

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION: THE POINT OF VIEW OF FATHERS

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ABSTRACT

The amount of father-child contact after separation is closely linked to the probability that fathers fulfill their financial obligations towards their children. Determining the factors that encourage this contact is, therefore, crucial to the process of reducing the risk of poverty to which children of separated parents are exposed. Based on data collected from fathers at the 1995 Canadian General Social Survey of the Family, this paper uses multi-level regression analysis to identify factors associated with higher levels of contact between fathers and children, including socio-demographic characteristics of children and fathers, variables associated with attitudes, and fathers' satisfaction with custody and access arrangements.

INTRODUCTION

Why Study Fathers?

In Canada, over the last thirty years, changes in adult conjugal behaviour have profoundly affected the relationship between fathers and their children. Marital breakdown escalated following the introduction of the 1968 *Divorce Act* and the institution of marriage lost ground to cohabitation, at first as the entry into conjugal life, and more recently as the context for starting a family. These changes have led to a noticeable increase in the number of children experiencing single parenthood, and at an increasingly early age. Among Canadian children born at the beginning of the 1970s, 25% had known life with a single parent by the age of fifteen; ten years later, this proportion was reached at the age of ten. For children born in the late 1980s, the same proportion was reached as early as age six (Marcil-Gratton, Le Bourdais, & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2000).

After their parents separate, the vast majority of children continue living with their mother. Daily contact with their father can, therefore, no longer be taken for granted and, from the point of separation on, the quality and frequency of the

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relationship between fathers and children are determined by their parents' often-conflicting expectations. Thus, questions about the extent to which non-resident fathers remain involved in their children's lives following separation and how this evolving relationship affects their children's development have received considerable attention in the past ten years. Findings from the numerous studies conducted are inconclusive: some reveal a positive impact of father involvement on child outcomes; some suggest a negative one; and others find no impact at all (see Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato, 2000; Seltzer, 1994). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) argue that this ambiguity is largely because there has been a tendency in the literature to focus on the quantity rather than on the quality of contact, and that other dimensions of the father-child relationship are important for children's well-being.

By contrast, there is a strong consensus in the literature on the positive association existing between the frequency of father-child contact and child-support payment (Bartfeld, 2000; Jacobsen & Edmondson, 1993; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thompson, 1994; Seltzer, 1991). Whatever the quality of the father's relationship with his children, if he spends time with them, he invests economic resources as well. The identification of the factors likely to increase the frequency of contact thus constitutes a crucial step towards devising policies that encourage fathers to fulfill their financial obligations towards their children, thereby reducing the risk of poverty to which children of separated parents are often exposed.

The best way to explore this issue is, undoubtedly, to ask fathers directly about the relationships they have with their children, rather than to use the more readily available and reliable information provided by mothers, as has been the common practice in the past. It is all the more important to use information from fathers, given that research suggests a strong link between the payment of child support and fathers' satisfaction with arrangements surrounding custody and access (Emery, 1995). While it may be possible to justify studying contact levels from mothers' reports, it is not reasonable to assume that mothers and fathers necessarily share the same level of satisfaction with any given custody or access arrangement. In fact, a comparison of answers given by mothers and fathers in a 1995 Canadian survey on this subject revealed significantly divergent opinions (Le Bourdais, Juby, & Marcil-Gratton, 2001). While the majority of separated fathers and mothers contacted by the survey appeared satisfied with custody arrangements, in terms of where and with whom their child lived, fathers were nonetheless four times as likely as mothers to express dissatisfaction with these arrangements (18.4% versus 4.5%). Among male respondents, the level of satisfaction was strongly linked to the amount of time they spent with their children: the less frequent the contact, the lower the satisfaction. For mothers, the opposite pattern appeared: their dissatisfaction increased as the fathers' level of contact increased.

These results underline the importance of undertaking research from the male perspective in order to reach a better understanding of the factors influencing whether or not fathers maintain contact with their children (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 1996). Such an approach is taken in the present study, which aims to identify the factors and circumstances that are most likely to affect the amount of time fathers spend with their children after separation. Thus, the multi-level regression

analysis, which is based on data from the 1995 General Social Survey on the Family (GSS), includes various characteristics of both fathers and children.

Factors Affecting the Frequency of Contact between Fathers and their Children

A number of studies have examined the level of fathers' involvement with their children after separation. However, most of these studies are restricted to "non-resident" fathers (i.e., those whose children live with their mother). Here, we have extended our analysis to include all fathers not living with their child's mother—from those who never see their children to those who live with them full-time. With an increasing number of fathers requesting shared custody, we prefer to view this arrangement as one extreme of the "contact continuum"—a form of very frequent access. To exclude these fathers and children from the study would mean ignoring an important element of father-child contact. In addition, living arrangements after separation tend to be flexible, responding to changes in the lives of fathers, mothers, and children. A child in shared custody at one point in time may well end up living with his or her mother or father later on, thus blurring the boundaries between "non-resident" and "resident" fathers.

Father and child socio-demographic characteristics. Research based on non-resident fathers has identified several factors that are likely to influence the level of involvement they maintain with their children, although the effect may vary across studies. Evidence concerning the effects of gender on the frequency of contact between children and fathers is mixed. Although most studies have found no significant distinction between the time separated fathers spend with sons and daughters, research does suggest that a child's gender plays a role in custody decisions, with boys more likely to be in their father's custody than girls (Litton Fox & Kelly, 1995). Since our study is not limited to non-resident fathers, it is important to include this variable in our analysis.

