Fabricius, W. V., Sokol, K. R., Diaz, P., & Braver, S. L. (2012). Parenting time, parent conflict, parent-child relationships, and children's physical health. In K. Kuehnle & L. Drozd (Eds.) Parenting Plan Evaluations: Applied Research for the Family Court (pp. 188 - 213). Oxford University Press.

7

Parenting Time, Parent Conflict, Parent–Child Relationships, and Children's Physical Health

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INTRODUCTION

Questions the Chapter Will Address

Two questions often confront family law courts and policymakers: "Is the quantity or the quality of parenting time more important for children's outcomes?" and "Should parenting time be limited in high-conflict families?" Most discussions in the research literature give the following answers: The *quality* of parenting time is more important for children's well-being than the *quantity* of parenting time, and when there is frequent and severe parent conflict, parenting time should be limited because it can seriously harm children. In the present chapter, the authors argue that these long-standing conclusions should be re-examined in the light of new evidence. New data on the correlation between quantity of parenting time and quality of parent–child relationships in families with and without severe parent conflict are presented, and new findings in the health literature on family relationships and children's long-term, stress-related physical health are discussed. The authors conclude that these new findings indicate that the lingering situation of minimal parenting time with fathers for great numbers of children is a serious public health issue.

Model of How Parenting Time and Parent Conflict Affect Children's Health

Figure 7.1 shows the authors' conceptual model, or hypotheses, of how the effects of parenting time ultimately play out to influence children's health outcomes. Fabricius and colleagues (e.g., Fabricius, Braver, Diaz, & Velez, 2010; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007) have tested this type of model, and it is used here to organize the various sections of this chapter. The model indicates that parenting time should have an impact

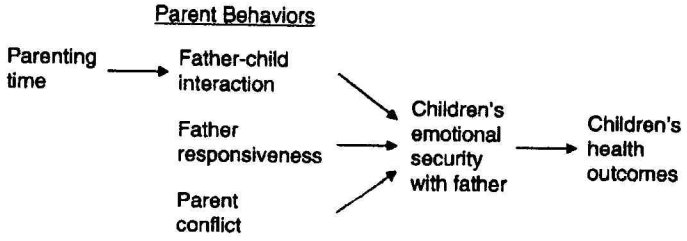

Figure 7.1 Conceptual model relating parenting time to parent behaviors, children's emotional security with father, and children's health outcomes.

on one class of parent behaviors, namely father–child interaction. Interaction is spending time doing things together. *Impact* means that for each father, given his own personal tendency to interact with his child, more parenting time will allow more interaction and less parenting time will allow less. When impact is indicated by an arrow, it usually means both that more of the things on the left end of the arrow causes more of the thing on the right end, and that less of the thing on the left causes less of the thing on the right.

Parenting time should not normally have an impact on father responsiveness, which is the reliability of the father's tendency to respond when the child expresses wants or needs. It reflects not how frequently the child asks, but how reliably the father responds. Responsiveness can occur with or without face-to-face interaction and can be manifested in deeds or words. Examples include conversations, either in person or on the phone, in which the father really *listens* to the child, buying or making things that the child *wants*, helping with homework when the child *asks*, etc.

The model indicates that both father–child interaction and father responsiveness independently affect the child's felt emotional security in the father–child relationship. Parent conflict also has an impact on the emotional security of the father–child relationship (in this case, more parent conflict causes less emotional security, and less parent conflict causes more emotional security). For simplicity, the analogous factors for mothers have not been included in Figure 7.1, but suffice to say that mother–child interactions, mother responsiveness, and parent conflict have an impact on the mother–child relationship, and both the mother–child and the father–child relationships have an impact on the child's health outcomes. Later in this chapter, more will be said about how parenting time differentially affects the mother-child and the father-child relationships.

IS THE QUANTITY OR THE QUALITY OF PARENTING TIME MORE IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES?

Old and New Measures of Parenting Time

An influential review of the research on father–child contact after divorce published just over 10 years ago (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) led to the consensus that quality was more important than quantity. Specifically, Amato and Gilbreth found that *frequency*

of contact was less important for children's outcomes than two other dimensions of the father–child relationship that seemed to reflect the quality of the time they spent together: father–child emotional closeness, and father authoritative parenting. The authors coded the following specific behaviors in the studies they reviewed as indicators of authoritative parenting: engaging in projects together, listening to the child's problems, monitoring and helping with schoolwork, giving advice, explaining rules, and using non-coercive discipline. Amato and Gilbreth's finding continues to influence many researchers to be skeptical that increasing *quantity of parenting time* with non-resident fathers benefits children (e.g., Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007; Stewart, 2003). However, the rest of this section explains why courts and policymakers should be cautious about drawing implications about effects of quantity of parenting time from studies that instead measured frequency of contact.

Amato and Gilbreth (1999) noted that most of the studies prior to 1999 measured frequency of contact and only some measured duration or regularity of visits. When respondents are asked how frequently father–child contact has occurred, they are given a limited number of categories to choose from, such as "once a year," "one to three times a month," "once a week," etc. Frequency poorly represents amount of parenting time. For example, two divorced families that have the same parenting time schedule of every other weekend at the father's home could choose different categories. One family could count it as two *visits* per month, in which case they would report it as "one to three times a month." The other family could count it as four *days* per month, in which case they would report "once a week." Even if both families reported it as "one to three times a month," it might be a two-day weekend visit for one family and a three-day weekend visit for the other. Argys et al. (2007) recently compared several large surveys, four of which measured frequency, and concluded, "What is most striking about the reports of father–child contact . . . and perhaps most alarming to researchers, is the magnitude of the differences in the reported prevalence of father–child contact across the different surveys" (p. 383). This inherent unreliability makes it difficult to find consistent relations between frequency measures and child outcomes. Many of the pre-1999 studies, and many studies today, are based on several national surveys[1] that measured frequency; other national and state surveys[2] as well as individual researchers (e.g., Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000) continue to use measures of frequency.

