



## **The Dangers of Presumptive Joint Physical Custody**

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## Introduction

Popular proposals to enact statutory presumptions for joint physical custody (JPC) threaten the safety and well-being of battered women and their children. While Idaho appears to be the only state to have a universal statutory presumption for JPC,<sup>2</sup> several other states have presumptions that operate under specific circumstances (*e.g.*, where the parties agree to JPC or they fail to reach an agreement regarding JPC).<sup>3</sup> Proponents of JPC have developed an appealing theme to promote a presumption, advocating the benefits and fairness of having both parents equally engaged in their children’s lives under a “shared parenting” or “co-parenting arrangement.”<sup>4</sup> The danger of presumptive JPC is that it assumes that “shared parenting” and “co-parenting” are inherently good for all children, without regard to what is actually happening in the lives of the dissolving family. In this way, presumptive JPC blindly elevates the rights of parents – even really bad parents – over the safety and well-being of children. It also disregards a significant body of research that questions the benefits of JPC and its impact on children. Nevertheless, efforts by JPC proponents to promote legislative presumptions are gaining traction. This document explains the legal implications of JPC presumptions and the negative impact such presumptions have on battered women and their children.

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<sup>2</sup> IDAHO CODE §32-717B(4).

<sup>3</sup> States that have presumptions of joint physical custody (or its equivalent) when parties agree to it include Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Oregon and Vermont. 19-A ME. REV. STAT. §1651, 1653(2)(a); MICH. COMP. LAWS §722.26a(2); MISS. CODE §93-5-24(4); OR. REV. STAT. §107.169, Subd. 4; 15 VT. STAT. §666. Louisiana statutes provide that in the absence of an agreement between the parties, the court shall award custody to parents jointly. LA. REV. STAT. §9:335, Art. 132. Additionally, many states have statutory presumptions for joint legal custody, or for joint custody, generally. Those presumptions are not discussed here.

<sup>4</sup> This linguistic shift might seem, at first blush, to be a matter of benign political correctness. In fact, these are politically negotiated terms that predispose the family court (as well as attorneys, guardians ad litem, custody evaluators, mediators and even the litigants themselves) to devise joint custody arrangements, even where such arrangements are inconsistent with the best interests of the child.

## An Overview of Joint Physical Custody

Within the context of family law, custody generally refers to the care and control of a minor child. The concept of custody is further refined by distinguishing the *authority* to make important major life decisions on behalf of the child from the *responsibility* for the everyday supervision and care of the child, including providing a primary home for the child. The former is often referred to as “legal custody,” while the latter is generally referred to as “physical custody.”

Although the precise legal definition of “*joint physical custody*” varies from state to state, it is generally understood to be an arrangement whereby the daily care, control and residence of the child are shared, often (but not always) equally, between the child’s parents.<sup>5</sup> Children will often spend relatively equal time at each parent’s home, and both parents may be deeply involved in their children’s daily affairs (meals, transportation to and from school and activities, homework, etc.). Hence, a necessary corollary of JPC is that parents have frequent and ongoing contact with each other, ideally cooperating in parenting until the child reaches majority.

Sharing physical custody of a child is not inherently harmful and can work quite well for some families; specifically those in which there is no history of violence, little conflict, and where *both* parents share a demonstrated commitment and ability to work together.<sup>6</sup> In fact, many families prefer this type of arrangement and freely choose it for post-dissolution parenting.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g. MINN. STAT. §518.003 3(d) (2008).

<sup>6</sup> One study found that models of shared parenting, like JPC, were “a viable arrangement for a small and distinct group of families, who self-selected into [the] arrangements.” Jennifer McIntosh & Richard Chisholm, *Cautionary Notes on the Shared Care of Children in Conflicted Parental Separation*, 14 J. FAM. STUD. 37, 38 (2008). See, also, Christy M. Buchanan & Parissa Jahromi, *A Psychological Perspective on Shared Custody Arrangements*, 43 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 419, 424 (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Robert E. Emery, Randy K. Otto & William T. O’Donohue, *A Critical Assessment of Child Custody Evaluations: Limited Science and a Flawed System*, 6 PSYCHOL. SCI. PUB. INT. 1, 17 (2005); Mary Ann Mason, *THE CUSTODY WARS: WHY CHILDREN ARE LOSING THE BATTLE AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT*, 63-64 (2000).

## The Best Interest of the Child

The paramount interest in crafting custody arrangements is to discern and protect the safety and well-being of children. Most states require that family courts apply what is known as “the best interest of the child” standard in reaching custody decisions.<sup>8</sup> While “best interest of the child” standards vary from state to state, they typically instruct courts to consider a list of statutorily enumerated factors to determine which parenting arrangements are appropriate for the child under the particular circumstances of the case. These factors focus squarely on the child and, depending on the jurisdiction, include such considerations as: (1) the wishes of the parents; (2) the preferences of the child; (3) the child’s interaction and interrelationships within the larger family unit and extended care-giving network; (4) the child’s adjustment to home, school and community; and (5) the mental and physical health of all interested parties.<sup>9</sup> While many states have slightly different and often expanded lists of “best interest factors,” the intention is the same: to ensure that custody determinations remain child-centered.<sup>10</sup> That is, whatever specific form it takes, the best interest of the child standard is designed to produce custody outcomes that are good for children.

