APS Australian Psychological Society

CHILD WELLBEING AFTER PARENTAL SEPARATION

A Position Statement prepared for

the Australian Psychological Society

by the APS Public Interest Team

July 2018

CHILD WELLBEING AFTER PARENTAL SEPARATION

An APS Position Statement

Separation is a common relationship phenomenon in the community today. Despite the changes in community attitudes and family patterns, separation still represents a major life stressor for the individuals involved. This position statement addresses factors that promote child wellbeing after parental separation.

The APS Position

The APS recognises that most children are resilient and adaptable and the majority of children who experience parental separation adjust well.

The APS recognises that the impacts of separation on parents and their children can be far-reaching and complex. Separation can impact on all aspects of family life, and the process of adjustment is important for individuals, their families and our society.

The APS recognises that children continue to need a secure emotional base after their parents separate, with warm, responsive and supportive parenting. There is a need to promote family processes that contribute to children's wellbeing, particularly in times of stress and change in family structure.

The APS recognises the heightened risk of psychological, emotional and physical vulnerability for parents and their children around the time of the separation.

The APS recognises the harmful impacts of family violence and the need to prioritise safety, as well as the potential for positive outcomes once safety has been restored after the victim parent and children have moved away from the abusive partner.

The APS acknowledges the pivotal role of parents and parenting in the post-separation adjustment of children and recommends early and ongoing support for parents in their own management of this transition.

The APS acknowledges the role of social science and legal professionals in facilitating safe, collaborative dispute resolution processes and the early re-establishment of a cooperative co-parenting relationship.

In the light of the weight of evidence about the best way to provide conditions for promoting child wellbeing during and after parental separation, the APS:

- Recommends that parents be supported in looking after their own mental health.
- Supports developmentally appropriate care and parenting arrangements following separation. Arrangements must be tailored around parental

capacity to provide warm, responsive and supportive relationships, and take into account the child's developmental stage, wishes, needs, concerns, and capacities to cope with change.

- Notes the necessity of avoiding exposure of children to risk factors, especially high conflict and emotional, verbal or physical violence, given overwhelming evidence of negative effects.
- Notes that separation can be beneficial for children, e.g. children's wellbeing improves when removed from a situation characterised by emotional, verbal or physical violence.
- Recognises that most children manage the separation experience with relatively mild and temporary adjustment reactions.
- Supports parenting arrangements that respect each parent's continued shared responsibility for children and enable children to maintain a meaningful relationship with both parents, even if one is non-resident, provided it is safe to do so.
- Supports care arrangements that maintain as much normality in the child's life as possible.
- Recognises that, in general, children in shared parenting arrangements tend to have more positive outcomes, which are likely due to characteristics such as more cooperative parental relationships, work flexibility and continuous father involvement, which are more common in these families.
- Recommends sensitive interpretation of the obligation on courts to consider each parent having equal, or "substantial and significant", *time* with children, given the evidence that equal time is only viable for a limited number of families, and notes that the quality of the relationship with each parent is more strongly related to child wellbeing than the amount of time spent with each parent.
- Recognises that there are individual factors that influence the degree to which shared-time arrangements are of benefit to children. Thus each case needs consideration of the optimal ways to support the development of meaningful relationships, while taking into account the safety, needs and wishes of the child.
- Recommends that parents be prepared to modify time arrangements as children's needs change – e.g., very young children may have difficulty coping with extended time away from their primary caregiver, and adolescents need to be able to maintain their peer relationships.
- Recommends paying attention to children's needs regarding the timing and nature of further transitions such as school changes, repartnering, and formation of blended families, recognising that new transitions can be particularly stressful and unsettling for children, especially if they occur soon after the initial separation.
- Recommends that separating parents work to respect the other parent's continued shared responsibility for children. Whenever it is safe to do so, this means each parent supporting the other parent in maintaining (or building) a strong relationship with children, working to maintain (or

build) a cooperative relationship with the child's other parent, and avoiding blaming or denigrating the other parent.

- Supports collaborative dispute resolution processes such as mediation (including child-focused or child-inclusive mediation) as preferable to litigation for resolving parenting disputes and creating solutions that are in children's best interests (but notes that this may be inappropriate or require special support in the context of a history of violence).
- Recommends that parents make use of available services to support children and parents to adjust to separation if needed.
- Supports early intervention and prevention programs that ameliorate conflict and promote cooperative parenting.
- Promotes the education of primary health care providers (and others) and legal representatives in key risk and protective factors for parents and children following separation, and education in appropriate referral pathways.

Recommendations for future research

Psychologists have important contributions to make by filling gaps in current knowledge. It is important that such research avoids the limitations of much previous research by taking onto account child and family circumstances before, during and after the separation experience. Particular areas in need of further research include:

- Research on child wellbeing following separation to learn more about how to optimise child and adolescent development (to balance most previous work, which has focused on problems)
- Culturally appropriate research on the impacts of parental separation on children from different ethnic, racial or cultural backgrounds
- Research into child wellbeing following separation in the context of non-traditional family forms such as same-sex parented families
- Research into child wellbeing following separation in the context of family conflict and violence
- Further research and development in the area of intervention programs to help children and parents cope with separation, including testing of programs with different client groups such as those from diverse ethnic backgrounds
- Research on the differences in child wellbeing amongst those whose families have undergone litigation versus mediation.

