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Descriptive Finding

**Weakened parent–child ties and the well-being
of older divorced parents**

Matthijs Kalmijn

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Weakened parent–child ties and the well-being of older divorced parents

Matthijs Kalmijn¹

Abstract

BACKGROUND

The consequences of declining parent–child ties after divorce have primarily been studied for children’s well-being and not for parents’ well-being. Some parents lose contact with their children after divorce, and one would expect that such a decline in contact hampers their emotional well-being, in particular when parents are older and children are adults.

OBJECTIVE

This study aims to describe the association between how much contact divorced fathers and mothers have with their children and parents’ well-being in old age.

METHOD

This report uses a survey with a register-based oversample of divorced parents and children from the Netherlands in 2017 ($N = 4,641$). Parents (mean age 62) reported about life satisfaction, health, and loneliness and on contact with two adult children (mean age 34).

RESULTS

A sizeable minority of older divorced parents had little or no contact with their children, although this was more common among fathers than mothers. Parents who had little or no contact with their adult children had substantially lower levels of well-being than parents who had regular contact with their adult children. A negative association was present for mothers and fathers. Divorced parents with a (new) partner were less strongly affected by the lack of contact with children, pointing to the compensating role of partners.

CONCLUSIONS

Reduced contact with adult children after divorce is strongly associated with parents’ well-being. In a more general sense, the findings point to a vulnerable segment of the divorced population that is currently aging.

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CONTRIBUTION

The study presents systematic quantitative evidence on an often assumed but rarely tested association.

1. Introduction

One of the consequences of the rise in divorce is that new problems have arisen in intergenerational relationships (Seltzer and Bianchi 2013). After divorce, children often reside with their mother and experience declining contact and closeness with their father (Köppen, Kreyenfeld, and Trappe 2018; Koster and Castro-Martin 2021; Mortelmans et al. 2011; Poortman 2018). Divorce is associated with conflict, not only between parents themselves but also between parents and children (Yu et al. 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that these negative associations carry over into adulthood (Albertini and Garriga 2011; Amato and Afifi 2006; Danielsbacka and Tanskanen 2018; De Graaf and Fokkema 2007; Hartnett, Fingerma, and Birditt 2018; Kalmijn 2013; Palmtag 2021). Adult children see their parents less often, are less close to them, and receive less support when parents divorce during childhood than when parents remain married. Adverse long-term effects also apply to the amount of support that parents obtain from family members when they are aging and in need of support (Lin 2008). The rise of co-parenting and shared custody after divorce will probably improve parent–child relationships, but most divorced parents who now have adult children got divorced before co-parenting became common (Poortman and Van Gaalen 2017).

Many studies have examined how relationships with parents affect children’s well-being. These studies generally focus on children living with their mother after divorce and associate various indicators of father–child relationships to child outcomes. In general, studies find that good relationships with the father after divorce have a positive association with children’s well-being (Adamsons and Johnson 2013). Such associations are most apparent for aspects of the quality of the relationship with the father (e.g., involvement) and weaker for the amount of contact and visitation. Studies also find moderator effects, however, especially of the quality of the relationship between ex-partners. When the relationship between former partners is good, father–child contact does appear to be beneficial for children’s well-being (Kalmijn 2016). Recent research has extended this line of study to the effects of co-parenting on child well-being, but the evidence in this literature is still developing (Bastaits and Pasteels 2019; Koster and Castro-Martin 2021; Nielsen 2018).

