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**An Overview of Findings from the WiscParents Survey  
2022–2024 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 10**

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## INTRODUCTION

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As the focus of child support offices expands from payments and cost recovery to broader family support, understanding the interrelated ways that divorced parents navigate parenting over the longer term can offer valuable insight into the families that these agencies serve. Whereas child support offices have traditionally focused narrowly on child support itself, there is increasing recognition that financial support and broader family functioning and well-being of all parties are all interrelated. The WiscParents Survey (Vogel, 2021), supported by the Bureau of Child Support (BCS) and conducted by the Institute for Research on Poverty, provides a wealth of information about the context and circumstances surrounding parents' child support behaviors, offering novel and rich insight into how parents are navigating the financial, logistical, and relational aspects of parenting long after the divorce is finalized.

This report uses WiscParents data to provide an overview of current parenting practices and perspectives of divorced parents with sole or shared physical custody of their children in Wisconsin, 6 to 10 years after the divorce. We focus on overall patterns for divorced parents as a group; similarities and differences by placement type; and to the extent possible, similarities and differences in the perspectives of mothers and fathers. It builds on past work with these data by looking beyond child support and living arrangements to provide a fuller, more multidimensional understanding of post-divorce parenting dynamics. To do so, we capitalize on survey data pertaining to the nature and extent of involvement of both parents in various aspects of their child(ren)'s lives; how parents share responsibility for the logistical aspects of parenting; the nature and frequency of communication between parents; similarities and differences in rules between mothers' and fathers' homes; and conflict around issues such as child support, schedules, child health, and education decisions.

The premise of this work is that a fuller understanding of the parenting roles, logistics, and challenges as perceived by divorced parents can provide valuable perspectives into a subset of families (that is, divorced parents) impacted by child support policy and practice.

Consistent with the survey sampling frame, our analysis includes mothers with sole placement, and mothers and fathers with shared placement, who began divorce proceedings during the 2010–2013 period. This sample provides both opportunities and limitations. By including mothers with shared as well as sole placement, it allows us to speak to the perspectives of the large majority of mothers post-divorce, as well as to compare the perspectives of mothers in shared as compared to sole placement. By including both mothers and fathers with shared placement, it provides parallel perspectives on a rapidly growing family structure that, in the most recent data, encompasses over half of all divorcing couples (Chanda et al., 2023). At the same time, we acknowledge that we are unable to speak to the perspectives of nonresident fathers, nor to the small subset of fathers who have sole placement of their children. We also caution that the survey data were collected largely during the pandemic, which likely impacted parenting patterns in ways that limit, to at least some degree, the generalizability of these findings.

### **Prior Research with WiscParents**

In past work with the WiscParents data, we have explored a relatively narrow set of questions focused on how divorced parents in Wisconsin allocate parenting time and financial support and their overall satisfaction with these arrangements. We briefly summarize that work here, including evidence of its interplay with broader aspects of co-parenting practices and relationships.

Our work on stability of placement arrangements found that legal placement changes were uncommon, but that many parents did not adhere closely to the specifics of those orders, with mothers reporting, on average, that children spent more time in their care than dictated by legal orders regardless of placement type. That work also found that mothers with shared placement reported considerably larger discrepancies vis-à-vis their placement orders than did fathers (Bartfeld et al., 2021), highlighting how perceptions of the same seemingly objective circumstances can differ. The majority of mothers, and of fathers with shared placement (other fathers were not included in the sample frame), were satisfied with their legal and actual placement arrangements, though a sizable minority were not. Satisfaction was higher among mothers with sole versus shared placement, although difference appeared to be narrowing with time: mothers with shared placement reported higher satisfaction than at the time of the divorce 6 to 10 years prior, whereas mothers with sole placement reported lower satisfaction (Berger et al., 2021). Importantly, mothers' satisfaction with shared placement varied greatly depending on the quality of the relationship between parents, with better relationships associated with higher satisfaction (Riser et al., 2023).

Regarding divisions of financial responsibilities, almost three-quarters of divorced parents had a formal child support order in place, with an average compliance ratio over 80 percent. Orders were much more common among couples with sole as compared to shared placement, though compliance rates were lower (Bartfeld et al., 2022). The large majority of parents in both placement groups also had orders dictating how they were expected to share health insurance and medical expenses. In practice, mothers described a wide range of cost-sharing between parents across several expense categories (e.g. clothing, school, activities, medical), with cost-sharing much more common among shared-placement couples. Roughly

two-thirds of mothers were at least somewhat satisfied with the overall division of parents' contributions to child costs, with satisfaction and perceived fairness considerably higher among mothers with shared placement. We also found that the quality of parents' relationship was a strong predictor of how mothers perceived the fairness of the financial arrangements, and that relationship quality and the nature of parental communication were integral to whether and how mothers sought to address concerns about child support and cost sharing (Bartfeld et al., 2022).

Taken together, our past work utilizing WiscParents data confirmed that living arrangements and the nature of sharing costs are substantially different for shared- and sole-placement parents, but a wide range of experiences and patterns also exist within both placement types. Likewise, satisfaction with the allocation of time and costs varies considerably within both placement groups; on average, however, mothers with shared placement report less satisfaction with placement arrangements, but more satisfaction with the allocation of child-related costs, than their sole-placement counterparts. This work also highlights the importance of parental relationships and communication to how mothers feel about the division of time and costs, affirming the importance of understanding issues of child support and placement in light of a broader understanding of co-parenting contexts and dynamics.

## **Overview of Report**

Whereas our past work focused on broad patterns of time use and cost sharing, here, we look in detail at parenting and co-parenting logistics, and at alignment and conflict in parenting practices that provide insight into what time-sharing is like in practice. We are interested in such questions as how parents share routine parenting tasks and responsibilities; how they navigate tasks and responsibilities specifically related to parenting when parents live apart; to what extent they communicate with each other around parenting issues, and with their children during time in

the other parent's home; similarities and differences in parenting practices; and sources of alignment and conflict. To place these patterns in broader context, we also discuss parents' open-ended responses to survey questions that provide insight into how living arrangements have evolved to those that are currently in place, and about the factors that contribute to their own and their child's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current living arrangements. Our goal is to provide new insight into the ways divorced parents share and navigate their parenting and co-parenting roles. Findings provide insights into how Wisconsin families approach the practical aspects of parenting and co-parenting in the long-term following divorce, the issues and challenges they navigate, and the potential implications for family relationships and for child support offices that serve divorced parents.

Because experiences vary considerably between mothers with shared and sole placement, we summarize similarities and differences between the groups. And, because mothers and fathers have unique perspectives, we also draw on reports from fathers in shared placement cases to describe similarities and differences in parents' reports. Our results, therefore, provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of divorced mothers as a group; similarities and differences between experiences and perspectives of divorced mothers with shared and sole placement; and similarities and differences between the experiences and perspectives of mothers and fathers with shared placement.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows: An overview of the data, including basic characteristics of the parents in our sample; an overview of our approach; results; and conclusions with some overall lessons-learned and potential implications for policy and research.

## SAMPLE

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Data are from the Wisconsin Parents Survey (WiscParents), a 2020 survey conducted with a sample of divorced parents in Wisconsin. The WiscParents sample frame included couples in the Wisconsin Court Record Data (CRD) who began divorce proceedings in 2009–2010 (cohort 30) and 2013 (cohort 33), limited to parents with a child aged 6 or under at the time of the divorce petition, such that the youngest child would still be under 18 at the time of the survey. It was further limited to the roughly 90% of divorcing couples in the relevant CRD cohorts with sole mother placement or shared placement as of the final divorce judgment. Shared placement, in Wisconsin, refers to arrangements in which the child(ren) spend at least 25% of time with each of their parents. Only mothers were interviewed from the mother-sole couples, but both parents were included from the shared-placement couples.<sup>1</sup> As such, the final sample was specifically constructed to provide an overview of divorced mothers as a group,<sup>2</sup> and to support comparisons of mothers' perspectives in shared and sole placement as well as of differences between the perspectives of mothers and fathers in shared placement. Interviews were administered in person during February-March 2020, and by phone April-October 2020, with the change in survey mode due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The final data include 640 parents consisting of 170 sole-placement mothers, 239 shared-placement mothers, and 231 shared-placement fathers, reflecting response rates of 54.1% to 56% across the three groups. Two-thirds of the shared-placement mothers and fathers had equal-

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<sup>1</sup>This decision reflected persistently lower location and response rates in past survey rounds among fathers of children with mother-sole placement.

<sup>2</sup>While the survey universe does not include all categories of divorced mothers—it omits the 10% of demographically eligible mothers in the CRD for whom the child(ren) have father sole placement, split placement (varying between children), or other arrangements such as involving a third party at time of the divorce—we refer to this group as 'all divorced mothers' in this report.

shared arrangements at the divorce, whereas the remainder had more time with one of the parents, almost always the mother. The shared placement responses include 143 matched pairs of mothers and fathers, 94 mother-only responses, and 87 father-only responses (Vogel 2021). Thus, roughly two-thirds of the mothers and fathers represent the same couples, while the remainder represent couples with only one parent responding. When we compare shared-placement mothers and fathers in this report, we do not limit the sample to matched pairs; however, the kinds of similarities and differences between mothers' and fathers' reports noted at various times in our discussion are also evident when we look at the smaller matched sample. Our comparisons between shared-placement mothers and fathers address the extent to which representative samples of mothers and fathers provide similar or different responses as a group, not the extent to which within-couple responses are similar or different.

Many of the questions in the survey are asked regarding the couple's youngest child, referred to as the "focal child." These children ranged from 0 to 6 years old when the divorce petition was filed, and from 6 to 17 years old at the time of the survey.

