

L. Nielsen, Shared residential custody: Review of the Research
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Abstract: One of the most complex and compelling issues confronting policy makers, parents and the family court system is what type of parenting plan is most beneficial for the children after the parents' divorce. How much time should children live with each parent? Since an increasing number of children are living with each parent at least 35% of the time in shared residential parenting families, a number of issues arise: How much weight should we give to parental conflict in deciding whether children might benefit from shared residential parenting? How different are the conflict levels for parents in sole residence and shared parenting families? Most importantly, can children in shared parenting families benefit when there is ongoing parental conflict?

Keywords: joint custody, parenting plans, shared parenting, shared residential custody, joint physical custody, shared care

Shared residential custody: Review of the research

Shared residential custody is becoming more prevalent worldwide. Until recently only 5% to 7% of American children lived at least one third of the time with each parent after their divorce. Most lived exclusively with their mother, spending only four or five nights a month - at most - in their father's home (Kelly, 2007). But a change is clearly underway. For example, in Arizona and in Washington state 30% to 50% of the children whose parents divorced in the past several years are living at least one third of the time with each parent (George, 2008; Venohr & Kaunelis, 2008), as are 30% of the children whose parents divorced in Wisconsin between 1996 and 2001 (Melli & Browne, 2008). Likewise, in Australia, the Netherlands, and Denmark approximately 20% of children whose parents have separated are in shared residential custody (Smyth, 2009; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). In an international study of 14 countries, rates of shared parenting varied from 7% to 15% (Skinner, Bradshaw, & Davidson, 2000). In Norway 25% of children have parents who live apart, 8% of whom live with their fathers and 10% live in shared residence (Skjorten & Barlindhaug, 2007). And in Sweden where the courts have the legal right to order alternating residence even when one parent is opposed, 20% of the children with separated parents live in two homes (Singer, 2008). Interestingly, in France about 12% of the children whose parents live apart share their time between the two homes while an additional 12% live with their fathers and spend some time living with their mothers (Toulemon, 2008). Moreover, in France since 2002 shared residence has been an explicit legal option for separating parents. Indeed it is placed as the first option in a list of possible parenting plans, with both parents receiving health insurance benefits and the government allowance for dependent children (Masardo, 2009)

Since there are now two dozen studies on these shared parenting families, a clearer picture is emerging – one which runs counter to a number of negative assumptions and misconceptions commonly held about these families. Nevertheless, publications and discussions about shared parenting too often ignore this body of research and focus instead on only a few studies – often based on small, nonrandom samples of the highest conflict, physically abusive and never married

parents. For example, a recent article in a British law school journal is entitled “Shared residence: a review of recent research evidence”. Yet the article only presents four research studies, two of which are based on samples with large numbers of never married couples (Trinder, 2010).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to summarize all of the studies presently available on shared parenting families. A number of terms are used to refer to families where the children live at least 35% of the time with each parent after they separate: dual residence, shared physical custody, shared care, joint physical custody, and shared parenting. In this paper, the term “shared parenting” or “dual residence” will be used to refer to these families. Other families will be referred to as “sole residence” or “maternal” residence since 95% of the children living with only one parent are living with their mothers.

Common concerns about shared parenting

Despite its growing popularity, shared parenting still raises a number of concerns and considerable debate. In academic publications, legislative debates over custody law reform, and family court custody proceedings, six issues are often raised as arguments against shared parenting. The first is that children will not benefit any more from living in a shared parenting family than from living with one parent and spending varying amounts of time with their other parent. In short, additional fathering time – especially extensive time with overnights - will not be beneficial. Second, fathers can maintain quality relationships with their children without having to live together more than a couple of weekends a month. That is, high quality parenting and close, meaningful relationships are not related to the amount of time fathers and children spend together – or to how that time is allocated. Third, family income, cooperative co-parenting and high quality parenting are more beneficial than living with each parent 35% to 50% of the time. Put differently, shared parenting is not related to children’s well-being. Fourth, shared parenting will only succeed and will only benefit the children when the parents are cooperative, have little or no conflict, are relatively well educated and financially above average, and mutually agree to share the parenting without any intervention by lawyers, judges or mediators. In short, it only works for a handful of parents. Fifth, most shared care families are going to fail because the arrangement is so stressful and so problematic for the parents and for the children. So why put everyone through this unpleasant “experiment” since it so rarely succeeds? And sixth, most shared parenting children feel stressed, dissatisfied, insecure, destabilized, and troubled by living in two homes. They feel the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages.

Each of these six issues will be addressed through the research presented in this review. But first we present the three premises on which shared parenting is predicated. First, children benefit from maximizing nonresidential fathering time. Second, overnight time is more important than daytime contact only. Third, most children dislike and disapprove of living with their mother and seeing their father no more than a couple of weekends a month.

Nonresidential fathering time: Does it matter?

The fundamental questions on which shared parenting rests are: Do most children benefit from spending time with their nonresidential fathers? Does the amount of time or how that time is allocated make any difference? In short, does fathering time matter? If not, then shared parenting is based on an irrational or unwarranted assumption.

Ironically, those who contend that nonresidential fathering time has little or no impact on children often cite the meta-analysis by Amato and Gilbreth – a study which did *not* come to that

conclusion (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). This analysis of 63 studies examined the relationship between the “frequency” of father contact and children’s academic achievement and internalizing and externalizing problems. The authors emphasized two important shortcomings: First, it was *not* possible to determine how much time the fathers spent with their children since “frequency” of contact is not the same as time. Second, the data on never married fathers was combined with data on divorced fathers. So unmarried fathers who had never, or only briefly, lived with their children were included with divorced fathers who had lived with their children for years. The researchers, therefore, were not surprised that there was only a weak correlation between contact and outcomes for children. Even so, there *was* a correlation. More important still, the correlation was much stronger in the recent studies (1989-1999) than in the older ones (1970-1988). “As expected, children were better off when they spent time with fathers who had positive relationships with their children and were actively engaged in parenting” (p. 570). Given this, they recommended changing custody policies so that fathers would not be restricted to weekend time. In an even more recent review of the research, Amato again concludes: “Consequently, policies and interventions designed to improve ties between fathers and children should be maintained and encouraged” (p. 192) (Amato & Dorius, 2012).

More recent studies continue to demonstrate that the amount of time nonresidential fathers spend with their children is closely tied to the ongoing quality and endurance of their relationship. This finding is robust across a wide range of studies with large samples, for examples: 650 young American adults from a national sample (Aquilino, 2010), 162 British children, (Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, & Bridges, 2004), 1200 American college students in Missouri, (Harvey & Fine, 2010), 99 college students in Virginia (Laumann & Emery, 2000), 105 Canadian college students (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008), 80 predominantly Hispanic American college students in Florida (Schwartz & Finley, 2005), and 245 adolescents in Germany (Struss, Pfeiffer, Preus, & Felder, 2001).

