

How often do adult children see their parents?

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Leaving the parental home is not a final separation. In France, 43% of adult children see their father or mother every week. From the student's "homecoming" to the regular visits of the independent adult, these encounters are shaped both by choice and by constraint. Using data from the French version of an international survey on family relationships, Arnaud Régnier-Loilier has calculated the frequency of contacts between parents and children, and the variations between men and women, professionals and manual workers, only children and members of large families, etc.

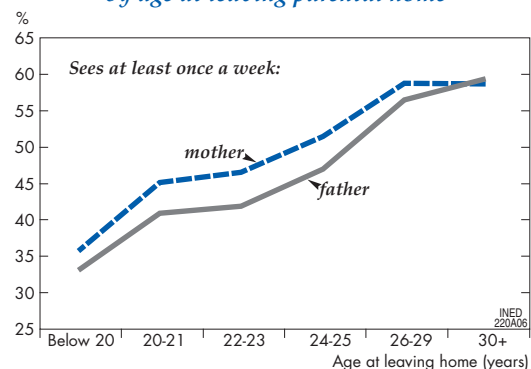
How often do children see their parents after leaving home? How does this frequency vary as parents and children grow older? The Generations and Gender Survey (Box 1) provides data to measure and examine the influence of different factors on the frequency of contacts between children and parents, such as age at leaving home, family environment during childhood, or the number of brothers and sisters. It provides a means to check whether certain events, such as the birth of children, parental separation or the death of a father or mother, bring families closer together or, on the contrary, weaken the parent-child relationship. The fact of seeing or not seeing one's parents at least once a week is used as the indicator of frequency of contact [1].

◆ Children who leave home earlier see their parents less often

The earlier people leave the parental home, the less often they see their parents afterwards (Figure 1). Among children who left home before age 20, 35% see their mother at least once a week, compared with 58% of those who left home at ages 26-29, and 33% their father, compared with 56% of the second group. This is due partly to the fact that those who leave home earlier tend to move further away (Box 2): 54% of children who leave before age 20 live more than 30 minutes from their parents' home, compared with 35% of those who leave at ages 26-29. And children living far from their

parents see them less often. If distance is measured by the time taken to travel from one home to another, 85% of children living less than 15 minutes from their parents' home see them at least once a week, compared with 41% of those living between 30 minutes and an hour away, and 3% of those living more than two hours away. The distance between parents and children is sometimes imposed by their occupation or by conjugal constraints. Farmers for example, who generally take over from their father on the family farm, often live close to their parents – half live less than seven minutes away. Conversely, half of people in higher-level occupations live at least one hour away from their parents.

Figure 1 – Percentage of children who see their father or mother at least once a week by age at leaving parental home



Population: Men and women aged 30-79 whose parents are both still alive.

Source: INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1, 2005.

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Distance also reflects the closeness of bonds between parents and children. If children leave home at an early age when they have been raised by just one of their parents, they also tend to move further away: 41% of those raised by one parent live more than two hours away from their mother and 45% more than two hours from their father, compared with only 26% of those raised by both parents

◆ **When the parents are separated, children see their mother twice as often as their father**

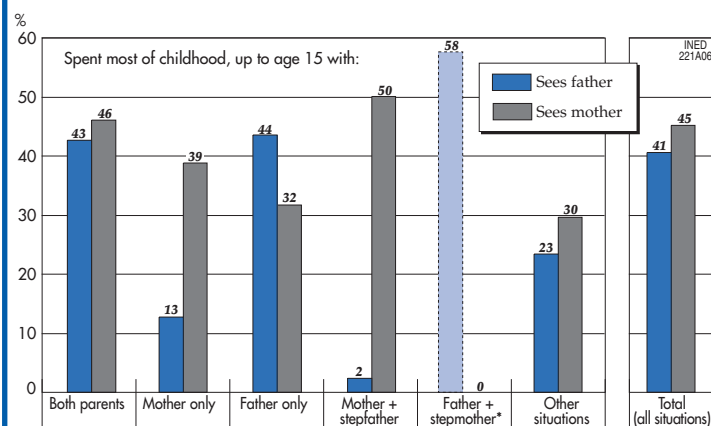
When both parents are alive, practically the same proportion of children see their mother every week (45%) as their father (41%). But this average conceals large disparities between families where the parents are separated and those where they are not. When parents are not separated, the children logically see them both equally often. However, when they live apart, they more often see their mother (39% at least once a week) than their father (19%). When the parents are separated, children are closer to the parent who contributed most to their upbringing: in 8 cases out of 10, the mother. When the mother raised the child alone, without a stepfather, contacts with her are frequent: 39% of children see her every week (Figure 2). When the father is the lone parent, without a stepmother, contacts with him are even more frequent: 44% see him every week. This unusual situation reflects a strong attachment between father and child. Relationships with the father are very loose, however, when he was not the main parent in the child's upbringing: only 13% of children in this case have contacts with him, compared with 32% who see their mother if they were raised by their father. Lastly, children brought up by a step-parent have practically no relationship with the other absent parent, of either sex.

