Post-separation parenting, property and relationship dynamics after five years

Lixia Qu, Ruth Weston, Lawrie Moloney, Rae Kaspiew and Jessie Dunstan
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Executive summary

The 2006 family law reforms introduced a series of significant changes to the family law system. The key objectives of the reforms were to strengthen family relationships, prevent parental separation where possible, encourage both parents to remain involved in children’s lives after separation, protect children from violence and abuse, and support families to avoid court proceedings in making parenting arrangements. In 2006, the Attorney-General’s Department (AGD) and the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) commissioned the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to undertake an extensive evaluation of the early effects of the reforms. As part of this work, AIFS developed the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF), in consultation with AGD and FaHCSIA, with findings from the first wave feeding into the AIFS evaluation report (Kaspiew et al., 2009). The second wave was carried out around 12 months later, with key results being reported in 2010 (Qu & Weston, 2010). The AGD commissioned the collection of data for LSSF Wave 3 in order to facilitate an ongoing understanding of the experiences, behaviours and circumstances of parents and their children about five years after parental separation. The fieldwork for this study took place between September and November 2012. This report not only focuses on the results from Wave 3, but also provides a longitudinal perspective.

The LSSF is a national study of parents with a child under 18 years old who separated after the 2006 reforms were introduced and who were registered with the Child Support Program (now in the Department of Human Services) in 2007. Some 10,000 parents participated in the first survey wave. Interviews were conducted in late 2008, on average 15 months after separation. The second wave of data collection was conducted between September and October 2009, with 70% of the original parents being interviewed again. The third wave of data collection took place between September and November 2012, with 9,028 parents interviewed (comprising 5,755 members of the original sample and a “top-up” sample of 3,273 parents). Both the original and top-up sample members had been separated for an average of five years. In all three waves, almost all child-related questions asked of parents focused on one child born of the separated relationship. In Wave 1, nearly 60% of these children were under 5 years old, and by Wave 3, two-thirds were 5–11 years old (i.e., of primary school age). The analyses outlined in this report were based on the reports of all parents who participated in Waves 1, 2 and/or 3 (taken separately), as well as on parents who participated in all three waves (the “continuing sample”).

Key findings

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.

Close to half of the parents who participated in all three waves held the same views in each survey wave, with positive views being the most likely to be repeated across the survey wave. This was by far the most common of all possible scenarios. Revised assessments were equally likely to suggest that relationships had improved or deteriorated, though some assessments fluctuated across the waves.
Frequency of inter-parental communication

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. This is not surprising given that a substantial proportion of the children were under 5 years old in Wave 1 and that the fine-turning of care-time arrangements may take considerable time. Of all three scenarios—decreases, increases or no change in frequency of communication—decreases were the most apparent in the continuing sample, followed by no change in frequency. Decreases in communication frequency were apparent regardless of the age of the child, though this trend was stronger for older than younger children.

Experience of emotional abuse or physical hurt and safety concerns

Parents were asked whether they had experienced various specific forms of abuse and whether their child’s other parent had hurt them physically. The specific forms were classified as “emotional abuse” even though some may have involved offensive physical contact (an issue not addressed in the survey), for such contact may well have generated apprehension in the victim. The concept of “violence or abuse” (or “violence/abuse”) is used in this report to refer to general subject matter covering both emotional abuse and physical hurt.

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. Ten forms of emotional abuse were asked about in Waves 1 and 3, and seven formed the focus of Wave 2. These seven items were asked in all survey waves.

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 and slightly more mothers in Wave 3 indicated that they were recipients of some form of emotional abuse. Humiliating insults represented the most common form of emotional abuse experienced, with the circulation of defamatory comments being the second most common form experienced, and monitoring the whereabouts of the respondent being third. In addition, most respondents who were recipients of the three most common forms of emotional abuse also indicated that these behaviours occurred sometimes or often.

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 the 12 months before Wave 2, and only 2% reported such experiences for the 12 months before Wave 3.

Of parents who participated in all three survey waves, one-quarter of parents indicated that they experienced violence/abuse in all three periods, with the proportion being higher among mothers than fathers. Another one-quarter indicated that they had not experienced any of the forms of violence/abuse examined in any wave, with fathers being more likely than mothers to indicate no experience of violence/abuse.

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. Close to one in five mothers and slightly fewer fathers in each wave (taken separately) said that they held safety concerns for their child and/or themselves associated with ongoing contact with their child’s other parent, with the proportion falling slightly in Wave 3. Most of the fathers were concerned about
their child’s safety alone, while much the same proportions of mothers indicated having concerns about their child alone or about both themselves and their child.

Most of those who held safety concerns (especially mothers) attributed their concerns to their child’s other parent, but fathers were more likely than mothers to hold safety concerns about the other parent’s new partner or another adult.

In Wave 3, “emotional abuse or anger issues” formed the most common reasons for safety concerns, followed by “mental health issues” and “violent or dangerous behaviour”, then “neglect or lack of supervision”. The majority of parents with safety concerns in Wave 3 (over 80%) said that they had reported their concerns to an authority or service.

Around two in three parents who participated in all three survey waves indicated that they held no safety concerns in any wave. Any safety concerns were most commonly expressed in one survey wave alone, followed by two waves. Around 5% of all parents in the continuing sample expressed safety concerns in all three waves.

