

Children's and Parents' Well-Being in Joint Physical Custody: A Literature Review

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Joint physical custody (JPC), a parental care arrangement in which a child lives with each parent for at least 25–50% of the time after separation or divorce, is increasingly common in many Western societies. This is a major shift from the standard of sole physical custody, with mostly mothers providing primary childcare after a parental separation or divorce. The increasing share of separated or divorced parents who practice JPC, which in some countries, U.S. states, and regions reaches 30% and more, results from increasing gender equality due to mothers participating considerably in the labor force and fathers being actively involved in their children's daily lives. This review focuses on the effects of JPC on children's and parents' well-being, based on 40 studies from North America, Australia, and Europe published between 2007 and 2018. In sum, there is empirical evidence from different countries that suggests that JPC arrangements can have positive effects on the well-being of children and of parents. However, the existing studies are conceptually, methodologically, and contextually very heterogeneous. In addition, self-selected highly educated parents with a high socioeconomic status, a low conflict level, and children between the ages of 6 and 15 practicing JPC dominate the samples. Thus, the risks and benefits of JPC are not clear yet and are heavily debated by advocates and academics. The review concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Children's well-being; Child custody; Custody; Divorce; Divorce and custody; Joint physical custody; Parents' well-being; Separation; Shared parenting; Shared residence; Bienestar de los niños; Tenencia de los niños; Divorcio; Tenencia compartida; Bienestar de los padres; Crianza compartida

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INTRODUCTION

A care arrangement after parental separation or divorce, increasingly common in a growing number of Western countries, is the *joint physical custody* plan (also *shared parenting* or *shared residence*), in which a child spends at least 25–50% of the time with each parent (Smyth, 2017, p. 494). Although there are only relatively few robust empirical results on how joint physical custody arrangements affect the well-being of children and parents, the topic is heavily debated by, for example, social scientists, family law professionals, mental health practitioners, counselors, and policy makers. These debates are in part highly ideological (e.g., Harris-Short, 2010; Kruk, 2012). The central question of the discussion is which custody plan meets juridical requirements focused on “the best interests of the child” after a parental breakup. The children's interests, however, are sometimes inseparable from the subjective interests of the parents, which are often not

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explicitly stated, but should also be taken into account. Thus, the debate revolves around the problem of whether joint physical custody should be mandated by judges even against the will of one of the parents, or whether shared parenting can be recommended only if both parents come out in favor.

Given the great attention on the topic by family scholars, practitioners, and law professionals, it is not surprising that several meta-analyses and reviews about joint physical custody or shared parenting have been published in recent years. The majority focused, for good reasons, on the well-being of children (meta-analysis: Baude, Pearson, & Drapeau, 2016; reviews: Fehlbeg, Smyth, MacClean, & Roberts, 2011b; Gilmore, 2006; Kelly, 2007; Nielsen, 2014, 2017; Smyth, 2009; review of Swedish studies: Fransson, Hjern, & Bergström, 2018), but two of them also concentrated on parental adjustment (meta-analysis: Bauserman, 2012; review: Nielsen, 2011). So what does this particular review add to the existing literature? First, it is a review of the most recent empirical studies (2007–2018). (For an overview of the 40 studies included [e.g., sample, sample size, methods, key results], see Table S1 under “supporting information” on the *Family Process* webpage.) Thus, it includes new studies not already considered in other reviews. These new empirical studies are of particular interest because they capture research from European countries, where JPC has just started to receive public and scientific attention. Second, and most importantly, this paper summarizes the arguments and empirical results regarding the effects of joint physical custody on both children’s and parents’ well-being. Accordingly, the present review provides a comprehensive overview of the state of the discussion and the empirical evidence on joint physical custody, for children and for parents, taking recently published studies from North America, Australia, and Europe into account.

METHOD: LITERATURE SEARCH

The review is based on an extensive and systematic literature search. First, the search-platforms Web of Science/Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), JSTORE, Scopus, and Google Scholar were used to find all books and papers on joint physical custody, independent of the year of publication, the country of observation, the scientific research area, the particular subject, or the applied method. The following keywords were used for the search: joint physical custody, physical custody, custody, child custody, shared parenting, shared residence, shared-time parenting, dual residence, residence arrangement, co-parenting, and parenting plan. Second, the reference lists of all of the publications were scoured systematically to avoid overlooking books or papers which were not listed in the electronic databases. The literature search was restricted to publications in English.

In total, 163 journal articles, book chapters, and working papers on joint physical custody were identified. They included not only empirical studies, but also meta-analyses, reviews, and discussions of certain aspects such as legal decision-making about parenting plans. The publication dates reached from 1986 to 2018. For this review, the decision was made to focus exclusively on recent *empirical studies* (2007–2018). Altogether, 40 empirical studies were included (see Table S1 in the online appendix–supporting information). Even though the literature search was not focused on results from only a specific region, all of the publications were from Western countries in North America, Australia, and Europe.

In addition, the majority of the studies published in the last 11 years are from a few key countries, states, and regions in which joint physical custody has already been widely practiced for many years, such as Wisconsin (USA), Sweden, Australia, or Flanders (Belgium). This is not only because the number of families with joint physical custody arrangements is high enough to conduct research, but also due to a few active and successful

research groups dedicated to the topic (Bergström and her colleagues, e.g., from Sweden). Accordingly, the question arises as to whether these results are also valid for other countries or regions where the phenomenon is still relatively new. However, extensive research on joint physical custody began recently, and it seems appropriate to include every single existing study to see if there is a general trend in the results or not, even if particular countries are overrepresented. After this first important step, the second step, of international comparisons focusing on country-specific context variables that might influence the children's and parents' well-being, should be set up.

JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY: DEFINITION, LEGAL CONTEXT, AND PREVALENCE

The term *joint physical custody* (also *shared parenting* or *shared residence*) refers to a child's residential placement after a parental separation or divorce. Generally, joint *physical* custody (shared parenting time) corresponds with *legal* custody (shared decision-making), but it is not a prerequisite. Unfortunately, there is no precise definition of JPC yet, but rather an ongoing debate of scientists, practitioners, policy makers, and others about how much time with each parent would be required to fulfill the criteria of "joint" or "shared." The common denominator, however, seems to be the supposition that the child is alternating between the households of its parents and, thus, resides with each of them for a *substantial* time. Most empirical studies and jurisdictions are using the threshold of 30–50% with each parent to distinguish joint physical custody from sole physical custody, where the child lives primarily or exclusively with only one parent. An exception is the state of Wisconsin, USA, which defines JPC as living with each parent at least 25% of the time (Smyth, 2017, p. 498). However, only spending 50% of the time with both parents would meet the criteria of equal sharing, so that a child would not have a "primary" and a "secondary" home or a "resident" and a "non-resident" parent. In all other cases, it would be joint physical custody with the mother or father as primary (25–49%) (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017, p. 502).

Not only the amount of time the child spends with its parents, but also the cycles of care (i.e., the time between changeovers) can vary, depending on the wishes and needs of the family members (Masardo, 2009). Some children change between the homes of their parents every week, others every second week, or even every month. Interestingly enough, cultural differences in ideas about the psychological well-being of children exist, which, in consequence, lead to certain common care cycles in different countries, with either longer or shorter blocks of time. In a qualitative study, using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 British and 15 French fathers who had at least one biological child under the age of 18 in a joint physical custody arrangement, Masardo (2009, p. 202) was able to show that British fathers prefer shorter cycles of residence than do French fathers.

Due to the fact that fathers' involvement in their children's daily lives has overall strongly increased during recent years (Westphal, Poortman, & Van der Lippe, 2014), and that the number of working mothers who divide parenting responsibilities with the father has also increased (Hook, 2006), the desire to share parenting after a separation or divorce has forced legislative changes regarding custody arrangements accordingly (Juby, Le Bourdais, & Marciel-Gratton, 2005). Furthermore, fathers' rights movements have campaigned for more equal childcare responsibilities after parental separation or divorce (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009).

Thus, in several Western countries, states, and regions, custody laws were revised in the last couple of years that underline the importance of ongoing co-parental involvement (e.g., *Australia*: Smyth & Chisholm, 2017; *Belgium*: Vanassche, Sodermans, Declerck, & Matthijs, 2017; *Catalonia, Spain*: Solsona & Spijker, 2016; *Italy*: De Blasio & Vuri, 2013; *Sweden*: Singer, 2008; *The Netherlands*: Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017; *UK*: Nikolina,

2015; *Wisconsin, USA*: Meyer et al., 2017). Interestingly, none of the jurisdictions in those countries legislated with a 50/50 share in mind. “Several countries, however, now require judicial officers and family law system professionals to consider a shared-time arrangement as a starting point but to do so within the broader consideration of children’s best interest and the safety of the family members” (Smyth, 2017, p. 497). Thus, joint physical custody as a placement schedule that allows the child to have regular and meaningful periods of time with each parent is recognized in the family law of those countries as a legitimate option, challenging previous postseparation family practices by explicitly questioning the default sole physical custody (or primary care model), which is a huge legal shift. It seems necessary to point out, however, that none of the new legal regulations regarding residence arrangements is mandating JPC, but oblige courts to seriously consider this arrangement, if one or both parents request it (see Nikolina, 2015, for detailed information on legal aspects of residential co-parenting in England, the Netherlands, and Belgium).

The different legal situations—which might be reflected in more open attitudes and social norms—has also had an effect on the prevalence of joint physical custody in different countries and U.S. states: In Wisconsin, it is reported that the proportion of divorced parents who had a shared parenting plan increased from about 12% in 1989 to about 50% in 2010 (Meyer et al., 2017, p. 505). Also in other countries, the prevalence of joint physical custody arrangements in separated or divorced families has increased in the last couple of years. They make up to about 40% in Belgium (Vanassche et al., 2017, p. 549) and Sweden (Bergström et al., 2015; p. 769), about 30% in Norway (Kitterød & Wiik, 2017, p. 561), about 20% in Denmark (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009, p. 66), 5% (Ontario) to 40% (Quebec) in Canada (Bala et al., 2017, p. 520), 16% in Australia (Smyth & Chisholm, 2017; p. 594), 22% in the Netherlands (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017, p. 533), 15% in Spain—again with large variations between different regions (Solsona & Spijker, 2016, p. 302), and 12% in the UK (Harris-Short, 2010, p. 258). Although JPC arrangements have increased during recent decades in all of these countries, it seems that they have now plateaued in some of them (e.g., Wisconsin, Australia, and the Netherlands). Furthermore, the question arises as to why only a minority of separated or divorced parents are choosing a JPC arrangement, even if it has been strongly advocated for many years in some of the countries, states, and regions.

JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY: EFFECTS ON CHILDREN’S AND PARENTS’ WELL-BEING

Countless studies have shown that separation or divorce is associated with lower levels of well-being for children and for parents (e.g., Amato, 2010; Härkönen, Bernardi, & Boertien, 2017). One of the most important factors identified by empirical studies that accounts for the maladaptation is the lack of resources resulting from sole physical custody, which means that the child lives with only one of the parents, in most cases with the mother. In short, children suffer from the loss of the relationship with the nonresident father and his emotional and financial resources; fathers also suffer from the loss of the relationship and the parental role, and mothers are overworked and stressed with the burden of daily child-care and labor force participation. With the growing number of joint physical custody arrangements, however, a question has arisen about whether the child’s spending substantial time in the mother’s and the father’s home might result in even worse outcomes or, in contrast, can maybe buffer detrimental effects caused by separation and divorce for both children and parents.

