



Australian Association for  
Infant Mental Health Inc.

## Infants and overnight care – post separation and divorce

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### Background paper

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This background paper considers the current available research in relation to overnight care arrangement of children aged three years and under in families where the parents do not live together, due to family separation or because the parents have never lived together. The Australian Association for Infant Mental Health notes there have been a number of recent reviews in relation to overnight care of children post family separation which have resulted in differing views and recommendations (e.g. McIntosh & Smyth 2012; Pruett *et al.* 2012; Pruett, McIntosh, & Kelly 2014; McIntosh, Pruett & Kelly, 2014; Nielson *et al.* 2014; Warshak 2014; McIntosh, Smyth & Kelaher, 2015). This paper does not make comment about these review articles or the opinions they have put forward but rather examines original research only that specifically assesses outcomes for children aged three years and under where parents do not live together, and where the research has specifically addressed overnight care arrangements. The articles included in this review have been drawn from 14 published original studies identified from the above review articles. Of these, eight studies met our inclusion criteria (Table 1). Only original research articles were included in this review that focussed on children in separated families or where parents have never lived together and included:

- specific analyses of data in relation to children 3 years and under of age
- measurement of overnight care arrangements
- measurement of child outcomes and/or child-parent attachment relationships
- published in English.

This paper provides the foundation for the AAIMHI *Guidelines for Infants and Overnight Care after parental separation or divorce*.

### Review of studies of infants and overnight care

Eight original research studies were found that assessed children aged three years and under in separated families, or where parents had never lived together that included measurement of overnight care arrangements and the measurement of child outcomes and/or child-parent attachment relationships. These studies are of varying quality and all the studies have a range of limitations. In addition, the studies use different study designs (cross-sectional/ longitudinal; telephone interview/clinical interview/pen and paper report), populations (general population/court population/clinical or convenience group), different groupings for overnight care arrangements, and different outcome measures (clinical assessment +/- standardised tools/mother report/father report/third party report), and different statistical analyses, making them difficult to make direct comparisons. Only four studies used random samples with varying relevance to the general population. Also of particular relevance for AAIMHI only two studies included analysis of child outcomes for children under one year of age, five including children one year and over, and two studies including children two years and over. See Table 1 for information about these studies.

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## Parent conflict and child outcomes

Eight of the nine studies found that conflict between separated parents was associated with poorer emotional and behavioural outcomes for children. Of interest the study by Althenhofen and colleagues (2010) found that higher parent conflict was associated with lower parent emotional availability, which is known to be associated with insecure attachment (Biringen & Easterbrook, 2012).

## Child-parent attachment relationships and overnight care

Four studies assessed child-parent attachment either directly or indirectly. All four studies had methodological weaknesses in relation to sample size or the generalisability of the samples to the general population. Three studies used well-accepted measures of attachment security, with Solomon and George (1999; sample size = 146) using the Strange Situation Procedure, while two studies – Althenhofen, Sutherland and Biringen (2010; sample size 24) and Tornello, Emery and Rowan (2013; sample size 2,570) – used variation of Q-sorts. The study by McIntosh and colleagues (2010; sample size 835 for children 0 – 5 years) assessed behaviours associated with attachment such as the child's monitoring of their primary care giver and their irritable behaviour.

Three studies found increased insecure attachment for young children in frequent overnight care. The study by Tornello and colleagues (2013), based on a large random sample, reported that one or more nights per week away from the primary carer was significantly associated with insecure attachments despite the mothers' rating the fathers in the overnight groups as being better parents and having better relationships with their children. The sample in this study however was comprised of high risk, low income families with many of the parents never having lived together since the birth of their child and therefore not generalisable to all separated families. The majority of participants of the study by Solomon and George (1999) also had not lived together and while a much smaller study they also found greater child-mother attachment insecurity when the child spent overnights away from the primary carer. Of interest the children's attachment to their fathers in this study tended to be insecure/disorganised regardless of overnight stays. An added limitation in this study was that the analysis compared the overnight groups to a combined group of children who did not spend overnights with their fathers and children from intact families.

