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## **What is shared care?**

**Dr. Tina Haux (University of Kent)  
Dr. Renee Luthra (University of Essex)**



## Non-Technical Summary

Shared care, i.e. where children spend substantial amounts of time in both households, is fast becoming the most popular separation arrangement internationally. Yet, the evidence base on shared care remains thin in the UK with estimates of its prevalence varying between three and 17 per cent. Capturing a relatively new and evolving phenomenon such as shared care is a challenge initially for longitudinal surveys as much of their value is based on asking the same questions over time. *Understanding Society* is a key investment by the ESRC to capture changes in society and therefore needs to strike exactly this balance between stability and adaptation.

The aim of this project is to explore how shared care is understood, negotiated and practiced by separated families, to assess the appropriateness of existing questions in *Understanding Society* in capturing the phenomenon, and to suggest changes where appropriate.

To do so, we conducted 31 qualitative interviews with separated parents sampled from *Understanding Society*, 13 non-resident fathers and 18 main carer mothers who reported at least weekly contact between children and the non-resident parent in *Understanding Society*. Using the results from our interviews, we examined existing *Understanding Society* data to assess the utility of existing survey questions.

We would argue that *Understanding Society* captures the new phenomenon of shared care very well both in the present as well as changes over time once contact frequency and decision-making are taken together. However, the decision-making question is currently only asked of the resident parent and it would aid future analysis if it could also be asked of the non-resident parent as well.

## What is shared care?

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Dr. Renee Luthra (University of Essex)

### **Abstract:**

Shared care is becoming the most popular separation arrangement internationally. Yet, the evidence base on shared care remains thin in the UK with estimates of its prevalence varying between three and 17 per cent. Capturing a relatively new and evolving phenomenon such as shared care is a challenge for longitudinal surveys as much of their value is based on asking the same questions over time. This project explores how shared care is understood, negotiated and practiced by separated families, to assess the appropriateness of existing questions in *Understanding Society* in capturing the phenomenon, and to suggest changes where appropriate.

**Keywords:** qualitative, shared care, longitudinal studies, separation

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# What is shared care?

Report to the ESRC

July 2019

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## 1. Project Summary

Shared care, i.e. where children spend substantial amounts of time in both households, is fast becoming the most popular separation arrangement internationally (FCR 2017). Yet, the evidence base on shared care remains thin in the UK (Haux et al 2017) with estimates of its prevalence varying between three and 17 per cent (Ermisch et al., 2011; Fehlberg et al., 2011). Capturing a relatively new and evolving phenomenon such as shared care is a challenge initially for longitudinal surveys as much of their value is based on asking the same questions over time. *Understanding Society* is a key investment by UKRI to capture changes in society and therefore needs to strike exactly this balance between stability and adaptation.

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To do so, we conducted 31 qualitative interviews with separated parents sampled from *Understanding Society*, 13 non-resident fathers and 18 main carer mothers who reported at least weekly contact between children and the non-resident parent in *Understanding Society*. Using the results from our interviews, we examined existing *Understanding Society* data to assess the utility of existing survey questions.

### **Our key findings are:**

- 1) **How is shared care practiced and understood?** The focus in this study was to extend current knowledge beyond contact frequency to focus on parenting specifically, encompassing day-to-day practicalities, mental load, default parenting as well as parental

beliefs and aims for the children. This approach allowed us to identify the key dimensions that separated shared care from more traditional care as well as to distinguish between different forms of shared care. Those dimensions are, firstly, frequency and content of communication between parents, and secondly, shared parenting responsibility in terms of practicalities as well as decision-making and a shared value system for their children. Shared parenting therefore was in contrast to what we have termed traditional parenting, where one parent was clearly the main carer with sole responsibility for the day-to-day raising of the children despite the children having frequent contact with the other parent, including overnight stays.

- 2) **How to better capture shared care in *Understanding Society*?** A key finding is that contact frequency by itself is an insufficient indicator of shared care as it does not tell us enough about how the parenting is organized across the two households. Preliminary analysis of the quantitative data suggests that the existing question on joint decision-making can act as a proxy for both of the dimensions identified above. Taking frequent contact (in this study measured as seeing children once a week or more) and joint decision-making together arrives at a provisional estimate of 14 per cent of families practicing shared care post-separation.
- 3) **Contact patterns:** There seemed to be three main contact patterns of shared care. The first was a 50/50 split with children spending half the week with one parent and half the week with the other parent, including overnight stays. The second pattern consisted of children seeing the other parent one or two evenings/ nights per week and staying overnight every other weekend. A third type involved few or no overnight stays with the non-resident parent, but extensive contact between the non-resident parent and children in the other parent's home. Parents differed whether the pattern was based around work commitments of the parents or whether it deliberately did not involve several overnight stays in a row.
- 4) **Capturing change over time:** Our findings mirror previous research, namely, that the arrival of a new partner and step- or half-siblings, as well as children ageing into adolescence, can destabilize shared care arrangements and this seemed to affect the frequency of contact as well as overnight stays; both aspects which are currently captured in *Understanding Society*.
- 5) **Terminology:** No clear terminology for the parenting arrangements of respondents emerged, mostly due to respondents not having a term for their arrangements themselves rather than a lack of agreement between different options. Shared care, in particular, did not resonate with respondents. Co-parenting was used as a term at times but not consistently while a sub-group talked about 50/50 care.

In summary, we would argue that *Understanding Society* captures the new phenomenon of shared care very well both in the present as well as changes over time once contact frequency and decision-making are taken together. However, the decision-making question is currently only asked of the resident parent and it would aid future analysis if it could also be asked of the non-resident parent as well.

## **Recommendations:**

*Understanding Society* is one of the few surveys that follows the non-resident parents after they leave the main sample household and this is a critical advantage when looking at separated parents. *Understanding Society* has also recently harmonized the contact frequency questions across non-resident and resident parents in forthcoming waves, which will make comparisons across separated parents easier. Building on this work we would like to recommend:

- Given the importance of decision-making to distinguish shared care from frequent contact in our view, we would recommend that that decision-making question is not only asked of resident parents but also of non-resident parents (NRP).
- Similarly, given that there is considerable interest in the association between contact, quality of parenting and children's outcomes, we would encourage *Understanding Society* to ask parenting questions of NRP as well in instances where they report seeing the child at least weekly.