The empirical findings of existing studies on joint physical custody are very difficult to compare because of different samples, sample sizes, methods, societal contexts, outcomes,

and control variables. Some of the studies, for example, included separated parents, while others concentrated exclusively on the divorced. In addition, the age of the children concerned ranged from 0 to 25, and the definition of joint physical custody varied from 25% to 50% of time per parent. Many more factors could be listed here, but it is not possible to describe every study in detail in a literature overview. However, where it seems helpful for understanding and grouping the results, more information on methodological issues is given.

Another major issue is selectivity. As several studies have pointed out, parents who practice joint physical custody differ from parents in other postseparation care arrangements in their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. They are, for example, more likely to have a higher level of education, a higher income, a lower level of conflict, a higher level of active paternal parenting prior to separation or divorce, and closer residence to each other (e.g., Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014; Cashmore et al., 2010; Juby et al., 2005; Kitterød & Lyngstad, 2012; Masardo, 2009; Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013a). Even in countries, states, and regions where the prevalence of joint physical custody arrangements of separated or divorced parents is about 30%, parents are socioeconomically better off in comparison to those who practice sole physical custody (Bakker & Mulder, 2013; Fransson, Låftman, Östberg, Hjern, & Bergström, 2017; Melli & Brown, 2008). Consequently, the question is inevitable as to whether joint physical custody is an arrangement chosen by a positively selected group of parents who are able to provide a certain kind of childcare, which in general induces more positive outcomes, independently of the parenting plan.

Before presenting recent empirical results on the impact of joint physical custody arrangements on the well-being of children and parents, it seems necessary to give an overview of the arguments brought into the debate from two sides—advocates, on one hand, and others who are more cautious about embracing the practice, on the other hand. A consideration of their rationales is essential for assessing what is being considered as “empirical evidence,” in order to conclude which assumptions have been proven by empirical results and where there are still lacunas which need more research attention in the future.

Effects of Joint Physical Custody on Children’s Well-Being

Arguments linking JPC with children’s well-being

There is largely consensus among researchers, practitioners, and law professionals that joint physical custody arrangements after parental separation or divorce benefit most children if parents cooperate and have low levels of conflict. Under these circumstances, children usually profit from maintaining close relationships with both their mother and their father. This is not only because child development research suggests that the better the parent–child relationships, the better the child’s adjustment, but also because it increases the possibility of the child’s getting access to the (psychological, social, and economic) resources of both parents.

However, disagreement exists regarding the effect of joint physical custody for children if parents do not cooperate or have ongoing conflicts. On one hand, advocates argue that joint physical custody is always in the best interest of the child (Kruk, 2012; Warshak, 2014). Even if the separated or divorced parents have ongoing conflicts, the contact with the father is still worth it. It would be worse for the child to lose the relationship with the father than to see the parents quarrel. In advocates’ opinion, the positive impact of joint physical custody for the child outweighs the stress by far. On the other hand, others have argued that ongoing parental conflict is extremely harmful for the child, and that under such circumstances, sole physical custody would be the better arrangement (Emery, 2016;

McIntosh, Pruett, & Kelly, 2014; Pruett, McIntosh, & Kelly, 2014). This is because conflict frightens children, makes them feel torn between their parents, exposes them to inconsistent parenting, and sometimes leads to an active undermining of one parent by the other. Thus, in high-conflict relationships, the parents cannot meet the needs of the child, and the arrangement is detrimental for the child's welfare (Kalmijn, 2016; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013).

There are at least two other intertwined issues without expert agreement: first, whether joint physical custody is suitable for children of any age; second, what the best care cycle is, depending on the child's age. Some people argue that it is too stressful for infants and toddlers to alternate between two parental homes and that it interferes with the development of secure bonding (Tornello et al., 2013). Others hold the opinion that even infants and toddlers can live in joint physical custody arrangements, if their separation tolerance is respected (Millar & Kruk, 2014). Thus, appropriate age-related arrangements are a very important factor: Preschool children may tolerate 3–4 days; at age eight, 5- to 7-day cycles seem possible (Kelly & Lamb, 2000). Even if ensuring continuity is very important for younger children, flexibility is more important when they grow: Adolescents, for example, tend to find joint physical custody arrangements more inconvenient, even if that type of plan worked for them earlier for an extended period of time, because it often interferes with children's social lives as they get older.

Empirical results on the effects of JPC on children

To begin with, the results of various empirical studies showed that joint physical custody after parental separation or divorce has a neutral to positive impact on children's well-being. A neutral effect means that the well-being of children in JPC arrangements is comparable with the well-being of children in sole physical custody arrangements, thus, that they are neither worse nor better off. However, there are studies showing that children in joint physical custody fare better than children in sole physical custody depending on measurement outcomes (see Table S1 on the *Family Process* website under supporting information).

Several large-scale Swedish studies and one from Norway, defining joint physical custody as equal shared-time arrangements, focusing on mental health as measure of child's well-being (using, e.g., the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ) showed that children in nuclear families scored lower than children with separated or divorced parents, but that children in joint physical arrangements scored lower than children in sole physical custody arrangements (Bergström, Fransson, Hjern, Köhler, & Wallby, 2014; Bergström, Fransson, Wells, Köhler, & Hjern, 2018; Bergström et al., 2015; Fransson, Turunen, Hjern, Östberg, & Bergström, 2016; Hagquist, 2016; Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007; Nilsen, Breivik, Wold, & Bøe, 2017).

