

EFFECTS OF FATHER AND MOTHER PARENTING ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGH- AND LOW-CONFLICT DIVORCES

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This article studied the relations of children's mental health problems to the warmth of their relationship with their noncustodial father and custodial mother and the level of conflict between the parents. Using a sample of 182 divorcing families, multiple regression was used to test the independent effect of father warmth, mother warmth, and interparental conflict. Results indicated that father warmth and mother warmth were both independently related to lower child-externalizing problems. However, the relations between mother and child warmth and child-internalizing problems were different as a function of interparental conflict and level of warmth with the other parent. Implications for court practices and policies are discussed.

Keywords: *noncustodial fathers; parenting; child divorce adjustment; interparental conflict*

INTRODUCTION

Two of the most potent factors that influence children's postdivorce adjustment are exposure to interparental conflict and quality of parenting (Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Understanding the impact of conflict and parenting on children's well-being is complicated because they are interrelated in complex ways. For example, conflict may influence parenting, and the relations between parenting and children's well-being may be influenced by the level of conflict between parents. One of the goals of this article is to disentangle the separate and interactive effects of parenting and conflict on the well-being of children who are experiencing the divorce of their parents. This research has important implications for how the courts respond to issues brought before them. In developing a postdivorce parenting plan, divorcing parents need to negotiate the level of contact that each will have with the child, and decisions concerning a parenting plan need to be informed by research concerning the effects of maternal and paternal parenting on children's well-being. Negotiating a parenting plan that is in the best interest of the child is particularly difficult under conditions where there is a high level of conflict between the parents. There is currently little empirical research to inform our understanding of what the impact is of parenting, by both the mother and the father, on the children's well-being in divorcing families where there is a high level of ongoing conflict.

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EVIDENCE CONCERNING THE INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN FATHER AND MOTHER PARENTING, CONFLICT, AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Research over the past two decades has increasingly recognized the complexity of the issues in studying the effects of parenting, interparental conflict, and children's well-being following divorce. Both parenting and conflict are complex, multidimensional constructs. Furthermore, they are dynamically interrelated so that conflict and parenting can influence each other, and the effect of each on children's well-being may differ as a function of the level of the other. However, progress has been made in studying these complicated issues, so that findings are beginning to emerge to inform court and family decision making.

HIGH-QUALITY PARENTING BY BOTH THE MOTHER AND THE FATHER IS RELATED TO POSITIVE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

High-quality parenting is conceptualized as including both a high level of affectively positive, affirming parent-child interactions, in which the parent is responsive to the needs of the child, and a high level of effective discipline, in which the child knows the rules, and they are consistently and fairly enforced (Baumrind, 1991). In the years following divorce, the stressors on the parents often lead to a decrement in the quality of parenting, which is associated with increased strain in parent-child relations and higher levels of child problems (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Considerable research has demonstrated, however, that high-quality parenting from the custodial mother is associated with better postdivorce child well-being and helps protect children from the stress of divorce (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Amato & Keith, 1991). Furthermore, recent research has demonstrated that the quality of mother-child relationships can be improved by relatively brief parenting programs, with positive and dramatic effects to improve children's long-term, postdivorce well-being (Sandler, Wolchik, Winslow, & Schenck, 2006). Illustratively, Wolchik et al. (2002) demonstrated that the New Beginnings Program, which was designed to strengthen parenting by the custodial mother, was effective in reducing the rates of diagnosed mental disorder, substance use, and high-risk sexual behavior and in improving self-esteem and grade point average of children of divorce six years after program participation (Wolchik et al., 2002; Wolchik, Sandler, Weiss, & Winslow, in press). Tein et al. (2004) found that the positive effects of the New Beginnings Program on children's mental health problems was mediated through the changes it brought about in the quality of parenting by the custodial mother.