Consistent with the findings based on the data of first two waves (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/substance abuse were issues in the relationship before separation.

Service use

In Wave 3, around one-third of separated mothers and fathers (taken separately) made use of services in the two years prior to the Wave 3 interviews, with the most common service used being a Family Relationship Centre (FRC). The majority of parents who had used a service in the last two years indicated that the purpose was to sort out issues relating to parenting arrangements. This was the most common reason mentioned by parents attending the various services examined, especially by those who used FRCs.

Other issues (e.g., property arrangements, child support, violence/abuse or safety issues and so on) were much less common. Lawyers were used for the resolution of property arrangements more commonly than other services.

In terms of underlying needs, the majority of parents indicated that they went to services for information or advice. Dispute resolution was also commonly sought, but to a lesser extent. Information or advice was sought by a majority of parents attending all services except the courts. Dispute resolution was most commonly mentioned by parents who went to FRCs.

Many parents of both genders held positive views about the services they received to help settle their issues after separation. Eight in ten parents considered the service they received to be very helpful or somewhat helpful to them and the remainder reported that the services they used were not helpful at all to them. Views varied across type of services used. The proportion considering the service used as being very helpful was highest among parents who used a lawyer, followed by those who used a Legal Aid Commission, and it was lowest among those who used FRCs, community legal centres and women’s legal services. It should be noted that for some parents, engagement with these latter services was likely to have resulted in some advice or referral, rather than direct assistance, as their requests may have been outside the scope of the respective services’ capacity for assistance. For example, while the issue of an s 60I certificate provides parents with the option of taking the matter to court, it also signals that a resolution was not appropriate or not possible via FDR. Such an outcome may be perceived as frustrating, disappointing and “not at all helpful”.

Sorting out parenting arrangements

In each wave, the majority of parents reported that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements. In Wave 3, over two-thirds of parents said that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements and around one-fifth were in the process, while over one in ten indicated that nothing had been sorted out. Findings from the three LSSF waves demonstrate that “sorting out” parenting arrangements is a dynamic process. For example, of those parents who believed that they had sorted out their parenting arrangements in Wave 1, three-quarters claimed this in Wave 3. But of those who reported in Wave 1 that they were in the process of sorting out matters or that nothing had been sorted, just over one-half indicated that they had sorted out matters by Wave 3. Of parents who participated in all three waves, around 8% reported in all three waves that nothing had been sorted about, with about half of this group indicating that no agreements about parenting had been developed at any time after separation.

At each wave, inter-parental discussions and “it just happened” were easily the most common main pathways for parents who indicated that they had sorted out or were in the process of sorting out their parenting arrangements (77% in Wave 1 and 70% in Wave 3). The next most common main pathway was counselling, mediation or dispute resolution, followed by lawyers and then courts.

The longer the time it took for parents to first sort out arrangements, the more likely they were to report the use of a professional intervention as their main pathway. Parents who took a longer time to reach parenting agreements were also more likely than other parents to have experienced ongoing violence/abuse and/or safety concerns.

Most parents who had sorted out arrangements held positive views about the process of the pathway used. However, those still sorting things out at each wave provided less favourable views about the process. With respect to particular main pathways, fathers and mothers who sorted arrangements out through discussions were the most positive about the process, and other pathways were less often seen to provide a satisfactory process. These patterns were consistent with the findings of the first two waves.

Family dispute resolution

Over the three waves, the proportion of parents who attempted FDR reduced from 31% in Wave 1 to 15% in Wave 3. In each wave, about four in every ten parents who attempted FDR reached agreement as a direct part of the FDR process itself. Section 60I certificates were issued to a little over two in ten parents in Wave 1 and a little over four in ten parents in Wave 3. This may suggest that the cases presenting for FDR were becoming more difficult over time or may signal that FDR practitioners had changed their approaches.

Of those parents who had reached agreement through FDR in Wave 1, just over half (54%) reported that parenting arrangements had remained sorted out at all three waves. By contrast, of those who were issued with a certificate, less than a quarter (23%) reported that parenting arrangements were sorted out at all three waves. Dealing with family violence/abuse is clearly “core business” for FDR practitioners. Parents who indicated in Wave 1 that they had reached agreement were less likely than those who were issued with a certificate to report having experienced violence/abuse before and/or after separation and to express safety concerns in one or more waves. Overall, parents who were issued with a certificate showed signs of greater distress. They were considerably more likely than other parents to have expressed safety concerns at all three waves.

The analysis also suggests that there is a sub-group of families with multiple issues (i.e., conflictual/fearful inter-parental relationships, safety concerns, violence/abuse) who continue to experience significant difficulties well into the post-separation period covered by this report.
Care-time arrangements

Most children were in the care of their mother for the majority of nights or all nights per year (i.e., 66–100% of nights) in each wave, with around three-quarters being in such an arrangement in Wave 3. Nevertheless, such care-time arrangements appeared to have declined slightly. On the other hand, the proportion of children in shared time or in paternal care for most and all of the time increased slightly. Care-time arrangements comprising children who saw their father during the daytime fell from over one in five children in Wave 1 to one in ten in Wave 3.

Consistent with the reports based on the first two waves, care-time arrangements in Wave 3 varied according to children’s age. Shared care-time was more prevalent for children of primary school and early secondary school age than for either younger or older children. It was not common for children across all age groups to be in the care of their father for most or all of the time. Nevertheless, this arrangement was more prevalent for older children than younger children.

