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**YOUNG ADULTS’**

**PERSPECTIVES ON DIVORCE**

**Living Arrangements**

William V. Fabricius and Jeffrey Hall

There is increasing consensus that the perspectives of children need to be taken into account in

decisions made by divorcing parents and the courts and that young adults who have lived through

their parents’ divorces can be an important source of information about children’s perspectives.

In this study, the authors assessed the perspectives of 820 college adults from divorced families

on the issue of children’s living arrangements after divorce. Respondents wanted to have spent

more time with their fathers as they were growing up, and the living arrangement they believed

was best was living equal time with each parent. The living arrangements they had as children

gave them generally little time with their fathers. Respondents reported that their fathers wanted

more time with them but that their mothers generally did not want them to spend more time with

their fathers.

The purpose of this study is to examine the outcomes of divorce from the

perspective of young adults who grewup with their parents’ divorces. Important

consequences of their parents’ divorces for these young adults include

the perceptions, attributions, attitudes, and feelings they are left with as they

begin the process of starting their own adult lives and families. There is

increasing consensus (L’Heureux-Dube, 1998; Mason, 1999;Wallerstein &

Lewis, 1998) that the perspectives of children need to be taken into account in

decisions made by divorcing parents and the courts and that young adults

who have lived through their parents’ divorces can be an important source of

information about children’s perspectives. But divorce researchers have typically

not queried young adults about their parents’ divorces.

One important aspect of the lives of children of divorce involves the living

arrangements they have with each of their parents. Decisions about living

arrangements are usually made early in the separation and divorce process

and tend to be perpetuated throughout children’s divorced family life. In most

cases, these decisions are made for them. Because these arrangements set the

context for their daily lives, children of divorce are likely to form strong perspectives

on the issue of living arrangements.

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Earlier research on younger children’s perspectives on living arrangements

has demonstrated that children desire free and frequent access to

noncustodial parents. For example, Rosen (1979) found that 60% of children

wanted unrestricted contact, regardless of whether the noncustodial parent

was mother or father. Children repeatedly insisted that being able to see the

noncustodial parents whenever they wished and being able to see that parent

often made their parents’ divorces tolerable for them.

Kelly andWallerstein (1977) reported that young children viewed the typical

every-other-weekend visitation arrangement as severely inadequate. “The

only younger children reasonably content with the visiting situation were those

7- and 8-year-olds visiting 2 or 3 times a week, most often by pedaling to their

father’s apartment on a bicycle” (p. 52). They also report that older children

also wanted easy access and frequent contact. These children’s feelings appeared

to have some external validation in that “there were surprisingly few

instances where we considered frequent visits to be detrimental to a child, or

where such frequent visiting placed that child substantially at risk” (p. 54).

The perspectives of young children, although compelling, have not had

much influence in public policy debates about custody and visitation. Young

children’s feelings may be suspected of being relatively temporary, malleable,

and ultimately not strongly connected to measurable outcomes. The public

policy debate about custody and visitation has generally been framed in

terms of parents’ (and, most recently, grandparents’) rights rather than children’s

wishes (Mason, 1999). Thus, it is important thatWallerstein and Lewis

(1998) have recently reported on the longitudinal follow-up of the perspectives

of these children now that they are adults. Their report is based on a

subsample of 25 respondents who were the youngest (now ages 27 to 32) in

the longitudinal study.

Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) found that many of their respondents

reported that their visitation schedules with their fathers had been too disruptive

and too inflexible and that when thiswas true they got little enjoyment or

benefit from visitation in theway of enhanced relationships with their fathers.

As adults, they feel strongly now, as they did then, that their wishes should

have been taken into account, and they remain angry and resentful that they

were not. On the basis of the current perspectives of these adult children of

divorce, Wallerstein and Lewis argue that the child’s voice is too often not

heard in decisions about living arrangements and visitation schedules.

