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## (Re)doing parent-child relationships in dual residence arrangements: Swedish children's narratives about changing relations after separation

### Eltern-Kind-Beziehungen in Doppelresidenz-Arrangements (neu) herstellen: Erzählungen schwedischer Kinder über sich wandelnde Beziehungen nach der Trennung

#### Abstract

This article explores children's experiences about growing up in dual residence arrangements, i.e. post-separation arrangements where children share their time equally between their parents. It focuses on children's narratives of re-doing family relationships after separation.

Guided by a social constructionist approach, the analysis is based on in-depth and reflexive interviews with nineteen co-parented children aged 9-17. The ways in which children and parents shape everyday life through interaction and negotiations in each family-unit, are illuminated by the concept of *doing family*.

Many children point out how they get more attention and more time on their own with each parent. Results demonstrate that many participants perceive the relationships with their parents differently after separation, corresponding to a novel reflexivity concerning the family as well as new ways of positioning themselves. Over time, the break-up of the nuclear family, however difficult, brings an opportunity for children to reflect on family ties in a new way. In so doing, it becomes possible to question relationships as well as to build closer and more profound connections with family members.

#### Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel werden die Erfahrungen von Kindern beleuchtet, die in Doppelresidenz-Arrangements aufwachsen, d.h. in Nachscheidungsarrangements in denen Kinder gleich viel Zeit mit beiden Elternteilen verbringen. Der Fokus liegt dabei auf den Erzählungen der Kinder, in denen sie berichten, wie die Familienbeziehungen nach der Trennung (neu) hergestellt werden.

Auf einen sozialkonstruktivistischen Ansatz aufbauend, basiert die Analyse auf ausführlichen, reflexiven Interviews mit neunzehn Kindern im Alter von 9 bis 17 Jahren, die zu gleichen Zeitannteilen bei beiden Elternteilen leben. Die Art und Weise, wie Eltern und Kinder durch Interaktion und Aushandlungen in beiden Familienhaushalten ihr Alltagsleben formen, wird mithilfe des „Doing Family“-Konzepts veranschaulicht.

Viele dieser Kinder heben hervor, wie sie mehr Zuwendung, aber auch mehr Zeit für sich selbst bei jedem Elternteil bekommen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen auf, dass viele Studienteilnehmer die Beziehungen zu ihren Eltern nach der Trennung anders wahrnehmen, was sowohl mit einer neuartigen Reflexivität in Bezug auf die Familie als auch mit neuen Vorgehensweisen hinsichtlich der eigenen Positionierung einhergeht. Im Laufe der Zeit bietet die Auflösung der Kernfamilie, wenn sie auch für die Kinder schwer ist, den Kindern die Möglichkeit, über Familienbande neu nachzudenken. Dadurch wird es möglich, sowohl Beziehungen in Frage zu stellen als auch engere und tiefere Verbindungen zu Familienmitgliedern aufzubauen.

**Key words:** dual residence, shared residence, joint physical custody, shared care, post-divorce childhood, divorce, doing family

**Schlagwörter:** Doppelresidenz, geteilte Residenz, gemeinsames Wohnsorgerecht, gemeinsame Fürsorge, Nachscheidungskindheit, Scheidung, Herstellung von Familie (doing family)

## 1. Introduction

Dual residence – arrangements where children alternate their family life across the two households of their separated parents - is becoming increasingly common in many western countries. In Sweden, about one third of children with separated parents spend half (or just about half) the time with both parents<sup>1</sup>, typically spending every second week in each household (Statistics Sweden 2014)<sup>2</sup>. This number has been steadily increasing since the beginning of the 1990s, when about 4% of children of divorced or separated<sup>3</sup> parents shared their time equally between their parents' households.

The pluralization of family models has had a large impact on many children's lives. What characterizes dual residence arrangements compared to more traditional single parent residency is the division of children's time and space. Belonging to two separate households includes taking part in two distinct family lives. Marschall (2013) refers to these separated families as bi-nuclear families, a term which underlines the way the family is divided into two by the separation of the parents while still staying closely connected by the child(ren) belonging to both households and altering between them.

Arguments in favor of dual residence emphasize that it promotes the preservation of parent-child relationships after separation (Bergström et al. 2013; Spruijt/Duindam 2009). Living with each parent, albeit every second week, makes it possible to maintain an everyday relationship with both parents. On the other hand, opponents argue that shifting homes on a regular basis results in rootlessness and instability (Gustavsson 1999; Spruijt/Duindam 2009) and that this arrangement could turn out to be detrimental in case that there still is ongoing conflict between parents (McIntosh 2008; Trinder 2010).