Another nationally representative Swedish study (ULF) found evidence for a markedly lower likelihood of subjective stress for children living in joint physical custody when compared with children living in sole custody (Turunen, 2016). This result was supported by a study of adolescents from two compulsory schools in Stockholm, Sweden ($n = 75$), which showed that living arrangements were not associated with higher cortisol measures or recurrent pain (Fransson, Folkesson, Bergström, Östberg, & Lindfors, 2014). The Swedish ULF-study also revealed that children in single care reported lower self-esteem than children in other care arrangements (Turunen, Fransson, & Bergström, 2017). The differences did not disappear under the control of socioeconomic factors.

Another focus of two Swedish studies was risk behavior—like the use of alcohol or illicit drugs and smoking—of adolescents in different family forms (Carlsund, Eriksson, Löfstedt, & Sellström, 2013; Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007). Both studies came to the result that adolescents living in joint physical custody had no or only slightly higher rates of risk

behavior compared with adolescents from nuclear families, but significantly lower rates than their counterparts from single-parent families. However, the differences were no longer significant for children living with single mothers after controlling for possible confounders like number of close friends or school satisfaction (Jablonska & Lindberg, 2007).

A study by Bergström et al. (2013) brings several of the already-mentioned results regarding the well-being of children and adolescents in joint physical custody arrangements together. Again, situated in Sweden, they used representative data from a classroom study and analyzed 10 dimensions of the KIDSCREEN-52 and KIDSCREEN-10 indices. The results of this study showed that children from nuclear families have, in general, higher levels of well-being in comparison to children with separated and divorced parents. However, children in joint physical custody reported better well-being than children in sole custody. Since the 15-year-olds felt better than the 12-year-olds, Bergström et al. (2013, p. 7) conclude that JPC may have different effects for children of different ages. In addition to age, the gender of the child may also be an influencing factor, but results are mixed so far (e.g., Bergström et al., 2015; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009).

Two studies comparing children in joint physical custody arrangements with children in other family forms in 36 Western countries (Health Behaviour in School-ages Children Study, HBSC) found that they have equal or fewer problems communicating with their parents, as well as equal or higher levels of life satisfaction than children in single or step-families (Bjarnason & Arnarsson, 2011; Bjarnason et al., 2012). Two studies from Belgium, using nationally representative data (LAGO, Divorce in Flanders), taking not only the environment (custody arrangement) into account but also the moderating effects of personality (Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014), parental conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and the complexity of family configurations (Vanassche et al., 2013), revealed that although there was no effect of the custody type on several measures of subjective well-being itself, joint physical custody was less beneficial to child's well-being (compared with sole mother residency) in case of high parental conflict, and when the relationship quality with the father is poor.

Several studies from different countries found evidence that joint physical custody is associated with stronger and more enduring bonds between fathers and children (Cashmore et al., 2010; Melli & Brown, 2008; Sodermans, Botterman, Havermans, & Matthijs, 2015; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). The strength of the bonding was measured by, for example, paternal involvement in child rearing, joint leisure time, and emotional closeness. Since one of the most important reasons for the lower level of well-being of children with separated or divorced parents is the absence of and, therefore, the reduced closeness to the father (including the loss of support, financial resources, and engagement) (Bastaitis, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2012; King & Sobolewski, 2006), this is truly a remarkable result. Hence, joint physical custody with the possibility of regular and meaningful contact with both parents, instead of traditional sole physical (mother's) custody, was affirmative for the relationships between children and their fathers. However, the causality of the effect should, again, be discussed because active fathers have much higher odds of practicing joint physical custody after separation or divorce.

Moreover, a study using a representative sample of Dutch separated and divorced parents with children between the ages of 4 and 17 showed that the association between father-child contact and child well-being depends heavily on paternal involvement in child rearing before parental breakup (Poortman, 2018). This also holds true for shared parenting arrangements: If the father's predivorce involvement was low, joint physical custody did not have any advantage for the well-being of children when compared to mother-only residence. Only if fathers' predivorce involvement was medium or high did children benefit from regular contact with their fathers. Or as Poortman (2018, p. 11) stated in her discussion: "it is not so much the frequency of contact per se that benefits children but,

rather, the extent to which postdivorce residence arrangements reflect predivorce parenting arrangements.”

The controversy regarding whether joint physical custody is under all circumstances—including those in high-conflict couples—the best custody arrangement or not is reflected in contradictory empirical results, too. Some studies revealed no or only a minimal additional negative effect of conflict (assessed by the Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale, CPIC) on the outcomes of children in joint physical custody arrangements (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009), and others found that conflict increases the likelihood of negative outcomes for children (Cashmore et al., 2010; McIntosh, 2009; Vanassche et al., 2013). Similar to the latter result, Sobolewski and Amato (2007) showed with longitudinal data from the United States that adult children who were raised in high-conflict or divorced families did not have a higher subjective well-being when they had close relationships with both parents in comparison to those who had only a positive relationship with one parent (see also Kalmijn, 2016, and Vanassche et al., 2013, for the Dutch case). Thus, the benefit of having two close parent–child relationships in high-conflict families may even be outweighed by the emotional cost of stress. Several other studies confirmed that it is not the total amount of time spent with the child that is related to better outcomes, but the quality of the parenting (Hagquist, 2016; Sandler, Wheeler, & Braver, 2013; Spruijt, de Goede, & Vandervalk, 2004).

The age of the child is debated as another major concern. Experts discuss whether joint physical custody is risky for infants and toddlers, because children at a very young age need a stable care basis for healthy social and emotional development, especially regarding the formation of secure attachment relationships (Kelly & Lamb, 2000). A related question is, accordingly, which care cycle would be appropriate for which age, that is, how many days and nights an infant or toddler may be separated from an attachment figure without being harmed. However, there are not yet any published empirical studies on the impact of different care cycles on children’s well-being.

