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## Does Shared Parenting Help or Hurt Children in High Conflict Divorced Families?

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### Abstract

Despite a recent shift in the allocation of parenting time arrangements following divorce, there is no clear consensus regarding the effects of shared parenting on children's adjustment in high conflict families. We propose key questions and methodological options to increase the ability of results from well-designed empirical studies to inform practice and policy. We review eleven studies of the relations between parenting time and quality of parenting with children's adjustment in high conflict divorced families. Despite heterogeneity of the methods used across the studies some tentative conclusions can be made based on findings across multiple studies. Higher levels of shared parenting were related to poorer child adjustment in samples with high conflict many years following the divorce, but typically not in samples that assessed conflict during the divorcing process or in the two or three years following the divorce. There is also evidence that the effects of shared parenting on child adjustment in the presence of high conflict differs by gender, and that high quality of parenting by at least one parent is associated with better child adjustment in high conflict divorces. Implications for policy and practice are discussed as well as directions for research to strengthen the knowledge base to inform policy.

### Keywords

Interparental Conflict; Parenting Time; Parenting Quality; Fathers; Youth Adjustment; Shared Parenting

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Over the past several decades, there has been a significant shift in the allocation of parenting time following divorce, such that fathers are receiving more parenting time than ever before (Meyer, Cancian, & Cook, 2017). Reasons for this cultural shift in parenting time include increases in women's participation in the workforce, legislation encouraging shared

parenting arrangements, changing attitudes about the benefits of father involvement in children's upbringing (Lamb, 2012) and changes in what is considered a fair distribution of parenting time following divorce (Braver, Ellman, Votruba & Fabricius, 2011). As shared parenting arrangements have become more widely accepted, changes in court practices have followed, either by holding a presumption for shared parenting (Fabricius, Aarons, Akins & Assini, 2017) or by imposing shared parenting on families that cannot reach a voluntary agreement on a parenting plan (Smart, 2004). Although there is broad agreement that shared parenting is *generally* associated with better child adjustment following divorce (Braver, 2017), there is disagreement about whether this generalization holds under conditions of high interparental conflict (Nielsen, 2017; Smyth, McIntosh, Emery, & Howarth, 2016).

Over the past two decades, three groups have made recommendations related to shared parenting, including optimal parenting arrangements in the context of high interparental conflict. In 1997, a group sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997) emphasized the importance of both parents staying involved following separation or divorce and recognized the need to protect children from an ongoing pattern of violence between parents but did not provide special recommendations for parenting arrangements when high levels of non-violent conflict were present. In 2013, a group sponsored by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts advocated for a balance of the needs to maintain family relationships following divorce and protect children from exposure to high levels of interparental conflict (Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014). This group of judges, lawyers, mental health professionals, and social scientists proposed that decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis for families with high levels of conflict. Their report cautioned against using research findings uniformly, particularly in high conflict cases, and instead advocated that research should inform lines of inquiry and variables to consider when assessing families during custody evaluations. They reached no consensus on shared parenting for young children. A third group reached consensus that shared parenting was appropriate for families with young children (Warshak, 2014, with 110 endorsements from researchers and practitioners). The report considered the special case of high conflict families (i.e., families who litigate custody or show conflict in their interactions) and supported the consideration of shared parenting arrangements even in families with high levels of interparental conflict<sup>1</sup>. This group suggested that courts heavily weigh their assessment of the quality of parenting in both parents and consider ways to improve transitions between parents and reduce conflict, rather than dismiss the option of shared parenting arrangements in cases of high interparental conflict.

Despite the considerable attention that the issue has received, there continues to be conflicting recommendations from prominent social scientists about whether shared parenting is likely to be in the best interest of children in divorced families when there is a high level of interparental conflict (Nielsen, 2017; Smyth et al., 2016). Further, it remains unclear how much quality of parenting should be considered. Many have argued that it is important to consider quality of parenting when deciding on parenting time arrangements in

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<sup>1</sup>The report specifically exempted families with a history of violence or child abuse from its recommendations.

high conflict divorces because quality of parenting is more strongly associated with child adjustment than parenting time per se (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013).