It is clear from Wallerstein and Lewis’s report that their respondents

wished for more flexibility in scheduling of visits, but it is unclear if on balance

they wished for more or less amounts of time with their fathers. The

issue of flexibility of scheduling of visits is separate from the issue of amount

of time spent with father, but it is reasonable to assume that these adults

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wanted to have had their voices heard regarding both. Among the best

adjusted of these respondents at 7 and 8 years of age were those who could

ride their bikes to their fathers’ houses, effecting some control over both the

scheduling and the amount of time with their fathers. If we are able to take the

child’s wishes into account regarding visitation, then a crucial missing piece

of information is the quantity of time they now wish that they had had with

their fathers.

We have undertaken a systematic examination of this issue with a large

sample of young adults who, like Wallerstein and Lewis’s respondents, are

looking back and evaluating their childhood experiences in divorced families.

First, we examine their reports of what living arrangements they had and

how those arrangements changed as time passed. Second, we examine what

living arrangements theywanted and what arrangements they feel their mothers

and fatherswanted. Third, we examine in some detail what living arrangement

this next generation of parents believes is best.

It is important to determine what living arrangements young adults

remember having. There have typically been reports that most divorced

fathers do not see their children much (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill,

1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991, Table C).

However, this research has been done almost exclusively with mothers.

When asked, fathers report more involvement, both on subjective scales

(Ahrons, 1983; Fulton, 1979) and objective scales (Braver et al., 1993). Part

of the difference may be due to different interpretations by mothers and

fathers of what constitutes father involvement (Ahrons, 1983). Children’s

interpretations of how much involvement they had with their fathers are

important because these interpretations form the children’s subjective assessments

of the disparity between what they had and what they wanted.

Young adults will have some understanding of the living arrangements

each of their parents wanted, based not only on what their parents said but

also on their actions while they were growing up. These perceptions of what

their parents wanted are important because they are part of the young adults”

understanding of how and why their parents made the living-arrangement

decisions that they did. These perceptions are also a potential source of feelings

of rejection or resentment if the young adults perceive that a parent

wanted little involvement or that one parent wanted the other parent to have

little involvement with them.

There may be an advantage to asking young adults what their parents

wanted because it may avoid a self-serving bias that could influence parents’

reports. There have been reports that mothers want father involvement

(Furstenberg, 1988).We know much less about what fathers want (Seltzer &

Brandreth, 1994). Statistics showing that divorced fathers spend little time

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with their children do not tell us that this is necessarily what the fathers want.

Some fathers may want little time, but others may have wanted to take equal

responsibility for child rearing but were prevented by circumstances from

doing so. Thus, young adults’ perceptions of the living arrangements their

parentswanted will provide some needed third party the information on what

kinds of living arrangements divorced mothers and fathers want.

A final part of their perspectives is their belief about what living arrangement

is best for children. This belief will be personally relevant to them in at

least twoways. They will evaluate the living arrangements they had in light of

what they believe is best for children, and what they believe is best will influence

future decisions they may have to make for their own children. They

may think that what they think is best is similar to what divorced mothers

think, or divorced fathers, or neither. To the extent they see their own beliefs

as different, and their parents’ generation’s beliefs as wrong, they may be

likely to hold their own beliefs more strongly. Consequently, we also examined

what they thought divorced mothers and divorced fathers would believe

are the best living arrangements for children.

Derevensky and Deschamps (1997) have recently examined some of these

issues and concluded that most young adults from divorced families do not

see joint physical custody as a viable option; however, their conclusion may

be premature. They studied a very small sample (*N* = 37) of college students

from divorced families, and the only question they asked about their preferred

living arrangements was whether they would have wanted joint physical

custody or sole physical custody with one or the other parent. Most students

had sole maternal custody, and 83% of them preferred it. However,

circumstances such as their parents living in different school districts might

have prevented students from wanting to split their time equally between

their parents’ houses, although they still might have wanted more time with

their fathers. Derevensky and Deschamps did not ask how much time they

would have preferred with their fathers, nor did they ask what living arrangement

they feltwas best for children in general. They did find, however, that of

those students who actually had joint custody, 80% preferred having it.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were students in an introductory psychology course at a large

southwestern state university who took part in research for course credit dur-

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ing the fall 1996, fall 1997, spring 1998, fall 1998, and spring 1999 semesters.

During this time, 344 male participants and 485 female participants indicated

they were from divorced families. These participants constituted the sample

for this study.