While much has been written about the potential effects of divorce on children's well-being and adjustment, there is still a lack of knowledge about the specifics of dual residence. Above all, more evidence on children's views of dual residence is needed. This paper addresses the aspect of post-divorce family relationships from children's point of view. Particularly, it explores how parent-child relationships may be re-shaped after separation in dual residence arrangements

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1 It is estimated that another 10% of children with separated parents have their permanent residence with one of the parents but stay at least 30% of the time with the non-residential parent (Statistics Sweden 2014).

2 About 80% shift houses every week, according to Statistics Sweden (2011).

3 In this text, separation is used synonymously to divorce and the data on which the article is based include both divorce and separation. This is relevant in the Swedish context where less than one third of first-time parents in 2000 were married. Another third got married in the course of the following ten years (Statistics Sweden 2012).

## 2. Dual residence in Sweden and elsewhere

Comparing the prevalence of dual residence between countries is difficult due to differences in definitions and official statistics on post-divorce living arrangements (Bjarnason/Arnason 2011). However, cross-national studies and research reviews show a particularly high rate of Swedish children growing up in dual residence arrangements compared to other countries (Bjarnason/Arnason 2011; Nielsen 2013; Trinder 2010). This can be explored in light of Swedish family policy, where gender equality has been highly ranked on the political agenda since the end of the 1960s. Like in other Nordic countries, the dual-earner model (characterized by two full-time jobs) prevails in Sweden, and there are wide-ranging policies to promote gender equality and symmetric parental roles. One objective has been to reshape fathers' relationships with their children and families. Couples are encouraged to share and take joint responsibility for the care of children, and fathers have become more involved in children's daily lives (Bergman/Hobson, 2002; Ellingsæter/Leira 2006). According to Swedish legislation, the importance of parents taking joint responsibility for their children does not end with separation but does emphasize "children's need of a close and good contact with both parents" also post-separation (Svensk författningssamling, Föräldrabalken [The Parental Code] 1949:381). Thus, parents are expected to continue sharing the responsibility of children after divorce and joint *legal* custody has been the rule since 1992 (Schiratzki 2010). Changes in custody laws in 1998 provided societal legitimacy to joint *physical* custody. Since then, courts have the legal right to order alternating residence if this is considered to be in the best interests of the child, even when this decision is opposed by one parent (Svensk författningssamling, Föräldrabalken [The Parental Code] 1949:381). However, this paragraph is used in a restrictive manner and in the great majority of cases, a shared time arrangement is the result of an agreement between parents (Statistics Sweden 2014).

With this background, one might wonder what characterizes the group of children in dual residence compared to children in single parent residency after parental separation in Sweden. First of all, this type of arrangement is mainly associated with children of Swedish origin, i.e. children who have two parents born in Sweden. In comparison, only ten percent of children whose parents are born abroad live in equal share arrangements compared to forty percent of children to parents born in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2014). Second, parents of children in dual residence arrangements have a higher educational level than divorced parents in general (Bergström et al. 2013; Statistics Sweden 2014). Furthermore, these children are more likely to be enrolled in schools where a high proportion of parents have post-secondary education. These children are marginally more likely to live in urban areas and their parents have a higher level of income (ibid). From an international perspective, corresponding results have been found regarding higher levels of education and a higher income among parents sharing post-divorce care in comparison to other post-divorce arrangements (Heide Ottosen 2011; Juby et al. 2005; Kitterød/Lyngstad 2012; Melli/Brown 2008; SOU 2011:51). Consequently, the socioeconomic positions of the parents seem to influence children's living arrangements after divorce.

As dual residence arrangements are becoming more prevalent in many Western countries, the research-based knowledge is gradually growing (Nielsen 2013). The major part of this research has focused on outcomes such as children's social and psychological

wellbeing, as well as educational outcomes and social adjustment, often with a comparative perspective. According to a recent Swedish large-scale research study<sup>4</sup>, Swedish children in dual residence have been reported better wellbeing than children in other post-separation arrangements, although not as good as children in nuclear families (Bergström et al. 2013; Låftman et al. 2014). However, international findings are not unanimous. While some studies have shown that children in dual-residence arrangements are no less well-adjusted than those in other post-divorce arrangements, and fare better in terms of the quality and endurance of their relationships with their fathers (Fabricius 2003; Nielsen 2013; Spruijt/Duindam 2009), other research questions these positive conclusions (McIntosh 2008; Trinder 2010). It is argued that it is typically not the quantity of time with each parent that matters for children's well-being, but the quality of the relationships surrounding the child. While there is agreement with regard to the benefit of having both parents actively and cooperatively involved in children's lives after separation, McIntosh (2008) points out that this is not true in separated families where there is ongoing high conflict between parents. She calls attention to the increased risk of exposure to parental conflict in dual residence arrangements and argues that shared care might then strain rather than support a child. The detrimental effects of parental conflicts for children's wellbeing have been revealed by ample research (Fabricius et al. 2012; Spruijt/Duindam 2009). In contrast, others argue that the negative effects of severe parental conflict are not necessarily worse in equal share arrangements and that unsupportive parent-child relationships are equally harmful. Accordingly, they argue that shared care arrangements promote increased parenting time and thus parent-child relationships (Fabricius et al. 2012). Whatsoever, it is important not to draw conclusions about dual residence in general based on studies on the high-conflict group. Furthermore, some Scandinavian studies suggest that parents of children in shared caring arrangements report less conflict in relation to the other parent than parents in other post-separation caring arrangements (Heide Ottosen, 2011; Haugen 2010; Skjørten et al. 2007). Even so, less exposure to parental conflict in shared care arrangements could be a result of social selection rather than the living arrangement itself.