We believe that potential savings could be made by dropping the questions on closeness to the non-resident child and differentiating term time and holiday contact as these did not reveal much variation in our study. However, this question may well be important in other contexts.

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## 2. Introduction

How do parents “do” shared care after separation? This question is gaining policy and scholarly attention for three reasons: The first reason is the current high prevalence of parental separation in the UK: by the time they are 16, 47 per cent of children in the UK are no longer (or have never been) living with both of their birth parents (DWP 2013), meaning that the parenting of separated parents affects a large group of children. The second is the growing acknowledgment of the importance of parenting as a determinant of social inequality, and the resulting interest in how parental separation and shared care may influence children’s outcomes (among others see Nielsen 2011). The final reason is the increased involvement of fathers in childcare (e.g. Dermott 2014) and therefore the



expectation of this involvement continuing post-separation (Poortman et al 2018; Haux and Platt 2015).

Internationally, an increasing proportion of parents choose shared care as a post separation arrangement (see FRC 2017). There is growing popular – though not scholarly - consensus that this is the ‘best’ type of post-separation care for children (providing there are no concerns over the well-being of the child and the safety of all family members involved). Yet, despite the policy relevance and increasing interest in post-separation parenting, the evidence base on the shared care prevalence and persistence over time, and on the evolution, understanding, and negotiation of parenting practices post-separation, remains thin in the UK (Haux et al. 2017; Bryson et al. 2017, Fehlberg 2011, for an exception see Masardo 2008).

The goal of this project therefore is to provide new evidence on how separated parents **understand, define and practice** shared care. Our aim in so doing is to contribute to a consensus definition of the phenomenon in order to better measure the causes and consequences of this emerging family form in the future. More formally, we address the following research question: **How is shared care understood, negotiated and practiced by those families with a high(er) frequency of post-separation contact?**

To answer this question, we interviewed 13 non-resident fathers and 18 main carer mothers where the non-resident parent had at least weekly contact with his child, including 7 “matched couples” where both the biological mother and biological father from former partnerships were interviewed. This approach was made possible by using *Understanding Society* as a sampling frame to obtain contact details for the interviews, as the survey is unique in the UK for following separated parents after they leave the main survey household.

### 3. Background

The main goal of the study was to obtain new evidence on how shared care was understood, negotiated and practiced by families with higher levels of post-separation contact, in order to better define the phenomenon of shared care. One of the hindrances to our current understanding of shared care stems from a **lack of a stable definition** of the concept. Despite the increasing interest in shared parenting internationally, there is a lack of clarity over ‘how co-parenting should be defined; if, and how often, it occurs; how the courts should deal with it; what effect it has on children’s well-being; and thus also what the best course of action for the legislator would be in dealing with co-parenting.’ (Nikolina 2015; 2-3 but see also Smyth et al., 2016). The absence of an official definition of shared care in the UK, or even a clear academic sense of what should be counted, particularly complicates data gathering efforts on the phenomenon. Terms such as ‘shared parenting’, ‘shared care’ and ‘shared residence’ are often used interchangeably. The confusion is reflected and enhanced by the absence of survey data on shared care in the UK that

captures more than contact frequency and overnight stays (Bryson et al. 2017, Haux et al. 2017 – see also our discussion below of questions currently in *Understanding Society*). The available estimates of '50/50' shared care in the UK range from 3 to 17 percent (Fehlberg et al. 2011) reflecting the difficulty in capturing this phenomenon on the basis of **inadequate survey questions**. Thus, an additional aim of our project was to better understand how shared care is *understood* and *defined* by parents themselves in order to improve data gathering in major household surveys.

In addition to this methodologically driven aim, we are also interested in how pre-separation parenting and gender ideologies might lead to shared care parenting beliefs and practices post-separation. Traditionally, research on post-separation parenting has focused on patterns of **contact and time** (see Smyth 2004; Smyth et al. 2005 and Smyth 2009 for a review), **child well-being and child outcomes** (see Nielsen 2011 and Fehlberg et al 2011 for reviews of existing research), the **experience and views of children** (most recently Fransson et al., 2017; Sadowski and McIntosh 2016; Bermann 2015; Davies 2015; Marschall 2014; 2017), and the **legislative process** and key actors in the UK particularly (see Trinder 2014, Harris Short 2010 and Crewe 2016). Explicit studies of pre- and post-separation parenting practices are less common (for an exception see Philips 2014). However, some qualitative studies have also examined key drivers for different models of post-separation shared parenting in practice (among others, Trinder et al. 2002, Markham and Coleman 2012; McIntosh and Smyth 2012). However, many of these studies use data that is now over 10 years old, the majority are not about the UK and their primary focus is on contact arrangements, rather than on **parenting beliefs and practices post-separation**. Focussing on the latter is important to capture the experience of children in shared care arrangements more fully, which is relevant to the broader discussion of the effects of shared care arrangements on child outcomes (see Nielsen 2011).

This lack of recent evidence base for the UK is important because shared care arrangements are increasingly popular across many Western countries (Fehlberg et al., 2011; Smyth 2017). We know from research in other countries that as the number and proportion of families practicing shared care increases, the composition of those families becomes increasingly diverse (FCR 2017). Given the repeated iterations of legislation in UK which emphasise shared parental responsibility post-separation (most recently the 2014 Children and Families Act, see Trinder 2014; Crewe 2016), we can potentially expect a similar increase in shared care parenting – and an accompanying increase in diversity - over time in the UK. It is therefore important to define and measure this family form in large, nationally representative surveys such as *Understanding Society* in order to capture its (possible) expansion and diversification as it emerges.

## 4. Methodology

### Qualitative data collection and analysis

We have conducted 31 in-depth interviews, using the nationally representative *Understanding Society* (University of Essex et al. 2018) as a sampling frame to purposively select respondents who are separated parents<sup>1</sup> with children under the age of 16. By explicitly selecting respondents based on non-residential contact frequency, including matched couples, we were able to reach theoretical saturation with a smaller number of total interviews. Using the survey also enhanced the coverage of our study; we achieved interviews with respondents with varying time since separation, age of children, and socioeconomic profiles, and from across England, Wales and Scotland. More common methods of qualitative sampling, in contrast, are dependent on referral patterns of existing respondents (such as snowball sampling, see Prazen et al. 2011, Masardo 2008 and Lacroix 2006), or self-selection into the sample (when advertisements are used, see Neoh and Mellor 2010; Smyth 2004; Lee 2002) – such methods are more likely to result in homogeneous samples in terms of location, class status and children’s ages.

