



Adolescents' perception of parenting and communication in one-parent families as opposed to other family types: Results of a representative study for Flanders

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Abstract

Questionnaire data from a Flemish study ($n = 1955$; 10 to 18 year olds) are used to examine whether children living in a one-parent family, in an alternating family context (e.g., shared custody) or in a traditional family differ in their perception of parenting and family communication. These differences are being examined by means of non-parametric tests. The empirical evidence suggests that children's perceptions vary according to the type of family in which they live. Differences in perception are found with respect to most of the parenting and communication aspects examined, i.e., monitoring of the child's activities, feeling of acceptance by the parents, behavioural autonomy experienced by the child, the child's communication with mother and father and mutual communication between parents.

Key words: adolescents, single parents, divorce, traditional family

Introduction

Over the last few decades various changes have occurred in the constitution and functioning of families. Some of these changes may have positive effects for children; the sharp decline in fertility, for example, may have contributed to a reduced risk of affective neglect of children living in families. Other changes might, however, constitute a potential threat to the children's well-being and development. The number of divorces has increased considerably in most Western industrialised countries. In 2001, single-parent households accounted for 9% of all households with dependent children in the EU15 (Lehmann & Wirtz, 2004). The one-parent family has become an increasingly common phenomenon alongside the two-parent family. As a consequence, a significant proportion of young people spend part of their childhood or youth in a one-parent family or in a family that has been reconstituted after remarriage or re-partnering of one of the parents. By the time they turn eighteen, nearly half of the children of married parents in the United States have experienced their parents' separation. According to the National Records Office, in Belgium 11% of children (0-21 year old) live with a single mother (9,7%) or a single father (1,7%) (Vernaillen & Lodewijckx, 2002). This figure is comparable to

European figures. For Western Europe as a whole this percentage is estimated at some 10 to 20% of all children (du Bois-Reymond, 1995).

In this article, we *first* formulate a number of hypotheses on the basis of the findings reported in literature on the functioning of different family types and on children's perceptions in these various types, with particular consideration for parenting features (i.e., parental supervision and monitoring, acceptance by parents, behavioural autonomy) and family communication (i.e., communication between parents and children and communication between parents). From international literature it is obvious that there are significant differences in parenting styles and features between two-parent and single-parent families. The differences between single-parent and two-parent families may precisely originate from the nature of the family structure and from the restrictions placed by single parenting on the adequacy of the socialisation process. There are problems with socialisation but also problems associated with feelings of failure in the parents themselves. Families and households of separated parents are found to be more disorganised than those of non-separated parents (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1977). Single parenting involves assuming unshared responsibility for care, upbringing, family financial security and various household tasks (Thomson et al., 1992). The literature generally concludes that in single-parent families – where it is overwhelmingly the mother who assumes the largest part of the responsibility for education – family relations, educator-child interactions, pedagogical value orientations and children's development are less effective than in two-parent families. Based on ten years of research McLanahan (1999) concludes that a disrupted family usually has fewer financial resources to devote to upbringing and education, less time and energy to nurture and supervise children, and reduced access to community resources to supplement parents' efforts.

Secondly, we empirically tested these hypotheses. Questionnaire data were gathered in the Children and Adolescent's Living Condition Survey, conducted by the Population and Family Study Centre (CBGS) in collaboration with the Commissioner for Children's Rights (KRC) in Flanders in 2000 (see Van den Bergh, Ackaert & De Rycke, 2003). For five parenting and five communication aspects we compared the perception of children living with a single parent, living in an alternating family context (such as in situations of shared custody) and living in a traditional family. If perceptions differ, these differences potentially give rise to differences in well-being. Both researchers and social workers have for a long time been picking up signals that children from single-parent families and stepfamilies run a greater risk of encountering problems in their development. The societal developments as regards divorce have increased interest among scientific circles in research into this phenomenon, especially into the effects of divorce on children, both on their psychological well-being and on more objectifiable aspects of their living conditions, such as school performances and subsequent careers. An enormous amount of research has been carried out into short- and long-term effects on children caused by the two biological parents living apart (Cherlin, 1999). Many surveys into the effects of divorce have revealed that children growing up with both their parents feel better and perform better than children growing up with a single parent (e.g. Dawson, 1991; Pardeck et al., 1991; Bhushan & Shirali, 1992; Acock & Demo, 1994; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Conger & Chao, 1996; Simons & Chao, 1996; Steinberg, 1996). In the early eighties the first cross-sectional and, especially, longitudinal surveys were set up. They revealed that single parents more often had emotional problems and that children of separated parents had more developmental disturbances, i.e., they had more problems at school, were sexually active earlier, suffered more periods of depression and committed acts of delinquency more often. Since the eighties and nineties Anglo-Saxon researchers, in particular, have made abundant use of longitudinal databases.

