Parenting and contact before and after separation

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Introduction

With high rates of divorce and separation in the UK, an increasing number of children are living apart from their fathers. What does this mean for mothers' and fathers' parenting?

There is a longstanding debate about whether separation has negative consequences for children, with a strong emphasis on the importance of children maintaining contact with their non-resident parent, most often their father. There is also interest in how separation affects mothers' parenting capacity.

Fathers are spending substantially more time with their children than previous generations and there has been a steady increase in post-separation contact. Nevertheless, around 20 per cent of non-resident fathers are not in contact with their children two years after separation, a state of affairs policymakers have been keen to address.

It is also recognised that a mother's mental health as well as her income can be adversely affected by a separation. Research from the US suggests that parents are likely to be less available and less able to pay attention to their children in the early stages of separation. Such "diminished capacity to parent" tends, however, to recover relatively quickly in most cases.

The research reported here therefore addresses the following two questions:

Question 1. What are the links between fathers' parenting before separation and contact after separation?

We use four measures of parenting: involvement in activities with the child; time alone with the child; feelings of closeness to the child, and confidence in his parenting.

We also investigate if contact is affected by time since separation, the age and sex of the child, father's health and the socio-economic position of the family.

Question 2. Is the parenting competence of mothers affected by separation, and if so, does it recover?

We also investigate if the impact of separation on parenting competence is linked to maternal mental health, child behaviour, and the level of contact the child has with his or her father.

This is the first study to investigate these questions for the UK using nationally representative data with information on both pre- and post-separation parenting. We find that more involved fathers pre-separation do have high rates of contact post-separation; and we show that separation has a negative impact on mothers' evaluation of their parenting competence.

The data

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a UK-wide cohort study of around 19,000 children born to families resident in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002. The children's families were first surveyed when the children were aged around 9 months old and then again at 3, 5, 7 and 11 years old. Both resident parents are interviewed and they also complete a self-completion questionnaire. Following separation, the non-resident parent is not re-interviewed. Any information about contact is collected from the resident parent. The MCS carries a detailed range of questions on parenting activities, which change with the age of the child. It also has detailed information on family context, parents' characteristics, and, for separated families, contact between the child and their non-resident parent.

Question 1

What are the links between fathers' parenting before separation and contact after separation?

To analyse the role of the father's parenting, we start with all families where the child was living with both parents at age 9 months. Parents who have separated before the child is 9 months old are not included, since we need to know about the father's parenting before separation. We exclude the small number of cases where the father dies or where the cohort children are twins or triplets, since parenting is likely to be different in such families. This gives us a sample of 2,758 children whose parents go on to separate by they time they are aged around 11.

Measures and questions

We investigate three aspects of post-separation contact: any contact, frequency of contact, and overnight stays with the father.

Specifically, separated mothers are asked at each survey whether there is any contact at all with the non-resident father and how frequently the child sees him, with the following options:

- Every day
- 5-6 times a week
- 3-4 times a week
- Once or twice a week
- Less often but at least once a month
- Less often than once a month
- Never

From age 5, mothers are asked how often the child stays overnight with his or her father, with the following options:

- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

We use four measures of father's parenting prior to separation. We construct an index of parenting activities to summarise his (age-specific) *involvement* with the child. At age 9 months this includes frequency of nappy changing, feeding and getting up in the night; and evolves with the child's age to include activities such as reading to the child, telling stories, making music, going to the park, playing games and putting them to bed. We separately measure whether the father *looks after the child on his own*, as this has been shown to be important for contact.

Our third measure is how *close* the father feels to the child. And our fourth measure of parenting is how *competent* he feels as a parent. This fourth measure was only asked when the child was aged 3 and 5.

Other factors

Time since separation is likely to have a negative impact on father's level of contact. However, child's age at separation is likely to increase the amount of

contact, other things being equal. Since time since separation increases with child's age, we need to disentangle these two effects. We construct a detailed monthly measure of time since separation from relationship history questions asked of the mother and measure child's age in fractions of years, centred around the median age.

