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FINAL REPORT OF THE MOBILEKIDS PROJECT

Children in shared physical custody

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Presentation of the research and scope of the report

This report summarizes the **main results** of the ERC Starting Grant project "MobileKids: Children in multi-local, post-separation families", funded by the European Research Council and led by prof. Laura Merla [1]. **This sociological research** aims to understand how Shared physical custody (SPC), and the mobility and multilocality that result from this type of post-divorce family arrangement, affect children aged 10-16 [2]. More specifically, **the aim is to understand how these (young) adolescents cope (or not) with this lifestyle marked by the alternation between two living places, to uncover the diversity of experiences lived by these children, and to identify their needs, based on their own accounts.** This implies determining how, and in what circumstances, children appropriate this way of life and develop new ways of acting and being in the world, or "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1979, 1997) specific to multilocality, mobility and the experience of intermittent co-presence and absence.

We will see in this report that living in and between different places of residence implies that young people face obstacles and difficulties in their daily lives (such as the physical burden of carrying their personal belongings, longing for a parent during days of absence, the distance to travel between dwellings, juggling different and even contradictory family cultures, and so on). However, we will also show that by being socialized in this environment, the children we met develop skills, strategies, and ways of being and doing, specific to this multilocal lifestyle, which help them to 'cope' with these periods of absence and presence. These practices integrate the different spaces of residence, which are seen as distinct from each other, and relate them to form a whole, an encompassing and unique sense of home. **Rather than taking the appropriation of this way of life for granted, the aim here is to understand the mechanisms that underpin this appropriation.** Indeed, we will also show how certain practices are facilitated or, on the contrary, made difficult, or even impossible, by material, cultural, social, and temporal conditions, which together form a structure of opportunities and constraints with which young people must deal on a daily basis.

In doing so, our work is part of an emerging body of research that looks at SPC **from the point of view and practices deployed by the children themselves**, not so much to evaluate in fine whether this mode of care is 'good' or 'bad' for young people, but rather, **to understand a way of life experienced daily by thousands of children in Europe and**

[1] The MobileKids project is funded by an ERC Starting Grant from the European Research Council under the Horizon 2020 program, under agreement No 676868. This report reflects the views of the authors only. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for the use that will be made of the information contained herein.

[2] In this report we will use the terms 'child', 'adolescent', 'teenager', 'youth' and 'young people' interchangeably to refer to children in this age group.

beyond. This lifestyle re-interprets both the foundations of the family as it has been constructed over the last two centuries, and the way in which the social sciences themselves study the family (Merla, Nobels et al., 2021; Thomson & Turunen, 2021).

These approaches complement and qualify the numerous studies in the social sciences, demography and psychology on children in separated/divorced families, which tend to focus on the impact of these living arrangements on children's well-being and on gender inequalities, mainly using quantitative methodologies based on parents' views. [3] The results of these studies are mixed, some pointing to the fact that the well-being of children in SPC is better than that of children living in other post-divorce configurations, while others point to specific difficulties, particularly when the degree of conflict between parents is particularly high (Berman and Daneback, 2020). Together, therefore, they do not resolve the sometimes-heated public debate about the advantages and disadvantages of SPC, but rather point to the need to take account of specific situations and contexts. They also call to move beyond this psychologically charged focus by developing more sociological research that starts precisely from the children's point of view and broadens the analysis to include other issues, such as interpersonal relationships, geographical and emotional mobility, and cultural and normative constructions of the family (Berman and Daneback, 2020: 10). It is precisely from this perspective that our approach is taken. **The aim here is not to provide an answer to the debates on the merits of SPC, but rather to approach it from a sociology of family, youth, space and mobility, in order to understand a way of life that questions sedentary societies which are also increasingly marked by a normative ideal of 'mobility' in all spheres of life.**



Geographical area

The MobileKids project **focused primarily on Belgium** (with an emphasis on French-speaking Brussels and Wallonia), while at the same time carrying out research in another context, that of Italy, to shed light on a different legislative, normative and geographical context.

[3] Reviews of this literature include Bernardi and Mortelmans, 2021; Steinbach, 2019; Zartler, 2021.

The research project was carried out at **three levels**:

- The micro level of 'children's lives' represents the core of this study and examines how children maintain their family relationships as they move with varying temporalities between two dwellings. In line with the sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1997), we recognize that children are social actors who can, to varying degrees, exercise agency and influence over their own lives as well as the lives of those around them, while being constrained by their environment and by institutions. Thus, we have given children a voice in this project, to understand:
 - how they maintain their family relationships,
 - what role they play in the daily organization of their multilocal lives and negotiate the different aspects of this life with their parents and relatives,
 - the strategies they put in place to control, resist and limit their mobility,
 - the way in which children appropriate the spaces in which they live,
 - what role communication technologies can play in this context,
 - the structural factors that constrain or facilitate the appropriation practices deployed by young people.

In analyzing these issues, we have paid particular attention to the diversity that characterizes children's experiences and practices, the tensions that arise from living in multiple locations, and the innovative practices that children and their families put in place to cope with their situation.

- The meso level refers to family environments and focuses on the role played by family resources, cultures and practices in the children's socialization to multilocality. Children from post-separation families live in heterogeneous family environments (Widmer and Favez, 2012) where different resources and functionings can coexist. In our analyses, we took into consideration the social, cultural, and economic characteristics of children's families, the specific and sometimes heterogeneous cultures and practices that characterize them, and the tensions that may arise from this heterogeneity. This level also includes the spatial contexts in which the children's double households are located, such as the size and quality of housing, or accessibility in terms of transport and communication.
- Finally, the macro level of policy includes contextualizing SPC in divorce, separation and childcare legislation and how this legislation is implemented.

This report contains **three sections**.

- The first, entitled 'SPC in context', provides a brief overview of the Belgian legislative context and the proportion of divorced or separated families living in SPC. It then presents the main findings of three surveys. The first survey was conducted among judges and family lawyers and identifies the main criteria used to assess requests for egalitarian SPC, as well as the normative representations of the family that inform the assessment of requests and the reasons for refusal of SPC. The second analyses the way in which Belgian family policies take account of SPC. The third survey was administered in 2018 to 1,500 teenagers in secondary education in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation - 158 of whom live in SPC.
- The second part forms the core of this report, namely the lived experience of SPC. It presents the results of in-depth doctoral research conducted by Bérengère Nobels, under the supervision of Laura Merla, over 5 years with 21 children aged 10 to 16 living in SPC in the Brussels-Wallonia Federation. It provides a detailed picture of the issues and questions linked to the micro and meso levels of the MobileKids project, based on a study of the way in which young people construct a sense of home and negotiate their place in the family. The results of this study were discussed in focus groups with institutional stakeholders and practitioners. The results of these discussions and the resulting recommendations are presented at the end of this section.
- The third part deals with the lived experience of SPC for Italian children. It presents the results of post-doctoral research conducted by Sarah Murru, under the supervision of Laura Merla, over 5 years with 20 children aged 10 to 16 living in the Piedmont region. By drawing up a detailed portrait of the issues structuring the day-to-day practice of SPC in the Italian context, this study presents a counterpoint to the Belgian case. The results of this study help us to understand the influence of the legislative framework, the school system, urban organisation and gender norms on the daily practice of SPC.



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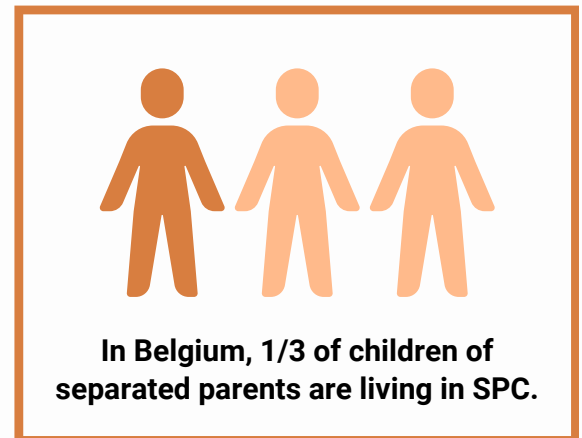
PART 1

SPC in context

Legislation and figures

Shared physical custody (SPC) is a childcare arrangement following divorce or parental separation, in which **children alternate residence between their mother and father**. This arrangement has become **increasingly common** in the European Union, affecting 5% of divorced parents in countries without a legislative framework in favor of this arrangement (such as Germany), around 20% in Denmark or the Netherlands, and around 40% in countries with legislation that strongly supports this arrangement, such as Belgium or Sweden (Recksiedler and Bernardi, 2021; Steinbach, 2019). It is based on the principle that parenting should be shared between separated or divorced parents, and that children have a right to a continued relationship with their parents - both of whom are responsible for their accommodation and practical care, upbringing and maintenance (Hakovirta and Rantalaiho, 2011). Recksiedler and Bernardi (2021) note that, while SPC tends to be **adopted primarily by the more affluent and educated middle classes, it tends to spread over time to other social strata in countries that support this arrangement**. [4]

In Belgium, **parental separation has become a relatively common experience for children and adolescents**, to the point of losing its extra-ordinary character (Marquet & Merla, 2015). Belgium has historically had a very high divorce rate compared to the European average. In 2010, it reached its highest rate of 2.7, compared to the European average of 2.0. Since then, the rate has been gradually decreasing, with a rate of 2.0 observed in 2019, for an EU average of 1.8 (Eurostat [5]).



In 2020, according to the "Parent Barometer" (Ligue des Familles, 2020), more than four out of ten parents in Brussels and Wallonia have experienced a separation or divorce. About 1/3 of them opt for SPC, a system that was enshrined in Belgium in 2006 in a law that gives priority to this type of accommodation when at least one of the two parents requests it. It is now estimated that approximately one in three children of separated parents is concerned by this type of accommodation (Merla & Dedonder, 2020). According to the 2018 "Parent Barometer" (Ligue des Familles, 2018), half (51%) of separated couples informally agree on how their children are to be accommodated, regardless of whether it is egalitarian or not. **Only 35% of couples resort to a court decision.**

[4] SPC raises challenges for families, not only because they must implement a new way of life, but also because of the costs and constraints that shared custody involves. At the same time, as Wagener, Merla and François (2021) point out, this type of accommodation is gradually becoming a model for what some call 'successful divorce' - based, according to Bastard (2006), on the idea that 'the partners, through the agreements they make, must prove themselves capable of ensuring the circulation of their children between them'. This, Wagener and colleagues point out, potentially stigmatizes other forms of child custody, particularly single parenthood. SPC is not desirable in all situations and is not accessible to a disadvantaged section of the population where divorce and parental separation can be particularly conflictual, where financial resources are lacking, and where access to the judicial system may be difficult (see, for example, Fierens, 2008 and, for France, Bessière et al., 2013).

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics#Fewer_marriages.2C_more_divorces

The outlook of legal practitioners

Article 374 (§2) of the Civil Code states that 'in the absence of an agreement, in the case of joint parental authority, the court shall **examine as a matter of priority, at the request of at least one of the parents, the possibility of fixing the custody of the child in an egalitarian manner** between parents. However, **if the court considers that shared physical custody is not the most appropriate arrangement, it may decide to arrange non-equal custody**. But various time arrangements are possible. For Van Houcke (2017:5), this notion covers two situations. On the one hand, "egalitarian SPC" designates situations where the child's time is divided equally between both parents (50/50), according to a variety of alternating rhythms (periods of 3.5 days, one week, 15 days...). On the other hand, "quasi-equal SPC" occurs when the child spends 65% of his time at one parent's dwelling and 35% at the other parents's dwelling, or when the child's custody is based on a 9-day/5-day alternation.

This part of the research focuses on the **different criteria that are taken into account in cases concerning an request for egalitarian SPC in Belgium, by cross-referencing the testimonies of judges and lawyers practicing family law**. Beyond the identified criteria, the aim is to understand which **normative representations of the family** guide the evaluation of requests and the motivation of refusals of SPC.

Firstly, based on the results of **an online survey** conducted at the end of 2017-beginning of 2018, we investigate the assessment criteria mobilized by lawyers practicing family law in their roles of advice and assistance. We then look at criteria mobilized in a series of cases a) by these lawyers, b) by parents to oppose a request for SPC, and c) by judges to justify their refusal to grant such arrangements.



We rely on a **survey conducted among French-speaking family lawyers in Belgium**, through a questionnaire drafted by our team in consultation with scientists, judges and family lawyers, and administered online at the end of 2017-beginning of 2018. The aim of this survey was to gain a better understanding of their professional practice, to highlight some current trends in the magistrates' legal decisions (or homologation) regarding SPC, and lastly to offer an overview of the profiles of the parents who request this type of custody. While 112 lawyers responded in full or in part to our questionnaire, we have chosen to retain and exploit here the 56 questionnaires that were fully completed. [6]

[6] Among our respondents we find: a majority of people aged 36 and over (76.8%), women (83.9%), and with more than 10 years of experience as a family lawyer (74.6%). Our respondents are evenly distributed among the Bars of five French-speaking Belgian provinces (Brussels, Walloon Brabant, Liège, Hainaut and Namur).

Three criteria appear to be generally mobilized against SPC. The first two are widely used both by lawyers in their advisory role, as well as by parent (in cases the lawyers told us about), when SPC is requested by the other parent against their will, and by judges in justifying their decision not to grant SPC. These are **the young age of the child (under 3 or even 6) and the lack of availability of the requesting parent**. The third criterion, namely **the geographical distance between parents**, is strongly identified by lawyers in their advisory role, and is among the three main criteria used by judges to justify their decision (in the cases examined by the lawyers who responded to our survey).

Secondly, we confront the criteria that emerge from the lawyers' testimony with the practices and representations of **eight family judges interviewed in 2018**, which enables us to better appreciate the notions covered by these criteria, the way in which they are weighed up by the judges, and, in fine, the representations of the family that underpin these processes.



In parallel to the survey described above, we conducted **semi-structured interviews with 8 family judges** to further explore their practices and perceptions of legal decisions regarding SPC, with a particular focus on the criteria they use to assess a request for SPC. The interviews of approximately 1.5 hours were conducted with 5 judges working in the Walloon Region, one judge in the Brussels-Capital Region and 2 judges working in the Flemish Region. One judge was a man, the other 7 were women. All of them were between 40 and 60 years old.

It should be noted that the **case-by-case approach** prevails in the examination of cases by these judges, although particular attention is paid to **three criteria** that tend to weigh against SPC, namely **the child's young age, geographical distance (which also affects the stability of the child's social environment), and material conditions for childcare** that are deemed unsatisfactory. On the other hand, positions vary as to the criterion of the **parents' availability**. While the judges we met agree that **problems of violence, addiction or unreliability** of a parent are a hindrance to the establishment of SPC, they will react differently if these behaviors are not verified in social enquiry report or by a court decision. There is also general agreement that **conflict between parents** is not in itself a reason for refusing a request for SPC, and that if the child is to be heard, **the burden of the decision** should not be placed upon his shoulders.

We also note that **the model of the nuclear family** with parents and minor children living under the same roof remains the reference model for the judges who were interviewed. Parental separation is often seen in itself as an obstacle to the interests of the child. The ideal model of the nuclear family is then linked to a vision of family relations in which love, warmth, peace, communication and kindness prevail.

The criteria on which our judges agree reflect a desire to reproduce conditions similar to those that might be found in an idealized nuclear family, namely stability of the social environment, geographical proximity and keeping siblings together.

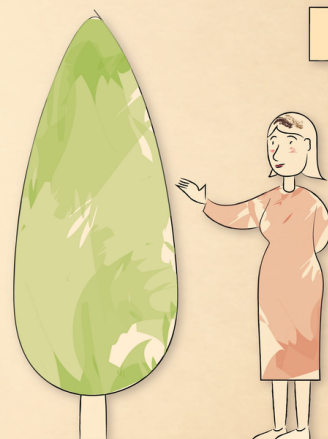
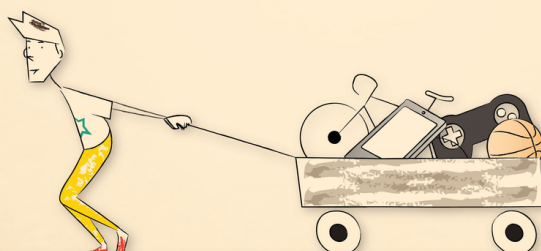
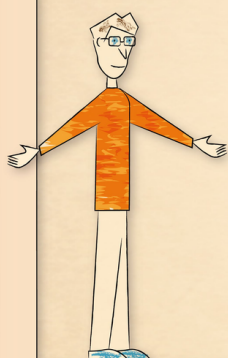
Beyond the ideal of good relations, the question of child physical custody is marked in the discourse of the interviewed judges by **a tension between two gendered normative models of parenthood**: a model based on a more traditional conception (the mother taking more responsibility for the care of the (young) children and the father taking more responsibility for the financial aspects) and a model based on equality between men and women.

The **model of consensus between the parents** is unanimously supported. Agreement between the parents on the type of custody arrangement granted by the court is an essential point for these eight judges, who state that they try to favor a compromise that satisfies both parties to a certain extent. This consensus model positions the parents as actors in their family choices and, according to our interviewees, tends to transform the "winner-loser" logic of the judicial procedure into a process of conciliation of each party's interests.



Further reading (in French):

<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/254841>



To what extent do family policies adapt to SPC in Belgium?

With the *MobileKids* project, we also wanted to pay attention more broadly to the question of family policies to understand how they structure the practice of SPC in Belgium, France and Italy. Considering that SPC represents a key case for understanding the evolution of family configurations in contemporary society, we ask:

- What normative constructions of the family inspire these policies?
- How do these policies respond to new family configurations?
- How do these policies adapt to the growing practice of SPC?

In Belgium, the 6th state reform has brought about profound changes in the area of family benefits, in particular:

- The competence for family benefits has been "defederalized".
- Family benefits are financed by taxes (federal budget) according to a distribution key, and no longer by social contributions.
- The link between the right to family allowances and the socio-professional status of the parents has been eliminated. The child thus becomes the beneficiary and the recipient of his or her own benefits: it is the child who is entitled to the benefit.
- The system thus participates to the transition from a logic of solidarity linked to employment to a universal and general coverage.

Family policy is the product of "Belgian pluralism". The result is **a system of social benefits that is among the most unconditional** in the European context, based on two types of solidarity: the sharing of the burden of children across the entire society (horizontal solidarity, from families without children to families with children) and the fight against child poverty (vertical solidarity between different social categories).

Based on (1) a questionnaire survey aimed at experts and key informants, and (2) a literature review, we analyzed how family policies take into account (or not) the specificities of SPC. We analyzed four pillars of family policy: family benefits, access to services, tax measures, and parental leave. Note that we mainly looked at rights and benefits that affect parents (not their potential partners).

