Family and Legal Indicators of Child Adjustment to Divorce Among Families With Young Children

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This research used structural equation modeling to examine relations among family dynamics, attorney involvement, and the adjustment of young children (0–6 years) at the time of parental separation. The article presents baseline data (N = 102 nonresidential fathers and N = 110 primary caretaking mothers) from a larger longitudinal study. Results showed that the effects of parental conflict on child outcomes were mediated by paternal involvement, the parent–child relationship, and attorney involvement. A scale assessing parental gatekeeping yielded two significant factors: Spouse’s Influence on Parenting and Positive View of Spouse. Paternal involvement was related to children’s adaptive behavior, whereas negative changes in parent–child relationships predicted behavior problems. Mothers who experienced greater psychological symptomatology were less likely to utilize an attorney, which in turn predicted greater internalizing problems in their children.

Despite a generation of divorce research providing evidence of the developmental risks faced by children of divorcing families, we still know relatively little about families with very young children. Yet these families represent one of the most vulnerable subgroups of separating and divorcing families. The challenges of infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool developmental eras are heightened by parental separation and divorce, as the child’s needs for security, trust, autonomy, and patience that characterize this early period of life meet head on with the exhaustion and stress that often accompany divorce.

Qualitative research suggests that divorcing families with young children face significant challenges and risks, which result in children under age 6 experiencing substantial emotional distress and adjustment problems at the time of the marital dissolution (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Young children are likely to appraise the reasons for the divorce less realistically, to blame themselves more readily, to fear anxiety about abandonment, and to be less likely to utilize the protective resources of other people (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Furthermore, approximately 55% of the divorced or separated women in the United States with children under 6 years of age live below the poverty line (Teachman & Paasch, 1994). These children spend more hours in day care (of often less than optimal quality) and are less likely to be cared for by their father when their mother is working (Whiteside, 1995). Because parents with young children are often younger themselves, they may be less educated and less mature than their older counterparts. Given the stresses that young children and their divorcing parents face, it is not surprising that divorcing families comprise the largest consumers of court-related family services (Depner, Cannata, & Ricci, 1995; M. K. Pruett & Bailey, 1998).

However, the long-term sequelae of these stresses are less clear. Recent meta-analytic research of 67 studies conducted throughout the 1990s involving children across a broad range of ages (preschool to college age) reveals that disparities in academic achievement, psychological adjustment, and self-concept between children with divorced and married parents have increased since the 1980s (Amato, 2001). Unlike studies of older children, which have shown consistent negative effects of divorce on children’s and adolescents’ behavior, social interactions, psychological well-being, and academic performance (Amato, 2001; Cherlin et al., 1991; Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999), the evidence linking marital dissolution to longer term outcomes among younger children is less consistent. On the one hand, younger children may be at greater risk for long-term social and emotional adjustment problems than older children (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Reliable data show elevated clinical symptoms at adolescence among children whose parents divorced when they were young, regardless of the socioeconomic or cultural status of the family (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). On the other hand, Amato and Keith (1991) reported in their meta-analysis that the negative effects of divorce on measures of...
academic achievement, behavior, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social competence appeared to be less for young children than for older ones. A follow-up meta-analysis (Amato, 2001) did not include preschool children but showed stronger negative effects on academic achievement for primary school than secondary school children, and weaker effects for the younger children on psychological adjustment variables. Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, and Booth (2000) reported data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care, which assessed over 1,000 children from ages 0–3 years from intact, never married, separated, and divorced families. Parent and child functioning were assessed before and after marital disruption. When maternal education and family income were controlled in statistical analyses, children from divorced, separated, or never married families performed more poorly across age groups only on tests of cognitive ability. Not surprisingly, maternal depression, anxiety, and stimulation/support of the child—but not marital status—were significant predictors of child adjustment.

Concerns about young children and divorce often center on the child’s capacity to form secure attachments to both parents in the context of coparenting arrangements. It is possible that young children of divorce are at risk for attachment disorders in early childhood (Solomon & George, 1999). Focusing on the young child’s relationship to both parents rather than attachment per se, K. D. Pruet and Pruet (1999) found that children 6 years or younger were concerned about the security and stability of their relationship with both parents and about their own physical and emotional safety. Wolman and Taylor’s (1991) research suggests that 5 years after divorce disputes, psychological effects on the child can persist with sufficient severity to require psychotherapy or medical treatment. Given the dearth of knowledge about young children in divorcing contexts, it remains imperative to identify the factors that maximize children’s chances of successful coping and adjustment during separation and post-divorce.

Predictors of Child Adjustment

It is generally accepted that two critical factors negatively impacting children of divorce are marital and parental conflict and destabilized parent–child relationships (e.g., see summaries of Amato, 2000; Kelly, 2000). In addition to their influences on child adjustment, marital and parental conflict have been shown to have differential effects on the mother–child and father–child relationships (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000).

