

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From fortresses to open islands: Negotiating time, space, and material flows between parental homes in shared residential arrangements

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Abstract

This article examines how separated parents establish boundaries between their respective households when sharing physical custody of their children. Framed through the metaphor of an archipelago, each parental home is conceptualized as an ‘island’, capturing how children navigate life across two distinct yet interconnected households. Drawing on interviews with 21 Belgian children (aged 10–16) from 17 families, we propose a typology of five parental ‘islands’: (a) ‘fortress island’; (b) ‘cocoon island’; (c) ‘reef island’; (d) ‘open island’; and (e) ‘wild island’. Each island has its own characteristics and properties in which specific and distinct practices and subcultures can develop. While tensions between islands can—and often do—exist, this does not prevent children from experiencing home as a unified whole grounded in their sense of belonging and familiarity. Our typology serves as a conceptual tool for family law and mental health professionals to help families reflect on and improve their co-parenting arrangements post-separation.

KEYWORDS

alternation schedules, changeovers, children, communication, divorce, objects, parenting, shared physical custody, shared residence, transitions

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Key points for the family court community

- Children's two dwellings can be conceived as two islands forming an archipelago in the daily experience of children.
- Parents establish boundaries between their dwelling and that of their ex-partners, which in turn shape children's experience of transitioning between homes and of the time spent in each household.
- Five types of 'parental islands' can be distinguished, with more or less flexibility and openness/closure in relation with residential calendars, virtual contacts, and the circulation of objects: (a) the 'fortress island'; (b) the 'cocoon island'; (c) 'the reef island'; (d) the 'open island'; and (e) the 'wild island'. The fortress island aims to be as impermeable as possible to flows originating from the other islands. By contrast, the cocoon and reef islands allow certain forms of passage while the open and wild islands are conceived as pertaining to a continuum that includes the ex-partner's island.
- Children can live with parents who each have a different type of island (for instance, a 'fortress island' father and a 'reef island' mother). These islands can also evolve over time.
- The key factors influencing each type of island include: material dimensions (notably the standard of living and material resources); a spatial dimension (i.e., physical distance between homes); familial dimensions (e.g., family composition, degree of inter-parental conflict, and family values); and temporal dimensions (such as the age of the child, and each parent's desire to have time with the child and time for themselves).
- This typology of 'parental islands' can be used with parents and children to explore how their current arrangements are working and how they would ideally like them to function.

INTRODUCTION

Shared residence, also referred to as joint (or shared) physical custody or shared parenting, has emerged as an increasingly prevalent post-separation arrangement, garnering growing scholarly attention (Hakovirta et al., 2023). This custodial model, wherein children alternate their residence between each parent, challenges prevailing Western familial norms that presuppose continuous co-residence between parent and child (Morgan, 2011). It also challenges the widely held assumption that a singular, stable household constitutes a critical determinant of children's and adolescents' wellbeing (Merla et al., 2021; Merla & Nobels, 2025).

To date, empirical investigations have predominantly concentrated on the implications of shared residence for child wellbeing (Augustijn, 2021, 2022; Berman & Daneback, 2020; Riser, 2025). More recently, research has begun to explore the everyday logistics and organizational dynamics of shared residential arrangements. Some studies have focused on the temporal structuring of shared residence, analyzing residential schedules, including the frequency of overnight stays with each parent and the number of transitions between households (Hachet, 2021; Murru & Merla, 2025; Steinbach & Augustijn, 2021; Smyth et al., 2012; Sodermans et al., 2013). Other studies foreground children's lived experiences and processes of socialization within these dual-residence family structures (e.g., Merla & Nobels, 2025; Merla et al., 2021; Palludan & Winther, 2016), while others examine co-parenting typologies and their influence on the operationalization of shared residence practices (Brunet et al., 2008; McHale & Negrini, 2017; Naldini et al., 2021; Widmer et al., 2014). Yet, little is still known about how specific aspects of transitioning between homes shape children's experiences.

In this article, we contribute to this emerging body of literature by examining the boundaries that parents establish between their own household and that of their former partner, based on in-depth fieldwork with 21 Belgian children (pertaining to a total of 17 families) aged 10 to 16 living in egalitarian or quasi-egalitarian shared residential arrangements.¹ This analytical lens offers novel insights into how parents conceive and organize the interconnections between their home and that of their ex-partner, and, in turn, how children experience and navigate the everyday realities of living alternately in two distinct family environments.

The archipelago metaphor

In our study, we have chosen to use the metaphor of the archipelago to characterize the children's two dwellings (Merla & Nobels, 2025). This image allows us to understand these places of residence as interconnected 'islands' in the children's experience, between which they navigate and at which they anchor themselves on a daily basis.

This metaphor was originally developed in the field of multilocality studies by Duchêne-Lacroix (2014). By living in more than one habitual dwelling and by engaging in an 'active daily life' (*vita activa*) in and between their residences, the children we encountered experience a form of 'multilocal dwelling' that Duchêne-Lacroix (2013) defines as:

...the appropriation of the multi-residential situation as a way of life, not experienced as transitional, transient or abnormal but as a way of inhabiting space, a discontinuous lived space, "contaminated" by rhizomic practices, appropriated through the transposition and activation of resources and the permanence of a portable array of instruments for daily life. (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2013, p. 159)

¹This paper is based on sociological research that was conducted as part of the ERC Starting Grant MobileKids project, which investigated how children develop a sense of home within the context of shared physical custody and, in doing so, negotiate and define their position within each household. The results of this research have been published in the open access book "Belonging and Belongings: Children's Sense of Home in Shared Custody Arrangements" (Bristol University Press) co-authored by Merla and Nobels.