Having a close and enduring relationship with their fathers should – in and of itself – be enough justification for maximizing fathering time – when their relationship does not come at the expense of the child’s emotional, physical or psychological well-being. But nonresidential fathering time is correlated with other positive outcomes for children as well. Among the benefits are higher self esteem (Berg, 2003) (Dunlop, Burns, & Bermingham, 2001), less delinquency and drug use (Carlson, 2006) (Coley & Medeiros, 2007), fewer behavioral problems (King & Soboleski, 2006), and less smoking and dropping out of high school (Menning, 2006; Menning, 2006). In fact, adolescents from intact families who do not feel close to their fathers are more delinquent than adolescents with divorced parents who feel close to their fathers (Booth, Scott, & King, 2010).

The second premise on which shared parenting is based is that overnight time benefits children more than daytime contact only with their fathers. Only one study with 60 Australian adolescents has directly addressed this question. Those who spent overnight time in their father’s home felt closer to him and felt he knew more about what was going on in their lives than those who spent the same amount of time with their fathers, but never overnight time. Those who lived more than 30 nights a year with their father were more likely than those who spent fewer overnights to feel comfortable in his home, to feel they belonged there, and to feel their fathers knew them well. It is worth noting that these benefits accrued regardless of the level of parent conflict (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008).

Fathering time: Children's perspectives

The third premise underlying shared parenting is that most children want to spend more time living with their fathers. Most do not like the “every other weekend” parenting plan. Indeed, this is one of the most consistent, most robust findings in the research on children of divorce. Most children say they wanted more time with their fathers and that the most long lasting, most negative impact of their parents' divorce was the weakened or lost relationship with their fathers (Emery, 2004; Finley & Schwartz, 2007; Marquardt, 2005) (Smith, 2003). The majority who had lived with their mothers said that shared parenting would have been in their best interests (Fabricius, 2003; Parkinson, Cashmore, & Single, 2005; Schwartz & Finley, 2005; Shulman & et al, 2001; Harvey & Fine, 2010). Not surprisingly, when fathers try to rebuild their relationships during the children's early adult years, the relationship is often too strained or too damaged to be reconstructed (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006) (Harvey & Fine, 2010). As one of the most highly respected researchers on children of divorce, Joan Kelly, states: “For four decades children have reported the loss of the father as the most negative aspect of divorce. *Even when they continued to see each other*, most relationships declined in closeness over time. *This has been primarily a result of the traditional visiting patterns of every other weekend* which has been slow to change even in the face of mounting research evidence and a reluctance to order overnights for your children” (p. 66) (Kelly, 2012) .

Shared parenting is not based on the assumption that all children will benefit from this living arrangement or that other factors do not also contribute to children's well-being after their parents separate. It has long been acknowledged that physically abusive, violent, drug addicted, alcoholic, emotionally abusive, or mentally disturbed parents seldom have a positive impact on their children (Lamb, 2010). These parents, therefore, would be poor candidates for shared parenting. What must be kept in mind, however, is that these parents comprise no more than 8% to 15% of divorced couples (Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009). Moreover, the parenting plan is one among many factors that influence children's well-being. Among them are family income, parents' educational levels, the quality of each parent's relationship with the children, the level of conflict between the parents, and the quality of the parenting. It is widely accepted in our society and is documented in the parenting research that both parents need ample time with their children in order to create and maintain quality relationships and quality parenting (Amato & Dorius, 2012). Shared parenting is based on the assumption that this principle applies to children whose parents are no longer living together, as well as to those in intact families.

Each of the studies addresses at least one of four questions. First, do most parents in shared parenting families differ in significant ways from other divorced parents? Specifically, are they far better off financially or far more cooperative and conflict free than other divorced parents? Put differently, is shared parenting feasible only for a relatively small, selective group of parents? If that is the case, then the benefits of shared parenting may be more closely related to the parents' attributes than to the parenting plan. Second, are there any advantages for children who grow up in shared parenting families compared to those who live almost exclusively with their mother? Third, how do adolescents and young adults who have been raised in shared parenting and maternal residence families feel about the living arrangement that their parents chose for them? Which of these two parenting plans did they feel was in their best interest? And fourth, how does the quality of the father-child relationship compare in shared parenting versus mother residence families?

Parent conflict and cooperation

Before discussing the issue of conflict in shared parenting families, a number of important research findings must be kept in mind (Birnbaum & Bala, 2010; Birnbaum & Fidler, 2010). First, the term “high conflict” has not been and probably never will be operationalized by social scientists or by professionals involved in custody decisions. The term covers too wide a range of behaviors to be of much practical significance in regard to legal custody or parenting time. The term is used in family court and by researchers to describe anything from intense anger and distrust, to ongoing problems with communication, to frequent disagreements about child-rearing, to verbal abuse, to injurious and life threatening physical violence. Second, conflict is highest during the time when couples are separating – the time when custody decisions are being discussed or disputed. Moreover, parents often disagree about how much conflict exists in their relationship. But regardless of how it is defined, “high” conflict almost always declines after the divorce is finalized, meaning that conflict during divorce proceedings is not a reliable predictor of future conflict. Third, the term is used in overly broad, inconsistent and inappropriate ways by lawyers, judges and mental health professionals in the family justice system. That is, “conflict” becomes the weapon parents use in their attempt to deprive one another of legal custody or parenting time. There is ample motivation, therefore, for one or both parents to portray their conflict as far higher and far more intractable than it actually is. Fifth, it is estimated that no more than 8 to 12% of divorced couples are in “high” conflict – the kind of conflict that poses a danger to children and often stems from personality disorders, drug or alcohol additions, or mental illness (Johnston et al., 2009). Sixth, even though conflict is never beneficial for children, parental disagreements and verbal conflicts are not necessarily harmful. This is especially true when the conflict stems from a sincere desire by both divorced parents to maintain an active role in their children’s lives. It is the children’s involvement in conflict, either as witnesses to harshness or violence or as pawns used to express hostility that harms children. Seventh, even when the conflict is ongoing and seemingly intractable, parallel parenting plans still make it possible for these parents to share the parenting time. Parallel parenting plans provide the kind of specifics and structure that limit the parents’ need for contact or communication, thus reducing conflict. Finally, it must be remembered that *conflict is inevitable for all parents* over childrearing issues. Even the most happily married couples argue and disagree over parenting. Divorced parents, therefore, should not be expected to be “conflict free” in order to share the parenting.

For all of these reasons, many experts on children of divorce concur that conflict should not be used as the reason for limiting the amount of time that children spend with either parent – unless that conflict involves a documented history of physical abuse or violence. (Lamb & Kelly, 2009; Adamsons & Pasley, 2006; Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Fabricius, Braver, Diaz, & Schenck, 2010; Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Kruk, 2011; Pruett & Donsky, 2011; Sandler et al., 2012; Warshak, 2011)

Shared parenting families: Conflict and Cooperation

Insert Table One

In regard to conflict then, do most shared parenting couples have a cooperative, friendly, relatively conflict free relationship compared to other divorced couples? Are these parents so friendly and conflict free that they are all enthusiastic from the outset about sharing the residential custody? In short, is shared parenting only possible for a small, select group? Moreover, if most of these couples have a conflict free, communicative, friendly co-parenting relationship, then is it not likely that whatever benefits might accrue to their children is due to the parents' excellent relationship - and not to the shared residential parenting? As Table 1 illustrates, many parents who are maintaining shared parenting families do not have especially friendly, cooperative, or conflict free relationships.