Parental Conflict

Children’s capacities to adjust to their parents’ divorce are seriously compromised when the children are exposed to ongoing parental conflict (Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Parish, 1995; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1994; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991; Petersen & Zill, 1986; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Parental conflict has been associated specifically with internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Buehler et al., 1998), self-blame, and shame in children (Grych & Fincham, 1993). Children from high-conflict families also have been found to exhibit signs of stress and fearfulness, poorer interpersonal skills, insecure attachments, and generalized insecurities (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; K. D. Pruet & M. K. Pruet, 1999). Equally important for young children, marital and parental conflict are consistent precursors to poorer parent–child relationships after divorce, with less discipline and higher discord noted (Kelly, 1998, 2000; Kline et al., 1991; Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990).

Commonly, parental conflict increases when parents are negotiating their rights and obligations (e.g., economic, coparenting) through the legal system (Hetherington, 1993). The divorce process within the institutional context of the judicial system can be described as a culture of litigation in which parents’ opposing positions become exacerbated through the adversarial process (M. K. Pruet & Bailey, 1998). The system augments family struggles that have neither clear facts nor standards on which to base decisions when two parents have differing viewpoints. The result is a metastatic process in which conflict spreads and feeds on itself, sustaining or increasing the negative family dynamics the divorce was intended to dissipate. The role of attorneys cuts both ways during the legal process: Having an attorney can help parents navigate smoothly, or it can contribute to their financial strains and stresses attendant to the divorce process (M. K. Pruet & Jackson, 1999).

Parent-Child Relationships

Clinical vulnerabilities of parents become clinical realities once family dynamics get entangled in the legal system. Separated and divorced adults consistently report greater psychological distress than married or never married adults (Hope, Power, & Rodgers, 1999; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Wade & Cairney, 2000). In turn, depression and anxiety can lead to a diminished capacity to parent and poor adjustment in children (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Pett, Wampold, Turner, & Vaughan-Cole, 1999). Disruptions in warm but authoritative parenting capacities or a conflicted relationship with the primary residential parent have been associated with lower academic achievement, less social competence, increased internalizing and externalizing problems, and lower self-esteem (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Tschann et al., 1990).

Paternal Involvement

The role of the nonresidential parent in child adjustment is also believed to be salient, but the findings show a complex pattern of interconnected factors. Because mothers still tend to be the primary caretakers of children (Demo & Acoc, 1993; Lamb & Oppenheim, 1989; Pleck, 1997), researchers have typically equated the status of nonresidential parent with the father. In one study, children from lower conflict families reported a better adjustment to the divorce,
and their adjustment was even better when there was a high level of father involvement (Amato & Rezac, 1994). In their meta-analysis of 63 studies of noncustodial fathers, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that authoritative parenting style (supportive and nonthreatening parental control) was significantly associated with better child outcomes such as higher academic achievement and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems.

In the divorce literature, diminished fathering has traditionally been the focus of empirical work. Only recently have researchers also examined the depth and breadth of paternal involvement after divorce, not to mention the creativity many men have applied to sustain their relationships with their children. In the general fathering literature, a link is consistently found between active fathering and adaptive child behavior, especially in social and academic domains (see K. D. Pruett, 2000). Thus, a critical dimension of the divorce process remains how to maximize quality parent–child relationships and minimize parental conflict after divorce, especially during the divorce process itself.

Gatekeeping

Especially among families with young children, a critical element of parental conflict and parental involvement is the gatekeeping that occurs between parents. Gatekeeping refers both to facilitative and inhibitory functions exercised by one or both parents that determine who will have access to their children, and the nature of that access. The psychological literature has emphasized the primary role of mothers in raising young children, and their role as gatekeepers. Maternal gatekeeping has been defined as a set of beliefs and behaviors that inhibit a collaborative effort between fathers and mothers by limiting the men’s opportunity for caring and rearing of their children (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The mother, in her customary role as primary caretaker, becomes the monitor, permission giver, and controller of the father’s involvement with the child and the form of that involvement (Grossman, Eichler, & Winickoff, 1980). During and after pregnancy, the willingness of the mother to foster or support her husband’s or partner’s involvement with their child is key to his level of involvement. The importance of mothers’ attitudes in gatekeeping is evident from research showing that 60%–80% of mothers do not want their husbands more involved in childrearing, as such involvement would change the balance of power in the marriage and the important role mothers ascribe to themselves (Lamb & Oppenheim, 1989; Pleck, 1997). In their exploration of the role of maternal attitudes on paternal involvement, Beitel and Parke (1998) found that when mothers perceived their partners as motivated to engage in child care responsibilities and, to a lesser extent, as competent to do so, fathers were more involved in child care.