We purposefully took a broad view of potential shared care of at least weekly contact (rather than a more commonplace definition of at least 30 per cent time with the non-resident parent), both because we did not want to *a priori* exclude potential shared care interviewees and also because *Understanding Society* did not include the necessary identifiers for this definition in interviews with the main carer parent. To determine eligibility for main carers, we used their reports of non-resident parent contact frequency; for non-resident parents, we used self-reports.

Following the extant literature on post-separation parenting, we have further restricted our sample to separated couples where the main carer / resident parent is the mother and the non-resident parent is the father (87% of all separated couples with children under 16 in *Understanding Society*). We realise that other factors are shaping shared care arrangements: for instance re-partnering and additional children in either of the separated parents’ households, the length of separation, and the age of the child at separation. Stratifying our sample to accommodate all these factors would necessitate a substantially larger qualitative sample, which was not feasible given the estimated prevalence of shared care in the UK and the expected qualitative interview response rates from the *Understanding Society* respondents. Although we aimed for an even split of separated

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<sup>1</sup> This sample includes members of separated former couples where both members of the couple are biological parents. Please note that throughout this paper we restrict our definition of parents only to heterosexual biological parents. We recognize that this omits a great diversity in the experiences of parenting and of parental separation, in particular homosexual partnerships with children, adoptive parents and children residing with other family members. Unfortunately a project of this scope cannot provide sufficient attention to these multiple sources of variation, and so we restrict our focus to the children who have two known biological parents and currently reside with one biological parent.

mothers and fathers, as is common in research, the *Understanding Society* liaison team was more likely to achieve contact with female sample members and to obtain consent for their participation, resulting in a final sample of 18 women and 13 men.

The qualitative interviews covered a range of topics yielding both methodological and substantive insights. In accordance with our research question, we are looking to provide a thick description of the contact patterns and form of involvement practised by each parent, how these arrangements are arrived at, the degree of autonomy between separated parents and how decisions are made. We further investigated other influences in how shared care is practiced: the roles fulfilled by others (e.g. grandparents and/or step-parents) and their influence, the socio-economic characteristics of the families, 'relationship equipment' (McIntosh and Smyth 2012), the role of maintenance arrangements as well as changes over time (see topic guide in appendix). We use this information to develop a typology of shared care families in the UK.

In addition to each of the substantive questions outlined above, an important part of this project is to provide new material on best practice in capturing contact arrangements in quantitative interviews. Very little is known about how respondents interpret, evaluate and formulate their survey responses when asked standardised questions about contact arrangements. Understanding the cognitive processes involved, identifying the appropriate language to use, ensuring proper memory retrieval through the use of the right triggers, and so on are all crucial for effective survey questionnaire design (Groves et al, 2009).

The qualitative interviews therefore included questions of terminology, attempting to capture any mismatch between survey responses and lived experience, and the reasons behind the mismatch. We were also particularly interested in extending the questions to cover activities by either parent that form part of making shared care arrangements work practically and emotionally such as after school care, joint meals and other arrangements that go beyond overnight stays (see Marshall 2014 children's perspective on shared care). This is with the view of capturing the potential diversity of shared care elements but also to help develop new questions to identify shared care circumstances in survey research.

## **The fieldwork process**

Funding for this project was confirmed in January 2019. In early February we began the process for ethical approval for the project, and ethical approval was granted on 17 April 2019.

In late April and early May 2019 we used the most recent wave of *Understanding Society* (wave 8) to identify three samples from which to draw our interviews:

- a) A list of the personal identification numbers of 64 mothers, randomly drawn from a possible sample of 882 women present in wave 8 with children under 16 who do not currently reside with the children's other biological parent, but who (in wave 7) report at least weekly contact between the child(ren) and the non-resident parent

- b) A list of the personal identification numbers of 64 fathers, randomly drawn from a possible sample of 339 men present in wave 8 with children under 16 who do not currently reside with them, but who report at least weekly contact in wave 7
- c) Members of a and b who were formerly observed in a single household in *Understanding Society*: these are “matched couples.” The data contained 80 men and women who formed 40 former partners, or “matched couples.”

*Understanding Society* data managers matched these personal identifiers with the survey participants contact details and these were provided to the participant liaison team for *Understanding Society*. These team members were given the attached Shared Care Protocol and a short briefing to inform them of the purpose of the study and provide guidelines on how the recruitment should take place. The liaison team was asked to target matched couples for interviews first, followed by a balance of women with children and non-resident fathers.

The final achieved sample was 13 men and 18 women, including 7 matched couples. Descriptive information on this sample is found in table 1 below. Having matched couples on parenting post-separation is especially rare and would not have been possible without *Understanding Society* as a sampling frame. The interviews have been professionally **transcribed** and thematically **analysed** using NVivo.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants as reported in wave 8