Six in ten children who were still under 18 years of age by Wave 3 had experienced some change in their care-time arrangements across three waves. Children were more likely to experience an increase in paternal than maternal care time, with 30% having increased time in the care of their father and 20% increased time in the care of their mother. Around one in ten children experienced a fluctuation of changes across the survey waves.

Change in care-time arrangements was influenced by the dynamics of the inter-parental relationship, experience of violence/abuse and safety concerns. Parents with improved relationships were more likely than other parents to report increases in paternal care time. Care-time arrangements were more likely to be subject to change if parents indicated experiencing violence/abuse both before/during separation and after separation or if they held continuing safety concerns.

Property division

There was a wide spread of wealth levels reported by separated parents. One-fifth of parents said that they had nothing to divide, nearly one-fifth reported a low level of assets (here defined as being under $40,000) and one in ten parents reporting a high level of assets (here defined as more than $500,000). The remainder were spread across ranges defined here as “low–medium”, medium, and medium–high. A very small proportion (less than 2%) reported debts outweighing assets.

Parents who separated from cohabiting relationships had less wealth compared with formerly married parents. For example, just over one-half of former cohabitees reported having either no assets to divide or the lowest level of assets (less than $40,000), compared with less than one-fifth of formerly married parents.

Of parents with property to divide, nearly one-half (45%) said these matters were resolved on separation or in less than twelve months, and about a quarter said the division had concluded between one and two years after the separation. The remainder (30%) took at least two years. Longer resolution timeframes were associated with higher asset levels.

Four in ten parents indicated that they had worked out their property division through discussions with their child’s other parent, and nearly one-fifth reported doing so without using any specific mechanism. A substantial minority, nearly three in ten, indicated using lawyers, and small minorities used courts or mediation. Lawyers and courts were more likely to be used by parents who had significant amounts of assets to divide, and also by parents in a negative net financial position.

Consistent with previous research, parents appeared to under-report the share that they received in the property division and over-report the share that went to the other parent.
On average, based on both fathers’ and mothers’ reports, mothers received 57% of assets and fathers received 43%. The most common division reported was a share for the mother of between 40% and 59% (one-third), and about a quarter of parents reported a higher share for the mother of between 60 and 79%. Care-time arrangements were associated with property division, with parents who had the minority of care time receiving a lower share of the property.

The majority of parents considered that the property division was fair, both at the time it was finalised and at the time of Wave 3 interviews. Significant minorities, however, considered it to have been unfair. Fathers were more likely than mothers to express a view of unfairness. Insights from qualitative data reinforced the subjective nature of perceptions of fairness. There were three main themes from parents’ comments of unfairness: the perception that a fair outcome required an even split; inadequate consideration of the respondents’ contributions during the relationship, with many comments suggesting values attaching greater weight to income-earning and financial contributions than homemaker contributions; and inadequate apportionment of liability debts and the inclusion of resources provided by the parents’ own families (e.g., their own parents or grandparents) in the asset pool. Other comments include the assertion that the system is biased against men (fathers’ reports), and that it is unable to handle one party behaving dishonestly in disclosures relating to property and financial resources.

**Child support**

In each survey wave (taken separately) about four in five parents reported that the father was required to pay child support. Of the remainder, the next most common liability was the mother being required to pay. Fathers as payers represented the most stable of these situations. Of parents who participated in all three waves, 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 had experienced a change in their liability status by Wave 3, the most common outcomes being mothers becoming payees and fathers becoming payers.

The payers claimed that they were required to pay higher amounts than the payees claimed they were to receive, though both mothers and fathers reported higher liability amounts where the father rather than mother was liable to pay. In Wave 3, the average amount that father payers said they were liable to pay was $131 per week, whereas the average amount mother payees claimed that they should receive was $20 less (i.e., $111 per week). The average amount that mother payers said they were liable to pay was $78 per week, while father payees claimed that they should receive $61 per week.

According to all parent groups, payments were most often made in full (including more than the required amount) and on time. The proportion of father payers 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. Mother and father payees who experienced violence/abuse were less likely than those without such experiences to report that they received child support both in full and on time.

There was a substantial agreement from payers that they could afford the payments and very high levels of agreement from the payees that their former partners had the capacity to pay. However, nearly half the father payers and over one-third of mother payers thought that the amount they were paying was more than their children needed. A significant minority of father and mother payers agreed that there was resentment with respect to paying because they had no say in how the money was spent and given the amount of time they spent with their child. On the other hand, a significant minority of father and mother payees believed their former partners would prefer not to pay in order to make their (the
receiving parent’s) life difficult. The data also reveal a clear affiliation between this view and the quality of the post-separation relationship.

Children’s wellbeing

Across all three survey waves, parents in general provided favourable assessments of their child’s wellbeing across all areas examined, including general health, and progress in learning, peer relationships and overall development. The analysis of the extent to which parents’ assessments of their child’s wellbeing had changed (and the direction of this change) between Waves 1 and 3 revealed that few parents provided unfavourable assessments in both occasions, which were four years apart. This trend was apparent in all measures examined. Where parents’ assessments had changed between Waves 1 and 3, the change was more likely to suggest wellbeing had improved rather than worsened.

