



Why should they live more with one of us when they are children to us both?



Parents' motives for practicing equal joint physical custody for children aged 0–4

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ABSTRACT

Joint physical custody, i.e., children spending an equal amount of time in both parents' home after a separation or divorce, is increasing in many countries. In line with the national policy to promote paternal involvement in parenting, two-thirds of Swedish preschoolers with non-cohabiting parents live in two homes. Internationally, there has been a debate regarding the benefits or risks with joint physical custody for infants and toddlers. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the reasons given by divorced parents for sharing joint physical custody of children 0–4 years of age. Interviews were conducted with 46 parents (18 fathers and 28 mothers) and analyzed using systematic text condensation. Two themes emerged in response to the research question. In the theme *Same rights and responsibilities*, parents described that joint physical custody was 'a given' as both parents were seen to have equal rights to and responsibility for the children. Both men and women described involved fatherhood as an ideal goal. In the theme *For the sake of the child*, parents emphasized that joint physical custody was in the best interest of the child. Some parents had conflicts with their ex-spouses, but were still convinced of the benefits of joint physical custody and strove to make it work.

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1. Introduction

Children in joint physical custody (JPC) spend an equal amount of time in each parent's respective home after a parental separation or divorce. JPC arrangements are increasing in many Western countries but are particularly common in Sweden (Nielsen, 2014a, 2014b; Swedish Government Official Report, 2011).

Internationally, there has been a debate regarding JPC for infants and toddlers, for example, in Norway, Australia, and the U.S. with some arguments against JPC (George, Solomon, & McIntosh, 2011; Norsk Psykolog Forening, 2014; Smyth, 2009) and some in favor (Lamb & Kelly, 2010; Nielsen, 2014a; Pruett, McIntosh, & Kelly, 2014; Warshak, 2014). A similar debate was ongoing in Sweden, around the beginning of the 2000s (Barnombudsmannen, 2000; Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2001; The Swedish Government Offices, 1999). Arguments

favoring JPC highlight joint parental involvement and the benefit of everyday contact with both parents along with the potential value of having access to both parents' financial and social resources. In contrast, concerns for children under the age of four emphasize the potential stress of being separated from a primary attachment figure and risks for not developing secure emotional attachment relations. Thus, attachment theory, which describes how children form relationship(s) of a special emotional quality from birth onward (Bowlby, 1988), has been central in the debate regarding JPC. In the literature, the mother is most often supposed to act as a primary caregiver; this position, however, is not gender related and parents may take turns in being the child's first choice. Some developmental psychologists and other social scientists recognize children's capacity to establish parallel attachment relationships to both parents and recommend overnights in order to strengthen both relations (Lamb & Kelly, 2010; Warshak, 2014), while others emphasize the risks associated with frequent separations from the primary attachment figure (George et al., 2011) such as the risk of insecure attachment to the mother (Solomon & George, 1999; Tornello et al., 2013).

In Sweden, previous recommendations stressed the special needs of children <3 years of age, mostly regarding their need for proximity to the mother as well as the child's vulnerability for the frequent

Abbreviations: JPC, joint physical custody.

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separations (Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2001). These recommendations, however, have been withdrawn by the administrative authority, but have not been replaced with other recommendations, creating ambiguity and reliance on personal opinions.

Parallel to the ongoing debate among researchers and professionals, JPC arrangements for the youngest children have increased in Sweden. About one-third of children aged 0–5-years-old with separated parents spend an equal amount of time in both parents' homes. When including children who live in the home of both parents but spend more time with one of them, about 60% share their time between the parents' homes (Statistics Sweden, 2014; Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). An increase in JPC has also occurred in other Western countries, however, to a lesser extent than in Sweden. Recent figures report the share of JPC among children with separated parents to be 25% in Norway (Kitterod & Lyngstad, 2014), around 20% in Denmark (Ottosen, 2004), and 16% in the Netherlands (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). An increase was reported in Belgium from 10% for families divorced before 1995 to 33% when divorce occurred in the 2010s (Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). In the United Kingdom, the share of JPC was 17% (Peacey & Hunt, 2008), and after legal changes in Australia and Italy, JPC is increasing (Smyth, 2009; Lavadera, Caravelli, & Togliatti, 2013). In the United States, the numbers vary between states, with over 30% living in a JPC setting in Wisconsin (Melli & Brown, 2008; Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014). Despite being widely spread, JPC is less practiced among families with a non-Swedish background (Bergström et al., 2013) and among those in the lowest income category (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011).

