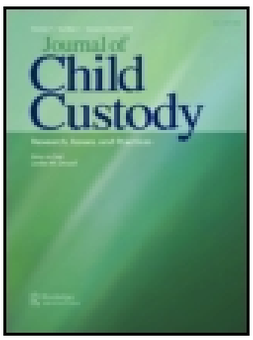

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# Joint versus sole physical custody: Outcomes for children independent of family income or parental conflict

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# Joint versus sole physical custody: Outcomes for children independent of family income or parental conflict

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**ABSTRACT**

Is joint physical custody (JPC) linked to any better or worse outcomes for children than sole physical custody (SPC) after considering family income and parental conflict? In the 60 studies published in English in academic journals or in government reports, 34 studies found that JPC children had better outcomes on all of the measures of behavioral, emotional, physical, and academic well-being and relationships with parents and grandparents. In 14 studies, JPC children had equal outcomes on some measures and better outcomes on others compared to SPC children. In 6 studies JPC and SPC children were equal on all measures. In 6 studies, JPC children were worse on one of the measures than SPC children, but equal or better on all other measures. In the 25 studies that considered family income, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 18 studies, equal to better outcomes in 4 studies, equal outcomes in 1 study, and worse outcomes on one measure but equal or better outcomes on other measures in 2 studies. In the 19 studies that included parental conflict, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 9 studies, equal to better outcomes in 5 studies, equal outcomes in 2 studies, and worse outcomes on one measure but equal or better outcomes on other measures in 3 studies. In sum, independent of family income or parental conflict, JPC is generally linked to better outcomes for children.

**KEYWORDS**

Joint custody; joint physical custody; physical custody; shared parenting

Sole physical custody (SPC) arrangements where children live primarily or exclusively with their mother and spend varying amounts of time with their father after their parents separate are becoming less common as joint physical custody (JPC) families where children live more than 35% of the time with each parent are on the rise. The increasing popularity of JPC is seen, for example, in Wisconsin where JPC increased from 5% to more than 35% from 1986 to 2012 (D. Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017). As far back as 2008, in Washington state 46% of the parents had JPC plans (George, 2008) as did 30% in Arizona (Venohr & Kaunelis, 2008). Internationally rates have risen to nearly 50% in Sweden (Bergstrom et al., 2017); 30% in Norway (Kitterod & Wiik, 2017) and in the Netherlands (Poortman & Gaalen, 2017); 37% in

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Belgium (Vanassche, Soderman, DeClerck & Matthijs, 2017); 26% in Quebec providence and 40% in British Columbia, Canada (Bala et al., 2017); and 40% in the Catalonia region of Spain (Flaguer, 2017). At least 20 states in the United States are considering revising their custody laws to be more supportive of shared physical custody (Jones, 2015).

Nevertheless, two questions regarding JPC custody arrangements continue to stir debate. First, are the outcomes for children significantly better or worse in JPC than in SPC families? Second, if JPC children do have better outcomes, can this largely be attributed to their parents having significantly higher incomes or significantly less conflict than SPC parents? Put differently, do children benefit from JPC if their parents have a poor coparenting relationship or high levels of conflict or when the plan was "forced" on one of the parents as a result of a custody hearing or prolonged, conflicted negotiations with lawyers? Is it true, as some social scientists have claimed (e.g., Smyth, McIntosh, Emery, & Howarth, 2016), that if JPC children have better outcomes than SPC children, it is probably because JPC parents have far more money and far less conflict? The present article briefly summarizes the 60 studies that have compared JPC and SPC children's outcomes. Unlike any previous articles on this topic, this article addresses the question: How do the outcomes of JPC and SPC children differ after family income and parental conflict are considered?

## Previous summaries of children's outcomes in JPC and SPC families

There are presently only two meta-analyses that have compared children's outcomes in JPC and SPC families (Baude, Pearson & Drapeau, 2016; Bauserman, 2002). Neither addressed the question of family income or the level of parental conflict. More importantly, neither analysis included more than a portion of the existing 60 studies. Baude et al. included only 17 of the 51 studies published in English that existed at the time. In all 17 studies, children were living with each parent at least 35% of the time. JPC children had better outcomes than SPC children, though the overall effect sizes were small. Notably, however, the benefits of JPC were much larger for children who lived 50% time with each parent than for JPC children who lived less than 50% time with each parent. Similarly Bauserman found better outcomes for JPC (defined as 25% time with each parent) children in all 10 studies that had been published in academic journals between 1988 and 1999, though again the effect sizes were small, which Bauserman attributed to the small samples sizes in the existing studies.

