Children's influence on dual residence arrangements: Exploring decision-making practices

Article in Children and Youth Services Review · June 2018
DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.05.038

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Children's influence on dual residence arrangements: Exploring decision-making practices

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Dual residence
Shared residence
Joint physical custody
Children's influence
Decision-making
Family practices

ABSTRACT

Dual residence, where children live with each parent for approximately equal amounts of time, is increasingly common for children who have experienced parental separation or divorce. This article explores the perspectives of Swedish children growing up in dual residence arrangements, focusing on their influence over the residence arrangements and practices therein. Alternating one's home life across two households requires organizing and a great deal of decision-making to make everyday life work for children and their families. Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with children aged 9 to 17, this paper explores these decision-making practices. Findings demonstrate that children want to have the choice to influence and take part in the decision-making practices of their dual-residence arrangements, and that most children do influence the way their dual-residence arrangements are shaped albeit to different degrees. However, some children are prevented from having this influence despite their wish to have a say. Barriers and enablers are further discussed in relation to children's influence within their families.

1. Introduction

Across a range of Western countries, a growing number of children live in dual residence arrangements following their parents' separation or divorce. These family arrangements, where children live across households spending up to equal amounts of time in each parent's home, are also referred to as joint/shared physical custody, shared residence, shared parenting or co-parenting. Terminology varies significantly across countries, as does the definition of this model (ranging from 25 to 50% of time with each parent) (Smyth, 2017). The term 'dual residence' (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992) is used in this study because it privileges the child rather than the parents, placing the child at the center and reflecting her/his perspective. From a Swedish point of view, dual residence is defined as equal, or near equal, division of time (Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, 2004) and this is the definition adopted here. Despite the large number of children concerned, children's perspectives on dual residence remain remarkably unmapped.

This article explores children's perspectives on their influence over dual residence arrangements. This is significant because we have little knowledge of whether children in these kinds of arrangements take an active part in shaping their living arrangements and the way they are structured. The feeling of having an influence over one's everyday life seems to be closely related to children's well-being (Brannen & O'Brien, 1996; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2011; Morrow, 1998) and research has suggested that children generally want to take part in decisions that concern them (i.e. Cashmore, 2011; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). Studies investigating children's experiences of dual residence arrangements found that children's influence is an important factor in making arrangements work well for the children themselves (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Haugen, 2010; Heide Ottosen, Stage Hansen, & Søndergaard Jensen, 2011; Smart, 2004). In this study, influence is defined as children having a say and being involved in decision-making processes over the way their dual residence is arranged and put into practice. Accordingly, influence can be understood as one aspect of participation. Nevertheless, Jensen (2009) argues that children's influence on family decisions is still limited and that children have to accept their parents' decisions about how to organize everyday life post-separation. Although the pluralization of family forms may increase the agency of adults who are free to choose their family model, the same is not necessarily true for children.²

This article explores how Swedish children influence their dual

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¹ The terms divorce and separation are used interchangeably, and the data on which the article is based include both. This is relevant in the Swedish context, where less than one third of first-time parents were married (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

² Also worth noting is that, in some instances, agency may be reduced for adults, e.g., those parents that may wish for a shared care arrangement but are unable to “negotiate” one with their former partner or through the family law systems of their respective countries where a “cultural” acceptance of such arrangements may be less accommodating.
residence arrangements and the way they are organized. The aim is to investigate children's views of their influence in decision-making processes and the ways in which they take part in shaping their everyday lives in their families in the context of dual residence.

2. Contextualizing dual residence

In Sweden, dual residence arrangements have increased dramatically since the 1990s. In 1993, the percentage of children in this model was 4%, compared to today's 35–40% (Fransson, Hjern & Bergström, 2018; Statistics Sweden, 2014). This development appears to follow a similar trend across a range of Western countries, but such arrangements are particularly common in Sweden (Bjarnsson & Arnarsson, 2011; Fransson et al., 2018; Kaspiew et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2014; Smyth, 2009). In line with this development, many jurisdictions have either considered legislative presumptions of shared parental care post-divorce (i.e. UK, Australia, Canada), and/or legislated to encourage it (i.e. Belgium, Netherlands, Australia, Wisconsin) (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011; Haux, McKay, & Cain, 2017; Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017; Smyth & Chisholm, 2017). In Belgium, for example, there is a “default judicial recommendation” (Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013) of equally divided residence, implicating that this arrangement must be given initial consideration by the judge if either parent makes a request for it (Vanasseche, Sodermans, Declerck, & Matthijs, 2017). Currently, the 35 to 40% of Swedish children with divorced or separated parents who spend an equal amount of time in two homes, make up almost 10% of all Swedish children (Fransson et al., 2018). If the definition adopted in most studies was used (min. 30% of time with both parents), 45–50% would be defined as in dual residence (Statistics Sweden, 2014).

This development should be seen in the context of the Swedish welfare state, where policies are explicitly aimed at gender equality and shared responsibility for children since the 1970s (Alsarve, Lundqvist, & Roman, 2017). There is a strong Swedish tradition of dual-earner households and policies to encourage symmetric parental roles, and fathers have become more involved in children’s daily lives (Bergman, Eriksson, & Klinth, 2011; Ellingsaeter & Leirn, 2006; Hobson, 2002). For example, parental leave has been gender neutral since 1974 and three months of leave (out of thirteen) are now reserved for each parent. In 2016, Swedish fathers used 26% of all payed parental leave days (Statistics Sweden, 2016). There is a (re)buffatable presumption of shared legal custody and public discourse accents continued shared parenting post-divorce as being in the best interests of the child, which is reflected in legal usage (Eriksson, 2011). There is also a broad public support for ideals of gender equality and shared parenting, before and after divorce (Björk, 2017). In a study by Fransson, Sarkadi, Hjern, and Bergström (2016) about the reasons why parents preferred dual residence, a majority of parents expressed the view that sharing the care of their children equally post-separation was “a given” and also the consequence of two involved parents prior to separation. Another explanation may be sought in the ways developing practices are spread through imitating what others do. Masado (2011) suggests that “it is reasonable to suppose that the more widely accepted the practice of shared residence becomes, the more likely it is to be taken up as a serious option when parents separate” (2011, p. 133).

