

Researching Communication Needs and Practices between Divorced Parents and their Children

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1 Introduction

Existing research in the field of divorced families concentrates more to the characteristics that are important to the development of children growing up in such families. There is no research, in our knowledge that proposes technical solutions to the improvement of communication between these family members.

The goal of this report is to unveil the facts in the Netherlands of single-parent families, present what has already been researched in literature regarding communication in single-parent families and finally propose a method to elicit requirements of a pervasive awareness system which could satisfy the communication needs of single-parent families.

The source of information for the the first goal was the website of Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). CBS is the official organization held responsible for gathering and publicizing facts about the society in the Netherlands. It also provides some comprehensive articles that analyze facts and figures of their research.

The second goal was achieved by reviewing the chapter: "Communication in Divorced Families and Single-Parent Families"[10] printed in "Handbook of Family Communication". This chapter summarizes 76 conference and journal papers as well as other chapters in books that are related to divorced and single-parent families. The interesting finding is that the main concern of the majority of researchers are the factors that lead families to divorce and the factors that potentially affect children's lives. Communication is seen as means of answering the pre-mentioned focus of research, rather than the end.

Finally, several research methods were reviewed by the assistance of the book: "Research Methods in Psychology". A Focus Group is proposed as the most suitable for serving the purpose of eliciting requirements of an awareness system aiming at improving the communication in single-parent families.

2 User group characteristics, in the Netherlands

2.1 Figures

According to figures of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), there is a steady growth of single-parent families every year in the Netherlands 1. The expectation of CBS is that this number will rise further to more than 500 thousand single parent families in 2020. Divorce is the main reason for the creation of Single-Parent Families [6]. The population of single-mothers is far greater (85%) than that of single fathers (15%).

Number of two- and single parent families			
	Total	Two-parent families	Single parent families
	x 1000		
1995	2473	2112	361
1996	2474	2106	369
1997	2465	2093	372
1998	2459	2084	375
1999	2457	2078	380
2000*	2468	2081	387
2001*	2487	2088	399

Figuur 1: Steady growth of single-parent families, source: CBS

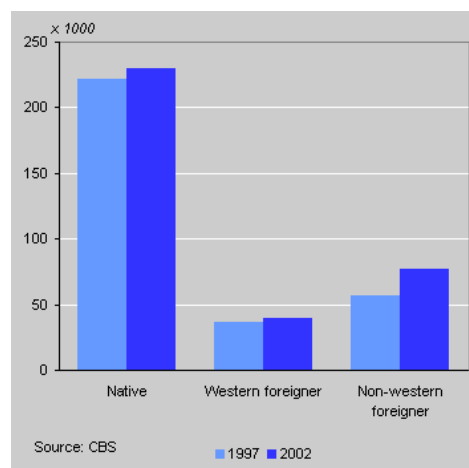
Subjects	Marriages dissolved due to divorce				
	Total divorces	Average duration of marriage at divorce	Total percentage divorces	Average age of divorcing men	Average age of divorcing women
Periods	absolute	year	%	year	
1992	30,463		12.3	29.3	40.0
1993	30,496		12.0	29.2	40.1
1994	36,182		12.0	33.5	40.3
1995	34,170		12.2	31.7	40.4
1996	34,871		12.2	32.8	40.8
1997	33,740		12.3	32.4	41.0
1998	32,459		12.7	31.8	41.6
1999	33,571		12.9	32.1	41.8
2000	34,650		12.9	34.1	41.9
2001	37,104		13.1	37.2	42.1
2002	33,179		13.6	34.4	42.7
2003	31,479		13.6	33.3	43.0

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Figuur 2: Marriages dissolved, source: CBS

In absolute numbers there were just over 410 thousand single parents in the Netherlands in 2002, 40 thousand more than in 1997 and 49 thousand more than in 1995. They include 65 thousand single fathers and 345 thousand single mothers. That makes 85% of single-parents women. This percentage did not change at all over the years. About a quarter of the single mothers has never been married [4]. The 345 thousand single mothers include 77 thousand single mothers of non-western descent 3 [6]. The high percentage of single mothers among (non-western)

foreigners is partly caused by the higher risk of divorce for these groups (marriages where spouses belong to different cultures). Half of native Dutch single mothers are divorced, a quarter are widows, and one quarter are unmarried [6].