◆ **Only children see their parents more often**

The frequency of contacts also depends on the number of brothers and sisters. The larger the number of siblings, the less often they see their parents: 51% of only children see their mother at least once a week, compared with 42% of children who have at least three brothers and sisters. The same pattern is observed in contacts with the father. This does not necessarily suggest that the parent-child relationship is weaker, but rather that it is less exclusive, with parents sharing their time between their different children.

For an equal family size, women who only have brothers see their mother and father more often than those who have at least one sister. Contrariwise, the

Figure 2 – Percentage of children who see their parents at least once a week by childhood family environment



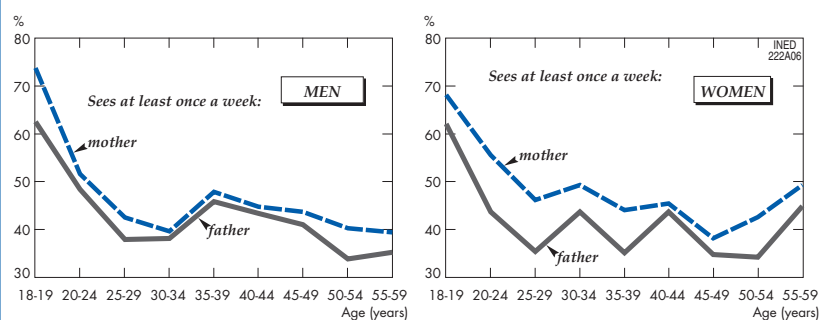
Interpretation: 46% of individuals who spent most of their childhood with both parents see their mother at least once a week.

* numbers are very small (fewer than 10 observations).

Population: Men and women aged 18-59 whose parents are both still alive.

Source: INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1, 2005.

Figure 3 - Percentage of children who see their father and/or mother at least once a week by age



Population: Men and women aged 18-59 whose parents are both still alive.

Source: INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1, 2005.

more sisters they have, the less often they see their parents. For men, on the other hand, no differences are observed.

◆ **From independence in youth to dependence in old age**

At all ages, daughters maintain more contacts with their mother. The same is true for sons, though to a lesser extent (Figure 3). After age 50, both have more frequent contacts with their mother than with their father, though this is because mothers are more frequently widowed at older ages. In cases where both parents are still alive, these differences totally disappear. Frequency of contact with parents tends to decrease with age, but rises again at ages of 30-34 and again after age 50 for daughters and at ages 35-39 for sons.

Before age 25, children see their parents very often. Though they have left the parental home, they are not necessarily independent of their parents, especially if they are students. Frequency of contacts then declines up to around age 30, as the children assume their independence and start living with a partner [4].

The increase in contacts at age 30 among daughters corresponds in part to the birth of children. Grandchildren revive the family support network, with parents – mothers in particular – being called upon to look after preschool-age grandchildren. But this renewal of contacts only takes place if the daughters live close to the parental home: among those who live with a partner less than 30 minutes away from their parents, 87% of those with a child under three see their mother at least once a week, compared with 80% of those with no children and 74% of those with one or more children aged three or above. When the parental home is more than 30 minutes away, the trends are reversed: travelling between homes is more difficult, both for those with a small child and for the grandparents.

