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Postdivorce Parent–Child Contact and Child Well-being: The Importance of Predivorce Parental Involvement

Frequent parent–child contact after divorce is generally assumed to be in children’s best interests, but findings are mixed. This study extends the small body of research about the conditions under which parent–child contact is more beneficial or less beneficial by examining the role of predivorce parental involvement. It is argued that the more a parent was involved in child rearing in the past, the more important postdivorce parent–child contact is for child well-being. Data from the Netherlands (N = 3,694) show that when children live with the parent who was not the primary caretaker, child well-being is lower. Similarly, the more the father used to be involved in child rearing, the more beneficial nonresident father–child contact is for children. These findings suggest that it is not so much the frequency of contact per se that matters for child well-being but, rather, the extent to which postdivorce residence arrangements reflect predivorce parenting arrangements.

Ever since divorce rates started to rise, scholars have studied the link between postdivorce parent–child contact and child well-being. Their assumption has been that postdivorce

contact with both parents is in children’s best interests, yet most studies found no association between nonresident father–child contact and child well-being (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Results for the increasingly common shared residence arrangement (i.e., joint physical custody) offer more support, but research is scarce and effect sizes are small (Baude, Pearson, & Drapeau, 2016). Other aspects of the parent–child relationship, such as its quality, are therefore assumed to be more important than contact (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

Previous findings relate to average associations. Few studies have examined the conditions under which parent–child contact is more beneficial or less beneficial. Besides sociodemographic variations (e.g., King, 1994), most researchers have studied postdivorce parental conflict as a source of variation in the association between parent–child contact and child well-being. These studies found that nonresident father–child contact or shared residence was beneficial when conflict was low, but had adverse effects on child well-being in high-conflict situations (Kalmijn, 2016; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013).

The predivorce family context may be another important modifying condition (Videon, 2002). Research showed increased delinquent behavior in adolescents residing with the same-sex parent with whom they had a bad relationship, but decreased delinquency when the relationship was good. The current study examines

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whether the association between postdivorce parent–child contact and child well-being depends on parents' involvement in child rearing prior to divorce. Postdivorce parent–child contact refers to (a) main residence (mother, father, shared) and (b) nonresident father–child contact. Drawing on the parental loss perspective (Amato, 1993) and theories concerning the importance of family stability (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007), I argue that the more a parent used to be involved in child rearing, the more important it is for child well-being that children remain in frequent contact with that parent.

As far as I am aware, this study is the first to examine the moderating role of predivorce parental involvement. By focusing on predivorce parenting as a factor that increases the importance of parent–child contact, it may offer the growing group of married and cohabiting fathers who are actively involved in child rearing a more optimistic view of fathers' postdivorce role (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). This study may also be important for legal practice by providing empirical evidence for the need to consider parents' predivorce contributions to child rearing in custody decisions.

I use data from the Netherlands, where the results may be particularly relevant because Dutch law encourages both parents to be equally involved in child rearing after divorce. I compare the associations between parent–child contact and child well-being across varying levels of parents' involvement prior to divorce. Analyses control for predivorce characteristics affecting parent–child contact as well as child well-being (selection) and for postdivorce determinants of child well-being.

PARENTAL LOSS AND INSTABILITY

The “parental loss perspective” (Amato, 1993) assumes that parents provide children with social resources necessary for optimal development. These resources include giving advice, helping with homework, or acting as a role model. Such support is less readily available after divorce because children often have less contact with a parent, usually the father (Amato, 1993), thereby lowering child well-being. Access to economic resources may also be limited, as contact and financial support are positively related (Fabricius & Braver, 2003; but see Veum, 1993). Because more contact means greater access to parental resources,

frequent nonresident parent–child contact may increase child well-being (Amato, 1993). Shared residence benefits children because they have access to the resources of both parents (Breivik & Olweus, 2006).

One interpretation of the parental loss perspective is that, besides absolute postdivorce levels, a loss of resources may be particularly significant. Even if postdivorce contact is equal, children used to high parental involvement may do worse because losing such support may be painful. Furthermore, as argued in the literature on income and well-being, resources may affect well-being relative to some standard (Diener, Sandvik, Seidlitz, & Diener, 1993): Is one doing better or worse? Past resources are such a standard, implying that child well-being depends on changes in parents' resources, not absolute levels.

The parental loss perspective is silent about gains in parental involvement, but studies suggest that they are unlikely because predivorce parental involvement is a strong predictor of postdivorce contact: Parents who were more involved had more contact with their children after divorce (Juby, Le Bourdais, & Marcil-Gratton, 2005; Westphal, Poortman, & Van der Lippe, 2014). Also, we cannot simply reverse the argument by claiming that gains increase child well-being: “losses loom larger than gains” (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), and in a disruptive event such as parental divorce, greater involvement may not be experienced as “gain.”

