

# Shared Parenting Levels in Scotland

## WHAT IS SHARED PARENTING?

Shared Parenting means both parents having relatively equal involvement in bringing up their children. As well as spending time with their children, involvement includes sharing key decisions on education, health, religion etc and sharing all types of activity, not just the fun or weekend bits. Although obstacles to sharing parenting happen in all families, it becomes a particular issue when parents separate. The standard Scottish pattern in separated families is still for children to spend most of their time with one parent, usually the mother, with 'contact time' with the other. Meaningful shared parenting involves a far more equal sharing of time and responsibilities, with a 50:50 time split whenever practical.

## WHY SHOULD SHARED PARENTING BE ENCOURAGED?

Shared Parenting can bring significant benefits for children in separated families. They continue to get support and encouragement from both of their parents and from both their wider families. An increasing number of studies from various countries show that children in shared care do better than those in sole or care predominantly with one parent. An added benefit of shared parenting after separation is that both parents also get time for themselves.

## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE LEVEL OF SHARED PARENTING IN SCOTLAND?

FNF Scotland obtained support from the 2017 Analytical Exchange Programme, conducted by the Scottish Government's Chief Statistician. This was for a short project exploring available data from Scottish sources. David Redhead, a senior information analyst from NHS Scotland National Services Division, worked with us to assess various possible sources of information.

We looked at various data sources, including the Children's Wellbeing Surveys:

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/realigning-childrens-services/meeting-childrens-needs> and the 2015 Scottish Household Survey:

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/09/7673/downloads> as well as Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) and the Millennium Cohort.

The only Scottish source of statistical information that we could use to assess shared parenting levels was the Growing Up In Scotland longitudinal research study

<https://growingupinscotland.org.uk/>

An introductory analysis was prepared from sweep 7 of birth cohort 1 from GUS.

These data were obtained when the children were aged 7/8. There were 3456 responses from the cohort out of an original total of 8076 families when the cohort was first surveyed.

This showed the following care frequencies:

### SEPARATED FAMILIES

Shared care/joint physical custody	160	4.6%
Mostly with one parent	147	4.3%
Sole care	147	4.3%

### INTACT FAMILIES

Natural father in household	2752	79.6%
Not applicable	213	6.2%

Data on other aspects such as child health, and child's progress from that sweep can also be analysed according to these levels of shared care:

Given the current discussion on parental involvement it is interesting to see data on involvement in school activities and the communication that the school has with parents. Although these results can be separated into the various care categories the information is only coming from the resident parent.

In 72.5% of the separated families, the children had some contact with the non-resident father.

The distance between the households of separated parents is an important factor in relation to contact. 71.9% of children who have shared care live within 10 minutes of the other parent's home, and a further 24.4% live within 11-30 minutes. In contrast, only 52.5% of children who are mainly with one parent live within 10 minutes of the other parent, and this reduces to 25.3% for children in sole care.

The results relating to assessments of how much "interest" the non-resident parent has indicate that those in shared care have high levels of interest in their children (86.3%) compared with those where children live mostly with one parent (46.2%) or sole care (19.7%). As these assessments are only made by the resident parent, they should be treated with some caution, as noted below.

Various factors need to be taken into account when assessing these results:

The information on parenting patterns is taken from responses by the resident parent, usually the mother. Although GUS has recognised the need to obtain information from non-resident parents and has produced [reports](#) on this issue it has not so far collected information directly from non-resident parents. This means that the assessment of time spent with the children hasn't been confirmed by both parents. In a Norwegian study<sup>1</sup>, mothers reported the change in levels of shared parenting from 7% in 2002 to 25% in 2012, whereas fathers reported a growth from 11% to 33% in the same period.

The number of separated families in this study is quite small, and this sweep contains data from less than half of the original sample. While we know that GUS tries very hard to ensure that the original cohorts are representative of the whole Scottish population, these factors may mean that this aspect of the study cannot be taken as being representative.

As noted in the Family Court Review introductory article (see below), "good data on shared-time arrangements (especially population data, both survey and administrative) are probably the exception rather than the norm". The GUS data gives some indication that at least 5% of Scottish families are sharing the parenting.

The report published by GUS in 2009 on Sweep 3 non-resident parents<sup>2</sup> gives the following findings:

The dynamics of non-resident fatherhood

- The overall proportions of children with a non-resident father have remained steady at 21% (birth cohort) and around 26% (child cohort) between sweeps 1 and 3 of GUS.
- For the majority of children, family situations have been relatively stable since birth; just

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<sup>1</sup> Kitterod & Lyngstad (2014) She said, he said: comparing mothers' and father' reports on the non-resident father's contact with his children, Demographic Research, 30, 899-910. <https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol30/31/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2009/01/21085002/8>

11% (birth cohort) and 17% (child cohort) had experienced their father leaving or entering the household since birth.

