Post-separation families: Residential arrangements and everyday life of separated parents and their children
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Children living dual-locally: Parental perceptions of children’s residential experience after separation
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ABSTRACT - Most children with separated parents live to some extent dual-locally. This article aims to acquire insight into separated parents’ perceptions of their children’s residential experiences. Empirical evidence is drawn from a qualitative study among 35 separated parents in the Netherlands. Five parents stated explicitly that they had taken into account where their children would feel at home, while negotiating a post-separation residential arrangement. All five preferred for their children to experience one residence as home. However, this preference resulted in different residential arrangements. Residential mothers (with whom the children live most of the time) in particular perceived their children to experience their residence, more than that of their ex-partners, as home. Shared residence parents (whose children alternate between their and their ex-partners’ homes) more often perceived their children to experience both residences as home. These differences in perception can be explained by elements of the temporal, physical and social dimensions.

5.1 Introduction

According to the dominant, western ideology of childhood, home has a central meaning in children’s everyday life (Forsberg and Strandell, 2007; Harden et al., 2013). ‘The significance of home cannot be ignored, nor can day care, hobbies or school ever replace home totally’ (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä, 2012: 82). However, what one sees as ‘home’, is not easily defined and the meanings and lived experiences are diverse (Blunt and Varley, 2004). The concept of home is historically, socially and culturally constructed, and formed and reformed over time. In the post-modern debate, ‘home’ is seen as a multiple, situational, individual and transitory concept (Rapport and Overing, 2000). Consequently, the concept of home has been detached from a distinct, physical location and has become mobile (Ni Laoire et al., 2010). This notion of mobile home suggests that the concept of home has become footloose, or that place is no longer related to ‘home’. However, as Ursin (2011: 223) stated: ‘The
contemporary notion of ‘home’ as mobile does not indicate that one is at home everywhere, but rather that one may feel at home anywhere, depending on the circumstances.’ In other words: one could bring ‘home’ along to other places (Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009a).

In European countries 67 to 90% of the children live with both of their parents, usually residing at one location (see for percentages per country Currie et al., 2004: 28). Considering the high divorce rates, the number of children living at two different physical locations is expected to be substantial in European countries, the United States and Australia. As far as I know, there are no exact numbers available on children living dual-locally.

In the Netherlands, 30% of all children under age 18 have separated parents (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). Most of these children live with their mother and have contact with their non-resident father on a regular basis (66% of the children of separation in the Netherlands: Spruijt and Kormos, 2014; 80 to 85% in the United States: Kelly, 2007). Approximately 32% of the non-resident fathers who divorced after 1979 have their children sleep over at least once a week (Kalmijn and De Graaf, 2000). Furthermore, there is a growing group of parents who maintain a shared residence arrangement, in which their children live with both parents alternately on an (nearly) equal basis (27% of the children of separation in the Netherlands: Spruijt and Kormos, 2014; 9 to 12% in the United Kingdom: Peacey and Hunt, 2009).

Both children who regularly stay with a non-resident parent and children who are involved in a shared residence arrangement live to some extent in two parental households and therefore live dual-locally. Having children who live at two residential locations has consequences not only for separated parents’ daily life (Bakker and Karsten, 2013; Bakker et al., 2014; Stjernström and Strömgren, 2012) but also, likely, for their children’s everyday life and experience of home.

For dual-local children (as well for migrant or nomadic children), the concept of mobile home might be a daily reality. Neale et al. (2003) stated that feeling at home at both parental residences is one of the key elements of children feeling positive about being involved in a shared residence arrangement. However, children’s residential experience is important not only to shared residence parents. According to Fleming and Atkinson (1999) children’s residential experience is also important to non-resident parents, who want their children to feel at home and to enjoy visiting them.

In their study on the consequences of divorce, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989)

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12 2.0 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in the Netherlands in 2011; 3.7 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in the USA in 2011; 2.2 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants in the England in 2011, for more numbers see Eurostat Yearbook, 2013.
stated that many children experience a lasting discrepancy between their mothers’ and fathers’ homes. Common complaints of parents about shared residence arrangements include the lack of one place where children feel at home, difficulties experienced by the children with belonging in two places and the need for the children to frequently commute between two residences (Gilmore, 2006; Jensen, 2007).