Table 1, drawn from our detailed report on placement arrangements (Bartfeld et al., 2021), summarizes the characteristics of the parents in the data, looking separately at mothers with sole placement, mothers with shared placement, and fathers with shared placement. This provides useful context for thinking about the results, in two key ways. First, it illustrates differences between the sole- and shared-placement samples, where differences are expected in that placement is not randomly assigned. To that end, children with sole placement at the time of divorce are somewhat younger than those in the shared-placement group, and likewise younger at the time of the interview—though by design, all were age 6 or under at time of divorce petition; mothers in the sole-placement group have lower combined pre-divorce incomes than



their shared-placement counterparts, consistent with long-established placement patterns; mothers with sole placement are more likely to have orders that were established by the courts rather than by mutual agreement (though the large majority of mothers in both groups describe agreements as mutually reached). Both groups of mothers are equally likely to have conducted their interviews before vs after the start of the pandemic (the large majority after for both groups), and they are equally likely to be in the earlier vs later of the two divorce cohorts included in our sample, meaning parents with shared and sole placement were interviewed, on average, at comparable amounts of time since the divorce. Table 1 also compares the characteristics of mothers and fathers with shared placement. Since they are drawn from the same sample and are intended to generalize to the same universe, our analyses are more informative to the extent the shared-placement mother and father samples look similar. Here, we see no significant differences between shared-placement mothers and fathers' reports for any of the measures. As noted, roughly two-thirds of the mother and father shared-placement samples consist of parents from the same couples.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Sample, Wisconsin Parents Survey**

	Respondent Group			Respondent Group Differences	
	Sole Placement: Mother (%)	Shared Placement: Mother (%)	Shared Placement: Father (%)	Shared Mother vs Sole Mother	Shared Father vs Shared Mother
N	170	237	230		
<b>Focal Child Age at Divorce Judgment</b>					
4 or Younger	87.29	73.68	77.19	-13.61***	3.92
Over 4	12.71	26.32	22.81		
<b>Focal Child Age at Interview</b>					
12 or Younger	62.30	54.82	57.12	-7.48	2.26
Over 12	37.70	45.18	42.88		
<b>Focal Child: Sex</b>					
Male	50.11	48.90	53.34	-1.20	4.44
Female	49.89	51.10	46.66		
<b>Combined Parental Earnings at Time of Divorce Judgment</b>					
Below \$75k	68.35	40.58	45.34	-27.77***	4.76
>=\$75k	31.65	59.42	54.66		
<b>Method of Establishing Placement Order</b>					
Court Determined	26.57	14.95	21.03	-11.62***	6.08
Mutual Agreement	73.43	85.05	78.97		
<b>Interview Timing</b>					
Pre-pandemic	14.41	15.53	18.63	1.12	0.13
Post-pandemic	85.59	84.47	81.37		
<b>Cohort</b>					
30	58.55	54.32	56.97	-4.24	2.70
33	41.45	45.68	43.03		

Source: Table from Bartfeld et al., 2021.

Note: Sample characteristics are weighted to adjust for different sampling rates across counties and cohorts. Asterisks denote significant differences between respondent groups. \*= $p < .1$ , \*\*= $p < .05$ , \*\*\*= $p < .01$

## ANALYTIC APPROACH

### Quantitative

We present descriptive results to characterize how parents allocate parenting roles and responsibilities, how children navigate some of the logistical issues facing parents who live apart, and sources of alignment and conflict between parents. We draw variously on what parents report about themselves and what they report about the other parent. Ideally, we would have information from mothers and fathers in the full range of parenting arrangements. In practice, as

described above, we have information from a larger group of mothers than fathers; the survey sample included mothers with shared or sole placement, and fathers with shared placement. As such, we do not hear directly from nonresident fathers (the ex-partners of mothers with sole placement), nor from either parent in the limited number of father-placement couples. Because of this, we variously provide several kinds of analyses:

- Reports from all mothers in the sample: collectively, this group is representative of around 90% of divorcing couples in the 21 sampled counties; as a group, they provide a snapshot into the medium- to long-term practices and perspectives of divorced mothers overall.
- A comparison of reports from mothers with shared and sole placement: we describe their separate (as well as combined) perspectives as these groups represent two substantively different structural approaches to post-divorce parenting.
- A comparison of responses from mothers and fathers with shared placement: this provides two different perspectives on the same kinds of families and helps to highlight areas in which our understanding depends on which parent is reporting. When relevant, we note the extent to which mothers' reports about fathers are similar to fathers' reports about themselves, and vice versa.

Our analyses focus on several broad areas:

- *The context of post-divorce parenting*: an overview of living arrangements at the time of the survey including proximity between homes and differences between actual and legal time allocations.
- *Parenting roles and responsibilities*: the extent to which parents are involved in decision making around key issues, participate in a range of parenting responsibilities, and attend child-related events. This is by no means a comprehensive accounting of parenting roles; the survey was designed to capture a range of ways parents may be involved in tasks associated with parenting, but not to generate a detailed accounting.
- *Parenting together / co-parenting*: parents' patterns of communication with each other and their children in the context of two households, the extent to which they ask for and accommodate flexibility in parenting schedules, and the quality of their relationship and functioning as a parenting team.
- *Conflict and alignment between homes*: the extent to which parents perceive rules as aligned between homes, and sources of conflict between parents.
- *Satisfaction with child's living arrangements*: Parents' assessments of their own and their child's satisfaction with actual living arrangements in the past year.

## Qualitative

Our qualitative analyses provide additional insight into parents' perspectives on why children's living arrangements and time with parents have evolved in particular ways, and the kinds of factors contributing to parents' and children's overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current living arrangements. Specifically, we examine, when relevant: (1) parents' explanations for why their arrangements differ from the legal arrangements; (2) reasons a noncustodial parent has not had contact with the child, and why respondents perceive (3) themselves and (4) their child as satisfied or unsatisfied with the living arrangements. We used structured tabular thematic analysis (Robinson, 2022) to code open-text responses to each of the four survey items related to each of these topics and organize clusters of codes into themes. Structured tabular thematic analysis is a method of coding and analyzing short text excerpts, such as those captured through open-text items on surveys. We used a hybrid inductive-deductive coding approach, in which we created both pre-defined (deductive) codes derived from the literature and emergent (inductive) codes to systematically categorize open-text responses. A team of two coders reviewed responses (with each coder serving as the "lead" coder for two survey items and the "second" coder for the other two survey items). The lead coder generated, refined, and assigned codes to every response within each question; organized codes within each item into thematically grouped clusters; and documented coding decisions and proposed themes in a codebook and companion memo for each item. The second coder double-coded all responses to each survey item by the lead coder and documented coding discrepancies. Throughout the process, the coding team met to name and refine themes and discuss any coding disagreements until resolution was reached.

## RESULTS

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### The Parenting Context

We begin with an overview of the structural context for (co)parenting: We summarize parents' proximity to each other in distance and time, as well as parents' reports of how their child's actual living arrangements over the past year compare to the legal order and how adherence to the order has changed since the divorce. Results are shown on Table 2.

### Proximity Between Parents

How close or far divorced parents live from each other is an important dimension of the context in which they co-parent. Proximity between divorced parents varies widely. About two in five divorced couples live within 10 miles of each other, based on mothers' reports, while one-third live more than 40 miles apart. In terms of travel time, two in five live within 15 minutes of each other, while almost one-third have travel times of over 1 hour. Parents with shared placement tend to live closer to each other, as captured by distance and time, compared to those with mother sole-placement, though there remains considerable variability within both placement groups. Half of shared-placement parents live within 10 miles of each other, as do one-third of sole-placement parents; almost half of sole-placement parents live more than 40 miles apart, more than twice the rate for shared placement. Closer distances translate into less travel time: shared-placement parents are twice as likely to live within 15 minutes travel time of each other (53% vs 27.6%), and dramatically less likely to live an hour or more apart (15.2% vs 42.4%). The proximity patterns for parents with shared placement are substantively the same when we look at fathers' reports as compared to mothers'. Proximity differences by placement are not surprising, in that shared placement is more logistically feasible with greater proximity. Nonetheless, that differences in formal placement align with differences in proximity

**Table 2: Proximity, Living Arrangements, and Parent-Child Contact Among Divorced Parents, by Respondent Group**

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
N	408	170	238	230
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
<b>Distance Between Parents</b>				
<10 Miles	40.7	32.4	50.2	53.1
10–20 Miles	14.6	11.2	18.5	18.4
20–40 Miles	10.6	10.5	10.6	12.9
40 or More Miles	34.1	45.9	20.6	19.6
<b>Travel Time Between Parents</b>				
<5 Minutes	13.2	8.8	18.2	16.5
5–15 Minutes	26.3	19	34.6	40.7
15–30 Minutes	19.9	17.1	23.1	21.3
30–60 Minutes	10.8	12.7	8.7	9.9
Over an Hour	29.7	42.3	15.4	11.7
<b>Living Arrangements in Past Year</b>				
% of Nights w/ Mother (mean)	74	89	62	55
% of Nights w/ Father (mean)	26	11	38	45
<b>Living Arrangements Compared to Order</b>				
More Time with Mother	43.9	46.2	41.3	16.4
More Time with Father	12	10.8	13.3	24.9
Consistent with Legal Order	44.1	43	45.4	58.7
<b>Changes in Adherence to Order since Divorce</b>				
More Closely Now	8.1	11.5	4.3	5.5
About the Same	45.8	44.9	46.9	49.8
Less Closely Now	46.1	43.6	48.8	44.7
<b>Child Contact with Mothers in Past Year</b>				
Yes, In-Person	99.8	100	99.5	98.9
Yes, but Not In-Person	0	0	0	0
No	0.2	0	0.5	1.1
<b>Child Contact with Fathers in Past Year</b>				
Yes, In-Person	83.9	73.2	96.1	98.7
Yes, but Not In-Person	2.1	3.5	0.5	0
No	14	23.3	3.4	1.3

**Note:** Results are weighted to adjust for different sampling rates across counties and cohorts.

highlights that differences in parenting and co-parenting roles between parents with different placement arrangements may be reinforced by proximity or lack thereof.

## Time with Mothers and Fathers

Respondents provided detailed monthly calendar data on where the focal child spent nights over the past 12 months. Based on mothers' reports, children with sole mother placement spent an average of 89% of nights with mothers. Among children with shared placement at the divorce (that is, at least 25% time with each parent), mothers and fathers both report slightly more time with mothers than fathers, averaging 62% based on mothers' reports and 54% based on fathers' reports. As we have documented extensively in earlier work with these data, while the vast majority of parents have not had changes in legal placement type (shared or sole) since the divorce, actual arrangements often vary considerably from legal arrangements (Bartfeld et al., 2021). Fewer than half of mothers report that the focal child's actual living patterns are consistent with the order, while over 40%, overall and in shared and sole placement subgroups, report the child spending more time with mothers than specified in the order (Table 2). Fathers with shared placement, in contrast, report greater adherence to the order and also higher rates of extra time with fathers.<sup>3</sup> These patterns have evolved over time: almost half of respondents, across all groups (sole-placement mothers, shared-placement mothers, and shared-placement fathers) report following the placement order less closely now than at the time of the divorce (6–10 years prior). While the details of children's time-share arrangements are not the primary focus of this report, understanding what factors have played a role in the way living patterns have

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<sup>3</sup>Survey respondents provide a response to a general question about how the actual time allocation in the past year compares to the order, as well as a detailed accounting of nights with each parent. While fathers' response to the general question indicates a higher rate of extra time with fathers than mothers (Table 2), their detailed time accounting shows, instead, a higher rate of extra time with mothers, as we have reported in past work looking in detail at living patterns. Mothers' responses, by either measure, show a higher rate of extra time with mothers (Bartfeld et al., 2021). As such, past work finds greater consistency in mothers' reports than fathers' on this dimension.

evolved is useful context for understanding the parenting patterns and practices documented here.

