

IRELAND'S FIRST **NATIONAL SHARED PARENTING SURVEY**



RESULTS &
RECOMMENDATIONS



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1 INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

One Family, founded as Cherish in 1972, is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting, and/or separating; offering support, information and services to all members of all one-parent families, to those who share parenting, to those experiencing an unplanned pregnancy, and to professionals working with one-parent families. Our vision is an Ireland where every family is cherished equally and enjoys the social, financial and legal equality to create their own positive futures. In 2016, One Family devised and conducted Ireland's first national Shared Parenting Survey in response to a lack of public debate and narrative around shared parenting in modern Ireland.

Shared parenting is when two parents, who are no longer in an intimate relationship, continue to parent their child together in a parenting relationship. Today, one in four families with children is a one-parent family and there are over 215,000 one-parent families in Ireland. Since 1996, the proportion of the population aged 15 years and over who were divorced has grown significantly from 0.4 per cent (9,787 people) to 2.4 per cent in 2011 (87,770). The proportion of the population who were separated has also grown from 2.8 per cent in 1996 (9,787 people) to 3.2 per cent in 2011 (116,194)¹. It is anticipated that Census 2016 will show a further increase in diverse family types. Currently, our national Census does not capture data on the number of families who are sharing parenting in Ireland.

The only empirical data available on shared parenting was derived from the Growing Up in Ireland data on the child cohort (nine year-olds)². As defined by the resident parents in that study, it is most common in cases of divorced or separated lone parents (39%), is slightly less common in step-families (30%), and is least common in never-married lone parent families (26%). The data also showed that non-resident parents in divorced or separated lone parent families have the most frequent contact with their children, followed by those in step-families, and is lowest with those in never-married lone parent families.

As a result of working with parents and families for 45 years, however, One Family knows that people share parenting in many different ways, that it can

be incredibly challenging to do so, and that policy makers, public services and the wider population may not understand how to support shared parenting. We see it as our role to try to bridge this gap. In order to achieve this, it is imperative that the voices of parents who are sharing parenting, or who have tried to, are heard. With as many ways defining shared parenting as there are families who do it, we sought views from parents all over Ireland on what shared parenting means for them and their children.

We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to these parents who shared their personal experiences so freely. Over one thousand people responded to our call, and the quotations throughout this report are theirs, directly drawn from their survey comments. One Family believe that their willingness to be so open and honest will help to make Ireland a better place to share parenting in the future. We urge those who inform and develop policies and services for people sharing parenting in Ireland to hear their voices, to listen, and to act.

1.2 Methodology

The results and analysis are based on over 1,000 individual responses from parents to a 21 question online survey disseminated using Survey Monkey via One Family's website, ezine, email and social media platforms. Responses were anonymous and confidential. We welcomed responses from people who are sharing parenting, or have done so in the past, and those who may have tried but have been unable to share parenting, for whatever reason.

The survey included key demographic questions yielding numerical data which was collated and summarised to give a snapshot of shared parenting in Ireland. A number of open ended questions produced over 3,500 individual comments from respondents. All were carefully read and analysed in order to identify recurring themes. Key policy recommendations arising from these comments were also collated. Both male and female voices are represented throughout the report. A self-selected, convenience sampling method was used. A key limitation to this sampling method is that the results cannot be generalised to the entire population. Future research on shared parenting in Ireland is needed to look at geographical demographics and to seek broader sampling for nationally representative results. However, the survey has offered parents an opportunity for the first time to share their views and to highlight both the successes and challenges of sharing parenting.

¹ Census (2011)

² Fahey et al. (2012) https://www.ucd.ie/news/2013/01JAN13/docs/Family_Relationships_and_Family_Well-Being_Dec_2012.pdf

2 WHAT IS SHARED PARENTING?

In preparation for **Ireland's first national Shared Parenting Survey**, One Family had developed a working definition of shared parenting based on our work with families, as follows:

Shared parenting is when both parents, who live separately, have an active parenting role in their child's life, irrespective of how much time they might actually spend with their child. One Family has a broad and inclusive approach to what sharing parenting might look like in each family.

This definition aimed to be very open and inclusive of the diversity and range of shared parenting relationships. In particular, we did not include reference to the amount of time spent with children. Our reasons for this were based on the situations of some of the families we work with where the non-resident parent may contribute financially, or otherwise, but cannot spend physical time with their child, for a variety of reasons. One Family supports these parents to form and maintain relationships with their children, as best they can.

When parents are no longer in a relationship, parenting children is often complex and challenging, and any attempt to define it will inevitably reflect these complexities and challenges. Some parents who responded to the survey were unhappy with our original definition as they felt it did not reflect their reality. There was a particular emphasis on both the quality, and amount, of time spent with children which were identified by a large number of respondents as essential aspects of sharing parenting. The importance of shared decision making and financial contribution from both parents were also highlighted.

"I don't know to be honest. Why use a definition? Every family is different but the child should be at the heart of it."

Mother of 2

"Shared parenting is child-centred, reflecting, respecting and responding to the evolving needs and capacities of the child. It requires that parents learn to communicate clearly and respectfully with each other and with their children, and that they each provide what resources they can to support their children's growth and development."

