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To cite this article: Linda Nielsen (2018) Joint Versus Sole Physical Custody: Children's Outcomes Independent of Parent-Child Relationships, Income, and Conflict in 60 Studies, Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 59:4, 247-281, DOI: [10.1080/10502556.2018.1454204](https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2018.1454204)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2018.1454204>



Published online: 11 Apr 2018.



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# Joint Versus Sole Physical Custody: Children's Outcomes Independent of Parent–Child Relationships, Income, and Conflict in 60 Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Is joint physical custody (JPC) linked to any better or worse outcomes for children than sole physical custody (SPC)? How are these outcomes affected by family income, parental conflict, and the quality of parent–child relationships? Compared to SPC children in 60 studies, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 34 studies, equal outcomes on some and better outcomes on other measures in 14 studies, equal outcomes on all measures in 6 studies, and worse outcomes on 1 measure, but equal or better on all other measures in 6 studies. In 25 studies, independent of family income, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 18 studies, equal on some and better on other measures in 4 studies, equal outcomes in 1 study, and worse outcomes on 1 but equal or better on other measures in 2 studies. In 19 studies, independent of parental conflict, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 9 studies, equal to better in 5 studies, equal in 2 studies, and worse outcomes on 1 but better outcomes on the other measures in 3 studies. In the 9 studies, independent of the quality of parent–child relationships, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 5 studies, equal or better outcomes on other measures in 2 studies, and worse outcomes on 1 of the measures in 2 studies. Independent of income, conflict, or the quality of children's relationships with their parents, JPC generally children had better outcomes on most or on all measures.

## KEYWORDS

Joint physical custody; shared parenting; child custody; high-conflict divorce

Do children fare better in joint or in sole physical custody (SPC) families? This question assumes increasing importance as joint physical custody (JPC)—where children live at least one third of the time with each parent—has become more common in the United States and abroad. For example, in Wisconsin JPC increased from 5% in 1986 to more than 35% in 2012 (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017). As far back as 2008, 46% of the parents in Washington State (George, 2008) and 30% in Arizona (Venohr & Kaunelis, 2008) had JPC arrangements. JPC has risen to nearly 50% in Sweden (Bergstrom et al., 2013), 30% in Norway (Kitterod & Wiik, 2017) and the Netherlands

(Poortman & Gaalen, 2017), 37% in Belgium (Vanassche, Soderman, DeClerck, & Matthijs, 2017), 26% in Quebec and 40% in British Columbia (Bala et al., 2017), and 40% in the Catalonia region of Spain (Flaquer, 2017). At least 20 states in the United States are considering revising their custody laws to be more supportive of JPC (Chandler, 2017).

Despite its growing popularity, JPC continues to generate controversy in regard to two major issues: Are children's outcomes better or worse in JPC than SPC families? If JPC children have better outcomes, is this largely because their parents began with more money, more education, less conflict, better parenting skills, or higher quality relationships with their children than SPC parents?

Income, conflict, and parenting factors—specifically the quality of parent-child relationships and quality of the parenting skills—are the three factors that are most frequently proffered as the reasons why JPC children probably have the better outcomes (e.g., Smyth, McIntosh, Emery, & Howarth, 2016). From this perspective, children's well-being largely rests not on JPC but on parenting, income, and conflict (PIC). In that vein, we might envision this article as a “PIC axe” that will dig up and root out many unfounded assumptions about the roles that parenting, income, and conflict play in explaining the better outcomes for JPC children.

The most comprehensive analyses of the quantitative studies comparing JPC and SPC children's outcomes summarized all 40 studies that existed at the time the analyses were prepared (Nielsen, 2011, 2014a). This article first updates these previous reviews with 20 additional studies. Then the article addresses the PIC question: Does the parenting quality, income, and conflict between the parents change the outcomes for children in JPC and SPC families? Does PIC trump JPC?

## **Previous analyses of JPC and SPC children's outcomes**

There are 10 qualitative studies that have included 466 children from six different countries who were interviewed about their experiences and feelings about living in JPC or SPC families (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015). The authors concluded that JPC children's experiences were “mixed and varied” and were related to the quality of their relationships with both parents and the “flexibility/rigidity” of the parenting arrangement. As is always the case with qualitative studies, the weakness of these 10 studies is that there were no objective, quantitative measures, which is why the 60 quantitative studies offer more reliable data.

There are presently only two meta-analyses comparing children's outcomes in JPC and SPC families (Baude, Pearson, & Drapeau, 2016; Bauserman, 2002). Baude et al. (2016) only assessed 16 of the 55 studies published in English in academic journals that were available at the time of their analysis. In all 16 studies JPC was specifically defined as living at least

30% time with each parent, although in most studies the children were living more equally with both parents. JPC children had better outcomes than SPC children across all measures of well-being. Similarly, in a much older meta-analysis of 21 studies published between 1988 and 1999, JPC children had the better outcomes on all measures, except academic achievement where JPC and SPC children were not significantly different (Bauserman, 2002). The JPC advantage held even after controlling for levels of parental conflict. Because these studies dated back as far as 30 years to a time when JPC was extremely rare, JPC was defined as living at least 25% time with each parent. Not all of the studies were published articles; some were dissertations. Bauserman (2002) addressed this potential weakness by analyzing the data from published articles and dissertations separately. He found no significant difference in effect sizes.

In both meta-analyses the differences between JPC and SPC children's well-being were statistically significant, but the effect sizes were small. Bauserman (2002) attributed this to the small size of the samples. Baude et al. (2016) attributed small effect sizes to the differences in the samples. For example, effect sizes were much larger for JPC children when the samples came from schools than when samples came from clinical populations of families seeking help. Baude et al. also emphasized that effect sizes were considerably larger for JPC children who lived more than 40% time with each parent than for JPC children who lived 30% to 39% with each parent.

In addition to these two meta-analyses, several articles have summarized a small portion of the studies comparing JPC and SPC children's outcomes. For example, when Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, and Roberts, (2011) and Trinder (2010) wrote their summaries, there were 39 studies comparing JPC and SPC children's outcomes (Nielsen, 2011). Fehlberg and Trinder included only 5 of the 39 studies. Similarly in "detailing the current body of literature" (p. 156) McIntosh and Smyth (2012) included only 5 of the 40 studies published in peer-reviewed journals (Nielsen, 2013). More recently, Smyth et al. (2016) included only 17 of the 42 studies available at that time in peer-reviewed journals, stating that they had "undertaken a comprehensive integrative review of studies of postseparation shared-time arrangements" (p. 123).

Of further concern, some of these research summaries have misreported the findings from several of the most prominent studies. For example, Smyth and his co-authors (2016) cited Buchanan et al.'s (1996) study as finding that JPC "works badly for children exposed to bitter and chronic tension" (p. 121). This is not correct. Buchanan and her colleagues concluded: "We did not find that dual residence [JPC] adolescents were especially prone to adjustment difficulties under situations of high interparental conflict" (p. 257). Similarly, Smyth et al. (2016) cited Bauserman's (2002) meta-analysis as finding that JPC "may prolong or intensify children's exposure to parental

conflict, neglect, violence, abuse or psychopathology” (p. 120). This is not correct. Bauserman (2002) reached exactly the opposite conclusion: “The research reviewed here does not support claims by critics of joint custody that joint custody children are likely to be exposed to more conflict or to be at greater risk of adjustment problems due to having to adjust to two households or feeling torn between parents” (p. 99). Based on their summary of 17 of the 42 available peer-reviewed studies, Smyth et al. (2016) dismissed JPC studies as a “quagmire.” “Put simply, the international literature looks to comprise—at best—a disparate collection of partially overlapping investigations with little convergence among the various lines of inquiry” (p. 135).