The notion of 'multilocal dwelling' invites researchers to examine how practices of physical mobility are linked to practices of local anchoring (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2014). The 'archipelization of living spaces' (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2014, p. 52) thus describes the articulation between stable, immobile places of anchorage (routines, expectations, strong ties) and mobile, immaterial spaces within which people, objects, and ideas travel, ensuring continuity between living spaces. The in-between is thus central to the experience of multilocality as it creates continuity between places. Indeed, multilocal living implies regular, circular mobility between at least two habitual places of residence, with a certain degree of habit. This circular mobility allows the individual to connect these places of interest through the regular use of a physical passageway. This 'transitional space' (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2014, p. 38) is appropriated by individuals who develop routines and rituals as they travel, initiating certain activities that are then continued in the fixed places where they arrive (such as reading a book or starting a discussion). What happens 'in between' connects the dwellings and gives meaning to the lived spaces of multilocality. This in-between space is thus a 'constitutive part' of multilocal living in shared residential arrangements (Schier et al., 2015). The perspective of multilocality therefore considers both stability and mobility to be integral to the experience of multilocal living arrangements.

Moreover, relationships between family members are no longer confined to physical, embodied spaces; they extend beyond the walls of the dwelling through virtual means of co-presence. As Wellman (2018) notes, digital media 'have afforded household members the ability to go about on their separate ways while staying more connected' (p. xix). The rapid rise and democratization of information and communication technologies (ICT) have thus had a profound impact on the ways in which family members stay in touch, providing new forms of virtual co-presence that create opportunities to maintain family and social relationships across space and time (Merla et al., 2021).

In our work, we propose considering the family residences of children as two 'islands' that form an archipelago symbolizing the children's multilocal dwelling. This metaphor invites us to focus on what happens within each 'island' as well as the practices deployed between the two. In other words, it channels our attention towards the various practices taking place 'here', 'there', and in between the 'islands', which are interrelated as in an archipelago. This metaphor does not imply, however, that the archipelago is made up of islands that are similar, homogeneous, and equally invested as 'home'. Our study of children's sense of home reveals that each island can have its own characteristics and properties, that specific and distinct practices and subcultures can develop there, and that tensions and contradictions can arise between them. However, this does not prevent them from forming a whole, global home, in the children's experience (Merla & Nobels, 2025).

The parents of children living in shared residence must deal with the reality that their child regularly crosses the border between their residence and that of their ex-partner, thus creating passages and connections between the two places. In this paper, we will see that parents establish more or less permeable boundaries between their dwelling and the dwelling of their ex-partner. These boundaries shape not only how children experience their time in each household but also their capacity to construct continuities and discontinuities across both residential settings. These parental delineations play a critical role in mediating children's sense of place and belonging within dual-home arrangements.

Research questions

This article addresses the following three research questions:

RQ1. In a context where children regularly travel back and forth between their parental homes, what boundaries do parents place between their dwelling and the dwelling of their ex-partner?

RQ2. How do these boundaries shape children's experience of their time spent in each dwelling and of the transitions between them?

RQ3. What factors influence these boundaries?

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on fieldwork with 17 Belgian families practicing equal or quasi-equal shared residence.² A total of 21 children (10 girls and 11 boys), aged 10 to 16 and living in this arrangement for at least 1 year, were interviewed in 2019. This age group was selected for its relevance to key transitional phases, such as the transition to secondary school and the development of autonomy in mobility, digital practices, and personal organization.

Families were recruited through calls on specialized platforms, social media, professional networks, and snowball sampling. Most children alternated weekly with each parent ($n = 13$); others alternated every 5 days ($n = 4$), every 6–8 days ($n = 3$), or every 9–5 days ($n = 1$). Custody arrangements began before the age of 3 years ($n = 7$ children), between the ages of 3 and 6 ($n = 3$), or after the age of 6 ($n = 11$). Eight parents were single; 26 were in blended families. Parental conflict was low to moderate in 7 families. Families were predominantly middle class, though varied in education (11 secondary-level, 21 university-level, 2 unknown) and perceived living standards (4 modest, 24 intermediate, 6 affluent). Twelve children's parents lived within 25 min of each other; the rest lived between 20 and 50 km apart. All families resided in urban or peri-urban settings.

Data collection involved three stages: (a) a semi-structured interview with at least one parent to understand family culture and context; (b) two individual interviews with each child using participatory tools—the Socio-Spatial Network Game (Schier, 2017), where children mapped meaningful places and relationships, and the Emotion Map (Gabb & Singh, 2008), where they identified the territories of each resident, and assigned emotions to these spaces in each home; and (c) a walk-along interview replicating the child's usual commute between homes, inspired by the Go-Along Method (Kusenbach, 2003).

Thematic analysis was conducted at three levels: (a) triangulation of materials to build individual case narratives; (b) comparison with parental accounts to enrich context; and (c) cross-case analysis to identify points of contact and disparity. Children's creative outputs served as prompts for discussion and were not analyzed separately.