Qualitative studies on the child’s perspective have shown a more nuanced image (Haugen, 2010; Neale et al., 2003; Schier and Proske, 2010; Smart et al., 2001). According to Haugen (2010) many children of divorce report having two parental homes without suggesting that either place is more ‘home’ than the other. Smart and colleagues (2001) reported that children have both positive and negative experiences of moving between two homes after a parental separation. In general, children’s residential experiences after separation seem to vary widely. Studies on the child’s perspective on residential experiences are important, because it is the children of separation who actually have two residences and must commute between them.

At the same time, in general it is the parents who are primarily responsible for creating (or at least trying to create) a home for their children. They are the ones who actual arrange the post-separation residential arrangement and it is mostly their decisions that determine whether the child has to commute. The parents’ perceptions of their children’s residential experiences are therefore also highly relevant.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to gain insight into the perceptions of separated parents on their dual-locally living children’s residential experience. Separation is defined as the dissolution of a co-residential union, either married or unmarried, by moving apart, regardless of whether a legal divorce took place. The following three questions are addressed: (1) Do parents report they took into account their children’s (future) residential experience while negotiating the post-separation residential arrangement, and what were their considerations about this issue; (2) How do separated parents perceive their children’s residential experiences; and (3) What elements (of the physical, social and temporal dimensions) are perceived by parents to affect their children’s residential experience. The empirical evidence is drawn from in-depth interviews with separated parents who live in the Netherlands and have children who are younger than 18 years of age. More detailed information about the respondents can be found in the methodological section of this article.

5.2 An experience of home: three dimensions

A house or residence can be experienced in many ways. An experience of home is one of them. In their study on the meaning of home for dual-residential commuter couples (households in which one partner lives near his or her work and away from the family
home part of the time), Van der Klis and Karsten (2009a) distinguish a continuum of levels of experiencing a residence, scaled from space, through place, to home. Space is the anonymous and functional experience of a residence, place is the well-known and familiar experience of a residence and home is the intimate or personal experience of a residence. This distinction is based on earlier studies by Tuan (1977) and Taylor (1999) and emphasises that instead of a dichotomy between ‘home’ and ‘not home’, there is a scale of different experiences that fall in between the two.

For both adults and children, home has different connotations (Blunt and Dowling, 2006) and is not restricted to one place, but can refer to a number of places at the same time (Ellingsen and Hidle, 2012; Sixsmith, 1986). In their study on the home experiences of Finnish children between 5 and 7 years old, Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä (2012: 75-78) report that for children home can be a place ‘where all his/her nearest and dearest people are: a mum, a dad, siblings and possibly the pets’; ‘a place where a child has his/her own place’; ‘a place for play’; and ‘sometimes also a place of worries and distress’. Therefore, home should be understood as a multi-dimensional concept.

Previous studies on the residential experience of persons who live dual-locally have distinguished different dimensions that can contribute to an experience of home (Kenyon, 1999; Sixsmith, 1986; Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009a). Although these studies concern different types of dual-local households (i.e., students: Kenyon, 1999 and Sixsmith, 1986, commuter partners: Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009a), there are remarkable similarities in the dimensions and elements that are found to contribute to an experience of home. Three dimensions are distinguished by all three studies.

First, all three studies find the physical dimension of a residence to be part of the experience of home. Home is much more than a place to live; it is a place that ‘affords opportunities for doing things that are personally highly valued’ (Sixsmith, 1986: 292). Not only the residence itself (e.g., the space available) but also the presence of personal objects and decorations in it can create a sense of belonging or familiarity and can transform a house into a home (see also Easthope, 2004). Objects can have both a functional and an emotional value. To experience a residence as a home it is not only the practical aspects of a residence but also the personalisation of a residence through objects that is important.

Second, all three studies distinguish a social dimension of home. Residential-based social interaction with others, such as relatives and friends, contributes to the

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13 Van der Klis and Karsten (2009a) discuss the physical elements of home as part of the material dimension.
experience of a place as a home. A home is often shared with relatives and should allow both entertainment and the enjoyment of other people’s company. In addition to positive experiences, there can be negative experiences of other people’s company. In her study of children involved in shared residence arrangements, Haugen (2010) concludes that the presence of stepfamily in a household could be an explanation for experiencing a residence as not only more but also less of a home. Furthermore, according to British students, a home should provide a supportive atmosphere where social and emotional needs are met and also should be located in a friendly neighbourhood (Kenyon, 1999).