A neglected aspect of the problem lies in the well-being of parents. Although several studies examine how a divorce affects former partners’ well-being and how this differs

between parents and nonparents (Leopold and Kalmijn 2016; Williams and Dunne-Bryant 2006), few studies examine how the well-being of older divorced parents is associated with the relationships they maintain with their (adult) children. Some older parents who divorced when their children were living at home see their grown-up children on a weekly or monthly basis – just as married parents – but there are also divorced parents who have infrequent contact with their children, and some parents even lose contact altogether (Becker and Hank 2022; Juby et al. 2007; Van Spijker, Kalmijn, and Van Gaalen 2022). Theoretically, one would expect that infrequent contact with children is something parents worry about and that some of these parents suffer emotionally from having lost contact. Casual observations and anecdotal evidence suggest that some divorced parents who do not see their children anymore experience mental health problems. There is also a stream of psychological research on ‘parental alienation’ that points in this direction (Baker and Verrocchio 2016; Verrocchio, Baker, and Marchetti 2018), but this research is not based on representative survey data and has been criticized for its measurement (Emery, Otto, and O’Donohue 2005). Parental alienation is related to a loss of contact but includes subjective evaluations of parent–child ties that are not considered here.

In this brief report, large-scale nationally representative survey data were used to examine the association between the amount of contact that divorced mothers and fathers have with their adult children on the one hand and indicators of parents’ well-being on the other hand. The question of this paper was whether older divorced parents who rarely see their adult children have more mental health problems than divorced parents who maintain regular contact with their children. The focus was on parents’ self-rated health, life satisfaction, and loneliness. Adjustments were made for relevant determinants of well-being, including retrospective measures of mental health problems during marriage and interparental conflict. It was further assessed if having a partner may compensate for the potentially negative consequences of losing contact with children. Assessing if these associations exist, for whom, and how strong they are is theoretically important in light of debates about the strength of family ties and relevant for policy debates about post-divorce childcare arrangements.

The present study was done in the Netherlands, which has a moderate divorce rate, generally good parent–child relationships, and relatively egalitarian gender roles (Halman, Luijkx, and Van Zundert 2005; Hank 2007; OECD 2008). The cohorts we cover – parents of children born in the 1970s and 1980s – were the first to experience divorce on a substantial scale. There were improvements in legal custody arrangements in the Netherlands. In 1995 joint legal and physical custody could be requested by former partners, and in 1997, this became the default arrangement after divorce. These changes came relatively late, especially compared to the United States (Cancian et al. 2014; Poortman and Van Gaalen 2017). The practice of shared custody will undoubtedly

strengthen fathers' roles after divorce, but this applies to fathers who currently experience a divorce, not to earlier divorce generations.

2. Data and methods

Data were used from the survey Parents and Children in the Netherlands (OKiN) (Kalmijn et al. 2018). The survey used a register-based oversample of children 25 to 45 whose parents divorced in their youth. Data were collected among children and their parents and stepparents. Parent data were collected with web-based questionnaires in the first half of 2017, with a response rate of 38%. Analyses of nonresponse based on matched parent–child data show that bias in descriptive findings was negligible (Kalmijn 2021). The survey benefited from the fact that it was possible to approach parents and children independently. In other words, parents were approached without obtaining permission or addresses from child respondents first. The design of the survey was approved by the AISSR Ethical Advisory Board of the University of Amsterdam.

The analytical sample consisted of mothers and fathers 50 to 86 years of age (mean age 62) who had children from a divorced or separated union. Children were 21 to 62 (mean age 34) at the time of the survey ($N = 4,641$).² For the initial descriptive findings, data were added from mothers and fathers who did not divorce or separate when their children were growing up ($N = 1,898$). In separate, additional analyses (see below), child data were linked to the sample of divorced parents ($N = 2,643$). Note that not only the responding child can be a child in the data but also other children, which explains the broader age range. The mean age of the children when the parents divorced was 8.8.

Three outcome measures were used: (a) the satisfaction with life scale of Diener and colleagues (1985), using three items ($\alpha = 0.86$), (b) the loneliness scale of De Jong-Gierveld (1987), using six items ($\alpha = 0.82$), and (c) the standard self-rated health question, which was coded from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). The items are presented in Appendix 1. Scales were constructed by taking the standardized items' average and rescaling to a standardized score ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$). Self-rated health was not recoded into a dichotomy as is often done since the standardized scales allowed comparing associations across the three outcomes.

