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## Children's Relationships With Grandparents in Married and in Shared and Sole Physical Custody Families

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### ABSTRACT

Grandparents can be an important source of support for their grandchildren in the often difficult time during and after parents' divorce or separation. Grandchild–grandparent relationships can be hampered or even totally lost when parents separate, however. What happens with grandparent relationships when parents break up is closely linked to postdivorce physical custody arrangements. This article focuses on the beneficial role that grandparent relationships can play after parents separate and examines how grandparent–grandchild relationships differ in shared and sole physical custody arrangements.

### KEYWORDS

divorce; grandchildren; grandparents; joint physical custody; shared parenting

Grandparents and grandchildren often play an important role in each other's lives. These days, grandparents are potentially also more available because increased life expectancy helps them survive into their grandchildren's adult years. In addition, declining family size has led to fewer grandchildren so that grandparents have more time and attention for each grandchild (Arber & Timonen, 2012). This might be particularly valuable given the widespread rise in divorce rates and consequent risks for children (Bengtson, 2001; Thompson, 1999).

The parents' separation and its aftermath can have a major impact on children, but during these difficult times grandparents can be a vital source of support and stability (Silverstein, Giarusso, & Bengtson, 2003). Although relatively little is known about how important grandparents actually are for grandchildren, the existing evidence seems to confirm that strong relationships with grandparents are beneficial and help to buffer the negative consequences of the parents' separation (e.g., Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016b).

Parental separation also raises the risk of extended family ties being weakened or even severed (Attias-Donfut & Segalen, 2007). Grandparents and grandchildren, particularly those on the father's side of the family, have less frequent contact after the parents stop living together when compared to

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intact families (e.g., Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004). The differential impact of separation on contacts with maternal and paternal grandparents is largely due to the physical custody arrangements of grandchildren. As the majority of children reside with a custodial parent (usually the mother) after separation, grandparents on the side of the nonresidential parent in particular, usually the father, get fewer chances to see their grandchildren (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016b; Johnson, 1998; Schutter, Scherman, & Carroll, 1997).

Now that shared physical custody arrangements are becoming more popular, the question arises as to what happens with grandparent–grandchild relationships when grandchildren live alternating between both separated parents. Pressure groups campaigning for grandparents' rights have claimed that shared parenting is beneficial for grandparent–grandchild contact, as it prevents paternal grandparents from being excluded (Kaganas, 2007). Only recently, though, has this claim been tested empirically (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016b; Westphal, Poortman, & Van Der Lippe, 2015).

This article summarizes the results of studies that my colleague Jan Van Bavel and I have conducted on grandchild–grandparent relationships after parental separation, and also reports on the findings of other research on this topic. The first part looks into the role grandparent relationships can play in the well-being of grandchildren after parents separate. Next, the focus is on grandchild–grandparent relationships in married, sole custody, and shared residence arrangements. To start, I situate the data used for our studies.

## **Data and physical custody arrangements in Flanders**

Our studies use data from the survey Divorce in Flanders (DiF; Mortelmans et al., 2011). In this survey, married and divorced partners, one of their children, and one of their parents were interviewed in 2009 or 2010. Marriages that had ended in divorce were oversampled. In total, 6,470 (ex-) partners, 1,257 children and 2,203 grandparents participated. The graphs presented in this article are based on a selection of participating children between 10 and 21 years old. About one third of the children came from intact families; two-thirds had divorced parents.

Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, and provides a particularly interesting context to study questions about children and parents in sole and shared physical custody families. Belgium has one of the highest divorce rates in Europe (Eurostat, 2016). As in most Western countries, the majority of children live with their mother after a parental separation, spending varying amounts of time with their father. Living with the father is rather uncommon. Shared physical custody arrangements, with children living about half of the time with each parent, are on the rise, stimulated by recent policy changes. In 1995, joint parental authority was legally established; and in 2006, joint physical

custody (shared residence) became the default arrangement after parental separation. About one fifth of Flemish children with divorced parents now live about equal time with the mother and the father. Considering only the children whose parents divorced after the introduction of the 2006 law, more than 25% live in these shared parenting families (Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013).