Mother of 4

Gingerbread, a national charity working with one-parent families in the UK, has devised the following definition of shared parenting:

A flexible and co-operative child-centred approach between parents where the child is able to enjoy a good quality relationship with each parent - a "co-parenting" approach based on shared parental responsibility rather than a focus on shared residence. A co-parenting approach, characterised by flexibility and focused on the child's needs, can be at the heart of any type of parenting arrangement. This can be in couple or separated families; main-carer or shared care models.³

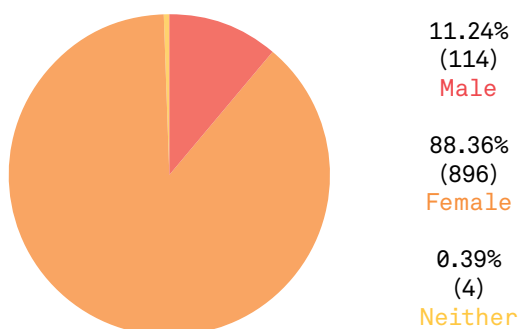
The research presented herein is just one step towards developing a clear understanding in Ireland of what shared parenting is, how it works in families, and what helps to support it to be successful. One Family would like that shared parenting arrangements are always child-centred and focussed on high quality relationships. While there are numerous instances of parents who are sharing parenting successfully by establishing productive communication and working together to achieve positive outcomes for their child, we know that this is not always the reality. Many children live, or have relationships, with parents who are not always able to prioritise their welfare. In One Family, we believe that our role is to continue to support all parents to work towards stronger shared parenting arrangements that ensure a child-centered approach.

3 <https://gingerbread.org.uk/uploads/media/17/7365.pdf>

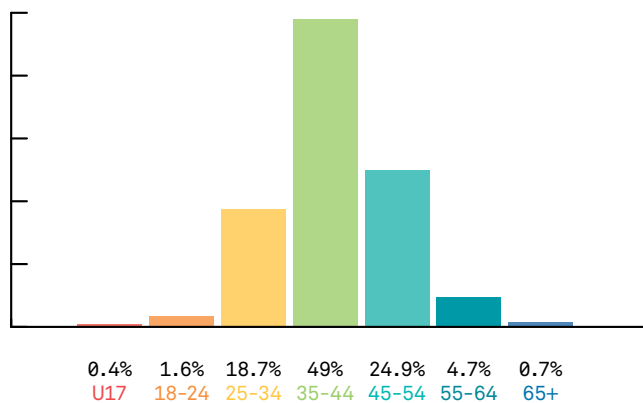
3 FACTS AND FIGURES

The facts and figures arising from the responses to our Shared Parenting Survey give us a snapshot of shared parenting in Ireland and represent the 1,014 parents that contributed to this report. Statistical analysis of responses to survey questions 1-13 follows, with accompanying commentary for additional clarification as required.

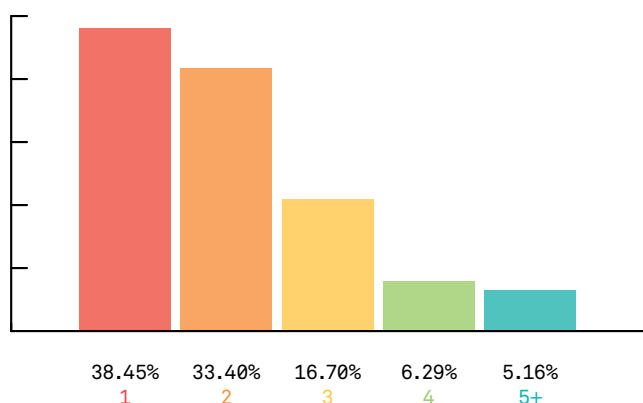
Q1 Are you...



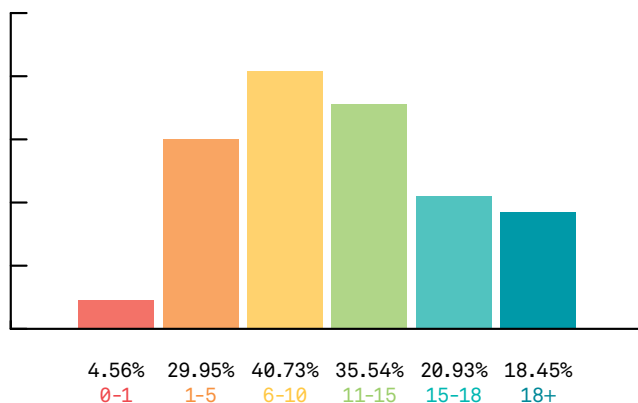
Q2 Which of the following age groups do you belong to?



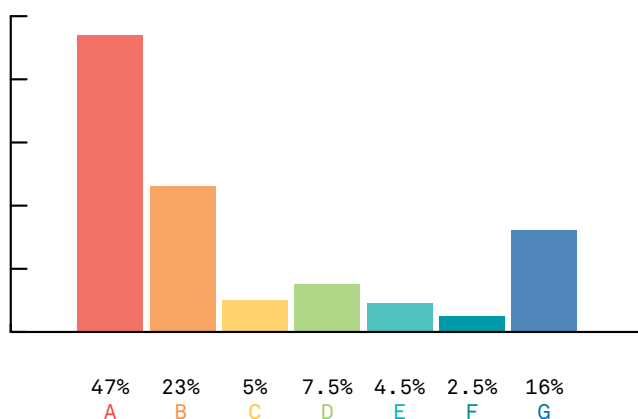
Q3 How many children do you have? (If you share parenting of step-children please include them)



Q4 Which of the following best describes the age ranges of the child(ren)?