BACKGROUND

Separation is a common relationship phenomenon in the community today, and Australian societal attitudes towards marriage, separation and divorce have shifted markedly in recent years. Marriage is no longer regarded as the only legitimate form of adult intimate union, and there is increasing acceptance of cohabitation as an alternative (Evans, 2015). The marriage rate is declining (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2014), paralleled by an increase in the number of couples who choose to cohabit. The proportion of Australians who view marriage as a lifelong commitment that should never be ended (except by death) has decreased dramatically from 78% in 1995 (de Vaus, 1997) to 35% in 2011 (Baxter, 2016), paralleled by increasing acceptance of divorce (DeRose, 2011). Following the legislative changes from 1975 onwards which have made the divorce process less onerous, the rates of divorce have increased markedly, so that a third of marriages in Australia are now expected to end in divorce.

Attitudes towards diverse family forms have also shifted. There is an enduring social norm among Australians that a pre-requisite for childbearing is the establishment of a stable and secure relationship (Arunachalam & Heard, 2015), and marriage is still the most common setting for childrearing (Qu & Weston, 2013). However, many couples choose to have children without marriage, including same-sex couples who until January 2018 were not legally permitted to marry in Australia. Most people see cohabiting couples with children (79%) and single-parent households (74%) as families.

As a result of these major shifts, around 40% of Australian children can expect to spend time in a family form which differs from the traditional 'biological mother, father and children' model (Baxter, 2016a).Many children experience more than one family transition as their parents form new relationships.

Despite the changes in community attitudes and family patterns, separation still represents a major life stressor for the individuals involved. How are families best supported to make this life transition less stressful for all concerned, especially children?

Research into the effects of parental separation on children's wellbeing is particularly challenging, and shortcomings in many past studies have contributed to controversy in this area. For example, most early research was plagued by selection effects: families in which parents separate tend to differ from those who stay together on a range of background characteristics that affect child outcomes.

The more instructive studies are those that look at the factors which predict child wellbeing. In general, the factors predicting child wellbeing are the same for children in separated families and those in non-separated families. The strongest single predictors of child outcomes are family violence and inter-parent conflict, which have direct negative effects on child wellbeing as well as indirect effects through their impact on parenting and parent mental health. On the positive side, if parents can cooperate, communicate and problem-solve effectively, this has beneficial effects on child wellbeing.

Parenting quality is another major predictor of child wellbeing, with children profiting from responsive, warm, consistent and authoritative parenting. The challenge for all parents is to maintain adequate parenting responsiveness while dealing with their own issues. Current Australian family law encourages shared parental responsibility (for major decision-making regarding the child), and, where possible and appropriate, shared parenting (meaning the child spends substantial time with each parent). Currently about 20% of Australian children experience shared parenting, with numbers varying by child age, and these families differ from those without shared parenting on a number of dimensions (such as geographic proximity of parents, dual incomes, higher educated parents, a cooperative relationship, and fathers who had been involved in caring for their children prior to separation). In terms of children's wellbeing, it is difficult to separate the effects of these underlying factors from the effects of shared parenting, but some literature suggests that there are benefits for children from shared parenting. Shared parenting is contraindicated where there is risk of violence.

Children travel along different pathways of development before their parents separate, and after it. Most children are temporarily challenged by multiple changes and experience psychological distress in the months immediately prior to and after separation, including significant sadness, worry and sometimes fear (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Many will largely recover from these reactions, some will continue to show symptoms over some months, and a minority will carry forward the effects of interacting vulnerabilities into their adolescence and early adulthood (Amato, 2001). The normative outcome of separation then might be said to be resilience but not invulnerability (Amato, 2010; Amato & Anthony, 2014).

This position statement, based on a more extensive literature review commissioned by the APS (Sanson & McIntosh, 2018), addresses factors that may tip the balance between good and poorer adjustment amongst children experiencing parental separation. It summarises current research relating to parenting in the context of separation and divorce, and considers some of the services, policies and community-based interventions that might be supportive of positive parenting and child wellbeing during and after such major life changes.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Associations between parental separation and children's wellbeing

Parental separation typically exposes children to a number of challenges, such as observing parents' heightened emotions and stress, an associated decline in parenting sensitivity, a range of socio-economic and environmental changes including reduction in financial resources, learning to alternate between households, moving schools and/or neighbourhoods, reduced contact with a non-resident parent, and family reformation that may involve step-parents and step-siblings.

It is therefore unsurprising that parental separation tends to be associated with a higher rate of emotional and social adjustment problems than among children in 'intact' families. However, many authors have noted the substantial difficulties in drawing causal conclusions in this area (e.g., Amato, 2010; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). Studies that focus on the consequences of divorce without taking into account the circumstances in the child's life prior to divorce are liable not only to overstate the effects of divorce on child outcomes, but to imply misleadingly that divorce is the only, or the most critical, determinant of child wellbeing (Strohschein, 2012).