Despite all the research on divorce since the 1980s, there is no standard measure of amount of parenting time. Argys et al. (2007) noted that in the surveys they examined, "variation in the phrasing of the questions [about father–child contact] is significant" (p. 382). The authors hope that the Argys et al. review will initiate the dialogue necessary for the field to arrive at valid, reliable measures of amount of parenting time, because courts and policymakers are in great need of that information. Some progress is being made. Smyth (2004) describes the telephone survey designed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.[3] Smyth et al. used these questions to sort families into discrete groups to reveal the variety of parenting plans in use. These questions could also be used to calculate the amount of parenting time. One shortcoming of these questions, however, is that they do not apply to parents who do not have a set parenting plan, or to those who live far apart and have yearly plans. A second shortcoming is that they capture only the parenting plan that is in place at the time the questions are asked. If the plan changes later, as a result

of relocation for example, then the data for that family may not represent the parenting plan the child experienced for most of his or her life.

A different approach was taken by Fabricius and Luecken (2007), who asked young adults four retrospective questions about the typical number of days and nights they spent with their fathers during the school year and vacations.[4] The amount of parenting time can be calculated from these questions, and this is the approach used below in the new data. An advantage of this retrospective approach is that respondents can focus on the time period after the divorce that was most typical or representative.

Having valid measures of parenting time is one prerequisite for addressing the issue of the relative importance of quantity versus quality of parenting time, but so is having valid measures of the quality of the time. That issue is discussed next.

To summarize:

- Skepticism about benefits of parenting time stems from data collected with old measures.
- Old measures reflected frequency of visits rather than quantity of parenting time.
- New measures reflect quantity of parenting time.

Distinctions Between Quantity of Time and Quality of Time

Argys et al. (2007) also concluded, "There is no consensus on which measures of the quality of [non-resident] parent–child interaction matter most" (p. 396). This lack of consensus is illustrated in Table 7.1, which shows two recent studies of high-quality father involvement. Both of these studies use the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health 1995-1996 (ADD HEALTH 95; Harris, Florey, Tabor, Bearman, Jones, & Udry, 2003), but the researchers defined different constructs from the same survey questions. This large national survey, like many others, includes items that tap into the central constructs in the model (Figure. 7.1); namely, the quantity of interaction (IN) parents and children have, the degree to which parents are responsive (RE) to children's needs and requests, and children's emotional security (ES) in the parent–child relationship. Table 7.1 shows how each set of researchers idiosyncratically mixed IN, RE, and ES items to form their constructs.

The field needs more principled, theoretical analyses of the quality of non-resident parent involvement and how it relates to parenting time. The authors believe that the scheme represented in Figure 7.1 has good theoretical grounds and also that it makes good intuitive sense. First, according to the classic analysis of Lamb, Pleck, and Levine (1987), the time that parents and children spend together can be divided into the time during which the parent is *available* to the child, and the time during which they actually *interact*. For non-resident parents, parenting time (PT) provides availability. However, the scheme represented in Figure 7.1 further distinguishes interaction into quantity (IN) and quality (RE). The authors do not mean to suggest that other parent behaviors are not also important, such as consistent discipline, monitoring, etc. The point here is to distinguish between parent behaviors (IN) that are more likely to be related to parenting time and parent behaviors (RE) that are less likely to be related to parenting time. When researchers mix IN and RE measures, they blur the distinction. For example, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) mixed

Table 7.1 CONSTRUCTS, ITEMS, AND SOURCE OF DATA IN TWO STUDIES OF HIGH-QUALITY FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND HOW THE ITEMS MAP ONTO THE CONSTRUCTS IN OUR MODEL IN FIGURE 7.1

Study, Construct, and Items	Data set	PT	IN	RE	ES
Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007	ADD HEALTH 95				
Active fathering					
Frequency of contact		x			
Leisure, recreational, religious activities			x		
Talked about important personal or school issues				x	
How close do you feel to father					x
Stewart (2003)	ADD HEALTH 95				
Leisure and recreational activities					
Went shopping together			x		
Played a sport together			x		
Went to movie, play, museum, concert, sports event			x		
Authoritative parenting					
Worked together on school project			x		
Talked about important personal or school issues				x	
Closeness to father					
How close do you feel to father					x

PT = Parenting Time; IN = Interaction; RE = Responsiveness; ES = Emotional security with father

IN measures (engaging in projects together) and RE measures (listening and helping) into their construct of authoritative parenting. When researchers create a mixed measure and label it a measure of quality, they inadvertently stack the deck toward finding that quality of time is more important than quantity of parenting time.

Second, these three dimensions (IN, RE, and ES) are grounded in the central constructs of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), in which parent availability for interaction and responsiveness to the child both contribute to the security of the young child's emotional connection to the parent, and ultimately to the development of healthy independence. Parent availability and responsiveness are parent behaviors that convey meaning to the child about the reliability of the parent's continued support and caring. As Robert Karen (1998) summarized attachment theory after reviewing its historical development and current research, "All your child needs in order to thrive both emotionally and intellectually is your availability and responsiveness" (p. 416).

Third, these three dimensions are also foremost in adolescents' minds when they think about their relationships with their parents. The authors recruited 393 families for a longitudinal study of the role of fathers in adolescent development. Children were asked to describe their relationships with each of their parents in open-ended

interviews when they were in seventh grade and again when they were in 10th grade. The families were equally divided between Anglo-American and Mexican American families, and between intact and stepfather families (see Baham, Weimer, Braver, & Fabricius, 2008, and Schenck, Braver, Wolchik, Saenz, Cookston, & Fabricius, 2009, for sample details). Regardless of which parent they described (resident mother, resident biological father, resident stepfather, and non-resident biological father), virtually all adolescents at both ages and in both ethnic groups spontaneously evaluated their relationships with their parents in terms of IN (e.g., "She does a lot with us." "Sometimes he'll take me out to basketball." "Most of the time we really don't spend time with each other."), RE (e.g., "He's always there for me." "He tries not to ignore me." "When I ask for help, she's always too busy"), and ES (e.g., "He can make me feel better." "She's nice but she can be mean." "He yells at me a lot."). It is remarkable that adolescents still monitor and distinguish the same general types of parent behaviors (IN and RE) that, according to attachment theory, initiated their attachment and emotional security with each of their parents when they were infants. This is consistent with Aquilino's (2006) finding that frequent contact during adolescence was the most important predictor, among other measures of father involvement, of close relationships with fathers in young adulthood. The fact that these parent behaviors (IN and RE) continue to be important in adolescents' representations of their relationships with their parents provides further justification for maintaining this fundamental distinction in the scheme represented in Figure 7.1. As Bowlby (1969) always emphasized, attachment processes continue to operate throughout one's life.