Key points:

- In general, SPC seems to be relatively well acknowledged:
 - **Family allowances and most family benefits can be shared between ex-partners in case of SPC** (except for the birth grant).
 - The **tax system recognizes SPC** through the fiscal co-parenting regime.
 - Each child opens the right to a parental leave, for each parent. **SPC does not affect the**

allocation of this leave to the parents. It must be noted that, given the need for filiation between the requesting parent and the child concerned, in recomposed families the stepparent can only access this leave if he or she has adopted the child.

- However, **few services include specific instructions** regarding SPC.
- The most notable feature of the Belgian welfare system since the sixth state reform has been the placement of the child at the center of the family benefit architecture. This responds to a **process of individualization of rights**, which is ultimately indispensable for the recognition and support of SPC.
- Our analysis highlights the problems and inequalities inherent in the principle of **the child's single fiscal residence**: some parents have an interest in keeping the child's residence, especially if there is a significant difference in income between the two parents, and tax benefits play a major role. This situation can create antagonism between parents, especially in the context of conflictual separations. In addition, the tax co-parenting regime is only reserved for parents who practice egalitarian or quasi-egalitarian forms of physical custody, thus excluding "asymmetrical" forms chosen for practical reasons, or when the child is young.



To go further (French):

Izaguirre L. (2022). *Dans quelle mesure les politiques familiales s'adaptent-elles à la pratique de l'hébergement égalitaire ? Le cas de la Belgique.*

<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/265453>

Adolescents' perception of shared custody: a few statistics

We analyzed the responses of 1,474 young people aged 12 to 18 who attended school in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and took part in the LAdS survey [7], of whom 158 were living in shared physical custody (SPC).



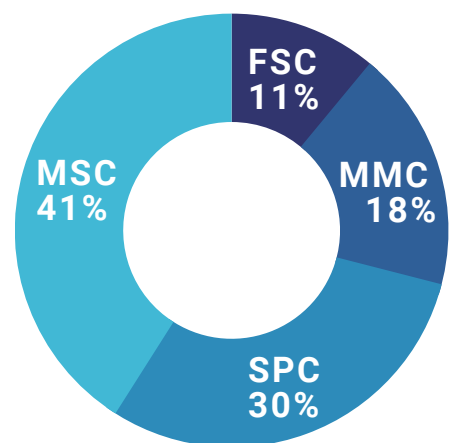
The family configurations were identified based on the following criteria:

- **Parents together:** the child reported living with parents who are neither divorced nor separated.
- **Sole custody:** the child resides 100% of the time with one of his parents.
- **Main custody:** the child resides more than 70% of the time with one of his parents.
- **Shared physical custody:** the child resides between 30 and 70% of the time with one parent, and 70 to 30% of the time with the other parent. It should be noted that in this survey, half of the young people in shared custody are in a strictly egalitarian model (50-50).

Children of separated or divorced parents represent 35% of our respondents - in other words, **just over one in three children lives in a separated or divorced family**. The family configuration "parents together" (PT) therefore remains dominant, but it is losing ground in comparison to, in order of importance, mother sole custody (MSC), which concerns 14% of adolescents, then shared physical custody (SPC), which concerns nearly 11%. Father sole custody (FSC) configurations are uncommon but still concern 55 children in our population (nearly 4%). On the other hand, the Father main custody (FMC) is almost absent from our population (only 9 children are concerned).

Note that **if we focus only on post-divorce/separation configurations**, custody types are distributed as follows:

- 4 out of 10 young people in mother sole custody (MSC),
- 3 out of 10 in shared custody (SPC),
- nearly 2 out of 10 in mother main custody (MMC),
- and 1 out of 10 in father sole custody (FSC).



[7] <https://uclouvain.be/en/research/cirfase/leuven-louvain-adolescents-survey-0.html>

158 CHILDREN IN SPC

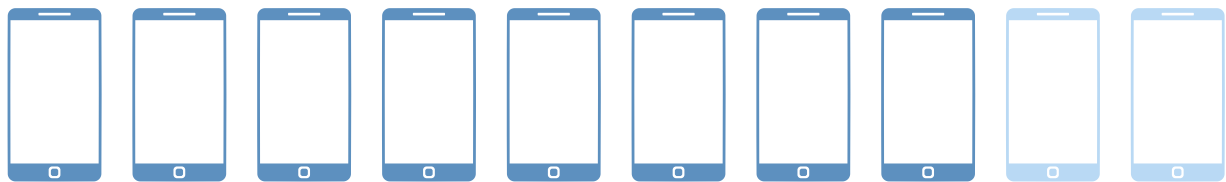


6/10 declare to have been consulted on the setting up of SPC.

86%

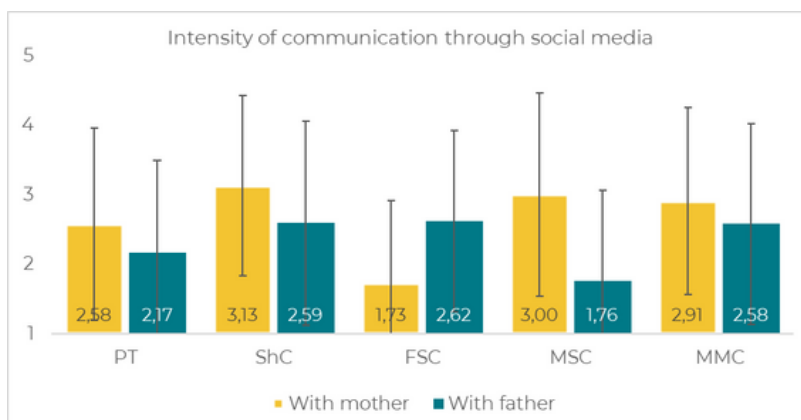
86% of adolescents report being satisfied with their custody arrangement.

We observe that many young people from separated or divorced parents **maintain inter-home contact with their parents** (mainly via telephone calls, text messages or instant messaging). This reflects the fact that the most of them have a relatively continuous relationship with both parents.



9 out of 10 young people in SPC communicate with the parent they are not living with at the moment.

Adolescents from separated or divorced parents also use social media to maintain contact with their parents, and they do so **to a greater extent than those who live in nuclear families**. It should be noted that it is **with their mother** that young people communicate more. This makes the mental workload of mothers visible, as they are quite heavily solicited online by their children. Forms of virtual co-presence therefore support parent-child relationships.



- 1: Never
- 2: Several times a month
- 3: Several times a week
- 4: Once a day
- 5: Several times a day

PT = parents together
 ShC = Shared physical custody (SPC)
 FSC = father sole custody
 MSC = mother sole custody
 MMC = mother main custody

However, it should be noted that there is currently **no consensus about the facilitating nature of these modes communication in the parent-child relationship in existing research on the use of social media in post-divorce/separation families**, which are still few in number (Saini et al, 2013). While some authors show that the use of Skype or FaceTime can lead parents and children to **feel 'closer'** (Wolman and Pomerance, 2012), others point to the fact that virtual contact with a non-custodial parent between visits can be perceived as **superficial and frustrating**, especially when technologies do not work properly (Gollop & Taylor, 2012). The **advantages and disadvantages** of this type of communication are still to be explored, but among the first, existing research mentions in particular the increase in quality time with the non-custodial parent, and a minimization of the geographical distance between children and their parent. Potential limitations include interference from the other parent, intra-parental conflicts that could negatively affect the effects of communication and/or be reactivated by these ongoing virtual contacts, and possible tensions between former partners over access to technology and the sharing of equipment and connection costs. It should be noted that the analysis of the LAdS survey data **did not reveal a causal link between the level of parental conflict and inter-home communication**. In other words, intra-parental conflict does not seem to influence the level of child-parent communication here.

Young people in SPC report **a good relationship with both parents** (scores above 3 on a scale of up to 5), although the score is slightly higher on the mother's side than on the father's side. In this respect, they are **close to children whose parents are together, but stand out in comparison to children in sole or main custody**. These children have lower scores, particularly on the relationship with the father. Two interpretations may follow from this: young people in SPC had a better relationship with their father from the start, which may have influenced their choice of this type of custody, and/or the equal sharing of custody was believed to be favorable to the development (or maintenance) of a good relationship between the children and their father (the lower maternal score in the other post-divorce configurations being pulled down by situations of exclusive custody by the father, where the quality of the relationship with the mother is less good).

Analysis of the **level of conflict between parents** as reported by the children shows that, on the one hand, the level of inter-parental conflict **decreases** after divorce/separation and, on the other hand, that the current level of inter-parental conflict is quite similar in SPC and in main or sole custody with the mother.

Ex-couples with SPC, especially mothers, seem to have a better employment situation. More than half of the parents in SPC both work full-time (whereas in other post-divorce/separation configurations this is the case in only 24% of cases). Far behind, the other parents in SPC fall into several smaller groups, including the full-time father and part-time mother (12%); and, almost equally, the full-time father and unemployed mother (7.6%) and both parents part-time (6.3%). Slightly more parents in SPC are also both employed full-time than 'parents together'. Mothers in SPC were also more likely to be working full-time (6 out of 10, compared to 5 out of 10 in the other two groups). Fewer mothers were also unemployed (just over 1 in 10, compared to 4 and 5 in 10 in the 'parents together' and 'other divorced/separated parents' groups respectively).

Among SPC families, we also observe that:

- That more than 6 in 10 adolescents (7 in the case of the father) report that their parents rarely or never encounter financial difficulties.
- That **more children report financial difficulties on the mother's side** than on the father's side. Just over 1 in 10 adolescents report that their mother often or always encounters financial difficulties, and 1 in 4 adolescents report that their mother sometimes encounters such difficulties.

If we compare SPC with the other two groups, we note that more young people in SPC report financial difficulties than young people whose parents are together; but that they are less affected by financial difficulties than children living in sole or main custody (where mothers seem particularly in difficulty).

Young people report **relatively high and similarly high levels of comfort for both parents** - a level that is higher than in other post-divorce/separation configurations for both parents. It should be noted, however, that the difference in comfort levels between fathers in SPC and other configurations is higher than for mothers, which may be explained by the fact that most of these adolescents are living mainly or solely with their mothers - it may seem logical that there is less space or no room of their own at a non-custodial parent's.

Youth in SPC also report **a high level of feeling 'at home'** at both parents'. Compared together with post-separation/divorce configurations, sense of home at the mothers' is of the same level, but it is higher at the father's in SPC.



Further reading :

<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/228063>



PART 2

Lived experiences of SPC

I. Sense of home in shared physical custody (SPC)

Presentation and method

In this research [8], **we give voice to children of separated parents who alternate residence in order to understand how they define and construct a "sense of home" while living in more than one place.**

This lifestyle raises several questions that we intend to answer: **What does it mean to "feel at home" when living alternately in and between two family dwellings? How do young people negotiate their place in the family when they are intermittently absent? How do they maintain their family relationships remotely? How do they adapt to the different family contexts in-between which they circulate?**

We **hypothesize** that the quality of family relationships and the feeling of belonging to the family as a member who is recognized by all have an impact on how the child will inhabit and appropriate certain rooms, spaces, and objects rather than others (such as his or her room, neighborhood, garden, suitcase, parent's car, etc.) and feel more or less at home there. Just as, contrariwise, the way in which they invest the space of the dwelling will influence the creation, maintenance and quality of their family relationships.

We examine the way in which children, for whom the different living spaces are fragmented and multiplying, potentially establish links between them. In other words, we look at how they represent **the here, the there and the in-between and how an "archipelization" of their living spaces is formed** (Duchêne-Lacroix, 2010: 2). Inspired by the work of this sociologist, we use the metaphor of the archipelago in the rest of this report to account for the way in which the children see each place of residence as distinct from the other, while at the same time being interrelated, like two islands that are part of a single archipelago. This metaphor refers to *"a form of social continuity in physical discontinuity that is both constructed as a representation and the result of practices"* (2010: 2); representation and practices that we develop further below.

Living in and between distinct places of residence implies that young people face **obstacles and difficulties** in their daily lives (such as the physical burden of carrying their personal belongings, missing a parent during days of absence, the distance to travel between dwellings, juggling with different and even contradictory family cultures, etc.).

However, we hypothesise that by being socialized in this environment, children would potentially develop **skills, strategies and ways of 'being and doing' specific to this multi-local**

[8] The research was conducted by Bérengère Nobels under the supervision of Laura Merla as part of a doctoral thesis.

lifestyle that would enable them to cope with these periods of absence and presence. These practices integrate the different living spaces and link them together to form a continuum, a 'global home' (Serfaty-Garzon, 2006: 19). Far from taking the appropriation of this lifestyle for granted, the aim here is to understand the mechanisms underlying this appropriation. Indeed, we analyse **the ways in which certain practices are facilitated or, on the contrary, made difficult, or even impossible, due to material, cultural, social, temporal conditions, etc.**

Finally, we study the way in which their 'family practices' (Morgan, 2011), which are simultaneously mobile and stable, deployed in and around each place of residence, make it possible to create a particular family life in each dwelling. Considering that children who alternate living places also travel between 'contrasting educational practices (or not)' (Michaud Delahaye, 2009) and between non-homogeneous family cultures (Merla, 2018), we observe the ways in which young people would develop various **strategies and skills to adapt, appropriate, negotiate and position themselves in relation to distinct family environments.**



We rely on the testimonies of **17 Belgian families** to answer these questions. A total of **21 children** were interviewed, 10 girls and 11 boys, **who are between 10 and 16 years old**, and have been living in SPC for at least one year.

These data are presented on the following page.

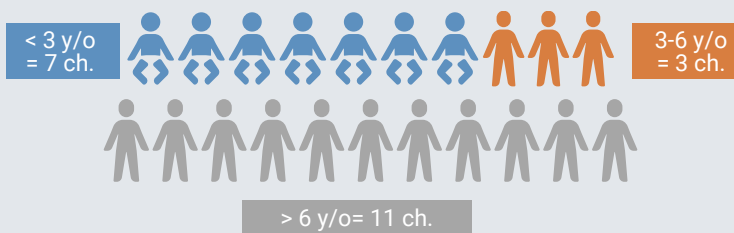
Note: The socio-demographic profile of these families **nuances** the idea that parents practicing SPC necessarily have high levels of education and income, and a relatively low degree of conflict (Berman & Daneback, 2020). As Reckseidler and Bernardi (2021) point out, **there is in fact a diversification of these profiles in countries where SPC is encouraged by the legislator - even if it remains difficult to implement for precarious families.**

Age and gender of children

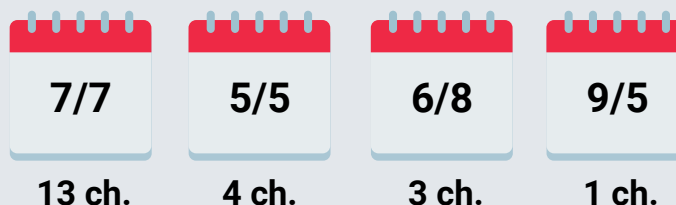
10-12 y/o = 10 ch.
13-14 y/o = 6 ch.
15-16 y/o = 5 ch.



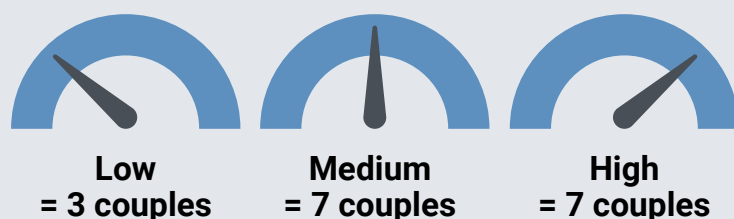
Age at implementation of SPC



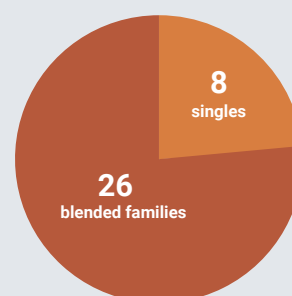
Rhythm of alternation



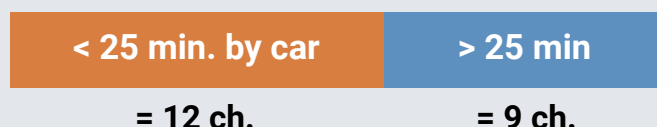
Degree of parental conflict



Family configuration

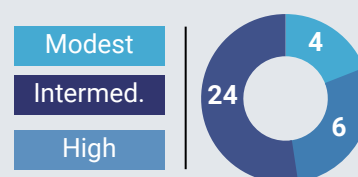


Distance between the two dwellings



Note: They all live in an urban or peri-urban environment.

Perceived standard of living



Educational level

Most of the families are middle class, but there are disparities in terms of the educational level of the parents.





There were two stages in the data collection process:

- We started with a **semi-structured interview with at least one of the parents** to understand the child's family context and culture. These discussions drew our attention to elements that can shed light on the children's discourse, such as cultural dimensions, educational values or the type of relationships maintained between family members.
- We then conducted **two or three semi-structured interviews with each child** individually, each structured around a participatory method:
 - The Socio-Spatial Network Game (Schier, 2017) which consists of a board game on which the children place and construct the different places that are important to them, describes the people associated with them, and how they move between these places.
 - The Emotion Map (Gabb & Singh, 2015) where the children are asked to draw each dwelling as a map seen from above on which they place the places they feel belong to them using a colored sticker, and to which they assign an emotion that reflects how they feel there. Children then proceed in the same way, assigning a different colored sticker to each member of the family, and using an emoticon to describe how they feel in these rooms that "belong" to others.
 - The Go-along Method (Kusenbach, 2003) which consists of a ride that replicates the usual way in which the children travel between their two places of residence.

These different methods allowed us to address many issues such as the way children travel between their different living places; the spatial configuration of their family network; the links they have with the different members of the family; their practices of living and feeling at home, etc.

This corpus was subject to a thematic analysis on 3 levels:

- Triangulation of the collected materials to build **individual case studies** relating the story of lived experiences.
- **Cross-referencing these cases with the parents' discourse** to create a dialogue between several voices on the same reality and add elements of the family context.
- **Cross-referencing the contextualized case studies** to bring out cross-cutting themes and similarities or differences between children.

Main findings

Post-separation arrangements challenge the Western view of a home built within a single, stable place of residence associated with the nuclear family model. Therefore, we questioned how multi-local children who live in more than one place of residence (i.e. several islands) develop an encompassing sense of home that nurtures a sense of belonging to multiple living places and sometimes to complex family configurations, all of which are apprehended and practiced as a coherent whole (i.e. an archipelago).

We consider that home is not only a material environment (i.e. a place objectively defined by the walls of a single dwelling) but rather a feeling that is constructed through individual and family practices. It is a 'localisable idea' in space (Douglas, 1991: 289), associated with one or more places on the basis of the absence or presence of a unique sense of peace, stability, familiarity, security, privacy, comfort, belonging, memories, identity, etc.

Below we present the main findings that emerge from the analysis of adolescents' discourse about their experience of living in SPC. We note different practices and ways of doing things that enable them to establish links and continuities in their experience of mobility.