When parents divorce in order to break the spousal connection, the sharing of childrearing provides an opportunity and a responsibility to remain connected. Negotiating who does what with regard to child care is a complicated task, in married or intact relationships (C. P. Cowan & Cowan, 1992) and may be equally difficult, albeit in different ways, in divorced or separated couples with children. Although the majority of research on gatekeeping has focused on married families, divorce and post-divorce conflict may provide fertile ground for furthering our understanding of the family dynamics inherent in gatekeeping. Strict gatekeeping may result in less involvement by the nonresidential parent, more primary parent–child conflict, and feelings of insecurity in the child regarding his or her relationship with the less seen parent (usually the father) (Doherty, 1998; Kelly, 2000).

However, the effects of gatekeeping as discussed in the divorce literature have remained primarily at the theoretical level. In divorcing and separating families, the role played by level of parental conflict may be a critical variable for consideration. Primary caretaker parents may use involvement with the child as a reward or punishment depending on how they were treated by their ex-spouses during the marriage. Such ideas have not been expressly tested, nor have the constructs of gatekeeping in separating/divorcing families been empirically investigated as they have been in married, dual earner samples (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Purpose of the Study

The family law literature is replete with acknowledgments that the current legal system regarding divorce is costly in terms of families’ (particularly the children’s) emotional and economic well-being (e.g., Medved, 1989; Sarat & Felstiner, 1995). This study was motivated by the view that the custody context provides a unique setting in which to initiate preventive interventions with families during this vulnerable transition. Although review articles and meta-analytic studies summarize current knowledge regarding divorce and child outcomes (Amato, 2000, 2001; Kelly, 2000), the literature lacks a cohesive conceptualization of how specific variables that have been found to be related to specific aspects of child functioning operate among young children. The direct and indirect relations among variables related to child functioning are still underdetermined for very young children and their parents.

The present study is part of a larger longitudinal investigation examining the effects of a collaborative divorce intervention for families with children ages newborn through 6 years, on child, parent, and legal outcomes. Using structural equation modeling, we offer a model of the relations among key divorce dynamics in families with young children, including parental and legal variables, as well as child outcomes prior to the collaborative intervention. A goal of the study was to test the hypothesis that after controlling for child age and parental distress, parental conflict would be predictive of negative changes in parent–child relationships, stricter gatekeeping, and less father involvement. We also expected a negative relationship between maternal gatekeeping and paternal involvement. Further, we anticipated that parental symptomatology would be predictive of a poorer parent–child relationship. With respect to child outcomes, we expected father involvement to predict child adaptive behavior, whereas parent–child distance and discord would predict child behavioral...
problems. We further expected that parental conflict would be associated with the use of attorneys (as a proxy of the adversarial climate) and that the utilization of an attorney would have an additional negative impact on child behavior problems. Finally, since much divorce research has assessed women’s reports or men’s, but not both, we tested whether the relations among the variables in the model were the same for both mothers and fathers of young children.

Method
Participants

The Project was designed to assess the effectiveness of a comprehensive intervention and prevention program for children, ages newborn through 6 years of age, and their families during the initiation of divorce proceedings for married couples or during the development of parenting plans and child support arrangements for nonmarried couples. Court clerks, parents’ attorneys, the Family Court judges, or Family Services personnel from two Connecticut court districts cooperated with the Collaborative Divorce Project in recruiting participants, as either intervention recipients or comparison families. Eligible families were invited to participate voluntarily in an assessment of an innovative court project designed to help families with young children steer a course through the legal system with less adversarial and expensive legal costs, as well as improved coparenting relationships and children’s psychosocial adjustment. Inclusion criteria included (a) a child 6 years or under in the family, (b) no substantial history of substance use, and (c) no significant history of physical spousal or child abuse within the family. Families were enrolled at the beginning of their legal proceedings. The majority of families had just separated, and the others were in the planning phase of doing so.

Of the 161 families in our longitudinal sample, we included in this study only those in which mothers were the primary residential parent. The final sample included data from 102 fathers and 110 mothers (85% Caucasian, 4% Latino or Hispanic, 11% other). Of the children, 59% were boys and 41% were girls. The parents’ relationships averaged approximately 8 years, ranging from 0.5 to 26 years. Nonmarried couples (n = 23 mothers, n = 20 fathers) reported themselves as significantly involved with one another; all but two lived with their partner at the time of conception. Average educational attainment for parents was generally high school graduation, a year of college, or some specialized training. Yearly incomes were measured in discrete intervals. Mothers’ yearly income averaged between $18,001 and $25,000, whereas fathers’ income averaged $25,001 to $50,000. Incomes for both mothers and fathers ranged from under $5,000 per year to over $75,000 per year, yielding an economically diverse sample.