Compared to children in other post-separation arrangements (i.e. full or frequent maternal or paternal single care), it is more common for parents sharing the care of children to have higher levels of education and a higher income, in Sweden and internationally (Bakker & Mulder, 2013; Fransson, Sarkadi, Hjern, & Bergström, 2016; Heide Ottosen et al., 2011; Melli & Brown, 2008). In Sweden, this type of arrangement is mainly associated with children of Swedish origin (Fransson, Bergström, & Hjern, 2015; Statistics Sweden, 2014). However, the impact of the socio-economic situation of the parents on children’s living arrangements post-divorce is likely to diminish as dual residence arrangements become even more common. Previous research has largely focused on outcomes for children, with a particular focus on different aspects of child well-being and health. Drawing on research using various psychometric instruments, psychosocial development and mental and physical well-being in children in dual residence arrangements has been compared to children in nuclear families and single parent families. Recently, there have been several studies and reviews associating dual residence arrangements with children’s well-being (Bergström et al., 2013; Carlsund, Eriksson, Löfstedt, & Sellström, 2013; Nielsen, 2014, 2015; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010). Others question whether dual residence arrangements work in all circumstances, namely for children under the age of four and where there is a high level of conflict or domestic violence, and call for more research (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011; McIntosh, Smyth, & Kelaher, 2015). Conflicting opinions among both researchers and practitioners on the potential benefits and/or costs for children have led to a somewhat polarized debate focusing on whether dual residence arrangements should be advocated or not (see for example Harris-Short, 2010; Kruk, 2011; Nielsen, 2015). There are many disciplinary and professional interests involved, each one with their own perspective on the best interests of the child.

Although there is still little research investigating children’s own experiences of dual residence, the existing studies reveal that children are happier with flexible and child-focused arrangements, when there are no serious conflicts between parents, and when they can influence the set-up of their living arrangements (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Haugen, 2010; Heide Ottosen et al., 2011; Neale & Flowerdew, 2007; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). It has also been found that children who were able to discuss problems associated with their arrangements and had an influence on the decision-making process were more likely to be positive about the arrangement than children with no influence (Cashmore, 2003).

3. Theoretical framework

The current study is based on the (new) sociology of childhood and the idea of children and young people as social actors who interpret, reflect, and create meaning, thus taking part in shaping their lives (Alanen, 1992; Christensen & James, 2008; James & Prout, 1990). In the context of divorce and post-divorce residence arrangements, this approach implies an understanding of the child as a co-practitioner of post-divorce family life and an agent of change (Neale, 2002). According to the sociology of childhood, participation indicates the child’s opportunity to influence their situation through their agency. However, as Neale and Flowerdew (2007) suggest, agency is not an autonomous process but rather a process dependent on available support from others. Agency always occurs in a relational context, such as families. In the context of dual residence, young people’s agency is demonstrated in decision-making practices as well as in the co-construction of family relationships and everyday life.

Inspired by Morgan’s (2011, 1996) theorizing on family practices, this paper examines decision-making practices within dual residence households. A “family practices” approach refers to the observation of families through what they do: the routines, rituals and activities of their everyday lives. The approach shifts the focus away from seeing the family as a static structure, associated with normative ideas of “the family”, to recognizing the ways in which families constantly undergo change and the practices that constitute day-to-day family living (Morgan, 2011). In this context, decision-making practices are to be understood as particular forms of family practices, through which the processes of influence and decision-making within families and households are manifested.

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2 A dramatic increase can be observed also in other jurisdictions, the Netherlands (Westphal, 2015), Norway (Kitterød & Wiik, 2017) and Wisconsin (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017) for example.

3 These are often referred to as “daddy months”, indicating that parental leave is still a highly gendered affair (Alsarve et al., 2017).
Most (80%) of Swedish dual residence households have adopted a two-week cycle of care, with the vast majority shifting houses every week. In Sweden, dual residence is formally known as "eld的理念:分") and in the Netherlands (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017), dual residence is known as "having dual residence (living every second week or other ways of living half the time with each parent)." All participants except one split their time (just about) equally between their two households, or had done so at the time of recruitment, with the vast majority shifting houses every week. However, many had made changes to their residence model over time, for example concerning the schedule or the length of periods spent in each household. In the sample, most residence arrangements were based on parents' agreements, except for two cases that were settled in court.

Recruiting participants proved to be a very challenging process. Talking about family life and close relationships in relation to separation is a private and sensitive issue. When respondents are under the age of fifteen, they are subject to the consent requirement, which means that the guardian must approve that children talk about private matters in a research interview. Great efforts and many search strategies were required to find the twenty participants. Finally, the majority was recruited via schools. Teachers, school counselors and school nurses in a big city region and surrounding municipalities were involved in the recruitment process, and some headmasters gave permission to put flyers about the study in their schools or on the students' website. The majority of participants were recruited in cases where the school nurse or school counselor volunteered to engage personally in the recruitment process on their school. Since schools are informed about pupils' living arrangements, nurses and counselors often have information about which pupils have dual residence. Where nurses or counselors assisted in recruiting participants, they first informed children about the study (making it very clear it was a voluntary engagement). To those children who wished to participate, written information was sent to them and their parents. If parents approved, the interview was arranged. All of the older participants (above 15) though, contacted me after finding information about the study on flyers in their schools or school websites. Two children were recruited through snowballing (i.e. informed by other participants about the project), two had participated in a previous study by the author, and one child was recruited via a support group for children experiencing litigation after divorce.

