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Co-Parenting for Young Children: The Benefits of Overnights in Each Parent's Home

by Donald Gordon, PhD.

A subject of debate and contention in many co-parenting negotiations centers on the subject of “overnights for young children.” Many people believe that young children should not be separated from their mothers overnight. The most current research on the subject does not support such a belief. **The first few years of a child's life are especially important for establishing a secure bond between parent and child. Divorce can easily disrupt this bond and can pose serious long term risks for the child.**

A recent study authored by Richard A. Warshak PhD. at the University of Texas Southwest Medical Center has taken a very comprehensive view of this issue. While the study focuses on the importance of a balanced approach to co-parenting, I found a compelling and practical statement about the benefits of allowing “overnights” with the father. *“Consider the logistics of loading a baby and necessary paraphernalia in a car, driving to the father's residence, unloading the car, feeding the child, and helping the child become accustomed to the surroundings. If the child has to be returned within 2 hours of being picked up by the father, this leaves little time for relaxed interaction. Overnights help to reduce the tension associated with rushing to return the child, and thus potentially improve the quality and satisfaction of the contact both for the parent and child. Overnights allow the child to settle in to the father's home, which would be more familiar to the child who regularly spends the night in the home compared with one who has only short segments in the home (allowing for transportation and preparation for the return trip). The physical spaces in which father-child interactions take place influence the nature and types of interaction, and affect the father's identity as a parent (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). Spending the night allows the father to participate in a wider range of bonding activities, such as engaging in bedtime rituals and comforting the child in the event of nighttime awakenings. An additional advantage of overnights is that in the morning the father can often return the child directly to the daycare; this avoids exposing the child to tensions associated with the parents' direct contact with each other.”*

Of course, circumstances might not always allow this to be a practical solution. However, too often a rigid approach to allowing a young child or infant to stay overnight with the father can hinder the father-child bond from developing. That increases the chances dad will drop out of his child's life and bring a host of potential bad outcomes for the child. These can include behavioral and emotional disorders (depression, anxiety, aggression), school failure, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and suicide. As much as a stressed mom may want dad out of her and her child's lives during the trauma of divorce, having a trusted co-partner to share the ups and downs of raising the child is of great benefit to all.

Social science and parenting plans for young children: A consensus report.
Warshak, Richard A., Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, Vol 20(1), Feb 2014, 46-67.

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