In addition to the two meta-analyses, several authors have summarized a portion of the quantitative studies that were available at the time they wrote their reviews. When Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, and Roberts (2011) and Trinder (2010) wrote their summaries of the research, there were 39

quantitative studies that had compared JPC and SPC children's outcomes (Nielsen, 2011). Fehlberg and Trinder included only 5 of the 39 studies, while purporting to be presenting a "research review." Similarly, in "detailing the current body of literature", McIntosh and Smyth (2012, p. 156) included only 5 of the 40 available studies at the time (Nielsen, 2011). More recently, Smyth et al. (2016) included only 17 of the 42 existing studies published in peer reviewed journals. These summaries of the research share four things in common: (a) claiming to be reviews of the available literature; (b) excluding the majority of studies where JPC children had better outcomes than SPC children; (c) reporting data incorrectly from several studies in ways that support the claim that JPC children have worse outcomes than SPC children; and (d) concluding that, based on the empirical data, JPC poses more risks and harm for children than SPC.

The most recent of the review articles serves to illustrate how data can be misrepresented when comparing JPC and SPC children's outcomes (Smyth et al., 2016). These authors reported that Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) found that JPC: "works badly for children exposed to bitter and chronic tension" (Smyth et al., 2016, p. 121). This is not correct. Buchanan et al. concluded: "We did not find that dual residence (JPC) adolescents were especially prone to adjustment difficulties under situations of high interparental conflict" (p. 257). "*When the conflict was high and hostile* they were not more stressed or depressed or worse on any measures of well-being" (Buchanan et al., 1996, p. 265, emphasis added). Similarly the authors cited Bauserman's meta-analysis (2002) as finding that JPC "may prolong or intensify children's exposure to parental conflict, neglect, violence, abuse or psychopathology" (Smyth et al., 2016, p. 120) In fact, Bauserman reached the opposite conclusion: "The research reviewed here *does not support claims by critics of joint custody* that joint custody children are likely to be exposed to more conflict or to be at greater risk of adjustment problems due to having to adjust to two households or feeling torn between parents" (Bauserman, 2002, p. 99, emphasis added).

Eliminating most of the available studies from summaries of the literature or inaccurately reporting the results in ways that support only one viewpoint is not a matter of small consequence. For example, in a book aimed at mental health and family court professionals involved in custody decisions, based on 17 of the 42 studies available at the time, Smyth et al. (2016) concluded that: "Put simply, the international literature looks to comprise—at best—a disparate collection of partially overlapping investigations with little convergence among the various lines of inquiry" (Smyth et al., 2016, p. 135). Similarly Smyth's co-author, Robert Emery, following the controversial veto of a shared parenting bill by Florida's Governor, was quoted in a Florida newspaper as saying that "the problems with joint custody outweigh the benefits" and "children suffer in joint custody arrangements (Presson, 2016).

In order to avoid the kind of distortions or bias that have been referred to as "scholar advocacy" (Emery et al., 2016) or as "woozling" the data (Nielsen, 2014b), authors who summarize the research must take great care to report the findings accurately and to include the results of all studies, not just those that support their particular point of view.

In addition to the 60 quantitative studies that are presently available, there are ten other studies where 466 JPC and SPC children from six different countries were interviewed about their experiences and feelings (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015). In these ten studies, children who had good relationships with both parents and who had some flexibility in the parenting schedule were the most satisfied in JPC families. The children's experiences in the two types of families were varied and mixed, even for children in the same family. The weakness of these studies is that there were no objective, quantitative measures of children's well-being, in contrast to the comparisons in the 60 quantitative studies.

The most comprehensive summaries of the quantitative studies comparing JPC and SPC children's outcomes included all 40 studies that existed at the time (Nielsen, 2014a; Nielsen, 2015). The present article updates these previous summaries with an additional 20 studies. Due to space limitations, only these 20 additional studies are included in the references. The other 40 references are listed in Nielsen's two review articles (2014a, 2015). The major focus of this article, however, is to addresses the question of how JPC and SPC children's outcomes differ after family income and parental conflict are taken into account. This information brings us closer to determining whether higher income and lower parental conflict are the likely causes of JPC children's better outcomes. This important question has not been explored in any of the former summaries of these studies or in either of the two meta-analyses.

