

## 7.3 Parents' views about child support payments

Whether it is to be paid or received, sense of fairness or unfairness about child support issues may well influence how parents relate to each other and the extent to which payers comply with their liability. A sense of fairness or unfairness may be associated, for example, with beliefs regarding whether the payments are excessive in terms of their affordability or children's needs. Whatever the reasons, payers who believe that the payments are unfair may be less inclined than other payers to meet their obligations, although these views may also arise at least partly as a post hoc rationalisation of non-compliance behaviour; that is, non-compliance may strengthen views about unfairness, thereby justifying non-compliance. This section examines the views of payers and payees regarding fairness and some more specific beliefs about the payments that may feed into views on fairness.

### *Sense of fairness about child support payments*

In each survey wave, parents were asked whether their “current amount of child support” was very fair for them, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair or very unfair for them. It is important to point out that some parents may have answered this question in relation to payment liability and others to the amount actually paid.<sup>1</sup> Parents were not asked to provide any reasons for their answers to this question. While the subsequent questions introduced in Wave 3 may throw light on this issue, other untapped reasons may have contributed to sentiments on fairness; for example, changes in care time may have made the current payment liability or actual amount paid seem fair or unfair.

Figure 7.9 (on page 130) shows the proportions of father payers and mother payees providing each of these responses, while Figure 7.10 (on page 130) presents the corresponding patterns of answers provided by mother payers and father payees.<sup>2</sup>

With one exception (mother payers in Wave 3), at least half of the parents in all groups provided favourable evaluations; that is, they said that the child support amount was very or somewhat fair. The proportions of father and mother payers who provided favourable evaluations decreased progressively across the survey waves (father payers: from 71% to 63%; mother payers: from 57% to 45%), while the proportion of payees indicating a sense of fairness was higher in Wave 1 than in the other waves, where the proportions were virtually identical (mother payees: 58% vs 53%; father payees: 62% vs 53–54%).

Whereas father payers were more likely than mother payees to provide favourable evaluations, the opposite was the case for mother payers and father payees. However, the difference was greater where father (rather than mother) was liable to pay child support. In fact, in all survey waves, father payers were the most likely of all groups to consider the current amount of child support to be either very or somewhat fair for them. The following proportions of parents indicated these views:

- Wave 1: 71% of father payers vs 57–62% of other parents;
- Wave 2: 66% of father payers vs 51–54% of other parents; and
- Wave 3: 63% of father payers vs 45–53% of other parents.

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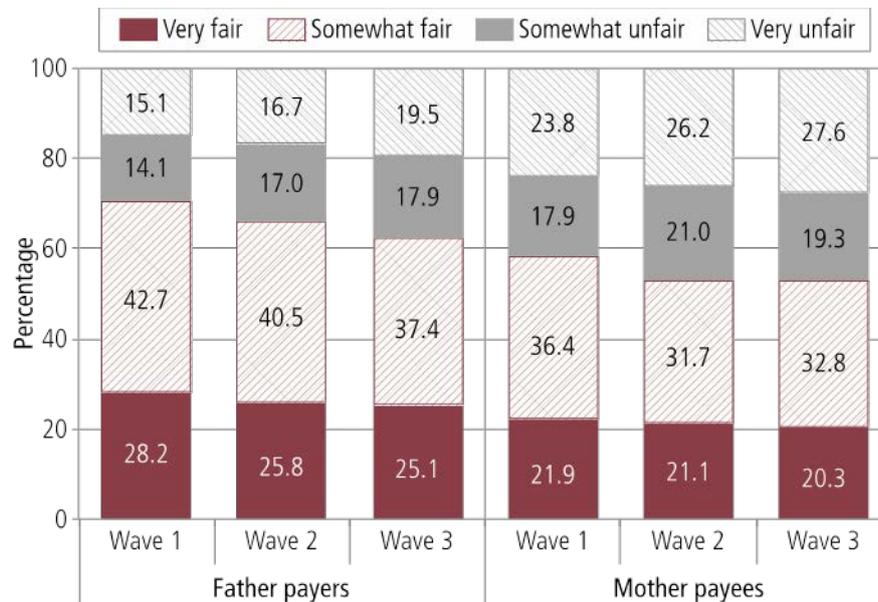
<sup>1</sup> In Wave 3, the two questions preceding that on fairness covered the amount of child support actually paid, then whether the payments were made on time. Other questions were introduced between these two sets in Waves 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> These percentage distributions also appear in Appendix E along with the percentage distribution of responses provided by all payers and by all payees (i.e., based on mothers and fathers combined).