Third, Kenyon (1999) distinguishes the temporal dimension of the experience of home. Although Sixsmith (1986) and Van der Klis and Karsten (2009a) do not distinguish a temporal dimension, both discuss this aspect in their studies and underline time as an important element in the experience of home. A residence can become a home when it is a permanent and stable base or when it has the potential to become a stable base (Keynon, 1999). Van der Klis and Karsten (2009a) also describe stability as an element of the experience of home. Other elements of time that they describe are the actual period that a home is used, along with the frequency of use.

5.3 Respondent selection and methods

Thirty-five separated parents took part in an individual, in-depth interview, carried out by the author of this paper. Respondents were selected from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) (Dykstra et al., 2005; 2007), the first wave of which contains information on 8,161 Dutch inhabitants between 18 and 79 years of age who were not living in institutions. The respondents were selected through purposive (also known as theoretical) sampling (Mason, 1996). All selected respondents had experienced a divorce or the dissolution of an unmarried, cohabiting union; had at least one child with the ex-partner, where at least one of those children was less than 18 years of age and lived with the respondent for at least half the time; and the ex-partner was still living. At the moment of separation all 35 interviewed parents were in a heterosexual relationship. In two cases the relationship ended because one of the parents ‘came out’ as homosexual. The respondents’ children living in resident-mother arrangements stayed with their non-resident fathers two to six nights every four weeks (excluding holidays). The respondents’ children living in shared residence arrangements stayed

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14 Van der Klis and Karsten (2009a) also distinguish an activity dimension. Whereas the social dimension of home not only implies the presence of relatives (and friends) but also interaction with them, there is a considerable overlap between the activity and the social dimensions. Therefore, in this article the activity dimension is considered part of the social dimension.
with each parent alternately for at least twelve nights every four weeks. The selection contained 20 resident mothers, 15 shared residence parents (7 fathers, 8 mothers) and no resident fathers. In the Netherlands, the number of resident fathers is small (7% of all children with separated parents live with their fathers: Spruijt and Kormos, 2014). Within the selection, we aimed for variations in place of residence, respondents’ educational levels, number of children and children’s ages. The ability to select interviewees from the NKPS survey made it possible to choose separated parents with adequately varied characteristics. Unfortunately, the agreement concerning the collection of interview data from NKPS respondents did not allow us to interview either the children or the ex-partners of the respondents.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2008 and 2009 and focused on separated parents’ experience of daily life. To give the respondents ample time to tell their narratives in their own words, the role of the interviewer was limited to raising topics from the topic list. The interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes. They were recorded and fully transcribed.

The interview data were coded, classified and analysed thematically with the help of ATLAS.ti. The analyses were conducted using a top-down approach over the three dimensions, which can contribute to an experience of home taken from the literature, and a bottom-up approach, which involved relevant themes derived from the interview material. The analyses focused on respondents’ narratives of their perceptions of their children’s residential experiences. Exploration, rather than generalisation, was the focus.

5.4 Creating home as part of the negotiations after separation

When parents separate, they must decide where and with whom their children will live. The Dutch law promotes continued parenting after divorce (Spruijt and Kormos, 2014) and obliges parents with children below the age of 18 years to formulate a parenting plan as a precondition for the request to separate. The plan must contain a description of the consequences of the separation for the children and agreements between the parents on how parenting will continue after the separation. According the Dutch law the default situation is that parents have joint legal custody after separation. In general, when parents come to an agreement the juridical court will take over the agreement. When parents cannot come to an agreement, juridical court will decide.

During the interviews, 5 out of the 35 interviewed parents explicitly emphasised that creating one home for their children was a precondition to negotiating a post-separation residential arrangement. For two out of those five parents, this
precondition indeed resulted in an arrangement that accommodates children living in one house most of the week: the resident-mother arrangement. For them, a shared residence arrangement was out of the question because the children would not have one stable home and would have to live in and commute between two homes.

I: ‘Did you ever consider a different arrangement?’
R: ‘With respect to the children, no, because I think it is good to have one home. In principle, I am not a proponent of a shared residence arrangement because I think it is really turbulent. Even though it is a pity, however, that they miss their father part of the time.’ [Sally, a resident mother of a 13-year-old daughter and a 12-year-old son with her ex-partner and a 6-year-old son with her new partner]

To such parents, creating a home at the mother’s residence and a visiting address at the father’s residence was considered to be a good solution to their desire to establish one home for their children.

