

Research in Brief

Research and Statistics Division



Parent-reported parenting arrangements after separation or divorce, 2017

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Introduction

The dissolution of a marriage or common-law relationship can have implications that extend beyond the couple itself. When children are involved, parents must continue to meet their children's basic needs after separation, including providing a secure, stable, and nurturing environment. Decisions about where children will live, how much time they will spend with each parent, and who will make major decisions in their lives are expected to reflect the best interests of the child, a principle entrenched in international law through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and embedded in Canada's federal *Divorce Act* and provincial and territorial family legislation.

This Research in Brief describes parenting arrangements among separated and divorced parents with children aged 18 and under. The report examines several interrelated aspects of post-separation parenting: where the children usually live, how often parents see and communicate with their children, who makes the major decisions for the children, and the degree of formality for any parenting arrangements. Throughout, the findings highlight how these arrangements might vary across regions and demographic characteristics, where available.

Methodology

This report is based primarily on data tables¹ generated from the 2017 General Social Survey (GSS) on Families, a nationally representative survey that collected information on family formation, dissolution, and post-separation arrangements. While the analysis focuses on data collected in 2017, comparable measures from earlier five-year cycles of the GSS on Families, including the 2011 iteration, have been

¹ These tables are from a custom request on parenting data from the GSS and not available elsewhere. The data tables can be shared on request (rsd.drs@justice.gc.ca).



incorporated where available to highlight changes over time.² The target population for the 2017 GSS was all non-institutionalized persons aged 15 and older living in the 10 provinces (excluding Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut). The final sample comprised 20,602 respondents.³ Of these, 913 were separated or divorced parents with at least one child aged 18 or younger who responded to the parenting arrangement questions analyzed in this report. Among these 913 parents, 41% were fathers and 59% were mothers. Regionally, 8% lived in the Atlantic provinces, 33% in Quebec, 34% in Ontario, 17% in the Prairie provinces, and 8% in British Columbia. With respect to age, 2% were between 15 and 24 years of age, 18% were 25 to 34, 46% were 35 to 44, and 34% were 45 to 64.⁴

A similar methodology was used for the 2011 GSS on Families. In total, 22,435 people responded to the survey, but only 1,055 respondents (or 5% of the total sample) were separated or divorced, had at least one child under the age of 18 and answered the questions related to parenting arrangements. Of these respondents, 39% were fathers and 61% were mothers.

The results from the survey are based on a sample, meaning that the data are subject to sampling error. The target sample mentioned above represents a small proportion of all Canadians which can further limit the generalizability of the data. Results may therefore have been different if a different sample or the entire population had been targeted. In an effort to mitigate this limitation, all estimates are weighted to represent the target population, and only differences that are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level are discussed in this report. At times, percentages are presented with an “E” symbol to indicate that they are based on a small sample size. While the percentages provided are representative of the sample size, they are less reliable when making generalizations about the population and as such, caution should be used when interpreting the data. Similarly, the “F” symbol is also used in this report to designate where percentages are too unreliable to publish. The data unreliability can be for a number of reasons, such as too few responses to publish, poor data quality or other technical reasons. Given that women made up a larger share of respondents than men, the findings may be skewed towards the perspective of mothers. Also, since the responses of both parents were not necessarily surveyed,⁵ the findings may be biased by the experiences of the parent who participated in the survey.

The term **parenting arrangement** covers both the time the children spend with each parent (parenting time) and who makes major decisions for the children’s well-being. **Shared parenting time** is defined as situations where a child lives between 40% and 60% of the time with each parent. **Decision-making responsibility** refers to who makes important decisions about the child’s well-being, including health care, education, culture, language, religion or spirituality, and significant extracurricular activities.

Findings

Over four in ten respondents reported that the children lived only with them; mothers were five times more likely than fathers to report this situation.

² Unless otherwise specified, the 2011 GSS data come from custom request tables.

³ For more information about the GSS on Families, please see:
<https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&Id=335816>.

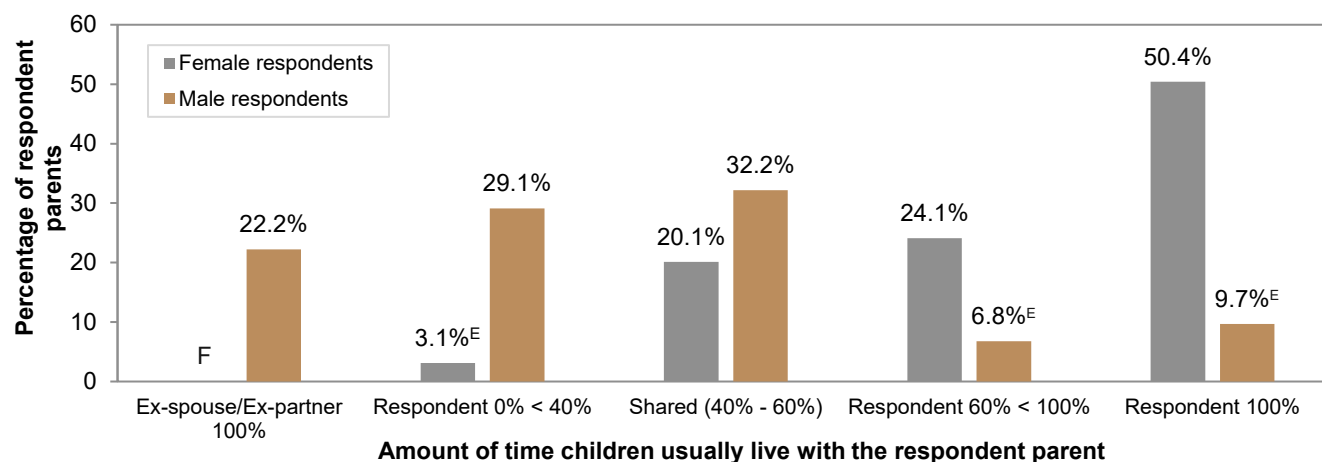
⁴ Estimates for those aged 65 years and older were too unreliable to publish.

