3 Family dynamics

A key focus of the 2006 reforms and post-separation relationship services has been to encourage and support former couples in their efforts to detach interpersonal tensions from discussions regarding future parenting arrangements. This focus is consistent with strong evidence suggesting that an important factor linked to child wellbeing after separation is the level and persistence of parental conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Emery, 2012). How to create and maintain child-focused dialogues against a background of high levels of emotion, disappointment and anger has been recognised as an important challenge for family dispute resolution practitioners and service providers (see McIntosh, Long, & Wells, 2009; Moloney & McIntosh, 2006). Approaches that involve greater collaboration between lawyers and less adversarial processes within courts have also been developed as steps in the direction of discouraging the conflation of interpersonal difficulties and the resolution of parenting disputes.

Wave 1 of the LSSF provided the first reliable empirical evidence of post-separation parental relationships in Australia. Clinicians and many family law professionals who work with the more problematic end of the parental separation spectrum were probably surprised to find that roughly 15 months after separation, about three in five parents rated their relationship as either friendly or cooperative. A further one in five mothers and fathers, however, described their relationship as “distant”, while a little over one in eight reported “lots of conflict”. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, 7% of mothers and 3% of fathers described their relationship at this point in time as being “fearful”.

These Wave 1 findings helped to clarify the task that faces the family law system. On the one hand, the evidence suggested that most separated parents were relating to each other fairly well. Data on service use and main pathways towards sorting out arrangements for their children suggest that, at most, these parents needed only modest assistance from facilitative, therapeutic or advisory services (including of a legal nature).

On the other hand, there was evidence that a substantial minority of parents were experiencing inter-parental relationships in the negative categories (lots of conflict or fearful). Many of these parents reported a history of dysfunctional behaviours associated with family violence/abuse, not infrequently accompanied by mental health and/or addiction issues. They were considerably less likely to have sorted out post-separation parenting and considerably more likely to be making or have made use of services, lawyers and courts.

Subsequent analyses of Wave 2 data, gathered some twelve months later, suggested that many relationship dynamics continued to reflect such earlier experiences. Although these broad patterns remained, and while the proportions in the relationship categories described above had not changed appreciably in Wave 2, the longitudinal nature of these new data was able to demonstrate the more dynamic aspects of post-separation relationships. Although some parents had moved towards more positive relationships with each other, similar numbers reported that relationships had deteriorated. For some, living through a subsequent year of separation appeared to have a healing effect, whereas for others, this was not the case.

The Wave 3 data permit further analysis of the evolution in parental relationships some five years after separation. They reveal, for example, what proportion of parents maintain, develop or lose a cooperative working relationship with each other after about five years of separation. They provide clues about the extent to which dysfunctional behaviours apparent before or during the separation period continue to pose problems for the
relationship, and the extent to which the stresses and strains associated with post-separation life events also contribute to a possible deterioration in inter-parental relationships.

This chapter focuses on the parents’ perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their child’s other parent, how often they communicate with each other about their child, their experiences of emotional abuse or physical hurt, and any safety concerns they held for themselves and/or their child as a result of ongoing contact with their child’s other parent. The analyses in each section below begin with an outline of trends for all participants in each survey wave and then focus on changes apparent for the continuing sample; that is, for the parents who participated in all three waves. The former (cross-sectional) approach provides insight into the prevalence of experiences at different points in time. The latter approach highlights the nature of evolving experiences and associated trajectories across the three waves.

3.1 Quality of inter-parental relationships

In each survey wave, respondents were asked to indicate whether their relationship with their child’s other parent was mainly friendly, cooperative, distant, entailing “lots of conflict” or fearful. Figure 3.1 shows the patterns of answers provided by all fathers and mothers who participated in any of the survey waves.2

![Figure 3.1: Perceived quality of inter-parental relationship by gender and wave](image)

Notes: Data have been weighted. Sample sizes of fathers and mothers across the three waves vary (fathers: n = 3,203–4,860; mothers, n = 3,355–4,927). Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (1–3% across all 3 waves). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

The following trends were apparent in each survey wave (taken separately):

- Most respondents described their relationship as either friendly or cooperative (fathers:

1 Parents’ views about whether mental health or addictions were issues in the relationship were only asked for the pre-separation period.

2 Trends for the continuing sample can be found in Appendix A.
60–64%; mothers 56–62%). In Wave 1, a slightly higher proportion considered their relationship to be friendly rather than cooperative, but little or no difference was apparent in subsequent waves.

- A distant relationship was the third most common description, followed by one entailing a great deal of conflict.³
- Few parents described the relationship as fearful (fathers: 3% in all waves; mothers: 5–7%).

Overall, then, a similar pattern of results emerged in each survey wave.⁴ There was no evidence that parents who had been separated for an average of five years were any more likely to see their relationship as being friendly or cooperative than when they had been separated for some 15 months.

Indeed, friendly relationships were marginally more likely to be reported by respondents in Wave 1 than Wave 3 (fathers: 36% vs 29%; mothers: 34% vs 28%), while the proportions describing their relationship as cooperative were very similar (28–31%).

An even smaller difference between Waves 1 and 3 was apparent in the proportions reporting either highly conflictual or fearful relationships—here classified as negative relationships (fathers: 17% in Wave 1 vs 14% in Wave 3; mothers: 20% vs 17%).

The proportion of parents reporting distant relationships was higher in Wave 3 than Wave 1 (27% in Wave 3, compared with 19% in Wave 1, for both fathers and mothers).

The above findings are based on all respondents represented in the survey waves, including the top-up sample in Wave 3. A better idea of the effect of duration of separation on quality of the inter-parental relationship can be obtained through the assessment of patterns of answers provided by the continuing sample. Table 3.1 categorises parents into three groups according to whether they viewed the relationship in Wave 1 as positive (i.e., friendly or cooperative), distant, or negative (i.e., marked by conflict or fear), and shows their appraisals of the relationship in Waves 2 and 3.

³ In Wave 3, virtually the same proportions of mothers described the relationship as distant or highly conflictual (27–28%).

⁴ The general pattern of results is also consistent with those in the Survey of Recently Separated Parents (SRSP) 2012, undertaken some 12–18 months after separation. In this survey, 30–32% of fathers and mothers described their inter-parental relationship as friendly, another 30–32% said it was cooperative, 19–23% considered it to be distant, 12–13% said it entailed “lots of conflict”, and 3% of fathers and 6% of mothers described it as fearful (De Maio, Kaspiew, Qu, Smart, Dunstan & Moore, 2013). The SRSP was funded by AGD and had many features in common with the first wave of LSSF. The same sampling frame was used (i.e., the sample was drawn from the Child Support Program database), the sample was stratified in the same ways, and parents had generally been separated for a similar length of time. However, the parents in SRSP 2012 had never lived together or were not together when the child was born were not included in the SRSP 2012, unlike in the LSSF sample.
Table 3.1 reveals that across most comparisons, the descriptions provided in Wave 1 tended to be repeated in Waves 2 and 3 (taken separately). However, this repetition was far more likely where parents described their relationship as being positive in Wave 1, than where they considered it to be distant or negative. Most parents who described their relationship in a positive light also expressed this view in Wave 2 (79%) and Wave 3 (74%), and very few of these parents described the relationship as negative in Waves 2 or 3.

Nearly one half who believed in Wave 1 that their relationship was distant also held this view in the two subsequent waves; however, they were more inclined to view the relationship more positively over time rather than more negative, especially in Wave 3 (Wave 2: 33% positive vs 21% negative; Wave 3: 39% vs 16%).

Where parents described their relationship in Wave 1 as negative, around one half (51%) expressed the same view in Wave 2, 31% saw the relationship as distant, and only 18% as cooperative or friendly. In Wave 3, only 30% assessed their relationship in this negative light, while 37% now saw it as distant and 32% considered it to be friendly or cooperative.

In general, then, about three-quarters of the parents who described their relationship in a positive light in Wave 1 tended to also view it positively some four years later (in Wave 3); of those who described their relationship in a negative light in Wave 1, a little under a third viewed it in a positive light some four years later, while a little over a third saw it as distant. A little under half of those who saw the relationship as distant in Wave 1 held the same view in Wave 3, while a majority of the remainder had moved into the positive category.

Table 3.2 highlights the level of consistency and nature of the changes that occurred across all three waves. However, it needs to be stressed that some people who repeated the same views in adjacent survey waves may have revised and then re-instated these original views during the interval between the two waves.
Table 3.2: Changes in perceived quality of inter-parental relationship reported in Waves 1, 2 and 3, by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers * (%)</th>
<th>All parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive, all three waves</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant, all three waves</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative, all three waves</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative in Wave 1 ‘distant or positive in Wave 3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant in Wave 1 ‘positive in Wave 3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worsened</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Wave 1 ‘distant in Wave 3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive or distant in Wave 1 ‘negative in Wave 3</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluctuated across three waves</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>2,086</td>
<td>2,203</td>
<td>4,289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused (6%). “Negative” = lots of conflict or fearful; “positive” = friendly or cooperative. Percentages may not total accurately due to rounding. * p < .05; statistically significant relationship emerged between gender and changes in perceived quality of inter-parental relationship.

