Parenting across households: taking a material approach to high-conflict divorce families

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Prolonged custodial conflicts can be harmful for children. Understanding the dynamics of such conflicts is therefore important for improving the everyday life of children with parents living apart. This paper focuses on material conditions in the everyday life of children in high-conflict divorce families: Firstly, that these children move between households and secondly, that a key condition of parenting is that care is shared between parents who live in separate households.

The paper suggests that focusing on practices of care may be lead to a turn in the attention away from conflicts between former partners and towards the child’s situation. This implies a perspective where parents in conflict first are seen as two parties who have to coordinate care for the child across locations, secondary as in conflict. This material approach, may supply emotional discourses, which predominately focus on the parents’ hatred and bitterness after a partnership break-up.

The empirical basis for the paper is a qualitative study, exploring parents’ perspectives on the family’s situation. 15 parents, eight fathers and seven mothers, who a) lived in separate households, b) had severe disagreements on the child’s residence, contact or how to provide the child adequate care, and c) had been in contact with the child welfare service during their custodial battles, were interviewed.

The study shows that these parents are part of a co-parenting relationship, where one or both had severe concerns about the quality of care in the other household. Furthermore, these parents struggle to balance their involvement across household, such as having insight into and influence on the care given in the other home. The analysis shows that parents have different logic of care, some trying to set firm boundaries between the households, others trying to take a total responsibility for the child across locations. The study indicate that the parents’ disagreements on how to allocate the child’s time between two households, is intertwined in a challenging co-parental context, which must be addressed.

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