

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF PARENTING PLANS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Interjecting Data Into the Debate About Overnights

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The debate about the benefits and drawbacks of overnight schedules for young children is hotly contested in family law. This study investigated connections between occurrence of overnights, schedule consistency, number of caregivers, and young children's adjustment to parental separation and divorce. Families ($N = 161$) with children aged 6 years or younger were recruited at the time of filing for divorce or child custody (if unmarried); follow-up data were obtained from 132 families 15 to 18 months later. Results indicated that parenting plan variables are related to children's social, cognitive, and emotional behavior, with caregivers and schedule consistency more salient than overnights. Girls benefited from overnights and more caregivers, whereas boys did not. Overnighting children aged 4 to 6 years when their parents filed manifested fewer problems 1.5 years later than did younger children. Even when controlling for parental conflict and parent-child relationship variables, the constellation of parenting plan variables contributed to young children's adaptation.

Keywords: *young children; overnights; father involvement; child adjustment*

For all of our recent gains in understanding the impact of divorce on children and families, what we know about its effects on young children remains a tunnel with scant light at the end. It is generally accepted that divorce affects a substantial proportion of children. Nearly half of all children in this country spend an average of 5 years living in a single-parent home (Castro-Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Glick & Lin, 1986). The majority of single parents will remarry, with divorce rates even higher among remarriages. A less well-known fact is that the youngest children are among those most likely to experience the changes in family structure attendant to separation and divorce. More than half of the children who experience divorce do so by age 6, and 75% of these young children are younger than 3 years of age (Emery, 1988).

Divorce, therefore, is likely to produce ongoing disruption in the nurturing domain at precisely the time of development when the stabilizing aspects of children's cognitive, social, and emotional worlds are so crucial to their well-being (Kaplan & Pruett, 2000). Even in amicable divorces, reaching legal and financial settlements can take a substantial proportion of a young child's life; the younger the child, the more his or her life is subsumed by the divorce period. In less amicable circumstances, this process can occupy (and for parents, preoccupation) much of the young child's life. The challenges and risks facing young children and their parents are further magnified by the lack of time and opportunity for more adaptive experiences to balance the effects of the familial disruption and change. Many of these children are more likely than their counterparts in nondivorced homes to live in poverty and

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spend time in substandard childcare (Whiteside, 1995). In addition, the parents of young children are likely to be younger themselves, and consequently less educated and mature than their older counterparts.

More balanced family roles in two-parent homes and concomitant changing societal attitudes toward the role of fathers in children's lives find more families with very young children choosing, or being required, to develop parenting plans and time-sharing schedules that involve overnights away from the primary caretaker, usually the mother. Surveys from California and Wisconsin indicate that more than one third of children younger than 2 years old in separated and divorced families spend overnight time with their second parent (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1988; Seltzer, 1991). The powerful conundrum about how young children do (or do not) adapt to overnights, and under what conditions, has generated one of the more heated debates in the field of family law today.

Goldstein, Solnit, and Freud (1973) sparked the discussion when they espoused the opinion that children involved in contested divorces should remain in the care of one primary caretaker for overnights until later toddlerhood (see also Goldstein, Solnit, Goldstein, & Freud, 1996). Despite subsequent controversy over the authors' heavy reliance on the primacy of one parent for decision making and residential arrangements, authoritative sources nonetheless continued to caution against overnights before children are 3 years old, even in lower conflict situations (Spokane County Bar Association, 1996).

Research from child development and divorce literature was subsequently considered by mental health experts who embraced one of two contrasting views: On balance overnights benefit young children, or they do not (see Hodges, 1986; Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Lieberman, 1993; Solomon & Biringen, 2001; Stahl, 1994; Warshak, 2000). Interpretations of child development and father involvement literatures, in particular, fuel varying perspectives, with the experts' positions stemming from their theoretical models regarding the best interests of children.

In recent *Family Court Review* issues, several authors (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Lamb & Kelly, 2001; Warshak, 2000) challenged the prevailing view: They reviewed existing literatures and found compelling reasons to support overnights even for the youngest children. Kelly and Lamb (2000) point out that the preponderance of developmental literature suggests that infants become attached to both parents at 6 to 7 months of age. In addition, children develop hierarchies of meaningful attachments with caretakers depending on their mood and need, and the particular capacities of each of the caretakers. The authors argue that it is not the amount of time that nonresidential parents and children spend together, but the kinds of interaction that accompany longer stays and overnights—feeding, diapering, soothing, and putting to bed—that help to strengthen and consolidate relationships. They reason that given the importance of fathers' involvement in children's lives and the challenges to keeping fathers involved with infants and toddlers, the benefits of overnights outweigh the detriments. Kelly and Lamb (2000) further recommend that young children should have briefer times away from their primary caretaker, with more transitions between parents, and they are careful to explicate that children's unique temperaments and capacities must be taken into account in each case.

Solomon and George (1999) rejoined with the only empirical data about this issue to date (also see Solomon & Biringen, 2001). They found that significantly more infants (aged 0 to 1 years) who had overnight visitation with their fathers were classified as disorganized or unclassifiable in attachment to either one or both parents than children from married families, whereas the differences were not significant for toddlers. In a follow-up study these children, who were now 2.5 years old and having regular overnights, showed more anger,

resistance, and provocation with their mothers after second-time brief laboratory separations, suggesting heightened sensitivity to separations and reunions. Solomon concludes that most parents in the study did not create safe conditions to facilitate overnights and maintain their children's secure attachment. She thus cautions against setting up repeated overnights for infants or toddlers and suggests that regular overnights be delayed through the 3rd year of life. The limitations to these data, as the only published information on the subject, are important ones. Notably, many of the infants in the divorced group had never lived with both parents, fathers' data were missing on key measures, and some of the children had experienced repeated and prolonged separations from their fathers. In addition, the effects of overnights were examined primarily in terms of children's attachment behaviors. Furthermore, and most critical for the current investigation, the study leaves open the possibility that overnights may not account for children's adjustment beyond what is accounted for by the quality of the parents' relationship to each other or to the child.

Attachment tells only a small frame of the entire story of a young child's life; attachment categorizations may change over time (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). Behavior and psychological symptoms represent other important indices in child adaptation that have not yet been empirically examined in relation to overnights. Finally, it is possible that overnight arrangements may have differential effects on boys' versus girls' adjustment, with age also implicated in how a young child adapts, but this has not yet been explored scientifically.