We take into account a number of socio-demographic variables expected to influence both parenting and contact. These include parents' age, health, education, employment status and family income. We also investigate whether living in London (with its high costs), the child's sex, and whether there are older or younger siblings in the family are associated with contact patterns.

Analysis

We combine all those families that have experienced a separation between 9 months and 11 years and use multivariate regression methods to analyse each combination of our three contact measures and our four parenting measures.

This allows us to take account of both time since separation and child's age and to assess the role of pre-separation fathering net of the other factors likely to shape post-separation contact.

Key findings

Overall, levels of contact were high, with at least 8 out of 10 separated fathers in contact with their child. This is in line with figures from other aggregate sources. Moreover, 6 out of 10 fathers see their child at least once or twice a week. Of those who had contact, at least 4 out of 10 had their child stay overnight 'often' from the age of 5. The findings from multivariate analysis are summarised in Figure 1.

We find that whether contact is taking place at all is not affected by fathers' pre-separation parenting. What does matter for losing or maintaining contact is the age of the child at the time of separation and the length of time since separation. Loss of contact increases with time since separation and is more likely if the child is younger at the point of separation.

Looking at *how often* the non-resident parent sees their child tells a different story, with the involvement of fathers prior to separation making a real difference. Where the father was involved in parenting and had looked after the child by himself, contact tended to be more frequent after separation.

Interestingly, whether the child is a boy or girl affects frequency of contact, even where the level of pre-separation parenting was the same. Contact tends to be more frequent when the child is older at the point of separation and is a boy.

Paternal involvement and looking after the child on his own were both important determinants of the post-separation frequency of overnight stays.

Given contact, time since separation does not have an additional effect on the frequency of overnight stays. This could partly be because overnight stays are only measured from age 5, and the impact of time since separation is likely to be more acute at younger ages. We also see that boys stay over more frequently than girls.

Overall, we find that, over and above pre-separation parenting, socio-economic characteristics of the parents are clearly associated with post-separation contact, though somewhat less so for contact frequency than for any contact or overnight stays. This may highlight the importance of resources in, for example, being able to provide a bedroom for the child, or to find settings and opportunities to meet and spend time with them.

Figure 1: Summary of initial research hypotheses and findings

Parenting / family context measures	Contact measure					
	Any contact		Contact frequency		Overnight stays (if contact)	
	Hypothesis	Hypothesis supported?	Hypothesis	Hypothesis supported?	Hypothesis	Hypothesis supported?
Father has more involvement in childcare / activities	Greater chance of any contact	No	Greater contact frequency	Yes	More overnight stays	Yes
Father spends time alone with child more often	Greater chance of any contact	No	Greater contact frequency	Yes	More overnight stays	Yes
Father feels close to child	Greater chance of any contact	No	Greater contact frequency	Yes	More overnight stays	Yes
Father feels confident as a parent	Greater chance of any contact	No	Greater contact frequency	No	More overnight stays	No
More time since separation	a) Lower chance of contact b) But not so much lower for more involved fathers	a) Yes b) No	a) Lower chance of contact b) But not so much lower for more involved fathers	a) Yes b) No	No difference conditional on contact	Yes
Child is older	Greater chance of any contact	Yes	Greater contact frequency	Yes	More overnight stays	No
Sex of child	No difference	Yes	Lower contact frequency for girls	Yes	Fewer overnight stays for girls	Yes
Father's health is poor	Lower chance of any contact	No	Lower contact frequency	No	Fewer stays	No
Higher paternal and family socio-economic resources	Greater chance of any contact	Yes	Higher contact frequency	Partly	More overnight stays	Yes

Source: MCS survey sweeps 1-5 (age 9 months, 3 years, 5 years, 7 and 11 years)
Notes: An hypothesis was not supported if the p-value of the measure was greater than 0.05.

Question 2

Is the parenting competence of mothers affected by separation and if so, does it recover?