Children's views of shared time arrangements are less investigated. There are, however, a few qualitative studies specifically exploring children's experiences of dual residence. The studies conclude that there is a wide range of experiences of dual residence. These experiences vary with respect to the nature of the arrangement, the circumstances around each case and the individual preferences of the child. While some children are very pleased sharing their lives between two households, others find it highly demanding (Berman 2010; Cashmore et al. 2010; Haugen 2010; Heide Ottosen 2011; Skjørten et al. 2007; Smart et al. 2001; 2004). Smart, Neale and Flowerdew (2003) call attention to the emotional challenges of dual residence that should not be underestimated, and Smart (2004) and Harris-Short (2010) caution against a presumption for dual residence, since they are concerned that it might be in the interests of adults rather than children.

In conclusion, the studies indicate that children are happier with flexible and child-focused arrangements, provided that there are no serious conflicts between parents and al-

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4 I.e. a national classroom survey carried out among nearly 165 000 Swedish 12- and 15-year-olds (The Swedish Public Health Institute 2011).

so provided that they can influence the set-up of their living arrangements (Cashmore et al. 2010; Haugen 2010; Smart 2004; Smart et al. 2003). The feeling of having an influence on one's everyday life seems to be closely related to children's well-being, as identified by other studies (Smart et al. 2001; Morrow 1998).

### 3. Theoretical framework

After parental separation, families undergo substantial change in structure as well as in content, i.e. in the way they act, relate and shape their shared family lives after separation (Smart et al. 2001). In the process of change, there is room for new practices to emerge within the separate households in making. Morgan (2011) has provided a theoretical model for understanding families through their everyday practices. In dual residence households and other post-separation arrangements, the newly formed family units have to find new ways of shaping everyday life and *doing* family beyond the context of the nuclear family. The social constructivist concept of *doing family* underlines the way families take shape, change and are manifested through their doings, i.e. the activities, routines and rituals of their everyday life. Just like *doing gender* counterpoints the idea that gender is an innate quality of the individual (West/Zimmerman 1987), the notion of *doing family* contradicts the essentialist idea of 'family' as a naturally occurring and static structure associated with normative ideas of 'the family' (Morgan 1996). By regarding 'family' as a social unit whose activities can be better expressed by a verb rather than by a noun, the focus shifts from the structure of the families to the practices, the day-to-day family living.

Furthermore, this article draws on the 'new' sociology of childhood, which underscores children's capacity to influence and take part in the doings of their families. In that way they influence the way their childhoods are shaped (Alanen 1992; Christensen/James 2008; James/Prout 1997). Morgan's (2011) concept of *doing family* is a useful tool for exploring children's co-construction of their social world. In the context of divorce and dual residence arrangements, this approach implicates an understanding of children as agents of change and active practitioners of family life. This is part of a significant shift from former perceptions of children as passive victims of their parents' divorce (Neale 2002). Even though childhood sociology emphasizes the power imbalance between children and adults, the focus on children as actors may conceal structural factors that hamper children's agency. Children are actors within frames set by adults, thus they have limited possibilities to exercise their agency beyond these frames. One example is the unequal power relation which appears in cases where children's wishes may differ from parents', such as in custody disputes. In this paper, children are understood as both individual social agents and belonging to a social minority group (Wyness 2012). The child/adult relationship is central according to this perspective, since this is a hierarchical relationship which may limit but also enable children's agency. Accordingly, there may be varying opportunities for children to practice their agency according to the relationship between child and adult (Mayall 2001).

#### 4. Methods and data

The empirical data for this article are drawn from the qualitative research project *Children's experiences of dual residence* [Reference missing!], exploring children's perspectives on everyday life in their respective two homes. The data comprise qualitative research interviews with 19 children carried out in the years 2012 to 2014. The interviews are in-depth, participative and reflexive qualitative interviews, carried out mainly individually but in three cases the children were interviewed together with a sibling or a friend.

