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RESEARCH REPORT

MOVING ON: THE EXPANSION OF THE FAMILY NETWORK AFTER PARENTS SEPARATE

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Moving On: The Expansion of the Family Network After Parents Separate

*Phase 3 of a three-part project commissioned by the
Family, Children and Youth Section of the Department of Justice Canada*

**The Impact of Parents' Family Transitions on Children's Family Environment and
Economic Well-Being: A Longitudinal Assessment**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

This is the third of three reports commissioned by the Child Support Team of the Department of Justice Canada. These reports use family history data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth¹ (NLSCY) to explore the impact of parents' conjugal behaviour on their children's family environment and economic well-being. The previous report focussed on the first and most common transition experienced by children: their parents' separation. In this report, we move on, looking at the expansion of children's family networks, as separated mothers and fathers continue their conjugal and parental life courses, entering new unions and creating new families.

The report is divided into two main sections. The first section focusses on the arrival of new parents, stepsiblings and half-siblings, showing how complex and diverse the experience of family life has become for Canadian children. In the second section, we explore how children perceive their relationship with parents and parent figures, and we attempt to gain an insight into how these relationships are affected by their family life pathways.

Research approach

The retrospective "Family and Custody History" section of the NLSCY provides complete conjugal and parental histories of each child's biological parents, whether or not they live in the same household. This makes it possible not only to reconstitute children's family life pathways, but also to extend the study of family networks beyond the residential group. With growing proportions of children spending a decreasing number of years in a family that includes their two biological parents, close family members who play an important role in a child's life do not necessarily live in the same household.

The family life course analyses in Section 1 are based on information collected from the NLSCY longitudinal sample of approximately 15,000 children included in the first two survey cycles, and aged between 2 and 13 years at Cycle 2 (1996–97). The analyses of children's perception of their "parents" draw on data collected at the third cycle in 1998–99 for children aged 10–15 years who completed the child-based questionnaire.

Highlights

Creating new conjugal unions after separation

- The probability that parents will enter new conjugal unions rises consistently with time since separation, though fathers form new relationships more rapidly than mothers.
 - Within three years of separation, one third of fathers and a quarter of mothers had remarried or started living with someone other than the child's other parent.

¹ A panel survey conducted jointly by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and Statistics Canada.

- Within 10 years, one third of mothers had done so.
- Mothers and fathers in Quebec formed new relationships more rapidly than parents in any other region of Canada. With time, regional differences lessened among fathers and increased among mothers.
- Once-married mothers and fathers are just as likely to enter a new union as are parents separated from a cohabiting union.
- Non-resident fathers who have only limited contact with their children are most likely to enter a new relationship, and those with full custody are least likely to do so.
- Children are much more likely to live with their mother's new partner than with their father's new partner: more than four fifths (84 percent) of children in this sample lived full time with their stepfather, while only 6 percent did so with their stepmother.

Stepsiblings and half-siblings

- Close to half the new relationships formed by separated parents were with individuals who already had children from an earlier union.
- As children usually remain with their mother when parents separate, stepsiblings rarely share the same residence.
- Although fathers enter new unions more rapidly, mothers tend to have babies within these new unions more quickly. Fathers catch up over time, and nine years or more after the separation, approximately 40 percent of fathers and mothers entering a new union had started a second family.
- Children more often live with maternal half-siblings than with paternal half-siblings.
- Overall, almost one in five children aged 0–13 years in 1996–97 had at least one stepsibling or half-sibling in their family network.

Can I talk to my father and mother about myself and my problems?

- Boys and girls (aged 10–15 years) were more likely to confide in their mother than their father, though the difference between the two is much smaller for boys than girls.
- Irrespective of family circumstances, the ability to confide in parents declines as children enter their teens, less so among boys than girls. The father-daughter relationship is particularly affected.
- In all family environments that involved a parental separation, a smaller proportion of children felt able to talk to their parents.

- Compared with children who, at separation, lived with their mother but saw their father frequently:
 - children with sporadic or no contact with their father were significantly *less* likely to confide in their father, and *more* likely to confide in their mother; and
 - children in shared physical custody were significantly *more* likely to confide in both their mother and father.

Relationship with mothers, fathers and stepfathers

- Biological fathers clearly remain fathers even when they do not reside with their children, and even if there is a stepfather in the picture. Asked to select the “father figure with whom they spent the most time,” the vast majority of children living with a lone mother, and a good proportion of children living with a stepfather, identified their biological or adoptive father.
- Most children have a very positive perception of their relationship with both biological parents. Differences between mothers and fathers were small; mothers scored a little higher in understanding children, giving them affection and maintaining overall closeness, while scores were almost identical in terms of “fairness,” a question that may be less oriented towards maternal aspects of parenting than the others.
- Children held a higher opinion of the quality of their relationship with a biological father than with a stepfather. Nonetheless, the stepfather relationship is more often seen in a highly positive light than a negative one: 45 percent of children identifying a stepfather as the main father figure stated that they received “a great deal” of affection from him compared to the 21 percent who received “very little.”

Implications

Perhaps the most important policy contribution of the life course analyses is that they promote awareness of the growing fluidity and diversity of family life in Canada. To avoid simplistic solutions to complex situations, it is essential to appreciate the shifting nature of family circumstances after separation. In many cases, for example, arrangements made at separation in terms of custody, visiting and child support will need to be modified in response to changes in mothers’ or fathers’ conjugal or parental situation.

As more parents become responsible for children from two or more unions, they will increasingly have to address the competing needs of these children. Similarly, issues related to stepparents’ rights and responsibilities now apply to an increasing proportion of families. Already, the majority of separated parents face this situation; with rising numbers of adults and children in step-relationships, these relationships are likely to become more rather than less important.

INTRODUCTION

This is the third of three reports that use longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) to examine the impact of parents' family transitions on children's family environment and economic well-being. These reports take a life course perspective on children's family experience, viewing it as a "process" evolving in response to decisions parents make about their own conjugal and parental life. From this perspective, parents are considered not as a unit but as two individuals whose paths meet for an undefined period of time, during which a child is conceived. The child's family life course depends on whether parents continue to follow the same path or go their separate ways.

The second report followed children from birth to the most common family transition: their parents' separation. However, separation may be just the first of many transitions; subsequently, the child's family life course is subject to decisions made separately by each parent. In this report, we explore what happens in children's family lives as separated mothers and fathers continue their conjugal and parental life courses, creating new family units.

Our approach also extends the study of the child's family environment beyond the residential group. With growing proportions of children spending a decreasing number of years in a family that includes both biological parents, close family members who play an important role in a child's life do not necessarily live in the same household. The NLSCY, a panel survey conducted jointly by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and Statistics Canada, makes it possible to take this broader perspective. The retrospective "Family and Custody History" section of the NLSCY provides complete conjugal and parental histories of each child's biological parents, whether or not they live in the same household.

This report is divided into two main sections. The first section focusses on the expansion of children's family networks, estimating the probability that children will acquire new parent figures and stepsiblings or half-siblings as separated parents continue their family lives. In the second section, we link this information to children's perception of the parent figures in their lives. Parts of this study are concerned with the family life course these children live; these parts are based on information collected from the longitudinal sample of approximately 15,000 children included in the first two survey cycles, and aged between 2 and 13 years at Cycle 2, which was carried out in 1996–97. The analyses of children's perception of their "parents" are based on data collected at the third cycle in 1998–99 for children aged 10–15 years who completed the child-based questionnaire.

I EXPANDING FAMILY NETWORKS

Separation and its immediate consequence, life with a lone parent, have received a great deal of attention in recent years. The rising proportion of parents and children experiencing this first, and most common, family transition has challenged those involved in social policy decision making. Less well documented is what will happen next, as mothers and fathers separately continue their conjugal and parental life courses—creating different family units as they enter new conjugal unions.

Equally unknown is how this process affects children’s family experience. When a separated mother forms a new conjugal union, for example, an additional parent figure, and possibly stepsiblings, enter her child’s family universe. The same goes for separated fathers. Subsequently, these new couples may decide to have a child together, expanding the child’s family environment still further with the addition of half-siblings.

Transitions in the life of the custodial parent alter the composition of the child’s residential family unit. In the non-resident parent’s life, however, transitions may require just as much adaptation, as children see other children “taking their place” within this parent’s household. These transitions may also generate new family responsibilities that change the relationship between children and their non-resident parent.

In addition, each family transition can have repercussions in other areas of the child’s life. A parents’ new union may involve moving to a new home, which may mean a change of schools and friends for the children. In the case of the non-custodial parent, it might involve a reorganization of visiting or less frequent contact. The additional family commitments may also prompt the non-resident parent to ask for a modification of the child support agreement.

Although society has acknowledged the growing importance of the stepfamilies that are created when the custodial parent enters a new union, there is little appreciation of how complex the family life course can become for children whose biological parents live apart. Instead, this complexity is often concealed in simple family distributions based on cross-sectional data and restricted to the residential family unit.² Understanding this complexity is essential for anybody involved in assessing the impact of family change on children, or in developing public policies that deal effectively with the consequences of this expansion of the child’s family environment, such as the rights and responsibilities of stepparents.

In this section, we use longitudinal data from the first two cycles³ of the NLSCY to explore the growth of children’s family networks as parents go their separate ways. In the first step, we focus on the arrival (and departure) of new parent figures, as separated mothers and fathers form or dissolve new unions. In this step, we do the following:

- evaluate the frequency and timing of mothers’ and fathers’ new unions, within Canada as a whole and for the different regions;

² It is, for example, still impossible to distinguish stepfamilies from other two-parent families in the census.

³ Data problems meant that the analysis could not be extended to the third cycle.

- reconstruct the family life course experience of Canadian children, to illustrate how each conjugal transition in the life of separated mothers and fathers translates into family change for children by expanding and diversifying the family pathways Canadian children take through childhood;
- show how the complexity of children’s life courses is closely related to the different contexts within which they were born (whether that be outside a union, within marriage or within a common-law union); and
- examine how these new unions expand children’s sibling networks with the arrival of stepsiblings (children of the new parent figure) and how these unions create new family units within which half-siblings may be born (in both cases, these new siblings may or may not live in the same residential family unit).

NEW UNIONS—NEW PARENT FIGURES

A new union in a separated parent’s life means a new “parent” figure, or stepparent, joining the child’s family network.⁴ Of the children whose biological parents lived apart before the child’s birth or following separation, how many saw a new father or mother figure enter their family universe? What proportion had both an extra father *and* mother figure to adapt to? To answer these questions, we draw on information gathered in the family history and custody section of the NLSCY regarding parental separation and the new unions separated parents formed. Most of the following analyses are based on children interviewed at Cycle 2 (1996–97), when they were aged 0–13 years.

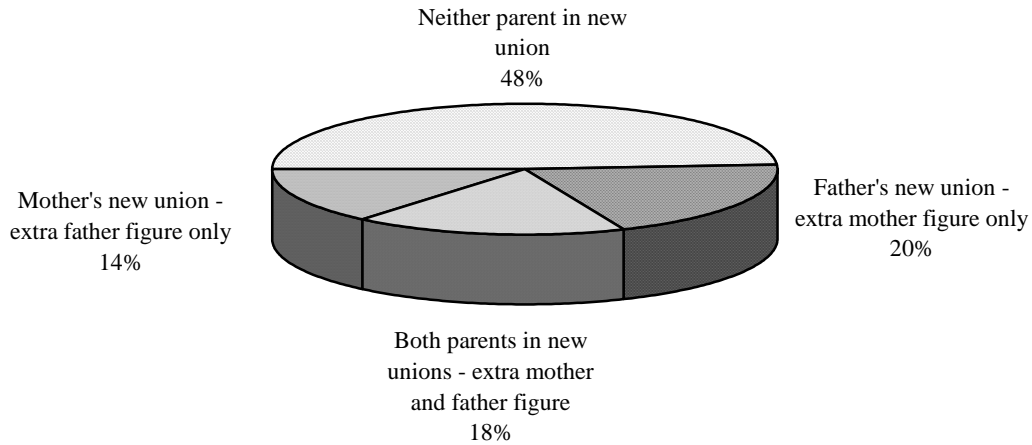
First, Figure 1.1 shows how common it is for children, who were born outside a union or whose parents separated at some point,⁵ to see a new parent figure enter their family network when their mother or father forms a new union. Although they were, on average, only eight years old, more than half the children (52 percent) had acquired at least one extra parent figure in their family environment by 1996–97, and close to one child in five (18 percent) had gained two. Factoring in children for whom both parents entered new unions, one third (14% + 18%) of the children had seen an additional father figure enter their family network, and almost two fifths (20% + 18%) saw an additional mother figure.

Although high, these proportions do not give a true image of the extent of the phenomenon, as they combine the experience of children whose parents have been separated for different amounts of time—sometimes from the child’s birth. Although a new parent figure may already be in the picture at the time of separation, and may even have acted as a catalyst for it, the expansion of the child’s family universe occurs over time. In the next section, we use life table techniques to more precisely estimate the frequency and timing of separated parents’ new unions.

⁴ These terms are used interchangeably, partly to acknowledge the fact that the mother’s or father’s new partner may not be perceived, or perceive themselves, as a stepparent.

⁵ Approximately 2800 children aged 0–13 years at Cycle 2.

Figure 1.1 Distribution of children aged 0–13 years in 1996–97, whose parents were living apart, according to whether new parental unions introduced extra parent figures into their family environment, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2



Frequency and timing of mothers' and fathers' new unions

At Cycles 1 and 2, when biological parents were living apart, responding parents were asked whether they, or the other parent, had formed a union with a different partner and, if so, when this new union occurred.

Mothers who had their child outside a union and had never lived with the child's father after birth, however, were often ignorant of the date of a new union created by the child's father. As this information is essential for calculating the table probabilities, children who had never lived with their father were excluded from the analysis. These tables apply, therefore, only to children who had lived with both parents from birth or at some point afterwards, and whose parents subsequently separated.

The tables are based, nonetheless, on a larger sample than that used in other analyses in this section (approximately 3700 children), as the life table method makes it possible to include incomplete histories in the calculations. As a result, the experiences of all children (with separated parents) interviewed at Cycle 1, whether or not they remained in the survey at Cycle 2, were included in the estimates.⁶

Figure 1.2a presents the proportion of children with separated parents whose mother or father had entered a union with a different partner and shows that the probability of forming a new union increases consistently as time passes after the separation. Fathers formed new relationships more rapidly than mothers: within three years of separation, one third of fathers and a quarter of mothers had already remarried or started living with someone other than the child's other parent.

⁶ To reduce costs, the longitudinal sample was reduced from 22,831 children (Cycle 1) to 16,903 (Cycle 2).

Ten years after their parents separated, over 63 percent of children had seen their mother set up home with a new partner, and 67 percent had seen their father do so.

Figure 1.2a Cumulated probability that children’s separated mothers and fathers will enter a new conjugal union, according to the time elapsed since separation, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2 (life table estimates)

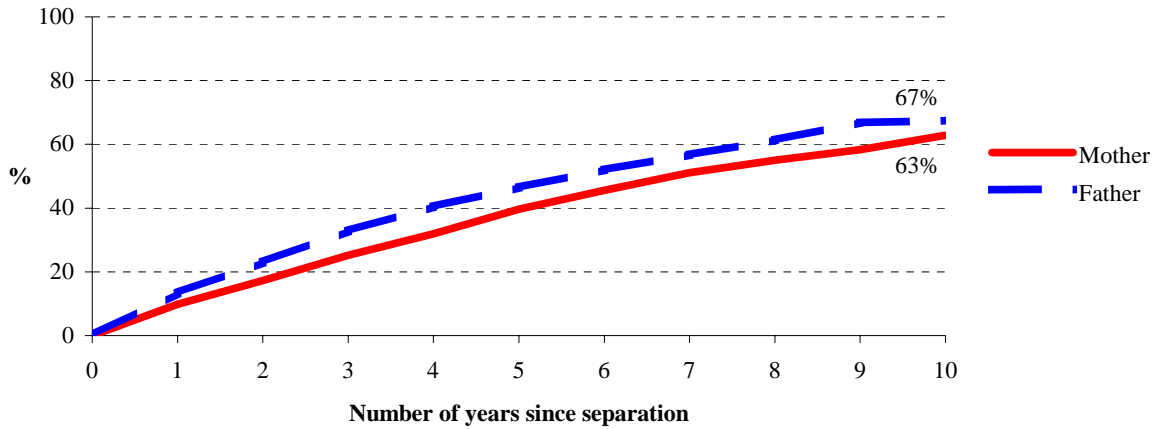
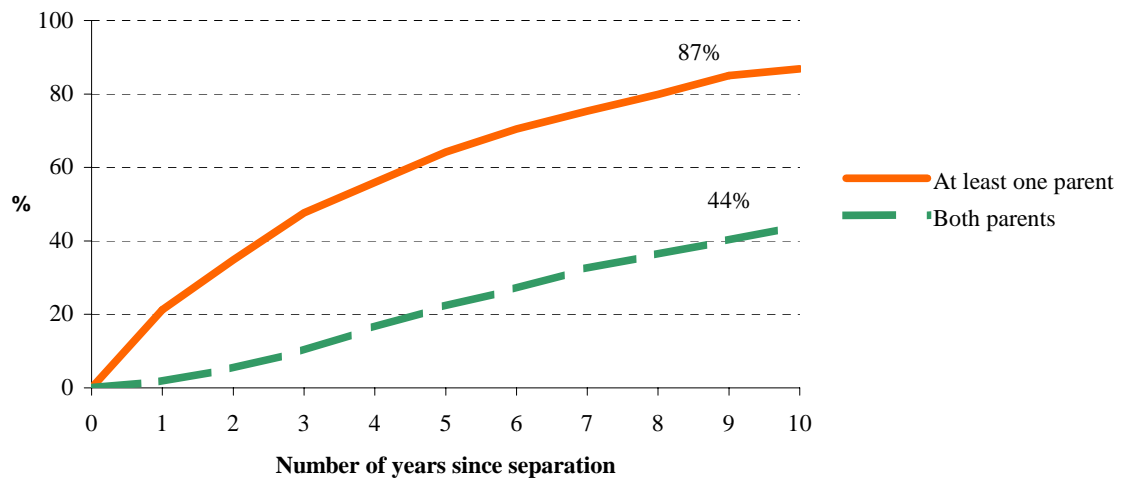


Figure 1.2b Cumulated probability that one or both separated parents will enter a new conjugal union, according to the time elapsed since separation, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2 (life table estimates)



From the child's point of view, the expansion of the family network is even more rapid than it appears when mothers and fathers are considered separately. Figure 1.2b presents similar probabilities, this time looking at the arrival of the first (solid line) and second (dotted line) new parent figure, irrespective of whether the mother or father created the union. The solid line shows the following:

- Only two years after their parents separated, over one third of children already had at least one additional parent figure.
- After five years, two thirds had an extra father or mother figure.
- After 10 years, close to 9 out of 10 children with separated parents (87 percent) had seen one of these parents form a new union.

