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What Can We Say Regarding Shared Parenting Arrangements for Swedish Children?

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ABSTRACT

Joint physical custody (JPC) refers to children living alternatively and about equally with both parents after a parental separation or divorce. The practice has been debated in relation to child well-being because of the frequent moves imposed on children and the potential stress from living in 2 homes. This study describes the background to the high frequency of Swedish children in JPC and the results from research on Swedish children's well-being in this living arrangement. Children in JPC report better well-being and mental health than children who live mostly or only with 1 parent. No Swedish studies have found children's health to be worse in JPC than in sole parental care from child age of 3 years and beyond. The existing literature cannot, however, inform us about the mechanisms behind the findings. The risks of selection effects into living arrangements are plausible. For this purpose, longitudinal studies are warranted.

When parents separate, many wonder what solution is best for their children. Do they benefit most from living in sole physical custody (SPC) with one parent or from living about half the time with each parent in a joint physical custody (JPC) or shared parenting arrangement? In the debate over custody arrangements, JPC has been framed as coupled with potential health risks, such as the stress of living in two homes and in two different family cultures (Gilmore, 2006; McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, Wells, & Long, 2011), and difficulties in maintaining friendships when moving between two neighborhoods (Prazen, Wolfinger, Cahill, & Kowaleski-Jones, 2011). For the very youngest children, the debate has mostly regarded the potential risk of being separated from the mother (McIntosh et al., 2011). In contrast, others have emphasized the importance of JPC for the continued involvement of both parents on an everyday basis (Lamb & Kelly, 2010; Nielsen, 2013a; Warshak, 2014). Sweden provides a unique situation for addressing these questions because Swedish parents are much more likely than parents in other advanced nations to share physical custody of their children after they separate.

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In Sweden, JPC has become as common as living mostly with the mother after parents separate. The proportion of Swedish children in JPC was about 1% of children with separated parents in the mid-1980s, but is now between 35% and 40%. Of all children between 12 and 15 years of age, 1 in 10 are in JPC (Bergström et al., 2013; Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). Indeed, for 3-year-old children, JPC is nearly twice as common as SPC, at least among Swedish-born and well-educated parents (Bergström et al., 2018). When Swedish parents separate, they also tend to live in nearby neighborhoods so that the distance between their homes is relatively short (Turunen, 2017).

Sweden and the presumptions for joint physical custody

The share of children in JPC is around 30% in parts of the United States (Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014; Melli & Brown, 2008), 25% in Norway and Denmark (Kitterod & Wiik, 2017; Ottosen et al., 2014), and under 20% in the United Kingdom (Peacey & Hunt, 2008). A large part of the reason why JPC is so much more common in Sweden lies in the attitudes and policies about shared parenting for married and for separated parents. Swedish family policy has had a gender-neutral focus since the early 1970s. When gender-neutral parental leave was launched in Sweden in 1974, the advertisements showed fathers interacting with their infants, and the policy was promoted as “involved fatherhood” (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Draper, 2003).

Most of Sweden’s political parties have parental equality as a stated goal in their policy programs (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014), encouraging both parents to engage in paid work as well as in household work and child care (Daly, 2011). By 1974 Sweden offered both mothers and fathers paid parental leave, and since the early 2000s, parents have been encouraged to share the parental leave equally (Daly, 2011; Klinth, 2008). In 2012, fathers used 24% of the Swedish parental leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013). Of children born in 2010, about 13% had parents who shared the parental leave days equally for the first 2 years of their child’s life (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013).

Sweden’s goals for gender equality in parenting are also expressed in other policies applied equally to mothers and fathers. For example, both parents have the same number of days with pay to stay home with a sick child up until the age of 12. The government also provides subsidized child care for children 1 to 5 years old and 84% of these children participate. 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, at 80.7% in 2013 (OECD, 2014). Furthermore, Swedish family policies generally support the dual earner model, aiming at financial self-reliance for both mothers and fathers. Also, when parents separate, there are fewer financial disputes involving custody (Haas, 1996). After they

separate or divorce, most Swedish parents share the legal custody of their children (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). Most also mutually agree on living arrangements without any professional or judicial involvement (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). An estimated 14% of separating parents seek advice about how to tackle their disagreements over physical custody arrangements (Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2011). About 9% of parents resolve their custody disputes in court (Swedish Government Official Report (2017), which is comparable to the number in the United Kingdom (Rešetar & Emery, 2008).