Regarding children’s age, the controversy is ongoing. Advocates argue that the infant–father attachment is as important for the child as the infant–mother attachment. Thus, they emphasize the high significance of continuity in both relationships for the child’s social, emotional, personal, and cognitive development (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Kruk, 2005; Warshak, 2014). In the advocates’ opinion, attachment theory suggests that regular interaction with important caretakers fosters and maintains attachment, which is why a longer separation from either parent should be avoided unconditionally. The idea that children can have only one attachment figure has traditionally been held, but modern research suggests that children can develop and maintain meaningful relationships with multiple caretakers (Kelly & Lamb, 2000). However, a certain competency in childcare, as well as emotionally supportive behavior, is undoubtedly necessary to care for a very young child.

Some academics caution against the implicit confidence that “spending regular and frequent overnights with both parents is beneficial to early development, and should occur at any age” (McIntosh, Smyth, & Kelaher, 2015, p. 111; see for the same argument: Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004; Tornello et al., 2013). The results of two empirical studies on the impact of frequent overnights with both parents on the attachment and well-being of children under the age of five revealed some evidence that frequent overnights of very young children in two homes are associated with attachment insecurity and less regulated behaviors (McIntosh, Smyth, & Kelaher, 2013; Tornello et al., 2013). The methodological procedures, in particular, the conclusions drawn from the results of these studies, are seriously debated between the JPC-supporters (Millar & Kruk, 2014; Warshak, 2014) and researchers who ask for caution (Emery & Tornello, 2014; McIntosh et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, only three studies from Europe consider the moderating effects of step-family formation on the impact of joint physical custody on child outcomes (Nilsen et al.,

2017; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009; Vanassche et al., 2013), although stepparents may have an important influence on children's adjustment after divorce (e.g., Amato, King, & Thorssen, 2016). With an increasing share of joint physical custody arrangements, the proportion of children with residential stepparents will also increase (Sodermans, Matthijs, & Vanassche, 2013b) because both biological parents are then considered as residential. Even if the child lives with the new partner of the mother and the new partner of the father only part-time, the impact of stepparents changes dramatically if there is not one stepparent in the primary home and another one in the secondary home, but both stepparents play a full-time parenting role up to half the time. This is especially true for stepmothers, who can become much more important in the future because they will spend time with their stepchildren on a regular basis (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009).

Besides the many quantitative studies, several *qualitative studies* have been conducted in recent years. None of them compared children in joint physical custody arrangements with children in sole physical custody arrangements or with children in nuclear families. However, using small samples but in-depth interviews, they revealed a deeper understanding of how family members in joint physical custody arrangements are redoing family relationships (Berman, 2015; Markham & Coleman, 2012; Masardo, 2009). In other words, they examined how parents and children interact and negotiate with each other in joint physical custody arrangements (Berman, 2015), identified different types and dynamics of co-parenting relationships (Markham & Coleman, 2012), and acknowledged the challenges that parents have in establishing such care models (Masardo, 2009). Furthermore, they investigated how the children themselves see the situation (Berman, 2015; Campo, Fehlberg, Millward, & Carson, 2012; Haugen, 2010; Neoh & Mellor, 2010; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2016), and how the social networks of children are influenced (Prazen, Wolfinger, Cahill, & Kowaleski-Jones, 2011; Zartler & Grillenberger, 2017). In sum, the studies concluded that there is no "one-size-fits-all" arrangement after parental separation or divorce.

Effects of Joint Physical Custody on Parents

In comparison to the impact of joint physical custody on children, the effects of joint physical custody for the separated or divorced parents are discussed less frequently, although it is not less important (Amato, 2000). First, separated or divorced parents are in general somewhat more likely than others to experience maladjustment in different areas of life (Amato, 2000; Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2006). Joint physical custody can serve as a buffer against these negative outcomes for parents. Second, the well-being of parents has both a direct and indirect impact on the child's well-being (Harris-Short, 2010). Consequently, studies on the impact of joint physical custody on the outcomes of children should also focus on the parents' well-being.

Arguments linking JPC with parents' well-being

Just as there are contradictory arguments on how joint custody affects children, there is a lack of consensus on how joint physical custody can affect parents. Advocates argue that parental conflict can be substantially reduced in joint physical custody arrangements because mothers and fathers get equal status regarding their parental rights and duty to spend time with the child. Thus, there are no reasons for fights anymore (Bauserman, 2012). Others disagree and state that this is not the reality. Instead, they state that high-conflict parents would continue to fight, finding other issues of contention, such as, for example, care cycles or parenting practices (Harris-Short, 2010). In addition, if conflict is not reduced, it can be very damaging for parents' health to have a joint physical custody arrangement (Harris-Short, 2010), because there is no way to avoid friction.

Other advantages of joint physical custody for parents, advocates have suggested, are better financial resources, better health, greater freedom, and a reduction in the parent's general workload and stress (Breivik & Olweus, 2006). Furthermore, the parent who is the nonresident parent in sole custody arrangements—typically the father—might benefit from an ongoing relationship with the child, not only because of the additional interpersonal resources but also because it reduces confusion as to how to continue fulfilling the parental role (Bauserman, 2012). In contrast, mothers, typically the resident parent in sole custody arrangements, benefit from joint physical custody because they are often overstrained by having full care responsibilities for the children almost every day. With the shared responsibility for childcare, mothers can establish and maintain social contacts more easily (Botterman, Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2015), which even increases their chances of repartnering (Schnor, Pasteels, & Van Bavel, 2017).

Others, however, argue that joint physical custody might be very stressful because parents have to constantly plan and coordinate childcare tasks (Bauserman, 2012). The permanent consultation and negotiation can be a burden that may outweigh the reduction in childcare demands (Van der Heijden, Poortman, & Van der Lippe, 2016). In addition, the financial costs are much higher because children need to have duplicate sets of clothes, school supplies, etc., in each home. Moreover, parents have to live relatively close to each other, in order to manage the transportation when the child is alternating between their homes, and this becomes even more relevant when the child reaches school age.

