

Changes in grandparent-grandchild contact ten years after divorce

Weverthon Machado, Anne Brons, Anne-Rigt Poortman

Utrecht University

Background and theory

Parents (i.e. the middle generation) play a crucial role in mediating the relationship between children and their grandparents, thus parental divorce can have major impacts on the frequency of grandchild-grandparent contact (Jappens, 2018; Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016; Kemp, 2007; Westphal et al., 2015). In fact, children with divorced parents meet their grandparents less often than children whose parents are still married (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016). But this contact can vary significantly across postdivorce families, especially when comparing maternal and paternal grandparents. Previous research has highlighted two factors explaining variation in grandchild-grandparent contact after divorce: *opportunities* for contact facilitated by the middle generation and the parent's *needs for support* (e.g. grandparental involvement with childcare). Owing to these factors, contact with grandparents in postdivorce families is strongly dependent on residence arrangements: children who live most of the time with the mother have more frequent contact with the maternal grandparents, the opposite is true for children who live most of the time with the father, and children in shared residence have similar levels of contact with both sides of the family (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016; Westphal et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, previous studies have focused on grandchild-grandparent contact at one point in time, usually a few years after the divorce or separation, and there is limited evidence on how the contact develops in the long run. Our first research question is: *To what extent does the contact between grandparents and grandchild change during the ten years after divorce/separation?* We hypothesize that divorced parents rely on (emotional, financial, logistic) support from their family especially in the first few years after divorce. Thus, grandchild-grandparent contact might decrease after an initial period of adjustment in which grandparents are more involved in helping their divorced child set up a new life. But we also expect that residence arrangements remain important in structuring opportunities for grandchild-grandparent contact, and that changes in needs for support only matter for the contact with grandparents on the side of a residential parent. Therefore, we posit the following hypotheses for the trajectories of contact:

H1a: Contact with maternal grandparents decreases over time for children in mother-residence and shared residence, and remains stable for children in father-residence arrangements.

H1b: Contact with paternal grandparents decreases over time for children in father-residence and shared residence, and remains stable for children in mother-residence arrangements.

Second, we consider the effects of a quite frequent transition in postdivorce families: the repartnering of the parents. Thus, our second research question is: *to what extent is repartnering of parents associated with the contact between grandparents and grandchildren?* A new partner, and stepparent, can bring about several changes in family life, including new routines and a residential move, and might affect other relationships in the family system. More specifically, a new partner might reduce both the access of grandparents to grandchildren (e.g. less frequent visits due new routines) and the need for grandparents to help with childcare. We expect that repartnering of a parent mainly affects the contact with their side of the family, rather than with their former in-laws. We therefore hypothesize that:

H2a: Mother's repartnering decreases the contact between child and maternal grandparents

H2b: Father's repartnering decreases the contact between child and paternal grandparents

Data and method

We use the three waves of the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) survey, which sampled a cohort of couples with had minor children and divorced or separated in 2010. Parents were first interviewed two years after divorce and, for approximately 30% of the families, both parents participated in the first wave. The second and third waves were collected, respectively, five and ten years after divorce/separation, and included a refreshment sample. Among a wealth information about postdivorce family life, parents reported on the contact between their child — in case of multiple children, one focal child was selected — and each of the child's living biological grandparents. Thus, for each child, we have information on contact with up to four grandparents, as reported by one or two parents. We take the reports (e.g. contact of child *i* with the maternal grandmother, reported by the mother) as units of analysis, so that our analytic

sample consists of 13,067 reports of contact with maternal grandparents and 11,865 reports of contact with paternal grandparents.

Our main outcome is the number of face-to-face contacts between the child and the grandparent in the past year, reported by parents. This was measured on an 8-point scale ranging from “daily” to “less often than one a year”, which we recoded as counts (e.g. 365 times if the answer was “daily”, 12 if the answer was “once a month”, and so on). The key independent variables are wave, residence arrangement (sole mother residence, sole father residence, shared residence) and indicator for whether the mother and the father have new co-residential parents. We control for a host of sociodemographic characteristics — such as sex and age of the child and of the reporting parent, and grandparent’s sex — as well as other relevant family ... (e.g. levels of conflict).