The current study examines how the occurrence and structure of overnights relates to psychological and behavioral problems in young children. We test the possibilities that these linkages may be different for young boys and girls, and for children younger than 3 versus 4 to 6 years old. Previous studies have suggested that because younger children have greater needs for stability, increased access for the second parent should be restricted. This study will test this supposition by examining whether the association between overnight schedules and child outcomes differ according to age. Given how dominant the parental relationship and parenting variables are as predictors of early childhood outcomes, we also test whether overnights, in and of themselves, explain unique variance in child outcomes beyond what is explained by the quality of interparental and parent-child relationships. We further examine two critical aspects of parenting plans related to overnights: how many caretakers are involved in a young child's life and the stability of the schedule.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were drawn from the Collaborative Divorce Project (CDP). The CDP was designed to assess the effect of a comprehensive collaborative intervention program for families whose children were aged 0 to 6 years during the initiation of divorce proceedings for married couples or child custody actions for nonmarried couples. Participants were recruited from two Connecticut court districts upon filing for divorce or a court action and were randomly assigned as either intervention recipients or comparison group families. Inclusion criteria included (a) a child 6 years or younger in the family who was the biological child of the parties, (b) no substantial history of parental substance use, and (c) no significant history of physical spousal or child abuses within the family. Eligible families were invited to participate voluntarily in an assessment of an innovative court project designed for families

with young children. Families were enrolled at the beginning of their legal proceedings. The majority of families had just separated, with the other families in the planning phase of doing so.

At baseline, 161 families began participating in our longitudinal study. Families and other collateral informants (attorneys, day care providers, and teachers) were contacted 15 to 18 months later to provide additional data regarding child adjustment, coparenting and parent-child relationships, and custody arrangements. Follow-up data were collected from 132 families (i.e., 82% of the original sample). The sample for this study includes data from fathers and/or mothers from these 132 families. Data from intervention and comparison families are not differentiated for purposes of this study.

The parents are primarily Caucasian (86%). The youngest child from each family served as the target child for the study. At the follow-up, the average age of the children (74 boys and 58 girls) was 4.89 years ($SD = 1.70$). The average length of married parents' relationships was 8 years, ranging from 1 to 26. With the exception of 3 couples who never lived together, the majority of unmarried couples ($n = 31$) self-reported that they were significantly involved with one another at the time of conception. Average educational attainment for parents was generally high school graduation, a year of college, or some specialized training. Yearly incomes were measured in discrete intervals. Mothers' yearly incomes averaged from \$18,001 to \$25,000, whereas fathers' averaged \$25,001 to \$50,000. Incomes for mothers and fathers ranged from less than \$5,000/year to more than \$75,000/year, yielding an economically diverse sample.

PROCEDURE

Once both parents consented to participate, they completed questionnaires at baseline and at 15 to 18 months after legal proceedings began. Parents were paid \$50 for their participation at each assessment. As part of the legal process and the study, parenting plans involving parental access and overnight schedules, as well as decision-making guidelines, were formulated and recorded.

MEASURES

Demographic variables. Child's gender (0 = boy, 1 = girl) was recorded on recruitment. Child's age was calculated at the follow-up assessment. When tested as a potential moderator variable, child's age at baseline was used to determine how children responded to overnights over the divorcing period. In analyses of child's age, age at baseline was coded as a dichotomous variable (0 = aged 0 to 3, 1 = aged 4 to 6). Socioeconomic status was computed as the mean of the standardized variables of the Hollingshead Status Index (Hollingshead, 1975) and family income at baseline. The Hollingshead Status Index is derived from a formula that accounts for and weights parental education and occupational status (Hollingshead, 1975).

Family relationship variables. Negative changes in the parent-child relationship were assessed using Maccoby, Mnookin, and Depner's (1993) 10-item, 5-point Likert measure of the parent-child relationship. Parents reported on changes in the emotional distance in their relationship with their child, as well as changes in expectations for the child, play time, patience, consistency, and the child's compliance since parental separation. Higher scores

indicate more distance and difficulty between parents and their child (Mothers' report: $\alpha = .77$; Fathers' report: $\alpha = .81$).

Interparental conflict was measured with the Content of Conflict Checklist (Johnston, 1996). This scale is calculated from the sum of a 17-item measure of the extent of parental disagreements regarding childrearing issues, such as coparenting and access arrangements, discipline, daily care, and trust and support for the other parent's involvement with the child. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*false*) to 5 (*true*) was used. Higher scores indicate higher levels of parental conflict. Internal consistency of the Content of Conflict Checklist scale has been shown to be high (Mother's report: $\alpha = .88$; Father's report: $\alpha = .91$).

Parenting plan variables. All of the families reached parenting plan agreements as couples; most used assistance from the Family Services arm of the court and/or their attorneys. Specified parenting plan arrangements as negotiated by the CDP and Family Services counselor teams were recorded for intervention families, augmented for parents in both conditions by information provided on parental follow-up questionnaires. Parenting plans were developed between 6 and 15 months after recruitment, with exact dates varying depending on when individual families reached agreement and/or reported it to the courts or researchers. The CDP staff utilized the parenting plans to obtain information about overnights, access schedules, and various caregivers' involvement with the child. When parents' information differed, attempts were made to reconcile the differences using all available sources of information. When discrepancies could not be reconciled, the parent's report that contained more detailed information was used. The data reflect parenting plans actually being used at the time of data collection rather than de jure plans designed earlier in the divorcing process.

Parenting plans specified the occurrence of overnights (0 = no, 1 = yes). More detailed variables about the frequency of overnights did not yield additional information in analyses and were excluded. Number of caregivers specified the number of caregivers the children typically interacted with during the week. Typical caregivers included parents, grandparents, other family relatives and friends, and day care providers. A dichotomous variable was used to assess schedule consistency in the parenting schedule. Responses to the question, "Is the parenting schedule always the same every week?" were scored as 0 = no and 1 = yes.

Dependent variables/child outcomes. Children's problem behaviors were measured in accordance with the widely used Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). Parents ranked whether each item was 2 (*very true or often true*), 1 (*some-what or sometimes true*), or 0 (*not true, as far as you know*) for their child. Two versions were used according to the age of the child (2 to 3 years or 4 years and older); both forms have demonstrated very good reliability and validity (Achenbach, 1991, 1992). The CBCL is not used for infants and toddlers younger than 2 years. In the younger children's version, there are six problem scales: Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn, Sleep Problems, Somatic Problems, Aggressive Behavior, and Destructive Behavior (Achenbach, 1992). The older children's version includes many of the same domains, with several additions, yielding a total of 8 subscales: Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn, Somatic Complaints, Aggressive Behavior, Social Problems, Thought Problems, Attention Problems, and Delinquent Behavior (Achenbach, 1991). Items for the Thought Problem scales include psychotic symptoms (e.g., hallucinations), as well as indices of children's strange behaviors and ideas.