Mother payers were either as likely as, or more likely than, mother payees and father payers to provide such positive appraisals. The following proportions of parents considered the child support amount to be very or somewhat fair:

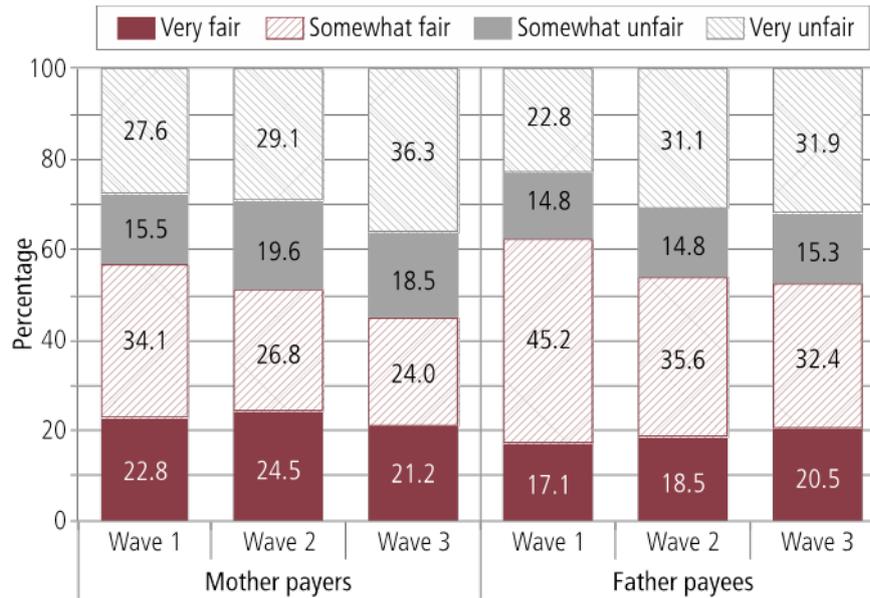
- Wave 1: 57% of mother payers vs 58–62% of mother payees and father payers;
- Wave 2: 51% of mother payers vs 53–54% of mother payees and father payers; and
- Wave 3: 45% of mother payers vs 53% of mother payees and father payers.

Table 7.5 (on page 130) shows the mean assessed amount of child support payment of father payers and mother payees set against their views about child support payments in Wave 3. Father payers who considered that their child support payment was very fair were required to pay the lowest mean amount of child support per week (\$97), followed by those who considered the amount of payment as somewhat unfair (\$127), while fathers with the view of very unfair or somewhat unfair were required to pay the highest mean amounts (\$157 and \$155, respectively). The opposite patterns emerged among mother payees. The mean assessment amount of child support was lowest for mother payees who reported the amount of payment as very unfair (\$62), while mothers who considered their current amount as very fair had the highest assessment payment (\$157).



Note: Data have been weighted.

Figure 7.9: Sense of fairness about child support payments for self, father payers and mother payees with study children < 18 years, by wave



Note: Data have been weighted.

Figure 7.10: Sense of fairness about child support payments for self, mother payers and father payees with study children < 18 years, by wave

Table 7.5: Sense of fairness about child support by amount supposed to pay/receive per week (mean), father payers and mother payees with study children < 18 years, Wave 3

Sense of fairness	Father payers (\$)	Mother payees (\$)
Very fair	\$97	\$157
Somewhat fair	\$127	\$128
Somewhat unfair	\$155	\$104
Very unfair	\$157	\$62
No. of participants	2,929	2,938

Notes: Data have been weighted.

### *Are payments affordable and to what extent do payers appear to begrudge paying?*

To throw further light on the non-compliance issue, payers were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- I can afford to pay the amount I am required to pay.
- I think that the amount I'm expected to pay is more than the amount needed by the children.
- I resent paying because I have no say on how the money is spent.
- I resent paying, given how much time I spend with (child's name).