Across all five semesters, 30.7% of the students reported that their parents

were divorced. This is comparable to the typical estimate that one third of

children’s parents will divorce (Bumpass&Sweet, 1989; National Center for

Health Statistics, 1990, Table 1-31).Women (31.3%) were not significantly

more likely to be from divorced families than men (29.9%).1 Self-reported

ethnicity among these participants included Caucasian (77.0%), Hispanic

(8.5%), Asian (3.2%), African American (3.2%), Native American (1.4%),

Middle Eastern (0.4%) and other (6.4%) (including any two or three categories

and none of the above). Mean age at time of testing was 20 years, 1.5

months.

In spring 1999, we asked participants (*n* = 321) when their parents’

divorces occurred. Participants were given six response options (1979 or

before, 1980-1983, 1984-1987, 1988-1991, 1992-1995, 1996 or later). The

respective frequencies for these year-of-divorce intervals were 11%, 29%,

21%, 22%, 12%, and 6%. Thus, for our sample as a whole, the estimated

average years of the divorces were from 1985 to 1987.

Participants were given five response options to indicate how old they

were when their parents divorced (0-5 years old, 6-10, 11-15, 16-18, 19 or

older). The respective frequencies for these age-at-divorce intervals were

38%, 28%, 20%, 10%, and 4%. The estimated age of our participants from

these age-at-divorce intervals was 8 years. Braver’s (1998) representative

sample of divorces filed in 1986 in Phoenix yielded children at approximately

6 years of age.

**Procedures**

Students who were present in class were given one of four randomly distributed

paper-and-pencil questionnaires during a class period each semester

devoted to research participation. Each semester, either some or most of the

questions analyzed here were included on one or all of the questionnaires.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the means by gender for the living arrangements participants

reported they had, the arrangements they wanted, their perceptions of

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what their parentswanted, their own beliefs about what living arrangement is

best, and the living arrangements they think divorced mothers and fathers

believe are best for children. For each variable, the scale ranged from 0, indicating

primary residence with mother and little contact with father, to 8, indicating

primary residence with father and little contact with mother, with 4

indicating equal time spent with each parent.

Men reported a significantly greater amount of time spent with their

fathers (mean = 2.32) than women did (1.98).2 Men also reported that they

wanted significantly greater amounts of time with their fathers (3.13) than

women did (2.62).3 Importantly, both men and women wanted significantly

more time with their fathers than they actually had.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of responses to these two questions, collapsed

over gender. Eighty percent of participants reported that they had lived

primarily with their mothers,8%reported having lived equal amounts of time

with each parent, and 12% reported that they had lived primarily with their

fathers. Whereas almost half (48%) reported actual living arrangements in

one of the two lowest categories of seeing their fathers, either minimally or

not at all, or only some of the time, in a dramatic reversal, 48% reported that

they hadwanted one of the two categories of seeing their fathers a lot or living

equal amounts of time with each parent.

To see how living arrangements and visitation frequency might have

changed over time, we asked participants (*n* = 134) to report the arrangements

they had during the first 2 years after the divorce (mean for men and

women combined = 2.27), the 3rd and 4th years (2.20), the 5th and 6th years

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Table 1

*Means and Number of Respondents for Reports of Respondents” Living Arrangements*

Men Women

Living Arrangement Mean Number Mean Number

What they had 2.32 339 1.98 481

What they wanted 3.13 135 2.62 180

What their mothers wanted 2.01 140 1.86 214

What their fathers wanted 3.06 144 3.39 210

Their beliefs about what is best 3.58 341 3.54 478

Divorced mothers’ beliefs 2.10 82 1.65 114

Divorced fathers’ beliefs 4.40 82 4.43 114

NOTE: The scale ranged from0 = primary residence with mother and minimal or no contact with

father to 8 = primary residence with father and minimal or no contact with mother, with 4 = equal

time spent with each parent.

(2.05), and the 7th and 8th years (2.14). Statistical analyses showed no indication

that contact with the father decreased during the 8 years following the

divorce.