Summed scores of the items for each problem behavior scale were converted to normed *t*-scores to provide a standardized measure across male and female participants in the toddler version. Age-related *t*-scores were also used in the older children's CBCL version, with dif-

ferent norms for boys and girls. The toddlers' Destructive Behaviors scale and the older children's Delinquent Behavior scale were averaged together to increase the sample size for this analysis because of their similar theoretical basis. Composite scales of internalizing behaviors (based on Anxious/Depressed, Withdrawn, and Somatic Complaints subscales) and externalizing behaviors (based on Aggressive Behavior, Destructive Behavior, and Delinquent Behavior subscales) were examined in all analyses prior to their constituent subscales.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Four key sets of analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers. First, we examined bivariate correlations between the family relationship variables (i.e., negative changes in the parent-child relationship and interparental conflict) and each of the child outcome measures. Second, we examined correlations between the parenting plan variables (i.e., occurrence of overnights, number of caregivers, schedule consistency) and each of the child outcome measures. Third, regression models were used to test for moderator effects of child's gender and age in the relationships between the parenting plan variables and the dependent measures. Fourth, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses to address whether the parenting plan variables explained incremental variance in child outcomes above and beyond what is explained by child's age and gender and the quality of family relationships. In the case of a nonsignificant result ($p > .05$) for internalizing or externalizing behaviors at the composite scale level, we tested constituent subscales. Given the importance of overnights and other details of parenting arrangements in the divorce literature and in the courts and public policy arena, we also examined the ability of each parenting plan variable separately—as a single predictor—to explain incremental variance in child adjustment.

RESULTS

Intercorrelations between the predictor variables and children's problem behaviors are presented in Table 1. In general, all constructs were differentiated and correlated with each other as expected. Subscales within the CBCL are well documented to correlate with one another, and they were significantly correlated in this study as well. Overall, the predictor variables (i.e., parenting plan variables and family relationship variables) were well differentiated with only one significant association within the parenting plan variables: Children who did more overnights also had more caretakers ($r = .28, p < .01$).

Descriptive information regarding overnights and other parenting plan variables is presented in Table 2. The majority (75%) of the children experienced overnights. More specific, 31% of the sample experienced one overnight per week and 44% experienced more than one overnight per week. Thus, overnights occurred with high frequency. Two predominant caregivers across the week (59%) was the most common circumstance for the children, although about one third of the children (35%) experienced three or more caregivers. Finally, weekly residential schedules stayed consistent for most of the children (83%).

FAMILY RELATIONSHIP FACTORS AND CHILD OUTCOMES

Bivariate correlations between child outcomes and the two family relationship variables—negative changes in the parent-child relationship and interparental conflict—were exam-

Table 1
Intercorrelations of the Measured Variables

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
A	—	.13	-.04	.04	.01	.47***	.33***	.37***	.54***	.43***	.36**	.30*	.42***	.56***
B	.05	—	-.08	.12	-.01	.08	.13	.20*	.07	-.02	-.06	-.12	.01	.33
C	-.03	.00	—	.28**	.04	-.13	-.11	-.04	-.04	-.09	-.24*	-.28*	-.25*	.22
D	-.05	.03	.18	—	.01	.20*	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.17	-.25*	-.21	-.33**	.43**
E	.04	.14	-.08	.01	—	-.22*	-.18	-.09	-.16	-.05	-.28*	-.17	-.11	.01
F	.09	.24*	-.06	-.06	-.14	—	.62***	.40***	.57***	.28**	.43***	.60***	.47***	.73***
G	.19	.23*	-.07	-.19	-.22*	.58***	—	.51***	.61***	.44***	.65***	.60***	.71***	.53**
H	.02	.17	.06	-.03	.02	.55***	.29**	—	.38***	.44**	.37**	.35**	.47***	.39*
I	.34**	.07	-.08	-.21	-.07	.22*	.46***	.07	—	.51***	.58***	.51***	.66***	.50**
J	.16	.26*	-.03	-.09	-.02	.31**	.63***	.16	.60***	—	.61***	.38***	.62***	.39*
K	.33*	-.13	-.32*	-.01	-.30*	.64***	.55***	.52***	.51***	.40**	—	.43***	.72***	—
L	.22	.16	-.18	.07	-.19	.37**	.45***	.32*	.31*	.22	.53***	—	.58***	—
M	.38**	-.03	-.20	-.02	-.23	.36**	.43**	.26	.76***	.22	.62***	.47***	—	—
N	-.05	.13	.23	-.14	.28	.43*	.41*	.59***	.37*	.33	—	—	—	—

NOTE: A = negative changes in parent-child relationship; B = interparental conflict; C = occurrence of overnights; D = number of caregivers; E = schedule consistency; F = Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), anxious/depressed; G = CBCL, withdrawn; H = CBCL, somatic problems; I = CBCL, aggressive behavior; J = CBCL, destructive and delinquent behaviors; K = CBCL, social problems; L = CBCL, thought problems; M = CBCL, attention problems; N = CBCL, sleep problems. Correlations based on mothers' data are above the diagonal and correlations based on fathers' data are below the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Frequencies of Overnights, Number of Caregivers, and Schedule Consistency

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Occurrence of overnights	No	25
	Yes	75
Number of overnights	None	25
	A few per month or less	0
	One per week	31
	More than one per week	44
Number of caregivers	1	6
	2	59
	3 or more	35
Schedule consistency	Variable	17
	Consistent	83

ined. Both parents reported that when parent-child relationships were more negative, the children exhibited more attentional problems (mothers' report: $r = .42, p < .001$; fathers' report: $r = .38, p < .01$), social problems (mothers' report: $r = .36, p < .01$; fathers' report: $r = .33, p < .05$), and externalizing behaviors (mothers' report: $r = .61, p < .001$; fathers' report: $r = .26, p < .05$). According to mothers, increased negativity in their relationship with their children was also related to their child's thought problems ($r = .30, p < .05$), sleep problems ($r = .56, p < .001$), and higher levels of internalizing behavior ($r = .51, p < .001$).

In the face of higher interparental conflict, mothers reported more sleep problems ($r = .33, p < .05$) and somatic complaints ($r = .20, p < .05$) from their children. Fathers reported that higher interparental conflict was associated with greater internalizing behaviors ($r = .22, p < .05$) and destructive/delinquent behavior ($r = .26, p < .05$). Thus, according to both parents, the quality of family relationships, particularly negative changes in the parent-child relationship and parental conflict to a lesser extent, was a strong predictor of a wide array of problem behaviors.