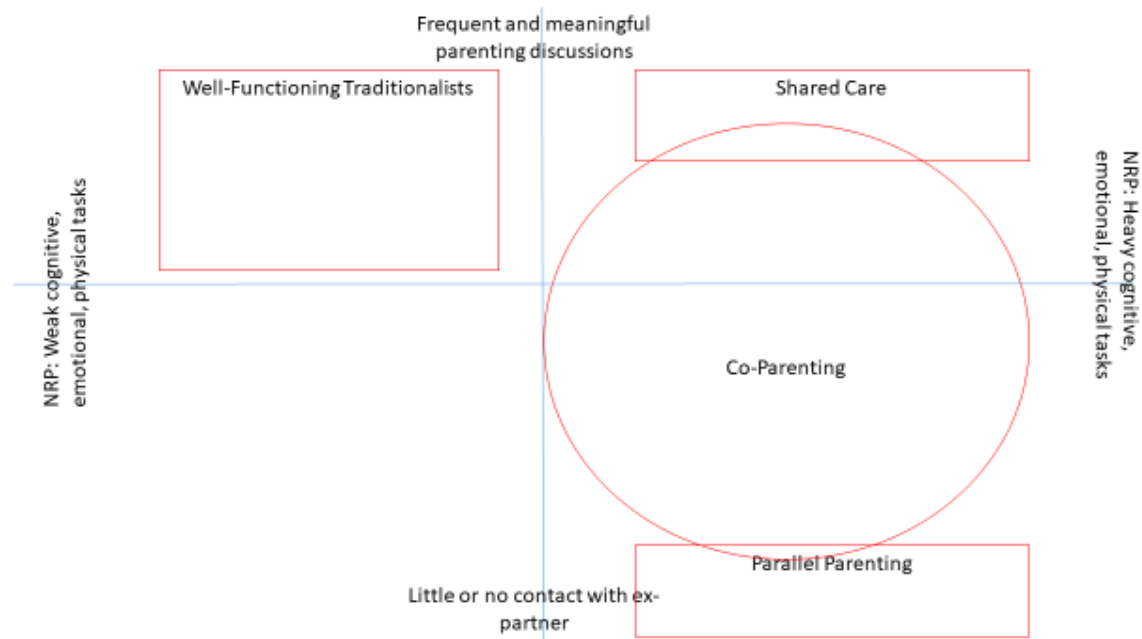
<i>Socio-demographics</i>		White British	29
Male	13	<i>Region</i>	
Female	18	North West	3
Mean Age	37	Yorkshire	6
In Paid Employment	28	East Midlands	2
<i>Education</i>		West Midlands	1
Degree or other HE	15	East of England	1
A-level	11	London	2
Less than A-level	5	South East	6
<i>Current Partnership Status</i>		South West	3
Married / Civil Partnership	4	Wales	3
Co-habiting	4	Scotland	3

## **Quantitative analysis of survey data**

We followed up our qualitative study with preliminary data analysis with *Understanding Society*, to assess whether existing survey questions could be used to identify shared care and the degree of agreement between different measures of the post-separation parenting relationships. These initial analyses were conducted on the relevant waves of *Understanding Society* (3, 5, and 7) with all respondents to the child maintenance module in these waves (for the resident parent or main carer) as well as those non-resident parents who completed the family networks module which contained questions about contact with children under 16 not residing in the household. We note that this analysis may result in “double counting” of children in separated families, in instances where, due to high contact frequency of both parents, children may be counted as residing in two households at once. While this can be empirically determined in matched couples formerly observed together in the data, it is impossible in the great majority of separated parents observed in *Understanding Society* where the other biological parent is not observed.

## **5. Preliminary findings**

Our aim had been to explore how parents understood and experienced shared care and the dimensions that constitute and differentiate shared care. Based on the interviews we propose a typology of shared care (see Figure 1) based on two key dimensions: parenting activities and parental communication.



## Dimensions

The first dimension (horizontal axis) represents the range of **parenting activities** that both parents, but especially the non-resident parent, engaged in. Our respondents referred to parenting as a suite of activities, including

- a) physical activities such as bathing, cooking and cleaning for, and providing transportation for children;
- b) emotional activities such as discussing important matters, enjoying leisure time of shared and mutually enjoyable activities, strategizing for dealing with bullies or school difficulties, providing “cuddles” and connected time together, and
- c) cognitive activities (or mental load, or cognitive labour (Daminger 2019)), including making important decisions on behalf of the child (for instance, researching and choosing schools, setting boundaries such as screen time restrictions, and choosing and arranging third party childcare) as well as more mundane cognitive tasks such as ensuring the child has lunch money, proper footwear and clothes, and planning holidays, birthday parties or playdates.

At the lower end of this dimension were non-resident parents who, despite fairly or even very frequent contact, did not engage in a wide or meaningful range of childcare activities. At the extreme were non-resident parents who not only did not engage in the “unfun” mundane tasks of shoe-shopping or washing clothes but also did not perform emotional or physical activities with their children when they were in their care, for instance by having the children watched by a grandparent or partner or giving the child a computing tablet.

For instance, the non-resident parent of Sheila's child has her for 3 nights per week, yet she reports a low level of engagement across all three elements of care:

*"... but he [non-resident parent] always has put work first, so if something's happening at work or something's going on at work, he would rather be there or be involved or be on a call and Angela ... has to **either potter about on her own with her computer and her iPad or be looked after by someone else** which is not something I'm particularly happy about....*

*...like I said earlier on, things like homework, every week I send him a message saying, 'I've done this, I've done this, I've done this. I need you to read the book, recite the two times table, and do whatever else if there's anything else for him to do.' **And nine times out of ten he doesn't do it.** I need to say to him, 'She needs new school shoes. I bought X, Y, and Z, can you get school shoes?' **He doesn't think of these things off the top of his head if that makes sense."***

At the high end of the distribution were those non-resident parents who were actively involved in all three dimensions of care. For instance, even though the non-resident parent has no overnights in this couple, Sarah reports:

*"At the minute we're quite lucky [with school activities], it's one of the days we're off, so either Tuesday or Wednesday, **so depending on who's off, they'll go to the open evening or, if we can, we'll go together, if we can get the right time.** Homework and things like that as well, again, it depends on the subject, so maths, he writes and does music and things as well, so he helps him sometimes with that sort of work. And then I'll do more the creative side and stuff. So, even with homework, **we share those responsibilities."***

Although this dimension was associated with the *amount* of contact time spent with the non-resident parent, there was substantial variation in the level of childcare provided by non-resident parents with the same levels of formal contact.

The second dimension on the vertical axis represents the **level of communication** between the child's separated parents. Variation in communication was found in terms of **frequency, medium, and content.**



In our aim to capture shared care couples, we only interviewed separated parents with non-resident contact frequency of weekly or more, with the result that those separated parents with very low contact were excluded from our sample. However, even among our participants communication frequency between parents can be seen as a continuum with those communicating most frequently doing so practically every day, or even multiple times per day, and those least frequently limiting their communication to when it was absolutely necessary (weekly or less) and sometimes involving other family members in the handover to avoid confrontations.

In terms of medium, text and WhatsApp as a medium worked for many parents for a quick exchange of news though they tended to switch to email or talking during handovers for longer or more complicated topics. Very few parents spoke face to face frequently, with even those with high levels of contact preferring more impersonal methods of communication.