Figuur 3: Single mothers by ethnic group, source: CBS

Overall, every year some hundred thousand couples break up. About a third of them get divorced and the remainder are cohabiting couples who break up. It should be noted that most of these two hundred thousand people are in their late twenties [9]. A divorce is a major change for the lives of children. Some facts and figures about their situation, in the Netherlands, are following in the next section.

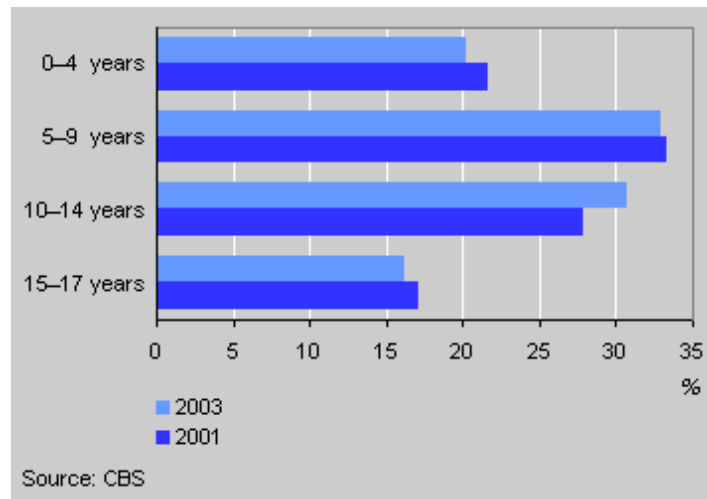
2.2 Children's involvement

The facts described in the previous section, makes one out of six families with children a single parent family. Sixty percent out of these families, has one child [5]. On the contrary, there are few single parent families with many children: only 10% has three children or more [4]. Furthermore, most of the divorces (6 out of 10) concern couples with under age children [7]. One can review the percentage of children who are affected by divorce, categorized by age, in the following figure:

The majority of those children (80%) are going to stay with their mother. Some, (15%) will live with their father and the remaining (5%) live with their father and mother alternately, with a foster family or in a home [6]. Although the cases of foster families or homes are very few. That makes co-parenting cases the exception and mothers acting as the custodial, single-parent the rule.

The communication between children and their parents is affected after the divorce. One quarter of all children of divorced couples no longer have any contact with their father after the divorce. One third of the children who do see their father view their relationship with him negatively. Two thirds consider the relationship reasonably good or good.

On the other hand, it is just over 60% of children in one-parent families say that they have a good relationship with their mother. This is a smaller percentage than for children in two-parent families, where eighty per cent have a good relationship with their mother [2].



Figuur 4: Children affected by divorce by age, source: CBS

Single parent families by number of children

	Total	Of whom		
		1 child	2 children	3 children or more
x 1000				
1995	361	218	106	36
1996	369	223	109	37
1997	372	224	110	38
1998	375	225	111	39
1999	380	228	112	40
2000*	387	231	115	41
2001*	399	237	119	42

Source: Statistics Netherlands

Figuur 5: Single-parent families by number of children, source: CBS

Parents, as individuals will continue their life. Most men (75%) who divorced in 1994 were living with a new partner in 2000, for women this was 60%. It would thus seem more divorced women than men remain alone. One important reason for this is that children will usually stay with the mother after a divorce, and the presence of children reduces the chance of entering a new relationship. This is true for both men and women [2]. It must be noted though that cohabiting couples run a higher risk of breaking up than married couples [5].

Forty per cent of children of divorced parents are confronted with a step-parent at some stage in time. In by far most cases this is a stepfather. Children are thirteen years of age on average when step-parents enter this stage. Less than half of these children have a positive view of this new family situation, while for children growing up with both their own parents, this percentage is eighty. Children with a step-parent have spent an average of five years in a single parent family [4].

