

## **Shared Parenting After Divorce: A Review of Shared Residential Parenting Research**

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*One of the most complex and compelling issues confronting policymakers, parents, and the family court system is what type of parenting plan is most beneficial for children after their parents' divorce. How much time should children live with each parent? An increasing number of children are living with each parent at least 35% of the time in shared residential parenting families: How are these children and their parents faring? In what ways, if any, do divorced parents who share the residential parenting differ from parents whose children live almost exclusively with their mother? How stable are shared residential parenting plans? By reviewing the existing studies on shared parenting families, these questions are addressed.*

*KEYWORDS joint physical custody, parenting plans, shared parenting*

Divorced parents, policymakers, and legal or mental health professionals working in the family court system share a common goal: to choose and to promote the most beneficial parenting plan for children whose parents are separating. Although the goal is both worthy and straightforward, achieving it raises a number of complex and compelling questions. What is the most beneficial living arrangement in terms of its impact on the well-being of children? More specifically, how much time should children live with each of their parents in families where both parents are fit and loving? Do children benefit from living with both parents at least 35% of the time? If so, how and

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why? Do parents who share residential custody differ in significant ways from the majority of divorced parents whose children live almost exclusively with their mother? And how are these shared parenting children and their parents faring?

These questions have become increasingly relevant for at least three reasons. First, shared residential custody is becoming more prevalent. Until recently only 5% to 7% of children lived at least one third of the time with their father. 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 & Brown, 2008). Likewise, in Australia, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden 18% to 20% of children whose parents have separated are in shared residential custody (Smyth, 2009; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010).

Second, the majority of people who have been surveyed on the issue of custody believe that children should live equal time with both parents after divorce. In a 2004 nonbinding ballot election in Massachusetts, 85% of the voters (530,000 people) said that children should live with each parent equally after divorce (Fatherhood Coalition, 2004). Other surveys in Arizona of college students and other adults also found that 80% to 90% believe in shared residential parenting after divorce (Braver, Ellman, Votruba, & Fabricius, 2011). In an even more recent survey of 375 people who had been called for jury duty, 67% said they favored shared residential parenting (Braver et al., 2011).

Third, given the growing support for shared parenting, many state legislatures are in the process of revising their custody laws in ways that reflect the changing cultural norms in our society. At present equal physical custody is almost never ordered by the judge if either parent objects. In most states a judge is not ever allowed to order it unless both parents agree (Ellman, Kurtz, & Weithorn, 2010). State legislatures, therefore, are giving greater consideration to changing the laws in ways that would promote more shared residential custody. Among those proposals under consideration is a rebuttable presumption of equal residential custody. If legislated, the law would mean that when parents cannot reach a mutual agreement on the kind of parenting plan they think is best for their children, the children would live equal time with each of them as long as both were "fit and loving" parents.

In sum, the research on shared residential parenting families is of interest to a broad range of people—policymakers, lawyers, judges, custody mediators, and evaluators, and above all, to parents in the process of divorcing.

## METHODOLOGY

Because 85% to 90% of children live with their mothers after their parents' divorce, there have been relatively few studies on families where the children live at least 35% of the time with each parent. Unfortunately, most studies have merely categorized children according to whether their parents have joint or sole legal custody without designating how much time they actually live with each parent. This means, for example, that a child whose mother has sole legal custody might be living more time with the father than a child whose parents have joint legal custody. In that regard, Bauserman's (2002) much publicized meta-analysis is not cited in this review because there is no way to distinguish children who actually lived with their fathers at least 30% of the time from those whose parents simply had joint legal custody.

This review includes only studies that clearly designated that the children lived at least one third of the time with each parent. Twenty studies published in peer-reviewed academic journals were found through a Social Science Index search. In the research on custody, the term *shared parenting* is used to refer to children who see their fathers regularly but live with their mothers, as well as to children who live with their fathers 35% to 50% of the time. To avoid confusion, in this article the terms *shared parenting* or *shared residential parenting* are used interchangeably to refer only to those families where the children live at least 35% of the time with each parent. The term *maternal residence* is used to refer to families where the children live almost exclusively with their mother and spend varying amounts of time with their fathers. As Table 1 illustrates, several of the studies date back almost 30 years and the sample sizes across the 20 studies vary considerably. Some have directly compared adults and children in shared parenting to those in mother residence families. Others have provided data on the shared parenting families without comparable data on maternal residence families. The older studies tend to have less random, smaller samples and to take account of fewer confounding variables—most notably the parents' income, education, and levels of conflict. Yet despite these limitations, the 20 studies reach remarkably similar conclusions about shared parenting families.

