

Can Time Really Heal: The Long-term Impacts of Joint Custody Arrangements

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**Abstract**

Due to a growing diversity of family structures, children grow up in a variety of living arrangements, especially if their parents are separated or divorced. The most common solution for these divorced families is joint custody or dual-residence arrangements, where children spend up to 50% of their time in each parent's household. The current literature on the effects of joint custody arrangements shows mixed results for children's overall adjustment and well-being, which seem to depend more on moderating factors like the child's age, exposure to interparental conflict, and parent-child relationship quality. This thesis reviews the existing literature on the advantages and disadvantages of joint custody arrangements for children and then investigates the long-term perceptions of young adults based on their childhood experiences with this living arrangement. Through semi-structured interviews, young adults reflect on their past experience and discuss their current perceptions to show how time has changed their views on joint custody arrangements. The participants generally disliked their living arrangement as children because of logistical challenges and psychological and emotional distress. However, as young adults, the participants developed a more positive view of their joint custody arrangements based on the following themes: increased understanding of the reason for divorce, greater empathy for their parents, developed responses to change, and evidence of personal growth. The results concluded that perceptions of joint custody arrangements do change over time, opening avenues for further research and application of therapeutic interventions that can potentially improve children's experience of joint custody arrangements.

**Can Time Really Heal: The Long-Term Impacts of Joint Physical Custody Arrangements**

In recent years, the United States has moved away from the traditional, nuclear family structures toward more diverse structures: divorced, separated, single-parent, blended, gay, grandparent, and childless families. Historically, courts tended to grant mothers sole custody of their children in divorce cases; however, more recent trends show an increase in the number of children growing up in dual residence living arrangements post-divorce (Bastaitis & Pasteels, 2019). Dual residence, also called joint custody and shared physical custody, is defined as “a post-divorce living arrangement where children spend up to 50% of their time in each parent’s household after separation or divorce” (Berman & Daneback, 2022, p. 1448). This living arrangement is a common solution for children; however, it raises many questions about a child’s psychological and emotional well-being, the accomplishment of developmental milestones, and his/her relationship with each parent. While critics argue that joint custody causes instability in home life and increased exposure to parental conflict, previous research suggests that joint custody arrangements provide overall better outcomes for children than sole-custody arrangements (Bastaitis & Pasteels, 2019). Based on John Bowlby’s attachment theory, providing young children with a secure base is crucial for their emotional, relational, and cognitive development (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby (1988) uses the following analogy to explain the concept of a secure base:

In these respects it is a role similar to that of the officer commanding a military base from which an expeditionary force sets out and to which it can retreat, should it meet with a setback...for it is only when the officer commanding the expeditionary force is confident his base is secure that he dare press forward and take risks. (p. 11)

Joint custody arrangements, therefore, allow regular contact with both parents to help form better attachments with both the mother and father. However, several other moderating factors beyond the living arrangement are also critical to a child's healthy adjustment—the child's age and developmental stage, interparental conflict, and the overall quality of the parent-child relationship. Both advantages and disadvantages exist in the current literature on joint physical arrangements.

### **History of Custody Arrangements**

In the twenty-first century, divorce has become a normal occurrence in the United States. Although divorce statistics can be nuanced and difficult to measure, recent data seems to suggest that divorce rates are the lowest they have been since the 1970s. According to the National Center for Health Statistics (2019), the crude divorce rate has decreased from 2000-2019 from 4.0 per 1,000 total population to 2.7 per 1,000 total population. However, clinicians must recognize that the marriage rate has also decreased in that time from 8.2 to 6.1 per 1,000 total population. Therefore, with fewer marriages, fewer opportunities exist for legal divorce. Despite the decline in divorce rates, this crisis is still relevant. In 2019 alone, the United States reported approximately 747,000 divorces (National Center for Health Statistics, 2019). Many of these divorces leave children—a victim of their parents' decision—to deal with the consequences.

At first, the most common custody decision awarded sole physical custody to the mother with some visitation with the father. However, in the last forty years, this trend has begun to change as well. This shift from maternal sole-custody to shared custody started in the late 1980s, when the proportion of mothers granted sole physical custody fell from 80% to 74% between 1986 and 1993/1994, and the proportion of parents sharing custody doubled from 7% to 14% in the same time period (Cancian et al. 2014). Since then, Meyer et al. (2022) determined that the

likelihood of shared physical custody after divorce has more than doubled in the United States from 1985 until 2010-2014 from 13% to 34%. According to Cancian et al. (2014), this increase in joint custody arrangements is not caused by a change in the characteristics of families and parents. Instead, this shift reveals the changing cultural norms and legal processes for custody decisions. With the increased popularity of shared custody arrangements for children of divorce, new research has begun to ask questions about the functionality of joint custody arrangements, the benefits and risks to children's emotional, developmental, educational, and financial needs, and the unique conditions under which joint custody best functions for all parties