Procedure

Once both parents consented to participate, they completed questionnaires regarding family demographics, parents’ and children’s adjustment, legal outcomes, custody arrangements, nonresidential parents’ involvement, and quality of the coparenting and parent–child relationships. Mothers and fathers completed each measure, except for the dependent measure of children’s adaptive behavior. Interviews with a trained clinician were conducted over the telephone, typically with custodial parents, to obtain ratings of adaptive behavior with the Vineland Screener (Sparrow, Balla, & Cicchetti, 1984). Parents were paid $50 for their participation at each assessment. We used information only from the initial assessment for this study because follow-up data are not yet available.

Measures

Background and Family Climate Variables

Three background variables, length of marriage/relationship, length of separation, and parents’ socioeconomic status, were examined. However, in the interest of parsimony and because of their lack of influence in the context of this study, they were not included in the primary model. Age of the child was calculated at the time of the baseline assessment.

Parental conflict. Conflict between parents was scored as the average of multiple measures of parental conflict drawn from items in the Acrimony Scale (Emery, 1997), the Discuss and Share Decision-Making Scale (Ahrons, 1981), and the Content of Conflict Checklist (Johnston, 1996). From the Acrimony Scale we included the items from the Relationship with Former Spouse subscale that assess areas of potential conflict between separated or divorced parents (e.g., “Visitation is a problem between me and their mother/father” and “I feel hostile toward my children’s mother/father”). Items are rated on a 4-point scale. Questions from the Discuss and Share Decision-Making Scale address issues of hostility and lack of cooperation between spouses (e.g., “How often is the underlying atmosphere [between spouses] one of hostility or anger?”) and “Do you and your spouse have basic differences of opinion about issues related to childrearing?”). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The Content of Conflict Checklist is a 17-item measure of the extent of parental disagreement regarding childrearing issues, such as coparenting and access arrangements, discipline, daily care, and trust and support for the other parents’ involvement with the child. Each item is measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = false and 5 = true). Internal consistency of the composite parental conflict construct was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$).

Parental symptomatology. To assess the levels of parent symptomatology, we employed the 53-item, self-report Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis, 1993). The inventory assesses nine primary symptom dimensions, including somatization, obsessive-compulsive thoughts and behaviors, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychoticism. Parents rated how much discomfort each symptom had caused them in the past 3 months using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (extremely) ($\alpha = .97$).

Intermediary Variables

Father involvement. To assess level of father involvement, we used Ahrons’s (1981) 10-item checklist of Nonresidential Parent-Child Involvement in this sample of nonresidential fathers. Various parental responsibilities are queried on a 5-point scale (1 = never, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = always) to reflect how involved the nonresidential father has been with his child. Responsibilities include discipline, dressing and grooming, holiday celebrations, running errands for the child, religious and moral training, and taking the child for recreational activities ($\alpha = .93$). Parents noted when an item was not relevant to them or their child.

Negative changes in parent–child relationship. To assess changes in the parent–child relationship, we used Maccoby, Mnookin, and Depner’s (1993) 5-point Likert measure of the parent–child relationship developed for the Stanford Child Custody Study. Parents reported on changes in the emotional
distance in their relationship with their child, as well as changes in expectations for their child, play time, patience, consistency, and the child’s compliance since parental separation. Higher scores indicate more distance and difficulty between parents and their child ($\alpha = .84$).

Use of an attorney. To indicate whether an attorney was used by each parent we used a dichotomous variable, with $0 = \text{no attorney involved}$ and $1 = \text{attorney involved}$. Each parent in the study chose either to move through the court process pro se (representing themselves) or to hire an attorney. A total of 64% of fathers and 69% of mothers had retained and utilized an attorney. Attorney involvement was not correlated with socioeconomic status, which thus had no effect on hiring a lawyer.

Gatekeeping. Maximum-likelihood extraction with an oblique rotation was used to factor analyze the 19-item measure of the gatekeeping measure developed for the Collaborative Divorce Project. An optimal three-factor solution was retained. Correlations among the three factors ranged from .07 to .36, indicating a distinct set of gatekeeping constructs. Three items comprised each factor.

The first factor, Enhancing Spouse’s Parenting ($\alpha = .78$), assessed the degree to which parents valued the importance of the other parent and fostered their (ex)-spouse’s involvement in their child’s life. Items that loaded on this factor included the following: “It is part of my job as a parent to positively influence my child’s relationship with his/her other parent”; “It is my job to help my spouse be the best parent he/she can be to our child”; and “In order to best take care of my child, it is important for me to positively influence my child’s relationship with my spouse.” Theoretically, it is assumed that such valuing would be an important determinant in the decision to “open the gate to,” facilitate, the child’s access to the other parent.

The second factor, Positive View of Spouse ($\alpha = .73$), contained items measuring the positive feelings about the other parent from the marriage and the effects of affection for a child on a parent’s view of his or her spouse. Factor items included the following: “During my marriage, the closer I felt to my child, the closer I felt to my spouse”; “During my marriage, my spouse helped me to be the best parent I could be”; and “The closer I feel to my child now, the closer I feel to my spouse.”

