



Research Roundtable Summary



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Research Projects

Infants after Divorce: Overnight Visitation and Family Relationships

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Research Roundtable #21 Summary

Infants after Divorce: Overnight Visitation and Family Relationships

About This Series

The Research Roundtable Series, sponsored by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB), disseminates the results of MCHB-funded research to policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in the public and private sectors. The results of these projects influence future service, research, and policy development. The Research Roundtable sessions provide an opportunity for researchers to discuss their findings with policymakers, MCH program directors, service providers, and other health professionals.

The MCHB Research Program is directed by Dr. Gontran Lamberty and administered through the Division of Systems, Education and Analysis, MCHB, Health Resources (HRSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of the MCHB Research Program is to support applied research that shows promise of substantial contribution to the advancement of maternal and child health services.

Introductions

Dr. Gontran Lamberty introduced the speakers for the Research Roundtable. Dr. Judith Solomon is a developmental psychologist who received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. Her area of specialization is the development of attachment in normative and high-risk populations. She has published extensively in professional journals and books on such topics as the definition of insecure-disorganized attachments, mental representations of attachment and caregiving of children and their parents, attachment assessment, and the development and organization of the caregiving system. Dr. Solomon received a grant from MCHB for the first systematic study of infants and toddlers in divorced and separated families. This work was funded through the Judith Wallerstein Center for the Family in Transition, in Corte Madera, CA. Major summaries of this work have been submitted for publication. She is the first editor of *Attachment Disorganization*, the first edited volume of original research on these high-risk attachment relationships (in press).

Dr. Mari L. Clements is assistant professor of psychology and Associate Director of the Child Study Center at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research interests are centered on the effects of marital conflict on children and families. She has published in such journals as *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, and *Journal of Social Issues*. She has

served as a reviewer for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Dr. Clements received her Ph.D. from the University of Denver and completed her clinical psychology internship at The Children's Hospital in Denver.

Presentation of Research and Relevant Findings

Statement of the Problem

It is generally well known that about half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. It is less generally appreciated, however, that divorce is most likely to involve young children; over half of the children who experience divorce do so by age 6, and 75 percent of these children are younger than age 3. When we consider the number of children whose separated parents were never married, it is obvious that an even larger number develop their primary relationships—with mother and with father—in a divided family. To date, there have been no systematic studies on the following issues: (1) the development of parent-infant relationships in this context; (2) the question of how very young children cope with various visitation and access arrangements; or (3) possible compensating, buffering, or risk factors. The present study was designed to address these issues.

Reflecting contemporary shifts in attitudes toward the needs of young children and the role of fathers, a sizable minority of separating parents choose, or are required by the courts, to establish time-sharing arrangements for the infant that include overnight visiting schedules away from the primary caretaker, usually the mother. Findings from California indicate that over a third of children age 2 or younger participate in overnight visitation with a second parent. Despite the prevalence of such arrangements, concerns about how they may influence the development of the infant-mother attachment have been expressed. Several early but often-cited authorities advised against any overnight visitation away from the primary caregiver for children younger than 3 years of age. Similar cautions continue to be emphasized in publications for families and court personnel.

Research Questions

This study was undertaken to address some of the most critical and controversial issues involving divorce and young children. First, do parenting schedules in separated and divorced families that include overnight stays with the father pose a threat to the infant-mother relationship? Do schedules that include overnight stays promote more secure infant-father relationships? Second, what are the factors that appear either to buffer the infant's attachment to its parents or to place it at greater risk?

Study Design and Methods

The sample consisted of 145 mothers and their first-born or oldest child. Eighty-three fathers also participated. The families were of three types. About a third included children whose parents were separated or divorced and who were participating in some form of overnight visits with the father (44 families). Most commonly, the schedule provided for 1 overnight per week or 2 nights every 2 weeks, but 20 percent of infants spent 3 to 7 nights away from their mothers on a weekly or biweekly basis. Another third of the sample (49 families) were infants who had regular visits with the father, sometimes in the mother's presence, but no overnight visits. The last third of the sample consisted of infants in two-parent families who served as a comparison group (52 families).