The likelihood that both parents will take a new partner changes more gradually; nonetheless, only five years after their parents separated, over one fifth of children had seen both a new mother and father figure enter their family environment, as did close to half of them (44 percent) after 10 years.

Regional similarities and differences

Figures 1.3a and 1.3b compare separated mothers and fathers in five Canadian regions, in terms of the frequency and timing of their entry into new unions during the first five years following separation. Mothers and fathers in Quebec formed new relationships more rapidly than in any other region of Canada. After only a year, for example, separated parents in Quebec were twice as likely to have entered a new union as were those in British Columbia. After five years, however, these regional differences among fathers were much less apparent; fathers in the Prairies, in particular, were as likely to enter a new union within five years as were those in Quebec. Among mothers, on the other hand, the gap widened over time; five years after separation, close to half of separated mothers in Quebec had formed a new union, but only one third of mothers in Ontario and Atlantic Canada had done so.

Figure 1.3a Cumulated probability that children's separated mothers will enter a new conjugal union, by time since separation and region of Canada, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2 (life table estimates)

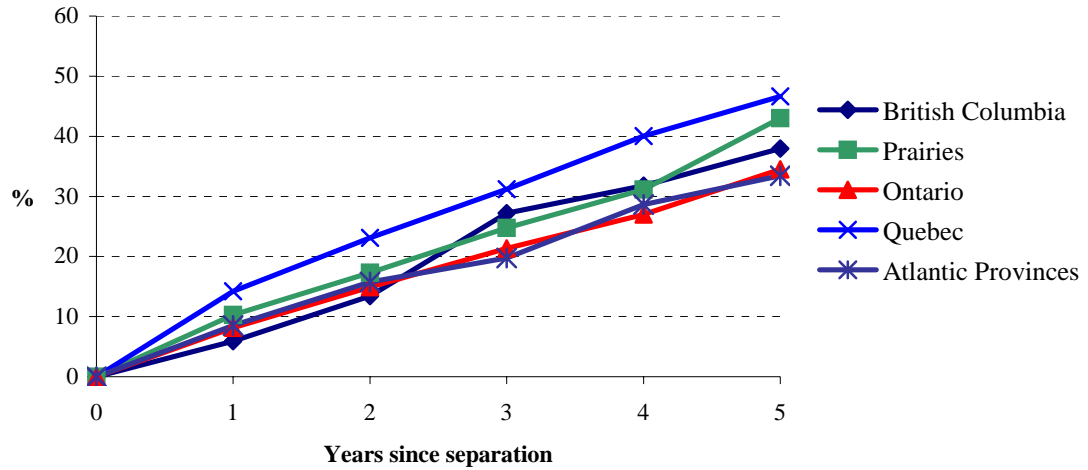
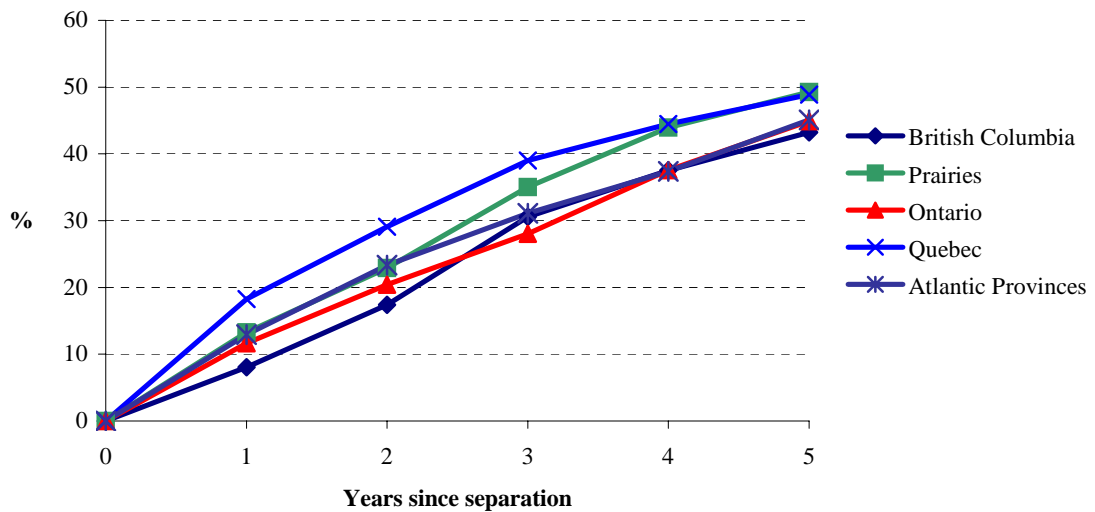


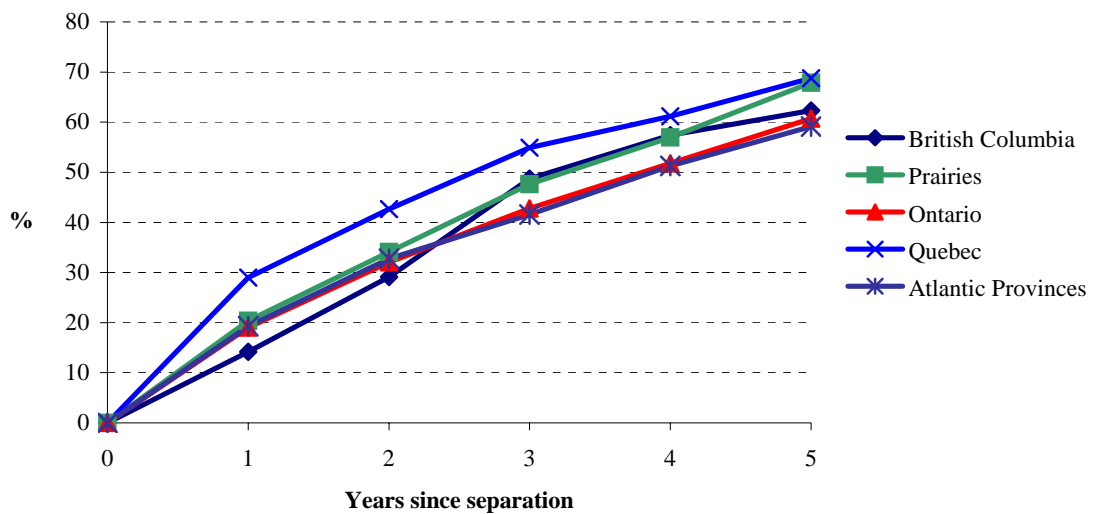
Figure 1.3b Cumulated probability that children's separated fathers will enter a new conjugal union, by time since separation and region of Canada, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2 (life table estimates)



In all regions, fathers form unions more rapidly than do mothers. In Quebec, the gap between the sexes had more or less disappeared after five years; by this time, 47 percent of mothers and 49 percent of fathers had started a new union. Gender differences were most apparent in Atlantic Canada and in Ontario; in these regions, 45 percent of fathers entered new relationships within five years of separation, which was the case for only one third of mothers.

These regional disparities affect the speed at which children’s family networks expand (see Figure 1.4). Within the first two years of their parents’ separation, children in Quebec were much more likely to have an additional parent figure enter their family universe than was the case anywhere else in Canada. The gap shrank with time, as fathers in other regions caught up with those in Quebec.

Figure 1.4 Cumulated probability that at least one of a child’s separated parents will enter a new conjugal union, by time since separation and region of Canada, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2 (life table estimates)



Why do separated parents in Quebec create new relationships more quickly than they do elsewhere in Canada? Research shows that younger mothers enter new unions more frequently and rapidly than do those who are older when they separate. Are Quebec’s mothers younger at separation than they are elsewhere in Canada, or are there other factors at work? Is the discrepancy linked to the fact that cohabitation is so much more common in Quebec than elsewhere, for example? In the next section, we will use event history analysis to attempt to throw some light on these questions.

Entering a new union: a multivariate analysis

Table 1.1 presents the results of two separate analyses exploring the association between certain factors and the frequency and timing of separated mothers' (first column) and fathers' (second column) entry into a new conjugal union. Odds ratios above one show that the variable is positively associated with entering a new union; ratios below one show a negative relationship. For example, the ratio for mother's age in the first column shows a negative relationship; it indicates that the older mothers are when they separate, the *less* likely they are to enter a new union subsequently.

Table 1.1 Impact of different variables on the likelihood that separated mothers and fathers will enter a new union, Canada, NLSCY, Cycles 1 to 3 (event history analysis^a—odds ratios)

Variables	Enters a new union	
	Mother	Father
N	3379	3358
Mother's age at separation^b	0.933***	-
Type of union (marriage)		
Cohabitation	1.037	0.961
Union duration at separation^b	1.036**	1.030***
Custody and contact at separation (with mother/regular contact with father)		
With mother/irregular contact with father	1.183*	1.381***
With mother/no contact with father	1.558***	0.790
Shared custody	2.277***	1.228
With father	1.934**	0.633**
Region (Ontario)		
Atlantic Provinces	1.161	0.946
Quebec	1.366***	1.669***
Prairies	1.136	1.251*
British Columbia	0.940	1.104

^a Odds ratios. Coefficients significant at: † = 0.1 * = 0.05 ** = 0.01 *** = 0.001

^b These two variables are analyzed as "continuous" variables, as opposed to assigning each case value to a discrete category.

Previous analyses have demonstrated that children born within marriage are less likely to see their parents separate than are children born to cohabiting parents. Results here suggest that this difference does not persist after parents have separated; once-married mothers and fathers are just as likely to enter new unions as are parents separated from a cohabiting union. In terms of union duration, one might expect that the longer mothers and fathers had been in their relationship before separating, the more cautious they might be about entering a new one. The opposite appears to be the case, however; the longer the union duration, the more quickly mothers and fathers found a new partner.

It is sometimes suggested that having the care of children from an earlier union inhibits the formation of a new union. There is some evidence of this in our findings, though the picture is rather more complicated and it is not possible to establish the direction of any relationship. For example, mothers are significantly more likely to enter a new relationship when the children are in shared custody or in the father's custody. However, we do not know whether this type of custody was arranged *because* the mother had already formed a new attachment, or whether she was more able to form one because children were not in her care all the time. Among mothers who have custody of their children, however, the less time children spend with their non-resident father, the more likely mothers are to enter a new union. Is it easier for all concerned to integrate a new father figure into the family unit when the biological father is less involved?

Having their children living with them full time certainly appears to inhibit new union formation among separated fathers. Custodial fathers are significantly less likely to enter a new relationship than are other fathers who remain closely involved with their children after separation but who do not have sole physical custody. Most likely of all to enter a new relationship are non-resident fathers who have only limited contact with their children after separation; once again, the direction of the relationship is not clear.

Unfortunately, these findings provide few clues as to why separated mothers and fathers in Quebec create new unions more often and more rapidly than those living elsewhere in Canada. The fact that the significant differences between Quebec and the other Canadian regions persist even after controlling for other variables suggests that neither the higher incidence of cohabitation in Quebec nor the age of mothers at separation is responsible.

New unions and the expansion of children's family life pathways

As we have seen, each conjugal decision taken by a mother or father involves a transition in the life of their children. When parents separate, reconcile or form a different union, the child's family environment is modified accordingly. These are the events that, put together in chronological order, create the family pathways followed during childhood.

In order to reveal something of the diversity and complexity of children's family experience, we reconstructed the family pathways taken by children in the longitudinal sample from their birth to the second survey cycle in 1996–97, when the oldest children in the sample were 13 years old. As it takes a number of years for such life course events to occur, we limited the analysis to children aged 6 years and over at Cycle 2; this left a sample of close to 9000 children aged 6–13 years, with an average age of approximately 10 years in 1996–97. The following analyses portray, therefore, the experience of Canadian children born during the second half of the 1980s (between 1983 and 1991).

Figure 1.5 traces the most common family pathways travelled by children born within a union between birth and 1996–97. Each arrow represents a transition, in terms of parents entering or dissolving a conjugal union; each box represents the presence or absence of new parent figures in the child's family network as a result of the transition. It should be read from the top as follows:

- The first box represents the starting point for all children born within a couple. At this point in 1996–97, there were still children whose parents had not separated at any time, and who had therefore lived no family transition.
- The arrows to the next level represent the first family transition, usually when parents separated, occasionally when a parent died. Children who had lived through only one transition by the time of the survey had no new parent figures in their lives.
- Four types of transition were possible for children whose parents had separated: their parents got back together, their mother or father entered a new union, or a parent died.
- Children who had seen two transitions between birth and 1996–97 were back with their two parents, had a new mother or father figure in the family environment, or had only one living biological parent.

These pathways continue down, getting even longer when both parents entered a new union, or if a new union ended. Some children had experienced as many as four or five transitions.

Figure 1.6 puts numbers on the pathways shown in Figure 1.5, showing the proportion of children taking these different routes. Each box gives the number of children (per 1000), aged 6–13 years in 1996–97 and born within a couple, who had followed a particular pathway to that point. By Cycle 2, for example, 28 children (per 1000) had parents who had separated and were each living with a new partner in 1996–97; these children had lived through three family transitions by the time of the survey, and their family environment included their two biological parents plus an additional mother and father figure.

This figure shows the following:

- The majority of children (778, or 77.8 percent) had lived continuously with both biological parents from birth up to the time of the survey.
- More than one fifth of children (210) born to married or cohabiting parents had experienced their parents' separation by 1996–97.
 - Only a third (68) of these children lived through no other transition before the survey. The rest lived through at least one other transition—in most cases, the arrival of a new mother or father figure. A small proportion had also witnessed the departure of one or more of these extra parent figures.
- The parents of 24 children were reunited at some point after the initial separation, although 4 had already parted company again by the time of the survey.

Each “level” in the diagram is equivalent to the number of family transitions a child had experienced as of 1996–97. Summing the numbers at each level gives the number of children (per 1000) who had lived through a particular number of family transitions by the survey. For every 1000 children born in a couple, 80 children (68 + 12) had seen only one transition, 78 children had seen two transitions (20+35+20+3) and 64 had seen three or more (4+10+28+7+7+1+7). Altogether, 22 percent of children born within a couple between 1983 and 1991 had experienced at least one family transition as of 1996–97. As we see in the next section, however, family pathways through childhood are closely linked to the conjugal situation of parents when their child is born.

Family life pathways and the context at birth

There is increasing diversity in the context within which Canadian children are born. Marriage, in particular, is losing its monopoly on family life, and growing proportions of children are born either to cohabiting parents or outside a union altogether. Whereas 85 percent of the oldest NLSCY children (1983–84 cohorts) were born to married parents, this was the case for under 70 percent of the youngest ones (1997–98 cohorts at Cycle 3) (*When Parents Separate: Further Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, 2004-FCY-6E). Whether children are born within marriage, within a cohabiting union or outside a union altogether is closely linked to a child's subsequent family life course. Cohabiting parents are more likely to separate than married parents, for instance, while children born outside a union start life within an entirely different family context. In our sample, 80 percent of the children were born to married parents, 13 percent to cohabiting parents and 7 percent to a lone parent; in the following sections, information about children's family life pathways is presented separately for each group.

Born to a single parent

Children born to a single mother are essentially born to “separated” parents; they experience life in a lone-parent family from birth, which is a very different matter from arriving there as a result of parental separation. For these children, the *formation*, not the dissolution, of a conjugal union is the first family transition. Figure 1.7, which presents the most common pathways followed by the 7 percent of children in our sample born outside a conjugal union, shows what this means for the family life course.

- Children born to a lone parent are much more likely to experience family change than those born within a union: only 16.2 percent had experienced no family transitions.
- The fact that five sixths (84 percent) of these children had experienced at least one transition by 1996–97 is largely a product of the fact that these “separated” parents are more likely to form a union than couples are to separate.
- Parents who are not living together at the time of their child’s birth are as likely to marry or start living with each other as with somebody else. At some point, over 40 percent⁷ of children starting out in a lone-parent family actually experienced intact family life within a union formed by their two biological parents.
- These unions were not particularly durable and, by Cycle 2, only slightly over half (225 of 417) were still intact. For those whose parents separated, other transitions often followed, either when parents reunited (30) or when one parent entered a union with a different partner.
- Otherwise, the pathways resemble those taken by other children whose parents have separated, with a strong likelihood that the father, mother or both parents will continue their conjugal life course creating, and terminating, unions with other individuals.

How many family transitions?

By comparing children born to a lone parent with those born to married or cohabiting parents in terms of the number of family transitions experienced between birth and 1996–97, Figure 1.8 clearly shows the association between the context at birth and children’s family life pathways. We have already commented on the high proportion of children born outside a union who experience at least one family transition. The contrast between children born to cohabiting rather than married parents is also striking. Half the children in the sample born to cohabiting parents had experienced at least one change in their parents’ conjugal situation by 1996–97, and one third had seen at least two. This compares with 18 percent and 11 percent of children whose parents were married. In fact, children born to cohabiting parents reached each level approximately three times as frequently as did children born to married parents.

