

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe

BY JONATHAN GOULD

What child development research tells us about age-appropriate parenting plans has changed significantly over the past 10 years.

Prior to 2000, the general consensus was that infants and toddlers should live with the person who historically has been the child's primary caregiver. However, beginning with a set of important articles published in 2000, the general consensus today is that children are best served by continuous and frequent contact with both parents.

In developing your parenting plan, you will hear and read about the concept of "attachment." Attachment refers to the type of relationship that develops between parent and child. It is not linked to any specific parenting behaviors, practices, or styles. Attachment refers to a parent's tuning in to the subtle and obvious signs and signals of a child. In a sense, attachment is about the dance of intimacy between parent and child. Attachment develops as parents respond in appropriate and timely ways to the signs and signals of their child.

Most research during the 1950s and 1960s that examined attachment, parenting, and child development was based on research involving young children and their mothers. The focus on mothers was a matter of convenience because the American middle-class family was generally composed of a stay-at-home mother and a work-outside-the-home father. The available research regarding child development, childrearing, attachment formation, and parenting was often based only on studies that examined a child's relationship with the mother—not because fathers were unimportant—but because fathers were generally unavailable to participate in the research because they worked away from home.

The results that were generated from the narrowly focused mother-child research perpetuated the notion that children were best served by maternal caretaking. How children developed attachments with their mothers was described in study after study, with little, if any, corresponding research examining children's attachment to fathers. It was not until the late 1960s that researchers began to include fathers in their research. This is an impor-

Crafting age-appropriate parenting plans for your children



tant fact to reflect upon. It was not that fathers were unimportant to childrearing. It was that little research focused on father-based parenting and its impact on children.

At the same time, as researchers began to examine fathers' roles in child development, changes began to occur in the law of custody. The legal standard shifted from the "tender years doctrine" to the "best interests of the child." The tender years doctrine was, simply put, that children need their mothers more than they need their fathers during the tender years from birth through about age seven. The best interests doctrine focused attention on what was best for the child, whether it was parenting from the mother or from the father.

Interestingly, despite almost 50 years of legal precedent supporting the best-interests-of-the-child standard, some studies have found that judges continue to place greater value on the tender years doctrine than on the best interests standard. This is strong evidence that changing social beliefs regarding a child's needs for mother versus father is difficult at best.

Why should historical context be important to you? You may find several older resources that advocate for what I will call the "happy mother–happy child" model. (It reasons that if the mother is happy, the child will be, too.) There is little support for this model today, but that does not stop people from continuing to cite it and recommend it.

As research into the role of fathers in child development continued, research into children's attachment also progressed beyond the simple mother-child dyad. During the 1980s, researchers found that children were able to form

multiple attachments to multiple caretakers. Children were also found to develop attachment hierarchies in which parents were at the top and other caretakers occupied lower positions. The finding that children are able to form multiple attachments to multiple caretakers without any risk to their development was contrary to earlier beliefs and contrary to the beliefs that laid the foundation for the tender years doctrine.

Children are able to form multiple attachments to multiple caretakers without any risk to their development

During the 1990s, researchers focused attention on what each parent provides to children through his or her respective contributions to parenting. More recent research has revealed that boys may react differently than girls to multiple, non-parental caretakers during their infant and toddler and preschool years. Other findings generally reveal how mothers provide different types of parenting than fathers. The overall consensus in the field is that children are best served when they develop strong and secure attachments to each parent. Likewise, when such attachments are developed, strong and secure attachments should be enhanced, rather than disrupt-

ed during separation and divorce.

If you have a very young infant, the sooner your child learns to spend the night with each parent, the more likely the child is to form secure attachments to each parent. Recent literature about infants' brain development suggests that attachments may influence the development of brain structures. Infants and toddlers who are well adjusted and who have healthy and competent parents have few problems spending the night with either parent. Most often, difficulties in young children's adjustment to overnights with the noncustodial parent arise when a primary caretaker is anxious about the arrangement. Another critical factor to successful overnights is a predictable and consistent schedule across households.

Children are best served when they develop strong and secure attachments to each parent

When parents separate and divorce and children are very young, overnights with the father allow the child to be fed by the father; bathed by the father; and nurtured by the father at bedtime, during the night, and upon waking. The child needs to learn that he or she is as safe with the father as with the mother. Attachments strengthen when parents are able to participate in caretaking of their child across different situations such as waking, sleeping, soothing, playing, and other such activities.

Some recent research suggests that boys under six years of age may have a somewhat more difficult time with overnights because of their less developed verbal skills compared with girls. Parental cooperation and communication are needed to support such an enlightened and healthy parenting access plan.