McIntosh and colleagues (2010) found significantly greater levels of infant irritability and greater monitoring of primary carers in children under two years who spent one or more overnight per week away from their primary carer. These emotional regulatory and attachment behaviours were associated with insecure attachment relationships (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, Wall, 1978). In this study, when children aged 2 to 3 years of age spent overnights away from their primary carer, they were found to have less persistence at tasks, which has been shown to be associated with insecure attachment (Sroufe et. al., 2005). A strength of this study is that the sample is drawn from a random sample of Australian families. Importantly, they also controlled for a range of factors such as parenting style, co-parenting relationship qualities and socio-economic status that are known to be associated with the self-selection into shared parenting arrangements. The main weakness with this study is that in attempting to specifically analyse 0 to 2; 2 to 3; and 4 to 5-year age groups the numbers in some groups were small. Althenhofen, Sutherland and Biringen (2010) did not find a connection between the age a child commenced overnights with their father and attachment security. However, this study had several methodological problems such as a very small sample size (n=24) and a lack of a comparison group. Overall, while all these studies had methodological problems, the results suggest less secure attachment with frequent overnights for children less than four years of age, particularly if the parents have never lived together with the child.

Solomon and George (1999) investigated protective and risk factors in relation to the child's attachment to the mother. They noted that overnight visits were not inevitably associated with disorganised infant-mother attachment. However, risk factors that emerged were in relation to parent conflict and the mother's perceived ability to protect the child from harm. Through interviews they found that high levels of conflict (including cold avoidance of all communication) was a common

occurrence during the transition from one parent to the other and that this atmosphere of tension and hostility would likely heighten the child's anxiety and need for reassurance both during separations and reunions and in general. This problem is also noted by Altenhofen and colleagues (2010) where they found that high conflict was associated with the mother being less emotionally available to provide emotional warmth and sensitivity to their child. Those mothers in the overnight group where the infant-mother relationship was rated as secure described themselves as being active and effective in providing psychological protection for their infants in a low conflict environment.

### **Child outcomes and overnight care**

Seven studies measured child outcomes. Again each measured different aspects, and used different assessment measures from clinical assessment to parent or third party report using rating scales or standardised tests. Five studies found associations between negative child outcomes and overnight care (although one study also found a positive association for some children over three years of age). Two studies did not find any associations.

Two of the five studies that found negative associations used face to face clinical assessments by a third party to professionally assess the children's emotional wellbeing. Both these studies had small non-random samples. One study by Brotsky, Steinman and Zimmelman (1988) included 26 children less than four years of age with all participating families having been referred to a Joint Custody Project in the USA. All children were in some form of shared care. At one year post separation approximately half the children (14) were reportedly doing well. However, at an 18-month follow up these children were not doing so well suggesting that their problems were more evident when the children struggled with subsequent normal developmental milestones. At the one year post separation time point there were a further 27 per cent of children (7) who were deemed as meeting their developmental milestones but were emotionally distressed, and a further 20 per cent (5) who were assessed as being at serious risk of major emotional disturbance and/or developmental delay. Overall, the majority of these children were found to be struggling emotionally or not meeting their developmental milestones at the time of the assessment or at a later date. There was no comparison group of no overnight care to demonstrate whether these results were associated with overnight care or parental separation and associated conflict.

The second study was also conducted in the USA by McKinnon and Wallerstein (1987). This study followed the development of seven children under 3 years of age and a further 19 children between 3 to 5 years of age for 1 to 4 years. Again all children were in some form of shared care arrangement. The clinical information was complemented by parent report and, where relevant, teacher reports. Three of the seven children under 3 years did well. These parents were highly motivated to maintain their parenting commitment, to synchronise that child's routines, had daily communication and cooperation and conflict was minimal. The remaining four children under three years did poorly. While they initially showed age appropriate development they deteriorated as the parental conflict continued and parents struggled to provide adequate parenting. Of the children aged between 3 to 5 years only 16 per cent (3) were found to do well while the remaining 84 per cent (16) were emotionally stressed and having difficulties with the parents' new partners, poor parenting and family violence. Again there was no comparison group of children with no overnight care.

McIntosh and colleagues (2010) found children age 0 to 2 years who spent one or more overnights per week away from their primary carer had greater levels of irritability compared to children who did not. Children aged between 2 to 3 years had greater levels of problematic behaviours while children aged 4 to 5 years did not show differences in primary verses shared care arrangements. As noted above this study also statistically controlled for a range of factors that are associated with self-selection into various care arrangements post separation.

Tornello and colleagues (2013) as reported above found that attachment insecurity was significantly related to overnight care for young children. They also found that secure attachment for one and three years olds was related to better outcomes at age three and age five. Whereas, for one-year-olds, one or more nights away from their primary caregiver was associated with both attachment insecurity and

emotional and behavioural problems at both ages one and three years. For children aged three years and over there were no significant adjustment problems found to be associated with overnight care. This study also controlled for a range of factors associated with self-selection within random samples (i.e., while the sample is randomly drawn parents with certain characteristics chose different parenting arrangements post separation).

