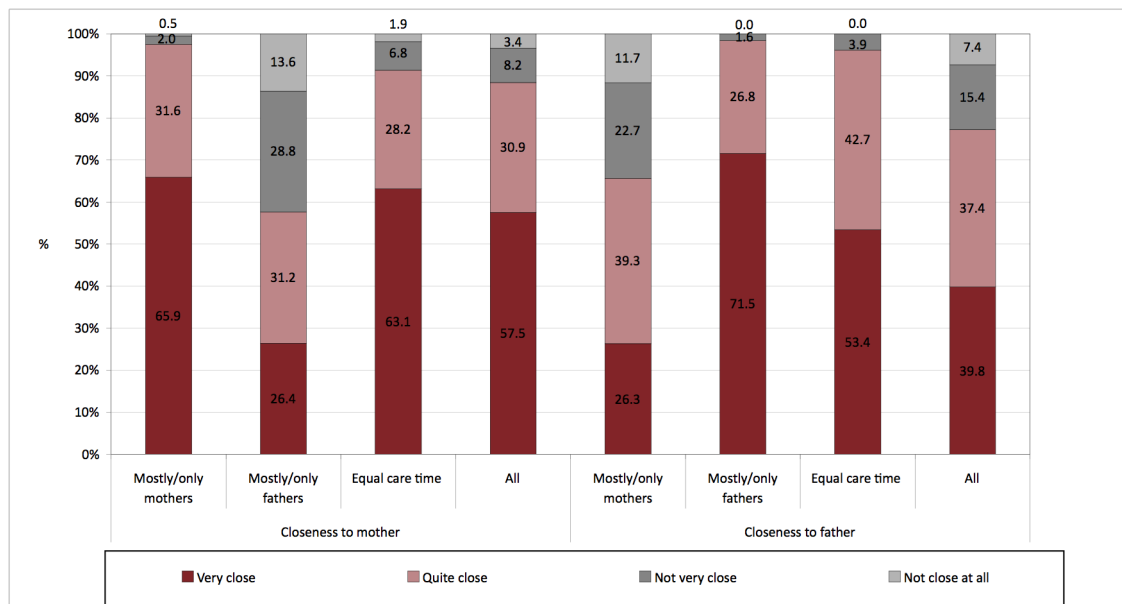


Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.6 Degree of satisfaction with parent–child relationships, reports of own and other parent's relationships, by care-time arrangement**

Adolescents reported their feelings of closeness and level of confiding in each of their parents. They also indicated their ability to talk openly to each parent about their other parent. As reported in Figure 5.7, the majority of adolescents reported feeling close (very close or quite close) to their mother (88%) and, to a lesser extent, their father (77%).

However, adolescents' feelings of closeness with their parents varied depending on the adolescents' care-time arrangements. In particular, adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother and those with equal care time were more likely to be closer to their mother than those adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father. Likewise, adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father and those with equal care time were more likely to be closer to their father than those adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother. These findings are in line with those reported elsewhere (e.g., Cashmore et al., 2010), indicating that children feel closer to the parent they live with most of the time than to their other parent.

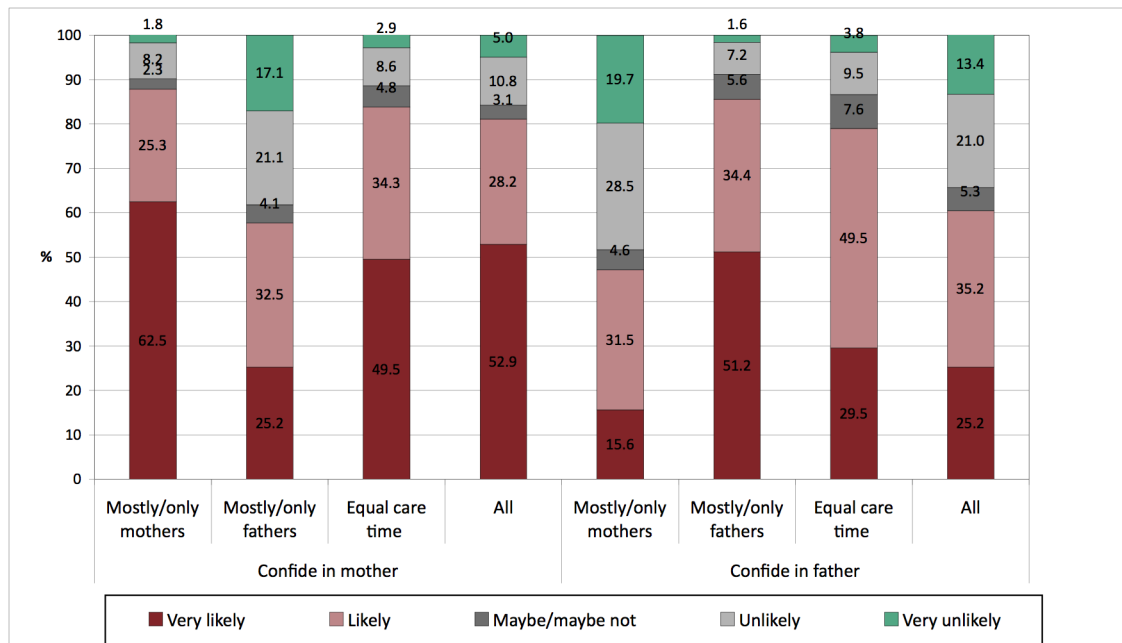


Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure. 5.7 Adolescents' feelings of closeness to their parents, by care-time arrangement**

Overall, more than four in five adolescents (81%) were likely or very likely to talk to their mother if they had a problem, compared to three in five adolescents (60%) who were likely/very likely to confide in their father (Figure 5.8).

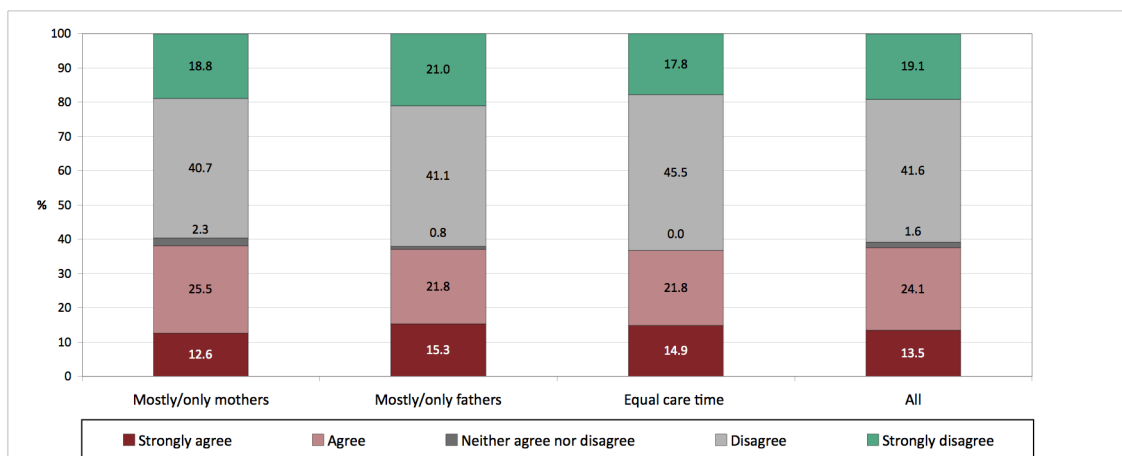
However, adolescents' care-time arrangements influenced their willingness to confide in their parents. Significant differences were evident between adolescents in the three different care-time arrangements. Consistent with the previous findings, adolescents were more likely to confide in the parent that they lived with most of the time. Specifically, adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother (88%) or equally with both parents (84%), were more likely to confide in their mother than were adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father (58%). Conversely, adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father (86%) or equally with both parents (79%) were more likely to confide in their father than were adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother (47%).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.8 Adolescents' willingness to confide in parents, by care-time arrangement**

In relation to their ability to talk openly about each parent, adolescents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with the statement: "I feel that I can't talk about one parent to the other". As the results in Figure 5.9 show, most adolescents felt that they were able to talk to one parent about the other parent (61%). However, almost two in five adolescents (38%) felt that they could not talk to one parent about the other. Adolescents' care-time arrangements did not influence their ability to talk openly about each parent.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.9 Adolescents' ability to talk openly to one parent about the other, by care-time arrangement**

## 5.4 Relationships with step-parents

Many children and adolescents whose parents separate will experience living in a step-parent household. Around one in ten couple families in Australia contain resident step-children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007) and 13% of households surveyed in Wave 3 of the

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) study had either residential or non-residential step-children, or both (Qu & Weston, 2005).

Longitudinal studies have suggested that children and adolescents who experience parental divorce and remarriage have an increased risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, many children in step-families have been found to fare adequately or well (Amato, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000), and established step-families can provide good environments for child development (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996).

This section examines adolescents' accounts of relationships with their step-parents. To assess relationship quality, adolescents were asked about their feelings of closeness and level of confiding in their step-parents. The prevalence of step-parents in this sample is reported both in terms of the adolescents' gender and care-time arrangements.

Where parents have re-partnered after separation, step-relationships often cross household boundaries (here called non-resident step-relationships). As shown in Table 5.1, adolescents living in a household headed by a single parent, and adolescents living with a parent and step-parent, may have a parent living elsewhere who has re-partnered. In this sample, more adolescents had a non-resident than a co-resident step-parent, while a minority of adolescents had both a step-mother and step-father.

**Table 5.1 Prevalence of step-parents, by care-time arrangement**

	Mostly/only mother	Mostly/only father	Equal care time	All
	%			
Have step-father	18.4	51.7	25.7	26.0
Have step-mother	40.2	21.8	21.2	33.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>58.6</b>	<b>73.5</b>	<b>46.9</b>	<b>59.0</b>
Have both step-mother & step-father	9.2	12.7	8.6	9.8
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>615</b>

Note: The question asked was: Does your mum/dad now have a new husband/wife or partner who lives with her/him?

Overall, more than one in four adolescents had a step-father (i.e., mother had a new husband or partner who lives with her), while a third of all adolescents had a step-mother (i.e., father had a new wife or partner who lives with him). Ten per cent of all adolescents had both a step-mother and step-father.

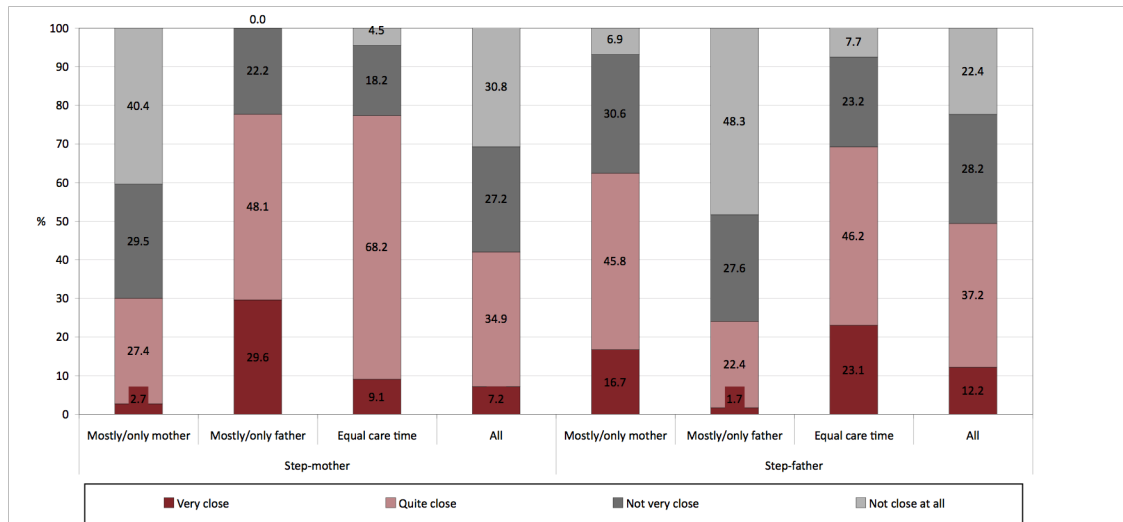
Clear trends were evident in re-partnering according to adolescents' care-time arrangements. Notably, adolescents living mostly/only with one parent were more likely to have a non-resident step-parent than a co-resident step-parent (40–52% vs 18–22%). Those with equal care time were just as likely to have either a co-resident step-mother or co-resident step-father (21–26%), and some 9% of adolescents with equal care time had both a step-mother and step-father.

Feelings of closeness and confiding were less common between adolescents and their step-parents, on average, than with their parents. Adolescents' relationships with their step-parent also varied according to adolescents' care-time arrangements. Specifically, findings reported in Figure 5.10 indicate that adolescents felt closer to co-resident step-parents than non-resident step-parents.

Just under half of all adolescents whose mother had a new husband or partner, felt very close or quite close to their step-father. Around two in three adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother felt close (very or quite close) to their mothers' new partner, while three in four adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father did not feel close (not very close or not close at all) to their step-father. Most adolescents with equal care-time arrangements (69%) felt close to their mother's new partner.



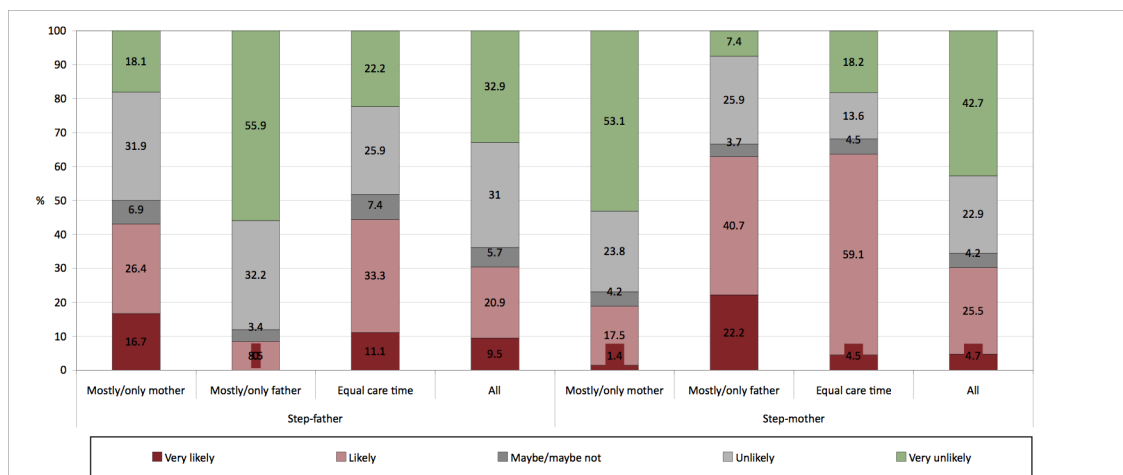
Conversely, two in five of all adolescents whose father had a new partner indicated that they felt very close or quite close to their step-mother. Adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father (78%) and with equal care time (77%) were more likely to feel close (very or quite close) to their fathers' new partner. On the other hand, 70% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother did not feel close (not very or not close at all) to their step-mother.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.10 Adolescents feelings of closeness with step-parent, by care-time arrangement**

Similarly, adolescents' willingness to confide in a step-parent varied depending on adolescents' care-time arrangements. Findings indicate that adolescents were much more likely to confide in co-resident step-parents than non-resident step-parents (Figure 5.11); that is, the vast majority of adolescents were unlikely or very unlikely to confide in a non-resident step-parent. These findings are in line with those on adolescents' closeness to their step-parent.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.11 Willingness of adolescents to confide in step-parent, by care-time arrangement**

## 5.5 Relationships with grandparents

The dynamics of post-separation relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren can be complex. In the context of the 2006 family law reforms, it was recognised that:

children have a right to spend time on a regular basis with, and communicate with, both their parents and other people significant to their care, welfare and development (such as grandparents and other relatives) where this is consistent with their best interests. (*Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) s60B(1)(2)(b))

This section examines the role that grandparents play in adolescents' lives following the separation of their parents. Adolescents were asked several questions to elicit the degree of change in their closeness to their grandparents, and how involved their relationships with their maternal and paternal grandparents were after parental separation. Adolescents were also asked about their desire for more time with their grandparents and perceived obstacles to seeing them. Findings are presented according to adolescents' care-time arrangements.

