



# Why should they live more with one of us when they are children to us both?



## Parents' motives for practicing equal joint physical custody for children aged 0–4

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### ABSTRACT

Joint physical custody, i.e., children spending an equal amount of time in both parents' home after a separation or divorce, is increasing in many countries. In line with the national policy to promote paternal involvement in parenting, two-thirds of Swedish preschoolers with non-cohabiting parents live in two homes. Internationally, there has been a debate regarding the benefits or risks with joint physical custody for infants and toddlers. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the reasons given by divorced parents for sharing joint physical custody of children 0–4 years of age. Interviews were conducted with 46 parents (18 fathers and 28 mothers) and analyzed using systematic text condensation. Two themes emerged in response to the research question. In the theme *Same rights and responsibilities*, parents described that joint physical custody was 'a given' as both parents were seen to have equal rights to and responsibility for the children. Both men and women described involved fatherhood as an ideal goal. In the theme *For the sake of the child*, parents emphasized that joint physical custody was in the best interest of the child. Some parents had conflicts with their ex-spouses, but were still convinced of the benefits of joint physical custody and strove to make it work.

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### 1. Introduction

Children in joint physical custody (JPC) spend an equal amount of time in each parent's respective home after a parental separation or divorce. JPC arrangements are increasing in many Western countries but are particularly common in Sweden (Nielsen, 2014a, 2014b; Swedish Government Official Report, 2011).

Internationally, there has been a debate regarding JPC for infants and toddlers, for example, in Norway, Australia, and the U.S. with some arguments against JPC (George, Solomon, & McIntosh, 2011; Norsk Psykolog Forening, 2014; Smyth, 2009) and some in favor (Lamb & Kelly, 2010; Nielsen, 2014a; Pruett, McIntosh, & Kelly, 2014; Warshak, 2014). A similar debate was ongoing in Sweden, around the beginning of the 2000s (Barnombudsmannen, 2000; Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2001; The Swedish Government Offices, 1999). Arguments

favoring JPC highlight joint parental involvement and the benefit of everyday contact with both parents along with the potential value of having access to both parents' financial and social resources. In contrast, concerns for children under the age of four emphasize the potential stress of being separated from a primary attachment figure and risks for not developing secure emotional attachment relations. Thus, attachment theory, which describes how children form relationship(s) of a special emotional quality from birth onward (Bowlby, 1988), has been central in the debate regarding JPC. In the literature, the mother is most often supposed to act as a primary caregiver; this position, however, is not gender related and parents may take turns in being the child's first choice. Some developmental psychologists and other social scientists recognize children's capacity to establish parallel attachment relationships to both parents and recommend overnights in order to strengthen both relations (Lamb & Kelly, 2010; Warshak, 2014), while others emphasize the risks associated with frequent separations from the primary attachment figure (George et al., 2011) such as the risk of insecure attachment to the mother (Solomon & George, 1999; Tornello et al., 2013).

In Sweden, previous recommendations stressed the special needs of children <3 years of age, mostly regarding their need for proximity to the mother as well as the child's vulnerability for the frequent

Abbreviations: JPC, joint physical custody.

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separations (Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2001). These recommendations, however, have been withdrawn by the administrative authority, but have not been replaced with other recommendations, creating ambiguity and reliance on personal opinions.

Parallel to the ongoing debate among researchers and professionals, JPC arrangements for the youngest children have increased in Sweden. About one-third of children aged 0–5-years-old with separated parents spend an equal amount of time in both parents' homes. When including children who live in the home of both parents but spend more time with one of them, about 60% share their time between the parents' homes (Statistics Sweden, 2014; Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). An increase in JPC has also occurred in other Western countries, however, to a lesser extent than in Sweden. Recent figures report the share of JPC among children with separated parents to be 25% in Norway (Kitterod & Lyngstad, 2014), around 20% in Denmark (Ottosen, 2004), and 16% in the Netherlands (Spruijt & Duindam, 2009). An increase was reported in Belgium from 10% for families divorced before 1995 to 33% when divorce occurred in the 2010s (Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). In the United Kingdom, the share of JPC was 17% (Peacey & Hunt, 2008), and after legal changes in Australia and Italy, JPC is increasing (Smyth, 2009; Lavadera, Caravelli, & Togliatti, 2013). In the United States, the numbers vary between states, with over 30% living in a JPC setting in Wisconsin (Melli & Brown, 2008; Cancian, Meyer, Brown, & Cook, 2014). Despite being widely spread, JPC is less practiced among families with a non-Swedish background (Bergström et al., 2013) and among those in the lowest income category (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011).

