Relocation After Separation and Divorce: What the Social Science Can and Cannot Tell Us

AFCC ONTARIO

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Families on the Move

Friday, October 23, 2026
9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Ontario Bar Association
Suite 200, 20 Toronto Street, Toronto

Michael Saini, Ph.D., M.S.W., R.S.W.
Factor-Inwentash Chair in Law and Social Work
Co-Director of MSW/JD Program
Cross-Appointed with the Faculty of Law (Associate Professor)

FACTOR-INWENTASH
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



Does relocation harm children?

- The question has often been too simple.
- A better question is:
  - Under what conditions, for which children, and through which mechanisms does relocation affect adjustment?

Why relocation disputes arise after separation

- Separation often triggers two interconnected challenges:
  - Housing: One or both parents may need to move, sometimes repeatedly.
  - Parenting: Moving can require changes to children's living and contact arrangements
- Separation increases residential mobility, and some moves become parenting disputes

(Mikolai et al., 2020; Kleinepier et al., 2021; Kostense, 2026)





Relocation Defined in the Social Science Literature

- Generally refers to a parent's proposed move with a child to a substantially different geographic location from the other parent.
- Difference between local moves, which usually do not materially affect parenting arrangements, from moves that may disrupt the child's contact with the other parent.
- No consistent distance threshold for defining relocation.
  - The significance depends in part on the move's effect on parenting time and parent–child contact.

(Department of Justice Canada, 2013)

Nature of the Problem

The balance between the aspirations of the moving parent and the non-resident parent who wants the children to remain in their current surroundings (Van Schalkwyk, 2005).

This typically requires changing an existing parenting plan arrangement because of the new distance between the child and the non-moving parent.





The Relocation Dilemma

- Limited room for compromise:
  - The move/no-move decision can be all-or-nothing, making mediation difficult. (Morrow, 2025)
- The rise of conflict:
  - Relocation may intensify existing tensions, but family conflict and other stressors also matter. (Kostense, 2026)
- - Children may feel caught in the middle:
  - Parental conflict can create loyalty conflicts and emotional strain. (Kostense, 2026)
- The challenge is not simply the move itself, but how parents manage disagreement and its impact on children.

Why relocation is so difficult

A single move can **simultaneously** change many aspects of a child's life:



Views from the Field

- Austin et al., (2016) sampled 90 child custody evaluators in the United States about their attitudes and beliefs in child custody relocation cases.
  - Participants found many risk, protective, and specific relocation factors important.
  - The triad of past parental involvement, support for the other parent, and child's age were afforded the most importance.



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Biases

- Fabregas et al., (2020) completed a case survey of Spanish family law judges (*N* = 30) and asked them to complete a assess a case using the criteria proposed in the scientific literature.
  - Observed a third of the judges tending to authorize relocation requests and another third tending to deny them, indicating the presence of biases or presumptions.


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Guidance to the Field?

- The field is replete with summary reports and literature reviews
- Various factors considered regarding potential impact and long-term consequences.
- Family court professionals are given the daunting task of sorting through the conflicting and competing interests.



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A Critical Review of Relocation Research Specific to Separation and Divorce

MICHAEL SAINI
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

DARIA ALLAN-EBRON
Children's Aid Society of the Region of Peel, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

JESSICA BARNES
Hamilton Catholic Children's Aid Society, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Relocation, as an issue in the context of family law, typically involves the proposed move of a separated or divorced parent with a child to a new residence a substantial distance away from the non–moving parent. Based on a comprehensive review of the empirical evidence, 11 studies that focused on relocation within the context of separation and divorce were located, retrieved and appraised based on a common standard for assessing the methodological quality of the studies. Results of the critical appraisal found that the majority of social science research studies on relocation are of poor quality. Overall, the project's findings demonstrate the need to move away from oversimplified considerations for relocation and to embrace a more comprehensive approach to fully capture the various factors that are relevant when considering the strengths and limitations of relocation.

