

Research on Child Custody Arrangements

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What have researchers found recently about child custody arrangements for minor children? Is there one best arrangement? Do children do better with the stability provided by an arrangement of primary physical custody with one parent, or do they do better with large amounts of time with each parent but a more disjointed schedule? Are there other options that should be considered? Should gender or age of the child be considered? Should the child's wishes be considered? The following information is a summary of the most recent information I could locate.

Robert Bauserman (2002), in a meta-analytic review of 33 studies on the subject found the following:

- Across the studies, joint-custody children scored significantly higher on adjustment measures than sole-custody children.
- Both children in joint legal custody and children in joint physical custody were better adjusted than children in sole custody.
- For all categories of adjustment except academic adjustment (overall adjustment, family relations, self-esteem, emotional adjustment, behavioral adjustment, and divorce-specific adjustment), children in joint custody were better adjusted than sole custody children.
- Children in joint-custody arrangements reported less current and past conflict than did children in sole-custody arrangements.
- Children in joint-custody arrangements did not differ from children from intact families in level of adjustment.

William V. Fabricius and Jeff A Hall (2000), in a study of 800 college students who had experienced their parents divorces, found:

- Children wanted to have had more time with their fathers;
- Children believed that spending equal time with each parent would be the best living arrangement post-divorce;
- Children believed that their fathers wanted to spend more time with them;
- Children believed that their mothers did not want them to spend more time with their fathers;
- Children believed that relatively equal time with each parent was desirable except for the very youngest ages, and then that they should have more than the typical custody award usually allows;
- Custody arrangements did not change demonstrably from the time of the divorce until eight years later. This implies that custody arrangements may not have been flexible in meeting the children's needs and desires.

Mona J. Suleman and Steven A. Meyers (1999) used data from the National Survey of Families and Households to study the associations between custody arrangements and parent-child involvement following divorce. They found the following:

- Mothers spent more time with younger children than with older children post-divorce. The same was not true for fathers.

- For custodial parents, number of days of custody awarded were not correlated with the amount of parent-child involvement.
- Gender of the child was not associated with level of involvement with mothers or fathers.

Michael E. Lamb, Kathleen J. Sternberg, and Ross A. Thompson (1997) reported consensus findings from a group of experts from developmental and clinical psychology, sociology, social welfare, and law on the effects of divorce and custody arrangements on children's behavior, development, and adjustment. They agreed that:

- Five to ten percent of divorcing parents are unable to work through their anger, disappointment, and loss in a reasonable time or at all, which places their children a considerably higher risk of psychosocial problems;
- A fourth to one third of parents have considerable difficulty resolving the issues of their divorce, which also places a highly stressful burden on their children;
- Consistent payment of child support payment from secondary residential parents is associated with better adaptation of the child and more contact with the secondary residential parent;
- Children typically do better when they have regular contact with both parents, but this may hold true only if the parents are able to resolve or control their conflicts;
- Children have better post-divorce adjustment when their primary residential parent has a satisfactory standard of living, can function effectively as a single parent, and is able to reestablish a sense of well-being after the divorce;
- Children benefit when their parents provide similar daily routines for things such as bedtime, sleeping arrangements, and mealtimes, and when the parents mostly agree on how to discipline and raise their children;
- When one or both parents engages in violence toward the other or toward their children, regular contact with the violent parent(s) may not be in the best interest of the child.
- Custody arrangements that are arrived at and agreed to by the parents themselves or with the assistance of a mediator or arbitrator, are more likely to generate cooperation by both parents and better outcomes for children than decisions that are ordered by the courts;

In a running dialogue on the Smart Marriages listserv, several experts on children and divorce weighed in on which type of custody arrangement is best for children. Here are summaries of their opinions.

