

# Second round in a second nest

## Research slashes stereotypes

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**Contrary to popular belief, it is more common for women to have children from different partners than for men. As a rule, children of different fathers live with their mother, in which case the fathers have a 'second nest'. Research has shown that the ties fathers have with their children from a first relationship tend to be strained. Another finding is that the stereotype of an older man going off with a younger woman and founding another family does not correspond with reality.**



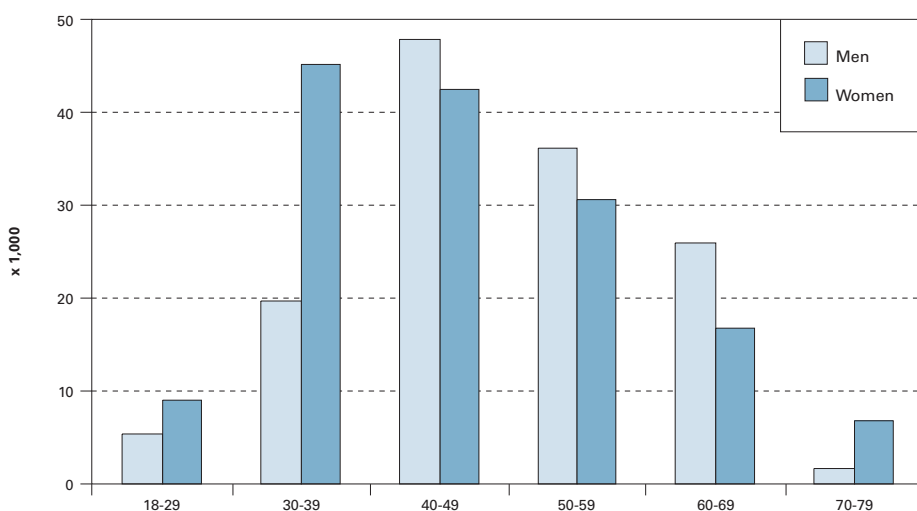
Photo: Marcel Minnée

A study that is currently being conducted in a large number of European countries, the Generation and Gender Survey (GGS), looks into a variety of issues, including the 'second nest' phenomenon or serial parenthood. The GGS is the first international study into the phenomenon that parents have two or more children from different partners. The results are already known for a few countries. The data for the Netherlands are based on the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS).

As things stand now, an estimated 270,000 people in the Netherlands have biological

children from at least two different partners: 142,000 women and 128,000 men. Most of the younger (under 40 years) parents are women and most of the older ones (40-plus) are men (Figure 1). In each age group, men and women with children from different partners constitute no more than three to four percent. Another finding is that a large majority of men and women who start a family with a second partner do so fairly shortly after divorce. And so the stereotype of an older man going off with a younger woman and founding another family does not correspond with reality

**Figure 1.** Number (x 1,000) of men and women with biological children from at least two different partners (second round), by age group, the Netherlands (estimate based on NKPS data)



### Second round in a second nest

If women have children from a second partner, all their children – those from the first and those from the second round – usually live with her ('in her nest') if they have not yet left the parental home. Men who have children from a second partner usually have a 'second nest': because children tend to stay with their mothers following divorce, fathers are the only ones who end up having a second nest. This is probably the reason why we tend to think of men when we speak of a second nest. For the sake of clarity: the term second nest is used to refer to the state of having biological children of one's own from at least two different partners. In other words, the children concerned have a half-brother and/or half-sister. Second nest does not refer to families where men and women have step-children from a new relationship, except if they also have biological

children from the new partner, in which case the new family will consist of both step-brothers and/or sisters and half-brothers and/or sisters.

**Strained ties between father and oldest child**

Biological parents in a second nest have known their children from birth. The lifelong blood ties parents have with one or more children who leave the home at some point and who have one or more half-siblings, tend to be much closer than the ties parents build with their step-children.

In the past, parents with a second nest were usually widowed men and women who had children from a new relationship. As the children in this situation continued to live with the only surviving biological parent, ties between parents and children were generally close. The first GGS results show that this is still a common situation in countries such as Georgia.