On the survey, respondents who indicated that the focal child spent more or less time with other parent than their legal order calls for were asked to share the reasons for these changes. These open-text responses provide helpful insight into the factors underlying lack of adherence among some families over time, and three key themes emerged. The first theme reflected family member preferences. Most often, respondents cited the focal child's preference to spend more or less time with either parent; respondents also cited the other parent choosing to be uninvolved in the focal child's life or to not spend as much time with the child as the legal agreement called for, or either parent preventing contact between the focal child and other parent. The second theme encompassed issues related to the environment of either parent's home. Proximity emerged as an important environmental factor, including the distance between either parent's home and places the child needed to go, such as school, work, friends' houses, or extracurricular activities, or the distance between parents' homes. Other environmental factors—including unstable living conditions, conflict with other household members, or safety issues in either home—often co-occurred with child preferences or parental gatekeeping. The third theme related to schedule compatibility, including either parents' schedule working better with the focal child's schedule; short-term changes due to vacations, activities, or the COVID-19 pandemic; and intentional longer-term adjustments so the schedule better met the needs of either parent or the focal child.

In a minority of cases, children had no contact at all with their father, based on mothers' reports (Table 2). While virtually all of the mothers had in-person contact with their child over the past year, 14% of mothers reported that father had no contact at all with the focal child over



the past year, and an additional 2% had contact but not in-person contact. This was concentrated almost entirely among the mother-sole group, of whom 28% reported the father had no in-person contact and 23% no contact at all.

The survey asked respondents who indicated that the focal child had not had any in-person contact with their other parent in the past year to describe, on an open-text follow up item, the reasons for that lack of contact. These responses provide insight into the evolution of co-parenting arrangements for the roughly one-quarter of couples with mother-sole placement in which, by the time of the survey (6–10 years after the divorce), the other parent was no longer actively engaged with the child. At the same time, we caution that we have only mothers' perspectives, and thus only a partial understanding. Explanations were quite varied. Safety was a common overarching theme, with approximately one-third of respondents indicating that safety issues were a key factor underlying lack of contact between the focal child and other parent. Parents who expressed safety-related reasons described legal requirements set forth by the court for the other parent to have supervised visitation with the child; substance use issues that prevented the other parent from maintaining a relationship with the focal child or safely parenting the focal child; and experiences of or concerns about abuse that precluded the other parent from having contact with the child. Among reasons unrelated to safety, most frequently, respondents cited perceived disinterest on the part of the other parent, including either unwillingness to see the child or lack of interest in parenting generally, or perceived lack of parenting ability by the other parent. Respondents also pointed to competing demands for the other parent's time, including new family obligations, as well as practical barriers to engagement such as lack of adequate housing, legal issues (such as outstanding warrants), or physical distance between the other parent and focal child due the relocation of either parent. Finally, a

substantial share (approximately 20%) expressed that they were not sure why the other parent was not in contact with the focal child.

Taken together, the open-text responses regarding deviations from placement orders, and in some cases lack of any contact with a parent, highlight that the parenting patterns observed in the survey and discussed in this report are occurring in the context of living arrangements that have been, in many cases, adapted over time to respond to a wide range of preferences and to contextual and logistical influences and constraints.

## **Parenting Roles and Responsibilities**

Like all parents, divorced mothers and fathers vary in the extent to which they are engaged in routine aspects of parenting including decision-making, day to day parenting responsibilities, and attendance at child-related activities. While dividing parents into shared or sole physical placement suggests a dichotomy, specific parenting roles may or may not be closely tied to physical placement. For instance, legal decision-making authority arises from legal custody rather than physical placement, and hands-on parenting involvement is not limited to parents who cross a particular time-share threshold. Here, we summarize what mothers say about the division of various parenting-related roles between themselves and the other parent. We look at mothers as a group as well as separately by placement arrangements. For these questions, respondents provide information not only about their roles but also those of the other parent, so we can learn something of the allocation of parenting roles between parents, at least from mothers' perspectives, even in the case of the sole placement sample for whom we do not have father counterparts. We then look more closely at parents with shared placement, where both mothers and fathers provide information on both parents' roles; this offers an opportunity to learn not only about how mothers and fathers see their own roles, but the extent to which

mothers' perceptions of fathers' roles, and vice versa, are similar or different. Results for all mothers, mothers separated by placement type, and fathers with shared placement are summarized in Table 3. In our discussion below, we first summarize results from mothers, overall and by placement, and subsequently compare responses from mothers and fathers with shared placement.

**Table 3: Parenting Roles and Responsibilities, by Respondent Group**

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
N	408	170	238	230
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
<b><i>Decision-Making</i></b>				
<b>Mothers' Involvement in School Decision-Making</b>				
Not At All Involved	1.1	0.9	1.4	5.5
A Little/Somewhat Involved	2.7	1.8	3.8	16.1
Very/Extremely Involved	96.1	97.4	94.8	78.9
<b>Fathers' Involvement in School Decision-Making</b>				
Not At All Involved	34.4	54.2	12	5.2
A Little/Somewhat Involved	28.2	26.3	30.4	19.8
Very/Extremely Involved	37.3	19.5	57.6	74.9
<b>Mothers' Involvement in Health/Healthcare Decision-Making</b>				
Not At All Involved	0.9	0.9	0.9	4.9
A Little/Somewhat Involved	1.6	1.5	1.7	11.7
Very/Extremely Involved	97.5	97.7	97.4	83.4
<b>Fathers' Involvement in Health/Healthcare Decision-Making</b>				
Not At All Involved	32.1	48.6	13.4	4.3
A Little/Somewhat Involved	32.3	31.3	33.4	18
Very/Extremely Involved	35.7	20.1	53.3	77.7
<b><i>Responsibility for Parenting Tasks</i></b>				
<b>Caring for Child When Sick</b>				
Usually Mother	64.6	78.8	48.4	9.8
Usually Father	2.1	2.3	1.9	12
Depends on Where Child is or Who is Available	32.7	18.9	48.5	76.8
Other	0.6	0	1.2	1.4

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
<b>Taking Child to Doctor/Dentist</b>				
Usually Mother	78.7	91.1	64.6	32.4
Usually Father	2	1.9	2.3	21.8
Depends on Where Child is or Who is Available	19.2	7.1	33.2	45.9
Other	0	0	0	0
<b>Taking Child to Activities</b>				
Usually Mother	58.7	80.6	34.7	12.3
Usually Father	4.4	3.4	5.6	20.7
Depends on Where Child is or Who is Available	35.8	16	58.5	64.5
Other	1	0	2.2	2.6
<i>Attendance at Child-Related Functions</i>				
<b>Meetings with Teacher</b>				
Mother Attended in Past Year	89.5	92.6	86.1	84.2
Father Attended in Past Year	39.6	25.6	55.7	80.8
<b>School Events</b>				
Mother Attended in Past Year	92	93.4	90.4	85.3
Father Attended in Past Year	56.4	42.4	72.6	87.2

**Note:** Results are weighted to adjust for different sampling rates across counties and cohorts.

## Mothers' Reports

### *Involvement in Decision-Making*

Respondents assessed how involved they, as well as the other parent, are in decisions about the focal child in two key areas: schooling and healthcare. Mothers almost uniformly report high levels of involvement in both domains: 96% describe themselves as very or extremely involved in schooling decisions, and 98% in health care decisions. This is approximately the same regardless of baseline placement type.

In contrast, mothers report much less involvement on the part of their ex-partner. One-third of mothers report no involvement on the part of fathers in decision-making related to either schooling (34%) or healthcare (32%), and just over one-third report that the other parent is very or extremely involved (37% and 36%, respectively); the remaining roughly 30% are described as a little or somewhat involved—a category mothers, regardless of placement (shared or sole),

almost never used to describe themselves. Here, there are notable differences by placement: around half of mothers with sole placement report no father involvement in each domain, while only 20% report fathers being very or extremely involved; in the case of shared placement, this is reversed, with only 12–13% of mothers reporting no involvement on the part of the other parent and over half reporting high levels of involvement. Despite these placement-related differences, differences in how mothers characterize their own versus their ex-partners' involvement are strikingly large for both placement groups.

### ***Parenting Responsibilities***

Parents also reported on who has responsibility for filling specific day-to-day parenting roles, including care for the focal child when sick, taking the child to doctor and dentist appointments, and taking the child to activities they are involved with, such as sports, music, etc. For these items, parents were asked to indicate if it is usually their own responsibility, usually the other parent's responsibility, usually somebody else's responsibility, or varying depending on where the child is staying or which parent is available.<sup>4</sup> We refer to the latter as a shared responsibility.

Almost two-thirds of mothers report that they usually care for the child when sick (65%), while almost all of the rest report that it varies based on where the child is staying or parental availability. Results are further skewed in the case of taking the child to doctor appointments, with 79% of mothers reporting they usually handled this and 19% reporting that it was a shared responsibility. Finally, almost 60% reported usually taking the child to activities, while 36%

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<sup>4</sup>When one parent has had no contact with the child in the past year, we assume the other parent was solely responsible; for instance, if a mother indicates in an early survey question that the father had no contact with the child since 2018 or earlier, she is not asked about which parent has been responsible for various activities in the past year and we assume she is responsible.

reported sharing this responsibility based on the child's location or parents' availability. Across these roles, then, almost all mothers characterized roles either as usually hers or shared, and very rarely as falling largely to fathers.

Not surprisingly, responses varied greatly by placement, with sole-placement mothers much more likely than their shared-placement counterparts to report they usually handled each of these tasks. The differences between placement groups are almost entirely in the extent to which mothers describe roles as largely hers or shared, with shared-placement mothers much more likely to describe roles as shared and less likely as predominantly hers, compared to their sole-placement counterparts. The specifics vary across roles, with one-third of shared-placement mothers reporting primary responsibility for taking kids to activities, compared to 59% reporting a shared role; about half reporting primary responsibility for caring for children when sick (48%) and half describing a shared role (49%); and about two-thirds reporting handling doctor appointments as usually her role (65%) and one-third describing this as shared. Notably, only 2–6% of shared-placement mothers in either placement group described any of the roles as primarily the father's. Results suggest, at least from mothers' perspectives, that even in the case of shared placement, there are important differences in the division of these kinds of parenting tasks, with mothers perceiving a much more central role for themselves than for fathers.