Various explanations are given for the fact that children in two-parent families perform better, and for the association between parental separation and children's well-being or suffering. Some scholars believe in a causality between divorce and problems experienced by children. They point to factors that are attributable to the separation transition itself, such as low family

income, stress, absence of the father, diminished parenthood, more rigid child-raising methods, etc. Others focus on the role of family processes preceding separation. It follows that scholars do not yet agree at all on the extent to which divorce in itself or merely living in a specific type of family causes children to experience problems, nor on the degree to which children might have predispositions to particular problems before there was any question of divorce.

The objective of our study however is not to study differences in well-being, we limit ourselves to studying differences in perception of the educational context in different family types. For the sake of simplicity we will refer to the three types of families with the terms “traditional families”, “single-parent families” and “alternate parenting families”. Now and then we will speak of traditional as opposed to non-traditional families.

Finally, we round off by formulating a number of policy relevant conclusions from literature and research.

Differences in parenting and communication in various family types: Hypotheses from literature

We formulate five hypotheses about the way children perceive family functioning in various family types: three on parenting (parental supervision and monitoring, acceptance, behavioural autonomy) and two on communication patterns (communication between parents and children, negative communication between parents).

Parental supervision and monitoring

Simons and Johnson (1996) find that single parents exhibit less parental competences (such as being warm and supportive, establishing consistent standards and norms, monitoring the child's behaviour) than married parents. Specifically, divorced mothers engage in less child monitoring, less consistent rule enforcement, greater hostility, and more punitive forms of punishment. Other research (Thomson, McLanahan & Curtin, 1992; Demo & Acock, 1988; Demo & Acock, 1996) also shows that single parents exert less supervision and control than two-parent families, despite the fact that they more often resort to authoritative parenting. The transitional process experienced by a single-parent family is often accompanied by a diminution in the feeling of parental competency, reduced supervision over child behaviour, less affection, reduced demands regarding child performances and more negative, authority-oriented discipline strategies (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982).

Single parents have less time and energy for the supervision of their children and to give attention to their occupations. The absence of one of the parents as a second care giver is a factor impeding continuous monitoring. Besides that, a number of other specific problems with which single parents are faced are linked to the fact that they cannot but supervise their children's activities less closely: financial pressures, role and task overload, feelings of depression, a reduced social life, emotional distress, problems with the ex-partner, etc.

Several observers hold that a particular level of parental supervision is beneficial to a child's development (e.g. Amato & Rezac, 1994). A diminished parental supervision may thus adversely affect a child's well-being in single-parent families. The greater behavioural problems found among children in single-parent families appear to be largely influenced by the degree of the father's parental involvement. E.g., an American longitudinal study among 10- to 14-year-old adolescents (Carlson, 2000) found that a father's parental involvement and father-child closeness are important mediating factors which account partly for the higher level of behavioural problems (delinquency, drug use, truancy and negative feelings) observed in adolescents

from single-parent families. A recent study by Manning and Lamb (2003) comes to a similar finding.

Our first hypothesis is: "There is more parental supervision in traditional families than in single-parent families and in alternate parenting families."

Acceptance by parents

Despite the higher intensity of conflict in single-parent families, Walker and Hennig (1997) found a greater closeness between single parents – usually the mother – and children in single-parent families than evidenced in two-parent families. However, children being particularly critical of parental absence (Van Gils, 1995; Van den Bergh, 1996) and being particularly fond of joint family activities, the father's absence often implies that children feel less accepted by him because the number of activities with the father has been greatly reduced. Stepfamilies and reconstituted families in turn generally have a complex family structure. Fine and associates (1994) see life in a stepfamily as a stress factor that affects a child's sense of well-being. Different family systems are remodelled into one family unit. The greater confusion of roles and the possible presence of stepbrothers and stepsisters in stepfamilies may lead to family conflicts and stress. In these families, ill-defined roles, the lack of clear-cut models, lack of good communication and a more problematic family functioning in general may have a negative impact on a child's well-being and contribute to greater behavioural problems in children. Children, and adolescents too, have a need for rules and a clear-cut family structure, what is often precisely defective in the case of dual-household arrangements (Lampe, 1998). In particular, we think that life in alternating households and repeated change of residence have a negative impact on a child's sense of acceptance, because of the discontinuous presence of both mother and father. We assume that a permanent parental presence in a single-parent family has a positive influence upon the sense of acceptance.

