

Sharing the care of children post-separation: family dynamics and labour force capacity

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Purpose

This paper presents new data on the circumstances of income support¹ parents who share the care of their children on a substantially equal basis post-separation. The aim of the paper is to explore the different patterns of shared care arrangements, the extent of flexibility in the arrangements, and factors that impact on the arrangements in the context of the labour force capacity of the parents.

The impetus for this research arose from the treatment of shared care parents in the social security income support system. Carberry (1998) argued that family law and social security provisions are at odds with one another in relation to the treatment of separated parents who share care of their children on a substantially equal basis.

In brief, under current rules only one parent is eligible to receive an income support payment for being primary carer of the children—Parenting Payment. If the other parent needs income support, they would generally receive Newstart Allowance. There are considerable differences between these two payments. Parenting Payment has a more generous rate and income test, and has no activity test requirement (Table 1). These arrangements are inequitable because:

- The parent who receives Newstart Allowance is treated as any other unemployed person and their parenting role is not recognised, as the activity test requires them to be actively seeking work.
- The parent who receives Newstart Allowance is financially disadvantaged compared to the parent who receives the Parenting Payment, as they receive a lower income support rate, cannot receive an additional payment that recognises the extra costs of lone parents, and any income they earn reduces their income support payment more quickly.
- The parent who receives the Parenting Payment is not obliged to seek work to qualify for payment, and has access to special employment and education assistance on a voluntary basis.

¹ Including recipients of Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment.

Table 1: Overview of selected social security payments

Payment Type	Description	Maximum Amount Paid (rates at 20 September 1999)
Newstart Allowance	Assistance for a person who is unemployed and satisfies an Activity Test*. The payment is income tested, using private income of the person and their partner (if any).	Varies with situation. Relevant examples are: Single over 21 years, no children - \$326.70 per fortnight Single over 21 years, with child - \$353.40 per fortnight Partnered, over 21 years (with or without children) - \$294.70 per fortnight
Pension Parenting Payment (Single)	Assistance for an unpartnered person who has main care of a child under 16 years old. The payment is income tested, using private income of the person.	\$371.90 per fortnight (includes Pharmaceutical Allowance of \$5.40)
Benefit Parenting Payment (Partnered)	Assistance for a partnered person who has main care of a child under 16 years old. The payment is income tested using private income of the person and their partner (if any)	\$294.70 per fortnight

* The Activity Test is a requirement to be undertaking an approved activity, usually job search.

While the issue of income support arrangements for shared care parents is of interest to the Department of Family and Community Services, there is a wider range of issues that are of interest to other policy developers and service providers in regard to shared care.

Experts in the area of parental separation and children agree that continued positive contact between children and non-resident parents is associated with children's positive divorce adjustment (Amato 1987; Family Law Council 1992). The factors that appear to impact on children's well-being following separation are ongoing conflict between parents and the withdrawal of a parent from their lives (Seddon and Disney 1999; Family Law Council 1992). One way to achieve ongoing contact between both parents and their children is through shared care arrangements.

The family law reforms introduced in June 1996 reinforced the rights of children to have regular contact with both parents and emphasised joint parental responsibility for children following separation. The Family Law Act now makes it clear that upon separation, each parent exercises the full range of parental responsibilities unless the parents agree to vary this or a court orders a variation in these responsibilities (Carberry 1998).

The Family Law Act does not prescribe shared residence as the model for parenting after separation as it is not always the best arrangement for children. Graycar (1999) argues that there has been no significant move to shared parenting following the 1996 legal reforms. She suggests that final residence orders are still too often based on pre-separation parenting patterns, and that an attitudinal change is needed if shared parenting is to become more prevalent.

According to the ABS, in 1997, there were 978,400 children aged between 0 and 17 years who had a natural parent living elsewhere (Table 2). For most (88 per cent), it was their father who lived elsewhere. Of these children, over three-quarters lived in one-parent families. Only 3 per cent or 25,400 of these children with a parent living elsewhere had shared care arrangements—that is, each natural parent looked after the child for at least 30 per cent of the time. Note, however, that the ABS uses a different definition of shared care (between 30 and 70 per cent) than that used for the purposes of this paper.

Table 2: Children with a natural parent living elsewhere—parental care arrangements (per cent)

	Parental care arrangement -	
	Sole	Shared
Family type		
Couple family	23	13.4*
One parent family	77	86.6
Lone mother	68.6	54.1
Lone father	8.4	32.5
Number	953,000	25,400
How visiting arrangements decided		
Private	52.1	58.2
Mediation, counselling, consultation with lawyers and/or court proceedings	17.1	41.4
Not asked/stated	30.8	-
Number	953,000	25,400
Age of child (years)		
0-2	11.5	9.0*
3-4	9.7	13.4*
5-11	41.7	48.4
12-14	19.5	14.6*
15-17	17.5	14.6*
Number	953,000	25,400

ABS Family Characteristics, April 1997, 4442.0

* Relative standard error greater than 25 per cent

It was decided to undertake a survey of shared care parents in receipt of income support payments (Parenting Payment and Newstart Allowance) to inform future policy development. This paper will explore the results from the survey, in particular:

- the different patterns of shared care arrangements;
- the extent of flexibility in these arrangements;
- the potential for labour force engagement among shared care parents.

These issues are of particular interest to the Department of Family and Community Services, as the nature of shared parenting arrangements is obviously a crucial factor in determining the labour force capacity of each parent (Carberry 1998), particularly if the parent does not have a new partner. Any parent's capacity to participate in paid work is affected by the presence of children and their caring responsibilities. Shared parenting would, presumably, impose its own constraints and difficulties in combining work and caring roles. In particular, it could be anticipated that the pattern and variability in the care arrangements, as well as the presence of a new partner, would be significant factors affecting a parent's ability to manage participation in the labour force. For example, how common is it for a parent to have responsibility for a child in their care for one week in every two and manage to find work in the alternative week? It may be easier for a parent to combine study with shared parenting, if the course of study was suitably flexible, and access to affordable child care was available or the child was at school.

Carberry (1998) states that shared care of children could be both in the interests of parents wishing to combine working and parenting, and in the interests of government, in terms of encouraging people to take up opportunities to improve their financial circumstances and minimising social security outlays in the longer term. The recently announced review of the welfare system will be examining ways to achieve a better balance between a strong safety net and policies that allow people to participate fully in the workforce where they are able.

Survey methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on telephone interviews conducted in July 1999². Interviews were conducted with 503 shared care parents in receipt of Newstart Allowance or Parenting Payment (single or partnered) who choose to split Family Allowance with another person in the range 40 and 60 per cent.

Where a parenting plan or custody order exists, the proportion of Family Allowance each parent is paid is based on the plan or order, except where the parents choose to share the Family Allowance in a different arrangement than that given in a court order or parenting plan. Where there is a dispute, the shared care proportions specified in the court order or parenting plan are used to calculate the proportion of payment.

² Fieldwork was conducted by Roy Morgan Research.

For the purpose of this research, the population of parents who split their Family Allowance in the 40 to 60 per cent range were chosen as a proxy for parents who share care of children equally.

There are, however, some Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment customers who share the care of their child or children in the 40 to 60 per cent range who choose not to split their Family Allowance in this way. These parents may have decided to take account of the sharing of expenses associated with the children in other ways. They are not included in the survey. Also, some customers who choose to split their Family Allowance in this way may not be sharing care of their children in the 40 to 60 per cent range. This may be because they were once sharing care of their children and have since changed this arrangement without commensurately adjusting their Family Allowance.

Of the 503 shared care parents who completed the questionnaire; analysis showed that only 458 of these were in the scope of the survey. That is, analysis of the amount of time the child or children spend with each parent showed that 458 of the 503 shared the care of their children in the 40 to 60 per cent range. The 45 shared care parents whose answers indicated that their shared care arrangements were not within this range were excluded from the analysis. Therefore the detailed analysis involves only the 458 shared care parents.

A total of 1,955 customers were drawn from Centrelink's database on 2 April 1999. These represented all the customers on the database in receipt of Newstart Allowance or Parenting Payment who:

- were recorded as receiving between 40 and 60 per cent of their maximum Family Allowance entitlement;
- did not have other non-shared care children in their care.

Of these, 1,547 had a telephone number recorded on the system. The remaining 408 customers were recorded as having silent numbers or no telephone. The population was split by payment type, area and sex as set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Shared care population by payment type, area and sex (number)

Area	Newstart Allowance		Parenting Payment Partnered		Parenting Payment Single		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Metropolitan	118	50	6	28	234	372	358	450
Other urban	97	49	11	42	193	298	301	389
Rural/remote	63	31	3	24	144	192	210	247
Total	278	130	20	94	571	862	869	1086

Centrelink Administrative data; April 1999

The 1,547 shared care parents with telephone contact details were contacted by mail to explain the purpose of the survey and were provided with a 1800 number to ring if they did not wish to be contacted to participate in the survey. Fifty-four of this group contacted the 1800 number to opt out of the survey.

