

Myths and Truths about Shared Parenting and Child Well-Being

Myth	Truth
Shared parenting emphasizes parents' rights at the expense of the best interest of children.	The primary consideration supporting a presumption of shared parenting is the benefits shared parenting provides to children. More than 40 years of social science research establishes a growing consensus that in the vast majority of cases, children raised in shared parenting arrangements score significantly higher on almost every metric of child well-being than those raised in a sole custody arrangement. Nielsen (2014); Baude (2016); Bauserman (2002 & 2012)
Shared parenting doesn't benefit children when the parents are in conflict with each other.	Even when there is conflict between parents, shared-custody arrangements are better for children than sole-custody arrangements on all measures of behavioral, emotional, physical, and academic well-being and are related to children having better relationships with their parents and grandparents. The quality of the parent child relationship is a better predictor of children's long-term outcomes than coparenting conflict. Fabricius & Leucken (2007); Nielsen (2017 & 2018); Harmon, <i>et al.</i> (2022); Fabricius & Suh (2017)
Shared parenting doesn't <i>cause</i> the better outcomes for children; it's just a correlation.	While families that choose shared parenting may have other characteristics that help children succeed (higher income, higher levels of education, less conflict), there is now clear evidence that shared parenting itself, and not just these other characteristics, contributes to children's well-being. Evidence for this comes from countries where shared parenting is common across socio-economic divisions and, also, from advanced statistical analyses that allow measurement of the effects of shared parenting. [Braver & Votruba, 2018]
Shared parenting isn't appropriate for infants and toddlers.	Young children develop primary attachments to more than just one person. Strong, healthy parent child relationships need consistent and frequent contact including daytime and nighttime caregiving. Restricting infants and toddlers from overnights with loving parents is inconsistent with what we know about the development of meaningful parent-child relationships in the first years of life. There is no scientific support for the claim that infants' and toddlers' overnighting with their fathers are harmful or interferes with their attachment to their mothers. Warshak (2014 & 2018); Nielsen (2014); Fabricius & Suh (2017); Fabricius (2022)
Shared parenting undermines children's security by requiring them to shuttle between two homes.	While having two homes sometimes causes inconveniences, research has shown that this is not harmful to children, nor does it hinder their developing strong relationships with both parents. Overnights "up to and including equal numbers of overnights at both parents' homes" benefitted "both the long-term mother-child and father-child relationships." Fabricius & Suh (2017); Fransson et al. (2018); Warshak (2014)
Shared parenting isn't necessary because what benefits children is the quality not the quantity of time with each parent.	The quality of parenting time is vital, of course. But the quantity of parenting time is also vital to children's well-being. Research shows that benefits to children arise because both parents are significantly involved in ordinary, day-to-day parenting responsibilities, not just weekend and holiday time. And the benefits of shared parenting for children increase as the time with each parent approaches equality. Fabricius & Suh (2017); Fabricius (2020 & 2022)
Shared parenting leaves children vulnerable to abuse	There is no scientific evidence to support this statement. Shared parenting laws are rebuttable when this type of custody plan is not in the child's best interest and when there is a demonstrated history of family violence. HHS reports show no increase in cases of child maltreatment in states after enactment of equal shared parenting presumptions. (" Child Maltreatment 2020 " U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, p. 30.) Fabricius (2020)

