

Shared Parenting – Benefits and Barriers

An overview of Research on Contact and Residence

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Why speak to a fathers group?

- *Why speak to a largely male conference? Should a psychologist not be “gender neutral”.*

Two key points

1 Psychologists support neither fathers nor mothers – the best interests of the child are paramount. Children need *fathers and mothers*.

2 So why don't we have 'Families Need Mothers'? ...

Some statistics

- The vast majority of resident parents are mothers
- The vast majority of parents denied contact with their children are fathers

In how many cases is the father the resident parent?

Has there been a big change in the last 20 years?

Data from the US Census

1993: 16% 2013: 17.5% *no significant difference*

Shared care: a national survey of contact after separation (Peacey & Hunt, 2008)

See also: The Millennium Cohort Study (Haux, Platt & Rosenberg 2015)

A survey of 559 separated parents

- 85% of non-resident parents reported some contact
 - For 68% it was at least fortnightly
 - For 45% it was at least weekly

 - For 79% of those having contact it included residential contact
- Of those with residential contact:
- For 73% it was at least monthly
 - For 31% it was at least weekly

How many have 'shared care'

(Peacey & Hunt, 2008)

- 'Shared care' was defined as residential arrangements that were split equally, or nearly equally, between the parents

(Note: accurate figures in all matters relating to shared care, contact and residence are very difficult to establish)

Best estimate

12%

(sample limitation – fewer non-resident parents responded)

Is it better for children to have contact?

1 Why the issue arises

Separation and divorce and its impact on children

(see Coleman & Glen, 2009)

- There is a strong association between parent relationship breakdown and poor child outcomes
- Some adverse outcomes may be lifelong

Long-term increased risk of:

- Poorer economic status, early cohabitation or marriage, teenage pregnancy, marital breakdown
- The high prevalence of divorce and separation, and wider social acceptance of relationship breakdown, have not diminished the adverse effects on children

A major protective factor

Relationship and contact with both parents

2 *The psychological benefits of contact*

The main research findings have been in place for the last 30 years
(see Fortin, Hunt & Scanlan, 2012)

- Better **academic** outcomes
- Better **emotional** outcomes
- Specifically, lower levels of **anxiety and depression**
- Contact with the non-resident **father** is important – but particularly important for **boys**
- Contact has benefits whether or not a child has the support of a **step-parent**, but is even more important where there is not a step-parent
- Contact still conveys benefits **even when there is conflict**
- The importance of **self-identity** and **genealogical connectedness**

Distress and contact

- Reports of children being unsettled or distressed in relation to contact are extremely prevalent following separation, **with or without contact disputes**
- Where there is **ongoing unresolved conflict**, reports of child distress are endemic
- Unsettled or distressed behaviour is particularly common **just prior to and following contact**
- The overwhelmingly **most common cause is parental conflict**, with the child caught in the middle
- When a child is **'kicking and screaming'** on going to contact, the cause almost invariably lies with the **resident parent**
- The cause of distress **rarely has anything to do with the contact itself or the behaviour of the non-resident parent**

Distress and contact: guidance to courts (see Weir, 2006)

*The threshold at which contact should be constrained is **high**. The distress should normally:*

- Lead to a **clinical diagnosis** of disorder
- Show clear evidence of being **caused by the contact itself** and not by other factors
- Be of such severity as to cause **substantial impairment and continuing suffering**
- Be unlikely to respond to a known, available and **effective psychological intervention**

RESIDENCE – SHARED PARENTING

Shared parenting: outcomes for children

(see Nielsen, 2014 – summary of 40 studies)

Children in shared parenting had better outcomes for:

- Emotional adjustment
- Behavioural adjustment
- Psychological wellbeing
- Physical health
- Relationships with fathers
- Relationships with mothers

These benefits remained even with high conflict

Shared parenting: outcomes for parents

(see van der Heijden, Gähler & Härkönen, 2015)

Data from 4,175 recently divorced parents

Parents with shared parenting:

- Had **higher life satisfaction**
- Had **better relationships** with each other
- Had better opportunities to be engaged in leisure pursuits and other **quality of life benefits**

(Cautionary note: limited data from acrimonious family law cases)

Shared parenting: challenges

- Some **added stresses** for children and parents
- No unique **sense of 'home'**
- **Differing parental discipline** and expectations
- Maintaining **peer groups**
- The issue of **distance**, especially for travel to school
- ***Nevertheless***, children in shared parenting arrangements (including very young children) showed better outcomes than living with just one parent
- ***Key factors for success:***
 - Minimising conflict
 - Quality of relationship with each parent