This factor speaks to motivation for gate opening or closing. We theorized that when a parent feels the other parent was a positive force in the marriage and in the child’s life (e.g., a positive identification between child and other parent exists), he or she will be more inclined to leave the gate open after divorce.

The third factor, Spouse’s Influence on Parenting ($\alpha = .68$), measures parents’ assessment of the support they received from a spouse during the marriage and its impact on their past and present parenting. It contains the items: “During my marriage, the support I received from my spouse affected my ability to parent my child”; “The way my spouse treated me during the marriage (good or bad) affected my confidence as a parent”; and “My feelings about my spouse affect my ability to parent my child.”

This factor, too, speaks to the motivations for gate opening or closing. When a parent views the other spouse as powerful and as having used that power to support or hinder their own parenting ability or confidence, they will be inclined to monitor access to the child after separation and divorce more strictly or openly. There is a potential to repay the other spouse (positively or negatively) for their support during the marriage.

**Dependent Variables: Child Outcomes**

Adaptive behaviors. Vineland scores were obtained from a shortened version of the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale known as the Vineland Screener (Sparrow et al., 1984). The Vineland Screener ($\alpha = .97$) provides an adaptive behavior composite measure of child functioning in four skill areas: Communication (e.g., “speaks in full sentences”); Daily Living Skills (e.g., “washes and dries face without assistance”); Socialization (e.g., “follows school and facility rules”); and Motor Skills (e.g., “walks as a primary means of getting around”). Three different versions of the Screener assess age-appropriate skills for infants/toddlers ages newborn to 2 years, preschoolers ages 3 to 5 years, and school-age children (6 to 12 years). Each domain was assessed in the various versions, except for Motor Skills which are not assessed for children 6 years and older. Responses to items are scored as $2 = \text{yes, usually}$, $1 = \text{sometimes or partially}$, $0 = \text{no}$, $N = \text{no opportunity}$ for behavior to be exhibited, and DK = don’t know. Vineland scores were standardized across all participants.

Internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Measures of internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors were obtained with the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) given to each parent. Two versions were used according to the age of the child (2 to 3 years or 4 years and up). CBCL scores were not obtained for the youngest children in our sample. In the toddler version (Achenbach, 1992), internalizing behaviors were summed statements from both the Anxious/Depressed scale of 11 items (e.g., “clings to adults or too dependent”) and the Withdrawn scale of 14 items (e.g., “doesn’t get along with other children”). Externalizing behaviors reflect the sum of two scales, Aggressive Behavior, consisting of 15 items (e.g., “hits others”), and Destructive Behavior, consisting of 11 items (e.g., “gets into everything”). In the older child version of the CBCL, internalizing behaviors ($n = 31$ items) are drawn from three scales: Withdrawn (e.g., “would rather be alone than with others”), Somatic Complaints (e.g., “feels dizzy”), and Anxious/Depressed (e.g., “feels worthless or inferior”). Externalizing behaviors include 33 items regarding Delinquent Behavior (e.g., “lying or cheating”) and Aggressive Behavior (e.g., “threatens people”). Scores from both problem composites were standardized across participants. These two scales of child behavior problems have high internal consistency (Internalizing, $\alpha = .82$; Externalizing, $\alpha = .92$) in the current sample and have demonstrated test–retest reliability (Achenbach, 1991). It is also known that these two domains of children’s behavior problems are significantly intercorrelated ($r = .60$).

**Analytic Procedures**

Missing values for all variables (< 5% of the data) were imputed using a saturated regression equation (i.e., each variable is regressed on the matrix of all possible variables within the data set, except the variable itself). Outliers were also identified using the saturated regression equation (i.e., any data point outside the 99% confidence interval surrounding the regression line) and were reweighted to normalize their influence (for details, see Lopez & Little, 1996; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989).

We employed a two-group (mothers vs. fathers) path analysis with LISREL 8.5 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2001) to test our substantive hypotheses. We also examined mean-level differences using means structures analyses with LISREL (Little, 1997). Conducting the analyses separately for mothers and fathers had the dual advantage of identifying any differences between the two parents as well as providing a cross-validation framework for all estimated paths.

To evaluate the overall model fit, we relied on the maximum likelihood chi-squared statistic for which a nonsignificant value is desired. A nonsignificant chi-square value for the model indicates that the specified path relationships reproduce the observed
variance–covariance relationships accurately and efficiently. Between-group differences (i.e., comparisons between mothers and fathers) were examined using the chi-square difference test. For this test, the significance of the drop in fit is evaluated to determine whether constraining any paths between males and females to be equal in magnitude is warranted. A nonsignificant drop in fit indicates that any constrained paths are statistically equivalent.