Research on the child's age is also inconclusive, with some studies finding no effect and others finding that fathers have more contact with older children (see Cooksey & Craig, 1998). However, two factors may account for these inconsistencies. First, the link between child's age and father-child contact may be affected by an interaction among variables not included in the model, such as the time elapsed since separation—a variable that generally has a negative impact on the frequency of father-child contact (Seltzer, 1991). The youngest children in the survey (who tend to have *less* frequent contact with their father) are also those for whom the separation is, by definition, relatively recent—and who might, therefore, be expected to have *more* frequent contact with their fathers. Without controlling for time since separation, the opposite effects of age and duration cancel each other out. The second factor relates to the age variable itself. In most studies, the "age" variable refers to the child's age *at the survey*. However, the child's age *at the time of separation* may be of even greater relevance to the frequency of father-child contact, as it gives a measure of the length of time fathers and children had to develop their relationship on a daily basis before separation. We would expect the frequency of contact to increase as the child's age at separation increases.

The context in which children were born is also likely to affect the level of contact they have with their fathers. Past research has shown that never-married

fathers are less likely to keep in contact with their children than are married fathers (Marsiglio, Amato, & Day, 2000). However, the effect of this characteristic is likely to differ depending upon whether the father was cohabiting with the mother at the birth of the child. Beyond the fact that children born outside a union are expected to have less frequent contact with their father, it is hard to predict the direction of impact that the type of union at birth (married or cohabiting) might have on levels of contact after separation. On the one hand, Cooksey and Craig (1998) have argued that children born into cohabitation should have less contact with their father than those born within marriage, because of the lower institutionalized status of this type of union. On the other hand, given the greater equality in gender roles between partners observed among cohabiting couples (Le Bourdais & Sauriol, 1998; Shelton & John, 1993), one could expect cohabiting fathers to have been more involved in their children's care and therefore to maintain a closer relationship with them after separation than more "traditionally" wed fathers.

The distance separating the households of the two parents has been shown to be a key factor in the continuation of father-child contact (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). Geographic proximity facilitates enormously the movement of children from one parent's home to the other. Without this proximity, joint custody is virtually inconceivable, given the problems of organizing schooling and social life.

The father's age is also likely to influence the level of contact maintained with children, but we can expect this effect to vary across the various groups of fathers. Older fathers may be more likely, and more able, to take responsibility for their children. However, given that recent research has shown increased paternal involvement among younger cohorts of fathers, this group could prove to have closer relationships with their children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998).

Research has consistently pointed to a link existing between income, child-support payment, and frequency of contact (Bartfeld, 2000; Jacobsen & Edmondson, 1993; McLanahan et al., 1994; Seltzer, 1991). Studies show that fathers with medium to high incomes are more likely to provide financially for their children on a regular basis and to have frequent contact with them. At the other end of the spectrum, fathers whose earnings are not sufficient to pay regular child support may cut off their relationship with their children (Seltzer, 1994). Other variables related to fathers' capacity to meet their financial obligations towards their children, such as education and employment, also have an influence on levels of father-child contact. For instance, Cooksey and Craig (1998) found fathers' education to be consistently and strongly linked to contact, with more educated fathers maintaining more frequent contact.

Work schedules constitute another variable that is likely to affect the level of contact that fathers maintain with their children. Presser (2000) has documented the rise of flexible and atypical employment during the last thirty years and shown how these changes have modified family time (the time that both fathers and mothers spend with their children). Hence, regular evening work reduces the amount of time that parents and children spend together (Rapoport & Le Bourdais, 2001). Although no research on father-child relationships after separation has, to our knowledge, taken this variable into consideration, we would expect fathers' patterns of employment to affect the frequency of contact they maintain with their children.

The conjugal and parental trajectory followed by fathers after a separation may modify the relationship they have with their children. (Manning & Smock, 1999; Smock & Manning, 2000). Choosing to form a union with a new spouse who has children, to have another child within the new union, or to separate once again are decisions that are likely to influence the time and financial support that separated fathers are able to offer their children. Early research on this topic indicated that the frequency of father-child contact decreased with the father's remarriage (Seltzer et al., 1989). More recently, however, studies suggest that remarriage, as such, may favour father-child contact; the key factor in reducing contact is the birth of children within the new union (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). The impact of these events, therefore, is likely to be considerable and may vary according to the moment in time at which they occurred.

Attitudinal variables. Cooksey and Craig (1998) include a number of attitudinal variables in their study of father-child contact, on the assumption that non-resident fathers' behaviour towards children would be influenced by their attitude towards a number of "family-related" issues, including the institution of marriage, the acceptability of divorce when children are young, the role of children for life satisfaction, and gender roles. Findings showed, as expected, that fathers who valued the fatherhood role and believed children to be necessary for a satisfying life had more frequent contact with absent children. Contrary to their expectations, however, fathers who held more "traditional" gender ideologies also had more frequent contact.

While attitudes themselves change through time, and are often modified as a result of life experiences, the data relate only to the attitudes held at the time of survey. This fact raises the question of whether, for example, fathers valued their fatherhood role *before* separation, or whether this attitude developed as a result of "quality" time spent with children *after* separation. Clearly, any association between attitudinal variables and the amount of contact needs to be interpreted with caution, as perceptions can as easily be the result as the cause of the observed behaviour. In addition, it is important to remember that the link between attitudes and behaviour may be blurred by the fact that the amount of time fathers spend with their children after separation does not depend entirely on their own wishes. Nonetheless, within these limits, information about respondents' attitudes is certainly of interest, and provides an additional perspective on the processes at work.

DATA AND METHOD

Data

The analysis is based on data from the General Social Survey on the Family, which was carried out by Statistics Canada in 1995. For the first time in Canada, this survey collected information on the frequency of contact between fathers and children, not only from separated mothers but also directly from fathers (though not from both parents of the same child). More than 10,000 men and women aged 15 and over were interviewed and replied to questions concerning all the children they had given birth to or raised during their life. Separated parents also were asked to state how much time they had spent with each of their children during the year preceding the survey, and how much contact each child had had with the other parent.

