

Communicative aspects of post-divorce parental interaction in a Swedish sample: A longitudinal qualitative project

Helena Willén, Nordic School of Public Health, Göteborg, Sweden

Martin Richards, Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge

This project analyses parental cooperation about children for couples who have legal joint custody after divorce. Joint custody in Sweden means that the child/ren are under guardianship of both parents and that the parents are expected to consult each other about important decisions concerning the children. Furthermore, the parents' have equal responsibility to financially support and provide care for their children. This does *not* imply anything about who provides care or about residence. Parents are generally granted legal joint custody after divorce in Sweden. Little research has been carried out in Sweden on post-divorce parental everyday interaction, which may be of particular international interest as gender equality norms and policy for family and work are more strongly enforced, and more children of divorce are sharing their time equally between the parents in Sweden than anywhere else in the world. In 2003/04 most children lived with their mothers (67.5 %) and 11 % lived with their fathers. An increasing number of children of divorce (20 %) shared residence equally between the parents, usually on a week-week basis. This can be compared with for instance the UK, where an estimate may be less than 1 %.

A longitudinal, qualitative research design was chosen, with repeated interviews being carried out over a period of a little more than two years (2002-2004). This approach was expected to give detailed insight into the everyday life and functioning of divorced families from three to five years after divorce.

Participants were 55 parents from 43 families (34 women, 21 men), recruited from a county court register and a voluntary organisation for separated parents. Participants came from one large and one small city. All had children under 18 living at home and most had divorced 3 years before first interview. The parents were interviewed 1-5 times in 2 years in face-to-face or telephone interviews. Interview data were analysed qualitatively. Half of the children shared their time equally between the parents while the other half lived either with their mother or their father and had contact usually every second weekend. Some had split the children between them and others had different systems for different children.

Three main types of post-divorce parenting patterns were found based on frequency of communication, distribution of responsibility for child care, and level of conflict. These patterns were: *Shared parenthood*, *Single parenthood* and *Parallel parenthood*, distributed in about equally sized groups.

When parents shared parenting they were keen to talk with each other about the children, not leaving the other out, pass on information, discuss and solve problems, and involve each other in decision-making. In these families the children often spent an equal amount of time in both parents' home, though not all children did. The conflict level was generally low, to some extent due to efficient emotion regulation. Strategies to deal with negative emotion were for instance choosing-your-battles, focusing on the other parent's positive qualities, and on the higher goal of the children's best interest. The system was flexible and allowed for changes. The other parent was generally positively perceived as a parent, but also as support for oneself.

Single parenthood could be divided into two groups according to conflict and stress level: Single distressed and Single accepting. Single parents, distressed and accepting alike, had joint custody, but in practice they were caring on their own. The child/ren had usually more or less regular contact with the other parent, usually the father, but s/he did not take any real part in care and upbringing. There was little communication, and this mainly focused on the most necessary information, and decisions were made by the parent the child/ren lived with, except when both parents were required by law to be involved, such as medical decisions. Contact between parents frequently led to conflicts, especially in the distressed group.

Many parents in the distressed group were upset and anxious because of their burden of responsibility, lack of support and a low degree of flexibility. Some mothers wanted the father to be involved almost to any cost, despite the fact that the children were clearly upset about seeing their alcoholic or mentally ill fathers. They felt powerless and caught in an irresolvable dilemma. All attempts to communicate or change anything broke down. Some needed the father to be involved for their own sake, while all believed that some contact is better than none at all. Other mothers were just very angry that the fathers had withdrawn and couldn't stop being angry.

Accepting mothers were in similar situations, except that they had accepted what was happening and tried to make the best of it. Fathers in this group didn't have the serious problems such as alcoholism as was seen in the distressed group. This meant that the mothers didn't always worry about their children when they were with their father. They were unhappy with the father's withdrawal but had decided that they couldn't do anything about it. So, again, emotional regulation is involved. It was quite clear how some mothers had worked hard with their anger and disappointment.

In parallel parenthood both parents had considerable influence over the child/ren as the children stayed about equally much in each parent's home. However, communication had broken down and the children were living in 2 separate worlds. Necessary information was communicated indirectly, by e.g., text-messages or by using children or new partners as messengers, or even not at all. Also important decisions that affected the other parent were made separately and communicated as fait accompli. Anger, mutual distrust and relational stress characterized these families. Due to lack of communication the system was highly rigid and the perception of the ex-partner was mainly negative and stereotyped.

Despite the good intentions of the policy to strengthen both parents' ties to the children after divorce in many cases this doesn't seem to happen. People who seem to share parenthood on the surface have serious and intense conflicts going on year after year. If this sample is at all representative this is true for 50% of children of divorce. Something needs to be done to help people in these situations. Those who are capable of collaborating use strategies, emotional as well as cognitive, to maintain a working relationship. What might help at least some of these people would be to work on their feelings, maybe using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

Families with serious mental problems or personality disorders need more intense interventions, also the children and the "healthy" parent, to be able to protect the children from destructive parenting.