A more useful approach is to examine the factors that might account for these differences, in order to provide advice to parents and others about how to support their children's wellbeing, and to identify modifiable factors that can be targets of interventions to support children who are undergoing family transitions.

Major factors that predict child wellbeing in separated families

In general, the factors predicting child wellbeing are the same for children in separated families and those in stable families.

Parenting quality

Parenting quality is a major predictor of child wellbeing. Post-separation parenting by mothers and fathers typically reflects the quality of pre-separation parenting (Amato & Booth, 1996; Burns & Dunlop, 1998). The challenge for parents is to maintain adequate parenting responsiveness while dealing with their own issues around separation.

Protective factors include:

- High maternal sensitivity and parenting consistency both pre- and post-divorce (Karre & Mounts, 2012; Lucas, Nicholson, Bircan & Erbas, 2013; Weaver & Schofield, 2015)
- Parents who are warm, supportive, communicative, responsive to their needs, set appropriate limits, use firm, fair and consistent discipline, and monitor their activities while providing opportunities for autonomy (Cyr et al., 2013; Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, and Sandler, 2000).

Parental mental health

Parenting quality can be affected, of course, if a parent has mental health problems, particularly in the context of social, interpersonal and economic stressors. Such problems are somewhat more common amongst separated parents, whether pre-existing or the result of the stress of the separation process. However, having a mental health issue or condition does not necessarily mean that one cannot parent, or parent well.

- Mental and behavioural health problems are twice as likely to be reported by separated and divorced people than by those in intact relationships (prevalence rates being 20% in the case of separation, 17-19% for divorce, and 8-10% for those in intact relationships) (McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012).
- Divorced or separated parents with dependent children are twice as likely as married/de facto parents to have used an illicit drug in the past 12 months, despite similar proportions reporting a previous history of drug abuse (National Drug Strategy Survey Data, 2010).
- Recent separation (within three months) has also been shown to be a risk factor for suicidal ideation, especially in men (Kolves et al, 2010).
- Parent mental health problems and poorer parenting together account for significant variance in the relationship between family separation and children's outcomes, including behaviour problems (Cyr, Di Stefano, & Desjardins, 2013; Weaver & Schofield, 2015).

Relationship between parent and child

Strong parent-child relationships are known to be among the most important predictors of healthy child and adolescent adjustment, whatever family structure the child grows up in (e.g. Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2006; Levin & Currie, 2010).

- Strong close relationships with both parents are strongly linked with post-separation outcomes like higher self-esteem, lower delinquency and fewer depressive symptoms among adolescents (Booth, Scott & King, 2010).
- Positive relationships with non-resident parents are facilitated by cooperative co-parenting, high communication and low discord between parents (e.g. Amato et al., 2011).
- The experience of separation can be associated with higher conflict in parent-adolescent relationships relative to intact families (Ruschena et al., 2005).
- This conflict can be reflected in poorer adolescent adjustment, like adolescent substance use (Kristjansson, Sigfusdottir, Allegrante, & Helgason,2009) and increases in delinquent behaviour if the adolescent was strongly attached to the same-sex parent and then removed from this parent at separation (Videon, 2002).
- Children who become alienated from a competent non-residential parent of

either gender are at higher risk of poor long-term adjustment (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2012; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Parental alienation[1]refers to a child's unreasonable rejection of one parent, due to being influenced by the other parent and by the child's own attributions of blame for the separation (Kelly & Johnston, 2001).

- An important predictor of positive relationships between children and their non-resident fathers is cooperative co-parenting, characterised by high communication and low discord between parents (e.g. Amato et al., 2011).

Inter-parental conflict and family violence pre- and post-separation

The strongest single predictors of negative child outcomes are inter-parental conflict and family violence, which have direct negative effects on child wellbeing as well as indirect effects through their impact on parenting and parent mental health(Amato, 2005; Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011; Kristjansson et al., 2009; Lucas et al., 2013; Sullivan, 2008).

Inter-parental conflict and family violence are often conflated in the parental separation research, but it is important to try to distinguish between them. Conflict is a normal part of any relationship, particularly in times of crisis. It can be reciprocal, with both parents contributing. Family violence, on the other hand, is typically one way, reflecting a power imbalance between the parties involved, where one party seeks to be feared and obeyed by threatening their partner's personal autonomy and safety, and directly or indirectly, the safety of their children.

Inter-parental conflict

In this section we focus on the effects of inter-parental conflict (noting that it is not always possible in reviewing the research literature to separate examples of high conflict from family violence because of the way the studies have been conducted).

Parental conflict is marked by some or all of the following inter-parent behaviours: high degrees of anger and distrust, verbal abuse and frequent or acute difficulty in communicating about and cooperating in the care of their children (McIntosh, 2003).