An analysis of the frequency of father-child contact can adopt either the fathers' perspective, and be based on a sample of fathers, or the children's, using a sample of children. However, an exploratory analysis showed that fathers with more than one child often spend different amounts of time with their children. Custody arrangements may vary among siblings: a father might, for instance, have his adolescent son living with him full-time while a younger child might only visit every other weekend. In addition, children reported by a father may not all have the same mother, in which case they are very likely to have different custody and visiting arrangements. To take these variations in the levels of father-child contact into consideration, we constructed a sample of children.

From the information provided by male and female respondents, we selected all children aged from 0 to 17 years whose biological (or adoptive) parents were not living together at the time of survey, and retained only those with both parents still living. Children whose one parent had died, or for whom no information was available, were excluded from the analysis. The sample included, in other words, all minor biological or adopted children whose parents had either never lived together or had separated earlier on. Stepchildren living with respondents (i.e., all children born from an earlier union of the respondent's partner) and children aged eighteen or over at the time of the survey were excluded. The resulting sample consisted of 443 children who were reported by 311 fathers.

Dependent Variable: The Frequency of Contact between Fathers and their Children

The dependent variable is the frequency of contact that fathers had with their children during the year preceding the survey. Respondents living apart from their child's other parent were asked to specify the number of hours, days, weeks, or months that they spent with each of their children in the course of the twelve months preceding the survey; they were also asked to estimate the amount of time each child had spent with the other parent. This information, recoded as a number of days in the public micro-data file produced by Statistics Canada, permitted us to classify the children according to the frequency of contact with their father;¹ 25 children for whom this information was missing had to be excluded from the analysis, reducing our sample to 418 children (and 291 fathers).

Table 1 presents the distribution of children in relation to the number of days that they spent with their fathers in the twelve months preceding the survey, as reported by their fathers. Three children in ten (30.4 %)² lived at least five months of the year with their father; only 1/8 spent 10 months or more with him. At the other extreme, one child in six had no father contact in the previous year.

Table 1 also presents the same distribution, as reported by the children's mothers. Two results are worth noting. First, instead of the similar proportions that should be found in a representative sample, the number of children reported by mothers far exceeds that declared by fathers (676 versus 418). Second, the image given by fathers' declarations is one of much closer father-child ties than that portrayed by mothers. According to mothers' reports, 1/4 of the children had no contact with their fathers in the twelve months preceding the survey, and only

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION

TABLE 1

Distribution (in %) of biological or adopted children aged 0-17 years reported by their father or mother, according to the number of days spent with their father in the twelve months preceding the survey

Number of days spent with the father	Respondent	
	Father	Mother
None	16.8	24.7
1-6 days (less than 1 week)	6.6	9.4
7-29 days (less than 1 month)	8.2	11.6
30-59 days (1 to 2 months)	14.6	17.0
60-149 days (2 to 5 months)	23.4	20.5
150-209 days (5 to 7 months)	13.5	6.7
210-299 days (7 to 10 months)	4.0	3.3
300-365 days (10 months and over)	12.9	6.8
Total	100	100
N ^a	418	676

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (GSS), Cycle 10: the Family, 1995.

^a Weighted data, brought back to the original sample size.

16.8 % of children³ (half of the proportion declared by the fathers) spent five months or more with them.

Though surprising at first, these results confirm findings noted in other studies (Furstenberg, 1988; Poulain, Riandey, & Firdion, 1991; Rendall, Clarke, Peters, Ranjit, & Verropoulou, 1997; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994). This dearth of children reported by fathers is due, in part, to the fact that surveys have more difficulty contacting separated fathers than mothers, leading to an under-representation of fathers. In addition, separated fathers are more likely than separated mothers to under-report the number of children they have had in the past, particularly if they have little or no contact with their children, and do not pay child support (Juby & Le Bourdais, 1999). Hence, the "true" proportion of children with infrequent or no contact with their father is likely to be substantially higher than that observed from fathers' declarations, closer to the distribution suggested by mothers. As long as this observation is kept in mind when interpreting the data and analyses, the information provided by fathers can provide a valuable insight into why some fathers remain more closely involved in their children's lives than do others.

One criticism that might be levelled at the approach taken here is that spending time with someone is not the only way to maintain links. Making a telephone call or writing a letter could also be effective means of keeping contact, particularly when distance prevents frequent visits (Cooksey & Craig, 1998). In the 1995 GSS, separated respondents were asked about the frequency of letter or telephone contact with children when they were not living with them. An analysis of these data indicated a direct correlation between the two variables: the less often fathers saw their children, the less likely they were to communicate with them by letter or telephone, and vice versa. This outcome confirmed findings from other studies, which have shown that contact by letter or telephone is seldom used as a substitute

for visits by fathers who rarely see their children (Seltzer, 1991). The variable constructed as an indicator of the frequency of father-child contact thus appears to adequately represent the extent of the contact that separated fathers had with their children in the previous year.

Predictor Variables

A range of variables were included in the analysis relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of children and fathers, their family histories, and fathers' attitudes towards certain aspects of custody and the paternal role. The descriptive statistics for variables measured at the child level are given in Table 2 and, at the father level, in Table 3.

Demographic characteristics measured for each child include the child's sex and age, time elapsed since the separation, the type of parental union at birth, and the distance between the parents' households. All three variables related to timing and age in the child's life (child's age at survey, age at separation, and time elapsed

TABLE 2
Weighted descriptive statistics of the characteristics at the child level included in the analysis of the time that separated fathers spend with their children^a

Variable	Category	Frequency
Sex of the child	Boys	52.2
	Girls	47.8
Age of child at separation	0-1 year	35.2
	2-5 years	32.3
	6-11 years	24.6
	12-17 years	7.8
Time elapsed since separation	0-1 year	18.2
	2-4 years	27.9
	5-9 years	36.3
	10-17 years	17.6
Type of union at birth	Marriage	44.5
	Marriage preceded by cohabitation	19.8
	Cohabitation	10.6
	Out of union	25.1
Distance between parents' households	Less than 10 km	35.3
	10-49 km	26.7
	50-399 km	20.7
	400 km and over	17.3
Father satisfied with custody arrangement	Yes	78.1
	No	21.9

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (GSS), Cycle 10: the Family, 1995.

