Attachment/Child Development

Overnights with Young Children
Developmentally Appropriate Parenting Plans

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Attachment

The Developmental Task of Infants
Attachment: A Primer

- Often misunderstood/misused term
- Konrad Lorenz (1903 – 1989) - An Austrian Zoologist
  - Studied animal instinctive behavior
  - Rediscovered the principle of imprinting originally noted by Douglas Spalding in the mid 1800’s.

- Reformulated by John Bowlby (1973) and studied extensively by Mary Ainsworth (1970+)

- Attachment Theory has become the dominant perspective on an individual’s development as a result of parent-child relationships.
Attachment

- Attachment starts with the biologically driven survival mechanism. The survival of infants depends on their ability to maintain proximity to protective adults. Many other species are mobile at birth. Humans, however are unable to move close or follow adults for months and even unable to cling to adults for protection or warmth.
It was rediscovered by the early ethologist Oskar Heinroth, and studied extensively and popularized by his disciple Konrad Lorenz working with greylag geese. Lorenz demonstrated how incubator-hatched geese would imprint on the first suitable moving stimulus they saw within what he called a "critical period" between 13–16 hours shortly after hatching. For example, the goslings would imprint on Lorenz himself (to be more specific, on his wading boots), and he is often depicted being followed by a gaggle of geese who had imprinted on him. Lorenz also found that the geese could imprint on inanimate objects. In one experiment, they followed a box placed on a model train in circles around the track. Filial imprinting is not restricted to non-human animals that are able to follow their parents, however. In child development, the term is used to refer to the process by which a baby learns who its mother and father are. The process is recognised as beginning in the womb, when the unborn baby starts to recognize its parents' voices.

(from Wikipedia)
The filial imprinting of birds was a primary technique used to create the movie *Winged Migration* (Le Peuple Migrateur), which contains a great deal of footage of migratory birds in flight. The birds imprinted on handlers, who wore yellow jackets and honked horns constantly. The birds were then trained to fly along with a variety of aircraft, primarily ultralights.
Attachment

- Attachment is the developmental task of infants.

- Initially, it is the means by which babies entice adults to approach them, take care of them, and protect them.
  - Use signals such as crying
  - Adults are predisposed to respond to cries by approaching, picking up, soothing the baby.
Attachment

- The attachment relationship serves as a template or schema for other relationships
  - Variation in the quality of care giving by a parent, such as emotional availability, acceptance, sensitivity, and responsiveness, particularly during times of distress, will predictably lead to different attachment behaviors in the child (sense of security, fundamental feelings of responsiveness by parent, anxiety, tension, helplessness, insecurity...)

Attachment

***The attachment relationship:

- may provide the child with a secure base, sense of emotional security and protection against harm
- and/or provide the child with the experience that the world is unsafe, disorganized, chaotic, angry….
Attachment

- Attachment and child development are inextricably intertwined. *Attachment is the psychological version of the immune system* and a secure attachment will allow the child to devote their energies to other development achievements such as exploration, learning, social relationships and play.

- The quality of care provided to the child, particularly sensitivity and responsiveness, leads to a SECURE (optimal), INSECURE, or DISORGANIZED attachment relationship – these are the child’s organized and consistent strategies to deal with the parents’ care giving behaviors.
Attachment

- Our attachment relationships provide us with a system of beliefs, images, and emotions about ourselves and our relationships.
- Our primary attachment relationships become an internalized element in our self-representation.

  - We want to promote secure attachments with both parents because the origin of self-image is
    1. The perception of self in relationship to others, and
    2. The image of others

- A child’s overall well-being is promoted when attachment relationships are protected.
Attachment

- Secure attachment
  - Allows the child to devote energy to other tasks
  - Leads to successful intimate relationships with others
  - Increases likelihood of successful independent functioning
  - Promotes autonomy and independent functioning

- We develop a mental representation of our primary attachment relationships and that mental image allows for separation and exploration (independent functioning) from the primary caregiver
  - Goal of parenting plans is to develop a plan which promotes the attachment relationship with both parents (all other things being equal)

- Children may develop different forms of attachment relationships with each parent
Attachment

