

PARENTING TIME, PARENT CONFLICT, PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS,  
AND CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL HEALTH

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### INTRODUCTION

*Questions the chapter will address.* Two questions often confront family law courts and policy makers: “Is the quantity or the quality of parenting time more important for children’s outcomes?” and “Should parenting time be limited in high-conflict families?” Most discussions in the research literature give the following answers: The *quality* of parenting time is more important for children’s well-being than the *quantity* of parenting time, and when there is frequent and severe parent conflict parenting time should be limited because it can seriously harm children. We argue in the present chapter that these long-standing conclusions should be re-examined in the light of new evidence. We present new data on the correlation between quantity of parenting time and quality of parent-child relationships in families with and without severe parent conflict, and we discuss new findings in the health literature on family relationships and children’s long-term, stress-related physical health. We conclude that these new findings indicate that the lingering situation of minimal parenting time with fathers for great numbers of children is a serious public health issue.

*Our model of how parenting time and parent conflict affect children’s health.* Figure 1 shows our conceptual model, or hypotheses, of how the effects of parenting time ultimately play out to influence children’s health outcomes. We test this type of model in our ongoing research (e.g., Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Fabricius, Braver, Diaz & Velez, 2010) and we use it here to organize the various sections of this chapter. The model indicates that parenting time should

impact one class of parent behaviors, namely father-child interaction. Interaction is spending time doing things together. By “impact” we mean that for each father, given his own personal tendency to interact with his child, more parenting time will allow more interaction and less parenting time will allow less. When we indicate impact by an arrow it usually means both that more of the thing on the left end of the arrow causes more of the thing on the right end, and that less of the thing on the left causes less of the thing on the right.

Parenting time should not normally impact father responsiveness, which is the reliability of the father’s tendency to respond when the child expresses wants or needs. It reflects not how frequently the child asks, but how reliably the father responds. Responsiveness can occur with or without face-to-face interaction, and can be manifested in deeds or words. Examples include conversations, either in person or on the phone in which the father really listens to the child, buying or making things that the child wants, helping with homework when the child asks, etc.

The model indicates that both father–child interaction and father responsiveness independently impact the child’s felt emotional security in the father-child relationship. Parent conflict as well impacts the emotional security of the father-child relationship (in this case, more parent conflict causes less emotional security, and less parent conflict causes more emotional security). For simplicity, we have not included the analogous factors for mothers in Figure 1, but suffice to say that mother-child interactions, mother responsiveness, and parent conflict impact the mother-child relationship, and both the mother-child and the father-child relationships impact the child’s health outcomes. We will say more about how parenting time differentially impacts the mother-child and the father-child relationships later.

IS THE QUANTITY OR THE QUALITY OF PARENTING TIME MORE IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN’S OUTCOMES?

*Old and new measures of parenting time.* An influential review of the research on father-child contact after divorce published just over 10 years ago (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) led to the consensus that quality was more important than quantity. Specifically, Amato and Gilbreth found that *frequency of contact* was less important for children's outcomes than two other dimensions of the father-child relationship; i.e., father-child emotional closeness, and father authoritative parenting. The authors coded the following specific behaviors in the studies they reviewed as indicators of authoritative parenting: engaging in projects together, listening to the child's problems, monitoring and helping with school work, giving advice, explaining rules, and using non-coercive discipline. Amato and Gilbreth's finding continues to influence many researchers to be skeptical that increasing *quantity of parenting time* with nonresident fathers benefits children (e.g., Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007; Stewart, 2003). However, we explain in the rest of this section why courts and policy makers should be cautious about drawing implications about effects of quantity of parenting time from studies that instead measured frequency of contact, and we point to studies with better measures of quantity of parenting time.

Amato and Gilbreth (1999) noted that most of the studies prior to 1999 measured frequency of contact and only some measured duration or regularity of visits. When respondents are asked how frequently father-child contact has occurred, they are given a limited number of categories to choose from, such as "once a year," "one to three times a month," "once a week," etc. Frequency poorly represents amount of parenting time. For example, two divorced families that have the same parenting time schedule of every other weekend at the father's home could choose different categories. One family could count it as 2 *visits* per month, in which case they would report it as "one to three times a month." The other family could count it as 4 *days* per month, in which case they would report "once a week." Even if both families reported it as "one

to three times a month,” it might be a 2-day weekend visit for one family and a 3-day weekend visit for the other. Argys et al. (2007) recently compared several large surveys, four of which measured frequency, and concluded that, “What is most striking about the reports of father–child contact ... and perhaps most alarming to researchers, is the magnitude of the differences in the reported prevalence of father–child contact across the different surveys” (p. 383). This inherent unreliability makes it difficult to find consistent relations between frequency measures and child outcomes. Many of the pre-1999 studies, and many studies today, are based on several national surveys<sup>1</sup> that measured frequency; other national and state surveys<sup>2</sup> as well as individual researchers (e.g., Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000) continue to use measures of frequency.

Despite all the research on divorce since the 1980’s, there is no standard measure of amount of parenting time. Argys, et al. (2007) noted that in the surveys they examined, “variation in the phrasing of the questions [about father-child contact] is significant” (p. 382). The Argys, et al. review will hopefully initiate the dialogue necessary for the field to arrive at valid, reliable measures of amount of parenting time, because courts and policy makers are in great need of that information. Some progress is being made. Smyth (2004) describes the telephone survey designed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.<sup>3</sup> Smyth and colleagues used these questions to sort each family into discrete groups to reveal the variety of parenting plans in use. These questions could also be used to calculate the amount of parenting time. One shortcoming of these questions, however, is that they do not apply to parents who do not have a set parenting plan, or to those who live far apart and have yearly plans. A second shortcoming is that they only capture the parenting plan that is in place at the time the questions are asked. If the

plan changes later, as a result of relocation for example, then the data for that family may not represent the parenting plan the child experienced for most of his or her life.

A different approach was taken by Fabricius and Luecken (2007), who asked young adults four retrospective questions about the typical number of days and nights they spent with their fathers during the school year and vacations.<sup>4</sup> The amount of parenting time can be calculated from these questions, and this is the approach we use below in our new data. An advantage of this retrospective approach is that respondents can focus on the time period after the divorce that was most typical or representative.