Figure 7.1 illustrates why the authors believe questions such as, "Is quantity of time or quality of time more important for child outcomes?" or "Is parenting time or the parent–child relationship more important?" are straw man comparisons that need to be retired from the debate. As shown in Figure 7.1, parenting time helps build emotionally secure relationships via interaction, but so do other things, including the parent's responsiveness. Emotionally secure parent–child relationships help ensure positive child outcomes. Thus, parenting time is farthest to the left in the causal chain, and things like parent responsiveness and the emotional security of the parent–child relationship (which are different constructs usually subsumed under the rubric "quality") are farther to the right and closer to child outcomes. Things closer to child outcomes in the causal chain will have stronger correlations to child outcomes than things farther away. Asking whether parenting time or various indices of quality are more important presupposes a theoretical model in which they occupy positions in the causal chain the same number of links away from child outcomes, but no such models are on offer. In the absence of such a model, it is an unfair question. In the model represented in Figure 7.1 it is fair to ask, for example, whether IN or RE is more important for ES. The question focused on below, however, is the more important one for courts and policymakers, and the one for which there are new data: What is the strength of the relationship between PT and ES with the father?

To summarize:

- Researchers usually measure but often confuse three things: the amount of direct interaction parents and children have, the degree to which parents are responsive to children's needs and requests, and the child's emotional security in the parent–child relationship.

- These distinctions are grounded in attachment theory and also in adolescents' representations of their relationships with their parents.
- The model represented in Figure 7.1 specifies connections among two aspects of quality and two aspects of quantity: the *quantity* of parenting time should have an impact on the *quantity* of father–child interaction, which in turn should have an impact on the *quality* (i.e., security) of father–child relationship; parenting time should not affect the *quality* of father–child interaction (i.e., the fathers' responsiveness).
- The question of whether quantity or quality of time is more important is a straw man.

New Findings on the Quantity of Parenting Time and the Quality of Parent–Child Relationships

During the 2005–2006 academic year, two of the authors of this chapter, Fabricius and Sokol, surveyed 1,030 students who reported their parents had divorced before they were 16 years old. On average their parents had divorced about 10 years earlier. They completed an online survey administered by the Psychology Department for Introductory Psychology credit, and for which Institutional Review Board human subjects approval was received. The survey included the parenting time questions in Footnote 4, as well as a large number of questions about their past and current family relationships and situations that allowed the researchers to capture several aspects of the emotional security of their relationships with their parents with a single score for each relationship. Because these scores represent how the students viewed their relationships at the time of the survey, when they were generally 18 to 20 years of age, they allowed the researchers to assess long-term associations between PT and ES.

Figure 7.2 shows the relation between PT and ES with the fathers. The vertical line divides the PT scale at 13 to 15 days per "month" (i.e., 28 days). This represents 50% PT with each parent. The father–child relationship improved with each increment of PT from 0% time with father to 50% ($r = .51$, N = 871, $p < 0.001$). From 50% to 100% PT with father, the father–child relationship did not show statistically significant change ($r = .15$, N = 152); the smaller sample sizes in these categories in which children lived primarily with their fathers mean that the zigzags are not reliable and probably represent random variation.

For simplicity in Figure 7.2, the mother–child relationship scores are not shown. As Fabricius and colleagues have found in other studies (Fabricius, 2003; Luecken & Fabricius, 2003), the long-term mother–child relationship mirrored the father–child relationship; that is, it remained constant with each increment of PT from 0% to 50% time with father, and declined thereafter. These findings indicate that when either parent has the child living with him or her for a majority of the time, increasing PT with the second parent is not associated with any risk of harm to the relationship with the first parent. Instead, increasing PT with the second parent is associated with improvements in that relationship, and benefits continue to accrue up to and including equal PT. At 50% PT, it appears that each relationship achieves its highest level of emotional security.

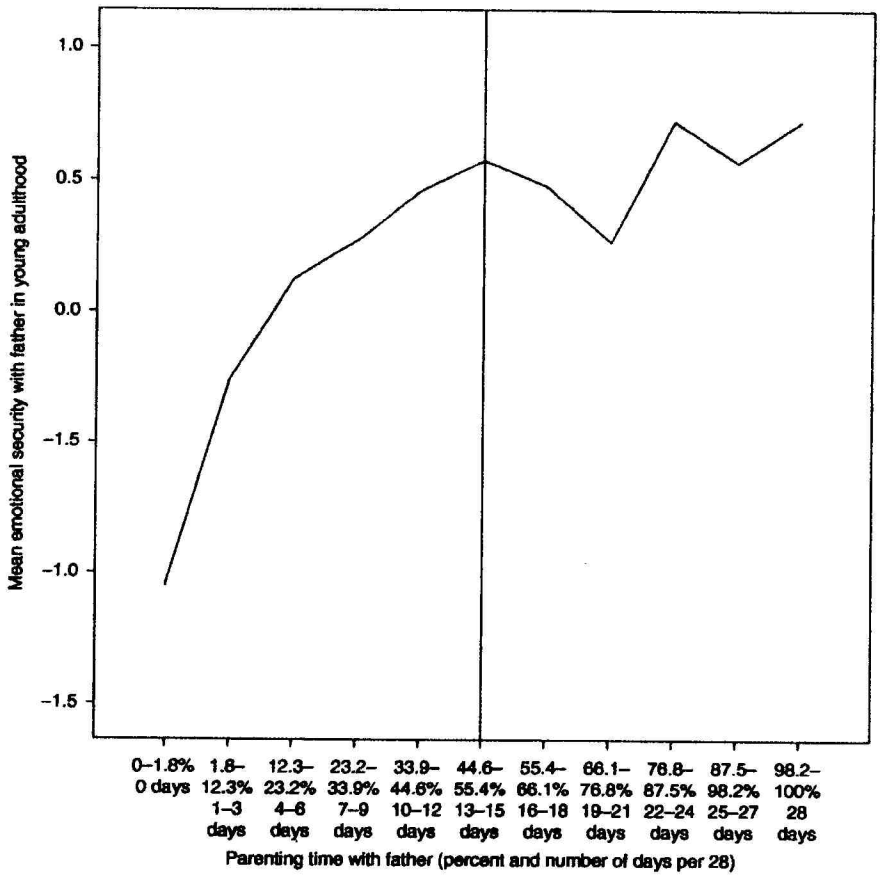

Figure 7.2. Relation between the amounts of parenting time per month (4 weeks) students had with their fathers and the emotional security of their relationships with their fathers in young adulthood.