Shared parenting: summary

‘Overall the children in shared parenting families had better outcomes on measures of emotional, behavioural, and psychological well-being, as well as better physical health and better relationships with their fathers and their mothers, benefits that remained even when there were high levels of conflict between their parents’

(Nielson, 2014)

PARENTAL ALIENATION

The features of parental alienation (see Warshak, 2001)

Note: the reality of parental alienation is firmly established – the only controversy is about calling it a ‘syndrome’ as it has no place in diagnostic classification systems

- The rejection or denigration of a parent reaches the level of a **campaign**, that is, it is persistent and not merely an occasional episode
- Second, the rejection is **unjustified**, that is, the alienation is not a reasonable response to the alienated parent’s behaviour
- Third, it is a full or at least partial result of the **non-alienated parent’s behaviour**.

Some practical signs of parental alienation

- The child's stated reasons for rejecting contact are **nebulous or inconsistent**
- The child describes the non-resident parent in terms which reflect **adult language and thinking**
- The child is unable to state **positive memories** of the non-resident parent
- The child's view of the non-resident parent is '**all black**' with no shades of grey
- The child gives **unlikely or exaggerated accounts** of the non-resident parent's conduct

Can parental alienation be addressed?

- Parental alienation often points to **lack of care, or to abuse, by the resident parent**
- **'Treatment'** proposals (psychological therapy and counselling aimed at the child) are futile
- Addressing alienation requires the **strongest action** by the courts – including considering the ultimate *compulsitor* of **change of residence**

ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE

Abuse: implications for contact

(See Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, 2009)

- Some children are subject to **abuse** by a parent (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Some witness **physical violence of one parent to another**
- These cases raise particular **issues for contact**
- A history of abuse does **not automatically exclude** the possible benefits of contact
- Key factors are **the need to ensure child protection and hearing the voice of the child**

False allegations of child abuse

(See MacKay, 2014)*

- A study of contested family law cases in Scotland
- Sample: a series of disputed contact cases seen by author in 4 year period to December 2013
- 107 children (60 boys, 47 girls)
- Age range 1-15 years (median age 8 years)
- Ongoing contact disputes
- Full case histories constructed from assessments and documentation

* Full text:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265346094_False_allegations_of_child_abuse_in_contested_family_law_cases_The_implications_for_psychological_practice

Descriptive data

- Of 107 children, mother was resident parent for 89 (83%)
- No allegations in 70 cases (65%)
- Allegations made in 37 cases (35%) of which:
 - 20 (54%) – physical abuse only
 - 11 (30%) – sexual abuse only
 - 6 (16%) – physical and sexual abuse
- Of these 37 cases, all but 2 allegations made by mother

Status of allegations

Of 37 cases:

- 26 (70%) deemed by Court to be false
- 9 (24%) unsubstantiated
- 5 (14%) of false cases deemed to have been coached
- Only 2 cases upheld
- No boy/girl differences

Abuse allegations and mental health of children

Of whole sample of 107 children, 19 (18%) had mental health problems (intervention by mental health services required)

- 8 (11%) of the 70 with **no allegations** had mental health problems
- 11 (30%) of the 37 **where abuse was alleged** had mental health problems
- Chi-square test: $p=0.003^*$

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS

Additional support needs

(learning difficulties, autism...)

- Children with ASN have *fully as much need* of a relationship with both parents as others
- They often are more psychologically vulnerable when parents separate
- Resident parents of children with additional needs frequently (*and often unreasonably*) believe the non-resident parent cannot look after the child safely or adequately
- The best guidance is to treat such a child *exactly like any other* in relation to contact unless reasons not to are very obvious

Summary

- Separation and divorce have an adverse impact on children
- Contact has emotional, behavioural and other psychological benefits for children
- Child distress around contact is common, especially where there is conflict, but contact should still take place with few exceptions
- Shared parenting, while having challenges, is associated with better outcomes both for children and for parents
- Parental alienation has a clear definition, may often be seen as abuse or lack of care by the resident parent and can only be addressed by the most robust court action
- Children who have lived with domestic abuse must be protected, but false allegations of abuse are rife in contested cases and have a negative impact on children's mental health
- Children with additional support needs have as much need for contact as others and the starting point is to treat them exactly the same