Our second hypothesis is: "The perception of acceptance by mother and father is lowest in children living in alternate parenting families. We assume that the sense of acceptance by a mother in single-parent families does not significantly differ from the sense of acceptance by a mother in traditional families. With reference to acceptance by the father however we assume there is a difference between children living in single-parent families and children living in traditional families."

Behavioural autonomy

Vermulst and Gerris (1988) conclude from their research that single-parent families aim at greater autonomy among their children. Research by Hetherington and Clingempeel (1992) shows that children in single-parent families are given more responsibilities and possibilities of supervision. Moreover, they state that parent-child relations in single-parent families display a higher degree of equality than in two-parent families. Single-parent-families are often structured on a more equal basis, leading the parents to treat their children on a more equal basis. A greater autonomy of behaviour is not necessarily beneficial to a child's well-being. There is a risk of 'parentification' and, consequently, parent-child relations are less cherishing. "This situation makes parent/child conflict a greater problem, particularly in the adolescent years, because of the weakening of generational boundaries and the lack of a second parent to provide a united front" (Walker & Hennig, 1997, p. 64). Some research findings show that these families merely adhere to a more permissive style of upbringing. This may lead to uncertainty and confusion in children. Dölle (1994) states: "The second parent's absence and the looser climate of upbringing often make the exercise of authority more difficult. Many parents confirm

that they have become more indulgent towards their children after separation. A permissive style of education may throw a child's mind into confusion." Nock (1988) attributes reduced success as adults, in the case of children from one-parent families, to the very fact that they were less exposed to hierarchical models of authority within their families. "By virtue of living in non-hierarchical families, children from single-parent households are handicapped in their ability to function in institutions that are fundamentally hierarchical, namely, education, the economy, and occupations" (Nock, 1988, p. 957). At the same time, Nock finds that parenting among single mothers becomes more restrictive: "Single mothers have been shown to rely more than other parents on restrictive disciplinary methods – authoritarian discipline – thereby restricting the child's freedom and relying on negative sanctions. That single mothers would be more likely to resort to such strategies reflects their relative lack of authority, a predictable consequence of the peer-like relationship they have with their children. Unable to enforce their wishes in any other fashion, such mothers resort to assertions of power and force" (Nock, 1988, p. 962). The difference in parenting would thus imply that the emphasis lies more on supervising and observance of rules, that there is more restraint and that less affection is shown, although this hypothesis is not confirmed in other studies (Vermulst & Gerris, 1988).

Alanen (1992) also found a greater autonomy in children from single-parent families, but she simultaneously found that it is not necessarily associated with ill effects. Cooperating in a household and having bigger responsibilities may lead to higher self-esteem, more self-dependence and a greater feeling of competence in these children.

Our third hypothesis is: "Children in single-parent families and alternate parenting families have a greater behavioural autonomy than children in traditional families."

Communication between children and parents

Several studies report on differences in communication styles in different family types, generally evidencing a lower quality of parent-child communication in single-parent families than in traditional families. E.g., Demo & Acocck (1996) demonstrate that one-parent-families and stepfamilies report the highest levels of mother-child conflict and the lowest levels of favourable mother-child interaction. Walker & Hennig (1997) found that single-parent families gave evidence of a higher intensity of conflict; in their study, members of single-parent families appeared to be less objective in their problem-solving, proved less tolerant with respect to ambiguity and disagreement, less emphatic, more inclined to disparage others and to resort to anti-social and maladjusted behaviour.

Explanations are mostly sought in specific features of family functioning and dysfunctioning in various types of families. One-parent families use different styles of communication and upbringing, because of their family-specific circumstances and problems. Family circumstances lead to a tenser form of communication. Weaker family cohesion and relatively heavier family burdens may cause single mothers to resort more often to rather negative, less affective communication with their children; single mothers may be more likely to punish their children. Communication in single-parent families may be characterised by more negativity owing to the absence of a second parent to assist in maintaining discipline and supervision. Single mothers would have more recourse to authority-oriented discipline strategies (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1982; Leve & Fagot, 1997; Nock, 1988). Both bad communication with the mother and bad communication with the father may adversely affect a child's sense of well-being. Positive, supportive communication and acceptance favourably affect self-concept in children (De Rycke & Van den Bergh, 2003).

