



Columbine Counseling Center

Viewpoint – A Quarterly Newsletter

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Fall 2002

10 Reasons Why Early Overnights with Fathers Should be Considered in Divorce Families

The opinion that children can tolerate sleeping during the day in their father's presence, and in the presence of hired attendants in daycare centers, but not at night with their fathers, cannot be said to express a scientific judgment. (Warshak, 2000a, p.440)

At a recent Metropolitan Denver Interdisciplinary Committee (MDIC) workshop, psychologists and noted authors, Carla Garrity and Mitch Baris, updated participants in regards to their now famous "Little Green Book" (LGB also known as "Children of Divorce" 1988) and its sequel "Caught in the Middle" (1994). The authors updated their views on early overnights for nonresidential parents in light of the past fourteen years of research (Garrity, 2002; Baris, 2002). In what this writer had hoped would be an enlightening display of how current research is changing our thinking about fathers roles with children, the authors fumbled. They relied on thin ice descriptions of resiliency literature to suggest that the need for children in divorce settings is for the unobstructed formation of one strong bond with their primary caregiver. Turning resiliency literature on its head to include all children, rather than those who have had the misfortune of growing up under war-torn and other traumatic conditions, is misguided¹. Moreover, the authors combined this caregiver factor from resiliency studies with other contra-indicators of cooperative parenting to justify restricting overnight access between nonresidential parents and young children.

Unfortunately the authors followed up there over attention to one aspect of resiliency research with an equally dubious distortion of Joan Kelly's summary of child development research as it applies to overnights. In defending their book as written for children of well-functioning post separation parents, the authors neglected to note that in the politicized atmosphere of high conflict divorce, their "guidelines", which recommended no overnights for infants until two and a half years, have been misused for years to keep fathers from early overnights.

¹ I emailed Joan Kelly, Ph.D. after the presentation. Here is her response to the resiliency defense of "blanket overnights": "To compare children of divorce to those young children raised in orphanages in Europe and presumably traumatized by lack of consistent care and then separation is simply wrong. Completely wrong, and indicates a view toward divorce which is of considerable concern. They appear to believe that divorce automatically traumatizes young children, a very strong word. For many children, the stress of separation and divorce is the experience of not seeing significant attachment figures on a regular basis, and the emotional upheaval of the parents."

Additionally, the authors minimized the overnight experience as an important one for the child and nonresidential parent (Garrity, 2002). While Dr. Garrity noted the increase of father's hands-on parenting involvement in the past forty years, the complexity of infant development, and major revisions in our understanding of attachment theory, she failed to consider them important factors driving the present debate over early overnights. Dr. Garrity also noted, but did not elaborate on, the importance of multiple attachments for children, the need to keep conflict low in divorcing families, and the temperament of the child. She further acknowledged that divorce is an ongoing process, which commences for the majority of children under two years of age. Absent was due consideration of the research on children of divorce and father involvement, research on the effects of early daycare on parental attachment, and a more precise understanding of conflict in marital and divorce families as it effects children. Other researchers and writers (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Lamb & Kelly, 2001; Warshak, 2000a) have reviewed these areas in reaching conclusions about the need for more ongoing support for fathers early involvement as caregivers with young children.

In an effort to correct this misinformation, the following "Lettermanesque" ten reasons are listed for why fathers should be considered for early overnights in divorcing families:

#10 The wisdom of the judiciary². Despite the negative spin placed on early overnights for fathers, the judges who responded to the presentations appreciated the need for early father involvement and indicated they would consider father overnights. In fact, most observers of our culture are aware of the increased involvement of present day fathers in the overall caregiving and development of children. Back in the 1950's and 60's, fathers parented in a more removed manner. The MDIC presenters seemed to ignore what is intuitive to most of us, namely, that many present day fathers are significant caregivers in their children's lives and should be treated as such.

#9 A Braver Idea. Critique was also heaped upon the "Model Parenting Time Plans (Arizona Supreme Court, 2001) recently released by the Arizona Supreme Court through cooperation with the Family Law Section of the Arizona Bar. It is not surprising that Arizona would lead the way in developing parenting plans which are less restrictive in regards to father early overnights. A significant eight-year father/child study (Braver & O'Connell, 1998) emerged from the work of Sanford Braver and colleagues at Arizona State University. This research detailed how poorly designed studies and gender politics were used to create the myth of large numbers of "deadbeat dads". Braver's research led to the development of six myths³ about the lack of post-divorce father involvement with children. Dr. Braver's work shows that fathers difficulties in maintaining continued involvement with their children after divorce is often born out of politically driven policies without empirical data to support them. Also of note, Dr. Kelly consulted (for one day) with a fifteen member interdisciplinary committee, which developed the Arizona plans, with "great deliberation" (Kelly, 2002) over the next year.