One of Smyth’s coauthors, Emery, has gone further in his representations of JPC research to the media and in seminars for family court and mental health professionals. Following the Florida governor’s veto of a shared parenting bill, Emery was quoted in the *Florida Sun* as saying that JPC studies “are based on small samples” and that “only 10%” of children live in these families.” “The problems with joint custody outweigh the benefits. Children suffer in joint custody arrangements.” Their lives “resemble that of traveling salesmen.” “The classwork, clothing, cleats or clarinet are always at the other house. The children often live under two sets of rules, sometimes with dire consequences” (Presson, 2016). When warning against the risks of JPC in his book, Emery (2016a) reiterated that there is “only a small body of reasonable studies” (p. 72) on how children fare in JPC and that “conflict is more damaging to children than having only a limited relationship with your other parent” (p. 51). In seminars he has announced that there is a recent study showing that “kids in JPC had worse psychosocial outcomes” (Emery & Pruett, 2015), and that in this “nice new study of different custody arrangements predicting 9 years into the future,” having a highly involved father when conflict between the parents was high led to worse outcomes in this 9-year longitudinal study (Emery, 2016b, slide 133). This is incorrect. In the study he was citing (Modecki, Hagan, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2015), there were no JPC children. All children were in SPC families living with their mother and “high involvement” sometimes included letters and phones calls, with no face-to-face contact.

Misreporting, exaggerating, distorting, or omitting data in ways that support only one point of view has been referred to by Emery et al. (2016) as “scholar advocacy” and by Nielsen (2014b) as “woozling.” As Emery et al. (2016) put it, “We must be careful about leaving the door wide open for scholar advocates to promote false or misleading claims” (p. 137). “Making strong claims that go beyond the empirical evidence is a violation of perhaps the most basic rule of science: making consistent efforts to maintain objectivity” (p. 135). Especially when purporting to be presenting summaries of the research, or when making statements to the media or offering advice to practitioners that are supposedly based on summaries of the existing research, responsible scholars report the data as accurately as possible, include the results of all studies, and make clear,

especially to the media, when they are expressing a personal opinion that is not supported by the existing body of research—or is supported by only a limited number of studies.

To address these concerns about “woozling” data and “scholar advocacy,” this article includes all 60 studies that have compared JPC and SPC children’s outcomes and has noted those studies that were commissioned and published by government agencies rather than published in academic journals.

### **Selection of the 60 studies**

To identify relevant studies, three data bases were searched—PsycINFO, Social Science Citation Index, and ProQuest Social Science. The key search words were joint physical custody, shared parenting, shared care, custody and income, parenting plans and income, and income and children’s well-being. Eight journals likely to publish articles on these topics were also searched at each journal’s website: *Journal of Family Psychology*, *Child Development*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Child Custody*, *Family Court Review*, *Family Relations*, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, and *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*. Articles were selected on the basis of whether they had statistically analyzed quantitative data that addressed the questions presented at the outset of this article. Sixty studies were identified and all were included, thus capturing all data that have been published in English in academic journals or in government-commissioned reports. As noted earlier, excluding any of these studies could potentially bias the analysis.

### **Overview of the studies**

As [Table 1](#) indicates, in the 60 studies children ranged in age from infants to young adults, with sample sizes ranging from 21 to 51,802. Data came from eight countries and from different sources: court records, mediation and counseling centers, public schools, convenience samples, and college courses. All studies were published in peer-reviewed academic journals, with the exception of seven studies that were commissioned and published by the Australian government (designated by “gov”). Even though these seven studies did not have the benefit of blind peer review as do articles in academic journals, they are included because they are based on large, nationally representative samples and because they were conducted at research institutes.

Data from the 60 studies are grouped into five broad categories of child well-being similar to the categories used by Bauserman (2002) and Baude et al. (2016) in their meta-analyses: (1) academic or cognitive outcomes, which include grades, attentiveness in class, and tests of cognitive development; (2) emotional or psychological outcomes, which include feeling depressed, anxious, or dissatisfied with their lives or having low self-esteem;

**Table 1.** Outcomes for Children in Joint Physical Custody (JPC) and Sole Physical Custody (SPC) Families in 60 Studies

	Factors included in study	No. children		Ages	Academic & cognitive development	Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self-esteem	Peer behavior, substance use, hyperactivity	Health & psychosomatic problems	Parent-child or other family relationships
		JPC	SPC						
JPC better on all measures than SPC: 34 studies									
Buchanan	= C = \$	51	168 mom, 62 dad	13–16	Better	Better	Better	Better	Better
Brotsky	C+	45	10	1–10		Better	Better		
Breivik	C \$*	41	483	12–16	Better				
Barumazadeh	C* \$	91	328 mom, 34 dad	11–12		Better			
Bergstrom et al. (2014)	= \$*	129	176	4–18		Better	Better		
Bergstrom et al. (2018)	\$*	136	151	3–5		Better			
Bjarnason	\$	2,206	25,578	11–15		Better life satisfaction			
Bjarnason	\$	2,206	25,578	11–15					Better
Carlsund et al. (2013)	\$* P	888	2,019	11–15		Better	Better	Better	Better
Carlsund et al. (2012)	\$*	270	801	11–15			Better		Better
Cashmore (gov)	= C+ \$	84	473	0–17	Better	Better	Better		
Cashmore (gov)	= C+ = \$	90	411	0–17		Better			
Campana		207	272	10–18		Better	Better		
Dissing	\$*	3,222	3,032	11–12		Better			

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Factors included in study	No. children			Ages	Academic & cognitive development	Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self-esteem	Peer behavior, substance use, hyperactivity	Health & psychosomatic problems	Parent-child or other family relationships
		JPC	SPC	871						
Fabricius et al. (2012)	C*	152	871	College						Better
Fabricius (2003)		80	739	College						Better
Fabricius & Luecken (2007)	C \$	75	136	College					Better	Better
Fabricius & Suh (2012)	= C = \$	13	103	College					Better	Better
Fransson et al. (2016)	C > \$*	391	543 mom, 111 dad	10–18			Better			
Frank	C	16	90	College						Better
Hagquest	\$* P	17,754	30,400	12–15					Better	
Irving	= C = \$	108	294	1–11			Better			
Jablonska		443	2,920	14–15				Better behavior, equal drinking	Better	
Janning	= \$	5	17	College						Better
Jappens		176	707	10–25						Better with grandparents
Laftman	\$* P	1,573	1,584	15–16			Better		Better	Better
Lee	> C * = \$	20	39	6–12				Better		
Nilsen	> \$*	398	1,223	16–19			Better	Better		
Pearson	C > \$	62	459	9–12			Better	Better		
Shiller	= C	20	20	6–11				Better		
Turunen	C \$* P	387	758	10–18			Better			
Turunen	< C \$	240	567	10–18			Better			
Wadsby	> \$	324	736	17–18			Better			Better

(Continued)



Table 1. (Continued).

Factors included in study	No. children		Ages	Academic & cognitive development	Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self-esteem	Peer behavior, substance use, hyperactivity	Health & psychosomatic problems	Parent-child or other family relationships
	JPC	SPC						
Westphal	1,076	2,767	10–18					Better with grandparents
JPC equal or better outcomes than SPC: 14 studies								
Bergstrom et al. (2013)	17,350	43,452	12–15	Equal	Better		Better	Better
Bergstrom (2015)	15,633	29,468	12 & 15	Equal	Better		Better	
Bastaitis & Mortelmans (2016)	138	238	10–18		Better self-esteem, equal life satisfaction			Better
Drapeau	37	75	8–12		Equal to better	Equal		Equal affection, better boundaries
Donnelly	12	88	6–18					Better
Fransson	497	854	10–18		Equal psychological, better stress	Equal drinking, better smoking, better bullying	Better	Better
Havermans	224	446	11–19	Equal				Better
Kaspiew (gov)	947	3,513		Moms say equal, dads say better	Moms say equal, Dads say better			Grandparents better
Luepnitz	22	30	8–13		Equal			Better
Melli	597	595	1–16		Equal		Better	Better
Neoh	27	40	8–15		Equal	Better		