The strength of the association between PT and ES with father is substantial. A correlation of .51 means that about 25% of the variability in relationship security across students can be explained by PT. In the model represented in Figure 7.1, PT is just one of the things that affects ES, and it does so only indirectly, through the amount of father–child IN that it makes possible. (Fabricius et al. [2010] reported other evidence that PT correlated significantly with IN, and that it did not correlate with RE.) The fact that PT accounted for about one fourth of relationship security so many years later is important. The authors' hypothesis is that PT causes these changes. The alternate hypothesis that the increase in ES across PT categories from 0% to 50% was due to different fathers self-selecting into different categories of PT. This might happen in two ways. Most of the disinterested fathers—those who would ultimately end up with the worst relationships with their college-aged children—might choose,

or be given, 0% PT, and progressively fewer such fathers might choose or be given each PT category up to 50%. Or a similar, but reversed, self-selection process might occur for fathers who are especially committed and capable.

The authors examined the feasibility of the self-selection explanation by first splitting the father relationship scores into five equal groups (quintiles) from lowest to highest. The top 20% are those fathers with the best relationships and, according to the self-selection hypothesis, are the most committed and capable. Those in the bottom 20% are presumably the most disinterested. The self-selection hypothesis is that the increase in the security of father–child relationships across PT from 0% to 50% is explained by the distribution of especially committed and/or disinterested fathers across the PT categories. It would be unlikely according to that hypothesis to find a significant correlation between PT and ES *within either the top or bottom quintile*. That would require a remarkable degree of precision by which those especially committed or disinterested fathers chose or were given PT categories that matched their abilities to eventually achieve corresponding levels of relationship security with their college-aged children. In fact, there were significant positive correlations between PT and ES in *both* the top and bottom quintiles, and also in two of the three middle quintiles. This suggests that the self-selection explanation for the association between PT and ES, in which the most committed fathers were sorted into the higher categories of PT and/or the least interested fathers were sorted into the lower categories of PT, is not sufficient to account for the details of the data. Fabricius et al. (2010) also considered the self-selection hypothesis, but in light of the common finding that fathers and children generally want more PT with father. They concluded that "the self-selection hypothesis should be viewed with a new sense of skepticism" (p. 214). The new data shown in Figure 7.2 provide additional cause for skepticism. The available evidence is not sufficient to reject the hypothesis that PT causes changes in father–child relationship security.

Studies in the past (i.e., those reviewed by Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) focused more on associations between father–child contact and child outcomes such as depression, aggression, and school success than on associations between contact and father–child relationships. This is changing, however. Fabricius et al. (2010) reviewed the studies that focus on associations between contact and parent–child relationships. In contrast to the weak findings in studies of contact and outcomes, these studies find consistent associations between contact and relationships. These studies are summarized in Table 7.2.

To summarize:

- Consistent with the model represented in Figure 7.1, the long-term father–child relationship improves at each level of PT; benefits continue to accrue up to and including equal PT; the long-term mother–child relationship remains constant at each level of PT, up to and including equal PT.
- The evidence to date is consistent with the hypothesis that amount of PT exerts a causal effect on father–child relationship security.
- Many other studies also find consistent associations between father–child contact and father–child relationships.

Table 7.2 Studies of Associations between Father-Child Contact and Father-Child Relationships

Study	Measures	Findings
Buchanan et al., 1996	Amount of parenting time, including number of overnights	Adolescents with 2 or more overnights per week had better relationships with both parents than those in sole residence; those in sole mother residence had better relationships with father if they had some parenting with him.
Dunn et al., 2004; King, 2006; Sobolewski & King, 2005; King & Sobolewski, 2006; Aquilino, 2006	Frequency of father-child contact	Strong associations between frequency of contact and higher father-child relationship quality
Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008	Amount of parenting time	Young adults who had more parenting time experienced higher levels of affective, nurturing fathering, which was likely an indication of father-adolescent closeness.
Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Luecken & Fabricius, 2003	Amount of parenting time	College students who had more parenting time had better relationships with fathers.
Struss, Pfeiffer, Preuss, & Felder, 2001	Quantity of father-child interaction during parenting time	More father-child interaction predicted adolescents' positive feelings about visiting.
Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996	Quantity of father-child interaction during parenting time; frequency and length of visits	Quantity of interaction and frequency and length of visits were related to the father-child relationship.
Whiteside & Becker, 2000	Meta-analysis of studies of frequency of father-child contact	More frequent contact related to better father-child relationships.

Trends in Parenting Time

Courts and policymakers need to be aware of changes in cultural values and norms regarding parenting because custody policy and practice derive their legitimacy in part from accurate reflection of parenting values and norms (Fabricius et al., 2010). There is now a strong consensus among the general public that equal parenting time is best for the child. Large majorities favor it in all the locales and among all the demographic groups in the United States and Canada in which this question has been asked, and across several variations in question format, including variations that ask respondents to consider differences in how much pre-divorce child care each parent provided, and differences in parent conflict. It should be noted that none of the polls asked about cases in which there is domestic violence, and the public consensus for equal parenting time should not be taken to apply to such cases. Table 7.3 summarizes these polls. This public consensus about equal parenting time

Table 7.3 PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ABOUT EQUAL PARENTING TIME

Reference	Participants	Questions	Responses
Fabricius & Hall, 2000	AZ college students	What is the best living arrangement for children?	70% to 80% said "equal time with both parents;" no difference due to gender or whether their parents were divorced.
Braver, Fabricius, & Ellman, 2008	Tucson, AZ, jury pools; Phoenix, AZ, & Riverside, CA, parents	What is the best living arrangement for children?	Most frequent response was "equal time with both parents" for men (67%) and women (46%).
Massachusetts ballot 2004 http://www.boston.com/news/special/politics/2004_results/general_election/questions_all_by_town.htm	Voting citizens	Should there be a presumption for joint physical custody?	85% said yes.
Fabricius, et al. (2010)	Tucson, AZ, jury pools	Repeated wording of the MA ballot question	90% said yes; no differences due to any demographic variables.
Canadian National Poll 2009 http://www.familylawwebguide.com.au/forum/pg/topicview/misc/4171/index.php&keep_session=2049584127	Random telephone survey of 1,002 Canadians from March 13 to March 18, 2009	Do you support legislation to create a presumption of equal parenting in child custody cases?	78% said yes.
Braver, Ellman, Votruba, & Fabricius (2011)	Tucson, AZ, jury pools	Hypothetical cases in which participants were asked to award parenting time.	Participants most commonly awarded equal parenting time even when one parent had provided most child care and when there was high mutual parent conflict; when one parent instigated the conflict, they awarded more time to the other.

is probably best characterized as a cultural value rather than mere opinion, given both its connection to the long-term historical trend toward gender equality, and the evidence for its universality and robustness. This cultural value is consistent with the findings in Figure 7.2.

