



Research into target groups for multi-parenthood and multi-person authority in the Netherlands

Rapport Ipsos I&O – Summary and conclusions

Colofon

Uitgave

Ipsos I&O
Piet Heinkade 55
1019 GM Amsterdam

Rapportnummer

2025/037

Datum

Februari 2025

Opdrachtgever

Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum

Begeleidingscommissie

- Dr. Simon Zebregs (projectbegeleider extern wetenschappelijk beleidsonderzoek)
- Prof. mr. Wendy Schrama (hoogleraar familierecht en rechtsvergelijking, Universiteit Utrecht)
- Mr. dr. Geeske Ruitenberg (Universitair hoofddocent Privaatrecht, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)
- Dr. Mariska Klein Velderman (Senior onderzoeker weerbare jeugd en ouderschap, TNO Child Health)
- Mr. Rita de Jager (Programmasecretaris meerouderschap en meerpersoonsgezag, Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid)

Auteurs

Carolien Veldkamp
Naïma van Huizen
Rachel Beerepoot

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1.1 Introduction

Society is changing, and with it, the way in which relationships and parenthood are shaped. Many children no longer grow up in a traditional two-parent family. For example, divorces create families with stepchildren and stepparents. There are also parents who consciously choose to have and raise children with more than two adults. Currently, the Dutch law still assumes a maximum of two parents and two people with parental authority over a child. The Dutch Government Commission for Reassessment of Parenthood has recommended offering the possibility of granting legal parenthood and parental authority to a maximum of four parents¹. The WODC has asked Ipsos I&O to conduct research into the potential target group for legislation on multi-parenthood and multi-person authority in the Netherlands. In this chapter, we present the most important research results and conclusions of this study based on the research questions.

1.2 Method

The research consisted of two phases. The first exploratory phase consisted of literature research, interviews with parents in multi-parent families, and experts in the field of multi-parent families. Subsequently, in the second phase of the research, a questionnaire was developed using the insights from the first phase. To complete this questionnaire, 20,000 residents of the Netherlands aged 20 to 68 were approached through the I&O Research Panel. A total of 11,639 people participated in the study. The data was weighted on the characteristics of gender, age, education level, and region, so that the results are representative of the Dutch population aged 20 to 68 in terms of these characteristics.

1.3 Limitations of this research

When interpreting the research results, a number of limitations of the research should be taken into account:

1. This research involves self-reporting. Respondents were asked to provide factual information about complex family situations and legal terms such as legal parenthood and parental authority. It is possible that some of the respondents did not fully understand these terms and therefore answered the questions partly incorrectly.
2. The number of adults in an intentional multi-parent family who completed the questionnaire is small. The results of this group should be considered indicative.
3. The proportion of respondents (aged 20 to 68) who indicate having children (51%) differs somewhat from Statistics Netherlands (CBS) figures from 2022². CBS figures show that 59 percent of the Dutch population in the Netherlands has living children. This could have translated into an underestimation of the number of intentional and unintentional multi-parent families in this study. However, this cannot be determined with certainty.

¹ Staatscommissie Herijking Ouderschap (2016). *Kind en ouders in de 21^{ste} eeuw. Rapport van de Staatscommissie Herijking Ouderschap*. Accessed via: <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-archieff-e54a66df-894c-4247-ae11-e15c0991e594/pdf>
² CBS (2022). *Aantal kinderen naar leeftijd*. Accessed via: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2024/vader-en-moeder-op-leeftijd/bijlage>

1.4 Summary and conclusions

What potential target groups can be distinguished for a legal regulation for multi-parenthood and multi-person authority?

The most important distinction in the potential target group is the difference between intentional and unintentional multi-parent families. In short: whether it was the intention before the conception of the child to bring this child into the world and raise it with more than two parents or not. Within these two target groups, different types of families can be distinguished. For example, intentional multi-parent families consisting of two mothers and a father, or a heterosexual couple who have a child with the help of a (known) third person. Unintentional multi-parent families can consist, for example, of divorced parents, one of whom has a new partner, or of divorced parents who both have a new partner.

What is the size of the potential target groups that can be distinguished? And what proportion of the potential target group already had plans to raise the child in a multi-parent family before conception?

Four percent of adults between the ages of 20 and 68 in the Netherlands indicate in this study that they are raising one or more children under the age of 25 in a multi-parent family: 3.8% in an unintentional multi-parent family and 0.06% to 0.24% in an intentional multi-parent family. Based on the number of parents who indicate in this study that they are part of an intentional or unintentional multi-parent family, an estimate has been made of the number of multi-parent families in the Netherlands. With this estimate, we arrive at approximately 1,700 to 9,200 intentional multi-parent families and 108,750 to 145,000 unintentional multi-parent families with children under the age of 25 in the Netherlands. It should be noted that these are estimates and we are dealing with a margin of error in the percentages found. In addition, there is a possible underestimation of the number of people with children in this study, which may also lead to an underestimation of the number of multi-parent families (see paragraph 1.3).

What are the characteristics of these potential target groups?

The composition of the group of intentional multi-parent families is diverse. They consist largely of rainbow families (families in which at least one adult belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community), but there are also situations in which a heterosexual couple has a child together with a third person. In addition, these families change over time, and separations and new partners also occur in intentional multi-parent families. The group of non-intentional multi-parent families mainly consists of families in which one or both partners have children from a previous relationship. Within this group, there is naturally a large number of different family compositions. A small proportion of non-intentional multi-parent families involve foster care or adoption.