We now turn to the impact of separation on mothers' parenting capacity, to answer the following questions:

1. Do mothers who split have lower parenting competence than mothers who do not split and, if so, does it recover over time?

2. Can any reduction in self-evaluated confidence be linked to other factors that might be expected to influence perceived self-competence, such as mother's mental health, child's behaviour and father's post-separation contact?

For this part of the analysis we draw on information from the first four surveys of the MCS, as the parenting competence questions were not asked at the age 11 survey. The focus is on mothers, as they constitute the vast majority of parents with care following a separation involving young children. We look at those mothers who were living in an intact relationship when the child was around 9 months old and who were followed up at least once thereafter. Our total sample comprises 12,744 mothers who were living with the child's father at age 9 months: 10,706 mothers who were still living with the child's father when last surveyed and 2,038 mothers who were separated from the child's father by the age 7 survey.

Measures and analysis

Our measure of parental capacity is perceived self-competence collected from the mother in the self-completion questionnaire at the age 3, age 5 and age 7 surveys. We compare the competence of all those mothers who are still in intact relationships at each survey with those who have separated by that point, using growth curve models. Since we control for competence at age 9 months, this gives us a measure of the impact of separation on parenting competence over time. We investigate whether our results change if we include maternal mental health (measured using the Kessler scale) or child behavioural difficulties (measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire).

In a second step we compare how parenting competence varies among separated mothers. We look at whether competence is affected by the time since separation to evaluate 'recovery'; and we examine whether the amount of contact the child has with his or her father affects mothers' perceived competence, through more sharing of parenting responsibilities.

As well as parenting competence at age 9 months, we control for mother's age at the birth of the child, and her ethnic group, educational level, housing tenure, marital and employment status at the time of the first survey. We also control for the child's sex.

