Children’s perspectives on shared parenting arrangements after divorce or separation
Children’s Perspectives on Everyday Experiences of Shared Residence: Time, Emotions, and Agency Dilemmas

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It makes sense that shared parenting or ‘shared residence’ (a post-divorce arrangement in which each parent has equal, or close to equal amounts of parenting time) should become the norm, since it promotes gender equality, fairness, and the continued involvement of fathers. Research has indeed shown that children benefit from retaining relationships with both parents after divorce or separation. But do children themselves experience ‘shared residence’ as an arrangement that is in their best interests? This was the question addressed by psychologist Gry Haugen from the Norwegian Centre for Child Research in a study reported in Children & Society. The research aimed to highlight the value of studying the actual experiences of children when they spend their time between two different households.

The research drew from a large Norwegian study called ‘Families after Divorce’ which used both surveys and in-depth interviews of parents and children from divorced families (Moxnes and others 1999, 2001). In total 96 children were interviewed of which 15 were from a shared residence arrangement. The author noted that children’s perspectives provided valuable insights that departed from the current interpretations of ‘best interests of the child’ and the need to acknowledge and underline individual variations when it comes to making decisions about what’s best for children.

For example, the current assumption that children should miss both parents equally and therefore should always want to spend equal amounts of time with each parent may not reflect the actual changing needs of children over time. While children may begin willing to shift their
time between two households, studies have recognised that, eventually, they often choose to
spend most of their time at one place simply because children’s practical and emotional needs
change over time (Haaland, 1988; Moxnes, 2003; O’berg and O’berg, 1987, 2002). The author
noted that children in the interviews often spoke about the hassles of shifting between two
residences with representative quotes including:

‘They said we could spend time at both places ... wherever we wanted ... but I
didn’t feel that that was really the case’

‘It would be wonderful to stay only at one place...but at the same time I want to
meet with both of them...’

Children may compromise on their own needs at the expectations of their parents, for example
‘Roald started by spending 2 weeks at each place, but he found it stressing and time-consuming
to spend almost a whole day just arranging everything and packing up all the stuff he took
between the two households. He negotiated with his parents, and after some reorganisation he
ended up spending 4 weeks with each parent. His story therefore illustrates how the right of
children to have a say may be put in to practice. Even if Roald, like the other children and
young people … acknowledges the value of sharing his time between his parents, he finds the
arrangement disturbing: ‘Except that I meet my mother just as much as my father ... except for
that, I don’t see any advantages with the arrangement actually’. Roald claims that, because his
parents live within walking distance of one another, he finds the arrangement satisfactory,
though at one point during the interview he suggests that ‘children should generally live in one
place and visit the other.’

The author makes the important point that shared residence can work as both a blessing and a
burden, particularly if parents and courts implement a shared-residence arrangements without
actually thinking about what that entails for the children. Shared residence works best for
children when it is operated flexibly and is ‘in the best interests of the child when children have
an opportunity to have a say...’ and when ‘...their opinions and choices are respected.’

In sum, the research demonstrates that children’s satisfaction with shared residence might not
be straightforward, and likely depends on how it is implemented. Children endorse a range of
feelings in this living arrangement and at times perhaps feel pulled between their needs and
their perception of their parents’ needs. Parents need to be flexible and negotiate the living
arrangements according to the feedback and needs of the children (Haugen, 2008).

Gry M. D. Haugen, (2010). Children’s Perspectives on Everyday Experiences of Shared

References

Summary of: ‘Children’s Perspectives on Everyday Experiences of Shared Residence: Time, Emotions