Regarding norms of practice, there appears to be a slow trend toward greater amounts of PT with fathers, especially equal PT. In the data collected in 2005–2006 in which the students' parents had divorced on average 10 years earlier, about 9% of students reported equal PT (50%). In Wisconsin the percentage of divorced parents with equal PT increased from 15% in 1996–1999 to 24% in 2003–2004 (Brown & Cancian, 2007). In Washington, the percentage of divorced parents with equal PT was approximately 20% in 2008–2009 (George, 2009). In Arizona the percentage of case files specifying equal PT tripled from 5% in 2002 (Venohr & Griffith, 2003) to 15% in 2007 (Venohr & Kaunelis, 2008). The Arizona case files included both divorced and never-married parents, whereas the other rates reflected only divorced parents.

The above makes clear that the practice of equal PT lags the consensus about its value. Braver, Ellman, Votruba, and Fabricius (2011) and Fabricius et al. (2010) discuss the possible complex reasons for the lag. One possibility is a self-fulfilling prophecy stemming from belief that family courts are biased toward mothers. Such a belief appears to exist among divorce attorneys in Maryland, Missouri, Texas, and Washington (Dotterweich & McKinney, 2000) and in Arizona (Braver, Cookston, & Cohen, 2002), and also among the public in Arizona (Braver et al., 2011; Fabricius et al., 2010). Belief that the courts have a maternal bias could dissuade fathers from pressing for shared parenting or entice mothers to resist. If so, it is important for the public to know whether the bias is real.

Some evidence exists (Stamps, 2002) that judges in four Southern states may have a maternal bias. Fabricius (in preparation) received Institutional Review Board human subjects approval to present to approximately 30 Arizona family court judges and commissioners two of the hypothetical cases involving child custody previously used with the public by Braver et al. (2011; Study 2). In each case the two parents ask for as much PT for themselves as possible, and in each case there are no issues with parental fitness, or ability to care for the children, or domestic violence. The difference is that in one there is little conflict between the parents, while in the other there is a great deal of current conflict between the parents, equally often initiated by the father and the mother. Whereas about two thirds of the public said that if they were the judge they would grant equal PT in each case (Braver et al., 2011), about 90% of the judges and commissioners said they would grant equal PT in each case. This question format using hypothetical cases representing judges' daily professional experience produced more responses from judges that reflected the cultural value placed on equal PT than from members of the lay public. This suggests that skepticism about the court's willingness to award shared parenting in Arizona at least might be unwarranted.[5]

Family courts also derive legitimacy from scientific findings. The findings about families that have joint residential parenting are clear. In 2002, Robert Bauserman published a comprehensive review of the research comparing joint versus sole custody. This review included 11 published and 22 unpublished (almost all doctoral dissertations) studies, comprising 1,846 sole-custody and 814 joint-custody children. The category of "joint custody" included *joint physical* custody as well as *joint legal*

custody with sole maternal physical custody. Children in joint custody were significantly better off than those in sole custody (and about as well off as those in which the parents remained married) in terms of general adjustment, family relationships, self-esteem, emotional and behavioral adjustment, and divorce-specific adjustment. The joint legal custody families and the joint physical custody families showed similar benefits, and both involved a "substantial proportion of time actually spent living with each parent" (p. 93).

At issue, though, is the possibility that the "better" parents may have been the ones to want joint residential custody. In the classic Stanford Child Custody Study (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), the researchers statistically controlled for characteristics that might predispose parents both to want joint residential custody and also to have more parenting skills and resources, including education, income, and initial levels of interparental hostility. Even after controlling for these characteristics, though, children in joint residential custody were still the ones who showed the greatest satisfaction with their parenting arrangements and had the best long-term adjustment (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993).

Moreover, the great majority of joint residential parents did *not* initially want and agree to joint residential custody. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) gathered data at the pre-decree interview about parents' initial preferences ("what he or she would personally like in terms of residential custody, regardless of what in fact had been or would be requested in the legal proceedings," p. 99). Using the now publically available early waves of the Stanford Child Custody Study (www.socio.com/srch/summary/afda/fam25-27.htm), the current authors determined that there were 92 families with joint residential custody in which the parents had expressed wishes for either sole or joint residential custody. Both parents had initially wanted joint custody in only 19 of those 92 families. The largest subgroup of the joint residential custody families (N = 37) were those where the mother had wanted sole residential custody for herself and the father had wanted joint custody. In 19 other families each parent had wanted sole custody for himself or herself. Thus, very few parents initially agreed on joint residential custody, and the great majority had to accept it over their initial objections. About half accepted it after using some level of court services (mediation, custody evaluation, trial, or judicial imposition). Nevertheless, those with joint residential custody had the most well-adjusted children years later. This finding validates the responses of the Arizona judges and commissioners discussed above that they would impose equal PT when each parent wanted the majority of time for himself or herself.

Having considered the evidence and the underlying theory for the impact of quantity of PT on emotional security of parent–child relationships, and the consistency between the science and contemporary cultural parenting values, the next section considers whether any of that changes in high-conflict families.

To summarize:

- All public opinion findings to date indicate widespread public endorsement of equal PT.
- There is a slow trend toward equal PT in practice.
- Family law attorneys and the public appear to believe that family courts have a maternal bias, but initial data suggest courts may be more willing to order equal PT than generally believed.