- This was also the case, though to a lesser extent, for children with a non-resident father; 77% having not lived with their father since the study began and 66% having not lived with them since birth (birth cohort).
- 29% (birth cohort) and 34% (child cohort) of children with a non-resident parent at sweep 3, lived with either a step-parent or a relative in addition to their mothers, with 9% and 17%, respectively, living with a step-parent.
- Step-families' household incomes, though higher than that of lone parent families, were lower on average than couple families consisting of both natural parents; 68% of lone parent families were in the lowest income group, in contrast to 36% of stepfamilies and 13% of couple families containing two natural parents.
- For children whose fathers had left the household and who had previously had at least one parent in full-time employment, only 30% remained in that position, with almost half of this group now living in a household with no parent in employment (birth cohort).
- And again, although lone parent families who re-partner fare far better than lone parent families in terms of having at least one adult in either full or part-time employment, they are still more likely to have no parent in employment than those in couple families containing both natural parents.

## OTHER UK DATA

[September 2017 UK](#) data from the Child Maintenance service shows that of the 77,730 children in separated families using their service, 14% of non-resident parents had their child one night per week, 6% had 2 night/week, 1.5% had their child 3 nights per week and 0.4% had 50:50 care. This represented 22.44% of their caseload, but this caseload comprises parents who have had to use the official services to arrange child maintenance, and who therefore are probably less likely to reach agreement on shared care. The other complicating factor is that the current UK child support system only provides a very limited recognition of shared care, measured in 'overnights', while also creating a perverse disincentive for the parent receiving maintenance to offer to share more equally the time the children spend with the other parent.

Other UK benefit and tax credit services giving funding towards the cost of bringing up children can only be obtained by the parent who receives child benefit, which makes it very difficult to share these entitlements in proportion to the actual amount of care. This disincentive to shared care also applies to housing support payments for extra bedrooms for children, which are not usually available to the parent who is not the main carer of the children. This makes it very difficult to have the children to stay overnight, particularly if the age criteria for housing support has restricted the parent to shared rental accommodation.

## HOW DOES THIS COMPARE WITH OTHER COUNTRIES?

The October 2017 edition of [Family Court Review](#), the journal of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) was a special issue on shared-time parenting after separation. Review articles described the situation in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, the United Kingdom and Australia. We have extracted the following statistics from these papers. For the full papers see <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/fcre.2017.55.issue-4/issuetoc>

While there is no standard definition of shared parenting and measures in different countries vary, the following note gives an indication of the level and trends in a range of countries. The

information was extracted from table 1 in the introductory article to the special issue by Bruce M.Smyth (p494-499)

#### United States – Wisconsin

50% of divorce cases result in children spending at least 25% of time with each parent, with maternal sole custody showing a linear decrease and shared custody increasing from 12% since 1990.

#### Canada

Shared custody defined as at least 40% of time with each parent at 22% in 2015 and considered to be rising

#### Netherlands

Shared residence 50% with each parent in 22% of divorce cases in 2013 (from divorce records)

#### Belgium

Alternating residence (at least 33% of time with each parent) rose from 9% in 1990-95 to 37% 2006-08

#### Norway

Shared residence 50% with each parent: 25% of youngest children in 2012 (mothers reports), 33% of youngest children in 2012 (fathers reports)

#### Australia

Shared care at least 33% of time with each parent: 17% of new entrants to child support scheme in 2014-15; 10% of children in orders by judge 2012-14; 14% of children in litigated consent orders in 2012-14; 26% of children in in consent orders 2012

Figures for Sweden have been noted in various research papers.

50:50 shared care was assessed at 30% in 2012 by [Bergstrom et al](#)

The Swedish statistical publication [“Different families live in different ways”](#) (2014) showed 35% of children in separated families spend equal time with both parents; 29% only with the mother; 22% mainly with the mother; 4% only with the father; and 4% mainly with the father.

One in four Swedish children live in separated families.

#### **NEXT STEPS?**

Shared Parenting isn't the easiest option after separation There are various personal, cultural and institutional barriers. It can be difficult for ex-partners to communicate constructively with each other about the arrangements for the children or reach agreement immediately after separation when key decisions have to be made. When a separation is particularly hostile it can be very difficult to avoid involving the children in the conflict or using their residence and financial arrangements as bargaining counters.

These problems can be overcome with support from services such as family mediation, but even when people become aware of such services they are not immediately available.

The institutional barriers to shared parenting include the child maintenance system, welfare benefits, family law, and the adversarial court system. Cultural factors include the attitudes of both parents and their families in intact families or after separation, the presumptions of health visitors,

schools, social workers and general opinion formers. None of these barriers is insurmountable. The evidence from the increase in shared parenting in other countries is that changes in attitude are at least associated with economic changes, in turn associated with removal of institutional barriers.

**Families Need Fathers Scotland: Both Parents Matter**  
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