FINDINGS

A typology of 'parental islands'

Analysis of the children's accounts of their life experiences reveals that parents represent and delimit the boundaries³ between their dwelling and their ex-partners' with varying degrees of permeability, allowing or restraining certain passages between their 'islands,' and those of their ex-partners. In doing so, they give their island a particular shape and create an important framework that the children must deal with daily (see Table 1).

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the five types of 'parental islands' that we identified in our study, defined by specific forms of inter-household boundaries: wall, membrane, reef, and flow. Put briefly, the 'wall' is an impermeable boundary that does not allow any exchange between the two households. The 'membrane,' while relatively impermeable, does allow some inter-household exchanges. The 'reef' is relatively permeable, regulating exchanges mainly through the strong fusion among inhabitants of the 'island'; while in the 'flow' the two 'islands' are conceived of as being part of the same 'space-time continuum', allowing everything (children and belongings) to circulate freely between them.

In this context, the degree of impermeability of the boundaries delimiting each 'parental island' is defined in terms of three types of spatio-temporal limits. *Limits on movement* refer to the potential for children to move between their parents' dwellings outside the alternating schedule and for them to meet a parent on days when they

²For more information on the legislation and the criteria commonly used to assess requests for shared residence in Belgium, see Merla et al., (2025).

³As our work focuses on the life experiences of children, we are considering here the boundaries imposed on the children, which may differ considerably from those imposed on the ex-partner. For example, some parents refuse to allow their ex-partners access to their dwelling, while allowing their children to visit them on days outside the custody schedule.

TABLE 1 Typology of ‘Parental Islands’.

		Fortress island	Cocoon Island	Reef Island	Open Island	Wild Island
Inter-household boundary		Wall	Membrane	Reef	Flow	
Spatio-temporal limits	Travel limits	Physical co-presence not sought on days of scheduled absence	Limited physical presence on days of scheduled absence Negotiation possible	Physical co-presence on days of scheduled absence possible but must be negotiated	Physical co-presence possible on days of scheduled absence	
	Transfer limits	Transfer of objects not authorized	Transfer limited but negotiation possible	Authorized but negotiated transfers	Freedom to manage personal belongings Transfers authorized without permission Everything belongs to the child, not to the ‘island’	
	Limits to virtual contact	Everything belongs to the ‘island’, so must go back to its original place				
Limits to virtual contact		Little or no contact between ‘islands’	Regular inter-‘island’ contact	Potential inter-‘island’ contact		
Parents (n = 34)		4	7	7	12	4

are residing with the other parent. *Virtual contact limits* refer to whether contact is maintained through virtual means of communication (such as telephone or video calls, text messages, emails, or messages on social networks) when children are at the other parent's dwelling. *Transfer limits* refer to whether children are allowed to take personal belongings with them to the other parent's dwelling.

It is important to note that each parent has his or her own type of ‘island,’ which can be different from the other parent's. A child can therefore live on, and between, two different types of ‘island.’

The ‘fortress’ island

The ‘fortress’ island is characteristic of parents who delimit the boundaries with walls that must not be crossed.⁴ They value fusion among members of their household and their retreat onto a ‘fortress’ island; they therefore circumscribe their living space and set predictable times to be with the child, structuring and ordering their homes by establishing rigid spatio-temporal boundaries. The child's two places of residence are considered mutually exclusive; these parents draw an impermeable boundary between the two islands, allowing the child to cross only on the day of the planned change of residence. Parents in this category also value loyalty to the ‘new family’⁵ and respect for family rituals, often establishing inflexible family routines and habits. The time spent together in the home of the

⁴This is the case in our study for the mothers of Marie (aged 12) and Romane (10) and the fathers of Théodore (13) and Coralie (12).
⁵We use the term ‘new family’ to designate the biological parent and the children born of the same union where the parent is now single, or in case of family blending, the biological parent, the children born of the first union, and the new partner and their children, if any, as well as any children born of the second union.

'new family' is structured by the precise schedules and defined rhythms. Marie emphasizes the importance of meal-times at her mother's residence: "*Often we turn off the TV, because they like the four of us to be together and everything, and so, well, we eat and talk.*"

Trips to the other parent's dwelling are seen as shared moments when family members come together. These trips are almost always accompanied and monitored. The children cannot go to the other parent's dwelling whenever and however they want. Parents with fortress islands give priority to spending time among members of their 'new family,' structured by family routines and habits (the child's unexpected arrival outside of scheduled times would disrupt this pattern). The children do not say explicitly that they cannot go to their parent's residence when they are not living there; rather, they talk about how these travel restrictions give stability to the time they spend with that parent in their dwelling.

The 'fortress' parents avoid virtual contact with their children when the children are not residing with them. As Romane explains, their 'fortress' parents want to strengthen the relationships within their dwelling for a defined period of time, and do not seek out contact except on special occasions:

[S]ometimes they'll call to wish me happy birthday or [to tell me] if things went well or if there's been a health problem. Not too much contact, though

(Romane, aged 10).