Beginning with the oldest longitudinal study, the landmark Stanford Custody Study is a good starting point. The study collected data over a four year period in the late 1980s from 1100 divorced families with 1386 children. There were 92 shared parenting families. Initially nearly 80% of the mothers were not in favor of sharing the residential parenting. In other words, most entered into the agreement reluctantly. Moreover the majority did not work closely together in co-parenting and did not communicate better than the other divorced couples. Most had a disengaged, business-like, parallel parenting relationship where they communicated "as needed". They differed from other divorced parents primarily in two ways. First, both parents were committed to having the father remain actively involved in the children's lives. Second, the father's flexible work schedule made it possible for the children to live with him at least one third of the time. But in regard to conflict and cooperation, the researchers' concluded: "*Parents can share the residential time even though they are not talking to each other or trying to coordinate the children rearing environments of their two households*" (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1991, p. 292).

Five smaller studies with a total of 117 shared parenting families also conducted in the 1980s echoed the results of the Stanford study. Many couples did not mutually agree at the outset to share the parenting, varying from 20% (Irving & Benjamin, 1991), to 40% (Brotsky, Steinman, & Zimmelman, 1991) to 50% (Luepnitz, 1991). The overall quality of their relationships was somewhat better than other parents, but most were more strained than they were friendly. For example, three years after separating, 10% of the 39 parents who had maintained shared parenting said their relationship was "impossible" compared to 30% of the 276 parents who were not sharing (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991). In these five studies, however, the shared parenting couples had no history of physical violence, unlike the families whose children were in sole residence. Learning to make shared parenting work well took time for most couples. Yet most of these families continued even though they still had conflicts and many had initially opposed the sharing.

A much more recent, larger study in Wisconsin reached similar conclusions (Melli & Brown, 2008). Data were collected three years after divorce from a large random sample of 590 shared residence and 590 sole residence families. Roughly 15% of the couples in both groups described their relationship as "hostile". Most shared parenting couples had a cordial but business-like relationship that was not conflict free. In fact, the shared parenting couples were *more likely* to have conflicts over childrearing issues (50%) than families where the children lived with their mother (30%). Understandably there were more conflicts over childrearing issues in the sharing families since these fathers were more engaged in parenting than the fathers whose children lived with their mothers.

International studies confirm these American studies. In a Dutch study conflict for the 135 couples with shared parenting and for 350 with sole residence were similar four years after their

divorce. On the other hand, the couples who had the least conflict at the time of the divorce were more likely to have shared parenting (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). Likewise, in a large Australian study, 20% of the 645 shared parenting couples had ongoing conflicts and distant relationships even three years after their divorce (Kaspiew et al., 2009). In a smaller Australian study with 105 shared parenting and 398 sole residence couples, only one third of the couples in either group said they had a cooperative relationship. Likewise, only 25% of the sharing and 18% of non-sharing couples said they were “friendly”, with 8% and 15% respectively reporting “lots of conflict” (Lodge & Alexander, 2010). In a smaller study with 20 British and 15 French fathers, the majority did not have cooperative, friendly relationships with their children’s mother. Again, these couples were parallel parenting with little or no communication, even though half of these 60 children were under the age of five (Masardo, 2009)

Another question regarding conflict is: If couples are in conflict over whether to share the parenting, can this parenting plan endure? That is, if the plan is court ordered or negotiated through a mediator or lawyers, can it work and can the children still benefit? In the seven studies that have collected this data, the answer is “yes” as Table One illustrates. Despite the fact that many of their parents were not initially in favor of a shared parenting plan, these children had more positive outcomes on measures of wellbeing than the children in maternal residence families. Shared parenting was not the first choice for a number of these parents. The number who did not initially want to share has ranged from 20% (Irving & Benjamin, 1991), to 40% (Brotsky et al., 1991; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2010; Pearson & Thoennes, 1991) to 50% (Luepnitz, 1991; Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989), to 82% (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Although it stands to reason that those who mutually agree to share from the outset probably have an easier time making their plan work, these seven studies demonstrate that children can benefit and shared residential parenting can be maintained even when one of the parents is not initially in favor of the plan.

In sum, shared parenting couples do not generally have a conflict free, exceptionally friendly, or highly cooperative and collaborative relationship. Likewise, a considerable number did not mutually agree to share, yet they were still able to maintain their shared parenting family. On the other hand, they rarely endure when the parents’ conflicts have reached a level of physical abuse, violence, or terrifying intimidation.

Income and other distinguishing characteristics

If having a friendly, cooperative, conflict-free relationship and being mutually enthusiastic about shared parenting from the outset are not absolutely necessary for couples to maintain a shared parenting family, are there other factors that set them apart? Yes. Both parents must have flexible enough work schedules that their children can live with them more than a couple of weekends a month. And since well-educated people generally have more flexible, family friendly work hours, parents with higher incomes and more education are somewhat more likely to have shared parenting plans (Kitterod & Lyngstad, 2011; Pearson & Thoennes, 1991; Juby, Burdais, & Gratton, 2005; Lodge & Alexander, 2010).

This does not mean, however, that most shared parenting couples are college educated or financially well off. Most are not. Generally speaking, shared parenting couples have incomes and educations similar to other divorced parents (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2010; Luepnitz, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Masardo, 2009; Melli & Brown, 2008). On the other hand, for 758 Canadian families in a national survey, the mothers without high school degrees were more likely than better educated mothers to share the parenting. It may be that these mothers wanted

more free time to finish their educations (Juby et al., 2005). Or it may be that shared parenting is becoming more popular with less educated parents. For example, in Wisconsin shared parenting has increased in lower income families over recent years (Cook & Brown, 2006). In any case, shared parenting is not only for wealthy, well-educated parents. A large, recent study with 1180 families in Wisconsin illustrates this (Melli & Brown, 2008). In the shared parenting families, the fathers' average incomes were \$40,000 (30% college graduates) compared to \$32,000 (25% college graduates) for the other divorced fathers. The mothers' incomes and educational levels were virtually the same, \$23,000 versus \$22,000 with only 25% in both groups having a college degree.

Interestingly though, college educated fathers may be less willing than other fathers to let their children have a say in whether they want a shared parenting plan. In a Norwegian study with 527 divorced parents, half of whom were sharing the parenting, the least educated fathers were twice as likely as the college educated fathers to give their children a say in how much time they wanted to live with each parent. The mothers' educational levels were irrelevant. It may be that the college educated fathers were more involved in their children's lives before the separation and were more committed to continuing to live with them. Or it may be that the college educated fathers were more knowledgeable about the importance of fathers in children's daily lives. Regardless of the fathers' educational levels, adolescents were allowed more input than younger children. So both the father's education and the children's age played a part in determining the parenting plan (Skjorten & Barlindhaug, 2007).

Moreover, factors other than income and education are associated with a couple's decision to share the parenting. A large Canadian study with 758 divorced families where 16% of the children were living in shared residence families illustrates several of these. The shared parenting mothers were more likely to have a boyfriend (often someone she had been involved with before the divorce) and more likely to be clinically depressed. It may be that these mothers were more willing to share the parenting because they wanted the child-free time to finish school or to be with their boyfriends. For depressed mothers, it may be that living with the children full time was too daunting and overwhelming (Juby et al., 2005).