Some scholars report on differences in styles of communication between mothers and fathers (Kwaaitaal-Roosen, 1998; Shulman & Klein, 1993), father-child communication being less open, focusing more on values like competition, independence and achievement. This charac-

teristic father-child communication is often lacking in single-parent families, at least on a daily basis.

The fact that fathers score somewhat less positively than mothers does not necessarily imply a negative impact on adolescent development. On the contrary, good communication, confirmation and guidance by the father are important to young people's search for identity and development of self-confidence. "During adolescence sons and daughters are disengaging from their family and preparing themselves for their adult roles. This separation/individuation process can be influenced positively by fathers, who are somewhat distant and less open towards their children. In this unobtrusive way, fathers can play a positive role in raising adolescents" (Kwaaitaal-Roosen, 1998, p. 108). Shulman and Klein (1993) hold that fathers, more often emphasizing values as competence, autonomy and performance in interacting with their sons and daughters, have a positive influence on the development of self-esteem and self-confidence in their adolescent children. Various studies point to a positive connection between a child's well-being and the frequency of contact with the parent living elsewhere (e.g., Amato & Rezac, 1994). Some scholars argue that negative contact between father and child may even play a part in the emergence of violent behaviour and psychological problems (Lampe, 1998). Regular, positive contact with the father living elsewhere may diminish or prevent psychological and other problems in children living with a single mother. Irregular or lacking contact assails young persons with negative feelings: they feel rejected, hurt or abandoned (Dölle, 1994).

Our fourth hypothesis is: "Communication between parent and child has poorer quality for children in single-parent and alternate parenting families than in traditional families."

Communication between the parents

As happens with most separated couples a tumultuous period sets in after separation. Negative contact between ex-partners often jeopardises a good relationship between the child and the partner living elsewhere, with all its concomitant drawbacks. Children suffer from the deleterious effects of this atmosphere of conflict. They usually strive to maintain a good relationship with both their parents (Hermanns et al., 1985). Lampe (1998) holds that a discordant relationship between ex-partners is harmful to their children. If inter-parental conflict persists, children are continuously victims of conflicts of loyalty: merely living with one parent induces feelings of disloyalty to the other. Even if one parent breaks off all contact with the other parent, children suffer severely (Lampe, 1998). Problems already implicitly present in children of separated parents are often intensified by unconcealed hostility between parents.

Research shows that continual parental conflict is associated with serious problems in children, such as depression, weak social competence, low self-esteem, poor performance at school and externalising behavioural problems (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Wegelin, 1990). A recent study on risk factors affecting children after divorce demonstrates that it is the extent and quality of parental cooperation that determines the severity of the effects of divorce on children (Moxnes, 2003).

Parental conflict affects a child's well-being, irrespective of family structure (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Hostility between parents thus also has an adverse effect on a child's well-being in traditional families. Some scholars even hold that parental conflict has a greater undermining impact on a child's sense of well-being than mere family structure (Demo, 1992; Bishop & Ingersoll, 1989). Some include the intensity of parental conflict as a mediating variable in their research into the effect of family structure on a child's sense of well-being (Dronkers, 1996; Demo & Acock, 1988; Hanson, 1999; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). E.g., Dronkers (1996) includes the intensity of pre-separation conflict in his analyses. He concludes that pupils brought up by one biological parent reported a higher sense of well-being than those having grown up with two non-separated but quarrelling

parents. He states however that this view only holds in the case of very frequent and serious parental quarrels. In the event of few parental conflicts it would have been better for pupils if their parents had not separated, he concludes. Similarly, Amato, Loomis and Booth (1995) conclude that children from high-conflict families actually obtain a net benefit from divorce through reduced exposure to parental conflict, while those from low-conflict families lose a great deal when their parents divorce.

Our fifth hypothesis is: "Children from single-parent and alternate parenting families experience more negative communication between their parents than children from traditional families."

