

# Population & Societies

## When fathers lose touch with their children after a separation

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Many fathers rarely see their children after a separation, and some lose touch altogether. How many children are concerned? Analysing data from the French version of the Generations and Gender Survey (Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles, ERFI), Arnaud Régnier-Loilier studies the frequency of this loss of contact between fathers and their children, and the circumstances in which it occurs.

With the increase in union instability, children are at greater risk of experiencing a parental separation. Under the French law of 4 March 2002, parental authority is shared between the father and mother in the event of separation. This is the case for 98% of divorces and 93% of separations of unmarried parents.[1] The parent who does not have primary custody is entitled to spend time with the child(ren) and to look after them in his or her home (unless there are serious grounds for refusal), but the law does not impose any requirements with respect to the children's main place of residence, which is generally with the mother (in 7 cases out of 10). While alternating residence has increased in recent years, it is still uncommon, and residence with the father is exceptional. After separation, it is difficult for a father to fulfil his paternal role because the children no longer share his everyday life.

With the growing numbers of lone-parent families, it is important to know how children are affected by the absence of a parent during adolescence and after reaching adulthood. Many studies have demonstrated the positive effect on children's social, cognitive and emotional development of continued contact with the father after parental separation. Yet separated fathers frequently lose touch with their children, as shown by the ERFI survey (Box).

### Almost one in five children whose parents have separated never see their father

In families where the parents are still together (Figure 1a), the children start leaving the parental home at

age 18 to pursue their education or set up their own home, but they stay in close contact with their parents and the proportion who never see their father or mother is insignificant. When the parents are separated, however (Figure 1b), frequency of contact differs greatly between the father and the mother. With a few rare exceptions, separated mothers report living with their children until they reach age 18, either all the time or through alternating residence. Beyond this age, contact remains frequent; only 5% of children aged 18-34 never see their mother.

Residence with the father is less frequent, and is overestimated in the survey.<sup>(1)</sup> Separated fathers who do not live with their children see them frequently at young ages, notably before age 5. However, almost one in ten under 18 year-olds never see their separated father, and this proportion rises to 19% at ages 18-21 and to 32% at ages 30-34. In all, for 18% of children (aged 0-34) of separated parents, the father reports never seeing them.

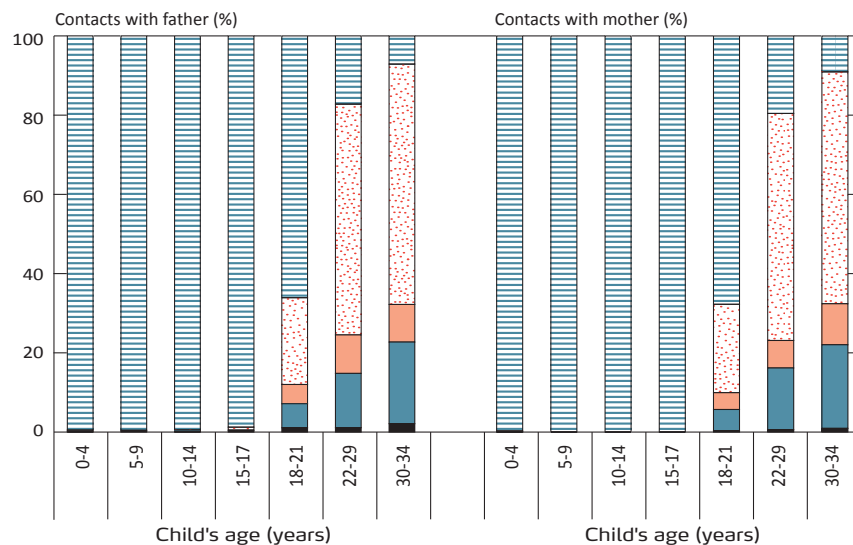
Age 18 is a clear break-off point (Figure 1b), perhaps because rights associated with parental custody apply until the children's 18th birthday. Up to that age, the parent with primary custody is obliged by law to provide access to the child(ren) for the other parent.