## Critical Questions for the Scientific Community

For the scientific community to better inform policy recommendations for parenting time in families with high interparental conflict, there are three critical questions that need to be addressed:

1. Is shared parenting time associated with better child adjustment when there are high levels of interparental conflict?
2. Is the quality of mothers' and fathers' parenting associated with better child adjustment when there is high interparental conflict?
3. Do shared parenting time and quality of parenting interact to influence child adjustment in high conflict families?

Before reviewing the studies that have addressed these questions we will discuss how interparental conflict, parenting quality, and parenting time have been defined and measured in the literature.

## Defining and Measuring Interparental Conflict (IPC).

IPC following divorce has been defined broadly in the literature to include a wide range of factors including anger, unresolved grief, hostile contempt, uncooperative co-parenting, verbal and physical fighting, and legal conflict between the parents (Nielsen, 2017; Smyth et al., 2016). Previous research and large-scale meta-analyses have documented the negative impact of IPC on a wide range of youth adjustment outcomes including internalizing and externalizing problems, self-esteem, and relationship problems (Rhoades, 2008). However, the measures of IPC used in the literature differ in their association with child adjustment. For example, Goodman and colleagues found only modest relations among mothers' and fathers' ratings of IPC, "incompetent parenting" by the other parent, and legal conflict (range of  $r = .24 - .39$ ), and reported that only the measure of mother and father IPC was related to child mental health problems (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004).

Several factors are important to consider when assessing IPC. First, conflict should be distinguished from domestic violence, which refers to severe emotional and physical abuse that occurs between parents. This distinction has been noted by reviews of the literature on factors that may influence decisions about parenting time arrangements following divorce (Lamb et al., 1997; Warshak, 2013). Second, it is important to distinguish between high IPC that occurs immediately following separation and during the custody deliberations but declines over time (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) and conflict that persists years later. Third, the intensity of IPC can range from verbal disagreements to verbal abuse. Fourth, the IPC may or may not involve, or occur in front of, the children. And fifth, reporter effects are important to consider. Children's exposure to IPC may be best assessed by child report rather than parent report (Davern, Staiger, & Luk, 2005).

### **Defining and Measuring Quality of Parenting.**

Parenting quality is a broad term that has been applied to several constructs including the quality of the parent-child relationship (e.g., warmth, communication, support, encouragement, closeness), parental involvement in children's activities, and use of effective discipline (e.g., consistency, appropriate consequences, effective monitoring). The combination of a warm parent-child relationship and use of appropriate discipline has been consistently linked with positive child adjustment following divorce (Adamson & Johnson, 2013; Sandler, Wolchik, Winslow, Mahrer, Moran, & Weinstock, 2012). Reliable and valid measures of the quality of parenting by mother and father have been developed, although sometimes different measures are used for fathers because children have historically lived primarily with their mothers after divorce. For example, many studies use fathers' parenting time and involvement in their children's activities as proxy measures for quality of parenting (see Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012 for review). In contrast, mother's quality of parenting tends to be assessed more directly with measures asking about specific aspects of parenting such as warmth, communication and discipline style.

### **Defining and Measuring Parenting Time.**

Shared parenting is typically defined as living with each parent a minimum of 30% of the time and has been measured by some researchers as a dichotomous variable of "shared" physical residential parenting versus "sole" or "primary" residential parenting. Other researchers report parenting time as a continuous variable, by measuring the number of overnights, or the typical number of days and nights children spend with each parent (Fabricius et al., 2012).