Each of the 20 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 than other divorced parents? Put differently, is shared parenting feasible only for a relatively small, selective group of parents? 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

**TABLE 1** Shared Residential Custody Studies

Study	Dual residence	Maternal	Age of data	Positive outcomes for shared residential custody
Breivik & Olweus (2006)	41 children	409 children	2005	yes
Brotsky, Steinman, & Zimmelman (1991)	40 families	—	1985	yes
Buchanan & Maccoby (1996)	97 families	150 families	1984–1988	yes
Campana, Henderson, & Stolberg (2008)	207 families	272 families	2007	yes
Fabricius, Diaz, & Braver (2011)	440 young adults	590	2005	yes
Fabricius & Luecken (2007)	80 young adults	320	2000	yes
Irving & Benjamin (1991)	35 families	42 families	1983–1986	yes
Juby, Burdais, & Gratton (2005)	121 families	657 families	2005	yes
Kaspiew et al. (2009)	750 parents	4,250 parents	2006	yes
Lee (2002)	20 children	59 children	2002	yes
Luepnitz (1991)	11 families	89 families	1991	yes
Melli & Brown (2008)	597 families	597 families	2001–2004	yes
Neoh & Mellor (2010)	27 children	37 children	2008	mixed
Pearson & Thoennes (1991)	62 families	459 families	1979–1983	yes
	9 families	83 families	1991	no difference
Prazen et al. (2011)	17 children	—	2011	yes
Smart (2001)	65 children	52 children	2000	mixed
Smyth (2009)	63 parents	—	2005–2009	yes
	55 parents	274 parents		yes
	80 parents	2,222 parents		yes
Spruijt & Duindam (2010)	135 children	350 children	2010	yes

the father–child relationship compare in shared parenting versus mother residence families?

It is important to note at the outset that this article does not include studies based on the 10% to 15% of divorced parents in the high-conflict group. These adults' unrelenting conflicts are extremely aggressive, physically threatening, and often violent or physically abusive. Designing parenting plans for these parents is a challenging task that has received extensive attention in the literature. Because these high-conflict couples consume so much time in family court and because their conflicts often involve physical abuse, much of the discussion of and objections to shared parenting have been focused on them (Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; McIntosh, Burns, Dowd, & Gridley, 2010; Kuehnle & Drozd, 2012). This article, however,

focuses on the 85% to 90% of divorced parents who are not in this high-conflict group. In addition to the fact that this high-conflict group represents only a minority of divorced parents, they are excluded from this article for another reason as well. Presenting the research on the high-conflict minority along with the research on the other 85% to 90% can lead to unsubstantiated conclusions about shared parenting. For example, the Australian research by McIntosh and her colleagues (2010) is often cited to support the claim that shared parenting is harmful for most children. An ABC News story about McIntosh's research begins with the sobering headline: "Shared parenting hurting children" (Fullerton, 2009). Likewise, an article claiming to be a "review of recent research on shared parenting" published in a British law school journal was based on only two studies of shared parenting families—one of which is McIntosh's study (Trinder, 2010). The problem is that the McIntosh et al. studies come from a small, nonrandom sample of 69 shared parenting families, most of whom were in the high-conflict groups and only 16 of whom had voluntarily chosen shared parenting. The researchers themselves concluded that the young children's higher anxiety scores were more closely correlated with the father's low education, the parents' high conflict, and the mother's poor parenting skills than with the shared residential parenting (McIntosh et al., 2010). This review, therefore, does not include studies based on the 10% to 15% of high-conflict couples, so that data from these studies will not be generalized to the remaining 85% to 90% of divorced parents.

### RATIONALE FOR SHARED RESIDENTIAL PARENTING

At least four conclusions from several decades of research on children of divorce are relevant to the growing interest in shared residential parenting plans. All four are compatible with the assumption that shared residential parenting might be associated with equal or better outcomes for children than maternal residence—above all, to stronger and more enduring bonds between fathers and children.

First, children of divorce benefit most when their father is actively engaged in their lives across a wide range of daily activities and when he is has an authoritative rather than a permissive or an authoritarian parenting style (Amato & Dorius, 2010). Given this, limiting fathering time to weekends or to brief weekday visits is less likely to benefit children because the kinds of activities that build strong parent-child bonds and promote authoritative parenting are less likely to occur. These ordinary routines and rituals include cooking together, running errands, getting ready for school, working together on homework, shopping, doing chores, and being together in spontaneous, unstructured ways. In other words, it is not merely the total number of hours with their father that benefits children most. It is having the kind of time together engaged in a broad range of daily activities that

promotes the best outcomes for children. Even 15 years ago a group of 18 nationally renowned experts in psychology, sociology, social welfare, and law concluded that divorced fathers need more extensive and more “regular” kinds of time with their children to maintain a quality relationship (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997).