Q5 Which of the following best describes your current parenting/ family situation? Tick all that apply

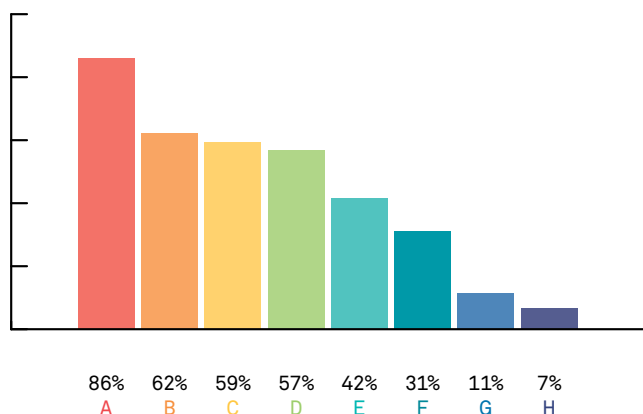


- A** I live on my own with my child(ren) in a one-parent family
- B** I live on my own with my child(ren) and share parenting with their other parent
- C** I live partly with my children and they live with their other parent the rest of the time
- D** I live with my child(ren) and a new partner and share parenting with their other parent
- E** I live with my child(ren) and a new partner and I don't share parenting with their other parent
- F** I am a step-parent and I share parenting of my partner's child(ren)
- G** Other (please specify) (for e.g. separated but still living together)

Commentary

Not all parenting and family situations were captured in the choices available. For example, some respondents stated that they were separated but still living together, while others were living with extended family members. In these cases, this was due to financial constraints and housing issues.

Q6 What is your understanding of what shared parenting is?

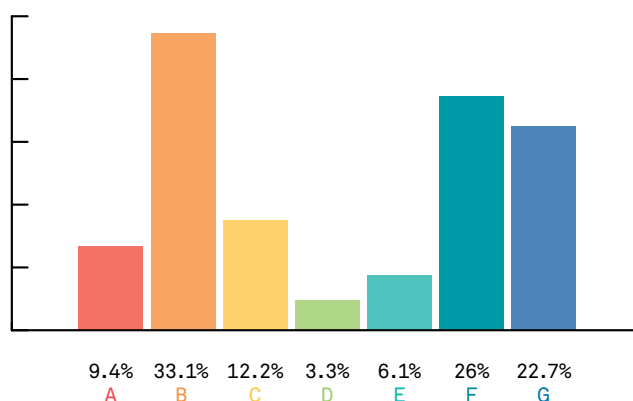


- A** Both parents working together for the best interests of their child(ren)
- B** Both parents spending time with child(ren)
- C** Both parents contributing financially to child(ren)'s costs
- D** Joint decision making on issues related to the child(ren)
- E** Both parents sharing special occasions together e.g. birthdays, graduations etc.
- F** Children living part of the time with each parent
- G** Children living 50:50 with each parent
- H** Other (please specify)

Commentary

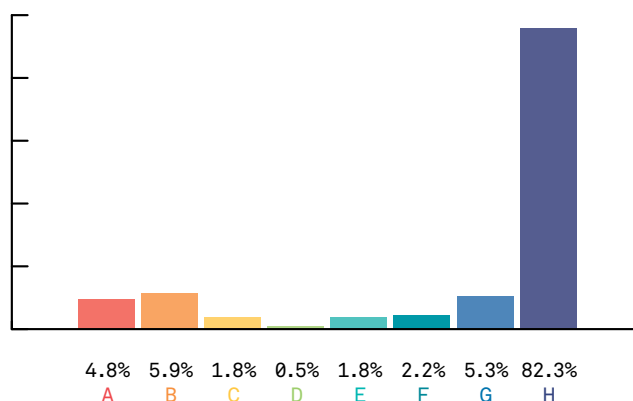
While complexity and multiple ways in which to share parenting are evident, the majority of people felt that shared parenting is about working together and spending time with their children, while a minority understood shared parenting to be 50:50 time spent with each parent. However, based on later responses, there appeared to be a gap between parent's understanding as illustrated above, and the reality and challenges of sharing parenting. Identifying this gap, and the needs of these parents, is the central aim of this report.

Q7 If your child lives with you most of the time, how often do they spend time/have contact with their other parent? Tick all that apply



- A** Daily
- B** Weekly
- C** Fortnightly
- D** Monthly
- E** During holidays (Christmas, summer etc.)
- F** Less often
- G** Does not apply

Q8 If you live separately from your children, how often do you spend time/have contact with them? Tick all that apply

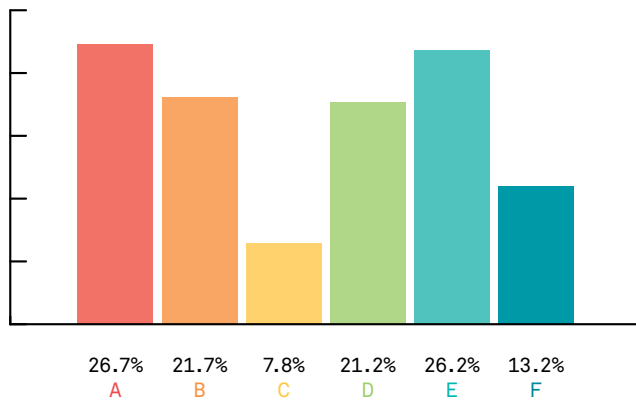


- A** Daily
- B** Weekly
- C** Fortnightly
- D** Monthly
- E** During holidays (Christmas, summer etc.)
- F** 50/50 equal access
- G** Less often
- H** Does not apply

Commentary

These questions reflect the fact that most children who do not live with both of their parents together, do in fact spend time with both of their parents on a weekly basis.