The other three of the five respondents who explicitly emphasised that establishing one home for their children was a precondition initially tried to arrange a shared residence arrangement in which the children stayed at one residence and the parents moved in and out. One of the ex-couples actually tried this type of arrangement for three months, but it did not work out. At the time of the interview, they were still searching for a solution:

‘When we separated two years ago, we initially hired a second apartment together. We lived there alternately. So my ex-partner stayed in the apartment for three days when I stayed with the kids in the former family home and then we switched. So the children stayed in our communal home and we commuted between the two residences. It is a solution that is used sometimes, but the two of you have to be on speaking terms. For us, it did not work out to share a house. So we decided that the most quiet and elegant solution would be for the children to stay with my ex-partner in the former family home. At the moment, I have my own residence and three days per week I stay at their place during daytime. I leave after dinner, when my ex-partner gets home from work.’ [Pauline, a shared residence mother of three sons, aged five, eight and nine]
The second ex-couple had just arranged a shared dwelling when the mother found a new partner and cancelled the arrangement. The third ex-couple gave the option much thought but decided that their privacy was more important. Ultimately, providing the children with an equal amount of contact with both parents, combined with making the children feel at home at both residences, was considered to be more important than the children actually having one home.

The other 30 interviewed parents did not explicitly mention that a desire for their children to experience one or both residences as a home was part of the negotiation while arranging a post-separation residential arrangement. This does not necessarily imply that those parents did not think it was important for their children to experience one (or both) residence(s) as a home. It is possible that those parents did not mention the importance of their children’s experience of one or both residence(s) as a home because it is so obvious and embedded in everyday life that they did not even think of mentioning it. However, it is also possible that they did not give this issue much thought at the time of separation, or that it was a painful issue to them that they did not want to bring up in an interview setting.

5.5 Parental perceptions of their children’s experience of home

Although most children of separation live in two residences to some extent, not all respondents perceived that their children experience both residences (equally) as home. The narratives of the respondents revealed four types of parental perceptions of children’s residential experiences. Table 5.1 provides an overview of some of the characteristics per dimension for these four groups.

First, most of the respondents (17 out of 35) perceived that their children experienced their own residence as more of a home than the residence of the ex-partner. All of these respondents were mothers. Second, four of the respondents (two fathers and two mothers) perceived that their children experienced their own residence as less of a home than the residence of the ex-partner. Third, ten of the interviewed parents (four fathers and six mothers) perceived that their children experienced both residences equally as home.

Fourth, four parents (one father and three mothers) stated that they did not know whether their children experienced both residences as a home. All four had a tendency to believe that their children felt at home at both residences, but explicitly emphasised that they did not know for certain. Parents who perceived that their children experienced one residence as more of a home than the other residence were more likely to have children younger than 12 years of age.
Table 5.1 Characteristics of the respondents

<table>
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<th>(n=10)</th>
<th>(n=17)</th>
<th>(n=4)</th>
<th>(n=4)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>men</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Physical dimension</td>
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<td>Bedroom for themselves</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>at respondent’s only</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Distance between</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>residences</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>≥ 10 km</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Social and activity dimension</td>
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<td>Presence of new partner</td>
<td>at both residences</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Presence of siblings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>neither</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sports, hobbies, friends</td>
<td>at both residences</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>at one residence</td>
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To gain more insight into separated parents’ perceptions of their children’s residential experiences, the physical, social and temporal dimensions of the residential arrangement were explored. What elements of these three dimensions did the parents perceive as affecting their children’s residential experiences?

**The physical dimension**

Elements of the physical dimension that were mentioned by the respondents in relation to the residential experience of their children included whether the children had their own bedrooms, the distance between the two residences and the presence and moving of personal belongings between the two residences.