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Factors included in study	No. children			Ages	Academic & cognitive development	Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self-esteem	Peer behavior, substance use, hyperactivity	Health & psychosomatic problems	Parent-child or other family relationships
		JPC	SPC							
Qu & Weston (2010) (gov)	= C \$	1,000	4,320		1–17	Moms say equal, dads say better			Better	
Qu et al. (2014) (gov)	= C \$	720	2,354		4–17			Equal	Equal	
Spruijt	< C = \$	135	400		10–16	Equal	Equal	Equal		Better dad and stepmom
Equal outcomes: 6 studies										
Bastaits et al. (2014)	> \$ P	139	227				Equal			
Cashmore		26	110		Teenage		Equal			
Faust	C+	34	35		2–19		Equal	Equal		
Johnston	= C + = \$	28	69		9–15		Equal	Equal		
Kline	= C+ > \$	35	65		4–12		Equal	Equal		
Pearson	C > \$	9	83		9–12		Equal	Equal		
JPC worse outcome on 1 measure: 6 studies										
Lodge (gov)	= C > \$	105	398 mom, 120 dad		12–18	Equal		Better for girls, worse for boys		Better for parents, grandparents, and stepparents
Sandler	< C + P	67	74		12–14			Mixed		Mixed

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Factors included in study	No. children			Ages	Academic & cognitive development	Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self-esteem	Peer behavior, substance use, hyperactivity	Health & psychosomatic problems	Parent-child or other family relationships
		JPC	SPC							
Sodermans	C \$* P	104	330 mom, 70 dad		14-21		Mixed for depression, equal for life satisfaction			
Vanassche	= C + > \$ P	395	1,045		12-19		Worse for girls, better for boys			Better with dad, equal with mom
McIntosh (gov)	< C* > \$ *	Ages 2-3: 20 Ages 4-5: 60	Ages 2-3: 232 Ages 4-5: 870		2-5		Mixed for toddlers, equal for preschoolers		Equal to better for all ages	
Tornello	> C > \$	174	1,880		0-5		Equal	Better social development	Equal	Mixed infant attachment

Note: Mixed differences between JPC and SPC outcomes depended on factors like gender, personality, or age. C = conflict links to children's well-being were included in the study; C \* = JPC and SPC parental conflict was statistically factored into analysis; C + = researchers specified that very high-conflict parents in litigation over custody were in this study; + C = no significant differences in JPC and SPC conflict; < C = JPC parents had significantly less conflict than SPC parents; > C = JPC parents had more conflict than SPC conflicts; \$ = income links to children's well-being were included in the study; \$ = = no statistically significant income differences in JPC and SPC parents; \$ ≠ = incomes not equal, JPC parents had higher incomes than SPC parents; \$ \* = income differences were factored into statistical analysis before comparing outcomes; P = parent-child relationship quality was factored in before comparing outcomes; gov = government-published study (Australia), not peer-reviewed academic journal.

(3) behavioral problems, which include misbehaving at home or school, hyperactivity, and teenage drug, nicotine, or alcohol use; (4) overall physical health or stress-related physical problems (e.g., sleep or digestive problems, headaches); and (5) the quality of parent–child relationships, which includes how well they communicate with and how close they feel to their parents.

The second column in [Table 1](#) provides much more detailed information about the many different ways that the researchers treated family income, parental conflict, and quality of parent–child relationships in their study. This level of detail had to be provided by using a number of different symbols in the table, as it was not possible to include all of this information in the body of this article.

In 44 of the 60 studies, the researchers considered the quality of parent–child relationships, family income, or parental conflict (the PIC factors) in ways that allowed the impact of the custody arrangement to be assessed separately. This was accomplished in one of two ways. The first was to include the information about JPC and SPC parents' income, conflict, or the quality of parent–child relationships in the statistical analysis. This resulted in statistical models where the effects of income, conflict, or relationship quality could be assessed separately from the custody arrangement. These studies are designated with an asterisk P\* for parent–child relationship quality, \$\* for income, and C\* for conflict between the parents. The studies that included more than one of the three factors in the statistical analysis merit special attention because they are ruling out parenting quality, income, and conflict as probable explanations for children's outcomes. The second approach was to compare the outcomes in samples where JPC and SPC parents' incomes or levels of conflict or parent–child relationships were not significantly different from one another. These studies are marked = \$ or = C, meaning equal income or equal conflict.

Other information about income and conflict is provided in the second column of [Table 1](#) and designated with various symbols for people who want to know more about each individual study. Studies where JPC parents had significantly higher incomes than SPC parents are marked > \$ for greater income, versus = \$ for equal incomes between the two groups. In regard to conflict, when the researchers specifically mentioned that there were parents in the study who presently were, or who formerly had been, in litigation over custody, the study is marked C+, meaning high conflict plus litigation. When JPC parents had significantly less conflict than SPC parents, the study is marked < C. A number of studies explored the ways income, conflict, or the quality of parent–child relationships affect children's well-being in JPC and in SPC families, but without comparing the two custody arrangements to one another. These studies are marked with \$ (money), C (conflict), or P (parent–child relationships).

## Positive outcomes for JPC children

As Table 1 illustrates, in 34 of the 60 studies JPC children had better outcomes on all measures of well-being than SPC children. In 14 studies JPC children had better outcomes on some measures and equal outcomes on others. In six studies JPC and SPC children were not significantly different on any measure in the study. In six other studies, JPC children had worse outcomes on one of the measures, but equal or better outcomes on all other measures. In none of the 60 studies were the outcomes worse for JPC children on all measures of well-being.

JPC and SPC children were the most alike (had the most “equal” outcomes) in regard to academic achievement or cognitive skills. In seven studies they were equal and in three studies JPC children had the better outcomes. This is consistent with Bauserman’s (2002) meta-analysis, where there were no significant differences in academic achievement between JPC and SPC children. This suggests that the custody arrangement might have the least impact on children’s school performance or on their cognitive development compared to other areas of their lives.

The biggest advantage for JPC children was better family relationships. In 22 of 23 studies that assessed family bonds, JPC children had closer, more communicative relationships with both parents. The one exception is discussed in the section on negative JPC outcomes (Sandler, Wheeler, & Braver, 2013). It is worth noting that the largest of these studies compared 2,206 JPC and 25,578 adolescents who participated in the World Health Organization Health Behavior Survey from 36 different countries (Bjarnason & Arnarrson, 2011). Similarly, in all four of the grandparent studies, JPC children had the closer relationships (Jappens & Bavel, 2016; Kaspiw et al., 2009; Lodge & Alexander, 2010; Westphal, Poortman, & Van Der Lippe, 2015). These findings matter because children who have close relationships with their grandparents after their parents separate are better adjusted emotionally and behaviorally than those who do not (Jappens, 2018).

The next greatest advantage for JPC children was better physical and mental health. In 13 of 15 studies, JPC children were physically healthier and had fewer psychosomatic, stress-related physical problems (insomnia, intestinal problems, headaches, etc.). In 24 of the 40 studies that assessed emotional health (depression, life satisfaction, anxiety, and self-esteem), JPC children had the better outcomes and in 12 studies there were no significant differences between the two groups. In 6 of the 40 studies of emotional well-being, the results were “mixed” depending on the child’s gender and which measure of emotional well-being was being assessed. These six studies are described in the next section.

JPC children were also better adjusted than SPC children during adolescence on a number of measures. Twenty-four studies assessed multiple dimensions of adolescent behavior: drinking, smoking, using drugs, being

aggressive, bullying, committing delinquent acts, and getting along poorly with peers. In 21 of the 24 studies, JPC teenagers were more well-adjusted than SPC teenagers. In three studies the differences between JPC and SPC teenagers depended on gender or on which one of the several measures was being assessed.

## **Representative studies**

Four of the 40 studies that assessed emotional or behavioral well-being are briefly presented here to illustrate the wide range of behaviors that the researchers explored. In a nationally representative sample of Swedish children aged 3 to 5, the 136 JPC children were better adjusted than the 151 SPC children, as assessed by both parents on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and by the preschool teachers' answers to a separate questionnaire. The SDQ scale assesses a wide range of behavior including hyperactivity, conduct problems, inattentiveness, symptoms of stress or depression, and problems getting along with peers. The better results for the JPC children held even after controlling for parents' educational levels and even after separating the children into three age groups: 3-year-olds, 4-year-olds, and 5-year-olds (Bergstrom et al., 2018).