The second finding is that when children live only with their mother, the majority of their fathers end up spending too little of the “right kind” of high-quality, authoritative parenting time with them (Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009). Only 30% of maternal residence children spend time with their father weekly and another third have not seen him at all in the past year. The typical parenting plan only allows fathers and children to be together every other weekend and on occasional weeknights for a part of the evening. This means that most children only live with their father 15% of the time, at most. These statistics suggest that maternal residence might not be the best parenting plan for many children because it might not be the best way to encourage or promote high-quality fathering time.

Third, in maternal residence families, divorced fathers’ relationships with their children often grow weaker or deteriorate altogether. This weakened or damaged bond leaves many children feeling that the greatest price they have paid for their parents’ divorce is the damaged or lost relationship with their father—a feeling and a longing that often continues into their adult years. For example, a recurring theme in many of the 900 divorce stories written by university students was the longing for a better relationship with their fathers—or longing for any relationship with him (Harvey & Fine, 2010). Likewise, in 15 years of surveys involving almost 200 college women with divorced parents, only 5% said they had the kind of relationship they wanted with their father (Nielsen, 2006). Extensive interviews with 100 adults between the ages of 18 and 35 also show that 60% of them with divorced parents still missed their father (Marquardt, 2005). In yet another survey involving nearly 1,200 undergraduates, nearly half of whom were Hispanic American, 75% still hungered for a closer relationship with their father (Finley & Schwartz, 2007). These recent findings are not particularly surprising given that a meta-analysis of research from the 1990s found that most children’s relationships with their fathers worsened or ended altogether after their parents’ divorce (Reifman, 2001). It would be illogical and unreasonable to suggest that the damage to these father–child relationships is due solely to the fact that the children live with their mother. On the other hand, it is reasonable and logical to assume that there are fathers and children whose bonds would be stronger if they lived together more than 15% of the time after the parents’ divorce.

Fourth, the ongoing quality and endurance of the father–child relationship is closely related to the amount of time they spend together in the years immediately after the parents separate. Even 20 years after divorce, children who have spent the most time with their fathers following the divorce have closer relationships with him from there on than children who



only occasionally saw their fathers (Ahrns, 2007; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Indeed, in a nationally representative survey of 300 young adults, how much time they had spent after the divorce with their fathers during adolescence was the strongest predictor of how close they felt to him as young adults, how likely they would be to ask his advice, and how often they talked to him about anything personal (Aquilino, 2010). For another 100 young adults, those who had seen their father at least once every week as teenagers felt closer to him than those who had only seen him a few times a month (Laumann & Emery, 2000). More noteworthy still, for another 105 young adults, having a meaningful adult relationship with their fathers was related to how much time they had spent together after the parents' divorce, but was not related to the father's socioeconomic status. In short, time trumped money (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). In yet another study with 354 teenagers, those who spent the most time with their fathers were closer to him, admired him more, and felt they would talk to him if they were unhappy or had a major decision to make. This held true even for those whose parents had ongoing conflicts (Sobolewski & King, 2005).

In sum, the research suggests that living almost exclusively with their mother might not be the best way to preserve or to promote the children's relationship with their father. Shared residential parenting might be associated with equal or better social, emotional, and psychological outcomes for children—but, more important, with stronger and more enduring bonds between fathers and children.

### PARENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

We begin our exploration of the shared parenting research by asking which parents are the most likely to create shared residential parenting families after their divorce. Are they significantly different from other divorced parents in terms of their initial enthusiasm for shared parenting, their incomes, education, level of cooperation, work schedules, or amount of conflict? In other words, are shared parenting couples somehow “special” compared to other divorced parents? Are they a unique minority whose experiences with shared parenting cannot be generalized to the majority of divorced parents? If they are significantly different from most other divorced parents, then it can be argued that whatever benefits might accrue to their children are largely due to factors other than living with both parents at least 35% of the time. Put differently, if they are more educated, richer, and far more cooperative than other divorced couples, then their children might have benefited just as much by living with their mother.

In addressing these questions, the landmark Stanford longitudinal study considered several confounding variables and directly compared shared and sole residence children and their parents. The study collected data

over a 4-year period in the late 1980s from 1,100 divorced families with 1,386 children. There were 92 shared parenting families. In terms of being mutually enthusiastic about shared parenting, only one fifth of these parents initially wanted to share the residential parenting. Although none were ordered by the court to share, most entered into the agreement reluctantly. Moreover, they were not significantly more cooperative, wealthier, or more educated than the other divorced parents. Most did not work closely together in coparenting or communicate far better than other divorced couples. Instead they had an emotionally disengaged, business-like, "parallel parenting" relationship. Most only communicated "as needed," which became less necessary as the children aged. They differed from other divorced parents in only two significant ways. First, they were both committed to having the father remain actively involved in the children's lives. Second, the father's work schedule made it possible for the children to live with him at least one third of the time. Especially noteworthy is the researchers' conclusion: "Parents can share the residential time even though they are not talking to each other or trying to coordinate the child rearing environments of their two households" (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992, pp. 248, 292).