Q9 How was this time agreed upon?
Tick all that apply

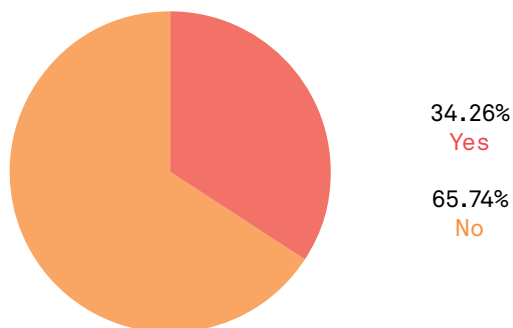


- A** Amicably between both parents
- B** With difficulty between both parents
- C** Through mediation
- D** Court ordered
- E** Does not apply
- F** Other

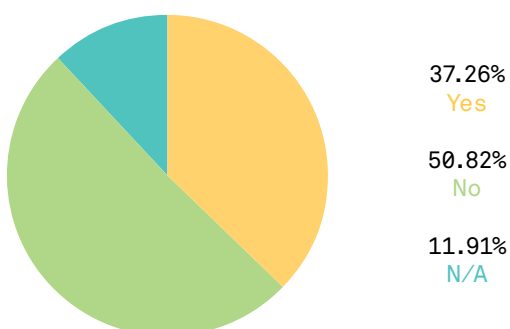
Commentary

Most respondents whose children formally spend time with both of their parents were unable to arrange this amicably themselves.

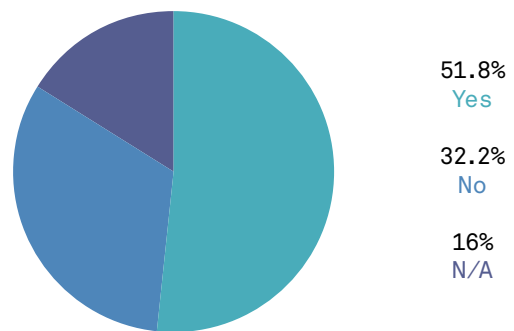
Q10 Have you ever attended mediation?



Q11 Do you make decisions jointly with the other parent on issues impacting your child(ren)?



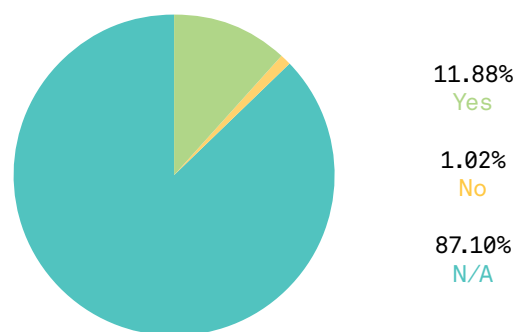
Q12 If your child(ren) lives with you most/all of the time, does the other parent contribute financially?



Commentary

This question applies to 84% of respondents, whose children live with them most or all of the time. Of those parents, 62% state that the other parent contributes financially to their children's costs, while 38% state that the other parent does not contribute.

Q13 If you live separately from your child(ren), do you contribute financially towards their costs?



Commentary

This question only applies to 13% of respondents, who live separately from their children. Of those parents, 92% state that they contribute financially to their children's costs, while only 8% state that they do not contribute.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 SHARED PARENTING SUCCESSES - WHAT WORKS?

4.1.1 Communication

Open communication between parents is seen as both a prerequisite for a shared parenting relationship, and the result of a good parenting relationship. The importance of how to communicate with, and in front of, the children is also frequently referenced.

"I really make an effort to include their father in their lives. We talk about him, telephone him spontaneously, include him in special occasions, make spontaneous plans to include him. He is part of their lives."

Mother of 2

"Parents who were friendly to each other in front of him and "singing from same hymn sheet" regarding issues relating to him."

Mother of 1

"When an argument happens – which it will during shared parenting – it's important not to use children as weapons between each other."

Mother of 2

4.1.2 Benefits for Children

Respondents record that the benefits of shared parenting for children are plentiful, including but not limited to children having sufficient access to both parents and feeling secure about their relationship with both; and that children also have a wider support group available to them, in the form of extended families, with a shared parenting relationship in place.

"Separation and divorce is very distressing for children but I feel that by adopting a shared parenting approach, I am making the most

functional choice for my children in their daily lives that I can."

Mother of 2

"The children love both of us and get to spend time with both of us. Children love Christmas as Dad comes to stay every Christmas Eve and is there for Santa, pressies, grave visits and Christmas Day dinner."

Mother of 3

"I've been very lucky in that we've always had a good relationship. This has been achieved by placing our daughter's welfare above all else and choosing to let petty issues go."

Mother of 3

"My daughter thinks having two families is normal and has no problem talking to other children about her experience of having a step mother and half brother and sisters (with dad) and a step dad at home with us. She has lots of grandparents and is happy to stay with either her dad or me. The fact is, there is no shame or even an inkling for her that our set up is not 'the norm'."

Mother of 1

4.1.3 Decision Making and Support from Other Parent

The ability to share responsibility for decision making between both parents is seen as important by many; and 'time off' from parenting duties that their shared parenting arrangement allows, helps with this.

"I feel supported by my ex when I have difficult moments when parenting a three year old. We are sharing responsibility for major decisions and finances and I'm happy that we can facilitate our daughter's equal access to both of us."

Mother of 1

"We planned to live separately from the beginning but to parent together. We make all family decisions together and our living apart hasn't caused any difficulty."

Father of 2

"Also as primary care giver, it is allowing me some time to myself each week, to recharge my batteries and have my own social life."

Mother of 1

4.2 CHALLENGES OF SHARED PARENTING

4.2.1 Attitudes towards Mothers and Fathers

Both mothers and fathers feel that society, including policy and law makers, treats them unfairly because of their gender, which sometimes creates a chasm in the shared parenting relationship, and in some cases, causes shared parenting to be unworkable.

"The mother is placed under considerably more scrutiny than the father [as a single parent by society]."

Mother of 1

"There is a view in Ireland that the mother is granted sole responsibility for making decisions, and where a father is very proactive in their children's lives this can be diminished by this culture."