⁵ Since the sample was based on households, it is possible that both parents from a previous relationship were included in the findings if they no longer resided in the same household.

When separated or divorced parents were asked about their child's living arrangements in the past 12 months, more than four in ten (44.2%) respondents indicated that the children lived exclusively with one parent – most commonly with the survey respondent (33.8%) rather than the respondent's ex-spouse or ex-partner (10.4%). By comparison, one-quarter (25.0%) of parents indicated that they had shared parenting time, where the child lived with the respondent between 40% and 60% of the time – up from 9.4% in 2011. The remaining parents reported that children lived the majority of the time with one parent, meaning more than 60% but less than 100% of the time; specifically, 17.0% lived with the respondent, while 13.7% lived with the ex-spouse or ex-partner.

Living arrangements differed significantly depending on the gender of the respondent (see Chart 1).⁶ Respondent mothers (50.4%) were five times more likely than respondent fathers (9.7%^E) to report that the child lived with them exclusively.⁷ Conversely, almost one-quarter of respondent fathers indicated that the child lived exclusively with their ex-spouse or ex-partner (22.2%); this figure was too unreliable to be published for mothers. Regarding shared parenting time (i.e., between 40% to 60% of the time), fathers (32.2%) reported this arrangement more frequently than mothers (20.1%). In the majority of parenting time situations, almost one-quarter of mothers (24.1%) and 6.8%^E of fathers reported having the child more than 60% of the time. Fathers were more likely than mothers to report seeing the child less than 40% of the time (29.1% versus 3.1%^E, respectively).

Chart 1. Living arrangements of children in ex-couple relationships, by gender of the respondent, 2017



^E Use with caution

^F Too unreliable to publish

Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Due to data unreliability and rounding, percentages may not add to 100%. The gender of respondents' ex-spouses/ex-partners were not collected.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

⁶ The surveys asked respondents whether they were female or male. For simplicity, this report uses the language of "mothers" and "fathers" in relation to respondents' gender. Note that the gender of the respondent's ex-spouse/ex-partner was not collected and cannot be used for comparison.

⁷ In instances where "E" accompanies an estimate, this indicates high sampling variability and values should be used and interpreted with caution.

Shared parenting time was most common in Quebec, with proportions double that of Ontario and Western Canada.

The analysis of parenting time arrangements across geographic regions reveals distinct patterns in Quebec. In 2017, shared parenting time was significantly more common in Quebec (38.6%) than the national average (25.0%). When compared to specific regions, the proportion of shared parenting time in Quebec was more than double that of Ontario (17.9%), the Prairies (17.9%^E), and British Columbia (15.8%^E). Conversely, Quebec reported the lowest proportion of children living exclusively with the respondent (23.3%). This proportion was significantly lower than those observed in Western Canada (46.4% in the Prairies and 48.4% in British Columbia), where exclusive residence with the respondent was the most common arrangement.

Although the GSS on Families cannot directly explain these regional differences, other research has suggested that Quebec's higher rates of shared parenting time may reflect a combination of legal and social factors specific to the province. These possibilities include a longstanding presumption of joint "parental authority" (i.e., decision-making responsibility) in the *Civil Code*, a judiciary and legal culture that may be more open to shared parenting time arrangements, the earlier institutionalization of family mediation (which can encourage shared arrangements), and broader shifts in gender roles and family norms—such as higher rates of maternal employment and a much higher prevalence of common-law relationships in Quebec compared with the rest of Canada.⁸

Families with two children or children under the age of 15 were almost twice as likely to have a shared parenting time arrangement compared to families with one child or adolescent children.

Survey results on the characteristics of the children, including family size and age, show significant differences in their parent-reported living arrangements. In terms of family size, shared parenting time was nearly twice as common among parents with two children (36.5%) compared to those with only one child (19.3%) in 2017. Families with a single child were significantly more likely to report that the child lived exclusively with the respondent (38.6%) compared to those with two children (23.5%).⁹

There were also differences when looking at age, with distinct shifts occurring in late adolescence. While shared parenting time was reported for almost one-third of children aged 6 to 9 years old (30.1%), as well as those aged 10 to 14 (32.8%), the proportion fell significantly to about one in ten (13.4%^E) for adolescents aged 15 to 18. Consequently, older adolescents were the most likely group to live exclusively with the respondent (49.1%).¹⁰

One-third of separated or divorced parents saw their child on a daily or weekly basis when the child was not living in their household.