The analysis suggests no strong link between care-time arrangements and children’s wellbeing. There was no apparent link between change in children’s overall wellbeing and change in care-time arrangement according to mothers’ reports.

Changes in children’s wellbeing between Waves 1 and 3 were associated with changes in family dynamics, specifically, the experience of violence/abuse, having safety concerns and the quality of inter-parental relationships. Parents who had not experienced violence/abuse in either wave, held no safety concerns on either occasion, or consistently reported a positive inter-parental relationship were more likely to report consistently high or improved child wellbeing. On the other hand, consistently low or worsened child wellbeing was more likely to be reported by parents who reported experiencing violence/abuse, holding safety concerns, or having a negative inter-parental relationship in both waves, compared with other parents.

Concluding thoughts

On the whole, the findings in this report paint a positive picture of separated families in the LSSF study some five years after separation. Nevertheless, a minority of parents continued to face significant problems. These include experiencing violence/abuse, holding safety concerns, and having highly conflictual or fearful inter-parental relationships. In Wave 3, one-fifth of mothers and a lower proportion of fathers (16%) reported that they had at least two or three such problems. Each of these was also related to parents’ views that mental health and/or addiction issues existed in the relationship before separation. Although only a minority of mothers had re-partnered, some fathers cited this new partner or another adult as a source of concern about their child’s safety. All these negatively affect the ability to manage parenting agreements. Such difficulties are in turn likely to compromise the wellbeing of the children caught in the middle.

The findings in this report are supportive of the work of existing services and intervention strategies and also highlight ongoing challenges with respect to the delivery and management of more intensively focused and more coordinated professional interventions.

There is evidence in the present report that sustained problems experienced by some families are at the expense of the wellbeing of children and parents. This reinforces the need for the development of service models designed to specifically address the multiple needs of families affected by concerns relating to family violence/abuse, safety concerns, conflicted and/or fearful relationships, and their frequent correlates: mental ill health and/or substance misuse.

It has become increasingly clear that each of the mainstream professions in the family law system has a potentially constructive role to play in helping to untangle the serious predicaments in which a minority of family law clients find themselves. Successive waves
of longitudinal data are contributing to a growing understanding of the characteristics and needs of these families. These understandings can in turn inform the efforts being made within and between the legal and family relationships sectors to work together more effectively in the service of their clients.

More broadly, there is strong evidence that the services linked to the 2006 reforms have the potential to assist a large number of separated parents and their children in ways that were simply not possible previously. Continued realisation of that capacity relies on an ongoing commitment to continue to support and further develop services and interventions that match the needs of these families.
1 Introduction

This report outlines key findings from the third wave of the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF), conducted between September and November 2012. The first wave of data collected in 2008 made a major contribution to the *Evaluation of the 2006 Family Law Reforms* report prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS; Kaspiew et al., 2009). The report was completed on behalf of the Australian Attorney General’s Department (AGD) and the then Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA; now Department of Social Services [DSS]). Results from the second wave of data collection in 2009 were published by AIFS a year later (Qu & Weston, 2010). AGD commissioned the collection of data for LSSF Wave 3 in order to facilitate an ongoing understanding of the experiences, behaviours and circumstances of parents and their children in the subsequent two years (years 3 and 4) after parental separation.

1.1 Background

The 2006 family law reforms introduced a series of significant changes to the family law system. The key objectives of the reforms were to strengthen family relationships, prevent parental separation where possible, encourage both parents to remain involved in children’s lives after separation, protect children from violence and abuse, and support families to avoid court proceedings when making parenting arrangements.

Earlier reports (Family Law Pathways Advisory Group, 2001; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003) had highlighted concerns about the uncoordinated nature of family law services as well as an over-reliance on legal processes in family law. The 2006 reforms responded to these concerns by establishing and expanding alternative community-based and relationship-focused pathways. In particular, 65 new Family Relationship Centres, a telephone dispute resolution service, a national advice line and an online service were established, and existing early intervention and post-separation relationship services were expanded.

Recommendations and observations from the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group (2001) and the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003) were based largely on the views of professionals, interest groups and members of the public. What was lacking at the time, however, were empirical data from a large representative sample of separated parents about their post-separation relationships, the connection between those relationships, the pathways used to resolve disputes about children, the satisfaction levels and “success rates” attached to each of those pathways, and the stability of arrangements reached.

The three waves of LSSF provide a longitudinal dataset from a national sample of separated families that is without precedent in Australia.1 Although cross-sectional studies are useful, they can be misleading when considered in isolation. For example, a focus on the cross-sectional data on the rates of agreement about parenting arrangements would suggest that they were similar in Waves 1 and 2. But the longitudinal nature of the study reveals a more dynamic process, whereby some arrangements that had been sorted out in Wave 1 were in the process of being re-negotiated in Wave 2, while others that had not been sorted out in Wave 1 were resolved at the time of the Wave 2 interview. In addition, even among those arrangements that had been sorted out at both points in time, a large minority had changed the details of their agreements in the year or so between waves.

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1 The sample is representative of the population of parents who had separated after 1 July 2006 and whose case was registered in the Child Support Agency database in 2007.
Longitudinal studies such as the present one make it possible to identify interactive factors that promote or interfere with the development of positive post-separation trajectories. The data reveal a more complex picture of post-separation relationships and negotiations than that which was assumed to be the case in the 2001 and 2003 reports referred to above. The dynamic nature of these relationships and the decision-making processes revealed in the Wave 1 and Wave 2 data and reinforced in the present report, has important implications for the evaluation and planning of existing and future services.