Research regarding the effects of nonresidential fathers on child well-being has focused on three aspects of father parenting: quantity of contact, payment of child support, and quality of the relationship. Early research on the effects of fathers on children following divorce primarily addressed two aspects of fathering: frequency of contact between the nonresidential father and children and the payment of child support. The studies failed to provide consistent evidence for a positive relationship between frequency of father-child contact and children's well-being (Amato, 1993; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), but did find that payment of child support was associated with children's well-being (King, 1994). More recently, it has become clear that, similar to the findings for mothers, quality of fathers' relationships with their children following divorce is positively related to children's well-being. The quality of the relationship is conceptualized, similarly as it is for mothers, to include positive involvement in the children's activities (e.g., homework and school), strength of the emotional tie between parent and child (e.g., feelings of closeness and positive relationships), and authoritative parenting (e.g., effective discipline and positive

affective relationships). Illustratively, Amato and Gilbreth (1999), in a meta-analysis of 63 studies, found that the dimensions of a father–child relationship, which involved feelings of closeness and authoritative parenting, were significantly related to the children’s positive well-being (i.e., better academic success and fewer externalizing and internalizing problems) and that these positive benefits were found across gender and age of the children.

One limitation of many of the studies of the effects of postdivorce parenting on children is that they investigate the influence of mothers and fathers separately, without considering them in the context of the effects of the other parent. For example, it could be that the positive effects of fathers are due to their being in divorced families where there is a mother who has a positive relationship with the child. In a methodologically rigorous study, King and Sobolewski (2006) investigated the joint effects of parenting by mothers and fathers using a national sample of 453 families in which the children lived with their mother and there was a nonresidential father. They found that high-quality and responsive parenting on the part of fathers and mothers each had an independent relationship with lower child mental health problems, even when accounting for the quality of the relationship of the other parent. While extent of father contact had no direct relation to child well-being, it was strongly related to the quality of the father–child relationship, so that the contact had an indirect effect through its influence on the quality of relationship. They also studied children’s well-being under the different conditions of having a positive relationship with one parent, both parents, or neither parent. Similar to other research (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991), children did most poorly when they did not have a close relationship with either parent. The presence of a positive relationship with either mother or father was associated with fewer mental health problems for children, as compared to not having a close relationship with either parent.

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT FOLLOWING DIVORCE IS ASSOCIATED WITH POORER CHILD WELL-BEING

There is considerable evidence that exposure to interparental conflict is associated with higher levels of mental health problems for children (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Conflict often increases in the period immediately following the separation and divorce, but decreases over time for many families (Hetherington, 1999; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). However, conflict persists over a prolonged period of time for approximately 8 to 12 percent of divorced families (King & Heard, 1999; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Postdivorce conflict is associated with poorer child adjustment, particularly when it places the child in the middle, through badmouthing of the other parent, carrying negative messages between the parents, and creating loyalty conflicts for children (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Postdivorce conflict can also threaten the children’s well-being indirectly by leading to a decrease in the quality of parenting by the custodial and noncustodial parent (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007).

A critical issue that needs further study concerns the interrelations between conflict, parenting by the noncustodial father, and the well-being of children. Some research has indicated that the level of conflict affects the relations between father contact and child well-being. In low-conflict, divorced families, high father contact is associated with better child adjustment. Conversely, in high-conflict families, high contact with the noncustodial father has been found to relate to worse child adjustment (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston,

Kline, & Tschann, 1989). It is notable, however, that this research focused on father–child contact rather than the quality of the father–child relationship. Because the quality of a relationship between a noncustodial father and a child, rather than the quantity of contact, has been found to have the most robust positive effect on children, this is an important distinction. The lack of evidence concerning the effects of quality of noncustodial father–child relationships on children’s well-being, under conditions of high conflict, is an important gap in our knowledge. It may be that a high-quality relationship with fathers is a positive resource for children when there is high conflict between the parents, just as it is when there is low conflict. On the other hand, it may be that, because of loyalty issues, the conflict between the parents mitigates the ability of the father to support the child, reducing the potential impact of a positive relationship between father and child.