These parents also set up an impermeable transfer boundary, maintaining that the child's personal effects belong to the child, but only within the framework of his or her own 'island.' They therefore control the management of the child's belongings by limiting transfers from one dwelling to another, or by requiring the child to systematically return belongings to the parental residence to which they belong. These parents ensure that their child's material needs are met within their 'island' to avoid exchanges between dwellings. Coralie explains that her father encourages her to leave things with the parent who gave them to her:

...Often if it belongs to someone, the person who gave it to me, for example if Dad gave me something, it often stays with Dad, it doesn't go to Mum. Dad doesn't like it very much if I take too many things home to Mum, so ...

(Coralie, aged 12).

This is also the case for Théodore, whose father allows him to take some of the things that he has given him to his mother's house, but only on the condition that he brings them back the following week. Théodore explains that this is why on the day he moves (Friday), he makes sure he is wearing the same outfit he had on the day he arrived at his mother's:

Clothes! I have a stash at Mum's and a stash at Dad's, and if I run out at Mum's or if I need a sweatshirt or two, I go and get them at Dad's and bring them here. (...) But generally they all stay at home, but sometimes I put on a T-shirt on a Friday so it goes to Mum's, and I try to put it on again the next Friday so it will go back to Dad's.

(Théodore, aged 13).

The 'cocoon' island

The 'cocoon' island is delimited by a relatively impermeable membrane that allows the 'new family' to withdraw into a closed space for a limited time. The membrane protects the island while allowing certain passages. Indeed, these parents value negotiation among members of the 'new family' and allow potential openings of their territory.

These parents are relatively closed to the outside world, promoting retreat within the 'new family' dwelling. They tend to be homebodies who value family routines, and who ensure affection, comfort and intimacy (the core values of the 'cocoon' parent).⁶

This strong sense of closure and fusion makes the children's mobility dangerous in the eyes of their parents. These children are restricted in their movements but have some room to negotiate for more flexibility. They are not supposed to go to the 'cocoon' island outside of the planned schedule, but they can sometimes arrange to see the 'cocoon' parent outside of their residence. For example, Émilie's mother will occasionally travel to her ex-partner's village on Thursday (when her daughter is living with him) to attend one of Émilie's judo sessions and share a moment with her at the same time. Manuêlo and Giorgio's father takes advantage of the proximity of his house to his sons' activities, sometimes greeting Manuêlo as he leaves his Scout meeting or cheering on Giorgio at his rugby match on weekends, when they are living with their mother.

The permeability of the 'cocoon' island's membrane concerns primarily the use of virtual contact to maintain relationships. 'Cocoon' parents communicate with their children several times a week when the children are away from 'home', extending the fusion of members of the 'new family' across physical boundaries. Émilie, for instance, receives calls from her mother multiple times a week:

Yes, a lot ... she calls me like every other day, but she's the one who calls me (...) it's usually my mum who calls me when I'm with my dad.

(Émilie, aged 10)

Cédric (aged 15) actively maintains contact with his parents when they are not living together, regardless of who takes the initiative:

[Interviewer] And when you're with your dad during the week, for example, do you still have contact with your mum on the days when ... ?

[Cedric] *Yes, yes, of course (...) during the week, two, three times (...) and messages every day. (...) It's just to say hello. (...)*

[Interviewer] What about your father?

[Cedric] *It's exactly the same thing ... the same.*

In terms of transfer restrictions, 'cocoon' parents limit the movement of the child's personal belongings from one dwelling to another but leave room for negotiation. Children are allowed to take personal belongings with them on the day of a move, though they are advised to bring them back to the 'island' where they belong. Émilie says that she often has "problems with clothes ... like, for example, my knickers stayed at Dad's, and Mum, she complains."

This was also the case for Tristan (aged 15), who clearly distinguished between his wardrobes:

[Tristan] *I have [sic] my clothes here, my clothes at my mother's ... It was the separate thing. It was that each of them bought clothes separately; they were really different things.*

⁶In our study, the parents with 'cocoon' islands are the mothers of Coralie (aged 12), Chloé (12) and her sister Annelise (10), and Émilie (10), the fathers of Tristan (15) and Cédric (15), and both parents of Giorgio (16) and his brother Manuêlo (13).

[Interviewer] OK, so let's say you came from your mum's to your dad's with clothes from your mum's. How did you handle that?

[Tristan] I'd put them back on when I left. (...) So we'd wash them and everything, and then I'd put them back on again.

Chloé also has separate wardrobes at each parent's residence, but she negotiates with her parents so she can take her favorite outfits, which she gets mainly from her father (or rather, her paternal grandmother), wherever she goes.

The 'reef' island

Parents with a 'reef' island also give priority to the 'new family,' in that time spent at home with the family group is valued.⁷ Because of this degree of fusion, these parents spatially delimit their island to establish a predictable time with their child, surrounding it with a 'reef' that protects it from unwanted interference. Despite this boundary, the children have considerable room for maneuver. They are seen as partners on an equal footing with other members of the 'new family,' and are invited to express their wishes, which are taken into account as far as possible.

Children can visit the 'reef' island outside of scheduled times, but these visits must be planned and negotiated beforehand. These parents demonstrate spontaneity without seeking to impose routines and are broadly open to transfers from one island to the other. Nevertheless, they prefer to keep to the pre-established alternation schedule, despite granting frequent exceptions. Théodore explains that his mother allows his sister Suzanne (aged 20) to stay with her during exam periods, or on certain weekends when she does not necessarily want to go to their father's house. He finds that this flexibility does not pose a problem for their mother, as long as it is organized in advance:

So there's me and there's Suzy, who also goes from one house to another ... but I go every Friday, and she decides whose house she's going to. So sometimes she goes to Mum's at the weekend because it's quieter for studying, and sometimes she goes to Dad's because, well, she wants to go to Dad's.