The child's gender also appears to play a role in parents' decisions to share the parenting. Sons are slightly more likely than daughters to be living in a shared parenting family (Grall, 2006; Juby et al., 2005; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010; Stamps, Booth, & King, 2009; Kitterod & Lyngstad, 2011; Melli & Brown, 2008; McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, & Wells, 2010). This may be happening because mothers feel less capable of raising sons on their own. Or it may be that fathers and sons feel more comfortable living together than fathers and daughters. Then too, fathers and sons generally have a closer relationship than mothers and sons or fathers and daughters before the parents separate (Nielsen, 2012).

Characteristics of shared parenting fathers

Another issue raised in regard to shared parenting is that these fathers are somehow "better" than other fathers to begin with. If this is true, then whatever benefits are associated with shared parenting might have accrued even if these children had lived mainly with their mothers. To my knowledge, no study has compared the quality of father-child relationships before and after divorce to the type of parenting plan the parents chose. But there are at least three reasons not to assume that the majority of shared parenting fathers are far "better" parents than fathers who only see their children every other weekend.

First, many “weekend” fathers say they wanted shared residential custody. For some, their work schedules or their low incomes made it unfeasible for their children to live with them. For others, they could not afford or did not believe they could win a legal battle for shared parenting. Consequently, these fathers yielded to the mother’s wishes that the children live with her (Frieman, 2007; Kruk, 2010; Stone & Dudley, 2006). In the Stanford Custody project, for example, only 30% of the fathers who wanted joint residential custody received it (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). And according to 320 college students who lived with their mothers after their parents’ divorce, half of their fathers had wanted equal parenting time (Fabricius, 2003). We have no reliable way of determining how many fathers have wanted, but were denied or never pursued, shared residential custody. But whether or not a father has a shared parenting plan is not the most reliable way to assess how much he may have wanted to share the parenting.

It is not the aim of this review to assess how accurate fathers are in their assumptions about bias against them in family court. Some evidence suggests the fathers might be wrong. For example, in a survey of 345 divorcing couples in North Carolina, 20% of the fathers were awarded shared parenting by a judge, versus only 5% who reached their shared parenting agreement with a mediator and 10% with a lawyer (Peeples, Reynolds, & Harris, 2008). On the other hand, lawyers and judges in several surveys have stated that there is a bias against fathers in the family courts (Braver, Cookston, & Cohen, 2002; Dotterweich, 2000; Stamps, 2002; Wallace & Koerner, 2003; Williams, 2007). Likewise, in a recent study of 367 people who had been summoned for jury duty, nearly 70% said that children should live equal time with each parent. But only 28% believed a judge would make that decision (Braver, Ellman, Votruba, & Fabricius, 2011). The important point is that a father who *believes* a judge or his state’s custody laws are biased against fathers is less likely to try to negotiate a shared parenting agreement than a father who believes there is no bias. This situation is acknowledged in the legal profession as “bargaining in the shadow of the law” – meaning that even though only 10% of divorced couples have their case decided by a judge, many divorcing couples are nonetheless influenced by their state’s custody laws and case law when they are negotiating their custody agreement (Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1979). Given this, it is overly simplistic to assume that those fathers who have a shared residential parenting agreement are always more dedicated or somehow “superior” to fathers whose children live with their mother.

Positive outcomes for children: academic, behavioral, psychological, physical health

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How well do most children fare in shared parenting families? Compared to children who live with their mother, are they significantly better or worse off on measures of academic, social, psychological or physical well-being? As Tables 2 and 3 illustrate, a number of studies have addressed these questions. We begin by summarizing the studies that found equal or better outcomes for children who lived 35%-50% time with each parent. We then consider the studies that found worse outcomes and look carefully at how much worse those outcomes were.

Beginning with the oldest studies, the most methodologically impressive is the Stanford Custody Project where data were collected over a four year period (1984-1988) from 1100 divorced families with 1386 children. Four years after the divorce, the dual residence adolescents were better off academically, emotionally, and psychologically than the sole residence children. These children were less likely to be stressed by feeling the need to take care of their mother. On the other hand, when their parents were not getting along well, these teenagers were more likely than those in sole residence to feel caught in the middle of the disagreements. Fortunately, their

parents were not more likely than other divorced parents to drag them into their conflicts. Moreover, having a closer relationship with both parents generally offset the negative impact of the parents' conflicts. Children in both types of families were more stressed, anxious and depressed when there were large discrepancies in their parents' parenting styles. But the impact was the worst on the children who rarely got to spend time with their father, not on those in dual residence. What is especially noteworthy about this longitudinal study is that even after controlling for parents' educations, incomes and levels of conflict, the shared residential children had the better outcomes (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

A number of smaller studies conducted at around the same time as the Stanford Study also found equal or better outcomes for children in shared parenting families. Four years after their parents divorce, the 11 children in dual residence were not significantly different from the 89 children in sole residence in regard to stress, confusion, or insecurity (Luepnitz, 1991). In a larger study, three years after the divorce, the 62 dual residence children were less depressed, stressed and agitated than the 459 children in sole residence. What is especially noteworthy is that all of these children had similar scores on these measures at the time their parents divorced (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991). In a much smaller study by the same researchers, there were no differences on these measures between the 9 children in dual residence and the 144 children in maternal or paternal residence. Given the very small number of shared parenting families it is not surprising that family income, conflict and domestic violence accounted for half of the differences in children's well-being in all families. In a San Francisco study where parents were receiving free counseling for their ongoing conflicts, the children in the 26 dual residence families were better off in regard to stress, anxiety, behavioral problems, and adjustment to moving between homes than the children in the 13 sole residence families. It is important to note that the children whose parents needed the most counseling initially to make shared parenting work ended up as well off as children whose parents initially were getting along fairly well (Brotsky et al., 1991). Similarly in a Canadian study, 85% of the shared parenting couples said they felt close to their children and that the children adapted well to living in two homes (Irving & Benjamin, 1991).

More recent American studies reach similar conclusions. In the Wisconsin study with 590 shared parenting families, these children were less depressed, had fewer health problems and stress related illnesses and were more satisfied with their living arrangement than the children in the 590 sole residence families (Melli & Brown, 2008). They were 30 % less likely to have been left with babysitters or in daycare. Nearly 90 % of their fathers attended school events, compared to only 60 % of the other fathers. Almost 60 % of the mothers said the fathers were very involved in making everyday decisions about their children's lives. In fact 13 % of the mothers wished the fathers were *less* involved. Likewise, 80 college students from shared parenting families had fewer health problems and fewer stress related illnesses than the 320 students who had lived in sole residence (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). For middle and high school students, children were less depressed, less aggressive and had higher self-esteem when their divorced parents had an authoritative rather than a permissive parenting style. But because the 207 children in shared residence were more likely than the 272 in sole residence to have two authoritative parents, their outcomes were better (Campana, Henderson, & Stolberg, 2008). With younger children aged six to ten, the twenty children in shared parenting families were less aggressive and had fewer behavioral problems than the 39 children sole residence (Lee, 2002). In a very small convenience study with only eleven elementary school children in shared parenting families, the parents and the children agreed that making friends and maintaining their

contact with friends was not a problem even though the parents' homes were in different neighborhoods (Prazen, Wolfinger, Cahill, & Jones, 2011).