Empirical results on effects of JPC on parents

There are few results regarding the consequences of joint physical custody for parents. This is surprising because there are a large number of studies on the consequences of divorce for adults, showing that the divorced are worse off than the married in many ways (Amato, 2000). Consequently, questions arise as to what the advantages and disadvantages are for parents who practice joint physical custody arrangements and whether there are differences between mothers and fathers.

Research converges on the finding that most separated or divorced parents express satisfaction with their joint physical arrangement. They are, as a nationally representative study from Sweden ($n = 1,297$) (Bergström et al., 2014) and a parents' survey from Australia ($n = 1,028$) (Cashmore et al., 2010) show, more satisfied than parents with sole responsibility for their child's care. However, fathers are more likely to be satisfied than mothers (Cashmore et al., 2010). Mothers' satisfaction varies according to the circumstances and declines with high conflict, safety concerns, and court-imposed arrangements as two quantitative Australian studies (Cashmore et al., 2010; Kaspiew et al., 2009) and two qualitative studies using in-depth interviews, one from Australia ($n = 32$) (Fehlberg, Millward, & Campo, 2011a) and one from the United States ($n = 20$) (Markham & Coleman, 2012), point out. In contrast, fathers express satisfaction with joint physical custody even with ongoing high conflict, as a quantitative Australian study (McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, Wells, & Long, 2010) reveals. As a matter of completeness, it has to be added that children are, in general, less satisfied with the situation than their parents are (Cashmore et al., 2010; McIntosh et al., 2010; Neoh & Mellor, 2010).

A Dutch study "New Families in the Netherlands" (NFN) (2012–13) on the association between physical custody arrangements and feelings of time pressure, using a representative sample of parents who got divorced or dissolved their cohabitation in 2010 ($n = 4,460$), revealed that mothers with sole physical custody experienced higher levels of time pressure than nonresident mothers and mothers practicing joint physical custody (Van der Heijden et al., 2016). Interestingly, the results did not significantly differ between nonresident and joint physical custody mothers. However, fathers practicing joint physical custody experienced higher levels of time pressure than nonresident fathers did.

In addition, the findings of the study suggested that the child's residence is most important because visitations (as there often might be) of nonresident parents are not as demanding regarding childcare tasks and responsibilities as living with a child. Thus, an increasing share of joint physical custody arrangements after parental separation or divorce may be of advantage for mothers in particular because it substantially reduces their time pressure. This again, is suggested as being beneficial to their participation in the labor force and thus, their economic independence.

Besides being favorable for the work–family balance of mothers after a separation or divorce, Botterman et al. (2015) found in a study of divorced parents in Belgium, using data from the Divorce in Flanders survey ($n = 1,506$), that joint physical custody arrangements are also of advantage for mothers regarding their options to participate in outdoor home leisure activities and to maintain social contacts (see also Sodermans et al., 2015). Another study from the Netherlands, drawing on 18 in-depth interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009 with separated parents sampled through the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), came to the same result, showing that mothers in joint physical custody arrangements experience less constraints in combining work, care, and leisure in daily life than single mothers do (Bakker & Karsten, 2013). In general, parents with joint physical custody seem better equipped to balance their postseparation or postdivorce commitments successfully.

Given the fact that parents practicing joint physical custody are more satisfied with their situation, feel less time pressure, and have more time for both leisure time activities and labor force participation, it is not surprising that a study from the state of Wisconsin, USA, based on a random sample of 590 divorced mothers and fathers who shared the physical care of their children and 590 who had traditional custody by the mother, found that JPC parents are also better off regarding their physical and emotional health than parents practicing sole physical custody (Melli & Brown, 2008). However, another study from Belgium using the Divorce in Flanders survey ($n = 1,506$) did not find a direct association between custody status and parental subjective well-being (Sodermans et al., 2015). They did, however, find small gender-specific indirect effects: While more parenting time was positively associated with subjective well-being of mothers because of more open communication with their children, it was negatively associated with the subjective well-being of fathers because of more problems in communication with their children. Thus, communicating with their children presumably indirectly influenced the mothers' and fathers' well-being. The very few existing results regarding the consequences of joint physical custody for parents suggested different costs and rewards for mothers and fathers.

CONCLUSION

To begin with, the empirical results of many studies show that children in joint physical custody arrangements are often equal (not worse) and sometimes slightly better off in their welfare than children living in sole physical custody (e.g., Bergström et al., 2015; Fransson et al., 2016; Hagquist, 2016; Spruijt & Duindam, 2009; Turunen et al., 2017). Thus, the first important answer to the question of the effect of joint physical custody is, indeed, that children are not generally harmed, as was often discussed when the pattern of equal parental care after separation or divorce emerged in several Western countries. In addition, there is also empirical evidence that joint physical custody arrangements have certain benefits for parents, including better health, greater freedom, and a more equitable share of the burdens of childcare (e.g., Bergström et al., 2014; Cashmore et al., 2010; Melli & Brown, 2008; Van der Heijden et al., 2016).

Overall, there are several relational and structural conditions which appear conducive to beneficial joint physical custody arrangements (Gilmore, 2006, p. 26): (1) geographical

proximity, (2) the ability of parents to cooperate without (high) conflict, and at a minimum, to maintain a business-like relationship, (3) a certain degree of paternal competence, (4) family-friendly working hours, (5) a certain degree of financial independence, (6) flexibility, and (7) a high degree of responsiveness to the needs of the children, including willingness to alter the arrangements to meet the children's changing needs when they get older (e.g., Cashmore et al., 2010; Fehlberg et al., 2011b; Gilmore, 2006; Skjærten & Barlindhaug, 2007).