OVERNIGHTS, PARENTING PLAN SCHEDULES, AND CHILD OUTCOMES

Bivariate correlations were used to examine the relation between parenting plan variables (i.e., overnights, number of caregivers, schedule consistency) and child outcome variables.

Overnights. Children who were overnighting had fewer social problems according to mothers ($r = -.24, p < .05$) and fathers ($r = -.32, p < .05$). Although there were no significant correlations between the occurrence of overnights and internalizing or externalizing behaviors, mothers reported that children who experienced overnights had fewer attention problems ($r = -.25, p < .05$) and thought problems ($r = -.28, p < .05$).

Number of caregivers. Based on mothers' reports, children with more caretakers had fewer social problems ($r = -.25, p < .05$) and attention problems ($r = -.33, p < .01$) but more sleep problems ($r = .43, p < .01$). Although there were no significant associations with internalizing or externalizing behaviors at the composite scale level, a higher number of caregivers was associated with greater anxious/depressed behavior ($r = .20, p < .05$). There were no significant correlations between number of caregivers and father-reported child outcomes.

Schedule consistency. According to both parents, the existence of a consistent caregiving arrangement from week to week was associated with fewer social problems (mothers' report: $r = -.28, p < .05$; fathers' report: $r = -.30, p < .05$). No significant correlations were found with mothers' reports of internalizing or externalizing behaviors at the composite scale level, but children whose schedules remained consistent exhibited less anxious/depressed behavior ($r = -.22, p < .05$). Similarly, fathers reported that children with consistent schedules manifested less internalizing behavior ($r = .23, p < .05$).

MODERATOR EFFECTS OF GENDER AND AGE IN THE PREDICTION OF CHILD OUTCOMES FROM PARENTING PLANS

Next we tested whether gender or age moderated the associations found between our three predictors (occurrence of overnights, number of caretakers, and schedule consistency) and child outcome variables. First, socioeconomic status was examined but found to be unrelated to child outcomes, so it was not included in subsequent analyses. Gender and age were examined in separate regression analyses because it was only possible to test moderator effects of age in a subset of our child outcome variables, that is, in those variables which were measured in younger and older children. Following recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), the number of caretakers variable was centered (i.e., subtracted the sample mean from all individuals' scores) to minimize problems of multicollinearity and maximize interpretability of results. The other predictors and moderator variables were dichotomous and therefore did not require centering.

Variables were entered hierarchically into the regression model in the following order: (a) moderator (i.e., gender or age), (b) one of the parenting plan predictors (i.e., occurrence of overnights, number of caretakers, or schedule consistency), and (c) the interaction between the proposed moderator and the predictor. When a significant interaction was found, two regression equations for the relationship between the proposed moderator and child adjustment were conducted (Holmbeck, 2002). In testing gender as a moderator, the first equation was calculated for boys and the second equation was calculated for girls. In testing age as a moderator, the first equation focused on children aged 0 to 3 and the second equation on children aged 4 to 6. Significance tests (t) for each slope were then conducted to determine the nature of the relationship between the predictor and the dependent variable for boys versus girls and for younger children versus older children.

Moderator effects of gender. A similar pattern of moderator effects for gender emerged in mothers' and fathers' reports of child outcomes. First, a significant interaction between gender and overnights was found in the prediction of both parents' reports of withdrawn behavior (mothers' report: $t = -2.61, p = .01$; fathers' report: $t = -2.21, p < .05$). The slope of the relationship between overnights and withdrawn behavior was then examined separately for boys and girls. As illustrated in Figure 1, according to both parents, girls with overnights showed less withdrawn behavior (mothers' report: unstandardized $b = -5.17, p < .01$; fathers' report: unstandardized $b = -4.76, p < .05$), whereas the relationship was nonsignificant for boys (mothers' report: unstandardized $b = 1.03, p = ns$; fathers' report: unstandardized $b = 1.33, p = ns$).

Both mothers' and fathers' data yielded significant interactions between gender and number of caretakers in the prediction of internalizing behavior (mothers' report: $t = -2.41, p < .05$; fathers' report: $t = -2.38, p < .05$). This interaction was then probed to determine the significance and direction of the associations for boys and girls separately. According to

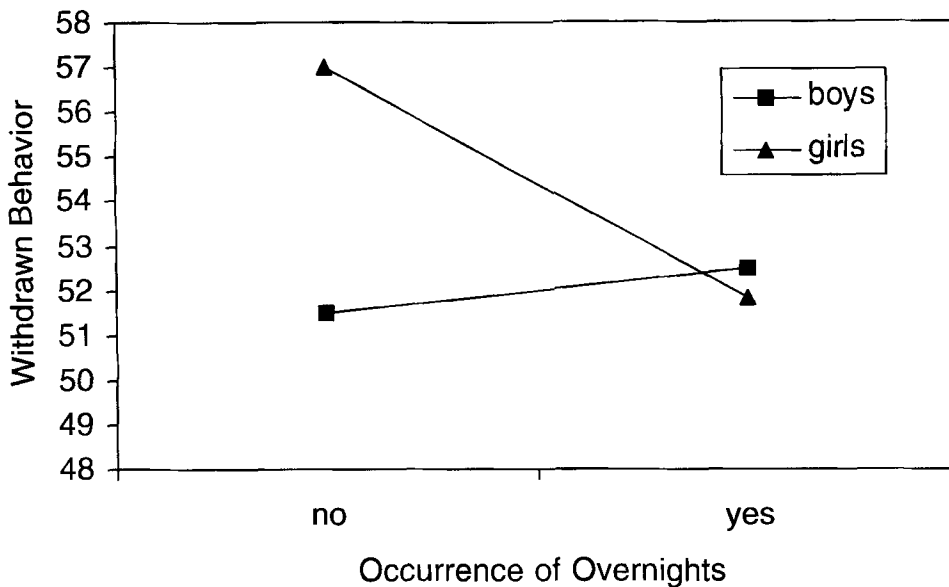


Figure 1. Regression lines for relations between overnights and mother-reported withdrawn behavior as moderated by child's gender: Girls exhibited significantly less withdrawn behavior when they experienced overnights, whereas relation was nonsignificant for boys; the same pattern of results was found using fathers' reports

mothers, boys exhibited significantly greater internalizing behaviors as the number of caregivers increased (unstandardized $b = 6.51, p < .05$), whereas the relation was nonsignificant for girls (unstandardized $b = -2.19, p = ns$). Fathers reported similar associations, but the significance pattern was reversed: Girls showed significantly fewer internalizing problems as the number of caregivers increased (unstandardized $b = -5.47, p < .05$), whereas the relation was nonsignificant for boys (unstandardized $b = 3.49, p = ns$). In sum, mothers and fathers agreed that with more caretakers, girls tended to show fewer internalizing problems and boys tended to show greater internalizing behaviors, but the statistical significance of these patterns was inconsistent. This moderator effect, as exemplified by fathers' data, is illustrated in Figure 2.