The broad patterns of responses of fathers and mothers were very similar. Around half provided the same descriptions of their inter-parental relationships in all three survey waves. About 18% of parents indicated that their relationship had improved, and another 18% reported that their relationship had worsened. The remaining 14% provided a picture of relationship quality that had changed in inconsistent ways across the survey waves.5

The most common trajectory, especially for fathers, was one of positive relationships experienced in all three survey waves, although this was by no means the majority view. Overall, two in every five parents described their relationship as being either friendly or cooperative in all survey waves.

All other trajectories were reported by fairly small minorities. For example, as noted above, 14% provided descriptions that suggested a fluctuating relationship quality; 11% saw the relationship as negative in Wave 1 but apparently improved by Wave 3; and 10% considered it to be friendly or cooperative in Wave 1 but distant by Wave 3. Only 5% described the relationship as distant in all three survey waves, and only 4% consistently saw the relationship as being negative.

Further analysis focused on the extent to which parents maintained the same general appraisals of their relationship with the other parent in all three waves, using their descriptions provided in Wave 1 (i.e., positive, distant or negative).

The majority of parents who viewed their relationship positively in Wave 1 continued to hold this view in both of the later waves (64%). Nevertheless, 24% reported that their

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5 This is, of course, an over-simplistic characterisation. The measure itself is very crude and appraisals provided by some respondents would have been be more affected by current mood, views about the most recent communication with the other parent, the children’s behaviour and so on. In addition, the study could not capture the “highs and lows” in relationship quality that may have taken place between survey waves.
relationship had worsened since then, while 12% reported that their relationship had changed inconsistently.

Parents who provided a negative picture of their relationship with the other parent in Wave 1 also tended to indicate that their relationship had improved since Wave 1 (66%), while a substantial minority (23%) held the same description consistently in both of the later waves. The remainder (11%) reported inconsistent changes in the quality of their relationship with the other parent.

Of parents who in Wave 1, described their relationship as distant, just over one-quarter (26%) consistently held this view in the later waves. A higher proportion of these parents reported that their relationship had improved compared to those whose relationships had worsened (35% vs 13%). One-quarter indicated inconsistent change in later waves.

In short, most respondents evaluated their inter-parental relationship in a positive light in the wave(s) in which they participated, and those who did not do so in Waves 2 and 3 were more inclined to see the relationship as distant rather than negative at the time. The data for the continuing sample suggest that parents most commonly evaluated their relationship positively across all survey waves, though this was by no means the majority view. Changes in relationships that were deemed to be positive in Wave 1 were more likely to be subsequently viewed as distant rather than negative. Similarly, changes in relationships that were described in negative terms in Wave 1 were more likely to be described as distant rather than positive in subsequent waves. On the other hand, changes in relationships that were perceived as distant in Wave 1 were more likely to be deemed positive rather than negative subsequently.

### 3.2 Frequency of child-focused communication between parents

In each survey wave, respondents were asked to indicate how often they communicated with the other parent about their child, with Wave 1 focusing on the period since separation (covering 15 months, on average), and Waves 2 and 3 focusing on the previous 12 months. The response options and patterns of answers provided by fathers and mothers are presented in Figure 3.2 (on page 18).

In Wave 1, fathers and mothers most commonly reported that communication occurred daily or a few times a week, with the second most common response being that communication occurred at least once a week. In total, around two-thirds indicated either of these two circumstances; that is, that they communicated with the other parent about their child once a week or more frequently (68% of fathers and 64% of mothers). Only 7–11% of fathers and mothers provided each of the other responses, ranging from at least once a fortnight to never.

Compared with the Wave 1 trends, respondents in Wave 2 were considerably less likely to indicate that they were in touch on a daily basis or a few times a week with their children. Nevertheless, more than half of the fathers (58%) and nearly half of the mothers (49%) indicated that they communicated at least once a week or more frequently.

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6 For 95% of the sample, Wave 1 interviews took place between 6 months and 2 years after separation.
In Wave 2, 23–26% of fathers and mothers said that they communicated at least once a fortnight or at least once a month (up from 18–19% in Wave 1), and 20–26% indicated that they communicated even less frequently or never (up from 14–17%).

The trends emerging in Wave 2 continued in Wave 3, with frequency of communication appearing to be considerably lower than that reported by respondents in Wave 1. For instance, in Wave 3:

- 48% of fathers and 39% of mothers said that they communicated once a week or more frequently (down from close to two-thirds in Wave 1)
- 27% of both fathers and mothers either said that they were in contact at least once a fortnight or at least once a month (up from 18–19%); and
- 26% of fathers and 34% of mothers either said that communication occurred less frequently than once a month, or that it never took place (up from 14–17%).

Consistent with the results based on the reports of all respondents, Figure 3.3 (on page 19) shows that parents in the continuing sample most commonly indicated that communication diminished in frequency as duration of separation increased.
According to their responses in each survey wave, 44–48% of fathers and mothers communicated less frequently in Wave 2 than Wave 1; much the same proportions indicated this to be the case between Waves 2 and 3; and by Wave 3, nearly 60% were apparently communicating less frequently than in Wave 1.

The second most common scenario was that communication levels remained the same. This was indicated by around one-third of parents between Waves 1 and 2, and Waves 2 and 3, and around one-quarter of parents between Waves 1 and 3.

Increased frequency of communication appeared to be the least common of the three courses, with 20–24% of fathers and 16–24% of mothers indicating this in the three sets of comparisons. Nevertheless, the proportions apparently experiencing increased communication were by no means negligible.

Given the newness of the situation and the fact that the children tended to be quite young in the early period of separation (in Wave 1, one-quarter of the children were under 2 years old), it is understandable the communication levels would be relatively frequent in earlier rather than later periods, when the children had grown older. But to what extent are changes in frequency of communication related to the age of the child?

Figure 3.4 sheds light on this issue. The fathers and mothers are each classified into five groups according to the age of their child in Wave 3, from under 6 years old to at least 18 years old. Children who were under 6 years old in Wave 3 would have been under 2 years old at the time of the first survey, and those who were at least 18 years old in Wave 3 would have been 15–17 years in Wave 1. Based on their reports in Waves 1 and 3, the results show the proportions of respondents whose frequency of child-related communication appeared to be higher, lower, or the same in Wave 3 compared with Wave 1.
Overall, the course that the frequency of such inter-parental communication took varied according to the age of their child. Although the most common change in communication across all age groups was to be less frequent, the extent to which this occurred tended to rise with increases in the age of child. For example, diminished communication in Wave 3 was reported by:

- 50–53% of fathers and mothers whose child was under 6 years old;
- 60–61% of fathers and mothers whose child was 12–14 years; and
- 63% of fathers and 74% of mothers whose child was at least 18 years old.

The alternative two courses (increased frequency of inter-parental communication or no change) tended to become less common in Wave 3 with the increasing age of the child, although this trend was weaker according to the reports of fathers than of mothers.

For virtually all age groups taken separately, an increase in inter-parental communication frequency was the least likely of all three alternative courses. This was especially so for parents whose child was at least 18 years old: only 10–12% of parents in this group indicated that communication had increased.

In short, frequency of contact mostly diminished, regardless of the age of the child, with this trend strengthening for children who were already older rather than younger.

### 3.3 Experience of emotional abuse or physical hurt

In each survey wave, parents were asked questions concerning whether they had been abused in various specific ways or physically hurt by their child’s other parent. The time frame referred to in the questions varied. In relation to specific forms of abuse, parents were asked in Wave 1 whether they had experienced various behaviours before or during
their separation, while the question on physical hurt focused on the pre-separation period only. In subsequent waves, they were asked about their experiences of specific forms of abuse and physical hurt in the 12 months prior to the interview. In Wave 3, this was, on average, during the fourth year of separation. Other questions asked on these issues are outlined in the discussion of results.7

It should be pointed out that while useful and informative, the presentation of data in this format has significant limitations. For example, none of the specific forms of abuse tapped gauged whether they involved physical contact. Regardless of whether it causes hurt, any direct physical assault on the body, even if initially perceived by the victim as accidental or marginally intentional, can also signify that such behaviour may well re-occur. Repeated episodes would be likely to reinforce this expectation. There may also be evidence or concerns that the behaviour is becoming increasingly severe, and perhaps diversifying in form, leading victims to spend much of their time in a state of hyper-vigilance (sometimes described as “walking on eggshells”). The fear or actual threat of continued physical abuse therefore can harm the victim’s psychological state and may be treated as also constituting emotional abuse. The fact that maintenance of strong control over the victim may require no further infliction of direct physical assault means that in such circumstances, the phenomenon is likely to be under-reported. For these reasons, we have referred to the specific forms of abuse tapped as “emotional abuse”, even though some may well have also involved physical abuse.8

Experience of emotional abuse

The following seven forms of emotional abuse were asked about in each survey wave: belittling insults; threats to harm the child (or children), other family/friends, you or themselves, or threats or actual harm to pets; and actual property damage/destruction (see Table 3.3 on page 21). These were the only forms of emotional abuse that were asked about in Wave 2, but in the first and third survey waves, ten forms were examined, though the three additional issues asked about in Wave 1 differed from those asked in Wave 3. The Wave 1 set concerned attempts to prevent the respondent from engaging in certain activities, while in Wave 3, respondents were asked whether the other parent had monitored their whereabouts, circulated defamatory comments, or tried to force them into any unwanted sexual activity.

