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## Original Research

# Self-esteem in children in joint physical custody and other living arrangements



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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Parental support has been shown to be important for children's self-esteem, which in turn is related to later important life outcomes. Today, an increasing number of children in the Western world spend time in both the parents' respective households after a separation. Children who live with both parents report more parental support than children who live only with one parent after a divorce. We took the opportunity of the commonness of children sharing their time between their parents' homes in Sweden to investigate children's self-esteem in relation to family type.

**Study design and methods:** With nationally representative survey data (ULF) collected from both parents and children, we analyze differences in children's self-esteem among 4823 10–18 year olds in nuclear families, joint physical custody and those living mostly or only with one parent after a separation using ordinary least squares regression, adjusting for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

**Results:** We found no significant difference in self-esteem between children who lived equally much with both parents, mostly with one parent and those in nuclear families, whereas children in single care showed lower self-esteem compared with children in the other living arrangements. The difference was not explained by socioeconomic factors.

**Conclusion:** The self-esteem of children who share their time between their parent's respective homes after a separation does not deviate from that in their peers in nuclear families. Instead, those in single care reported lower self-esteem than those in the other living arrangements. These differences were not explained by socioeconomic factors. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish pre- and post-separation family characteristics that influence self-esteem and well-being in young people.

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## Introduction

### *Children's living arrangements in Sweden and elsewhere*

An increasing number of children in the Western world have over the last decades entered a new type of life circumstance after a parental separation. The term joint physical custody (JPC) implies that a child lives alternatively and equally much with both parents, moving between their respective homes for example every other week.<sup>1–3</sup> In Sweden, it is particularly common that children share their time between the parents' two homes after a separation and the share in JPC has risen from around 1% of the children with separated parents in the mid 1980s to nearly 40% in 2011.<sup>4,5</sup> About 10% of all children aged 12–15 years had JPC in Sweden in 2009, while only a slightly larger proportion, 13%, lived exclusively with one of the parents, mostly with the mother.<sup>6</sup> The share of children spending half the time in each parent's home is even higher among recently separated families, reaching 50%. It has therefore been argued that JPC constitutes a new norm among Swedish parents.<sup>7</sup>

The share of children in JPC is rising also in other countries. In Norway, it concerns 25% of the children with separated parents,<sup>8</sup> and in Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and some parts of the United States, around 20%.<sup>2,3,9,10</sup> In most European countries, as well as in the United States, the most common living arrangement for children with separated parents is however still single maternal care.<sup>11</sup> Factors such as proportion of women in the labor force, family legislation, and cultural views on gender roles in parenthood contribute to explain cross-country differences in post-separation custody forms.<sup>12</sup>

### *Adjustment and well-being after parental separation*

Research on children's adjustment and well-being after a parental divorce has established higher risks for emotional problems and social maladjustment than among those with parents living together.<sup>13–19</sup> Pre-separation characteristics such as lower relationship satisfaction and higher conflict levels may contribute to explain the higher risks as well as the potential emotional crises associated with the separation.<sup>20</sup> The stressful experience of the separation for a child can be moderated by continued parental involvement and support.<sup>21</sup> Parents' abilities to stay involved in their children's lives may however depend on factors such as parental conflict level and cooperation as well as parenting time schedules, parental ill health and lack of necessary economic resources.

### *Adjustment in JPC and relationship with parents*

The drawbacks of living in JPC have in an interview study with children been described as, for example, logistics such as traveling between the homes, not having one's personal items and difficulties keeping in contact with friends.<sup>22</sup> Living in two homes and family cultures may also impose stress on children.<sup>23,24</sup> These drawbacks have however been argued to be outweighed by the continued involvement of both parents on an everyday basis.<sup>25,26</sup>

Several studies have shown that children in JPC report more satisfaction with their relationships to, and support from, parents (in particular fathers) than children who live only or mostly with one parent after a separation.<sup>6,11,27–30</sup> High paternal support and control have been shown to positively influence children's well-being.<sup>27,31</sup> Therefore, this may, at least partly, contribute to explain the higher well-being and social adjustment and lower frequencies of health problems for children in JPC compared with single care solutions.<sup>6,28–30,32</sup> Another explanation may be the lessened risk of loss of social and material capital from one of the parents.<sup>33</sup> A high frequency of parent-child contact does however not with necessity imply high parenting quality and high quality has been found more important for children's positive development than actual time spent together.<sup>21</sup> Still, parenting schedule arrangements of every second weekend and holidays with the non-resident parent may not give children sufficient access to everyday support and control.

### *Self-esteem*

Self-esteem is the level of satisfaction with one's own behavior and self and the disposition to experience oneself as being competent and expecting a bright future.<sup>34</sup> It has been argued to consist of both self-efficacy and self-respect and is a positive indicator of well-being.<sup>35</sup> Previous research has shown that a high level of self-esteem, or rather the avoidance of low self-esteem, is important for a person's well-being throughout the life span.<sup>34,36</sup> It has also been argued that the absence of problem behaviors or risk factors is not the same as presence of positive behaviors and protective factors, making the use of positive welfare indicators such as self-esteem an important contribution to the child well-being literature that has for a long time been dominated by negative indicators.<sup>37</sup>

### *Self-esteem and parent relations*

Self-esteem is constituted during childhood and adolescence, in close relationship with significant others, like parents.<sup>35,38,39,40</sup> High levels of parental support have been found to be associated with higher self-esteem in adolescents<sup>39,40</sup> and secure attachment relationships between children and parents are associated with more perceived self-worth.<sup>41</sup>

### *Purpose*

In this study, we took advantage of the comparatively high occurrence of JPC in Sweden to compare self-esteem in children in JPC with nuclear families and those living mostly or only with one parent. We did this by using nationally representative data on 4823 Swedish children 10–18 years of age.

## Methods

Data were obtained from Statistics Sweden's yearly Survey of Living Conditions (ULF), collected in the years 2007–2011. The survey is a nationally representative sample of the Swedish population aged 18 to 84 years and includes child supplements with data collected from children aged 10–18 years living in

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