### **Are grandparents beneficial to children in divorced families?**

As suggested by the holistic perspective of family systems theory, the well-being of children and adolescents is not only affected by the relationships with their parents, but by experiences and relationships across the whole family (Cox & Paley, 1997). Grandparents can be important members of family systems and can contribute highly to the family's functioning (Miller & Sandberg, 1998). Often grandparents also become valuable attachment figures for grandchildren (Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). Therefore, grandparents are likely to play a prominent role in grandchildren's lives and well-being. Relatively few empirical studies, however, have actually examined the link between grandparents and children's well-being. Although some found no associations (e.g., Dunifon & Bajracharya, 2012), the majority of these studies did find that grandparents' involvement with grandchildren and the quality of their relationships is positively related to the children's well-being (Coall & Hertwig, 2010; Griggs, Tan, Buchanan, Attar-Swartz, & Flouri, 2010; Moorman & Stokes, 2016; Sear & Coall, 2011).

Moreover, grandparents are often considered latent resources in families. They usually play a relatively minor and noninterfering role in their children's and grandchildren's lives. They are, so to speak, waiting on the sidelines. In times of family crisis, though, such as a divorce or separation, they are prompted to step in to take on more active roles (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986; Johnson, 1988).

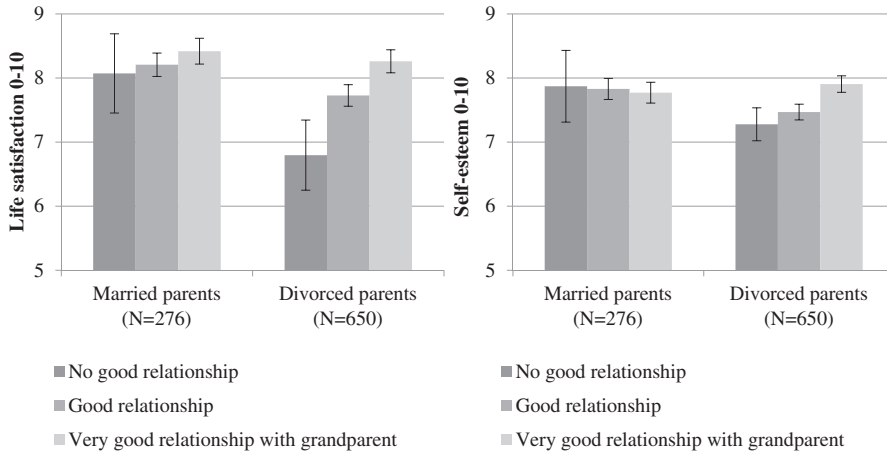
When parents separate, this can create numerous stressors that have short-term as well as long-term negative effects on children (Amato, 2000; Bernardi et al., 2013). In the difficult times following parental break-up, therefore, grandparents can be an important source of support and stability for their grandchildren, acting as "shock absorbers" or buffers who reduce the risk of negative consequences for children (Silverstein, Giarusso, & Bengtson, 2003). Many grandparents provide their divorcing children and grandchildren with advice and practical, emotional, and financial support. In exceptional cases, they might temporarily or even permanently take on the role of surrogate parents (Ferguson, 2004; Jappens & Van Bavel, 2015a; Timonen, Doyle, & O'Dwyer, 2009). Children often consider grandparents among the key people to trust and confide in and with whom they

can find security and attention in turbulent times after the divorce (Robinson, Scanlan, & Butler, 2009).

A handful of other studies have examined the association between grandparent relationships and children's well-being in divorced families. Most confirm the idea of grandparents as resources that mobilize when needed. In a small sample of 5-year-old children in England, those who reported closer relationships with their maternal grandparents had fewer adjustment problems than those with more distant relationships. This was the case in married and in divorced families (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). In the second wave of the same study, however, there was no significant association (Bridges, Roe, Dunn, & O'Connor, 2007). In a larger study with 1,515 secondary school students in the United Kingdom, although it did not take into account any role played by the parents, those who indicated more involvement from grandparents also reported fewer emotional difficulties. This was more true for children in single-parent and in stepfamilies than for those in intact families (Attar-Schwarz, Tan, Buchanan, Flouri, & Griggs, 2009). Similar results were found in two U.S. studies. One study compared 925 young adults in different family structures and found that those who had a closer relationship to their grandparents also reported fewer depressive symptoms. The effect was more powerful for those from single-parent (divorced, continuously single, or widowed) families than for those in intact families (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007). The second study investigated relationships with maternal grandmothers of 324 adolescents in Texas and found that the relationship quality was positively related to their psychological functioning, especially among those from divorced families (Henderson, Hayslip, Sanders, & Loudon, 2009).

