

Overnights for Young Children
By
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Approximately 40% of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. As a consequence of divorce and separation, thousands of children spend at least a few years living in single-parent households. More than 50% of children are affected by divorce by the time they finish first grade, and three-quarters of these are impacted before they enter kindergarten. Given these statistics, it is becoming increasingly common for infants, toddlers and very young children to be raised in two separate, single-parent households, or in households that include a stepparent as an added caregiver.

Research shows that infants form attachments to both parents as early as six months of age, and that they develop a hierarchy of attachments, influenced by each caregiver's unique characteristics. Over the past three decades, traditional parent roles have undergone dramatic change, and it is now common for fathers to share substantially in the care of their children. Thus, when parents separate or divorce, children are likely to have reduced contact with one parent who has been an active care giver and an important source of physical and emotional support.

After parents of very young children separate or divorce concern is often raised by the residential parent, typically the mother, about the appropriateness of overnight parenting with the former spouse, based on the concern that such an arrangement might harm the child emotionally. In contrast, the non-residential parent typically believes that reduced contact and no overnights will undermine the child's emotional bond to him and, ultimately, weaken their relationship.

The literature on this subject has been inconclusive. Two widely divergent theories are often cited in support of one position or the other. One holds that infants may be harmed by overnight separation from the residential parent, while the other posits that the benefits of overnight contact with the non-residential parent outweigh the potential drawbacks.

One study¹, the first of its kind, examined the relationship between overnight parenting with non-residential parents' and the occurrence of specific behavior problems and symptoms. The study's unique contribution lies in the fact that it directly investigated young children's adjustment to overnights using, as its primary source of data, symptoms and behavior problems reported by both parents.

One hundred thirty-two families completed the study, with both parents providing information regarding their child's adjustment. Children were divided into two age groups: birth to 3 years, and 4 to 6 years. Seventy-five percent of the children had overnights with the non-residential parent, with 31% spending one overnight each week and 44% spending two or more overnights each week.

The researchers analyzed their data along three dimensions to evaluate the effect of: (1) Children who experience one versus more than one overnight per week; (2) Children who are taken care of by one versus more than one caregiver in the non-residential parent's household; and, (3) Children who experience overnights on a consistent versus an inconsistent basis.

The major conclusions are summarized below.

According to data supplied by both parents, children who spent at least one overnight per week with the non-residential parent had fewer social problems. Mothers also reported fewer attention problems and thought problems. Both mothers and fathers reported that girls who experienced at least one overnight per week with the non-residential parent displayed less withdrawn behavior.

For children who had more than one caregiver in the non-residential parent's household, mothers reported fewer social problems and attention problems, but more sleep problems, and they linked the involvement of multiple caregivers to higher incidences of anxious and depressed behavior.

According to mothers, boys exhibited significantly more internalizing behaviors as they were exposed to a greater number of caregivers, while girls were reported by mothers to show significantly fewer thought problems as the number of caretakers increased. Fathers reported that girls showed significantly fewer internalizing behaviors as they were exposed to a greater number of caregivers in the non-residential parent's household. Mothers also reported that older children displayed fewer problem behaviors on almost all outcome measures, when they were exposed to a greater number of caregivers.

Both parents reported fewer social problems and less anxious and depressed behavior when overnights occurred on a consistent basis. Fathers also reported that consistent overnights were associated with less internalizing behavior for boys and girls, and significantly fewer externalizing problems for boys. Children aged 4 to 6 who consistently spent overnights with the non-residential parent, according to their mothers and fathers, displayed fewer problem behaviors overall, while the relationship between overnights and problem behaviors were not significant for infants and toddlers.

The study concludes that, within limits, overnights are associated with children's positive adjustment to parental separation and divorce. It also concludes that maintaining consistency of overnights and minimizing parental conflict are critical elements to children's post-divorce adjustment and successful implementation of parenting plans. Consistent with previous research, the results also indicate that the most salient predictor of child behavior problems is the quality of the parent-child relationship, and problems in parent-child relationships were associated with child behavior problems more than any other variable studied.

This study provides preliminary evidence that regular and consistent schedules of overnights are associated with children's well being. Consistency provides children with the best opportunity to confront, deal with and adjust to the myriad challenges created by two households and the need to conform to two sets of parental rules, expectations and routines. To sum up, the more opportunity children have to function in each household, the greater the likelihood that they will master the demands of each environment with minimum negative effects.

Reference:

1. Pruett, M. K., Ebling, R., and Insabella, G. (2004). Critical aspects of parenting plans for young children. *Family Court Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 39-59.

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