

Fifty-fifty split best for children of divorce

September 7 2017, by Elin Bäckström



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Preschool children in joint physical custody have less psychological symptoms than those who live mostly or only with one parent after a separation. In a new study of 3,656 children in Sweden, researchers from Uppsala University, Karolinska Institutet and the research institute CHESS show that 3-5-year-olds living alternately with their parents after a separation show less behavioural problems and psychological

symptoms than those living mostly or only with one of the parents.

The practice of joint physical custody, i.e. [children](#) living alternately and spending approximately the same amount of time in their [parents'](#) respective homes, have increased in recent years and is more common in Sweden than in any other countries. Previous studies have shown that school children and adolescents fare well in joint physical custody. Child experts have claimed the practice to be unsuitable for young children since they are assumed to need continuity and stability in their parent relations. However, few studies of [preschool children](#) with joint physical custody have been conducted.

Assessments by parents and preschool staff

Based on parents' and preschool teachers' estimates, the researchers compared [behavioural problems](#) and mental symptoms of 136 children in joint physical custody, 3,369 in nuclear families, 79 living mostly with one parent and 72 children living only with one parent. In this sample, joint physical custody was hence more common than living only or mostly with one parent. The symptoms were assessed using the popular "Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire" (SDQ), and showed that both preschool teachers and parents indicated children living mostly or only with one parent to have more difficulties than those living in joint physical custody or in nuclear families. In the parental estimates, there were no significant differences between children in nuclear families and joint physical custody, while preschool staff reported fewer symptoms of children in [nuclear families](#).

The study, conducted by researchers at Uppsala University, Karolinska Institutet and the research institute CHESS, is the first of its kind to show how Swedish children this young fare in joint physical custody. The assessments of children's health from the preschool staff, in addition to those of the parents, is a considerable strength of the study. However,

the study design does not allow any interpretations of causal relations. Such interpretations require knowledge of the children's wellbeing and symptoms before parental separation.

More information: Malin Bergström et al, Preschool children living in joint physical custody arrangements show less psychological symptoms than those living mostly or only with one parent, *Acta Paediatrica* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/apa.14004](https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.14004)

Provided by Uppsala University

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