KEYWORDS divorce, evidence-based, mobility, parenting plan, relocation

Child custody disputes involving relocation pose significant and unique challenges to legal and mental health professionals within the family court system. Gottfried (2003) noted that "the needs of both parents to secure

Address correspondence to Michael Saini, PhD, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 246 Bloor St. West, Toronto, ON M5S 1A1, Canada. E-mail: michael.saini@utoronto.ca

Where the evidence stood in 2015

- Saini et al. (2015) for Justice Canada
  - 11 empirical studies
  - Considerable methodological weakness
  - Inconsistent definitions of relocation
  - Heavy reliance on retrospective reports
  - Limited longitudinal evidence
  - Limited child voice
  - No high-quality studies
  - No Canadian child-outcome studies

- Conclusion: individualized assessment was necessary.



What did we get right?

- The earlier framework correctly emphasized:
  - Safety
  - Child adjustment
  - Child perspective
  - Developmental stage
  - Parent-child relationships
  - Parenting functioning
  - Communication
  - Distance
  - Travel costs
  - Reasons for relocation
  - Social support

What has changed since 2015?

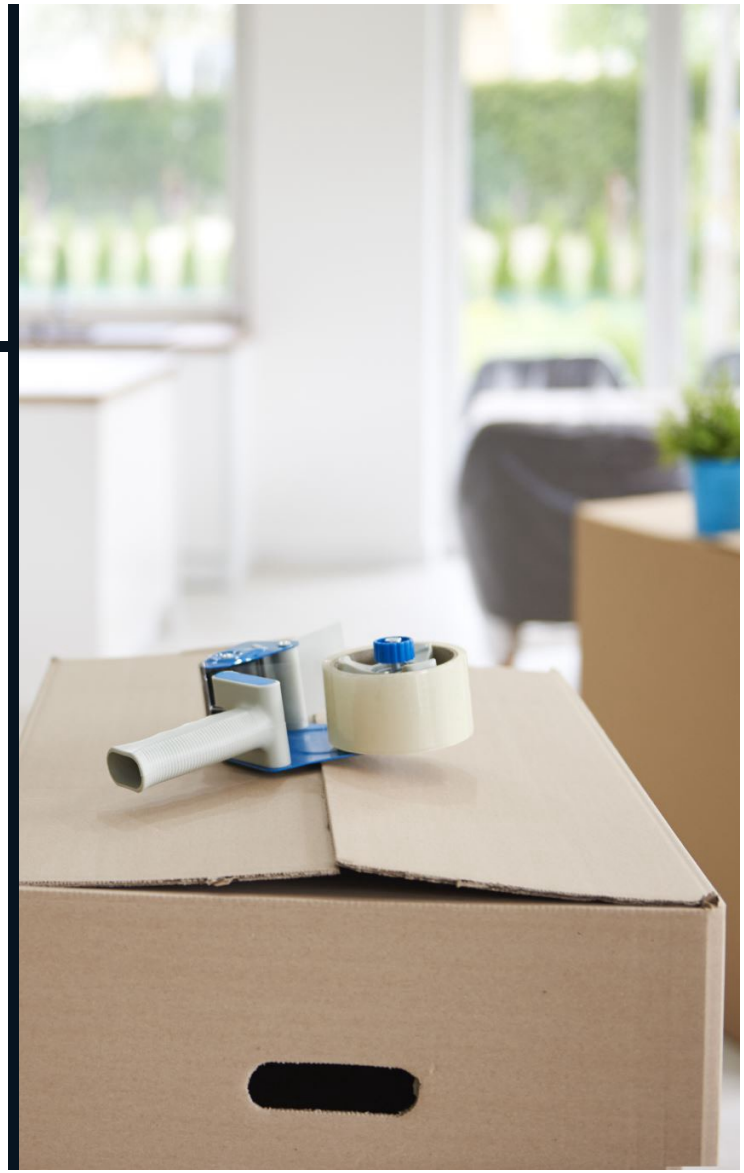
- The research now includes more:
  - longitudinal research
  - child-perspective studies
  - evidence on denied relocation
  - attention to conflict and family violence
  - attention to travel, peers, and support systems
  - empirical legal decision-making research
- (Austin et al. 2016; Fabregas et al., 2020; Koller, 2017; Kostense, 2024, 2026a, 2026b; Mikolai et al., 2019; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2018)



Relocation is not one exposure

- Research has examined:
  - General residential mobility
  - Post-separation residential mobility
  - Long-distance parent-child separation
  - Child relocation with a parent
  - Parent relocation without the child
  - Contested legal relocation
- Related, but not interchangeable.