### **Theories concerning the effects of parenting time and quality of parenting in high conflict divorced families.**

There are competing theories regarding how contact with the parent who has less parenting time predicts child adjustment in high conflict divorces. Because this parent is usually the father, we will refer to this parent as the father in this paper. The "conflict hypothesis" posits that there is an interaction between conflict and parenting time, such that greater amounts of father parenting time is beneficial when conflict is low, but harmful when conflict is high. The theory holds that in high conflict families, more time with father creates more opportunities for children to be exposed to IPC (e.g., Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989) and thus have more adjustment problems (see Nielsen, 2017 for review of evidence concerning this theory). A competing theory posits that in high conflict as well as low conflict divorces more time with the father should predict better child adjustment because it increases the potential benefit of the support the father provides (Fabricius et al., 2012; Lamb, 2012). We refer to this as the "benefits hypothesis." A further variant of the benefits hypothesis is that, in order to understand the relation between parenting time and child adjustment, the quality of parenting needs to be considered, such that children in high conflict families benefit from shared parenting only when children receive high quality parenting (Lamb, 2012; Sandler, Wheeler, & Braver, 2013).

### Research designs to test the various theories.

Several analytic approaches have been used to test the question of whether the benefits of time or quality of parenting persist even when there is a high level of conflict between the parents following the divorce. One approach compares the relations between parenting time (or parenting quality) of the father and child adjustment, taking into account (or statistically controlling for) the level of IPC. Studies using this approach generally find better adjustment outcomes (mental health and academic) in children with shared parenting or more time with the father (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; see Nielsen, 2017 for review). These findings indicate that children benefit from more time with their fathers, even when accounting for the negative effects of IPC. A second approach compares the effect of IPC on child adjustment with the effects of father parenting time or quality of father parenting on child adjustment to determine whether conflict has a stronger negative effect on child adjustment compared to the positive effect of parenting time and/or quality of parenting. Some studies have found that parenting quality is a stronger predictor of positive child adjustment relative to IPC (e.g., Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990). However, neither of these approaches directly addresses the question of how parenting time or quality of parenting is positively or negatively related to child adjustment when there is high IPC.

We propose that researchers design studies that consider the two-way interaction between IPC and parenting time or quality of parenting in predicting child adjustment. This would help to determine whether more father parenting time or a high-quality relationship with the father is likely to help or hurt child adjustment in families with high IPC. A positive relation between father parenting time and child adjustment problems under conditions of high conflict would support the conflict hypothesis. A negative relation would support the benefit hypothesis. In high conflict samples (e.g., families court ordered to high conflict classes), a test of the simple effects of parenting time on child outcomes would be sufficient to test the conflict and benefit hypotheses. These interaction models could also answer more complicated, and as yet unanswered questions. For example, does the effect of father parenting time on child adjustment in high conflict families depend on the quality of his parenting? That is, shared parenting time may be related to better child adjustment for high conflict families when there is high quality parenting, but not when there is low quality parenting. These models can be tested as triple interaction effects, between IPC, parenting time, and parenting quality, although adequate power to detect complex interactive effects requires large sample sizes.

Another approach is to assess the levels of child adjustment problems in families that are characterized by different combinations of parenting time, quality and IPC. An advantage of this approach is that it starts by identifying the different patterns (or profiles) of parenting time, quality and IPC that best characterize the sample being studied and the percentage of families that represent each pattern. For example, although it may be of theoretical interest to understand children's adjustment in families characterized by high father parenting time, low quality parenting, and high IPC, the policy implications of that pattern would differ greatly depending on what percent of families are characterized as having that pattern. A limitation of this approach is that the profiles of most interest to policy makers (e.g., high

conflict, shared parenting, high quality of parenting) may not be the ones that best characterize the samples that are studied. Common examples of this approach are latent profile analysis (LPA) and latent class analyses (LCA), both of which allow for inclusion of many variables in the model and create profiles based on common patterns among the participants.

### **Current empirical evidence of the joint effects of IPC, parenting time, and parenting quality on child adjustment.**

We have found eleven studies that examined the joint relations between parenting time, parenting quality, and IPC and child adjustment following divorce using the analytic approaches described above (See appendix available online for a table expanding on the details of these studies). We discuss findings from these studies to systematically address the joint effects of conflict, parenting time, and parenting quality on children's post-divorce adjustment. We first report findings from all studies that report on the associations of parenting time with child adjustment under conditions of high conflict. We then report findings from studies that report on the associations between parenting quality and child adjustment under conditions of high conflict. Finally, we report on studies that report on the joint effects of parenting time and quality under conditions of high conflict.