Practically speaking, the best interest of the child standard has been extremely challenging for courts to apply. Over the years, the standard has been criticized for being elusive

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<sup>8</sup> See, ALA. CODE §30-3-152; ALASKA STAT. §25.24.150; ARIZ. REV. STAT. §25-403.03; ARK. CODE §9-13-101(c); CAL. FAM. CODE §3011; COLO. REV. STAT. §14-10-124; CONN. GEN. STAT. §46b-56a(c); DEL. CODE 13 §722; D.C. CODE §16-914 (a)(3); FLA. STAT. §16.13(3); GA. CODE §19-9-3(a); HAW. REV. STAT. §571-46; IDAHO CODE §32-717; ILL. COMP. STAT. 5/602(a); IND. CODE §31-17-2-8; IOWA CODE §598.41; KAN. STAT. §60-1610; KY. STAT. §403.270(2); LA. REV. STAT. §9:36; 19-A ME. REV. STAT. §§1653; MASS. GEN. LAWS 208 §31; MICH. COMP. LAWS §722.23; MINN. STAT. §518.17(1); MISS. CODE §93-5-24; MO. STAT. §452.375(2); MONT. CODE §40-4-212(1); NEB. REV. STAT. §42-364(2); NEV. REV. STAT. §125.480(4); N.H. REV. STAT. §461-A:6(I); N.J. STAT. §9:2-4; N.Y. DOM. REL. LAW §240; N.C. GEN. STAT. §50-13.2; N.D. CENT. CODE §14-09-06.2; OHIO REV. CODE §3109.04(F); OR. REV. STAT. §§107.137(1); 23 PA. CONS. STAT. §5303; R.I. GEN. LAWS 1956 §15-5-16; S.C. CODE 1976 §20-7-1520; TENN. CODE §36-6-106(a); UTAH CODE §30-3-10.2; 15 VT. STAT. §665(b); VA. CODE §20-124.3; WIS. STAT. §767.41(5); WYO. STAT. §20-2-201.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., UNIF. MARRIAGE & DIVORCE ACT §402, 9A U.L.A. 288 (1979).

<sup>10</sup> Linda Elrod & Milfred Dale, *Paradigm Shifts and Pendulum Swings in Child Custody: The Interests of the Children in Balance*, 42 FAM. L. Q. 381, 397 (2008).

and unpredictable, inviting protracted litigation and competing expert opinions, and ultimately leaving critical parenting determinations to the discretion of the family court judge or other surrogate decision maker (*e.g.*, a custody evaluator, guardian ad litem, or other non-judicial court appointee).<sup>11</sup> One of the seemingly attractive features of the JPC presumption is that it bypasses the problematic application of the best interest of the child standard.<sup>12</sup> Rather than having to grapple with a long list of ill-defined factors and suffer the agony of protracted litigation, the JPC presumption permits the court to cut right to the chase and make a quick, easy and predictable custody award.<sup>13</sup> The apparent appeal of the presumption comes at a cost, however: it takes consideration of the child's best interests out of the calculus altogether.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Mason, *THE CUSTODY WARS: WHY CHILDREN ARE LOSING THE BATTLE AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT*, 19 (2000). Elrod & Dale, *supra* n. 9 at 42.

<sup>12</sup> Lyn R. Greenberg, Dianna J. Gould-Saltman, & Robert Schnider, *The Problem with Presumptions: A Review and Commentary*, in *RELOCATION ISSUES IN CHILD CUSTODY CASES* (Philip Stahl & Leslie Drozd eds., 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Contrary to assertions by its proponents, a JPC presumption is not likely to reduce litigation. In fact, it is more likely to have the opposite effects. In Oregon, for instance, post-decree litigation nearly doubled after enactment of its statutory JPC presumption. Margaret Brining, *Does Parental Autonomy Require Equal Custody at Divorce?* 65 *LA. L. REV.* 1345, 1368 (2005).

<sup>14</sup> Lindsay Dangel, *A Critical Evaluation of Presumptions in Favor of Joint Custody: Why Michigan Should Not Follow the Trend*, 11 *MICH. CHILD WELFARE L.J.* 9, 17 (2008).

## How the Joint Physical Custody Presumption Works

The joint physical custody presumption is a legal short-cut. It presupposes that joint physical custody is in the best interest of the child.<sup>15</sup> Unlike most presumptions, which spring into effect only after a predicate fact has been established, the JPC presumption begins at the end: it starts with the legal conclusion that JPC is in the best interest of the child.<sup>16</sup> As discussed below, the scientific research does not support this conclusion.<sup>17</sup> Herein lies the legal peril: the JPC presumption universally applies a legal “conclusion” that is not universally true. It mandates a finding that JPC is in the best interest of the child, *even though the research shows that the exact opposite is often true.*<sup>18</sup>

The JPC presumption is generally rebuttable. That means that the legal conclusion that JPC is in the best interest of the child may be challenged through the introduction of contrary evidence. If no contrary evidence is introduced, the legal conclusion stands.<sup>19</sup> In other words, joint physical custody will be deemed to be in the best interest of the child unless the parent who

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<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., IDAHO CODE §32-717B(4) (2007) (“...there shall be a presumption that joint custody is in the best interest of the child.”); D.C. CODE §16-914(a)(2) (2001) (“There shall be a rebuttable presumption that joint custody is in the best interest of the child...”); N.M. STAT. §40-4-9.1(A) (2007) (“There shall be a presumption that joint custody is in the best interests of a child...”).