- Children may develop different forms of attachment relationships with each parent.
- Children are able to form multiple attachments and there is no evidence that there are necessarily hierarchies of attachment.
- Attachment and other components in the parent-child relationship (e.g., teaching, discipline, support, respect and encouragement/discouragement of autonomy) require careful consideration in any custody/access recommendations. Attachment does not encompass the whole of the parent-child relationship.
- Parental Separation is a powerful challenge to the child’s attachment relationships with mother and father.
  - Threats or disruptions in the attachment relationship (e.g., parental separation) leads to fear/anxiety and may increase attachment behavior (e.g., the need for proximity to attachment figures).
Attachment

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- Threats or disruptions in the attachment relationship (e.g., parental separation) leads to distress and specific expression of the distress depends on the quality of the attachment:
  - may increase attachment behavior (e.g., the need for proximity to attachment figures) with secure attachments.
  - May increase withdrawal, may see ambivalence.
Attachment

- Disruption of an early attachment places the child at increased risk for negative developments
  - One goal of parenting plans is to promote and protect these primary attachment relationships

- Can assess working model of attachment through cognitive and language-based assessments (stories, psychological testing, doll play)

- Can predict with about 75% accuracy the child’s attachment schema (secure or insecure) based on assessment of parent’s childhood attachment experiences and past and current attachment experiences (Adult Attachment Interview)
Attachment

- The most well-researched attachment measure is the Strange Situation (Mary Ainsworth)
- 21 minute research-based process
- Research used a sample of infants 12 – 20 months
- So, research is valid in research settings with 12 – 20 months old children
  - Introduce mild stress and assess how well the child uses the parent as a secure base (for comfort, emotional regulation, soothing)
  - Uses 8 different scenarios
  - The “stress” activates the child’s attachment system
  - Assess the schema of the attachment
Attachment

The Stange Situation:

- Requires extensive training
- May be influenced by family stress (e.g., divorce)
- Not likely that custody evaluators have the required training

- So, evaluators who talk about attachment really are talking about the relationship and their opinion of the attachment without scientific validation
Attachment

- What do we know?
  - Secure attachments do predict positive childhood/adult outcomes
    - Health (physical and mental health), stability & success (e.g., employment, education, relationships)

- Attachment status in infancy is stable through adulthood (and, therefore, predicts positive outcomes) but can be affected by negative events (abuse, serious illness, parent’s death)
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers
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- Discussion in the Literature Regarding Overnights – some in Family Court Review & Family Law Quarterly (Kelly and Lamb; Richard Warshak; Solomon and Biringen; Judith Younger; Marsha Kline Pruett)

- Family Court Review April 2014 – devoted to important current issues: Shared Parenting, Overnights, Risks/Benefits of Presumptions in Statutes
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Issue = Does overnight visitation at an early age create some instability in the child that predisposes them to later problems?

- Premise from 1970s through early 2000s:
  - Early stable and secure attachment with a primary caretaker is required for internal stability and strength
    - Promoted by Goldstein, Freud and Soinit beginning in the 1970s
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers


- Postulated that continuity and stability in relationships, environment, and surroundings were critical for positive child development

  - Their Conclusion: Overnights away from primary parent (usually mother) should not occur until the child reaches pre-school age
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Joan Kelly and Michael Lamb (2000)
  - Children can have multiple attachments
  - Relationships with both parents should be primary focus of parenting
  - Focus on ongoing contact with each parent with frequent transitions

Note: Special needs changes weighting of factors
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Richard Warshak (2000)
  - Incorporated research on institutional day care and kibbutzim to show that being away from parents did not lead to more insecure attachments.
  - Found that risks of “separation trauma” as a result of overnights at an early age were overstated and unsupported
  - He advocated for frequent and consistent contact with both parents

- Solomon and Biringen (2001)
  - Disagree with Kelly and Lamb as well as Warshak
  - Discuss work of Solomon and George (1999 and others) which suggested that children 12 to 18 months of age with overnights were more likely to have disorganized or even unclassifiable attachments to their mothers
  - Believe in the primacy of mother-child relationships and that too much emphasis was being placed on the child’s ability to have multiple attachments
Problem with Solomon and Biringen’s interpretation of Solomon and George:

- Many children in the study never lived with both parents
  - Results cannot be applied to situations where a child lived with both parents
- Many children in the study often had lengthy separations from their father
  - Results are not generalizable to overnight disputes in divorce cases where child was familiar with (and nurtured by) both parents
  - Results may have to do with other issues such as never having lived with both parents, circumstances which led to parents never having lived together (e.g. confounding variables)
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Attachment research shows that relationships with each parent is independent of the other.

