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## Shared Residential Custody: Review of the Research (Part II of II)

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*Part I of this two-part article, which appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of the American Journal of Family Law, focused on major concerns relating to shared residential custody, the children's perspective, parental conflict, and cooperation and income. Part II discusses characteristics of fathers, outcomes for children (e.g., academic and behavioral), and stability of shared parenting. The studies referenced appear at the end of the article.*

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### CHARACTERISTICS OF SHARED PARENTING FATHERS

An 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. However, 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 that they could win a legal battle for shared parenting. Consequently, these fathers yielded to the mothers' wishes that the children live with her (70–72). In the Stanford Custody project, for example, only 30% of the fathers who wanted joint residential custody

were awarded it (62). And, according to 320 college students who lived with their mothers after their parents' divorce, half of their fathers had wanted equal parenting time (34). We have no reliable way of determining how many fathers have wanted, but were denied or never pursued, shared residential custody. 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, however.

It is not the aim of this article to assess how accurate fathers are in their assumptions about bias against them in family court. Some evidence suggests that 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

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had reached their shared parenting agreement with a mediator and 10% with a lawyer (73). On the other hand, lawyers and judges in several surveys have stated that there is a bias against fathers in the family courts (74–78). 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. However, only 28% believed that a judge would make that decision (79). The important point is that a father who *believes* that 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 that 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, 100% of them are nonetheless influenced by their state's custody laws in regard to shared residential parenting (80). Given this circumstance, 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.

### OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN: ACADEMIC, BEHAVIORAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHYSICAL

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? The twenty five studies presented in *Tables 1* and *2* address these questions.

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, and 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 (47;62).

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*Overnight time provides a more natural familial setting.*

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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 dual residence in regard to stress, confusion, or insecurity (54). 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 (55). In a much smaller study by the same researchers, there were no differences on these measures between the nine 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

**Table 1 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%

Shared Residence (35–50% Overnight time Share) or Sole Residence							
	Shared/Sole		Cognitive Academic	Psychological & Emotional	Delinquency Drug/ Alcohol Aggression	Physical Health	Relationship with Parents
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

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 (53). Similarly in a

Canadian study, 85% of the shared parenting couples said that they felt close to their children and that the children had adapted well to living in two homes (52).

### SIMILAR CONCLUSIONS IN MOST AMERICAN STUDIES

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). The children were 30% less likely to have been left with babysitters or in daycare. Nearly 90% of their fathers attended school events, as compared to only 60% of the other fathers. Almost 60% of the mothers said that the fathers were very involved in making everyday decisions about their children's lives. In fact, 13% of the mothers wished that 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 (81). 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 (82). With younger children aged six to ten, the 20 children in shared parenting families were less aggressive and had fewer behavioral problems than the 39 children sole residence (83). 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 (84).

### International Studies

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 (85). 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. However, they were less likely to smoke, to be depressed, to engage in antisocial behavior, and to have low self esteem (86). 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 (87). 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 (5).

Because Australia revised its custody laws in 2006 in ways that were more favorable to shared residential custody, this research has attracted considerable attention. The largest is a random national survey of 645 dual residence parents and 7118 sole residence parents one to two years after separation (57). 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.

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*Daughters were more than 2.2 times as likely to have difficulty talking with their fathers.*

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The other large Australian government report presents data from two separate studies (59). The first was a longitudinal study of 84 dual residence and 473 sole residence families with children who were first assessed at ages four to five 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, "[o]verall 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 (58). 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 (88).

The largest, most recent and most internationally representative study further confirms the benefits associated with shared parenting (89;90). 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 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?

### 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

**Table 3 Shared Physical Custody: Children in 36 Western Countries**

Family Type	Percent of Children Who Find It Difficult Very Difficult to Talk to their Father About Things that Really Bother Them	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.

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 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, 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 (29).