International studies have also found children in shared parenting families doing equally as well or better than other children of divorce. In a large Swedish study, the 443 children in shared parenting families had more close friends and had fewer problems making friends. They were no more likely than the 2920 children in sole residence to be aggressive, violent, or abuse drugs and alcohol (Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007). A Norwegian study also found that 41 shared parenting adolescents were no more likely to drink or use drugs than the 409 in sole residence. But they were less likely to smoke, to be depressed, to engaged in antisocial behavior and to have low self esteem (Breivik & Olweus, 2006). In a small Norwegian study where all 15 adolescents had lived in dual residence from three to ten years, all but one was satisfied with shared parenting – mainly because it enabled them to maintain close relationships with both parents (Haugen, 2010). Likewise, in a Dutch study with 135 adolescents in shared parenting, the girls were less depressed, less fearful and less aggressive than the daughters in the 250 sole residence families (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010).

Because Australia revised its custody laws in 2006 in ways that were more favorable to shared residential custody, a number of recent Australian studies have compared “shared care” and “primary care” families. The largest is a random national survey of 645 dual residence parents and 7118 sole residence parents one to two years after separation (Kaspiew et al., 2009). Despite the fact that the shared parenting couples were just as likely as others to report domestic violence before their separation, there was no evidence to suggest that this had any more negative effect on the dual residence children than those living in sole residence. Even after accounting for parents' levels of education and violence, the shared parenting children had marginally better outcomes on the behavioral and emotional measures than those in sole residence. As expected, regardless of their living arrangement, children whose parents had a history of violence had more behavioral and emotional problems.

The other large Australian government report presents data from two separate studies (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2010). The first was a longitudinal study of 84 dual residence and 473 sole residence families with children who were first assessed at ages 4-5 and again two years later – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) survey. The second was a survey of 440 parents with dual residence and 419 with sole residence (CSA). In the CSA survey, according to the fathers, the children in shared care were doing better socially, emotionally and academically. According to the mothers, the children were no better or no worse in shared care. In the LSAC study, according to teachers' reports, at the end of the two year period, the shared care children had fewer peer problems, fewer academic difficulties, and less hyperactive behavior than those in sole residence. Even though there was too much variation in scores within each group to achieve statistically significant differences, the shared care children had higher scores on socio-emotional and language development. Even though violence, family income and parents' educational levels were more strongly correlated with children's outcomes than was the parenting plan, the authors conclude that: “Overall this research paints a positive picture of shared care both in terms of parental satisfaction and children's wellbeing.”

These conclusions are confirmed in several smaller Australian studies. Comparing 105 adolescents living in shared care, 398 living with their mother and 120 living with their father, the shared care children had the best relationships with both parents, their stepparents and their grandparents two years after their parents separation (Lodge & Alexander, 2010). Interestingly, even though the shared care parents reported being no more cooperative than the other divorced

parents, their children reported them as getting along better than did the children living with the mother or their father. The shared care children were just as well adjusted socially and academically as the other children. But they were much more likely than the children who lived with their mothers to confide in their fathers (80% versus 45%) and to say they had a close relationship with him (97% versus 65%). In small study with 27 children in shared residence, 37 in maternal residence and 24 in intact families, the children in sole residence were significantly more hyperactive than the others. All children's stress levels were in the normal range, although those in shared parenting had somewhat higher scores. The children were equally satisfied in shared or sole residency. But the parents in the shared care families were more satisfied and less stressed (Neoh & Mellor, 2010).

Insert Table 3 and 4

The largest, most recent and most internationally representative study further confirms the benefits associated with shared parenting (Bjarnason, 2012; Bjarnason, 2010). Data were gathered from 36 Western countries from nearly 200,000 children: 148,177 in intact, 25,578 in single mother, 3,125 in single father, 11,705 in mother/stepfather, 1,561 in father/stepmother, and 2,206 in shared parenting families. The children were 11, 13 and 15 years olds who were in the World Health Organization's 2005/2006 nationally representative data base. The shared parenting children were the least likely to say they had a "difficult" or "very difficult" time talking to their fathers about things that really bothered them (29%) than another of the other children, including the children in intact families (32%). As Table 3 illustrates, children living with their single mother or with their mother and stepfather had the most difficulty communicating with their fathers (42% and 43% respectively). When asking how satisfied they were with their lives, the children in intact families were the most content. As Table 4 illustrates, the shared parenting children were more satisfied with their lives than the children in all other families, except intact families. Even when the children's perceptions of their families' financial situations were factored in, the children with separated parents were still less satisfied than those with married parents - and the shared parenting children were still the most satisfied.

Overall then, children in shared parenting families are better off in terms of academic, psychological, emotional and social well-being, as well as their physical health. But are there relationships with their fathers any more meaningful or any closer and more enduring than those children who live with their mother and see their fathers periodically?

Positive Outcomes for children: Relationships with parents

As previously discussed, nonresidential fathering time is closely related to the quality and the endurance of the father-child relationship. Given this correlation, fathers and children in shared parenting families should be expected to have better relationships than those who only see each other a few days a month. But do they? Is shared parenting correlated with stronger or more enduring bonds between fathers and children?

To begin, it is worth noting that even when the children live with their mother, spending overnight time in their father's home is associated with closer relationships. For 60 adolescents, those who spent overnights at their father's home had a closer relationship with him those who only saw him during the day. This held true even when the overall amount of time they spent together was equal and regardless of the amount of conflict between the parents. Apparently overnight time provides a more natural, familial setting where children and fathers can relate in more meaningful, more relaxed ways. Then too, this kind of time together may help adolescents

and their fathers experience and appreciate their bond in more powerful ways (Cashmore et al., 2008).

But are the number of days spent living with their father related to the quality of their relationship years after their parents' divorce? Is their relationship any better if they spent more than a couple of weekends a month together and are greater amounts of time associated with better relationships? In answering this question, the most methodologically sophisticated study is based on 1030 young adults whose parents divorced before they were sixteen (Fabricius, Diaz, & Braver, 2011). Nearly 400 of them had lived in shared parenting families. The number of days they lived with their fathers each month and the present quality of their relationship was highly correlated. The more days they had lived together each month, the better their relationship. The researchers also addressed the complicated question: Was spending time together associated with any better relationship for those who did not have particularly good one? In other words, for the worst relationships, was spending more time together still associated with a higher rating? To answer this question, the researchers separately analyzed data for the top 20% with the highest ratings and the 20% with the lowest ratings. In both groups, spending more time together was still associated with higher quality relationships. Those who lived together more of the time, had the better relationships – especially those who had lived together 35% to 50% of the time. Beyond 50% time, the quality of relationships was not highly correlated with time.