- Children who have joint residential custody fare better than children in sole residential custody, and these findings do not seem to be due simply to "better" parents choosing joint residential custody.

SHOULD PARENTING TIME BE LIMITED IN HIGH-CONFLICT FAMILIES?

Previous Research is Mixed but Can Be Sorted Out

One of the vexing questions confronting courts and policymakers concerns PT when there is high conflict between parents.[5] The argument is often made that more PT exposes children to more of the conflict, but that argument is a bit muddled. It is not clear that more PT per se necessarily exposes children to more parent conflict; PT schedules that give more *frequent* discrete periods of PT and thus more *transitions* between parents are more likely to do so. In addition, it is not often acknowledged, but the previous research on this question is in fact quite mixed. On the one hand, Amato and Rezac (1994) and Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) found that more frequent contact in high-conflict families was related to poorer child outcomes. Johnston, Kline, and Tschann (1989) found that among the very high-conflict families referred to court services for custody disputes that composed their sample, greater amounts of visitation in sole custody arrangements were generally harmful. These findings have led some commentators (e.g., Amato, 1993; Emery, 1999) to advocate limiting PT when high conflict prevails.

On the other hand, there is at least as much contrary evidence. Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbush (1996) did not find that greater amounts of visitation were harmful in high-conflict families, and Crosbie-Burnett (1991) did not find that more frequent contact was harmful in high-conflict families. Johnston et al.'s (1989) finding was restricted to sole custody families; the children with equal PT (in which children spent 12 to 13 days a month with their fathers) did not have worse adjustment than those in sole custody. Amato and Rezac's (1994) finding was restricted to boys; girls who had more frequent contact in high-conflict families did not have poorer outcomes. Healy, Malley, and Stewart (1990) and Kurdek (1986) found the opposite pattern: that more frequent visitation was actually associated with fewer adjustment problems when parent conflict was high. Similarly, Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that more PT was associated with improvements in father–child relationships in families with both high and low frequency of conflict, and served to counteract the negative effects of parent conflict on father–child relationship security.

The divergence of findings among these studies can be partly explained by whether researchers measured frequency of contact or amount of PT. Most researchers measured frequency of contact (Amato & Rezak, 1994; Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Healy et al., 1990; Hetherington et al., 1978; Kurdek, 1986), and among those studies the results are mixed. However, results were consistent among studies that measured amount of PT. Buchanan et al. (1996) and Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that more PT was not harmful in high-conflict families, and Johnston et al. (1989) found that equal PT was not harmful in families referred to court services for custody disputes. Johnston et al. (1989) did find that greater amounts of PT in sole custody arrangements were

harmful, but in their study amount of PT and frequency of transitions happened to be substantially correlated. Thus, sometimes studies indicate that more frequent contact and *transitions* between conflicted parents' homes can be harmful, presumably because they expose children to more instances of conflict. However, there are two ways to limit transitions: one is to eliminate some visits, and the other is to combine some visits into longer, uninterrupted time periods. In the first case amount of PT would decrease, and in the second it could stay the same or increase. The second approach remains viable—and is no doubt preferable—for high-conflict families because there is no evidence that greater *amounts* of PT are harmful for most children of conflicted parents, or that equal PT is harmful for children whose parents are involved in lengthy custody disputes. On the contrary, evidence suggests that father–child relationships can be strengthened through increased PT in high-conflict families as well as in low-conflict families (Buchanan et al., 1996; Fabricius and Luecken, 2007; Johnston et al., 1989), and that strengthened parent–child relationships can shield children from some of the effects of parent conflict (Fainsilber-Katz & Gottman, 1997; Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998).

To summarize:

- When researchers used the old measures of frequency of contact, the findings sometimes showed that more frequent contact was harmful in families with high parent conflict, and sometimes did not show it was more harmful; the harm might have been due to more transitions in some families with higher frequency of contact.
- When researchers measured amount of PT the findings were more consistent that more PT was not harmful and was beneficial even in high-conflict families.

New Findings When Conflict is Severe

The measure of parent conflict in Fabricius and Luecken (2007) asked about frequency of parent conflict. The new 2005–2006 data set described above included a different measure that asked about the severity of parent conflict before, during, and up to 5 years after their parents' final separation was examined. Results showed that more PT was related to better father–child relationships not only for those students reporting low severity of parent conflict but also for those reporting high severity of parent conflict. These findings on severity of parent conflict replicate and extend the Fabricius and Luecken (2007) findings on frequency of conflict. It is important to state that these findings should not be taken to apply to families in which there is violence or abuse, however.

To summarize:

- The long-term father–child relationship improved with increases in PT in families in which parent conflict was less severe as well as in those in which it was more severe.
- These findings should not be taken to apply to families in which there is violence or abuse, however.

LINKS TO CHILDREN'S LONG-TERM PHYSICAL HEALTH

Risky Families

The divorce literature has long documented the heightened risk for children of mental health problems traceable to the disrupted parent–child relationships and parent conflict that so often accompany divorce. The recent physical health literature that focuses on *risky families* is relevant to divorce research because it indicates profound effects on children's long-term, stress-related physical health attributable to these same family factors. It also gives insight into the underlying physiological mechanisms that are triggered by these factors. The physical health findings have yet to make their way prominently into the divorce literature and appear to be less well known to courts and policymakers.

Rena Repetti, Shelley E. Taylor, and Teresa E. Seeman of the University of California, Los Angeles, published the first review of the physical health literature as it relates to family relationships in 2002 in the prestigious journal *Psychological Bulletin*. They concluded that dysfunctional family relationships "lead to consequent accumulating risk for *mental health disorders*, *major chronic diseases*, and *early mortality*" (p. 330, emphasis added). They reviewed 15 physical health studies, including several longitudinal studies that began decades ago and fortunately included questions about family relationships in addition to questions about diet, alcohol, exercise, smoking, etc. Findings consistently point to adverse health consequences to children of families characterized not only by high parent conflict, but also by cold, unsupportive parent–child relationships, the so-called risky families. The findings suggested that conflict between the parents and poor parent–child relationships exert similar effects. Family conflict and aggression were related to poorer health in childhood and adulthood, including higher rates of infectious diseases, and to slowed growth, including reduced weight gain in infancy and reduced height at age 7 and in adulthood. Poor parent–child relationships were also related to poorer physical health, including obesity in early adulthood and serious medical conditions in midlife, and to delayed growth during infancy.