1.1. Swedish family policy

Swedish family policy is one factor behind the popularity of JPC. Since the 1970s, Sweden has had an active policy for increased parental equality (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014) with the goal of engaging both parents in paid work as well as in the household work and childcare responsibilities (Daly, 2011). In 1974, Sweden was the first country to offer both the mothers and fathers to use the paid parental leave; however, fathers could transfer this right to the mother. Today, Swedish parents are entitled to 13 months of publicly financed parental leave, where two months are earmarked and non-transferable for each parent in the time period 2002–2015 (changed to three months in 2016). Since the beginning of the 2000s, the public policy goal has been for the parents to share the parental leave equally (Daly, 2011; Klinth, 2008). In 2012, fathers used 24% of the Swedish parental leave (Social Insurance Report, 2013), thus, not reaching the role of gender equity in this regard (Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). The strivings for gender equality in parenting are also expressed in various privileges for both the mothers and fathers, such as the right to stay home with a sick child and the availability of subsidized childcare. In line with these policies, Sweden has the largest proportion of women in the labor force among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 80.7% in 2013 (OECD, 2014).

Separated or divorced parents in Sweden most often continue to share the legal custody (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). Most of the separated parents mutually agree on how to organize the living arrangement for their children and make a plan for this, without any professional or judicial involvement (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). An estimated 14% of separating parents seek advice to tackle their conflicts regarding legal and physical custody plans (Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2011), and about 2% have their custody disputes resolved in court (Rejmer, 2003). This is a low number compared to other countries see e.g., Rešetar and Emery (2008). Swedish family policies generally support the dual earner model, so both mothers and fathers are financially self-reliant; thus, the reasons for financial disputes involving custody have decreased (Haas, 1996).

1.2. Attitudes toward gender equality in parenting

For the past several decades, changes in society have moved the fatherhood ideal from the breadwinner to a more “involved fatherhood” (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Draper, 2003). Swedish public policies may have influenced fathers' involvement as well as views of fatherhood among the Swedish parents (Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). The ideal is to be an available father who is important to the child from early on (Johansson, Hildingsson, & Fenwick, 2013; Haavind, 2011; Mellström, 2006; Yoshida, 2012). Swedish contemporary fatherhood could also be defined as “child oriented” and defined according to the man's proximity to the child (Bekkengen, 2002).

The aim of this study was to explore the reasons given by separated or divorced parents for sharing parenthood equally through joint physical custody of children 0–4 years of age.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Recruitment

Participants were recruited through advertisements in the local and national Swedish newspapers, radio, and the TV from December 2011 to February 2013. Interested parents were invited to fill out a form on the research group's website. The inclusion criterion was currently having a child 0–4 years of age living in a JPC setting. JPC was defined as the child living equal amounts of time in each parent's home. On the website form, child(ren)'s age, proportions of time spent with each parent, and socio-demographic data were recorded. All parents who fulfilled the inclusion criteria were contacted by telephone or e-mail and given oral and/or written information about the study. Parents were interviewed by phone. Efforts were made to include parents of diverse backgrounds. Informed consent was obtained from all the individuals participating in the study. The study has been approved by the Ethics committee at Karolinska Institutet. All procedures were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable standards.

Table 1
Sociodemographic data for participating parents and their children.

	Children (n = 50)	Fathers (n = 18)	Mothers (n = 28)
<i>Child variables</i>			
Child's age in years			
1–2	4		
2–3	14		
3–4	25		
4–5	7		
Child's age in months at parental separation or divorce, Mean (range)	21 (0–49)		
Child's gender, girl (boy)	19 (31)		
<i>Parental variables</i>			
Age in years, mean, (range)		36.3 (27–50)	34.1 (26–44)
Highest level of education, n (%)			
Primary school		1 (5.5)	0 (0)
Secondary school		4 (22)	1 (4)
College or University		12 (67)	2 (7)
Missing		1 (5.5)	25 (89)
Monthly Income in SEK*, n (%)			
Low (<13,500)		1 (5.5)	0 (0)
Median (13,500–31,500)		4 (22)	16 (57)
High (>31,500)		10 (55.5)	6 (21.5)
Missing		3 (17)	6 (21.5)
Home district, n (%)			
City >200,000		9 (50)	21 (75)
City <200,000		6 (33)	5 (18)
Rural areas		3 (17)	2 (7)

* Low and High income in Swedish kronor (SEK) represents the lowest and highest income quartiles in Sweden 2013 http://www.scb.se/en_/Finding-statistics/Statistics-by-subject-area/Household-finances/Income-and-income-distribution/Income-and-tax-statistics/Aktuell-pong/302201/Income-Persons/The-entire-country/303237/.

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