In another Swedish study, the 17,350 JPC adolescents rated themselves higher than the 43,452 SPC adolescents on 7 of the 10 subscales of the 52-item Kidscreen questionnaire developed by researchers from 13 European countries to assess children's well-being. JPC children rated themselves as better adjusted in regard to physical health, psychological well-being, moods and emotions, satisfaction with material resources, relationships with parents, peer relationships, social acceptance, and bullying. JPC and SPC teenagers were equal on the other three subscales: school satisfaction, self-esteem, and autonomy (Bergstrom et al., 2013).

In regard to school, in Belgium 224 JPC adolescents were more engaged in their academic work and better behaved at school than the 476 SPC adolescents, and parents' educational levels had no impact on these results (Havermans, Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2017). The most engaged and best behaved children were those who had good relationships with their parents—especially with their fathers. Given the claim that children are stressed by having to move between homes, it is worth noting that JPC children who moved “frequently” during the week between their parents' homes had outcomes as good as JPC children who spent one whole week with each parent on an alternating week schedule.

We might wonder whether SPC children would have outcomes similar to JPC children if their mother remarried, but this was not the case in a Norwegian study that tested this hypothesis. The 212 SPC children whose mothers had remarried and the 1,011 SPC children whose mothers had not

remarried both had more behavioral and emotional problems than the 398 JPC children (Nilesen, Breivik, Wold, & Boe, 2017).

Overall then, the most prevalent and most consistent benefit for JPC children is having better relationships with their parents. This is also the most important advantage, as it is firmly established in the child development research that close parent–child relationships bestow a wide range of benefits on children—and that the quality of their relationships is as strongly, or even more strongly, linked to children’s well-being than parents’ incomes or educational levels (Lamb, 2010; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Based on the 60 studies, JPC children are not more stressed and distressed than SPC children and are not in dire circumstances when their parents have two different sets of rules.

### **Negative outcomes for JPC children**

As previously mentioned, in 6 of the 60 studies JPC children had worse outcomes than SPC children on one of the measures of well-being, but equal or better outcomes on the other measures. The earliest study included 105 JPC and 398 SPC children between ages 12 and 18 living with their mother in Australia (Lodge & Alexander, 2010). The 50 JPC boys were more likely than the SPC boys to report having trouble “getting along well” with their peers. In contrast, the 55 JPC girls reported getting along better with peers than the SPC girls. Specifically 16% of JPC boys versus 8% of SPC boys reported only getting along well with peers “sometimes.” In contrast, only 4% of JPC girls versus 16% of SPC girls reported only getting along well “sometimes.” Other than this one negative finding for JPC boys, JPC teenagers reported having better relationships with both parents, stepparents, and grandparents than SPC teenagers. Interestingly, in JPC families only 2% of children reported not feeling close to their father, whereas almost 9% reported not feeling close to their mother. In stark contrast, in SPC families 35% of children reported not feeling close to their father and 3% reported not feeling close to their mother.

In the second Australian study, 19 to 22 toddlers (the sample size differed on various measures) under the age of 3 had worse outcomes than 191 SPC toddlers on two of the six measures of well-being (McIntosh, Smyth, Kelaher, & Wells, 2010). Compared to SPC toddlers, JPC toddlers scored lower on three questions about “persistence at tasks” and on three questions about how often they “looked at” their mother or tried to “get her attention.” The researchers interpreted the mothers’ answers to these six questions to mean that JPC toddlers were less securely attached to their mother and less persistent at tasks than SPC toddlers. The JPC toddlers also had lower scores on a validated “problem behavior” scale (i.e., sometimes refusing to eat, clinging to mother when she tried to leave). McIntosh et al. (2010) interpreted this as a negative outcome of JPC. In fact, however, JPC toddlers’ scores were well within the

normal range and were not significantly different from the scores of 50% of the toddlers in the general population. On the four validated measures of well-being, JPC and SPC children were not significantly different.

The third study to report some negative outcomes for JPC children compared adolescents from 545 mother custody, 92 father custody, and 385 JPC families in Belgium (Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). Overall JPC and SPC teenagers had similar outcomes on all measures—with two exceptions. First, those teenagers who had bad relationships with their fathers were more depressed and more dissatisfied in JPC than in SPC. Second, in those families where conflict remained high 8 years after the divorce, girls were more depressed in JPC than in SPC. In contrast, boys in these high-conflict families were less depressed in JPC than in SPC. Still, the quality of parent–child relationships was more closely linked to the outcomes than was the custody arrangement or the conflict.

In the fourth study, also from Belgium, there were 400 adolescents in SPC (70 were living with their fathers) and 104 in JPC (Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014). No differences between JPC and SPC children were found on the three measures—feelings of mastery (feeling “in control” of their lives), depression, and life satisfaction—until the quality of the parent–child relationship and the child’s personality traits were included in the statistical analysis. Although some might expect that teenagers who were very “neurotic” (anxious, tense, depressed, sad) would not adjust as well living in two homes, this was not the case. Scores on neuroticism, openness (intelligent, curious, and creative), and agreeableness (well-behaved, compliant, and trusting) were not linked to any outcomes. In contrast, teenagers who scored high on conscientiousness (task oriented, planful, rule oriented) felt more depressed and less in control of their lives in JPC than in SPC, although they were no less “satisfied” with their lives in JPC than in SPC. On the other hand, adolescents who scored low on conscientiousness felt more in control and less depressed in JPC than in SPC. As for extraversion (very social, outgoing, active), those who scored very high felt less in control of their lives in JPC than in SPC, but they were no more depressed and no more dissatisfied than the very extraverted children in SPC. Those who scored low on extraversion, however, felt more in control in JPC than in SPC. Again though, personality traits mattered less than the quality of the parent–child relationships and the conflict. “We observe very few changes in the effect sizes of the control variable by entering the personality variables” (Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014, p. 350).

The fifth study was conducted in Arizona with 74 SPC and 67 JPC adolescents in high-conflict families (Sandler et al., 2013). All JPC and SPC parents had been designated as high in conflict by a judge and all were in litigation over custody issues. Those adolescents who gave one of their parents low ratings for “positive” parenting (e.g., making the children feel they “mattered,” setting and enforcing rules) had more behavioral and emotional problems in JPC than in



SPC. When they gave both parents good ratings, however, JPC children had fewer emotional and behavioral problems than SPC children.

The sixth study stands apart from the other 60 studies in several ways that make it difficult to generalize or to interpret the data (Tornello et al., 2013). First, all of these children (ages 0–5) were living in impoverished, inner-city, minority families where only 20% of the parents had been married or cohabited and where mothers' and fathers' rates of incarceration, substance abuse, addiction, violence, and mental health problems were extremely high. Second, one third of the children lived primarily with their fathers, yet all of their scores on the measure of secure attachment to the mother were interpreted as if these children were living with the mother and “overnighting” with the father. The 51 1-year-olds who spent more than 50 nights a year with their father or their mother (for the 26 babies who were living with their father) had more insecure attachment scores than the 583 1-year-olds who only saw their father during the day or spent fewer than 50 nights a year with him. The researchers concluded that “frequent” overnighting—which sometimes reached JPC levels—had a negative impact on babies' attachments to their mothers. The other five measures of child adjustment were not linked to how much overnight time the babies spent with their nonresidential parent. The one exception was that children who were in JPC as 3-year-olds were better behaved than the SPC children as 5-year-olds.

In these six studies, JPC was less beneficial in some regards than SPC for certain groups of children: adolescents who did not have a good relationships with both parents, teenage girls whose parents had high, ongoing conflict 8 years after separating, adolescents who were highly conscientious or extremely extraverted, and babies under the age of 2 living with impoverished, single parents. With these exceptions, the 60 studies report generally better outcomes for children in JPC versus SPC families. The question then becomes this: What might account for their better outcomes? We thus return to the issue of whether JPC trumps PIC.