Method

Participants

The analyses presented here are based on the Children and Young People Living Conditions Survey carried out in 2000 in Flanders among 1,955 10 to 18 year olds; 995 of them were boys and 960 were girls. For this survey, two stratified representative samples of schools in Flanders and Brussels Capital Region were selected, one from all primary schools and one from all types of secondary schools. In each school two classes of students were randomly selected to participate. The response rate was 91%. For the primary schools, only children of the fifth and sixth grade (10-12 year olds) were engaged (n = 722, from 19 schools). For the secondary schools, students of all grades (12-18 year olds) were engaged (n = 760, from 33 schools). In the final sample, 37% were children from primary schools; 20 were first and second graders, 22% were third and fourth graders and 21% were fifth and sixth graders of secondary schools. Mean age of the participants was 14 years and 3 months.

For our study, a "type of family" variable has been constructed in which the children's principal place of residence was taken as a criterion for classification. The first group consists of children who live permanently with both their biological parents, without any stepbrothers or sisters (so-called "intact" biological families). The second group consists of children who mainly – i.e. the greater part of the week at least – live with one parent, without a new live-in partner. We call this group single-parent families in the strict or proper sense. The third and last group of children are categorised under "alternate parenting families": these are children who live alternately in two households, e.g. partly with the mother and/or partly with the father (e.g. a co-parenting arrangement), or children living in other alternating situations or in reconstituted families, with or without step-siblings. Children living with their grandparents are also placed in this category. The third category thus also includes single-parent families, although not in a narrow sense, because the children are not cohabiting permanently, or because a new partner is cohabiting.

The sample survey's categorisation by this type-of-family variable is presented in Table 1.

According to the categorisation we used, three quarters of children constantly live with both their biological father and their biological mother; 9% of children live with only one parent, without a new live-in partner; the other children (16%) live in what we call "alternate parenting families", i.e., they live alternately with one of the parents, in reconstituted families or in other types of families.

Table 1

Categorisation of children according to three types of families

	n	%
Living (mainly) in a single-parent family	173	8.8
Living in alternate parenting families	318	16.3
Living with both biological parents	1464	74.9
Total	1955	100.0

Measures and instruments

We used existing scales to operationalise parenting and communication. In these scales, children were offered a series of statements and most often had to rate on a five-point scale how much they agreed upon these statements (1 = not at all to 5 = very much). (Behavioural autonomy was measured with a six-point scale). The scales were programmed on portable PC's and were completed at school, during class time. Principal components analyses (PCA) were conducted on the completed scales. Only items loading at least .30 on components obtained in the PCAs were retained. For all final scales, Cronbach alpha was between .72 and .89 (see table 2), indicating sufficient internal consistency.

Parental supervision and monitoring (mother/father). The short monitoring questionnaire by Brown, Mounts, Lamborn and Steinberg (1993) contains six items and conveys the extent to which parents are informed or are involved in their child's daily pursuits (e.g., who their friends are, when and where they go out, etc.). Maternal and paternal monitoring was measured separately. For both scales PCA yielded one component; all original items were retained.

Acceptance by the parents (mother/father). Items from three scales were used to operationalise the perception of acceptance by the parent (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Van den Bergh, 1997a; De Brock, Vermulst, Gerris & Abidin, 1992). This scale was completed for mother and father. PCA on the eight items resulted in two components, for both mother and father. Only the three items loading on the first component, measuring acceptance of the entire person (e.g., my mother thinks I'm pleasant and nice) were accepted.

Behavioural autonomy (parents). The 'Perspective on Adolescent Decision Making Questionnaire' (PADM-B) of Bosma et al. (1996) contains 21 items looking into the degree to and the areas in which children can decide autonomously. Children indicated on a six-point scale whether they decide all alone (= score 1), whether they decide together with their parents (= score 3), or whether their parents decide all alone (= score 6) on different things that concern adolescents (e.g. leisure time spending, sports they do, bedtimes, smoking, etc.). Although several components were obtained in PCA, we nevertheless summed scores on the 21 items of the original scale for analyses in the present study, as was done by Bosma et al. (1996).

Positive and negative communication between children and their parents (mother/father). Both subscales of the family communication scale conceived by Van den Bergh and Van den Bulck (1999) were completed separately for mother and father. The positive communication subscale contains seven items measuring the commitment, support and emotional expression in the relationship with the parent (e.g., when I'm sad, I talk to my mother/father; my mother/father and I do pleasant things together, etc.). For both mother and father PCA revealed one component; all original items were retained. The final, negative communication subscale contains six items measuring the degree of verbal curses and conflict (e.g., my mother/father and

I quarrel with each other). For mother as well as for father two original items of this subscale were rejected because PCA indicated that they did not load on the same component as the six retained items.