### 1.1. Swedish family policy

Swedish family policy is one factor behind the popularity of JPC. Since the 1970s, Sweden has had an active policy for increased parental equality (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014) with the goal of engaging both parents in paid work as well as in the household work and childcare responsibilities (Daly, 2011). In 1974, Sweden was the first country to offer both the mothers and fathers to use the paid parental leave; however, fathers could transfer this right to the mother. Today, Swedish parents are entitled to 13 months of publicly financed parental leave, where two months are earmarked and non-transferable for each parent in the time period 2002–2015 (changed to three months in 2016). Since the beginning of the 2000s, the public policy goal has been for the parents to share the parental leave equally (Daly, 2011; Klinth, 2008). In 2012, fathers used 24% of the Swedish parental leave (Social Insurance Report, 2013), thus, not reaching the role of gender equity in this regard (Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). The strivings for gender equality in parenting are also expressed in various privileges for both the mothers and fathers, such as the right to stay home with a sick child and the availability of subsidized childcare. In line with these policies, Sweden has the largest proportion of women in the labor force among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, 80.7% in 2013 (OECD, 2014).

Separated or divorced parents in Sweden most often continue to share the legal custody (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). Most of the separated parents mutually agree on how to organize the living arrangement for their children and make a plan for this, without any professional or judicial involvement (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). An estimated 14% of separating parents seek advice to tackle their conflicts regarding legal and physical custody plans (Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, 2011), and about 2% have their custody disputes resolved in court (Rejmer, 2003). This is a low number compared to other countries see e.g., Rešetar and Emery (2008). Swedish family policies generally support the dual earner model, so both mothers and fathers are financially self-reliant; thus, the reasons for financial disputes involving custody have decreased (Haas, 1996).

### 1.2. Attitudes toward gender equality in parenting

For the past several decades, changes in society have moved the fatherhood ideal from the breadwinner to a more “involved fatherhood” (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Draper, 2003). Swedish public policies may have influenced fathers' involvement as well as views of fatherhood among the Swedish parents (Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). The ideal is to be an available father who is important to the child from early on (Johansson, Hildingsson, & Fenwick, 2013; Haavind, 2011; Mellström, 2006; Yoshida, 2012). Swedish contemporary fatherhood could also be defined as “child oriented” and defined according to the man's proximity to the child (Bekkengen, 2002).

The aim of this study was to explore the reasons given by separated or divorced parents for sharing parenthood equally through joint physical custody of children 0–4 years of age.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Recruitment

Participants were recruited through advertisements in the local and national Swedish newspapers, radio, and the TV from December 2011 to February 2013. Interested parents were invited to fill out a form on the research group's website. The inclusion criterion was currently having a child 0–4 years of age living in a JPC setting. JPC was defined as the child living equal amounts of time in each parent's home. On the website form, child(ren)'s age, proportions of time spent with each parent, and socio-demographic data were recorded. All parents who fulfilled the inclusion criteria were contacted by telephone or e-mail and given oral and/or written information about the study. Parents were interviewed by phone. Efforts were made to include parents of diverse backgrounds. Informed consent was obtained from all the individuals participating in the study. The study has been approved by the Ethics committee at Karolinska Institutet. All procedures were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable standards.