As a preamble, **we first outline the family environment** in which the children we interviewed are growing up in terms of standards, values and educational practices. We highlight:

- How young people have or have not been involved in the decision-making process about setting up SPC and how they define an arrangement as 'fair' and 'just' for all family members.
- The type of border, more or less impermeable, that each parent draws between their dwellings and that of their ex-partner.

We then enter the heart of our research, namely **the way in which adolescents inhabit multi-locality**'. To do this, we retrace the pathways of their circulation between their parents' dwellings, by examining:

- The moment of transition from one place to another (management of belongings, and travel between the two dwellings).
- The routines and rituals of 'coming back home', upon arrival at the dwelling.
- How children define and negotiate their place in the family that resides in the current dwelling.
- The maintenance of a symbolic presence during the absence.

We also shed light on the framework set for them by their family environment, which is marked by material and spatial constraints, educational values and styles, specific temporalities, etc. We highlight the way in which these elements facilitate or constrain the practices of adolescents.

We conclude by presenting the contours of the singular plural sense of home of the young people we met.

1 Family environment

1.1. Participation in decision-making regarding SPC

In most cases, the egalitarian alternation rhythm was **set up by the parents themselves** without necessarily consulting children beforehand because of their young age at the time of separation (16 children out of 21 were no more than 7 years old) or professional constraints. This choice was made by the father and mother so that both could spend equal time with the child(ren) and enable them to maintain and strengthen their relationship.

Most of the young people evaluated the equal housing arrangement positively because the shared time between their parents was seen as fair, equal and just for their father and mother but also for themselves. **This assessment is not based on a strictly egalitarian allocation of time**, but rather on the fact that all family members, including the children themselves, have the opportunity to have a say in the decision. The final outcome is thus considered fair and impartial even though it may not meet children's initial request. The research results show that children in our study mainly want to 'have their say' on matters that affect them, but do not want to have complete control over these decisions.

In terms of children's involvement in SPC decision-making, it appears that our respondents adopt three distinct attitudes.

The majority of them (13 children) appear to be **detached** from this issue and let themselves be guided by the parents' choice without wanting to become more involved in the decision-making process, even though they are allowed to do so. In fact, they acknowledge that they have a say in the process if the need arises and they occasionally intervene about possible changes in the set up organization of the alternation rhythm.

Others are **involved** (6 children) on an ongoing basis and give their opinion about the rhythm of the alternation and possible changes. While children are invited by the father and mother to express their wishes, it is the adults who make the final decision.

The **resigned** ones (2 children), on the other hand, would like to be more involved in the decision-making process, but parents limit discussion on this subject because of external imperatives from which they cannot derogate (such as professional constraints).

The system that appears **most equitable** in the eyes of the children in our study is the one that strikes the fairest balance between the constraints and wishes of the different family members, and where everyone's needs can be heard and recognized. As highlighted in other studies (Marquet and Merla, 2015), this goes hand in hand with the importance of relieving children of the burden of having to choose whether they wish to reside with one or the other parent, by limiting their involvement in the sense that the final decision about the housing arrangement lies with the parents.

1.2. Participation in the planning of the alternation

With regards to the allocation of time between the parental dwellings, some young people express the desire, like their parents, to spend an exact number of days with each of them. For instance, when the rhythm was changed because the father or mother had to be temporarily absent for professional or personal reasons, they express the wish to make up for the days they did not spend with the parent whose turn it was.

Others do not attach as much importance to spending a strictly equal number of days with each parent. However, they may agree to change the rhythm from time to time in order to make up for the days they did not spend with a parent, in order to satisfy the latter's need to maintain a strictly equal alternation of dwellings.

We also observe that young people and parents try to articulate their social time, considering the presence/absence of each other in the dwelling, but this articulation takes a different form between the father and the mother.

On the parents' side: when working time arrangements are possible, it appears that mothers work fewer hours per day when the child is at home and make up for this time on the days when the child is at the father's dwelling. Conversely, it appears that, unlike mothers who try to adapt to the rhythm of the alternation, it is the rhythm that is adapted to the professional imperatives of fathers. This finding reflects the gender inequalities still present in the professional sphere in Belgium, where women continue to be primarily assigned to the family sphere compared to men who devote more time to paid work. It should be noted, however, that flexible working hours are not possible for all functions or socio-professional categories.

On the children's side: we observe that they also articulate school, family and leisure time on the basis of the parent's presence at home. For example, while they like to set their own timetable and enjoy freedom and independence, young people sometimes give up activities when they feel obliged to devote time to the parent whose turn it is to have them at home.

1.3. Parenting styles

Our study shows that children travel between distinct family environments characterized by each parent's own parenting style, which refers to a set of norms, values, routines and inter-individual practices. The father and mother are not perceived as a unit (or parental couple) but rather as individuals with whom the child has a singular relationship.

We distinguish 5 parenting styles depending on:

- the degree of openness of the parent to the external environment,
- the degree of fusion between the members of the 'new family' [9],
- the type of regulation (negotiated or established based on statutes),
- the organizing values of the family group.

[9] We distinguish the "new paternal family" from the "new maternal family". Both refer to the way in which each parent composes a 'new family'. Either it includes new members such as a new partner, step- and/or half-siblings, or, when the father or mother is single, it includes the biological parent and the child/children from the first union.

The different parenting styles are the following:

The **Bastion** style refers to a strong fusion on the "new family" group. The parent seeks to establish few external relationships because the home is an important anchor. Rules are established based on status (by age and gender) and members invest the domestic sphere to spend time together as a family. Strong family habits and routines are visible, such as sharing meals together at a specific time in the evening to spend time together.

The **Cocoon** style refers to "new families" which show a strong fusion and which do not value the establishment of relationships outside the home. Unlike the Bastion style, the rules here are established based on communicative regulation which gives room for negotiation and case-by-case analysis of situations. Members invest the domestic sphere for themselves and find affection and a sense of comfort within the family group.

The **Companionship** style refers to "new families" that value external integration and community spirit. They are thus open to the external environment and seek to establish external relationships to nourish their internal dynamics (as in the case of grouped housing). They show a strong fusion on the family group and give priority to time spent together. Rules are defined in a negotiated way between equal members. They avoid establishing family routines and are more spontaneous.

The **Association** style characterizes the "new families" in which the emphasis is on the autonomy of members and where time for oneself is privileged. Relationships established outside the family group are essential to their internal dynamics. Norms are negotiated between members of the "new family" who value self-expression and respect for individual rights.

The **Parallel Anomic** style refers to a high degree of closure to the external environment and a low degree of fusion of the members of the 'new family'. They value the differentiation of spheres of activity, self-withdrawal, the priority given to time for oneself and the expression of individual particularities. Parents value the absence of rules. This anomic dimension appears through the disinvestment, on the part of the parent, in the internal relations of the "new family" and the lack of family routines.

The type of parental functioning thus influences **the degree of impermeability of the boundary that delimits the parents' living spaces**, or the islands that form the archipelago within which the child circulates. Indeed, father and mother draw the limits of this border spatially and temporally by setting a more or less stable time with the child within the living space of each 'new family'. This spatio-temporal boundary comes in three types and is determined, at least partially, by the parent's wish to maintain or not long-distance links on days when the child does not live with them. We can distinguish:

- **travel boundaries** which refer to the children's scope to travel between their parents' islands/dwellings and to see them on days when they are not staying at their place;
- **virtual contact boundaries** which refer to whether or not contact is maintained with the children on the days when they are staying on the island/dwelling of the other parent, through various means of communication such as verbal exchanges on the phone or by video or indirectly through written exchanges via SMS, email or messages on social networks;
- **transfer limits** which refer to whether children can take personal belongings to/from the other parent's island.

Hence, we identify **5 types of 'parental islands'**, each characterized by a specific form of boundary drawn between the islands/dwellings of each parent, and corresponding to a distinct style of parental functioning:

The fortress island is characteristic of the "Bastion" style parent. Some mothers and fathers draw an impermeable line between the islands. They value the child's anchorage in their home in the sense that the dwelling constitutes a delimited space within which adolescents spend a stable time with their parent. The two places of residence therefore appear to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, children cannot go to the other parent's dwelling at any time. The parents do not maintain virtual contact with their son or daughter during the days of absence and they control the management of their children's personal belongings by limiting their transfer from one place of residence to the other or by requiring children to systematically return them to the dwelling of the parent to whom they belong.

The cocoon island is characteristic of the "cocoon" style parent. These parents draw a membrane-like boundary: it is also impermeable and delimits a set space and time with the children, but they are somewhat more flexible than the former, because of the room for negotiation between the members of the 'new family' about norms, values and practices. Children are not expected to go to the island of the parent whose day of care it is not. Instead, they find a compromise to see each other exceptionally, at the child's request, in an outside environment (such as in an extracurricular activity). The partial opening of this boundary mainly concerns the permeability of virtual boundaries by maintaining long-distance relationships through various communication media (telephone calls, contacts on social networks, etc.) when the children do not live with them. With regard to material boundaries, parents restrict the transfer of the children's personal belongings from one place to another but leave room for negotiation. Children are not allowed to take personal belongings with them on the day of the move, although it is recommended that they bring them back to the dwelling from which they left.

The reef island is characteristic of the "companionship" style parent. These parents spatially delimit their island/dwelling in order to establish a stable time with the child(ren). Despite this spatial and temporal boundary, children are still given a lot of flexibility because they are considered as partners and are invited to express their wishes, which are taken into account as far as possible. Children can visit the parent's dwelling outside the custody periods, but these visits must be organized and negotiated with the parent beforehand. These parents do not set limits on virtual contact, but not all have the same relationship with NICTs. Some use it to maintain contact with the children when they are not living with them, while others only do so if they have to organize activities or if the children feel the need to contact them. Children also face few material limitations, as the parents allow the regular circulation of objects between the two islands/dwellings after negotiation.

The open island is characteristic of the 'Association' style parent. These fathers and mothers do not establish spatial and temporal boundaries around their island/dwelling. Children feel free to move around and come and go from each parent's dwelling whenever they want. They value autonomy as an individual freedom that contributes to their personal development. They do not set virtual or material limits, which gives children the possibility to communicate with them during the days of absence and to bring with them what they want.

Finally, **the wild island** is characteristic of the 'anomic parallel' parent. These parents also don't establish boundaries around their island/place of residence. They do not set any rules and thus leave the children free to move between dwellings, to communicate with them if they feel the need to do so and to take the things they want to the other dwelling. They value children's autonomy so that they do not have to take charge of the journeys or the management of the children's belongings.

The parental boundaries described above are one element of the structure of opportunities and constraints within which young people develop practices and a sense of home. It should be noted that they represent the family environment as conceived and designed by the parents, whereas, as we shall see below, young people develop their own practices and design their own archipelago, not necessarily respecting the boundaries designed by their father and mother.

We now present the insights from the core of our research, namely the children's discourses on how they experience living and moving between more than one residence. Indeed, to use the metaphor presented in the introduction, we are capturing various practices deployed here, there and between islands. From these practices results a feeling of continuity between the different dwellings taken in a coherent whole, like a single archipelago.

Thus, we highlight what happens during the journeys that children take from one island/dwelling to another; what happens upon arrival on the island/dwelling of the parent whose turn it is to look after them; what takes place within each island/place of residence in terms of appropriation and construction of a particular sense of home; and finally how children maintain a symbolic presence on days when they are absent. We conclude by presenting different dimensions that encourage and promote some of these practices and others that limit and constrain them.

2.1. Making the journey between islands: The transition from one place of residence to another

It is common to think that children travel from one place of residence to another with a huge bag on their back filled with their personal belongings. However, the young people we met manage the transition and their belongings in different ways. While some actually take "all" their belongings with them, others take "nothing". Moreover, while some perceive this management as a burden, others, on the contrary, value it.

2.1.1. Managing belongings

Up to the age of secondary school (11-12yo), fathers and mothers help their children to prepare their personal belongings, although children are encouraged to do so themselves from the age of 9-10. Parents tend to perceive packing as a personal task that children must learn to manage and take responsibility for. Children perceive this self-management in different ways:

- Some consider it **a burden** because they must take responsibility for their mismanagement when something is forgotten. In addition, thinking about what to take with them and/or what to leave behind is a mental burden for these children.
- Others see this **autonomy** as a **freedom** offered to them and as a way of acquiring new skills that allow them to be less dependent on their parents (such as proceeding methodically to ensure that they do not forget anything by going through the dwelling several times according to a specific logic; collecting them gradually once the child has no more use for them; preparing them at the last minute).

In addition to the limits imposed by parents according to their own parenting style (see above), we observe that adolescents act differently with regard to the management of their personal belongings. While some choose to assign objects primarily, or even exclusively, to a particular place of

residence (objects that are "parked "), others choose to take them with them in their transitions between, and/or journeys to, these places of residence (objects "in transit"). These different types of objects, considered as key elements of their mobile life, offer children reference points and stability regarding practices by maintaining habits within each place of residence and on the move.

The meaning that the children give to these practices, which consist of sorting objects, taking them with them or, on the contrary, leaving them behind, reveals **two main ways of managing multi-locality**:

The first one is to **order, distinguish and anchor themselves (in) each place of residence** by favoring the fixing of "**parked objects**" and limiting the circulation of objects between these places. These markers remain fixed, in the same place, and delimit the spaces and times spent with each 'new family'. They allow children to maintain a certain stability in their multi-local lifestyle by finding a familiar world each time they return home.

While these children distinguish each place of residence, they do so according to **various logics**:

- Some **distinguish them** by keeping and using different objects and belongings in each dwelling. For example, Theodore (15 years old) longs to return to his room at the other parent's house each weekend as it contains different items than those he has in the other dwelling. He values this difference because it allows him to engage in a variety of diverse activities each week (such as reading comics and playing Wii at the father's house or playing in the garden and on the PlayStation at the mother's dwelling).
- Others try to create a balance between each dwelling by dividing their personal belongings between their dwellings **in an equal manner**, such as Coralie (12 years old) who decided to leave her video games permanently at her mom's and her tablet at her father's. Maintaining this balance is sometimes a burden for the children, mainly in relation to managing the clothes they wear when they arrive. In order to keep the balance, they set upon themselves to remember to bring them back to their original dwelling. While some of them choose to wear them again on the day they change dwellings, others carry them in their school bags.
- Others surround themselves with **identical items at each parent's dwelling** so that they can carry out the same activities wherever they live without having to take personal belongings with them. Manuëlo (13), for example, has his video games at each parent's dwelling. He asked to buy the same games and to have a controller at both dwellings. Although these items are not of the same quality (one Action brand and one PlayStation brand), they allow him to do the same activities wherever he lives.
- In addition to these three logics, some of the adolescents also said that they **do not take 'anything' with them**. Some of them only take their schoolbag with them, like Félicien (12 years old) who purposefully takes a picnic wrapped in disposable plastic film with him on the day he switches homes after school. This technique means that he doesn't have to think about returning anything, not even a lunch box, back to the parent he has left.

- Others say the same thing even though they are actually taking a **'little bag'** that contains things that their parents wanted to return to one or the other (such as clothes bought by the other parent, lunch boxes, sports equipment, etc.). This 'nothing' should therefore be understood as 'nothing that belongs to the other dwelling' or 'nothing essential' that they would not have on the other side. The items that are passed over have become so familiar and taken for granted that they are now unnoticed. This extra bag is a burden for the children who would like to take nothing with them but are forced to do so at the request of a parent. Emilie (10 years old), for example, leaves this bag in a corner of her room. She only empties it of its contents on the day of her departure, as she has no use for the objects that the parent asks her to bring back.

The second is to **create permanence and continuity in the movement** via **'objects in transit'** that circulate with the child. Among these everyday objects, the children spoke of clothes in the majority of their testimonies, but they also mentioned their school and sports equipment, their games and objects that have a strong emotional value for them (such as a favorite blanket or teddy bear, a T-shirt in the colors of their favorite sports team, etc.). Taking 'all their belongings' has different meanings for children and encompasses a variety of practices - notably in terms of the quantity and types of objects taken and the frequency of movement (at once on the day of the change of residence or in dribs and drabs, i.e. several times during the parent's period of custody). Among these significant objects, we distinguish:

- **Shadow objects** that represent personal belongings to which the children are attached and which accompany them in all their transitions. They are stable and familiar, and reassure them through their daily presence (such as Chloe's toiletry bag, Joseph's headphones and computer mouse, Lewis' computer, etc.).
- **Objects on standby** are personal items that remain permanently in the child's bag and offer a certain reassurance: the security of not missing anything wherever they are. They know that they will only use them occasionally but will have them on hand when they need them, avoiding the frustration of waiting a week to find them at the other parent's dwelling (such as a belt or a pair of shoes), or the burden of having to obtain them in another way (such as a pad of paper).

Concerning **the transfer of belongings from one dwelling to another** :

- Some of the children make the journey and transfer their belongings alone. Some of them stress the importance of alleviating their parents of the logistics, and see their involvement as a way of acquiring responsibilities and skills.
- Others make the journey independently, but their father or mother takes care of transporting their personal belongings.
- Still others make the journey with their parents and their belongings. Here, parents see these tasks as a burden for their child, which they must take off their hands.

2.1.2. Travel between islands/dwellings

Children travel between their parents' dwellings in different ways. Some make the journey on their own, whether by public transport (bus, metro or train), on foot or by bicycle. Others are accompanied by the parent they are leaving or the parent they are returning to. In this case, they travel together by car, train or on foot. While some leave a place of residence to go directly to the other parent's dwelling, others travel through an 'intermediate space' such as the school or a place of extracurricular activity.

As Michaela Schier et al (2015) point out, it is not only the location of objects that is important to consider when studying people's mobility, but also the link between here, there and the in-between, i.e. the transitional path that they take once or several times a week. Analyzing the adolescents' discourse, we distinguish two types of 'neutral transitional spaces' (public and family-related) which play an important role in the daily life of children in SPC insofar as they allow them to distance themselves from the family environment (such as norms, values, parental functioning, activities, different decoration and atmosphere, etc.) that they are leaving and help them to adapt to the family environment that they are returning to.

These are "neutral" spaces because they do not refer to either the father's or the mother's dwelling: they are public, concrete spaces that are well known to the child (such as the school, the sports hall, a shopping street, etc.) because of the usual activities that take place there, and whose frequentation during the transition phase helps to stabilise the life shared between the two places of residence and gives a particular meaning to the relationship between their two dwellings. The children appropriate these "neutral transitional spaces" and give them a particular meaning because they facilitate these transfers. We distinguish:

A) Public transitional time-spaces, such as the school, the place of an extracurricular activity or public transport. Moving from one dwelling to another via a place that is well known to children provides them with reference points (gestures, habits and routines), which foster a feeling of familiarity and continuity. The transfer is thus smoother from an emotional point of view but also lighter from a logistical point of view because the choice to transit through this space or route they would have taken that day anyway, avoids them to make several trips on the day they change residences, the only difference being that the place of departure is not the place of return. For those who take 'objects in transit', the fact that they do not return to the place of residence of the parent they are leaving means that they must take them with them. Some children explain that these extra bags burden them during a whole day. In addition, they make their mobile lifestyle and family situation visible to others, which can cause some embarrassment.