We asked participants which living arrangements they perceived their

mothers hadwanted and which they perceived their fathers hadwanted.4 Both

male and female participants alike reported a significant difference between

how much time their fathers wanted with them (mean for men and women

combined = 3.25) and how much time their mothers wanted their fathers to

have (1.92). Figure 2 shows the distributions of responses to these two questions.

Forty percent reported that their mothers had wanted them to see their

fathers either minimally or not at all, or only some of the time. Only 7% felt

their mothers hadwanted them to spend equal amounts of time with each parent.

Many fewer fathers than mothers were perceived to have wanted the

three lowest categories of father involvement, whereas 44% of participants

reported that their fathers had wanted their children to live with them either

half time or more than half time.

There was no significant difference between the actual living arrangements

participants reported they had and what they reported their mothers

wanted them to have, for either men or women. Fathers, however, were perceived

by both male and female participants to have wanted significantly

more involvement than they had. This was especially true of those fathers

who sawtheir children minimally or not at all, some, and a moderate amount.

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Figure 1. Proportion of subjects who reported they had each type of living arrangement and

proportion who reported they wanted each type.

The percentages of these fathers who were perceived to have wanted more

involvement than they had were 63%, 78%, and 78%, respectively. In contrast,

the percentages of mothers who were perceived to have wanted their

children to have more contact with their fathers decreased rapidly once

fathers had a moderate amount of contact. The corresponding percentages of

mothers were 60%, 55%, and 28%. Overall, only 32% of participants

reported that their mothers and fathers had wanted the same living

arrangements.

Finally, men felt that their fathers wanted the same amount of time with

them (mean = 3.06) as they themselves wanted (3.13), but women felt that

their fathers wanted significantly more time with them (3.39) than they

wanted (2.62) (see Table 1).

We next wanted to see what our participants, who had lived through their

parents’ divorces, thought was the best living arrangement for children of

divorce.5 In asking this question, we used more socially acceptable anchor

categories of regular visits with the other parent, instead of anchoring the

scale with categories of seeing the other parent minimally or not at all. These

were followed by three categories specifying increasing numbers of overnight

stays (a few, some, and a substantial number). As before, the central category

(4 on the scale) specified living equal amounts of time with each parent.

There was no significant difference between men (mean = 3.58) and women

(3.54) on this question. Figure 3 shows that 70% of the participants felt that

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Figure 2. Proportion of subjects who reported their mothers and fathers wanted each type of

living arrangement.

the best living arrangement for childrenwas equal amounts of time with each

parent.

We checked to see if the strong preference for equal living arrangements

was not perhaps coming from those participants who had lived less with their

fathers. Perhaps believing that an equal living arrangement is ideal is a “grass

is greener” phenomenon, and those who had in fact lived more equally with

both parents might perceive this arrangement as less than ideal. However, of

those who lived equal time with each parent, 93% believed that an equal living

arrangement was in fact best.

We asked participants (*n* = 88) what they thought was the best living

arrangement for children of different ages (stipulating that the parents were

both good parents and they lived relatively close to one another). There were

five versions of this question that asked about children ages birth to 2 years, 3

to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 14 years, and 15 to 18 years. The question

asked, “How many days should the child spend at the Dad’s house during an

average 2-week (14-day) period where ‘day’ means daytime plus overnight?”

The response scale differed from the qualitative scale used in the previous

question, because it provided quantitative categories. It was worded as

follows: “0 = 1-2 days at dad’s (this is equivalent to one weekend at most with

dad); 1 = 3-4 days at dad’s;2=5days at dad’s;3=6days at dad’s;4=7days at

dad’s (equal time with each); 5 = 8 days at dad’s; 6 = 9 days at dad’s; 7 = 10-11

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Figure 3. Proportion of subjects who believed each type of living arrangement was best for

children, and proportion who thought divorced mothers and divorced fathers would

believe each type was best.

days at dad’s; 8 = 12-13 days at dad’s (this is equivalent to one weekend at

most with mom).”