When recruiting participants, the intention was to reach children

### Table 1

**Participants.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years since separation (age at separation)</th>
<th>Distance between homes</th>
<th>Stepparents</th>
<th>Siblings</th>
<th>Amount of influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mira 9</td>
<td>4 (age 5)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>1 original, 1 halfsibling</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella 10</td>
<td>6 (age 3)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>1 original, 2 stepsiblings</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia 10</td>
<td>2 (age 8)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1 original</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyla 10</td>
<td>8 (age 2)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>One ex-stepparent (separated)</td>
<td>1 halfsibling (living “every second week” too), one ex-steppibling</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassandra 10</td>
<td>4 (age 6)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1 original</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josef 11</td>
<td>10 (age 1)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2 stepsiblings (at one place), soon 1 halfsibling (at the other place)</td>
<td>Strong (continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saga 11</td>
<td>Always</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>2 halfsiblings</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linnea 11</td>
<td>4 (age 7)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>4 stepsiblings (2 at each place)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kornelia 12</td>
<td>6 (age 6)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>Two (but one parent is separating from stepparent)</td>
<td>1 original, 2 stepsiblings</td>
<td>Strong (continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adamo 12</td>
<td>6 (age 5)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>1 original, 2 stepsblings</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia 13</td>
<td>5 (age 8)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>2 original, 1 halfsibling</td>
<td>Strong (continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia 13</td>
<td>2 (age 11)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1 original</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ylva 13</td>
<td>4 (age 9)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>1 original</td>
<td>Strong (continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia 14</td>
<td>11 (age 3)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>Two + one ex-stepparent</td>
<td>5 stepsiblings (1 at one place, 4 at the other)</td>
<td>Strong (continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida 15</td>
<td>8 (age 7)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>1 original</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah 15</td>
<td>12 (age 3)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>One + one ex-stepparent</td>
<td>2 halfsiblings</td>
<td>Strong (with age)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip 16</td>
<td>10 (age 6)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1 original, 2 stepsiblings (at one place)</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel 16</td>
<td>4 (age 12)</td>
<td>Close</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>2 halfsibling (one with each parent, but one left home years ago)</td>
<td>Strong (continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannes 17</td>
<td>7 (age 10)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>1 original</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl 17</td>
<td>7 (age 10)</td>
<td>Less close</td>
<td>One</td>
<td>2 original, 1 stepsibling</td>
<td>Strong (with age)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Stepparent = new partner who lives together with parent.

### 4. Methods

The empirical data analyzed in this paper are drawn from a study exploring dual-residence children's perspectives on everyday life in two homes.

#### 4.1. Participants and data collection

In-depth and reflective qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty children aged 9–17 (9–11 years: 8 children, 12–14 years: 6 children, 15–17 years: 6 children), with experiences of sharing their time between parents ranging from periods of one to fourteen years. While acknowledging the diversity of experiences and social situations within this category of children, they shared the experience of living in dual residence arrangements. Still, their families were shaped in numerous ways. While some participants were only children, others had sisters and brothers with whom they moved together between their two family units. Some had step-parents, step-siblings or new younger siblings in one or both homes. Whereas some participants belonged to two households of similar type, others alternated between a household of two (i.e. child and parent) and a vast family network (i.e. parent, step-parent, step-siblings and new younger siblings). Half of the participants had short distances (0–5 km) between their two homes and were able to walk or bicycle, while the remainder had to go by car or public transport (10–50 km) when shifting houses (Table 1).

Children were recruited who considered themselves as “having dual residence (living every second week or other ways of living half the time with each parent).” All participants except one split their time (just about) equally between their two households, or had done so at the time of recruitment, with the vast majority shifting houses every week.

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5 There is only one Swedish formal term for dual residence: "alternating living", if directly translated from Swedish. In everyday talk, though, "every second week" is normally used, especially among children and young people.

6 According to ethical guidelines in Sweden (Swedish Research Council, 2012), parental consent is required up to the age of 15, in contrast with the standards in many other countries.
from divorced families of different social backgrounds. Despite this intention, children from middle-class backgrounds were over-represented, somewhat reflecting the overall composition of the group of Swedish children in dual residence arrangements (Statistics Sweden, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in the home of the child, in their school, or at the research office, as chosen by each child. Most were individual interviews, but three participants chose to bring a sibling or their best friend. After an initial talk to establish trust and rapport, the children were given the option to draw their family. Using drawings in child interviews has been reported as a fruitful method of starting the interview and making the topic more comprehensible (Scott, 2008). About half of the children opted to make family drawings, which were then used as a tool during the interviews. The interview guide covered broad themes (family, friendships, leisure, school, everyday routines, influence and decision-making, etc.) and the questions were open-ended so that respondents were encouraged to bring up their own reflections and relate the topics to whatever other themes they found important. Most participants seemed comfortable with this and spoke easily about their lives, while some were less talkative and preferred more detailed questions. Unless participants brought certain issues up themselves, follow-up questions concerning specific topics were asked. As there was a wide age range among participants, open-ended questions served to adapt the interview to each child and help the interviewer fine-tune the follow-up questions. In the interviews, the following questions related to children’s influence were explored: Did they have an influence on the way their living arrangements were shaped? Did they wish to participate in the decision-making, and how? Were they involved? Were their living arrangements rigid or flexible, i.e. open to change? Were they allowed to make exceptions to the regular arrangement according to their own needs and wants? How was it put into practice? Was it possible to change the arrangement itself if they wished?