Having valid measures of parenting time is one prerequisite for addressing the issue of the relative importance of quantity versus quality of parenting time, but so is having valid measures of the quality of the time. We turn to that issue next.

To summarize:

- Skepticism about benefits of parenting time stems from data collected with old measures.
- Old measures reflected frequency of visits rather than quantity of parenting time.
- New measures reflect quantity of parenting time.

*Distinctions between quantity of time and quality of time.* Argys, et al. (2007) also concluded, “There is no consensus on which measures of the quality of [non-resident] parent-child interaction matter most” (p. 396). This lack of consensus is manifest in Table 1, which shows four recent studies of high-quality father involvement. These studies use three different national surveys. The large national surveys include items that, to varying degrees, tap into the central constructs in our model (Figure 1); namely, the amount of direct interaction (IN) parents and children have, the degree to which parents are responsive (RE) to children’s needs and requests, and children’s emotional security (ES) in the parent-child relationship. Table 1 shows

the lack of consensus about the constructs of high-quality fathering that these researchers have constructed, and how each set of researchers idiosyncratically combines IN, RE, and ES items into the same constructs.

The field needs more principled, theoretical analyses of the quality of non-resident parent involvement and how it relates to parenting time. We think that the scheme represented in Figure 1 has good theoretical grounds and also that it makes good intuitive sense. First, according to the classic analysis of Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985) the time that parents and children spend together can be divided into the time during which the parent is *available* to the child, and the time during which they actually *interact*. For non-resident parents, parenting time (PT) provides availability. However, our scheme further distinguishes interaction into quantity (IN) and quality (RE). We do not mean to suggest that other parent behaviors are not also important, such as consistent discipline, monitoring, etc. Our point here is to distinguish between parent behaviors (IN) that are more likely to be related to parenting time and parent behaviors (RE) that are less likely to be related to parenting time.

Second, these three dimensions (IN, RE, and ES) are grounded in the central constructs of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), in which parent availability for interaction and responsiveness to the child both contribute to the security of the young child's emotional connection to the parent, and ultimately to the development of healthy independence. Parent availability and responsiveness are parent behaviors that convey meaning to the child about the reliability of the parent's continued support and caring. As Robert Karen (1998) summarized attachment theory after reviewing its historical development and current research, "All your child needs in order to thrive both emotionally and intellectually is your availability and responsiveness" (p. 416).

Third, we have discovered that these three dimensions are also foremost in adolescents' minds when they think about their relationships with their parents. We recruited 393 families for our longitudinal study of the role of fathers in adolescent development, and we asked the children to describe their relationships with each of their parents in open-ended interviews when they were in 7th grade and again when they were in 10th grade. The families were equally divided between Anglo-American and Mexican-American families, and between intact and stepfather families (see Baham, Weimer, Braver, & Fabricius, 2008, and Schenck et al., in press, for sample details). Regardless of which parent they described (resident mother, resident biological father, resident stepfather, and nonresident biological father), virtually all adolescents at both ages and in both ethnic groups spontaneously evaluated their relationships with their parents in terms of IN (e.g., "She does a lot with us." "Sometimes he'll take me out to basketball." "Most of the time we really don't spend time with each other."), RE (e.g., "He's always there for me." "He tries not to ignore me." "When I ask for help, she's always too busy"), and ES (e.g., "He can make me feel better." "She's nice but she can be mean." "He yells at me a lot."). It is remarkable that adolescents still monitor and distinguish the same general types of parent behaviors (IN and RE) that, according to attachment theory, initiated their attachment and emotional security with each of their parents when they were infants. This is consistent with Aquilino's (2006) finding that frequent contact during adolescence was the most important predictor, among other measures of father involvement, of close relationships with fathers in young adulthood. The fact that these parent behaviors (IN and RE) continue to be important in adolescents' representations of their relationships with their parents provides further justification for maintaining this fundamental distinction in our model. As Bowlby (1969) always emphasized, attachment process continue to operate throughout one's life.



Figure 1 illustrates why we think that questions such as, “Is quantity of time or quality of time more important for child outcomes?” or “Is parenting time or the parent-child relationship more important?” are straw man comparisons that need to be retired from the debate. As shown in Figure 1 parenting time helps build emotionally secure relationships via interaction, but so do other things including the parent’s responsiveness. Emotionally secure parent-child relationships help insure positive child outcomes. Thus parenting time is farthest to the left in the causal chain, and things like parent responsiveness and the emotional security of the parent-child relationship (which are different constructs usually subsumed under the rubric “quality”) are farther to the right and closer to child outcomes. Things closer to child outcomes in the causal chain will have stronger correlations to child outcomes than things farther away. Asking whether parenting time or various indices of quality are more important presupposes a theoretical model in which they occupy positions in the causal chain the same number of links away from child outcomes, but no such models are on offer. In the absence of such a model, it is an unfair question. In our model it is fair to ask, for example, whether IN or RE is more important for ES. The question we focus on below, however, is the more important one for courts and policy makers, and the one for which we have new data: What is the strength of the relationship between PT and ES with the father?

To summarize:

- Researchers usually measure but often confuse three things: the amount of direct interaction parents and children have, the degree to which parents are responsive to children’s needs and requests, and the emotional security of the parent-child relationship.
- These distinctions are grounded in attachment theory and also in adolescents’ representations of their relationships with their parents.

- Our model indicates that the *quantity* of parenting time should impact the *quantity* of father-child interaction, which in turn should impact the *quality* (i.e., security) of father-child relationship; parenting time should not impact the *quality* of father-child interaction (i.e., the fathers' responsiveness).
- The question of whether quantity or quality of time is more important is a straw man.

*New Findings on the Quantity of Parenting Time and the Quality of Parent-Child*

*Relationships.* During the 2005 – 2006 academic year we surveyed 1030 students who reported their parents had divorced before they were 16 years old. On average their parents had divorced about 10 years earlier. They completed an on-line survey administered by the Psychology Department for Introductory Psychology credit, and for which we received Institutional Review Board human subjects approval. The survey included the parenting time questions in Footnote 4, as well as a large number of questions about their past and current family relationships and situations which allowed us to capture several aspects of the emotional security of their relationships with their parents with a single score for each relationship. Because these scores represent how the students viewed their relationships at the time of the survey, when they were generally 18 to 20 years of age, they allow us to assess long-term associations between PT and ES.