The 408 customers without telephone contact details were sent a different letter explaining the survey and inviting them to telephone the 1800 number and provide a contact number so that they could participate in the survey. Of the 408 without telephone contact details, 59 telephoned the 1800 number and left a contact number so that they could participate in the survey.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a small number of shared care parents in the questionnaire development phase. These face-to-face interviews were conducted to develop a better feel for the diversity of the customer group so that more appropriate questions would be asked in the survey proper. The questionnaire was piloted to fine tune the questionnaire before the survey proper was conducted on 8–10 July 1999.

Of the 1,429 attempts to contact shared care parents, 626 answered the first question on the questionnaire. The other 803 were excluded before the first question was asked for a number of reasons including initial contact being with an answering machine, the number being disconnected, customer refusing, no reply and telephone number being engaged. After the first few filtering questions, 506 shared care parents remained in the scope of the survey. One of the initial filtering questions excluded any families who were caring full time for children other than their shared care children. Of the 506, 503 completed the questionnaire.

Analysis of the patterns of shared care revealed that some were not sharing in the 40–60 per cent range. These people were excluded, leaving 458 respondents. The analysis is on these 458 shared care parents. It is useful to compare the 458 with the original population of 1,955 to see the extent of any differences between these two groups. Table 4 below shows the breakdown of the 458 respondents by payment type, area and sex.

Table 4: Shared care survey respondents by payment type, area and sex (number)

Area	Newstart Allowance		Parenting Payment Partnered		Parenting Payment Single		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Metropolitan	24	11	1	4	48	84	73	99
Other urban	12	8	5	12	47	82	64	102
Rural/remote	13	5		6	43	53	56	64
Total	49	24	6	22	138	219	193	265

Centrelink administrative data April 1999

Note: The payment type given in this table is that identified from the Centrelink administrative data as at April 1999.

In the survey, respondents were asked what social security payment type they were receiving. This information, and whether or not the respondent said they had a partner at the time of the survey, has been used to categorise respondents for the purposes of the analysis rather than the payment information from the original database of 2 April 1999. This information was used in preference to the database information since it was more recent and some respondent's circumstances may have changed during that time. Table 5 below shows the base data used in the analysis in this paper.

Table 5: Shared care parents by payment type, area and sex, July 1999 (number)

Area	Newstart Allowance		Parenting Payment Partnered		Parenting Payment Single		Total	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Metropolitan	20	10	1	9	52	80	73	99
Other urban	10	5	5	18	49	79	64	102
Rural/remote	11	6	3	8	42	50	56	64
Total	41	21	9	35	143	209	193	265

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

The data presented in this paper is unweighted.

Characteristics of shared care parents³

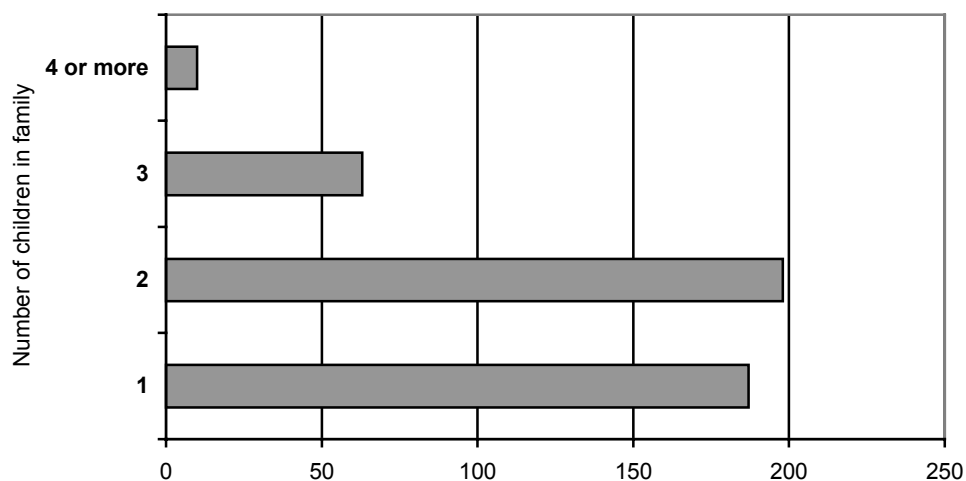
The majority of shared care parents were mothers (58 per cent). However, the proportion of shared care parents who were fathers was much higher than the proportion of lone parents who are fathers (42 per cent compared to 14 per cent). This is probably because in the total population of persons sharing care of a child there is an approximately equal number of males and females (reflecting the fact that almost all shared care arrangements are between parents).

The percentage is also likely to be influenced by:

- the extent to which males or females are more likely to have higher incomes (and hence be ineligible for income support payments);
- differences in the likelihood of having further children (for example, following repartnering) and hence being outside the scope of the survey.

Shared care parents were most likely to have only one (41 per cent) or two (43 per cent) shared care children (Chart 1). Only 14 per cent had three shared care children. Five per cent of parents had four or more shared care children.

Chart 1: Shared care parents by number of children in family (number)

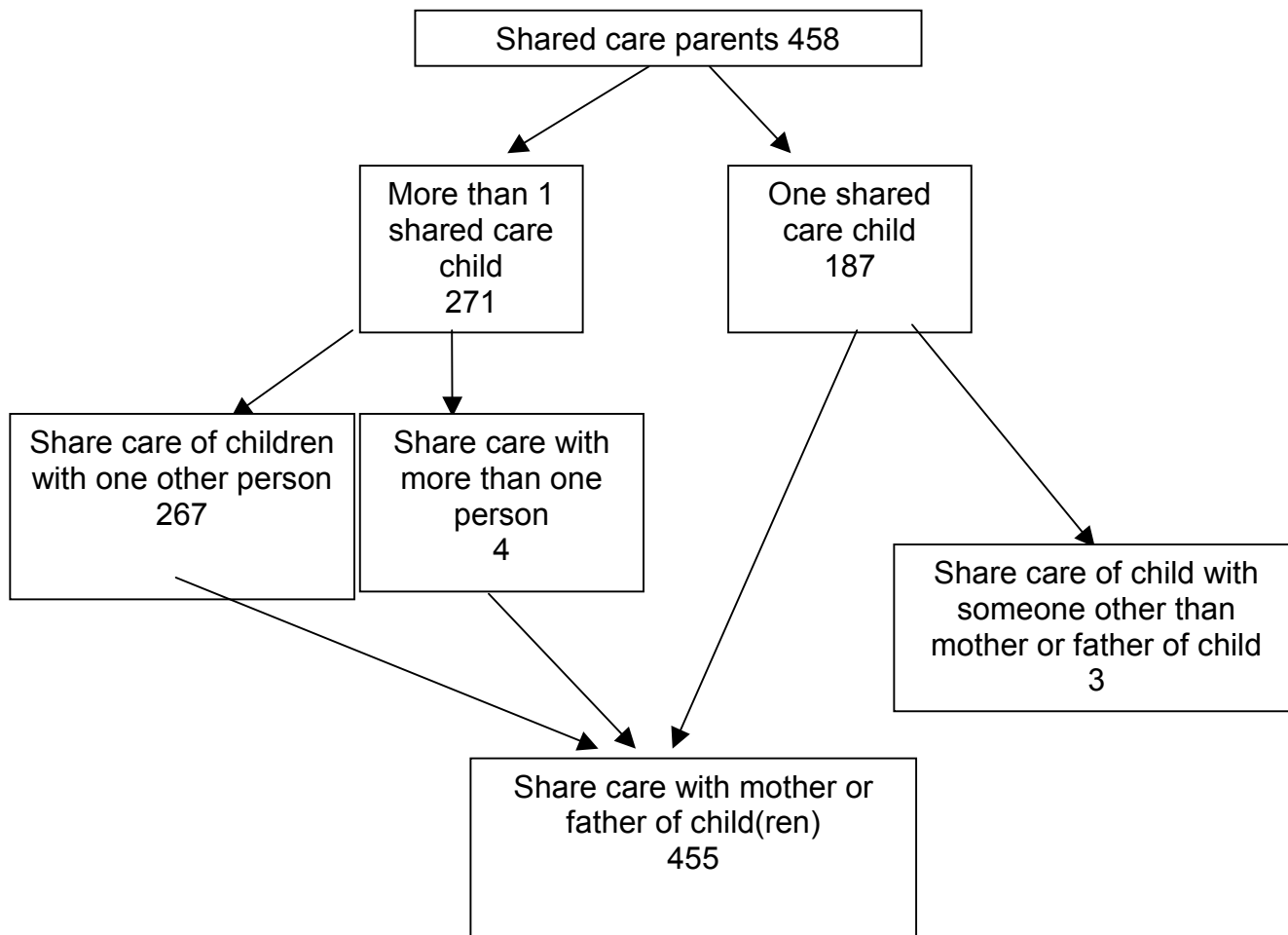


FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

The vast majority of shared care parents shared that care with the mother or the father of the child. Only three parents shared care with someone other than the mother or father (Chart 2).

³ For the remainder of this paper, the term 'shared care parent/s' refers to the survey respondents.