<sup>16</sup> In most cases, presumptions spring into effect only after some predicate fact has been established. Greenberg et al., *supra* n. 11. In the case of the presumption *against* JPC due to domestic violence, for instance, the presumption does not spring into operation unless a party first establishes the predicate fact that domestic violence has occurred. Only after the predicate fact has been established can the court infer that joint physical custody is *not* in the best interest of the child. By contrast, the JPC presumption does not require proof of a predicate fact. It simply starts with a conclusion without any foundational showing whatsoever.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion, *infra*.

<sup>18</sup> The logical fallacy is that the JPC presumption converts an untested “judgment” (that JPC is in the best interest of the child) into a conclusive “fact.”

<sup>19</sup> Criminal law provides a familiar example of how legal presumptions work. In the United States, criminal defendants benefit from a legal presumption of innocence unless the State can produce enough evidence to prove otherwise. A defendant bears no evidentiary burden unless the State first meets its burden of proof beyond a reasonable doubt. The rebuttable JPC presumption works the same way, except that the burden to overcome the presumption requires a lesser degree of proof. The parent who desires joint physical custody bears no evidentiary burden unless the other parent puts on sufficient evidence to show that JPC is *not* in the best interest of the child.

has reason to doubt that conclusion proves otherwise. This places a substantial evidentiary burden on the party who believes that joint physical custody is *not* good for the child.<sup>20</sup>

Operationally, the JPC presumption means that physical custody will be shared by the parents, without regard to the safety and well-being of the child, unless the parent seeking to avoid the arrangement can produce enough evidence to rebut the presumption. The danger of the JPC presumption is that, unless affirmatively challenged, the court is required to order joint physical custody regardless of whether that arrangement *is actually* in the best interest of the child or meets the specific needs of the dissolving family. In other words, joint physical custody will be ordered even if, *in reality*, it is bad for the child. Justice White recognized the peril of custody presumptions in *Stanley v. Illinois* where he observed:

Procedure by presumption is always cheaper and easier...than individualized determination. But when...the procedure forecloses the determinative issues of competence and care, when it explicitly disdains present realities in deference to past formalities, it needlessly risks running roughshod over the important interests of both parent and child.<sup>21</sup>

As appealing as the JPC presumption may seem on the surface, it is a poor mechanism for decision-making in child custody cases.<sup>22</sup> Without a JPC presumption, courts must consider the *actual* best interests of the child in fashioning appropriate custody awards. With a JPC presumption, courts do not have to think about the child at all, unless one of the parents has the wherewithal to mount a formal legal challenge.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Since family court litigants often appear *pro se*, it is doubtful that many unrepresented parents will understand that they have an evidentiary burden, much less how they might meet that burden without the benefit of counsel.

<sup>21</sup> *Stanley v. Illinois*, 405 U.S. 645 (1972) (considering the presumption that unwed fathers are unfit parents) .

<sup>22</sup> Greenberg et al., *supra* n. 11..

<sup>23</sup> This is risky business in a jurisdiction that has a “friendly parent” provision. *See discussion, infra*.

## The Presumption Contradicts Research on Joint Custody

Proponents of presumptive JPC claim that children are much better off when both parents are jointly engaged in their lives.<sup>24</sup> In fact, when parents freely elect to parent cooperatively, and they have the commitment and resources to sustain a shared parenting arrangement without significant levels of conflict, children tend to adjust well to joint custody.<sup>25</sup> However, even in families where joint physical custody is voluntarily chosen, research indicates that it does not always prove to be a stable or desirable model over time.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, given the choice, parents who are able to successfully negotiate appropriate post-dissolution parenting arrangements with little or no conflict rarely opt for joint physical custody, and even more rarely choose a purely equal physical custody arrangement.<sup>27</sup>

The presumption that joint physical custody is in the best interests of the child directly contradicts current research. According to a team of psychologists at Wake Forest University,

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<sup>24</sup> Robert Emery, *THE TRUTH ABOUT CHILDREN AND DIVORCE: DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONS SO YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN CAN THRIVE*, 176 (2004). The unspoken assumption is that parents are naturally involved in their children's lives when, in actuality, they often are not. There is no research to suggest that an uninvolved parent will become involved simply by virtue of a joint parenting arrangement. Anne Opie, *Ideologies of Joint Custody*, 31 *FAM. & CONCILIATION CTS. REV.* 313 (1993); Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, *Child Custody in the Age of Children's Rights: The Search for a Just and Workable Standard*, 33 *FAM. L. Q.* 815 (1999).

<sup>25</sup> One study found that models of shared parenting, like JPC, were a "viable arrangement for a small and distinct group of families who self-selected into [the] arrangement," but noted that "most separating parents who require Court or dispute resolution services to determine their contact and care arrangements unfortunately do not share these characteristics." Jennifer McIntosh & Richard Chisholm, *Cautionary Notes on the Shared Care of Children in Conflicted Parental Separation*, 14 *J. FAM. STUD.* 37 (2008). Christy Buchanan & Parissa Jahromi, *A Psychological Perspective on Shared Custody Arrangements* 43 *WAKE FOREST L. REV.* 419, 425. The economic realities of impoverished families, especially within poor communities of color, can make joint physical custody arrangements especially cumbersome and impractical. Margaret Martin Barry, *The District of Columbia's Joint Custody Presumption: Misplaced Blame and Simplistic Solutions*, 46 *CATH. U. L. REV.* 767 (1997).