While the research conducted by Solomon and George (1999) did not specifically measure child behavioural outcomes, children in the overnight group showing significantly greater levels of disorganised attachment and children who demonstrated disorganised attachment were found to be significantly more anxious, unsettled, and angry.

The two studies that did not find negative associations between overnight care and child's outcomes used parent report questionnaires. Pruett, Ebling and Insabella (2004) studied 132 parents with children 0 to 6 years, with the majority being preschoolers not infants. This study did not include high conflict families. Using both mother and father reports the researchers found that the level of parent conflict, quality of child-parent relationships, consistency of schedules, and number of care givers were more important in relation to child outcomes compared with overnight care.

Kaspiew and colleagues (2009) explored data from the Australian large-scale *Longitudinal Study of Separated Families*. This research examined only one time point and as such is a cross-sectional study. Kaspiew and colleagues did not find any significant associations between overnight care arrangements and child emotional and behavioural outcomes, except where the mother raised ongoing safety concerns. They measured both mother and father reports and found only 18 per cent agreement between parents for the same child demonstrating that each parent had a very different view of their child's emotional and behavioural development. The authors also raised concerns that parent reports may reflect the parents' emotional state and feeling about their current situation rather than the actual outcome for the child. To date there is no study that has assessed the validity of self-report measures by mothers and fathers within the context of separated families and litigation. In the Kaspiew study both parents tended to rate the child as having more problems in situations where there was a greater level of conflict, previous family violence, ongoing safety concerns, and where there were concerns in relation to addictions and mental health problems. Mothers rated children as having greater problems in the overnight care groups but this did not reach significance. Of note, this study used a random sample and did not statistically adjust for factors known to be associated with self-selection into various care arrangements following parental separation.

### **Overnight care, parent conflict and child outcomes**

Only two studies specifically addressed the interactions between conflict and overnight care. Both these studies used large Australian representative samples and found differing results. McIntosh and colleagues (2010) found that conflict was more problematic for young children (under 5 years) with greater number of overnights away from the primary carer. This was not found to be the case for children over five years of age. The second study, by Kaspiew and colleagues (2009), found that children did better post separation when their parents' relationship was friendly rather than distant, conflictual, or fearful, however, they did not find an increased risk of negative child outcome with an increase in overnight care, except where there was ongoing fear reported by the mother. This study found strong links between pre-separation family violence and ongoing safety concerns. In comparison to the McIntosh study, Kaspiew and colleagues did not control for a range of factors or characteristics that are known to be associated with parents that self-select to share the care of their children and quality of parenting, co-parenting relationship and socio-economic factors. In addition, this study did not analyse child outcomes for children less than two years of age.

### **Gender and overnight care**

Pruett, Ebling and Insabella (2004) found that girls benefited from overnights and multiple caregivers whereas boys did not. However, the children in the study were primarily preschool age and the analysis did not assess whether this was the same for infants. The study by Kaspiew and

colleagues(2009) found that both mother and father reports indicated that boys had significantly greater problems compared to girls however they did not conduct analyses of the overnight data in relation to gender.

## Conclusions

Research in the area of overnight care for infants and young children is minimal and as such little is known about the developmental impacts of overnight care for children whose parents separate when they are in infancy or who may never have lived together with the child (Pruett & DiFinzo, 2014). Importantly there are no generalizable studies that have followed children's development through preschool and into primary school. As seen in both the clinical assessment studies (Brotzky, Steinman & Zimmerman, 1988; McKinnon & Wallerstein, 1987) children may or may not present with developmental problems when shared overnight care commenced but may show marked deterioration as they are challenged with subsequent normal developmental tasks to master. It is still unclear which children will benefit from overnight care and at what age or stage of their development and which ones will not. Therefore future research needs to measure the age that overnight care commences and follow the child's development over time. Furthermore, there are many other unanswered questions such as: Does it make a difference if a child has an older sibling? And do additional family transitions, such as new partners, impact on child outcome?

All of the studies reviewed above have addressed different research questions and used a range of methodologies and analyses which do not allow for direct comparisons. In addition, no one study provided a comprehensive study of all the relevant issues and each study had their limitations and strengths. In general the more recent studies that have used large random samples have stronger research designs and therefore must carry more weight. However, with these there are significant differences in statistical analyses; the use of controls to avoid potential confounding factors; and self-selection into various groups that can add bias to random samples. There are also limitations in being able to generalize the findings to the general population and particularly to those seeking overnight care via the legal system. Furthermore with large scale studies, the outcome measures tend to cover broad areas which then may not have been sufficiently sensitive to detect specific problems.