Chart 2: Shared care parents by number of shared care children and who they share with (number)

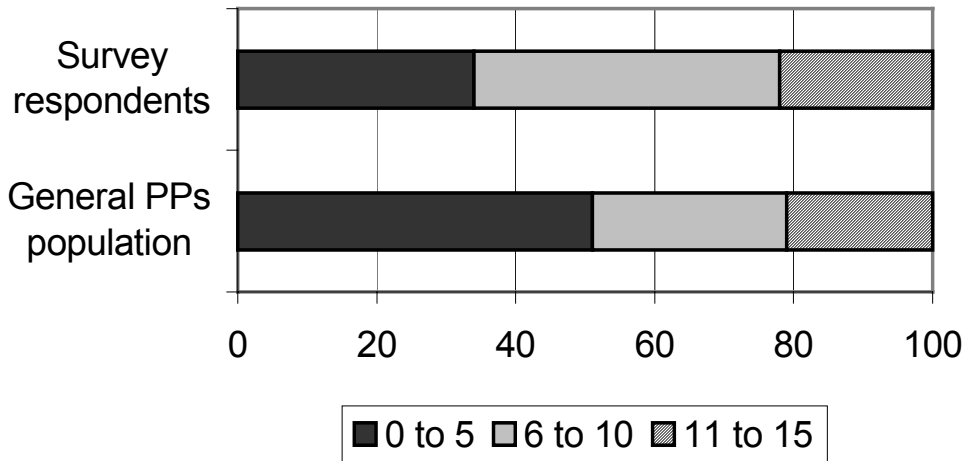


FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Chart 3 compares the age of the youngest or only child in the families of shared care parents with the age of the youngest or only child in families in the overall Parenting Payment single population. On average, shared care parents had older children than the lone parent recipients of Parenting Payment.

This is not unexpected, as parents may feel it is in the child's best interests to remain primarily with one parent when children are very young.

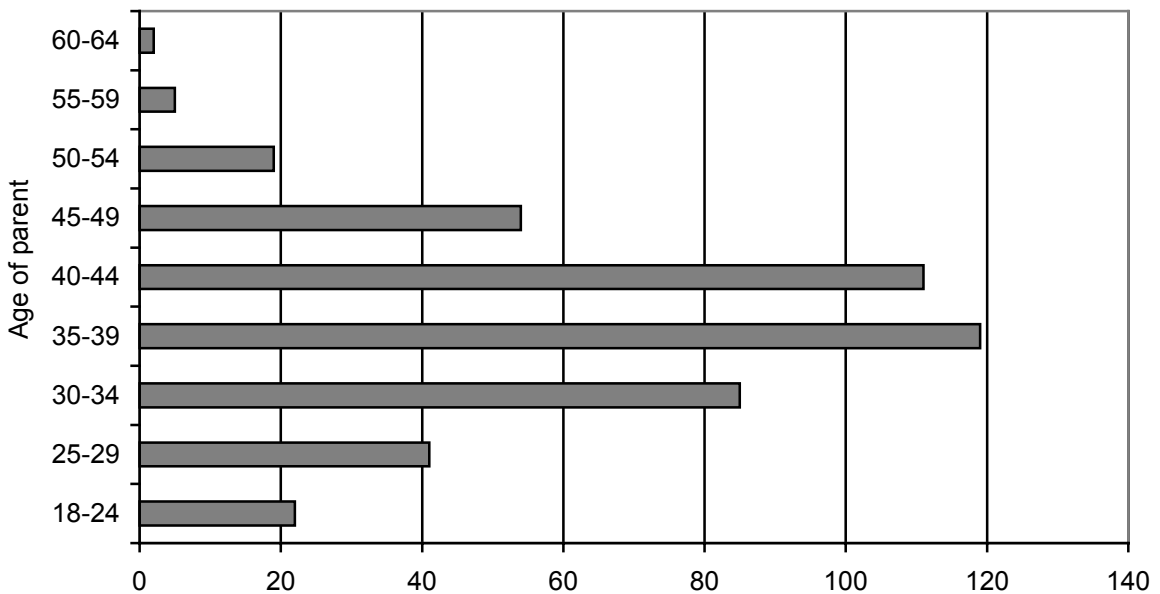
Chart 3: Shared care parents and recipients of Parenting Payment (Single), by age of youngest child (per cent)



FaCS shared care survey (July 1999) and Department of Family and Community services data (April 1999)

Few shared care parents (10 per cent) had a new partner currently living with them. Fifty per cent of shared care parents were in the age range 35 to 44 years. Chart 4 shows the age distribution of the shared care parents.

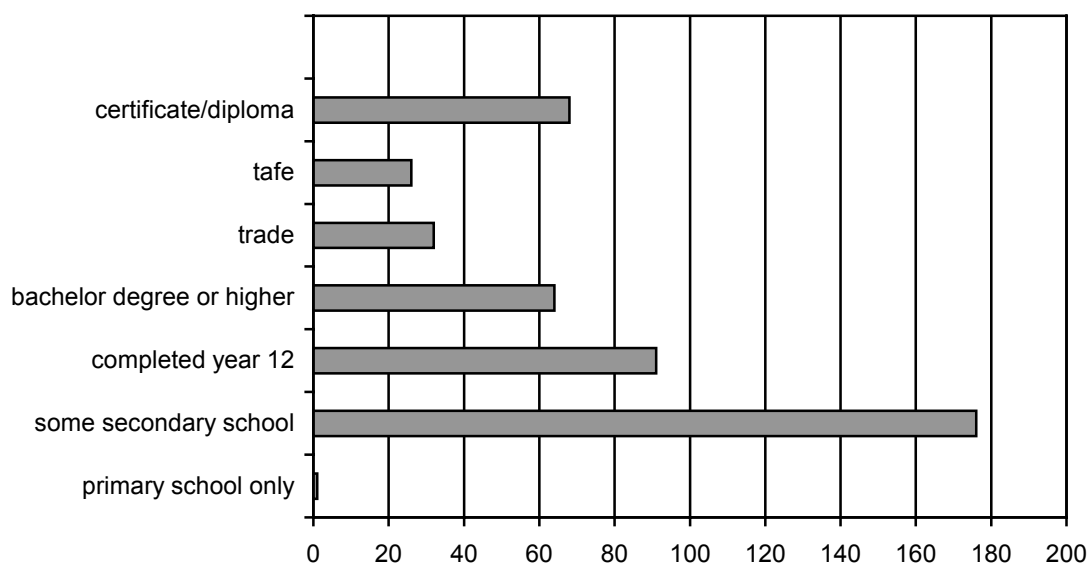
Chart 4: Shared care parents by age of parent (number)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

The highest levels of education attained by shared care parents are shown in Chart 5. 38 per cent had not completed secondary education.

Chart 5: Shared care parents by highest level of education (number)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

There was a relatively high level of labour force attachment among shared care parents. Almost half (45 per cent) had some paid work, while a further 28 per cent were actively looking for work. Those currently in paid work were more likely to be in professional/semi professional occupations compared to the previous occupations of those not currently in paid work (Table 6).

Table 6: Shared care parents by current occupation (if working) and previous occupation (if not working) (per cent)

Occupation	Currently in paid work	Not in paid work – previous occupation
Professional	5	3
Owner of small business	8	5
Sales	6	5
Semi-professional	14	5
Other white collar	13	14
Skilled	19	24
Semi-skilled	22	19
Unskilled	10	20
Other	2	5
Total	100	100
Number	206	238

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Most (67 per cent) parents were sharing the care of their child with someone who was in paid work, predominantly in permanent full-time work. The remainder were sharing care with someone who was not in paid work, or they did not know the labour force status of the other person. The types of employment undertaken by those who were in paid work are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Type of work undertaken by employed co-sharer (per cent)

<i>Type of job</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Permanent full time	65
Permanent part time	15
Casual full time	3
Casual part time	9
Can't say	8
Total	100
Number	307

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Reasons for sharing care⁴

The needs of their children was the most common reason cited by shared care parents for adopting the arrangement (78 per cent). A large proportion (58 per cent) wanted both parents to have contact with the children or both parents to have an influence on the children's lives, and believed that a substantially equal shared care arrangement would achieve this result. A smaller proportion (14 per cent) believed that shared care arrangements would be less traumatic for their children, while in 5 per cent of cases the children had made the decision for shared care (Table 8). These two latter reasons were more likely to be cited by parents with older children.

A third (33 per cent) of shared care parents cited reasons pertaining to the parent's needs as one of the reasons for sharing care. The equity or fairness for both parents was mentioned by 30 per cent of respondents, while a smaller proportion (3 per cent) indicated that sharing the care of the children provided them with a break from their parenting responsibilities.

Only 18 per cent of respondents were sharing care involuntarily, mostly due to a court order. They were more likely to be parents with younger children. A small proportion (3 per cent) agreed to share care in order to avoid conflict with the other parent.

There was little difference between mothers and fathers in the reasons for sharing care. Mothers were slightly more likely to be sharing care involuntarily (19 per cent) compared to fathers (14 per cent).

⁴ Multiple responses were permitted to this question.