The means for the five age intervals were 1.98, 2.78, 2.99, 3.01, and 2.91,

respectively. The mean for birth to 2 years was significantly lower than the

means for the older ages, which did not differ among each other. The quantitative

response options used in these questions reveal that participants felt

that, in a 2-week period, even infants and toddlers should spend 5 days and

nights at their fathers’ houses (1.98). For older children, age 3 to 18, participants

felt they should spend on average six days and nights (2.92). In this

question, the category of equal time was defined narrowly as 7 days and

nights out of 14. The percentages of respondents who chose either 6 days or 7

days for each age interval were 32%, 52%, 64%, 61%, and 57%, respectively.

Finally, we wondered if participants felt that their views on the best living

arrangements for children were similar to the views held by their parents’

generation.6 The response scalewas the qualitative one, anchored by the categories

of regular visits with the other parent. Even though the questions specified

conditions (i.e., two good parents living nearby) that should have been

conducive to shared living arrangements, there was a significant difference

between what they thought divorced fathers would think was best and what

divorced mothers would think was best. They felt that fathers on average

would think the best arrangement for children is to live with their fathers

somewhat more than half the time (mean for men and women combined =

4.42), and that mothers would think that only some overnights with father

was best (1.88). Figure 3 also shows the distribution of responses to these two

questions. Importantly, participants felt that their own beliefs about what is

best were significantly different from those of divorced mothers, in that they

felt few mothers would think equal time was best, and also from those of

divorced fathers, in that they felt many fatherswould think primary residence

with the father was best.

**DISCUSSION**

Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) argue that children’s voices too often are not

heard in decisions that affect them during divorce, leading to resentment,

anger, and damage to parent-child relationships that persist into adulthood. In

this study,we asked more than 800 young adults who had grown up with their

parents’ divorces to give us their perspectives on a central issue that affects

children of divorce daily: their living arrangements with each of their parents.

Their perspective was clear. They wanted to have spent more time with their

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fathers as they were growing up, and the living arrangement they believed

was best for children was living equal time with each parent.

The two categories of living arrangements that participants most wanted

to have were to live equal amounts of time with each parent and, one step

below that, to see their fathers a lot. These desires for more time with their

fathers stemmed from a childhood in which they spent generally little time

with them and in which they perceived substantial disagreement between

their parents on the issue. Participants reported uniformly low levels of

amount of time spent with their fathers. Their living arrangements were notable

for their lack of variation. The most common arrangementwas the lowest

category of father involvement (see father minimally or not at all) on the

scale, and the range hardly extended beyond half of the scale. The living

arrangements were also notable for their stability over time. What participants

reported they had at the beginning of their parents’ divorces was the

same as what they had up to 8 years later. This seems to supportWallerstein

and Lewis’s (1998) report that parents were not flexible in adjusting living

arrangements as children grew older.

Participants perceived that their parents disagreed on the living arrangements

they each wanted. It might have been expected that because father

involvementwas so lowthat is what fatherswanted, whereas motherswanted

fathers to be more involved. But the opposite was true. Participants reported

that their mothers wanted the status quo and it was fathers who wanted more

time with their children. Many more mothers than fathers were perceived to

have wanted the three lowest categories of father involvement. The preferences

participants perceived in their fathers represented quite a high level of

desired parental responsibility. Forty-four percent of fathers were perceived

by their now-grown children to have wanted their children to live with them

either half time or most of the time. They thus believed that close to half of

their fatherswanted to have assumed a significant, and more often a majority,

of their daily care responsibilities. Even among the participants who saw

their fathers minimally or not at all, some of the time, and a moderate amount,

63%, 78%, and 78%, respectively, reported that their fathers had wanted to

see them more. It isworth remembering that these were not childhood reports

obtained during early stages of fantasy-laden attempts to cope with father

absence but reports of adult college students who had, in Wallerstein and

Lewis’s (1998) words, “formulated and reformulated their judgments on

each parent on the basis of their own observations throughout their growing-

up years” (p. 377). Given that mothers wanted the status quo and fathers

wanted more involvement, it is not surprising that only 32% reported that

their mothers and fathers had wanted the same living arrangements.