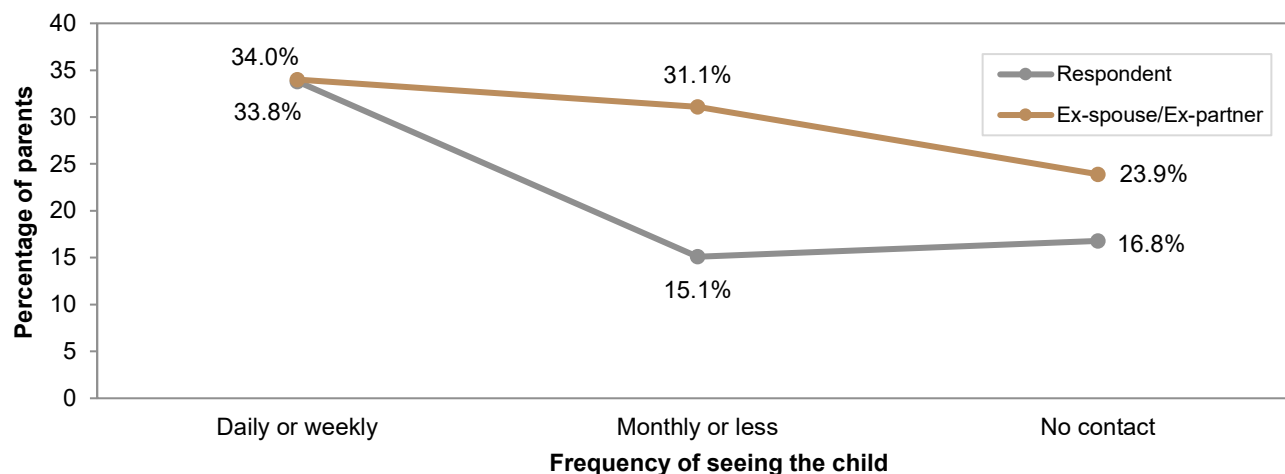
⁸ Pelletier, D. 2017. "Combien d'enfants en double résidence ou en garde partagée ? Sources et mesures dans les contextes québécois et canadien." *Cahiers québécois de démographie*, 46(1), 101–127, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/cqd/2017-v46-n1-cqd03427/1043297ar/>.

⁹ Due to higher sampling variability, results for families with three or more children were not statistically different from the other groups.

¹⁰ Among children aged 5 or younger, roughly three in ten respondents indicated that the child lived equally with both parents (27.4%) and exclusively with the respondent (32.4%). However, due to wider confidence intervals, these rates were not statistically distinguishable from those of older adolescents (aged 15 to 18).

In 2017, approximately one-third of respondents (33.8%) reported that they saw their child¹¹ on a daily or weekly basis when the child was not living with them in their household (see Chart 2). A further 15.1% saw their child on a monthly basis or less, and 16.8% reported not seeing their child at all. When respondents were asked about their ex-spouse or ex-partner's contact with the child, daily or weekly in-person contact was reported at a very similar proportion (34.0%). However, when comparing respondents' self-reported contact with reports of their ex-spouse or ex-partners' contact, ex-spouses or ex-partners were twice as likely to have seen the child on a monthly or less basis (31.1%) and were almost 1.5 times more likely to have not seen the child in the past year (23.9%). Overall, while similar proportions of respondents reported that they or their ex-partner or ex-spouse frequently saw the child, respondents were significantly more likely to indicate that their ex-spouses or ex-partners infrequently saw or did not see the child at all.

Chart 2. Frequency of in-person contact with the child, by respondent and ex-spouse/ex-partner, 2017



Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Instances where the child lived exclusively with the respondent or ex-spouse/ex-partner are not included in this chart. Therefore, percentages may not add to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

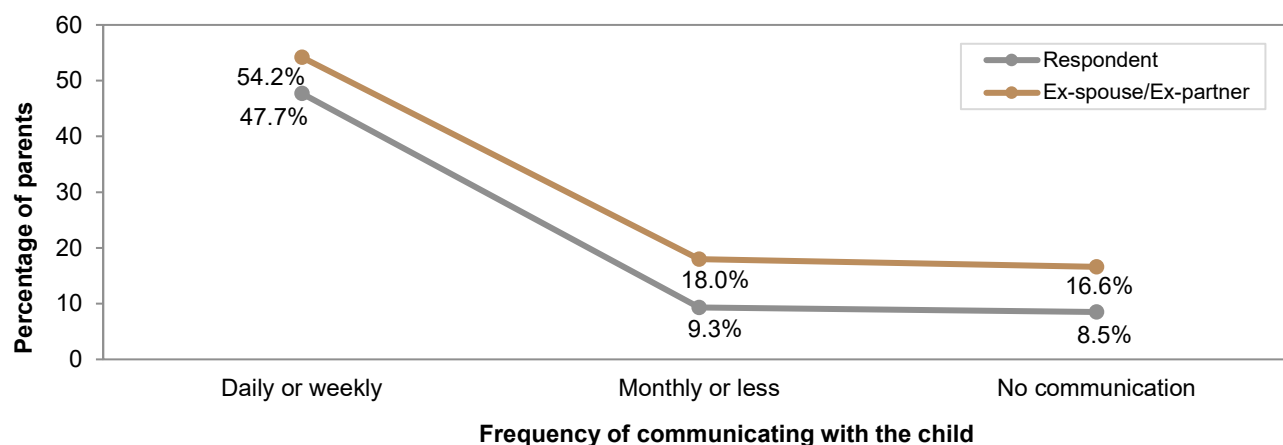
Half of all separated or divorced parents communicated with their child on a daily or weekly basis when the child was not living in their household.