### **The P in PIC: Parent–child relationship quality versus quantity**

Do children in JPC families have these better outcomes because they started out with better relationships with their parents and because their parents had better parenting skills than SPC parents? Is it the higher quality of parenting and of their relationship that these children had all along, and not the additional quantity of fathering time in JPC families, that is largely responsible? Quality or quantity: Which matters more? One argument raised against JPC is that these children were doing better before their parents separated due to two parenting advantages: higher quality relationships with their parents and higher quality parenting skills. Supposedly then, it is not the greater quantity of fathering time in JPC that matters, as these children would have done as well in SPC given the advantages they had on the parenting factors.

This argument against JPC is often based on the claim that research shows that the quantity of fathering time has no effect on children and then citing two meta-analyses by Amato and Gilbreth (1999) and Adamsons and Johnson (2013). For example, citing both meta-analyses, Emery (2016b) stated that “father contact made *zero* difference,” that “Amato found no link between children’s outcomes and father contact” (Emery & Pruett, 2015), and that “*Research* does not support a focus on time. In fact the amount of time children spend with their divorced dads actually is tied only weakly, or not at all, to measures of children’s psychological well-being” (Emery, 2016a, p. 70). In responding to the issue of states revising custody laws to more equally distribute the parenting time and to be more supportive of JPC, in the *Washington Post* Emery was quoted as saying, “It’s not the amount of parenting time but the quality of parenting and the quality of co-parenting that matter” (Chandler, 2017). Similarly, advocating against enacting JPC statutes, Trinder (2010) cited Amato and Gilbreth’s paper: “A meta-analysis of 63 studies found no relationship between the frequency of contact with non-resident parents and child wellbeing” (p. 181).

Reporting these two meta-analyses in this way is misleading and incorrect. More important, applying these meta-analyses to JPC families is inappropriate and illogical. These two meta-analyses address this question: Does the frequency of “contact” with the father by phone, by letter, or in person affect the well-being of SPC children who live with their mother? An entirely separate body of research asks: Is living with the father in JPC more beneficial than living in SPC with the mother?

To not confuse these two issues, we have to understand that studies about “frequency of contact” with the father are not talking about children who live with their father in JPC families. Both meta-analyses reached a number of the same conclusions about fathers’ contacts with their children. The only conclusion reported by those who use these two analyses in arguing against JPC, however, is this: Children who had more “contact” with their father did not have better emotional, behavioral, or academic outcomes than children who had less “contact.” Reporting only this one portion of the findings, however, is misleading and inaccurate for at least six reasons—all of which are explained in both meta-analyses. First, in contrast to the studies that were 20 to 30 years old, in the more recent studies, children with more frequent contact with their fathers did have better outcomes. The researchers believe this is because modern-day fathers play a much larger role in their children’s lives while the parents are together and that the “contact” with their children is much more likely to be personal and to be in person than by phone or letter. Second, White children with more frequent father contact did have more positive outcomes, whereas non-White children had more negative outcomes. This meant when the two were averaged together, it made it appear as if contact had no impact, which was not the case. Third, the

frequency of contact did make a difference for girls, but not for boys, in regard to academics, and for younger children and for children in studies using representative samples. Fourth, contact had a positive impact on academic and internalizing problems, but not on externalizing problems—which, once again, when averaged together made it appear as if contact was not beneficial. Fifth, children with authoritative fathers who were involved in their lives did have better outcomes—which, as the researchers pointed out, could not happen without ample quantities of contact. Sixth—and perhaps most important of all—phone calls and letters (e-mails did not exist decades ago when many of these studies were conducted), with little or no time actually spent with their father, were counted as “contact.”

These two meta-analyses would, in fact, lead us to expect that JPC children would have better outcomes because they are far more likely than SPC children to have the kinds of involvement and interaction with their father that were linked to better adjustment. Amato (personal communication, April 10, 2016) reiterated, “Contact is a necessary condition for a high-quality relationship to develop and be maintained.” In response to people who have misreported or misunderstood her 2013 meta-analysis, Adamsons (2018) explained:

Some have taken the non-significant association between contact and child well-being as an argument against joint physical custody. ... *It should not be assumed that fathers do not need time with their children or that the amount of time spent does not matter.* ... A father who only sees his children on Wednesday evenings and every other weekend, after which the child returns “home,” has extremely limited opportunities for engaging in children’s activities on a regular basis, being an authoritative parent or engaging in the types of everyday interactions that build relationships. ... How likely are children to view their fathers as “being there” for them, if fathers only can “be there” if the child’s need arises on 1–3 specified evenings or afternoons per week? *Fathers should be given equal parenting time* and encouraged to spend that time with their children in a variety of positive ways. ... When it is known that father–child contact has positive benefits in some circumstances, but potentially a negative influence in others, *to conclude and report that, on average, father contact is not important for children’s well-being is both inaccurate and misleading.* (Emphasis added)

In regard to whether children benefit more from JPC than from SPC, the “quantity” issue is specifically asking whether children who live with their father at least a third of the time year round and during the school week have better outcomes than SPC children who spend lesser quantities of time and little or no school week overnight time with their father because they are living with their mother.

The quality–quantity question is this: Do JPC children have better outcomes because they have higher quality relationships to begin with—or is it because they have the additional quantity of time together to build and to maintain high-quality relationships? It is clear from the 60 studies that JPC

children have better relationships with their parents than SPC children. That is not the question. The question is whether these better relationships are largely a result of living in a JPC family. The answer to that question lies in the 60 studies on children's outcomes. By assessing the quality of the parent-child relationship and then including that assessment in the statistical analysis, we can see whether the custody arrangement itself is having an independent impact.

Unfortunately only 9 of the 60 studies included the quality of the parent-child relationship and parenting skills in the statistical analysis so that the effect of the custody arrangement was assessed separately. In the various questionnaires used in these studies, the children were rating their parents on parenting skills (i.e., setting and enforcing rules, supervising and monitoring, authoritative parenting) as well as on specific aspects of the relationship itself (i.e., feeling loved, being able to communicate comfortably, feeling emotionally supported). Although few in number, the findings from these nine studies are more reliable and more trustworthy than speculations about whether quality matters more than quantity.

What do these nine studies tell us about "quality versus quantity" of parenting in JPC and SPC families? Compared to SPC children, JPC children were better adjusted on all measures in four studies (Carlsund et al., 2013; Hagquist, 2016; Laftman et al., 2014; Turunen et al., 2016), equal on some outcomes and better on others in one study (Bergstrom et al., 2015), equal on all outcomes in one study (Bastais, & Mortelmans, 2016), and worse outcomes on one measure but better outcomes on the other measures in three studies (Sandler et al., 2013; Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2014; Vanassche, Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2013).

Six of these nine studies went a step further and also included income in the statistical analysis. In four of these six studies, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures than SPC children. They were equal on some and better on other measures in one study, and worse on one of the outcomes in one study. It is worth noting the large number of children in most of these studies: 15,633 JPC and 30,468 SPC (Bergstrom et al., 2015), 17,774 JPC and 30,400 SPC (Hagquist, 2016), 888 JPC and 2,019 SPC (Carlsund, Eriksson, & Sellstrom, 2013), and 1,573 JPC and 1,584 SPC (Laftman et al., 2014).

One additional study should be noted here because it asked parents about father "involvement" with the children before the parents separated. In this large Australian study from a nationally representative sample, both parents were asked how involved the father had been in the children's lives before their separation (Kaspiew et al., 2009). Fathers and mothers of 1,235 JPC and 6,485 SPC children reported that SPC fathers were just as involved with the children as JPC fathers—with the exception of those SPC fathers who had no contact at all with their children after the parents separated. Over the course of this 5-year study, compared to SPC children, JPC children had better

emotional and behavioral outcomes according to their fathers and equal outcomes according to their mothers (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Qu & Weston, 2010; Qu, Weston, & Dunstan, 2014).