Almost all adolescents (98%) had at least one grandparent (either maternal or paternal) who was living. As seen in Table 5.2, for over half of all adolescents, both their maternal grandparents were living. Similarly, over half of all adolescents reported that both their paternal grandparents were living. For a third of adolescents, all of their grandparents were living (i.e., both grandparents on both maternal and paternal sides). Approximately one in four adolescents had a living maternal grandmother only. Similarly, one in four adolescents had a living paternal grandmother only.

**Table 5.2 Proportion of adolescents' with maternal and paternal grandparents**

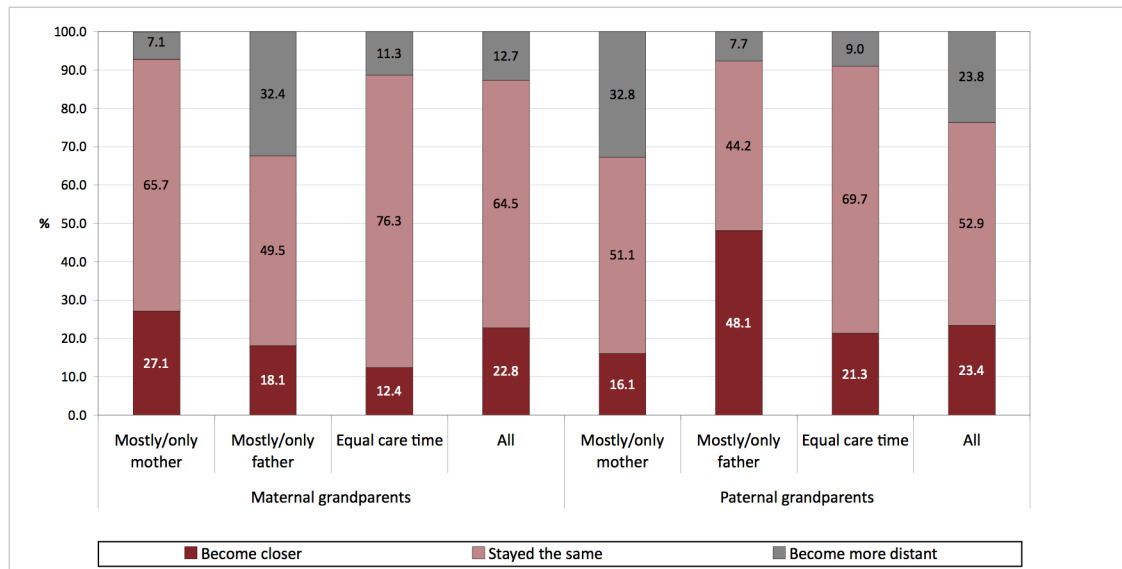
	Maternal grandparents %	Paternal grandparents %
Yes, both	59.5	53.2
Yes, grandmother only	24.3	25.6
Yes, grandfather only	5.8	6.1
No, both grandparents deceased	10.4	15.0
<b>Total <sup>a</sup></b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>620</b>

Notes: The question asked was: "Do you have grandparents?" <sup>a</sup> Excludes a small number of adolescents who reported "don't know" or refused to answer the question. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

Changes in relationship closeness with grandparents varied according to adolescents' care-time arrangements. As shown in Figure 5.12, adolescents living mostly/only with their mother were more likely than those with other care-time arrangements to report that their relationship with their maternal grandparents was closer. Of note is that almost a third of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father indicated that their relationship with their maternal grandparents had become more distant.

Conversely, adolescents living mostly/only with their father were considerably more likely than those with other care-time arrangements to report that their relationship with their paternal grandparents was closer. Importantly, adolescents living mostly/only with their mother were three to four times more likely than those with other care-time arrangements to report that their relationship with their paternal grandparents had become more distant since their parents separated.

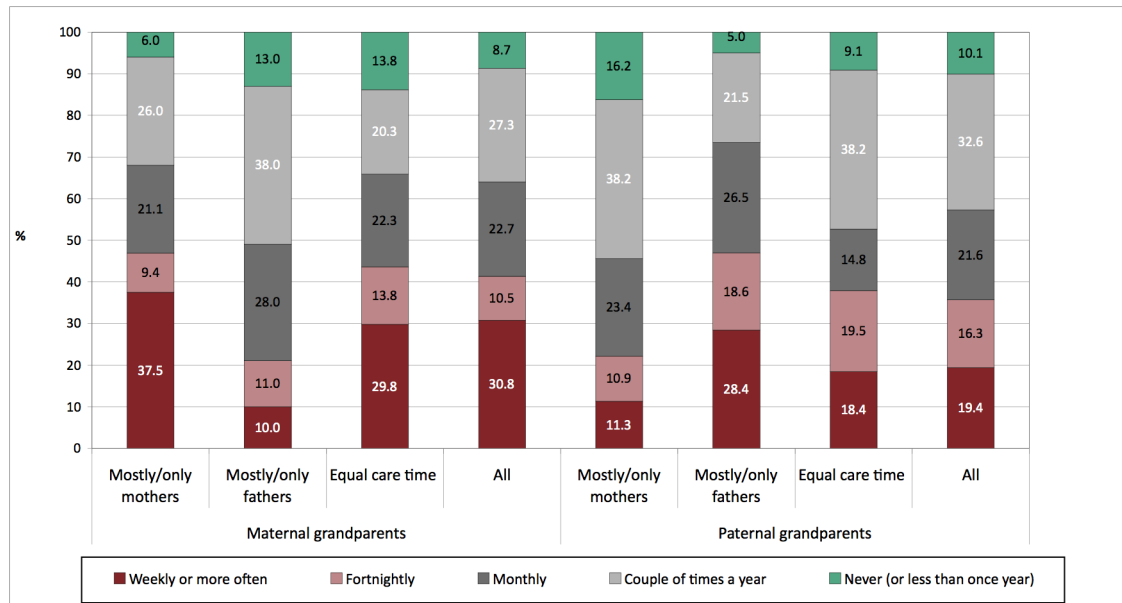
While grandparent relationships for adolescents equal care time were mostly unchanged, more adolescents with equal care-time arrangements reported that their relationship with their paternal grandparents (21%) had become closer than their relationship with their maternal grandparents (12%).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.12 Changes in adolescent–grandparent relationships post-separation, by care-time arrangement**

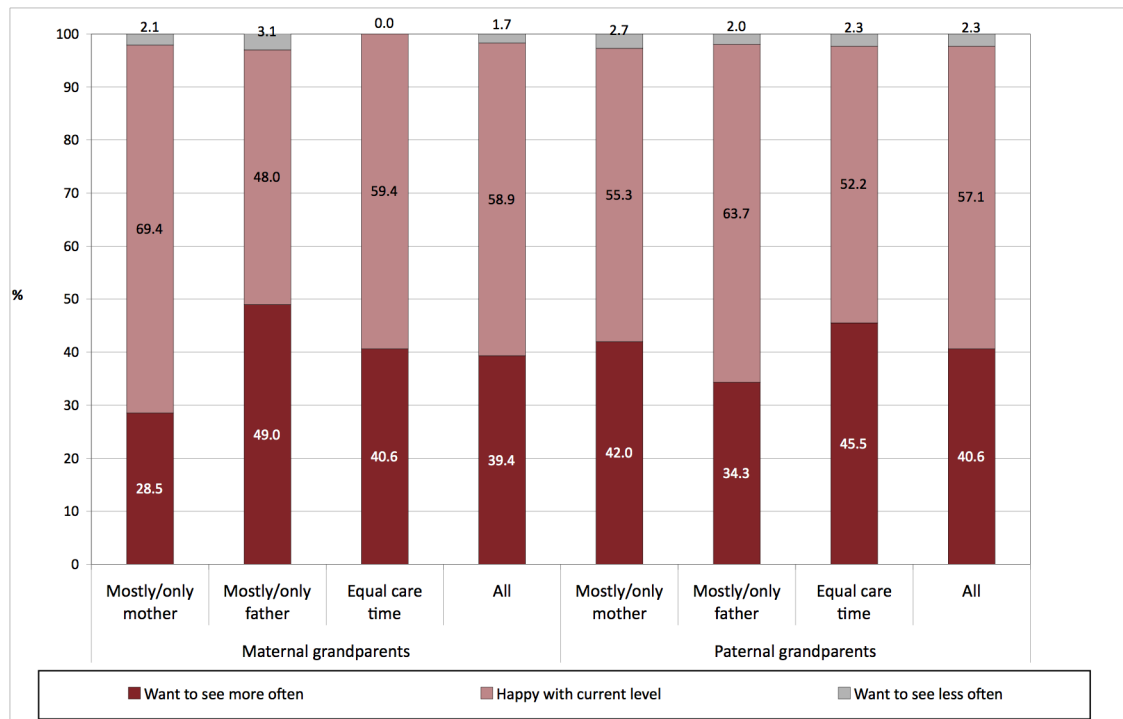
Adolescents were asked about the frequency of contact with both their maternal and paternal grandparents. Interestingly, across all care-time arrangements, adolescents had more frequent contact with their maternal than paternal grandparents (30% vs 19%). Further analysis by care-time arrangements is presented in Figure 5.13. In general, these findings align with the changes in closeness to grandparents reported in Figure 5.12. Specifically, adolescents living mostly/only with one parent were likely to have more frequent contact with that parent's parents; that is, adolescents living mostly/only with their mother were more likely than those living mostly/only with their father to see their maternal grandparent(s) frequently (i.e., weekly or more often) (38% vs 10%). Less pronounced, yet still consistent with the trend, was that a greater proportion of adolescents living mostly/only with their father saw their paternal grandparent(s) frequently compared with adolescents living mostly/only with their mother (28% vs 11%). Adolescents with equal care time reported regularly seeing both their maternal and paternal grandparents.



**Figure 5.13 Frequency of adolescent contact with maternal and paternal grandparents, by care-time arrangement**

Adolescents were also asked if they would like to see their grandparent(s) more or less frequently. As seen in Figure 5.14, more than half of all adolescents were satisfied with the level of contact they currently had with each set of grandparent(s). However, more than one in three adolescents wanted to see their maternal grandparent(s) more often. Adolescents living mostly/only with their father were significantly more likely than those living mostly/only with their mother to desire to see their maternal grandparent(s) more often.

Conversely, satisfaction with contact with paternal grandparent(s) was similar across all care-time arrangements. Overall, more than two in five adolescents wanted to see their paternal grandparent(s) more often. However, most adolescents were happy with their current level of contact with their paternal grandparent(s).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 5.14 Adolescents' satisfaction with level of grandparent contact, by care-time arrangement**

Adolescents who reported that they would like to see their grandparent(s) more often were then asked about the main reason for this. In total, 175 adolescents explained the main reason that they did not get to see their maternal grandparent(s) as often as they would have liked and 190 explained the main reason that they did not get to see their paternal grandparent(s) as often as they would have liked. Responses concerning spending time with both maternal and paternal grandparents were similar.

Distance—that is, having grandparent(s) who lived interstate or overseas—was the most commonly cited reason for not seeing maternal (61%) and paternal grandparents (58%) as often as desired. Other common reasons included being too busy with commitments or a sense that it required too much of an effort (19%); for example:

Because I've got school, work, friends and family and she is in an old folks home and it's kind of hard to see her and she is always doing things. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only mother]

It's hard to allocate time in between other things. [Male, aged 14 years, mostly/only mother]

I probably don't put (in) the effort needed. [Male, aged 14 years, equal care time]

If I want to see them, I have to go to my dad's and it's hard to get there because I have work and school and stuff. [Female, aged 16 years, mostly/only mother]

I have school and my dad works, so we only get to see my grandfather over the weekend. [Female, aged 14 years, mostly/only father]

Because I only see her with my dad and I only see my dad once a fortnight. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only mother]

Although less commonly mentioned, other adolescents explained that the main reason for not seeing their grandparents was due to family discord or not being in contact (6–13%). Examples of such responses in relation to both maternal and paternal grandparents are:

After mum left, dad didn't know most of the other family and didn't really want to be in contact with mum's side of the family. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only father]

Because my mum lives with my grandnan and I don't want to see my mum. [Male, aged 12 years, mostly/only father]

Because my grandparents don't like my mum. Also mum doesn't like my grandparents. [Female, aged 14 years, mostly/only mother]

My mum doesn't get along with my paternal grandmother and I don't get a chance to contact her. [Male, aged 18 years, mostly/only mother]

Because my dad and grandmother had a fight. [Male, aged 13 years, mostly/only mother]

## 6 Economic wellbeing and support

Separation often brings with it many financial changes. It is often associated with lower levels of income post-separation than pre-separation. It can take some time for parents to financially adjust, especially if they need to find accommodation and set up a new house. In other words, parental separation usually leads to a loss of economic resources for children (Amato, 1993; Coleman, 1990; Gray & Chapman, 2007; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Smyth & Weston, 2000; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Economic hardship following parental separation has been associated with an increased risk of negative outcomes for children (Aseltine, 1996; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Morrison & Cherin, 1995; Smyth & Weston, 2000).

This chapter reports on:

- the post-separation financial status of parents of adolescents;
- substantial re-establishment costs reported by parents post-separation;
- the prevalence of financial assistance sought by parents of adolescents in the preceding 12-month period (post-separation);
- parents' level of satisfaction with their current financial situation (post-separation); and
- financial support for adolescents post-separation (in relation to everyday expenses), as reported by adolescents.

In presenting findings on these topics, the first parts of this chapter restricts analysis to majority-care parent households (i.e., mostly/only mothers and mostly/only fathers). Equal care-time parents are excluded because there were insufficient respondents to allow the analysis to be conducted on mothers and fathers separately. However, equal care-time parents are included in analyses based on all parents of adolescents.