It is reported that children of divorced parents are more likely to break off their own relationships [8]. Since one quarter of children of divorced parents no longer have any contact with their fathers, and another quarter have a difficult relationship, one can conclude that most communication problems exist in the group of fathers with their children.

3 Communication in Divorced Families

The facts of this section are based on the chapter: "Communication in divorced and single parent families" from the book: "Handbook of family communication" [10]. This chapter focuses on "the commonalities in the findings across studies and highlight the different methodologies" on studies on communication of divorced parents and their children.

The research methods already used are: self-reporting on paper questionnaires, interviewing and observations. However, only a few investigations have directly observed family members interacting.

But before focusing on the communication of this group, a few words on the reasons that create this separation. In a nut-shell, the main reason reported is the *frequency of marital conflict*. High amounts of *negative affect* (e.g. criticism, defensiveness, contempt) is a predictor of couples who were more likely to divorce within 7 years. The *absence of positive affect* on the other hand, was a predictor of later divorces. The sources of conflict can be various. Events such as extra-marital affairs, loss of employment, the birth of a child can affect profoundly the couple.

There is a distinction between two types of divorced families. Families that experienced *high-level conflict* and *relatively low-level conflict*.

3.1 Pre-Divorce Situation

Conflict is the main reason of divorce. This conflict could be the outcome of several factors but the main reason which creates conflict, is the fact that the needs of one, or both of the spouses are insufficiently covered within marriage. Namely, having a difficulty in recognizing, communicating and eventually satisfying needs.

Conflict that directly involves children, is the most harmful in their upbringing. Here the child can act as the target of conflict, the observer or the reason for parental conflict. However, there are families that keep the conflict away from their children. This though acts as a shock to the children because when the couple decides to break up, that decision seems without reason. Suddenly children are exposed and become the target of conflict; regarding issues of custody, child-support and time-sharing. Another myth is that conflict declines after divorce. Facts point exactly to the contrary, specifically in short time after the divorce.

3.2 Characteristics of Post-Divorce Communication

It is difficult to predict the individual behavior after the divorce. There are cases of fathers who were previously distant whereas after divorcing become more involved and vice-versa. There are also cases that mothers changed the nature of their care-giving. Individuals who had a stable and confident character displayed chaotic behaviors and people who were fragile and insecure showed strength after the divorce.

On the contrary with individual behavior, communication between spouses is very easy to predict; it declines. Usually it takes some time till the level of intensity and interactions subsides. Additionally, the content of communication becomes more practical and less personal. It revolves around topics of mutual concern and especially around children issues.

There are five different descriptions of communication between spouses after divorce:

- Mutual constructive communication:
Both parties seek constructive problem solving and avoid conflict.
- Demand/withdraw communication:
One party is demanding contact whereas the other withdraws. Usually wives are the demanders and husbands the withdrawers.
- Mutual avoidance:
Both parties avoid communicating as much as possible.
- Perfect pals:
Both spouses communicate in a positive way.
- Angry associates:
Both spouses communicate in a negative way.

A common factor in all cases though is parental responsibilities. Generally it is expected that parents will keep communication channels open for the sake of children, to accommodate their needs. Reality though shows that very few parents achieve that level of communication. Most parents engage in "parallel parenting". On the other hand, there are very few cases where negative communication is maintained, in which children are also involved.

On the whole, parenting is much harder after divorce (loss of resources, increased stress, addition of responsibilities, etc.). This fact affects directly the relations between parents and children. For example, 1-year postdivorce custodial mothers showed less affection, communicated less, punished more harshly and showed more inconsistent discipline. Custodial fathers had less problems with discipline, but also communicated less and monitored ineffectively their children. Non-custodial fathers became less parental and more strict.

