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To cite this article: Michael E. Lamb (2018): Does shared parenting by separated parents affect the adjustment of young children?, Journal of Child Custody, DOI: 10.1080/15379418.2018.1425105

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15379418.2018.1425105

Published online: 01 Feb 2018.

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Does shared parenting by separated parents affect the adjustment of young children?

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ABSTRACT
The changing family roles and evidence that most infants form attachment relationships with both of their parents have sparked a debate about parenting arrangements when the parents of infants and toddlers separate. Misunderstanding of attachment theory and the available empirical evidence has obscured rather than clarified evidence-based decision-making. In this report, I closely examine the five studies most frequently referenced in this context and show what they do and do not tell us about the ways in which children's adjustment can be promoted when their parents separate. Consistent with attachment theory, the evidence suggests that children benefit when parenting plans allow them to maintain meaningful and positive relationships with both of their parents.

KEYWORDS
Divorce; early childhood; infancy; parenting plans; separation

Over the last two decades, there has been considerable controversy regarding the optimal parenting plans for young children whose parents separate (Drozd, Saini, & Olesen, 2016). The debate has gained resonance thanks to the convergence of two trends: increases in the numbers of unmarried parents who separate while their children are still young and shifts in the willingness of the legal system to implement plans designed to promote relationships between children and both of their parents rather than mother-focused parenting plans. Furthermore, the heated controversy has been stoked by the publication and (as argued in the following sections) widespread misinterpretation of several studies ostensibly focused on the wellbeing of infants and toddlers in separated families who experience discrepant patterns of maternal and paternal involvement. Accordingly, this brief paper seeks to set these findings in context and to examine each of the studies closely. It is critically important to consider the research carefully because the findings have substantial implications for the wellbeing of many children in western countries. A fuller discussion of these issues and their context has been provided by Lamb (2016).

Researchers have long been concerned that parental divorce may adversely affect children’s adjustment. Decades of research and hundreds of studies...
have consistently shown that parental separation, whether or not the parents were married, increases the risks that children will manifest any of a variety of indices of maladjustment, although it is important to note that the majority of children whose parents separate are perfectly well adjusted (see, for example, Lamb, 2002b, 2016, for reviews). Such findings underline the extent to which the outcomes are variable and have prompted a shift from studies simply comparing children in one- and two-parent families to studies focused on individual differences in children’s outcomes. Despite variations with respect to the ways that these factors and the outcomes have been measured, it is clear that outcomes are better when children have strong supportive relationships with their parents post-separation and are worse when there is continued and intense conflict between the parents.

The consistent finding that children are better adjusted when they have and maintain strong, positive, and supportive relationships with both of their parents post-separation has in part informed the previously mentioned changes in the willingness of decision makers and legal advisors to seek post-separation parenting arrangements that promote continuation of those relationships. It has also prompted scholars and decision-makers to better understand how child–parent relationships form, and how they both develop and are maintained.

Attachment theory offers the most thoroughly articulated model of child–parent relationship formation (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1969). According to this theory, attachments form when infants come to realize that specific people consistently respond in appropriate and positive ways to their signals, especially their signals of distress. Consistent appropriate responding creates a sense of trust on the part of those children, and that sense of trust is further reinforced by repeated demonstrations of sensitivity by the adults in other contexts and in response to a variety of both positive (e.g., smiles) and negative (e.g., cries) signals.