Some of the key issues examined in the analyses of the first two waves were family dynamics, the development of parenting plans, and any services used to assist this process. The Wave 1 and 2 data showed a strong association between the quality of relationship between former partners and their capacity or willingness to sort out parenting arrangements. Broadly speaking, those with friendly or cooperative relationships were the most likely to have sorted out parenting issues and the least likely to have relied mainly on services, lawyers or courts to achieve this.

At the same time, despite the short time span (one year) between Waves 1 and 2, it was not uncommon for participants to have reported a change in the quality of their relationships with their ex-partners. For example, although the AIIFS evaluation report (Kaspiew et al., 2009) and the Wave 2 report (Qu & Weston, 2010) suggested that roughly three in five parents had described their relationships as being either friendly or cooperative, it was found that about 20% of those who provided this description in Wave 1, had changed their assessments in Wave 2. And while fewer than one in five parents in both the 2009 and 2010 reports described their relationships as being highly conflicted or fearful, only about half of those who provided this assessment in Wave 1 continued to feel this way in Wave 2. Overall, about a third of the parents interviewed provided a different assessment of their relationship in Wave 2, with similar percentages of parents reporting improved and deteriorated relationships.

Reports of family violence/abuse in the form of emotional abuse or physical hurt were common in both waves. Not surprisingly, the experience of family violence/abuse was also linked to service use and the capacity or willingness to sort out parenting matters. Thus increasing rates of violence/abuse were reported by those relying mainly on each of “counselling mediation or family dispute resolution”, lawyers and the courts to assist them in sorting out post-separation parenting. In addition, the more formal the intervention (with courts being at the most formal end of the spectrum), the less likely it was that parenting issues had been sorted out.

The proportion of parents reporting emotional abuse declined only slightly between Wave 1 and Wave 2, but the proportion reporting having been physically hurt declined markedly. The most common form of emotional abuse identified was that the child’s other parent had engaged in humiliating insults, with other forms of emotional abuse less commonly reported in each of the first two waves.

These data could be seen to suggest that for some parents separation results in a diminution or cessation of family violence/abuse, particularly physical hurt. However, for a substantial minority, family violence/abuse, particularly emotional forms, are sustained well beyond separation. Despite reports of a decrease in physical hurt between waves, it was found that around one in five parents in each of the two waves reported that they held safety concerns for their child and/or themselves as a result of ongoing contact with the other parent. Not surprisingly, safety concerns were linked with negative inter-parental relationships and reports of emotional abuse or physical hurt.

Although the data from each of the first two waves indicated that at least seven in ten parents said they had sorted out their parenting arrangements at the time they were interviewed, comparison between the two waves again reveals a more dynamic process
than information from either wave in isolation might suggest. For example, about one in eight parents who said they had sorted arrangements out in Wave 1, reported that they were in the process of sorting out things in Wave 2 or that nothing was now sorted out. In addition, among those parents who said that parenting arrangements were sorted out at both waves, a substantial minority had changed the nature of those arrangements and others were in the process of doing so.

Overall, nearly one-third of children had experienced changes in their care-time arrangements between waves, although most of these changes were fairly modest in scope. At one level, such findings should not be surprising. Whether in separated or “intact” families, children’s needs and parents’ circumstances change. The findings serve as a reminder, however, that families of whatever type are dynamic institutions; and that long-term rigid adherence to a particular parenting arrangement may indicate parental reluctance to engage with each other in the service of meeting their child’s needs.

How parents manage (or don’t manage) these negotiations, their use of services, the main pathways they employ to arrive at parenting arrangements, and the stability of care time across the three waves of the LSSF (or over the five years post-separation) are a major focus of the present report.

Like all parents, separated parents also have an obligation to continue to provide for the financial needs of their children. In the first two waves, nearly nine in ten parents reported that they were liable to pay or receive child support. In each survey wave, nearly three-quarters of the father payers reported that their child support payment was met in full and on time (here called “full compliance”). In contrast, full compliance with child support obligations was reported by only half the mother payees in Wave 1 and even fewer in Wave 2. The present report provides an update on these data.

As noted, a central aim of the 2006 family law reforms was to protect and promote the wellbeing of families at all stages. The first two waves of LSSF suggested that most parents provided favourable assessments of their child’s wellbeing. The Wave 2 report indicated that most parents either gave consistently favourable assessments of their child’s wellbeing or indicated improvements. Family dynamics (e.g., quality of inter-parental relationships, a history of family violence/abuse, safety concerns) appeared to be important in shaping children’s wellbeing. The present report continues to monitor how the children were faring in the medium term following parental separation, as well as the factors interfering with their wellbeing.

Although the AIFS evaluation and Wave 2 reports provided a generally positive picture with respect to separated families in the first two to three years of separation, the data also revealed the extent to which negative family dynamics as well as mental health, substance misuse or other addictions existed in the relationship prior to separation, and how relationship dynamics evolved over time. The LSSF Wave 3 data has provided an opportunity to examine the extent to which positive relationships and agreements over parenting are sustained in the medium term after separation and the extent to which negative family dynamics decrease, persist or increase over time.

