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Delivering Parenting in Divorced Families
Reflections on Child-Sharing Regimes
Psychological Effects on Children

Introduction:

We know that mothers and fathers are both important for the healthy development of children. We know that both are equally equipped by nature to provide for the basic parenting needs of their children. We know that in addition to this, mothers and fathers each offer specific contributions to their children, which correspond with specific needs children have for each parent. Being deprived of either parent's contribution causes significant challenges and detriments to children's development. Thus, we know that one of the **three primary needs** of children after divorce is the continuation of an involved relationship with **both parents**. The other two are **peace** and a **home**.

The following discussion about sharing children in divorced families is based on the author's general clinical experience as a therapist, mediator, and evaluator of separated families for over 40 years. Research on the effects of specific child-sharing structures is inconclusive, scattered, and not very helpful. This is due largely to the almost universal finding that the specific schedule or structure is not what principally affects children's adjustment, but rather the degree of conflict versus cooperation between the parents. The issue of inter-parental conflict/tension/polarization is central to any discussion of child-sharing regimes, because the quality of the inter-parental atmosphere has the predominant effect on children of divorce. What matters far more than any particular child-sharing regime is whether there is peace or conflict, cooperation or animosity, ease or tension, between the parents. Studies show that conflict involving the children, especially if such conflict also preceded the separation, has the greatest detrimental effect.

Problem Arises From Children's Needs:

There are two fundamental issues facing children when their parents divorce. In addition to peace and the basic requirements of parental care and development, children need two things after a divorce. **First**, they need two parents. They need their relationship with both their mother and their father to continue in a viable, meaningful and effective way. Divorce should not lead to the loss or marginalization of one parent. In other words, children need their experience of

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having two parents to continue after the divorce. **Second**, children also need to continue to experience the security, groundedness, and consistency that come from having a solid and stable home base. Divorce should not result in children becoming nomads, with no base for their own lives, and no sense of belonging somewhere.

These two basic needs of children work together in a married family. When a divorce occurs, these two needs, both of which are valid, come into tension. They pull in different directions. One parent (usually mother) argues for home base, stability and consistency, which translates into proposing a majority home and an access home. This position is often bolstered by arguing that she had historically been the major caretaker of the children. The other parent (usually father) argues for the importance of two parents, bolstering his position with arguments about the importance of fathers, and with his commitment to restructure his life to have more time with the children, or to continue his high level of involvement.

These two different positions, both of which are valid, can result in two different proposed schedules. The first parent often proposes an access schedule of every second weekend; while the other often proposes a 50/50 schedule, usually in the form of alternating weeks for each household. Thus, the child-sharing issue in many divorcing families has two hallmarks: 1) the problem arises from two valid but competing positions, which in turn derive from two fundamental but competing needs of children in a divorced family; and 2) most proposals, and in fact most eventual schedules in divorced families, are based on a 14-day repeating cycle, because weekends in our society are important times for parents and children.

Common Solutions in More Cooperative Families:

It is useful to reflect on the solutions most frequently arrived at by parents who solve the problem themselves, often in mediation, and after grappling with the two fundamental issues (two parents versus home base). The math, based on an eventual 14-day rotating schedule, is interesting. An every other weekend schedule is a 12 and 2 split (12 nights in one home and 2 in the other). This provides a very consistent home base, but clearly marginalizes the minority parent, challenging involved or effective parenting. An alternating week schedule is a 7 and 7 split. This provides equal involvement by both parents, but does not provide a consistent home base. An 11 and 3 split does not adequately improve the 12 and 2 schedule, while an 8 and 6 split still doesn't address the home base issue. There are only two possibilities left: 10 and 4, and 9 and 5. Most families

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who grapple with the issues and solve the problem arrive at one of these two schedules, in terms of the number of nights the children sleep at each home in a 2-week period. The specific schedule usually also takes into account the parents' schedules and availability, as well as the children's activities and requirements.

