Parents’ perceptions of how well bird-nesting works
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Sharing the responsibility of child rearing after divorce, such that children spend equal, or close to equal amounts of time with each parent has become increasingly common practice in the Western world; particularly in Scandinavian countries like Sweden where progressive family policies are actively promoted. Research confirms that when compared to children who live primarily with one parent, those who retain close contact with both parents after separation typically do display better physical health, psychological well-being, peer relations, and academic outcomes (e.g., Bergström, Modin, Fransson, Rajmil, Berlin, Gustafsson, & Hjern, 2013; Bergström, Fransson, Fabian, Hjern, Sarkadi, & Salari, 2018). While many now believe that shared parenting arrangements are in the best interests of children, one potential drawback is the frequent moves required between different households, and the subsequent stress and disruption to daily life that the children can endure (e.g., Cashmore, Parkinson, Weston, Patulny, Redmond, Qu, Baxter, Rajkovic, Sitek, and Katz, 2010; Haugen, 2010).

The concerns regarding the well-being of children in shared parenting arrangements are perhaps what has fuelled the development of more child centred co-parenting measures such as ‘nesting’ or ‘bird’s-nest co-parenting’ which aim to buffer the negative impact and disruption caused to children when parents separate. A ‘bird’s-nest’ co-parenting arrangement is one in which the children remain in the family home, and the parents (rather than the children) move in and out, usually transitioning between the family home and a separate residence, taking it in turns to provide care. Thus the children experience far less disruption to their daily lives and routines. Intuitively it seems like a sensible albeit different approach, but how well does it work in practice?

While little research exists on the topic, one study conducted by Vanessa A. K. Hurwitz, suggested that parents’ perceptions of how well bird-nesting had worked for their families were overwhelmingly positive. Hurwitz analysed the first-hand accounts of seven parents whom had
bird-nested; two men and five women ranging in age from 37-62 years old. She conducted in-depth interviews exploring motivations to nest and parents perceptions of how well nesting had worked.

The first theme to emerge from the interviews concerned the motivations to nest; all of the parents in the study were motivated by their perception of the best interests of their children. They spoke about nesting providing stability and consistency, and making things easier on children by negating the need to move between two homes. Parents spoke about the importance of keeping the children in the home and neighbourhood that they were used to. The author concludes “The parents’ motivations in this sense were consistent with Amato’s (2003) research that found that the number of family transitions is negatively correlated with outcomes. The parents’ use of nesting may have been an important support during the critical 2-year window following divorce during which families struggle the most (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).”

The second theme related to the ways in which nesting was stressful; one parent described how nesting was stressful logistically and how adopting the arrangement had given them insight and empathy for children moving between residences:

I strongly believe that every couple who has children and is getting a divorce has to do this. If only just to realize how awful it is to have to pick up and move. To understand that you never. I would tell a friend. I now know if I want a pair of gold earrings, I don’t get to choose which ones, I just get to choose whatever happens to be at that house that day…So I think, when I hear about parents who split up the custody where the children go for 3 days to one and 4 days to the other, I’m thinking how awful that must be for the kids. Getting up and moving each time. I strongly urge them to have to do it for 6 months to see how awful.

Others spoke about how nesting could be interpersonally stressful. Interpersonal stressors included leaving the children, feeling sad and lonely when away from the nest, conflict with the ex-partner, poor communication, and strain on new relationships. Interestingly only one participant described nesting as a ‘sacrifice’ but stated:

“It’s worth it if you’re trying to do what’s best for your kids.”

The author concluded that “Some legal experts have assumed the stress inherent in nesting makes it untenable (Flannery, 2004; Luscombe, 2011; Silverman & Higgins, 2003). Although

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the parents in this study did find nesting to be stressful, some of these stressors are not unique to nesting, and each of the respondents in this study said they would recommend nesting to a friend”.

The third key theme to emerge from the interviews related to the benefits derived from nesting. As well as holding it to be in the best interests of their children parents also noted that the arrangement facilitated greater quality of time with children when in the nest, and more quality time for themselves when away from the nest. The author notes “The emphasis on how this arrangement was benefitting the parents is a rebuttal to claims that nesting needlessly overburdens parents (e.g., Flannery, 2004; Luscombe, 2011)”. It seems that more defined boundaries around care-giving time had benefits for both children and parents:

You would have two weeks on, where you’d be dealing with homework and the kind of stuff you do as a parent. And you’d have two weeks where you were able to take a little time to yourself, which when you’re going through a divorce, that’s a good thing to do. And not have to worry about dinner, and making sure that your son gets to school and all that good stuff.

Interesting, another benefit to emerge from the interviews was that bird-nesting allowed for a “gradual, layered, uncoupling”:

I think, and what I’ve seen from other people, it sort of runs a course. Our breakup was amicable enough. We didn’t have big fights or anything like that. So at first it was kind of like we almost sort of stayed as a family, and we sort of would get together for dinner or that kind of stuff. And then gradually over time, we really started to separate. I don’t know if that had anything to do with the nesting, but it must be a gradual thing that happens when you divorce and separate from each other.

The author noted that “…because nesting resulted in continued intimacy less than in marriage, but presumably more than in other postdivorce arrangements, at the end there was another layer of uncoupling, which might be a double edge sword for some. During the nesting period the connection could be seen as a benefit. At the conclusion it might be another loss. Ahrons (1980) and Emery (2012) have highlighted the importance of redefining the boundaries subsequent to divorce, such that the spousal system is reconfigured into strictly a parenting system”.

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Reflecting on her analysis Hurwitz stated the study was “the first to my knowledge to explore and describe parents’ motivations to nest, [and] their perceptions of how well it works, []. The parents in this study overwhelmingly expressed nesting was a positive experience for their families, despite the challenges that arose and regardless of whether they intended it to be long term or not. Each of them said they would recommend it to a friend in similar circumstances, though some with caveats”.

The author sums up by stating “The parents in this study were motivated by their perception of the best interests of their children. Determining child outcomes was beyond the scope of the present study, but interpreting these findings within the lens of [] mechanisms by which divorce impacts children provides some foundation for future studies. [] Nesting, by limiting the number of stressors and maximizing the access to parental resources, might enhance resilience. [] Whether time is equally shared or not, nesting presumably protects against withdrawal of a parent from the children’s lives”.

While not a one-size fits all solution and one which certainly requires adaptability, flexibility and responsiveness to the ongoing needs of children, the author hopes that the findings will “equip parents and those employed to assist them in negotiating postseparation physical custody arrangements with preliminary information about nesting processes. For those parents who will not choose nesting, it is hoped that these findings will inspire flexibility and creativity in developing a parenting plan that suits their families”.

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References
General’s Department Sydney; Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.


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