With regard to sons, the more frequent contacts with parents around age 35 are not due to the birth of children (1), but rather to the fact that more sons at this age live close to their parents: half of sons aged 25-34 live less than 30 minutes from their mother, and 57% at ages 35-44. This closer geographical proximity is also observed, though to a lesser extent, among daughters from age 25.

Last, the increase in contacts between parents and daughters after age 50 reflects the fact that daughters are the main providers of support to elderly, more dependent parents.

◆ People in higher-level occupations see their parents less often

Frequency of contact also depends on the child's occupation. Unemployed men living less than 30 minutes away from their parents see their mother and father more often than those who are employed (84% of unemployed men see their mother at least once a week and 76% their father, compared with 71% and 69% respectively for those in employment). If they live more than 30 minutes away however, the financial constraints of unemployment reduce the frequency of contacts, due to higher transport costs. For women, the differences between working and unemployed daughters are smaller, though for comparable distances, non-working women see their parents more often, probably because they have more free time.

Large differences are observed between occupations. People in higher-level occupations see their parents almost three times less often than farmers, and only half as often as manual workers and clerical workers. These differences can be explained partly by the distance between the parents' and children's homes.

(1) Those with children under three do not see their parents more often than those with no children.

Box 1

The French Generation and Gender Survey

The "Étude des Relations Familiales et Intergénérationnelles" (ERFI-GGS1) is the French version of the European Generations and Gender Survey being conducted in around twenty industrialized countries. It was carried out in France by INED and INSEE in the autumn of 2005 on a sample of 10,079 men and women aged between 18 and 79. Respondents were asked about their working activity, their health, their family situation, their children, their parents and their relationship with them (support, frequency of contacts, etc.). The same people will be interviewed again in 2008. In this article, we focus on the answers to two specific questions: "In what month and year did you for the first time start living separately from your parents for at least three months?"; "How often do you see your father / mother?"

To find out more: [2] www-erfi.ined.fr

Box 2

Children leave the parental home at the same age as 40 years ago, but for different reasons

The ERFI survey (Box 1) shows that in France, in 2005, young adults left their parents' home at the same age as 40 years ago, at around age 21 on average for both men and women. The distribution of ages at leaving home has changed however. Fewer children leave the parental home below the age of 18: early leavers represented 10% of those born in 1971-75, compared with 20% of those born in 1931-35. The reasons for leaving home have also changed. In the past, children often left home to live with a partner: 40% of men and 65% of women born between 1931 and 1935 and who left home after age 16 started living with a partner in the year of their departure, compared with 24% and 44% respectively for the 1971-1975 cohorts. Today, they do so in order to pursue their education or to find a job. This is especially true for children whose parents live far from universities or employment areas, and who tend to move away earlier than the average. Conversely, high rents in urban areas often prevent young people from leaving home, or oblige them to delay their decision [5]. The age at leaving home is also governed by other factors such as the structure of the parental household during childhood. Children who have lived in a reconstituted family due to divorce, the death of a parent or the absence of a parent since birth, tend to leave home at a younger age [5]. Moreover, children raised by their father and a stepmother leave earlier than those raised by their mother and a stepfather [3].

The average distance is largest among people in higher-level occupations. And for children living more than 30 minutes away from their parents, the difference between socio-occupational categories disappears. But distance doesn't explain everything. Among children living less than 30 minutes away, behaviours are different: 85% of farmers, 78% of clerical workers and 77% of manual workers see their mother every week, compared with only 64% of people in higher-level occupations.