**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic data for participating parents and their children.

	Children (n = 50)	Fathers (n = 18)	Mothers (n = 28)
<i>Child variables</i>			
Child's age in years			
1–2	4		
2–3	14		
3–4	25		
4–5	7		
Child's age in months at parental separation or divorce, Mean (range)	21 (0–49)		
Child's gender, girl (boy)	19 (31)		
<i>Parental variables</i>			
Age in years, mean, (range)		36.3 (27–50)	34.1 (26–44)
Highest level of education, n (%)			
Primary school		1 (5.5)	0 (0)
Secondary school		4 (22)	1 (4)
College or University		12 (67)	2 (7)
Missing		1 (5.5)	25 (89)
Monthly Income in SEK*, n (%)			
Low (<13,500)		1 (5.5)	0 (0)
Median (13,500–31,500)		4 (22)	16 (57)
High (>31,500)		10 (55.5)	6 (21.5)
Missing		3 (17)	6 (21.5)
Home district, n (%)			
City >200,000		9 (50)	21 (75)
City <200,000		6 (33)	5 (18)
Rural areas		3 (17)	2 (7)

\* Low and High income in Swedish kronor (SEK) represents the lowest and highest income quartiles in Sweden 2013 [http://www.scb.se/en\\_/Finding-statistics/Statistics-by-subject-area/Household-finances/Income-and-income-distribution/Income-and-tax-statistics/Aktuell-pong/302201/Income-Persons/The-entire-country/303237/](http://www.scb.se/en_/Finding-statistics/Statistics-by-subject-area/Household-finances/Income-and-income-distribution/Income-and-tax-statistics/Aktuell-pong/302201/Income-Persons/The-entire-country/303237/).

**Table 2**  
The interview guide.

Questions
How is it that you chose JPC?
What is your view of mothers and fathers?
Did you seek and/or get any support in choosing the living arrangement?
What is your view of the role of mothers and fathers for a small child?
Can you tell about your experience of JPC for you and your child(ren)?

## 2.2. Participants

Forty-six parents (18 fathers and 28 mothers) of 50 children (31 boys and 19 girls) under 5 years of age were interviewed. The mean age of the children was 37.4, with a range of 13–59 months. For all children but one, only one parent in each family was interviewed. Characteristics of the participating parents and their children are presented in Table 1.

## 2.3. Interviews

Before the telephone interview, the interviewers reminded the parent again of the aim of the study and the possibility to withdraw from participation at any time. Their oral consent to participate and to be recorded during the interview was noted. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min. We used a semi structured interview guide covering various themes but allowing for follow-up questions on interesting statements. Examples of probing questions used: “Could you give me an example...” “So what I hear you saying is...” “How do you feel about...” The interview guide was pilot tested with a mother of a nearly five-year-old living in a JPC setting. No alterations were made in the guide after this interview, and the material was included in the analyses. The interviews covered themes concerning the parent's attitudes and experiences of JPC for themselves and their children. For the purpose of this article, we used descriptions and answers to the interview questions presented in Table 2.

## 2.4. Analysis

Background data were collected from the web form and the interviews. Descriptive statistics were computed for the numeric data

**Table 3**  
The steps of the analysis process in systematic text condensation according to Malterud.

Steps in data analysis	Examples from the data
1 Total impression of the data: → Finding themes	Both the mothers and the fathers feel that JPC is a “given” – that seems to be the very words they use. Most of them view 50–50% as the most straightforward solution. Even those who disagree with details around the arrangement view sharing custody as such as something that is a right for both parents. Some parents clearly resent the negotiation process. Theme: <i>Same rights and responsibilities</i>
2 Identifying and sorting relevant text units under the designated theme → From themes to categories	Both wanted them to live with both parents, it was really a given right from the start ( <i>Mother</i> ) It was really a given. Why should they live more with one of us when they are children to us both? ( <i>Mother</i> ) It was the ideology from the start, that both parents should be as important ( <i>Father</i> ) It was [the father] who wanted to have him 50% [when the child was 18-months-old] and so I couldn't really say a lot ( <i>Mother</i> ) Category: JPC is a given
3 Condense the meaning in each category as if it were a story told by a parent → From category to meaning through abstraction	<i>JPC is a given to us both and it should be 50–50%. Neither of us is prepared to give up the child and even if it feels strange sometimes, there is really not much I can protest about since both of us have the right to the child.</i>
4 Summarize each category, prepare the analytical text and select quotes → From abstraction to presentation	Both the mothers and the fathers described JPC as ‘a given,’ and a majority of parents emphasized that the sharing should be equal, i.e., 50–50%. The reason given for this was that both parents had equal rights to and responsibility for the child. “It was really a given. Why should they live more with one of us when they are children to us both?” ( <i>Mother</i> ) “It was the ideology from the start, that both parents should be as important.” ( <i>Father</i> )
5 Compare the resulting themes and categories with the unbroken text → Recontextualisation	The theme and one or more of its categories appear in every re-read interview.