### **Strengths of Joint Custody Arrangements**

Research has shown that separation and divorce have detrimental effects on a child's overall adjustment and well-being, but how many of these consequences are mitigated by, caused by, or buffered by the custody arrangement? Although some of the research is contradictory, joint custody arrangements allow for increased parental emotional support, less parental stress, and better access to resources when compared with sole-custody arrangements. Therefore, Bastaitis and Pasteels (2019) believe that joint custody arrangements provide a better framework for post-divorce, parent-child relationships due to the increased parental communication and support from both parents. Attachment theory suggests that regular interaction with important caretakers fosters and maintains attachment, therefore, supporting the distribution of time with each parent in joint custody arrangements (Bowlby, 1988). In their review of current literature on attachment theory and custody decisions, Kelly and Lamb (2000) argue that continuity in infant-parent attachments promote a sense of security, foster self-confidence, and help develop trust. While many early maternal sole-custody decisions were based on a misrepresentation of Bowlby's attachment theory—that infants only developed an attachment to their primary or

significant caregiver—a better understanding of child development has shifted to prefer joint custody because of the stresses of separation from attachment relationships, the sudden loss of a parent, and severed father-child relationships. For infants and toddlers, Kelly and Lamb (2000) argue for frequent transitions between each parent's home because the stability of consistent interaction with both caregivers is more important than the stability of location. A more recent study by Bacro and Macario de Medeiros (2021) seems to also support these claims. Their research revealed that attachment representations of children in joint physical custody were not significantly more disorganized than those of children from intact or sole-custody families with a more stable living environment.

Joint physical custody is also positively correlated with stronger father-child relationships. Paternal involvement is essential for a child's healthy development—physically, mentally, emotionally, and intellectually. They model adaptive behaviors, provide financial resources for the family, and offer emotional support. Steinbach (2019) argues that one reason for the declined well-being of children with divorced parents is the absence or lack of meaningful contact with the father. Therefore, joint physical custody arrangements offer an alternative solution that allows for greater paternal involvement in a child's development, in shared leisure time, and in emotional availability. In their study on the parenting of divorced fathers, Bastaits et al. (2012) found that the parental behaviors of fathers in joint custody arrangements showed similar levels of parental support and control as married fathers, especially when compared to non-residential fathers. Therefore, joint custody arrangements seem to facilitate greater parental consistency before and after separation as well as allowing the time and structure to form stronger paternal bonds. According to Bacro and Macario de Medeiros (2021), the increased parental involvement of joint custody arrangements seems to contribute to the

fewer reports of maladaptive behaviors like aggression, attention problems, and hyperactivity in comparison with the children who lived primarily with their mothers. In a similar study of preschool-age children, parents and teachers reported that children of joint custody arrangements showed less psychological problems than those in sole-custody arrangements (Bergström et al., 2019).

Additionally, joint custody arrangements provide more balance of parental and work responsibilities between the mother and the father, lowering overall parental stress. In sole-custody arrangements, the single mother must function as both the financial provider and the nurturer for her family. However, in shared parenting arrangements, each parent has breaks from watching his/her children to focus on work responsibilities and social relations while they stay with the other parent. In a study on the association between custody arrangements and feelings of time pressure, Van der Heijden et al. (2016) found that mothers with sole physical custody experienced higher levels of time pressure than mothers of joint custody arrangements. Therefore, Breivik et al. (2009) theorize that joint physical custody leads to better family environments because parents are less burdened by financial stress or custody conflicts and fear of losing their child, making the transition much easier for children.

Finally, joint physical custody arrangements give children greater access to financial resources and academic opportunities. Joint custody parents tend to be more educated, to be employed, and have higher incomes, but the nature of this causality is somewhat unknown (Bakker & Mulder, 2013). Does the higher socioeconomic status lead to shared parenting arrangements, or does the shared parenting arrangement lead to higher socioeconomic status? The relationship could be reciprocal. For example, a Swedish study revealed better economic and material conditions, social relations, health behaviors, neighborhood safety, and leisure time



activities among children in shared residences when compared to single parent residence homes (Frasson et al., 2018). Therefore, children in sole-custody arrangements appear to have fewer resources than children in joint-custody homes.

### **Weaknesses of Joint Custody Arrangements**

Despite the positive impacts of joint physical custody arrangements on children, research also shows that this living arrangement poses a risk to children. With the location instability and frequent transitions, increased exposure to interparental conflict, and potentially different parenting styles between homes, joint custody arrangements can also have adverse effects on a child's well-being. Joint custody arrangements have the potential to decrease a child's emotional well-being from the lack of stability in constantly changing households (Turunen, 2017). On a regular basis, children must pack up their clothes and move to their other parent's house, where they must sleep in a different bed, eat different food, have a different routine, and more. This conflicts with previous research mentioned on attachment theory, which argues that relational consistency and frequent contact with both attachment figures is more important than geographical and environmental consistency (Kelly & Lamb, 2000).

Additionally, because the parenting is shared between unmarried parents, children in joint custody arrangements must sometimes adapt to largely different parenting styles and different sets of family members, especially stepparents (Turunen, 2017). Although little research has been done on the effects of inconsistent parenting styles in joint custody arrangements post-separation, different house rules, disciplinary techniques, and communication styles between homes could be very confusing for young children. Children need clear rules and boundaries for healthy moral, cognitive, and emotional development (Nieman & Shea, 2004). Therefore, vast differences from week-to-week in each home could be potentially harmful to children.

Another negative impact of joint custody arrangements on children is greater exposure to interparental conflict. Augustijn (2022) argues that joint custody is often related to higher levels of interparental conflict because the shared parenting responsibilities, coordination of financial and emotional resources, and schedule-making forces more interaction between the separated parents. Parents must often interact more face-to-face in dropping off and picking up their child and transition times. This interparental conflict “frightens children, makes them feel torn between their parents, [and] exposes them to inconsistent parenting” (Steinbach, 2019, p. 358). In their empirical study of over 200 newly separated/divorced parents, Pires and Martins (2021) found that harsh parenting along with interparental conflict and triangulation may lead to poor early child adjustment, especially in the early stages of the separation and custody process.