Telephone calls, texts, emails, or video chats are an important component of post-separation communication between parents and children. When asked how often they communicated with their child while the child was living with the other parent, in 2017, nearly half (47.7%) of respondents reported doing so on a daily or weekly basis (see Chart 3). Respondents also gave similar assessments of their ex-spouses or ex-partners, reporting that just over half (54.2%) communicated with the child on a daily or weekly basis.

¹¹ For simplicity, this report generally uses the singular term "child" when describing parenting time, contact, and decision-making arrangements. However, respondents could have one or more children with their ex-spouse or ex-partner, and their answers may reflect arrangements for more than one child. Where age is discussed, estimates refer to the age of the youngest child in the parenting arrangement.

Infrequent or no communication with the child was reported less often, although respondents tended to indicate that their ex-spouses or ex-partners had less frequent communication than they did. About one in ten respondents (9.3%) indicated that they communicated monthly or less often with their child, compared with nearly one in five ex-spouses or ex-partners (18.0%). Similarly, no communication was reported by 8.5% of respondents, while respondents indicated that 16.6% of ex-spouses or ex-partners had no communication with their child. Overall, respondents generally reported that most parents – both themselves and their ex-spouses or ex-partners – frequently communicated with their child, and that having no or infrequent communication was the exception rather than the norm.

Chart 3. Frequency of communication with the child, by respondent and ex-spouse/ex-partner, 2017



Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Instances where the child lived exclusively with the respondent or ex-spouse/ex-partner are not included in this chart. Therefore, percentages may not add to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

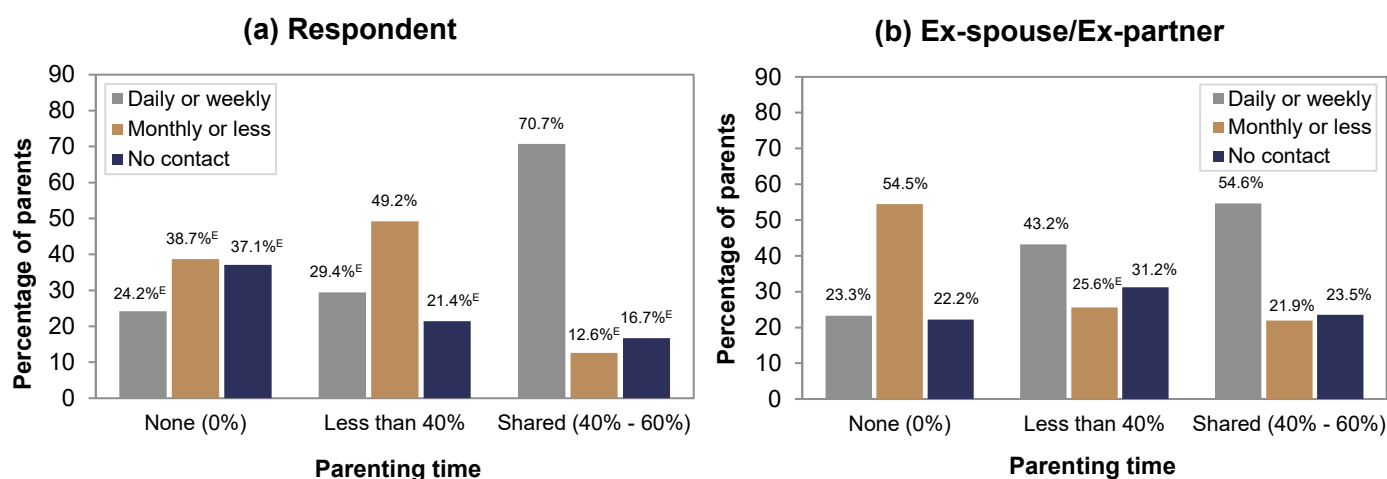
For parents without shared or majority parenting time, almost three-quarters saw their child on a monthly or less basis or not at all in the past year.

How often parents saw their child varied with the amount of time the child lived in their household. When a parent had no parenting time, meaning that the child lived exclusively with the other parent, in-person contact was usually infrequent or absent. Just under one-quarter (24.2%^E of respondents and 23.3% of ex-spouses/ex-partners) with no parenting time reported seeing their child on a daily or weekly basis in 2017, while more than one-third saw their child on a monthly or less basis (38.7%^E and 54.5%) (see Chart 4a and Chart 4b). More than one in five ex-spouses/ex-partners (22.2%) and one in three respondents (37.1%^E) reportedly did not see the child at all.

When the child lived with the ex-partner/ex-spouse less than 40% of the time, respondents described contact as more evenly distributed (43.2% saw the child daily or weekly, 25.6%^E saw them monthly or less, and 31.2% did not see them at all). When the child lived with the respondent less than 40% of the time, contact also tended to be infrequent. Almost half (49.2%) saw their child on a monthly or less basis, roughly one in five (21.4%^E) did not see their child at all, and only about three in ten (29.4%^E) saw their child daily or weekly.

In contrast, when parenting time was shared between households, a reverse pattern emerged. Most respondents (70.7%) and ex-spouses/ex-partners (54.6%) reportedly saw their child on a daily or weekly basis, more than twice the proportions observed among parents with no parenting time. Parents with shared parenting time were also significantly less likely to report seeing their child on a monthly or less basis (12.6%^E of respondents and 21.9% of ex-spouses/ex-partners) than those with no parenting time. Overall, respondents' reporting of their ex-spouses or ex-partners echoed the pattern observed for themselves: frequent in-person contact was most typical when parenting time was shared, while those with no parenting time were most often reported to see their child infrequently or not at all.