(parental age, child's age, income, etc.). The parent being interviewed provided the information about how much time the child lived in each home.

Analysis of the interview data was performed using systematic text condensation (Malterud, 2012), see Table 3. To achieve dependability of the analytical process, the identification of the themes was conducted separately by the three co-authors who then met to discuss and agree on the final themes. The categorization process was done individually with each author responsible for the separate themes. Narrative data on practical solutions, such as parenting schedules, were categorized separately and summarized.

## 3. Results

Table 4 summarizes the ways in which parents arrived at their shared parenting agreement for each child age interval (1–2, 2–3, 3–4, and 4–5 years). Parents of 38 children (76%) had agreed on JPC without any reported involvement from the family court or social services, while the parents of five children had a court decision on JPC, and another seven parents reported having solved the living arrangements through assisted negotiation/mediation available through the social services. Children spent about half of the time with the participating parents, regardless of whether the participating parent was the father or the mother.

Two themes emerged for the parents' reasons for having equally shared joint physical custody (Table 5). In the theme *Same rights and responsibilities*, the parents described that JPC was ‘a given’ as both parents had equal rights to and responsibility for the children. In the theme *For the sake of the child*, the parents emphasized that JPC was in their children's best interests.

### 3.1. Same rights and responsibilities

This theme involved three categories: JPC is a given, Unequal parenting roles prior to separation make it harder to agree on JPC, and Equal JPC isn't always voluntary. The majority of the parents in this study felt that JPC was ‘a given.’ They believed that both parents had equal rights to the child, as well as in the importance of a gender-equal parenthood. Although most parents agreed that both parents should have equal rights and responsibility for the children, problems in implementing JPC arose when unequal parenting roles were a problem in the relationship before the divorce, when the circumstances of the

**Table 4**

Reasons for JPC and time with the participating parent by child's age.

Child's age	1–2 years (n = 4)	2–3 years (n = 14)	3–4 years (n = 25)	4–5 years (n = 7)
Reasons for JPC, n (%)				
Mutual (n = 38)	4 (100)	8 (57)	20 (80)	6 (86)
Mediation (n = 7)	0 (0)	4 (29)	3 (12)	0
Court decision (n = 5)	0 (0)	2 (14)	2 (8)	1 (14)
Time in % with the participating parent, mean (n)				
Father	49 (3)	48 (6)	49 (7)	48 (4)
Mother	50 (1)	53 (8)	51 (18)	50 (3)

separation were more dramatic, including betrayal during pregnancy or violence, and when custody was awarded by the court rather than by mutual agreement. Partly contradictory and despite the parents' views regarding equal rights, both the mothers and the fathers agreed that fathers sometimes have to fight more for their rights for equal JPC compared with mothers.

Both the mothers and the fathers described JPC as 'a given,' and a majority of the parents emphasized that the sharing should be equal, i.e., 50–50%.

*"It was really a given. Why should they live more with one of us when they are children to us both?" (Mother with a four-year-old child)*

*"It was the ideology from the start, that both parents should be as important." (Father with an 18-month-old child)*

The parents talked about "fairness" and emphasized that equal sharing was the only model of JPC that was easy to defend and agree upon. It was quite common that both parents just assumed their partner would not allow anything but an equal division of parenthood, and therefore never considered any other options than equal JPC. Most parents could agree on JPC and even those mothers who did not like the idea of equal sharing right away felt that they had no valid reason to object.