Using the same response options, payees were also asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements that the other parent could afford to pay the amount required, believed the amount to be excessive, or resented paying because the

payee had no say in how the money was spent or because payment was not commensurate with the time the payee was able to spend with the child.

In addition to responding to these issues, payees were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement that the other parent would prefer not to pay in order to make life difficult for the payee.

The response options provided to participants were: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree”. Some parents volunteered that they were uncertain about specific statements and such responses were combined with “neither agree nor disagree”. Figures 7.11 and 7.12 (on page 132) present the patterns of answers for payers and payees of each gender.

There was substantial agreement from payers with respect to the affordability of payments (78% of fathers and 64% of mothers) and very high levels of agreement from the payees (91% of mother payees and 83% of father payees) with respect to their former partners’ capacity to pay.

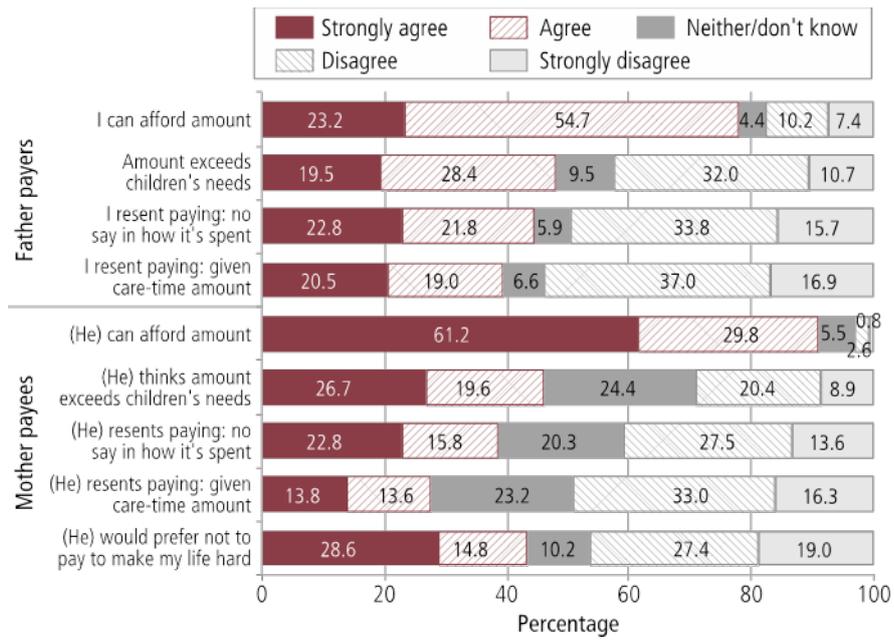
Nearly half the father payers thought that the amount they were paying was more than their children needed, while similar proportions of the receiving mothers suggested that this was what their former partners believed. This compares to 36% of mother payers thinking that the amount they were paying was more than their children needed, and 37% of receiving fathers reporting that this was what their former partner believed.

A little under half (45%) of the paying fathers and 39% of receiving mothers agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that there was resentment with respect to paying because the father had no say in how the money was spent. About two in five paying mothers held a similar belief, while just over one-third (35%) of the receiving fathers thought this was the view of their former partners.

About two in five paying fathers and over one in four (28%) of receiving mothers agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that there was resentment about how much time the father was spending with his child(ren). Among paying mothers, 37% held this view and 33% of receiving fathers agreed or strongly agreed that their former partners held such a view.