Many other recent studies confirm these results. For 400 university students, almost all (93%) of the 80 students who had lived in dual residence families said this had been the best parenting plan for them, compared to only 30% of the students who had lived with their mothers after the divorce. More than half (55%) of the young adults with divorced parents said their fathers had wanted equal residential custody, but their mothers had opposed it. Even those who spent two weekends every month with their fathers said this was not nearly enough time together. The dual residence children had closer relationships with their fathers *and* their mothers than the others (Fabricius, 2003). Father-child bonds also were much stronger in the large Wisconsin study. Three years after their parents' divorce, 80% of the children in the 597 shared parenting families were spending just as much time with their father and were more satisfied with their relationship with him. In contrast, more than half of the children in sole residence families were spending far less time with their fathers and were unhappy about this loss. A number of their relationships had ended altogether (Melli & Brown, 2008). And in another much smaller study, the 5 young adults from shared parenting families had better relationships with their fathers than the 15 who had lived with their mother and spent varying amounts of time with their father (Janning, Laney, & Collins, 2010)

International studies reach the same conclusion. In the Netherlands, 135 children in shared parenting families had as close a relationship with both parents as the 2000 children from intact families. Their relationships with their fathers were closer than the relationships of children who had spent time regularly with their father, but lived with their mother (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). Likewise, 16 Canadian college students in dual residence had better relationships with both parents than the 90 students who had lived with their mothers (Frank, 2007). In an exceptionally large international study, as Table 4 illustrates, data were gathered from 36 countries, where 2206 children were in dual residence and 25,578 in maternal residence. The shared parenting children communicated better with their fathers than the children in all other family types, *including intact families*. This is especially noteworthy in regard to daughters, since the daughters were more than 2.2 times as likely as sons to have difficulty talking with their fathers regardless of living arrangements (Bjarnason, 2012).

Older studies reached similar conclusions. In the Stanford Custody Study, four years after their parents' divorce, the dual residence adolescents had closer and more trusting relationships with their fathers than adolescents who had only spent every other weekend with their fathers (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996). Likewise, in two smaller studies involving 110 shared parenting families one year after divorce, 90% of the mothers said their children had good relationships with their fathers compared to only 50% of the sole residence mothers (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991).

Although not directly measuring the quality of the father-child bond, several studies have compared the fathers' stress and dissatisfaction in shared and in sole residence families. Stressed, unhappy fathers are less likely to interact with their children in ways that promote a meaningful relationship (Lamb, 2010). Given this, if fathers in shared parenting are less stressed and less dissatisfied than other divorced fathers, it is logical to assume that their children will probably benefit. And indeed, fathers in shared parenting feel less stressed (Neoh & Mellor, 2010) and more satisfied than fathers whose children live with their mother (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Smyth, 2009).

In sum, children in shared parenting families generally have stronger, more enduring relationships with their fathers than children who lived with their mother. Leaving aside the other benefits associated with shared parenting, the quality and endurance of the father-child bond *in and of itself* is compelling data.

Negative outcomes for shared parenting families

In contrast to the majority of studies showing equal or better outcomes for shared parenting families, two Australian studies by one group of researchers reached more negative conclusions (McIntosh et al., 2010). These two studies have received considerable media coverage, for example, in an ABC news story entitled "Shared parenting hurting children" (Fullerton, 2009). They are also frequently cited in academic journals and at professional conferences for judges, lawyers and policymakers as arguments against shared parenting (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011; Gilmore, 2010; Gilmore, 2010; Harris, 2011; Trinder, 2010). Both studies were released in a 169 page report commissioned by the Australian government, but neither was peer reviewed in an academic journal. Understandably many people may only read the 20 page synopsis of this lengthy report. Unfortunately this can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the actual data, especially if readers are not aware of the methodological shortcomings of the studies.

First and foremost, these parents and children were not representative of most divorced families. In the first study "the data are from a small nonrandom select group of cases – high conflict families seeking help from community mediation" (p.15). "The small high conflict nature of the sample means that care should be taken not to generalize this finding" (p. 14). A number of these parents had never been married to each other; and the children were more than twice as likely as children of divorce in other studies to test in the borderline or high category for psychological problems (p.58). In the second study, 90% of the infants' parents had never been married and 30% had never lived together - neither had 57% of the parents of the 2-3 year olds and 49% of the 4-5 year olds.

Other methodological problems have also been pointed out by several renowned scholars (Lamb, 2012; Ludolph & Dale, 2012; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2011; Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, & Diamond, 2012; Warshak, 2012). First, the sample sizes were extremely small for many of the comparisons. For instance, there were fewer than 20 mothers in several of the groups providing

data on children's wheezing, irritability, visual monitoring, or persistence; and no more than 25 two to three year olds in shared care on any of the seven factors being measured. Second, for children under the age of two, shared care meant anywhere from 4 to 10 overnights a month – a very broad definition that did not distinguish between parents who were providing a great deal of overnight care and those who were not. Third, “visual monitoring” – one of the three measures of “emotional regulation” - was assessed and interpreted in ways that are of questionable validity or reliability. The authors chose three questions from the Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales which is designed to assess language and communication problems in young children: “When this child plays with toys, does he/she look at you to see if you are watching? When you are not paying attention, does the child try to get your attention? Does the child try to get you to notice interesting objects – just to get you to look at the objects, not to get you to do anything with them?” On the basis of the mothers' answers to these three questions, the researchers concluded that shared care children were worse off because they monitored their mothers more frequently – and according to some attachment researchers, visual monitoring indicates that infants are anxious about their caregiver's emotional and physical availability (p. 115).

A fourth limitation is that the authors drew conclusions about children's stress and parent-child attachment based on how frequently their mothers said they wheezed – which is problematic in terms of reliability and validity. Despite acknowledging that the differences were *not* statistically significant until they added socio economic status (p. 135), the authors nonetheless concluded that: “Higher rates of wheezing in the shared group are congruent with the attachment/stress hypothesis. Several studies confirm a link between negative emotional family environment and the onset of asthma and wheezing in infancy” (p. 147). The authors have made a remarkable leap of logic by implying that the stress of shared care was responsible for the wheezing – and that this wheezing was caused by stress, rather than by physical problems such as bronchitis and asthma that most commonly cause wheezing in the general population of children this age. Indeed, from infancy on, boys are nearly twice as likely as girls to have asthma. Consequently boys wheeze more than girls, with 25% - 30% of infants having at least one episode of wheezing before the age of one, increasing to 40% by age four (Weiss, 2008) . Since there were more boys in shared care than in primary care families, especially for the four to five year olds, the shared care “children” (boys) would predictably have more wheezing – as would *any* group of children who had more boys. Second, wheezing is correlated with many environmental factors having nothing to do with stress – allergens in the child's food, in the home (including cockroach feces, mold and dust mites), and in the air. As for the connection between stress and wheezing, asthmatic children who wheeze the most are also the most likely to have mothers who are more anxious, depressed, stressed and demoralized (Carmo, 2009; Reyes, 2011) But this correlational data should *never* be used to suggest that these mothers “caused” their children's wheezing. It could very well be that having an extremely asthmatic child who wheezes frequently causes mothers to become more stressed and depressed. The point is that wheezing in and of itself is not a valid or reliable measure of stress - and should not be used to make assumptions about stress or parent-child attachment in shared care families.

As is true for any lengthy report, merely reading the synopsis of this report might lead to overly simplistic and overly negative conclusions about shared care. For example, according to the synopsis: “not surprisingly” shared care families “tended” to revert to primary mother residence and were more than twice as likely to fail if the plan came about through mediation (p. 12). Looking closely at the data, we see that 53% of the 131 families started out with shared

care, decreasing to only 43% four years later. Over four years, 18% of shared care families changed to primary and 14% of primary care changed to shared, so apparently both types of families were about equally likely to revert to a different plan (p. 35-36). In the “more than twice as like to fail” group, there were only 23 couples – couples who had a number of factors working against them that may have had an equal or greater impact on their failure than having a mediated parenting plan. Compared to the 46 couples who maintained shared care, these 23 couples started out with more conflict, more children, worse father-child relationships, and less income and education.