⁷ The sum of all these children whose parents were living together in 1996–97, or who had lived together at some point after their birth and then separated: $225+43+30+33+44+42=417/100=42\%$

Figure 1.5 Family pathways from birth for children whose parents were together (married or cohabiting) at their birth, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2

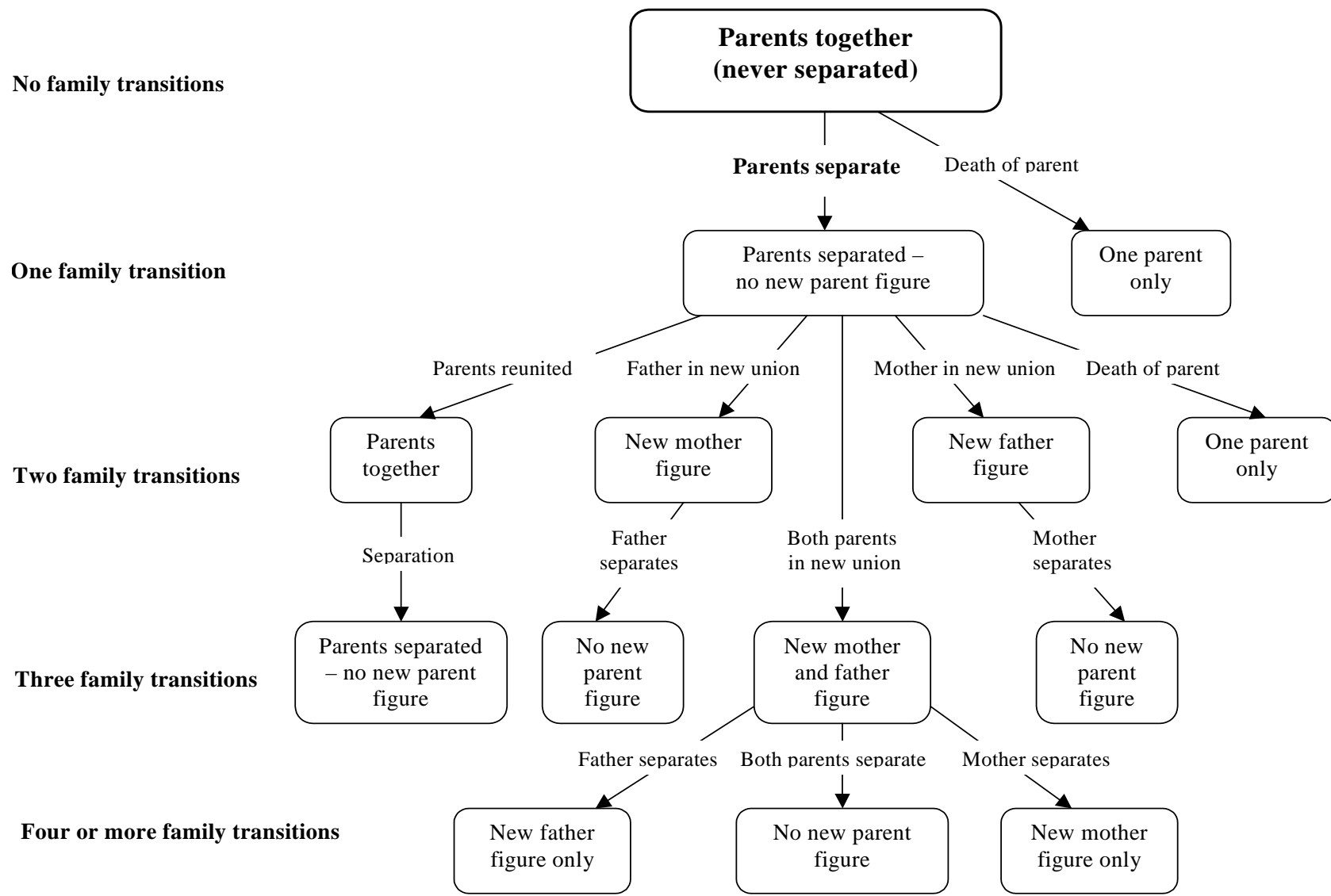


Figure 1.6 Family pathways followed since birth and family environment in 1996–97, for 1000 children aged 6–13 years, whose parents were together (married or cohabiting) at their birth, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2

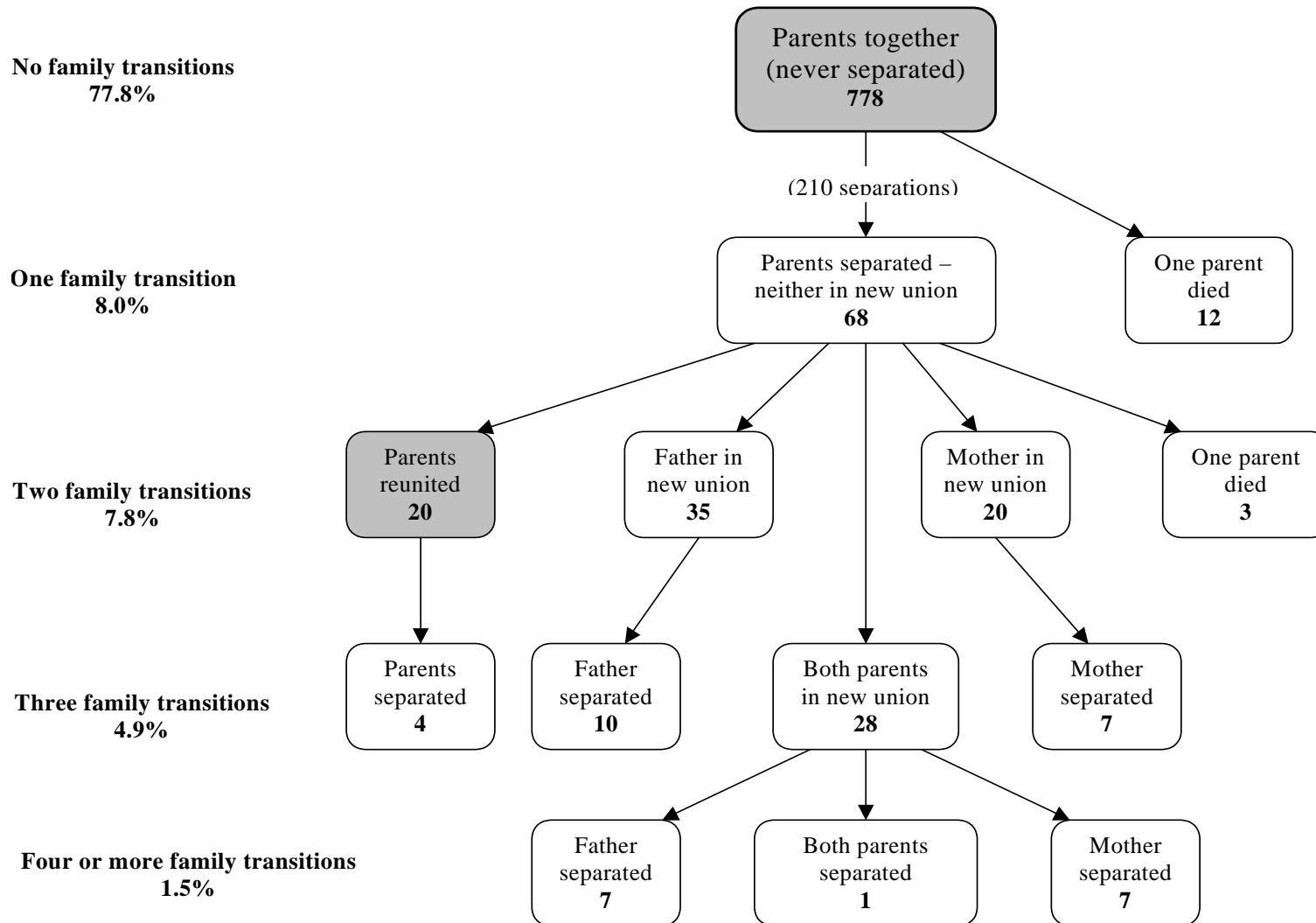


Figure 1.7 Family pathways followed since birth and family environment in 1996–97, for 1000 children aged 6–13 years, whose parents were living apart at their birth, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2

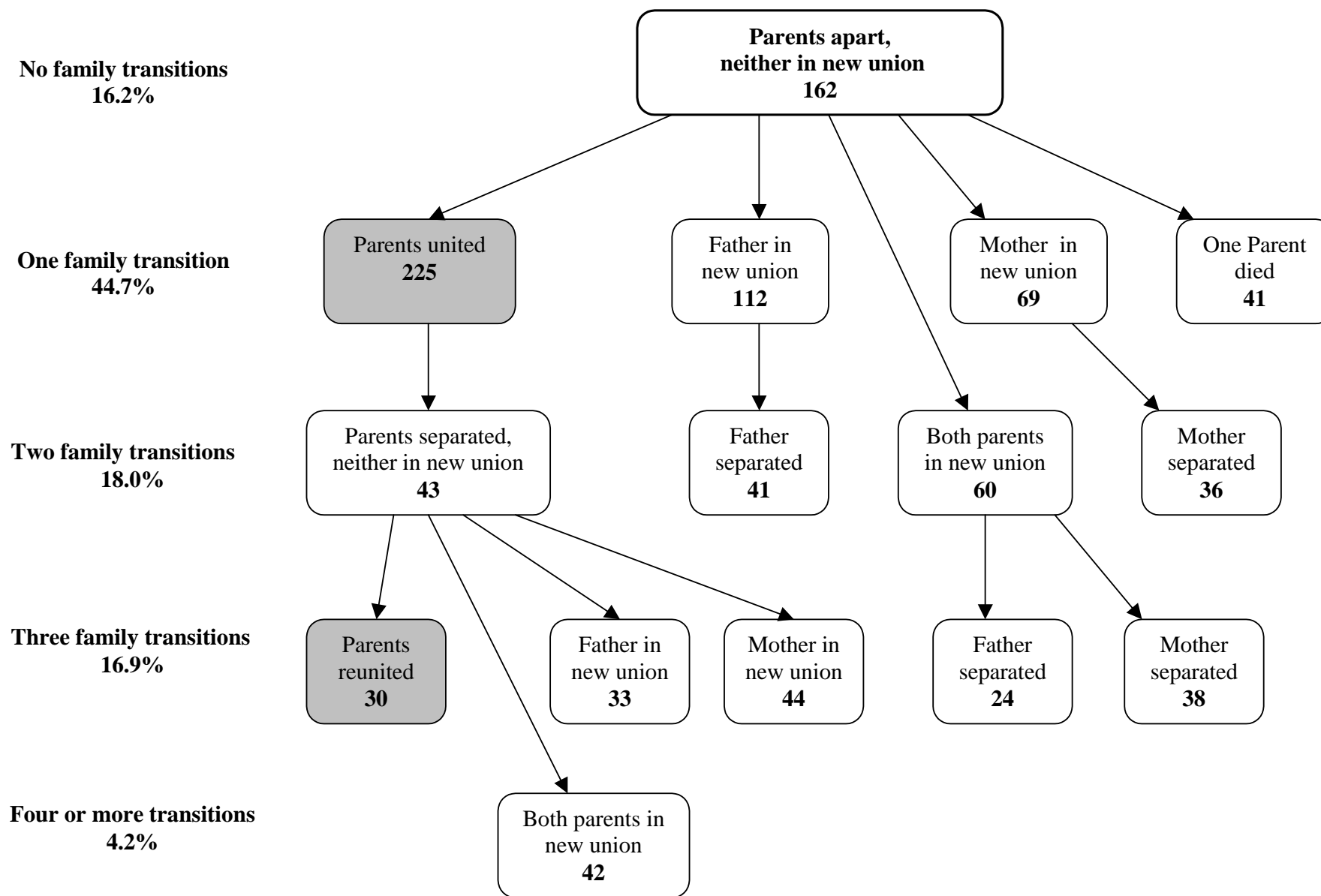
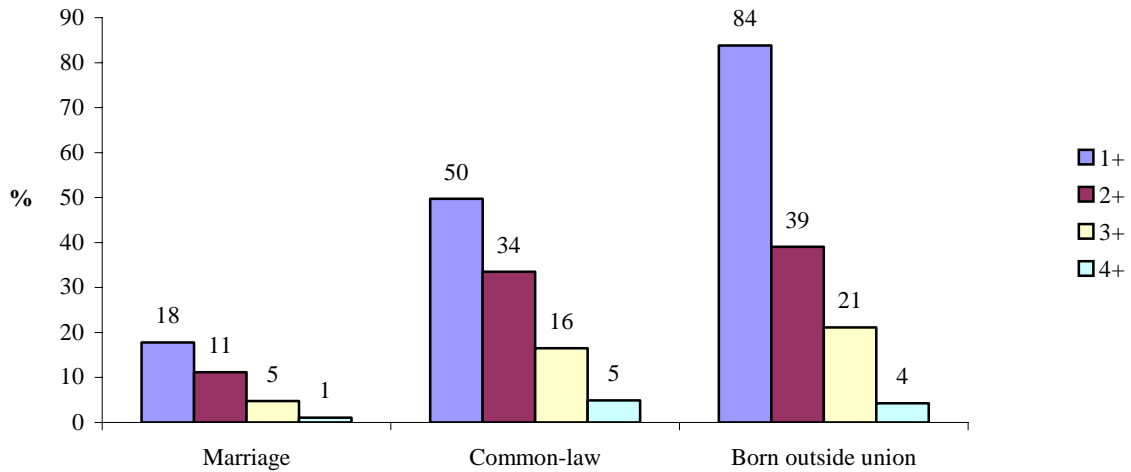


Figure 1.8 Distribution of children aged 6–13 years, according to the number of family transitions experienced between birth and 1996–97, by context at birth, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2



What does this mean in terms of the child population as a whole? Table 1.2 presents the whole sample of children (aged 6–13 years in 1996–97), according to their parents’ conjugal status at birth, and whether or not they had experienced a family transition. Overall, over a quarter (26.7 percent) of the children saw at least one family transition between birth and 1996–97. Almost two thirds (65.7 percent) of children in these birth cohorts had a “traditional” childhood, in the sense that they were born to, and lived with, married parents at least up to the time of interview in 1996–97. This is ten times the proportion of children born to and raised by cohabiting parents (6.4 percent).

Table 1.2 Distribution of children aged 6–13 years in 1996–97, according to family transitions experienced since birth and their parents’ conjugal status, NLSCY^a

Family transitions between birth and 1996–97	Parents’ conjugal status at child’s birth ^b			Total
	Marriage	Common-law union	Born to a single mother	
	%	%	%	%
No transitions	65.7	6.4	1.2	73.3
At least one transition	14.3	6.4	6.0	26.7
Total	80.0	12.8	7.2	100.0

^a Longitudinal sample present at Cycles 1 and 2.

^b Biological or adoptive parents.

For children born in the 1980s, therefore, having married parents meant less exposure to family change: altogether, the 20 percent of children in these cohorts born outside legal marriage account for close to half the children who experienced some form of family change. Nonetheless,

because four out of five children in the 1983–91 cohorts were born within marriage, marital separations (14.3 percent) were more common in the population as a whole than were separations among cohabiting unions (6.4 percent). This may change in coming years as the context within which Canadian children are born evolves. The proportion of extra-marital births rose steeply during the 1990s; by 1997–98, almost one-third of births occurred outside marriage (22 percent to cohabiting couples and 10 percent outside a union), with particularly high rates in Eastern Canada and Quebec, at 39 percent and 55 percent respectively (*When Parents Separate: Further Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 2004-FCY-6E*). If the association between birth context and family life course continues, this evolution means that the proportion of children following the complex family pathways described here will rise.

What type of transitions?

It is possible to calculate the frequency of a particular *type* of transition from the numbers given in Figures 1.6 or 1.7, by summing the number of children who travelled a particular pathway. For example, in Figure 1.6, the total number of children whose mother formed a new union after separation from the father is equal to 70/1000, and includes the children whose mother entered a new union and remained within it (20); those whose mother separated from the new union (7); those whose two parents formed a new union and remained within it (28), and those whose father (7), mother (7) or two parents (1) separated from their second union.

Table 1.3a Percentage of children (aged 6–13 years in 1996–97) who have experienced different types of family transition, according to the type of union at birth, NLSCY^a

Type of family transition	Marriage		Common-law union		Total
	%	Of separated parents	%	Of separated parents	
Parents separate	17		48		21
• parents' reconciliation	2	11	6	13	2
Mother forms a new union	6	33	17	35	7
• end of mother's new union	1	5	6	12	2
Father forms a new union	7	42	20	41	9
• end of father's new union	1	8	5	11	2

^a Longitudinal sample present at Cycles 1 and 2.

The proportions of children making the six most common transitions have been summarized in this way. The proportions are presented in Table 1.3a for children born within a union and in Table 1.3b for those born to a lone parent. Altogether, the parents of over one fifth (21 percent) of children born within a union had separated at some point before 1996–97. Subsequently, of children with separated parents, the following apply:

- One tenth saw their parents get back together again at some point (though not always permanently).

- One third acquired a new father figure when their mother entered a union with a different partner.
- Over 40 percent acquired a new mother figure when their father entered a union with a different partner.
- Some children had already experienced another separation by 1996–97. One child in ten had seen their mother’s new relationship end; the same proportion had seen the end of their father’s new union.

Parental separation was much more common among children of cohabiting (48 percent) than married (17 percent) parents. The proportion experiencing their mother’s new union (17 percent versus 6 percent) or their father’s new union (20 percent versus 7 percent) was also higher. However, what really distinguishes cohabiting parents from married parents is their propensity to separate. The fact that almost three times the percentage of children born to cohabiting parents acquired additional parent figures through their mother’s or father’s new union is a direct consequence of the higher proportion whose parents separated in the first place. After separation, as the figures in italics in Table 1.3a show, formerly married mothers and fathers are just as likely to enter new unions as are formerly cohabiting parents. In both cases, approximately one third of separated mothers and just over 40 percent of separated fathers entered a new union. Once formed, however, these subsequent unions are also less durable among parents who were living together than they were if the parents were married at their child’s birth.

Table 1.3b Percentage of children aged 6–13 years in 1996–97, born to a single mother, who had experienced different types of family transition by 1996–97, NLSCY^a

Type of family transition	Born to a single mother %
Parents marry or start living together	42
• parents separate	19
Mother forms a union with another partner	31
• end of mother’s union	7
Father forms a union with another partner	35
• end of father’s union	6

^a Longitudinal sample present at Cycles 1 and 2.

Among children born outside a union, the pattern was rather different. As Table 1.3b indicates, being born to a lone mother does not necessarily mean growing up in a single-parent family.

- Over 40 percent of these children spent some time in an intact family when their biological parents moved in together; almost half of those whose parents reunited (19 percent), however, had also experienced the end of this episode.

- The mothers of close to one third (31 percent) of these children had entered a union with someone other than the child's father; almost a quarter of these unions had already ended (7 percent).
- An even higher proportion of fathers (35 percent) had entered a union with someone other than the child's mother; five sixths of these unions were still intact at the survey.

Same family type, different family pathway

Finally, the pathway diagrams illustrate another important feature of the family life course: that several different pathways may lead to a given family situation at a particular time. The four shaded boxes in Figures 1.6 and 1.7 each represent a group of children who were living with both biological parents in 1996–97. The pathway leading to each one reveals a different route into an intact family: a) together from birth; b) together at birth, separated and reunited; c) united after the child's birth; d) united after the child's birth, separated and reunited. Children who at one time live in an intact family may have also experienced life with a single parent.

It is important in family research to understand these distinctions, and to take account of the pathway leading up to any given "family structure." Research into the impact of family change on child outcomes, for example, has tended to treat lone-mother families as a homogeneous group. The experience of children living with a lone mother from birth, however, has very little in common with that of children who find themselves with a lone mother following parental separation. Similarly, the experience of stepfamily life will vary considerably according to the pathway leading to it; children born outside a union and living with a stepfather from infancy will have a very different experience from that of children acquiring a stepfather later in life, after a period in an intact family.