Of particular importance to our aim of identifying shared care, we found that the content, rather than communication frequency, differed a great deal across the sample. At the high end, parents talked about the emotional state of the child on a regular basis, let each other know little things that had been going on during their time with the child so that the other parent would know about it, e.g. something that happened in school, exchanged information about their children's adherence to jointly agreed rules and admitted difficulties with particular aspects of parenting to the other parent. At the other end of the spectrum communication would be limited to the practical arrangements about handovers. Parents in the middle might text each other with regards to decisions regarding holidays or notifications of school events, with more substantial conversations only reserved for major issues such as school choice or mental or physical health diagnoses. The following quote from Andrew, who was seeing his children three nights per week until recently, provides an example of where, despite frequent contact, deep communication is barely taking place:

*“Usually they [children and mother] **hide it** from me, and then I eventually find out from the school in one way or another, and then they have, what's it called? A TAF, Team Around the Family, I think because their mum struggles, and they've both struggled in school, and that's usually where I find things out. [Laughing] I'll get there and **I'll start hearing things that have happened and things that have gone on that I don't know about...**”*

At the other end of the spectrum is Jonathan, who sees his children 1-2 nights per week, but reports speaking with his children's mother very frequently, who directly asks for his parenting advice:

*“more often than I'd like....so, nowadays, she phones me and goes, 'Well what are you doing?' It's like, I make sure when they're here, I cook. Cathy's my daughter, she washes up.*

*Jacob dries up. ... And they don't do that at her home.... So nowadays, she does ask me. She phones me and goes, 'I want to do this,' or, 'What do you think about this?'"*

The frequency and content of communication was linked to the amount and level of joint decision-making, which on a continuum again ranged from some parents making all the decisions themselves without consulting the other parents at all or as little as possible and others working jointly towards decisions and being prepared to compromise if there was disagreement.

An example of a couple at the low end of the joint decision making spectrum is reported by Polly:

*"Then, I just feel like I made the decisions and I feel that I imposed them on him, but he never, never seems to be interested in taking part. So, I don't even ask him really what he thinks. I just say well, I'm going to do this or that, or I've arranged this or that and that's the way it is."*

At the other hand of the spectrum we have Emily, who reports non-resident contact three nights per week:

*"...Yeah, you know, if we are having some issues like with the other day, he was a bit mean to his little brother, so the **three of us sat**, and you know, we said, 'If you are nice then you have a nice life, but if you're not very nice then you have things taken off of you.' So, **we agreed that we'll ban the phone, we'd ban all sort of, anything, you know, with a screen. You know, we are very much on the same [page]...**"*

## Typology

Our interviews revealed that these two dimensions - **parenting activities and communication** – can be used to characterise different types of post-separation care. Due to our sampling strategy, we only interviewed a few participants where the non-resident parent was very low on both communication content and frequency and very limited in terms of parenting activities. A large proportion of our interview participants, however, could be characterised as fairly high in terms of contact frequency and content but fairly low in terms of the range of activities carried out by the non-resident parent. We have termed this post-separation parenting type as **functional traditionalists**. This group was characterised by a gendered division of labour with the main carer performing the majority of the

cognitive tasks as well as much of the physical care. Main carer mothers in this group often reported that children might not be regularly bathed, have hair combed, or be changed from their pyjamas during weekends with non-resident parents. When non-resident fathers in this group had children on school nights, main carers would often prepare the child's book-bag, school uniform, and occasionally lunch and snack as well prior to handover. The degree of synchronisation of rules across households would vary, but where unified rules existed, these would often be led by the mother. Despite this imbalance in terms of childcare activities, these parents were generally amicable, with such gendered divisions of labour having arisen pre-separation and often accompanied by a reduction in the work hours of the mother at the time of the children's birth. The parents were still speaking frequently about both mundane and more consequential matters of children's care, yet these decisions were generally led by the main carer, for instance Diana, who's ex-husband has their two boys every other weekend and Tuesday night, as well as half the holidays:

*I: [...] I mean, when he has the boys though, what is he in charge of? When he has the boys and when he doesn't have the boys?*

*P: **What's he (in) charge of?***

*I: Yeah.*

*P: **That's a good question. I don't know. Not much.** He's in charge of what he does with them to some extent, but **I will have organised their clubs and packed their things that they need to go to those clubs.** If they've got birthday parties to go to, then he will have to buy the present. If it's your weekend and it's a party, then you're the person who buys the present. **But, I tell him where he's going and so forth.***

Moving from the upper left hand side to the upper right hand side of Figure 1, we move from functioning traditionalists to a group of parents characterised by both high levels of communication and a high degree of parenting responsibilities born by both parents: this is the post-separation parenting type we term as **shared care**. Most of the key identifiers of this group in terms of communication were content related, including, firstly, shared rule making, with input from both partners and sense of being, or arriving at being, "on the same page." Secondly, shared care parents made important decisions jointly, with input from the other parent respected and considered. Finally, parents in this type were able to speak honestly and openly about parenting challenges, as in the

case of Jonathan quoted above, where both parents could solicit advice from the other and discuss how best to parent their two early teenage children. In terms of medium and frequency, while shared care parents were more likely to speak face to face and to speak more frequently, we found that parents could and did use texting and email for the deep communication that characterises shared care.