### *Attending Activities*

Parents also reported on whether they and/or the other parent had attended teacher meetings and school events in the past year. The vast majority of mothers had done so: 90% and 92%, respectively, with no substantive difference among mothers with shared and sole placement. They reported much less attendance on the part of fathers: 40% for teacher conferences and 56% for school events. Mothers reported considerably higher attendance in both

domains for fathers in the context of shared-placement arrangements (56% and 73%, respectively), though still substantially lower rates than they report for themselves, particularly for teacher conferences. Note that these questions ask about whether a parent ever attended in the past year, and do not touch on regularity of attendance.

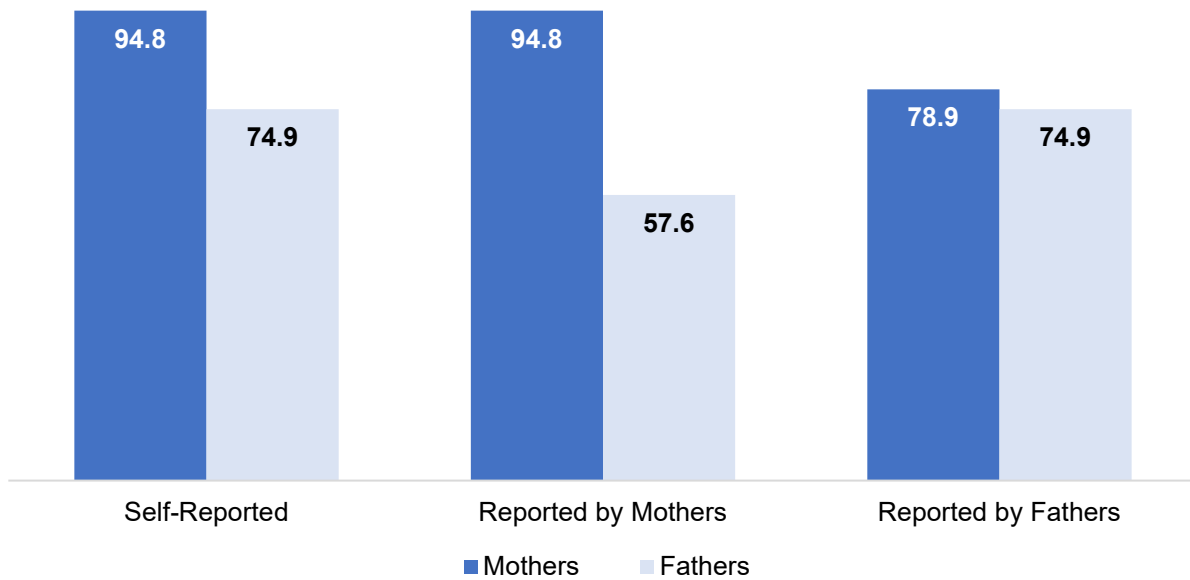
### **Shared Placement Mothers' and Fathers' Reports**

The results discussed above describe parental engagement in a range of parenting roles from the standpoint of mothers, relying on mothers to describe both parents' engagement in various parenting domains. Here, we focus on all parents with shared placement, fathers as well as mothers. We look at how mothers and fathers each describe their own roles and compare how what mothers say about fathers (and vice versa) align with what parents say about themselves. Fathers' responses are included in Table 3, above.

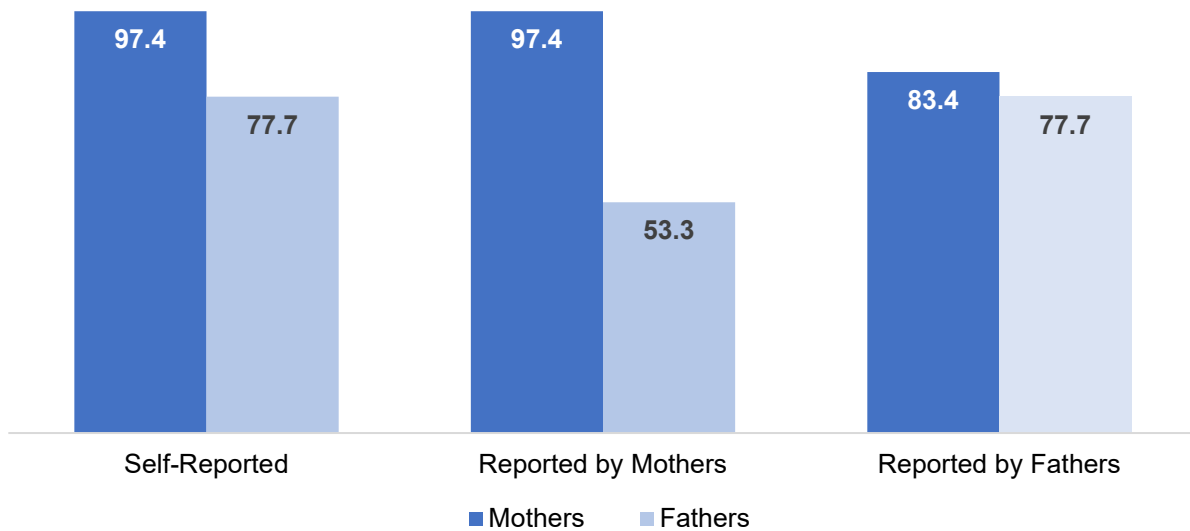
### ***Decision-Making***

We begin with decision-making responsibilities, looking first at what each parent says about his or her own role. Focusing on self-reports, mothers nearly always describe themselves as very or extremely involved, compared to about three-quarters of fathers who describe themselves as being comparably involved. Based on self-report, then, mothers with shared placement describe higher rates of involvement in decision-making than do fathers, with a roughly 20 percentage-point difference in the self-reported share who consider themselves very or extremely involved (Figures 1A and 1B, 'Self-Reported' bars).

**Figure 1A: Shared-Placement Parents Who are Very or Extremely Involved in Decisions about Child’s Schooling (%)**



**Figure 1B: Shared-Placement Parents Who are Very or Extremely Involved in Decisions about Child’s Health and Healthcare (%)**



Notably, this self-reported difference, while large, is considerably smaller than the roughly 40-point differential if we rely solely on mothers’ reports for both parents (Figures 1A and 1B, ‘Reported by Mothers’ bars), and substantially larger than if we rely solely on fathers’



reports for both parents (Figures 1A and 1B, ‘Reported by Fathers’ bars). This pattern reflects that both parents, but especially mothers, report lower involvement for the other parent than he/she reports having when asked directly.<sup>5</sup> As a result, fathers describe decision-making roles that are much more similar between shared-placement mothers and fathers than suggested by mothers, though parents’ self-reports nonetheless do suggest higher involvement for mothers than fathers. The main differences in all cases are not in which parents are involved at all, but rather in how they characterize their involvement (being very or extremely involved as compared to only a little or somewhat involved).

### ***Parenting Responsibilities***

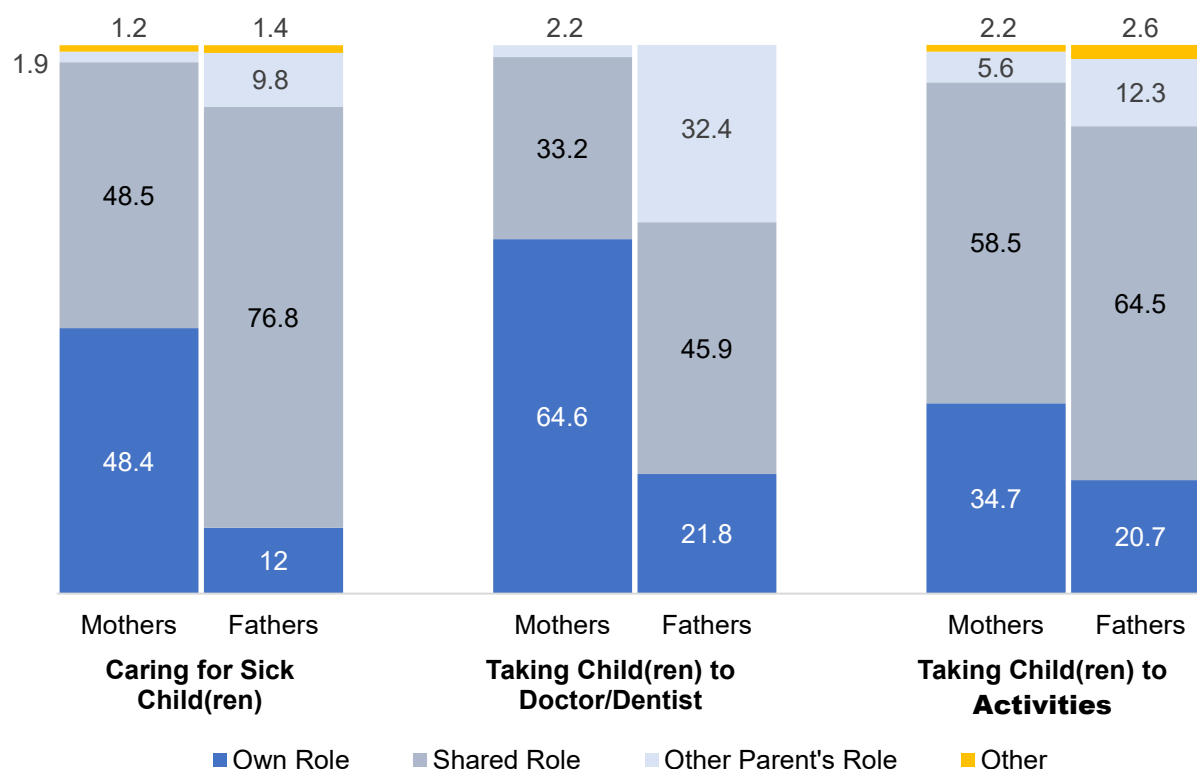
Next, we look at what parents with shared placement say about the division of responsibility in three domains: caring for kids when sick, taking kids to doctor appointments, and taking kids to activities. As explained previously in our discussion of mothers’ responses, rather than reporting separately on their own and their ex-partner’s role, respondents assess whether a responsibility is usually theirs, usually the other parent’s, shared, or other. Figure 2 shows the share of mothers and fathers who report that each of three roles is either usually their role or a shared role. Looking first at how parents characterize their own involvement, fathers with shared placement are much less likely than mothers to report primary responsibility for any of the roles, and much more likely than are mothers to describe roles as shared. To the extent that having a shared or primary role both reflect substantive responsibility, fathers and mothers are similarly likely to report a substantive role in caring for sick kids (90% and 97%, respectively, representing the total who report either own or shared responsibility) and taking kids to activities

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<sup>5</sup>When limiting our analysis to the smaller sample of shared-placement parents where we have surveys for both parents, similar patterns remain; that is, even with matched couples, shared-placement fathers rate their own involvement higher than the rating from their ex-partner (not shown).