On average, the interviews lasted about 90 min and were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer/author. All respondents’ identities were anonymized. The quotes used in this article have been translated from Swedish.

Conducting research on your own entails certain demands, as you do not have the critical eye of your coworkers. One way of addressing this problem was to discuss the research on a regular basis with senior researchers.

4.2. Data analysis

Interview transcripts where analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to understand participants’ perspectives on living across households (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process encompassed open coding as well as template coding. Using open coding, codes were derived inductively from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Template coding, on the other hand, was based on predetermined codes in specific areas of interest. In this case, template codes included influence and decision-making in relation to the dual residence arrangement. Open codes included children's engagement in doing care, for example. In the initial coding phase, all interviews were repeatedly read one by one, looking at the narrative of each child. In the second phase, the focus was instead on commonalities across these narratives. NVivo software was used to assist data management and analysis.

In relation to the theme of children’s influence on their residence arrangements, different decision-making practices and the varying degree of influence was identified. Across the diverse set of experiences, a pattern emerged where these could be assembled into three groups: Strong influence, Some influence and No influence.

The analysis is based on a sample of twenty children. While I am cautious about drawing general conclusions, I argue that these narratives are relevant to an understanding of children’s influence on their everyday lives lived across two households, and that they do address many important aspects.

4.3. Ethical considerations

Research with children is always linked to ethical considerations throughout the process. This study followed the ethical guidelines for social sciences in Sweden (Swedish Research Council, 2012) and was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board (ref. no. 511-11). Consent was obtained from the child after receiving information about the research and its aims, as was parental consent for children under the age of 15. Written consent from the child was re-obtained just before the interview, along with information about confidentiality and about the option to withdraw at any stage of the research process (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013). Parental consent was only requested from one parent. This approach might be discussed, but was chosen in order not to exclude children who experienced parental acrimony and to avoid potential conflict between parents. Also, double consent would have further aggravated the difficult recruitment process.

After the interview, many participants voiced their appreciation for taking part in the research; some expressing the chance to reflect on their family life in a novel way. To be asked and listened to does provide an opportunity for children to reflect on and develop strategies for the kind of agency they wish for in everyday life (Näsman, 2004).

5. Results and discussion

The children had many ideas about how they were involved in the decision-making processes relating to their living arrangements. They talked about practical decisions, for example about how long time should be spent in each household, which day of the week to shift houses and where to spend holidays and birthdays. The following analyses are based on the children’s accounts of their everyday lives.

5.1. Decision-making practices in a twofold family life

Participants generally wanted to feel involved and listened to, although not necessarily on all matters. In line with previous research, findings showed that sometimes having a voice was sufficient, even though the situation was not expected to change (Cashmore, 2003; Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Skjorten & Barlindhaug, 2007).

The analytical categories presented below serve the purpose of clarifying a complex reality by outlining some distinct features in the way children’s influence in their families may differ. These categories should not be viewed as static, but as dynamic and sometimes changing over time. For example, many children gained more influence as they grew older.

5.2. Strong influence

Eight children had a high degree of influence. Six of them regularly discussed family matters and how to organize everyday life and their dual residence arrangements with their parents — their influence was continuous. The other two had acquired a strong influence over their residence arrangements as they aged, but did not have family cultures otherwise characterized by inclusion in family decision-making.

5.2.1. Continuous influence

In the families characterized by continuous influence, decisions regarding residence arrangements were usually made jointly, preceded by negotiations. The children were quite influential when it came to organizing and making changes to their living arrangements.

Samuel was sixteen years old at the time of the interview. He had shifted between his mother’s and father’s house every week ever since their divorce four years ago. After a demanding initial period, including a “total transformation” of his family and everyday life, he adapted to this new lifestyle, which he was now mostly happy with. At the time of their divorce, his parents had asked Samuel where he wanted to live. He
articated during the interview how much he had wanted to stay with both of his parents. As he knew someone who lived “every second week” with each parent, obviously spending as much time as possible with each one of them, he concluded that dual residence would be the best solution for him, too. Although he was basically allowed to come and go as he wished at both places, he was accustomed to changing houses on Fridays, which he kept doing. Changing houses on a distinct day provided some kind of routine, which he appreciated. Besides, he found one week in each home just enough before he started missing the other parent. Before holidays and special events, he usually communicated to his parents his ideas on how to make arrangements and where he would spend his time, and jointly they came up with a solution that worked for all of them. This was sometimes the result of negotiations or compromises. Despite Samuel’s relative autonomy when it came to decision-making, he pointed out that although his arrangements sounded simple, it took a lot of planning, organizing and negotiating with his parents.

SAMLUM (16): Well you get better at planning things because you still have to fit into two lives, both Mum’s and Dad’s... even if I have freedom [laughter]. The advantage is that I have autonomy and things, but the thing is you still have to check everything: “Does this work? Does that work?” Because it’s not just like “I’m gonna do this”.