The “instability perspective,” taken from the literature on family structure and child well-being, states that instability lowers child well-being: Changes in parental involvement, be they losses or gains, cause stress because existing family interactions and roles need to be replaced by new modes of interaction to which children and parents must adjust (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Magnuson & Berger, 2009). The instability argument not only refers to changes in absolute levels of involvement but also states that changes in a parent's contribution to child rearing relative to the other parent may lower child well-being. Stability is also more likely to be evaluated in terms of parents' relative contributions. The nature of parent–child contact often changes after divorce, especially for nonresident parents, for whom leisure activities become the main mode of parental involvement (Stewart, 1999). Such change makes comparing

absolute levels of predivorce and postdivorce involvement difficult.

Both perspectives predict that predivorce involvement modifies the role of postdivorce parent–child contact. In gender-specific terms, when the father’s past contribution to child rearing was low, postdivorce father–child contact may have a small positive or no association with child well-being: Children have greater access to the father’s resources, but more contact also implies greater instability in his involvement compared to the predivorce situation, which may cancel out a positive association. If the father used to be highly involved, a positive association is more likely: His higher postdivorce involvement gives children access to more resources, and they experience smaller losses and less instability. Because father’s postdivorce involvement is greater in the case of (a) shared and father residence (versus mother residence) and (b) frequent nonresident father–child contact, I expect that the higher the father’s predivorce involvement, the greater the likelihood of or the stronger the positive association between child well-being and (a) shared and father residence (versus mother residence) and (b) nonresident father–child contact.

THE ROLE OF CHILD’S GENDER AND AGE

The same-sex parent is often said to serve as a role model, the parent with whom children identify more strongly than with the opposite-sex parent (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Given their important socializing role, frequent contact with the same-sex parent and minimizing losses or instability in the child’s contact with that parent, may be more important for child well-being than contact (and losses or instability therein) with the other parent. Yet evidence that nonresident father–child contact benefits boys more than girls is mixed (see the meta-analysis by Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). It is difficult to determine whether shared and father residence (as opposed to mother residence) benefits boys more than girls because most studies did not test for gender differences (but see Bergström et al., 2013). The one study that examined the predivorce family context as a modifier for the link between child residence and child well-being found modifying effects only for the same-sex parent (Videon, 2002).

The association between postdivorce parent–child contact and child well-being

may also depend on the child’s age, but arguments lead to opposing hypotheses. On one hand, parental involvement and stability in parental relationships might be particularly important for young children because of their greater dependence on their parents and their greater vulnerability to stressful transitions. On the other hand, older children, perhaps especially during adolescence, may be more vulnerable and in need of parental support and guidance as they take the first critical steps toward independence (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Cavanagh & Huston, 2008). Findings are mixed. Meta-analyses showed either no age-related differences in the effects of nonresident father visitation or shared residence on child well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Baude et al., 2016) or stronger effects of nonresident father visitation at younger ages (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Given these inconclusive findings, I refrain from hypotheses here and will only explore whether results depend on the child’s gender and age.

METHOD

I used the New Families in the Netherlands survey (NFN; Poortman, Van der Lippe, & Boele-Woelki, 2014) conducted in 2012–2013. In collaboration with Statistics Netherlands, a sample was drawn from the population of parents with minor children who dissolved their marriage or cohabiting union in 2010. Both parents were approached to participate in an online survey. Eventually, 4,481 parents participated. For approximately 30% of former households, both ex-partners participated. The response rate was 39% among persons and 58% among households. A response rate of 39% is comparable with other Dutch family surveys and a good response given the population of NFN, a group that may be difficult to reach because they are divorced and only 2, often tumultuous, years have passed since their breakup. Former cohabiters, men (particularly those with young children), younger persons, people of non-Western descent, people on low incomes, and those on welfare were underrepresented, whereas men with children officially registered at their address were overrepresented. In the group of former cohabiters, parents from the most urbanized areas and men with one child were also underrepresented. In addition, the participation rate may have been lower among

parents in high-conflict divorces or less-involved parents.

Parents provided information on a focal child. If at least one of the children was aged 10 years or older at the time of the survey, parents reported on the youngest child of those aged 10 or older. If all children were younger than 10, the parents reported on the oldest child. Although parents received similar instructions and questions when both participated, they did not always report on the same child (18%), as information on the child's gender and age did not coincide. Correlations between the mother's and father's reports on other child and household characteristics ranged from Pearson's $r = .36$ for reports on predivorce father involvement and $r = .85$ for reports on whether they had been married or cohabiting. Comparing the means for mothers and fathers from the same household showed that mothers more often reported a former cohabitation and reported higher predivorce and postdivorce conflict and more parental problems. Fathers more often reported shared or father residence, more frequent nonresident father-child contact, and greater predivorce father involvement. Given these different perceptions and assuming that the "true" values lie somewhere in between, the analyses include reports from both parents (see Analytical Strategy).