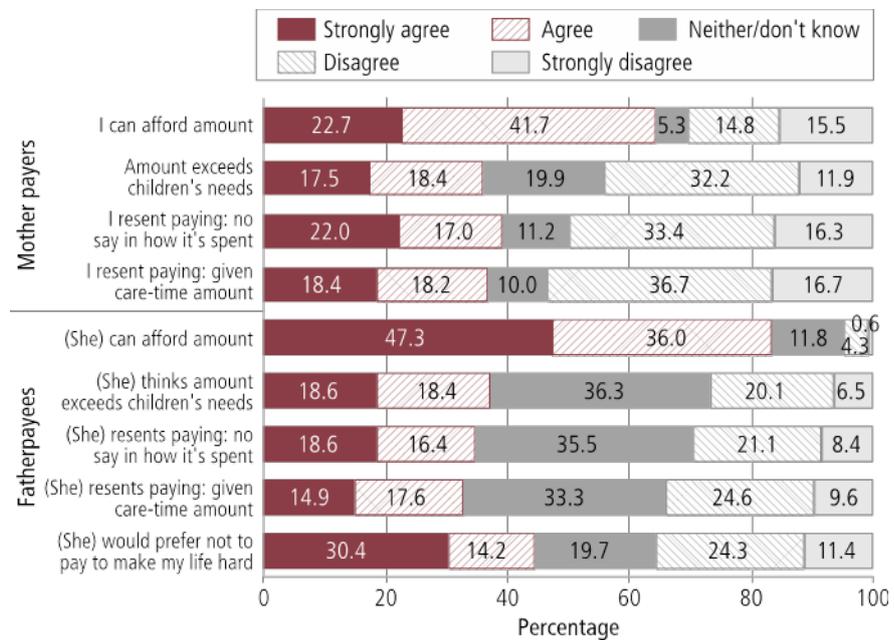
Finally, 43% of receiving mothers 45% of receiving fathers agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that their former partners would prefer not to pay in order to make their (the receiving parent’s) life difficult. This is a perplexing finding. It is possible that the response was influenced by the two preceding questions, both of which invited consideration of the possibility that a former partner might “resent paying”. But in view of the earlier positive data on fairness and capacity to pay, it is also possible that the response is reflecting to some extent the respondent’s assessment of the quality of the relationship with his or her former partner. Table 7.6 (on page 133) explores this proposition.

The table reveals a statistically significant near linear relationship between payees’ assessments of their former partners’ desire to make their lives difficult (by not meeting child support obligations) and their assessment of the quality of their post-separation relationship. Thus, only 13% of mother payees with friendly relationships agreed or strongly agreed that their children’s father might prefer not to pay child support in order to make their lives difficult. The equivalent figure for father payees was 6%. At the other end of the spectrum, 85% of mother payees with fearful relationships and 76% of fathers with conflictual or fearful relationships agreed or strongly agreed that their children’s other parent might prefer not to pay child support in order to make their lives difficult.



Notes: Data have been weighted.

Figure 7.11: Views about child support affordability/willingness to pay, father payers and mother payees with study children < 18 years, Wave 3



Notes: Data have been weighted.

Figure 7.12: Views about child support affordability/willingness to pay, mother payers and father payees with study children < 18 years, Wave 3

**Table 7.6: Payees' agreement that payer "would prefer not to pay to make life difficult for me", by quality of inter-parental relationship, Wave 3**

	Quality of inter-parental relationship ** (%)				
	Friendly	Cooperative	Distant	Lots of conflict	Fearful
Mother payees					
Strongly agree	5.9	13.7	40.6	69.3	77.6
Agree	7.3	14.2	22.1	18.2	6.9
Neither/don't know	5.1	11.3	14.6	5.2	11.7
Disagree	39.8	38.0	18.6	6.3	3.1
Strongly disagree	41.9	22.8	4.1	1.0	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of participants	784	897	893	395	165
Father payees					
Strongly agree	4.8	17.5	37.6	66.0	
Agree	1.6	12.8	23.2	10.0	
Neither/don't know	13.6	20.8	23.0	18.2	
Disagree	52.5	32.5	12.0	5.9	
Strongly disagree	27.5	16.5	4.2	0.0	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
No. of participants	80	108	149	63	

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small proportion of parents who did not respond or did not know. Includes payees whose "focus child" was 18 years or older. Percentages may not total 100.0% due to rounding. \*\*  $p < .01$ ; relationship between extent of agreement/disagreement and quality of inter-parental relationship is statistically significant for both mother and father payees.

## 7.4 Summary

In each survey wave (taken separately) about four in five parents reported that the father was required to pay, while between 4% and 8% of parents attributed payment liability to the mother. At the same time, 13–15% of fathers and 9–17% of mothers across all three waves indicated that there was no child support requirement. This general pattern of results is similar to that observed by De Maio et al. (2013).