### Amount of Time Together

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 (91). 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 a 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 that this had been the best parenting plan for them, as compared to only 30% of the other students. Nearly 70% of the sole residence students felt that it would have been in their best interests to have lived more with their father. More than half (55%) said that 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 that this was not nearly enough time together. The dual residence children had closer relationships with their fathers *and* their mothers than the others (34). Likewise, three 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 (56). In a much smaller study, the five young adults from shared parenting families had better relationships with their fathers and were more likely to feel their parents had equal authority than the 15 who had lived with their mother and spent varying amounts of time with their father (92).

### International Studies, Same Conclusions

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 (5). Likewise, 16 Canadian college students in dual residence had better relationships with both parents than the 90 students who had lived with their mothers (93). 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 (89).

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 that their children had good relationships with their fathers, compared to only 50% of the sole residence mothers (55).

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*Most adolescents wish that they had more say in when to switch homes.*

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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 (39). 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 (88) and more satisfied than fathers whose children live with their mother (4;57).

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.

## SHARED PARENTING: NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

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 (68). These two studies have received considerable media coverage, for example, in an ABC news story entitled "Shared parenting hurting children" (94). They are also frequently cited in academic journals and at professional conferences for judges, lawyers, and policymakers as arguments against shared

parenting (11;95–97). 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 two to three year olds and 49% of the four to five year olds.

## Limitations in the Australian Studies

Other methodological problems have also been pointed out by several renowned scholars (99,100). 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" was measured and interpreted in ways that have no established validity or reliability. The authors devised their own measure and then interpreted the results from their perspectives on attachment theory. They chose three questions from the Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales and asked the mothers to answer "yes" or "no" to each question: "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 these three questions, the researchers concluded that shared care children were worse off because these mothers said their infants and toddlers were more likely to visually monitor them.

A fourth limitation is that the authors drew conclusions about children’s stress and parent-child attachment based on how frequently their mothers said that they wheezed – which is of questionable 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: “[h]igher 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, which 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 (98,101). Because 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 (102,103). However, 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 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.

### Reading Reports in their Entirety

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 care 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, “[g]reater 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).

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*Changing parenting plans over the years is not necessarily a bad thing.*

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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)

### More Nuanced Conclusion

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:

“[b]y 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 25 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. However, 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 (59). In another Australian study with 105 adolescents in dual residence, most agreed and were satisfied with their parents’ decision (58). 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 (104). Likewise, in depth interviews with 15 Norwegian children ages nine to 18 who had lived three to 10 years in shared families found that only one of the children would have preferred to live in one home. Although some said that it would be more convenient to live in one home, they felt dual residence was the best choice because they loved both parents equally (87). Similarly, in the Swedish national health and welfare study, most dual residence children said that 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 (8). For another 31 American adolescents living in dual residence four years after their parents’ divorce, most felt that this was the best arrangement for them (47). 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 who wished that their divorced parents had allowed the children to live in both homes (34).

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 that 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.

**STABILITY OF SHARED PARENTING FAMILIES**

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 (105). This kind of instability appears to be far less common today, as Table 4 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 (47,62). In smaller studies from the 1980s, most dual residence families were still functioning two years after the divorce: 65% in 48 families (53), 94% of 440 families, 80% in 110 families (55) and 80% in 38 families (61). More recently, in the Wisconsin study with 597 shared parenting families, three years after their divorce

		<b>After Controlling for Their Perceptions of Their Family’s Economic Situation</b>
<b>Intact Family</b>	<b>Contrast</b>	<b>Contrast</b>
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.

90% of the children were still living in dual residence (106). Likewise, 94% of the 440 families in a recent Australian study were still sharing the parenting two to four years after separating (59). Understandably, young, never married, low income, poorly educated, or physically abusive couples are the least likely to succeed at maintaining their shared parenting family (68).

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 that 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 (4).

## 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) (95). '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 caregiver 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 (97). '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' (11).* 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 that 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.

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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