A quite common 9 and 5 split has the children with the minority parent every second weekend from Thursday evening until Monday morning, plus each alternate Thursday evening overnight until Friday morning. The one-week gap between Thursdays is often bridged by a Monday or Tuesday evening visit, or by participation in specific activities of the children.

Parents arrive at solutions like these as a compromise, trying to achieve some degree of home base for the children, while giving **adequate and regular** exposure to the minority parent. It is usually important that the schedule have a consistency and regularity about it (such as every Thursday night with the minority parent). Also, an attempt is made to avoid prolonged absences from either parent on the one hand, and to minimize the number of transfers of residence on the other.

It is clear from the above, and from the experience of many families who have grappled with the issues, that any solution for sharing the children consequent to a divorce will represent a **compromise**; that is, a particular way of addressing the complex and competing issues for the children's welfare. We also know that there is no magic in any one formula or schedule, because the overriding issue impacting children's adjustment and emotional welfare is the degree of cooperation versus conflict between the parents. Any particular solution or schedule can be made to work for the children, provided there is adequate parental cooperation, communication, goodwill and focus on the children's needs. Children need **peace** more than anything else if their love and attachment to both parents is going to translate into a good adjustment and healthy development. Peace greatly enhances the effectiveness of parenting. An atmosphere of conflict can and often does negate the benefits of good parenting on both sides.

50/50 Arrangements in Cooperative Families:

The discussion of any particular schedule—50/50 or 7 and 7 in this case—will be based on looking at the advantages on the one hand, and the problems that need to be addressed on the other. Insights can be gained from the ways that

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cooperating parents have made it work. When parents adopt an alternating weekly schedule, they usually do so in order to establish peace and/or to give the widest possible scope to both parents' involvement with the children. They have sacrificed a majority home base in order to achieve this, and they are immediately confronted with a number of issues that must be addressed.

If the children are very young (preschool), the home base issue isn't as important, because young children find their principal security and base in their parents and not so much in a particular setting. (Although there are some children who are quite dependent on their surroundings and react more than most to change.) On the other hand, young children are quite affected by prolonged absences from their parents, such that any 50/50 arrangement needs to take this into account. Absences should be kept within the limits able to be tolerated by the children's stage of development. In essence, this means that any 50/50 arrangement with very young children tends to become unmanageable, requiring too many and too frequent transfers and changes in setting. Very often, it is better to look at parental schedules and availability, and attempt to have the children in direct parental care as much as possible. This usually leads to some schedule other than 50/50.

For school age but preteen children (age 5 or 6 through 12), an alternating weekly schedule needs to address a number of issues. The first is access to the absent parent. Without any contact with the absent parent, these children will be living a divided life, switching from one world to the other on a weekly basis. In order to have access to the absent parent, a certain amount of cooperation and goodwill is necessary. Again, depending on how access to the absent parent is arranged, the schedule begins to drift away from the alternating weekly schedule to something else, dictated by the children's schedules and the parents' availability. But it can be done, with sufficient cooperation between the parents

The second issue for this age group is the need for sufficient communication between the parents to prevent the children's worlds from becoming too polarized. There are a myriad of issues that need to be shared in managing children's lives from two homes: behavioral and emotional issues, school issues, activity and project issues, health issues, appointment issues, etc. Without adequate communication between the parents, a child's two worlds become very separate and distinct, and the child almost invariably is asked to assume the role of carrying messages to the other parent and of trying to organize things. Children are not equipped emotionally or psychologically for this task, and two things tend to happen when they are put in this position. First, their own emotional adjustment is compromised; and second, the way they attempt to cope

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with this role generates more and more conflict between their parents, which further jeopardizes the children's adjustment and development. With sufficient communication, goodwill, organization, and flexibility, these issues can be managed in a workable way.