I excluded cases in which the focal child was younger than age 4 ($n = 228$; 5%) or age 18 or older ($n = 94$; 2%), because the measure for child well-being was developed for children aged 4 to 17 (see later). I also excluded respondents who reported that the focal child's main residence was an arrangement other than mother, father, or shared residence ($n = 80$; 2%). I further excluded cases with missing data on the variables used in the analyses. The number of missing values was low, ranging from 0% to 4% (for nonresident father-child contact). After excluding missing values, 3,694 respondents were left (from 2,884 households). Note that for the analysis of the role of nonresident father-child contact for child well-being, the sample is furthermore limited to respondents who reported mother residence. The number of father residence cases was too low to analyze nonresident mother-child contact ($n = 196$). Restricting the analysis to mother residence meant that the sample for nonresident father-child contact was reduced to $n = 2,364$ (from 1,942 households).

Measures of Main Variables

Child well-being. This was measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) for children aged 4 to 17. The SDQ contains 25 items referring to five subscales (prosocial behavior, hyperactivity, peer problems, conduct problems, and psychological problems). Parents indicated how closely items described the focal child's behavior in the past 6 months or during the current school year (0 = "not true," 1 = "somewhat true," 2 = "certainly true"). Example items are "Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long," "Often unhappy, depressed or tearful," and "Gets along better with adults than with other children." The scores on all items except for the prosocial behavior scale were summed (see www.sdqinfo.org; Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$). Higher scores indicate more problems and thus lower child well-being. Because SDQ was skewed to the right, the natural log was taken.

Main residence. Parents reported with whom the focal child resided most of the time at the time of the survey: "with me," "with the ex-partner," "with both parents about equally," or "other arrangement." Respondents reporting "other arrangement" were excluded, and dummies were created for mother residence, father residence, and shared residence.

Nonresident father-child contact. In the case of mother residence, parents indicated how often the nonresident father saw the child: never, once or twice a year, several times a year (not monthly), or at least once a month. These responses were recoded to yearly contact frequency (1 = 0, 2 = 2, 3 = 7, 4 = 12). In the case of monthly contact, parents indicated with whom the child resided during the day and at night for each day of the 4 weeks in an average month ("me" or "ex-partner"). A more precise measure of yearly contact was created by counting the total number of daytimes and nights spent at the nonresident father's place in a month, dividing that number by two (daytime and night making one day) and multiplying by 12 (from month to year). Because the variable was skewed to the right, the natural log was taken to avoid too much leverage by the extremes (see also Kalmijn, 2016).

Father's predivorce involvement. Parents indicated who did most of the following

child-rearing tasks during their relationship: “changing diapers,” “washing child, bathing,” “putting child to bed,” “playing games with child, doing crafts,” “talking to child about what is on his/her mind,” “outings with child, such as playground, zoo or the movies.” This question made no reference to the focal child, but I have no reason to believe that involvement with the focal child would differ systematically from this general measure of parental involvement. Answer categories ranged from 0 = *I did much more than my ex-partner* to 4 = *my ex-partner did much more*. Items were made gender specific and recoded in the direction of the father’s contribution. A scale was created by taking the mean, with higher scores indicating higher father involvement (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$). Note that the items referring to physical care (e.g., changing diapers) are more appropriate for younger children and may thus refer to a more distant past. Additional analyses, however, showed that results do not differ when distinguishing between father’s involvement in social activities (i.e., the items about outings, talking, and playing games) and his involvement in care (i.e., changing diapers, bathing, putting to bed). The correlation between these scales is also high ($r = .74$). Also note that the measure pertains to the father’s contribution relative to that of the mother. Although from a theoretical perspective both absolute and relative measures would be ideal, NFN provides a relative measure only. Because a positive correlation between fathers’ absolute and relative involvement levels is likely, the measure indirectly indicates absolute levels. Consistent with previous findings, the correlations between father’s predivorce involvement and the indicators of postdivorce father–child contact were significant and positive, but weak ($r = .11$ for nonresident father–child contact and $r = .25$ for main residence, coded in the direction of more father–child contact: 1 = “mother,” 2 = “shared,” 3 = “father”).

Measures of Control Variables

Parents’ education. Respondents reported their own highest educational level and their ex-partner’s (1 = *less than primary education* to 10 = *postgraduate*). I constructed variables for the mother’s and the father’s education ($r = .41$).

Parents’ predivorce work hours. Respondents reported the number of contractual hours that

they and their ex-partner worked per week in the year before divorce. I created mother’s and father’s predivorce work hours. If parents were not employed, they were assigned zero hours. If parents worked more than 80 hours per week, they were assigned a score of 80.