(Kostense, 2024; Stevenson et al., 2018)



Relocation as ecological reorganization

- A move may reorganize the child's:
  - Relationships
  - Routines
  - Resources
  - Risks
  - Social world

(Mikolai et al., 2019, 2020; Kostense, 2026b)

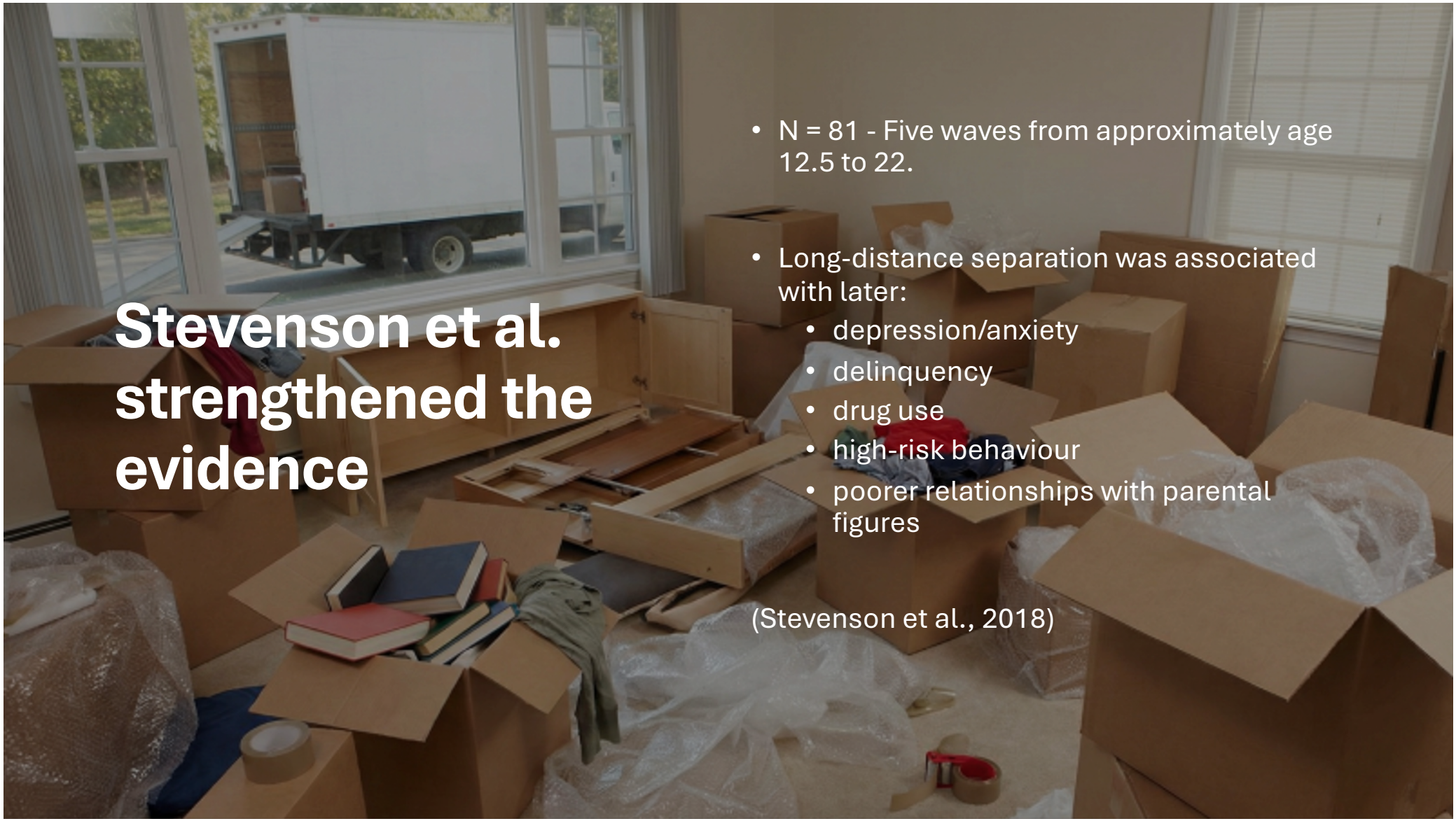


Children's psychological and behavioural adjustment

- Some studies associate long-distance parental separation with:
  - depression and anxiety symptoms
  - behavioural difficulties
  - delinquency/risk behaviour
  - lower perceived mattering to parents
  - poorer parent-child relationships
- But: association does not establish causation.