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED BY THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study addresses two issues concerning the interrelations between the quality of parenting by custodial mothers and noncustodial fathers, interparental conflict, and the children’s well-being following divorce. First, the study seeks to replicate the findings from King and Sobolewski (2006) concerning the independent and interactive relations between quality of parenting by custodial mothers and noncustodial fathers on children’s well-being in a general sample of divorcing parents. The study differs from King and Sobolewski (2006) in that it includes only divorcing families early in the divorce process, while King and Sobolewski (2006) included both divorced and never-married families, where the father lived separate from the mother-headed household and where the separation occurred an average of 10 years prior. Thus, the current sample is more similar to the families that appear before the court in the process of divorce. The study also investigates the independent and interactive effects of parenting by custodial mothers and fathers and interparental conflict when considered simultaneously in the same model. More specifically, the study addresses the question of whether the effects of parenting by the noncustodial father and the custodial mother differ as a function of the level of conflict between the parents. Because the study focuses on several of the most robust factors that are believed to impact the well-being of children following divorce, it has significant implications to inform court policies and practices concerning divorcing families.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample was obtained as part of an intervention study for divorced fathers, the Dads for Life Program (Braver, Griffin, & Cookston, 2005). A complete description of the recruitment of participants is presented in Braver et al. (2005) and is briefly reiterated below. Participants were recruited using public divorce and child support court records from Maricopa County, Arizona to identify recently divorced couples. Court records were reviewed every 6 months over a 3-year period and couples that had been divorced in the prior 4- to 10-month period were invited to participate, provided that the couple had at least one child between 4 and 12 years old, the mother had primary physical custody of that child, and both parents lived within an hour of the study site. Of the 357 families who agreed to attend an orientation session prior to participation in the study, 214 actually

attended that session and met all subsequent eligibility requirements for random assignment to either a treatment or control condition. Trained staff conducted interviews with fathers at the orientation session and conducted in-home interviews with mothers and children within a few days of the father's interview and at three subsequent times. Data from the initial interview, prior to any participation in the intervention, were used in the current study. Only the 182 families where complete data were collected from the father, mother, and child were analyzed for the current study.

The children interviewed from these families included 104 girls and 78 boys. At the time of the initial interviews, the age of the interviewed child ranged from 5 to 12, with a mean age of 9.97 years.

The participating families were overwhelmingly of European American descent, with 86% of fathers and 89% of mothers identifying themselves as such. An additional 5% of fathers and 5% of mothers identified themselves as Hispanic, while 3% of fathers and 2% of mothers identified themselves as African American, and 1% of fathers and 2% of mothers identified themselves as Asian American. The educational level of the parents varied widely: 17% of fathers and 7% of mothers had an advanced degree beyond the bachelor's degree; 23% of fathers and 22% of mothers had completed a 4-year college degree; 18% of fathers and 19% of mothers had a 2-year degree; 30% of fathers and 38% of mothers had some college, but had not received a degree; and 12% of fathers and 14% of mothers had no education beyond high school.

MEASURES

Interparental Conflict

A composite measure of interparental conflict was used to assess multiple dimensions of conflict. The composite included two constructs for which father, mother, and child reports were obtained (Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale [CPICS]; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992; Conflict Tactic Scale [CTS]; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980) and one construct with only father and mother report (Braver Conflict Breadth Scale, created specifically for this study). This yielded a total of eight, equally weighted scales that were used to form the composite. Each of the three constructs assessed a different aspect of interparental conflict. The CPICS assessed the frequency, intensity, and degree of resolution of interparental conflict. Internal consistency for this scale was high for all reporters (father report $[\alpha] = .89$; mother report $[\alpha] = .90$; child report $[\alpha] = .88$). The CTC specifically assessed child-witnessed conflict, and internal consistency was also respectable for this construct (father report $[\alpha] = .82$; mother report $[\alpha] = .84$; child report $[\alpha] = .77$). The eight-item Braver Conflict Breadth Scale assessed how often parents argued about a number of different topics. Items included, "During the last month, you and your ex-argued about child discipline practices (didn't happen/happened rarely/happened sometimes/happened often/happened very often)," and "During the last month, you and your ex-argued about money matters other than child support (same response options)." Internal consistency for this construct was adequate (father report $[\alpha] = .82$; mother report $[\alpha] = .79$).

Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to assess the suitability of creating a composite with the eight scales. A three-factor model was tested with each factor represented by reporter. Factor loadings ranged from .50 to .94, and fit indices suggested excellent fit for the model (nonnormed fit index = .98, standardized root mean square residual = .04). Because the three factors were highly correlated (Pearson's r ranged from .44 to .61), they

were composited to generate a single robust measure of interparental conflict. To calculate the composite score, all eight measures were standardized and the *z* scores were averaged.

Father Warmth and Mother Warmth

The Acceptance and Rejection subscales from the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Schaefer, 1965) were used to assess child reports of fathers' and mothers' warmth. Interviewers read a series of statements about parent behaviors and asked whether those statements were "like your parent," "somewhat like your parent," or "not like your parent." The items were read once while the children were asked how well the statements described their fathers' behaviors during the last month and were read again when they were asked how well the statements described their mothers' behaviors during that same time frame. For each parent, the child was read the full 16-item Acceptance subscale and 16-item Rejection subscale. The Acceptance items included statements such as "My dad/mom enjoys talking things over with me" and "My dad/mom is able to make me feel better when I am upset." The Rejection items included statements like "My dad/mom isn't very patient with me" and "My dad/mom forgets to help me when I need it." Scores on the CRPBI have been shown to discriminate between normal boys and delinquents and to have adequate internal consistency (Schaefer, 1965). In this sample, Cronbach's alpha for fathers' acceptance and rejection were .92 and .86, respectively, and for mothers' acceptance and rejection they were .82 and .80, respectively. The items on the rejection subscale were reverse coded and the acceptance and rejection subscales were then combined to form a warmth score for each parent.

Child Internalizing Behavior Problems

Data on child internalizing behavior problems were collected from fathers, mothers, and children and their reports were combined into a composite score, formed by computing the mean of the standardized scores for all three reporters. Father report and mother report were each measured using the 31-item Internalizing subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). A large body of research provides support for the reliability and validity of this subscale (Achenbach, 1991). In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha was .89 for both parents' reports.

Child reports of internalizing behavior problems were assessed using two constructs: depression and anxiety. Child reports of depression were measured using the 27-item Child Depression Inventory (CDI; Kovacs, 1981). The CDI has been shown to have good convergent validity with other indicators of child depression (Kovacs, 1992). Internal consistency and test-retest reliability have been shown to be adequate for this scale (Kovacs, 1981; Kovacs, 1992). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .83. The 28-item Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (RCMAS; Reynolds & Richmond, 1978) was used to measure anxiety. The RCMAS has adequate internal consistency (Reynolds & Richmond, 1978), test-retest reliability (Reynolds & Paget, 1981), and construct validity (King, Gullone, Tonge, & Ollendick, 1993). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .88. A child-report score for internalizing problems was formed by averaging the standardized CDI and RCMAS scores. To form the cross-rater composite score for internalizing behavior problems, the child-report measure of internalizing and the standardized father-report and mother-report internalizing scores were averaged. The composite score was used to reduce the problem of Type I error introduced by repeating analyses for a larger number of outcomes.

Child Externalizing Behavior Problems

A similar approach was taken for assessing child externalizing problems. Father-report and mother-report were each measured using the 33-item Externalizing subscale of the CBCL. In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha was .90 for father report and .89 for mother report. Child reports of externalizing behavior problems were obtained using a 23-item scale that has been adapted for use in prior studies at the Prevention Research Center. These items include seventeen that were identical to those in the CBCL and six others from Cook's Hostility Scale (Cook, 1985), which consists of items adapted for child reports from the externalizing subscale of the CBCL. In this sample, Cronbach's alpha was .81. To form the cross-rater composite score for externalizing behavior problems, the mother-, father-, and child-report scores were standardized and the mean of these scores was computed.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Scores for the child report of father warmth ranged from 44 to 96, with a mean of 84.02. For child report of mother warmth the range was 37 to 96, with a mean of 87.73. Table 1 contains the bivariate correlations among the study variables. As can be seen, child reports of father and mother warmth were significantly correlated with each other, and both warmth measures and child gender were correlated with child externalizing problems. There was a moderate correlation between internalizing problems and child report of mother warmth, but not father warmth. Neither gender nor child age were correlated with child reports of warmth by the mother or father. The measure of interparental conflict was significantly correlated with father warmth and moderately correlated with mother warmth, both in a negative direction.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations of Father and Mother Warmth, Interparental Conflict, Child Gender, Child Age, and Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Problems