Both adults in intentional and non-intentional multi-parent families do not differ from the Dutch population in general in terms of the urbanity of their place of residence, education level, and residential region.

Which part of the potential target group made agreements on paper before conception?

All parents who can be said with certainty to be an intentional multi-parent family made agreements about matters concerning the child. In most cases, they made agreements before the birth on the following topics: legal parenthood and parental authority, making medical decisions

about the child, division of care tasks, the child's place of residence/stay, and finances related to the child. Agreements about contact and access to the child were made slightly more often after the birth. Most parents did not receive professional guidance in making these agreements. However, most parents did record (some of) these agreements in writing.

Contact between adults in multi-parent families

As indicated above, agreements about contact and access to the child are often made after birth. In non-intentional multi-parent families, this often happens at the separation of the biological parents. Contact between the adults involved is not always good in both intentional and non-intentional multi-parent families. In the case of non-intentional multi-parent families, this is to be expected. After all, in these families, it was not decided before the birth of the child to raise the child together, and a way has to be found together later on. However, some parents in intentional multi-parent families also indicate that contact between all parents/carers is not good. We also see that children do not always spend the same amount of time with all parents. Whether this deviates from agreements made is impossible to say. However, situations can also change in intentional multi-parent families, for example due to separations, and agreements made may therefore turn out differently than expected.

What bottlenecks are currently being experienced by the potential target groups and their environment?

Adults in intentional multi-parent families who do not have legal parenthood and/or parental authority experience limited problems in daily practice as a result. This is often because solutions are found before the problems arise. It is also clear to schools and for example sports clubs, who the parents are, and they accept that there are more than two parents. Parents do not always think about less common situations such as medical decisions and inheritance law, and because these situations do not occur often, people do not currently encounter problems with them. A few people do worry about this. The feeling of recognition as a parent is probably an important point for parents without legal parenthood and/or parental authority, but it has not been specified as a bottleneck.

The majority of adults in non-intentional multi-parent families who do not have legal parenthood and/or parental authority do not experience any problems. The group that does experience problems experiences similar problems to adults in intentional multi-parent families. However, these problems seem to occur relatively less often in non-intentional families than in intentional families.

Which part of the potential target groups expects to potentially make use of a legal regulation if it is introduced?

Intentional multi-parent families

A large proportion, but not all, intentional multi-parent families would like to make use of a legal regulation for multi-parenthood and/or multi-person authority. This is because some of the people who do not currently have legal parenthood or parental authority do not want it. There is also a proportion who would want it but expect that the other parents in the multi-parent family will not agree to it.

It should be noted that this was asked in the context of the current situation. It is possible that the current relationships are different from when it was decided to start a family with multiple parents. The age of the children can also play a role, for example because the children are over 18 and parental authority no longer plays a role.

In addition, due to the small numbers we are talking about here, it is not possible to express this in percentages. However, the picture is consistent with what has been found in the literature, namely that a majority of intentional multi-parent families would like to make use of a legal regulation, but that there is also a proportion that does not feel the need for this.

Non-intentional multi-parent families

The desire to make use of the regulation is relatively lower among non-intentional multi-parent families than among intentional multi-parent families. In particular, only a small proportion of parents want to give legal parenthood and/or parental authority to the new partner of an ex-partner. When we look at the adults who do not currently have legal parenthood and/or parental authority, we see that about 6 percent of all adults in a non-intentional multi-parent family would like to have this and expect that the other adults involved would agree. This is a small proportion of parents in non-intentional multi-parent families. However, in absolute numbers, this may be a larger group than the number of intentional multi-parent families that would like to make use of a regulation, due to the much larger proportion of non-intentional multi-parent families in the Netherlands.

As with intentional multi-parent families, it should be borne in mind when interpreting these results that parents with children aged 18 to 25 are also included here. Parental authority no longer plays a role in this group.

Reasons for using the regulation

For both intentional and non-intentional multi-parent families, the most frequently cited reasons for wanting to make use of a regulation for multi-parenthood and/or multi-person authority are: recognition, having rights over the child, and the authority to make decisions. Multi-parenthood would give parents who are closely involved in raising the child but are legally 'nothing' to the child recognition for their role. This is also one of the main needs that emerged in previous research³.

Reasons for not wanting to make use of the regulation include the fear that it would make the family situation too chaotic or complex. This applies to both intentional and non-intentional multi-parent families. Adults in non-intentional multi-parent families give another reason: adults would not want an extra person (usually their ex's new partner or their own new partner) to have parental authority or legal parenthood, because this person is not the biological parent and has not been involved with the child and/or upbringing from the beginning. Nor was it the choice of both parents that this person would be involved in raising the child.

³ *Argumentenfabriek (2023). Waarden en wensen bij een wetswijziging meerouderschap en -gezag. In opdracht van: Ministerie van Veiligheid & Justitie*

The advantages and disadvantages of the regulation mentioned by people in multi-parent families correspond to the reasons for using or not using a regulation. Parents who do not want to make use of a possible regulation mainly see disadvantages and few advantages. Parents who do want to make use of it see advantages but also a number of disadvantages.

Contactgegevens

Ipsos I&O Enschede

Zuiderval 70

Postbus 563

7500 AN Enschede

053 - 200 52 00

KVK-nummer 08198802

nl-info-publiek@ipsos.com

www.ipsos-publiek.nl

Ipsos I&O Amsterdam

Piet Heinkade 55

1019 GM Amsterdam

020 - 308 48 00

nl-info-publiek@ipsos.com

www.ipsos-publiek.nl