We model contact separately for maternal and paternal grandparents. Because our dependent variable is a count with overdispersion, and to account for the nested structured of our data, we use multilevel negative binomial models. In additional analyses focusing on the likelihood of having very limited contact (less than once a year) we use multilevel logit models.

Preliminary results

Figure 1 shows the descriptive trajectories of contact with maternal and paternal grandparents by wave and residential arrangement, indicating a generalized decline in contact over time after divorce. Further preliminary analysis indicates that this decline is mostly driven by age of the child.

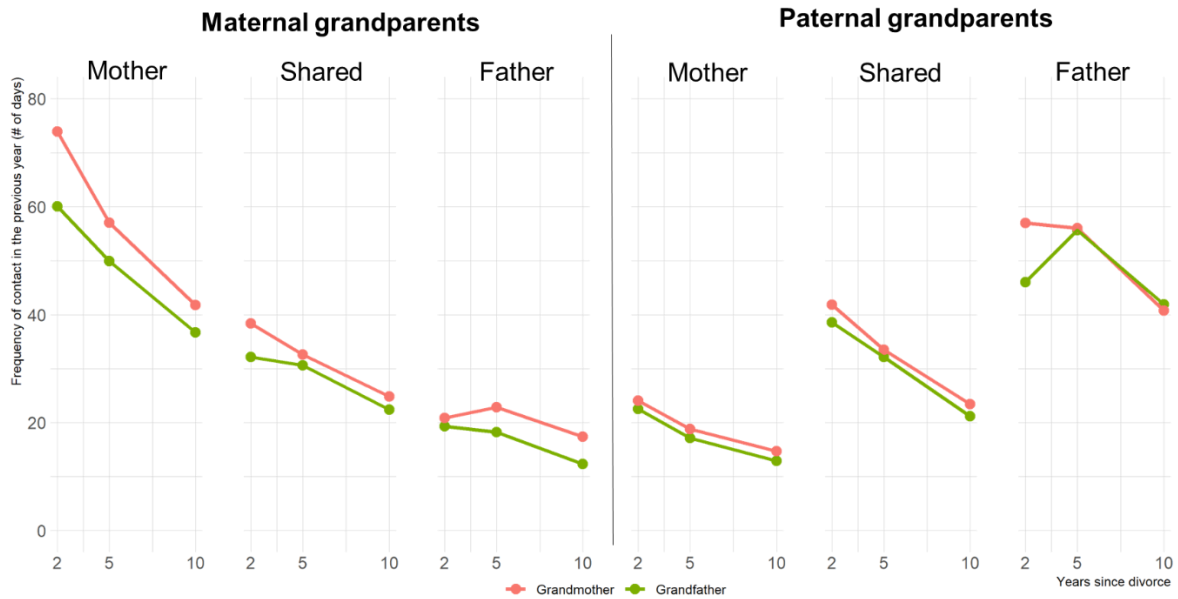


Figure 1 – Frequency of contact between children and (maternal/paternal) grandparents, by residence arrangements and time since divorce

References

- Jappens, M. (2018). Children's Relationships With Grandparents in Married and in Shared and Sole Physical Custody Families. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 59(5), 359–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2018.1454199>
- Jappens, M., & Van Bavel, J. (2016). Parental Divorce, Residence Arrangements, and Contact Between Grandchildren and Grandparents: Contacts With Grandparents After Divorce. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(2), 451–467. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12275>
- Kemp, C. L. (2007). Grandparent—Grandchild Ties: Reflections on Continuity and Change Across Three Generations. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(7), 855–881. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07299599>
- Westphal, S. K., Poortman, A.-R., & Van Der Lippe, T. (2015). What About the Grandparents? Children's Postdivorce Residence Arrangements and Contact With Grandparents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(2), 424–440. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12173>