Ongoing conflict between ex-partners can negatively affect parent–child relationships and erode effective parenting, as it makes it difficult for either parent to focus on the children's priorities (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Pedro-Carroll, 2011). These in turn contribute to children's emotional and behavioural problems (Pedro-Carroll, 2011).

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[1]Parental alienation is differentiated from parental estrangement, where the child's refusal of contact with a parent may be seen as reasonable and rational. However the application of both terms is context dependent and thus subject to interpretation.

The research shows that:

- Children from separated families report higher levels of antagonistic communication between parents before and after separation, than those from intact families (Shimkowski et al, 2012).
- A large body of research documents direct and indirect effects of destructive marital and ex-spousal communication on children's wellbeing (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Papp et al., 2002, 2009; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), particularly forms which "triangulate" the child.
- Children whose parents continually denigrate one another are more likely to experience depression and anxiety compared to children of high conflict parents who do not involve their children in angry exchanges (Buchanan et al, 1991).
- Children who have experienced high conflict are also more likely to experience more distant parent-child relationships in young adulthood, especially with the denigrating parent (Rowen & Emery, 2014).
- There are clear associations between persistent negative, hostile behaviours between parents and patterns of anxiety, depression and disruptive behaviours in childhood (Amato, 2005; Baker & Brassard; 2013; Baxter, Weston, & Qu, 2011; Grych, 2005; Kristjansson et al., 2009; Lucas et al., 2013; Sullivan, 2008); and depression, suicidal ideation and marijuana use in older adolescents (Rogers et al., 2011).
- Inter-parent conflict, mothers' and fathers' mental health and socioeconomic factors fully accounted for a twofold increase in risk of mental health difficulties among children from separated families compared to those from intact families (Lucas et al., 2013).
- It is also important to note that despite the difficulties of ongoing conflict with an ex-parent, many parents find ways to make their children's needs a top priority and learn to parent effectively (Pedro-Carroll, 2011).

Family violence

Family violence is not simply an increase in the frequency of conflict. It is defined as any violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of their family, or causes the family member to be fearful. As well as physical violence, such behavior can also include emotional, verbal, sexual, spiritual, and economic abuse. Family violence also includes behaviours like the deliberate sabotaging of the child's relationship with the other parent.

The use of violence by a parent towards their partner/the other parent has significantly more potent effects on children's adjustment than high levels of inter-parent conflict (Bancroft & Silverman, 2004; Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Graham-Bermann & Edleson, 2001; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997; Jaffe, Baker, & Cunningham, 2004; McNeal & Amato, 1998; Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). Perpetrating violence does impact on both perpetrator's and victim's ability to parent.

Behavioural, cognitive, and emotional problems that have been shown to increase with exposure to violence include aggression, conduct disorders, delinquency, truancy, school failure, anger, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Interpersonal problems include poor social skills, peer rejection, problems with authority figures and parents, and lower empathy for others (McIntosh & Ralfs, 2012).

While research has focused on the negative consequences of parental separation for children, there are circumstances where it has a beneficial effect. Research has repeatedly shown that parental separations that remove children from home environments marked by chronic discord and violence appear to result in improvements rather than decrements in wellbeing (Amato, 2000; Booth & Amato, 2001; Kitzmann & Emery, 1994; Strohschein, 2005).

However the effects of family violence can continue to take their toll, even after the parents' relationship has ended. Family violence can also worsen at the point of separation. There might be an escalation to different types of violence, such as physical violence. The controlling partner may go to great lengths to try to restore or maintain control, or to punish the partner because they are losing control over them.

Inter-parent cooperation and communication post-separation

Co-parenting refers to the sharing of parenting roles and tasks between separated parents, while parallel parenting refers to situations where the child has considerable contact with both parents but the parents themselves communicate little.

Cooperative co-parenting is seen as the ideal, with resident and non-resident parents working together in a business-like relationship to avoid conflict, establish consistent routines across households, share resources, rights and responsibilities, and support each other's parenting practices for the benefit of their children.

- Only 25 to 30 per cent of separated parents have a cooperative and effective co-parental relationship (Kelly & Emery, 2003; McIntosh, Wells, et al., 2008).
- Families with a history of violence are less likely to have co-parenting arrangements than any other group (Cashmore et al., 2010). However a history of family violence does not necessarily prohibit cooperative relationships between the parents post-separation (Kaspiew et al., 2009).
- A study by Amato et al., (2011) showed that children who experienced cooperative co-parenting had the smallest number of behaviour problems in adolescence and the closest ties to their fathers in young adulthood, compared to children who experienced parallel parenting or 'single parenting' (Amato et al., 2011).
- However this study also showed that adolescents who experienced cooperative co-parenting were no better off than adolescents with single

parenting with respect to self-esteem, school grades, liking school, substance use, and life satisfaction (Amato et al., 2011).

- Similarly as young adults, those experiencing cooperative co-parenting did not differ from those experiencing single parenting on a range of factors - substance use, early sexual activity, number of sexual partners, cohabiting or marrying as a teenager, and closeness to mothers (Amato et al., 2011).

