

Children suffer if parents do not share care equally

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SEPARATED parents are increasingly sharing the care of their children, but the wellbeing of children who spend equal time with their parents is no different to those who see their father just once a week, a new analysis suggests.

But where parents share the care of children unequally — that is, the time with parents is split 30/70 instead of 50/50 — parents report that children fare worse.

The findings come from the biggest study of parents since changes to family law came into effect in 2006. Under the changes, the Family Court must consider shared care where it is deemed to be in the children's best interests.

Figures show that 17% of newly separated parents registered with the Child Support Agency were sharing the care of their children as of June this year, compared with 9% in 2003. Of all cases managed by the Child Support Agency, 12% now have shared care, compared with 7% five years ago. Children are deemed to be in shared care when they spend 30% to 70% of the time with each parent.

Associate Professor Bruce Smyth, from the Australian National University's department of demography and social research, said fathers were becoming more involved in their children's lives. But when both parents spent significant but unequal periods of time with the children, it could be problematic.

"Unequal care looks to be a proxy for conflict," he said. "In some cases, unequal shared care may represent an unhappy compromise."

Parents who had an equal share of care were probably more likely to get along better and to have an egalitarian approach to parenting.

Professor Smyth said parents who reported high levels of conflict tended to report that their children were doing less well than parents who reported a co-operative or friendly relationship. It is not the arrangement that matters but the quality of the parental relationship.

Australian National University professor of family health and wellbeing Bryan Rodgers said the preliminary findings also suggested that parents in the equal-shared-care group reported better wellbeing than parents in the other groups. They were also more satisfied with the care arrangement for their children.



Shared child care is growing.

"It's the quality of the relationship with the parents that's important," he said.

Professor Rodgers said the researchers wanted to investigate whether shared-care arrangements had grown since the changes to the child support formula came into effect in July.

The formula is used to determine how much financial support is owed. There have been concerns that it might create a financial incentive for non-resident parents to spend more time with their children, as child support is reduced once they share the care of a child for at least 35% of the time. This could mean that shared parenting might rise further.