B) The time-space of the family journey, which refers to journeys from one dwelling to the other made (by car, train or on foot) in the company of a parent and/or sibling. Some children emphasize how the time-space of the family journey offers them opportunities to spend specific family time, in a place that is neither father's nor mother's dwelling, where new practices are created that strengthen the links with the child (such as sharing the child's favorite snack, taking part in little games to keep themselves occupied during the journey, confiding in them about sensitive subjects such as tensions with in-laws, etc.)

We distinguish a third type of transitional space-time, an **interstitial space-time**, which is **not neutral** because it refers to a place of residence. These are situations where the child waits at the dwelling of the parent for whom it is no longer their turn to look after them until the other parent comes to pick them up and take them to their residence. Some children perceive this transition more negatively because they are in an uncomfortable situation: they are aware that they are physically present in a place where they should no longer be. They feel that they are temporarily losing their reference points because they are in a blurred space-time where they are no longer supposed to be at one parent's dwelling but are not yet at the second. To avoid this discomfort, some children prefer to wander the streets or hang out with friends while waiting for the parent to come and pick them up.

2.2. Going back to the island: Routines and rituals of return

We now explore what the moment of return to the dwelling they left a few days earlier means for the adolescents in SPC: what happens once they step through the door of their dwelling and what meaning does this "arrival-return" have? While some consider this return to be a relatively banal moment which is part of the routine of the custody arrangement, others give it a symbolic and ritual character.

For the children who see the return to a parent's dwelling as a **routine**, it is an ordinary, momentary practice that "has to be done" and is part of the family organization specific to each household. It is repeated every week (or several times a week if the child alternates dwellings more frequently). For these children and for the members of the "new family" they are reunited with, they have no particular meaning and are no different from a traditional return from school.

For those who see the return to their mother's or the father's dwelling as a ritual, this practice has a particular meaning. We note **3 types of rituals of return**:

A) Some children see it as an **"integration ritual"**. It is a convivial moment shared with the members of the "new family", on the return of the child/children, around an activity that is out of the ordinary, such as a festive meal. It helps to define 'who they are' because it shows the children as well as the members of the 'new family' that they are a united 'new family'. However, this practice can be destabilizing for some children when for them the return home is just an ordinary routine. The festive character reflects their regular absence and mobility, whereas for them it is an integral part of their daily life and does not require a special reunion.

B) Other children see the return to the parental dwelling as an **'anchoring ritual'**. These are activities that children usually carry out on a daily basis on the days when they are living in the place they are returning to (such as sitting at their computer in their room, lying down in their favorite chair to watch television, etc.). However, doing so specifically on the day of their arrival symbolizes for them that they are regaining their bearings - their cocoon or personal world - which gives them a sense of being at home. They show the other members of the "new family" that they are in their regular place, as usual, and that there is nothing extraordinary about their return.

C) '**Rituals of (not) unpacking**' refer to the practices of installing or not installing 'objects in transit' that children have taken with them on the day of switching residences.

- Some of them do not unpack their belongings (even if their parents ask them to do so) to reduce the mental burden of the transition, as they keep their belongings in the same place wherever they live. This means that they do not have to think about what essentials they need to take with them or risk forgetting them. In addition, the fact that their bag or suitcase remains visible to other members of the "new family", marks the space of the dwelling with their physical imprint and thus makes their return to them visible. However, this return is temporary because the container is a symbol of their mobility and upcoming departure, reinforcing the impression that they are just passing through the parental dwelling.
- Other children unpack their belongings and put them in their room. In doing so, they signal - not always consciously - to themselves and to members of the 'new family' that they are taking up their place as permanent residents. In this way, these practices signify to the members that the children have returned and they help children to (re)integrate and position themselves within the household. Indeed, through them, children symbolically communicate their status within the dwelling, i.e. as being 'in transit', waiting to leave for another place or, on the contrary, as permanent residents.

2.3 Making each island 'its own': Defining and negotiating one's place in the dwelling and thereby in the family

One of the key issues for children who live alternately in two family dwellings is to appropriate a space within each residence, and, beyond that, to define a symbolic place within the dwelling but also within the family unit that resides there. We begin by highlighting different practices through which adolescents appropriate spaces and then report on how they define and negotiate their physical and symbolic place within the family.

2.3.1. Appropriation practices

Young people adopt various practices of space appropriation within each place of residence, whether within a room of their own (such as a single room) or in shared spaces (such as a shared room, the sofa or a corner of the living room). These practices are about making their mark about controlling certain spaces.

A) **Making a mark**: Children mark their places of residence in three ways:

- By surrounding themselves with **singular objects** to which they are particularly attached (such as a teddy bear, a video game, posters of their favorite singers/players, collectors' items, etc.). They constitute their personal universe which reflects their tastes and personality.
- By **arranging them** in a singular way, as when they divide the space into distinct zones according to the activities they carry out (the bed for resting, calming down or crying; the

shelf for collecting memories, etc.), choosing the color of the furniture according to their preferences and the type of activity they want to do, a personalized choice of wall color (choosing a light color to be calmer and more relaxed in the room or, on the contrary, choosing a bright color to give energy), free arrangement of furniture (when the children move their furniture in their room when and as they wish).

- By spending **time** there regularly, if not exclusively. This time spent there allows them to feel secure in a place where they can relax and be entertained. It is not only about spending time there, but also about ensuring exclusivity of places where they are the only ones to go or to use the objects present there. This is the case, for example, when the children have a private room or a desk in a common room where they gather all their personal belongings, souvenirs, etc., which the other members of the family do not use. This monopoly of use therefore leaves a symbolic imprint that puts other family members at a distance and helps to define the child's place within the space of the dwelling and the family group.

B) **Controlling time and space**: Children attempt to appropriate places by exercising some control over time and space through physical, virtual and symbolic boundaries.

- They establish **physical boundaries** by controlling access to their personal space. When children have their own room, the door provides distance and isolation from other family members by delimiting an inside and an outside, a private and a public space, in short, a personal and a family space. Most children ask family members to knock before entering their room, which allows them to accept or deny access. Failure to comply with this rule often leads to tension and even conflict, especially when the intrusion occurs when the child is away from home. In situations where the child shares a room, the arrangement of furniture (such as a screen or a piece of furniture between the beds) creates different personal territories.
- They also create **virtual boundaries** using technological tools (such as the telephone, computer, tablet or console). In the same way as when they extract themselves from family life by going into exile in their own space, the use of the smartphone allows them to free themselves from the world around them and to isolate in a bubble. They define a time to themselves and for themselves, away from the gaze of others, and show the other members of the family that they do not wish to be disturbed at that time. Like one young girl who explained that when her older half-sister was lying on her bed in the shared room with her phone, she shouldn't go and talk to her because, then, the older one would ask her to leave her alone and leave the room.
- They draw **symbolic boundaries** by establishing their own rules (what activities to do, who to allow in and who not, etc.) and their own order (where to put - or not to put - each object). Unlike shared spaces, where children have to follow the rules set by adults (parents, stepparents, grandparents), they are masters of their own space and know its codes perfectly well. However, if children have a certain amount of freedom, parents still control that personal spaces are at least tidy and maintained, which can be a source of tension.

2.3.2. Color schemes and battles

In view of these appropriation practices, we wondered about the way in which adolescents define their place within the dwelling and also within the family group that lives there permanently.

To answer this question, we started from the metaphorical image of a color palette. If we consider that a specific color is assigned to each member of the 'new family', we distinguish, on the one hand, 'monochrome spaces', i.e. spaces that are appropriated [one's own] which gather the belongings of a particular person and which can therefore be identified on the basis of the 'characteristic color' of these objects. On the other hand, there are 'polychromatic' spaces that collect objects belonging to different family members, and which are therefore made up of a multitude of colors.

Giving children a material place in the space of the dwelling (by allowing them to bring their personal belongings, to have a bed or even a room), or in other words, adding their "color", gives them the feeling of being included, welcomed and of belonging to the family group. Conversely, when children do not recognize themselves in the materiality of the place because none of their personal belongings are there, they sleep on a spare bed, etc., and their 'color' does not appear there, they will feel rather excluded from the family group in which they do not find their place and will feel like a guest.

Leaving their mark and claiming material space is a strategy developed by young people to be recognized within the 'new families', which can be a source of tension or even conflict. Such as when a child returns to a parent's dwelling and the stepmother and quasi-sister who live there permanently refuse to allow him to leave his belongings where he is accustomed to do so because they have decided otherwise; or when a half-brother monopolizes the favorite sofa of his half-sister, who alternates between dwellings, scattering all his toys around and refusing to remove them when he returns home, even though she would like to settle in; or like the mother-in-law who decides to occupy the desk that the child uses to do his homework and activities, and asks him to take all his belongings back to his cramped and already busy room. In each of these situations, materiality plays a role in family relationships and in defining the physical and symbolic place of children.

2.4 Keeping one's island when leaving it: Maintaining one's place during absence

Young people who alternate living places develop practices to maintain a certain relational closeness and a sense of family belonging extended through several places of residence. Through this, they remain both physically present here and symbolically present there. Their place would thus be defined through their physical and material but also virtual and symbolic presence.

2.4.1. Maintaining one's place through materiality

When children leave one dwelling to go to the other, they leave behind certain things that characterize them. Whether intentional or not, the visible presence of these objects implies that the members of the 'new family' think of them when they are not around. It reminds them of the

symbolic place they occupy within the household and the family group. Moreover, these material traces establish symbolic boundaries that keep the members of the 'new family' at a distance from their personal space even when they are absent. Indeed, opening or closing the door to their room or leaving their belongings in the order (or disorder) they have given them, allows children to signify to the other members of the 'new family' that their space 'continues to live' (Hachet, 2021: 100) even during their absence and that they remain symbolically present as 'permanent residents'. Conversely, being forced to tidy up their room - or even the dwelling - before they leave, gives the child the feeling that they must remove all traces of their passage. They feel like "regular visitors" who are returning to another place.

2.4.2. Maintaining one's place through thought

Children also remain symbolically present 'in spirit' when the permanent residents take account (or not) of their absence in their family practices or activities (such as a family party, a trip, the arrival of a new pet, etc.). Children feel included in the family group when they find their 'usual place' at the table or on the sofa, a place left empty waiting for them to return and which they resume as if they had never left. Seeing that they are taken into account in the organization of family life, even during the days they are absent, the child feels like a real member. On the other hand, when they realize that family life continues without them during their absence and that they are not taken into consideration, the child does not feel recognized and feels excluded from the family group. This feeling of exclusion then produces frustration and a sense of injustice towards permanent residents such as half-siblings who do not alternate dwellings.

2.4.3. Maintaining one's place virtually

Family relationships are also maintained and nurtured within a virtual space. Using digital technologies, children remain virtually present, which creates a certain relational continuity between the child and the parent, but also between the child and his siblings and in-laws, despite the geographical distance that separates them. Even if the exchanges often seem to be nothing more than casual, functional discussions, it is the regularity of these exchanges that maintains a 'continuous conversation' (Licoppe, 2004) across time and space and cultivates a common belonging. In other words, it is the fact of communicating with each other that reinforces the members' sense of closeness, more than the content of the communication itself.

While for some, these exchanges take place (almost) daily, for others they are done sporadically to fill a gap or to organize an event that will take place during the parent's care days from which they are currently away.

While it is common to think that maintaining the link at a distance is favorable to children's well-being, it should be noted that these regular contacts at a distance have contrasting effects: while these new family routines in virtual co-presence allow children and parents to maintain bonds at a distance, these practices also paradoxically reinforce the feeling of absence and distance that separates them. Some children prefer to avoid contact with their absent parent so as not to think about the fact that they will not be able to see or be with them for a few days. It should also be remembered that some parents (those characterized by the limit form) do not maintain contact with the child when he is not living with them in order to delimit the time they spend together.

Contact with parents and stepparents is mainly maintained through telephone calls or instant messaging. Contact with siblings and half-siblings is also maintained through WhatsApp messages and online video games. These games allow them to continue playing a common game when one of them is not present, while they can also share the trivial events of everyday life when they video call each other or chat via a virtual gaming platform (such as Discord).

2.5. Structure of opportunities and constraints

The practices we have described in this report take place in the context of structural factors that facilitate or, on the contrary, constrain them. The personal, temporal, family, spatial, material and cultural dimensions, which we develop below, do not automatically condition practices and give rise to sometimes divergent behavior or attitudes. Children work around these constraints or obstacles to circumvent them or negotiate arrangements with their parents that allow them to structure their multi-local lifestyle in a way that suits them better. Thus, the meaning that these children give to this lifestyle is constructed at the intersection between the framework imposed on them by their environment - which constitutes a structure of opportunities and constraints - and their own aspirations.

2.5.1. Temporal dimensions

The temporal dimensions include those related to the child itself and those related to SPC.

A) Temporal dimensions related to the child itself

These temporal dimensions refer to the age and schooling level of children. We have observed that the transition to adolescence and the entry into secondary school, with the gradual acquisition of autonomy, is a pivotal moment in the practices that children deploy to manage their multi-local lifestyle.

- First, with regard to transition practices, we note that children under 12 years of age are still highly dependent on their parents, who are therefore responsible for journeys between residences and for transferring their personal belongings. This dependence is due to the fact that they are not yet autonomous in their mobility practices (Kaufmann & Flamm, 2003). As they enter secondary school, children **become more autonomous** in their daily travel to and from school by their own means (by public transport or on foot). Alongside this increased autonomy, some parents also perceive them as being more responsible for their personal belongings. While they gain more autonomy and become freer to take what they want (or not) to the other parent's dwelling, they also take on more responsibility in this respect. They are thus responsible for the proper management of these personal belongings by assuming responsibility for potential forgetfulness. It is then up to children to decide whether to leave it behind for a few days or to make an extra trip to pick up what they forgot to take.
- In addition to the gradual acquisition of autonomy, the transition to secondary school also has an influence on children who have to carry more compulsory items (such as folders, schoolbooks, etc.). As a result of **the weight of school equipment**, some of them

limit the number of personal belongings they take to the other parent's dwelling and favor 'parked items' in order not to become overburdened, while others set up another organization that allows them to take their objects 'in transit', for example, by using a container (bag, suitcase, bin) that can hold all the things the child considers useful and necessary, or by transferring things on a more regular, even daily, basis, including those forgotten in the dwelling where the child is not currently staying.

- The age of the children also has an influence on maintaining contact with a parent remotely. We observe that it is less easy to maintain contact with the youngest children because they do not have **their own communication tool**, which means that they must go through an intermediary (such as the other parent's or an older sibling's phone) to reach them. We also note that the acquisition of a smartphone is often conditional on the passage to secondary school (i.e. around the age of 12). They thus have more autonomy in their communication practices and are, consequently, freer to communicate in different ways (via a call, via social networks, etc.). It is therefore easier for parents and children to maintain contact when they are apart. However, it should be noted that while the acquisition of a personal phone offers the opportunity for children to communicate freely with their parents and maintain links at a distance, not all of them take advantage of it.
- The children we met **invest and appropriate their rooms differently** according to their age. The youngest children decorate their rooms with their own creations (such as drawings, crafts, games), allow their parents to enter their personal space and also appropriate the common living areas (such as the living room, kitchen, etc.). From the age of 12 onwards, they gradually detach themselves from the parental cultural heritage (such as furniture chosen by the father and mother) and personalize their own space, over which the parents still exercise a certain amount of control, gradually transforming it, in adolescence, into a place where they express their tastes and passions, creating a personal universe that reflects their identity.

B) Temporal dimensions related to SPC

These temporal dimensions refer to the age of the children at the time of parental separation, the duration of the separation, the history of the dwelling and the rhythm of the alternation.

• The age of the children at the time of parental separation

The majority of the children interviewed were aged 7 or under at the time of parental separation. Except for two of them, they were not consulted about the setting up the alternation rhythm. Moreover, because of their child's age, the fathers and mothers set up particular logistics that suited them, as they themselves took charge of transitions and transfers of belongings from one dwelling to the other. They accompanied the children on their journeys and helped them pack their belongings, which sometimes limited the children's ability to choose what they wanted to take with them. The three children aged 10 and over at the time of parental separation, being already more independent, were freer to choose whether or not to take things with them.

- **The temporality of the parental separation**

The time elapsed since the parental separation has an influence on transition practices as well as on communication practices. Firstly, the longer the time elapsed, the more flexible fathers and mothers become about allowing the child to take things to the other parent's dwelling. However, while some seize this opportunity and take "all their stuff" with them, others maintain the material limits initially established by their parents because they constitute their balance. In this way, they keep the habits they have developed.

As far as communication practices are concerned, it appears that with time, children get used to being separated from their parents and the lack is felt less and less strongly. They therefore feel less need to contact the absent parent regularly. For others, this frequent contact has become a habit that they maintain over time.

- **The history of the dwelling**

Eleven of the children we met still live with one of their parents in the dwelling where they lived before separation. **The personal history and childhood memories experienced in this dwelling** give them a strong sense of attachment and identification with the place. The elements of the past represent stable bearings for them. Moreover, the dwelling is anchored in the neighborhood where they grew up, went to school, participated in activities, etc., which symbolizes other anchoring factors that offer them a certain continuity in their daily life after separation. However, while these factors have a positive influence on the feeling of attachment to place for some children, it should be noted that not all of them are primarily attached to their former dwelling.

- **The rhythm of the alternation**

The subjective perception of the rhythm of the alternation has an influence on the children's material practices, as well as on their communication and appropriation practices. Thus, when children perceive the rhythm of alternation as 'short', they feel less need to take things with them, as they will find them quickly. Those who perceive it as 'long' are more likely to take their belongings with them so as not to be without them for too long. Moreover, among children who alternate on a quasi-equal basis, some tend to leave more personal belongings at the dwelling where they reside for the longest period of time and make do with what they have at the other parent's dwelling for a few days, while others take things 'in transit' in order to have the same material comfort on each side.

With regards to **communication** practices, when children perceive the rhythm of alternation as 'short', they feel less need to communicate with the parent from whom they are away because they have the feeling that they will be reunited quickly. They make contact, for instance during holidays, when the periods of separation are often longer than those during the school period. Those who perceive the rhythm as "long" communicate once or several times with the parent who does not have the child's custody at the moment.

The rhythm of the alternation also influences the appropriation of space and the definition of a **sense of home**. Indeed, children who alternate dwellings on a quasi-equal basis take ownership of, identify with, and become strongly attached to the dwelling of the parent with whom they spend one or more additional days of custody.