Negative communication between the parents. The subscale 'negative communication between parents' of the family communication scale (Van den Bergh & Van den Bulck, 1999) contains five items measuring the degree of verbal curses, hostility and physical aggressiveness between parents (e.g., my mother and father quarrel with each other, hurt each other, etc.). PCA revealed one factor; all original items were retained.

Table 2
Results of Kruskal-Wallis and Cronbach's alpha values of the scales

	Chi ²	p	Cronbach's α
Monitoring by mother	21.925	0.000 < 0.001	0.8422
Monitoring by father	78.715	0.000 < 0.001	0.8743
Mother-child acceptance	6.421	0.040	0.7520
Father-child acceptance	8.259	0.016	0.7589
Behavioural autonomy of child	27.944	0.000 < 0.001	0.8981
Negative mother-child communication	7.714	0.021	0.8612
Negative father-child communication	7.953	0.019	0.8696
Positive mother-child communication	5.931	0.052	0.8752
Positive father-child communication	46.435	0.000 < 0.001	0.8942
Negative communication between parents	27.667	0.000 < 0.001	0.8843

Table 3
Results of post-hoc tests ($\alpha = 0.05$)

	Biol – Sing	Alt – Biol	Sing – Alt
Monitoring by mother	*	*	
Monitoring by father	*	*	*
Mother-child acceptance		*	
Father-child acceptance	*		
Behavioural autonomy of child	*		*
Negative mother-child communication	*		
Negative father-child communication	*	*	*
Positive mother-child communication			
Positive father-child communication	*	*	*
Negative communication between parents	*	*	

Biol: children living with both biological parents.
Sing: children living in single-parent families.
Alt: children living in alternating families.

Statistical analyses

Non-parametric tests are used where the requirements for parametric testing (e.g. analysis of variance) are not fulfilled, i.e., if the sample scores are not normally distributed. Non-parametric tests are also used in cases of ordinal scale measurement of the dependent variables. The Kruskal-Wallis Test is a *non-parametric* test which makes no assumptions about normality of the data and which is based on ranks. It is used for testing the equality of means between groups. The critical value used for determining significance is set at $\alpha = 0.05$. If the calculated p value is less than 0.05, then we can accept the hypothesis that the means of at least two of the subgroups differ significantly. If the Kruskal-Wallis test leads to the conclusion that the means are not equal, information about where the differences are located is obtained through a multiple pairwise testing procedure (post hoc test). This test establishes testing limits for all pairwise tests. If the testing limits include zero, we conclude that the corresponding means do not differ. If the testing limits do not include zero, we conclude that the corresponding means differ ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Results

Table 2 indicates for each scale or subscale whether or not there is a significant difference between children living in a single-parent family, in an alternately parenting family or in a family with both biological parents.

Table 3 shows the results of the post-hoc testing procedure.

Parental supervision and monitoring

Supervision and monitoring both by mother and father differ significantly in the three family types considered ($p < .00005$). The children's information points out that in traditional families both mothers and fathers are best informed about their children's occupations. Parental supervision is experienced as weaker by children in one-parent families and alternate parenting families, as compared to traditional families. Children from single-parent families and from alternate parenting families do not hold different views on their mothers' supervision of their activities. They do differ however in their perception of supervision exerted by their fathers. The findings reveal that monitoring by fathers is rated lowest by children from single parents.

Our first hypothesis, whereby parental supervision is experienced as weaker by children in one-parent families and alternate parenting families, as compared to traditional families, is confirmed.

Acceptance by the parents

Significant differences are found between three family types for the extent to which children feel accepted by their mothers ($p < .05$) and their fathers ($p < .05$). Children living alternately in two households feel less accepted by their mother than children living in traditional families. Children living with single mothers feel equally accepted by their mothers as children living with both their parents. Perception of acceptance by the father is lowest among children from single-parent families: they feel significantly less accepted by their father than children in traditional families.

The part of the second hypothesis whereby alternate parenting families, in particular, have a negative effect on the perception of acceptance only holds for acceptance by the mother, not for acceptance by the father (which is worse in single-parent families). Our results also confirm the hypothesis that the perception of acceptance by children living with single mothers does not significantly differ from the perception of acceptance by mothers in traditional families. The perception of acceptance by the father is significantly lower in children from single-parent families than in children from traditional families, thereby confirming our hypothesis.