(Braver et al., 2003; Fabricius & Braver, 2006; Koller, 2016; Stevenson et al., 2018)





Stevenson et al. strengthened the evidence

- N = 81 - Five waves from approximately age 12.5 to 22.

- Long-distance separation was associated with later:
  - depression/anxiety
  - delinquency
  - drug use
  - high-risk behaviour
  - poorer relationships with parental figures

(Stevenson et al., 2018)

But we still do not have the causal answer

- Even stronger observational studies cannot fully determine whether poorer outcomes reflect:
  - relocation itself OR
  - the family circumstances associated with relocation

- Potential confounds include:
  - Pre-existing parental conflict
  - Family violence
  - Economic stress
  - Parent-child relationship difficulties
  - Repartnering
  - Housing instability
  - Other stressful life events

(Fabricius & Braver, 2006; Stevenson et al., 2018; Kostense, 2026a)





Distance matters through relationships

- What relationship is being placed at a distance?

- Consider:
  - Historical caregiving
  - Emotional closeness
  - Frequency of involvement
  - Reliability
  - Developmental importance
  - Safety

(Braver et al., 2003; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2018)

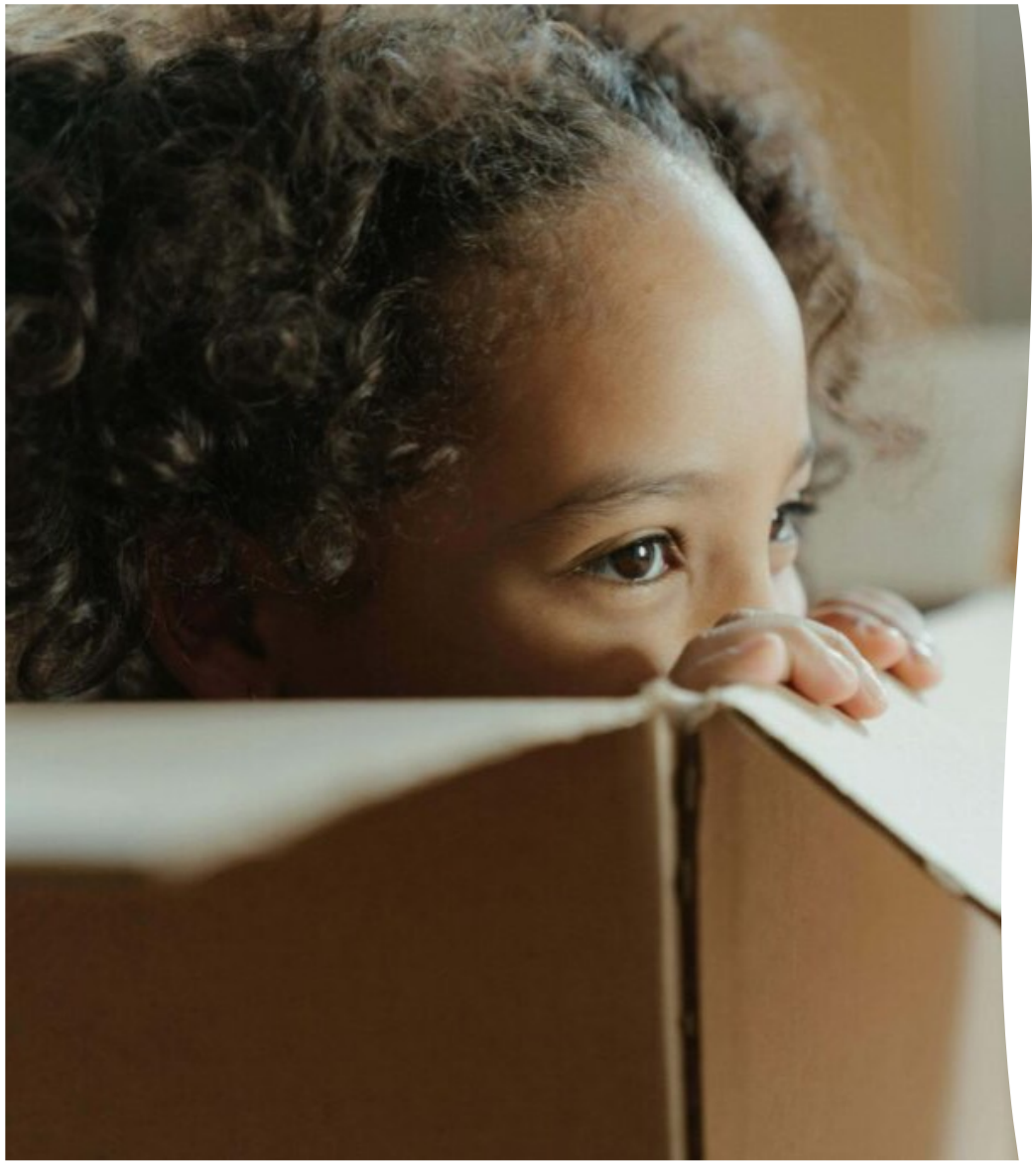
Adjusting to the place is not the same as adjusting to the relationship