^a Based on weighted data (N=410 children).

since separation) should not be simultaneously included in the analysis since, with any two of them, it is possible to obtain the third. In a separate analysis, we tested the relative importance of each variable in explaining the frequency of father-child contact, and retained the two that best fit the data: the age at separation and the time elapsed since separation.⁴ For children born outside a union, the age “at separation” was defined as equal to 0. Thus, the fact that 1/4 of children in the sample had parents who were not living together when they were born explains the high proportion (35.2 %) of children aged 0-1 years at separation. Only 7.8 % of children were aged 12 or more when their parents separated. This small percentage is attributable to the exclusion from our sample of children who were aged 18 or over at the time of the survey; children who were in their teens when separation occurred were too old to be part of the sample within a few years of their parents’ separation.

The majority (64.3 %) of children in the sample—almost equally proportioned according to gender—were born to married parents. Among this group, we distinguished those (19.8 %) whose parents had cohabited before marrying, since past research has shown these parents to be more likely to separate than those who had married directly (Le Bourdais et al., 2000). Only 10.6 % of the children in the sample were born within a cohabiting union. Over one-third of the children (35.3 %) had parents living less than 10 kilometres apart, and almost 40 % had parents who lived 50 kilometres or more from each other.

The “father” characteristics (Table 3) include: age at survey, education, employment pattern, and subsequent family history (i.e., forming a new union, having another child, or living with a new partner’s children). Unfortunately, even though the effect of fathers’ income on father-child contact has been well-documented in the literature, this variable could not be included in this analysis because of the large number of missing values for it. However, other variables, such as education and employment (and even age, to some extent), are likely to capture at least part of the income effect.

As can be seen in Table 3, nearly 1/4 of fathers were over the age of 45 years at the time of the survey, and 2/3 were aged 30 to 44 years. Education is summarized in a four-category variable that refers to the highest level of studies reached at the time of the survey. In our sample, just over 1/5 of separated fathers had not graduated from high school while, at the other extreme, almost 1/4 had a university education.

GSS respondents were asked if they had worked at a job or business during the twelve months preceding the survey, and those who were employed reported the number of weeks and hours worked and their work schedule (regular day schedule, or evening, night, or weekend shifts). By combining the data gathered on these questions, we constructed a “work pattern” variable that distinguishes the work status (full-time as opposed to part-time) and the employment schedule (atypical hours as opposed to regular “9 to 5”). Fathers who, in the course of the previous year, had worked less than 32 weeks or who had worked an average of less than 30 hours per week were classified as working part-time. Only 6.7 % of fathers did not report paid work during the year preceding the survey and 17.8 % had worked on a part-time basis. Among those working full-time, six fathers out of ten reported working regularly in the evening, at night, or during weekends.

TABLE 3
Weighted descriptive statistics of the characteristics at the father level included in the analysis of the time that separated fathers spend with their children^a

Variable	Category	Frequency
Socioeconomic characteristics		
Age of father	Under 30 years	12.6
	30-44 years	64.8
	45 years and over	22.6
Highest level of education	No high-school diploma	21.0
	Secondary diploma	17.7
	Post-secondary	36.9
	University	24.4
Employment pattern	Full-time/day	29.7
	Full-time/evening, weekend	45.8
	Part-time	17.8
	Not working	6.7
Family trajectory		
% who entered a new union		54.8
% living with stepchildren		10.3
% who had a child in new union		11.9
Attitudinal variables		
Relationship with own father	Very close/better than own father	19.2
	Very close/not better than own father	37.4
	Not very close/better than own father	33.5
	Not very close/not better than own father	9.9
Happy to have had child	Yes	90.0
	No	10.0
Not responsible for childcare tasks	Strongly disagree	35.9
	Do not strongly disagree	64.1
Satisfied with time with children	Yes	67.9
	No	32.1

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (GSS), Cycle 10: the Family, 1995.

^a Based on weighted data (N=268 fathers).

The GSS also collected information on the retrospective family histories of respondents—on their conjugal unions and on all the children they had adopted, given birth to, or raised during the course of their lives. These data not only enabled us to describe the family situations of the responding parents at the time of the survey, they also made it possible to reconstruct the conjugal and parental

trajectories followed by respondents after a separation or the birth of a child. By combining all relevant information, we established the trajectories of fathers from the breakdown of the union in which the youngest child in the sample was born up to the time of the survey. Three dichotomous variables summarize this history: (a) whether the father has formed a new union, (b) whether his new partner has children of her own living in the household, and (c) whether the father has had another child within a new union. As shown in Table 3, more than half the fathers had entered a new union by the time of the survey, 10.3% had lived with a step-child, and 11.9% had had a child within a new union.

Separated parents were asked about their degree of satisfaction with different aspects of the custody and living arrangements of their children. Unfortunately, the complexity of the pathways followed in the GSS questionnaire meant that certain questions were not asked about all children included in our sample. Consequently, only two such variables are included in our analysis. Measured at the child level (Table 2), the first variable contrasts fathers who declared themselves satisfied with the existing custody arrangements (i.e., where and with whom the child lived) with those who were either not satisfied or without an opinion on the subject. The second variable (Table 3) contrasts fathers who were satisfied with the "time spent in general with their children" with those who were dissatisfied or without an opinion. Interestingly, fathers appeared to be more satisfied with the custody arrangements than with the time spent with their children: only one father out of five reported being dissatisfied with the former (Table 2), while one out of three reported dissatisfaction with the latter (Table 3).

