

This Divorce Arrangement Stresses Kids Out Most

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Regarding the wellbeing of kids with divorced parents, the debate over what kind of custody arrangement is best rages on. But a new [study](#), published Monday in the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, suggests that children fare better when they spend time living with both of their parents.

That goes against some current thinking that kids in shared-custody situations are exposed to more stress due to constantly moving around and the social upheaval that can come along with that. “Child experts and people in general assumed that these children should be more stressed,” says study author Malin Bergström, PhD, researcher at the Centre for Health Equity Studies in Stockholm, Sweden. “But this study opposes a major concern that this should not be good for children.”

The researchers wanted to see if kids who lived part time with both parents were more stressed than those who lived with just one parent. They looked at national data from almost 150,000 12- and 15-year-old students—each in either 6th grade or 9th grade—and studied their psychosomatic health problems, including sleep problems, difficulty concentrating, loss of appetite, headaches, stomachaches and feeling tense, sad or dizzy. They found that 69% of them lived in nuclear families, while 19% spent time living with both parents and about 13% lived with only one parent.

Kids in nuclear families reported the fewest psychosomatic problems, but the more interesting finding was that students who lived with both of their separated parents reported significantly fewer problems than kids who lived with only one parent.

“We think that having everyday contact with both parents seems to be more important, in terms of stress, than living in two different homes,” says Bergström. “It may be difficult to keep up on engaged parenting if you only see your child every second weekend.” Having two parents also tends to double the number of resources a kid is exposed to, including social circles, family and material goods like money. “Only having access to half of that may make children more vulnerable or stressed than having it from both parents, even though they don’t live together,” she says.

Girls reported more psychosomatic problems than boys did, and the most frequent problem for girls was sadness. Sleep problems were the most common in kids overall.

In Sweden, joint-custody parenting has risen dramatically in the past few decades; in the 1980s, only 1% of kids of divorced parents lived in joint-custody arrangements, but that number jumped to 40% in 2010. Shared parenting is less common in the U.S., says Ned Holstein, MD, founder and acting executive director of the [National Parents Organization](#), and he estimates the rate is less than 20%. Still, he says that the research in favor of shared parenting for kids is overwhelming. “You’ll hear opponents say, ‘You’ll turn them into suitcase kids; they don’t want to be dragged back and forth,’” Holstein says. “Clearly, taking the suitcase back and forth once or twice a week so that you spend a lot of time with both parents is way better for the kids than the alternative of basically losing an intimate and closely loving relationship with one parent.”

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