For instance, Russek and Schwartz (1997) examined data from Harvard undergraduate men in the early 1950s who were asked to describe their relationship with each parent. Their descriptions were coded as positive ("very close," "warm and friendly") or negative ("tolerant," "strained and cold"). Twelve percent of relationships with mothers and 20% with fathers were coded negative. Thirty-five years later the researchers obtained health status based on in-person interviews and review of available medical records. Of the men who described a negative relationship with either their mother or their father, 85% to 91% had developed cardiovascular disease, duodenal ulcer, and/or alcoholism, compared to only 45% to 50% of those who had described positive relationships. When assessments of parent–child relationships and parent conflict were made in the same study, researchers found similar effects associated with each. For example, Shaffer, Duszynski, and Thomas (1982) examined data from White male physicians who graduated from medical school between 1948 and 1964 and described their family members' attitudes toward each other as either positive (warm, close, understanding, confiding) or negative (detached, dislike, hurt, high tension). Men who described more negative and less positive family relationships were at increased

risk of developing cancer, even after controlling for health risk factors such as age, alcohol use, cigarette smoking, being overweight, and serum cholesterol levels.

It is noteworthy that several of these studies began in the 1950s and 1960s, when mothers were almost exclusive caregivers. The fact that they show that a poor relationship with either the mother or the father had similar effects indicates that the health risks associated with disrupted parent–child relationships are not limited to the primary caregiver.

To summarize:

- Families characterized by either parent conflict *or* poor parent–child relationships pose serious long-term health risks to children, including early mortality.
- Some of these studies began in the 1950s and 1960s, when mothers were almost exclusive caregivers, and they show that a poor relationship with either the mother *or* the father had similar effects. Thus, the findings are not limited to just the primary caregiver.

The Stress Response System as the Mechanism by Which Risky Families Can Damage Health

Repetti et al. (2002) found evidence that risky families affect children's physical health via cumulative disturbances established during infancy and early childhood in physiologic and neuroendocrine system regulation (i.e., disruptions in sympathetic-adrenomedullary [SAM] reactivity, hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical [HPA] reactivity, and serotonergic functioning). Such disruptions can have effects on organs, including the brain, and on systems, including the immune system. The emerging consensus (Repetti et al., 2002; Troxel & Matthews, 2004) is that the social processes of parent conflict and poor parent–child relationships cause constant stress in the home, which chronically activates and thereby dysregulates children's biological stress responses, leading to deterioration of cardiovascular system functioning and hypertension (e.g., Ewart, 1991) and coronary heart disease (e.g., Woodall & Matthews, 1989), and possibly hindering children's acquisition of emotional competence and self-regulatory skills (e.g., Camras et al., 1988; Dunn & Brown, 1994; Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Tesla, & Youngblade, 1991).

Psychological processes add the cognitive and emotional dimensions to this dysregulation. In modern attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), poor parent–child relationships lead to feelings of insecurity, anger, distrust in continued parental support, and low self-worth, which can by themselves chronically activate and dysregulate children's biological stress responses. In Davies and Cummings' (1994) attachment-based theory, parent conflict similarly leads to emotional insecurity because the child fears abandonment by one or both fighting parents. This is represented in Figure 7.1, where parent conflict is a parent behavior like parent–child interaction and responsiveness. Parent conflict can also lead parents to withdraw from the children and reduce their interaction and responsiveness (e.g., Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Weirson, 1990; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Parke & Tinsley, 1983) and thus can also indirectly affect the child's felt security in the parent–child relationship, but for simplicity that more complex path has not been included in the model.

This emotional security mechanism is not an abstract concoction. It incorporates the "fight-or-flight" response system that we experience in acute form when our security is threatened, for example by someone pulling a gun or by hearing footsteps behind us in an empty parking structure. One of the greatest advances in modern psychology has been to see how this system functions during the child's normal development in the family. The primary threats to safety and protection that the helpless human infant and young child's system is attuned to detect are parent absence, parent unresponsiveness, and parent conflict. In acute form, they elicit in children the same shortness of breath, increased blood pressure and heart rate, fear, etc., that we all experience when threatened because they are caused by the instantaneous release of the same powerful hormones. Children in families characterized by dysfunctional parent conflict and unsupportive parent–child relationships experience these threats repeatedly and learn to anticipate them when they are absent. This exposes these children to chronic, low-level doses of these hormones, which is what causes the long-term health problems.

Considering that almost 40% of the college students represented in Figure 7.2 fell into the two lowest categories of PT with their fathers, and now on average as young adults have destroyed relationships with their fathers, and linking that with the lifetime health outcomes of young adults who had reported similarly distant relationships with their parents, should cause alarm among researchers and policy makers at the extent of the personal suffering—and at the scope of the public health problem—that they represent. Further considering that those who also experienced severe parent conflict generally have still worse relationships with their fathers (though, as noted above, even for them more PT is related to improved relationships), should raise even more concern.

To summarize:

- Consistent with attachment theory, when parents are unavailable, unresponsive, or in conflict with each other, children perceive this as a threat to their continued support, which leads to chronic activation of the stress response system.
- Chronic activation can damage organs and systems, and lead to serious long-term health problems.

Mechanisms Available to Courts and Policymakers to Reduce Health Risks to Children of Divorce

These findings indicate that high parent conflict and unsupportive relationships are formidable risks associated with a number of mental health problems and major illnesses later in life. The implication is that family courts and policymakers should give equal consideration to minimizing parent conflict and strengthening parent–child relationships because of their similar long-term health consequences. Many jurisdictions do have policies and interventions regarding reducing parent conflict and strengthening parent–child relationships by promoting positive parenting.