### Key messages

- Mothers with majority care of their adolescent were more likely than fathers with majority care to report that they were struggling financially. Some three in five majority-care mothers compared to one in two majority-care fathers reported that they were either just getting along, or poor or very poor.
- Mothers and fathers with majority care of their adolescents were similarly likely to report having substantial re-establishment costs (38% of all parents), including having to purchase things like household furniture and whitegoods.
- Of those parents experiencing financial difficulties, more mothers with majority care of their adolescents reported going without meals, having to sell something of value, seeking financial assistance from a welfare or community agency, and seeking financial assistance from family and friends.
- One in four parents of adolescents reported moving house one or more times in the 12 months since first being interviewed, suggesting that for some parents (and adolescents) residential mobility is high.
- More than one in four parents of adolescents expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their current financial situation, while fewer than one in five parents reported feeling neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- Adolescents reported that the parent with whom they lived paid for their everyday expenses, such as clothing, schooling, leisure and spending money. However, fathers were more likely to be seen as contributing to school costs than mothers, while mothers were more likely to be reported as paying for adolescents' clothes more often than fathers.
- Adolescents were most likely to approach the parent with whom they lived with when they needed extra money for something; otherwise they were more likely to approach their father than their mother.

## **6.1 Financial status, re-establishment costs and financial assistance post-separation**

This section details the post-separation financial status (as perceived by parents) and re-establishment costs experienced by majority-care parents of adolescents. It also reports on the prevalence of financial assistance sought by majority-care parents of adolescents in the 12-month period preceding the second interview (post-separation).

### **Post-separation financial status**

Majority-care parents of adolescents rated their current financial situation (from prosperous through to very poor), taking into account their current needs and responsibilities. Post-separation financial status varied depending on the care-time arrangement of adolescents. Specifically, mothers with the majority care of their adolescent were less likely to describe their financial situation in positive terms, with only 39% feeling they were either prosperous or comfortable, compared with 49% of fathers with majority care.

### **Re-establishment costs**

Parents of adolescents were asked about any substantial re-establishment costs they had incurred in the 12-month period preceding the Wave 2 interviews (post-separation), apart from accommodation costs. Examples of such re-establishment costs are household furniture and whitegoods. In total, almost two in five parents of adolescents (38%) reported substantial re-establishment costs (in the preceding 12 months), with little difference between mostly/only mother (35%) and mostly/only father (40%) respondents.

### **Financial difficulties**

Parents of adolescents were asked if they had sought financial assistance in the preceding 12-month period (post-separation), including both informal (i.e., family and friends) and formal (i.e., welfare or community agencies) forms of financial assistance. They were also asked to report on financial difficulties during the preceding 12 months. Specifically, parents were asked if they had experienced any of the following financial difficulties in the last 12 months:

- unable to pay the gas, electricity or telephone bills on time;
- unable to pay the car registration or insurance on time;
- unable to make rent or mortgage payments;
- unable to heat the home;
- had to go without meals;
- had to sell something;
- had to seek financial assistance from a welfare or community agency; and
- had to seek financial assistance from family and friends.

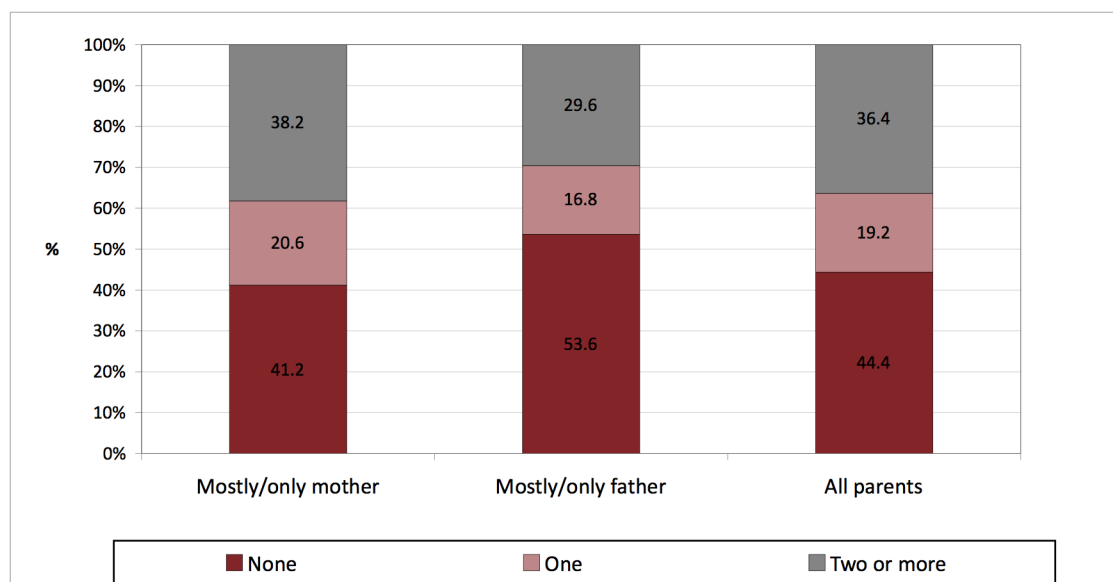
More than a third of parents indicated that in the last 12 months they had been unable to pay the gas, electricity or telephone bill on time (35%) or had to borrow money from family and friend (36%). These figures and the results for the other items are shown in Table 6.1



**Table 6.1 Proportion of parents reporting financial difficulties post-separation**

Indicators of financial difficulties	Parents of adolescents %
Unable to pay the gas, electricity or telephone bills on time	34.7
Unable to pay the car registration or insurance on time	17.6
Unable to make rent or mortgage payments	12.0
Unable to heat the home	9.4
Had to go without meals	7.5
Had to sell something	14.0
Had to seek financial assistance from a welfare or community agency	12.0
Had to seek financial assistance from family and friends	35.5
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>623</b>

Parents' responses to these questions were summarised into three groups: none of any of the listed difficulties, one of the listed difficulties, and at least two of the listed difficulties. Their distribution can be seen in Figure 6.1. Mostly/only mother households were affected more by these issues than mostly/only father households, with 38% of the former reporting two or more items compared to 30% of the latter.



Note: "All parents" includes parents with equal care time.

**Figure 6.1 Parents' reports of number of financial difficulties in the last 12 months, by care-time arrangement**

## 6.2 Housing mobility and tenure

In this section, consideration is given to the housing of adolescents. The separation of parents leads to changes in housing, sometimes because the parent chooses to, but often because there is no other option. Various studies have found that moving house is often particularly stressful for children and is sometimes associated with long-term problems (Brown & Orthner, 1990; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995; Humke & Schaefer, 1995).

On average, one in four parents (24%) interviewed in Wave 2 indicated that they had moved house in the previous 12 months.<sup>21</sup> As seen in Table 6.2, however, the vast majority of parents only moved once, with just 2% of all parents moving more than once. The number of moves was similar for both mothers in majority care and fathers in majority care.

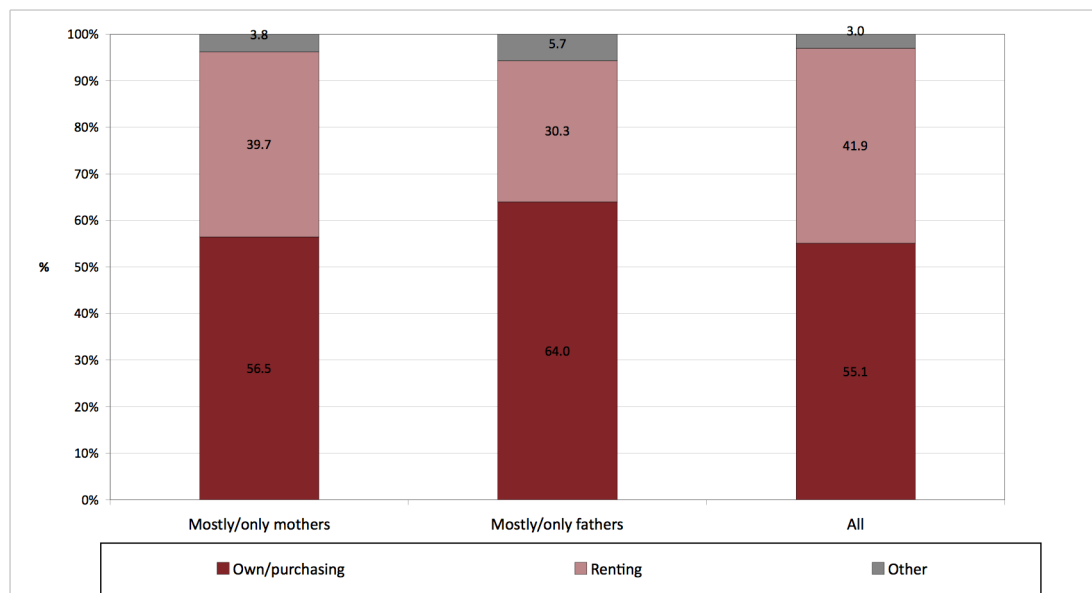
<sup>21</sup> Parents reported how many times they had moved since they were last interviewed at Wave 1 in 2008.

**Table 6.2 Parents' reports of post-separation residential mobility, by care-time arrangement**

	Mostly/only mothers	Mostly/only fathers	All
		%	
No moves	76.7	76.8	76.2
1 move	20.4	21.6	21.3
2 move	2.0	1.6	1.5
3 or more moves	0.9	0.0	0.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>No. of respondents</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>623</b>

Notes: The question asked was: "How many times have you moved house since [month] last year?" Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

The majority of parents either owned their home outright or were purchasing their own home (Figure 6.2). Fathers in majority care were somewhat more likely than mothers in majority care to own or be purchasing a house (64% vs 57%). Of all parents, almost two in five (38%) were renting, most often privately. Consistent with the previous finding, renting was less prevalent among fathers in majority care than among mothers in majority care (30% vs 40%). Relatively few parents indicated that they were living with their own parents (i.e., the adolescents' grandparents) or in other accommodation.



Notes: "Other" includes accommodation through work, living rent free, boarding, and living in parents' house. "Renting" includes both private rental and public housing.

**Figure 6.2 Housing status of parents of adolescents, by care-time arrangement**

### 6.3 Satisfaction with current financial situation

Parents of adolescents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with their current financial situation (on a scale of 0 = "completely dissatisfied" through 10 = "completely satisfied"). The following five categories are used to describe level of parent satisfaction: "dissatisfied" (0–2); "somewhat dissatisfied" (3–4); "neutral: neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" (5); "somewhat satisfied" (6–7); and "satisfied" (8–10). The results are summarised in Figure 6.3.

Level of satisfaction was similar for mother-majority and father-majority care-time arrangements. Across all parents, more than half were somewhat satisfied or satisfied with their current financial situation. However, more than one in four parents of adolescents (27%) expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their current financial situation. Notably, 18% of all parents reported feeling neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

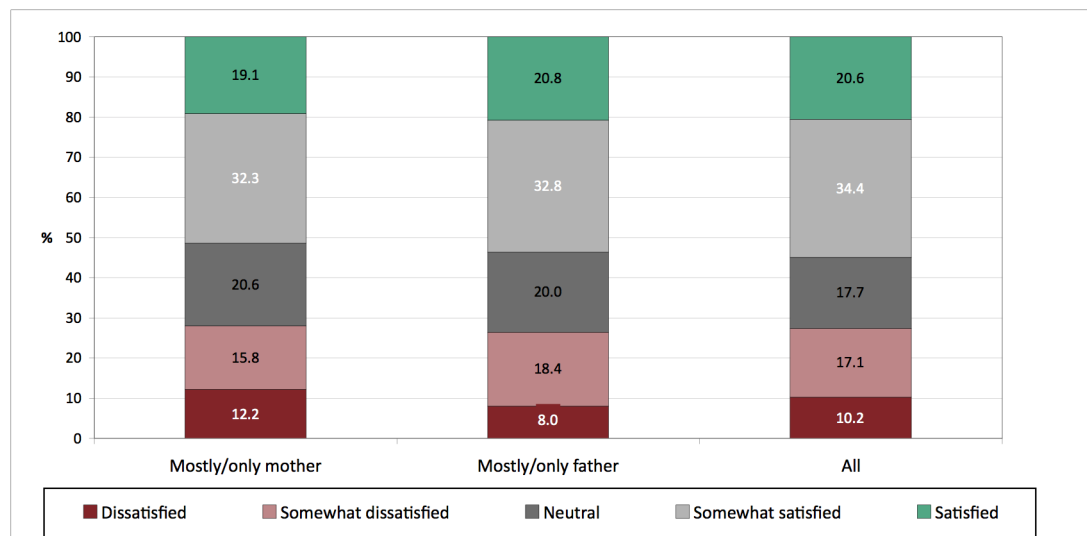


Figure 6.3 Parents' level of satisfaction with their financial situation, by care-time arrangement

## 6.4 Financial support for adolescents post-separation

Financial support for adolescents post-separation was examined in relation to everyday expenses such as clothing, schooling, leisure, and spending money. The findings described reflect the perceptions of adolescents. Adolescents were asked to report who usually paid for each of these items. They were also asked to whom they would go for extra money if they needed it. Findings for all expenses across all adolescents are summarised in Figure 6.4.

Overall, everyday expenses of adolescents were mostly shared between parents. Mothers were more likely to pay for clothing expenses, whereas fathers paid for more school costs. However, everyday expenditure varied depending on adolescents' care-time arrangements. As illustrated in Figures 6.5 through 6.8, the parent they live with most of the time generally paid for adolescents' everyday living costs.<sup>22</sup>

For instance, the vast majority of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother reported that their mother paid for their clothes (76%) and their school-related costs (67%). Over half of the adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother (52%) indicated their mother paid for their leisure activities (such as going to the movies), while a similar proportion (53%) reported receiving spending money from their mother.

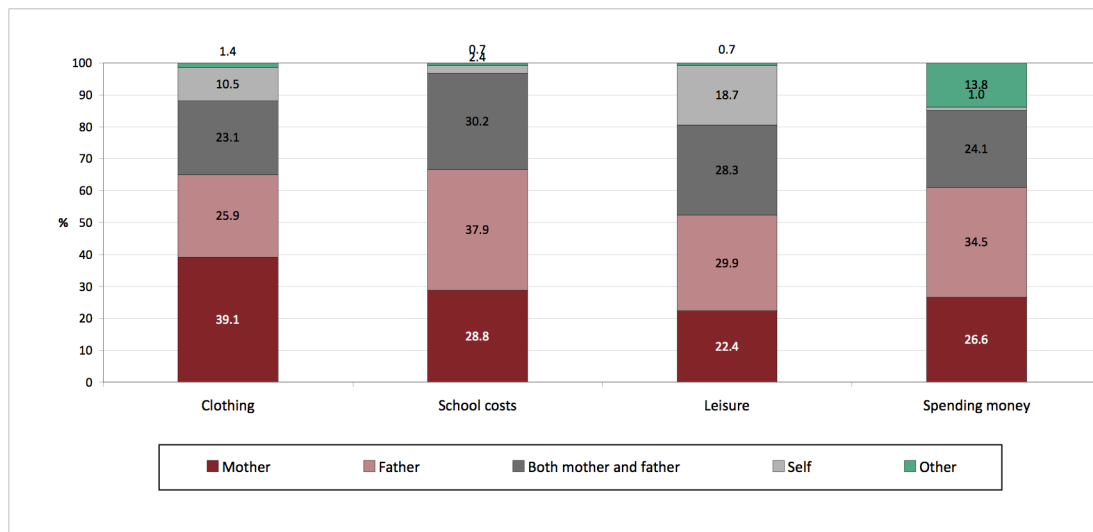
Similarly, most adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father reported that their father paid for their clothes (63%) and their school-related costs (76%). Again, most adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father (60%) said that their father paid for their leisure activities. They were also more likely to receive spending money from their father than their mother.