Finally, it should be noted that a new module on property division was introduced in the third wave of the LSSF. This is in response to the fact that the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth) (FLA) has undergone important amendments in relation to property matters after separation during the last decade or so. Amendments introduced in 2002 allowed superannuation to be treated as part of a couple’s property. In addition, since March 2009, couples not legally married (i.e., de facto couples) have been able to access the legislation with regard to property distribution. LSSF Wave 3 examined how separated parents divided their property and their views about property outcomes.
1.2 Structure of this report

Before the Wave 3 data are presented, Chapter 2 outlines details of the design and implementation of the third wave and basic characteristics of the sample. Chapter 3 discusses family relationship dynamics, while the status of parenting arrangements, main pathways followed, and use of family dispute resolution (FDR) are examined in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 focuses on care-time arrangements, and the links between these arrangements and family relationship dynamics. How parents divide up their property after separation and their sense of fairness regarding the outcomes are examined in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 directs attention to child support issues, while Chapter 8 focuses on issues relating to child wellbeing. Chapter 9, the final chapter, summarises key findings of the report.
2 Methodology

As outlined in Chapter 1, this report explores the experiences of parents who separated after 1 July 2006. The sample was drawn from the database of the Department of Human Services Child Support Program (DHS CSP)\(^2\) in 2007. Wave 1 was conducted between August and October 2008, with 10,002 participating parents. The second wave of data collection was conducted between September and October 2009; 7,031 parents participated in a follow-up interview. The third wave of data collection, approved by AIFS' Ethic Committee, took place between September and November 2012, with 9,028 parents being interviewed.

2.1 Sample

LSSF Wave 3 involved two groups of parents: the “follow-up” sample, comprising the participants who were interviewed in Wave 1, regardless of whether they participated in Wave 2; and a new sample of parents (referred to as the “top-up” sample) to supplement the total number of Wave 3 participants, due to sample attrition in Waves 1 and 2.\(^3\)

Of the 10,002 parents who participated in the first wave, 9,874 parents agreed to be re-contacted for future waves, and 7,031 of these parents were interviewed in Wave 2. In light of this sample loss in Wave 2 and the longer duration between Wave 2 and Wave 3 (three years) relative to the duration between first two waves (one year), which may have resulted in further loss of the original sample, LSSF Wave 3 introduced a new sample. This approach compensated for anticipated loss of original LSSF sample and ensured that separated parents in different circumstances were appropriately represented in further analyses (e.g., fathers who never see their children; families with equal care time; parents who hold safety concerns about their child seeing the other parent; and parents who have used the court system at some stage).

In Wave 3, the average interview length was 27 minutes for the follow-up sample and 35 minutes for the top-up sample. The longer interviews for the latter component were due to additional questions being asked of these new participants that had already been asked of parents in Wave 1.

Follow-up sample

All 9,874 parents from Wave 1 who agreed to be re-contacted in the future waves were eligible for Wave 3 (regardless of whether they participated in Wave 2). However, parents who wished not to be re-contacted in Wave 2 interviews were excluded, along with those who opted out of LSSF through other means at any stage prior to the commencement of Wave 3 interviews. Overall, less than 2% of original respondents were not contacted for Wave 3 interviews.\(^4\)

A range of measures was adopted prior to Wave 3 in order to maintain up-to-date contact information for follow-up participants. Similar to LSSF Wave 2, all follow-up participants were sent a “study update” newsletter in June 2012 (approximately three months prior to the commencement of Wave 3 fieldwork), which reminded them about the study and provided some key findings from the research so far. The newsletter also provided

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\(^2\) Formerly known as the Child Support Agency.

\(^3\) The sample extraction criteria for the top-up sample were identical to the LSSF Wave 1 sample (e.g., the date of separation was between July 2006 and December 2007) with the exception that the date of registration with the Child Support Program was from January to March 2008, in order to avoid duplication of sample extraction from LSSF Wave 1.

\(^4\) Including a small number of parents who were in jail or deceased.
participants with a contact number should they wish to update their contact details, find out more about the study or withdraw their participation. Participants were also sent an approach letter one week prior to being contacted by telephone, which included a 1800 number and the LSSF study website address, both of which provided parents with an opportunity to find out further information or update their contact details. Other measures were used during the course of fieldwork to make contact with as many sample members as possible. For example, “buddy” contact details collected in Wave 1 were used if necessary, voicemail messages were left on mobile phones and emails were sent.

As Table 2.1 shows, 5,755 parents in the follow-up sample were interviewed in Wave 3, of which 4,859 were also interviewed in Wave 2 and 896 participated in Wave 1 only. The main reason for loss of the original Wave 1 sample was that the parents couldn’t be recontacted (26%), while only 10% withdrew from the study. A small proportion of parents didn’t participate due to other reasons (e.g., away or unavailable during the fieldwork period, study child or parent deceased).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retention status in Wave 3</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusions</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No contact a</td>
<td>2,606</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusal</td>
<td>966</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of scope b</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>5,755</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1 sample</td>
<td>10,002</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have not been weighted. a Includes phone numbers that were disconnected, or by the end of fieldwork were engaged, answering machine, no answer etc. b Includes parents who were overseas or in institutions.