Four smaller studies with a total of 117 dual residence families also conducted in the late 1980s reached similar conclusions. The number of couples who initially were not in favor of their shared residential custody agreement varied from 20% (Irving & Benjamin, 1991), to 40% (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991) to 50% (Luepnitz, 1991). Although the shared residence parents had higher incomes and were more educated, the overall quality of their relationship with one another and their level of conflict were not significantly better than the other divorced couples. The only exception was that none of these parents had ever been physically abusive. For most of them, learning to get along well enough to share the parenting took time. They managed to succeed even though they still had conflicts and even though many had not initially been in favor of the shared custody agreement.

In a more recent and much larger study in Wisconsin, the results were similar to the older studies. Data were collected 3 years after divorce from a random sample of 597 shared residence and 597 maternal residence families (Melli & Brown, 2008). The shared parenting couples were not that much wealthier, more educated, or more cooperative than the other divorced parents. The fathers' average incomes were \$40,000 (30% college graduates) and \$32,000 (25% college graduates), respectively. The mothers' incomes and educational levels were virtually the same, at \$23,000 versus \$22,000 with 25% college graduates in both groups. In regard to money, it is important to note that in Wisconsin there has been an increase in shared residential custody for lower income parents, suggesting that this arrangement is becoming more widespread (Cook & Brown, 2006). As in older studies, the shared residence fathers had more flexible, child-friendly work hours, but the quality of the coparenting relationship was



not especially friendly. Both groups were equally likely to describe their relationship as “hostile” (15%). Most parents had a distant, 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%), largely because these fathers were so much more engaged in the parenting (Melli & Brown, 2008).

Studies from other countries reach similar conclusions. In a Dutch study 4 years after divorce, the current levels of conflict for the 135 shared residence and the 350 mother residence couples were similar. On the other hand, those with the least conflict at the time of the divorce were more likely to be in shared parenting (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). Likewise, in the Australian shared residence studies, 20% of these couples had conflicts and 20% were distant even 3 years after their divorce (Kaspiew et al., 2009).

In regard to parents’ characteristics, several intriguing findings recently emerged in a large Canadian study with 758 divorced families where 16% of the children were living in shared residence families. Although the fathers generally had higher incomes and more flexible schedules, the mothers without high school degrees were more likely to have shared residential parenting than more educated mothers. The mothers were also more likely to have a boyfriend within 6 months of their divorce (often someone they had been involved with during the marriage) and to be more clinically depressed. It might be that these mothers wanted the “child-free” time to finish school or to be with their boyfriends. For depressed mothers, it might be that living with the children full time seemed too daunting and overwhelming. The fathers, however, were not more likely than other divorced fathers to have a new girlfriend (Juby, Burdais, & Gratton, 2005).

One final distinguishing characteristic of shared residential parenting families is that sons are somewhat more likely than daughters to be living with their fathers at least one third of the time (Grall, 2006; Juby et al., 2005; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010; K. Stamps, Booth, & King, 2009). Although speculative, this might happen because mothers feel less capable of raising sons on their own or are less jealous about having the sons live with their fathers. It might also be that fathers and sons feel more comfortable living together than fathers and daughters—perhaps a reflection of society’s discomfort with fathers living alone with daughters once they reach adolescence. Fathers might also feel more confident and more capable with sons than with daughters. This could also be a continuation of the different parent–child bonds before the divorce. Mothers and daughters are generally closer and more involved in one another’s lives than fathers and daughters and than mothers and sons (Nielsen, 2011).

Overall then, parents with shared residential custody do not get along with one another exceptionally better than other divorced parents. They are, however, cordial or cooperative enough to enable their children to live

in two homes. As is true in intact families, these parents do not have a conflict-free relationship. Given this, it is worth noting that the general consensus among experts is that nonphysical conflict should not be used as an excuse for limiting the amount of time that children spend with either parent after their divorce (Afifi & Hamrick, 2006; Ahrons, 2007; Amato & Dorius, 2010; Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996; Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005; Emery, Sbarra, & Grover, 2005; Fabricius, Braver, Diaz, & Schenck, 2010; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Johnston et al., 2009; King & Soboleski, 2006; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008).

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FATHERS

A more complicated question for researchers to answer is whether shared parenting fathers are different in ways other than their higher incomes and more flexible work schedules from fathers whose children live with their mother after the divorce. Are fathers who see their children regularly less dedicated than fathers whose children live with them at least 35% of the time? Or did they have far better relationships with their children before the divorce than the other fathers? If either is true, then it could be argued that any benefits associated with shared residential custody would have accrued to these children even if they had lived full time with their mothers. To my knowledge, no study has compared the quality of father-child relationship during the marriage or his level of commitment after the divorce for fathers who remain actively involved in their children's lives versus those who have their children living with them at least a third of the time. There are, however, at least three reasons not to presume that shared residential fathers are necessarily "better" than other fathers in these regards.