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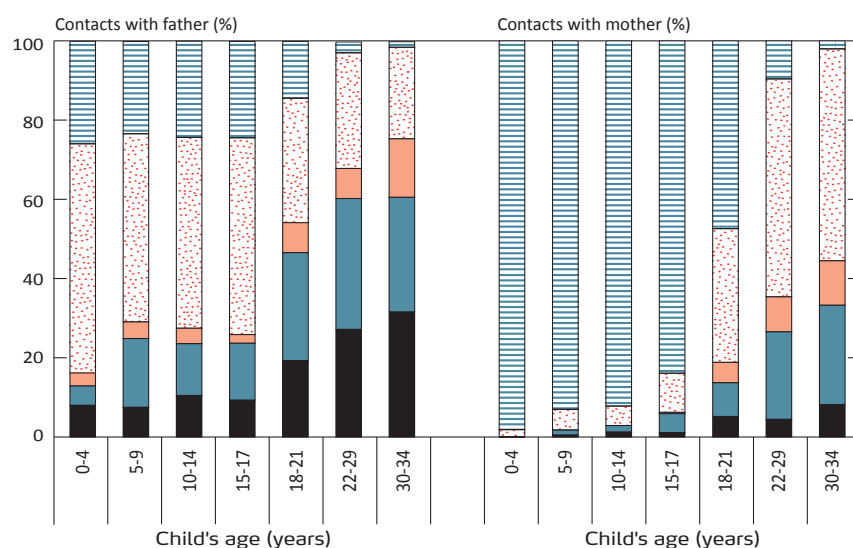
1. In most cases where a father reports living with his child(ren), a system of alternating residence is in place; second, recently separated fathers are under-represented in the survey [2]; last, men tend to under-report their number of children in surveys, notably after a separation when links are severed, but also to report living with children when this is not in fact the case.

Figure 1. Frequency of parent-child contacts by child's age

a. Children whose parents are not separated



b. Children whose parents are separated



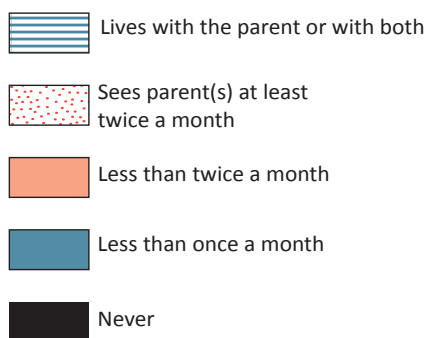
(A. Régnier-Lollier, *Population and Societies*, no. 500, INED, may 2013)

Source: INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS(1), 2005.

Population: Children below age 35.

Interpretation: For 8% of children aged 0-4 whose parents are separated, the father reports never seeing them.

Note: According to mothers, 98% of children aged 0-4 live with them after parental separation (Figure 1b), while fathers report that 26% live with them (making a total of more than 100%). This is due in part to situations of alternating residence, when both parents report living with the child, but also to the fact that certain parents tend to report living with children who in fact only stay with them on an occasional basis.



After reaching their majority, children cannot be legally obliged to see their father, nor the father to see his children. Some over-18s may no longer wish to maintain contact with their father, and in some cases, the father considers that his parenting role comes to an end at this age and so makes no further effort to keep in touch.

Bonds which weaken over time

This net effect of child's age at the time of the survey reflects different time-related factors. First, the older the child, the longer the time that has probably elapsed since parental separation, and it is known that frequency of contact is linked to time since separation. Fewer than 6% of children whose parents separated less than 4 years previously never see their father, but this proportion rises to 19% for separations that occurred 10-14 years previously, and to 32% for even older separations (Table). The child's age at the time of separation is also a factor: the younger the child, the less he or she see the father after separation. More than one child in four among those aged below three at the time of separation do not see their father, versus one in seven among those who were at least 8 years old.

With time, the father's situation may also evolve; he may form a new union, for example, and have a child with his new partner. In such cases, his bond with the previous child(ren) is even weaker: 14% of children never see their father if he lives alone, versus 24% if he lives with a partner and has a child in this new union (Table). While these findings show a clear correlation, they do not distinguish between cause and effect. When the father finds a new partner, the child may no longer want to see him, he may lose interest in the child, or the mother may seek to prevent father and child from keeping in touch; equally, the loss of contact with the child may have encouraged the father to

start a new life elsewhere.