To measure contact with children, questions were asked of two (randomly chosen) children of the previous union. The question was how often they had contact (face to face or telephone) with each of their parents. The answers were categorized into four categories in the descriptives: weekly or more, monthly or bimonthly, less often, and never. In the regression models, a variable indicated whether contact was low (less often

² We include separation with the term divorce.

or never) with one or two children. Two dummy variables were created to assess if the associations were cumulative. A dummy variable was added to control for the number of children. For an explanation of the parametrization of the model, see Appendix 2. An extra variable indicated if the parent had biological children with a new partner (10%).

The following control variables were used: age ($M = 62$, $SD = 6$), education (coded in ISLED, $M = 5.6$, $SD = 2$), employment (yes/no, 55%), whether the parent was single (yes/no, 29%), and whether the parent was treated for mental health problems during marriage (yes/no, 23%). Single was defined as not having a cohabiting or living-apart-together (LAT) partner. In a separate analysis, a control was added for the amount of conflict parents had during the marriage as reported by the child. Conflict was measured with three items, which formed a reliable scale ($alpha = 0.85$, $M = 0.20$, $SD = 0.95$, see Appendix 1). I considered several adult child variables (ever married, ever separated, having children, age, and sex), but there were very few significant effects on parent well-being. The effects of contact with children on parents' well-being were unchanged when adding these variables.

OLS models were estimated for mothers and fathers separately for each outcome. Regression coefficients and p -values are reported. Since the dependent variables were standardized, the effects of the no-contact dummy variables can be interpreted in terms of Cohen's d , which is the most common effect size measure. To test selected gender differences in the effects, mothers and fathers were pooled, and main and interaction effects of gender were included. All regression findings are presented in Table 2. Margin plots are presented in Figure 1. All other variables were held constant at the means to calculate the margins. Mothers and fathers were pooled to present the gender-specific margins in one plot, but interactions between parent gender and all other variables were included in calculating the margins. This ensures that the coefficients in the pooled model were equal to those in the parallel models for mothers and fathers.

3. Findings

Table 1 shows how divorced and married parents differed in the amount of contact with their children. The percentages refer to the oldest of the two (randomly chosen) children. Among divorced fathers, 12% never had contact with this child, and another 6% saw this child less often than once every two months. Among married fathers, such low contact frequencies were rare: 1.5% for the two contact categories combined. Low contact frequencies were also observed among divorced mothers: 7% never had contact with the oldest child, and 5% had infrequent contact.

Table 1: Contact with adult child by gender and divorce of parent

Contact (4-categories)	Parent type					N
	Married mother	Married father	Divorced mother	Divorced father	Total	
	%	%	%	%	%	
Weekly+	85.0	82.8	69.4	54.7	69.1	4,521
(Bi)monthly	13.9	15.7	19.2	27.8	20.5	1,342
Less	0.6	1.3	4.6	5.9	4.0	259
Not at all	0.4	0.2	6.8	11.6	6.4	417
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	6,539
N	927	971	2,653	1,988	6,539	

Source: OKiN data 2017.

Contact can also be evaluated at the family level, aggregating the information for one or two children, depending on family size. For divorced parents with one child, 16% of the fathers and 10% of the mothers had little or no contact with their child. For divorced fathers with two children, 16% had little or no contact with one child, and another 10% had little or no contact with both children. For divorced mothers, the percentages were again lower: 10% for one child and 6% for two children. In sum, these findings show that a sizeable minority of older divorced parents – especially fathers – had weak ties with at least one child.

Table 2 shows how contact with children was associated with the well-being of parents. The dependent variables were standardized so that regression coefficients are interpretable as effect sizes. Divorced mothers and fathers who had little or no contact with one child had lower life satisfaction than mothers and fathers who had regular contact with their child(ren). Having little or no contact with two children had a similar although slightly stronger negative association with life satisfaction.

The associations for loneliness were significant as well and quite strong. For mothers, the association was 0.570 for having little or no contact with one child and 0.959 for having little or no contact with two children. For fathers, the associations were 0.466 and 0.497, respectively. There were also negative associations with self-rated health for both mothers and fathers, but these were smaller than they were for life satisfaction and loneliness.