First, there are fathers who say they wanted shared residential custody at the time of their divorce but whose children live full time with their mother. Some fathers say this happened because they could not afford a lengthy legal battle. Others say they did not want to put their children through the ordeal. Still others feel they had very little bargaining power because they believed, sometimes with their lawyer's agreement, that the judge would rule against them anyway, given the bias against fathers in family court (Frieman, 2007; Kruk, 2010; Stone & Dudley, 2006). To my knowledge no study has determined or estimated the number of fathers who feel this way at the time of their divorce. But two of the shared parenting studies included information showing that this was the case for many fathers in their study. In the Stanford Custody project with 1,100 divorced families, only 30% of the fathers who wanted equal residential custody were awarded it (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). According to 320 college students who lived with their mothers after the divorce, half of their fathers had wanted dual residence custody (Fabricius, 2003).

It is not the purpose of this review to determine how accurate fathers are in their assumptions about bias, but many judges and lawyers themselves believe that this bias does exist. On the other hand, in a survey of 345 divorcing couples in North Carolina, 20% of the fathers were awarded shared residential parenting by a judge, versus only 5% who reached an agreement with a mediator and 10% with a lawyer (Peeples, Reynolds, & Harris, 2008). On the other hand, in several surveys lawyers and judges have stated that there is a bias against fathers in the family courts (Braver, Cookston, & Cohen, 2002; Dotterweich, 2000; L. Stamps, 2002; Wallace & Koerner, 2003; Williams, 2007). But the point is that a father who *believes* there is a bias is more likely to give the mother sole residential custody of the children. 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, 100% of them are nonetheless influenced by their state’s custody laws in regard to the likelihood of getting shared residential parenting (Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1979). In that respect, a recent study of 367 people who had been summoned for jury duty is particularly relevant. Given several scenarios of divorcing parents, they were asked what custody decision they would make if they were the judge. Nearly 70% said the children should live equal time with each parent, but only 28% believed a real judge would give the parents equal time (Braver et al., 2011). Again, the perception of how a judge would rule is important because the way the parents negotiate a parenting plan will be influenced by what they believe will happen in court, even if those beliefs are not accurate. 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.

Third, as already mentioned, more parents than ever before are sharing residential custody in the United States as well as in other countries. It is unlikely that these dramatic increases are mainly due to fathers becoming so much more dedicated to their children—or to parents having much better relationships with one another before their divorce. Based on the public opinion polls already discussed, a more likely explanation is that more parents and people in the family court system are coming to appreciate the potential benefits of shared parenting.

In sum, shared parenting couples are often more similar to other divorced couples than might be assumed. First, in many families the divorcing parents are not equally enthusiastic about sharing the residential parenting. Both parents are, however, more likely than other divorced parents to believe it is important for the father to remain actively and fully involved in the children’s daily lives. Second, their incomes and educations are not dramatically higher than most other divorced parents—with the exception of those parents whose incomes are too low to support two

households suitable for children. Shared parenting couples do, however, have more flexible, child-friendly work schedules that enable the children to live with them at least one third of the time. Third, although a friendly relationship facilitates shared parenting, it is not necessary to have a friendly, cooperative, conflict-free relationship to make shared parenting work.

### THE CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

How well do most children fare in shared parenting families? Compared to those in mother residence, are they significantly better or worse off on measures of academic, social, psychological, or physical well-being? In divorced and in intact families, children's well-being is closely related to the well-being of their parents. Given this, do parents with shared residential custody perceive any benefits for themselves when compared to other divorced parents? If so, are these the kind of benefits that might indirectly have a positive impact on their children? (See Table 2).

The oldest longitudinal study, the Stanford Custody Project, collected data over a 4-year period (1984–1988) from 1,100 divorced families with 1,386 children. There were 92 shared parenting families. Four years after the divorce, the dual residence adolescents were better off academically, emotionally, and psychologically than the sole residence children. These children felt closer to both of their parents and 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. But their parents were not more likely than other divorced parents to drag their children into their conflicts. Moreover, having a closer relationship with both parents than the other divorced children 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. Even after controlling for parents' educations, incomes, and levels of hostility, the shared residential children had the better outcomes (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

More recent studies confirm these results. In Wisconsin, data were collected 3 years after divorce from a random sample of almost 597 shared parenting and 597 sole residence families (Melli & Brown, 2008). The shared parenting children were less depressed, had fewer health problems, had fewer stress-related illnesses, and were more satisfied with their living arrangement than those in sole residence. They were 30% less likely to have been left with babysitters or in day care. Nearly 90% of their fathers attended school events, compared to only 60% of the other fathers. Almost 60% of the