Swedish studies on joint physical custody

Shared parenting for young children

In a series of studies known as the Elvis Project (from the Swedish word *växelvis*, which means *alternate*), we have been investigating the situation for JPC families. In a first study we interviewed Swedish parents regarding their experiences of shared parenting for children under 4 years of age (Bergström, Sarkadi, Hjern, & Fransson, *in press*; Fransson, Sarkadi, Hjern, & Bergström, 2016). Telephone interviews were conducted with 18 fathers and 28 mothers whose 50 children were, on average, 21 months old when the parents separated. Most participants had mutually agreed to share the parenting, but 24% of the parents agreed to JPC after mediation or had JPC as a result of a court decision (Fransson et al., 2016). Even parents who reported having been hesitant about JPC at the start most often found ways to make JPC work. Some parents did not trust the other parent's abilities to take care of the young child. A majority of these parents, however, found individual solutions and resolved their concerns. They ended up being satisfied with JPC and feeling that their young children benefited from the arrangement. In many cases, schedules were changed either to let the child live longer periods with each parent (e.g., a whole week at a time) or to move more frequently between the homes so the children would not miss the other parent. Parents reported "tricks" to make the children's adjustment easier. For example, they would leave the child's toys in the same place where they were before going to the other parent's home or they would have specific routines the first night together after having been apart. In sum, shared parenting worked well for these families with children ages 1 to 4.

Three epidemiological studies on mental health in children in the youngest age groups have been conducted in the Elvis Project. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to measure the well-being of children in intact, JPC, and SPC families. One study was published in September 2017 (Bergström et al., 2018) and the subsequent two studies will be finalized during late 2017 or early 2018. In the recently published

study, we investigated psychological symptoms for 136 children in JPC, 3,369 children in intact families, 79 children living “mostly” with one parent, and 72 children living only with one parent (Bergström et al., 2018). The preschool teachers and the parents reported that children living mostly or only with one parent had more emotional and behavioral problems than those living in JPC or in intact families. According to the parents’ reports, there were no significant differences between children in intact families and JPC children. The preschool teachers, however, reported fewer problems for children in intact than in JPC families.

In the second Elvis Project study, the SDQ scores of children from five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) were compared according to family types. There were 152 children in JPC, 303 in SPC, and 3,207 in intact families (Bergström, Fransson, Wells, Köhler, & Hjern, 2018). The children were all between the ages of 2 and 9. As with the first study, the children in SPC had more psychological and behavioral problems than those in JPC and those in intact families had the fewest problems.

In the most recent study, we are gathering data on more than 6,000 Swedish 3-year-olds. More than 200 live in a JPC arrangement. In this study we are exploring how the quality of the coparenting relationship is linked to the children’s outcomes in the various types of families. We suspect that coparenting quality might be one explanatory factor behind the better health reported in children with JPC.

Epidemiological studies on children’s health in school-age children

As is true in the studies with preschoolers, the Swedish studies on school-age children and adolescents also show that children in JPC have better mental health and fewer behavioral problems than children in SPC families, who most often live in sole mother care, as well as children who live mostly with one parent (Bergström, 2012; Bergström et al., 2015; Bergström et al., 2013; Brolin Låftman, Bergström, Modin, & Östberg, 2014; Brolin Låftman, Fransson, Modin, & Östberg, 2017; Fransson, Brolin Låftman, Östberg, Hjern, & Bergström, 2017; Fransson, Turunen, Hjern, Östberg, & Bergström, 2015; Turunen, Fransson, & Bergström, 2017). Regarding health-related behaviors, two Swedish studies from other research groups show that adolescents in JPC are more likely to smoke or drink alcohol than those in intact families, but the JPC adolescents’ risk was lower (Carlsund, Eriksson, Lofstedt, & Sellstrom, 2012) or similar (Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007) to that of their counterparts in SPC families. Reviews of the research from other countries also show equal or better physical health in JPC than in SPC (Nielsen, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013; Westphal & Monden, 2015).

In many Swedish studies, children in intact families reported better health than those with separated parents (Bergström, Fransson, Hjern, Köhler, & Wallby, 2014; Bergström et al., 2015; Bergström et al., 2013; Brodin Låftman et al., 2014; Carlsund, Eriksson, & Sellström, 2013). These results might not be surprising, as the parental separation can be difficult for children (Ängarne-Lindberg & Wadsby, 2009; Bjarnason et al., 2012). More surprising results from several Swedish studies are that there are no differences between children in JPC and nuclear families in regard to emotional or behavioral outcomes (Bergström, 2012; Fransson, Folkesson, Bergström, Östberg, & Lindfors, 2014; Fransson et al., 2017; Fransson et al., 2015; Turunen et al., 2017; Wadsby, Priebe, & Svedin, 2014).