(85% and 93%), but differ in likelihood of describing a substantive role in taking kids to doctor appointments (68% vs 98%).

**Figure 2: Shared Placement Parents' Assessment of Own and Other Parent's Parenting Responsibilities Across Domains (%)**



The above discussion focuses on parents' self-reports. Reframing our comparison to focus on similarities and differences in what parents each say about mothers and fathers, across the three parenting roles, mothers are substantially more likely than fathers to describe roles as usually falling to mothers, less likely to describe roles as shared, and a little bit less likely than fathers to describe roles as falling usually to fathers (see Table 3). These differences are starkest in the case of caring for sick children, where mothers are almost 40 percentage points more likely than fathers to say this is usually her role (48% vs 10%), almost 30 percentage points less likely to describe it as shared (49% vs 77%), and 10 percentage points less likely to describe it as usually the father's role (2% vs 12%).

Importantly, differences in mothers' and fathers' reports on sharing responsibilities are not necessarily inconsistent, in that responsibilities could in practice fall primarily to one parent (as suggested by mothers), even when that allocation depends on parental availability or child location (as reported by fathers). As such, it is possible that mothers and fathers differ in what is most salient to them about the tasks, with mothers focusing on the bottom-line outcome of who does more, and fathers focusing on the context for those outcomes (with whom is the child living when a task is needed and/or who has more availability). Indeed, when we look at the subsample of shared-placement couples for whom we have responses from both parents, almost all of the inconsistent responses involve one parent saying he or she is usually responsible and the other saying that it depends on either where the child is staying or which parent is available (not shown). Nonetheless, the considerably different ways that mothers and fathers characterize their roles highlights the importance of hearing from both parents—and the inherent challenge in reconciling different characterizations of the same reality.

### *Attending Activities*

Finally, we look at what shared-placement parents say about attending teacher conferences and school events. If we focus on parents' self-reports, we see similar likelihood of mothers and fathers attending both types of events, both in the 80–90% range. Like in other domains, fathers with shared placement report considerably higher engagement for themselves than mothers report them having, particularly in the case of teacher conferences. In contrast, fathers' reports of mothers' involvement are broadly similar to her own reports. Thus, mothers' reports of both her own and the other parent's attendance show substantive discrepancies between parents, which is not evident when relying on each parent's self-report.

## **Takeaways Regarding Parental Roles**

Across the various kinds of parental engagement discussed in this section, several overarching patterns are apparent. First, mothers as a group report almost universally high engagement, regardless of placement; they report substantially lower engagement for fathers, with differences more pronounced in the case of mother sole as compared to shared placement, but nonetheless evident in both placement groups. Looking at shared placement, where we have reports from fathers as well as mothers, mothers tend to self-report higher engagement than do fathers; but having mothers and fathers each report on themselves yields differences in roles that are less pronounced than when mothers are the sole reporter.

## **Parenting Together / Co-Parenting**

Our prior discussion focused on division of parenting roles and responsibilities. In this section, we summarize what parents say about interactions and communications between households. We are interested in the extent to which parents engage with each other in their capacity as co-parents, the extent to which their engagement with their children extends to times when the children are with the other parent, the flexibility they afford each other regarding children's living schedules, and parents' assessments of their relationship and coordination with each other. As in prior sections, we look first at how mothers characterize these patterns, including differences between mothers with shared and sole placement. Next, we look specifically at parents with shared placement and compare mothers' and fathers' perspectives. Results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Parenting Across Households, by Respondent Group**

	<b>Mothers</b>			<b>Fathers</b>
	<b>All</b>	<b>Sole Placement</b>	<b>Shared Placement</b>	<b>Shared Placement</b>
N	408	170	238	230
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
<b>Parents Spent Time Together with Children</b>				
Never (includes Assumed Never from skips)	49.6	59.3	38.7	36.7
Once or a Few Times in Past Year	28.4	26.3	30.7	35
About Once a Month	9.1	4.4	14.6	10.5
Up to Once a Week	8.5	5.2	12.2	14
More than Weekly	4.4	4.9	3.8	3.8
<i>Communication Between Parents</i>				
<b>Parents Communication About Children</b>				
Never	12.7	20.8	3.4	3.1
Once or a Few Times in Past Year	16.1	22.8	8.6	7.2
About Once a Month	14.3	12.7	16.2	10.9
More than Once a Month or Once a Week	32.9	26.4	40.3	39.8
More than Once a Week	23.9	17.2	31.4	39.1
<b>Parents Communicate About Daily Decisions when Child is with Dad</b>				
Never	26.1	25.9	26.2	22.4
Rarely	32.9	35.9	30.4	37.6
Sometimes	26.5	22.5	29.8	29.6
Very or Extremely Often	14.6	15.7	13.5	10.4
<b>Parents Communicate About Daily Decisions when Child is with Mom</b>				
Never	46.3	56.5	34.8	20.9
Rarely	25.4	20.1	31.4	33.2
Sometimes	20.8	18.8	23	32.7
Very or Extremely Often	7.3	4.6	10.3	13.2
<i>Communication Between Parents and Child</i>				
<b>Mother Communicates with Child while with Father</b>				
None	7.5	8	7	8.1
A Few of the Days	17.7	22.2	13.8	27
Some of the Days	17.5	12.7	21.5	34
Most of the Days	23.2	20.4	25.6	20
All of the Days	34.2	36.7	32.1	10
<b>Father Communicates with Child while with Mother</b>				
None	19	19	19	6.6
A Few of the Days	37	41	33	22
Some of the Days	26	28	25	31
Most of the Days	13	10	16	22
All of the Days	5	2.3	7.5	18

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
<b><i>Scheduling Flexibility</i></b>				
<b>Father Ever Requested Temporary Schedule Change</b>	48.4	37	61.5	68.2
<b>Frequency Mom Made Change if Requested</b>				
Never	2.4	0.3	3.9	5.4
A Few Times	6.2	6.2	6.2	18.6
Sometimes	4.7	5.9	3.9	10.4
Most of the Time	28.8	39.9	21.3	31.8
Always	57.8	47.7	64.7	33.8
<b>Mother Ever Requested Temporary Schedule Change</b>	43.5	31.6	57.1	67.1
<b>Frequency Dad Made Change if Requested</b>				
Never	9.7	12.1	8.1	1.4
A Few Times	23.1	26.3	21.1	7
Sometimes	6.7	4.6	8.0	9.5
Most of the Time	25.3	30.1	22.3	24.7
Always	35.2	26.9	40.4	57.4
<b>Relationship Quality Between Parents</b>				
Poor	28.9	34.7	22.3	19.7
Fair	27.8	31.7	23.2	24.6
Good	21.3	19.8	23	24.8
Very Good / Excellent	22.1	13.9	31.5	30.9
<b>Functioning as Parenting Team</b>				
Poor	26.2	31.1	18.4	15.9
Fair	20.6	24.4	16.2	13.3
Good	23.1	22.9	23.4	23.5
Very Good / Excellent	26.2	13.9	40.3	46.8
Do Not Think of Self as Parenting Team	3.9	5.8	1.7	0.6

**Note:** Results are weighted to adjust for different sampling rates across counties and cohorts. Sample sizes vary by question as not all questions are relevant to all parents.

## Mothers' Reports

### *Spending Time Together with Children*

Divorced parents vary in what parenting apart looks like in practice; one metric is whether, and to what extent, they continue spending time together with their child(ren). Half of all mothers say they have never spent time together with the other parent and child(ren) over the past year, other than incidental time related to dropping off or picking up the child(ren). More

than one-quarter say this has happened only once or a few times, while the remaining 22% report time spent together (both parents and their child(ren)) at least monthly.

Mothers with shared placement are much more likely to report at least some time spent together with both parents and child(ren) than are their sole-placement counterparts. Among the former, slightly over one-third report no time all together, close to one-third report no more than a few times, while close to one-third report spending time together at least monthly. Sole-placement mothers, in contrast, only infrequently report more than a few instances of time together over the year, and three in five report never spending time all together. The latter includes the 27% of fathers in that group who, per mothers' reports, had no in-person contact at all with their child during the year.

### ***Communication Between Parents, and Between Parents and Children***

Communication is a central part of co-parenting. Here, we examine how often parents communicate with each other about their children. We first examine general communication encompassing in-person, phone, email, and/or text. We then look at communication around daily parenting decisions when the child is with the other parent. We also assess communication between parents and their child when the child is with the other parent.

#### ***General Communication***

Most mothers report at least some communication with the other parent regarding their child(ren) in the past year (87%), with almost half (46%) communicating at least weekly. Not surprisingly, this too varies considerably by placement. Virtually all mothers with shared placement report some communication about their child, including one-third who communicate weekly and another 31% more than once per week. Among mothers with sole placement, around one in five had no communication at all, and another third only rarely; fewer than one third

(29%) of parents with mother sole placement communicated at least weekly. These differences suggest that shared placement is linked not only to each parent spending more time with their child(ren), but to substantive differences in routine communication between parents.

*Communication about Daily Parenting Decisions when the Child is with Mother or with Father*

In addition to asking about general communication between parents regarding their child(ren), the survey asked about the extent to which parents communicated about day-to-day parenting decisions—specifically when the child(ren) was in one or the other parents' home. These questions were only asked when potentially relevant; thus, mothers were not asked about communication when children were with the father if she had already indicated the child and father had no in-person contact—which encompasses more than one-quarter of the couples with mother sole placement.