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7 Most of the questions were based on items in the national Personal Safety Survey, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in 2005.

8 While threats regarding issues that may harm a person’s physical, social or emotional wellbeing may be treated as emotional abuse in the sense that they have the potential to generate a sense of foreboding and distress, threats of physical harm are often treated as a form of physical abuse or physical assault (e.g., ABS, 2013).
Table 3.3: Types of emotional abuse participants were asked about in each wave of LSSF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did [study child’s other parent] ...</th>
<th>Wave 1 (before/during separation)</th>
<th>Wave 2 (in last 12 months)</th>
<th>Wave 3 (in last 12 months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>try to prevent you from contacting family or friends</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>try to prevent you from using the telephone or car</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>try to prevent knowledge of or access to family money</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insult you with the intent to shame, belittle or humiliate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threaten to harm the child/children</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threaten to harm other family/friends</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threaten to harm you</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threaten to harm themselves</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threaten to harm or actually harm pets</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>damage or destroy property</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tried to force you into any unwanted sexual activity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monitored your whereabouts (e.g., followed you, made constant phone calls etc.)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>circulated defamatory comments about you with the intent to shame, belittle or humiliate (incl. social media)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Wave 3 includes both the follow-up and top-up samples.

All the emotional abuse items listed in Table 3.3 were also included in the AIFS Survey of Recently Separated Parents 2012 (De Maio et al., 2013). Parents in the latter survey were asked whether they had experienced the various forms of emotional abuse: (a) before/during separation, and (b) since the separation, and if so, how frequently such abuse occurred. The LSSF results are also compared with those of the SRSP 2012 in the following discussions.

The concept of “attempted force”, asked in relation to unwanted sexual activity in Wave 3, may well imply direct bodily assault, though some respondents may have been referring exclusively to intense arguments or threats of harm. However, because the question on this issue was embedded within those of emotional abuse, the results are discussed in this section. Given that very few respondents reported such experiences (outlined below), its classification as emotional abuse does not alter the gist of results. As explained above, all forms of direct assaults on the body, including those that resulted in physical hurt, may also be treated as forms of emotional abuse in that they can signify that such behaviour could re-occur.

Some attempts to prevent engagement in certain activities (tapped for the pre-separation and separation period) may have also been accompanied by direct physical assault. The same applies to threats to harm the respondent (tapped in all survey waves), for such threats may take the form of physical force (e.g., pushing the respondent) under the pretence of “rough play”.

Wave 3 also examined whether each of the behaviours experienced had occurred “often”, “sometimes” “rarely (but more than once)” or “once only” in the previous 12 months. In
other words, the sample would have, on average, been reflecting on their fourth year of separation, though some would have been focusing on the fifth year.9

The proportions of fathers and mothers who reported having experienced the various emotionally abusive behaviours in each survey wave (taken separately) are depicted in Figures 3.5 and 3.6 respectively. These figures also show, for each survey wave taken separately, the proportions of fathers and mothers who said that they had experienced: (a) at least one of the forms of emotional abuse at the time, and (b) at least one of the seven forms of emotional abuse that were asked in all three waves. These results are based on all respondents who participated in any survey wave.

Notes: Data have been weighted. Sample sizes of fathers across the three waves vary ($n = 3,212-4,935$). Excludes a small number of fathers who did not know or refused to answer (less than 2% for each wave). Wave 1 focused on experiences occurring either before or during separation, while Waves 2 and 3 focused on experiences occurring in the 12 months prior to interview. Multiple responses accepted, therefore sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Although referred to as emotional abuse, some of these forms of emotional abuse may have entailed direct physical assault.

Figure 3.5: Fathers’ reports of emotional abuse, by wave

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9 As noted in Chapter 2, the Wave 3 sample had been separated for an average of five years, with 95% having been separated for 4.5 to 6.0 years.
Notes: Data have been weighted. Sample sizes of mothers across the three waves vary (n = 3,212–4,935). Excludes a small number of mothers who did not know or refused to answer (less than 2% for each wave). Wave 1 focused on experiences occurring either before or during separation, while Waves 2 and 3 focused on experiences occurring in the 12 months prior to interview. Multiple responses accepted, therefore sum of percentages may exceed 100%. Although referred to as emotional abuse, some of these forms of emotional abuse may have entailed direct physical assault.

Figure 3.6: Mothers’ reports of emotional abuse, by wave

Comparison of survey waves and gender differences

The across-wave trends for fathers and mothers were similar, with the proportions reporting the various forms of emotional abuse tending to decrease with increasing duration of separation. Nevertheless, even in Wave 3, a substantial minority reported the experience of some form of emotional abuse.

Mothers were more likely than fathers to report the experience of at least one form of emotional abuse, and where gender differences were apparent in relation to specific forms of emotional abuse experienced, mothers were more likely than fathers to indicate that they had experienced them.

The gender-related percentage point differences were for the most part greatest in Wave 1 and smallest in Wave 3, given that the likelihood of experiencing the forms of emotional abuse examined diminished substantially across survey waves.

These various trends were also apparent when the analysis focused exclusively on the parents who participated in all three waves (see Appendix A).

Experience of any form of emotional abuse

In Wave 1, nearly two-thirds of mothers (64%) and more than half of the fathers (52%) said that they had experienced some form of emotional abuse. By Wave 2, on average 28 months after separation, this applied to 53% of mothers and 45% of fathers, while in
Wave 3, some five years after separation, 43% of mothers and 38% of fathers mentioned experiencing at least one form of emotional abuse.

These trends fail to take into account the fact that the number of emotionally abusive behaviours examined varied across the survey waves. However, much the same results emerged when the analysis was restricted to the experience of any of the seven forms of emotional abuse that was asked in each survey wave.

The most common forms of emotional abuse reported across survey waves

Humiliating insults represented the most commonly reported experience of all those assessed. This type of emotional abuse was asked about in all three waves, and the proportions of parents reporting it were similar in the first two waves, but had fallen by Wave 3 (fathers: 41–44% in Waves 1 and 2, and 31% in Wave 3; mothers: 50–51% in the first two waves, and 36% in the third).

Threats of self-harm and of harming the respondent and property damage were among the other most commonly mentioned forms of emotional abuse mentioned. These were also assessed in all three waves. The proportions mentioning these types of emotional abuse diminished successively and substantially across the waves. They were reported by 15–18% of fathers in Wave 1 and 3–4% in Wave 3, and by 25–31% of mothers in Wave 1 and 5% in Wave 3.

The three activities asked in Wave 1 only were also among the most commonly mentioned forms of emotional abuse experienced by parents either before or during separation:

- 18% of fathers and 20% of mothers reported that the other parent had tried to prevent them from contacting family or friends; and
- a higher proportion of mothers than fathers mentioned the other two behaviours (attempts to prevent use of telephone or car: 19% vs 10%; attempts to prevent access to family money: 23% vs 15%).

Circulating defamatory comments, and monitoring the respondent’s whereabouts (asked in Wave 3 only) also appeared to be relatively common forms of emotional abuse experienced—an issue discussed below.

Experiences in the 12 months prior to Wave 3

Although the proportion of respondents reporting humiliating insults had fallen by Wave 3, this form of emotional abuse remained the most common, applying to around one in three fathers and mothers.

The next two most commonly mentioned forms of emotional abuse were circulating defamatory comments, and monitoring the respondent’s whereabouts, with much the same proportions of fathers and mothers reporting them: 22% of fathers and 21% of mothers said that the other parent had circulated defamatory comments in the previous 12 months, while 12% of fathers and 14% of mothers indicated that the other parent had monitored their whereabouts.

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10 Figure 3.5 and Figure 3.6 show that, when the focus for Waves 1 and 3 switched from the full set of items examined in these waves to the seven repeated items, the proportions reporting the experience of any emotional abuse changed as follows—fathers: from 52% (all items) to 48% (repeated items) in Wave 1 and from 38% to 33% in Wave 3; mothers: from 64% to 62% in Wave 1 and from 43% to 39% in Wave 3.

11 It needs to be kept in mind that a longer timeframe was used in Wave 1 (experiences before and during separation) than in the subsequent survey waves (experiences in the 12 months prior to interview).
While the latter two issues were only asked in Wave 3, data from the SRSP 2012 suggest that these forms of emotional abuse would have been considerably more prevalent in the first year or so after separation:

- 39% of fathers and 36% of mothers in the SRSP 2012 said that their child’s other parent had circulated defamatory comments since their separation (covering a period of around 12–18 months); while
- 26% of fathers and 33% of mothers indicated that the other parent had monitored their whereabouts (De Maio et al., 2013).