Predivorce conflict. Respondents indicated how often the following things happened in the final year before divorce: “There were tensions or disagreements between you and your ex-partner,” “there were heated discussions between you and your ex-partner,” “you made serious accusations against each other,” “you sometimes stopped talking to each other,” and “arguments got out of hand.” Answers ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *often*. I created a scale by taking the mean score on these items (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .87$).

Predivorce household income. In a secure environment, NFN was linked to register data from Statistics Netherlands about yearly standardized household income from 2003 to 2011. I used the income referring to a year earlier than the year in which parents separated or divorced officially (if married). About 2% of respondents indicated that they divorced or separated in 2003 or earlier, meaning that income data were not available (thus, missing).

Predivorce parental problems. Respondents indicated whether they or their ex-partner had experienced the following problems during their relationship (1 = “yes”): “serious physical illness or handicap,” “serious psychological problems,” “violence, drugs or alcohol addiction,” and “contact with the police (excluding traffic offenses).” I created a variable counting the number of problems.

Child’s gender. This was a variable indicating whether the focal child was a 0 = “boy” or 1 = “girl.”

Child’s age. The focal child’s age was measured in years.

Postdivorce conflict. This was a variable indicating how often the former partners had conflicts or tensions at the time of the survey: 1 = *never* to 4 = *very often*. Respondents were also asked whether their ex-partner had done the following since they split up (1 = “yes”): “made serious accusations against you,” “said bad things about

you to others," "called or visited you uninvited," "turned your children against you," "wrongly accused you of something," "spoke ill of your common past," "scolded, quarreled with you," and "threatened violence." A variable counting the number of incidents was created.

Repartnering. This indicated whether either parent lived with or married a new partner (1 = "yes").

Postdivorce household income. Using register data on income, I constructed a variable indicating respondents' household income in 2011 (the year before the survey) or in the most recent year before 2011 for which income data were available. Nearly all respondents had a yearly income of less than 250,000 euros; only one had an income of slightly more than 500,000 euros. This outlier did not affect the results, and, given the reliable source of the income data, I left this respondent in the analysis without adjusting his or her income.

Union type. I used a dummy for whether the former relationship was 0 = "marriage or registered partnership" or 1 = "cohabitation." A registered partnership is a form of legal cohabitation offering almost the same rights as marriage (4% in the sample).

Respondent's gender. A dummy for whether the respondent is 0 = "male" or 1 = "female."

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analyses by overall sample and by respondents with mother residence (because the analysis for the role of nonresident father-child contact is restricted to these respondents only).

Analytical Strategy

I estimated a base model that included postdivorce contact (i.e., main residence or nonresident father-child contact), predivorce father involvement and the control variables (Model 1). This model shows the overall (statistical) effects of main residence and nonresident father-child contact on child well-being. Because main residence was measured by two dummies, I also performed a Wald test for whether both dummies were simultaneously zero. In Model 2, I added interactions between parent-child contact and

father's predivorce involvement to test whether the role of parent-child contact depends on predivorce involvement. Wald tests were conducted to test for interactions with the two dummies for main residence simultaneously. To explore the role of the child's gender and age, I included interactions between the main variables and the child's gender or age. I conducted multilevel regression analyses to allow for the participation of both parents in about 30% of households. Additional analyses included a random term for both the household and the focal child, as some parents did not report on the same child (see previous text). These analyses yielded similar results. I also explored whether results differed by respondent's gender. Gender differences were only observed for the base models, showing that nonresident parents report lower child well-being than resident parents and that nonresident fathers who see their child less often report lower well-being than resident mothers. The main results of the interaction models (Model 2) in this study did not differ by respondent's gender, however.

RESULTS

Starting with the findings for main residence, Model 1 in Table 2 shows that child well-being differed significantly across residence arrangements. The Wald test for whether the dummies for shared and father residence were both zero was significant ($\chi^2(2) = 10.73$; $p = .005$; not in Table 2). Recall that the dependent variable (SDQ) refers to the extent to which the child has social, psychological, or behavioral problems; high scores indicate more serious problems and thus lower well-being. Children in shared residence had the fewest difficulties, followed by children with mother residence. Children with father residence had the most problems, but this group was small (5%) and possibly selective (e.g., the mother is not able to care for the children). All contrasts were significant at the 5% level, except for the difference between mother and father residence ($p = .09$). Effect sizes were small. On a scale from 0 to 3.5, the largest difference in SDQ was between shared and father residence and amounted to 0.168 (not in Table 2), equivalent to a small effect size of 0.22 ($= 0.168/SD(Y)$, with $SD(Y) = 0.75$).