The respondents’ narratives showed that most of the respondents had only limited personal experience with their children’s other residence. This is in line with earlier studies that conclude that divorced parents have limited knowledge of the other parent’s family situation (Fleming and Atkinson, 1999; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989). Most parents mentioned practical aspects of the physical dimension of the other residence, such as the location and type of residence and the availability of a private bedroom for the children. However, not all parents knew exactly how their children’s bedrooms were furnished or personalised. Not all respondents were welcome at the ex-partner’s residence. Asking children (especially young children) about the ex-partner’s residence did not always result in clear answers. Sometimes, parents decided not to ask too many questions:

‘Sometimes, she is reluctant to talk, particularly about what happens here or what happens there [at her mother’s residence]. She tries to be discreet... when you ask her how things went over there, she stays quiet. So I cannot get an impression of how things go over there. That is her protection, I guess.’ [Ted, a shared residence father who is uncertain whether his nine-year-old daughter experiences both residences equally as home].

The respondents often mentioned whether children had their own bedroom as important for those children to experience a residence as a home:

‘I do not have a sense that they do not feel at home in one of the residences. They have their own rooms. My daughter has the smallest room over here and the biggest room at her mother’s residence, and for my son it is the other way around.’ [Jack, a shared residence father who]
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has the perception that his 13-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter experience both residences as home]

In practice, however, the children of parents who perceived them to experience both residences as home were as likely to have a room to themselves in both homes as were children of parents who perceived them to experience one residence as more of a home than the other (table 5.1).

Another frequently mentioned element of the physical dimension was the distance between the two residences. Table 5.1 shows that most of the interviewed parents who lived within one kilometre of the ex-partner perceived their children to experience both residences equally as home. Respondents who lived a short distance from the ex-partner, often emphasised that living in one social environment explained why the children experienced both residences as home. However, three of the four respondents who perceived their children to experience the ex-partner’s residence more as a home also lived within 1 kilometre from the ex-partner. For those respondents, living in close proximity did not seem to be an important element of the experience of home. Respondents who lived further than one kilometre from the ex-partner more often perceived their children to experience their own residence as more of a home than the residence of the ex-partner. Irene, a resident mother, who perceived her 16- and 18-year-old daughters to experience her residence as more of a home than their father’s residence, explained as follows:

‘The children would be better off when I had lived closer to my ex-partner. Going to school, going to friends’ houses and going out at night, living close by makes all these things easier. Now, when they go to their father’s house, they are really pulled out of their familiar residential environment. My older daughter still has friends over there but my younger daughter does not. She gets really bored over there… it is a big change for her.’

Moving personal belongings —such as clothes, books and toys— is an issue that must be addressed by all children of separated parents. Even when both residences are fully ‘equipped’, there are belongings that must be moved. There is a wide variety in how parents interpret this routine ‘migration’ of belongings and how it influences their perceptions of their children’s residential experiences. Some parents interpreted moving personal belongings as a burden on the children negatively affected their residential experiences. Consequently, some parents tried to minimise the amount of
belongings to be moved. Other parents interpreted moving personal belongings as a service that they were obliged to offer their children to make their stay at both residences as comfortable as possible.

‘The funny thing is that during the first years after the divorce, I was proud that we only had to move a small backpack containing some medication and stuffed animals. Clothes and toys were present at both residences. But we had to move more and more things. It started with two little backpacks. Nowadays, my daughter’s whole wardrobe must be moved because she does not want to choose. All of her clothes, her laptop, her books and her shoes. [… ]We still bring or pick up their stuff, so they do not have to worry about it. I see it as... Yes, we are separated, so it should not be their problem. So we have to take responsibility for moving their stuff.’ [Jack, a shared residence father who perceives his 13-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter to experience both residences as home]

The social dimension

The structure of the post-separation families, the presence or absence of friends and the opportunities to participate in sports and hobbies are elements of the social dimension that were mentioned during the interviews in relation to children’s residential experiences. Only two of the interviewed parents, both mothers, explained their children’s residential experiences in terms of their own presence:

‘Home is where the heart is. In particular, for my youngest child, this is where Mama lives, here it is pleasant, so this is home.’ [Pauline, a shared residence mother who perceives her oldest son to experience his father’s residence as more of a home and her youngest son to experience her residence as more of a home]

Apparently, the presence of a parent in a residence does not automatically transform a residence into a home for the children. Furthermore, the absence or presence of a new partner in one of the households was never mentioned as an explanation for the children’s residential experiences, whether positive nor negative.