Father of 2

"It is particularly difficult being a man and a tendency for the law and society to endorse the mother's parenting role as primary caregiver without much consideration to the father as an equal partner."

Father of 1

4.2.2 Communication Difficulties

Difficulties in communicating with the other parent are cited by many as a major barrier to a working shared parenting relationship. Lack of appropriate communication has hindered effective parenting and caused practical problems for children. In some cases abusive or derogatory language has been used by one parent about the other to, or in front of, children.

"Communication is very poor and one-sided. Decisions are probably largely made by me but I would always inform her dad before confirming them."

Mother of 1

"They do not give feedback on what the child may need when they drop them home, especially when the child is a young baby. They have control over you to a certain extent by using the child. The most challenging aspect of shared parenting in my mind is communication. Lack of it from either party does not benefit the children in any way."

Mother of 4

"When communication breaks down for any reason, children's interests become sidelined and decisions are less effective and sustainable."

Mother of 4

"It is difficult sometimes to put individual grievances aside and understand that because someone wasn't a good partner, it doesn't mean they aren't a good parent."

Mother of 2

4.2.3 Lack of Control

Some parents stated that they are uncomfortable about the level of control they feel their ex-partner still has over them after a relationship breakdown. A significant issue for many was the different parenting techniques when spending time with the other parent which some think of as damaging for children, but feel powerless to change. Lack of control over contact arrangements is also felt by some, including step-parents.

"The worry of letting my child spend time with a father who is not parenting as well as I would like but being aware that it is important for her to have a relationship with him, even if he's far from perfect."

Mother of 1

"With both parents holding very different values and beliefs regarding the children, it becomes a battle of wills as opposed to shared parenting."

Mother of 4

"As a step-parent it is a challenge not being allowed see them, and having to be careful about not getting too close to them."

Mother of 5

4.2.4 Lack of Interest from the Other Parent

Many respondents were concerned about the impact that lack of interest from the other parent, regarding contact or when contact arrangements were cancelled at the last minute, was having on the child.

"Child is five and other parent hasn't seen her or helped towards her in the last five years. After years of begging he finally saw her last week. I made the right decision to do this as she definitely needed it. I worry as he's showing signs he hasn't changed. I make all the effort ... I contact first. I make the plans."

Mother of 1

"The child would suffer less if I did not try shared parenting. Less disappointment and heartbreak when they don't show up etc."

Mother of 2

"The biggest challenge has been the total disengagement of my ex spouse. He walked away and despite unlimited and unhindered access he has chosen not to avail of it. Failure to turn up when promised and lack of engagement in critical decision making issues affecting kids education or health."

Mother of 3

4.2.5 New Relationships

Although in some instances respondents comment that the other parent's new partner has had a positive impact on the family as a whole, new relationships are also mentioned as challenges to overcome.

"It's hard when ex gets a new partner. I have welcomed them as they were part of the kids' life. And she has been fantastic. Been years together now and she is part of the family. But it's hard to remember to include her at times."

Mother of 2

"It is difficult when the separation is not amicable, and especially when there is a new partner involved, to hand the children over for several days."

Mother of 3

4.2.6 Domestic Violence

A pervasive theme throughout the survey responses is the issue of domestic violence and the challenges this presents in trying to share parenting after separation.

"There is a lack of protection from the 'other parent', who is dangerously abusive towards me and our child. The state/court system seems to favour parental contact regardless of the abuse therein. It is not fair or justified and the system must change to protect parents and children escaping from abusive relationships. Adequate financial supports are also imperative."

Mother of 1

"Domestic violence cannot be ignored in any forms of mediation, court attendances etc. Parenting programmes need to be tailored with these issues in mind too. Currently they are not."

Mother of 3

"The mediator said she could not mediate in our situation as there was a history of violence (his violence to me). I later secured a barring order. Mediation does not work in my situation."

Mother of 3

4.3 COURTS AND THE LEGAL SYSTEM

4.3.1 The Court Experience

Many parents report a sense that the courts are unfair and not fit-for-purpose. When deciding on custody or access, respondents state that the legal profession does not have children's interest at heart, and lacks time, expertise or the will to deal with these complicated issues. Many women feel that fathers are being allowed to manipulate the system to their advantage, and men also feel unfairly treated because of their gender.

"Different judges all the time. Never really felt heard, just a number. We're all going there for the kids, trying to do the right thing, but it ends up 'tit for tat'. I know that kids can't be in court, but I think they should have some sort of say."

Mother of 2

"The court system is a joke. If a father doesn't attend access, the judge will just say he can't be forced but if the mother makes any alteration to access, she can be threatened with a fine and or jail! If father doesn't make a maintenance payment and falls into arrears, he's told to pay a minuscule amount in back payment and yet again the mother is left struggling!"

Mother of 3

"The courts in my experience are often uncaring and provide no help. They give less than 5 minutes to make a decision, and don't hear you out."

Mother of 1

"Although I was granted legal guardianship to my son, his mother refuses to inform me or to tell me anything about his life. I have raised this issue with the courts but the judges just do nothing and there are no consequences for his mother."

Father of 1

"The father showed he was able to take care of the child and the court granted the day to day care and duties and that the child reside with the father. The child is happier, more at ease inside, many years later."

Father of 2

4.3.2 Legal Costs

Some parents speak of the prohibitive cost of going to court, especially with regard to legal fees and the time required to take off work. The cost of obtaining a Section 47 Assessment Report⁴ is mentioned as having a possible devastating effect on children's welfare in cases where one parent feels it would be essential to determine access decisions but is unable to afford to have it carried out.

"To access many of the above services there is no option but to go privately. I could afford legal support and secured this (Section 47) report, had I not been in a position to do this as many aren't my child's life would have a very different outcome. Essential reports like this which affect a child should not be left to be funded privately."