Among the continuing sample, two-thirds of all fathers were payers and nearly three-quarters of all mothers were payees across all three waves. Around a quarter of all fathers and mothers experienced a change in status by Wave 3, the most common outcomes being more mothers becoming payees and fathers becoming payers.

Around nine in ten father payers and mother payees in Wave 1 indicated that they had the same liability status in Wave 3. Half of the mother payers and two-thirds of the father payees in Wave 1 had the same liability status by Wave 3. About two in five fathers (41%) and a little more than a quarter of mothers (27%) who had no liability in Wave 1 maintained this status of no liability in Wave 3. Two-thirds of mothers with no liability in Wave 1 became payees by Wave 3, while 43% of fathers with no liability in Wave 1 became payers by Wave 3. Much smaller proportions of these fathers and mothers with no liability in Wave 1 became father payees and mother payers.

In Wave 3, the total average that father payers claimed to be paying was \$131 per week, whereas the total average mother payees claimed to be receiving was \$111 per week. The total average that mother payers claimed to be paying was \$78 per week, whereas the total

average father payees claimed to be receiving was \$61 per week. Perceived discrepancies remained, though not to the same extent, when the data were broken down according to the number of children requiring financial support.

According to both father payers and mother payees, use of Child Support Collect increased progressively across the survey waves, while Private Collect arrangements decreased. Just over one-third of the father payers and mother payees in Wave 1 indicated that payments were transferred via Child Support Collect, while nearly two-thirds said that payments were transferred privately. On the other hand, the proportion of Wave 3 father payers and mother payees reporting these two modes were similar. Where mothers were the payers and fathers the payees, modes of payments reported did not vary much across the survey waves.

According to all parent groups, payments were most often made in full and on time. This was followed by payments being made in full but not on time and then by payments being made neither in full nor always on time. The least likely outcome was that payments were made on time but not in full.

Payees were less likely than payers to report full compliance, and unlike payers, the proportions reporting full compliance was lower in Waves 2 and 3 than in Wave 1. The general pattern of results for mother and father payees in Wave 1 is consistent with that observed by De Maio et al. (2013) based on the SRSP 2012.

Across all care-time arrangements and survey waves, father payers were considerably more likely than the mother payees to report that payments were made in full and on time. The proportion of fathers reporting full compliance varied little according to care-time arrangements. The reports of mother payees suggest that fathers who never saw their child were considerably less likely than other fathers to fully comply with their liability.

For each survey wave taken separately, mother and father payees who experienced violence/abuse were less likely than those who had been free from such experiences to report that they received child support both in full and on time. Generally speaking, payment compliance reported by payers did not vary according to whether they had experienced violence/abuse.

With one exception, at least half of the parents in all groups said that the child support amount was very or somewhat fair. Indeed in all survey waves, father payers were the most likely of all groups to consider the current amount of child support to be either very or somewhat fair for them. At the same time, the proportions of father and mother payers who provided favourable evaluations of fairness decreased progressively across the survey waves. The proportion of payees indicating a sense of fairness was higher in Wave 1 but virtually identical in the other two waves.

Father payers who considered that their child support payment was very fair were required to pay the lowest mean amount of child support, while fathers with the view of payments being very unfair or somewhat unfair were required to pay the highest mean amount. The opposite patterns emerged among mother payees.

There was substantial agreement from payers with respect to the affordability of payments and very high levels of agreement from payees with respect to their former partners' capacity to pay.

Nearly half the father payers thought that the amount they were paying was more than their children needed, and a similar proportion of mother payees believed that their former partners held this view. About one-third of mother payers thought that the amount they were paying was more than their children needed, and a similar proportion of father payees agreed that their former partner held this view.

A substantial minority of father payers and mother payees felt there was resentment with respect to paying because the payer had no say in how the money was spent or because the payer spent so much time with the child. This pattern also emerged among mother payers and father payees.

Finally, it was concerning to find that a little under half of mother and father payees believed their former partners would prefer not to pay in order to make their (the receiving parent's) life difficult. The prevalence of this finding might have been influenced by a possible priming effect, whereby each of the two previous questions had asked whether the parent's former partner might resent paying child support. At the same time, the data reveal a clear affiliation between propensity to hold this view and quality of post separation relationship.