



# **Mental health in Swedish children living in joint physical custody and their parents' life satisfaction**

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## Swedish children

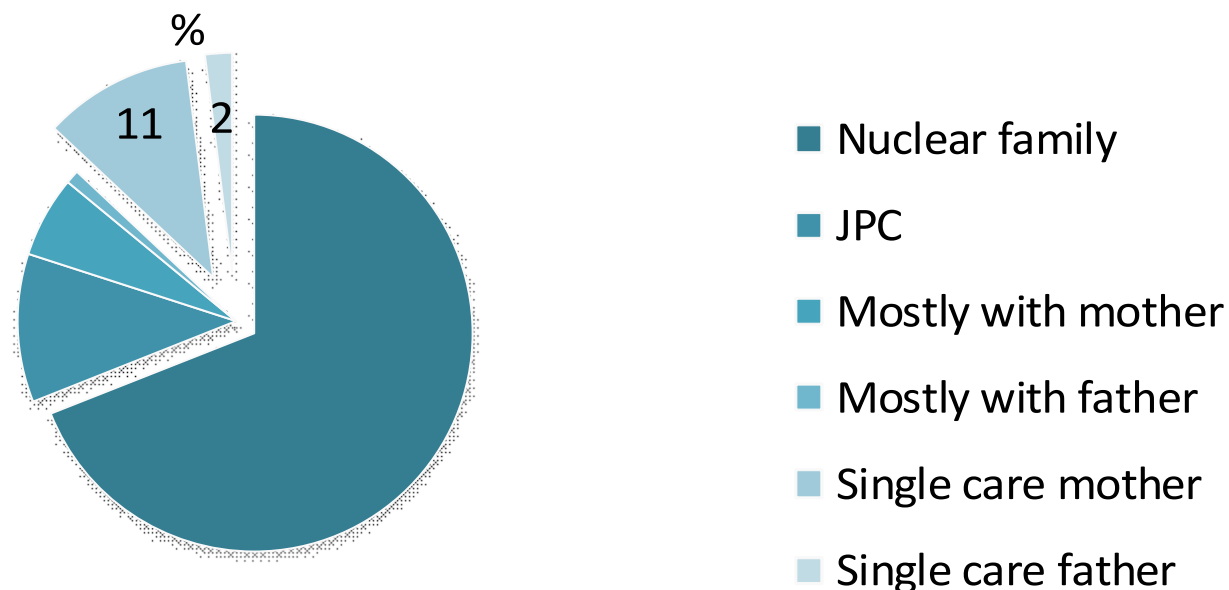
- 500.000 (25%) have separated parents
- About 200.000 (10%) have joint physical custody and lives approximately equally much in each parent's home
- Joint physical custody is expected to increase since it is more common among children with newly separated parents.

# **Children with separated parents are at increased risk of poor health**

- Increased risk may be attributed to the children's loss of material resources
- Or to loss of parental support, supervision and engagement
- Parental conflict or affluence, before and after separation, affect children regardless of living arrangement

(Kelly & Emery, 2003; Lansford, 2009; Jekielek, 1998; Nielsen, 2011)

## A majority of Swedish children lives with both parents



## **Parents in different living arrangements**

Being a mother with sole custody, or a father with no custody, is associated with a greater risk of negative mental and physical health (Melli & Brown, 2008).

Parental ill-health could impact negatively on child development and well-being (Goodman & Gotlib, 1999; Ramchandani, Stein, Evans, O'Connor, & Team, 2005).

## Pros and cons with JPC

- One suggested benefit is frequent involvement of both parents.
- Father involvement has been shown to predict positive behavioral outcomes in children (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008).
- Exposure to parental conflict could have a negative impact (Modecki, Hagan, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2014).

# **Mental health in Swedish children living in joint physical custody and their parents' life satisfaction: a cross-sectional study**

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In press, Scandinavian Journal of Psychology

DOI: [10.1111/sjop.12148](https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12148)

## **AIM**

This study investigated the mental health of children in joint physical custody, compared with children in nuclear families and in single care.