## *Selection of the 60 JPC vs. SPC outcome studies*

To identify relevant studies, three data bases were searched: Psych-Info, Social Science Citation Index and ProQuest Social Science. The key search words were: joint physical custody, shared parenting, shared care, custody and income, parenting plans and income, income, and children's well-being. Six journals likely to publish articles on these topics were also searched at each journal's website: *Journal of Family Psychology, Child Development, Journal of Marriage and Family, Child Custody, Family Court Review, Family Relations, Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* and *Psychology, Public Policy and Law.* Articles were selected on the basis of whether they had statistically analyzed quantitative data that addressed the questions presented at the outset of this article. All 60 studies were included. These searches do not capture studies that have not been published in English.

In the 60 studies children ranged in age from infants to young adults. Studies were conducted in ten different countries, with one study having a sample from 26 countries (Bjaranson & Arnarrson, 2011). Sample sizes ranged from 21 to 51,802. Data came from a variety of sources: court records, mediation and counseling centers, public schools, convenience samples, college students, and parents who were recommended to researchers by lawyers and mediators. Seven studies were commissioned and published by the Australian government rather than being published in academic journals (designated by "a" in Table 1). Even though these studies did not have the benefit of blind peer review, they are included because they were based on large, nationally representative samples and were conducted by research institute teams. Eight studies specified that the sample included parents in litigation or parents whose JPC plan was the result of a custody hearing (designated by C+ in Table 1). In 19 studies parental conflict was factored in before comparing the children's outcomes (designated with "C"). In 25 studies parents' incomes were factored in (designated with "$"). Two studies (McIntosh et al., 2011; Tornello et al., 2013) are designated with an "X" in the table because the researchers used measures that had no established validity or reliability, meaning that it is not clear what was actually being measured or how we can interpret the results.

In order to provide a simplified, brief overview of the 60 studies, data were grouped into five broad categories of child well-being which are similar to the categories used by Bauserman (2002) and Baude et al. (2016) in their meta-analyses (a) academic or cognitive outcomes which includes grade point averages and scores on tests of cognitive development; (b) emotional or psychological outcomes which includes feeling depressed, anxious or dissatisfied with their lives or having low self-esteem; (c) behavioral problems which include misbehaving at home or school, hyperactivity, and teenage drug, nicotine or alcohol use; (d) overall physical health or psychosomatic illnesses; and (e) the quality of parent–child relationships that includes how well they communicate and how close they feel to one another.

## *Positive outcomes for JPC children*

As Table 1 illustrates, 60 studies compared children's outcomes in SPC and JPC families. In 34 studies, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures of well-being. In 14 studies they had better outcomes on some measures and equal outcomes on others. In 6 studies, there were no significant differences between the two groups on any measures. In 6 studies, JPC children had worse outcomes on one measure, but equal or better outcomes on all other measures.

JPC and SPC children had the most equal outcomes in regard to school achievement and cognitive skills. This suggests that custody arrangements