When dealing with the question of whether PT should be limited in high-conflict families, courts should consider the potential risk of damaging parent–child

relationships by reducing PT. The evidence indicates that in divorced families with frequent and severe parent conflict, more PT with the father is associated with an improvement in the father–child relationship. Limiting PT when there is parent conflict limits the amount of interaction children can have with that parent, which risks undermining the parent–child relationship and risks making those children doubly vulnerable to long-term damage to their physical health. Courts have better options to deal with children's exposure to parent conflict than reducing PT, such as schedules with fewer transitions, or transitions that do not require face-to-face parent interactions. The evidence suggests that parent conflict alone should not be the basis for limiting PT; rather, the data indicate that courts should weigh the option of increasing PT in high-conflict families. This flies in the face of the accepted wisdom and practice of limiting PT in high-conflict families. But as discussed, the arguments for the accepted wisdom and practice are not based on strong empirical evidence that increased PT is harmful to children in high-conflict families. This recommendation to consider increasing PT in high-conflict families is consistent with Repetti et al.'s (2002) conclusion that parent conflict and parent–child relationships can have independent effects on children's health. That means that parents in conflictual relationships are not necessarily also the ones who are cold and unsupportive with their children. That implies that parent–child relationships can be improved in high-conflict families. Direct evidence that improved parent–child relationships can counteract some harmful effects of parent conflict is available (Fainsilber-Katz &Gottman, 1997; Sandler et al., 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998).

The allocation of PT is an important tool that courts and policymakers have to strengthen parent–child relationships in all families. Evidence and theory both suggest that the quantity of PT affects the long-term quality of the father–child relationship via the increased parent–child interaction it allows. The evidence in Figure 7.2 makes a relatively strong argument that PT exerts a causal influence on parent–child relationships. That argument is also supported by the theoretical explanation of the causal influence provided by attachment theory. It is especially impressive by how important parent–child interaction is to adolescents, as indicated by the central role it plays in their representations of their relationships with their parents. They closely monitor the amount of interaction they have with each of their parents, and evaluate whether it is personally sufficient. Attachment theory identifies parent availability as one of the potential threats that the child's emotional security system is designed to monitor. Time spent interacting is one way that emotionally close and supportive relationships develop, and time lost risks exposing children to chronic stress and disrupted parent relationships, even in adolescence (e.g., Aquilino, 2006).

Courts and policymakers may be reluctant to consider the allocation of PT as a tool to strengthen parent–child relationships because they often receive the following expert advice or testimony: (a) Quality is more important than quantity of PT, and (b) Policies that might encourage any particular level of PT should be avoided because it is not known what level of PT is best for any individual family. The reasons why (a) is an unfair comparison have already been discussed. Here is an analogy regarding (b): Level of education affects the types of jobs people get, which in turn affects their lifetime earnings, but economists do not frame the question as, "Which

is more important for determining lifetime earnings, level of education or type of job?" Education has an indirect effect, so this either/or question is not useful. The correlation between job type and earnings will be stronger than the correlation between education level and earnings, but that would not prompt economists to advocate for less attention being given to education.

To carry the analogy further, society takes it for granted that it is not known what level of education is best for any individual, and that policy makers cannot prescribe the same level of education for everyone. But society nevertheless endorses policies that inform people of the importance of education for lifetime earning potential, that make education available to all who want it, and that encourage education even to the extent of prescribing a minimum level for all children. Similarly, courts and policymakers cannot know what level of parent conflict or what level of security of parent–child relationships is acceptable for any family, but they nevertheless institute policies that encourage parents to reduce conflict and strengthen relationships. Likewise, courts and policymakers should institute policies that encourage parents to maximize PT for both parents within the constraints of individual family situations.

The strong connection between PT and father–child relationships in divorced families with both low and high levels of parent conflict, along with the evidence and theoretical understanding that have built over decades about how unsupportive parent–child relationships impair long-term health, means that the lingering situation of minimal PT for great numbers of children is a public health issue that demands the attention of researchers, policymakers, and individual courts. Much research (reviewed in Fabricius et al., 2010) shows that children and divorced fathers generally want more PT. The authors do not see a compelling reason to doubt that absent any unusual circumstances, granting and encouraging more PT, especially in high-conflict families, will be a good thing for children, and for society.

Guidelines: Considerations and Cautions

- Courts and policymakers should give equal consideration to minimizing parent conflict and strengthening parent–child relationships because of their similar long-term health consequences for children.
- Courts have better options to deal with children's exposure to parent conflict than reducing parenting time because that might risk damaging the parent–child relationship; better options include schedules with fewer transitions, or transitions that do not require face-to-face parent interactions.
- Evidence and theory both suggest that quantity of parenting time affects the child's long-term security in the father–child relationship, which makes it another important tool courts have to strengthen parent–child relationships.
- Courts and policymakers should institute policies that encourage parents to maximize parenting time for both parents within the constraints of the individual family situation.

NOTES

1 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79; http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy79.htm); National Survey of America's Families (NSAF; http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/series/216); National Survey of Families and Households 1987 (NSFH87) and 1992 (NSFH92; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

2 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health 1995–1996 (ADD HEALTH 95; Harris, Florey, Tabor, Bearman, Jones, & Udry,2003); National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97; http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy97.htm); Britain's Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children 1991 (ALSPAC91; Golding, 1996), Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth 1994–1995 (NLSCY94; Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007); Wisconsin Child Support Demonstration Evaluation–Mother Survey, late 1990s (WCSDE; http://www.irp.wisc.edu/research/childsup/csde.htm).

3 "Six questions were asked of parents who reported that a set pattern of face-to-face contact was occurring: Is your contact arrangement based on a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly schedule? Each [week/fortnight/month], how many blocks of contact usually occur? Thinking about [each] block of contact: What day of the week does contact usually start? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually begin? What day of the week does contact usually end? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually end?" (Smyth, 2004, p. 36).

4 "Considering the most typical living arrangement you had after the divorce, what was (a) the number of days you spent any time at all with your father in an average 2-week period during the school year [0 to 14]? (b) the number of overnights (i.e., sleepovers) you spent with your father in an average 2-week period during the school year [0 to 14]? (c) the number of school vacation weeks out of 15 (Christmas = 2 weeks, spring = 1 week, summer = 12 weeks) during which your time with your father was different from what it was during the school year [0 to 15]? And (d) the percentage of time you spent with your father during those vacation weeks above that were different from the regular schedule [0% to 100% in 10% increments]?"

5 It might be important to note that Arizona family court judges had received periodic training during the past decade on research related to parenting time.

6 Because of the complexity of the issue and because of space limitations, we are not including here conflict that reaches the level of physical violence. Lamb and Kelly (2009) have a good discussion of this and reference the quickly changing consensus view observed by Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, and Bala (2008) and Kelly and Johnson (2008) that types and duration of the physical violence must be distinguished.

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