At the time of the interview, all participants were between nine and seventeen years old and had between one and fourteen years' experience of sharing their time with both parents. Children were recruited who considered themselves as "having *alternating residence* (living *every second week* or other means of spending half the time with each parent)".<sup>5</sup> All participating children but one split their time approximately equally between their two households or had done so at the time of recruitment, with the vast majority changing homes on a weekly basis. The exact amount of time spent in each home was not measured in most families, which indicates certain flexibility to the arrangements. Many of them had made changes to their residence model over time.

The participants live in a city region in the south of Sweden, although spread across urban and rural areas, downtown and in suburbs. The children come from different social backgrounds, even though middle-class backgrounds are more represented. Most arrangements are voluntary agreements between parents, although two of them were settled in court. Among the nineteen children are two pairs of siblings, of which one pair chose to be interviewed together and one individually. Despite the fact that all children live in dual-residence arrangements, their families take quite different forms. Some of the children live with only one parent in each household, while others have sisters and brothers alternating residences together. Some have stepparents in one or both places and some have stepsiblings and/or new younger siblings. Sometimes they are part of large networks of families linked together by their children (cf. Larsson Sjöberg 2000). Whereas some participants belong to two households of a similar type, others alternate between a household of two (i.e. child and parent) and a vast family network (i.e. parent, stepparent, stepsiblings and new younger siblings). Almost half of the participants had walking distance between their two homes, while the remainder had to go by car or use public transport when shifting over.

The participants were mainly recruited via schools, with the intention of reaching children from divorced families of different social backgrounds. A few were recruited through snowballing and one through a support group for children in litigating families. The interviews took place in the home of the child, in school or at the research office, according to the choice of each child. In general, the younger children wished to do the interview at home while the teenagers preferred to come to the research office.

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5 Alternating residence is the Swedish formal concept for shared residence. In everyday talk though, every second week is normally used, especially among children and young people. In Sweden, most shared residence households have adopted a two-week cycle of care, i.e. the children alternate homes every week (Statistics Sweden 2011).

The interviews were semi-structured. An interview guide was used, consisting of broader themes (family, friendships, leisure, school, everyday routines, participation etc.) and examples of more detailed follow-up issues. Initially, some background questions were posed, followed by open-end questions and participants were encouraged to reflect and bring up their own issues. In some interviews, the children told their stories openly after an invitation (i.e. "Please tell me about your family") and some follow-up issues, while others needed more detailed questions. About half of the children opted to make family drawings, which were used as a tool during the interviews. The time recorded for each interview was between 60 and 130 minutes, with the average interview lasting about 80 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author. All names were anonymized.

The data were analyzed by the author, using a thematic analysis approach (Braun/Clarke 2006). Initially, all interviews were repeatedly read one by one, looking at the narrative of each child. In the next step, the interviews were analyzed across cases. Themes were mapped out and sorted during the process, and structured with the assistance of qualitative analysis software (NVivo). When analyzing the interviews, the ambition was to approach the material as open-mindedly as possible, gradually creating categories derived from the data. One such category was the re-doing of family relationships after divorce, which appeared to be connected to changed practical circumstances but also to a particular kind of reflexivity. These themes have therefore been further explored in relation to the theoretical framework. The analysis was inspired by narrative analysis, based on the idea that narratives are constructed and reconstructed according to the context and the audience (Kohler Riessman 1993). The interviews were regarded as interactive processes, stressing the content of the interview as well as the meaning-making dimension (Gubrium/Holstein 1995).

The study complies with the ethical guidelines for social sciences in Sweden (Swedish Research Council 2014) and was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board. Informed consent was given by parents (i.e. legal guardians) in all cases where children were below the age of fifteen, after receiving information about the research project, its aims and ethical principles (SFS 2003:460). Specific attention was paid to the ethics of conducting research with children, giving them an informed choice about participating in the interviews and guaranteeing their confidentiality. The children were given written and/or verbalized information before their decision to participate, and then again before the interview. They were also reminded of the option to terminate the interview whenever they wanted.

## 5. Results

This section of the article explores co-parented children's perspectives on the issue of parent-child relationships after separation. The findings demonstrate how relationships are re-negotiated after separation and how the shaping of new family identities gives rise to a novel reflexivity with regard to family ties.

### 5.1 (Re)doing family after separation

The transition from a nuclear family to a bi-nuclear family is an example of how families undergo major change. For that reason, *re-doing family* (cf. Morgan 2011) seems to be an appropriate term to describe how new ways of doing family and creating new kinds of family relationships are developed after divorce. Many children interviewed in this study articulated how the process of separation had meant a radical transformation of their everyday life.