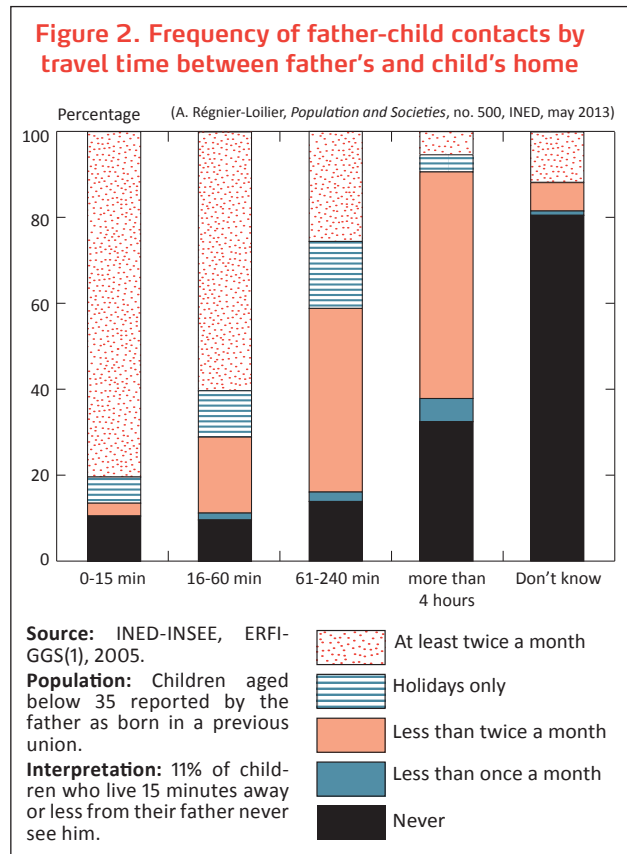
Geographical distance between parent and child

Not surprisingly, the distance between the parent's and child's respective homes is a central factor: the greater

Table. Proportion of children with separated parents who never see their father, by various characteristics		
		% who never see their father
Sex of child	Female	17.7
	male	17.9
Time since separation	0-4 years	5.6
	5-9 years	7.3
	10-14 years	19.4
	15-34 years	32.3
	unknown	19.5
Person who initiated the divorce	father	21.7
	both parents	15.6
	mother	23.2
	not married	15.7
Father's current situation	alone	14.1
	childless couple	20.1
	couple with child(ren)	24.2
Living arrangement of child in year following separation	with father	12.0
	with mother	21.0
	alternating residence	1.0
	other	9.6
Father's educational level	lower secondary	22.3
	upper secondary ( <i>baccalauréat</i> )	10.9
	higher education	6.0
Father's employment status	active in employment	15.2
	inactive, unemployed	27.6
Monthly income of father's household	below €1000	29.8
	€1000-1999	15.6
	€2000-2999	23.4
	€3000+	7.8
Father spent most of his childhood	with both parents	15.1
	other situations	30.3
Frequency of contact between father and his own father	never	39.3
	less than once a month	6.0
	less than once a week	8.9
	at least once a week	2.5
	father deceased	22.3
<b>OVERALL</b>		<b>17.8</b>

**Source:** INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS(1), 2005.  
**Population:** Children below age 35 reported by the father as born in a previous union dissolved by separation.  
**Note:** Apart from the child's sex, the correlation with each of the variables presented here is significant, all other things being equal (logistic regression not presented here.)

the distance, the less frequent the contacts.[4] The averages conceal interesting differences, however (Figure 2). Up to a journey time of 4 hours, the time needed to travel from one home to the other has a strong influence on the frequency of meetings, without affecting the proportion of children who never see their father (10-14%, non-significant differences). It is only above 4 hours of journey time that the proportion increases sharply (to 33%), reaching 81% when the father reports not knowing the travel time to his child's home, a response which suggests a total loss of contact.



### Less frequent loss of father-child contact after alternating residence

The way the separation took place also influences the frequency of father-child contact. The proportion of children who never see their father is high when the divorce was not by mutual consent but initiated by either the mother or the father only (Table). Ties are more frequently broken if the child(ren) lived mainly with their mother in the year following the separation: 21% no longer see their father, versus 12% in the rare cases where the father has custody, and only 1% when they live alternately with their two parents.

While alternating residence appears to substantially reduce the risk of fathers losing touch with their children, in fact a combination of effects are at play. First, alternating residence enables the father to maintain regular links with the child(ren) and to establish a certain normality; second, this solution tends to be chosen in cases of consensual separation, less so when the parents are in conflict: alternating residence is more frequent in cases of divorce by mutual consent (22%) than in cases of uncontested divorce (11%) or fault-based divorce (4%).