<sup>26</sup> Study of joint custody families found that nearly half did not maintain that arrangement over time. Eleanor E. Maccoby & Robert H. Mnookin, *DIVIDING THE CHILD: SOCIAL AND LEGAL DILEMMAS OF CUSTODY*, 103, 300 (1992). In another study, one-third of the parents who voluntarily agreed to joint custody reverted to sole custody for a variety of logistical reasons. Susan Steinman, *The Experience of Children in a Joint Custody Arrangement*, 51 *AM. J. ORTHOPSYCHIATRY* 403 (1981). In yet another study, only one-third of the parents with an initial joint physical custody order maintained that arrangements over time. Margaret A. Little, *The Impact of the Custody Plan on the Family: A Five Year Follow-Up*. Los Angeles County Family Court Services (1991). In the UK, approximately 60% of negotiated parenting arrangements had broken down within two years. Liz Trinder & Joanne Kellett, *The Longer-Term Outcomes of In-Court Conciliation*, United Kingdom Ministry of Justice (2007).

<sup>27</sup> Maccoby & Mnookin, *supra* n. 25 at 300; *See, also*, McIntosh & Chisholm, *supra* n. 24 at 38 (*citing*, Smyth B (Ed) (2004) *Parent Child Contact and Postseparation Parenting Arrangements*. Research Report No. 9, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne).

“[I]mposing joint physical custody on families who are litigating, particularly if litigation is protracted, is highly unlikely to promote the best interests of the children and may in fact do them harm.”<sup>28</sup> This conclusion is reinforced by numerous longitudinal investigations, including two recent studies in Australia following implementation of shared parenting legislation in 2006. The research suggests, among other things, that post-separation shared parenting arrangements can negatively impact children’s emotional and physical development, particularly where the parents are engaged in entrenched conflict.<sup>29</sup>

Significantly, the current research neither absolutely supports nor absolutely rejects joint physical custody arrangements.<sup>30</sup> Rather, it demands “informed and careful consideration...of whether shared care...provides a desirable and viable developmental pathway for each child in the circumstances of each case.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the weight of the research calls for an individualized analysis of whether JPC is in the best interests of the child. Presumptive JPC calls for none. It treats every case the same, regardless of the developmental needs of the children or the level and context of parental conflict.

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<sup>28</sup> Buchanan & Jahromi, *supra* n. 24 at 428.

<sup>29</sup> McIntosh & Chisholm, *supra* n. 24 at 50. In a California study of family court judges, two-thirds concluded that joint custody imposed by presumption led to negative or mixed results for children. Thomas J. Reddy, et al., *Child Custody Decisions: A Survey of Judges* 23 FAM. L. Q. 75, 80 (1989).

<sup>30</sup> There is no one-size-fits-all custody arrangement that works for all families. Even when violence is present in a family, these families should not all be treated identically either. Uniform treatment in any category ends up hurting children most. We should “not assume uniform characteristics or experiences for children who have been exposed to violence perpetrated against their mothers.” Claire Crooks, et al., *Factoring in Effects of Children’s Exposure to Domestic Violence in Determining Appropriate Post-Separation Parenting Plans*, in DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, ABUSE, AND CHILD CUSTODY: LEGAL STRATEGIES AND POLICY ISSUES (Barry Goldstein & Mo Hannah eds., 2009).

<sup>31</sup> McIntosh & Chisholm, *supra* n. 24 at 38.

### **Good Faith Efforts to Rebut the Presumption Can Backfire on Children**

While joint physical custody presumptions are typically rebuttable, good faith attempts to overcome them can backfire under so-called “friendly parent” provisions built into many state custody laws. “Friendly parent” provisions are commonly included among the long lists of “best interest” factors.<sup>32</sup> They ask the court to consider each parent’s willingness to encourage and facilitate frequent and continuing contact between the child and the other parent.<sup>33</sup> A parent who, in good faith, seeks to challenge the JPC presumption implicitly communicates to the court a belief that frequent and continuing contact between the child and the other parent is not good for the child. Even if the parent challenging the JPC presumption does not intend to limit contact between the child and the other parent, the court might draw such an inference from the challenge itself. Consequently, the very act of challenging the presumption can create the perception, whether real or imagined, that the challenging parent would prefer to limit, rather than encourage, contact with the other parent. That perception, in turn, can be – and often is – used against the challenging parent in the court’s best interest of the child analysis.<sup>34</sup> Since a good faith challenge to the JPC presumption represents an effort to protect the child, the very act