Table 8: Shared care parents: Reason for sharing care (per cent)

Reasons for sharing care	Per cent
Children have contact with/influence of both parents	58
Children's decision	5
Less traumatic for children	14
In the best interest of the children	1
Fair/equal for both parents	30
Parent's get a break	3
No choice/court order	18
To avoid conflict	3
To suit parental work responsibilities	2
Other	10
Can't say	1
Number	434

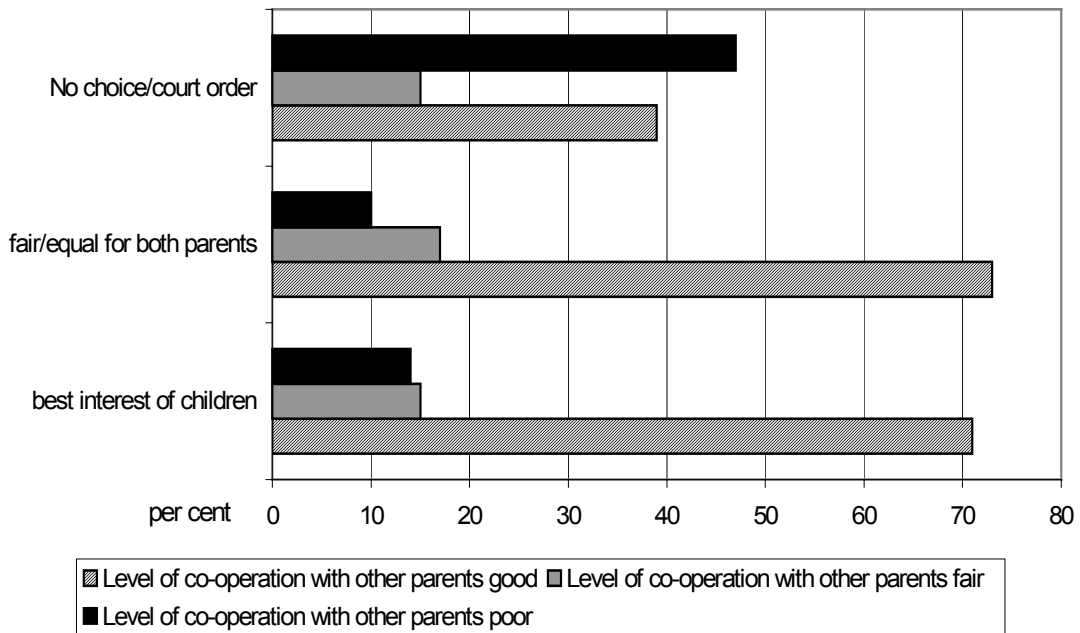
FaCS Shared Care survey, July 1999
Multiple responses permitted

Level of cooperation with other parent

Shared care parents were asked to rate their perception of the level of cooperation with the other parent regarding the shared care arrangement. Just over half (53 per cent) rated the cooperation as positive (35 per cent rated it as very good, 18 per cent as good), 17 per cent rated it as fair, and 20 per cent as poor.

As might be expected, those who were sharing care due to non-voluntary reasons (such as a court order) were more likely to rate the level of cooperation as poor, compared to those who chose to share care for reasons relating to the best interests of the children and parents (Chart 6).

Chart 6: Shared care parents: Level of co-operation with other parent by reason for sharing care (per cent)

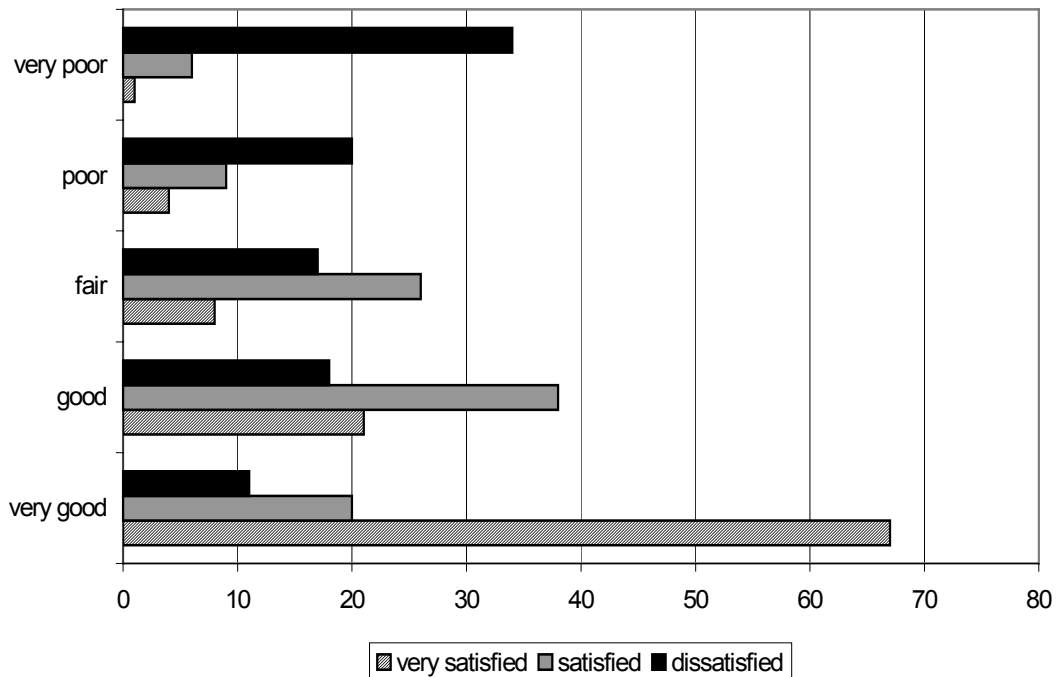


FaCS Shared Care Survey, July 1999

The level of cooperation with the other parent was a very important factor in the degree of satisfaction with the shared care arrangements. The greater the cooperation, the greater the level of satisfaction (Chart 7). It is likely that the level of cooperation between parents would vary over time as different situations arose and children's needs changed as they grew older.

There was some indication that shared care parents whose children changed care at different times had poorer levels of cooperation than other respondents, although the numbers are small.

Chart 7: Shared care parents: Level of cooperation with other parent by satisfaction with arrangements (per cent)



FaCS Shared Care Survey, July 1999

Satisfaction with shared care arrangement

Most shared care parents (72 per cent) were satisfied with their shared care arrangements. The satisfied parents were more likely to have voluntarily chosen to share care (59 per cent), and to have good levels of cooperation with the other parent (83 per cent) than those who were dissatisfied.

Those who were dissatisfied with their shared care arrangements (17 per cent of respondents) were more likely to have not voluntarily chosen to share care (38 per cent), and to have poor levels of cooperation with the other parent (54 per cent). The disadvantages these dissatisfied parents saw with their shared care arrangements were the children having two sets of parenting styles/rules (38 per cent) and having to negotiate/communicate with the other parent (17 per cent).

Nearly half (44 per cent) of the survey respondents felt that they would change their shared care arrangement if possible. The reasons for this included:

- the belief that the children would get better care in a different arrangement (25 per cent);
- the belief that the children needed a stable environment and the shared care arrangement was too disruptive for them (18 per cent);
- wanting to have full custody of the children (14 per cent);
- a desire to spend more time with the children as they were missed when with the other parent (14 per cent);

- the child wanted to change the arrangements (5 per cent);
- a belief that the children needed their mother (3 per cent);
- a belief that the other parent is unfit/neglects the children/irresponsible (4 per cent);
- a desire to move to another area or to be able to find work (3 per cent).

Of those parents wanting to change their shared care arrangements, nearly half (42 per cent) would like full-time care of their children.

The dynamics of shared care arrangements

Patterns of care

The extent to which stable patterns of care (if any) exist in shared care arrangements is of interest for a number of reasons. The dynamics of shared care arrangements shed light on the complexity and changing nature of parenting post-separation. For the children involved the presence or otherwise of stable patterns of care may affect their capacity to adjust to the separation of the parents. For the parents, a stable pattern of care may be a factor affecting workforce capacity, or the ability to engage in other social activities.

The period over which a child resides with a particular parent may also influence workforce capacity. For example, even though both are a 50/50 split, a caring arrangement involving month about residence changes might provide a different capacity for work than one in which residence changed daily.

Shared care parents were asked about their caring arrangements in order to establish:

- what patterns of care exist;
- how stable and/or flexible they were;
- what factors lead to flexibility in care arrangements;
- why care arrangements change;
- whether variations in care arrangements were associated with different levels of workforce participation.

Caring arrangements during holiday and non-holiday periods were examined separately, in the expectation that school breaks were more likely to be times during which the usual pattern of care was altered.

Care arrangements in non-holiday period

In determining the types of care arrangement in place, respondents with more than one child were asked:

- Did all shared care children change residences at the same time?

- Were caring arrangements with only one person?

Table 9: Overview of arrangements in families with more than one shared care child, July 1999 (number)

	Children change residences at same time	Children change residences at different times	Total
Care shared with same person	246	21	267
Care shared with different people	1	3	4
Total	247	24	271

FaCS Shared Care Survey, July 1999

Where care was shared with only one other party (99 per cent), that person was, overwhelmingly, a former partner, who was also the mother or father of the shared care child. Only nine cases involved another care arrangement. In six of these, the other party was the father or mother of the child, but was not regarded as a former partner. The remaining arrangements involved grandparents (1), or could not be ascertained from the data (2).

In the four cases where care of multiple children was shared with more than one other person, the other party was always a parent of the child.

In general, shared care arrangements did not change much. Where the residence arrangements of the children changed at the same time, 69 per cent had care arrangements that stayed the same and 24 per cent had arrangements that stayed somewhat the same but were flexible. Six per cent had care arrangements that changed all the time.

Shared care parents whose care arrangements did not change, or remained somewhat the same, but flexible, were asked to describe their pattern of care⁵.