(Théodore, aged 13)

Similarly, Joseph says that his mother does not mind if he or one of his younger sisters asks to stay with her for a few more days to have some special time with her:

After all, it doesn't really bother my mother if one of my two sisters stays at home, as long as it's not both of them, because if they're together they're a bit noisy and it sometimes gets on your nerves, but otherwise she [Amandine] can stay. So, it's not a problem.

(Joseph, aged 16)

However, extending a stay beyond the number of days originally planned should not be done unexpectedly or repeatedly. For the past month, Joseph has been going to his father's house by train directly after school on the day he moved. When he is too tired to take the train by himself, he waits until 7:30 p.m. when his sister Amandine's acrobatics class finishes, and then travels with his father as he has done in the past: "Either I stay at school for a while, so I revise my lessons (...) and then I leave, or I chat with friends outside school and then my father comes so I can go back with him." To be more comfortable, he would prefer to wait at his mother's house, which is in the same town as the acrobatics class. But, he does not feel welcome there:

⁷Parents in this category include the fathers of Marie (aged 12), Émilie (10) and Mélissa (10) and the mothers of Mathilde (13), Joseph (16) and his sister Amandine (12), Théodore (13) and Cédric (15).

because on Friday evenings I'm [supposed to be] at my father's, I have to wait until 7:30. I don't necessarily feel like it (...) And so, logically, [since] I'm not [supposed to be] at my mother's anymore, I should be somewhere else....

(Joseph, aged 16)

Extending the stay at his mother's house must remain the exception, even though there may be many such exceptions.

Parents with 'reef' islands generally do not set limits on virtual contact, but do not all have the same relationship with ICTs. Some use these technologies to keep in touch with their children when they are away from their residence. Amandine explains: "For example, when I'm with my dad or whatever, she sends me a little message to say, 'How are things?' or something." Her brother Joseph explains that he "makes an effort" to stay in touch with his mother when he and his sisters are away from her. He tries to text her from time to time to chat, because he knows that "she's a bit more sensitive about that." This is also the case for Mathilde, who keeps in regular contact with her parents, but mainly with her mother, "because dad asks for a bit less information, but he still does it":

We text each other [she and her father] and it's always one week, one week, so it's the same with my mum, that I don't see her, but we keep in touch. (...) To tell them how things are going with me, to say that things are going well with school, (...) sometimes there are things I have difficulty with, so she [her mother] wants to know how that test went and all, you know.

(Mathilde, aged 13)

Some parents value maintaining the fusion among members of the 'new family' beyond their physical presence on the island. Other parents with 'reef' islands set temporal limits by not keeping in contact with the children outside their scheduled days, except when needed for organizational reasons. Nevertheless, they allow the children to contact them if they feel the need.

Children also face few transfer restrictions. Indeed, parents with 'reef' islands allow regular transfers of objects between dwellings after negotiation. However, as Mathilde points out, these belongings must always be returned to the dwelling from which they came.

Mélissa systematically returns the clothes she receives from her paternal grandparents to her father's house because, as she says, "they have to go back there":

He [her father] prefers that they stay with him because, when my grandparents give me clothes, I think they prefer me to wear them when, you know, [she is staying with her father]. And so, he tells me I have to take them home, even if they're dirty; I put them in a bag and we'll wash them at his place.

(Mélissa, aged 10)

The 'open' island

Parents with an 'open' island advocate for openness to the outside world and autonomy for the members of the 'new family', seeing their dwelling as part of a single large expanse whose spatial and temporal boundaries are difficult to define.⁸ Children are thus free to travel and to situate themselves wherever and whenever they wish within the 'space-time continuum,' connecting the 'open' island with the other parental island. Rather than discrete

⁸In our study, these were the fathers of Mathilde (aged 13), Joseph (16) and his sister Amandine (12), Chloé (12) and her sister Annelise (10) and Romane (10); the mothers of Lewis (16), Eliot (14), Remi (13) and Mélissa (10); and the two parents of Jean (13) and his sister Anouk (10) and Félicien (12).

territories to which children feel they belong, space is seen as being made up of networks to which they decide to connect temporarily, only to interrupt these connections and reactivate them later as they wish. As Lewis explains:

One time I told my father that I'd stay an extra day with my mother, or something like that, but (...) In fact I don't even ask, because both my parents tell me, (...) especially my mother, that I really shouldn't worry, that they want me to be OK and so they're happy to see me, but in and of itself. I choose when I go to one's home and when I go to the other's; the alternation is just so we don't have to worry about it.

(Lewis, aged 16)

In this way, the adolescent is encouraged to move fluidly and continuously from one parental island to the other and is free to maintain virtual contacts if he wishes so.

This high degree of autonomy means that children are free to move between islands as they wish. Children like Eliot feel free to go to their parents' 'open' island to "just to go say hello" or to look for things they have forgotten:

Yes, a lot of times when I go to get my things, I'll see them [his mother and father], or sometimes I go to say hello, out of habit. (...) During the week I go to say hello, just to drop by like that. (...) Sometimes it's for particular reasons but there are times when it's just to say hello.