Co-parenting is a very complex task. It requires constructive communication, share of resources, conflict avoidance and mutual respect. Both parents need to act authoritatively but with warmth, give support but monitor the activities of their children, be open to discussion. All of these should be done in two households simultaneously. The ability of co-parenting has proven one of the strongest influences on children's post-divorce adjustment. Ideally co-parenting has the following characteristics:

- Open channel of communication between parents about the children
- Cooperation in setting limits
- Effective problem solving

- Communicate consistent, positive and affective messages

The criterion of being successful on the pre-mentioned characteristics is redefining the limits and roles of both the parents. This negotiation is critical. The greater access to children means more contact between parents. That fact is reported to conclude to more conflict. Due to conflict, especially non-custodial fathers tend to withdraw from their responsibilities. There is also evidence that custodial mothers control access between fathers and children through the degree of resentment directed at father. Fathers tend to avoid contact when negativity is high. However, frequent contact between parents, with the consideration that there are no negative interactions, is beneficial to the children.

The majority of cases take up roles of "parallel-parenting". Parents operate independently having as less contact as possible with the other parent. Less contact usually means less conflict but creates two distinct families. Hence, the children might have to cope with different rules, values and daily practices. The norm is that both parents break communication when children move to adolescence. They also become less involved with their children's activities and communicate in a negative way; especially between mothers and daughters. Most teenagers leave or spend less time at home, avoid communication with family members and are more vulnerable to risky behaviors (like drug use, early sex and alcohol). Moreover, relationships between the non-custodial parent and his/her children are bound to decrease over time. However, it is likely that non-custodial fathers get involved with their sons. At the same time they seem to have difficulty in maintaining a good relationship with their daughters.

The fact that seems to earn the respect of children is hard-working parents that sacrifice a lot during their upbringing. It should be noted though that children in non-divorced families showed more warmth and closeness to their parents comparing with the ones in divorced. Adult children from divorced families tend to spend less time and resources for their parents and feel less responsible for them. However, there are cases that when they in their turn become parents, the relationship with their parents is restored.

3.3 Conclusions - potential requirements of an awareness system

As mentioned earlier most of the studies aim to predict the factors that will lead a family in a divorce, or distinguish the characteristics that will affect children in their adult life. Although the route of the problem in divorces is poor communication, which deteriorates after divorce, there are no (technical at least) proposals for the improvement of communication between children and their parents.

Eliciting requirements for a system that aims to improve communication in such a complex and sensitive situation is not an easy task. There are some directions that can be drawn by the literature review. It seems that:

The system should be sensitive to the type of relationship: Different relationships have different needs. Generally, fathers tend to have better relations with their sons, whereas have difficulties with their daughters. Custodial-mothers might also encounter problems with their daughters.

The content of communication should not stimulate inter-parent communication: Communication between parents creates more conflicts and deteriorates the overall communication. The content of a proposed system should instead, focus on children's activities that do not involve parents.

Communication between parents and children is sometimes negatively biased: Pre and post divorce conflicts construct a negative frame of communication. Sometimes children are the target of that communication and sometimes they are being used as mediums of negative messages. Proactive communication which suggests topics of discussion between parents and children, based on children's activities and interests, could support a parent in communicating with the children.

Facilitate overlapping parenting efforts: Parents due to the fact that do not communicate with each other tend to co-parent. That creates two households and brings practical difficulties to parents and children alike. A "parallel parenting" is usually what occurs. A system should log children's activities without emphasizing the roles of parents. It should rather present the parenting tasks as needs of the children and not as parental efforts.

4 Proposed Method for eliciting requirements for a Pervasive Awareness System

The first question that needs to be addressed is whether a *Pervasive Awareness System* would be seen by parents and children as a medium of improving communication between them. To answer effectively that question, one needs to know:

1. **Are existing communication mediums sufficient?** Thus, elicit the communication habits in the current situation. More specifically, the mediums used, the content communicated (form and semantics), the activities in face-to-face interactions, how much time is spent over medium.
2. **What are the attitudes towards possible awareness systems?** Thus, present scenarios of pervasive awareness systems and observe the reaction of participants.