More than half of separated parents engage in a form of parallel parenting, marked by low conflict, low communication,and emotional disengagement (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children who experience such parallel parenting can fare well when parents provide nurturing and appropriate care (Kelly & Emery, 2003). However, a desire for more active communication and friendship between parents is often evident in children's subjective accounts (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015; Smart et al., 2004).

Parents' proactive attempts at calm, reasonable conflict resolution that reduce threat have been found to result in children's increased emotional security and decreased tendency to self-blame (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Riina and McHale (2014) found shared decision-making protected against increased risky behaviour for boys.

Changes in economic status post-separation

Separation and divorce typically involve economic stress, with new residence arrangements, moving schools and work, and increased travel exerting financial demands that can have flow-on effects for parent and child wellbeing (Smyth, 2004). The financial implications of separation differ for men and women, with women and single parent families typically experiencing significant economic disadvantage after separation (Austen, 2004; Cairney, Boyle, Offord & Racine, 2003; Grall, 2007; Smyth, 2004; Smyth & Weston, 2000). In general, children cope better with divorce if their parents can ensure their material wellbeing (Mandemakers & Kalmijn, 2014).

- Economic status both before and after separation is predictive of child outcomes, with an adverse family background and drop in household income amplifying the negative effects of divorce (Monden & Kalmijn; 2010; Stroschein, 2014; Sun & Li, 2002, 2009).
- Associations between divorce and child problems are moderated by family income before the divorce, such that children from families with higher incomes prior to the separation have fewer internalising and externalising problems[2] than children from families with lower incomes (Weaver & Schofield, 2015), and better school engagement (Havermans, Botterman & Matthijs, 2014).

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[2]Internalising problems (negative behaviors that are focused inward, such as fearfulness, social withdrawal, and somatic complaints) and externalising problems (problem behaviours that are directed outwards, including physical aggression, disobeying rules, cheating, stealing, and destruction of property).

- A decrease in income has a smaller impact on developmental trajectories if social supports are available and positive new relationships are made (Amato & Anthony, 2014).
- Lower household income plus a more chaotic, less supportive and less stimulating post-divorce home environment are risk factors for higher internalising and externalising behaviours in children post-separation, whereas higher maternal sensitivity and children's higher intelligence are protective factors (Weaver & Schofield, 2015).

Taken together, these findings suggest that income is important, but there is much more contributing to children's adjustment following divorce than a decrease in household income (Lansford, 2009). Financial hardship is just one of many inter-connected stressors that can be associated with separation.

Child's time and contact with both parents

Australian family law encourages shared parenting (encompassing not only shared responsibility for children, but also roughly equal time spent caring for them). However, actual parenting arrangements are diverse and changing over time. There is a continuing predominance of maternal care. Shared care is only experienced by about one in five children. These shared-time families are not typical of the broader separated-parent population (Cancian et al., 2014; Pruett & Barker, 2009). They are more likely to be well-resourced and well-functioning, and have features like dual incomes, higher educated parents, higher incomes, elementary-school-aged children, more flexibility in hours of employment, closer proximity to each other, a cooperative relationship, and fathers who had been involved in caring for their children prior to separation (Kaspiew et al., 2009; Smyth, 2004).

There is a diversity of findings for children experiencing shared-time parenting. The research is plagued by differences in definitions, study designs, sources of information, and sampling strategies (Smyth, McIntosh, Emery and Howarth, 2016), making it difficult to identify key findings. Baude et al. (2016), for example, conducted a meta-analysis of 19 studies, which were mainly cross-sectional and based on middle class samples, of child adjustment in joint physical custody versus sole custody for children between age 3 and 18. They found some support for joint custody over sole custody in terms of behavioural and social adjustment but not emotional and general adjustment. Causal conclusions could not be drawn because most of the studies reviewed were cross-sectional. The authors cautioned that the results needed to be interpreted prudently and the quality of the parent–child relationships is a potentially more reliable predictor of children's adjustment after a separation than time allocations. Similarly, Bergstrom et al.'s (2017) study of Swedish preschoolers reported that joint physical custody arrangements were associated with fewer psychological symptoms than those in sole custody as assessed using rating scales completed by pre-school teachers. However they stated that longitudinal studies are needed to account for potential pre-separation differences.

Another meta-analysis, by Bauserman (2002), was also limited by lack of data on pre-existing differences between the families entering into joint custody compared to sole custody. The authors reported a just-over-small effect size (.23) for joint custody (defined as 25% or more of time with each parent) over sole custody on a range of child measures. Conflict at the time of separation was lower in joint than sole custody (effect size (.33) and the author noted that joint custody couples self-select for low conflict and hence better adjustment. Despite finding overall benefits for children in joint custody, Bauserman cautioned that the findings do not demonstrate a causal relationship between joint custody and better child adjustment, and do not in themselves support joint custody as preferable to sole custody in all situations.