(Eliot, aged 14)

Jean, aged 13, says that he has become accustomed to this rhythm of life in alternation, and that he forgets his personal belongings "less and less." Until recently, he would systematically return to his other parent's residence when he forgot a notebook or phone charger on the day of the move. Today, he still sometimes goes to his father's flat while residing with his mother, "to rest" and enjoy the "beautiful view" from the third floor, to be able to catch the bus with a friend who lives nearby, or to find something to do.

These visits are not a problem for Jean's parents if they are informed. In fact, when he goes to his father's flat on Mondays, "they don't notice anything anyway" because both parents are away and "they don't know that I'm here [at my father's place]" so "it doesn't change anything for them." On other days of the week, Jean limits his comings and goings to avoid having to keep his parents informed of his whereabouts.

Some parents with 'open' islands maintain relationships over distance by communicating with their children repeatedly during the period of separation, encouraging virtual forms of co-presence (Baldassar, 2008). Anouk explains:

Sometimes I call on Dad's phone, two or three times [a week]. (...) Sometimes it's Mum [who calls] ... to ask Dad something and so I take the opportunity to call her. Or I call her [to tell her] if I'm doing well, if I got good grades at school ... And sometimes I ask her whether the rabbit is OK.

(Anouk, aged 10)

Other parents check in on their children occasionally but maintain a low profile while they are apart. Chloé's and Mathilde's fathers will call in case of particular events like exams or doctor's appointments but do not necessarily keep in touch otherwise.

With respect to transfer limits, children are free to take the belongings of their choice to the other dwelling, as parents with 'open' islands consider these objects to belong to the child rather than to the 'island.' Remi takes a suitcase containing his everyday belongings each time he moves; Eliot goes back and forth between his residences to get the things he needs during the week; Chloé surrounds herself with "everything [she] need[s]"; and Amandine sometimes takes clothes with her, even though she has a wardrobe in each of her parents' houses, simply because she "likes to have a few more."

The 'wild' island

Finally, the 'wild' island also has fluid boundaries. Like parents with 'open' islands, those with 'wild' islands demonstrate a low degree of fusion and give greater priority to time for themselves and to individual pursuits than to spending time with their 'new family.' However, whereas parents with 'open' islands invest in the domestic sphere, those with 'wild' islands withdraw from this sphere into their own worlds. Their hobbies (for the father of Remi [13] and the mother of Tristan [15]) or their work (for the fathers of Lewis [16] and Eliot [14]) monopolize the time that they could devote to their children, who may feel abandoned. In fact, these family groups rarely spend time together in the living room, and may not even share meals:

[In the living room] there's my stepmother when she comes home from work, but then she goes off to her computer. (...) There's my father who comes home from work, but he never really goes into the living room; he goes straight to the kitchen or to his computer, or to work on his models, and then my brothers come in, but, well, you know [they don't stay there long].

(Remi, aged 13)

But during the week, what we do is we eat separately. So my mother is in the kitchen and my brother [Adam, 19] and I are in the living room, or just me in the living room and my brother in his room. (...) We eat where we want.

(Tristan, aged 15)

Children are free to move wherever and whenever they wish:

Actually, if I want to go to one of their places one day, I can, totally. My mother is totally fine with it, and my father wants to see me, but, well ... I don't know how that works; it's like he doesn't think he's the one who decides, so ... Yes, I feel very free in that respect.

(Lewis, aged 16)

However, children do not always feel welcome when they return to their parent's 'wild' island:

In fact, when I'm at my father's, the day before I'm going to go to my mother's, I call her (...) and my father, I never tell him because, well, I get home and he's there or he's not there. He knows more or less when I come home, so...

(Lewis, aged 16)

As for those with 'open' islands, it may be concluded that parents with 'wild' islands perceive the children's mobility between islands as natural. However, in this case, the children's considerable freedom of movement results more from the parent's reluctance to take responsibility for their travels than from valorization of autonomy as contributing to the children's personal development. Parents with 'wild' islands encourage their children to travel alone, without relying on family resources, and leave them free to manage their schedules and destinations without imposing rules. Thus, Lewis, for instance, describes himself as "pretty independent." He is "pretty familiar with public transport," having used it since he was in primary school to get to school while living with his father, to visit friends or just to ride around town without a specific destination.

Parents in this category relinquish their responsibility and commitment to their children, devoting themselves entirely to their own personal and/or professional activities. They are too busy or absent to take care of the children, who learn to look after themselves and benefit from a high degree of 'forced' autonomy. The absence of rules means that these children enjoy considerable autonomy and freedom of movement between their parents' dwellings. Indeed, there are no restrictions on their movements in the sense that their comings and goings from one place to the other are not monitored by the parent. This is the case for Eliot (aged 14), who moves freely between his two

residences. When he goes to his father's house during the week, he stays there for only a short time because his father is too busy at work and is “*never*” there.

In terms of limits on virtual contact, whereas one mother has maintained contact with her son while he is living with his father, the other parents do not necessarily maintain contact with them. However, they do allow them to make contact when necessary.

With regard to transfer limits, as for ‘open’ islands, children's personal belongings are considered to belong to the children more than to the ‘island’. The children are therefore free to take whatever they want to the other residence without the parent having any say in the matter. Only Tristan's mother, who is facing financial difficulties, asked her son not to leave the clothes she had bought for him at his father's, so she would not have to buy new ones when they ran out. As for his other belongings (console, computer, and so on), he was free to take whatever he wanted without approval from his mother, because his forgetting them at his father's house would not directly affect her.