For a number of adolescents living mostly/only with one parent, both parents paid for their expenses—namely schooling, leisure and spending. Notably, few mothers contributed to everyday expenses for adolescents living mostly/only with their father, while more fathers contributed to school, leisure and spending costs for adolescents living mostly/only with their mother. The reverse was true for clothing expenses, with a greater proportion of mothers than fathers contributing to clothing expenses for their non-resident adolescent.

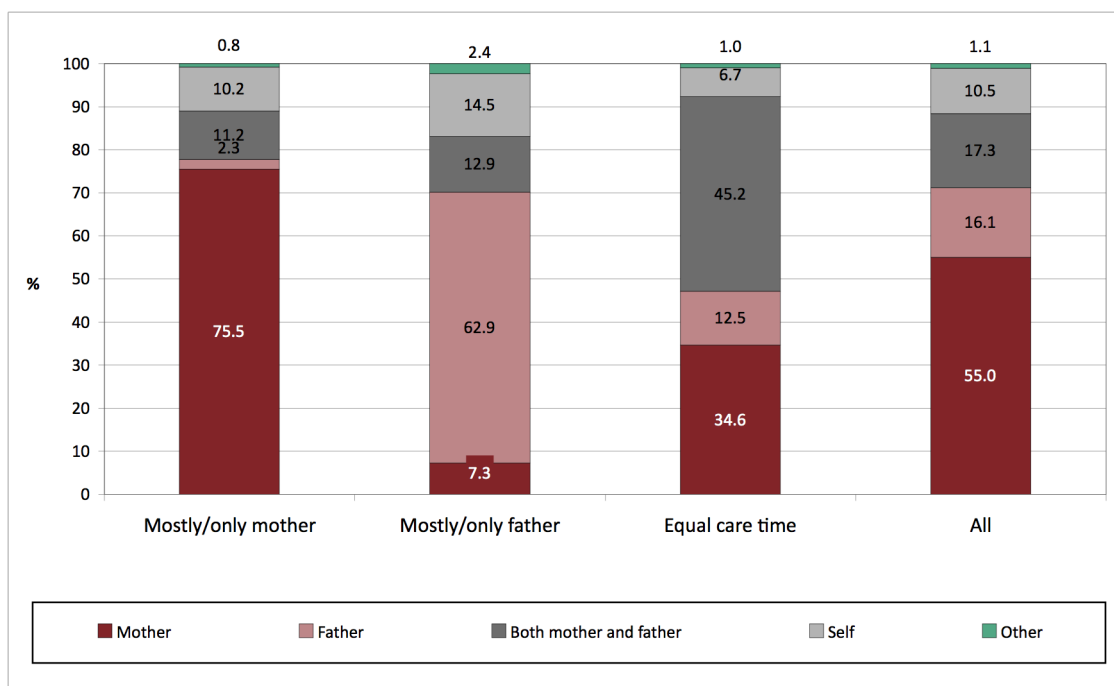
For the vast majority of adolescents with equal care-time arrangements, both parents paid for their everyday expenses. However, similar trends to those living mostly/only with one parent were evident; that is, more fathers than mothers paid for school expenses and leisure activities,

<sup>22</sup> Equal care-time arrangements are included in the analysis for the balance of this chapter.

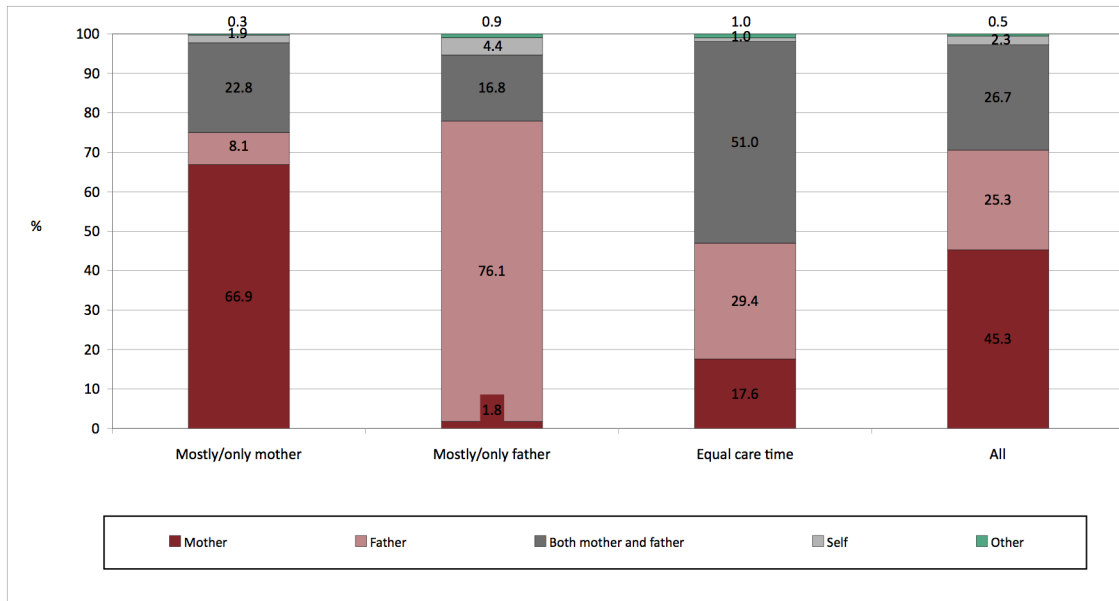
while more mothers than fathers paid for clothing. Fathers and mothers contributed equally to spending money for adolescents with equal care-time arrangements.



**Figure 6.4** Sources of payment for adolescents' everyday expenses, by type of expenditure

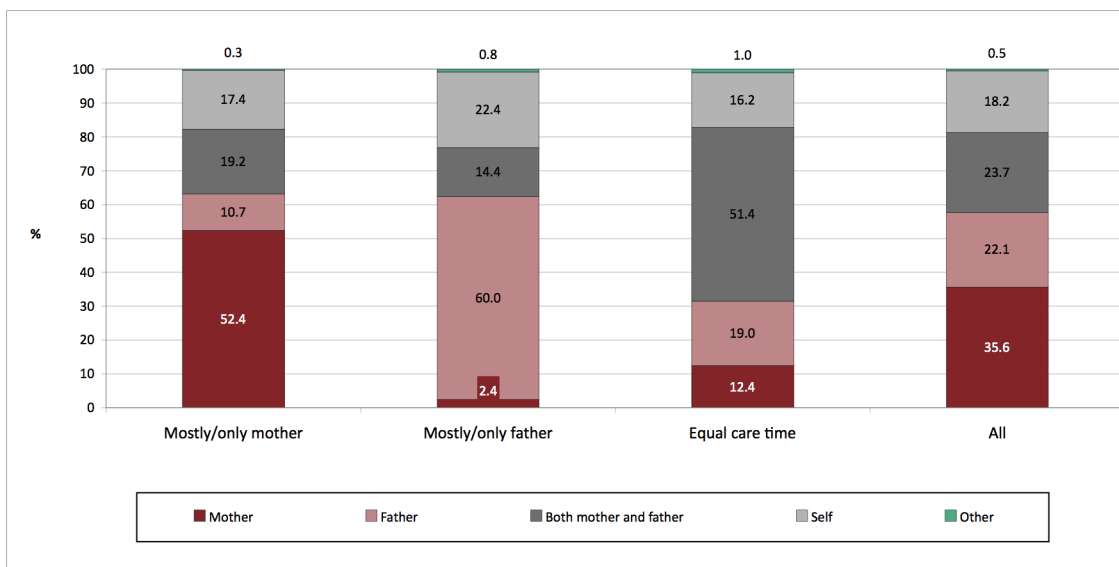


**Figure 6.5** Sources of payment for adolescents' clothing expenses, by care-time arrangement



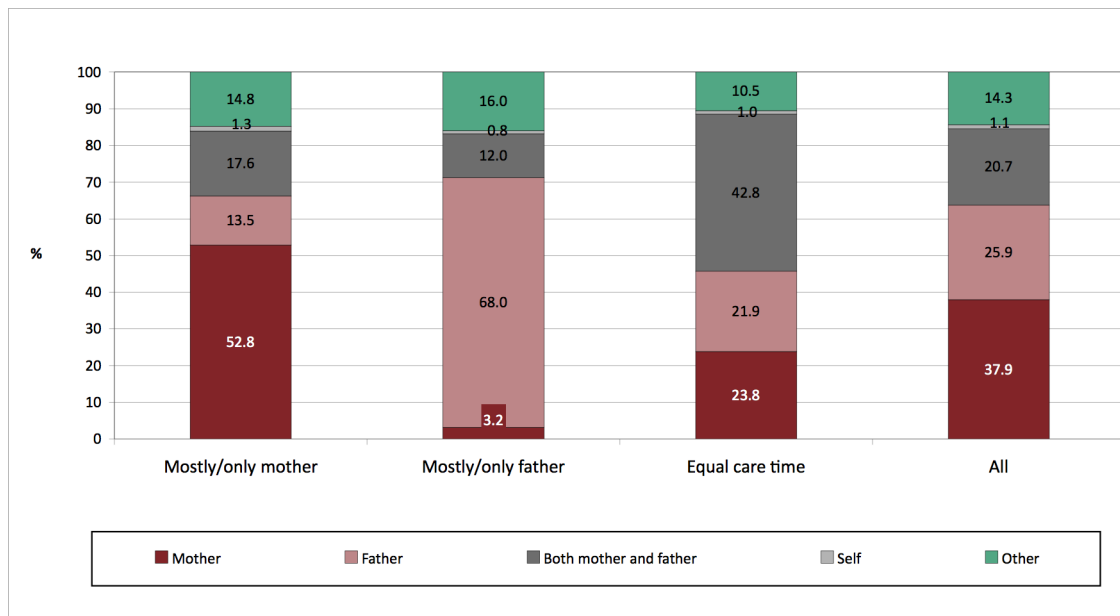
Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 6.6 Sources of payment for adolescents' school expenses, by care-time arrangement**



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 6.7 Sources of payment for adolescents' leisure expenses, by care-time arrangement**

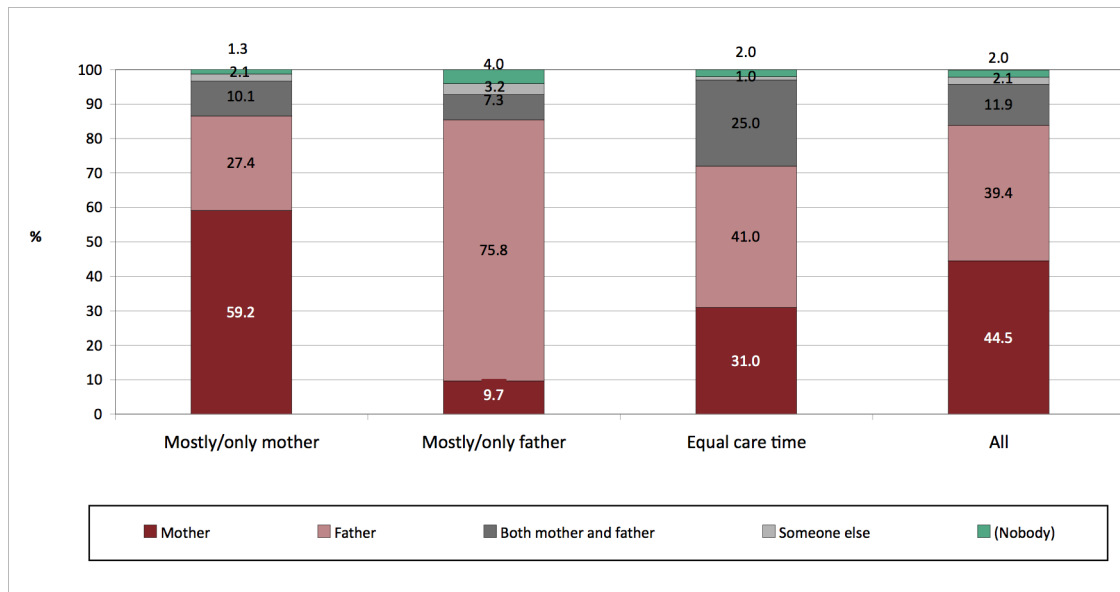


Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 6.8 Sources of payment for adolescents' spending money, by care-time arrangement**

Adolescents were also asked to whom they would be more likely to go when they needed extra money for something. Results presented in Figure 6.9 show that adolescents are more likely to approach the parent with whom they live; otherwise they are more likely to approach their father than their mother.

Almost 60% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother said that they were most likely to approach their mother for extra money, compared to 10% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father. More than 75% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their father said that they were most likely to approach their father for extra money, compared to 27% of adolescents who lived mostly/only with their mother. Adolescents with equal care time said that they would approach their father for extra money (41%); fewer than one in three (31%) would approach their mother; while 25% said that they would go to both their mother and father for extra money.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 6.9** Person to whom adolescents would go to for extra money, by care-time arrangement

## 7 Adolescents' health and wellbeing

Adolescents can be expected to react differently to the separation of their parents and there are many complex factors that are likely to influence an adolescent's adjustment. Chapter 3 highlighted that adolescents in this sample were in a range of care-time arrangements and that some adolescents had experienced multiple changes in these arrangements since separation. Chapter 5 examined the quality of adolescents' relationships with various family members, including the closeness of parent-child relationships. This chapter continues to explore these themes and how important they are in helping children adjust to life after parental separation.

Specifically, the chapter reports on:

- adolescents' feelings about parental separation;
- adolescents' and parents' perceptions on health and schooling;
- links between care-time arrangements and adolescents' health and wellbeing;
- links between multiple changes in care-time arrangements and adolescents' health and wellbeing; and
- links between closeness of parent-child relationship and adolescents' health and wellbeing.

### Key messages

- While some adolescents felt relieved by their parents' separation, others did not. Boys seemed to be the most troubled by their parents' separation, being less likely than girls to express relief over the separation and more likely to desire a parental reunion.
- Similarly, younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years) tended to express more unease over their parents' separation than older adolescents (aged 15+ years), were less likely to express relief over the separation and more likely to desire a parental reunion.
- A greater proportion of younger adolescents with equal care time also felt that it would have been better for them if their parents had stayed together, compared to both younger and older adolescents living mostly/only with one parent.
- Boys with equal care time were less positive about their ability to get along with others, while girls living mostly/only with their father had lower levels of self-confidence.
- Adolescents who had experienced multiple changes in their arrangements since separation were less positive in their social abilities and ratings of general health.
- Feeling close to at least one parent was important in helping adolescents adjust to life after parental separation.