²The Honorable Robert Russell II, Arapahoe County District Court; Magistrate Elizabeth Leith, Denver County District Court; The Honorable John W. Coughlin, Denver County District Court; Magistrate Louis Gresh, Douglas County District Court.

³ Dr. Braver's six myths about divorced dads are: divorced dads are deadbeat dads, runaway dads, dads who impoverish their former wives and children, are favored by the courts in divorce settlements, have it easy emotionally after divorce, and initiate most breakups.

#8 Kibbitzing Kibbutz. Research from the Kibbutz system in Israel gives us a glance at the “sacred cow” of those who espouse “blanket restrictions” of early infant overnights – monotropy; the belief that attachment efforts should be focused around one primary caregiver (Lamb & Kelly, 2002; Warshak, 2000a). Some Kibbutz research shows that children develop attachment to their mothers, even though they sleep in “infant houses”, and are removed from their mothers (and father’s) full time care between six to twelve weeks of age. The salient point is not the decrease in secure attachments but the robustness of attachments in such circumstances. Also of importance, kibbutz care may weaken mother attachment but what does that have to do with father overnights (Warshak, 2002).

#7 Daydreaming. Research on early childhood care sheds light on the issue of whether primary caregivers (usually mothers) secure attachment is harmed by alternative care given by others during the day. In 1997 the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development released the results of a study on early childhood care. In that study 1,153 mother/child dyads were examined across a variety of variables. It was concluded that regardless of the type of care provided by others during large portions of the day, there was no negative impact on mothers attachment to their children. This landmark study (NICHD, 1997) suggested that fathers could provide care for their children, because children tolerate day sleep and care without harm to the primary attachment.

#6 Overnight Blues. Despite research that clearly points to the utility of early and continual father involvement with children, some mental health professionals continue to believe that overnights present risk of harm to children (Solomon & Biringen, 2001; Biringen et al., 2002). What is most alarming, is that the research that drove the “deadbeat dad” myth and created favorable conditions for woman in the courts for years, most likely contributed to the theory based and research-barren recommendations made in Baris and Garrity - that children should be restricted from overnights with fathers for two and a half years. Baris and Garrity state:

“During the early period of children’s lives, it is important for the nonresidential or visiting parent to step aside somewhat – albeit only temporarily. There is no need at this developmental level to rush building the attachment to a parent who has been less active prior to this time (Baris & Garrity, 1988, p. 16- 17)”.

Their further comment reveals a geographic stability misunderstanding of care and comfort:

“Sleeping away from their primary home, in an environment separate from their primary caretaking parent, can be frightening for infants and young children. To insist on overnight visitation during this stage may be more of a detriment than a progressive step toward the goal of strengthening the relationship between an infant and the nonresidential parent (p. 17)”.

Many on the gender politic side of this equation fail to realize that the mistaken assumptions of the past created many of the mythological beliefs, which led to mother dominated homes, and fathers being disenfranchised from their children’s lives. What is ironic, is that these political processes were occurring at the very time when fathers were assuming more active roles with their children than ever before. When only mothers are interviewed to provide the foundation for research data on father involvement, something is amiss. When a primary researcher (Lenore Weitzman, Ph.D., 1985) from Yale University grossly exaggerates the standard of living

impact of divorce on children, the creditability of any position restricting father's early involvement with children apriori should be questioned⁴.

#5 Joan of Arc. As stated above, Dr. Kelly's work was grossly misinterpreted during the recent MIDC workshop. Instead of listing the breath of her assessment and the synthesis value of her seminal work (Kelly & Lamb, 2000; Lamb & Kelly, 20001), Dr. Garrity suggested that Dr. Kelly is encouraging overnights without due consideration of risk factors. Here I will quote Lamb and Kelly and let the reader decide for herself:

"A minority of parents, both mothers and fathers, appear incapable of providing development-promoting experiences for their children, and in these cases, it seems preferable to concentrate on strengthening children's relationships with the more competent of their parents [italics added] (Lamb & Kelly, 2002, p. 367)."