Respondents mentioned both positive and negative effects of the presence of half- or stepsiblings on their children’s residential experiences. Sally, a resident mother who perceived her 13-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son to experience her
residence as more of a home than their father’s residence described their complex family situation and its mixed consequences as follows:

‘My family consists of my husband and our three children, of which the youngest is our biological son and the oldest two are the children of my ex-partner and me. [...] For many years now, their father has had a new partner, who has two daughters with her ex-partner. [...] I have noticed that our son did not like that he was never alone with his dad. There were always three girls hanging around them, being really chatty. For that reason, they now organise private time together on Wednesdays. [...] Our daughter is friends with the two daughters of my ex’s new partner. Those girls are really nice and they really like each other. That makes it easier. She visits them on her bike and they go shopping together, stuff like that.’

A good relationship between children and their step- or half-siblings seems to have a positive effect on the residential experience. However, having step- or half-siblings and living dual-locally always implies that you will not live together all of the time:

‘In general, when children of divorce stay with their father—for example, for three weeks during the summer holidays—they miss their mother. But my two daughters (who are half-siblings) also miss each other. That makes it even more difficult.’ [Violet, a resident mother with 6- and 9-year-old daughters from two different ex-partners]

In addition to the narratives of the respondents, table 5.1 shows no clear relationship between post-separation family structure and parental perceptions of their children’s residential experiences.

The interviewed parents often mentioned everyday activities and routines as an aspect of their children’s experiences of home. The possibility of continuing daily activities independently at both locations was often mentioned as one of the reasons why children experienced both residences as home. Table 5.1 also shows that most of the parents who said that their children have sports, hobbies and friends at only one of the two locations perceived their children to experience one residence as more of a home than the other. Many resident mothers perceived that their child(ren) were
bored during days with their father because the children could not live their everyday lives with their friends.

‘Initially, they (two daughters) visited their father every other weekend. But after a while some problems emerged. They wanted to join a hockey team, and wanted to play hockey at weekends. Their dad lives in Belgium and he said that they could not play hockey on the weekends when they stayed with him. So when they reached puberty, they decided that they would rather go to hockey and have fun with friends than visit their father every other weekend. Nowadays, they visit him once per month.’ [Ruth, a resident mother who perceives her daughters to experience her residence as more of a home than their father’s residence]

Their children’s dependence on activities planned by the father for his days with the children gave some of the interviewed resident mothers the impression that their children were visitors to be entertained, not family members who participated in daily routines. In particular, when the distance between the residences was large, everyday routines and social activities were often restricted to one residence.

A few parents mentioned that they had tried to arrange two social environments for their children to make them feel at home at both locations. For example, they encouraged their children to join a sport or hobby clubs at both locations. However, it is difficult to be a club member when one is not present at one location on a full-time basis. Parental separation influences not only weekend activities with the non-resident parent but also activities with the resident parent. To some children, being somewhere else every other weekend is a reason not to become a member of a sports club or to get a weekend job.

‘Horse riding, for example, takes place on Wednesdays and Fridays, but on Friday my daughter leaves to go to her father’s house. So we tried several hobbies, but none of them fit her schedule. Classmates’ birthday parties are always a problem; they are often thrown on the weekend. For my youngest it is easier because her father lives in the neighbourhood.’ [Violet, a resident mother who perceives her 6- and 9-year-old daughters to experience her residence as more of a home than their fathers’ residences]
The temporal dimension

The two elements of the temporal dimension (i.e., a linear and a cyclical element), described in the study by Van der Klis and Karsten (2009a), were also mentioned by the respondents as part of the explanation for the respondent’s residential experiences.

First, the actual period that a child had lived in a particular residence (i.e., the linear element of time) was often mentioned by the respondents. In 31 of the cases, one of the parents stayed in the former family residence after separation. At the time of the interviews, in 21 cases one of the parents (12 mothers and 9 fathers) still lived in the former family residence. In their quantitative study based on the first and second waves of the NKPS, Mulder and Wagner (2012) showed that in 97% of separations in the Netherlands one of the ex-partners stayed in the former family dwelling. In Sweden (Mulder and Malmberg, 2011) and Denmark (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen, 2008) these percentages seem to be a bit lower (respectively 76 and 70%).

However, these differences are difficult to interpret. The Swedish and the Danish studies are based on register data, in which places of residence are observed only once a year and only if they are reported to the population register. Moves to temporary accommodation are frequently not recorded. The question in the Dutch survey pertained to the situation at the moment of separation. It is likely that many of the respondents moved out after a few months.