We also included the family's financial situation and the parents' satisfaction with their own health, economic and social situation in the analyses.



## Participants

A nationally representative sample from a 2011 survey of 1 297 Swedish families with children 4-17 years old.

- 76.4% (n=992) in nuclear families
- 10% (n=129) in joint physical custody
- 3.6% (n=176) in single care families

## **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)**

The parent who was most familiar with the child's situation was asked to fill out the screening instrument

SDQ measures psychosocial problems (between 0-10)

- Emotional symptoms
- Conduct problems
- Hyperactivity/inattention
- Peer relationship problems

We used the sum of scores from these subscales (0-40)

## Living arrangement

Based on the parent's answers to the survey question "with whom does the child live?".

Joint physical custody –

- "the child has joint physical custody"
- or stated that the child lives 180-185 days /year with the other parent

## **Parental variables**

Income was divided into quartiles, with quartile one including the 25% with the lowest incomes.

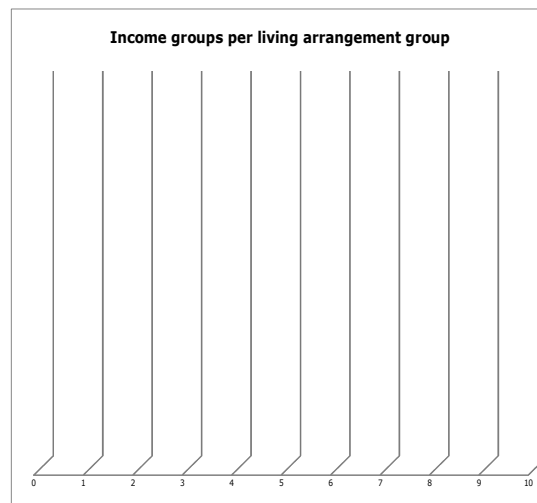
# Parental life satisfaction

- 1) parent's satisfaction with work, economy, education, leisure time and social network
- 2) satisfaction with ability to influence their own, and their family's, life situation
- 3) satisfaction with own health

## RESULTS

Of children with joint physical custody

- A larger proportion was boys 57.4 % than girls 42.6%.
- More children were in the mid-age categories (7-12 yrs)
- Belonging to the lowest income category was more than twice as common among the two post-separation family types than the nuclear families



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Parental satisfaction variables	Nuclear (n=992)	JPC (n=129)	Single care (n=176)
Economic situation	6.09	6.81	7.27
Social situation	7.32	8.14	9.17
Health	1.95	2.04	2.37

High values indicate less satisfaction



Child outcomes	Nuclear (n=992)	JPC (n=129)	Single care (n=176)
SDQ Total Score	7.34	8.96	9.57
<i>SDQ Subscales</i>			
Emotional	1.15	1.77	1.92
Conduct	1.13	1.29	1.41
Hyperactivity	2.33	2.69	2.88
Peer Contact	1.03	1.58	1.71

## Conclusions

Parental wellbeing and life satisfaction may be important factors when it comes to explaining why children's mental health varies in relation to different living arrangements

Parental economic and social factors still differ substantially between parents in different living arrangements.

- Positive relationships with their parents are important for children's wellbeing and mental health (Låftman & Östberg, 2006)
- Children in joint physical custody report more satisfaction with their parental relationships, in particular with their fathers, than children in single care (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010).
- Children in joint physical custody are as satisfied as children in nuclear families with their parental relationships (Swedish Government Official Report, 2011).

## Summary

We found that the children's mental health in different living arrangements was associated with parental satisfaction with their health, social and economic situation

Children in joint physical custody have better mental health than children in single care, but not as good as children in nuclear families.

## Future directions

- Longitudinal studies are needed to elucidate the causal directions in these associations.
- Parental life satisfaction, as well as age at separation and the duration of the separation, should be investigated further as these may help to explain the differences in symptom loads between children in various forms of living arrangements



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