#### **Question 1: IPC and Parenting Time.**

Seven studies analyzed the interactions between father parenting time and IPC in regard to children's adjustment. Significant conflict x parenting time interactions were found in four of the seven studies. In three of these studies, the interaction between parenting time and conflict differed by gender of the child (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston, Kline, and Tschann, 1989; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). Three other studies did not find a significant interaction between conflict and parenting time (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Gunnoe & Braver, 2001; Kaspiw, Gray, Weston, Moloney, Hand, & Qu, 2009).

Vanassche and colleagues studied mother/father parenting time and IPC in a large representative sample of adolescents of divorced families in Belgium (mean time since divorce = 7.8 years) (Vanassche et al., 2013). The children in the "joint custody" families were living at least one third of the time with each parent versus those in "primary maternal custody" who lived more than two thirds of the time with the mother<sup>2</sup>. When girls reported high levels of IPC, those in joint custody had significantly higher feelings of depression and marginally lower life satisfaction than girls in primary maternal custody. There was no similar interaction for boys.

A second study also found differences between boys' and girls' outcomes when considering the interaction between IPC and father parenting time (Amato & Rezac, 1994). There were 725 children between the ages of 5 and 18 in the subsample with divorced parents. "Contact" was broadly defined as anything from phone calls and letters to spending in-

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<sup>2</sup>The authors also studied sole custody vs. all other parenting time. We are not including those analyses in this paper because they do not study the minimum criteria for shared parenting.

person time with the father. In the high conflict families, boys who had the most contact with their fathers had more behavioral problems than boys who had less father contact. Boys had the fewest behavioral problems when father contact was high and parent conflict was low. There was no significant father contact x conflict effect for the girls.

The third study finding differences between boys and girls was conducted roughly four and a half years after the parents' separation (Johnston et al., 1989). In this study of 100 children ages 1 to 12, all of the parents were considered "high" conflict because they had been court referred for counseling or mediation services. Children who were in the clinically disturbed range using the Total Behavior Problem Score clinical criterion (above the 90%, Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) had higher levels of access to the less seen parent. Also, more transitions between parents was associated with clinically disturbed levels of social competence (lower 10%). Probing indicated a gender difference in the relations between contact and children's behavior problems. For boys (but not girls), more access to the less seen parent was associated with lower social competence. For girls (but not boys), greater access to the less seen parent was related to higher behavior problems.

Healy, Malley, and Stewart's study (1990) studied 121 recently separated families (children ages 6 – 12) with primary maternal custody immediately following the divorce and again one year later. There was a significant interaction between "legal" conflict and father parenting time (i.e., visitation regularity and frequency) in predicting mothers' reports of children's behavior problems and children's reports of self-esteem measured concurrently. Regular and frequent visits with the father were related to fewer behavior problems for children in families with high legal conflict. When predicting self-esteem, higher regularity of visits was associated with lower self-esteem when legal conflict was high, but with higher self-esteem when legal conflict was low.<sup>3</sup> In their prospective longitudinal analysis the interaction effects between conflict and father visitation frequency and regularity were not significant in predicting children's self-esteem or behavior problems on year later.

Three studies did not find significant interactions effects between IPC and parenting time in predicting child adjustment. Fabricius and Luecken (2007), in a retrospective longitudinal study of 266 college students with a wide range of time since divorce found that more father parenting time was associated with less feelings of distress surrounding the divorce and more IPC was associated with more feelings of distress. The effects of father parenting time and IPC did not depend on levels of the other factor. Gunnoe and Braver (2001) studied 78 parents of younger children (mean age of approximately 8 years) two years after divorce. They found that children with joint legal custody arrangements had fewer impulsive behavior problems than children with sole maternal custody. This positive effect of father parenting time was not dependent on pre-decree level of IPC. Kaspiew and colleagues (2009) explored the interaction between IPC and parenting time on child adjustment using data from the Longitudinal Study of Separated Families, a large national sample from Australia of 10,000 parents within 26 months of separation. Interparental relationship quality was defined as a categorical variable that delineated friendly/cooperative, distant, and

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<sup>3</sup>Although the authors did find gender x parenting time interactions in the overall sample they did not test whether these effects were present for the high conflict divorces.

conflictual/fearful parents; several care-time arrangements were examined, including father minority, shared care, mother minority, and no father contact. These researchers found no consistent pattern of significant interaction effects of interparental relationship x care arrangements in predicting child adjustment.