In three of the nine parent–child quality studies, JPC children had worse outcomes than SPC children on one of the measures. In a study with 67 JPC and 74 SPC U.S. teenagers from high-conflict families, those who had good relationships with their fathers had fewer emotional and behavioral problems—but only when they lived in a JPC family (Sandler et al., 2013). Children who had good relationships with their father, but who were not living with him at least a third of the time, reaped no benefits. This finding syncs with a study from Belgium where having a supportive, authoritative (the most beneficial parenting style) father had twice as positive an effect on children’s life satisfaction for the 139 JPC children as it did for the 227 SPC children (Bastais, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2014). On the down side, though, Sandler et al. (2013) found that when the teenagers in these high-conflict families gave either parent a “bad” rating for the quality of their relationship, they fared worse in JPC than in SPC. This was also the case in a study from Belgium where teenagers who had bad relationships with their fathers were more depressed and more dissatisfied in JPC than in SPC (Vanassche et al., 2013).

In two other studies from Belgium, even when the quality of the parent–child relationship was good, some JPC children had worse outcomes than SPC children on one of the measures of well-being. Gender and personality traits played a role. When children were highly conscientious or highly extraverted, they felt more depressed in JPC families. Somewhat perplexingly, though, they reported being just as “satisfied with their lives” in either type of family. Perhaps this was because the quality of their relationships with their parents was more closely linked to their well-being than were their personality traits (Sodermans, & Matthijs, 2014).

In the second study, the quality of relationships with their mother and with their father affected how depressed or how dissatisfied the girls were with their lives. In contrast, for boys, only the quality of their relationship with their father affected depression and life satisfaction. The quality of their relationship with their mother affected boys’ life satisfaction, but not depression. After accounting for the quality of these relationships, if there was high conflict between the parents, girls were more depressed in JPC than in SPC, but boys were more depressed in SPC than in JPC (Vanassche et al., 2013).

A gender difference and weak effect of the parent–child relationship also emerged in a Swedish study. For 1,573 JPC and 1,584 SPC teenagers, being able to turn to their parents for help was more closely linked to girls’ than to boys’ emotional problems and psychosomatic, stress-related health problems (Laftman, Bergstrom, Modin, & Ostberg, 2014). JPC children more often than SPC children sought help and advice from their parents—especially their father. However, the quality of their relationship explained only a small

part of the variation between JPC and SPC children. These two studies suggest that the quality of parent–child relationships might affect boys and girls differently.

Two other studies approached the quantity versus quality question in a different way, both underscoring the importance of quantity of fathering time even in high-conflict families. Seventh graders who spent the most time with their divorced fathers—including living with him up to 50% of the time—had better relationships with him 3 years later than children who spent less time with their father during those 3 years (Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012). Even for those who had the worst father–child relationships in seventh grade, the more time they spent together over the next 3 years, the better their relationship became. This held true even in high-conflict families.

This is consistent with another study with 136 SPC and 75 JPC U.S. college students (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). The more time they had lived with their father after the divorce, including JPC, the better their current relationship was with him. This held true regardless of the level of conflict between the parents at four separate times: just before separation, during separation, 2 years after, and then 3 years after separation. On a 12-item scale of parental bonding, high-quality relationships were strongly linked to JPC—twice as strongly as the level of parental conflict over 5 years. Children from high-conflict families were not as close to their fathers as those from low-conflict families, but the more time they had spent with their father, the better the relationship was at present. JPC children also had better health and fewer stress-related physical problems than SPC children.

To be clear, the fact that JPC children fare better than SPC children even after factoring in the quality of relationships with their parents does not mean that having a good relationship with parents is not beneficial in SPC families. In a number of studies where JPC children had the better outcomes, good relationships with their parents were more closely linked to their good outcomes than was the custody arrangement (Bastaitis & Mortelmans, 2016; Fransson, Turunen, Hjern, Ostberg, & Bergstrom, 2016; Hagquist, 2016; Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014). For example, JPC children did better at school in terms of behavior, attention, and engagement than SPC children (Havermans et al., 2017). However, this depended more on how close JPC or SPC children were to their father than the custody arrangement. Likewise, teenagers in SPC and in JPC families who could comfortably talk to their parents were the least likely to smoke, drink, or have conduct problems (Carlsund, Eriksson, Lefstedt, & Sellstrom, 2012). In both types of families, children with authoritative parents were less depressed, were less aggressive, and had higher self-esteem than children with permissive or authoritarian parents (Campana, Henderson, & Stolberg, 2008).

In sum, parenting matters in that children are less likely to have problems when they have good relationships with both parents, regardless of the



custody arrangement. JPC children fared better even after the quality of these relationships was included in the statistical analysis. These studies did not conclude, however, that a good parent–child relationship is more beneficial than JPC or that, if the relationships with both parents are good, children will do just as well in SPC as in JPC families. Nor did these studies conclude that JPC children had better relationships with their parents to begin with and that is largely why they fared better than SPC children. Is it quantity or quality? It is not "either–or"; it is "both–and." JPC and good parent–child relationships are each beneficial—especially when combined.

### **The I in PIC: Income**

The second issue is whether JPC children have better outcomes largely because their parents are substantially richer and better educated than SPC parents. Twenty-seven of the 60 studies compared JPC and SPC parents' incomes or educational levels, which was used as a proxy for income. In these studies there are three ways to explore the effect that parents' incomes and educational status might have on children over and above the effect of the custody arrangement. We can compare children's outcomes in the 10 studies where parents' incomes or educations were equal (= \$), in the 16 studies where income or education differences were incorporated into the statistical analysis (\$\*), and in the 11 studies where JPC parents had higher incomes or educations than SPC parents but income was not factored into the statistical analysis (> \$).

In the 10 studies where the parents' incomes or educations were equal, on all measures JPC children had better outcomes in 7 studies, equal to better outcomes in 2 studies, and equal on all outcomes in one study. In the 16 studies where income or education differences were statistically controlled, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 12 studies, equal to better outcomes in 2 studies, and worse outcomes on one measure but better outcomes on the others in 2 studies. In the 11 studies where JPC parents had the higher incomes and income was not statistically controlled, we would expect JPC children to have generally better outcomes than SPC children, if income was an influential factor. In fact, however, compared to SPC children in only 2 of the 11 studies were JPC children better on all outcome measures; in 4 studies they were equal on some and better on others; in 3 studies they were equal on all measures; and in 2 studies the results were mixed depending on the child's gender.

These "income–outcome" studies suggest that the I in PIC is less likely than the P to explain the JPC advantages. Again though, these studies should not be misconstrued to mean that income has no impact on children's well-being after their parents separate. For example, adolescents who believed their parents were having serious financial problems were twice as likely to

have difficulty communicating with their parents in JPC and in SPC families and were less satisfied with their lives (Bjarnason & Arnarrson, 2011). In JPC and SPC families, teenage girls who thought their mothers were having financial problems were more depressed than girls who felt their mothers were not struggling financially (Vanassche et al., 2013). Similarly, in both custody arrangements, children whose parents' incomes were in the bottom 25% had more emotional and behavioral problems than children whose parents were in the top 25% (Bergstrom, Fransson, Hjern, Kohler, & Wallby, 2014).

Still, having wealthier, more educated parents is not always to children's advantage after their parents separate. In each of the following studies, children with wealthier, more educated parents had worse outcomes than children with less educated, less wealthy parents in both SPC and in JPC families. In a Swedish study with 391 JPC families and 654 SPC families, children with the wealthier, more well-educated parents were more stressed and more anxious (Fransson et al., 2016). Moreover, having a parent with a graduate degree was more closely linked to children's stress and anxiety than was the physical custody plan. The researchers speculated that highly educated, wealthier parents might put more academic and social demands on their children, which, in turn, increases children's stress and anxiety.