Many respondents who perceived their children to experience one residence as more of a home than the other (including all four respondents who perceived their children to experience the ex-partner’s residence as more of a home) mentioned as part of the explanation that one residence was the former family home or even the home where the children were born.

‘Of course the former family residence is somehow more of a home. They were born there and they have more things there that belong to them. That is something that I cannot change. You can try to make them feel at home by creating a personal place for them, but it will never be the same as it is at home.’ [Bernard, a shared residence father who perceives his 12- and 16-year-old sons and his 15-year-old daughter to experience their mother’s residence as more of a home]

However, in the cases where the respondents perceived their children to experience both residences equally as home, the frequency with which one of the parents still lived in the former family residence was nearly the same (see table 5.1).
The importance of stability to the residential experience, i.e., knowing that a residence will be a stable and permanent base or can become one, has been described by Keynon (1999) and Van der Klis and Karsten (2009). In the case of separated families, an important role was played in the experience of stability not only by the actual time that they had lived in the residence but also by the time since the parents’ separation.

‘My oldest son still has problems with seeing this place as his home. It becomes more and more of a home; it is just one and one-half years since we moved here. That is a short period, of course. And he says: ‘There [his father’s residence] is where I was born’. That’s okay; I let him express this freely. But I hope that in the future, he will feel at home here.’ (Pauline, a shared residence mother with three sons, separated for one and one-half years).

Table 5.1 shows that almost all parents (9 out of 10) who perceived their children to experience both residences as home have been separated for more than five years.

Second, the frequency and length of stays were mentioned (i.e., the cyclical element of time). In particular the residential arrangement —shared residence versus resident mother— seems to have consequences for parental perceptions of their children’s residential experiences. Table 5.1 shows that most shared residence parents (four fathers, two mothers) perceived their children to experience both residences equally as home. In line with this, most resident mothers (16 out of 20) perceived their children to experience their residence as more of a home than that of the father:

‘I do not think that she experiences her father’s residence as a home. Home is here, because she is here most of the time.’ [Naomi, a resident mother with an 11-year-old daughter].

One resident mother explicitly mentioned the length of stays. She perceived her daughter to feel at home at her father’s place during the summer holiday, during visits of a few weeks in duration. However, during the winter, when the daughter only visited the father for a few days per month, she did not have enough time to make herself comfortable and feel at home at her father’s residence.

Furthermore, table 5.1 shows that all four of the parents who perceived their children to experience the ex-partner’s residence as more of a home than their own, along with all four of the parents who did not know for certain whether their children
experienced both residences as a home, were parents with a shared residence arrangement. Therefore, it can be concluded that shared residence parents hold a wider variety of perceptions of their children’s residential experiences than do resident mothers. This can be explained by the fact that children involved in a shared residence arrangement live at both residences on a nearly equal basis. In other words, such children truly do live dual-locally. Parents of children involved in a resident-mother arrangement might perceive their children to live single-locally and consider the fathers’ house as only a visiting address for their children.

5.6 Conclusion and discussion
This article aims to gain insight into separated parents’ perceptions of the residential experiences of their dual-locally living children. The first question addressed is; Do separated parents report they took into account their children’s (future) residential experiences while negotiating the post-separation residential arrangements, and what were their considerations about this issue? The five respondents who did explicitly mention that they took into account their children’s (future) residential experiences all preferred their children to experience one residence as home. This shared preference however resulted in different residential arrangements. Some perceived the resident mother arrangement as best accommodating the one-home option. Others tried the option of a shared resident arrangement with children staying at one address and parents moving in and out. The finding that most interviewed parents (30 out of 35) did not explicitly mention considering their children’s (future) residential experiences, while arranging the post-separation residential arrangement does not necessarily imply that those parents did not consider their children’s residential experiences to be important. It is possible that parents consider this as a matter of course and thus would forget to mention it. It is also possible that the interviewed parents did not give this issue much thought at the time of separation, or that it was a painful issue to them that they did not want to bring up in an interview setting.