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<sup>32</sup> ALA. CODE §30-3-152(a)(3); ALASKA STAT. §25.24.150(c)(6); ARIZ. REV. STAT. §25-403(A)(6); ARK. CODE §9-13-101(b)(2); CAL. FAM. CODE §3040; COLO. REV. STAT. §14-10-124(1.5)(a)(VI); CONN. GEN. STAT. §46b-56(c)(6); FLA. STAT. §61.13(3); 750 ILL. COMP. STAT. 5/602(a)(8); IOWA CODE §598.41(1)(c); KAN. STAT. §60-1610(a)(3)(B)(vi); LA. REV. STAT. Art.134(10); 19-A ME. REV. STAT. §1653.(3)(H); MICH. COMP. LAWS §722.23(j); MINN. STAT. §518.17(13); MO. CODE §452.375(2)(4); NEV. REV. STAT. §125.480(4)(c); N.H. REV. STAT. §461-A:6(l)(e)-(i); N.J. STAT. §9:2-4(c); N.M. STAT. §40-4-9.1(B); OHIO REV. CODE §3109.04(F)(1)(f); OR. REV. STAT. §107.137(1)(f); 23 PA. CONS. STAT. §5303(a)(2); TENN. CODE §36-6-106(a)(10); UTAH CODE 1953 §30-3-10(1)(a)(ii); VA. CODE §20-124.3(6); WIS. STAT. §767.41(5)(10); WYO. STAT. §767.41(5)(10).

<sup>33</sup> *See, e.g.*, MINN. STAT. §518.17(1)(a)(13) (“The best interest of the child’ means all relevant factors to be considered and evaluated by the court including...the disposition of each parent to encourage and permit frequent and continuing contact by the other parent of the child....”).

<sup>34</sup> Allison C. Morrill, Jianya Dai, Samantha Dunn, Iyue Sung, & Kevin Smith, *Child Custody and Visitation Decisions When the Father has Perpetrated Violence Against the Mother*, 11 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 1076 (2005).

of protection can have the ironic effect of placing the child at greater risk of harm.

Consequently, the rebuttal to the JPC presumption works *worst* when a child needs it *most*.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> As a result, a competent attorney might actually counsel his client against challenging the presumption for fear that it could be strategically disadvantageous. Likewise, an informed and genuinely protective parent might think twice before challenging the presumption for fear that the objection could actually put the child in harm's way.

## Presumptive Joint Physical Custody and Domestic Violence

The negative implications of presumptive joint physical custody are compounded for families experiencing domestic violence.<sup>36</sup> Research suggests that batterers are inappropriate candidates for physical custody in general,<sup>37</sup> let alone joint physical custody with the victim parent, and that they serve as poor roles models for their children.<sup>38</sup> “In cases where it is established that a parent presents an ongoing risk of violence to the child or (other) parent...no meaningful parent-child relationship is possible.”<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the procedural and evidentiary burdens of the presumption already noted are exacerbated for victims of domestic violence, and their general vulnerability litigating against their perpetrators places them at an additional disadvantage. In families with a history of violence, JPC is simply not in the best interest of the child.<sup>40</sup>

In families where domestic violence is present, JPC not only requires ongoing contact between the batterer and his children, but greatly increases the amount of contact, including physical contact, with the victim.<sup>41</sup> Joint physical custody increases the “opportunities for abusers to maintain control and to continue or to escalate abuse toward both women and

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<sup>36</sup> Mandating JPC in cases where domestic violence is present is perhaps most troubling due to studies demonstrating that in 30% to 60% of cases where a male partner is violent towards his spouse, children are also direct victims of violence. Jeffrey E. Edelson, *The Overlap Between Child Maltreatment and Woman Battering*, 5 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 134 (1999).

<sup>37</sup> Peter G. Jaffe, et al., *Custody Disputes Involving Allegations of Domestic Violence: Toward a Differentiated Approach to Parenting Plans*, 46 FAM. CT. REV. 500, 515 (2008) (asserting that in families with domestic violence the best parenting arrangement is for sole legal custody and sole physical custody to be assigned to the parent capable of providing a non-violent home); Crooks et al., *supra* n. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Peter G. Jaffe, et al., *Parenting After Domestic Violence: Safety as a Priority in Judging Children’s Best Interest*, 6 J. CTR. FAM., CHILDREN & CTS. 81, 82 (2005).

<sup>39</sup> Jaffe et al., *supra* n. 36 at 515.

<sup>40</sup> “The past and potential behavior of men who batter means that joint custody or sole custody to him is rarely the best option for the safety and well-being of the children.” Daniel G. Saunders, *Child Custody and Visitation Decisions in Domestic Violence Cases: Legal Trends, Risk Factors and Safety Concerns* (2007), [http://www.vawnet.org/category/Documents.php?docid=1134&category\\_id=617](http://www.vawnet.org/category/Documents.php?docid=1134&category_id=617).

<sup>41</sup> Jaffe et al., *supra* n. 37 at 82.

children.”<sup>42</sup> Even after a separation or divorce, batterers use joint physical custody arrangements to continue emotional and verbal abuse of their victims, with the children either forgotten, or worse, placed in the middle.<sup>43</sup> For batterers, JPC is another tool of control by which they can continue to exert power over their victims, despite physical separation or divorce.<sup>44</sup> The violent parent has ample opportunity to continue to coercively control the other parent, possibly diminishing that parent’s capacity to parent fully. When this information is considered in light of the data on separation violence and escalation,<sup>45</sup> it becomes even more apparent that JPC is less a workable parenting arrangement for battered women than a court-sanctioned means for batterers to have continued contact and control over them. Statutory presumptions of JPC effectively endorse batterers’ use of the legal system to maintain control over their victims.<sup>46</sup>

Joint physical custody arrangements in families experiencing domestic violence have negative outcomes for children because the arrangements prolong children’s exposure to violence.<sup>47</sup> Batterers generally continue their abuse and violence and, if they lack access to the primary victim, children often become the main conduit for violence.<sup>48</sup> Giving a violent parent

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<sup>42</sup> Saunders, supra n. 39; Jaffe et al., supra n. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Crooks et al., supra n. 29.