The GSS also collected information on respondents' values and attitudes towards several aspects of conjugal and family life, some of which (particularly those related to the paternal role) appeared in a preliminary analysis to be linked to the frequency of father-child contact (see Le Bourdais et al., 2001). For these questions, respondents were asked to select one of four replies, according to whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the statements put to them. Three "paternal role" variables were entered into our analysis. The first one, combining information from two questions, was aimed at identifying the way in which fathers perceived their paternal role in relation to that of their own father. Four categories were here distinguished: (a) men who felt they were close to their own fathers during childhood but who thought that they, themselves, were better fathers; (b) men who felt close to their fathers, but who did not consider themselves to be better fathers; (c) men who were not close to their own fathers and who felt they were better fathers; and (d) men who were not very close to their fathers,⁵ but did not feel they were better fathers. Table 3 reveals that slightly more than half the fathers (56.6 %) felt very close to their father during childhood; in such cases, two fathers out of three (37.4 out of 56.6. %) did not consider themselves to be better paternal figures than their fathers. By contrast, nearly eight fathers out of ten (33.5 of 43.4 %) who did not feel close to their fathers when growing up thought of themselves as better fathers.

The second paternal role variable contrasts fathers who felt that "the fact of having children made them happier" with those who did not; for 90% of fathers, children constituted a source of happiness. The third and last variable contrasts fathers who strongly disagreed with the statement that "everyday tasks linked to chil-

dren are not principally men's responsibility" with the other fathers (including those without an opinion); approximately one father out of three strongly disagreed with that statement.

Method

The aim of our analysis is to identify the net effect that each independent variable exerts on the frequency of contact fathers maintain with their children. The fact that fathers can have several children whom they see at different frequencies⁶ gives our data a particular structure (referred to as "hierarchical"). Put differently, children (level 1) are viewed as being "nested" within fathers (level 2). The dependent variable (frequency of father-child contact) is measured at the level of each child, while the independent variables are, as we have seen, measured either for the children, or for the fathers. This type of data cannot be analysed with conventional ordinary least squares regression models, for the hierarchical data structure introduces dependency and covariance between observations sharing the same context (i.e., children with the same father); this produces unstable estimates and biased standard errors. Consequently, we use a "multi-level" type of model to correctly estimate the effect of the independent variables (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Goldstein, 1995; Marchand, 2001). Multi-level models do not assume that observations are independent, and they have the property of producing stable parameter estimates and unbiased standard errors that take into account the covariance between observations (Hox & Kreft, 1994). This method makes it possible to distinguish the proportion of the dependent variable's variation originating in differences between children from that stemming from differences between fathers, and to evaluate the contribution made by independent variables in explaining the variation at each level of the data hierarchy.⁷

The dependent variable included in the regression analysis is the number of days (continuous duration) that fathers spent with children in the course of the year preceding the survey or, more exactly, the square root of this number of days; this transformation was made because the number of days did not follow the normal distribution required by the regression model. Certain independent variables, such as age or the time since separation, are introduced into the model as continuous variables; others, measuring either a state (such as the type of parental union at birth) or a threshold effect (such as level of education), have been entered in the form of dichotomous or polytomous variables, with the reference category given in parentheses (see Table 4). Models 2 to 4 include the socio-demographic characteristics of children and fathers, and attitudinal variables are added in Model 5. After excluding cases with missing information for one or more of the variables included in the model, the final sample is based on 410 children declared by 268 fathers.

RESULTS

Table 4 presents the results of the multi-level regression analysis, and contains the regression coefficients associated with the father and child characteristics. These coefficients indicate the net effect that each of the independent variables has on the time fathers spent with children when the other characteristics are controlled for. A

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION

negative coefficient indicates that the variable in question decreased the amount of

TABLE 4
Effect of various socio-demographic and attitudinal variables on the time
that separated fathers spend with their children
(Coefficients of the multi-level regression model)^a

Variable ^b	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Constant	8.328	6.986	-11.230	-10.500	-11.230
Child variables					
Sex (boys)		0.184		-0.016	-0.056
Time elapsed since separation		-0.021		-0.099	-0.121
Age at separation		1.607*		1.406*	1.156*
(Age at separation) ²		-0.231*		-0.200*	-0.173*
(Age at separation) ³		0.010*		0.009*	0.008*
Type of union at birth (marriage)					
- Out of union		1.059		1.149	1.267
- Marriage preceded by cohabitation		-1.546		-1.273	-1.351
- Cohabitation		-0.074		0.241	1.080
Distance (< 10 km)					
- 10-49		0.261		-0.210	-0.032
- 50-399 km		-1.910*		-1.757*	-0.561
- 400 km and over		-3.002*		-2.855*	-1.562
Satisfied with custody (no)					1.446*
Father variables					
Age			1.167*	1.082*	0.876*
(Age) ²			-0.015*	-0.014*	-0.012*
Highest level of education (Secondary)					
- < Secondary			-1.158	-1.319	-1.111
- Post-secondary			-0.280	-0.253	-0.575
- University			-1.398	-0.908	-1.193
Employment (Full-time/day)					
- Not working			-2.450	-1.442	-0.190
- Part-time			-2.654*	-2.339*	-2.538*
- Full-time/evening, night or weekend			-1.140	-1.169	-0.965
New union (no)			-0.204	0.380	0.541
Child in new union (no)			-1.516	-0.445	-0.725
Stepchild (no)			0.640	0.343	-0.717
Relationship with own father (very close/better)					
- Very close /not better					-1.126
- Not very close/better					0.102
- Not very close/not better					-1.171
Not responsible for childcare tasks (strongly disagree)					0.847
Happy to have had child (no)					2.293*
Satisfied with time with child (no)					3.001*
Variance—level 2	26.16	22.81	22.93	20.15	16.61
Variance—level 1	7.24	6.60	7.24	6.63	6.93
Deviance	2747.25	2709.43	2730.75	2692.92	2447.13
χ^2 (degrees of freedom)	n.a.	37.82 (11)	16.51 (11)	54.33 (22)	86.60 (29)
R ² ₂	n.a.	0.12	0.10	0.21	0.30
R ² ₁	n.a.	0.12	0.10	0.20	0.29

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey (GSS), Cycle 10: the Family, 1995.