### 7.1 Adolescents' feelings about parental separation

Parental separation presents adolescents with many challenges that add to the normal demands of growing up. Among these is the acceptance that their parents' separation is permanent. This section reports on adolescents' feelings and views about parental separation. Adolescents were asked to indicate their level of agreement ("strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree or disagree", "disagree", "strongly disagree") with two statements in relation to their parents:

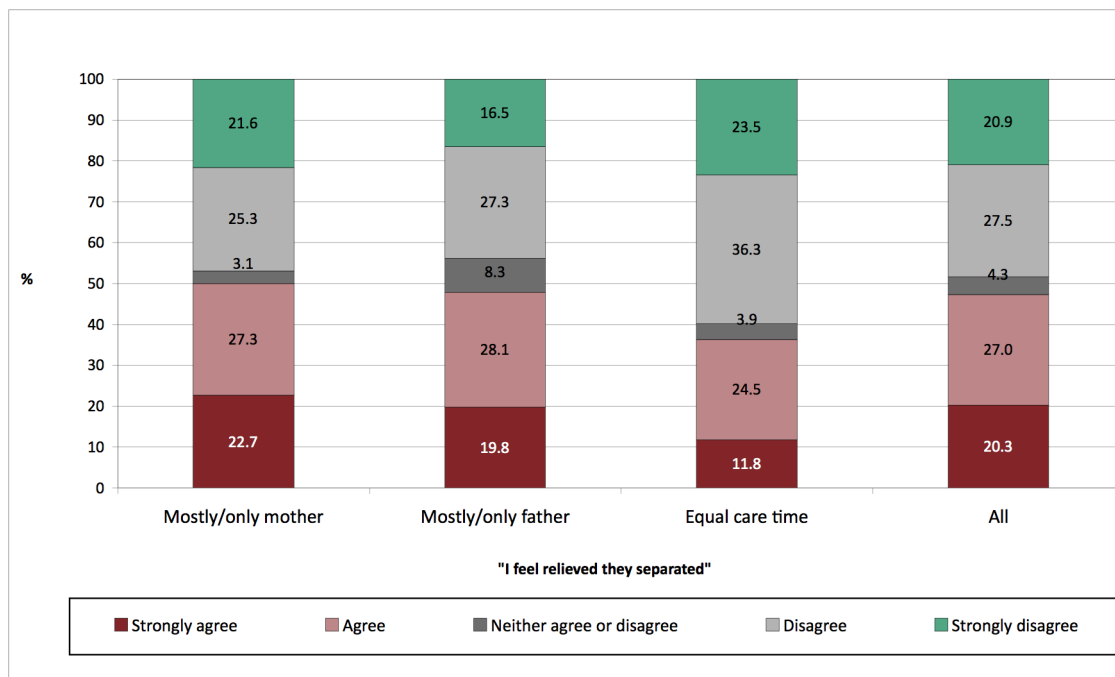
- "I feel relieved they separated"; and
- "I wish they would get back together".

Adolescents were also asked: "Do you think it was better for *you* that your parents separated, or do you think it would have been better if they had stayed together?"

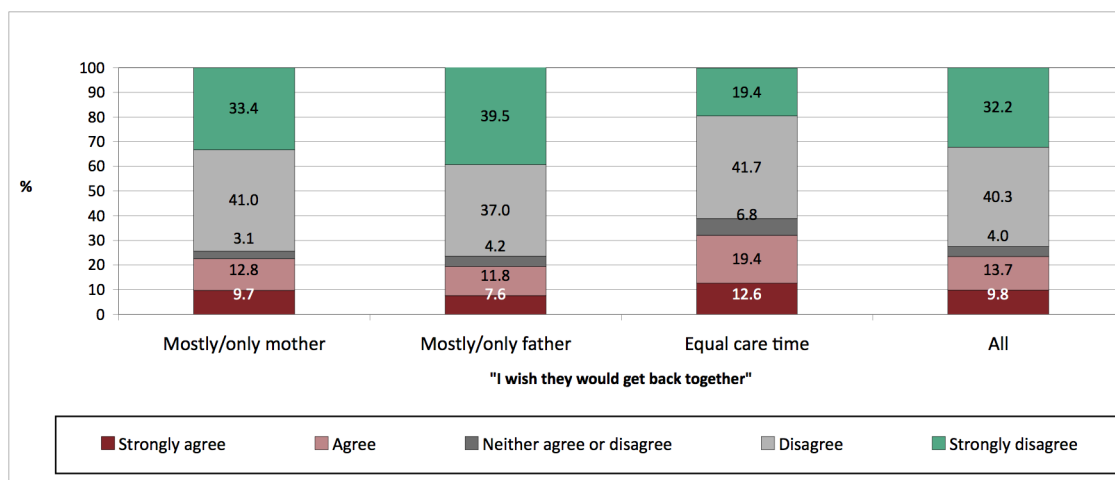
Adolescents' relief over the separation and their desire for a parental reunion were similar across all care-time arrangements. As reported in Figure 7.1, almost half of all adolescents (47%) expressed relief at their parents' separation (agree/strongly agree), while an equal proportion of adolescents (48%) did not feel relieved they separated (disagree/strongly



disagree). However, most adolescents did not desire their parents to get back together (see Figure 7.2), although this applied less to those with equal care time (61% vs 74–77%).



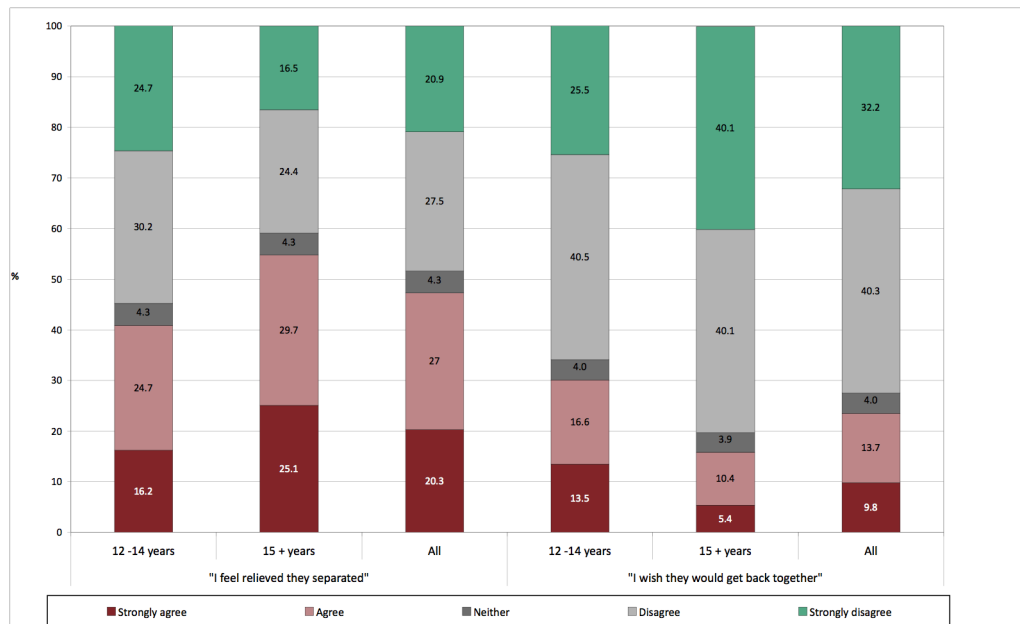
**Figure 7.1** Adolescents' degree of relief that parents separated, by care-time arrangement



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.2** Adolescents' desire for a parental reunion, by care-time arrangement

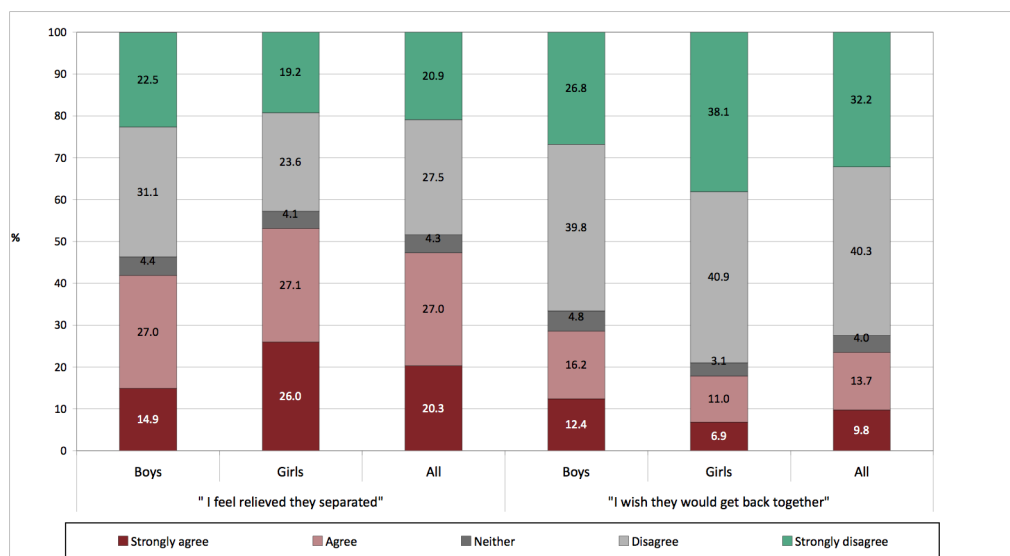
While care-time arrangements were not that strongly related to adolescents' feelings about their parents' separation, the age and gender of the adolescent were more so. Specifically, older adolescents (aged 15+ years) were more likely to express relief over the separation than were younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years) (Figure 7.3). Consistent with the above findings, younger adolescents were also more likely to desire a parental reunion than were older adolescents. Almost twice as many younger adolescents (30%) wished their parents would get back together (agree/strongly agree) compared with older adolescents (16%).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.3 Adolescents' feelings about parental separation, by age group**

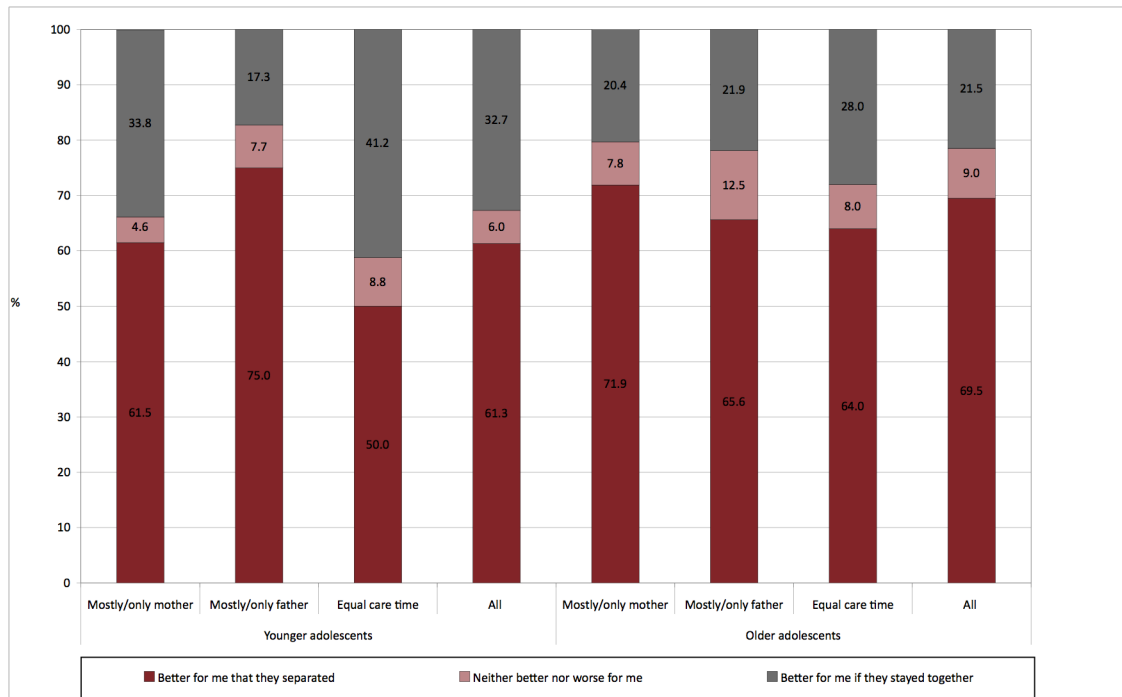
Similarly, boys seemed more troubled by their parent's separation than girls (Figure 7.4). Boys were less likely than girls to express relief over the separation. They were also considerably more likely than girls to desire a parental reunion.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.4 Adolescents' feelings about parental separation, by adolescents' gender**

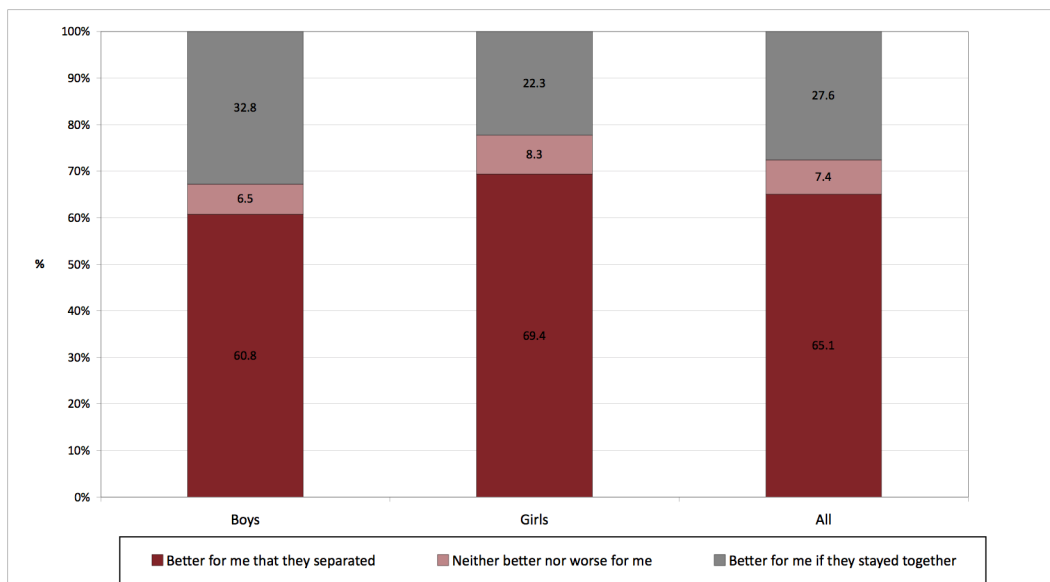
Adolescents were asked directly if they felt that it was better for them that their parents separated or if it would have been better for them if they had stayed together. As shown in Figure 7.5, a greater proportion of younger adolescents with equal and mother-majority care time felt that it would have been better for them if their parents had stayed together, compared to older adolescents living in the same care-time arrangements. In contrast, for adolescents in father-majority care, it was the older adolescents who felt that it would have been better for them if their parents had stayed together compared to younger adolescents, although the difference here was fairly marginal.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.5 Adolescents' perception of effect on them of parental separation, by care-time arrangement and age group**

More boys than girls (33% vs 22%) also felt that it would have been better for them if their parents had stayed together (Figure 7.6).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.6 Adolescents' perception of effect on them of parental separation, by gender**

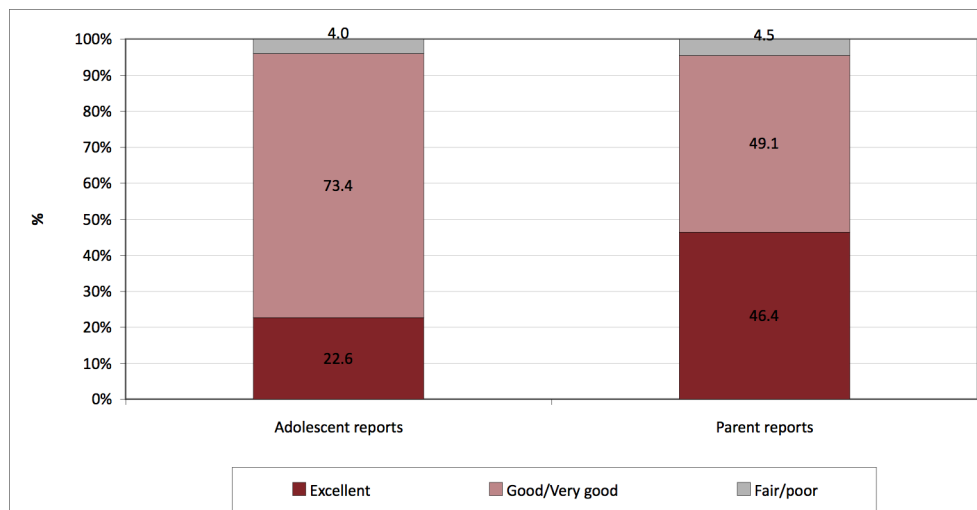
## 7.2 Adolescents' and parents' perceptions on health and schooling

This section examines the reports of both adolescents and their parents on two common measures of wellbeing. The measures compared include:

- general health of the adolescent; and

- the adolescents' academic achievement.