As mentioned earlier, the methodologies used while researching communication in divorced families was [10]:

- Self-reporting methods; namely questionnaires
- In-depth interviews
- Observations¹

We propose an alternative method: Focus Groups. Given the fact that it is the beginning of the “Pervasive Awareness” project:

- “Focus Groups are often used in an exploratory way, when researchers are not entirely sure what categories, links and perspectives are relevant.” [11]
- “A group can provide prompts to talk, correcting or responding to others, and a plausible audience for that talk that is not just the researcher. **So focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in everyday lives - but don't**”[11]
- “Focus groups are seen as valuable tools for exploring how points of view are constructed as well as how they are expressed” ([13] viewed at: [12])

Moreover, Focus Groups are often a good method of data generation if the question to be addressed [12]:

- Involves gathering opinions and impressions from lay people or consumers
- Affects many people the same way
- Suggests that group discussions would help people to be frank

They are less useful if:

- Deep and detailed responses are needed
- Individuals’ reactions are likely to vary, and this difference is important to capture
- The topic is likely to involve private reactions

¹Observations were the less used, because of practical difficulties.

4.1 Important features of a Focus Group

This section attempts, in a nutshell, to present all the features that a researcher should pay attention to in conducting a Focus Group.

Location is important: The physical location should be flexible that participants see each other, do not produce dead spots and should convey a cosy and friendly atmosphere.

Degree of moderation can vary: The moderator could be strict and tightly control the responses of participants or could be more loose and let discussions evolve.

Participants should have various backgrounds: It is reported that Focus Groups in which participants were well-educated do not necessarily work better [11]. They do work better with participants who have well-developed routines for talking to each other; having something in common is already a good aspect.

Moderator should be prepared for introvert, quiet participants: A subtle technic of addressing such a matter is by using body-language. For example, the moderator can orientate his body (and particular shoulders) and keep his gaze fixed to a participant who has not been speaking.

4.2 Research Questions

In this section, we are trying to describe the activities and research questions we want to conduct and address with the Focus Group. These activities are ordered in the way they are going to be presented to participants.

4.2.1 Starting activity

In a Focus Group, “breaking the ice“ and focusing on the topic of discussion is important for the outcome of the discussion. Free-word association is a method used for achieving that. Thus participants will be asked to write on a paper:

- Please write what first comes to your mind when you think of “communication with my children“.

4.2.2 Current communication habits

Next, participants will be asked to mention how much they are using current mediums:

- Do you initiate communication with your children (while they are with their other parent)?
- If yes, what mediums do they use? (If not, what is the reason?)
- If yes, what are the reasons?
- If yes, how often do you do that?
- Try to remember the last time there was such an initiation. Could you describe it?
- Try to remember the last time you wanted to know how your children were doing (while they with their parent). What did you do?

Then, participants will be asked to rate certain statements. We believe that this will focus and stimulate discussion. The rating will be on a five-scale (Strongly disagree-disagree-undecided-agree-Strongly Agree). The statements to be asked are the following:

- The existing communication mediums (telephone, mobile phone, email, instant-messaging) are serving well the communication with my children, when they are visiting the other parent.
- I would not mind sharing information (like pictures) of activities between me and my children, with my ex-partner.
- I wouldn't mind having no communication with my children, when my children are visiting my ex-partner.
- I would rate the overall communication between me and my children is: (very good-good-neutral-could be improved-needs a lot of improvement)

4.2.3 Children's perspective

Knowing the children's communication habits is equally important. We realize that having as participants only parents, we lose children's perspective. But the parent's view about the children's involvement is equally important because they are the major influence of children. Thus, parents will be asked the following questions:

- Do children initiate communication with you (while they are with their other parent)?
- If yes, what mediums do they use? (If not, what is the reason?)
- If yes, what are the reasons?
- If yes, how often do they do that?
- Try to remember the last time there was such an initiation. Could you describe it?