*SAMUEL (17): Although it's mainly in the beginning... that is, before you get used to it. If your parents have just divorced, it's a **total makeover** to stay one week in one place and then next week in another...*

*And I don't think there is any magic trick to make it... [snaps his fingers] ... kind of all well again, it has to... It's a huge change; it takes time to get used to it.*

In the beginning, many of the participants found it hard to cope with their parents' separation and their new living arrangement. On the other hand, for some it was a relief to get away from the endless arguments of their parents. Over time, they had all adapted to a family life divided between two homes. Mira expressed how she had got over the initial period of turbulence following her parents' divorce:

*MIRA (9): Now I've kind of got over it, because I'm used to it and it already happened, and it has kind of been this way for four years now, so I got over it a very-very-very-very long time ago.*

We learn from the children and adolescents participating in this study that the initial process of distress was usually followed by routine, resilience, capacity to manage potential difficulties and sometimes happiness about the way things had turned out. While some of the participants had shared their time between two homes for almost as long as they could remember, others had only one or two years' experience. Nevertheless, their caring arrangements had become routine. Being accustomed to two places of residence and a two-fold family belonging, it became difficult to imagine a family life in only one place.

*ELLA (10): I kind of wonder what it would be like to live full-time!*

*Q: Well, what do you think?*

*ELLA: Weird!*

Ella, who had been practicing dual residence for six years, used the expression "full-time" to describe the opposite of her own way of living. To her, sharing her time represented the normal situation. Despite finding it really demanding to pack her things every week, Ella could not imagine any other living arrangement. Adamo put it like this:

*ADAMO (12): If I look back, I don't think I would like my parents to have stayed together, because then I wouldn't have met Felix and Wilma [stepsiblings].*

Reflecting about the way his life had turned out after the divorce, Adamo was pleased his parents had not stayed together. He was happy he had got his stepsister and stepbrother (the latter being also a very good friend) with whom he lived every second week. On the

other hand, when imagining a situation in which his parents had never divorced, he pointed out that he would probably have liked them to remain together:

*ADAMO: Well, but I'm rather content anyway, although at the same time I am not. You see, if I had had **non-divorced** parents, I would have wished for them **not to divorce**, but **now** I would have wanted them to **divorce**.*

In a very reflexive way, Adamo expressed that what seemed awful at the moment of divorce eventually turned out in a positive way. By that, he also identified the struggle it may take to adapt to a new way of living. Adamo, just like the other participants, were well aware that the divorce could not be reversed. Yet they did practice their agency to outline their lives as much as it was allowed for in their particular families, i.e. by being involved in the set-up of their living arrangements. For instance, Saga (11) had negotiated with her parents to stay two weeks instead of one with each parent and Alicia (13) had asked to stay only with her mum for some time, but later decided to go back to changing homes every second week. A few siblings had different living arrangements or changed homes on different days due to their individual wishes.

Nevertheless, the degree to which the children were involved in making decisions on their living arrangements varied significantly. Some children had considerable influence on the living arrangement itself. A few, especially in the older age group, were involved in the decision about how to arrange the residence issue immediately after divorce. Others did not have a say at that time, however they were accustomed to continuously re-evaluate the living arrangement to see how it worked and whether changes were to be made. Yet a few did have little influence or no say at all in these matters. The findings suggest that most children highly value having a say in family issues. In addition to influence on the residence arrangement itself, the children took part in creating new family identities and defining the roles of their bi-nuclear families.

*SAGA (11): Me and my dad we usually cook together and things... I like doing it, but then at my mum's place... I don't really take the initiative. Well and me and my dad we go jogging together and stuff.*

*At my dad's it's more of a restplace, because I don't have my younger brothers who I feel I have to take care of all the time, it's more like ... it's just me and my dad!*

*Q: Mhm.*

*SAGA: And me and my dad we really like watching humor shows, so I feel like I can relax and... stay up a bit longer.... It's like dad is the weekend and mum is like the workday.*

As shown by Saga, they did it, for instance, through distinguishing family practices and routines in each household, establishing the characteristics of each family unit. The concept of *doing family* was represented by how children talked about themselves and their family members, how they constructed their individual as well as family identities, along with their family practices.

## 5.2 *Family relationships are central*

Practicing dual residence involves a twofold family belonging. The children have been moving between their two households, linking their (small or large) family networks together (cf. Larsson Sjöberg 2000). In contrast to their former nuclear family, many of them had gained new family members – stepparents, stepsiblings, new younger siblings, step grandparents etc. They were embedded in, and at the center of, a wide network of family relations. The new relationships were often a source of happiness to the children, although a few experienced poor relationships that caused serious distress.

Moving between two homes meant moving alone, or with siblings, between parents who did not share *all* of their everyday life. This could bring about feelings of liberty and autonomy, but also of loneliness. However, those who went together with their siblings appreciated the special bond created by shifting houses together and often mentioned an emotional closeness. Ylva (12) explained how her own experience gave her a special capacity to comfort her younger sister when she missed a parent. The young people of this study described family relationships as crucial, and many mentioned in particular their parents, perhaps because their presence is not constant in the separated family.