Based on mothers' data only, a significant interaction was also found between gender and number of caretakers in predicting thought problems ($t = -2.43, p < .05$). Once again, further testing revealed that girls showed significantly fewer thought problems as the number of caretakers increased (unstandardized $b = -5.28, p < .01$), whereas the relation was nonsignificant for boys (unstandardized $b = .15, p = ns$). Based on fathers' data only, a significant interaction was found between gender and the consistency of weekly schedules in predicting externalizing problems. Here, boys showed significantly fewer externalizing problems when schedules were consistent (unstandardized $b = -9.04, p < .01$), but the association was nonsignificant for girls (unstandardized $b = 1.94, p = ns$).

Moderator effects of age. In testing for moderator effects of age, the target child's age at baseline was dichotomized into younger (aged 0 to 3) and older (aged 4 to 6) children based on theoretical rationales from previous research. Based on the mothers' data, robust moderator effects of age were found in the relations between parenting plan variables. The mothers'

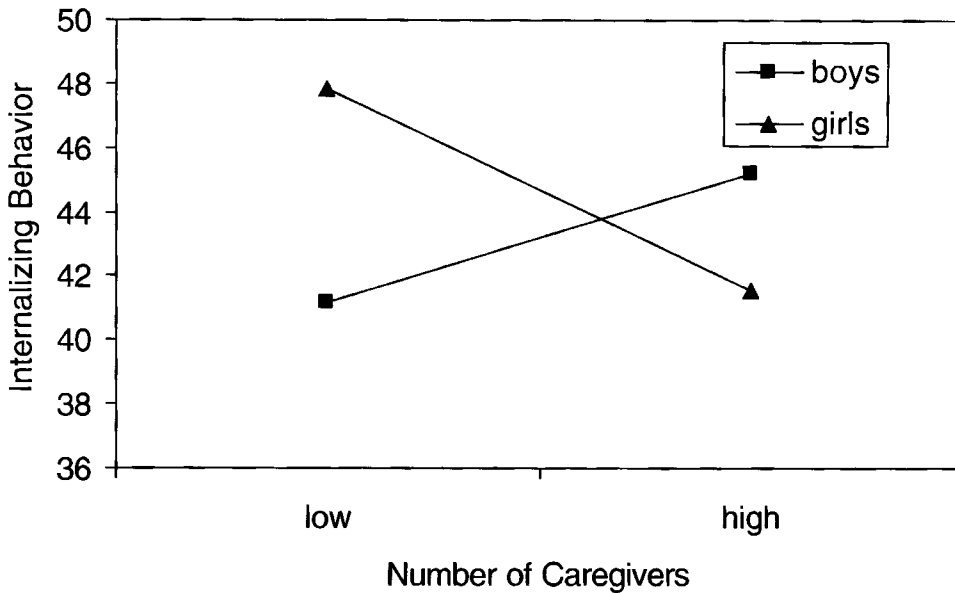


Figure 2. Regression lines for relations between number of caregivers and father-reported internalizing behavior as moderated by child's gender: Girls exhibited significantly less internalizing behavior with more caregivers over the week, whereas relation was nonsignificant for boys

data revealed a significant interaction between child's age and the occurrence of overnights in the prediction of internalizing ($t = -2.31, p < .05$) and externalizing behaviors ($t = -2.25, p < .05$) at the composite scale level. Although the slopes for the younger group were positive (suggesting higher symptomatology with overnights) and the slopes for the older group were negative (suggesting lower symptomatology with overnights), none was significantly different from zero.

To better characterize the nature of these effects, we proceeded to test for age moderator effects using the constituent subscales of internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Significant age moderator effects were found between the occurrence of overnights and anxious/depressed behavior ($t = -2.32, p < .05$), withdrawn behavior ($t = -2.17, p < .05$), somatic complaints ($t = -2.59, p < .05$), aggressive behavior ($t = -2.73, p < .01$), and destructive/delinquent behavior ($t = -2.51, p < .05$). In addition, age was found to moderate the relationship between overnights and attention problems ($t = -2.91, p < .01$) (see Figure 3) and thought problems ($t = -3.84, p < .001$). Across outcome measures, older children who spent overnights with the second parent exhibited fewer problem behaviors (anxious/depressed behavior: unstandardized $b = -4.45, p < .01$; withdrawn behavior: unstandardized $b = -4.84, p < .05$; somatic complaints: unstandardized $b = -4.83, p < .05$; aggressive behavior: unstandardized $b = -4.98, p < .05$; destructive/delinquent behavior: unstandardized $b = -5.00, p = .01$; attention problems: unstandardized $b = -6.61, p < .01$; thought problems: unstandardized $b = -8.66, p < .01$), whereas the relationships between overnights and dependent measures were nonsignificant for younger children.

A very similar pattern of age moderator effects was found for links between number of caregivers and mother-reported child outcomes. Again, there was a significant interaction between child's age at baseline and internalizing ($t = -2.81, p < .01$) and externalizing behaviors ($t = -2.09, p < .05$). Post hoc probing of these interaction effects revealed that younger

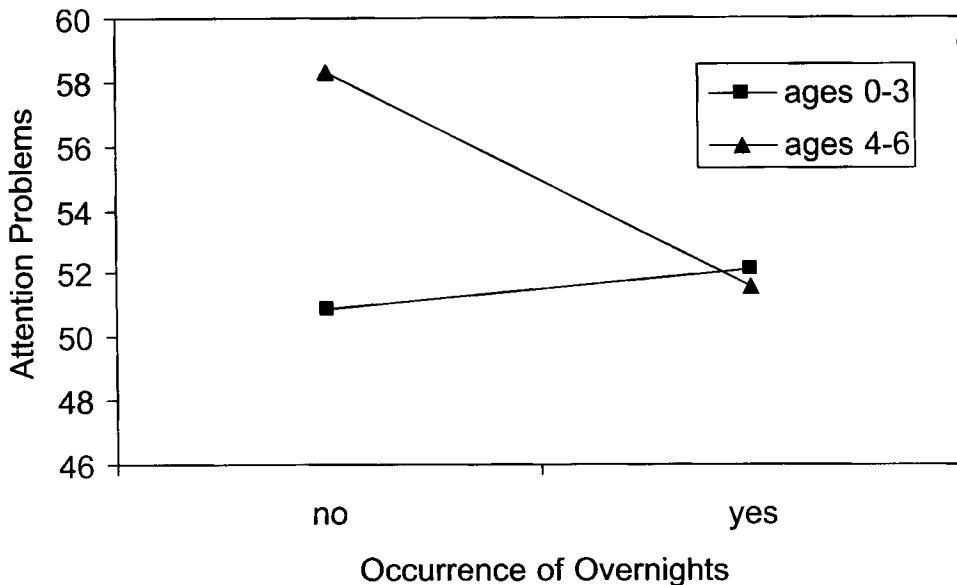


Figure 3 .Regression lines for relations between overnights and mother-reported attention problems as moderated by child's age at baseline: Children who were aged 4 to 6 when parents initiated legal action exhibited significantly fewer attention problems with overnights, whereas relation was nonsignificant for children aged 0 to 3