**Table 1.** Outcomes for Joint Physical Custody vs. Sole Physical Custody Children in 60 Studies Studies Children.

| JPC better on all measures than SPC 34 studies | Factors Included in Study | # of Children Physical custody | | Ages | Academic & Cognitive development | Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self esteem | Peer Behavior Substance use Hyperactivity | Health & psycho somatic problems | Parent-child or other Family relationships |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Joint JPC | Sole SPC | | | | | | |
| Buchanan | = C = $ | 51 | 355 mom 100 dad | 13–16 | better | Better | Better | better | Better |
| Brotsky | C+ | 45 | 10 | 1–10 | | Better | Better | | |
| Breivik | $* | 41 | 483 | 12–16 | Better | | | | |
| Barumazadeh | C * | 91 | 328 mom 34 dad | 11–12 | | better | | | |
| Bergstrom (2014) | $* | 129 | 176 | 4–18 | | better | better | | |
| Bergstrom (2017) | $* | 136 | 151 | 3–5 | | better | | | |
| Bjarnason | | 2,206 | 25,578 | 11–15 | | Better life satisfaction | | | |
| Bjarnason | | 2,206 | 25,578 | 11–15 | | | | | Better |
| Carlsund (2013) | $* | 888 | 2,019 | 11–15 | | Better | Better | better | Better |
| Carlsund (2012) | $* | 270 | 801 | 11–15 | | | better | | Better |
| Cashmore (gov) | =C+ | 84 | 473 | 0–17 | Better | better | better | | |
| Cashmore (gov) | =C+ = $ | 90 | 411 | 0–17 | | better | | | |
| Campana | | 207 | 272 | 10–18 | | better | Better | | |
| Dissing | $* | 3,222 | 3,032 | 11–12 | | better | | | |
| Fabricius (2012) | C* | 152 | 871 | College | | | | | better |
| Fabricius (2003) | | 80 | 739 | College | | | | | Better |
| Fabricius (2007) | | 75 | 136 | College | | | | better | Better |
| Fabricius (2016) | =C = $ | 13 | 103 | College | | | | better | Better |
| Fransson (2016) | $* | 391 | 543 mom 111 dad | 10–18 | | Better | | | |
| Frank | | 16 | 90 | College | | | | | better |
| Hagquest | $* | 17,754 | 30,400 | 12–15 | | | | better | |
| Irving | =C = $ | 108 | 294 | 1–11 | | better | | | |
| Jablonska | | 443 | 2,920 | 14–15 | | | better behavior equal drinking | better | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Janning | = $ | 5 | 17 | College | | | | | Better |
| Jappens | | 176 | 707 | 10–25 | | | | | Better with grand parents |
| Laftman | $* | 1,573 | 1,584 | 15–16 | | Better | | better | Better |
| Lee | C* = $ | 20 | 39 | 6–12 | | | Better | | |
| Nilsen | $* | 398 | 1,223 | 16–19 | | better | better | | |
| Pearson | | 62 | 459 | 9–12 | | Better | Better | | |
| Shiller | = C | 20 | 20 | 6–11 | | | Better | | |
| Turunen | $* | 387 | 758 | 10–18 | | better | | | |
| Turunen | | 240 | 567 | 10–18 | | better | | | |
| Wadsby | | 324 | 736 | 17–18 | | Better | | | Better |
| Westphal | $* | 1,076 | 2,767 | 10–18 | | | | | Better with grand parents |
| **JPC equal or better outcomes than SPC 14 studies** | | | | | | | | | |
| Bergstrom (2013) | | 17,350 | 43,452 | 12–15 | Equal | Better | | better | Better |
| Bergstrom(2015) | $* | 15,633 | 29,468 | 12 & 15 | Equal | Better | | better | |
| Bastaits(2016) | | 138 | 238 | 10–18 | | Better self esteem<br>Equal life satisfaction | | | Better |
| Drapeau | = C $ * | 37 | 75 | 8–12 | | Equal to better | Equal | | |
| Donnelly | = C | 12 | 88 | 6–18 | | | | | Equal affection<br>Better boundaries |
| Fransson | | 497 | 854 | 10–18 | | Equal psychological<br>Better stress | Equal drinking<br>Better smoking<br>Better bullying | better | Better |
| Havermans | | 224 | 446 | 11–19 | Equal | | | | Better |
| Kaspiew (gov) | = C | 947 | 3,513 | | Moms say equal dads say better | Moms say equal Dads say better | | | Grand parents better |
| Luepnitz | = $ | 22 | 30 | 8–13 | | Equal | | | Better |

(*Continued*)