As shown in Model 2, the associations between main residence and child SDQ

Table 1. Mean, Range, and Standard Deviation of the Variables in the Analyses

Variable	Total sample			Mother residence only		
	<i>M</i>	Range	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	Range	<i>SD</i>
Child difficulties (logged) ^a	1.97	0–3.50	0.75	2.03	0–3.50	0.73
Main residence						
Mother residence	0.66	0–1	^b			
Shared residence	0.29	0–1	^b			
Father residence	0.05	0–1	^b			
Nonresident father–child contact (logged)				3.71	0–5.82	1.20
Predivorce father involvement	1.16	0–4	0.83	1.01	0–4	0.82
Control variables						
Education mother	6.28	1–10	2.02	6.14	1–10	2.02
Education father	6.27	1–10	2.19	5.98	1–10	2.22
Predivorce work hours mother	20.42	0–80	12.11	19.24	0–80	12.41
Predivorce work hours father	37.31	0–80	11.95	37.47	0–80	12.38
Predivorce conflict	2.36	1–4	0.81	2.43	1–4	0.81
Predivorce household income (× euros 10,000)	2.34	0–22.96	1.28	2.25	0–22.96	1.28
Parental problems	0.54	0–4	0.83	0.59	0–4	0.86
Child is girl	0.48	0–1	^b	0.48	0–1	^b
Child’s age	10.44	4–17	3.53	10.23	4–17	3.58
Severe postdivorce conflict	2.98	0–8	2.66	3.27	0–8	2.70
Postdivorce tensions	1.88	1–4	0.96	1.97	1–4	0.99
Repartnering	0.46	0–1	^b	0.49	0–1	^b
Postdivorce household income (× euros 10,000)	2.29	0–51.12	1.52	2.18	0–19.29	1.26
Cohabiting before divorce	0.22	0–1	^b	0.23	0–1	^b
Respondent is female	0.57	0–1	^b	0.62	0–1	^b
<i>n</i> of respondents	3,694			2,364		
<i>n</i> of former couples	2,884			1,942		

Source. New Families in the Netherlands, 2012–2013.

^aMeasured by Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. ^bStandard deviation not presented for discrete variables.

depended on how parents divided child-rearing tasks prior to divorce. A Wald test for the interactions between predivorce involvement and the dummies for shared and father residence was significant ($\chi^2(2) = 13.25; p = .001$). As expected, the more the father was involved in child rearing prior to divorce, the more shared residence ($b = -0.058; p = .085$) and, particularly, father residence ($b = -0.171; p = .001$) were beneficial to child well-being when compared with mother residence. Also, the higher father’s predivorce contribution to child-rearing, the more father residence was beneficial to child well-being when compared with shared residence ($b = -0.113; p = .043$; not in Table 2). Because few respondents indicated that the father’s predivorce contribution exceeded 50% (10%), I conducted additional analyses using discrete measures for father involvement, taking the natural logarithm or cutting off or excluding the 5% highest values. These analyses yielded

similar results, suggesting that interactions were not driven by the few highly involved fathers.

Figure 1, Panel A, is a graphical representation of the results of the interaction model (Model 2) and shows predicted child well-being levels ($\ln[SDQ]$) and their 95% confidence intervals for different combinations of predivorce father involvement (at the minimum, intermediate, and maximum values of 0, 2, and 4, respectively) and postdivorce residence arrangements. We see that father residence was associated with more child difficulties than shared and mother residence when father’s past involvement was low (value of 0). The main effects of main residence in Model 2 (Table 2) show whether these differences were significant: Father residence differed significantly from both mother and shared residence, whereas the latter two arrangements did not differ significantly from each other. When predivorce father involvement was at medium levels (i.e., egalitarian division

Table 2. Multilevel Regression Analyses of Child Difficulties on Child's Main Residence and Nonresident Father–Child Contact: Unstandardized Coefficients

Variable	Total sample		Mother residence only	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Mother residence (reference)	–	–		
Shared residence	–0.076*	–0.003		
Father residence	0.092 ^{†a}	0.343 ^{**a}		
Predivorce father involvement	–0.031	–0.004	–0.030	0.119*
Nonresident father–child contact (logged)			–0.023 [†]	0.018
Interactions of Predivorce Father Involvement				
× Mother Residence (reference)		–		–
× Shared Residence		–0.058 [†]		
× Father Residence		–0.171 ^{**b}		
× Nonresident Father–Child Contact				–0.041 ^{**}
Education mother	–0.030 ^{**}	–0.030 ^{**}	–0.030 ^{**}	–0.030 ^{**}
Education father	–0.021 ^{**}	–0.021 ^{**}	–0.019*	–0.020*
Predivorce work hours mother	–0.001	–0.001	–0.001	–0.001
Predivorce work hours father	–0.002 [†]	–0.002 [†]	–0.002 [†]	–0.002 [†]
Predivorce conflict	0.023	0.023	0.028	0.032
Predivorce household income (× euros 10,000)	–0.007	–0.008	–0.011	–0.011
Parental problems	0.064 ^{**}	0.066 ^{**}	0.061 ^{**}	0.063 ^{**}
Child is girl	–0.175 ^{**}	–0.173 ^{**}	–0.175 ^{**}	–0.177 ^{**}
Child's age	–0.007*	–0.008*	–0.010*	–0.010*
Severe postdivorce conflict	0.032 ^{**}	0.032 ^{**}	0.024 ^{**}	0.024 ^{**}
Postdivorce tensions	0.080 ^{**}	0.078 ^{**}	0.097 ^{**}	0.094 ^{**}
Repartnering	–0.053*	–0.053*	–0.061*	–0.060*
Postdivorce household income (× euros 10,000)	–0.026 ^{**}	–0.028 ^{**}	–0.033*	–0.031*
Cohabiting before divorce	–0.021	–0.019	–0.021	–0.020
Respondent is female	–0.099 ^{**}	–0.099 ^{**}	–0.163 ^{**}	–0.167 ^{**}
Wald chi-square	457.22 ^{**}	482.94 ^{**}	292.04 ^{**}	302.57 ^{**}
Rho	0.398	0.408	0.389	0.396
n (respondents)	3,694	3,694	2,364	2,364
n (former couples)	2,884	2,884	1,942	1,942

