

Removal Is a Separation: What the Research Means for Child Welfare Courts

For the Supreme Court of Texas Children's Commission • L. Brooks McKenzie, PhD • Nov. 6, 2026

The finding. A parent works as part of a child's regulatory system. Removal, placement changes, and limited visitation interrupt that system, and the research on stress shows extended separations carry a cost of their own. When a child must leave a home, the least disruptive safe option is a fit parent or relative the child is already attached to.

1. A parent regulates the child's brain. Gee and colleagues (Psychological Science, 2014) found that in children aged 4 to 10, viewing their mother's face suppressed amygdala (threat-center) activity and shifted its link to the prefrontal cortex toward the mature pattern; children made fewer errors on an emotional self-control task beside their mother. The effect was absent in adolescents, marking childhood as a sensitive period. Limits: 23 children and 30 adolescents, mothers only, laboratory task.

2. Stress buffering belongs to each relationship, and long separations remove it. Hostinar, Sullivan and Gunnar (Psychological Bulletin, 2014) report that caregiver buffering of the cortisol stress system is "repeatedly documented by the end of this first year," that attachment security "is a relationship quality, not a trait of the child," and that extended separations raised cortisol in all toddlers studied. Limits: mechanism evidence incomplete; much from animal studies; no human study of fathers as buffers.

3. Losing a parent has measured long-run effects. McLanahan, Tach and Schneider (Annual Review of Sociology, 2013) reviewed 47 studies built to separate cause from selection: strong evidence that father absence increases externalizing behavior, harm to adult mental health, and "very robust" evidence of higher substance use, holding in sibling comparisons. Limits: effects smaller than in simple comparisons; weak for adult earnings and marriage.

3a. Time with each parent builds the relationship. Fabricius and Suh (Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 2017; N = 116) found that more overnights with fathers in infancy and at age 2 were associated with better young-adult relationships with both parents, with father-child scores highest at equal overnights. The associations held in families where a court or mediator imposed the plan over a parent's objection. Limits: correlational, retrospective parent reports, college-student sample; the authors state the findings "do not establish causality."

3b. Time carries a parent's good care to the child. Sandler, Wheeler and Braver (Journal of Family Psychology, 2013; N = 141 children aged 9 to 18 in court-identified high-conflict families) found that the link between a parent's positive parenting and fewer child mental health problems was moderated by overnights: "high levels of overnight visits are only beneficial when positive parenting is provided." Limits: cross-sectional, child self-report, about 40 percent participation, ages 9 and up only.

3c. Two homes, at population scale. Bergström and colleagues (Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, 2015; N = 147,839 Swedish sixth and ninth graders) found children in joint physical custody reported fewer psychosomatic problems than children living mostly or only with one parent, though more than children in intact families. Limits: cross-sectional; associations weakened after adjusting for material resources and parent-child relationships.

3d. Stress in two homes. Turunen (IUSSP conference paper, 2013; Swedish Surveys of Living Conditions 2001 to 2003; n = 853 children of separated parents) found children in shared physical custody had lower odds of reporting frequent stress (odds ratio 0.58) after controls including parental disagreement and parent-child conflict. Limits: the author calls the results “tentative”; cross-sectional; single self-report item.

4. Safety turns on the facts, not the home’s status. In Child Maltreatment 2023 (HHS, Table 3-9), mothers acting alone were perpetrators for 37.2 percent of maltreated children and fathers acting alone for 24.6 percent. These are group figures and say nothing about any individual parent.

5. Texas law already names these harms. Tex. Const. art. I, § 19 (due course of law). Fam. Code § 153.001(a) (frequent and continuing contact with fit parents). Fam. Code § 261.001(1) defines abuse as “acts or omissions,” including permitting emotional injury; DFPS’s rule, 40 TAC § 707.453, lists depression, anxiety, aggression, and withdrawal from relationships as that injury.

For the Commission’s committees

- Prevention and Trauma Informed Care: treat each removal and each placement change as a separation event with its own cost, weighed against the risk at home.
- Parent Resources and Standards of Representation: identify and engage the noncustodial parent and relatives at the first hearing.
- Training: bench guidance on relationship-specific attachment, using validated measures scored by certified coders as one input, never a verdict.
- Data: report placement changes and time to reunification or placement with a parent, by parent.

What would change this. Well-designed studies showing that removal to non-relative care, or reduced contact with a fit parent, improves child outcomes as a group after accounting for selection.

Limits, stated plainly. The brain and stress studies are small group findings; the family-structure evidence is observational with small-to-moderate effects. Where a parent is proven dangerous, removal from that parent is the answer; the point is that removal itself is never cost-free.