	<i>Father Warmth</i>	<i>Mother Warmth</i>	<i>Interparental Conflict</i>	<i>Child Gender</i>	<i>Child Age</i>	<i>Child Internalizing Problems</i>	<i>Child Externalizing Problems</i>
Father Warmth	1.000	.282**	-.288**	-.011	-.121	-.145	-.260**
Mother Warmth		1.000	-.185*	.035	.075	-.161*	-.326**
Interparental Conflict			1.000	-.072	-.031	.292**	.132
Child Gender				1.000	.008	-.123	.181*
Child Age					1.000	-.044	.054
Child Internalizing Problems						1.000	.547**
Child Externalizing Problems							1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Listwise $N = 182$.

Table 2

Results from Multiple Regression Analyses with Child Internalizing and Child Externalizing Regressed on the Three-Way Interaction Between Father Warmth, Mother Warmth, and Interparental Conflict

<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>Child Internalizing Outcome</i>			<i>Child Externalizing Outcome</i>		
	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Block</i>	<i>R²ch</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Block</i>	<i>R²ch</i>
<i>(n = 182)</i>						
Child Gender	Ns	1	ns	.17*	1	.04*
Child Age	Ns			ns		
Father Warmth (child report)	Ns	2	.093***	-.20*	2	.14***
Mother Warmth (child report)	Ns			-.29***		
Interparental Conflict	.24**			ns		
Father Warmth × Mother Warmth Interaction	Ns	3	ns	ns	3	ns
Father Warmth × Conflict Interaction	Ns			ns		
Mother Warmth × Conflict Interaction	Ns			ns		
Three-Way Interaction	.225**	4	.039**	ns	4	ns

All the regression coefficients reported are taken from the model with all variables entered (the final step). The blocks are reported only to inform the R^2 change interpretations.

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, and *** = $p < .001$.

REGRESSION ANALYSES TO PREDICT CHILDREN'S INTERNALIZING AND EXTERNALIZING PROBLEMS

Separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to predict children's internalizing and externalizing problems, in which child age and gender were entered on the first step, the main effects of paternal warmth and maternal warmth and interparental conflict were entered on the second step, the two-way interactions of mother warmth × father warmth, mother warmth × conflict and father warmth × conflict were entered on the third step, and the three-way interaction of mother warmth × father warmth × conflict was entered on the fourth step. Regression coefficients for the final model, predicting children's internalizing problems, including all main effects and interaction effects, are presented in Table 2. The results show a significant mother warmth × father warmth × conflict triple interaction effect, which indicates that the effects of mother warmth and father warmth on internalizing are conditional on the level of conflict between the parents. Figure 1 shows two plots to represent the relations between warmth of one parent at different levels of warmth of the other parent when there is a high level of conflict between parents. The plots represent the same mother warmth × father warmth interaction effect, under conditions of high conflict, but for illustrative purposes differ in terms of whether mother warmth or father warmth are shown on the x axis. Figure 1a shows that the positive relations between mother warmth and children's internalizing problems occurs when father warmth is low. Similarly, Figure 1b shows that the benefit of father warmth is seen when mother warmth is low. The highest levels of internalizing problems occur when conflict is high and both mother warmth and father warmth are low. However, when conflict is high, warmth from either parent serves as a protective factor when warmth of the other parent is low. The