2.5.2. Family dimensions

The family dimensions include family composition, the presence of a pet, the degree of parental conflict as well as cultural dimensions which include the values at the center of family organization as well as parenting styles.

A) Family composition

The **presence of siblings** came up in the discourse of the children as an important source of stability in their daily lives. Most of them act in unison and agree on an identical alternating rhythm for all the children, taking into account the needs of each of them (like the older ones who accept a shorter alternating rhythm to allow the younger ones to see their parents more regularly and thus reduce the time of separation).

In cases of **blended families**, the type of housing and cohabitation arrangement has a positive influence on the standard of living of the children but a negative influence on their material comfort. In fact, single parents (mainly mothers) face greater financial difficulties than those living with a new partner who contributes to the daily expenses and maintenance of the home. However, in cases where the new partner has children of his or her own, the children we met emphasized that they had to make room for them (or make their own place when they are the ones who have moved in with their parent in the stepparent's dwelling) and that this cohabitation has resulted in their **level of material comfort** being reduced by the fact that they now have to share a room, which is perceived as too small, to accommodate an additional member.

B) The presence of a pet

It appears that attachment to a space is influenced by the presence of a pet. Indeed, the emotional bond that children feel towards a place is strengthened by the affection they have for the pet that resides in the space.

C) Degree of conflict between parents

In situations where the child does not have his or her own **communication** tool, it appears that the degree of parental conflict has an influence on long-distance communication practices with children, as it facilitates or limits opportunities for contact. Indeed, when the level of conflict is low, parents call each other regularly to discuss the children but also more personal matters. These exchanges offer the child the opportunity to talk to the parent from whom he is separated when his father and mother have finished their conversation. However, not everyone takes this opportunity and does not necessarily maintain contact with the other parent from a distance. In more conflictual situations, where communication between ex-partners is more likely to be by email or message, these opportunities are rarer but not non-existent. Fathers and mothers find alternatives (such as providing a small phone, an iPod Touch or creating a WhatsApp group specifically for exchanges with the child) that allow the children to maintain contact with the other parent without being bothered.

In situations where children have their own devices, their practices are not conditioned by parental harmony - or lack of it.

D) Cultural dimensions

This last category refers to the values that parents place at the center of family organization and the functioning styles that they adopt and based on which they establish spatial and temporal boundaries between their dwellings.

- **Values**

Some children prefer 'parked items' because the father and mother do not share the same values and therefore do not allow them to take certain items, such as a video game, with them because one or other parent does not approve of their use. In addition, among the participants, some mothers and fathers support ecological and anti-consumerist values. They encourage their children to pass things around to avoid buying the same item twice, or buy second-hand goods so that their children have "parked items" in each other's dwellings.

- **Parental islands**

It appears that parental islands and parenting styles influence the material practices of children. Indeed, parents set material boundaries mainly according to the degree of fusion they value between the members of the "new family". Those who promote the "us" group over the individual "me" (parents who fall under the boundary, membrane and dyke forms) limit the passage of children's personal belongings because they consider that these objects belong more to the place of residence than to the child. Children are thus encouraged to leave the goods they have received from this parent "parked" and to take them back to their dwelling if they have exceptionally taken them to the other parent's dwelling. Conversely, those who favor children's autonomy (parents characterized by the open and wild islands) leave them free to take what they wish from one dwelling to another because they consider these effects to be theirs above all. While some children seize this opportunity and take all their personal belongings with them, others limit transfers from one dwelling to another, knowing that if necessary, they are allowed to do so.

The degree of fusion also influences **communication** practices between children and their parents. While only parents associated with the fortress island type draw clear virtual boundaries and have little or no contact between dwellings, parents associated with the other island types do - potentially - have contact with the child on days when the child is away. While cocoon island and dyke island parents seek contact with the child to maintain the degree of fusion between the members of the 'new family' beyond the walls of the dwelling, open and wild island parents are open to the child's desire to contact them on days when they are not in their care, and leave the child free to choose whether or not to take up the opportunity for contact.

2.5.3. Spatial conditions

Spatial conditions include the geographical distance between the two dwellings, the geographical location of the places of residence, the distance between the dwellings and the social network, the mode of travel used to get to the other parent's dwelling, and the transitional space.

A) The geographical distance between the two dwellings

The distance between the parents' dwellings is one of the criteria that influence the decisions made by judges and family lawyers regarding the accommodation of children in cases of separation. They encourage parents to live close to each other to facilitate the logistics of alternation, to avoid children having to travel too far, to allow children to participate in their activities and maintain their network of friends wherever they live, etc. While for three of the children we met, all aged 10, travelling alone is a frightening and stressful experience, no matter how far they must travel, others see it as positive because it allows them to acquire more autonomy and independence in terms of mobility.

However, although children whose parents live at a distance from each other value the greater autonomy this brings and explain that they have become accustomed to making the long journeys, they do not deny that this distance represents a certain **weight** in their daily lives because of the time they spend travelling.

When parents live at a distance from each other, children will avoid taking their personal belongings with them. Leaving them 'parked' means they don't have to worry about them on a long journey and they don't have to make - or ask the parent to make - a time-consuming return trip to collect them if they forget something. Others, however, value 'items in transit' and take their entire mobile world with them at once.

Those whose parents live close to each other favor 'items in transit' because they only must carry them for a short time and find it easier to pick up things from the other parent's dwelling if they forget something - although they may prefer to take 'everything' at once. Others, on the other hand, prefer 'parked items' because of other factors, such as the history of the place where they live or the quasi-equal alternating rhythm.

In addition, this proximity offers the opportunity for children to move more freely between dwellings as they are not dependent on their parent to make the journey. However, while this proximity encourages contact, it does not guarantee it. In fact, the maintenance of these contacts is influenced by **other factors** such as age, which limits children's autonomous travel, or the parenting styles (see below), which set spatial and temporal limits between dwelling and prevent children from travelling freely to each other's dwellings.

B) Accessibility of the dwellings

In addition to the distance between dwellings, their accessibility also influences the transition practices of children. Indeed, when parents live at a distance from each other and the places of residence are easily accessible by public transport (train or bus), as they grow up, children are encouraged by their parents to travel independently and to take care of the journeys between dwellings and the transfer of their personal belongings by their own means. Where dwellings are in more remote areas that are difficult to access without a car, fathers and mothers are forced to take responsibility for travel and the transfer of the child's belongings (if any).

C) The distance between dwellings and the social network

The distance between dwellings represents a social cost for these children. Indeed, while the proximity of parental dwellings to the children's social network (such as school and the places of activity he or she frequents) allows them to maintain a network of friends and habits, the distance between them means that children feel isolated during the days when they live with the parent living further away from these points of reference. While some people perceive this distance negatively, others, on the contrary, value it. In fact, being temporarily away from the place where they have all their landmarks, all their friends, all their activities, allows them to withdraw for a while from all the hustle and to rest at the other parent's dwelling where they enjoy the time spent with their 'new family'.

D) Mode of travel and transition space

The way in which children move from one residence to another, as well as the transitional space they use to get to the other parent's dwelling, also have an influence on their practices. Indeed, travelling by car, accompanied by a parent, or by public transport, by their own means, are two situations that offer opportunities or represent a constraint for the children. For example, having a **car** at one's disposal to make the journey makes it easier to transfer bulky or large items, regardless of the distance between the parents' dwellings. In addition, these accompanied journeys allow children to free themselves from the mental burden caused by the way others might look at them if they came to school with their belongings in one or more bags.

On the other hand, the 'weight' of the school equipment that children must take with them on the day they change homes is all the more restrictive for those who are transferring on their own between parental dwellings, **through school or an extracurricular activity**. This transfer method encourages some children to leave their belongings 'parked' at each parent's dwelling so as not to be burdened with them on public transport and during the school day and to avoid having them stolen.

2.5.4. Material dimensions

The material dimensions refer to the standard of living in each household and the type of room the child has at both parents' dwellings.

A) Standard of living

The standard of living [10] of each parent influences the material and appropriation practices of children. Indeed, when parents have a perceived high standard of living, children are more likely to have duplicate items at each parent's dwelling and not to take any items from one

[10] In our survey we measured the 'perceived' standard of living, as we did not always have access to details of the income levels of both parents (among others). According to the INSEE, the 'felt standard of living' is assessed on the basis of the parents' perception and not on the basis of a statistical measure (Clerc, 2014). Here, we distinguish three levels (affluent, intermediate and modest) based on parents' and children's descriptions of their 'living conditions', understood as having standard material well-being or, on the contrary, encountering financial difficulties that lead to a number of deprivations. We consider here the quality of housing, the availability of a room (single or shared) for each child and the purchasing power for the child's belongings (clothes and games).

dwelling to the other. Children whose father and/or mother have a lower standard of living are encouraged to leave items they have received from one or the other "parked". This avoids the need for them to repurchase or retrieve forgotten items at the other parent's dwelling. Conversely, these parents encourage their children to move expensive items such as video games, tablets and computers from one place to another so that they can have them in each dwelling. When teenagers do not have the same standard of living at their parents' dwellings, they cope with these financial differences by systematically taking certain items with them wherever they go and enjoying the same level of comfort at each parent's and/or maintaining the same dress style.

It should also be noted that the fact of having a **car** influences the practices of children. Indeed, when parents take care of the transfer of their child's belongings by car, some children can take bulky objects or more personal belongings with them more easily than if they had to transport them by public transport or on foot. However, among those who have a car, some parents of modest means do not wish to use it to accompany the child to the other parent's because of the high cost of gasoline involved.

The standard of living also influences children's **appropriation practices**. Indeed, if they perceive the material environment of a living space positively, they become more or less attached to it and become personally invested in the appropriation of the space. Conversely, if they interpret it negatively because of a low level of comfort, for example, children tend not to become attached to the place and not to appropriate it.

B) Type of room

Whether a child has a single or shared room in a parent's dwelling influences the material and appropriation practices of children. Indeed, when they share a room, children tend not to take things with them so as not to clutter up the shared space. Those who have a **single room** in each parent's dwelling act differently: among those who surround themselves with 'parked objects', some reproduce objects identically in each dwelling and others value the fact that they find different things each time they return; still others travel with 'objects in transit' which they wish to surround themselves with in each of their rooms.

The fact of having one's own room will also have an influence on the definition of one's own space and on the feeling of attachment felt towards this room. Indeed, it appears that when children have their own room in one parent's dwelling and a shared room in the other's, they invest in and become strongly attached to the former and see the latter as secondary.

3

An archipelago of islands with particular properties: building a singular plural sense of home

In this report we have highlighted that children see each place of residence as distinct from the other, yet interconnected, like two islands in a single archipelago. This interconnectedness results in the definition of **a singular plural sense of home** because each dwelling (or island), in between which the children move, is thought of as in relation to each other and as forming a coherent whole (an archipelago) - but not necessarily without tensions. At the same time, the meaning attributed to each place of residence is unique, since it is defined on the basis of physical criteria (such as the material comfort available to the child), family criteria (such as the quality of the relationships maintained between the members, the warm atmosphere) and/or personal criteria (such as appropriating a space and making it its own) that are specific to each place.

The construction of a sense of home in each dwelling is based on **three dimensions, which can be interconnected**: the personal dimension, the physical dimension and the family dimension.

A personal sense of home

This refers to the way in which children appropriate a space and make it 'their own'. It is the most intimate connection to a physical space. They create a world in their own image (through personalized decoration and design of the space) and exercise a degree of control and ownership over it.

A physical sense of home

This sense refers to the way these young people interpret and perceive the dwelling's material environment (imposed decorations, special configurations) as more or less comfortable, as corresponding to them, and offering them (or not) the opportunity to engage in activities that valorize them personally.

A familial sense of home

This refers to the activities and practices that take place in the dwelling and the quality of the relationships between members. It refers to the feeling of being at home in the household when the atmosphere is considered to be warm, friendly and relaxed, and when relations with the inhabitants are good.

As mentioned earlier, children think of their places of residence as interconnected and define a single, all-encompassing sense of home (an 'archipelago') even though each dwelling (or 'island') has a distinctive color based on the three dimensions described above.

Hence, we distinguish different configurations:

- Some feel at home at a parent's dwelling in a **personal and physical way** because they have appropriated a space of their own (such as a bedroom, a corner of the living room) which they find comfortable based on the physical dimensions of the place (such as the brightness, the small size of the room, the warmth, etc.), while in the other dwelling they feel at home in a **familial way** because of the warm atmosphere among members.
- Other children feel at home in a **personal way** in a parent's dwelling even though they rate it as uncomfortable and unwelcoming based on the physical dimensions of the space (such as coldness, size of the room, untidiness, etc.). They feel at home in a **familial and physical way** in the second dwelling because its layout and decoration provide a warm atmosphere, which encourages them to spend time with their family.
- Other children experience both places of residence individually, creating **two "personal homes"**. They take a room or corner of the living room in each parent's dwelling and personalize it: they fill it with unique objects that reflect their tastes and passions, and they arrange and decorate it to create a comfortable space in which they spend most of their time and over which they have some control.
- Lastly, some experience a place of residence in a **physical, familial and personal way** without giving more importance to one of the modes of experiencing the place, and experience the other residence in a **familial way** based on the fact that a relative lives there. Because they evaluate the comfort of the dwelling rather negatively and do not take personal ownership of any of the spaces in the dwelling, the relationship with the parent who lives there is sometimes not enough to maintain the attachment the child feels towards the place. For instance, one of the children in this situation asked to change the rhythm of the existing alternation schedule to move to an exclusive mode of accommodation at his father's dwelling, where he felt physically, familially and personally at home, whereas he struggled to feel at home at his mother's (characterized by a wild island).



Further reading:

Merla L. & Nobels B. (Forthcoming, 2024) *Belonging and belongings. Children's sense of home in shared physical custody arrangements*, Bristol University Press, Sociology of Children and Families Series

Nobels B. & Merla L. (2022) *Deux 'maisons', un 'chez-soi'? Expériences de vie de jeunes en hébergement égalitaire*, Académia-L'Harmattan, coll. Famille, Couple, Sexualité

II. Insights from field actors on the results about the "Sense of home in SPC"

The findings of the research on "the sense of home in shared physical custody", as presented in this report, were discussed with practitioners from the family, child and youth sectors. Three focus groups were held in May-June 2022 to highlight the specific contributions of this research as well as its limitations, and to consider recommendations for public authorities.

Methodological note

Focus groups are an opportunity to bring together actors from different sectors and to confront their positions. It is a time for sharing experiences and points of view, which makes it possible to obtain rich feedback, fueled by the discussion between the various participants. These exchanges thus facilitate crossing of the views of field actors regarding the results of this research, in a participatory and interactive approach.

Participants were divided into three groups, according to their profiles and their availability, with the aim of encouraging a dynamic of exchange and participation. Each group met for three hours (on separate dates) in order to allow sufficient time to review the results of the research as presented in this report, and to give everyone time to express their thoughts. Participants were given the opportunity to ask clarifying questions about the research and its findings, and were then invited to share their experiences of SPC and give their feedback on the data presented in the report and at the beginning of the session.

Identification of participant from the family, child and youth support sectors was thought through prior to recruitment, so as to include a diversity of profiles, particularly in terms of their sectors and environments of activity (AMO, mental health service, court, etc.), their respective disciplines (psychology, law, mediation, etc.), and their geographical location. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research object, either because their expertise relates to youth or the family, or because they work directly with these groups, particularly in situations of separation. In addition, some of the people who confirmed their participation were also included in this reflection around the fields, services or practitioners to be included and invited.

The comments collected were transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the fourteen participants listed below.

Mario Alu	Psychologist, Children and Families Departement of the "Chapelle-aux-Champs" Mental Health Centre
Claire Baland	Pedagogical coordinator, AJMO & counselor, Parents in separation' meeting space (Charleroi)
Edwige Barthélemy	Lawyer and family mediator, and Director, Youth Rights Service (Hainaut)
Marie-France Carlier	Family and youth Judge, Family and Youth Court (Dinant)
Bénédicte Cuypers	Coordinator, Parents in separation' meeting space (Waterloo)
Bernard De Vos	General Delegate for Children's Rights
Anne-Marie Dieu	Research Director and Coordinator, Observatory of Childhood, Youth and Youth Support (OEJAJ)
Caroline Francotte	Delegated Judge, Family and Youth Court (Luxemburg)
Michaël Mallien	Family lawyer, Brussels Bar & Professor of Law
Rachel Postelmans	Pedagogical coordinator, Parenting House (Waterloo)
Sandra Reisse	Officer, General Administration of Justice Houses
Philippe Renard	Director, Carrefour J Youth Service (Wavre)
Jennifer Sevrin	Research Officer, Family League
Hélène Soyeur	Family Advisor, 'Parents in separation' meeting space (Charleroi)

Contributions and limitations of the research, from the point of view of field actors

1 Children's voices collected outside of litigation and major intra-parental conflicts

A first element that emerges across the various focus groups is the **different, positive perspective that this research provides**. Indeed, professionals whose role is to help or intervene in problematic or highly conflictive situations have very little insight into situations where things are going relatively well. Revealing the experiences of families in which intra-parental conflicts are low to moderate (communication between conflicting parents remaining possible if absolutely necessary), and where young people cope relatively well with this type of accommodation, despite the difficulties encountered, offers a new perspective on understanding this type of accommodation.

Similarly, various participants emphasize the interest of hearing **children's views in a context without litigation**, without any stakes that might compromise their views or put a weight on their shoulders (such as, for example, the fear of damaging the interests of a parent in conflict with the other one, in the context of legal proceedings).

"I find it very positive for us who are in conflict to see that, overall, well, it's true that there aren't many, compared to the statistics, conflicts are not very important. [...]" (FG 1)

Some participants doubted that this research could be used to manage crises in **high conflict situations**. Indeed, in such situations, everything would be a source of conflict and the issue would therefore go beyond the management of daily life (objects, transfers, etc.) and would sometimes be more a question of survival.

"But yes, for us, it's really uncommon because the parents we meet are sometimes so overwhelmed with emotion and conflict that they don't see the child's distress or that their behavior is going to have implications. They will not question the SPC, because for them, the problem is not there. End of story. And yes, they're not able to realize how much the children fit into this dysfunctional system." (FG 1)

In such situations, the mobilization of research results could prove to be too premature, but could nevertheless contribute, particularly in the context of communication workshops, to fueling the parents' reflection and potential awareness-raising. Indeed, although the research does not in itself shed light on the experience of certain high-conflict situations encountered in the field, it does offer tools to invite reflection and to initiate a work process once tensions have somewhat diminished.

2 A judgement-free view that reveals a variety of experiences and practices

In line with the 'case-by-case' logic that prevails in professional practice, and which is consistent with the pursuit of the best interests of the child, professionals emphasize that, while the law tends to favor SPC when requested by either parent, an important place is always given to exploration. It is indeed essential to individualize decisions, as each family - and each child - has its own way of functioning. In this respect, the fact that this research presents a rich palette of experiences and practices serves to underline the notion that there is not "one and only one way" of living and organizing SPC, but multiple possibilities.