children exhibited greater internalizing behaviors (unstandardized $b = 6.59$, $p < .01$) as the number of caregivers increased, whereas the relationship was not significant for older children. In predicting externalizing problems, the slope for younger children was positive (suggesting higher symptomatology with more caregivers) and the slope for older children was negative (suggesting lower symptomatology with more caregivers), but neither slope was significantly different from zero.

More detailed analyses revealed significant interactions between child's age and number of caretakers for anxious/depressed behavior ($t = -3.55$, $p < .01$), withdrawn behavior ($t = -2.94$, $p < .01$), somatic complaints ($t = -2.96$, $p < .01$), aggressive behavior ($t = -2.58$, $p < .05$), and destructive/delinquent behavior ($t = -2.97$, $p < .01$). In addition, there was a significant interaction between age and number of caretakers in the prediction of attention problems ($t = -2.91$, $p < .01$). For all but one of these outcomes, mothers reported that older children exhibited fewer problem behaviors when they had more caregivers (withdrawn behavior: unstandardized $b = -3.16$, $p < .05$; somatic complaints: unstandardized $b = -3.46$, $p < .05$; aggressive behavior: unstandardized $b = -3.02$, $p < .05$; destructive/delinquent behavior: unstandardized $b = -4.38$, $p = .001$; attention problems: unstandardized $b = -5.15$, $p < .01$), whereas there were no significant associations between number of caregivers and outcomes for younger children. However, mothers reported that younger children experienced significantly higher anxious/depressed behavior with more caregivers (unstandardized $b = 3.71$, $p < .001$), whereas the relationship was nonsignificant for older children.

Two other moderator effects of age were found. First, based on mothers' data, there was a significant interaction between child's age and schedule consistency in predicting thought problems ($t = -2.08$, $p < .05$). Older children had fewer thought problems when schedules were consistent (unstandardized $b = -5.76$, $p < .05$), but there was no significant relationship

for younger children. Second, based on fathers' reports, there was a significant interaction between child's age at baseline and number of caretakers in the prediction of externalizing symptoms ($t = 2.15, p < .05$). More specific, fathers' reported that younger children showed fewer externalizing symptoms (unstandardized $b = -6.16, p < .05$) when there were more caregivers, whereas the relationship was nonsignificant for older children.

PREDICTION OF CHILD OUTCOMES FROM PARENTING PLAN VARIABLES AFTER ACCOUNTING FOR CHILD'S AGE, GENDER, AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Hierarchical regression analyses were next employed to examine the capacity of overnight and caregiving variables to predict child outcomes after accounting for demographic characteristics and the quality of family relationships. Variables were entered in the following order: (a) child's age and gender, (b) family relationship variables (i.e., negative changes in the parent-child relationship since parental separation or divorce, and interparental conflict), and (c) parenting plan variables (i.e., occurrence of overnights, number of caregivers, and schedule consistency).

Using mothers' reports of child outcomes, the parenting plan variables accounted for unique variance in three types of problem behavior beyond what was accounted for by child's age and gender, as well as the quality of family relationships: (a) anxious/depressed behavior, (b) social problems, and (c) attention problems (see Table 3 for details). Based on father-reported child outcomes, the parenting plan variables explained incremental variance in two types of problem behavior: (a) withdrawn behavior and (b) social problems. Table 4 presents results for these analyses.

Next, analyses of individual parenting plan indices were conducted similarly to the hierarchical regression analyses described above, with demographic variables (child's age and gender) entered on the first step, and family relationship variables (negative changes in the parent-child relationship and interparental conflict) entered on the second step. In these analyses, the occurrence of overnights, number of caretakers, or schedule consistency variables were each entered alone on the third step. As a single predictor, the occurrence of overnights explained incremental variance in children's social problems, as reported by fathers ($\beta = -.31, p < .05$). Overnights alone explained incremental variance in no other dependent measures beyond what was explained by demographics and the quality of family relationships. Number of caregivers as a lone predictor made a significant contribution to the explained variance in mother-reported social problems ($\beta = -.25, p < .05$), attention problems ($\beta = -.35, p < .01$), and destructive/delinquent behavior ($\beta = -.22, p < .05$). Based on both parents' data, consistency in the caregiving schedule significantly incremented the prediction of internalizing behavior (mothers' report: $\beta = -.18, p < .05$; fathers' report: $\beta = -.27, p < .05$) as well as social problems (mothers' report: $\beta = -.28, p < .05$; fathers' report: $\beta = -.28, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research interjects data into the debate about young children's capacity to tolerate various kinds of postseparation parenting arrangements that include overnights with the second parent. Until now, the debate has been based largely on circumstantial evidence from research bearing on child adjustment to divorce, in general, rather than direct information pertaining specifically to parenting plan arrangements. These analyses offer new informa-

Table 3
Incremental Variance Explained by Parenting Plan Variables in the Prediction of Mother-Reported Child Outcomes (n = 92)

Step	Variables Entered	Anxiety/Depression			Social Problems			Attention Problems		
		β	R^2	Change	β	R^2	Change	β	R^2	Change
1	Age	-.06			.07			.08		
	Gender	.04			.13			.10		
	Statistics for step		.006	.006		.023	.023		.018	.018
2	Negative changes in parent-child relationship	.50***			.43**			.53***		
	Interparental conflict	.04			-.09			-.01		
	Statistics for step		.252***	.247***		.218**	.195**		.288***	.270***
3	Overnights	-.14			-.08			-.04		
	Number of caregivers	.19			-.23			-.34**		
	Schedule consistency	-.23*			-.23			-.04		
	Statistics for step		.342*	.090*		.345*	.127*		.412*	.124*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Incremental Variance Explained by Parenting Plan Variables in the Prediction of Father-Reported Child Outcomes (n = 79)

Step	Variables Entered	Withdrawn Behavior			Social Problems		
		β	R^2	Change	β	R^2	Change
1	Age	.06			-.20		
	Gender	.07			-.01		
	Statistics for step		.007	.007		.039	.039
2	Negative changes in parent-child relationship	.18			.33*		
	Interparental conflict	.23*			-.16		
	Statistics for step		.091*	.084*		.178*	.139*
3	Overnights	-.08			-.39**		
	Number of caregivers	-.15			.16		
	Schedule consistency	-.27*			-.27*		
	Statistics for step		.189*	.097*		.378**	.200**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

tion about the psychological impact of overnights on children in the context of factors known from prior research to exert considerable influence on child adaptation during divorce. Such factors as child age, gender, parental conflict, and difficulty in the parent-child relationship are accounted for in the models before examining what additional impact overnights and caregiving arrangements have on child adjustment. The results are conservatively reflected in the remaining explained variance.