Figure 2 shows the relation between PT with the father and ES with the fathers. The vertical line divides the PT scale at 13 – 15 days per “month” (i.e., 28 days). This represents 50% PT with each parent. The father-child relationship improved with each increment of PT from 0% time with father to 50% ( $r = .51$ ,  $N = 871$ ,  $p < .001$ ). From 50% to 100% PT with father the father-child relationship did not show statistically significant change ( $r = .15$ ,  $N = 152$ ); the

smaller sample sizes in these categories in which children lived primarily with their fathers means that the zigzags are not reliable and probably represent random variation.

For simplicity in Figure 2, we do not also show the mother-child relationship scores. As we have found in other studies (Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius & Luecken, 2003), the long-term mother-child relationship mirrored the father-child relationship; i.e., it remained constant with each increment of PT from 0% to 50% time with father, and declined thereafter. These findings indicate that when either parent has the child living with him or her for a majority of the time, increasing PT with the second parent is not associated with any risk of harm to the relationship with the first parent. Instead, increasing PT with the second parent is associated with improvements in that relationship, and benefits continue to accrue up to and including equal PT. At 50% PT it appears that each relationship achieves its highest level of emotional security.

The strength of the association between PT and ES with father is substantial. A correlation of .51 means that about 25% of the variability in relationship security across students can be explained by PT. In our model, PT is just one of the things that impact ES, and it does so only indirectly, through the amount of father-child IN that it makes possible. (Fabricius, et al. (2010) reported other evidence that PT correlated significantly with IN, and that it did not correlate with RE.) The fact that PT accounted for about one-fourth of relationship security so many years later is important. Our hypothesis is that PT causes these changes, and although we cannot test causality directly, we considered the alternate hypothesis that the increase in ES across PT categories from 0% to 50% was due to different fathers self-selecting into different categories of PT. This might happen in two ways. Most of the disinterested fathers – those who would ultimately end up with the worst relationships with their college aged children -- might choose, or be given, 0% PT, and progressively fewer such fathers might choose or be given each

PT category up to 50%. Or a similar, but reversed, self-selection process might occur for fathers who are especially committed and capable.

We examined the feasibility of the self-selection explanation by first splitting the father relationship scores into five equal groups (quintiles) from lowest to highest. The top 20% are those fathers with the best relationships and, according to the self-selection hypothesis, are the most committed and capable. Those in the bottom 20% are presumably the most disinterested. The self-selection hypothesis is that the increase in the security of father-child relationships across PT from 0% to 50% is explained by the distribution of especially committed and/or disinterested fathers across the PT categories. It would be unlikely according to that hypothesis to find a significant correlation between PT and ES *within either the top or bottom quintile*. That would require a remarkable degree of precision by which those especially committed or disinterested fathers chose or were given PT categories that matched their abilities to eventually achieve corresponding levels of relationship security with their college-aged children. In fact, there were significant positive correlations between PT and ES in *both* the top and bottom quintiles, and also in two of the three middle quintiles. This suggests that the self-selection explanation for the association between PT and ES in which the most committed fathers were sorted into the higher categories of PT and/or the most disinterested fathers were sorted into the lower categories of PT is not sufficient to account for the details of the data. Fabricius et al. (2010) also considered the self-selection hypothesis, but in light of the common finding that fathers and children generally want more PT with father. They concluded that “the self-selection hypothesis should be viewed with a new sense of skepticism” (p. 214). The new data shown in Figure 2 provide additional cause for skepticism. The available evidence is more consistent with the hypothesis that PT impacts father-child relationship security.

Studies in the past (i.e., those reviewed by Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) focused more on associations between father–child contact and child outcomes such as depression, aggression, and school success, than on associations between contact and father–child relationships. This is changing, however. Fabricius, et al. (2010) reviewed the studies that focus on associations between contact and parent-child relationships. In contrast to the weak findings in studies of contact and outcomes, these studies find consistent associations between contact and relationships. These and these are summarized in Table 2.

To summarize:

- Consistent with our model, the long-term father-child relationship improves at each level of parenting time; benefits continue to accrue up to and including equal PT; the long-term mother-child relationship remains constant at each level of parenting time up to and including equal PT.
- The evidence so far is stronger that amount of parenting time exerts a causal effect on relationship security, than that the association is due to self-selection.
- Many other studies also find consistent associations between father-child contact and father–child relationships.

*Trends in parenting time.* Courts and policy makers need to be aware of changes in cultural values and norms regarding parenting because custody policy and practice derive their legitimacy in part from accurate reflection of parenting values and norms (Fabricius, et al., 2010). There is now a strong consensus among the general public that under normal circumstances, equal parenting time is best for the child. Large majorities favor it in all the locales and among all the demographic groups in the United States and Canada in which this question has been asked, and across several variations in question format, including variations

that ask respondents to consider differences in how much predivorce child care each parent provided, and differences in parent conflict. Table 3 summarizes these polls. This public consensus is probably best characterized as a cultural value about parenting rather than mere opinion, given both its connection to the long-term historical trend toward gender equality, and the evidence for its universality and robustness. We note that this cultural value is consistent with the findings in Figure 2.

Regarding norms of practice, there appears to be a slow trend toward greater amounts of parenting time with fathers, especially equal parenting time. In our data collected in 2005-06 in which the students' parents had divorced on average 10 years earlier, about 9% of students reported equal PT (50%). In Wisconsin the percentage of divorced parents with equal PT increased from 15% in 1996-99 to 24% in 2003-04 (Brown & Cancian, 2007). In Washington the percentage of divorced parents with equal PT was approximately 20% in 2008-09 (Washington State Center for Court Research, 2009). In Arizona the percentage of case files specifying equal PT tripled from 5% in 2002 (Venohr & Griffith, 2003) to 15% in 2007 (Venohr & Kaunelis, 2008). The Arizona case files included both divorced and never married parents, whereas the other rates reflected only divorced parents. The practice of equal parenting time lags the consensus about its value. Fabricius, et al. (2010) provide a discussion of the possible complex reasons for the lag.