### **Mitigating Factors**

#### **Age of Child**

Children can react differently to parental separation and custody arrangements depending on age and developmental stage. In a study examining the association between the number of overnight stays away from their primary caregivers and the infant’s settledness and emotional regulation in separated families across three age brackets (0-1 year olds, 2-3 year olds, and 4-5 year olds), McIntosh et al. (2013) concluded that 0-3-year-old children who showed a higher number of overnight separations were associated with greater affect dysregulation with the custodial parent. However, the older age bracket showed no significant association, suggesting that older children adjust better to the disruption and separation from a parent in joint custody arrangements. In a similar study, Solomon & George (1999) found that infants with regular overnight visitation with their fathers were less likely to be classified as secure and more likely to have a disorganized or unclassifiable attachment to their mothers. However, this research was

conducted when mothers were still the primary attachment figure for a child. Therefore, based on a more recent understanding of Bowlby's attachment theory, developmental psychologists now stress the importance of frequent contact with both caregivers for healthy development (Kelly & Lamb, 2000).

In a more recent study, Baude et al. (2019) reviewed sixteen different studies on children in joint custody arrangements. They concluded that, for 6-12-year-old children, the custody arrangement only moderately affected a child's adjustment. According to Nielson (2014), adolescents actually show better academic, behavioral, and psychological outcomes in shared parenting families, as well as higher quality parent-child relationships. Therefore, this data seems to suggest that older children are more resilient to the frequent transitions and benefit more from the regular involvement of both parents.

### **Schedule Flexibility**

Another important factor to consider is the flexibility of custody schedule both for parents and children. Some co-parents must follow their schedule strictly in order to follow court orders or to avoid further conflict with their ex-spouse. However, for some separated families, joint custody arrangements are determined without judicial intervention giving parents and children more freedom to change the schedule to fit changing emotional or psychological needs, activities, or commitments. In a qualitative synthesis of children's experiences of shared care arrangements post-divorce, Birnbaum and Saini (2015) found that "parenting plans should be flexible and accommodate the changing needs and preferences of the children involved and should consider the developmental needs of the child...and the changing views of children as they develop" (p. 128). Children tend to become more frustrated with the rigid parenting plans where they feel powerless to make any modifications. Although the best interest of the child

should always remain primary in custody decisions, schedule flexibility allows children's wishes and opinions to be valued and acknowledged, especially when divorce takes away much of a child's feeling of control. Haugen (2010) would agree that "shared residence might be in the best interests of the child when children have an opportunity to have a say, if their opinions and choices are respected" (p. 119). The weight of a child's voice, however, both in custody decisions and day-to-day scheduling, should depend on the age and development of the child.

### **Interparental Conflict**

According to Baude et al. (2019), the family environment in each home affects childhood outcomes more than the type of custody arrangement. As previously discussed, joint custody arrangements seem to place children at a greater risk of exposure to interparental conflict. This high, ongoing conflict between parents showed more negative outcomes for children in shared parenting arrangements (Nielson, 2014), specifically poor child adjustment (Pires & Martins, 2021), thus increasing the risk of developing insecure attachments (Solomon & George, 1999). In a recent study, Smith-Etxeberria et al. (2022) examined the role of parental behaviors like co-parental respect, cooperation, and interparental conflict on emerging adult children's attachment-related anxiety and avoidance. They discovered that positive co-parenting behaviors were associated with lower attachment-related avoidance. This suggests that negative parental strategies like making negative comments about the other parent or exposing children to interparental conflict during or post-divorce can lead to attachment issues in children. Through a qualitative analysis, Sadowski and McIntosh (2015) discovered that parental conflict can lead to distress in children because they feel helpless, unable to influence their living situation, and they feel a lack of parental support. Interparental conflict also leads to lower trust and communication

and higher alienation in both mother-child and father-child relationships, and this effect is more significant than the parental divorce itself (Smith-Etxeberria & Eceiza, 2021).

In their qualitative research, Francia and Millear (2015) differentiate between two types of parental competitive conflict—direct and indirect. Direct interparental conflict is characterized by overt verbal and physical behaviors like yelling, screaming, and attacking. Indirect conflict, on the other hand, are more passive behaviors like triangulation of children in conflict, using children as spies, and denigrating the other parent in front of children. Both of these types of conflict can threaten the emotional security of children in shared living arrangements. When this conflict is left unresolved, the child may believe that the conflict is his/her fault, may feel responsible for resolving the conflict, or may struggle to imagine an end to the conflict. It can therefore create barriers in the child's relationship with both parents and challenge age-appropriate development (Francia & Millear, 2015).

### **Quality of Parent-Child Relationship**

While interparental conflict can be a risk factor for insecure attachments in children of joint custody arrangements, parental warmth and communication can serve as a protective factor. For example, the presence of maternal psychological protection during visitation with the father was associated with more secure attachments in infants (Solomon & George, 1999). Children feel most secure in joint custody arrangements when original family members are present, parents scaffold a state of joy and comfort, psychological companionship and intimacy are recognized, and connection and togetherness are fostered. However, children feel most insecure when they are emotionally isolated and disconnected from their primary caregiver, and parental support is absent or denied (Sadowski & McIntosh, 2015). Divorce can cause significant emotional distress in parents, often making them less available to help their children transition.