Mother of 3

"Legal fees – stop the nonsense of overcharging parents in need, still to this day no one in the government cares to reinforce charges of flat fees or quotes by solicitors being honoured. They still overcharge, do not quote, intentionally delay the court systems to charge extra because a straightforward case is 'oh so complicated'."

Mother of 1

⁴ Section 47 Reports: Sometimes, when a family is engaged in a Court process, perhaps because of a separation or an issue regarding custody or access, the Court can request that a Section 47 Assessment Report be carried out, in order to determine what the best interest of the child or children are [From]: <http://www.annemccormack.ie/section-47-reports/> Legal definition: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1995/act/26/section/47/enacted/en/html>

4.3.3 Solicitors and Gardaí

Quite a few responses highlight the adversarial effect that solicitors can have on the process of developing amicable arrangements between parents. Some recount negative experiences of dealing with the Gardaí, who are seen as indifferent (or in some cases, hostile) to court orders regarding maintenance.

"I have given up with courts and Gardaí. They don't care anyways, it is all just a game for them and I do not trust them anymore to assist to protect my child."

Mother of 1

"I wanted to go down a collaborative route but my ex's solicitor advised him against it ... Court needs to be the very last option."

Mother of 2

"When solicitors get involved, it's a fight between both parents. Solicitors don't care, they just want the money, they drag it out to the last, the law needs to change."

Mother of 3

4.3.4 Experiences of Mediation

Several people speak very highly of the mediation process and the positive effect it had on their ability to share parenting successfully.

"Mediation was our saviour ... No slagging matches on the court steps or any of the other sad goings on that you see hurt people partake in. Yeah, we did have our slagging matches but in the company of the mediator who quickly brought our focus back to what was important ... our children. Our solicitors were at the ready to fight our battles for us but thanks to the judge asking us to try mediation first, and as much as he could, make it compulsory, our story was as much as a success as it could be."

Mother of 3

"I attended with the Family Mediation Service. It was an excellent experience and if properly supported and promoted it could save many from the unnecessary combat engendered by the legal profession."

Father of 1

However, many parents are critical of the mediation service they had experienced.

"It was of no use whatsoever. I felt very vulnerable during the sessions. Mediator was male, which I didn't have a problem with but he allowed my ex husband to verbally abuse me during the sessions. Not a positive experience at all. After 10 very difficult sessions, mediation concluded with nothing agreed."

Mother of 2

"Crap, all geared towards my ex wife, mediator did his best but as said all towards ex wife, nothing towards me."

Father of 5

"He used mediation as a place to say horrible things about me in an attempt to have his actions validated by someone in authority. It wasn't very helpful, and set the tone for several years of behaviour."

Mother of 3

"My reservation with mediation would be that as a free service with variable commitment from parties it can be viewed as a pseudo resolution rather than the complete resolution... Reports suggest that mediation agreements can be disregarded when submitted to court, this makes no sense whatsoever as the emotional effort applied by parties in mediation is then in vain."

Father of 2

4.4 SHARED PARENTING AND MONEY

4.4.1 Child Maintenance

Non-existent or insufficient maintenance payments are the most common financial problem discussed by respondents. Court delays and social welfare rules can also result in reduced payments due to court ordered but unpaid maintenance.

"I told the authorities that he gives me money even though he doesn't because they put me under pressure to have a maintenance agreement in place and so I miss out on some money from rent allowance each week."

Mother of 2

"Finances have been the biggest issue in my shared parenting relationship. I'm the mother and although my son sees and speaks to his father regularly, when it comes to money it is always an issue."

Mother of 1

"Owed over €7,000 in maintenance arrears. Have been waiting on legal aid to sort it out for almost 4 years. In the meantime the arrears continue to mount and I go further into debt to meet the children's needs. Have been told by solicitor that he will never be made to pay it all back."

Mother of 3

However, some parents who do not have their children live with them feel that they suffer financially because of unnecessarily high maintenance contributions.

"I pay above average maintenance, because once again, the judge didn't force my ex to receipt and prove her off-the-wall affidavit of means. She enjoys several holidays a year, while I struggle to keep a roof over my head and can only dream of bringing my daughter on a holiday."

Father of 1

"The maintenance I pay pays for my child's upkeep so even though the other parent works full time, she is not actually using any of her own wages to maintain our child."

Father of 1

4.4.2 Accommodation

For all parents who live separately from each other and share parenting, the unavailability and lack of affordability of sufficiently sized housing is cited as a significant problem.

"I am in a poverty trap because I am the sole carer who shares parenting. Despite receiving maintenance, I have to live alone in a one-bed flat, sharing the bed with my child."

Mother of 1

"The banks are allowed to repossess homes making families homeless when one parent moves out and neither can afford full mortgage anymore instead of coming up with a solution."

Mother of 3

"I was advised that I am not entitled to more than a single person's allowance as my dependant son stays with his Dad. They don't take parental rights into account so the estranged parent can afford to rent a larger property so their children can come and stay."

Mother of 3

4.4.3 Social Welfare Assessment and Tax Relief

Financial issues arising from social welfare eligibility and lack of sufficient tax credits to take into account the financial burden of taking care of a child in a shared parenting arrangement, are also evident from responses. Parents feel that One-Parent Family Payment rules need to incorporate a better understanding of shared parenting, and that this would help reduce barriers to good shared parenting arrangements.

“DSP⁵ assesses maintenance as means when it would be worth so much more to both parties if it wasn’t and children wouldn’t be living in such poverty.”

Mother of 3

“Social Welfare benefits (namely FIS & OFP⁶) need to address a shared parenting scenario. A system which encourages lone parenting over shared parenting is clearly incorrect and disadvantageous for children and families.”

