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10 Surprising Findings on Shared Parenting After Divorce or Separation

by [Linda Nielsen](#)



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What is the most beneficial parenting plan for children after their parents separate or divorce? Are children better off living primarily or exclusively with one parent in sole physical custody (SPC) and spending varying amounts of time with their other parent? Or are their outcomes better when they live with each parent at least 35% of the time in a joint physical custody/shared parenting (JPC) family? Furthermore, is JPC beneficial when parents have high, ongoing conflict? In fact, isn't shared parenting only chosen by, and suitable for, a very select group of parents—those with higher incomes, lower conflict, and more cooperative relationships who mutually and voluntarily agree to share from the outset?

To answer these questions, I reviewed 54 studies that compared children's outcomes in shared and sole physical custody families independent of family income and parental conflict. In another recent [study](#), I examined all the studies that compared levels of conflict and quality of co-parenting relationships between the two groups of parents. Ten findings emerged from my [research](#), many of which refute commonly held beliefs that can lead to custody decisions that are often not in children's best interests.

- In the 54 studies—absent situations in which children needed protection from an abusive or negligent parent even before their parents separated—children in shared-parenting families had better outcomes than children in sole physical custody families.** The measures of well-being included: academic achievement, emotional health (anxiety, depression, self-esteem, life satisfaction), behavioral problems (delinquency, school misbehavior, bullying, drugs, alcohol, smoking), physical health and stress-related illnesses, and relationships with parents, stepparents, and grandparents.
- Infants and toddlers in JPC families have no worse outcomes than those in SPC families.** Sharing [overnight parenting time](#) does not weaken young children's bonds with either parent.
- When the level of parental conflict was factored in, JPC children still had better outcomes across multiple measures of well-being.** High conflict did not override the benefits linked to shared parenting, so JPC children's better outcomes cannot be attributed to lower parental conflict.
- Even when family income was factored in, JPC children still had better outcomes.** Moreover, JPC parents were not significantly richer than SPC parents.
- JPC parents generally did not have better co-parenting relationships or significantly less conflict than SPC parents.** The benefits linked to JPC cannot be attributed to better co-parenting or to lower conflict.
- Most JPC parents do not mutually or voluntarily agree to the plan at the outset.** In the majority of cases, one parent initially opposed the plan and compromised as a result of legal negotiations, mediation, or court orders. Yet in these studies, JPC children still had better outcomes than SPC children.
- When children are exposed to high, ongoing conflict between their parents, including physical conflict, they do not have any worse outcomes in JPC than in SPC families.** Being involved in high, ongoing conflict is no more damaging to children in JPC than in SPC families.
- Maintaining strong relationships with both parents by living in JPC families appears to offset the damage of high parental conflict and poor co-parenting.** Although JPC does not eliminate the negative impact of frequently being caught in the middle of high, ongoing conflict between divorced parents, it does appear to reduce children's stress, anxiety, and depression.
- JPC parents are more likely to have detached, distant, and "parallel" parenting relationships** than to have "co-parenting" relationships where they work closely together, communicate often, interact regularly, coordinate household rules and routines, or try to parent with the same parenting style.
- No study has shown that children whose parents are in high legal conflict or who take their custody dispute to court have worse outcomes than children whose parents have less legal conflict and no custody hearing.**

These findings refute a number of popular myths about shared parenting. One among many examples is a [2013 study](#) from the University of Virginia that was reported in dozens of media outlets around the world under frightening headlines such as: "Spending overnights away from mom weakens infants' bonds." In the official press release, the researchers stated that their study should guide judges' decisions about custody for children under the age of four. In fact, however, the study is not in any way applicable to the general population. The participants were impoverished, poorly-educated, non-white parents who had never been married or lived together, had high rates of incarceration, drug abuse, and violence, and had children with multiple partners. Moreover, there were no clear relationships between overnights and children's attachments to their mothers.

My review of 54 studies on shared parenting finds that, independent of parental conflict and family income, children in shared physical custody families—with the exception of situations where children need protection from an abusive or negligent parent—have better outcomes across a variety of measures of well-being than do children in sole physical custody. Knowledge and understanding of these findings allow us to dismantle some of the myths surrounding shared parenting so we can better serve the interests of the millions of children whose parents are no longer living together.

Dr. Linda Nielsen is a professor of Adolescent and Educational Psychology at Wake Forest University. She has written numerous articles on shared parenting research and is frequently called upon to share the research with legislative committees and family court professionals. For copies of her research articles contact nielsen@wfu.edu.

Highlights

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- On average, most kids in shared physical custody families have better outcomes than children in sole physical custody. [TWEET THIS](#)
- Sharing overnight parenting time does not weaken young children's bonds with either parent. [TWEET THIS](#)

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