4.2.4 Communication between the parents

Inter-parent communication affects the parent-children communication. We need to know if and what are the communication channels open between the two parents. So, participants will be asked the following questions:

- How would you rate the communication you have with your ex-partner now? (5-point scale)
- Do you talk about the children with your ex-partner? If yes, what are the things you usually discuss about? How often do you do that?

4.2.5 Communication Attitudes

This section tries to grasp the attitudes of parents towards communication involving their children and their ex-partner. There is the case that parents do not want any more communication, or they are satisfied with the communication they already have.

- Please recall some of the main events this week that you shared with your child and note them down. Would you like some impression of them to be communicated to the other partner? If yes, why? and in what form? If no, why not?
- Are there cases, where you find out about the activities of the child with the other partner that you would prefer not to know about? Can you describe them?
- Would you like to be informed about daily activities of children (if yes, which of them are more important)?
- If yes, would you like to be informed about daily activities of children if the other parent is involved as well?
- Do you mind children communicating (over medium) activities they with their other parent?
- Would you be willing to share information about daily activities of children to the other parent?
- Try to remember one recent incident, while you were communicating with your children (over medium) that made you happy.
- Try to remember one incident from the previous week that you would like to communicate to your children (while the children are with you).
- Try to remember one incident from the previous week that you would like to communicate to your children (while the children are with the other parent).

4.2.6 Attitudes towards an Awareness System

Next, participants will be presented with scenarios of potential awareness systems and will be asked to give their opinions. They will be asked to read the statements in the following list. These statements will be accompanied by a picture which will clearly present the proposed solution.

- Imagine the following device: A child touches the frame-picture of his/her parent. That gesture lights the frame that holds a picture of the child in the parent's side [15].
- Imagine the following device: You are carrying a mobile-phone that can show you at any time, if your children want and are available to communicate with. Moreover you can see which is the means they can be contacted with (e.g. email) [16].
- Imagine you have a device like a pin-board [17]. There is one in the children's room in both of the houses of their parents. In this pin-board, both you and your children can put digital-pictures, or write messages to each-other. You can also delete the pictures and/or the messages. These two "electronic-pin boards" show the exact same thing. That is the pictures and messages you and your children are storing.
- Imagine a shelf with a camera pointing at it. The child can place things on the shelf. Your child(ren) can place drawings, new favorite toys, sweets awarded for good behavior, the tooth that fell out last night. They can also empty the shelf or cover it. You will get notified for changes in the shelf-content and can see the contents of the shelf as an MMS on your mobile phone or on an email, or on a protected website.

- Imagine that your activities are represented by an abstract picture. For example, the picture is busy if you are busy, it shows Amsterdam if you are there, your office if you are there, a car if you are driving, group of people is on the picture if you are not alone, etc. This picture is updated automatically and can be seen by your child(ren) in an MMS on their mobile phone, or on a protected website, or on an email.
- Imagine that you play a game with the child(ren). Through the game the child gets reminders of his/her activities in the week and tells a story about them.

4.2.7 Greater issues addressed

The greater issues we want to address can be summarized in the following list:

- Do parents communicate their feelings/activities/events to their children, while the children are in the custody of the other parent?
- How much are their communication needs covered?
- In case their communication needs are not covered sufficiently, how much are their communication needs over medium covered?
- What is it that children communicate to their parents when they are in the custody of the other parent?
- What is it that children communicate to them when they are together?
- What do parents do when they want to know how their children are doing?
- How much information are they willing to share with the other parent about the children?
- Would they see their child carrying a device that can communicate awareness information to them?

4.3 Potential bibliographic interest

Since the proposed methodology is not used before (according to [10]) a reflection of the results produced by Focus Groups could be interesting to the scientific community.

Furthermore, requirements or even solutions that would address the communication needs of the user group have not previously published (as far as our knowledge permits us to say something like this and based on [10]).

Finally, it seems that in co-parenting research focus was drawn only in process models of co-parenting and there is no literature of the content of co-parenting. In the words of [15], “process variables focus only on how the parents communicate, leaving out what they are communicating about”.

4.4 Analysis

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