Property damage and threats of self-harm or harming the respondent or family/friends were reported by only 3–6% of fathers and 5–9% of mothers. Attempts to force unwanted sexual activities were reported by close to 1% of fathers and 2% of mothers.12

The SRSP 2012 study suggested that around 3% of fathers and 4% of mothers would have had such experiences some 18–24 months after separation (De Maio et al., 2013).

**Forms of obsessive harassment?**

While all forms of emotional abuse may be considered to entail harassment, the fact that some were occurring so long after separation may suggest an obsessive preoccupation with the other parent resulting in repeated harassment—unless the emotional abuse had been triggered by recent events (e.g., disagreements about changing care-time arrangements or child support liability). The very nature of monitoring another’s whereabouts and circulating defamatory comments suggests obsessive harassment, though in some cases, the behaviour could have been triggered by some recent events (e.g., re-partnering of the other parent).

**Incidence versus frequency**

In Wave 3, parents who reported the experience of each specific form of emotional abuse in the previous 12 months were asked whether the behaviour had occurred “often”, “sometimes” “rarely (but more than once)” or “once only” during the same period. The patterns of responses are shown in Figure 3.7 (on page 25).

Most parents who said that they had been monitored or had been the victim of defamatory comments indicated that it occurred sometimes or often (monitored: 71–76%; defamed: 67–69%). Of all parents in Wave 3 (not just those who reported such forms of emotional abuse), 8% of fathers and 9% of mothers had been monitored sometimes or often and 13% of fathers and 12% of mothers had sometimes or often been the victim of defamatory comments.

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12 Of the small number who said that the other parent had tried to force them to engage in unwanted sexual activity (24 fathers and 46 mothers), a majority (18 fathers and 38 mothers) also said that the other parent had not hurt them physically during the 12 months prior to Wave 3.
Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (fathers: 0–6%; mothers: 0–5%). Data for some items not presented due to small sample size (fewer than 25). Although referred to as emotional abuse, some of these forms of abuse may have entailed direct physical assault.

Figure 3.7: Frequency of each form of emotional abuse, by gender, Wave 3

More than half those who experienced humiliating insults also said that such behaviour occurred sometimes or often (54–57%, or 16% of all fathers and 20% of all mothers). Unlike monitoring behaviour and the circulation of defamatory comments, humiliating insults require interaction (face-to-face or other forms) between the parents and may arise over parenting or other disputes.

While only 2–3% of respondents reported that the other parent had threatened to harm the children, it is noteworthy that, among those who experienced such threats, 58% of fathers and 45% of mothers said that such threats were sometimes or often made (i.e., 1% of all fathers and mothers).

Of the small proportions of fathers and mothers (4% and 7% respectively) who said that they had been recipients of threats to harm family or friends, nearly half of the fathers (46%, i.e., less than 2% of all fathers) and nearly one-third of the mothers (31%, i.e., 2% of all mothers) said that this occurred sometimes or often.

Even fewer parents (1–2%) indicated that the other parent had attempted to force them into any unwanted sexual activity, but a substantial minority of mothers who were victims of these attempts (43%, i.e., 0.3% of all mothers), indicated that such attempts occurred sometimes or often.13

For those who experienced them, each of the other forms of emotional abuse were reported to occur sometimes or often by one in four to almost two in five parents. Specifically, this level of frequency was reported by:

- 38% of fathers and mothers in relation to being personally threatened with harm (i.e., 2–3% of total sample);

---

13 There were too few fathers reporting experiences of attempts to force unwanted sexual activity to derive reliable estimates concerning their apparent frequency.
• 36% of relevant mothers regarding threats to harm the pets (or 0.6% of all mothers);\(^{14}\)

• 29–30% of fathers and mothers about the other parent threatening self-harm (i.e., 1% of total sample); and

• 25% of fathers and 32% of mothers in relation to damaging or destroying property (i.e., 1% of total sample).

In short, the three most common forms of emotional abuse experienced in Wave 3 (humiliating insults, circulating defamatory comments and monitoring one’s whereabouts) were among the most likely to have occurred repeatedly—with monitoring and defamatory comments being the most likely to be seen as often occurring. This may reflect an element of obsessiveness on the part of the other parent. Furthermore, even among the forms of emotional abuse that were experienced by very small proportions of parents, some had occurred repeatedly to a substantial minority of victims.

**Humiliating insults: Isolated experiences or accompanied by other forms of emotional abuse?**

To what extent was the experience of emotional abuse restricted to the most prevalent form: receipt of humiliating insults? Was there any evidence that the experience of emotional abuse became increasingly concentrated on humiliating insults as the duration of separation increased? By asking these questions, we are in no way suggesting that the experience of humiliating insults is a minor matter.

In order to address these questions, attention was first directed to the seven forms of emotional abuse asked in each wave. The assessment is only rough, given that the timespans referred to in Waves 2 and 3 covered a 12-month period, while that for Wave 1 covered a less specific period: before or during separation.\(^ {15}\) Figure 3.8 focuses on those who reported the experience of at least one of the seven forms of emotional abuse asked about in each survey wave and shows the proportions of these respondents who indicated that they had experienced humiliating insults and none of the other six forms of emotional abuse asked about in each wave.

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\(^{14}\) There were too few fathers reporting experiences of threats to harm the pets to derive reliable estimates concerning their apparent frequency.

\(^{15}\) Parents’ interpretations of the timeframe covering “before separation” may have varied, from the entire period during which the couple lived together to the last few weeks or months prior to separation.
Notes: Data have been weighted. Sample sizes of fathers and mothers across the three waves vary (fathers: \( n = 1,477–2,656 \); mothers, \( n = 1,817–3,277 \)). Some of the forms of behaviour classified as “emotional abuse” may have also entailed direct physical assault.

Figure 3.8: Parents reporting experiences of humiliating insults and no other emotional abuse, respondents experiencing at least one of seven types of emotional abuse, by gender and wave

In Wave 1, a minority of parents who experienced at least one of the seven types of emotional abuse assessed in each wave indicated that humiliating insults were the only form experienced, with fathers being more likely to indicate this than mothers (30% vs 20%). However, in Waves 2 and 3, 55–58% of fathers and about half the mothers reported that humiliating insults represented the only one of these seven types of emotional abuse experienced. This form of emotional abuse is perhaps the most likely of all forms to be triggered by ongoing negotiations about parenting issues. Such negotiations, for example, may centre on transfers of financial support for the children, changing care-time arrangements, looking after the children in responsible ways, and deciding on issues relating to the children’s long-term welfare (e.g., schooling). Nevertheless, it is important to note that even by Wave 3, a substantial proportion of parents who were recipients of humiliating insults also indicated that they had experienced at least one other of the seven forms of emotional abuse in the preceding 12 months (45% of fathers and 49% of mothers).

In order to examine further the extent to which parents who were recipients of humiliating insults also experienced other forms of emotional abuse, we focused on all ten forms of emotional abuse asked about in Wave 3. Of the parents in Wave 3 who indicated that they had been recipients of humiliating insults in the 12 months prior to their interview,\(^{16}\) around two-thirds of fathers and mothers (taken separately) reported that they had also experienced at least one of the additional nine forms of emotional abuse asked in Wave 3. Specifically, among parents who had been recipients of humiliating insults in the preceding 12 months:

- 30% of fathers and 26% of mothers reported experiencing one of these additional nine forms of emotional abuse;

\(^{16}\) The analysis based on 1,435 fathers and 1,578 mothers who experienced humiliating insults during the preceding 12 months.
• 36% of the fathers and 39% of the mothers said they had experienced at least two additional forms of emotional abuse; and
• 34–35% of fathers and mothers had not experienced any other type of emotional abuse.

In short, when attention was directed to all forms of emotional abuse asked in Wave 3, humiliating insults were typically accompanied by other types of emotional abuse. Experiences of humiliating insults seem therefore likely to represent an aspect of a serious set of behaviours rather than simply “bickering”.

Further analysis suggests that being the victim of circulated defamatory comments often went hand-in-hand with the receipt of humiliating insults. In total, 83% of both fathers and mothers who reported that the other parent had circulated defamatory comments about them also said that this parent had engaged in humiliating insults. Of those who said that they had experienced humiliating insults, on the other hand, 59% of fathers and 49% of mothers indicated that the other parent had also circulated defamatory comments about them.

Experience of physical hurt

In Wave 1, respondents were asked whether, before separation, they had ever been physically hurt by their child’s other parent, while in the subsequent waves, they were asked whether they had ever been physically hurt in the 12 months prior to their interviews. In all three waves, those who said they had been physically hurt were asked whether any violence or abuse had been seen or heard by the children.17

In addition, Wave 3 respondents who said they had been hurt were asked to indicate how often they had been hurt (in the previous 12 months) and the type of injuries sustained.18

Incidence of physical hurt in the three periods assessed

In Wave 1, mothers were more likely than fathers to indicate that their child’s other parent had hurt them physically before separation (26% vs 17%).19 Physical hurt was considerably less likely to be reported by parents in Wave 2 (4–5%), and Wave 3 parents (around 2%) were the least likely of all three groups to report such experiences. Unlike Wave 1 respondents, parents in Waves 2 and 3 reported only on the previous 12 months.