Behavioural autonomy

The extent to which a child perceives autonomy is different in the three family types considered ($p < .00005$). Single-parent children significantly differ from children in both the other types of families. The perceived level of autonomy attributed to them within the family is at a much higher level for single-parent children.

This result confirms our hypothesis for children living in single-parent families but it disconfirms our hypothesis that behavioural autonomy in children from alternate parenting families would also be at a higher level. There is no difference between traditional families and alternate parenting families in perceived autonomy.

Communication between children and parents

Children living in different family types experience several differences in the communication between their parents.

There is a difference in the perception of the degree of *negative* verbal communication with mother ($p < .05$) and with father ($p < .05$). This negative kind of communication manifests itself through quarrelling, unfriendly shouting, abusive language and anger at each other. Children and mothers in single-parent families more frequently communicate in this negative way than mothers and children in traditional families. Children's perception of negative communication with the father differs in all three family types. Father-child communication is perceived as most negative in single-parent families.

Furthermore, children have different experiences of *positive* communication with their father ($p < .05$), but no significant differences are noted in their experience of positive communication with the mother. The positive communication scale measures different aspects of parent-child communication. Positive communication manifests itself, a.o., in being able to communicate on feelings (affective communication) and in doing pleasant things together. Children in traditional families most frequently experience positive communication with their father. Children living with single parents have the least positive communication with their fathers. Children living in alternating families again report more positive communication with their fathers.

Our findings largely confirm our fourth hypothesis: they give evidence of a lower quality of parent-child communication in single-parent families, i.e. with respect to negative communication with both father and mother, and with respect to positive communication with father. The hypothesis is however not confirmed with respect to positive mother-child communication.

Negative communication between parents

Children living in different family types differ ($p < .00005$) in their perception of negative communication between parents. Children in single-parent families and alternating families

experience more negative communication between their parents than children living in traditional families.

Our fifth hypothesis, saying that children in single-parent and alternate parenting families perceive more negative communication between their parents than children living with both parents, is confirmed.

Discussion

Our results reveal that several differences in educational context and communication are perceived by children in various family types.

Firstly, children from single-parent families experience less guidance by their fathers and mothers. Monitoring by fathers in particular is rated very low by children living with single parents. These children often live with their mother and thus spend much more time with her than with their father. Children from alternate parenting families again perceive their father's supervision as stronger, which may to some extent be attributed to the higher frequency of contact with the father compared to children living with single parents.

Secondly, alternately parented children feel least accepted by their mothers. Single-parent families do not differ from traditional families in this respect. We assume that a permanent presence of one parent in the one-parent family positively influences the feeling of acceptance. We can deduce that children feel that their mothers generally find them more difficult and less pleasant when they reside alternately in two households or in stepfamilies. With reference to acceptance by the father we only found a difference in perception between children from traditional families and children in single-parent families. Children living with single parents feel less accepted by their father than children in traditional families. Once more this may be explained by the fact that single-parent families are mostly headed by the mother. Father's absence negatively influences the child's feeling of acceptance in a one-parent family.

Thirdly, children in single-parent families are given more autonomy. They feel more able to decide for themselves on important aspects of their living environment than children in other types of family.

Fourthly, children living in single-parent families and alternating families experience more negative communication with their mother. The communication between father and child is perceived as most negative by children in single-parent-families. The father's absence is a determining factor here; the father's presence is of course a necessary condition for being able, in some way or another, to establish a kind of communication. Despite the father's absence, single mothers succeed in achieving positive communication with their children, even if at the same time more negative contact occurs, which is very likely caused by the tensions of single parenthood. The additional efforts single mothers make to positively support and communicate with their children are indeed felt by these children (the empirical evidence already pointed out that children from single mothers feel equally accepted and positively supported by their mothers as children in traditional families). Children have a more pleasant and more affective contact with their fathers in traditional families. For children in single-parent families this kind of communication with the father is least common. Children living in alternating households may have a higher frequency of contact with their fathers, which causes them to perceive communication with their father as more positive than children living in single-parent families.

