

Sharing & Caring

Division of parental leave from a psychological perspective

Monica Lidbeck

Psykologiska institutionen

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Fakultetsopponent:

Docent Malin Bergström

Institutionen för medicin, Karolinska Institutet och Centre for Health Equity Studies, Karolinska Institutet och Stockholms universitet

Avhandlingen baseras på följande delarbeten:

- I. Lidbeck, M., & Boström, P.K. (2020). 'I believe it's important for kids to know they have two parents': Parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave in Sweden. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, in press, 1 September, 2020.
- II. Lidbeck, M., Bernhardsson, S., & Tjus, T. (2018). Division of parental leave and perceived parenting stress among mothers and fathers. *Journal of reproductive and infant psychology*, 36(4), 406-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2018.1468557>
- III. Lidbeck, M., & Bernhardsson, S. (2019). Having it all – perceived coparenting quality and work-family balance in the context of parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2019.1704399>
- IV. Lidbeck, M., & Bernhardsson, S. (2020) What happens to the couple relationship when sharing parental leave? A prospective, longitudinal study. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, in press, 2 August, 2020.



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Abstract

Lidbeck, M. (2020). *Sharing & Caring – Division of parental leave from a psychological perspective*. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg.

Parents' preconditions for early parenting vary depending on social and cultural contexts. This thesis provides a psychological perspective on parenting and family life within the context of parental leave in Sweden, framed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. In Sweden, both parents have the same right to parental leave, yet little is known about parents' experiences and how parents' division of leave influences their wellbeing and interaction with each other, and their engagement in working life.

The aim of the thesis was to explore how parents' division of parental leave influences parenting and family life from a psychological perspective, by focussing on parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave and how they perceive the shift in caregiving (Study I), and how parents' division of leave influences perceived parenting stress, coparenting quality, work-family balance, and the couple relationship (Studies II-IV).

In Study I, parents' experiences of equally shared parental leave were explored, with a focus on the shift when mothers on parental leave returned to work and fathers took over the primary caregiving responsibility. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 parents of 12 infants. The main findings were that paternal involvement in the process of shifting parental leave and the mother's trust in the father's capability facilitated the shift in caregiving responsibilities, and that the parents' shared experiences seemed to increase their understanding of each other's everyday life.

For Studies II-IV, 280 parents recruited from 25 child healthcare centres in Region Västra Götaland answered a questionnaire at six and 18 months after their child was born.

Study II showed that fathers who shared parental leave equally were less likely to perceive parenting stress 18 months after childbirth than those who shared unequally, and that no such association existed among mothers.

Study III showed that both mothers and fathers who shared parental leave equally perceived higher coparenting quality 18 months after childbirth, that mothers who shared parental leave equally were more satisfied with their partner's involvement in caregiving, and that both mothers and fathers who shared parental leave equally reported a better work-family balance.

Study IV showed an association between equal division of parental leave and perceived couple relationship quality 18 months after childbirth in fathers, but not in mothers. The association was not affected by parenting stress or coparenting quality.

The thesis provides new knowledge about the relation between division of parental leave and psychological aspects of parenting and family life. The findings suggest that parents' choices regarding parental leave have consequences from the individual level to the societal level, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's theory. Spending time with the child and sharing caregiving responsibilities makes a difference for parental roles and relationships within the family, especially for fathers. The findings have implications for discussions about parental roles in family support settings, such as parental groups, and for the development of family policy programmes.

Keywords: parental leave, coparenting, couple relationship, equality, family life, father involvement, parenting, parenting stress, work-family balance

Monica Lidbeck, Antenatal Care Unit and Child Health Unit, Regionhälsan
Region Västra Götaland, Kungsgatan 11, 411 19 Gothenburg, Sweden
Phone +46 727213670, E-mail: monica.lidbeck@vregion.se
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