^a Weighted data, brought back to the original sample size (N₁=410 children and N₂=268 fathers).

^b For the dichotomous and polytomous variables, the reference category is given in brackets.

* Coefficient is significant at the 0.05 threshold.

contact, while a positive coefficient increased it in relation to the reference category given in parentheses. Other statistics given in Table 4 include the proportion of variation in the number of days explained by the independent variables included in the model (R^2), and the variance calculated for the fathers (level 2) and children (level 1). For example, the child characteristics taken as a whole (included in model 2 of Table 4) explain 12% of the variation between children (R^2_1) and 12% of the variation between fathers (R^2_2). This contribution is statistically significant at a threshold of 0.001 ($\chi^2 = 37.82$ with 11 degrees of freedom).

The constant in Model 1 corresponds to the average value of the dependent variable, and is equal to the square root of the average number of days fathers spent with their children. Once squared, the number indicates that each child spent an average of 70 days a year with his or her father. Most of the observed variation in the number of days fathers and children spent together is located at the father level:⁸ 78% of the total variation in the number of days comes from differences between the fathers; consequently, only 22% of the variation is situated at the child level. In other words, the analysis reveals that fathers have much the same behaviour with each of their children and that differences observed between children of the same father are relatively small.

Models 2 and 3 include only child and father characteristics respectively, while the fourth and fifth models integrate both the father and the child characteristics. In Model 4, the coefficient associated with the child variables shows, first, that the child's sex does not appear to be significantly related to the frequency of contact fathers maintain with their children following separation, once other socio-demographic characteristics are controlled for. Surprisingly, whether parents were married or cohabiting at the child's birth also has no significant impact on the frequency of contact. The link noted in other studies may reflect differences in the age of children at separation or in the time elapsed since separation rather than differences in the type of union itself. For instance, children born outside marriage tend to be younger when their parents separate than are those born to parents who married directly, which would partly explain why they saw their father less frequently.

The child's age at separation does appear to be strongly linked to the amount of contact between fathers and children, confirming the crucial role of the point in time at which parental separation occurs in children's lives. However, the effect of the child's age at separation is not linear. To correctly model the link between age at separation and frequency of contact, we added two variables representing the age at separation squared and cubed. The first coefficient is positive, indicating at first a positive relation between child's age at separation and the number of days spent with the father; later on, this relationship is inverted (the coefficient is negative when associated with the age squared), before becoming positive once again (when associated with the age cubed). Constructing the curve attached to the regression parameters shows that the frequency of father-child contact rises as the child's age at separation increases until approximately 5.5 years; it then decreases slightly until the age of 10 years, from which point the amount of contact starts to increase sharply again.

This result is hardly unexpected. During the early years of life, it is likely that maintaining father-child contact after separation is directly related to the amount of time a father had to create close ties with his child before separation, thus the increase in contact with children who were preschool-aged at separation. The rise observed at pre-adolescence separations probably reflects a combination of the concrete links children established with fathers before the separation and their greater autonomy in the decision to see their fathers. Fathers have more contact with older children, and this effect remains even when the length of time since separation is taken into account. The level of contact tends to decrease as the time since separation (or since birth, in the case of children born outside a union) lengthens, but the effect associated with this variable is no longer statistically significant once the effect of the child's age at separation is controlled for.

The distance separating the parents' homes has a significant influence on the frequency of contact between fathers and children. Thus, when mothers and fathers live 50 kilometres or more apart, children see their father much less often than when the distance separating the two households is less than 10 kilometres (reference group in the equation).

Among the fathers' socio-demographic characteristics, only their age at the time of the survey and the work pattern in the year preceding the survey appear to be significantly linked to the degree of father-child contact. Education, a more recent union, having new children, or living with stepchildren do not show any significant influence on the amount of time fathers and children spend together.

Fathers' age has a non-linear effect on frequency of contact. The regression coefficients attached to the age and to the age-squared are both significant. The first coefficient is positive, showing that the number of days spent with children increases as fathers' age at survey increases, up to a certain age; after this age, contact levels start to decline, as indicated by the negative coefficient associated with the age squared. Constructing the curve attached to these regression coefficients shows that contacts increase until around 40, and then start to decrease.

Fathers working part-time spend significantly less time with their children than fathers employed full-time with regular day schedules (coefficient of -2.339 for the former compared with 0 for the latter). One might have expected the opposite result, on the assumption that fathers who work part-time would have more free time to devote to their children. However, since part-time work is often characterized by atypical working hours, it is possible that fathers working part-time are actually less free to see their children. The most probable explanation for the association, though, is that fathers in full-time employment have higher incomes than part-time workers.

The introduction of the attitudinal variables into the equation (model 5) increases the proportion of variation explained between fathers and between children, from around 20% to 30% (compare the R^2 in models 4 and 5). Introducing these variables into the analysis hardly changes the impact of fathers' and children's socio-demographic characteristics on the amount of time they spend together. Thus, the child's age at separation, the father's age at the time of the survey, and his work pattern remain significantly linked to the level of father-child contact. However, the distance separating the parents' domiciles is no longer significant once the attitude

and perception variables are added to the model, suggesting that fathers who live far from their children and who see them less often are also less likely to declare themselves happy to have had children and satisfied with the time they spend with them in general.

The findings related to the attitude variables themselves are as expected. Fathers who are satisfied with custody arrangements and with the time they spent with children, and who are happy to have had children, have more frequent contact with their children than those who are not. It is impossible, however, to draw any conclusion as to the direction of the observed relation between fathers' attitudes and perceptions and the amount of contact they have with their children: is the satisfaction expressed by fathers concerning custody arrangements, for example, the cause or the consequence of how much time they spend with their children? To determine the direction of these associations, we would need prospective data on father's attitudes before and after separation.