In terms of parenting activities, shared care families were characterised by active and varied involvement of the non-resident parent in all elements of parenting: physical, emotional, and cognitive activities. However, this was not a distinguishing feature of shared care couples but rather was also common for the third type of post-separation parenting we identified, which in accordance with the existing literature we have termed **parallel care**. Parallel care is characterised by a high level of engagement from the non-resident parent, often with the result that the child is perceived as having two equal “homes,” with practical care such as bedtimes, bathing, eating and transport being arranged independently by both parents during “their days,” and the child often having a fairly separate set of friends (often cousins or family friends from each respective side), as well as toys and clothing purchased by each parent and remaining at each parental home. An example of this is in quote from Cheryl, whose ex-husband has their two girls two evenings every week and every other weekend:

*I: OK, can I ask if you chat about sort of things like meal times, bedtimes, getting ears pierced, clothing, these types of decisions?*

*P: No, we haven't, **because they have like their own clothes when they're with me, they have clothes with him. ... There's only one big decision that I have had to contact him on, and it's not going very well at the moment, and that is, I would like to move the girls' schools. So, I text him that, and then we went to mediation, and we went to one session of mediation and he walked out of mediation and wouldn't agree anything.***

Finally, we have also tentatively defined an “intermediate” type of shared parenting, falling in between shared care and parallel parenting, which we refer to as **co-parenting**. Alongside the functioning traditional parents, this parenting type was more commonly observed among our participants, and is characterised by lower level, generally text or email communication that is nevertheless more open than that observed among parallel parents, but lacks the frequency and degree of joint decision making that is observed among shared care couples. These couples might attend a parents’ evening together, and will pass along relevant information about their child’s well-being, for instance if a child had a major argument with a sibling while in their care. But in general parents of this type allowed the

other parent to “get on with it” even when they disagreed, as in the case of Melinda whose ex-husband has their daughter one night per week and every other weekend:

*Well, bedtimes, she arranges her at her dad’s. ... Like, New Year’s Eve, he always wants her and for, I’m going to say from five-ish onwards, he’s always kept her up past midnight, when she was a baby he woke her up after midnight, **always didn’t agree with it, but that’s what he did.***

### **Patterns of contact and care:**

From the qualitative research, three main contact patterns of shared care emerged. The first pattern was as close to a 50/50 split with children spending half the week with one parent and half the week with the other parent, including overnight stays. The second pattern tended to be based around children seeing the other parent one or two evenings/ nights per week and staying overnight every other weekend. The third pattern involved few, if any, overnight stays with the non-resident parent, but extensive contact between the non-resident parent and children in the other parent’s home. Parents practicing the first pattern were very clear that they wanted to share the time with the children as evenly as possible. At times this could be closely tied to wanting to reduce the amount of maintenance paid and some parents expressed frustration that they were liable for a small amount of maintenance due to not being able to split the week completely equally between themselves and their former partner.

The quotes below demonstrate the complicated contact patterns that emerge when truly 50/50 care is attempted:

*‘It doesn’t work like that, it’s just four on, four off. So, it doesn’t really work, you know, like that. So, for example, now, he had them yesterday, so he has them Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and then I have them, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, like that, and then he has them back on the fifth day then, like that, so it’s like a rolling four days... We’ve always done it this way, because his shifts, he does four on, four off, so it fits nicely with childcare and things and we don’t, you know, we manage, we’re flexible then in-between’*

- *Janine, 50/50*

*‘we got exactly a 50/50 split over a two-week period. So, on a normal weekdays, I have my daughter on a Tuesday and a Thursday night, and then alternate Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. So, one week, I’ll have her five out of seven, and the next week I’ll only have her two out of seven, but obviously it’ll be seven nights out of 14 on a two-week cycle.’*

- *Tom 50/50*

The second pattern of regular overnight stays during the week and every other weekends could either be the result of having moved from the 50/50 pattern to less frequent contact or could have been set

right after separation. The amount of consecutive time children were spending with each parent was an important consideration for arranging such contact patterns although fitting the contact arrangements around the work patterns and demands of one or both of the parents featured prominently in the interviews as well:

*'They do, yeah. They see him every, and stay overnight as well and stay on Wednesday and Thursday evening... And then they also spend every other weekend with them as well, and then they get dropped off on a Sunday night at six o'clock.'*

- Cheryl, 2 evenings and weekends

The third pattern of frequent visits but no overnight stays tended to be most suitable where one parent had concerns over the well-being of the child in the other house, where one parent did not have suitable accommodation or where teenagers were making their own arrangements in terms of contact and opted out of the regular changing of residence.

*'She spends quite a bit of time with him. She spends Tuesday evenings with him from school. She spends, so she has Friday afternoons off school and he generally has her all of Friday afternoon and then takes her to Guides in the evening. Then she sees him every second weekend for the Saturday and Sunday. She used to stay with him. She doesn't stay with him anymore. She doesn't want to stay with him anymore, but she does see him every second Saturday and Sunday.'*

- Rose, evenings and Saturday

The diversity of the patterns observed in terms of their frequency, rhythm and nature makes it all the more important that the survey questions are able to capture most of the differences between groups as well as changes over time. Surveys focusing specifically on separated parents are able to capture more of the complexity of care arrangements by asking respondents to indicate and handovers across a weekly timetable. However, this would not be possible in a multi-purpose survey such as *Understanding Society*.

## **Terminology**

One of the difficulties of capturing shared care is the lack of agreed terminology by academics and policy-makers alike. Currently, terms such as co-parenting and shared parenting or residence are used interchangeably. When asking respondents about how they would describe their relationship

one typical response was silence or confusion showing that the arrangements did not have a term attached in the respondents' mind. When prompted co-parenting or shared parenting resonated with some parents but not others. However, asking whether respondents would refer to their arrangements as lone/main parent and non-resident parent tended to distinguish those with shared care and those with traditional care arrangements. In other words, respondents had a clear sense that their arrangements did not fit the traditional lone parent/ non-resident parent image but were less clear what they call these new arrangements.

*I: What's different with those who co-parent?*

*P: [One of my child's friends], he spends half the week in each house. The other house, or the dad's house, do a huge percentage of the **childcare arrangements**. ... There's a real shared view of the co-parenting and who takes. There's a shared responsibility. I don't think we have a shared responsibility. **I think I have the responsibility and he sees the children**. I don't know what you'd call that, because he's still legally got parental responsibility. He is their dad. He sees the kids. He cares about the children and he loves his children. But, I don't, I don't know. I think it depends on individual situation. **I know I wouldn't say we shared the care.***

- Rachel, 2 nights per week

Where parents had 50/50 arrangements, this was usually also the vocabulary that was used. This could be a reflection of a genuine intention to share but similarly also be referring to language used in determining maintenance. In fact, for a number of parents it was frustrating that a week could not be split equally as it meant that they were still liable for maintenance payments.