Key factors influencing the shape of parental islands

The particular form of inter-household boundary (‘island’) established by each parent is influenced by a number of factors, including material, spatial, familial and temporal dimensions.

The material dimension

The ‘material dimension’ refers to the perceived standard of living of each ex-partner and the material resources available to the child. Although the parents in our study had a relatively homogeneous profile in this sense, different strata could be distinguished, ranging from modest to comfortable standards of living. These perceived levels influence the types of boundaries that parents establish to demarcate their territory.

Parents with a modest standard of living tend to create ‘fortress’ and ‘cocoon’ islands. Because of their limited financial resources (and/or their desire to live modestly according to their values), these parents, who were mainly mothers in our study, draw strict transfer boundaries in particular, being unable to easily replace children's belongings if they are left at the other parent's residence. This was the case for Marie's, Romane's, and Chloé and Annelyse's mothers, who preferred that their daughters keep the things they had given them at home; Émilie's mother, who was angry when her daughter did not bring back the knickers she was wearing when she left; and Coralie's mother, who divides her daughter's belongings between wardrobes in each parental residence, asking her to keep them in balance by not taking anything from one house to the other.

‘Reef’ and ‘open’ islands are most prevalent among parents who perceive their standard of living as intermediate to high, considering that they have sufficient economic and material resources. These parents draw fewer boundaries between their islands and those of their ex-partners, leaving their children free to manage their personal belongings. If they lack something, the question of whether to replace it or buy more may be one of principle rather than economics, in contrast to parents with a more modest standard of living. It is noteworthy, however, that some parents who see their standard of living as modest will also create ‘reef’ and ‘open’ islands as they value openness to the outside world, which distinguishes them from those with ‘fortress’ and ‘cocoon’ islands.

Finally, there is no clear relationship between ‘wild’ islands and perceived standard of living, as the profiles of these parents are very diverse. Parents with ‘wild’ islands are distinguished mainly by the priority they give to their own individual time, be it leisure or professional time.

The spatial dimension

The 'spatial dimension' refers here to the physical distance between residences. Ex-partners who live close to one another tend to create 'open' or 'wild' islands, allowing children to move freely between dwellings that are only a short walk apart. However, proximity does not entirely determine their practices. Cédric's parents, who live a 20-min walk from one another, have 'reef' and 'cocoon' islands. By contrast, Romane's mother, who lives a 5-min walk from her ex-partner's flat, has a 'fortress' island. While some parents create an 'open' island because of the proximity of the parental dwellings, others choose this type of island because their dwellings are far apart. Traveling this distance on a regular basis requires particular family arrangements, and parents are often responsible for making the long journeys between residences. Parents with 'open' islands encourage their children to become independent and to take responsibility for these journeys in part to relieve themselves of this logistical burden, while others, like Coralie's father with his 'fortress' island, may see these car journeys as shared 'family time'.

The familial dimension

The 'familial dimension' relates to family composition, the degree of conflict between parents, and the core values at the centre of family organization.

Family composition has an impact on the resources available to the 'new family.' In our study, single parents, particularly single mothers, often face financial difficulties, exacerbated by a lower income due to their often part-time jobs; consequently, they may have limited material resources. This is why the mothers of Romane (who has a 'fortress' island), Chloé, Annelyse and Émilie (who have 'cocoon' islands), and Mathilde (who has a 'reef' island) set limits on transfers of belongings between residences, although these may sometimes be negotiable. These limits allow them to keep the few items they are able to give to their daughters in their own dwellings, and to avoid having to replace clothes or toys the girls may forget at the other parent's residence.

The degree of conflict between parents also influences the boundaries drawn between households. As Hachet (2021) points out, when the level of conflict is high, it is difficult for parents to maintain contact with their children when those children live with an ex-partner who does not answer the phone or never calls. The level of conflict between Marie's parents was reported to be medium-high. The girl's mother (who has a 'fortress' island) maintains contact with her father (who has a 'reef' island) only by email; both parents avoid seeing one another or talking on the phone. When Marie did not yet have her own phone, this situation prevented her from communicating with the parent she was not residing with. With the exception of Lewis's parents, who maintain a friendly relationship (low conflict), the parents with 'wild' islands (Eliot's and Remi's fathers and Tristan's mother) barely communicate with their ex-partners, with whom they maintain medium-high levels of conflict. Now that these adolescents have their own mobile phones, they are free to communicate with their other parents as they wish.

The core values around which parents construct their family organization are also important in defining their territories. Coralie's father, who has a 'fortress' island, attaches great importance to general culture and education. When his daughter is staying with him, he spends a lot of time with her, and it is important to him to spend weekday evenings alone together at home. They have a ritual that they never miss: they watch and discuss the TV news together, and do further research on current affairs. In this way, he creates an impermeable boundary, enabling him to spend time with his daughter. Théodore's father, who also has a 'fortress' island, has erected an impermeable wall between dwellings because he does not share all his ex-partner's values or educational rules. He sets transfer limits to prevent his son from bringing home things of which he does not approve, such as a PlayStation. Concerned about the impact that new technologies can have on children, he sets clear rules about their use and does not seek contact with Théodore when he is at his mother's house to limit his son's use of these technologies.