The current study investigated several components of parenting plans: (a) occurrence of overnights, (b) number of caretakers involved in the child's life, and (c) consistency of week-

to-week schedules. The results project the debate forward by showing that overnights play an important role in child adjustment in some limited respects and by illuminating a larger picture that indicates it is not overnights in and of themselves that are most important. Our findings underscore the importance of taking into account the circumstances that surround the arrangements and basic characteristics of the individual child. As other researchers have concurred (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Solomon & Biringen, 2001), the context surrounding the parenting plan is critical to the way in which it is experienced by the child. We have begun to explicate critical factors and some gender and age differences in relation to those factors.

Conducted as a longitudinal study, these results reflect correlational (rather than causal) relationships between family characteristics and dynamics and child outcomes. In concurrence with prior research, problems in parent-child relationships were found to be the most powerful indices of child problem behaviors (Amato, 2000; Kelly, 2000; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990). Poorer parent-child relationships after divorce were related to the majority of problem behaviors, according to the reports of the mother/father or both parents. Parental conflict explained additional variance, although the amount was relatively small. Other researchers have found it to be a more powerful predictor (Buehler et al., 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Johnston & Roseby, 1997), but in this study, the young age of the children under study potentially insulates them from the wider complexities of parental conflict (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003). Parental reports, in particular, might not link parental conflict to child outcomes because parents of very young children, particularly those with less knowledge of child social-emotional development, often underestimate the impact of their behaviors on their children ("2000 National Survey," 2000).

While mindful of the context provided by these very important predictors of child adjustment, we examined the combined and differential impact of overnights, caretakers, and schedule consistencies and what they add to our understanding of how young children adjust to parental separation and divorce. The majority of children in our sample spent overnights with the less-seen parent, and most of the overnights occurred on weekends. Whereas the majority of the children had two primary caretakers, one third of them had three or more caretakers on a regular basis. Most of the children's schedules remained consistent week to week, with consistency marked by regularity week to week, not including changes every other weekend.

After accounting for the variance explained by parental conflict and parent-child relationships, parenting plan variables still explained significant amounts of child problem behavior. The results were less evident within an examination of main effects. The only finding of significance was that when parents maintained consistent schedules, fathers reported fewer social problems than if the schedule varied. This variable captured changes in schedule during weekdays, when parents were apt to gear the parenting plan to their work schedules or day care availability.

Results indicated that, according to mothers and fathers, children with overnights and those with more caretakers had fewer social problems, whereas children with inconsistent schedules had more social problems. In addition, mothers reported that children with overnights and more caretakers had fewer attention problems, but more caretakers also was associated with sleep disturbances and depression/anxiety. Children with inconsistent schedules were likely to be viewed as having more internalizing symptoms by mothers and fathers.

Although there were main effects of parenting arrangements on children's problem behaviors, important gender differences were noted. Girls were the beneficiaries of parenting plans with overnights and multiple caregivers, whereas boys did not derive the same

benefit. Girls with overnights were less socially withdrawn, according to mothers and fathers. Because the professionals' debate about the benefit of overnights for young children generally casts mothers as the primary parents who wish to limit overnights and fathers as the driving force toward increasing shared parenting time, it is noteworthy that the mothers notice a positive difference among their female children when they have more overnights. The same effect was not found for boys.

Similarly, girls with more caretakers, who generally spent time with each parent on a regular basis as well as one or more other caregivers, manifested less internalizing symptoms (according to fathers) and less thought problems (according to mothers). Boys, on the other hand, had more internalizing symptoms, according to mothers. Mothers also reported that boys with inconsistent schedules showed more externalizing behaviors.

One possible interpretation of these results is that girls, who generally develop verbal and social skills at an earlier age than boys (Mayes & Cohen, 2002), are better able to parlay the stresses and joys of overnights and multiple caretakers into a positive circumstance for themselves by making use of their greater ability to ascertain and state their needs and wishes. Boys, who lag behind at this developmental era, may not have the skills or readiness to engage at the level girls do, so that the parenting arrangements require more of them emotionally and tap into their relative vulnerability in this regard.

Alternatively, the parenting plan variables under study may serve as proxies for greater nonresidential father involvement in the lives of their children. Such involvement is generally threatened during separation and divorce (Cohen, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002; Pruett & Pruett, 1998), especially among families with young children, but these variables indicate the continued presence of fathers at this time. A salient paternal role is to orient his children toward the wider social world and its expectations of them (see Pruett, 2000). With young children, in particular, father involvement is related to higher adaptive developmental skills relevant to the external world (Pruett et al., 2003). Overnights offer opportunities for adaptation to differing household routines and exposure to differing parenting styles around bedtime, meals, and other intimate activities that may help foster this external world orientation in daughters. By contrast, the sons may simply identify more with their fathers' action-focused problem-solving styles on the basis of gender alone, such that the overnights per se have less of an incremental impact. For sons, the importance and significance of quality time spent with their less-seen fathers, occurring within the bounds of their usual routines and home life, may be salient enough. The parent-child tie among males may be supported by a less permeable connection secured by biological similarity and identification.

Although our sample size produced age effects that must be considered with caution because the interactions were significant but did not yield clear effects in second-order probes, consistent trends emerged that suggest that age influences the child adaptation equation as well. Having overnights and multiple caretakers were beneficial for children preschool age and older (aged 4 to 6) when their parents first filed in the legal system. The children showed less internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors, according to their mothers. The lack of findings for the youngest children at time of legal filing could mean several things. Clinical logic dictates that the children are not old enough yet to manifest symptoms that are more likely to emerge as children enter preschool or elementary school settings. It is also possible that the younger children benefited from being too young to have any/much memory about the legal process and parental separation/divorce, that is, they have never known living arrangements other than those set up during this period. It stands to reason that it is easier to be "born" into parenting plans that require overnights and multiple

caregivers than to adjust to it once the child has habituated to a different family pattern. Additional research is needed to elucidate just how such phenomena operate in children's lives.