Kelly and Lamb also state:

"It is important that time distribution arrangements following a parental separation and divorce facilitate the active involvement of both parents in their children's lives, provided of course, that the parents have adequate parenting skills or the capacity to learn them [italics added] (p. 367)."

#4 Quid Pro Quo. An often ignored aspect of parenting is that most of us, if not all, learn on the job (OJT). This OJT aspect of parenting seems to be negatively interpreted for fathers, while mothers are given the opportunity to develop such experience without critique. In early parent/child interactions, bi-directional influence is critical, not only in forming attachment but in other important ways. Bi-directional influence strengthens the bond between parent and child and increases the likelihood of ongoing parental involvement – an outcome that is increasingly viewed as having long-term effects on adult adjustment (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001).

#3 Overnight Phobia. Dr. Garrity indicated that overnight behavior, which she described as caring for, changing, feeding, soothing, bathing, and waking up with, is somehow not appropriate in the evening hours for fathers, as they are behaviors which can be experienced during the day. As stated above in slightly in different form, the ability to care for a child in the off-work hours, the sacrifices that are necessary to interrupt ones sleep and ones evening hours in order to be present for a child, *imprints* a parent with a deep sense of connection and responsibility. As fathers impact their children's lives by becoming competent and active caregivers, the child's behavior influences the father, strengthening his commitment. Enfranchising fathers is simply good social policy (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). Others have written about the give-and-take of relationship formation and the value of an interactive perspective to relationship formation and maintenance (Fyfe, 1999; Kraemer, 1992). A correlation between overnights and strength of father involvement has been suggested (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

⁴ For an enlightening discussion of Dr. Weitzman's errors in reporting the data, please refer to Braver & O'Connell, 1998, p. 55-86. In essence Dr. Weitzman called a 27 % drop in the standard of living for divorcing women and children, a 73% drop – an error of severe portions. Dr. Braver (and others) have re-analyzed similar data which call into question the belief that fathers benefit financially from divorce.

#2 Fight Club. High conflict is often cited as a reason to restrict father involvement, particularly in regards to early overnights. In her Colorado IDC presentation (May 2001), Dr. Kelly summarized research on conflict in both intact and divorce families. What has emerged is a more specific line of research, namely, that ongoing, intense conflicts with the focus on the child are the most harmful forms. When ongoing conflict (angry behavior and harsh statements) takes place in front of children, neither Dr. Kelly, nor others associated with the emerging literature on early nonresidential parenting time, recommend overnights, as Dr. Garrity indirectly suggested.

Today there are several strategies which lower conflict for such families. The courts can order specific exchange procedures, which decrease the probability of further disruption in front of children. Mental health professionals have responded by providing transition house opportunities, safe exchange services, curbside exchanges, and other monitoring procedures. In short, problems can be avoided by the judicious use of third party observers for exchanges. When the primary caregiver is intensely angry with the nonresidential parent, that caregiver should not be rewarded with increased childcare including all overnight responsibility for their children - a result that some angry primary caregivers may desire.

#1 Social Policy 101. The emergent research in the area of father involvement with children is unequivocal: children of divorce function better as adults across a variety of indices if they establish and maintain a positive and working relationship with *both* parents (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Austin, 2002). Our society is moving towards the adoption of this principal in early childhood involvement by fathers, and where appropriate, early overnight care, regardless of what cautious tales come from misguided sources.

Early writings such as LGB forced lawyers, parents and mental health professionals to view overnights cautiously, even in ideal circumstances. This "blanket" policy assumes (without supportive data) that divorce in itself is traumatic for infants. How else can it be explained that fathers should be restricted from overnight care for two and a half years? This "blanket" recommendation is prescriptive and fails to account for family-specific factors. The Arizona model parenting plans list four alternatives from birth to twelve months. Only one of these plans has a twenty-four hour period with a nonresidential parent (Arizona Supreme Court, 2001).

Those who would delay early overnights for fathers until long-term studies are conducted on the possible effects of such caregiving arrangements (Baris, 2002), ignore the negative impact of LGB (Austin, 2002). Failure to appreciate the importance of multiple attachments for children, overly cautious warnings of the potential for harm from overnights and fear of the unknowable future, keep many from considering family-specific reasons (Gould & Stahl, 2002) for justifying early child overnights with fathers. Perhaps it is best to close this piece with a quote from John Bowlby. Please note the plural:

"Intimate attachments to other human beings are the hub around which a person's life revolves, not only when he is an infant or toddler, but throughout his adolescence and his years of maturity as well, and on into old age (Bowlby, 1973, p.442)".

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