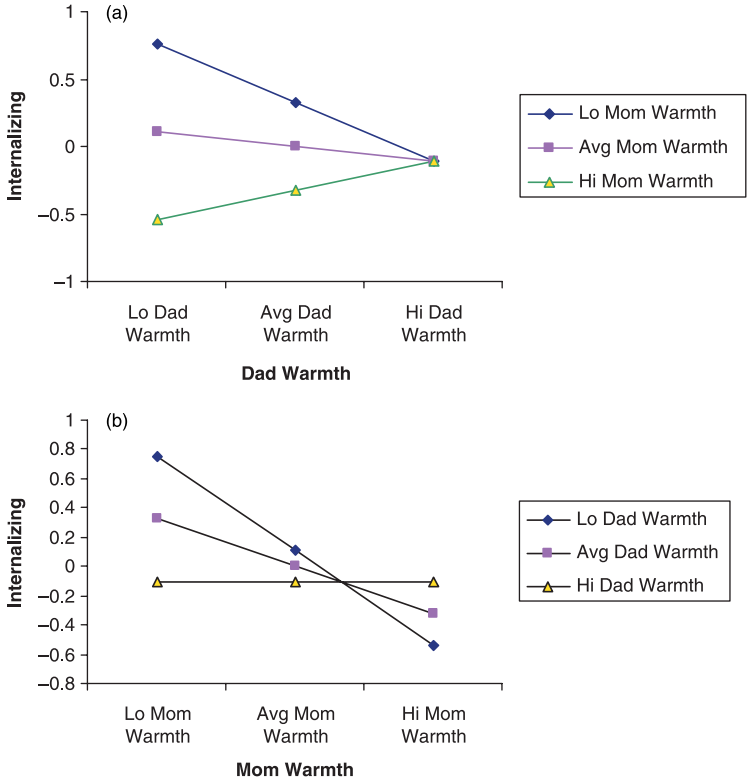


Figure 1 The simple two-way interaction between father warmth and mother warmth predicting child internalizing problems when interparental conflict is high. (a) Relations between father warmth and internalizing at different levels of mother warmth and high conflict. (b) Relations between mother warmth and internalizing at different levels of father warmth and high conflict.

relations between father or mother warmth with internalizing problems at different levels of warmth of the other parent, when interparental conflict is low, are shown in Figure 2. As can be seen in 2a, when mother warmth is high, higher levels of father warmth are related to lower levels of child internalizing problems. Similarly, as seen in 2b, when father warmth is high, higher levels of mother warmth are related to lower levels of child internalizing problems. Children have the lowest levels of internalizing problems when both father and mother warmth are high, but when father warmth is low, children have a higher level of internalizing problems, even though maternal warmth is high. However, when mother warmth is low there is no relation between father warmth and children’s internalizing problems. Another way of looking at this is that maternal warmth and paternal warmth facilitate each other’s positive effect to lower children’s internalizing problems. For externalizing problems, neither the triple interaction nor the two-way interactions reached statistical significance, so we present the main effects model of mother warmth, father warmth, and interparental conflict in Table 1. As can be seen, both the main effect of mother warmth and of father warmth is significant, while the effect of interparental conflict is not significant.