The study began when the children were between 12 and 20 months of age. On average, infants were 5 months old at separation, but many couples separated during pregnancy or had never really been "together" at all. Thus, most parents were making the transition to parenthood on their own and in the shadow of a failed relationship. The issue for toddlers was usually not one of loss of an

attachment, but of establishing their primary attachments in the context of repeated separations from both parents and considerable discord between the parents themselves.

All parents who participated were observed in a laboratory separation and reunion procedure with their infants, were interviewed extensively about their relationship with the child and the other parent, and completed questionnaires about themselves, their children, and their relationship with the other parent. About 85 percent of the sample returned 1 year later for follow-up observations.

For our assessment of attachment relationships, we relied mainly on the widely used classification measure of attachment relationships developed by Ainsworth. This measure differentiates secure attachments from a variety of insecure attachment patterns on the basis of the infant's behavior in the course of two separations and reunions with the parent. A range of relationships may be considered secure or somewhat insecure, but adequate. These attachment relations (termed A, B, and C for those familiar with the procedure) are termed organized. A fourth type of relationship is termed disorganized or unclassifiable and is identified by infant behavior that is confused, frightened, disoriented, incoherent, or contradictory with respect to the parent. In some samples, these relationships have been found to represent the greatest attachment insecurity and have the poorest developmental outcomes as the infant matures, but it is important to note that developmental psychologists know the least about the origins and meaning of this classification.

Research Findings

We found significantly higher numbers of disorganized and unclassifiable infant-mother attachment relationships in the "overnight" as compared with the "no overnight" and "married" groups. Approximately two-thirds (64 percent) of the infant-mother relationships in the overnight group were classified as disorganized as compared with only one-third (35 percent) in the married comparison group. Although this finding seems to suggest that overnight stays away from the mother present a risk to the overall security of the infant-mother relationship, it is important to note that about a third of infant-mother attachment relationships were classified as organized—that is, adequate. This means that the functioning of some infants ranged from adequate to very good despite the overnight arrangements. Furthermore, we found that attachment security with the mother was not related to the amount of time spent with the father each month, the number of transitions between the mother's and father's care, the total number of overnights per month, the number of consecutive nights away from the mother during a visit, or how well the schedule had been followed. Thus, the data suggest that overnight separation from the mother, in and of itself, is not necessarily seriously disruptive to the mother-child attachment.

Three factors were related to organized vs. disorganized attachment in the overnight condition. These data provide us with the most important findings of the study since they can help us understand why so many relationships in the overnight group seem to be troubled. These factors were the following:

- (a) Psychological protection for the child. Mothers who convincingly described themselves in interviews as taking active measures to protect the infant from the possible ill effects of separation from them had infants whose attachment was judged to be organized. Examples of protection include demanding a particular schedule based on the mother's assessment of the infant's needs, modifying the arrangements when she believes they are too stressful, and providing support and reassurance to the infant when he or she seems distressed by separation. In contrast, mothers whose infant's attachment to them was disorganized described themselves as helpless to protect their child or as failing to do so despite their concerns about the infant or the infant's care while with the father. Examples of helplessness included a mother who allowed herself to become involved in intense conflict with the father in their child's presence despite

the toddler's obvious distress, a mother who reported angrily rejecting her infant who was fussy and fretful after a visit with the father, and mothers who permitted overnight stays with the father despite their concerns that the father was a danger to the child. It is important to note here that many mothers had no choice about permitting the visits, but what is critical from the infant's point of view is that the mother was upset, even frightened for the child, and yet did nothing about it. Further, at issue here is not the veracity of the mother's perception, but how she sees herself in relation to the child.

- (b) Communication. The second, equally important factor was the extent to which parents communicated with one another about the infant's health and development. Infants whose attachment to the mother was organized had parents who communicated frequently and openly about care. In contrast, disorganized infants had mothers who reported little communication with the father.
- (c) Conflict. Infants in the overnight group whose attachment to the mother was organized tended to have parents who were low in verbal and physical conflict, while infants whose attachment to the mother was disorganized tended to have parents who engaged in frequent and intense conflict.