When several people from more than one household are involved, making common decisions becomes even more complex. In Samuel’s case, less coordination was required than for many others, as his parents had no new partners. When there are new partners, step-siblings, and maybe new partners’ ex-partners and children involved, changing time routines (i.e. which day of the week to shift houses) turns into an intricate enterprise. For Samuel, the constant need to organize simple changes to his ordinary schedule was sometimes annoying. Fitting into his parents’ separate lives was undoubtedly more complicated than when they had shared a common family life. On the other hand, his position as relatively free to move between two separate households offered him more autonomy and room to maneuver than ever before. It could be concluded that power relations in the family became less distinct: the former parental dyad was no longer dominant but replaced by three individuals negotiating on a more equal level over their dual residence arrangements (Berman, 2015).

Alicia was another participant who always took part in the decision-making processes in her family. Unlike Samuel, she did not move back and forth autonomously, but she regularly discussed how to organize her residence arrangements with her parents. During the five years since her parents’ divorce, she had actually already changed her arrangements several times. For example, at one point she had arranged to live only at her mother’s place, but after some time changed back to dual residence.

ALICIA (13): Eh...Before, er, when we lived in Blueville [another community] last year, I thought it was easier, so I lived more with my Mum. Because I went to school there and...my big sister lived there as well. But then, when I switched to this school over here, I wanted every second week again... But she [older sister] still has it the other way....

INTERVIEWER: Ok. What did you do then, when you wanted to change things?
ALICIA: I just asked if I could do it... and Dad was really happy! And so was Mum.

INTERVIEWER: If there is something you feel you would like to change about your living arrangements, do you ask your parents?
ALICIA: Yeah. And it usually works.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of other things you have changed?
ALICIA: I don’t know whether to talk about it, but I didn’t like my step-mum... that’s why I changed really.

INTERVIEWER: Ok, that’s why you lived only with your Mum for some time?

ALICIA: Yeah, it was. Err, but then we started to get along better, so I might as well live there every second week.

Alicia’s account indicates that she perceived having a large measure of control over her living arrangements. She also highlighted the emotional aspects involved in everyday life post-divorce and how these impinge on dual residence practices. Although Alicia never made decisions independently, there was a continuous discussion going on in her family and her arrangements were open to change. Her sister had a different residence arrangement seeing her father every other weekend, as this arrangement worked better for her. Different arrangements for different children reflect how individual needs and preferences were recognized. As Alicia concluded:

ALICIA (13): Me and my sister, we have quite a lot of power; we get to decide quite a bit about where we want to stay and stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Is that good or bad?
ALICIA: It’s good! [Replies straight away and in a confident voice]

At large, these children had substantial influence over their living arrangements and were happy about it. Two of them, who were among the oldest at the time of divorce, remembered having been involved in the decision about how to deal with the issue of their residence immediately after the separation. Others did not have a say at the time of separation but were accustomed to continuously evaluating their living arrangements to see how they worked and whether adjustments needed to be made. Just like Alicia, many used trial and error to find a way of organizing residence arrangements that best suited them.

The decision-making practices of these families involved a democratic style of family life and decision-making, where all members of the bi-nuclear family (Ahrons, 1979) were expected to have a say. Important matters were usually out in the open and were discussed and negotiated. However, influence is not to be confused with choice, and the fact that the children had influence does not mean that they made independent decisions (Neale, 2002). Rather, they were included and had a say in the decision-making process. Even if the children’s ideas were not necessarily put into practice, they were listened to and mostly felt that their opinions were taken into account. Sometimes it might be a relief not to have the overall responsibility. The responsibility of making independent decisions in these matters may function as a burden instead of a freedom (Haugen, 2010).

5.2.2. Strong influence with age

Two participants had got a high degree of influence on how their residence arrangements were shaped as they aged, despite otherwise not being continuously included in family decision-making. Hannes (aged 17) actually had a rather limited influence until he turned 14, which he ascribed his parents’ problems to communicate and their habit of putting their own needs first. At age 14, he had realized children’s statutory right to have a say in matters that concern them, and claimed his right in negotiations using age as an argument. Sarah (aged 16), on the other hand, had not negotiated at all. Her strategy had been to step by step make very small changes to the arrangement on her own, just notifying her parents in a “by the way” manner.

SARAH (16): It’s like on short-term. Like “I want to go to dad now”, or “tomorrow”

INTERVIEWER: Ok. Like immediately or do you.... SÅRÅH: [interrupts] Well yes, it’s been like that recently, when we didn’t really have a definite schedule. I usually stay the weekend and some more, and then I say like “I’m going to dad on Monday” if it’s Saturday or something like that.

As they grow up, children often gain more participatory rights within their families, as well as in the community (Neale & Flowerdew, 2007). Just like children in general have increasing influence over decisions in their lives, the study-participants got increasing influence over residence arrangements as they aged. Hannes and Sarah were both
teenagers, and as such were approved a certain degree of autonomy in relation to their everyday lives, highlighting the developmental aspect of influence. The significance of age became very clear regarding the decision of dual residence at the time of divorce, where none of the children below the age of eight at separation remembered having been involved in the initial decision over residence, illustrating the way in which influence was adapted to age.

To conclude, the high degree of influence characterizing this group were based on different assumptions. While some children had claimed more influence by age, others had been included in family decision-making for as long as they could remember. Their democratic decision-making practices not only had to do with age, but also with relationships and family cultures.