To examine the latent function ascribed to grandparents and the protective power of close grandparent relationships for children of divorce, we have been investigating the association between the quality of these relationships and children's well-being (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2015b, 2017). [Figure 1](#) is based on 10- to 21-year-old children in the DiF survey who had at least one living grandparent. They were asked how good or bad their relationships were with each of their grandparents. We selected the best relationship and constructed three categories of grandchildren: (a) children not having a good relationship with a grandparent (their best grandparent relationship is bad, neither bad nor good, or there is no contact), (b) children having a "good" relationship with at least one grandparent, and (c) children having a "very good" relationship with a grandparent. [Figure 1](#) shows children's mean score on life satisfaction and on self-esteem according to the quality of their relationships with their grandparents.

The life satisfaction and self-esteem for the 267 children with married parents was not closely linked to the quality of the relationships they had with their grandparents. It might be that in these families the grandparents have less impact because they are "on the sidelines" as the parents are not relying on them or

*Children's Life Satisfaction**Children's Self-esteem*

**Figure 1.** Children's well-being by quality of relationships with grandparents (mean score, with 95% confidence intervals).

involving them heavily in the children's lives. A different pattern emerged for the 650 children with divorced parents. The children with good and above all very good relationships with their grandparents had clearly higher self-esteem and were more satisfied with their lives than children who did not have a good relationship with their grandparents. The children with divorced parents who had a very good relationship with a grandparent scored their self-esteem and life satisfaction about as high as children with married parents.

In the divorced families, the quality of children's relationships with their grandparents was still linked to their life satisfaction, self-esteem, and also mastery and anxiety even after controlling for many other factors that might be linked to the children's well-being. These factors included sociodemographic characteristics, the quality of the relationships the grandchild had with his or her mother and father, the type of custody arrangement, the time passed since the divorce, repartnering of the parents, and the level of parental conflict. There were some differences between the indicators, but overall the strength of grandchild-grandparent relationships was positively associated with children's subjective well-being, above and beyond the quality of their relationships with their parents (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2015b, 2017).

In an ongoing study, we also examined whether it mattered that the children's relationships were with the maternal or the paternal grandparents. We found that the strength of relationships with maternal as well as paternal grandparents was positively associated with children's subjective well-being. This suggests that close relationships with either maternal or paternal grandparents could help grandchildren to cope better with the divorce of their parents (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016a).

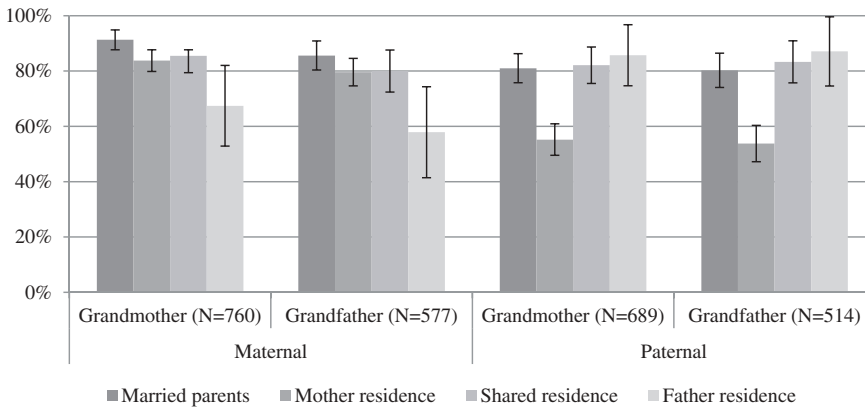
## How do grandparent relationships differ across physical custody arrangements?

Grandparents can thus be an important source of support for children when parents separate. As previous studies have shown, however, the separation can also put extended family ties under pressure and often results in less frequent contact between grandparents and grandchildren. This is especially the case for grandparents on the father's side of the family, who are also most at risk for losing all contact (Creasey, 1993; Drew & Smith, 1999; Geurts, Poortman, Van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2009; Jaskowski & Dellasega, 1993; Kemp, 2007; Myers & Perrin, 1993; Oppelaar & Dykstra, 2004). For contacts with maternal grandparents, some studies reported no impact (Cooney & Smith, 1996; Henderson et al., 2009) or more frequent contact after a divorce (Ehrenberg & Smith, 2003).