Reports on whether children witnessed any violence/abuse

The following proportions of respondents who experienced physical hurt during the specified period also reported that at least one of their children had seen or heard (i.e., “witnessed”) some violence/abuse: 68% in Wave 1, 80% in Wave 2 and 67% in Wave 3.20

In Wave 2, much the same proportions of fathers and mothers who had been physically hurt (79–81%) believed that their children had witnessed some form of violence/abuse. In

17 The growing awareness of the importance of this issue (see Richards, 2011), is reflected in the Family Law Legislation (Family Violence and Other Matters) Act 2011 (Cth), which amended the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) to, among other matters, address in more detail than previously what is meant by “exposure to family violence” (s 4AB(3) and (4)), and to recognise that where such exposure results in the child sustaining “serious psychological harm”, it amounts to child abuse.

18 De Maio et al. (2010) pointed out that physical hurt may result from purposeful aggression or defence against potential aggression. It may also result from “rough play”, which may in turn entail elements of purposeful aggression; that is, the line between “accidental” and “intentional” harm can be obscure.

19 These results are very similar to those in SRSP 2012, where 16% of fathers and 24% of mothers said that they had been physically hurt before or during separation. (Note that the question asked in the SRSP 2012 extended the timeframe to cover the separation period.)

20 Such trends should be taken to reflect parents’ views rather than reality, for there is evidence that parents tend to underestimate their children’s exposure to domestic violence (see Richards, 2011).
the other survey waves, mothers were more likely to believe this than fathers (Wave 1: 72% vs 63%; Wave 3: 80% vs 48%).  

**Frequency of episodes of physical hurt in the 12 months prior to Wave 3**

Of the Wave 3 parents who said that they had been physically hurt in the preceding 12 months, around one-quarter (26%) said that this had occurred sometimes or often, and the remaining 74% said that it had occurred rarely or only once during this period (i.e., 0.4% of total sample).

**Injuries sustained in the 12 months prior to Wave 3**

Parents in Wave 3 who had been physically hurt were asked whether they had sustained various types of specified injuries. These are listed in Table 3.4 (on page 29), along with the proportions of fathers and mothers who had been injured in these various ways. The parents were also given the opportunity to describe other injuries that had not been mentioned by the interviewer (listed as “Other” in Table 3.4). These questions were also asked in the SRSP 2012 and, as De Maio et al. (2013) pointed out, they could represent aggressive or defensive behaviour.

Bruises or scratches represented the most common forms of injuries sustained during this period (reported by more mothers than fathers who said that the other parent had physically hurt them: 69% vs 56%). Cuts (other than stab wounds)—the second most common injury—was mentioned by similar proportions of relevant fathers than mothers (21% and 18% respectively). Taken separately, each of the other types of injuries specifically listed was reported by considerably fewer parents. A variety of injuries not asked about were reported (in total by 12% of fathers and 25% of mothers who said that they had been physically hurt). These included psychological trauma and head injuries.

Of those who reported that they had been physically hurt, 28% referred to more than one type of injury, and 31% reported that no injuries were sustained.

It should be kept in mind, however, that less than 2% of fathers and around 2% of mothers had reported the experience of physical hurt in the 12 months prior to interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of injury</th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers (%)</th>
<th>All parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruises or scratches</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuts (other than stab wounds)</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fractured or broken bones</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken teeth</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun shot/wound, stab wounds, burns</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscarriage for female respondents</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Wave 3, 45 fathers and 71 mothers answered this question. Only three fathers and one mother who experienced physical hurt in 12 months prior to interview did not answer the question.

Fathers who said they had been physically hurt were more likely than mothers reporting such hurt to indicate that this occurred sometimes or often (46% vs 19%). However, these percentages (especially that for fathers) are based on small numbers who reported physical hurt (39 fathers and 71 mothers) and results may not be reliable.
3.4 Overall rates of violence/abuse assessed

Experience of types of violence/abuse

Of parents who had been physically hurt in each wave, at least 95% also reported that their child’s other parent had engaged in emotionally abusive behaviours. For this reason, we derived the proportions of parents who reported experiencing physical hurt or emotional abuse alone.23

Table 3.5 focuses on reports of experiences of physical hurt, emotional abuse alone or neither in the three survey waves. The emotional abuse experiences refer to all forms asked in each survey wave (taken separately). The overall pattern of trends did not change when attention was restricted to physical hurt and the seven forms of emotional abuse items asked in each survey wave (see Appendix A).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wave 1</th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fathers (%)</td>
<td>Mothers *** (%)</td>
<td>All (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical hurt a</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse (any form) and no physical hurt b</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither physical hurt nor emotional abuse</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical hurt &amp;/or emotional abuse</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>59.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>4,918</td>
<td>4,959</td>
<td>9,877</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (1%). Wave 3 data are based on the combined reports of the continuing and top-up samples. The number of parents represented in each survey wave varies. a Includes a small number of parents who had been physical hurt but did not report whether they received any emotional abuse. b Some of these forms of emotional abuse may have included direct physical assault that did not cause physical hurt. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. *** p < .001; statistically significant relationship emerged between gender and experiences of violence/abuse.

It has already been shown that the experience of physical hurt appeared to diminish with time and was far greater before separation than during the post-separation periods examined. This means that the violence/abuse reported in the second and third waves was

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23 As suggested above, all forms of physical hurt would also represent emotional abuse, assuming that victims would generally appreciate that the perpetrator is capable of repeating such behaviour. Indeed, some may conclude that the perpetrator might well inflict new forms of abuse than any so far experienced and/or that the frequency and severity of abuse experienced could escalate. It should also be noted that some parents may not appreciate that certain behaviours are abusive. On balance, it was decided to classify the Wave 3 question on attempts to force unwanted sexual activities as emotional abuse, even though such behaviour may have involved bodily assault. As noted above, more than half of those who reported experiencing these attempts also indicated that the other parent had never hurt them physically. Some of the other behaviours, here classified as emotionally abusive, may have also entailed direct physical assault (e.g., attempts to prevent use of telephone or car).
overwhelmingly in the category of emotional abuse alone, though as noted above, some forms of emotional abuse tapped in this survey may have also entailed physical contact that did not result in bodily harm. The “changes” outlined below are inferred from trends based on a different number of parents in each survey wave. However, the precise extent of change is better identified through a focus on the experiences of the continuing sample; that is, parents who participated in all three survey waves (outlined subsequently).

As expected, the experience of emotional abuse alone appeared to be more common in the 12 months prior to Wave 2 than before or during the separation period. This trend appeared to be more marked for mothers than fathers. That is, the proportion of mothers reporting emotional abuse alone appeared to increase from 39% to 49%, while that for fathers appeared to increase from 36% to 42%. These gender differences are not surprising, given that the apparent fall in the proportions reporting physical hurt across these two time periods was greater for mothers (from 26% to 5%) than fathers (from 17% to 4%).

The proportion of Wave 3 respondents reporting the experience of emotional abuse alone did not differ much from that of Wave 1, even though physical hurt seemed more unusual during the fourth year after separation than before separation. While for Wave 3 respondents any experience of family violence/abuse almost always took the form of emotional abuse alone, it is noteworthy that even then, close to four in ten parents (38% of fathers and 44% of mothers) were experiencing emotionally abusive behaviour of some form. And even though only 2% of parents had been physically hurt so long after separation, these proportions nevertheless translate into large numbers of parents dealing with such behaviours.

It is worth noting that there was a strong association between reports of experiencing violence/abuse and the quality of inter-parental relationships. For example, in Wave 3, 78% of fathers and 73% of mothers who described their relationship with the other parent as positive reported neither emotional abuse nor physical hurt in the 12 months prior to the Wave 3 interview. By contrast, 81% of fathers and 82% of mother who reported negative relationships with the other parent experienced violence/abuse in the preceding 12 months.

Experience of violence/abuse over time

Table 3.6 (on page 31) throws some light on this issue. This table presents the proportions of parents in the continuing sample who reported the experience of some form of violence/abuse in the various combinations of survey waves (e.g., in Wave 1 only, in all three survey waves, etc.), and the proportion reporting no such experiences at all. The majority of these fathers (69%) and mothers (80%) indicated that they had experienced violence/abuse during at least one of the periods assessed. Conversely, 31% of fathers and 20% of mothers indicated that they had not experienced violence/abuse in any of these periods.

