

Shared custody equals less stress for children

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Portrait of Jani Turunen. Credit: Stockholm University

Children who live full time with one parent are more likely to feel stressed than children in shared custody situations. The benefit holds regardless of the level of conflict between the parents or between parent and child. These are the results of a new study from Stockholm University's Demography Unit.

"The explanation may be that [children](#), who spend most of the time away from one parent, lose resources like relatives, friends and money. Previous research has also shown that children may worry about the parent they rarely meet, which can make them more stressed," says Jani Turunen, researcher in Demography at Stockholm University and Centre for research on child and adolescent mental health at Karlstad University.

The fact that children who live full time with one parent are worse off psychologically than children in shared physical custody has been previously shown, but this study is the first to look specifically at stress. Shared physical custody is not to be confounded with shared legal custody. Shared legal custody only gives both parents the legal

right to decisions about the child's upbringing, school choices, religion, and so on. Shared physical custody means that the child actually lives for equal, or near equal, time with both parents, alternating between separate households.

The data for this study are from the Surveys of Living Conditions in Sweden, ULF, from 2001-2003, combined with registry data. Sweden is a country that is often considered a forerunner in emerging family forms and behaviors like divorce, childbearing and family reconstitution.

"This means that the results of this study are relevant to today's situation in many European countries, since their situation today might be comparable to the one in Sweden 15 years ago," says Jani Turunen.

In the survey, a total of 807 children with different types of living arrangements answered to questions about how often they experience stress and how well, or badly, they get along with their parents. The parents answered questions regarding how well they get along with their former partner.

The study shows that children living with only one of the parents have a higher likelihood of experiencing stress several times a week than children in shared physical custody. This generally applies even if the parents have a poor relationship, or if the children don't get along with either of them.

"There has previously been a concern that shared physical custody could be an unstable living situation that can lead to children becoming more stressed. But those who pointed to it earlier have built their concerns on theoretical assumptions, rather than empirical research," says Jani Turunen.

What probably makes children in shared physical [custody](#) less stressed is that they can have an active relationship with both their parents, which previous research has shown to be important for

the children's well-being. The relationship between the child and both of their parents becomes stronger; the child finds the relationship to be better, and the parents can both exercise active parenting.

"In other words, living with both parents does not mean instability for the children. It's just an adaptation to another housing situation, where regular relocation and a good contact with both parents equals to stability," says Jani Turunen.

More information: Jani Turunen, Shared Physical Custody and Children's Experience of Stress, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* (2017).
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