Courts also derive legitimacy from scientific findings. The findings about families that have joint residential parenting are clear. In 2002, Bauserman published a comprehensive review of the research comparing joint versus sole custody. This review included 11 published and 22 unpublished (almost all doctoral dissertations) studies, comprising 1,846 sole-custody and 814 joint-custody children. The category of "joint custody" included *joint physical* custody as well as

*joint legal* custody with sole maternal physical. Children in joint custody were significantly better off than those in sole custody (and about as well off as those in which the parents remained married), in terms of general adjustment, family relationships, self-esteem, emotional and behavioral adjustment, and divorce-specific adjustment. The joint legal custody families and the joint physical custody families showed similar benefits, and both involved a “substantial proportion of time actually spent living with each parent” (p. 93).

At issue though is the possibility that the “better” parents may have been the ones to want joint residential custody. In the classic Stanford Child Custody Study (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992), the researchers statistically controlled for characteristics that might predispose parents both to want joint residential custody and also to have more parenting skills and resources, including education, income, and initial levels of interparental hostility. Even after controlling for these characteristics, children in dual residence were still the ones who showed the greatest satisfaction with their parenting arrangements, and had the best long-term adjustment (Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993). Moreover, the great majority of joint residential parents did *not* initially want and agree to joint residential custody. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) gathered data at the predecree interview about parents’ initial preferences (“what he or she would personally like in terms of residential custody, regardless of what in fact had been or would be requested in the legal proceedings,” p. 99). Using the early waves of the Stanford Child Custody Study ([www.socio.com/srch/summary/afda/fam25-27.htm](http://www.socio.com/srch/summary/afda/fam25-27.htm)), we determined that there were 92 families with joint residential custody in which the parents had expressed wishes for either sole or joint residential custody. Both parents had initially wanted joint in only 19 of those 92 families. The largest subgroup of the joint residential custody families (N = 37) were those where the mother had wanted sole residential custody for herself and the father had wanted joint.

In 19 families each parent had wanted sole for him- or herself. Thus very few parents initially agree on joint residential custody, and the great majority had to accept it over their initial objections. About half accepted it after using some level of court services (mediation, custody evaluation, trial, or judicial imposition). Nevertheless, those with joint residential custody had the most well- adjusted children years later.

We turn now to the question that courts and policy makers face regarding parenting time and parent conflict. Having considered the evidence and the underlying theory for the impact of quantity of PT on emotional security of parent-child relationships, and the consistency between the science and contemporary cultural parenting values, we consider next whether any of that changes in high-conflict families.

To summarize:

- All public opinion findings to date indicate widespread public endorsement of equal parenting time.
- There appears to be a slow trend toward equal parenting time in practice.
- Children who have joint residential custody fare better than children in sole residential custody; these findings do not seem to be simply due to “better” parents choosing joint residential custody.

#### SHOULD PARENTING TIME BE LIMITED IN HIGH-CONFLICT FAMILIES?

*Previous research is mixed, but can be sorted out.* One of the vexing questions confronting courts and policy makers concerns parenting time when there is high conflict between parents.<sup>5</sup> The argument is often made that more parenting time exposes children to more of the conflict, but that argument is a bit muddled. It is not clear that more parenting time *per se* necessarily exposes children to more parent conflict. Parenting time schedules that give



more *frequent* discrete periods of parenting time and thus more *transitions* between parents are more likely to do so. In addition, it is not often acknowledged but the previous research on this question is in fact quite mixed. On the one hand, Amato and Rezac (1994) and Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) found that more frequent contact in high-conflict families was related to poorer child outcomes. Johnston, Kline, & Tschann (1989) found that among the very high-conflict families referred to court services for custody disputes that composed their sample, greater amounts of visitation in sole-custody arrangements were generally harmful. These findings have led some commentators (e.g, Amato, 1993; Emery, 1999) to advocate limiting parenting time when high conflict prevails.

On the other hand, there is at least as much contrary evidence. Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbush (1996) did not find that greater amounts of visitation were harmful in high-conflict families, and Crosbie-Burnett (1991) did not find that more frequent contact was harmful in high-conflict families. Johnston et al.'s (1989) finding was restricted to sole custody families; the children in joint physical custody arrangements (in which children spent 12 to 13 days a month with their fathers) did not have worse adjustment than those in sole custody. Amato and Rezac's (1994) finding was restricted to boys; girls who had more frequent contact in high-conflict families did not have poorer outcomes. Healy, Malley and Stewart (1990) and Kurdek (1986) found the opposite pattern, that more frequent visitation was actually associated with fewer adjustment problems when parent conflict was high. Similarly, Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that more parenting time was associated with improvements in father-child relationships in families with both high and low frequency of conflict, and served to counteract the negative effects of parent conflict on father-child relationship security.

The divergence of findings among these studies can be partly explained by whether researchers measured frequency of contact, or amount of parenting time. Most researchers measured frequency of contact (Amato & Rezak, 1994; Crosbie-Burnett, 1991; Healy et al., 1990; Hetherington et al., 1978; Kurdek, 1986), and among those studies the results are mixed. However, results were consistent among studies that measured amount of parenting time. Buchanan et al. (1996) and Fabricius and Luecken (2007) found that more parenting time was not harmful in high conflict families, and Johnston et al. (1989) found that dual residence was not harmful in families referred to court services for custody disputes. Johnston et al. (1989) did find that greater amounts of parenting time in sole-custody arrangements were harmful, but in their study amount of parenting time and frequency of transitions happened to be substantially correlated. Thus, sometimes studies indicate that more frequent contact and *transitions* between conflicted parents' homes can be harmful, presumably because they expose children to more instances of conflict. However, there are two ways to limit transitions; one is to eliminate some visits, and the other is to combine some visits into longer, uninterrupted time periods. In the first case amount of parenting time would decrease, and in the second it could stay the same or increase. The second approach remains viable—and is no doubt preferable—for high-conflict families because there is no evidence that greater *amounts* of parenting time are harmful for most children of conflicted parents, or that dual residence is harmful for children whose parents are involved in lengthy custody disputes. On the contrary, evidence suggests that father-child relationships can be strengthened through increased parenting time in high conflict families as well as in low conflict families (Buchanan et al., 1996; Fabricius and Luecken, 2007; Johnston et al., 1989), and that strengthened parent-child relationships can shield children from some of the

effects of parent conflict (Fainsilber- Katz & Gottman, 1997; Sandler, et al., 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998).