These methodological issues in parenting studies continue to limit our ability to draw meaningful conclusions on the impacts of shared-time arrangements on child wellbeing. It remains difficult to differentiate the impacts of these wider family and background factors from the impacts of the shared time arrangements when examining children's outcomes. For example, although parents with shared-time arrangements tend to report that their children are doing well and that they and their children like the arrangements (e.g. Bjarnason et al., 2012; Cashmore et al., 2010), this may be due to the preexisting characteristics of these families (Bauserman, 2012). Nevertheless, a recent review of a diverse set of 60 studies by Nielsen (2018), although limited to cross-sectional analysis and hence not accounting for pre-existing differences among children, found that 'joint physical custody' tended to be associated with more positive child outcomes than 'single physical custody', after controlling for parental income, conflict and parent-child relationships (e.g., Fransson et al., 2016; Turunen et al., 2017).

Further, based on a detailed review of a number of peer-reviewed outcome studies of post-separation shared-time arrangements since 2000, with careful attention to conceptual, measurement and sampling issues in the reviewed research, Smyth et al. (2016) concluded that there are many benefits in shared-time arrangements, due largely to the effects of sustained parental involvement and continued economic support. Specifically, they reported the following:

For *school age children and adolescents*, reported benefits of shared-time parenting include:

- Father and child reports of more supportive fathering (Bastaits, Ponnet, & Mortelmans, 2012)
- Better physical health of children (Melli & Brown, 2008)
- Fewer internalising problems for adolescents (Breivik & Olweus, 2006)
- Lower rates of hyperactivity in one study (Neoh & Mellor, 2010), but elevated hyperactivity for children in *rigid* shared time arrangements, especially boys, in another study (McIntosh et al., 2010).
- Lower externalizing problems (Bergstrom et al 2017)

For *older adolescents*, reported benefits include:

- Stronger parent–child relationships (more so at times than in intact two-parent families) (Bergström et al., 2013; Bjarnson & Aronarsson, 2011; Lodge & Alexander, 2010).
- Higher quality of life among 15-year-olds across 11 dimensions of personal health and wellbeing, compared with adolescents living primarily with one parent, and also when compared to 12-year-olds with shared parenting, suggesting age effects in benefits (Bergström et al., 2013).

Some negative and null effects have also been found:

- Neoh and Mellor (2010) found little difference between Australian children in shared parenting, sole residence and occasional contact with the non-resident parent on a range of adjustment measures, according to both self- and parent reports. ⌷SEP⌷
- Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, and Swicegood (2013) found that overall the wellbeing of adolescents in joint physical custody in Belgium was similar to that of children in other custody arrangements, although this was negated in situations where there was high parental conflict.
- Parents (particularly fathers) in shared-parenting families were more satisfied with their situation than were their children (McIntosh et al., 2010; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015; Smart, 2004).
- Children in shared-time arrangements reported more stress than children who were mainly cared for by one parent, or children from sole resident families (McIntosh, Smyth, Wells & Long, 2010; Neoh & Mellor, 2010).
- Children and adolescents in shared-time arrangements were the most likely to want to change their living arrangement, relative to children with less time with their non-resident parent (Lodge & Alexander, 2010; McIntosh et al., 2010).

However, the majority of high quality studies of children of mixed ages (ranging from very young to late adolescence) find few significant differences in child wellbeing between children with different patterns of parenting arrangements.

For *infants and toddlers*, very few studies of shared parenting exist, and Pruett, McIntosh and Kelly (2014) describe this small body of literature as itself in its infancy, and of limited use in practice. The available research suggests that:

- Infants and toddlers may be vulnerable to extended time away from a resident parent, while pre-school children are not (McIntosh, Smyth & Kelaher, 2013).
- High frequency over-night arrangements (defined as more than weekly for children under 2, and more than twice weekly for 2-3 year old children) may be associated with more attachment insecurity than lower frequency overnight stays (Tornello et al., 2013).

Overall, it appears that factors including logistics and resources, how parents get along, and the extent to which the parenting arrangements are responsive to children's developmental needs and temperament are critical to whether shared parenting is beneficial to children (Emery 2006; Neoh & Mellor, 2010; Smyth et al., 2016).

- For school aged children, outcomes of parenting arrangements are largely dependent on the manner in which parents execute the arrangements, rather than the apportionment of time itself (Neoh & Mellor, 2010; Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015; Sodermans & Matthijis, 2014).
- The interacting effects of parental conflict, quality of the child's relationship with both parents, presence of a new partner in the parental households and individual characteristics of the child including age and gender account for significant variance in outcomes (Sandler, Wheeler, & Braver, 2013; Sodermans & Matthijis, 2014; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013).

Child factors

Person-environment interactions are important for understanding the development of mental health problems and wellbeing in the context of parental separation, as they are for children in any family context.