Mother of 2

“For me the key issue is access to child benefit and to the Single Person Child Care Credit. I lobbied the Dept of Finance and various TDs on this but there was no interest in changing rules that are fundamentally unequal and detrimental to shared parenting.”

Father of 1

4.4.4 Finances – What Works?

Positive experiences within shared parenting arrangements regarding finances are centred on equal sharing of financial responsibilities for both the day-to-day upkeep of children, as well as less regular expenses.

“We share everything to do with the boys 50/50.”

Mother of 2

“We have 50/50 access and we share crèche costs, clothing and medical costs.”

Mother of 1

“[He] has contributed consistently – same amount of maintenance per month for the last 12 years.”

Mother of 1

“Court order is adhered to always.”

Mother of 4

“Dad pays half the childcare and medical bills. Then we halve other expenses too, eg return to school, clothes, Christmas presents.”

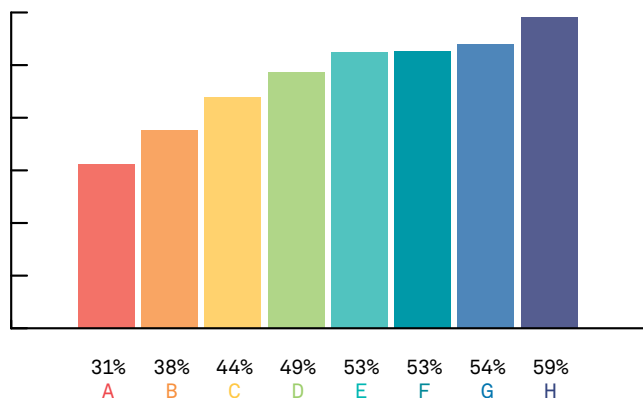
Mother of 3

5 DSP is the Department of Social Protection: www.welfare.ie

6 FIS is Family Income Supplement: <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Family-Income-Supplement-FIS---SW-22.aspx>. OFP is the One-Parent Family Payment: <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/One-Parent-Families.aspx>

4.5 WHAT WOULD HELP PEOPLE TO SHARE PARENTING BETTER?

Sharing Parenting – What Services Work?



- A** Better administration of shared tax credits such as the Single Person Child Carer Credit
- B** Broader access to mediation
- C** One-Parent Family Payment rules to incorporate a better understanding of shared parenting
- D** One-to-one parent mentoring that addresses shared parenting
- E** Improved family court services
- F** Counselling supports
- G** Access to parenting programmes that address shared parenting issues
- H** Improved supports for children (such as play therapy)

4.5.1 Improved supports for children

Almost 60% of respondents say that specific supports for children were needed to support them to deal with difficult emotional aspects of parental separation.

“There is no absolutely no play therapy for children available and no information to help parents.”

Mother of 2

“Play therapy would be massively beneficial. My child constantly asks questions about his absent father ... this worries me more than financial & other struggles. I’m sure there are many others in the same boat.”

Mother of 1

“I think because our children spend most of their childhood in the education system that the schools have a huge role to play - to facilitate, be aware, to be mindful and to discuss modern families the young children in my son’s school created a fantastic environment for my son to deal with the separation as did the teacher (I informed the school immediately).”

Mother of 2

4.5.2 Parenting Programmes that Address Shared Parenting Issues

The service many respondents think would help parents deal with shared parenting was improved access to parenting programmes.

“Parenting classes should probably be made compulsory as even when they are available, people believe they don’t need them or would be embarrassed to go.”

Mother of 2

“[The] Parenting when Separated course was amazing.”

Mother of 2

4.5.3 Counselling and Mentoring

Almost 53% of parents feel that counselling supports for parents would help people to share parenting better; while almost half of all respondents select one-to-one parent mentoring that addresses shared parenting as an important service.

"We attended relationship counselling together as our personal differences were affecting our parenting decisions. Our communication and understanding of shared parenting has greatly improved as a result. We can now interact as a family unit for outings and holidays."

Mother of 1

"We went for couples counselling before we separated and continued through the separation process to help things go smoothly."

Mother of 1

4.5.4 Mediation

Many parents comment about the need for mediation to occur before legal procedures. The pros and cons of mediation are also discussed in the courts section of this report.

"Mediation should be compulsory for separating couples and the interests of their children should be hammered home at every opportunity."

Mother of 1

"Solicitors told me not to bother 7 years ago. It was a huge mistake, things became very acrimonious because of legal teams."

Mother of 2

"I do feel that everyone should be made attend a certain amount of mediation sessions before going before the courts ... Separation is never easy and shared parenting can be difficult but if both parents are constantly reminded, certainly in the beginning, who and what really is important there would def be a lot less heartache."

Mother of 3

4.5.5 Other Services

Some additional comments highlight the following key areas that would support shared parenting arrangements.

Child Contact Centres

"More places to share access (contact centres), eg between my ex moving out and leaving the country, I wasn't comfortable with him in my home (previous issues) so we needed somewhere safe and suitable to meet for him to spend time with Baby."

Mother of 1

"More supervised access centres."

Mother of 2

Information & Awareness

"Guideline documents. Some examples of what works..."

Mother of 2

"Get more info out there. In doctors' surgeries etc ... I had no idea that there was any help out there for me."

Mother of 1

"Better rights for Dads when it comes to working, trying to get time off is impossible in certain jobs because it's seen as a "woman's role" and understanding of one's personal situation as a dad and primary care giver is seen as a negative thing."

Father of 1

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS WHAT IS NEEDED?