- Attachments are strengthened when interactions occur in multiple care giving contexts.

- Lamb and Kelly argue that father-child relationships should be given the same weight as mother-child relationships and there is research to show that father’s considerable involvement with children provides a unique and independent contribution to child development including:
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Relationship with father provides independent significant benefits for children
  - Greater social, academic, occupational, marital success and satisfaction

- Pruett, Ebling, and Insabella (2004) – Their research examined how frequency and structure of overnights related to a child’s psychological and behavioral problems as reported by parents, extended family, and day care
  - Conclusion:
    - Consistency of schedule is key
    - Relationships with both parents is critical
    - Research does not show that overnights are a problem as long as they are developmentally appropriate.
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

Recent studies:

  - Group of studies from Australia
  - Results show that three year olds and under with weekly overnights with non-primary parent showed problems with more irritability and other behavioral problems
  - **Problem:** the sample is not a representative sample of divorced parents
    - Majority of parents were never married (90% for infants and 60% for toddlers)
    - 30% of parents never lived with each other
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Reported Results:

  “Frequent overnights were significantly associated with attachment insecurity among infants, but the relationship was less clear for toddlers. Attachment insecurity predicted adjustment problems at ages 3 and 5, but frequent overnights were not directly linked with adjustment problems at older ages.”

  “The present study is the largest investigation to date of young children’s frequent overnight contact with nonresident parents and its association with attachment security. The reported findings are consistent with our hypothesis that frequent overnights away from the primary attachment figure are associated with greater attachment insecurity among infants.”
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers


Problem**:

- The sample is not representative so cannot generalize the results
- 85% of parents were never married
- 62% of the families were below the poverty level
- 85% were racial minorities
- A majority of the families had a parent incarcerated some time before the child was five years old
- 65% of the parents had nonmarital births from more than one partner in their teenage or young adult years

** from Richard Warshak (2014)
Shared residential Custody: Review of the Research, Parts I and II
Linda Nielsen (2013)

- Reviews over two dozen studies involving shared parenting (at least 35% time with each parent)
- “Shared parenting families are stable when the parents have formerly been married, are not physically abusive, and are not struggling with poverty.”
- Shared parenting benefits children as long as schedule is developmentally appropriate

- Article reviewed by 110 researchers and practitioners
- Summary:
  - Children able to form attachments with multiple caregivers
  - No support for thesis of only one attachment figure or hierarchy of attachments
  - Attachments and relationships with caregivers develops from frequent parenting over the entire range of parenting activities (e.g., talking, playing, singing, feeding, changing diapers, putting to sleep, waking up, etc.)
No support for automatic denial of shared physical custody because family is “high conflict”

Young children do not need to spend vast majority of time with one parent in order to have positive outcomes

More frequent contact with one parent does not come at expense of attachment or relationship with other parent (not a “zero sum game”)

As a general statement (assuming child has relationships with both parents), and except for special circumstances (e.g., IPV, risk of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, untreated or inadequately treated mental illness or substance abuse problems) children benefit from frequent contact with both parents

Schedule must be developmentally appropriate
Integrate two competing views: (1) very young children need stability and protection from the disruption to early attachment relationships & (2) children benefit from joint parental involvement and maximizing time with each parent (all other things being equal).
Their focus

- Parenting plans for young children (birth to child’s 4\textsuperscript{th} birthday) must:
  - Foster the child’s developmental well-being
  - Support the health of each parent-child relationship
  - \(\Rightarrow\) they have developed a decision-tree based system which includes child’s safety, parents safety with each other, trust and security with each parent, parent’s mental health, child’s health and development, child’s behavioral adjustment (and temperament), co-parenting relationship, resources to support sharing overnights, and family factors (e.g., siblings).
Their view:

- Overnights during early years are supported but should be developmentally appropriate and overnights should be limited during the first three years.
- Prioritizes establishment of organized attachment and early nurturance and maintenance of enduring relationships between each parent and child.
- Parenting plans must be considered on a case by case basis.
Know the research &
Know your expert witness