<sup>44</sup> That batterers use custody litigation as a tool of control is validated by evidence that men who abuse their partners contest custody over twice as often as non-abusive fathers. Am. Psychol. Ass’n, VIOLENCE AND THE FAMILY: REPORT OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASS’N PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE ON VIOLENCE AND THE FAMILY (1996), available at <http://www.apa.org/pi/viol&fam.html>.

<sup>45</sup> J.L. Hardesty & G.H. Chung, *Intimate Partner Violence, Parental Divorce, and Child Custody: Directions for Intervention and Future Research*, 55 FAM. REL. 200 (2006); Crooks et al., supra n. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Jaffe et al., *Common Misperceptions in Addressing Domestic Violence in Child Custody Disputes*, 54 JUV. & FAM. CT. J. 57 (2003); J. L. Hardesty & L. H. Ganong, *A Grounded Theory Model of How Women Make Custody Decisions and Manage Co-Parenting with Abusive Former Husbands*, 23 J. OF SOC. & PERS. RELATIONSHIPS 543 (2006).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g. K.M. Kitzmann et al., *Child Witnesses to Domestic Violence: A Meta-analytic Review*, 71 J. OF CONSULTING & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 339 (2003); D.A. Wolfe, *The Effects of Children’s Exposure to Domestic Violence: A Meta-analysis and Critique*, CLINICAL CHILD & FAM. PSYCHOL. REV. 171 (2003).

<sup>48</sup> Janet Johnston et al., *Ongoing Postdivorce Conflict: Effects on Joint Custody and Frequent Access* 59 AM. J. OF ORTHOPSYCHIATRY 576 (finding that forced joint physical custody in families where there is domestic violence leads to children being caught in conflict between parents). Additionally, men who batter are also more likely to abuse their children. Jaffe et al., supra n. 37 at 82.

regular, ongoing contact with the other parent places children in dangerous and highly stressful situations.

Additionally, a legal presumption of JPC gives unfair advantages to the batterer-parent in custody negotiations. A batterer often will want to share physical custody of a child because such an arrangement maximizes his contact with and control over the victim-parent. By contrast, a victim-parent will want to minimize or cease contact with the batterer-parent, and have a desire to protect the child from unsupervised contact with the violent parent. A legal presumption of JPC enormously buttresses the batterer-parent's position, as it is also the starting point for the court's analysis, thus creating an enormous legal hurdle for the protective parent.

Indeed, JPC is dangerous for families where domestic violence is present even if it is "voluntarily" chosen. A battered mother's ability to voluntarily choose a custody arrangement in cooperation with her batterer is questionable at best. Due to the nature of domestic violence and the power and control that batterers exert over their victims, it is unlikely that a cooperative choice of any custody arrangement can occur. While a battered mother may not want to choose a JPC arrangement which will mandate future contact with her batterer, she may be pressured or frightened into this choice.<sup>49</sup> The strong likelihood that battered women are pressured into JPC arrangements is a related but separate subject that practitioners, advocates, and courts should always keep in mind. For this and similar reasons, many states have actually adopted presumptions *against* joint physical custody if domestic violence is present.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See, Penelope E. Bryan, *Killing Us Softly: Divorce Mediation and the Politics of Power*, 40 BUFF. L. REV. 441 (1992); *The Coercion of Women in Divorce Settlement Negotiations*, 74 DENV. U. L. REV. 931 (1997); and *Women's Freedom to Contract at Divorce: A Mask for Contextual Coercion*, 47 BUFF. L. REV. 1153 (1999).

<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., MINN. STAT. 518.17(2)(d) ("...the court shall use a rebuttable presumption that joint legal or physical custody is not in the best interests of the child if domestic abuse...has occurred between the parents.").

Domestic violence is present in a significant number of custody cases,<sup>51</sup> but there is no reliable way to identify and track these cases for special treatment. It is clear that JPC represents a worst-case scenario for families with domestic violence, and because there is no guaranteed way to ensure that those cases are identified and treated differently, a presumption simply should not apply to any families. These presumptions both ignore the frequency with which families with custody disputes are affected by domestic violence and tacitly condone the violence by forcing all families into the very custody arrangement that is most dangerous for battered women and their children. In families where domestic violence is present, joint physical custody arrangements create tremendous safety concerns by allowing substantial opportunities for batterers to access the other parent.

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g. Janet Johnston, *High Conflict Divorce*, 4 THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN 165 (1994) (finding that among one sample population of disputed custody cases in mediation, 70-75% of parental couples had experienced physical aggression in the relationship); Janet Johnston et al., *Allegations and Substantiations of Abuse in Custody-Disputing Families* 43 FAM. CT. REV. 283, 288 (2005).

## Domestic Violence Exceptions to Presumptions of JPC Do Not Work

Many states with statutory presumptions for joint legal or physical custody include language that directs courts *not* to apply the presumption for joint custody if a court finds that domestic violence has occurred between the parents.<sup>52</sup> In fact, some states have statutes directing courts to apply a rebuttable presumption *against* joint legal or physical custody if a court finds that domestic violence has occurred between the parents.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, the exceptions existing in statute today have proved largely futile because of the very nature of domestic violence.