However, studies have also raised a number of important concerns. First, parents who practice joint physical custody differ in several significant ways from the majority of separated or divorced parents whose children live almost exclusively with their mothers. They are, for example, better educated, have a higher income, and quite low conflict levels (e.g., Cancian et al., 2014; Juby et al., 2005; Sodermans et al., 2013a). This positive self-selected group was the focus of most of the existing studies. Thus, an unanswered question is how joint custody will affect children and parents when the arrangement is not voluntarily practiced by privileged parents, when the total numbers increase and the characteristics of the parents change to a more representative sample. This leads to the second concern, the impact of conflict in joint physical custody arrangements. There is some evidence that the degree of conflict between the parents is a significant factor that negatively influences the child's and the mother's adjustment in a joint physical custody arrangement (e.g., Cashmore et al., 2010; Vanassche et al., 2013). More research is urgently needed. Third, experts have articulated strong concerns about the use of joint physical custody arrangements for very young children. They argue that it disrupts the child's development of a secure attachment to a primary caretaker. The very few existing empirical findings support this assumption (McIntosh et al., 2015; Tornello et al., 2013), but very little is yet known. Thus, the next step must be to conduct more and better studies to examine the impact of conflicts and care cycles as well as the effects of joint physical custody for children under the age of four, not only from a sociological or legal, but also a psychological angle.

Another so far nearly neglected aspect would be to include not only divorced but also separated parents because separation is very common in most Western countries (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Some couples never get married or even do not cohabitate, and thus are excluded from analyses if only the divorced are considered. The same holds true for married couples who split up but never get divorced.

As is so often the case, longitudinal studies are required that measure the situation before and after separation or divorce as well as consider changes in the physical custody arrangements. However, not only custody arrangements, but also family member constellations can change. Stepparents, half- or step-siblings, and step-grandparents have been largely neglected so far. The same holds true for the effect of joint physical custody on relationships with other members of the family such as siblings and grandparents (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016). Finally, yet importantly, migrant families have not generally been the focus of research on separation or divorce (but see Jensen & Pace, 2016; Steinbach, 2013), particularly not concerning custody models and residence schedules.

Joint physical custody, evidence thus suggests, is a promising arrangement for fathers, mothers, and children that meets the needs of modern families where parents share work, household, and childcare. For decades, decisions about parenting plans after separation or divorce were strongly connected to traditional beliefs and visitation guidelines, which saw the mother as the best primary caretaker for children. This is certainly not an adequate perspective anymore because societal changes, such as increasing labor force participation of mothers as well as fathers who participate in caring for their children, challenge these traditional ideas. However, joint physical custody seems to have both positive and negative effects, which need to be explored by better-suited studies. Future research must put

more effort into identifying the circumstances in which joint physical custody works, even under the condition of ongoing conflicts between the parents, to serve the best interest of all family members.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Table S1 Overview of Empirical Studies on Joint Physical Custody (JPC) (2007–2018).

Table S1: Overview of Empirical Studies on Joint Physical Custody (JPC) (2007-2018)

Study	Country	Def. JPC	No. of JPC	Children's Age	Interview Partner	Focus on	Sample/Data	Focus of the Study	Results
Bakker and Karsten (2013)	The Netherlands	40%	8	0-18	One Parent	Parents	Qualitative Sample from NKPS (2008/09)	Balancing paid work, care and leisure	Shared>Sole
Bergström et al. (2013)	Sweden	50%	17.350	12 & 15	Children	Children	Representative sample (2009)	Well-being (KIDSCREEN)	Nuclear>Shared>Sole
Bergström et al. (2014)	Sweden	50%	129	4-18	One Parent	Children	Representative sample (2011)	Mental health problems (SDQ)	Nuclear<Shared<Sole
Bergström et al. (2015)	Sweden	50%	15.633	12 & 15	Children	Children	Representative sample (2009)	Psychosomatic problems	Nuclear<Shared<Sole
Bergström et al. (2018)	Nordic Countries	40%	152	2-9	Mother or Father	Children	Representative sample, NordChild (2011)	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Nuclear<Shared<Sole
Berman (2015)	Sweden	50%	19	9-17	Children	Children	Qualitative Study (2012-14)	Re-doing family relationships after separation	Shared>Sole: Children get more attention & time with each parent
Bjarnason and Arnarsson (2011)	36 Western countries	50%	2.206	11, 13 & 15	Children	Children	Representative sample, HBSC (2005/6)	Communication problems with parents	Shared=<Nuclear<Sole
Bjarnason et al. (2012)	36 Western countries	50%	?	11, 13 & 15	Children	Children	Representative sample, HBSC (2005/6)	Life satisfaction	Nuclear>Shared>Sole
Botterman et al. (2015)	Belgium	33%	480	0-18	Parents	Parents	Divorce in Flanders (2009/10)	Outdoor home activities, social contacts	Shared>Sole (Mothers) Shared=Sole (Fathers)
Campo et al. (2012)	Australia	30%	22	10-18	Children	Children	Qualitative Study (2009-2011)	Descriptions and views of parenting arrangements	Positive & negative experiences depending on distance & conflicts
Carlsund et al. (2013)	Sweden	50%	270	15	Children	Children	Representative sample, HBSC (2005/6 & 2009/10)	Risk behavior	Nuclear<Shared<Sole
Cashmore et al. (2010)	Australia	35%	Several studies	Several studies	Children Parents	Children	Several data sources	Well-being of children & parents	Circumstances under which shared care arrangements work, and do not work
Fehlberg, Millward, et al. (2011)	Australia	30%	32	2-16	One Parent	Parents	Qualitative Study (2009, 2010, 2011)	Pathways and outcomes for parents	Differences between mothers' and fathers' experiences and perceptions of shared care
Fransson et al. (2014)	Sweden	50%	75	14-16	Children	Children	School study in Stockholm (year?)	HPA-axis activity and recurrent pain	Nuclear=Shared