Source. New Families in the Netherlands, 2012–2013.

Note. The dependent variable (child difficulties) is measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and logged.

^aThe difference between father residence and shared residence is significant (2-sided $p < .05$). ^bThe difference between Father Involvement × Shared Residence and Father Involvement × Father Residence is significant (2-sided $p < .05$).

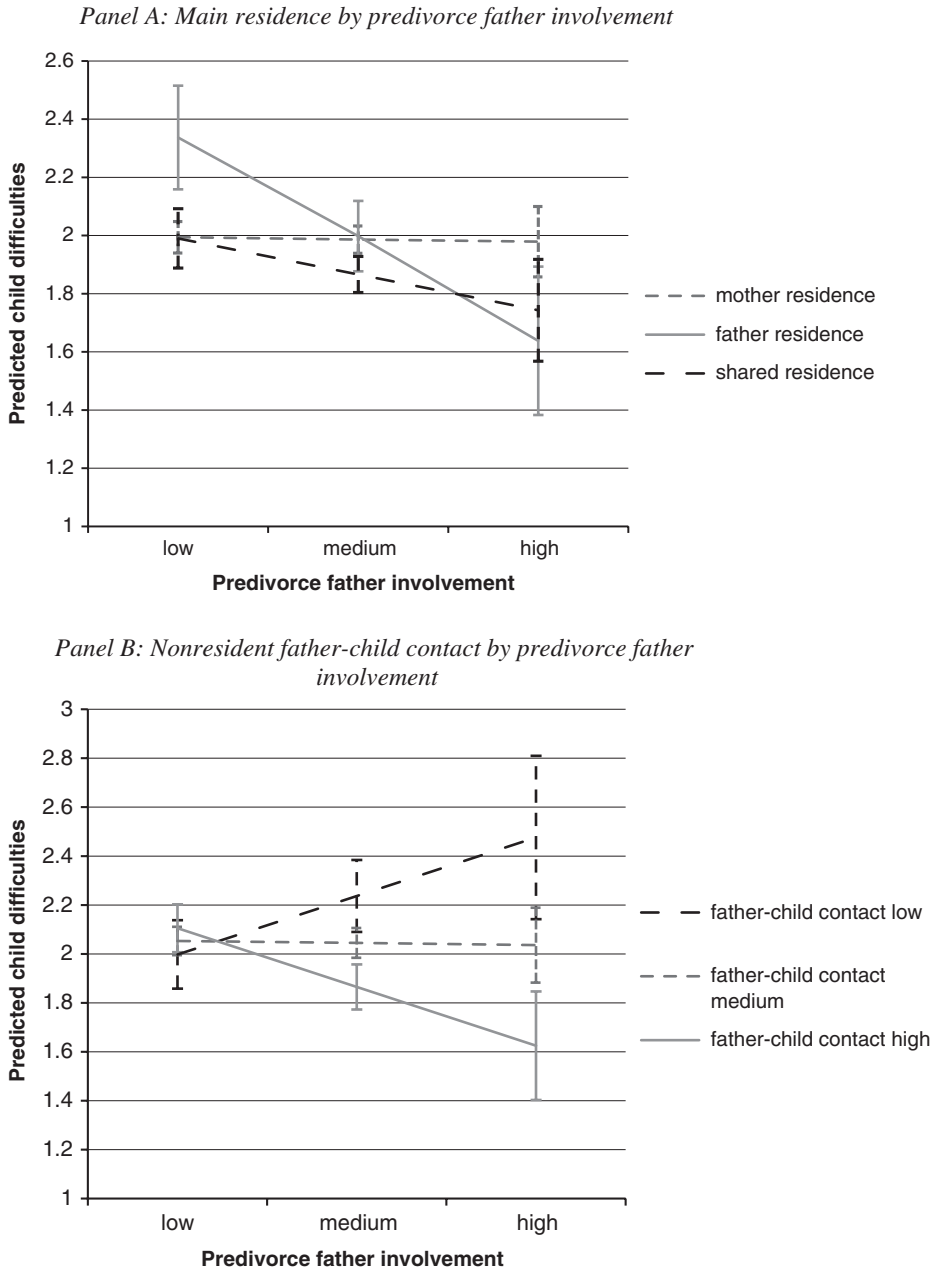
[†]Two-sided $p < .10$; * two-sided $p < .05$; ** two-sided $p < .01$.