An exception to a JPC presumption for domestic violence fails to provide sufficient protection to battered women and their children, because there is no reliable way for courts to consistently or accurately distinguish custody cases with domestic violence from others.<sup>54</sup> Given conflicting stories from two parents involved in a custody dispute, “[a] naïve professional in the family court system may dismiss or minimize the claims of both spouses or erroneously conclude that the abuse is mutual when it is not.”<sup>55</sup> For many reasons, courts are poorly equipped to make accurate determinations about the presence of violence, thus rendering domestic violence exceptions ineffective. Many victims of domestic violence do not call their experience by labels that make it easily identifiable, especially if their experiences include more aspects of coercive control and less physical violence. A battered woman might not stand up in court and call herself such, partly because she may not recognize her own experience as abuse or battering.

Additionally, victims of domestic violence may have no verifiable proof that the abuse is

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<sup>52</sup> IOWA CODE §598.41(1)(a); N.H. REV. STAT. §461-A:5 (presumption is overcome by presence of domestic violence); TEX. FAM. CODE §153.131 (presumption is automatically overcome by a finding of domestic violence); W.V. CODE §48-9-207 (presumption is overcome by a showing of abuse).

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g. MINN. STAT. 518.17, subd. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Cases of domestic violence often get confused or lumped in with “high conflict” cases. Yet, “minimizing battering as ‘couples conflict’ can result in a failure to institute the proper safeguards for women and children.” Crooks et al., *supra* n. 29.

<sup>55</sup> Jaffe et al., *supra* n. 36 at 507.

occurring. Women might never report the abuse to the police or take other action like seeking protection orders, leaving them without documentation to present to a court. Victims of domestic violence might also fail to self-identify due to very real fears. They may fear retaliation from their batterer for bringing up the violence and attempting to avoid application of the presumption. They might have fear or mistrust of the legal system or worry about child protective services involvement. Victims of domestic violence might also fear that they will not be believed<sup>56</sup> and will have revealed a very painful truth for nothing. Victims' attorneys might discourage victims from disclosing violence because they believe such allegations will make the victim appear vindictive and uncooperative or "unfriendly."<sup>57</sup> In those states that have domestic violence exceptions to legal presumptions for joint physical custody, allegations of domestic violence are rarely made.

Courts might also have difficulty assessing and differentiating between different forms of violence used between parties. Force used in self-defense might look like aggressive violence or battering in the context of a custody battle. An individual's single use of violence might carry the same weight as another individual's use of violent behavior over many years. Courts are ill-equipped to gauge the fear and actual impact an individual's ongoing use of violence has on a family. Courts simply have difficulty identifying domestic violence,<sup>58</sup> thus exceptions to a JPC presumption do not work. An exception is pointless when there is no way to determine the cases to which the exception will apply.

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<sup>56</sup> "Reports of abuse first made in the context of litigation should never be dismissed solely because of the timing of disclosure." *Id.* See also Johnston et al., *supra* n. 50 at 288 (reporting data that allegations of abuse by mothers and fathers was substantiated at near-identical rates, disproving a parental alienation perspective that mothers are more likely to make unfounded allegations).

<sup>57</sup> See discussion of "friendly parent" provisions within the best interest of the child standard, *supra*.

<sup>58</sup> *E.g.*, M. A. Kernic et al., *Children in the Crossfire: Child Custody Determinations Among Couples with a History of Intimate Partner Violence* 11 VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN 991 (2005); Jaffe et al., *supra* n. 37 at 84 ("the intended consequences of domestic violence (i.e., intimidation, silence, and fear)...increase the odds that the court simply will not know enough about the parties to be concerned about safety issues).

## Listen to Children

A presumption of JPC produces bad outcomes for battered women; it forces them to have prolonged contact with their batterers and exposes them to continued violence. A presumption of JPC also leads to continued violence in the lives of children. Recent research demonstrates that exposure to violence has incredible negative impacts on children.<sup>59</sup> Children exposed to domestic violence can have the same levels of emotional and behavioral problems as children who are direct victims of physical or sexual abuse.<sup>60</sup> Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely than other children to be aggressive and exhibit behavioral problems.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, these children display higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms.<sup>62</sup> Specific problems vary depending on the age of the children, but exposure to violence has a developmental impact at every stage of a child's life, including: interruption of brain development (birth-3 years), inappropriate messages that violence is a tool (3-6 years), rationalizing of violence and difficulty forming peer relationships (6-12 years), use of violence in dating relationships, risk-taking behavior and drug use (12+ years).<sup>63</sup>

Although those promoting joint custody frequently minimize the seriousness of domestic violence and suggest that domestic violence should not interfere with a father's rights to custody of children, the research asking children about their experiences tells a different story. In one of only a handful of studies designed specifically to study children's experiences of domestic violence, McGee interviewed 54 children and 48 abused mothers,<sup>64</sup> finding that in 41 of the

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<sup>59</sup> Peter G. Jaffe et al., *Common Misperceptions in Addressing Domestic Violence in Child Custody Disputes*, 54 JUV. & FAM. CT. J. 57 (2003).

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at 60.

<sup>61</sup> Crooks et al., *supra* n. 29.

<sup>62</sup> G. Margolin, *Posttraumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents Exposed to Family Violence*, 38 PROF. PSYCHOL.: RES. & PRAC. 613 (2007).