Although these life course diagrams illustrate the diverse and complex nature of children's family life experience today, they nonetheless simplify the real situation, as they include only transitions resulting from *conjugal* life decisions made by parents; the diversity is all the greater when changes in the sibling network are taken into account.

NEW UNIONS—NEW SIBLINGS

When separated parents form new relationships, they may introduce more than an extra parent figure into their children's family universe. New partners may themselves be separated, with children of their own from an earlier union; these "stepsiblings" expand the child's family environment still further. Later on, half-siblings may be added to the already extended family network, as newly formed couples decide to have children together. In this section, we focus on the expansion of the sibling network, using data from all children in the Cycle 2 sample whose mother or father entered a union with someone other than their child's other biological or adoptive parent.⁸

⁸ Sample size (after exclusion of missing data): 1304 children whose father had formed a new union, and 1120 children whose mother had formed a new union.

Living with stepparents, living with stepsiblings

Co-residence patterns are an interesting feature of step-relationships, and are the direct result of the tendency of children to continue living with their mother when parents separate. First, children are much more likely to live with their mother's new partner than with their father's new partner. In this sample, for example, whereas 84 percent of children lived full time with their stepfather, only 6 percent did so with their stepmother; in fact, under 15 percent of children lived with their father's new partner even part of the time. Second, stepsiblings rarely share the same residence. Only if *both* partners in the new couple have full custody of children from earlier unions are stepsiblings part of the same family unit on a full-time basis. They share a residence part of the time when both partners have at least shared custody. In general, children have contact with their stepfather's children only when the latter come to visit him; they have contact with their stepmother's children, on the other hand, only on visits to their father.

Figure 1.9 Proportion of children aged 0–13 years in 1996–97 whose mother or father formed a new union, according to the existence of stepsiblings, and whether they share a residence with them on a part- or full-time basis, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2

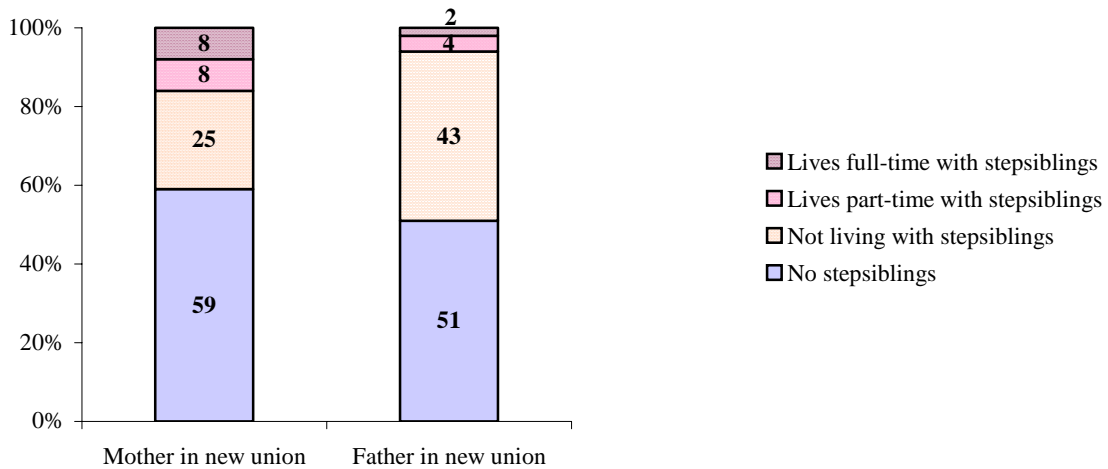


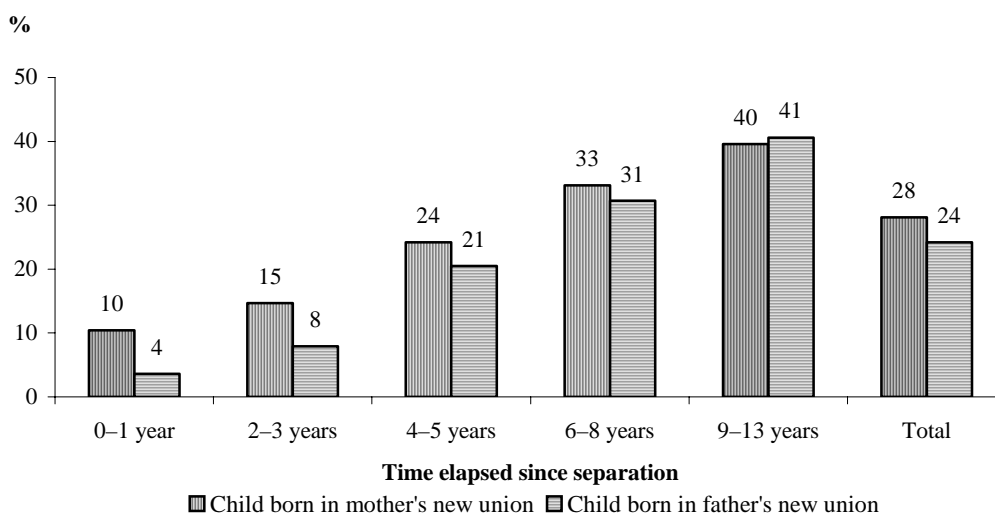
Figure 1.9 gives the distribution of children whose mother or father formed a new union, according to whether the new parent figure had children from an earlier union, and whether children shared a residence with these stepsiblings. Overall, close to half the new relationships formed by separated parents were with individuals who already had children from an earlier union: only 59 percent of mothers' new unions and 51 percent of fathers' new unions did not bring extra siblings into the family network. Only 8 percent of children whose mother formed a new union lived full time with their stepfather and his children, and only 2 percent of those whose father had a new partner lived with their stepmother and her children. Although children do not often share a residence with their stepsiblings, they appear to do so more frequently, nonetheless, with their stepfather's children than with their stepmother's children.

Approximately two fifths of children whose stepfather had children from an earlier union lived with these stepsiblings, at least part time; this was the case for a much lower proportion of those with stepsiblings from their father’s new union.

Half-siblings

Another event, occurring later on, may also have an impact on a child’s relationship with his parents—the arrival in his life of a half-sibling, when one parent has a child with a new partner. This is a relatively common occurrence: by 1996–97, 28 percent of mothers’ new unions and 24 percent of fathers’ new unions were fertile. Evidently, since it follows a parent’s entry into a new union, the likelihood of acquiring a half-sibling increases with the time since separation. Figure 1.10 presents the proportion of new unions (mothers’ and fathers’) within which a child is born, according to the time elapsed since separation. This figure includes only children whose parents separated at some point during their childhood; children born to a lone mother who never lived with their biological father are excluded.

Figure 1.10 Among children whose separated mother or father formed a new union, the proportion whose parent had a child with a new partner, according to the time elapsed since separation, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2



Although fathers enter new unions more rapidly than do mothers, mothers tend to have babies earlier on: two to three years after separation, 15 percent of mothers who had formed a new relationship had had a child, compared with only 8 percent of fathers. Men gradually caught up, and nine years or more after the separation, approximately 40 percent of fathers and mothers who had entered a new union had started a second family.

The earlier arrival of babies within mothers’ new unions cannot be explained entirely by the fact that women’s fertility cycle tends to end earlier than that of men. Research has shown that one of the key factors in stepfather family fertility is the age of the mother’s youngest child at the start of the new union (Juby, Marcil-Gratton and Le Bourdais, 2001). It is possible that mothers,

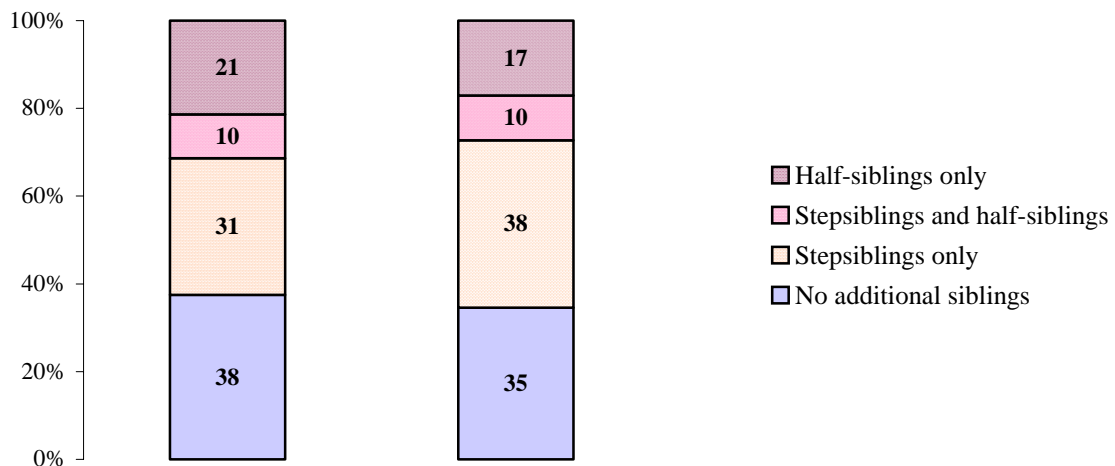
whose children generally live with them after separation, prefer to have an additional child rapidly, in order to minimize the age difference between siblings. For fathers this is generally less of a preoccupation, as their children from different unions are less likely to be part of the same family day to day.

How positively or negatively children experience the arrival of a half-sibling will largely depend on how it affects the contact they have with their parents. Once again, we would expect these adjustments to be more of a challenge when the father has an additional child; any time and money invested in his new baby will usually be invested in a different household from the one in which his other children live.

Half-siblings and stepsiblings

For some children, a new parent figure signifies the expansion of the family environment to include both stepsiblings **and** half-siblings. Figure 1.11 shows how the sibling network developed for children who acquired a new father or mother figure. Over 60 percent of children whose mother entered a new union, and close to two thirds of those whose father did so, saw their sibling network expand with the arrival of stepsiblings, half-siblings or, for 1 child in 10, both types of sibling. Although stepsiblings make up the majority of new siblings, as children progress further along their life course, and as parents have more time to establish new families, the proportion of children with younger half-siblings may eventually exceed that of stepsiblings.

Figure 1.11 Proportion of children aged 0–13 years in 1996–97 whose mother or father created a new union, according to the presence of stepsiblings or half-siblings in their family network, NLSCY, Cycles 1 and 2



The extended sibling network

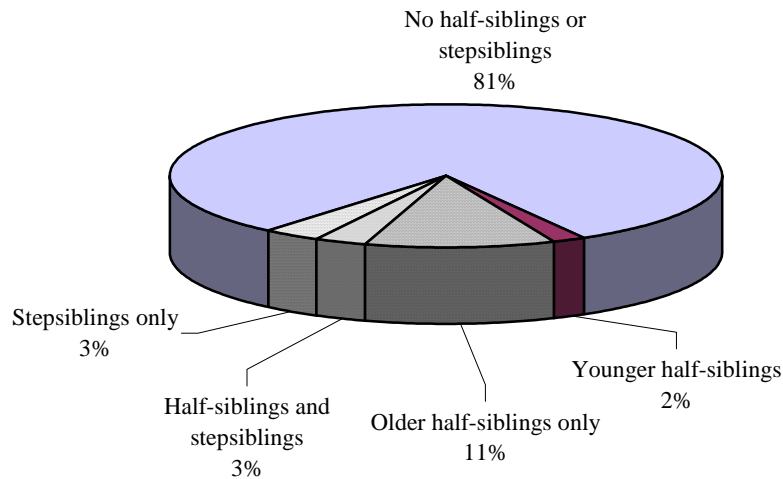
From the point of view of the child whose separated father or mother has children within a new union, these half siblings are, by definition, younger. From the point of view of the child born within these new unions, on the other hand, half-siblings are, by definition, older. In other words, children acquire half-siblings in one of two ways: a) they gain younger half-siblings when a biological mother or father has a child within a new relationship; b) they gain older half-siblings by being born into a “stepfamily” environment—one in which the mother or father already have children from an earlier union. So far, we have only considered the arrival of younger half-siblings in a child’s family network. Nonetheless, as mentioned in an earlier report (*When Parents Separate: Further Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, 2004-FCY-6E), 13 percent of children in the NLSCY longitudinal cohort were born into the second family of one or both parents; this meant they had half-siblings in their family from birth.

In the child population as a whole, aged 0–13 years in 1996–97, close to one tenth of children had maternal half-siblings, and almost the same proportion had paternal half-siblings. In both cases, approximately one third of half-siblings were younger, and two thirds older, once again because of the young age of the sample. As their life course progresses, many other children will acquire younger half-siblings, as biological parents separate and start new families. Having both older and younger half-siblings is very rare. This occurs either when one parent has children in three separate families, or when one parent has children from an earlier union, and the other has children in a subsequent one.

In terms of the extended sibling network, therefore, children may have older or younger half-siblings or stepsiblings. Unlike half-siblings, who remain “part of the family” irrespective of conjugal decisions made by parents, stepsiblings may be only temporary figures in a child’s extended sibling network; when a mother or father separates from their new partner, the children of this new partner are likely to leave the family environment with their parent. Figure 1.12 shows the distribution of the whole sample of children, aged 0–13 years in 1996–97, according to their half-sibling and stepsibling network; information on stepsiblings refers to the proportion of children who had experienced the arrival of stepsiblings *at some point*, and does not necessarily imply that they were actually present in the family environment in 1996–97.

- Altogether, almost one in five children had at least one stepsibling or half-sibling.
- Children born into a stepfamily environment (with older half-siblings) represent the largest proportion of children with an extended sibling network.
- Only 3 percent of children had both stepsiblings and half-siblings.

Figure 1.12 Distribution of children aged 0–13 years in 1996–97, according to whether stepsiblings or half-siblings have been part of their family network, NLSCY



CONCLUSION

Separation is often just the first of a series of changes affecting children, whose relationship with their biological parents continues even after the latter have gone their separate ways. It is just the beginning of a process that generally leads to a rapid expansion of the child’s family environment to include new “parents,” stepsiblings and half-siblings. The life course diagrams highlight just how diverse the family experience and environment have become for the ever-increasing group of children with biological parents living separately.

Although most of the children in the sample used for these analyses had not yet reached age 10, over a quarter of them had already lived through at least one transition, and one in five had a sibling who was not a full sibling. As children progress further along their life course, and as more parents separate and enter new unions, these complex life courses will become more frequent and increasingly diverse.

One reason why life courses are so complex is that, once parents separate, their children’s family potentially expands in two directions. Although some non-resident parents lose contact with their children, the majority continue to play a central role in their lives.

It is important, therefore, not to limit the analysis of family change, and its impact on children, to the residential group. Children are likely to be as affected by the arrival of new “family” members in the life of either the non-custodial or custodial parent. Although they rarely live with their stepmother’s children, these non-resident stepsiblings do have an impact on their lives. They may, in fact, be as affected by children who live with their non-resident father as by stepsiblings with whom they reside—both in emotional terms, and in terms of the time and money their non-resident father has to invest in them.

Perhaps the most important policy contribution of these analyses is to promote awareness of the fluidity and diversity of family life. It is essential to appreciate the shifting nature of family circumstances after separation in order to avoid simplistic solutions to complex situations. In many cases, for example, arrangements made at separation in terms of custody, visiting and child support will need to be modified in response to changes in mothers' or fathers' conjugal or parental situation. Questions related to the competing demands of different children in a parent's life are also becoming more urgent, as increasing numbers of parents are responsible for children from two or more unions.

Finally, with growing numbers of adults and children in step-relationships, the issue of stepparents' rights and responsibilities is likely to become more rather than less important, especially since most stepfathers are not legally married to the mother of their stepchildren. Evidently, the rights and responsibilities of stepparents are in some ways related to the role they play in the lives of their stepchildren. Although a large body of research on stepfamilies exists, few studies have examined how children integrate these new "actors" into their family universe. This question is the focus of the next section of this report.

II MY FATHER AND I

The previous section showed how new patterns of conjugal and parental behaviour have modified the family trajectories of children born towards the end of the twentieth century. Fewer of today's children are born into the first family of married parents and remain within this family unit until leaving home and starting their own family. The pathway through childhood has become more complex and diverse as a result of the widely divergent avenues parents follow through family life.

Many studies have attempted to evaluate whether and how children are affected by these unpredictable life courses; most use developmental indicators created by psychologists and based on objective measures of children's behaviour, such as hyperactivity, aggression, social skills and school performance.

Very rarely do we hear from the children themselves—on how they feel about their relationships with parents and how these feelings may be affected by family life course events, such as separation or parents' new unions. Their father's image, in particular, may be affected by the volatility of family life. With parental responsibilities most often allocated to the mother, the father-child relationship is vulnerable in the post-separation settlement.

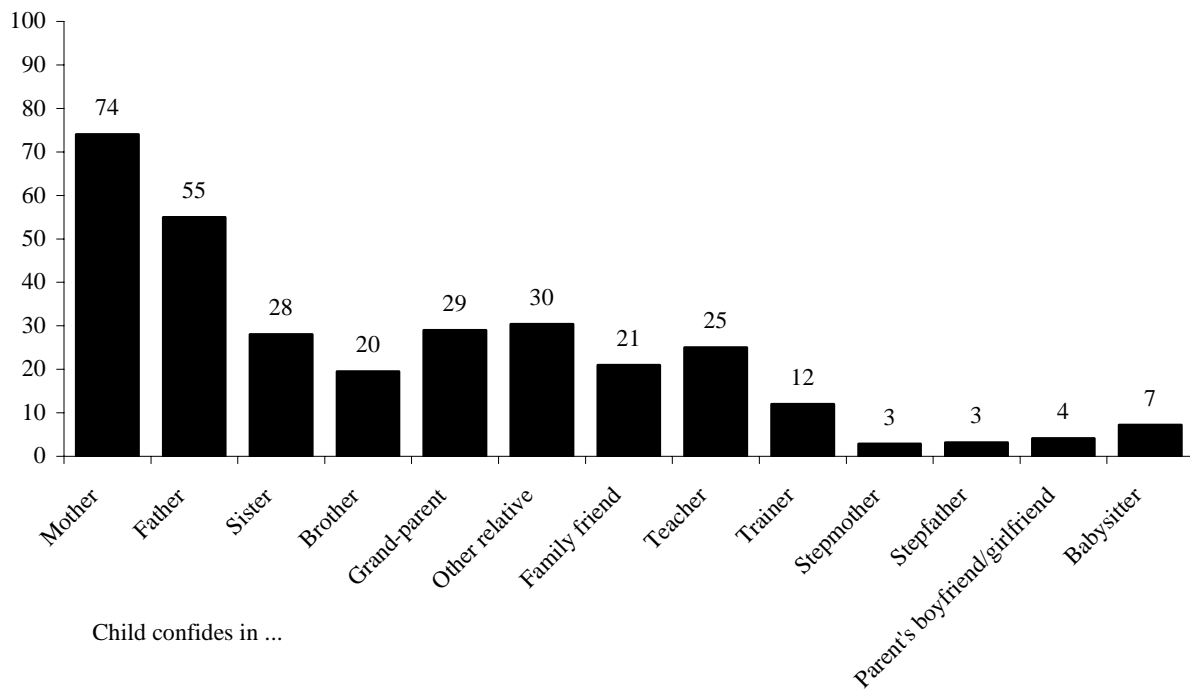
This ignorance of the child's point of view stems principally from the scarcity of data. The NLSCY goes some way towards filling the gap, with one section of the questionnaire, completed by the children themselves. Children aged 10 years and above were asked a number of questions about the quality of their relationship with their mother and father, and with other parent figures. This section of the report will address the issue of how youngsters perceive these relationships, particularly that with their father, and examine the extent to which these perceptions are influenced by the child's past family trajectory.