- Children may successfully:
  - change schools
  - make new friends
  - settle into a new community

- while still struggling with:
  - reduced parent contact
  - loss of ordinary involvement
  - travel burden
  - relational distance

(Parkinson & Cashmore, 2018; Kostense, 2026b)





Child voice is more than a preference

- Children and young people value:
  - being informed
  - being consulted
  - understanding what is happening
  - having their concerns acknowledged
- But participation does not mean assigning them responsibility for the decision.

(Taylor et al., 2010; Gollop & Taylor, 2012; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2016; Kostense, 2026b)

Peer relationships are not a side issue

- May strongly shape adjustment, especially for older children and adolescents:
  - Friends
  - School
  - Sports
  - Employment
  - Clubs and activities
  - Community identity

(Norford & Medway, 2002; Taylor et al., 2010; Cashmore & Parkinson, 2016; Kostense, 2026b)

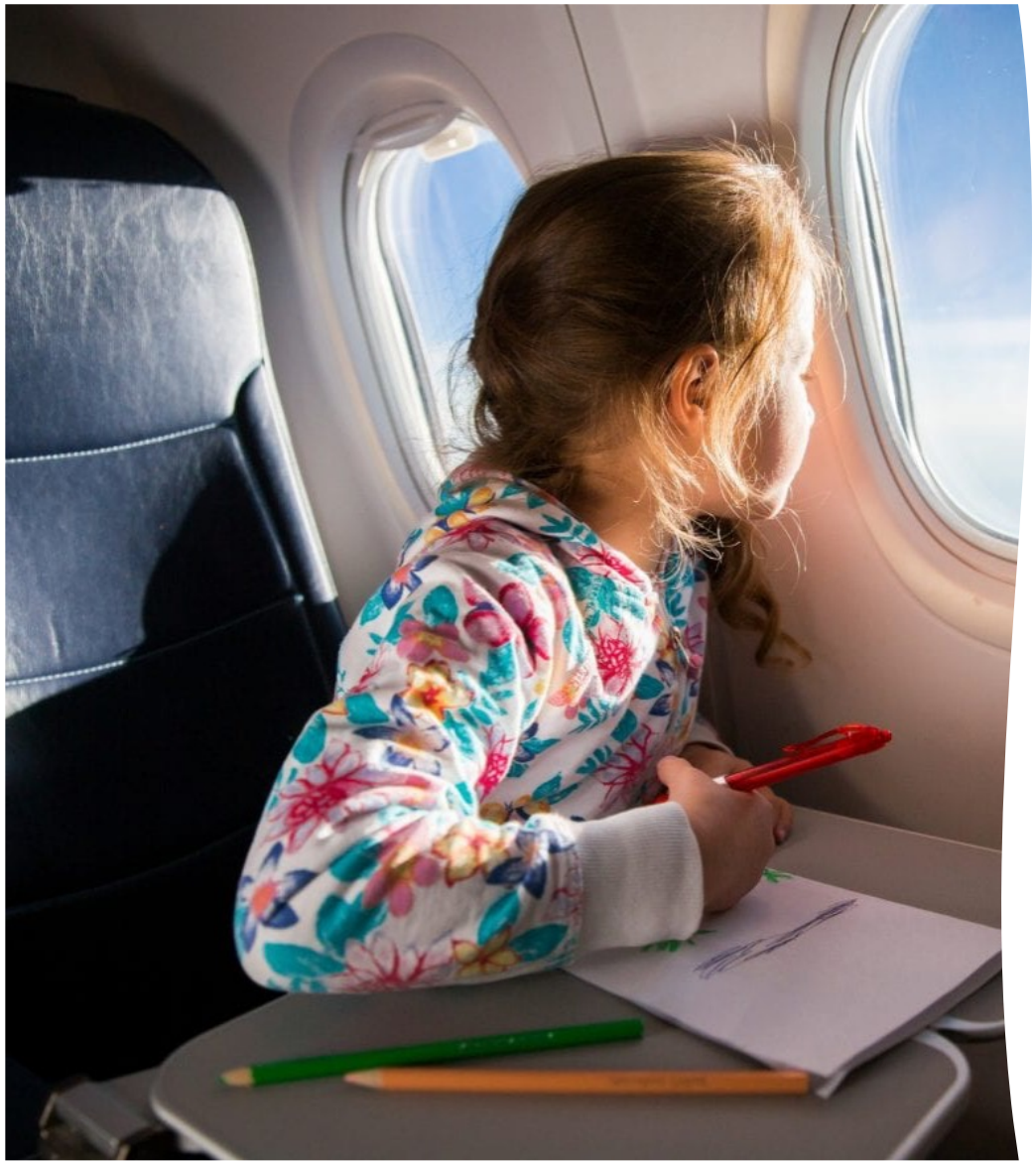




Safety changes the meaning of distance

- Conflict and family violence can operate as:
  - pre-existing child risk
  - reasons for relocation
  - barriers to co-parenting
  - confounders in research
  - reasons geographic distance may improve safety

(Fabricius & Braver, 2006; Stevenson et al., 2018; Kostense, 2026a, 2026b)



Co-parenting becomes harder with distance

- Long-distance arrangements require greater capacity for:
  - Information sharing
  - Planning
  - Transportation
  - Cost sharing
  - Schedule flexibility
  - Decision-making
  - Managing disruptions

Is the plan workable or aspirational?

(Parkinson et al., 2010; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2018; Saini et al., 2015)



Children experience distance in time

- Travel can affect:
  - time
  - fatigue
  - school
  - sports and activities
  - peer relationships
  - cost
  - willingness to exercise parenting time

(Cashmore & Parkinson, 2016; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2018; Kostense, 2026b)



The consequences of staying

- No relocation does not mean no change.