The aggregate findings from adolescent and parent reports are described in this section.<sup>23</sup> In terms of general health, adolescents tended to be more modest in their self-reports than were parents (Figure 7.7). For example, fewer adolescents than parents rated their health as excellent (23% compared to 46 %); however, both adolescents and parents tended to provide favourable overall health assessments. There was also a high consistency between adolescent and parent reports in terms of reporting fair/poor health (4% and 5% respectively).

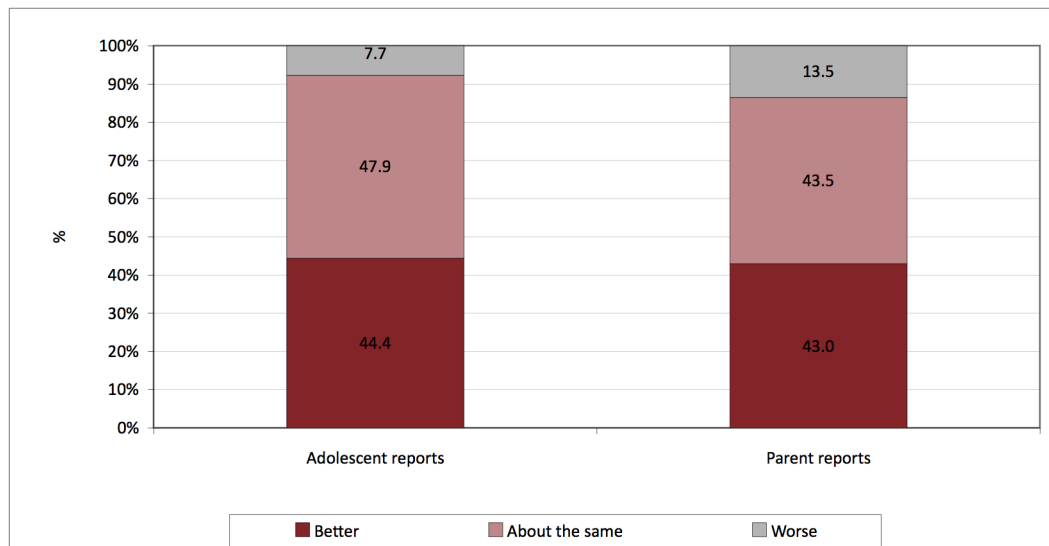


**Figure 7.7 Adolescent and parent reports on general health**

Both adolescents and their parents were asked to rate adolescents' achievements at school compared with peers their same age. As seen in Figure 7.8, there was general consensus between adolescents' and parents' perceptions on school achievement. More than two in five adolescents (44%) felt that they were achieving much/somewhat better than their peers at school, and a similar proportion of parents (43%) reported this about their adolescent child.

Approximately half of the adolescents (48%) agreed that they were doing about the same as their peers at school, while a slightly smaller number of parents (44%) agreed with this statement. Few adolescents (8%) indicated that they were achieving somewhat/much worse than their peers at school, while approximately 14% of parents felt their adolescent was underachieving (somewhat/much worse).

<sup>23</sup> Separate analyses were undertaken where items were specific to the focus adolescent and sibling adolescent; however, there was a very high level of consistency in results for both adolescent and parent reports.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.8** Adolescent and parent reports on general academic performance compared to adolescents' peers at school

### 7.3 Care-time arrangements and adolescent wellbeing

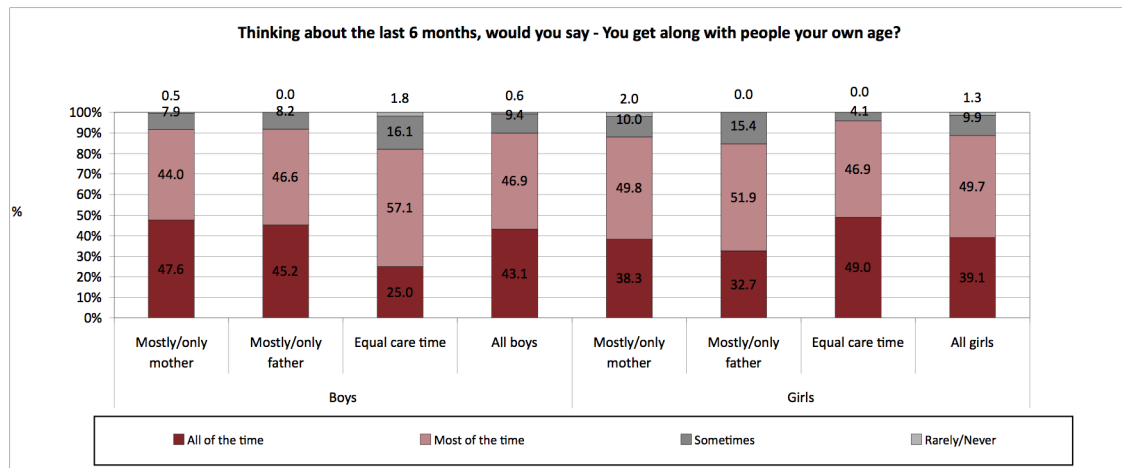
Self-reported aspects of adolescent health and wellbeing are reported here. Adolescents were specifically asked to think about the preceding six months and to rate four aspects of their wellbeing.<sup>24</sup> These included:

- peer relationship quality;
- self-confidence;
- loss of self-control/temper; and
- general feelings of happiness.

Analysis revealed a link between adolescents' gender and care-time arrangements on some aspects of their wellbeing, with differences being evident in terms of peer relationship quality and self-confidence. No relationships were evident for loss of self-control/temper or general feelings of happiness.

Boys with equal care-time arrangements rated their ability to get along with peers more negatively than did boys and girls in other care-time arrangements (Figure 7.9). Only one in four boys with equal care time said they got along with others their age all of the time, compared to almost half of the girls with equal care time. Interestingly though, girls in majority-parent care were less likely to say they got along with people their own age than were boys in these care arrangements.

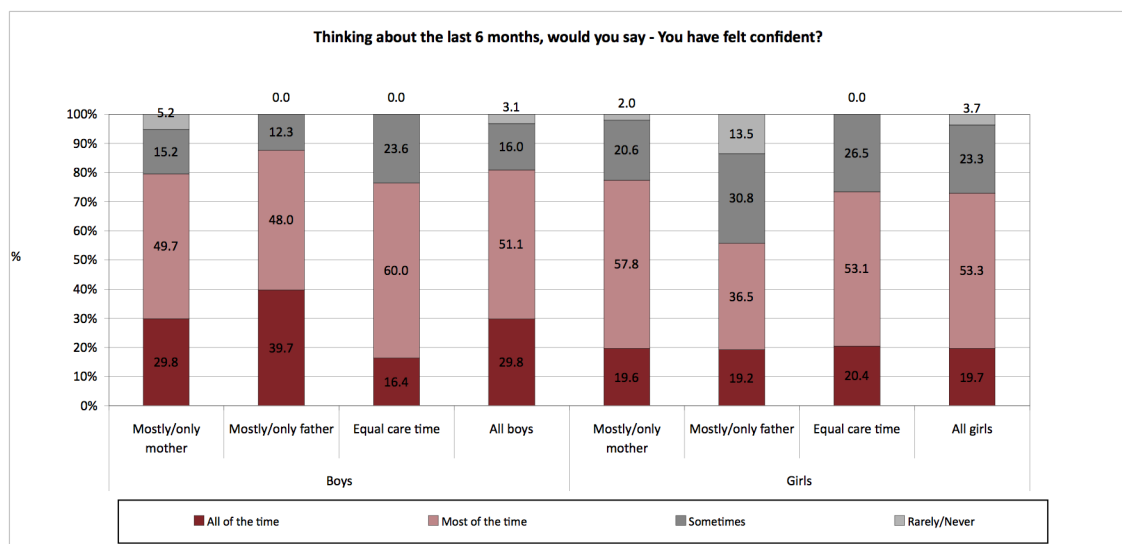
<sup>24</sup> Adolescents rated four items on a five-point scale ("all of the time", "most of the time", "sometimes", "rarely", and "never"). Items were: "Would you say: you get along well with people your own age? you have felt confident? you lost your temper easily? you feel happy with your life in general?"



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.9 Adolescent reports of whether they get along with their peers, by care-time arrangement and gender**

As seen in Figure 7.10, adolescent self-confidence also varied according to gender and care-time arrangements. While girls overall were somewhat less confident than boys, the difference was more marked for adolescent girls living with their father, compared to girls and boys with other care-time arrangements. More than two in five girls living with their father (44%) reported that they sometimes, rarely or never felt confident compared to boys living mostly/only with their father (14%), living mostly/only with their mother (19%) or with equal care-time arrangements (22%). Boys who lived mostly/only with their father were the most confident group of all the boys and girls across all care-time arrangements.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.10 Adolescent reports of feeling self-confident, by care-time arrangement and gender**

## 7.4 Links between changes in care-time arrangements and health and wellbeing

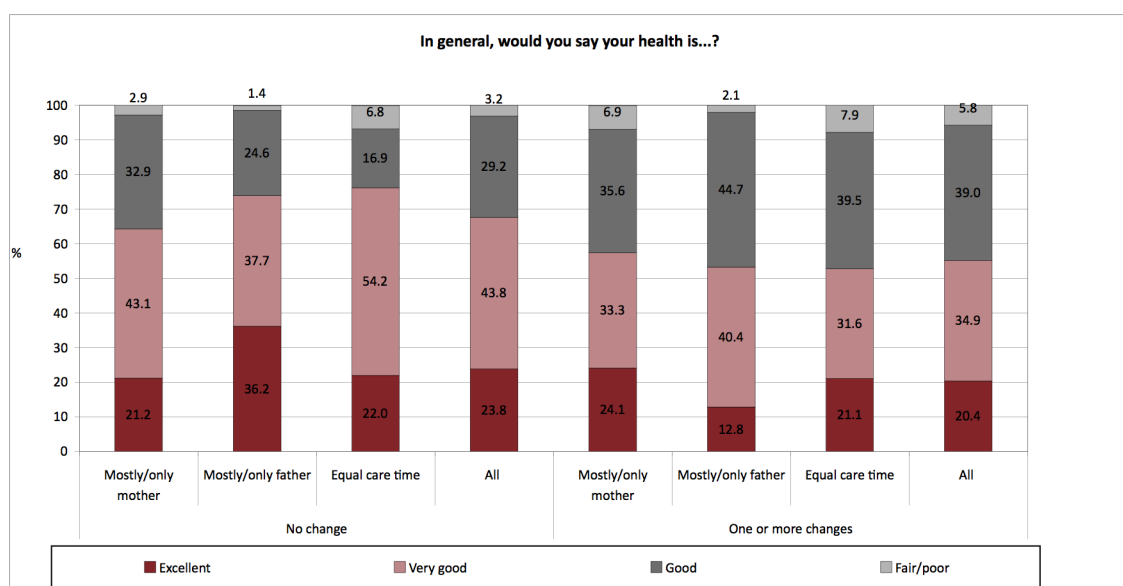
So far, this chapter has focused on adolescents' feelings and views about parental separation according to care-time arrangements, adolescent gender and age. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, some 30% of all adolescents reported a change in arrangements concerning the number of nights they stayed with each parent since separation. Of these adolescents, most

(68%) had experienced one or two changes in their main living arrangements. This section examines aspects of adolescent health and wellbeing according to those who experienced changes in their care-time arrangements and those who reported no change. Areas of adolescent health and wellbeing examined included:

- general health;
- academic performance;
- peer relationship quality;
- self-confidence;
- loss of self-control/temper; and
- general feelings of happiness.

In sum, findings indicated that adolescent self-reported health and peer relationships varied depending on their experience of changes in care-time arrangements, but not on the other measures of health and wellbeing.

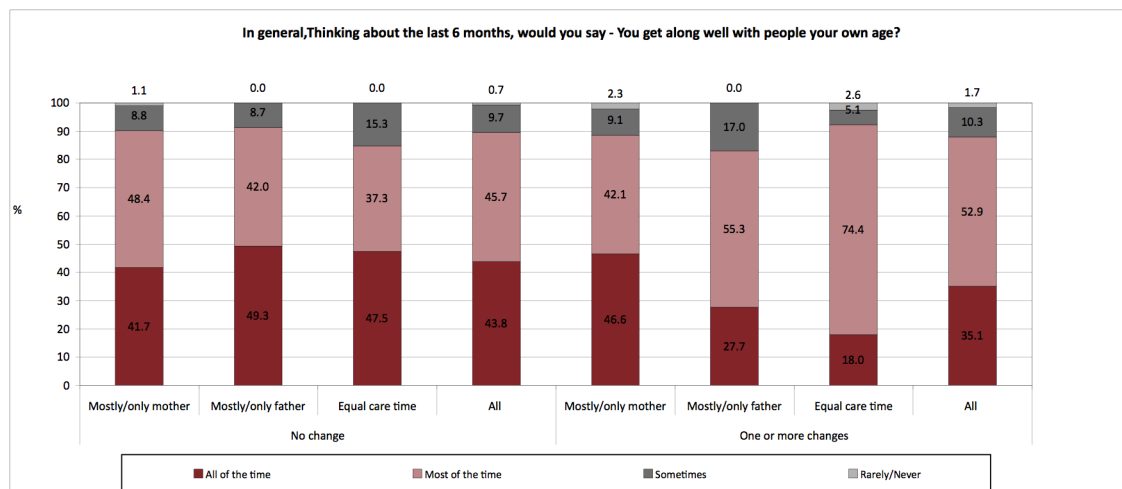
As illustrated in Figure 7.11, adolescents who had experienced changes in their arrangements rated their health less positively than did those adolescents experiencing no change. In particular, adolescents living mostly/only with their father at the time of the interview and who had also experienced one or more changes in arrangements since separation were the least positive about their general health, with only 13% rating it as excellent.