5.3. Some influence

Half of participants were not asked explicitly about their opinions about residence and family matters on a regular basis but were expected to tell their parents if they were not pleased with the way things were organized. This group encompassed children with different degrees of influence over their living arrangements, in specific areas, or when voicing their opinions. While the continuous influence group of families had an embedded democratic style of organizing everyday life, this group was characterized by partial influence, meaning that they were involved in many issues related to dual residence arrangements, although the arrangement itself was not negotiable. For example, it was possible to negotiate changes within the 50/50 arrangement, although parents were the ones who set the framework. Within the group, there was a variety of ways to have a say. Mira, for example, was pleased to have some influence over her everyday life, but would have liked to be more involved. When responding to what happens when she would like to change something she is not pleased with, she described a common scenario:

MIRA (9): Yeah, I tell Mum and then she says “Well that’s the way it is, and if we are going to change it I have to talk to Dad, and you know he never accepts my proposals although I have to accept his, and it’s never going to work”. And then, if I tell my Dad and he tells Mum, then it is ok. But when I tell Mum first and dad thinks it’s her idea, it doesn’t work.

Mira had developed strategies to gain as much influence as possible, sometimes even without her parents noticing. Accordingly, one strategy was to first propose her ideas to her Dad, so that he could then introduce them to her Mum. From experience, she knew that her father seldom consented to the ideas of her mother. Consequently, it was better to first approach her Dad. The tension between Mira’s parents impinged on her agency, impeding the flexibility of the arrangement, and challenged her to find other strategies for influencing the decision-making. Hence, as we can see, agency is practiced in a number of ways, not only when children are “given” a voice as illustrated in the first group. Mira and her younger sister also “snooped around” to find out what her parents were planning, and then interfered in issues under discussion. She voiced her opinion whether asked for it or not and thus often got a say in the negotiations.

For children less forward than Mira, or with parents less open to the child’s involvement, it may not be as easy to voice an opposing point of view. Saga (11), whose parents had separated before she was born, was usually pleased with the way she could influence everyday matters, apart from matters she considered too sensitive. Particularly, she would have liked to have a say when it came to her living arrangements.

INTERVIEWER: So then, if you feel there is something you would rather change, do you tell your parents about it?
SAGA (11): Yes....
INTERVIEWER: Mhm...?
SAGA: But sometimes... I kind of don’t really dare to.

INTERVIEWER: No...?
SAGA: I want to be honest, but at the same time I don’t want to hurt anyone....

So, well... I’m kind of a little frightened to say what I think. But sometimes I do have the courage.

INTERVIEWER: What might that be, for example, that is difficult to talk about?
SAGA: Well sometimes when I am like with my Mum... I love being with my Dad, you know. And then it’s like... then... I sometimes feel like... I don’t want to be at my Mum’s place, I want to be at my Dad’s. But I don’t kind of have the courage to tell my Mum.

Saga’s description of her situation suggests a number of things. First of all, she was involved in many decisions and did have a certain degree of influence over the shaping of her everyday life, with the exception of her residence arrangements. What was difficult was the need to voice her ideas and bring up difficult topics herself. She would have appreciated her parents asking for her views more frequently. Secondly, Saga was afraid of hurting people’s feelings, especially those of her parents. In consideration of her mother, she kept certain feelings to herself. Saga’s moral reasoning highlights the dilemma of being considerate and taking responsibility for other people’s emotions versus the wish to gain influence, a dilemma which is present in several of the children’s narratives. Children’s moral agency builds on strong emotional bonds and commitment to family members is apparent in the everyday lives of the young people in this study (Mayall, 2002). The concept ‘sentient activity’ (Mason, 1996) includes both feelings and actions of care (‘caring about’ versus ‘caring for’) (Mayall, 2002) and captures children’s ‘doing’ of care through emotionally engaging in the well-being of others.

Philip’s case was quite a different story. He was one of the few children who claimed he did not want to take part in the decision-making, unless “in case of an emergency”. That is, if his parents made decisions he considered inconsistent with his needs.

PHILIP (17): Mum and Dad make the decisions. I don’t interfere, they have to do it. They usually make good decisions.
INTERVIEWER: Would you like to take part in making the decisions?
PHILIP: Oh no! I don’t bother, that’s just too annoying...

Although at first sight it may look like Philip did not have much influence over his dual residence family life, I would argue the opposite. Philip demanded that his parents organize his residential arrangements according to his needs and wishes without involving him in the actual negotiations. When his parents had negotiated, for instance, the division of time during the summer holidays, they informed him about their agreement and he usually accepted it. He only needed to interfere when their plans did not suit him, a procedure that he was content with.

INTERVIEWER: So, if there is a problem for you...?
PHILIP (17): Then I tell them.
INTERVIEWER: Who do you tell?
PHILIP (17): I tell both of them. “I don’t want it like this”. [Determined voice].
INTERVIEWER: Aha. And then what? They have to rearrange things?
PHILIP: Then they have to rearrange things. Or compromise. I cannot decide completely but I can always have my own opinion. But I don’t bother to interfere in their discussions, only if there were an emergency, kind of.
INTERVIEWER: But you prefer them to handle it?
PHILIP: Well yes, they have to do that, they’re in for that, they are both parents. That’s not my task. They have to handle that on their own.

Philip was determined that it was the duty of his parents to handle the decision-making, the negotiations and the organizing of his living arrangements. To him, taking part in these things was just time-
For Karl, giving his opinion would put him in a difficult position. He would risk hurting his mother’s feelings, and he would feel very guilty. However, it was not only anxiety about culpability that hindered Karl from trying to interfere, but also worry about “messing up” the situation for his parents, potentially fueling their conflict even more. He mentioned, downheartedly, his parents’ long struggle and all the money they had put into custody disputes. Instead of trying to change the arrangement, Karl was eager to finish school and get a place of his own in a couple of years.