DISCUSSION

The increase in separation and divorce since the early 1970s has considerably modified the relationship between fathers and children. Following a separation, children often stop living with their fathers, and a substantial proportion of them eventually lose contact altogether. According to the fathers studied in this research, almost 1/4 of the children had little contact with their fathers, and one child out of six had had no contact at all in the year preceding the survey. In reality, the portrait may well be more sombre than the one painted here, and probably closer to the image provided by mothers, who reported that 1/4, rather than 1/6, of children had not seen their father in the twelve months prior to the 1995 GSS.

With research showing a consistent and positive link between the amount of time fathers and children spend together and the regularity of child-support payments, the importance of contact for children's living conditions is clear: facilitating father-child contact after separation will also help keep fathers involved in the financial support of their children. Since research on the impact of child support payments shows a positive relation with children's educational attainment, and a negative one with externalizing problems, such as aggression and delinquency (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Lamb, 1997; McLanahan et al., 1994), facilitating father-child contact may also assist children in adjusting to their new situations. How much time separated fathers spend with children, however, depends to a great extent on three factors: (a) how much contact fathers *wish* to maintain with their children, (b) to what extent fathers' wishes are incorporated into the agreement reached by separating parents concerning visiting and custody arrangements, and (c) how easily these arrangements are implemented. Understanding the dynamics of father-child contact rests largely upon how close we get to finding answers to these questions. Although they were not asked directly in the survey, GSS data provide elements of the answers that were taken into consideration in our analysis.

The first of these three elements, how much contact fathers wish to maintain with their children, hinges largely on how "close" they were to them prior to se-

paration. Although direct data is rarely available on this question, indirect information can provide some clues. The question concerning the extent to which fathers considered the daily tasks of childcare to be a man's responsibility gives an idea of how much fathers may have been involved in their children's care before separation. In addition, societal changes in paternal role expectations, which have evolved over time from the "breadwinner" model to that of a more actively involved father, may be partly reflected in the age of the father in 1995, with younger fathers more likely to adopt the latter role. The type of conjugal union may also have an impact, due to legal differences related to the termination of married rather than common-law unions; it may also indicate a man's commitment to family values. Married men may be more likely to remain committed to their children after separation. Finally, all things being equal, the older children are when parents separate, the longer they have had to develop relationships with their fathers.

Our analysis showed that, of these factors, only the age of fathers at survey and the age of children at separation appeared to be statistically linked to the amount of time fathers spend with children. The child's age at separation, in particular, emerges as an important predictor of level of contact, with young children especially at risk of losing contact with their fathers. Where young children are involved, the types of visiting arrangements normally on offer may be inappropriate or difficult to implement. Shared custody arrangements, or even overnight stays with fathers, for example, may be disturbing for some very young children and thus may make it even more difficult for fathers to develop the kind of relationships that will ensure ongoing involvement. More frequent, shorter visits might be more suitable—seeing the child daily for an hour or two, for example, might not only maintain paternal involvement but actually strengthen a relationship that had little time to form before separation.

The father's age also had a significant effect on the number of days spent with children, which rose as the age of fathers increased up to the age of about forty years, and then started to decline. However, it is unclear how this relationship should be interpreted. It could indicate a life-cycle effect (or passage of time), meaning that fathers lose interest in their children after a certain age. More probably, it indicates a cohort trend, which would confirm recent findings that contact with non-resident fathers became more frequent during the 1990s (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

The second of these elements, the ability to balance the mothers' and fathers' needs and expectations in the arrangements they make for their children, has been more directly measured by the GSS. Comparing fathers' level of satisfaction with the amount of contact, on the one hand, and with custody arrangements, on the other, provides an interesting insight into the question of father-child contact, though it must be remembered that the fathers who may be the least satisfied are underrepresented in the father sample. While relatively satisfied with their children's custody arrangements (i.e., the place and person with whom their children live), fathers are far less positive about the amount of time they spend with them. This result seems to suggest that many fathers are not asking for custody of their children, just for more frequent access to them. Facilitating contact with their children for these frustrated fathers might reduce the likelihood that they renege on their financial obligations towards them.

The third element, the implementation of custody arrangements, is perhaps the most difficult to assess in that it depends on a wide range of factors, many of which change over time. The most important factor may well be the quality of the relationship maintained by the separated parents and the amount of conflict involved in implementing the arrangements—information that was not available in our data set. In another study, based on the first panel of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) conducted in 1994-95, we showed that the degree of tension parents reported over visiting rights and living arrangements was closely linked to the frequency of contact that fathers maintain with their children (Marcil-Gratton & Le Bourdais, 1999). Other factors, however, are also of relevance. Regular contact is very hard to maintain when the separated parents reside at a distance, for example; geographic proximity facilitates enormously the movement of children from one parent's home to the other and is indispensable for shared living arrangements. Reaching an agreement about child-support payments is also an essential ingredient of father-child contact, as is the father's willingness or ability to fulfill his financial obligations. Contact and child support may also undergo changes as a result of the arrival of a new partner and children in the life of either the mother or father. Problems with data collection meant that only some of these elements could be satisfactorily integrated into our analysis.

The significant and negative association between the distance separating parents' homes and the frequency of father-child contact disappeared once father's perceptions were controlled for, indicating that fathers who value their paternal role, and are satisfied within it, tend to live close to their children. However, it is not possible to determine to what extent the level of happiness or satisfaction expressed by fathers is the cause or the consequence of the distance separating them from their children. In other words, it may be the less "committed" fathers who are prepared to live far from their children.