Unfortunately, maternal negative emotional state and instability are associated with higher attachment-related anxiety among emerging adult children (Smith-Exteberria et al., 2022).

Although joint custody arrangements can alter parent-child relationships, they also foster relationships and quality time with both parents, increasing the possibility for communication, trust, and support with both the mother and father (Bastaitis & Pasteels, 2019). Parental emotional availability is the parent's responsiveness and attunement to the child's needs and goals, creating a secure base from which the child feels encouraged and empowered to explore their environment. This emotional availability is communicated to the child through sensitivity to the child's needs, responsiveness to their signals and communications, and modifying parental affect, emotional tone, and conflict regulation with the child (Altenhofen et al., 2010). When this attunement and emotional availability is properly communicated to the child, it can significantly impact the child's adjustment and outcomes in divorce and joint custody arrangements.

As a result, the conclusion can be drawn that custody decisions are quite nuanced. Making a blanket statement that joint custody is always the best option for every child is premature. Age of the child, the relationship with each parent, and the competence of each parent are all important factors to consider as well. The research seems to suggest that these decisions cannot be one-size fits all.

### **Long-Term Perceptions**

Joint physical custody arrangements have both advantages and disadvantages that impact a child's life in different ways. However, emerging adults could offer some perspective in their retrospective analysis of the joint custody living arrangement from their childhood. Although their memory might be somewhat limited or altered, young adults can generally offer a more mature and holistic opinion on their preferred living arrangement in comparison to a child's

perception. In a qualitative study of university students of both divorced and intact families, Derevensky and Deschamps (1997) found that young adults from divorced families preferred sole custody arrangements, while young adults from intact families (when asked which they would prefer in hypothetical parental divorce) would prefer joint physical arrangements. However, the quality of the parental relationship appeared to significantly mediate these preferences. The precise reasoning for young adult children of divorce's preference for sole custody arrangements, however, was beyond the scope of this study. The following qualitative study aims to explore this gap in the literature.

### **Conclusion**

Because of the variability of outside factors within each custody case, it has become often difficult to pinpoint the true source of child stress in parental divorce. Is it the custody arrangement or exposure to parental conflict or separation from a parent or poor parental support? Any number or combination of these factors can contribute to a child's maladjustment and isolating just one of these variables in research is nearly impossible. Beyond that, generalizing joint custody research is difficult due to the situational complexity and idiosyncratic factors. Each family, separation, and custody arrangement are unique. Therefore, it could be detrimental to say that one custody arrangement is better than another for every child and every separated family. While a significant amount of research has discussed the strengths and weaknesses of joint custody arrangements, its general effects on children, and other factors that could either contribute to or detract from the child's healthy adjustment to this living arrangement, the literature is limited about how young adults perceive and evaluate their joint custody arrangement several years after the experience. This study, therefore, sheds light on the long-term perceptions of joint custody arrangements for young adults and explore the differences

between childhood perceptions of their present experience and their adult reflections on their joint custody living environment.

### **Methods**

This qualitative research study uses a series of semi-structured interviews to explore young adult's long-term perceptions of their personal joint custody arrangements, seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. How did the participants perceive their joint custody living arrangements as children?
2. How do the participants perceive their childhood experience now as young adults? In what ways do the participants believe their joint custody arrangement has affected them long-term?
3. Did their perceptions of their joint custody experience change over time?

### **Participants**

The participants were five young adults who experienced joint physical custody arrangements in their childhood for at least two years following parental separation or divorce. These young adults consisted of undergraduate students at Liberty University, recruited through professor announcements and residential psychology classes. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who were eligible according to the constructs established by the researcher in the screening survey. These constructs ensured that each participant spend adequate time in a joint custody arrangement following parental divorce to develop a clear and holistic perspective of their experience. The participants were all 20 years old, but the age of parental divorce varied from two to 14. There were four female participants and one male participant. Table 1 presents the demographics of each participant gathered in the screening survey.



**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age (in years)	Gender	Age at Parental Divorce (in years)
Participant 1	20	Female	2
Participant 2	20	Female	10
Participant 3	20	Male	13
Participant 4	20	Female	11
Participant 5	20	Female	5

**Measures**

The sample of young adults participated in a semi-structured interview to answer each research question. Participants were asked about their age at the time of divorce/onset of the joint custody arrangement and their perceptions of their living arrangement as a child. After reflecting on the past, participants then responded with their current view of their childhood experiences with joint custody, their understanding of how it affects them today, and how these perceptions have changed over time.

**Procedure**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at an evangelical university in the southeastern United States provided approval for the study before participants were recruited. The researcher then contacted psychology professors to receive permission to recruit through classroom announcements. Potential participants were sent a screening survey to determine their eligibility for the study. Five participants were eligible for the study based on the qualifying criteria set by the researcher. After being sent the study information sheet and a copy of the interview questions in advance, the researcher conducted in-person interviews with each participant.

