

Cohabitation, separation and fatherhood

Cohabitation has become widespread and separation in these relationships is more likely than it is in marriage. Yet we know little about why couples cohabit, the role of cohabiting men as fathers and what happens to them when a relationship dissolves. This study, by a team at Lancaster University, examines cohabitation breakdown from the perspective of the father. In interviews with fifty parents who had cohabited and then separated, it looked at how fathers and mothers described their cohabitation, the role of the father in the relationship and his continued involvement once the relationship dissolved. The researchers found that:

- f** Respondents compared marriage and cohabitation in three main ways: as indistinguishable and in which one or other form is a preferable arrangement. A majority described cohabitation as a moral obligation or commitment equivalent to marriage, but also as more 'honest', with change and dissolution seen as part of a negotiation process rather than a breach of marriage vows.
- f** 72 per cent of these unmarried mothers and fathers proclaimed strong beliefs in egalitarian gender roles.
- f** Almost half (47 per cent) of these fathers were reported to have a major or equally shared involvement in their children's care when they were cohabiting.
- f** However, often the separation was attributed to the man's 'immaturity' either in failing to provide for his family or in trying to break away from this 'traditional' expectation. This view was expressed mainly by women.
- f** There was a deeply held assumption, mainly by mothers, that maternal 'rights' have a primacy over paternal responsibility.
- f** After separation the man's role in childcare dropped considerably even if he had been the primary carer of his child. The mothers were depicted by both mothers and fathers as being in control of paternal contact, whether by keeping fathers at arms' length or encouraging their involvement.
- f** A number of factors hampered the continuation of paternal care of the child, including the size and location of the father's new home, negotiations with their ex-partner over money and the lack of a strong social support network for fathers.
- f** Many fathers felt powerless in their attempts to maintain their contact with and responsibilities towards their children.

Background

One-quarter of children are now born to cohabiting couples and these relationships are more likely to dissolve. At the time of preparing this *Findings*, unmarried men do not have Parental Responsibility for their children, unless they take formal steps to do so. This report looks at the experiences of such fathers and examines their reasons for cohabiting, their reported involvement in childcare and how this changes once the cohabitation breaks down.

Why cohabit?

All respondents were asked this question. On the surface their responses appear to support popular beliefs that individuals drift in and out of cohabitation:

"We didn't make a clear decision, it just sort of happened. He started staying a lot and then we got a house together, it was an evolutionary thing. We didn't say 'Oh right, we're going to live together'. It just sort of happened." (Mother)

However, a large majority depicted cohabitation as at least equivalent to marriage. Some suggested that the two forms of relationship are indistinguishable – both require a commitment:

"My commitment to a relationship is the same, regardless of the piece of paper." (Father)

"I don't honestly see a lot of difference between marriage and cohabitation ... what matters is the relationship and whether it works or not, you know." (Mother)

A few contrasted cohabitation with what they depicted as a preferable and more stable formal marriage contract. However, 66 per cent of respondents still believed that living together is preferable to marriage in that it allows greater honesty and individual freedom within relationships. Formal ties were seen as a relic of a more religious past, or as an oppressive institution:

"I detest the process whereby couples seek the approval of the state hierarchy or the religious hierarchy in order to do what they want to do. My view is if people want to be together, let them be together, they don't need anybody's permission." (Father)

Cohabiting men as fathers

Most couples dismissed the idea that cohabiting fathers are 'irresponsible' and described a high degree of paternal childcare during the cohabitation. These

views reflected a belief in sexual equality both in the home and within society at large:

"We'd share doing stuff together, it was hard work getting up in the middle of the night, feeding him with bottles and stuff like that but generally it was easy going, like it was easier [with] two of you." (Mother)

"You do the same things ... you share bills, you work together to make a home, you have a commitment to each other." (Father)

In this sample at some time in the relationship, 14 per cent of fathers had been primary caregivers, while 33 per cent had shared the care of the child equally.