A few other examples highlight the importance of reading reports in their entirety. The synopsis states that shared care children were the least satisfied of all care groups and reported the most conflict. Later in the report we see that 13 of the 44 children in continuous primary care and 20 of the 42 in continuous shared care were dissatisfied with their arrangement – a difference of only 7 dissatisfied children. The least satisfied children were those in “rigid” shared care. But these were the families where the parents’ high ongoing conflicts were creating the most distress for the children. What readers may also overlook in the synopsis is that overall the shared cared children were *not* more distressed by their parents’ conflicts than primary care children. Moreover, we might have concluded that being in shared care somehow increased children’s problems with inattentiveness and hyperactivity, since the synopsis states that they had “greater difficulties in attention, concentration and task completion by the fourth year of this study” (p.14). As it turns out, the shared and the primary care group means were within the normal range on the test for hyperactivity and inattention. The only children who were in the “borderline” range (borderline $x=5.0 - 6.0$ for boys) for hyperactivity/inattention were the 10 boys in “rigid” shared care whose score ($x=5.2$) was much higher than the general population mean ($x=3.1$) (p. 63). Then too, the synopsis states that amounts of overnight time were *not* associated with children feeling that their father was more emotionally available. This might easily confuse readers who do not read later in the report: “Greater amounts of overnight time with a father confident in his own parenting ability from the outset *was* important to children’s perceptions of their fathers’ capacity to understand, be interested and responsive to their needs” (p. 54).

Other misunderstandings might occur in regard to the synopsis statements about children under the age of three. “Infants under two years of age living with their non- resident parent *for only one or more* nights a week were more irritable and more watchful and wary of separation than young children primarily in the care of one parent” (p.9) The shared care children “showed *significantly lower* levels of persistence with routine tasks, learning and play than children in the other two groups” (p. 17). “Thus regardless of socio economic background, parenting or inter-parental cooperation, shared overnight care of children under four years of age had an independent and *deleterious* impact on several emotional and behavioral regulation outcomes” and was associated with “*severely distressed* behaviors in their relationship with the primary parent” (p. 9). What is not stated until Appendix 1 is that the shared care infants had exactly the same irritability score as the 3851 infants from intact families ($x=2.50$) and had almost the same score on visual monitoring as the 4041 infants from intact families, $x=2.48$ and 2.41 respectively . Moreover, the authors later acknowledge that the differences in the ratings for infant irritability and visual monitoring became significant *only after* parenting warmth, conflict and SES were added to the model (p. 132-133). (Italics are mine)

In sum, the limitations of this study call for a more nuanced and less negative conclusion than what is offered at the end of the synopsis: “By implication shared care should not normally

be the starting point for discussions about parenting arrangements for very young children” (p. 10). These two Australian studies are certainly not alone in having shortcomings and limitations. Indeed, all studies have their flaws and limitations. What is troubling, however, is that they are so widely disseminated and so often cited as evidence that shared parenting is “bad” for young children. Moreover, putting so much emphasis on these two studies may lead to overlooking the more positive outcomes in the other twenty five international studies: Children in shared parenting families generally have equal or better outcomes on measures of emotional, behavioral, psychological, physical and academic well-being. Above all, they generally have far better relationships with both parents than children who live with only one of their parents.

Children’s perspectives on shared parenting

Leaving aside the academic, behavioral or psychological benefits, how do the children themselves feel about shared parenting? Most researchers have not asked the children how they feel about living with both parents. But those that have are remarkably consistent in their results. So how happy or satisfied are most of these children? Do they feel that the stress and hassle is worth it? Or do they feel like “suitcase kids” who are “bounced around” and “homeless”?

Fortunately most children feel the benefits outweigh the hassles and inconveniences of living in two homes. In a survey with 136 Australian children, most of those in shared care liked living with both parents – mainly because they appreciated the importance of having a close relationship with both parents. Although many said it was inconvenient keeping up with their things in two homes, this was also true for children who only spent weekends with their fathers (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2010). In another Australian study with 105 adolescents in dual residence, most agreed and were satisfied with their parents’ decision (Lodge & Alexander, 2010). Similar results emerged from a British study with 73 shared parenting children. Despite having to adjust to different household rules and to make the emotional shift when changing from one home to the other, most preferred living with both parents to living with only one. Given their busy social lives, adolescents felt more inconvenienced than younger children. Some children wished they could live in one home because they found the other parent boring, because that parent had fewer creature comforts to offer, or because they disliked a stepparent or stepsiblings. Still, most felt that having a close relationship with both parents outweighed the hassles - and many enjoyed having a break from each parent from time to time (Smart, 2001) . Likewise, in-depth interviews with 15 Norwegian children ages 9 to 18 who had lived three to ten years in shared families found that only one of the children would have preferred to live in one home. Although some said it would be more convenient to live in one home, they felt dual residence was the best choice because they loved both parents equally (Haugen, 2010). Similarly, in the Swedish national health and welfare study, most dual residence children said they were glad to have the chance to develop close relationships with both parents. Although some wanted to live in only one home, they did not want to hurt their parents’ feelings by suggesting a change (Singer, 2008). For another 31 American adolescents living in dual residence four years after their parents’ divorce, most felt this was the best arrangement for them (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996). Likewise, 80 American college students at the University of Arizona reported that living with both parents had been in their best interests in contrast to 70% of the other 330 students with divorced parents who felt that children should live with each parent more equally (Fabricius & Hall, 2000).

Overall then, most children feel that living with both parents is a sacrifice, a compromise and a trade-off. But it is one they generally feel is worth making for the payoff: a better relationship with both parents. Not surprisingly, most children – especially adolescents – wish they had more say in when to switch homes and how long to stay with each parent. Understandably though, the kind of ever changing “flexibility” that children would ideally like to have would be difficult, if not impossible, for most parents to provide given their own demanding schedules at work and at home. Moreover, since adolescence is a time when most children complain about not having enough freedom to make decisions, it’s possible that without a parenting plan to complain about, these adolescents would find another outlet for their desire to escape parental control.

Stability of shared parenting families

Insert Table 5

A final concern about shared parenting is that these children may have a less “stable” lifestyle, meaning that these families cannot maintain this lifestyle. Consequently these children will have to undergo the stressful ordeal of moving back to live with their mother – a move that results primarily from the stress and unhappiness of “experimenting with” shared parenting. Several studies from 25 to 30 years ago found that many children who started out living in both homes moved back to live full time with their mothers in a relatively short period of time. Most of these studies, however, were based on small, non-representative samples of extremely high conflict couples, many of whom were still in the midst of legal battles over custody (Cloutier & Jacques, 1997). This kind of instability appears to be far less common today, as Table 2 illustrates.

