

Extended Abstract

How parents adjust to separation or divorce is an issue that has received considerable attention from researchers, with empirical studies repeatedly showing that family dissolution can have detrimental effects on the well-being of both mothers and fathers. Because the majority of children in Western countries continue to live mostly or exclusively with their mother after separation or divorce, research on the well-being of divorced or separated mothers has concentrated mainly on mothers in sole physical custody families; that is, traditional care arrangements involving a residential mother and a non-residential father. However, in recent years, there have been significant changes in the frequency of contact between children and their non-residential fathers, with fathers being increasingly involved in their children's lives after separation or divorce. This trend is reflected in the growing prevalence of joint physical custody, a parental care arrangement in which children live alternately in the two parental households, and spend substantial amounts of time with both parents after family dissolution; usually more than 30% of the time with each parent.

In recent decades, several studies have shown that joint physical custody has either neutral or small positive effects on child well-being. However, despite the claim made by advocates of joint physical custody that parents – and particularly mothers – in post-separation families will benefit from this new parental care arrangement, only a handful of empirical studies have explored the association between joint physical custody arrangements and parents' well-being.

From a theoretical point of view, several arguments can be made that having joint physical custody rather than sole physical custody may enhance a mother's well-being. The first argument is that in joint physical custody arrangements, the mother is able to share parenting responsibilities more equally with the father. In contrast, residential mothers with sole physical custody must fulfill all household roles and responsibilities alone, which is why they are at a higher risk of being overburdened by the demands that result from having the sole responsibility for parenting. Moreover, given that parents spend more time and energy on child care tasks in relation to how much time they spend with their children, joint physical custody may provide mothers with more time that they can spend on activities other than childrearing. For instance, they have more time to invest in the work domain without experiencing the same levels of stress that mothers with sole physical custody tend to experience. Therefore, they should find it easier to pursue paid employment, and, once employed, to balance child care and paid employment more effectively. Furthermore, mothers in joint physical custody families may benefit from having more time that they can spend on leisure activities, including participating in social or recreational activities. Finally, mothers who practice joint physical custody may also benefit from the greater amount of leisure time they gain

from this arrangement by having higher chances of repartnering than mothers with sole physical custody.

On the other hand, practicing joint physical custody may also negatively affect mothers' well-being. For instance, joint physical custody involves more coordination and communication between the parents than sole physical custody. Consequently, joint physical custody requires the separated or divorced parents to have more contact, which may increase the risk of interparental conflicts occurring, or exacerbate the severity of existing conflicts. Thus, living in a joint physical custody family may be a chronic stressor for mothers. In addition, as coordinating the children's transitions can be complex, extensive planning efforts on the part of the parents may be required. These circumstances can elicit feelings of time pressure in mothers, which can negatively affect their well-being. Moreover, joint physical custody may have detrimental effects on maternal well-being precisely because this care arrangement means that mothers are spending less time with their children than they would in a sole physical custody arrangement. Instead of feeling liberated, mothers may see having less time with their children after family dissolution as a loss, and this may result in feelings of worry and anxiety.

Given these conflicting arguments, the aim of this study is to shed light on the association between physical custody arrangements and mothers' well-being by examining three dimensions of maternal well-being: life satisfaction, depressiveness, and stress. Statistical analyses are based on data from the Family Models in Germany (FAMOD) study, a convenience sample of 1,554 nuclear and post-separation families that was conducted in 2019. The FAMOD study's main objective was to investigate the health and well-being of family members in post-separation families across Germany, with a special focus on joint physical custody arrangements. To identify potential differences in well-being between mothers with either joint or sole physical custody arrangements linear regression models were estimated for 996 residential mothers living in post-separation families.

The results of the linear regression models showed that mothers who practiced joint physical custody reported statistically significantly higher levels of life satisfaction, lower levels of depressiveness, as well as fewer experiences of stress than mothers with sole physical custody of their children. However, when controlling for a set of the mothers' socio-demographic characteristics and various family-related characteristics, the differences between mothers with joint physical custody and sole physical custody arrangements disappeared. Instead, factors like the mother's partnership status, her relationship with her child, and her relationship with the child's father were more strongly related to the mother's well-being than the physical custody arrangement she practiced in the post-separation period.

Taken together, the findings of this study showed that mothers in joint physical custody families had higher levels of well-being than mothers in sole physical custody families. Moreover, the statistical analyses also demonstrated that the conditions under which a certain physical custody arrangement was practiced had more relevance for the mothers' well-being than the physical custody arrangement itself. However, one needs to bear in mind that physical custody arrangements likely have a positive or a negative influence on these conditions, and particularly on the quality of family relationships in post-separation families. Thus, this study has shown that further research is needed to shed light on the relationship between physical custody arrangements and factors that are known to influence mothers' well-being in post-separation families – especially in the context of joint physical custody.

Results of the Linear Regression Models: Physical Custody Arrangements and Mothers' Well-Being in Post-Separation Families (Standardized Coefficients)

	Model 1 Life satisfaction	Model 2 Depressiveness	Model 3 Stress
Without covariates			
Joint physical custody (ref.: sole physical custody)	0.11** (0.11)	-0.11*** (0.03)	-0.13*** (0.05)
With covariates			
Joint physical custody (ref.: sole physical custody)	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.05)
Mother's age	0.00 (0.01)	-0.06 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Mother's educational level (ref.: low educational level)			
Medium educational level	0.00 (0.14)	0.05 (0.04)	0.04 (0.07)
High educational level	0.00 (0.14)	0.08** (0.04)	0.08 (0.07)

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	Model 1 Life satisfaction	Model 2 Depressiveness	Model 3 Stress
Mother's number of children (ref.: one child)			
Two children	0.03 (0.10)	0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.05)
More than two children	-0.04 (0.19)	0.03 (0.05)	0.07* (0.09)
Age of the mother's youngest child (ref.: 0-5 years)			
6-10 years	-0.03 (0.11)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)
11-14 years	-0.04 (0.15)	0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.07)
Mother's working hours	0.12*** (0.00)	-0.07* (0.00)	0.06 (0.00)
Mother has a partner (ref.: no partner)	0.30*** (0.10)	-0.22*** (0.02)	-0.09** (0.04)
Quality of mother-child relationship	0.32*** (0.05)	-0.24*** (0.01)	-0.24*** (0.02)
Coparenting support	0.19*** (0.06)	-0.17*** (0.02)	-0.21*** (0.03)
Interparental conflicts	-0.14*** (0.07)	0.18*** (0.02)	0.21*** (0.03)
Constant	2.32*** (0.62)	2.85*** (0.16)	4.02*** (0.29)
Adjusted R ²	0.31	0.22	0.23
N	996	996	996

Note: Family Models in Germany (FAMOD); Standard Errors in Parentheses; *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05