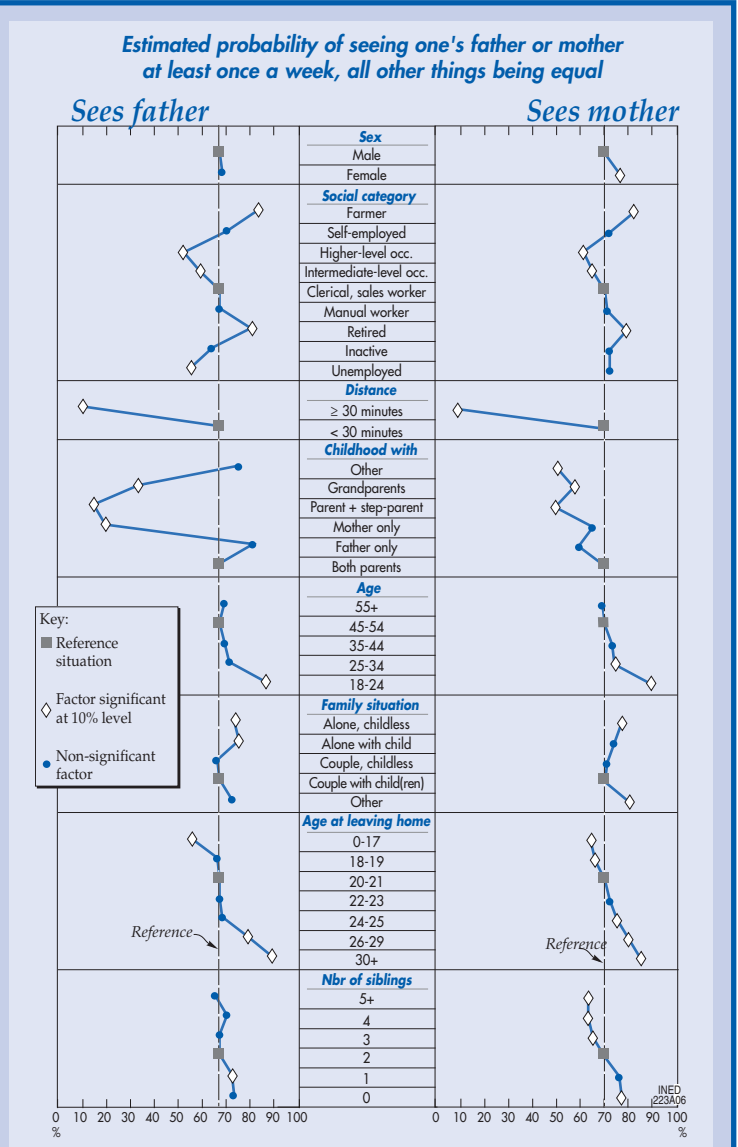
Box 3

What factors influence the frequency of contacts between parents and children?

The frequency of contacts between parents and children depends on various factors: geographical factors to start with, such as distance; demographic factors such as age, sex, number of siblings; and social factors such as the family environment during childhood, educational level, age at leaving home or type of employment. We sought to separate out the different factors and determine the influence of each, "all other things being equal" (Figure). As expected, geographical distance is the predominant factor, with increasing distance reducing the frequency of contact. Compared with the reference category (Cf. "Interpretation" of the figure), those living less than 30 minutes from their parents' home are much more likely to see their mother each week (70%) than those living more than 30 minutes away (8%), all other things being equal. This is the factor with by far the strongest effect on contacts with parents, though it does not explain everything. A childhood spent with the mother and step-father reduces the probability of seeing one's father as much as living far away from the father's home. Having several brothers and sisters also affects frequency of contacts, though to a lesser extent. Last, daughters are more likely than sons to see their mother each week, though both see their father equally often. Weekly contacts with parents are more frequent among young people under 24, among children who left the parental home at a late age and, to a lesser extent, among women living alone without children. Last, farmers are more likely to see their father and mother regularly than clerical workers and people in intermediate and higher-level occupations.

Source: INED-INSEE, ERFI-GGS1, 2005.

Interpretation: For persons corresponding to all reference situations (man, employed, living less than 30 minutes from parents, etc.) 70% see their mother at least once a week. Among women corresponding to all other reference situations, the proportion who see their mother at least once a week is 76%. The difference between these two proportions measures the specific effect of sex, all other things being equal.



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ABSTRACT

Children who leave home earlier see their parents less often after moving out. This is due partly to the fact that they tend to move further away, and larger distances reduce the frequency of contacts. The frequency of contacts declines as the parents and children grow older. It is also lower among children with brothers and sisters than among only children, since the parents share their time between their different offspring. People in higher-level occupations see their parents two to three times less often than farmers, manual workers and clerical workers. These differences are due partly to the geographical distance between parents and children, which is larger on average for higher-level occupations. Last, when the parents are separated, the children maintain closer contacts with the parent who played the largest role in their upbringing, generally the mother.