The coefficients for the control variables were in line with other research on well-being (Layard 2005). Well-being was positively associated with having a partner, employment, a higher education, and being older. Interestingly, the indicator of mental health issues during marriage had substantial effects on all three outcomes, suggesting that this was a relevant control variable.

Table 2: Regression models of the well-being of divorced parents with adult children

	Life satisfaction mothers	Life satisfaction fathers	Loneliness mothers	Loneliness fathers	SRH mothers	SRH fathers
Age	.028 (.000)	.017 (.000)	-.015 (.000)	-.017 (.000)	.013 (.000)	.014 (.000)
Education (ISLED)	.062 (.000)	.056 (.000)	-.067 (.000)	-.040 (.000)	.085 (.000)	.066 (.000)
Paid work	.267 (.000)	.200 (.000)	-.228 (.000)	-.166 (.000)	.405 (.000)	.396 (.000)
Single	-.592 (.000)	-.488 (.000)	.400 (.000)	.547 (.000)	-.256 (.000)	-.247 (.000)
Past mental health issues	-.380 (.000)	-.373 (.000)	.438 (.000)	.462 (.000)	-.283 (.000)	-.247 (.000)
New biological children	-.011 (.868)	-.031 (.628)	-.103 (.111)	-.060 (.333)	.001 (.982)	-.040 (.506)
One child	-.048 (.275)	.060 (.260)	.120 (.007)	.035 (.503)	-.123 (.005)	.016 (.749)
No/little contact one child	-.387 (.000)	-.261 (.000)	.570 (.000)	.466 (.000)	-.210 (.000)	-.124 (.021)
No/little contact two children	-.452 (.000)	-.304 (.000)	.959 (.000)	.497 (.000)	-.239 (.007)	-.206 (.005)
Constant	-1.887 (.000)	-1.167 (.000)	1.023 (.000)	1.049 (.000)	-1.255 (.000)	-1.319 (.000)
Parents	2,687	2,003	2,686	2,002	2,689	2,003
R-square	.186	.134	.180	.183	.126	.114

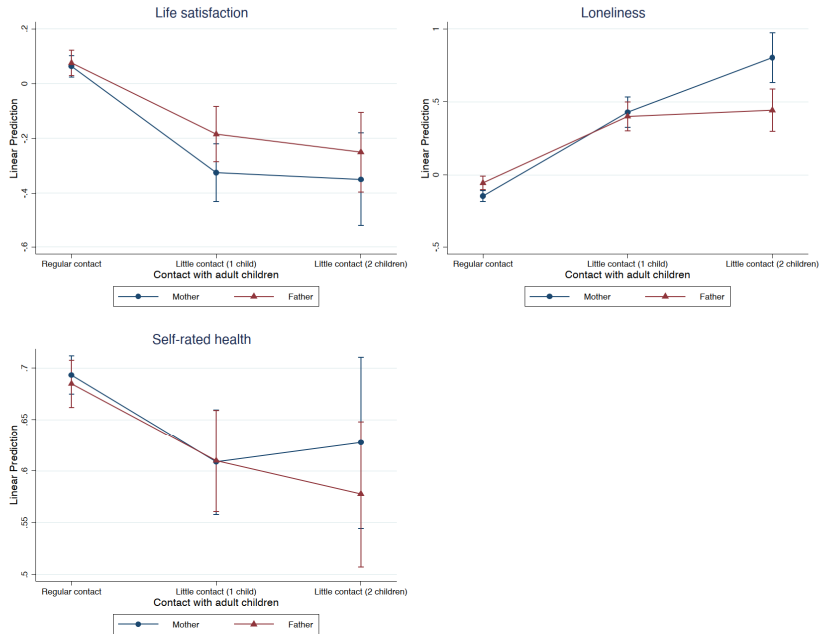
Notes: OKiN data 2017. *P*-values in parentheses. Dependent variables were standardized. Effects of dichotomous variables are effect sizes (Cohen's *d*). SRH = self-rated health.