Summary of research

You are going to read and hear a lot about attachment when developing an age-appropriate parenting plan. Attachment theory is very popular today. The original notion was that mothers love their babies by protecting them from harm and by nurturing them to explore their environment. Mothers who protect their infants and toddlers from harm create an environment in which the child is able to fully explore surroundings and grow up to be big and strong and securely attached. The problem with this romantic formulation is that little research supports it.

In the beginning of attachment research, it was believed that the early years of a child's life are critical to developing secure attachment and that once formed, a securely attached

infant or toddler is prepared to handle the big, bad world. Over the past 10 years, we have learned that children's attachments are not necessarily stable over time. Attachments may change over time, and there are predictable, acceptable reasons for that change, especially if the child's environment changes as often happens in separating and divorcing families.

It appears that the first 36 months of life are critically important, and a child is best served by safe, secure, and consistent caretaking from parents. The less disruption there is to the child's attachment to either caretaker, the better for the child. Your job as a parent is to create a stable, safe, and predictable environment for the child, no matter his or her age. There are factors, however, that may affect the child's perception of the stability of your environment, the perceived safety of your environment, and the consistency or predictability of your environment. Each of these factors may affect the child's attachment to you and to the other parent.

The good news is that disrupted attachments can most often be rehabilitated. Children need to spend time with each parent to develop the view that each parent's home is safe. Children need to engage in a variety of activities with each parent, across different contexts. That is, you need to vary the activities you undertake with your child so that the child develops a belief that no matter what the context, he or she is safe, secure, and comfortable with either parent.

For many years, child development specialists and child custody evaluators have tried to develop common-sense parenting plans based on research. Infants and toddlers generally need time with each parent, but are unable to tolerate a lot of time away from either parent. If there is a primary caretaker, then the noncustodial parent should visit with the child at least three to four times a week. Infants' memories are limited, and they have virtually no language expression. Frequent visits allow for the infant to have multiple experiences over time with the noncustodial parent, which increases the likelihood that the infant will begin to remember who the noncustodial parent is. Depending on the early caretaking history, infants up to about 8 to 12 months may tolerate an overnight with their father. Infants and early stage toddlers may tolerate more overnights, depending on the caretaking history, the temperament of the child, the level of conflict between the parents, and other associated factors.

Infant attachment is best facilitated when each parent is able to provide experiences in a variety of settings and across a broad range of parenting situations. An infant is well served when both parents are involved in bathing, feeding, clothing, playing, soothing, diapering, and other parent-child interactions.

As children grow, their memories and language skills improve. As memory and language improve, toddlers and preschoolers are able to spend more time away from each parent. The general rule of thumb is that an early stage toddler can tolerate about one to two days away from one par-

ent, whereas an older toddler might be able to spend two or three days away from a parent. Preschool children often can tolerate three to four nights away, but parents need to be sensitive to children's feelings of homesickness and a need for contact with the other parent.

A good rule of thumb is that both parents must be sensitive to their children's needs. Even when researchers recommend no more than two days away from a parent during toddlerhood, if the child reacts poorly to that separation, parents need to adjust the parenting plan. This is where things get dicey during custodial disputes. It is important to respond to the specific and unique needs of your child. If a child is homesick, parents need to place the needs of the child ahead of their own needs and allow the child to have access to the absent parent. The dicey part is when the parent is projecting the parent's own distress about being separated from the child and making it seem as if the child is distressed.

Most children in elementary school are able to handle alternate weeks with each parent. This does not mean that a one-week-on/one-week-off parenting plan is appropriate for all children in elementary school. This means only that most elementary school-age children have the capacity to tolerate such parental separations. Whether such a plan makes sense for your child will depend on a variety of variables too extensive to discuss here.

Researchers have found no support for the notion that midweek overnights with the noncustodial parent interfere with a child's adjustment. On the other hand, clinical experience has taught us that some children are comfortable with midweek overnights, whereas others find them disruptive. Again, although research shows that midweek overnights do not adversely affect adjustment, some children are more comfortable throwing their book bags in one place for the week.

Many parents ask for "make up" time when planned parenting time is missed for work or other reasons. If researchers have it right, "make up" time cre-

ates more confusion for children because it interferes with the consistency of their schedules. Once again, a parent might need to sacrifice "make up" parenting time to provide consistent scheduling for the children.

The bottom line is that using child development research to create age-appropriate parenting plans makes sense as long as we also apply common sense to each situation. As children get older, they are able to spend more time with each parent. Whether a particular child is ready to spend more time with the other parent depends on many unique factors relating to the child and how the child has been parented. **FA**

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