

Shared physical custody and children's experience of stress

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Background

The emergent complexity of family forms in the past decades has got a lot of attention within the social sciences. This paper analyses children's likelihood of experiencing stress in shared physical custody settings with shared and alternating residence after parental union dissolution. Shared physical custody of children is one aspect of family complexity that has so far largely been overlooked. The reason is likely the fact that it still is relatively rare in most countries. One should however not confuse shared *physical* custody and shared residence with shared *legal* custody. Whereas shared custody only gives both parents the legal right to decisions about the child's upbringing, shared residence means that the child actually *lives* equal, or near equal, time in with both parents, alternating between separate households. This makes it possible for both parents to engage in active parenting and giving children the possibility to have ongoing contact with both parents after separation.

Sweden is often considered a fore-runner in development of new family life patterns that are soon followed by other industrialized countries. Whereas shared legal custody is the default option after union dissolution, shared residence for children is a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden. But it is becoming increasingly common. This phenomenon has however not yet been widely analyzed.

Lundström (2009) has shown that shared residence have increased among children with separated parents in Sweden. During the mid-1980s, it was still very rare phenomenon with only one percent of children with separated parents living with both of the parents after union disruption. Since then, the phenomenon has become much more common with more than a quarter of children whose parents separated having shared residence in 2007.

Living in two different households and alternating not just between two geographical locations but also potentially between two different "parental regimes" with different rules and customs may increase children's feeling of stress. On the other hand this family setting gives the child an opportunity to develop a close relationship with both parents after a family dissolution giving access to more parental resources compared to children who rarely meet their absent parent. This may have a positive effect on children's well-being.

Research question

We ask whether children in shared physical custody settings report higher levels of stress compared to children living with a single parent or with a parent and a stepparent.

Data and methods

This paper studies shared physical custody in Sweden. The analysis is cross-sectional using logistic regression analysis and it is based on the Swedish Surveys of Living Conditions (ULF) from 2001, 2002 and 2003 and the child supplements of these.

These are nationally representative rich containing a wide variety of relevant control variables such as parental labor market- and occupational status, educational attainment, income, housing status etc. The child supplements include information collected directly from the children themselves on a wide range of issues including social relations, emotional wellbeing etc.

The sample for this study includes all children living with a single parent or in a stepfamily setting (n=853). The dependent variable is a dummy for the child's experience of stress. It is coded as 1 if the child has reported feeling stressed daily or several times per week and 0 for all others. The independent variable is a dummy variable for shared physical custody or shared housing, meaning living equal time in the household of the mother and the father.

In addition controls for family size, type of city of residence, child's age and sex, parent's age and sex, parent's educational attainment, income, occupational class, immigrant background and union status are added. We also control for whether the parents report conflict regarding questions considering the child and whether the child reports conflict with at least one of the parents.

Preliminary results

The tentative results show a surprising pattern with children living in a shared physical custody setting with alternating residence between the households of the mother and the father reporting a markedly lower likelihood of feeling stressed (see Table 1). We also see that girls have much higher likelihood of feeling stressed than boys do. When it comes to the socioeconomic controls we see a income gradient with children of low income parents being less stressed, albeit only statistically significant on 10%-level. We also see that children of farmers and self-employed report lower stress.

The results leads us to reject the hypothesis that children living in two parental households are more stressed than those living more than half the time with one parent after a union dissolution.

Table 1. Children's likelihood of feeling stressed.

Variables	Odds ratio
Shared physical custody	
Yes	0.58**
No	ref.
Parent's occupation	
Upper non-manual	1.20
Middle/ low non-manual	1.14
Manual	ref
Self-employed/ farmer	0.39**
Parent's income	
Lowest 25 %	0.60*
Medium 50 %	ref.
Highest 25 %	1.18
Parent's education	
Lower-secondary	1.15
Upper secondary	ref.
Tertiary	0.70
Child's age	
12-12	0.67*
13-15	ref.
16-18	1.17
Parent's age	
<35	ref
36-40	0.88
41-45	0.82
>45	0.76
Child's sex	
Boy	ref
Girl	1.89***
Parent's sex	
Male	ref
Female	0.92
Stepfamily	
Yes	ref
No	1.03
Non-European immigrant	
No	ref
Yes	2.01
Number of children	
1	ref
2	0.91
3	1.06
>3	1.11
Parental disagreement	

Yes	1.39
No	ref.
Parent-child conflict	
Yes	1.47
No	ref.
Place of residence	
Stockholm	ref
Gothenburg	0.81
Malmö	0.61
Other	0.62
*p<0,1 **p<0,05 ***p<0,01	

References

Lundström, Karin (2009) Växelvis boende ökar bland skilsmässobarn. *Välfärd* 4, pp. 3-5.