*LINNEA (11): Mum and dad are... well, the best. They... yeah, I couldn't live without them.*

The emphasis put on the quality of these relationships is not surprising, given that the concept of 'the family' itself is often defined in terms of close relationships by the children of the current study. For most participants, this attitude seemed to mirror the relationships between family members in their own families.

## 5.3 *New parent–child relationships emerging*

Some children reflected on the way in which the relationships might have changed when they were required to reshape family life and find new ways of spending time together with their parents after divorce, in two separate homes.

*SARAH (16): It is... well right now it's not like that with my mum, but anyway... I actually think you get **closer** to your parents ... err... and then, well, the parents think "I better take the opportunity to be with my child" sort of... And it's like... they want to be with me more... If my parents had kept on living together, I think they had probably... err, they had done something fun with me only once in a while. Whereas now, it's like... I don't know how to put it, but they want to be with me all the time.*

*Q: You kind of spend more time with your parents?*

*SARAH: Yeah, and you get **more attention** in both places too.*

At the time of the interview, Sarah had been practicing dual residence for thirteen years. Her parents divorced when she was three, and during the first years they lived in the same neighborhood to make things easier for her. Later on, her mother re-partnered and got two children whereas in her father's household she was the only child. Thus, there were huge

contrasts between the everyday lives of her two family units. At her father's place, she spent a lot of time with him alone, and articulated how they had become really close, a lot closer than she considered they would have been if her parents had still been together. On the other hand, Sarah did not feel as close to her mother at all, with whom she never spent time in the same way. She got along very badly with her stepfather, whom she thought of as the one setting the agenda in her mother's household, while she herself had little decision-making power. Even though she loved her siblings, Sarah felt somewhat excluded from the family. This feeling of not belonging had led her to diminish her time at her mother's place. She explained how she used to feel much closer to her mum before, but the poor relationship with her stepdad had put her in an awkward position in relation to her mum.

Like Sarah, many of these young people gave evidence of an enriched relationship with their parents after divorce, partially explained by spending more time together with one parent on their own. Sarah also drew attention to family members *taking the opportunity* to spend time together when time is limited. During that restricted time, parents and children did things together; everyday activities as well as more special events. Cornelia (12) explained how both her parents arranged special activities on their "child-weeks", resulting in twice as many happenings than would otherwise had been the case.

When reflecting on the relationships with their parents, the participants found them essential. They revealed a way of "not taking parents for granted", which has also been observed in other studies (Smart et al. 2001). Despite the difficulties Sarah has to face, she expressed her conviction that she had a closer relationship to her parents than she would have if they had never split up.

From Saga's (11) experience too, more time was spent with parents after separation, although for a different reason. From her point of view, it was because her parents spent less time arguing in favor of being with their children. All the same, her conclusion was that one gets more time together with one's parents when they are divorced.

Thus, one aspect is *time*. One would suppose that living half of the time with each parent would result in less time together with each one of them. Paradoxically, a number of children expressed how they spent more time on their own with their parents after divorce.

*Q: So, what are the good things about... [alternating residence]?*

*FRIDA (15): You get to spend some time on your own with your parents.*

*Q: Yes. Why do you like that?*

*FRIDA: I don't know, but I get to know them better that way, I figure. And then I find it easier somehow to be with one of them at a time, I don't know why it's like that. . . . You get more time, which make you get to know them better and you may get closer to them, like me and my mum, we are really close... I think you must take your time to be with them because I think you feel better that way. For some reason.*

A large group of children brought up how much they appreciated having one parent "for themselves". Particularly those whose parents had not re-partnered were familiar with this on a daily basis. Nonetheless, other children also appeared to experience this side of life in dual residence. It seems as if many parents devote more time to being on their own

with their children after separation, even if they have new relationships and sometimes also stepchildren. The concept of dyadic relationships, borrowed from psychology, may well be useful to describe the character of bonds that benefit from more time on a one-to-one basis. Precisely the opportunity to spend more time with their children is brought up as a great advantage of dual residence also by parents. They emphasize the special kind of communication that occurs when you are alone with your children, as shown by a small-scale Swedish study (Borgström 2012).

The division of children's time and space implies that one parent at a time is the one responsible. That is, the one who is involved in all the everyday activities: eating meals together, saying good night and good morning, talking about your day in school, watching television together, taking you to activities, listening to you if you are happy about something or if you are worried, comforting you if you feel sad, etc. All of these *doings* add to the feeling of closeness. These doings also make part of (re)constructing the family identity in each bi-nuclear family unit (cf. Morgan 2011).