Chart 4. Frequency of in-person contact with the child, by parenting time, 2017



^E Use with caution

Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Instances where the child lived the majority of time (60% or more) or exclusively (100% of the time) with the respondent or ex-spouse/ex-partner are not included in this chart. Therefore, percentages may not add to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

Communication peaked in early adolescence, with more than six in ten parents of 10- to 14-year-olds reporting daily or weekly remote contact.

The frequency of in-person contact between the respondent and the child did not differ significantly by the age of the youngest child. For instance, daily or weekly in-person contact ranged from 26.8% to 40.6% across age groups, and no in-person contact ranged from 12.1%^E to 20.3%^E. Similar results were found when respondents were asked about their ex-spouse or ex-partner's in-person contact with the child.

In contrast, the frequency of communicating with the child by telephone, text, email, or video chat showed a clear age pattern in 2017. For respondent parents, daily or weekly remote contact was most common when the youngest child was aged 10 to 14 years (61.9%). This proportion was significantly higher than among families whose youngest child was under 5 years (38.4%) and those whose youngest child was 15 to 18 years old (38.6%). When respondents were asked about their ex-spouses or ex-partners, daily or weekly remote communication was also highest when the youngest child was

aged 10 to 14 years (66.5%), which was also significantly higher than for children under 5 years (44.6%) and those aged 6 to 9 years (47.4%).

Four in ten parents had shared or split decision-making responsibility with their ex-partner or ex-spouse.

When separated or divorced parents were asked who makes major decisions regarding their children's health, religion, and education,¹² more than four in ten (42.0%) reported having a parenting arrangement that involved shared or split decision-making responsibility in 2017. In these arrangements, both parents retain the right to make significant decisions about the child's care; they must make decisions either together or alternatively. This was similar to 2011, where just over one-third (35.0%) reported having shared or split decision-making responsibility.

Of the remaining parents, more than half in 2011 (60.0%) and in 2017 (53.0%) indicated that either they or their ex-partner/ex-spouse had sole decision-making responsibility – meaning one parent has the full right to make important decisions about the children and does not have to consult or involve the other parent when making decisions.¹³ The remaining parents reported situations where someone else was responsible for making decisions, where it varied depending on the what the decision was, or where there was some other reason or dynamic.

Respondent mothers six times more likely than respondent fathers to report having sole decision-making responsibility.

Among ex-couple relationships where one parent had sole decision-making responsibility, more than three-quarters (77.0%) of respondents indicated that they were the sole decision-maker in 2017. Most of these self-reports were from mothers, who were six times more likely to report having sole decision-making responsibility (66.7%) compared to respondent fathers (10.4%^E). In contrast, the remaining 23.0% reported that their ex-spouse or ex-partner had sole decision-making responsibility. Similar results were reported in 2011, where a higher proportion of mothers (85.0%) had sole decision-making responsibility compared to fathers (15.0%).

Parents with shared or split decision-making responsibility were seven times more likely to have shared parenting time compared to parents with sole decision-making responsibility.

Decision-making responsibility and parenting time are both issues that are covered in a parenting arrangement. When parents reported having shared or split decision-making responsibility, they were seven times more likely to also report having shared parenting time (50.6%) compared to parents with sole decision-making responsibility (7.0%^E) (see Chart 5). In 2011, shared or split decision-making was also more frequent among parents with shared parenting time (83.0%).¹⁴ In the remaining cases of

¹² If decisions differed between children, respondents were asked to report arrangements for their youngest child only.

¹³ Unless the separation agreement or court order says otherwise.

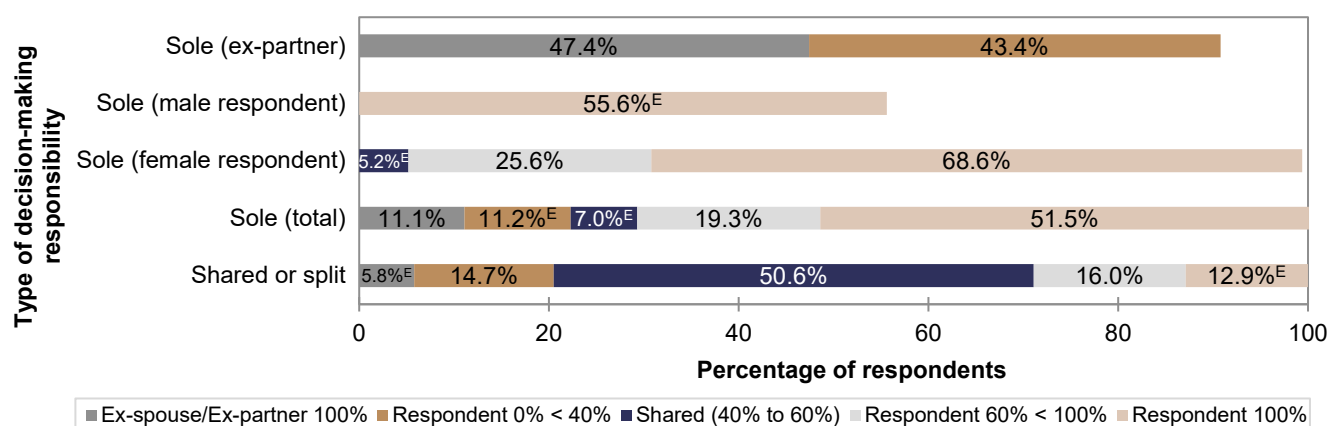
¹⁴ Sinha, M. 2015. Parenting and child support after separation or divorce. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-652-X, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2014001-eng.htm>.