The researcher developed these interview questions based on the research questions. Questions 1-2 review the demographic information from the screening survey. Questions 3-10 cover the participant's childhood experience of joint custody arrangements, as well as the influence of mitigating factors like flexibility, interparental conflict, and relationship with each parent on this experience. Questions 11-16 shift the focus toward the participant's long-term perceptions and lasting effects of joint custody arrangements. These interviews were conducted in a private study room in the university library and recorded through the researcher's smartphone. The interviews were transcribed using an online transcription software and edited and refined manually by the researcher. The researcher then conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed data to find common words, phrases, and concepts among the responses of the five participants to answer the research questions. The childhood and long-term perceptions were also compared to find similarities and differences in these assessments.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was to ask open-ended questions in order to foster conversation with the participants and gather data. Although the researcher did personally experience a joint custody arrangement after parental divorce in her childhood, she was aware of the potential bias this could bring into the study and guarded against skewing the research in several different ways. The interview questions were reviewed by the IRB and approved by the researcher's committee to provide clarity and eliminate leading questions. All interview questions were asked in the same order to each participant in an objective manner. The responses were each analyzed equally, and the themes emerged from the participants' words without the researcher inserting her own thoughts and hypotheses. These themes were also compared in the discussion to the current literature on the topic.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before recruiting participants, the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided approval for the study. All documents, including the recruitment announcement, screening survey, study information sheet, and interview questions were approved by the IRB. The researcher conducted these interviews in private settings and securely stored all recordings, transcripts, and participants demographics on a password-protected computer. Additionally, the researcher was aware of the potential psychological and emotional distress that participants could experience while reflecting on their experiences and informed the participants of their right to refuse answering questions that are too distressing. All participants were informed of local counseling and psychological services if they needed further care after discussing difficult topics in the interview.

### **Findings**

#### **View of Joint Custody Arrangements as Children**

As the participants reflected on their parents' divorces and their joint custody living arrangements, all the participants shared a dislike for some aspect of the living arrangement. Three out of the five confessed that they "hated" the living arrangement, while another "did not like it at all." Participant 3 expressed that he did not mind the arrangement when staying with his mom, however, he dreaded his dad's house. Participant 1 did not express a clear assessment of her living situation. Because her joint custody arrangement started at two years old, she had little to compare it to and could not form a complete evaluation of the situation. However, several areas of discomfort arose with the custody arrangement upon further investigation.

The reasons for the feelings of dread, dislike, and even hatred varied by each participant. Despite the diversity of circumstances surrounding the divorce and other environmental factors,

some common themes still emerged among the responses: practical and logistical challenges, emotional and psychological conditions, and other idiosyncratic factors. Each of these will be discussed in more detail below.

### ***Practical and Logistical Challenges***

The first theme that arose in discussing childhood perceptions of joint custody arrangements was the practical and logistical challenges of living between two different homes. Three participants mentioned the added stress and hassle of having to pack a suitcase to transport clothes, toiletries, and other necessities between their parents' houses. This not only added time and energy to pack and unpack on a regular basis, but it also created frustration when something was left, missing, or out of place. However, Participant 4 uncovered a deeper emotional meaning behind the logistical complications of a suitcase. She expressed her frustration at the greater injustice of a child having to pack to spend the night with his or her parent, relating it to a "day camp" instead of a home. As a result, packing a bag could actually contribute to a feeling of instability and unsettledness which will be discussed later in this paper.

Another practical challenge of joint custody arrangements that emerged was the child's isolation from friends, family, and surrounding community. Participants 4 and 5 both described feelings of isolation due to their living arrangement. For example, Participant 4 explained that she often played outside with her neighbors at her mother's house (even before the divorce), while her father's house about twenty minutes away could not provide the same social environment. She shared that her father was much more reserved and did not have any relationships with the neighbors in his condo community. Participant 5's circumstances were slightly different, however. Her father did not allow her to get together with friends on the weekends that she spent at his house, so she often missed out on sleepovers, birthday parties, and

other hangouts. Additionally, she expressed that her father would not allow her to go to church on Sundays. The constant disappointment eventually led her to stop asking. These experiences seem to suggest that the definition of home for a child extends beyond the physical building or parent and extends to their broader community of friends.

As these participants discussed their feelings of isolation, another common factor emerged that caused the participants to hate their living arrangement—boredom. Three of the five participants disliked spending time at the house they felt most bored at. Participants 4 and 5 both shared similar experiences at their dad’s house. They described their dad’s house as “boring” because they “didn’t do anything” and “it didn’t feel like there was any connection.” Much of the day was spent sitting and watching television for prolonged periods of time. Although this challenge is not directly related to the custody arrangement, boredom could make the adjustment to each house more challenging. Additionally, Participant 1 explained that her father would often leave her and her brother alone at the house with nothing to do while he played golf with friends. However, Participant 1 had a slightly different perspective of the relationship between joint custody and boredom. She viewed the ability to switch houses as an advantage because she could easily avoid or escape the feelings of boredom.

The final practical obstacle that the participants expressed related to the actual living space and environment of each home in their custody schedule. Although each had different circumstances, all the participants were introduced to new, different, and uncomfortable living environments due to the changes of their parents’ divorces. For example, Participant 2 noted that her father lived with her grandparents for a time for financial reasons, and she described that this living situation caused greater anxiety and insecurity. Participant 3 had to move to two completely different homes than where he originally grew up, causing instability and a period of

adjustment. Two of the participants also described an aversion to their new small and cramped homes. After divorce, newly single parents often must downsize for practical and financial reasons. However, Participant 4 explained that the newly cramped environment meant that she had nowhere to rest or process the difficult emotions of the family transition. On the flipside, Participant 5 explained that she was significantly more comfortable and secure when she had her own room and space. Therefore, the physical setup and environment of the home, although this is not always in the parent's control for financial reasons, do seem to affect the child's experience and appraisal of their joint custody living arrangement.