The incidence of particular patterns of care in the stable care group is shown in Table 10. A perhaps obvious point to make is that as the respondent group was comprised of persons sharing care of a child in the 40–60 per cent range, the patterns shown simply reflect the most commonly occurring ways of obtaining this percentage. There are many other patterns of care that can produce this outcome, as reflected in the large ‘other’ group.

As indicated earlier, the respondent group as a whole tends to have older children than the overall population of Parenting Payment (single) recipients. This suggests a possible link between the prevalence of particular shared care arrangements and the age of the children. To explore this further, Table 10 sets out the pattern data by age of the youngest child.

⁵ In this paper, these two groups are collectively described as having stable care arrangements.

Consistent with this possible link, the presence of a child under six does appear to reduce the likelihood of arrangements involving comparatively long periods away from each parent. For example, an arrangement involving residence changes on a fortnightly basis was not papered at all in the group with a child under six.

Table 10: Patterns of care by age of youngest child (per cent)

Pattern of care	0 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 15 years	Total
Week about	29	53	44	43
4 days one week/3 days the next week	4	2	3	3
3.5 days about	4	2	1	3
Fortnight about	*	5	11	4
4 days with child/3 days without	21	10	16	15
3 days with child/4 days without	3	2	*	2
Other	39	28	25	31
Total	100	100	100	100
Number	140	178	89	407

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Flexibility of care arrangements

As noted earlier, shared care parents described as having stable caring arrangements were comprised of those having arrangements which do not change (74 per cent), and those whose arrangements are mostly the same, but flexible (26 per cent).

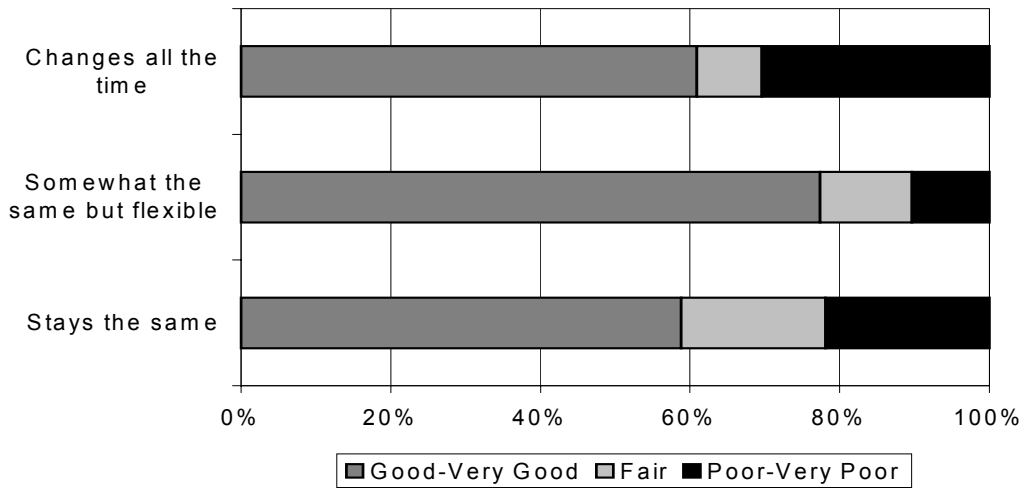
Those with flexible arrangements were asked what was the reason for the flexibility. The most common reasons were:

- work or study commitments of either parent (34 per cent);
- non-specified commitments of either parent (25 per cent);
- to accommodate requirements of the children (18 per cent);
- parent wishes to take child somewhere/special occasions/visiting (8 per cent).

The remaining cases comprised a range of responses, including illness of the child or parent (6 per cent), a willingness to help each other out (5 per cent) and the ubiquitous 'other' (9 per cent).

Given the extent to which the need to accommodate the other parent's commitments is a feature of the reason for flexibility, the issue of the level of cooperation between the parties is of interest. Chart 8 shows the variability of care arrangement with the person's assessment of the degree of cooperation with the other party. The responses from which this chart is taken exclude the 24 cases where care arrangements differed between the children in the family, and three cases where the responses could not be categorised.

Chart 8: Flexibility in care arrangement by level of cooperation with other carer (per cent)

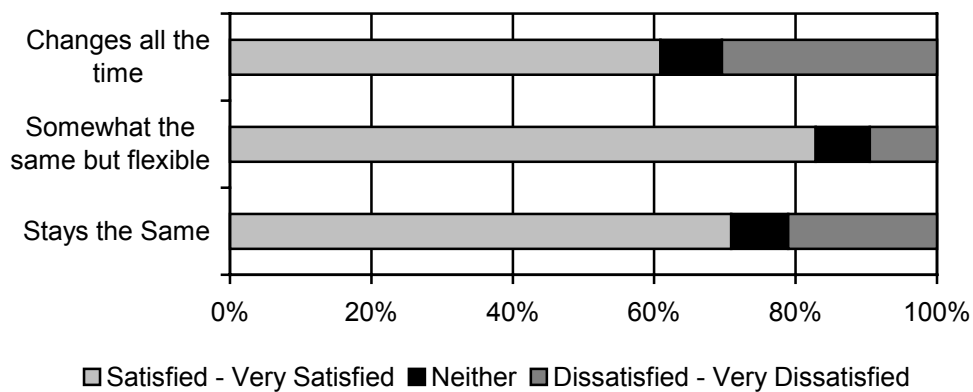


FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Not surprisingly, the flexible arrangement group had the highest levels of cooperation with the other carer. The least cooperative group were those where care arrangements changed all the time. Even here, however, around 70 per cent of respondents characterised their degree of cooperation as at least fair.

As shown in Chart 9, the type of care arrangement also appears to be related to the degree of satisfaction that the parties expressed with the arrangement.

Chart 9: Flexibility of care arrangements by level of satisfaction with those arrangements, July 1999 (per cent)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Care arrangements that change all the time were the least likely to be considered satisfactory by respondents. Arrangements that were somewhat the same, but flexible were more likely to be considered satisfactory.

Changes in care arrangements

Shared care parents were asked for how long the care arrangements described earlier had been in place. 70 per cent indicated that their care arrangements had not changed for at least 12 months.

Among those whose care arrangements had changed, the most common reasons were:

- To go on holiday (27 per cent)
- Work commitments of either party (17 per cent)
- Either party wanted to change (6 per cent)
- Other party was travelling (5 per cent)

Effect of school holidays

Shared care parents were also asked whether their care arrangements changed in the last school holidays, compared to the usual non-school holiday arrangements. In 70 per cent of cases, the arrangements did not alter during the school break. Note, however, that the timing of the survey meant that 'last school holiday' was one of the shorter breaks between school terms. The level of change during the longer summer break may be higher.

Of the 124 cases where care arrangements had changed, 87 (70 per cent) involved old or new care patterns that were described as 'other' by respondents. The remaining 30 per cent involved a large range of care patterns, with the result that the categories contained too few cases for meaningful analysis.

Labour force capacity

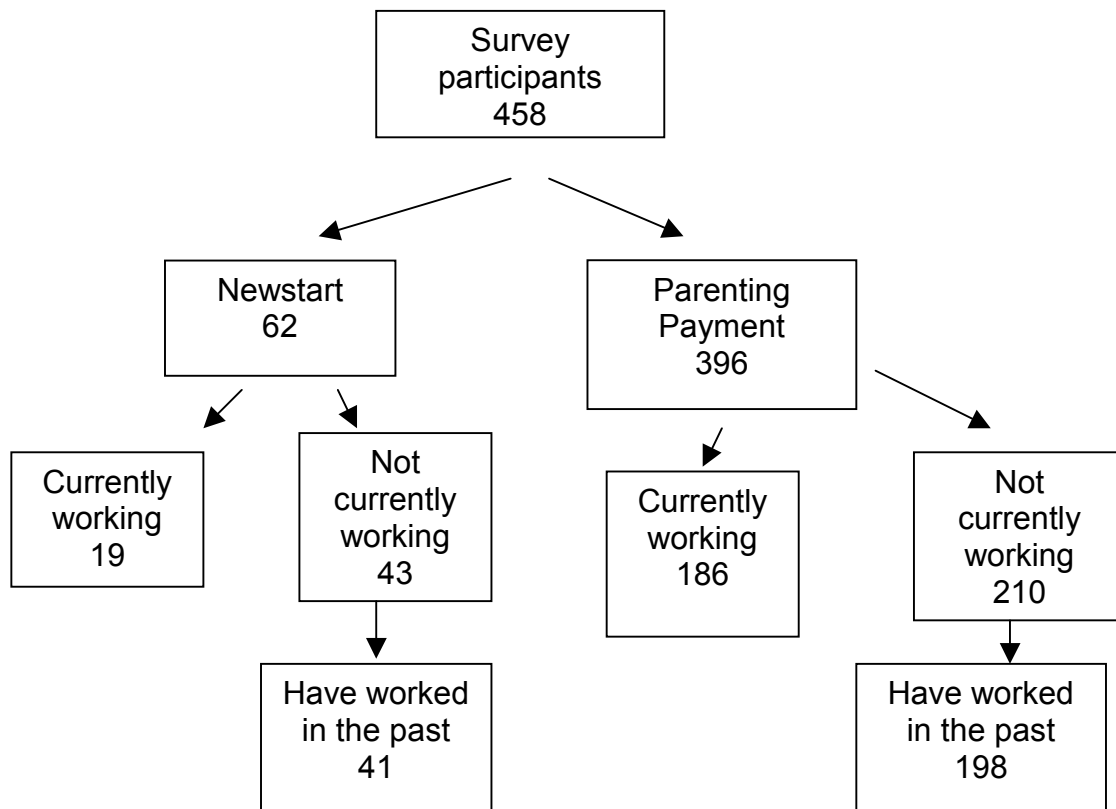
This part of the paper looks at the factors influencing shared care parents' participation in work, training, education, voluntary work and other social activities. From the perspective of income support policy, it is desirable for shared care parents to take-up paid work opportunities. This is because of the positive effects of parental employment on the families' financial circumstances and the positive impact of workforce attachment on future opportunities (such as savings for retirement). Given their parenting responsibilities and commitment from both parents to be highly involved in their children's lives, it could be expected that many shared care parents would prefer part-time work or jobs with flexible hours to be preferred.