"[...] from what the children say about SPC, there is really precious material to also make practice evolve, yes more [enlightened] practice. We were talking about case by case earlier, we do case by case, but we actually do case by case a bit in the dark." (FG 1)

3 The identification of a range of bearings on which young people rely in their daily lives

A participant pointed out that the judge's work to select a custody type is often based on notions of landmarks and attachment. However, the research shows in concrete terms the landmarks on which young people in SPC rely on a daily basis, and the way in which family relationships are played out in this context.

"It's really interesting to see how these landmarks materialise [...]. I think it is really something very, very interesting and it is important that what was said in this study [...] also finds its way into judicial practice. I think that would be important. (FG 1)

Accordingly, several participants emphasized that the research results show how young people cope with and adapt to a situation that they have not chosen, where "everything explodes", and in which their security base is undermined:

"How is it that in a situation that I have not chosen, I will still, in my own way, color, color a content that I have not chosen. I didn't choose the figures, but I can still color them my way. How do I do it, how do I shape this or that element of my life into a marker of fundamental importance or not. (FG 1)

4 A research that provides resources and tools for working with families and young people

Some participants mention that these results allow them to discover things, but that, at the same time, these are not necessarily "surprising" because they encounter them in their practice. Therefore, they see it more as a resource that, on the one hand, can shed light on certain situations and, on the other hand, provide concrete tools in their professional activities.

A) The value of typologies

Practitioners showed a strong interest in the typologies proposed in this research (around parental islands, management of objects, rituals, appropriation of space, etc.), which in their view constitute concrete tools for intervention and for working with families. Several people testified to the usefulness of having very visual concepts, allowing for a better understanding and approach to certain situations.

"I really picked up these 5 concepts that I feel are relevant to me and I think that we could very well have, for example, a young person facing a judge, saying 'I'm fed up with this fortress island, my father lives 500m away, I have my hockey sticks, I have my tennis racket, I always have to think about everything, can't we be a bit more flexible?'" (FG 1)

There is a strong consensus on the relevance of **using these concepts in the context of an intervention**, in several ways. On the one hand, these concepts can be used in discussions with both young people and parents, in particular to invite the latter to reflect on their mode of functioning, on the island they want to invent for their family.

"[...] the fact of naming concepts and all that, it really gives concrete leads that I can see myself using very, very well in intervention with the parents who consult us, so I find it very very rich. (FG 1)

"[...] It's really a very interesting tool to work with parents who are under stress. It's to be able to show them that there is a diversity of ways of doing things and that perhaps, depending on the time of the separation, things can also change. [...] I really see tools, for the family consultation that I carry out, and also for the meetings with parents and young people, I find that it gives the opportunity not to fix things. That there is no right or wrong". (FG 2)

Indeed, the **neutrality of the terminology** used to describe the parental islands is often mentioned as a positive point for intervention with families, making it possible to visualize the functioning of the parent without making value judgements about it. These concepts, as well as the metaphor of the archipelago, can be used to open up the discussion more easily and invite parents to agree to reflect on their functioning and its implications.

"It also legitimizes the possibility for each parent to invent their own world with their children. [...] these are very good tools because the two models are not opposed. They say, in the end, take your place, each of you. It is possible. [...] so it does no longer become a fight. I find that it allows us to really triangulate and to say let's get to work. (FG 2)

"[...] the metaphor of the islands in the archipelago. Because it's true that we have parents who are in fortress models. And so, for them, it's something so distinct that they can't imagine that for the child, there's a continuation and that for him/her, it's an archipelago. And so I think it's an interesting metaphor [...] and to work on that with the parents [...]. (FG 3)

"What intrigues me and what will help me, I think, and what I want to test, is really to work individually with the parents on the way they imagine the child lives the space in their dwelling, in each of the dwellings. Together, I'm not sure, because there are many parents who refuse to say how things are at each other's dwellings, but to work on it and to see how things can be connected. It would be really interesting to use the islands, etc., that seems to be really meaningful. The children (...), the moment, the ritual too. And obviously, everything related to the transition. But that's something we're used to working on because it's obviously always the most critical moment when parents don't get along, but even the ritual of settling back into the house, I find it really [useful]" (FG 3)

Professionals's feedback also point to the usefulness for their respective future practices of mobilizing the results of the research on the **appropriation of space**:

"[...] to say, well, how do you position yourself as a parent in your collective space? How do you see the place of each child? How can we try to articulate things differently so that everyone can find their place? Is a room divider enough, or do we need more? [...] I think that these are analytical tools that can become collective. [...] everyone can get hold of it. That's what I find interesting. (FG 2)

In terms of their professional expertise, some participants felt that it can be complicated for young people to have to navigate between two very different islands. However, some adolescents would be able to see how this navigation could benefit them. They also noted that during adolescence, a fortress island could lead to tensions between children and parents, whether they are separated or together. More broadly, it is the child's experience and well-being that are questioned with regard to the types of islands and the navigation between two different islands. However, some nuances are brought, indicating that experiencing different things from one island to another can be enriching. In other words, this mobility can be both constraining or destructive as well as enriching. It is therefore especially important to **ensure that everyone has room for manoeuvre and the possibility to express themselves on what goes well or not and to grow.**

In addition, children's **personality** will greatly influence their experience of one type of island or another. Some young people will feel better in something open, others in something more closed. Thus, within one family, SPC can be experienced in a totally different way by two siblings. In any case and as mentioned before, professionals are pleased to see that young people adapt to the different islands and are able to feel 'at home', since they are more confronted with situations where it does not go well.

B) An approach through everyday objects

Many participants noted that everyday objects are rarely used by youth and family workers. However, the research shows the extent to which **an approach based on objects can shed light on the experiences, needs and expectations of young people in SPC.** Participants noted in particular the interest in seeing what types of objects have what type of meaning for the children, but also their ways of appropriating space, or the meaning of order or disorder. Identifying these elements opens up the possibility of working on them with parents or young people.

"The objects, all that, they're not things that we, the journey a little bit yes, but the objects, it's not something that we're going to address. And that can actually be very, very, very enlightening, it can be very concrete as to questions that we would ask a child, it's really interesting." (FG 2)

"But then, everything that makes up a third party, but you've pointed it out well in your description of, even of the space and the objects, etc., all that makes up a third party. And even a blanket or teddy bear can be a third party, or an object or the hammock, that's very well said. It's a space where the child feels safe, like in a cocoon, in the community. That's very, very interesting. How can these young people find their own way of creating a third party? The animals, that's a third party too". (FG 3)

In **high conflict**, objects can also be a source of tension. Several professionals shared stories about objects, such as a winter coat or glasses, that the parent refuses to send to the other dwelling because of their high cost. Pets, extra-curricular activities, the vision of medicine, cultural differences, the choice of doctor or psychologist, are also potential sources of conflict which can, in some cases, prove problematic, even to the point of endangering the child's health.

C) Sense of 'home'

In relation to the results on the sense of home, two points emerge from the first focus group. Firstly, the results challenge participants by showing that, **regardless of social background, parents**, however well-intentioned they may be, **sometimes fail to make the child feel at home on a personal, family and material level**. Secondly, participants question whether and how a sense of home can be experienced in **high conflict situations** - a question that this research does not answer.

However, the discussions in the second focus group suggest that the **three forms of sense of home** developed in the research, which go beyond material conditions, can shed light on the situations encountered by professionals and help them to **understand** why a particular adolescent wishes to change accommodation because he or she does not feel (sufficiently) at home with either parent. At the same time, these dimensions offer insights into how **to help parents** who feel lost and wonder what is best for their children. Participants also see ways to help families by enabling them to :

[...] refocus more on the very concrete, rather than just "what would you like for the future? Because projecting oneself into the future must be very complex. [...] it's trying to see what the child puts behind 'feeling at home' and what the parents put behind it too. (FG 2)

The elements that contribute to a sense of home also go beyond the parent-child relationship.

"This study is very positive because there are not only the parents, there is the dog, there is the cat, there is the bedroom, there are the brothers and sisters, the half-siblings. (FG 1)

The study thus highlights **a range of variables** to build on and/or take into account - for example, the importance of animals in young people's experiences, also observed by several participants in their professional practice:

"I sometimes hear the dogs say that they don't raise issues, they're always nice, they're welcoming, we get home and "aaaah". And so it's like having a person in the family or an element with whom, on an emotional level, we can rest a little" (FG 3)

D) Elements to reflect on the day and place of alternation

The research findings on the transition between dwellings and the routines and rituals of return offer concrete elements for (re-)thinking about the day and place of the switch, and the logistics surrounding it.

"This is a question that the court often has to answer: who should take charge of the journey and to what place of exchange. It's really interesting because I've never asked myself the question so far in relation to the concrete situation of the child. And so it's true, some people say to me, well I don't like it if it's an after-school transfer because there's the question of bags, etc." (FG 3)

The identification, in the research, of 'interstitial' transitional time-spaces in which children feel uncomfortable, particularly **challenges certain professional practices** which consist in encouraging one parent to go and pick up the child at the other's.

"At the same time, I hear that if you wait for the parent, it's very uncomfortable for the young people you've heard. I used to think that it was an alternative for the bag, that the parent comes to pick the child up from the other parent's house: the child has all of his/her stuff, they just have to put it in the car. There's the question of extreme conflicts where they say it has to be at the school because they don't want to see each other. And so I wonder what the right solution is?" (FG 3)

The importance of offering young people a "neutral" space for transition was raised by many participants, particularly in situations of high intra-parental tension. Some participants mentioned the French system of setting up a neutral zone in front of a police station, which may have advantages but also raises the question of the experience of a child who must make a transition via a system that may be stigmatizing. School is also often considered as a neutral transitional place, but with limitations as well, particularly in relation to the fact that young people who take their belongings with them have to "expose" their mode of living to their peers.

The research findings also challenge some of the assumptions about the importance of providing young people with two dwellings **close to each other**.

"If the two dwellings are far apart, this is often a criterion that will be taken as contrary to shared physical custody. And, in fact, from our practice too, the child often experienced this moment of travel as something very positive. Once again, this contradicts our vision of the world a little". (FG 3)

The findings, which highlight the way in which young people appropriate living space, and in particular **the bedroom, whether individual or collective**, lead some participants to rethink the importance of the individual bedroom - particularly in the case of judicial intervention. For example, although this practice is declining, some judges would be reluctant to give custody to a parent who cannot provide a single room for their child. In the same way, children of the same sex would not be able to share a room after a certain age, which would be a problem for social housing in particular. However, the research shows that it is possible to create intimacy/privacy bubbles in shared spaces. It also highlights the fact that **mobile phones** offer young people a space of intimacy and retreat, regardless of their location. Participants in the first focus group felt that this aspect should be explored further in the future.

E) Tools for collecting children's voices

The methods used to collect the testimony of the adolescents - in particular the "socio-spatial network game" and the "emotion map" - appear to be particularly promising tools for the participants, in that they make it possible to get young people to talk about their family life in terms of places, objects and everyday practices. It allows us to **enter into the young person's concrete life**, and then to bring out information about their family relationships, their experiences and their feelings. These methods could also be used to **help parents better understand their child's experience**.

"I think it's an interesting tool, this thing where the child can visually label what's important to him, in terms of space, but also the animals. I think it's a great medium between parents and children, because sometimes parents can think that the child invests in an object/space when in fact the child may not invest in it so much, but may invest in the hammock that the parent doesn't realize that it has value. And I think it's a great medium, maybe with younger children, but in any case, to be able to go through things that are visual, etc. And it sometimes allows us to shift from words that are not so easy to put between parents and children" (FG 3)

Some professionals point out that these methods, and the results of the research, shed light on **how things can be arranged (decoration, transit of objects, etc.) by listening to the child, while at the same time making the parent responsible**.

5 The ability of young people to adapt

The research highlights the ability of young people to adapt to a way of life characterized by a family arrangement in which they alternate between two "parental islands", and to deploy strategies and ways of being and doing that are specific to this way of life. Based on their own observations, participants in the focus groups confirm the observation that the children have a **great capacity to adapt**, even though they must navigate between two islands functioning differently. Furthermore, one participant emphasize that the skills developed in this context could be sustained in the long term and, potentially, better prepare these young people to deal with certain situations later on, particularly in their professional and emotional lives.

However, participants emphasize that the ability to adapt **varies from one child to another**. Some may therefore appreciate, or even enjoy, this type of accommodation and its advantages (e.g. double holidays), while others may find it much more difficult.

"There are, for example, profiles of children who always forget everything, so good luck to the one who is in one or two fortress islands, if he always forgets everything, he will always be stressed" (FG 1)

Children's personality influence their experience of SPC and the strategies they put in place. Hence the interest in **combining future sociological research with a psychological approach that takes into account the personality of the child or parent** - a potential articulation that is all the more possible as the tools for collecting the words of children mobilized in MobileKids are close to those mobilized by psychologists.

The question of young people's well-being who implement strategies of adaptation, who demonstrate resourcefulness or autonomy is also raised, particularly in situations where the adolescent is required to compensate for a lack of investment on the part of the parents, a support that should be given to them, but is not. While the discussions link SPC to the development of certain skills, they also link it to a **potential lack of basic security** that could lead to certain fragilities.

6 Insights relevant to other family situations and housing arrangements

Several participants felt that the research sheds more light on the way contemporary families function, and on the family experience and relationship to space of children and adolescents, whatever their family configuration. The research - knowing what it feels like to be at home in a place that is not necessarily ideal or chosen - can also provide tools that could be adapted, particularly for young people with difficulties, for example the ones who end up in foster care.

Recommendations

1 Making schools more welcoming to children in SPC

Participants agree on the importance of the role played by the school regarding SPC situations, particularly as the transition between dwellings often takes place on Fridays after school. The research confirms this importance, showing that the school can play a facilitating role, by offering a neutral spaces of transition between both dwellings, but that it can at the same time add to the weight of the transition, in the literal sense, adding to the school material that the young people have to take with them on a daily basis. One proposal would be to provide young people with lockers of a size adapted to their belongings, which would prevent them from carrying their bags all day.

2 Raising awareness among actors in the field of sports, cultural and leisure activities

The places that young people frequent for leisure activities (e.g. sports clubs, academies) are also seen as places that can facilitate the transition by providing a neutral space at the time of residence change; but which can also complicate the logistics of the transition (particularly because of the material to be transported). Participants recommended that these actors be made aware of the role they play in the lives of these young people.

3 Training professionals in the use of tools adapted to the collection of children's voices

Participants emphasized that, depending on their background and discipline, professionals working with young people and their families are unequally equipped to gather the child's voice. They recommended strengthening the initial and ongoing training of those working in the field and in institutions by giving them access to methods of the same type as those used in this research (in particular, the socio-spatial network game and emotion maps).

4 Supporting the dissemination of scientific research results to actors in the field

Participants find it important to rely in an effective way scientific research results towards field actors, through the organization of workshop and training days, but also through other means (such as podcasts, video clips, short and accessible publications), and providing tools directly usable on the field – such as the typologies developed in this research.

5 Stimulating the development of research in the field of childhood, youth and the family, rooted in various disciplines (law, psychology, sociology, history, etc.)

Those working in the field lack scientific sources to inform and guide their practice in the area of divorce, parental separation and family recomposition, particularly with regard to the concrete experiences of children and young people, the important issue of "new" siblings, and the role played by grandparents and peers.

6 Listening to the child and taking their views into account... without putting the burden of decision on their shoulders

Lastly, the participants pointed out that it is essential to listen to children and to consider their opinion in matters that concern them, while stressing that the burden of decision must ultimately rest on the adult's shoulders.

PART 3

Practices of shared physical custody in Italy

Presentation

The aim of this research is to shed light on children's experiences of shared physical custody (SPC) **in a different geographical, legal, and normative context - that of Italy**. The choice of Italy is motivated by the desire to understand how SPC is structured in a context where, unlike Belgium, **the legal framework does little to support this practice**. The idea is that the way in which SPC is organised is closely linked to the normative, cultural and legal context of a country and is **standardised in practice**. This is therefore not a comparison in the strict sense of the word, but rather a parallelisation to see how the similarities, but above all the differences in practice, challenge the knowledge and habits we are familiar with in Belgium.

Moreover, the Italian case is particularly stimulating because there are few sociological studies, especially qualitative ones, that have documented and analysed the practice of SPC since the introduction of a law on the subject in 2006 (Merla & Murru, 2021). The project ahead of us was thus quite ambitious, the foundations of which had to be laid: understanding the specificities of the legal framework governing these practices, in order to then report on the lived experiences of children living in SPC, while moving away from the Belgian normative and cultural framework with which we are familiar, to grasp the complexity of the issues at stake in the Italian case.

We propose to answer the following questions: **How are the alternation schedules constructed? How much autonomy do children have in this context? How do living spaces and housing characteristics influence these practices? What cultural and normative contexts structure these practices?**

We examine how three factors contribute to shaping children's lived experience of SPC in Italy, namely: (1) **the school system**, as well as logistics inherent to Italian schooling; (2) **the type of housing** and the distance between places of residence; (3) the influence of **gender models and inequalities**. Finally, we look at how these factors have been challenged in the **(re)organisation of alternating schedules in times of COVID-related lockdown**.

While there are similarities within the children's accounts, this research also aims to highlight the **diversity of experiences**. The aim, therefore, is not to draw universal conclusions about the way SPC is organised in Italy, but rather to sketch the landscape of a variety of practices and to outline avenues of understanding in order to open up further questions and to advance the current state of research on SPC in Italy.



Our answers to these questions are grounded on the testimonies of **14 Italian families**. A total of **20 children** were interviewed, 5 girls and 15 boys **aged between 10 and 16**. They had been living in egalitarian, quasi-equalitarian or asymmetrical SPC for at least one year. The geographical area covered was the **Piedmont region** of northern Italy.

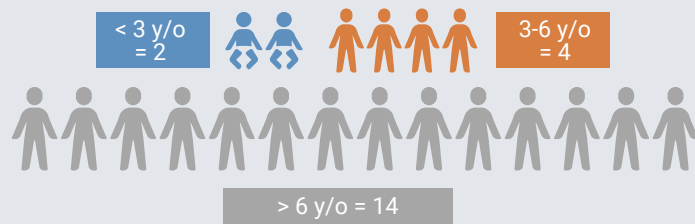
These data are presented on the next page.