The second question addressed is how separated parents perceived their children’s residential experiences. When asked, all of the parents interviewed had a perception of their children’s residential experiences. Whereas earlier studies (Haugen, 2010; Neale et al., 2003; Schier and Proske, 2010; Smart et al., 2001) find that children’s residential experiences vary widely after separation, this study revealed that the perceptions of separated parents on their children’s residential experiences also vary widely. This study shows that about half of the interviewees (17) perceived that their children experienced their own residence as more of a home than the residence of the ex-partner. Based on the narratives of the respondents, three other types of
perceptions were distinguished: the perception that the children experienced both residences equally as home; the perception that the children experienced the respondent’s residence as less of a home than the residence of the ex-partner; and last the perception of not knowing for certain whether the children felt at home at one or both residences.

To gain more insight into parental perceptions, the third question addressed in this article is what elements parents perceived to affect their children’s residential experiences. Three dimensions were explored: physical, social and temporal.

The narratives of the separated parents showed that elements of all three dimensions play a role in parental perceptions of their children’s post-separation residential experiences. The post-separation residential arrangements were strongly associated with the parental perceptions of their children’s residential experiences. Most resident mothers perceived their children to experience their residence as more of a home than that of the father. Although the shared residence parents showed a wider variety of perceptions of their children’s residential experiences, most of them perceived their children to experience both residences as a home. A shared residence arrangement seems to combine several elements of the physical, temporal and the social dimensions that parents perceived to contribute to their children’s experience of home.

The physical dimension stands for the bedroom situation, personal belongings and the distance between both paternal residences. Parents who perceived their children to experience both residences as home more often lived within 1 kilometre of the ex-partner than did parents who perceived their children to experience one residence as more of a home than the other. As was shown previously (Bakker and Mulder, 2013), in the Netherlands, there is a strong association between being involved in a shared residence arrangement and living within a distance of 1.5 kilometres of ones ex-partner. The interviewed shared residence parents explicitly mentioned living in really close geographic proximity to each other, preferable in the same neighborhood, as a precondition for maintaining a shared residence arrangement.

The social dimension (i.e. everyday activities and routines) is perceived by the parents to provide an experience of home for their children. Those routines and activities, along with friendships, are formed and located in neighbourhoods. The social and the physical are related. Both adults (Van der Klis and Karsten, 2009a) and children who live dual-locally have difficulties in bridging the gap between two geographically distinct social environments.
Furthermore, the temporal dimension becomes evident in the actual time children spent in each residence. Children involved in a shared residence arrangement live at both residences on a nearly equal basis in terms of time. In other words, such children really do live dual-locally. Parents of children involved in a resident-mother arrangement might perceive their children to live single-locally and to only visit the fathers address frequently.

The empirical findings in this article contribute to the post-modern debate on the concept of home. The findings support the concept of mobile home, but also emphasize the importance of place to the concept of home. It seems to be true that one can ‘bring along home’ to other places, but —according to their parents— for children, the distance between those places has to be limited. As Jensen (2009) stated, children’s everyday life is located in space, in one neighbourhood, one school or one kindergarten.

There are some limitations of this study that should be mentioned, which at the same time suggest some avenues for further research. First, the agreement on the collection of interview data from NKPS respondents did not allow interviews of the respondents’ children. Interviewing both parents and children would provide highly relevant information on the coherence or discrepancy between the perceptions of parents and those of their children. Second, the primary topic of this article —parental perceptions of their children’s residential experiences— is sensitive. Stating that you perceive that (one of) your children do not experience your residence as a home can be difficult or even unbearable for some parents. The fact that four respondents stated that they perceived their children to experience their residence as less of a home than the residence of their ex-partner, and that four parents stated that they did not know for sure whether their children experienced both residences as a home, suggests that at least those respondents felt confident enough to be honest about their thoughts.

The significance of home for children should not be ignored, especially when parents separate and must decide where and with whom their children will live. What is good for children will differ according to each situation and family, but it is important that separated parents consciously take into account their children’s everyday residential experience. This article shows that shared residence parents more often perceived their children to experience both residences as home, but also held a wider variety of perceptions, than resident mothers do. It seems likely that both shared residence parents and their children demonstrate a wider variety of residential experiences. The population of children living dual-locally is increased not only by high separation rates but also by the growing popularity of shared residence arrangements. Therefore, parental perceptions of their children’s residential experiences will become
even more relevant in the near future and should be an important topic both in studies on the consequences of separation and in political and social debates on separation.