Annotated References

Reference	General Findings/Conclusions
Baude, A. et al. (2016). Child adjustment in joint physical custody versus sole custody: A meta-analytic review. <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> . 57(5), 338-360.	This meta-analytic study found that "better adjustment for young people in joint custody was only significant for those who spent an equal or almost equal amount of time with their two parents."
Bauserman, R. (2002) Child adjustment in joint-custody versus sole-custody arrangements: A meta-analytic review. <i>Journal of Family Psychology</i> , 16(1), 91-102.	A meta-analysis of 33 studies compared adjustment between children being raised in sole custody and children being raised in joint custody after divorce. Children were found to be better adjusted in areas of self-esteem, family relationships, divorce related adjustment, academic achievement, and emotional and behavioral adjustment, when raised by parents who shared legal and physical custody.
Bauserman, R. (2012). A meta-analysis of parental satisfaction, adjustment, and conflict in joint custody and sole custody following divorce. <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> . 53(6), 464-488.	"[B]oth JC [joint physical custody] mothers and JC fathers report less conflict with their ex-spouse, and more emotional support and positive feelings in the relationship. Frequency of relitigation is also less in cases of JC (especially for specific types of actions, such as child support modification)."
Braver, S. L., and A. M. Votruba. (2018). Does joint physical custody "cause" children's better outcomes? <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> 59(5), 452-468.	While it is well-established that children raised in shared parenting arrangements fare better on average than those raised in a sole custody situation, there has been controversy over whether the better outcomes are caused by the shared parenting. Braver and Votruba employ advanced methodologies to establish that shared physical custody is, indeed, a cause of children's better outcomes.
Fabricius, W. & Luecken, L. (2007). Postdivorce living arrangements, parental conflict, and long-term physical health correlates for children of divorce. <i>Journal of Family Psychology</i> . 21(2), 195-205.	"The more time children lived with their fathers after divorce, the better their current relationships were with their fathers, independent of parent conflict ... more time with father was beneficial in both high- and low-conflict families, and more exposure to parent conflict was detrimental at both high and low levels of time with father."
Fabricius, W. and Go Woon Suh. (2017). Should infants and toddlers have frequent overnight parenting time with fathers? The policy debate and new data. <i>Psychology, Public Policy, and Law</i> 23(1) 68-84.	Recent findings demonstrate the ability of infants to form multiple attachments simultaneously. Based on interviews with college students and their parents, this study focused on three factors not addressed by previous studies: (1) longer term impact of frequent overnights; (2) long-term benefits to the father-child relationship; and (3) the impact of daytime-only parenting time. The analyses of these surveys demonstrated long term benefits to both parent-child relationships associated with overnights, even when the research delineated children under two and then children under one.
Fabricius, W. (2020). Equal parenting time: The case for a legal presumption. <i>The Oxford Handbook of Children and the Law</i> (pp. 453-476). Oxford University Press.	"[T]he overall pattern of evidence indicates that legal presumptions of equal parenting time would help protect children's emotional security with each of their divorced parents, and consequently would have a positive effect on public health in the form of reduced long-term stress-related mental and physical health problems among children of divorce."
Fabricius, W. (2022). Attachment and parenting Time for children under three years of age. <i>The Oxford Handbook of Development Psychology and the Law</i> (in press). Oxford University Press.	"The best parent-child relationships in young adulthood were those in which the children were spending equal overnights at both parents' homes before they turned 3." "The current findings indicate the unique role of equal parenting time in infancy and toddlerhood in laying the foundation for future relationships. The long-term health risk of damaged parent-child relationships should translate into policies that encourage equal parenting time in order to protect the young child's developing attachment to each parent, and the child's future health."
Fransson, Emma, Anders Hjern, and Malin Bergström. (2018). What can we say regarding shared parenting arrangements for Swedish children?. <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> . 59(5), 349-358.	Equally shared physical custody "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 found that "[c]hildren in JPC [joint physical custody] 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."
Harmon, J., Matthewson, M. & Baker, A. (2022). Losses experienced by children alienated from a parent. <i>Current Opinion in Psychology</i> , 43: 7-12.	This article describes the lifelong losses a child experiences when they are alienated from a parent. The losses affect many areas such as identity and self-concept, enriching childhood experiences with parents and extended family, a sense of community, and quality relationships.
Neilsen, L. (2014). Shared physical custody: summary of 40 studies on outcomes for children. <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> , 55(8), 613-635.	Overall, the children in shared parenting families have better outcomes on measures of emotional, behavioral, 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.
Nielsen, L. (2017). Re- examining the research on parental conflict, co-coparenting, and custody arrangements. <i>Psychology, Public Policy, and Law</i> , 23, 211-231.	This article addresses four questions: (1) How much consideration should be given to co-parenting conflict when determining parenting time, (2) Do children have better outcomes when their divorced parents have low levels of conflict, (3) are children's outcomes worsened by parents taking their divorces to court, and (4) are children's outcomes better in sole-physical custody situations if the parents are conflicted and uncooperative?
Nielsen, L. (2018). Joint versus sole physical custody: Children's outcomes independent of parent-child relationships, income, and conflict in 60 Studies, <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> . 59(4) 247-281.	This article reviews the outcomes for children in joint physical custody (JPC) compared to those in sole physical custody (SPC) controlling for income, coparenting conflict, and quality of the parent-child relationship. Independent of income, conflict, or the quality of children's relationships with their parents, JPC generally children had better outcomes on most or on all measures.
Warshak, R. (2014). Social science and parenting plans for young children: A consensus report. <i>Psychology, Public Policy, and Law</i> . 20(1) 46-67.	The conclusions of this report were endorsed by 110 researchers and practitioners. Those conclusions include: "There is no evidence to support postponing the introduction of regular and frequent involvement, including overnights, of both parents with their babies and toddlers" and "the social science evidence on the development of healthy parent-child relationships, and the long-term benefits of healthy parent-child relationships, supports the view that shared parenting should be the norm for parenting plans for children of all ages, including very young children."
Warshak, R. (2018) Night shifts: Revisiting blanket restrictions on children's overnights with separated parents. <i>Journal of Divorce & Remarriage</i> , 59(4) 282-323.	A review of the literature regarding infants and toddlers having overnights with fathers after separation and divorce. The research supports the conclusion that children benefit from spending overnights with their fathers.