INTERVIEWER: So, if you imagine, or dream of the best way to arrange your living; how would that be?
KARL (17): I don’t know really... Leave home I guess. Live on my own, that’s it.
INTERVIEWER: Would that be nice?
KARL: That would be really nice.

As we have seen, trying to influence the practicalities of one’s living arrangement might perceive negative outcomes. In Karl’s case, he learned not to interfere, not even when he was unhappy with the arrangement. An important explanation for the lack of influence is parents’ inability to cooperate, typically resulting in a rigidly imposed regime. Consequently, children are trapped in arrangements strictly regulated by non-negotiable agreements between their parents. Non-flexible arrangements mean little scope for the children’s influence. In combination with a high-conflict parental relationship, which is the usual scenario, this means serious difficulties for children in gaining control over their everyday lives, which has also been found elsewhere (Heide Ottosen et al., 2011; Neale, 2002; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). Hence, these children are dispossessed of their participatory rights within the family, i.e. the right to be part of the process in which questions profoundly related to their lives and well-being are negotiated.

Karl’s parents had had a hostile relationship since their divorce ten years ago. The residence arrangement was decided by court after long drawn-out custody disputes, and Karl and his sisters spent many years in the middle of their parents’ battles. Although the conflict had now calmed down somewhat, they were constantly aware of the risk of its resuscitation. After the legal process, Karl’s time was divided between his parents in a 9-5 cycle: nine days with his mother followed by five days with his father, with the exception of holidays that were split equally. He was the only participant in the study who had never shared his time on an equal basis.

KARL (17): So now it’s decided that both parents are to have exactly the same amount of time during the summer, and both are to have at least one period of three weeks of continuous vacation, and then another two weeks in addition to that, and it all has to be exactly equally divided.

Karl studiously followed the detailed, rather complicated, schedule agreed upon by his parents several years ago. The well-defined schedule had helped to reduce conflict, however it was mainly adapted to his parents’ terms. Even though Karl would prefer to have more autonomy and influence over his living arrangements, he did not voice his opinion, mainly out of care for his parents and in order to avoid further conflict. He was well aware that even suggesting a small change in the arrangements risked exacerbating the situation. Even if hostilities were dormant at the moment, they did flare up now and then. During the interview, Karl revealed that he would in fact prefer to divide his time equally between his parents. Nevertheless, he refrained from telling his parents because he knew his views would not change things; he had no influence over his living arrangements.

INTERVIEWER: So how come you don’t tell your parents you’d prefer to stay more with your Dad?
KARL (17): That’s probably mainly cos I don’t want to mess it up for them. Well, and for me too I guess. ... Because I know my Mum would be really sad if I told her, and then she’d immediately bring that up again; “Ok, so you don’t like me?” and she’d be really pissed and that would last for ages... So I think telling them would really just cause a lot of problems for everybody. That’s why.

For Karl, giving his opinion would put him in a difficult position. He would risk hurting his mother’s feelings, and he would feel very guilty. However, it was not only anxiety about culpability that hindered Karl from trying to interfere, but also worry about “messing up” the situation for his parents, potentially fueling their conflict even more. He mentioned, downheartedly, his parents’ long struggle and all the money they had put into custody disputes. Instead of trying to change the arrangement, Karl was eager to finish school and get a place of his own in a couple of years.

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As we have seen, trying to influence the practicalities of one’s living arrangement might perceive negative outcomes. In Karl’s case, he learned not to interfere, not even when he was unhappy with the arrangement. An important explanation for the lack of influence is parents’ inability to cooperate, typically resulting in a rigidly imposed regime. Consequently, children are trapped in arrangements strictly regulated by non-negotiable agreements between their parents. Non-flexible arrangements mean little scope for the children’s influence. In combination with a high-conflict parental relationship, which is the usual scenario, this means serious difficulties for children in gaining control over their everyday lives, which has also been found elsewhere (Heide Ottosen et al., 2011; Neale, 2002; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001). Hence, these children are dispossessed of their participatory rights within the family, i.e. the right to be part of the process in which questions profoundly related to their lives and well-being are negotiated.

It is also worth noting that many of the children in the present study had experienced an initial period of parental conflict following separation, when their parents had problems communicating. This had resulted in an initial period of little influence, which gradually increased as their parents learned to cooperate and everybody got used to the new family situation.

5.5. Discussion

As highlighted, children’s narratives reveal how most of them engaged in different kinds of decision-making practices on a regular basis. Children’s agency is manifested in the many strategies they used to gain as much room to maneuver as possible. The argument by Jensen (2009), that children’s influence is still limited and that children have to accept parents’ decisions about how to organize everyday life after separation, is challenged by some of the children’s accounts within this study while holding true for others.