These recommendations are based on the suggestions and lived experiences of over 1,000 parents who completed the national Shared Parenting Survey and are underpinned by One Family's 45 years of expertise in supporting diverse families and their children. This report is calling on Government to remove the obstacles that make it harder for parents to share parenting and to implement appropriate supports to reflect the challenges these families can face. A more coherent approach, between Government Departments and agencies, to separation and shared parenting would be very beneficial.

"I would love an agency that deals purely with separation."

Mother of 2

5.1 Parenting and Family Support Services

Many of the challenges parents face post-separation are around building and maintaining a quality workable shared parenting arrangement for their children. This process could be hugely supported with further investment in family support and parenting services available in local communities as well as more specialist services ancillary to family law courts.

This will decrease familial conflicts, decrease the use of courts, save legal fees, promote child wellbeing and protection and ensure that children's rights are upheld.

- Use existing family support organisations to provide child-centred specialist services to support families through separation and shared parenting on a regional basis. These services include post-separation parenting programmes, play therapy for children, mediated parenting plans, parent mentoring, and counselling for parents.
- Professionals working with people separating and sharing parenting including legal practitioners, the judiciary, Gardaí, Tusla and family support services should be knowledgeable about, and receive training on, the challenges experienced by separated families including domestic abuse, child protection issues, gender issues, conflict resolution, parental conflict and diverse families.

- Specialist family support services for parents with higher needs are critical for children's safety. These include Child Contact Centres, parenting capacity assessments, Section 47 reports, risk assessments for contact etc. These services need to work in partnership with family law courts and practitioners and be available and affordable to families with low-incomes. Where courts require information to make decisions regarding children's welfare the State should pay for these assessments. These services should be available in all main regions of Ireland.
- There is a lack of a structured connection between Tusla's work on child protection and private family law courts. In our experience this may lead to child protection concerns including domestic abuse allegations not always being considered in access and custody cases.
- Clear accessible information should be readily available about all issues relating to separation, shared parenting and alternatives to courts through a range of family support and legal providers.
- The provision and resourcing of mediation should be strengthened in a structured way, as a valid alternative to courts. Build on the Dolphin House mediation pilot and plans for the new Child & Family Courts in Dublin to develop a model of best practice for the co-location of family support and mediation services with family law courts. Family support services should include the provision of domestic abuse services, counselling, parenting programmes, family assessments etc.

5.2 Family Law Courts Reform

The fact that both family law processes and facilities are poor and in need of overhaul are well acknowledged in Ireland and reflected in the survey findings. Good practices by individual legal practitioners, judges and progressive legislation such as the Children & Family Relationships Act should be built on so that all family law work is child and client centred with accessible family support services that work positively with the courts.

There is a chasm in the provision of legal family law services in Ireland due to the lack of a CAFCASS⁷ type system, which exists in the United Kingdom. There is no holistic support for people using private family law services and so the process can be more damaging than it need be. This is the type of investment that is required to keep children safe, to decrease familial conflict and to strengthen family relationships post-separation in Ireland.

- Serious consideration needs to be given to the longer term development of a court welfare system in Ireland that would provide the necessary services for families attending family law courts.
- Reorient the physical family law courts and family law processes so they are child and family centred. This is a significant change management project requiring investment and time.
- Ensure equal access to courts through the resourcing of the Legal Aid Board, the Family Mediation Service and ensure that families with low incomes can access family assessments and support services as required by courts.
- Ensure that long delays in relation to court dates, assessments and reports do not result in children and parents being denied contact time in the interim period.
- Cooperation is critical by Government agencies requiring proof of earnings or maintenance as the family law courts are not an appropriate avenue to obtain such proof.
- The payment of maintenance is a perennial problem for parents, children and the courts. Research is required into the best systems internationally, where State intervention is often the most effective way to ensure consistent payment.
- A clear and transparent system on how child maintenance payments are calculated by the courts is needed to ensure clarity, consistency and equity for families.
- Ensure that parents who have safety or barring orders in place do not have to breach them to facilitate contact with their child's other parent.
- Ensure that the voice of the child is consistently heard in court cases affecting them in an age appropriate and child centred way by specialists.

5.3 Reduce Child Poverty

The reduction of the alarmingly high rates of child poverty is a stated aim of the current Government and is reflected in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*⁸. It is well documented that children in one-parent families suffer far greater poverty rates than children living in other families. Separation, shared parenting and parenting alone are consistently associated with less income available for children, the requirement of additional resources, and conflict. Many of the reasons for this can be addressed through policy and practice changes by Government Departments.

- Many children now live part of the time with both of their parents even if it is not 50% of the time. Both parents should have appropriate access to social welfare and tax supports. Innovation will be required to develop a good system that reduces child poverty and supports shared parenting and this will require a strong understanding by DSP of what shared parenting is.
- The current co-habitation rules that apply to parents in receipt of One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's Transition are too restrictive, discourage shared parenting after separation and need to be amended.
- Amend the administration of the Single Person Child Carer Credit (SPCCC) to reflect the realities of sharing parenting and ensure that the SPCCC is available to both parents who share parenting of their children.
- Due to the disproportionate number of lone parent families becoming homeless, government must ensure that both parents in a shared parenting relationship are assessed appropriately for accommodation needs to facilitate overnight visits with their children.
- Ensure that parents are not means tested for unpaid court-ordered maintenance by state agencies such as the Dept. of Social Protection, Health Service Executive and SUSI⁹. Children and families must not be penalised where a parent stops or reduces maintenance.
- Ensure that parents who are subject to domestic abuse are not hindered from leaving these relationships due to administrative difficulties accessing social welfare supports.

7 CAFCASS: Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/>

8 The National Policy Framework for Children & Young People 2014-2020 http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/cypp_framework/BetterOutcomes-BetterFutureReport.pdf

9 Student Universal Support Ireland www.susi.ie



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