2017 where parents shared or split major decision-making responsibilities, the child lived the majority of the time (30.7%)¹⁵ or exclusively (18.7%)¹⁶ with one parent.

In contrast to shared or split decision-making arrangements, 70.8% of respondents who held sole decision-making responsibility reported that the child lived with them either exclusively or the majority of the time in 2017.¹⁷ Among respondents' ex-spouses or ex-partners, a similar pattern was observed: sole decision-making responsibility was almost always (90.8%) accompanied by the child living the majority of the time or exclusively in the ex-spouse or ex-partner's care.¹⁸

In cases where both parents had shared or split decision-making responsibility, in 2017, nearly three-quarters reported communicating with their child by telephone, text, email, or video chat on a daily or weekly basis (71.0%), compared to parents with sole decision-making responsibility (29.4%).¹⁹

Chart 5. Type of decision-making responsibility by parenting time arrangement, 2017



^E Use with caution

Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Due to data unreliability, suppression and rounding, percentages may not add to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

About half of separated or divorced parents had a written parenting arrangement, while one in five had no arrangement at all.

In 2017, when separated or divorced parents were asked if they had an agreement in place for the amount of time the children spend with each parent,²⁰ almost four in five (78.8%) indicated that they

¹⁵ Includes respondents who reported the child lived with them more than 60%, but less than 100% of the time (16.0%), or the child lived with them less than 40%, but more than 0% of the time (14.7%).

¹⁶ Includes respondents who reported the child lived with them 100% of the time (12.9%) or their ex-spouse or ex-partner 100% of the time (5.8%^E).

¹⁷ Includes respondents who reported the child lived with them 100% of the time (51.5%) and more than 60% of the time (19.3%). Note that there were no significant differences in the sole decision-making responsibility between respondent mothers and fathers.

¹⁸ Includes respondents who reported the child lived with them less than 40% of the time (43.4%) and 100% of the time with the ex-spouse or ex-partner (47.4%).

¹⁹ There were no statistically significant differences with other frequencies of contact with the child, such as monthly or less and no contact, between parents with joint or split decision-making responsibility and those with sole decision-making responsibility.

²⁰ If arrangements differed between children, respondents were asked to report arrangements for their youngest child only.

had some type of parenting arrangement. When asked about the type of arrangement, just over half (51.5%) of parents reported having a written parenting arrangement, almost two times the proportion of those with verbal arrangements (27.3%). The remaining 21.1% of parents reported having no arrangement at all.

In 2011, a similar, but slightly larger share of parents (83.9%) reported having an arrangement in place for the time spent with the children. However, the type of arrangement differed: slightly fewer reported a written arrangement (46.1%) and no arrangement (13.6%), while a higher proportion reported a verbal agreement (37.8%). Overall, these results suggest that there may have been a shift over time toward written arrangements and away from verbal agreements.

Separated or divorced parents without an arrangement most commonly cited amicable situations.

Among parents who reported having no arrangement or agreement in 2017, one-third (33.0%) indicated that an agreement was not needed because the situation was amicable. Smaller proportions reported that there was conflict with the ex-spouse or ex-partner that was preventing them from reaching an agreement (11.7%^E), there was difficulty locating or contact was lost with the ex-partner/ex-spouse (6.0%^E), or it was the child's decision to not have an arrangement (11.7%^E).²¹

Results from 2011 were broadly similar. The most common reason for not having an arrangement was because respondents did not think an agreement was needed because the situation was amicable (26.0%^E). The other reasons cited were similarly reported by smaller proportions, including that it was the child's decision (13.0%^E), there was a conflict between the parents (12.0%^E), or a there was a loss of contact with the other parent (12.0%^E).²²

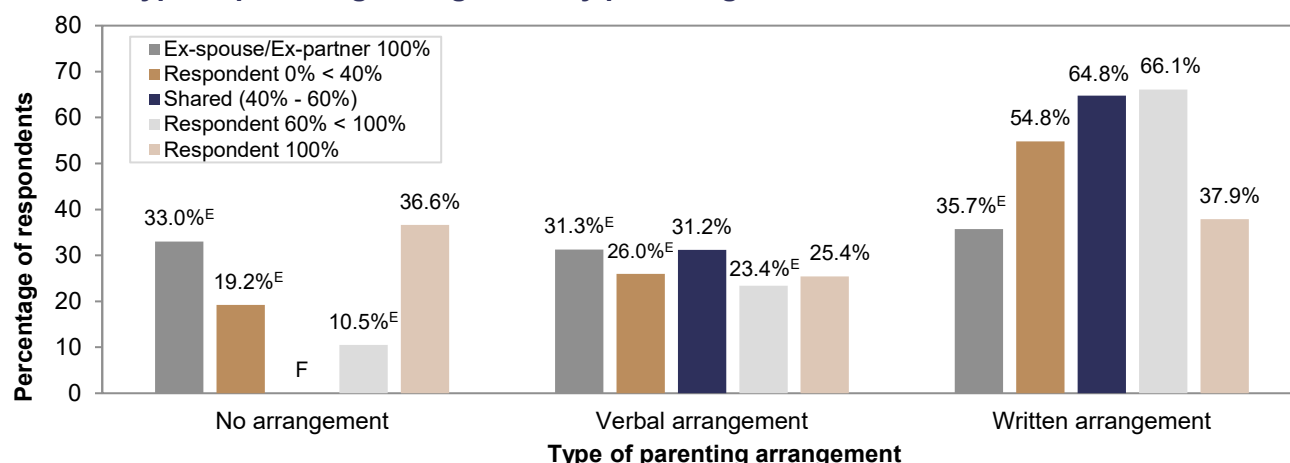
Written agreements were most common when children lived in both households and least common when they lived exclusively with one parent.