*'So, I would probably class it as a **50-50 shared parenting** is probably the way that I would kind of on the basis that we try and ensure that we have Sarah half the time as much as possible. Obviously, it's not feasible to have the split 50-50 because there's seven days in a week... I think one thing that slightly annoys me is that, within Scotland, there's, and I'm trying to remember what term it is, but it's almost like the **main caregiver or something like that, along those lines, and it just feels like it's a little bit of a 1900s type terminology** whereas actually there shouldn't necessarily need to be a main caregiver, it should be viewed that actually there is a **shared caregiver**.'*

*Colin, 3 nights per week*

Respondents with more traditional arrangements but still frequent contact tended also not to refer to themselves as 'lone parents' and instead preferring 'main parent'. However, the corresponding parent to the 'main parent', i.e. those we would have previously labelled 'non-resident parent' or 'absent parent' (a terminology that has been seen as inadequate for some time), were less sure what to call themselves or the parenting arrangement they were involved in other than 'separated parent'.

In summary therefore, parenting arrangements post-separation have been changing without adequate terminology emerging at the same time. This suggests that it would be too early to adapt the wording of survey questions in order to capture the phenomenon by its name and instead to keep focussing on key components such as frequency, overnight stays and decision-making.

## **Existing data in *Understanding Society***

Having now summarised our preliminary findings from our interviews, we go on to examine to what extent we identify shared care using existing *Understanding Society* data.

### **A. Identifying Shared Care: Main Carer**

As discussed above, interview data suggested that cognitive labour was a particularly important part of the parenting dimension differentiating between shared care parents and those with high contact but more traditional parenting arrangements. The closest measure of this cognitive element of parenting for separated parents is a question on shared decision making, which is included in the child maintenance module for main carer parents in *Understanding Society*:

*"When important decisions, such as relating to education or health, have to be made in CHILD NAME's life, would you say that decisions are made..."*

In wave 5, 78% reported that important decisions were made mainly by the respondent, 17% reported that both parents had a roughly equal say, with less than 1% reporting that the non-resident parent mainly made important decisions.

Sharing decisions is closely related to, but by no means perfectly correlated with, contact arrangements as reported by the main carer. As can be seen in table 2 below, only slightly more than half of the parents who report daily contact between their child and the non-resident parent also report shared decision making. This proportion rises to 73% of the very small number of parents who actually report 50/50 shared care, but drops to only 56% even for those main carers who report daily contact with the non-resident parent, and stays below 30% for every other contact pattern.



Table 2. Contact Frequency reported by main carer and proportion reporting equal say on important decisions in child's life

	Equal Say	N
50/50 shared care	.73	48
at least once a day	.56	207
at least once per week	.30	791
at least once per fortnight	.10	299
at least once per month	.06	222
at least once per year	.02	164
less often	.02	83
never	.01	944
child is old enough to make arrangements	.13	86

*Authors Calculations Understanding Society Wave 3*

However, as can be seen in table 3, it is shared decision making, rather than contact patterns, that is more strongly associated with other characteristics that might differentiate shared parenting practices, such as receiving in-kind transfers from the non-resident parent and maintaining a friendly or very friendly relationship with the non-resident parent. For instance, when decision making is shared, 47% of main carer parents receive in-kind transfers, and 79% report a friendly relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent, even when contact is only every fortnight; contrast this with 52% receiving in-kind transfers, and 52% reporting a friendly relationship, when decision making is not shared but contact is daily or more.

Table 3. Shared parenting, by contact patterns and shared decision making

Contact Frequency	Receive in-kind help		Friendly or very friendly with ex		N
	Mainly respondent	Equal Say	Mainly respondent	Equal Say	
50/50 shared care	.62	.66	.71	.90	48

at least once a day	.52	.72	.52	.76	207
at least once per week	.41	.62	.38	.83	791
at least once per fortnight	.21	.47	.47	.79	299
at least once per month	.11	.43	.32		222
at least once per year	.10		.23		164
less often	.08		.09		83
Never	.06		.38		942
child is old enough to make arrangements	.08	.45	.24	.73	86

*Authors Calculations Understanding Society Wave 3*

Given the importance of shared decision making, shared visions for childcare, and respect and communication in our interview respondent's descriptions of what defines shared care and co-parenting, **we argue that *Understanding Society* can best be utilized to capture this practice by combining contact patterns (weekly or more) and shared decision making to identify those main carer parents most likely to be practicing shared care.**

Using this definition, the proportion of main carers reporting shared care ranges between 30% and 20% for men, and between 11 and 14% for women, across waves 3, 5 and 7 (see table 4).

Table 4. Proportion and N of Main Carer Parents with shared decision making and weekly NRP contact

	Wave 3	Wave 5	Wave 7
Main Carer Fathers	.30	.29	.20
N	62	67	43
Main Carer Mothers	.12	.14	.11
N	327	483	311

## B. Identifying Shared Care: Non Resident Parents

Non-resident parents in *Understanding Society* are asked questions about children under the age of 16 residing outside of their household in the Family Networks module, in waves 3, 5 and 7. Non-resident parents are asked fewer questions about their relationship to their ex-spouse, most importantly they are not asked about shared decision making. However, there are questions concerning the quality of relationship with child, contact frequency, overnight stays (from wave 5 and beyond), and distance to child. **Overnight stays covary strongly with more than weekly contact, and adding this category to the contact question in the child maintenance module will improve our ability to identify different sorts of post-separation care.** As can be seen in table 5 below, there is very little variation in non-resident parent reports of relationship quality with children at levels of contact above monthly. **We would suggest that closeness to child might be a potential candidate to omit in favour of shared decision making for non-resident parents.**

Non-resident parent contact and other characteristics

	Weekend and Holidays	Very or quite close to child	Child within 30 minute drive	Number of sleeps per week	N
Once per month or less	.42	.62	.36	1.10	315
Weekly	.50	.93	.72	1.22	115
More than weekly	.68	.98	.81	1.87	208
Daily or 50/50	.68	1.00	.87	2.41	139

## 6. Conclusions

This lack of recent evidence for the UK is important because shared care arrangements are increasingly popular across many Western countries (Fehlberg et al., 2011; Smyth 2017) and are therefore likely to affect an increasing number of children. We know from research in other countries that as the number and proportion of families practicing shared care increases, the composition of those families becomes increasingly diverse (Smyth 2017). Given the repeated iterations of legislation in the UK which emphasise shared parental responsibility post-separation (most recently the 2014 Children and Families Act, see Trinder 2014; Crewe 2016), we can potentially expect a similar increase in shared care parenting – and an accompanying increase in diversity - over time in the UK.

