

## **Developmental Best Interests of the Child: At What Age Can a Child Survive Overnights without Injury?**

First in a Series

By Faye Snyder, PsyD

Make no mistake about it. There is a theoretical war in the field of psychology, just as there are adversarial positions in legal proceedings. There are different motives on each side, even amongst researchers. In the greater field of psychology, there is theory and research which supports the point of view of the parents, and there is theory and research which supports the needs of the child. In developmental psychology, we need to remember the needs of the child. In the courts, we need to remember the child's *best interests*. When we don't take these concerns into consideration, the child becomes an adult who is less fortified for life than he or she could have been. It is all about "how high is your bar" we hold and how much we are willing to tear the child apart for the so-called needs of the parent(s).

It fascinates me that there is so little custody research on the needs of children under the age of three years of age, while there is major research on the impact of daycare on children and the need for an infant and small child to have one continuous caregiver. That is our evolutionary design. We cannot suddenly arrive at an age of technology and throw out our design without major consequences to children and ultimately society. The results of such capricious treatment of children are that, thus far, children are much wilder, tougher, and less emotionally healthy than they used to be in only a few generations. When I was a child the problems in school amounted to chewing gum and cutting in line. Now the problems involve drugs, fights, domestic violence, and yes, mass murder. We are violating our design, and we can't see it.

Babies were born to stay with their mothers and gradually move out into the world, where their fathers reigned. *That* is the genetic design. Period. This design results from hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. This truth confronts feminism, regretfully. I was a feminist through the 60s and 70s. I am a feminist now. I believe women are just as smart and productive as men in the work place. I think women are on an equal par with men, in all ways. Only, we have a tether. If we elect to have children, we need a plan in which we can stay home with the baby for the first three years; we can provide so that our husband or mate can stay home with the baby; or we accept that the nanny is mom, insuring that we do not lose or fire that nanny for any offense less than the Department of Children's Services would act on. That is what parental responsibility requires. We love our child enough to insure that he or she has a continuous caregiver, even if it isn't us.

Earlier researchers interpreted the data differently, because abandoned children frequently develop Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), the primary symptom of which is premature independence. Jubilant researchers reported that the earlier children were put into daycare, the more independent they were. These researchers were not qualified to assess children. They knew very little about attachment theory and the reactions or apparent adaptations children have to trauma.

However, trauma and attachment researchers are reviewing older research and conducting more careful studies, and the fat lady has sung. The jury is in. There is a great deal of research on daycare today which supports the importance of a continuous and unbroken bond. Researchers are proving that the earlier a child is put in daycare, the more aggressive and prematurely independent they become. They have not only assessed the children's behavior for RAD, they have tested their cortisol levels. Children who attend daycare before the age of three have spiked levels of cortisol throughout the day. These raised levels continue in a state of hypervigilance for a lifetime. The child organizes his or her personality around these formative experiences, and mistrust becomes a world view, that is, a projection upon others which becomes self-fulfilling. They cannot enjoy healthy intimacy and trust, as they could have otherwise. It's a shame, and it doesn't matter, because many of these children still fit into what is considered normal. It's a matter of "how low is your bar." Children suffer when they are shipped out and when they have rotating caregivers.

Unfortunately, child custody research has not caught up to daycare research. Child custody evaluators still write and teach that it is alright to give an infant overnight visits with the other parent. Until the research catches up, we can borrow from daycare research. I offer judges a measure to assess and see for themselves. Unfortunately, this measure is a way for judges to appraise damage done. Hopefully, once they see it for themselves, then they will refrain from making such recommendations in the future. Since it is against the laws of ethics in psychology law for us to experiment upon human subjects, I would ask that judges who conduct this research keep a record of their findings and submit them to me. I will collect and publish the data.

Before you send a child for overnights for the first time have the child sit in the arms of the mother (hopefully in chambers, where they are both comfortable), and see if the mother can achieve an intimate gaze from her baby. If she can't, the trust has already been broken. See if the father can achieve the same gaze. Then, after the child has suffered a number of overnights (actually, one will do it), test the gaze again. You will notice that the infant will not gaze into mommy's eyes lovingly. This infant has committed herself to never trusting Mommy, or anyone, for that matter, again. She will not give her heart away again, ever. It was too painful. She thought she would die. She will organize her personality around avoiding such faith and intimacy ever again. This infant, will instead, change the subject, I call it. She will point to other things. Most tuned-out parents interpret this behavior as curiosity and intelligence. What has happened is a permanent change in personality or temperament.

*Dr. Faye Snyder is a professor of developmental psychology, pathological behavior, and parenting theory at California State University, Northridge. She is a licensed marriage and family therapist. She is founder of The Institute for Professional Parenting (TIPP), a non-profit organization. She is a child custody evaluator and available to the courts for assessment on the origins of criminal behavior. She can be reached by calling 661-257-1020. Send correspondence to TIPP, 28416 Constellation Road, Valencia, CA 91355.*

*The second article will be on how much separation a child can handle, even while with the other parent. The third article will offer the research results from other venues.*