In the Netherlands, 'second nest' generally refers to a situation where partners in a first relationship from which children are born split up and enter into a new relationship which again brings forth children. Both biological parents are usually still alive and the age difference between children from both relationships tends to be small.

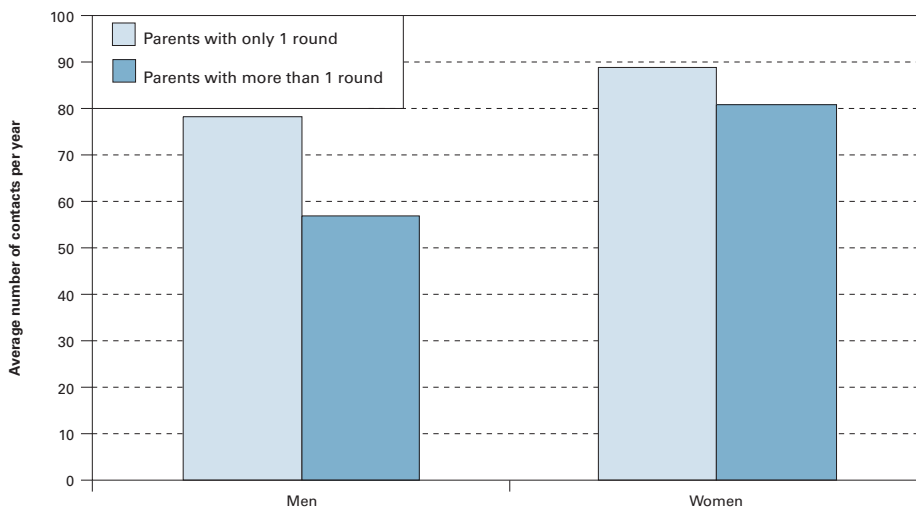
Studies among eldest children over 18 years of age who have left the parental home show that in the case of a second nest, the ties between the oldest biological child and its father tends to be more strained than the relationship with the mother (Figure 2). The difference is statistically significant, suggesting that fathers find it much more difficult to maintain good contact with their oldest child than mothers. The most logical explanation is that the child in question has lived with the mother for most of its life and that the father has not been able to raise his child(ren) from a previous relationship in the same way as those in his second nest. The fact that the oldest child shuttles back and forth between its biological mother and step-mother is not conducive to a clear and consistent education. It would appear that fathers are not able to show the same level of solidarity with all their children. If this results, later in life, in half-brothers and half-sisters having conflicts not only with their father (parents) but also with each other, this could make it extra difficult for them to maintain stable relationships themselves and to decide to have children. Their own parents, after all, did not set a good example.

**To conclude**

The findings of the GGS have so far not been used to examine which partners go on to build a second nest and which do not after having had children from a first relationship. Whereas there is ample demographic literature about divorce and separation, about starting anew and raising children from a broken marriage, literature about the second nest phenomenon is sadly lacking. The literature suggests that women only go on to have children from a second relationship if their desire to have children has not yet been fully met. The reason

The data for this article relate to a small number of European countries for which data from the Generation and Gender Survey (GGS) have recently become available. This survey, coordinated by the Economic Commission for Europe (United Nations, Geneva) is being held in a much larger number of countries but it will take some time for the data from the first panel wave to be released for all these countries. Data relating to the Netherlands were provided by a similar survey, the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). During a conference held in Geneva in May 2008, entitled 'How generations and gender shape demographic change', more than 20 presentations were given about a wide range of GGS topics, targeted primarily at policy makers. The session 'Realities of parenthood and childbearing' included a presentation about the 'second nest', which has been documented in this article.

**Figure 2.** Average number of contacts per year with the oldest biological child (18+, non-resident), parents with 1 versus parents with more than 1 round (Bulgaria, Germany, France, Georgia, Russia)



why men do so is probably different: they tend to have children in a second relationship if their new partner does not have children but has a clear desire to have children. If both partners have children from a previous relationship, they only rarely decide to have children together to seal their new relationship. There is evidence suggesting that those who do, have progressive views on relationships and having children. More research on this is forthcoming.

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Photo: Marcel Minnée