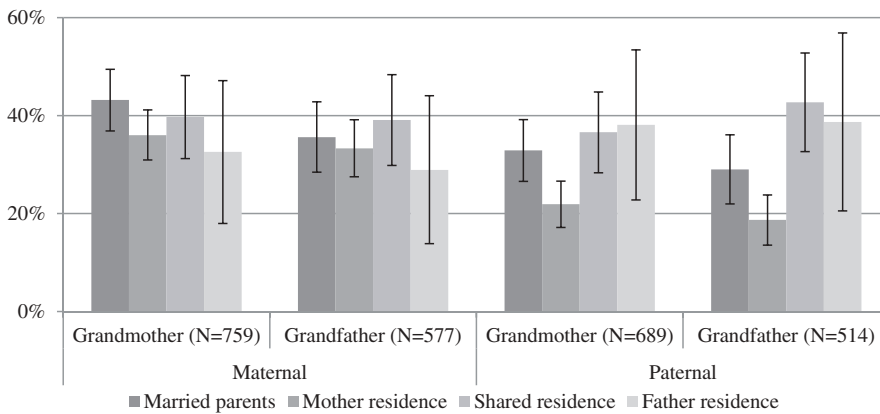
Only very few studies have been able to empirically explore the role of physical custody arrangements in the differential impact of parental divorce on contacts with maternal as compared to paternal grandparents. Some have studied grandparent–grandchild contact in sole mother versus sole father residence in Australia (Weston, 1992) and in the United States (Hilton & Macari, 1998). These studies did not include shared residence arrangements, but they found that contact frequency was indeed lower for grandparents on the nonresidential parent's side. As grandparent–grandchild contacts are often mediated or even initiated by the parents, especially when grandchildren are younger, grandparents on the nonresidential parents' side get fewer opportunities to see their grandchildren. Sole residential parents, on the contrary, might be in need of extra support in the care for the children. This help is often provided by their own parents, in this way adding to the frequency of contacts between children and grandparents on the residential parent's side (Attias-Donfut & Segalen, 2002; Johnson, 1998; Kemp, 2007).

Based on DiF data, we studied grandchild–grandparent relationships in married and in sole and shared physical custody families (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016b). Figures 2, 3, and 4 are based on samples of 10- to 21-year-old children with the grandparent alive and not living in the same household. The children with divorced parents were grouped into three physical custody arrangements: living with the mother (67%–100% of the time), shared physical custody (living minimum 33% of the time with each parent), and living with the father (67%–100% of the time). The small group of children with other or no fixed arrangements was excluded.

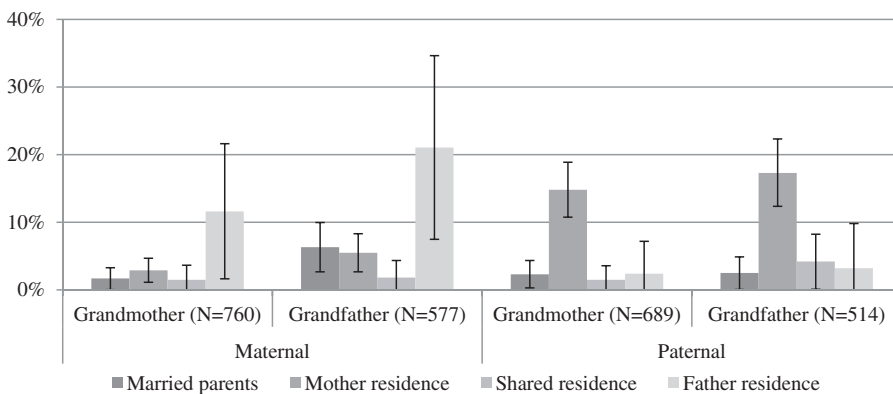
Figure 2 shows the percentages of children having face-to-face contact with grandparents at least once a month. Compared to children living with their married parents, grandchildren whose parents were divorced saw their grandparents less often, especially grandparents on the nonresidential parents' side of the family. When considering maternal grandparents, the very



**Figure 2.** Children with monthly face-to-face contact with grandparents in intact, shared, and sole physical custody families (percentage, with 95% confidence intervals).



**Figure 3.** Children with "very good" relationships with grandparents in intact, shared, and sole physical custody families (percentage, with 95% confidence intervals).



**Figure 4.** Children with no face-to-face contact with grandparents in intact, shared, and sole physical custody families (percentage, with 95% confidence intervals).



small group of children who lived primarily with their father had remarkably less frequent contact with them than did children in all other family types. Children in a mother residence and in shared residence were equally likely to see their maternal grandparents at least once a month. However, children living with their divorced mother were far less likely than other children to have monthly contact with their paternal grandparents. Children who were living in shared residence or primarily with their father were equally likely or even slightly more likely than children in intact families to have monthly contact with their paternal grandparents.