In a French study with 91 children living in JPC, 34 living with their fathers, and 328 with their mothers and 1,449 living in intact families, in all four family types, wealthier children were just as likely as less wealthy children to report being entangled in their parents' conflicts and to report high conflict between their parents (Barumandzadah, Martin-Lebrun, Barumandzadeh, & Poussin, 2016). For American adolescents in SPC families, those with higher income mothers had higher levels of deviant behavior and of substance use—which was not the case in the JPC families (Buchanan et al., 1996). Similarly, Flemish adolescents with more well-educated, wealthier fathers were not more satisfied with their lives (Bastaitis et al., 2014). Even though JPC parents were richer and more well-educated than SPC parents, JPC children were no more well-behaved and no more engaged in school. The Flemish children who were most engaged and well-behaved were those who had the best relationship with their father—and those were the JPC children (Havermans Sodermans, & Matthijs et al., 2017). Wealthier Dutch children were also no more likely to spend time or to maintain close relationships with their grandparents after their parents separated than less affluent children (Westphal, 2016). One unusual finding is that Canadian children with wealthier parents had fewer internalizing problems in JPC families, but no fewer problems in SPC families (Drapeau, Baude, Quellet, Godbout, & Ivers, 2017).

Metaphorically then, “money does not buy happiness” in that children still generally fare better in JPC than in SPC independent of family income.



## The C in PIC: Conflict

If parenting and income do not appear to play a strong role in accounting for the advantages of JPC, what about the C in PIC—conflict? Do JPC parents have significantly less conflict than SPC parents when they separate or in the ensuing years? Do they have a much better coparenting relationship, working together closely in a low-conflict, cooperative, communicative way? Is conflict more closely connected than the custody arrangement to children's outcomes? If all three of these things are true, then the conflict factor might help to explain why JPC children fare better.

People who warn against the potential risks of JPC often assert that children do not benefit from this arrangement unless their parents have a low-conflict, cooperative relationship—and that being exposed to conflict has a more negative impact than not having an involved relationship with the father (who is almost always the nonresidential parent in SPC families). Some go so far as to claim that the research strongly supports their position. For example, Emery (2014) contends that “the best research supports the conclusion that in high conflict divorces children do worse in joint physical custody than in other arrangements.” “Based on research ... living in the middle of a war zone between two parents is more harmful to children than having a really involved relationship with only one of them” (Emery, 2016a, p. 28). “*Protection from Conflict is a more basic need than Two Good Parents in my hierarchy of children's needs in two homes*” (Emery et al., 2016a, p. 49, Emphasis added).

In fact this is not what the research shows, according to analyses of the studies that have actually compared JPC and SPC children's well-being in high-conflict families. Children in high-conflict families generally fare better in JPC than in SPC families. largely it seems because JPC children have closer relationships with their parents to help buffer the impact of high conflict (Bauserman, 2002, 2012; Fabricius et al., 2012; Mahrer, O'Hara, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2018; Nielsen, 2017).

In terms of conflict, in an analysis of 19 studies that compared JPC and SPC parents' levels of conflict and the quality of their coparenting relationship, JPC couples did not have significantly less conflict or more cooperative, communicative relationships than SPC couples at the time they separated or in the years following their separation (see Nielsen, 2017, for detailed summaries of the 19 studies). Compared to SPC couples, in three studies JPC couples had less conflict, in one study they had more, and in one study the conflict differences depended on the age of the children. Not all of these studies, however, assessed children's outcomes, so they cannot address the question of whether conflict might have influenced children's outcomes.

Another aspect of conflict is how much disagreement the parents had over the custody arrangements at the outset. Are JPC parents a unique group who,

unlike SPC parents, agree to the parenting plan voluntarily without being forced or coerced to share? According to the seven studies that have specifically addressed this question, the answer is “no” (see Nielsen, 2017, for a discussion of these studies). The percentage of couples who were initially opposed to JPC at the outset ranged from 30% to 80%. Yet in all seven studies, JPC children had better outcomes than SPC children despite the fact that many of their parents had not agreed to the plan at the time they were separating.

As Table 1 illustrates, 19 of the 60 studies took parental conflict into consideration in one of two ways. In 15 studies there were no significant differences between JPC and SPC parents’ conflicts ( $=C$ ), which means conflict would be unlikely to explain any differences in outcomes. In the other four studies, the differences between JPC and SPC parents’ levels of conflict were included in the statistical analyses so that conflict would not influence the outcomes ( $C^*$ ). In these 19 studies JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 9 studies, equal outcomes on some measures and better outcomes on others in 5 studies, equal outcomes on all measures in 2 studies, and worse outcomes on one measure but equal or better outcomes on other measures in 3 studies.

In six other studies there were differences between JPC and SPC parents’ levels of conflict, and this difference was not included in the statistical analysis. This leaves open the possibility that conflict was having an impact separate from the custody arrangement. Compared to SPC parents, in two studies JPC parents had more conflict ( $> C$ ) and in four studies they had less conflict ( $< C$ ). If lower conflict bestows benefits on children, then JPC children in these four studies should have generally had better adjustment. This was not the case. Even though their parents had the lower levels of conflict, in only one study did JPC children have better outcomes on all measures. In the other three studies, JPC and SPC children were equal overall. In the two studies where JPC parents had more conflict than SPC parents, JPC children were still better off than SPC children.

As Table 1 indicates, only eight studies controlled for both income ( $\$^*$ ) and conflict ( $C^*$ ). These eight studies are especially important because they ruled out both factors as possible causes of children’s adjustment. In five studies, on all measures JPC children fared better than SPC children. In one study JPC children were equal to SPC children on some measures and better on others. In one study they had equal outcomes on all measures; and in one study JPC resulted in worse outcomes on one measure but equal or better results on all other measures. JPC children had the better overall outcomes above and beyond the effects of income and conflict.

As with income and parent–child relationships, however, these conflict studies should not be misinterpreted to mean that high, unrelenting conflict—especially when children are dragged into it—has no effect on children. In

many studies there were links between conflict and various aspects of children's well-being. Unlike the conflict studies just discussed, these studies did not assess whether the conflict was significantly different in JPC and SPC families, but these studies do shed light on the complicated role that conflict plays separate from the custody arrangement.

Contrary to the assertion that conflict has a very negative impact on children, conflict accounted for only a small portion of the difference between JPC and SPC children in a number of studies where JPC children had the better outcomes (Barumandzadah et al., 2016; Buchanan et al., 1996; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Vanassche et al., 2013). The small impact of conflict decreased even more after children's personalities were taken into account (Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014). Moreover, even when conflict was high, children had better relationships with their father in JPC than in SPC (Fabricius & Lueken, 2007; Fabricius et al., 2012). In contrast, when conflict was high and children did not have a good relationship with their father, they fared worse in JPC than in SPC (Sandler et al., 2013). Also interesting, even in two studies where JPC parents had more conflict than SPC parents, JPC children still had the better outcomes (Lee, 2002; Melli & Brown, 2008).

As for gender, in JPC or SPC, high conflict had a negative effect on the daughter's relationship with the father, but not on the son's—and not on either's relationship with their mother (Frank, 2007). Similarly, when conflict was high, girls in SPC and SPC families were more stressed than boys (Fransson et al., 2016). In high-conflict families 8 years after the parents' separation, girls were more depressed in JPC, but boys were more depressed in SPC (Vanassche et al., 2013). Then again, in another study, 4 years after their parents' divorce, when conflict was high, in JPC and SPC families, boys were more depressed than girls (Buchanan et al., 1996). In regard to school, high conflict before the divorce was linked to less motivation and worse behavior, regardless of the custody arrangement or their parents' educational levels (Havermans et al., 2017).

Based on these findings, there does not appear to be any clear-cut, consistent, or predictable way that conflict affects children in JPC and in SPC families. It does appear, however that we might be exaggerating the role that conflict plays, especially when children have good relationships with their parents and are living in JPC.

### **The PIC factors: Understanding the interplay**

The 44 studies that considered parent-child relationship quality, income, or conflict also show us that no one factor can account for all the differences. PIC factors work in conjunction with the custody arrangement, interacting in ways that are not consistent or predictable. By looking closely at one study, we can more fully appreciate this interplay.