Fifthly, communication between parents is perceived as most negative by children in one-parent families. Children in alternating families experience less negative communication between their parents than children from single parents. Children in co-parenting families may have parents who, owing to their joint custody of the children, communicate better with each other regarding important aspects of upbringing, although communication between the (biological)

parents is still worse than in traditional families. After all, communication is a condition for successful co-parenthood. Situations where the father has only a right of access may be more indicative of a conflictive style of communication between parents.

The differences in children's perceptions are mainly found between single-parent and traditional families. Children in these two types differ from each other for all the education and communication features we considered, except for positive child-mother communication. There are fewer differences between children in single-parent and alternate parenting families. Where differences between both these types are observed, they are especially related to features in which the father plays a role: monitoring by the father, negative communication between child and father, positive communication between child and father and behavioural autonomy.

Our results point to differences in children's perception of parenting and communication in different family types. They suggest that family type-related conditions exist which might have an influence on the child's perception. However, our analyses were not aimed at demonstrating that the differences perceived are solely attributable to the type of family; this causality cannot be established by the type of research we conducted. The differences revealed in children's perception may have potential harmful effects, both on children's objective well-being and on their feeling of well-being. More research is however needed to establish these relationships. Also, we have to keep in mind that despite statistically significant differences, a number of single-parent families may not function less adequately than two-parent families.

On the basis of our results some leverages can be indicated which may positively influence children's well-being in one-parent families. An important welfare-enhancing effect may be expected from positive communication and positive commitment with the parents. The results show that father-child communication is worse in one-parent families, that children's sense of acceptance by fathers is lowest in these families and that these children experience little monitoring by their father. It is obvious that fathers can make an important difference. Also, a less discordant relationship between ex-partners may contribute to the well-being of children. Some important leverages are, therefore, within the reach of parents themselves.

To conclude: Some policy suggestions

We do believe that children from "broken" families deserve special attention. For the average child, divorce is associated with parental income loss, residential mobility, altered friendship circles, reduced contact with resident parents: all of which may represent losses in economic and social capital. Their problematic position cannot always be attributed to their parents' divorce, but the divorce does play a role. Not only the single parent's child but the single-parent family as a whole is especially vulnerable. Vermulst and Gerris (1988) state that the principal difference between both types is that educators in single-parent families experience more difficulty in performing their educational task and are simultaneously less supported by their social environment. The loss of support is not compensated by support from a social network: single-parent families manifestly lack support in relation to two-parent families (Vermulst & Gerris, 1988). Certain observers argue there is a direct connection between the social networks of a single mother and her children's adaptation in the family (Schlesinger, 1995). If a sufficiently extensive social network exists, upbringing may often be less burdensome for the parent. Educators at school and social workers should be constantly attentive to possible problems of children living in single-parent families. They should point out to parents the importance of good communication and close commitment, and the importance of social networks.

At a macro level too family policy should take sufficient account of the differences in functioning between single-parent and two-parent families. We believe that a targeted family policy for single-parent families is necessary and highly advisable. Particularly in the years immediately following divorce children may need more attention and single parents have to struggle more with the dilemmas inherent in their dual role, namely trying to care for their children's emotional and material needs, both as a good, caring parent and as the family breadwinner (Burghes, 1993). The main problem in delineating a suitable policy for single-parent families would be to have a workable definition of a single-parent family's composition. After all, we must not lose sight of the fact that many single-parent families belong to a certain type of co-parenthood or include a new partner who takes over some of the household duties (Van den Bergh & Van Dongen, 1998). An appropriate policy should be directed especially towards single-parent families in the strict sense.

A number of specific features in the way single-parent families function clearly justify a targeted policy: dependence on only one income, increased need for full-time labour-force participation, double work load, halving of available time, restricted availability for children, etc. Measures of adjustment might be taken in the organisation of employment, the organisation of external child care, tax law and social security. We do not argue that the present range of support facilities is sufficiently meeting the needs of two-parent families; but we do hold that single parent families are more seriously affected by inadequacies in family policies. Examples of advisable measures are: modifying child benefits to give greater support for children of first order; flexible opportunities for short career interruption to tackle acute or chronic overwork or temporary incompatibility between work and family life; possibility of a temporary reduction in working hours; flexible working hours; more affordable domestic help; affordable external child care; extra tax relief; low-interest loans, etc. A targeted policy need not necessarily stigmatise, nor lead to unintended positive discrimination towards single-parent families. The central purpose of any appropriate policy should lie in moderating and reducing the increased role conflicts and tensions experienced by single parents.

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