- Denied relocation may affect:
  - employment
  - housing
  - social support
  - parental stress
  - family relationships
  - caregiving stability

(Parkinson & Cashmore, 2013)



What the evidence supports

- The evidence supports:
  - individualized analysis
  - realistic comparison of alternatives
  - attention to meaningful relationships
  - explicit safety analysis
  - child participation
  - peer/community context
  - travel feasibility
  - attention to both moving and staying consequences

(Saini et al., 2015; Kostense, 2024; Parkinson & Cashmore, 2018; Kostense, 2026b)



What the evidence does not support

- The research does not currently support:
  - Universal presumption for relocation
  - Universal presumption against relocation
  - Fixed distance rule
  - Simple age rule
  - Primary caregiver as automatic trump factor
  - Assuming parental benefit = child benefit
  - Assuming virtual contact replaces proximity

(Saini et al., 2015; Kostense, 2024)

A social science-informed decision tree

- Safety concerns?
- What are the realistic alternatives?
- Which relationships are developmentally important?
- What are this child's developmental needs?
- What does the child gain and lose under each option?
- What is the child's perspective?
- Can meaningful contact realistically be maintained?
- How will each option affect parental functioning?
- Can risks be reduced through supports or safeguards?
- Which option best supports the child's developmental ecology?



A factor list is not enough

- Even when professionals agree on the relevant factors, they may:
  - Interpret them differently
  - Weight them differently
  - Selectively emphasize certain evidence
  - Bring implicit assumptions to the analysis
- Evidence-based reasoning requires transparency.

(Fabregas et al., 2020)



Five questions to take back to practice

- Before taking a position on relocation, ask:
  1. What changes?
  2. For whom?
  3. Compared with what?
  4. What is the evidence?
  5. What are we assuming?



Closing Remark

- The social science does not give us a presumption; it gives us better questions.