Most infants being raised in two-parent households form attachments to both of their parents at roughly the same time (in the middle of the first year of life) and in the same way, through the development of trust or security based on consistent appropriate responding (see Lamb, 2002a, for a review). Attachments sometimes develop at the same time to other people (e.g., regular providers of care, including grandparents or siblings) and co-residence is not necessary; regular, consistent interaction is instead critically important. Secure infant–adult attachments are associated with better adjustment later in childhood, with children who are securely attached to both parents (or multiple attachment figures) appearing better adjusted than those who have insecure attachment relationships or only one secure attachment (e.g., Kochanska & Kim, 2013). For obvious reasons, findings such as these underline the importance of seeking to promote the maintenance of attachment relationships to both parents when the parents separate.
However, while scholars such as Kelly and Lamb (2000) were explaining the importance of infant–mother and infant–father attachment, another group of researchers began to warn that infant–mother attachments would be harmed if infants regularly spent time overnight away from their mothers (e.g., Solomon & Biringen, 2001). These arguments seemed to be based on a discredited notion, monotropy, which Bowlby (1969) once mooted but later discarded (Lamb, 2002a; Waters & McIntosh, 2011). This notion held that infants initially formed attachments only to their mothers, that these relationships remained primary, and that they would be challenged, if not disrupted, by regular extended separations. Importantly, such arguments ignored extensive evidence not only that most infants formed attachments to both of their parents at the same time and in the same way, as previously noted, but also that infants were not unduly stressed by separations from attachment figures when they were accompanied and supported by other attachment figures. Nevertheless, several researchers undertook studies designed to determine whether repeated overnight separations of infants from their mothers adversely affected the security of infant–mother attachments and/or the infants' psychological adjustment (Fabricius & Suh, 2017; McIntosh, Smyth, & Keleher, 2010; Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004; Solomon & George, 1999; Tornello et al., 2013). In this article, these five studies are examined closely in an effort to determine whether, in fact, yield generalizable findings regarding the likely effects of overnight separations from mothers by infants who spend those nights in the company of fathers to whom they are also attached.

**Solomon and George (1999)**

Solomon and George’s (1999) Bay Area study was the first study to obtain findings that appeared to support concerns that overnight infant-mother separations adversely affected attachment. A close look at the study makes clear that such interpretations and conclusions were not warranted, however, as the lead author has since acknowledged (Solomon, 2013).

The study involved 52 two-parent families and 93 separated families. The samples were certainly not representative or comparable; the intact families involved parents who were better educated and more affluent than those in the separated families. Further, the separated families were characterized by unusually high levels of conflict, with nearly all of the fathers and a substantial number of the mothers under restraining orders. Even more importantly, “many” of the separated families had never lived together and the average family had separated when the infants were only 5 months old, which was before attachments were formed and 11 months before the infant–mother attachments were assessed. Thus, the study did not examine the costs or
benefits of infants spending overnight with fathers to whom they had been able to form attachments.

In about half of the separated families, the infants spent one overnight per month with their fathers and the initial report underlined the fact that more of the infant–mother attachments in that group (66%) were “disorganized” than in the no overnight (43%) and intact family (35%) groups. As emphasized by Solomon (2013), however, the amount of conflict between the parents, rather than the occurrence of overnights, explained disorganization. Stated differently, this study did not test and thus did not elucidate, the effects of overnights involving infants who were attached to both of their parents. There was no evidence that overnights with involved fathers affected the quality of infant–mother attachments. Rather, the study showed that the security of infant–mother attachment was at risk in high-risk family circumstances.

Pruett et al. (2004)

The next relevant study, conducted with the assistance of family courts in Connecticut, involved 132 separating families of whom only 3 had never lived together. The children’s adjustment was assessed by both parents 15 to 18 months after separation, at which time the children averaged 4.89 years of age. About a quarter of the children lived exclusively with their mothers, about a third (31%) spent one night each week with their fathers, and the remainder (44%) had more than one overnight each week with their fathers.

According to reports by both parents, children had fewer behavior problems at the time of follow-up when they had good relationships with both parents. Having a regular schedule and having overnights with fathers were both associated with having fewer behavior problems. These findings were thus consistent with the view, based on attachment theory, that children benefit post-divorce from the opportunity to maintain supportive relationships with both of their parents.

McIntosh et al. (2010)

McIntosh et al.’s (2010) study reached startlingly different conclusions and thus attracted a considerable amount of attention from practitioners. Because the actual findings are frequently misreported and misinterpreted, it is important to describe this study in some detail.

The participants were drawn from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), a large nationally representative study of Australian children who were recruited in infancy or early childhood and followed at regular intervals (http://www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au/). For purposes of the analyses, McIntosh and her colleagues (2010) identified 258 infants, aged
between 3 and 20 months at the time of their first assessment. Most (164) of these infants lived exclusively with their mothers, 21 mostly did so, but stayed overnight with their fathers less than once a month, and 63 did so at least once a week. Importantly, McIntosh and her colleagues did not determine whether the parents had ever lived together or whether the infants had had the opportunity to form attachments to their fathers. Furthermore, some of the infants were assessed so young that they would not be expected to have formed attachments to anyone.