- Judith Wallerstein (author of several books on divorce) - Custody arrangements should be child-centered—that is, flexible enough to allow for changes that will occur as the child matures and develops relationships, interests, and responsibilities outside the immediate family.
- Elizabeth Marquardt (author of forthcoming book “The Secret Inner Lives of Children of Divorce: A Generation’s Childhood Turned Inside Out” and a child of divorce) - The home is the core of children’s identity development. When a child is forced to move between two homes, it is difficult for the child to develop a cohesive identity. The child must develop his or her own identity and value system much more independently than children in intact families. Moving back and forth fairly equally between homes creates a situation in which children are unable to maintain friendships or forge close bonds with the people in their neighborhoods. Also, they have more difficulty maintaining a sense of order in their lives. She advocates a primary home with lots of weekend and holiday time with the other parent,

though her greater desire is for “good enough” marriages to be saved instead of dissolving in divorce.

- Don Gordon (author and producer of the Children in the Middle videos along with David Arbuthnot) indicated that research on children in joint custody settings has shown better outcomes for children in joint custody when compared to children in sole custody, or no differences between the two groups. He recommends highly structured parenting schedules for high conflict families, but advocates that children have contact with both parents when at all possible. The withdrawal of one parent, especially if that is the more reasonable or calm parent, may subject the child to more instability and volatility.
- Jed H. Abraham (lawyer and author of “From Courtship to Courtroom: What Divorce Law Is Doing to Marriage, Bloch Publishing Co., January 2000) - In states with strong joint custody laws, there has been a substantial increase in child support compliance and a significant decline in divorce rates. Theories have been offered to explain these associations. One theory suggests that child support compliance is greater in those states because parents paying support have more opportunities to monitor the use of that support because they have greater contact with their children. (I think it might be more related to a greater willingness to provide support for a child with whom the parent is regularly involved.) Explanations for the lowered divorce rate include the theory that fathers will allow themselves to become more emotionally involved with their children during marriage if they think that a future divorce will not result in having their children removed from their lives. Also, mothers who see that they will be unlikely to have sole custody of their children may be less willing to divorce because of the probable decrease in their parenting time and authority with their children.
- Johathan Metcalf, an attorney with the Lahey Clinic indicates that there are studies that suggest that children do better in school when they stay in the home and the parents do the moving in and out. I have not been able to locate those studies but have heard of the concept and of parents who have even practiced this.

Based on the research, what can we recommend? First of all, there is no single arrangement that will work well for all children and their families. However, there seems to be a consensus that, when it is safe, it is best to allow children lots of access to both parents. Some researchers found that joint legal custody or shared parenting with a primary residence with one parent and ample parenting time with the other parent resulted in similar outcomes for children as exhibited by children in shared parenting relationships. However, the research that looked at what children wanted showed that children wanted more equal time with parents. What is workable for any one family will depend on factors such as parent-child relationship, closeness of parents’ residences, parents’ work schedules, children’s schedules, and how cooperative and flexible parents can be with each other.

Researchers did not find that children fared any better when placed with a same-sex parent over an opposite-sex parent. However, boys desired more time with their fathers than did girls.

It is important for both parents to support and encourage time spent with the other parent. Both boys and girls saw their mothers as being less supportive of time with fathers than they would have liked.

Consistent payment of child support is associated with better child outcomes and with greater involvement of the secondary residential parent. However, a parent should not restrict a child from time with the other parent because child support payments have not been received (in fact, this is illegal).

Parents who can keep children's schedules similar across households and who can agree on child rearing practices will help their children's adjustment process. In cases of continued disagreement, it is better to try the parallel parenting approach where the parents follow their own rules when the child is with them but do not attempt to interfere with or change the rules of the other parent.

As much as possible, parents should try to keep changes such as a move, change of schools, change of church, changes in extracurricular activities, or change in access to other relatives to a minimum for their children. The more changes associated with the divorce, the more stressful it will be for the children.

Parenting time arrangements need to be as flexible as possible to allow for the changing needs of the child. As children get older, their own commitments and activities may interfere with parenting schedules. Parents who are willing to work with their child and each other will be more likely to maintain a good relationship with their children.

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