Research results can be misleading if you are not familiar with the research and are not aware of the sample

Experts can be misleading if they are not familiar with the research and simply quote study results

Knowing the sample allows us to know whether the results can be extended to our typical divorcing family
Current Controversy: Overnights for Infants/Toddlers

- Old Thinking – Stability and security is defined by place -» child needs consistence in place
- More recently – Stability and security is defined by consistency in relationships and schedule -» child needs consistency in relationships and schedule
- Children, including infants, do best when the schedule remained consistent from week to week
- Children with overnights with inconsistent schedules had more social and emotional problems
Recent Research

- Marsha Kline Pruitt and colleagues (1994 and later) have examined effects of overnights with multiple caregivers.

- In and of themselves, overnight periods of placement do **not** negatively affect young children’s social and emotional adjustment.
Basic Principles

- The younger the age of the child, the more frequent the visits (high frequency/short duration)
  - Have not achieved object constancy

- In the best of all worlds, with good parenting and co-parenting, routines are the same across households, access is frequent, and visits may be overnight beginning at an early age

- Note: These cases do not come to Court. Therefore, issues before the Court will typically not involve excellent parenting/co-parenting
Basic Principles

Old Model:

- As conflict increases (level of conflict is the single greatest predictor of child’s adjustment):
  - The more limited the transitions
  - Visits are shorter

New Model:

- The parenting plan must be individualized and take the conflict between the parents into account
Research-Based Parenting Plan Options

• Assess and consider relevant factors, including, but not limited to:
  ◦ Children’s developmental needs, child’s personality, and whether they have any “special issues” which need to be considered (e.g., learning issues, mental health issues)
  ◦ Parents’ Ability to meet Children’s needs
  ◦ Each parent’s parenting abilities
  ◦ Parent’s Mental Health
  ◦ Parent’s ability to make joint decisions
  ◦ Level of conflict between parents
  ◦ Geographic distance between parents …

• Quality of Parent-Child Relationships Considered

• Options Can be Customized to Family Situation

• Range of Options Assist in Settlement
Issues in Developing Parenting Plans

- Continuity in both Relationships (if appropriate)
- Involvement in Child’s Work and Play
- Type of Conflict and Presence of Buffers
- What Arrangements Will Contain Conflict?
- Level of Communication Needed
- Opportunities for Sibling Differences
- Flexibility When Needed
Ten Take-Aways for Parenting Plans:

1. Goal, in general, is to promote and maintain the child’s attachment with their parents
2. Children can develop attachments to more than one parent and there is no inherent hierarchy for attachment
3. Children need predictable, consistent, and emotionally available parents
4. Parenting plans must take child development and any special needs into account (e.g., presumption of 50/50 shared parenting plans for infants and young children is inconsistent with literature and research)
5. Overnights for young children are not inherently problematic for infants or young children but child development must be considered
Ten Take-Aways for Parenting Plans:

6. Relationships with a parent should be experienced as safe and secure prior to overnights – encourage frequent involvement in child care across a wide range of parenting activities.

7. Night time care is different than day time care for children. Night times activate the attachment system and require that child have an attachment to parent who responds to child.

8. Recent literature suggests no more than one overnight with the non-physical custodial parent for minimum of first year (and most consider one overnight appropriate though minimum of 18 months).
Ten Take-Aways for Parenting Plans:

9. Goal of parenting plans in most instances is shared parenting. Research shows that 35% time with each parent is typically required for child to benefit from relationship with each parent (⇒ 5/14 overnights). For children, 35/65 = 50/50.

10. High conflict situations do not need to impact 35/65 ratio but must be managed by managing transitions

11. Stress alters brain development. Brain grows more extensively and more rapidly in first twelve months than at any other time. The formation of 40,000 new synapses each second.
Ten Take-Aways for Parenting Plans:

12. Domestic Violence: The impact on children of witnessing domestic violence is the same as if there were the victim of the violence. The only difference is the behavioral expression of the problem: internalizing vs. externalizing
For Some Sample Parenting Plans

- www.supreme.state.az.us/dr/text/modelptplans.htm
- www.mass.gov/courts/courtsandjudges/courts/probateandfamilycourt/afccsharedparenting.pdf
Thank you.