**TABLE 2** Outcomes for Children in Shared Residential Custody

Study	Other	Psychological emotional	Behavioral	Relationship with father	Relationship with mother	Physical health
Buchanan & Maccoby (1996)	better academically	better	better	better	better	better
Melli & Brown (2008)	—	better	better	better	—	better
Fabricius & Leucken (2007)	—	—	—	better	better	better
Fabricius et al. (2010)	—	—	—	better	—	—
Campana et al. (2008)	—	better	better	—	—	—
Lee (2002)	—	better	better	—	—	—
Luepnitz (1991)	—	same	same	—	—	—
Pearson & Thoennes (1991)	—	better	better	—	—	—
Brotsky et al. (1991)	—	better	better	—	—	—
Breivik & Olweus (2006)	same academically drugs and drinking	better	better	—	—	—
Kaspiew et al. (2009)	—	better	better	—	—	—
Neoh & Mellor (2010)	—	same	more stressed	—	—	—
Spruijt & Duindam (2010)	same academically	better	better	better	better	—

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, in a study with university students, the 80 students from shared parenting families were in better physical health and had fewer stress-related illnesses than the 320 students who had lived with their mothers (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007).

A study in Virginia found similar results with 518 children ages 10 to 18 in 272 mother residence families, 37 father residence families, and 207 shared parenting families (Campana, Henderson, & Stolberg, 2008). Regardless of family type, the children were less depressed, were less aggressive, and had higher self-esteem when both parents were authoritative. But because the children in shared residence were more likely to have two authoritative parents, their outcomes were the best. In a smaller study with 6- to 12-year-olds, the 20 shared residence children were less aggressive and had fewer behavioral problems than the 59 children in maternal residence (Lee, 2002). In yet another small study with 17 5- to 10-year-olds in Utah, neither the parents nor the children felt that living in two homes impeded the children's making or maintaining friends. Some of the employed mothers regretted that the time their child spent with friends meant less time for the parent and child. Still, the parents were supportive and recognized the importance of their children's friendships (Prazen, Wolfinger, Cahill, & Jones, 2011).

Smaller, older studies also found equal or better outcomes for children in shared residential custody. Four years after the divorce, there were no significant differences in the children's maladjustment in regard to stress, confusion, insecurity, or how well they dealt in making the transitions between their parents' homes. The parents benefited, however, by feeling less overwhelmed and less stressed than the other divorced parents (Luepnitz, 1991). In a larger study in Denver with 459 maternal custody, 76 paternal custody, 89 joint custody, and 62 shared residential custody families, the shared residence children had the best scores 3 years after the divorce on measures of depression, agitation, stress, and favorable adjustment. What is especially noteworthy is that the children in both groups had similar scores on these measures 3 years earlier at the time their parents divorced. These benefits might have occurred partly because only 10% of their parents were having more conflicts than 3 years previously, compared to 25% of the parents with sole residential custody. Then too, only 13% of the mothers said they felt overwhelmed and exhausted, compared to 30% of the mothers with sole residence. In a much smaller study by the same researchers, there were no differences on these measures between the children in the 9 joint residence families and those in the 83 maternal, 21 paternal, and 40 joint legal custody families. Given the small number of shared parenting families, it is not especially surprising that family income, parental cooperation, and domestic violence accounted for half of



the differences in children's well-being across groups (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991). For another 40 shared and 8 sole residence families in San Francisco who received free counseling at a Jewish Family Services center in return for participating in the study, at the end of 18 months, the dual residence children were better off in regard to stress, anxiety, behavioral problems, and adjusting well to the transitions between their two homes. It should be noted that the children whose parents needed the most counseling initially to resolve their problems with shared parenting ended up as well off as children whose parents initially were getting along better (Brotsky, Steinman, & Zimmelman, 1991).

Studies from other countries reach similar conclusions to the U.S. studies. A large Norwegian study compared 2,000 young adolescents living in intact families, 40 in shared residence, 188 with remarried mothers, and 295 with single mothers. The shared residential adolescents were better off in regard to antisocial behavior, smoking, depression, and self-esteem. There were no significant differences, however, in their grades, drinking, or drug use (Breivik & Olweus, 2006). Likewise, a large Dutch study compared 135 children in shared parenting, 250 in mother residence with frequent visits from their father, 145 in mother residence with little or no father contact, 50 in father residence, and 2,800 in intact families. Unlike the children in all other living arrangements, including those who saw their fathers regularly, the children in shared parenting were as close to both parents as children from intact families. The girls were less depressed, less fearful, and less aggressive than girls who lived with their mother but had regular visits with their father. There was little difference in the academic performance of children in shared parenting and those who saw their father regularly each month. Again what is noteworthy is that the children in the shared residence families were better off than those who saw their fathers at least once a week (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). Similarly, in a Canadian study with 75 shared parenting and 42 sole residence families, 85% of the shared parenting couples said they felt closer to their children than ever before and that the children had adapted well to living in two homes (Irving & Benjamin, 1991).