of labor), shared residence was associated with the fewest child problems—although additional analyses revealed that only the difference with mother residence was significant at 5%. Children whose father used to be their primary caretaker did better with shared and father residence, in the sense that they had fewer problems, than in mother residence arrangements. Additional analyses showed that the differences with mother residence were significant.

Although the pattern is clear, note that the confidence intervals around the line for father residence were large (likely because of the small number of cases with father residence) and that the intervals overlapped except when there was low father involvement and father residence, but this may well be a small and selective group.

The results for nonresident father–child contact showed that, overall, the association between postdivorce contact and child

FIGURE 1. EFFECTS OF MAIN RESIDENCE AND NONRESIDENT FATHER–CHILD CONTACT ON CHILD DIFFICULTIES BY LEVELS OF PREDIVORCE FATHER INVOLVEMENT.



Note. Child difficulties is measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and logged.

well-being was not significant at the conventional significance level of 5% ($b = -0.023$; $p = .081$; see Model 1, Table 2). Model 2 includes the interaction with predivorce

father involvement. The association between father–child contact and child well-being depended—as expected—on predivorce involvement: The more the father used to

be involved in child rearing, the more beneficial frequent contact was for the child ($b = -0.041$; $p = .002$). I checked whether the interaction was driven by a small group (8%) of highly involved fathers (i.e., using discrete measures for father involvement, its natural logarithm, and cutting off or excluding 5% highest values), but the results were similar.

The interaction effect is illustrated in Panel B of Figure 1, which shows predicted values of child difficulties (ln[SDQ]) for different combinations of predivorce father involvement (values 0, 2, and 4) and (logged) nonresident father visitation (minimum, intermediate, and maximum values of 0, 3, and 5.8, respectively). When past father involvement was low, predicted child well-being scarcely differed by level of postdivorce father-child contact. The main effect of father visitation in Model 2 also shows that there was no significant association between father-child contact and SDQ in the case of minimal father involvement. When predivorce father involvement was medium or high, frequent contact was associated with fewer child difficulties. Additional analyses showed that the negative effects of father visitation on SDQ were significant at medium and high levels of predivorce involvement ($b = -0.064$; $p = .001$ for medium involvement; $b = -0.147$; $p < .001$ for high involvement). To illustrate, when the father used to be highly involved in child rearing, the maximum possible increase in nonresident father-child contact (from 0 to 5.8) was associated with a decrease in SDQ (logged scale 0–3.5) of 0.85, which was a large effect size of 1.16 ($= 0.85/SD(Y)$, with $SD(Y) = 0.73$). Note that the size of the confidence intervals around the predicted values increased with higher predivorce father involvement, as few fathers were highly involved. Also note, however, that the interval around the line for high father-child contact did not overlap with the other intervals at medium and high father involvement, providing more confidence in these results.

In additional analyses (not shown), I examined whether results differed depending on the child's gender and age by including interactions between these child characteristics and the main variables. The results for main residence did not differ between boys and girls, but results varied for nonresident father-child contact. In Model 1, the interaction between contact and child's gender was significant ($b = -0.050$; $p = .036$), implying no association for boys and a

negative association between father visitation and difficulties for girls. Frequent contact with the nonresident father thus seemed to be particularly beneficial for girls. In Model 2, interactions with child's gender were not significant at the conventional level of 5%, but the results suggested that the stronger associations between postdivorce father-child contact and child well-being in the case of greater predivorce involvement pertained in particular to girls, not boys (Father Visitation \times Father Involvement \times Child Gender interaction; $b = -0.046$; $p = .068$). As to child's age, no significant interactions were found for nonresident father-child contact. In addition, no significant interactions were found in Model 1 for main residence. In Model 2, interactions with child's age were not significant at conventional levels (5%), but the results suggested that the beneficial effects of father residence on child well-being in the case of medium and high father involvement predivorce pertained in particular to older children; Wald test of three-way interactions of the two residence dummies, father involvement and child age ($\chi^2(2) = 5.70$; $p = .058$).

