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‘The Teacher Returned the Call to My Ex’: How Separated Parents Struggle to Get Information from their Child’s School

Published: July 16, 2024 6.15am AEST

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It is increasingly common for Australian children to live in a different house from one of their parents. About 28% of children under 14 have separated parents.

While most children are born into a two-parent family, the proportion of children living in a one-parent or step-family increases each year with a child’s age.

This means information about children’s schooling often needs to go to more than one household. However, this information is not always communicated clearly or reliably between schools and parents, and between separated parents themselves.

What is it like for separated parents who share responsibility for their child’s education?

Our survey shows separated parents struggle to get clear information, as well as the support and understanding they need.

Our Research

In 2020, we surveyed 140 separated parents about their experiences dealing with their child's school.

The majority of parents identified as mothers, while just over 20% of participants were fathers. Parents had either sole or equal care of their children, primary care (that is, more than 50% of the time) or minority care (less than 50%).

Participants were recruited from across Australia and from a wide range of schools, including public and private schools at both the primary and secondary level.

Our Findings

Overall results regarding separated parents' experiences with their children's schools revealed most parents were unhappy with their school interactions:

- 57% rated their experiences with teachers as negative
- 60% rated their experiences with school leadership (such as principals or deputy principals) as negative
- 63% rated their experiences with school administrative or office staff as negative and 14% rated them as "very poor".

Why are Separated Parents Struggling?

Unless there is a court order that says otherwise, both parents are entitled to access information about their child at school, regardless of who the child is living with.

But parents in our survey reported frustrations with getting both routine information and important messages and updates from the school.

This included newsletters, permission notes, and homework information, as well as medical updates (for example, if the child was injured at school or sent home sick). One father reflected that it is "extremely difficult" to access report cards and parent-teacher interviews because

all of these processes are designed for traditional families and [the school] can't handle two separate emails for report cards and two separate days for interviews.

For those parents with equal care, a child's movement between houses on a regular basis made communication between schools and parents particularly problematic. As one mother explained, the school showed a lack of empathy for her situation and

a lack of understanding about how to deal with separated parents. Communicating or sending out information to one parent only, and ignoring the other parent.

When there is not equal care, parents told us that school staff “tend to favour the person the child lives with regardless of any situation”. One mother who had minority care of her children — a group that felt particularly alienated and judged in their school interactions — said the schools “don't want to talk to me about much.”

Separated Families Can Be Complex

Parents stressed schools often fail to acknowledge or accommodate the complexities of family life after a separation. This can include scenarios where one partner is being financially or emotionally abused, or where parents simply do not get along.

As one mother with shared care said “the expectation that both parents be in the same space isn't realistic”.

In fact, some parents believed interactions with the school amplified family conflict and even made them feel unsafe. One parent said schools are “unequipped for dealing with high conflict parents”.

The school just didn't have systems in place nor training of staff to [...] make sure both parents are informed of things [...]

Gender Plays a Role

Stereotypical ideas about gender and parental roles was a frequent theme in our findings.

For example, mothers with majority care reported more positive experiences with their children's school than mothers with shared or minority care.

Fathers were more likely to report they felt the school favoured the other parent. One father told us the school preferred to defer to the mother's authority, regardless of his status as the primary caregiver.

When I have called with a query, the teacher returned the call to my ex-partner instead. Deliberately seeking out my ex instead of me to discuss matters.

Another father with sole custody explained he was unable to nominate himself as the "main parent" because the school decided "this had to be a mother".

Even mothers who were generally satisfied with their school interactions reported difficulties with gendered expectations, such as the idea mothers had more time and greater responsibility to help with their child's learning.

There is a judgement that I am not interested in my children's schooling if I don't volunteer in the classroom. This expectation is not the same for my ex-husband as he 'has to work'.

What Should Happen Next?

The needs of separated parents, as a significant percentage of the school community, are not well understood or well accommodated.

Our research shows schools should set up clear and consistent communication protocols that are not based on entrenched assumptions of the nuclear family.

The onus to ensure effective and equitable communication should not sit squarely with parents.

All school staff should be involved in targeted training to improve their understanding of family complexities and the needs and challenges of separated parents. This is especially important when parental conflict is exacerbated by the sharing (or withholding) of school-related information.

These findings are of significant concern for Australian educators and policymakers given the very real impact on parents and the unknown impact on the education of so many Australian children.