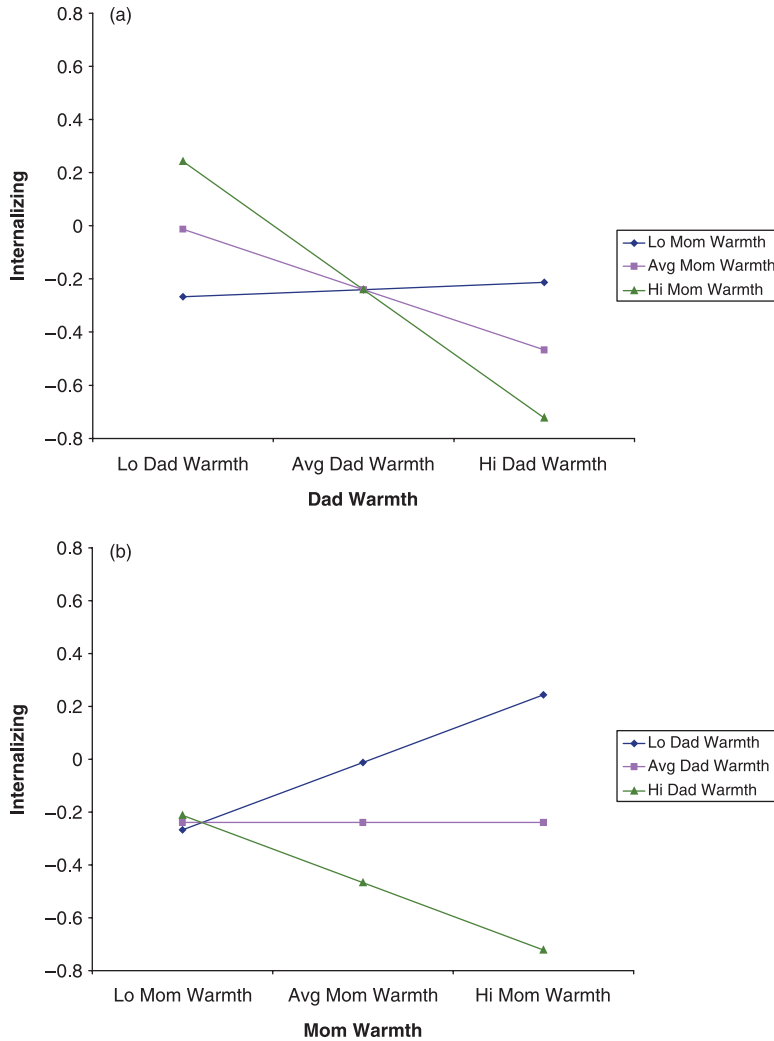


Figure 2 The simple two-way interaction between father warmth and mother warmth predicting child internalizing problems when interparental conflict is low. (a) Relations between father warmth and internalizing at different levels of mother warmth and low conflict. (b) Relations between mother warmth and internalizing at different levels of father warmth and low conflict.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that parental warmth of both custodial mothers and noncustodial fathers was significantly and independently related to the children's externalizing problems. However, the relations between warmth of custodial mother and noncustodial father and children's internalizing problems differed as a function of the level of conflict between the parents and the warmth of the relationship of the other parent. The discussion will focus

on placing these findings in the context of previous research on the effects of parenting by mothers and fathers following divorce and suggesting psychological processes which may account for these effects. We will also suggest implications of the findings for court policies and practices for the general population of divorcing parents and for those who have high conflict.

The finding that a warm relationship with the mother or the father is related to lower externalizing problems is consistent with a large body of evidence concerning the positive benefit for children of having a positive relationship with both parents following divorce. Simply put, there is a growing consensus that children's relationship with both the custodial mother and noncustodial father impacts their adjustment following divorce. It is also interesting that the effects of conflict on externalizing problems are not significant. It is likely that there are complex pathways by which parenting and conflict influence each other and children's mental health, including an indirect pathway by which conflict reduces the quality of the parent-child relationship (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). While these pathways cannot be addressed in this article, the current findings highlight the strong contribution of parenting by both parents to children's well-being, even when considering the effect of interparental conflict.

The relations of mother and father warmth with children's internalizing problems differed as a function of the level of conflict between the parents. Under conditions of high conflict, children who do not have a warm relationship with either parent have the highest internalizing problems. However, children have lower internalizing problems when they have a good relationship with either the custodial mother or the noncustodial father, even though they have a negative relationship with the other parent. One might think of this as a "compensation effect," whereby under conditions of high conflict, a warm relationship with either parent compensates for the lack of a warm relationship with the other parent, in terms of reducing the levels of child internalizing problems. The psychological processes that account for this effect may involve the impact of parenting and conflict on the children's sense of attachment and security to both parents (Katz & Gottman, 1997) or through their effects on emotional regulation processes (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Exposure to conflict may undermine the children's confidences in their relationship with both parents or it may undermine the functions of both parents to promote effective emotional regulation behavior in the children. From these perspectives, a high level of warmth in the relationship with either parent may provide protection that reduces children's internalizing problems. It is interesting to note that a similar protective effect of a positive relationship with a single adult has been previously reported in nondivorced families with serious levels of discord (Jenkins & Smith, 1990; Rutter, 1990).