Income support payments could act as a supplement to earned income for these families, enabling them for some period of their parenting to combine work and caring. This raises the issue of the extent to which different income support structures support workforce participation, or involvement in activities that may lead to employment. It also raises the issue of how easy it is for shared care parents to find and keep such work, and what types of employment-related assistance they may need.

Workforce participation

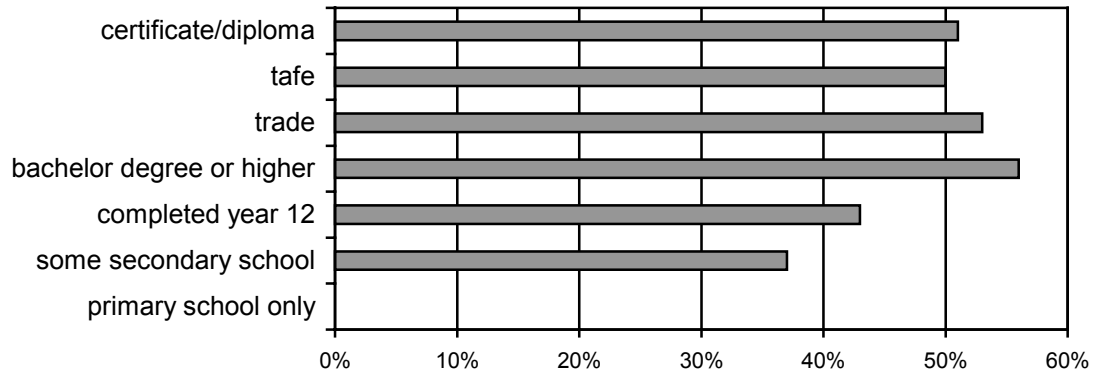
Among shared care parents, 45 per cent were employed, and of these, 60 per cent were in casual or part-time jobs. Most who were in permanent work (77 per cent) were working part-time. Just over half (55 per cent) of those working were in skilled, semi-skilled or semi-professional occupations.

Chart 10: Labour force attachment by payment type (number)



The workforce participation rate for the shared care parents was higher for those who had some qualifications in addition to schooling (Chart 11). Those with a degree were most likely to be working (56 per cent). In general, as the level of education increased, there was a greater likelihood that shared care parents would be working.

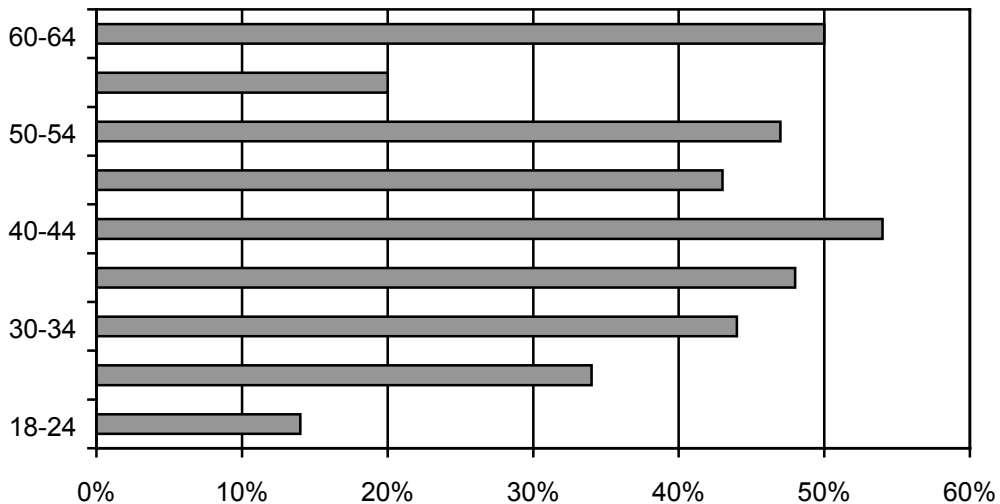
Chart 11: Workforce participation by education level (per cent)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Workforce participation was highest among parents aged 40 to 44 years, with participation generally lower among older and younger parents (Chart 12). This probably reflects a combination of the age of the youngest child, previous workforce experience, and disadvantages in the labour market associated with age.

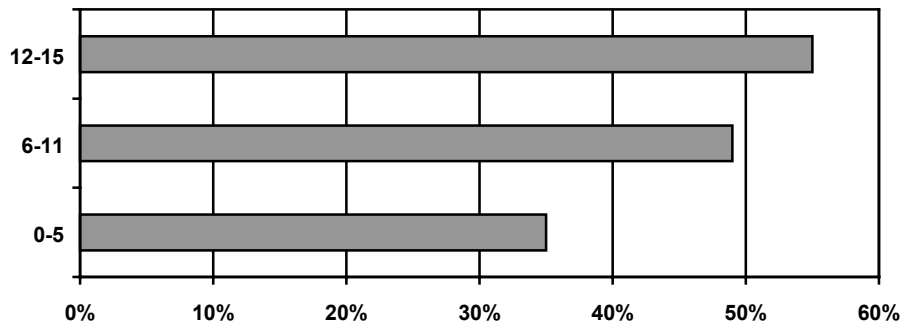
Chart 12: Workforce participation by age of shared care parent (per cent)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

There were clearly differences between the workforce involvement of shared care parents with children of different ages (Chart 13).

Chart 13: Labour force participation of shared care parents by age of youngest child (per cent)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Just on half (49 per cent) of the shared care parents who were working cited difficulties in balancing their work and child care responsibilities. Difficulties included time management (8 per cent), being able to drop off and pick up kids from school (9 per cent) and a number of other reasons to do with the difficulties of arranging working hours around the responsibilities of caring for children.

Around 40 per cent of those employed indicated they would like to work more hours. However, trying to increase hours was difficult given their parenting responsibilities (25 per cent) and due to the impression that there were no suitable jobs available (23 per cent).

A small proportion (10 per cent) of those working actually wanted to decrease their hours of work, but the restriction of their work or financial pressures prevented such a reduction.

It was interesting that only a small proportion (19 per cent) of shared care parents were both unemployed (Table 11). The employment pattern of shared care parents was most likely to be one parent working/one not working (55 per cent), followed by both parents working (32 per cent).

Table 11: Employment status of both shared care parents (per cent)

Employment status of other parent	Employment status of surveyed parent		
	Employed	Not employed	Total
Employed	57	79	67
Not employed	36	19	28
Not known	7	2	5
Total	100	100	100

FaCS Shared Care Survey, July 1999

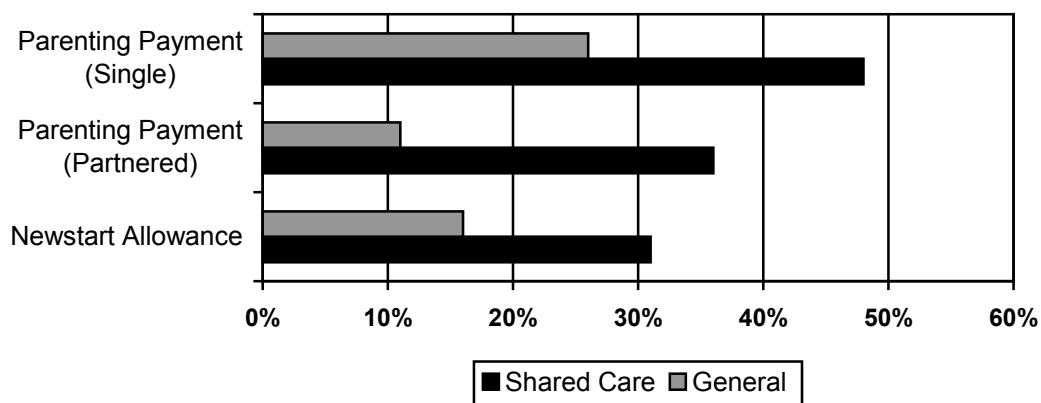
There were some interesting differences in the level of workforce participation between Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment. Parenting Payment single recipients were more likely to be working than the other payment types—48 per cent, compared to 36 per cent Parenting Payment partnered and 31 per cent Newstart Allowance recipients.