Some participating children remarked how their parents had adapted their job routines in order to spend as much time as possible with their children; some worked longer hours every second week to be able to work less on their "child week" and others who travelled in work concentrated the travelling to their "single week". Even though many parents worked hard to find solutions to adapt their working hours to their children's needs, this brings the question of social class into the analysis. Having the economic capacity or the flexible work schedule it takes to work shorter hours every second week is intrinsically connected to social class. This pinpoints how the conditions for re-doing family after separation differ among individuals, sometimes even in the separated couple, as shown by Eyla below:

*Q: If you were to tell someone who didn't know what it is like to live every second week, what would you tell?*

*EYLA (10): It's rather fun, to see what your dad is without having somebody else... Well, you get to know your parents more, themselves. [Whom do you refer here to?] And it's rather funny, you experience two sides, you do... Mum doesn't have that much money, so we don't really go to places that cost money. With my dad I always go abroad twice a year, or once with my grandma. He makes quite a lot of money on his kiosk.*

Economy and material resources are not irrelevant when it comes to children's well-being, and among the participants are those whose [meaning is somewhat obscure – maybe "some"?] everyday lives contrast considerably because of parents' different resources.

#### *5.4 Are there shifting power relations after separation?*

The time spent with only one parent was considered as different from being with both parents at the same time. The children of the study talked about more space [meaning unclear – maybe "scope of acting on their own?"] and more attention, and experienced being listened to in another way when an adult partner did not receive the attention of the parent. [Please clarify what situation you mean] They seemed to experience a transformed position vis-à-vis their parents, by which they were given more leeway and more space to express their opinions.

The re-shaping of families may bring new questions to the fore: How are we to make decisions in this household? Who takes part? Devoid of the parental dyad, i.e. parents as a joined and cooperative entity, each parent may give more attention to the child(ren)'s voice(s) in their respective household. Thus, the withdrawal of one parent's influence seems to leave more room for children's participation, particularly if there is no other adult in the household.

*YLVA (12): Well I can easier agree with one than with two, because otherwise they need to talk to each other and stuff.*

While in many respects the everyday life of a nuclear family is outlined by negotiations and compromises between two parents, the situation appears to be different when each parent constitutes a family unit with the child(ren). In two parent families, much of the decision making is largely managed by the parents (adults), who inform the children about the outcome after having reached an agreement. In some matters, the decision may thereafter be open to re-negotiation with the children involved. Mostly, though, negotiations are handled by the adults of the family before the children get a say. Hence, the generational power relations are made visible in family negotiations. The results suggest that, with separation, the positions within the family change and so may the power dynamics between children and adults. Consequently, the children may become negotiating partners to a greater extent than before. Below, Ylva exemplifies how her family negotiated changes to the normal schedule:

*YLVA (12): Well, they [mum and dad] always check with us, like if mum wants to go to the countryside to study for a couple of days or something. "Would it be all right if we change? Would it be OK if I go that week?" and so they check with us. And then we agree or not. "No, but we want... Why do you have to go when we're at your place, can't you go another week?" So everybody checks with each other, and that's what works.*

If the parents cohabit and have children with a new partner, things may be different. A new parental unit – a parental dyad – is built together with the step parent. Even if the parent and child also form a dyad within the "new" family, the parent's position in the new parental dyad may have priority.

According to the narratives of the children, it seemed that many of them, particularly the older ones, took participation in decision making for granted. This spurs the question whether they take the position as the parent's negotiation partners in family decisions more frequently than others, especially when parents have not re-partnered. For instance, Sarah mentions how she and her father made the decision to move from the countryside to the city. The indication of shifting power relations in children's narratives is an issue that deserves more investigation.

### 5.5 *A novel reflexivity*

The study aimed at getting to know how children reflected about the changes to their family lives brought by their parents' separation, and what these changes may produce. Parental separation confronts children with experiences which challenge them to think about

families in new ways (Smart et al. 2001). First of all, parental separation inevitably brings an awareness of the instability of families. However, it also seems to give rise to a novel reflexivity concerning families and family-related issues. If families are no longer fixed, new opportunities, as well as risks, become accessible. [possible?]

*LINN (13): But if we had lived together, I mean if my parents had still lived together and been friends, compared to what it is like now, I think it is better the way it is... because one week is enough, being with one parent and then the other one. It's different... every week. And, then, after a week you have missed the other parent... which means you spend more time with him or her. Compared to if I had lived with both of them, then I might not have spent as much time with them. . . . I guess I wouldn't have liked my parents as much if they were still living together.<sup>6</sup>*

Linn brought the question to the heart of the issue. She explained how she appreciated her parents more due to the fact that she did not have access to them all the time. It is not only a question of spending more time together, as discussed above, but also of realizing how much they matter to you. Paradoxically, the reasoning indicates that by being away from each other for lengthy periods of time you may learn to better appreciate being together. Linn further reflected on the fact that many of her friends in nuclear families did not seem to love their parents as much as she did, simply because they were so used to having them around all the time. This kind of awareness of family ties is an example discerned from many interviews.