**Table 1.** Continued.

| JPC better on all measures than SPC 34 studies | Factors Included in Study | # of Children Physical custody Joint JPC | Sole SPC | Ages | Academic & Cognitive development | Depression, anxiety overall satisfaction, self esteem | Peer Behavior Substance use Hyperactivity | Health & psycho somatic problems | Parent-child or other Family relationships |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Melli | | 597 | 595 | 1–16 | | Equal | | Better | Better |
| Neoh | | 27 | 40 | 8–15 | | Equal | Better | | |
| Qu (2010) (gov) | = C | 1,000 | 4,320 | 1–17 | Moms say equal Dads say better | | | better | |
| Qu (2014) (gov) | = C | 720 | 2,354 | 4–17 | | | equal | equal | |
| Spruijt | = $ | 135 | 400 | 10–16 | Equal | Equal | Equal | | Better dad & stepmom |
| **Equal outcomes 6 studies** | | | | | | | | | |
| Bastaits (2014) | | 139 | 227 | | | Equal | | | |
| Cashmore | | 26 | 110 | Teenage | | equal | | | |
| Faust | | 34 | 35 | 2–19 | | equal | equal | | |
| Johnston | = C+ = $ | 28 | 69 | 9–15 | | Equal | equal | | |
| Kline | = C+ | 35 | 65 | 4–12 | | equal | Equal | | |
| Pearson | | 9 | 83 | 9–12 | | Equal | equal | | |
| **JPC worseoutcome on 1 measure 6 studies** | | | | | | | | | |
| Lodge(gov) | = C | 105 | 398 mom 120 dad | 12–18 | Equal | | better – girls **worse - boys** | | Better –parents grand parents & stepparents |
| Sandler | C+ | 67 | 74 | 12–14 | | | **Mixed** | | **Mixed** |
| Sodermans | $* | 104 | 330 mom 70dad | 14–21 | | **Mixed: depression** Equal: life satisfaction | | | |
| Vanassche | = C+ | 395 | 1,045 | 12–19 | | | | | Better with dad |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | **Girls worse boys better** | | | Equal with mom |
| McIntosh (gov) X | C* $* | 20 | ages 2–3 232 | 2–5 | **Mixed for toddlers** | | Equal to Better | |
| | | 60 | ages 4–5 870 | | Equal for preschoolers | | all ages | |
| Tornello X | C $ | 174 | 1,880 | 0–5 | Equal | Better social development | equal | **Mixed infant attachment** |

C* conflict was controlled by statistically JPC & SPC differences into the analysis
= C conflict was controlled because there were no significant differences between JPC & SPC conflict
$* income was controlled by statistically factoring it in to the analysis
= $ income was controlled because there were no significant differences between JPC & SPC parents
C+ researchers specified that very high conflict parents in litigation over custody were in this study
gov government published study (Australia), not peer reviewed academic journal
Mixed differences between JPC & SPC outcomes depended on factors like gender, personality, or age
X some measures used to gather data were not validated.

may have less impact on children's cognitive skills or school performance than on the many other areas of their lives that were assessed in the 60 studies. Notably, JPC was linked to children having better relationships with their parents, stepparents, and grandparents in 24 of the 25 studies that assessed family relationships. It should be noted that one measure in the Tornello et al. study (2013) is listed in the "family relationships" column, although the study did not assess the quality of children's relationships with their parents. The study assessed how impoverished, single parent, inner city, minority mothers felt their toddlers interacted with them, with the results being "mixed" based on the child's age.

In all 4 studies that compared JPC and SPC children's relationships with their grandparents, JPC children had the better relationships (Jappens & Bavel, 2016; Kaspiew et al., 2009; Lodge & Alexander, 2010; Westphal, Poortman, & Van der Lippe, 2015) As Table 1 indicates, these studies included large numbers of children ranging in age from 2 to 25. These findings are noteworthy because children who have close relationships with their grandparents after their parents separate are better adjusted emotionally and behaviorally than children without these close relationships (for a review see Jappens, 2018, in press) . In these regards, then, JPC children again have an advantage over SPC children.

### *Negative outcomes for JPC children*

Despite the more positive outcomes overall for JPC children, in 6 of the 60 studies JPC children had worse outcomes than SPC children on one, but not on all, measures of well-being. These 6 studies are listed at the end of Table 1. Because people are especially concerned about any negative outcomes for children who live in JPC families, these six studies are described in detail below.

In an Australian study commissioned by the government, toddlers (ages 2–3) had worse outcomes in JPC on two of the six measures of well-being (McIntosh et al., 2011). Because this one study has so often been misrepresented in the media and in academic circles (Nielsen, 2014b; Warshak, 2014), it merits more careful attention than the other 59 studies. The 19 JPC toddlers scored lower on a 3 question test of "persistence at tasks" and lower on 3 questions asking how often they tried to get their mother's attention and how often they looked at her. Neither of these two measures had any established validity or reliability, in contrast to the instruments used to measure children's outcomes in the other 59 studies. Nevertheless, on the basis of these two invalid measures, these researchers concluded that JPC toddlers were less securely attached to their mothers and less persistent at tasks than SPC toddlers. The 22 JPC toddlers also scored more poorly than 191 SPC toddlers on a validated "problem behavior" scale (refusing to eat,

clinging to the mother when she tried to leave, hitting the mother). Again, these researchers interpreted this finding as a negative outcome of JPC. In fact, however, JPC toddlers' scores were well within the normal range and were not significantly different from the scores of 50% of the toddlers with married and with separated parents in the general population. On the other four validated measures of well-being, JPC and SPC children were not significantly different.