*"It was [the father] who wanted to have him 50% [when the child was 18-months-old,] and so I couldn't really say a lot." (Mother with two children, two- and three-years-old)*

One mother and one father thought that JPC was not a good option for children, although they both had JPC arrangements. The father said he pitied the children for being forced to have two homes, whereas the mother thought the concept of JPC suited the adults more than the children.

*"I think this every other week custody is an adult construction to suit the needs of adults. It works well with the career's agendas to do it that way." (Mother with a two-year-old child)*

Problems in implementing JPC arose when unequal parenting roles were a problem in the relationship before the separation or divorce. The mothers in this category claimed that the unequal gender roles were in fact the cause of the divorce, and they felt it was unfair or unrealistic that their partners, who had previously been so uninvolved would be credited to take care of the young child alone.

*"When we separated, [the father] barely knew the size of his clothes or how they are washed." (Mother with a three-year-old child)*

Disputes relating to equity in parenting, however, were not necessarily linked to the gender roles between men and women. A lesbian couple that had separated seemed to have much the same issue.

**Table 5**

The resulting themes and categories.

Same rights and responsibilities	JPC is a given Unequal parenting roles prior to the divorce make it more difficult to agree on JPC Equal JPC is not always voluntary
For the sake of the child!	The child's right to both of us Involved fatherhood as the ideal Minimize the damage done by the divorce Attentive parenting

*"I guess it was the old usual stuff, I breastfed, got up at night, put him to bed more often and took more responsibility overall. (...) She was very insecure and left most of it to me, during the first...really until we separated. So it's like a situation now when she wants to show off that she can manage on her own." (Mother with a two-year-old child)*

Nevertheless, many mothers felt that that the JPC arrangement made men become more responsible and, in fact, parenting more gender equal than before the separation or divorce.

*"What I want is for us to share. That was one of the things that didn't work out for us. It is actually more equal now than it was when we lived together." (Mother with a three-year-old child)*

Many mothers saw a good relationship developing between their former partner and the child, and they liked what they saw. This made them become increasingly positive to and comfortable with the decision to have an equal JPC arrangement.

*"Part of why we separated was because he wasn't an engaged parent, but he is now and that's great." (Mother with a three-year-old child)*

From the fathers' perspective, unequal gender roles prior to the divorce were perceived as something that was held against them and not a valid argument for decreasing their time with the child.

*"His mother breastfed him until he was 2.5; she tried to stop when he was 6 months, but continued. The breastfeeding was used as an argument against me having him the same amount of time, because I hadn't helped out during the nights she breastfed." (Father with a two-year-old child)*

Equal JPC was not always voluntary, and there were several reasons as to why couples had difficulties agreeing on equal amounts of time for the child with each parent. One such reason was when the circumstances of the separation or divorce were especially hurtful and/or the person left behind had lingering feelings of sorrow, anger, or resentment.

*"I think he is a real asshole for leaving me while I was pregnant, and then I still had feelings for him (...) But from the day [the child] was born, he said that, just for my information, he was just as important as me and the child should have both his parents. For me, this has become like an equity troll somehow." (Mother with a two-year-old child)*

The former partner's efforts to achieve equal JPC were viewed as something threatening and not justified in the eyes of these mothers. Especially when the children were very young, mothers often felt that JPC on an equal basis or with too long a time in between changes was harmful to the child. They protested against their ex-partners' claims to have the child for longer periods of time.

*"I was pretty skeptical to how it would play out, from the start it was basically just [the child] and me and now [the father] was suddenly going to have him over a whole weekend (...) It was a very scary thought for me." (Mother with a two-year-old child)*

When the decision on having equal JPC came from the court, both the mothers and fathers showed resentment. Mothers felt that the court decision was informed by strong ideologies regarding the importance of fathers, rather than the best interest of the child.

*"You get that pretty much everywhere, at the child psych services, at family court, the social services, that it is the child's right and it's important and good for the child to have both its parents." (Mother with a three-year-old child)*

Some mothers experienced this ideology as being so strong that they did not feel they could voice their concerns regarding the child's wellbeing.