Because Australia revised its custody laws in 2006 in ways that were more favorable to shared physical custody, this research has attracted considerable attention. Leaving aside the work of McIntosh et al. (2010) with high-conflict couples for reasons already mentioned, so far there is only one large study with a nationally random sample that directly measured children's well-being. In the sample of 5,000 divorced parents, 16% of the children were in shared residential custody, with that level rising to 26% for children between 6 and 11. These children had marginally better outcomes on the behavioral and emotional measures than those who lived with their mothers (Kaspiew et al., 2009). In a much smaller 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 those in

shared or intact families. All children's stress levels were in the normal range, but those in shared residence had the highest stress scores. The children were equally satisfied in shared or sole residency. But in the shared parenting families both parents were more satisfied with their living arrangement and the fathers were less stressed (Neoh & Mellor, 2010).

Two other Australian studies indirectly assessed children's well-being by asking divorced parents how satisfied they felt the children were with their living arrangements (Smyth, 2009). The first study included 274 parents with maternal custody and 55 with shared physical custody. The shared custody parents felt that they and their children were benefitting from having time to "just hang out" and to relate in more spontaneous, unstructured ways. The second study included 12 parents in a focus group and a random sample of 63 coparents. Most of the parents felt their arrangement was beneficial for themselves and for their children. Although larger and more detailed studies are underway, at present what is known about the well-being of Australian children in shared residential families is based on a small number of families.

Overall then, across three decades of research, the children in shared residential custody generally have had equal or better outcomes on measures of emotional, behavioral, physical, and academic well-being.

## STABILITY AND SECURITY

Another aspect of children's well-being is having a sense of security and stability. Do children who live in two homes feel more unstable or more insecure than those who live with only one of their parents? How stressful or "destabilizing" is having two homes? Do most of these children live in a perpetual state of feeling harried, confused, or carelessly "shuffled around"? To my knowledge, no study has directly compared levels of insecurity or instability by comparing children in both kinds of families. But given the research just reviewed on the positive outcomes for children in dual residence, living in two homes does not appear to be creating a sense of insecurity, instability, or confusion for most of them.

This is not to say that living in two homes is as convenient or as simple as living in only one. In that regard, two studies of British children between the ages of 6 and 22 are instructive. Of the 117 children, 38 lived for an equal time with each parent and 35 lived every weekend with one parent and weekdays with the other. The study was not intended to compare the children in the two types of families. Consequently the data were not quantitatively analyzed or compared for the two groups. Nevertheless, the interviews with the 73 children who were living in both parents' homes reveal a diverse array of reactions. Most mentioned the practical inconveniences such as having to pack up clothes, toys, and school supplies; letting friends know where they were; keeping up with their things; and needing

to be well organized. Most also said it took time to adjust to each parent's household rules and make the emotional shift from one home to the other. Adolescents tended to find the arrangement more inconvenient than younger children because it interfered more with their social lives. Despite these inconveniences and adaptations, most preferred living in two homes to living with only one parent.

How well or how quickly children adapted to having two homes varied. Again though, no quantitative comparison was made to determine which children adapted best and why. At the one extreme were the children who intensely disliked moving back and forth and found it disorienting, even when they were equally happy living with both parents. These children would have preferred to live with one parent because they found the other parent more boring, or because there were fewer creature comforts in one home, or because they disliked a stepparent or other children living in that household. At the other extreme were those who appreciated the benefits and were relaxed and comfortable with their lifestyle. Among these benefits were having a better relationship with each parent, gaining a deeper understanding of their parents, enjoying the break from each parent, and feeling equally loved and secure with both parents. Some also mentioned having to become "a different person" in each parent's home, much as all children have to do when they are at home versus at school. Overall, though, most preferred their lifestyle to the alternative of living with one parent, even for those who had difficulty with the transition between their two homes. Moreover, the children who were the most stressed and unhappy were not those in dual residence, but those who lived with their mother but seldom saw their father (Smart, 2001).

But how stable are shared parenting families in terms of maintaining this parenting plan over the years? Do most children end up living full time with their mother? If so, does this usually happen because the parenting plan was a failure? For those children who go to live full time with their mother or their father at some point, is the change unsettling and upsetting? Several studies from 25 to 30 years ago found that many children moved back to live full time with their mothers. Most, however, were based on small, nonrepresentative samples of extremely high-conflict couples, many of whom were still in legal battles to finalize their custody agreements (Cloutier & Jacques, 1997). This kind of instability appears to be far less common today.