This initial glimpse suggests that, for the behavioral and emotional outcomes under study, the worry about implementing overnights and parenting plans with multiple caretakers for infants and toddlers is misplaced, as preschoolers may bear the brunt of such arrangements. Parents and judges also will want to consider whether the schedule can remain consistent across weeks and months, and not be subject to change in accord with parental work schedules or other adult needs. Both parents reported identical links between inconsistent schedules and internalizing problems and social problems, suggesting that such inconsistencies took their toll socially and emotionally on children. Alternatively, parents who cannot or choose not to maintain consistent schedules may have a more difficult time supporting their children's social and emotional development in other ways as well. These findings underscore the importance of parenting plan schedules for young children, but also turn us away from the overnights debate toward a fuller evaluation of the broader context of the plan.

Despite the importance of having preliminary data to apply to the overnights debate, it is vital that this study be interpreted as preliminary. This is the first of a number of results that are beginning to be culled from our longitudinal study, and further refinements are already in progress. Of greatest significance, this was an intervention study, and results reported emanate from groups receiving two different conditions during separation and divorce. Group differences based on potential impacts the intervention had on parenting plans, in general, and on child outcomes more specifically, are next steps for examination. Because overnights were not a targeted focus of the intervention, although paternal involvement and parental cooperation were targeted, it is unclear if and how the intervention affected parenting plan-related outcomes. The contributions of parental well-being and symptomatology, for another example, are being examined as control variables and in interactions with other overnight-related indices. Additional child outcomes will be studied as well, including skill-related variables rather than problem-focused ones, such as child's social competence. Nonparental sources of information, namely teacher or childcare provider data, will be considered in future analyses. Legal (length and cost of divorce) and parental outcomes (conflict and cooperation, father involvement) may also have indirect effects on child outcomes, or may constitute positive family outcomes that must be considered alongside the child parenting plan data. All of these types of information will be examined in subsequent studies from this research project.

There are a number of methodological limitations from this study that should be considered prior to drawing conclusions from these results. The patterns of association between overnights and child outcomes were different for boys and girls and for children at different developmental stages. Such findings are likely to be more salient here than in other divorce research because the focus on young children coincides with when boys and girls are more differentiated in their developmental progress and when children progress at especially uneven and idiosyncratic rates. Our sample size limits the conclusions we can draw; there are not enough children at any one stage to understand how gender and age interact together to affect the pattern of results that emerged.

Second, the overnight measures are simple in construction and new in presentation compared to the other measures, all of which have been used and widely reported in prior divorce research. Third, the sample sizes for some variables were constrained by the fact that this was an intervention study with a randomized control group. For the intervention families, we had detailed information about the parenting plans, complete with children's schedules and peri-

odic modifications in the plan. For the comparison sample, we were limited by what the parents reported in their follow-up questionnaires or by information obtained from court files. Less information was typically available than we had for intervention families, especially when the comparison families were not seen at length by the family services arm of the court. Therefore, we could not acquire more details about caregiving arrangements and quality of day care situations. Fourth, although we endeavored to comprise a representative sample, not all families who were approached entered our study through either the intervention or control groups. In particular, the perspective of higher conflict couples who felt they were in too much disagreement to subject themselves to participation in a collaborative venture may not be represented.

One positive aspect of conducting evaluation research with this population is that prior research in early joint custody studies has already tapped those parents most amenable to shared parenting (e.g., Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989; McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1986; Steinman, Zimmelman, & Knoblauch, 1985). Similarly, higher conflict families have also been investigated by such researchers as Johnston (1994) and Johnston and Roseby (1997). This middle-range conflict group of families with young children is less studied and thus a less understood population. Where younger children are concerned, we know the least about the court process and its impact while facing the greatest need for representative samples that offer vital and robust data to judicial and legal professionals, mental health practitioners, and, most important, the families impacted on a daily basis. It should be emphasized that the results reported here are aggregate data and should be used sparingly alongside detailed information about individual families for purposes of legal decision making.

These cautions notwithstanding, this research offers a beginning to clearing the murky realm of young children's adjustment to overnights and/or living in two homes after parental separation and divorce. Overnights do matter, but what matters more to these children is whether they occur on a regular, unchanging schedule. This consistency gives the child the best chance of adapting to the challenges and stresses inherent in mastering a schedule that includes adjusting to two homes, rooms, beds, and all of the other trappings associated with overnights. It should be cautioned that, given the correlational nature of the data, it is also possible that children with behavioral problems may encourage parental inconsistencies in scheduling and overnights, in efforts to manage or respond to the child's behavior. Such dynamics could serve to aggravate the very behaviors of concern to parents in regard to parenting plans. A negative cycle could ensue, especially among mothers and boys, for whom overnights and concomitant features of parenting plans were more difficult. Such patterns echo the coercive cycles of problematic parenting and child behaviors after divorce identified previously in family research (e.g., see Forgatch, Patterson, & Ray, 1996).

This research, like the divorce research before it (Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2000), has found that relationships between parents and between parents and their children are the primary factors in children's adjustment to the changes occurring in the family. Also, it accords with previous studies that indicate that boys may have a harder time adjusting (Amato, 2001), and that among young children in particular, girls may develop more varied coping strategies than boys do (Johnston & Campbell, 1986), at least in the short-term. The more positive adaptation of the girls may be temporary, so that the longer term meaning of the gender difference cannot be discerned from these data.

Prior research has focused on the attachment of children to their parents after divorce (Solomon & Biringen, 2001), whereas this research focuses on behaviors as indices of children's adjustment. Children in most families, even those who receive only moderately ade-

quate nurturing, develop important and lasting attachments to their parents. Attachments represent but one aspect of the complicated transactional relationships established by parents and children (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000), which change and evolve during stressful family transitions. By focusing on behaviors and skills, we hope to expand the discussion about overnights to indices of children's adjustment that is readily observed by parents and other caretakers.

The main query should not be simply at what age children should do overnights, because separating and divorcing mothers and fathers will continue to desire and need such precious time with their children. We instead need to focus on the balance of developmental opportunities and risks that shared parenting and dual homes present and how best to help parents introduce and manage these structural changes in family life. The critical outcome is to help young children navigate this transition and emerge competent, secure, and on course for mastering developmental milestones and meeting the next inevitable challenges of life.

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