This is probably a result of a number of factors, including the more generous income test for Parenting Payment single recipients, which in effect allows more income from part-time work to be retained compared to the income tests on the other payments.

In the general population of income support recipients, Parenting Payment (single) recipients also have a higher level of workforce participation than people in receipt of either Parenting Payment (partnered) or Newstart Allowance. Comparative results are shown in Chart 14.

The data⁶ suggest that the shared care population is more likely to be employed than their non-sharing counterparts. This is presumably a reflection of a greater work capacity engendered by a part-time caring role. The result for the Newstart Allowance group should be treated with caution, however, as the general Newstart Allowance population is not readily comparable to the shared care group.

Chart 14: Percentage of shared care parents in work by payment type, compared with general income support population



FaCS Shared Care Survey, July 1999
 FaCS Annual Report 1998-99 (Parenting Payment (Single), Newstart Allowance [includes those with nil rate due to income])
 Centrelink Administrative Data, September 1999 (Parenting Payment (Partnered))

⁶ Workforce participation data for the general population of Parenting Payment (Partnered) recipients does not include non-benefit Parenting Payment (Partnered) or those with a Newstart Allowance Partner. The former group is not comparable with the survey population, and data for the latter is unreliable.

Participation in other activities

In addition to the high level of workforce participation among shared care parents, there was a high level of other types of activities, in addition to parenting (Table 12).

Table 12: Activities being undertaken by shared care parents by payment type (per cent)

Activity	Newstart Allowance	Parenting Payment	Total
In paid work	19	27	45
Looking for paid work	34	14	28
Studying	4	9	14
Training program	1	2	4
Working as a volunteer	8	8	13
Home duties	33	37	62
Caring for someone with a disability	1	1	4
Other	-	1	1
Number	62	396	458

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999
Multiple responses were allowed.

Many shared care parents participated in several activities. The majority (94 per cent) was doing one or more of paid work; looking for work; or home duties. 66 per cent of respondents were either looking for work or doing paid work.

It is interesting to note that while 62 per cent indicated home duties as one of their activities, only 19 per cent indicated that they were doing home duties only. The percentage of Newstart Allowance recipients who claimed that they were looking for work is noticeably higher than in the Parenting Payment group. This is perhaps not surprising given that looking for work is a condition for payment of the allowance in most cases.

Of those who were studying, 83 per cent said they were doing study to improve their employment opportunities and 35 per cent indicated personal growth as a motivating factor. Those undertaking training were doing so mainly to improve their employment opportunities.

Non-employed parents

Just over half (55 per cent) of the shared care parents were not currently employed. However, the majority (95 per cent) had done some paid work in the past. Past employment was either a permanent full-time job (42 per cent), casual part-time work (26 per cent), or permanent part-time work (18 per cent).

There were a number of reasons these parents left their last job, including the need to care for their families (18 per cent) and a lack of jobs (18 per cent) (Table 13). Fathers were more likely to cite labour force disadvantages than mothers (31 per cent compared to 24 per cent respectively). However, there was no difference between fathers and mothers in terms of the proportion who left their last job because they preferred to stay home.

Table 13: Main reasons why shared care parents who are not currently working left their last job (per cent)

Reason why left last job	per cent
Needs to stay at home and meet needs of family	18
No jobs available	18
His or her health	9
Retrenched/business closed/moved elsewhere	9
Job finished/seasonal	8
Prefer to stay at home and meet the needs of the family	7
Pregnancy or birth of child	7
Studying	5
Needs to be home when children finish school	4
Number	239

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Multiple responses were allowed

Shared care mothers were equally likely to be out of paid work as were the shared care fathers (52 per cent compared to 48 per cent). However, the presence of a child under school age was associated with being non-employed—41 per cent of shared care parents not employed had a youngest child aged under six compared to 28 per cent of employed shared care parents.

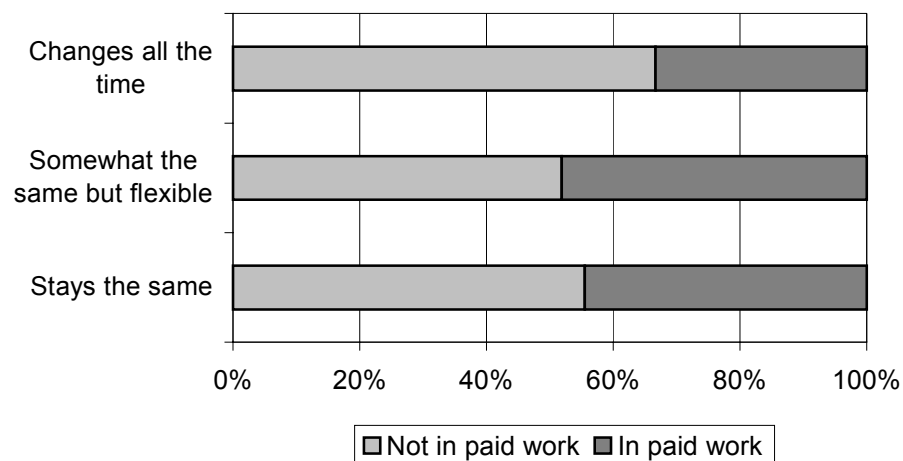
There were some interesting differences between recipients of different payment types in terms of their reasons for not working. Just on half (51 per cent) of the shared care parents receiving Newstart Allowance were not currently working because there were no jobs available. Lack of jobs was not as significant factor for parents receiving the Parenting Payment, with only 20 per cent of lone recipients and 8 per cent of partnered recipients citing this reason.

In contrast, Parenting Payment partnered recipients (38 per cent) were more likely to cite the need or preference to stay at home than Newstart Allowance recipients (23 per cent) or Parenting Payment single recipients (26 per cent).

Impact of flexibility of care arrangements on workforce participation

As noted earlier, a major reason for having a flexible shared care arrangement was to accommodate the work or study commitments of either party (34 per cent of 'flexible' cases). Chart 15 compares the type of care arrangement in place for those with and without paid work. The responses from which this chart is taken exclude the 24 cases where care arrangements differed between the children in the family and three cases where the responses could not be categorised.

Chart 15: Employment status by flexibility of care (per cent)

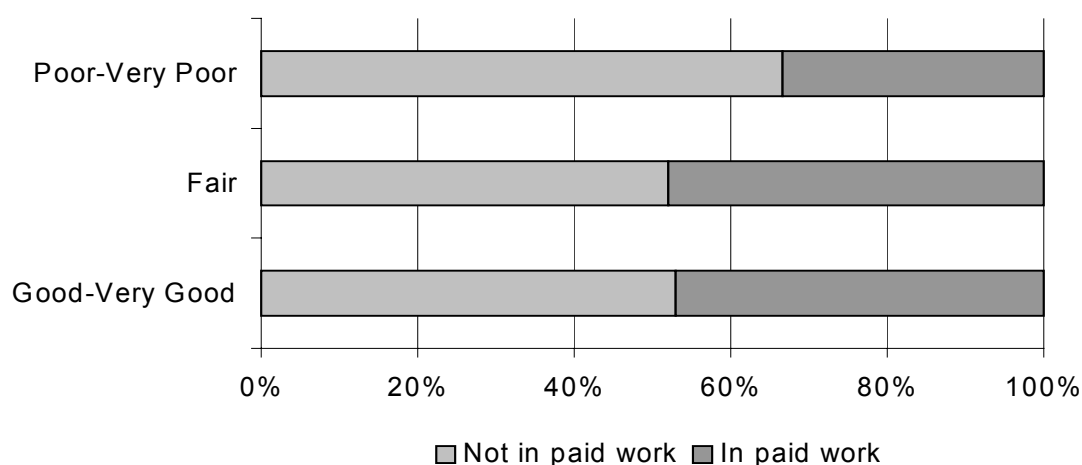


FaCS Shared Care Survey July 1999

This suggests that being in paid work is more likely if the care arrangements are relatively stable: 33 per cent of respondents with arrangements that change all the time are in employment, compared with 46 per cent of those with stable, or relatively stable arrangements.

Continuing this theme, Chart 16 looks at employment status by the degree of cooperation with the other party. This indicates that a poor level of cooperation is associated with a reduced level of workforce participation.

Chart 16: Employment status by level of cooperation with other carer (per cent)



FaCS Shared Care Survey July 1999

Child care usage⁷

Only a small proportion of shared care parents (17 per cent) were using child care at the time of the survey. Both formal and informal child care were used, with formal child care being about three times more likely to be used than informal child care.

Table 14: Use of child care by payment type (per cent)

	Newstart Allowance	Parenting Payment Partnered	Parenting Payment Single	Total
Using child care	19	11	17	17
Not using child care	81	89	83	83
Total	100	100	100	100
Number	62	44	252	458

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Table 15 below shows the type of childcare being used by shared care parents. Note that some parents identified usage of more than one form of childcare. After school care and long day care were the most common types of childcare used by parents in the formal sector, while care by relatives was common in the informal sector.

⁷ . For the purposes of this survey, formal childcare was defined as long day care and occasional care in a child care centre, family day care, before and after school care at a childcare centre, school or family day care. Informal childcare was defined as where a babysitter, a friend, relative or ex partner looks after the child when the child is living with the other parent.