Figure 3 presents children who indicated having a very good relationship with their grandparents. The patterns are very similar to those in Figure 2. Particularly relationships with grandparents on the side of nonresidential parents are less likely to be very close after divorce. For children in shared residence, equal or even higher percentages reported having a very good relationship with both sets of grandparents when compared to grandchildren with married parents.

The children who resided with one parent only were also those having a greater risk of losing all contact with grandparents on the side of the nonresidential parent. This is illustrated in Figure 4, showing the percentages of grandchildren who never met their grandparents in the year before the DiF survey. For children in shared residence families, the proportion of those not having contact with grandparents was low and did not significantly differ from those in married families.

Multivariate analyses covering different age categories of children and controlling for a range of other determinants of grandchild–grandparent contact (including sociodemographic characteristics, traveling distance between grandchild and grandparent, and the quality of the parent–grandparent relationship) have confirmed these results. Compared to those with married parents, grandchildren whose parents were divorced had especially less frequent contact with grandparents on the side of a parent they never or not often resided with (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016b).

In shared parenting families, contact opportunities for grandparents on both sides of the family are less than in married families, but both parents can still facilitate meetings between their parents and children. The parents might also have an increased need for grandparents' support during the time the children are residing with them. In fact, we found that children in shared parenting families had as much or only slightly less contact with their maternal grandparents as children in married families or in mother residence. Contacts with paternal grandparents were also equal or even more frequent among children in shared residence when compared to children with married parents. These paternal grandparents possibly play an important role in the care for the children when their divorced son becomes a shared residential father. Or, it might also be that grandparents play a more

active role and that fathers are more inclined to take up a shared residence responsibility when their parents are willing to be involved and help with child care at the outset (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016b).

One other study compared the frequency of grandparent–grandchild contact after recent parental divorce in three custody arrangements. The study was conducted in the Netherlands, a neighboring country to Belgium, where shared residence arrangements also have become more popular in recent years. Their results are in line with ours. They concluded that contact with maternal grandparents was most frequent in mother residence and least frequent in father residence, with shared residence holding an intermediate position. The frequency of contact with paternal grandparents was highest for children in father residence and shared residence, and lowest in mother residence (Westphal et al., 2015).

## Discussion

The impact of a separation and custody arrangements clearly reaches beyond the parents and their children, where it has been studied most so far. Grandparents are impacted, too.

Consistent with other research, our findings show that children with better relationships with their grandparents are more satisfied with their lives, have higher self-esteem and mastery, and are less likely to be anxious. This holds true even when the quality of the children's relationships with their parents is taken into account. Having a close grandparent relationship matters particularly for grandchildren whose parents have divorced. Grandparents from both sides of the family could be important resources for children, and good relationships with grandparents might help them to cope better with the divorce or separation of their parents.

When parents separate, this also affects relationships between children and their grandparents. For some grandparents, contact with grandchildren is hampered or even totally lost after the separation, but in other cases grandparents see their grandchildren more often and take on a more important role. Children's custody arrangements play a major intermediating role between parental separation and grandparent relationships afterward. Compared to grandchildren with married parents, grandchildren have especially less contact and less close relationships with the grandparents on the side of the parent with whom they do not (or do not usually) reside. Because most children live mainly with their mothers after separation, it is most often the relationships with paternal grandparents that are affected. In shared residence arrangements, our research showed that contact with grandparents on the father's side is significantly higher when compared to mother residence, without considerable loss of contact with maternal grandparents. These results support the claim that shared residence is beneficial for

children's relationships with their grandparents—especially the grandparents on their father's side of the family (Kaganas, 2007).

Grandparents are too often neglected in divorce and child custody policies. Therefore, it is important for policymakers, practitioners, and parents to be aware of the role grandparents can play in the well-being of grandchildren. For example, the importance of grandparents could be emphasized in mediation and parenting programs for separated parents. It should, of course, not be forgotten that grandparents also derive joy from contact with their grandchildren. Severing these relationships has an adverse impact on the grandparents' emotional well-being (Doyle, O'Dwyer, & Timonen, 2010; Drew & Silverstein, 2007). Arrangements of shared physical custody have pros and cons (Sodermans, 2013), but when considering what is in the best interest of children after their parents separate, the benefits from close contacts with grandparents on both sides of the family are worth taking into account.

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