

**Studying post-divorce living arrangements with the residential calendar:
Testing a new method to map custodial arrangements
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Rationale for the study

Belgium and its largest region Flanders have one of the highest divorce rates in Europe. This means a considerable part of families are faced every year with a parental break-up. When children are involved, a divorce does not automatically mean the end of the parental union, since the parental role is currently seen as unconditional. Hence, among the most difficult decisions made concerning divorce are indeed those about custody and the residence of the child. In 1995 the principle of joint legal custody was installed in the Belgian law. Since the legislator did not propose a preferred residential model (the only guideline was the child's best interest), as many residential arrangements as divorces came into force. In some cases the child is physically 'divided' over both parents' homes. This is called joint physical custody and it became the standard in Belgium since the law of 2006. Research has showed that joint physical custody provides continuity in the relationship between parents and children, enables more emotional support for children and leads to higher quality parenting (Wolchik et al, 1985). Notwithstanding the empirical evidence that joint custody would be the best arrangement for parents and children, it seems clear that it wouldn't work for every child nor for every family.

This study wants to contribute to the debate by investigating post-divorce living arrangements in Flanders. Where common research generally measures living arrangements by a fixed-items scale only, here a residential calendar was used as well. As far as we know, this method was never used before in similar research.

A first aim of this research was to evaluate the residential calendar method by comparing the answers of each individual on the fixed-items scale and the calendar. Do adolescents classify themselves in accordance with the way researchers interpret their answers on a fixed-item scale? A next purpose is to examine how the different post-divorce living arrangements are related to adolescent general well-being and feelings of depression. We are especially interested in the question whether joint physical custody is beneficial or harmful for the adolescent when compared to sole mother or sole father custody. Thereby we want to get insight in the role of family characteristics like inter-parental conflict and the parent-child relationship.

Data and sample

In the period January – March 2009, data was gathered in ten schools in Flanders, the largest Belgian region, spread across three different provinces and the different Flemish education systems (general, vocational & technical). In total, 2052 students between 11 and 20 age years old were questioned using a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Information was gathered concerning their socio-demographic profile, their household and family characteristics, their family relationships and different dimensions of their well-being. 20% of the adolescents, or 443 youngsters, indicated that their parents were divorced or did not live together anymore. This group is the research sample for our study.

Research question 1: measuring residential arrangements by the calendar method

Our main independent variable is the residential arrangement which is measured in two ways. In the first place a traditional fixed-item scale was used and the respondent was asked where he or she resided. Respondents had to choose from a list of pre-defined arrangements. Possible answers were: with my mother – with my father – alternating with my mother and father – for the most part with my mother, sometimes with my father – for the most part with my father, sometimes with my mother - other.

Because of the extensiveness of the amount of arrangements, such a list reduces the variability in arrangements and a lot of information can be lost. When children are the respondents they might also have difficulties with the abstractness of such categories. In this study a residential calendar was used, on top of the traditional fixed-item scale. Respondents were presented a four-week calendar in a written questionnaire.

Every day was split into two periods: day and night, illustrated by a sun and moon symbol. For every period, respondents had to write an 'M' in the box of every period where they stayed with their mother and a 'V' when they stayed with their father. When the residential arrangement was recurrent on a weekly base, only one week had to be filled out. This method of measuring the residential arrangement is unique and never used before in similar research as far as we know. Over 300 calendars were analyzed and a whole range of today post-divorce living arrangements could be distinguished. Additional information on the contact frequency between the adolescent and his parents was also available. Respondents had to indicate how often they had contact with their biological mother and father on an eight-point scale, ranging from never to every day. This information was used to better interpret the calendar results. A first exploration of the residential arrangements resulted in a typology of four: 1) no or little contact with the non-residential parent, 2) much contact with the non-residential parent, 3) limited joint physical custody and 4) full joint physical custody.

In a first research question the use of the residential calendar is evaluated. The individual answers on the fixed items scale and the typology variable will be compared and we will investigate if there is a discordance between both measures.

Research question 2: the influence of the residential arrangement on adolescent well-being

Many scholars already investigated the effects of custody type on child adjustment (for an overview see Bauserman, 2002). The results are however mixed. Some studies emphasize the beneficial effects of joint custody on child well-being (Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Glover & Steele, 1989; Luepnitz, 1986; Shiller, 1987; Spruijt, 2008) to a large extent caused by increased parental involvement and fewer economic difficulties. Other studies fail to find any relationship between custody type and child adjustment (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991, 1992; Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1992; Lee, 2002; Naevdal & Thuen, 2004; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). The reason for this inconsistency is probably caused by the complexity of the notion 'child adjustment', by the fact that different forces are interacting with each other like in a system (Lee, 2002) and that various intermediating factors are in play. According to Bray (1991) the question of which is the best custody arrangement for the child is impossible to answer because it ignores the variability and complexity of children, their family and the social context. Judges, social workers and therapists should consider multiple factors together to determine the best custody type (Kelly, 2006). Not the custody status in se but parent, child and family characteristics are vital in explaining child outcomes (Kline et al., 1989; Lowery & Settle, 1985).

In our second research question we want to study the effect of the residential arrangement (with special attention to the distinction joint physical custody versus no joint physical custody) on the psychological well-being of adolescents. Thereby we want to get insight in the role of two family characteristics. The intra-parental conflict was the first variable that was taken into account. It is measured by five items of the Conflict Awareness Scale (Grych & Fincham, 1993). The parent-child relationship is measured by nine items of the Network of Relationship Inventory (Furman & Burhmester, 1985). The psychological well-being of the adolescents is our dependent variable and is measured by two variables. The general well-being is measured by the cantrill ladder (Spruijt & de Goede, 1997). The respondent is asked how he or she feels on a ten-point scale. Feelings of depression were measured by the CES-D 8 scale (Radloff, 1977).

Preliminary results coming from an OLS-regression model with the residential arrangement as the independent variable and adolescent psychological well-being as dependent variables are available. They are in favour of joint physical custody and show that adolescents who live alternating with their mother and father score higher on general well-being and report less feelings of depression. In a subsequent analysis we will include the family characteristics 'intra-parental conflict' and 'parent-child relationship' to verify whether these effects stay robust.

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