A California study assessed 51 JPC and 455 SPC teenagers' social and behavioral problems and their grades 4½ years after their parents' divorce (Buchanan et al., 1996). Incomes and conflict levels of JPC and SPC parents were not significantly different. In fact, 80% of JPC parents had been in conflict over the custody arrangement at the outset, even though they eventually adopted a JPC plan. Even in the highest conflict families and even when the children were caught in the middle, JPC teenagers fared better. In both types of families, adolescents who did not feel close to either parent had more emotional and behavioral problems than adolescents who were caught up in the high ongoing conflict. "Interparental conflict had much smaller relations to adolescent adjustment than we had expected" (Buchanan et al., 1996, p. 257). Indeed, in high-conflict families, JPC children were more likely than SPC children to get caught in the middle—and yet they still had fewer problems than SPC children. The researchers attributed this to the fact that JPC children had closer relationships with their parents, which offset the impact of high conflict. In short, quality of parent–child relationships trumped conflict and income, but the greatest benefits only accrued when quantity of parenting time through JPC was added to the mix.

### **Limitations of the studies**

Several limitations should be kept in mind in regard to the studies discussed in this article. First, the studies report correlations, which means they cannot prove that the quality of the parent–child relationship, family income, parental conflict, or the custody arrangement caused the outcomes. As already explained, however, many of the studies controlled for one or more of these factors, which increases the likelihood that it was the JPC arrangement that accounted for the children's better outcomes.

Second, the 60 studies are not of equal quality. Some are superior to others in regard to sample size, representativeness of the sample, validity and reliability of the measures, and sophistication of the statistical analyses. The higher quality studies included income, conflict, and the quality of the parent–child relationship quality in the statistical analysis to assess the effect of the custody arrangement itself. Then, too, most of the reports of children's well-being and about parental conflict came only from mothers, not fathers. Especially because these parents were separated, relying on only one parent's feedback could yield an inaccurate or skewed view.

Some social scientists have criticized or dismissed JPC studies because the researchers used different measures and different types of samples (e.g., Smyth et al., 2016). This criticism is somewhat unusual because the research on many topics, such as parental conflict or divorce, also use different measures, different research designs, and different samples. More important, when a body of studies has used different measures, different samples, and

different approaches to explore the same basic question, this is considered a strength, not a weakness, in social science research. When studies differ in these respects, but still arrive at the same general conclusion, this is a desirable situation referred to as *convergent validity* (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001). Convergent validity adds to the confidence and the trustworthiness of the findings. The 60 JPC studies have a high degree of convergent validity in that they consistently find that JPC children are better adjusted than SPC children across a wide range of measures, using different samples, using data from different countries, and collecting data across several decades.

Finally, even though differences between JPC and SPC children's outcomes are statistically significant, the effect sizes are generally small to moderate. Given this, it has been argued that JPC is not especially beneficial. For example, speaking about these small effect sizes, "Mountains are being made out of molehills" Emery (2015).

Several things must be understood, however, about effect sizes. Small effect sizes are common in studies that assess factors, such as poverty or parental conflict or domestic violence, that affect children. Indeed, fewer than 3% of the studies in social psychology meet the standard for a "strong" effect size (Hemphill, 2003). Nevertheless, small effect sizes in social science and in medical science have important implications for large numbers of people (Ferguson, 2009). In fact, many public health policies and mental health treatment protocols are based on research with weak to moderate effects (Meyer, 2001). Furthermore, "there is no agreement on what magnitude of effect is necessary to establish practical significance" (Ferguson, 2009, p. 532).

Then, too, we need to consider the risks versus the benefits before dismissing small effect sizes as trivial or meaningless "molehills" (Rosenthal, 1990). For example, if there is a statistically significant but weak link (small effect size) between JPC and children's using drugs, smoking, drinking, and having a weaker or troubled relationship with their father, and if there are no worse outcomes for JPC children, then the benefits outweigh the risks regardless of how small the benefit. Small effect sizes also become increasingly important if the risks are low but the consequences can be enormous; for example, children dying as a result of a drinking accident or drug overdose, or having lifelong health problems as a result of starting to smoke as a teenager, or having little to no relationship with their father for the remainder of their lives.

Underscoring the importance of small effect sizes in regard to children's well-being, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) offered a hypothetical example of children who have authoritative fathers (the most beneficial parenting style) versus children whose fathers do not have an authoritative parenting style. By changing their wording from "authoritative" fathering to "JPC," their example would read, "Half of the children live in JPC families and 20% of them

experience a particular behavior problem, compared with 30% of those in SPC families. This outcome would mean that JPC is associated with a one third decline in the probability of experiencing the problem. Most observers would agree that this is a substantively important effect. Yet this example would yield a correlation of only  $-.115$ ." (p. 568). Put differently, in this hypothetical example, even an extremely weak effect size would mean the JPC children were 30% less likely to develop the behavioral problem than SPC children.

In regard to the 60 JPC studies, the issue of effect sizes is further complicated by the fact that most studies did not report effect sizes. Given this, it would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that the effect sizes are small. Effect sizes can differ dramatically depending on which facet of a child's well-being is being assessed and what type of sample is used. For example, in Baude et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis, the effect size for the correlation between JPC and behavioral problems was four times as big as the effect size for the correlation between JPC and emotional problems. Effect sizes were also five times stronger for JPC children in studies using school samples than studies using national samples. More noteworthy still, effect sizes in studies where JPC children spent 50% time with each parent were five times stronger than in studies where JPC children lived more than 35% but less than 50% time with each parent. In Bauserman's (2002) meta-analysis there was also a wide range of effect sizes for the positive impact of JPC, ranging from .005 (very weak) to .97 (extremely strong).

Finally, we should keep in mind that effects of JPC are sometimes as strong or stronger than the effects of parental conflict or family income. For example, in a meta-analysis of 68 studies, the effect size for high parental conflict and children's adjustment problems was only .19 (Buehler et al., 1997). In another meta-analysis of 50 studies involving 10,364 children, the link between having adjustment problems and blaming themselves for their parents' conflicts or feeling threatened by the conflict was merely .18. Most of us would be unlikely to criticize people for "making mountains out of molehills" because they considered these findings relevant for children's well-being.

This is not to say that large effect sizes do not merit more attention or carry more weight than small effect sizes. They do—especially if we are forced to choose only one option. As a hypothetical example, assume we are trying to lower the odds of children becoming clinically depressed after their parents separate. Sixty studies showed that three options all led to statistically significant lower rates of depression for these children. None of the three options was linked to any negative outcomes. If we were free to choose all three, that is what we would do regardless of the effect sizes. If allowed to choose only one, however, we would choose the one with the largest effect size. If there were only one option that had proved to be

statistically significant, no matter how small the effect size, we would choose it. The point is that we should not allow small effect sizes to be the “tail” that wags the “dog” in determining whether JPC is beneficial for most children.

## Conclusion

As the studies summarized in this article demonstrate, JPC is generally linked to better outcomes than SPC for children, independent of parenting factors, family income, or the level of conflict between parents. It appears that leaving the classwork, clothing, cleats, or clarinet at the other parent’s house and living under two sets of rules has not created dire circumstances for JPC children—perhaps because they are not leaving behind the love, attention, involvement, and commitment of either parent when with their other parent. Those who minimize the contribution of JPC argue that it is factors such as parents’ income, education, parenting skills, and low conflict that better account for the positive outcomes seen in JPC children. This view finds very little support in the data from the 60 studies.

This is not to say that children do not benefit from high-quality relationships with their parents, or living in higher income families, or having parents with low-conflict relationships. As explained in this article, these factors do matter. Nor is this to say that JPC is the most beneficial arrangement for all children. As documented in this article, that is not the case. What these studies do mean is that the vast majority of children benefit more from JPC than from SPC—and that there is no compelling evidence that PIC trumps JPC. Even if the parent–child relationship, income, and conflict were equal, children are still more likely to benefit in JPC families.

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