Before introducing the impact of family history, however, it is important to understand more generally how sex and age are determinant factors as children move into adolescence, modifying the perception of their relationship with parents. The analysis is divided into two parts: the first focussing on whether children feel able to confide in their *biological* father and mother, and the second looking more generally at children's relationship with the father figure with whom they spend the most time. Analyses are based on Cycle 3 information, collected from approximately 5000 children aged 10–15 years in 1998–99.

CAN I CONFIDE IN MY PARENTS?

In the self-completed questionnaire, children were asked to choose among a number of individuals, other than close friends, with whom they feel able to talk about themselves or their problems. The different individuals, and the proportion of children confiding in them, are shown in Figure 2.1. In interpreting these results, it is important to remember that they are not directly comparable, as not all children have each type of individual in their environment. Children are more likely to have a mother or father, for example, than they are to have a sister or brother, and much more so than they are to have a stepparent.

Figure 2.1 Proportion of children aged 10–15 years, according to various relatives or other individuals with whom they are able to talk about themselves and their problems, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99



The results dispel any doubt about the pivotal role parents still play today in providing a safe haven for their children. From the list of potential confidants, most pre-teens and teens still share their problems with their parents: almost three quarters feel able to confide in their mother, and more than half in their father. Interestingly, just as more children confide in their mother than in their father, they are also more likely to talk to a sister (28 percent) than to a brother (20 percent). Many young people are also able to talk to grandparents (29 percent) and other relatives (30 percent). A quarter even have a teacher in whom they are able to confide—an encouragingly high percentage, given that many of these children are already in high school.

Do children’s age and sex make a difference?

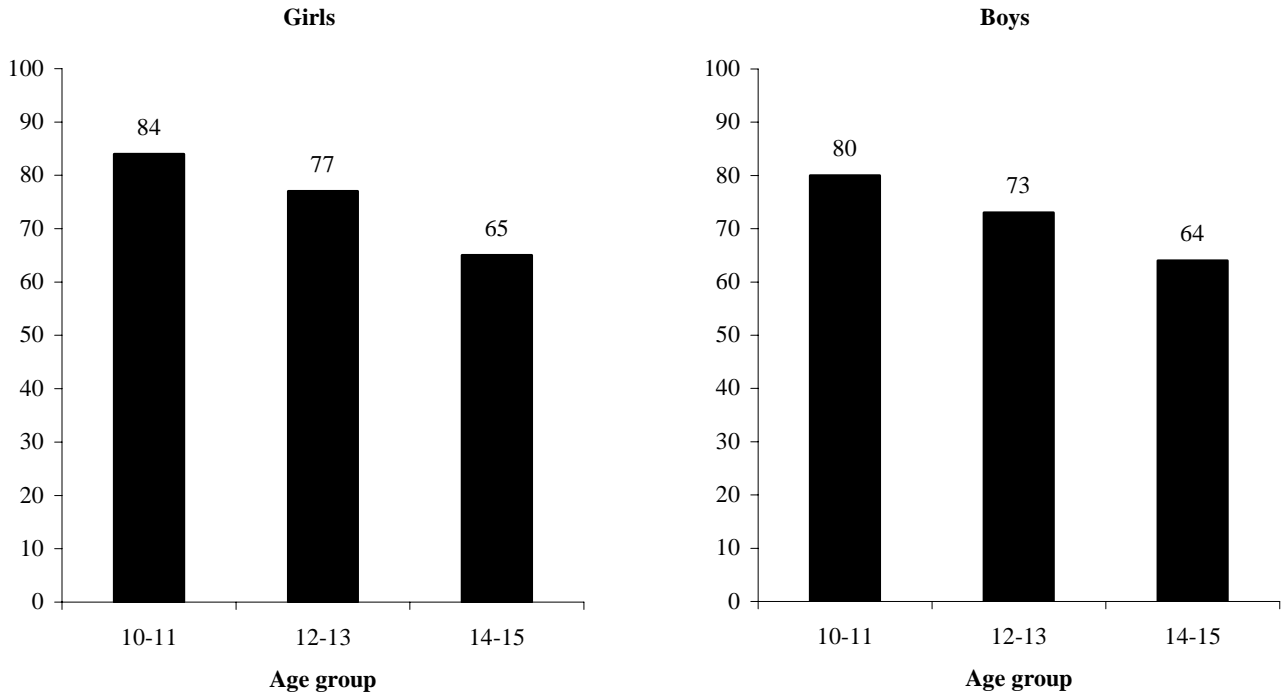
Children appear to find it easier to confide in mothers than in fathers. Does this depend on whether they are boys or girls? Is this closeness a permanent feature of the parent-child relationship, or does it evolve as children move from childhood to adolescence? In this section, we explore age and sex differences in the proportion of children who declare that they can talk to their father and mother about themselves and their problems. These two elements are fundamental, both because the children in the sample (aged 10–15 years) are in a transition period, often a turbulent one, in the evolution of their relationship with their parents, and because girls and boys seem to react differently during this passage.

Figure 2.2 examines the evolution of the relationship between fathers and mothers and their daughters and sons as they approach and enter the teenage years. Clearly, the distance between both boys and girls and their parents increases as they enter their teens. Whereas approximately four fifths of 10- and 11-year-old girls and boys were able to talk to their mother, the proportions dropped to under two thirds among 14- and 15-year-olds. There was a similar drop in the ability for children to talk to their father.

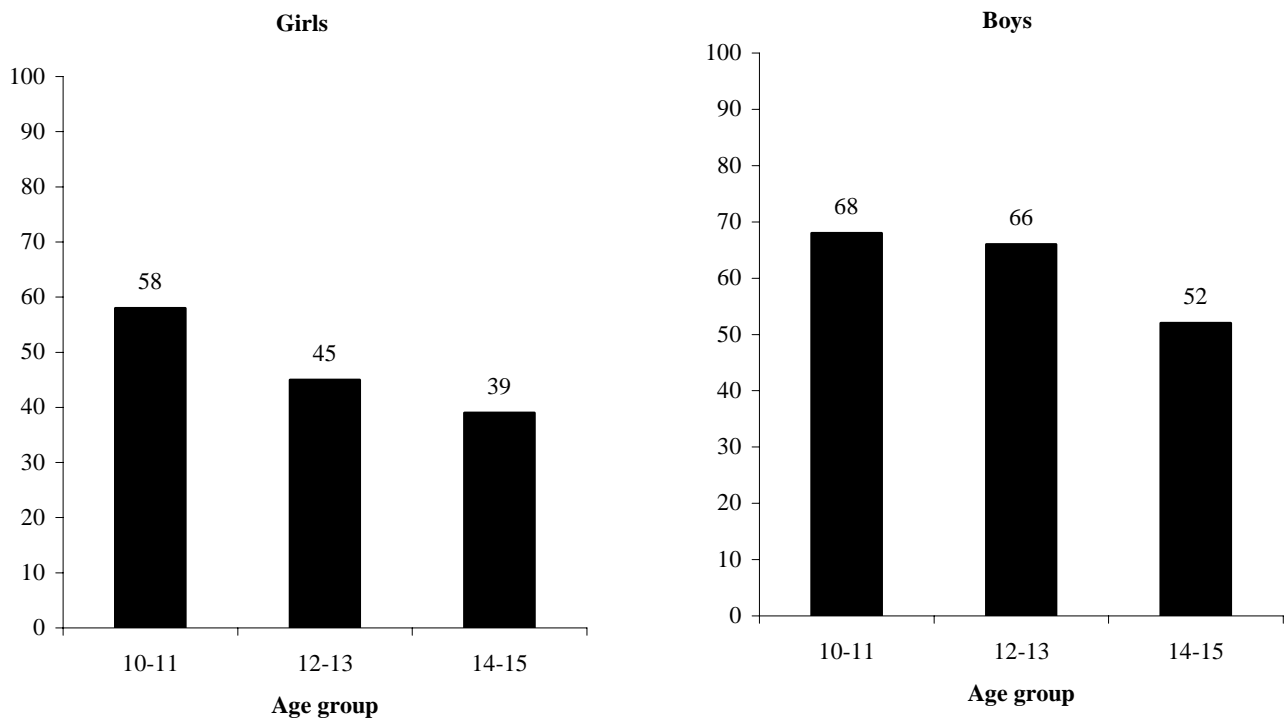
The gulf between fathers and daughters is particularly marked: while 58 percent of 10- and 11-year-old girls declare their fathers to be confidants, the proportion dips to 39 percent by the time they reach 14 or 15 years. Boys remain more open with their fathers through their teens, with a slight majority (52 percent) still confiding in them at 14 or 15 years. In other words, although both boys and girls are more likely to confide in their mother than in their father, the difference between the two is much smaller for boys than girls, at all ages.

Figure 2.2 Proportion of girls and boys aged 10–15 years who are able to confide in their mother or father, by age group, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

Proportion who confide in their mother

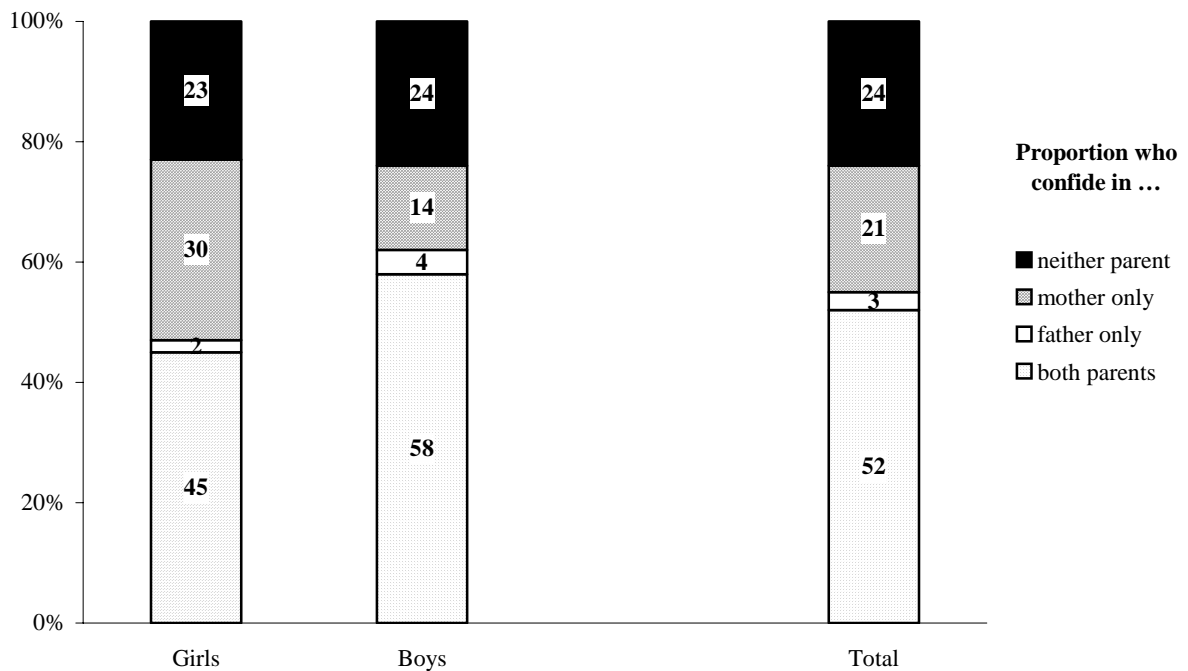


Proportion who confide in their father



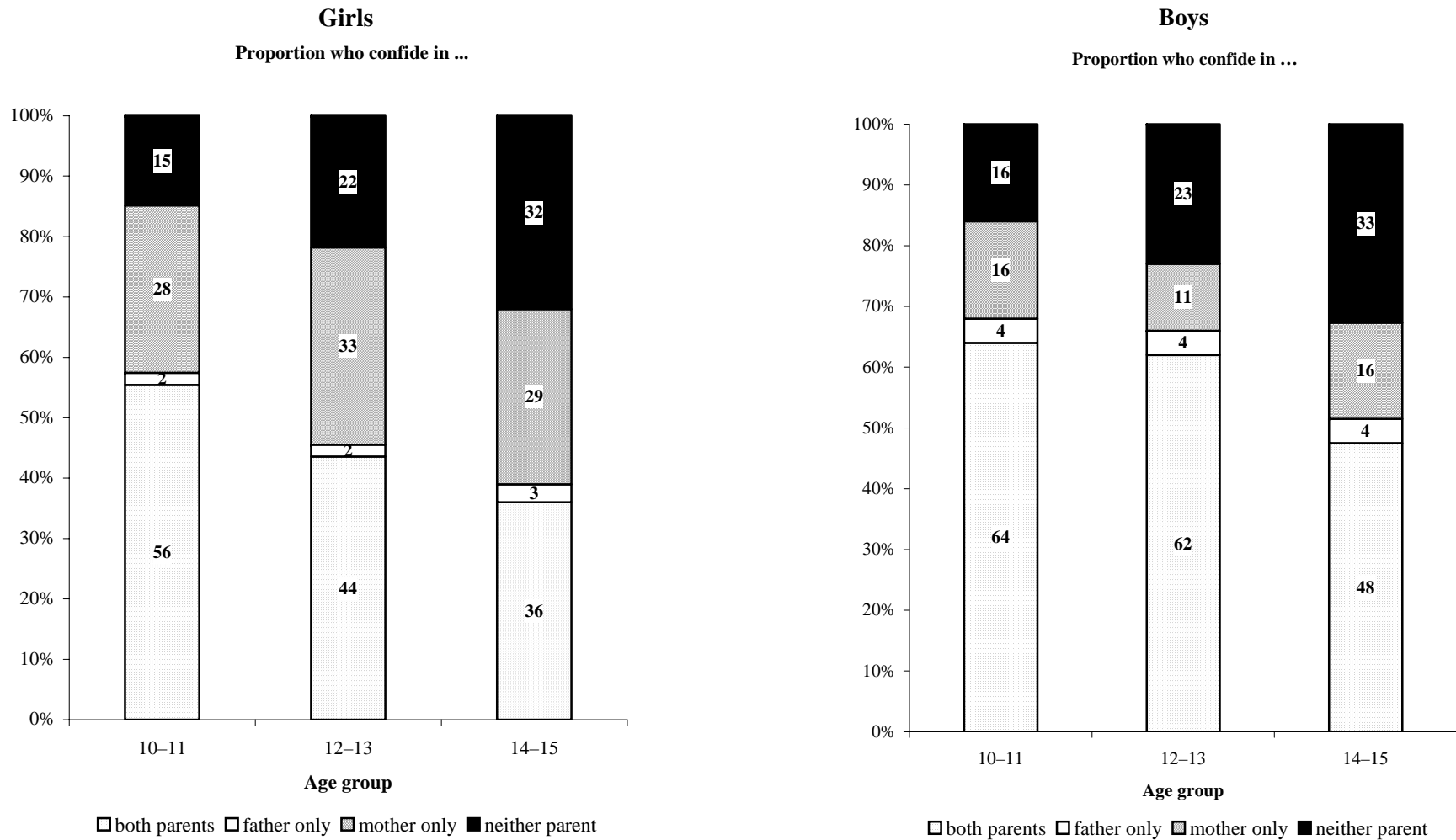
Do children tend to have only one parent in whom they confide, or do those who talk to one also talk to the other? Figure 2.3 suggests that the way children relate to one parent often extends to both: over three quarters of children felt able to confide in both their parents or in neither (summing 52 percent and 24 percent). Among those confiding in only one of their parents, most (21 percent) talked only to their mother; only 3 percent selected their father as the only parent in whom they could confide. Whereas almost equal proportions of boys and girls declared being able to talk to neither parent, boys were significantly more likely to be able to confide in both parents than girls were; girls declared they could talk only to their mother more than twice as frequently as boys did.

Figure 2.3 Distribution of girls and boys aged 10–15 years, according to whether they are able to confide in their mother or father, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99



How does age affect this distribution? The proportion of girls and boys who confide in neither parent increases rapidly, from about 15 percent at age 10–11 years to close to one third of adolescents aged 14–15 years (Figure 2.4). The proportion of those who confide in both parents declines in a similar manner; by the age of 14–15 years, just over one third (36 percent) of girls could confide in both parents, which was the case for almost half (48 percent) of the boys in this age group.