**Top-up sample**

The selection of the top-up sample generally followed the same protocols as the original LSSF sample for Wave 1 (separation date between July 2006 and December 2007, registered with DHS CSP, at least one child under 18 years old, etc.). However, the top-up sample was drawn from cases that registered with the DHS CSP between 1 January and 31 May 2008. The main reason for drawing the sample from cases registered in the first five months of 2008 instead of cases registered in 2007 was due to difficulties in drawing another sample from the remaining cases from 2007 after excluding those that had been drawn for LSSF Wave 1. That is, the remaining cases would have been insufficient to achieve the expected number of interviews, especially for cases where the mother paid child support and the father received it. By extracting the sample from cases registered in early 2008 where separation took place in the same period as in the follow-up sample, it was anticipated that the experiences of separated parents in the top-up sample would be similar to those in the follow-up sample. Indeed, parents in the follow-up and top-up samples were found to be similar in their experiences after separation (e.g., family dynamics, pathways to parenting arrangements, care-time arrangements, etc.).
Consistent with the procedures for the follow-up sample, all potential participants for the top-up component were given opportunities to opt out of the study on multiple occasions prior to being contacted for an interview. In addition to an initial letter sent from DHS about the study prior to the sample being released to the fieldwork agency, top-up sample participants were also sent an approach letter and participant information brochure one week prior to being contacted by an interviewer. This brochure was similar to the brochure provided to all follow-up participants in Wave 1, including a detailed explanation of the study and providing contact details for both the fieldwork agency and the AIFS Ethics Committee if they had any queries or concerns. Table 2.2 summarises the final call outcomes for the top-up sample. Of 10,032 sample records that were initiated during fieldwork, an interview was achieved with one in three records.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Call outcome</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No contact a</td>
<td>3,249</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of scope</td>
<td>1,686</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusals</td>
<td>1,824</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>3,273</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of records</td>
<td>10,032</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have not been weighted. a Consists of phone numbers that were disconnected, or by the end of fieldwork were engaged, answering machine, no answer etc.

2.2 Survey contents

Many of the modules from Wave 2 remained relatively unchanged for the follow-up and top-up questionnaires, with the latter incorporating key demographic sections from Wave 1 (already collected for the follow-up participants). New areas for focus in the Wave 3 questionnaires included an expanded section on experiences of family violence/abuse to examine frequency and any injuries caused, as well as a new section on property division. Table 2.3 provides an overview of the modules in the LSSF Wave 3 questionnaires.
### Table 2.3: Questionnaire modules, follow-up and top-up samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
<th>Top-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current household</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force status</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus parent relationship status</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation pathways</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child wellbeing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting arrangements</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of family law services</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental relationships and parent wellbeing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property settlement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background demographics</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 2.3 Sample characteristics

Table 2.4 (on page 8) describes selected characteristics of parents who participated in Wave 3 (both the follow-up and top-up components). The mean age of fathers was 39 years, while for mothers it was 36 years. The most common age bracket for both fathers and mothers was 35–44 years (43%). A higher proportion of fathers than mothers were 45+ years (27% vs 18% of mothers). Conversely, a higher proportion of mothers than fathers were less than 35 years old (39% vs 30% of fathers).
Table 2.4: Demographic characteristics of separated parents by gender, Wave 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic characteristics of participant</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>All parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (%)</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 35 years (%)</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44 years (%)</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–54 years (%)</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+ years (%)</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of separation (mean years)</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status at the time of separation (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (incl. separated before &amp; never lived together)</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean duration of living together (years)</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Australia (%)</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (%)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or above</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other post-secondary qualification (incl. trades etc.)</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12 (no post-secondary qualification)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11 or below</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time employed</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time employed</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed (hours not reported)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income ($ ’000s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median personal income</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing tenure (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own or purchasing</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private rental</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with family</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public housing</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of participants</td>
<td>4,614</td>
<td>4,414</td>
<td>9,028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (< 1%). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Parents in Wave 3 had been separated for an average of five years. They had lived together on average for 10 years before separation. Among parents who were married prior to separating, this includes time spent living together before marriage.
separated from marital relationships and one-third from cohabiting relationships, while 
13% had separated before the study child was born or had never lived together.

The vast majority of responding parents (84%) were born in Australia. A small proportion 
(3%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Just over half the parents in Wave 3 of LSSF had a post-secondary qualification, with 15% 
of fathers and 17% of mothers having a bachelors degree or higher. Almost one-third of 
the parents had not completed secondary school.

Most parents were employed, though the hours that fathers and mothers worked varied 
considerably. Seventy-four per cent of fathers worked full time compared with 27% of 
mothers, whereas 10% of fathers worked part time compared with 38% of mothers.
Sixteen per cent of fathers and 35% of mothers were not working at the time of the 
interview.

Fathers’ income was notably higher than mothers’, with a median personal income of 
$52,200 per year compared with mothers’ median personal income of $35,000. Similarly, 
the median household income was higher among fathers than mothers ($65,000 vs $43,200 
among mothers).

The most common housing arrangement among parents in Wave 3 was living in a rental 
property (44% of fathers and 49% of mothers). A further 39% of fathers and 37% of 
mothers owned or were purchasing their own home. Eight per cent of parents reported 
that they lived with family members, and the remaining parents had other arrangements 
such as public housing or company accommodation, or were boarding.

