



Of course, quantity AND quality of nonresidential father involvement matters ... as part of every individualized best interests of the child determination: Commentary on Adamsons 2018 article

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ABSTRACT

Adamsons uses two prominent meta-analyses to argue that “time (of father involvement) is a necessary but not sufficient factor” in predicting child adjustment after parental separation. Quantity of contact between nonresidential parents and their children does not, by itself, predict child adjustment or well-being. Adamsons points out the ingredients for positive child adjustment include father involvement in activities, forming quality father–child relationships, and authoritative parenting. She also notes there are instances when contact can be negative and adversely impact the child’s adjustment. Scholars and practitioners should not be surprised by these findings, which illustrate the complexity of the task of deciding what is best for children and the need for individualized determinations. Adamsons provides a cogent argument against making decisions based on “averages” and notes the need to consider moderating variables when predicting child adjustment. She easily defeats one strawman presumption argument (e.g., time does not matter), then seems to miss how that the logic of her arguments also undermines the argument for an equal time presumption. The individualized best interests of the child standard is never mentioned in her article, but it remains the approach that best fits the task and the data.

KEYWORDS

Child custody; joint custody; sole custody; presumptions; meta-analysis; father involvement

In *Quantity versus Quality of Nonresident Father Involvement: Deconstructing the Argument that Quantity Doesn’t Matter* (Adamsons, 2018), Adamsons uses the findings of two prominent meta-analyses to argue child well-being requires consideration of both the quantity and quality of nonresident father involvement. She notes clear findings showing children substantially benefit when nonresident fathers are involved with their children in positive ways. In the first meta-analysis, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found the effect sizes for authoritative parenting and child support payments were associated with child well-being, but frequency of contact was not. In the second meta-analysis, Adamsons and Johnson

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found father involvement in activities and father–child relationship quality were positively associated with overall child well-being, but financial provision and contact were not (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Adamsons also notes a certain amount of parenting time, above a minimum of one night per week and every other weekend, is necessary for the kinds of beneficial parenting fathers can provide their children. She concludes both meta-analyses “confirmed that nonresident fathers can *and do* positively influence their children, but that contact in and of itself does little to benefit children” (Adamsons, 2018, p. 30). I agree fathers *can* positively influence their children, but whether they *do* is a fact-specific issue, a fact Adamsons first clearly recognizes but then minimizes in her conclusion.

Adamsons’ article challenges what she believes is an inappropriate interpretation of the data included in the two meta-analyses. She views it as inaccurate to interpret the available data from these two meta-analyses as supporting a view that “fathers do not need time with their children, or at least, that the amount of time spent is irrelevant” (Adamsons, 2018, p. 30). She views this data as insufficient to support any social policy against joint physical custody, noting “Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners must be vigilant that they do not fall into the trap of misinterpreting average effects in the presence of substantial variation” (Adamsons, 2018, p. 33). She concludes, “When it is known that father-child contact is positive under some conditions and negative under others, to only conclude and report that, on average, father contact is not important for children’s well-being, is both inaccurate and misleading” (Adamsons, 2018, p. 30). I agree.

The gravamen for Adamsons’ (2018) argument against using “averages” and group aggregate research to determine either policy or the outcome of any case should be familiar to child custody professionals. It is an argument for individualized determinations.

For example, Adamsons (2018) notes,

Although it is true that, on average, father contact is not associated with child well-being, taking the average as representative of the whole, however, epitomizes the ecological fallacy of assuming all individual constituents of a group exhibit the group’s average qualities. The findings of both sets of heterogeneity analyses demonstrate the invalidity of this conclusion. In reality, *some* kinds of father contact appear to be helpful, whereas other kinds are irrelevant or problematic, and possibly in differential ways depending upon the aspect of child well-being being examined. This is where quantity and quality become intertwined and difficult to examine in isolation from one another (*italics in original*) (p. 30).

I agree with Adamsons (2018) when she advocates for the need to investigate when and how contact is beneficial:

[I]t should not be assumed that fathers do not need time with their children or that the amount of time spent does not matter, but rather, we should investigate and

outline the conditions under which time spent is beneficial or harmful and the types of activities in which fathers should engage during the time they have with their children (p. 31).