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.11 Adolescent ratings of general health, by current care-time arrangement and number of changes in arrangements since separation**

Similarly, adolescents who had experienced changes in their arrangements were also less positive in their ratings of their social interactions than were those adolescents experiencing no change (Figure 7.12). Notably, adolescents living equally with both parents at the time of the interview and who had also experienced one or more changes in arrangements since separation were less likely to say that they got along with their peers all of the time (18%) compared to adolescents with equal care and no changes in arrangements (48%).



Note: Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding.

**Figure 7.12 Adolescent reports of whether they get along with their peers, by current care-time arrangement and number of changes in arrangements since separation**

## 7.5 Link between parent–child relationship and adolescent health and wellbeing

Research suggests that the quality of relationships between parents and children is important in helping children adjust to life after separation (Hawthorne et al., 2003). In Chapter 5, the quality of adolescents' relationships with various family members was reported. This section examines the importance of parent–child relationships in helping adolescent children adjust to life after parental separation. More specifically, it examines whether adolescents' self-rated health and wellbeing differ according to their level of parental closeness. Adolescents' ratings on how close they felt to each parent were collapsed into categories for the analyses (close to mother, close to father, not close to mother, not close to father).

As previously reported, several areas of adolescent health and wellbeing were examined. These included:

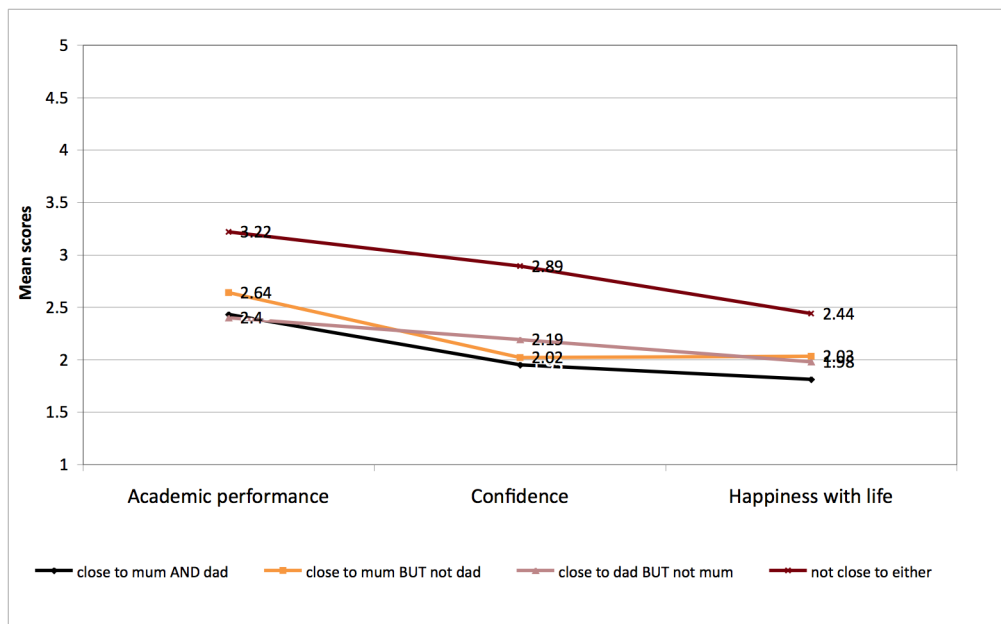
- general health;
- academic performance;
- peer relationship quality;
- self-confidence;
- loss of self-control/temper; and
- general feelings of happiness.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effect of the three types of care-time arrangements (mostly/only mother, mostly/only father, equal care time) on these measures of adolescent health and wellbeing and parental closeness. The results of the analysis indicate that three of these measures of adolescent health and wellbeing varied depending on the closeness of the adolescent to their parents. Specifically, adolescents' ratings of academic achievement, self-confidence, and general happiness with life varied according to how close the adolescent felt to their parents. All other measures of health and wellbeing tended not to vary by how close adolescents felt to their parents.

Mean scores for each measure are displayed in Figure 7.13. Higher mean scores indicate poorer ratings on academic achievement, self-confidence and general happiness with life. The results clearly show that feeling close to both or at least one parent (either mother or father) was important in helping adolescent children adjust to life after parental separation. Most notably, those adolescences who did not feel close to either their mother or their father were



considerably more likely to have poorer ratings on academic performance, self-confidence and general happiness with life.



**Figure 7.13** Adolescents mean scores on wellbeing, by closeness to parents

## 8 Summary of key findings

The findings in this report are based on data from the Adolescent Study (2009), together with data collected from parents of these young people in the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF W1 2008 and LSSF W2 2009). The study explored the experience of parental separation for 623 adolescent children (321 male and 302 female) whose parents separated after the introduction of the family law reforms in July 2006. Adolescents were aged 12–18 years at the time of interview (ages at separation ranged from 9 to 15 years). For most adolescents (89%), their parents had been married at the time of separation and the majority (84%) had at least one sibling from their parents' union. All families had been registered with the Child Support Agency in 2007. The study methodology is fully described in Chapter 1.

### 8.1 The policy landscape

Reforms to family law came into effect through the *Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act 2006* (Cth) (*SPR Act 2006*) and increased funding for new and expanded family relationships services, including the establishment of 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) and a national advice line. The changes affect separated parents and their children.

The overriding aim of the reforms was to protect children's best interests. Specifically, this involved moving away from long and costly court battles and towards more cooperative parenting solutions with the help of dispute resolution services, and promoting shared parental responsibility in an environment where children are safe from violence and abuse.

The survey findings presented in this report describe how adolescent children view their experiences of parental separation in the context of the reforms.

### 8.2 Findings from the Adolescent Study

This concluding section highlights adolescents' experiences of the process of parental separation and their own involvement in the decisions parents made about them following separation. It sheds light on what adolescents want in their care-time arrangements, how they express their views, who they turn to for support, their relationships with parents and other family members, and their understanding of issues concerning parental conflict. It specifically addresses several questions relevant to family law policy, including:

- How involved are parents in adolescents' lives following separation?
- How well do adolescents' care-time arrangements work?
- What do adolescents want in their care-time arrangements?
- Who do adolescents turn to for support when their parents separate?
- What is the quality of adolescents' relationships with their parents after separation?
- How do adolescents experience becoming part of a step-family?
- What role do grandparents play in adolescents' lives after separation?
- How does the economic status of parents after separation affect adolescent wellbeing?
- How do adolescents experience parental violence and conflict?
- How are adolescents adjusting to life after parental separation?

Each of these important questions is discussed in turn.

#### How involved are parents in adolescents' lives following separation?

A key objective of the 2006 family law reforms was to encourage greater involvement of both parents in children's lives following separation, provided that the children are protected from family violence or child abuse.

The survey findings suggest that for most adolescents, their parents' separation resulted in one parent becoming primarily responsible for their care. Across all age groups this was most often their mother (64–66%).<sup>25</sup> However, the proportion of adolescents living mostly/only with their father tended to increase from the younger to older age groups, whereas adolescents with equal care time were typically younger adolescents aged 12–14 years. While there was a relatively equal split between boys and girls living mostly/only with their mother, more boys than girls were living with their father or with equal care-time arrangements.

Daytime contact with the other parent (without staying overnight) was relatively common for adolescents living primarily with one parent. Almost half of all adolescents saw their other parent during the day at least once a week or more often. The survey also highlighted the importance of other forms of parent–child contact after separation. Some 71% of adolescents living mostly/only with one parent reported that they were in touch with their other parent either on the phone or by email at least once a week or more often.

However, the survey also revealed that some adolescents never stayed overnight with their other parent (26%), most often their father. Older adolescents (15+ years) were more likely to never stay overnight than were younger adolescents (12–14 years). A small number of adolescents (9%) had no face-to-face contact at all with their other parent (either overnight or during the daytime). Findings of the survey revealed that for these young people there were often complex issues pertaining to not seeing their other parent, including the parent or child not wanting or making contact, or a history of family violence.

In sum, most adolescents remained involved with both parents even though they may not have lived with one of them very much or at all. Involvement with the non-majority-care parent included contact through phone or email, daytime-only activities, or regular overnight care. For adolescents who never saw their other parent (either overnight or during the daytime), there were often complex issues underlying this experience.

### **How well do adolescents' care-time arrangements work?**

One of the most notable findings highlighted by the survey is the instability of care-time experiences for a minority of adolescents. Importantly, whether in shared care time or living mostly/only with one parent, almost one in three adolescents experienced a revision in the number of nights they spent with their parents within the first two to three years of parental separation. For some, changes in circumstances may have meant that earlier arrangements were not working well for them or their parents and needed to be reviewed. Importantly, changes in adolescents' care-time arrangements tended to reflect small changes in the number of nights spent with each parent rather than a change in the adolescents' primary residence. As adolescent children develop, reviewing arrangements is something that is likely to be useful for all families.

While most adolescents found the change a positive experience that was more convenient and allowed them to see their other parent more, some adolescents found it difficult to adjust to new arrangements and schedules. This suggests that support and care provided to adolescents experiencing changes in arrangements needs to be sensitive and responsive to the particular needs and possible vulnerabilities of this subgroup.

It is of further concern that adolescents who experienced multiple changes in their care-time arrangements reported less positive adjustment after separation than did adolescents who had experienced no change. This was most notably found in areas of social abilities and general health. Either the circumstances necessitating the change or the change itself are likely to be contributing to the stress expressed by these adolescents.

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<sup>25</sup> Except for age 14, where mother-majority care dropped to around 54%.

## What do adolescents want in their care-time arrangements?

Most adolescents agreed that the decision on where they would live was very much what they wanted and most adolescents were satisfied with the amount of time they spent with their other parent (in the case of majority care), suggesting that on the whole, parents tended to settle on arrangements that worked well for their specific circumstances. The majority of adolescents also felt they were able to see their other parent when they wanted or needed to and few expressed a desire to change their current arrangements. These are reassuring findings, suggesting that, on the whole, care-time arrangements being reached by parents are providing an environment that promotes adolescents' sense of safety and wellbeing.

Most adolescents wanted a say in the decision about who they would live with and the majority of adolescents achieved this by talking it over with their parents. While it could be concluded that it is important for young people to have a say, more than one in three adolescents surveyed did not wish to be involved in the process of resolving parenting arrangements after separation; that is, some adolescents wished to avoid getting involved, perhaps to avoid having to "choose" between parents.

Above everything, adolescents most wanted flexibility in their arrangements. Being able to move between households on their own schedules was important. Adolescents who had equal care-time arrangements reported the greatest ease in seeing each parent in between things like doing schoolwork, playing sport or seeing friends.

The survey findings suggest, however, that there is room for improvement in meeting adolescents' needs. About one-quarter of adolescents found interruptions and changes to their care-time schedules difficult and somewhat stressful. Of those adolescents desiring a change in the number of nights they spent with each parent, most wanted the change so that they could have a relationship with both of their parents. Others wanted more stability or consistency in their arrangements, particularly around the transition between households.

The survey provides insights into the nature and extent of the challenges faced by some adolescents. Of note is that logistical and relationship challenges were the main obstacles for adolescents in seeing their other parent. Often parents lived some distance away or the challenge of coordinating busy parent and child schedules made care-time arrangements overly complex for some.

## Who do adolescents turn to for support when their parents separate?

Adolescents often turned to parents, friends and relatives for support during their parents' separation. They were most likely to talk to the parent with whom they mainly lived, while those with equal care time were just as likely to talk to their mother or their father. For around half of the respondents, siblings were also an important source of support, as were grandparents and other relatives for others. The vast majority of adolescents found the support and advice of friends and family helpful.

One in three adolescents spoke with a counsellor, including phone or online counselling services such as Kids Helpline. Young people may seek counselling when attempts to speak to their parents fail (either through being ignored or minimised), while others may need help to clarify their concerns or to raise problems that they are having with their family (Kids Helpline, 2006).

The survey revealed that many of those adolescents who had a say in decisions about whom they would live with also spoke to a counsellor or mediator. While some adolescents described the process as awkward and embarrassing, most adolescents reported that it was useful to talk through their feelings and to clarify issues around their parents' separation.

## **What is the quality of adolescents' relationships with their parents after separation?**

For adolescents experiencing parental separation, a strong relationship with their parents is likely to have an integral role in their adjustment. Compared to peers from intact families, adolescents from separated families tend to have more difficulties in their relationships with both their mother and their father (Lanz, Iafrate, Rosnati, & Scabini, 1999). However, this study found that feeling close to at least one parent was important in helping adolescents adjust to life after parental separation. A secure relationship with parents was related to greater self-rated school achievement, self-confidence and general happiness with life. Less secure relationships with both parents were related to poorer academic and psychological wellbeing in adolescents.

Adolescents living mainly in one household often felt close to their live-in parent, while their relationship with the other parent was often less assured. Adolescents were also more likely to confide in the parent with whom they lived most of the time. For adolescents with equal care time, the parent–child relationship often stayed warm, secure and trusting after the separation. Parents of adolescents with equal care time also tended to be more satisfied with their child's relationship with their other parent than those in majority care time. In addition, parents of adolescents with equal care time tended to communicate more often with each other than parents with majority care.

## **How do adolescents experience becoming part of a step-family?**

The survey findings indicate that parental remarriage and re-partnering can be a challenging experience for some adolescents. Some adolescents lived in a household headed by a single parent, and also had a parent living elsewhere who had re-partnered, while others lived with a parent and step-parent. A few adolescents in the survey lived with a parent and step-parent and also had a parent living elsewhere who had re-partnered. Interestingly, adolescents who lived mostly/only in one household were least likely to have a co-resident step-parent, whereas adolescents with equal care time were just as likely to have either a step-mother or step-father.

Warm relationships and trust were less common between adolescents and their step-parents, on average, than with their parents. Adolescents with equal care time tended to have more of a connection with step-parents than others. Likewise, adolescents who lived mostly/only in one household were more likely to have warmer relationships with their co-resident step-parent.

These findings have relevance to the adjustment of adolescents after parental separation. While many children in step-families have been found to fare adequately or well (Amato, 2000; Coleman et al., 2000), others report that adolescents who experience parental separation and remarriage have an increased risk of developing emotional and behavioural problems (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It suggests that the quality of the step-parent–child relationship is likely to be an important factor in these outcomes.

## **What role do grandparents play in adolescents' lives after separation?**

Grandparents can play an important role in the lives of their grandchildren following parental separation. In the survey, many adolescents reported that their relationships with their grandparents became closer after separation. Adolescents living with their mother were more likely to have closer relationships and more regular contact with their maternal grandparents than paternal grandparents, and the reverse was true for adolescents living with their father.