Among mothers whose children had in-person contact with their fathers in the past year, almost three-quarters (73.9%) of mothers reported having had some level of communication with the father around day-to-day parenting decisions when the child(ren) stayed with him, including one-third (32.9%) who only rarely communicated, one-quarter (26.5%) who sometimes communicated, and 14.6% for whom such communication happened very or extremely often. This was broadly similar regardless of placement, unlike what we found for communication between parents more generally, which was much more common in the context of shared placement. Conversely, only about half (53.7%) of mothers reported some level of contact with the father around day-to-day decisions when children were with her, with contact considerably more common in the case of shared versus sole placement.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The lower rates of communication between parents when children are with mothers as compared to with fathers, particularly for children in sole-placement arrangements, is to at least some degree a reflection of the high overlap between fathers who have had no contact with their child and parents who do not communicate with each other. The least-engaged fathers—those with no contact with their children at all—are captured as non-



*Communication with Child When He/She is with the Other Parent*

Here, we look at mothers' reports of her interactions with their child when the child is with the father, and her reports of fathers' interactions when the child is with her (when relevant).<sup>7</sup> This provides one metric of the extent to which active engagement in parenting is bounded by the periods when the child is in the home or extends to periods when the child is staying with their other parent.

Almost all mothers report communicating with the focal child when he/she is with the other parent. Only 7.5% report having no communication, while one-third report daily communication, and another 23% report communication on most of the days. This does not vary greatly between mothers with shared and sole placement. Mothers also reported on communication and interactions between fathers and children during times children were with her—though we note that parents may not be aware of all such communication. That said, mothers describe considerably less communication and interaction between fathers and children during times the children are with her than the reverse, regardless of placement arrangements. These results are limited to fathers who have been in communication with their children during the past year. For instance, 60% of mothers with sole placement report that the child's father communicated with the child no more than a few of the days that the child spent with her; only 30% of those mothers reported similarly low communication between themselves and the child

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communicators when asked about communication while children are with mothers; they are not captured at all when asking mothers about communication when children are with fathers, in that the question is not relevant in the latter case.

<sup>7</sup>Mothers (or fathers) are only asked about their communication when the child is with the other parent in couples for whom the child has spent time with the father (or mother), and in which the parent has communicated with the child. Thus, for instance, a mother would not be asked about her communication with the child while with the other parent if the child has not spent time with the other parent in the past year, nor would she be asked if she herself had already indicated she had had no communication with the child in the past year. We only report results for parents for whom the question is relevant.

when the child was staying with the fathers. Similar differences are evident in the case of mothers with shared placement. These differences in communication between parents and children when children are with mothers as compared to fathers are broadly similar to the differential pattern of communication between parents around parenting decisions, which likewise appears more common during times children are with fathers than with mothers—at least from mothers' standpoint.

### ***Flexibility***

The survey also asked about whether mothers and fathers had ever asked to make temporary changes in the parenting schedule over the past year and, if so, the extent to which they each had tried to accommodate such requests. Overall, mothers' reports suggest that both parents were similarly likely to have asked for changes at some point (close to half of mothers and of fathers); that mothers perceived that they were more accommodating than fathers (87% of mothers vs 61% of fathers accommodating requests most or all of the time, based on mothers' reports); that requests from either parent were roughly twice as common among parents with shared versus sole placement; and that both parents were more likely to accommodate requests in the context of shared versus sole placement arrangements.

### ***Relationships and Collaboration***

Respondents provided an assessment of their overall relationship quality with the other parent, as well as an assessment of how well they do as a parenting team. Responses varied widely on both measures. Overall, mothers were roughly evenly distributed among those who rated their relationship as poor (29%), fair (28%), good (21%), or very good/excellent (22%), with relationships substantially better among the shared- vs sole-placement group. Mothers were similarly distributed in terms of how they felt they and the other parent fared as a parenting team,

ranging from 26% rating it as poor to another 26% rating it as very good or excellent. Not surprisingly, there were large differences by placement here as well, with shared-placement mothers three times as likely to rate their parenting team at the high end (41% vs 14%).

### **Shared-Placement Mothers and Fathers**

The above discussion focused on patterns and interactions that fall broadly within the co-parenting domain, as perceived by mothers. Here, we examine mothers' and fathers' perspectives in the case of shared placement. Results are included in Table 4 above.

### ***Time Together and Communication Patterns***

There are both similarities and differences in the interaction and communication patterns reported by fathers and mothers with shared placement. Both parents report similar rates of spending time together with parents and child(ren) and similar rates of communication between parents when the child is with the father. Relative to mothers' reports, fathers report somewhat more frequent general communication between parents, as well as more contact between parents during times when the child is with the mother, but the differences are modest. By in large, mothers and fathers with shared placement are in broad agreement about the extent to which they interact and communicate with each other around parenting issues, and they describe broadly similar patterns for periods in which the child is with mothers and with fathers.

Similar to what we found with other forms of engagement, both mothers and fathers report considerably more frequent communication with their children than reported by their counterparts. This may reflect, in part, that parents are not necessarily privy to their children's communications, especially for somewhat older children. For instance, only 30% of fathers report that the other parent communicated with the child most or all days they were with him, in contrast to the 58% of mothers who report having this level of communication. Similarly, 24% of

mothers report that fathers communicated with the child most or all days with her, in contrast to the 40% of fathers reporting that level of communication.

Focusing specifically on parents self-reported communication with the child while the child is with the other parent, mothers report more frequent communication than do fathers (58% vs 40% report such communication on most or all days with the other parent). In terms of their own perceptions, then, mothers characterize themselves as more regularly in contact with their children during their time apart than do fathers. Differences notwithstanding, most mothers and fathers with shared placement report being in touch with their child on anywhere from some to all days.

### ***Flexibility, Relationships, and Coordination***

Among parents with shared placement, fathers and mothers described similar willingness to accommodate requests for schedule changes, with almost two-thirds saying they accommodated requests most or all of the time. Yet, fathers as a group characterized themselves as more accommodating than the way they were described by mothers (82% vs 62% indicated they usually or always accommodated requests); similarly, mothers characterized themselves as more accommodating than the way they were characterized by fathers (86% vs 66% indicated they were usually accommodating). As such, shared-placement mothers and fathers both perceive themselves as more accommodating than their ex-partner, again highlighting the value of hearing from both parents for a balanced picture. These differences notwithstanding, there appears to be substantial but not universal efforts to accommodate need for flexibility.

Regarding relationship quality as well as functioning as a parenting team, mothers and fathers with shared placement have extremely similar reports, suggesting a high degree of

concordance in how shared-placement mothers and fathers perceive themselves on these dimensions.

## Alignment and Conflict

Thus far, our discussion has focused on logistical dimensions of parenting and co-parenting, spanning roles and responsibilities as well as patterns of communication related to parenting apart. In this section, we turn to issues of alignment and conflict between parents related to various aspects of parenting (Table 5).

**Table 5: Conflict and Alignment Between Parents, by Respondent Group**

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
N	408 (%)	170 (%)	238 (%)	230 (%)
<i>Similarity of Rules Between Homes</i>				
<b>TV and Screen Time</b>				
Not at All	20.8	25.4	17.1	15.5
A Little	10.7	9.8	11.3	8.7
Somewhat	35.5	35.5	35.4	33.2
Very / Extremely	33.1	29.3	36.2	42.6
<b>Curfew and Bedtime</b>				
Not at All	20	25	16	12
A Little	8	9	7	9
Somewhat	32	34	31	33
Very / Extremely	40	31	47	46
<b>Homework, School Behavior, and Attendance</b>				
Not at All	10.2	14.0	7.2	5.3
A Little	5.5	5.9	5.2	4.2
Somewhat	21.0	27.2	16.0	13.2
Very / Extremely	63.3	52.9	71.6	77.3
<b>Household Chores</b>				
Not at All	17.8	23.1	13.6	12.5
A Little	12.0	12.3	11.8	15.4
Somewhat	39.2	39.0	38.9	39.6
Very / Extremely	30.9	24.9	35.8	32.3
<b>Supervision</b>				
Not at All	13.5	17.8	10.1	5.6
A Little	10.0	11.9	8.5	8.8
Somewhat	24.9	26.8	23.5	22.9
Very / Extremely	51.5	43.6	58.0	62.8

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
<b>Conflict with Other Parent</b>				
<b>Day to Day Parenting Decisions</b>				
None	51.8	58.3	45.5	48.1
A Little	23.7	17.8	29.4	32.4
Some	16.2	16.2	16.2	15.9
Quite A Bit	6.8	5.8	7.8	2.4
A Great Deal	1.5	1.8	1.2	1.2
<i>Conflict Score</i>	<i>1.83</i>	<i>1.75</i>	<i>1.90</i>	<i>1.76</i>
<b>Focal Child's Schooling</b>				
None	69.0	72.1	65.9	60.1
A Little	16.1	10.1	21.9	24.3
Some	9.6	12.3	7.0	10.6
Quite A Bit	2.9	2.3	3.3	4.1
A Great Deal	2.5	3.2	1.9	0.9
<i>Conflict Score</i>	<i>1.54</i>	<i>1.54</i>	<i>1.54</i>	<i>1.61</i>
<b>Focal Child's Health / Healthcare</b>				
None	74.9	75.4	74.4	66.2
A Little	11.5	7.9	15.0	19.3
Some	8.9	11.3	6.6	10.1
Quite A Bit	2.8	2.6	2.9	3.5
A Great Deal	1.9	2.9	1.1	0.9
<i>Conflict Score</i>	<i>1.45</i>	<i>1.50</i>	<i>1.41</i>	<i>1.54</i>
<b>Amount of Time with Each Parent</b>				
None	66.0	64.1	67.9	59.2
A Little	15.4	14.7	16.2	17.3
Some	9.9	12.2	7.7	15.0
Quite A Bit	4.5	5.1	3.9	4.4
A Great Deal	4.1	3.9	4.3	4.2
<i>Conflict Score</i>	<i>1.65</i>	<i>1.70</i>	<i>1.60</i>	<i>1.77</i>
<b>Child Support and Child Expenses</b>				
None	49.4	46.4	52.2	46.3
A Little	17.7	18.3	17.2	22.4
Some	15.4	16.7	14.3	17.8
Quite A Bit	9.0	10.6	7.4	8.0
A Great Deal	8.5	8.0	8.9	5.5
<i>Conflict Score</i>	<i>2.10</i>	<i>2.15</i>	<i>2.04</i>	<i>2.04</i>

**Note:** Results are weighted to adjust for different sampling rates across counties and cohorts. Sample sizes vary by question as not all questions are relevant to all parents. The conflict score ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 means *None* conflict and 5 means *A Great Deal* of conflict.