Findings for infant-father attachment were slightly different than for infant-mother relationships, although caution is called for because the sample is very small. For both those with overnights and those without, we found about twice the number of disorganized infant-father attachment relationships in both the separation and divorce groups (59 percent in each group) in comparison with the married group (32 percent). Different aspects of the scheduling were again unrelated to the quality of the infant-father relationship, with one exception. For fathers who did not have overnights with their children, the more often the infant was in the care of the father in the mother's absence, the more likely the infant was to have an organized relationship with him.

As with mothers, high conflict tended to be associated with disorganized relationships in the overnight group. The results were even clearer regarding parent communication. High parent communication about the child was significantly related to better (that is, organized) infant-father relationships in all father groups (overnight, no overnight, and married).

There was evidence of continuing difficulties at the time of follow-up. Analyses of the data are still under way. Children with overnight visiting schedules were more likely than children who did not have overnights (no-overnight and married groups combined) to shift from cooperation with the mother to non-compliance and anger with her following a laboratory separation and reunion. This suggests that 2-year-olds who experience parenting schedules that include overnights away from the mother are particularly sensitive to or vulnerable from separation from the mother.

Limitations of the Findings

There are several potential important limitations to the findings of this study. First, norms for Ainsworth's Strange Situation assessment are based on the study of families living in stable circumstances, with few or no major separations between parents and child. The validity of this measure for children with repeated brief separations from the parents and its appropriateness for measuring long-term, stable qualities of the infant-parent relationships for such children are unknown. Second, in 70 percent of couples in the divorce sample in this study, there was some dispute about custody or visitation, and these couples had already attended mandatory mediation. Our picture of the overall distribution of troubled vs. relatively untroubled relationships may be unrepresentative. Third, findings may differ, especially regarding the infant-father relationship, when the father has had a more extended opportunity for developing a relationship with the infant before separation and when more than one sibling is involved in visitation.

Interpretation and Conclusions

These findings highlight the complexity of the factors that must be addressed when considering residential schedules for very young children in separated and divorced families. Couples who can focus together on the care of their child, with little conflict, should not be dissuaded from working out residential schedules that include overnights. On the other hand, when couple conflict is high and the couple's ability to communicate is impaired, overnight schedules should be avoided before at least 20 months of age. It is noteworthy that regardless of the schedule, the father-infant relationship appears to suffer when communication between parents is low, whether this is because the father refuses to communicate with the mother or because the mother freezes the father out of a relationship with the infant.

It must be emphasized that the key is not scheduling per se. Evidence from these and other data emphasizes that the separation from attachment figures is inherently stressful. However, separations do not appear to interfere with basic security in the long term, when the parents can focus on the child's reactions and console and support the child adequately under these higher levels of stress, both at the time of transition and during reunion periods. For couples who cannot work these issues through on their own, counseling that focuses on enabling the parents to provide adequate support and protection under these adverse circumstances is strongly recommended.

Reactor Response

This research emphasizes the importance of understanding the impact of divorce on children, especially on infants. There is limited research exploring the impact of divorce on an infant's family relationships. Dr. Solomon's research highlights the complexity of studying divorce and its impact on infants. The difficulties in studying this topic should not be underestimated.

Even though divorce is associated with several negative outcomes for children, such as long-term psychological difficulties, we know that not all children of divorce have psychological difficulties. We do not understand why some children of divorce cope better than others. We need to better understand the reasons for these different outcomes. Such understanding may help us develop strategies to help children and families who are going through divorces.

This research can be further advanced by studying group differences among three key groups: (1) children who have no contact with their fathers, (2) children whose parents have true joint custody, and (3) children whose mother has primary custody and whose father has visitation. Understanding these differences will help us identify the resources and support that these families need.

Discussion

The discussion focused on the complexity of the research, the role that fathers play in the mother-infant attachment relationship once a divorce occurs, and the role the judicial system plays in determining visitation and custody. Most participants stated that more research is needed in this area. Participants also stated that fathers needed to be included in future research. In addition, the audience voiced concern about what information was being used to determine the visitation or custody relationship that was best for the child and family.

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