

Integrating Parenting Plans with Child Outcome Research

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- I. Which schedule is best? “It depends...”
 - a. Why? Because when trying to predict child outcomes, the parenting time schedule is not the most important variable – not even in the top three
 - b. The three most important factors are:
 - i. Parenting quality (warmth, anger)
 - ii. Inter-parental conflict and acrimony
 1. directly witnessing conflict and aggression
 2. indirect effects:
 - a. McIntosh (2010) found that Mom’s acrimonious attitudes toward Dad were more important than actual conflict in determining whether the child viewed Dad as emotionally available
 - b. Studies have shown that conflict leaves parents preoccupied and emotionally depleted, and then the quality of their parenting declines. These parenting deficits are more harmful than direct exposure to the conflict. Attunement and sensitivity are the first to go (Cummings and Davies, 2010)
 - iii. Child characteristics that pre-date the separation (intelligence, flexibility, sociability, insight) – Research on “invulnerable kids” (IQ, consistent relationship with at least one adult, perspective)
 - iv. Only after these other factors are taken into account, does the parenting time schedule start to become important. Easy to forget this, because we don’t have control over the first three
- II. Analogy to Antidepressant Research
 - a. Clinical trials studies are all focused on one thing, suppressing the placebo effect (80% of a drug’s effectiveness)
 - i. Keep things clinical and impersonal in interviews
 - ii. Loaded outcome measures (CES-D)
 - b. Strong claims about Celexa vs. Prozac. vs. Zoloft, when in fact placebo and expectancy effects are much more important
 - c. Same sort of thing with parenting plans. A 5/5/2/2 plan may be great for one family, horrible for another.
- III. Disagreement among experts about shared parenting time plans and overnights for young children
 - a. There are very few studies that have directly addressed these issues, those that are out there are correlational (not true experiments)
 - b. Several of the studies that get cited the most have serious methodological problems or misrepresent their own findings

- i. Bauserman’s (2002) meta-analytic study concluded children in joint custody do better than children in primary custody, but 2/3 of the studies included were non-published (i.e., not vetted by peer review process), and they made no distinction between joint legal custody and joint physical custody
- ii. Solomon and George (1999) states that for infants (under 2) even one night per week away from Mom leads to more disorganized attachment, but very weak effect and many of the children included in the study had never lived with both parents. It was unclear whether they had formed attachments to their fathers before overnights commenced.
- iii. McIntosh (2010) Australian Government AG’s Dept. Special Report. Two studies: one looking at 131 high conflict families, and a second that sampled parents of 10,000 children between birth and age 5. Great in many respects, but vastly overstates the data when it comes to the impact of overnights with children 2 and under:

“...This study identified a cluster of developmental vulnerabilities independently associated with shared overnight care at two different thresholds: for infants at the rate of one night or more per week, and for young children aged 2 – 3 years at the current policy definition of 5 nights per week or more per fortnight.

At these rates, shared overnight care independently predicted higher irritability [$R^2 = 0.03$], proximity seeking behaviors [$R^2 = .01$], and higher problem behaviors and lower capacity for persistence in 2 – 3 years olds...” [$R^2 = .01$ for both]

- IV. A couple of shortcuts for assessing research
 - a. Look at effect sizes, Cohen’s F or R squared, anything lower than .10 is pretty negligible, especially when you are trying to set policy. R^2 provides a measure of how well data correspond to the model – how much variation is explained
 - b. Look to see if they “controlled” or “partialed out” for parenting quality and conflict.
 - c. Look at the sample. There are huge differences between people who arrive at shared custody voluntarily vs. those who arrive at this through court disputes

Voluntary Shared Custody	Court-determined Shared Custody	Outcomes
Low conflict, cooperative	High Conflict, repeat litigation	As conflict intensifies, children’s satisfaction with shared parenting time

		plummets
Shared parenting values	Low regard for other parent	As parental contempt rises, very hard for kids to maintain neutral position
Flexibility; willing to make child-centered exceptions	Rigid adherence to parenting plan	If adherence to the plan is rigid and the parents live far apart, children report high dissatisfaction

- V. Implications for Shared Parenting Plans
- a. Shared parenting plans are fragile and take more work to maintain than primary care plans. Tend not to work if:
 - i. Parental conflict is high and cooperation is poor. This is especially true for toddlers and preschoolers, who depend on parents to help regulate their arousal levels, model appropriate emotional reactions, etc. Research from developmental neurology suggests that inter-parental conflict has a negative impact on brain development and adult attachment patterns.
 - ii. There are problems in the parent-child relationship or weak pre-existing attachment before shared plan is implemented
 - iii. Parents don't live close to one another (friends, school, and activities can't be consolidated easily)
 - iv. The child is highly anxious, inflexible, or chronically disorganized. (Include story about my own kids and their differing styles.)
 - b. Shared plans do confer advantages when they work well
 - i. Stronger relationships with both parents – very important when parents have different strengths, different things to offer
 - ii. Boys with involved fathers tend to do better in school and be less aggressive
 - iii. Single parents can get overwhelmed and depleted; dividing care means that children are spending more time with a “fresh” parent who is excited to see them.
- VI. Take home messages
- a. Tailoring plans to fit individual family characteristics is still the best approach and is strongly supported by the research. One-size models and simple formulas are likely to harm children.
 - b. “Do no harm.” Even though we (as attorneys and evaluators) cannot compel parents to get along or parent their kids well, we can make these things worse.
 - i. As an evaluator, the task is to balance clear communication of findings with respectful regard of parents
 - ii. Allegation-based allegations have the potential to inflame conflict, just as strength-based evaluations can sugar coat findings.
 - iii. For attorneys, important to remember that the parenting schedule is not the most important factor. If you prevail in your case and achieve an optimal schedule for your client, but in the process you

inflame conflict and breed contempt between the parents, you have ultimately done the child a disservice.

- c. Advantages to the “Best Fit” approach
 - i. Keeps it child-focused
 - ii. Works against judgmental attitudes (i.e., task is not to find the good parent and the bad parent, but the parent whose characteristics provide the best match for this particular child). Similar characteristics will be a good match for one child and not another.
 - 1. for example, authoritarian, structured father with ADHD child vs. self-motivated teenager who doesn’t like being told what to do
 - 2. Finding in my masters thesis about maternal anger predicting good child adjustment in single-mother, minority, low-income families.
 - 3. recent example about parent being over-bearing in PC interaction. Mom is exacting school teacher who hounded the kid on a homework-like task, but he was OK with it
 - iii. “It’s not about us.” We get to stay in one house and shape our new lives, whereas kids have to travel back and forth and don’t have a lot of control in their lives. It’s our job to make it as easy as possible for them.