### ***Emotional and Psychological Conditions***

Alongside the practical challenges of joint custody arrangements, the participants also described the emotional and psychological strain of transitioning between two homes. Two of the participants expressed their resentment at the instability and constant change they experienced as a child having to “go back and forth” and live “two separate lives.” Participant 3, in particular, provided insight on the cause of this bitterness when saying that “I didn't feel the need to uproot my life because of what he [my father] did.” No child chooses for their parents to divorce, yet they still experience the consequences. As the participants suggested, this loss of control over their lives causes children to develop feelings of bitterness toward their joint custody arrangement and harm their relationship with their parents. Participant 4 expanded upon this idea that the constant change was very confusing and made it challenging to process the emotions of the divorce. Participant 2 claimed to develop an anxiety disorder and described herself as very unstable because of her living arrangement. Whether the instability and constant change was caused by the logistical factors of joint custody, the changes from the divorce itself, or the emotional environment of each home is subject to further research.

The theme of parental conflict also emerged throughout the interviews. Previous research has shown that joint custody arrangements actually increased the risk of childhood exposure to parental conflict because parents must interact more to negotiate scheduling, pass off the children, and navigate parenting and financial decisions for their children. However, contrary to the literature, three of the participants explained that their parents hid their arguments well, both before and after the divorce. Participant 4 commented that because she was never exposed to any significant interparental conflict, she believes that she was able to develop healthy relationships with both parents. However, two of the participants did witness interparental conflict during their joint custody arrangement. This conflict manifested in many different ways. For example, Participant 5 watched her parents yell at one another. For Participant 3, he shared that his parents often talked badly about the other parent to try to pit him against the other. Two other participants explained that their parents tried to avoid conflict by communicating through the child. Participant 2 shared that “I would have to be the communicator between the two. Like, hey, Mom said to stop doing this...or this is making Dad uncomfortable.” The participants recalled feeling scared, confused, and even bitter towards their parents for both the outright and the subtle interparental conflict. Participant 5 also described that she felt responsible to fix the conflict between her parents, keep the peace between them, or protect her parents’ emotions, which often resulted in hiding her own emotions about the joint custody arrangement: “I didn’t want them to fight...I just have to be calm for them, collected for them, not show them that...I hate this.”

Another emotional condition that affected the participants’ views of their joint custody arrangement was their feelings and definition of home. All the participants defined “home” as their mother’s house. Although the literature suggests that this is not always the case, the

participants found their mother's house a safer and more nurturing environment. When asked to expand further, the participants shared a variety of reasons for this. Participants 4 and 5 described their mother's house as familiar. They knew where everything was and spent most of their school days—their “formative days”—at this house. Participant 5 described that her mother always helped her with her homework and met her physical needs. Several of the participants also explained that they felt a greater emotional connection with their mothers, which helped them to be able to relax physically, mentally, and emotionally at home. Participant 3 described that his mother was “someone I knew that I could always go to for advice, or to vent about something and that I knew she would never judge me for bringing something up.” This unconditional love and acceptance, alongside nurturing care for the child's basic needs, appears to foster feelings of emotional safety that are very important for developing children.

The participants described their fathers' homes very differently, however. One participant described it as a “vacation home.” Another two shared that their scheduled time at their dad's house “felt like a visit.” In contrast to the “homey” environment of her mother's house, Participant 1 described her father's house as a “single dad environment”—empty, no food in the fridge, and no homecooked meals. Participant 5's experience also supported this idea. She felt like her father could not provide the same motherly love and care. As explained earlier, many of the participants also felt bored at their father's house with little to do but watch television. The participants believed that these factors made their joint custody arrangement more emotionally challenging. Participant 4, for example, remembered that the small and sterile environment of her father's home gave her little room to process emotions. Additionally, Participant 2 always felt very anxious and unsettled at her father's house.



The final theme that shaped the participants' experiences of their joint custody arrangements was parental emotional attunement—the parent recognizes their child's emotions and responds to them in a non-judgmental way that validates their feelings. During the interview, Participant 4 provided an anecdote of her father's attunement to her emotions. Her father invited his new girlfriend over to spend Thanksgiving with the rest of their family, and this change upset the participant. She shared:

I went to his room and just cried...But I just remember, like, sitting on his bed and I was sharing all these emotions. And he listened to me and then asked her to leave. Like, he was very receptive of how I felt... And afterwards, like wrote me a long letter apologizing, and it just is so sweet, very self-aware, and understanding of my feelings.

Her father recognized the emotional adjustment that his daughter would experience as a result of his new relationship, so he listened, acknowledged her feelings, and responded with empathy, unconditional love, and self-sacrifice. However, other participants explained emotionally volatile responses from their parents when they struggled with the divorce or the joint custody arrangement. For example, Participant 5 expressed that her relationship with her father felt like “walking on eggshells” because “you would come home one day, and he'd be in a super great mood. Or he'd come home one day, and he would be ready to be angry and start arguments and instigate problems.” Participant 2, who already experienced anxiety and panic attacks about the joint custody arrangement and spending time at her dad's house, described several instances where her father yelled at her for having this anxiety or was offended by it. These inconsistent and often angry reactions often compromised their trust and feelings of emotional safety at that parent's house, which only added further stress and anxiety to their joint custody arrangement.