The third issue for school-aged, preteen children is the need to facilitate the development of their peer relationships and social and community involvement. In an alternating weekly schedule, unless the two homes are **geographically close** and the parents are willing and able to undertake the necessary transportation and management, the child's development of adequate peer and social involvement will become quite compromised. A child cannot exit his peer group and social environment every second week and remain in the loop. This problem is mitigated by the child's school attendance, but a lot of the child's peer and social life depends on extracurricular contact. Parents whose homes are in the same area; who communicate well enough to organize the child's attendance at birthday parties, activities, sleepovers, etc.; and who are committed to the necessary anticipation, organization and transportation, can successfully address these problems.

When it comes to teenage children, more issues arise. Although there are exceptions, teenagers in general prefer a single base for their operations. As their own academic, peer, and social lives become increasingly important to them and complex, they usually begin to object to shuffling between two homes. They often complain about living a "double life". This is consistent with their stage of development, which is telling them it is time to establish their own identity. They are more independent and more mobile, so that there are increased opportunities for visits. They often say they would rather visit their parents than "hang out" with them.

Research has shown a tendency for teenagers to drift away from 50/50 arrangements, even where this was the family's arrangement when they were younger. If they do retain an alternating weekly schedule, they are more able and inclined personally to organize their activities and lives than are younger children. There are increased demands for flexibility on the part of the parents. Also, there are often other issues that continue to require parents to be able to communicate and cooperate if such a system is to work.

With younger children, parents can rely more on each doing things his/her own way, and the children can adjust to the requirements of each household. Teenagers, however, tend to bring more potent issues and challenges to parents

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that often require the parents to work together if the teenager is to experience adequate parental structure, authority, or guidance.

The difficulties that need to be addressed for all children, but especially teenagers, in the context of an alternating weekly schedule are probably best experienced by those parents who try to live their own lives this way. While uncommon, it does happen that some parents agree to establish one home (usually the matrimonial home) for the children, while they (the parents) alternate weekly living in the house with the children. If there is animosity and tension, this soon becomes an emotional and practical nightmare. If there is cooperation and good communication, it can work for awhile. But it is rarely a workable, long-term solution, because it is too difficult for the parents not to have their own home base, their own territory or domain under their control, and a settled life experience.

From the above discussion, it is clear that **two things are necessary** for a 50/50 arrangement to work out well for the children: 1) an adequate level of cooperation, communication and organization between the parents; and 2) geographic proximity. Of the two, the first is the most crucial element. Sufficient parental effort, organization, communication, and cooperation can overcome some of the challenges presented by two homes in different neighborhoods.

The Issues for Children in Polarized/Conflicted Families:

The reason that parental cooperation and communication are so important becomes clear when we look at what happens to children who grow up in polarized families. A **polarized family** is one where the parents are in conflict, usually about the children; where the parents cannot communicate in an effective or courteous way, but rather tend to argue or not to talk at all; and where there is significant tension if not outright hostility between the parents. In such families—and it is usually families with these types of problems who apply to the courts to solve their disputes—the children are going back and forth between two separate camps, each of which is mistrusting of or hostile toward the other. The children are in the position of trying to love two people who are at odds with each other. The difficulty of such a situation can be particularly appreciated if we reflect on how hard it is even for adults. Parents would be in serious distress if their children became enemies, constantly fought with each other, and began to show constant tension, animosity and even hatred toward each other. The parents' distress would become even more intolerable if they were asked to solve this problem by choosing which child to side with, to favor, to support, and to be loyal to; and which one to condemn or send away. Even skilled diplomats experience

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how difficult, if not impossible, it is to care for and relate effectively to two warring sides. Parents and diplomats often feel the situation will drive them crazy, because it is so stressful. Such a task is even more difficult for children.