To summarize:

- When researchers used the old measures of frequency of contact the findings sometimes showed that more frequent contact was harmful in families with high parent conflict, and sometimes did not show it was more harmful; the harm might have been due to more transitions in some families with higher frequency of contact.
- When researchers measured amount of parenting time the findings were more consistent that more parenting time was not harmful and was beneficial even in high-conflict families.

*New findings when conflict is severe.* We further examined this issue in the new 2005 – 2006 data set described above. The measure of parent conflict in Fabricius and Luecken (2007) asked about frequency of parent conflict. Here we examined a different measure that asked about the severity of parent conflict before, during, and up to 5 years after their parents' final separation. Figure 3 shows the relation between PT and father-child ES for those students reporting high versus low severity of parent conflict. It is clear that more parenting time is related to better father-child relationships in both levels of severity of parent conflict. These findings on severity of parent conflict replicate and extend the Fabricius and Luecken (2007) findings on frequency of conflict. It is important to state that these findings should not be taken to apply to families in which there is violence or abuse, however.

To summarize:

- The long-term father-child relationship improved with increases in parenting time in families in which parent conflict was less severe as well as in those in which it was more severe.
- These findings should not be taken to apply to families in which there is violence or abuse, however.

## LINKS TO CHILDREN'S LONG-TERM PHYSICAL HEALTH

*Risky Families.* The divorce literature has long documented the heightened risk of mental health problems for children traceable to the disrupted parent-child relationships and parent conflict that so often accompany divorce. The recent physical health literature that focuses on “risky families” is relevant to divorce research because it indicates profound effects on children’s long-term, stress-related physical health attributable to these same family factors. It also gives us insight into the underlying physiological mechanisms that are triggered by these factors. The physical health findings have yet to make their way prominently into the divorce literature, and appear to be less well-known to courts and policy makers.

Rena Repetti, Shelley E. Taylor, and Teresa E. Seeman of the University of California, Los Angeles, published the first review of the large physical health literature as it relates to family relationships in 2004 in the prestigious journal, *Psychological Bulletin*. They concluded that dysfunctional family relationships “lead to consequent accumulating risk for *mental health disorders, major chronic diseases, and early mortality*” (p. 330, emphasis added). They reviewed 15 large, longitudinal physical health studies began decades ago, and which fortunately often included a few questions about family relationships in addition to the more numerous questions about diet, alcohol, exercise, smoking, etc. Findings consistently point to adverse health consequences to children of families characterized not only by high parent conflict, but also by

cold, unsupportive parent-child relationships, the so-called “risky families.” The research suggested that conflict between the parents and poor parent-child relationships exert similar effects.

Longitudinal studies revealed that family conflict and aggression related to an increased risk of heart disease in boys, risk of cancer, minor infectious diseases, increased chance of obesity in adulthood, poorer metabolic control over diabetes, and overall lower self-reported health status. Cross-sectional studies showed links to poorer growth during infancy (Valenzuela, 1997), poorer general health (Gottman & Katz, 1989), and, among children with a diagnosed medical problem, less control over the severe symptoms of the disease (Gil et al., 1987; Martin, Miller-Johnson, Kitzmann, & Emery 1998).

Poor parent-child relationships were associated with higher rates of illness and physical complaints several years later (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, 1997; Wickrama, Lorenz, & Conger, 1997) and more serious medical conditions in midlife (Russek & Schwartz, 1997; Shaffer, Duszynski, & Thomas, 1982). For instance, Russek and Schwartz (1997) examined data from Harvard undergraduate men in the early 1950’s who were asked to describe their relationship with each parent. Their descriptions were coded as positive (“very close” “warm and friendly”) or negative (“tolerant” “strained and cold”). Twelve percent of relationships with mothers and 20% with fathers were coded negative. Thirty-five years later the researchers obtained health status based on in-person interviews and review of available medical records. Of the men who described a negative relationship with either their mother or their father, 85–91% had developed cardiovascular disease, duodenal ulcer, and/or alcoholism compared to only 45–50% of those who had described positive relationships. It is noteworthy that these studies began in the 1950’s and 1960’s when mothers were almost exclusive caregivers, so the fact that they

show that a poor relationship with either the mother or the father had similar effects indicates that the health risks associated with disrupted parent-child relationships are not limited to the primary caregiver

When assessments of parent-child relationships and parent conflict were made in the same study, researchers see similar effects associated with each. For example, Shaffer et al. (1982) examined data from White male physicians who graduated from medical school between 1948 and 1964 and described their family members' attitudes toward each other as either positive (warm, close, understanding, confiding) or negative (detached, dislike, hurt, high-tension). Men who described more negative and less positive family relationships were at increased risk of future cancer, even after controlling for health risk factors such as age, alcohol use, cigarette smoking, being overweight, and serum cholesterol levels.

To summarize:

- Families characterized by either parent conflict or poor parent-child relationships pose serious long-term health risks to children, including early mortality.
- These studies began in the 1950's and 1960's when mothers were almost exclusive caregivers, and they show that a poor relationship with either the mother or the father had similar effects, thus the findings are not limited to just the primary caregiver

*The Stress Response System as the Mechanism by Which Risky Families Can Damage Health.* Repetti, et al. (2002) found evidence that risky families affect children's physical health via cumulative disturbances established during infancy and early childhood in physiologic and neuroendocrine system regulation (i.e., disruptions in sympathetic-adrenomedullary (SAM) reactivity, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) reactivity, and serotonergic functioning). Such disruptions can have effects on organs, including the brain, and on systems,

including the immune system. The emerging consensus (Troxel & Matthews, 2004; Ripetti et al., 2004) is that the social processes of parent conflict and poor parent-child relationships cause constant stress in the home which chronically activates and thereby dysregulates children's biological stress responses, leading to deterioration of cardiovascular system functioning and hypertension (e.g., Ewart, 1991) and coronary heart disease (e.g., Woodall & Matthews, 1989), and possibly hindering children's acquisition of emotional competence and self-regulatory skills (e.g., Camras et al., 1988; Dunn & Brown, 1994; Dunn, Brown, Slomkowski, Tesla, & Youngblade, 1991).