Yet, children’s influence relies heavily on the degree of available support from their parents. Neale and Flowerdew (2007) point out that agency is not an autonomous process, but rather a relational process where social relationships influence the way in which children are able to exercise their agency. Support from one or both parents may assist children in exercising their agency (ibid; Mayall, 2001). In the case of dual residence, the support of both parents facilitates children’s influence over their living arrangements. Consequently, there may be shifting opportunities for children to practice their agency, as we have learnt from the children’s different experiences. If parents are not willing or able to include children in decision-making processes, gaining influence becomes more difficult. This pinpoints the crucial role of parents as “gatekeepers” to power (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003). As illustrated by Karl, the hostility between parents hinders children from being involved in everyday decision-making in their families. In his case, a substantial part of his life was organized without his involvement, with the focus on his parents rather than on Karl and his sisters.
In a conflict situation, parents are typically blind to their children’s needs (Erel & Burman, 1995; Harold, Acquah, Sellers, Chowdry, & Feinstein, 2016). Furthermore, if the decision about residence is made by court, rigid contracts about residence and visitation are often established, clashing with children’s need for flexibility. This makes it impossible to try out different models, adjust or re-negotiate in relation to children’s needs or wishes. Although the legal system has a clear emphasis on protecting the child, these contracts entail an objectification of the child itself, reducing her/him to an object of negotiations between parents. For the child, this may result in the loss of participatory rights, as defined by the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Parental hostility and difficulties cooperating thus serve as barriers to children’s opportunities to influence their everyday lives. It has been estimated that about 14% of Swedish children experiencing divorce have parents involved in a dispute over custody or residence arrangements (National Board of Health and Welfare, 2011). This figure is evidence of a reality where a vast number of children are exposed to parents’ severe conflicts. It is well known that conflict and parents’ cooperation have a great impact on children’s well-being (Fabricius, Sokol, Díaz, & Braver, 2012; Harold, Acquah, Sellers, Chowdry, & Feinstein, 2016; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). It is possible that the lack of influence and the absence of control over their everyday lives is an additional cause of harm to children impacted by parental conflict. While several scholars have cautioned against dual residence for children in high-conflict families (Haugen, 2010; McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008), one may ask whether other shared living arrangements are necessarily less harmful when parents have hostile relationships?

In the present study, the children who had no influence at all over their living arrangements both had parents who were locked in severe conflict. There are, however, other barriers that could potentially limit children’s influence, although these were not visible in the present study sample. Poor relationships in the family or non-recognition of children’s needs or wishes in addition to structural factors might impinge on the flexibility of the arrangements and the potential for adjustments to them. The impact of economic resources or parents’ working conditions for example brings to the fore the class dimension. Parents’ working schedules, for instance, may impede or make difficult certain changes that would otherwise benefit their children. Limited material resources might not only affect children’s influence, but it may actually also rule out dual residence as a viable post-divorce living arrangement, due to the necessity of double housing and other expenses.

A relevant question when discussing children’s influence in family decision-making is whether including children’s opinions implies placing too much responsibility on them. Haugen (2010) points out that participation in the process of divorce and post-divorce family life makes children vulnerable and can be related to feelings of responsibility and guilt. Children are moral agents, often taking responsibility for their parents’ well-being, as exemplified by Saga and Karl not voicing their wishes out of consideration for their mothers. Although there is criticism of including children in family decision-making regarding these matters, often arguing for the children’s need for protection, children themselves often wish for inclusion. In line with previous research, findings from this study show that these young people wished to be informed and have influence over the organization of family life (Haugen, 2010; Heide Ottosen et al., 2011; Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001).

5.6. Limitations

Despite the insights from children’s lives, this study was not without limitations. With a larger and randomized sample, general conclusions of the findings would have been possible. A longitudinal design would have enabled us to comprehend changes over time.

6. Conclusions

To date, research on children’s perspectives of growing up in dual residence arrangements is scarce. This paper has focused on children’s perspectives on influence and decision-making practices in the context of dual residence.

The findings suggest that children want to be listened to and have the choice to influence and take part in the decision-making practices of their dual-residence arrangements. Children’s influence can be gained in several ways; i.e. by being continuously included in family decision-making, being asked their perspectives or by articulating their views of their own accord. If parents are responsive to their needs, children could also have influence through being “listened to” without always voicing their opinions. Whether or not children are pleased with their degree of influence seems to be connected to their well-being and contentment with the dual-residence arrangement.

Irrespective of the degree of influence, whether or not children were happy with their dual residence arrangements had to do with many things. Children’s narratives specifically highlight the variation in experiences within the group, depending on how the arrangement is settled as well as children’s distinctive personalities. All participants experienced positive as well as negative sides, benefits and constraints. Some loved the constant change, enjoyed having two homes or experienced their relationships to parents as closer than ever, while others experienced transitions as hard, suffered from divided loyalties or constantly missed one parent. Dual residence can be hard work for some children even when they have a say and their parents get along, whereas others perceive difficulties as minor and mostly enjoy their dual home life. However, all participants valued having an everyday life with both parents. Even those who otherwise experienced mainly constraints did not see any alternatives.

To conclude, children are individuals with different needs, and there is no way to determine what residence arrangement is “good” or “bad” for children in general or what kind or degree of influence works best. This paper emphasizes the significance of taking children’s individual voices into account to make post-divorce arrangements work well for them, and to allow for different forms of having a say. To find out what support they might need, we – as parents or professionals – have to ask them and to listen to what they tell us. This should be considered when children voice their needs, but we also need to continuously ask and evaluate how their arrangements work and whether they can be improved. Children’s views, opinions and needs do change over time; thus, being open to modifications of residence arrangements is fundamental if children’s voices are to be taken seriously.

6.1. Implications for policy and practice

The findings of the current study have a number of important implications for practice. First of all, they highlight the need for more attention to children’s voices on their dual residence arrangements to make these work well for children. Children should be informed and be given the choice to have a say about their living arrangements. A key priority should therefore be to make information about this available to separated parents. Particularly, greater efforts are needed to reach parents outside the court system, as most dual-residence arrangements are informal.

Additionally, along with previous research, this study points at the urgent need for further development in the field of child and family support during and after the separation process in order to protect children from the harms that may be caused by parental acrimony, regardless of living arrangement.

Conflict of interest

I declare that I have no conflict of interest.
Acknowledgments

I wish to express my thanks to the children who helped me with this research, generously sharing their experiences and reflections about growing up in dual residence families. Also, many thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and helpful comments.

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