Age and gender of children

10-12 y/o = 6
13-14 y/o = 7
15-16 y/o = 7



Age when SPC started



Type of SPC

egalitarian
50/50

9 families

quasi-equal
40/60

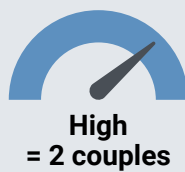
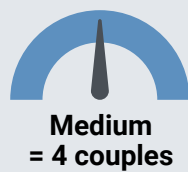
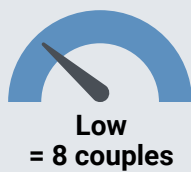
3 families

asymmetrical
30/70

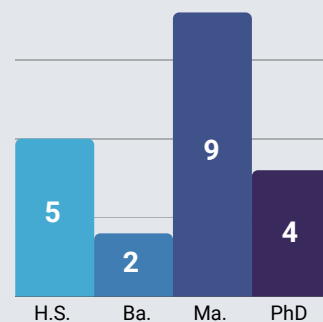
2 families

RQ: the parent with whom the children spend the most time is always the **mother**.

Level of conflict between parents



Level of education



5 high school (4 mothers, 1 fathers)

2 bachelor (1 mother, 1 father)

9 master (6 mothers, 3 fathers)

4 PhD (4 fathers)

*Missing data: 2 mothers and 5 fathers

Distance between the two dwellings

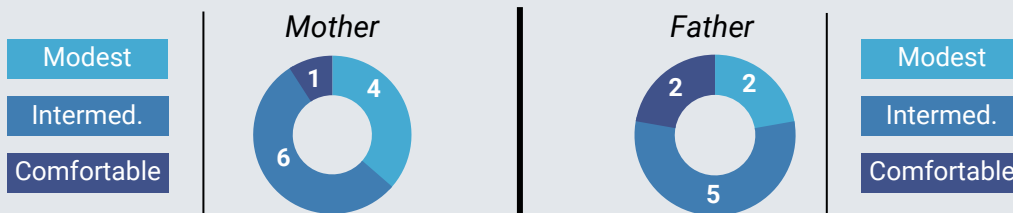
< 10 min. by foot or transportation = 8 families

10-25 min. by foot or transportation = 4 families

> 25 min. by transportation = 2 families

RQ: 16 dwellings in city-centre, 12 in suburban or rural areas

Perceived standard of living



*Missing data: 5 fathers and 3 mothers



Data was collected longitudinally:

- **The first wave of data collection**, between March 2018 and March 2019, took place in two phases:
 - We started with a **semi-structured interview with at least one of the two parents** to understand the child's family context and culture. These interviews drew our attention to elements that could shed light on children's discourse, such as cultural dimensions, educational values and the nature of relationships between family members.
 - We then conducted **two or three semi-structured interviews with each child individually**, using participatory methods:
 - The Socio-Spatial Network Game (Schier, 2017), which consists of a board game on which the child constructs the different places that are important to them, describes the people associated with them, and how they move between these places.
 - Auto-photography (Ziller, 1990), in which the child is asked to take photos of a typical day at the mother's and the father's dwelling. These photos are then used to discuss the similarities/differences in practices, spaces and roles in each dwelling.
 - The Circle Map (Weller, 2012), which consists of a series of concentric circles in which the child, placed in the centre, is asked to write down the names of people with whom he or she has an intimate/less intimate relationship or sees frequently/less frequently. The closer the person is to the child, the greater the degree of intimacy/frequency of contact.
 - Vignettes (Marquet & Merla, 2019), in which children read a short story about the practices of a fictional family and are asked to react to the story.

These methods allowed us to address a wide range of issues, such as how children move between their various dwellings; the spatial configuration of their living environments; the relationships they maintain with different family members, extended family and friends; their ways of living and feeling at home; and the values they hold onto.

- **The second wave of data collection** took place between April and July 2020, during the lockdown period linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. This second wave was organised around **semi-structured online interviews with both children and parents**, individually, to document 3 elements:
 - What had changed (or remained the same) 1 or 2 years later in terms of: the school calendar, housing (moves to new places?), studies (transition from elementary to high school?), parents' marital situation (new arrivals in the family?), etc.

- Deepening inquiry on the place of the school as well as the neighbourhood in children's lives
- The experience of lockdown as a separated family: how were alternations (re)organised? how was remote learning organised? etc.

Data was thematically analysed on 2 levels:

- An **institutional ethnography** (Smith, 2005), which involved analysing and mapping the children's everyday practices ('what they do' on a daily basis) and the ways in which these are coordinated with the practices of other people in the child's network (including at other times and places), in order to identify the different institutions that organise these practices.
- A **thematic analysis of the children's accounts**, cross-referenced with the **parents' accounts** to allow multiple voices to speak about the same reality and to add elements of the family context. This allowed the emergence of cross-cutting themes as well as similarities and differences between the children.

Italian legal frame for separation, divorce, and child custody



The report can be downloaded here:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/255877>

This report examines the legal framework with regards to couple separation, divorce and child custody in Italy, and offers a useful guide for international audiences and social sciences researchers interested in those issues.

Italy, which has a relatively stable crude divorce rate (from 1,6 in 2016 to 1,4 in 2019) slightly under the European one (1,9 in 2016, Eurostat), is for many reasons an interesting case study when it comes to examining separation and child custody. Indeed, the way separation, divorce, and child custody are articulated in legal texts tends to be different from other European countries – which is linked to Italy's Family Law history, the social and political debates that have accompanied it, as well as larger (European) debates on the best interest of the child that have influenced national legislations. This report thus explores how the larger question of shared legal and physical custody came to take shape in its legal body. It is divided into three sections:

- 1.a chronological perspective on the various laws and regulations regarding couple unions, separation and the custody of eventual children;
- 2.a clarification of central legal and administrative terms and procedures inherent to separation, divorce and child custody;
- 3.a state of the art of the various surveys and studies that have analyzed the effects of these legislations on today's family practices, further specifying the impacts on recomposed families and the advent of family mediation.

1. Law and regulations for separation, divorce, and child custody

This section presents, in a chronological perspective, the various legislations that concern family matters and especially the questions regarding couple unions, separation and the custody of eventual children. It helps understand how the spirit of the law evolved and has been impacted by religious, as well as cultural, normative views and how policy advocacy has influenced the formulation of various articles over the years. In particular, it outlines:

- The introduction of the possibility to divorce in 1970,
- The subsequent major reform of family law in 1975 which, generally speaking, entailed abandoning the hierarchical understanding of family relations and suppressing discriminations between illegitimate and legitimate children.
- The so-called “joint custody law” of 2006, which is law regarding child custody that is applicable today and sets forth that the judge has to evaluate in priority the possibility for joint (legal) custody. The main change introduced in this law is a default joint parental responsibility but this does not translate, in the law, in terms of residential times in each dwelling.

- The 2012-2013 reform of filiation, which entailed, among others, the suppression of the separation between legitimate and ‘natural’ (formerly ‘illegitimate’) children, and the suppression of the word potesta (‘power/authority’) from the legal locus.
- The 2016 law introducing civil unions for same-sex partners, but that also gave recognition to legal cohabitation of non-married couples.

2. Central legal and administrative terms and procedures

The second section clarifies central legal and administrative terms and procedures inherent to separation, divorce and child custody, especially with regards to proper translations from Italian to English. Indeed, the Italian case is quite particular when it comes to divorce/separations and custody of children in the sense that it uses some of the same terms that are widely mobilized in other languages, while conferring to them a (slightly) different legal meaning.

- For instance, separation and divorce both represent steps of a legal procedure for previously married spouses. In other words, “separation” is a legal step (with specific legal proceedings) that precedes the legal act of divorce.
- Moreover, translating affidamento condiviso to “joint custody” creates confusion because affidamento condiviso entails a right of the child to maintain a balanced relationship with both parents, but this does not translate in Italian law to an equality of residential time at each parent’s dwelling, and more precisely refers to joint legal custody and a shared parental responsibility.

This section thus emphasizes in detail the various steps that married and non-married couples must undertake when separating, and the particular nature of “legal separations” in this context. It further clarifies a whole set of legal terms, and further details the implications of collocation, child support and alimony in the Italian context.

3. The law in practice

The last section states the art of the various surveys and studies that have analyzed the effects of these legislations on today’s family practices, which highlights the crucial need to engage in qualitative studies and further deepen national statistics on separation and divorce, to include more questions about child custody, especially on the amount of residential time in each dwelling, as well as broadening the surveyed population to include non-married couples.

Moreover, this section highlights the legal void with regards to recomposed families and the advent of family mediation.

The report concludes by highlighting the importance for future studies on separation, divorce, and child custody, to include a more precise description of the distribution of residential times between parents; to pay attention to jurisprudence and how judges actually make use of these laws; and to document the everyday practices of people engaged in civil unions, free unions, legal cohabitants, or recomposed families.

To what extent do family policies adapt to SPC in Italy?

The nature of family policies and benefits in Italy is strongly influenced by its history, as well as by the social and ideological debates that have accompanied the various reforms over the years. In particular, we note:

- **The historically familialist character** of the Italian system, while there is a **recent support for indirect defamilialization through the market** (i.e., when individuals and families must draw on their private resources to purchase in the market care or education services that are not provided by public policies).
 - As a result, the very limited development of family policies takes the form of a very fragmented set of poorly financed measures
 - And the system is organized according to a logic of vertical redistribution, instead of horizontal (which classically guides all family policies).
- The Italian model is conservative or corporatist, in the sense that social protection depends on the individual's position in the labor market, and the family complements state interventions.
- This creates great pressure on families, and especially on women, who must face increased family responsibilities.

Based on (1) a survey of experts and key informants, and (2) a literature review, we analyzed how family policies (do not) take into account the specificities of SPC. We reviewed four pillars of family policies: family benefits, financial support for access to services, fiscal measures, and parental leave.

- In general, there is **a relatively low level of consideration** for SPC in family policy.
- This is due, among other things, to a legal void regarding the amount of time of residence at each parent's and the designation of a primary place of residence for the children.
 - The legal term "shared custody" or *affido condiviso* refers to the exercise of joint parental responsibility in the event of divorce or separation, without necessarily implying the establishment of shared "physical" custody. Thus, in the Italian legislation there is no equivalent to egalitarian physical custody (or residence), however it is this situation that has been investigated in the present survey.
 - Courts still predominantly opt for *affido condiviso*, combined with exclusive or main residence of the child with one of the parents, which statistically is most often the mother.
- Family allowances and family benefits cannot be shared in the case of *affido condiviso*. On the services side, the offer is very limited, with only the support for childcare (bonus asilo nido) being adapted to the *affido condiviso*. Finally, the tax system recognizes the *affido condiviso* and allows the sharing of the "shares" of the child(ren) between both households.
- The Italian system of public policies (in cash and in kind) is very **fragmented**, spread over four levels of action: national, regional, provincial, and municipal.

- Most family and child policy responsibilities are regional or municipal; cash benefits, family allowances, and maternity and paternity allowances are the most important measures at the national level; and tax benefits (exemptions for spouse and dependent children) and social assistance are modest, of marginal importance, discretionary, and provided by local government.
 - More specifically, the Italian context is characterized by a double fragmentation: on the one hand, the multiplication of policies aiming at the same objective; on the other hand, the differentiation between public policies managed at the national, regional and municipal levels, which explains the rather low level of coverage of the share of these policies.
 - This characteristic generally makes it more difficult for families to know about the existence of the benefits to which they are potentially entitled - especially for those in precarious economic conditions and/or with little education.
- Our analysis highlights problems and inequalities linked to the gender gap in the structuring of family policy.
 - In particular, care is organized on the basis of a gendered and asymmetric model that remains mainly the responsibility of women, with little involvement of fathers in family matters.
 - For example, parental leave is hardly used by fathers in Italy. This is due both to the low allowance for such leave (30% of salary) and to a general lack of recognition in the workplace of the importance of parental leave for fathers, and therefore also for their children.

Key findings

1

Generally short stays punctuated by periods of physical co-presence

Italy tends to stand out from what is generally practised in Europe in terms of the timetable for alternating between the child's two dwellings. In fact, studies on SPC generally describe similar schedules, using the week as a reference for reasons of clarity and simplicity (the week is a constructed and repeated time), but also for reasons of fairness (allowing both parents to spend school days with their children, but also free time during weekends) (Hachet, 2021). Similar arrangements were observed in Belgium. Although shorter alternation periods can be observed, they are not the most popular and are often set up when the children are young, as a transitional phase, before moving on to what is seen as a more stable rhythm and longer periods of residence.

In Italy we observed two trends that stand out in the scientific literature:

- children tend to alternate more frequently - spending shorter stays with each parent;
- parents arrange time to be physically present with their children on days when they are not living with them.

1.1. Calendar of alternations

The different types of alternation we observed are shown in the table below, which is organised over 4 weeks - making it possible to observe recurring patterns. Each line corresponds to a different type of alternation.

	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S
2-2-3 (fixed)																												
2-2-3 (Alt)																												
2-1-1 – Wend Alt																												
2-1– <u>Thur</u> + Wend Alt																												
2-1 Alt-2 Wend Alt																												
Week M – Week P																												
Week M – Wend P																												
Flex – Wend Alt																												
Hyper Flex																												

- **5 families** practise the first two alternating modes, i.e. 2 days with the mother, 2 days with the father and every other weekend (including Friday) with each. However, we distinguish between 'fixed' and 'alternating' living arrangements:
 - "2-2-3 fixed" means that **the days with the mother and the father are always the same**. In this case, Mondays and Tuesdays are always the mother's days, and Wednesdays and Thursdays are always the father's days. This means that the parent with whom the children spend the weekend will systematically have them for 5 days (overlapping Monday and Tuesday in the case of a weekend with the mother, or starting Wednesday and Thursday in the case of a weekend with the father).
 - "2-2-3 Alt" means that **the weekdays with the mother and the father are not fixed: they alternate depending on which parent has the children for the weekend**. In other words, if it's the father's weekend, the children will go to the mother's on Monday and Tuesday, to the father's on Wednesday and Thursday, and to the mother's on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. As a result, on the following Monday and Tuesday, the children go to the father's, on Wednesday and Thursday to the mother's, and on Friday, Saturday and Sunday to the father's. We therefore see a deliberate choice not to allow long stays with either parent and to systematically alternate stays of 2 to a maximum of 3 days in each dwelling.
- **3 families** use a relative similar method of alternation, including small differences:
 - "2-1-1-Wend Alt" means that the child spends Monday and Tuesday with the mother, Wednesday with the father, Thursday with the mother and the weekends alternate. This is designed to create **a block of 6 consecutive days** in the weeks when the children spend the weekend with the mother. This is the only case where so many consecutive days were observed with the same parent.
 - "2-1-Thurs + Wend Alt" means that the children spend **two days with one parent and one day with the other, alternating Thursdays and weekends (including Fridays)**. In other words, the children will spend Monday and Tuesday with the mother, Wednesday with the father, Thursday with the mother and the weekend with father. The following week they go to the father's on Thursday and to the mother's on the weekend. This means that every other week there is a block of 5 days at the mother's and the rest of the time they alternate very briefly.
 - "2-1 alt-2-Wend Alt" is similar to the previous mode, but in this case it's **Wednesday** instead of Thursday that **alternates with the weekend** (Saturday and Sunday only). In other words, the children systematically go to the mother's on Mondays and Tuesdays and to the father's on Thursdays and Fridays. In the weeks when they go to mother's for the weekend, they go to the father's on Wednesday and vice versa. This model allows for frequent alternation, but also includes blocks of 4 or 5 days with the mother and the father.
- **2 families** use **the week as a reference** but do not alternate on the classic "one week/one week" basis.
 - "Week M - Week F" means that they start with the idea that each parent has "his/her" week. But in this case, during the mother's week, the children go to the father's on Wednesdays; and during the father's week, the children go to the mother's on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Again, the logic is to break up long periods with one or two days at the other parent's.

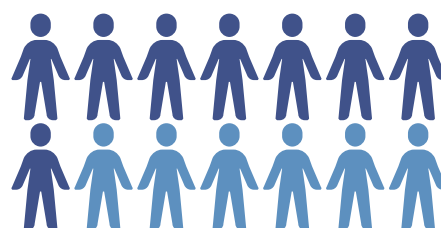
- “Week M - Wend F” means that the child always lives with the mother on school days (including Sunday evenings) and with the father on Fridays and Saturdays. This is a special case where the school was 100 metres from the mother’s dwelling and the father’s dwelling was 20 minutes away by car. The parents agreed that the child would wake up at mother’s dwelling every morning when he has to go to school.
- **4 families** practised some form of **flexibility in (or even absence of) the calendar**. In these 4 cases it is interesting to note that the children spend a maximum of 3 days with the same parent - sometimes the child changes every day.
 - “Flex - Wend Alt” means that the only fixed times for each parent are weekends (including Fridays), which alternate between each parent. Weekdays are flexible and vary according to the wishes and needs of both children and parents.
 - “Hyper-flex” means that there are no fixed days at either parent's dwelling. Again, the children move between dwellings according to the wishes, needs or constraints of the children and parents.

The school week is systematically broken down.

The alternation schedules therefore vary between the families we met. However, while the alternation is sometimes organised to allow slightly longer blocks at one or the other parent's dwelling, there is generally **a tendency to alternate frequently between short stays in each dwelling**. It is also interesting to note that these blocks of 4 to 6 days always occur around a weekend (overlapping before and/or after). **The school week, on the other hand, is systematically broken down** (except in the case of “Week M - Week F”). This is quite different from what we are used to observing in Belgium or elsewhere, where, for various reasons, there is a tendency to avoid disrupting children's stay during the school week (Hachet, 2014). Finally, it is interesting to note that the age of the children does not influence the alternation schedule: young and older children are found in both very broken down styles and those with longer blocks of time, as well as in both fixed and very flexible styles.

1.2. Times of physical co-presence

This alternating schedule concerns overnight stays in each dwelling. At the same time, however, we observed that **more than half of the families (8 out of 14) agreed on times of physical co-presence with both parents (separately) or only with the mother, regardless of the defined place of residence**. In other words, on the day when they are residing at the mother’s, they may spend some time with the father during the day and vice versa.



8 out of 14 agreed on times of physical co-presence with both parents (or only with the mother)

Here are **two examples** to illustrate this phenomenon:

- The parents of Clara, aged 10, live on the same (long) street, cut down in the middle by a park, with the school being a little further east of the park. Parents practice the flexible schedule during the week with alternated weekends. But regardless of where Clara sleeps, parents usually meet in the park on weekday mornings before going to school. In practice, this means that if she slept with her mother, she will go out with her and from the park on, her father will walk her to school alone (and vice versa). This also allows the parents to "pass" the dog to each other so that it too resides in the same place as Clara. So, if Clara and her dog slept with the father but it has been decided that she will sleep with the mother the next day, the father will take the opportunity to give the dog to the mother when they meet in the park.
- Francesco, 15, and Giuzy, 13, are brother and sister, and have the habit of systematically going back to their mother's dwelling after school (as both places are close to each other) and waiting for their father to come and pick them up by car after work on the days when they sleep at his place - he lives 25 minutes away by car. This means that:
 - On the days when they stay with their father, they still see their mother for a couple of hours after school.
 - And on days when they stay at their mother's, their father still comes back after work to take them for an hour's sports with him nearby, then takes them back to the mother's before going home.