As shown in Table 2.5, the average age of the study children by Wave 3 of the LSSF was 9 
years, with two-thirds aged between 5 and 11 years (67%). By Wave 3, 5% of the study 
children were 18 years or over, which, given the time that had passed since Wave 1, is not 
unexpected. Study children were relatively evenly divided between boys and girls (51% and 
49% respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of study child</th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers (%)</th>
<th>All parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 5 years</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6 years</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–11 years</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–14 years</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–17 years</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+ years</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Gender of study child         |             |             |                 |
| Boys                          | 50.6        | 51.4        | 51.0            |
| Girls                         | 49.4        | 48.7        | 49.0            |

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer (< 1%). Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.
2.4 Sample attrition from Wave 1

As mentioned above, 58% of the original responding parents in Wave 1 were interviewed in Wave 3 (the follow-up component). Table 2.6 (on page 10) outlines the retention rates of the follow-up parents by selected characteristics recorded in Wave 1.

Retention rates differed according to the gender of the parents and their age, with slightly higher proportions of mothers than fathers participating in Wave 3 (59% vs 56%) and older parents being more likely than younger parents to be followed up in Wave 3.

Retention rates were similar between mothers born in Australia those born overseas (59–61%); however, retention rates were slightly lower for fathers born overseas (51%) than those born in Australia (57%).

Higher levels of education and employment were linked with higher retention rates. The majority of parents with a degree participated in Wave 3 (67% of fathers and 76% of mothers), compared to fewer than half the parents who had not completed secondary school (47% of fathers and 49% of mothers). Parents who were employed had higher retention rates than those who were not employed (fathers: 58% vs 44%; mothers: 67% vs 49% respectively).
Table 2.6: Retention rates for Wave 3 by demographic characteristics of parents and children and care-time arrangements in Wave 1, follow-up sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Fathers (%)</th>
<th>Mothers (%)</th>
<th>All parents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of parent in Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 35 years</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>50.5</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44 years</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45+ years</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>66.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>58.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other country</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level in Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree or above</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>71.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other post-secondary qualification (incl. trades etc.)</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 12 (no post-secondary qualification)</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 11 or below</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status in Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status at the time of separation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (incl. separated before &amp; never lived together)</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>44.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of study child in Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 5 years</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–6 years</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–11 years</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>68.7</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–14 years</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>64.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–17 years</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care-time arrangement of study child in Wave 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father never sees child</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father sees in daytime only</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66–99% with mother (1–14% father)</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53–65% with mother (35–47% father)</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48–52% with each parent (i.e., equal care time)</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–47% with mother (53–65% with father)</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–34% with mother (66–99% with father)</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother sees in daytime only</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother never sees child</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Data have been weighted. Excludes a small number of parents who did not know or refused to answer for each variable (< 1%).

Retention rates were also higher for parents who were legally married at the time of separation than for those who were cohabiting at the time of separation and those who
separated before the child was born or never lived with the other parent of their child. This pattern was apparent for both fathers and mothers. The group with the highest response rates in Wave 3 were those who were formerly married (62% of fathers and 68% of mothers). In contrast, around half of the formerly cohabiting parents participated (48% of fathers and 51% of mothers). Parents who separated before their child was born or never lived with the other parent had the lowest response rates of the three groups (42% of fathers and 47% mothers).

The retention rate also varied with the ages of the study children. Specifically, parents with older children were more likely than parents with younger children to participate in Wave 3. The pattern was apparent for both fathers and mothers. For example, 49% of fathers whose children were under 5 years in Wave 1 were interviewed in Wave 3 while 64% of fathers whose children were at least 12 years old were interviewed in Wave 3. This is consistent with higher retention rates for older parents.

The retention rate in Wave 3 was also linked with care-time arrangements. For both fathers and mothers, those with shared time were the most likely of all care-time groups to have participated in Wave 3, while parents who had the majority of nights or all nights had higher retention rates than those who had a minority of nights or no time at all.

2.5 Technical notes

The analyses presented in this report are based on weighted data. The sample data for parents were first weighted to take into account the unequal probability of sample selection of participants with different characteristics. Separate parent weights were developed for the top-up and follow-up samples. The method for weighting the Wave 3 data was as similar as possible to the methods and variables used in Waves 1 and 2, with only a slight simplification of the response propensity model to allow for the smaller cell sizes in Wave 3. This change to the weighting method does not affect the comparability of the datasets from each wave. The tables and figures presented in this report show weighted data, but where the number of observations is provided within a table or in a figure note, these are unweighted.

For the majority of the data items reported in the remainder of this report, the proportions of “don’t know” or “refused” responses were low (less than 5% of the combined total in most cases) and therefore, for simplicity, the “don’t know” and “refused” responses have been excluded from almost all of the reported analyses. In both Waves 2 and 3, parents who had reconciled or were attempting reconciliation were omitted.

The analyses in this report are for the most part based on two samples—all parents who were interviewed in any wave (including the top-up sample for Wave 3 data, unless otherwise specified), and parents who were interviewed in all three waves. The specific sample on which an analysis is based is noted at the end of each caption. Unless otherwise specified, “continuing sample” represents those parents who participated in all three waves. Further clarification is provided where analyses were based on specific sub-groups.

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8 Weighting variables used included participant gender, age group, income, and child support payer type.