Study	Country	Def. JPC	No. of JPC	Children's Age	Interview Partner	Focus on	Sample/Data	Focus of the Study	Results
Fransson et al. (2016)	Sweden	50%	391	10-18	Children One Parent	Children	Representative sample, ULF & Child-ULF, (2007-11)	Psychological complaints	Nuclear=Shared>Sole
Fransson et al. (2017)	Sweden	50%	497	10-18	Children One Parent	Children	Representative sample, ULF & Child-ULF, (2007-11)	Living conditions (resources, health, safety, leisure time activities)	Nuclear=>Shared>Sole
Hagquist (2016)	Sweden	50%	8.725 8.669	12 15	Children	Children	Representative sample Statistics Sweden (2009)	Psychosomatic Problems (PSP)	Nuclear>Shared>Sole Child-parent relation = mediating variable
Haugen (2010)	Norway	50%	15	9-18	Children One Parent	Children	Qualitative Study (2012-14)	Everyday experiences of shared residence: time, agency, and emotions	Shared residence can work as both a pleasure and a burden
Jablonska and Lindberg (2007)	Sweden	50%	443	14-16	Children	Children	School study in Stockholm (year?)	Risk behaviors, victimization & mental distress	Nuclear=Shared>Sole
Markham and Coleman (2012)	USA	33%	20	0-12	Mothers	Mothers	Qualitative Study (year?)	mothers' experiences of joint physical custody & coparenting types	shared physical custody relations are dynamic and can vary greatly
Masardo (2009)	Britain France	30%	20 15	0-19	Father	Children	Qualitative Study (2005/06)	Experiences of negotiating and managing shared residence	Practice of shared residence is different in different families
McIntosh (2009)	Australia	35%	142	School-aged	Parents Child	Children	Qualitative Study (year?), three points of measurement	Impacts of two distinct mediation interventions on parent, child and family relationship functioning	Ongoing conflicts are harmful
McIntosh et al. (2013)	Australia	35%	63 26 71	0-1 2-3 4-5	Parents	Children	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (year?)	Child's psycho-somatic health, emotion regulation	Shared<Sole Shared<Sole Shared=Sole
Melli and Brown (2008)	Wisconsin, USA	30%	408 402	0-16	Fathers Mothers	Children	Random sample from WCRD (2001 & 2004)	Physical health parents & children	Shared>Sole
Neoh and Mellor (2010)	Australia	40%	27 31	8-15	Children Parents	Children	Qualitative Study (year?)	Children's adjustment (SDQ)	Nuclear>Shared=Sole
Nilsen et al. (2017)	Norway	50%?	398	16-19	Children	Children	youth@hordaland study (2012)	Mental Health (SDQ)	Nuclear=Shared<Sole
Poortman (2018)	The Netherlands	50%	836	4-17	Parents	Children	Representative sample, NFN (2012/13)	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Shared>Sole
Prazen et al. (2011)	USA	50%	17 13	5-11	Children Parents	Children	Qualitative Study (year?)	Children's neighborhood friendships	JPC does not imperil children's neighborhood friendships

Study	Country	Def. JPC	No. of JPC	Children's Age	Interview Partner	Focus on	Sample/Data	Focus of the Study	Results
Sadowski and McIntosh (2016)	Australia	35%	16	8-12	Children	Children	Qualitative Study (year?)	Security and contentment In shared time parenting	Shared time does not itself produce security for the child
Sandler et al. (2013)	USA	40%?	?	9-18	Children	Children	Pre-test interviews (year?)	Mental health	In high conflict families: Shared<Sole
Skjørten and Barlindhaug (2007)	Norway	50%	527	0-18	Parent	Children	Quasi-Representative sample, (year?)	Impact child's age and gender on decision on placement	The older the more impact, gender & education of parents played a role
Sodermans and Matthijs (2014)	Belgium	33%	104	14-21	Children	Children	Representative sample, DiF, (2009/10)	Subjective well-being	Shared=Sole
Sodermans et al. (2015)	Belgium	?	242 238	0-18	Fathers Mothers	Parents	Divorce in Flanders (2009/10)	Subjective well-being	Shared=Sole
Spruijt and Duindam (2009)	The Netherlands	40%?	113	10-16	Children	Children	Representative sample (2006-2008)	Well-being	Nuclear=>Shared=Sole
Tornello et al. (2013)	USA	35%	71 103	1 3	Mother	Children	Representative sample, Fragile Families (1998-2000)	Attachment Security	Shared<Sole
Turunen (2016)	Sweden	50%	234	10-18	Children One Parent	Children	Representative sample, ULF & Child-ULF (2001-03)	Stress	Shared<Sole
Turunen et al. (2017)	Sweden	50%	387	10-18	Children One Parent	Children	Representative sample, ULF & Child-ULF, (2007-11)	Self-esteem	Nuclear=Shared=Sole
Van der Heijden et al. (2016)	The Netherlands	50%	1.202	0-18	Parents	Parents	Representative sample, NFN (2012-13)	Time pressure	Shared<sole (mothers) Shared>non-resident (fathers)
Vanassche et al. (2013)	Belgium	33%?	385	12-18	Children	Children	Representative sample, LAGO (year?)	Well-being	Shared=<Sole
Zartler and Grillenberger (2017)	Austria	50%	14	10-14	Children	Children	Qualitative Study	Social network	Close relations are not multiplied; children's networks at both homes = limited connections