Despite this increased closeness, adolescents in general expressed a desire to see their respective grandparents more often. The most commonly cited obstacle for adolescents was distance; that is, their grandparents lived too far away.

The survey also shows that grandparents are an important source of help, advice and support for grandchildren after parental separation. A number of adolescents in the survey spoke to their grandparents about their parents' separation and the majority agreed that this was helpful.

Taken together, these findings suggest that most separated parents work out arrangements that allow children to maintain their relationships with their grandparents, especially with those of the resident parent.

### **How does the economic status of parents after separation affect adolescent wellbeing?**

The survey highlighted the economic wellbeing of resident parents and their adolescent children after separation. The vast majority of adolescents had a parent in paid employment, including both full- and part-time employment, although one in five parents were not in the workforce. This observation is important, given the significance of parental employment in reducing child financial hardship.

In Australia, single mothers have a lower employment rate than in many OECD countries (OECD, 2009). The survey found that mothers with majority care made up the largest proportion of parents reporting financial difficulties. Mothers with majority care were more likely to be receiving government income support than others. They often had substantial re-establishment costs after separation, including expenses for things like household furniture and whitegoods. Mothers with majority care were also more likely to have experienced financial difficulties in the previous 12 months, such as going without meals, having to sell something of value, seeking financial assistance from a welfare or community agency, or seeking financial assistance from family and friends.

While being in paid employment can increase the economic wellbeing of resident parents and their children after separation (Gray & Chapman, 2009), employed single parents still run a high risk of financial hardship in many countries, including Australia (Whiteford & Adema, 2007). More than one in four parents of adolescents in the survey expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their current financial situation, while almost one in five parents reported feeling neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Further insight into support for children after separation can be gained from the reports of the adolescents in the survey. The majority of adolescents indicated that it was the parent they lived with most of the time who paid for their everyday expenses such as clothing, schooling, leisure and spending money. Accordingly, adolescents were more likely to approach the parent they lived with most when they needed extra money for something. Overall though, fathers were more likely to be seen as contributing to school costs than mothers, while mothers were reported to pay for adolescents' clothes more often than fathers.

In sum, the capacity of separated families to manage their affairs financially is likely to be stressed by changes in circumstances, inadequate incomes, accumulated debts and different approaches to managing incomes. The survey highlights that for some adolescents living mostly/only with their mother, there may be a greater chance that they will experience a diminished economic wellbeing, placing them at a higher risk for child financial hardship, with implications for policies and support that address the needs of children in separated families.

### **How do adolescents experience parental violence and conflict?**

It was clear from this survey that separation does not always reduce parental conflict. While most parents had either friendly or cooperative relationships after separation, others did not. For most of these parents, their discord concerned a general animosity towards the other parent, while for others, conflict stemmed from financial concerns, including the payment of child support. Mothers with majority care of their adolescent were more likely to report experiencing angry or hostile relationships with their ex-partner.

Of all parents, almost one in four experienced family violence (being physically hurt) before their separation. In many cases, children had witnessed some of the abuse or violence. This is important, as the degree of parental conflict, either during the relationship or following



separation, is a major risk factor associated with children's adjustment to parental separation (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Grych, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

More than one in three parents of adolescents had a distant relationship with their ex-partner. Parents with majority care tended to communicate less with each other than those with equal care time. However, despite the fact that parents tried to shield their children from any ongoing relationship difficulties, many adolescents were aware when the conflict between parents continued after their separation. It would appear that these adolescents had a better understanding of why their parents could not live together; this group expressed the greatest relief over their parents' separation and the least desire for a parental reunion.

### **How are adolescents adjusting to life after parental separation?**

While it was evident that no single post-separation arrangement is in the best interests of all children because of the diversity of families and children's situations, adolescent age and gender were important factors. While some adolescents felt relieved by their parents' separation, others did not; older adolescents (aged 15+ years) responded somewhat differently than younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years) to the separation of their parents. Younger adolescents expressed more unease over their parent's separation than older adolescents. It may be that younger adolescents (who were aged 9–11 years at the time of separation) were less aware of the problems their parents were having and felt surprised and confused when the separation occurred. Younger adolescents were also more likely to maintain a desire for their parents to one day reunite, suggesting an unconscious grieving for the loss of their parents' relationship.

Boys seemed the most troubled by their parents' separation, being less likely than girls to express relief over the separation and more likely to desire a parental reunion.

While on the whole, adolescents across all care-time arrangements were just as well adjusted, it is noted that the risk of poor social adjustment is twice as great for children whose parents are separated or divorced than from those in intact families (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kelly, 2000; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999). In the survey, boys with equal care time were more likely than others to report social concerns; being the least positive about their ability to get along with others. In addition, girls living mostly/only with their father tended to report lower levels of self-confidence than did others. A lack of confidence is often linked with self-destructive behaviour and habits, such as smoking or drug or alcohol use.

Adolescents' early responses to parental separation should be distinguished from the impact of many family changes on the adolescents' development and adjustment. For some adolescents in the survey, the separation of their parents brought multiple changes and new relationships. These included changes in housing arrangements, changes in care-time arrangements, parental re-partnering (and the possibility of step-siblings), and changes in contact with grandparents. Taken together, separation is a stressful period for children and invariably a lot of adjustment is required. The survey findings suggest that multiple changes in care-time arrangements in a relatively short period may affect adolescents' ability to cope after separation. For some, changes in arrangements were positive, while others experienced difficulties in adjusting to new routines and schedules.

Adolescent adjustment is likely to be supported through enhanced economic stability for adolescents and their parents post-separation. As previously described, mothers in majority care made up the greatest proportion of parents reporting financial difficulties and it is well established that growing up in a household with low income can negatively affect life chances and opportunities of children.

In the same way, the survey also suggests that adolescent adjustment and recovery is likely to be enhanced when parents are able to minimise conflict and communicate regularly with each other after separation. Parents can also play an important role in helping children understand what is happening and provide support by talking to their adolescent.

The findings suggest that it is important for parents to remain sensitive and responsive to their children's needs, including having flexible arrangements around adolescents' schedules (e.g., doing schoolwork, playing sport and seeing friends). For some adolescents, being involved in decisions about them is important, while others wish to avoid a situation of having to "choose" between parents.

Adolescent adjustment is likely to be enhanced when parents reach arrangements that promote a sense of safety and wellbeing. Where re-partnering occurs, supporting and developing quality step-parent-child relationships is important.

At the same time, the survey findings suggest that promoting a warm, secure and trusting relationship with at least one parent is of great importance in helping adolescents adjust to life after parental separation.



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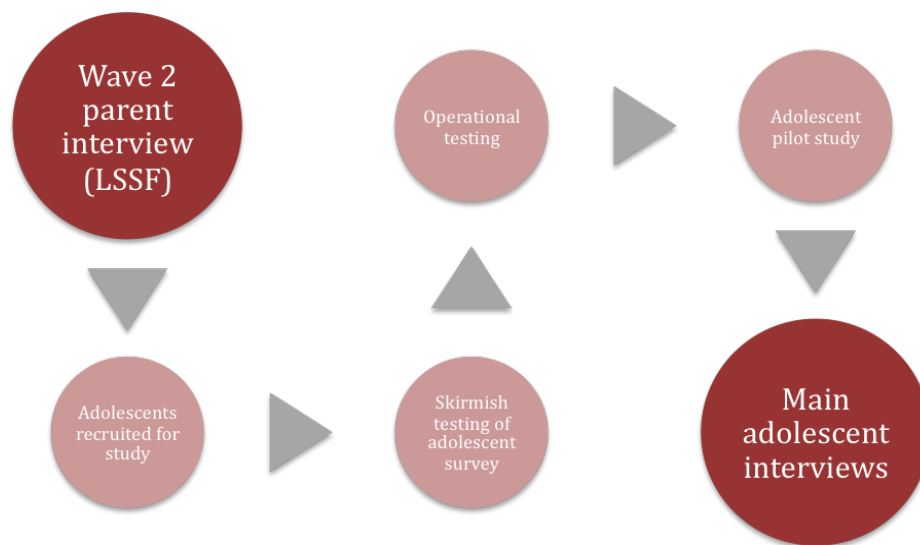
## Appendix A: Technical notes

The following provides definitions and further details relevant to both data collection and analysis procedures.

### Data collection

The questionnaire procedure was split into four key stages (Figure A.1):

1. skirmish testing;
2. operational testing;
3. pilot study testing; and
4. main Adolescent Study interviews.



**Figure A.1 Procedures for the Adolescent Study**

**Skirmish testing** is the technique whereby the questionnaire is “tested out” on others who are readily available to check for any major issues before more formal testing commences.

A small team of interviewers undertook two rounds of skirmish tests. Those participating had experience in interviewing adolescent respondents about potentially sensitive topics and therefore were able to provide valuable feedback. The following four scenarios were used to focus the skirmish interviews:

- Child (12 years old) lives with mother all of the time, never sees father. Sad that parents have separated, arrangements changed when mother moved states.
- Child (16 years old) lives with father. Used to live with mother and now sees her on the weekend. Attending TAFE. OK that their parents have separated.
- Child (14 years old) spends 50% of the time with each parent—1 week on, 1 week off. Mother and father have both re-partnered. OK that parents have separated but moving between houses is difficult/time-consuming and as a result child doesn’t have time for themselves/friends.
- Child (15 years old) lives with mother during the week and father on weekends. Difficult divorce. Parents spent a lot of time in court fighting over the children and the home. Very stressed out, doing badly at school and wants parents to get back together.

A number of **operational testing** procedures were implemented to ensure the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) script truly reflected the questionnaire. CATI is a telephone surveying technique in which the interviewer follows a script provided by a software

application. It is a structured system of microdata collection by telephone that speeds up the collection and editing of microdata. The software is able to customise the flow of the questionnaire based on the answers provided, as well as information already known about the participant. CATI software has built-in logic, which also enhances data accuracy.

Operational testing procedures of the CATI system included:

- reading the questionnaire directly into the CATI program, thus eliminating the possibility of typographical errors occurring in the set-up process;
- programming the skips and sequence instructions as per the hard copy questionnaire;
- checking the questionnaire in CATI “practice mode” to enable the display of the questionnaire and all sequencing and wording to be checked;
- generating frequencies from the CATI questionnaire, thereby enabling the “bases” for all questions to be thoroughly checked;
- subjecting the CATI program to a rigorous checking procedure undertaken by the Project Manager, researcher and interviewing and supervisory staff; and
- including interviewer notes, prompts, explanatory wording, etc. as part of the onscreen script, to enhance consistency of delivery.

**Pilot test** is the process by which the survey is tested with “live” respondents, using the same mode as for the actual survey. In a pilot test we would expect that all elements of the survey are tested in essentially the form that they would have for the live run. Pilot tests are complementary to other forms of testing because they provide information not otherwise captured on: likely response rates, estimated average interview time, or issues with flow of the questionnaire.

A small pilot test was conducted with 27 adolescents who had the same characteristics as those recruited for the main study.<sup>26</sup> Key statistics from the pilot test are detailed in Table A.1.

**Table A.1 Key pilot test statistics**

Component	
Completed interviews	27 respondents
Response rate	71%
Average interview length	17.1 minutes

The **main study interviews** (included in this report) collected survey data using CATI. Telephone interviews were conducted with 623 adolescents from across Australia between October and December 2009. A specialised team of nine interviewers worked on the project; however, three interviewers completed 49% of the interviews, ensuring a high level of consistency. Table A.2 summarises the distribution of interviews achieved.

**Table A.2 Number of sample records and achieved interviews, by respondent type**

Type	Sample records	Achieved interviews
Original focus child/adolescent	612	471
Adolescent sibling of focus child	195	152
<b>Total</b>	<b>807</b>	<b>623</b>

## Analysis

**Analysis of variance** (ANOVA) is a multivariate statistical technique for helping to infer whether there are real differences between the means of three or more groups in a population (e.g., care-time arrangements), based on sample data.

<sup>26</sup> Adolescents for the pilot test were recruited from the same pool as those for the main study.

**Multivariate analysis of variance** (MANOVA) is an extension of ANOVA. MANOVA procedures are applied to situations in which there are two or more related dependent variables (DV)<sup>27</sup> that are correlated or conceptually related (ANOVA analyses only a single DV at a time).

The MANOVA procedure identifies (inferentially) whether:

- different levels of the independent variable (IV) have a significant effect on a linear combination of each of the DVs;
- there are interactions between the IVs and a linear combination of the DVs; and
- there are significant univariate effects for each of the DVs separately.

**Crosstabs** is a procedure that cross-tabulates two variables to display their relationship in tabular form. Crosstabs are often used to record and analyse the relationship between two or more categorical variables (i.e., variables assessed on a nominal scale).

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<sup>27</sup> A **dependent variable** is used in statistics as the outcome variable that one attempts to predict or explain using one or more **independent variables**. For example, adjustment to parental separation could be a dependent variable, and parental involvement, age and gender might be used as independent variables to predict adolescent adjustment to separation.

## **Appendix B: Adolescent study brochure**



## The Family Pathways surveys

Family Pathways is a group of surveys looking at the experiences of separated families. The Adolescent Study is one of these surveys.

Your family has been selected to be part of the Family Pathways study. This will involve young people and parents from all over Australia.

These surveys will provide a picture of what life is like for separated families of all different kinds.

### Kids Help Line

If you need to speak to someone in person you can call **Kids Help Line** on **1800 55 1800** or visit **www.kidshelp.com.au** to talk to a counsellor online.

Helpful information is also available at **REACHOUT.COM**

## More information

For more information about the study visit the website:

**[www.aifs.gov.au/familypathways](http://www.aifs.gov.au/familypathways)**

The Social Research Centre will be interviewing participants for the Institute. To update your contact details or make a time for an interviewer to call you, call us on 1800 443 135.

## Who is conducting the survey?

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is undertaking the Family Pathways study. The Institute undertakes high-quality research that informs the Australian Government and the community.

The study is funded by the Attorney-General's Department and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs as part of an evaluation of the family law reforms.



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

Freecall 1800 443 135

Web [www.aifs.gov.au/familypathways](http://www.aifs.gov.au/familypathways)



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**



## How will my privacy be protected?

All interviewers, researchers and others involved in the study must comply with the *Privacy Act 1988*. Very strict procedures are followed to ensure that your information remains confidential, as far as allowed by law.

If you agree to participate in the survey, your answers will remain strictly confidential. Your parents won't be able to find out what you've said, unless you want to talk to them about it.

Information collected during the survey will be used for research purposes only and will never be used in any way that identifies you or your family.

Your contact details will be removed before your survey information is passed to the researchers at the Institute.

## The Adolescent Study

The Adolescent Study focuses on the experiences and opinions of young people whose parents have separated.

This study will help us to identify the best ways in which support for young people and their families can be provided.

Your views are important. Some people may find it difficult to talk about family separation, but we need your help in understanding how family separation impacts upon young people.

## What do I have to do?

An interviewer from the Social Research Centre may phone you soon to invite you to talk about your experiences. All you have to do is answer the list of questions the interviewer asks you.

Taking part is voluntary and you can skip any questions that you don't want to answer.

**Being part of this study gives you the chance to express your opinions and have a say.**