In an additional analysis for a subsample of parents whose children were also interviewed, a control was added for the amount of conflict between the parents during marriage as reported by the adult child. Conflict had a small effect on loneliness in the expected direction ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.01$ for mothers; $\beta = 0.06$, $p < 0.03$ for fathers) but no significant associations with life satisfaction and self-rated health. A mediation analysis shows that the associations between low contact and well-being were not significantly reduced when interparental conflict was added to the model. Even though it is known that ties with children are more likely to weaken in high-conflict divorces (Yu et al. 2010), it does not seem likely that the association between low contact and well-being is confounded by interparental conflict.

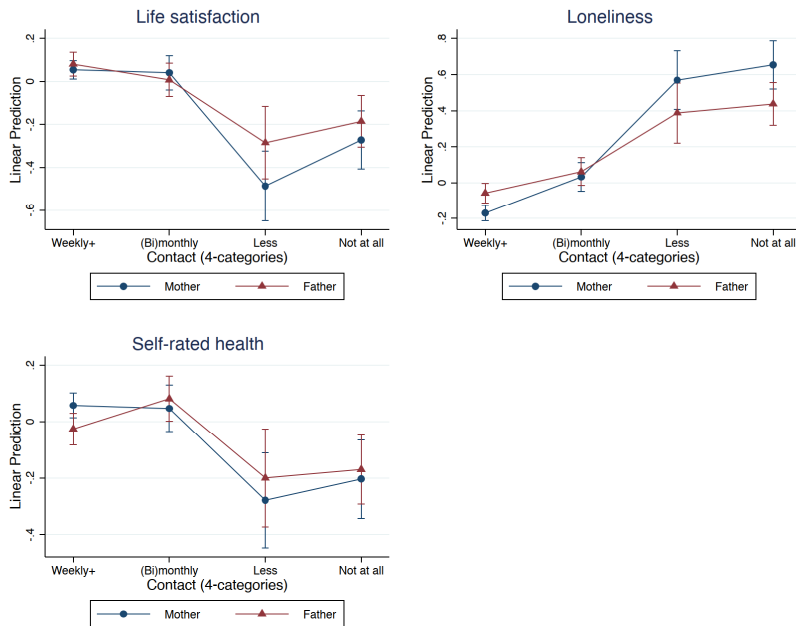
Figure 1 plots the margins for mothers' and fathers' well-being. All other variables were held constant at the means. Mothers and fathers were pooled, but interactions between parent gender and all independent variables were included. The figure confirms the negative association between low contact and well-being and further shows that the associations with loneliness were slightly stronger for mothers than fathers, although this applied only to having no contact with two children. For health and loneliness, there were

also ‘dose effects’ (i.e., additional effects for each child) in a few cases, with additional declines in well-being for losing contact with each additional child.

Figure 1: Parental well-being by contact with children



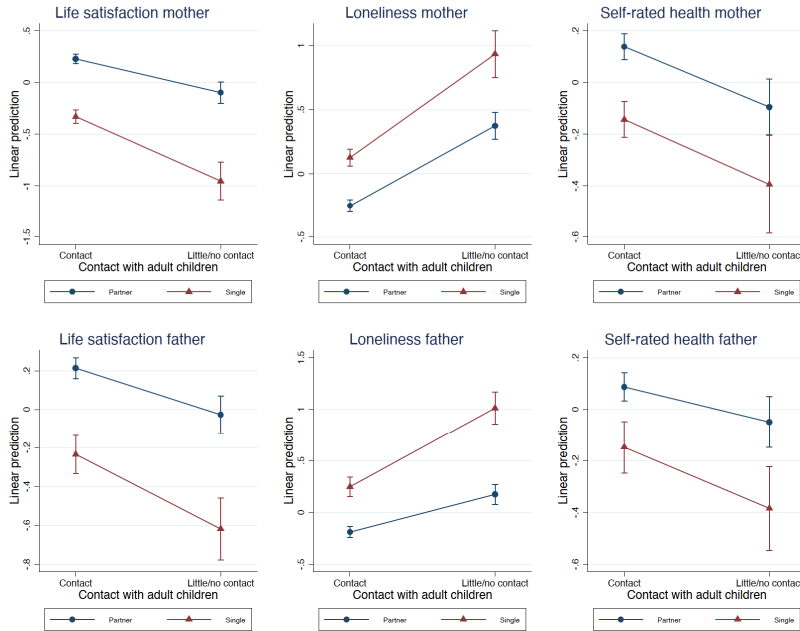
In Figure 2, a more fine-grained measure of contact was used, focusing on the first child only. Four contact categories were compared in the model, and the margins were plotted, holding all other variables constant at the means. The figure shows that the most relevant contrast for well-being was between weekly and (bi)monthly contact on the one hand and less or no contact on the other. This validated the contrast used in the main analyses.