Results

For the purposes of independent replication of our analyses, the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. In general, all constructs were well differentiated and uncorrelated with each other, with the exception of the Internalizing and Externalizing behavior scales from the Child Behavior Checklist ($r = .60$), which have been well-documented to be highly correlated. The purpose of the path analysis was to evaluate how well our hypothesized model predicting child and parental outcomes fit the data set and to test for mother–father differences using a two-group path analysis model.

Mean and Variance-Level Differences

The means and variances of mothers’ and fathers’ self-reports were equivalent for half of the variables, with exceptions noted below. The mean differences offer additional information about the variables for interpretation purposes but had no effect on the actual path analyses. Nonresidential fathers felt they were significantly more involved with their children than perceived by the mothers. Fathers reported a more negative change in their relationships with their children than did custodial mothers. Nonresidential fathers had higher means on gatekeeping variables than did the mothers across all three domains. Thus, fathers reported that mothers were stricter gatekeepers than vice versa, in accord with our theory.

In addition, variances were lower for mothers’ reports as compared with fathers’ reports for the negative changes in parent–child relationship and the Vineland scores. Again, the slightly lower variances of these two measures did not affect any individual differences relationships. As noted above, the intercorrelations among variables indicated autonomous constructs. Generally, the intercorrelations among variables for mothers and fathers were equal across gender groups.

Structural Relations and Gender Differences Among the Variables

The results of the best-fitting model assessing the relations among our variables of interest are presented in Figure 1. The final model revealed an excellent fit, $\chi^2(98, N = 212) = 97.5, p = .49$.

As children became older, their involvement with their fathers increased ($\beta = .17, p = .05$), and their adaptive behavior skills increased ($\beta = .42, p = .01$). In addition to the strong direct effect of child age on the Vineland, we
found a mediated effect of age through increased nonresidential father involvement that also enhanced children's adaptive behaviors ($\beta = .15, p = .05$). These paths were equivalent across both mothers' and fathers' reports.

As hypothesized, parents' symptomatology was also an important factor within the model. Greater symptomatology for either parent was associated with negative changes in the parent–child relationship ($\beta = .39, p = .01$). In addition, mothers with more symptoms were less likely to use the services of an attorney ($\beta = -.23, p = .01$) and more likely to perceive their spouse's support or lack thereof as an influence on their parenting (Spouse’s Influence on Parenting) ($\beta = .27, p = .01$). Fathers’ psychological well-being did not affect gatekeeping or the likelihood of attorney involvement.

We had expected that after controlling for the child’s age and parental symptomatology, parental conflict would be predictive of less involvement of nonresidential fathers with their children, gatekeeping, and negative changes in the parent–child relationship. Across both mothers’ and fathers’ groups, increased levels of parental conflict predicted less nonresidential father involvement ($\beta = -.37, p = .01$).
Additionally, higher levels of parental conflict predicted a less positive view of spouse ($\beta = -0.24, p = .01$). Only by fathers’ accounts did increased levels of parental conflict predict difficulty between nonresident fathers and their children ($\beta = .43, p = .01$). Parental conflict had no effect on the mother–child relationship. As expected, higher levels of marital conflict also increased the likelihood of involving an attorney in the divorce or custody proceedings ($\beta = .22, p = .01$).

Neither parental conflict nor parental symptomatology directly predicted children’s behavior problems. For both mothers and fathers, negative changes in the parent–child relationship served as the best predictor of children’s problem behaviors, for both internalizing ($\beta = .22, p = .01$) and externalizing ($\beta = .31, p = .01$) symptoms. For nonresident fathers, the discord and distance within the father–child relationship mediated the effect of parental conflict on children’s problem behaviors. Mothers reported fewer child internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, or somatic complaints, when attorneys were involved in their legal case ($\beta = -.17, p = .05$); however, this relationship did not hold true for fathers.

**Discussion**

This research used structural equation methodology to model possible relations among family and legal variables and outcomes for young children of separating and divorcing families. The proposed model yielded an excellent fit to the data and mostly cross-validated across mothers and fathers, with a few notable exceptions (shown in Figure 1). Overall, the models were far more similar than different, indicating family processes that are descriptive from either parent’s viewpoint. A primary objective of this study was to test the hypothesis that after controlling for child age and parental distress, parental conflict would predict less father involvement, stricter gatekeeping, and more negative parent–child relationships. Negative changes in the parent–child relationship were expected to be predictive of child behavioral problems, whereas parental involvement was expected to be related to children’s adaptive skills. Also, we predicted that paternal gatekeeping would be associated with less father involvement. With regard to use of attorneys, we expected greater use among higher conflict couples and, in turn, more behavior problems among the children.

The outcomes of our final model supported most of these premises. First, parental conflict was indirectly related to child adjustment through parental involvement, the parent-child relationship, and attorney involvement.