In the second study, also Australian, there were 105 JPC adolescents (ages 12–18), 120 in JPC with their father and 398 in SPC with their mother chosen from a nationally representative data base (Lodge & Alexander, 2010). Eight (16%) of the 50 JPC boys reported that they "*sometimes* didn't get along with peers," compared to 32 (8%) of JPC boys living with their mothers (italics added). In contrast, JPC girls were four times less likely than SPC girls to "*sometimes* not get along" with peers.

In the third study highly "conscientious" adolescents with a great need to plan ahead and to be very organized were more anxious and depressed in JPC than in SPC families. However, the least conscientious adolescents who were less anxious and less depressed in JPC (Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014). For 400 adolescents in SPC (70 were living with their fathers) and 104 in JPC, the high and the low conscientiousness adolescents were equally "satisfied with their lives" in JPC as in SPC. Since the researchers did not report how many of the 104 JPC children were in the "highly conscientious" group, we cannot know how widespread a problem this was. It appears, however, that there were very few "highly conscientious" adolescents, since the researchers concluded that: "We observe very few changes in the effect sizes of the control variable by entering the personality variables" (Sodermans & Matthijs, 2014, p. 350).

The fourth study compared adolescents from 545 mother custody, 92 father custody and 385 JPC families (Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). JPC teenagers were more depressed and more dissatisfied with their lives than SPC teenagers when they had bad relationships with their fathers. In those families where conflict still remained high eight years after divorce, girls were more depressed in JPC than in SPC. On the other hand, in these families with years of unending conflict, boys were less depressed in JPC than in SPC. Overall the quality of the relationship with both parents mattered more than the custody arrangement or parental conflict.

In the fifth study with an Arizona sample of 74 SPC and 68 JPC adolescents in high conflict families, children's outcomes again depended on the quality of their relationships with their fathers. All of the JPC and SPC parents had been designated high conflict by a judge and were in litigation over custody issues. The adolescents who had bad relationships with their fathers had more behavioral problems in JPC than in SPC (Sandler, Wheeler, & Braver, 2013). On other hand, JPC children did not have worse outcomes than SPC children

when they had good relationships with their fathers. This again suggests that it is not the level of parental conflict that matters most, but the quality of children's relationships with their parents.

The sixth study stands apart from the other 59 studies in two ways that make it difficult to generalize or to interpret the results. First, all of the children (ages 0 to 5) were living in impoverished, inner city, minority families where only 20% of the parents had been married or had lived together and where mothers' and fathers' rates of incarceration, substance abuse, addiction, violence and mental health problems were extremely high (Tornello et al., 2013). Second, one third of the children lived primarily with their fathers, which means the mothers' reports on a test of "secure attachment" were not actually assessing the link between JPC and SPC and this measure. Only 1 of 14 correlations between frequency of overnighting and child adjustment measures were significant. The one negative finding was that the 22 babies who spent anywhere from 52 to 256 nights away from their mother each year had more insecure attachment scores than the 124 babies who spent fewer than 52 nights a year away from her. For the three year olds, the 22 JPC children had more insecure scores than the 137 SPC toddlers. On the other 13 measures of well-being, there were no significant differences linked to how often the children overnighted with their father. On one measure, the five-year-old JPC children had better outcomes in terms of having better social behavior than the SPC children.

Overall, these six studies caution against JPC for adolescents who have bad relationships with their fathers, for girls whose parents have high, ongoing conflict many years after separating, and for adolescents who are highly conscientious.

## JPC versus SPC parents: Conflict and coparenting

Although the 60 studies show that JPC is generally more beneficial for children than SPC, the central question for the present article is: Are these benefits largely due to JPC parents having significantly higher incomes or having significantly less conflict than SPC parents? If this is true, then this would likely account for the better outcomes of JPC children.

Do JPC parents have substantially less conflict and more cooperative coparenting relationships than SPC parents? In 14 of the 19 studies that addressed this question, JPC couples did not have significantly less conflict or more cooperative, communicative coparenting relationships than SPC couples (see Nielsen, 2017, for citations to the 19 studies).Compared to SPC couples, in 3 studies JPC couples had less conflict; in one study they had more, and in one study the conflict differences depended on the age of the children. In short, cooperation and low conflict are not likely to account for JPC's children's better outcomes.