The summary in the lower panel of Table 3.6 indicates the following trends:

- The most common scenarios entailed violent/abusive experiences both before/during separation and during one or both post-separation periods investigated (reported by more mothers than fathers).
- The second most common scenario was a lack of any experience of violence/abuse during the periods investigated (reported by more fathers than mothers).
- The other two scenarios applied to much the same proportions of mothers and fathers (close to 15%); that violence/abuse was experienced: (a) before/during the pre-separation but not in either of the post-separation periods examined, and (b) during one or both post-separation periods but not before/during separation.
Of all the specific combinations of experiences outlined in the upper section of Table 3.6, the most commonly reported ones were the experience of some form of violence/abuse: (a) in all three periods examined; (b) before/during separation and in one of the two post-separation periods examined; and (c) in no period examined.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Violence/abuse experiences</th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers *** (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in all survey waves (Waves 1–3)</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in Wave 1 only</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in Wave 2 only</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in Wave 3 only</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in Wave 1 and Wave 2, but not Wave 3</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in Wave 1 and Wave 3, but not Wave 2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in either Wave 2 or Wave 3, but not Wave 1</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicated in both Waves 2 and 3, but not Wave 1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not indicated in any survey wave</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers *** (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both before/during separation and since separation</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before/during separation, not since separation</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not before/during separation, but since separation</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No violence/abuse reported in any wave</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>2,136</td>
<td>2,304</td>
<td>4,440</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer in at least one wave (2%). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. *** p < .001; statistically significant relationship emerged between gender and experiences of violence/abuse across survey waves.

Mothers most commonly reported experiencing violence/abuse across all periods examined (29%) and fathers most commonly indicated that they did not experience violence/abuse during any of these periods (31%). Around one in five parents reported that they had experienced violence/abuse before/during separation as well as in one of the two later waves. Where violence/abuse commenced after separation, such experiences were more likely to be reported for one rather than both post-separation periods examined.

3.5 Safety concerns

Safety concerns and limiting contact

In each survey wave, parents were asked whether they had any concerns about their own or their child’s safety as a result of ongoing contact with the other parent (see Table 3.7 on page 32). Those who expressed concerns were asked whether they had ever tried to limit
contact because of these concerns. (Given that the question didn’t specify any time period for their attempts in Waves 2 and 3, some parents may have referred to the attempts that had already been reported in Wave 1.)

Across the three waves, a large majority of parents did not express safety concerns for either themselves or their child (84–87% of fathers; 80–82% of mothers). The proportions expressing safety concerns appeared to decline slightly over time.

Table 3.7: Reports of current safety concerns and attempts to limit the child’s contact with the other parent, by gender and wave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wave 1</th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fathers (%)</td>
<td>Mothers (%)</td>
<td>All (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for both self &amp; child</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for self</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for child</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No concerns a</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>79.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had concerns: attempted to limit child’s contact with other parent</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>4,871</td>
<td>4,949</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer in at least one wave (had concerns: 1–3%; limited contact: up to 1%). a Respondents whose child never saw one parent are here deemed to have no safety concerns regarding ongoing contact. The percentages shown for Wave 1 therefore differ slightly from those in the AIFS evaluation report (Kaspiew et al., 2009). Percentages may not total exactly due to rounding. *** p < .001; statistically significant relationships emerged between both gender and expression of safety concerns, as well as gender and attempts to limit the child’s contact with the other parent across survey waves.

Very few parents in any survey wave expressed concerns about their own safety alone (1–2% of fathers and 2–3% of mothers). Safety concerns held by fathers tended to relate to their child alone; however, much the same proportions of mothers expressed safety concerns for their child alone and for both self and child. For example:

- in Wave 1, 12% of fathers said they were concerned for their child alone, and only 3% indicated concerns for both self and child, compared to 9% and 8% of mothers respectively;
- in Wave 3, the proportions reporting safety concerns for child alone as opposed to both self and child were: fathers: 9% vs 2%; mothers: 8% vs 7%.

Taken together, only a small difference emerged in the proportions of fathers and mothers expressing concerns about their child’s safety (i.e., whether alone or together with concerns about their own safety). The difference was especially small in Wave 1 (expressed by 15%...
of fathers and 17% of mothers). By Wave 3, 12% of fathers and 16% of mothers expressed concerns about their child’s safety.

The extent to which safety concerns engendered attempts to limit the child’s contact with the other parent varied according to gender and the survey wave in which they were apparent. The proportions of relevant fathers and mothers reporting such attempts were lowest in Wave 1 and highest in Wave 3. In each survey wave, safety concerns were more likely to prompt mothers than fathers to try to limit contact with the other parent.

**Safety concerns across all three waves**

Table 3.8 (on page 33) focuses exclusively on parents who participated in all three waves, and shows the proportions of parents who expressed safety concerns (in relation to self and/or child) in the various combinations of survey waves.\(^25\) This approach highlights, for example, the extent to which safety concerns held in Wave 1 were also held subsequently, and the extent to which having safety concerns had emerged by a subsequent survey wave. However, it is important to point out that any sense of mistrust may be tenuous; some safety concerns may be short-lived and some may arise then disappear between survey waves. It is therefore important to keep in mind that absence of safety concerns in adjacent survey waves does not necessarily mean that such experiences never arose during the interval between waves. Similarly, safety concerns expressed in adjacent survey waves do not necessarily mean that they had been held continuously between survey waves. Nor do they imply that the concerns in adjacent waves relate to the same issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety concerns</th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers *** (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All three waves</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two waves</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 &amp; Wave 2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 &amp; Wave 3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2 &amp; Wave 3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One wave</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 alone</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2 alone</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3 alone</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the three waves</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>2,049</td>
<td>2,209</td>
<td>4,258</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer in at least one wave (6%). Percentages may not total exactly due to rounding. *** \( p < .001 \); statistically significant relationship emerged between gender and expression of safety concerns across survey waves.

Overall, 73% of fathers and 63% of mothers did not express safety concerns in any survey wave. Parents most commonly indicated safety concerns in a single survey wave (15% of fathers and 20% of mothers), followed by two waves (8% and 12% respectively). Only 4% of fathers and 6% of mothers expressed concerns in all three waves.

\(^{25}\) The above-noted finding that fathers’ concerns tended to relate to their child alone, whereas much the same proportions of mothers expressed concerns for their child alone or for themselves together with their child was also apparent for the continuing sample (see Appendix A).
Sixteen per cent of fathers and 22% of mothers expressed concerns either in Wave 1 alone or in Wave 1 and at least one other survey wave. For 11% of fathers and 15% of mothers, safety concerns emerged after Wave 1. In most of the latter cases, the concerns were expressed in only one of the two survey waves (i.e., in either Wave 2 or Wave 3). Safety concerns emerging after Wave 1 may occur where, for example, respondents believe that the environment to which their child is exposed when in the care of the other parent is no longer safe, or where issues have come to light that have led them to believe that, contrary to their earlier assumptions, the child’s safety had always been at risk. In addition, safety concerns expressed in any survey wave may reflect “fear of the unknown”.

In each survey wave, parents who expressed safety concerns were asked whether their concerns related to contact with their child’s other parent, the other parent’s new partner, another adult, and/or another child (Figure 3.9 on page 34). In most cases, parents’ concerns focused on only one of these alternatives.

Across the three waves, most parents who expressed safety concerns indicated that some or all of their concerns related to their child’s other parent, although mothers were considerably more likely than fathers to indicate this (mothers: 92–93%; fathers: 68–72%). Fathers, on the other hand, were more likely than mothers to express concerns about the other parent’s new partner (18–24% of fathers; 8–16% of mothers), and/or another adult (25–33% of fathers; 11–17% of mothers). No information was derived about who this other adult may be (e.g., gender, age, whether related in any way to the child). Fewer than 10% of parents indicated that some or all of their concerns related to another child.

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26 Of course, some parents who did not express safety concerns in Wave 1 may have held them previously.
In addition, the proportion of parents who nominated the other parent’s partner as responsible for the safety concerns was greater among participants in Wave 3 than among those in Wave 1. This is not surprising, given that more parents would have re-partnered by this stage. Indeed, the proportion of fathers who were living with a partner increased from 10% in Wave 1 to 33% in Wave 3, while the relevant proportions for mothers were from 6% to 27%. The proportions of fathers who said that their child’s mother was living with a partner in Waves 1 and 3 were 17% and 39% respectively, while the proportions of mothers who said this of the child’s father were 19% and 40% respectively.

Sources of safety concerns

Further probing designed to identify the nature of respondents’ safety concerns was included in Waves 2 and 3, but not in Wave 1. In Wave 2, parents were asked whether their concerns related to any of the following: alcohol or substance abuse; mental health issues; gambling problems; violent or dangerous behaviour; emotional abuse or anger issues (e.g., getting angry easily); or something else (the nature of which was then ascertained). The latter issues most commonly related to: neglect or lack of supervision/responsibility; road safety or other physical safety issues; and sexual issues. The latter three issues, volunteered in Wave 2, were specifically asked about in Wave 3. In addition, respondents in Wave 3 were asked whether their concerns related to unknown adults. The patterns of answers are summarised in Table 3.9 (on page 35).

The first five items listed in Table 3.9 were specifically asked about in each survey wave. The results in relation to these items are therefore comparable across survey waves.
Patterns of answers were roughly similar in the two surveys, but varied somewhat according the gender of respondent.

Most mothers and fathers expressing safety concerns referred to emotional abuse or anger as sources of these concerns (mentioned by 71–78% of fathers and by 80–83% of mothers). Mental health issues formed the second most commonly endorsed issue for fathers (61–70%), and the third for mothers (56–62%). Violent or dangerous behaviour, on the other hand, represented the third most commonly mentioned issue for fathers (50–58%), and the second for mothers (60–66%). The fourth most commonly mentioned concern was alcohol or substance abuse (44–48% of fathers and 55–56% of mothers), while the fifth—gambling problems—was mentioned by considerably fewer parents (7–9% of fathers and 13–14% of mothers).