Figure 2: Parental well-being by amount of contact with one child

Finally, I assessed whether having a partner moderated the associations of contact with well-being. The expectation was that having little or no contact with children would be extra detrimental to well-being if divorced parents were single. An interaction between contact and singlehood was included and displayed in Figure 3 for mothers and fathers separately. Contact was dichotomized to simplify the interpretations (no contact with one or two children was combined). There was clear evidence for the main effects of partner status. Divorced parents who were single had lower life satisfaction, experienced more loneliness, and reported poorer health than divorced parents with a (cohabiting or LAT) partner. There was some evidence for moderator effects. The decline in mothers' life satisfaction associated with losing contact was steeper when divorced mothers were single (the p -value for the interaction effect was below 0.01). Similarly, the increase in fathers' loneliness associated with losing contact was steeper for divorced fathers without a partner (the p -value for the interaction was 0.03). Similar but nonsignificant patterns were observed for the loneliness of mothers and the life satisfaction of fathers. In other words, the association between contact and these two aspects of well-being was stronger

for parents who were single than for parents who had a partner, confirming the compensating role of a partner.

Figure 3: Parental well-being by contact with children and singlehood



4. Conclusion

Many studies have been conducted on how relationships between parents and children after divorce affect the well-being of children. This literature is motivated by the deteriorating relationship between the father and the child after divorce and the possible adverse effects of this decline on children’s well-being and life chances in the long run. Little is known, however, about how parent–child relationships after divorce affect the well-being of parents. Some divorced parents maintain regular contact with their adult children, like married parents, but others have little or no contact. Is the well-being of these parents affected by the loss of contact with their children? And is this true for both parents or only for fathers? This brief report used a large national sample with a register-

based oversample of divorced parents in the Netherlands ($N = 4,641$) to examine the prevalence of contact, the association between contact and well-being, and a possible moderator of such an association.

Older divorced parents who had little or no contact with their children had lower well-being than divorced parents who had regular contact with their children. This was true for all three well-being indicators, but the associations were strongest for social well-being (loneliness). The associations were not limited to fathers but were also present for mothers. Since the prevalence of low contact was smaller for mothers, however, the overall impact on well-being was larger for fathers. There was some evidence for 'dose effects,' with further reduced well-being when there was little contact with two children rather than just one child. Moreover, the association between well-being and losing contact was less negative when divorced parents had a (new) partner, suggesting that a partner compensates for losing ties to children.

The relevance of the findings is both theoretical and practical. In practical terms, it is important to recognize mental health issues in an important segment of the divorced population, especially now that the parents of this generation are aging and increasingly in need of support. The combination of having been divorced, having no ties to one's children, and not having a partner may be a risk factor during old age when mental and physical health problems arise. Theoretically, the findings emphasize the importance of intergenerational ties. In the married population, there is less variation in terms of contact, and the variation is possibly less consequential for well-being. The findings in this paper show that the difference between monthly and weekly contact had no association with well-being. Focusing on divorced parents reveals a more meaningful range of contact and shows the potential beneficial effects of intergenerational ties more clearly.