In general, older children had more involved fathers, which was predictive of better communication, socialization, and daily living skills. This link between father involvement and children’s adaptive skills is consistent with research on involved fathering in intact families (K. D. Pruett, 2000). However, parental conflict was an important predictor of father involvement, such that higher conflict was associated with less paternal involvement. This finding is in accord with previous research showing that in the face of conflict, fathers are more likely to withdraw from their children than in situations of lower parental conflict (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; P. A. Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Howes & Markman, 1989). One pathway in the model traces parental conflict to lower father involvement, which in turn was associated with lower overall adaptive functioning by the child. The long shadow of marital conflict that affects child development (Kline et al., 1991) is thus evident in the postdivorce parental conflict among these families with young children. Parental conflict predicts less father involvement, ultimately affecting young children’s early socialization and acquisition of necessary life skills. This link is likely to be especially salient among families with young children, where fathers’ own withdrawal in the face of parental conflict could get exacerbated by maternal influences on fathers’ opportunities for regular contact with their children and participation in child-rearing responsibilities (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Fogas, & Svetina, 1991).

We theorized that more conflict might lead mothers to bar fathers from certain kinds of involvement with their children, exercising their gatekeeping functions. Parental conflict also was inversely related to one of our three gatekeeping factors: Positive View of Spouse. The more parents fought, the less likely they were to experience an affinity for their partner despite their shared child. This gatekeeping factor seems to capture a positive identification process through which spouses judge the support they received from one another and extend their positive feelings about their child to each other. This kind of connection underlies positive coparenting, as it helps parents look beyond their conflicts to the shared role and bond of having a child. Conflict undermines this aspect of positive family connection.

Parental conflict led to reports of negative changes in the parent–child relationship, but for fathers only. This finding is not consistent with some previous research comprised largely of older children and focused on mothers’ decreased warmth and parental authority (e.g., Kline et al., 1991; see also Kelly, 2000) and may be a function of the very young ages of the children. The relatively consistent proximity and intimacy mothers reported to have with their children, and the children’s neediness as commensurate with their developmental levels, may have buffered the mother–child relationships, at this point in time, early in the divorcing process. However, the finding is consistent with research indicating that fathers withdraw more from their children under conditions of higher conflict (see Kelly, 2000). One aspect of this parent–child measure is a question about perceived distance between parent and child since separation. That aspect may be tapping into similar constructs explored in other research.

Negative changes in both the mother–child and father–child relationships were predictive of greater internalizing and externalizing problems in young children, a common finding in studies with older children (Roseby & Johnston, 1998; Tschann et al., 1990; see also Kelly’s, 1998, discussion).

Whereas parental conflict negatively impacted the father–child relationship, maternal psychological symptomatology was the best predictor of negative changes in the mother–
child relationship after separation. These parents reported greater difficulty in being consistent with their child’s demands, maintaining consistent routines, being patient with their child, and making time to play with their child. Hence, it was not the coparenting, but rather mothers’ own internal well-being that most powerfully affected their parenting capacities.

In addition, mothers with greater symptomatology were more likely to endorse the gatekeeping factor measuring their spouse’s influence on their parenting, both during the marriage and in its aftermath. This finding could stem from these more vulnerable mothers’ perceptions that their husbands had more influence over their parenting. Alternatively, it could suggest an actual behavior in which fathers extend more support and assert more influence on their spouse’s parenting in the marriage when they perceive the mothers as less able to parent in a healthy way on their own. Either way, the difficulty that less psychologically healthy mothers have in parenting their young children is manifested in reliance on the ex-spouse’s support and views. For mothers and fathers, parental symptomatology indirectly influenced child behavioral outcomes through the negative changes in the parent–child relationship. This finding is consistent with research which shows that parental distress and vulnerability may lead to diminished parenting capabilities, which in turn is associated with poorer child outcomes (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Pett, Wampold, Turner & Vaughan-Cole, 1999; Tschann et al., 1990).