### Table 3.9: Behaviours/mental health state generating concerns among parents who held safety concerns, by gender, Waves 2 and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour/mental state</th>
<th>Wave 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>Wave 3</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fathers (%)</td>
<td>Mothers (%)</td>
<td>All (%)</td>
<td>Fathers (%)</td>
<td>Mothers (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse or anger issues</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>83.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health issues</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent or dangerous behaviour</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol or substance abuse</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling problems</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect or lack of supervision</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road safety or other physical issues</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual issues</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about unknown adults</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues *</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>1,167</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>773</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Responding parents across waves are not the same. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer in each wave (taken separately). The lightly shaded data refer to issues that were volunteered by parents rather than asked about directly (i.e., concerns about unknown adults was not raised by parents in Wave 2). In Wave 3, parents were asked specifically about these various issues (except about unknown adults). * “Other issues” in Wave 2 omits those who volunteered the issues represented by the light shading and did not volunteer any other issues. Multiple responses allowed, therefore percentages may exceed 100%.

While relatively large differences between survey waves in the proportions reporting concerns were apparent, the proportions tended to be higher in Wave 3 than Wave 2. It is not possible on the basis of only two survey waves to identify whether such differences reflect increases or fluctuations in any tendency for these matters to become sources of safety concerns as the duration of the separation increases.

The relevant results of the SRSP 2012 (De Maio et al., 2013), based on parents who had been separated for 12–18 months, throw further light on such matters. These results closely approximate those derived in Wave 2 (where 95% of parents had been separated for 18–36 months). Such trends are consistent with the notion that, as the duration of separation increases to an average of five years (represented by those in Wave 3), safety
concerns may well increasingly derive from such factors as violence/abuse or dangerous behaviour and emotional abuse or anger issues.27

Table 3.9 also lists other issues that were asked in Wave 3 but not in Wave 2, though some parents in Wave 2 volunteered such responses (data not shown).28 In Wave 3, most fathers and mothers (nearly 60%) who held safety concerns indicated that neglect or lack of supervision was a source of their concerns. This issue, then, formed one of the most commonly mentioned concerns. Road safety or other physical safety issues were mentioned by a substantial minority (35–44%), while sexual issues were mentioned by 16–18%.

While similar proportions of fathers and mothers with safety concerns referred to neglect or supervision issues and to sexual issues, more fathers than mothers referred to mental health issues (especially in Wave 3), and more mothers than fathers mentioned all other commonly nominated concerns.

**Reporting concerns to authorities**

In Wave 3 only, parents were asked whether they had reported their concerns to any authorities or services. The authorities/services specifically asked about are listed in Table 3.10, along with the proportions indicating that they had done so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.10: Authorities/services to which parents reported their safety concerns, parents who held safety concerns, Wave 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fathers (%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not report safety concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported safety concerns to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispute resolution service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A legal service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child protection authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic violence service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of participants</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (0.6%). Among those who reported concerns, multiple responses allowed and therefore percentages may exceed 100%.

Most parents (83–85% of fathers and mothers) indicated that they had reported their concerns to at least one authority, with a dispute resolution service being the most commonly mentioned, followed by a legal service, the police and a child protection authority.

While fathers were more likely than mothers to have reported their concerns to a child protection authority, mothers were more likely than fathers to have reported their

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27 De Maio et al. (2013) showed that the proportions of parents in the SRSP 2012 with safety concerns who nominated the specific matters as the source of their concerns were as follows: emotional abuse or anger issues (71% of fathers and 81% of mothers); mental health issues (55–56%); violent or dangerous behaviours (48–52%); alcohol or substance abuse (39% of fathers and 48% of mothers); and gambling problems (4% of fathers and 10% of mothers).

28 These additional questions were not asked in the SRSP 2012. That is it is not possible to gain insight into the prevalence of such concerns among parents who had been separated for only 18–24 months.
concerns to all the other services listed. This gender difference was greatest in relation to use of a domestic violence service (17 percentage points).

**Links between safety concerns and other aspects of family dynamics**

In this section, we examine the extent to which safety concerns were related to the perceived quality of the inter-parental relationship, the experience of violence/abuse, and beliefs held in Wave 1 that mental health or addiction problems were issues in the relationship before separation. There were apparent links between these various issues in both the first and second waves (as reported by Kaspi et al., 2009, and Qu & Weston, 2010, respectively). Figure 3.10 (on page 37) shows the extent to which, in Wave 3, the perceived quality of the inter-parental relationship varied according to whether parents held safety concerns.

Around two-thirds of the fathers and mothers with no safety concerns in Wave 3 described their relationship with the other parent as either friendly or cooperative, with about a quarter considering it to be distant. Close to one in ten with no safety concerns described their relationship in negative terms (i.e., lots of conflicts or fearful). Those with safety concerns, on the other hand, were most likely to view their relationship as highly conflictual or fearful, and least likely to describe the relationship in positive terms.

Figure 3.11 (on page 37) shows the extent to which experiences of violence/abuse within the preceding 12 months varied according to whether fathers and mothers held safety concerns in Wave 3.

More than three-quarters of fathers and mothers with safety concerns in Wave 3 reported that they had experienced at least one of the forms of violence/abuse in the preceding 12 months. On the other hand, around two-thirds of fathers and mothers without safety concerns indicated that they had not experienced any of these forms of violence/abuse for the preceding 12-month period.
Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (<6%) for each panel (regarding inter-parental relationship and safety concerns). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Relationship between safety concerns and quality of inter-parental relationship is statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Figure 3.10: Quality of inter-parental relationship, by whether parent held safety concerns and gender, Wave 3

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (<6%) for each panel (regarding inter-parental relationship and experience of violence/abuse).

Figure 3.11: Experience of violence/abuse in the preceding 12 months, by whether held safety concerns and gender, Wave 3
The obverse of these findings are also worth noting: around one-third of parents without safety concerns had experienced at least one form of violence/abuse during the preceding 12 months, while one in every four or five with safety concerns had not experienced any form of violence/abuse.

Again, in both the AIFS evaluation and follow-up studies, most fathers and mothers who held safety concerns indicated in Wave 1 that mental health problems or addictions were apparent in the relationship prior to separation. To what extent did the same apply to parents in Wave 3 who had participated in the previous survey waves? Figure 3.12 (on page 38) focuses on parents in the continuing sample and classifies the fathers and mothers according to the number of survey waves in which they expressed safety concerns (from none to all three waves). The figure shows the proportions in each of these subgroups that maintained that mental health and/or addiction issues were present in the relationship prior to separation (reported in Wave 1).

![Figure 3.12](image_url)

**Figure 3.12: Perceived presence of mental health or addiction issues in the relationship before/during separation, by number waves where safety concerns indicated and gender, continuing sample**

Notes: Data have been weighted. Statistically significant relationship emerged between gender and the number of waves in which safety concerns were expressed ($p < .001$).

Figure 3.12 shows that the greater the number of waves in which safety concerns were expressed, the more likely were the fathers and mothers to state in Wave 1 that mental health and/or addiction issues existed in the relationship prior to separation.

The vast majority of parents who expressed safety concerns in all three waves had indicated the belief in Wave 1 that mental health and/or addiction issues existed in the relationship prior to separation. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that a substantial minority of parents who consistently indicated that they did not have any safety concerns believed in Wave 1 that mental health and/or addiction issues were apparent in the pre-separation relationship. In addition, some respondents who reported these pre-separation issues may have been attributing the problems to themselves rather than to the other parent.
Across all four sub-groups represented in Figure 3.12, a higher proportion of mothers than fathers indicated in Wave 1 that mental health and/or addiction issues existed in the relationship.

Further analysis examined the extent to which parents still had complex issues by Wave 3, some five years after separation. Here, complex issues are indicated by the number of problems that parents reported having—violence/abuse, safety concerns for self and/or child, and conflictual or fearful inter-parental relationships. In Wave 3, 57% of fathers and 51% of mothers did not report any of these issues (or problems), and 27% of fathers and 28% of mothers referred to one of them alone. In addition, 11% of fathers and 13% of mothers mentioned two problems, and the remaining 5% of fathers and 7% of mothers reported having all three problems. In total then, 16% of fathers and 20% of mothers mentioned experiencing at least two problems.

3.6 Summary

The importance of cooperative parenting for children’s wellbeing is well recognised in policy, research and practice. This chapter examined the perspectives of parents on matters of relevance to this issue. Most of these matters were examined in each survey wave, allowing identification of levels of stability of trends—and directions of any change—as duration of separation increased. The analyses focused on all parents represented at each survey wave (entailing different numbers of respondents in each wave and providing a cross-sectional perspective), as well as on the “continuing sample”—the parents who were represented in all three waves (providing the longitudinal perspective necessary for identifying trajectories).