## **Mothers' Reports**

### ***Alignment of Rules Between Homes***

Respondents assessed the extent to which rules were similar or different between both parents' homes, with options ranging from not at all similar to extremely similar. These questions were only asked of parents who indicated that children had in-person contact with both parents over the past year. Questions about rules spanned five areas: television and screen time; curfew and bedtime; school behavior and attendance; household chores; and supervision. Mothers reported the strongest alignment between homes regarding school behavior and attendance rules, with almost two-thirds (63%) feeling they were very or extremely similar. Half of mothers felt supervision rules were very or extremely similar. This declined to 40% for curfew and bedtime rules. Alignment was lowest for rules regarding TV and screen time (one-third reported rules were very or extremely similar) and for rules regarding household chores (31% were very or extremely similar, while a comparable share felt rules were not at all or only a little similar). Taken together, it appears that differences were most widespread regarding expectations for time use and responsibilities in the home, as captured by TV and screen time rules and rules regarding chores.

Across all categories, mothers with shared placement reported greater similarity in rules than did mothers with sole placement. This difference in alignment between parents with shared and sole placement was largest in the case of homework, school behavior, and attendance: almost three-quarters of shared-placement mothers reported that rules were very or extremely similar, compared to just over half of mothers with sole placement. The higher alignment in rules in the context of shared placement is consistent with the higher rates of communication between shared-placement parents noted earlier.

### *Parenting Conflicts*

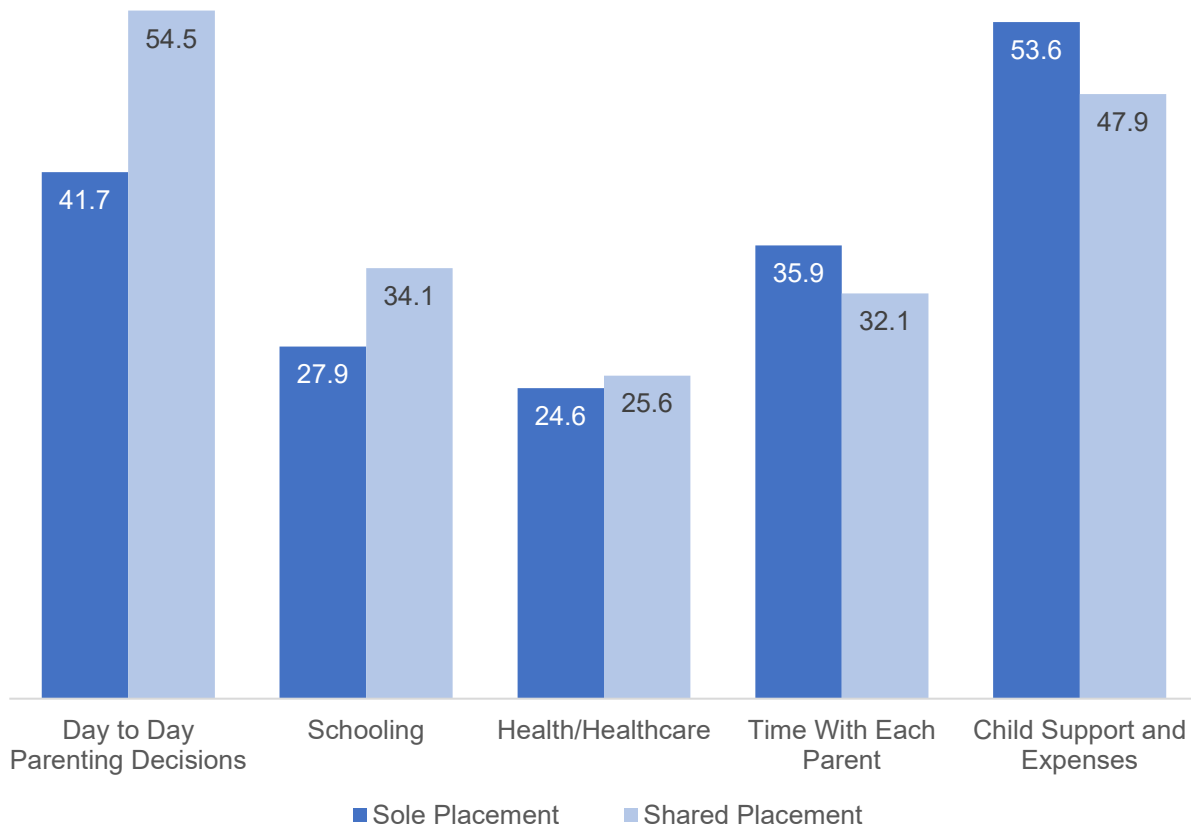
The survey also asked about the extent to which various parenting issues cause conflict between parents. These questions were only asked of parents who had some contact with each other over the past year. Questions covered five domains: day-to-day parenting decisions; decisions related to schooling; health and health care; the amount of time the child spends with each parent; and child support and child expenses. Responses range from no conflict to a great deal of conflict. We show the distribution of responses, as well as an average conflict score, where 1 means no conflict and 5 means a great deal of conflict. Overall, mothers did not report high levels of conflict, with mean scores ranging from 1.54 (between ‘none’ and ‘a little’) to 2.1 (just over ‘a little’). Decisions about health and health care involved the least conflict among the areas in question, with three-quarters of mothers reporting no conflict and only 14.5% moderate or high levels (that is, anything more than ‘a little’). This was similar for decisions about children’s schooling, with 69% of mothers reporting no conflict. Conflict related to the amount of time the child spent with each parent was also fairly uncommon, with two-thirds reporting no conflict. In the case of day-to-day parenting decisions, just under half of mothers reported some conflict, with about one-quarter reporting at least moderate levels. The most widely cited area of conflict was child support and child expenses; here over half reported at least some conflict (54%), including one-third at moderate or high levels.

There was little substantive difference in reported conflict between mothers with shared and sole placement (see Table 5 for detailed results and Figure 4 for an overview). The most notable difference is that shared-placement mothers were more likely to report conflict around day-to-day parenting decisions (54.5% vs 41.7%), which is not surprising in light of them both, by virtue of shared placement, being more likely to each be involved in those decisions and having more opportunities for conflict. Nonetheless, the differences were largely confined to the



low end of the range; there was little difference between groups in moderate or higher conflict. In the case of shared-placement mothers, the most common area of conflict was around day-to-day parenting decisions, with just over half having at least some conflict including one-quarter at moderate or high levels. Conflict related to child support and child expenses was also common for shared-placement mothers; almost half reported some level of conflict, with about 30% at moderate to high levels. Child support was the most common source of conflict for mothers with sole placement (54%), including one-third at moderate or high levels.

**Figure 4: Divorced Mothers Reporting any Conflict with Other Parent (%)**



## Shared-Placement Mothers and Fathers

Mothers and fathers with shared placement are, for the most part, well aligned in how they describe both the similarity in rules and the extent of conflict around various parenting issues.

## Satisfaction with Placement Arrangements

### Respondents' Satisfaction

Finally, respondents provided a global assessment of their own satisfaction with the focal child's living arrangements as well as their perception of the child's satisfaction (Table 6). We have reported these results in earlier work (Berger et al., 2021), however, we extend them here with a summary of factors respondents pointed to as influencing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

**Table 6: Satisfaction with Child's Living Arrangements, by Respondent Group**

	Mothers			Fathers
	All	Sole Placement	Shared Placement	Shared Placement
N	408 (%)	170 (%)	238 (%)	230 (%)
<b>Own Satisfaction with Living Arrangement</b>				
Not at All	3.7	2.8	4.8	9.7
A Little	2.5	0.5	4.8	6.8
Somewhat	20	15.8	24.7	19
Very / Extremely	73.8	80.9	65.7	64.5
<b>Child's Satisfaction</b>				
Not at All	2.7	2.4	3	2.8
A Little	6	5.2	7	6.4
Somewhat	26	19.8	33	31.4
Very / Extremely	65.3	72.7	57	59.4

**Note:** Results are weighted to adjust for different sampling rates across counties and cohorts.

Mothers reported very high satisfaction with the child's living arrangements, with three-quarters (74%) being very or extremely satisfied and almost all the rest at least somewhat satisfied. Satisfaction was somewhat higher (81%) for mothers with sole versus shared

placement, as compared to 66% very or extremely satisfied. Low satisfaction was uncommon in both placement groups. Fathers with shared placement had satisfaction levels almost identical, as a group, to those of shared-placement mothers.

In an open-text follow-up item, respondents elaborated on the reasons for their own satisfaction or dissatisfaction with living arrangements. Most frequently, respondents grounded their responses in feelings about the amount of time they had with the focal child, where parents were either explicitly satisfied with the amount they had, or wished they had more time with the focal child. Many parents noted that they enjoyed being with the focal child and missed them when they were apart. Another commonly raised theme related to the respondent's perception of the focal child's happiness and well-being. Respondents grounded their satisfaction in whether or not the focal child was happy with their living arrangements and amount of time with each parent; whether or not they perceived the arrangements to be in children's best interest; how well-cared-for they perceived children to be in both homes; and whether or not living arrangements—particularly frequent transitions across households—caused children to miss out on experiences or opportunities. Themes related to the safety of either household, the COVID-19 pandemic and household health practices, and the overall environment of either household often co-occurred with discussions of the focal child's well-being.

Additionally, some respondents highlighted characteristics of the schedule for living arrangements as relevant for their own satisfaction, including the extent to which the order was followed, how fair they perceived the schedule to be, and whether short- or long-term changes to the schedule aligned with their wishes. Further, how the schedule was enacted in respondents' daily lives, such as having flexibility (or variability) in when they would actually have the child, also affected satisfaction; some parents had arrived at flexible living arrangements that they felt

worked well for both parents and the focal child, and others experienced challenges due to schedule unpredictability or perceived rigidity on the part of the other parent. Attributes of the co-parenting relationship—including communication, trust, and conflict with the co-parent, and the extent to which the respondent experienced the co-parent to be reliable and involved—also affected respondent satisfaction with living arrangements.

### **Child's Satisfaction (As Reported by Parents)**

Parents also reported high satisfaction on the part of the children, with two-thirds of mothers feeling their child was very or extremely satisfied, and another 26% at least somewhat satisfied. As with their own satisfaction, mothers with sole placement reported somewhat higher satisfaction for their children compared to those with shared placement. Fathers with shared placement assessed their children's satisfaction quite similarly to the assessments of shared-placement mothers.