### **Question 2: IPC and Parenting Quality.**

To assess the interactions between conflict and parenting quality, Sandler and colleagues conducted a cross-sectional study with 182 recently divorced families with children between 5 and 12 years old who participated in the “Dads for Life” intervention study (Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008). The researchers defined parenting quality as the warmth of children’s self-reported relationship separately for mothers and fathers. There was no significant interaction between IPC and either mother warmth or father warmth in predicting children’s internalizing or externalizing problems. However, there was a significant three-way interaction in predicting children’s internalizing problems. When IPC was high, higher warmth from either the mother or father was associated with lower child internalizing problems when warmth from the other parent was low. Children had the highest levels of internalizing problems when both maternal warmth and paternal warmth were low.

Sandler, Wheeler, and Braver (2013) investigated the relations between quality of mother and father parenting and child mental health problems in a sample of 141 divorced and separating families who were court ordered to attend a class for families with high conflict. The average length of time since separation was five years. Consistent with the effect found by Sandler et al. (2008) for high conflict families, the quality of both father and mother relationships with the children predicted lower child mental health problems when quality of parenting by the other parent was either moderate or low, but not when parenting quality of the other parent was high.

Examining the interaction between father parenting quality (i.e., children’s report of closeness) and legal conflict, Healy et al. (1990) found that closeness with the father was not related to child problems when legal conflict was high, but was related to lower child problems when legal conflict was low. This study only assessed the quality of relationship with the father, so they were not able to test whether this effect was further moderated by quality of relationship with the mother.

### **Question 3: IPC, Parenting Quality, and Parenting Time.**

Sandler and colleagues (2013) examined the interaction between father parenting time (i.e., overnights) and parenting quality in predicting child mental health problems in a sample of high conflict divorces. They found a significant interaction between number of overnights and quality of parenting in predicting children’s mental health problems, such that higher quality of parenting was only related to lower problems when there was a higher level of time with the child (approximately 30% time). This effect was found for both mother and father parenting time.

In two longitudinal studies, Sandler and colleagues examined the interactions between parental conflict, father parenting time, quality of the father-child relationship and young adults’ adjustment across a period of 17 years after the parents’ divorce in a sample of 240



families who participated in an intervention for divorced mothers, (Elam, Sandler, Wolchik & Tein, 2016; Modecki, Hagan, Sandler, and Wolchik, 2014). In these studies, contact with the father included the father writing to or phoning the children, in addition to spending time together in-person. Parents in these studies divorced in the early 1990's when father's typical parenting time after divorce was much lower than in more recent studies. Modecki, Hagan, Sandler, and Wolchik (2014) examined how patterns of IPC, father's parenting quality (i.e., psychosocial support), and father's parenting time (i.e., contact) 6 – 8 years after the divorce (when youth were 15-18 years old), predicted adjustment nine years later (15 - 17 years after the divorce, when youth were 24-27 years old). The authors found three distinct profiles of families: 1) moderate contact, moderate support, and low IPC; 2) low contact, low support, and moderate IPC; and 3) high contact, high support, and high IPC. Young adults whose fathers had moderate contact/moderate support and low IPC had significantly higher academic achievement and marginally lower externalizing problems compared to young adults whose fathers had either the highest or lowest levels of involvement and where there was higher IPC. However, there were no significant differences between the three profiles in how they predicted internalizing problems. These results were interpreted to demonstrate the benefit of a low level of conflict, regardless of the levels of contact or support.