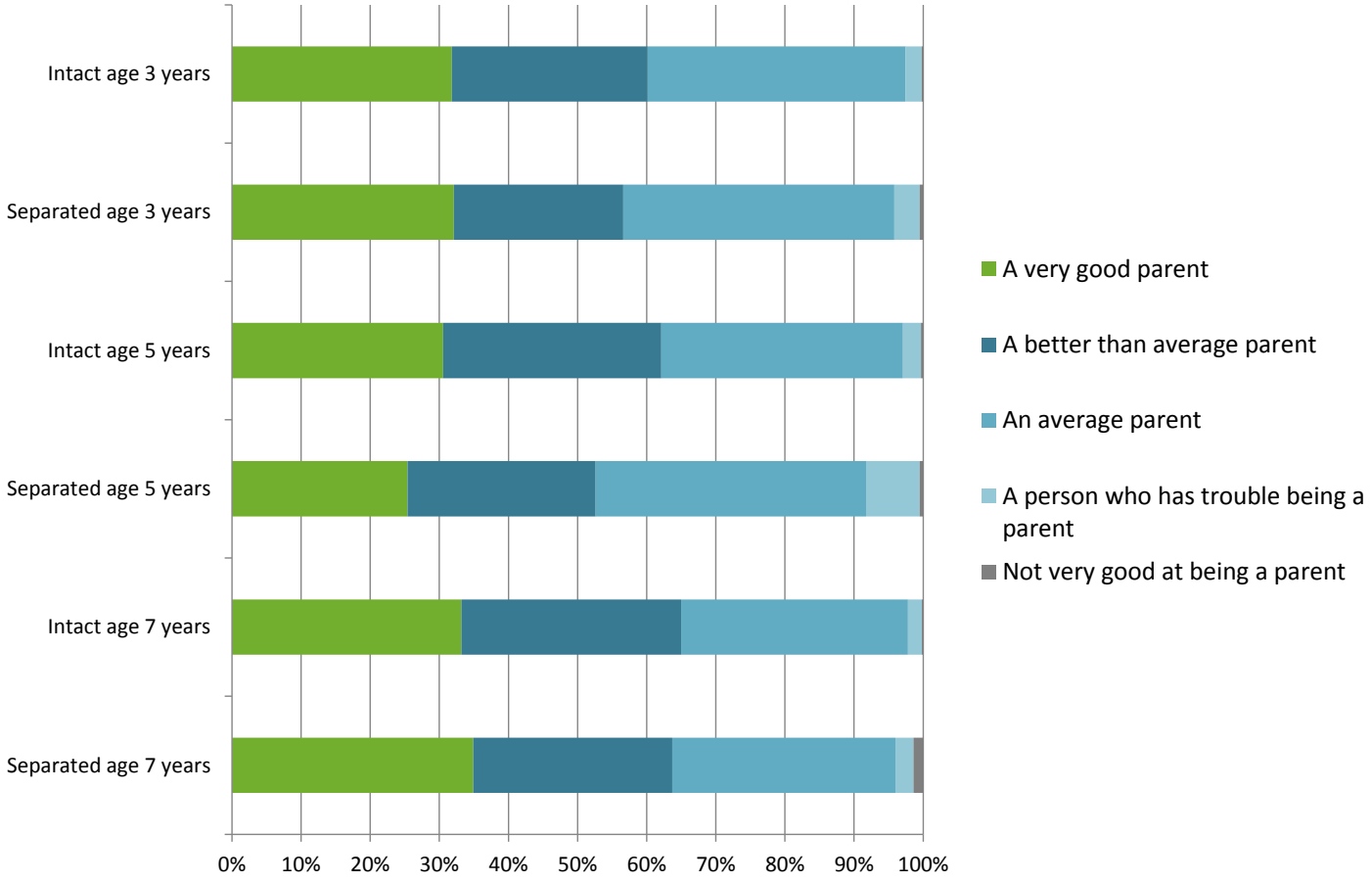
Key findings

Separation and parenting competence

Importantly we find no significant differences in initial parenting confidence among those who go on to separate compared to those who do not. This means that it is not those who have lower confidence in their parenting who subsequently separate, but that it is separation which is likely to be causing any reduction in self-evaluated competence.

Figure 2 shows that those who separate have lower self-evaluated parenting at each point. When we systematically investigated this in a multivariate framework, we found a statistically significant drop in parenting competence for mothers who separated.

Figure 2: Parenting competence among intact and separated mothers at each survey



Once maternal depression or children's behaviour is included in the model, the relationship disappears (Figure 3). So it seems that separation is likely to go hand in hand with higher rates of maternal depression and with higher rates of child behavioural problems, and that either of these results in a reduced evaluation of parenting competence.

Competence among separated mothers

We now turn to consider how far time since separation and contact with the non-resident father makes a difference among separated mothers. In contrast to the literature on the effects of separation on mental health and on life satisfaction, we saw no improvement in perceived parenting competence among separated mothers over time, whether or not we controlled for child's age. That is, mothers who had been separated for longer did not tend to have higher parenting competence compared to mothers who had been separated more recently.

It may be that this is partly a consequence of the relatively short time span since separation within our sample, with an average of only 2.7 years since separation across the mothers. However, replicating the analysis with depression as the dependent variable indicated that, among separated mothers, the level of depression was sensitive to the time since separation. Mothers' mental health tended to recover over time since separation, other things being equal. This finding on depression is consistent with other research, while parenting competence shows little improvement with time since separation.

We found no association between the level of post-separation contact fathers had with their children and mothers' perception of their parenting competence. That is, more sharing of parenting did not increase mothers' perception of their own competence.

Figure 3: Summary of initial research hypotheses and findings from analysis

	Parenting competence	
	Hypothesis	**Hypothesis supported?**
Separation	Reduces competence	Yes
Time since separation	Increases competence ('recovery')	No
Child's behavioural problems	More problems reduce competence; mediates effect of separation	Yes
Maternal mental health (depression)	Reduces competence; mediates effect of separation	Yes
Father's contact frequency with child	Increases competence	No
Age 9 months competence	Associated with higher subsequent competence	Yes
Socio-demographic factors	Associated with competence and with separation, but do not fully mediate impact of separation	Yes

Source: MCS survey sweeps 1-4 (age 9 months, 3 years, 5 years and 7 years)
Notes: A hypothesis was rejected if the p-value was greater than 0.05.