Nearly two-thirds of parents with shared parenting time indicated they had a written arrangement (64.8%) (see Chart 6). Written agreements were also common among parents with majority parenting time: over half of respondents whose children lived with them or their ex-partner/ex-spouse more than 60%, but less than 100% of the time, reported a written agreement (66.1% and 54.8%, respectively). By contrast, when the children lived exclusively with the ex-partner/ex-spouse, written arrangements were significantly less common (35.7%^E) than in shared or majority parenting time cases. Similarly, the proportion of parents with a written arrangement where the child lived exclusively with the respondent was also lower (37.9%) than those with shared parenting time.

²¹ Due to small sample sizes, most subgroup estimates (e.g., by child's age or parenting time) were too unreliable to publish.

²² Sinha, 2015, *supra* note 14.

Chart 6. Type of parenting arrangement by parenting time, 2017



^E Use with caution

^F Too unreliable to publish

Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Due to data unreliability and rounding, percentages may not add to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

Written parenting agreements were most common among divorced, higher-educated, and higher-income parents than their counterparts.

Divorced parents were significantly more likely than separated parents to report having a written agreement (73.4% versus 38.2%, respectively) and less likely to depend on verbal-only arrangements (15.2%^E versus 38.2%). Written agreements were also significantly more common among parents with a postsecondary certificate or diploma (55.3%) or a university degree (65.6%) than those whose highest education was a high school diploma or equivalent (38.9%). These differences were mirrored in the likelihood of having no arrangement: one-third of parents with a high school diploma reported having no parenting agreement (33.3%), compared with 17.6% of those with a postsecondary credential and 10.4%^E of university graduates. Parents with family incomes²³ between \$20,000 and \$39,999 were also less likely to report a written agreement (34.4%), compared to those in the \$40,000 to \$59,999 range (54.7%) and those earning \$140,000 or more (67.7%). While parents in the middle-income ranges, earning between \$60,000 and \$79,999 (47.6%) or \$80,000 to \$99,999 (51.5%), also showed a higher likelihood of having written agreements than those in the \$20,000 to \$39,999 range, these specific differences were not statistically significant.

Overall, parents who were more socio-economically advantaged (through education or income) or whose relationship breakdown was formalized through a divorce were more likely to have written parenting agreements and less likely to rely on verbal or no arrangements compared to their counterparts. One possible explanation for this may be that higher educational attainment is often

²³ Personal income questions were not asked as part of the General Social Survey in 2017. This derived variable represents the sum of the incomes of all members of the census family received in the calendar year 2016 from all sources before income taxes and deductions, including wages and salaries, self-employment income, government transfers, investment income, private retirement pensions and any other income, excluding capital gains or losses. 'Census family' refers to a married couple (with or without children of either and/or both spouses), a common-law couple (with or without children of either and/or both partners) or a lone parent of any marital status, with at least one child.

associated with higher income,²⁴ which may make it easier for these parents to access legal or mediation services and, in turn, to formalize their parenting agreements in writing.

Almost half of written arrangements involved professional assistance and over one-third were court-ordered in 2017.

In 2017, among parents with a written parenting arrangement, the agreement was rarely prepared solely by the respondent and their ex-spouse/ex-partner (13.7%). Instead, the most common method for reaching a written agreement was through assistance from mediators, lawyers, or family justice services, accounting for almost half (47.8%) of all written agreements. A similar proportion of respondents reported that their arrangement was court-ordered (38.2%).

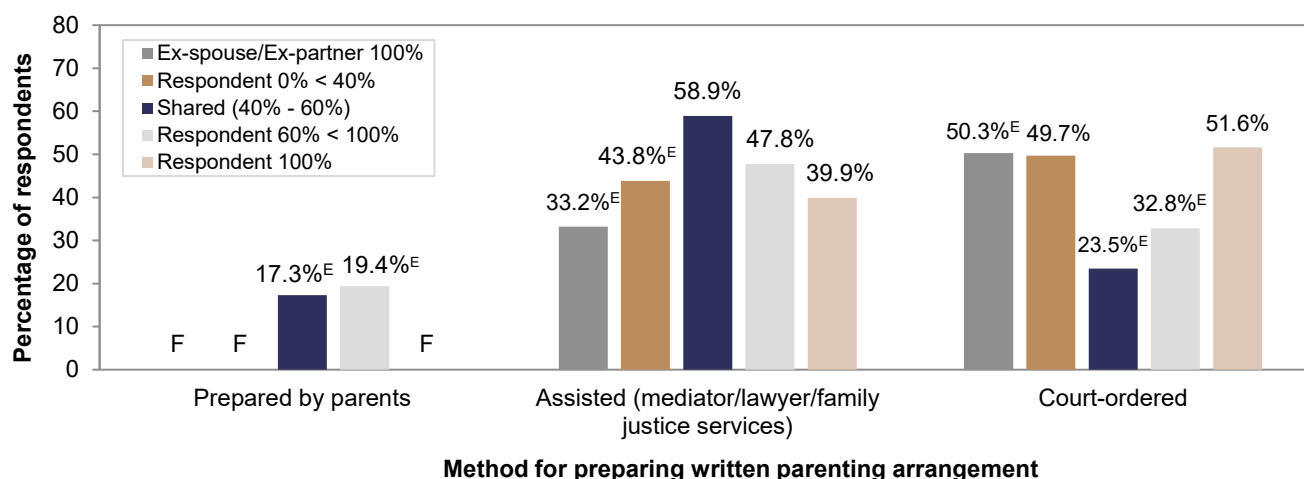
Similar patterns were observed in 2011. Written agreements were seldomly prepared solely by the respondent and their ex-spouse/ex-partner (9.4%^E), and were most commonly reached through assistance from mediators, lawyers, or family justice services (53.2%) or through a court order (37.5%).

