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How "Woozling" Deprives Babies of Fathering Time (<http://family-studies.org/how-woozling-deprives-babies-of-fathering-time/>)

by Linda Nielsen (<http://family-studies.org/author/lindanielsen/>)

June 23, 2014 (<http://family-studies.org/how-woozling-deprives-babies-of-fathering-time/>)

Highlights

- *How experts became (wrongly) convinced that young kids of separated parents shouldn't stay overnight with their dads.*

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- *We have a responsibility to examine carefully the studies that receive the most media attention.*

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(<http://www.warshak.com/store/cr53.html>) agree with the conclusion reached by psychologist Richard Warshak in his recent research paper (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/law/20/1/46/>): there is no scientific evidence that justifies limiting or postponing overnighting until children of separated parents reach the age of four.

You're also probably unaware that only six studies have compared overnighting to non-overnighting infants and toddlers —three of which found more positive outcomes for the overnighters, and only one of which found negative effects. That one study has received the most publicity and has also been the most highly criticized for its flaws and questionable conclusions. Unfortunately, the mistaken belief that overnighting is "bad" lives

Have you heard that children under the age of four should live primarily, or exclusively, with their mothers after their parents separate because too much overnighting in their studies or people (http://ifstudies.org/people/) or problems—especially for infants? Have you read that babies and toddlers frequently spend the night at their father's house are less securely attached to their mothers and are more irritable, anxious, and stressed than those who only spend time with their nonresidential fathers during the day?

If so, then you—along with many lawyers, judges, and policy makers—have been misled. You are unlikely to know that 110 international experts

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on, too often resulting in custody decisions and custody laws that deprive these very young children of overnight care from their fathers.

So I wanted to find out how and why so many people—including well-educated professionals involved in making custody decisions and reforming custody laws—came to believe that overnighting had been “proven” to be so damaging. As I explain in a recently published article, the answer involves a process (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/law/20/2/164/>) I call *woozling*. The term comes from the children’s story where Winnie the Pooh and his friends become obsessed with the idea that they are being stalked by a frightful beast they call a woozle. In reality, there is nothing to fear because there are no woozle “footprints”; the footprints they see are their own as they keep circling the tree. They were deceived by faulty “data.” Using Winnie’s imaginary woozle as an analogy, the sociologist Richard Gelles coined the word “woozle” to refer to a belief that takes hold in the general public but that is based on inaccurate, partial, or seriously flawed data. But because the faulty conclusion is repeated so often, most people embrace it as the truth.

So how are woozles depriving the youngest children of overnight fathering time? In large part, the answer has to do with a single Australian study that has frequently been cited as “scientific evidence” against overnighting. The message that arose from this 2010 study was this: Babies who overnight more than three times a month and toddlers who overnight more than nine times a month are more irritable, inattentive, physically stressed, anxious, insecure, and wary than other children. They are also “severely distressed” with their mothers, and they wheeze more often due to stress. Overlooking the fact that on four of the six measures the overnighters were no different from the non-overnighters and never mentioning the study’s flaws, many journalists reported on the study under such alarming headlines as “Infants struggle in shared care” and “Shared custody a mistake for under-2’s.”

I set out to peel back the layers of the many woozles arising from this study. For example, the “wheezing woozle” claimed that overnighting caused babies to be so stressed that they wheezed more often. But as most pediatricians and parents know, infant wheezing can be caused by many factors having nothing to do with stress, like mold, pets, cigarette smoke, and carpets in the home. Add to that another medical fact: infant wheezing is often difficult to detect even for doctors, let alone for mothers who were asked to answer only one question (“Does your child wheeze more than four nights a week?”). And even for diehards who insist that the wheezing was measured accurately and was caused by stress, the woozle ignores the fact that toddlers who frequently overnighted wheezed *the least*.

[read-this-1-sentence/373893/](http://online.library.wiley.com/enhanced/doi/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2014.02893.x))

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Then there was the "whining woozle," claiming that overnighting made babies more irritable and more "severely distressed"—which was interpreted to mean they were not securely attached to their moms. The reality? The overnighting babies had exactly the same mean score on irritability as babies from intact families. Then, too, the babies who frequently overnighted were no more irritable than those who never overnighted.

As for "severe distress," the overnighters' scores on the behavioral problems test were well within normal range. And those behaviors that were considered signs of a toddler's "severe distress"—kicking, biting, or getting angry at their mom, gagging on food or refusing to eat, being clingy and crying when mothers were leaving—turned out to be behaviors reported by nearly 50 percent of Australian moms of toddlers in a separate nationwide survey. In short, the severe distress and whining woozles rest on shaky ground.

Especially in matters as important as depriving children of fathering time, we need to ask ourselves: Am I being woozled in this report about the "scientific evidence"? Fortunately, there are journalists who are not so easily bamboozled and whose investigative reporting raises public awareness about woozled data. Indeed, this has happened in Australia, where the journalist Bettina Arndt investigated the study (<http://www.theage.com.au/national/empty-days-lonely-nights-20140428-37e3e.html?rand=1398717331120>) that I had written about in my woozling paper. By revealing the woozles that the study had created, Arndt's reporting led several organizations to reexamine their recommendations against overnighting.

But even without the help of journalists, we have a responsibility to examine more carefully the studies that receive the most media attention. Otherwise, we can end up like Winnie the Pooh: woozled into being afraid of something that should never have aroused our fear at all.

Linda Nielsen is a professor of educational and adolescent psychology at Wake Forest University. This post was adapted from her article "Woozles: Their Role in Custody Law Reform, Parenting Plans and Family Court" (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/law/20/2/164/>).

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P.O. Box 7967
Charlottesville, VA 22906
info@ifstudies.org (<mailto:info@ifstudies.org>)
434.260.1770 (tel:434.260.1770)

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