Figure 2.4 Distribution of girls and boys aged 10–15 years, according to whether they are able to confide in their mother or father, by age group, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

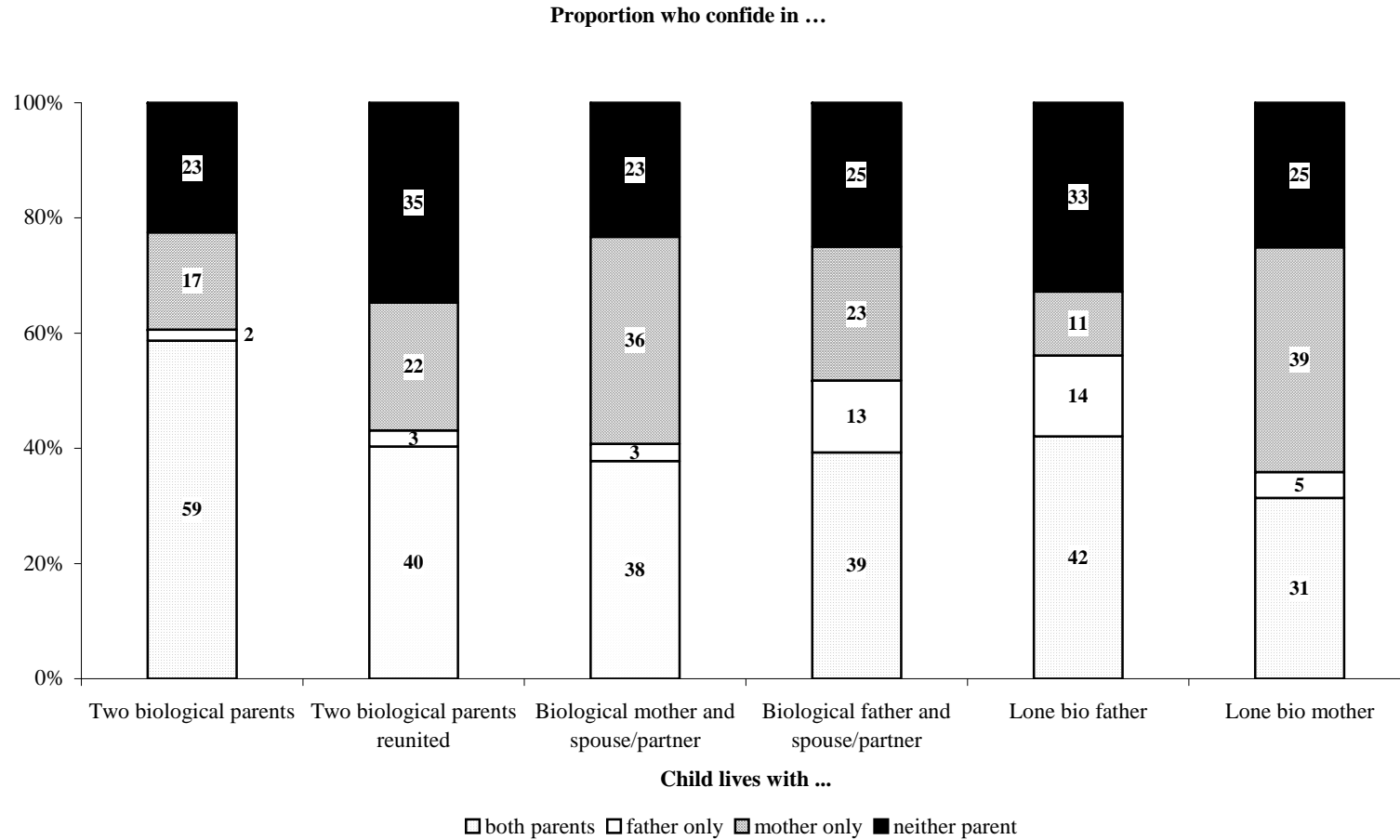


Evidently, the ability to confide in parents is influenced strongly by the gender of both the parent and the child, and by the child's age. It seems "only natural" that children should talk to mothers more than fathers, given that the home and family continue to be predominantly the domain of women. That so many children are able to confide in their fathers says a great deal about the changing role of fathers from "breadwinners" to carers over the last few decades. It is also hardly unexpected that girls confide more in mothers than in fathers, particularly as they reach puberty. Nor is it surprising that boys and girls talk less to parents as they negotiate the transition to adulthood. Do factors other than these basic demographic characteristics also influence this aspect of the parent-child relationship? In the next section, we explore the relationship between children's family life course and their ability to confide in their father and mother.

What difference does children's family life course make?

At each survey cycle, data were collected on the child's residential family group. In cases of shared custody, this information refers to the household of the survey respondent—the individual selected as the "person most knowledgeable" about the child, which was the child's biological mother in more than 90 percent of cases. In Figure 2.5, we compare children living in six different family types in terms of whether they confide in their parents. The first two types include children and both their biological (or adoptive) parents; in the first, the parents have never separated; in the second, parents had separated at some point but got back together subsequently and were still together in 1998–99. Two stepfamily configurations are the biological mother and her spouse or partner, and the biological father and his spouse or partner. Finally, children may live in a lone-parent family with either their father or mother.

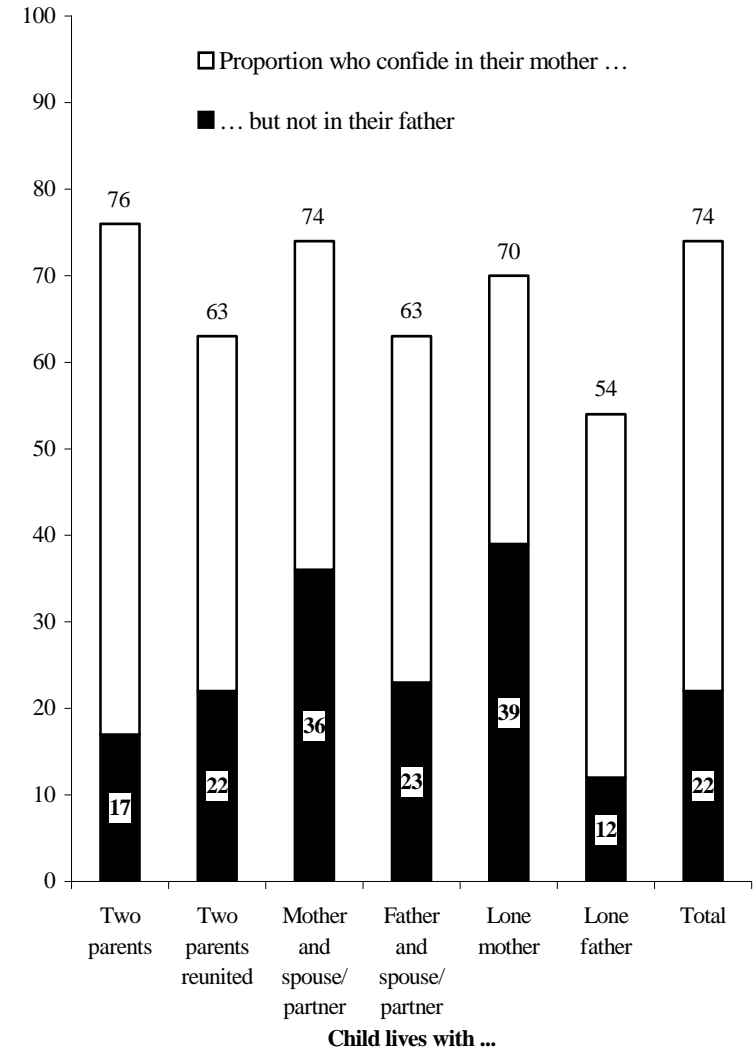
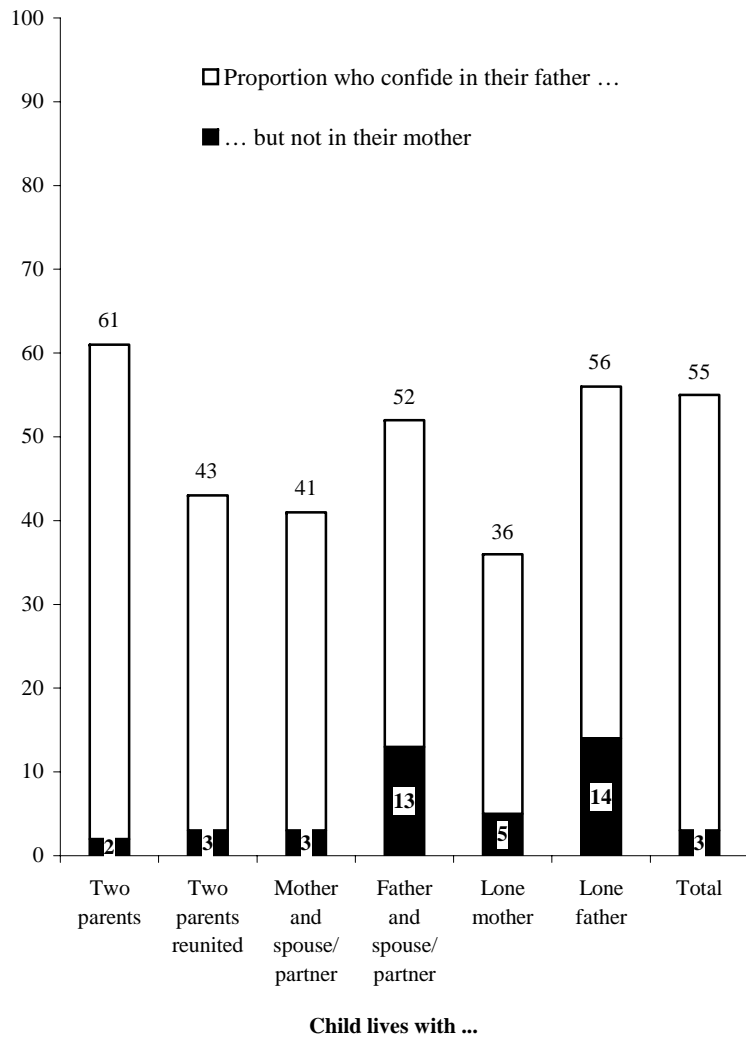
Figure 2.5 Distribution of children aged 10–15 years, according to whether they are able to confide in their mother or father, and according to their family environment, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99



A first look at Figure 2.5 reveals that children in truly intact families are most likely to feel able to talk to both parents about themselves or their problems. Nearly 6 out of 10 do so, a considerably higher proportion than do children whose parents have reunited after a separation (40 percent). Children whose parents have reunited are also the most likely to feel unable to confide in either of their parents (35 percent). Is this reticence the result of scars from the parental break-up, even when parents try to start afresh? Or were children in these families less close to their parents even before the break-up? This cross-sectional image makes it impossible to know.

Whatever the explanation, in all family environments that involve a parental separation, children are similarly less predisposed to confide in both parents. They continue to feel more able to confide in their mother than in their father, except in the relatively infrequent arrangement where children remain in the care of their lone father. This greater closeness to the mother is only to be expected when children remain in their mother's care after separation and lose daily contact with their father. Surprisingly, it is also true among children living with their father and stepmother: almost twice as many felt able to talk only to their mother (23 percent) than only to their father (13 percent). Finally, only 36 (5 percent plus 31 percent) of children who remain with a lone mother felt able to talk about themselves and their problems with their father.

Figure 2.6 Among children aged 10–15 years who are able to confide in one of their parents, proportion who are not able to confide in the other, according to the family environment, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99



The fact that children living with a lone mother are disinclined to confide in their father is confirmed in Figure 2.6, which focusses more directly on the association between family environment and the ability of young people to confide in their mother, father or both. For each family situation, Figure 2.6 gives the proportion of children who report being able to confide in their father, on the one hand, and in their mother, on the other. Most interesting are the proportions, among children able to confide in one parent, of those who say they are unable to confide in the other. Systematically, whatever the family environment (with the exception of lone-father families), a higher percentage of children confide in their mother but not their father, than the reverse. This finding confirms that “sharing problems” is something children do more with mothers than with fathers, and does not necessarily measure the quality of parenting.

Nonetheless, the fact that these differences are more glaring among children living with lone parents suggests that family history has some influence: when living with a lone father in whom they confide, three quarters of children are also able to confide in their mother, whereas under half of those living with, and confiding in, a lone mother also declare their father as someone with whom they can share problems. Many different factors may contribute to this situation, but these results suggest that father-child relationships suffer most from parental union disruption. In the next section, we use multivariate analysis techniques to measure the association between these and other variables and the propensity for young people to confide in their father.

Confiding in my father: A multivariate analysis

Using logistic regression analysis, we conducted a series of analyses in order to gain some insight into the relative importance of different variables for children’s ability to confide in their father. Table 2.1 gives the odds ratios calculated for models that include the three principal variables: children’s sex, age and family environment. These models confirm the significant role played by children’s age and sex in the evolution of the relationship with their father as they move towards and through adolescence. They show that boys are almost twice as likely as girls are to confide in their father, and pre-teens are significantly more likely to do so than are teens.

Even controlling for these factors, however, family history also has a part to play. Children in any other family type are less likely to confide in their father than those living continuously with both biological parents; children living with their mother after separation, in lone-mother or stepfather families, are significantly less likely to do so, as are those whose parents reunited after a period apart. Only among children who continue living with their father after separation are the differences not significant.

Table 2.1 Impact of different variables on the likelihood that children aged 10–15 years will feel able to confide in their father, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99 (logistic regression,^a N = 5272)

Variables	Able to confide in their father (yes)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Sex (girl)			
Boy	1.809***	1.822***	1.833***
Age (14–15)			
(10–11)		2.078***	2.126***
(12–13)		1.541***	1.505***
Family type (two parents)			
Two parents reunited			0.504***
Lone mother			0.356***
Mother and spouse/partner			0.439***
Lone father			0.794
Father and spouse/partner			0.699

^a Odds ratios. Coefficients significant at: † = 0.1 * = 0.05 ** = 0.01 *** = 0.001

Does the family environment remain important once other factors, such as socio-economic status, are taken into account? The full model presented in the first column of Table 2.2 shows this to be the case—the coefficients for family environment, as for children’s age and sex, remain virtually unchanged. Although the education and gender of the survey respondent (the person most knowledgeable about the child) do not appear to be associated with a child’s ability to confide in his father, two other variables are. In terms of regional differences, children in Quebec and, to a lesser extent, in British Columbia, feel more able to confide in their father than do children in Ontario. Income also seems to be associated with the type of father-child relationship. Children in high-income families are more likely to discuss their problems with their fathers than are children in low-income families.

Table 2.2 Impact of different variables on the likelihood that children aged 10–15 years will feel able to confide in their father or their mother, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99 (logistic regression,^a N = 5272)

Variables	Child able to confide in	
	Father (yes)	Mother (yes)
Sex (girl)		
Boy	1.825***	0.842**
Age (14–15)		
(10–11)	2.135***	2.524***
(12–13)	1.502***	1.653***
Family type (Two parents)		
Two parents reunited	0.513***	0.598**
Lone mother	0.395***	0.675***
Mother and spouse/partner	0.445***	0.906
Lone father	0.967	0.517**
Father and spouse/partner	0.753	0.648
Region (Ontario)		
Atlantic Provinces	1.089	0.953
Quebec	1.278**	1.410***
Prairies	1.051	0.953
British Columbia	1.165 [†]	1.095
Household income (< \$30,000)		
\$30,000–\$49,999	1.187 [†]	0.907
\$50,000–\$79,999	1.138	0.779*
\$80,000 or more	1.370**	0.900
PMK^b education (high school diploma)		
Less than high school	0.986	0.753*
Beyond high school	1.099	1.144
College or university degree	1.113	1.219*
PMK^b (mother)		
Father	0.917	0.746*
Other	0.486	0.562

^a Odds ratios. Coefficients significant at: [†] = 0.1 * = 0.05 ** = 0.01 *** = 0.001

^b PMK: Person most knowledgeable about the child, selected as the survey's respondent.

What about the mother?

If family change is associated with children's feeling of being able to talk to their father, is this also true for the relationship with their mother? Coefficients given in the second column of Table 2.2 suggest that it is. Whether children live with their father or mother, living with a lone parent reduces children's ability to confide in the other parent. The same is true for children living in a stepfamily: children living with their mother and new spouse are less likely to confide in their father, and those living with their father and new spouse are less likely to confide in their mother.⁹ That living with a lone mother also lowers the likelihood that children confide in their mother is more surprising. Living with a lone father, in contrast, does not affect children's ability to confide in him. Is this because fathers who assume the care of their children after separation were already particularly close to them before? Finally, the relationship with both parents appears to suffer when parents separate and reunite; children living through this kind of change are significantly less likely to confide in their mother, just as they were in their father.

The differences between children in Quebec and other Canadian children are even more pronounced when it comes to confiding in mothers than they are for fathers, although it is beyond the scope of this report to explain why. In addition, the more highly educated the children's mother, the more likely they are to confide in her.¹⁰ Once education was controlled, in fact, the relationship with income was the reverse of the one that might be expected, with children from the lowest income families most likely to confide in their mother.

What about custody and contact?

The type of contact and custody arrangements made at separation will, to some extent, reflect the type of relationship that exists between fathers and children before separation. These arrangements will also influence the way this relationship develops during the years following separation. We look at this question in the third analysis, which is restricted to children whose parents separated at some point.

⁹ The coefficient for stepmother families (child lives with father and spouse/partner) is not significant, possibly because of the small number of children in this situation.

¹⁰ PMK's education is the mother's education in approximately 90 percent of cases.

Table 2.3 Impact of different variables on the likelihood that children aged 10–15 years whose parents have separated feel able to confide in their father, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99 (logistic regression,^a N = 1235)

Variables	Able to confide in their father (yes)	Able to confide in their mother (yes)
Custody and contact at separation (with mother/sees father regularly)		
With mother—irregular or no contact with father	0.637**	1.434*
Shared	1.551*	2.231*
With father	1.444	1.072
Years since separation	0.956*	0.991
Sex (girl)		
Boy	1.613***	0.938
Age (14–15)		
(10–11)	1.504**	2.191***
(12–13)	1.671***	1.193
Family environment (lone mother)		
Mother and spouse/partner	0.919	1.316
Lone father	1.304	0.568*
Father and spouse/partner	0.895	0.718
Two parents reunited	0.881	0.835
Region (Ontario)		
Atlantic Provinces	1.383	1.432
Quebec	1.176	1.446*
Prairies	1.349 [†]	1.416 [†]
British Columbia	1.465 [†]	1.721*
Household income (\$30,000)		
\$30,000–\$49,999	1.331 [†]	0.882
\$50,000–\$79,999	1.815**	1.154
\$80,000 or more	1.475	0.859
PMK^b education (high school diploma)		
Less than high school	0.693	0.588*
Beyond high school	0.998	0.631*
College or university degree	0.831	0.715

^a Odds ratios. Coefficients significant at: [†] = 0.1 * = 0.05 ** = 0.01 *** = 0.001

^b PMK: Person most knowledgeable about the child, selected as the survey's respondent.

Results of this analysis, given in Table 2.3, confirm the link between custody and contact arrangements made at separation and the ongoing relationship between children and separated parents. The importance of establishing regular contact with children from the start is clear. Whether or not children live with their father after separation, they are more likely to feel able to talk to him when he remains involved on a regular basis. Certainly, children living part of the time with their father are significantly more likely to confide in him than are those who live exclusively with their mother, even if they see their father regularly.

It is hard to know whether the shared physical custody creates the closeness, or whether it results from a closeness that existed before the separation. The even stronger association between shared custody and confiding in the mother suggests that families who opt for this arrangement are those in which communication between children and both parents is already good before the separation. Even controlling for the custody and contact established at separation, and for the fact that children are getting older, the relationship with the father suffers as the years since separation pass by, while the relationship with the mother does not.

As far as the other variables are concerned, children's age and sex continue to play the usual role, though to a lesser degree. Overall, there are few significant differences between the different family environments; nonetheless, children living with a lone father are most likely to confide in their father, and least likely to confide in their mother. Among children whose parents separate, regional differences are emerging; Ontario now stands out as the region in which children are least likely to confide in either of their parents, particularly their mother.