However, the change in family structure after separation may also lead to a questioning of family ties. Hannes is one of very few participants who questioned the relationships to his parents. Instead of a deepened bond to his parents, he found himself not being very close to either of them:

*HANNES (17): ... it is not like we have had a lot of **personal** contact, more like I lived there because I ought to live there. Sort of.*

After his parents divorced, opposed to many other participants, Hannes did not at all experience getting closer to neither of his parents:

*HANNES: If you compare to other families, I don't know, but I think mine is rather conserving in a way, you don't really have the same liberty to do what you like as you do in other families. But then the best thing is that I get a lot of life experience so to say, because... compared to others, I didn't have a simple[an easy time?] time growing up.*

Comparing to other families and reflecting about his own rather led Hannes to diminish the contact with both of his parents. His parents' communication was characterized by silence. They did not talk to each other unless required to, and Hannes perceived their arguments about time [unclear, what kind of "time" do you mean? Please clarify.] as putting their own needs first, ignoring him and his brother. The supportive parental relationships discussed earlier were absent and the bonds between Hannes and his parents were not very close. Hannes sensed a lack of influence, which is recognized from [which is also know from?] other interviews that indicated that parents were unable to communicate.

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6 This quote is from a preceding study about co-parented children's everyday lives (Berman 2010).

When Hannes was fourteen, he realized his statutory right to have a say in matters that concern him, which he then used “against” his parents to gain more influence over his everyday life.

*HANNES: Anyway, it was good when I realized: “Now I’m 14...” or whatever it was “...so now I get to decide on my own where to live”.*

*Q: And then you did that?*

*HANNES: Mm, then I did that... That’s why I came up with this thing about living two weeks in each place instead [of one week].*

Despite a limited influence because of his parents’ inability to involve him in decisions, Hannes’s reflexivity led him to regain influence by taking action on his own. Now, at age 17, he has decided to live only at his mother’s place.

## **6. Concluding discussion**

The re-construction of the family and family relationships is an arena where children reflect about the family and its practices.

The findings illustrate how many participants perceive the relationships with their parents in a different and more profound way after separation. The growing appreciation of parents expressed by children gives rise to the question whether parent-child relationships may even be strengthened in dual residence arrangements? One possibility is that these re-evaluated relationships correspond to a novel reflexivity concerning the family as well as family members’ new ways of positioning themselves in the separate family units. However, reflecting about family and family ties does not necessarily lead to awareness and appreciation of the bonds to one’s parents, but may also lead to a questioning and challenging of those bonds, and possibly a rejection of them. The ending of the nuclear family and the shaping of a new family identity provides an opportunity for children to reflect on family ties, as does the awareness of their family model as diverging from the norm. When the participants reflect on issues associated with their families and relationships, they continuously relate to societal ideals and norms. Smart et al. (2001) highlight the way in which the phenomenon of divorce had focused on the negative effects on children and the risk of losing parent-child relationships: They argue that “the very fact that these relationships have been problematized means that there is a cultural space available in which change, reflection and redefinition can occur” (Smart et al. 2001:113). Moreover, children in dual residence (and perhaps also in other family arrangements that diverge from the norm) relate to families outside the nuclear family model and so may learn to reflect on family life from a non-normative perspective, at least with regard to different family models.

One central aspect of dual residence arrangements is the division of children’s time and space. One side of belonging to two family units is signified by never (or very rarely) spending time with both parents at the same time. Always being apart from one of your parents may lead to feelings of loss and longing, but it may also involve spending more

time together on a one-to-one basis, once you are together. According to several studies, the importance of spending time together is perceived as being crucial in the modern family (Forsberg 2009; Wissö 2012). Wissö (2012) has established *being together time* as being essential in the families of Swedish child-centered society. It does not apply to any kind of time spent together, though, but time spent in a close, intimate and relaxed way, what Jamieson (1998) would refer to as *disclosed intimacy*. The children interviewed in this study did not explicitly mention “being together time” or specific ways of being together with their parents. What they did mention, however, was the particular attention they received from one parent at a time. This kind of attention was something they highly valued (cf. Frida, p. 18).

The interviews illustrate how children are engaged in the everyday lives of their families. Even so, it is important to be aware of the different degrees to which children are able to participate in decisions about caring arrangements or how to shape their daily lives. For most children in this study, though, it appears to bring out greater participation. As such, it makes children’s agency visible. According to Wyness (2012), children are likely to be more pro-active in the case of separation, or other changing circumstances, where major decisions influencing their lives need to be made. The concept of *re-constructing family* itself, (cf. Morgan) includes an active stance; namely the creating of, and negotiating families. This is a process in which children are actively involved (Wyness 2012). This obviously greater participation opens up for new ways of exercising agency within the families and may be a sign of shifting power relations between adults and children in dual residence families.

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