### **Long-Term Perceptions and Impacts**

As the conversation transitioned into the current views and perceptions of their joint custody experiences as young adults, the participants provided some insight on how these views have changed over time and how the living arrangement still impacts them today. Several of the participants shared fear for their future marriage and family, increased parental empathy and understanding, and evidence of personal growth.

#### ***Fear for Future Marriage and Family***

The first long-term impact that several of the participants identified was an increased fear about their future marriage and family. Participant 5 described how a breakup of a dating relationship could surface ongoing trauma from her parents' divorce. Participant 4 identified a greater insecurity and lack of trust in potential partners because "if my own parent who I'm his own blood didn't think I'm worth it to stay, how can someone who I don't have any blood relation to think I'm gonna be worth it to stay?" Two of the participants also discussed a fear of repeating the cycle with their future children because they would not want to see people who they care about experience a joint custody arrangement. Whether these fears are more closely related to their parents' divorces or the joint custody arrangement is unclear. However, the participants also expressed that time has helped them process these fears and understand what actually lies in their spheres of control.

#### ***Increased Parental Empathy and Understanding***

In looking back on their experiences, several of the participants discussed an increased empathy and understanding toward their parents from the lens of a young adult. Two of the participants expressed how they did not fully understand the reason behind their parents' divorce until their late adolescent or adult years. With greater understanding of the justification for

divorce, they were now able to better empathize with their parents, acknowledging that they were also processing the end of their marriage. Participant 4 also described that her perspective on her living situation has changed in more recent years. Before, she harbored bitterness toward her father for the small and cramped nature of his condo. However, now that she has a more mature perspective on finances, she explained that “my dad was doing the best he could with the resources he had...his condo was small, but what else was he supposed to get for just one person?” This holistic understanding of the financial and emotional strains of divorce on parents could help children to better empathize with their parents and understand that some of the challenges of joint custody arrangements are outside of their parents’ control. Future research could explore how to effectively educate children as a developmentally appropriate level of the legal, financial, and emotional ramifications that divorce has on parents.

Additionally, three of the participants agreed that, over time, they have come to recognize and accept their parents’ flaws and weaknesses. Many children idolize their parents and view them as perfect. As divorce and joint custody exposes areas of immaturity, emotional volatility, or selfishness, seeing their parents’ imperfections for the first time can be stressful and disillusioning. Participant 5 commented:

Now that I’ve grown, I realized that a lot of it was just their immaturity and their inability to just act like adults and own up to their responsibilities...they were so caught up in their own selfishness and their own motives, that they didn’t realize they were hurting their kids.

Participant 1 agreed that “I have seen the sinfulness in humanity in both of my parents...I think they handled things in a very immature way.” Participant 3 also gained a deeper understanding of the reason behind some of his father’s outbursts of anger after realizing that he was also a

product of divorce. This recognition of the imperfections of their parents and the injustice of certain parts of the joint custody arrangement appear to lessen its effects on the child. Participant 5 explained that “it’s definitely changed where, in the moment, it felt like the biggest deal, but now I’m like, oh, that was irresponsible. And not right—the way that they handled things.” For Participant 1, this shift in mindset helped her to forgive her parents, develop empathy for her parents, and understand the reasoning behind their decisions. Participant 2 explained that “my mom told me everything as I’m older now, and I understand what’s kind of happening behind...where everything came from. Why my dad did what he did, because now I’m more understanding.”

Oftentimes, children are kept in the dark during the divorce and custody process for their protection. However, the results of this research could support the idea that increased transparency and age-appropriate education could increase their understanding of the reasons behind the joint custody arrangement.

### ***Response to Change***

Joint custody living arrangements could also affect a person’s response to change. For example, Participant 5 discussed how her joint custody arrangement has affected her day-to-day adult life: “I think it’s made me able to adapt fast but also have a distaste for change because my whole life was constant change.” The joint custody arrangement increased her desire to stay in one place, however, when life inevitably changes, she is able to respond and transition quickly because of her childhood experience.

### ***Personal Growth***

Another long-term impact the participants described was their own personal growth through the divorce process and their joint custody living arrangement. This growth manifested

in different ways for each of the participants. Many of the participants come from religious backgrounds, and three participants described a growth in their faith and spirituality during their parents' divorce and the joint custody arrangement. They described how their faith helped them process the difficult emotions of their changing family structure, provided stability in the midst of an unstable living situation, and learn to forgive their parents and release any resentment. Participant 5 added that "I just think there's a lot I've learned...how to navigate situations...it sucked but the Lord used that to bless me and grow me and shape me in a way that I wouldn't be if it didn't happen." In reflecting back on their experience afterwards, the participants were able to see the growth opportunities that emerged from the challenges and how their experiences shaped their personality and character.

#### *Long-Term Evaluation of Joint Custody Arrangements*

To conclude the interview, each of the participants were asked for their perspective on the ideal living arrangement for children of divorce based on their own personal experience, similar to the study conducted by Derevensky and Deschamps (1997). Although none of the participants gave a clear answer on their preference between sole-custody or joint physical custody, they provided insight on potential circumstances to consider in making custody decisions and factors that may ease the transition for children.