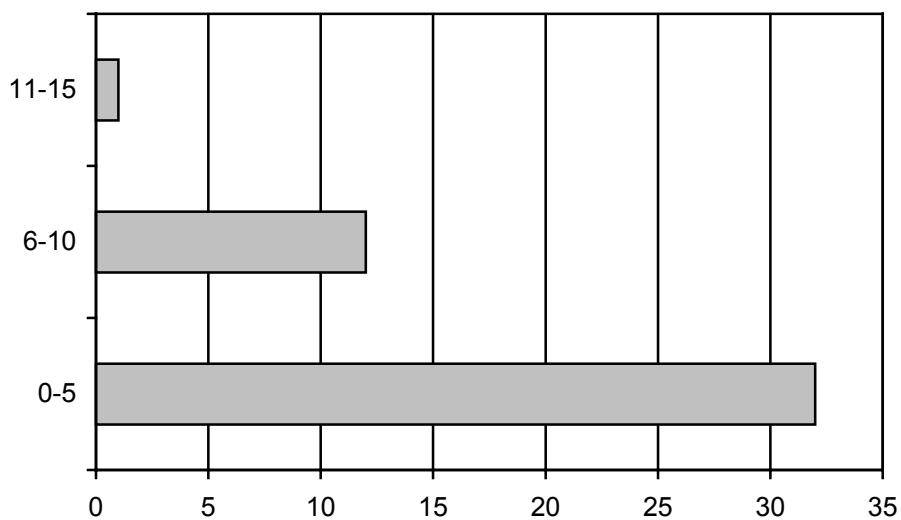
Table 15: Type of child care used by shared care parents (per cent)

Type of childcare	Shared care parents who use
FORMAL CHILD CARE	
Child Care Centre - long day care	32
Child Care Centre - occasional care	13
Before school care	12
After school care	36
Vacation care	14
Family day care	14
INFORMAL CHILD CARE	
Paid babysitter	4
Friend	10
Relatives	17
Ex Partner	6
Other	4
Number	77

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999
Multiple responses permitted

Overall, shared care parents were three times more likely to use formal child care than informal child care. Chart 17 shows the percentage of shared care parents who use child care, by the age of their youngest child. As would be expected, shared care parents had a greater use of child care when they had a younger child. Once children reached school age, there was a decrease in the use of child care, with a very small level of use for older primary and secondary school aged children.

Chart 17: Extent of child care use by age of youngest child (per cent)



FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

Most shared care parents using child care (62 per cent) were doing so for work-related reasons. Table 18 shows how this preference is divided between those who work and those who do not work. It is interesting to note the much greater use of child care centres by those not in paid work. Before and after school care and vacation care were used much more by those in paid work.

Table 16: Types of childcare used, by employment status (per cent)

	In paid work	Not in paid work
Child care centre – long day care	23	48
Child care centre – occasional care	8	21
Before school care	17	3
After school care	48	-
Vacation care	23	-
Family Day care	17	10
Paid babysitter	6	-
Friend	13	7
Relatives	17	17
Ex	10	-
Other	2	7
Number	48	29

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

The majority of shared care parents who were not currently working expected to use child care if they did work (87 per cent). The strongest preference was for informal child care (60 per cent) as opposed to formal child care (27 per cent).

Table 17: Childcare preference if working by payment type (number)

	Not in paid work	Whether would not use childcare if found work					
		Informal childcare			Formal childcare		
		Yes	No	Can't say	Yes	No	Can't say
Newstart Allowance Parenting Payment	43	29	9	5	16	23	4
Total	210	124	69	17	51	143	16
	253	153	78	22	67	166	20

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999

The resistance to using formal care was due to:

- the availability of relatives or friends to care for their children;
- children being old enough to care for themselves;
- the cost of formal childcare; and

- belief in not using childcare (Table 18).

Table 18: Shared care parents who would not use formal childcare if they found work by reason and payment type (per cent)

Reason for not using formal childcare	
Have relatives or friends to care for children	41
Children can look after themselves	18
Can't afford it	11
There aren't any available	3
Don't agree with them	10
Prefer to look after children myself	4
Child would be unhappy	4
Child is too old	2
Not needed	1
Work school hours or at home - don't need	4
Other	8
Total	166

FaCS shared care survey, July 1999
Multiple responses permitted

The major barrier to using informal childcare was the lack of relatives or friends to care for their children.

Conclusions

The first two aims of this paper were to examine the different patterns of shared care arrangements and the extent of flexibility in these arrangements. Such patterns of care may impact on the parents' labour force capacity. The most common shared care arrangement was where parents had the children week about with the other parent. The age of youngest child had an effect on the arrangements adopted, with shorter periods of time with each parent where younger children were present. For example, three days with one parent then four days with the other. These parents with younger children were also less likely to be working than those with older children.

Overall, shared care arrangements were fairly stable. A small proportion of parents indicated that while the care arrangements were stable, they were still able to be flexible in their arrangements. Such flexibility suited one or both parents' work or study commitments. Parents who were able to maintain flexible arrangements also had high levels of cooperation with the other parent, and were more satisfied with the arrangements. It would appear that the shared care arrangement a person has can have an impact on workforce participation. There was a considerably increased likelihood of a shared care parent being in paid work where:

- the care arrangement was stable, or mostly so;
- the person with whom care was shared was cooperative.

These results suggest that policies that encourage and support flexible and cooperative arrangements between parents are likely to increase the workforce participation and satisfaction of shared care parents.

The third aim of the paper was to analyse the labour force capacity of shared care parents. The labour force participation rate of shared care parents in receipt of income support was considerably higher than other parents in receipt of income support. As might be expected, the majority of working shared care parents were combining part-time work with parenting. The incidence of casual work was quite high, perhaps as such work is more flexible in fitting around the parenting responsibilities. However, some working parents did experience difficulties in combining work and parenting, mainly in terms of time management and picking/dropping children at school. While some would have liked to work more hours, this was not possible at this point in their lives because of their parenting commitments, although some did have difficulties in finding suitable work with more hours.

Most non-employed shared care parents appeared highly motivated to undertake some work as their children get older. Most Newstart Allowance parents claimed they would work even if they could get a payment just for being a parent. However, some of these Newstart Allowance parents faced difficulties in finding work. It is not clear whether this is related to a lack of jobs that suit their caring arrangements, or to an inability to compete in the labour market due to some other disadvantage. Specially tailored employment assistance, like that provided to Parenting Payment recipients under the Jobs, Education and Training program, may be worth exploring for these parents. It is not known how these parents fare in the Job Network or in Intensive Assistance.

Higher workforce participation was associated with higher levels of education, providing support for policies which assist shared care parents to take-up education opportunities as a way to improve their employment outcomes.

Finally, it is possible to begin to unpack some of the issues around the provision of income support to shared care parents based on the survey results. The income support system can act to support the decision by parents to equally share the care of their children through the provision of equitable income support arrangements. This is not currently the case as only one parent can get access to Parenting Payment while the other must claim Newstart Allowance if substantially out of the workforce, with considerable differences in rates of payment, income testing structures and activity requirements.

The Government's proposed new arrangements—placing both shared care parents on Newstart Allowance (rather than Parenting Payment)—is one answer to this issue. However, the income test on Newstart Allowance is less supportive of combining part-time work and parenting. In contrast, a passive income support payment (like Parenting Payment)⁸ may disadvantage those who choose to stay out of paid work for long period of time, thus losing their competitiveness in the labour market and consigning the family to a long period of dependence on income support.

The vast majority of shared care parents receive Parenting Payment, with a generous income test that supports part-time work and the absence of an activity test which enables them the choice of not working. However, many of these Parenting Payment recipients do combine part-time work with parenting, indicating that these parents have a strong attachment to the paid workforce. In contrast, there were a smaller number of shared care parents in receipt of Newstart Allowance, and fewer of these parents were working. This suggests that if the desired social policy is to encourage non-employed shared care parents to combine paid work and caring, income support payments need to be structured to support part-payment and receipt of earned income.

It is interesting that shared care fathers make up a large proportion of all lone fathers on income support. Male lone parent numbers have been increasing over recent years, and it is possible that a growing trend for fathers to take on a more active and equal role in the care of the children post separation may underlie this phenomena.

Most shared care parents choose the arrangement because they believed it was in the best interests of their children. This was despite recognition of the disadvantages of the arrangements and a desire by many to have full-time care of their children. There has been little research undertaken in Australia on whether shared care arrangements are actually in the best interest of children, but it is obviously an area worth exploring.

The data suggest that while most parents choose to share care and are satisfied with the arrangements, they nevertheless have concerns about the impact of the arrangements on their children and some difficulties of communication with the other parent. The fact that 14 per cent of parents who chose to share care for the sake of the children rated the level of cooperation with the other parent as poor indicates the difficulties for parents in maintaining a harmonious shared care arrangement. Presumably, ongoing communication and negotiation between parents who share care substantially would be crucial to maintaining the arrangement, and support services to help these parents may be useful.

⁸ A passive payment in this context is one that does not require the recipient to undertake approved activities in order to qualify for payment.

In a smaller proportion of shared care cases, the arrangements are not voluntary, resulting primarily from court orders. In these families, conflict levels between parents and dissatisfaction levels are higher. There may be a demand for services to provide ongoing assistance to these parents if the best outcomes are to be achieved for the children.

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