Taken together, these practices of short and frequent alternation, coupled with times of physical co-presence during the day, have several implications for the way these children practice and experience SPC:

- **Impact on logistics and materiality:** by moving frequently, children have less need to take a whole pile of things with them, as they quickly go back to what they have left behind. The material analysis is therefore very different from what was highlighted in the Belgian case - we don't observe the weight of objects at all in the Italian case because **the majority of them don't 'pack'**. In general, they have clothes on both sides and don't feel the need to take with them objects, games, books or other things they are attached to. The only item they take with them is their **school bag** and possibly their braces. These frequent moves are also made possible by the **parents' decision to live close to each other**. With regards to materiality, this means that if children forget something at one parent's dwelling, it's quick and easy to go back and pick it up. **This takes a lot of the mental load off of the children**, who don't see forgetting an object as something stressful or worrying.
- **Implications for low use of NCTs** - As parents and children see each other very often, and in the majority of cases there is almost constant physical contact with both parents, the families we met felt little need to maintain a virtual co-presence through technology. Contact between parents and children by telephone or text message is generally used to exchange quick, important information or to ask a question that needs an immediate answer.

In what follows, we analyse three structuring factors that shed light on these different elements and the choice between short alternation periods and frequent times of physical co-presence: the relation to school, to home, and gender.



The Italian school system is divided into **3 levels**:

- *Scuola elementaria*, which corresponds to elementary school in Belgium but lasts 5 years in Italy (pupils are generally aged between 6 and 11).
- *Scuola media*, which is an intermediate level between elementary and secondary (high) school in Belgium and lasts 3 years (pupils are generally aged between 11 and 13).
- *Scuola superiore*, which corresponds to the Belgian secondary (high) school and lasts 5 years (pupils are generally aged between 14 and 18).

From the second level one (*scuola media*), classes finish around 1 - 2 pm. Students usually go home for lunch and **do homework or exercises in the afternoon**. Depending on the options chosen, some students may return to school on certain days in the afternoon for an extra lesson. The subjects taught rely on **textbooks** which contain both the theoretical knowledge to be studied and the exercises to be completed as homework.

In practice, this means that Italian children have a large number of books, textbooks and/or folders/binders. It is clear from our interviews that **the burden of school logistics** is something that has to be dealt with in SPC arrangements. The majority of children and parents **feel that it is impossible and unthinkable to carry all school materials from one dwelling to another**.

In this context, we have observed a phenomenon that we have chosen to call the "**homework house**": this is a dwelling to which children return to every day of the week, regardless of where they plan to sleep, to do their homework and prepare their schoolbags with the books and other they will need for the next day at school. In practice, this means 4 scenarios. Let's use the scenario where the "homework house" is defined as the mother's dwelling:

- If the child wakes up at the mother's dwelling, he returns there after school to do his homework and stays there overnight if it's a day when he stays at the mother's;
- If the child wakes up at his mother's dwelling, he returns there after school to do his homework and then goes to his father's in the early evening if it is a day when he is staying with him;
- If the child wakes up at the father's, he goes back to the mother's after school to do his homework and then stays there if it's a day when he stays with her;
- If the child wakes up at the father's, he goes back to the mother's after school to do his homework, and then goes back to the father's in the early evening if it's a day when he's staying with him again.

Among the children we met:

- **2 children in primary school** (*scuola elementaria*) were not yet involved in these logistics - but by the time of the second wave of data collection they had both moved on to middle school (*scuola media*) and had set up the 'homework house' system.
- **3 families where the children do their homework where they sleep.** Of these, in two families it was the parents who organised the logistics, for example by leaving the bag with all of schooling items on the doorstep or in the other parent's garage on the way to work. Of the three families, **there was only one where the children** (including one in primary school and one in middle school) **carried all their belongings to school.** This was perceived as a real burden for the middle school child, but it is also a case where the parents were in a high level of conflict, which is one of the reasons for the desire to keep what happens in the mother's dwelling separate from what happens in the father's dwelling. On the other hand, the two dwellings are in the same neighbourhood, less than 10 minutes' walk from each other, which means that the trips are logistically demanding but very short.
- All the other families practise the "homework house" system:
 - One of the 'homework houses' is set up at the child's maternal grandparents, where the child returns every weekday after school to do his homework, and the parent with whom he sleeps that night picks him up from the grandparents' dwelling after work;
 - One of the 'homework house' is set up at the father's, but in this case the paternal grandmother lives in the adjacent apartment and it is she who comes to look after her grandson when he comes home from school;
 - One family uses a hybrid system where the two dwellings symbolically form an all-encompassing whole in the way the child organises and tidies his space. The dwellings are 2 minutes' walk from each other and both are very small. The child has therefore set up a system whereby he 'stores' all his school supplies in one of the dwellings and does his homework in the other. He visits each of these dwellings every day. He is practising a 'homework house' in the sense that he always does his schoolwork in the same dwelling (regardless of where he sleeps), but this form differs from the others in that he goes to both dwellings every day regardless of where he lives.
 - In all other cases, **the homework house is the mother's dwelling.**

This partly **explains the frequency of times of physical co-presence analysed above**, in that the children in the 'homework house' system see the parent with whom it is established (except in the case where the 'homework house' is at the maternal grandparents'), either because, in the majority of cases, the parent of the homework house decides to be there when the children come home from school to prepare lunch and/or supervise homework (often involving a reduction in working hours), or because the child is still in the 'homework house' when the parent comes home from work and they see each other for a short time before the child goes back to the other parent's dwelling. In addition, the "homework house" system also partly **explains the fact that most of them do not pack a bag, as they have a dwelling that they pass through every school day.**

In a context where Italian children frequently move between their two dwellings, including through the 'home ownership' system, we have observed that **the majority of parents choose to live close to each other after separation.**

- **More than half of the families** (8) live in the same neighbourhood, where the school is also located. Children in this situation **tend to think of their neighbourhood as their home**, metaphorically speaking, given the strong links between the places they frequent.
- **For 4 other families**, the distance between the two dwellings is between 10 and 25 minutes by foot or by transportation - generally this means that the dwellings are one or two stops away by public transport, or in one case 25 minutes by car.
- **Only two families** make longer trips - the children travel 40 minutes by public transport on weekdays, sometimes facilitated by a car ride, systematically done by the father, on weekends.

Two factors help us to understand this decision by parents to live close to each other: the first is a point in the Italian legislation on shared custody (2006 law) relating to the "allocation of the family home"; the second is the Italian property market.

3.1. Allocation of the family dwelling



Allocation of the family dwelling in Italy

This aspect of Italian legislation on shared custody is very different from what we know in Belgium. Specifically, the 2006 **law gives the child the right to stay in the pre-separation family dwelling**, as it is considered to be in the child's best interest, for his or her psychological and emotional balance and well-being, to be able to maintain a certain **continuity** with his or her living conditions pre-separation.

- As a result (unless there is a prior agreement between the parents), the judge awards the right to reside in the pre-separation family dwelling to the parent with whom the child has its primary residence, regardless of who owns it. In the case of parents who have signed a rental contract, the parent to whom the judge awards the main residence has the right to take over this contract in his or her name [11].
- In practice, by analysing judges' rulings, several studies have shown that the pre-separation **family dwelling is allocated to the mother in the vast majority of cases** (de Blasio and Vuri, 2019).

[11] Further information on the practical details of this section of the law can be found in the MobileKids Report on "The Legal Framework for Separation, Divorce and Child Custody" (Murru, 2021).

In our study, we found that:

- **6 mothers lived in the pre-separation family dwelling:** 1 had bought out the father's share; 2 were still joint owners with the father; 2 mother were and remained the sole owner; and 1 rented and took over the lease in her own name. Each of these dwellings is described by the children as 'bigger than the other'.
- **3 fathers lived in the pre-separation family dwelling,** of which they were and still are the sole owners. One of these dwellings is described by the children as being larger than the mother's and the other two as being the same size as the mother's.
- **The parents in the other 5 families agreed that they would both move after the separation.** In two of these families the children described their dwellings as being of equal size, in two others the children described the mother's dwelling as being larger than the other, and in one family the father's dwelling was described as being larger (one of the few cases where one of the parents, in this case the father, had children with his new partner).

The allocation of residence in the family dwelling, mostly granted to the mother, has an impact on the size of the post-separation dwelling in so far as it is a place that was intended to accommodate more people - logically, the pre-separation family dwellings in which one of the parents continues to live after separation are all defined by the children as larger (in the majority of cases) or of the same size as the other dwelling. However, this also has an impact on children's sense of home, which is likely to be stronger in a dwelling they have lived in for longer (sometimes since birth) than in a new one. It is interesting to note that among the children we met:

- In 7 families the children felt more at home with the mother than with the father: in 6 cases the mother lived in the pre-separation family dwelling and in one case both parents had moved after the separation;
- In 7 families, the children felt as much at home with the father as with the mother: these were the 3 cases where the father lived in the pre-separation family dwelling and the 4 cases where both parents had new dwellings after the separation;
- In no case did children feel more at home with their father than with their mother.

3.2. The Italian property market



The Italian property market

This point has a fundamental impact on the practice of SPC in Italy. In fact, the Italian housing market has historically been built around apartment blocks (condominio) or single-family houses, which are built gradually, floor by floor, allowing different members of the extended family to occupy the various floors (Filandri et al, 2020; Semi et al, 2020). This means that **many Italian families live in apartments.**

The families we met were no exception to this trend as, apart from one mother who lived in a house with a small garden, all the other parents lived in apartments, even in suburban and rural areas. Mothers' dwellings are generally more spacious - at least from the child's point of view. What's more, when it comes to the distribution of living space, apart from 3 only children who have their own bedroom at their mother's and their father's, **almost all siblings share a bedroom, pre and post separation**. This includes:

- 1 family where the brother and sister have their own room at both their mother and their father's (the parents are well off);
- 1 family where the eldest has younger twin brothers and has his own room at both parents' - note that at the father's dwelling, the father shares the room with the two little ones;
- 2 children have a single room at their mother's but not at their father's;
- 1 child has a single room at their father's, but not at their mother's;
- All other children share a room in both households.



There is less of this normative idea that it is good for siblings to have 'their own room', especially when they enter adolescence.

However, this is not seen as a constraint. In general, **in Italy there is less of this normative idea that it is good for siblings to have 'their own room', especially when they enter adolescence** (Glevarec, 2010; Palludan & Winther, 2016; Ramos, 2018). In addition, among the Italian children we met, siblings **share a room regardless of their age and regardless of the number of children**: we met children up to the age of 18 during the second wave of data collection who shared a room with their brothers; there were also cases of adolescent brothers and sisters sharing a room, and cases of three or even four children sharing a room. But again, this is not experienced as a constraint and it has not occurred to these children to ask for their own room. Most of them are well aware that a dwelling in which each of them would have his or her own room would be far beyond their parents' means, in relation to the housing market in Piedmont.

We also found that for fathers who had to find new accommodation after separation, proximity to the mother's dwelling, grandmother's dwelling or school was more important than the size of the dwelling. Consequently, among the families who took part in our study, there are:

- **3 fathers who share their bedroom with one or more children** - which is never the case at the mothers';
- **1 father who sleeps on the sofa bed in the living room every night;**
- **1 father sleeping with one of the children while the other sleeps on the sofa bed in the living room.**

But again, children value having two dwellings close to each other or close to places they go to, such as school, more than having more living space in their own dwelling. This has several implications for the way in which Italian children practise SPC.

First, **there is less material and symbolic investment in living spaces**. The bedroom is not a place of reference or intimacy, as it is the case in our Belgian study. This can also be explained by the fact that this is a **culture where people live more outdoors** and therefore spend less time in homes, including the bedroom. This also has an impact on **territorial conflicts**, tensions, and strategies related to the appropriation of space, were almost unfound in Italy. Finally, in the families we met, **we did not observe any rationale for the appropriation of space that changed with separation**.

Second, there is **an imbalance in the way things are stored** in mothers' and fathers' dwellings. The majority of fathers' dwellings are smaller, bedrooms are shared, sometimes with the father, and in some cases common areas such as the living room are also used for sleeping. This means there is **less space for wardrobes or shelves to store personal items**. So it is easy to understand why most children store **most of their belongings at their mother's**. This is also made possible by the fact that children move between dwellings frequently, that these are often close to each other and that many of them return to one of the dwellings during the week to do their homework.

Third, **there were very few family recomposition among our participants**. Only two fathers had children with a new partner. Among the other parents: 15 are single; 3 are cohabiting with a new partner; 8 are in a non-cohabiting couple, two of whom have children from previous unions. The latter, like other parents, do not envisage having a recomposed family one day, as housing to accommodate them all seems unaffordable. Couples with children from previous unions therefore arrange to see each other on days when they don't have their respective children, and possibly to sleep at each other's dwellings - sometimes they organise weekend day-trips into town with all the children, but this remains the exception. This also has an **impact on the low level of territorial conflicts** compared to the situation of the Belgian stepfamilies we met.

Finally, we note that **in certain families, siblings sometimes have different alternating days**, in two cases:

- When sports activities are scheduled on different days and take place near one of the two dwellings. For example, one family has two boys who have soccer training that finishes late and is close to the father's dwelling. This is a family whose parents live more than 25 minutes away from each other and who have a flexible schedule during the week and alternate on weekends. During the week, the boys don't necessarily alternate together on the evenings when they have soccer training, preferring to sleep at the father's dwelling on those days.
- Depending on homework help: when one parent able to help with homework than the other, the alternation will vary depending on school tests. For example, a child will sleep alone at the father's the night before a test so that he can revise with him and not be disturbed by his brother. This has also been observed in cases where the parents live more than 20 minutes away from each other, so the decision is made to sleep at the father's once they are done studying.

The points presented in this report inevitably lead us to examine gender relations in relation to the practice of SPC in Italy. In general, the literature suggests that the introduction of SPC contributes to an increased gender equality between parents, as fathers become more involved in domestic tasks and mothers see an increase in the time they can devote to their professional careers (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2021; Thomson and Turunen, 2021). However, the Italian case calls to rethink these observations in two main ways.

First, **from a legal perspective, it appears that fathers might be disadvantaged**, at least in cases where a judge decides on custody arrangements. Mothers are favoured in terms of the allocation of the pre-separation family dwelling and generally still receive alimony, even in cases of egalitarian SPC (de Blasio & Vuri, 2019; Murru, 2021). We have also seen that alternation schedules amongst the families we met tend to allocate more overnight stays to mothers: in most cases, alternation is organised to allow a larger block of 5 to 6 days at the mother's dwelling in one week out of 4. And when families plan times of physical co-presence, it's either only with the mother or with both parents – but, in either case, with the mother.

In fact, the school and residential system helps to **reinforce the position of the mother-as-main-carer** (Crespi & Ruspini 2015; Merla & Murru, 2021; Murgia & Poggio 2011; Naldini & Solera 2018; Naldini & Santero, 2019). One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the system of the "homework house". Since, in the vast majority of cases, the homework house is the mother's, mothers tend to adjust their working hours so that they can be there when their children come home from school, prepare lunch for them and possibly supervise their homework. In these cases, mothers also spend more on food supplies, as the children's meals have to be planned during the week. The 'homework house' often becomes the place where the children keep all their clothes and where laundry is done. Many children have got into the habit of having a shower at the mother's dwelling when they've finished their homework, putting on the clothes they're going to wear to school the next day, and then going to the father's dwelling for the evening and night - which explains why they only keep underwear and pyjamas at the father's dwelling. It should be noted that we have also observed that it is more often fathers who do car rides to pick up or drop off the children and, if necessary, to drop off or collect things (school or sports bags) when the dwellings are further apart and when there is no homework house system in place.

Finally, we have observed several instances in the discourse of both parents and children around **the normative idea that children 'need their mother', or that it goes without saying that they feel more at home at their mother's**. However, we have also seen that structural factors explain and help to reinforce this feeling and idea. It appears, then, that **the nuclear family model** remains the dominant normative reference model, coupled with the model of the male breadwinner and the female caregiver, which is not diminished with the introduction of SPC.

SPC IN LOCKDOWN

As the second wave of data collection took place during the strict lockdown enforced in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 - particularly in northern Italy, which was the epicentre of the virus' spread in Europe - we wanted to understand how separated families, whose children are normally used to daily mobility, coped with forced immobility. We analysed the strategies that these families developed to cope with lockdown, but we also looked at the underlying structural elements that contributed to shape this experience.

We developed a typology based on alternating custody arrangements during lockdown and how this affected parental involvement, based on (1) whether or not overnight stays were changed in favour of the mother/father, and (2) similar/different arrangements for siblings.

Four types were identified:

- Living exclusively with the mother, increasing the mother's caring responsibilities;
- Maintaining a relative status quo;
- The separation of siblings and the increased involvement of fathers in caring;
- The introduction of different arrangements for siblings, which increases care responsibilities for mothers;

In each type, we were able to highlight new parenting practices and the role played by the material configurations of the dwelling, relationships and tensions between family members, and the balancing of work, school and childcare. In particular, we showed that while the separation of siblings was in some ways experienced as a resource in times of lockdown - reducing the number of people living under the same roof at the same time - it also had an impact on the division of childcare responsibilities, with both parents in some cases living permanently with at least one of their children. In these cases, fathers were given more care responsibilities, partly challenging the dominant model of 'mother as main carer' that characterises Italian society.



To find out more:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/260076>

Lessons from Italy

In short, the analysis of everyday practices of SPC in Italy highlights three elements:

- (1) **The inextricable link between the school system and the practice of SPC.** School plays an important role in children's lives. Particularly in the case of SPC, new functions are ascribed to the school: in the Belgian case, it is observed that it functions as a "transitional space-time", as children often pass from one dwelling to the other through the school. The school offering children a kind of "decompression chamber" between their two residential contexts. On the other hand, the Italian case confronts us and encourages us to further explore the question of the weight and impact of the school system and national educational policies (Griffith & Smith, 2010) on the practice of SPC.
- (2) The influence of **the layout of the dwelling** on the way SPC is structured and organised. Indeed, if the dwelling is cramped and people live more outdoors, this has implications for the way children perceive their different places of residence, as well as the different outdoor spaces they frequent. The Italian case, and the way in which some children see their 'neighbourhood as home', encourages us to look not only at children's dwellings when analysing their relationship with space, but to look more closely at all the places they frequent.
- (3) Finally, in order to gain a better understanding about the balance of parenting practices in the context of SPC, the Italian case calls for greater attention to be paid, on the one hand, **to what families do with the time spent during the day** outside of overnight residence and, on the other hand, **to the way in which siblings organise their alternations**, sometimes not together. These two factors help to shape parents' involvement in caring tasks, as well as the amount of time they have alone, without children. In line with the work of Davies (2015), our study thus encourages further consideration of the sharing of care tasks in separated families.



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FINAL REPORT OF THE MOBILEKIDS PROJECT

Children in shared physical custody

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