The research appears to present a united front in relation to the negative impact of parent conflict on children. However, there are inconsistent findings in relation to whether parent conflict has a greater negative impact on infants and young children when they are spending frequent overnights with the parent they do not live with or are in a shared care arrangement. There are three out of four studies that raise concern about the impact of overnights away from the primary carer in relation to insecure/disorganised attachment, particularly when the parents have not lived together with the child. Insecure and disorganised attachments are particularly concerning given the increased risk they confer in relation to the later development of psychopathology (Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland; 2004). There are also mixed findings in relation to children's current developmental outcomes, however, as stated above there are concerns that not only current but also future development may be compromised. While some studies found that some children's development did not appear to be affected by frequent overnight care away from their primary carer, or may in some circumstances be beneficial, this appeared to be in the context of low conflict, effective communication and parents who were motivated to work together in the best interest of the child. These parents are not parents who have required ongoing mediation, legal advice or the assistance of the Courts.

At the current time, while more research is being conducted, it is the view of AAIMHI that a cautious approach to overnight care of young children following parental separation (or when parents have never lived together) is required, given the potential for significant harm to this vulnerable age group during this period of rapid development.

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- McIntosh JE, Smyth BM (2012). Shared-tiem parenting: An evidence-based matrix for evaluating risk. In: (Eds.) K Kuehnle & L Drozd. *Parenting Plan Evaluations: Applied Research for the Family Court*. Oxford University Press.
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- Woodward L, Fergusson DM, Belsky J (2000). Timing of parents' separation and attachment to parents in adolescence: results of a prospective study from birth to age 16. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62, 162-174.

**Table 1: Research papers considered for review**

Reference	Analysis under 4 years	Measures		
		Overnight care	Child outcomes	Attachment/ associated behaviours
Altenhofen S, Biringen Z, Mergler R (2008). Significant family dynamics related to postdivorce adjustment in parents and children. <i>Journal of Divorce and Remarriage</i> 49, 25-40.	✓	✓	x	x
Altenhofen S, Sutherland K, Biringen Z (2010). Families experiencing divorce: Age at onset of overnight stays, conflict, and emotional availability. <i>Journal of Divorce and Remarriage</i> 51, 141-156.	✓	✓	x	✓
Berger LM, Brown PR, Joung E, Meli MS, Wimer L (2008). The stability of child physical placements following divorce: Descriptive evidence from Wisconsin. <i>Journal of Marriage and Family</i> 70, 273-283.	x	✓	x	x
Brotsky M, Steinman S, Zimmelman S (1988). Joint custody through mediation: A longitudinal assessment. <i>Conciliation Courts Review</i> 26, 53-58.	✓	✓	✓	x
Kaspiew R, Gray M, Weston R, Moloney L, Hand K, Qu L (2009). <i>Evaluation of the 2006 family law reforms</i> . Australian Institute of Family Studies	✓	✓	✓	x
McCoby EE, Mnookin RH (1992). <i>Dividing the child: Social and legal dilemmas of custody</i> . Harvard University Press, London.	x	✓	x	x
Melli MS, Brown PR (2008). Exploring a new family form – the shared time family. <i>International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family</i> 22, 231-269.	x	✓	x	x
McIntosh J, Smyth B, Kelaher M, Wells Y, Long C (2010). <i>Post-separation parenting arrangements and developmental outcomes for infants and children</i> . Australian Government Attorney General's Department.	✓	✓	✓	✓
McKinnon R, Wallerstein JS (1987). Joint custody and the preschool child. <i>Conciliation Courts Review</i> 25, 39-47.	✓	x	✓	x
Pruett MK, Ebling R, Insabella G (2004). Critical aspects of parenting plans for young children. Interjecting data into the debate about overnights. <i>Family Court Review</i> 42, 39-59.	✓	✓	✓	x
Solomon J, George C (1999). The development of attachment in separated and divorced families. <i>Attachment and Human Development</i> 1, 2-33.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tornello SL, Emery R, Rowen J, Potter D, Ocker B, Xu Y (2013). Overnight custody arrangements, attachment, and adjustment among very young children. <i>Journal of Marriage and Family</i> 75, 871-885.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wallerstein JS, Kelly J (1975). The effects of parental divorce: Experiences of the preschool child. <i>Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry</i> 14, 600-616.	✓	x	✓	x
Woodward L, Fergusson DM, Belsky J (2000). Timing of parents' separation and attachment to parents in adolescence: results of a prospective study from birth to age 16. <i>Journal of Marriage and the Family</i> 62, 162-174.	✓	x	✓	✓