Psychological processes add the cognitive and emotional dimensions to this dysregulation. In modern attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), poor parent-child relationships lead to feelings of insecurity, anger, distrust in continued parental support, and low self-worth, which can by themselves chronically activate and dysregulate children's biological stress responses. In Davies & Cummings' (1994) attachment-based theory, parent conflict similarly leads to emotional insecurity because the child fears abandonment by one or both fighting parents. We have represented this in Figure 1, where parent conflict is a parent behavior like parent-child interaction and responsiveness. Parent conflict can also lead parents to withdraw from the children and reduce their interaction and responsiveness (e.g., Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Weirson, 1990; Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984; Parke & Tinsley, 1981), and thus can also indirectly affect the child's felt security in the parent-child relationship, but for simplicity we have not included that more complex path in the model.

This emotional security mechanism is not an abstract concoction. It incorporates the "fight-or-flight" response system that we experience in acute form when our security is threatened, for example, by someone pulling a gun or by hearing footsteps behind in an empty

parking structure. One of the greatest advances in modern psychology has been to see how this system functions during the child's normal development in the family. The primary threats to safety and protection that the helpless human infant and young child's system is attuned to detect are parent absence, parent unresponsiveness, and parent conflict. In acute form, they elicit in children the same shortness of breath, increased blood pressure and heart rate, fear, etc. that we all experience when threatened, because they are caused by the instantaneous release of the same powerful hormones. Children in families characterized by dysfunctional parent conflict and unsupportive parent-child relationships experience these threats repeatedly and learn to anticipate them when they are absent. This exposes these children to chronic, low-level doses of these hormones, which is what causes the long-term health problems.

When we consider that almost 40% of the college students from divorced families that we recently surveyed had had minimal parenting time with their fathers, and then when we look at Figure 3 and see the destroyed relationships those who had minimal parenting time now have as young adults with their fathers, and when we link that with the lifetime health outcomes of young adults who had reported similarly distant relationships with their parents, we should be alarmed at the extent of the personal suffering -- and at the scope of the public health problem -- that they represent. When we look at Figure 3 and see that those who also experienced severe parent conflict have even worse relationships with their fathers, we should be even more concerned.

To summarize:

- Consistent with attachment theory, when parents are unavailable, unresponsive, or in conflict with each other, children perceive this as a threat to their continued support, which leads to chronic activation of the stress response system.



- Chronic activation can damage organs and systems.

*Mechanisms available to courts and policy makers to reduce health risks to children of divorce.* These findings indicate that high parent conflict and unsupportive relationships are formidable risks associated with a number of mental health problems and major illnesses later in life. The implication is that family courts and policy makers should give equal consideration to minimizing parent conflict and strengthening parent-child relationships because of their similar long-term health consequences. Many jurisdictions do have policies and interventions regarding reducing parent conflict and strengthening parent-child relationships by promoting positive parenting.

When dealing with the question of whether parenting time should be limited in high-conflict families, courts should consider the potential risk of damaging parent-child relationships by reducing parenting time. The evidence indicates that in divorced families with frequent and severe parent conflict more parenting time with the father is associated with an improvement in the father-child relationship. Limiting parenting time when there is parent conflict limits the amount of interaction children can have with that parent, which risks undermining the parent-child relationship and risks making those children doubly vulnerable to long-term damage to their physical health. Courts have better options to deal with children's exposure to parent conflict than reducing parenting time, such as schedules with fewer transitions, or transitions that do not require face-to-face parent interactions. The evidence suggests that parent conflict alone should not be the basis for limiting parenting time; rather, the data indicate that courts should weigh the option of increasing parenting time in high-conflict families. We are aware that this flies in the face of the accepted wisdom and practice of limiting parenting time in high-conflict families. But as we have discussed, the arguments for the accepted wisdom and practice are not

based on strong empirical evidence that increased parenting time is harmful to children in high conflict families. Our recommendation to consider increasing parenting time in high-conflict families is consistent with Repetti et al.'s (2004) conclusion that parent conflict and parent-child relationships can have independent effects on children's health. That means that parents in conflictual relationships are not necessarily also the ones who are cold and unsupportive with their children. That implies that parent-child relationships can be improved in high-conflict families. Direct evidence that improved parent-child relationships can counteract some harmful effects of parent conflict is available (Fainsilber- Katz & Gottman, 1997; Sandler, et al., 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998).

The allocation of parenting time is an important tool that courts and policy makers have to strengthen parent-child relationships in all families. Evidence and theory both suggest that the quantity of parenting time impacts the long-term quality of the father-child relationship via the increased parent-child interaction it allows. We argued that the evidence in Figure 2 makes a relatively strong argument that parenting time exerts a causal influence on parent-child relationships. That argument is also supported by the theoretical explanation of the causal influence provided by attachment theory. We have been especially impressed by how important parent-child interaction is to adolescents, as indicated by the central role it plays in their representations of their relationships with their parents. They closely monitor the amount of interaction they have with each of their parents, and evaluate whether it is personally sufficient. Attachment theory identifies parent availability as one of the potential threats that the child's emotional security system is designed to monitor. Time spent interacting is one way that emotionally close and supportive relationships develop, and time lost risks exposing children to chronic stress and disrupted parent relationships, even in adolescence (e.g., Aquilino, 2006).

Courts and policy makers may be reluctant to consider the allocation of parenting time as a tool to strengthen parent-child relationships because they often receive the following expert advice or testimony: (a) Quality is more important than quantity of parenting time, and (b) Policies that might encourage any particular level of parenting time should be avoided because we do not know what level of parenting time is best for any individual family. We have already discussed the reasons why (a) is an unfair comparison. Here we would like to offer an analogy: Level of education affects the types of jobs people get, which in turn affects their lifetime earnings, but economists do not frame the question as, “Which is more important for determining lifetime earnings, level of education or type of job?” Education has an indirect effect, so this either/or question is not useful. The correlation between job type and earnings will be stronger than the correlation between education level and earnings, but that would not prompt economists to advocate for less attention being given to education.

