



## Joint Custody Better for Kids of Divorce

Study finds they manage better when parents communicate more

**By Adam Marcus**  
*HealthScoutNews Reporter*

SUNDAY, March 24 (HealthScoutNews) -- More than two decades after the movie "Kramer vs. Kramer" dramatized the traumas of a hostile divorce, a Maryland researcher has found that children raised in joint-custody settings do better than those in sole custody and almost as well as those from two-parent homes.

Overall, children in joint arrangements tended to be better adjusted than those in sole-custody situations, with less anxiety and depression, fewer behavioral problems, and they fared better in school, the new study found.

"It's very clear that the joint-custody children show somewhat better adjustment than the sole-custody children," says Robert Bauserman, a behavioral scientist at the Maryland Department of Health in Baltimore who conducted the study.

"That doesn't mean that sole-custody children are maladjusted. But if you look at the overall pattern of results, kids [in joint-custody situations] seem to be doing better in a large variety of areas," from self-esteem to school performance, he adds.

Joint custody isn't a good option for every splintering family, especially those in which a spouse is abusive, mentally ill or otherwise unstable, according to experts.

However, in general, divorce courts and states that don't already do so should consider joint arrangements as the default for custody, Bauserman says.

Joint custody "is an idea whose time has come," adds Richard Warshak, a well-known divorce expert in Dallas and author of *Divorce Poison*.

"The more we learn about how children experience their parents' divorce, the more we find they can be shielded" from harm, as long as "the parents behave like adults, and they don't expose their kids to all the conflict," he says.

Not only do children in joint custody report more satisfaction with the setup than those in sole custody, Warshak says, but they stick to that assessment as adults.

Almost 90 percent of Americans will marry at least once in their life, but half of those unions will end in divorce, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In his day job, Bauserman studies the social impact of AIDS. However, as a child of divorced parents, he has long been interested in the impact of a torn marriage on the children.

A review of the scientific literature told him that much of what happens in divorce court has little, if any, basis in research.

"It's really surprising to me that there hasn't been more research done on what's really beneficial for those kids, and what should be encouraged legally and socially," says Bauserman, whose study appears in this month's issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Bauserman analyzed 33 previous studies, of which 11 were published and 22 were unpublished (almost all doctoral dissertations), comparing outcomes of children living in either joint- or sole-custody arrangements.

Joint custody can refer to physical timesharing, in which children split residence between parents. It can also describe children who use one parent's home as a base, but spend at least 25 percent of their time with the other parent. Joint physical custody is less common than joint legal custody, although both have become increasingly popular in recent years, Bauserman says.

One of the factors at play here could be that joint-custody parents may have better pre- and post-divorce relationships than those who opt for sole custody. But Bauserman says that even after accounting for reported levels of strife, joint custody still seemed easier for children to handle.

"You still find an advantage in the joint-custody children. When you have ongoing positive contact with both parents, that's going to be beneficial to the children," he says.

David Royko, director of marriage and family counseling for Cook County Circuit Court in Chicago, agrees.

"I think a joint legal custody situation encourages and assumes cooperation and communication between parents, which is critical to parenting, whether you're married or divorced or separated," Royko says.

Children thrive when their parents communicate well. Yet, in divorces with less-cordial splits, they often manipulate their parents to stimulate any interaction at all -- even if that means acting out to keep some ember of a relationship glowing, he adds.

"They use conflicts just to keep [parents] communicating," Royko says.

Not all divorce experts agree that joint physical custody is a good alternative.

"I think it's inappropriate to split a child down the middle like a piece of property," says Alton Abramowitz, a Manhattan divorce lawyer and former president of the New York State chapter of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. "Children need a home base. Children tend to thrive better in a situation where they're not moving back and forth every week or every month."

## **What To Do**

To learn more about custody and its impact on children, check out the [American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#) or [Divorce Poison](#).

For more on divorce and marriage in America, try the [National Center for Health Statistics](#).

SOURCES: Robert Bauserman, Ph.D., Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Baltimore; **Richard Warshak, Ph.D., Dallas**; Alton Abramowitz, divorce lawyer, New York City; David Royko, Sc.D., director, marriage and family counseling service, Mediation Department for the Circuit Court of Cook County Domestic Relations Division, Chicago; March 2002 *Journal of Family Psychology*

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