While the main finding of this paper is not unexpected, it has not been documented before for a large representative sample of divorced parents. Moreover, effect sizes were substantial, showing that there are vulnerable subgroups in the population of older divorced couples (e.g., divorced parents who lost contact with their children and did not repartner). The finding also clarifies that a lack of contact with children is not something divorced fathers take for granted as they move on to a new partner with possibly a new set of children.

In closing, we need to make a caveat about causality. It was not possible to assess with the OKiN data if there were causal effects of the amount of contact with adult children on the well-being of parents. A US study shows that poor child well-being resulted in reduced involvement of the father in the child's life (Hawkins, Amato, and King 2007). Whether such an effect also applies to parents' well-being is not known. It is possible that children avoid contact with their divorced mother or father if children have emotional problems. A negative effect of mental health on contact has been found in longitudinal research on student networks but has mostly been attributed to the

withdrawal of students with depressive symptoms (Schaefer, Kornienko, and Fox 2011). The withdrawal mechanism seems less likely for divorced fathers. In our sample, a large percentage of divorced fathers (61%) indicated that they ‘missed their children a lot’ after divorce (Kalmijn 2022: 51).

It is difficult to test nonrecursive effects of divorce, contact, and well-being. Losing ties with children probably develops gradually, and this does not easily fit into a short-term panel design with before-and-after outcome measurements. Collecting (very) long-term panel data that could give better evidence on causality is theoretically possible but excessively difficult in practice mainly because divorce is still not all that common. Not only long panels but also very large samples would be needed. In this report, relevant control variables were used for parents’ past mental health problems and interparental conflicts, which addressed an important share of selection bias. That said, it remains important to emphasize that the finding in this paper is descriptive. Now that the association has been established, more research needs to be done on both mediating and confounding factors.

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Appendix 1: Items used in scales

<i>Satisfaction with life scale of Diener</i>		<i>Alpha</i>
My life is ideal in most respects.	1 = completely agree to 5 = completely disagree.	.86
The conditions of my life are excellent.		
All in all, I am satisfied with my life.		
<i>Loneliness scale of De Jong-Gierveld</i>		<i>Coding</i>
I experience a general sense of emptiness. (R)	1 = yes, 2 = more or less, and 3 = no	.82
There are plenty of people I can lean on when I have problems.		
There are many people I can trust completely.		
There are enough people I feel close to.		
I miss having people around. (R)		
I often feel rejected. (R)		
<i>Interparental conflicts</i>		
There were tensions and/or conflicts between your parents.	1 = never to 4 = often	.85
Your parents did not want to talk to each other for a while.		
There were serious fights between your parents.		

Note: R = item reversed.

Appendix 2: Parametrization of child effects

The model is defined as follows:

$$Y_i = b_0 + b_1 K1_i + b_2 K2_i + b_3 NK_i + e_i,$$

where Y_i is well-being, $K1_i$ is no contact with one child, $K2_i$ is no contact with two children, and NK_i is a dummy for the number of children (1 = one child, 0 = two children). By assumption, $E(e_i) = 0$. Control variables are not included in this explanation. The model implies the following expected values for the five possible groups in the data:

Group	Definition	$E(Y_i)$
A	1 child, with contact	$b_0 + b_3$
B	1 child, without contact	$b_0 + b_1 + b_3$
C	2 children, both with contact	b_0
D	2 children, one with contact, one without	$b_0 + b_1$
E	2 children, both without contact	$b_0 + b_2$

The difference between A and B and between C and D equals b_1 , formally:

$$B - A = (b_0 + b_1 + b_3) - (b_0 + b_3) = b_1.$$

$$D - C = (b_0 + b_1) - b_0 = b_1.$$

In other words, the parameter b_1 reflects the difference of having no contact with one child versus having only child(ren) with contact.

In addition, the difference between C and E equals b_2 , formally:

$$E - C = (b_0 + b_2) - b_0 = b_2.$$

Hence, b_2 captures the difference between having no contact with two children versus having contact with both children.

It was tested whether the effect of having no contact with one child was different in families with one child and families with two children, but these were not significant.