In conclusion, we argue that shared care is most strongly characterised by **communication** and **joint decision making** rather than **contact frequency**. Furthermore, shared care is also associated with continuity of contact arrangements that included flexibility where required. While the degree to which the relationship between parents was amicable differed across shared care households, there was a universal belief that the father's presence should be facilitated (partly due to sampling). We contrast the shared care arrangements with what we term functional traditional arrangements whereby one parent had the main responsibility for parenting activities and decision-making despite frequent contact, often including overnight stays, of the child with the other parent. Preliminary analysis using contact frequency and shared decision-making using *Understanding Society* data would suggest an estimate of 14 per cent of separated families having shared care arrangements in the UK.

Finally, according to the respondents there seemed to be strong continuity between the division of labour adopted after birth and the contact and residence arrangements. This also means that post-separation parenting is strongly influenced by the same gendered parenting patterns as intact families and suggests that policy changes such as extending parental leave to encourage fathers to spend more time with their children after birth are likely to have long term benefits.

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## 8. APPENDIX: Topic guide

### Shared care and parenting post-separation – starting to close the knowledge gap

Provide information about the study

Reminder about gift voucher

Go through consent form

Check that the recording is on!!!

Mention that there are not right or wrong answers but also that we are looking for their thoughts as much as anything and are not trying to fit them into categories as we would for the traditional Understanding Society interviews.

#### Context/background

- Can you tell me a bit about your circumstances?
  - How long have you lived at this address?
  - Who lives with you? [*Has this changed recently?*]
  - What is everyone doing now? [*School /nursery / working / not working / what type of job?*]

We can see from the interviews you did on the Understanding Society survey that you have children from a relationship where you no longer live their <father/mother> and we want to ask you about how that has worked out and the roles you and your ex-partner have in your child(ren)'s lives.

#### Post-separation arrangements

- Next I would like to know more about the **current contact arrangements** with the child/ren?
  - [*details of contact arrangements*]

- frequency,
  - overnight stays,
  - different forms of contact,
  - mainly other parents/ other family members,
  - the same for all children if several children involved, handovers)
  - 
  - *[household composition]*
  - Are there additional partners in either household permanently or some of the time?
  - Are there additional children in either household permanently or some of the time?
  - How are you dealing with school holidays (where appropriate)
  - How has any of the above changed over time since separation
- **Current Communication and co-ordination** across two households: tell me more about the communication with your former partner?
    - *[communication about children]* topics, amount, venue, nature thereof
    - How has any of the above changed over time since separation
- **Current Parenting** across two households
 

**Tell me more about how you do the actual parenting across the two households?**

    - *[part of communication, common rules/ goals/ priorities, equal share or one more the 'fun' parent]*
      - Probe (age appropriate) for formal and informal, i.e., bathtime, bedtime, mealtimes, screentime, going out, etc.
      - *[Styles]* If any, what rules/boundaries were children set? Who decided these? Who enforced these, why?
      - *[decision-making]* how are decisions affecting children made? Which are made jointly, which not? When and to what extent are the child/ren involved in decision-making: e.g. school choice, mobile phones or pocket money
      - *[child development/ homework/hobbies]* how are issues such as homework and child's hobbies being decided and accommodated, also what about broader issues of child development/ well-being?
      - *How do you deal with unexpected events such as the child being ill and not able to go to school?*
      - *How are you dealing with things such as doctors appointments?*
      - *[new household members in either household]* Role of new partners/ children, where appropriate
      - How has any of the above changed over time since separation
      -

- How has any of the following **changed** (over time) since separation?
  - *[Contact Arrangements]* Working / not working / what type of job?
  - *[Paid work]* Working / not working / what type of job?
  - *[Child maintenance arrangements]* Who contributes what?
  
- **How is it all working out?**
  - *Better/ worse, in what sense, how about the children*

### **Parental aspirations**

- What aims do you have for your children? What would you like their future to be like?
- How do you see your role in achieving this? How do you see your ex-partner's role in achieving this?
  - *What effect, if any, do you think separation has had on your children?*
- **Talk more about perceptions of self as breadwinner / caregiver**

### **Before separation**

- Who was doing what at this time?
- (at this point, it is useful to check how old the child/ren were when the parents separated? as that will affect this division of labour)
  - *[Division of household labour]* Working / not working / what type of job?
  - *[Parenting]* What kinds of activities did you and your ex-partner do with your children? *[Probe for all kinds of activities: formal and informal, e.g., bath time, bedtime, mealtimes, play times etc.]*
    - *[Family cohesion]* Separately and/or jointly?
      - Why <activity> separately/jointly?
    - *[Frequency/duration]* How often/ how long? *[Why this?]*
    - *[Styles]* What rules/boundaries were children set, if any? Who decided these? Who enforced these?
    - *[equality]* Was the division of labour (in terms of paid/care and care/housework) equal/ faire/agreed ? had it been explicitly agreed or happened?
  - *[Child development/ homework/hobbies]* how are issues such as homework and child's hobbies being decided and accommodated, also what about broader issues of child development/ well-being?

### **Other key influencers**

- Who else, if anyone, plays a key role in your child(ren)'s lives? [*Step-parents, grandparents, older step/half siblings*]
  - What kind of role do they play?
    - What kinds of things do they do? [e.g., practical support, emotional support, financial support, etc]
  - How does their role impact on your role/your ex-partner's role in your children's lives? [*What difference do they make?*]
    - How does this affect your relationship with your ex-partner, if at all?

### **General attitudes**

- Are there any positives or negatives that you can/have taken from your experiences? [*If not already discussed at length*]

### **Terminology**

- To conclude, can I ask how you describe your childcare situation when talking about it with others?
  - Shared care vs Shared parenting or something else?
  - What do you think about the lone / main parent vs non-resident parent distinction?
    - If you don't use these terms, what do you use, and with which people (eg other parents, family, in official situations when talking to schools or doctors)?

Thank you

**Double check address for incentive payments (£40 gift voucher)**

**Mention timetable for here – finish interviewing in June, carrying in the analysis over the summer**

**Send summary of the findings out in autumn**