

Staying involved? The relationship between pre-separation fathering and post-separation contact



Parental separations are on the rise, and nearly half of all children growing up in the UK today are not living with both biological parents by the time they reach adulthood. Using prospective analysis of a large UK longitudinal study, [Tina Haux](#) and [Lucinda Platt](#) ask: are fathers who stay in more frequent contact different from those who lose touch? They identify a modest association between pre-separation fathering and post-separation contact. But even for more involved fathers this

declines over time.

In the face of high rates of parental separation, while many children retain strong bonds with both parents, others face more limited, and often declining contact with their non-resident parent, typically their father. These patterns contrast with the well-documented increases in fathers' involvement in raising their children in couple families. Since ongoing involvement of both parents post-separation is potentially important for the well-being and outcomes of children, there is a strong current policy focus on enabling fathers to be more involved. However, this implies that contact patterns are independent of fathers' prior engagement with their children and only impacted by factors following the separation. While there is considerable evidence on such post-separation factors associated with the loss of contact, including either parent starting a new relationship or having further children, there is scant research into whether early involvement of fathers with their child prior to separation shapes their subsequent contact patterns. That is, are fathers who were more actively involved in parenting their children prior to separation, also more likely to stay in more regular contact and vice versa? While it would seem to be intuitive that this would be the case, there is little direct evidence. The only studies that address this question so far have used retrospective reports which are subject to recall bias. That is, those with better current relationships with a parent may recall more positive early involvement.

In a recent study, we shed unique new light on this question. We use detailed information from the Millennium Cohort Study, a nationally representative study of children born in 2000-2002. We draw on fathers' reports of their involvement in their child's lives and family characteristics for around 2,800 fathers who are surveyed when their child is young and subsequently separate from the child's mother. We then investigated how far this was associated with three measures of contact: having any contact, frequency of contact, and frequency of overnight stays. We concentrated on separations that took place before the child was aged 11, as the early years are the time when families are more at risk of splitting, and when fathers are most likely to lose contact. Fathers' involvement with their child was measured both as active fathering, i.e. doing things with the child, and solo fathering, that is looking after the child on his own, which may be particularly important for building bonds and establishing trust and confidence in parenting. We were also able to distinguish between formerly cohabiting and married parents, which addresses the recurrent policy debate over the rise in cohabiting unions and whether they are associated with greater instability.

The study showed that those fathers who were more involved with their child prior to separating from the child's mother were somewhat *less* likely to lose touch with their child, and tended to have more frequent contact, both in terms of regularity of meeting up and overnight stays. This relationship between pre-separation fathering and post-separation contact was particularly marked for those fathers who were previously married to the child's mother.

The association though clear and consistent was, however, modest in size. Even the most involved fathers did not see their child for many more days per week than those least involved prior to separation. Moreover, contact reduced with time since separation for more involved just as much as for less involved fathers. Overall, around 15% of fathers had no contact with their child, and each additional year of time since separation increased the probability of non-contact by around 2.5 percentage points. Looking more closely, the impact of time since separation was greatest for those who separated when the child was younger.

The fact that there was loss of contact over time regardless of prior paternal involvement suggests that there are not simply 'good' fathers who are more involved and stay in touch regardless. It demonstrates the challenges in maintaining and supporting a high degree of contact after lives diverge. At the same time, our research shows how facilitating fathers' involvement may still increase the *levels* of contact, even if it cannot stop the reduction over time.

Overall, the findings suggest that paternal involvement prior to separation matters for subsequent father-child relationships. It therefore makes sense to consider how it could be further facilitated, particularly in the early years, through policies such as paternity and earmarked parental leave. Maintaining post-separation contact with younger children is, however, likely to remain challenging even for non-resident fathers with high levels of paternal engagement.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in *The European Journal of Population*.

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