Elam and colleagues (Elam, Sandler, Wolchik, & Tein, 2016) conducted a similar analysis with the same sample of 240 families, six years earlier. They examined how patterns of IPC, father's parenting quality (i.e., psychosocial support), and father's parenting time (i.e., contact) were associated with children's adjustment problems concurrently (an average of 12 months following the divorce, when children were 9 – 12 years old) and predicted child adjustment problems six years later. Latent profile analyses revealed four profiles: 1) high contact, moderate conflict, moderate support, 2) low contact, moderate conflict, low support, 3) moderate contact, high conflict, moderate support, and 4) moderate contact, low conflict, moderate support. The relations between the various profiles and youth mental health outcomes concurrently and 6 years later differed. In the concurrent analyses, children in the moderate contact, high conflict, and moderate support group had higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems compared to children in the other profiles. However, in predicting child behavior problems 6 years after the divorce, contact appeared to be the more salient variable, with children in the low contact, low support and moderate conflict group demonstrating higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems compared to the moderate contact, moderate support, high conflict group, and greater internalizing problems compared to the moderate contact, moderate support and low conflict group. These findings suggest that immediately following the divorce, there is more support for the conflict hypothesis but that over time there is greater support for the benefits hypothesis in predicting children's adjustment.

## Limitations of Current Evidence

Differences between the samples on key variables such as time since separation or divorce, parenting or custody arrangement, measurement of constructs (e.g., conflict, parenting time, or quality of parenting), and whether the study was cross-sectional or prospective longitudinal pose limitations in our ability to compare the findings. For example, there is

high variability in how parenting time is measured, with some studies dichotomizing samples into full versus shared arrangements, and others measuring any type of father contact (e.g., phone calls, etc.). Thus, it is unclear whether differences across the studies are due to inconsistency in actual effects versus methodological differences. Further, secular trends in the acceptance of shared parenting (Smart, 2004) may explain differences in findings from studies conducted in the 1980s and those conducted in the 2000's, which inherently have a different distribution of parenting time between mothers and fathers. Another significant limitation is that most samples consist of predominantly non-Hispanic white families. Implications of the findings may not be generalizable to ethnic minority families with different arrangements of family structure and traditions after divorce (Foster & Kalil, 2007). Also, the reviewed studies do not include infants and toddlers, who may require different parenting time arrangements depending on levels of IPC. Finally, there was not a sufficient sample size of studies to conduct a quantitative analysis to examine the heterogeneity of effect sizes across key variables such as child age or gender, or time since divorce.

### Summary of findings from empirical studies

Despite the limited number and heterogeneity of the studies, some tentative conclusions based on the findings can be discerned. First, in the four studies that found that higher father contact was associated with more child problems for high conflict divorced families, conflict was assessed several years after the divorce, and this effect depended on the child's gender in three of the four studies (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston et al., 1989; Modecki et al., 2015; Vanassche et al., 2013). However, the studies that assessed the interaction between parenting time and IPC more proximally to divorce (either during the divorce or within the first years following), had mixed results. Elam and colleagues (2016) found that the high IPC, *high* father contact group had higher child problems concurrently, but in contrast, the moderate IPC, *low* father contact group had more problems six years later. Healy and colleagues (1990) reported that in high IPC families, father parenting time related to lower child behavior problems, but also related to lower self-esteem. Three additional studies did not find a significant interaction between father parenting time and IPC (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Gunnoe & Braver; Kaspiew et al., 2009). Taken together, these nine studies suggest that the positive or negative effects of higher levels of father parenting time in high conflict divorces may depend on whether conflict is assessed more proximally to the divorce (within the first several years) or reflects conflict that persists over a more prolonged period of time.

There is also suggestive evidence that both mother's and father's quality of parenting can be protective in the context of high IPC. Two studies found that in high conflict divorces, higher quality of parenting by either the mother or father was related to lower child adjustment problems when the relationship with the other parent was either poor or moderate, but not when the relationship with the other parent was very good (Sandler et al., 2008; Sandler et al., 2013). The one study that found that closeness with the father was not significantly related to child problems (i.e., was not protective) when legal conflict was high, did not examine the effect of closeness with the mother (Healy et al., 1990). It is likely, therefore,

that the effect of parenting quality on child adjustment in high conflict families is best understood when considering the parenting by both the mother and father.