The way young children are designed by nature causes them to relate to polarization between their parents in a particular way. They do not have the cognitive ability to figure out the situation and talk about it like adults do. Instead, nature has given them an instinct to love and bond with their parents, because their survival depends on the protection and security provided by this bond. When parents polarize, their children continue to love and bond with both of them. The way nature achieves this is to provide children with an instinct to fit in with the parent, to accept the parent, to love the parent, and to endorse the parent's world. When parents are together and love each other, this instinct offers the child a secure and clear context in which to grow up and develop a unique self and personality. When parents diverge, divorce and polarize, the child's instinct still operates to cause the child to fit with and love each parent. But now, the instinct causes the child to change each time he/she transfers between the polarized parents. This changing, or **"switching"** as the children often call it, accomplishes a good relationship with each parent, at the expense of the child's development of a consistent self and personality. The more polarized the parents, the more the child must change, and the less the child can develop his/her own personality.

Unfortunately, this process is invisible to the parents, because of their lack of communication. Each parent believes the child is doing fine. One way children have of fitting with each parent's world is to complain about the other parent. Thus, each parent attributes any problems in the child to the other parent. The conflict and polarization tend to increase and become more and more focused on the children. At best, this process damages the development of the child's own self and personality. At worst, it can stress a child's mind to the breaking point, especially as adolescence approaches. When this happens, the child's mind has another survival mechanism that often takes over. The child's mind begins to solve the intolerable problem of trying to love and fit in with two warring parents by alienating (or splitting) from one parent. This immediately simplifies the child's world and makes it livable. One parent is good and the other is bad. The good parent is loved, while the other is feared or rejected. The child's mind denies its attachment to one parent, by pretending that parent is bad, doesn't care and never did, and by forgetting all good times. It works. The child usually becomes happier, more settled, and does better in school. Unfortunately, the cost is very high: a child and parent lose their relationship, principally because of family conflict. This is eventually a serious challenge to the child's healthy

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psychological development. Unfortunate also is the way the parental conflict, which caused the denial-of-attachment in the first place, intensifies as each parent blames the other for the child's reaction.

Sharing Children in Polarized Families:

Keeping these dynamics in mind, we can look at the problem of sharing children in polarized families. In addition to blaming each other for the polarization—(the battle over assigning blame is the most obvious hallmark of polarized parents, and going down the road of determining who is at fault is usually not only impossible but also makes things worse)—parents often make two arguments. One (often father) proposes that we give the children two equal worlds, where they hopefully can get the best of both worlds. This institutionalizes the polarization in the family and tries to make the best of it. The other parent (often mother) proposes that the effect of the polarization on the children be controlled and mitigated by limiting the children's exposure to the other parent. This is an attempt to solve the problem at some cost to the children's relationship with and parenting by the other parent. Both proposals contain serious liabilities.

While the proposal to make the best of the situation and to provide the child with full and adequate parenting by both parents has some merit, institutionalizing the polarization for the child presents serious liabilities to the child's development of a stable personality. As the child resorts to **"switching"** in order to adjust to the polarized family situation, the self-development necessary to prepare for teen years is not occurring. When adolescence arrives, with the primary developmental task being the establishment of a personal identity, the child is poorly prepared. In addition to the stress and/or behavioral symptoms that often derive from being the center of conflict between one's parents, the child has developed a talent and penchant for fitting in and going along with whatever winds are blowing at the time. This is how the child has adjusted to family life. It is all too likely that the same child will tend to go along with whatever winds are blowing or trends occurring within his teenage peer world. We all know the trouble this can lead to.

On the other hand, while the proposal to limit the effects of the polarized family on the child has merit, doing so by marginalizing one parent also presents serious liabilities. The many detrimental effects to children's development, and the association with very many symptoms in children and teenagers, deriving from an inadequate relationship with a father (or a mother) are well known. Also, limiting the children's exposure to one parent does not really go very far in remedying the effects of the polarization and conflict. The child can still be

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exposed to the conflict, and resort to switching, even with every other weekend access. On balance, although the issue has been argued both ways, it seems that in a polarized family there are more liabilities for the child from losing an adequate relationship with one parent than from experiencing the effects of the polarization. And there is always the hope that with an adequate relationship with both parents, the polarization will eventually subside. If it does not, alienation can sometimes occur.