Another aspect of conflict is how much disagreement the parents had over their parenting plan at the outset. Are JPC parents a unique group who, unlike SPC parents, agree to their plan "voluntarily" and without being "forced" to agree to share? According to the 7 studies that have specifically addressed this question, the answer is "no" (Nielsen, 2017). The percentage of couples who were initially opposed to JPC at the outset ranged from 30% to 80% of the parents. In each of these studies, however, JPC children had better outcomes than SPC children despite the fact that many of their parents had not agreed to the plan at the time they were separating.

Not only do JPC parents generally not have significantly less conflict or more cooperative coparenting relationships than SPC parents, JPC children have better outcomes than SPC children even after family conflict is taken into account. As designated in the "conflict" column on Table 1, 19 of the 60 studies considered parental conflict before comparing children's outcomes. In some studies, parental conflict was not significantly different between SPC and SPC parents, and in other studies, the researchers added conflict into the statistical analyses before comparing the children's outcomes. In the 19 studies that considered parental conflict, JPC children had better outcomes on all measures in 9 studies, equal to better outcomes in 5 studies, equal outcomes in 2 studies, and worse outcomes on one measure but equal or better outcomes on other measures in 3 studies.

In sum, there is not compelling evidence that low conflict or cooperative coparenting account for JPC children having better outcomes than SPC children. The two groups of parents are more similar than they are different in regard to conflict and coparenting. More importantly, JPC children generally had better outcomes even after parental conflict was taken into account.

## JPC and SPC outcomes independent of family income

The second question is whether JPC children have better outcomes because their parents are wealthier than SPC parents. There are studies—especially older studies—showing that JPC parents are wealthier and better educated than SPC parents. However, studies that merely compare JPC and SPC parents' incomes, without comparing the children's outcomes, cannot address the question: Does income account for the better outcomes for JPC children?

Twenty-five of the 60 studies that compared children's outcomes controlled for family income, as indicated with "$" on Table 1. Income was taken into consideration either because JPC and SPC incomes were not significantly different to begin with or because the researchers added income into the statistical analysis before comparing the children's outcomes. In the 25 studies that considered family income, JPC children had better outcomes on all

measures in 18 studies, equal to better outcomes in 4 studies, equal outcomes in 1 study, and worse outcomes on one measure but equal or better outcomes on other measures in 2 studies.

Why were JPC children's outcomes better than SPC children's outcomes, even after family income was factored in? A thorough examination of this question is beyond the scope of this article and is available elsewhere (Nielsen, 2018, in press). Two studies are offered here merely to illustrate that higher family income may, in fact, be disadvantageous to children and that other factors, such as the quality of the parent—child relationship, may matter more than income.

In a Swedish study with 391 JPC families and 654 SPC families, the 10 to 18 year-olds with the wealthier and most well-educated parents were more stressed and more anxious than children with less wealth, less educated parents (Fransson, Turunen, Hjern, Östberg, & Bergström, 2016). Moreover, having a parent with a graduate degree was more closely linked to children's stress and anxiety than was the physical custody plan. The researchers speculated that highly educated, higher income parents might put more academic and social demands on their children, which, in turn, increases children's stress and anxiety.

Similarly, in a French study with 91 children living in JPC, 34 living with their fathers and 328 with their mothers and 1,449 living in intact families, wealthier children were no less likely than less wealthy children to be caught in the middle of their parents' arguments (Barumandzadah, Lebrun, Barumandzadah, & Poussin, 2016). SPC children were also just as likely as JPC children to be caught in the middle of their parents' arguments. Money did not buy happiness in the sense that wealthier children were not more protected from their parents' conflicts.

As Table 1 shows, only a few of the studies controlled for both conflict and income. These are the studies where income and conflict were either equal to begin with (designated with "=" on the Table) or where the difference in income and conflict was factored into the statistical analysis (designated with "∗" on the Table). A close analysis of these studies is presented elsewhere, with special attention to those studies that also considered the quality of the children's relationship with both parents (Nielsen, 2018, in press). One of these studies by Buchannan et al. is detailed here to illustrate that neither conflict nor income can be held accountable in any simplistic way for the better outcomes of JPC children.