On an open-text follow-up item to all respondents asking for the reasons why respondents answered as they did about their child's satisfaction with the arrangements, most frequently, respondents grounded their answers in the preferences of the child. Parents raised different aspects of children's preferences; for example, many respondents cited agency the focal child had (or did not have) in decisions about living arrangements, and many cited the focal child's explicitly expressed happiness (or unhappiness), or their perceptions of the focal child's overall happiness, as indicative of the focal child's level of satisfaction. Characteristics of the schedule dictating living arrangements also emerged as a theme related to children's satisfaction; similar to respondents' own satisfaction, respondent perceptions of how well-suited (or not well-suited) the flexibility or consistency of living arrangements was in relation to focal children's needs shaped their perceptions of children's satisfaction. Relationships also emerged as a key theme

affecting children's satisfaction. Respondents highlighted both the parent-child relationship—where the child might struggle with missing either parent when apart, or where the child's relationship to either parent is especially close, strained, fearful, or nonexistent—as related to the focal child's feelings of satisfaction with living arrangements, as well the nature of the co-parenting relationship. In particular, some respondents reported strong communication practices and minimal conflict with their co-parent and expressed that collaboration helped them adapt living arrangements as needed to work best for the focal child, which in turn shaped the focal child's satisfaction with those arrangements. Additionally, the environment of children's living arrangements emerged as a key factor affecting children's satisfaction. Environmental factors encompassed household functioning, including safety, stability, and rules in either home; the presence or absence of activities and resources desirable to the focal child in either home; and the child's overall comfort level in either home environment. Respondents also highlighted the role of the presence or absence of others in the focal child's satisfaction with living arrangements, including new family members or pets residing in either home, and how the child is treated by others (including parents) in either home. Finally, respondents identified proximity to friends, family, and extracurricular activities, and the distance between the parents' homes, as relevant for the child's satisfaction.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

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This report provides an overview of parenting practices of divorced parents in Wisconsin a substantial amount of time after their divorces were finalized. Our findings add to a growing body of work from IRP researchers exploring the circumstances of these families. Whereas earlier work focused on the details of the way children's time is shared, parents' overall satisfaction with those arrangements, and the extent to which parents share the costs of kids via

child support and more direct cost-sharing, here we have explored a much broader range of outcomes, spanning parenting roles and responsibilities, patterns of communication between parents, alignment and conflict between homes, and the quality of and collaboration involved in parents' ongoing relationships. Results speak to divorced mothers overall; to differences between those with shared versus mother-sole placement; and to similarities and differences between mothers and fathers in the context of shared placement. Additionally, our analyses add insight to some of the questions previously explored—notably why living patterns have evolved over time and the sources contributing to parents' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with those arrangements—by capitalizing on parents' open-text responses. Importantly, this report is focused on describing patterns, not on assessing whether patterns conform to any particular ideals. Our goal is to shed more light on how post-divorce parenting plays out in practice over the medium to longer term.

We know from past work that living arrangements aren't static. We find here that among the nearly half of parents who follow their placement order less closely than at the time of the divorce, the evolution of living patterns arises from a wide-ranging set of influences, including the preferences of the parents and/or children (sometimes mutual, sometimes coercive, sometimes passive); logistical factors making it easier or harder to navigate time in two homes; and compatibility of parents' schedules and constraints. At times, contact with one parent (in these data, almost always fathers), is entirely absent; mothers often perceive this as stemming from safety concerns, disinterest, competing obligations, and practical barriers. Parents' explanations make it clear that the way time is shared between parents, while governed by a legal agreement, in practice is subject to many competing forces influencing both preferences and possibilities. While these explanations are offered in the specific context of understanding why

living arrangements have evolved as they have, similar influences are likely relevant as well to the broader range of parenting practices and dynamics assessed in this report.

An overarching takeaway is the wide range of parenting circumstances—from parents who live in close proximity to each other, spend time together with their children, communicate regularly, perceive their parenting practices as generally aligned, and report good relationships and collaboration—to those who fall at the other end of the spectrum on these dimensions. In many cases, there are broad differences in prevailing practices between parents in mother-sole as compared to shared-placement arrangements. As such, the wide range of circumstances within both groups remains an important takeaway.

Regarding parenting roles and responsibilities, we found that mothers as a group almost universally report very high engagement across all types of roles and activities, regardless of placement. They report substantially lower engagement for fathers, with differences much more pronounced in mother-sole than in shared-placement arrangements but nonetheless evident in both placement groups. Looking at shared placement, where we have direct information from both parents, mothers tend to self-report higher engagement than do fathers, suggesting there are in fact differences between parents beyond those stemming from proxy reporting, albeit far less pronounced than when relying solely on mothers to report.

We found that communication between divorced parents is common but variable, and considerably more common in the context of shared versus sole placement. At the same time, mothers' reports of communication with the father during times the child is with him, as well as her communication directly with children during those times, differs little by placement, suggesting the degree to which mothers are actively engaged in their parenting role when apart from their children is not closely tied to placement. Among parents with shared placement,

mothers describe more frequent communication directly with their child when he/she is with their father than fathers do during times the child is with mothers—though like differences in parenting roles, the differences in their self-reported communication is far less than when we rely on proxy reports.

Alignment of rules between homes varied across domains, with highest alignment in the case of school-related rules (e.g., homework, attendance) and lowest in the case of rules surrounding time use and responsibilities in the home (e.g., screen time, chores). Across categories, alignment was higher for parents with shared vs sole placement, particularly for school-related rules. This pattern was consistent with the greater communication that shared-placement parents described. Mothers and fathers had very high concordance in these responses.

Parents reported generally low levels of conflict across a range of dimensions, and this was true regardless of placement type or which parent was reporting. Child support and child expenses was the most common area with moderate or high conflict for both placement types. It's important to note that lack of conflict does not necessarily equate to satisfaction with the status quo. One consideration is the conflict questions were only asked of parents who reported having contact with each other in the past year; a second is that avoidance of conflict can be an explicit choice even in the context of disagreement. Indeed, our past work on parents' perceptions of the fairness of the way child costs were shared highlighted that satisfaction and perceived fairness were much lower for mothers with shared vs sole placement (Bartfeld et al., 2022), even as our findings here show little variation by placement in the level of conflict in this domain. Turning to measures of relationship and coordination, parents varied widely in how they described the quality of their relationships and how well they functioned as a parenting team,



though mothers with shared placement fared notably better than mothers with sole placement; here too, mothers and fathers in shared-placement arrangements reported very similar patterns.

Taken together, results suggest that parents in shared placement arrangements have parenting patterns characterized by more frequent communication, more engagement of fathers in a range of roles and responsibilities, greater alignment of rules, better relationships with each other, and more flexibility in accommodating schedule changes. These seemingly favorable attributes notwithstanding, we find that mothers with shared placement report moderately lower satisfaction with the arrangements than their sole-placement counterparts. While some parents point to dimensions such as communication, conflict, and parental involvement in explaining their satisfaction or dissatisfaction, more commonly they reference how much time they prefer to have with their child, their perceptions of the child's well-being and happiness, and logistical challenges for parents and children stemming from the arrangements.

Finally, results affirm the value of hearing from both parents to ensure a fuller and more nuanced understanding of divorced-parenting contexts. We found notable patterns of both concordance and discordance in how shared-placement parents characterize their roles, interactions, and circumstances. As a group, mothers' and fathers' assessment of many aspects of their joint circumstances and dynamics were quite consistent, including how they perceived the alignment in rules, the sources and magnitude of conflict, the quality of their relationship, their functioning as a parenting team, and aspects of their communication and interactions with each other. They differed, however, in how they characterized their own roles and engagement with their child, with parents—particularly fathers—describing more engagement on average than suggested by proxy reports.

## **Limitations**

An important limitation of this work involves timing: most interviews were conducted after the start of the pandemic, which likely impacted the details of time allocation for at least some families. More than 80% of respondents described living arrangements and parenting practices for a 12-month reference period that included at least several weeks, and for a small minority up to 7 months, of the pandemic period. Alternately, only 11% of respondents who said their living arrangements varied from the legal order explicitly referenced the pandemic as a reason (Bartfeld et al., 2021). Regardless, it is clear the results need to be considered in the context of the unique period in which they were collected.

A second issue is the absence of fathers whose children have sole-mother placement arrangements. As is evident in the similarities and differences seen in mothers' and fathers' reports in the context of shared placement, having both parents' perspectives is critical to a comprehensive understanding. This is true in affirming reports and perspectives that are shared by parents and in highlighting areas in which they differ. Past survey efforts have struggled to reach nonresident fathers, and the long timespan between the divorce and the survey informed the decision to not include those fathers in the sample frame for WisParents (Vogel, 2021); nonetheless, this remains a limitation in what we can and can't learn from these data.

Likewise, we have no information directly from children. While parents provide proxy reports of their child's satisfaction with the arrangements, much could be learned from children themselves regarding how they experience their living arrangements and relationships.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Our findings suggest several implications for child support policy, practice, and future research. An overarching theme is that families differ in their post-divorce experiences;

perceptions vary across families regarding where children spend time, how parents communicate and co-parent, and how family members feel about their respective situations. As child support programs nationally and within Wisconsin shift towards a more family-centered model, innovative approaches to service delivery will need to be sufficiently flexible to serve families of many different configurations and needs. As our results suggest, some families with child support orders may come to the program with strong co-parent collaboration and a minimal need for intervention, while other families—particularly those in high-conflict and low-communication situations—may require support to ensure that children’s needs are met. Furthermore, these patterns may evolve over time. Child support programs could continue to explore opportunities to facilitate connections to mediation services when safe and appropriate and affordable legal services when either parent could benefit from representation. Supporting access to pro se agreements when parents’ child support wishes align could also help parents reach agreements that work for their families. Findings also provide helpful insights into the service needs some families who come into contact with the program might have, such as co-parenting education, services related to family violence, services for mental health or substance abuse issues, and other services and supports. Fostering relationships with local referral partners to help address these needs could help support family well-being in a more holistic manner.

Findings also suggest that exploring ways for the court and child support agencies to receive more regular updates on the actual living situation of children could potentially help facilitate adjustment of child support orders to better align with the realities of where children live. Our findings indicate that informal placement shifts over time are not uncommon and occur for a wide range of reasons. If these placement shifts occur in such a way that could substantially affect the child support order amount, such as for once-shared families that shift towards de facto

sole arrangements, these changes may result in undue financial burden on either parent. Concerns about fairness may be of particular concern for high-conflict and/or low-communication families in which either parent may avoid bringing changes to the attention of the court due to concerns about creating further discord or safety issues or a reluctance to upend the status quo (Bartfeld et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2024).

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