*"It didn't feel like I had the right, because of the authorities... I actually thought he was too young to sleep at his father's place right from the start, but I didn't feel I had the support to say that." (Mother with a three-year-old child)*

Fathers, on the other hand, claimed that the court system discriminated against the fathers or displayed attitudes in their decisions that regarded the child's relationship to the mothers as more valuable, especially in young children.

*“Being a dad, you're a little... you've got the system against you. Of course, both parents should be equally valuable, but that's not how I think it works. It depends on which judge you get.” (Father with a two-year-old child).*

### 3.2. For the sake of the child

This theme involved four categories: The child's right to both of us, Involved fatherhood as the ideal, Minimize the damage of the divorce, and Attentive parenting.

The parents described JPC to be in the best interest of the child, since the child has the right to an everyday life with both the parents. Both men and women described involved fatherhood as an ideal goal. For parents who had a nuclear family as an ideal, JPC was described as a way of minimizing the damage from the divorce. Parents were also pleased that the child no longer had to be exposed to the conflict that might have been ongoing in the relationship. The child had gotten happier parents, was one way of putting it. When seeing the child only half of the time, both the mothers and the fathers experienced that they could focus on and give their children more attention.

The majority of parents regarded joint physical custody as the natural choice, since they were convinced that the child had the right to both the parents. ‘Having access to’ implicitly meant being taken care of and building a strong relationship to both. This reinforced the need to have an equal amount of time living with both the parents. The assumption was sometimes based on the engaged parenting style of both the parents prior to the separation, making it impossible to suddenly disrupt one of the child's close relations.

*“It would feel totally wrong to let go of our close connection.” (Father with a two-year-old child)*

For some, JPC was seen as especially important in the long run. They regarded the secure relationships that the child formed to both the parents as an investment in the child's future wellbeing.

*“I want my children to feel wanted and loved, so therefore, I like the fact that X and I have them just as much. In the future, he won't feel rejected by anyone. He feels that both of us want him.” (Mother with two children, one- and three-years-old)*

Both the men and the women described involved fatherhood as an ideal goal. Some of the mothers had initially been reluctant to share parenting equally but, after having tried JPC for a while, felt that they needed to keep the practice since it seemed beneficial for the child.

*“I have sometimes felt that I egoistically would like him to stay only with me, but this makes him fare well.” (Mother with a three-year-old child)*

The parents also contrasted the value of involved fatherhood with their own experiences – both positive and negative – of parental separation and concluded that children need both of their parents and when fathers are not present in the children's lives, they will long for them.

*“It is difficult, growing up without a father, and it has really been influential in my life. So I think there should be a possibility for children to get to know both of their parents.” (Father with a two-year-old child)*

The value of sharing everyday ups and downs was portrayed as a more “authentic” parenthood than that of every other weekend “fun” parenting.

*“For her to only stay with one parent, I think that would've been pretty worthless. That's how it was for me when I grew up and it was fine, but it isn't an ideal situation for a parent because you need to share everyday life with each other.” (Mother with a two-year-old child)*

In their narratives, parents referred to JPC as a way to “minimize the damage.” For many of the parents, a nuclear family was assumed to be the best family form for the children; therefore, they often had feelings of guilt.

*“The worst for the children, I assume, is that mom and dad don't stick together. (...), but the children must not suffer because things didn't work out between us.” (Father with a three-year-old child)*

Several of the parents also pointed out that it is the adults' responsibility not to let either parent's relationship to the children be harmed by adult conflict.

*“You have to separate your own conflict from the children's relation to the parent. Maybe the adult relationship doesn't work, but it doesn't have to mean that parenting does not work.” (Mother with two children, two- and three-years-old)*

Parents seemed aware of the deleterious effects of chronic conflict on children. Therefore, one of the main advantages of the separation and thus minimizing its possible damage on the child was seen to be the avoidance of exposure to adult conflict. Allowing the children equal access to both the parents on an everyday basis was viewed as a way to keep many of the features from the nuclear family that they found important and positive.