Most of the participants agreed that the ideal living arrangement is dependent on situational factors within each family. Participant 5 explained that the court system should consider where the child would thrive, where the child feels most safe, where the best fit parent is, and also give some weight to the child's desires. Participant 3 believes that age should matter in custody decisions, which is also supported in the literature. He described that, for teenagers, joint custody arrangements seem to be the best option. Participant 4 also discussed that the

parents should also live in close proximity to one another, for it became very difficult to maintain relationships with both parents after they lived in different states. Finally, three of the participants agreed that they benefitted from seeing both parents regularly because it helped foster a relationship with both that has lasted into their young adult years.

Finally, a crucial factor that emerged in the interviews was schedule flexibility. Three of the participants emphasized that they either appreciated the flexibility or wished they had more freedom to alter the custody schedule to accommodate their needs. Participant 3 described that “trying to force a child to live in a certain place or with a certain place when they might not want to is detrimental.”

### **Idiosyncratic Factors**

Some idiosyncratic factors also affected the individual experiences of each participant that are worth noting. Participant 5 shared about her experience with an alcoholic father and how that significantly affected her joint custody arrangement. Therefore, her disdain for the joint custody arrangement and lack of safety in her father’s home could be more attributed to her father’s drinking problem, emotional volatility, and absence. The relation between these factors, however, should be explored further.

Another interesting factor that appeared to affect the participants’ views of their joint custody arrangements was the presence of stepparents and stepsiblings. For some of the participants, this factor added additional stress, but for others, it actually helped mitigate the effects of their living situation. Participant 1 shared that her mother often had boyfriends over to spend the night which increased her discomfort, caused her to feel unsafe, and created bitterness toward her mother thus harming their relationship. Participants 3 and 5 stated that having stepsiblings provided further motivation to want to go over to his father’s house. For Participant

4, the introduction of a stepmother was a “rough adjustment,” but over time, they developed a good relationship. Participant 5 shared a conflicting experience with her stepmother. While she acted as a “buffer” and “made the dynamic with my dad a lot easier,” she also increased the conflict between her biological parents by interfering in the custody arrangement. Therefore, depending on the situation, this suggests that stepparents and stepsiblings could either help mitigate the effects of joint custody arrangements or add more stress to the experience which could be explored more in later research.

The child’s capacity to remember life before the joint custody arrangement arose as a unique factor that should be further researched. Participant 1’s joint custody arrangement began at two years old, and as a result, her living arrangement felt very normal. She explained that “at least from my experience, it [her joint custody arrangement] didn't really affect me, because it was just what I was used to. Because I was so young, I don't think I have any memories from my parents being together. I was just used to being with my mum and visiting my dad every once in a while.” This information could suggest that the transition in family structure and living arrangement causes more of the challenges than the actual joint custody living arrangement itself.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the childhood and long-term perceptions of joint custody arrangements among young adults. As children, the participants disliked their living arrangement due to logistical challenges and added psychological and emotional distress. However, this study revealed that their perspectives did change over time and with increased personal maturity. Most of the participants viewed their joint custody arrangement more positively after the fact because of their increased understanding of the reason for divorce,

greater empathy for their parents' situation, and the evidence of personal growth from the crisis. Each divorce and joint custody arrangement is unique; however, the results of this study argue that time and human development can improve a child's perspective of their personal joint custody experience. These exploratory findings open several avenues for future investigation and application.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is the small sample size. According to Creswell (2013), five to twenty-five participants are suggested as adequate for phenomenological studies. This study falls on the low end of this spectrum. Only five participants participated in qualitative interviews, and although each experienced a joint custody arrangement in their childhood, the circumstances surrounding that living arrangement—the reason for divorce, the age at separation, the relationship with each parent, financial resources, actual custody schedule, flexibility, exposure to conflict—varied greatly among the participants. Therefore, identifying universal trends that are clearly related to the joint custody arrangement itself presents a challenge. Another limitation is that the experiences described in the study are merely perceptions and phenomenological data, not quantitative data. Therefore, they cannot be applied generally to all children of joint custody living arrangements. A third limitation is that this study asked participants to reflect on their childhood experiences. This retrospective analysis is always subject to recall or misclassification bias (Talari & Goyal, 2020). Although this study evaluates the differences between childhood and long-term perceptions of joint custody arrangements, their current appraisal could potentially skew their memory or recall of their true childhood perceptions. Future research may benefit from talking directly with children as they currently experience a joint custody living arrangement.



**Implications of Findings**

The results of this study could inform developmentally appropriate ways to educate and counsel children to better understand and empathize with their parents and see the personal growth that could occur from parental divorce and joint custody arrangements. The results from this study could also open the door for long-term therapeutic interventions to help young adults process their joint custody arrangements, build awareness of how it may affect them today, and acknowledge the positive and negative impacts of joint custody arrangements. These interviews may also serve as an outlet to process childhood experiences with joint custody arrangements and evaluate the potential growth that resulted.

**Future Research**

The idiosyncratic factors of each individual participant, as discussed in the results section, also provide opportunities to explore in future research. The influences of unique circumstances like paternal alcoholism, paternal absence, parental emotional volatility, and the presence of stepparents and stepsiblings on joint custody arrangements could all be topics for future studies.

**Conclusion**

Finally, the results of this research suggest that young adults have a more positive view of their joint custody arrangement than their original perceptions as children. This change in perspective seems to be attributed to their overall development, increased empathy and understanding, evidence of growth, and the passage of time. New therapeutic interventions could be created from this research to help children to develop a more positive perspective of their joint custody arrangements sooner. These interventions could include age-appropriate

psychoeducation about the financial and logistical impacts of divorce, the possibility for personal growth, and the reasons for divorce.

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