### Other factors are involved

The father's level of education, employment status and income all affect the likelihood for a child of not maintaining contact with him. The lower his level of education and the greater the instability of his employment

situation (short-term contract, unemployment, disability), the more likely he is to lose touch with his child(ren) (Table). Conversely, the proportion of children who never see their father is much lower when the household where he lives has a high income (8% when the monthly income is €3,000 or more, versus 30% when it is below €1,000). A high income makes it easier to pay the travel costs of visits and to afford a dwelling that is large enough to accommodate the child(ren) when they come to stay. A father's relations with his children are also strongly influenced by the relations he had with his own father, and by his past family history in general. The proportion of children who no longer see their father is twice as high when the father himself was not raised by two parents up to age 15 (30% versus 15% when he was raised by both parents). Likewise, loss of contact is much more frequent if the child(ren)'s father never sees his own father. Last, we note that the absence of father-child contact is not linked to the child's sex, but in cases where children live with their father, they are more frequently boys.

### Are behaviours evolving?

In 2005, 13% of under-age children not living with their fathers were reported by the fathers to have no contact with them. An earlier study showed that in 1994, 24% of under-age children living with their mother never saw

their father. [6] Although, for methodological reasons, these two studies cannot be directly compared, it would appear that a slightly higher proportion of fathers are maintaining ties with their children than in the past. The context has changed in recent years, and the idea that the parental couple must outlive the conjugal couple is taking hold. The law of 2002 doubtless contributes to this change by limiting the cases where the mother can prevent the father from seeing his children, and by encouraging fathers to claim their rights. By simplifying divorce by mutual consent, the law of 26 May 2004 (which came into force on 1 January 2005) aims to make separation less antagonistic, thereby making it easier for fathers to maintain relations with their children. In the majority of cases, however, custody is granted to the mother for a variety of reasons. While this option may be the preferred choice of both parents, or may stem from the practical difficulties of establishing alternating residence (geographical distance between parents, financial problems etc.), it creates obstacles to regular parenting by the father and clearly increases the difficulty of maintaining father-child ties.

### References

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- [3] Toulemon L., 2005, "Enfants et beaux-enfants des hommes et des femmes" in Lefèvre C. and Filhon A., *Histoires de familles, histoires familiales*, Les cahiers de l'Ined, 156, pp. 59-77.
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- [5] Chaussebourg L., Carrasco V., Lermenier A., 2009, "Le divorce", report of the Ministry of Justice.
- [6] Villeneuve-Gokalp C., 2005, "Conséquences des ruptures familiales sur le départ des enfants" in Lefèvre C. and Filhon A., *Histoires de familles, histoires familiales*, Les cahiers de l'Ined, 156, pp. 235-271.

#### Box. The French GGS survey (Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles, ERFI)

The ERFI survey was conducted in 2005 by INED and INSEE on a sample of 10,079 men and women aged 18-79 living in ordinary households in mainland France and Corsica. It is the French version of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) conducted in some twenty countries (<http://www.ggp-i.org/>).

Focusing on family construction, intergenerational and gender relations, the questionnaire asked respondents to describe all of their children and, for those living outside the household, to indicate how frequently they saw each of them (the question was: "How often do you see [first name of non-cohabiting child]?"). Here, the study covered children aged 0-34 (in 2005) reported by the father and born in a union that was later dissolved, whether or not the child lived with the father at the time of the survey (n = 1,227 children).

Note that the fact of not seeing one's father or mother does not necessarily signify a total absence of ties, since other forms of contact may take place (letters, phone calls, Internet, etc.), but they are not covered in the survey. The ERFI survey was funded by ANR, CNAF, CNAV, COR, DARES, DREES, INED and INSEE. The present study forms part of the ANR project "Lone fathers: contemporary fatherhood and new family trajectories" (project leader: A. Martial, CNRS - Centre Norbert Elias).

### Abstract

According to the 2005 ERFI survey, almost one in ten under-age children whose parents are separated never see their father. The younger the child at the time of parental separation, the less frequently he or she subsequently sees his father. The proportion of children who never see their father is high when the divorce was not by mutual consent but initiated by either the mother or the father only. It is also higher when the father has a low level of education, has an unstable job or is unemployed, or has a low income. Loss of contact between father and child is less frequent in cases of alternating residence.