Because the LSAC was a large multifacet ed study of child development, many domains of development were assessed but the study included no established or validated measures of infant adjustment or infant–parent attachment other than a single rating by the researchers of how the infants responded to them. One 24-item measure (the Communication and Symbolic Behaviour Scales) focused on the infants’ readiness to learn language; multiple studies using data from the LSAC confirm that higher scores on these scales predict greater language learning and communicative skills (e.g., Wetherby & Prizant, 2002; Wetherby, Allen, Cleary, Kublin, & Goldstein, 2002). Although the items had been chosen because they predicted language-acquisition, McIntosh and her colleagues (2010) chose three items to measure “vigilance”: “When this child plays with toys, does he/she look at you to see if you are watching,” “When you are not paying attention to this child, does he/she try to get your attention,” and “Does this child try to get you to notice interesting objects—just to get you to look at the objects, not to get you to do anything with them?” Vigilance was interpreted as an index of attachment insecurity, notwithstanding the fact that the items were validated as measures of language readiness rather than attachment insecurity.

The LSAC also included a parent-report measure of temperament to assess enduring or constitutional aspects of infant personality. The measure included 5 scales and a composite score (difficulty), which was the only one shown, both generally and in the LSAC, to predict later behavior problems. However, McIntosh and her colleagues (2010) used the mother-reported levels of irritability to index the putative effects of attachment difficulties.

Infants who had one or more overnights per week with their fathers were as irritable and “vigilant” as those in non-separating (“intact”) families but more irritable and “vigilant” than those with rare overnights (“primary”). Infants in the intact family group were not included in the reported analyses, from which many of the other participants were also excluded, presumably because there were data missing. There were no group differences in how the researchers rated the infants’ responses to the researchers when they arrived to conduct the interviews.

Mother-reported behavior problems, emotional functioning, and “persistence” (on the 6-scale measure of temperament) and teacher-reported levels of conflict were examined to assess adjustment on the part of the
two- and three-year-olds. Analyses showed that the 26 children who stayed overnight with their fathers 35% of the time or more were less persistent (according to their mothers) than children in all the other groups and also behaved more problematically (according to their mothers) than children who infrequently stayed overnight with or visited their fathers.

Assessments of the four- and five-year-old participants (an unspecified number of whom had been included in the earlier waves of assessment) again involved maternal rating of temperamental persistence as well as teacher-reported measures of conflict and behavior problems. Those who stayed with their fathers 35% of the time or more did not differ from children in the other groups on any measures.

Overall, the results of this complex study showed some group differences in the behavior of the infants and toddlers on mother-reported measures, many of which were of unknown validity. There were no differences at any age on observer- or teacher-reported measures and whatever differences were noted previously were not evident when the children were assessed when the children were four or five years old. In that wave of assessment, some of the children were being assessed for the first time, but others had been assessed at younger ages, raising questions regarding the longevity of any differences identified earlier in their lives.

Tornello et al. (2013)

Tornello and her colleagues (2013), like McIntosh and her colleagues (2010), drew data from a large national study (the Fragile Families Study; (http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/) initiated for other purposes. Unlike the LSAC, however, the Fragile Families Study was, by design, not nationally representative, because it sought to focus on “fragile” or high-risk new families. Thus, 90% of the couples were not married, 70% were not cohabiting, and 20% were not even in relationships with one another when their infants were born. In addition, 60% were at or below the poverty line, 66% of the parents had not completed high school, and 85% were Black or Hispanic.

For the purposes of their study, Tornello et al. (2013) selected families that were living apart when the children were one and three years of age and then divided them into groups, on the basis of the mothers’ responses, when the infants were aged one year and three years, to the following questions: “How many nights altogether has CHILD spent with Father since s/he was born” and “How many nights altogether has CHILD spent with Father since his/her first birthday,” respectively.