<sup>63</sup> Crooks et al., *supra* n. 29.

<sup>64</sup> C. McGee, CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, 15 (2000).

families (85%) children were eyewitnesses to violence,<sup>65</sup> in 25 of the families (52%) children were physically abused, in 6 families (11%) children were sexually abused, in 29 families (60%) were emotionally abused, 15 families (31%) experienced controlling behavior, and in 28 families (58%), children overheard violence.<sup>66</sup> The children gave many examples of emotional abuse, such as:

- Calling child a “little slut”;
- Telling child they “should have been an abortion”;
- Abusing the children’s pets;
- Deliberately breaking the children’s toys;
- Threatening to burn the house down;
- Telling the children their mother/grandmother doesn’t love them;
- Telling the children the mother was having an affair, had AIDS and was dying, and was a drug user.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to emotional abuse, physical abuse was present in more than half of the families in the study. Hitting the children was the most common form of reported physical abuse, followed by throwing the children, throwing objects at children, and pushing children who were trying to protect their mothers out of the way. In addition, children were injured incidentally to the abuser’s attack against the mother, including a child who was burned when the abuser threw a kettle of boiling water at the mother.<sup>68</sup> Respondents in the study reported a variety of other physically abusive behaviors such as shaking a baby, strapping a child to a bed with a belt, pushing a child’s head into a dirty dishwasher, and dragging a child down stairs.<sup>69</sup>

A variety of cruel and controlling behaviors were also reported in McGee’s study. Thirty-one percent of the families noted controlling behaviors that often mirrored abusers’ efforts to control mothers. Common controlling behaviors included not allowing children to play and

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<sup>65</sup> *Id.* at 49.

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> *Id.* at 50-51.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* at 53.

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

confining children to certain areas of the home, including locking children in their rooms.<sup>70</sup> The abusers used a variety of intimidation tactics to control the children, including holding children and their mothers hostage, constantly staring at them, depriving children of sleep, telling children's friends not to talk to them, and stalking.<sup>71</sup>

Although respondents were not questioned about sexual abuse, sexual abuse was reported against 11% of the children in McGee's study. The children described the emotional abuse that accompanied the sexual abuse, and their fears about what would happen to them if they disclosed (often based on the abusers' explicit threats), and their fears about not being believed.<sup>72</sup>

Given such graphic experiences by children, any custody process needs to incorporate the age-appropriate wishes of children.<sup>73</sup> More specifically, children expressing disinclination or outright rejection of a violent parent need to be respected, and their wishes honored.<sup>74</sup> Courts and evaluators can be too quick to second guess a child when voicing fear of and resistance to a parent, even where the parents has a documented history of violence. Courts listen to parents, but they should also endeavor to listen to children, as the determinations and custody arrangements arguably have greater effect on their lives.<sup>75</sup> Putting limits on parents' access to their children is always problematic; but one parent's violence toward children or the other parent needs to be taken into account. A presumption of JPC, however, does just the opposite, turning a blind eye to violence and treating all families as if they shared the same safe family relations.

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<sup>70</sup> *Id.* at 54.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.* at 55.

<sup>72</sup> *Id.* at 56-57.

<sup>73</sup> Jaffe, et al., *supra* n. 36 at 510.

<sup>74</sup> *Id.*

<sup>75</sup> This is not typically the case. *See, e.g.* Judith Wallerstein & Julia M. Lewis, *Disparate Parenting and Step-Parenting with Siblings in the Post-Divorce Family: Report from a 10-Year Longitudinal Study*, 13 J. FAM. STUD. 224, 234 (2007) (explaining that "courts [are] reluctant to acknowledge the child's influential role...[and] have often thought of the child as a passive vessel for carrying one parent's agenda." The study's findings demonstrated that to the contrary, children often played a role independent from that of their parents).

## Conclusion

Presumptive joint physical custody lacks the requisite foundation for sound public policy and errs on the side of risk instead of caution. Contrary to scientific evidence, the presumption is based on the faulty assumption that shared parenting is always in the best interest of the child, without regard to what is actually going on in the lives of the people directly affected. The most recent literature demonstrates that joint physical custody works best “in a small and distinct group of families, who self-select into [such] arrangements.”<sup>76</sup> Consequently, the presumption provides no benefit for those families who are best suited for JPC because those are the families who are most likely to choose it without court intervention. The presumption would only operate in cases least suited for JPC because those are the cases in which violence and conflict are most entrenched. While the presumption may offer some short-term administrative ease, it can lead to long-term administrative problems:

It stands to reason that custody decisions that are more formulaic and presumption-driven will leave litigants feeling that their individual circumstances have not been heard or considered. This result may have real consequences, including increased litigation, decreased post-decision involvement by the “losing parent,” and decreased compliance with court orders.<sup>77</sup>

Most importantly, however, while presumptive JPC pays lip service to the best interest of the child, in actuality, it fails to account for the interests of the child altogether. In fact, the individual child does not factor into the equation at all. A presumption that ignores the safety and well-being of children, especially children who are at heightened risk of harm due to the presence of domestic violence, is bad public policy.

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<sup>76</sup> McIntosh & Chisholm, *supra* n. 24 at 38.

<sup>77</sup> Greenberg et al., *supra* n. 11 at 163-64.

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