Conclusion

Looking across parental separations taking place in children's lives from 9 months up to 11 years old, we found that a father's pre-separation parenting was associated with post-separation contact. Broadly speaking, a father's parenting involvement had more bearing on frequency of contact and frequency of overnight stays than on whether or not he had any contact at all. This suggests that those who are supported in being more active parents in the child's early years will maintain such involvement to a greater extent if the parents split up. Worryingly though, even after controlling for parenting levels, there was evidence of a 'decay' in contact with time since separation. It was not just that non-involved fathers were more likely to lose touch with their children over time, the duration of separation seems to matter across the board.

On the question of whether mothers who subsequently separate are likely to have lower perceived self-competence than mothers who remain with their partners, our evidence makes two specific – and unique – contributions to the debate. First, it includes both formerly married and cohabiting couples; and secondly it focuses on the mother's perspective before and after separation rather than on child outcomes. This approach helps paint a new picture of what is happening in the UK. The results show that separation affects the perceived parenting capacity of parents, but the way it does so operates through increased risks of maternal depression and through child's behaviour.

The fact that the parenting competence of separated mothers does not increase over time, and that it is not influenced by levels of contact with the absent father, suggest that it may be the separation itself rather than the post-separation arrangements that undermine confidence in parenting. While we have suggested that a child's behavioural problems may impact a mother's assessment of her competence, it may still be the case that the shock to a mother's parenting exacerbates problems with a child's behaviour, we can not separate the causal direction.

Recommendations

Paying attention to pre-separation circumstances, with a particular focus on the types and levels of activities a father is involved in, can pay dividends when attempting to understand patterns of post-separation contact. To this extent it is important that fathers' participation in childcare in the family home receives increased support both financially and culturally. Certainly, it would seem that parental leave and paternity leave policies that support the involvement of fathers in parenting early in the child's life and through their early years may have payoffs in terms of subsequent contact, should the parents separate. It is important to note, however, that socio-economic factors are important influences on post-separation contact over and above pre-separation parenting patterns. Policy makers who are concerned about fathers maintaining contact with their children might do well to consider these findings. A good example is having the means to provide an additional bedroom for the child so that they can stay overnight.

Our findings on mothers' parenting confidence suggest that a focus solely on a recovery in her mental health after a separation may not be enough to help get her back on her feet. Child's behaviour also affects perceived competence, and the impact of separation appears to persist over time. Approaches that focus on psychological and practical support around parenting are, therefore, likely to have positive knock-on effects.

Further information

Working Papers

A working paper on each of the research questions from the project has been published as part of LSE's CASE Working Paper Series.

Haux, T., Platt, L. and Rosenberg, R. (2015) Parenting and post-separation contact: what are the links? CASE Working Paper, London: CASE, http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper189.pdf

Platt, L., Haux, T. and Rosenberg, R. (2015) Mothers, parenting and the impact of separation, CASE Working Paper, London: CASE, http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper190.pdf

Data

Data for this research came from Sweeps 1-5 of the Millennium Cohort Study.

University of London. Institute of Education. Centre for Longitudinal Studies. 2012. "Millennium CohortStudy: First Survey, 2001-2003[computer file]. 10th Edition." Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], August 2012. SN: 4683.

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University of London. Institute of Education. Centre for Longitudinal Studies. 2012. "Millennium Cohort Study: Third Survey, 2006 [computer file]. 5th Edition." Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], August 2012. SN: 5795.

University of London. Institute of Education. Centre for Longitudinal Studies. 2014. "Millennium Cohort Study: Fifth Survey, 2012 [computer file]." Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], February 2014. SN: 7464.

For more information about the Millennium Cohort Study, visit the website www.cls.ioe.ac.uk.

Contact details

For further information about the project and a range of useful resources, please visit the project page on the Nuffield Foundation website www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

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