Most studies included gender of the child as a control variable, with only three studies including an interaction term to test gender differences in the context of IPC. Gender moderated the effects such that more father parenting time in high conflict families affected boys and girls differently. One study found that when there was high IPC, joint physical custody was associated with higher depressive symptoms for girls, but not for boys (Vanassche et al., 2013). Another found a negative effect of more father contact on behavior problems for boys when there was high IPC, but not for girls (Amato & Rezac, 1994). The third study with high conflict families found that boys who had more frequent access with the less seen parent exhibited lower social competence scores but for girls, more frequent access was related to more behavior problems (Johnston et al., 1989). Given the lack of consistency across findings, it is unclear as to which gender may be more negatively affected.

### **Implications for court policy and practice concerning post-divorce parenting time.**

Some tentative implications can be drawn concerning policy and practice issues facing the family courts. Although four studies found that more contact with the father was associated with more child adjustment problems when there were high levels of chronic, persistent IPC, these studies do not provide guidance for decisions made at the time of the divorce. There is no consistent set of findings that support a policy against shared parenting based on having a conflictual relationship at the time of divorce. Many parents have conflictual relationships when they are separating and in the year that follows, but conflict typically decreases over time, with rates of high conflict dropping from over 50% of families in the initial period after the divorce to about 25% of families several years later (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Fischer, De Graaf, & Kalmijn, 2005). Because IPC is likely to diminish over time in most families, it seems that conflict should not be as heavily weighed as other factors (i.e., parenting quality) when determining parenting arrangement at the time of the divorce.

Although chronic conflict has more serious implications for parenting time arrangements than conflict early in the divorce process, the findings are mute about strategies to promote children's positive adjustment when high conflict persists over time. Given the clear negative implications of chronic IPC for children's adjustment, arrangements that might decrease conflict or children's exposure to conflict would be in the best interest of the children. This might be accomplished by arrangements that minimize the situations where children are most likely to be exposed to the conflict (e.g., exchanges between the parents). If one parent is primarily driving the conflict, reductions in the opportunities for that parent to expose the child to conflict might be considered (e.g., reduced parenting time). In addition, given the association between quality of parenting by either parent and children's adjustment in high conflict divorces, efforts to strengthen and support high quality of parenting may help promote child adjustment. The current evidence provides guidance as to the factors that should be considered in making decisions about parenting time for high conflict divorces. It is critical to consider the nature of the IPC in terms of severity, frequency, child exposure, and the role each parent plays in maintaining the conflict. It is also critical to assess the

potential of both parents to provide moderate to high quality parenting in terms of a warm and close relationship with the child. Both fathers and mothers can provide high quality parenting even if there is high conflict and high-quality parenting by either parent can protect children from the deleterious effects of IPC. However, high quality parenting is most likely to be beneficial if children have adequate time with their parent (Sandler et al., 2013).

It is important to emphasize that these implications are based on current evidence and that the research and practice landscapes are rapidly changing. As more jurisdictions are promoting shared parenting arrangements, there will be more opportunities to learn about the conditions under which these arrangements work well or poorly for children in high conflict divorces. To help inform policy and practice recommendations for parenting time in cases with high IPC, researchers should give priority to three issues. First, given that parenting time decisions are typically made early in the process of divorce, more studies are needed to assess the relations between different patterns of contact and child adjustment in families with high IPC close to the separation and divorce and how this changes over time. Second, studies are needed to identify factors that lead to chronic and persistent conflict several or more years after the divorce. Third, although there are multiple programs that have benefits for divorced families, including mediation (Holtzworth-Munroe, Beck, & Applegate, 2010), parenting programs (e.g., Wolchik et al. (2013), conflict reduction (Braver, Sandler, Cohen Hita, & Wheeler, 2016), child coping (Boring et al., 2015; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985) and alternative approaches to obtaining a divorce (Pruett, Insabella, & Gustafson, 2005), more research is needed to identify the best approaches to promote the long-term adjustment of children in high conflict divorced families. Assessing whether they have positive effects on child adjustment in families with high IPC has clear implications for promoting the well-being of children in divorced families with high IPC.

## Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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