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Participants believed that the best living arrangement for children was

equal time with each parent. This represented a remarkable consensus on

their part and a remarkable divergence from their experiences in their own

families. Fewer than 10% grew up in the category of living equal amounts of

time with each parent. They also felt that fewer than 10% of their mothers and

20% of their fathers wanted equal time, and just over 20% of participants

themselves wanted equal time given their particular family circumstances.

But 70% of them, men andwomen alike, thought that living equal amounts of

time with each parent was the best living arrangement for children. Among

the few of them that actually had that arrangement, an even greater percentage

(93%) believed it was best. This belief of theirs also represented a

remarkable divergence from what they though their parents’ generation

would believe is best. Participants saw themselves as holding a new belief

about which living arrangement is in the best interests of the child. Male participants

saw themselves as different from divorced fathers on the issue, and

female participants especially saw themselves as different from divorced

mothers (see Table 1). From their points of view, neither divorced mothers,

whom they perceived to want much less father involvement, nor divorced

fathers, many of whom they perceived towant their children to live with them

more than half time, got it right.

Thus, participants’ belief that children should live equal amounts of time

with each parent was not simply a reflection of their perceptions of anyone

else’s views. Clearly, this was their own decision, and it proved difficult to

shake. It remained unchanged through changes in thewording of the question

and changes in the position of the question in the surveys. And it remained

remarkably consistent through changes in the response scale that introduced

quantitative responses and distinctions among different-age children. The

majority of participants felt that in a 2-week period the best arrangement

should be either 6 or 7 days and nights at the father’s house for each age interval

beyond infancy and toddlerhood.

Research on the correlates of divorce has shown that parental conflict is

associated with negative outcomes for children (e.g., Emery, 1982; Peterson&

Zill, 1986). The present data show that the potential exists for children to be

exposed to parental conflict on the issue of children’s living arrangements.

Children apparently expect that it is the norm for divorced mothers and

fathers to disagree quite strongly on living arrangements (see Figure 3). And

children apparently easily notice if their fathers do want more time, because

57% of our participants reported their fathers wanted more time. Thus, children

are likely to expect and know about parental disagreement over living

arrangements. The current situation in which both fathers and children gener-

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allywant more time together than they have thus creates a dilemma. If fathers

try to reassure their children that they would like to have more time with

them, they run the risk of making the child feel caught in the middle. If fathers

try to hide it, they run the risk of their children thinking they do not share their

desire for more time together.

The way out of this dilemma is to somehow promote more parental agreement

on the issue of living arrangements. The primary consideration should

be children’s wishes, as Mason (1999) and Wallerstein and Lewis (1998)

have recently and forcefully argued. For too long, however, we have had little

insight into what living arrangements children actually want and which ones

make the pain of their parents’ separations easier to bear, and parents and policy

makers alike have paid too little heed to what insight we did have (Kelly&

Wallerstein, 1977; Rosen, 1979). Our participants, who have lived through

their parents’ divorces and have now entered young adulthood (and college),

have given us their “expert” advice. Seventy percent of them, men and

women alike, believe that living equal amounts of time with each parent is the

best arrangement for children. Our participants felt that a substantial portion

of their fathers wanted to be primary caregivers (see Figure 2), which was

clearly not in agreement with participants’ beliefs about what is best,

whereas other fatherswanted less than equal involvement. Therefore, change

for fathers will apparently have to come in both directions. But among mothers,

virtually all were perceived to have wanted less father involvement than

equal time, so change for mothers will be in the direction of approving of

much more father involvement. What should motivate both mothers and

fathers is the knowledge that if they do not change, their children will growup

feeling that their parents did not give them the living arrangement that they

consider to be best for children. What should make change easier is the fact

that what children want are more equitable living arrangements, and so parents

ideally do not have to see the issue as a win or lose situation for

themselves.

In society and the courts, the discussion is still circumscribed by assumptions

and concerns about reasonable visitation within the context of primary

residence with the mother. This assumption is at odds with what the current

generation of college students believes is best. And the resulting living-

arrangement decisions that were made for this generation were at odds

with the amount of time they wanted to spend with their fathers. But if the

attitudes expressed by our participants do not change as they growolder, then

the custody wars that they experienced as children will become a thing of the

past in the next generation. The future mothers and fathers among our participants

agreed on the best living arrangement for children after divorce. We

suspect that their attitudes are not likely to change for several reasons. They

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see themselves as taking a new position on living arrangements, different

from both mothers and fathers in their parents’ generation. Having arrived at

that position on their own, they may be less likely to give it up. And they are

not likely to forget the experiences and feelings they had as children of

divorce that led them to their belief that equal living arrangements are best for

children.

**SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The plea has recently been made (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998; Mason

1999) and apparently is being heard by the courts (L’Heureux-Dube, 1998) to

develop a child-centered approach to custody and visitation decisions. The

current findings can be used by those setting policy and those deciding individual

cases to understand the typical feelings that children undergoing their

parents’ divorces will have regarding their living arrangements.Young adults

who have lived through their parents’ divorces, and who have gone on to college,

do not think living equal time with each parent is necessarily unworkable,

and in fact, they believe with remarkable consensus that it is the best

arrangement for children. Application to individual cases must of course be

based on assessments of individual children and their particular circumstances,

which may or may not make equal living arrangements appropriate.

But it is the parents who ultimately must decide to make these arrangements

workable. Perhaps the best use of these findings is for professionals to share

them with parents, to make parents aware of the lasting feelings their children

are likely to have about the living arrangements they will give them. Future

research does need to determine how well these findings hold for students

who do not go to college. Thus, the most conservative application of the current

findings for nowis to families who are likely to send their children to college.

But the remarkable consensus shown by our participants does suggest

that the belief that equal living arrangements is best cuts across many different

family circumstances and childhood experiences. Our participants did

not seem to represent families that were particularly predisposed to encourage

children to believe that equal living arrangements were viable and optimal.

Children generally had little time with their fathers, mothers tended to

want that level of father involvement, and fathers ranged across the scale in

terms of how much involvement they wanted. The current results show that

for a large section of the population at least, children want more time with

their fathers after divorce and they perceive that their fathers do also. Viewed

in just one simplistic way, the discrepancy between the amount of parental

responsibility perceived to be desired by their fathers and the amount they

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actually provided represents a significant and untapped source of child care.

Viewed in a deeper way, in terms of human relationships, it represents a lost

opportunity on the part of both father and child and a potential source of

regret and resentment in ongoing relationships.

**NOTES**

1. Throughout this article, when we refer to differences being significant, we mean statistically

significant at the conventional level of probability, that is, that there is less than a 5%probability

that the difference would not be found again in a different study on another set of participants.

Details of the statistical tests are available on request.

2. This question read, “Between the time your parents got divorced and now, which of the following

best characterizes your living arrangements with each of them?”

3. This question read, “What living arrangement do you feel most closely describes what you

wanted to have after the divorce?”

4. These questions read, “What living arrangement do you feel most closely describes what

[your mother or your father] wanted you to have after the divorce?”

5. The first version (fall 1996) of this question began as follows: “If two parents get divorced,

and they are equally good parents and live relatively close to one another . . . ” We suspected that

the term “equally good” might have tended to elicit responses of “equal time with each parent.”

Consequently, we revised the question in the next three administrations of the survey to replace

the term “equally good parents” with “both good parents.” The change had no effect. The mean

before the change was 3.58 (*n* = 147), and after the change the overall mean was 3.57 (*n* = 359;

fall 1997 = 3.65, spring 1998 = 3.59, fall 1998 = 3.40). Finally,we changed thewording again for

the last administration to remove the phrase “and they are both good parents and they live relatively

close to one another” so that participants would not base their answers only on children

who had optimal circumstances for equal time. The question simply asked, “If two parents get

divorced, what do you feel is the best living arrangement for the children?” The mean remained

the same at 3.58 (*n* = 321). The position of the questionwas also varied within the divorce section

of the surveys. In the first two administrations, it appeared after the same 10 questions about

actual living arrangements and relationships with parents; in the final three administrations, it

appeared as the first question.

6. These questions read, “We want to know what you think divorced moms [divorced dads]

would say to the question: If two parents get divorced, and they are both good parents, and they

live relatively close to one another, what do you feel is the best living arrangement for the

child(ren)?”

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