Child temperament and personality factors

- Greater self-regulation and positive emotionality appear to be protective, and negative reactivity to be a risk, for adjustment to parental separation(Hetherington et al., 1989; Lengua et al., 2000).In one study, increased externalising problems were evident only for adolescents low on effortful control (i.e. capacity for self-regulation), and increased internalising problems were only found for children high on fearfulness (Sentse, Ormel, Veenstra, Verhulst & Oldehinkel,2011).Another study found that adolescents high in conscientiousness (reflecting being organised, orderedly, and planful) had more depressive feelings and lower self-esteem when in joint physical custody arrangements (perhaps because they found it harder to adjust across households) (Sodermans, Botterman, Havermans & Matthijs, 2014). There are very few studies in this area.
- Other individual characteristics that buffer the negative impact of divorce on children include intelligence (Katz & Gottman, 1997; Weaver & Schofield, 2015), specific talents, physical attractiveness, and the ability to respond effectively[1]when confronted with stressful events (McIntosh, 2003).

Attributions

- Children who place blame for the separation on themselves (e.g. 'they were arguing about parenting - if not for me, they'd have stayed together') tend to be more poorly adjusted (Bussell, 1995; McIntosh,

Smyth, et al., 2010a), with higher rates of depression, externalising problems, and lowered feelings of self-competence.

Gender

- Most studies report few or no differences between boys and girls in the effects of parental separation on children (Painter & Levine, 1998; Sun & Li, 2002; Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000).

Age

There is not a great deal of robust evidence regarding the effect of parental separation by age (Amato, 2001). A limitation of much of the existing literature is the lack of data on children's age at the time of the separation, with many studies reporting only the children's age at the time of the study. However, there is general agreement that a child's age, in combination with temperament, may play a role in how they respond to periods of separation from various caregivers (Robb, 2012), and age is also likely to affect short-term reactions.

Infancy and the Pre-school Years (0-4)

Young children's responses to parent separation are mediated by their limited cognitive and social competencies, their dependency on their parents, and their restriction to the home.

- Infants and children younger than three years of age may reflect a caregiver's distress and grief, and their observed behaviours may include irritability, poor sleep-wake rhythms, separation anxiety or feeding disturbances (Clark, 2013; McIntosh, 2011; Zeanah et al., 2011, 1999).
- High intensity conflict, family violence and disrupted parental care appear linked to greater propensity for insecure and disorganised attachment styles (Lieberman, Zeanah, & McIntosh, 2011).

Early and middle school-age children (5–12 years)

Primary school-age children are more verbally articulate and better able to express their feelings than younger children; however, deterioration in behaviour following significant change in home life is also common amongst this age group.

- They are less likely than older children to be able to understand that parents' conflict is about divergent goals, and are more likely to be self-blaming (McIntosh, 2003).
- They are likely to express anger, stress and confusion through behaviour problems, difficulties concentrating, peer problems and so on.
- They often have an intense desire for their parents to get back together and may promote reconciliation at contact/access times.
- If given a choice, children in this age group often have a strong focus on "making it fair" for their parents (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015b). This may

be a contributing factor to the higher prevalence of young school-aged children living in a substantially shared parenting arrangement (McIntosh, Long, & Wells, 2009).

Adolescence

Adolescents typically experience considerable initial pain and anger when their parents divorce; however they are better able to accurately assign responsibility for the divorce, to resolve loyalty conflicts, and to assess and cope with additional stresses such as economic changes and new family role definitions. Adolescents are also able to take advantage of extra-familial support systems.

- Parental separation can challenge adolescents' capacity to develop self-regulated, autonomous behaviour, achieve academic and vocational goals, develop a clear sexual identity and form intimate relationships (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).
- Some adolescents experience premature detachment from their families, which can lead to greater involvement in peer groups, often with lowered adult monitoring and more risk-taking behaviours such as early sexual activity and drug and alcohol use (Amato, 2010).
- Co-parenting problems within and across households such as inconsistency in limit-setting can exacerbate challenging behaviour. Adolescents are especially sensitive to double standards and manipulation, hence parents who are dishonest, or who encourage the young person to take sides, may lose their adolescent's respect (Rowen & Emery, 2014). Adolescents are the least likely to want to enter or maintain a substantially shared parenting arrangement (McIntosh et al., 2009).

Additional factors

Number and complexity of family changes following separation

Parental separation is often one in a number of transitions. Experiencing multiple transitions in family structure post-separation, such as remarriage of one or both parents and/or the addition of step-siblings and half-siblings, is associated with subsequent increases in a number of problems including:

- Behaviour problems (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006;Osborne & McLanahan, 2007).
- Drug use (Cavanagh, 2008).
- Externalising problems and delinquent behavior (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).
- Poorer academic achievement (Hill et al., 2004; Martinez & Forgatch, 2002).
- Poorer psychological wellbeing (Amato, 2010).
- Relationship instability in adulthood (Wolfinger, 2000).

Further, repartnering by one or both parents may at times account for the apparent effects of separation (e.g. Fagan, 2012). Timing of transitions is important:

- Preschool-age children showed poorer literacy post-separation *only* when residential mothers transitioned into new cohabiting relationships shortly following the breakup of their previous relationship (Fagan, 2012).
- Having a parent enter a new relationship too quickly can increase a child's sense of loss and the fear of being 'replaced' as a parent shifts the focus of his or her affection to a new partner (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Wolchik, Schenck, & Sandler, 2009).