The best solution, therefore, seems to be a **compromise** between the two positions. From the perspective of what the child is faced with, the question becomes this: how does the family provide exposure to both parents, in a way **sufficient and adequate** to achieve real parenting, while at the same time limiting the child's exposure to the effects of polarization by establishing some sense of a consistent home base? Both experience and research show that equal time is not necessary to achieve adequate and sufficient parenting. Even in married families, time and involvement with the children is often not equal. Again, the discussion winds up at the mathematical possibilities: a 9 and 5 or 10 and 4 split of the 14-day cycle (arranged as required by parental and child schedules, the degree of polarization, the possibilities and likelihood of improving the polarized situation, the particular talents and liabilities of each parent, the age of the children, the historical role of each parent, the quality of attachment between the children and each parent, as well as any number of other issues specific to the family).

Some Causes of Polarization:

Finally, some reflection on the causes of the polarization may be useful. Often the polarization is a continuation of the marital conflict and power struggle. When this is the case, it usually means that one or both of the parents is not yet finished with the relationship and hasn't yet fully accepted or adjusted to the divorce. As this adjustment occurs over time (it usually does but sometimes not), mutually agreeable ways of sharing the children can emerge and polarization diminish. Another driving force behind parental conflict over the children is often the deep emotional pain experienced as the marriage failed and ended in separation. Again, one or both of the parents have not yet processed this emotionally and recovered. The conflict keeps pain and grief at bay, until the individual is ready to face it. However, **the most frequent issue at the heart of parental conflict over the children is fear**. Fathers fear being marginalized or losing the children. Mothers fear having their role with the children diminished. Fathers fear the financial consequences of child support, while mothers fear the collapse of their standard of living. Divorce really is a scary process for many

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parents; and their desperate war, which polarizes the children's family life, is often their response to these fears.

Summary:

The pros and cons of various child-sharing regimes for children of various ages, in general and with parents able to agree in mediation, were discussed. It was shown that the most frequent outcome is a **compromise** between 50/50 and limited access. The child-focused reasons for this were presented.

Beneficial and workable 50/50 regimes, usually by way of alternating weeks, seem to require two things: **geographic proximity** and an adequate level of **cooperation and communication** between the parents. Thus, successful and beneficial 50/50 regimes best arise by agreement between the parents, whose cooperation, organization, and communication can effectively address the challenges of such a regime. If such regimes are imposed on high conflict families, the children's development can be seriously challenged by living a split or polarized life.

When parents are in conflict, such that there is tension, lack of communication, and hostility, the child's world becomes polarized. The conflict can even reach the level of litigated custody/access disputes. Continued inter-parental conflict has consistently been found to be the primary factor associated with children's difficulties after divorce.

The psychological and emotional effects on children of living in a polarized family were discussed. The conclusion was twofold: 1) polarized parents would be unlikely to deal with the challenges of a 50/50 regime in a successful and beneficial way, such that the child's healthy development would be jeopardized; and 2), trying to mitigate the effects of polarization by limiting access and marginalizing one parent is both too costly for the children and not effective. The conclusion, again, was that a **compromise** is usually best: the same type of compromise that non-polarized parents often arrive at. The compromise for sufficient and **adequate** (but not necessarily equal) scope for each parent mitigates the effects of polarization by offering a majority home base, and provides a structure where polarization can (hopefully) decrease over time.

Finally, some reflections on the causes of intense parental conflict after separation were discussed. The conflict was seen as arising from one (or more) of three sources: a lack of acceptance of the divorce itself; the need to avoid grief and pain by focusing on anger and conflict; and a response to fear and

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uncertainty. These reflections point the way toward the issues that could be addressed, either to help remedy the polarization, or be assessed to determine the best recommendations for the family.