DISCUSSION

Although it is generally assumed that frequent postdivorce contact with both the mother and the father is in children's best interests, empirical evidence has not furnished unanimous support for this assumption. Prior research, however, relates to average associations between postdivorce contact and child well-being. This study extended the small body of research about the conditions under which postdivorce parent-child contact is more beneficial or less beneficial (e.g., Kalmijn, 2016; Videon, 2002) by examining the role of predivorce parental involvement. Drawing on arguments about parental loss and family instability, I argued that the more a parent was involved in child rearing prior to divorce, the more important postdivorce parent-child contact is for child well-being.

This study's analysis of recent large-scale Dutch data first showed that frequent postdivorce parent-child contact with both parents after divorce was, in general, not strongly associated with child well-being. No association was found between nonresident father-child contact and child well-being, and the well-being of children in a shared residence arrangement was

found to be slightly better than that of children in sole residence arrangements. These findings challenge the assumption that frequent contact benefits children but corroborate findings from previous research (see the meta-analyses by Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Baude et al., 2016).

This study's second main finding reveals finer distinctions, with predivorce parental involvement being found to play an important role in the association between postdivorce parent–child contact and child well-being. When children went to live with the parent who was not the primary caretaker—or with one of the primary caretakers when child rearing was equally divided—prior to divorce, child well-being was lower. Note, however, that these results may have been driven by the small, and possibly selective, group with father residence arrangements. Similarly—and more convincingly—when the father's predivorce involvement was low, child well-being was not associated with nonresident father–child contact; the greater the father's involvement, the closer the association between frequent contact and higher child well-being. These findings support this study's central argument that the more a parent used to be involved in child rearing, the more postdivorce parent–child contact matters for child well-being. The results are also in line with a previous study showing the modifying role of the predivorce quality of parent–child relationships for the link between main residence and delinquency (Videon, 2002).

Findings were inconclusive about the role of the child's gender and age. Contrary to arguments about the importance of the same-sex parent (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), no evidence was found that shared or father residence mattered more for boys' well-being. On the contrary, the only significant finding was that nonresident father–child contact was particularly beneficial for girls. This finding adds to the already mixed evidence concerning child's gender (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) and may be due to specific features of this study, such as the outcome measure used or the focus on recent divorces. For instance, girls may be more vulnerable to the turmoil and instability of the first few years after divorce. The results of this study also revealed few significant differences between younger and older children.

These inconclusive findings call for research that includes even larger numbers of less common parenting arrangements (e.g., father residence, highly involved fathers predivorce)

to address the role of child's age and gender more conclusively. Such research should ideally also include very young children, as children younger than the age of 4 were not part of this study. Also, because of the study's retrospective design, child well-being prior to divorce was unknown and could not be controlled for. The retrospective design may have led to memory bias. More involved parents postdivorce may have reported higher involvement predivorce, leading to an underestimation of their effects on child well-being. Panel data would thus be ideal, but such data often do not cover enough divorced people in less common arrangements (e.g., shared, father residence). Another limitation was that reports on child outcomes and parents' predivorce and postdivorce involvement came from the same source (i.e., the parent), which may have biased the results (but see Fuller, Simmering, Atinc, Atinc, & Babin, 2016). In addition, parents may not always have an accurate view of their child's well-being. Additional data using child self-reports on well-being would be an improvement. Furthermore, the data included a measure only for the father's relative contribution to child rearing. Theoretically, both relative and absolute involvement levels matter and future research would ideally include both absolute and relative measures. Finally, this study focused on the short-term effects of postdivorce parent–child contact on child well-being because the survey took place about 2 years after respondents divorced. It may well be that parents' involvement (or stability in that involvement) is particularly important for children in the first few years following divorce and that children adjust to the new situation later on.

Overall, the main conclusion of this study is that it is not so much the frequency of contact per se that benefits children but, rather, the extent to which postdivorce residence arrangements reflect predivorce parenting arrangements. Beneficial effects may arise because losses in parental resources are minimized (Amato, 1993) or because the stress associated with instability in family relationships is reduced when postdivorce parenting arrangements mirror predivorce ones (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). Although this study could not disentangle these two mechanisms, findings in any case suggest that more nuance is required in the most common interpretation of the parental loss perspective in terms of the possible beneficial effects of mere

absolute postdivorce parent–child contact levels. The finding that greater father involvement predivorce increases the importance of postdivorce father–child contact for child well-being also offers the growing group of involved fathers a more optimistic view of the postdivorce role of fathers. The findings furthermore have practical implications. Previous studies suggest that parents or legal practitioners already take predivorce parental involvement into account when deciding on children’s residence arrangements: The associations between pre- and postdivorce parental involvement are generally found to be positive (Juby et al., 2005), and judges assess predivorce parenting levels in custody decisions (Artis, 2004). This study underscores that it is good practice to consider predivorce parenting when advising or deciding which residence arrangement is most beneficial for children.

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