Shared parenting time arrangements were most often prepared with assistance, while court orders were prevalent in exclusive residence situations.

Among parents with shared parenting time arrangements in 2017, nearly six in ten (58.9%) reported that their written arrangement was prepared with the help of a mediator, a lawyer, or family justice services, while just under one-quarter (23.5%^E) indicated that their arrangement was court-ordered (see Chart 7). By contrast, when the child lived exclusively with the respondent or the ex-partner/ex-spouse, just over half of written agreements were court-ordered (51.6% and 50.3%^E, respectively), more than double the proportion observed in shared parenting time situations.

²⁴ Gill, J. 2025. Average earnings, 2024. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 14-28-0001, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/14-28-0001/2025001/article/00001-eng.htm>; Zhao, J., S. J. Ferguson, H. Dryburgh, C. Rodriguez and L. Gibson. 2017. Does education pay? A comparison of earnings by level of education in Canada and its provinces and territories. Census of population, 2016. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-200-X2016024, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016024/98-200-x2016024-eng.cfm>.

Chart 7. Method for preparing written parenting agreements by parenting time, 2017



^E Use with caution

^F Too unreliable to publish

Notes: Conditions for these data are such that during a separation/divorce the ex-couple had children under the age of 18, and that the ex-spouse/ex-partner was still alive at the time of the survey. Due to data unreliability and rounding, percentages may not add to 100%.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (Cycle 31) on Families, 2017, custom request.

The method in which written agreements were reached did not differ significantly by the age of the respondent, region, age or number of children, marital status, or family income. The only exception was that parents with at least one selected disability²⁵ were roughly 1.5 times more likely than those without a disability to report that their written arrangement was court-ordered (47.7% versus 29.7%).

Conclusion

Overall, results from the 2017 GSS on Families show that parenting time, contact and communication, decision-making responsibility, and parenting arrangements form related but distinct dimensions of post-separation parenting. In terms of parenting time, in 2017, parents most often reported that their child lived exclusively or primarily with one parent, and mothers were more likely than fathers to indicate that the child usually lived in their household. Shared parenting time was more prevalent in Quebec than in any other province, exceeding the national average, and it was also more common among families whose children had not yet reached adolescence. More than half of parents reported that they or their ex-spouse/ex-partner had sole decision-making responsibility. Parents with shared parenting time and more frequent contact, however, were more likely to report having shared or split decision-making responsibility.

In terms of contact and communication, about one-third of parents reported seeing their child daily or weekly when the child was not living in their household. Communication was more common, with roughly half reporting daily or weekly communication by phone, text, email, or video chat. Frequent in-person contact was most typical when parenting time was shared, whereas parents without shared or majority parenting time more often reported infrequent or no in-person contact.

²⁵ Disability status was measured at the time of the survey and may not reflect disability status at the time of separation or divorce. Disability may include sensory, physical, cognitive, and/or mental health conditions.

When determining parenting arrangements, about half of separated or divorced parents reported having a written arrangement. These written agreements were most common when parenting time was shared, often reached through the assistance of mediators, lawyers, or family justice services. When children lived exclusively with one parent, parents were less likely to report a written agreement and, when one was in place, the arrangement was more likely to be court-ordered.

When looking at comparable data from the 2011 and 2017 cycles, findings were largely consistent, with a few clear changes. The most notable shift was an increase in shared parenting time. Decision-making responsibility was broadly similar, with a small shift toward shared or split decision-making and away from sole decision-making. However, the gendered pattern persisted, with mothers substantially more likely than fathers to report being the sole decision-maker. Parenting arrangements were common in both cycles, but the form of arrangements shifted, with fewer relying on verbal agreements and more using written agreements, alongside an increase in parents reporting no arrangement. Finally, among parents with written arrangements, how agreements were reached remained similar, most often involving professional support or court processes rather than being developed solely between former partners.

This Research in Brief provided the most recent national portrait of parent-reported parenting arrangements after separation and divorce; however, the 2017 GSS on Families marked the last time these data were collected. With no ongoing, repeated survey questions to track how parenting time, decision-making responsibility, and parenting arrangements evolve over time, there is a growing data gap in this area. Future research on post-separation parenting arrangements will need to consider how best to address this gap, whether through new survey initiatives, the use of administrative or court data, or integrated data sources that can continue to inform evidence-based policy and practice.

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