*“If you consider that there is never going to be a 'best case scenario,' I still think it [JPC] is as good as it can get.” (Mother with a two-year-old child)*

When everything worked well, some of the parents spoke about the benefits of shared parenting as compared to a nuclear form. Living in two homes was assumed to foster independence in the child and being able to relate to different kinds of people. Saving the child from having to choose between the parents was another assumed benefit.

Parents talked about ‘attentive parenting’ as one of the benefits of JPC. This meant that parents were able to give the child their full attention during the time they were together – and vice versa. When the child arrived, the parent could put aside chores and obligations and prioritize being together. Parents also talked about the presence that is demanded of them as lone parents, but they also acknowledged that having half the time off allowed them to be more ready for these demands.

*“I would say that we formed an even deeper relationship. You have to be constantly available as a parent. You don't need to do that when there's two parents.” (Father with a two-year-old child).*

One mother felt that the child did not favor his father as much as before, since both parents were now play-partners as well as busy making dinner.

*“Our relationship has become stronger during this year when everything happened, before he was more of Daddy's little boy; it was Daddy doing all the fun things and Mommy was busy with other things, but now it's different.” (Mother with two children, one- and three-years-old).*

When reunited with the child after a week, some parents had implemented certain routines to help the child to adjust. Parents prepared to just be together, not planning for visits, etc. the first evening. Both the fathers and the mothers also expressed some concerns that the child could be spoiled being in JPC, as the parents felt that they more often gave in to the child's wishes and that their parenting boundaries were more lax.

*“You are so thrilled to see him so you kind of relax a bit on your principles.” (Mother with a three-year-old child).*

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Is JPC becoming an internalized norm?

This study explored the reasons given by parents for choosing JPC for their young children. Participating parents represent both those who have a mutual agreement with the other parent as well as those who started practicing JPC after a court decision or an agreement negotiated through the social services. A majority of the parents in the study expressed the view that JPC was “a given” and also that it was a natural consequence of two involved parents prior to the separation. The recent figures show that about 30% of preschool children with separated or divorced parents live in equal JPC settings. Thus, the values regarding JPC presented by many of the participants could be rather common (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011). Swedish family policy has for a long time emphasized the similar roles of mothers and fathers.

The notion that JPC is a given and that JPC is the best for children, as they need to maintain an everyday contact with both the father and the mother, shows how Swedish family policies might have been internalized by many of the parents. Similar conclusions have been drawn from other parental practices in Sweden, e.g., fathers' involvement in perinatal care (Plantin, Olukoya, & Ny, 2011).

Nevertheless, embracing the practice of JPC was not without ambivalence. Some parents in the study were hesitant toward having JPC for reasons such as the child being very young, or not having enough confidence in the other parent. However, these hesitant parents still had a feeling that JPC was the eventual goal. For parents who had a nuclear family as an ideal, JPC was described as a way of minimizing the damage done by the divorce. Parents were also pleased that the child no longer had to be exposed to the conflict that might have been ongoing in the relationship. Compared to children living only with one parent, older children living in a JPC setting have previously been shown to report higher wellbeing and less symptoms of ill-health e.g., (Bergström et al., 2013; Bergström, Fransson, Hjern, Köhler, & Wallby, 2014; Pruett, Ebling, & Insabella, 2004), thus, supporting the parents' beliefs.

#### 4.2. Fathers and mothers are believed to be equally important

The parents described that the child had two equally important relationships that both of the parents needed to continue, irrespective of the divorce. One of the reasons for this given by both the mothers and the fathers was the fathers' early involvement in the care of the infant. In many cases, this derived from the father's use of the right to have parental leave, i.e., they stayed at home with the sole responsibility for the child during longer periods during the child's first and second year. The putative importance of parental leave for father's involvement in early child care was also reported by Almqvist and Duvander (2014), whose study indicated that when fathers took a long parental leave, they shared both household tasks and childcare more equally with their partners than other fathers.

