

# EQUAL SPLIT

For More Divorced Moms And Dads, Parenting Remains A Joint Venture || BY CHERYL KANE HEIMLICH

**F**or children of divorce who grew up in the 1970s and '80s, here's what life in a broken home typically looked like: Weekdays were spent with Stay-at-Home-Mom, who handled all school matters, doctors' appointments, cooking, shopping and laundry. Weekends—or every other weekend—were spent with Breadwinner Dad, who paid for child support but otherwise generally kept his nose out of such mundane day-to-day affairs.

These days, a growing number of divorced homes look like this: Breadwinner Mom and Co-Breadwinner Dad live close to each other and their kids' school. They abide by a shared custody agreement that's as close to 50/50 as possible. And dad is just as

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involved as mom in those mundane day-to-day affairs.

Nick Kanelidis, a family law attorney in Fort Lauderdale, says the change is obvious even from the legal language that describes such arrangements. “They don't even call it ‘custody’ anymore,” he says. “That word has been changed to ‘parental responsibility’ or ‘parenting plan.’ It's shared parenting.”

This issue looms particularly large in Florida, which year after year manages to land among the nation's Top 10 states for divorce rates. And with so many of today's parents having grown up in broken homes, they understand how difficult a split can be for their kids.

“I think most people start with the idea that if they're facing divorce themselves, then they want it to be

a more peaceful situation,” says Lori Barkus, a Weston-based family law attorney and mediator. “In my mediations a lot of people say, ‘We don't want to be what our parents were. We don't want the bitter divorce.’”

Although women have been in the workforce for decades, Barkus says, it's only in recent years that divorce courts have moved away from the old model of assigning “primary residence” status

to the mom and “visitation” to the dad.

“I think fathers are taking a more active role, in part because more women are working, but also because more fathers want to spend more time with their children—picking them up from school, coaching, etc.,” Barkus says. “A lot of people grew up with the ‘weekend dad’ visitation schedule and feel they were negatively impacted by that. I've seen a lot of mothers say, ‘I





don't want dad to be just a visitor of the children, or for them to just see dad every other weekend.”

And even if they did want that, judges these days would be unlikely to let it happen.

“We’re seeing more joint 50/50 custody in the last couple of years, and the judges here in South Florida are now encouraging more involvement, more equal parenting, more time-sharing,” Barkus says. “They will tell the parents to try to figure out a schedule that will work; otherwise the judge will impose a schedule for them.”

Barkus says there are two schedules that seem to work for most divorced parents. The first is “one-week-off, one-week-on,” where kids live with each parent for seven days at a time and then switch.

But a week can be a long time for a child to go without seeing mom or dad, “so sometimes if the

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kids are younger, the parents will agree to one night during the week for the non-time-sharing parent to have dinner and see them,” she says. “They call it Date Night.”

The second schedule is known as “5-2-5,” where school nights are divided between the parents. Kids might spend Monday and Tuesday night with mom, for example, then Wednesday and Thursday night with dad. On weekends, they alternate between the homes.

“The goal is to ease the number of changes,” Barkus says. “You don’t want to have an every-other-day schedule. Kids need predictability, stability, something they can follow.”

Shared parenting goes more smoothly, experts say, if mom and dad are both willing to outfit their homes

with identical sets of items like textbooks, bedding and favorite stuffed animals. That way the kids feel at home without having to lug their belongings back and forth all the time.

“Occasionally you do get cases where the child does feel like a ping-pong ball, constantly in the car going back and forth,” Kanelidis says. “But where it used to be thought that a child had to return to a certain home every night... now the science and experts are saying (that what’s most important) is that a child needs to see both parents. It’s a changing of thinking and a changing of laws that’s happened over time.”

Molly Olson, a national activist for shared parenting, has spent years collecting research for the two

advocacy groups that she runs from her home in St. Paul, Minn.

“There’s a mythical assumption that kids can’t handle going back and forth,” Olson says. “But the truth is they would much rather go back and forth while seeing both parents than (to stay in one place) and have restricted access to one parent.”

One of the best-known reports on this topic is a study by psychologist Robert Bauserman, published by the American Psychological Association. After compiling data from 33 studies of sole-custody and joint-custody children over a 17-year period, Bauserman found that children in joint-custody arrangements had fewer behavior and emotional problems, higher self-esteem, and better family relations and school performance than children in sole-custody arrangements.

Bauserman’s report also noted that “joint custody couples reported less conflict, possibly because both parents could participate in their children’s lives equally and not spend

the time arguing over childcare decisions. Unfortunately, a perception exists that joint custody is more harmful because it exposes children to ongoing parental conflict. In fact, the studies in this review found that sole-custody parents reported higher levels of conflict.”

It’s studies like this, as well as anecdotal evidence from people who have suffered through divorce, that have led to what Barkus calls “a large national movement” to make shared custody the preferred arrangement in all 50 states.

“We’re not fighting for a mandate for all parents,” says Olson, who notes that there are always exceptional cases where joint custody would not be healthy for the child. “We’re just saying that if there is a fit, loving and responsible parent who is ready, willing and able to step up to the plate, then that parent shouldn’t be denied the opportunity to share equally in the responsibility of parenting their children.” ○