In Buchanan et al.'s study (1996) conflict, income and quality of the parent–child relationship all came into play in explaining JPC children's better outcomes. In 80% of JPC families, one parent was initially opposed to the plan. Despite their parents' initial conflict over the JPC plan, JPC children still had better outcomes than SPC children on measures of emotional and behavioral problems four years after the divorce, even in the

highest conflict families. The one exception was that the small group of children who did not feel close to either of their parents and whose parents were still in high conflict four years after separating. These children were more likely to be caught in the middle of their high conflict parents' arguments in JPC than in SPC families. As for income, there were no significant differences in the incomes of the JPC and SPC families. However, in SPC families, the children with higher income parents had more behavioral problems and used drugs or alcohol more often than SPC children with lower income parents. This was not the case in JPC families.

In sum, neither family income nor parental conflict can account for JPC children having better outcomes than SPC children. This might largely be explained by the fact that the quality of children's relationships with each parent often effects how well children fare in JPC or in SPC (for a review of these studies, see Mahrer, O'Hara, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2018, in press). Further analyses of the JPC and SPC studies show that children's outcomes are effected not only by the quality of their relationships with their parents, but by the child's gender (Nielsen, 2018, in press). In other words, the reason why JPC children have better outcomes independent of family income and parental conflict may be because they have better relationships with each parent, which, in turn, may override the importance of family income and the amount of conflict or cooperation between the parents.

### *Limitations of the studies*

Several limitations should be kept in mind in regard to the studies comparing children's outcomes in JPC and SPC families. First and foremost, the studies are correlational, which means none can prove that family income, or parental conflict, or the custody arrangement caused better or worse outcomes for children. Fortunately, a number of studies analyzed several different factors simultaneously, showing which factors were the most closely linked to the outcomes. Other studies included factors such as income, conflict, age of the children or parents' educational levels to eliminate the possibility that those factors were influencing the outcomes. These more sophisticated statistical techniques in some of the more recent studies bring us closer to understanding which factors might be the cause of children's better or worse outcomes. When the present article discusses the "impact" or "effects" of JPC or family income or parental conflict, this refers to the statistical significance of findings and does not imply causality.

Second, the studies are not all of equal quality. Some are superior to others in regard to sample size, representativeness of the sample, validity and reliability of the measures, and sophistication of the statistical analyses. Moreover, roughly half of the studies did not take account of parental conflict or family income before comparing the children's outcomes. This leaves open

the possibility that in those particular studies, low conflict or high income were more closely linked to children's well-being than was the JPC plan.

Although Smyth et al. (2016) have criticized JPC studies for using different measures and having different types of samples, this is in fact a strength in social science studies, not a weakness. When studies use different samples, different measures and different approaches to explore the same question, and when they arrive at the same general conclusions, this is a desirable situation referred to as "convergent validity" (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001). Convergent validity adds to the confidence and the trustworthiness of the findings.

Third, even though differences between JPC and SPC children's outcomes are statistically significant, the effect sizes are generally small to moderate. It should be remembered, however, that small effect sizes are also common in studies of the links between children's well-being and factors such as parental conflict, poverty, and domestic violence. Effect sizes in social science and in medical studies are often relatively small, yet they have important implications for large numbers of people (Ferguson, 2009). In fact many public health policies and treatment protocols are based on research findings with correlations in the range of only .15 to .30 which are considered weak to moderate (G. Meyer, 2001). More specific to the issue of the small effect sizes in the JPC and SPC studies, Amato and Rezac (1994) point out that even the small effect sizes in their famous meta-analysis of the frequency of nonresidential fathers' contacts with their children meant significantly better outcomes for very large numbers of children.

Fourth, almost all of the data regarding children's well-being and about the level of conflict between the parents comes only from the mothers. Without the fathers' input, especially in the JPC families where children are living with each parent at least 35% of the time, we cannot know how accurate the mothers' reports are. Likewise, relying only on the mothers' reports of conflict between the parents may be yielding an inaccurate or skewed view.

## Conclusion

As the studies summarized in this article demonstrate, JPC is linked to better outcomes than SPC for children, independent of family income or the level of conflict between parents. This is not to say that children do not benefit in any way from living in higher income families or from having parents with low conflict, cooperative coparenting relationships. What these studies do mean is that the better outcomes for JPC children should not be attributed to higher family incomes or to low conflict between their parents. Moreover, all 30 studies that assessed children's relationships with their parents and other

relatives found better outcomes for the JPC children. Given this, it is highly likely that family income and parental conflict are less closely linked to children's well-being than the quality of their relationships with their parents, stepparents, and grandparents. As researchers continue to explore the factors that might explain children's better outcomes in JPC families, it is clear that shared parenting families are on the rise and that children are benefitting from this new family form.

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