Beginning with the oldest studies, in the Stanford Custody Project roughly 50% of the children moved from dual residence to sole residence, but another 20% moved from sole to dual residence. Moreover, the moves took place over the course of 4 years. Most of those who moved back to live with their mother full time came from low-income families where the father could not afford to maintain housing suitable for the children—or where an unemployed father had to move away to find work. Most who moved to a sole residence did so because one of their parents had to move,

which made dual residence unfeasible—not because the shared parenting failed. And as children approached adolescence, they were more likely to move to their father's home than to their mother's (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). In smaller studies from the 1980s, most of the dual residence families remained intact during the 2 years after the divorce: 65% in 48 families (Brotsky et al., 1991), 80% in 75 families (Irving & Benjamin, 1991), and 80% in 110 families (Pearson & Thoennes, 1991).

More recently, in the Wisconsin study with 597 shared parenting families, 3 years after their divorce 90% of the children were still living at least one third of the time with their fathers (Berger, Brown, Joung, Melli, & Wimer, 2008). In contrast, in a small Australian study with only 40 families, half of the children had moved back to live with their mother full time within 3 years (Smyth, 2009).

Overall then, it appears that most dual residence families are stable. On the issue of stability, however, the author of the 5-year retrospective study of shared parenting in Australia astutely points out that there can be “good” stability and “bad” stability. Just because a child moves from dual to sole residence or vice versa does not necessarily mean there will be a “bad” outcome for the child or that the family is “unstable.” “Instability” should not be confused with flexibility. That is, making a change in the initial parenting plan might mean that the parents are being flexible and responsive by making a change in residence that they feel will benefit their child (Smyth, 2009).

### FATHER–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

As previously discussed, nonresidential fathering time is closely related to the quality and the endurance of the father–child relationship. Given this, we would expect that fathers and children in shared parenting families would have better relationships than children and fathers who do not live together at least a third of the time. But do they? Is there any evidence that living together more than a couple of weekends a month is associated 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 with their father in his home is associated with closer relationships. For 60 adolescents, those who spent overnights at their father's home had a closer relationship with him than 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 this creates a more natural, familial setting where children and their fathers can relate in more meaningful, more relaxed, more “natural” ways. Then, too, this kind of time together might have helped these adolescents and their fathers experience

and appreciate their bond in more powerful ways (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2008).

But are the number of days spent living with their father related to the quality of their relationship years after the parents' divorce? In other words, are there any more benefits if they spend more than a couple of weekends a month together? In answering this question, the most methodologically sophisticated study is based on 1,030 university students whose parents divorced before they were 16 (Fabricius, Diaz, & Braver, 2011). Nearly 400 of them had lived in shared parenting families after their parents separated. The number of days they lived with their fathers each month and the present quality of their relationships were highly correlated. That is, the more days they had lived together each month, the higher they rated the quality of their present relationship. The amount of time these fathers and children had spent together after the parents' divorce ranged from never up to 50% of the time. The researchers also addressed this complicated question: Does additional time together have any impact on the very worst relationships or the very best relationships? In other words, for the relationships with the best and the worst ratings, will the amount of time they spent living together be associated with any higher ratings? In short, how much does spending time together matter? To answer this question, the researchers analyzed the correlations for the "best" and the "worst" 20% of relationships. If it is assumed that the fathers in the top 20% would have had great relationships with their children regardless of how much time they lived together, then time should not be highly correlated with the relationship quality for this group. And vice versa: Time should not be associated with the quality of the relationship for the 20% with the worst relationships. In fact, however, for the best and the worst relationships, living more time together was still associated with higher quality relationships. In other words, those who lived together more of the time, had the better relationships—especially those who had lived together 30% to 50% of the time.

Five 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 other students. Nearly 70% of the sole residence students felt it would have been in their best interests to have lived more with their father. More than half (55%) 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). Likewise, 3 years after their parents' divorce, 80% of the children in the 597 shared parenting Wisconsin 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). In the Netherlands, 135 children in shared parenting families had as close a relationship with both parents as the 2,000 children from intact families. These father–child relationships were closer than those where the father regularly spent time with the children who lived with their mother (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010).

Older studies reach similar conclusions. In the Stanford Custody Study, 4 years after their parents' divorce the dual residence adolescents had closer and more trusting relationships with their fathers than those who had only spent a few nights a month in his home (Buchanan & Maccoby, 1996). In two smaller studies involving 110 shared parenting families 1 year after divorce, 90% of the mothers said their ex-husband had a good relationship with the children 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. It is well documented that 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 reasonable to assume that their children will benefit. It is noteworthy, therefore, that fathers in shared parenting report feeling 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 see their father regularly but live with their mother. Leaving aside the other benefits associated with shared residential parenting, one could argue that the quality and endurance of the father–child bond in and of itself should be the overriding and most compelling consideration in choosing a parenting plan.

## CONCLUSION

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 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 toward more shared residential parenting. With the research serving 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.

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