Discussion

Since the 1970s Swedish family policies have encouraged fathers to be involved in their children's lives from infancy onward. Given this, it is not surprising that Swedish parents generally consider JPC to be the most desirable option after they separate, even for very young children. Swedish studies on health and well-being in younger children and adolescents have shown that those in JPC report better well-being and mental health than children who live mostly or only with one parent after a separation or divorce. In regard to the controversial issue of shared parenting for very young children, no studies on children from 3 years of age and older have found children's health to be worse in JPC than in single care. Sometimes the children's health has been reported to be similar in JPC arrangements and nuclear families.

The better outcomes for JPC children might be partly explained by socioeconomic differences between sole and shared custody families. However, in the international literature, even after the parents' incomes and conflict were considered, children in the JPC studies still had better outcomes (Nielsen, 2017, this issue). Moreover, most of the Swedish studies have adjusted for economic factors. Even if conflict and income cannot fully explain the differences between JPC and SPC children's health and well-being, these two factors might still be influential. An additional explanation could be that JPC children benefit more than SPC children from support and a close relationship with both parents, which might resemble the parenting in an intact family. Involved fathering has been shown to be important for children's school achievements, health, and general development, and JPC gives fathers the opportunity to stay involved (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008).

The Swedish studies described in this article have all had a cross-sectional design, which means that child health or well-being is measured at one point in time. This design does not allow us to draw conclusions about whether JPC is the "cause" of the children's better outcomes. It is possible that factors existing before the parents' separation can directly influence the choice of

living arrangements, thus causing important selection bias. Poor health or stress in both the custodial and noncustodial parent in SPC families might also contribute negatively to the well-being of the child. Furthermore, it seems likely that parental conflict and paternal engagement before the separation influence the choice of living arrangements, and thus influence the well-being of the child both before and after the separation. For instance, if one parent suffers from mental or physical problems or from drug or alcohol addictions, this would decrease the likelihood of JPC. Also children with physical, behavioral or emotional problems might be less likely to be in JPC families. Differences in well-being between children in JPC and SPC arrangements could hence be related to family factors unaccounted for in the studies. A longitudinal study design with repeated measurement before and after separation would be the most desirable design for future studies.

Factors that benefit or hinder children from thriving in JPC, such as being caught in the middle of high ongoing conflict, family violence, and families with child and parental psychiatric morbidity, have not been sufficiently studied. The Swedish family law, in accordance with the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, states that children have the right to know and be cared for by their parents. At the same time, though, a child also has the right to be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty, and exploitation. Few studies have explored situations or family factors that indicate that JPC is unsuitable. For example, a recent doctoral thesis showed that children who were victimized by domestic violence by an abusive father did not fare well under the imposed visitations or in a JPC arrangement (Forssell, 2016). When the father–child relationship was positive, children were, however, eager to keep the close relationship with their father despite the experiences of violence between the parents. In line with this, a review of international studies shows that even in high-conflict families, the quality of the parent–child relationship is more closely correlated with child well-being than conflict or the quality of the coparenting relationship (Nielsen, 2017). The same review, as well as a recent longitudinal study (Fabricius & Suh, 2017) states that JPC is linked to stronger parent–child relationships, which helps to mitigate the negative impact of conflict. More studies are needed, though, to determine those circumstances where children should be protected from an abusive parent by not living in a JPC family.

Other factors that are insufficiently studied in relation to JPC are child temperament, the well-being of children 0 to 2 years old, and children with special needs. Another area that needs more attention is what type of parenting plans are most suitable for children in different ages. Especially for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, such guidance should be welcome. In the international literature on young children in JPC, the authors have stressed that sensitive parenting and flexible schedules seem more important for children's well-being than the amount of overnights, but how such

flexibility and sensitivity should be executed concretely remains to be described (Pruett, McIntosh, & Kelly, 2014). Moreover, the assumption that young children need frequent transitions between their parents' homes due to their immature perception of time and limited memory capacity has not been empirically tested. In one of the Elvis Project studies, however, some parents felt that the frequent moves ruined the young child's sense of stability. Longer periods of time in each home worked better for some young children, whereas shorter intervals of time worked better for others (Fransson et al., 2016).

The increase in JPC arrangements is one of the most important societal changes that has occurred in the last 20 years. It is thus important that high-quality studies are prioritized to fill the knowledge gaps and provide sound guidance for separating and divorcing parents as well as for policymakers.

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