Geographical distance and electronic communication

Time involved in commuting between households can be an additional stress for children (Smyth, 2004a). Viry (2014) found that fathers' residential proximity had a positive effect on children's adjustment. While practitioner wisdom confirms this finding, little other research evidence on this question exists.

Virtual parent-child contact has the potential to be a positive transitional means to maintain contact between children and their parents despite geographical distance (Ashley, 2008; Bach-Van Horn, 2008; Gottfried, 2012; LeVasseur, 2004; Rivera, 2010). Electronic media can help maintain ongoing, frequent and meaningful communication with children so that non-resident parents are more aware of the children's day-to-day activities (Hofer, Souder, Kennedy, Fullman, & Hurd, 2009), and can also create less rigidity in schedules for contact through opportunities for informal parent–child contact. Viry (2014) found that cohesive co-parenting was more closely related to frequent father-child contacts by phone or e-mail than to residential proximity.

Social and cultural factors

Virtually all the existing literature on the impact of parental separation on children comes from Western countries, and very little of this research pays attention to differences in social and cultural background amongst participants (other than socio-economic status).

Same sex parents

There is scarce research on the effects of parental separation on children from same-sex families. One American study (Gartrell & Bos, 2010) found that there were no differences on the Child Behavior Checklist (by mother report) between 17-year-old offspring whose mothers were still together at this age (44% of the sample) and those whose mothers had separated (56%). In both cases, these adolescents scored significantly higher in social, school/academic, and total competence and significantly lower in social problems, rule-breaking, aggressive, and externalising problem behaviour than their age-matched counterparts in the normative sample of American youth. In 71% of cases where parents had separated, children were in the shared custody of both parents, which contrasts with data on US heterosexual couples, where 65% of mothers retain sole custody of their children. Gartrell and Bos (2010) suggest that the greater proportion in shared custody may be one factor underlying the lack of differences in psychosocial adjustment between separated and intact families.

Interventions to ameliorate effects – services, supports, policies

The preceding sections have highlighted that families often need support to ameliorate the impact of separation on parents and children. As a field, intervention research in separation/divorce is fledgling, and programs differ substantially in quality (e.g. treatment fidelity, evaluation data).

Child support programs

There is some meta-analytic evidence of effectiveness of short-term group programs for reducing behavioural, emotional and school-related adjustment problems following family separation (Abel, Chung-Canine, & Broussard, 2013; Durlak & Wells, 1997; Rose, 2009).

Parent education programs

Prevention and early intervention parenting education programs for ameliorating the impact of separation on children are widespread (McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003; Thoennes & Pearson, 1999). These programs include *Children in the Middle* (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996); *Key Steps to Parenting after Separation*(Dour, 2003);and *Family Transitions Triple P* (Stallman & Sanders, 2014).

Longer-term divorce education programs delivered to groups or individuals enable parents to learn, practise, and master parenting skills over time. Overseas findings support the effectiveness of multi-week, in-person, skill-based programs. These programs can improve parent-child relationships and reduce inter-parental conflict as a consequence of improved parental judgement and behaviours around discipline, the use of positive reinforcement and non-coercive limit setting, and enhanced communication skills (Bonds et al., 2010; Wolchik, Sandler, et al., 2009).

Online programs specifically designed for separated couples are just emerging. The only Australian online education program to date is the *Young Children in Divorce and Separation Program* (YCIDS), which aims to support effective co-parenting with infants and is currently being pilot-tested (McIntosh & Tan, 2017).

Mediation versus litigation

There is now encouragement for parents to resolve their separation through non-adversarial mediation-based processes, rather than through the courts. Modified mediation practices are also being developed to ensure the safety of participants where there is family violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, Beck, & Applegate, 2010).

Little research has directly assessed benefits of mediation on child wellbeing, but there is considerable evidence of the benefits to parents from mediation, which is likely to lead to indirect benefits accruing to children:

- Families experiencing a higher level of litigation displayed more family conflict or maladjustment, less favourable divorce conditions, poorer child coping ability, and less positive divorce resolution compared to those with lower levels of involvement (Bing et al., 2009). (NB: Pre-existing differences between those with more and less litigation may partially account for these findings).
- In comparison to families who litigated custody, non-residential parents who mediated were more involved in multiple areas of their children's lives and maintained more contact with their children 12 years after the resolution of their custody disputes. They also made more changes in their children's living arrangements over the years, generally reflecting increased cooperation and flexibility. Fathers remained much more satisfied if they mediated rather than litigated custody, with few differences in satisfaction for mothers (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001).
- Child-focused and child-inclusive mediation processes have been developed to hear children's voices in mediation of matters involving the care of school-aged children (McIntosh, 2000; McIntosh, Long, & Moloney, 2004; Moloney & McIntosh, 2004). Both were associated with better parenting and child adjustment outcomes and lower re-litigation rates than mediation as usual.

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