Perceived quality of the inter-parental relationship

Whether they participated in one, two or all three waves, most fathers and mothers described their inter-parental relationship in positive terms; that is, as either friendly or cooperative. Less positive relationships were more likely to be perceived as distant rather than highly conflictual, and least likely to be seen as fearful.

Among the continuing sample, close to half the parents held the same views in each survey wave, with positive views being the most likely to be repeated across waves. This was by far the most common of all possible scenarios. Revised assessments among the continuing sample were equally likely to suggest that relationships had improved or deteriorated, though some assessments fluctuated across the survey waves.

Frequency of child-focused communication between parents

In each survey wave, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they spoke to their child’s other parent about matters relating to their child. Given that a substantial proportion of the children were under 5 years old in Wave 1 and that the tweaking of care-time arrangements for younger children may take considerable time, it is not surprising that most parents in Wave 1 indicated that they were in touch with each other daily or at least once a week. Frequency of communication tended to fall with each survey wave, though nearly half of the fathers and nearly two in five mothers in Wave 3 indicated that they were communicating with the other parent about their child at least once a week.

Of all three scenarios—decreases, increases or no change in frequency of communication—decreases were the most apparent for the continuing sample, followed by no change in frequency. Decreases in communication frequency apparent for the
continuing sample were also the most likely of the three scenarios regardless of the age of the child, though this trend was stronger for older than younger children.

**Experience of emotional abuse or physical hurt**

Parents were asked whether they had experienced various forms of abuse and whether their child’s other parent had hurt them physically. While all the specific forms of abuse examined were here classified as “emotional abuse”, on the grounds that all abuse may be taken as a warning that it could re-occur, some may well have entailed physical assault. The Wave 1 questions focused on experiences of emotional abuse before or during separation and physical hurt before separation, while the other two survey waves asked respondents about their experiences during the 12 months prior to their interview, with Wave 3 focusing on the fourth year (on average) of separation.

Seven forms of emotional abuse were asked about in all survey waves, with an additional three being introduced in Waves 1 and 3. In Wave 1, the three additional items covered attempts to directly control the respondent, while in Wave 3, they concerned the other parent circulating defamatory comments about the respondent, monitoring the respondent’s whereabouts, and attempting to force the respondent into engaging in unwanted sexual activity.29

**Emotional abuse**

By Wave 3, the proportions of parents reporting the experience of emotional abuse had fallen considerably, but remained substantial, nonetheless. In total, nearly two in five fathers in Wave 3, and slightly more mothers by this stage, indicated that they were recipients of some form of emotional abuse.

Where gender differences emerged regarding the experience of a specific form of emotional abuse, mothers were more likely than fathers to indicate that they had experienced it. In all three waves, humiliating insults represented, by a considerable margin, the most common form of emotional abuse experienced. In Wave 3, the circulation of defamatory comments represented the second most common form experienced, and monitoring the whereabouts of the respondent was the third.30

Even where a form of emotional abuse was experienced by a small minority of parents, substantial proportions of such victims indicated in Wave 3 that the emotional abuse had occurred sometimes or often (rather than rarely or only once) in the 12 months prior to interview. In fact, most respondents who stated that the other parent had engaged in humiliating insults, monitored their whereabouts, or circulated of defamatory comments also indicated that these behaviours occurred sometimes or often. After about five years of separation, the monitoring of a person’s whereabouts may be particularly likely to reflect obsessive harassment, unless such monitoring has been instigated by genuine concerns about personal safety or the safety of others, including the children.

**Physical hurt**

One in four mothers and one in six fathers said that the other parent had hurt them physically before separation. However, only 4–5% of parents reported having been hurt in

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29 Very few parents indicated that they had experienced attempts to force them into unwanted activities in the 12 months prior to Wave 3, and most of those who reported such experiences said that the other parent had not hurt them physically in this 12-month period.

30 The latter two forms of emotional abuse were not asked in the previous survey waves, but data from the SRSP 2012 suggests that these forms of emotional abuse were more commonly experienced some 18–24 months after separation (De Maio, et al., 2013).
the 12 months before Wave 2, and only 2% reported such experiences for the 12 months before Wave 3.

Around one-quarter of parents who had been physically hurt in the 12 months before Wave 3 said that they had been hurt sometimes or often (rather than rarely or only once) in the 12 months prior to Wave 3 (or 0.4% of total sample). During the latter period, bruises or scratches were the most common forms of injuries sustained by those who had been physically hurt, though some parents mentioned cuts (other than stab wounds).

**Violence/abuse across the three survey waves**

Not surprisingly, the proportion of parents who experienced some form of violence/abuse fell across the survey waves, though close to two in five fathers and mothers who participated in Wave 3 said that they had been recipients of at least one form of violence/abuse in the previous 12 months.

One-quarter of parents in the continuing sample indicated that they had experienced violence/abuse in all three periods, while another one-quarter indicated that they had not experienced any of the forms of violence/abuse examined in the various survey waves. Mothers were more likely than fathers to indicate that they had experienced violence/abuse in all three waves, while having no experience of violence/abuse in any of the three waves was more likely to be reported by fathers than mothers.

**Safety concerns**

Parents were asked whether they held any safety concerns for themselves or their child as a result of ongoing contact with the other parent. It is important to point out that trends emerging reflect parents’ views, which may be based on a variety of circumstances, including suggestions or evidence of threats to personal or child wellbeing of varying degrees of certainty.

For each survey wave (taken separately), close to 20% of mothers and 13–16% of fathers said that they held safety concerns associated with ongoing contact with their child’s other parent. Reports of safety concerns appeared to fall slightly from Wave 1 to Wave 3. Most of these fathers were concerned about their child’s safety alone, while much the same proportions of mothers indicated concerns about their child alone or about both themselves and their child.

Parents in the continuing sample most commonly expressed safety concerns in one survey wave alone, followed by reporting concerns in two of the three waves. Around 5% expressed safety concerns in all three waves, and nearly three-quarters of mothers indicated that they held no safety concerns in any survey wave.

Most of those who held safety concerns (especially mothers) attributed their concerns to their child’s other parent. In each survey wave, higher proportions of fathers than mothers attributed at least some of their concerns to the other parent’s new partner or to another adult.

In Wave 3, four sets of circumstances were each cited as reasons for safety concerns by at least three in five fathers and mothers (taken separately) who held safety concerns. Emotional abuse or anger issues formed the most common reason, followed by mental health issues and violent or dangerous behaviours, then neglect or lack of supervision. Nearly half the fathers and slightly more mothers expressed concerns about alcohol or

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31 The estimate of 0.4% represents the number of parents who reported being hurt sometimes or often as a percentage of the total number of respondents in the sample. That is, this estimate was not derived from the above-quoted percentage of parents who experienced physical hurt coupled with the percentage of these parents who had reported that such experiences occurred sometimes or often, for these percentages contain slight errors associated with having been rounded to whole numbers.
substance abuse. Around two in five parents gave road safety and other physical issues as a reason for their concerns, while around one in six referred to sexual issues. Similar trends were apparent in Wave 2 for those issues that were specifically asked about in both waves.32

Fathers were more likely than mothers to nominate mental health issues as the reason for their safety concerns, and with two exceptions mothers were more likely to nominate the other issues. The exceptions concerned neglect or lack of supervision and sexual issues: fathers and mothers were almost equally likely to refer to these matters.

Over 80% of parents with safety concerns in Wave 3 (the only wave in which the matter was raised) said that they had reported their concerns to an authority or service, and of those services focused on in the survey, a dispute resolution service was the most commonly mentioned, followed by a legal service, the police and a child protection authority.

While fathers were more likely than mothers to have reported their concerns to a child protection authority, mothers were more likely than fathers to have reported their concerns to all other services tapped, with the largest gender difference emerging in relation to use of a domestic violence service.

**Links between safety concerns and other aspects of family dynamics**

As was apparent in the analyses of Waves 1 and 2 (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Qu & Weston, 2010), strong links emerged between the holding of safety concerns in Wave 3 and concurrent perceptions of the quality of the inter-parental relationship, experiences of violence/abuse in the preceding 12 months, and reports in Wave 1 that mental health or alcohol or substance abuse were issues in the pre-separation relationship.

In Wave 3, eight in ten parents with safety concerns described their relationship as negative or distant (with the former being the more prevalent), while most parents without safety concerns considered their relationship to be positive. In addition, nearly eight in ten with safety concerns indicated that they had experienced violence/abuse in the 12 months prior to interview, compared with around one in three without safety concerns.

In addition, the greater the number of survey waves in which safety concerns were held, the more likely it was that the parents in the continuing sample had said in Wave 1 that mental health or addiction problems were issues in the relationship prior to separation. Such problems were mentioned by the vast majority of fathers and mothers who held safety concerns in all three survey waves.

While these results derive exclusively from parents’ reports, the strength of links between their beliefs concerning mental health or addictions and repetitive or continuing safety concerns indicate that such pre-separation matters should be given particular attention when parenting arrangements are made. This principle would hold for education programs such as the child-focused sessions that typically occur before FDR, as well as for FDR itself (or similar facilitated processes), legal advice and court adjudications.

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32 The circumstances giving rise to safety concerns were not identified in Wave 1.