These analyses explored the relationship between children and their biological father and showed that, while children's sex and age are the central factors in the evolution of this relationship, family history is also important. We will now turn to the relationship between children and the father figure they have identified as the one who is most present in their daily lives. This will allow us to investigate the impact of family change on the individual who has taken on a paternal role in the children's life and to examine the extent to which children's perception of this father figure depends on the individual identified: the stepfather, the non-resident biological father or the resident father.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER FIGURE

At the survey, children aged 10–15 years were asked to identify the father “they spend most time with,” their choices being “biological father,” “adoptive father,” “stepfather,” “foster father” or “another person.” Two other options were also offered: “I am not in touch with my father” or “I do not have a father.” This section analyzes in detail how children identify their “father” and links this choice to their family history and environment at the time of survey. Children are classified according to the type of father they have identified and according to their family status.

Not all children with a resident stepfather appear to have adhered strictly to the instruction to identify as father figure the “father” with whom they spent most time, however. Generally speaking, children living with a stepfather were more likely to select their biological father as the father figure when they had frequent contact with him, and particularly so if they had spent some time in shared custody arrangements. However, some selected him even though contact had been

irregular, or even absent, during the 12 months preceding the survey. It is important to keep this in mind while interpreting the results of the following analyses.

My father, which father?

Table 2.4 shows which individuals were identified by children aged 10–15 years as the father figure with whom they spent the most time. Figures are also given for the individual identified as the mother figure, and differences between the distributions result primarily from the tendency for children to continue living with their mother after separation.

Table 2.4 Distribution of children aged 10–15 years, according to the mother and father figures identified as those with whom they spend the most time, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

Variables	Canada
Mother figure	%
Biological mother	95.7
Adoptive mother	1.6
Stepmother	1.2
Foster mother	0.3
Other	0.6
No contact with mother	0.6
I have no mother	
Total	100.0
N	5,100
Father figure	%
Biological father	87.0
Adoptive father	2.4
Stepfather	5.6
Foster father	0.2
Other	1.1
No contact with father	2.9
I have no father	0.7
Total	100.0
N	5,100

Although an overwhelming proportion (89 percent) of children identify their biological or adoptive father as the male with whom they spend the most time, they are nonetheless considerably more likely to identify someone other than a biological parent as a father figure than as a mother figure. In particular, they choose a stepfather as a parent with whom they spend the most time four times as frequently as they choose a stepmother (5.6 percent compared with 1.2 percent). This is to be expected, given that children live much more often with their stepfather than with their stepmother. The number of stepfathers is, therefore, adequate for a comparison of children's relationships with stepfathers and biological fathers. Finally, the

proportion of 10- to 15-year-old children stating that they have no father, or have no contact at all with him, is significantly higher than the proportion stating the same about their mother.

When linked to the child’s residential family unit (Table 2.5), the diversity of situations and perceptions becomes more evident. Almost all children who were living with their biological or adoptive father at the time of the survey selected him as the father figure with whom they spent the most time; this was the case whether they had been living with him since birth, whether their parents had separated and reunited, or whether they had separated and the children had continued living with their father on a full or part time basis.

Predictably, children living with their mother and a stepfather most frequently selected another individual as father figure; nonetheless, a good proportion of them still identified their biological or adoptive father as the “father” with whom they spent the most time. This was also true for the vast majority of children living with a lone mother. Clearly, biological fathers generally remain fathers even when they do not reside with their children, and even if there is a stepfather in the picture. This variable will be central to our analysis of how new family trajectories influence children’s relationships with their father.

Table 2.5 Distribution of children aged 10–15 years, according to their family environment and the father figure they have identified,^a Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

Child lives with ...	Canada
Two parents	%
Never separated, biological father identified	73.1
Reunited, biological father identified	2.6
Never separated, other identified	0.8
Lone mother	%
Biological father identified	11.4
Other identified	1.9
Mother and spouse/partner	
Biological father identified	2.6
Other identified	4.1
Lone father	%
Biological father identified	2.4
Father and spouse/partner	%
Biological father identified	1.1
Total	100.0
N	4,875

^a Excluding children who said they had no father/mother, or had no contact.

How close am I to my “father”?

Four questions referred to the child’s evaluation of his or her relationship with the individuals selected as the main mother and father figures. Children were asked the following:

- How well do you feel that your father (mother) understands you?
- How much fairness do you receive from your father (mother)?
- How much affection do you receive from your father (mother)?
- Overall, how would you describe your relationship with your father (mother): very close, somewhat close, not very close, I am not in touch with my father (mother), I don’t have a father (mother)?

The distributions of responses for each question are compared in Figures 2.7a to 2.7d, for the three parent figures most commonly identified by children: the biological or adoptive mother, the biological or adoptive father, and the stepfather. These four figures suggest generally very positive relationships between children and their biological or adoptive parents.

Whatever the indicator chosen (parent understands child, is fair, gives affection or is close to the child overall), only a small minority of children (between 6 percent and 12 percent) gave a negative evaluation (very little / not very close). In addition, differences in children’s perception of their biological mother and father are not very great. Mothers score a little higher in understanding children (Figure 2.7a), giving them affection (Figure 2.7c), and overall closeness (Figure 2.7d). Their scores are almost identical in terms of “fairness” (Figure 2.7b), a question that may be less biased towards the affective, or “maternal,” aspects of the parent-child relationship.

More marked than differences between biological mothers and fathers is the difference between stepfathers and biological fathers. Overall, children clearly have a higher opinion of the quality of their relationship with a biological father than with a stepfather. Among children selecting a stepfather as the father figure with whom they spend the most time, twice as many report very little understanding from a stepfather, three times as many report very little fairness or affection, and more than twice as many declare that, overall, their relationship with the stepfather is not very close.

Nonetheless, since many of these stepfathers have been in the picture for a relatively short time, it is perhaps encouraging to see that the relationship with a stepfather is more often seen in a highly positive light than in a negative one: 45 percent of children whose main father figure is a stepfather, for example, state that they receive “a great deal” of affection from him, compared with 21 percent who receive “very little” (Figure 2.7c). Overall, therefore, these figures indicate that children’s perception of their relationship with parent figures is mostly positive. In the following sections, we attempt to uncover some factors that may affect the quality of these relationships.

Figure 2.7a Perception of the relationship with the most common mother and father figures identified by children aged 10-15 years, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

How well do you feel that your “mother” or “father” understands you?

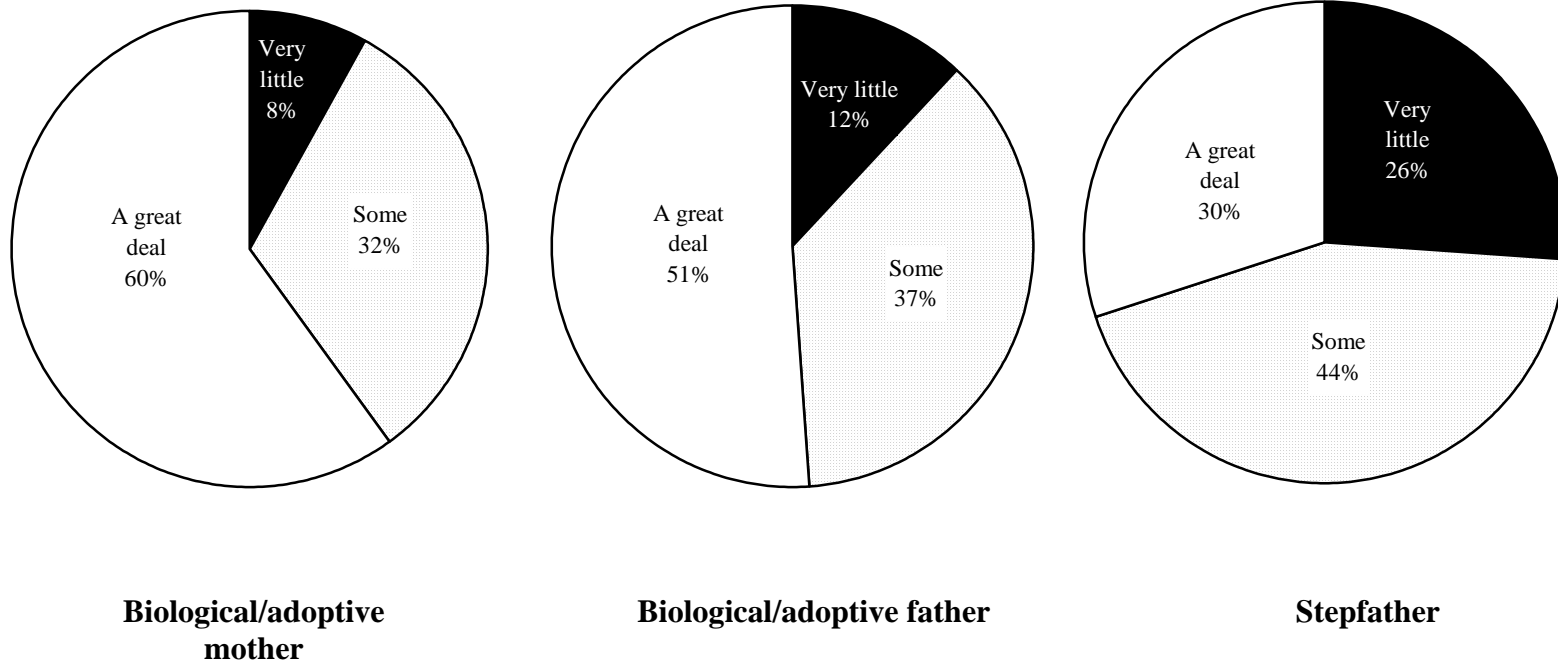


Figure 2.7b Perception of the relationship with the most common mother and father figures identified by children aged 10-15 years, Canada, NLSY, Cycle 3, 1998-99

How much fairness do you receive from your “mother” or “father”?

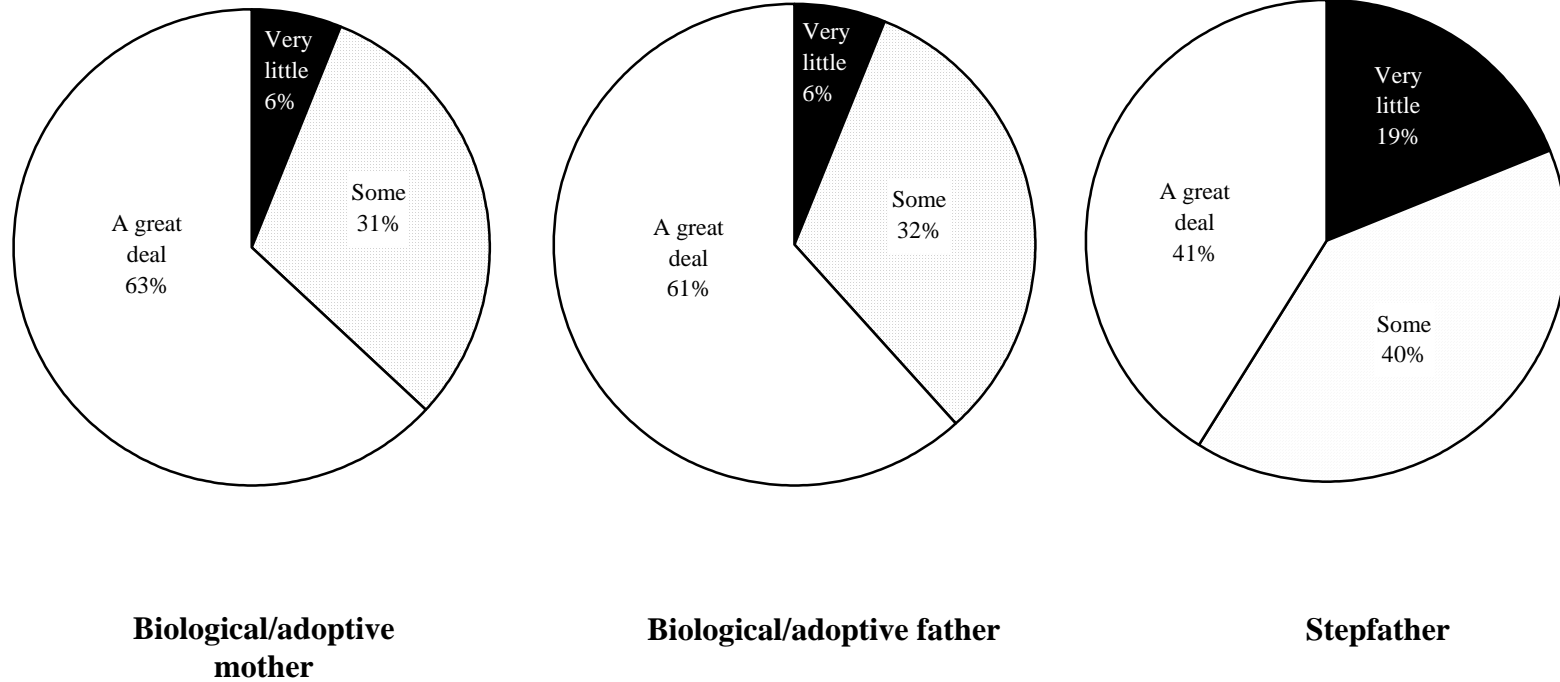
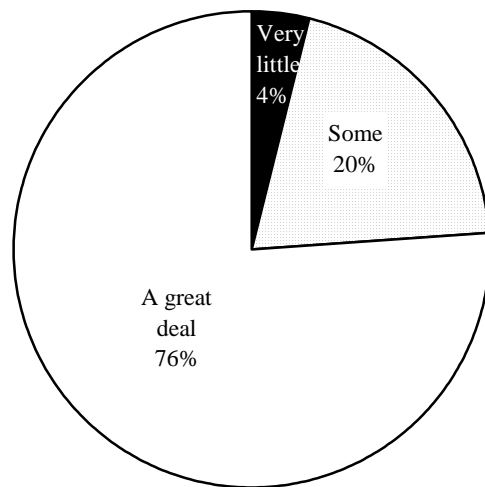
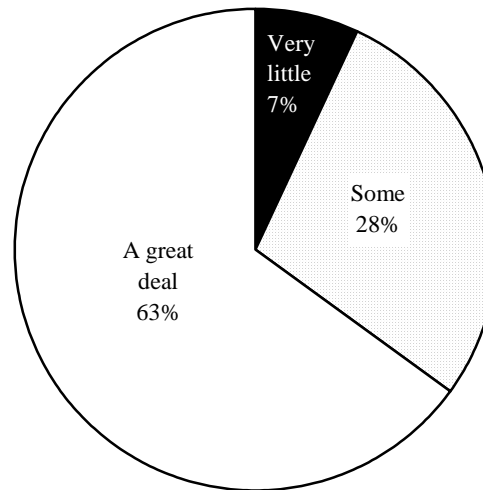


Figure 2.7c Perception of the relationship with the most common mother and father figures identified by children aged 10-15 years, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998-99

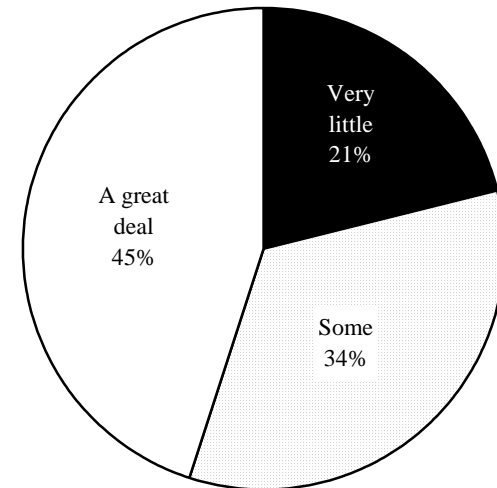
How much affection do you receive from your “mother” or “father”?



Biological/adoptive mother



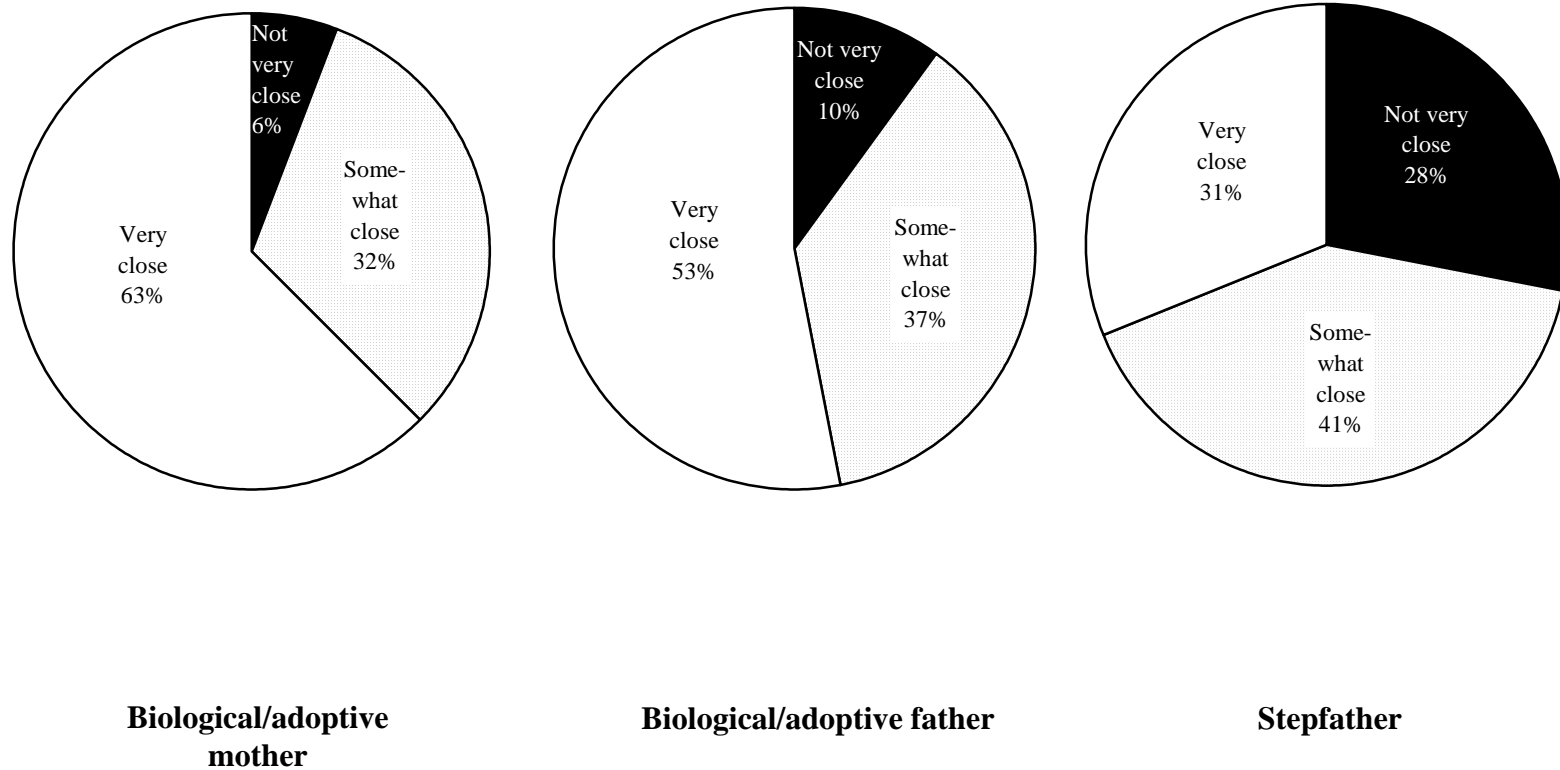
Biological/adoptive father



Stepfather

Figure 2.7d Perception of the relationship with the most common mother and father figures identified by children aged 10-15 years, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

Overall, how would you describe your relationship with your “mother” or “father”?