Beginning with the oldest studies, in the Stanford Custody Study roughly 50% of the children moved from dual to sole residence, *but* another 20% moved from sole to dual residence. Moreover, the moves took place over the course of four years. Most children who moved back to live with their mother full time did not move because of family stress and unhappiness. Most moved for economic reasons. Either their fathers could no longer afford to maintain housing suitable for the children or he had to move out of town to find a job. Interestingly too, as children approached adolescence, they were more likely to move full time to their father’s home than to their mother’s (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In smaller studies from the 1980s, most dual residence families were still functioning two years after the divorce: 65% in 48 families (Brotsky et al., 1991), 94% of 440 families, 80% in 110 families (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991) and 80% in 38 families (Kline et al., 1989). More recently, in the Wisconsin study with 597 shared parenting families, three years after their divorce 90% of the children were still living in dual residence (Berger, Brown, Joun, Melli, & Wimer, 2008). Likewise 94% of the 440 families in a recent Australian study were still sharing the parenting two to four years after separating (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2010). Understandably, young, never married, low income, poorly educated or physically abusive couples are the least likely to succeed at maintaining their shared parenting family (McIntosh et al., 2010).

Overall then, shared parenting families are stable when the parents have formerly been married, are not physically abusive, and are not struggling with poverty. It is also worth noting, however, that changing parenting plans over the years is not necessarily a bad thing. These changes might reflect the kind of flexibility that better meets children’s needs as they age. Just because some children move from dual to sole residence or vice versa does not necessarily mean there will be a “bad” outcome or that the family is “unstable”. “Instability” should not be

confused with “flexibility”. Making a change in the initial parenting plan may mean that the parents are being flexible and responsive in ways that will benefit their child (Smyth, 2009).

Conclusion

Given what decades of research have taught us about the importance of nonresidential fathering time, the benefits associated with shared parenting, the characteristics of these parents, and the over-emphasis on divorced parents’ conflict, it is unfortunate that this body of research continues to be ignored in a number of recent publications . (italics are mine) For example, “*Research shows* that the best interests of children are not connected to any particular pattern of care or amount of time” (with their fathers) (Fehlberg et al., 2011) . “*No* convincing argument can be made on behalf of shared care for the children’s benefit.” “*The research makes clear* that father presence and frequency of contact in and of itself is not a significant factor.” “The message from this research should be *clear*: It is of *crucial importance in every case* to try to minimize the degree of conflict between the adults, *even if* this leads us to the now almost heretical conclusion that to continue to expose the primary carer and child to continuing conflict through the promotion of contact with the father may be doing more harm than good. Moreover, the levels of conflict between parents *show no sign of diminishing* with time (Harris, 2011) . “It is *clear* from recent Australian research that *many* shared care arrangements are tried out on a temporary basis but do not endure long term”. “In fact there is little *if any* evidence that the mere amount or frequency of contact (with fathers) is better or worse for children” (Trinder, 2010) .

Given the growing popularity of shared residential parenting, policymakers and professionals who work in family court, as well as parents, should find the research compelling. As demonstrated in this review, overall these studies have reached four general conclusions. First and foremost, most of these children fare as well or better than those in maternal residence – especially in terms of the quality and endurance of their relationships with their fathers. Second, parents do not have to be exceptionally cooperative, without conflict, wealthy and well educated, or mutually enthusiastic about sharing the residential parenting in order for the children to benefit. Third, young adults who have lived in these families say this arrangement was in their best interest – in contrast to those who lived with their mothers after their parents’ divorce. And fourth, our country, like most other industrialized countries, is undergoing a shift in custody laws, public opinion, and parents’ decisions – a shift towards more shared residential parenting. A backlash in the face of this shift is to be expected. Notwithstanding efforts to paint a negative portrait of shared parenting by overlooking the preponderance of the evidence and giving skewed presentations of research data, with a body of research to inform us, we can work together more effectively and more knowledgeably to enhance the well-being of children whose parents are no longer living together.

Table 1**Characteristics of Shared Parenting Couples**

Number of shared Parenting families		Conflict & cooperation	
		Shared compared to sole	Initially opposed sharing
Brotsky	40	similar	50% in court ordered mediation
Cashmore			
CSA	440	dads say better/ moms say similar	
LSAC	84	similar	
CFC	123	somewhat better	40%
Irving	75	somewhat better	30%
Juby	112	similar	
Kaspiew	645	somewhat better	
Kitterod	209	similar	
Kline	35	worse in shared	all in court ordered mediation
Lodge	105	similar	
Luepnitz	11	similar	50%
Maccoby	150	similar	82%
McIntosh		somewhat better	
Melli	595	somewhat better	
Pearson	111	somewhat better	40%
Spruijt	135	somewhat better	

TABLE 2**Dual Residence Families: Changes in parenting plans over time**

	Years separated	Unchanged
Brotsky	1.5	80%
Cashmore	2 - 4	55%
Kaspiew	3 - 4	70%
Kline	2	80%
Lodge	2 - 3	67%
Maccoby	3.5	50%
McIntosh	4	65%
Melli	3	90%

TABLE 3: OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN**Shared residence (35-50% time share) or Sole Residence**

	shared/sole	Academic Cognitive	Psychological Emotional	Behavior Substances	Health	Parent relationship
Bjarnason	2200 25,578		better			better
Breivik	41 409	equal	better	better		
Brotsky	26 13		better	better		
Buchanan	97 150	better	better	better	better	better
Cashmore						
*CSA	440 148	better	better	better		
* LSAC	84 473	better		better	better	
Campana	207 272		better	better		
Fabricius	30 201					better
Fabricius	337 686					better
Fabricius	130 136				better	better
Frank	16 90			better		
Jablonska	443 2920			better		
Janning	5 17					better
Kaspiew*	645 7118		better	better		
Kline	35 58		better	equal		better
Lee	20 39			better		
Lodge	105 518	equal		equal		better
Luepnitz*	11 89		equal	equal		
Melli*	597 600		better			better
McIntosh #	17-70 14-624		mixed	mixed	equal	
McIntosh	42 44		better	equal		better
Neoh	27 37			better		
Pearson*	62 459		better	better		
*	9 83		equal	equal		
Spruijt	135 350					better

* number of families, not number of children

The number of children measured on each variable varied considerably

TABLE 4

Shared physical custody: Children in 36 Western Countries

**Percent of children who find it difficult or very difficult
to talk to their father about things that really bother them**

Family type		Children ages 11, 13 & 15
Mother & stepfather	43%	11,705
Single mother	42%	25,578
Father & stepmother	39%	1,561
Single father	33%	3,125
Intact families	32%	148,177
Shared physical custody	29%	2,206

Bjarnason, T. et al (2012). Joint physical custody and communication with parents: A cross national study of children in 36 western countries. *Children & Society*, 26. 51-62.

Table 5**Children's satisfaction with life compared to children from intact families**

		After controlling for their perceptions of their family's economic situation
Intact family	contrast	contrast
Shared custody	-.26*	-.21*
Mother & stepfather	-.41 *	-.33 * +
Single mother	-.44 *	-.28 * +
Single father	-.58 *	-.49 * +
Father & stepmother	-.63 *	-.62 * +

* Children are significantly less satisfied than those in intact families ($p < .001$)

+ Children are significantly more satisfied after factoring in their economic situation but remain statistically less satisfied than children in intact families.

Reference List

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