The principal dependent measure was an assessment of infant–mother attachment security when a subset of the toddlers were three-years-old. This assessment was based on maternal responses to an abbreviated list
of the items from the Attachment Q-sort (AQS: Waters, 2013; Waters & Deane, 1985). The reliability and validity of this abbreviated list of items had not been assessed and prior research has established that reliable and valid assessments using the full-list of items can only be obtained if trained observers rather than parents are employed as raters. Mothers also reported on their children’s behavior problems at age five using a reliable and valid measure, the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991, 1992).

Tornello and her colleagues (2013) reported that 57% of the 51 infants who stayed with their fathers frequently (between 1 and 5 nights per week) were securely attached to their mothers at age one, compared to 75% of those infants who only saw their fathers during the day and 84% of those who stayed with their fathers overnight infrequently. Importantly, however, 26 of the 51 infants in the key group actually lived most of the time with their fathers, such that any test of the effects of overnights should have examined effects of separation on infant–father rather than infant–mother attachment.

Similarly, only 63% of the three-year-olds who stayed with their fathers frequently were securely attached to their mothers, along with 82% who visited only during the day, 67% of those who had infrequent overnights, and 78% of those who had some overnight visits. Again, however, the majority of the frequent overnighters (70%) lived predominantly with their fathers, so the study did not elucidate the effects of regular overnights away from the primary attachment figure. In addition, the children in the misleadingly labeled “frequent overnight” group had fewer behavior problems at age 5, according to their mothers.

Fabricius and Suh (2017)

The most recent study adopted a very different methodology. Students at a selective university identified parents who had separated when the students were under three years of age. Those parents were then asked to describe their children’s overnight residence patterns during the infancy and toddler periods, while the students described the quality of their present relationships with both of their parents. The number of overnights per week in infancy and toddlerhood each separately predicted the quality of reported father–student relationships but were unrelated to measures of the quality of student–mother relationships. Furthermore, positive effects on the quality of father–student relationships were evident even when the parents reported that there had been considerable conflict. Of course, generalization of these findings to the universe of separating families is limited by the selective sampling of high functioning young adults from relatively affluent family backgrounds.
Discussion of limitations

This review of all empirical studies focused on the effects of regular overnights with fathers on the children’s attachments to their primary-caretaking mothers and on the children’s psychological adjustment reveals a small corpus of relevant studies characterized by many misinterpretations and methodological problems. Some of the important limitations are repeated here.

First, none of the studies assessed the child–mother relationships or the youngsters’ behavior pre-separation, and none included any assessments of the child–father relationships, even when, as in Tornello et al. (2013) study, the fathers were the primary sources of care and were thus likely to be the primary attachment figures.

Second, the few reported group differences related to variations in the young children’s overnight arrangements were largely based on potentially biased maternal reports (McIntosh et al., 2010; Tornello et al., 2013).

Third, both McIntosh et al. (2010) and Tornello et al. (2013) relied on measures whose validity was either lacking or unknown. This reliance alone warrants caution when seeking to derive implications for practice from the reported findings.

Fourth, Tornello et al. (2013) treated children who lived mostly with fathers as frequent “visitors” and concluded that it was harmful for young children to be separated frequently from their mothers while failing to assess the quality of the children’s relationships to their primary attachment figures.

Lastly, few researchers examined sources of variance others than the number of overnights. However, Pruett et al. (2004) reported that inter-parent conflict was more problematic than the number of overnights, and Fabricius and Suh (2017) reported that overnights in early childhood had a beneficial effect on father–child relationships even when there was inter-parental conflict.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding these qualifications and limitations, the available research shows that, as predicted by attachment theory, overnights allow the consolidation of attachments with those parents who do not co-reside most of the time. Studies by Pruett et al. (2004) and Fabricius and Suh (2017) clearly showed positive effects; whereas those studies that purportedly showed negative effects were sufficiently flawed that their conclusions are not valid. Importantly, there is no clear evidence that those overnight experiences have reliable and consistently negative effects on the quality of the children’s relationships with their resident parents or with the children’s psychological adjustment. Of course, the positive effects revealed here are reaped when children have had the opportunity to develop relationships with both parents.
before separation. When that is not the case, overnights with the nonprimary parents would not be indicated until and if the relationships had been built through opportunities for the two to interact regularly in a variety of contexts (see Kelly & Lamb, 2003, for a more extended discussion).

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References