A matter of co-residence?

Most children selecting their biological father as the father figure have lived their entire life with him; those selecting a stepfather have generally only lived part of it with him. To what extent does this explain these differences between stepfathers and fathers? Are children's perceptions of their biological father affected by living apart from him? In Table 2.6, the proportions of children replying negatively to questions about their father figure are compared by the type of family environment in which they were living in 1998–99.

- Children express negative feelings about their father least often when there has been no family change at all—when they have lived with both biological parents since birth.
- After separation, children feel more positively about fathers with whom they live. When living with a lone father, or with their father and stepmother, children perceive their father negatively less frequently than when they live with their lone mother or when their parents separate for a spell.
- Among children living with their mother and stepfather, children who selected their stepfather as the father figure expressed negative feelings more frequently than those who chose their biological father. The difference between fathers and stepfathers persists, in other words, even when children do not live with their father.
- Among children living with their mother and stepfather, the largest difference between biological fathers and stepfathers, as perceived by the children, is “fairness.” On this “male role” question, children declare their stepfather unfair to them four times as often as they do their biological father.
- Interestingly, among children living with both biological parents, those whose parents have separated at some point are much more likely to respond negatively to questions about their relationship with their biological father than are those whose parents have never separated. Is it the time spent apart that has undermined the paternal relationship?

Table 2.6 Indicators of the perception children aged 10–15 years have of their relationship with the father figure, according to the family environment, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

Family environment and father figure	Proportion of children who say their father figure ...			
	is not very close to them	is not very fair	understands them very little	gives very little affection
Lives with two biological parents	%	%	%	%
Biological father identified:				
Parents never separated	7.9	5.1	10.0	6.3
Parents reunited	19.0	6.5	19.4	17.4
Lives with lone biological mother:				
Biological father identified	16.4	11.3	20.5	9.7
Other identified	33.8	12.2	22.5	20.8
Lives with biological mother and spouse/partner:				
Biological father identified	12.5	4.2	15.0	12.5
Stepfather identified	25.0	17.3	23.3	19.5
Lives with lone biological father:				
Biological father identified	12.6	8.9	11.6	6.4
Lives with biological father and spouse/partner:				
Biological father identified	11.8	---	9.6	9.6

Although there is a clear association between residence and the relationship with the biological father, we come up again against the problem of cause or effect. Are children closer to fathers with whom they live after separation *because* they live with them, or are they living with them precisely because of their close relationship before separation? Most likely, both factors come into play, reinforcing each other in a positive or negative way.

A matter of sex and age?

We have already shown differences between girls and boys in terms of their ability to confide in their parents and in their fathers in particular. We have also determined that such differences increase with age during adolescence. Table 2.7 confirms that these observations remain true when we dig deeper into gender differences in the type of relationship that exist between girls, boys and their parent figures, controlling for age. Girls' perception of their closeness with the father figure undergoes the biggest drop at the onset of adolescence: 65 percent of 10- and 11-year-old girls say they feel very close to their father, as opposed to only 25 percent of 14- and

15-year-old girls. Whatever the age group, boys clearly feel closer to their father, although less than half (43 percent) of boys still feel very close to him when they reach age 14 or 15.

Table 2.7 Children’s perception of the closeness of the relationship with their father and mother figures, by sex and age group, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

	Relationship with the father figure			Total %	N
	Very close %	Somewhat close %	Not very close ^a %		
Girls					
10–11 years	64.6	26.1	9.3	100.0	853
12–13 years	43.5	41.2	15.2	100.0	833
14–15 years	25.0	50.5	24.5	100.0	867
All	44.0	39.5	16.5	100.0	2,553
Boys					
10–11 years	70.9	19.9	9.2	100.0	830
12–13 years	56.6	34.7	8.7	100.0	838
14–15 years	42.9	41.7	15.5	100.0	873
All	56.3	32.4	11.3	100.0	2,541
	Relationship with the mother figure			Total %	N
	Very close %	Somewhat close %	Not very close ^a %		
Girls					
10–11 years	77.0	20.1	2.9	100.0	845
12–13 years	61.7	32.1	6.2	100.0	854
14–15 years	41.9	44.2	13.8	100.0	875
All	59.7	32.5	7.8	100.0	2,574
Boys					
10–11 years	84.4	11.3	4.3	100.0	834
12–13 years	64.7	32.0	3.3	100.0	837
14–15 years	46.9	46.0	7.2	100.0	870
All	64.8	30.2	5.0	100.0	2,541

^a Including children who said they had no father or mother, or had no contact.

When considering the same indicator in relation to the proximity to the mother figure, both girls and boys declare a considerably higher degree of closeness, and a less accentuated reduction, as they grow older. Age and sex, therefore, appear to remain discriminating factors in children’s evaluation of their relationship with their father figure. These factors should constitute significant variables in our multivariate analysis.

A matter of socio-economic background?

How far is the socio-economic environment a potential stimulus of or deterrent to positive relationships between children and their parents? The distribution of children according to the closeness of their relationship with the father figure and household income in Figure 2.8 provides an insight into possible links. Clearly, there seems to be some association: the proportion of children declaring that they do not feel very close to their father increases noticeably from the highest income households (8 percent) to the lowest (25 percent). However, such a link may very well be mediated through the family environment, as lone-parent families are often among the lowest income households. In the next section, we use logistic regression to help clarify the role played by the family environment as opposed to socio-economic background.

How close am I to my “father”? A multivariate analysis

The majority of children assessed their relationship with their father figure as being “very close.” In this analysis, we attempt to identify which characteristics are associated with an increased probability that children do *not* feel very close to their father figure. Results are given in Table 2.8. As expected, children’s age and sex have a significant impact in all models and do so in the expected direction.

In terms of family environment, once all the control variables are introduced into the model (model 4), only living with a lone mother significantly raises the probability that children will not feel very close to their father. The significant result in model 3, for children living with a mother and stepfather, disappears once we control for the identity of the father figure. Thus children in stepfather families who identify their stepfather as the father figure are significantly less likely to feel very close to their biological father than are those who selected their biological father as the father figure. Children who live with their biological father after separation, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to feel very close to him, even more so than are children whose parents have never separated.

As for the other control variables, findings support a pattern mentioned earlier. Children who feel able to talk to their father are generally able to talk to their mother as well. In this analysis, children who evaluate their relationship with their mother as “somewhat close” or “not very close” are much more likely to characterize their relationship with their father in the same way. In addition, while household income has no apparent effect, education (generally the mother’s education) has an unexpected effect: the higher the education level, the more likely children are to feel not very close to their father. Finally, children in Quebec are significantly more likely not to feel very close to their father figure than are children living in other Canadian regions, which is an unexpected result in light of earlier analyses.

Figure 2.8 Distribution of children aged 10–15 years, according to the closeness of their relationship with their father, by household income, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99

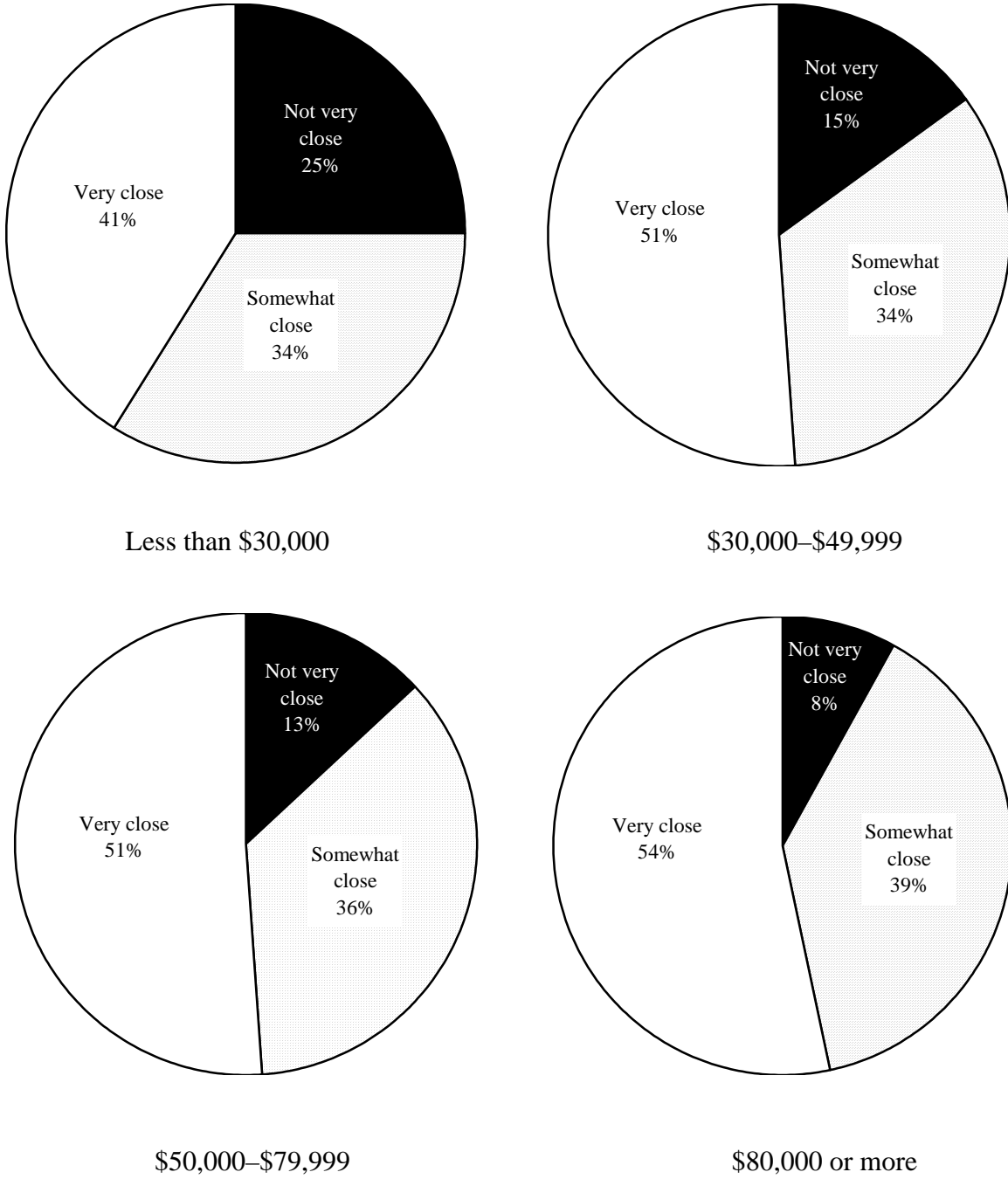


Table 2.8 Impact of different factors on the likelihood that children^a will not feel very close to their father figure, Canada, NLSCY, Cycle 3, 1998–99 (logistic regression,^b N = 4719)

Variables	Likelihood of not feeling very close to father figure			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sex (boy)				
Girl	1.731***	1.828***	1.815***	1.938***
Age (10–11 years)				
(12–13 years)		2.295***	2.421***	1.839***
(14–15 years)		4.544***	4.798***	2.932***
Family environment (two parents)				
Two parents reunited			1.233	0.973
Lone mother			2.634***	2.564***
Mother and spouse/partner			1.691***	1.051
Lone father			0.856	0.481**
Father and spouse/partner			0.663	0.386**
Father figure (biological father)				
Stepfather				2.512***
Other				2.277*
Close to mother (very)				
Somewhat close				11.405***
Not very close				7.170***
Household income (continuous)				1.000
PMK^c education (high school diploma)				
Less than high school				0.676**
Beyond high school				1.107
College or university degree				1.212 [†]
Region (Ontario)				
Atlantic Provinces				1.014
Quebec				1.680***
Prairies				0.965
British Columbia				0.967

^a Excludes children who said they had no father or mother, or had no contact.

^b Odds ratios. Coefficients significant at: [†] = 0.1 * = 0.05 ** = 0.01 *** = 0.001

^c PMK: Person most knowledgeable about the child, selected as the survey's respondent.

DISCUSSION

This section has provided some novel insights into the evolution of children's perception of their relationship with their parents and parent figures. It has highlighted the key role played by the gender of parents and children, and by children's age, during the transition to adolescence.

Nevertheless, care should be taken in interpreting these results for a number of reasons.

First, these perceptions are closely related to their historical context. A generation ago, children might have declared less "closeness" to both mothers and fathers. A generation into the future, gender differences may have disappeared completely.

Second, the questions were mostly "affective" in nature, relating to warmth and communication and therefore more appropriate to "mother" roles. Responses to the only "male" question (whether parent figures treat the child fairly) showed little difference between children's perception of mothers and fathers. It would be interesting to have asked children what they expect from their father rather than from their mother.

Also, not only are some questions more related to affective aspects of the parent-child relationship; in addition, girls and boys may themselves interpret the questions differently, or they may have different expectations of what it means to be able to confide in, or to be close to, a parent. Girls tend to mature earlier than boys, which may partly account for differences in the evolution by age. Is the increasing distance evident during early adolescence part of the move towards independence? Is there a reversal of the trend as children progress through their teens? Data from further cycles should clarify this issue.

We have repeatedly come across the question of cause and effect between children's perception of their parent figures and family change. While there is undoubtedly a negative relationship between "alternative" family environments and the closeness children feel towards parents, it is hard to know how to interpret this. Only by following the evolution of children's perceptions of parent figures before and after family change would it be possible to assess whether the significantly closer relationships associated with shared physical custody, for example, were there before separation. Then we could also explain whether this closeness resulted from the contact between parents and children living in shared custody.

CONCLUSION

This third phase of research into the impact of parents' transitions on children's family environment and economic well-being has focussed on the aftermath of separation. We looked first at the expansion of children's family networks as parents continue their conjugal and parental pathways after separation, entering new unions and starting new families. Then, using data gathered from children themselves, we attempted to evaluate the impact of family change on children's perception of their relationship with their biological parents and with their stepfather.

Analyses in the first section are based on the family histories of children born during the late 1980s. Although most of these children had not even reached their teens at the time of the survey, many of them had already experienced the arrival of new parent figures, stepsiblings and half-siblings in their family environment. These complex family pathways are likely to become even more common among children born in the 1990s, who were exposed to even higher rates of parental separation. Other trends, such as the growing number of families established outside marriage and growing proportions of out-of-union births, suggest that this type of family life course may become more mainstream.

The picture of the child's family life course that emerges is full of contrasts—between children born into two-parent rather than one-parent families, for example, or to married rather than cohabiting parents—in terms of the different levels of complexity of their family life pathways. The series of events initiated by separation alters the child's family landscape, multiplying the number of parents, siblings and other relatives whom children relate to in the course of their childhood. This creates another contrast: between children who spend their entire childhood within an “intact” family, with no parents other than biological ones and no siblings other than their full siblings, and those who do not. The latter group includes an ever-increasing group of youngsters with an entirely different experience of what family life and membership is all about.

As a relatively new phenomenon, this family expansion is not “completely institutionalized,” to borrow Cherlin's term (Cherlin, 1978). There are few hard-and-fast rules as to how these transitions should be made, how rights and responsibilities towards children should be divided between parents in different households, and how parents should share resources among children who do not all live in the same household.

Families face these types of challenges all the time, and generally do so with very little guidance. The frequency and rapidity with which separated parents form new unions is on the rise, and this means that these questions are not going to go away. As increasing numbers of parents become responsible for children from two or more unions, more families will struggle with the competing demands of different children in a parent's life.

Similarly, the rising number of adults and children in step-relationships raises issues relating to the rights and responsibilities of stepparents. Whereas stepparents readily

accrue obligations to children, such as the obligation to pay child support,¹¹ the opposite is not true: the law does not permit stepparents to readily obtain rights in relation to stepchildren. For example, the biological parent normally possesses parental authority over a child, and this authority would have to be taken away by court order in favour of the stepparent, by an order of custody of the child, adoption etc.

Stepparents have no legal authority in relation to the children, except in cases where an order, as noted above, is in place that bestows custodial or adoptive rights on the stepparent. However, the biological parent is in a preferred position when determining parental responsibility and custody (the best interests test looks to biological relations, in most if not all statutes). Adoption requires the informed, written consent of the biological parents.

To many stepparents and children, the current situation is unacceptable. The reality in Canada is that many children have multiple parental figures. This is not reflected in the application of the law, which continues to be largely based on the “nuclear family” model, with rights and responsibilities generally defined in relation to the biological ties to the child. Adoption may be the most prominent example, in which case a biological parent’s rights must be fully extinguished in order for the child to be placed for adoption with a stepparent.

Structures, laws and institutions fail to reflect this diversity of family—this should be a first priority. How will these experiences affect children? Will their impact be negative in the long term, or will these children be better prepared than those with more “stable” childhoods?

Much has been written about the impact of family transitions on children’s well-being, and apart from economic well-being which tends to decline, there is little agreement about these effects. However, it is generally agreed that the more straightforward and harmonious these transitions are, the more successful and speedy the adjustment to them is, on the part of both parents and children. Developing guidelines that “institutionalize” and facilitate this constantly changing process should be a priority.

Finally, a positive conclusion that can be drawn from the statements made by children about their parents: it takes more than separation to destroy the relationship between parents and children. Children appear to have less difficulty coping with multiple parent figures than parents do themselves. Although living with parents after separation facilitates closeness, as long as non-resident parents stay involved with their children, they remain important and close figures in their lives.

¹¹ See Divorce Act s. 15, and various provincial and territorial legislation establishing obligations of those who “stand in the place of a parent.” Also referred to as In Loco Parentis laws.