- Relocation is best understood as a comparative reorganization of the child's developmental ecology.

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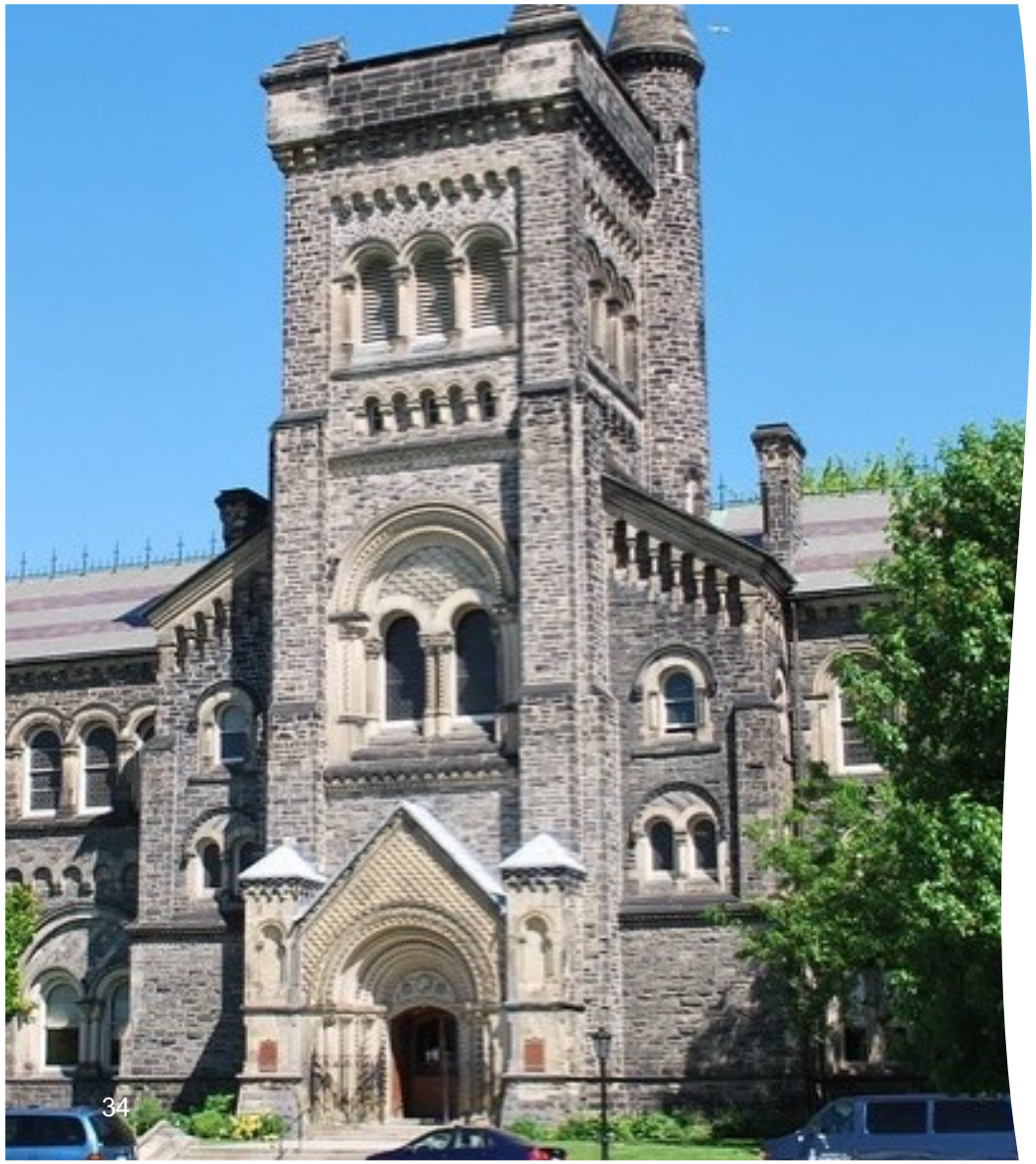

Contact Information

Michael Saini, Ph.D., M.S.W., R.S.W.

Professor

Factor-Inwentash Chair of Law and Social Work

Co-Director of the JD / MSW Combined Program

Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work

University of Toronto

246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1A1

Tel: 416-946-5027 Fax: 416-946-8846
Email: michael.saini@utoronto.ca

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