Émilie's and Marie's fathers each have a 'reef' island. The values of community involvement and external integration are central to their family organization. Indeed, they have both chosen to live in co-operatives, where they

hope their daughters will be able to participate in various activities with their 'new families.' Parents with 'open' islands advocate values such as self-expression and negotiation, which they express by leaving children free to make their own choices. Consequently, they see their dwellings as being part of a 'space-time continuum' within which the children can move freely. Parents with 'open' islands are also characterized by a certain approach to life, taking it day by day and living each moment to the fullest. From this perspective, there is no point in setting limits in terms of time and space. Moreover, their children are invited to take part in discussions and to express themselves freely on all subjects, creating a warm and friendly atmosphere in a space where they can come and go freely.

The temporal dimension

The 'temporal dimension' relates to the age of the children and also to the parents' desires to have time with the child and time for themselves.

In our study, the age of the child affects boundary formation primarily for mothers who are likely to set impermeable boundaries when they have an eldest daughter aged 12 or under. This is the case for the mothers of Marie (aged 12) and Romane (10), who have 'fortress' islands, and for those of Émilie (10), Chloé (12) and her sister Annelyse (10), and Coralie (12), who have 'cocoon' islands. The mothers of Mélissa (10) and Anouk (10) have 'open' islands. We believe that this difference can be explained by the girls' positions as youngest siblings. Benefiting from their experience with the older siblings, their mothers seem to be more comfortable with the external environment and are therefore more inclined to encourage their independence. Conversely, the 'fortress' and 'cocoon' mothers mentioned above tend to withdraw into the 'new family', setting impermeable boundaries to ensure that the family space is disturbed as little as possible. Fathers appear to be relatively unaffected by the child's age and show less fear of the outside world with respect to their daughters. Similarly, when children are in secondary school,⁹ their parents tend to create 'reef' or 'open' islands, seeing their children as partners and thus giving them more autonomy.

The desire to have time for the child, and time for oneself without the child (alone time), also influences the form of parental islands.¹⁰ This observation echoes the work of Hachet (2021) on the parental experience of shared residence in France. While Hachet describes a number of ways of conceiving of 'time without the children', the majority of parents see this time as 'time for oneself'. Some parents see this time as strictly delimited from time with the child, as time when they are not parents, but simply individuals (which Hachet observed mainly among fathers). Others, while enjoying this time for themselves, maintain links with the child in a spirit of continuity (mainly mothers). Both types of behavior were noted among our participants, but without a marked gender difference. Thus, some parents, such as Théodore's father ('fortress' island) or Manuêlo and Giorgio's mother ('cocoon' island), set limits on movement to prevent the children from coming to their dwellings outside of scheduled days. They appreciate the egalitarian arrangement because it allows them to spend a week with their children and then have time to themselves, or private time with a new partner who has come to live with them. The mothers of Jean and Anouk ('open' island), Mathilde ('reef' island), and Amandine and Joseph ('reef' island) also value having a week without the children so they can have some time to themselves or with friends. While Jean and Anouk's mother is open to her son and daughter coming and going as they please, the others are not opposed to seeing their children outside the scheduled days but prefer to be informed beforehand and for the decision to be discussed and taken together. For her part, Romane's mother ('fortress' island) appreciates having a few days without the children to compensate for her reduced working hours when she is looking after them. Other parents, such as Marie's mother and Coralie's father, who both have 'fortress' islands, set spatio-temporal limits to ensure a predictable time with their children while they are present. While Marie's mother does this to respect her ex-partner's desire for an

⁹In Belgium, secondary education begins with the first year of secondary school at around the age of 12 and ends with the sixth year of secondary school at the age of 17–18.

¹⁰Merla et al. (2025) note that according to family judges, one of the reasons why mothers request egalitarian residence is to be able to have time for themselves. Bernardi and Mortelmans (2021) note that this type of arrangement reduces the pressure of needing to juggle paid work, family and leisure, in particular by allowing mothers to have time for themselves.

egalitarian arrangement in which he has as much time with their daughter as she does, Coralie's father sets limits to ensure that his ex-partner does not interfere with his time with his daughter, even by a short phone call.

CONCLUSIONS

Parents implementing shared residential arrangements face the challenge of managing boundaries between their own households and that of their ex-partners in a context where their children move regularly back and forth between the two homes. This article examined three domains in which boundaries are actively negotiated: (a) adherence to shared residence schedules (can the child show up unexpectedly?); (b) the maintenance or interruption of communication during the child's absence; and (c) the circulation of objects that may travel with the child from one household to the other. Depending on how boundaries are drawn across these three domains, five types of parental islands have been identified. These island configurations also mirror parental conceptions of their role and the extent of autonomy they are willing to afford the child. The topography and shape of these parental islands inform the ways in which children construct and navigate the relational and material links between their two households, shaping the practices they deploy in their daily lives. These island configurations are dynamic rather than fixed, subject to transformation over time in relation, for instance, to the elapsed period since separation, children getting older and gaining more autonomy, or the emergence of family reconfigurations.

Mapping and analyzing these parental island configurations may offer valuable insights for professionals working with divorced families and providing a framework to better understand and support co-parenting dynamics after parental separation.

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