Operationalizing the Gatekeeping Construct

The hypothesis pertaining to gatekeeping was not borne out in the model. Factor analysis of the gatekeeping measure designed for this study revealed three distinct subcomponents: Enhancing Spouse’s Parenting, Positive View of Spouse, and Spouse’s Influence on Parenting. Allen and Hawkins (1999) discussed three conceptual dimensions of gatekeeping: maternal identity confirmation, differentiated family roles, and standards and responsibility, which they acknowledge are derived from research on intact relationships. Like the latter dimension, the concepts we targeted also were focused on parental, especially maternal, attitudes (see also Beitel & Parke, 1998), but they differ in important ways. We were focused on the dimensions of gatekeeping pertaining specifically to the dynamics between separating spouses that might lead to more liberal or stricter gatekeeping. We focused on the balance between negative views of the parent as partner and the potential for maintaining a positive view of the partner as parent to a shared child. We found that Enhancing Spouse’s Parenting, or belief in the importance of fostering the other parent’s relationship with the child, did not contribute significantly to the overall model. Parental conflict and maternal psychological symptomatology predicted less Positive View of Spouse and greater Spouse’s Influence on Parenting, respectively. Yet these factors did not prove to be related to child outcomes. It is not surprising that the connections between parental conflict, maternal symptomatology, and gatekeeping factors do not extend to child outcomes. Until we conduct further research with these new gatekeeping factors, we cannot ascertain how the presence of these factors affects child outcomes and under what conditions. Moreover, none of the factors was simply correlated with father involvement within the path model. Thus, it remains for further analyses to better understand how gatekeeping operates in this sample and in what ways the family dynamics tapped herein play out during the separation and divorce process.

Attorney Involvement

Unexpectedly, maternal psychological symptomatology had indirect effects on child behavioral outcomes when mothers used an attorney in their divorce. Mothers with more psychological symptoms were less likely to have hired an attorney, which predicted greater internalizing problems in their children. More healthy mothers may have utilized attorney expertise to foster protective actions regarding their children, helping to organize and contain the mother’s stress related to the divorce and/or separation. In contrast, the less healthy mothers may have taken the divorce process upon themselves and, hence, upon their children. This finding held true when socioeconomic status was controlled, indicating that the choice of using an attorney was not solely an economic decision. These results have important implications for the role of attorneys in a collaborative divorce model. Many divorcing parents determine their interests and the interests of their children with the aid of legal counsel. This research suggests that when mothers who experience increased psychological vulnerability work with an attorney during the divorce process, the attorney may help absorb some of the negative effects of that vulnerability on child functioning, especially as the parent’s stress increases during the legal process.

This model demonstrates how marital conflict affects young child outcomes in families with low to moderate conflict. In addition, it implicates gatekeeping as part of the family dynamic in divorce that also contains changes in father involvement and parent–child relationships. However, data are only the first step in a series needed to better understand the dynamics of families with young children in the legal system.

Implications for Application and Public Policy

These findings lend impetus to movements to improve clinical and psychological practice and create social changes in areas of divorce. The results provide information about a relatively unknown population of special importance in the field of public health and policy—our country’s youngest children. Given the common experience of parental separation before marriage or after divorce, these young children will live much of their early life in the shadows of their parents’ conflict, separations, and coparenting. Understanding which family dynamics influence their positive adaptation will assist in the development of support programs and interventions.

With these data, we are beginning to look at processes of psychology and law as they are intertwined during divorce,
rather than just existing in tandem. How the introduction of an attorney into the process impacts psychological and legal outcomes has important implications for the ways in which people choose to conduct their legal process. Increasing awareness of potential avenues for influencing the legal system is important to families, mental health professionals, legal professionals, and the public policy leaders who have been calling for change in the current system on the basis of individual anecdotes and collective knowledge and experience (Pruett & Jackson, 1999), but without empirical backing. Empirical backing provides the basis for legislative and social change.

We stand ready to examine how the dynamics elucidated in this study change over time, especially in light of an intervention implemented through the legal system. This study presented baseline data from longitudinal research that included a collaborative divorce intervention and a model of family dynamics prior to the intervention. Future analyses from these data will focus on how the collaborative intervention alters family dynamics to affect child and legal outcomes. Indeed, one of the limitations of the present study is that bidirectional relationships between the variables could not be assessed at this point given that only baseline data were analyzed. We did test for different models and these pathways were the only ones borne out by this structural equation model. The model will be tested with the same sample in the future to see whether and how pathways change for the 6-month and 15-month follow-up periods. The intervention will attempt to change the institutional context in which divorce occurs and to examine the impact such changes have on child and family well-being. In so doing, it will help inform policymakers interested in judicial reform about the types of substantive change that are possible and effective within the legal system.

In addition to child outcomes, more attention will be given to legal outcomes. Because only cases where the father was the nonresidential parent were analyzed in order to assess maternal gatekeeping, legal outcomes such as custody designations (i.e. joint legal, joint physical vs. joint legal, sole physical custody) were not included in the model. In the next iteration of these data, data from attorneys regarding legal costs, length of divorce, and utilization of court services will be included.

Tests of the model for different age groups and each gender will also be considered in forthcoming models. Within the age group sampled in the current study, it is possible that various aspects of the family dynamics may interrelate differently or predict different child outcomes for younger children in comparison with older children. Clearly, this study represents a tip of the iceberg. In future models we hope to examine the impact of frequent overnights and frequent court visits. Step-by-step we begin to shed light on the black hole of young children’s adaptation to parental separation and divorce and on the legal processes that support or hinder parents in their efforts to steer their children through this early life transition.

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