To carry the analogy further, society takes it for granted that we do not know what level of education is best for any individual, and that we cannot prescribe the same level of education for everyone. But society nevertheless endorses policies that inform people of the importance of education for lifetime earning potential, that make education available to all who want it, and that encourage education even to the extent of prescribing a minimum level for all children. Similarly, courts and policy makers cannot know what level of parent conflict, or what level of security of parent-child relationships are acceptable for any family. They nevertheless institute policies that encourage parents to reduce conflict and strengthen relationships. Courts and policy makers could likewise institute policies that encourage parents to maximize parenting time for both parents within the constraints of individual families’ situations

The strong connection between parenting time and father-child relationships in divorced families with both low and high levels of parent conflict, and the evidence and theoretical understanding that have built over decades about how unsupportive parent-child relationships impair long-term health means that the lingering situation of minimal parenting time for great numbers of children is a public health issue that demands the attention of researchers, policy-makers, and individual courts. Much research (reviewed in Fabricius, et al., 2010) shows that children and divorced fathers generally want more parenting time. We do not see a compelling reason to doubt that absent any unusual circumstances, granting and encouraging more parenting time, especially in high-conflict families, will be a good thing for children.

#### GUIDELINES: CONSIDERATIONS AND CAUTIONS

- Courts and policy makers should give equal consideration to minimizing parent conflict and strengthening parent-child relationships because of their similar long-term health consequences for children.
- Courts have better options to deal with children's exposure to parent conflict than reducing parenting time because that might risk damaging the parent-child relationship; better options include schedules with fewer transitions, or transitions that do not require face-to-face parent interactions.
- Evidence and theory both suggest that quantity of parenting time impacts the child's long-term security in the father-child relationship, which makes it another important tool courts have to strengthen parent-child relationships.
- Courts and policy makers should institute policies that encourage parents to maximize parenting time for both parents within the constraints of individual families' situations.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79); National Survey of America's Families (NSAF); National Survey of Families and Households 1987 (NSFH87) and 1992 (NSFH92; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call; 1988).

<sup>2</sup> National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health 1995-1996 (ADD HEALTH 95; Harris, et al. 2003); National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97); Britain's Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children 1991 (ALSPAC91; Golding, 1996), Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth 1994–1995 (NLSCY94; Juby, Billette, Laplante, & Le Bourdais, 2007); Wisconsin Child Support Demonstration Evaluation – Mother Survey, late 1990's (WCSDE).

<sup>3</sup> “Six questions were asked of parents who reported that a set pattern of face-to-face contact was occurring: Is your contact arrangement based on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly schedule? Each [week/fortnight/month], how many blocks of contact usually occur? Thinking about [each] block of contact: What day of the week does contact usually start? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually begin? What day of the week does contact usually end? What time on [day of the week] does the contact visit usually end?” (Smyth. 2004; p. 36)

<sup>4</sup> “Considering the most typical living arrangement you had after the divorce, what was (a) the number of days you spent any time at all with your father in an average 2-week period during the school year [0 to 14]? (b) the number of overnights (i.e., sleepovers) you spent with your father in an average 2-week period during the school year [0 to 14]? (c) the number of school vacation weeks out of 15 (Christmas = 2 weeks, spring = 1 week, summer = 12 weeks)

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during which your time with your father was different from what it was during the school year [0 to 15]? And (d) the percentage of time you spent with your father during those vacation weeks above that were different from the regular schedule [0% to 100% in 10% increments]?”

<sup>5</sup> Because of the complexity of the issue and because of space limitations, we are not including here conflict that reaches the level of physical violence. Lamb & Kelly (2009) have a good discussion of this, and reference the quickly changing consensus view observed by Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala (2008) and Kelly and Johnson (2008) that types and duration of the physical violence must be distinguished.

Table 1

Constructs, Items, and Source of Data in Four Studies of High-Quality Father Involvement and How the Items Map Onto the Constructs in Our Model in Figure 1

Study, construct and items	Data set	PT	IN	RE	ES
Sobolewski & King (2005)	NSFH92				
<i>Father-child relationship quality</i>					
Likely you would talk to father				x	
Admire father					x
Overall relationship					x
Father praised or complained					x
<i>Responsive fathering</i>					
Father explains reasons				x	
Father talks over decisions				x	
Father changed mind because of child's ideas				x	
Dunn et al (2004)	ALSPAC91				
<i>Child-father positivity</i>					
Enjoyment of father					x
Warmth in relationship					x
Confiding				x	
Time spent together			x		
<i>Child-father conflict</i>					
Level of punishment					x
Levels of parent and child upset					x
Frequency of disagreement					x
Hawkins, Amato, King (2007)	ADD HEALTH 95				
<i>Active fathering</i>					
Frequency of Contact		x			
Shared activities			x		
Communication				x	
Emotional closeness					x
Stewart (2003)	ADD HEALTH 95				
<i>Relationship quality</i>					
Went shopping together			x		
Played a sport together			x		
Went to movie, play, museum, concert, sports event			x		
<i>Authoritative parenting</i>					
Worked together on school project			x		
Talked about import personal or school issues				x	
<i>Closeness to father</i>					
How close do you feel to father					x

PT = Parenting Time; IN = Interaction; RE = Responsiveness; ES = Emotional Security with Father

Table 2

## Studies of Associations between Father–Child Contact and Father–Child Relationships

Study	Measures	Findings
Buchanan et al. (1996)	Amount of parenting time including number of overnights	Adolescents with 2 or more overnights per week had better relationships with both parents than those in sole residence; those in sole mother residence had better relationships with father if they had some parenting with him
Dunn, et al. (2004); King (2006); Sobolewski & King (2005); King & Sobolewski (2006); Aquilino (2006)	Frequency of father-child contact	Strong associations between frequency of contact and higher father–child relationship quality
Peters & Ehrenberg (2008)	Amount of parenting time	Young adults who had more parenting time experienced higher levels of affective, nurturing fathering, which was likely an indication of father–adolescent closeness.
Fabricius (2003); Fabricius & Luecken (2007); Luecken & Fabricius (2003)	Amount of parenting time	College students who had more parenting time had better relationships with fathers
Struss, Pfeiffer, Preuss, & Felder (2001)	Quantity of father-child interaction during parenting time	More father-child interaction predicted adolescents' positive feelings about visiting
Clarke-Stewart & Hayward (1996)	Quantity of father-child interaction during parenting time; frequency and length of visits	Quantity of interaction, as well as frequency and length of visits, were related to the father–child relationship
Whiteside & Becker (2000)	Meta-analysis of studies of frequency of father-child contact	More frequent contact related to better father-child relationships