Reasons for the break-up

Forty per cent of the sample (particularly mothers) identified the 'irresponsibility' of their partner as the main cause of the split. Seventy per cent of separations were initiated by the woman.

"[ex-partner's name] would describe it as she grew up but I didn't. And her kind of idea of what's fun and so on changed I think as she was kind of moving up her business. She came into contact with people who were interested, well the way I think of it, more interested in gardening than sex really ... becoming stuffy, more right-wing and less adventurous and so on. And so, she's gone in this kind of more quiet mode and I'm just "not grown up" as she would say." (Father)

Separation and the legal position of fathers

No father had applied for Parental Responsibility before the separation and few had heard of the need for unmarried fathers to gain such a status. The main factor determining men's awareness concerned the mother-father relationship. When there was a conflict between them one or both sought help and were informed about the man's weak legal position. Even after a cohabitation breakdown half did not think about their legal responsibility over the child:

"I haven't thought of that [laugh]. Um, the legal rights ... I don't look at [it] in terms of legal rights. I see it more as social justice and moral right ... Whereas if you're married it's because the marriage and the family is like this legal thing then there are these legal rights." (Father)

While most knew little of the need to apply for a Parental Rights Agreement and for that to be signed by the child's mother, a small group of men insisted

on negotiating the break-up and division of childcare through the courts. Those men that did follow up their claims to parental contact were relatively satisfied with the outcome:

"If you agree to pay maintenance ... and you split up and you finally find yourself in court, at least it gives you some rights over those children that you didn't have before." (Father)

Father-child contact after the separation

All the mothers initially assumed primary responsibility for the child, usually with the father moving out and into accommodation that was unsuitable for the child or children to stay on a regular basis.

Like married men, these cohabiting fathers' contact with the child dropped dramatically after the separation, even when they had been the child's primary care-giver. As with all fathers, the patterns of their contact varied, depending largely upon the relationship between father and mother and patterns of financial exchange (see Figure 1).

The patterns of contact in Figure 1 conceal the complex factors behind individual cases. For example, one of the 'no contact' men had gone with his new partner to Australia; another had been excluded as a result of a dispute over residence with the child. The two resident fathers had older children who chose to move in with dad after a lengthy time with mum. Most of those who saw the child for half the week claimed that they did so on the mother's terms and depicted themselves very much as 'secondary' parents.

His and her perceptions of parenting
In a sub-sample both ex-partners were interviewed. They tended to agree with one another about what had happened in the relationship. The fathers who did not have residence with their children expressed feelings of loss, and the mothers had sympathy for their position:

"I think it's very tough ... for fathers who split up from their children ... people who haven't got married are even on a more sticky slope. I think it's tough for all fathers you know to suddenly lose their children and they may not have been the ones that started the whole process, it seems terribly hard..." (Mother)

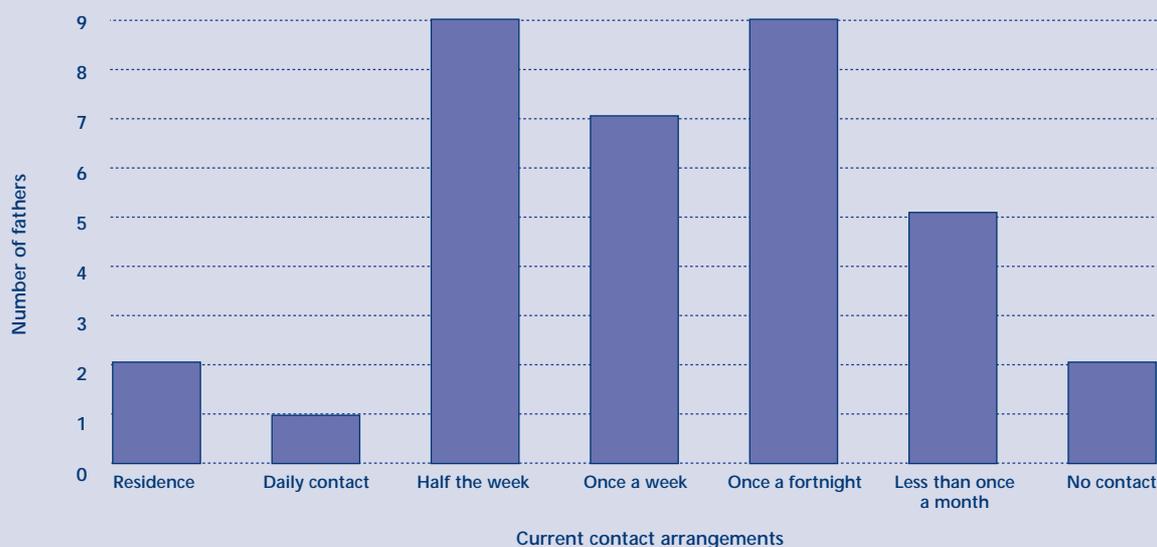
However, parents' views about the same events often differed. For example, one mother saw paternal reserve as a lack of interest:

"[Father] just accepted that she [child] would go with me and that was it. It never even came into discussion that she would stop with him, never. He's not really been interested ... not been there for her." (Mother)

For him, the interest is acute:

"It's very painful not having access ... because I feel I can't contribute, that I can't be a proper dad any more because I'm being restricted all the time... It's the most painful thing I've ever known ... last year was the worst year of my life because I was so far away from them and I was so distant from them." (Father)

Figure 1: The amount of current contact between father and child



Why don't more fathers gain residence?

Four main reasons were given for men's continuing disadvantages after the separation:

The primacy of 'mothering'

The presumption that mothers are more important to the child than are fathers ran through many interviews, even those with fathers who had primary responsibility for the child.

Accommodation

Moving to a new home puts the father at a disadvantage. Often his accommodation is less comfortable and has few possessions for the child to identify as her/his own. If it is in a new area then this creates problems about giving the child a sense of belonging there.

"It was much more sensible that she stayed with the kids and had the house and they had a kind of stable, domestic environment." (Father)

Money

Mothers saw negotiations over child support as demonstrating the man's lukewarm commitment as a parent. Fathers saw maternal demands over money as a demonstration of the fact that he has to 'buy' contact with the child.

"I've always been the complete father despite the circumstances ... she used to get money off me so she could go out with a guy: "If you give me money so I can go out you can have Phil tonight" ... so I'd give her money, so I could get Phil. I bought him, basically." (Father)

A social network

Many fathers did not have the network of friends and relations to support them as active parents. Indeed a few mothers suggested that single mothers support each other, occasionally to the exclusion of men:

"I am lucky I've got a lot of support really from friends ... I thought "no I can't do it alone" and they always said "Well you've got lots of friends in the same boat" ... With like single parents who you know, there's just no fathers about at all." (Mother)

Policy issues

The study suggests that some of the issues faced by fathers after cohabitation breakdown echo those faced by men after divorce. Like divorcees, fathers after a cohabitation ends describe:

- A socio-legal system in which they are treated as secondary parents even if they have been highly involved with caring for their child.
- Polarised reactions to the services that provide mediation and a means of financial exchange between ex-partners.

Ex-cohabitees have the additional problems of :

- Not having Parental Responsibility for their children and facing even greater problems in maintaining their strong commitment to fatherhood.

Parents think a great deal about how they parent.

These parents argued strongly that policy-makers need to listen to parents and to draw on their experience.

About the project

This study was undertaken by Charlie Lewis, Amalia Papacosta and Jo Warin at Lancaster University. The sample consisted of 50 parents who had cohabited, had a child and then separated. They were located in the main in three towns in the north-west of England and were mainly from unskilled or professional occupations. In 14 cases both ex-partners were interviewed while in 22 just one person participated. Each individual was interviewed 1-1 with one of the authors.

How to get further information

The full report, **Cohabitation, separation and fatherhood** by Charlie Lewis, Amalia Papacosta and Jo Warin, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 58 X, price £13.95).