Most parents in the study seem to acknowledge the child's attachment to both parents equally; they refer to, *different but equally important*, relationships between the infant/child and the two parents. In some of the cases, however, mothers talked about taking extra precautions to ensure the child's attachment to them, and parents had experiences of some professionals who also stressed attachment to the mother more than to the father in case of infants. Other studies have also pointed out that several influential discourses impact how motherhood and fatherhood are pictured, specifically, the discourse of gender equality as well as discourses based on biology or the notion of different predispositions of men and women (Bergnéhr, 2008; Fägerskiöld, 2008). Thus, while many parents truly believe in the gender equality ideal, the expectations could still be gendered when it came to the relative importance of early attachment relationships (Widarsson, Engström, Tydén, Lundberg, & Hammar, 2015; Bergnéhr, 2008).

#### 4.3. Methodological considerations

The participants volunteered to be interviewed in this study, and the sample is not necessarily representative of the population of Swedish parents living apart.

Within qualitative research, the terms credibility, dependability, and transferability are used to control for quality: 1) credibility refers to the confidence one has with respect to the truth of the data in relation to the research question; 2) dependability refers to the stability of the data, i.e., the extent to which the results can be corroborated or confirmed by others; and 3) transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or contexts.

##### 4.3.1. Credibility

Using an interview guide helped the interviewers cover the same topics in each interview. However, probing questions were employed

beyond the interview guide. Peer debriefing is when sessions are conducted with peers for reviewing and exploring the different aspects of the research. In this study, the design, the ads used, and the planned analyses were discussed in multiple research team meetings.

##### 4.3.2. Dependability

Several measures to improve the dependability were utilized: using co-analysts, researcher reflexivity, and leaving a clear decision trail. Co-analysts were used to identify the themes; the authors then met to discuss and agree on the final themes. Researcher reflexivity means carefully considering the possible preconceptions held by each analyst to minimize the effect of subjective bias. Three of the four authors were born and raised in Sweden in a culture where gender equity in parenthood was considered a strength, from both the child's and the parent's perspectives. These authors also have personal experiences of shared parenting after separation or divorce in different ways (as a child, parent or grand-parent). The third author was raised in Hungary, where a more traditional perspective on gender- and parental roles was predominant. The authors discussed their preconceptions in relation to the findings during the entire process of analysis and when preparing the manuscript.

##### 4.3.3. Transferability

Our sample included both parents who have no conflict as well as those who have had their custody disputes resolved in court. Some parents in our sample found it easy to accommodate for JPC, while others had a hard time adjusting. Thus, a range of relevant experiences of JPC has been elucidated; moreover, a sample size of 46 was very large for being a qualitative study with in-depth interviews. On the other hand, our sample was recruited through advertisements in the local and national Swedish newspapers, radio, and TV; thus, the participants actively chose to participate in a study about JPC. Their reasons might have been either a strongly positive or negative experience of JPC, but in any case, their participation could be regarded as being driven by a desire to share their personal experiences, possibly even a statement in its own right. To increase the transferability, negative case analysis was also employed, meaning that we paid special attention to accounts that seemed to differ from that presented in the majority of the descriptions.

Since parents who did not have equal shared custody were excluded, the sample only represents parents who – either through their own or the court's will – actually shared custody equally. It is possible that shared custody with different proportions of time spent with each parent might have other drivers and/or parental perceptions attached to it.

Future studies with representative samples are needed to confirm whether the results represent the general population of parents with JPC.

## 5. Conclusions

In this unique qualitative study with 46 parents, of 0–5 year-olds, who had opted for equal physical custody, we showed that parents were convinced of the benefits of JPC and strove to make it work. For most parents in this study, JPC was 'a given,' as both parents were seen to have equal rights to and responsibility for the children. Parents also emphasized that JPC was in the best interest of the child, yielding two involved parents, hence 'minimizing the damage' of the divorce. Difficulties sometimes arose when conflicts lingered between the couple or when a court decision was involved. In sum, however, the participating parents considered JPC as the most acceptable and often, even most desirable option after a separation or a divorce.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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