Table 3

## Public Opinion Polls about Equal Parenting Time

Reference	Participants	Questions	Responses
Fabricius & Hall (2000)	AZ college students	What is the best living arrangement?	70% to 80% said “equal time with both parents; no difference due to gender or whether their parents were divorced.
Massachusetts ballot 2006	Voting citizens	Should there be a presumption for joint physical custody?	86% said yes.
Braver, Ellman, Votruba & Fabricius (in press)	Tucson AZ jury Pools	Repeated wording of the MA ballot question  Scenarios in which participants were asked to award parenting time.	90% said yes; no differences due to any demographic variables  Participants most commonly awarded equal parenting time even when one parent had provided most child care and when there was high mutual parent conflict; when one parent instigated the conflict they awarded more time to the other.
Canadian National Poll <a href="http://www.nanosresearch.com">www.nanosresearch.com</a>	Random Telephone Survey of 1,002 Canadians from March 13th to March 18th, 2009	Do you support legislation to create a presumption of equal parenting in child custody cases?	78% said yes

Figure 1.

Conceptual Model Relating Parenting Time to Parent Behaviors,  
Children's Emotional Security with Father, and Children's Health Outcomes

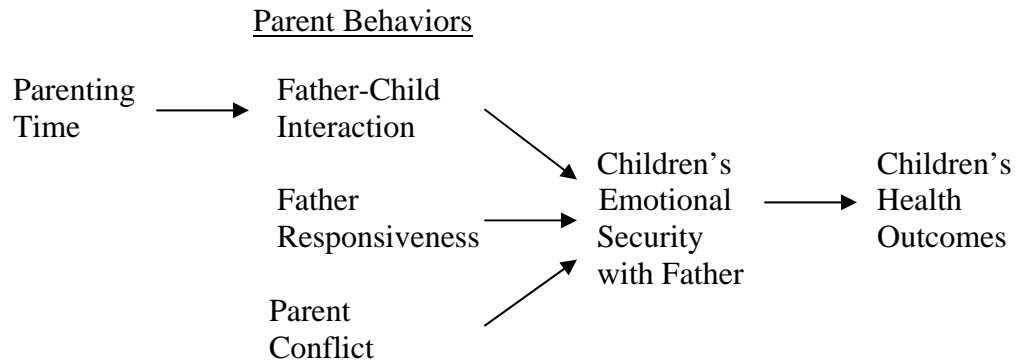


Figure 2.

The relation between the amount of parenting time per month (4 weeks) students had with their fathers and the emotional security of their current relationships with their fathers.

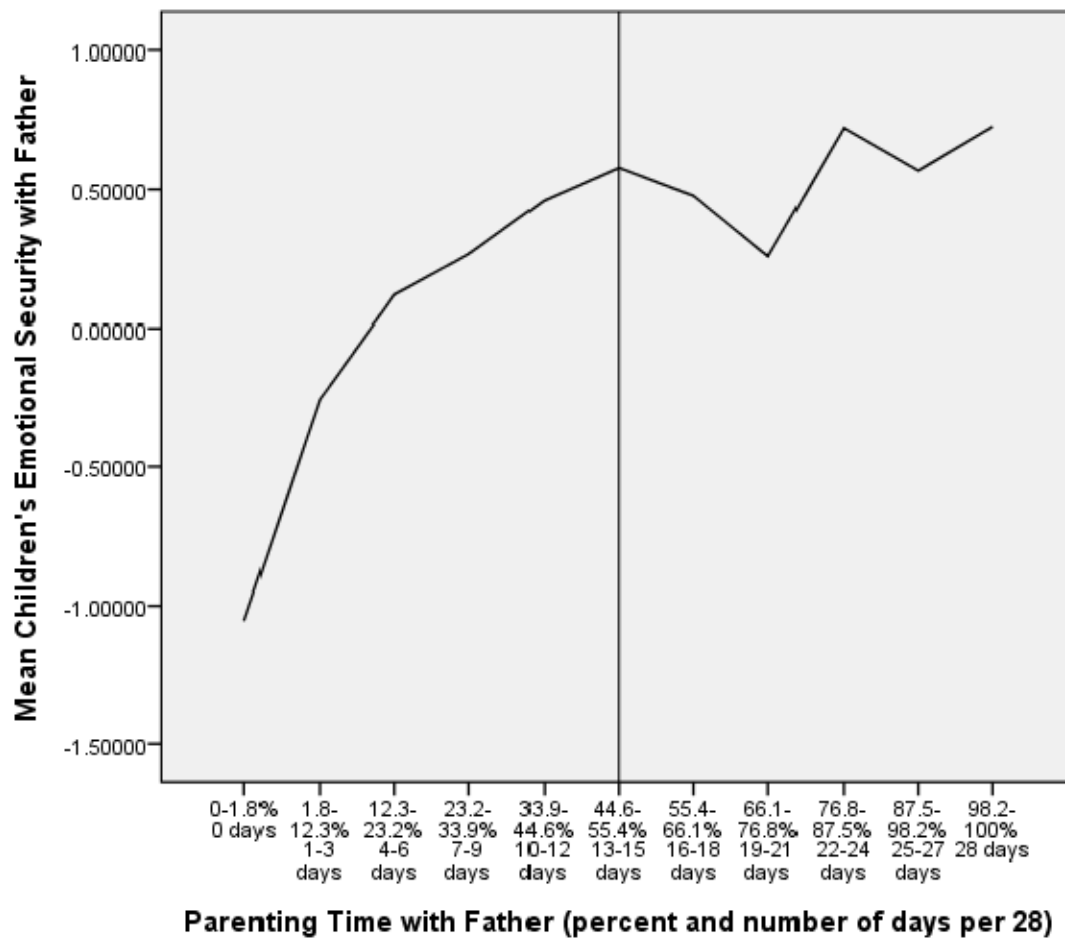




Figure 3.

The relation between the amount of parenting time per month (4 weeks) students had with their fathers and the emotional security of their current relationships with their fathers for those reporting high versus low severity of parent conflict