While noting the benefits for children of positive fathering behaviors, Adamsons (2018) also notes the possibility that certain fathering behaviors can have an adverse effect on a child:

One can easily imagine a scenario where a nonresident father spends a great deal of time with his child, but exhibits poor parenting strategies, is not close to the child, demonstrates little warmth, is neglectful, and engaged in harsh discipline practices. Such fathering behaviors likely would have an adverse impact on that child's well-being, and time spent with this father would be a negative thing (p. 30–31).

However, Adamsons (2018) concludes, “Fathers should be given equal parenting time and encouraged to spend that time with their children in a variety of positive ways” (p. 32). I disagree. Adamsons does not remain faithful to the logic of her own arguments and statements against using “averages” or taking into account “known” differences in the impact of fathers on children's well-being. After making several arguments against a presumption or social policy that is unsupported by the available research data, Adamsons argues for a presumption or social policy that is again unsupported by the available research data. In these situations, the underlying structure of logic used against a disfavored or unattractive presumption (e.g., time does not matter) cannot be abandoned as if it did not also apply to a proposed replacement presumption (e.g., fathers should get equal time). Adamsons argues that “time is a necessary but not sufficient factor for positive father involvement,” (p. 31) a truism impossible to rebut but of minimal practical utility unless one knows the context within which it must be applied.

Adamsons (2018) notes that, “Authoritative parenting, feelings of closeness and high-quality father–child relationships, involvement in children's activities, and maintaining multiple forms of involvement are things that require time with children to achieve” (p. 31). This statement is certainly true, but it too must be placed in context. The importance of the amount and frequency of father involvement depends upon, among other things, individual circumstance, context, history, and goals or objectives. Differing amounts of parent–child contact would be recommended for different goals or objectives. For example, is the case-question one of establishing, reestablishing, maintaining, or improving the parent–child relationship? Is the history of the parent–child relationship positive or negative? Are there case-specific facts (e.g., adverse events) or factors (e.g., age or special needs of the child) influencing any time schedule? What are the practical considerations around contact? An endless number of factual permutations can easily be constructed.

The term “best interests of the child” does not appear in the article, even though it is the legal standard for adjudication of custody disputes in every American jurisdiction (Elrod & Dale, 2008) and in most instances around the world (UN General Assembly, 1989). The best “interests of the child” in child custody cases is something to be decided separately for each individual child. Defining the “average” American family is impossible, a fact that reinforces Adamsons comments regarding the fallacy of “taking the average as representative of the whole” (Adamsons, 2018, p. 30). In *Troxel v. Granville*, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote, “The demographic changes of the past century make it difficult to speak of an average American family. The composition of families varies greatly from household to household” (*Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S. 57, 63, 2000). If there are no “average” fathers and no “average” families, we should remain committed to the idea there are no “average” children. As the standard for child custody issues, the best interests of the child embraces the notion there is no “average” child with the guarantee, at least in principle, that

... each recommendation, each decision made, considers the individual child’s developmental and psychological needs. Rather than focusing on parental demands, societal stereotypes, cultural tradition, or legal precedent, the best interests standard asks the decision makers to consider what this child needs at this point in time, given this family and its changed family structure. There is no other way to address a child’s best interest. The best interest standard represents a willingness on the part of the court and the law to consider children on a case-by-case basis rather than adjudicating children as a class or a homogeneous grouping with identical needs and situations (Kelly, 1997, p. 385).

Conclusion

Ironically, Adamsons (2018) provides a cogent argument about the need for the individualized best interests of the child standard in child custody. Unfortunately, she does not mention this as a logical conclusion from her article. Group aggregate research can inform decision-making processes in individual cases, but it cannot answer the question of what is best for any individual child in any situation. Nor should weak and limited group aggregate research findings get molded into presumptions for broad, indiscriminate application, either for or against any parent. I do agree with Adamsons that emphasizing only the quantity of father-child contact is incomplete and misguided and that “encouraging and tracking the quality and types of father involvement and the overall father-child relationship” are central issues for child well-being (Adamsons, 2018, p. 33). It is my opinion, however, that these issues already fit within the individual best interests of the child analysis and there are numerous other factors deserving of consideration. I also believe the research data does not support

either of the presumptions discussed in the article and that the notion of a presumption of equal time for both parents, while a blessing for some, would be a curse for others.

Disclosure statement

The author of this article has no financial interest or personal relationship that might bias the work being submitted.

Ethical standards and informed consent

This was a review of an article and did not involve human subjects.

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