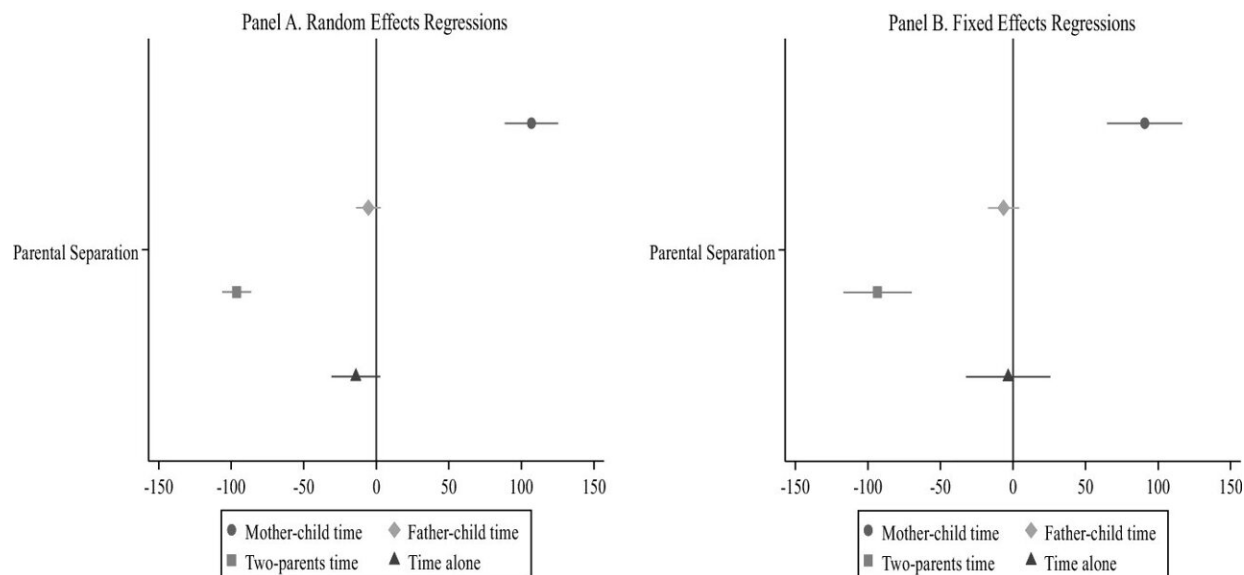


# Separation leads to significant but temporary gender differences in parent-child time

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Regression models of children’s time with parents and alone—average effect. Source Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. K Cohort, waves 1–6 (2004–2014). Note Both the random effects (Panel A) and fixed effects (Panel B) regressions include four separate models, controlling for child age, maternal education, paternal education, mother’s class, father’s class, language spoken at home, number of siblings, region of residence, and residential parent re-partnering. Child’s sex is only included in the random effects models. Confidence intervals are included at the 95% level (number of diary observations = 14,862). Credit: *European Journal of Population* (2022). DOI: 10.1007/s10680-022-09643-2

Separation leads to a significant but temporary increase in gender inequalities in parent-child time, according to new research from sociologists in Trinity College Dublin and UNED Madrid, Spain.

The international study found that after parental split up mother-child [time](#) doubles, two-parent time declines threefold, and father-child time remains low. It also found that parental break-up negatively affects children's time use, especially among boys, with an increase in children's time spent in unstructured activities and moderate decline in educational activities.

These effects, particularly the dramatic increase in mother-child time, are however temporary, with strong effects in the short run, and a return to pre-separation levels after 2–4 years.

This finding supports set-point theory, which predicts that major life events impact on an individual's behavior in the short term but the individual adapts back to their pre-event baseline over time. This return toward pre-separation levels of parent-child time could be related to a reduction in the incidence of stress, a rearrangement in time-use patterns or the starting of new partnerships in the years after divorce or separation occurred.

How divorce and separation influences parents' and children's time use has received very little scientific attention. This study, published recently in the *European Journal of Population*, sheds new light on how parental separation shapes parent-child time and children's daily activities.

The study used unique time-diary data from six waves of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. It is the first time that the effects of parental separation on parental involvement and children's time use has been examined with longitudinal data across multiple waves.

## Key findings:

- Parental separation leads to strong increases in gender inequalities in childcare time. After separation, mother-child time doubles, two-parent time declines threefold, and father-child time remains low.
- Parental separation also leads to a decline in children's time allocated to educational activities (e.g., studying, reading) and an increase in children's time in unstructured activities (e.g., TV watching, video gaming, smartphone use).
- The effect of separation on children's time use is twice as large for boys than for girls, with gender gaps in children's unstructured time increasing over time.
- These effects of separation, particularly regarding mother-child time, is temporary, with strong effects in the short run, and a return to pre-separation levels after 2–4 years.

Pablo Gracia, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Trinity commented, "We show that parental separation can lead to declines in children's engagement in developmental activities, particularly among boys. But also, we critically show that separation can bring important additional 'time penalties' to women that contribute to existing gender inequalities in society."

"In our research we wish to avoid simplistic debates on whether divorce is a good or a bad thing. Separation can lead to both positive and negative outcomes, and this depends very much on each case. Our study simply highlights some risks that parents and children can face in [everyday life](#) after separation and will be of great interest to policy makers and the general public seeking to mitigate some of the negative outcomes of the separation process."

Tomás Cano, Assistant Professor of Sociology, UNED, Madrid added,

"Our findings have strong policy implications. Separation not only leads mothers to experiencing a motherhood wage penalty, but also a time penalty. Promoting gender equality in caring responsibilities after separation and divorce could bring improvements in mother's career advancements, with separated fathers potentially working more on caring for children."

"Equally, the findings that boys' educational activities, reading and studying, are disproportionately harmed by separation will need to be taken into account by educational [policy makers](#)."

**More information:** Tomás Cano et al, The Gendered Effects of Divorce on Mothers' and Fathers' Time with Children and Children's Developmental Activities: A Longitudinal Study, *European Journal of Population* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10680-022-09643-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-022-09643-2)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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