The absence of an association with the father's conjugal history, both in terms of the type of union at birth and in the formation of new families, came as a surprise. Several elements could explain why these variables had no significant effect. First, the small sample size is undoubtedly partly responsible for the absence of statistical significance of coefficients with relatively high values. In addition, the bias in the sample of children reported by fathers certainly helps explain the absence of a link with union type at birth. Research has shown that separated fathers who were never married to or never lived with the mother(s) of their children are more likely to have little or no contact with those children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998; Seltzer, 1991). Given the greater difficulty of reaching fathers who rarely see their children, a sizeable fraction of these men may well have been excluded from the GSS sample.

One limit of the analysis is our inability to integrate information on the financial aspects of post-separation arrangements, in particular the fathers' income. Due to the high number of missing values, it was not possible to assess directly the effect of a father's ability to pay on the frequency of contact with his children. The only insight into this question was provided by the work pattern of fathers during

the year preceding the survey. Fathers working part-time spent considerably less time with their children than those working regular daytime hours on a full-time basis. Somewhat surprising at first, this result probably reflects the fact that fully-employed fathers have, on average, higher incomes, and that fathers with higher incomes tend to see their children more regularly. This result lends support to the hypothesis advanced in other research (Seltzer, 1994), suggesting that fathers who are unable to meet their financial obligations may cut off links with their children.

CONCLUSIONS

Further analyses need to be carried out if we hope to reach a fuller understanding of the process set in motion by separation. In particular, access to longitudinal data following the same individuals through the different stages of their lives is essential. Such data will permit us to disentangle the life cycle and cohort effects in our findings concerning, for example, the impact of fathers' age at the survey and the children's age at separation. In addition, with longitudinal data, it will be possible to examine the effect that pre-separation conditions, such as fathers' involvement with their children, the level of conflict between parents, or the income and employment patterns of both parents, have on the custody and access agreements reached by parents following separation, and on fathers' subsequent relationships with their children. Finally, only prospective data that follow individuals as they experience family change will allow us to understand the interaction between attitudes and behaviour, and the impact family transitions have on this relationship. We will be able to explore, for example, how fathers' attitudes and behaviour towards their children before separation are linked to their involvement with their children afterwards, and how the experience of separation may itself modify the attitudes held by fathers about family life. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY), which tracks a large sample of Canadian children as they grow up, will provide the data necessary to answer many of these questions and enable us to gain a better insight into the variety of father-child contact pathways taken by fathers who no longer share a residence with their children's mother.

At the same time, this research needs to be enhanced by analyses based on other surveys, such as the General Social Survey on the Family (GSS) conducted by Statistics Canada in 2001. Despite the richness of the NLSCY data, it has a major weakness when it comes to explaining why fathers remain close to their children in the event of a separation: very few fathers were interviewed in the context of the NLSCY. The "person most knowledgeable" about the child was asked to reply to the questions; more than 90% of the time, this person was a woman, in most cases the mother of the child. The NLSCY does not, therefore, make it possible to broach the question of father-child contact directly from the man's point of view, as the General Social Survey does. In addition, the 2001 GSS has improved on the 1995 GSS in two ways highly relevant to research in this area: (a) the majority of difficulties created by problems with the paths followed by the 1995 GSS questionnaire have been ironed out, and (b) the sample is much larger (by two to three times) than it was in 1995, and should therefore permit more sophisticated analyses than those carried out here. Exploiting both this survey and the NLSCY should yield numerous studies that will enhance our understanding of the factors likely to

increase fathers' involvement with their children following separation.

NOTES

1. For a certain number of children, it was necessary to adjust the number of days reported by the respondent. For example, since fathers who declared that their children lived with them full time were not asked the number of days they spent with them, we estimated this number by subtracting from 365 the number of days these children spent with their mother. In addition, when the total number of days spent with the mother and father exceeded 365, we inputted the number of days spent with the respondent as the difference between 365 and the number of days the child spent with his or her other parent.
2. The sum of $13.5 + 4.0 + 12.9$.
3. The sum of $6.7 + 3.3 + 6.8$.
4. For more details, see chapter 5 in Le Bourdais et al. (2001).
5. Fathers who did not feel very close to their own father includes also those who were without an opinion on the subject; the same is true for those who do not consider themselves better fathers.
6. In our sample, approximately 40% of the fathers with more than one child saw their children for a different number of days.
7. The estimation of parameters is based on Goldstein's (1986) iterative generalized least square (IGLS) method, integrated into the software MLwiN (Goldstein et al., 1998). Where they converge, the estimates are those with the maximum likelihood. MLwiN produces standard errors for the fixed and random parts of the model, as well as a deviance value (-2 log-likelihood) that could be used to calculate a likelihood ratio test, the latter having a chi-square distribution with a number of degrees of freedom equal to the additional model parameters (Bryk and Raudenbush, 1992).
8. The inter-class correlation, which represents the relation between the variance of fathers and the sum of the variance of fathers and children, is estimated at 0.78 (i.e. $[26.16 / (26.16 + 7.24)] = 0.78$).

RÉSUMÉ

La propension des pères à s'acquitter de leurs obligations alimentaires envers leurs enfants après une séparation est étroitement liée à la fréquence des contacts qu'ils maintiennent avec eux. La détermination des facteurs susceptibles d'accroître la fréquence des contacts pères/enfants constitue donc une étape cruciale si l'on veut réduire les risques de pauvreté auxquels sont confrontés les enfants de parents séparés. C'est là l'objectif des auteures de cet article, qui ont recours aux données colligées auprès de pères séparés, interrogés dans l'Enquête sociale générale sur la famille de 1995, pour mener une analyse de régression multiniveaux. L'analyse examine l'effet sur la fréquence des contacts pères/enfants des caractéristiques sociodémographiques des enfants et des pères, des attitudes des pères face à la vie familiale et de leur degré de satisfaction à l'égard des arrangements de garde et des droits de visite.

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