Under conditions of low conflict, there is a positive "facilitation effect," whereby the effect of warmth by one parent enhances the positive effect of warmth by the other parent. The relationship between warmth of the father-child relationship and lower internalizing problems is significant when there is high warmth in the mother-child relationship, but not when there is low warmth in the mother-child relationship. Children have the lowest level of internalizing problems when warmth by the custodial mother and noncustodial father are both high. It may be that, even when there is low conflict between the parents, the lack of a warm relationship with one of the parents spills over onto the other parent, so that children are less able to benefit from the positive relationship with that parent.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COURT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The findings have implications for court practices and policies that impact the well-being of children following divorce. Because considerable research indicates that divorce

is associated with an increased risk for a wide range of child mental health, substance abuse, and social adaptation problems (Kelly & Emery, 2003), a positive postdivorce relationship with their parents can be seen as a source of protection to lower their risk. For the general population of divorces, the issue is how to develop parenting plans that provide adequate opportunity for a positive relationship with both the mother and the father. As Kelly (2007) has stated, traditional visitation guidelines of every other weekend are not optimal for facilitating an active ongoing involvement of the noncustodial father in children's lives. She proposes that, instead, "children's contacts with their nonresident parents . . . should reflect the diversity of parental interest, capability, and the quality of the parent-child relationship" (p. 47).

A second implication for the general population concerns the content of parent education programs that many courts provide to all divorcing parents in order to help parents and children cope with divorce. While the content of these programs varies widely, there has been little emphasis in these programs on teaching parenting skills or the quality of the parent-child relationship (Braver, Salem, Pearson, & DeLusé, 1996; Geasler & Blaisure, 1998). Illustratively, Geasler and Blaisure (1998) reported that only 19% of programs they reviewed covered parenting skills, while a much larger percentage covered topics with no known relationship to children's post-divorce adjustment (e.g., 49% covered the grief/loss cycle). Given the growing evidence of the critical influence of the quality of the parent-child relationship on children's postdivorce adjustment, increased focus on parenting skills would be important. Research has demonstrated that quality parenting can be strengthened by teaching parenting skills (e.g., parental warmth and discipline) through time-limited (10 to 14 sessions), skill-focused programs and that such programs lead to the improved adjustment of children following divorce (e.g., Wolchik et al., 2002). Such programs would be a useful resource for motivated parents who are concerned about their children's adjustment following divorce.

The findings also have implications for court policies and procedures for divorces in which there is a high level of interparental conflict. Few programs have demonstrated efficacy to reduce the negative effects of postdivorce conflict on children (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004). The current findings suggest that high levels of parental warmth by either the custodial mother or noncustodial father may have beneficial effects for children in families with high levels of interparental conflict following divorce. Thus, programs that include components focused on reducing conflict and improving the quality of parenting by both parents might help improve the postdivorce adjustment of these children. Working with these families is highly challenging, however, so that rigorous tests of the efficacy of such programs is a required first step before they may become a useful resource that courts can utilize to help high-conflict divorce families.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

While the current study advances knowledge about the complex relations between postdivorce parental warmth of both mothers and fathers and children's well-being, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of families that were enrolled in an intervention program for parents following divorce and thus are likely to be a more motivated group than the general population of divorced parents. Thus, the study should be replicated in a more representative sample of divorced families. Second, the study focused on one important aspect of parenting, but did not include a second important dimension:

use of effective discipline. Third, the study did not address other factors that may influence the impact of parenting or conflict on children, such as substance abuse or mental illness of one of the parents or domestic violence. It is likely that, while warm parenting generally is positively related to children's adjustment, it does not have a positive relationship in cases where the parent is abusing drugs or where there is domestic violence.

Several strengths of the current study enable it to make a significant contribution to the literature. Particularly, the use of well-validated measures of parental warmth and conflict and the analysis of the joint effect of warmth by the custodial mother and noncustodial father and conflict on the mental health of children. While some previous literature had indicated a negative effect of father contact with children on child well-being in high-conflict divorces (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989), the current results indicate that, under conditions of high conflict, parental warmth received from either mothers or fathers can be a positive resource for children.

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